



FERAL FASCINATIONS

By

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Dedication

May your muse help you escape a little each day into the world of creation and control writers seek so often when writing, Sheree.

Chapter One

The human male standing near the San Diego pier never ceased to amaze Kindrist Trekaar after seven hundred and twenty-one days of observation. Jake Straightarrow was not as tall as the tallest earth male selected for service. Nor as attractive in his informal clothing choices based on earth's current magazine trends. But he was cloaked in a mystique she couldn't peg. Something, some force in the universe, drew her to him. Her comrades felt otherwise. His actions even labeled him a wild card among his own people. The man was volatile, striking without warning or notice. Yet, he struck with a conscience. That conscience made him a candidate for were-assassin duty.

Okay, in my eyes alone.

For a Nulvitian who had no family, no inhabitable home planet, nothing but ancestry to claim, the power of a man like Jake offered certain aspects of revenge to a woman orphaned from her wasted homeland. His raw brute strength and intelligence could save him from the perils of psychic war--those dangers mercenary mates couldn't control. But could he truly survive covert psychic operations? He was the only Violet Child she'd seen who she dared parade before the sacrificial altar bound to her in a metaphysical web of soul-mate marriage. Here stood hope, or The Cause would buckle, and all sentient beings would fall under the dark power of Voldon.

Yes. Bonding with this earthling would end the Blood Wars.

"Trekaar, do you have the subject in sight?" Operator Forty Three's thoughts penetrated Kindrist's head in mindspeak.

Jake was anything but a subject. She focused, pushing a reply wave back to the operator's mind and completed the two-way telepathic communication channel. "He studies a middle-class woman with her male child. Both toss food to sea gulls."

The gulls squawked and dove for food.

A dirty human male, his clothes worn, his beard long and silvered with perhaps age, sat near the woman and child. He seemed to ponder the sunlight glinting upon the almost-non-existent swells in the water instead of the woman's back turned to him. She and her child ignored the man or didn't notice him as they fed the whirling mass of birds.

"*Why do you waste valuable time on this human?*" Forty Three chided inside Kindrist's mind. "*The universe quakes as we speak. Forget him. Choose another subject for were-assassin duty. We must bring the neural network down. 2012 is upon us.*"

"*Do not patronize me. It is my right to choose my soul mate in my sacrifice to our cause. My freedom for the freedoms of a multitude in the universe, never forget.*"

"*How many more days will pass before young Red Kindrist Trekaar chooses her destiny?*"

Jake stepped away from a food stand and carried a basket of food toward the woman.

How unusual for him to stop for sustenance before mid afternoon.

"*What?*" Forty Three demanded.

Why did operators have to listen to every thought when the communication channel was open? "*I wasn't talking to you. But Jake is giving the food to the man.*"

“No fighting? What’s wrong with your subject today?”

“Go away, Forty Three.”

“There’s no time. You must choose today.”

“Get out of my head so I can think.”

“If I leave you to yourself, the universe will fall to Voldon. No more delays. Choose. Today.”

For the love of blessed Devros, holiest sun of all suns. *“I choose subject Straightarrow.”*

Absolute silence resonated in Kindrist’s mind.

“I predict your feral fascination shall lead to the end of any semblance of peace in the civil universe, Red Kindrist Lotyl Trekaar, daughter of martyr Purple Trekaar. You are a foolish warrior who knows we’ve spent too much time here at earth this leg of the journey.”

Doubt me? *“Straightarrow is no animal. My father would approve of this decision to save free-thinkers. And if you buy into legends, you will send the ship.”*

Silence echoed again.

“Send the ship, Forty Three.”

“How will you bring Straightarrow over?”

“I will seduce him.”

“Blessed daughters of Ilak! The Day of Promise is upon us. And you choose seduction with this unpredictable subject? Not the best beginning to a marriage. Nor does he strike me as a man who appreciates being toyed with.”

“Send the ship.”

* * * *

Jake left the dock after handing the steaming fried seafood to the grinning homeless Vietnam vet sitting near the snob and her brat kid. What were they thinking throwing food at gulls when a hungry man sat watching? What was the world coming to when good citizens ignored the plight of the less fortunate? He strode between two cars lined up beside parking meters.

The hum of an engine purred in the distance.

Lunch traffic. Folks just heading down to the bay for a bite to eat. Great idea. Buy food. Need money to buy food. Time for this guy to find real work and stop eating away at the emergency wad. He clipped across the street’s two lanes and onto the sidewalk.

A woman stepped onto the sidewalk before him.

Strange nocturnal number wearing what has to be plastic. Could she even afford leather? And who’d want to wear either in this early summer heat?

She walked toward him in the tightest black ensemble with a swing nobody could ignore.

The saunter could have been her body trying to shake off those suffocating pants.

Her clothing left nothing to the imagination. She was tall compared to the short women he grew up with on the reservation. But her hair was as straight and dark as any found among his People. A man would have to imagine what went on behind her pitch-black sunglasses. There was something else, something more to her that shouted outer space. Beyond the typical Goth-babe outfit. Maybe the hint was the knife’s hilt tucked into the shaft of her knee-high boot? What kind of idiot walked the streets of California with a weapon in plain view? One looking for trouble.

Too bad, Babe. I grew up and changed my middle name.

She sauntered up to him, smacked her lips, and stopped.

What was going down?

"I locked my keys in my car. You know where I can get a hanger?"

That type of plight could happen to anyone. But she seemed the type to scratch the hell out of her car, get nowhere, and break the window in a last-ditch resort to reaching the lock.

"You can call a locksmith. Save damaging your vehicle."

She twisted her head an inch left. "Don't have the time."

Probably going to melt in the heat.

His gut cringed.

Intuition was never wrong. Maybe she had a real problem. Something bigger than getting sleep to bar hop all night. "Why the rush?"

"My sister needs the car to go to an interview." She sighed and scanned the street. "I shouldn't be wasting time. She's got three kids to feed."

Well, a man could help or be shamed from letting the world fall into chaos. He shoved his hand into his pocket and grabbed the rolled-up bills he kept handy for emergencies.

She focused on him counting out the twenty dollar bills. "No. I don't want your money."

The woman would take the cash and leave him to his peace. He shoved a hundred bucks at her. "Call her a cab. Send it over. The taxi will be there long before you with your problem."

"No." She wagged her head.

Hell. Was a man to do everything himself?

* * * *

Kindrist tried to act like she didn't want the charity. Whatever Straightarrow was doing certainly entertained any other mercenaries and operators observing the scene. But his actions unknowingly kept proving him more and more the humanitarian as he turned to the street and tried to find a cab.

Out of nowhere, a blue-and-white taxi whisked to a stop in front of the restaurant. Three men exited the vehicle.

Jake waved the driver over and joined her at the curb. "Give him the address. I'll pay."

The thin Indian male squinted at Kindrist as he rolled down his window.

Better to lie than lose the opportunity to induct this noble human into The Cause. She rattled off an address used by another Nulvitian operative.

Jake thrust the money at the man. "Don't let me hear you didn't show. I've got friends in this town. You'll never work again."

"No problem, sir." The man snatched the money and sped away.

Jake anchored a satisfied gaze upon her.

"Thank you." Like I put up a fight.

"Now, why don't you call a locksmith?" He inhaled like a scolding father.

"Maybe I will." She took a step back the way she'd come down the sidewalk and shot him a glance over his shoulder. "Dinner, tonight?"

He thrust his fingers through his hair and nodded. "Why not?"

"Meet me at the Interstate 805 rest area past the 52 Exit going north. Nine o'clock."

* * * *

Straightarrow hadn't balked at the secluded location as Kindrist departed in triumph to meet her destiny. But now, hours later, the itchy sand and stinging cacti just might ruin her plans in the moonlit expanse of the southern Californian desert. If there were time, she could request the ship to hover and blow the place clean. That was too risky and utterly ridiculous a request given the large spacecraft would be spotted. And Devros knew how much earthlings lurked with cameras waiting to photograph extraterrestrial vehicles.

Insects buzzed and chirped in the rolling hills near the rest area where her Violet Child was to meet her.

The song held an enchanting sort of beauty. Perhaps it was more from the silver moonlight illuminating nature. Nature? Something wiped clean from her home planet's surface during psychic warfare. She sighed and studied the full moon.

A sign in some earth mythology. Power? More like coercion. What she did to Jake in this initiation rite would activate his dormant genes. Legend claimed he would become an animal at times when they were separated too long, unable to unite in sacred union. Shift into a form that no person could love? No other but one's mate could love an individual after inducted into psychic mercenary unions. And in a mate's absence, in Jake's absence, she would slowly die, incapable of functioning without the blood exchange necessary to maintain her bonding to a lesser-evolved being. So went the way of the universe and war. But she hadn't chosen rashly. Jake wouldn't fail her after his merciful act with the cab and the hungry man.

An engine hummed in the distance.

One headlight peered through the murky darkness of the distant horizon.

A motorcycle.

* * * *

Jake didn't know what to make of the woman standing inside a cone of lamplight at the rest area at nine P.M. She didn't even have a back-up vehicle waiting to help her escape if she decided he was dangerous. What kind of woman put herself in this kind of risky situation? One toting weapons. He braked and let the bike roll to a stop beside her.

"My sister dropped me off so she could use the car. I hope you don't mind having to drive." She blinked in the golden beam of light. "Maybe drop me off home later?"

A night with her ending with her home later? Most men would jump on that. But what if she wasn't the kind of woman he slept beside? Was she trustworthy? Caution could save a man's ass. Or spoil his recreation. "Sure."

A beautiful grin set her face glowing. She grabbed his hand. "Let's go."

"Where then?"

"Back to San Diego."

Night life. Nice destination given the cool breeze with long lean thighs pressed against him when riding a bike. And his gut wasn't noting danger.

She sank atop the seat behind him, pressing her firm curves against his body.

His blood surged.

Nothing from his intuition. Usually his gut rattled on people. Especially people wielding weapons.

She squeezed his thighs and ass with her strong legs. "Cut this baby loose."

Hard to free something clamped inside her lean leg vise.

She squeezed his thighs with hers again. "I want to feel like I'm flying."

No problem. He'd help her take off any time.

Her arms slid around his waist. Her fingers stopped dangerously close to his crotch.

Not a good thing. Better to ignore the presence than act the jerk before he detected the full breadth of her signal. But maybe she was just an adrenaline junkie. He kick started the bike into a vibrating rumble.

What he'd give for a vibrating bed at the moment. "Hang on." He steered the wheels from soft gravel onto the smooth interstate.

Her fingers rubbed his thigh.

Beyond dangerous. Signal wide and clear. But that kind of hanging on wouldn't help them get to town for dinner. Although, he didn't mind a late-night picnic.

His hard-on lurched.

The touch of those fingers trailed away.

Or he couldn't feel anything but the motorcycle's vibrations and his tight-ass blue jeans.

Fingers toyed with the snap at his waistline.

She definitely didn't have dinner in the city planned. More like a picnic in the moonlight. He scanned the long stretch of endless moonlit freeway's dashed lines for any sign of an exit on the dark curved horizon.

Her fingers dug into his jeans, searching as her cool fingertips raked through his pubic hair.

Hell. She knew what she wanted. The shoulder was a great place to snack. He braked. The bike slowed.

An excellent choice given he could really feel her hand milking him. If he wasn't careful, he'd wreck. He cautiously rolled the bike to a stop and kicked the kickstand into duty.

"Want to see the stars?" she cooed, her body twisting, the rise of her breasts rubbing the soft touch of leather against his upper arm.

Receptive. Was it wrong to take something willingly offered? She seemed so much like him. A part of society but living in a parallel Goth-babe universe. And her pumping hand action would kill him. God, she knew all about astronomy. "Where are the stars?" He rasped.

The bike bounced, and her grip on him disappeared.

Not good.

She skirted his knee like a phantom traced in moonlight, staring back at him with eyes cloaked in shadow, reaching for his head.

To have those warm hands on his skin again.

Her fingers locked into his hair.

Their lips met in a frenzy to send stars flying.

She was all over him, straddling his thighs, her hot moist mouth eating his face.

Maybe it was time to wonder if you wanted something aside from fucking? This babe had a knife. But by the way her tongue sucked on his, she didn't seem too worried about carving.

Her hands were everywhere.

He grabbed her small tight ass and pulled her against firm crotch against his stiff cock.

She groaned into his mouth.

The grip from one of her hands disappeared.

Carving time? But nothing bad registered on his intuitive radar. Good. Time to dirty dance beneath the stars.

She shoved back off him and peeled her shirt down to expose what had to be none other than two heavenly bodies.

Large. Round. There was nothing like two handfuls of breast. He slid his hands up to cup the hot silken curves.

She threw her head back and moaned.

He ran a fingertip across a nipple's soft circle and onto the hard tips.

His cock lunged.

Hard and taut. She had to be wet. He clamped his teeth on one nipple's hard point and barely nibbled.

She squirmed and grabbed his hair, shoving her breast into his face. "Yes."
Right word. He hefted a leg over the bike while never releasing his hold on her.

* * * *

Kindrist couldn't believe Straightarrow was leaving. Why? Gods, to lose the only man with whom she desired to bond. Destiny certainly toyed with her. She stared up into his shadow-cloaked face.

Only the moon glowed with enthusiasm beyond his shoulders.

He grabbed her hair, pulled her lips to a fraction of an inch from his. "Take off those pants," he said. His voice deep and throaty.

Devros wins tonight. She wriggled the fingernail injector from her hip pocket and shoved her pants to her ankles where they clamped onto her damned boots.

Shackled by her own ignorance in seduction. Like she'd ever done this before.

He yanked her hips, swung her around to face the road, and leaned her over the vehicle's soft leather seat where her breasts rubbed the warm seat leather.

His hands shifted her where he wanted her. And then he was there, pressing his firm silken shaft against her buttocks, between her legs.

Blessed Universe! For all that is sacred, I gift my soul to free thinkers.

His fingers found her, guided himself to claim entry. Prepared to take her soul.

She wanted to spread her legs. Yearned to trap him there locked inside them. Keep him there forever. To save what was left of hope. To give free-thinkers a future.

Pleasure burned then tickled her soul as he found his way inside her.

She gasped and clutched the shaking motorcycle seat and shut her eyes.

He thrust into her with a steady beat, rocking the bike with such force that he couldn't deny he desired her.

Oh how the universe faded with the lull of his thrusting. Maybe he would forgive her for tricking him into joining her fight against tyranny.

If only he'd spread her legs wider and touch her soul. To have him take what he sought and turn her into a whimpering fool. The world became one with this feeling of bizarre powerlessness.

She dove toward the darkness beyond her eyelids, bobbing on what felt like debris ebbing and flowing in a black void. She couldn't see the stars overhead spreading a path back to her barren homeland. As if her life was lost to her forever.

Forever. He was the answer to her problems. The father of legend. A man who could have all of her he wanted if only he would keep her begging for more. She raised up onto her toes and thrust her bottom back at him, matching his movements, binding her soul with the only man who could save tomorrow.

A spark of energy tingled in her cells and wafted throughout her body.

Genes tickling into action.

Destiny unfolded at long last began.

What waited in its promise?

Passion?

Power?

What did it matter the way she wanted him to ram inside her.

Ecstasy welled in her soul like a ball of energy threatening to blow her apart.

She cried out.

Again and again.

The pleased surged until she thought she'd scream.
Mating. There was no greater reward for her service to The Cause.
He groaned and grabbed her hips. Jerking both inside and outside her.
Was his genetic code also igniting?
He lunged, thrusting, throbbing, pulsing.
Energy or something more intimately intrinsic to his touch jolted her to the core. She
shook uncontrollably, attached to him as if they were one, and cried out.
Did the universe birth a star inside her soul?
He collapsed his forehead falling against her back.
Her mouth watered.
For a taste of the metallic tinge from salty blood.
The ritual hunger.
Blessed Devros, a star was moments from rising to claim its place among the rest in the
heavens. Careful not to mistake her target, she aimed the nail pricker at his arm and shoved her
finger home.

Chapter Two

“Damn bugs.” Her prey said, shaking his arm after Kindrist removed the pricker to release his blood for the binding ritual.

His body seemed to sink into her.

One Gabron. Two Gabrons. Three Gabrons. “Jake?”

He didn’t move.

Now for the mating blood.

She slid out from under him, wriggled her clothes back into position, shoved his hair aside from his neck, unsheathed her blade, and made a short cut on his collar bone where soul mates preferred to bite.

Blood bubbled from the slit.

She trailed her tongue through bitter aftershave mingled with salty sweat.

Sweet. Too delicious to stop. To bite down. To take her fill. She anchored her mouth around the oozing opening and sucked.

“Red Kindrist, I sense you have completed your duty,” Forty Three said with mindspeak inside her head.

How dare the woman interrupt during this sacred rite of passage. *“Right. You were there the whole ride. Just send the ship, Forty Three. I need time to think how I’ll explain what just happened.”* She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and stared into space.

Where was the ship?

“If The Cause is fortunate, you will wield the yellow eyes of a pregnant Nulvitian upon arrival.”

* * * *

Bright light bore through Jake’s eyelids. Asphalt ground into the back of his head. Dammit. Some bastard got the better of him and left him unconscious on the street.

No pain.

I probably just got knocked out.

Mugged. What was that sterile smell? Not the standard stench of beer, puke, and piss on the hidden street. He tried to lift a hand to rub his skull.

Hard biting metal held his wrist.

Was he minus a kidney? Shit. Time to wake up. He shook his head.

Whatever he laid upon was smooth and flat. Not asphalt. Not concrete. And the steady hum wasn’t what one would expect from an alley.

Why won’t my eyes open?

At least, he didn’t feel like he was packed in ice. Two kidneys were key to a long life. Time to see a way out of this mess. Open eyes.

Open.

The damned things wouldn’t budge.

How long had he lain there asleep, strapped to something smooth?

Sweat cooled his brow.

Just get out of here. But without vision, an ex-mercenary was beyond blind. Dead.

Sweat trickled beneath his armpits.
More like baked. Where in the hell was he? The roasting sun could flay a man.
His eyelids popped open.
Light flooded the space from overhead.
Artificial light. Where in the hell was this place? He tried to crane his neck to look around.
His hard miserable skull wouldn't lift.
Fine. He scanned the area.
Gray walls lurked barely visible beyond the intense curtain of light.
His wrists were bound in metal cuffs.
His chest was bare.
A silver blanket draped his groin.
What interrogator worried about decency? Crap, they should be hovering, waiting to rip his balls off.
Something about the scenery conjured memories of alien-abduction movies.
A sound whispered.
The hairs on his neck prickled to chilly attention.
An aching, a longing, need pinned him down.
What? Need? While in shackles?
He went uncontrollably rock hard.
Naked on the table with a boner wasn't good. Why sex when a man was about to lose his balls of steel that were really quite soft and sensitive?
Off the table. Now. How to get down? How to get my hands on a woman? One like the nocturnal number back on the street. No. No. His medical or specimen-tied-to-carving-table situation was all her fault.

* * * *

Kindrist stood inside the spaceship's sliding silver door, above Jake's head where he couldn't detect her presence. Would he forgive her? Or hate her? He was the kind of man The Cause couldn't rely on. A hothead. A loner abandoned by society because he didn't fit in. Alas, Violet Children rarely fit in with their evolved psychic abilities. But she had witnessed the good in his thoughts through all those self-less actions. And now they were bound to each other beyond the restrictions of standard mental telepathy—that being he was lesser-evolved and higher-evolved psychics couldn't mindspeak with him. He had to be convinced to help them defeat Voldon. Or all peoples would be enslaved, including Jake's own.

"Is someone here?" Jake snarled.

The anger in his voice reflected his imprisonment. But releasing him before his debriefing would certainly result in a battle. This was not the time to fight or lie. Better to stand here and answer. "I am. Welcome aboard *The Seeker*."

Jake's chin snapped upward, and he shot a defiant stare at the shadows in her direction.

He couldn't see her if his vision were anything lesser-evolved. But he knew she was there by the glare in his eyes.

The tranquilizer was wearing off. Time for a little persuasion. "My name is Red Kindrist Lotyl Trekaar. I will release you when you prove to me you can behave civilly."

His eyes narrowed to slits. "Me? I'm the one shackled to a table. You need some etiquette lessons."

"You feel like a caged animal. As anyone would. But I must know you can behave

before I can release you.”

“If you want me to believe you, step on into to the light.”

A man who wanted to assess his captor. Typical mercenary reaction. Bending to his needs might gain her some power over him. Some control. Yet, no mercenary could refuse such a request from her mate.

His chest was incredible. He lay relaxed without a hint of duress. Oddly enough. One would expect him to fight for freedom.

The bulging muscles in his limbs called to her fingers. And his apparent interest in her beyond talking, an interest apparent in the bulge in his blanket, was a promise to force him to keep.

To release his bindings.... To unite again. Only a fool would let him off the table. She stepped into his view.

“You! What am I doing here?” He sneered.

So he remembered their encounter. At least, he had that to connect with before the sedative stole his memories.

“What do you want with me?”

At least, he seemed to control himself. “I’m free to tell you everything. But I want your promise that you will remain calm and listen.”

Her husband lay quietly.

Or the animal inside all beings took over.

What would he say?

“All right.” He jerked one of his arms against its restraint.

Then it begins. Sexual union or not. It was time to show this man she could be trusted. A soul mate had to be trusted. The Cause believed in him. He had to realize this singular point. She reached for the buttons on the bed’s small control panel and pushed the coded sequence.

His restraints popped open and dangled in the air.

He rose, grabbing his wrists, rubbing them.

Not all his body waited relaxed. His was willing for more unification.

Yet, he just stared at her with patience every father begged a child show.

Good.

Heat of desire ebbed through her core.

To have another round of mating....

Her mouth watered.

For sweet salty blood to melt across her tongue. To shove him against the examination table and take more of him. To weave their essences into one basic seed. The seed to grow into the promise of legend—a child who will bring free thinking to the universe.

Such strange raw need.

Yearning.

Animalistic lust.

A sensation beyond description.

Genetic mating proved stronger than she expected.

He stood there like he’d pounce any moment.

Waiting.

Why wouldn’t he just come to her? Set her inner beast free? She wanted to jump on him. Throw her legs across his iron body. Extinguish the indescribable craving buried deep inside her core.

If only she could read his lesser-evolved earthling thoughts.

To know he craved her.

To hear what he wanted to do to her.

How bizarre this detachment was. But that's what the binding was for—to prevent any psychic being from detecting his presence during an attack. His lesser-evolved brain was the key to covert operations.

For the love of Devros, what brilliance in the act of marriage to these psychic earthlings.

Jake lunged across the room and grabbed her, shoving her into the shadows beyond the examination light's illumination, against the spaceship's cold hard metal wall.

The wall bit into her shoulder blades.

What was he doing?

His hot breath turned to a faint steam in the chilly corners of the shadowy sick bay.

Breathing seemed impossible with his twisted mask in her face.

"Who are you?" he growled.

Was that the sound of hunger or anger? Dare she admit everything now? If he wouldn't accept his destiny, if he wouldn't take her blood, she would turn into a raving beast after forty-eight hours and rampage through the ship on a blood hunt. Seducing him had been stupid. Only honesty would set things right between them. "I am your mate."

He snarled. "Not the answer I wanted." He stared at her lips.

Mesmerized. He could rip them off and chew them and the universe would continue expanding. "Take them. They are yours. Curtail this madness between us so we may speak civilly again."

He yanked her elbow, whirled her one-hundred-and-eighty degrees, and shoved her backward.

The examination table caught her in the kidneys.

Pain shafted through her lower back.

Sweet merciful sensation. Now, she could think clearly again.

"Tell me who you are," he demanded.

No wasting time with this earthling. Did he withhold his sexual need for self-preservation or more for pride? "I am mercenary Red Kindrist, the pawn in an endless battle between good and evil. And I have just recruited you."

His angry mask transmuted into shock. "What? Nobody inducts me," he roared.

He stood nude in all his human glory, muscles flinching as his situation was revealed. Still desirous of her.

And there, in his body's reaction to the news, he fought the yearning to unite with his mate. How could he refuse the instinctual command of genetic passion? Rather obsession, given her experience. She felt empty, needy, uncomfortable in her pants. Oh to shove them down. To sit on his discomfort and ride it into exhaustion.

His gaze scanned the room.

What did he search for?

He jumped toward the door.

The door whisked open.

"Wait." How foolish of her to release him from his restraints. He'd run through the ship and possibly injure a crew member. What would they call her volatile earthling then? He was a threat enough already. She rammed feet into the metal floor beneath her.

The clack of her leather boots heralded her bursting into the brightly-lit corridor in

pursuit of his contrary muscular backside that he paraded through the ship by running the opposite direction.

His long hair hid none of the finely-chiseled butt and legs she'd bound herself to. That probably wasn't the reason the other three white-cloaked operatives in the long hall pressed their bodies against the ship's silver walls. Jake had to be terrifying, an angered recruit on the loose. Rumored to be unpredictable. Dangerous. Deadly. She forced her legs to move faster.

Not difficult when you're inhuman by earth's definition and reared off-world where gravity was more forgiving. Humanoid, yes. But faster than the lithe perfect specimen of a Violet Child attempting escape. "Stop," she shouted. "You endanger yourself in this futile attempt to flee."

Why bother speaking in such an archaic form of communication?

Air molecules kissed her skin.

Have I taken to the air? Am I flying? Swooping down upon my prey? Oh for sweet salty blood. And to satiate the emptiness deep within through ingesting the tasty earthling's blood after getting him tucked safely within their personal quarters. For that precious moment....

Gods, would her thoughts steal away her dignity? Soul-mate attraction was stronger than anyone could imagine. Especially for Jake who knew nothing of the madness. He needed help. Her respect. Or he would never find a place among free-thinkers. And she, the last of the Nulvitians, would never mother the child of legend. She reached for his swinging elbow.

The iron skin slid beneath her fingertips.

Fool. Could he not see there was nowhere to run in the winding sterile corridor? She leapt at his back and snaked her arms around his heaving chest's warm pliable tissue.

Electricity tingled from her core to her toes.

Oh, what torture the universe played on those dabbling with genetic mysteries defying all scientific study.

Jake's legs suddenly slithered between her boots. He fell, taking her along.

The solid floor jolted them into halting.

He rolled, knocking her against a wall, and tried to shake her off.

Not today. She held onto him like a Nulvitian lohl's seven tentacles encircled his upper body.

"Enough," Goro's monotone voice commanded.

Surprisingly. The commander never spoke with his mouth. She craned her head to peer back up the corridor at Goro's black leather pants and boots.

Jake had the sense to be still where his solid mass laid against the cold hard floor. But his lurching erection didn't understand the commander's language where it attempted to wrestle her thigh.

"This nonsense is beneath you both," Goro said. "Come with me." He spun on his heels and stepped down the hall.

Beneath her? Was that not the truth of things? She'd taken a soul mate and now struggled to contend with her future. Goro's profound statements never failed to catch her off guard.

"Who is he?" Jake muttered.

She stared into her soul-mate's dark unforgiving eyes. "Our commander. Please, Jake. I know how hard it is to remain calm. But he will answer your questions. I'm releasing you now." She slid her arms from where they grappled his chest and got her boots beneath her.

Jake unfolded overhead.

The indomitable assassin. His movement was more like a blink than a man moving. Strange. Deadly. Bless the stars for Destiny's forethought. She waved a palm toward the receding Goro's flapping ankle-length black coat. "This way."

Jake sized her up with a lengthy gaze raking up and down her leather mercenary's outfit. His gaze paused at her heaving breasts.

Nice gesture. Every girl needs some reassurance. He'd be a bundle of sexual frustration until he burned it off every forty-eight hours though.

He looked both ways down the hall.

As if he still fancied escape possible. "Nulvitian mercenaries can outrun any earthling in seconds. You're better off hearing what our commander has to say." Would he listen?

He shot her a standard earthling go-to-Hell stare.

Chapter Three

Jake struggled to control the need to jump the woman walking at his side as he followed the large male down the sterile passageway. What was going on with his brain? Some sort of carnal instinct throbbed in every cell of his body.

Just to thrust inside the sexy minx. Over and over. And her short tight leather, for lack of a better word, shirt didn't cover those god-damned skin-tight pants she wore. How could anyone restrain himself from running his hand across her curved ass, right to where he knew she had to be wetter than Niagra Falls. The vixen's scent was sex.

Sex.

The salty smell rooted deep inside his nostrils.

Why? Could every person on this ship smell it too? Here I am, walking through some fortress butt naked, and I don't mind. Something was seriously wrong here.

Or I am losing my mind.

The large man's black cape swung to the left.

A door whisked open.

The man turned his stoic orange gaze to meet Jake's and nodded toward the space beyond.

One look into the barren chamber cast with a sunset glow didn't calm his body's lust. Oh well. He headed toward the single plain bench anchored before a large window and the view beyond of stars in deep space.

The sound of clipping footfalls followed at his heels.

She stood there. Ready. Waiting.

His loin lurched.

What kind of shit was going down causing his body to react this way? Had she shot him up with some sort of drug?

"Be seated, Mr. Straightarrow," the man timbered.

Why sit? He pivoted to the quiet man.

She watched him where she stood at her boss's side.

Not one fraction of a sign of distress even danced upon her features. Didn't he cause the same unsettling sex-crazed reaction in her? Maybe she was some sort of sexual mercenary. Her game was to unravel opponents. Seduce them. Why? Forget winning, honey.

"Please sit, Mr. Straightarrow," the man said again.

"I prefer to stand."

The man nodded. "Always the warrior. Perhaps Red Kindrist's choice wasn't as rash as so many predicted."

So, I'm toilet paper stuck on his black boot? "Do you mind elaborating, or do you insult all of your prisoners?" Of course he did. Right before painful down-and-dirty interrogation.

A faint smile twisted into one of the man's cheeks. His gaze scanned him from head to toe and anchored back on Jake's. "You are every bit the mercenary, Mr. Straightarrow."

The perfect lead into here's-my-hot-poker or disembowelment? "So, what's your game?" Probably send in the whore to do a man's job.

“You’re from a special generation of earth children. We need your help.”

Jesus. Like in those movies where people are abducted to fight wars in outer space because they play video games so well. I don’t play video games much. “So what can I do for you?”

“You have powers beyond your earthling peers. Psychic abilities. Things maybe you wish not to admit. But you’ve built a life upon those powers and find yourself fighting the greater good. Always fighting.” The man’s black eyebrows arched slightly as if he could read Jake’s mind and delve through the history of memories tucked therein.

Was the commander Asian? Maybe not. Something. Definitely different with those eerie orange eyes. But the man’s piercing gaze and long nose reminded him of his people back on the reservation. The commander could hold his own with his unnerving quiet demeanor. Not today. Time to sniff out some life-saving information. “Tell me about my secret power. Tell me who you’d like me to be.”

“I need you to travel into a compound on a planet of telepaths.” The commander concluded with a defy-me blanket stare.

Red Trekaar shifted one of her black boots, her stoic stare never wavering.

Those blue eyes weren’t eerie and luminous like her boss’s eyes. No. Anything but magical. She was just the spy slut. Was the commander using her to distract him? To keep him from realizing that he never got an answer to his question? “Just tell me what this secret power is that I have.”

The man inhaled sharply. “You have heightened intuition. You’re able to read people. You may disagree with my assessment. But you wouldn’t be as skilled a mercenary if you didn’t use this power to your advantage. Mr. Straightarrow, none of my people, none of the rest of the universe’s psychics can read your mind. With your training and your intuition, you are more valuable to the free-thinking universe than even I am. You may even be the free universe’s savior.”

Then why do I feel like a horny manacled shit? “You expect me to believe this?”

The man’s gaze slid to the shadows across the room. “You must in time. Because there is no turning back for you.”

Red Kindrist blinked.

What for? Was she to blame? Or weak in this battle of who could remain in control? “I’d like to think over this deal. Decide if it’s something worth fighting for. You know, I just don’t kill people without a reason these days. Been there. Done that. I’m nobody’s patsy now. Don’t take this personal. But I don’t know if I believe your little story.”

* * * *

“He is stronger than you thought, Kindrist,” Goro said to her in mindspeak.

“No, commander. His will is the only one strong enough to enter Gameddaron. The only will strong enough to destroy this quadrant’s neural network. Believe me.” She knew Jake for what he was, a man of honor. Why else would a mercenary quit his day job to live in hiding for the rest of his life as a homeless person? Jake couldn’t kill without thinking his target deserved death. He was a mercenary with a conscience.

“He just doesn’t trust us,” Kindrist told Goro.

“I hate to be blunt, Red Kindrist, but I don’t need a mind reader to tell me that much.”

Goro didn’t look at her when sending his facetious reply telepathically. Talk about a day in the Blood Wars.

“Take him to The Chamber. He’ll feel more comfortable among his kindred until he

grasps our truth.” Goro pivoted and strode toward the door.

Camaraderie for her newly inducted soul mate was good medicine. As long as he steered clear of Darla’s rants in The Chamber.

Jake clenched his fists as Goro turned to depart.

Probably a sign of his internal battle to stand alert instead of pouncing her to mate. “I will take you to the other earthlings, Straightarrow.”

“Others?” he barely growled. “What do you want with us?”

The accusation only reiterated he had values. He was a grand protector. Perfect. “I’ve already explained the war and your psychic powers. Now, I will help you understand by sending you in among your brothers and sisters.” Holy Devros, if he didn’t find some understanding soon, the consequences would worsen exponentially. Especially since the clock ticked onward toward shape-shifting time.

* * * *

“I could care less about the rest of your prisoners.” Jake watched as the commander left him standing in the empty room with that woman. Her scent wafted around him, crawling under his skin, until he couldn’t think about anything but her. What was going on? She was temptation.

She exhaled loudly.

Almost like a sigh. Or sound of content you hear a woman make after climax. God, to lay her down and make her come. To get over this damned woody.

“I was ordered to take you to the recreation chamber,” she said.

A little recreation was just what she needed with those bulging breasts and tight pants.

“I hope we can learn to work together.” She stepped toward him, sauntering, swinging those damned hips.

His cock throbbed so hard his knees were about to buckle.

What would she do if I collapsed to the floor? This was all her idea anyway. Why would she care if I relieved myself? And wouldn’t she go along?

“What’s wrong, Straightarrow?” she asked, her head tilting her inviting mouth.

* * * *

Kindrist studied her mate. Straightarrow looked deep in the blood lust. Rigid and totally nude, he couldn’t hide his condition. The least I could do is release the tension for him. She reached out to stroke the length of his long hard shaft.

He didn’t budge.

Fully engorged, his manhood was. The veins begged to burst free along its length. If only he would look into her eyes. Show her that he needed her. To have a mate who wanted me.

His eyes stared across the room. Slowly, ever so slowly, his gaze slid to hers.

Hunger burned in those chocolate eyes.

Would he fight me? Or was he so lost in the blood lust that he could only submit to his carnal needs? Humans easily succumbed to the demands of were-mate marriage. But that never bothered mates. A mate would help release her partner’s tension through sex. Would he allow me to assist him? She slid her other palm across his cheek.

His nostrils flared.

Was he drawing breath to squelch the desire he couldn’t fight? I could help him. I can. He just needs to realize. She brushed her lips against his soft mouth and nibbled the lower edge.

He grabbed her, pinning her against his solid body, right against his shaft, and thrust his tongue inside her mouth.

Gods, to have him devour her. She thrust her hands into his long hair and begged him to take her with his tongue.

He shoved her down to the cold metal floor, climbing on top of her, his hands everywhere pulling her clothes off. And then nothing stood between them.

His mouth kissed scorching life across her skin.

Why wasn't he inside her? Didn't he know Destiny wanted them together? She grabbed his back and pulled his shoulders to block the overhead lighting.

He shoved her knee aside and rammed his manhood inside her, all the way to her soul, burying the amazing root.

Blessed penetration. Now to get him moving.

He watched her for a moment.

As if he didn't know whether or not he wanted to lie with her.

His hardness lurched inside her.

Take pity on me, universe. I need my mate to finish my mission. She wrapped her legs around his narrow waist and rocked her hips.

His eyes clamped tight. He leaned his head back and began the sacred dance of life.

They melded their movements into one synchronized motion until she couldn't help but cry out and moan at the delicious way her body twisted. With each of her gasps, he plunged harder and faster, touching her so intimately that the world ceased to exist. It didn't matter how the air seemed to no longer fill her longs. But she had Jake inside her.

His arms stiffened, and he pumped so hard she almost came off the floor with the bliss racking her womb. She dug her nails into his back and matched his moves until they both stretched to their body's limits and laid still gasping for air.

Jake heaved left, rolling while bending an arm, landing on his back.

Would he talk to me? She waited.

A long time. He probably just needed more time to warm up to Destiny's call to duty. Since he wasn't up to discussing life, she yanked on her leather pants, shirt, and boots.

* * * *

The door whisked open leading from the sterile corridor into a chamber so full of plants, rocks, and running water that Jake felt like he was in a garden. Good thing if the water was icy cold. His hard-on needed some down time.

"Welcome to The Chamber." Red Kindrist poked his back.

She couldn't be a spy used for seduction with her irritating jab.

"Earthlings spend countless hours here, Straightarrow. However, I'm unaware of who is present because we can't probe the minds of earthlings. And, if you'd like to depart, you will be monitored by the earring in your ear."

So they had tagged him. What else had they done to him while he was unconscious? At least, this chamber wasn't a barren cell.

A bird twittered off in song.

Birds too? What a strange detention area.

"Please, Mr. Straightarrow, make yourself at home here." Her fingertip nudged him again. "You'll find some earthlings enjoying nature. And I will bring you some clothes."

Anything to get a breather from the need to throw her down and kill the adrenaline coursing through his loins. Time away from her might help him think up an escape plan. He stepped into the cavernous chamber.

The door whisked shut at his heels.

Was she there? His body hadn't relaxed. She had to be in the room. He shot a glance over his shoulder.

Only the silver door stood in his shadow.

Fine. Time to think up Plan A.

A chilly draft taunted his bare ass.

How strange was it that a man in survival mode didn't give a damn about clothes? My gutter thoughts are probably overriding my sanity.

Movement among the drooping fronds caught his eye to the left.

A woman. Brunette. Peering out from behind a wide green leaf. Great. As if one woman wasn't enough.

"Who are you?" she blurted.

So much for her exhibiting a bit of caution. "Tell me who you are first. Maybe I'll answer."

She scanned the area around them and anchored a gaze upon his. "You must be just in from earth." She waved a hand at him. "Waiting for clothing."

And we're psychic? So much for the claim of winning this war. At least this woman had normal brown eyes. He planted a palm on his hip. "I take it that you don't read minds."

Her gaze pinched a moment as if she caught the invisible side of his verbal slap. "Not at all. My power is levitating objects."

On second hand, Eve in the Garden of Evil just might be useful in affecting an escape. "Where are the others?"

"Others?" She shook her head, keeping her gaze anchored on his.

"The rest of us captured earthlings."

"The fools come and go." She stepped out from behind the protective foliage. "Like I'm that stupid." She chuckled. "To believe they are fighting a war for the greater good. I know what they are. What they want me to become." She pointed a finger at him. "And you'd be wise to be wary." She turned and disappeared into the wall of vegetation.

Well, he could head the Club of Wary given his knack for survival and his intuitive gut. He followed the vanishing woman into the trees.

Why was she leaving? Especially after dropping all those clues. And what exactly did he need to be wary of? "What do they want me to become?" he called at the bobbing branches.

The limbs slapped his arms and legs.

Apparently, the trees didn't care for him. But plants weren't the culprits in this round of mind games.

"A creature," she yelled. "An abomination. God spoke little of these things. But it's what he did say that meant the world."

Great. He had unknowingly jumped aboard the Sunday-school wagon. One would expect to find different modes of thought out in space. Some things are just too damned hard to shake. "What are you talking about?"

"They claim I am Goro's mate. Can you believe it? Like I would hop in the sack with someone I never met."

Was she taken against her will, too? "Wait. Are you saying you've been raped by the man?"

"No." Her voice droned into an ephemeral sound. "He says if I choose to be his mate, I can save the free universe from oppression."

That's pretty much the fool's standard debriefing. He shoved another foot through the

soft undergrowth.

But other earthlings didn't buy the story either. Just why was this woman talking given the choice? "They told me after the fact. I'm supposedly mated to the whore spy. What do you know about this?"

The fronds of another enormous tree parted before him. The woman's brown stare almost pitied him. "They're hypocrites. They take all of your freedom of choice in order to fight this war for freedom. And then expect you to buckle under the pressure. To give in. But you can be stronger. Find peace in the knowledge you are a son of God." She turned back.

The fronds fell together blocking the back of her head.

If she'd just stop babbling about God, he could get a grip on this situation. He took another step in the crunching leaf litter and followed her deeper into the forest. "Can you elaborate here? Just what will I become?"

The sound of the branches slapping against one another lead him to fall into her invisible footsteps.

"In the earliest of Christian history, it began with umbilical cords. People feared what would become of the blood and burned them in ritual offerings to God. The act prevented any binding of their children to extraterrestrials before the child's first day had passed. And then the cross appeared. Little did the ancients try to point out its true symbolism was to remember the blood sacrifices of earlier times."

Maybe now was a good time to start praying to God for this demented woman to suddenly have the power of communication. Talk about miracles.

"But I have seen the light," she called from wherever she hid inside the foliage. "I understand that these extraterrestrials have been harvesting humans for millennia to fight this war. I know the blood lust is real. And I will never fall to the level of a blood fucker."

Chapter Four

Yep, Jake thought. This version of Eve is nuts in this twisted Garden of Eden. But she's probably full of useful information. He shoved a tree's frond into a shaded area after her.

The space was topped with some natural dome made from living branches. Maybe just a screen. But something about it looked living. A creek ran through the tranquil space. The woman stood beside the trickling water, peering over her shoulder at him. She wore black leather. The same attire of the seductress claiming to need his help.

Could she be trusted?

"You're welcome to stay here as long as you like," she announced.

A bell rang through the dense foliage.

She turned back to the silver water running through her space. Or home. Or whatever she fancied it. "Your clothes are waiting at The Chamber's entrance."

Pants would be nice. But finding his way back and forth might be trickier than worth the trouble.

"I know you think I'm insane. Everyone does. But when your bones twist and you grow fur, you'll remember my words."

What? "Is that the punishment the Bible states for whatever I've been inducted into?"

She pivoted, anchoring a stoic poker face at him unlike anything he'd seen before and crossed her arms over her chest. "You're going to shape shift into a were-wolf."

Okay. "Now, I've heard everything." Maybe boots and pants were better friends than psycho earth woman.

"Legends serve a purpose, my friend. You are about to learn what legends are made of." She shot him a smile.

Whatever she implied had to be crap. "Werewolves, burning umbilical cords, blood fuckers? My head's spinning. Take pity on a man who doesn't even have a pair of pants. Can you just lay everything on the line?"

One of her brown eyebrows arched. "The blood. You need the blood to keep your sanity. If you can't have your mate's blood, then the only alternative is the blood of your people. That's why umbilical cord blood was an option in early Christian history. Until the Church outlawed the practice."

The Church plus monster movies weren't a cup of Joe worth chugging. "You're not making sense."

She sighed. "The blood of these more-evolved psychics is too strong for us. Chemically different. That's why there haven't been any children from blood-fucker marriages. The extraterrestrials tried to breed a partially-psychic generation two millennia ago to fight the Blood Wars. Their efforts failed. We've got some interesting variation in earth blood types now. But nothing else to show of the hybridization attempts."

This chick was whacko. "So, I'm a were-wolf?" Better to get pants than chat with Ditz. He turned back the way he came through the trees.

"It's a conspiracy. Dare to trust those who share information with you. For what is hidden will bite you in the ass. Literally. You can't shape shift back until you've champed on a

few bites of earthling or your soul mate.”

A limb slapped his buttock.

Fire burned his skin.

He rubbed the sting.

“Mark my words, blood fucker, the sons of God took unto themselves the daughters of man. And Ezekiel saw the wheel!”

Adios Sunday school. Hello pants.

The broken foliage wasn't hard to follow back to The Chamber's entrance. One would have thought his permanent woody would have given up the ghost with each step of the long hike. Not likely. They must have injected me with some kind of liquid stimulator. Even worse, the whore spy was waiting beside his blue jeans, shirt, and combat boots, all piled atop the single plain bench.

Her stance spoke of anything but seduction. She stood at ease, hands on her sexy curvaceous hips as if she were about to whip out a pistol to win a duel for the right to own him. The dominatrix. Wasn't she even slightly in the need to bump uglies? This damned blood-fucker thing had to be one-sided. She probably expected him to drop and give her twenty at a moment's notice. Or everything was some grand farce to mess with his mind. Or body. Babies. Was this about hybrids? God, he was a freaking stag, bull, or stud. There was no way he was giving into his body's fascination. Or their expectations.

His skin prickled and crawled.

Like something feral lurked under his skin. Or was that his dependable gut talking? This woman bearing clothing couldn't be trusted. Time to covet the nut-case's warning.

Red Kindrist studied him with a blank expression.

She was good. Ruthless. And holding his broke-in jeans. A fool would let those pants get away. He strode to his clothes beside her high-heeled black boot, grabbed his favorite pants, and thrust a foot into one squirming leg.

Silence toyed with The Chamber.

Not good given his little friend wouldn't just shove into his pants. The bastards were certainly having a good laugh watching him struggle to hide his affliction. They wouldn't get to see anything else. For damned sure. He shimmied everything into place, silently thanked his old friend zipper, and worked on the boot's lacings until he was fully dressed.

