



Praise for the writing of
Rayne Forrest

Across Time is an extremely well written, powerful and intense story. The characters and scenes are so well described that I could visualize everything so well that I felt like I was watching a movie instead of reading a book....**Across Time** is like a science fiction version of Indiana Jones with a mystical twist that had me absolutely riveted until the very last page. Recommended Read, Kerin, TwoLipsReviews

WARNING

This e-Book contains sexually graphic scenes. Store your e-Books carefully where they cannot be accessed by underage readers.

Truest Treasure

The Curiosity Shoppe II

Rayne Forrest

Aspen Mountain Press

Truest Treasure
The Curiosity Shoppe II
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Dedication

For Ron

Thanks for all our adventures.

Zebadiah LaCroy refused to flinch under his captain's steely gaze. He knew the regulations as well as anyone and he knew what he was asking. He also knew that exceptions were made every day. He pressed his new bride closer to his side to stop her from squirming.

"She won't be any trouble, sir. She understands that she has to stay in my cabin, unless I'm accompanying her. By the time we reach Saturn, her papers will have cleared."

"LaCroy, do you know what you're doing? Once she sets foot on Earth, there's no turning back."

He couldn't turn back no matter where his feet were planted. . He had bonded to Semele, and she to him. They were one in ways a simple marriage could never achieve. They would need a marriage certificate, however, for her to have full citizenship on Earth.

"I appreciate your concern Captain, really I do. I know what I'm doing. If you would just perform the simple civil service, sir, I'll get her settled in and then log in for duty."

His captain rolled his eyes. "You're a romantic, aren't you, LaCroy. I think we can give you a day or two for a honeymoon. Stowe your gear and report to my cabin in five minutes. It will be short and sweet, but it will be legal."

Semele tugged at his sleeve. The unusual words had piqued her curiosity. He knew it like he knew her left ankle hurt, and she was thirsty.

"Thank you, sir." Zeb turned, gathered up his mate's one bag, wrapped an arm securely around her waist and moved her along down the corridor. She made a grab for the bag, strengthening his conviction that it held more than met the uninitiated eye. He had a firm grip on it and her, and he wasn't going to let go of either her or that bag until they were safely inside his quarters. She bowed her head meekly.

Uh-huh. He was right. The bag definitely held something odd in nature. He'd been a fool not to question her more closely on the space station. He tightened his grip around her waist as he guided her along. She was just too sneaky to let go.

"You'd better tell me now what you have in this bag."

She seemed to be concentrating on her little slippered feet as they peeked out from under her robe as she walked.

"Semele. Tell me. Don't make me have to spank you." He sent of the image to her of her lying across his lap, bare bottom in the air.

She stopped dead at her tracks. Her gorgeous emerald eyes narrowed to slits.

"You should reconsider this action, Zebadiah."

"You should confess what's in this bag."

"Everything I need."

That's what scared him. She could, to some degree, manipulate matter. The problem was he didn't know, for sure, what that degree was. He needed to ask the right question with just the right wording to get an honest answer. It wasn't that she was deliberately lying, it was the quirky way she processed the English language. Talking telepathically was still new to him. He was far from mastering it, but improving fast. He'd eventually get a straight answer from her.

"Here's my cabin. It's not very big, but I think we'll manage." He reached for her right hand to place it on the security pad.

She pulled away, but not in fear. "What is this?" Her eyes glowed with curiosity.

He concentrated on explaining to her the function of security pad, what it was, how it worked, why it was important for her to place her hand on the pad and let it be scanned.

She blinked at him. "This will allow only you and me into these quarters?"

"Yes. Only a very few people can override the security lock. You'll be safe in here." He reached for her hand again. This time, she didn't pull away as he programmed the system to recognize her. It beeped. "There. All finished."

The door opened and he motioned her to precede him. The cabin wasn't very big, only about thirty feet by twenty feet, but it held all the necessities. He had his own shower facilities, his own food dispenser, and a bunk big enough for two. "What do you think?"

She tilted her head in that way she had when she was thinking hard. "Why do you think I am disappointed with this room?"

"For one thing it's rather small."

"It seems adequate." She moved around the small space, the tiny bells sewn into her robe tinkled softly as she walked. She stopped and looked at the bunk. His groin tightened as the image of them coupling reached him through their bonding. The image of looking up at himself while they made love grew in his mind. His body responded with surprising speed, his cock swelling.

It was not his image. It was hers, reaching him through their bonding.

"Stop thinking about that, Semele. Before we can do that again we have to go get married, and I don't want to say my vows with a hard-on."

"Are we not already bonded?" She blinked those big green eyes at him again. She questioned the institution of marriage. She found it an inadequate way to secure a mate but she'd agreed to the ceremony as a way to please him.

He knew all this through the strange bond that had formed between them. It was very disconcerting to know things about her in a cloudy, fuzzy sort of way. Stranger still when the impressions suddenly came into sharper focus.

"We are, but we have to say the words in front of a legal representative of our judicial system for your papers. That's our law."

She smiled demurely. He wasn't fooled by the shyness act. He wrapped his arms around her. Warmth suffused his being. It was his own pleasure at holding her, and hers at being held, multiplied and intensified by their sharing of it within their unique bond.

"Should we not go, Zebadiah? Your superior said five minutes. Do I misunderstand that this is a very short time? And tell me, what is 'honeymoon'?"

He kissed the tip of her nose. "Yes, we need to go, and yes, you'll really enjoy our honeymoon. Being on this ship isn't it, my sweet." He grinned and flashed her own image of them in the bed together back at her. "But you'll like that, too."

He laughed wickedly when she blinked at him then grabbed his hand and dragged him toward the door. "We must hurry. I am anxious for you to show me these things I will enjoy."

He was anxious, too. "You'll have to let me pace myself, Semele. I'm only human."

She hauled him into the corridor and pulled him along in the right direction. Clearly she could read his thoughts much better than he could hers and had seen the location of the captain's quarters in his mind.

"You should not worry about being human, Zebadiah. I have learned a human male can mate many times in a row with no ill effects."

"You have, have you? Where'd you learn that bit of nonsense?"

She stopped so quickly he stepped on her foot. She yelped and hopped away from him to lean against the bulkhead and rub her toes.

I'll rub them for you later, Semele. I may even suck on them.

Her lips parted. Her eyes narrowed. He smiled at her. She wanted him to strengthen his mental voice, so he thought he'd work on it with things she'd understand. She'd not expected this, though.

You seem to think I would like that. Is this a human mating game?

It could be. It could just be I'm teasing you.

She dropped her foot and gave him one of her sidelong glances. He thought about painting her toenails red, calling the image up in his mind as vividly as he could. Her head snapped up. Her jaw dropped.

He seized the moment. "We're going to be late. The captain will space us and we'll miss our chance to get better acquainted." He held out his hand to her.

She hobbled up to him but he was a fast learner and had figured out some of her little tricks. “Forget it, Semele. I’m not going to carry you through the corridors just because you like it when I pick you up.”

She stopped limping, her strides becoming fluid and graceful once more. They stopped in front of the captain’s door. Zeb pressed the call button and the door opened. He motioned for her to walk in. She balked.

I do not know this man very well, Zebadiah. I cannot judge his actions.

“Just go in, Semele. He won’t bite.”

“Like hell I won’t,” the captain called gruffly from inside.

Zebadiah, you must go in first.

“Don’t be afraid. Just walk in.”

I must not go into a stranger’s home before my mate. It isn’t done.

“You’re making that up. I can tell by the look on your face. Okay, okay. You win.” He stepped inside. She followed him, practically plastered to his backside. He pulled her around to stand beside him.

What’s wrong, Semele?

He’s angry.

Not with you, sweet. He’s not happy with me, but he’s not angry.

As you wish, Zebadiah. But he will be angry.

Zeb didn’t have time to ask why she thought that. The captain had called up the standard form on his console. He glanced at Zeb.

“I have your information. Now what’s the bride’s name?”

“Semele.”

“And her last name is?”

Zeb looked at her. She shook her head then answered softly. “Among my people, one has only one name. Another is not needed.”

The captain looked at her. “Right. Just where are you from?”

Zeb put his arm around her as she edged closer to him. He had a few doubts about her being from the Beta Circini star system, but why would she lie about it? His captain wasn't going to like this one. She nudged him with her knee.

"She's from the Beta Circini system, sir."

"Of course, she is," the captain replied dryly. The captain put Beta Circini in the field for species origin. Semele nudged him again.

Shh. Don't say a word, Semele.

I do not need to. I showed him my world. He now believes.

Zeb choked. The memory of a sunlit, agrarian world with a sky full of vivid colors came to him. She'd given him that memory.

You did what? Now he'll know you're telepathic!

No, he will not. He will not consciously remember how he knows of the Cincietel.

