

J.S. Frankel



Fight Like a Woman

Also by J. S. Frankel:

Twisted

Lindsay Versus the Marauders

Lindsay, Jo and the Tree of Forever

Lindsay, Jo and the Well of Nevermore

What She Saw

Fight Like A Woman

J. S. Frankel

Young Adult Books by Regal Crest

Copyright © 2019 by J. S. Frankel

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher. The characters, incidents and dialogue herein are fictional and any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

ISBN 978-1-61929-402-8
eISBN 978-1-61929-403-5

First Printing 2019

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Cover design by AcornGraphics

Published by:

Regal Crest Enterprises

Find us on the World Wide Web at <http://www.regalcrest.biz>

Published in the United States of America

Acknowledgments

There are so many people to thank for this novel. I'd like to thank Cathy Bryerose from Regal Crest for giving me the chance to write for her company. She's tops in my book, and that's that.

I'd also like to thank Ms. Annette Mori and Ms. Helen Dunn for serving as beta readers for *Fight Like A Woman*. They gave me a lot of constructive, caring advice, and their comments helped me to make the novel that much better.

Finally, thanks to my editor, Verda, for going through the manuscript and setting me straight on what needed to be done.

Dedication

To my wife, Akiko, for supporting me, to my children, Kai and Ray, for letting me hog the computer, and, in no special order, Sara Lennertz, Harlowe Rose, Emily, Lyra Shanti, Elizabeth Zervos, Mirren Hogan, Eva Pasco, Joanne Van Leerdam, and so many more fine writers and readers who've supported me every step of the way.

Finally, to my sister, Nancy Dana Frankel, thank you for giving me that push. I couldn't have done it without you.

Chapter One

Space Life

Space Station Eighty-Seven. The year – 2112.
The time – night, eternal night.

SPACE WAS THE only home I'd ever known. And, like my life, it was vast, empty, and devoid of feeling. I tried not to let it bother me, but all the same, it did.

My room, barely five-by-five meters squared, wasn't much, but it was all that I had on this station. The clock on my nightstand read five-forty-five in the supposed a.m. Outside, night ruled on a constant basis.

To take my mind off my lack of a social life, I got dressed in my overalls, went outside, took a mop and bucket from a nearby closet, and got to work. My shift would begin at oh-six-hundred hours. Storage room number ten was first on my list. It was cool, quiet, and best of all, empty, just the way I liked it.

Kyle Sorton demanded alone time. I'd never liked working with or alongside anyone. Then again, no one had ever wanted to work with me, so there it was.

Everything seemed to be in order. Neatly stacked crates contained spare parts for the plasma arrays, packets that held the nutrients we consumed daily had been arranged on the shelves, and everything else – machines, stacks of clothing, barrels of synthetic fuel – had been placed just so.

In the far-right corner were five large barrels that held *alumpeter*, a nasty smelling synthetic fuel used for heating whenever the power systems went down. Twin suns that symbolized the Interplanetary Council, Earth's nominal government, marked them.

However, my attention centered on a tall, glass-and-metal cylinder that sat in the opposite corner. A supply ship had brought it up the other day. I walked around it, curious as to its purpose. Science had never been my specialty. My position in life wasn't glamorous. I wasn't an engineer or a pilot. I was a janitor.

However, if it mattered, I happened to be the best – and only – janitor on this three-tier heap. Cleaning was my world, and my mop and bucket had seen me through many a stain. In a lot of ways, they were so much more reliable than people.

Space Station Eighty-Seven, my home for the past seventeen years, was considered only a temporary place to live. One of the oldest way-stations around, it was a stopover for the citizens of Earth to rest up for their journey to the distant parts of the galaxy.

It had been cobbled together from spare rocket parts and other

materials brought up from the planet in years past. A thousand other space stations had been put together the same way, strung out between Earth and Mars. Most of the inside space of our station was taken up by the Landing Bay, which had been designed to accommodate the various transport ships that ferried the remainder of Earth's population to the stars.

Our planet was no more. The Neuroshi Virus of 2087 had seen to that. No one knew where it started or who was to blame for it. In the long run, it didn't matter. It only mattered what the virus could do, and what it did was cause the nerves in the body to seize up. Two weeks after that, the patient died. There was no cure or even stop-gap medicine.

Highly contagious, more than ninety-nine percent of the world's population had died within less than a year. The survivors turned on each other, and it became a battle of the fittest and the most desperate. Once fifteen billion, our numbers ended up at about two hundred thousand. As a species, we'd become virtually extinct.

I hadn't experienced any of this, of course. I'd been born on this station and had never been to Earth. Everything I'd learned came from files on my holo-puter. A virtual kind of computer, it provided visual graphs, textbooks for studying, and more.

Space travel had become easier with the invention of faster propulsion systems. Plasma-induction powered spaceships got our people to distant worlds. While they didn't go at light speed, they did cut space travel from years to merely hours in some cases.

For those fortunate enough to have skills, and for those who'd hitched a ride to a new world, they'd encountered more problems. From what the shuttle pilots had told me, some Class- M worlds had welcomed the people of Earth. Others had tried to kill them.

"The Droogs, those damned Droogs," was the refrain I'd heard from those pilots who'd visited those worlds. Many of them had returned with scars. Others came back minus limbs. One thing was for certain. The Droogs were dangerous.

Large, ugly and angry raiders, they came from a far-off star system. All efforts to communicate with them had failed. They never took prisoners, and the Interplanetary Council had warned settlers about taking them on in armed conflicts.

The council could talk all they wanted about new worlds. I didn't even know about my own world. My parents had been scientists, and they'd died three years ago, when I was fourteen. Despite the warnings, they'd ignored them and gone down to the planet to conduct research. Containment suits notwithstanding, they'd contracted the virus.

Game over, as the old saying went. Since the virus was contagious, their bodies had been cremated. I'd been left alone here with the other, older members. Although I'd never been that close to my parents, losing them hurt.

Being alone hurt even more. Saying that life up here wasn't easy had to be the understatement of the century. I'd grown up eating synthesized food, breathing recycled air, and studying from computer discs. I'd been largely left alone for the last three years of my life.

Like many of the kids who'd grown up in space, I'd had dreams of becoming a soldier or a pilot. I'd flown over sixty successful flights...in a simulator. My instructors hadn't thought much of me, though.

"You're never going to be a fighter pilot," a pilot had said.

"What about the expeditionary forces?" I'd asked, hoping against all hope someone would take me along.

The other man grunted something unintelligible before saying, "You're weak, and you can't fight. You barely survive physical training."

While his words stung, being honest about it all, he was right. On the short side of five-five and around sixty kilos soaking wet, I was slender and wiry, able to run fast, but I couldn't fight, and kids my age or younger usually beat the hell out of me.

Even my looks were another strike in the long list of things working against me. A mop of brown hair and brown eyes covered a thin and unremarkable face. Barely average, that was me. Check that. With no skills, I was below average, and there was nothing that I could do about it, either...

"Good morning, Kyle."

The voice came from behind me and interrupted my journey down washout lane. I turned around. Doctor Gillman stood in the doorway. He was the only doctor on the station responsible for the well-being of a hundred and twenty people.

A man in his late sixties, bald and pasty-faced, he stood a good twenty centimeters taller than I did, and probably weighed as much as me. Everyone said he ran himself thin because he never slept and never took time to eat.

Then again, the food up here smelled worse than a toilet bowl and it had only one taste—unpleasant. "I was making the rounds," he said, "and I heard someone in here."

I waved my hand at all the crated equipment. "Just doing my job. Cleaning is my life." Sarcasm wasn't my forte, but it got a grin out of him.

His grin grew wider as he pointed to the device I'd been inspecting. "I haven't seen that since I got out of the army."

"What is it? One of the shuttles brought it in the other day."

"It's the Clavatar. I used to work on that program when I was younger."

I continued to stare at the machine. "You called it a what?"

"Let me give you a bit of history, son."

The Clavatar. The name was a mix of cloak and avatar. It had been invented over forty years ago. Its original purpose was to cover a person with a thin sheet of transparent material that temporarily bonded with their cells and left them invisible. The ultimate stealth weapon, the US

government had teamed up with the army to develop it. It had never worked, so the army went in a different direction.

“We then redesigned it as a chamber for combat soldiers. It was supposed to reduce swelling from internal and external injuries if they weren’t too severe and heal them as well. While it worked, a few soldiers told us that for some reason, they’d felt as though their minds had traveled outside their bodies.”

For some reason, that made me laugh. “They had out-of-body experiences? Didn’t the people a hundred years ago believe that?”

Gillman laughed with me. “Yes, science has come a long way since then. The inventor of the machine reasoned that the electrical relays somehow stimulated not only the body, but they also stimulated the neurons of the brain. It was called brainwave synchronization or brainwave entrainment back then. It caused the brainwaves to function at a much higher level, but only for a relatively short time.

“So, once more, science decided to move in a different direction. I was recruited to serve on the team that monitored the effects of the Clavatar program.”

More history followed. Years back, the army had developed something called a Synthoid, a synthetic being. Designed for the military, the theory was that they would send a soldier’s mind into the upgraded robotic body to fight wars. If the robot body sustained damage, no problem, as the mind of the subject could always be recalled. It was a good theory, but there was one problem.

“The program was discontinued after only a few months,” the doctor said.

He didn’t say why, only bent down to examine the machine and then straightened up with a grunt of surprise. “This is the original! I can tell from the serial number. There were only three built. I never thought I’d see it again in my lifetime. I wonder why they sent it up here.”

I continued my own inspection of the chamber. Roughly two meters in height and around one meter in circumference, it sported transparent sheeting. Amazing or not, the metal and wires made it look incredibly intimidating, and the concept of transferring one’s mind made it doubly intimidating. “What kind of problems?” I asked, remembering what he’d said just a few moments ago.

Gillman touched the machine, his face a study of reverent awe and fear. “The transfer process itself was short, roughly thirty seconds, but it didn’t always take.”

Hold on a moment. “So, his mind was stuck in there, or it didn’t work?”

“No to your first question, and yes—sort of—to your second. Remember, the Synthoid wasn’t human. It wasn’t designed to carry a human consciousness for more than a few hours. After that, it would shut down.”

He rubbed his chin as if lost in thought. “Going into the Synthoid was one thing, but for some reason, when the patient’s consciousness returned

to his own body, it resulted in insanity and then death. After three attempts, the army stopped testing.”

That didn't sound good. “Did you ever try it from person to person?”

Gillman's eyebrows arched and he slowly puffed out a breath. His explanation came even more slowly. “Once. There was a soldier. He'd been injured on the battlefield. He was going to die, anyway, so he volunteered.

“Another soldier who'd been killed on the battlefield in a different conflict was brought in. We managed to repair his physical injuries, but his brain had been deprived of oxygen for too long. The first soldier knew the risk. He said to go ahead.”

Gillman heaved a sigh. “We performed the procedure.” Eager to find out what happened, I asked, “Well?”

“The man woke up insane and subsequently died. We thought it was due to the second soldier's weak brain function, but we weren't sure, so the army mothballed the project. After the Neuroshi epidemic started, they had enough trouble dealing with the riots and other problems on Earth. And now, we're here.”

Gillman excused himself to resume his duties. Since there was nothing better to do, I put away my mop, dumped out the water – it would be recycled, and the thought of drinking it made me want to vomit – and then jogged along the hallway.

Blackness punctuated by stars greeted me through the portholes as I went by. Our station had lights on to simulate daytime, but it was all the same to me, especially when I looked outside and saw only darkness.

Back in my room, I plopped down on my cot where my most prized possession lay – a holo-puter the size of my foot. “On,” I ordered, and a three-by-three-foot holographic screen formed, hanging in the air at a comfortable reading distance away. “Earth view.”

Immediately, a map of the Earth popped up. According to the news reports, only about thirty thousand remained. The rest had already gone on to their new worlds.

What else was there for me to do here, anyway? I still missed my parents and remembered when Captain Fawcett had come to my cabin to tell me what had happened. He'd been in charge of this station since twenty-one-hundred.

A grizzled ex-Marine as well as an ace pilot, he'd come to me after the news had been relayed up to the station. Short and stocky, but with a strong voice, he'd taken me aside. He sounded uncharacteristically gentle, for some reason.

“Kyle, I'm sorry this happened.” Those had been his first words.

He didn't have to say anything else. Act like a man, everyone had always told me. Be brave. People died all the time, especially now. Be strong.

Lies, all lies. I couldn't be strong, not now, and busted out crying. “Why them?”

Fawcett had shrugged. "It can happen to anyone. I'm sorry, Kyle. Once we find a place for you, you'll be going there. You'll have a new life and a new family."

On the surface, his words sounded comforting. Reality painted a different picture. Finding a new world and family – sorry, not happening. The Interplanetary Council had passed a law stating that only those who had the greatest abilities and skills to offer would get first ride on the shuttles to elsewhere.

In addition, a person had to be eighteen or over to be considered a member of the council—a citizen. Without citizenship in the council, a person didn't have many rights. Furthermore, families with children also got priority. Draconian or not, that was how it stood. Then there was me, an orphan, a person skilled at nothing and...

The buzzer on my intercom sounded and Fawcett's gravelly voice came through. "Time for training, Kyle. You know where to go."

He clicked off, and I took the lift to the bottom level, Storage Room Fifty. There, the trainees did calisthenics, lifted weights, and then practiced martial arts. When it came to combat, though, I always came out a sad second-best. No, make that last.

Everyone off-duty had already shown up and had started working out. Fawcett was there as well, barking orders. "A fit crew is one that will populate the new worlds you'll visit. A fit crew is one that will survive."

As usual, I struggled to keep up. Fawcett's words came back to me. Those who were fit would go somewhere. They had something to offer.

As for me, I was—what was that old expression again? Oh, yeah, cannon fodder.

"Sorton, front and center!"

Fawcett's voice cut through the grunts and groans going on. I made my way over to him. He called out another member of the crew, a shuttle pilot named Perkins who had been on many runs to other worlds.

At the age of twenty-one, he'd seen over twenty worlds, partied down with the older, more experienced pilots, and enjoyed doing those things that he did best. One of them was flying. The other was beating on others. It probably gave him something to do to work off the stress of flying and dealing with passengers.

Although he wasn't overly tall, maybe five-ten, he was lean and tough, everything I wasn't. Every single time he'd come back here for a quick layover, he'd always attended class and he'd always beat up on me. Maybe he got a thrill from it. In an amiable tone, he said, "Hey, Kyle, are you ready for another lesson?"

He sounded pleasant enough, but the glint in his eyes told me to expect the worst. "Let's battle." It sounded cool and tough, two words that didn't describe me.

Immediately, he lashed out with a kick aimed at my knees. Keeping my prior lessons in mind, I cautiously stepped out of range. He nodded, pursing

his lips. "You've learned something, kid."

When he moved in again, he feinted and then threw a right cross. I sidestepped it and threw a left that banged off his skull. Being left-handed, my left hook was my best punch. He staggered, while the rest of the onlookers cheered. That was a first. I'd never been able to hit him before.

"Time," Fawcett called.

Perkins wasn't listening. He growled and lunged forward to belt me squarely on the chin. I saw his fist move, couldn't get out of the way in time, and then a lot of stars flashed in front of my eyes along with the rusted metal that made up the ceiling.

"That's enough!" I heard Fawcett yell.

"Kid should know that there's no referee in outer space," Perkins replied while strutting around, the maggot. "If he can't fight here, what makes him think he can cut it in the program? That's why the council won't take him. He doesn't have what it takes. Everyone knows it."

"Out!"

The sound of footsteps resounded in my ears, and after Fawcett helped me up, he brushed me off and told me to go back to my quarters and rest up. "Perkins is a jerk, but he's one of the best pilots we have. That makes him—"

"A valuable commodity, yeah, I get it." Damn it, one of my teeth was loose. Wonderful, useless and soon to be toothless. "That makes me nothing, doesn't it?"

"Hey, hold on," Fawcett started to protest, but I was already halfway out the door and headed toward my cabin. A few people getting ready for their shift looked at me curiously but said nothing.

That's right. Say nothing. I am nothing.

Back in my room, the mirror told me the whole story. My jaw was swollen and I had a black eye. Great, this was something else for the healing rays we had in the infirmary to fix. I'd spent a lot of time there.

I lay back on my cot, trying not to cry at the sheer frustration coursing through every fiber of my being. I had only one wish in life—to be somebody.

Anybody would do. Just not me.

Chapter Two

Flight

THE NEXT DAY, it was back to work as usual. In the cafeteria, the other personnel studiously avoided me. What else was new?

My jaw still hurt from yesterday's abbreviated combat session. While trying to force the thing they called food, and what I called paste, down my throat, Captain Fawcett walked over, his tray in hand. "Can I join you, Kyle?"

Was he here to be friendly or apologize for yesterday? Friendly? Not likely. He didn't have any friends on board. No enemies, either. He gave the orders, expected them to be obeyed, and in turn, got the provisions we needed and got the ships out on time.

As for an apology, forget about it. Yesterday had been his closest call to date, but I hadn't expected it then, and I didn't expect it now. Finally, I relented. No one else was going to talk to me, so, fine, and I gestured to the bench. "Sure thing."

He sat and drummed his fingers on the metal table for a few seconds before speaking. "Look, Kyle, I know it hasn't been easy for you up here. You're the youngest crewperson, and your family, er, isn't around anymore."

If this was some kind of pep-talk, forget it. "So, what are you going to do, captain? Bring my parents back? Make everyone play nicely with me?"

"Kyle, hang on a second..."

It was time to vent, and vent I did. "Hang on for what? Are you going to tell me things are going to be okay? Are you going to do something about the crap I have to go through? It's not just Perkins. It's everyone. They think I'm a loser."

"No, you're not."

That sounded so insincere, I almost gagged. "I've got something besides cleaning skills to offer. I'm young. I can learn. And for the last three years I've been kept here by the Interplanetary Council because they say I'm not good enough. They turned me down because I don't have a family, and I know families get priority. So, yeah, life stinks."

With every sentence, my voice got progressively louder. A few people glanced at us, and then looked away. They didn't care. They were already ahead of me in the waiting game to get off this station. They had the clout. I had nothing.

Once my rant ended, Fawcett sighed. "Kyle, I agree that the council's rules are old-fashioned. Just remember, you're not the only one who's been stuck on space stations. There are other people in your position,

some up here, and some are still on Earth, trying to hitch a ride. They've been trying for years to get out, and they think that they have something to offer, too. Believe me, if I could get you on the next transport out of here to the Vega System, I would. But my hands are tied."

"Yeah." My voice came out lifelessly. I couldn't think of any sterling comeback to his logic. He didn't make the rules. He just followed orders.

"There's also trouble out there," he added. "It's hard enough to find habitable planets. Most of the planets we've discovered don't have atmospheres conducive to human life, and we don't have terraforming capabilities, not yet." He shook his head. "No, the real problem is that the Droogs have been making our lives miserable."

I'd heard the name before. "Do you know what they're really like?"

He shrugged. "Let me paint you a picture. They're big, mean, and ugly. The pilots I know who've seen them told me that they walk on three legs, they're purplish-colored all over, much bigger and stronger than we are, and they hate us."

"Why?"

"They're ravagers, and they think other species are inferior. We need planets to settle on, and last I heard, the Droogs aren't into sharing. Some of their raiding parties have killed our people. From what I know, they're a military society."

He got up, meal forgotten. "Anyway, enough about them. Let's get back to you. It's hard, Kyle. I know I've said that before, but I'll say it again. Try to hang on a while longer. I'm doing what I can to pull some strings and get you out of here."

With a supposedly friendly nod, he walked out. Suddenly, I'd lost my appetite. I shoved my tray aside and went back to my room. My next shift wouldn't start for another eight hours, so I sat on my bed, mentally replaying my failure from the day before.

Well, no, not a failure, not totally. On the positive side, I'd actually hit Perkins. On the negative side, he'd pounded the hell out of me.

While metaphorically kicking myself, the alarm went off. Its shrill sound cut through the air and all activity in my body stopped for a moment. We'd had emergency system drills before, but there'd always been the follow-up all-clear announcement.

Not now. "System failure, system failure," the emergency call went out. "Main engines, dead. Emergency backup generator— failing."

A shaft of fear went through me. System failure meant the air supply was compromised and the heat and lights would fail. It took about two hours for all systems to shut down entirely. After that, well, there wasn't anything else.

The alarm cut out, and then the captain's voice came through the intercom. "Crew and passengers to the life-ships. Everyone to the life-ships."

Good idea, and as I ran outside, a frantic tech hustled by, grabbed my arm, and towed me to the nearest elevator shaft. "You heard the order.

Systems are out," he said, panting heavily. "Landing Bay...the ships...they're taking everyone this time."

Everyone—that included me. Down in the Landing Bay, five very large ships, each of them capable of carrying up to twenty-five passengers, were loading. Sliding doors led to airlocks, which in turn fed into the ships docked at the station.

I waited on the metal platform while the coldness built, and the air got thinner. I tried to control my fear of suffocation and freezing to death, but also grew excited by the prospect that I was going to a new world. Any world would do, just as long as it was some place where I had the chance of fitting in.

My sense of elation grew, and then it faded as I waited. And waited.

And waited some more, listening as the pilots called out names and the people pushed past me to get on their respective ships. Perkins had command of one vessel, and he made it a point to walk over and read out the list. "Oh," he added and stared at me. "Your name doesn't seem to be here."

Jerk times ten—that was Perkins. I ignored his jibe and focused on making it out of here. Everyone moved past me until finally, only twenty people were left, including me. The captain's ship had already been loaded and had moved out.

As for my situation, the techs signaled that they'd finished servicing the Mephisto, the last transport. They then ran to their own ship. The rest of the evacuees milled around, as anxious as I was to get going. As usual, they got priority. A pilot came over, asking for me. "I'm Kyle Sorton, sir," I said.

He wore a distressed look. "Kyle, you'll have to hang on here for a while."
"How long?"

"I don't know, but the station should have enough power to keep going for another two hours. That's enough time for another rescue ship to dock and pick you up."

Whatever happened to the captain going down with his ship? I'd read that in all the holo-texts. Oh, wait, the captain had already taken off. There went all hope. Damn the council and damn their way of thinking! To them, I didn't matter. It was futile trying to fight. Attacking a pilot was suicide. All of them were armed.

The pilot who'd spoken to me, a grizzled veteran in his fifties, bald and with a tough, clenched-fist kind of face, motioned to the other passengers. "Let's get going."

"Out of the way," one of the lucky chosen said, and shoved me aside.

He and the other people ran to the doors, along with the pilot. Halfway there, though, a power coil located under the floor blew up and incinerated them.

They didn't even have enough time to scream. I did though, but got my courage up and charged ahead, avoiding the flames and diving through the airlock doors into the corridor that led to the Mephisto. As

soon as I entered the ship, the door slid shut and the engines came online.

"Hey, what's going on?"

No one answered, but from my time in the simulator, I knew that the acceleration was going to be fierce. I had just enough time to make it to the captain's chair before the Mephisto took off. The G-forces flattened my body against the chair's back, and then the pressure gradually eased.

I checked the computer. The ship had been pre-programmed to journey to the Vega system. Time—thirty-eight hours at maximum speed.

During the first twenty minutes, I familiarized myself with the ship's functions. I also took stock of the inventory in the rear hold. Five servobots stood in a row. Clunky little things, they were immensely powerful and could lift up to a kiloton in weight. Food packets were in the ship's galley, and someone had put the Clavatar on board as well.

Stress hit hard, and my heart rate went through the roof, so I took in deep breaths to calm down. *I can do this. I can do this.*

Once back in the driver's seat, a light on the main console flashed. Someone was trying to communicate with me. A flick of my finger activated the com-link, and Captain Fawcett's voice crackled through space. "Mephisto, acknowledge."

"Mephisto...acknowledging. Kyle Sorton, here."

"Where's everyone else? What happened to the others?"

"They, uh, didn't make it, sir."

He swore, and then asked, "Are you doing all right, Kyle?" I blew out a deep breath. "I'll make it, sir. Where are you?"

"On a ship roughly three parsecs ahead of you. Just relax and let the automatic guidance take you to the Vega Seven. We'll meet up there."

"Roger that."

He didn't apologize for having taken off before me, nor did he apologize for Perkins deliberately leaving me behind. Then again, I hadn't expected him to. I clicked the com-link off and leaned back, feeling the stress slowly drain away. This was going to be a simple trip, and soon I'd have a home.

Or not, as the ship gave a sudden lurch. "Hey, what's going on?"

Systems offline, the computer kept flashing. Oh, no, I'd just been through that, and here it was, déjà vu all over again. This...did not look good.

"Computer, respond. What's wrong with the engines?"

"Working," the metallic voice intoned. "Reactor core failure.

Systems...critical."

Critical—meaning they'd explode. The simulator had never prepared me for this! "Uh, estimated time before reactor exceeds maximum safety limit."

"Ten minutes."

Not good! "Prepare the escape ship and open the rear bay doors. Bring the Clavatar. I'll take that with me."

"Acknowledged. You now have nine minutes."

"Keep me posted."

The computer continued the countdown while I ran to the escape craft. Roughly fifteen feet long by five feet wide, it was a sleek missile that could only hold one person. An old-style model, it had to be manually operated.

Just thinking about that made me shake. There was just enough room in it for the Clavatar, some medical supplies, and three days of rations.

"Five minutes," the computer intoned.

Thank you so much.

I reached the ship just as the servo-bots had finished loading the Clavatar inside. After I secured it to the wall with some heavy-duty straps, I went to fire up the engines. This was going to be close.

"Three minutes."

I pushed the accelerator lever forward. The escape craft shot out of the rear of the Mephisto, and just as I thought a safe distance had been reached, the mothership blew.

"Shock wave," the computer announced.

It hit a micro-second later, rocking the life craft and sending it spinning. "Course correct!" I shouted.

"Correcting."

The ship soon righted itself, and I asked for a damage report. A high, whining note sounded. "Ship's starboard engine offline," the computer informed me.

"Get it online again. I can't fly with one engine."

"Unable to comply. System damaged."

"I just flew out of a ship that had a damaged system."

This time, the computer didn't answer. It didn't have to. No chance of repairing the engine, not now. "Where's the nearest habitable planet?"

"Searching..."

