

STAR TRAVELER

CAITLYN WILLOWS



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"Do you blame me? You've just told me you come from another planet." She half laughed to cover her nervousness. Not that she was afraid of him, just stupefied.

"I know, sweet love." He gently kneaded the soles of her feet—one in each hand. Warmth wiggled up her legs, straight to her crotch. Arrows of energy followed, pulsing toward her clit like the slow thrust of a cock. Her heartbeat quickened. Closing her eyes, Anne parted her legs slightly. A bolt pierced her cunt, heating gently, swelling her for a moment before dissipating throughout her body in a shimmer.

"Ahh... Kes...not fair..."

"Shh. Enjoy, love."

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BY

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STAR TRAVELER
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To the stars that enchant, delight, and tweak my imagination...

CHAPTER 1

Anne Sherwood prided herself on being completely open-minded. After all, what good did it do to stick your head in the sand? A world of possibility and wonder lay open to those who were willing to accept. She'd earned a reputation among her friends as a little Miss Mary Sunshine because of it. Coupled with her determined optimism, even Anne agreed she could be a bit much to take at times. But it was the way she'd chosen to live. Life had dealt Anne her share of blows and disappointments. Stewing about them only made it worse. So, she figured, what was the sense?

She'd be lying if she said she didn't give in to tears when necessary. But she refused to wallow in self-pity. One good cry and she'd right herself and get on with it, ready to tackle the next road block or embrace the next blessing. However...even she'd admit her open-mindedness had just been tested.

Anne shifted her gaze between the winning lottery ticket still clutched in her fingers and the gorgeous man beside her. Both were

STAR TRAVELER

hard to believe.

She'd met Kestral Dermot less than twenty-four hours before when he'd rescued her from muggers. Instinct had pulled her toward the man. Even the stars above told her he was the one. Her heart knew it; so did her body. In all her twenty-seven years, she'd never had sex as wondrous as she'd had with Kes. It was mind-boggling, soul-searing magic.

Minutes before she'd been close to tears thinking she'd never see him again. Then he trotted up the steps to her sun porch as if he'd been gone minutes rather than twelve hours. The first glimpse of his golden brown head set her heartbeat into triple time. Deep brown eyes settled on her face, saying what he had yet to utter—that he cared for her. Yes, in less than a day, this beautiful man loved her. Anne believed it. She felt the same way. But now she wondered if he were joking or a little...off. Next question—how should she handle it?

She glanced at the lottery ticket once more. Twenty million dollars! A dream come true. She could hardly believe that either, yet the proof was there. But if she was to believe what Kes told her, should she question the win?

Shaking fingers set the ticket on the low table before her. The entire house was silent—a miracle in and of itself with all her animals. Even her parrot, Stewie, was remarkably quiet.

"You don't believe me," Kes said.

There was humor in his voice, as if he fully expected her to call him a liar.

Anne sighed and stretched back into the cushiony comfort of her midnight blue sofa. "I... What..." She tsked. Words escaped her. How could she stay open-minded when this was so fanciful? "I don't know if you're serious or joking."

Kes leaned back and pulled her bare feet to his lap. "I'm serious. I know it's hard to believe."

"Do you blame me? You've just told me you come from another

STAR TRAVELER

planet.” She half laughed to cover her nervousness. Not that she was afraid of him, just stupefied.

“I know, sweet love.” He gently kneaded the soles of her feet—one in each hand. Warmth wiggled up her legs, straight to her crotch. Arrows of energy followed, pulsing toward her clit like the slow thrust of a cock. Her heartbeat quickened. Closing her eyes, Anne parted her legs slightly. A bolt pierced her cunt, heating gently, swelling her for a moment before dissipating throughout her body in a shimmer.

“Ahh... Kes...not fair...”

“Shh. Enjoy, love.”

His hot fingers drifted upward to the waistband of her panties. One tug pulled them down and off her legs. Need opened her to him. Anne fumbled for his broad shoulders, trying to tug him over her. Kes evaded her touch and danced his fingers along the inside of her thighs. Long strokes shoved more heat to her clit. She watched through heavy-lidded eyes and saw the light ripple between them. Further still he nudged her legs open, then cupped her butt as he dipped his head toward his target.

Anne’s fingers gripped the cushion beneath her. She quivered while she waited for that first touch of tongue. Instead, a slow, hot breath tickled around her. Kes blew softly. Anne twitched under the heat as it flicked around her. Two long fingers eased inside, urging the orgasm out of her. They pressed against the roof of her vagina—more heat just where she needed it.

Pleasure tripled. She gasped for breath once, twice, again as the spasm clutched at her. Then she came over and over again until she collapsed, exhausted. Through pants of breath she watched Kes stand. His gaze never left hers as he stripped off his shirt. Anne longed to reach for him, to trace the molded plains there, to wonder in how perfect he was, but she was too spent to move.

Gazes still locked, he toed off his shoes then stripped his tan twill slacks away. A burgeoning erection popped free. Pre-cum moistened the bulbous purple tip. Veins traced the hard surface. With one flick of

STAR TRAVELER

his wrist, Kes yanked the blue afghan from the back of the sofa. Lifting her hips in one hand, he tucked the cover under her with the other. Anne lay there mesmerized as he knelt between her open thighs.

Kes closed his eyes and cupped his hardened dick with his hands. It doubled to twice its erect size as she watched in wide-eyed wonder. Pants of exhaustion shifted to desire, awe, and a bit of worry. Would he fit now? God, she prayed so.

His eyes opened to hers. A smile tugged up one corner of his mouth. Dick still grasped in one hand, he aimed the tip at her center. Anne gasped as he slowly pierced her. She longed to dig her heels into his backside and seat him hard. But Kes was the one in control. His pulsing cock spread her wide until Anne felt impaled. Her clit responded with delight of its own as the log of flesh brushed it.

She felt his pubic hairs mingle with hers. He was in deep, to his hilt, and all she could do was whimper and beg him to...

"Give it to me, Kes. Don't hold back."

His lips slipped over hers. She met his tongue, looping and twirling in the oral dance. His cock rippled within her, slowly at first, then faster and faster. His hips never moved, yet the tension of holding back for her tightened his muscles. Her vagina caught the rhythm and countered. A low groan tore from his throat. Kes broke off their kiss with a soft smack, then tossed his head back.

Another orgasm built in Anne, stronger than the one before. Anne let it have her, knowing they'd come together this time.

"Now, Kes!"

Arching his back, he pressed deep and hard. Hot jets of jism hit the entrance to her womb as Anne's orgasm ripped from her, too. Suspended in bliss, their bodies rocked from pleasure. Then they fell into each other's arms amid the soft kisses and caresses of afterlove.

Anne cupped his face in her palms to stare into the depths of his eyes. Deception did not stare back, only love and affection. That she could believe in. As for the rest?

STAR TRAVELER

There was a magic aura about him. He'd shown her how to redirect her energy and control the power; how to talk to her animals. Was being a spaceman too hard to believe? Stranger things had happened. Still, a little more solid proof wouldn't hurt.

* * *

Kestral dusted the back of his fingers over Anne's cheek. By the moons, he loved this woman! She made him whole. Her love, the way she embraced life, even her menagerie of animals—everything about her gave him purpose and meaning. Where before life was ordinary, Anne had revived it. Where he'd stumbled about, she'd given him direction. Where he'd seen mundane, she'd opened his eyes anew. But even as he embraced this new love, Kestral feared losing it.

He knew he had to be honest with her. Yet, he stopped short of one hundred percent revelation. *One thing at a time.* Telling her he was from another planet was enough for now. Telling her she also now carried his child might stretch his credibility. And confessing to the bet that got her pregnant in the first place would definitely not set well.

Kestral was ashamed of himself for playing the game. It had seemed harmless sport at the time. Then he met Anne. She burrowed under his skin fast, nudging his guilt to the surface. He could have walked away and left her be. Fact was, by then, he wanted her too much to do so.

Odd as it was, Kestral had actually won the bet. He was the first of his friends to get an Earth girl pregnant. The prize was a sleek, top-of-the-line Planet Skipper. Sweet as it was, the rocket ship was nothing compared to what he'd found in Anne. Kestral had walked away and let Durok, Jamel, and Macris have at it. As he'd hurried toward the trans-light tube to come back to Anne, the three were hashing out another wager to see who'd take possession of the Skipper. Kestral had to laugh. They'd never know or understand what real prize awaited him.

He'd taken the stairs to her roof two at a time to reach her. At the top, his heart beat against his ribs with the first glimpse. Her flowing

STAR TRAVELER

dress was splashed with yellow and orange flowers like a garden bright with the midday sun or a beacon calling him home. She'd been waiting, searching her stars for signs to guide her. His little stargazer. A sheen of tears glimmered in her eyes. Kestral didn't ask...he just knew—she thought he wasn't coming back.

It took all his willpower not to sweep her in a crushing embrace and swear he'd be with her forever. There were things she needed to know first, like the truth, or what portion of it he was brave enough to spill out.

His declaration came on the heels of another miracle. In the time it took for six random numbers to be called, Anne went from struggling waitress to wealthy woman. Kestral had loved the shocked awe in her face. Some part of him wished he could have given her this gift. Just as quickly, he was glad he hadn't. Knowing Anne as he did, she would have wanted an honest win.

Kestral gave her little time to recover from that news when he burst out with his own. Her expression never changed. At least she didn't laugh or call him a liar. Of course, Kestral did his best to distract her afterwards with sex, pouring all his energy into a session she'd never forget. Now, in the aftermath, both of them spent, he had little choice but to face any ramifications of his revelation.