Not consciously remember? He had a few new questions for her once they'd gotten back to his cabin. He coughed and cleared his throat under the curious gaze of his captain.

He coughed again. "I'm fine, sir. What else do you need to know?"

"Her age?"

Zeb wouldn't mind knowing that, too. He looked at her. Her cheeks turned rosy. Well, well, well. That was something new.

"How old are you, Semele? You can tell us."

You do not want to know, Zebadiah.

Yes, I do. I'm curious. Please don't drag this out any more. Let's get it over with and get back to our cabin so I can practice being your mate.

"I've passed two hundred three cycles of the *juahira*," she said primly.

Zeb groaned. She blinked her eyes innocently at him. The captain sighed audibly.

"She looks twenty-one, LaCroy. That's all that matters and that's what I'm putting down."

“Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.” He’d get to the bottom of her age later. The form could be amended. He ignored her as she tugged on his fingers. He could sense her curiosity over the meaning of the captain’s statement.

That led to another question. Why couldn’t she get the information from his mind? He really needed a crash course on his bride’s telepathic abilities – and limitations.

Just as clearly as he could sense her curiosity about looking twenty-one, he could sense her concern over how old he thought she was. Was there a certain stigma about age among her people? The image of the young girl he’d seen on Station Janus rose in his mind. The first time he’d seen her she’d appeared to be about twelve years old.

Oh, dear lord! Was she even old enough to take a mate? Did she have family that would be displeased at what they’d done?

The captain stood, holding a piece of paper and ending his speculations if not his private panic over climbing into bed with an underage female of any species.

The captain began the ceremony, asking Semele if she took him to be her lawful husband. She cocked her head. Her delicately arched brows knitted together. She looked at him.

What am I to say, Zebadiah? This is very strange. Words cannot bond male to female. It takes much more.

Just say yes, wench. Trust me. I’ll give you some reading material on the custom later. And stop talking like this before the captain figures out you’re telepathic. We’ll really have problems if that happens.

Why?

Just say ‘yes’ so we can get out of here!

“Yesheismyhusband!”

The captain shook his head and turned to Zeb, asking if he took Semele as his lawful wife. He replied in the affirmative. The captain pronounced them husband and wife and they signed the papers. Zeb took their copy of the certificate and pulled

Semele into the corridor. It was no surprise she started babbling at him the minute the door closed behind them.

Is it wrong to speak like this? This is more normal for me than speech. Your language is awkward. That man is very annoyed with us. We have done nothing to him.

No, not wrong. Just very unusual. So unusual it would be of great interest to the scientists. They'd want to test you and do all sorts of things to you. You wouldn't like it much, and neither would I. So we need to be careful.

He could sense her thinking about that and temptation got the best of him. He thought about the mad scientist laboratories in the old horror movies he'd so avidly watched as a boy, making sure she could see the images in his mind. She slammed the door on their mental connection so fast he swore it created a breeze. He laughed out loud.

"Zebadiah!"

Her surprised disbelief that he'd tease her like that made him roar with laughter. She planted her feet stubbornly. He picked her up, slinging her over his shoulder and ignoring her cries of outrage as he carried her back to his cabin. He dropped her on the bunk. She started to sit up.

"Ah, my sweet, if you get up we can't play. Don't you want to start our honeymoon?"

He swore he heard her purr. Her long, graceful fingers began slowly releasing the fasteners on her robe. He smiled down at her.

"Are you in a hurry?" He sent the image of how she looked to him, naked and sprawled beneath him in the glow of candlelight. Christ, she *was* purring. His balls drew up and he started to swell.

She looked around his cabin then rearranged her robe to a chorus of tiny bells to sit cross-legged on the bed. He saw the image of candlelight in her mind. "Please give me my bag."

"We can't have candles on the ship. An open flame is against safety regulations. Would you like something to drink?" He handed her the iridescent bag. It had been a

dull black before, confirming a few more of his suspicions about it. Maybe now he'd get a glimpse of what its mysterious depths held.

"Yes. Something to drink would be appreciated." She pulled a strange metallic blue box from the bag. She opened it and pulled out a rough cut milky-white crystal that began to glow as she held it in her palm. She placed it on the narrow shelf above the bunk.

Damned if it didn't look like a small flame.

He handed her a glass of water. "So we'll have candlelight, after all. What else is in the box?"

"That which belongs to me. You should not investigate these things." She lifted her nose haughtily. "I understand their use. You do not."

"Okay. I won't snoop in your stuff and you won't snoop in mine."

"Snoop? What is snoop?"

"Covertly investigate. Spy. That goes for reading my mind, too."

She blinked coyly. "I cannot avoid seeing what is in your mind. It is open." Her emerald gaze fell to his zipper.

In this, he could read her mind all too easily. His skin prickled with anticipation of her hands on him again. His erection completed. He pulled the zipper tab down.

"That's open, too. Now what are you going to do?"

She feigned indifference, taking a long drink of her water.

He wasn't fooled. She had pert little nipples, for an alien female, and they were showing. He joined her on the bed, leaning back against the wall. He picked up her left ankle and began a slow massage. "Why does this hurt?"

She didn't have to pretend to be surprised. "You know I have pain there?"

The recollection of banging the ankle against the seat on the shuttle on the way to the ship came to him, and he knew it wasn't his memory. "Obviously. Did you injure it running from all those male suitors you must have had?"

She cocked her head, thinking. "I did not have many males pursuing me."

"Why not? Were you too young?"

Oh, ho ho. He'd hit on something she didn't want him to know. Her cheeks turned rosy again. She couldn't look him in the eye.

"Let's do some math, Semele. Two hundred three cycles of the *juahira* means what exactly? How long is a day on your world?"

"Approximately one hundred of your hours."

Damn. "You mean you only have one sunrise every one hundred hours? How many cycles of the *juahira* are there in a solar cycle?"

"There is only one."

"So you're about forty-eight of my years old." She didn't look a day over fifteen sitting there with a decidedly innocent look on her face. A look that didn't fool him.

"Are you young or old for your race?"

"I do not see why this is important. I have lived as long as I have lived."

"Don't be evasive. We won't..." He sent the image of them coupling to her. "So you'd better tell me."

"I am quite young, Zebadiah. Had I not known you were waiting for me, it would be many more cycles of the *juahira* before I sought a mate."

Jesus, he'd committed a felony on two worlds.

If she'd not known he was waiting for her. Hell, he'd not known he was waiting for her. She, on the other hand, had said they'd been drawn to a particular moment in time. He looked at the glowing crystal.

When they met, she'd told him she'd seen him in the crystal. His bride had some unusual talents that he didn't find reassuring. He kept massaging her ankle, working in a few strokes over her very shapely calf. "Semele, what would be done to you if you'd taken a male of your own species as a mate?"

She cocked her head. Her gaze inched its way back to his open fly and the bulge under it. He sensed she planned to tell him the truth and her hesitation came in finding the correct words.

"An older male would not have sought me until more seasons passed, thinking I needed more time for my maturity. A male of my peers would not yet have had interest

in a mate.” She pulled her foot away from his ministrations. Her bodice gaped open giving him a scintillating view of her very full, very firm right breast.

“No, Zebadiah. You fear a punishment for me and that would not happen. For one so young my heart is old. I sensed something different waiting for me. I sensed you, and I came.”

He wanted to know just how she sensed him across light years, but his desire to make love to her again shoved his curiosity out of the way. He had time to learn more about her after he could think straight again. Right now he was ready to let instinct lead the way. She sat eyeing his bulge like a cat seeing cream. His cock pulsed with anticipation.

“Well, punishment is a moot point. You’re going to be living on Earth. Do you like what you’re looking at, wife?”

Very much. Do you like what you are looking at?

He snorted. He liked it a lot, but she knew that. He picked up her bag. She made a quick grab for it and had he not been quicker, she’d have snared it.

“I’m only putting it on the floor.” He stretched and set it at the foot of their bunk. “I promised not to snoop and I won’t.”

He reached for her, gathering her into the circle of his arms. She snuggled in close, resting her head on his shoulder. Her robe gapped open affording him a good view of both her breasts. She knew he was looking and he heard her silent laughter through their bond. In his mind he built an image of them in the shower, washing each other, slick with soap. She started squirming.

“Would you like something to drink?” He didn’t even know if she could consume anything alcoholic.

I would not like to become intoxicated, Zebadiah. You are tired.

Oh, one of these days he’d test her tolerances to alcohol and call it a science experience, or something. He’d have to out sneak her smart little alien thought processes, though.

“I’m not too tired, sweet. I just want to relax for a few minutes.”

Then I will taste this drink, but I do not promise to consume any quantity of it.

"Good enough." He tipped her chin up and touched his lips lightly to hers.