Clicking sounds came from the computer, and the readout on the scanner grew fuzzy. The computer had also suffered damage. A moment later, it beeped. "There is a habitable planet within ten minutes of this position."

It gave me the coordinates and I duly set my navi-system to find it. The minutes ticked by, silence only broken by the laboring sound of the damaged engine and the clicking of the computer. Oh, and my own heavy breathing overrode all the other noises.

"We have...arrived. Entering orbit in seventeen seconds."

There—a planet came into view. A beautiful greenish-blue, the computer readout told me that it was a Class-M world, third from the sun, with an oxygen-nitrogen atmosphere. "What's the name of this world?"

"Unknown. It is not in the council's database of previously colonized worlds."

"Give me a readout. Are there any dangerous animals or plants?"

"Unknown."

“Marvelous, what else can go wrong?”

I’d spoken too soon. We entered the atmosphere and soon the outside of the craft was glowing cherry-red. “Heat shields...failing.”

Damn.

“Starboard engine...failure. Port engine...sixty percent failure.”

Damn. Damn!

“Oxygen level...falling.”

“Damn, damn, damn! Send out the distress signal.”

Sending...failure.

Wonderful, one more bit of bad news.

Then the sound of the port engine dying came through, and I did my best to muscle the ship into glider mode. At first it worked, and the ship leveled off. It was daytime. The landscape below me had trees, mountains, and what looked to be yellow grass. Beautiful though it was, it would also be fatal if I crashed.

“Four hundred meters...two hundred meters...one hundred meters...”

The computer read off the descending altitude, and I managed to get the landing gear down and the nose up. Good enough.

Oh, wait, no it wasn’t, and the ground came up hard to meet me. The wheels snapped off as I landed, and then the ship slid on its belly at an incredible speed. No brakes, no way to stop, but then I had the idea of putting the nose down.

In retrospect, it wasn’t the smartest move around. The nose went down, but the speed drove my ship into the ground. At the same time, something rocketed through the front screen and pierced my right side. Agony hit me everywhere, and I had just enough time to cry out before the darkness overwhelmed my consciousness.

Chapter Three

A New Life

IN UNCONSCIOUSNESS CAME dreams of my earlier life. One of my favorite subjects had been twentieth-century English literature. Books didn't exist, anymore, as there were no trees to make paper from.

From what I knew, the plots always seemed to have the same character types in them. The women were always pretty, the men studly, and the villains...villainous. Happy endings predominated. If I had to choose one word to describe those novels, then the word ideal seemed best. They always had the ideal girlfriend, the ideal life.

Ideal was not a word that factored into my vocabulary.

Both my parents were short and slight, brown-haired and with narrow features, traits I'd inherited. They were quiet and committed to their work, which meant they were always busy with some technical matter—and they never had time enough for me.

It wasn't like they didn't love me. They did. If I needed to talk to them about something, they were there—usually. But their work always came first.

That meant finding a cure for the Neuroshi Virus, even though discovering a cure had been deemed impossible. I once asked my mother about it. "You have to have hope, Kyle. Hope is what sustains us." A wistful smile crossed her face. "Sometimes hope is all you have."

After my parents passed away, my situation turned hopeless, as the rest of the personnel treated me as an afterthought. Since I couldn't do much to help anyone save cleaning, that was what the captain had assigned me to do. "Wash the floors, dust the machines, don't turn them on, and maybe nothing will blow up."

Then he went back to his station. And I was alone again.

On the occasions when people came up from planet-side, invariably they brought their children with them. Naturally, those kids bragged about being the first inhabitants of Epsilon Seven or Magus Three. In short, they outranked me.

Not only did they outrank me, they also dwarfed me half the time. They were bigger, meaner, and hungrier. They'd survived the Neuroshi Virus. If there was one thing they didn't tolerate, it was weakness, or what they perceived as weakness.

"Soft, you're soft," one of them said, right before he punched me in the nose.

I was fifteen at the time. The other boy was my age, but he was built, aggressive, and mean. I felt the bone break, felt the wetness of the blood running down my upper lip and then my mouth to splash onto the floor.

Immediately, pain smashed me right between my eyes. The other kids laughed, and the kid who'd punched me laughed with them. "Stay here with the losers. We're going places. You're not."

Enraged by the laughter and my own pain, I threw a wild left hook and it connected with the side of his head. He shook it off and proceeded to pound me out. His friends cheered him on, and once he'd finished, he stood up and kicked me in the side. "You fight like a girl."

Fight like a girl. Some compliment—not.

En-masse, they walked out, still chortling. A few crew members asked me if I was going to be all right. I stared at them, hating their stupid question. Did I look all right?

Afterward, in the infirmary, I'd gazed at my reflection in the mirror, assessing the damage. Busted nose, yes. The Naosu healing ray had fixed my broken beak in a matter of seconds, but the bruises around my eyes and on my psyche remained.

From that point on, I'd performed my duties as the station janitor, cleaning up and watching, always from the outside, watching...then came the loss of the space station, the rush to escape, and now here I was, journeying to a planet that had clean air, fresh water, and a new life...

"Unh."

A sharp pain in my right side jarred me back to consciousness. It was dark, with only a small overhead light working, and it cast a dull red glow over everything. When my eyes focused, I saw that a tree branch had gone into my body, just below my ribs.

In a stroke of good luck—the only luck I'd had so far—the computer was still operational, and I asked it to give me a bio-metric readout.

It responded with, "Subject?"

"Uh, Kyle Sorton, serial number six-four-eight-nine-nine." It hurt to breathe.

Its mechanical voice came immediately. "Scanning."

A series of clicking sounds came from the console. Then it spoke, the tinny voice fading in and out. "Liver damage—sixty-seven percent. Internal hemorrhaging. Right kidney damage—sixty percent. Two broken ribs on right side of body. Heart damage...life expectancy, two..."

"Shut up."

Knowing that it would hurt, but having no choice, I pulled out the branch and screamed. Blood leaked out, not uncontrollably, but darn close to it, and I got up and staggered to the rear of the ship.

The impact had driven the escape craft into the ground, and only part of the aft section was above the surface. Most of the section had been smashed along with the equipment, but miraculously, the Clavatar was still intact. It sat securely strapped to an undamaged portion of the ship. When I checked the med-kit, it, too, was largely intact.

Quickly, I searched for and then found a pain-killer injector. The other injectors had been smashed. Damn...I then stabbed my right side

with it. Immediately, the agony went down to a bearable level, but it wouldn't last long, maybe an hour at most.

How long I'd last after that wasn't worth thinking about. "Computer," I called out. "Tell me about this planet."

More clicking, and, oh, please work! Eventually, it gave me an answer. "Planet name—unknown. Oxygen-nitrogen atmosphere, suitable for human life. Ample vegetation suggests arable farmland. Sensors detect abundant water supplies in the immediate area. Two species detected, one humanoid, one...not."

What was with the, one not, remark? "Clarify."

"Unknown. This computer has detected two species of higher forms of life on this planet, but no data exists on which species is the dominant life form."

Great, I could run into people who sort of looked like me, or some alien race that wanted to feast on my innards. "What about dangerous animals?"

Not that I'd had much experience with them. There had been only a few lab animals on the space station, mostly mice, rats, and rabbits.

"Sensors detect lower forms of animal life." A series of clicking sounds ensued. "No venomous insects or animals found."

Lucky me, I'd crash-landed on a paradise. Too bad I wouldn't be around long enough to enjoy it. I checked through the medical supplies. Nothing much usable, outside of some antiseptic injectors and a bottle of antibiotics. While putting them in the med-kit, a groan sounded from outside. Something was there—an animal?

No, the computer had said the animals here weren't dangerous. It had to be a person. Slowly, I made my way through the wreckage and cautiously poked my head outside. The computer had said the air was safe to breathe, so I took a breath.

Clean air filled my lungs and made me cough, and the coughing increased the pain in my shattered body. I was used to breathing recycled air on the space station.

So, this was what nature was. This was what the Earth had once been. Trees, tall and greenish-blue, filled a forest. Nature—untouched, raw...and beautiful. Scanning my surroundings, I'd smashed down in a field, roughly a hundred meters away from the forest. Yellow grass stood waist-high. No sounds of machines. In fact, outside of some insects buzzing, there were no sounds at all.

A hot sun overhead bathed me in its light, and for a moment I forgot about my injuries. I didn't know much about seasons, but I knew the definition of what summer was, and this seemed to be it. At least I'd landed somewhere nice.

Reality intruded as the groan came again from off to my left. Carefully, I made my way to the surface, holding my side. A young woman lay on the ground. She'd been injured, and blood was pouring

from a wound at her right temple.

Quickly, I pulled a med-life scanner from the kit, clicked it on and ordered, "Scan her."

"Working."

It whirred, and a few seconds later, the readout appeared on the screen. Young humanoid—female—and I guessed that she was around nineteen. She wore a kind of threadbare loose and sleeveless green pullover with a belt cinched around the waistline. Dark gray hairless skin, long black hair, and an angular face with limpid brown eyes completed the picture. Those eyes were filled with pain.

She was pretty, I thought, but then again, I'd only seen pictures of pretty women on my holo-puter. I'd never even so much as spoken to girls in real life. All the other technicians on board the space station were women in their thirties and above.

My attention went back to the woman. "What can you tell me about her?" I asked the scanner.

It quickly listed her statistics. Six fingers instead of five. Same deal with her feet. Her height and weight matched mine. In short, she was humanoid.

Unfortunately, her condition wasn't good, as the scanner told me that she'd suffered a blow to the head and had swelling on the brain. Things did not look good. Without treatment, death was imminent.

A flash of agony speared me in my injured side. The painkiller was wearing off, what, after only fifteen minutes? Apparently so, and my demise was imminent as well. There had to be a way out of this. Think, think!

My gaze traveled back to the ship and to the object in the rear hold. Maybe...

I pressed a button on the side of the scanner. That linked it to the ship's computer. "Computer, can the Clavatar heal me?"

The response took a few precious seconds to come through, seconds I didn't have. "Negative. Damage to subject Kyle Sorton is irreparable by that machine."

So much for that possibility. Go to scenario number two. It was too late for me, but maybe not for her. "Can the Clavatar take down the swelling in her brain?"

Clicks from the computer indicated it was working on what little knowledge it had. Finally, it replied. "Unknown. This is a species not found in the database of any space station belonging to the Interplanetary Council or anywhere on Earth."

"We're not on those places now," I said tiredly, feeling my mind blank out.

No, focus up! Sleep and you die, and then she dies, and if she does, there goes...

The computer's tinny voice jarred me back to the land of the semi-alert. "Scanning. The female is in excellent physical condition. Body size,

bone structure, and internal organ arrangement—all similar to humans. Brain wave activity is similar to humans. Alpha wave output, higher than humans. Beta wave, also higher...”

“Kuteyo.”

That word from her made me switch off the scanner. Kuteyo. That’s what it had sounded like, and no, I couldn’t understand her, but her eyes told me the whole story. She was afraid of dying. Yeah, join the club.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I know you can’t understand me, but I’m sorry anyway. I’m not going to live much longer, either.”

Exhausted of waiting for death to come and claim me, I sat down gingerly, feeling my organs protest. More blood leaked from my wound, but who gave a damn, anyway? Kyle Sorton, orphan and outcast among everyone on the station—that was me.

I was going to die here, and there was nothing I could...

Wait...the wildest of all wild ideas hit. The Clavatar. Dr. Gillman had told me about its capabilities. If it could do what it was supposed to do, risk or not, without any options available, it was all I had. This would be done out of necessity, not choice.

Stop. Think this through. Insanity was a possibility, but the alternative wasn’t worth thinking about. If I went mad, then it wouldn’t matter, anyway. Hopefully, something or someone would kill me and put me out of my misery.

The woman had passed out. I clicked the scanner on. “Update on the woman.”

“Working.”

It proceeded to tell me that her brain function had declined to a minimal level. As my own time was short, I laboriously pulled her into the ship, every muscle and internal organ screaming for mercy. The computer link still worked. After requesting it activate the machine, it duly switched it on for me and fed me the instructions for the Clavatar.

“Place the female inside the chamber. This unit will send a series of ultrasonic pulses to reduce the swelling in her frontal lobe.”

I got her inside, and then the Clavatar went about its business. Madness, this was madness. This woman wasn’t synthetic, but a living, breathing person. Granted, she wasn’t human, but did it matter? All life mattered. Her life mattered.

I mattered.

“Swelling in the frontal lobe is now down to an acceptable level,” the computer intoned. “Condition—stable. Ready for consciousness transfer.”

It proceeded to give me more instructions. After inputting the proper equations, I hooked her up to the headset. Then I went outside and asked the computer if things were ready. It replied, “Working. The Clavatar is operational.”

My hands trembled as I set the machine in motion and then placed the interface helmet on my head. In a half-minute, I’d know if it worked or not.

“Process commencing,” the computer intoned.

It was getting harder and harder to think straight. The computer continued its countdown, and at twenty seconds, a shock hit me and the drift began, the journey from my body to— somewhere.

Reality faded in and out. Visions of that beautiful forest flashed in front of my eyes, and then my mind returned to the metal confines of the ship.

Forest...ship...forest...ship...

“Three seconds, two seconds, one...”

A blast of agony speared my brain, traveled down to the base of my spine, and then up again. As much as that branch in my side had hurt, this hurt even more.

Then blackness swirled in front of my eyes and the last thing I saw was the floor coming up to meet me.

Chapter Four

Hide in Plain Sight, Part I

FOR ME, waking up involved a massive sense of disorientation coupled with the fuzzy image of something large and bearish confronting this woman.

No, it was me.

No—it was her. I was seeing through her eyes. Hold on. I *was* her.

Weird...and then the image of the large thing came again. Nothing was clear except this whatever-it-was had swung a massive fist in her direction.

Colors flashed, the picture in my head faded in and out of focus, and then everything settled into a solid rhythm. The computer readout had said this woman's Beta waves were higher than those of a human's. Maybe that had something to do with it. I was no scientist. Only the computer had the ability to tell me what exactly had happened. If not, everything from here on in would be guesswork.

Guesswork was all I had to go on. Years back, when interstellar travel became possible, our linguists had compiled a catalogue of the various alien races they'd encountered. All the information had been shared among the survivors, just in case Earth's last residents and the residents of alien cultures ever met up.

As for language, scientists developed a universal translator device, and the T-Chip—the T stood for translation—became widely used. A tiny chip was inserted behind the right ear, just under the skin. Everyone who was going to a new world got one. Those like me, those who weren't going anywhere, we had to make do by studying language discs.

My father had laid down the law roughly a year before he died. "Familiarize yourself with all the different races we've catalogued. Learn the basics of their language. One day, you may meet them. You may have to live on their world. Remember, you'll be the alien, not them."

So, I'd studied. Now, I was here. The image I'd seen before returned. Facing me was a tall alien, roughly two meters in height. Three massive legs supported an equally massive torso. It had powerfully built arms and shoulders, and its hands—four fingered ones—had digits thick and strong enough to tear a person's limbs off.

Its face, though, reminded me of a lump of mud that had been crudely fashioned to resemble a man's. Although it had a mouth, two eyes and a nose and two ears, its features were asymmetrical, almost as though something had twisted its face from birth and it had never recovered.

Purplish skin. Three legs. It had to be a Droog. It couldn't be anything

else.

A moment later, the image faded, and I snapped back to reality. If there was any insanity, I wasn't experiencing it. "I'm alive." My voice came out softly. I was speaking English. My hearing worked. All was well—so far.

Slowly, I got to my feet and cautiously tapped my muscle groups from toe to upper torso, testing for feeling, pain receptors, and more. Whoever this person was, she had great muscle tone, and I decided to test out what she could do. Walking—check. Balance—perfect.

Try jumping next. I did...and yelped as I launched myself roughly three meters straight up. After landing lightly on my feet, I staggered, but something inside me—instinct—caused me to right myself. Chalk that up to another winning reflex.

A stunted tree lay roughly a hundred meters away, and I sprinted toward it. Incredible, it took only five seconds to get there! I'd been quick in my old body, but this? Some of the younger kids who'd stopped over at the space station had an expression for something great. They said coolish. "Coolish!" I exclaimed, and then shut my mouth in case someone was listening.

What about strength? Licking my lips, I swung a hard, tight, and well-aimed left hook at the tree—and then stepped back in shock as my fist easily cracked the bark. Winged creatures burst from the tree, screeching their indignation. Small, chubby and a dull red, they had a startlingly loud cry, but soon they settled in another tree and fell quiet.

Okay, check on my speed and strength. I sprinted back, and at the halfway point, I tried jumping again, this time putting everything into that spring from the ground.

Oh...yes! The land floated beneath me. I had to be over five meters up. With hair-trigger responses, not to mention tremendous power, was I the only one like this? There had to be others, but where were they?

When in doubt of one's surroundings, check the landscape. That rule had been drilled into us on the space station, along with physical and language training. As I scoped out the area, another ability manifested itself—better than average eyesight. It was dark, but two quarter moons shone overhead, sending out pale beams of light that barely illuminated the ship.

However, every detail was as clear as day to me, and once I got to the entrance, that also meant seeing my now lifeless old form lying outside the Clavatar. The machine was burned out, the insides, smoking. It had done its job, and I said a silent thank you.

My body—I—had to be buried. That body had seen me through seventeen years of life. Now...now, I had another.

I easily hefted my corpse over my shoulder, took it outside a good distance from the ship, went back to find a piece of jagged metal, and then returned to start hacking away at the earth. Fortunately, the topsoil was soft, and I quickly dug a grave near the tree line and laid my body inside.

“See you.” Dirt covered the old me, and just like that, it was all over.

What now? Oh, SOS time, and I ran back to the ship to turn on the emergency beacon. Fortunately, it still worked. With luck, a rescue ship would come soon and...

Oh, wait, why would they? How would they know where to find me? And even if they did, they’d be looking for someone human, not an alien. On the other hand, they hadn’t even wanted me around when I was human.

Rinarra.

A voice, somewhere deep within my mind, whispered the word, and I stiffened in shock. *Rinarra.*

It had to be this person’s name. She—me—whoever—had taken on that lumpy man-monster I’d seen and lost. I couldn’t see anyone taking on that thing and winning. It stood a head taller than me and had to weigh at least twice as much...

A whiff of smoke filtered into my nostrils and roused me from my semi-daydream. Smoke, where had it...?

“Damn it!”

The ship was on fire, and there was nothing that I could do about it, either, so I stood a safe distance away and watched it burn. No explosion, fortunately, but all the same it signaled any end to the hope of someone finding me. Here I was, and...

Another smell hit, this one heavier than the smoke and ten times as noxious. It reminded me of the smell of a lumpeter, only worse, and it came from inside the forest. Keeping personal safety in mind, I entered the forest. The trees and foliage were thick, and the hair on the back of my neck prickled in fear as well as uncertainty.

There—a harsh grunt to my right alerted me to the presence of someone—or something. Whatever it was, it had been tracking me. I edged forward, muscles tensed, nerve endings on high alert for the possibility of attack. Odd, whatever it was didn’t move on two legs, and not on four. What kind of animal was this?

Another grunt, closer this time, made me spin around another twenty degrees to the right. A voice, hoarse and raspy, bellowed, “You are mine!”

Not on four legs—it moved on three. A burst of movement from behind a large tree ten meters away alerted me to an attack. Something large and wide charged toward me. It wore a kind of toga that barely covered its massive torso. A thick belt with a fist-sized bag was strapped around its waist.

For all its bulk, it moved quickly. It was a Droog, the same creature I’d seen in Rinarra’s dream, and it was headed my way fast.

Even in the darkness, I easily made out its horribly askew features. Arms outstretched, it made to grab me, and only a leap to my left saved me from being enfolded in a surely lethal embrace.

“Huh, you are faster than the others,” it said in a harsh male voice as it spun around to ready itself for another charge. “This time you will not escape.”

Although the creature had to be speaking in its own language, I still understood it. Then I saw a thin band wrapped around its left wrist. That must have been their version of a universal translator. However, language comprehension aside, mutual rapprochement didn't seem to be on its agenda. "Don't you want to talk this over?" I asked.

The creature stopped in its tracks as if puzzled by the ridiculousness of the question. It cocked its head to one side, and then uttered one word. "No."

He reached into the bag and took a knife out. Very small, no longer than a few centimeters, at first it appeared almost inoffensive. The creature then pressed something on the side of the shaft and the blade magically lengthened into a lethal-looking meter-long sword. *Oh...not good.*

The monster advanced on me, slowly this time, and swung the blade back and forth. I had no weapons, but I figured that I could jump to the safety of a nearby tree—if that thing didn't cut it down first.

"Die," he intoned and slashed straight down as if trying to cut me in two.

My reflexes kicked in, causing me to jump back and then up and forward, and I somersaulted behind the monster. Making a fist, I punched the creature solidly in the upper back, and the impact of my punch knocked it forward onto its face.

Fingernails.

Rinarra spoke to me again. Although it couldn't have been using English, I understood it, and then her voice turned urgent. *Use your fingernails.*

Use my what? While the monster lumbered to his feet, I looked at my hands, and as if by some kind of unholy miracle, my fingernails shot out a good eight centimeters. They glinted a pale white under the moonlight. Solid bone, they were extensions of my fingers.

Say hello to the newest mutant on the planet—me. Nails—I had nails. They didn't hurt coming out, and as weird as they looked, I was glad I had them.

Time for a test, as the monster rushed me again, intent on killing me. Once more, he used his sword to cut straight down. For all his strength, he didn't seem intelligent enough to vary his pattern of attack. I slashed at the thing's face, and he howled as my nails drew blood. "You witch!"

Thanks for the compliment. I grinned despite my predicament. "Here's more."

He whipped his sword down time and again, and between dodging and ducking out of his way, I managed to get close enough to rip into his face three times and then once more. My reflexes were off the charts, but my opponent was incredibly strong, and no matter how much I cut him up, he kept coming.

"You...you will not win," he said, panting now.

Was he getting tired from the fight or the blood loss? I couldn't tell, and while wondering what to do next, he dropped his weapon and

grabbed me in a bear hug. This monster had terrifying strength, and the breath rushed from me. "I shall crush the life from you."

He was doing a pretty decent job of that, but he'd made one mistake. My arms were still free. With a cry of rage, I shoved my nails into his chest. Strike!

Blood spurted out of his torn flesh and splattered my face. He gave a horrid gasp of surprise and shock. Then he pushed me away and clutched at the wounded area in a vain attempt to staunch the flow of blood. Much too late, though, and he toppled onto his side, twitched a few times, and lay still.

A feeling of weariness combined with disgust came over me.

My first winning fight – and I'd killed someone.

Wearily, I plopped down, heaving in great gasps of air, and soon my heartrate slowed. Although I still felt sick over what I'd done, it had been a case of him or me. When in doubt, choose life. I leaned back, my breathing went back to normal, and as I relaxed, my fingernails reverted to their normal shape.

Wondering at how to control my weapons, mentally, I sent the command of bringing them out. They came out, and then I did the opposite. So that's how it worked. "Thanks, Rinarra."

Her inner voice didn't come this time, but the fact that she'd spoken to me meant that the woman whose body I'd inhabited remained alive in some capacity. I didn't know how or why, but it didn't matter. She'd been there for me. That was enough.

What to do now? There had to be some kind of life here. This place was more than primitive. There had to be towns or cities around, and wasn't there some kind of transportation to get me out of here?

Apparently not. Perhaps this world hadn't gotten industrialized yet. Hard to believe, but true. "Okay, go check things out."

I got up, took the sword, and pressed the button on the side of the hilt. The blade shrank to its tiny size, and I put it in the folds of my pullover. I discovered that the pullover had several tiny pockets, and the sword fit snugly in one of them.

My thoughts returned to my previous battle. There were probably others, but I heard nothing and smelled nothing, save the scent of its blood, and it was all over me.

First things first, though. I found an empty spot between two trees, used my hands and the sword to dig a hole, and then dumped the body inside. After covering it up, I wiped away the sweat that had cascaded from the top of my head.

Blood from that goon was all over me, and its scent practically caused my nose hairs to wilt. After a quick sniff of the air, the smell of water came through. Following my nose, I found a stream, took off my belt and pullover, and waded into the water. It was cold, but infinitely better than wearing the stink of that alien.

I quickly washed up, washed my pullover as well, and then tentatively took a sip of the water. It was cold and fresh, and if it was poisonous, too late

now. When nothing happened, I drank some more and sat on the bank, watching the water swirl downstream.

My reflection stared up at me. Really, it wasn't bad at all. Narrow hiped with slender, though muscular legs, my breasts— breasts!—were small and firm. Strongly built shoulders capped a lithe, well-toned physique. As for my face, I considered it to be attractive. Good enough for me.

Then reality hit—I was a woman now. Shock ran through me, filling me with wonder and more than a little terror. Internally, I didn't feel any different than a guy would, although several emotions coursed through me—the wonder and terror, along with a sense of loss.

Hormones or something had to be at work here. Not knowing much about women much less alien physiology, I could only guess that maybe this person had a special someone at home, yet nothing surfaced in my newly acquired brain matter.

Checking downstairs, yes, I had a woman's equipment, not that I'd ever seen a woman's equipment before. Wait, yes, I had. My holo-puter on the space station had a few sites showing old pornographic films, and I'd seen them—once.

My mother had caught me watching them when I was thirteen and she was not amused. "I can assume this is for your homework?" she'd asked.

"Uh, yes, yes it is."

"Uh-huh."

Result—suspended holo-puter privileges for a week.

My mind snapped back to the present. After rinsing out my garment and squeezing the excess water from it, I got dressed. "So, where to now?" I asked no one in particular. Of course, no one answered. Quiet had once more settled over the area, and it was something to be grateful for.

It was cool out, but not overly so, and the moons were now at their full apogee. With nothing better to do, I grabbed the bag full of the supplies I'd salvaged from the crash, made my way out of the forest, and began my trek. It led me uphill. At the top, I stopped and looked down on a village.

It was hemmed in by mountains on all sides and therefore secluded from outside contact. This looked to be a farming community, as it had numerous wooden huts dominating the area. The fields beyond were filled with high, greenish stalks of what could have been wheat. The huts were dark. Nothing stirred, and only the occasional squeak of whatever kind of lower life that lived here disturbed the stillness.