"I know it's all rather hard to believe." Kestral dropped a kiss to her forehead.

Anne sighed. Whether from contentment or frustration he didn't dare ask.

"Well...yes, it is," she finally admitted. "I'm trying my best, but it's a lot to fathom."

"What if I take you there?" The words were out before Kestral could stop them. Though impetuous, he wanted nothing more than to share his world with her. To watch her sea green eyes light with wonder at a new experience. He'd planned to take her there anyway, but wanted her to get used to the idea first. All that was shoved aside

STAR TRAVELER

with his need to show her all.

Anne pulled back as far as the cushion allowed. "To your planet?"

He smiled as he eased from her body. "Yes. We can catch a trans-light tube to Naru within the hour."

She tugged her rumpled sundress down over her knees. Indecision warred in her eyes. Perhaps a little fear, too. She either realized he was telling the truth or she thought he'd lost his mind.

Kestral grabbed her hand and kissed her fingers. "Don't count me out until you give me a chance, Anne. That wouldn't be fair and it wouldn't be in your nature."

"All right." She slipped free of his gentle hold. "Although it sounds cliché... take me to your planet." She snagged her white silky panties from where he'd dropped them. "Am I dressed all right or should I change?"

Her tone mocked him. Kestral didn't call her on it. Once the tube opened at her feet, she'd see. She'd also either embrace the event or run screaming. Kestral was betting on the former, once her shock wore off.

"If you're comfortable, you'll be fine." He hauled on his pants, then pulled his scanner from his pocket. The device looked like one of the PDAs Earthlings used. For Naruns, it was their lifeline to...well...everything. Without it, they were lost, literally.

Anne lifted one eyebrow as he punched in a request for a tube transport for two. He received confirmation immediately, snapped the lid closed, and stuffed it back in his pocket.

"It'll be here in fifteen minutes. We should hurry." He tugged his blue shirt over his head, then smoothed his hair with one rake of his hand.

Still skeptical, Anne slipped her slender feet into her sandals. "Should I take anything? A snack? After all, traveling to another planet isn't a hop, skip, and a jump."

He chuckled. "You'd be surprised. One Narun day is equal to one Earth hour. We'll be there before you know it."

STAR TRAVELER

“Well, then what are we waiting for?”

Quick strides carried her across the room to the front door. Kestral managed to reach it before her, swinging it wide. Anne tilted a gracious nod his way before she stepped over the threshold into the warm summer night.

Twilight had just faded to dark. One by one, stars clicked on in the inky desert sky. Kestral’s previous experiences on Earth had been in its bustling cities. There thousands of lights obscured the stars, but not here. The small southern California town boasted its own share of lights, but Anne’s home was away from it all—a small oasis with the nearest neighbor miles away. *Perfect*. And up ’til now, Kestral had been ready to write the whole planet off as worthless. Not any more.

He pointed to the area just beyond the small building where she kept her two old horses. “The tube will be picking us up over there. I thought the further away we were the less chance we’d have of disturbing the animals.”

“Couldn’t you just tell them what’s going on? You said you could talk to them.” A hint of sarcasm laced her words.

Kestral just laughed. “I already have.” Without warning, he scooped her into his arms. She let out a muffled squeal. “I wouldn’t want you to get sand in your shoes.”

“You’re going to carry this joke the whole way, aren’t you?”

“It’s no joke, sweet love. You’ll see.”

She draped her arms around his neck. “Looks like I have little choice. Watch your step. The last thing we need is for you to trip over a cactus.”

A single beep resonated from his pocket. Anne cocked her head to one side.

“Our ride’s here.”

Almost instantly, a slender beam of light landed behind the building. Anne’s eyes widened and her jaw dropped. She stayed mute as Kestral hurried toward the shimmering tube. It was only when they

STAR TRAVELER

were nearly to it she found her voice.

“Put me down. Now.” She pushed against his chest.

He stopped short of his goal and swung her feet to the ground. Anne glared at the transport, her sea green eyes huge in a mix of fear, awe, and the realization this was no joke.

Kestral snagged her fingers. “Come on. We don’t have much time. The longer the tube remains open, the bigger the chance we’ll be seen.”

Anne dug her heels into the sand. “No. I can’t. My animals... Who’ll take care of them?”

“We’ll be back by dawn here. As I told you, one Narun day is one Earth hour.”

“But...but...”

“Do you really want to miss this chance, Anne? You’ve known your whole life there was other life out there. You even told me last night you used to think your shooting stars were really people traveling to other planets. You were right. Now’s the time to experience it. I promise...you’ll be home by dawn.”

Her wide eyes glanced back at the house, then toward the tube. Wonder replaced fear. He felt her grip relax. He knew she couldn’t resist—further proof *she* was the woman of his dreams.

He slipped his arm around her waist, urging her forward. This time she didn’t hesitate. She stepped into the light and the door slid closed behind them.

CHAPTER 2

Ohmygod! This is real!

Anne couldn't decide if she was terrified or excited beyond words.
Probably both!

The door shut with a soft hiss. They were in a small cubicle. Not too small, though. In fact, they had much more room than if they were on an airplane. Four seats were molded into white platforms against the walls with two on each side. Gray material that closely resembled microfiber covered them. A shiny chrome-colored control panel dotted with digital displays was nestled in the wall opposite the door.

A female voice greeted them in a language Anne didn't understand. Kes motioned to one of the seats. "We need to sit."

Clutching the edge of the chair, Anne eased down. The cushion embraced her backside in comfort, fitting her proportions exactly. She leaned back and received duplicate attention there.

"Nice, isn't it?" Kes said. "It's designed to cater to the traveler's comfort."

STAR TRAVELER

Anne caressed the soft material. "It's doing a damn fine job."

"Then watch this." He pressed a button on the panel. The seat beside her stretched out into a bed.

She laughed lightly. "I've always wanted to fly first class."

Puzzlement wrinkled the space between his eyebrows. Anne was about to explain when the voice spoke again.

"What's it saying?"

Kes settled in the seat opposite of her. "It needs verification of identity." He pulled his PDA from his pocket and attached it to the panel.

"What is that?"

"It's called a LifeLock. Everything about us, everything we need to survive, is in here."

The computer spoke again, apparently confirming his ID since Anne heard, "Kestral Dermot," in the smattering of words.

He responded with, "Anne Sherwood."

This was frustrating. Obviously, her high school Spanish wasn't going to help her here. "I don't suppose this tube has a crash course in language."

He smiled. "Request one universal translation inoculation."

A panel slid open, revealing a small black knob that look like a trailer hitch.

"Wrap your hand over that."

"Is this going to hurt?" she asked as she did so. Before Kes could reply, she felt a tiny prick to the center of her palm. "Ow!"

"Just keep it in place," he said with a smile. "You'll know when to move it."

Seconds later, she heard, "Inoculation complete. Please remove hand."

Anne giggled as she complied. "Hey, I understood her...it...whatever."

"The nanochip works fast."

STAR TRAVELER

She massaged her palm while she looked for some sign she'd been stuck. Nothing. "Will I be able to understand anyone, even on Earth?"

"Anyone," he assured her.

"The things your people could show us." She continued to rub her hand.

"You know it can't work that way, Anne."

The seriousness in his tone made her look up. She'd watched enough sci-fi in her life to know the rules. Just because Hollywood invented those rules didn't mean they couldn't be close to the truth. Aliens *could* teach them a lot, but people here simply weren't mature or evolved enough to use the knowledge wisely. The way things were, they'd wind up destroying themselves.

"But you've shown me a few things."

"Yes, and there's so much more I'd love to show you. But you are unique, Anne. Sweet, kind, trustworthy."

Shoot. He'd have her bawling like a baby if he didn't stop soon.

"Decontamination complete. All possible contagions have been neutralized."

"You have no disease on your planet?"

Kes shook his head. "None."

"War?"

"Not on Naru."

"But on others?"

He nodded. "Sadly. People are what they are—"

"Always wanting what someone else has."

"Or needing it and just taking," he added.

"What about death?"

He leaned forward to caress her knee. "It's a fact of life. Our people are long-lived, but accidents and old age take their toll."

"How old is old?"

His thumb drew circles against her skin. "Our oldest reported person is three hundred and fifty of your Earth years."

STAR TRAVELER

“And that would make you...”

Kes’ laughter dissipated his dour expression. “Little older than you. Thirty-three. Naruns might live longer, but our life cycle generally follows yours. We simply age slower when we hit those years.”

Anne actually felt herself tear up. She was a speck of time in his life. If they had a future together, he’d eventually be left alone. She blinked to clear her vision, but not before one tear escaped.

Kes caught it on the edge of his finger, then brought the salty drop to his lips. “Why are you crying, love?”

He’d announced his love a scant hour ago, minutes before he told her who...what he really was. Still, Anne couldn’t bring herself to presume things that hadn’t been uttered. Alien or not, Kes was still a man. Men didn’t like to be cornered with life-long plans, unless they were the ones suggesting it.

She brushed it off with laughter she truly didn’t feel. “I suppose I’m just caught up in the emotion of it all. How does all this work with traveling from planet to planet? The age factor, I mean.”

He lifted his shoulder in a shrug. “The time differential doesn’t really come into play as far as age is concerned. If it did, no one would be able to travel anywhere.”

“So, you couldn’t go to Naru an infant and leave an adult.”

Kes shook his head. “Not possible. The planets might have their time differences, but the body works on its own clock.”

“That’s a relief to know.”

Scooting to the edge of her seat, Anne grabbed his face in both hands and kissed him quick. “Now, is there a window in this thing? I’ve got to see out. I want to see Earth disappear.”