She pressed upward, eager for the kiss. Her tongue made a gentle sweep across his lower lip, stealing his breath. Heat simmered in his groin. What she did to him should be a crime.

He jerked when she bit the corner of his mouth hard enough to draw blood. Her tongue soothed the small wound. He'd have to ask her to be more careful - when he could think again. He held her in his arms and that as all that mattered to him in this moment.

Light swirled around him. He could see the room in his mind, bathed in colors of blood red, rich purple, and midnight blue. Warm, scented air caressed his skin. Slender hands touched him, exciting him. Her lips found the flat, round disk of his nipple and suckled. He didn't remember taking his shirt off. Her breasts, generous for such a slender woman, were in his hands.

Her sweet musky scent, like some exotic honey, seeped into his brain, sinking into his being. She tasted of spices and sun-filled afternoons, her skin soft and dewy beneath his questing lips. Moist heat engulfed him. She'd taken him in her mouth. The thing that she had never dreamt of, but had seen in his mind.

He reached through their connection and reassured her. It was strange to be able to taste himself, to feel himself in the echoes of their bond. He pulled away from her, stretching out on the bed.

He didn't remember removing his clothes, or getting hers off, but it didn't matter and he didn't care. She was above him, straddling him, her heat sheathing him. She rose, then sank down over him, again and again, swamping him with waves of devastating pleasure. The light in the room changed becoming bright, golden. The need in his belly burned hotly.

Zebadiah.

Her inner walls clinched his cock. Her body suddenly bathed his thighs, raining down her pleasure over him. His balls drew up. The breath clogged in his throat.

“Zebadiah!” She spoke aloud, crying out his name.

Her body pulsed around his. He could feel her orgasm, feel her amazement and her desire for the sensations to never stop.

He wanted to stay with her, feel it with her, but his own climax seized him. He drove up into her, hard. Her body yielded again and again as he thrust into her, pouring out his seed. He sucked a deep breath into his burning lungs. She fell forward onto his chest, sobbing. He wrapped his arms around her slight body.

“Semele, baby, it’s alright.”

Even as he said the words he knew it wasn’t all right. She had done something to him to incite him to have sex with her. She’d bitten his lip. He rubbed his tongue to the spot and found no soreness or mark, no indication at all that she bitten him, but he clearly remembered her doing it. That wasn’t all he remembered.

He remembered the strange light that swirled about the room. It was gone. He glanced up at the milky white crystal that looked like an ordinary chunk of quartz. Looks could be deceiving, and he was sure, whatever it was, it wasn’t quartz. The uneasy stirrings of her guilty conscience reached him through their bond, tiny tendrils of touch seeking him.

You're angry with me.

She had good reason to be worried.

No, no I'm not. But I think in the future it would help if you were a little more patient.

Do you forgive me?

I won't spank you if that's which are worried about.

She curled up in his chest, catlike. He fumbled for the edge of the blanket and pulled it up over her. She didn’t seem to want a move, nor or did he want her to. His body still nestled within hers, and he liked the sensation.

“Semele, you shouldn’t do that to me when I’m not expecting it.”

“But you wanted to mate. Your body was ready to mate.”

"Maybe things are little different for us. For human males, I mean. My body might be ready to mate twenty times a day. That doesn't mean I can actually do it more than two or three times a day."

The mental connection between them echoed with her silence, then she whispered to him.

"That must be disappointing."

He roared with laughter. She tumbled off him. He rolled towards her, pinning her between his body and the wall.

"Okay, wench. I wanna know what you did to me. I want a straight answer. Is there something in your saliva, some chemical that effects males if introduced into their bloodstream?"

Her big green eyes blinked. She nibbled her lower lip. Ah, well, he'd hit on the truth of it. Now she was trapped, in more ways than one. She couldn't out and out lie to him because of their bonding, but she didn't want to tell him the truth either.

"Semele, let me tell you something about myself. I will always be angrier when you don't tell me something than when you do. I'm not angry now, merely curious. You might as well confess because I know you did something to me."

Tears welled up in her beautiful eyes. He settled her closer and brushed a kiss to her forehead to reassure her.

I will not do it again Zebadiah.

"What if I ask you to?"

Her surprise echoed back to him. "Yes, sweet, I might ask you to do that sometime. Would you do it?"

Her eyes widened. She swallowed and nodded solemnly. He hugged her and she relaxed in his embrace.

"I expect that we will find a lot of differences, Semele. Let's try not to surprise each other too much with them."

The differences are many, too many to speak of now. Now, I would like to taste this drink, you offered.

“You're changing the subject, but all right.”

He released her and rolled to his feet. He had a bottle of old-fashioned bourbon stashed in his footlocker. It was contraband onboard a ship, but he didn't care. A man had to maintain some semblance of southern gentility.

He could feel her gaze on his backside as he checked the security on the door then poured a small shot of the bourbon. He downed it with one quick flick of his wrist. The amber liquid burned all the way down, spreading familiar warmth through him. It tasted of home and made him wish this journey over so he could show Semele the bayou.

He refilled the glass then capped the bottle tightly before putting it back in his footlocker. His bride sat cross-legged on the bed, watching him.

Well, she wasn't watching *him* exactly, her being focused on his exposed manhood. He knew without asking she had sensed the wave of homesickness he'd experienced. He held the shot glass out to her. “Now stop looking at my cock and listen to me.”

She ducked her head and looked up at him through her wispy bangs.

“I want you to take just the tiniest little taste of this. Like this.” He touched the tip of his tongue to the fiery liquid. “No more than that, Semele.”

Yes, Zebadiah.

He didn't believe that meek little voice for a moment. “If you swill down this whole glass and you're allergic to this, I won't know what to do to help you.”

Yes, Zebadiah.

“If you swill down this whole glass and I have to take you to sick bay, the doctors are going to examine you and you're not going to like it.”

Yes, Zebadiah.

“If you swill down this whole glass and you throw up all over my cabin, *I'm* not going to like it.”

She glared at him. He grinned and handed her the glass. She obediently touched the tip of her tongue into the bourbon. Her whole face puckered. Her eyes watered. She sucked in a wheezing breath, holding the shot glass out to him as if it were a viper.

It is foul! She started coughing.

He quickly handed her a glass of water. She drained it and held the glass out for more. He refilled it for her. He sat beside her and patted her back. He sipped the bourbon under her wide-eyed stare. Concern for her well being grew into an uneasy ball beneath his heart. They'd not considered so many things before starting out on this journey together.

"We'll have to find something else you will enjoy. It may have to wait until we get home. Right now I'd like to know what you can eat."

"You should not worry. There is very little of your native foods that could harm me."

"How do you know that?" Lord, he hoped she was correct. The stupidity of taking her away from Station Janus and access to things not human suddenly crushed his chest. He couldn't live with himself if his haste harmed her in any way.

She turned to him, climbing onto his lap. He fell over sideways, sprawling them onto the pillows and wrapping her securely in his arms again.

"Zebadiah, I was on the space station long enough to learn many things. I must not eat anything you call nuts, or the delicacy you call chocolate. I have a comprehensive list of other substances I must limit."

The tightness in his chest eased. He recalled something she'd said when they first met, that she had realized the person calling to her across space was human. She'd had time to investigate, while she waited for him to show up at Station Janus.

She'd also said discovering her perspective mate was human had frightened her. He didn't think she was frightened anymore. He kissed her lightly. Her lips clung sweetly to his.

"I'm sorry, you can't have chocolate, sweet. Every woman I know loves it."

"I am not like any other woman you know, Zebadiah."

No, she certainly wasn't. "So are you hungry now? Did all of this give you an appetite?"

The image of them coupling again came to him, along with her wistful longing to make love again. "I need food, wench. And I really would like to take a shower. You'll like taking a shower with me." He patted her bare rump. "Besides, you don't want to wear your new toy down to a nub, do you?"

Her delicate brows knitted together. Her lips, rosy from his kisses, pursed as she thought about his words. He placed her hand over his genitals. "This new toy, sweet."

Sweet, Jesus, did all females know how to give a man that 'you only think you're cute' look? She had it down perfectly. He grinned at her, and pulled her to her feet and into the small bathroom. Damn.

He didn't have any of the soap solutions and potions that women seem to like. Maybe, being such a cute little alien, she wouldn't care. He set the water temperature and turned on the spray. She balked when he motioned for her to step in to the shower.

You go first.

"It's only water, Semele."

If I am to bathe, I need something from my bag.

Of course, she did. "What's in that bag, wife?"

I told you. All that I need.

Yep, that's what worried him. She scampered back out of the bathroom, snatched up the bag, and pulled a small bottle from it. She smiled as she walked towards him. Her hips swayed. Her breasts moved gently.