“I'll show you to your personal quarters if you're ready to go,” she stated.

Personal space? Or solitary confinement? Who knew what waited given this bizarre natural containment area. Some free time to think all this crap out might be good. He unfolded to look down where her black hair split neatly down one side of the crown of her head. “Lead the way.”

She stepped off toward the door and led him through a spaghetti tangle of identical sterile corridors until a side door whisked open to reveal a dimly-lit empty room with one simple bench in front of a small closed portal that had to be a window.

Red Kindrist sashayed across the space, shaking her hips like a streetwalker, and reached for some almost invisible buttons. A table unfolded from the wall. Some sort of rectangular platform opened as well.

She turned to him, assuming that at-ease stance of a mercenary cloaked in skin-tight black leather. “A table and bed. That's it for deep-space life.”

Hell. Both would do with one's little friend stoked to the max. Throw her down. Get dirty.

His pants pulled a hair at his crotch.

Damn them all. Deep space beyond what lay inside the whore was something he never requested. The bitch. His boots snapped up the distance between them in seconds.

Wasn't she worried? I'll show the smug bitch. He grabbed her shoulders and rammed her against the barren gray walls.

She only stared at him with those clear blue eyes.

"What gave you the right to suck me into this war?" Would she even answer?

His gut twisted.

So much for intuition.

But it would have been better if she did the talking. He slid his fingers around the soft skin of her white throat and squeezed. "I'm waiting."

Blood throbbed in her veins.

To bite her neck. To suck the soft skin of a woman. To chew it up and eat it.

The lighting danced a bit on her jet black hair, almost forming a faint red rainbow effect in its reflection. She watched him for a moment, blinked, and mouthed something.

Useless explanation. He shoved her aside and turned to the closed window.

"You could never know the danger your planet is in," she growled.

"Danger from you and your mobsters." He saw the button to the portal and pushed the smooth square.

The flat cover whisked open to a never-ending expanse of stars and multi-colored mist of a nebula.

"Without the protection from the free-thinking universe, earth would already be enslaved to Voldon."

Really? He turned.

She rubbed her throat and glared at him. Her hair now completely flared a fire-engine red.

"Look long and hard, Mr. Straightarrow. I'm known as Red Kindrist because, when I get pissed, as you earthlings love to coin the phrase, my hair burns with anger. I may not be able to read your mind. But you'll certainly read mine when it behooves you."

So she was ticked off now. Good. "Then define blood fucker."

Her eyes slowly closed and opened in disgust as she stared at him.

Would she answer with her poker hand? Or hold out for more money?

"I see you've spoken to Darla." She inhaled and immediately resumed her at-ease stance.

"You were explaining."

She licked her lips.

Full lips. Red lips. Perfect for....

His groin throbbed where it was safely hidden inside his pants.

Freaking hard-on.

"If you and I don't share blood and sex, we both will die. Blood fucker is the derogatory term for us. But I am a loyal assassin for the free-thinking universe, and I have given everything, including my virgin ass to The Cause for my people and yours. I ask you to please not use the term when speaking to me or anyone else on sacred mission to protect life everywhere. Because our blood, our unification, is the most sacred thing next to free thought in this existence. We are soul mates."

She stood motionless once her mouth closed, her body waiting as if she needed to hear a command.

Maybe she was being honest. From her side, she could very well believe what she claimed. And intuition was laying low. "Then what of Darla? Is she this ship's earth freak exhibit?"

"No." She stepped sideways and turned to walk toward the empty table. "She's confused. Very confused. Probably terrified. Every now and then one inductee won't cooperate."

Cooperation is a joke with this blackmail.

Red Kindrist turned a conspiratorial mask his direction, the red marks from his fingers still red beneath her chin. But her hair was calming back to jet black. "For Darla, she has abandoned her destiny as well as Goro's. Legend speaks of a man from his planet bonding with new blood. Bringing new hope to the universe with a miracle child. But Darla will have nothing to do with him." She pushed another button and a bench emerged beneath the table. She sat, her fingers interlaced atop the table.

What held back the rest of the information? "How do you know Goro is this man?"

"He's like me." She shot him a glance, rose, and strode toward the door. "I have some work to finish. I'll return shortly."

His gut flopped.

What was she hiding? "How is Goro like you?"

The door whisked open.

She turned to him, stepping through the doorway. "He is the only survivor from an attack on his world."

The door shut.

Should he believe the woman who shanghaied him? Rather, pity the worm stuck on the hook? And just who was the worm? Darla could have been one of Kindrist's decoys to lure him into joining The Cause. All of this may be another level of Kindrist's game.

* * * *

"Jovull's returned, Kindrist. His mate was killed," Forty Three said in mindspeak.

The dark shadow of the operator's pity hung inside Kindrist's mind where she stopped dead still and stared at the blank corridor wall. Not my teacher. "No."

Her gut sank.

Warm tears stung her eyes.

"My deepest sympathies, Kindrist. He's asked if you've returned from earth. He requests to speak with you."

She blinked back the wetness. "Where is he?"

"He refused to go seek refuge in the infirmary. He's waiting in his quarters."

"Thank you, my friend."

"Kindrist, it's been two days. I'm sorry, Kindrist. You must hurry."

"Curse the Voldon scum who took his mate." She stretched her legs and ran through *The Seeker's* halls.

When the door opened, she could see the older blond in nothing but his black pants. He'd removed his boots and sat with his back to her, his palms on the bench as if he meditated, looking out at the universe's dancing stars. As if he waited for Questra to return to him.

Never again. His wife was dead.

The door whisked shut behind her. "I'm sorry, dear friend. I hurried," she said in mindspeak.

He swung one leg at a time over the bench to face her with a genuine smile and pushed

into her mind. *"I am not the last of my people. Although, you are like the child I never had. My deepest regrets for that shake of the universe, Red. Questra would hate to be here. Hate to be the one telling you the same thing. She loved you like her own child as well."*

Her stomach curdled.

To think another thought would loosen her tears. She stared at his squared jaw.

"I heard news you took a mate," he grinned.

How could he be so serene? Forty-eight hours without soul-mate blood meant he was on the verge of shape shifting. She took a step toward him.

He held up a palm. *"Remain at a distance. When I begin to shift, please leave. I will spare my comrades and end this myself."*

Blessed stars! Jovull was a warrior to behold. He wouldn't lower himself to roaming his home planet and harvesting blood from his people. Not even those four planets of peoples on Voldon's side whose blood would suffice. He knew the risk he took in protecting free thinkers. Only a noble death for him. She nodded. *"Straightarrow is in transition."*

His long blond hair swayed against his muscled shoulders.

He chuckled softly. *"I knew you would choose a man who defied those in power. Give him time. He will come to his senses. Who couldn't when mated to such a beauty? Add your brains and your heart to the mix and you make old wise men dream of their youth."*

He was too kind to worry about easing her fears with death at his door. Everything would be lost with Jovull's death.

Reason.

Patience.

Friendship.

But that was the way of were-assassin business.

"I don't want to hear those thoughts again," he scolded.

So he broke free-thinking law in his last moments. Perhaps she would bully into one's thoughts herself. Her gaze met his.

Not a twinge of distress danced in his eyes.

He shrugged. *"It may be rude to eavesdrop. But I'm short on time."* He shot her an amazing grin. *"Questra took out Voldon's Quadrant XIV space hopper. It'll take months for them to set up another wormhole relay in that region. If you can convince this inductee of yours to cooperate, Gameddaron awaits. Disable the neural network. I know you can do it."*

"For you and Questra." She nodded. *"I shall avenge you both."*

He reached into his pants' pocket and tossed something across the floor at her boots.

Questra's locket rattled on a chain.

"Hurry," he said.

Memories of the years she studied under her mentor flooded her mind.

The holidays.

The three times she beat the couple with weapons.

The loss of their four stillborns.

"None is lost when one fights with friends of your caliber," he mind spoke.

Blessed Devros, justice proved cruel.

"Stop staring at it, Red. Our pictures are inside. Every time she left for a mission, she gave it to me. It was her last wish to bequeath it to you."

She slid her gaze from the warm bauble to where he sat with whitened knuckles clutching the seat.

The change clutched at his soul.

“Take it, Red.” His jaw began to clench, the muscles tightening with the shifting. *“You and your mate are destined to give rise to new legends. The future is in you. And now you take a piece of Questra’s soul to fuel the path to tomorrow.”*

The metal’s cold hardness spoke nothing of vital essence. Only death. She squeezed the rigid oval.

“I feel it,” he lowered himself to speak with his mouth as if he feared someone might overhear his thoughts. “Ashes to ashes. From dusk to dust. Never to live, love, and laugh. Remember the children on those scorched planets. Love and light, my child.” His shoulder jerked.

No time remained with a male mercenary shifting before her eyes. She grabbed the locket and met his resolute gaze. *“I shall never forget, father.”* She spun toward the corridor.

The door slid shut at her heels.

“May vengeance warm your heart and soul, my child,” Jovull whispered inside her head. *“Tell the child of legend I dreamed of him often. I felt his intelligence. I heard his laughter. I wish I could have seen my grandson. You will be the parent I could never be. Love and—”*

His thoughts were gone. She stared at the silver door.

He’d shifted or taken his life.

Her heart sank.

She squeezed the locket.

Chapter Five

Every tap of Kindrist's footfalls drummed out an unwanted farewell as she walked away down the sterile corridor. Jovull's wit and patience would never be shared with refugees turned mercenaries again.

But to hide before I lose my sanity.

To run.

To escape. She inhaled deeply and stepped faster.

Shit. Someone would detect her emotion.

Where could a person hide from psychics on this death ship? She crammed the locket into her pocket.

"Kindrist, do you need someone?" Forty-three asked in mindspeak. "*I can meet you somewhere.*"

Forget formalities with requesting permission to enter minds. "*I'd prefer to be alone.*"

"Everyone has reported to their quarters," the operator paused, "*in reverence,*" she added as if she feared stating Jovull's reality.

"*No one is in docking bay 12, Kindrist.*"

A place to be alone. "*Love and light, Forty-three.*"

Something squeezed her throat.

She couldn't swallow.

Jovull was almost gone. When would the sun rise again in the darkness of space?

The silence of sadness echoed off the empty corridor walls, sucking her along to docking bay 12 for the funerary viewing. The soft hushing sound of air flushing through the ventilation ducts insisted all crew members show reverence.

So much horrid silence. She faced the docking bay's entrance.

A loud sucking pop sounded.

The internal hatch's popping seal. And Jovull's looming funeral.

He would be interred to the sacred ocean of space at the moment of his planet of origin's sunset. Forget banners. Forget music. Only silence would see him home, his voice lost to those who cherished his friendship and guidance. She stepped through the exterior docking-bay hatch and crossed the empty chamber.

Each metallic ring of her clicking heels held no promises of the future.

Hard truth lay in a mercenary's job.

Speak of a mercenary's life to planet-huggers and one rarely heard tales of funerals—the ugly side of the war. Glory. They always sang of The Cause's exploits and progress. But buried deep inside the cheers rested the undeclared memories of all who gave their life for free thinkers.

Unspoken.

Understood.

Cursed silence. She climbed atop some protruding sheet of metal and stared out at the beckoning stars of deep space.

From sunrise to sunset. From dusk to dust. The stars called to every mercenary aboard, taunting with the memories of home life warmed by the beloved light of days, romantic sunsets,

and laughter. Reminding every crew member of their mortality in the Blood Wars.

Life, a ludicrous tragedy.

The night sky moved to the left like a rolling screen as she stared out at the brilliant pinpoints of stars.

So, the ship was underway. Nobody had announced the ship embarked toward a wormhole relay. Probably because of Jovull.

Had he taken his life yet? She flicked the locket open.

A hologram shot up featuring Jovull and Questra.

Probably made five years ago. Both smiled, arm in arm. Happy. How insane that they had found happiness in such a traumatic existence. If only I can find that same happiness in marriage.

The alarm rang thrice.

Goodbye, Jovull. She snapped the locket shut and lowered her head following Nulvitian tradition.

Her heart raced.

Never to live, love, and laugh again.

Hot tears stung her eyes.

Silence dragged on forever until the alarm rang again.

The stars beckoned him home. She lifted her gaze back to the heavens.

A cloud of ash jettisoned into space past her portal.

Outside *The Seeker's* hull. How fitting those who seek shall unlock the greatest mystery of all. Who knew what waited beyond the realm of the living?

Or was Voldon right?

Was this nothing more than Jovull's end?

Her heart sank.

Warm tears smeared her view of the great beyond. She stuffed the locket back into her pocket.

Ashes to ashes. From dusk to dust. Never more to live, love, or laugh. I will remember you more than the murdered children, my friend.

* * * *

Jake could have pissed a trail before the window in his quarters where he paced, trying to work out a plan. His bladder was screaming. But caged dogs wouldn't defile their quarters by peeing anywhere. Unfortunately, his bladder was on the verge of mutiny.

Where was his warden?

The damned door wouldn't open.

His happy-place private room had turned into a cell when Red Kindrist disappeared all of twelve hours ago. Right after taking her sex stud out for a run around the corral.

How could any captive sleep? The ship seemed to be moving. Or points of light in space moved. Like he knew what was going on. The last frigging time he even thought about astronomy was when he was a kid. Talk about being in deep crap. Especially since his ramrod-straight cock he'd jammed inside his pants hadn't given up the ghost.

And now he needed to piss.

Where's the fucking john? Some draft into the ultimate foreign legion. So what was up with the female warden? She dragged him aboard this ship. For what? Sex and blood? A part of him was willing. With or without consent. But why give her what she wanted? Why succumb to the level of a blood fucker and lose all one had of his dignity? Just what is in this for

me?

His gut snarled.

Food. These people obviously starved their prisoners into cooperation.

Just get out. Get home. He turned to the cold glass portal.

Nothing but black space and points of light out there. Home was gone.

Talk about screwed. Literally and physically. How could a man who knew nothing about flying anything more than a kite find his way back to earth now? Insane Darla might possibly pull off levitating an aircraft. She'd certainly want to leave. Well, if that freak could escape, she would have by now. Not an option. He sank his butt onto the hard bench.

His muscles twitched.

Sitting still was becoming impossible. He rose to his feet and continued pacing.

Would he be weak for complying with their demands? And just what did those demands entail? He needed a weapon. A tool. A pencil. Nothing but air rested on the tabletop and benches. One blanket and a small pillow rested atop the bed.

The door whisked open.

Red sauntered into the room with jet-black hair.

Good to see some folks on this cruise ship to the war zone were having a great day.

She glanced his direction and walked to the bed.

Pictures of her with her legs spread flashed in his mind. The memory of her wet heat....

His body ached to mount her.

And to take those muscled legs and wrap them around his waist. God, to end the madness of his screaming body.

She stretched out on her side upon his bed with her shoulder and the swell of her hip thrust toward the barren ceiling.

Taking a rest? Was she just going to lie there? Present herself to him? No. She wasn't asking. And Jake Straightarrow was no rapist. Even if he couldn't control himself these days.

"Sleep while you can, Straightarrow. The ship will reach the wormhole relay in four earth days. We can't afford to lose any sleep."

Orders? Like a new recruit would follow after being drafted. Was she asking him to crawl into bed with her? He turned to the window and watched the stars scroll by.

So they headed somewhere. "Where are we going?"

"We'll talk in the morning."

Not after he waited forever to speak to someone. He pivoted and faced her tight leather-cloaked shoulders. "No. Tell me now."

Pain knifed his bladder.

He shifted his footing, hoping the change of position would ease up on his latest problem.

She sighed, shoving off the bed, swinging one boot to the floor, and met his gaze with a look of disappointment. "We're heading to Gameddaron. We've got to take out Voldon's neural network. I can't do it. They can detect me. That's why we recruited you. You can fly in under their radar."

She seemed tired, drained. Maybe she just said anything to get some sleep. "How do I know you're telling the truth?" And did truth really matter now?

She rubbed her shoulder and wagged her head. "You're the intuitive one. I assumed you'd feel it." She twisted back into her sleeping position. "Get some sleep, Straightarrow."

How could anyone sleep with a boner? Was there a shower in this cell? Not to mention a guy could piss in the shower.

His gut snarled again.

How about bread and water? "I'm hungry."

She didn't move. "It's on the way."

Well good to see she decided to take care of her sex slave. "Where's the latrine in this joint?"

She shoved up, almost dejected in her apparent exhaustion, and climbed from the bed. "Forgive me, Straightarrow. It's been an accursed day." She walked to a point near the entrance, pushed what had to be a button, and a door opened across the room.

Better take a whiz before she closed the door. He strode to the entrance to find a small metallic sink protruding from a wall inside the tiniest closet.

Forget dreams of a cold shower. "Where's the toilet?"

The round of her breast brushed against his arm.

Damn, these pants were growing tighter every second. Cold water would fix the problem. "Does this prisoner get to shower?"

She reached for a button he could actually see. "You're not a prisoner, Straightarrow. You're one of the most honored members of this crew now." She rolled her gaze to his where her eyes were inches from his chin. "Earthlings have more status than the average mercenary."

Really? "Then, I'd like this ship to return me to earth."

She pointed toward another basin anchored to the wall. "There's the toilet. Press the button to eject whatever you void." She pointed at another button. "Here's your shower."

"Nice game. Just screw me, tell me I'm God, and ignore me."

She raked her long fingers through her thick hair. "I realize my needs aren't as demanding as yours right now. But I'm really tired." The heat of her body pulled away.

With one step, she disappeared back into the room.

Talk about the runaround. He relieved his bladder of which did nothing for his current involuntarily invigorated state, crammed his hard-on back inside his pants, and found a cart at the chamber's open door.

Red Kindrist took the handle from a white-robed blond male and rolled the squeaking wheels toward the table.

"Please sit, Straightarrow."

How courteous. Sitting was rough, but he descended.

His wicked pants twisted his sensitive peon.

Talk about the perfect setup for her. She fucks the man of her choice, tucks him into an inescapable spaceship, and gets a permanent over-sexed consort for her roommate. Why do I suddenly want to be the girl? Oh, that's right. She's in charge.

She slid a covered metal plate across the table toward him. "These are carrots, green beans, and pot roast. Foods borrowed initially from the first missions to earth two thousand years ago. Many people find them satisfying. I hope you will find the choice of meals pleasing."

What, twigs and scraps of hide?

She lifted the cover to reveal a meal that looked like it came from some small down-home-cooking restaurant. In a snap, she produced one set of two-prong forks, plopping one down by his dish, and filled two long-stemmed glasses with some clear turquoise liquid.

Could she be trusted? Was the food drugged? Probably laced with more peon stimulant.

She studied her own identical meal. "I apologize for this being our first meal together. I would have preferred to do something more exotic and celebratory. Unfortunately, the universe

had other plans today.” She stabbed a carrot with one prong on her fork and popped it into her mouth.

Full lips. Chewing, sexy lips. God he was screwed. Then, his boss looked tired. Weak. And now she apologized? “So you’re sorry?”

She shook her head and lifted her gaze to his. “We’re married by earth standards. Mated. I should be helping you. Today just hasn’t gone well.”

Jesus. I’m married to an alien and drafted as her big sex stud, but she’s had the bad day. “Why does amen come to mind?”

One of her curved black eyebrows arched.

Guilty by association? “No. That statement had nothing to do with Darla.”

She shoved a hunk of dripping beef into her mouth and stared out the portal.

What a display of double standards. “Why don’t you like Darla? She’s just defending her beliefs. Isn’t that what free thinkers are into? Freedom of thinking? Or is that term an honorary oxy-moron?”

She waved her fork like a dismissive finger. “My friend died today so that you can think what you will. So, I encourage you to think like there’s no tomorrow. Whatever that tomorrow may entail.”

So, a wise sex slave was supposed to put out and shut up? Or destroy some neural network. “Oh, things are getting much clearer now. I’m to replace your buddy on the battlefield, right?”

“If you so choose. Nobody will make you. I selected you because you’re honorable, Straightarrow. As your name implies, you shoot straight and true. We can’t afford to make mistakes in this game. People die when we make mistakes.” Her defiant stare wouldn’t allow him to turn away.

In other words, I’ll make her look bad if she doesn’t convince me to fight her battles. “That’s your argument? I wake up with a chronic boner and hear I’m supposed to drink your blood to remedy whatever the problem encompasses? Am I supposed to buy your story when you’re expecting me to passively accept becoming your sex slave?” Using the term blood fucker probably would have made a better point.

She shoved up from the table and stepped away, staring at the black expanse of space beyond their portal. “I can see you’re coming around.”

Like he was an ox one could yoke. What about all the coincidences any stooge would question? “I don’t get it, Red. You eat earth food and speak English. There are too many coincidences here. Why don’t you cough up the rest of the story? Convince me all is as you claim.”

Her long hair stilled. She paused.

The sensual mass didn’t change color though. If her day were bad enough to warrant mental fatigue, perhaps she could be trusted with spilling the beans out of desperation to crawl back into bed to catch a few winks.

She silently returned to her seat, not looking at him. “When a mercenary joins The Cause, he chooses the planet from which he will select a mate. That planet then becomes his focus. My English teacher was one of my best teachers before he died honorably. That’s killed in action to earth folk. I have no need of learning a language other than that of my people because I can communicate telepathically with psychic beings of a higher-evolutionary state, including those of Voldon’s forces. That’s what this war is about. Voldon insists on tapping into thoughts of free thinkers. He’s beyond narcissistic. He enslaves humanoids of lesser

psychic evolutionary status hoping to create hybrids he can control. Earthlings are one of those peoples. So, I chose earth as my glory planet and specialized in earth studies to select a mate.” She plucked another morsel of shiny carrot from the plate and shoved it between her lips.

Okay, now she was talking.

“Can you help me turn Darla around?” she asked.

For real? “I barely know you. But I guess I know you more than her. Why should I help you?”

“To help her. She’s confused. Lost.”

The last point somehow resounded with sympathy. Yeah. Right. He tried not to chuckle. “For The Cause, right? Does everyone get shanghaied into this position of respect I’ve been honored with?”

Her brow twisted. “You’re the only earthling seduced in two centuries. It’s a risky form of induction since earth’s focus on individualism—”

Something would give soon. The truth would surface. “Like I’m supposed to believe that. Especially in Darla’s case. What’s up with her? She says she’s still un-mated to Goro.”

“Most have time to fall in love with their mates. There’s always time. But Darla was in a situation requiring assistance. Goro pulled her aboard the ship to save her. And with you, I spent over two years observing human males. No matter which other Violet Children the operators sent me to study, I was always drawn back to you.”

A guy can’t knock an alien for having good taste. “So you just decided to induct me into The Cause?”

“The day approaches when legend claims your people will evolve at a faster rate. More and more earth children were born Violet Children over the past ten years. It’s a mental phase shift, so to speak. And if they can be persuaded to believe in Voldon’s story.... We have to bring down Voldon’s neural network before the uninitiated learn of the battle and hear his lies. Before it’s too late.”

Alas, the truth. Earthlings weren’t intelligent enough to defend themselves. Or were they? These people might very well be the bad guys. Just what did they hide from earth? Better to play this hand of poker to discover what lay ahead.

* * * *

Kindrist watched Straightarrow chew a mouthful of green beans. He’d immediately grown quiet with the point about his people’s imminent planetary evolution. If only she could probe his less-evolved mind. Know what darted around in his thoughts.

“So what is it that we earthlings won’t understand about this Voldon?” He anchored an inquisitive stare on her.

Without blood from their union, he had to be edgy. Lustful. How could he just sit there so calmly? But he’d heard enough for one day. Enough to rationalize. All he needed now was a few drops of her blood. “There are other things that are more helpful for you to know at the moment. Things that will help you understand about survival. Why don’t I tell you about our marriage?”

His eyebrows arched for a moment. “Sure. Why not?” He smiled.

Such a strange display of curious behavior had to show he began to realize she spoke truth. “I can end the desire that haunts mates. I can show you how the bonding is more like treating diabetes than attacking prey.”

He looked back at his food, shoving a piece of brown beef through gravy. “Prey? I’m prey? Or are you?”

The term was a foolish choice on her part. She really needed to be more cautious in explaining his new situation. “Not literally. Figuratively, as you earthlings love to say. The blood exchange can be simple, not aggressive, purely clinical.”

He held his fork with the tongs parallel to his meat. “You mean I can cut this meat like so.” He cut the lump in half. “Or,” he grabbed one dripping hunk of meat with the fingers of his other hand and crammed it between his teeth, “I can bite it in half?”

The implication rang quite clear in his barbaric display. Darla planted these ideas about mating in his mind. “Our sexual union is much deeper than that.” Now to prove his assessment wrong. She shoved one sleeve a few inches up her arm, grabbed the hilt of her knife tucked into her boot, rose, stood over her glass of Nulvitian marriage wine, and thrust the stinging blade into her arm in a place that was less likely to bleed profusely.

Forget the searing pain. The man just needed a bit of what his body craved. Medicine. He studied her blood-letting display.

Dark blood ran along the blade. She pulled the edge from her skin and stirred the wine with the sharp tip until the blood mixed with the alcohol.

A Beast Tamer, a drink that even the wildest mate would guzzle wholeheartedly. She slid the glass to him.

Would he refuse?

Could he refuse? The smell of her blood had to unsettle him. Another twenty-four hours and he’d chase her down to bite her with his fangs.

He stared at the sacred liquid. “So, I’m supposed to suck it down?”

“You speak with great ease. Don’t you yearn for the offering? My blood is the only blood that will satiate you. It will settle your hormones allowing you to think more clearly.”

“You mean lose the boner?” He chuckled and matched her stare. “Blood plus fucker. What a lovely term.”

Curse Darla. Words were wasted on this inductee tonight. Let his blood boil tomorrow. He’d bed her for relief before taking what she willingly gave in his wine. She turned to the bed.

Chapter Six

Jake's mouth watered where he sat across the table from the bloodied mixture. The succulent smell of blood wasn't what he remembered from a lifetime of fistfights and accidents back on earth. Now the metallic tang rooted in his nostrils with a sweetness that begged he chug-a-lug.

His mouth watered again.

Drink it and cave. To give in meant he relinquished the last vestige of choice he clutched.

But the scent called to him.

Nausea roiled in his gut.

Was that an intuitive sign to abstain?

She settled into her chair, shoving the blade back in its boot.

Funny thing about the glass's contents. His captor blurred into the background behind the drink. Faded into a smear beyond the magic concoction.

"Take it, Straightarrow. My gift of peace to you, my husband."

Husband? He shook his head and forced his gaze back to meet hers above the sparkling glass. Whatever she was up to with this ridiculous baited trap would not get him humping in the sack.

She flung her long hair back over her head. "I'm getting some sleep now. You do what's right for you."

Her curvaceous hips swung left and right, all the back to the bed where she unbuckled the leather straps on her boots and lined them up on the floor beside the bed like the habits of a good little soldier.

God, take the pants off now. Then the shirt. If she did, he'd be on top of her. Pounding home.

She stretched out with her back to him.

Ready for him. God to run his hand between those firm lean legs. The heat. The wetness....

Really, was there anything to lose without a way home? Why not buckle to the insanity? At least, enough to function with a brain cell or two working in one's favor. He ran a fingertip around the slick curved glass rim.

Sip from the vessel or wait and rip his wife's throat to get what he knew was the only way out of this mess. Rather, what would happen to him after he shifted into a creature? Would they kill him? After all, she claimed he was some kind of mercenary star. Anyway, he could observe these free thinkers, biding his time. Decide if they were good or bad. And that meant finding some way to balance control with the predicament his peon got him into. He pressed the cool glass against his lips to smell the brew.

Something spicy glistened within the container.

Observation, yes. Someone had to assess this situation. For humanity. He tipped the glass upward.

Cool liquid glided across his tongue.

Fire prickled where the fluid had touched.

His nostrils burned.

A bizarre sweetness emerged from the fire to snuff the flames in his mouth.

Better to swallow than contemplate what took place. He gulped and gulped, emptying the glass and placed it quietly upon the tabletop.

A tingling spread through his body to consume every limit of his limbs. Even his lips tingled.

Or were each of his cells quaking with terror at his latest mistake? Life was one live-and-learn chapter after another. But what other choice was there when a man couldn't fly a spacecraft? Like someone would be sending him home.

A sense of peace gripped his body.

What now?

"Come to bed, Straightarrow. You must sleep."

Hell, why not since he finally felt normal again? He rose, crossed the plain gray metal floor, and stopped beside the curvaceous stranger in his bed.

She never moved.

Never acknowledged his presence. Jesus. But the hard-on had vanished. Sleeping with the enemy couldn't possibly be easier. He sat on the edge of the bed with his back to her.

"What does the blood do?" he asked.

"It placates the inner beast for forty-eight hours by earth's standards."

So, the sands of the hourglass began to spill. "That's it?" He leaned down to stretch out beside her tight black leather outfit.

"Voldon's army has worked three-thousand years at conquering worlds." She rolled onto her back and stared at the shadows hugging the ceiling. "The war began so long ago that we almost laugh at the thought of life without war. But Voldon's predecessors always have the same name, the same power, and an insatiable appetite to conquer more of the universe." She grew quiet.

Hell, she could finish the story. "Is there any special reason why?"

"Blood has magical qualities to psychics, a personal essence, a quality with an individual tag that is impossible to detach. Voldon controls people by acquiring their blood."

Could he buy the explanation? Was it possible to control people by getting their blood? Better to get some sleep and ponder the possibilities tomorrow. He closed his eyes.

* * * *

The hum of the starship flying at maximum velocity sang to Kindrist when she awoke next to the snoring mate of her choice, he who would never have fallen asleep without sexual release in his state of desire. Or drinking the Beast Tamer. Thank the stars he proved extremely curious. Nor would he have stopped asking questions that could have taken days to answer without one form of sedative or the other. And now he understands how both work. That was less work for me and a made my mate more content.

Something jittered in low her gut.

A wave of nausea drove the sensation away.

The blood lust would come on today. With a vengeance. But Nulvitians' didn't have as rough a time with the symptoms as earthlings.

Jake snored a deep sound.

Not enough to quench the hunger in her body. The ventilation system's lull was far more melodic. She slid her gaze across the bulging muscles in his arms and up to his stern jaw line.

To run a hand across the hard body. She reached out to press a palm against his supple undulating muscle of his bicep.

His eyes snapped open.

Curiosity surfaced in those wells. What would he do if she explored his body more? Would he submit to her blood lust? She'd need to do something to curb the madness until she required a blood libation.

His gaze studied her.

Not my hand exploring the firm shape of his chest. He watched my eyes. Looking. Assessing anything that had to reveal my thoughts. Didn't a woman's touch do that for a man? Did he want me too? Would he care if I leaned into him? Or touched him in an even more intimate place? She slid her palm down the firmness of his belly to the wiry hairs of his groin, never breaking eye contact with him.

He lay still, observing.

Dare my fingertips venture lower? She tickled them through the tangle of hairs until she found the solid base of his shaft.

Bless Devros, he seemed always ready. Her womb melted as if instantly responding to his need. Invitingly. She curled her fingers around his manhood and stroked the full pliable length of him.

His breath knifed.

But he didn't fight me.

"If you want it, you'll have to take it," he groaned and rolled onto his back.

No problem, as earthlings say. She yanked off her pants, slid a leg over his thighs, held the soft tip of his shaft at the crook of her sex, and watched him.

What would he do?

His eyes shut, and he rocked his hips, barely forcing as much entry as he could muster in his position.

Sacred stars, he wants me. She bent her knees, taking the hard length of him all the way down to the amazing root inside her wetness in one delectable motion.

He moaned and laid his palms on her thighs. "You're so damned wet." His hands grabbed at her legs, shoving her, begging her to move.

Anything to keep him cooperating. To have his incredible presence filling my soul. Didn't he know understand how nothing but his soul would ever touch me so intimately? She squeezed her inner muscles and rose along his glorious length until his thickness almost popped out of her.

Not yet. Time and time again she plunged and rose to lure the victorious sounds of mating from her mate. His presence inside her was the most amazing sensation, driving her to a state of ravenous desire that nobody could ever explain to another person who hadn't experienced it. It was like they were one in the same. Starving. Desperate to find anything to feed their hunger for completion. Moaning and groaning for the unattainable.

And his need for sexual unification only proved his need was as demanding as hers.

To satiate his hunger.

To nurture his love.

To find happiness in marriage.

If only he wanted her for more than sex.

But sex didn't matter when she couldn't think of anything but his hardness rubbing her in that one blessed spot. The place that only he could touch. Didn't he realize how special he was?

Her soul began to quiver with satisfaction. She fell on her hands and leaned into the blissful force welling up as a tidal wave inside her.

Jake's hands grabbed her ass, and his jaw ticked as he gritted his teeth.

He needed her. Gods what a feeling.

He rammed inside her, gasping for sanity.

Insanity definitely proved a were-assassin's ally.

The world flashed with blinding light as they both cried out in the holiest of unions. Or was she just clamping her eyelids tightly? She couldn't breathe.

Didn't want to.

Just wanted the rapturous feeling of riding her mate to last forever.

But they both came.

And his grip slid away.

"Get off me," he croaked.

Her heart sank.

His participation was obviously mechanical. He'd have to cooperate in a few hours when her body craved blood at the end of her blood cycle. She would take the sacred nectar one way or the other. How could she have been so careless to seduce him into service? People would speak of her mistake for all eternity. She would be renowned as the ignorant were-assassin who gambled with her heart for nothing more than a child. But the legends wouldn't die because of her stupid choice of actions on earth. Although her heart might. Maybe one day he'd learn to love her. Blessed Devros, if only he would.

An alarm sounded.

Again and again.

Not an attack. En route to the wormhole relay, attacks only occurred when the ship plowed forward at maximum velocity. She slid off the warm body beneath her. "You must move, Straightarrow."

"What's happening?" he rasped and grabbed her.

She landed on the edge of the bed and yanked on a boot. "An attack."

A presence pushed into her thoughts. "*Red Trekaar?*" Forty-three called in mindspeak.

She pushed back to complete the communication pathway. "Yes?"

"*Goro says it's just a lone fighter craft. Your presence isn't required.*"

A lone fighter meant the nursery was endangered. She had delayed far too long on earth in searching for a soul mate. And now she wasn't to assist? "What?"

"*Stay with Straightarrow. His training is more important at the moment.*"

"*Like I'm sitting here with a kamikaze soldier on the other end of a projectile that could destroy half the beings on this ship when he tries to ram that bomb up my ass.*"

"Kindrist!"

"*Stop yelling. I'm on my way.*" She buckled the last bootstrap and ran toward the door.

"Well, you think I'm just sitting here?" Straightarrow yelled.

She whirled to face her mate racing after her in bare feet. "Stay here. You know nothing of these murderous warriors. I will go."

He stopped and smirked. "Come on. What kind of a man do you think I am?" He yanked on a boot.

All man by the look of his broad shoulders and squared jaw. My choice. What was I thinking? "You don't understand. Losing you is the worse loss The Cause could suffer now—"

"Uh-huh." He nodded and yanked on his other boot. "And then what do I do when you

go running off and get killed? Don't I have to suck your blood like every so often?"

Well, at least he paid attention. "Yes."

"Then if you die, The Cause loses me."

Chapter Seven

Time ticked agonizingly forward as Kindrist stared at her husband. But she had gone and mated an intelligent male. Surely, there was more good in the point than not. To save the universe. So went the life of a mercenary. “Fine. I’ll stay here as ordered.”

“Ordered?” Straightarrow’s black eyebrows arched.

He probably hadn’t fully processed how the crew was telepathic. She nodded.

“We’ve got some talking to do.” He waved toward the table.

Fine. Let Goro fight the war today. Maybe the fighter wouldn’t guess the nursery’s location. She sank upon a hard bench and planted her elbows into the hard admonishing tabletop.

As if she would ever be an immobile object? Or listen to one. Oh what blessing life would be to have been created a rock or table....

Straightarrow settled onto the bench on the opposite side of the metal tabletop and laced his fingers together as if paying homage to something. “What orders?”

Questions. Questions. “My job was to fight a war for eight years. But my job description just changed.” He’d obviously deduced the reason.

The ship shook and rattled.

An impact. She grabbed the table.

Straightarrow hit the floor.

The ship probably had some damage. Nothing too major with just one drone fighter in the mix. “You all right?” she asked her mate.

He did a pushup off the floor and shot her a glance over his shoulder. “I’ve been better. What in the hell was that?”

“They shouldn’t have sent a man to do a woman’s job.” She shot him a wink.

A chuckle rumbled from his lips. He climbed back to his seat.

He wasn’t such a bad choice. At least, he had a sense of humor. And the capacity for intelligent thought.

“So, you’re their best weapon?” He met her stare.

“Apparently more so now that I’ve taken on a mate. You and I have some work to do. Work that shall save the universe.”

“Yep. I keep hearing that. Just how do I fit into the scenario?”

The curious mask on his face shifted with seriousness.

Was he prepared to hear his future lay in his sneaking into an impenetrable compound? Or siring a child? Better to deal with mercenary work. “We need you to create chaos.”

“Well, nobody’s ever called me Jake the God of Chaos Straightarrow. I don’t know if I’m up to the job. Why not tell me a bit more about what the duty entails?”

How dogmatic. He didn’t appear disturbed. Why not confess? “The planet Gameddaron is a link in Voldon’s telepathic communication between Quadrants Twelve through Fourteen. If we can blow up their neural network, we can wipe out any attacks on earth and cripple Voldon.” How would he react?

He scratched his chin and slid his gaze around the room.

Typical prisoner. "What are you thinking?"

His gaze alighted upon hers. "You really can't read my thoughts, huh? Well, I was thinking this all sounds fine and dandy, but how do I know what's what? I'm just a dumb old earthling. It's not like we can think for ourselves to make a global decision about Voldon." He waved at her. "You know. That's why you're trying to protect us."

So, he toyed with her. Baited her for information. Luckily, she hadn't disclosed any secrets. "I know you'll grow to understand what earth has at stake. I know this because I chose you for your humanity. And your sense of honor. I should never have expected you to just go along with my ideas."

A straight-lipped smile stretched across his face. "You didn't really think I'd just do whatever was asked of me? Did you? Now, why don't you convince me of your people's plight? And just what do I get after all is said and done?"

He probably didn't want to hear he got one sex-crazed feral mate who couldn't live without his blood.

A force pushed into her mind. "*Kindrist?*" Forty Three said.

"*Yes?*"

"*The fire's out. The gardens are safe. The nursery has been destroyed.*"

Not the children again. Her heart sank.

"*Will you be staying with your mate, Kindrist?*" Forty Three asked.

"*Another hour alone with this earthling could drive me to thrust a blade between my eyes.*"

"What are you doing?" Straightarrow asked.

"*I believe I warned you he wouldn't be an easy convert,*" Forty Three noted.

"*Since there's no turning back for ease of transition, let's hope some hard labor will change his attitude.*" Kindrist rose.

"Why were you staring off like that?" Straightarrow insisted.

Since he wasn't privy to the telepathic communication, he had no idea what she was doing. But his distrust could work in her favor. He would probably respond better to hints of conspiracy. "I spoke to my operator. She reported the damage."

His brow arched as if intrigued. "You looked like you were daydreaming."

Maybe he wasn't ready to be enlightened through the grim reality of what a mercenary risks daily. "Stay here. I need to go assist with the aftermath." Kindrist whirled toward the door.

* * * *

Jake knew the only way off this ship was through finding his bearings. Better to follow the woman who knew her way around the ship and how to find the toilet. Besides, who knew when she'd want to have mind-blowing sex again. Jake stepped toward the sliding door.

Kindrist's black slinky body disappeared beyond the silver metallic hatch.

Shit. All his answers to everything were locked inside her Rubik's-Cube head. With his recent lack of luck, she'd get away. He shoved forward.

The door swooshed again.

The cloaked-in-black Kindrist hadn't vanished in the sterile white corridor. Strange contrast. Maybe he shouldn't follow the obviously bad-news babe.

"Go back, Straightarrow," she commanded without turning to scowl at him.

Like hell. His people were on the line.

For humanity's sake. He plowed toward her swinging tail.

She pivoted to face him, hands dangling at her sides. "I told you to stay here. There's

little you can do.”

Her insistent stare only called for more defiance. He crossed the space between them and halted a foot from her stoic gaze. “Why? Because I can’t handle the tragedy?”

She pivoted back toward her mysterious destination. “Remember, you said that.”

Like he hadn’t seen a crisis.

Kindrist led him through a curving corridor, onto some kind of elevator lift, and off onto a dark passageway illuminated with faint orange light emitting from thin tubes crisscrossing the ceiling in some strange futuristic lace. She headed into the tunnel of shadows.

A door whispered.

A barefoot woman, in a very long and simple yet fitting white tunic slit up the sides to reveal she wore white leggings, stumbled into the corridor in the distance. Her facial expression had to be distraught by the way she clutched the doorframe. But the prevailing darkness kept her mask cloaked from view.

The new woman faced them.

Or something else. Kindrist was whom the mute woman showed intense interest.

Kindrist’s quick pace ate the distance up between them, but she only nodded at the woman in passing.

A sense of gloom clenched his gut.

Not good from the old intuitive furnace. “Hey boss, what’s going on?”

“Our defense shields have been compromised. Voldon’s probes can read our minds,” her pace quickened, “if they’re close enough.”

“So, this quadrant or whatever you call it isn’t safe?”

“No. Policed. Yet, every second spent breathing is risky in reality during the Blood Wars.”

At least, she didn’t say the other guys were cannibals.

Something tickled the hairs to chilly attention on his arms.

She spun and stared beyond his shoulder.

He followed her gaze.

The woman sprawled out on the floor, supporting her upper body with one arm. A man, outfitted in a white ballet-type tight ensemble, ran toward her from the elevator.

“Is that her husband?” The man had to be by the way he hurried.

“No.”

The running man leapt over the woman and disappeared into the room.

So much for compassion for fallen comrades. He faced Kindrist. “Just what was that?”

“He’s her replacement.”

“For what?”

She turned back down the shady corridor. “The ship’s defenses.”

These people truly sucked horse shit for fun and could clutch their satisfying dung while he made a difference. “Well, I’m going to help her.”

Kindrist grabbed his elbow.

He stared into the orange light reflecting in her eyes.

“It isn’t safe if I leave you here. You know nothing about this ship.”

But whatever went on behind closed doors was his ticket off this ship. Of course, ignoring the injured woman was totally unacceptable.

“Forgive me, Kindrist. But minus the permanent erection, I can think clearly. And I don’t see any compassion in that guy jumping over the wounded woman to help with the ship’s

defenses.”

“Her meditation was disrupted.” Kindrist’s stare insisted he listen. “She’ll shake off the shock if we leave her to recover. As for her job, we have five meditators working at any time to create a protective barrier to keep our thoughts from being harvested by Voldon.”

“Harvested?”

She turned down the hallway and pushed another ridiculously invisible button. “Used against us, Straightarrow.”

A door hushed him.

“Do you want to be enslaved?” she challenged.

“Enslaved? Come on. I’m a blood fucker. I’m enslaved by default, honey. Or should I say boss? Don’t talk to me like I have freedom of choice.”

A door opened into another elevator.

“Come on, Straightarrow.” She turned into the small box.

So, there was no way she could deny the truth in his accusation. He stepped into the lift and choked back a chuckle about the crap she tried to feed him.

The upward motion set his gut flopping.

An unsettling sensation. More like his gut was talking to him.

Shaking him.

The door whooshed open revealing an enormous chamber beyond the wide rectangular doorframe. A space thoroughly destroyed. Furniture was on end. Twisted. As far as a stranger could tell. Charred black in places. Mostly heaped along one long wall of the room. Orange lighting tubes curved down from the ceiling in places like bent dislodged rafters.

A few white-dressed almost solitary people combed through the mess. But they halted, nodded at Kindrist, then each returned to his or her silent sojourn.

Kindrist stepped into the shadowy wasteland and quickly approached the edge of the massive heap.

Everything smelled of damp biting smoke.

A strange heap that seemed to have poured from the edge of the ceiling to create the side of a mountain that splayed outward naturally like the debris at the base of the mount.

Something clicked as if trying to turn on.

One careful move at a time, Kindrist seemed to wade through invisible mud.

Watching.

Searching.

Why?

His gut turned and wrung itself sick.

What bad news happened here? He stepped to Kindrist’s side and joined her silent search.

A loud snap popped across the room.

A cry pierced the silence.

Maybe a cat.

Or a baby.

Kindrist’s head snapped to the sound, her gaze assessing the pile of trash.

The sound squalled.

More like pleaded. Definitely a baby.

She grabbed a heap of garbage and tossed charred debris aside.

She displayed a mercenary’s determination.

Not enough to save an infant buried alive. That had to be a baby. He wrapped his finger around a metallic leg of some object and pulled.

The cry intensified.

Poor kid caught up in a war he had no hand in.

A small hand thrust up through the clutter.

Kindrist latched onto the small fingers.

The crying ceased.

Quiet was better, but she wouldn't get anywhere holding hands. He carefully lifted various pieces of metal from where the child lay covered. Bit by bit.

The bluest all-knowing eyes he'd ever seen focused on him, then Kindrist. The calm bundle stretched a free arm to her.

The child's white clothing was amazingly spotless.

"He's alright," Jake gasped more for himself than anyone else.

Kindrist rested the child against her shoulder and patted its back. "Yes. She is."

Why was a child here? "What is this place, Kindrist?"

She turned to the door and headed back. "The nursery."

"Shit." Talk about tragedy.

The baby's blue gaze anchored on him, searching for something of its own.