“Better look quick.” He pressed a button and the panel on the large rectangle above the controls slid down. “Earth’s barely a blue dot in the distance.”

“We’re already gone?” Like a kid at a toy store window, Anne pressed her nose against the glass. Stars flew past them at a dizzying

STAR TRAVELER

speed. She couldn't pick out one planet from the next much less the constellations. All she could do was sit back and enjoy the ride.

"How long before we arrive?"

"About one of your Earth hours." He tucked his LifeLock back into his pocket, then sat back.

"That quick, huh?"

"Thanks to warp drive."

She glanced around.

Kes had stretched his chair out. It looked like he intended to pass his time with a nap. He could afford to be nonchalant. This was old stuff to him. He looked rather yummy all splayed out for the taking.

Anne suppressed a naughty smile. She'd let him sleep...for now. But the very notion of making love while traveling at warp speed was too good to shrug aside. His deep, rhythmic breathing kept her company while she watched planets, asteroids, comets, and distant suns zoom by. She contained her excitement and absorbed it all quietly until she saw another space vehicle.

Squealing like a little girl, she snapped her spine to attention and pointed. "Look!"

Kes jerked awake.

"People!"

He gave her an indulgent smile as he glanced out the window. "Juronian."

"Do they look like us?"

"Yes."

From the corner of her eye, she watched him settle back down. "Is this how you normally pass your trip?"

"Mostly."

Abandoning her post, Anne crawled astride his lap. "I can think of much more pleasant pursuits."

* * *

Kestral's dick hardened at the prospect of more sex with Anne. He

STAR TRAVELER

would have bet it couldn't happen again so quickly; not after all the energy he had expended earlier to double his size for her. It would have been one of those crazy wagers he would have made with his friends days ago. Yet, here he was ready to take her again...or, rather, have her take *him*.

"You took a lot out of me already." He laced his fingers behind his head as he smiled up at her. "I don't think I could come again so soon."

"This says differently." She traced the ridge in his pants with her thumb and forefinger on either side.

Kestral sucked in a sharp breath between his teeth.

"Yes," she whispered as she stroke him again. "Feels good, doesn't it?"

She had no idea.

"Perhaps I'll try one of those pulses of energy you taught me about."

"I wouldn't advise it in here," his voice came out as a ragged gasp. "You could shut down the whole system if one of them went astray."

Anne cupped his balls. "Really?" Energy radiated from her to him. Blood engorged him, filling his balls until they were as hard and tight as his cock. "Let's get these pants off."

She massaged tiny circles against him as she slowly made her way to the top of his zipper. It was exquisite torture. One part of Kestral longed to shove her back and pound himself into her; the other part wanted to see how long he could last as her willing slave. He closed his eyes and let her have her way with him.

The fly button fell open at her touch. Tooth by agonizing tooth she eased the zipper down. His cock twitched and strained for release. Pre-cum moistened his cotton underdrawers. Kestral felt like a young boy on his first joining—ready to come at the mere touch of her heat against him.

Grabbing the waistband, Anne tugged his pants down to his thighs, but left the underwear. She lifted the hem of her dress and nestled her

STAR TRAVELER

panty-covered crotch over him. He wasn't the only one who was getting wet. Hot moisture surrounded him. His low groan echoed hers. Hands balanced on the muscles of his chest, she raked herself against him.

Kestral pressed against her. It took every ounce of will he possessed to keep from taking control...and she knew it...and reveled in it. That made his feigned restraint all the more erotic.

With renewed vigor, she pumped her body over his. Each rasp pulled her further toward orgasm until she was oblivious to another's pleasure but her own. Eyes closed, head tossed back, she body-fucked him.

He felt her cunt muscles tighten. Kestral's dick surged in response. They were going to come. Just like this. They were going to...

Clutching her hip with one hand, Kestral fished his cock out of the jockeys with the one jerk. He nudged the engorged tip past the crotch of her panties and deep into her molten core. Anne bucked against him, pulling them both toward orgasm. He let her ride, gritting his teeth against the inevitable, praying to hold on until she came. It was impossible. She was too hot, too tight, too wet, too good.

"God, Kes! I'm coming!"

Climax rushed upon Kestral, too, taking control, demanding fulfillment. It spewed from him in uncontrollable spurts of hot liquid. His loud, unrestrained cries of passion mingled with hers as her vice-like grip pulled the last drop from him.

They stayed joined while their fires cooled. He pulled her head to his chest. It grew heavy as sleep and exhaustion pulled her under. He kissed her temple and let her rest. At some point he dozed, too, for the next thing he heard was—"Destination approaching."

Anne stirred, dropped a kiss to his lips, then eased back to her seat. Her sea green eyes were bright with excitement. "I can't believe this is happening! I can't wait to see everything."

He adjusted his clothing as he smiled. He couldn't wait either.

STAR TRAVELER

“Look out the window and you’ll see Naru.”

Anne looked that way. A gasp stole her breath. “It’s wonderful. So many colors. Pink, green, blue, white.”

Kestral sat beside her, seeing his world as if for the first time. “Yes, it is amazing.”

Life through Anne’s beautiful eyes. A man would be crazy to want for more.

He cupped her cheek as he lowered his lips to hers. “I love you, Anne.”

Anne pulled back on a laugh. “You must be from another planet. You’d never catch an Earth man professing love after just one day.”

“But it wasn’t one day. It was pretty close to twelve.”

Her smile faded slowly. “That’s right,” she said, more to herself than to him. “One Earth hour equals one Narun day.” A small frown wrinkled her brow. “You left me for twelve days? Why?”

Kestral longed to yank the words back. He struggled for some explanation.

She slipped from his arms. “You weren’t coming back, were you?”

He pulled her back, wrapping her in a tight embrace. “I had a few things to settle here. Affairs to set in order. It was agony each second I was away from you.”

Anne eased away once more. “You took a big chance that I’d feel the same way as you.”

Panic clutched at his heart. What if she didn’t love him? She’d yet to utter the words. He’d had twelve days to agonize over life without her. Anne had only had twelve hours. Still...

“Do you?”

She arched her eyebrows. “You know what? I think I’ll let you worry about that for a while.”

Kestral lifted his chin and stared down his nose at her. “Now why do I take that as a challenge to win you over?”

Anne merely shrugged.

STAR TRAVELER

"You have now arrived at the Naru Central Terminal," the tube announced.

The door slid open.

Neither of them moved.

"Well?" Anne said. "Are you going to show me around or what?"

Laughing, he swept his arm before him. "After you, love."

Smirk tugging at her lips, she gave him a gracious nod then stepped forward. Kestral caught her around the waist and swung her back inside.

"I saw that hint of mischief in your eyes." A wave of his hand sealed them in once more. "Computer, take us on a slow tour of the Narun moons."

"Are you kidnapping me, sir?" Laughter sparkled in her eyes.

He pressed her against the closed door. "Only until you admit what we both know is true."

"And that would be?"

Kestral raked his hand down the front of her dress, opening buttons as he did so. "That you love me," he whispered.

Yanking down her bra, he molded his palm over her breast. The nipple beaded like a tiny nose nudging for attention. Anne pulled her lower lip between her teeth as she closed her eyes. Her long fingers slithered up to his head, deep into his hair. Arching her neck, Anne tugged his head to her breast.

Her sigh coursed through him as Kestral's lips closed over her nipple. His dick hardened in response. If he lived a thousand years, he doubted he'd ever get enough of her. Groaning, he suckled hard.

Anne cried out and reared back for more. He raked his mouth to the other breast, flicking the hard knot until it lengthened and pulsed against his tongue. Then he began his downward journey, laving wet kisses and soft nips across her belly, around her navel. He caught her panties and yanked them down. Anne peeled her legs free. A shrug of her shoulders dropped her dress to the floor in a puddle of discarded

STAR TRAVELER

flowers. Her bra followed. She was naked, glowing and glorious, and all his.

"In the chair, love," he whispered roughly. "Show me where you want it."

Through passion-glazed eyes, she did as he ordered and spread her thighs wide.

"Show me, Anne," he said as he stripped his clothes away and tossed them on top of hers.

She slid her hands down her crotch, then spread her cunt lips wide to reveal the swollen pearl at the top. "Here. Get on your knees and suck it like you did my tits."

Her words nearly pulled the cum right out of him. By the moons, they were equals, parrying power back and forth. Nothing was a greater aphrodisiac.

Grabbing her buttocks, he hauled her to the edge of the seat, spread her thighs wide, and dove his face toward her welcome heat. Anne thrashed beneath the onslaught, looping her legs over his shoulders as Kestral twirled the hard bulb between his teeth. Her orgasm burst upon him seconds later. Kestral gave her no time to ride the wave down.

"Now, on *your* knees."

He hauled her, still dazed, before him on her hands and knees, then stabbed his flesh into her. Hands braced on her hips, Kestral thrust hard and deep. She dug her fingers into the short pile carpet as she lowered her shoulders and pressed her hips up into him.

He found her clit once more. It swelled beneath his touch. Each flick twitched her hips all the more, driving him wildly insane.

"Tell me, Anne! Tell me!"

"God, Kes, yes! You know I do! You know I love you! You know I...ahhh..."

He rode her through the orgasm, then shot himself deep.

CHAPTER 3

Anne was disappointed. She'd been expecting something really unique and out of the ordinary...something that screamed "another planet." Stepping from the trans-light tube, she could have just as well have been at any airport, anywhere.

Polished stone floors reflected the mass of people flitting to catch their transports. All were humanoid and all carried possessions of some kind. Luggage was a multitude of devices—a tote bag, a duffel-like container, a suitcase. That's when Anne saw some hint she wasn't in Kansas anymore. Rather than wheel their baggage behind them, the luggage automatically followed the owner.