He might as well face it. He was goner. He'd been wrapped around her little finger from the first moment he'd heard her voice. He stepped under the jets and held out his hand to her. She squeezed into the small shower stall with him and he pulled the door closed.

He sensed her glee as she turned round and round under the water. A tub to bathe in was familiar, but a shower was something new to her. He stopped her spinning motion when she was facing the controls and gave her the crash course in

operating the shower along with the warning that water for bathing was restricted. She could have one twenty-minute shower a day, or two ten-minute showers. It was her choice. She nodded her understanding.

He picked up the washcloth, lathering it with bar of soap. He scrubbed under her watchful eye then handed her the cloth and asked her to wash his back. When she was finished, he offered to do the same for her. She looked pensive, then opened her bottle and poured a drop of dark liquid into his palm before turning around.

He rubbed his hands together creating a rich lather, strongly scented with a spicy musk. Before he was finished he'd washed her from head to toe with it. She'd smiled the entire time his hands were on her, but had miraculously refrained from saying anything or sending him mental images.

They finished rinsing off and he cut the spray. The towels onboard the ship left a lot to be desired in the soft and absorbent department. Once they got home she'd be drying off with one hundred percent Egyptian cotton. It would be gentler on her skin.

Now he had to get her something to eat.

He wrapped her in his old velour robe then instructed her to remain inside the cabin while he dressed and went to the mess hall to pick up their dinner. He sensed her reluctance to remain behind. "I will take you all over the ship tomorrow and you'll be able to see everything. Can you wait that long?"

"Yes, Zebadiah. I can wait." She blinked those big green eyes at him. "I am hungry," she said wistfully.

He grinned at her. "I'm going. I'm going! I'll be back in ten minutes." He tapped her nose gently with his index finger then left.

The mess hall was on the deck below. He wasn't armed with much knowledge of what she could eat. Avoiding nuts and chocolate would not be a problem on board ship. The mess hall meals were generally served buffet style. Carrots, corn, green beans and broccoli were staples. There were generally two meat proteins, two pastas with varying sauces, some sort of fruit, and nasty canned pudding for dessert. He put a

dollop of each item in a tiny bowl, and then filled a tray with them. She could pick and choose what she wanted and he'd eat what she didn't. Simple.

She greeted him with open arms when he reentered their cabin. They sat at the small table and he watched her nibble, sampling bits of each dish. She didn't think much of the corn or the canned pears, but she wolfed down all the carrots and a good portion of the wild rice. He filed the knowledge away for future reference. Their meal completed, he watched her try to hide several yawns in a row. He tossed everything into the recycler before scooping her up and laying her on the bed.

"Now we sleep, sweet." He kicked off his boots then let his pants fall to the floor.

"You do not wish to mate?" She yawned again, burrowing down deeper into the plush fabric of his robe.

"In the morning." He pulled the blankets up, then slid under them with her. She nestled against him as he wrapped his arms around her.

"Lights. Off." The room went black except for the tiny glow of the white crystal. He held her and reflected on the most unusual day of his life.

Last evening as he'd climbed into his solitary bed he could have never imagined Semele existed, much less that she would be here with him. He'd not gotten up this morning to go acquire a wife. His sole goal of the day he had been purchasing a Christmas present for his sister.

Now he had more than a wife. This strange bonding that united them echoed with her presence even as she drifted into sleep. It was disconcerting to sense the shadows of her dreams. It felt like an intrusion, and yet he knew it was not. She had said that in time he would learn to separate her thoughts from his consciousness. He took a deep breath and imagined a brick wall between them. Her essence faded.

She stirred in her sleep, whimpering, reaching for him. He wished the wall away, raising in its place the split rail fence draped with honeysuckle vine that graced the edge of the yard back home. She stilled, her breathing leveling again.

Could it really be as simple as that? He'd have to try again when she was awake although he knew the wall was gone for good. He didn't want that type of isolation from her. He just wanted to have private thoughts, private feelings. She would have to understand that was the way humans were.

He settled himself down, concentrating on sleep. The captain said he could have a couple days off. He'd take them. He wanted to be on the observation deck for his last look at Station Janus when they broke dock in the morning. Then he would show Semele around the ship. And after that he would lock them in their cabin and make love to her until neither of them could move.

She sighed in her sleep, a soft sound of contentment. Zeb smiled and joined her.

* * * *

Zeb woke up alone. Completely alone. Semele was gone.

Her scent lingered on the sheets, but she was not in the cabin, nor could he sense her presence anywhere. He leapt from the bed, his heart hammering in his chest. He yanked on a pair of pants and a tee shirt and tried to reach her through their bonding. He wasn't skilled enough. She simply wasn't there.

His hands shook as he punched in the code for the security officer. She reported that no one had left the ship since the final lock down at midnight. They were still scheduled to depart at oh-eight-hundred hours.

He barely managed to say thank you before he cut the connection. Where could Semele have gone? Could he have imagined the whole thing? He spun around. Her shimmering iridescent bag lay by the bed. That meant she was still on the ship. Hell, that meant she was real.

He took in a deep breath and steadied himself and reached beyond his own awareness.

Semele?

The warmth of her presence suffused him in a welcoming glow.

You are awake. Her mental voice sounded amused, which he was not.

Where the hell are you? he snapped at her and instantly regretted it. He knew her whereabouts. He could see what she was seeing and hear what she heard as clearly as though he were standing beside her. This bonding, this connection, was downright weird.

She was in the mess hall, surrounded by his crewmates, and loving all the male attention lavished on her. She held a tray while his *former* friends filled little bowls for her. She smiled coyly as samples of this, and samples of that, filled the tray. She deserved a spanking – and he told her so.

The smile dropped from her face.

“My bond mate is waiting. I must hurry.” She scurried off before they could add anything else to the tray. Zeb opened the cabin door and waited. The sound of tinkling bells reached him. She came around the corner and skidded to a stop.

“You will not do this spanking thing to me.”

“Wanna bet?” He leered at her. “Hand me that tray. It must be heavy.”

She complied, but kept her distance.

“Come on, sweet. And if I ever do spank you, it won't be for disobedience. You'll like it.” He set the tray on the table, grinning as she inched her way past him and eased onto a chair. She truly had no concept of human sex games. “You should have let me know you were leaving the cabin.”

“I wished to surprise you.” She bowed her head contritely. She didn't fool him.

“You did that.” He placed two of the bowls in front of her. “That's oatmeal, and the yellow stuff is scrambled eggs.”

He sprinkled some sugar over the oatmeal. She took a cautious bite. Then another. The eggs never made it past her nose.

“That is a processed dish. It lacks true nutritional value for me.”

“You can tell?”

She sniffed haughtily and pointed at what his spoon. "What is that?"

"Grits. It's a fine old Southern delicacy." He held the bowl out to her. She took a taste, shook her head, and went back to the oatmeal.

He smeared butter and jelly on a piece of toast and handed it to her. She took a few bites and turned her attention back to the oatmeal. Fine. She could have all the oatmeal she wanted. Every bite of it.

"Pay attention, wife."

She stopped eating and looked at him. God, those green eyes of hers were a distraction. They robbed him of all conscious thought. Her expression underwent a subtle change, moving toward the stubborn determination he already knew so well. She didn't care to be given orders and she knew she was about to get one. He leaned back and folded his arms over his chest.

"Semele, you can't be running about the ship alone. I'm sorry, but that's just the way it is."

"I will not lose my way. From your mind I've learned what I must know."

"That's what scares me." He leaned forward and tore off a hunk of cinnamon roll and handed it to her. She nibbled at it.

"You just pluck knowledge from my mind, and that's not fair since I can't do that to you, but that's not the big problem here. Did you not notice the way those men looked at you?"

She swallowed and nodded at him. "They were very friendly."

Friendly. Jesus. "They were that. Stay away from them. And stop trying to read my mind. Just this once, do what I tell you to," he ordered curtly.

She met his gaze. Her emerald eyes grew cold. The room swirled around him, vanishing. Suddenly he sat in the middle of a vast ice field, pummeled by sleet and snow pummeled him that burned his exposed skin with its harshness. He was freezing to death! His heart stuttered, faltered, stopped! He couldn't breathe, his lungs froze and shattered in his chest. Blackness grabbed him.

At the moment of death, he suddenly came back into himself, sitting comfortably at his breakfast table, warm and alive. He sucked in a deep breath and tried to calm his heart as the panic faded.

She'd done that to him.

What was she, really?

I am Cincietel. These men will not touch me. I will not allow it.

He cleared his throat and reached for his hot coffee with shaking hands. If she did that to too many men, he'd never be able to keep her away from the scientists.

"Maybe you don't have to scare them quite that badly."

"I am sorry, Zebadiah. But you needed to know I have defenses."

Defenses. He'd bet a year's pay no one threatened her people on their own world. She nodded and spoke in a cold, hard voice he hoped he'd not hear often.