The village looked charming under the moonlight, but there were numerous potholes in and around the fields. Something—a battle or a bombing—had happened here, and recently, too.

Should I stay or go?

Not knowing which choice to take, I retraced my steps back to the forest. It was cool, and my skin pimples from a breeze that had sprung up.

My clothes were still damp. What would a person do in this situation?

Then it came to me, or rather, Rinarra's voice came to me.

Branches...leaves...use them.

Her voice faded, but I now knew what to do. Hastily, I gathered up all the leaves and stray branches I could, made a mound, and squirmed inside. It wasn't overly comfortable, but at the very least it cut the chill. Then I passed out.

This had been a very strange first day.

Chapter Five

Hide in Plain Sight, Part II

THE CHIRPING OF birds woke me the next morning. I poked my head out of my leaf bed. It was cool, but not overly so, and a few sunbeams shone through the cover of the trees. I crawled out, got to my feet, and yawned while brushing myself off and stretching out.

A roundish creature that somewhat resembled a crab scurried by on short legs. It had a hard shell, four sets of claws, and a square face that held multiple eyes. It stopped briefly to look at me, its orbs moving in twenty different directions at once. Then it squeaked as it ran off. Odd little critter. It didn't appear dangerous despite its claws, so maybe only the two or three-legged kind of residents here held any danger.

My first night here had not been a restful one. Multiple images had flashed through my mind while I'd slept. Memories of huts—I'd seen those yesterday. Memories of fights against those purplish aliens. Memories of working in the fields, and then more visions of an encampment. Who was I, and more importantly, what had happened?

Smoke...fire...the scent of blood and death permeated every vision. A person wasn't supposed to smell things in their dreams. The odor of blood washed over me and I'd started out of my nocturnal slumber, flailing away.

"Oh, this is...this is real."

With that incisive comment, I'd slipped into an uneasy sleep. Now, morning had come, and half of me wondered if I had gone insane, while the other half knew that I was still sound in mind and body, but what kind of body was it, exactly? How much of this Rinarra person was left over?

It wasn't as though she controlled me in any way. I existed in her body, and I exercised total command of it. It was an incredible form, small, compact, and yet incredibly strong.

Furthermore, I had the ability to do the stuff of what people called legends. Physically, I had to be light years ahead of anyone out there. Good things came in small packages, as the old saying went.

However, her memories were something else, and now, a different function in my head clicked. Rinarra's voice echoed in my mind, saying something not English and yet sounding like English. It was gibberish at first, and then the words came to me.

We...are...complete.

In a blinding act of psychic fusion, we were, and instantly I knew that the language these people spoke would offer no problems.

Shortly after, another feeling washed over me, taking away visions of the past. It was hunger. I started walking, and the voice inside me spoke again. *Red berries. They are edible.*

Thanks for the hint. At a nearby bush, I picked a few. They were

sweet, and I immediately scarfed down a handful that sated my appetite. Soon after, though, an uncomfortable feeling downstairs told me it was time for a rest stop. How did women...? No water spout to leak from, so I hiked up my pullover, squatted down, and went. Leaves served as something to wipe myself with.

Once clean, I began walking. Insects much like dragonflies buzzed around me, except they had three sets of wings. They didn't sting, and I continued on, mentally categorizing the various sounds of the fauna I'd seen thus far.

After leaving the forest, I made my way up to the hill that overlooked the village I'd seen last night. No movement, so they were still asleep. Time was a factor, and I wondered how long the days were. I'd never seen real daylight, so all I could do for now was to go on when the sun rose and set, and even then, it would only be a rough guess.

My legs seemed to take on a life of their own and propelled me around the village and over the low mountain. After about twenty minutes, I stopped at a hill. Below me was an encampment. Three large buildings with searchlights mounted on their roofs, and something that looked like a derrick stood out amongst the nature.

"Lieutenant, a word with you!"

The words startled me. I had to be at least a hundred meters away, yet I'd heard the voice clearly. I scrambled behind a nearby bush and cautiously peeked out. Two large purple aliens, the same as the one I'd killed last night, met outside the largest building.

One of them wore an eyepatch over his left eye. When he spoke, it was in a hoarse, gravelly voice, as if he'd swallowed a piece of particularly indigestible food and was trying to bring it up. He wore a band around his left wrist, the same as the other man I'd killed had. Translation or not, their voices sounded deep, harsh, and evil.

The other alien was almost as large as the first man who'd spoken. While they shared similar features, this one's right forearm was almost twice as massive as his left. He saluted by slamming his left fist against his right shoulder. Very militaristic, and the leader obliged him with the same gesture.

"Yes, sir," the large-armed man said after giving his salute. "How may I please you?"

All right, now I knew who the leader was, and he spoke in a voice that stopped just short of outright anger. "With news of that woman's capture, I should hope. Have you found her yet?"

"No, sir. We are still searching. I hope to have a report for you later today."

"I shall expect it. Has Grooda checked in?"

Who was Grooda? I picked up a note of worry from the junior man. "He has not, sir. He was sent out to search for her whereabouts last night."

Last night...he must have been the scumbag I'd killed...

The leader ground his teeth. "Very well. Keep searching. Search for Grooda as well. I would hate to lose another man. That woman is a soreness in my side I would like to alleviate— permanently." He pointed at his patch. "I owe her for this. Was she with the townspeople or the villagers?"

The second-in-command shrugged. "I am not sure. I spoke with the leader of the townspeople yesterday. She said that the woman had not been seen for the past two days. I believe her."

A grunt greeted his last statement. "Summa, first off, they are simpletons as well as liars. Do not expect the truth."

"Shall I go to the village and search, sir?"

The leader scratched the skin around his injured eye. "Do that. I will alert the men and set them to work on the drill. Have the engineers checked it?"

"Yes, sir. It should be operational soon."

Summa saluted and left, and I crept back to the forest. This was not good. What to do now? I tried thinking, hoping Rinarra would pop in and help, but either she was lying dormant or had gone for good.

Wait...they are coming.

Surprise, she'd whispered to me, and I hid behind a tree. The smell of them drifted over, enough to gag an entire space station. Summa and another man were coming my way. They were armed with guns that resembled bazooka cannons.

When I'd lived on the space station, the soldiers carried weapons they called Plasmatrons. They were capable of firing blasts of concentrated energy, and their weapons had the ability to annihilate anything or anyone within a one-hundred-meter range. Those alien guns seemed similar in design.

The smelly men stalked closer, ever closer, but faced front and never looked to either side of them. Even so, I held my breath as they passed by, not daring to breathe. Once they'd gone, I followed them, keeping well behind but not out of sight. They went to the village and fired their guns once in the air.

Immediately, a group of around fifty women who looked to be middle-aged poured out of their huts. All of them wore the same kind of pullover I had, along with cloth boots. Of the lot, only two of them were young. They looked to be in their late teens or early twenties. They stood, trembling, and waited.

"You know me," Summa announced in a voice that brooked no dissent. "I am Farkeer's second-in-command. I am here to ask you once more where Rinarra is. If any of you know, inform us. You will be rewarded."

Silence greeted him. The women stared at the ground, and one of the younger ones wore an expression that indicated severe loathing. No, hatred was a better term.

Finally, a member of the assembled group, an older woman in her sixties, said, "We have not seen her. She has not been around this place for some time."

Summa stalked over to her. "You and the others have given me the same answer time and again. Tell us where she is. If you are lying, then I promise you, your punishment will be heavy."

She lifted her head to stare into his eyes. "I have told you before, I do not know. We do not know."

A cruel smile twisted his face up into a horrid rictus. "I think you do."

Summa then wheeled around and leveled a blast of energy plasma at a nearby hut. It instantly exploded. A few of the women screamed in fear, while the woman who'd spoken to Summa burst into tears and staggered over to the remains. She then collapsed, beating the ground in frustration and anger.

In contrast, the two younger women did not react. Perhaps they were inured to the violence. One of them was a little taller than the other, with a pretty, elfin face, and flashing brown eyes.

The shorter woman had a plainer, somewhat rounder visage with a mole on her right cheek, but appearances aside, one huge difference stood out. The taller one's expression spoke of defiance. The other woman's countenance was one of compliance.

Summa turned back to the group. "That is but one example of the power we have in our hands. What you have in your hands is the opportunity to make this occupation a peaceful one."

With a quick snap of his fingers, his subordinate joined him, and they moved out in the direction of their encampment. Soon, they were lost to sight. Thankfully, so was their stink.

A few of the other women went over to their fallen comrade, who remained on her knees, wailing at her lost home. "You may live with me," one of the other village inhabitants said with a note of compassion. "It is no difficulty."

"But, my home...my home—"

"Is no more. Please, Hassa, come with us."

The woman laboriously got to her feet. The taller of the two young women walked over to her and tried to help her up, but the older woman shoved her arm away. "I need no help from the likes of you."

Harsh words, and the younger woman stood ramrod stiff and watched as two other village residents helped the now homeless woman along to another hut. Everyone ignored the presence of the younger woman as they walked away. What was going on here?

Within a few seconds, only the young woman was left. She then slowly walked down the road. I had respect for her attitude, but zero respect for the women who'd shunned her.

This led to question number two. No men had appeared. Didn't this world have the concept of what an army was? My holo-puter would have been so useful right now.

Mentally sighing, I retreated to my place in the forest to think about things. So far, that had been my only quiet time since arriving here. I sat, ears and nose alert for any sign of enemy intrusion, but nothing came. Time passed, which I judged to be around twelve hours, the sun gradually moved across the sky, and soon, it was night.

With nowhere else to go, I wandered back to the quietude of the village to get some answers. While strolling down the main road, I took in the farming implements—hoes, rakes, and shovels—that had been scattered rather carelessly around the area.

Half the huts were in bad shape. Many of them had been patched up with scraps of cloth and had differently colored markings on their doors in the shape of an orb. All was still, and then that quiet voice in my head spoke to me once again and told me to head to the nearest hut. *She is there. Go to the place with the red marking on the door.*

She?

Not fully understanding, I went to the hut Rinarra's voice had indicated and found the door unlocked. I gently pushed the door open. A woman wearing the same kind of sleeveless pullover as I was sat at a rickety wooden table, on an equally fragile-looking chair.

A lit candle sat in a holder in the center of the table. A low fire burned in a fireplace, and some dishes, a pot, and several cooking utensils had been placed on the floor next to the fire. A pallet leaned against the far wall, a blanket draped over it. Five pullovers, neatly folded, sat next to the pallet.

When the woman saw me, an expression of disbelief came over her face, and she got up to run over and embrace me.

It was the same woman who'd given Summa that defiant look, the same woman who'd been shunned by the others. Fine, but what was with the hug? I dropped my bag and shoved it into the corner with a swift kick. The woman didn't seem to notice. She leaned her head against my shoulder, and my hands, where should my hands go?

Hesitantly, I placed my left arm around her waist. She murmured in a low, throaty voice, "Rinarra, you are back. You have been gone for two days. I never thought I would see you again. They were searching for you. Please, take precautions."

"Oh, well, yeah, I will. I mean, I'm here."

At my answer, she let go and stood back to eye me carefully. Her gaze traveled from the top of my head down to my bare feet, and then back to my face again. She pointed at my forehead. "Are you all right? You have a cut on your temple, you are shivering, and your garment is filthy. Is that blood?"

Questions, lots of questions, and how to answer her? "I'm, uh, fine. I got injured. There was something out there, something big. It hit me, and I must have passed out. I got dirty and washed up in the stream."

Explanation over, I went over to the fireplace and stood there, warming my body. The woman joined me. "The Droogs," she spat while

staring at the flames. "A curse upon them, and a curse upon their race. They have been here for almost three months and they are a plague upon us all."

From her brief explanation and from what I'd seen, it didn't take much mental effort to figure out what had happened. This world belonged to these people, and the Droogs had come to conquer it. It was one of the oldest stories in the books I'd read. It also mirrored the account that Captain Fawcett had given me.

Then I thought about how this woman had spoken. Like the Droogs, her speech was very formal, no contractions, and sounded almost archaic. Still, formal pattern of speech or not, anger laced every word she spoke, and she continued to vent on how foul the invaders were. "They are beyond evil."

"I met one of them in the forest."

She turned to face me and her eyes widened. "You fought with him, you mean?"

"He won't be coming back."

Her mouth worked in a dozen different directions as she processed my answer. "You killed him?"

"Yes."

Worry lines creased her forehead. "What did you do with the body?"

"I buried it in the forest. It's pretty deep. No one will know." She gazed at me searchingly. "You cannot be sure. That man must have been looking for you. The Droogs...they came here for a short time last night. If they discover the body, they will not take this lightly. We fear reprisal. You know that."

Think fast! "I, uh, I had to do something. He would have killed me."

My host got up to pace around the room. "Ever since those creatures came from the stars, they have heaped insult after insult upon our people. You know what they did to your parents."

No, but now I had a good idea. "Er, yes."

"You know they killed all the men here. You know they took the other, younger women here to another place. We have not found them, yet."

Great, they were slavers, in addition to being interstellar scum. "Yeah."

Worry leapt from her eyes. "And you know that I have repeatedly begged you not to go out on your scouting missions. Every time you leave, I fear you will not return."

Suddenly, everything became clear. This Rinarra person had done something about the invaders. With those nails she had, her agility and speed and more, she must have been someone fierce – and I was now her.

"Well, you know me," I said, trying to calm this person down. "I always come back. I always keep my promises, and now I'm here."

The woman stared at me. "I think that monster hit you harder than you know. Somehow you...you sound different."

"I'm still me." No, I wasn't, but she didn't have to know.

Outside of the table, chair, the primitive bed and the cooking implements, there was nothing here to indicate any modernity. No interstellar radio, no electrical devices of any kind that I could see. Getting a message to the Vega system would be impossible.

Then she kissed me on the cheek. "I am glad that you returned. I was so worried. It is good that you are safe."

Who is this person, I thought, and what was up with the kiss?

Then my inner voice spoke. *Merat. Her name is Merat.*

The second syllable in the name had been stressed. "Uh, Merat?"

"Yes?"

"I'm sort of tired. I think I have to lie down."

She nodded and went over to take the pallet and the blanket. She then searched among the pile of clothes, found an extra pullover, and handed it to me. "Here," she said. "Change your garment and rest. I will wash, we can sleep after."

Fine by me.

She prepared the pallet and then went outside, carefully closing the door behind her. I got changed, lay down, and looked around. The only source of light here was the fire and the single candle that burned on the table.

For the first time since crash-landing here, I felt a sense of peace creeping over me, along with a pleasant sensation of exhaustion. Sleep would be good...my eyes closed...and then they snapped open.

Merat had mentioned something about sleeping arrangements. There was only one pallet, and the way she'd held me before, not to mention that peck on the cheek...

Uh-oh.

I tried to think of Rinarra, searching inside my mind. *Are you there, Rinarra?*

No answer, but then again, I hadn't been expecting one.

The door opened, and Merat walked in, hair wet and matted down the sides of her face and on top of her head. She wore only her pullover, and casually took it off and dropped it as she went to the fire to dry off. "Are you feeling warm?" she asked, not bothering to turn her head.

She had a slender figure much like mine, but not as toned. In a quick move, she squatted down to stoke the fire, murmuring something about keeping warm, the nights here got cool in the summer, and that we should enjoy our time together.

Wait a minute. Enjoy our time...I'd never enjoyed my time with anyone—ever. I'd had thoughts, but those thoughts had never translated to any action, and now Merat wanted to...

Time to leave, but Merat came over to the pallet and slipped in beside me. "You must be exhausted after your battle. Was it bad?" she asked, her hand stroking my hair and then my face.

"It was bad enough." *There goes my heart rate, and what should I do with*

my hands?

"You are so brave," she whispered. "I could never do what you have done. Then again, I do not have your gifts."

She touched my fingernails. It was obvious she knew of my abilities, but didn't have the same set of skills.

Everything abruptly grew hotter, and it had nothing to do with the fire or the fact that I was underneath a very warm blanket. What to say in this situation? My breath came out shallowly, and right now no useful reply came to mind. "Uh, some of us have it. Some of us don't."

If ever there was a lame answer, that was it, but I couldn't come up with anything else. Things got even more uncomfortable when she slipped her hand under my pullover to gently fondle my breasts. While it didn't feel bad, I wasn't sure how to respond.

Merat didn't seem to think anything was wrong, as she gently kissed the cut on my temple, and then her lips whispered lower. "I have missed you so," she murmured. She caressed my shoulders, and her hands moved down my torso, past my navel, and then slipped around my back to cup my butt.

"Please relax," she said in the softest of all voices. "You usually do for me, but now it is my turn."

Her lips came closer to my mouth...closer...closer still, and...

Oh, hell, this wasn't going to work. My heart hammered uncomfortably close to my chest wall and sweat poured down from the top of my head. Even my breathing grew faint, so all this attention was going to either give me a heart attack or send me flying. I wasn't sure which.

Merat finally noticed my discomfort and stopped her stroking to ask, "What is wrong, Rinarra?"

"I have...I have to get some air. 'Scuse me."

My hands trembled as I threw back the cover and then ran out the door, stopping a meter away from the hut. The village was silent, the night air cool, refreshingly so, and it dried the sweat on my body. I breathed in and out deeply to calm down and my heart began to slow. I had no idea that Merat and Rinarra had been...

Whoa, not going there. No. No. No. No. No.

It wasn't as if I had anything against same-sex relationships. It was just that I didn't know anything *about* relationships to begin with. Now, I was here, operating out of a woman's body, and...

Check that. No such thing as operating out of another person's body. This wasn't a Synthoid or loan program. There was no possibility of a return to my old form. It was dead and buried and here I stood, until the sound of Merat's voice brought me back to my real-unreal situation.

"Rinarra, what is wrong? Have I hurt you somehow?"

I turned around to see Merat in the doorway, shielding her body with the blanket. She looked hurt and confused, and I felt even more confused.

"No, you're, uh, you're fine. It's just that after the battle and getting hit in the head, I, uh, need some fresh air."

"You seemed fine before. You were able to return home, so I took that to mean that your mind was undamaged. Was it something I said to you two days ago?"

"Two days ago?"

The confused look disappeared, replaced by one of exasperation and her voice grew a few shades sharper. "You do not remember, do you? We argued about you going out on your missions. You said this was something you had to do, as no one else could. We argued, one of the few times we have ever argued since we were children."

"Children?"

Her mouth opened and closed in as much surprise as in anger. "Rinarra, we grew up together. We worked in the fields during the day, studied at night, and then you and I found each other."

We'd found each other? Oh, Merat meant that they realized they liked each other—a lot.

"Well, yes, I remember, but that—"

"Wait."

Merat took a step toward me and brought her hand up to wipe my face. "You never perspired that much before, even when we were together."

"Together?" Now, my voice came out in a croak.

Now, a coy smile emerged on her elfin face. "When we coupled, of course. Do not tell me that your memories of our love are not there. Do you honestly not remember being with me, the way we touched each other?"

"Uh..."

Her smile disappeared, replaced by a look of suspicion. "You do not. I did not think you would. When you held me, you used your left arm. Rinarra always used the other arm—always."

Well, I was left-handed, so, time for an incredibly lame excuse. "It seemed to be the best way to do things."

My answer didn't assuage her in the least. "It is clear to me. Whoever you are, while your voice sounds like Rinarra's and while you look like her, the words you use and how you use them...your attitude...you are not the woman I love."

Interlude

FOR A MOMENT, time stood still. So did my heart. I hadn't expected any of this to happen, and now I stood across from someone who claimed to be my...my girlfriend?

This was too much to process. I was having a difficult enough time

handling the changeover from male to female—an alien female. While there didn't seem to be much of a difference physiologically speaking, mentally, it was still hard to process.

On the space station, the roles between men and women were blurred, unlike in centuries past. Both genders fought as soldiers, both worked at the same jobs, both got the same pay—when there was pay—and both shared in their roles as parents. Growing up, I'd spent as much time learning from my father as my mother.

Still, nothing had prepared me for leaping from one gender to another. While trying to process all those thoughts and more in the space of a scant few milliseconds, Merat stared at me through narrowed eyes. "I do not know who you are, but for you to claim that you are mine makes a mockery of the sanctity of our joining."

Joining? Was she talking about what I thought she was?

In a flash, it all became clear. It wasn't a case of dating. It was a case of being married.

Oh, no, this couldn't be happening. Merat started in on the times we'd shared, the touches, the kisses, and the more she talked, the more heated her speech grew.

Finally, she pointed at the hills beyond. "I do not know you. You are a stranger to me. Leave. Now."

"Merat, please, it's been a hard day, and—"

"Go."

The door slammed shut in my face. So much for that line of meeting the natives and gaining their trust. Interplanetary Council policy had always taught us three basic rules, and those rules had been drilled into our heads since childhood.

One, make contact. Observe, make notes on the inhabitants of the new world.

I'd already done that.

Two, try for intercultural communication. I'd sort of done that.

Three, make allies if and whenever possible.

Failure seemed too mild a word to use in this situation.

Dispirited, and with nowhere else to go, I walked back to the forest. The air temperature gradually dropped, making me shiver. My leaf bed awaited. Although the hike back should have been invigorating, I simply felt depressed. A riot of emotions ran through me, mostly of loss.

Something else, though, hit me hard. It wasn't only loss, it was betrayal, but not on my end. This woman—Merat—felt betrayed that someone or something had taken over her companion's body.

"It wasn't my fault," I muttered while striding along the path. "I didn't know."

Hopefully, Rinarra's consciousness or remnants of it would pop up and give me something to go on, but no one spoke to me. I had only my own thoughts, and right now, confusion ruled.

What was I supposed to do? I'd arrived at my makeshift shelter. A sniff of the air revealed the smell of flowers, the pungent odor of animal droppings, and nothing else. No stink of the Droogs. They'd probably gone elsewhere, but the memory of the fight along with the knowledge that they were stone-cold killers, remained.

Overhead, the moons sent out their beams of pale light to light up the forest, almost as if they were guiding me home. Although this planet was beautiful, it wasn't my home. I had none. I wasn't a part of this.

Then there was the village that was as strange to me as this world was, and as for my own new body, it could only be described as a world unto its own...

The sound of someone walking in my direction startled me. Their footsteps crunched the leaves and branches in a fast, regular pattern. Whoever it was, they didn't seem to be very concerned with keeping their presence a secret.

I was though, and dove into my leafy nest. There, I pulled the potential compost close to me, and waited. While it wasn't very warm, it was better than being in the wind, and could someone catch a cold here? I wasn't sure, but no sense in taking chances.

The footsteps suddenly stopped. They'd originated from the direction of the village, so perhaps the enemy had found my location.

No, it couldn't be the enemy. A moment later, the footsteps started up again. Light, hesitant now, they didn't belong to the Droogs. They had to weigh over one hundred and thirty kilograms. This individual weighed less than half of that, much less. How I knew this, I didn't know, but it had to be Rinarra speaking—or rather, thinking—through me.

The steps got closer. I tensed, my hands slowly searching for something to strike out with—a rock, a stick...anything. Then I remembered that my nails could extend and wondered why this Rinarra person had been born so differently.

Did it matter, though? Not only had I been kicked out of the town, I'd also failed to work something out with this Merat individual. She was the only person who could tell me what was going on, and I'd unintentionally messed things up.

The footsteps grew louder, and I let my nails out. Whoever this was, if they were looking for a fight, they were looking at the wrong bed of leaves. Funny thing, though. The nails only came out when I extended my fingers and mentally commanded them to extend. When I made a fist, they stayed in the retracted position.

"Rinarra?"

Who was that? A moment later, the voice said, "It is Merat. Rinarra, or whoever you are, we must speak."

To speak or not to speak, that was the question. Hesitantly, I sat up and poked my head out of the pile. Merat stood a meter away, arms folded across her chest. "Rinarra, we must speak," she repeated.

Mentally, I sent a command to retract my nails, and they melted inside my fingertips. "How did you know where to find me?"

"I saw what was inside the bag you brought with you. It was not of this world. Then I followed you. And you are not good at hiding. My Rinarra always wore boots."

Merat then pointed at the base of the pile. Sure enough, my unclad right foot was sticking out. "Oh."

Her mouth moved soundlessly for a few seconds, and then she said, "I do not know who you are, but if you know what happened to the real Rinarra, the Rinarra I knew, then please tell me."

"Uh, are you sure you want to know?"

"Come with me. We shall talk."

The old saying of truth being stranger than fiction came back to me. In this case, Merat was about to find out how strange the truth could be.

Chapter Six

Confession and Confirmation

MERAT CRIED AFTER discovering that I wasn't the person she had feelings for. Although it wasn't unexpected, it still shocked me to see her face collapse and listen to her sob in anguish.

I'd presented the facts as I knew them, related them as simply as possible, and hoped that she'd understand.

She didn't. The news had hit her hard, and she'd dropped to her knees in front of the fire, her face a mix of lost hope and despair. Crying was a bitter, ugly thing to witness, and I'd done my fair share of it back on the station.

Once she'd finished her crying jag, I'd gone over to sit across from her, hands folded in my lap. Her sobs made me feel bad, but I couldn't bring myself to hug her. Before she knew the truth, she'd held me, even tried to seduce me, but that was when she thought I was her wife.

Things were different now. I didn't think she'd want anyone touching her. And she and Rinarra had been...

"Tell me who you were."

Merat's voice interrupted my reverie. She sounded more composed, so back to business. "My real name's Kyle, Kyle Sorton. I'm, uh, from another world. It's called Earth. It's gone now, and I was on my way to the Vega system. Something went wrong, and I crash landed here. I tried to contact my people with the emergency beacon, but my ship – the one that I came here in – burned up."

The first stage of exposition over and done with, she'd stared at me. From what I'd read, people who'd never gone past the basic stages of industrial development tended to believe life didn't exist on other worlds. "Um, are you following me? I mean, do you understand what I'm saying?"

Merat lost her look of incredulity, and she gave a brief nod. "Yes. We know that life exists elsewhere. Although we do not have the ability to construct ships to the stars, in the past, visitors have come to our world."

All right, that was one problem solved. "By the way, what is this world's name?"

"It is called Windeeri. We are Windeerans. It means ones who live with the land."

Problem number two, that being the planet's name – solved.

As for the visitors... "Were they human?"