"Do those work on remote?" She motioned to three black cases that trailed a large woman in a flowing green caftan.

"Just her energy trail."

Anne glanced up at him. His face was bright and open, nonjudgmental of her naïveté. "Is that some of what you showed me?"

He nodded. "You'd be surprised how much it can do for you."

STAR TRAVELER

“I would think it would make people a little lazy.”

“Not really. It takes a lot of skill to master effectively. A lot of people don’t have the patience to reach the full level.”

“Not even you?”

He laughed. “Not even me.”

Anne appreciated the honesty. “And yet you manage to speak to my animals.”

“Why not? They have so very much to say. My mother taught me that joy at a very early age.”

“Before your impatient nature revealed itself?”

“Impatient?” Kes tossed back a laugh.

She lowered her voice for his ears only. “You just ravished me in the trans-light tube until I confessed my love. How impatient is that?”

He bent closer. “Ravished? My sweet Anne, all you have to do is flash that smile or glance my way with that hot glimmer in your eyes and I’m hard and aching with need for you.”

That heated her cheeks. “Oh, you.” She gave him a playful shove. “Come on. Time’s wasting. Show me...everything...anything but an airport.”

“My pleasure.”

A protective hand against the small of her back led Anne toward the exit. Once outside, the illusion of LAX faded. Where at an Earth airport taxicabs, buses, shuttles, and limos queued up for passengers, here she saw another bank of transportation tubes and sleek hovercrafts. The silence struck her first—there were no motors running. The lack of gas fumes and pollution hit her next. It was nothing but sweet, fresh air.

“I presume you’d prefer a fly-over rather than a quick transport.” Kes seated his LifeLock into a terminal. Within minutes a small hovercraft eased to a stop in front of them. The doors opened, inviting them in.

Anne sank into another soft seat while Kes took the driver’s position. Seat belts locked them in place as he punched coordinates into

STAR TRAVELER

the panel. Lights flashed. A steering column sighed into place in front of him. He wrapped his long fingers around the handles and engaged the engine.

The small ship lifted steadily. Foot by foot air terminal gave way to the sprawling city. Corridors of steel, glass, and concrete marked grids across the land, just as it would in any city. But vehicles traveled in layers—first the wheeled conveyances, then the small transports, then larger and larger. Talk about a nightmare of a horizontal and vertical traffic jam.

Kes picked out what she guessed was an express lane and zipped clear of the congestion. Towering glass and metallic skyscrapers gleamed against the glow of red-orange...

"You have two suns!" She sounded like a child, but Anne couldn't help it.

"Yes, and ten moons. Two are habitable. The suns are on alternating courses so our weather is pleasantly consistent year-round."

"Always warm, never cold?"

"Always."

"How wonderful." She'd never been fond of cold weather. "All those moons must make killer high tides."

"Only six are visible to the naked eye. Five are barely dots in the night, strung out like dewdrops on a spider's web each night. One is more like your own, but phases every sixty days."

Anne stopped short of asking if that coincided with a Narun woman's cycle.

Highrises gave way to lower buildings, just as they would in any city. Pedestrians appeared with their choice in mode of travel—on foot or on foot on a moving walkway. Most chose the walkway.

Hurry, hurry, hurry. Light years away, human nature hadn't changed.

"What do people do here? What is your job?"

"I repaired warp drives until I met you. I quit when I decided to

STAR TRAVELER

come to your planet.”

“Not much call for that on Earth.”

He merely shrugged—a gesture that begged to be dissected.

She shifted his way. “Did you cause those lottery numbers to be picked?”

“Absolutely not.” He flashed her a look from the corner of his eye as he maneuvered through air traffic. “If I’ve learned anything about you, it’s that you are completely honest. You’d settle for nothing less in your life...or your man. I’m not about to screw that up.”

“My man, huh?” She laughed and gave him another playful nudge. “But you could’ve made the numbers come up, couldn’t you?”

“Maybe...but where’s the sport in that? If you can win all the time, why play?”

She traced her fingers up his arm. “Something else you’ve learned over the years?”

“Thankfully only from watching others make fools of themselves.”

“Ah, the glory of friends.”

They laughed together, then he caught her hand and kissed her palm. His gaze remained focused on the air road ahead. Anne glanced down. City sprawl was gradually fading away. Patches of blue-green grass were interspersed with round buildings; not a square or rectangle was anywhere. Trees were multi-hued like the planet itself—green, golden, deep purple. A large expanse of foliage came into view, the center of which glimmered a pale blue. People strolled around the edge of the lake, a group of children played some sort of game, and lovers were tucked away in private coves. A parking area hosted dozens of vehicles in all shapes and sizes.

“That’s a pretty park.”

“How about a close-up view? We can also grab a bite to eat there. I’m sure you must be hungry. I know I am.”

He circled downward and eased into place beside a long, sleek, black vehicle trimmed in glistening chrome.

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“Nice.”

Kestral beamed. “That’s a vintage P-3 in pristine condition. Not many of those around anymore. They went out of favor about a hundred years ago. Too slow to keep up.”

“And I bet they guzzled the plasma,” she added.

“Something fierce, but she’s sweet and comfy.”

Anne tried not to laugh. Men...they truly did speak the same language no matter where they were from. She could see them now, huddled around an ancient fire in animal skins, grunting over the latest wheel.

Kestral popped the doors open. “The food synthesizers are right over there.” He jerked his thumb toward a bank of dark gray machines fronted with digital read-outs and glass panels.

“What would you like?”

This didn’t look promising. “Some fruit?”

Long strides hurried him in that direction. “Sweet or tart.”

“Sweet.” Anne followed at a slower pace. By the time she reached him, Kes had his LifeLock attached and was punching in an order. Less than a minute later, the glass panel opened to reveal two oblong, purple objects. *Great...raw eggplant.*

She eyed the fruit with suspicion as Kes handed it to her. *Nothing ventured, nothing gained.* That’s what got her here in the first place. Taking a deep breath, Anne bit in. Sweet juicy pulp filled her mouth—somewhat a cross between a melon and a strawberry.

“Delicious,” she said as she took a second bite. “What is it?”

“Saba-berry.”

“That’s one heck of a big berry.”

Kes glanced over her shoulder at the soft hiss of another vehicle approaching the parking area. “Let’s take a stroll.” Cupping her elbow, he guided her toward a brown, cement-like path that led into the park.

Bird chatter followed their progress along the winding trail. Every so often Anne caught a glimpse of furry creatures that darted out for a

STAR TRAVELER

look at them then ducked under the cover of golden leaves. Her skin tingled with each inhale of fresh air. The temperature was perfect. At home, she'd call it a beautiful spring day. Here? She supposed it was just another normal day.

"Do you have storms here?"

Kes nodded. "Fierce ones. Mostly when we are transitioning from the influence of one sun to the other. Otherwise, just mild, gentle rain."

"How fierce?" She popped the top on her water bottle and took a long drink.

"Thunder, lightning, hail, downpours, hard wind..."

"Cats and dogs, living together."

"Huh?"

Anne laughed. "Sorry. Earth joke."

"Oh... Here's a nice, quiet place. Let's sit." He motioned to a small crescent of blue-green grass that kissed the edge of the pale blue lake.

As they sat, a flock of green, long-necked birds landed on the water with barely a ripple. Another flock of smaller, black birds joined them. They circled each other as if catching up on the daily news, then slowly glided toward Anne and Kes. Two balls of brown fur with long, fluffy tails leaped from the tree and watched.

She hugged her knees to her chest and smiled. A thousand questions tickled at her brain. Suddenly, none of them seemed to matter. She'd learn it all in time.

"They seem very curious about us," she said as the animals inched closer. "Is that normal?"

"Animals have little to fear from Naruns, but I've never seen them do this before. Normally, they just ignore us."

Kes braced himself against the tree trunk behind him. Looping a leg on either side of Anne, he pulled her into the cove of his body.

She used his chest as a backrest. "What are they thinking?"

"I can only read domestic animals, not wild."

Anne turned her thoughts outward, trying to hone in on the two

STAR TRAVELER

squirrels watching her. An impression came back almost instantly. “They *are* curious...about *me*. They like me, trust me.”

* * *

Who wouldn't? Merely being in Anne's orbit felt life-giving. Kestral's heart raced with anxiety at the thought of never seeing her again. Without Anne, he'd go back to the shell of a life he'd had before.

He glanced around for any sign their privacy was compromised. So far, his friends hadn't found them. With luck, they wouldn't. Kestral and Anne were in the shadows of the food alcove when he'd spotted Durok, Jamel, and Macris arriving earlier. The last thing Kestral wanted was to have them anywhere near Anne. He'd hustled her out of there as quickly as possible and never looked back for fear they'd identify him.

She tucked his arms around her waist as she settled against him. “What had you planned to do on Earth? How had you planned to merge into society undetected?”

Kestral was embarrassed to admit he had no plan. All he wanted was to be with her. He hadn't thought beyond that. As for merging, confessing how well Naruns were able to access Earth information might not set well with her. It was tantamount to spying, infiltration, and just about as dishonest as one could get.

Not only did the Interplanetary Commission possess monitoring devices, but entertainment companies had used similar technology. Access screens were everywhere there was a club. Those who could afford it had them in their homes. If a planet was inhabited, it was in the Narun database for a virtual tour.

“There are ways to have appropriate documentation to live on Earth and no one would be the wiser,” he finally said. “I know it's not exactly the honest way of doing things, but...”