"No. They do not. The Cincietel are respected by all."

"And feared?" The glint in her eyes scared him and he knew she couldn't harm him. Their bonding prohibited it.

"None have cause to fear us without provocation, Zebadiah," she responded softly. "We learned long ago that our way of life is different and not all understand it."

He held out his hand to her, palm up. She placed her hand in his. He still needed to learn much about his bride but he'd had enough of an education for one breakfast.

"I want to go up to the observation deck and see Station Janus for the last time. I won't pass this way again."

"That makes you sad."

"A little. But it's time I went home and settled down. With you." He kissed her knuckles.

She smiled at him, her eyelashes fluttering dark against the luminescence of her skin.

Oh, no. He recognized that look. "No, wife. We'll play *after* the ship is underway, and then you'll tell me more about your home world."

"As you wish, Zebadiah." She rose with fluid grace and began clearing the remains of their breakfast.

He ducked into the bathroom. When he came out he found her arranging a group of smooth, black crystals on the table.

He decided he didn't want to know. Yet.

"This will protect all that is mine," she said without looking at him. "None will enter here."

"None will enter here, anyway. There's security on the door."

"This is more reliable."

He'd just bet it was. He hoped he could explain the concept of "household staff" to her when he got her home. She needed to refrain from frightening them for dusting the furniture.

The observation deck was crowded when they arrived. They got their fair share of curious looks. His former Plizi bunkmate moved aside, clearing space for them. Semele turned and glared at the Plizi female. Zeb spun her back to the view port and pointed at the space station.

Be nice, Semele. It was a long time ago, before I even knew you existed.

I will set a protection against her! You are my mate!

No, you won't. There's no need to do anything. Besides, what's done is done. I can't take it back that I had a little romp with her. She's actually a very nice person.

God, how stupid could one man be? She plucked the entire sordid episode from his memory. He wrapped his arms around her and grabbed her wrists. Onlookers would think he was being romantic. Far from it.

His bride was furious and ready to foolishly let her strange powers be seen. He called up the mad scientist imagery again. Semele stilled, sinking back against him.

That's better. Just look at the station. Do you feel the vibrations under your feet? The ship is powering up to move.

She didn't respond.

He thought about bending her over their little table in their cabin and taking her from behind.

She squirmed in his arms. One slippered foot slid up the back of his calf.

I love you, Semele. You're my bond mate. You should know I couldn't get involved with anyone else ever again.

He let go of the fantasy as Station Janus shrank in the distance. He watched sadly as it faded to a bright ball, then disappeared as the ship changed course. He would never pass this way again. The door had closed on this time in his life. He'd be earthbound, for the most part, once this flight ended.

Several of the people assembled congratulated them on their nuptials. Semele smiled politely at them and he sensed she immediately liked one of the younger women she exchanged pleasantries with. He'd invite the girl and her partner to visit them in a few days.

I would like that, Zebadiah.

I thought you might, sweet.

"Are you ready to go back to our cabin so we can continue getting acquainted?" he asked her.

She started pulling him down the corridor. Catcalls and applause erupted behind them. He waved over his shoulder at his crewmates. Let them have their fun because he certainly would have his.

* * * *

Zeb was cold. He clawed his way out of the murky depths of some dream where Semele floundered in the black bayou mud, crying out to him for help, to find he was naked, coverless, and drenched in sweat. Jesus, what a nasty dream. His back muscles screamed in protest as he rolled over. It might be awhile before he shook it off and went back to sleep, but he was going to reclaim his half of the blankets and be warm until he did.

Semele slept between him and the cabin wall. They'd hung a thick blanket on the wall to keep the chill of the cold bulkhead from her. Just his luck to have a cabin against one of the structural beams. He'd asked around in an effort to locate someone who would trade berths with him. The only person who volunteered was the Plizi and Semele stubbornly and flatly refused. She said she'd rather be cold than sleep where that female had. So she slept cold.

Which meant he was cold a lot.

He worked his way back under the covers and wrapped his arms around her. She was curled in a loose ball, cocooned in his robe. He cupped her breast. She stirred, a gentle tensing and relaxing of her muscles and a subtle shift toward the warmth of his body. Her awareness reached to his.

Their bond had strengthened over the last three months and his mental abilities with it. In his mind, he formed a picture of a warm summer day, baked by the sun, to warm her. She wiggled closer, pressing her bottom into the curl of his hips. His eyes would have crossed had they been open. Their sex life just kept getting better and it had started off great. He started working the edge of the robe up.

She started to shake.

Don't lay there and laugh at me, Semele. It's not nice to laugh at a man in my state.

I do not laugh at you, Zebadiah. I laugh with you.

Sure she did. He grasped her knee and lifted her leg. His rigid manhood slipped between her thighs. He eased her leg back down, securely locking his cock in a soft prison. He flexed his hips, gliding the steel core of his erection inside its silky sheath of outer skin. It was reminiscent of his youth when he only played at sex with girls.

Oh, that's heavenly, wife. It really was. He could easily get off like this if she'd allow it, but he sensed her ardor growing. It would soon match his.

I'm pleased for you, Zebadiah, that you find this stimulating, but it does little for me.

He licked the rim of her ear. *You're fibbing. I can feel you getting wet. You know we'll be arriving at Titan in less than two hours. Wouldn't you like to see the approach and the docking?*

“I would like for you to talk less, Zebadiah, and stop wasting time.”

He chuckled wickedly and dipped his middle finger down into her damp curls. How did she do that? One day she was smooth-skinned and the next she had silky curls. Surely she had to be reading his mind and tapping into the dark expectations in his fantasies.

He didn't want to ask her. The daily discovery was just too enjoyable. She arched her back and he was suddenly buried in her welcoming heat. He gave up speculation on his bond mate's unusual talents. At least for now. Just like he had everyday for the past ninety days.

He flexed his pelvis and she pressed back tightly to him. He rocked slowly within her, a slow ride to passion, and the ecstasy beyond. Her pleasure dewed their thighs, as she wound her consciousness around his to create their unique dance.

The cabin faded. They were no longer in their bunk but on a cotton-soft blanket on a thick green lawn under a red sun. The sound of a waterfall drifted to him along with the scent of fertile, tilled soil. Her world this time, not his. It was a world she rarely shared with him, so intent was she to fit into his.

“Are you homesick, sweet?” he murmured in her ear, tightening his embrace. The sadness that welled up within her caught him off guard. Their bonding could be a double-edged sword.

I miss the sky.

So do I. Once we reach my home, we'll be able to sleep under the stars.

The sudden clenching of her inner walls around his cock ripped a groan out of him. He drove into her. She answered, reaching behind him and digging her nails into his flanks. He rolled her beneath him, grasped her hips and pulled them to their knees, never breaking their physical connection. He pushed into her unresisting flesh.

She met him, thrust for thrust, giving no quarter and taking none. The vision of her world faded as her arousal grew.

She was completely open to him, trusting him. He didn't let her down as she raced to completion. Her body pulsed around his. She faltered and he was there to carry

the rhythm as she climaxed, calling out his name. She sucked in a sobbing breath and he fell over the edge with her.

His balls tightened. Sweat broke out on his back. His abdominal muscles tensed, protesting. Sensation skittered up his back and shrieked down to the base of his spine. Black spots swam in his vision. His world condensed to those few inches of flesh that joined them. His thighs threatened to cramp. He reached for the orgasm and it broke over him, swept through him. He emptied himself into her.

She waited there, in their bond, with him in that dark bliss, her heart beating in sync with his.

They drifted in the peaceful dark, sated, content. No conscious thought formed but he knew his bond mate was pleased. He coaxed her to move. She stretched out beneath him. He followed her down to the mattress, as reluctant to have their physical joining cease as she. His body covered hers and kept her warm. In their bond they circled and danced, freed from the constraints of the flesh.

The first time she'd shown him how to do that, how to move beyond his body, he'd been amazed, and not some little bit apprehensive. With practice he'd learned to initiate the experience, and to enjoy it fully. He refused to delve too deeply into the hows and the whys of it. He really didn't want to know about all Semele's little tricks. Not yet, anyway.

For now, he was content to be with her in their beautiful, silent dance where touch was real, and yet not, and all that mattered was the joy they shared in each other's presence. He slowed the dance, easing away from her essence. Experience had taught him that to linger too in their special realm exacted a price with fatigue. He kissed the back of her neck.

"Let's shower. I want to see Titan this last time."

She stirred beneath him. "You should get off me, then. I can not rise until you do."

"I can't move. I'm limp."

She snickered. Twice. Smartass little wench.

He rolled off the bed and headed for the shower. She followed behind him, patting his buttocks and telling him to hurry. He did. They made it to the observation deck in record time. The hazy orange of Titan rose before them, with Titan Station just beyond. Those assembled watched in total silence as the ship maneuvered into approach vector.