Maybe he shouldn't have cursed. Why could a baby make him feel guilty? He followed them back to the exit.

The door slid open.

A woman in white tunic and leggings raced down the hall toward them.

"Who's that?" he asked.

"Her mother."

Coincidence? Wait, they were telepathic. Gotta try to remember that.

The woman's golden bun flopped at the nape of her neck where it had managed to loosely cling.

The mother grabbed her baby.

Silence.

Total silence.

These were such strange people. Emotional. Yet, uttering nothing. Earthlings were so out of their element here.

The mother threw her arms around Kindrist, squeezed, then shrank away, departing down the hall with the baby.

Kindrist turned back to the dump.

Not one revelatory detail graced her face. "Is that woman heading back to meditate?" Hopefully, with the children at risk.

"She's a healer. She's taking her daughter back to her quarters."

Then that meant this was daycare.

"You've probably deduced this is the ship's nursery." She continued back the devastated space.

Why attack a nursery? "Did the zero misfire?" He kept on Kindrist's heels.

"Voldon's mercenaries target nurseries."

What kind of creature attacked the defenseless?

"You're probably wondering why he targets the defenseless." She reached for another heap and foraged for life.

"I thought my mind wasn't evolved enough for you to probe it?" But why did a psychic emperor lower himself to killing the children? "And Voldon's rationalization would be?"

"To kill our legends."

Why did he think *To Kill a Mockingbird* wasn't so far off the mark? "You're talking mental genocide?"

"It's not just killing the legends to end our fight for freedom. Voldon strives to ensure the legends never happen. He wants to kill the children who could rise up to defeat him. The children who he can't control."

"I don't get it, boss. If he can control all of us, why can't he control these children of legend?"

"Fear. He fears the legends will come to pass. He fears his reign will shortly end as prophesized."

"So he murders children to change his destiny? That man has no balls." No balls, no morals. Voldon was definitely unfit to rule the universe.

She turned an arched brow to him where she leaned over a heap, reaching to toss something aside. "Oh, he has audacious balls. And he sends his telepathic drones on suicide missions to kill our children. That's all. Our children." She rose and faced him with a more than a questioning twist to her brow. "Where's the honor in that?"

Honor shouldn't be used when discussing Voldon.

"Exactly." She returned to her digging. "Even worse. We usually have to jettison the atmosphere in this compartment to kill the fire before it comes in contact with something highly explosive. Because the water doesn't always put out the fire. Jettisoning the compartment's atmosphere means death to the surviving infants. Voldon's trapped us with his demented strategy where we can't even save our children. Hope." She snorted. "We're supposed to cling to it." She snorted a laugh. "But sometimes the gods are with us and a child survives expulsion of the compartment's air when protected beneath a heap of trash." She rose, flipped her hair back over her head and scratched her arm.

Why did she suddenly seem human? Maybe an ounce of compassion sparked in her contemplative stance. And something could be said for a mercenary with a soft spot for the weak.

* * * *

Kindrist shuddered as the memory of her burning planet flashed in her mind. Voldon had feared legend would ring true and Nulvitia would birth the free-thinkers' savior. The fool had scorched her world. But he wouldn't kill her. Not until she played her last move. Spirit proved mightier than psychic powers that allowed one man to control sixty-one percent of the entire universe's sentient beings. And if she didn't try to give birth to a legend, every atom of oxygen she breathed was wasted on her existence. Jake had to come around.

A presence pushed into her mind. "*Red Trekaar, what's your location?*" Goro asked.

"*I'm digging children out of the rubble in the nursery.*"

"*You can't be there if the pilot is still alive. If he gets one drop of your blood—*"

"*He won't.*"

"*You of all people know how much I respect your skill. But your decision to assist in the nursery is foolish. Return to your quarters.*"

"*I'm helping.*"

"*Red! And take your mate with you. Do you realize what Voldon can do if he gets one drop of your essence? He will destroy any chance of any of your pregnancies reaching full-term.*

Beat Voldon by safeguarding your blood and children."

Her gut sank.

The commander was correct. Voldon would use a drop of blood against her to control her actions and sabotage her efforts to give birth to a child of legend. *"I'm returning to my quarters."* She straightened her spine and turned to her foraging mate.

How kind of him to search for the children. And to witness his conscience demanding he return to help the fallen meditator kept proving him a good being. Worthy of were-assassin duty. She had made a wise choice. Now to protect the rest of the possibilities her actions could instigate. *"We've been ordered to return to our quarters."*

Jake unfolded, hands and wrists coated with chunks of wet black residue from searching through the wreckage, and shot her a confused look. *"Why?"*

"I was wrong to bring us here. Voldon's warriors collect blood for him. If the suicidal pilot survived the crash, Goro doesn't want us to risk our blood being added to his collection."

Jake sighed and shook his head. *"Huh?"*

"I can explain more later. For now, it's safer for us not to be here." She turned toward the exit to lead Jake back to the lift.

Jake walked quietly behind her.

Cooperation from him was strange at this point. Not exactly what she expected from this type of male who led. At least, the distressed pilot wasn't still lying in the corridor. Or she'd never get her valiant husband back to their quarters. She stopped at the lift's door and waited for the silver hatch to glide open.

Jake claimed a spot at her side.

A presence pushed into her mind. *"Kindrist,"* Goro said in mindspeak, *"the pilot survived. She will be interrogated as soon as possible. It will be better for all if you keep your soul mate in your quarters."*

Why did the sacrilegious temptation of interrogation always rear its ugly face? Would there be another victim? She sighed.

However, witnessing an interrogation just might help Jake understand the greater price of this war.

Chapter Eight

Jake watched two of *The Seeker's* crew members in a small brightly-lit room beyond a large viewing window. The crew members milled around a silver infirmary table. Probably preparing for an autopsy. Aliens autopsying aliens. You gotta note the irony there. But do I want a ring-side view? He turned to Kindrist.

She glanced at him but slid her gaze back to the show.

His wife didn't follow orders. "Aren't we supposed to be in our quarters?" Would she shrug?

"The pilot has many tales to share. For us, we are better off seeing what the commander can gain here." Her stoic stare at the interrogation scene never wavered.

But what could a lower-evolved being gain from a telepathic interrogation? "I guess I have to count on you for honesty in translation since you all are higher-evolved telepaths?"

Her conspiratorial gaze slid to meet his. "Interrogations are channeled to video screens throughout the ship. There are criteria one must follow in the free-thinking world. Because some of our treasured mercenary were-mates are incapable of reading minds, the telepaths' thoughts are presented in various languages. Today, in English since all the were-mates aboard speak English. And everyone gets to witness the interrogation as a method of curbing bad interrogative measures."

Well, at least they had some kind of ethics. And Kindrist was offering thorough explanations now. But she still had brought him here. They sat here, outside the interrogation room, against orders. How could she argue that point? "Can't we watch this in our personal quarters?"

One of her black eyebrows arched sinisterly. "I thought human males preferred the wide screen?"

So she wanted to crack sexiest jokes? Sexism must be universal. "Good one."

Something moved back in the room.

Two white-cloaked crew members pushed a frail body on a gurney toward the other metal table.

Jake's gut curdled.

The body had the large head and elongated eyes of an extraterrestrial portrayed in all those Hollywood flicks.

Not good. But what could be bad about intuition speaking up?

"That's a Mawshwuc, better known as a Martian to earthlings in science fiction. But they aren't from Mars. Nor are they figments of anyone's imagination."

And intuition scores. "So, what's the Mawshwuc's story?"

"What you see is the culmination of war over three millennia. Mutations. The Mawshwuc began the war looking like Nulvitians, myself. But living a life in space, generation after generation bred in captivity to fight Voldon's war, you see they no longer appear as any more than miniature stick figures with warped facial bones." She shot him a sideways glance.

"And don't let them fool you into complacency because they look weak. Mawshwuc's are reconnaissance zombies. They have spent millennia capturing earthlings, harvesting their

blood for Voldon's use, and tagging earthlings as if they were nothing more than creatures being released for recapture at Voldon's whims. If Voldon finds a way to control lesser-evolved beings through blood chemistry," she wagged her head. "All those alien-abductee stories are nothing but truth. Except earthlings have no idea the amount of danger earth faces. Give Voldon an inch of power in your solar system and earthlings definitely face the same future as the Mawshwucs."

Intuition wasn't throwing in its two cents. Kindrist had to be being honest. "Free thinkers are earth's guardians against Mawshwucs?" The question seemed more to peg down the facts than prove he was paying attention. "Why haven't your people gone through the mutations caused by life in space?"

"My planet was destroyed when I was ten. Nulvitians didn't live in space. Call us planet huggers. Who wants to leave the planet they call home?"

True. Earth was home.

She nodded.

Goro strode into the interrogation chamber.

Against the white backdrop, he looked the sinister party in black. Even with the captive's silver suit. But if Mawshwucs were commonplace on earth, there would be more evidence than just tales from people who appeared to have survived traumatic experiences. "How do these Mawshwucs operate on earth?"

Kindrist chuckled and met his gaze. "They are the vampires of earth legends. Soul suckers. Literally, one drop of blood on a Mawshwuc ship means your ass is potential zombie grass in Voldon's hands. Tagged." She winked. "And once you're tagged, you find Mawshwucs returning for more samples."

Not the picture he wanted to imagine. Yet, Kindrist could know enough to completely trick him into assisting her cause. Time to test her. "I'm tagged." He twisted his earring.

She sighed and turned back to the unfolding interrogation scene.

So much for cooperation. "Okay, then give me some historical points to prove you're not pulling my leg."

She expelled quickly with more of a sassy snort than a sigh. "The Visitor is found in Egyptian hieroglyphics. His Mawshwuc form is carved into Ancient Egypt's walls. You can't miss him given his skull shape. And among Native-American petroglyphs are the stick figures with Mawshwuc heads. Mesoamerican nobility even deformed their skulls in order to take on the appearance of the Mawshwucs—their gods. If you'd prefer a trip through earth history, I can set you up with a computer—" Her gaze snapped back to the room. "What is that fool doing?" she snarled.

One white-cloaked male pulled at the captive's mask.

Goro stood at his elbow, watching.

Well, the commander wasn't worried. "What can happen?" Hopefully, she would elaborate.

"Mawshwucs bite, aside from their various hidden ways to collect blood. Hand-to-hand combat isn't good at the moment. Goro knows not to expose anyone but the person who will delve into the bastard's mind." She scowled at the scene. "If it gets one drop of the crewman's blood in its mouth, the free thinker will live the rest of his life in fear of being controlled by Voldon. Or so legend claims. We have no proof of this. But countless numbers of free thinkers have been zombified by their blood being collected. We know that much is true and dare not allow a Mawshwuc to ingest the blood of a free thinker. These reconnaissance pilots of Voldon

are like the plague,” she snarled. “You earthlings think HIV is worth avoiding. Expose yourself to a round of Voldon’s thoughts and you can never go back.”

HIV didn’t look so horrific from outer space.

Goro turned a stoic mask to lock onto Kindrist.

So much for breaking orders. “Maybe we should go.”

Kindrist’s distant gaze implied she and the commander exchanged words. “I want to see this,” she muttered.

* * * *

“You should have followed orders,” Goro said to Kindrist in mindspeak.

“And if I had returned to my quarters, nobody who cared enough to stand up to you would have witnessed this poorest of choices. Why is a crew member touching the Mawshwuc?”

“Kindrist, we must learn if this soul-less creature is alive.”

Alive? How did Goro plan to test the issue? With a crew member as bait? And for what end?

“We must know if the Mawshwuc bite allows Voldon a way to break into our ship beyond the meditators’ defensive shield,” Goro explained. “Somehow, Voldon keeps locating *The Seeker*, killing our children. If a Mawshwuc channels to Voldon, we must know. Or Voldon has a spy.”

The highly-acclaimed intelligence of her commander slowly teetered upon ruin through desecration of free-thinking law. “*No wonder you sent me to my quarters. There has to be another way, Goro. Blessed Devros, don’t sentence that unarmed crewman to death.*”

“I asked for a volunteer. He gives his allegiance as openly as you have in mercenary were-assassin duty. Please, Kindrist, return to your quarters.”

And walk away from this ludicrous experiment? She pushed her thoughts back to his. “*What does this say about your sanity, my friend? How does this differ from what Voldon does to his blood captives? If you must kill one of our meditators to prove some highly improbable theory, then I should be witness to your madness. For you will never forget how you have turned into a vile soul sucker when you look into my eyes.*”

Goro blinked and waved the crewman back two steps.

“What’s he doing now?” Jake asked.

Showing he has some morals. “Making a choice for the greater good.”

“So he’s going to screw that lackey working for his cause? Well, Goro’s not much better than the psychic bastard he fights. Is he?”

The crew members hustled out of the room, leaving Goro alone with the unmasked Mawshwuc.

Goro made the better of the two choices for today. “No, Straightarrow, Goro’s found inspiration in free-thinking law. He won’t risk another’s life. He’s free to risk his own. But not another’s.”

“I’ll be damned.”

Whatever went through Jake’s mind had to be awe. Goro always conjured up awe in those working in his shadow. Even when he looked like he was about to make a mistake.

Jake’s piercing gaze met hers.

What thoughts did he wrestle? Did he view Goro as weak? Not easily done after working with the commander for years. “Don’t underestimate, Goro. He’s my voice of reason. You’ve witnessed his desperation to end the attacks on the nursery. And he’s correct. I shouldn’t have brought you here. Now, you’ve seen the commander in a different light. He is

not weak. Know his strength unites us, Straightarrow.”

Jake nodded slightly and glanced back to Goro. “Nobody can ever say you don’t think for yourself.”

Chapter Nine

Kindrist sat alone, stunned in Goro's waiting chamber at his rectangular table where the other mercenaries were to join their commander for the formal report dealing with the attack's details. Why am I here alone?

Although, alone felt good on a ship filled with psychics who could easily focus on her at the moment. That's if they didn't honor free-thinking code and leave her to herself. Especially after she caught Goro using that volunteer with the Mawshwuc. Blessed Devros, he dangled a life before the eyes of Voldon. What would have taken place if she hadn't disrupted Voldon's plan with the Mawshwuc?

Maybe she should have followed orders. But her mate wasn't shooting visual daggers her direction anymore. And he had willingly returned to their chamber. Would he continue to cooperate? His eagerness to help dig through the nursery's rubble reflected his noble thoughts. But he couldn't have missed the connection that she was at fault for the children's deaths because her delay on earth aided the Mawshwuc in locating *The Seeker*? Holy Devros, if she had chosen a different mate, shortened her stay on earth.... If she hadn't been so stubborn, the Mawshwuc may never have found their starship.

If.

Universal peace hinged upon the word like it was a fundamental constituent of the fabric of all matter. And now she had no guarantee Jake would agree to help her. Devros willing, he would see truth in her words.

If.... If

Curse the word birthed by choices.

So much for the value of free thinking.

The door whisked open.

Goro strode through the doorway in her direction. His fatherly gaze locked upon hers, the communication channel pushing inward to her mind. "*Don't beat yourself over the nursery, Kindrist,*" he said in mindspeak.

"Life is about the choices we make. Isn't choice what we're fighting for?"

"That's a double-sided reply." He shook his head and sank into a gray chair opposite her seat at the table.

The commander obviously didn't miss the implied insult directed toward his poor decision-making.

"They may take our children, Kindrist, but you and I are still here. The legends live. And the only way to ensure one of us provides a living child from an earth marriage is to allow us choice in mate selection. The seed of truth shall grow. Give it time." He stared off at the distant stars outside his large rectangular.

"We don't have time," she spoke with her mouth as if the act were her primary mode of communication.

He didn't grace her a glance for her act of lowering herself to the level of the lesser-evolved humanoids. Apparently, deep space held more significance than her statement.

"No, you don't," he said in mindspeak. *"Your mate is a wild card, as these earthlings*

would say. *And mine is insane. We've both royally screwed ourselves by earth standards.*"

True.

The door whooshed again.

Blue Sevra nodded at Goro, then Kindrist.

Recognition wasn't what I expected after my mating with the volatile earthling.

The portal's hatch whisked shut.

Sevra sat within a gabron.

The muscular blonde cloaked in standard black leather preferred to wear a torch instead of knives. A torch could reduce a room's organic components to ash in a blink but didn't wield the same coercive pain factor as a knife. The mercenary who used a torch always seemed weaker. Fearful of battle. The real trouble in fighting this psychic war. Even Voldon's actions revealed his fear. He controlled people because they would rise up against him otherwise. The Blood War would be won by the fearless.

Sevra's squeaking chair didn't seem to care for the torch either.

Sevra turned a stoic lime-green gaze to Kindrist and pushed her way into the communication pathway between Kindrist and Goro. *"How goes marriage, Red Trekaar?"* she asked in mindspeak.

A subtle insult lay in that question. *"Straightarrow is slow in gaining his bearings."*

"Any children recovered from the nursery?" Sevra's gaze cut through Kindrist.

"One," Goro noted.

Sevra stared at Kindrist.

Always tossing blame around, this one. Or I'm overly sensitive. But could there be any other reason for that accusatory stare?

"Red Trekaar follows her destiny," Goro stated in mindspeak. *"If legend is to save us, Trekaar walks destiny's path. Recalling that point keeps us fighting for our people."*

Sevra's gaze slid to the stern Goro.

He obviously waited for her to argue.

Sevra argued often. Not today. She flung her loose blonde hair over her shoulder and stared at the portal's closed screen.

An admonished Sevra was tolerable.

A rush of nausea surged through Kindrist's cells.

More like a strange urge to eat.

"What's wrong, Red Trekaar?" Goro asked.

Beads of cool sweat tickled into existence upon her brow.

A ticking clock for my blood cycle. She wiped them off with a palm. *"I suddenly feel ill."*

"More like a sign of mating. How long has it been?" Goro replied.

Definitely too long. The day had gotten away from her. She nodded.

"I will debrief you quickly so you may tend to your needs." Goro waved her toward the door.

Like Jake would offer up a blood sacrifice or sexual union. The man showed no sign of considering either all in a day's work.

"The Blood War threat has just changed. The Mawshwuc ingested one of our crew member's blood. The crew member's actions became irrational afterward. The man is being detained in the brig." Goro inhaled deeply. *"Voldon is like a nerve agent based on the crewman's behavior. And worse, we now know he can access those aboard our ship by gaining*

their blood—defense shields or not. Gods, if the criminal has discovered a way to control the lesser-evolved humanoids aboard....” A muscle in Goro’s jaw began to tick.

The universe certainly quakes with this revelation. She choked down the need to shudder. *“You said you wouldn’t go through with the experiment.”*

“It was an accident happening after you departed for your quarter. But hope shines in our future,” Goro announced. *“The Mawshwuc is pregnant. I’ve decided to keep the creature alive until the infant is born.”*

How is a Mawshwuc’s offspring going to play into legend when there is no mention of one? Goro would get the crew killed. *“Can’t Voldon access its mind and deduce The Seeker’s location?”*

“We shall see.”

Sevra never flinched.

“Go now, Red Trekaar. See to your needs.” Goro nodded toward the door.

But there was one more problem to deal with. *“What will happen to the crewman?”*

“He requested termination if Voldon accessed his mind. I will not fail him.” Goro’s blank expression spoke of resolve.

Definition of and the measurement of failure were obviously relative. And a crewman who gave his life freely deserved to have his last wish granted. *“Very well.”* She rose and made her way through the empty corridors.

Who was she to argue against the crew member’s sacrifice? Wasn’t she ultimately to blame for this attack? Life played a vile game of ifs with the living.

A sweetness filled her mouth.

Not bile. Nor puke. Just a sick sweetness.

Reality. She faced her personal quarters’ plain gray door.

Her mate waited beyond.

She had to convince him to fight for her.

Or the blood of the children would be on her hands until she ended her feral existence.

For the children. She stepped toward the door.

The door swooshed open.

Jake peacefully sat upon the bench beneath her portal. He turned a curious mask her direction. *“What did the big boss say?”*

Her gut flopped, and the sweetness in her mouth curled into bile.

The nausea worsened like she hadn’t eaten anything for three days. She tried to swallow. *“He says we should walk the path of destiny.”*

Jake’s black eyebrows arched. *“And where are these stepping stones?”*

Across space? Buried inside a man’s heart? The silkiness in seductive bedding? Most likely, the answer lay in the sweet and salty blood coursing through his body. Divine nectar. She had to keep her wits about her. *“Destiny is everywhere. One must welcome the steps as they appear.”*

He rose. *“Deep dogma there.”* He strode toward her, his long legs stretching his jeans.

What joy it would be to rip those pants off. To hand over his blood and seed into to the palms of destiny.

“You look strange.” His legs stilled a few steps away. *“Are we on verge of another attack?”*

You are. Better not to answer. She rubbed her clammy brow. Certainly, he’d understand given his recent bout of need. She met his gaze. *“It’s my turn to take the Beast Tamer.”*

“Huh?”

Why couldn't he just go with things? “It's almost been two earth days since I've ingested your blood.”

“Beast Tamer?” He almost forced one laugh during an exhale. “That's the perfect name.”

Was he holding back her blood libation in his display of enjoyment? Leave it to my choice in mates to taunt me so. I had definitely chosen the most obstinate of males.

Her head swooned.

She shook off the sensation and stared at him.

Need grabbed her guts and squeezed until something seared and ripped.

So much for a lovely trip laced with romantic memories promised in marriage. Forget love and lust. Pain was the reward for devout service. “How did you hold out so long experiencing these excruciating sensations?” He was obviously a strong-willed soul.

Her fingers began to burn.

The change, undoubtedly. Could she control herself? Would she injure Jake? Gods, to have learned of this magic in training instead of after marriage. Like a mercenary could contend with the unknown. No training prepared her for this.

Fire spiked up her limbs.

She shook her arms.

“You don't look good.” Jake's words echoed around the chamber.

Chunks of her skin fell off.

“Whoa!” He threw up a palm and stepped backward.

Chapter Ten

Run or not, Jake thought as Red Trekaar's body distorted inside some strange unearthly mirage inside his sterile personal quarters. Was she shifting into one of the crazy woman's werewolves?

Shit.

Her leather clothes ripped.

Hell. This was Christian Hell. Better to give her what she wanted. How? The knife. He dove for her boot and grabbed the hard hilt of her blade.

Something yanked him, pulled him up into the air above furry arms and legs.

Hairs ripped from his peon.

Men and pants were a bad combination. No erection looming though. Just his damned balls being severed by his crotch's inseam due to the grip she had on the waistband of his blue jeans in her beastly paws. He slid his gaze to hers.

Her head was still human.

The intent gaze from those blue eyes anchored on him.

"I don't want to hurt you, Straightarrow." She licked her lips like she fancied him a dripping carcass. "But I don't know what it's like to be in this form. And I'll be completely shifted soon."

She meant whether or not she could control herself. Whatever. He swung the knife at his arm.

Fire seared his skin.

Blood trickled from the cut.

"Take it." He shoved the offering at her.

Her mouth fell upon the wound.

Her lips latched onto his arm.

The calming way she sucked hit him deep and low in his center.

But she was hideous. He shut his eyes.

She groaned a human sound.

Was she normal again? He cracked an eyelid.

Her fur disappeared, leaving lean muscles and curves that begged him to touch them.

Nude. Those handfuls of breast. The patch of soft curls hiding her hot entry. Was she as wet as he remembered?

Slowly, she lowered his boots to the floor and leaned into him, sucking on his arm in some strange seductive homage. Almost instinctive was her sucking action.

He went rock hard.

To have those lips all over him. Working his body with hers.

Sexy angles. They had to feel like velvet. God, to touch them.

His fingers itched to touch her soft supple skin.

He placed a palm on her shoulder and ran a hand down to curl his fingers around the curve of her tight buttock.

Dampness teased his fingertips where it pooled between her cheeks.

His body twitched.

To test her damp heat. He squeezed her soft angles against his bony chest and slid his fingers farther into the wet softness lower between her legs.

“Jake,” she gasped, looking up at him with blood on her face.

Could she have known what would come from this blood-exchange encounter? She had to have. But who cared? Just to ram inside her. To take what was offered and feel normal for a while.

To end this madness of need.

She shoved him down to his knees, onto his back, and fussed with his jeans’ zipper. The woman was everywhere, blurring like a phantom, undressing him, taking what she desired.

Again.

His head and shoulder blades ground into the hard metal flooring.

God it felt incredible.

Nothing existed outside of their carnal drive to match each other’s movements. He thrust upward and lunged to some inaudible vibe that only she could hear.

She cried out.

Need surged through his body.

God, to come at long last. He grabbed her ass and held her warm writhing wetness against him.

She leaned down, nose to nose, met his gaze, and produced a blood-covered blade, never missing one beat with her grinding hips. She pressed the blade’s back to his lips. “We are one. My blood is yours. Beyond forever and always. Our blood cycles must stay synchronized.”

The hard metal banged against his teeth.

He inhaled her hot breath and strained to hold still when his hips wanted to thrust.

A sweet salty tang of blood melted across his tongue.

His mouth watered.

For her blood. God, all he wanted to do was pump his insanity away. Was he a wild animal? His participation marked him as guilty. A blood fucker. Only as long as he stayed here. He just needed to get back to earth. To escape. The blood could buy him more. Could keep her content until he came inside her. He licked the cold blade.

Sparks whirled in his eyes, blocking most of his vision.

Red Trekaar threw back her head and screamed.

The rainbow of lights swirled so rapidly that he couldn’t see. Only their hearts were there, pounding to the inaudible beat.

He exploded, arching up into her dampness to reach the stars as if he became their master.

How peaceful this sparkling place was here within the internal heavens.

Serene.

No place existed like this on earth.

Red Trekaar groaned and stilled atop his thrashing hips.

She couldn’t be finished. The flitting stars beckoned him.

Welcomed him.

Red Trekaar’s body slumped backward. Her head fell against his shins.

What now? He blinked a couple times, clearing the residual lightshow from his vision, and shoved onto his elbows.

She lay atop him, on her back, sleeping as far as he could tell.

“Red Trekaar?” He squeezed her thigh.

She didn’t move.

Christ, what now? He’d killed her with his blood or his fucking. What was up with these people? Or it was a woman thing. Women. He carefully lifted Red Trekaar, placed her sweaty curves upon their bed, and covered her with the gray metallic blanket.

She was breathing.

She was warm.

She even had a pulse.

Damn, no other woman could hold a flame to his wife’s beauty. But the other times they had sex, she hadn’t passed out. What had happened to her?

His wife-mercenary looked mighty weak and helpless lying in the bed.

She rooted around in the bedding.

Maybe she was just human and fell victim to exhaustion? Just like when she dug through the nursery’s wreckage in search of survivors. Just like he was human. Would he be wrong to give in to her beauty? Her logic? Her passion? Or was he lying to himself to take the easy route out of this mess his crotch had gotten him into? Ecstasy? Right. More like crossing the line of decency. He should have listened to ranting Darla. Kindrist’s state was an omen.

Her eyelids fluttered.

She reached up and rubbed both eyes.

“You’re okay, Red Trekaar. You just passed out.”

She peered up at him with yellow eyes. “Out?”

When she looked in the mirror, she was going to be even more shocked. “Uh, honey, I hate to break the news to you, but your baby blues have turned yellow.”

She shot up into a sitting position, staring at her bare toes on the plain gray bedding.

“What’s wrong, Red?”

“You should call me Kindrist since we are now expecting a child.”

Chapter Eleven

Holy fuck. Jake couldn't breathe. I've fathered an alien baby. "No way. Don't you need to kill a rabbit first before making a guy shit land mines?"

Her confused gaze met his. "With my people, we have eye-color changes when our body chemistry is altered in reproduction."

What next? "Don't tell me I'm God or anything even more whacko. Is there anything else that will shock the crap out of me?"

Her eyes pinched with confusion. "No." She shook her head. "The legends live. Because of you."

Why does something about this scenario remind me of that movie with early explorers landing on a continent where the producer has the heroine's people running around thinking love and light? Oh yeah, that was about my People. Totally ludicrous.

"Jake we embark to meet our destiny." She froze and stared vacantly across the room.

Okay, just another conversation I'm not privy to. Where's my damned pants? These people talk behind a guy's back and strip him butt naked for the pump-and-grind whims of an alien seductress. The crap about destiny started to turn into a comedy starring Jake Straightarrow, Wonder Stud. He shook a finger in the air.

Her gaze snapped to his. "What?"

"I don't believe in destiny crap. And forget any legends live stuff for my sake. I just need to know what the hell is going on. Especially if I've fathered a child. Shit! A child." He stepped toward the chamber's portal. "I can't find my pants. And I'm fornicating with an alien." He spun to her bewildered mask. "You sure as hell don't look upset. And all of you talk behind my back. What happened to sharing information so the dumb earthling knows what's going on?" Her honor certainly couldn't ignore that punch.

She shook her head and haphazardly waved a palm at him. "Earthlings have sex to procreate. So do Nulvitians."

"For the record, I was having sex for recreation on earth."

"Then you should have used preventative measures." She kicked her blanket off and slunk her perfect nude curves across the room to another god-damned invisible button.

A door opened. She produced more black leather clothing, and covered her seductive hour-glass body in silence.

Fine. If she was trying to populate the universe with some sort of Straightarrow spawn, she needed to get those damned tight-ass pants back on before he lost control again.

"Your biorhythms are set with mine now, Straightarrow. So, you won't need a Beast Tamer until I do. The sexual desire is another problem. Let me know when you need me." She strode to the door and shot him a glance. "I'll check in on you later. And since you're keeping up with the record, I prefer the sex over the blade." She shot him a wink. "Just call me an animal."

Who wouldn't prefer the fucking with her blood libation? Shit.

The door shut out the sight of her.

Fantastic. My god-damned crotch got me locked in a cell with invisible buttons. I'll be

really screwed if I can't find the pisser again. Might as well get some sleep. He headed for the bed but found himself pacing.

So much for returning to earth the planet's hero. Nobody had to tell a Native American about the value of half-breeds. His child couldn't possibly be considered anything more than an abomination. What if its hair changed color? What if it was a girl whose eyes changed color when pregnant? He paced his quarters.

Christ. He'd gone and enjoyed having sex with an alien. He stopped cold and stared at his reflection in the window.

A shirtless man stared back.

Nude for the most part. Foolish and naïve in his birthday suit. Was there any reason to dress? Just hanging out the animal he had become, trapped in his sex cage, seemed the simplest way to deal with this madness. But sex with Kindrist wasn't just for pleasure. Something deep and demanding pushed him forward. To what? Could something bigger than him, something metaphysical, be drawing his soul mate and him together?

Earth was on the line.

His ass was on the line.

His child was on the line.

Every damned thing worth saving begged he hang on to some invisible rope. But pulling meant he didn't get a choice. Or did he? Factoring in abstinence might have kept his ass from drip-drying while dancing the Samba across the tightrope of a proverbial line. He had made choices. Unfortunately, choices left little time for comparing pros and cons. The stakes had changed with fatherhood. Destiny had to be laughing. Nothing mattered now but being true to oneself and protecting one's child. Room for mistakes lay in his past.

The future echoed with survival. And taunted with a seductress who wielded an even greater burden. Dare he believe her story?

Her planet was destroyed.

She gave her life to a cause fighting for freedoms.

The enemy attacked the ship's nursery to kill any children she may have birthed because of a legend.

And she wouldn't permit her commander to sacrifice a crew member's freedom for the greater good.

Sounds like Red operates on honorable ethics.

Factor in great sex....

That's a plus. No, behaving like an animal doesn't count. Only morals count to civilized folks. And I've got morals. For now, it's save-your-child-and-see-the-universe mode. That beat the Army's promise of seeing the world.

* * * *

Kindrist stepped into the invisible doorway to Goro's map room. Would he even cringe at his actions? He had gone through with the experiment aside from what free thinkers would think of his actions. Aside from her debate of his ethics. The Mawshwuc bit the crewman. What would destiny reveal next of the Blood War twisting her commander?

In the ship's dark map room, Goro's faintly-sketched back was turned to Kindrist as she walked up to let him look upon her eyes. His form traced out a black void like one in space among the stars, except for his glinting shaved head.

"I sense you have something to share," he said in mindspeak without turning from the luminescent star charts he studied.

The commander's keen intellect had to hold him to free-thinking ethics. He dared not break code and read her mind. Or would that be the next oath he broke? She stepped beside him and met his gaze.

He peered into her now-changed eyes for a moment and nodded. *"What does your husband think, Kindrist?"*

If Jake realized the significance of Goro's back step in this war, he'd jettison himself into the merciful vacuum of space and die. But the commander hasn't read my thoughts. So, I'll play along and pretend all is as normal as expected. *"He's confused."*

"An honest answer." He nodded. *"But he fears the unknown just as you did when you joined The Cause."*

Right as usual. Why did Goro have to be so wise? *"I would speak to him more but he needs time to process the news."*

Goro pointed at Quadrant Eleven. *"Voldon's forces nucleate here. We need to act quickly. Can you bring Straightarrow over in enough time to train him to sabotage a neural network?"*

In the name of free-thinking children, I have no choice.

"And does my star pupil think I have erred today?" Goro watched her in his unnerving patient manner.

"Perhaps you would prefer to probe my mind for your answer?"

"Kindrist." Goro chuckled, *"We fight the same enemy. If you had been the volunteer today, I would have done the same thing."*

"A dead woman cannot give birth to your savior." Undoubtedly his reason for not utilizing her in his grand scheme to test Voldon's power.

Goro's mask melted into disapproval. *"You were young when you came to The Cause. Maybe I should have turned you away."*

"You couldn't. I was the last Nulvitian." Truth punched her in the gut.

He nodded once, solemnly like a sage. *"And now we shall have a half-Nulvitian to take up your torch when your days have passed."*

Just what did that imply? My usefulness was almost over?

"We fight the same war, Kindrist. And you shall always be more important to The Cause alive."

Maybe his actions were for the greater good. If not, free thinkers had little time.

"Go now, Kindrist. Your eyes are a testament to our victory."

True. Goro always spoke truth. He was inspiration for all those who struggled to clutch their freedoms. Today, her perceptions of him erred. She had to try harder to be more devout. Maybe spend time in meditation. Goro was her mentor for a reason. What had she done questioning his actions? Meditation was an excellent way to spend the many months of gestation. Safe. Practical. She nodded and pivoted to the invisible doorway.

Chapter Twelve

Jake stared at the strange gray popsicle-bomb-shaped vehicle. Okay, they said the thing was supposed to be a machine. “It’s an aircraft?” he asked his not-so-pregnant-looking pregnant wife who stood to his right inside the quiet docking bay.

“Spacecraft.” Kindrist stepped off to pace out a tapping tune around the ship with the heels of her black boots.

Oh yeah, I’m in space. How did anyone shaped like a six-foot human male ever fit inside that narrow flat vehicle? He scanned the four other identical windowless and seamless pod fighters sitting next to the one Kindrist circled in the otherwise empty cavernous chamber.

Weird. Father a child and earn an honorary pilot’s license? “Not only do I know nothing of flying aircraft, but I’m just as techo-dumb with spacecraft.” Maybe I wasn’t the best earthling for the job?

“A computer operates the fighter. You just tell it what to do.”

Now, if I tell it to fly to earth and it does, we’re in business. Shit. I’ve got a child to protect. But maybe escape could work into the picture later. Paying attention should pay off in the long run. “How does one fit inside this vehicle?”

Kindrist’s black form stepped around the nose-shaped front end of the ship. “You’ll lie on your back, inside. You’re really safe. There’s a view screen that shows you where you’re heading. The autopilot flies you to your destination as well as protects you with an advanced defense system.”

Right. Can’t psychics blow up things with their minds? “What kind of advanced defense system can protect me from psychics?”

She claimed a spot beside him, assumed an at-ease stance, and locked that eerie golden gaze upon his. “You are the most important weapon The Cause has at the moment. We wouldn’t send you into battle without the best defenses.”

What else was a sex-slave-turned-stud secret weapon to believe? He’d seen the lack of protection for the nursery. “How will I be any safer than the nursery?”

Her gaze slid slowly to the aircraft and back to his. “You won’t have me slowing you down.” She smiled weakly.

Boy, there is nothing like a nervous wife faking smiles, especially on a woman who never smiles.

She reached for a spot on the gray metallic hull. “Note this location.”

A crease broke the seamless siding, sketching out a hatch running the back half the length of the upper part of the fighter. The hatch slid forward to reveal the ship’s inner barren black interior.

Great. He’d be trying to get his sorry sad ass in and out of shit and never be able to find the invisible button. “So, I climb inside this trash can, no, coffin, and head out for some covert maneuver in a place where I’m as alien as you are to me. Hmmm. What’s Plan B?”

Kindrist waved toward the interior’s black hole. “For now, let’s see if you fit comfortably inside and tune this craft to your biorhythms. Afterward, I’ll explain everything you need to know.”

“Talk about need to know.... All the guys back home need to know to look out for sexy babes in tight Gothic leather attire.” He swung a leg down into the capsule, then the other, and shoved his boots all the way to the tip of the hole.

Kindrist smacked her lips and leaned toward him to peer at his knees. “Lie back.”

“Bossy, aren’t you. Must be the hormones.” He shot her a smirk and stretched back into his coffin. “So, does my body explode or something? Why the freaking crypt ambiance? You do need me alive, right?”

She stepped out of his view of metallic rafters and sheet metal.

The hatch slid shut.

Christ. “I’m really not ready to dash off into the unknown and fight 8-legged spies.”

“You’re not going anywhere,” her voice echoed.

The hatch snapped out the last of the docking-bay’s light.

Lying in the dark had to be equivalent to death. Talk about royally screwing the pooch. Damn, she is a were-wolf. How much pooch-ier could things get? Wait. She needs my blood.

A square screen lit up overhead.

Lights, camera, action. Maybe this was a time to contemplate rebirth. All the holy men back on the reservation would love a chance to chant at my ass while raking me over the proverbial coals. Gods, I should have seen this coming. My damned gut must be on vacation.

An orange beam of light shot out to his forehead.

Okay, this was supposed to be a bonding experience. Bonding didn’t equate to pain. Kindrist would pay for painful alien probing. Baby or not.

The beam shifted left to right and back again, fast, calculating his body like he rested inside an MRI.

“Please state your name and planet of origin,” a woman’s soft computerized voice commanded in perfect mechanical English as the orange beam zigzagged across his head toward the tips of his lost toes.

Those boots had to be lost in the darkness given there was no pain. At least this ship wasn’t psychic. Well, if it had mastered telepathy, earthlings were less-evolved. But the fighter spoke English. He could communicate with the ship. Command the freaking thing to fly to earth. Cooperation was his ticket home. Uh, after saving the baby. Why in the Hell couldn’t I keep my pants zipped? “Jake Straightarrow, earth.”

“Welcome, Straightarrow. Your password is thunderbird. To activate my flight status, you must say thunderbird. Speak of this to no one.”

Who gave the computer that culturally-specific term? So much for secrecy. “Gotcha.”

“Your bio-stats note you have forty-three earth hours until you must mate.”

Fantastic. What else would this squawking bird tell everyone? “Are we finished? Because I’m ready to get my feet under me.”

“Walk the path of destiny, Straightarrow.” The hatch slid open.

Who taught the flight computer Native-American sayings? To never hear destiny uttered again.... But the words so sounded like Native-American dogma. Bizarre.

Brilliant light flooded the compartment.

Kindrist leaned into view, a shadow-cloaked torso, among the metal grid work overhead. “I told you the process was painless.”

“Funny how you can’t read my mind but knew I wondered about pain.”

She turned her head left and shot him a sideways smile with some obliging light. “We’re all alike when it comes down to basics. We yearn for simple freedoms that make life a happy

experience. A pain-free existence is part of the picture. Now, what would you like to know?"

A million things that will get my feet back on earth. He patted his pod fighter. "Where's the gas tank on this baby and what do gas stations look like on the back forty past earth's moon?" Anything to get my butt back home.

She chuckled. "I wouldn't expect anything else from you, Straightarrow."

Wow, she had expectations.

"Forget refueling. This model spacecraft operates off your body's energy."

What a big lump to swallow. "Huh?"

She leaned her sexy organic curves against the vehicle's shiny straight inflexible hull, pressing her black leather against the metal.

Oh to pin her down back in our quarters.

"Our mother ship operates with psychic power," she said. "We feed ourselves, then turn around and fly the ship. Not much waste in the process. Nor do we harm any environment. But pod fighters are hard to explain. The technology is stolen from its planet of origin in Quadrant One. Thanks to Voldon's theft, we managed to grab a fleet of these almost indestructible pods." She patted the craft's crease-free nose like it was her prized war pony. "They aren't used for battle." Her gaze met his. "They're used to protect our secret weapons."

His gut fluttered.

Was that intuition talking? And this emotionless female really needed to wink now and then. Or do something expressive. After all, she was pregnant.

"Your code word will save your ass, Straightarrow. Nobody else can fly this ship. It's our version of a knight's medieval armor. And you don't even have to know how to fly it or how to read star charts. You just tell it where you want to go."

"And remember to eat a good breakfast. Right?" Or be the fool missing a meal.

She nodded. "As for this pod fighter, it's been waiting with The Cause over seven-hundred earth years for a pilot. You've just made its day. Now, Goro offered to walk you through the star chart chamber. I can take you to him."

Star charts showed earth's location. Although, finding earth had to be easier than digesting the fact a pod fighter hadn't seen flight time in seven centuries. Didn't the metal corrode? Had these folks heard the old adage use it or lose it? So many questions and so little time. Time was extremely important now. Just how long were Nulvitian pregnancies? Escaping was totally unacceptable until he found a way to protect his child. So an understanding of the star charts would help him. "After you."

Kindrist led him through the winding corridors to a lift and onto a ship level that was one large round room. As far as he could tell. An empty space.

What had to be a blank control-panel dashboard circled the space where three people wearing the same standard white crew garb sat cross-legged with their backs to him like monks in prayer.

"Here sit today's pilots," Kindrist whispered. "Please respect their meditation and remain quiet."

Okay. No yammering. Or I'll look like the green earthling who made the ship crash.

Kindrist touched his elbow and pointed left. He followed her to where there was nothing but a meditating pilot.

A door made of blue light shot up from the floor.

Geesh. Hide the star charts from the sex-slave-recruits. Well, good sex wouldn't break him. But the slave aspect ate away at a man's pride. He followed Kindrist through the doorway

into a room that looked as normal as his personal quarters except the little to no lighting.

The shadows turned at the center of the space.

Goro.

The commander stood emotionless. Almost at ease. “Congratulations on your news,” Goro spoke. “The crew hasn’t heard of the pregnancy. We’ll announce the news after Kindrist has passed the dangerous period.”

Dangerous period? After the attack on the nursery, who could guess what dangers Goro mentioned. So much for immediate escape to earth. He shot a glance sideways at Kindrist who stood at ease again--her natural state.

Kindrist nodded toward Goro. “Since the Mawshwuc is alive and has ingested our crewman’s blood, I take it your choice to keep my pregnancy silent is more a way to keep Voldon from learning through communication with his Mawshwuc.”

Goro didn’t wince and began pacing in the darkness. “I hadn’t thought of that aspect yet, Red Trekaar. Thank you for your candor.”

“I’ll return shortly.” She departed.

Well, there was nothing like facing one’s adversary. Goro wasn’t supposed to be the bad guy if this tale of a crazed psychic ran shod over the universe. Although, when a person became a shanghaied mercenary, everyone suddenly became at fault for something by default. Including the commander.

“You’ve been introduced to your pod fighter?” Goro asked.

“Yes. That was an enlightening experience. Let’s just say there must be more than seven wonders of the universe.”

The commander nodded. “Like flying continents, living without a soul, or children speaking in utero.” He nodded. “Wonders often best avoided.”

What kind of insanity did he elude to? The last thing I want to do is chat with the baby.

“Your expression tells me you’re confused about the wonders.” He chuckled and turned to face Jake, boots spread squarely beneath him. “Technology varies across the universe and differs greatly from what you have on earth. Now, you’ve been assigned an elite extraterrestrial spacecraft. I hope you find it pleasing and welcome the opportunity to use one. Very few will ever claim the luxury of owning something as unique.”

“Give me time to digest the concept.”

“Fair enough.” Goro nodded.

But all of the pomp and claims didn’t factor in the obvious. “So, what do I need to know about star charts if my spacecraft does the driving?”

“I thought you’d feel more comfortable being drawn beneath our cloak, into the secret side of our operation. After all, you think as well as the rest of us. Why not let you have a hand in the logistics of this operation?”

Finally, an earthling gets some respect around here. “All right. Show me where we’re going.”

Goro waved a wide hand.

Pinpoints of light popped around them in the room. Some seemed to rest upon their bodies. Others floated in clouds. Must be nebulae. Unfortunately, I never took that class.

“Show quadrants,” Goro commanded.

A grid system laced its way through the stars.

“Here,” Goro pointed to the uppermost quadrant, “is my planet of origin. Almost decimated the rock is, except for the atoms locked within my cells ready to fight at any moment

for free thought.” He pointed down to the bottom row of quadrants. “Earth bobs here in the great universe’s ocean. Ebbs and tides, universal currents of energy, keep all as it would be to the universe. But the universe’s rhythm has no control over Voldon. He originates in Quadrant Four.”

Goro stepped sideways and peered up at dots of light. “You can’t see planets or suns here. They are too small. But you can grasp the enormity of the universe knowing what you view is so large that it’s beyond your human comprehension. And mine. We as beings don’t even register as specks in this scene.”

No argument there.

“Computer, show Gameddaron,” Goro ordered.