Her eyes clouded with incomprehension. "Human?"

"Mm-hmmm, the people who came here, I mean. They look like you, um, us, but usually taller, with white or black or pale-yellow skin. They have five fingers and toes instead of six, and their hair has different

colors, like yellow, gray, red, or black. Their eyes are differently colored, too."

Merat blinked a few times, as if trying to recall the details. "No, I do not remember anyone looking such as you have described. When I was a child, I saw some visitors who had wings. Others have seen outsiders who crawled or hopped, but they soon left. Of all the visitors, the Droogs were and are the only evil ones among them."

Uh, right. "Well, anyway, my ship crashed here. I was dying. I had a machine that transferred my mind from my old body into Rinarra's."

Upon receiving this bit of information, Merat shook her head slowly, as if trying to process the impossible. "I...I am not ignorant. I understand what you say about machines. We have those devices that weave our clothes and that mill our grain and do other things, but I am not sure about this transfer of mind to Rinarra's body. If this is true, what happened to her mind? Do you not feel her presence?"

Not at this point, no. She'd guided me here, but then the voice had fallen silent, although I couldn't rule out a return engagement. "No, not now, at least."

Merat looked as though she might tear up again, but then got to her feet and took my hand. "Show me your ship."

Under cover of the night, we walked back to the remains of my escape craft. It had finished burning, and now was a useless hulk of lumpy, twisted metal. We then went over to the tree line to the grave. It was still fresh, the soil, loose. I twisted my toe in the dirt before asking, "Do you want to see what I looked like?"

Merat looked uncertain, but then nodded. "Please."

It didn't take very long to uncover my old body. In death, I actually looked better, more relaxed. It was funny in a way, yet— not.

After I filled in the grave again, Merat bowed her head briefly and her body shook. For a moment I thought she might start crying again, but she heaved in a deep breath and looked at me, almost as though she was looking through me. Her voice held an ineffable note of loss. "Rinarra and I—we were joined. Now, I do not know what to do."

"Joined? That's what you say?"

Her teeth flashed briefly in the darkness, but it was a smile of sadness, not one of joy. "In our culture, no matter where we live or our station in life, we call it a joining. It is the fusion of two spirits into one."

Call it marriage by any other name, but, whatever. "Um, not to sound stupid, but I don't know anything about same-sex joinings. Is that okay on this world?"

"If you are asking whether it is acceptable or not, is it acceptable on yours?"

I had to think about that. Since the end of twenty-thirty, universal marriage laws had been enacted all over Earth. From what I knew, there were some who still disliked it, but to me, it didn't make any difference, even though I always knew I liked girls.

Now, I was one of them, and while it didn't feel right, it didn't exactly feel wrong, either. Bewildered seemed to be the best term to describe my situation. "Before my world ended, it was accepted, more or less."

Merat spread her hands as if to indicate that was how things went on her world. "It is accepted on ours. The majority of joinings are between men and women, so perhaps that is the way among most people. I do not know. But here, in this village, everyone knew about me and Rinarra. Some did not care for it, but most understood our affection for each other."

Well, okay then, but...

My guide to the other side of life jerked her head up. "What's wrong?" I asked.

"Where is the other body, that of the enemy?"

We walked over to the Droog's grave. "Do not show me his face," she said, and then spat on the ground. "It is enough to know that he is here, and that he is dead."

She turned away and motioned for me to follow. "There is someone who can talk to you, someone who knows."

"Who?"

Merat didn't answer. She merely walked off and I hustled to catch up. We went through the village, up a small hill, and then down again where a narrow path lay. "Where are we going?" I asked.

"We must visit the Old One. It is too late to visit the town elder, and the town is a fair distance away over a mountain pass. However, the Old One will see us."

From the way Merat said it, it seemed that this person was someone special. "What's so special about this person?"

She never broke stride. "It has been said that she sees what others do not. When our leader is unsure about the changes in the weather or the movement of the animals here, she consults the Old One. She might be crazy, but she has never lied to me."

"Why would she?"

Merat stopped, and when she faced me, her expression spoke of a long-suppressed truth. "I have never spoken of this to anyone, only Rinarra. Now that you are in her body, I feel that I must."

Color me curious. "And that is?"

She bit her lip and her manner became downright shy. In a very human gesture, she twirled her hair between her fingers, almost a cross between a come-on and diffidence. "When Rinarra and I declared our love for one another, I was confused at first. My parents could not understand why I felt that way about another woman. Rinarra's parents were the same."

After a few more moments of her twisting her hair this way and that, she continued in a low, quiet tone. "Rinarra and I grew up together. We were the best of friends, tilling the fields with our parents during the day,

and studying our language, history, and culture at night. It was when thirteen of our seasons had passed, and when the time of change was upon us, that I developed feelings for her."

Seasons, she meant years. How long was a year here, anyway? That could be asked later. "And?"

The twisting of the hair stopped. A fleeting smile came to her face, and then vanished. "I was the first to declare it, and I was not sure if she would understand or accept it. I was surprised when Rinarra said the same about me."

Merat spoke with a quiet pride. "We kept our love a secret until five more seasons had passed, as we knew our parents would not understand. Still, feelings...they were all that mattered, so we—my parents and Rinarra's parents, and me and my love—we went to see the Old One. That was two seasons ago.

"The Old One told us that there are spirits within every living being, no matter where they are from. Those spirits guide us in our everyday life. Sometimes, they say to seek out those who are the same, and sometimes they say to seek out those who different. There is no shame," she said, "in loving one of the same gender. The only shame is not declaring it."

Uh-huh, that was easy for her to say. She was talking about basic biology, that one was hardwired to be drawn to the same or a different gender from birth. I'd had to study that when I was younger, and never really understood it—until now. On the other hand, I'd been a guy at the time. Now I had to work through an entirely different set of circumstances.

"After that," Merat continued, "my parents accepted it. So did Rinarra's parents. Perhaps they did not like it, but they accepted it. They had too much respect for the Old One not to listen to her. Not only that, we lived close to one another and had always been around one another."

She then raised her hands in a gesture meant to mean *that is how it was*. "So, since we preferred each other's company, perhaps they thought it was the way of all things for us."

"And what about your leader?"

Merat's face tightened. "She officiated our joining ceremony, and everyone from the town came. Our leader is not one who cares for the joining of those who are the same sex, but she was bound by law to do what was requested of her. At the time, her joined one was ill and could not attend."

She suddenly chuckled, her bad mood gone. "Rinarra wore a *chari*, as did I. Our village is not a wealthy one. We are two movements of the sun away from the nearest town, so fineries in fabric are not something anyone here has. I did not, but Rinarra had evidently found some rare items that she exchanged for the material we used to weave what we would one day wear. The *chari* is something very special in our culture."

Two movements of the sun. To me, that meant two hours, but it was only a guess. As for the word *chari* that was the second time she'd mentioned it. "A what?"

No download of information came, and with no frame of reference, it was necessary to ask. Merat didn't seem to mind, though. "A *chari* is a ceremonial robe everyone must make when they are young," she explained. "It signifies the passage from childhood to adulthood. There is no in-between period. It is long and multi-colored, with a *partootum* clasp.

"*Partootum* symbolizes a long life together in our culture. It is an extremely rare find, and that is why we use it as a symbol, as it is rare to find someone to join with."

Partootum...that was a new one. It was too bad that the ship had burned up. I would have given anything right now to have some kind of scanner for the geological system on this world, but as this was essentially an agricultural society, good luck in finding such an instrument.

Additionally, doubtful the Droogs would let me use their interstellar transmitter to contact someone on Vega Seven. No, for now, I was on my own.

Merat had continued to talk about finding the perfect mate, and reminisced about her early days of marriage. Her eyes began to well up, and then she quickly wiped them. "I am sorry, it is just that—"

"You loved her." The naked hurt was plain on her face.

Merat stared at me. "Yes, I did. I still do...even though you are not her."

Feeling bad about it, I hesitantly placed my hand on her shoulder and told a little lie. She wouldn't know, and perhaps it would make her feel better. "I am her—sort of. But my mind is mine, if that makes any sense. I'm just in her body. I'm not using her, but we, uh, live together, and—"

Merat gave an incongruous giggle. "That is something I have never considered. Borrowing another person's body."

Then her merriment faded, and a scowl formed. "That is what the Droogs have done to this land. But they have not borrowed. They have stolen."

From her description, it underscored what Fawcett had told me. The Droogs were like raiders and pirates, the latter term being something I'd studied from the old novels I'd read on my holo-puter. "Yeah, okay, I get it, but what are we—"

"First, we must speak to the Old One. It is late, but she does not sleep much. Her life consists of eating and dispensing advice. She will see us. Then, tomorrow, we shall speak to the elder of our village. Please trust me. This is the best way."

Once more, she took my hand to lead the way. It didn't feel romantic. From my perspective, she understood, and I was grateful that someone did.

"This way," she said.

The path led us over a low ridge and after ten minutes, Merat pointed to a cave that sat in a shady spot of a hill. "The person we seek is in there.

She lives alone, and someone from our village always brings her food.”

It showed. A bright light burned from deep within the cave, and a few bones and food scraps sat outside the entrance. A stink of fetid air floated our way. I wondered where the toilet was, and then decided not to think about it.

Animals the size of large rats stole in from the surrounding field to snatch away the scraps. They had beady eyes, long, forked tails, and made a rather cute squeaking sound when they discovered a morsel of food. Merat whispered that the animals— she called them *gerts*—were harmless.

“Are there other animals here?”

She nodded. “We have larger ones, some that we catch for food, some that fly, and some that prey on others. They usually live in the forests and the mountains near here. I will show you later, if you wish.”

I’d already seen a few, but learning was now on my menu. “Please.”

Merat then called, “Old One, may we speak with you?”

A querulous voice rang out from the back of the cave. “Who is it?”

“It is Merat. I am here with Rinarra.” She then glanced at me and added, “And another.”

Silence for a beat, and then the old woman’s voice came again. “Enter.”

We entered and Merat led me to where the Old One sat. A fire burned a few meters behind her. As I drew closer, the smell got stronger, and then I realized it was coming from the host. Although the cave was roughly ten meters in width, the person who sat there seemed to fill the space, and now the air dropped like a heavy blanket on me. To avoid the stink, I breathed through my mouth.

It didn’t help.

“So, Rinarra,” the woman said. “You have come to see the mad person who inhabits this humble abode. Speak, child.”

The Old One was a woman of indeterminate age, immensely fat, with long, gray hair, a withered face in sharp contrast to her body, and an opaque right eye indicating that a cataract or blindness had set in a long time ago.

She wore a stained, frayed pullover, and something dripped from her mouth. Food or drool perhaps, but she made no move to wipe it away. Her appearance was both fascinating and repulsive. “What have you come to see an old woman for?” she asked in a high-pitched, querulous tone.

“We seek your counsel,” Merat answered in an earnest tone. “My joined one and I have been having...difficulties. We wish to hear your opinion on what course of action we may take.”

A cackle came our way. “You do not have to tell me that you were having problems with your union. There was talk even before the two of you were joined. I heard from some other villagers who came to consult me on different matters. They mentioned it in passing.”

After the old lady had imparted that piece of information, Merat

grimaced. Her expression reminded me of the time when my father had eaten a particularly rotten piece of synthetic food. His face had sported an expression of disgust as if he'd been ordered to ingest poison. I was ten at the time, but that image had always stayed with me.

Clearly, Merat's concept of acceptance did not mean support. It was merely acceptance from others of the fact that she had been married to a woman—but they didn't like it.

On the other hand, Earth's inhabitants hadn't always been so accepting, either. "It is not about my mate or our relations," Merat hastened to reply after glancing at me. "We are—or were—compatible. However, this question concerns who she was—and is. I hope you can aid us in our search for knowledge."

The Old One grabbed a piece of bread, crammed it into her mouth, and chewed it noisily before swallowing it and emitting another cackle. "Child, you are no good at talking in riddles! Leave that to the ones who are considered mad, those like me."

Merat threw me another glance that meant *should I tell her*, and I shrugged. If this old woman had some special kind of insight, then it might help us in the future, although I couldn't see how.

Writers in the past had always talked about seers and prognosticators, but that sounded like magic or superstition to me. Now, though, I was on an alien world with people who perhaps had powers different or superior—or both—to our own. "Please...tell me who I am," I said.

The Old One shifted her gaze in my direction and beckoned me closer. Her body odor was horrid, and while it nearly suffocated me, it was too late to back out. "Sit in front of me," she ordered.

After doing as she asked, she put her hands to my temples, closed her good eye, mumbled something unintelligible, and then told me to close my eyes as well. "You will see and hear without seeing."

Immediately, contact happened at the psychic level. It felt odd, as though someone was walking around in my head and poking their fingers into each crevice and each fold of brain matter. It didn't hurt, but it wasn't on my recommended list.

However, the shock of having another stranger in my head made me open my eyes and I found the Old One still mumbling, head down.

Suddenly, her eyes flew open and she gasped. With that, the fingers in my mind withdrew. It came as a distinct relief to find someone else leave my head, although I felt that Rinarra was still in there, somewhere.

"This is...this is unforeseen," the Old One said, swiveling her head back and forth between Merat and me. "I sense...no, I saw and heard two spirits within you, one male and the other, female. How is this possible?"

So, she *did* have some special insight! How, I didn't know, but this was only one world of many.

"Tell me," she continued. "Who are you? I only saw brief glimpses of

you as well as the Rinarra I knew when she was a child. I must know in order to render a decision."

As simply as possible, I related my story to her. She gazed at me steadily with her one good eye and nodded when I'd finished giving her the details. "I know only a little of the stars and the life forms that inhabit them, although I know of the Droogs. They have left me alone, mainly because I am no threat to them."

"Why are they here?"

She shrugged. "Why do evil people visit other lands? They suffer from greed or envy or both. With the Droogs, they killed the men of our village, and they took the young women. That is all I know about them."

"Thank you for telling me."

She then asked me if I'd heard Rinarra's voice. "Only a couple of times. It's not like we have conversations, if you can understand."

Her good eye then turned a bright laser blue and it practically impaled me with its intensity. "I knew Rinarra from the day she was born. I knew of her as she grew to womanhood and chose to be joined with Merat. And I knew she was a good person. She is still in you. She is you, and you are her."

During this time, Merat hadn't said a word, but now she said with a hopeful note, "I am not sure that I understand. Do you mean to say that she is still alive within her mind along with his mind?"

The old woman grunted, picked up a piece of fruit, chewed it thoughtfully, and then put it down. "Yes...and no. It was difficult to see. The mind I entered was like a road at night filled with fallen trees, hard to cross, but passable. At last, I reached a small pool where I saw the essence of the Rinarra you once knew.

"Some of her most basic memories are still there. I saw images of her as a child. I saw her as a young woman who came with you and your parents to talk to me about the two of you joining. And I see her now, but only dimly."

"Not to be stupid or anything," I cut in, "but what does all this mean?"

A rather gentle smile came from the old lady. "Do not think yourself foolish for asking. As I said, I know not of alien worlds or their cultures, but I sense decency in you. You have also suffered loss. I could read that much."

Astonishing! "How did you know?"

She shrugged. "I have the ability to see impressions in people's minds. It is something that my mother had, and her mother before her. Although your thoughts are different from Rinarra's, they are not as different as you may think. Worry not, Kyle Sorton. I sense goodness within you."

I was no longer skeptical. This old woman did possess a power that I'd never heard of. It didn't matter how she knew. She just did. "So, what do I do now?" I asked.

Her answer was cryptic. "I can only tell you this. It is said that those of two spirits bring good fortune. I shall think on this more. Leave me now."

Merat pointed the way out. Once we stood in the fresh air, she took my hand again as we retraced our steps over the rock. Along the way, she asked me about what the Old One had said. "She said you suffered loss."

"Oh." Merat would have to bring up the subject of my parents. "My mother and father died from a disease about three years ago. I've been on my own since then."

"I see."

I wondered if she did, but Merat then squeezed my hand. "I, too, have suffered loss, my parents, and the rest...you already know. But I have also gained something back."

Once we'd returned to our hut, Merat yawned. "It is late. We should sleep. In the morning, we shall go and see our leader."

She busied herself with work, preparing for bed, banking the fire, and perhaps in deference to our relationship, she prepared another pallet and took out a blanket. "This is for you. We made a spare in the event that our first one broke. Please use the blanket. The nights get cold here."

Speaking of which, I asked her about how long the days were in terms of hours. "Hours?" She offered a quizzical look.

"Yeah, um, they're time periods – seconds, minutes, hours – like that."

Incomprehension ruled in her eyes. Clearly, she had no concept of time. "We know when it is time to rise, eat, work, and sleep. That is enough."

Great, they went on bio-rhythms. Well, so far it had worked for me, so go with it. I took the blanket and lay down. Merat went to her own pallet and turned in. Soon, she was snoring gently.

As for me, so far this had been an incredibly odd experience, and it wasn't over yet. Before my eyes closed, I said a silent thank you to Rinarra. Something the Old One had said, though, swam up in my mind. Two spirits...two spirits existing in one body...two minds, one heart...

Then the darkness came up to take me away.

Chapter Seven

Turned Away

IMAGES, VAGUE AT first and then more focused, flashed in front of my mind's eye as I slept. The dreams came, dreams of battles against the invaders of days or maybe weeks past. It didn't matter when they happened. What mattered was that those images from Rinarra's memories couldn't be shut down.

Everything was saturated in color. A whiff of smoke hit me right away, and then it turned into a heavy, blinding, acrid stink. I began to choke, and while coughing out the offending intruder, another smell came, this time the coppery scent of blood. It blotted out everything else and it fell upon me like a lead blanket.

Bodies lay everywhere, those of the villagers. Huts had been leveled, holes in the ground big enough to hold at least ten people, dominated the landscape. Death hung in the air.

This is our war, Rinarra's voice said.

The image now shifted to that of one-on-one combat. Rinarra was fighting a Droog with only her fists and her nails. He used a sword, the same kind of sword that I'd taken from the Droog I'd killed the night before.

She'd fought bravely against her opponent, fought fiercely, asking for no quarter and giving none. In two words, she was fearless and indomitable. No wonder Merat admired her.

Rinarra, more agile than her opponent, had used her jumping ability to vault three meters over him. She'd landed behind him, extended her nails, and had driven them into the back of his head, obliterating his brain. He'd had time to scream—once. His dying shriek reverberated in my head and it made me wince.

In an abrupt transition, another earlier memory came, one of peacetime. It was Rinarra and Merat's wedding day. They stood in a hall just large enough for around fifty people, and they wore brightly colored robes, the chari she'd mentioned.

As for the onlookers, they were clad in their ragged, threadbare pullovers, yet their faces were washed and shone brightly, and the women wore flowers in their hair. A festive atmosphere seemed to be present, and before the ceremony began, they chatted and laughed with one another.

Rinarra's voice came again. *Our happy times.*

Merat stood beside me. In front of us was the village elder, also a short and slight woman who leaned on a cane. She wore a severe expression, perhaps due to her position, or more likely that she didn't approve of the ceremony. She raised her arms and the hall quieted down.

"Merat and Rinarra, both residents of our village, we are here to celebrate

your joining. It is unusual, but it is something that is acceptable to all."

Neither a murmur nor a whisper sounded. "We rejoice in your union, and the village of Renya welcomes you."

Merat turned to me and grasped my forearms. I did the same for her. We then kissed, and the memory sent an odd sensation through me, something I'd never felt before. Sexual, yes, but something more, something that had been missing in my life. I realized that it was...affection.

A quick switch in the images occurred. The ceremony, now over, signaled a change in my host's life. With polite cheers from the villagers ringing in our ears, we, as newlyweds, walked out into the bright sunlight.

Another shift to night happened, and Merat and I sat at the table in our hut. Her hands moved restlessly over the rough top. "I cannot understand why you have to do this," she said. "It is useless."

"Someone has to try."

"But why you?" Her tears fell fast and hard. "Why you, Rinarra? We have been joined, and I cannot lose you as this village has already lost so many. Do you not remember our days of growing up? Our days of playing together? Our time spent finding out about one another?"

"I remember. It is why this must be done," Rinarra countered. "There is no one who possesses the abilities I do."

She looked down at her hands. Her fingernails came out, the ends glinting in the firelight. "I do not know why I was born this way. My nails are as hard as the metal our smiths produce. My parents did not know, either, yet they loved me. You loved me, although you were frightened when you first saw."

"I was, but I am not frightened now, only of what may happen to you."

Rinarra retracted her nails, got up and went over to the fire to stare at the flames. "I know of what may happen," she said quietly. "I am prepared for it. My parents were not. Neither were yours. They were slain as they slept, and it is only because you and I were elsewhere at the time that we survived."

Merat came over to stand beside her. "It is true, and I have the same feeling toward the invaders that you do, but there is—"

"There is no one. There is only me. I cannot destroy them all at once, but I can pick them off one by one, as we trap the gerts when food is scarce." She turned to embrace Merat. "I love you, my joined one, but this is something that must be done."

She then released her and walked out the door, never looking back.

I heard Merat's sobs, and then the image shifted again to the battle against another Droog. This one was much larger than the first man she'd faced, with an even more asymmetrical face, a more fearsome and violent fighting style, and a vicious sneer that was capable of wilting flowers.

With utter viciousness and no regard for their own safety they fought, and her nails came out to rake his face and take one of his eyes. He bellowed in agony, but had enough strength left to smash her across the

temple with his fist.

Farkeer.

Rinarra's whisper of his name echoed in my mind. I knew, though, who he was, and more importantly, what he was.

He was a monster.

The images faded after that, and mine took over. The fire that had killed the personnel on the space station...the escape shift spiraling out of control...the crash, and then the fusion of two minds into one. I was here, on an alien world, and those monsters, one of which I'd slain, were still out there, ready to kill...

"Uh!"

I woke up in a cold sweat, breathing hard and shivering. Like the evenings, mornings were cool here. Beside me, Merat was still asleep. The fire died and the room was cold, so I got up, tossed on my pullover, found a match, and lit the fire. Although I'd never done this before, an unspoken presence guided me on what to do.

Fire now lit, I blew gently on the flames to stoke things. I stood a couple of feet away, warming myself and limbering up.

"Good morning."

I spun around, and found Merat up, wrapped in her blanket. "Did you sleep well?" she asked, while yawning and using her free hand to style her tousled hair.

No, not really, but no sense in telling her. She was already upset about losing her wife. After what I'd seen in my dreams, there was no point in rehashing old and bitter memories. "Yes," I replied. "I'm fine."

She nodded, let the blanket fall, and reached for her pullover. Out of politeness and an acute sense of shyness, I averted my gaze until she'd finished dressing.

"I am done."

Her words brought me back to reality. She gave me a look that spoke of accepting our situation as it was, of having to live with an imposter, wanting, but never getting. I felt bad as well, as I'd unknowingly and unintentionally destroyed a marriage.

Perhaps Merat understood that. I said nothing while she busied herself with preparing the morning meal. It consisted of lightly charring a few vegetables. They were hard and bitter, but the water we drank was enough to wash the nasty taste away.

"This is what we are reduced to," she said as she ate. "We were farmers before, and that was our life, but now we are indigent farmers as well as prisoners."

In all this time, I hadn't thought to ask the name of this place. "Where are we, exactly?"

"In a village. It has no name. The town is called Renya, if that helps."

"It does."

We ate in silence, and once I'd finished, I asked about how the

Droogs had taken over. Merat propped her elbows on the table and rested her chin upon her hands. "They came some time ago, as I told you before, in one ship. We did not know of their intentions at first. Rinarra was curious, so she went to watch them."

"And?"

"They were not friendly."

It seemed that as soon as the Droogs had touched down, they'd established a base camp. Their ship had then taken off, and they'd installed a drill. "It drove deep within the earth. They were searching for something," Merat said.

"Do you know what?"

She nodded and got up to go over to a corner where a number of small bags lay. From one of the bags, she took out a silver pebble the size of my pinky fingernail and brought it over to the table. I wasn't sure what it was at first, so I asked her.

"This is partootum. It is a common, yet rare metal here."

Contradiction time. "Merat, how can something be common, and yet rare?"

She bobbed her head in apology. "What I meant was, there is much of this metal here, but it is rare in the sense that it can be processed. Our smiths here can alter its shape, but it is extremely time consuming for them to accomplish that feat."

After feeling the metal, I realized that it was naretium. One of the technicians had shown it to me on the space station. It had a texture all its own, rough and initially cold, yet it soon warmed under the touch of the person who held it. It was super-conductive and super-strong, so much so that it was almost unbreakable.

It had been discovered on asteroids roughly fifty years ago and mined from them after long-distance space flight had become feasible. Astro-geologists theorized it could be found on other worlds, and the earliest settlers had found deposits in their travels.

Since then, it had been used to construct space vessels, weapons, buildings for the new worlds, and more. It was considered an indispensable resource by the Interplanetary Council. Without a doubt, this was what the Droogs had come for. "You said this metal is everywhere?"

She nodded. "I know of one such place where there is a lot of it."

A lot—she had no idea of how much it cost or what people would do for it. No, check that, the Droogs had come. They knew, and they'd killed for it.

Merat said, "At any rate, the Droogs want other metals such as this. Rinarra said that she overheard them talking about it."

Her story continued with the Droogs marching into this village and executing the men. This had happened during the dead of night while everyone was sleeping in their beds. The invaders had swooped into the village and yelled at the locals to come out.

Once they had, the men and women had been separated. Fifty men in all had been vaporized instantly, as a warning not to interfere.

“Farkeer said that we were now his prisoners,” she said in a hollow tone. “We would be allowed to live if we did not interfere. He then went to Renya, killed their people, and imparted the same message.”

What. A. Slime. Mold.

No, slime was far ahead on the evolutionary scale. “So...that’s when Rinarra, er, me, went out to look?”

Merat nodded, and her voice grew low and quiet, her eyes watering. Painful memories – she was reliving them. I didn’t want to bring them up, but I had to know.

“Rinarra hated them. They killed her parents first, and then killed mine as a warning. Our parents had dared to speak out against them. Their bodies are buried just over the rise of the hill. I will show you later, if you like.”

“Yes, please.”

Her voice caught, and then she gained control of herself. “After they killed our parents, Rinarra swore revenge. There were no men left in our village, and none in Renya, either. She had certain gifts. She used them.”