“Titan is the second largest moon in our solar system,” he whispered in Semele’s ear.

It is very beautiful, Zebadiah.

Someone tapped him on the shoulder before he could respond. He turned to find the duty officer beside him.

“LaCroy, I know this your last trick with us so the guys juggled the duty roster around and you’ve got liberty on the station. Go show your bride around.”

No, I did not meddle!

Of course, she had. He didn’t doubt it for a moment. She’d given her word not to, but it was just too tempting – and too easy – when she really wanted something, and she really wanted to see Titan Station. She craved something new. Spending three months on a slow freighter with nothing to do would drive anyone crazy, and they had three more months before their journey ended. He’d deal with her later.

Maybe she’d finally get that spanking she so richly deserved. He’d convinced her it was a real possibility, although he couldn’t even bring himself to strike her cute little bottom during love play.

Her response was emphatic.

No! You will not!

He ignored her, something else that drove her right up the proverbial wall.

“Thank you, sir. I appreciate it.”

The man shook his head. “Well, there’s a spot of bad news in there. You need to cover for Grimes for two hours while the doctor has him in a regeneration field for two broken fingers. Then you’re free.”

"No problem. I'll suit up and get right down to cargo." He grasped Semele's elbow and gently steered her through the crowd. Her disappointment was palpable.

"It's only for two short hours, sweet. You can shine all your crystals while I do this."

My crystals are so polished their powers have increased to where I fear to use them.

Oh, she had his attention now. Could she be serious? That bag full of shiny rocks scared the hell out of him. She alluded to all sorts of possibilities when he'd questioned her about them.

Semele, you let them get out of control and away from you and I will spank you.

She stopped in her tracks, lips pursed. If looks could kill, he'd be in trouble.

"I mean it, Semele. Conjuring up dinner, sexy bedding, interesting clothing, and firelight is one thing. Setting the ship on fire is something else."

"I set a protection against that happening. This ship will never experience fire."

"Good. We've another three months on her."

She sighed, a long, drawn out sound of resignation. She'd traveled in a vessel that had warped the very fabric of time. According to her it had only taken a day to get from Beta Circini to Station Janus. It had taken him several weeks to accept she told the truth. Even accepting it didn't make it any less fantastic.

He swept her up in his arms as soon as they entered their cabin then dropped her on the mattress and bent over to kiss her.

"Two hours, Semele. It's not very long. Why don't you conjure up a new robe for yourself? Do you know how happy it makes me that I'll never have to buy you clothes unless I want to?"

She rolled her eyes and gave him a disgusted look. *Perhaps I will. You should go before I conjure a replacement for you.*

He grinned at her as he slipped into his coldsuit. The cargo holds were freezing. "I'll call you when I'm headed back so you can conjure some hot coffee."

She nodded, inclining her head regally. "Of course."

He kissed her again. *Thank you, sweet. I'll miss you every moment.*

She smiled coyly, mischief glinting in the emerald depths of her eyes. *I will polish my stones in case you are late returning.*

He laughed all the way to the holds and stepped into a beehive of activity as they prepared to dock and off-load cargo. He grabbed a manifest and started to work. Handling inventory was easy as breathing to him. This was what he'd be doing when he got home. The past years had been invaluable experience and opportunity to lay the groundwork for a major expansion of the family import and export business, and he'd be at the helm.

Semele didn't seem to grasp the concept of wealth. He'd tried to explain that his family was well off, and if he succeeded would be even more so. She smiled and said if he were happy then she would be, too. Well, he was certainly happy with her.

Several hours passed before he realized it. He signed off his portion of the manifest and handed the computerized board to Grimes, who'd finally reported in for work. Semele would be pouting by now. He didn't mind if she did. He knew what to do to put her back into good spirits. He reached through their bond, seeking her. There was nothing.

He hated when she did that. She must really be pissed at him for concentrating so completely on his work and ignoring her, not to mention being late. He jogged down the corridor to their cabin, only she wasn't in their cabin. That was very odd. She'd been surprisingly obedient after she'd settled in and rarely wandered around the ship without him. *Semele?*

He couldn't sense even an echo of her. Unease crept up his spine. He called the lounge and the mess hall. No one had seen her. He called the infirmary. She'd not been there, either.

Damn, damn, damn! Her bag of tricks was lying on the bed, open. The tiny pouch that housed her crystals was missing. What the hell could she be up to?

He broke a promise and gently poked through the items in the bag. To the uninitiated everything appeared ordinary. A bowl, a cloth with an embroidered edge, a

small flagon of oil, a quill, a small case of incense-like powder - none of which would be of value to anyone but the one who owned them.

Now he'd have to confess he'd snooped. Right after he spanked her for disappearing.

He called to his mind the image of her across his knees, bare bottom in the air, begging his forgiveness. He built it carefully, with as much vivid detail and he could manage, so she'd understand his displeasure that she had not remained in their cabin and for her blocking telepathic contact with him.

It was his best threat and it got him nothing - no glimmer of her at all. His skin prickled. Cold sweat broke out on his back. He called the security officer and asked for all the on duty personnel to report if they'd seen her. The answer chilled him to his bones.

She'd left the ship over ninety minutes ago, shuttling over to Titan Station with a group that included Lixa, his former Plizi bunkmate. He hit the corridor running. Semele was unreasonably jealous over his night with the Lixa, and their causal friendship, but stalking her?

He'd like to think she wouldn't but Semele could be unpredictable. Her alien thought processes took twists and turns he couldn't always follow, even within their bonding.

It took forever to board a shuttle and get underway, and then the transport crawled toward Titan Station. He paced restlessly until his fellow passengers took a vote, forcing him to take a seat and be still. They shot jokes back and forth at his expense, how being without his little alien made him nervous.

Oh, if they only knew what his little alien was capable of. If she threw a stone, it couldn't miss its mark.

Semele? Answer me, dammit! There was nothing. He strapped in for docking then was first out the hatch when it opened. He grabbed the first station security he saw.

The first question they asked brought home to him the seriousness of his situation. “What does this woman look like?”

He couldn’t answer. Semele could take on the appearance of a young girl if it struck her fancy to do so. The first time he’d seen her she looked twelve years old. They were in deep trouble if the authorities found out she could shapeshift like that. He cautioned her, but if she were bent on mischief, she’d do it her way and there would be no stopping her. He held his hand up level with his chin.

“She’s about this tall, dark hair, emerald eyes, has a remarkable tan for being onboard a ship for so long, and is wearing a long robe with bells sewn on it.”

“What color robe?”

“Hard to say since I didn’t see her leave our cabin, but all her outfits have the bells. You’d hear her walking. She sort of tinkles.”

The guy lifted his eyebrow and snorted. “What’s her most likely destination?”

Zeb shook his head, sucking in a deep breath. Honesty was best, he supposed.

“She’s female. Where can she get into the most trouble?”

The security officer absorbed that silently. He flipped open his radio and requested all personnel to be on the lookout for her and gave out Zeb’s personal communicator frequency to call if found. Zeb thanked him and started walking.

The middle concourse ring was his best bet. He made for the lift, trying not to knock any unsuspecting bystander off their feet in his haste. The mid-level wasn’t exactly in the middle, but it was as central a location as he could find. From there he hoped to glean some sense of her and know which way to go. The lift doors opened.

Right. He’d go right and walk with the majority of the people.

Semele? Answer me, Semele. I must find you.

Jesus, where could she be? His chest ached. He was wet with sweat. His imagination ran amok, flitting from one nasty scenario to another.

He walked to the end of the concourse and stopped dead in his tracks.

Stupid. He was stupid.

He'd allowed his fear for her safety shut down his brain. He flipped open his radio and called Lixa. The Plizi answered promptly.

"Is Semele with you?"

Her answer was a soft chuckle. "No, but she said you'd be angry with her, angry enough to practice some barbaric human ritual violence called spanking on her and I'm not to tell you anything." She paused. "I'm surprised she spoke to me, LaCroy. She doesn't like me much and I know why."

"You'd better worry about what I will do to you if you don't tell me, Lixa. Now where is she?" he thundered.

Heads turned in his direction. Curious eyes noted his appearance and he lowered his voice. "Lixa, just tell me where she was headed. Please. And I hope you didn't say anything stupid about our little fun night to her."

More laughter drifted out of his radio. "Live in fear, LaCroy. I would if I'd married a sorceress."

Fucking hell. How did Lixa know that? What had Semele done? Frustration won the battle for calmness and the need to keep his temper in check. His patience snapped. "Where the fuck is she, Lixa!"

"She said she heard the call of a wounded one."

"Meaning?"