Anne shrugged. “It's not like you're planning an invasion to take over the planet.” She arched back to look at him. “Are you?”

He laughed lightly. “No, we're not. At least not that I'm aware of.”

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"I'm sure if Naruns did, we wouldn't stand a chance. You're far more advanced than we are," she said as she settled into him once more. "Earth is probably nothing more than a playground for your people."

The words hit a little too close to home for Kestral. Maybe it was time to come clean with her and tell her exactly how he'd come to be with her in the first place. Fear of losing her made him remain mute.

They sat quietly in each other's arms watching the suns set. Even the animals settled down around them. The gold leaves shimmered with the shifting light. There was a wash of silence, except for a soft breeze that rattled the foliage gently, as if the world waited with breath held for an awe-inspiring moment. The red-orange glow faded to hot, deep pink. The landscape was transformed with it for that millisecond then subsided to a paler version until all that remained was a light gray tinged with blue. Behind them, the full moon took over the show.

The water birds tucked their beaks under their wings as they nestled to sleep on the banks of the lake. Other birds wafted up to their perches for the night. Furry animals skittered away. One paused and looked back at Anne.

She smiled. "Good night. It was nice meeting you, too."

Amazing.

He lifted her chin on the crook of his finger until her lips were a whisper from his. "You are the most wonderful—"

The flash of a light beam exploded upon them, followed by one of the three voices Kestral most dreaded hearing.

"Look who I found!"

Durok staggered over and plopped down beside them. Jamel and Macris wasted no time joining them. They looked as far gone as their friend. Bottles of moonfire wine were clutched in their hands—nearly empty bottles.

Durok's blond hair was a spiky disarray about his head; Jamel's a slicked-back swatch of black. Macris was the only one still neat and

STAR TRAVELER

orderly, but then he'd always managed to hide his excesses well...until he opened his mouth.

"Look what we have here," he slurred. "It's your little Earth girl. She's prettier in person." He leaned closer. The stench of booze wafted toward them. "How's it going, sweet stuff?" Macris wrapped long, skinny fingers around her ankle.

Before Kestral could snatch him up, Anne slithered neatly from the other man's hold and tucked behind the protection Kestral's arm provided. Only her hand on his chest kept him in place.

"Didn't mean offense. Just being friendly." Macris took a long chug of wine from the bottle.

Durok followed suit then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Don't think Kestral likes us being friendly. I have a feeling this is one lay he's not willing to share."

"Pity," Jamel said. "I'd like a go at the woman who was worth giving up a Planet Skipper for. Now there's a sweet ride."

Kestral curled his fingers into a fist. They disgusted him. To think, two weeks ago he would have been in the thick of things with them.

"Please, Kes," she whispered against his ear.

He forced his hand to relax. They were drunk and obnoxious, but otherwise harmless. He'd get his revenge when they woke up in the morning.

"In your shape, you shouldn't be walking much less flying a rocket ship." Kes stood, helping Anne to her feet as he did so. "Anne and I will leave you three to your bottles. Since I know you won't stay here until you're sober, we'll just get out of the area before you jump back in the pilot's seat."

Durok staggered to his feet. "Where's the fun in that?"

Anne blocked his passage. "There is no fun in harming yourself or another. You should stay here. Rest. The grass is soft. The night air pleasantly warm. Rest."

Durok stared at her, mouth agape while his befuddled brain

STAR TRAVELER

processed her words.

Macris tugged on his pant leg. "She's right, you know. Grass feels more comfortable than my bed."

"Yeah," Durok stumbled back. "I don't feel so good right now."

"Then rest is what you need," Anne said softly.

On their knees before her, the three looked up dumbly. Anne waved her arm toward the grass. Kestral swore he saw tiny sparks of blue light sprinkle from her fingers over his friends. One by one they yawned, stretched out, and fell asleep.

Anne's sigh spelled relief. "That ought to save them from themselves."

Kestral draped his arm around her shoulders and led her toward the path. "Anne...love, what did you just do?"

She stared ahead, yet her gaze was distant. "I don't know. As a child, my mom would pretend to sprinkle sand in my eyes from the Sandman to help me sleep. Those three are so drunk I thought... Next thing I know, blue sparkles are falling from my fingers. I don't know whether to be afraid or..." She shrugged.

He dropped a kiss to her temple. "Could just be residual energy from earlier. Come on. I'm going to take you to the best meal on all of Naru."

CHAPTER 4

Anne watched patches of light ease by below them—cities putting on their night jewelry. Every so often small lakes reflected the silvery, blue moonlight. Neighborhoods thinned, then clustered only to thin again as they passed from one settlement to the next.

She tried to enjoy the view, yet her mind kept wandering to the incident in the park. It rattled her—this energy that came to her at will. She wanted to believe it was residual. In her heart, she knew it wasn't.

She'd felt the change within her with her first breath of Narun air. Like thousands of little fireflies coursed through her blood energizing her. Afraid? Only of herself.

Anne knew what she was doing with Kes' friends. She'd meant to sprinkle them with "sand" to make them sleep. And in that instant it happened, she had never felt more powerful. Anne craved more. Remorse wasted no time swooping in. She blessed it and the humility that went with it.

This wasn't a cute little trick to use with sex any more. This was

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big, important, and damn well deserved respect. With power came responsibility, not abuse.

She studied Kes' profile. Lights from the control panel highlighted his face. How much should she tell him? How could she tell him when she could barely put the words together for herself? Somehow she suspected this went far beyond the simple things his people could do.

Concentration knit his brow as he maneuvered the small ship toward their destination. He'd said little since they'd left the park. Was he angry with his friends or worried over her little stunt?

Anne narrowed her eyes and focused her thoughts outward. Just as quickly, she yanked herself back. Responsibility, not abuse. Trying to read another person's thoughts was wrong. Each second she spent on this planet, the power that beckoned tainted her more. Intriguing as all this was, she wanted to go home before it spoiled her beyond redemption.

"Kes, I—"

"There it is!"

She followed the direction of his point. A lake ringed with trees spread out below them for miles. Dots of light around the circumference indicated houses here and there.

"Ganard Lake." A hint of pride tinged his voice as he angled down for a landing. "That's where my parents live. I transmitted a note to them earlier to expect us."

Anne swallowed the rush of emotion. This was serious. *He* was serious. Tears clouded her vision. Speech was impossible. Blinking rapidly cleared her eyes. Willpower kept them that way.

Craning her neck, Anne searched for the Dermot family home. The tress were thicker here, the homes more camouflaged. Then she caught a glimpse of soft yellow light trailing a driveway. Kestral dipped below the tree line and there it was. Recessed lights marked the porch that wrapped around the circular house. Windows curved in a continuous band around it as well. Blue-green with dark brown accents, the house

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blended well into the surrounding forest. Beyond, the massive lake glittered in the night.

The double front doors swung open wide as Kes sighed the vehicle to a stop just beyond the house. Dressed in a diaphanous dress of royal purple, a woman Anne guessed was his mother trotted down six steps to meet them.

“Renad, they’re here,” she shouted over her shoulder, and hurried on.

Kes laughed. “She’s very excited to meet you.”

At least she knew to expect them. Anne would have appreciated a little warning she was meeting his parents. Still, the bright smile that greeted her warmed her heart. She had barely left the ship when strong arms wrapped around her.

“You are obviously Anne. I’m Trina, Kestral’s mother, and so happy to meet you there aren’t enough words.”

Anne hugged her back. Who would refuse so wonderful a welcome?

Trina set her at arms’ length. “Goodness, you are beautiful!”

Coming from this woman, that was quite a testament. What Trina Dermot lacked in height—she was no taller than Anne’s five-three—she made up for in unmatchable beauty. Her short brown hair accentuated the curve of her cheeks, adding youth to her lively golden brown eyes. Crescents around her mouth hinted at a woman who smiled often. Love radiated from her...and from the imposing man whose shadow now filled the doorway.

Again it wasn’t height that gave Anne that impression...it was his personality. Here was a couple who would be noticed the instant they stepped into a room. Gray peppered his dark hair, and laugh lines bracketed his mouth and deep brown eyes. He pumped his son’s hand in welcome, then clapped him on the back as he gave him a one-armed hug.

“So...this is Anne.”

STAR TRAVELER

Long arms wrapped around her. She felt like a long-lost daughter who'd come home.

"I hope you two are hungry. Your mother made enough to feed an army."

Trina gave him a playful push. "That's because you men eat as much as an army." She tossed an arm around Anne's shoulders. "Let's grab your things and get you settled. Dinner will be ready soon."

Anne flashed Kes a look. "I...don't have anything with me."

That earned him a smack from his mother. "Idiot, you drag her all this way with nothing to wear but the clothes on her back? Where's your head?" She gave him no time to respond and guided Anne toward the house. "We look to be the same size. You're welcome to my wardrobe while you're here. Men...honestly. I'll show you to your room. Maybe a hot bath first? I'll grab a few things from the closet..."

"Goodness, Trina. Let the girl catch her breath."

The deep baritone voice pulled heads up. Another man stood in the doorway, silhouetted by the yellow light behind him. Electric blue eyes pierced the night, eyes that focused exclusively on Anne.

Kestral cupped her elbow. "Anne, this is Locar. My great, great, great grandfather."

The introduction was clearly made with the reverence it deserved. She stepped closer, one hand extended in greeting. "I'm honored."

His bright smile cut a swath across his face as his aged fingers grasped hers. Anne felt the energy in his touch. A shock of white hair graced his head. Deep canyons were cut in the dark leather of his face. Stooped somewhat from his advanced years, his grip was firm, sure. Power coursed through his veins.