The stars blinked away to leave one large round blue planet.

“As you can see, this is a planet.” Goro stepped around the sphere with the ease of a man who circled it daily.

Blue light cast the commander in an eerie glow.

“I can’t read your thoughts, Straightarrow.” His orange gaze glowed in the blue light. “So, I’ll have to believe in what you say. In return, I have to trust you believe my words.”

Well, an intuitive gut could vouch for what a man didn’t hear. “Fair enough. What about Gameddaron?”

“I need you to penetrate Voldon’s compound and sabotage the neural network. Only then will Voldon be incapable of channeling his power through Quadrant Eleven afterward.” He pointed at a tan area on the planet. “This is the planet’s only continent. The only structure on Gameddaron houses the neural network. You’ll have to fly low, locate the compound, land, and find your way underground.” Goro faced Jake squarely. “Can you do that in under forty-eight hours, before you shift? Before you lose some of your ability to reason?”

So much for defining impossibilities. “Uh, let’s start over. What kind of sabotage are we talking about? How big is this continent? And just how much time will I be spending in flight to the planet? Not to mention, just how do I fly under the radar when sneaking up on psychics?”

Goro’s low chuckle bounced around the room’s dark shadows. “You think the way I do, Straightarrow. Red Trekaar proves again to be the wisest of us all.”

Was that an insult? “Are you hitting me below the belt?”

Goro shook his head. “No. No, my friend. Red Trekaar blames herself for the nursery’s destruction and accepts responsibility for the death of our children. She believes her refusal to choose just any Violet Child created the delay Voldon’s drone needed to locate our ship. Alas, the blame does not reside with her. It’s easy to see that she waited for the right man. Of that, I am most certain now.”

So, that’s what her comment about not being on the mission with him meant. No wonder she said remember the children. What a cross to bear.

“Your fighter running on biorhythms is a stealth aircraft as you humans like to label your top-secret fighters,” Goro said.

Now the commander was speaking English.

“The pod fighter is actually a protective device to keep you alive by aiding in your secret approach,” Goro added. “And your fighter knows how to find humanoid activity. All you need to do is lie back and wait. As for the neural network, Red Trekaar will see that you have sufficient knowledge of all the styles of neural networks. After all, she has the most to lose—her life. Remember, fortress type is key to where the processing chamber’s location will be.”

So, why wasn’t Kindrist going along on this mission? “Could you explain why I go

alone again?”

“Two reasons. Voldon’s forces can’t read your mind and detect your presence. That’s the most significant reason. However, Voldon’s fascinated with killing exotic creatures since his predecessors learned our mercenaries shape shift. He knows how we bind as soul mates, how we continue to mate to appease the inner beast. As soon as he donned his crown, he began capturing The Cause’s soul-mate mercenaries, released them in his private arena, and slaughtered them before his masses. He can save the blood from one or both of you and use it to keep you alive as long as he desires. Alas, none of my crew members deserve a long torturous death. Keeping you separated on missions protects you both from being captured together.”

“This Voldon can contain a were-creature? Kindrist was pretty powerful when she shifted.”

“Voldon can do many things.”

The trip to planet Gameddaron seemed more and more futile.

“We need time, Straightarrow. Time for the legends to unfold. You can buy us time.”

Crap. More legend talk. “Don’t you people have a real plan?”

Goro cocked a brown eyebrow. “All we have are legends. And thanks to you, we just might have one of the children of legend.”

But what about the fighter aircraft? Why hadn’t their creators ended this war?

“What are you thinking, Straightarrow?”

“That the people who created these elite spacecraft you’re wanting me to fly into Gameddaron should have ended this war ages ago with their technology.”

Goro nodded twice and thrust his hands behind his back. “True. But fledgling psychics couldn’t prevent natural catastrophes like their sun going quasar. Only a few survived to die homeless. Their ships were passed on to The Cause to fight the war.”

How much of the tale actually occurred or was just twisted into a legend like half-breed earth babies? For some reason, the future seemed to be hiding many answers. I’ll be around a while to hear a few.

Chapter Thirteen

About an hour later, Jake found Kindrist standing by one of the docking-bay's large windows near the pod fighters. She hadn't seen him enter. Or so he hoped for the sake of posterity. The moment's sneak factor was kind of nice given these aliens could read minds.

He went rock hard.

The sight of her inspired his peon to get rowdy and make demands. Maybe they could sniff out a private place around here. He scanned the enormous space.

Other people, dressed in standard white meditator garb or black leather issue, worked around the pod fighters. The odd clothing contrast definitely had to have more significance than cowboy hat colors. Why the oddly universal color of peace and the color of death so blatantly on stage? Did folks around here need to be reminded of their reality so often? He shook off the point and strode to Kindrist's side.

The fingertips on one of her hands glued her to the portal's frame.

She cast a long speculative glance his direction. "Goro didn't send for me. You must remember the way through the corridors to have found your way here. Excellent memory. I will not have to worry about you as much now."

Just another reason for her to take pride in her choice of mates. But she didn't need to worry about a man who killed for a living getting lost among *The Seeker's* labyrinth. Still, expressing her concern for his safety showed another side of her. The side with a conscience. Would she admit she was softer with what he knew about her? "Goro said you blame yourself for the death of the children."

She slid her gaze back to the stars. "The probe wouldn't have found the ship if I hadn't taken my time."

Any number of things could have factored into that attack's success. But she assumed responsibility. That he could understand. Mercenary work was never pretty. Relying on another person proved foolish time and time again. Better to blame oneself than wait around for another to botch up your life. At least, nobody else could get the best of you. That singular truth resonated through the ages. They had a lot in common.

"You're quiet. Do my actions disgust you?" she asked.

He met her speculative stare. "No. I was just thinking about how alike we were."

"How so?" Her gaze grew long and deep, almost searching his eyes.

"Just mercenary life. That's all." But in the circles of her fiery yellow eyes he could see himself. The loneliness. The desperation. A passion for justice. Only a fool would confess that to his master though. Time to change the subject. "Humor me. Why do you all wear white or black?"

"As you know, black is the best color for mercenary work. Whereas, the rest of the crew is equal. Each pulls his own weight--to coin an earth phrase. And over two millennia ago, our leaders thought it best to ensure nobody felt of lower class, a situation that creates animosity. Animosity leads to people disrespecting each other and breaking code by reading another's thoughts. The general reason behind uniforms. So, free-thinkers fighting for freedom of thought aboard starships wear white, a color of peace. We are all equal. We never forget our equality."

What a farce of a utopia. More like one existing on the fringe of collapse. Could it be possible to have so many beings in the universe agreeing to live like this? Or was this just a military strategy for appeasing the troops? The differentiation between mercenaries and crew had to be a clue. “Do guys in black get special perks?”

“Perks?” Her gaze slid past his shoulder.

A blonde woman in black leather strode into the docking bay, eyed Kindrist with odd iridescent lime-green eyes, and nodded.

Kindrist returned the gesture as quickly and emotionlessly as the newcomer had initiated the reaction.

A tall lanky man wearing black leather pants and vest approached the blonde’s left.

Not a mercenary by any means. Both acted like they knew each other pretty well. The guy probably wore the sleeveless vest to make him look a bit more buffed than he could ever appear in long sleeves. Buffed just wasn’t happening for the scrawny male.

“That’s Sevra and her earth mate, Paul Weatherford,” Kindrist whispered. “They’ve completed two missions.”

Why whisper? Kindrist’s at-ease stance never wavered.

His gut sank.

Great. Something was going down. “Is something wrong I should know about?”

“Later. They’re coming.” Kindrist studied the were-assassin couple.

“Red Trekaar, my husband has asked to meet Straightarrow,” Sevra called over the dull shush of air blown through the ship’s ventilation system.

Kindrist stepped to Jake’s side and nodded. “It is good you both meet early on. Straightarrow surely misses earth.”

“Again, we agree on things,” Sevra said as she and her spouse claimed a spot two steps away. “I see congratulations are in order. May Devros bring your pregnancy to fruition. Safe days ahead as Destiny unfolds.” Sevra nodded solemnly to Kindrist.

“To us all,” Kindrist replied with a nod.

Sevra shot Kindrist a curious look, then waved from the gawky Paul to Jake. “And here is your brethren, an earthling, my husband. At long last, Red Trekaar treats your undying homesickness with a good dose of your mother earth.”

Jake’s gut wrenched.

And it wasn’t about his rising desire for sexual recreation. Sevra’s statement had to have been an insult. He focused on the man who stood a few inches taller. Paul almost had a somber zombified look about him. But more life lit his features than any zombie’s carcass.

Paul grinned and thrust out an enormous palm. “Good to meet you, Straightarrow.”

With squawking intuition, better to keep this professional. Well, as professional as mercenaries could get. He grabbed the wide solid hand and squeezed. “Where you from?”

“Texas. And you?” Paul returned the shake and released his grip.

“San Diego.” The man didn’t need to know anything else than the location of his alien abduction.

“I won’t attempt to repeat your history that’s been buzzing around the ship. Most likely, it’s been stretched and twisted a bit. But I gather you’re ex-military?”

Now, this guy was rather polite and sociable. What was up with his evil wife? Yet, something had to be derived from this meeting. Another universal truth. Outer-space rationalizations? Opposites attract. “Yes.” Now, how did her husband get sucked into this space opera? “What about you?”

“Computers.”

When advertisements for a degree in computer science claimed the education would take you far, they had no idea what lay ahead in space.

Paul shifted his scuffed leather boots. “And what about your New Age background? You should fit right in here with all this outer-space talk of destiny and peace.” He grinned from ear to ear.

New Age? Whatever. “My parents were mostly Native American. I learned how to keep a calm head from their teachings.” Or so I hope.

“Lucky you. I just crave jalapenos and dream of cold beer.” Paul winked. “So are you up for some tutoring? Goro asked me to assist with your understanding of neural networks over the next few days.”

“Wonderful.” Kindrist nodded.

“I agree,” Sevra said. “Destiny calls to us all to take up arms and fight this war. We dare not fall into Voldon’s narcissistic trap and feel we control anything. So, I hand over my husband to help fight the war.” Sevra turned a palm over toward Paul.

God, the alien female had to be ticked orders made leave her blood bag with me. He could get killed in a nanosecond. No husband. No blood. Goodbye universe. Or could there be something hidden within Sevra’s actions? Even suicide?

“As we all shall do in time.” Kindrist blinked solemnly.

Funny to think about the suicidal aspect of sending one’s blood-fucking spouse off to war and then witness Kindrist’s solemn reply. Both female aliens had to be chatting in their heads anyway. Neither could be trusted.

“But for now, we have other orders to contend with.” Sevra pivoted toward the door.

Was that a hint of annoyance in her fleeting expression?

Paul’s brow arched. “I’ve got to visit The Chamber. Duty calls. Later.”

The couple departed.

Adios dweeb.

Kindrist turned back to the stars beyond the window.

“What was all that about?” He tried to whisper.

In the window’s reflection revealing the opposite side of the docking bay, Kindrist watched the couple disappear through the sliding door. “Sevra is weaker than I am. She feels it and pokes at me whenever she can.”

Was that Kindrist’s true stance on the scene that just unfolded? “Weak? Her? She seemed like a bitch. A bitch in black leather wearing weapons doesn’t come off weak. You sure she’s just not jealous I’m a stud muffin and her squeeze ain’t?”

Kindrist shot him an assessing smirk that equated to a drop-dead-moron stare. “She wears a torch. A torch turns a room’s organic components to ashes in a second. There is no strength in keeping one’s enemies at a distance. There is only fear. A mercenary with a weapon that places him on an equal field with an opponent shows no fear.” She patted the knife’s butt at her knee.

True. Easy to say when you have more evolved psychic powers though. Time to see what this discussion can offer a man trapped for stud service. “Okay. Well, you can’t expect me to make accurate assessments when I don’t have much to build upon. Familiarize me with your world, Kindrist.” It couldn’t hurt to learn more and affect an escape.

A smile played with the corner of her mouth. “I prefer it when you use the name my parents called me. Come along. We’ll discuss the ship as we head back to our private quarters.”

She turned and sashayed toward the door.

Her parents. His wife? His baby. Talk about bizarre epiphanies. How many times had he almost changed his life so drastically only to learn his butt was still in one piece and he could get back to work? That the world hadn't changed. Well, not this time. He'd finally fathered a child. In wedlock! He followed his spouse's sexy swinging bottom.

The ass that got him into this fix.

Change the subject.

Fatherhood.

Okay, maybe fathered, rather sired, a child. Maybe couldn't sound any more significant. Just what did Goro mean by the dangerous period of pregnancy? Would any earthling even want this alien kid? Would the child be a freak? Hell, the kid wasn't to blame. I should have listened to the warning when Kindrist mentioned the legend. He was lower than a dead slug when she had confessed his purpose was to fight and to propagate and nothing registered in his pea brain. He caught up with her as she crossed the docking-bay's threshold and walked at her side in the white corridor where two white-garbed crewmen walked toward them.

Walked at her side like a spouse.

Or like a father.

Hell. He'd really done himself in this time. If he didn't protect her, he was a louse of a father. Sub-human. So now he was her guardian. Just another job for a mercenary. He sighed and studied her stoic profile.

First shanghaied into never-ending woody-dom.

The crotch of his pants caught his peon.

Damned uncontrollable appendage. He repositioned it with a swift hopefully undetectable motion and studied her out of the corner of one eye.

Those marching curves never let on if she knew he watched her. And now I'm tricked into parenting.

Double duped. Could he bring himself to respect her and raise a child? Somebody had to save the kid from his father's mistakes.

She turned her pointed nose his direction.

Those eerie unearthly yellow eyes. Talk about a fuck award. More like a reminder that a man in a foreign world had to be more careful.

His gut twisted.

I heard that, gut. Nothing else needs to be said.

"You're staring at me, Straightarrow."

Well, first things are first. "You need to call me Jake. We're having a child. We should at least be on first name terms."

She nodded once. "I wasn't on my home world when my parents died. Parents mean as much to me as fighting this war. And now parenting.... It is an honor that you allow me to call you by your familiar name." She bowed her head then met his gaze. "I can only hope you become more comfortable with me so that our child feels he is loved."

How much of the future did she know? "He?"

"Or she. All is unknown."

"What do your psychic abilities entail?"

"Telepathy. I can't levitate, start fires, or much of anything else you associate with psychic powers. That's the problem. Most of the universe is just telepathic. But for some reason, earth seems to produce psychics with extraordinary powers."

Weird. Why? “Even though we’re beneath you on the evolutionary tree?”

She shot him a scowl. “Forget that. It means nothing other than none of us can read your mind. You should thank the stars you have that much freedom.”

Now that she was talking, he could jab her with the big questions. “What about our child’s psychic abilities?”

“Hopefully, it can read minds and have special powers.”

But the child might never arrive. “What about this dangerous period Goro mentioned?”

“The healers believe it’s a problem with blood types. That our blood doesn’t mix and the embryo aborts early. Others say the universe chooses to punish those working against it. As you would guess, that’s Voldon’s perspective. We believe otherwise on *The Seeker*.”

As far as she knew or cared to say, Sevra obviously had issues with this woman. “Have Sevra and Paul had a successful pregnancy?”

“Rarely does anyone in the fleet. There hasn’t been one yet aboard this starship.”

“Where’s Sevra from?”

“A planet close to Voldon’s home.”

His gut flipped.

Sevra wore a torch and originated from a planet close to Voldon’s home. She probably was in cahoots with the bastard. “Why don’t I like that answer?”

She slid her gaze to his. “You’re the intuitive one. You tell me.”

Did she think this a good topic to discuss openly? “We should discuss this when we’re alone.”

Kindrist’s warning was one a smart man would heed. “So, what of neural networks? If I’m to study with the boob of the century, I’d like to know what neural networks really are.”

“Crystals.”

“Why do my thoughts veer off to energy now?”

She shot him a half-cocked smile. “Perhaps it’s because crystal energy on earth is the same as throughout the universe. Just like scientific laws.”

How did scientific laws explain psychic powers and this insane blood lust?

His groin demanded he ask with one wild lunge.

That part of his body needed to hold off on demands if only to keep me from looking like a sex addict. But something was going to have to give soon to keep me from losing my mind. And hopefully that would be Kindrist openly offering to appease the peon. Nobody was going to hold anything else over me out here in deep space. Even though earthlings looked weak in the blood lust aspect, my appearance in strength just might be the only thing saving my ass in the long run. Even with my alien wife.

Their silver door to their personal quarters suddenly punched him in the jaw.

His peon got really rowdy.

Personal time alone with Kindrist meant a struggle with desire.

Chapter Fourteen

Kindrist sat across from her husband at their personal quarters' table where he studied a small holographic screen displaying various fortifications. He hadn't asked for more sex. Surely he required more. Blood mates did. She'd give him anything to get back to winning his allegiance over. Just so she wouldn't lose her mind wondering if he despised her. Blood lust was an excellent binder of wills. But it masked many issues in relationships. Like love and homesickness. Hopefully Jake didn't miss earth. A content mate made for a happy life. But how could life ever be happy on a starship during wartime in comparison to the clean air and swaying vegetation on earth?

The familiar whisper of air blowing through the ventilation system tried to berate her for her preference of the hustle and bustle of a planet. Life aboard *The Seeker* was all business. So different from her childhood on Nulvitia. Maybe it was time to introduce Jake to some new music? No. Things finally progressed nicely. Her husband had stopped asking questions and focused on the information before him. At long last.

To hear a bird, a motor's hum, or the chatter from nearby people. Earth and the memory of Nulvitia's once-lush environment seemed so bright. So colorful. Life on a starship now felt cold. Estranged. Especially since she had a mate. And the baby was coming. Was Jake's cooperative behavior a sign he was suddenly protective of her? Or the baby? Becoming a parent did that to honorable people. Better he chose to be a father than snarling at becoming a husband. Yet, could she ever hope of earning his love?

They had sex.

Wild sex.

And how she craved more.

Did he? How could he after telling her to get off the last time she truly needed to help herself? Who knew what he would have done if the blood libation hadn't knocked her unconscious when she was on the verge of shape shifting. Gods, was she crazy for wondering? Curiosity often led to one's demise. But she couldn't help herself with him so close knowing how difficult it was for him to struggle with his weak earthling desires. She rose and skirted the table's silver corners.

Would he fight me? Or did he have a better understanding of what a free-thinking freedom fighter suffered and sacrificed? An understanding that hinged upon sexual therapy.

His gaze met hers.

Noting in that gaze indicated he'd balk. She slid her hands across his shoulders, to where his heart drummed beneath his solid chest. "Undress."

He thought, without blinking.

Apparently, desire wasn't driving him.

He rose against her touch, pulled off his shirt, and yanked off his boots, turning to her.

Bless the gods, she ached between her legs. Ached for him. She fell against him, grabbing at the zipper of his pants, turning her mouth to his.

Would he take it? Kiss her? She gently pulled his stiff manhood free of his pants.

He settled back against the table, watching her lips.

Holy Devros, to have him kiss me of his own free will.

His mouth fell against hers, brushing her lips with softness. Then his fingers raked into her hair, and his tongue thrust inside her mouth.

A wave of need plowed through her.

She had to get her clothes off. She shoved out of grasp and yanked off a boot. He was there, pulling at the hem of her leather shirt. Seconds later, she was free of her clothing and rubbing her breasts against his taut nipples.

He grabbed her, whirled her around, and laid her across the table. His warm mouth landed on her nipples, pulling, nibbling, sucking.

Need shafted through her core.

She groaned, thrust her fingers into his hair, and held him right where she wanted his mouth to milk her soul.

Oh to feel this revered every moment of life. To have a mate sip from your soul.

He pulled her groin to the edge of the table and leaned his manhood against her.

Holiest sun of suns, she couldn't take much more waiting.

He rammed his hardness inside her.

Over and over until he became the universe. Creation. And stars filled the blackness of her mind. Driving life from the void at that one point deep inside her womb where a man could make a woman dissolve into a gelatinous mass of gasping desperation on her back. She dug her fingernails into his shoulder blades and clung to him for sacred necessity because she couldn't swallow her cries.

Climax shot a wave of exhaustion through her cells.

She dared not relax and breathe because he had yet to come.

He hovered over her, head thrown back, grunting, thrusting.

Pounding against her writing body in the most amazing manner of a needy mate. He needed her. And if that were all she would have in his life, she would gladly satiate his hunger.

His body went rigid as he throbbed inside her.

Oh what life had cheated in holding back so long from giving her a mate to satisfy. Both him and herself. She ran her palms down his back to his iron ass and tried to sketch out the contours for a sacred mental picture.

He sank to a knee on the bench. "God, I needed that," he groaned.

Good to hear if only to know he wasn't forced and enjoyed himself. But the feral attraction wasn't freely entered into initially on his part. Jake's actions indicated he remained a pawn in her game. Could he ever forgive her of that? But she had had to choose the only man she could ever love—a man whom she respected. The fact he felt some reason to work with her was what she'd have to accept in the place of love in their relationship. Mutual respect wasn't grounds for a healthy marriage in many cultures.

A person's thoughts pushed into Kindrist's head. "*Red Trekaar, there is a problem in The Chamber. Please take Straightarrow to assist,*" Forty-three said in mindspeak.

"*Darla again?*" She stared at Jake where he studied a holographic display of various crystals associated with neural-network fortifications.

"*Yes.*"

What was Darla up to this time?

"*This isn't a matter where you need to endanger the child, Red Trekaar,*" Forty Three said. "*Send Straightarrow inside. Maybe he can learn why Darla is disturbed.*"

Again, I'm told not to intervene? Gaining a soul mate wasn't the triumph promised to

me.

“*Kindrist, are you listening?*” Forty-three asked.

“*Yes.*” She turned to Jake. “We need to go.”

His curious dark gaze met hers. “Need? I take it you’re chatting telepathically again.”

Something teased in his voice. Something belligerent. That’s what she liked about him though. He didn’t buy into anything but his own standards. If only their standards could merge, become the same. “A problem in The Chamber.” She shoved off the table to pull on her pants.

Jake managed to zip up his fly. “Oh, a chance to listen to one of Darla’s sermons again. And to learn where Paul went. It hasn’t been that long since we chatted in the docking bay.” His voice almost entertained laughter. Or suspicion.

Was he mocking her or thrilled at the prospect of catching Paul behind a disturbance? He seemed so ready to attack evil on earth. Why not on *The Seeker*? She yanked the hem of her shirt down to her waist and led him back through the clean almost empty corridor.

The few crew members they passed weren’t hurrying to The Chamber. The problem had to be localized. She turned down the final stretch of winding passageway.

“What could Paul have done to Darla?” Jake asked.

Unknowingly instigating chaos. “Funny you ask. But Goro has had him visiting with Darla for as long as he’s been here. Paul is the only earthling she confides in after earthlings have taken the Beast Tamer. But it’s obvious her patience is thinning.”

“What then? Why does she balk so much?”

He sounded somewhat concerned. Maybe to tell him the rest would help in his understanding. She paused and turned to face his intent scrutiny. “Voldon believes Darla is his mate. She was rescued from Voldon before they consummated their relationship.”

“That’s not what you told me.”

The judgmental glint in Jake’s eyes wasn’t the reaction she wanted to see. “Voldon despises Goro. Since our ship is the one in the fleet Voldon seeks most, it is easy to deduce that the mad man’s motive is obviously that he yearns to possess his enemy’s possessions.”

“We sex-slaves-turned-stud secret weapons have possessions. Fascinating.” He turned to The Chamber’s entrance. “Let’s see what’s behind door number one.”

“I didn’t say Voldon wanted Darla’s possessions. I hope you’re paying attention.”

Jake laughed and followed her lead.

Any type of cooperation equated to cooperation. A positive reality. But couldn’t he tell that he was being sent in because he was a new recruit? Darla might respond to him because there was the chance he didn’t totally believe in The Cause? If only Darla had learned Jake was seduced. Jake would have that wild card in his favor. But he obviously didn’t realize why he was chosen to intervene. “Don’t you understand? You must be careful.” She stepped behind his swinging long black hair.

“Careful.” He chuckled. “Why? Does Darla have a torch? If my ass is ash, then so is yours. We’ll die in a blink and—” He turned, grabbed her elbow, and shoved her back toward her personal quarters. “You stay here.”

Not one twist of anger danced upon his features. What was he doing? Had he lost his mind? “You know very little about this world. I can’t let you go in alone.”

“Doesn’t matter. You’re carrying my baby. Just stay here.”

First Goro breaking free-thinker law and saving a Mawshwuc. Now Jake thought he could give orders. All those years of working for The Cause vanished in an instant like an invisible torch turned them into useless ash. “You’ve lost your ability to reason, Jake

Straightarrow.”

He leveled an insistent gaze on hers. “Disobey me and learn what it is to be punished, wife.” He turned back to The Chamber’s door.

Men were the same throughout the universe. “Nobody threatens me that way. Besides, I’m dead not long after you. We both have our breath to lose.”

He blocked her path. “You mean you get pregnant with my child and won’t even attempt to stay alive for it? What kind of mother are you?”

To knee him in the groin. To watch him gasp for air as his head struck the floor. “How dare you question me? Not only am I your teacher, but I’m a mercenary. I know how to ensure I’ll draw breath beyond this moment.”

“Not anymore. Dangerous phase. Remember that discussion?” He shoved her back another step down the empty white corridor and turned to the gray door of The Chamber. “It’s time for you to trust the man you chose. You’re pregnant. I’ll be the brains now.”

How did a person argue with such lunacy? Until all the stars burn out, until the last speck of matter is sucked into the final breath of this universe’s existence, this earthling would wish he hadn’t won this debate.

The Chamber’s door shut out the last glimpse of his blue jeans.

And what do I do now? Wait for the Mawshwuc to kill a crew member. Like men could run the universe. All the Voldon’s through time have shown males couldn’t leave ego aside to end a psychic war. She leaned against the hard wall.

Nobody dared walk the long empty corridor.

Thank Devros. I’ve been relieved of duty. At least, without an audience. And what will become of *The Seeker* or free thinkers? Goro’s incubating a vampire. If Voldon infiltrated the ship through the minds of any of the crew, no one stood a chance against his corruption of *The Seeker*. What was Goro thinking?

Or I am wrong.

I must be wrong.

Goro would never fail the crew. Yet, his plan was so erratic from previous operations that he had to be working for Voldon. Could the man who took me in and gave my vengeance purpose be setting a ship full of free thinkers up for enslavement?

Gods, where do my thoughts coming from these days? I’m losing my mind.

Or Jake was right about hormone fluctuations. I must control these observations.

I must focus on the pregnancy.

I must stop fighting my destiny.

If I fail to embrace the future, Voldon wins.

Voldon must die.

Chapter Fifteen

Jake scanned the edge of The Chamber's rainforest. Only the sound of dripping water welcomed him. Dripping water was better than some woman's shrieking over the hum of a laser. And the trees were kind of nice, reminiscent of home. At least, he wasn't too late and gazing across dunes of ash because Darla had whipped out a torch and desiccated Paul's puny ass.

A woman screeched.

Crazy Darla. Time to locate Paul. He headed into the tree line's bobbing fronds.

Where was Darla? What was she up to? Paul could have managed to attack her. No. She had become part of the jungle. Paul couldn't overpower nature.

A crashing noise thundered.

Something rushed through the dense mishmash of hanging branches. Just what though? He squatted, disappearing into a canopy of leaves.

Paul's gawky upper body pushed through some drooping foliage. His concerned expression didn't share much of his story.

Better to be quiet and see what's going down.

"You're a traitor to your race," Darla snarled, hidden in the foliage. "Go back to your fuck buddy. And pray earth doesn't bite you in the ass."

Paul heaved into view with one hand clamped over his other forearm. Blood trailed down across his elbow. He scanned the trees as if looking for the woods to part revealing the doorway back to The Chamber's exit.

Broken branches wielding ends with fresh jagged breaks streaked through the vegetation.

Nature's arrows. Darla's magic, heading toward Paul's head. Duck dufus. Surely, the dolt had enough gumption to protect his brain and vision.

Paul dodged behind a tree trunk.

Well, maybe stumbled was a better word for Paul's actions. Don't send a computer geek to tend to mercenary work. Hell, Darla had to be lurking somewhere, firing missiles at the moron. Where? He scanned the forest.

Nothing in the canopies. Nor any sign of the whacko brunette in black leather. Whacko? Well, maybe not so much given her history with these aliens now that he had a few days aboard *The Seeker* to assess the situation. Darla had enough good sense to keep her legs crossed.

Paul ducked under some branches and ran three broad steps across a gap in the forest's vegetation like a scared fool.

Yep. Computer geek. Didn't he have some psychic power he could use for protection?

Paul stumbled back into the brush, not taking a moment to conceal his intentions, and departed.

Something moved back the other direction in the clearing.

Cloaked in killer black-leather garb, Darla carefully stepped over a fallen tree and surveyed the ground.

Probably for a blood trail. Just like a seasoned hunter. Excellent mercenary material. So that's why they wanted her to take the Beast Tamer. Forget the computer geek and save those deemed free thinkers. He slowly lowered even more into the surrounding leaves and low

branches. To observe.

Darla receded into a sheltering wall of tree trunks and leafy limbs.

Returning to nature.

A bell chimed.

Paul just exited or someone entered. If that was Kindrist coming onto this war zone, she'd have a lot of explaining to do in risking the safety of his child. He slowly rose and carefully stepped back toward the entrance.

Not a sound followed him to the edge of the metallic floor, and Kindrist.

Forget trust. There was no honor and obey in marriage to an extraterrestrial mercenary. He jogged to her elbow, grabbed her, and yanked her through the doorway into the quiet empty hallway where Paul's blood dripped out a path away from the closed door.

Kindrist jerked her arm away. "How dare you treat me like a child."

If a man who hadn't followed his orders had said that to him, the moron would be shoving his teeth back into their sockets. "Honey, Darla's using her levitation power to hurl projectiles at people." Calling her a stupid woman would have made more of an impact than sneering honey. He stepped off following the blood trail.

The heels of her black boots clicked out an angry beat behind him.

* * * *

The miserable savage. Lesser-evolved beings barely covered the source of Kindrist's problems. Her mate wasn't going to treat her like property. She fumed at the earthling's swinging jet-black hair where the glinting silk flicked from side to side as he stomped down the passageway.

Her choice of savior for the free-thinking universe just turned on her. What should she have expected in selecting a wild card? But how dare he give her orders. "I am the senior mercenary in this duo, Jake."

He shot her a snide grin over his shoulder. "Let me see, is the reason you won't be screwing up my mission because you can't follow orders?"

Of all the insolent accusations. His twisted smile only reaffirmed his disrespect. "I am the person dedicated to a cause. My course holds true. Where is the drum whose beat you follow, Jake Straightarrow?" She slowed her steps.

He rolled his eyes and turned back to the empty passageway. "Likely mumbo jumbo. I've got things to do." He forged down the corridor.

The earthling could follow his path alone as far as it would take him today. She had her child of legend. Nothing else mattered at the moment. Besides, destiny's embrace awaited them all. And the clock continually ticked toward blood fucking anyway. He would have to return and beg her for his libation if he wanted one. Beg.

"Red Trekaar?" Forty-three said in mindspeak.

Devros, she hadn't even noticed the operator's presence with her anger focused on Straightarrow. "Yes?"

"Goro wants to know what happened inside The Chamber."

"I couldn't tell you. Straightarrow has departed without reporting to me."

"You shouldn't have entered with him. I warned you he would be troublesome."

As well as operators. "No one can convince me a mate is anything otherwise." Apparently, Jake realized this long ago when choosing the solitary life of a mercenary. "I'll speak with Goro myself."

"He's in docking bay eight."

Whatever for? Had the Mawshwuc escaped? “Goro has ordered me to report to him.”

Jake shot her a cold glance and kept walking toward their personal quarters.

Fine. It’s better to speak with Goro without a hothead barking irrational demands because he couldn’t shake his earth ideas. She turned from Jake’s fleeting muscular body toward the docking bay.

Bless the stars the corridors were vacated on the way. No admonishing stares charged her with murder of the infants or the bad choice in soul mates.

Maybe Goro was right though. Maybe she wasn’t at fault for the recent attack on the nursery. Everything worked toward The Cause’s victory, now. Especially since Jake seemed like he had the perfect temperament for covert operations. But how did Goro’s strange behavior fit into destiny’s grand scheme?

The docking bay’s door swooshed open.

A few male crew members worked on *The Seeker’s* assortment of transport vehicles. Goro turned a stern mask her direction from where he stood across the cavernous space. His fatherly gaze warned he wasn’t happy.

But his place was to keep the ship intact. Functioning. Better to find purpose among the ship’s metal supports and sheeting. She covered the distance between them and assumed an at-ease stance.

“*What happened, Red Trekaar?*” He faced her squarely.

Even though he didn’t speak with his mouth, his formidable stance dared her not to hold anything back. Or maybe males were extremely irritating today. “*Am I the one who is in question here? Darla is waging war upon earthlings in The Chamber. My soul mate needs to learn the chain of command. I don’t understand why I’m the one providing explanations.*”

He pinched his eyes into slits, then opened them to scrutinize her as if she erred. “*You carry the child of legend. You’re no longer a mercenary. Your job equates to observation and reporting now.*”

Not one word could change the commander’s point.

Her throat tightened.

“*Stop fighting a war you can’t win. Live your destiny, Kindrist. Know your duty serves a higher purpose.*”

Something rammed up her throat.

She gulped but couldn’t swallow.

Everything she ever knew instantly never was. But would always be. And Goro’s words were truth. Reality. All she questioned, these things of coincidence, had to be the result of confusion. Her life course veered down the path she always wished for. Destiny awaited. She had to stop fighting the change. “*I understand.*”

“*I’ll work with Straightarrow this evening. Go now. Find a place to rethink the pride you wear so proudly. It is not such a hard lump to swallow for your pride is in what you have become. Embrace the transformation.*”

Always the wisest words came from Goro. If only she could remember them when necessary. She nodded and pivoted to the door.

The only thing left to do was sit in bed. To gestate. Forgetting how things had been. Focusing on the future. Happiness would come with the sacrifice. No. The long-awaited time to rejoice had arrived. Risking the freedom from psychic domination would be a foolhardy mistake. A choice she couldn’t bear. What if her name, that of the last Nulvitian, was associated with Voldon’s triumph? Her legacy would bequeath the universe a new Hell. Better to rise to

the universe's challenge and plow toward a utopia paved with free thought.

* * * *

Jake quietly stared out the starship's long curved portals of the barren bridge. The three pilots never winced at his presence. Who were they? Where did they come from if they weren't telepathic? Were they inducted somehow like he was to run the ship? And where was Goro? In his secret map room? Hopefully the commander was there. Passing on what I learned in The Chamber just might get me some information that will win me over some brownie points with the commander. Or just a general feel for the commander's true purpose.

"Are you waiting for me?" the commander's calm deep voice asked from behind him.

Talk about stealth. Goro wasn't a man to reckon with. Jake turned.

The door to the invisible room opened. Goro waved for Jake to enter.

A lucky captive would walk into a trap. Be killed. Why not? Better still, time to see if the commander could be trusted. Jake crossed the threshold into the dark star chamber.

Goro followed him, walked across the shadowy space, stood on the opposite side of a blue circle that glowed as if set into the floor like an illuminated mosaic of a ring, and faced him with the determination of a commander who demanded honesty. "What happened in The Chamber?"

Nice poker face. And not much, really. Would the information make much of a difference? "Paul seemed to stumble through the forest while Darla hurled objects that she levitated toward him. Nice use of psychic powers. Wish I could pull off that sweet feat."

Goro sighed and pursed his lips. "Darla is confused."

The man finally looked frustrated. Why do I feel like he says that about Darla often? Then again, who could blame people abducted from earth? After all, alien abductions weren't glorified in the movies or legends. However, one would expect a person to eventually acclimate to a new environment. Especially if the environment had something good to offer like simple freedoms. And freedoms to be your strange evolved self given others lacked your ability like the majority of earth's non-Violet Child population. Not that I ever felt the odd ball because of my yammering gut. All truly lies in a person's perspective. But how in the world could being inducted into a war equate to freedom? Didn't they offer Darla perks with service? Albeit, stud service isn't high on my list of super-hero adventure amenities. It's really kind of annoying with a peon that won't give up the ghost. But Darla didn't have that part of the problem to deal with. "How long has she been here?"

"Almost three earth years."

"That's a freaking eternity for someone to babble religious jargon. I gotta hand it to her though. She can really stick to her guns."

Goro sighed. "Women often prove the most steadfast. Factor in spirituality, and we're talking about moving mountains. Or so I have learned."

Dead on. But what did the commander think about his male gladiators? "Hey, give a guy a good reason to back you and he will. Women think too much about feelings and sparkly stuff."

Goro raked his unsettling gaze up and down Jake.

Studying me? More like x-raying. So, he didn't care for my assessment of women? To each his own.

Goro's assessing gaze twisted conspiratorially and locked upon Jake's. "Red Trekaar isn't taking well to her new role as mother," he noted plainly. "I trust you both have lessons to learn."

No kidding. "She doesn't take orders well."

"In that point, you are wrong. She's suddenly switched from guardian of The Cause to mother. Consider how strong her urge is to protect what she has struggled to save for fourteen earth years."

What's up with time accounted for in earth fashion? A constant reminder of where I would rather be isn't winning these folks brownie points. Or were they catering to him? Luring him into submission with familiar things?

"The pinch in your brow tells me something niggles your mind," Goro stated.

The commander behaved too fatherly for a man enrobed in full-body kick-ass black leather. Nice game of instilling a false sense of security in captives. "I don't know. Don't you people have your own measurement of time? I'm starting to wonder how the universe functioned before earth time was adopted by extraterrestrials. And you think we need protecting."

Goro grinned and patted Jake on the shoulder. "Excellent observation. Unfortunately, we operate on earth time to keep synchronized with earth in general. We must know what occurs there around the clock, as you say. We are earth's guardian angels—to turn a phrase. The other three planets with beings on the verge of higher psychic evolution are safeguarded by a portion of The Cause's fleet that operates by the standard time measurement of those planets. This system minimizes a lot of issues."

Nothing hidden there. Maybe a calm commander who was honest with his new recruits would share even more information. That equated to proof of The Cause's mission. "So Darla was supposed to be your mate. And Voldon got to her first. Just why do you keep her hidden in The Chamber? Or should I say imprisoned? Why don't you release her? Let her go wherever she wants."

Goro thrust his hands under his cape-like jacket and walked across the room as if he were in deep thought with fingers tucked behind his back like a contemplative field marshal. He turned a serious gaze to Jake. "I see Red Trekaar has explained many things to you.... Imagine what Darla would do back on earth. She would ramble about alien abductions. Would she not? And then Voldon would return for her. If she refuses me, don't you think she would refuse him again after three years' captivity on our starship? We are both extraterrestrials. And imagine Darla living as Voldon's pet for nothing more than the fact he wishes to steal her from me. She would be living in captivity as his mate. Is that a life worth living? It is safer for her here where she does as she wishes in The Chamber. I owe her protection from Voldon."

Or he purposely kept Darla tucked out of Voldon's reach. Sounds like grounds for Voldon to ram fighter craft up *The Seeker's* ass. Kindrist shouldn't take all the blame. And she'd hear that lecture very, very soon. Or was Goro's reason a cover for something else? Maybe poking the commander might help a few more details rise to the surface. "Darla tried to kill one of your men."

"There is reason to believe Weatherford has his own agenda."

Jake's gut sank.

Not more premonitions. Keeping Goro talking might get him to spill his guts. "Free thinking coming back to burn your ass?" What else could an intuitive psychic say to jab the guy?

"I have had my suspicions that cling to me like a phantom sucking Mawshwuc. You see," he shot Jake an ominous stare, "I can't scan Sevra's thoughts and remain commander. But I can observe. The game free thinkers play is a dangerous one. We live each day struggling for one more moment's free thought. Likewise, Voldon does to ensure he makes the only one! I

can't discount he has sent warriors to infiltrate The Cause. Are we doing any less? Why would I expect my enemy not to reciprocate? He matches me move for move."

Spoken like the field marshal. But toying with his words might reveal more about this commander. "You target their infants?"

Goro snorted and planted his black boots beneath him like a disgusted stallion. "Only cowards attack the defenseless. No. We do not target their children. We merely disable their ability to enslave our children."

The stern look in Goro's gaze reflected his distaste with Voldon's flavor of tactics. And my gut isn't balking. Why else would Goro confess all these things? He had to be for real. His cause true. But did it really matter? Fighting for humanity and for an unborn child required survival. Forget escape until the rest was part of history.

"Work with Weatherford for me," Goro said. "Get your bearings around him. Then tell me what you feel. We need your intuition for guidance."

Coming clean might work in my favor and result in earning this commander's confidence. Whether or not he truly gets mine in return. Survival often relies on lies to obtain free-thinker's freedom. Even if it's only to breathe. "I came to ask for help understanding neural-network fortresses. I don't trust Weatherford either. He's a coward. Kindrist said the same of Sevrá. I need another tutor I can trust to teach me what I can believe. I don't like flying off into the unknown. Give me trustworthy tutor, and I'll help you." Not that his effort wasn't for humanity or his unborn child.

"I will secretly tutor you myself in exchange for the favor. Of course, we must deal with secrecy to prevent the crew from thinking I'm showing favoritism. And I think the best way to skin a were-wolf is keep another on hand to flay the first's hide. I think Weatherford should accompany you to Gameddaron's neural fortification."

When one door closes, another opens. Goro didn't need to know I got exactly what I came for. A chance to sniff out the commander's true purpose beneath his right wing. Jake nodded.

* * * *

Kindrist was stiff from assuming a meditation stance for hours in her quarters. The annoying hush of the air ducts challenged her to defy reality and venture out about the ship. To risk losing her patience and blowing up in a horrible display of unrestrained anger. Not to mention, the bench gnawed into her haunches like a hungry were-mate. If only Jake were in the room, things would be more interesting. Instead, waiting for destiny to unfold with a view of a nebula and stars was anything but entertaining. Maybe her perspective was wrong. Half full, the earthlings say.

Half full.

The Mawshwuc could still prove to be an asset to free thinkers. If free thinkers could determine whether the creature's studies had produced offspring with viable hybridized blood, The Cause could hope for a new future. Or would using a hybrid Mawshwuc-earthling lead to more chaos by elevating fear among the free-thinking universe? Were free thinkers prepared for another level of psychic warfare?

Goro had to have weighed the pros and cons of his choice in saving the vampire. What did he expect to gain? It wasn't as if anyone could get inside his head to see. Not legally. Free-thinking law protected Goro. What would an intruder find inside the commander's mind? Twisted ego? Or raw fear? Nothing else could possibly have pushed Goro into saving the thing that would bring ruination to the rest of the universe.

Why am I thinking about this? Hormones. Curse the months ahead before the baby's arrival. Kindrist shook her head.

Something niggled at her subconscious about her honorable commander. Something untouchable. But what? Just what would drive a woman who had everything she wanted to doubting those she trusted most? Goro had saved her many times over. He was her big brother. Or her father. He wouldn't fail her. Or The Cause. She straightened her spine, popping muscles and bone facets one by one, and focused on one bright star among the moving lights in the vast darkness of space beyond her quarters' portal.

A siren blared.

Voices tore through the quiet peacefulness of her questioning thoughts.

Mindspoke. A frenzy. Too much indecipherable chatter. She shook her head, closed her eyes, pushed and shoved with her mind, and tried to block the chaotic discussion.

A presence shoved back. "*Quiet*," Goro demanded in mindspoke inside the ship's neural channel.

The susurrus almost instantly dissipated.

What now? A siren and the sound of fear only meant something bad unfolded.

"*The Mawshwuc has escaped*," Goro announced.

And Jake was off studying for the mission. Would anyone bother to inform him of the vampire running through *The Seeker*? Damn, Goro.

"Remain where you are," Goro ordered. "All doors have been locked for your protection. I will see this animal is killed."

None too soon. But a good wife would protect her naive husband. She rose and stepped over to claim a foothold before her metal door.

The hatch didn't budge regardless of how much she willed it to beneath her splayed fingers and palms. She closed her eyes, pushing out, feeling for the signature electric tingle that indicated she could connect with the mind she needed among the sea of minds in the ship's neural network.

A tingle zapped her and vanished.

"*Commander?*" she asked in mindspoke. He had to answer.

A welcoming sensation opened to her. "*Yes, Red Trekaar?*"

"*Straightarrow isn't here. He's most likely still in Weatherford's quarters.*"

"*Vilest spit of Voldon, like I don't have enough problems. Remain in your quarters, Red Trekaar. I will find him.*"

What else can the bearer of the universe's hope do behind a locked door?

But Goro's actions would prove his loyalty. They had to.

If he saved the Mawshwuc, he fought for Voldon.

If he saved Jake, he fought for free thinkers.

If he killed the Mawshwuc, he also fought for free thinkers.

Who would Goro champion?

Either way the solar system spun, irrefutable truth would sling for all to see.

Chapter Sixteen

“Whatever you hear or do, don’t open this door,” Paul growled while turning to face the door.

A step away from the suspicious edgy earthling, Jake watched the gawky Paul and his silent mate run through the doorway of their standard sterile and boring personal quarters into the white corridor beyond.

So, this Mawshwuc was on the loose and caused a freaking lockdown? The door would lock if that was true. And there was no way out of this sardine can. He jumped into the doorway.

The edge of the sliding door snapped into his chest and wedged him into position as if the hatch worked with Paul to keep him in place.