Yes, I had. “You mean, the nails, her fighting skills?”

Merat bobbed her head. “Yes. You are rare among our people. When I was a child, the elders in our village spoke of others who had your gifts, but I have never seen them. I knew long ago...”

Here, she abruptly choked up again. “I knew long ago what Rinarra was and what she could do. But it did not matter. I loved her. She loved me. And now?”

Then the tears flowed, and I didn’t know what to do, except to say, “I’m sorry.”

Merat sobbed quietly for a time before wiping her eyes. “It is all right. I do not understand what happened, not completely, but I am simply happy she survived. However, you being here, it is dangerous for us, for all of us.”

“Because I killed a Droog?”

“Because you killed many.”

Apparently, Rinarra had gone out on a one-woman killing spree, taking out no less than fifteen of the enemy. “Farkeer, their leader, he periodically sends out soldiers to see if they can find her – you.”

She corrected herself with a tiny laugh, but then she added, “If they cannot find you, they threaten to execute a few villagers or townspeople to show that they are in earnest. They have done so before. They can and will again.”

Monsters, they were nothing less than monsters. “Aren’t we going to fight them?”

Merat violently shook her head, her eyes widening in fear. “We cannot. We have no weapons. Those arms they carry, they cause a person

to disappear from existence forever. We cannot fight them.”

“Don’t you have armies on this world?”

Helplessness was written all over her face. “We have those who are warriors, but they would fall against the Droogs. In addition, the nearest city is no less than eight mornings away. We have no other transportation except for our feet.”

Mornings had to mean days. It frustrated me because we had no way of asking anyone for assistance. “Can’t you at least send someone to try and get help?”

Merat hung her head. “We tried. Two women from the city attempted to leave. They were killed as soon as they reached the outskirts of our town.”

Talk about a hopeless situation. Hemmed in by the mountains, outmanned and outgunned—dire seemed the best word to use. The people had been cowed into submission. “So, what do you do?”

“We hope they find their metal and then leave. That is all that we can ask for.”

It wasn’t much of a reason to put up with this, considering she’d already told me naretium was abundant on this world, but maybe she had her reasons for not telling the invaders. As if reading my mind, she said, “I know they seek this metal, among other kinds. But what they seek is not something we are prepared to give.”

That explanation made no sense at all. “Who told you this?”

“The Old One did. She once said that this metal was part of our world and there was good reason for it to remain where it was. She never spoke again of it.”

To me, it sounded like the Old One was talking about a prophecy. Many of the old novels talked about a special person or group of people coming to help or being born or overthrowing their oppressors. It was a waste of time thinking about it.

In addition, it appears the enemy was here to stay, and it was a given that they did not believe in the ways of the Windeerans.

Furthermore, the villagers here couldn’t be expected to attack a well-trained, physically superior enemy. I finished eating, and then Merat said we would journey to Renya. “It will take us around two movements of the sun, but we must speak to Bineta.”

Movements of the sun sounded like hours, but whatever. We set out, and along the way, we met a short, young woman who carried a basket. Oh, yes, I’d seen her the other day, standing next to Merat. This woman was gnawing on her nails, glancing around as if expecting an attack at any second. She stopped chewing when she saw me. A scowl turned her plain face mean. “Rinarra, you are back.”

Friendly person—not. Who was this? Merat whispered, “Her name is Pamka. She is a member of this village.”

Pamka’s scowl vanished and she returned to biting her nails and scoping out the area. “I should not be here,” she said. “You should not be, either. The

soldiers —”

“They have not come for a week,” Merat interrupted. “Do not fear. We are going to see Bineta now.”

Pamka didn’t seem to be reassured, as the chewy-chewy thing continued. “I do not wish to know this. I only wish to go to my field and gather food.”

“So, go,” Merat said. She waved her arm at the field behind us. “I have done so since the Droogs came. Go and gather what you need.”

“I would, but I am frightened of the Droogs. You are only brave because Rinarra has returned. She is fortunate. My parents were not,” Pamka answered, eyes still darting left and right, but then she took her hand away from her mouth and focused her gaze on me. “They would have lived, if you had not attacked the enemy.”

“My parents also died,” Merat countered, and her voice grew heated. “So did Rinarra’s parents. They were slain like animals as they slept. We, too, have suffered loss. Do not lecture me about your troubles. You are not the only one who has suffered.”

The floodgates opened, and both women started yelling at each other. The argument grew more and more heated, and me...what did this have to do with...

Oh. The Droogs had killed her parents in a reprisal for the old Rinarra killing a few of them. Making my move, I stepped in quickly to separate them, as they were now standing nose to nose, their faces flushed with anger. “Stop this, both of you. I only want to end the conflict.” It was rather lame, but what else could I say? “You should have thought of that before you attacked them!

You are responsible,” Pamka declared. “You are as guilty of murder as they are!”

Her outburst ended as quickly as it had started, and she moved out, her body quivering in fear or anger or both. Soon, she was out of sight.

“I didn’t realize I was that popular here,” I said as Merat and I resumed our journey. “She’s traumatized.”

Merat nodded. “If by that you mean she is frightened of everything, the answer is yes. She does not talk to many people, anymore. She seldom did before the Droogs came and seemed happiest with her parents. Now that they are gone, she resents you. That much is clear to me.”

“What about the other villagers and townspeople?”

My guide bit her lip. “They feel the same. They are sad and angry that someone acted.”

“Would you have?”

That caused Merat to stop in her tracks and her mouth worked in a dozen different directions. “I do not know,” she finally said. “After our parents were slain, that was when she told me of her plan to go out and harass the invaders.”

Rinarra’s memories of her last conversation came back to me. “Yeah, I remember.”

Merat shrugged. "I am not a fighter. I am afraid of war, and I have no skill to fight. Rinarra knew that, and so she told me to stay home. After you disappeared, the Droogs came to ask me questions about where you went. I told them that I did not know. At first, they threatened to take me hostage. Then they threatened to execute me, but they finally left after giving me a warning."

Something about the enemy abducting all the young women echoed upstairs. "Why didn't they take you or Pamka?"

A triumphant smile came to her face. "Pamka is three seasons younger than we are. The Droogs said they were not interested in her."

"With me, they claim that they do not have the concept of the same sex joining with each other on their world. It is abhorrent to them. Their leader told me so."

She hesitated and licked her lips. "But...there is another reason."

"And that is?"

"Rinarra fought him. She took one of his eyes. He has never forgiven her for it, and he knew that if he harmed me, she would take her revenge upon him."

"You mean, he's afraid of her, er, me?" Damn it, I would have to get my pronouns mixed up.

Merat shrugged. "He is. He pretends not to be, but he still sends his men out to search for you."

Her eyes glittered. "I am not afraid, but I do not know how to fight, and I am not clever enough to imagine a plan to defeat them. Still, if you need my help, then I shall give it."

Help was a good thing, but I hoped that it wouldn't give her any ideas of rekindling what she'd had with me—Rinarra—me. Fortunately, Merat didn't press the matter, and we continued.

After ninety more minutes of steady walking, we reached the town. A few huts stood on the outskirts. A dirt road led in and out of the town. With perhaps twenty single-story buildings still standing, half on one side of the road and half on the other, it resembled something I'd seen in the old holo-texts. "What kind of businesses did they have?" I asked.

"As farmers, we always brought our crops here. We had several shops. As I may have told you, in our culture we barter for goods."

"You did."

Merat nodded. "There are—or were—shops to buy clothes, cooking implements, bread, and other items. Most of them are gone now."

She swept her arm to the left to show a huge mound of timber. "Those were once buildings. They are not buildings now."

Merat then pointed to a white structure that stood on the far right. "That is our meeting hall. Bineta lives there now, as her house was destroyed. Her joined one was killed by the invaders."

That summed it all up. We went to the building and found the door open. Roughly forty by forty feet, the hall had nothing in the way of

furniture save for a few tables and chairs. As was the case with the huts, there was a fireplace at the rear of the room, a basin with a few dishes stacked on the floor, two neatly folded blankets that sat on a pallet, and that was all. Those things, and an old woman.

Bineta. I recognized her from my dream. She wore a threadbare pullover, the same as what everyone else wore, but had a shawl wrapped around her shoulders, despite it being summer.

Her hair was long and white, and her face deeply lined. Maybe she was in her eighties, although it was impossible to tell. She occupied one of the chairs and held a cane in her lap. Merat asked, "Bineta, may I be offered some refreshment?"

Immediately, the old woman got to her feet and stumped over, leaning heavily on her cane. Her face was a mask. "It is yours to take. Please wait."

She went to the back of the room where a jug and three glasses had been placed on one of the tables. While she busied herself pouring the drinks, Merat whispered that what she'd said was the customary greeting here. "We always ask about refreshment. It is our way of saying hello and showing that we mean them no harm."

"Oh."

Bineta came back with two cups in her hand and gave them to us. I sipped mine. It was very sweet. Merat whispered that it was a drink called Kler, a drink only offered to guests. The rest of the time, the people drank water.

We finished our drinks, and then our host turned to me. The mask of semi-civility disappeared, replaced by a look of disapproval, and her tone was severe. "Although I am pleased to see you alive, Rinarra, I am also displeased that you are here. I warned you before that your actions would lead to difficulties. You did not listen."

Like Pamka, she didn't sound overly friendly. "You mean about the raids I went on? Well, too bad, they had to be done. She, er, I, uh, well, they were necessary."

Merat pinched my arm as a signal to shut up, but it was too late. The gesture was not lost on Bineta as she blinked. "What is wrong with you, Rinarra? You have a cut on your temple and you are speaking oddly."

"I'm still me."

"She was in a fight with one of the Droogs, with their leader," Merat cut in, attempting to cover for my faux pas. "It has addled her brain somewhat."

Addled my brain? Well, now that I had two of them, sort of...

The old woman soon recovered her stern manner. "Fighting with those who have conquered us will only bring about our deaths sooner."

"Is it not better to resist than to cower?" Merat rejoined in a sudden burst of temper. That surprised me, as she'd already said that she was not a fighter.

"If we had the means to wage war against them, we would do so,"

Bineta countered. "We cannot. I say this now to both of you—do not come here again. I cannot refuse you entry to this town. I can only refuse you entry to this place. Since my joined one, my Hibara, died at the hands of the invaders, I am now responsible for the safety of the townspeople that are left."

She then speared Merat with an accusatory look. "I agreed to sanction the joining of you and Rinarra, although I personally do not approve of such a thing. However, our laws are our laws."

"Bineta," Merat began, but stopped when the old woman rapped her knuckles on the table.

"Silence, I am not finished yet. I agreed to such a thing, but with Rinarra ignoring the laws of town and country and taking matters into her own hands, it has left me in an impossible position. The Droogs have indicated that they are here to seek some kind of ore for their home world. If we leave them alone, then maybe we will survive."

"You're prisoners," I said. "This is wrong."

Bineta's dark eyes flashed anger. "It is better than being slaves. I have done what I have done for the safety of the survivors here, as well as in your village."

"And what if they don't leave? What if more of them come? If they do—"

"Rinarra, that will be enough," the old woman said, taking her cane and smacking the floor with it. She then waved her hand in dismissal. "Leave now. Our meeting is over."

We left, with Merat still grumbling. On our way back, she continued to mutter, her mood getting progressively darker. "What's wrong?" I asked.

"What do you think? I expected Bineta to at least listen to us, but she did not."

Of course she didn't, and I'd caught the tone of disapproval in her voice, especially when she'd mentioned our marriage. Merat and I were still technically married, and for some reason it irked me that another person would diss us as people. I hadn't been raised that way, although I still liked women...and I was a woman now...

Merat abruptly stopped. "You wished to see this?"

She pointed at some clearly outlined shapes in the dirt. A rock with a name—Ginta—had been chiseled into it and served as a tombstone. Another rock with the name Traka sat next to it.

"No family names?" I asked. "What is a family name?"

Oh, how to explain this? "Well, family names tell us where the parents came from or their job or if they belonged to a larger group." That seemed to be the simplest way of phrasing things.

Merat nodded. "I understand. In our culture, we do not have a concept of family names. We are given only one name for life." Tears began to fall from her eyes. "They were my parents."

She then led me to another pair of graves and told me this was where my/Rinarra's parents had been interred. Just seeing those names made

me get misty, too, not because they were Rinarra's mother and father, but because they made me think of my own parents.

Although we'd never been that close, I knew that they loved me. The rest of the world hadn't loved them, though. They'd never had a burial. They'd been cremated, their bones pulverized, and their ashes scattered.

They were the ones who bore me.

Rinarra's voice came suddenly, and then just as quickly vanished. Between the emotion she evoked and my own, I couldn't help but cry. I didn't want to, but I did, and Merat put her arms around me. "I am sorry you feel badly," she said.

A moment later, she released her hold. I looked into her eyes and saw only honesty. "Thanks."

She smiled, but a moment later, she gasped and pointed at something behind me. Following her finger, I turned around and saw a huge soldier marching toward us. He carried no gun, but a sword hung at his side and he tapped it in time to his strides.

Even unarmed, his hands looked more than powerful enough to tear us in half. The massive right arm gave him away—Summa. Merat gave a short whimper of fear as he approached. Once at our position, he asked in a rough voice, "Where are you two from?"

"From...from the village below," Merat answered haltingly. "We were taking a walk, visiting our parents' graves."

He snorted his disapproval. "Were you given permission to leave your village?"

"I wasn't aware that we needed it," I said.

That jarred him, and he blinked. He was the type that didn't like to be talked back to. "Merat, yes, I remember you," he said, scratching his head and staring at her. "You are that abomination my leader speaks of."

Merat gritted her teeth, but said nothing, so I took up the slack. "Look in the mirror."

He switched his gaze to me and then burst out laughing at the insult. "You have spirit, woman! I kill spirit, and..."

A second later, he stopped talking and his eyes grew round. In a slow, careful movement, he reached for his sword. "Rinarra...it is you. You were the one—"

He didn't get another word out, as something inside me made me launch a kick to his face. He wasn't ready for it, and my foot caught him squarely on his chin. His neck snapped back, and then he fell to the ground, unconscious.

"What did you just do?" Merat asked in a whisper. "I took care of business."

"If by that, you mean you have sealed our fate, then I agree.

More soldiers will come."

I heard a shout from a few yards away. A group of Droogs had apparently seen the knockout. "Any suggestions?"

Merat gulped. "Yes, we leave."

Sound idea. We ran back to our hut, took only a few provisions and stuffed them in a bag, and then ran out again. "Where should we go?" I asked.

"To the mountainside," she panted as we took the trail that headed upward. "There are caves there. We can hide."

It seemed like the thing to do. Halfway to wherever it was we were going, I realized that I'd forgotten to take my bag containing my med-kit and other provisions with me. Too late to go back now. We were now fugitives, and I had the feeling that if the Droogs found us, nothing short of our deaths would satisfy them.

Chapter Eight

Hideout

THE CAVE MERAT showed me lay high up on the mountain to the east. None of the mountains had names. She then added that she'd come with Rinarra many times in the past where they would talk for hours about their dreams and plans.

"What were they?" I asked.

She gave a wistful smile. "Where we would go when we were older, what we would do. I never wished to be a farmer, but there is really no other life for me. It is not something I like so much, but I accept it."

The view was quite beautiful, filled with greenish-blue trees that resembled firs, yellow grass, and numerous bushes upon which red and blue berries hung. "They are edible," Merat said.

In addition to the flora, the fauna here was interesting. A few of the crab-like creatures scuttled by. "They are called *kaniku*. It means that which has armor."

She then pointed out the chubby birds in the trees. "We call them *sarashi*. It means one that screams."

They certainly had a shrill cry. Other animals were plentiful, although Merat said they'd largely been scared off by the invaders. "Are any of them dangerous?" I asked.

Merat shook her head. "Not in these parts. There are large animals we fear called *manarkus*, but they are rare. They prey on everything, even our people, but they live in another region. There is enough food here to exist on, even though the Droogs take most of it. They are greedy pigs, and they do not understand the concept of being satisfied with what they have."

Other facts emerged. As the computer had told me, this world was largely an agricultural one. It was also quite egalitarian. Farmers made up the bulk of the populace, and the men and women worked equally in tilling the land and raising their children. "It is how we live," Merat explained. "We do not know another way."

In terms of commerce, merchant groups thrived in the big cities. "There is a king and his queen, but they live far away. It would take almost a third of a season to journey there. We are sufficient unto ourselves with our village and town. At least, we were."

I sensed she wanted to tell me something more, something personal, but instead Merat stopped speaking and set about gathering sticks and some stray brush. While she did, I took the opportunity to gaze over the area.

Although a great number of caves dotted this mountain range, perhaps more than fifty, this one stood out from the rest. It was larger and deeper than

the others, full of branches and scrub brush, and it overlooked the entire valley. From the vantage point of the tiny outcropping of rock, far to my left, a puff of oily- looking smoke hung in the air, accompanied by a loud sound. It wasn't deafening, but I still had to raise my voice. "I see smoke."

"That is their drill," Merat said as she prepared a small fire.

She pitched her voice higher to get over the racket.

The drill...yes. Summa had said it would be operational soon.

Apparently, the Droogs had just begun their drilling.

Merat stoked the fire by gently blowing on it and feeding it shavings of wood. She'd gone out earlier and returned holding two of the small animals by the tails. She'd called them gerts. They were dead, their necks swinging loosely.

"Eventually, they will bore into the ground. That thing is a monster," she said as she fed some shavings into the base of the fire and waved away the smoke.

I was worried that someone would see the fire or smoke from our position, but Merat told me we were safe. "We are too far away for them to notice. As well, there are many caves to hide in. However, the light from our fire can be seen at night. I will bank it, then."

Safety notice given, she resumed talking about the drill. "It will tear into the earth, and it frightens me."

"It's technology."

She glanced briefly at me before turning back to the fire. "Machines are not evil. This, I know. However, the Droogs' creation seems so. They are destroying our land."

Yes, they were, and I had the feeling that the Droogs wouldn't be satisfied with their initial findings. This scouting mission had to be a prelude to colonization. If they brought more of their people here, then say goodbye—forever—to the Windeerans. They'd either be slaughtered or enslaved. One was as bad as the other.

Merat said, "I do not understand why they destroy our land only for this metal."

"It's all about profit."

"Is that not what your people want as well?"

Her question stopped me cold. She'd asked it in an innocent manner, but it hit home. "Yeah, we want profit, too. But not by stealing and killing."

Then I caught myself. Yes, we had. Our history was full of it. Long ago, settlers had wiped out indigenous groups of people, all in the name of progress—and profit. Thinking about it, we were just as bad as the Droogs were.

Oh, right, answer her question. "We, uh, we can't let the Droogs have it. If they find more of this naretium, this partootum, then they'll be back."

"You mean to say, more of them will come?"

"Yes."

Oddly enough, she didn't seem frightened by the prospect of more

smelly aliens drooping in from the skies. Instead, the corners of her mouth curled up in a cryptic smile. "Those Droogs are digging in the wrong place."

"How's that?"

"I told you once that the metal they seek is in abundance. It is too hard for us to use in our daily life. If we find a shard of it, then we consider ourselves wealthy. We use other metals for our implements."

Amazing—whether they knew it or not, if what she said was true, then they were sitting on a supply that would satisfy every Earth colony out there, not to mention the other alien races that wanted the same thing. Their planet was incredibly rich, yet Merat didn't seem the type to care about money.

She turned her attention to skinning the dead gerts with a sharp stone. Clearly, she had skills. Her hands moved deftly, with no wasted motion. Once the animals had been skinned, Merat proceeded to shove a stick up their rear ends and roast them over the fire. It was sort of gross to watch, but hunger overrode any feelings of discomfort.

Then I noticed the scratches on her hands. "How'd you get those?"

Merat's attention remained on the fire. "They were from the gerts. It is their time to mate, and they turn feral. It is a sudden thing with them, and their ferocity makes it difficult to catch them."

Uh-huh. "What do they eat?"

She took out a small flower from her pullover. With white petals the size of my earlobes, it had a red center and sky-blue spots on the stem. "They eat anything, but this flower is something that drives them mad. It is only during the time of mating that they feast on this. It is a flower that blooms here, in the mountain areas. They are attracted to it as well as to the scent of the females and will fight each other to the death for it."

Uh-huh once again. "Are they, I mean, the gerts, poisonous?"

Merat looked at me. "To us, no. But to another race, perhaps. Why?"

"Just asking." A germ of an idea had occurred to me, and then the smell of the meat pushed the idea to the back of my mind. "Some skill you have," I said, pointing at the food. "I could never do that."

She gave me a look of surprise. "You often did the same thing. Do you not remember?"

No, I didn't. Apparently, only the most basic memories of Rinarra remained. "No, nothing registering."

I did have a question, that being how women acted. Stumbling over my words, I asked Merat about it and she gaped in surprise. "Why do you ask that?"

"Because I'm one of you now—sort of—and I don't know what to do."

A slow smile spread across her face. "You do as you wish. Rinarra always did, and you must act as you see fit. I sit with my legs under me to hide my womanhood. It is common sense."

All right, point taken. "But, aren't there gestures or something I

should know?"

Merat burst out laughing, holding her hands to her sides in mirth. Glad I could be here for her amusement. "What's so funny?" I demanded.

"It is your question. There are no specific gestures. You walk as you like and speak as you like. Our society is equal, and you do not have to pretend to be something you are not."

She paused to stir the fire, and then gave me a searching look. "However, you are different now, at least in your mind. Do you desire men?"

It was a reasonable question. "Uh, no."

The thought of being with a man made me ill. Someone who didn't know me would have thought that I'd automatically go for the guys, but in my case, things weren't so easily resolved. "No, I still like women."

Merat's eyebrows arched ever so slightly at my answer, but instead of speaking, she turned her attention to preparing the upcoming meal. The aroma of roasting meat came through and it was incredible, and something inside me said it would taste good.

When it came time to eat, it was better than great. I'd never eaten meat before. In fact, I'd never eaten anything real before. This was a treat, and I complimented the chef.

"Thank you," she answered, bobbing her head in gratitude. "Rinarra and I often shared our meals together. It was a way of life for us."

After lunch was over, I leaned back to think about what to do next. Merat carefully banked the fire, and then sat beside me. As if reading my mind, she said, "You would like to see the enemy encampment?"

I'd seen it briefly, but yes, why not? "You've been there?"

In answer, she took a stick and drew a simple diagram in the sand. No fences, but soldiers patrolled constantly. They were usually armed with swords, but rarely held their guns. "Perhaps they think we will not attack," she said. "They used them only when you—the before you—besieged them."

The rest of the camp was simply laid out. As the diagram showed, there was one large building for the barracks, one for the arsenal, and a smaller one that only a few soldiers went into. "I do not know what purpose this one has," she said, indicating the smallest of the three structures. She then drew a tall pole.

It had to be a transmitter. "It's an interstellar radio antenna."

An idea began to form. Since the old Rinarra had been attacking the soldiers, that was a start, but to really get at them, something had to be done to make them worry about their safety. A different plan started to form in my mind about what to do, but first I had to get a closer look at the compound.

"We'll go tonight," I said. "Why?"

"I need numbers."

Merat offered a quizzical look but said nothing. Our conversation then turned to village life. I was curious, and she seemed willing to tell me. "We are farmers. We live simply. There are those who have more, but we villagers have never been jealous of them. It must appear as next to

nothing to you, but that is—was—how we existed before the invaders came.”

“I see.”

After thinking things over, I asked her about the army here, if there were any warriors. She offered a sad smile. “Our warriors are far removed from this place. They are brave fighters, but would be destroyed if set against those monsters, as our own men were. Among our own, you were the fiercest.”

“Me?”

She nodded. “In our sixteenth season, one man in our village insulted me. He knew of our relationship, and he thought it great fun to mock us. You challenged him.”

As Merat explained, challenges, meaning fights, were always conducted at night. The villagers would hold torches and surround the combatants. There, in the small circle, the matter was settled.

“You did not even have to use your nails,” Merat said. “You used only your fists and legs. You broke his limbs. He never insulted me again.”

A smile came to her face. “I knew then that you and I were for each other.”

It was an interesting story, something I’d remember culture-wise, and then she asked me about life among the stars. “You mean, me being in space?”

“Yes.”

What could I tell her? That it had been an arduous one? That I’d had no friends, and that my family had been taken before their time by a virus that no one could defeat? Even though my parents had never shown me much affection, they’d done their best to raise me right.

To tell her all that, it really wasn’t worth it. I gave her only the basics. She listened intently and then said, “It seems as though you did not enjoy being in space, as you put it. You wanted a home, a planet to live on.”

Merat was extremely perceptive. “Yeah, but someone else always had priority.”

Confusion clouded her eyes. “I do not understand.”

Simplify it. “Uh, up there, people had skills. They were doctors or pilots or soldiers. I wasn’t any of those things, so those who had skills went to new worlds first. Me, well, I got left behind.”

She offered a shy smile and touched my hand. “You are among friends, now.”

“Only you.”

Merat nodded. “I suppose that is true. I...I wished that Rinarra would return to me, but that is impossible, is it not?”

An ineffable longing came out in her words, and it made me feel bad that I couldn’t give her what she wanted. “You know, I never had any friends on board the station. I could use one here.”

For that, she leaned over to peck me on the cheek. I took it as a

gesture of friendship. "I would like that," she said.

We then turned our attention to the scenery below us, and neither of us spoke. The noise had died down, and a calmness settled over the area. It seemed to say, you're home, and at that moment, I felt I was.

It was an illusion, though, as I had no home. Merat then interrupted my musings by saying, "I am tired. I must rest. Tonight we shall go to observe the encampment."

Good idea. I was also tired, and we lay down together. My eyes closed, and soon the darkness swallowed me up.

IMAGES, BLURRY AT first and then more sharply defined, hit me. These images of Rinarra as a young girl were far more vivid and intense than those I'd seen earlier.

Scenes of her playing with Merat stood out. They ran through the fields, laughed and shouted as all children did. Well, all children save me. My life had been one of study, and that had been a drab existence, indeed.

Another memory surfaced, that of Merat when she was thirteen. I saw myself walking with her through a field and holding hands. "I feel something for you," she said. "You...you are special to me."

Rinarra turned to face her. "As you are to me. I have known this for a long time."