"As am I." He slowly broke their physical connection, yet their minds remained linked on a subconscious level.

Anne's earlier trepidation dissipated. He knew and understood all she had experienced.

"You've all rushed up on her like she was a new pet." Locar

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softened his scolding with a wink to Anne. “Come, child. Let them fuss over arrangements and food while you walk an old man through the garden.”

She answered with a smile. “I’d like that very much.”

Walking side by side, he led her around the house on the covered porch.

“So...an Earth girl.” He clasped his hands behind his back. “I visited the planet many, many, many years ago. Nice place Earth.”

She laughed lightly. “Well, I rather like it.”

Locar smiled. “I suspect you do.”

Their footsteps echoed against planks that sounded very much like wood. One touch of the railing revealed it was a synthetic plastic.

“Yes, everything here is synthesized,” he said. “Nothing natural. A pity. But it was the only way to save our planet all those centuries ago. We’d just about cleaned the place out of plants and animals.”

“Thankfully, you were able to recover.”

He nodded. “But there was a cost—to us and to those species we couldn’t save.”

Three steps led them down to a small garden path. Locar slowed his pace, savoring the scent of flowers that now surrounded them. Calm seeped into her bones. Anne closed her eyes and inhaled. “I smell gardenias.”

“Yes, I love their scent, their velvety texture. I brought several plants back with me.”

“I don’t blame you. I love them, too.”

“But then there is very little you dislike, is there? Love surrounds you, despite the tragedies you’ve suffered.”

She shrugged. “I have my animals, my friends. No sense not embracing life.”

“Or opportunities?”

Anne didn’t know what to say about that. He motioned her to two chairs overlooking the lake and they sat.

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“You’ve felt a change since you’ve arrived on Naru.”

No sense denying what they both knew, so Anne kept quiet.

“It unsettles you, frightens you. New things this bold would frighten anyone.”

“It’s not the power, it’s my attitude toward it,” she freely admitted.

Locar covered her hand with his. “The fact you recognize its intoxicating effects and are humbled by that show me you would never abuse it. Cast your fear aside and embrace it. It’s a unique gift. Most fail to grasp it fully or they squander it on useless parlor tricks and sexual favors.”

Anne felt her cheeks heat and blessed the darkness that kept him from seeing her embarrassment. Still, Locar chuckled.

“Yes, my grandchildren are no better. There was a time I thought Kestral...” He pulled in a deep breath. “Never mind a old man’s ramblings.”

She touched his arm. “Please, tell me.”

Locar nodded. “I’d like to say our world is free of greed and avarice. Sadly, that’s not so. Kestral was a gifted child. Open and bright. Too much so. Another sought his power and took him. Kestral was a boy, but fought. The battle scarred him here.” He tapped his head. “By the time we got him home, he was close to exhaustion. His mother didn’t want him to lose his gift and opened him to the world of animals. That helped him heal. But Kestral never fully embraced the energy after that kidnapping.”

“Because he fears someone will steal it and use it wrongly?”

“Perhaps. He refuses to speak of it. But it’s still a part of him, despite the fact he doesn’t use it to its full potential.”

“Except in the heat of passion.”

Locar nodded. “At least he uses it wisely. Wasting it on tricks and favors dissipates it quicker than anything else. It’s as if it has a will of its own and is searching for a proper host.”

Her heart quickened. “Are you saying it’s an entity?”

STAR TRAVELER

"No one really knows." A sigh pulled him back in his chair. He closed his eyes and pulled in a deep breath. "I suppose it could be. You've felt the energy rushing in your blood. Doesn't it feel like life to you?"

She brushed a nonexistent chill from her arms. "I suppose it does."

"Maybe it senses the inherent good in you and selected you."

Anne laughed lightly. "The question is what will I do with it? What if I abuse it?"

"As I said...knowing the power it has to corrupt, knowing how powerful *you* feel, knowing how you love the person you truly are, could you possibly abuse it? No, not when you make the conscious effort not to."

"Not with you as my mentor," she countered.

Locar tossed back a hearty laugh. "And there we have it." He glanced her way. "I can guide you, but you have to teach yourself."

Anne cocked her head to one side. "Your eyes. They've changed from blue to brown."

"All in channeling, my young protégée. How else could I read you without intruding?"

"Ah...my first lesson... And, trust me, that one's desperately needed. Show me, please."

"My pleasure." He clasped her hands in both of his. "Now let the power build, but direct it in, settle it deep inside rather than casting it outward. I'll help ground you while you do so."

Since focusing her gaze normally helped Anne zero in on her target, she closed her eyes. Almost instantly her blood pulsed with electricity. It tickled her skin looking for an outlet. This time she was in charge. She let it wander for a few seconds, like an over-active child, then gently reined it under control. It tugged against the restraint for the space of one heartbeat before it bowed to her will, settling in a constant, humming flow just beneath the surface of her skin.

Slowly she opened her eyes. Locar's gaze met hers. Anne didn't

STAR TRAVELER

have to ask if she was successful; an inherent sense told her she was. She loosed one thread of energy toward the old man whose grip she held. Snippets of his life opened before her—his travels to other worlds, the wife he'd loved and lost only the year before, the generations that followed and revered him, and the adventures that still begged to be fulfilled.

Anne smiled and nodded. "There is still time."

"True, my young friend. So very true." He slowly released her hands.

"Thank you." On impulse, Anne dropped a peck to his cheek.

Locar chuckled softly. "No, dear one. Thank *you* for reinvigorating an old man. Kestral is indeed a lucky man." He pulled her fingers through the crook of his arm. "Come, dinner awaits. Trina's been fussing over it all day."

* * *

Kestral watched Anne and his grandfather make their way slowly back around the house. A soft glow surrounded them, a remnant of the energy so much a part of them both. Tiny sparkles of light dotted the air in Anne's wake. Their heads were bent in a quiet conversation only they could understand.

He had to admit he envied their closeness. In Anne, his grandfather had finally found a kindred soul, something sadly lacking in all his descendants. No one in their line had ever possessed the talent or the patience to learn. They all tried to hone the latent gift each Narun was born with. But, like ninety percent of their population, none had the interest or the skill to fully develop it.

Pride chased away envy. At least he'd been able to give his grandfather Anne. Her presence, her aptitude, scattered the vagaries of old age and gave him renewed purpose. Kestral could certainly appreciate that.

"She's a beauty," his father said from behind him. "Special, too. Grandfather felt her presence long before you arrived."

STAR TRAVELER

Kestral's gaze never left Anne. "I never thought I could love a woman like this. She's what makes me whole, what gives me purpose, and meaning to life."

His father came up beside him and watched the couple's progress along the porch. "Those obnoxious friends of yours were by shortly after you left. They seemed to find great amusement in the fact you'd gone back to Earth. Any particular reason why?"

"Knowing them, I'm sure they've already told you." Guilt gnawed at Kestral. He wasn't proud of how he'd come into Anne's life, but he was sure glad he'd met her.

"They did. Your mother and I just didn't want to believe it."

Kestral sighed. "It's true. I was a fool to take such a wager." He glanced at his father's profile, a mirror image of his own. "But if I hadn't, I never would've met her. And I do love her more than life. Without her, I'm nothing. I want her with me always."

"And what about what Anne wants?" His father slowly shook his head. "By your grandfather's word, she is a gifted, special woman who could go far if that talent is nurtured. Look at how it surrounds her. Look at how she has grasped that. What if she wants to explore the full spectrum? Would you deny her that? Or let her go to fulfill—"

"She's carrying my child," Kestral spit out through clenched teeth.

His father shifted a steady gaze his way. "Again, something she's had no say in and presently no knowledge of." He gave a humorless grunt. "And you claim to love her? You want her for what she does for you. Ask yourself what you can do for her, besides getting her with child. Love isn't selfish, Kestral. It's about sharing...and sometimes about letting go. Do you love Anne enough to let her go if that's her wish?"

He was spared having to reply by his mother's call to dinner. That quickened Anne and his grandfather's steps. The glow around them dissipated, but the aura remained.

"It smells wonderful!" Anne exclaimed as Kestral swung open the

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door for their entrance.

"I could eat my weight in food tonight," his grandfather added.

His father laughed and clapped the old man's back. "Now that's something I'd like to see."

Kestral caught Anne's arm as she followed the men. Head cocked, her gaze questioned him.

"I just wanted you to know I love you."

"I love you, too." Stretching on tiptoe, she kissed him then tugged him toward the dining area. "Come on. I don't know what Trina's cooked, but my mouth is watering."

* * *

Anne sank into sheer bliss. Not only was the bath water hot and silky against her skin, but the tub itself was heated. She danced her fingers against the cobalt blue tile as she eased against the pillow behind her. Then she closed her eyes and relived the last few hours.

It felt wonderful to be a part of a family again. As an only child, Anne had no one left after her parents passed away. Both sets of grandparents had preceded her parents in death years before. And the Dermots really did treat her like a princess just home from a long voyage. First there was Locar's quiet tutelage. Then there was dinner. While Renad plied her with stories of Naru, Trina stuffed her with a deliciously wonderful meal—vegetables and short grains in a light, peppery sauce. Afterward Trina opened her closet and tossed one outfit after the other over Anne's arms before steering her to the room she'd share with Kes.

Through it all he'd stayed quiet, seemingly content to watch Anne being adored by his family. But she didn't miss the light in his eyes or the love that radiated from him just for her. Content as she was, homesickness invaded her heart.

By Earth time she might not have been gone for more than a few minutes, but the clock ticked faster on Naru made her feel it'd been longer. Come morning she was going to ask Kes to take her home.