Why would inanimate objects behave any differently than sentient beings on this cruise ship heading for war with shanghaied crew members? After Paul’s strange touchy behavior had amplified beyond nervousness over the past two hours, beads of sweat had poured down the man’s forehead. Blood lust at its best. They guy should have just sent me back to my quarters. Trying to juggle my sanity to save my miserable stud hide from Paul’s heedless nitpicking wasn’t easy. More like a game of Russian roulette with me sitting as the target and Paul’s wife holding the torch. But the earthling and his mate were now gone.

The passageway hummed with an eerie unwavering sound.

Where was the crew? Locked away? That was a tactical maneuver?

Maybe standing here, pinned by a door, was foolish. All I need do is shove my way loose. What would a lesser-evolved psychic gain from having the opportunity to roam the ship when the crew quaked behind locked doors because a damned bloodsucker was free? And Kindrist was out there. Somewhere. Somebody had to do something. Especially with wimpy Paul out to save the universe. But were Kindrist and the child endangered?

Hell, if Goro’s bad decision-making got Kindrist into a tight situation....

And the last thing a man needed was his more-evolved wife being controlled like a puppet by some psychic bastard. Besides, all her non-reactive spunk was kind of nice. Familiar in a mercenary kind of way. Not that she needed to hear that. But there was a time and a place for sitting still. The moment demanded defying orders. Orders from goof Paul? Jake snorted, wriggled his fingers beneath the door’s stiff edge, and leaned into the tightness.

The pinching force gave.

The mass slid backward.

He jumped into the corridor.

The door swooshed shut at his heels.

Locked out. Did security really matter in this foreign place? Especially when you were locked in anyway.

Why cling to an alien ship for safety?

Time to kick some creepy alien ass. Well, figuratively. Nobody had seen fit to outfit him with weapons. Hopefully, a sharp mind and honed reactions would be enough to ensure the woman carrying his child was safe. He took a step down the hall.

A blood-curdling wail howled through the ship.

What made the ungodly sound? The thing had to be a were-mate. Did that mean two or just one padded around the *The Seeker*? A vampire and at least one were-wolf. Oh, for the lost pleasures of ignorant bliss among the rest of a planet's naïve population.

A deafening roar shook the metal floor beneath his boots.

Not good. Just what kind of strength did a distant creature have that enabled its roar to shake the floor? Maybe weaponless curiosity was a bit premature on new territory? With any luck, the beast will recognize me as an asset to the ship and munch on someone else. For blood? Shit. Kindrist owes me many times over for dragging my ass into this madness without my consent. And, now, somebody had to check on her. He stretched his stride down the corridor again.

The walls curved on like a brightly-lit tunnel.

Not to mention, the tunnel was oddly shorn of smashed twenty-ounce bottles or oversized hamburger containers. A guy had to give extraterrestrials credit for cleanliness. Filthy alleys were anything but paradise. And this place didn't reek of piss.

An elevator-lift's door appeared at the end of the meandering passageway.

Just two levels up unfolded the path to his personal quarters. Would Kindrist's door be unlocked? Too easy. But this game kept daring a man into action. He lengthened his stride.

The hall seemed to extend, stretching.

Somehow. Talk about a nightmare. Maybe I'm asleep. Or was the ship doing some kind of fancy deep-space maneuver like in all those space shows with warp drives and wormholes? He shoved his boot forward.

His foot took forever to hit the metal floor.

Everything unfolded in freaky slow motion.

Why? Or rather, what was the coincidence? The answer had to lay in alien-abduction movies. Just what could the coincidence imply?

The elevator door slid open.

Shit. Not a good time to meet a Mawshwuc.

A huge hairy dog-beast, larger than Kindrist when she shape shifted, leapt out onto all fours from the elevator and bellowed.

Vibrations radiated up Jake's legs from the quaking floor.

The were-wolf didn't look happy. Jake spun to return the way he came.

The force making things unfold in slow motion wouldn't allow him to turn away.

A frail-bodied short creature sporting a large head and elongated bug eyes stared back at him.

The Mawshwuc.

Christ almighty and whore spy extraterrestrials. Talk about stuck between a rock and a hard place.

His gut sank.

Loss of an arm? Or loss of self-control? Better save my ass from the alien female who wants to suck my essence for Voldon instead of the blood-hungry were-wolf. He looked into the creature's dark glassy eyes.

He wanted to yawn.

His eyelids became heavy.

A yawn stretched his mouth wide.

Poor thing.

It's female.
Just pregnant. Like Kindrist.
"Get back here, Straightarrow," a woman barked from behind him.
A deafening roar buckled his knees.
Something grabbed his arm.
He flew backward.
A brown blur took his place in the hallway.
What the Hell—
A force slammed into him.
He slid down a wall, hitting the floor hard, pain coursing through his ribs and shoulder blades.
Every cell in his body screamed he stand up.
His head shook and a rush of energy popped his eyes wide open.
A woman in black leather glared down at him.
Blonde. Sevrá.
"Get as far away from the elevator as you can before the vampire entrances you again," she commanded.
Entranced? Was that the Mawshwuc's psychic power? He watched Sevrá's scowl while waiting for his gut to chime in.
"Hurry before it collects Paul's blood," Sevrá shouted, yanking out her torch. "You're risking both mine and my husband's freedom, human." She pointed the torch toward Paul.
"We'll take care of that animal inside the elevator. Now, move."
Neither bloodsucking nor torching sounded like exceptional recreational activities on this involuntary cruise to see the wonders of the universe. He got his boots beneath him and shoved his aching body a few feet back down the hall.
Standoff at Corridor Level 2 carried on with a few ridiculously loud roars while both creatures dared each other to make a move with unwavering stares.
Sevrá stood with a boot in the lift's doorway and waited for whatever would follow, torch aimed as if she meant to toast her husband to save herself a few fleeting minutes of free thought.
Great, I'm either toast or a deposit in Voldon's blood bank.
Paul's beast form pounced.
A blur of a struggle filled the empty passageway.
Weatherford actually seemed more capable of moving mountains in his furry hide.
Larger and definitely formidable. Maybe I was wrong to discount the man's ability.
Suddenly, the smear of motion paused.
The were-wolf held the Mawshwuc by its unnaturally thin neck with what appeared to be furry human hands.
The Mawshwuc faced forward, away from making eye contact with Paul.
Better safe than sorry on Paul's part, I guess.
Paul walked upright on his hind legs, holding the Mawshwuc with clawed furry hand-paws at arm's length and paraded the vampire down the hall as if it harbored a mean case of flesh-eating bacteria. The small alien didn't struggle. Rather, she hung as if awaiting the inevitable from her balloon-like head.
With the were-assassins' reactions in this scenario, free Mawshwucs weren't good. But, how had the vampire managed to escape imprisonment?
Paul hurled the creature into the elevator.

Sevra thrust the torch into the small space.
The door slid shut until blocked by the torch.
A bright light flashed.
The Mawshwuc's ass was ash.
The were-wolf turned to Jake and snarled, prancing or pacing a few steps toward him.
Now, I'm going to die. Goro made the right call on this one.
An arm swung a blade at Paul's furry elbow.
Who was the blade meant for?
Paul's gaze fixated upon the blade.
Blood beaded upon the glinting metal.
Paul ran a finger across the silver surface and thrust the remedy into his mouth.
Blood, more like bestmilk.
The beast's furry skin began to fall off in clumps.
The sound of footfalls echoed down the hall.
Too late for the cavalry. Jake turned to find the black-cloaked commander arriving alone.
Goro eyed the scene and locked a stern gaze upon Jake. "Everyone was ordered to stay in their quarters."
Guilty as charged. "I wanted to find Kindrist."
The commander eyed him warily. "Honor is one thing. But risking your and her life when she was safely secured within your quarters was foolish." His gaze slid to Sevra. "Didn't you tell him?"
"He needs to learn to follow orders." She almost snarled at Jake.
Fantastic. Kindrist and I will be known as the flighty were-assassin couple. He shoved onto his feet. "For the record, I'm capable of taking care of myself. Keep your opinions to yourself."
"That remains to be seen." Sevra scowled.
A nude Paul collapsed on the floor.
Exhaustion had to be the exchange for shifting form for duty. "Nice birthday suit. Thanks for saving my ass." He thrust a hand out to shake Paul's where the man sat.
Paul shook the offering like a tired man. "I'd rather you hide out next time though. All this relay crap to communicate in a war zone is pretty damned frustrating."
At least, the aliens kept him in the loop.
"Everyone, report to my map room." Goro whirled and strode down the hall.
By the time Jake stood among the twinkling projected stars hung inside the dark chamber, the bitterness in Sevra's glare couldn't be shrouded by the room's darkness. The big chip on her shoulder stank like an elephant-sized pile of reeking dung. Was this the type of treatment a person got for disobeying orders? She should have told him what the commander said instead of muttering stay here. Problems definitely existed in passing on orders. But the obvious fact was these psychics just weren't into archaic communication.
Paul thrust his arms into his standard boring black leather vest.
Thank goodness, the guy picked up a pair of leather pants from his quarters before heading to the map room.
Goro turned to face Jake. "Did you have any physical contact with the Mawshwuc?" he said with his mouth.
The commander's voice held no clue of betrayal.
But they weren't going to blame me for a problem with their grapevine. "No. And it's

dead now. So would be the condition of any of my blood it collected, if it had.”

Goro ignored the point by turning to Paul. “Were you bitten?”

“No. Its ability to entrance humans didn’t affect me in my altered state. Let’s chalk that one up to the beast in me.” Paul snaked his arms across his chest. “Furry armor pays off in more than one way.”

“You now understand why were-assassins are the only weapon standing between us and them. Voldon and his entrancing slaves can’t control werewolves with their psychic powers.” Goro slid a stoic gaze to Jake. “Embrace your feral side for it’s the only weapon you have in psychic warfare.”

A man could make that deduction on his own. The point had to be uttered for more than my sake.

“It’s dead now. The danger has passed,” Sevra stated.

Goro wagged his head. “I wanted to know more about its offspring. If only we could learn whether they’ve managed to stabilize a fetus full term. But destiny didn’t see fit to humor our curiosity. We’ll have to wait to learn what destiny has in store for The Cause. It’s as if the Gods can’t decide which side should win. And a universe without the Gods’ favor is a frightening place.” He turned his back to them. “Go now, Sevra and Weatherford. Prepare for Gameddaron.”

Sevra shot Jake a speculative glance and departed with her spouse.

The woman has problems. He returned her stare until she vanished in the darkness.

“What happened between them and the Mawshwuc?” Goro asked.

Like I could assess something totally foreign to me. “The Mawshwuc hypnotized me. Then Paul roared onto the scene and knocked me away from the vampire. He grabbed the creature by the neck, hurled it into the elevator, and Sevra torched the bastard. Things happened so fast. That’s it.”

“The battle? Did you sense anything easy about Weatherford’s capture of the Mawshwuc?”

Could there have been something I missed? “I don’t know enough about were-wolves and alien vampires to assess what I witnessed.”

Goro scratched his bald head and paced two steps. “If only I’d witnessed the fight.” He straightened his spine and nodded at Jake. “Thank you for your candor. Please reassure Red Trekaar that Destiny has righted things once again aboard the ship.”

Or the commander used the Mawshwuc to test his crew.

* * * *

When the report resonated through *The Seeker’s* neural network that the Mawshwuc was terminated and nobody injured, assaulted, or killed, Kindrist sat upon her meditation bench and sighed. Goro had taken the time to seek out her mind during the chaos. To inform her of Jake’s defying orders. But Sevra championed The Cause. Saved my mate strangely enough. And Goro’s mistake in saving the vampire had corrected itself. Or Destiny took control and flipped the blunder back to status quo. None the matter, the elevated risk was now completely dissipated.

Bless all things sacred.

What did Jake think of his brush with Voldon’s biological weapon? Rather the enchantment? The unnerving hypnosis always takes the uninitiated by surprise, even long after the fact.

The door whisked open.

Jake strode into the room.

Oddly carefree.

“Did you have a good day, babe?” he asked like they had done this for years and she appreciated the favoritism.

Or was his attitude merely an offering of peace? Alas, a facetious soul mate was better than a grouchy earthling inducted against his will. Better to forget the earlier events in The Chamber and start anew. “After what unfolded, yes. The universe has righted itself.” The Cause had to be nature’s favorite. Proof that free will allowed for diversity and expansion of the universe.

He crossed the space to their table and claimed a space on the bench, his back against the wall. “A crazy thing happened today.”

Really? She gulped back a laugh. “What?”

“Aside from the creepy little creature working for Voldon trying to seduce me, I think your wonderful commander released the Mawshwuc.”

Impossible. “Why would he have done that?”

“He wanted to know if I saw anything unusual occur between Paul and the Mawshwuc during their confrontation.” Jake leaned forward, propping an elbow on a knee. “I think Goro tested Sevrá and her mate’s allegiance to The Cause.”

Could Goro have risked the lives of his crew members to test those he wanted incriminated? He must have. She met Jake’s triumphant gaze. “That has to be truth. His confusing actions are so logical from your perspective. Especially when Sevrá was the assassin who saved you.”

“Well, Paul was the shaggy DA. Over-sized. Not so scrawny. Terrifyingly powerful. The whole ship quaked when he roared. Quaked right up my legs from the metal floor. I have a new respect for him. At least when he’s subhuman.”

Spoken like a crew member with a keen awareness of reality.

Jake claimed a spot beside her, his assessing gaze sliding across her body.

Hunger dabbled therein.

“How do you feel now?” he asked, his dark gaze locking on hers.

For the most part, boredom fled with the attack. But was he asking about her blood lust? That would have to wait until after he explained how Goro tested Sevrá and Jake had a new appreciation for Paul. “I feel normal except for being pregnant. No pain if that’s what you’re concerned about.”

“Goro and Sevrá don’t think I follow orders.” He laughed and paced off toward the simple lines of their table. “You and I have quite a reputation.”

Is my mate challenging me? Or am I facing the truth far too impossible to ignore? I’ve bonded my soul to a man who I can’t hide from. A man who is trying to force me to forget who I was to just be his pregnant wife. Speak of an eternal Gods’ jest. Or is Jake merely toying with me? She blinked her husband’s muscled arms back into her thoughts.

Was the smug look on his face another aspect of his defiant nature? Did he think he won? Am I supposedly right where he wants me? Pregnant and strapped to a meditation bench. The master imprisoned by the prisoner. Believing any part of those thoughts is fear. Has to be fear. But Jake defied orders. Have I brought an unreliable earthling aboard *The Seeker*? Is Destiny falling apart because of my choices? Dare I believe Goro’s behavior is for the greater good of all free-thinkers?

I have to.

Jake sauntered toward her.

The man was edgy. Or something.

He grabbed her hand and heaved her to her feet. "It's time to sate the lust between us."

As if on cue, need ached through her so deeply her nipples pinched and her sex ached.

She couldn't answer. Didn't answer. Just simply followed him to the bed. Into his arms. Just to find some relief from the room's walls squeezing her reality into the tiniest space imaginable. But Jake peeled back the walls. And her clothes, planting hot kisses on her neck.

Her skin tingled with gooseflesh.

That mouth was a unique and deadly weapon that trailed across her chest from one taut nipple to the other. In the wake of those seductive lips, his fingers brushed away any lingering goosebumps. All the way down to her navel where his thumb circled, driving her hips mad with teasing.

Why wouldn't he rub her lower in the most divine place in the universe? Right there. In her sex?

His fingers trailed down to the hairs of her sex, investigating, seeking, slowly moving lower until she thought she'd snarl an order or two. But she choked them back and just rocked her hips with need. Anything to get her message across. Couldn't he tell she wanted him to hurry?

He grabbed her ass, turned her around, leaned her over the bed, and dipped the smooth tip of his manhood across the slickness of her sex. "God, you're so wet."

And he was so damned slow. She rubbed her sex against his manhood.

He plunged into her.

He had a different air about him this time. Like he was in control instead of desperately searching for release. And he could have anything he wanted. She arched her back, offering her soul to his whims where he pounded his shaft into her core.

The soft hypnotic beat of his sack against her tender skin almost felt like he admonished her—like a mate who deeply cared for his spouse. Maybe she'd been wrong for nursing her anger. By the way her body suddenly shivered against his firm manhood, she knew he was going to make a point. She needed to be more careful. Anything to bow down before him and receive punishment.

A wave of climax built up inside her with his increasing force and focused penetration.

She almost screamed but grabbed fistfuls of bedding instead. Cheek against the bed's softness, she couldn't hold back the cries his hard presence tickled from inside her. He groaned, matching each of her cries with a solid lunge burying the incredible root of his soul so deeply inside her she thought life would end because nothing could match the rapture of mating.

His grasp sought out new handholds to help him hang onto her while he exploded inside her soul.

As if she might run away. No. She shoved her sex back against his groin to show him he could have more. Anytime.

He sighed.

What thoughts whirled through his mind?

He folded over, blanketing her with the sweat of his triumph.

Still he offered no words.

Would he ever want to truly share himself with her?

His weight shifted as he climbed onto the bed and claimed a spot.

Silently. She stretched out with her back facing him.

She'd have to be content with that much in her mate. At least he could make her heart soar during sex.

Chapter Seventeen

“What did you think when you had that vampire by its scrawny neck,” Jake asked the relaxed guzzling Paul who sat across the table in what could loosely be referred to as a shadowy lounge wielding half a dozen tables with benches and some extremely haunting New-Age music.

Talk about eerie outer-space ambiance. Maybe asking about fighting the Mawshwuc wasn’t a good thing. No wonder earth folks hung out in The Chamber with crazy Darla.

Three other psychics in the room emptied their drinks in silence.

Probably talking up a storm inside each other’s heads. These extraterrestrials could humor the disturbed human and speak with their mouths. Or was that too beneath them?

Paul dropped his silver glass from his mouth and smacked his lips. “Well, I remember thinking if the damned Mawshwuc got its fangs on me that I’d have to rip its bloated head off.”

Typical scared-shitless response. So much for admiring the guy’s subhuman form. But the twit deserved points for honesty. Jake lifted his glass of neon-orange brew.

Had Paul lost all of his cognizance when his feral side wagged its tail? With his candor, he’d talk. “Did you recognize me when you were in were-form?”

“Oh yeah. That’s a given. We know who people are. It’s kind of tough to say how much we each will remember though. Or so I’ve been warned.” He leaned forward onto his elbows and chuckled. “Maybe it’s all dependent upon how much of an animal a person truly is. Deep down inside. Or so Darla likes to postulate.”

If he only realized how much more emphasis on his weak civilized scrawny existence that statement made. Paul feared Darla and a pregnant Mawshwuc. Two females. All Voldon needed to do was send a female after Paul. The psychic would reign supreme over Paul’s petrified form. Jake sighed and poured his draught of warm orange liqueur across his tongue.

Hopefully the alien’s burning silky liquid would knock him out for a few weeks because the mission to Gameddaron was destined for a disaster. He swallowed the wet fire and lowered his glass.

Paul studied him.

The wimp probably wondered how formidable I’d be in were-form. “So, what makes you think I won’t rip your head off when I shift into something as big, bad, and ugly as you were today?”

Paul’s brown eyebrows arched as he offered a straight-lipped smile. “Let’s hope for the best.”

The best must have ranked up there with the predestined stuff of extraterrestrial legends. At least the man had a good sense of humor. “Rather trusting in this destiny thing, aren’t you?”

A wave of heat roiled in his belly.

Paul scooted his glass across the metal table top, out of a line of fire, as if planning to speak with his hands. “I’ve seen too much these past three years not to believe in free-thinking legend. 2012 is bigger than an earth legend and the Mayan calendar stuff. It’s like the entire universe is part of some crazed space opera, moving toward a moment in time when things will shift and align.”

Maybe so. At least, there weren’t any intuitive points from one’s gut to hash over during

this revealing conversation.

“Do you know about web-bot theory?” Paul asked.

Was I supposed to draw a blank? “What’s that?”

“Similar to the 2012 Mayan prediction and Violet Child theory. Web bots have predicted many things to computer folks. They saw 9-11 happening. They see something happening on the winter solstice of 2012.”

“What’s a web bot?”

“An aspect of a search engine. Sites like Google send out feelers looking for keywords and themes to keep up with information for those doing internet searches. These feelers are web bots searching for tags. And through the years, tags are reflecting and predicting events. Maybe not finding the exact details of the event. More like clues pointing at an upcoming catastrophe. Like Bible Code.”

Not more Sunday school. How would the internet predict something that had yet to happen? “I don’t see the connection with web bots and Bible Code.”

“It’s all about order in the universe. Or connections. They say Voldon wants earth because the planet occupies one of three locations in the universe that will aid in channeling thoughts through quadrants.”

Whatever that meant. “You mean something bigger than neural networks?”

Paul nodded.

But the way telepathic communication worked didn’t appear failsafe. “Neural networks seem pretty weak in their need for a fortification and occupants to operate the pretty crystal collections.” Or so Goro had claimed during a tutoring session.

“Yeah. And Voldon forces his energy on those who must operate the crystals with their thoughts. Oddly enough, these neural networks are like electrical circuits run by breathing beings who just stand around and focus their thoughts on heightening the crystal’s natural vibrations. Weird.”

“What’s weird?” Like a wimp sitting here sucking down alien brews while telling me about being a were-wolf?

“How this ship runs on thoughts. How the neural network resonates thoughts throughout the universe by the power of thought. How the pod fighters run on biorhythms. It’s all weird science. If you can even imagine it being scientific. The science I took would never believe any of this.”

True. “But it works. Maybe it’s magic.”

Paul chuckled. “Yeah. Like the crystal skulls Voldon is dying to possess. All thirteen of them. That’s just another reason for extraterrestrial visits to earth. The big search for another skull. And those skulls are supposed to magically empower their owner if you get them working together for the big winter solstice of 2012.”

And magically enough, Paul hadn’t told one fib while clutching his extraterrestrial brewsky. But silence didn’t seem his forte unlike the aliens in the room. That characteristic would help a person sniff out his loyalties through idle chitchat. “How do you deal with the dreadful silence aboard *The Seeker*?”

He smiled. “I look for someone to talk to when I get the itch.” He thrust his cup up in a celebratory cheer-like gesture.

What a strange guy. Mercenaries and computer geeks were definitely two different species. Poor miserable Paul. God knows, not many chatty types hung about waiting for a homesick human. “Where are the other earthlings?”

“Fighting the war. They’re spread thin among a fleet of free-thinking starships. We usually meet the new recruits if we’re here when they’re brought aboard. The war covers such an immense amount of space that it’s almost impossible to run into another person from your home planet when you’re as rare as a Violet Child earthling were-assassin.”

Nobody needed to explain the rarity of shape shifters from good old mother earth when the reality of the situation smacked me with permanent silence twenty-four-seven.

Paul shoved off the table and stood. “Anytime you need to talk, let me know. I’m always up for a drink. But I’ve got to get back to work. The wife’s never-ending chore list is waiting for me.” He winked.

Or the commander had a chore list. Fortunately, scaring the birds out of the brush proved to be an interesting game. Who would be driven out of the bush? Maybe the commander. Or the Weatherfords. And wives, well they just needed a little satisfying like a guy’s miserable peon. “Not a bad idea in keeping the wife happy.” He shoved up from the table’s hard surface as well. “But I’m off to find out what the commander has in mind.”

“Goro’s an excellent mentor. Swing by my quarters afterward, and I’ll figure out what else you need to know before you head out in thirty-six hours.”

Jake’s gut sank.

Not a good sign for the mission. Didn’t Paul know he’s joining me on this cruise ship’s day excursion to Gameddaron? Certainly Goro had informed Paul already. Or Goro exhibited the suspicious behavior.

* * * *

Bench, table, and bed hidden inside their recesses, Kindrist sat cross-legged inside her empty personal quarters on the cold hard floor before the window where she gazed out at the universe’s vast expanse. The continual hush from the starship’s ventilation system kept her thoughts from the inner peace mercenaries strove to attain while assuming a meditative posture. Or was it her fears—the culprit behind any assassin’s failure. But could Goro be trusted? Sevra had saved Jake with the Mawshwuc. The problem had to lie with the commander. Or Jake.

Where was her husband? Learning more from Goro today? Interesting company they both kept. Or I’m losing my mind. She inhaled a deep soothing breath and exhaled slowly.

At least, the commander confided in a pregnant woman’s spouse when she was no longer fit for duty. Duty? More like shackling a woman in the dungeon.

How would duty imprison me next?

No negative thoughts, Kindrist. She sucked in another deep breath.

Body, mind, and soul as one. Always. For The Cause. For her child’s safety. For Destiny.

Duty demanded a high price.

What would the child bring into the equation? If the pregnancy goes full-term, if legend rings true, what kind of future will Jake and I have with the child? Hiding from Voldon was about as easy as dethroning him. Voldon would hunt them down. No, hunt the child down. Talk about blood pacts and vendettas. Voldon was as subhuman as humanoids came. Wild. Feral. Like my thoughts. Am I any better than him?

Her heart drummed for an answer.

Unfortunately, the only answer was wait until facing Voldon before worrying. Now was the time for meditation.

For carrying a child full-term.

And marriage.

Why hadn't Jake returned yet? Was her soul mate still stubbornly defying everyone? Surely he was becoming content with his destiny after learning so much about the enemy. Even if Violet Children were reared in a world where individualism graded into narcissism, he had to understand the risk in allowing Voldon to control the universe. But the Violet Children of earth cared little for the concept of predestined paths. To each his own meant nothing when legends were at stake. Jake had to care for more. Especially after he left Paul's quarters to ensure I was safe when the Mawshwuc was loose on the ship. But what could he care for, truly, when a psychic had no way of reading his thoughts? "I have to be wrong. I must be patient. Believe—"

Why am I speaking with my mouth?

Too many days with a man she wanted to help had weakened her. Altered her. I am behaving like a wild woman. Or perhaps all could be blamed on her state of being. Pregnancy. I have to focus. Center my essence. Crush my fear of losing control. How was one to manage such a feat? Jake wielded all the power, holding his blood over my head like a trophy.

He had every right to.

The child was as much his as hers.

His blood.

And I tricked him into fatherhood and marriage.

The door swooshed behind her.

At last, the man returned. Time to show him how a Nulvitian achieved reason through meditation. Clutched at inner peace. Attained strength through introspection instead of being thrown off Destiny's path through another's narcissism. She closed her eyes and inhaled deeply as the sounds of his footfalls barely whispered across the cabin's floor.

Something struck the side of her head.

Flashing light danced in darkness before her eyes.

Who struck me?

Fire burned through her ribs.

Gods, she was a fool for buying into Destiny's promise of her child. The child of legend. But who had Destiny chosen to take out the child? Not Jake. He was far too possessive of her. Or at least the child. She sucked in a breath to help her ignore the searing pain in her ribs and managed to turn to peer over her shoulder.

A fleeting image of plain shadowy walls held no clue.

The world went burned black.

Chapter Eighteen

By the time Jake left Goro's secret map room, his gut snarled for food as he walked through *The Seeker's* spotlessly clean corridor for some additional tutoring from Paul. Although food was a nicer diversion from wanting to mate with the sexiest woman in the universe.

His gut growled.

I just need food.

These people didn't have an eating schedule. They just ate whenever. But there didn't seem to be much time to find magic buttons that delivered food after private tutoring with the commander. The sands in that invisible hourglass spilled relentlessly. And the secret mission would be here before he could learn how to find the pisser. Oh, the damned irony in his peon's duty. He had to play games with Paul, guzzle a Beast Tamer, and not confuse what Goro taught him about neural network fortifications with anything misleading Paul offered.

Talk about a snake pit.

The game was on.

For what though?

A trip home? Earth seemed out of the picture now. How could a person sit back and refuse to participate with his gene pool on the line? Especially when a person stood on the line being compared with the crazed woman in The Chamber. Why hadn't Darla buckled to sex? Was her faith so strong that she could resist and occupy the last vestige of earth's proverbial Garden of Eden? Faith. Now that was an interesting term. And what was the fruit of knowledge? A drop of blood? Hell. Talk about too much damned coincidence. And Darla's ability to stave off the commander's manipulation.... Goro probably had a different approach with Darla than me. Still, Darla could stick to her guns in the end. Her determination was pretty amazing. Talk about amazing if Sevra was a saboteur working for Voldon, Paul ranked as manipulative as the commander.

Now to meet Paul and sense his true colors.

Jake stopped out of the door's sensor range and stared toward Paul's closed personal quarters in the empty corridor.

His gut flopped.

Not a bad moment for raising flags. Is my yammering gut implying Weatherford is a fraud to The Cause? Could anyone inducted into the war even blame Paul for feigning allegiance? But what type of mad man, okay let's stick with Voldon as a being, zeroed in on nurseries and babies to fight for something? Not one bent on gaining any respect from his subjects. Yes, The Cause had to be the cavalry. No other rationalization fitted the situation.

So, what of Paul? Sevra's obviously guilty by association in the fact her home world is close to Voldon's planet of origin. Not to mention, a were-assassin couple would be the most crucial piece in this space-opera game of strategy. If Voldon was insane enough to focus on Goro, then surely infiltrating Goro's ship would be the way to go. The only way aboard was through a were-assassin couple with faulty allegiances. Goro would be a fool not to be suspicious.

"Hey, man!" someone shouted behind him.

English deserved the time taken to look over one's shoulder. Jake turned back the way he'd come.

Paul hurried toward him with his signature smile. "Sevra's operator told me you were coming."

Smiles never appealed to a mercenary. "Sorry to tear you away from a rocking party."

"Yeah. One rocking party. Let's just say, every day is an adventure." Paul reached the door and stepped toward the plate metal.

The sliding hatch whispered.

Paul waved Jake through. "After you."

Such a gentleman. Time would surely reveal soon whether or not his birthday suit was one-hundred percent snakeskin. He crossed the threshold into Paul's barren domain. "I love what you've done to the place."

Paul laughed, locating some invisible buttons on one wall. "Tell me about it. I guess there's a lot of energy spared in omitting any effort spent on interior decorating."

The same standard plain table and benches slid out from their hiding place inside the room's walls.

Paul waved between Jake and the table, then locked a curious gaze upon Jake. "So what about you? How are you acclimating to the big change?"

Might as well take a seat and pretend to work with the man. "Shanghaied, marriage, or fatherhood? Which one?" He settled on a hard cold bench. "Got another one of those orange drinks in here? Or are they only reserved for camaraderie between buds in the outer-space psycho lounge?"

Paul laughed. "Yes on the neon drinks. And I've been there, dancing the horizontal mambo. Luckily, I'm still child free. Can't imagine how it feels with that legend looming over your head."

Jake's gut sank.

Time's taking pity on a man working his ass off today. Now to play a bit of poker. "You mean about Nulvitian's only survivor giving birth to a were-wolf?"

Paul's brow creased. "No. Rather, the one where a Nulvitian will give birth to one of two children who defeat Voldon's tyranny."

Well, he's going the honesty route. "Whew. Thanks. I was worried my child would be a were-wolf."

"No problem. On other ships, I hear a few of the psychic free-thinking peoples look quite different from us humans. There's even one that looks like light. But none here on *The Seeker*. So, that's not a problem. Just some strange genetic issue with mating. Can you imagine having a child with a person who looks like light? At least, Red Trekaar looks like earth women. And since were-beasts are only triggered after mating and sharing blood, your child shouldn't look odd." He waved off the topic. "So, have you finished memorizing fortress layouts?"

Better to keep the man talking so he'll slip and send a bad vibe the old gut will pick up on. "Just spent all day working with Goro on surface versus subterranean as well as submarine fortifications. I'm fortified out. What about your experiences on missions? I'd like to go in with my boots on, if you know what I mean. Goro didn't think that information much for discussion as if he thought I could deal with the unknown in a piece-of-cake fashion."

Paul propped his elbows up atop the metal tabletop. "You know, the planets all differed. Locations I mean. One was a desert. Another was on a rocky coast. It's like venturing to different hotspots on vacation. Minus the excellent meals and bikinis. And forgot your hot-

chick wife helping when the nights heat up. I actually had to attack a local after shape shifting on one mission. That blood business is brutal.”

Mercenary work is always all business, no pleasure. Especially, given I just might hurt an innocent bystander when ripping off one of their limbs as the need to quench some blood thirst overrules my ability to reason.

Paul’s interested mask melted into pinched contemplation. “The underground fortress confused me. But I’m a bit claustrophobic.”

Huh? Come again. So, the man flew all the way to his destination in a pod-fighter sarcophagus without one claustrophobic twitch? Time to play stupid. “No problem with claustrophobia here.” He waved at Paul. “You must hate the flight in a pod fighter though.”

Paul’s mouth drew into a flat smile. “Eh, nothing in life is easy. I’ve got Sevra and a job that blows. Literally with the mind-numbing sex. And look at the amazing things we get to see.” He hit the table with his palms and almost cheered. “Talk about the life.”

There had to be more to a pocket protector having mind-blowing sex. Maybe they needed to change the subject. “So what’s your psychic power?”

“Remote viewing. It actually helps with the claustrophobia in I pretend not to be wherever I am. Just hanging out in places where I’m not. You know,” he got all serious and leaned back against the ship’s walls, “I remember thinking I was losing my mind when something sent me off on a remote viewing escapade back when I was at work in the cubicle. Then Sevra showed up.” He winked at Jake. “Everything started making sense after that.”

Jake’s gut twisted.

Could anything the geek said be swallowed?

“And getting a little rest and relaxation while remote viewing works for me. I just jet back to Sevra and give her wet dreams.” Paul winked.

Some guys got all the breaks.

“And your secret power is?” Paul anchored a commanding stare on Jake.

He didn’t know? What about ship rumors? “I fancied the grapevine was shaking.” Jake tried to play dumb. “I’m intuitive.”

Paul’s curious mask melted slightly but managed to flare back into the same stupid look he initially wore. “How does intuition help you in a fight?”

Interesting thought process for the dweeb. “I don’t need any help. I can kill you now and nobody would be the wiser until your wife didn’t have her wet dream this afternoon.” Jake shot the man a wink.

Paul almost guffawed. “You probably could.” The man rose and walked to a blank wall.

As if he didn’t believe me. I could probably outsmart his hairy subhuman ass too. No sense testing that now. “What about Gameddaron? Do you know anything about it?”

Paul touched an invisible button and made two silver glasses appear inside a hole in the wall. “One continent. Blue planet like our own too. Goro wants to send you there?”

The man really didn’t know about the plan. “He’s sending the both of us.”

Paul’s brow furrowed again. “But that’s risky.”

“How so? You know what you’re doing. I don’t. Sounds like a plan to me.”

“They never risk two were-mates on a mission.” Paul wagged his head contemplatively, returning to hand over a cup of neon-orange brew. “Never.”

Well, the gears were turning in Dufus’ head. “Maybe they’re worried I’ll get killed on my own. You know,” Jake lifted his cup to his lips and paused, watching Paul’s growing smile, “with the child of legend spawned by my loins and the unique blood pumping through my veins.

I'm an endangered species."

Paul nodded once and lifted his glass in a cheer. "And I'll gladly cover your ass."

Disgust probably boiled Paul's blood. Who would want to hear he was a star assassin only to learn himself indispensable in comparison to the new rookie? So much for a partner covering your backside. Well, where were the freaking knives and other weapons to protect one's rare butt against freaking pocket protectors out to earn back their prized status? "What about weapons? Do they issue us weapons for these missions? Or do we just go in with our necks on the line unable to protect ourselves?"

"So you haven't received clearance to the weapon room?" Paul asked smugly, rose, and waved toward the door. "Come on. I can show you what you have to choose from. You'll have to talk to Goro about carrying them aboard *The Seeker*. Although, I don't think Goro will have a problem with you being armed. Aren't you a weapon yourself?"

What an almost dead ass. Jake followed Paul to the whisking doorway. "It's nice to think so. But I don't like letting something as smug go to my head and cloud my ability to reason." Like G.I. Typo, the scourge of girl's locker room, a guy nobody would have except a shady female extraterrestrial who liked to have sex whenever she wanted it. Something just wasn't adding up to save-the-universe there.

A form stepped into the end of the passageway.

Sevra. The leather-clad woman seemed strange. Almost impenetrable in the distance. She halted. "Follow me." She waved back the way she had come.

"Well, I guess something's up," Paul said.

Just what was Sevra's something?

She turned her body partially back as if she were leaving. "Hurry," she called down the sterile corridor.

"Weird." Paul scratched his head. "Wonder what she's uptight about?"

Remote viewing was obviously not intuition or mind reading. "Let's find out."

They caught up with the female mercenary who wordlessly turned to her destination.

"How in the Hell do you read these people?" Jake muttered to her husband.

Paul chuckled. "I haven't figured that one out, yet."

His wife ignored them like a cold killer leading them to the gallows, guiding them through winding landmark-deficient corridors. Keeping the twists and turns locked in one's memory was almost as difficult as maintaining your sanity when these chumps spoke to each other without audible words.

Sevra turned to a silver door.

The door slid open.

Kindrist lay upon a sterile metal table beneath a large bright white light.

Very extraterrestrial-abduction ambiance.

His gut flopped.

Even worse, his wife didn't look at them. Or, for the most part, anything with her eyes shut. Was she dead?

Goro stepped into the light, locking a stern gaze upon them.

Jake claimed a spot beside the table and studied Kindrist's serene features.

So calm. Peaceful. Bizarre for the killing machine. "What happened?"

"She was attacked," Goro announced. "And you'll prove to me you didn't do this."

Chapter Nineteen

Anger laced the commander's words where he stood across the flat metal table that magically cradled Jake's wife in the ship's infirmary. Or was Goro's tone accusatory? Jake matched the commander's stoic glare. "Who did this? How could it have happened? Isn't this ship impenetrable? You are all psychic, if I must remind you."

The mercenary couple shot blank glances between them from where they stood two steps behind Goro.

"We don't read minds on this ship, Straightarrow. We invite communication. But we don't force it." Goro's brow furrowed. "There's a time and a place for interrogative procedures. But I have little evidence to initiate them. For now, I'll have you report to your quarters where you're to remain until I have investigated the matter further."

"Me?" The bastard thought I had risked the life of my child to affect my escape? "What about my child? Is the child okay?" He turned to Kindrist's sleeping leather-clad form.

"Leave us," Goro commanded.

Why leave without answers? Wasn't the couple the primary suspects? Jake spun to find Paul and Sevrá stepping toward the metallic door.

Goro shot him an admonishing glance.

The door whooshed shut.

Only the commander faced Jake.

Surely a man could speak freely.

Time for a heart-to-heart talk. "I want to know who did this."

"As I." Goro thrust his hands behind his back beneath his black cape and paced from the light's cone into shadow.

Not one weapon graced the commander's outfit. What did he fight with? Could Goro have attacked Kindrist?

"I don't think you did this." Goro announced. "Sevrá does. But she's heard my accusation and departed. You and I will discuss the situation now."

Why would Sevrá point the finger at me? "The balls of her to speak such an accusation where I'm not privy to the discussion." But who did Goro suspect? "What do you believe?"

Goro paced back into the light. His gaze studied the floor where his boots connected with the clean metal sheeting underneath each of his almost-silent footsteps. "I need proof to invade her thoughts. Something incriminating, Straightarrow. We've never been able to single her out with blame. But your intuition is confirming my suspicions." He turned a speculative brow to Jake. "Maybe on the planet? Maybe, you can uncover something," he almost whispered.

"Doesn't it look suspicious that you're speaking to me alone in here?"

He shrugged. "Call it interrogation. The commander has the right to investigate in the manner he deems appropriate. Minus mind reading, mind you." Goro winked. "I've earned my rank. I can question you in private if I so choose."

So, I'm the forward observer with a ten-second life expectancy on Gameddaron's battlefield because Goro's earned the right to pierce me with a skewer and prop me up over his

flames. “Great. You’re sending me in with Tweedle Dumb. And I’m supposed to find something to peg his wife with Kindrist’s condition. I don’t know anything about you people. How can I tell what’s incriminating?”

“Go with your gut.”

“Truth be known, my gut may appear to but truly can’t cover my unarmed ass.”

Especially with were-Paul out to shred it. “You can take a moment now to prove you have faith in my allegiance by outfitting me with some weapons to use against psychics to protect my wife, child, and ever-so-precious unique blood.”

A small smile twisted Goro’s lips, and he nodded. “I’ll help you pick the best weapons aboard. But there isn’t much you can do to shelter your activities from a remote viewer’s prying. And even now, Paul could be observing our discussion. But he’d have to do so in the corridor. I doubt he’d risk being caught remote viewing on the commander’s private discussion out in the passageway.”

* * * *

The armory wasn’t what Jake expected. Forget an unending supply of big fancy metal gizmos to point at bastards and sharp projectiles to mentally hurl at enemies with the finesse of a ticked-off psychic. Especially one ticked-off guy with a hard-on whose hot-ass babe was lying in the infirmary. But standing in the center of the small room’s three tall lockers lining one wall, he suddenly began to feel extremely empowered. “This is it?”

Goro opened the closest squeaking door. “Knives prove the favored weapon of psychics. No matter how close an attacker gets, you can still use a sharp edge for defense.”

Amen. But why bother with explanations? Just give me a damned weapon. He studied the bins of various blades in the cabinet.

“Take whatever makes you feel comfortable,” Goro said. “I wouldn’t want a crewman heading out suffering from a debilitating sense of vulnerability.”

Gee. Nothing like raw reality following you around chanting like a sentient shadow. He grabbed two small knives and one wielding a seven-inch sparking blade.

“We’ve collected a store of torches and other archaic devices stashed away in the next locker.” Goro opened the second squeaking door.

Brutally piercing squeak, that is. How strange to hear such a caustic noise on such a quiet ship.

The hidden metal boxes held a large store of torches just like Sevr’s. But what would people think of a new recruit who fancied one? Weakness? He slid his gaze to Goro’s. “Do you think I’ll need a torch to fight off wolf-dog Paul?”

Goro didn’t wince at the shape-shifting assessment. “I’ve never been in were-form, Straightarrow. I can only tell you that he thinks I’m watching you for any mistake you make here or in the field. I doubt he’ll turn on you. If he’s working for Voldon, he’ll want his allegiance to remain hidden.”

Interesting double play. Sounds like Goro was *The Seeker’s* master manipulator. Someone attacked Kindrist. Everyone was guilty. Including master manipulators. Better to feign acceptance than appear fully aware of anybody’s game. He studied a pile of metal stars and a few bins of what appeared to be good old-fashioned grenades. “I’m not telekinetic. I think I’ll pass on those.” He turned to the attentive Goro. “What else do you have? Any laser-beam weapons? Or something I’ve never imagined? Something so incredible I just can’t pass up the opportunity to test it on Paul.”

Goro wagged his head. “Psychics find weapons cumbersome. We rely on our brains.”

Not bad when some guys operate on a higher level for survival. Something tells me Paul's number will be up soon. Especially when his wife isn't around to save him with her magic torch.

Goro studied my every move.

With the finesse of a master manipulator determined to win this round of chess. Too bad I have no intention of being his pawn. Could the commander detect my smugness in my body language though? Time to grumble some predictable fears for camouflage. "Easy to say when your more-evolved psychic powers cover your ass."

The commander chuckled softly. "That's why we started relying upon were-assassins. You can shape shift into a powerful creature that only a torch or very good aim can outwit. Not that your beastly brain will be smarter. But the animal inside us all operates in survival mode. No more Beast Tamers for you until after you return from your mission."

Just chunk control out the windowless pod fighter and pretend to be a happy peon. "I've been dying to shape shift."

"Success lies in your timing. But fear will be your demise."

Crap. The boss didn't buy my little white lie. Jake turned to meet the commander's serious gaze. "Paul's the guy with fears. Me, I'm here to protect my wife and child. Even if that means having to kill a commander who had every opportunity to attack my wife."

"That's what I wanted to hear." Goro nodded and bullied forward like a calm priest fingering prayer beads while spouting religious jargon. "You think beyond the moment. You assess every aspect of a situation. But know I too have yet to shape shift. I understand the initiate's thoughts vacillate between curiosity, trepidation, and exhilaration. Know I sense your capacity to channel your reasoning, focusing in were-form, success in righting the wrongs in your eyes." Goro quieted, staring at Jake.

As if I was supposed to agree with his mantra. What about flying back to my home base? "Does my pod fighter understand my growls?"

"You're allowed to take some of your mate's blood along to inject yourself with once you feel you're safely on your way home. Until then, become one with your inner beast."

Why do I have the sudden urge to light incense and chant? Or was Goro just playing games with more than two people aboard *The Seeker*? The man offered weapons like candy. And parents always told their children to beware of strangers bearing candy. Maybe this private pep rally was really a way for Goro to isolate Kindrist to ensure he got to kill her. "I'd feel better about going if we waited until Kindrist came around." After all, it didn't look like she could count on the commander for protection.

Goro's head tilted thoughtfully. His orange gaze assessed Jake with the scrutiny of a seasoned field marshal. "I've safeguarded her for fourteen years before your arrival, Straightarrow. Voldon is the enemy. We must take out his forces and push back his veil of darkness. Yet, I am happy to see you're worried about her well-being." He waved at the door. "Let us go now and check to see if she has awakened. But I will ask you to be defensive and angry. Play the part of the man who has been tied to the pyre with the torch about to light the wood at his feet. If anyone overhears anything we say, I want them to think you distrust me."

Easy. Maybe that wasn't such a bad idea. Who knew what went down with the commander pulling everyone's strings.

* * * *

Kindrist couldn't open her eyes where she lay upon a thin cushion that didn't shield her from the underlying hard surface.