"Please hold me."

They suddenly clung to one another, and their lips met. At that point, a bolt of something, an emotion of want and need and something else I couldn't define, surged through me and caused me to wake with a start. It was night, and Merat lay beside me, sleeping quietly.

Hastily, I wiped the sweat from my face. What in the hell had that been? I wasn't sure, but Rinarra's memories were much stronger than I'd first thought.

Was it me wanting this—or her? And did it mean that Rinarra's consciousness, what remained of it, was trying to overwhelm mine? It didn't seem so, but I couldn't be sure. If I couldn't exist as me, then who would I exist as?

This was a question I couldn't answer. I'd grown up knowing who I was. I always had a sense of self. Now, would my consciousness disappear, consumed or—what was that word...subsumed—by another? I didn't want to give up being me or living in general, and the notion of losing what I was, what I had been, at least in terms of knowledge and memories, scared me.

To think more clearly, I got up and went to the entrance. The cool night air wafted around me, the stars shone down, and the pale moons illuminated the landscape. It was a beautiful tableau, but the sounds of silence meant that the drill wasn't being used. Thoughts of self aside, it was time to go.

I went to Merat and gently shook her. She opened her eyes

immediately and asked, "Has darkness come?"

"Yeah."

She rose and took my hand. "I will guide you."

The trail we took led over the mountain and down to where the encampment was. As she'd told me before, no fences, but about thirty soldiers patrolled the area, plasma guns slung over their shoulders. The main building was large, perhaps sixty meters square, and two smaller buildings were spaced roughly one hundred meters away from it. All three buildings had one large floodlight swiveling away on the roof, lighting up the area.

Further away was the drill. Yes, as Merat had said, they were probably mining for naretium and whatever else they could find.

She'd also been right about the damage to the land. Even in the darkness, my eyes made out the wilted grass surrounding the drill. Its poisons must have leached into the ground. All of this had been done in the name of progress, and it sickened me.

Merat then tapped me on the shoulder and pointed at the transmission tower. "Look over there."

As she spoke, I saw a soldier walk into the transmission tower. The antenna extended upward a good fifty meters. The same soldier came out again, went into the main building, and this time emerged with another man, larger, more cruel-faced and infinitely uglier than the others. Farkeer.

As we crept closer, my guide whispered, "He and his men are the source of all this misery. I am sorry that you did not kill him before."

Her words prompted the memory of his enormous fist slamming into my skull. His punch to Rinarra's—my—head had almost killed her—us. Silently cursing my inability to use the correct pronoun, I asked, "Do you want to kill people?"

Merat shook her head. "I do not wish to kill, but they deserve it. After what they did to my parents and what they did to yours, they must pay. All of them must pay."

She fell silent then, and I wondered how to get in. This wasn't going to be easy. "Do you have any alternate routes down to the encampment?"

Merat chewed on her lower lip for a few seconds before nodding. "There are only two possible ways inside. One is a trail that lies on the opposite side of the mountain. It is hard to pass, full of rocks, and there are landslides from time to time. The other way is an old aqueduct. It may still be unblocked, but I am not sure."

I had to think about this, but then Farkeer's voice drifted up. Summa had come over, and even in the darkness, the expression on Farkeer's face was easy to read. It was anger. "Why did you not inform me of this earlier, Summa?"

The man with the massive arm sounded embarrassed. "I was on my way to tell you, sir. However, I encountered that...that woman we seek."

Farkeer muttered something dark. "And I suppose she got the better of you?"

Summa hung his head. "Yes, sir, she did. I was not prepared, and—"

"And she bested you. Very well, tell me about that ship you found."

Oh, damn, he'd found the ship!

Summa proceeded to give a detailed report. "Sir, my apologies. Our men had not been ordered to search in that area. It was only when one man went to relieve himself that he noticed something metallic sticking out of the ground."

Farkeer's response was biting. "I am sure that if we search the area more thoroughly, we will find Grooda's body. However, I am more interested as to why the ship was not detected by our sensors when it entered this planet's atmosphere. Nor did you say anything about hearing the sound of it passing over."

His second-in-command offered a most humble excuse. "Sir, the craft was small and must have been using some kind of stealth shield. Our men thought it was a shooting star. Those are common phenomena."

Stealth shield? I didn't know the ship had one. It was an obvious lie, and Farkeer's grunt of disdain indicated his displeasure as well as his disbelief. "Lieutenant, no more excuses. It is obvious that the pilot of that craft is hiding somewhere."

"We will find him, sir."

Farkeer grunted again and shook his head. He was not the type to tolerate failure. "As for contacting High Command, I specifically remember issuing instructions to do so. Nevertheless, since we have arrived here, that transmitter has failed time and again. The relief ship will not come unless we contact them first. Our empire has no ships or extra men to spare. Certainly, you know that."

"I do, sir."

Now, the wrath came out. "Then are you ignorant or merely incompetent? We need food and medical supplies as well as more drills!"

At this point, Summa's voice changed from humble to wheedling. "I tried, sir, but the transmitter is a delicate piece of machinery. It is in need of constant care and it was damaged during the flight. The material itself had been used and repaired countless times before it was assigned to us. It must be finely tuned. That will take another day, at least. My men are working on it."

Farkeer growled. "Keep me posted." He turned and strode away.

So...we had two problems, both equal and both binding. The Droogs were after me, although they had no idea who I was, not really. As well, their transmitter wasn't operational yet. That meant we still had a chance to stop them from sending a signal. If we could do that, at least no one else would come—I hoped.

Merat and I then walked to the other side of the mountain. As we made our way over, the gerts scampered underfoot, squeaking madly. A few of them

tried to climb Merat's pullover. "It is the flower," she said, and took it out and tossed it away. The animals gave chase and went at it tooth and nail while we walked on.

The trail was clearly marked, but still, it took about two hours to traverse it, and once we reached our destination, she pointed with a delicate forefinger. "It is there."

What faced us wasn't a trail. It was an obstacle course. Boulders twice as tall as a man and five times as wide stood in our way, logs and other debris littered the area, and a fine mist sifted down from overhead. It appears the side of the mountain was ready to collapse at any moment. "We have to go through that?"

She shrugged. "Other than the aqueduct, there is no other way."

Leaving aside the possibility of burrowing in from under the earth, going over land would be difficult at best. The only good thing about that possible point of entry was that it led right to one of the enemy's buildings. Other than that, it looked more than dangerous. With that one possible plan of attack mapped out, we turned back, and eventually got to our base where we immediately flopped down and passed out.

The next morning, the racket from the drill woke us up early. We breakfasted on berries and then set off in another direction. "Where are we going?" I asked.

"To see the Old One. She may know of other places that we do not. Since you do not remember, it is possible that she does."

It made sense. We got to the old woman's cave before noon, constantly listening for the sound of heavy footsteps and the stink of the enemy, but nothing lay in our way save beautiful scenery and six gerts fighting each other. They were large and had small, but sharp, teeth and claws. A smaller gert sat watching the melee. "See," Merat said while pointing at them. "The larger ones are after the female. They wish to mate."

In comparison to yesterday, they'd turned savage. Four of them lay dead, covered in blueish blood. Squeals of rage punctuated the air as they battled for the attention of the lone female, who was much smaller than the others and who sat watching the action.

Finally, one gert larger than the rest killed the others. He then mounted the female, who sat placidly while he did his business.

"How long do they go wild like that?" I asked as we resumed our trek.

Merat mulled the question over for a few seconds before replying. "For about five mornings. This is the beginning of the season. It will finish soon."

I filed that piece of information away, and eventually we reached the cave. There, however, a surprise greeted us. Bineta was inside, talking to the seer. "And he is not one of us?" she was saying.

"No, but he is decent," the Old One said. "That is enough for me."

Oh, damn it, Bineta knew. The only question I had was whether she would tell the Droogs or not. I couldn't believe that she would, but this was her world, and it was all about her town and the village first and foremost. I was

part of neither.

She must have heard me approach, as she swiveled her head around and offered a grunt of disapproval. With another grunt she got to her feet with the aid of her cane and hobbled outside. When she spoke, her mouth twisted most unpleasantly. "You," she said, and pointed her walking stick at me. "You are someone other than Rinarra."

Feigning innocence, I asked, "Me? I'm her."

"Do not play the part of the fool, Kyle Sorton. I have ears. I have spoken with the Old One, but even before I consulted her, I knew something was not right. Your voice is hers, your body is hers, but you are not her."

She then shifted her gaze to Merat. "And you are a fool as well! I know of your love for other women. That is something I cannot help, but for you to remain with this...this two-minded thing that is not Rinarra, it is untenable."

Merat replied in a firm, though polite, tone. "We only wish to help."

"How?"

Bineta sounded skeptical, and I couldn't blame her. "By fighting back," I said. "By taking the fight to them."

A scornful laugh greeted me. "Although it appears that two minds dwell within you, you think like Rinarra did. She, too, fought, and her actions have brought only misery to this place. The Droogs have indicated that they are here only to search for their precious rocks. I am inclined to believe them, more so than I would believe someone who is...unnatural."

Well, that was a nice statement—not. Merat's face tightened at the insult, and she stepped up. "Bineta, they have killed our people. They killed your joined one."

Bineta's eyes clouded over with hurt. "Yes, he was a good man."

Merat continued, her voice growing more insistent. "So, you know all too well about the ways of the invaders. Why do you not accept the reality? Those Droogs, they do not care if we live or die. We must do something, and—"

"You are to do nothing."

Bineta's voice came out colder than ice, and she once again stared at me. "That means you, Rinarra. Against my advice and judgment, you went out to fight them before, and it got you nothing save a new memory and the wrath of the other villagers."

"But—"

"I have said my piece." She then hobbled off.

Inside the cave, the Old One sat placidly, a half-grin on her somewhat mad-looking face. "Thanks for telling her," I said, not trying to hide my sourness at having been ratted out.

She shrugged. "I am bound to tell the truth if asked. Bineta asked." A hoarse giggle escaped her lips. "I answered."

Was she enjoying this? "You could have tried to talk to her, to make her see my point of view. I don't want to take over or anything. I just want

to help these people get those slimebags off this world.”

The Old One’s face sobered. “I could have told you that swaying Bineta to your point of view would not work. And it will not, will it?”

“No,” I answered, after thinking her question over. It was a matter of weighing the odds, and even though they were against us, we had to try something. “We’re going to attack them and hit them hard. Rinarra would have done it, and I have a plan.”

The old woman shrugged. “Plans are for those versed in the art of war. They often go awry. I will say nothing.”

“You must leave here,” Merat said in a fearful tone. “The Droogs, if they find out, they will –”

“Kill me,” the elderly woman interrupted. “Yes, that is probably what will happen, but where would I go? I am too fat to walk, and I have already seen more than eighty seasons pass. I am ready for death. Your lives, though, are far more important.”

Stubborn, this old lady was stubborn. “What do you think we should do?” I asked.

Her left hand reached out to touch my left temple. Once again, her fingers tiptoed through my mind. A few seconds later, she withdrew her hand.

“I sense that you will not listen to Bineta. She is as set in her ways as you are. You always have been. And to you, Kyle Sorton, I also sense that you have a concept of justice among your people. Deeds undone, they are what you dream of. I saw that the first time I touched your mind, and now as well. Nothing has changed.”

We left shortly after. Merat seemed disturbed, as she didn’t take my hand as she usually did, and her lower lip trembled. “What are you thinking about?” I asked.

“The Old One, she said you dreamt of deeds undone. What did she mean?”

Deeds—they consisted of getting a little back for myself. Of fairness triumphing over unfairness. Of fighting for myself, fighting and winning. All of those things I told Merat. She nodded, but kept biting her lip, so hard in fact, that a bead of blood appeared. It didn’t take a mind reader to know what she was thinking.

“Are you frightened?” I asked.

She didn’t answer at first, and then her voice came out so softly I could barely hear it. “Yes. I am scared for you and for the other villagers and townspeople as well.”

She needed reassurance, and so, doing the only thing possible, I took her hands in mine. “I’ll get through this. We all will, if we work together.”

A single tear trickled down the side of her face. “I am sorry for crying, but I do not wish to lose you again. I know that you are different, and that you should go your way if you wish, but I cannot help how I feel.”

Then she began to sob and leaned against me. Her voice, her attitude,

so honest and real, touched me to my core. While a part of me said no, she was a person, someone I liked as well as respected, and giving her some reassurance wasn't against any rules.

In addition, another feeling, that of affection, stirred in my gut and worked its way upward. It was a new feeling for me, but one I welcomed. Without hesitation, I put my arms around her and held her tightly, whispering, "We'll get through this, and I'll come back.

"I have before. I will again."

Interlude: The beginnings of sabotage

THAT SAME AFTERNOON, Merat and I stole out to where the ship was. We took our time, checking the air for the stink of the Droogs, and sure enough, once we arrived, two of them were there. My craft had solidified into a lump of useless metal. Both men were poking around the wreckage, but they soon came out and saluted when Summa walked into the picture. "Report," he said.

One of the soldiers hung his head. "Sir, we have found nothing here that will aid us. Even though it is damaged beyond repair, we know from the basic design that it is a ship that belongs to the Interplanetary Council. It is an escape craft, capable of carrying only one person."

"Did you use your sensors to check and see if a body was inside the wreckage?"

"Yes, sir," the soldier said. "It detected only metal, not human flesh. The pilot must be hiding in the mountains or among the villagers or townspeople."

Summa grunted his displeasure. "I see. Then we shall have a talk with the villagers. That is the closest place to this point."

They set off, and we followed them at a discreet distance. Waves of heat hit the land and we started to sweat, but neither of us paid it any attention. One thing the heat did was to make the enemy's body odor more apparent, which made it easier to track them. Either they didn't realize it or didn't care. I wasn't sure which, but it aided us in scouting them.

Merat didn't say a word until we reached the village, and we hid among the bushes as Summa bellowed for all the women to come out and stand in a line before him. Once they did, he addressed them in a commanding tone. Bineta, the town leader, stood among them.

Summa addressed the group in an arrogant manner, strutting up and down the line. "We are here to find an intruder among your people. It is a human, someone who is like you in appearance, but with fair skin, or black skin in some cases. I have seen those putrid things before, and they are as small and weak as you are."

Looks of distaste emanated from the assembled village people, but they said nothing. Summa continued to lay down his version of the law.

“If this person is being willingly hidden by you, our wrath upon this place will be tenfold what it was once before.”

When no one answered, he screamed at them to start talking. For some reason, Bineta turned her head in my direction. Maybe she saw me, as her mouthed dropped open, and then she shut it and her face became a mask.

Bineta then stepped forward. “We have seen no one who fits the description. The only people here are those you see.”

Summa grunted, a heavy, phlegmy sound. “Very well, you have been warned. I shall ask you another question, one at the behest of Farkeer, your leader.”

The expressions of distaste – now disgust – continued. “He is not our leader but yours,” another old woman said. Very skinny, with wild white hair, she resembled a wraith. “You may call him a leader. We would call him a conqueror.”

Instead of getting angry at her defiance, Summa offered a throaty chuckle. “I appreciate your honesty, biddy. You are correct. He is your conqueror. Therefore, if you wish to live a little longer, then it is in your best interest to cooperate.”

“We cannot cooperate if we do not know what you are talking about,” a third woman said. She was somewhat younger and portly, the only heavysset person I’d seen here outside of the Old One.

“I am referring to the ones called Rinarra and her mate. If you tell us where they are, we may show greater leniency.”

The women glanced at one another, then at Bineta who shook her head, and finally, they raised their hands in a very human we-don’t-know gesture. Bineta had lied – why?

Summa then asked them again if Merat and I had been here. “They were banished from the town center,” said Bineta.

“They are not welcome here, either,” added another woman, “not if they bring us greater misery.”

Beside me, Merat muttered something to the effect that they were all ungrateful witches. I couldn’t disagree. At least they hadn’t ratted on us.

Summa received the news without batting a beady eye, but the very tone of his voice conveyed thinly disguised menace. “Very well. You do not know, or claim not to. However, if we find out that Rinarra and her mate are here, your lives will be forfeit. You have been thusly warned.”

He turned and strode away, but not before ordering two of his men to stay on duty here. He was taking no chances.

Merat and I ran back to our cave. Once there she let out an exclamation of disgust. “Those hypocritical...things,” she spat while kicking the dirt. “They are no better than the Droogs. All those years I helped them to tend their fields, helped them carry their goods to market, and never once did I complain!”

I thought the same, but then again, if I’d been placed in that position, would I have acted any differently? Saving my own skin had always been

number one on my list of things to do, but I'd since changed my mind. I didn't want to die, but running wouldn't do anyone any good. No one could run forever.

Merat began to cry. I went over to her, but she waved me off. She sobbed uncontrollably for a time, and then, after heaving a deep sigh, she wiped the tears of frustration from her face. "All those years, they hated us. They did not approve of me and Rinarra being together, and they still do not approve of it."

She then turned her face to mine. "So, what shall we do?"

My mind was made up. "We do what we're supposed to. We made a promise to help. Even if the villagers don't care about us, I care about this village, this town, and this world."

"Why?"

It was a good question. "I, uh, I never had a place to stay.

This is it."

Merat then asked perhaps the most important of all questions in the smallest of voices. "And me?"

No sense lying about it now. I laid a friendly hand on her shoulder, and this time, she didn't shy away. "Well, yeah. You as well."

"Then that is enough."

It would have to be.

NIGHT FELL, AND we stole out into the cool air in the direction of the mountain pass. On space stations, the soldiers and pilots usually carried hand lasers capable of cutting someone in two at the range of over a hundred meters. They also had sonic disruptors to disorient the hearing of anyone stupid enough to attack them.

In contrast, Merat carried three small jugs of oil and a handful of matches. Primitive though our weapons were, we had knowledge of the enemy, their weak points, and Merat knew the land better than I did. Perhaps it would compensate for the imbalance in power, perhaps not. The only way was to fight and find out how we stood.

The way down the mountain pass was treacherous enough. At first, I didn't know where to step, night vision notwithstanding, but then something inside, a little voice, told me where to go. With greater confidence, I picked my way around the boulders, holding onto Merat's hand. She said nothing, but occasionally squeezed my hand. "I am still here with you," she whispered as we inched along.

Her words gave me greater strength, and we eventually found ourselves at the bottom of the embankment. Ahead of us was the back door of the transmission tower. A lone guard stood on duty, looking bored. "What do we do now?" Merat asked.

"Let me take care of him."

I took the matches and the jugs from her. While she hid behind a rock,

I cautiously approached the large guard, I carried my cargo in my left hand, and let my nails out on my right. This would have to be fast and nasty. "Well, girl," he said as I stopped in front of him. "What brings you out this fine night?"

"I love to look at the moon," I answered. "Blood always looks black under it, you know?"

In a quick movement, I brought my right arm around to slash his throat open. It happened so fast that he didn't have time to scream, only enough time to topple over and die.

Good, one down and another seventy-plus to go. I made my way inside, and found only one man working on a machine, the transmitter. He looked up, froze, and that gave me enough time to launch a punch that knocked him cold.

After dragging his body to the entrance, I went back and poured oil over the machinery and in every corner. Then I struck a match and dropped it. Instantly, the place became an inferno.

Time to go, and I ran outside, hearing angry shouts behind me. I got to the rock where Merat was waiting and grabbed her hand. "Let's move."

We tore off into the night. Behind us, Farkeer was bellowing in rage. "Find them, catch them!"

One of his men cried, "They are up in the rocks!"

"Then fire upon them, you dolts!"

Green bolts of energy smashed the earth around us, causing the rocks to disintegrate and throwing up a fine powder that caused me to cough. It also had another side-effect—it caused a landslide. "Move!" I yelled, as a particularly large boulder bounced our way.

Merat gasped as I grabbed her arm and pulled her to one side, just in time. The soldiers who'd charged after us weren't so fortunate. The large boulder dislodged some smaller ones, and they smashed everything in their path, including the men, who shrieked in fear before they were crushed.

"You idiots, fire upon them, not the mountain," Farkeer roared. "They are only two women. They are not armed. Have you forgotten your training?"

Apparently, they had. He ordered three more men to go out to our position. They advanced warily, evaded the rolling rocks, and then they moved to flank us instead of coming at us straight ahead. Two men took the left. One took the right-hand position.

Merat crouched behind our boulder, quivering in fear. "I want to leave." She grabbed my arm and tried to pull me away. "Please."

"Not yet. Work with me. Push." I put my hands on the rocky surface and shoved my weight against it.

"What are you doing?"

"Making the earth move under their feet. Help me."

With a moan of fear, she turned around and started to push with me. The

boulder, already somewhat unbalanced, began to shift, first a few centimeters, and then more. Abruptly, it rolled away, gathering momentum. The two soldiers on the left couldn't get out of the way in time and the boulder flattened them.

By now, Farkeer was in a supreme rage, stomping and swearing. We had no more cover, so I grabbed Merat's hand and we started up the trail, dodging rocks and energy blasts. There was no stopping now.

"Fire ahead of them," Farkeer screamed at his men. "Take up a position and fire. Cut off their escape!"

Risking a look behind me, three more men had joined the soldier who was still crouching behind a large rock. They set themselves in position and lifted their weapons to their shoulders. Merat swiveled her head around and let out a yelp.

"Just keep running," I urged, and she took the lead, pulling on my hand.

We ran, and the sound of the energy blasts was loud and terrible. The soldiers aimed high, and their shots struck the mountain's side. The rumble of the rocks above us increased, and pebbles and then larger chunks of rock rained down upon us.

I yelled, "Avalanche!"

"Keep running!" Merat shouted in a voice that was beyond terrified.

Our feet took us out of the path of the falling debris, and at the top of the mountain we watched as a massive pile of rock slammed into the ground below us and obliterated the guards.

Once the noise died down and the dust drifted away, the sound of Farkeer uttering the most vicious epithets around came through. He stomped around in a rage, slapped his men, and screamed that they were feeble excuses for Droogs. I wasn't about to argue with him on that point. Reality check time – their victory would not come easily.

Back at our cave, Merat stacked up the rocks and branches at the entrance and left only enough space for fresh air to circulate and let in a little light. She turned to me, a triumphant grin on her face.

"That was exciting," she said, and then hugged me. Abruptly, her expression turned contrite and she let go. "I am sorry. I was not trying to –"

"That's okay. I understand."

Merat looked around aimlessly for a few seconds before taking the pallet and preparing it for bed. We lay down, and after a moment's hesitation, I put my arm around her. It was cold, but we couldn't risk lighting a fire. That would attract too much attention. She snuggled in closer to me. "I was frightened, but that was exhilarating," she whispered.

Right then and there, I felt that this deserved a little celebration. On an impulse, I kissed her on the cheek. Her eyes widened. "Why did you do that?"

Oh, uh, and here came the shys. Despite me saying that I liked her

before, I still felt inhibited in showing my feelings. "Uh, well, you were pretty brave out there, and it's my way of saying thanks. You know, friends helping out and all that?"

Merat gave a tiny smile. "Rinarra used to do that after every mission. When she returned home, she would tell me what she had done. If she had seen this, she would have said it was a success."

"She did."

Merat bobbed her head in agreement. "Yes, she did."

Good enough for me. We'd returned safely and for now, all was well. "Here's to sabotage."

Chapter Nine

Life on the run

APPARENTLY, OUR RAID had done a lot more than simply take out Farkeer's transmission tower. A day after it had all gone down, Merat and I moved to another cave roughly three kilometers west of our previous one. While she took charge of cleaning it out, I crept down to the camp to get a firsthand view of the aftermath.

It had been spectacular, but at the time, I'd figured that the Droogs would have fire-fighting equipment around. They had advanced technology. They probably had experience in dealing with this sort of accident.

They didn't. A pall of smoke still covered the area, and the ground was littered with craters from the energy blasts. Rocks covered the path that Merat and I had used to traverse the mountain, and now it was virtually impassable.

As for the tower, it had burned completely to the ground. Unfortunately, the fire hadn't spread to the other two buildings. Still, it was a start.

Better for us was the breakdown in morale. Farkeer had summoned his men, and they now stood shoulder to shoulder outside the barracks. He walked up and down the line, berating each man for being derelict in his duty.

"You call yourselves soldiers, but you let two women in, and you let them destroy our base of communications. We shall now have to make permanent camp here until such time High Command relieves us, if they do."

After giving the order for the technician I'd knocked out to step forward, he pulled out his sword and switched it on. The blade sprang out, and then he touched something else on the weapon. Immediately, a blue flame covered the metal. Talk about modified! This was beyond lethal.

Farkeer confronted the man. "Norta, you are a disgrace."

Although the man had managed to escape the conflagration, he'd been burned almost beyond recognition, and the smell of charred flesh drifted over to my position. Norta stood trembling in front of his lord and master, partially from his injuries, but mostly from fear. Farkeer ordered two other soldiers to hold him upright. "This is the greatest of all crimes against our people," he said.

The soldiers glanced at each other. They knew what was going to happen but said nothing. Norta also knew, and pleaded, "Sir, I did my best, and..."

Farkeer's sword flashed straight down, cutting him in half. The soldiers holding Norta's bloody remains showed the appropriate amount of shock, dropped their quivering bisected cargo, and hurriedly went back to stand in line.

"Your best was not nearly good enough," Farkeer said.

He shut down the weapon, stowed it away, and then turned to face the rest of his men. "Let that be a warning. Your comrades in arms were killed in the avalanche last night, and now this man has sacrificed himself to the cause. His fate will be yours if you do not find that witch Rinarra and her mate. Bury this worthless offal first, and then I want search parties sent out..."

I turned away and crept back to the cave. Merat waited for me, and quickly put up the rock-scrub brush barrier. "What have you found out?" she asked.

"We're wanted, and not in a good way."

The news startled her, and she abruptly sat, hugging her knees. "So, we must be careful."

"We?"

"Yes, we," she answered, gazing into my eyes. "I once made a promise to Rinarra, and that was I would never leave her. That promise is something all joined couples do. I see no reason to break that promise."

What to say, except, "Thanks. Uh, even though I'm not her, I still am, if that makes any sense."

She shrugged. "I understand, and I am still prepared to help."

I had to know. "Why?"

She offered a wry smile. "Because no one else will, and no one else can. Do you not make the same promise on your world?"