"How would I know? She's your wife, LaCroy. Gotta go, Zeb. There are Plizi males here. Lixa out." The radio connection went dead. He fought the urge to fling the device to the deck and stomp on it to bits.

The call of a wounded one? What the fuck did that mean?

Wounded. The station infirmary?

He silently thanked the heavens he'd not stomped his radio to bits and called the sickbay. If they thought he was crazy they didn't say it. She wasn't there. His stomach performed an evil little roll, mocking him with threats of its own.

He ducked into the doorway of a clothing vendor and leaned against the bulkhead. He had to clear his head and think. She'd heard a call. Telepathically?

That had to be it, but whom could she hear? Titan Station was mostly human. There were a few aliens working on the various freighters but none of the known races were telepathic.

He blew out a deep breath and thought about that. None of the alien races let it be known they were telepathic was a lot more accurate. Could another of her kind be here? He closed his eyes and let his love for her flow into his thoughts.

Semele? I'm not angry with you, but I'm very worried for your safety. If something happened to you, how could I live? Let me come to you.

There it was! A break in the barrier she'd set to block him out.

Above. She was on the upper level. He sprinted for the lift, ignoring the glares and curses of the people he jostled in his haste. He clenched his fists tightly to keep from pounding on the walls in frustration at the slow speed of the lift as it climbed, and he was on the faster, more expensive of the three.

He bolted out of the lift the moment the doors opened, ignoring the curse thrown at him from another passenger. He shivered despite the warmer air on the upper level. There were any number of places she could be and he'd have to...the arboretum. Of course. She would seek to see the stars. He took the pedestrian ring at a dead run.

There was a one-credit donation to enter the arboretum. As far as he knew she didn't have any credits. She'd never asked him for any, never had any need while onboard the ship. He'd not offered her any, either. He'd expected her to wait for him to get off duty. So how'd she get inside? And he knew she was in there. He shoved his information badge in the slot.

He'd figure it out later. Right now he just had to see for himself she was unharmed.

The arboretum was not as spectacular as some he'd seen, but considering it was located on a working space station, the design was quite interesting. It was a working garden with small fruit trees, vegetables and herbs, and select insect varieties to aid

pollination. The birdsong sounded authentic, not recorded. A fluttering movement snared his attention. It was a live bird.

Semele, I am here. Where are you?

Come forward, to the dark.

He quickly scanned the area, searching for shadows. No place looked any darker than another to him. He started walking along the central path, his heels making the occasional 'click' on the pavers. The trail curved, revealing shadows before unseen. The sound of tiny, tinkling bells reached his ears. His feet moved faster without conscious decision.

There, in a small crevice between two boulders. She was sitting in the sand cradling something. Tears coursed down her cheeks.

It will not live, Zebadiah. What am I to do?

He sank to his knees beside her, torn between relief at finding her unharmed, anger that she'd disobeyed him, and the physical pain of feeling her anguish over the dying bird. He swallowed his anger and stepped aside from his relief. Her heart was truly breaking over the tiny winged creature panting desperately in her lap. It was a brown sparrow, from Earth, probably an unwitting stow-away on some ship.

"I'm sorry, sweet. There is nothing to be done. They're too fragile to withstand handling."

She nodded. Her shoulders slumped with misery. She caressed the tiny wing with a trembling finger.

I felt it's yearning for freedom. It threw itself against the walls seeking a way out.

The cold ball of fear in his stomach that had melted when he found her grew solid again. Jesus. Was it the panic of a kindred spirit she'd sensed? What had really driven her to leave her far-off world in search of him when surely there were males of her species available? She'd never really answered that question for him and probably never would. Her sorrow spoke volumes to him.

"You could sense the bird?"

“Yes. I didn’t know what it was. We do not have such things on Cincietel.” A tear broke free and rolled down her cheek as the bird stilled. “I tried to calm it but it could not hear me.”

“You did what you could, Semele. It didn’t die alone.” He lifted the lifeless body from her lap. “We have so many wild songbirds on my world that maybe we don’t appreciate them the way we should. You stay here. I’ll take care of him.”

He stood, looking about for a trash receptacle. True to her nature, his bride clamored to her feet, bells ringing as she stumbled then regained her balance. She took a limping step and he grabbed her elbow to steady her.

I was sitting on my foot. It tingles.

“That happens. There’s a disposal unit. We can put the body in there.”

“What would you do on your world?” she asked quietly. He took in her earnest gaze. Honesty was best.

“In the bayou, we’d bury the body in the ground. Nature would take care of it, as it should. I don’t think we can do that here.” He sighed. “Semele, this creature doesn’t belong here. I don’t know for sure how it could have gotten here, or how it could have even survived the journey. This is for the best.”

She looked up, watching as another small bird flew across the arboretum. She swallowed, hard, then looked down at her feet. She took a short, sharp breath then her gaze collided with his.

Such sorrow for sparrow, such a tender heart. He put his free arm around her, pulling her against him, opening his mind and letting her see for herself the natural order of such things on his world. She sighed, relaxing against him, her sadness lifting to acceptance that she couldn’t have made any difference for the tiny bird.

“Can you conjure up a small cloth to wrap him in? We do that, sometimes, when something precious passes away from us.”

She pulled a satiny cloth from her pocket. He didn’t think she’d used her strange powers to create it. He’d seen the handkerchief before.

"Semele, this is yours, from your world. You don't have much from there. Are you sure you want to part with it?"

She nodded. He wrapped the bird in the cloth and very gently laid it in the receptacle. The unit activated and it vanished. He gently took both her hands in his and held them under the sanitizer. The light flashed so brightly he saw the bones in her hands.

He'd gotten a strange one for a wife. Strange and wonderful. He'd never let her go. Her fingers curled around his.

"Hold me, Zebadiah." She pulled her hands from his and slipped her arms around his waist. He wrapped her in his embrace, knowing he could do little to ease her sorrow. It would pass in its own time. She was brave, too. She had to be to travel halfway across the galaxy to find her mate. It wouldn't take her long to accept that she'd tried, and that's what was important.

"Are you hungry, sweet? I'm ready for food, I think. There are several good restaurants on the station." He kissed her forehead. "I'm buying so you can pick the most expensive place here, if you like."

She sniffed the center of his chest. *I am hungry, too. You smell delicious.*

"I do, do I? Are you going to start referring to me as prime..." He jumped as her hand cupped his balls. His zipper opened. "...rib?"

She sought their lovemaking to heal her hurt. He knew it without seeking the knowledge in her mind. He would never deny her. His heart swelled with love for her, that she turned to him and trusted him to be one with her.

She batted her eyelashes at him and turned her attention to working her slender fingers under his thermals. He'd been cold in the cargo hold, even with several layers of clothing, and colder still to find her missing, but the chill was rapidly diminishing. His manhood swelled, anticipating her touch.

"You should stop that, wife. This is a public place."

"No one will see." Her hand closed around his cock. His erection completed, his knees went wobbly. No surprise there, they always did when she put her hands on him.

He buried his face in her hair and breathed in her scent. Today she was orange and magnolia on the surface, but her natural gingery musk was underneath. The mix was heady.

“You smell like home. How do you do that, Semele? How do you always know what I’ve dreamed about?”

“You are mine, Zebadiah. It is for me to care for you. It is for me to provide for your needs.”

The image of them coupling under a wildly blooming bush blurred his vision. He glanced over his shoulder. She was serious. “We can’t do that in here.”

She laughed softly. *I will shield us, Zebadiah. Do not doubt me.*

“You’d better set it to last for a certain amount of time. I’d hate for you to get so carried away that your shield drops and the general population gets treated to my buttocks in the air.”

She laughed louder, the light in her eyes dancing as she released her sadness in favor of embracing the beckoning joy of mating. He sensed it all through their bond and marveled again that he had her for his own.

He swept her into his arms then laid her down on the carpet of violet petals beneath the bush. The fragrance of the crushed flowers enveloped them and he covered her body with his.

It was no scent he knew, no bush he recognized. The multi-hued sky above them was familiar to him, though. The vivid reds and yellows, muted blues and purples all filled the night sky of her home world. He’d made love to her under this sky many times. No one would see them. Her spells were powerful. His mouth took hers.

Her lips quivered under his, clinging sweetly. A peculiar madness beckoned with a seductive lure to abandon the constraints of flesh and dance with her in a realm of pure energy. Yet the demands of his body must be met. The pulsing ache in his groin, the throbbing length of his rigid maleness would not be denied.

Her skin was dewed, heated with her arousal. He tasted the sweet saltiness of her neck as he kissed his way down, down to the soft mounds of her breasts. Her

fingers warred with his as they hurried to undo the ornate fastenings of her robe. Tiny bells whispered as he slid the velvety fabric aside, laying her bare before him. He bowed his head over her, teasing a peaked nipple with the tip of his tongue. She arched up to him.