STAR TRAVELER

They could always return another time. Maybe his family would be interested in visiting her.

The decision eased the heaviness in her heart. Anne relaxed her muscles by slow degrees. Since her experiment with Locar on the porch, the energy still coursed in her veins ready to be used at a micro-second's notice. Anne silently thanked the old man. One little session and he'd already managed to help her learn to control it rather than have it control her. With time and practice, who knew what she might be able to achieve. Anne looked forward to finding out. For now, she was merely grateful to feel blessed by it rather than cursed.

A presence eased around her. Anne loosed one tendril of energy and found Kes in the adjoining bedroom. She thought of him as a boy, fighting the madman who'd kidnapped him. Her heart choked with emotion. Had he spent the years since squelching the memory as he did the energy? Could be. If she had been in that situation, that's what Anne would have done.

"Care to join me?" she asked.

Wearing a smile and nothing more, he stepped into the room. "Reading my mind now?"

She laughed lightly. "Of course not. That would be rude."

He eased into the tub opposite her, then draped her legs over his. "Now *this* is comfort."

"I'll say. I love this tub. I love this room."

Tiny white flowers offset the blue tile throughout the spacious room. The tub was on a fully-enclosed platform next to a huge picture window that overlooked the lake. Plants dangled from hooks all around.

"I might just have to renovate my tiny bathroom with some of my lottery winnings."

"What? No traveling the world?"

"You've just opened the universe to me. What more could I possibly want?"

STAR TRAVELER

“What more indeed.”

But the smile in his eyes faded. Pulling in a sigh, he reached for one of the tubes of soap on the window ledge. He spurted a generous amount in his palm, then smeared it across his chest. Anne glided his way and slipped her fingers under his. They moved in tandem over the plains of his chest until she dared to dip lower. Kes closed his eyes and leaned back, content to let her explore.

His stomach muscles rippled beneath her touch. Re-soaping her hands, Anne traced the contours of his ribs, down to the clefts in his buttocks, over his hips, down his thighs, then up the inside. His jaw tightened in an effort to maintain control she was just as determined to break.

Turning her hand, she cupped his balls and lightly massaged them. A low groan tore from his lips. His erection bounced in the water, beckoning for attention. Grabbing the base gently between thumb and forefinger, Anne straddled his lap and tucked the tip of his penis into her vagina.

“Love,” he said on a choked groan. “Please don’t tease me.”

“Never,” she whispered in reply, and engulfed him in her warmth.

That spurred him to action, but not the kind Anne expected. Kes caught her hips and stilled her movements. Joined as they were, she felt the pulse of his cock against her walls as he fought to hold back the rush of orgasm. That she had put him on the edge so quickly was a heady feeling. One word, one twitch and victory would be hers. But at what cost to passion?

Desire shuddered through him with each pant for breath. Her clit swelled against his pubic hair, begging for attention. She slipped her fingers between them, squeezing the hard, little bulb into submission. It only made matters worse. Tossing back her head, she squeezed again.

“That’s it, love. Make yourself come. Let go.” He thrust his cock deeper.

Anne reared back as she frantically danced her fingers around her

STAR TRAVELER

clit. Each jab of his cock lifted her higher, closer to her goal, and he had yet to give her the full measure of his desire. The first spasm neared, elusive as a sneeze. It crawled down from her belly, drawing her tighter and tighter before it exploded from her in breath-taking wonder. Riding the wave, she ground against him and reveled in the twitch of his cock as his orgasm spurted into her.

In the after-love kisses that followed, both reached for the soap at the same time. Still joined, they bathed each other, building the lather as the passion flared once more. Though less urgent this time, the climax was just as sweet, if not sweeter. Finally spent, Kes pulled the plug on the water then wrapped her in a thick towel and carried her to bed. There he spread her open before him and dipped his tongue in the well of her nectar.

Clutching the bed curtain behind her, Anne opened her thighs as far as they could go. He traced each fold over and over, then wiggled his tongue deep into her opening, fucking her with it as he had his cock while his nose flicked back and forth over her clit. She twitched in helpless abandon beneath him, begging for completion while she longed for the moment to last forever. Her body edged toward the summit, hovered there, then—

“Oooooooooo.”

Kes gave her little time to recover. Lifting her leg, he rolled her to her stomach, then hauled her to her knees. One hard thrust seated him deep. Ass bouncing against his crotch, Anne burrowed her head to the sheets. While one hand held her in place, his other dipped forward to her clit. Still sensitive from coming, she jerked away the attention.

But Kes would not be denied. He pressed hard both behind and in front, demanding yet another orgasm from her. It tore from her in a blinding flash that stole her breath as well as her senses. Only his hands on her hips kept her in place while he rode her to his own pulsing orgasm. Breathless, they collapsed onto the bed and let sleep take them.

* * *

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A persistent tap against the bedroom window pulled Kestral awake from a sweet sleep.

Anne focused bleary eyes on him. “What is that? Someone at the window?”

He shook the fog away and snatched open the curtain. A curse choked in his throat at the sight of Durok, Jamel, and Macris standing there.

“What do you want?” he demanded.

“Come on. Be a sport. We just want to get to know the little lady,” Durok said.

Kestral let the curtain fall. Rage boiled. At least they didn’t sound drunk anymore. That made their appearance even more alarming.

Anne’s hand on his arm kept him from exploding. “If we don’t go with them, they’re going to wake the whole house.”

She had a point.

He peeked outside. “We’ll meet you outside in a few minutes. Just let us get dressed.”

Muttered comments followed, none of them pleasant and all having to do with leaving Anne in the state she presently was.

“Animals,” she said as she slipped an iridescent green dress over her head. “I can’t believe they’re friends of yours.”

“Right now, I’m finding that hard to believe myself.”

The three were in the Planet Skipper waiting when Kestral and Anne went outside minutes later.

Durok jerked his head toward the back. “Hop in.”

“Drunk as you were earlier, I think we’ll be doing good to just follow you.” Kestral lifted the door on the rental ship.

Anne slipped inside. “Bless you.”

“Don’t bless me yet, love. I have a bad feeling I know where they’re going to want to go,” he quietly responded.

“Something guaranteed to shock the Earth girl?”

“Absolutely.”

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A wicked smile spread over her face. "We'll see who shocks whom."

* * *

Anne was prepared for anything...except this. Bodies slammed together in sexual abandon to the beat of music. Women in short, silvery dresses served vials of blue liquid to customers, then serviced their needs as demanded. None of the women complained or seemed to mind, and that's probably what upset Anne the most. They accepted the treatment.

"So what do you think of our little hang out?" Macris squeezed the ass on a passing woman, then pulled her astride his lap.

Looking bored, the woman pulled his erection out of his pants and let him take her. It was all over in less than a minute.

It was the longest, most uncomfortable minute of Anne's life. She glanced everywhere but at the thrashing couple.

"Well?" He gave the girl's ass a parting pat as he waited for Anne's response.

"I'm sure you were the thrill of her life," she sarcastically replied.

Laughter exploded from those around them. Macris wasn't laughing.

Using the excuse of finding the ladies room, Anne slipped away. Picking through the tangle of bodies, she found the entrance to the kitchen and bar. Several women lounged back there, some crying. They straightened and started to walk away when they saw Anne watching them. She was quick to offer reassurance.

"Please, don't go. I just wanted to tell you...it doesn't have to be this way. Unless, you want it to."

The tallest one with long, flowing black hair took the forefront. "It wasn't always like this. There was a time when they cared about us. Now..." She shook her head.

A short redhead pushed forward. "The manager looks the other way. Says it's good for business and business is good. That we're well

STAR TRAVELER

paid to please the customer, so why should we care about anything else.”

“And was mindless sex part of the agreement when you were hired?” Anne glanced from one to the other. Their expressions said no.

The raven-haired beauty shook her head. “It just is. Somewhere along the way, roles shifted and we lost control. Very few customers...share.”

“Then change it. Take control back. Make a stand. They share or you don’t. You just serve food and drinks.”

One of the girls in the back flicked tears off her cheeks. “And how are we supposed to do that? They’re nothing but a bunch of rutting primitives.”

Anne smiled. “Oh, I think I know of a way. Watch.” She focused her attention on a burly man with a boasting erection just about to give it to his server tables away. Anne narrowed her eyes. His penis deflated.

The ladies muffled snickers behind their hands and quickly ducked behind the partition.

“How did you do that?” the redhead asked.

“By accepting and properly using what you were all born with,” Anne replied. “See what you want and make it so. I’ll show you.”

* * *

Kestral was about to hunt Anne down when he saw her making her way back across the room. Men’s gazes followed her, but all respected she was a patron just as they were and left her unmolested. That didn’t stop them from grabbing one of the servers after Anne had passed. Eyes riveted on Anne, they pumped away at the poor woman beneath or astride them. At least that’s what had happened on her initial trip across the room. The quiet since then had been eerie.

One by one, the female attendants slipped away until no one was on the floor. The clients were too drunk to notice at first. But with each minute that ticked by and their glasses emptied, the lack of attention

STAR TRAVELER

was obvious. Grumbled protests lifted in unison, increased in volume. The reappearance of the ladies, following Anne with ale-laden trays, settled the men. Unfortunately, the lust had tripled.

“There they are.” Durok lifted his empty glass. “It’s about time. Get over here, girlie. I got something that needs fixing.” He cupped his erection and shook it her way.

The blonde trailing Anne was all smiles, her gaze focused exclusively on Durok. The man’s victory smile sagged with his penis. By the time she reached him, Durok was humbly seated covering his shame.

“Drink, sir?”