A line from an old holo-vid I'd seen came back to me. It showed a man and woman standing before another man who'd asked them to love, honor, and cherish each other 'til death parted them. I wasn't sure how strong marriages were. I'd only known my parents' marriage, and they'd been devoted to each other.

"Yeah, I guess we do."

"Then that is my promise to you – as your friend."

Merat hugged me, and then just as quickly released her hold and went back to fixing up the cave. Once she'd finished, she asked, "What do we do now?"

Good question. Going after each soldier was foolish. There had to be at least sixty well-armed Droogs left to contend with and from this point on, they'd probably be doubly careful of an attack. However, we knew the land and where to go. That was in our favor.

"What's for lunch?" I asked.

"I shall catch some gerts. I know where they will be, so I shall bring back two and cook them as I did before."

"They'll be hard to catch. You said that it was mating season, and..."

My voice trailed off, and she gave me a look of curiosity. "What is it?"

An idea had just occurred to me, something very simple and yet workable. "Do you know how to make cages?"

"What do you mean?"

"I'll explain."

Our midday meal would have to wait. It didn't take very long for Merat to get the gist of the plan, but it would take longer to trap the little beasts. Mating season had made them angry, stronger, and very unpredictable.

Although we didn't have any cages on hand and couldn't spare the time to construct them, she told me where she could find some cloth bags. They were back at her hut. "Is it safe to go there?" I asked. "Summa left guards in the town. He probably stationed some at the village."

"I can get by them. Stay here," she said, and disappeared into the brush.

While waiting for her to return, I took stock of the situation. We were up against better armed personnel, and Farkeer had ordered his men to capture us at any cost. Vengeance was a powerful motivational force.

Anyone would have considered this a major disadvantage, but then I remembered my mother's words about staying positive. "Hope sustains us," she'd said.

It would have to, and while I was pondering hope's possibilities, Merat returned, carrying five crudely made bags and panting from the journey. "These are all I could find," she said.

"Did you see any soldiers?"

"Yes, I smelled them. You were correct about the guards. There are two men in the village, but they cannot be everywhere at once. It was easy to get past them."

She proffered one of the bags. "We can use these. They are woven from a flax we make, and are very strong."

Okay, but how would we catch the gerts? Simple answer – we needed a female. "If we catch a female, she will give off a scent and the males will come. You will see," Merat said with confidence.

Let's go catch some gerts. It was harder than it looked. The females tended to burrow into the earth, only poking their noses above the surface every now and then. In addition, it was difficult for me to tell male from female, as they had the same coloring and not all the males were that much larger.

"So, how do we know?" I asked Merat in frustration after I'd been chasing a particularly elusive critter for the past twenty minutes.

She giggled. "Rinarra, you never were very good at this."

Abruptly, her mood sobered. "I am sorry. I called you Rinarra. Perhaps you wish to be called by your old –"

"No, that's okay. Call me, uh, whatever you want."

She bobbed her head. "If I may call you Rinarra, then I would be grateful."

"No problem."

It was still sort of confusing for me as well, but since we had a job to do, it would be easier to get along. Not that we hadn't, but I wondered if she still felt the same, knowing what she knew. At the same time, I liked her, but she was in love with someone else, me – and not me.

Back to reality, and I asked Merat again how she could tell the difference between the sexes of our intended prey. "You look at the crown

of their heads. The males always have a red mark between their ears. The females do not. That is how you know."

So, now I knew. We continued searching, but all we found were males. They were remarkably agile as well as feral, and they snapped at me and Merat, thinking we were food or a female of their species. When they got tired of trying to bite us, they turned to fighting each other, and squeals and cries of pain cut through the stillness of the forest.

Finally, after another twenty minutes of running back and forth, Merat and I sat down, exhausted. We could walk for kilometers on end, run up and down hills without getting winded, but chasing after those elusive animals was tiring.

"I am all done in," Merat said, while leaning over and sucking wind. "Finding a female is harder than I imagined."

For some reason, that made me laugh, and then Merat, getting her joke, joined in. While still chuckling, I noticed a few of the males scurrying over to a nearby hole. They circled it, and another group of males circled another hole roughly two meters away. "Look at that," I said, and pointed.

Merat got to her feet and smacked the side of her head in a very human-like gesture. "I should have realized it sooner. They are following the spoor."

"What?"

"The males, they are following her scent. They know a female is down there."

Merat handed me a bag and took up a position at one hole, shooing off the males. I did the same at the other end. She then fired up a match, found a stray leaf and lit it, and shoved the leaf down the hole. A few seconds later, a wisp of smoke emerged through the dirt, and the males seemed to go wild.

"Get ready," she called.

I opened the bag and waited. A moment later, a female poked her head through the exit on Merat's end, and just as quickly disappeared. It came up on my side, and I quickly grabbed it and stuffed it into the bag. Unlike the males, this female was quiet and did not struggle.

Merat walked over, a few gerts trailing behind her and making angry squealing sounds. "Your hands are very quick," she said to me. "Maybe I should keep you."

It was said in jest, but I felt my face get hot and mumbled, "We should catch more females."

Merat cleared her throat. "Yes, right. Now we know what to do."

Our hunt went on, and after two hours, we managed to catch three more females. That would have to be enough. On this world, the sun was hot, and it sapped our energy. We took our precious cargo back to the cave, and while I put the gerts far away from the entrance, Merat built up the false wall.

Job over, she came back to me and gestured to the pallet. "If you need to

rest, I shall keep watch.”

She looked exhausted, and her face was flushed. I then realized she had to be thinking about her keeping-me comment earlier on. It didn't bother me, but I wasn't Merat and didn't know about the mindset of people here.

“You lie down first,” I said. “I'll stand watch.”

“If you are sure—”

“I'm fine.”

Merat offered a grateful smile and lay down. Soon, she was asleep, and I took up a position at the entrance. The male gerts had wandered off in search of new quarry, so I leaned against the wall and thought about the ramifications of someone being in my position.

The problem was, I couldn't. No one ever had been. No one, but...

A memory floated up. I was ten, and I'd been in the lab watching my mother perform some tests. She sat at her holo-puter, calling up graphs and charts, and then switched to looking at chemical matrixes. One of the other techs, a young redheaded woman named Carol, had been her assistant for a few years. She was slated to leave on the next transport and did not look very happy about it.

My mother told her not to worry about things. Carol gave a strained smile. “It's hard for me to be away. You know that.”

My mother sounded most sympathetic. “You'll be together. The captain has assured me of your transfer.”

Together...oh, she had a boyfriend. She was waiting for him. I may have been a little kid, but I knew about such things. On a space station, I'd often seen men and women going into each other's quarters. Most of them weren't married, but no one seemed to mind.

“It's not my transfer I'm worried about,” Carol continued. “It's, well, you know.”

“I do.”

Carol left, my mother went back to work, and I wondered what all the fuss had been about. Carol had always been very nice to me. In fact, she was nice to everyone on the station. No one had ever said anything bad about her, not that I'd heard of.

“You have homework to do, don't you?”

My mother's voice interrupted my musings. “Yeah, Mom, I'll get on it.”

She nodded, and I walked out. On the way, I saw Carol waiting outside another person's room. The door opened, and a short, skinny blonde woman stood in the aperture. They embraced, and after they'd shared a brief kiss, they disappeared behind the door.

Oh.

I went back to my room, thought about what I'd seen, and then decided that it was none of my business. I'd never mentioned it to my parents, and now I was here, on this world, in another form...

“Rinarra, I am up.”

I turned around. Merat came over to stand with me. "Is there any movement out there?"

"Nothing."

Her hand touched my shoulder. It was only a light touch, but it was soft, intimate, and it sent a thrill through me. Perhaps she knew what she'd done, for her hand fell away. "Please rest," she said. "I will keep watch."

The pallet was still warm from her body heat, and soon I drifted off. The dream came again. Carol was there, and this time, she wore a broad smile. She'd gotten her transfer, and she and the other woman—never got her name—had gone on a shuttle to another world, to another life.

My parents had been the first to congratulate them, and they had taken me to the Landing Bay where I'd stood with everyone else, waving goodbye and silently wishing them luck.

And after that, my life, such as it was, remained static. I stayed on the station, always alone, with only my parents for company and my holoputer as a way of keeping in touch with what was happening down on Earth.

People came and went. Couples, families, soldiers who were eager to fight, explorers and geologists, cartographers, scientists, and more. They all had their place, and they went to their new worlds while I stayed behind alone, always alone, dreaming of a permanent home...

"Rinarra, wake up. It is night."

Merat's voice tore me away from memories of the past. I sat up, shaking my head to clear it, and found my guide's face near mine. "You spoke in your sleep," she said. "You uttered a name. Carol. Is she a friend of yours?"

"She was a, uh, friend of my mother's years ago. She left, um, went to another planet. I don't know where."

"I see."

Maybe she did, but right now, that wasn't the most important thing. Through the opening, stars twinkled their eternal light. While it would have been ideal to attack when the night was cloudy, there was no way to control the weather. "Are you ready?"

She nodded. "Yes."

While she said yes, her voice carried a note of anticipation tinged with fear. Then I looked at her eyes. Someone once said they were the windows to the soul, the pathway to a person's inner feelings. Right now, Merat was feeling fear, something that had been with me most of my life.

I got up and pulled her up with me. "I need you on this, Merat. I need your help."

She trembled ever so briefly, but then inhaled a deep breath and gave a confident nod. "I am your helper."

"And my friend, too. Let's go."

I grabbed the bags with the female gerts while Merat removed the rocks and branches. We then made our way to the encampment. Along the way, she directed me to a bush. "What's here?" I asked.

"We shall gather flowers."

Flower gathering...the gerts... "Good idea!"

Once we reached the encampment, we crept up the edge of the hill. As usual, soldiers patrolled the perimeter. This time, though, they had their weapons in hand. Farkeer was taking no chances.

"Any ideas on how to get in?" I asked.

"I am not sure of the aqueduct. I shall have to look at it to make sure it is safe."

We didn't have time. "Merat, we only have tonight, and this plan has to..."

Something nudged my leg, and a squeak made me look down. It was a gert, a male, and it was pawing my leg, anxious to climb up and get at the bag. It had followed the scent. And then another male came over, and then two more, all squeaking their ardor.

More of them gathered around Merat. Damn it, they were going to give our position away. Couldn't they be at home, in bed, like everyone else?

No, they couldn't—and I was glad for it. "We have four females. The males will follow."

Merat looked at me carefully. "What are you going to do?"

"I think they're hungry."

She mumbled something about them being hungry for love. Totally true on that end, and we made our way to the enemy camp. Once at the ridge, I told her to stay where she was, and I poked a hole in the bags with my fingernail. A musky scent came through, and right away, a massive patter of tiny feet indicated that the males had picked up the aroma. Merat handed me the flowers.

"Time to go," I said. "Wish me luck."

She touched me on the shoulder. "Come back safely."

"I'll try."

It was a stupid line, but at that moment I couldn't think of anything else. I started down the hill, and at the bottom, I found an opening between two soldiers and ran past them at full speed, ducking my head as I went. They fired at me—missed—and their shots blew a hole in the storage building that I'd wanted to enter.

"Thanks!" I yelled and kept going.

A soldier stood ahead of me, so thinking quickly, I reached into one bag, took out the female gert and tossed it at him along with one of the flowers. He caught it, and was immediately swarmed by hundreds of angry, horny male gerts. He screamed as they bit him in a frantic attempt to get at the female. Another guard came over, and he got the second female plus another flower.

Now, a veritable army of the critters showed up, squealing and

overrunning the compound. The soldiers began firing blindly at them, blowing up great chunks of sod and sending it flying.

It didn't work. For every ten animals they vaporized, fifty more came. I dashed into the storehouse and let the last two females loose. The males poured in, many of them in a frenzy trying to get at the female and fighting amongst themselves.

Many others, though, started feeding on the foodstuffs, and I took the last few flowers, crushed them, and spread the petals and stems all over the bags and packages of the supplies.

"Eat hearty," I said, and ran through the door on the opposite side of the building.

Farkeer had come out and was roaring orders at his men to get the lights on and shoot the intruder. "We cannot find her," cried one of the men. "The night is working against us!"

Good thing I could see well in the darkness. They couldn't, and that worked in my favor. I sprinted up the hill, grabbed Merat's hand, and we took off from there.

"Where are we going?" she asked as we tore along the pathway.

"Anywhere but here."

Chapter Ten

The Fun Continues

SABOTAGE. WHILE GROWING up on the space station, my parents had often told me to search for the roots of words. “Know your history. It’s part of your education,” they’d said.

In this case, sabotage came from the French word *sabot*, which was a kind of a boot that revolutionaries threw into machines to stop them from working.

Call Merat and me modern-day revolutionaries. We had no tools outside of the most primitive ones, but it seemed that they were working well—so far. What we had done together had surprised me in the sense that I’d never been the adventurous type. Quite the opposite. Timid and shy probably described me best.

Since coming here, though, and setting up shop in a new body that was far superior to my old one, I’d changed my way of thinking. Rinarra had been a badass. That was an old term, but it fit.

I had no illusions, though, about achieving an outright victory. The Droogs were set in their ways, bullheaded and stubborn. Meanness was their middle name, and brutality had been their main weapon. They’d used those two traits to subjugate this world’s people and they had no qualms about killing.

However, they weren’t totally stupid. They had greater numbers, and in addition they had superior firepower along with the willingness to use it. All of that meant we had to be doubly careful.

Still, since the first raid with the gerts had worked so well, Merat and I decided to work our brand of magic again. Three days had passed since our initial raid. During that time, we’d changed caves twice. The enemy had sent scouting parties, but due to their stink, we knew where they were and easily avoided them.

“What about using the animals?” I asked.

We’d slept in, and the sun was at its zenith, the air hot and dry. Summertime seemed to last quite long on this planet. From what Merat told me, it lasted approximately eight months, with hot days, cool evenings, and very little rain. The winters were harsh, but short. Spring meant showers and occasional flooding of the lowlands, but it was still welcomed by the people, as the excess water could be shunted to other fields to feed the crops.

In answer to my question, Merat shook her head. “No, their time to mate is over. It happens very quickly on this world. That is their nature.”

All right, using the gerts was out. What else? Attacking at night seemed to be the best bet. Darkness remained the weakness of the Droogs, perhaps their only weakness.

“So, what do you propose we do?” Merat asked me while we took a break from guard duty. All was quiet for the moment. More than likely, the enemy was searching for us, but this area was so vast it was impossible for them to search every cave.

On the other hand, they could blast everything to ground level if they wanted. It surprised me that they hadn’t tried blowing up the mountainside. Hopefully, they wouldn’t get that idea into their heads. “Let me think.”

A few rocks were nearby, and I juggled them absentmindedly, trying to think up something that would even the odds. So far, we’d used attacks from animals as well as rocks to disrupt their operations. With no transmitter, they were cut off from their home planet. They were also low on food.

I’d snuck out the night before while Merat was sleeping and made my way to their base. Farkeer was outside the storehouse with Summa, an individual that I loathed just as much as the leader.

“Summa, what is the situation with our supplies?” he’d asked.

The other man scratched his head. “Approximately half the food was lost in the raid, sir. Those dratted animals ate what they could. They also bit our men. Sixteen of them are in the barracks, recovering.”

Farkeer was not amused. “Those animals carried venom?”

“Apparently so, sir. It is not fatal, but it causes a fever as well as joint weakness. The physician said that they should recover shortly.”

The leader grunted his displeasure. “Halve the remaining rations and send two-man teams out to forage for food.”

Summa had started off, but then turned back to ask, “Sir, the townspeople as well as those in the village must have stores of food. May I suggest that we station guards in the village and the town permanently? More men on duty there would give us a better chance of catching those interlopers.”

Farkeer’s answer had come back immediately. “No, that cannot be allowed.”

“Why, if I may ask, sir?”

“If we put too many men on patrol, then that will leave the base unguarded. The drill might be subject to attack. And, as I recall, that she-devil knocked you unconscious once, did she not?”

Summa hung his head. “Forgive me, sir.”

Farkeer sounded oddly conciliatory. “These things happen. Once is forgivable. Twice is not.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Understand that I have considered everything you have told me. Ordinarily, I would comply with that request. However, these are extraordinary times.”

He rubbed his misshapen lips. “The bulk of the men will remain here, guarding our drill. We cannot spare them for long periods of time to search.”

Farkeer then cast a look around the area. “Still, we do need sustenance.

Take the food from the farmers first, then send out teams to reap what is in the fields.

"After that, send out five two-man search parties for the women at three-hour intervals. Place them wherever you feel they are needed. Rotate shifts. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir."

Wonderful, they were now raiders as well as illegal miners and murderers. Call them a race with a whole laundry list of defects. I'd gone to hide among the bushes near the village early the next morning and witnessed a few two-man teams harassing the villagers and taking their baskets of fruit and vegetables.

This did not endear the people to the invaders. One old woman had protested. "You have already taken our land. What else do you want?"

The soldier shot her between the eyes, vaporizing her head. As she fell, the other villagers screamed in horror, and the soldier laughed. "You have been warned. Feed us or die."

Scum, they were nothing more than Ardellian pond scum. No, Ardellian pond scum had more intelligence, and it didn't kill indiscriminately. I raged, but there was nothing I could do.

Telling Merat what I'd seen, she'd been appropriately shocked, her mouth dropping open. "They are worse than barbarians."

Yes, they were, but their character defects—many—weren't the problem. The problem was how to defeat them.

Land.

Rinarra's voice floated up in my subconscious. "Land?"

"What?" Merat asked.

The voice came again, stronger this time.

Use the land.

Swallow them up.

It then faded. Use the land. "Are you all right?" Merat asked.

Use the...

Oh, wait, now I got it. "Yeah, I'm fine. I have an idea. Do you know where we can find a shovel?"

She shook her head. "I will look in the village, if you wish, but why do you ask?"

"We need to sharpen some sticks, and we need to dig some holes." I tapped the retractable sword in my robe. "I can sharpen things, but a shovel would help."

A quizzical expression crossed her face. "Holes? For what?"

"For the soldiers to fall into."

Her eyes lit up. "Wait here."

She was gone in a flash, and I wondered once again what I'd become. Was I a guy in a woman's body or the woman herself? I didn't know. Modern psychologists had found out there was no difference between a man and a woman's thinking. Men thinking one way and women another

was largely a societal construct, and the twenty-second century had done away with the old stereotypes, at least on Earth.

The problem was, there was no Earth, anymore. As well, those experts hadn't had their consciousnesses transferred. I had.

And then there was Merat. While she'd accepted the situation between us, all the same, was I wrong to not be with her? I liked her, liked her willingness to do the right thing, but she wanted to be with a woman—me.

Perhaps genders weren't so rigid, after all. Perhaps they were more fluid, at least for some people, or were they hardwired to be fluid in the first place? I was no psychologist. I'd never wished to become a woman, but I had.

Truthfully, it didn't feel any different than being a guy, and deep down I liked being this way. Being healthy, strong, capable, and able to do the impossible—what was wrong with that? Romance, though, was that something I wanted to start with Merat?

Things weren't so cut-and-dried, not anymore. With a sigh, I turned my attention to scanning the fields for enemy movement as well as waiting for Merat to return. When she did, she held two shovels with rounded ends and spikes on them that looked capable of biting into the hardest earth. She handed one of them over. "What do we do now?"

"We dig."

Things had to be planned carefully, and that was where Rinarra's hint came in handy. Merat handled the site location and showed me where the best places were to lay our traps. Astonished, I asked, "How do you know this area so well?"

"We played in those spots when we were children. Do you not remember those times?"

Her way of speaking was still too archaic for me. "No, I don't, and can you relax a little?"

"I do not understand."

"You could use contractions, for one thing. You know, don't instead of do not, can't instead of cannot...okay?"

A smile lit up her face and she laughed. "Your way of speaking is amusing to me as well. I cannot do it." She tapped her head. "It is up here." She then touched her lips. "I cannot make it sound your way when I speak."

It hit home, then. She was hardwired to speak the way she did, and I kicked myself mentally for trying to force her to speak my way, even if it was in Windeeran. After all, I was living in another body on her world. Yet, I could speak the way I'd always spoken, and that confused me even more as to what I'd become.

The concept of hardwiring came back to me, and then I decided that it didn't matter what I was or who I liked or how someone spoke. "Never mind. If we understand each other, it's enough."

She bobbed her head. "I understand you."

"Then let's get going."

It was roughly ten a.m. when we started. We decided to dig three traps halfway up the hill and spaced them a kilometer apart. Too many, I'd forget, and that would not end well. We dug, and constantly kept on the lookout for the enemy.

My enhanced strength helped. Ordinarily, it would have taken a long time, but the earth was soft, and I found that I could dig into it approximately three times as fast as Merat could, and she was no slouch.

Still, it took time, almost eight hours to get the holes ready, six feet down by five wide. As the hours wore on, the sun beat down on us, we sweated, my muscles ached, and Merat's face turned red from the exertion, but neither of us complained. This was too important.

Once the holes were ready, we took a quick breather and then gathered some long, sturdy sticks. I used my sword to sharpen their ends. "What are they for?" she asked.

It was something I'd read in one of my holo-books. In the late eighteenth-hundreds, or maybe even earlier, natives who'd lacked firepower had to come up with other ways to demoralize and decimate the enemy.

Punji sticks was their weapon of choice. Some cultures used to smear the ends with either poison or excrement. Then the sticks were positioned sharp end up, and the whole idea was to get the enemy to fall into the pit and impale themselves.

Merat offered the comment of, "They look...brutal."

"That's the idea."

Once the stakes had been positioned properly, we laid branches across the pit openings, and covered them with leaves. Then we waited for the enemy to approach.

By now, the sun had begun to sink, and the upcoming dusk cast shadows on the land. Late afternoon, so that meant night would fall soon. Night was best, and...

"I smell something," Merat said as she tasted the air with her nose. She then pointed to our left. "They are coming from that direction."

It was obvious, really. No one else exuded such a pungent stink as they did. We quickly took up a position behind a clump of bushes, and she whispered, "Their smell is getting stronger. They are here."

Yes, they were, and they were coming our way. "Stay here," I whispered, and went out to wave at them. Both men wore swords, but they remained strapped to their sides. Stupid...they had no idea what they were getting into. "Oh, boys, this way, please!"

One of them nudged his friend. "That is the witch Farkeer desires. Get her!"

Come and get me. I took a few steps to my rear, stopped at the edge of the pit, and then leaped backward, doing a double-flip in the air, which put me safely on the opposite side.

The two soldiers, however, never got the message. They stepped on the false foliage cover and tumbled into the pit. A split-second later, they cried out

in pain and then fell silent.

"Are they dead?" Merat asked as she crawled over to me.

I peeked over the edge of the pit. Both men had fallen upon the sticks, and blood stained their togas where the wood had slammed through their bodies. I climbed down carefully, snatched their swords, and snapped them over my knee. "Yeah, they're dead. Let's try our luck with the other pits."

At the second one, the same thing happened, with two more men meeting their doom. They never even had the chance to scream. I destroyed their swords as well.

With the third pit, a problem arose. Merat and I had just finished covering it. The wind had shifted direction, blowing at our backs. A Droog duo approached, and this time, Merat had been caught off guard. She stood at the front of the trap, while I stood at the back.

The men charged, and she looked indecisive. "Jump!" I called. "I'll catch you."

Merat was frozen with fear, and the distance between them and her quickly narrowed. "I cannot," she cried.

If they catch her... "Now, damn it, now! Trust me!"

Her face was filled with terror and her body shook. Nevertheless, she did an awkward standing jump and got three-quarters of the way over. It wasn't enough, and she yelped as she fell to certain death.

My reflexes came to rescue as I leaped over, grabbed her mid-air, and twisted my body so that we landed at the edge of the pit.

The Droogs weren't as lucky.

"Thank you," Merat said, still trembling and holding onto me for dear life. "Were we successful?"

"Let's go see."

Risking a look into the pit, one of the Droogs had already died, but the other was shrieking in agony. Yelling would alert the enemy. I disengaged myself from Merat's grasp, climbed down, took the soldier's sword, and cut off his head. That shut things up. It made me sick to do it, but they'd done far worse.

Once done, and after I'd destroyed their weapons, I climbed out of the pit and went over to Merat. "They're gone."

"Thank you," she whispered. "I mean, thank you for catching me." She pecked me on the cheek, but a moment later, she blushed and turned away. "I know that was improper, but—"

"It was fine."

She pivoted back to me, eyes wide. "It was?"

"Yeah."

It hit me right then and there. I'd come this close to losing her. I didn't want to lose her now. I wasn't even sure if that was Rinarra speaking through me or controlling my thoughts, but then I realized that she hadn't uttered a thought in a while. No, this had come from me.

Absurd as it might have appeared to someone out of the loop, I

suddenly had the greatest desire to kiss her on the lips. I drew closer, but she backed off. "We must think about their drilling device."

Uh, yeah. "Right, let's get to it."

The sun had largely set, and the drill became our next target. As usual, guards patrolled the perimeter. However, only one man guarded the machine. It was operating, its arm moving rhythmically up and down, and the noise verged on deafening.

"How do we get close enough?" she yelled into my ear.

Good question. We needed a diversion. "How fast can you run?"

It was dangerous, it was stupid, and the guards had plasma cannons. I'd seen what they could do. Merat gulped. "I can run almost as fast as you can. I am the one, then. Tell me what to do and then signal me."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

This was not smart, but that machine had to be shut down. We waited, and slowly crept down to the encampment, noses and ears on high alert. Farkeer was nowhere in sight, and only a few floodlights were in operation, casting a dim glow over everything. Suddenly, the drill stopped, and the soldier on duty kneeled to check the shaft.

"All right," I said, glad for the silence, and scoped out the area for a landmark. Where...there! "Go to where that red tree is." I pointed to a spot about a hundred meters away. "Do you see it?"

She followed my finger and nodded. "Yes."

"Good, go there and yell that you're hurt. When the soldiers start in your direction, you run, run as fast as you can back to the cave."

"What will you do?"

"I'll think of something."

Merat suddenly began to shake so violently that her teeth rattled. I held her, and she whispered, "I am frightened. Rinarra – you – she...she was always so brave. Now, I do not know if I can do this."