He trailed kisses along her jaw line, tenderly kissed her eyes, her lips, lingering over each caress until she sighed into his mouth. Her body relaxed, becoming pliant under his touch. The image of the little bird flying free hung between them then it disappeared, gone in a brilliant sunburst of a small life no longer mourned but celebrated.

She reached to him through their bonding, her touch gentle. He opened himself to the tiny tendrils of her essence weaving gossamer threads around his being. His physical body broke out in a sweat, anticipating pleasures well practiced the past several months, yet he would not hurry.

Well practiced but never predictable, that was their lovemaking. He couldn't get enough of her. His need to join with her, to feel her sheath his maleness, lay in his belly, a glowing ember that warmed him constantly, and yearned for her to ignite the spark that would bring it to life.

She did that now as she trailed her hands along his back, as she pushed his shirt off his shoulders. He sent the thought to her, unformed, and was suddenly naked. He shivered as the humid air of the arboretum settled over his bare skin. Her delicate fingers snaked through his hair, massaging the remnants of tension from his neck with surprising strength. He kissed his way back up to her mouth.

I'm sorry I worried you. I did not intend to do so.

I know, sweet. You shouldn't go wandering off on your own. It's not safe. What would I do without you? How could I live without you? I love you greatly, wife.

Her surprise jolted through him in their bond. She was insulted, believing he thought her protections ineffectual. He smiled against her lips.

I'm not so much worried about you, Semele, but about the poor slob who might be stupid enough to make a grab for you.

Her fingertips traced a trail along the crevice of his flanks. He tried to squirm away from her teasing touch. She knew that tickled. She liked feeling the involuntary twitch of his skin. His response pleased her enough that she stopped tickling him and cupped his buttocks.

I would never hurt anyone, Zebadiah, not even that female you spoke with while searching for me. I promised you, did I not?

"Yes, you did, and her name is Lixa. Now be quiet and kiss me again. Kiss me forever." He covered her mouth before she could speak. She didn't need to speak. Her agreement was on her lips, in her hands, in her thighs that parted and rose to hug his waist.

He flexed his hips. His erection slid over her slick female flesh. She was so wet, so open to him, and yet he held back. She clawed at his flanks. Her sharp teeth nibbled the corner of his mouth in warning. He drove into her, burying himself in her heat. She arched beneath him and he slipped even deeper. Dark bliss beckoned and he gave himself over to it, and to her.

Time suspended as he pumped into her, again and again. She was hot and tight around him, hugging every inch of him. Sweat pooled between them, his or hers, it didn't matter. Every time he rocked into her she breathed a soft 'yes' into his mouth. Every time he withdrew she moaned in soft protest.

Sensation streaked up his spine, jolted through him with each powerful thrust into her. Through the bonding her passion reached him as her awareness spiraled down to where their bodies joined. So strange, so arousing, even after these last months, to feel his penetration of her body through her senses. His body tightened to the point of pleasured pain as he rode the edge of orgasm – hers as well as his.

He reached for the dance, that sweet oblivion of merged self, but she denied him the now with the promise of it later, in the privacy of their bed. God, how could she be logical when he burned?

Her body suddenly tensed. Her thighs gripped him with surprising strength. Her inner flesh rippled around his as her climax seized her. He struggled to hold on for one...more... moment... The heat in his bellied boiled outward, downward into his balls. He opened to the fire, letting it sear him as he emptied himself into her, as the tide bore him to her, then away. His lungs burned as he sucked in a deep breath and was suddenly back inside the shell of his own skin, aware and separate, and spent.

He rose up on his elbows and looked down at the dreamy face of his bondmate. The hint of a smile bowed her lips. Her body whispered its satisfaction in little twitches and pulses around his softening penis. *Zebadiah*.

Her mental tone was sated, sleepy, and very content. A sigh that only he heard. He kissed her honey-gold shoulder, then her lips. Softly, gently, a kiss full of his love for her. She hugged him with arms and thighs then released him to stretch languidly beneath him. He smiled down at her.

"That was just too fast, sweet. I want to do that with you for hours."

Her emerald eyes glittered with speculation. "You should feed me. I require sustenance to prepare for these hours you speak of."

He'd just bet she did. So did he. He slowly withdrew from her, always reluctant for the moment when his body slipped from hers, abandoning her heat. Rolling away from her, he reached for his clothes.

One would think that since she was so adept at stripping them naked she could just reverse the process and dress them, but it didn't seem to work that way. He gathered up her slippers and eased them over her tiny feet. She smiled, liking his attention. He pulled on his boots and stood, holding his hand out to her. She took it and rose gracefully. He wrapped his arms around her.

"Okay, wench, listen up. We're going to take a walk around the station and see the sights. We're going to get a really nice meal at what passes for a swanky restaurant on this floating tanker, and then we're going back to the ship and settle in for the last three months journey to Earth. You are going to stay by my side and not get lost again and when we get back onboard, you're going to stay there. You got all that?"

Yes, Zebadiah.

Her docile tone didn't fool him one bit. She laid her head against his chest.

"We've managed to get halfway home with only this one little misadventure. I suppose that's not too bad."

No, Zebadiah, it is not.

She was way too agreeable, nor was she fidgeting to start her walk around the station. Every cell in his body basked in the joy of just holding her.

"Once we've had something to eat I think we'll get you some regular clothes. Your long robes are going to be too warm at home. The bayou is very warm."

Oh, he had her attention now. She was totally silent. "Besides, your bells will make all the ladies at home jealous."

This is not my problem, Zebadiah.

He smothered a grin and kissed the top of her head. "It's not at all customary to have bells, you know."

It is customary for me.

"Well, we'll see how it goes."

She glared up at him, pulling a pale, milky pink stone from her pocket. She held it in her hand. It darkened to a blood red. She gave him a sideways glance from under her long, dark lashes and slipped the stone back in her pocket.

"What's that mean?"

She grabbed his hand and pulled him along the path. "Come. You promised a walk and food."

"Semele, what does that crystal do?"

"It is harmless. Its power is in divination, not protection."

"Divination? Like in predicting the future?"

She rolled her eyes at him. "It tells what is in the heart and soul of another. It tells if another speaks truly..."

He stumbled as the sensation of her mouth on his genitals washed over him.

"...or if they seek to find humor at the expense of another."

He grinned. She knew he teased her just like she knew that if she did something unusual with one of her stones his curiosity couldn't remain silent. It had been his curiosity that had drawn him to her in the first place. She knew he had to ask or explode, metaphorically speaking. She'd scored on him. Again.

He didn't mind in the least. Life with his alien bondmate would never be dull. He raised their clasped hands to his lips, brushing a kiss across her knuckles. The memory of their lovemaking swirled in the bond between them.

"I love you, Semele."

Her beautiful eyes misted as she smiled up at him.

I love you, Zebadiah. Will there be many birds when we reach your bayou?

"Yes, sweet. You may even be able to coax a few to come sing to you."

I would like that.

He imagined them sitting on their balcony in the morning sun surrounded by pots and pots of blooming flowers and brightly colored birds singing to her. He knew the smile she would wear for them. It was part of a future he was determined to make happen for her.

He pulled her into his arms again, ignoring the stares of those around them. Their curiosity didn't offend him at all. He touched his mouth to hers in the briefest of kisses, then ran his thumb over her lower lip. She was his truest treasure and the life they would share lay shining before them.

"I would like that, too."

THE END

Truest Treasure – The Curiosity Shoppe II is a sequel to *The Curiosity Shoppe* which appeared in the Aspen Mountain Press anthology, *Babes in Toyland*. If you enjoyed *Truest Treasure*, we recommend you read how Zebadiah and Semele met.

Rayne's unique blend of romance and science fiction earned her a Recommended Read at TwoLips Reviews for *Across Time*. Former lovers are forced to work together to discover the truth behind sudden corporate interest in a planet considered valueless.

Corri Dunn's mission to distant Adhara VII begins on a downhill slide. Not only have her superiors withheld vital information, her ex-lover, Devin Tremaine, knows what it is. Corri must face Devin, and what happened five years ago, or lose her command. Confronting the truth means facing the fact she still loves Devin. She wants him back in her life, and her bed, but she has to survive this mission first.

Devin Tremaine made one big mistake in his life – he lost the love of his life when she needed his understanding and he couldn't give it. Now they're both at Adhara VII, caught in a web of deceit – and renewed passion. Corri's been sent into a trap and he's the only one who can save her.

Led by Corri's dreams of the mysterious Ori-Arkee, a powerful mystic who can reach through time and space, they race against time to discover hidden truths. But Time has a few tricks up her sleeve. The secrets of Adhara VII unlock their past, present and future, a future that is quickly unraveling unless Corri and Devin take a leap of faith – across time.