Flames spiked up her side.

Brutal fire trying to light the air in her lungs.

Why the burning pain? She tried to move her arm, to feel what caused the searing sensation in her ribs.

“Her hair just flared red. She’s regaining consciousness,” a man said.

Voices? Tones drenched with angst. Words spoken by lips. My mate. And Jake sounded anything but pleased.

“So, you send me off to study with Paul. While I’m away, my wife is attacked. Now, you expect me to believe you’re beyond suspicion? I’m supposed to head out to Gameddaron and take out a fortress with Tweedle Dumb? You want me to swallow this, Goro?”

“Do it for your people. Save earth for posterity’s sake.”

Yes, she had been attacked in her quarters. Another battle was brewing around her now. Provoking Jake probably wasn’t Goro’s best move. But Goro was chosen commander for a reason. And Jake wouldn’t attack a woman carrying his child. Not the man she had chosen for holy matrimony. Betrayal wasn’t part of Jake’s vocabulary. Even if he only was loyal to his child. Goro had to know. She opened her eyes.

Okay, tried to. Her body didn’t want to respond. She rocked her head against the slick grinding surface beneath her.

The movement shook her eyelids loose.

Bright white light stabbed into her brain.

The medical bay’s examination light. She squinted.

A dark form leaned overhead blocking the light.

“How do you feel?” Jake asked.

Damned the stars, she couldn’t move her lips. She studied his dark glinting gaze.

Anger danced like sparkling stars promising revenge inside her mate’s eyes.

Jake shot a glare over his shoulder at Goro. “Damn it. I leave her, by your orders, and look what happened.”

Goro’s defensive stare didn’t flinch.

Both of these guiltless men debating over each other’s innocence only wasted valuable time. Voldon’s thug had infiltrated their ship. She had to speak. To stop this ridiculous bickering. She tried to move her lips again.

Jake just hovered. “Her eyes are still yellow. That means she hasn’t miscarried. Right?”

“Yes,” Goro replied in his familiar calm manner.

Blessed Devros, for the sign that Jake cared for our child.

Jake searched her eyes. “Who did this to you, Kindrist?”

The caring in his voice was worth the searing pain wrapping around her side.

He cared.

What else could she ask for? But who had injured her? Who had risked the loss of a legendary child who could save the free-thinking universe?

Jake’s warm hand gently landed on her forehead and smoothed the hair down the side of her head. “Tell me who did this, Kindrist.”

She tried to move her lips again.

Nothing. Time to speak with Goro. She forced her thoughts out, reaching to the commander’s mind.

“Welcome back, Kindrist,” Goro said in mindspeak.

He shoved up next to her opposite Jake on the other side of the medical table.

Jake scowled at Goro.

Goro focused upon her, leaning against Jake's knuckles. "Tell me the identity of your attacker."

Sharp pain shafted through her chest with his command.

The room's shadows began spinning.

Lights whirled overhead.

Jake's torso swirled into a dark smear.

A wave of nausea tried to choke her last breath away.

She closed her eyes, trying to block the whirling scenery.

"Kindrist, you must tell me," Goro insisted.

If she didn't clear up the confusion, Jake would have more trouble than if she just gave into the need to sleep. She grabbed cool leather, Goro's sleeve, opened her eyes, leaned up toward her commander, willing his eyes to meet her gaze, and she forced her thoughts to reach him. "*It wasn't Jake.*"

The world went black.

* * * *

Damn it all to Hell. Jake yanked his knuckles clear of the comedy playing out before him. If Kindrist would only talk to Goro, this was one mixed-up marriage. A union I have no desire to participate in. He shoved off from the table, away from his unconscious wife, and stepped back.

Where could a guy get a nice shot of his mate's blood? This damned woody is getting on my nerves. And Kindrist can't do anything about the pressure.

Goro turned to him. "She's unconscious again. Yet, she told me that you didn't attack her."

Nice of her to cover my ass. How about honey it's good to see you? "What did she say about you? Or can I believe anything you say?"

Goro shook his head and thrust some fingers up to scratch the bald shining scalp above his ear.

The robust man finally looked bewildered.

"I don't know, Straightarrow." He turned to Jake. "I've got as much to lose as she does. Maybe more. We're talking about my reputation. I'm a man of honor. Kindrist said you were too. I assumed I could trust you."

Fantastic. Kick me in the balls.

After all, men-for-hire like cops and military special-ops guys had balls of steel. But how was this scenario any different than any other? A mercenary took orders. Mopped the floor for another chance to snatch a bone beneath the table. Why should life in outer space differ from home? Hell, if all they wanted is my semen and some blood, that's what I'll give them. He searched the shadows for signs of items to extract his own blood.

The medical bay was as fricking difficult to locate things as in personal quarters.

"What are you searching for?" Goro asked.

Truth? Reason? A needle. "I'm going to draw my blood. Leave it for Kindrist."

"I see." Goro's footsteps creaked until he came into view and pushed an invisible button on a dark wall. A moment passed before the commander handed over a needle and plastic tubing to Jake.

Talk about easy.

Goro's gaze met Jake's. "Take some of Kindrist's for yourself. I want you back here. I

know The Cause needs you. And I need a mercenary I can rely upon.”

Shit. The man could talk a bird out of a tree. But who could be trusted in this game of pawns? Not to mention, how in the Hell can I leave my child here in this three-ring circus and go to Gameddaron?

Chapter Twenty

Heading toward the low coffin form of his featureless pod fighter, Jake patted the metallic syringe containing Kindrist's blood stored inside a pouch beneath his T-shirt and warm leather of his standard-wear psychic-mercenary jacket. Maybe survival had got the better of him. He'd opted to go with the general theme in black leather if only to save his hide from chaffing or bizarre alien biting insects. Who knew what could come of flying low in a personal fighter?

A tremor shook him.

Just another damned indication I'm a blood fucker. A couple hours remain between me meeting my inner beast.

"Wait up, Straightarrow."

Tweedle Dee's voice yelled behind him. Just chaos insisting on accompanying me to the planet. He turned to the tall gawky computer geek's grin.

Yep. Dufus. Ten seconds and all would be over with the-Paul-kind-of forward observer tagging along. Time to crawl into my crypt and shape shift into the zombie these psychics have been dreaming of. Was that even the type of husband Kindrist wanted? A soul-less blood fucker devoid of morals and any personal spark left to make him unique?

A chill skittered down his spine.

Not the standard tickling fear. My gooseflesh merely insisted I was going to shape shift this time. Rather, die because who in the Hell knew what would come of the loss of control. Hopefully, Kindrist had enough blood to tie her over until after the baby was born.

Paul caught up with Jake and waved toward the pod fighters. "Up, up, and away."

Where's the idiot's rainbow-colored balloon? "Let's blow up a fortress." Adding returning in one piece seemed redundant. Returning at all began sounding like a pipe dream.

Why come back?

Why care?

Because an asshole tyrant needed splattering and fools needed to be flushed out from the universe's underbrush. Even if the fool proved to be the less-likely suspect, Goro. He touched the pod-fighter's secret invisible button.

The hatch magically appeared and shifted open with a mechanical sigh.

Wouldn't life become ridiculously nuts if the events over the next few days revealed the commander was behind Kindrist's attack? After all, Kindrist's frustration with his choice in saving the Mawshwuc might hint at where Goro's heart truly sided. Was the commander working for Voldon? And they fancy me a loose cannon? He gulped down a chuckle.

Little did they expect me to stick to my morals. Only when Voldon's last breath wafted skyward and his forces regained their ability to think for themselves would the universe offer a safe place for my child to live. Legend spinning a tall cup of neon truth or not. He thrust his boots into the dark recesses of the pod-fighter's interior.

Just tucking myself in for death.

The hatch slid shut.

Absolute darkness settled in around him.

Yep, death. What a transformation.

“Identify yourself,” the computer said in her perky formal English.

“Thunderbird.”

The soft lights flickered on, snuffing the tomb ambiance, and the star fighter trembled to life.

Kind of strange for the moment of death. Time to fly like an eagle on my death train. He fingered the syringe of Kindrist’s blood in the pocket of his jeans. So, they need a were-wolf to do their dirty work. Getting down and dirty sounded better with Kindrist’s curves sliding across his chest.

The image of her firm flexible nude body danced before his eyes.

God, to see that hair flare red as she groaned with completion. But an angry woman wasn’t agreeable. To run my palms across the taut nubs of her nipples. Time to go and get back to the basics with my dark and dangerous psychic chick.

“You have 3 earth hours before you transmute into a were-assassin, Straightarrow.”

Tick. Tick. Like I couldn’t tell with this hard-on. I’ll probably drown in my own sweat before we reach the planet. Let’s get this damned fiasco over with.

* * * *

Bright lights bore through Kindrist’s eyelids where she laid upon a soft surface as if the annoying light tried to sear her eyes shut like a laser beam.

A dull pain throbbed in her right side.

The familiar sound of air swooshing through the ventilation system whispered a strange promise of peace.

At least, she was on a ship. Hopefully, Goro’s. Peace and pain added up to the infirmary. Why? She tried to rub the annoying light from her eyes.

A presence pushed into her mind. “*Red Trekaar?*” Goro asked in mindspeak.

The man with answers. “*Where am I?*”

“*You’ve been out a few earth days.*”

What of Jake? “*What happened?*”

“*You said your attacker wasn’t Straightarrow at one point when you came to. Is this true?*”

Gods, what was he talking about? “*I don’t remember. But he wouldn’t risk the safety of his child. Not the man I chose to mate.*”

“*He left you as much blood as he could.*”

Damn the conniving universe. “*Left?*”

“*He’s on mission to Gameddaron. With Paul.*”

No. Between Paul and Sevrá, Jake would be killed.

“*Don’t worry. Sevrá is here even though she didn’t want to send Paul on the mission with Straightarrow. Paul doesn’t pose as much of a threat.*”

To Jake. Voldon will be hunting Jake’s ass down though. Paul will just end up dead by association. “*And how long have I been unconscious?*”

“*Thirty-eight earth hours.*”

Earth, the savior, bobbing in an endless sea of beings, unbeknownst to its peoples, offering the last survivor of a decimated planet hope with a soul mate, precious blessed life-giving planet, please see your offspring is as valiant as I thought him. Why did time feel like it would prove otherwise? To think the thoughts would be disastrous. Yet, every psychic knew the bad came with the good. Voldon’s actions proved that dichotomy. Teasing with promise, Earth was the tormentor. The Cause’s enigma.

“The child is fine, Kindrist,” Goro announced as if he had been probing her mind.

Fate of all fates, earth’s seed offered promise. She rubbed her flat belly. *“But what of my soul mate?”*

“If you can bring the child to full term, you and your soul mate will live for all eternity among the statuary on every planet in the free-thinking universe. Who could forget your success? Aside from infamy, Paul can’t bring Straightarrow down, Kindrist. Even his blood cycle is hours behind Straightarrow’s. Rest in peace now. I’m on my way to check on you.”

Something about resting in peace sounded like she was dead. Why? Because earth tormented *The Seeker’s* crew with earth metaphors. Jake had to return. She wanted him whole. Wanted to touch his hard gorgeous body. Wanted to engage in the complete Beast-Tamer ritual. Gods, just to spread my legs and let him ram himself into oblivion. Yes, the time approached where Jake would shift into were-assassin form. He would have the upper hand with Paul. But since Paul was chosen for were-assassin duty for a reason, he wasn’t one to underestimate a person. Especially since he could remote view.

Could Paul spy on Jake even now in transit? More so on Gameddaron? Could he inform Voldon’s forces of her soul mate’s location any moment Paul drew a breath?

And Goro ordered them both go.

After the Mawshwuc disaster, Goro needed a vacation from command to unravel his tangled thoughts. If they needed untangling. Just where was the rational man who taught her so much when life came to survival and revenge? But the ultimate vengeance was giving birth to the child of legend. Yes. Goro’s words were true. Now, Jake needed help.

But I’m supposed to sit tight and gestate.

I’m the person who should be with Jake. To protect him from what is loosely termed the infinite unknown to him. Not pupating.

And people speak of twisted destiny.

Destiny. The braided paths of opportunity leading to one’s demise tangled in one thorny bed. Only meditation could help her through this. And some of her mate’s blood.

* * * *

The blue planet rushed toward Jake until land drove away the water only to be pushed aside by an almost-golden savannah spreading in every direction. Forget endless herds of hooved animals dispersing haphazardly from a helicopter zooming toward them in this picture. Nothing graced the grassy scene below. Especially Weatherford’s pod fighter. Where was the traitor?

A cramp shot another round of ache into Jake’s right hip.

Aside from my raging hormones, the long flight sucked inside this sarcophagus. My damned left knee hurting was the last straw. He lifted the aching joint.

His knee struck a hard surface.

Some twist of fabric pinched his crotch.

Great. He shoved his ridiculous honeymoon trophy to the left.

Dead in Hell being punished for lust. What a joke. Had Kindrist come around yet? Hopefully, she was uninjured and ready for some rest and relaxation via blood libation. Anything to tend to a damned hard-on.

Sweat beaded upon his forehead.

A wise man would think about something other than resetting the clock through rolling in the hay.

A tree dotted the rolling expanse.

Then another.

Where was this flying morgue planning to deliver The Cause's zombie?

"We'll arrive two kilometers from the fortress, Straightarrow. The stronghold lies on the other side of the forest."

Was the computer psychic too? Probably so given the pod-fighter's alien technology. And the computer knew all about the terrain. There waited a subject worth serious focus. "What kind of plants and animals will I encounter?"

"This planet has no indigenous carnivorous vegetation. However, the animals have been hunted to extinction."

"Can we blame nature's silence on the locals?"

"Voldon exterminated the wildlife."

Leave it to Voldon to prove he cared for nothing. But what had Paul lied about to make an intuitive psychic's gut flop? "So, I've got to worry about Voldon's forces and Paul. Are there any sort of monitoring devices I should be concerned about?"

"The wildlife was terminated in an offensive maneuver to eliminate any confusion with mixed signals if something humanoid tripped a detection device."

So, was Paul tiptoeing through the tulips? "And where's Paul Weatherford?"

"He landed one kilometer west of the fortress. You'll need the distance for safety. The odds you both will be detected are extremely low. Even better once you shape shift."

Setting out in my inner feral skivvies with God knows what kind of measure of self-control wasn't how a mercenary preferred to attack. Especially with a disgruntled peon and a comrade with questionable loyalties watching my back. The only way to beat Paul was to observe him before the transmutation. Goro's approval or not. Surely an intuitive preference played a key role in the mission's success. "Can you conceal my approach from Paul?"

"Pod fighters are capable of blocking their detection by other pod fighters. However, you are too fresh to this world and war. What would the purpose be to hide from your partner, Straightarrow?"

Did the computer just call me naïve with its calm voice? Talk about a voice of reason. Maybe one of those psychics back on *The Seeker* was controlling this pod fighter, talking to me under the illusion of giving the new sex-stud some freedom.

Cool sweat beaded on Jake's brow.

The computer could stick its recommendations of caution. "All for precautionary means, computer. Please tell me when Paul lands, then block our approach."

"Paul landed three earth minutes ago," the computer announced. "I've disengaged all communication with the other pod fighter."

Sweet. Now to find Paul. "What is Paul's location?"

"One kilometer from the Voldon's fortress."

What about other precautionary measures? "If Voldon can't detect this pod fighter or read my mind, how can he locate my body's presence?"

"Touch nothing. Wind blows leaves along the ground. So, the devices stud the trees and rock surfaces to eliminate confusion. If you touch anything with your skin, your body heat will register on their equipment. Your boots will save you otherwise."

I should have gone into ballet. Maybe Paul was the best man for this job. "You don't happen to have any gloves?"

"No. Prepare for landing. Straightarrow, did you bring your mate's blood for treatment once you return from your mission?"

"Yes. One syringe treatment. What do I do with it?"

A yellow circle blinked on before his eyes. "Please insert the syringe into the circle you now see."

Hell, so much for counting on the use of civilized intelligence. A man shouldn't be asked to put his life on the line without the knowledge of a lifetime secured in his pocket. But clothes would be the first to go once he shifted. And Kindrist was anything but safe. Adios medicine. He shoved the syringe into the provided target.

"Upon your return, I will administer your treatment. All you need do is quickly assume your in-flight position."

Geesh. Like a wolf man can find invisible buttons. "Well, hopefully I'll remember how to open this sardine can."

"My sensors will detect your approach and open the cockpit."

At long last, something would be easy. If only I can recall enough to blow the crystal to bits. Paul or no Paul, Kindrist would be safe. At least, Paul had seemed aware of what was going on in his wolf form. Time to tiptoe through the tulips in a grand were-wolf ballet.

By the time Jake stepped onto the forest's crunching grass and leaves of the sparsely-vegetated under story, his gut was twisting.

And he couldn't blame the sweat beading on his brow. Something wasn't right beyond his blood lust. He leaned his head back into the pod-fighter's cabin. "Do you have a reading on Paul?"

"One kilometer to the east. His biostatistics are registering high. He's engaged in an abnormal activity."

Great. Now to sneak up on a psychic guy who can astral project to establish my location. Surprise was a ludicrous waste of energy.

"You have two earth hours and three minutes before you shape shift, Straightarrow."

Talk about wearing dynamite strapped to one's chest. They could have given me a watch. I guess a timepiece was unnecessary given one's body groaned with each passing second. He shoved off the ship's hard metallic hull and turned to the wall of trees.

The sun hovered in behind him.

So the sun rose in the west. Time to find Paul. He took off in search of man.

The hike wasn't bad since the tree trunks never grew less than a foot apart. The risk of setting off a detection device with a touch was minimal. But trying to hide held another layer of risk. There was nowhere to hide. If only his psychic power were invisibility. Forget ducking behind a tree or diving down to the ground with heat sensors everywhere.

Movement fluttered among the trees along the bowing forest floor.

He froze and scanned the wall of tree trunks.

A bare human arm waved and fell back behind a rise.

Rather pointed at something in the full canopy above what had to be a person. Since the psychic aliens he had met were all of the same physical appearance as humans, who knew what loitered among the gnarled tree trunks? No better time than the present to learn. He stepped carefully toward the spot.

"—coming." A voice wafted upon the breeze.

Paul's voice. Talk about an idiot mercenary. Any guard in the woods could hear the pansy's words. The jerk would definitely sabotage the mission. Jake scanned the surrounding army of trees.

Nothing. Time to shut up Paul. He took a few more careful steps toward the fool.

The side of Paul's face came into view. And the castle's solid wall slowly materialized

between the tree trunks beyond the man with each of Jake's quiet footsteps.

The mercenary leaned where he sat against a felled tree trunk in his standard black-leather vest. Tweedle Dee rocked his head from side to side with his eye shut. "No."

Who was he chatting with? Sevrá? Or were they talking? Maybe having wet day dreams. Jake painstakingly took a few careful steps toward Paul to listen.

"Trust me. I can do it," Paul insisted.

Jake's gut flopped.

What now? Intuition could try to be a little clearer in times of duress.

Just what was the man discussing while obviously remote viewing? Probably just reassuring his wife, one who knew she'd chosen an imbecile, that he could survive this mission. Then again, did Paul realize he spoke aloud on his psychic adventures? And what if the idiot tripped a sensor while talking with his limbs? Someone had to inform the fool about his waving and chatting. Jake took a step.

Paul raked his fingers through his brown hair, sat upright, and shook his head.

Well, at least the idiot would pay attention to where he laid his palms now. "Paul," he blurted in a somewhat muted voice.

Paul's gaze whirled to Jake. "Shh," he hissed.

Okay, that's the pot calling the kettle black.

Paul waved him over.

Time to pretend to be an idiot for survival and mission success. He cleared the space in a few steps and knelt beside the scowling Paul. "Any tips on how to handle what first?"

Paul turned toward some massive white walls beyond the distant tree line. "Let's work with the structure appears topside, surface. I counted five sides before I landed. The glass ceilings sparkled like blinding diamonds. But I spotted the sharp peaks of two crystal transponders. They've got to have a subterranean system underlying a decoy surface system." Paul chuckled. "Leave it to Voldon to set up a compound unit that might trick us into thinking we've knocked out the works without checking underground. But we don't want to bank on my hunch. For now, we're taking out a surface neural network."

Whatever. What about time? "How will we know the difference?"

Paul shot Jake a steady gaze. "We'll have to make certain whatever's down there is destroyed. No matter how deep Voldon buried or concealed the mechanism."

Jake's skin itched like it was about to fall off.

Forget beating the clock in human skin. Maybe Paul had been discussing the unusual fortification features with Sevrá? But intuition warned otherwise. "When will you shape shift?"

"Almost three hours." Paul stretched his arms overhead.

How had they managed to have almost identical blood cycles? "Okay, you're the seasoned pro with this kind of game. What's your plan of attack?"

"Wait until we shape shift."

Predictability obviously shot out the window in waging war beyond earth and attacking nurseries. "And you trust me in a form I've never experienced?"

Paul sighed. "You've got to believe me when I say you'll know what's going on. The free-thinking universe is counting on our element of surprise. And our unnatural were-assassin strength."

Someone needed to shove his explosive fistful of bullshit up his ass and strike a match. Trusting what one's gut rats on can't prove anything but disastrous. Especially when I have no idea what my brain will do in animal mode. "So, what do we do until the big moment?"

“Find the best place to scale the fortress’s walls.”

No ropes. The man probably hints at our use of claws. This should be fun. He scanned the long thick bulwark of the almost adobe-looking psychic castle.

“Here’s the plan,” Paul began. “You go left. I’ll go right. If you find some duct tunneling under or through the wall, follow it into the interior. We might encounter one to two dozen psychics inside. There’s no need for Voldon to man these fortifications beyond that number. And they don’t need guards with the forest bugged. We’ll either find a way in and meet up in time to set the fireworks, or we’ll hook up again somewhere on the backside. Just get in before you shift if you can. Otherwise, it’s one giant leap over the wall and a whole lot of head-ripping once you get inside.” Paul winked.

Decapitating Voldon’s slaves seemed pretty brutal. But leaping over that incredibly high wall was fascinating. “You can leap ten meters?”

Paul grinned. “I find you can do all sorts of crazy stunts when in were-form. Just call it liberation.” Paul winked.

Freeing the inner beast? Talk about a new perspective. Maybe I’ve had a bad one about my induction. Maybe I’m finally free enough to experience life at its fullest? Why am I not buying this rationalization?

Paul rose. “Let’s find an entrance and get off this rock.”

No way am I about to appear to assume command of the mission. Save my ass? Yes. Watch Paul at all times. You betcha gut. He followed Paul down through the trees and veered left as Paul veered right at the wall’s base.

Hi ho. Hi ho. Forget ass-wasting whistling and humming. A breathing body won out over the simple presence of an ash pile any day.

A wave of hunger shook his knees.

He struggled not to puke.

But the wind jangled the leaves on the trees.

Therapeutically. And the warm sunshine reminded him of earth.

Earth. A strange place that always seemed to push him away. Now the planet called to him like a desperate woman, begging him to change her flat tire. Triple A couldn’t resolve earth’s problem. Only Super Straightarrow. And his little peon. How in the Hell did I get dragged into this nightmare?

A low dull pop sounded.

He fell to a crouch and scanned the dark tree line and the nonexistent path he’d just tread.

Nothing. Yet, something had to be there. Excluding the wildlife-deficient forest, there were only Paul and psychic bad guys. Where in the Hell was dumb-ass Paul?

His gut twisted.

Paul had to have his hand in the cookie jar. He turned and carefully backtracked to the point he had to choose between where he found Paul in the forest or following Paul’s path. He scanned the ground for boot tracks.

Two fresh boot prints sank into the meal of some finely-ground sediment.

What had to be Paul’s footprints trailed off along the base of the white wall. He followed them for about ten minutes to where Paul sat, leaning against a boulder near the looming palisade.

Paul wasn’t facing him. Nor did Paul notice any movement from his approach. The man was busy waving an arm.

Pointing? Or astral projecting. Jake quietly stepped along until he could make out a few

of Paul's words.

"I'm trying to delay him until your supply ship arrives," Paul said.

Whose supply ship?

"Give me a chance to make this work, Voldon."

The stinking traitor. Time to kick the ball back to Paul and play a game of chess. Maybe putting control back in earth's corner just might buy him some time. And Goro. Now the commander had the right to probe Sevra's thoughts. And they'd know if Paul was behind Kindrist's attack. If the worm tried to kill my child.... The only way to end this charade and head home was to fake a problem. A delay. He started running across a bunch of loose gravel.

Paul's head jerked in Jake's direction.

Perfect. Jake dropped into a slide to first base, tumbled down an incline, rolled to a stop near Paul's black combat boots, and grabbed at his ankle. "Shit," he whispered a curse, trying to appear the mercenary who feared he'd given away their location.

His thigh hurt where the rocks had gnawed into his leg though.

The ache wasn't truly an injury. Paul needed to think the ankle was broken. He rubbed his ankle for effect and locked onto Paul's curious gaze. "Damn. I think my ankle's broke. Fuck. I can't fail Kindrist.... and the baby."

Paul's brow pinched. "You serious, man?"

Dufus would ask. "Hell, yes." He shoved up to feign an injury by trying to walk, limped, and fell on the other leg's thigh.

"No way. What cursed luck." Paul hopped up and hurried over to kneel at Jake's side. "Are you serious?"

Well, a foiled plan had to be serious. "Yes."

"What happened? Why did you come back?"

Stupid question from the guilty party. "I heard a twig pop. Who walked on it? I don't have any weapons."

Paul sighed and swatted at the seat of his pants. "It's just your heightened arousal, man. You're hearing things. Didn't they school you on what you'd experience?"

"No. I was in the crash-and-burn course because they wanted to get my butt over here to blow up my eardrums." He grabbed his ankle and groaned.

"I told you we should have waited until we shifted," Paul said.

Yeah. Like I'd give the seasoned were-beast a chance to trick my ass after Paul's strength magnified. "Hurry. Get in there. I'll wait here. If anything looks suspicious, I'll create a distraction. We've got to think about our wives."

Paul inhaled loudly and studied the unyielding expanse of rock.

Well, he obviously had no idea how he would explain this one to Voldon. "The Cause is counting on you."

Paul's assessing gaze locked onto Jake's.

What thoughts whirled inside his head? Maybe the traitor was more intelligent than his actions suggested.

"We have to do this together. Goro sent a team. I need you," Paul said.

Like Hell. He rubbed his lower leg for show. "You know as well as I do that this was my first mission, a training mission. You were sent to help me. You don't need me. I'm the rookie. Get in there and kick some alien ass." Lies were so lovely in times laced with imminent threat.

Paul nodded and scanned Jake's ankle. "Are you going to be okay here alone?"

“I may have fallen down a hill, but I know how to take care of myself.”

“That doesn’t look the case now.” He smacked his lips. “If they’ve detected you, I can’t help you from inside the fortress. You’re not exactly mobile.”

Go, moron. Incriminate yourself. “I’m dead anyway. It’s time to save the free-thinking universe.” He nodded toward the fortress. “You’ll be safer without me anyway.”

“When you shift, your bone will heal. Just hang in there.” Paul rose and stepped along Gameddaron’s wall. “I’ll come back for you, man.”

Don’t bother.

At least, fifteen minutes passed before the gawky traitor was well out of sight where the wall’s white base turned. Nothing else moved aside from wind blowing trees in the distance.

Poor Paul’s plans were foiled. Hopefully, he struggled to think of Plan B. Or the bastard had plopped down to remote view and consult with Voldon again.

And Voldon’s supply ship was coming. Time to get my human ass out of here.

Chapter Twenty One

The pod fighter shimmered into existence beyond the trees like a mirage beyond Jake. The ship must have detected his fluctuating biostats and presented itself. His biostats were definitely elevated by the way his body twitched warnings about his upcoming transformation. And the cure to the waves of nausea trying to slow him down was tucked into a little hole inside the ship. He grabbed the cockpit's smooth rim and climbed into the dark recesses of his spacecraft.

"Please state your password," the computer stated.

"Thunderbird."

"Welcome back, Straightarrow. Your biostats are elevated."

Duh. Leave it to a female computer to state the obvious.

Something shot into his thigh.

He gasped and flinched. "Damn. That felt like you drove a nail into my leg."

His racing heart suddenly calmed.

Thank God for another reprieve from becoming a mindless killer beast. "Let's head back to *The Seeker*, computer."

"What about your mission, Straightarrow?"

"I've done what I was sent to do."

"The compound still stands."

"Paul is placing the explosive as we speak. But I've got what Goro sent me to retrieve."

"As you wish." The pod fighter shivered into motion and darted into the blue sky.

The trip back to Goro couldn't pass fast enough with the shrinking blue planet.

"Straightarrow, I've detected an explosion on Gameddaron's surface."

What blew? "How big was the disturbance?"

"A Class 2 explosive detonated. Paul was successful in reaching the fortification's center."

Damn. Paul actually came through. Why? "I need to beat him back to the starship." To enlighten the commander before Paul and Sevrá had another opportunity to attempt to kill Kindrist.

"Paul's pod fighter hasn't taken off yet."

The man would be suspicious of Jake's escape. The only way to explain such a feat with a broken ankle was to chalk all up to what a person could do when facing death.

The ship lurched toward black space.

It was good to see something else lurching besides his need. Was Kindrist okay? And what happened to a were-assassin whose mate was killed? Surely there was more to that future than suicide?

* * * *

"*Strako has just docked, heard of the past few days' events, and is headed to your personal quarters,*" Forty Three announced in mindspeak to Kindrist.

A visit from the Illusian would help the time pass as her soul mate attempted to destroy a neural network. Kindrist pushed out a reply channel. "*Thank you.*"

But Strako wouldn't take the news of Jovull's passing well. Nor would he be silent about his fears of Sevra's allegiance. Still he was coming to visit. To illuminate the dark days of war. And rarely did a mercenary have such a treat. Kindrist rose and paced out a circle around her meditation bench.

Had Strako's mission been successful? He was a man who could move mountains. Throw in his earthling mate's ability to set things ablaze and the couple equated to invincible. Unless the enemy held a torch.

Her door whisked open.

Strako's Illusian bioluminescence blazed with the blinding essence of a sun in her doorway.

She couldn't help but squint.

"I apologize, Red Trekaar. But Rosa must tend to chores before we can appeal to the mercy of Beast Tamers." He strode into the place, his shoulder-length white hair raking the upper threshold.

A visit is a visit. *"I see Destiny has granted your safe return as always."* She produced the calm shallow bow expressing her satisfaction with the mission's end results and met his stoic almost-white blue gaze. *"You've heard about Jovull?"*

He snorted and claimed a spot at her portal, gazing into deep space. *"Destiny has a wicked sense of humor."* His all-knowing angelic gaze locked on hers. *"So you now carry the child of legend. I had to see for myself."*

She nodded as if an earthling's fears and respect of angels were some earth legend she'd adopted for truth. But Strako had the persona of a heavenly angel. One who would fight for justice and who could shift into an equally-menacing were-assassin.

"You wear the white garb of a psychic crew member well, my friend." His mouth stretched into a genuine smile.

If only I felt as complete in this drab clothing.

"Your mate is taking out Gameddaron?"

Hopefully. *"He's not into failure."*

"You mean the volatile earth mercenary you've observed over two years?"

Of course. She granted him one nod.

"The universe would not abandon us, Red. He's Jovull's replacement."

Her heart sank for her mentor. *"For me, it is a fair exchange, trading Jovull's sharing of old tales for the comfort of a mate."*

Strako nodded and turned back to the stars. *"Can you link Sevra to your attack?"*

"No."

"We must before she torches The Seeker."

* * * *

When Jake finally climbed out of the cockpit into the docking-bay's piercing light, Goro and Sevra waited. Was Kindrist conscious yet? Not to mention his little friend was back. The syringe's contents just weren't cutting the lust.

"Where is my husband?" the leather-cloaked Sevra demanded.

Goro waved a hand as if backhanding her, but his hand paused six inches from her unflinching angry mask. *"Welcome back, Straightarrow. The mission appears successful. Where is Weatherford?"*

Shit, time to limp. Anything to learn whether Sevra had attacked Kindrist while he was off sniffing out skunks. He threw a leg over the cockpit's side and groaned. *"I was injured."*

Paul went ahead alone. I figured I'd slow his escape down. So, I managed to make it back to my ride and left the trained guy to tend to your dirty work."

Hopefully, that sounded good. He slung his supposedly injured leg over the spacecraft's side and slid off his space mount.

His boots hit the metal deck with a clang.

He sucked in a breath, bent his knees, and pretended the impact hurt, clutching the cockpit's hard edge with a strained grasp. "Shit."

Goro's contemplative mask never wavered.

Sevra's face twisted with disgust.

What were they waiting for? "You think someone can help a poor guy get to the infirmary? I could use some medical attention. Or a stick. I'll hobble there myself. Do you think you could hand me a god-damned stick?"

Goro nodded Sevra toward the exit.

The woman hissed Jake's direction, then grimaced, turned, and departed in a series of haughty strides.

Not good. The snake could be heading for Kindrist.

Only when the door whisked shut did Goro's mask twist with an inkling of conspiracy.

The man needed to get his crap together. Sevra was on the hunt for Kindrist. "I need to see a medic, healer, whatever you call them, Goro."

"You will receive whatever treatment you require. Give the transportation a few moments. We'll get you over to the sick bay."

Why the delay? Kindrist had to be well if the commander wasn't worried about Sevra heading off alone. Since Goro appeared suspicious, it couldn't hurt to say the obvious about the mission. "Paul followed through without me."

Goro nodded. "He is quite responsible. How bad is your injury?"

What to add to that questionable statement without giving up the goose? Anyone could be listening. "Far worse than it would have been if I could have relied on Paul to return and help me escape. It looked like I was toast back there in the forest. So, I headed for the pod. Kindrist needed me to." That was no lie.

Goro nodded his now-serious mask. "No one will ever state you are any less responsible than Weatherford."

The commander said nothing about Kindrist. She had to be fine. Feigning an injury was best for now. "How is Kindrist?"

"Red Trekaar is well. So is her child."

"Good to hear. Does she have a guard?"

"Two. One is a being nobody dares to cross. You will meet him soon enough."

By the time the transport cart ushered Jake's propped up foot to the cold sterile clinical table, Goro announced Paul was close to docking.

A slim quiet woman in standard white starship attire with long dark hair twisted around her head in an otherworldly fashion strode toward Jake's medical table.

What was she up to?

"Straightarrow, this is Ligna, our medic."

Medic? Whew. At least, he wouldn't have to worry about what healers did. He stared into her neon pink eyes. Rat eyes. Was she going to rat out his feigned injury? "Nice to meet you."

She nodded. "And you. So you've hurt yourself in duty to save free-thinkers? So, noble

a sacrifice.” She reached for his calf.

He cleared his throat and shot her a wink. “The ankle.”

Ligna almost winced but reached for his boot lacing and focused on his leg.

Did she think he flirted with her? Strange. These folks were out there. “Let me.” He bumped her bony hand away and removed his combat boot.

Well, the truth about his ankle would surface now or never. He leaned back on an elbow and watched her.

Her palm draped his ankle.

A tingle tickled through his foot, then turned into prickling needles like his foot was waking up from a deep sleep.

Her accusing gaze slid to his. “Are you a self-healer?”

And mother never believed in miracles. “Yes.” Something about this whole side trip to the universe’s nowhere suddenly became the perfect scenario for deceit. And Paul would never know.

Goro inhaled deeply. “Is our star human repaired, Ligna?”

She turned to the commander, her tickling touch sliding away. “There was no pain transfer. He must be a self-healer.”

Goro nodded at her.

Ligna gracefully bowed her head, turned, and departed in what had to be a flowing natural ballet step.

And no one was the wiser about his fake injury. So much bizarre silence played out before him like the craziness you hear in really old black-and-white flicks.

The door slid shut at her heels.

Goro shot him a wary glance. “Self-healer? So, you have two psychic abilities.”

The commander needed to know who he could believe. Jake wagged his head. “Survival of the fittest.”

Goro’s black eyebrows arched as he shot Jake a speculative glance.

Time to drop the killer hint. “Paul came through in more than one way though.”

Goro nodded. “We’ll discuss this in my star-chart chamber.”

Smart move.

“Paul has docked, Straightarrow. Would you like to walk down to the docking bay to congratulate him on his success?”

“Sure.” He shrugged and shoved off the table.

Paul would revel in the glory of his mission. Until facing Voldon. Voldon didn’t seem like the type to understand one of his morons purposefully blowing up one of his fortifications. Jake followed Goro into the bright passageway and strode at the commander’s side.

Just what would Voldon do to Paul for destroying the fortress?

They made their way back to the docking bay in silence.

The typical mode of free-thinker operation. Not bad for prisoners of war or soldiers. Just strange when everyone knows what’s going on except the new chump shanghaied by the Black Widow and reborn into sex stud. Nobody back home would believe this. Especially when the stallion had fathered a colt. “Where’s Kindrist?”

“She’s in your quarters. And she has been informed of your arrival. I told her to remain where she is until we’ve debriefed Weatherford. She’s safer there.”

No one was safe with a traitor aboard. And his wife sported a torch. Kindrist would be ashes any moment. “Are you certain Kindrist’s guards are reliable?”

“The only people who can tread down her corridor without detection are earthlings. They’re on our side.” Goro shot him a wary look. “And Weatherford just landed in the docking bay.”

Paul didn’t have a drop of mercenary in him. How in the Hell had that social reject gotten the better of Kindrist? Or was another earthling behind the attack? “Who else aboard aside from the nutcase in The Chamber is an earthling?”

Goro shot him a speculative glance. “Darla never leaves her sanctuary. She fears us all. The two other earthlings normally aboard were off on missions when Kindrist was attacked. One has returned. And her mate is the guard nobody dares cross.” Goro turned back to the oncoming door of the docking bay. “Besides, you’re all tagged.”

The silver hatch whooshed open.

Paul strode toward them, wearing a smile. “Hey, man, how did you get back to your pod fighter?”

Nothing suspicious in that question. “I hear I’m a self-healer. More power to the universe, eh? I’ve got two psychic powers! I must have healed myself on the return flight because hopping on my mangled ankle was agony. But they say something kicks in when your ass is toast. Maybe the pain kicked my dormant psychic gene into action.”

Paul patted Jake’s shoulder. “Sorry I wasn’t there for you, man.”

Right. He’d probably rather be slitting my wife’s throat. “Well, I’m not going to say I told you so. But you were the best man to send on the mission.”

Paul’s eyebrows arched as if questioning the point. “I don’t know. But the fortification is rubble.”

The docking-bay door slid open again.

Paul’s face split into a broad smile. “Sevra.” He threw his arms wide and hugged the stiff woman who managed to return the embrace while glaring at Jake.

“Since everyone’s all cozy and reunited, I’d like to visit my wife.” Anything to get away from a traitor who needed strangling.

Goro nodded. “Red Trekaar is probably pacing. She needs to rest. Report back to me after you check on her.”

* * * *

Kindrist faced the door in her quarters where she sat in meditation-style, legs crossed, the backs of her palms resting against her white-cloaked thighs. Jake was coming. And there was much to say. Would they have a different relationship after he had chosen to leave her the store of blood? More so, what did the gesture mean? Was he grasping the extent of psychic warfare? No con could be worse than the enslavement of one’s child. Jake had to be coming around. If only to help protect the child.

Was that the only reason? She dared not dwell upon her weak neediness. Alas, once a person became attached to another, something always happened. Revenge. Attack. Death. But wasn’t there more to life than just free thought? Free thought implied the right to choose. A right of the individual to rise above animal desires and prove oneself elevated through actions of a person with a conscience.

The door whooshed open.

Her tall dark mate stood in the doorway, washed with Strako’s brilliance from the corridor.

A mercenary. A man. Strength. Power. His clothing melted away to the memory of his muscled body and tanned skin.

Her heart raced for more than a Beast Tamer.

She took his blood that morning. Her reaction was nothing but pure. Real. Not a hormonal craving of a soul mate.

What was he waiting for in the doorway? He'd saved her life and the child's. Maybe her humbled stance wasn't the right type of greeting. Maybe he yearned for something more jovial. She rose. "Welcome back, Jake. It's time to celebrate your success."

He stepped through the doorway, and the door shut out Strako's presence. "Paul saved the universe. I'm just jet fumes." He took slow measured steps that he obviously tried to make look leisurely.

"And thank you for the blood." She laid a palm against her lightweight thin crew-member's white tunic and pressed against her flat abdomen where their child slept.

Where the future awaited. Would he even notice she no longer wore a mercenary's garb?

He stopped two steps away. "I like you in white. You're softer. But I still see the soldier I married."

Thank the stars he did. There was no way to turn off her past. If only she could bond with the present. And the future seemed so unattainable. Fragile. As if any moment her body would reject the child countless free thinkers relied upon if she made one careless mistake. That's where truth lay more than her confused thoughts would bloody the white crewman's attire. "I've vowed to live the life of a wife until we know what fate has in store for me."

"I don't care about fate. And Destiny has this plan I keep hearing about." His boots ate the two steps between them, and he pulled her to his chest. "Fate's crap." He planted a hungry kiss on her mouth.

What did he mean? That everything she had done and said was superstition?

"Kiss me, Kindrist," he commanded against her lips.

Her heart stopped.

So much yearning resonated in his voice. And she wanted to give him what he needed if only to get the same in return. She slammed her lips against his.

Their tongues struggled in a futile dance to claim victory over the other. Who cared if he won. Just to stand there in his embrace and feel like a future awaited was enough.

Her heart melted.

Or was that her soul?

His mouth marched a tingling massage across her cheek to her ear. "Do you think anyone can hear us?" he whispered.

Sacred Devros, his behavior was one of caution. He feared speaking. Was the sex a ploy? She leaned against his hard shaft.

No. The man was deep in the blood lust. Why was he so cautious? "The only private place to speak now would be The Chamber. Nobody expects us to return there after Darla attacked Paul," she whispered into his ear.

His stubbled cheek grazed her chin. The heat of his breath warmed her lips. He planted another kiss on her mouth, and marched his lips to her other ear.

Her heart thrashed.

Would he not confess or just mate with her? What torture this moment was.

His hands slid to her ass where he squeezed her flesh so much that his manhood lunged.

He groaned softly. "I heard Paul speak to Voldon," he whispered. "Paul was behind your assault."

Voldon and Paul. That meant the feelings she held toward Sevrá weren't

misinterpretations. Something intuitive had warned her against trusting the woman. Would Jake share more of what he knew? She anchored a demanding gaze upon her mate.

“Later. There’s nothing for you to worry about. I’m going to kill him.” His lips promised her neck more than he could ever say in the way they reminded her of his hungry kiss.

But he spoke of revenge. And revenge meant risking his life. What made a man who didn’t trust you suddenly want to seek vengeance for your assault? Dare she call this love? Or just fancy this respect?

Her gut sank.

Respect was more than enough. She leaned away from his gentle touch and stared into the deep sparkling pools of her husband’s black eyes. “I know you will.”

He nodded solemnly and snaked his arms smugly around her chest.

What now? She planted her hands against his chest and waited for him to react.

Destiny had little left to deal her after sending her the perfect mate a mercenary could find.

Love from him?

Love was a trivial matter.

Respect would see her through the long months ahead when she’d clutch at her fleeting lost life and hold steadfast to the future’s promise for that one moment the universe hinged upon. Destiny.

The birth of her child.

A child of legend.

Voldon was wrong.

The mad man couldn’t defeat Jake Straightarrow’s mate.

Voldon now faced the end of his inheritance, his ancestors’ tyranny. But why was Jake staring at me?

His palm began sliding along every bend of her body.

The touch would drive her insane with need. “Jake.” She leaned her hips into his hardness and tilted her mouth up to his as a baby bird begging for a morsel. And Jake fed the starving chick. His mouth covered hers so gently her eyes threatened to tear.

Would he do more?

He slid his hand down her thigh and pulled her knee up to wrap her leg around his. Just enough to ensure her sex rubbed against his firm leg. And drove her racing heart. His sucking mouth set off on another expedition down her neck, searching or pausing to investigate. Whatever he was looking for, she didn’t want him to find it. To take his time. To spend all day exploring for sensitive spots on her body that made her hips wriggle her sex uncontrollably and necessarily against his leg.

The motion was merciless.

A wave of pleasure flooded her core. Not a rising orgasm. She clung to his arms and shoved him up to look into her eyes. “We must go to the bed.”

His hands gripped her ass, and he wagged his head no. “After I finish taking care of you, I’m going to have a Beast Tamer and go look for the bastard who tried to kill you.” He clutched her sex against his leg and rocked her body, so intimately the overhead lighting stung her eyes. She clamped her eyes shut, threw her head back, and gasped for air as the onslaught of pleasure washed his protective words deep into her mind.

Chapter Twenty Two

Blood lust temporarily satiated, Jake marched Kindrist through the sterile white corridors to the commander's map chamber. He wasn't about to leave her behind when he reported the day's events to Goro. Especially with that glowing guy. Although the guard Strako seemed every bit the righteous freedom fighter lacking a halo, a wife was safer when she was in sight. Besides, Kindrist could hear about Paul's little chat with Voldon if she were present at the debriefing. Talk about shit hitting the fan.

What action would Goro choose to take? Would Paul and Sevrá be interrogated? How could they separate Sevrá from her torch?

Talk about a can of worms. He waved his wife through the helm's doorway, across the empty room, and followed her lithe sashaying form as her body flickered and disappeared into the invisible star-chart vault.

Goro waited among the holographic stars and darkness on the other side. "Tell me."