He gave a single nod. She placed ale on the table and moved away. Remarkably, no one touched her. All three sat there like schoolboys caught cheating.

Anne slipped into the chair beside Kestral. A smile teased her lips. He glanced around the room. Everywhere he looked, Kestral saw the same scenario—the men well behaved in their seats while the women served booze.

Three men staggered from the facilities. Their pants were undone, erections bobbing before them. Collectively, the women looked their way. In seconds, three flaccid penises dangled exposed for all the world to see.

Smothering his laughter, Kestral nuzzled his mouth close to Anne’s ear. “What did you do?”

She fanned her fingers against her throat. “Me?” A sassy smirk followed.

“Let’s go,” he whispered. “Before I get picked off in the fallout.”

They stood as one.

“Where are you going?” Jamel demanded to know.

Kestral dropped his hand to the small of Anne’s back. “Back to bed.”

“You might want to consider doing the same and calling it a night,”

STAR TRAVELER

Anne told them.

Macris snickered. "You offering to keep me company?" He reached for Anne's leg, then yelped as if shocked.

She clucked her tongue. "Static electricity will get you every time."

Anne snagged a glass of ale from a passing tray. "Here, let me buy your next bedmate a drink for the road." Before he could move, she poured it into his open palm.

Female giggles tittered their way. Macris just stared in dumbstruck silence. Before that changed to rage, Kestral hustled Anne outside. Once inside the safety of the ship, he swiveled his seat her way and swung her into his arms.

"You realize what you've done for those women?"

She hiked her dress to her hips and sat astride his lap. "Just reminded them of what they could do for themselves. Now...do for me what the women said you did for them."

Kestral drew back. "Anne, I—"

"It was before me. It doesn't matter. But your shame in that behavior does show who you really are. Do you know how proud I am of you?" She fumbled with his pants until he was exposed to her. "They might be your friends, but you are nothing like them."

She dropped to her knees and pulled his dick deep into her mouth. The door to the club opened. Six men stepped out. Reluctantly, Kestral tugged away.

"Let's get home first, love. The last thing we need is eyes."

He couldn't fly fast enough. All he could think about was the sweetness that waited for him. Jerking the ship to a stop, he grabbed her hand and hurried them inside. One shove and she had him on his back, his pants undone, her body hovering over his throbbing cock.

He grabbed the hem of her dress and whipped it over her head. Her nipples were peaked, hard and waiting for his lips. Kestral girdled his hands over her ribs, seated himself slowly, then drew her forward. He suckled her breast deep within his mouth.

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Anne pulled in a sharp breath and lost herself to the pleasure. He wiggled his hand between them, giving her clit his thumb. Hands braced on either side of his head, she circled her hips around and around.

“Do it,” she pushed out through clenched teeth. “Give your energy to me.”

She reared back until he could see the place where their bodies were joined. Pooling the heat to his fingers, Kestral stabbed a pulse of energy toward her swollen clit. Then another that curled and licked around her like a tiny, warm flame.

Anne’s breath caught. Her eyes flashed open in wonder. She came a second later...and so did he.

They fell together with a kiss. Snuggled front to back, they settled down. Her deep, rhythmic breathing soon followed, but sleep eluded Kestral. Propped on one elbow he watched her for what would probably be the last time. She was powerful. His father was right. Kestral was being selfish. If he loved her—and he did more than life itself—he had to be willing to let her explore her full potential. Kestral had no business standing in her way. As much as he loved her, he was going to have to let her go...because he did love her.

A vicious circle.

He swallowed the pain in his heart and curled his body around hers.

CHAPTER 5

Sunrise called to Anne just as it did on Earth. She sat on the shore outside the Dermot house as she watched the lake shimmer pink with the promise of morning. One by one, birds and animals joined her. She felt their trust, their love.

Almost as good as being at home.

Almost but not quite. Anne couldn't bear it any longer. The second Kes woke up, she'd ask to go home. Having breakfast with the family would be the polite thing to do, but then...

A bird fluttered to her feet. Its wing was held out, broken. Sad, black eyes looked up at her for help.

"Poor little one."

Scooping the tiny creature in her hands, Anne pooled healing energy around it. The bird rested its head on the cradle of her palms and closed its eyes. Anne saw the injury and focused on melding the break together. A chirp signaled success. The bird tested its wings, then flew to her shoulder and sang her a tune before joining its friends nearby.

STAR TRAVELER

Anne smiled. “I’m glad I could help.” She watched the suns peek over the horizon.

The power to heal. What a wondrous gift.

Another to be used wisely. Kes had given her his love, opened the world to her. This was something she could do for him—give him back what was taken all those years ago.

* * *

Kestral watched awestruck. If he’d had any doubts before, he didn’t now. Anne was truly gifted. The animals loved her here just as they did on Earth. Power or not, that would always be so with her. Everyone, every thing needed to be in her orbit. Even the lake came alive in perfect synchronicity with her breathing; waves swelling with her intake then breaking softly with her exhalation. What she’d accomplished last night at the club was wondrous, but to see her heal that bird...

She turned a smile his way when she heard his footfall on the grass behind her.

“Good morning. Sleep well?”

Kestral stretched out beside her, curving his body around hers. “You exhausted me. How could I not?”

Anne laughed and nudged her elbow into his ribs. “Come to watch the suns rise with me?”

He dusted his fingers down her arm. “Of course.”

She sighed and leaned against him. “It’s beautiful, but I’d really like to go home, Kes.”

“Are you sure?”

Staring at the lake, she nodded. “I know you said it was only an hour to your day, but I feel I’ve been gone forever. I miss my animals. I want to go home. I need to go home.”

He caught her fingers and drew them to his lips for a kiss. “You have a universe of possibilities open to you, Anne. You must know the power you possess is unique. Don’t you want to explore it?”

STAR TRAVELER

“What good is power if it means deserting those you love and who love you?” She cupped his face between her palms. “I love my animals, Kes. I can’t leave them. I love my home. I don’t want to leave it.”

“Even if it means never knowing what you could accomplish?”

To his surprise, she laughed. “I can accomplish whatever I wish.”

He traced the apple of her cheek. “There are classes, specific instruction—”

“Silly.” She waved the idea away with a flick of her hand. “It’s what’s inside that counts. Only the classroom of life can teach you that. To reach my full potential, all I have to do is explore myself.” Anne cocked her head to one side. “But you never accepted that, did you? You’ve always been afraid to look inside. Afraid of being consumed. Afraid of what you might find.”

He had to admit she was right. How many times had his grandfather beckoned him to look inside and feel the power? Too many to count. Kestral’s patience had faded fast despite the old man’s quiet tutelage. He knew fear was a part of it.

“It’s what’s inside that counts. With everything we do in life, Kes. It’s what you are, what you believe. As long as you stay true to that...”

Anne slipped her hands into his. “You embrace the energy in the heat of passion—making love, protecting me from muggers. Maybe now’s the time to finally learn how to integrate it completely.”

“I don’t know, love,” he readily admitted with an awkward laugh. “It’s powerful and frightening.”

“Don’t I know it? Here—” She squeezed his hands. “—let’s explore together. I’ll ground you as Locar did for me.”

Here was a chance to experience that link she and his grandfather had established the night before. The oneness few could touch. How could he refuse? This was Anne and everything she touched was blessed. He closed his eyes. Energy pulsed in his blood. Hers was there as well, helping him tame it to a steady flow.

“Inward, Kes,” she said softly.

STAR TRAVELER

He began that internal spiral. Fear gnawed at him. Only Anne's presence kept him on track. He felt the first rays of sun lick them, felt her love surround him. Their souls touched, embraced. Nothing they had done sexually was ever as intimate as this. Pulling in a breath, he opened his eyes to hers. They were blue, vibrant, like the woman before him.

"How do you feel?"

He matched her smile. "Calm, peaceful yet energized." He gave a small laugh. "Naruns are supposed to be the higher evolved species."

"Yes, that was clearly evident in the club last night," she replied sarcastically.

Kestral had no defense for that one. "You have me there. To think an Earth woman could open my eyes to the wonders of my own world... You complete me, Anne. Make me whole. Without you, I am nothing. I want to be a part of you."

Anne pressed her fingers to his lips to silence him. "You are my world, Kes."

He traced a line down her throat with his forefinger. "Not your whole world, but a part of it."

She smiled. "A big part. I want you in my life."

He cupped her face between his hands, afraid to let go for fear this was all a dream. "Marry me. Here or on Earth. I don't care. All I know is I can't live without you. I'd lay the world at your feet if you asked me to."

Anne kissed him. "I'm not asking for the world, Kes. Just my home and my animals with you by my side forever."

Kestral pulled her down and wrapped his arms around her. "Let's finish watching the sun come up. Then it's home for us."

* * *

Anne settled in the cove of his body. *Home*. Nothing sounded sweeter. She closed her eyes and let the light and warmth embrace her. Energy grew. She steered it inward and felt Kes there with her, then the

STAR TRAVELER

presence of another deep inside.

Wonder flashed her eyes open. She dropped her hands to her belly.
A child! She carried Kes' child.

"Kes! We're...I'm..."

He covered her hand with his. "I know, love. I know."

CAITLYN WILLOWS

Caitlyn Willows is the pseudonym for award-winning author Catherine Snodgrass, who wanted to flex her writing muscles in the romantica genre. Readers will find the same quality from “Caitlyn” that they have come to expect from “Catherine,” but the stories will be more over-the-top and more steamy. Sometimes the novels are written singularly, and sometimes they are a collaborative effort with award-winning author Paris Dixon. Always they will be action-filled...in more ways than one.

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* * *

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