That command didn't need to be uttered and almost made Goro look weak. Jake stopped beside Kindrist. "Paul remote viewed. I came upon him in the forest. He was talking to Voldon."

Goro didn't wince.

Neither did Kindrist.

Not the expected reaction. These psychics were true unflinching mercenaries.

"Is that enough proof to allow you to interrogate him?"

"Did he detect your approach?" Goro asked.

"Not that I could tell."

One of Goro's eyes twitched. "We'll catch them at their own game as you earthlings say."

Not a fun round of cat and mouse when the mouse wielded a weapon that could snuff your ass. "Game? They're out to kill my child."

Kindrist shifted her footing. "How?" she asked the commander.

Good to see I'm not the only one questioning the plan.

"Jake, you will refrain from taking Red Trekaar's blood." Goro's gaze slid to Kindrist, shifting from serious to patronizing.

Kindrist's black hair flared fire-engine red.

Were they having a private discussion? Damn psychics. They'd get my child killed. "Speak with your mouths. I'm in on this. No secrets."

Goro's black eyebrow arched. His unyielding gaze slid to Jake's. "As you wish. I was ordering Kindrist to remain guarded in her quarters."

"I merely pointed out Sevrá has a torch and can kill my mate at a distance," Kindrist snarled at the commander.

Whatever glued their relationship together as more than commander and peon illuminated the dark space with more brightness than the sun.

Time to call them on their game. "Okay, whatever you two have between you is obviously stronger than the bonds of soul-mate marriage. So, tell me this much, are you both

going to end up getting my ass cremated because you can't share these little secrets you whisper inside each other's heads with me?"

Kindrist turned a penetrating gaze to him, her hair still ablaze. "I hide nothing from you. Without you, I am dead. Our child is dead. The free-thinking universe is dead. There is nothing without you. Why do you question my motives?"

His gut didn't jitter.

A good sign to say the least.

And an excellent argument.

But there's so little to buy into when you've only been in space about a week. Believing anything more would be stupid. For now, buying stock in her answer was necessity. And his gut wasn't grumbling otherwise. "I'm tired of wondering what you're thinking. Now, I know."

Her head cocked ever-so-slightly to the left and her golden eyes flashed where they were encircled by her angry red mane.

Hopefully, curiosity or respect sparked in that beautiful mask. Anything else would get the best of him. Not a good way to go out.

Kindrist scowled at Goro and disappeared through the star-studded surroundings back onto the ship's helm.

What ticked her off?

"Since the ship is on alert watching for Red Trekaar's assailant, Paul and Sevrä dare not attack either of you again," Goro stated solemnly.

The man dared utter the names so loudly. What if Paul was remote viewing? Jake stared through the shadows at Goro's encouraging mask.

"For Sevrä to use her torch, she must be facing Voldon's forces. Or her actions equate to betrayal by our crew. She is cornered more than she appears. And the only way we can cage her is to send in a raging were-mate who can disarm her, take her torch." Goro shot Jake a stare.

"She won't fight you because of the loss to the crew. You're an asset. You can take her out with little trouble. Without Sevrä's torch protecting Paul, he's also easily imprisoned as a threat to crew members when he inevitably shifts into were-form."

Enough with the explanations. The plan made sense. Time to wait and see what comes from Goro's strategy. Jake nodded. "We'll see, then, won't we?"

Curiosity crossed Goro's features.

"I'll be leaving to follow Kindrist." And lay low for two days.

Goro nodded.

Jake caught up with Kindrist in the sterile corridor.

She marched, staring ahead, the impenetrable mercenary dressed in confusing white. Not one of her blood-red hairs had faded to cold hard black.

Seeing her angry was like witnessing her vulnerability. So, she cared for him or his blood. Was this only a reflection of her need to defeat Voldon with a legendary child? Or something else? Love? No way.

Her clicking footfalls didn't drum away the madness in his thoughts.

Was a mercenary capable of love?

Respect, yes.

But love?

Was the emotion even possible in the bigger picture of war raging throughout the universe when love translated into weakness? Mercenaries with flaws shoveled their own the graves. But the idea of this babe feeling for him was kind of nice. Especially after the mind-

blowing sex.

The gray door to their quarters swooshed open.

Kindrist bullied forward, blatantly ignoring the risk of someone hiding inside.

But nothing could be done. He followed into the empty room.

Kindrist's footfalls clipped across the room to the portal where a pink nebula painted the endless black view. She stopped and stared into space.

The soothing effect of the view was similar to that of a fish tank—for him. But the red in Kindrist's hair wasn't draining quickly. Would she speak of her frustration in her vulnerable state? He strode over to join her.

His whispering footsteps spoke louder than the whispering ventilation.

Everything mocked him with secrets. Was it time to buy into Kindrist's truth? He studied her pinched eye in her profile. "You don't care for Goro's plan?"

She inhaled sharply. "It's ludicrous." She managed a glare for deep space.

Since I can take care of myself, her frustration didn't make sense. "Why are you so angry?"

Her glare snapped to meet his gaze as she sidestepped to face him squarely, one set of fingertips gripping the portal's ledge. "Look at me. I am no longer a mercenary. I garner no respect aboard *The Seeker*."

Really? She was these people's super star. "How so?"

She waved at her body. "I am expected to be a crew member but have nothing to do but gestate. I am nobody except the chrysalis in which the caterpillar metamorphoses into the sacred butterfly. And now Goro decides to risk my mate's life by sending you in to disarm the enemy."

At least, she managed to keep Sevra's name out of the discussion just in case someone eavesdropped. But there was more hidden in her words. He snaked his hands across his chest. "So you're jealous of me?"

Her face twisted with disgust. "Jealous? Look what I have done for so many peoples. I have given up everything—my very existence—to wed my soul mate, and now I am expected to forfeit my soul mate to capture the infiltrator."

How did she define everything? "Everything? Looks like you get the fame, babe. I'm just the gratuitous penis."

"A penis can argue, debate, get my blood boiling. A bag of blood just lays there until it's emptied." She pivoted left, stomped across the room, activated the table, mashed another invisible button, and sat.

Well, it's kind of nice holding some sort of significance. But what kind of future did she expect? "We're here for one reason, Kindrist." He walked over to join her. "You and I, we are the chess pieces in the bigger game. What else do you want?" He stared down at her sulking form.

"Aside from a meal to feed my grouching belly, I never knew." She sighed. "There was never anything else beyond fighting and choosing my mate. And now they risk your very existence. Where does that leave me?"

Well, there is nothing like the good reality kick of realizing you're indispensable. That she wasn't their star gladiator. But her irritated hair still burned with betrayal. Whether that be self-betrayal or abandonment by her field marshal.

"I want to fight," she growled and slammed a fist into the table top.

"You seemed happier with your situation when I returned from Gameddaron." He slid onto the bench opposite her. And boy what it a joy it would be to take his little redhead to bed.

She stared off at the portal. “Do earthlings try to turn a tiger into a cow? It’s impossible.”

“I don’t understand why you’re so angry now.”

Her yellow gaze locked on his. “I spent two earth years searching through humans with heightened psychic abilities for you, Jake Straightarrow. Two years I listened to the condescension from my comparisons of you to other human psychics. You were the only human I could respect, mate. And the ridicule I received in the prospect of bringing you into the war was worth the sacrifice of my position in pregnancy. Truly. Completely. But I will not allow them to kill you by sending you in to certain death. You are my mate. And Goro is a fool.”

Faith in purpose still proved priceless to a mercenary. “So you no longer trust Goro?”

She propped her cheek up with one palm and leaned on an elbow. “What does he say to you in your private meetings?”

Interesting question. “He appears to confide in me by comparing our situations. But I never get a gut feeling he’s dishonest.”

She blinked and sighed. “He is like my older brother—both of us akin in our lost worlds. He has always been there for me when I needed emotional support. But he isn’t my soul mate. I’ve started wondering if he views you as an obstacle. He’s done that with so many before your arrival.” She shook her head like she heard an irritating buzz. “You may never love me, Jake. But you are my husband, and I won’t fail you.”

His gut sank.

Something warmed inside his chest.

Or ached.

That was as close to an admission of respect-induced love one could ever hear. “You sit tight here. Try not to think these self-defeating thoughts. Let me take care of the traitor. If Goro’s right, the danger will die with little trouble.”

“If.” Kindrist sighed and nodded once, carefully, like a Buddhist priest, with a doubtful gaze.

What useless thoughts whirling around inside her head. He knew just how to sabotage them. He scooped her up from the bench, pivoted one-hundred-and-eighty degrees, and sat, straddling her across his lap.

Those yellow eyes squeezed into conspiratorial slits.

So she wondered what I was up to? Well, she went limp when he kissed her neck. What an excellent tactic to distract her anger. He sank his mouth against her soft delicate skin.

The smell of her salty metallic blood danced beneath that thinly stretched skin across her jugular.

His mouth watered.

His hard-on struggled where it was pinned inside his jeans.

Her head arched back, then rolled from side to side beneath his lips. He sucked and gently bit his way down to her clavicle and back up to nibble on her jaw.

“Oh, Jake,” she groaned. “Life without you would be so void of emotion.”

Didn’t she realize how pissed off she lived before she seduced me?

“You’re laughing, Jake.”

I won’t be in a few minutes. He shoved the hem of her tunic up. “Take this off.” And latched onto one of the tight beads on her nipples.

Oh for those breasts to grow with her belly. Talk about the perks of Destiny’s plan. He squeezed both breasts together where he could reach both nipples without working too hard.

She squirmed on his lap, arching her chest against his mouth, begging for more attention, and wrapped her arms around his head, locking him right where obviously she wanted him.

No problem. But the way she wriggled on his lap meant she was so damned wet and needy. He slid his hands down her long smooth back and beneath the waistband of her pants. Down to grab two handfuls of her tight little ass. To shove her crotch against his cock. "Are you ready?" He searched for her eyes above her rounded breasts.

She rolled her head around until her black hair framed her shoulders and locked a serious gaze on him. "I'm always ready for you."

"Bed, floor, or table?"

"Bench."

Oh ho ho. Would she debate over being in control?

She shoved his back down onto the bench and unzipped his fly too quickly for discussion. If she wanted to do a little horseback riding, I was definitely game.

She tossed her boots on the floor and shimmied out of her pants only to grab onto my cock with the most wonderful pressure.

My body lunged toward her grasp with a mind of its own.

Her legs straddled him, right above his engorged cock, where she hovered watching him through her wild black hair. Slowly she sank her moist vise around the tip of his penis and stopped.

Gods, to drive me insane. He grabbed her rounded hips and pulled her down the long sensitive length of him.

"Whoever thought impaling could be so glorious?" she groaned and rode her mount.

I tried to lie there and just let her have her way with me. But the need to thrust just kept me matching her every move. Over and over. I just couldn't stop. But she didn't seem to care with the mask of pleasure consuming her features. And then the all-consuming surge of need shook me. I couldn't thrust fast and hard enough.

And if only I could get enough air to breathe.

She fell down to grip the bench beside his ribs, raking her hard nipples against my chest, never missing a pump with that tight little grip she held me so deeply inside her with, and gyrated her hips in an intensely focused motion. I had to hold her ass in place. Or I'd pop free at the angle she worked me. And God knows that would be bad.

Just to come. Just to breathe again. But stopping meant it was over. And this little babe was one amazing number.

She started to groan, leaning her head back, her breasts shaking in rhythm with each of my pounding throbbing lunges.

It was coming. I couldn't breathe.

But I groaned.

She looked into my eyes, groaning as if in reply.

Or we were on the same plane at last.

The pressure in my cock came to a head and burst inside her hot body. And we pumped a few dying beats until we could finally breathe.

Her lips graced mine with a swift kiss before she fell atop me, draping my chest with her arms. "I can't live without you, Jake," she whispered.

And she wouldn't. He slid his arms around her quaking shoulders and petted her soft hair. "I don't intend on going anywhere." Plan A had better work.

* * * *

The day waned on with little conversation while Jake sat at the table. Kindrist just didn't appear to want to discuss anything as if she struggled with some inner war while pacing the room or staring out the portal with her hair flashing red, then cooling off to obsidian, only to flare up again and again.

She looked so frustrated.

So human.

So weak.

So god-damned hot the way her tunic clung to that curved ass imprinted upon my mind. Forget branding or tattoos. Goth babes from outer space could sear an unshakable fire-hot memory into the hardest mercenary's frozen heart.

But she stood there, terribly disturbed.

What good would come from telling her not to worry? Her future teetered upon a precipice. Leaving her more blood might help with the stress given his ass got toasted. But she could have requested the favor of another bout of sex just to take the edge off. No, she really had to care for him and resent Goro enough for his decision to argue against Plan A. No other explanation explained her actions. She hadn't balked when knowing her soul mate would be sent to Gameddaron. But her flaming red hair indicated this Plan A was questionable.

Good to know she cared. After all, she had admitted to being picky in the soul-mate department. And her resentment of Goro's plan to disarm Sevrá meant she defied orders.

For me.

I'm a treasure? A one in a trillion catch? The woman wasn't as disconcerted with her new status of chrysalis. No, just losing me. Could this only reflect her sense of responsibility?

Sevrá won't get the best of us in the end. But the big question is can a person control himself when he turns into the were-creature. Whatever the cost, he had to try for Kindrist and their baby. He slid his gaze to the sexy curves of his wife's back.

She stared out the portal at dark black space. But her red hair and white outfit brightened the gloomy ambiance.

What was she thinking in her anger? "Kindrist?"

She turned a straight-lipped scowl his direction.

Her disgusted expression made her look distant though. Would she help him even more after her admission of quasi-love? "I need you to explain shape shifting to me."

She shook her head slightly and crossed the room to the table. "I apologize. I am not myself today." She claimed the seat across the table and met his gaze with a pleasantly analytical mask. "Your skin will itch, crawl, and burn. You saw me shed my human skin. You too will do so. The process, the change, is internal." Black streaks began to color her mane.

That damned perky mouth of hers could use a good kiss. Maybe she'd settle down if he made a move. Or I've turned into something even more horrific than a were-creature. I fell for a woman. Time to change the subject. "But will I know what's going on after I transmute? Like, well, what about the particulars to Goro's plan?"

Her hair flashed totally red again.

"I'm sorry, Kindrist. I need some information."

She nodded once and inhaled. "You will know who I am. Rather, what I am to you. Your feelings toward Goro, Sevrá, and Paul should remain in your memory. Anything else is less likely recalled. To send you on a mission alone where you could shift isn't terribly dangerous since you have your pod fighter to fly you back to *The Seeker*. Yet, you'll be aboard ship this mission." Her eyes pinched shut. "But if Sevrá considers you a threat— If she loses her

head....”

“Goro isn’t the enemy here,” he interrupted.

Her gaze locked upon his.

Did she search for some inkling of credibility? “You have to let me think for myself, Kindrist. You’re just upset from the changes in your life.” But maybe she struck upon the root of the problem. Maybe she had to completely give up her connection to Goro in order to be a soul mate. After all, three was a crowd.

A loud sigh-like exhalation gushed from her plump lips. Her shoulders slumped. Yet, the red had drained from her hair. “This is all so new to me. So foreign.”

“And I’m dealing with the same type of change on my end.”

Her eyebrows squared. “What do you mean?”

“Well, it’s a completely different situation in a story, but this earth kid gets sucked into a war in outer space. Kind of like me. I’ll just end with you must have missed the movie.”

Her golden eyes twinkled. “You earthlings have such vivid imaginations. Or one of you with a higher psychic awareness saw the future and wrote that tale.”

Interesting prospect that could save an ass or two. “How many free thinkers can see the future?”

“Not many who wish anyone to know. It’s an illegal activity. Soothsaying is considered a form of psychic domination. Some peoples purposely evolved out of the skill in order to save their cultures from what we term cannibalistic behavior.” Her gaze slid to the gray metal table top.

How cultures forced psychic evolution would have to wait for later. Except for the obvious question. “How does cannibalistic behavior have anything to do with today?”

Her hair flashed brilliant red. “Soothsaying gives birth to legends.”

The child and dreaded Plan A. Well, there was no escaping the subject of their child or his destiny with shape shifting. He slid his fingers around her warm forearm’s skin, pulled her palm from beneath her head, and held her silky fingers.

She stared at him. “I wish you wouldn’t touch me unless you want to share a blood libation.”

Her hand flinched.

Her serious yellow gaze riveted upon his. “My time to mate approaches. Your touch is painful. And,” she shifted her position, “all I can think about is ripping your clothes off.”

That explained things.

Should I just lie down and give over again? Was that what she wanted? Oh to fall to the temptation. But he dared not taste her blood, or he’d ruin Goro’s plan. “You know it’s too risky to fall to blood lust right now.”

The corner of her lips curled up. “But it’s a sentimental thought.”

It’s amazing how much a smile affected a person’s appearance. She really needed to smile more often. “You’re laughing, Kindrist.” What a nice change.

“Remember those words when I have to fill you in on the rest of the universe.” She smiled and pulled a glinting blade from her white boot.

“No problem.” Especially when the chore implied he’d be around after Plan A panned out.

The blade seemed so foreign. So alien. So cold. To Hell with it. Just to lie her down and plow into her until she bit him. He shoved the sparkling knife away.

Her brow furrowed as her eyes tried to pinch her dark brows together.

“We won’t need that.” He lifted her into his arms and placed her questioning mask on the bed.

Why did she wonder why he was so willing? After all, she just needed someone to take care of her. And he could do that much. Especially take care of her little problem.

She had propped herself up on an elbow where she stretched out on her side with curves like the undulating clouds in the skies of his childhood. How he loved to dream back then. Never did he imagine he would be mated to an extraterrestrial. Married at all. He slid his hand underneath her tunic, up to the waistline of her pants, and pulled the elastic edge toward him over her hip.

She watched him.

Did she enjoy his touch? Maybe I’ll tease her. He abandoned the waistline mid-hip.

She growled and moved so swiftly that before he could safely react without risking injury to his child, he found himself on his back with her hands working the zipper on his pants.

“I can’t wait,” she said and pulled his hard-on free.

Not exactly free inside her seductive clench. She had better get busy or there was no telling what dangers awaited that baby.

She crawled backward, retreating to hover over his cock.

Stiff and engorged beyond belief near her seductive mouth, his cock throbbed in her grip.

God, who was teasing whom?

Her hot mouth latched onto his shaft and sucked like the blood pulsing within its veins would quench her hunger.

He couldn’t watch with the wave of all-consuming satisfaction that threw his head back.

Moist heat trailed along his cock’s edge, up toward the very tip as if it were going to leave. He thrust toward the damned sensation and plunged into a divine vise. Wet. Tight. And that trailing tongue.

* * * *

Kindrist wanted her mate to know her singular delight in life now revolved around pleasing him. Especially after he went out of his way to satisfy her. But gods, she needed him inside her. Just wanted that same satisfaction for herself one last time. Just in case Voldon foiled Destiny’s plan. Would he care if she slid along his firm length? She rose in a squat straddling him and tucked his manhood’s smooth round head into position.

Jake didn’t look.

Or couldn’t. He kept trying to thrust his shaft into her.

“Kindrist,” he groaned, grabbed her hips, and pulled her down the enchanting thickness of him.

The room vanished.

Life pulsed inside her. By Devros, she wanted to sink her teeth into his succulent flesh. To take what Destiny provided.

Perspiration chilled her skin, making her shiver.

Or was that just her reaction to the way he touched her ever-so delicately with his wild bucking?

He watched her finally.

With the drowsy gaze of a man lost deeply in something he believed in. Even if the belief bordered on animal lust. A woman about to lose her mate deserved a few last moments to prepare herself mentally. Lust would suffice. She rode him with the same passion, rising and falling until they cried for release deep in space where only the air conditioning shushed.

Her gut roiled.

Time for blood. She hopped off him, grabbed the blade from the floor, collapsed atop his drumming heartbeat and slashed his breast above the nipple.

His breath knifed.

Blood beaded along the laceration.

His life force that now was mine. Ours. Shared. She licked it and settled down against his breast.

Fed, I felt like a child at its mother's breast. That's what we are. Part of each other. The syringes were anything but sufficient surrogates.

His arms snaked around her shoulders. "Are you all right now?" He gasped for a breath.

"I'll be better when this ridiculous plan is over." Life without him was going to be pretty bleak.

Chapter Twenty Three

The glowing Illusian's light had withered to almost non-existent where he sat across the table from Jake in the empty Psycho Lounge. Well, maybe these psychics weren't psycho. But the eerie music and dim lighting could push a man over the edge. Or maybe the real problem laid in my mate's distrust of Goro. At least she worked with me in the bedroom. Nobody could say he wasn't a guy who could be won over by one means or another. But gullible wasn't my name.

"You seem distant. What troubles you?" Strako asked, fingering his glass of neon brew.

The extraterrestrial stood a good six-foot-four. If not taller. Even seated he towered over everyone. And Kindrist trusted this glowing alien. Better to lie when one's thoughts are concealed from mind-probing psychics. "I'm still getting used to this war."

Strako sipped from his cup thoughtfully and nodded. "Kindrist chose you because you would acclimate easily. Give Destiny time."

Not more Destiny crap. "Why does everyone have to remind me that my wife chose me for a reason?"

Strako chuckled.

Almost sinisterly. One all-too-evil of a sound coming from a guy who looked angelic from the shaft of a spotlight focused on his back. He seemed so chosen. But he wasn't part of any legend. "So are you planning on telling me why you're laughing?"

Strako's white eyebrows arched with intrigue. "Only if you tell me what's really bothering you."

Only a fool would disclose the truth. But something might appease the strange angelic alien. "Kindrist says you don't care for Sevra either."

A smile twisted one of Strako's cheeks. He traced the rim of his glass with one fingertip and smacked his lips. "That one is weak."

So speaking Sevra's name might be bad. Maybe this was an opportunity to learn more about Sevra and Paul. "Have you ever shifted in her presence? What could you sense? Is she a threat?"

Strako planted his elbows on the table and leaned forward. "That one wants power. Her greed has brought her face-to-face with your mate too many times. Since she never leaves empowered, she is angry with Red. Red is Goro's right hand. Where *she* wishes to be."

Kindrist might beg to differ but disclosing that info to anyone compromises her trust. Yet, the point was well-received. "You should speak to Kindrist. I think your perspective will give her some peace."

Strako nodded and turned his nose toward the door.

The door whooshed open.

A female bound by tight black leather strode from the corridor's shafting bright light into the lounge's darkness.

If only she were Kindrist. Tight pants. Breasts thrust out for his pleasure. If... Orders sucked.

"Rosa," Strako called. "Please welcome Red Trekaar's mate, Jake Straightarrow, a

member of your own race.”

Rose sauntered over like a Wild West gunslinger. Her long black ponytail swung at her hips.

She was somewhat Hispanic. Had to be with the long nose and the full lips. Add a few knife butts protruding here and there from her outfit and everyone would know she meant free-thinking business.

“Nice to meet you, Straightarrow.” She nodded at Jake and claimed a seat next to her mate. “You’ve only been here a handful of days?”

Jake nodded. “It feels longer.”

She chuckled and shot Strako a smile. “I remember those days. But years have passed since. So many years.”

The woman’s voice held no longing for home. As though it were possible to carve out a life among the stars. “How many?”

“I left in October 1999.”

Whatever for? “Weatherford had some premonition of disaster with web-bot theory. Was there a legend behind your joining The Cause?”

She smiled again and looked between Strako and Jake. “I was in love.” Her gaze landed on Jake’s. “I’ve found my own little piece of heaven. But I heard you were seduced. Have you found bliss yet?”

Damn the shaking of the grapevine. “Who is spreading rumors about me?”

“Goro wouldn’t allow crew members to instigate animosity on the communication network, even if I could access it. No, the crew didn’t inform me. Darla did.”

Darla? What did these two earth women have in common to calm ranting Darla down for a chit chat? “You managed to squeeze a little light talk out of that one? What a feat. I guess I’m the fool for spilling my guts during my first foray into the jungle.”

Strako’s stoic mask went contemplative. “Who wouldn’t speak of his journey after seduction into service and being interrogated by Darla?”

“Interrogated?” Rosa turned on her husband. “I wouldn’t call a first contact with Crazy Darla as interrogation. More like a confrontation with the childhood fears we all have instilled in us back home. Darla is the face of tradition. Although, she can rub me wrong in a heartbeat. As you can see, tradition doesn’t always supply the answers.”

More like tradition offers what it knows. “Since we’re talking about history, stoke my earthly curiosity with explaining what an Illusian is?”

Strako shot me a broad smile. “A curious mind embraces the universe.”

No wonder Kindrist liked this being.

“I am from a planet in Quadrant Three. The Illusian continent of my people has extreme lengths of days and nights, varying like days in the earth’s Arctic Circle. From this knowledge, it’s easily deduced Illusian humanoids evolved a bioluminescent quality as if our blessed planet protected us from the madness of lack of light.”

Nice explanation of his radiance. But how did Strako tone the light down for his mission to meet his mate? “So, how did you hide your glow from other earthlings when you visited Rosa?”

Rosa almost chuckled and leaned against a handful of her splayed fingers. “Yes, Strako, explain that paradox.”

Strako burst out laughing. “I told them I was an archangel sent to tell her the end of days was upon them.”

Rosa rolled her dark eyes and locked a gaze on Jake. “You can only imagine how my Catholic family interpreted that admission. Strako stretched the truth so skillfully that I believed God sent a messenger to speak with me.”

Strako’s arm wrapped around Rosa’s shoulders and shook with a light squeeze. “But before I confessed what I was, she guessed I was an extraterrestrial.”

She wriggled out of his embrace. “And now we drive back the frontier of darkness so the sun can rise again each day. That’s what we’re here for, Straightarrow. Don’t let Darla’s gloom and doom damper your vision of the future. She is wrong. She hides under the cloak of tradition allowing Voldon’s empire to expand. His evil cannot reach earth.”

Amen. And driving back evil began here with Sevrá. Kindrist may have fears worth speaking. But, in the end, Sevrá was going down. And somebody had to yank on that mangy fur to finish the dirty job.

* * * *

Jake watched his restless mate pace in their personal quarters. What couldn’t she believe he was the man for the disarming Sevrá? Kindrist probably thought nobody else could do Sevrá in but herself. “I can do this, Kindrist.”

Kindrist cut a military pivot one-hundred-and-eighty degrees before their view of deep space and headed back toward him.

At least only a few of her hairs seemed to bleed at the moment. Maybe she wasn’t extremely distraught. *The Seeker* needed a place its members could go that didn’t haunt a person with questioning music or mind-numbing alcoholic beverages. Somewhere relaxing. Not to mention, neither could be good for his wife though given her fertility. “Listen, Kindrist, talk to Strako. He explained so many things to me. Stuff about Goro. I’m certain the Illusian can help you relax.”

She waved a dismissive palm. “Help me see the light as you earthlings put it? Goro’s the one who needs to hear Strako’s illuminating philosophy. My mate’s about to be torched. I can think of nothing but a short future where I’m merely the chrysalis, and, after I give birth, my Destiny has ended.”

“That isn’t true. The child needs a mother. What fool would take the baby from you and risk angering whatever you chalk up to Destiny?”

She whirled to face Jake. “Sevrá.” She thrust out one finger. “Voldon.” She stuck out another finger. “Paul.”

The third finger was unnecessary.

“And even Goro.”

Four fingers pointed at me. Okay, taking out four enemies in one fatal swoop was impossible in this scenario. But Kindrist needed to stop worrying. “I can take care of myself and your enemies. And Strako says you’re Goro’s right hand assassin. So, stop expecting him to snatch the baby and run. You’ll have a long future to yell, nag, scream, and order me around. Just let me pull my weight now. That’s why I’m here.”

She stomped away from him.

Apparently, convincing her of his significance was a waste of time. He’d show her not to worry about Jake Straightarrow. He turned and departed.

* * * *

Kindrist tried to forget what her mate had said. But he was off now, saving the universe in the only way he could rationalize. And that leaves me in isolation.

Her door slid open.

Strako stared her down with his standard admonishing mask promising potential illumination.

As if I need some guidance. The Illusian's glow had intensified a bit since his last Beast Tamer, counting down the moments until he would turn to his mate for his next blood libation. However, Beast Tamers didn't bring him here. Why had he graced her presence with his bioluminescence?

The door swooshed shut at his heels.

A presence shoved into her mind. *"I encountered your mate in the armory,"* he said in mindspeak. *"I don't think mercenary work on earth taught him how to deal with a wife."*

Like his humor was going to wash away her fears. *"Why don't you go teach him what you know? Since you've been married more than a decade, you have much to share."*

"Don't play games with me, Red."

The mercenary couldn't guess my concerns. *"If you wish to be an uncle, you'd better volunteer to take my mate's place."*

"Straightarrow is a trained professional. He's even been tutored by Goro. Everything will unravel as planned."

The plan in question didn't necessarily have to be Destiny's plan. She snaked her arms across her chest. *"And you've heard Goro's plan? He's set a trap. But I fear who the trap will ensnare."*

Strako slowly stepped toward her, arms spread wide as if he'd take flight in the heavens. *"Red, you are not the assassin I know. What has become of her?"* He halted one step away.

"I died the day my eyes changed color. The woman you knew no longer occupies in this body. I have transformed beyond everyone else's wildest dreams."

He shook his head in dismay. *"Marriage is supposed to make a being whole and bring you to your senses. What has the most sacred of unions done to you?"*

"I have awakened."

He turned away, heading back toward the door. *"That remains to be seen."*

"Then watch. For you shall see how the taming of my mate is actually much, much more."

* * * *

The change was upon her mate. Kindrist knew the foolish plan would be his demise. What did the future hold with bloodless ashes of a soul mate? Less than what she clutched where her hands gripped the rim of a cold metallic sink. Locking herself inside the lavatory in the empty private quarters' next to Sevrá's was part of Goro's grand scheme though. Not hers. Could Goro right the universe? That depends on a person's perspective.

At least we all still have our own perspectives.

I don't like baiting my husband to find Sevrá.

Goro's genius required she play the lure to bring Jake to Sevrá. Fine. Jake would seek out his mate to end the fever caused by his feral yearnings. And for her to balk, to publicly refuse to assist as the bait, might cause bad feelings between her and the rest of the crew. If they even knew of Goro's plan.

Any moment Jake would shape shift.

But what options did she have?

Any tactic she devised would also risk the child's safety. And the resulting byproduct would be the pregnancy's undoing. Or ultimately allow Goro to take away her child. Gods' jest, no! Yet, Goro never made me worry about orders. Why would things suddenly change?

Am I losing my mind?

The pregnancy kindled my doubts.

I'm dangling haphazardly upon my last wit.

Blessed Devros, save me from myself. She squeezed the locket she'd hidden in her pocket and stared into her reflection's dark pupils encircled by the yellow iris ring. "You must be stronger," she whispered. "Jake will deal with Sevra."

How funny speaking with her mouth had become so comfortable.

Profound.

A voice pushed into her mind. "*Kindrist?*" Goro asked in mindspeak.

Can't a person await catastrophe in peace? "*I'm preparing to attend my soul-mate's funeral.*"

"Straightarrow doesn't face death. They dare not attack him. Even in defense. Suspicion is a far greater enemy than one raging were-mate."

And the commander dared to speak of the plan in her thoughts. He undoubtedly announced to everyone that a plan unfolded. "*How can you think those thoughts with a traitor among us possibly eavesdropping?*"

"You're angry and protective. And your hormones rage wild. Give Straightarrow a chance. We'll have one less problem to deal with today."

Easily said. "*What if you're wrong? What if your plan fails?*"

"He's left you a second blood donation. We have enough to see you through your pregnancy."

Like that mattered. "*This isn't about blood. I want my mate. I owe him that much. Besides, he wasn't someone I precariously chose. I have a vested interest in him, emotionally. Look at you and Darla, and the lengths you've gone to in order to protect her. Can you not believe I have the same respect for someone much more than a simple victim? Jake is my mate.*"

"I know you care for him, Kindrist. That's why this plan is our only option. Let him help me, and then he's all yours. And The Seeker will be free from Voldon's watchful eye."

What a twisted bargain.

As if I'd agree.

Jake waited down the corridor, jittering like his skin would burst loose any moment. And if I could just break orders, open the door, Jake could have his blood libation and leave this insanity to the next shape-shifting assassin.

"Kindrist, this is the only choice for all of us."

And where were the choices when ultimately there was no way to avoid buckling to Goro's will?

Her gut sank.

How could Goro resort to sending in the one man who free thinkers needed to see their child of legend through to the end? Why not wait for Strako's blood cycle to send him in armed with fangs and fur? "*There are other assassins.*"

"The time is upon us. You and I, we are the bridges to the universe's future, Kindrist. Trust me. I must go. I must make ready."

Goro's presence shrank away inside her head.

She stared into the sink's basin, agony shaking her body.

Am I alone with Goro gone off to observe his plot unfold? Alas being alone provided opportunity for second-guessing one's orders. I must be strong. "I will not fail." She turned to face the silver sheet of metal blocking her from the rest of the ship.

In the shining surface her distorted reflection stared back at her.
What did the shadow of a Nulvitian see? A woman of hope? Or a woman abandoning
her soul mate to the jaws of twisted fate?
To go would be saving myself from my Destiny.
To go is failing The Cause by disobeying orders.
To stay is right.
But am I failing Jake?

* * * *

Jake's skin wriggled like bugs crawled beneath his skin where he sat pondering the size
of stars and the other great mysteries dangling beyond the portal of his personal quarters. Oh to
shift into one of those beautiful inanimate objects. Anything to stop thinking about his rock-hard
woody and the endless barrage of nausea associated with transmutation.

What would happen when he transformed?
Would he remember who he was?
Would he recall what he was supposed to do?
At least, the strange sensation downplayed his damned erection. Like Goro cared a man
had to struggle with a bizarre feral hunger before going off to hunt psychics. But Goro's plan
was for the greater good.

His elbow jerked.
Oh, probably not a good sign. Time to learn what life is like in were-assassin form. At
least, we can get this show on the road.
His personal quarters' door whooshed open.
Goro stood in the corridor. "Quickly, Straightarrow. We're headed to the docking bay."
Give a guy an inch and he takes a universe. "The docking bay? Isn't that the wrong
way?"

Goro shot him a wink. "There isn't much time."
Okay, just play along.
His lower leg kicked out like he was almost asleep.
He headed after the waiting commander.
Why? Kindrist wasn't in the docking bay. What he'd give to wrap her long legs around
his waist. And for a nibble of soft skin. Her arm or neck would do.
Goro veered him toward the docking bay. "You'll take your fighter out as planned."
Okay, the plan part must refer to the original Plan A I'm privy to. "And blow up the
neural network."

Goro glanced sideways as if scanning the passageway's sterile white walls. "As we
discussed." He turned back to plow down the corridor.
A wave of prickles tickled Jake's chest, then washed out to the tips of his limbs.
The hall seemed to shrink in around him.
Fire burned his body.
He stopped to swat at the flames.
Ragged chunks of his skin littered the floor.
Crap. He stared at his arms, both hairy and unnaturally long. Claws curved from what
used to be his fingers.
"So the inner me literally is a demon. Everyone who knew me on Earth got that right."
He chuckled.
Hunger grabbed his belly and squeezed.

Food. What did these creatures eat?
The most succulent salty aroma tickled his nostrils.
His mouth watered.
Where was the food? His gaze slid up to the barren passageway walls.
His cock flinched.
A delicious smell teased him from behind.
Food. He turned to the rest of the empty meandering space.
The corridor. Yes. I know who I am. What did everyone fear of these were-wolves?
I'm in control.
His gut gurgled.
Now, where was that food? He sucked in one long sniff.
Sniff? I'm an animal. Weird. But the food had to be down the long tunnel. Who put it there? Maybe my mate. He stepped over the bench and headed toward the aroma.
"Straightarrow," a familiar voice called.
But the voice had little to do with the succulent scent ahead. He hopped into a trot.
"Wait, Straightarrow. What are you doing?" the same voice asked.
His belly howled.
Certainly the ship had a galley.
And galleys had meat, cheese, and beer.
God, what a good cold beer could do for my inner demon. Or Kindrist. Where were her long legs in those pants that sucked at her soft skin? Teasing him. He trotted around a curve in the hallway.
A woman cloaked in a white tunic and leggings stepped through a doorway farther down the hall and turned her back to him. One long brown braid dangled down to her knees.
Something smelled delectable.
Like meat. Or salty blood. He followed her swinging brown braid.
His lengthy strides shortened the distance between them.
And I thought being a wolf man wouldn't add up to a good time.
His mouth watered.
Why? Was the woman carrying meat?
She peered over her shoulder. Her eyes widened and she bolted up the passageway.
No fair running off with the goods. He stretched his stride.
Why was she running? After a few long strides, he could just grab that braid and yank the woman back to dig into Little Red Riding Hood's basket. Or just bite one of those thin juicy arms.
A man dressed in black leather jumped between them. "Stop," he shouted.
Okay. The commander. Boss smells just as tasty though. Where's his meat? "I'm hungry. What do you want?" He licked his lips.
Goro's eyebrows squared. "I don't understand you. Straightarrow. You've shifted into were-form. Where's Red Trekaar?"
What in the Hell have they done with my mate?
"Don't you know where she is?" Goro demanded.
If she were anywhere in sight, she'd be on her hands and knees as I rammed into her moist heat. Nothing would come between us until I burned out this freaking hard-on. "No, you idiot."
"Straightarrow, she must be found. She's endangered."

My mate's in trouble? He scanned the corridor back the way he'd come.
Nothing but empty space.
"You don't need to see her. Follow the scent. You can smell her."
So Kindrist made my mouth water.

Chapter Twenty Four

The roar echoing through the empty quarters and the lavatory door on which Kindrist leaned upon was a sound that scared the skins off psychics more than the sight of a torch. A loose were-assassin could flay a person in seconds trying to reach his mate. Were-assassins were also capable of flying pod fighters given enough training to climb inside in were-form. Hopefully, Jake had enough awareness about him to follow orders. He didn't seem like the irresponsible type. Still, the only way to test him was to provide a mission. This test run just might take care of Sevra too.

Another roar thundered.

The lavatory door shuddered beneath her palms.

Her heart skipped a beat.

Jake was coming. For her. And nobody dared get in his way.

Someone pushed into her mind in a different manner, the way one did to mindspeak to all the crew members. *"Red Trekaar, we need your assistance. Straightarrow has attacked Sevra and pursues them to the docking bay. Hurry before he kills one of them."*

In Jake's words, no problem. "Open door."

The hatch slid wide.

But a delay meant Jake could accidentally kill the traitors. Alas, seeing the couple squirm during interrogation would be more satisfying than death by decapitation. She stretched her stride.

Two male crew members crouched in the corridor beside a man's body. They shot her a glance.

She pushed into one's mind. "Does that crewman live?"

The man nodded.

Sacred Devros, one life lost in Goro's plan would not bear well on Jake's reputation. Or mine. She raced toward the docking bay.

But the commander had laid everything out. Certainly, the struggle was staged for Sevra's benefit.

"Red Trekaar, where are you?" Goro shouted inside her head.

"I'm almost to the docking bay."

"This volatile earthling you brought aboard my ship is tearing the pod-fighters' docking bay apart."

Shouting blame across the crews' minds in one blanket announcement was never part of this grand strategy. Maybe replying with a general don't forget this was your plan would shut him up. She skidded around a corner and rammed into a wall as a lift's door opened.

The door shut at her heels.

Would the elevator ever move?

A vibration and slight shifting of the floor shook her.

Come on. Come on. She stared at the silver door.

The movement ceased.

The door swooshed open.

The docking bay laid too many steps down the passageway where many hunkered forms dressed in black and white peered into the spacecraft-holding area.

Goro wore the black.

A tumultuous shriek reverberated down the corridor. A frenzy of erratic movement rushed beyond the docking-bay door's round windows.

Goro turned a reddened mask her direction and pushed into her mind for mindspeaking. *"There won't be a pod fighter left if you don't get in there."*

Something was wrong. Was the commander actually blaming her with his accusatory glare? She slid to a halt before the huddled forms and searched Goro's glare.

Not one fraction of conspiracy danced in his eyes.

Why did this sudden shift of blame surprise her after hearing the ludicrous plan? There was nobody left to trust but her soul mate. And Jake needed her. She shoved the door open and crossed the threshold.

The doors thumped at her back.

Jake's shaggy brown shoulders and head loomed beyond one upturned pod fighter. Another pod shifted effortlessly past the upset spacecraft's end.

Were-assassins had incredible strength. The ultimate weapon. But Jake's struggle to disarm the suspected traitors seemed uncontrollable. "Jake," she shouted.

The creature stopped and swung a wolfish muzzle her direction.

Her mate required blood. She unsheathed the knife in her white boot and held the glinting blade for his inspection. "Take your measure."

He hopped onto the upturned fighter then back onto the bay's metal floor.

Effortlessly.

The floor trembled beneath her shoes.

Would he know to take care with me? He had to sense she carried his child. She walked toward his towering form.

One could claim to fear these mercenaries. But to stand steadfast at a were-beast's approach was the only way to truly test one's bravery.

At least, he had calmed. But four of his strides remained between them. He needed a Beast Tamer now. She slid the knife's stinging edge across her upper arm.

He halted and stared into her eyes.

What did he search for?

Or did he fear his own strength?

His hairy leg took one questioning step toward her.

"My blood is yours, Jake."

Slowly the space between them disappeared until she stared up where his eyes waited above his glistening canines. The mouth bent down to her face, to her arm.

Gods, if he bit down on her arm she would certainly scream.

But what should one expect from a volatile mate?

The loss of a limb was treatable. Survivable.

He ran a sharp claw across her dribbling cut.

Did he toy with her?

Or was he fascinated by the drug of soul mates?

What went through a were-assassin's mind?

He licked his claw.

Her gut sank.

Care.

He was being careful.

And he realized her situation.

Two of her breaths passed before his body began the great shift.

He fell forward, his palms striking the floor.

Exhaustion was a high price to pay for his rearranging a docking bay. She sank to her knees and grabbed his slumped shoulders. "How do you feel, Jake?"

"God, I'm wiped out," he gasped.

Almost completely metamorphosed back into his nude human form, he would need to rest. She pulled his head to her shoulder and rubbed his long sweaty black hair.

There was plenty of time to rest now that the torch had been removed from Sevrá's possession.

Footsteps thumped behind her.

"Sevrá, you and Paul take this human to detention," Goro commanded with normal speech.

What? She shoved up from her lump of a soul mate and scanned the charging mob.

"What are you doing?" She searched the blank faces for Goro's gaze.

He would explain.

Her heart fluttered erratically.

Goro broke through the approaching throng. "*He's going to stay where we can watch him until we know if he's reliable,*" he announced in mindspeak.

The commander didn't even speak with his mouth so Jake could hear the accusation.

"Coward," she growled. "*He's done nothing wrong.*"

The five white-cloaked men stopped a step away.

"*You were warned when you chose him,*" Sevrá asserted in mindspeak where she stood behind Kindrist. "*One man lies injured. Must another die because of your foolishness?*"

Choking air closed in on her.

The commander wasn't after Sevrá. Jake had been his prey all along. Her gaze slid down to find her soul mate staring up at her as if she offered all the answers.

What have I done?

Chapter Twenty Five

Muscles burned where they had to be tearing around Jake's shoulders. He struggled to focus what remained of his energy after shape shifting on regaining his footing. Talk about impossible with the piercing pain tearing into his shoulders.

Sevra and Paul each gripped both of his elbows where his arms were twisted up behind his back, his wrists somehow tied together. They silently dragged him down the corridor to the ship's retaining area.

As if he were the traitor.

My ears don't lie. Neither does my gut. Talk about some fucked-up justice. Join the free thinkers. Get your ass nailed for following orders. Not to mention butt naked on the stake. There has to be something comical about this.

The floor peeled skin from his bare knees.

Footfalls clipped behind them.

Probably Kindrist. Her red hair meant she wasn't in on this twisted tale. Would she continue waiting helplessly in her quarters like she'd done after being ordered to remain there because of her pregnancy?

The pressure paused.

Everyone stood still.

He toed a foothold, climbed upright, and faced a lift door.

Both grips above his elbows slid away.

Who just released him? His ass-wipe targets? God damn, Goro. After recognizing his commander and the traitors while he was in were-form and successfully taking Sevra's torch, one could only suspect being suckered into this grand finale by the master manipulator, Goro.

Why hadn't my gut caught this one?

The door slid open.

Sevra jabbed him in the kidney.

Fine. He stepped onto the lift and turned.

Nothing could define the pissed-off expression on Kindrist's face. Her unwavering glare never left him. She claimed a spot inside the door as Goro stepped aside, out of her way, waiting to ride wherever they were headed.

His gut jittered with the rising elevator.

What kind of discussion was unraveling inside this huddle of telepathic minds? If Kindrist heatedly debated anything, she never winced. Nor need she say she had nothing to do with his entrapment. But what in the Hell had he done to deserve imprisonment?

The lift stopped, the door whispering as the metal glided open. Sevra and Goro exited toward three doors breaking up a curved wall. Sevra jabbed his kidney again.

Good thing the bitch tied down his hands. He followed his wife's flaming mane.

Goro wore Sevra's torch at his hip beneath his long black coat.

Talk about irony. The master manipulator now wielded the infamous weapon that made Kindrist rethink one or two moves.

Winner takes all and raises his flag on the hill!

Goro shoved a door wide.

Probably showing off his fancy matchstick. Bastard. Jake stepped across the threshold into a barren white chamber.

One wall on the end had a strange glow.

A shove at his back suggested he move toward the odd wall.

The glow vanished.

A man couldn't laugh at Darla anymore for hiding in The Chamber. He strode forward.

"There's no reason for you to enter the cell, Red Trekaar," Goro announced in English.

Apparently, Goth Babe wasn't going along with the plans.

"I want to go with my soul mate."

Yep. Leave it to the revolutionary to balk.

A force struck his back.

His body fell forward.

He caught himself with a couple footsteps and turned, watching the traitorous couple smirk with satisfaction. At least, his arms no longer felt like they were ripping out of their sockets.

A strange glowing curtain of light now separated him from his redhead's intense stare. Goro held her by her jerking elbows.

"He's not an animal," Kindrist shouted.

If only she'd calm down and think about the baby.

The baby. So I am just the stud. Mission accomplished. Let's turn him into glue. Just how useless or dangerous were earthlings? And hopefully my child will survive to kick some psychic butt. What would become of Kindrist after the child arrived? Maybe Kindrist's fears weren't so far-fetched.

Goro released Kindrist. "Stop fighting Destiny." He headed for the exit.

Sevra and Paul followed in his footsteps.

Kindrist scowled at their backs until they were out of sight, and turned.

What zipped through the mind behind her defeated expression? A pregnant woman, she had to be ready to fall off the sanity cliff after the past few days. "Go take care of the baby, Kindrist. See he has a future. Or she? Do you know if it's a girl? If it's a girl, please don't name her Desiree. I hate that name." A little humor couldn't hurt.

She carefully stepped up to the luminous barrier and paused.

White streaks of light emitting from the energy field seemed to dance across her face.

Poor thing. She didn't seem up for jokes.

"I'm sorry, Jake." She wagged her head. "I didn't know Goro's plan." She turned to the door and back again, resolve washing away the defeat on her features. "I don't know what just happened. But you'll be released, or they'll be prepping my carcass for funerary service."

The baby actually made for great leverage. Who would want the chrysalis dead? "Just get my arms free." He chuckled more to make her laugh than make fun of the shackles.

Her eyes closed, and she tipped her nose toward the metal floor.

His soul mate looked pained. "What's wrong, Kindrist?"

She wagged her head and met his gaze. "I'm ashamed of my people. Nothing makes sense anymore. And I brought you to this demise." She slid her gaze around his cell.

Kindrist stood so alone. Looked so lost. I proved her demon. My life was something she stole to fight her war. But her people didn't see me in the same light. Oh to clutch her tight, tell her she hadn't caused this mess.

Surely, she hadn't when a battle greater than any single person raged in the universe. Bigger than any mercenary. And who cared if anyone back home caught him soothing a woman? Those guys never had a soul mate cheated out of her life and dream. A woman who deserved some peace in this god-forsaken universe. But where did that leave him? Half hog-tied and staring out a cage like an animal incapable of communicating with telepathic beings. Even incapable of clothing himself. Jake Straightarrow was no animal. They could stick their assessment up the ass with Darla's blood-fucker label. Jake Straightarrow may have found himself on a wild adventure in space. But he had feelings and needs. And a wife who needed him. "What happens now?"

She shifted her footing but wouldn't look at him.

His gut sank.

Not a good premonition. "What happens now, Kindrist?"

Her gaze slid to his.

Tears shimmered in her eyes.

What could squeeze tears from a mercenary? "Kindrist, you're making me nervous."

"I've spent half my life on this ship. Only two people ever detained for suspicious behavior have been released from Detention."

Chapter Twenty Six

Nothing spilled out of his wife's eyes. Jake waited for something to change where he stood handcuffed behind the bars of light.

She didn't collapse the light-headed pregnant female. Nor did she scream with hysteria. She stood the cold hard mercenary wielding one hellacious slug of unyielding reality.

I'm going to be terminated.

"You are all I have, Jake. That's more than I've had in a long time. Rest assured I will see you are released." She pivoted and walked away.

* * * *

"Goro," Kindrist shoved out into the ship's telepathic network as she stormed toward the lift to the helm. *"I will speak with you now. In private or to the ship, I don't care. But I will speak with you now."*

A presence pushed back into her head. *"Show me the respect my rank demands, Red Trekaar. Or you'll find yourself detained with your soul mate."*

Goro probably wanted the chance to detain her. *"Better to die with one's soul mate than be shafted by one's brethren."*

"Report to the helm, Red Trekaar."

Sterile orders meant the commander was insulted. Good. Nobody deserved death for an accident occurring during the commander's mission. If Goro attempted to end Jake's life, the crew would hear about everything.

And Jake only cared about what I named his daughter.

Just as she reached the lift leading to the helm the elevator opened. Sevra, Paul, and Goro marched into the corridor.

Goro locked a stern gaze on her and pushed into her mind. *"Come with us. I'll speak with you when I've finished with the others."*

Why not accompany them to witness the next chapter in free-thinking madness? She fell into the rear behind Sevra and Paul. Goro led them to the docking bay housing the ship's standard transportation spacecraft.

"Sevra and Paul contact me as soon as you're ready for departure. I'll see Kindrist walks the path of free thinkers," Goro commanded for them all to hear.

As if I need supervision. She followed.

The traitorous couple headed into the docking bay.

Goro shoved Kindrist back into the corridor. "Stay here," he whispered.

"What else do you think you need to hide from me?" she snarled.

Goro yanked something out from beneath his coat.

Gods, no. The torch. "You'd kill me? Have we not always fought the same enemy?"

He nodded once. "Ashes to ashes. From dusk to dust." He shoved the torch through the docking-bay's gaping door.

A blinding yellow light flashed beyond the thick safety glass.

Why had he spoken with his mouth? So his thoughts couldn't be detected during telepathic communication.... Always, he was so clever.

Goro stepped back into the corridor and released the door.

The hatch, one of the few swinging hatches aboard, thumped until silence echoed.

Calling to the ventilation to shush everything so that it could take note of their death by cremation, no less.

Goro whirled to face her, tucking the torch back beneath his coat.

And the were-assassins were dust.

At least, he's not pointing that death stick at me. She teetered back, caught herself with two steps, and shoved against a solid wall. "You aren't going to kill Jake are you?" Staring at the floor was better than watching his stoic expression.

"No."

Blessed Devros.

Her knees shook.

Her gaze slid to his. "You should have confided in me with the plan," she spoke to avoid revealing anything of his plan to the crew through mindpeak.

He reached out one muscular hand as if to touch her.

As if he still held the title of friend. She stepped away from the approaching palm. "No friend puts a friend through that kind of torture."

His hand fell back to his side. "I'm sorry, Kindrist. I hope you can bring yourself to understand my objective was to protect your child and our people."

My people equated to one man in Detention. Time to release Jake. "Then I hope you can understand how long it will take for you to regain my trust after your failure to show me equal respect." She walked away.

Let the commander choose to torch me or not. A psychic mercenary could only believe a soul mate.

* * * *

With little else to do but stand around trying not to think about the discomfort in having his hands locked behind his back, Jake paced the barren cell. Talk about down on luck. I don't even get to die with my pants on.

Where was Kindrist? Odds were against the crew hurting her until the baby was born. Unless Goro worked for Voldon. Why not? Paul did. And where did Paul stand with his soul mate now?

A strange movement flashed in his periphery.

He turned to the detention-area's entrance.

Something had moved. But what? Or maybe the lighting flickered. He studied the light strips set into the ceiling.

Nothing different. His gaze slid back to the door.

The luminous barrier had vanished!

Why? He hadn't touched the light because everyone else avoided it. But what if this was some sneaky way to lure him over to where he would get zapped like a moth in a bug light when a hidden person turned the energy back on? Jake Straightarrow might be royally screwed. But he's not stupid.

Something moved beyond the door.

A black-haired Kindrist.

She bullied into the detention area holding black leather clothes, wearing the old familiar mercenary mask.

"Don't tell me we're off to play poker." He tried not to laugh. But the whole kissing-his-

ass-goodbye scenario really begged for a good guffaw.

She stopped at his side and touched his psychic handcuffs with something. "It's over."

The handcuffs vanished.

Not a bad answer. He rubbed his aching wrists. "Over?" He stared down at the shiny black hair on the crown of her head.

"As far as I'm concerned, Goro can fight this war. I'm finished."

Was everyone dead but the commander?

She fussed with a pair of leather pants.

Avoidance. Wrong answer. "Hey. Whoa." He grabbed her and forced her back to where he could see her yellow eyes, to look at him. "What happened?"

She blinked and made a hesitant feminine smirk. "I'll cry now if I talk about it. Spare me the humiliation. It's over. Let's just return to our quarters."

Kindrist The Invincible falls apart? He grabbed her soft cheeks and turned her yellow eyes back to him.

Tears pooled in them again.

Okay, she deserves my patience for getting my ass off of death's shoulders. He yanked on the decent-fitting leather pants.

His broke-in jeans must be torn to shreds after were-wolf transformation. That treasure needed a funeral itself.

The slick leather warmed instantly and gave his hide a bit of breathing room.

Not bad. More like weird. His last link to earth—his life--was gone, shed like an old snake skin. Did the change really matter? Purpose was purpose. And now he had a hot wife who not only risked her neck but kept things interesting. Rebirth was kind of cool. But Kindrist needed some privacy. Time to head back to their quarters to learn what happened. He wiggled his bare toes. "Let's go."

"What about the boots and vest?" She held the clothes up like a sacred offering.

"You need to get back to gestating." He laid a palm against her firm hip and shoved her toward the lift.

"No. I want you ready for surprises." She shoved the clothing into his knuckles.

Well, I can die with my boots this time. A few seconds couldn't hurt. And Kindrist had been right before. "You can call the shots any time." He yanked on his boots.

She led him back through the corridor system.

Back to Goro.

Hell, maybe the wife's tears covered up a bigger plan. After having my knees peeled and arms hyper-extended for duty, almost anything could happen next.

Goro stood along the final stretch leading to their quarters' door.

But the torch wasn't at the commander's hip.

Kindrist's spine straightened.

What took place while he was locked away in dead-end confinement? This was his final march. Her story may just be what it took to walk him down to where they planned to inject him with his last supper.

She walked past Goro.

Not brushing him. Or gracing him with a fraction of notice. Just heading onward. To where?

Goro stuck his hands behind his back in an at-ease military stance. "It's good to have you back at work, Straightarrow."

Kindrist walked past Goro without a glance.

He is kidding, right? “So you rip my arms out of their sockets, burn the skin off my knees, lock me up like an ape where I’m informed I’m to be terminated, and then welcome me back?”

Goro’s dark eyebrows arched. “A good show was the only way I could deceive Sevrá. She claimed you were the bad seed. Undoubtedly, she meant to aid Voldon. To trick her and her soul mate into entering an isolated contained area where I could use her weapon on her, I had to make it look good.”

Why did the explanation ring so true for Goro? Jake stopped and met Goro’s gaze. “You could have warned me you were going to sacrifice me like Christ.”

Goro’s stoic mask slid into a faint smirk. “You make the event seem as if you were bled.”

What do you call donating blood? Kindrist’s last supper!

The whisper of a sliding door noted Kindrist’s retreat into their personal quarters.

All the better. She didn’t seem to want to discuss the day’s events in public or with Goro.

“Red Trekaar’s anger is all but unwarranted,” Goro added. “Paul could remote view. I had no idea what he could witness aboard the ship. Without absolute secrecy, my plan was doomed to failure.”

Really, there was no way of knowing the extent of Paul’s psychic abilities. Still, the commander had no excuse for leaving a prized pawn out of the loop. Goro was the commanding master manipulator. “I wasn’t prepared.”

“Is a mercenary ever prepared for what lies before him?” Goro scratched his bald head. “Couldn’t you tell I was on your side?”

Who could read him? I’ll know better next time. “No.”

“Straightarrow, always go with your gut. The logical man turns intuition’s brightest day into the darkest hour.” Goro patted Jake’s shoulder and walked away.

Damn, I’m an idiot. But Kindrist wasn’t. She needed to hear about my stupidity and so much more. He stepped toward the sliding door.

Kindrist stood near the portal’s bench, her arms crossed over her chest. Red streaked her black mane.

“What lies did he feed you?” she demanded.

She needed to calm down. “Well,” he stepped over to her side and stared down at her scowl, “my gut tells me he came clean.”

She cocked her head and almost snarled. “I do not wish to listen to his lies at the moment.”

The gut doesn’t lie. He slid an arm around her waist and pulled her curves against him to where her pointed elbows thrust into his armpits the way she had them crossed like steel. “You expected me to believe a lot when you brought me aboard *The Seeker*. So, it shouldn’t be much of a chore for you to buy into what I share today. Turnabout is fair play.”

“Earth philosophy rarely applies in deep space.” She frowned and looked across the room.

Oh, when the table turns.... That earth adage certainly holds up the roof of reason at the moment in this deep-space shack. He chuckled and squeezed her so tight that her arms fell to her sides.

She watched his chest.

So she had refused to look into his eyes. But she hadn’t plugged her ears. “Goro said he

had no idea what Paul could see remote viewing on the ship. The only way he could ensure secrecy was to speak of the plan to no one."

Her scowl curved even more. Still she didn't make eye contact with him. "I'm pregnant. He should have worried the stress would cause me to abort the child of legend."

Pouting only made her sexier. But the expression had to prove she was softening to the news. And the softer a woman the better.

She slid her gaze to his.

The red faded to black in her hair.

But she isn't bloodless. And soft is really, really good. Like soft bottoms and breasts. Unlike the place where all his blood was running. He slid his hand down to her bottom and squeezed a firm mound.

The corner of her mouth curled into a faint smile. "You're not anywhere close to requiring a Beast Tamer."

Oh, interesting point to dissolve her anger. Did she fancy him attracted to her? He smiled back and wagged his head. "Why wouldn't I think of soft things?" He gave her firm ass another squeeze.

"Because Goro almost killed you." She shoved out of his embrace and began to pace the room.

What was wrong with her? Goro just admitted everything went down as planned. She had heard the news. Why was she so upset? "Kindrist, what's wrong?"

She shook her head and focused on her footfalls. "There is so little left to believe. My faith led me to this moment. I stood there on the edge of insanity with Goro pointing a torch at me." She shook her head like a spider jumped into her hair. "And now, I'm supposed to forget it all with your touch?" She halted, facing him. "He almost killed us. What don't you understand? I have been run through the fire, as you earthlings say."

More like ringer.

"And I will be allowed time to think things through."

Okay, maybe my wife needs to rest. "Fine. But why did Goro point a torch at you and not use it?"

She sighed. "He turned, holding it, slowly enough that it was pointed at me. After he torched Sevrá and Paul. How was I to know he wasn't taking aim?" Her stiff shoulders fell a bit.

The poor woman finally relaxed a little. She just needed time to digest what happened. "Okay, I want you to stretch out on the bed and close your eyes. Just try to forget about what happened."

Her mouth twisted with a smirk.

"Now, now. Stop that. I'm not calling you a liar. I just want you to rest and try to calm down." Or he'd never get her past the anger of betrayal.

And that's the vile cud she chewed.

Kindrist didn't argue. She practically dove into the bed.

What would be a good lie to keep her there? "I'm going to the armory."

She twisted up onto an elbow. "What? Why?"

Talk about edgy. "To get my hands on a torch." Or keep her thoughts on defense until she slept a good twenty hours.

"Bring one back for me."

Like I'd give her a toy that could nuke both her and the baby. "Sure." He headed into the corridor.

Would Goro be waiting? Or eavesdropping?

Nobody stood in the passageway.

Now to find Strako.

Goro stepped out from the passageway's end.

What did the commander want? I'll just walk past him. What could Goro do? Kindrist will probably never trust him again. And she's got the leverage inside her. He can't make me do anything now that my duty is to guard my child. So, the worm is powerless.

Goro stopped, and his gaze locked on Jake's. "I heard you leave your quarters." He paused. "How is Red Trekaar?"

"Funny you use her formal name now instead of Kindrist."

Goro's dark eyebrows arched.

Like he hadn't noticed a difference. The man used to be Kindrist's best friend. Not after the grand plan to fry traitors. Talk about a fiasco. "What do you want, Goro? You blew your relationship with my mate to Hell." He walked past the almost expression-less mask Goro donned.

The commander followed. "How can she blame me for bringing an end to Voldon's infiltration of the ship?"

"I'd say ask her, but she isn't very cooperative today."

"Talk to her, Straightarrow. There is much to do now that Voldon's strategy has failed."

Maybe the two commanders were playing chess. Yes, we are all the pawns in that game to control what kind of stage upon which the universe's occupants milked their cows. But people had feelings and standards. He spun to face Goro.

The man looked helpless for a fraction of a second before he threw back his shoulders and waited.

"You screwed up, Goro. Kindrist isn't playing along anymore. Game's over. Forget your plans."

"Not plans to kill others. *The Seeker* will never be safe for her and the child. This is a plan to provide you and her with a hiding place. A safe haven for the child to grow and learn."

Why don't I walk away? Because I'm playing along with Goro. Right. It's not that I care about my child's future. I'm just toying with his false sense of being in control. "So what's the plan?"

"It's been one earth day since I had a drink." He waved toward the lift down the passageway. "Let's discuss this over something warm."

Getting the guy wasted just might lead to disclosure of more interesting details of this plan to safeguard Kindrist.

* * * *

A presence shoved into Kindrist's mind and knocked for recognition beyond the pounding headache she tried to sleep off. But blessed sleep evaded her.

So much for rest and relaxation. "Go away."

"Red," Strako said in mindspeak. "What happened? I leave the ship on a scouting mission and return to find every crew member hiding in their personal quarters. None of the operators will speak of what's occurred."

Answering him might send him on his way. But Goro probably put him up to this informal interrogation. Could anyone aboard *The Seeker* be trusted again? Only my mate. "Did Goro send you to talk me into crawling out of bed and chatting with him?"

Pain knifed through her skull.

“No one tells an Illusian what to do. I fight for the right of free thought. I don’t swab decks or clean portals.”

Easy to claim. But *The Seeker* was practically self-cleaning with psychics running everything telekinetically. Although, Illusians were known for their extreme sense of honor—the one thing he and I hold in common. Strako probably didn’t lie for Goro’s benefit. She shoved her head into the soft pillow. *“Goro almost killed Jake. But we no longer have to worry about Sevra and Paul. Their dust darkens the heavens.”*

“At long last, my friend. Is Jake injured?”

Holiest Devros, leave me alone. *“Just scrapes and bruises.”*

Piercing pain shafted through her mind.

“Has he reported to the infirmary?” Strako asked.

Like Jake would waste time on ointments and bandages. But telling Strako where her mate was might send the commander yapping at Jake’s heels. That’s the last thing they needed. *“Jake’s walking around. Apparently, I’m irrational. Go away. My head is about to explode.”*

“So once again you prove the secret weapon.”

As if my head would actually detonate. *“Are you laughing? Because I don’t think that’s funny.”*

“You must be in horrible pain not to carry through with a joke. Until you feel up to a drink, love and light, my friend.”

Would love and light ever be possible again?

“I heard that, Red.”

“Nobody gave you permission to read my personal pontifications.”

“I shall grant your wish.” Strako’s presence dissolved from her mind.

The enormous brilliant being probably bowed with palms together, knowing Illusians. Why were these mercenaries bothering a useless pregnant female? Call life bad when the only person you have to count on can’t stand being in your presence. When Jake returns, I will try harder to be more pleasing. I have to because he’s all I have left.

* * * *

Jake stared across the table at the man who had made everything possible. Goro was the oil behind the wheel’s squeak. The commander who concocted his plans with the precision of a genius. Nobody would know whether to fear unleashing his wrath or buying into his game. Goro literally was God on *The Seeker*. But nobody said I had to like this god.

Goro chugged his ration of neon orange magma in two gulps and plopped his ringing cup down on the metallic table top. “You’re safer on earth. Voldon will never think you’re hiding there with Kindrist and the baby. He’ll chase Darla and I across the universe and beyond before he searches earth for you two.”

But earth has no defenses against alien werewolves and vampires. “How can you be so certain? You want to dump us on earth? That plan sounds more like an act of abandonment. Are you trying to get rid of us?” Sweep us under the carpet to hide and cover his tracks from other free-thinking authorities?

Chapter Twenty Seven

Goro smacked his lips in contemplation where he sat across the table from Jake in the ship's lounge. "There is no room for error here. I live for The Cause, Straightarrow. You are The Cause's best bet for free thinking." His unwavering gaze never altered. "I've played out every scenario I can imagine with Voldon. Nothing is more unexpected than you and Kindrist hiding on earth. I know she's incapable of thinking rationally in her pregnant state. So, you must do the thinking for her."

Oh, she won't like hearing this. Talk about screaming women! And the man had lost her respect one damnable act at a time. Kindrist's raging hormones were not at fault here.

"You must trust me and follow your hidden psychic ability, Straightarrow. I cannot control your gut. What does your intuition say?"

Absolutely nothing. "Maybe my old yammering gut was neutralized behind those flickering energy bars in the containment area." He shoved his cup of extraterrestrial brew aside and shot the commander a wary glance. "Then again, maybe my intuition's silence tells me I'm to believe you. Whatever I decide, I'll let you know."

Goro assessed Jake with the gaze of a keen opponent.

"I'd be foolish to expect anything else." He wiped his mouth with the back of a hand and shoved away from the table.

Maybe the guy was mentally drained. Each step of his plan relied on absolute cooperation of his crew. And I'm not exactly his whipping boy. Neither is Kindrist. But this seemed too easy a victory. Or was Goro insulted? Only time and observation of Goro would reveal the man's reason for walking away.

But Goro was best kept at distance. Far away where he could create plans and act upon them with as little effect on my wife and child.

The door whisked shut.

Alone with a bucket of booze.

Not good after the day I've had.

A guy could drink the madness away. Numb his senses. But Kindrist needs my mind covering her back now. He shoved his cold glass across the table to clink against Goro's.

Boy a drink sure would ease away the day's stress.

Just one couldn't hurt.

Nope. The damned commander brought him here for that very reason. To dull his senses and get him to cooperate. Not today.

Bright light sliced through the lounge's darkness.

A person stood in the doorway.

Large. Male. Radiating his own light.

Strako. How convenient. Goro leaves and Strako arrives. The commander had to be sending in the humanoid beacon to induce cooperation. Why did the Illusian just stand there? "Are you coming or going?"

Strako strode into the darkness. "I had hoped to find Rosa here."

"Check with Goro. He's probably got her working on one of his plans." Jake leaned back

to assume his full height while sitting to match the alien's kick-ass ambiance.

"Not you too." Strako sauntered over to descend onto the bench across the table.

What did that mean? "Huh?"

Strako sighed and leaned onto his elbows. "Kindrist is ranting about Goro too."

Tell me something new. "So your nose is squeaky clean?"

Strako's clean-cut jaw leaned right.

How funny the tough bastard could be rattled into silence. "Are you at a loss for words?"

"No." Strako maintained a genuine expression. "I just have no idea why it matters that my nose is squeaky clean."

So much for learning earth sayings. "I asked if you fancy yourself at Goro's beck and call."

Strako shoved backward, letting his arms fall to his side. "An Illusian fights for justice. I joined The Cause to bring peace to the universe. And, yes, I realize there could never be a utopia. But I never agree to perform any tasks I disapprove of." He leaned back onto his elbows and the tabletop.

More casually. Maybe he was being honest.

"Ask Kindrist. She sees me for my Illusian ethics. She knows I bow to no one."

Kindrist's anger isn't exactly the best point of reference today. But for Strako to make the point, I'd have to accept his explanation. "So, have you heard of Goro's grand plan to hide Kindrist on earth with me?"

Strako's eyes squinted in thought. But his gaze riveted on Jake. "That's not a bad idea."

"Abandonment?"

"He dares not leave you without a pod fighter."

That's transportation for one. "What about Kindrist and the child?"

"Pod fighters have firepower."

They sent me down to Gameddaron without telling me I had big guns? Jake laughed. "You're kidding, right?"

Strako flipped out a bright palm. "Everyone knows...." His words died as he looked at Jake.

Dead on. "They never said a thing about the pod fighter having weapons." Why the limited knowledge of pod-fighter usage?

"I think it unwise that you are left alone on earth with the mother of freedom and no understanding of how to operate a pod fighter. I will accompany you."

A guy couldn't fault the alien for his sense of chivalry. But could he be trusted? "Even if Goro let you go, what makes you think I'd take you along?"

"Red would want Rosa and I there."

Maybe not today. Or tomorrow. Kindrist wasn't up for philosophizing with anyone these days. "I don't know."

"She will agree."

* * * *

"Why are you making demands?" Goro's mouth almost twitched among the shadows.

As if the commander disliked someone telling him how things were going to happen, Jake thought and swallowed a chuckle where he stood in Strako's brightness among the subdued stars floating in the darkness of Goro's star-chart room. "This is a modification to Plan A."

"Modification? I haven't even decided to send you back to earth yet. Red Trekaar is near insane with distrust. She can't be as you put it abandoned on a planet."

Nice try to rescind Plan A before modification by an opponent. Hiding out on earth just kept looking better and better. No Goro. No questioning the ability of a person to command. And no shaking the chain of command. Yep. Throw in a glowing guy who looked like an angel or ghost floating around and nobody would dare bother them. And an ex-mercenary's savings account was still nestled safely away racking up interest. Earth, the perfect destination.

"Rosa and I can be there to help them when the baby comes. And we can offer additional protection," Strako added.

"I'll let you know what I decide to do," Goro announced. "Now leave me to my star charts." He didn't dismissively turn his back to them or move a fraction of an inch.

The commander stood with every ounce of his being trying to force their wills to bend to his.

"Goro," Strako trumpeted. "We feel this is the best way to protect the child. I will tell Rosa to pack her things for the mission." He pivoted and vanished in the darkness.

Goro just stood there with his blank expression, watching the blackness where Strako had stood.

Caught off guard. "Now you know how Kindrist felt when you hid the plans from her. Take a breather from managing The Cause and think about the consequences of your actions."

Goro's gaze slid to Jake.

But no malice danced in his eyes. "Prepare for your journey."

* * * *

Heading back to inform his wife she needed to pack Nulvitian baby stuff because they couldn't get them at earth stores wasn't what Jake had planned for the day. How would she react? Either scream or embrace the idea. Why did the first thought prove the strongest of the two possibilities? He stepped toward his mindless door.

Life threw lots of doors along one's path.

The door opened.

Kindrist lay with her back to the door fully dressed in her white uniform.

Hopefully she slept.

"Jake?" she asked without moving.

"It's a good thing I'm not trying to kill you." He strode to the bed.

She rolled over to face him. "Goro dare not try something that foolish after eliminating Sevrá and Paul. Do you think Goro was my attacker using Sevrá and Paul to cover his footsteps?"

He settled on the bed's soft padding. "I don't know. But that's a sweet thought for us to mull over."

Her brow furrowed. "What do you mean?"

So nobody visited her to spill the beans before him. "Goro's decided you and I will be hiding out on earth until the baby comes."

She shoved up with her elbows. "Maybe...." Her gaze drifted around the room.

"What's wrong?"

"It sounds like an interesting plan. But I've never given birth." She met his gaze with her eerie yellow eyes.

Almost cataract-ridden. But she could see. Maybe she could see better than the rest of them. "Strako has insisted he and Rosa accompany us."

"Were-mates? What a frivolous waste of a couple."

Well so much for her vision. He chuckled. "They know how to operate pod fighters. I

don't. They know all about the universe. I know almost nothing. They can kick alien ass while I try to help you escape—"

"All right. All right. I understand." She shoved his arm a little as if fantasizing about shoving him off the bed.

"Stop pushing. I'm here to stay, Kindrist. And you need to pack some baby stuff."

She almost squinted at him. "Baby stuff?"

Boy, this really was her first time around the playpen. "Whatever Nulvitians use to console their crying infants."

Her confused stare only revealed she had no idea what he was talking about. "Scratch that suggestion. How about just packing a toothbrush?"

She took two deep breaths and stared at her boots.

"What's wrong? I thought you would like putting as much distance between yourself and Goro as possible."

"You really want to go with me?" She shot him a sideways glance.

What a question? "How many times do I have to almost get my butt wasted for you to prove that one?"

She turned her nose to him and barely smiled. "You don't have to go. I can do this alone. We can separate with blood bags."

Just what in the Hell was she thinking? Time to show her how I felt. He slid a palm over her knee.

She studied his action without much of one herself.

Fine. He slid his fingers between her knees and followed the firm muscle of her inner thigh up to her mound.

She spread her knees for him and shot him an almost drugged glance.

It's nice to know I'm as potent as whiskey. He fought a chuckle but lost.

She reached for his shoulders and pulled him down onto the soft bed. "You are very important to me, Jake," she whispered.

Was I? "How so?" he whispered against her lips.

She kissed him gently and drew back to gaze into his eyes. "I love you as much as I did back on earth when I selected you."

That would explain all the incredible sex. "I could tell." He shot her a wink.

Her gaze slipped to his lips and back to meet his. "But what about you? Are you happy with the fate I forced upon you?"

He pulled her curves as close as he could and studied every turn of her ear, eyes, and nose.

"I wouldn't wish a future you despised upon you, heart of my heart," she whispered.

Chapter Twenty Eight

If only Jake's mate realized he wanted to be with her now. To protect her. And cuddle her, even if only just a little. But she seemed so fragile these days. He locked onto her gaze. Like they could separate with blood bags? Like a man wanted some cold squishy water bottle to cuddle up with. And where were those damned bags he had left? Undoubtedly, in the lavatory. He headed for the invisible button.

Four breaths passed before he stood in the lavatory, staring down at the only thing keeping him from achieving complete manhood.

"What are you doing, Jake?" She pressed her warm curves up beside him in the ridiculously small space.

Warm or cold? Breathing or inanimate? Forget the cold hot-water bottle. He met her curious gaze. "Making certain nothing comes between you and I again." He reached down to her boot, unsheathed her small personal knife, shoved the pliant bags in the sink, and slit them both wide.

Talk about liberation. Now, where are those long legs and soft curves I remember?

He went rock hard.

"What are you doing? Those bags were like the only cure for a plague," she gasped.

"Better to plague Goro than me." He winked and tossed her knife into the sink where the remnants of the bloody river washed away from the bags down the drain.

Kindrist stood there in nothing other than awe.

Maybe she just needed a good sex libation. He pulled her curves against his hard-on and snaked his arms around her tiny little ribcage.

Heat ebbed from her seductive body.

And she was all his sweet little woman. "This is it, Kindrist. Your Destiny. I thought you wanted to meet it."

She slowly slid her palms around his waist with her red lips tilted up, begging to be kissed.

Just what a man wants to see. "Nothing comes between us again," he said. Not even the commander's games. "It's just you and me, babe. Destiny or not."

She blinked. "Are you saying you desire me?"

God, can't she tell? He squeezed her firm ribs even closer to the point her breasts mounded upward. Thank God they'd get bigger with pregnancy. And just how long did they have before the baby arrived? "How long will your pregnancy last?"

"Ten of earth's lunar months."

That is plenty of time to practice sexual positions. "Well, get ready, Goth Babe, because I've got plenty of time to show you how I feel." He planted his lips on her warm mouth for a second. "And Don't worry, Kindrist. I'm not going to fuck you like a wild animal. I'm going to make love to you until you understand what this lesser-evolved human feels, just because you can't read my mind." And how that was true given she couldn't sense how he felt about her.

"You know, that feral crap is great for starters." He ushered her back toward the bed. "No more fifth wheels and no confusion. Anyone out to knock off a legend had better worry

about which side of the bed loose-cannon Jake Straightarrow rolled out of.” He planted another kiss on her soft mouth.

She blinked coyly and wriggled free from his grasp.

* * * *

What kind of man differentiated between sex and love? Her mate’s intent stare, head tilted, gaze locked on her like she dare not run away again, had to mean he loved her. That meant more than the spoken sentiment and didn’t require clarification through sex. But, damn the desire welling inside me, a little sex to seal their new marriage pact was just what I needed. Kindrist almost leapt back into bed.

He towered overhead, his hands working to free himself from his leather pants.

Why couldn’t he hurry?

Her heart raced as she yanked off her boots and clothes while he stripped the black leather from his glorious body. His hands slid across her body like an assassin paying homage to his weapon. Then he leaned down to shove his amazing muscles against her.

Who wouldn’t want to lay here while her mate slowly peeled his pants off? She wormed into his fleeting touch, trying to prolong the sensation, only making her body ache to meld with his.

His hot breath warmed her neck.

Sent a shiver tickling through her cells. She arched her neck.

His lips were there, playing where her neck bent.

Tracing. Kissing. Possible writing *I love you* across her skin. Who wouldn’t want to revel in a mate’s touch? Her future was more than surviving to raise the child. Her future was Jake. If their future landed them on earth, so be it. They would be together.

His hands glided down to her lower back and pulled her belly against his hot heavy body.

Blessed Devros, save me. “Jake.” She couldn’t control her utterings.

He rolled her onto her back.

Both easy and safe. Well, he was definitely going to take care of her now. Little did he know this was too damned slow. She spread her legs for him.

She would give him a few minutes to feel like he was in control. Like she would risk her child’s safety! For the love of the blessed universe, without completion I will go mad. “Please, Jake.”

He carefully began slow penetration.

Too slow like a man who worried he might cause her to miscarry. Why worry now? Too torturous. She rolled him over, pinned him to the bed, and matched his gaze. “Let me decide what’s safe.”

His hands were on her breasts. Gripping her ass. Pulling her hips down. Tracing out every inch of her body.

They danced and danced until she couldn’t bite back words as if he had always wanted her on top. The entire ship had to have heard them. Especially when they came. She fell onto his sweaty muscles and slithered around until she fit against the side of his hard body under his steely his arm. Not such a bad place to be given you’ve sacrificed everything you had twice over to save the universe.

“Your eyes are still yellow, babe.”

Just like they were meant to be. “Are you glad we’re returning to earth?”

“Life shouldn’t be so bad. I’ve got money in banks. We can live high on the hog.”

He had no idea how placing people into hiding worked. The Cause had so much gold and

platinum that they could buy the Taj Mahal. Precious metals varied around the universe. And when some mines produced enough trash metal other cultures treasured, all you had to do was know where to dump your garbage to beat the system and live like royalty.

"You didn't say anything," he said.

Since earth males fancied themselves the providers, she had probably insulted his masculinity. Time to play dumb. "I don't know what high on the hog means."

He squeezed her bottom again. "Living like rich people. So don't worry about bringing baby stuff. We can buy loads of it. Have it delivered." He smiled and touched the end of her nose. "It's easy to order online and have the loot delivered outside your door. Hide those wild yellow eyes." He gasped. "I know. We'll buy you contacts. You can choose from any color on the market. Try a new color, you know, those dream eyes you've always wanted."

The lilt in his voice almost made her laugh. "I'm not fussy. Earth women spend too much time primping. Just give me a hair brush. I'll wear sunglasses outside." But the reality of their hiding on earth began to mushroom with issues. How would they hide Strako? The Illusian glowed.

* * * *

Kindrist pulled the red hair brush through her black hair and tried to remember when the last time her hair color matched the brush's. She turned away from her New York City penthouse's dressing-table mirror.

Jake leaned over the side of the bed pulling on his combat boots.

Some things never change. "So you're really going to a Halloween party at eight?" Like he fantasized about dressing up in celebration of an earth legend.

"Yes." He rose and shifted his blue jean's waistband. "When else can a guy beat the streets with a glowing alien?"

"You can take the mercenary out of the woman, but you can't take the earthling out of the earthling." At least he had Strako for male companionship.

Jake's straight-lipped smile turned down. "That was so bad, Kindrist." He squinted like a man experiencing pain. "It'll be safe. You'll see. They're all dressing like Strako this year. I'm just accompanying him to ensure nothing comes of the fun."

What a feeble attempt to convince her he was going along with the Illusian for the Illusian's sake. "Since I've spent years caged on a starship, I'm not really surprised you're the one climbing the walls of isolation. You know he can knock off a mob with his otherworldly strength." She blinked and turned back to her reflection.

"Don't flutter those eyelashes at me." He shot her a glare.

"I blinked once." The man would do anything to squirm out of a tight squeeze.

"I've lived a long life of hiding alone. The career of an assassin doesn't require much of a social life. That's only what you see in movies about espionage and guys with numbers for names. I'm kind of into seclusion. Especially with a sex machine and The Cause's top-secret weapon for universal peace. You know, they could pay me a little more."

Oh the man and his money. He'd buy a European castle if he could do so without stirring up the curiosity of the locals in the process. They couldn't afford causing any more interest after Strako's ridiculous attempt to walk the streets as a rock singer Plutonium.

The baby kicked at her ribs.

"He's restless." She pressed a palm against her mounding belly.

Thumps patted against the heel of her hand.

Jake shoved over and slid his warm fingers under hers. "He's definitely more earthling if

he's ticked because he can't go trick-or-treating." He chuckled and met her gaze.

Like taking jabs at a mother's womb was the baby's way of declaring its favoritism for a planet. Since the child would never visit Nulvitia, arguing with Jake wouldn't make a difference.

"And you are certain it's a boy?" he insisted.

Not really. But Jovull had mentioned the baby's sex. And everyone knew Jovull's dreams came true. Soothsaying or not. "As far as I can tell. But with two months to go, the baby certainly kicks like a female assassin. Don't discount logic when dreams are the source of the information we're operating upon. Especially when neither of us had the dream. Anything could happen." A good ration of reason never hurt anyone. She smiled.

He inhaled and watched her.

Studying her with an assessing gaze.

"Are you sure you don't want to go out tonight? You never get to go anywhere. You're not an invalid. And those yellow eyes will just look like part of your costume. You can be Plutonium's little sister."

Why does anything could happen keep echoing in my head? "I'll just stay here and read about earth babies. Or shop for baby clothes."

He rose a few inches, planted a kiss on her forehead like he never touched her otherwise, even though they'd had sex twice during daylight hours, and stood. "Just don't spend the money we traded for the gold and platinum. I have no idea how long we'll be here. The Big Apple isn't a cheap city to live in indefinitely. Although, I wouldn't chalk our visit up to a vacation. We've got to worry about complications with childbirth."

Blessed Devros. "Stop. I can no longer bear the weight of these unsupported worries, husband. Go to your party." Her mate's concerns were getting annoying. Nulvicians rarely had complications with childbirth. But Goro hadn't mentioned anything about their length of stay on earth. And Strako was tired of sneaking around during the early hours of the morning. Maybe it was time to plan their departure once the child was up for space travel.

Jake stared out the penthouse window. The gray curtain hung, shoved aside by his shoulder, cloaking him.

My mate, the phantom. Of course, they lived like social deviants locked away from society except for the normal Jake and Rosa venturing out for supplies. And Strako's comical attempts to feign the identity of a rock star that always stopped the masses on the streets. The Illusian finally got too many offers to sing at clubs and had to give up the cover. Advertising posters posted everywhere wouldn't help them stay hidden in a world littered with The Cause as well as Voldon's operatives.

A presence pushed into her mind.

Probably Strako. She opened the communication channel from her end. "*How goes pregnancy, Red Trekaar?*" Forty Three asked in mindspeak.

Why is my operator contacting me? "*All goes well. Why are you contacting me?*"

"*The Seeker has been destroyed.*"

Chapter Twenty Nine

"I really have no desire to return to space. Why can't we stay here until the child comes?" Kindrist asked where she sat on the black leather sofa in the penthouse's living room.

Stay or leave? Jake couldn't pinpoint the safest option. At least she hadn't begged about jumping aboard her pod fighter and launching a counter attack. Sometimes, the darkest situations proved a person's real priorities. At last, Kindrist finally looked happy with marriage, her impending motherhood, and hanging out on earth. But the way Strako and Rosa shot disturbed glances between themselves meant the rest of the psychic assassins had issues with remaining on the blue planet. So much for hanging out in the real world tonight. "Well, it looks like the Halloween party is going down here tonight. What do you both think?"

Rosa sighed. "If Voldon managed to destroy a guardian starship, he can find you here." Her stern gaze slid to Kindrist. "The child is no longer safe."

Eight months of sleeping in and Kindrist devouring every kind of earth delicacy she could define had concluded with a nightmare. So much for Destiny.

"Forty Three had no orders over-riding Goro's," Kindrist replied. "We're supposed to stay here. Wait for the child. What would you suggest otherwise?"

Strako crossed his arms over his chest. "Traveling to Metta would be risky. It's a long flight. But once we arrive—"

"You can't be serious," Kindrist blurted and pointed at her mounded belly. "This abdomen will not fit inside a pod fighter."

"Collect your things. We will travel down to the blind and learn if your fears are true." Strako stood there, staring down Kindrist.

Nice standoff. But Kindrist usually won debates with enormous male extraterrestrials. "Why don't we sleep on it? Give ourselves one night to let the news sink in?"

Rosa shot us all a bitter glance. "I don't like this one bit. Every moment we delay is a chance for a Mawshwuc to find us."

At least they weren't suggesting Kindrist hide on vampire planet. "One night." He met Strako's blue gaze.

The Illusian nodded.

Strako ushered his doubting wife up the winding staircase, away from the living room. "We'll discuss this again over breakfast."

Kindrist's disgusted gaze landed on Jake.

Didn't she realize I bought her more time?

The couple closed their bedroom door.

Kindrist's pucker twisted. "I don't want to get caught in transit inside a pod fighter. Imagine what it would be like if you and I are separated in space? What of the baby? The notion is ludicrous, Jake. If they want to leave, tell them to go. But the child is far more important than our sense of safety."

So she met her Destiny with as much determination as every opponent crossing her path. He sidestepped until he could plant his butt on the soft cushion beside her. "Sacrificing yourself for Destiny still?"

She glared at him. "If you think teasing me is going to make this issue vanish, you're wrong."

Leave it to Kindrist to fight back. He slid a hand around her warm stiff shoulders and pulled the stubborn woman against his chest. "We'll stay if you want. You've won."

Slumped, she met his gaze. "Mark my words. If you don't follow through with that promise at sunrise, I'm naming our daughter Desiree."

Only Kindrist could come up with threats that hit home. "Just so you know, Desiree was the woman my mother planned for me to marry."

She rolled her eyes. "So much for the coercive power of my threat." She leaned against his shoulder and sighed. "I don't want to have this baby alone."

She needed say nothing else. "We'll stay. We may find a safer place to hide. Maybe a remote location where extraterrestrial mercenaries can't sneak up on us under the cover of a crowd."

* * * *

Sunrise's yellow greeting across the vast expanse of Pacific Ocean off the rocky coast of the desolate Apocalypse Island always amazed Kindrist. Especially when Erniok nursed.

The giant bundle shoved a fist against her breast and closed his eyes.

Always falling asleep latched on as if he feared he didn't know when his next meal would come. Just like a mercenary. She gulped down a chuckle. "Sleep well, Erniok the Young."

Two months passed since the torture of birthing him into a lung-filling atmosphere. Those two months of extra-rich Nulvitian milk made her son grow exceptionally well. She ran a fingertip over the bulging warm fat of his small wrist.

Rather, somewhere in the folds of that superfluous hybrid skin there was supposed to be a wrist. But her grandfather Erniok only sired tall Nulvitian sons. Throw in her father's height, and Erniok the Young would certainly exceed Erniok the Elder's earth height of six-foot-three.

A rock rolled behind her.

Probably Jake or Rosa on the trail leading down from the tent encampment to the crashing surf and spray.

"Don't tell me he's eating again." Jake chuckled.

Maybe the baby had too much food when in the womb.

"I'm getting jealous." Jake squatted and winked.

Men. Playing along wouldn't hurt. "Why?"

"That's what I feel like doing. Penning you down and claiming what's rightfully mine."

All those baby books said earth men behaved this way. At least he joked about the envy. "You can have them at naptime. You must learn to be patient and share with your son."

Jake stared off at the paling sunrise. "When do you think we'll hear from The Cause again?"

The problem was that they hadn't heard a thing since Forty Three hopped a transport to connect with them via mindspeak. The only crew member of *The Seeker* who they knew lived was the operator.

"What about Goro's plan?"

The plan to meet the commander in 2013 was pointless now since he could in all likelihood be dead. If he were ashes and dust, traveling through Voldon's defenses to reach Tranorl risked the baby's life. "We just wait to see whether or not we catch word of him."

Jake grew serious and faced her. "Let's send Strako and Rosa to assess the off-world situation."

Not a bad idea. “With our pod fighters, we’ll be able to relocate easily—”

Jake smirked. “We’d better take off as soon as possible by the looks of that boy’s latest growth spurt. Or we’ll never squeeze him inside the cab with you. But I’d really like to relocate. At least to the Costa Rican rainforest, or somewhere with a little more technology and accessible markets. All the fishing I have to do on this barren island with that creepy monolith watching my every move is starting to wear on my nerves.”

Her mate was such a bad liar. “That Mayan stela is just a carved marker noting the Mayan king who first walked here.”

“It reminds me of Easter Island. I just want to return to the mainland. You know, boil a big pot of corn-on-the-cob, bite into some thick homemade tortillas, and chew on meat that had more to it than a few swims around the shore.”

Maybe there would be a Chinese restaurant nearby. “You forgot egg rolls.”

“Oh no. We better stick out the wait for new orders here on the island.”

“What?”

Jake wagged a finger at her. “You’ve eaten enough of those Chinese nibbles to last you a lifetime since you got pregnant. I don’t want you dying from a heart attack.” He smiled and leaned close. His warm breath buffeted her ear. “I kind of like having you around. You keep me honest and on my toes. What more could a man ask for?”

The End