Really, there was no one else, but although her body shuddered, she drew in a deep breath. "But, I will do as you ask." I had to know. "Are you doing this because you care for

Rinarra, or because you want to get back at the invaders?"

"Both. And I care for you as well, Kyle Sorton."

With a slow, gentle motion, I reached over to smooth her hair back, letting my hand linger on her cheek. "Thanks, but call me Rinarra. That's...that's who I am now."

A shy smile came to her face under my touch. "Rinarra always caressed my cheek as you just did. Wait here. You will get your signal soon."

Heart thudding in my chest, I watched as she made her way over to the landmark I'd indicated. *Please stay safe.*

A few minutes later, darkness had fallen completely, and the floodlights increased in intensity. Her cry of, "Help me!" echoed over the area.

Immediately, the soldiers below twisted their heads in the direction of her voice. Farkeer emerged from the main barracks and yelled, "It is one of them. Get her!"

Six soldiers scrambled up the hill, leaving a temporary hole in their defenses. That was my cue, and I took off in a mad dash, practically flying past the other guards.

"Hey," I yelled, hoping that would divert their attention. "Follow me!"

It worked, as they forgot about Merat and turned around to give chase. I ran in the direction of the lone guard on drill duty. He stood directly in front of me, his weapon up and ready. A grin split his ugly features, and he mouthed, "You are dead."

If you say so—not. He let loose a shot, but I'd anticipated that, and flipped over his head to land behind him.

"Shoot her!" Farkeer yelled.

The remaining guards turned and fired. I jumped out of the way, and their blasts not only atomized the guard, they also damaged the shaft of the drill. While I wanted to grab the guard's fallen sidearm and finish the job, the other soldiers cut loose with a volley of shots in my direction. Escape became my first priority.

A distraction—I needed one, and picked up a large rock and threw it at one of the floodlights on top of the barracks. It exploded, and a section of the camp went dark.

"Kill her, kill her," Farkeer screamed, hammering his thighs in frustration. "Why is it you cannot kill her?"

Let them try. Death was not an option, not today, and not any day. More shots came my way, and how to take out the lights?

Then an idea came to me. I clambered up to the top of the storage facility and waved my arms. The Droogs obliged me by firing in my direction. That took out floodlight number two. I then repeated the procedure on the armory, and they repeated their idiocy. Immediately, the area was plunged into darkness.

Smoke billowed from the drill shaft, making it hard to see, but I knew where to go and started running. Other soldiers charged my position, but Farkeer warned them back. "No, it may explode. Move!"

I kept running, never looked back, and with the last of my strength, I scrambled up the embankment. From the safety of the tree line, I witnessed a ball of fire ascending from the drill. Farkeer was beside himself with rage, alternately stomping his legs and swearing at the top of his lungs.

Job over, I made my way back to the cave where Merat was sitting near the entrance. When I entered, she got up to embrace me. "I knew you would come back."

That was all I needed to hear.

Chapter Eleven

Reprisal

MERAT AND I slept in late. Neither of us bothered to keep watch. It wasn't the smartest strategic move around, but our cave was deep in the mountains, and I felt reasonably sure that the soldiers wouldn't venture this far. When I went to reconnoiter their encampment, clearly, they had other problems to consider.

Call this a job well done, and I gave myself a metaphorical pat on the back. Even from a distance of two hundred meters, it was easy to see Droogs swarming around the base of the drill, hauling away wreckage and yelling at each other. Farkeer stomped out to speak to his second-in-command. "Report!"

His savagely barked command caused Summa to flinch. "Our men are working as quickly as possible, sir. We were fortunate. The damage was on the upper part of the shaft. That section was destroyed, but the drill bit is still intact, as is the rest of the machinery. The men are clearing away the wreckage as we speak. We have spare parts, and everything should be operational by the end of the day."

Damn it, job not well done, and I took my metaphorical pat back.

Farkeer then asked, "What about the lights?"

Summa hemmed and hawed, scratching his chin. "Sir, we have searched, but so far we have —"

"Tell me!"

"We have no spares. Everything will have to be done by torchlight, as our own shoulder-mounted searchlights are not sufficient."

Farkeer's reply was most sarcastic. "Well, we are on a par with the natives here. At least we shall be able to see, will we not?"

He stepped forward to observe the repair crew, and then snapped his fingers. Summa obediently hustled over. "Sir?"

"What about the two women? Have your men managed to find them?"

"Not yet, sir. The area is vast, and there are numerous caves. We have lost men, and as I said before, there are not enough of us to protect this installation as well as go out on patrol, not to mention guard the village and the town."

"Have your men found the missing human pilot?" Summa hung his head. "Not yet, sir."

Farkeer turned on him, his eye glowing a dangerous red, and he spat, "Your men are incompetent."

With a massive forefinger, he rubbed the patch over his missing eye and grunted as if in pain that only shedding blood would satisfy. "I will not rest until that witch is captured. The same is true of her companion,

and the same also holds true for that cursed human. Try questioning the villagers again.”

Summa seemed at a loss as he aimlessly shuffled his feet. “We have tried that, sir. They claim to know nothing. They claim that the girl and her companion have not been around for the past few days. As I said, this area is vast, and –”

“Claims are nothing,” Farkeer snapped. “You are not asking the right questions in the proper manner. I will put the questions to the villagers. Summon two extra men. You are in charge while I am gone. The rest of the base is to be left on high alert.”

“Understood.”

Summa ran off and soon returned with two soldiers. Farkeer motioned straight ahead, and he and his men set off toward the town. I followed at a discreet distance. Halfway there, a sound came from behind me. No smell, so I turned around and found Merat creeping up, her feet moving quietly among the leaves and branches that lay strewn upon the ground. “What are you doing here?” I whispered.

“I wished to be with you.” That summed it all up.

Merat’s hand brushed against mine as we walked, and eventually our fingers intertwined. If that didn’t make me feel more positive, then nothing else would. We kept a respectable distance from the three soldiers, and once they entered the town, Farkeer immediately went to the meeting hall.

Merat pointed to a clump of bushes. “Over there,” she said, and beckoned me to follow her. We took up a position close enough to hear what was going on, and Farkeer banged on the door. “What is it you wish?” Bineta asked after she’d opened.

He got down to business right away. “I desire to know the location of that witch, Rinarra, and her mate. I also wish to know about the human pilot. That is all.”

Bineta’s mouth twisted with distaste. “I do not know about the two women you are searching for. Rinarra came here a few days ago. I told her that due to her actions, I could no longer consider her a member of this town. She may be among the villagers. That is all I can tell you. As for the human you mentioned, I have never seen one before. I would not know who or what to look for.”

“Hmmp.”

Her answer didn’t seem to satisfy the Droog leader, as he ordered his men to search the houses. Bineta began to protest, but Farkeer raised his weapon. She shut her mouth immediately.

The Droogs were efficient, as they went from house to house, kicking the doors and demanding entry. Once they’d been admitted, the sounds of furniture and other household goods being broken echoed over to our position. “What shall we do?” Merat whispered.

“We can’t do anything. We have to wait.”

The men soon returned, and one of them had a bag in his hand – the one I'd salvaged from the crash. Not good. He showed Farkeer, who took it and glanced inside at the contents. "You found this bag, but not the human."

"Yes, sir. The human is not here, and neither is the woman, or so the townspeople say."

"She is not here, she is not here," Farkeer mimicked, and then turned his wrath on Bineta and shook the bag in front of her face. "This is evidence that the human was here. It was in the same house that Rinarra and her mate cohabitate in, is it not? That means they are somehow collaborating. I ask you again, where is she?"

"I have already told you, I do not know," she answered, calm now, although her eyes radiated hatred. "I did not sanction her actions before, and do not sanction them now. My concern is with the people of this town and the village beyond. That is all."

Farkeer swiveled his head around, taking in the scenery, and then blew out a deep breath. In a deceptively quiet voice, he asked, "Do you approve of them?"

"If you mean do I approve of their relationship, then the answer is no. However, under the laws of this land, they wished to be joined. As the leader of this community, I was and am obligated to uphold the law."

A sneer came to the Droog leader's face. "You do not approve of their relationship, yet you united them. That is truly sad."

"What is sadder," Bineta retorted, "is that you have slaughtered innocent lives, including that of my joined one. If I had the means to drive you from this land, I would. Sadly, I do not."

A hoarse laugh emerged from his belly. "Old woman, you have no possibility of removing me from this land, let alone this world. I wish only to find the three troublemakers. If we do, if you tell me where they are, then my men and I shall bother you no more."

"I cannot help you."

Farkeer growled. "I see."

He then snapped his fingers and his two men ran over. One of them asked, "Sir?"

"Take three women from this town, and then march them down to the village."

"Yes, sir."

They walked over to the nearest house and kicked the door in. Sounds of shouting came through accompanied by the cries of the occupants. Soon, three women in their fifties stood before the leader.

From the glint of evil in his eye, I knew this would not end peacefully. Bineta started to protest once more, but Farkeer held up his massive paw. "You refuse to see the evidence I have shown. You refuse to tell the truth. However, I shall spare your life. If you do not wish to share your peoples' fate, then stay here and do nothing."

Her lips trembling, Bineta closed the door. Even though she'd lied about our whereabouts, not to mention my origins, I felt for her and for the rest of the townspeople. What was about to happen was too terrible to contemplate, yet there was no stopping things, not now.

Farkeer and the soldiers marched their captives down the path and prodded them with their swords when they faltered. Merat gasped. "What is he going to do?"

Like lambs to the slaughter they went, and my voice came out lifelessly. "He's going to kill them."

"He cannot. He will not."

He would. Merat started to say something, but I hushed her and made a motion for us to follow them. In time, we came to the village. There, the soldiers rounded up ten more inhabitants, but Farkeer ordered Pamka be set aside.

He then yelled, "You, you two witches! If you wish me to spare these peoples' lives, then show yourselves! There are thirteen lives in the balance, and you have the power to stop their execution!"

Oh, no, he's going to do it.

"Human, if you are listening, then heed my words. We can be merciful, if you let us."

Merat started out of our place of hiding, but I pulled her down, hissing, "Stop. He'll kill you and me, too, if we try to help."

"We must do something."

It hurt me to think it, much less come up with a response. "We can't do anything. I've only got my sword. They have guns, and we'd be shot down in a second."

Merat started to cry, and I put my hand over her mouth. She buried her head in my shoulder and sobbed quietly. While I didn't want to look, I couldn't look away. Farkeer then repeated his order, and finished up with, "Witness their hell. And witness your future!"

He then separated twenty of the villagers and made them stand alongside the thirteen townspeople. Once they did, he gave the command to fire. The two soldiers opened, and soon nothing was left but ash. Farkeer then turned to Pamka, who was staring open-mouthed in shock. "Do you know why I spared you?"

"N-no," she stuttered. "Please...I have done nothing—"

"My men need a diversion. If you can offer some information on the whereabouts of those people I seek, then perhaps your stay with us shall be a pleasant one."

He then waved to his soldiers. Despite her fear, she clawed at the face of one of the huge soldiers. The man laughed at her and slugged her across the jaw. She collapsed in a heap.

Farkeer observed the vicious act without so much as one muscle twitching in his face. He then yelled into the air, "You have seen this, Rinarra. You have seen this young one fight like a weakling, like all

women do. They scratch and claw and then cry. On our world, at least the women know their place.

“However, if you do not wish to be weak, if you have any courage, you will show your face. Instead, you cower with that equally weak person you call a mate!”

He then turned to his soldiers and directed the man who’d decked Pamka to pick up her body. “Use her as you see fit. That is all these women are good for. They cannot fight, but maybe they can serve another purpose.”

Wordlessly, the soldier hauled Pamka’s body up and tossed her over his shoulder.

Then they left. We were alone again, and all I had was my rage to sustain me.

Chapter Twelve

Capture

"WE SHOULD HAVE done something," Merat said. It was the evening of the same day. We'd taken up refuge in cave number five—or was it six? Being constantly on the move may have confused our enemies, but it was getting tiresome, not to mention confusing for me as well. There was nothing more that I wanted than to pass out in the confines of the hut that Merat owned.

However, we couldn't go back. Farkeer had decreed a death sentence—ours. Merat had been crying before, and while her sobs trailed away to disconsolate sighs, she had to be feeling awful. I wasn't feeling much better. While I thought about what to do, she aimlessly doodled in the sand.

Finally, it got to the point where saying something was better than saying nothing. "What are you thinking about?" I asked as I took a seat beside her.

A wistful smile crossed her lips. "About when we were children, that is all."

"Tell me."

Merat sighed and traced a picture of her home. "I was born very far away from here. It would take perhaps fourteen sunrises in terms of walking to get to my old home. My parents had a farm, but there was a drought, and so we moved here when I was around five seasons."

Five seasons—five years...that was a long time ago. As if reading my mind, she nodded. "Yes, it was many seasons in the past. I played with other children, but we never became friends, and then I met Rinarra. We took a liking to each other right away. On this world, most people are joined after they reach their eighteenth season. It is the way of all things. The rest, you already know."

"Yeah, you told me."

Merat chewed on her lower lip. "What shall we do now?"

"Pray for help." It was meant as a joke. Religion had largely died out at the same time the virus began.

"I do not understand."

How to explain? I recalled the information I'd gleaned from my holoputer. "Uh, well, praying means praying to God, to a being superior to everyone else. Praying to that god is supposed to make you feel better and, uh, grant you your wishes."

Merat gazed at me, her eyes open, empty, and the expression on her face, guileless. Finally, she nodded. "I think I understand. Your people...pray...to this being to give you something?"

Yeah, she understood. "Something like that."

"Do you pray?"

I shook my head. "No, I wasn't interested. My mother used to say that

you had to have hope. Hope sustains us. Without it, there's nothing."

Merat chuckled. "Rinarra used to say that, too." She cocked her head to one side, seemingly lost in a memory. "Perhaps you are more like her than I thought, and she as much you as you are."

Was she, was she really? I didn't think of myself as being my old me, but not my new me, either. Looking out at the night, the stars were shining. If they had the answer to all this, I would have given my next six months pay to know, but somehow, I had the feeling that I'd have to figure this out on my own.

"Did you want to see that rock you so greatly prize?"

Merat's question caught me off-guard. She meant the ore deposit. "You mean, now?"

"Of course."

A moment later, she put her hand up to stroke my hair. Light and intimate, it sent a thrill through me. "I am sorry for touching you," she said. "But this is something that I cannot hold inside any longer. If you wish to push me away, do so."

Half of me wanted to say stop, but the other half said no. I'd heard once that to make a friendship grow, you had to show your feelings—or something like that.

Showing my feelings was something I couldn't do, not yet, but I managed to stammer out a reply of, "That's okay. Uh, but...we have to do our job first."

Merat withdrew her hand and cleared her throat. "Yes, we do. I shall show you. Come with me."

Cool night air surrounded us as we made our way past the encampment. The deposit of ore she'd mentioned lay in a cave nearby the encampment on the mountain opposite the landslide area. The rocks and boulders were still there. No one had bothered to clear them away.

As we bypassed the enemy stronghold, the sounds of men yelling at each other drifted over. They were still working on the drill. Other soldiers were guarding them and holding torches, and still more patrolled the grounds.

They also carried torches and looked around uneasily. It seemed as though they were afraid of an attack, but Farkeer had come out to stand among them, holding a torch. It illuminated his face, accenting its hollows and the cruel twists and turns of his misshapen visage.

"It is not far from here," Merat said. "Come."

She took my hand and led me to a cave that had a larger entrance than the others we'd hid out in. "I do not know who discovered this place first. They only said it contained a kind of metal that was harder than anything they had ever encountered. Not many people have come here."

The cave itself was easy enough to enter, but at the end, there was an opening just wide enough for one of us to squeeze through. Merat went first, and when I slid through the opening, I found myself in a cavern. It was dark, but my eyes adjusted soon and Merat said she could make out

where to go.

"Come with me," she said, and took my hand.

There was a path, and it led downward, seemingly forever. It got progressively darker, so black that I could not make anything out. I felt things, though, rocks under my feet, branches, and depressions in the ground.

As the twists and turns continued, the footing became even more uncertain, with various pieces of rotted timber and rocks causing us to stumble. No, check that, Merat was fine. I was the one who tripped over things, despite my improved vision. "Are we there yet?" I asked.

"Soon," Merat whispered. "It is here. Look ahead."

We came into an open space, and here, a curious light shone. It came from the walls of the cave, some phosphorescent luminescence, and it lit up what we'd been looking for.

It was naretium. I'd only seen bits and pieces of it, but this had to be at least five hundred kilos worth, if not more. It wasn't scattered over the place nor was it inlaid with the rock. Instead, it sat in a giant lump in the center of the cavern, and it glowed.

Merat asked, "This is what the Droogs seek as well?"

"Yeah, that's it, all right."

This *was* it. As Merat had said, the Droogs had been drilling in the wrong place, or at the very least, in a place that didn't have much naretium. This deposit, though, it was more than enough to satisfy any planet hungry enough for an ore that could be shaped into anything and used for anything.

The best part was, not much was needed for building. It had the ability to expand its molecular structure and bind with steel or *tetrum*, another alloy that had been commonly used by our engineers.

"We can't let the Droogs find this," I said. "We have to hide it somehow."

"I am open to suggestions."

Her manner, so straightforward and her words, delivered in such a deadpan manner, made me laugh. "You're pretty coolish," I said.

I'd rarely used that term, but Merat ranked highly on my list of great things in my life. In fact, she was at the top of the list.

"What does that mean?"

"It means I like you."

She blushed. "I feel for you, too," she whispered. "A lot."

At that moment, the urge to kiss her hit me hard, but the sound of voices from up top caused me to stop. That, and the rank smell of body odor. Droogs. "What is it?" Merat asked.

I pitched my voice low. "We have company. Is there another way out of here?"

"No."

Not good, no, definitely not good. My mind began racing, formulating alternate courses of action, and they all came up with one result—we were going to get shot. We waited, hoping the search party would leave, but the

voices got louder. There was no point in waiting.

Waiting couldn't be done, anyway, as the sound of something being tossed into the tunnel echoed in my ears. A moment later, smoke began to fill the area. They were gas-bombing us.

Immediately, Merat started coughing and her eyes watered. Mine did as well. We had no choice. "Let's go," I said, while waving away the smoke.

Merat took the lead, and along the way I said that maybe the Droogs were only testing their weapons and would leave soon. Right, impart some false confidence. This situation needed it. In the back of my mind, I had the hope that a party from the Interplanetary Council would show up and rescue us. Or not.

As of this moment, I was leaning most strongly in the not category. As we ascended, the voices got louder and clearer. There were five men, but two voices stood out—Farkeer's and Summa's.

We got to within one hundred meters of the entrance, and Farkeer called inside, "Rinarra, I know you are there with your mate. We have tracked you down, and we do not wish any blood to be shed. Come out, now!"

So much for the council showing up. Merat whispered that she was scared. I was as well. But the hope that something good would come of this burned hot in me, and I was determined to take as many of them with me as I could.

We emerged from the tunnel and breathed in the fresh air. Once I got my lungs working properly, the leader himself stepped forward, wearing a grin. Four of his men accompanied him. "How'd you find me?" I asked.

Farkeer sounded smug. "One of the villagers was helpful enough to tell us where one of your hiding places might be."

He declined to say who it was. Right now, it didn't matter. Farkeer then moved aside and said to his soldiers, "Do not kill them. I want them alive."

As the soldiers approached, I kicked up some dust. It flew into their faces, temporarily blinding them. "Run," I yelled to Merat. "Get out of here!"

She continued to cough and shook her head. "I will not leave you!"

Oh, yes, she could, and she was leaving me now. While the soldiers were still clawing the dirt from their eyes, I grabbed her arm and threw her down the hill. "Hide!"

She tumbled out of sight. The stink of the men was very strong now. It was the smell of desire, the desire to hurt and maim and kill, and perhaps something else.

The men cleared their eyes and surrounded me. They had no guns, but they did have swords. Then Farkeer strode to the center. "Men, this one is dangerous."

"What about the other woman?" one of the soldiers asked. "We must also search for the human, is that not so?"

"Leave her. She is no threat to us, not now. As for the human, he will eventually be found."

The soldiers moved in slowly, cautiously, muscles tensed. Although they outsized me, I let my nails out, intent on doing as much damage to them as possible. "All right, let's get this going," I said. "I don't have all night."

The giant leader laid down a warning to his men. "Heed my words and take great care not to kill her. I would like her to suffer."

"Farkeer, you're the kindest person around."

A sneer so wide and deep that it could have slain a battalion emerged on his ugly visage. "My kindness is extended solely to my people. Not yours."

He then stepped back and waved his soldiers forward. I managed to take out one of them with a slash to his throat, but the other four swarmed me and I felt myself fall under a rainstorm of blows. Stars flashed in front of my eyes, blood roared in my ears, and my last thought consisted of five words.

I hope Merat is safe.

Chapter Thirteen

Interrogation

WHEN I AWOKED, I found myself inside a cell, on a stool, with my legs bound to the stool's feet by leather straps. My arms had been tied behind me with the same material.

Summa stood in front of me and informed me that I'd been placed in the main building. There were several rooms here, he said, where they kept the remainder of their food supplies. His mood was most ebullient. After all, he'd helped to capture me.

Still, I was glad that Merat had escaped. With her knowledge of this area's topography, they'd never find her. "So, you got me," I said. "You must be ecstatic."

An ugly smile formed on his even uglier face. "I am overjoyed, as is my commander. Know this—even though you and that other woman managed to destroy our main cache of food, we have put some aside as well as some food we have taken from the farmers. You will be given something to eat, too, if you help us."

"I'd rather go hungry."

"As you wish."

This cell didn't have bars of energy around it. It had thick steel bars only a few centimeters apart. Just being here sent a shaft of fear up and down my spine, as an aura of violence hung over it like a black cloud. This was a place where people were brought to be tortured. It was a place where they died.

Oddly enough, there was no door. Summa chuckled when I asked him why. It sounded like rusty metal grating upon rustier metal. "That is because no one escapes. I would not try, as there are two guards stationed outside."

He then left.

That was it? I expected them to beat on me for an hour or so. On the other hand, the smell here wasn't the most pleasant aroma around. Body odor from the Droogs combined with what I figured was bodily waste permeated the atmosphere. It was thick, heavy, and lay upon me like a wet, smelly blanket.

Stains covered the floor, along with smears of blood and flesh. In the corner, bits of skin and fur stuck out from the mess. They had to be the gerts' remains—there must have been thousands of them here. A laugh burred out of me. That had been a good trick. Merat had come up with it, and we'd both shared more than a few chuckles over that escapade.

Unfortunately, the Droogs didn't seem to have a sense of humor. They did have long memories, though. That insult upon their culture, not

to mention the fact that Rinarra — me — had poked out Farkeer's right eye, would make this stay a very unpleasant one.

While waiting, my sense of anxiety grew. Whatever they had planned for me would be nasty, brutal but not short, and I steeled myself for the upcoming punishment. I'd get through this. I had to.

Something inside me made me look at the floor again. The bloodstains of the animals were there, along with the fur. Upon closer examination, I recognized hair—Windeeran hair. No, it couldn't be. People had been here...

The door opened, and who else but the leader walked in, stomping over to the cell. He looked angrier than usual, but the semblance of a grin crossed his hideous face when he saw my bonds, and he rubbed his hands together in apparent glee. "I see you are enjoying our hospitality, Rinarra.

"I've had better." No, I hadn't, but no sense in telling him that. "Well, so what happens now? I must have made your day. I hope you're happy."

His smile faded. "Happy is not the word I would use to describe my mood at this moment in time. Vindicated would be a far better term."

Vindicated? "For what? You invaded this world, you killed innocent people, and for what? To get your precious metal? That's why you feel vindicated?"

Farkeer directed a sneer in my direction, although from the shape of his face, it seemed to be a permanent expression. "We came here on a research mission to check for a precious ore that we call *gratnum*. Other cultures call it *ventra*. On other worlds, it is known as naretium. That is one of the rarest and most sought-after metals in this galaxy and indeed, across the universe. If you had any scientific training, you would know how versatile as well as valuable it is. However, as you are an ignorant and uneducated peasant, I shall forgive you on this matter."

I knew what naretium was, but no sense in telling him that. "That's still no reason—"

"Watch your mouth," he cut me off, and punctuated his warning by slapping me across the face. "I will not stand here and listen to a woman-loving individual such as you lecture me on the so-called rules and regulations I should be observing. The universe is vast, and our people are from a resource-poor world. We need new supplies of ore, food, and other things that lie elsewhere. That is why we have come here."

The slap stung, but I wasn't about to give him satisfaction. He stopped ranting long enough to wipe the spittle that had formed at the corners of his lopsided mouth. "In contrast, your people are primitives. You have no interstellar radio, no monitors, and no weaponry."

Farkeer sounded so superior, it was laughable, and then I did laugh. He was not amused, and his lopsided mouth twisted into a snarl. "What is so humorous to you?"

"You're so great, but you got beaten by a couple of women who used

animals to destroy your food supply, and some matches and oil to take down your transmission tower. Oh, and how's the eye, by the way?"

My snappy comeback earned me a smack across the jaw. "I have constant pain, but I welcome that pain, for it lets me know that I am alive. What do you have?"

"I have hope. It sustains me." As old-fashioned as that sounded, I meant it.

A smirk crossed his face. "This is not the place for hope. This is the place where hope dies."

In a quick motion, he reached into his toga and took out a seven-inch metal rod. Its end was studded with tiny spikes, and he proceeded to wave it under my right eye. "I have not forgotten what indignity was wrought upon me. Shall I take yours as you have taken mine?"

Doing the only thing possible, I looked up—and then spit on him. He recoiled and reared his right arm back to hit me, but then the door opened, and another soldier entered. This one was different as he was somewhat smaller, with only two legs instead of three. The middle leg had been amputated, and only a tiny stump remained. Additionally, he had only two fingers on his left hand.

What he had in his right hand, though, concerned me. It was a device the size and shape of something that would fit over my head. Unlike the headset I'd worn when my consciousness was transferred, this headset did not look benign in any way, shape or form.

Farkeer greeted the soldier effusively as he stowed away his weapon. "I see, my physician, that you have brought your tools of information extraction with you."

The plot sickened. This man was a doctor, and doctors were supposed to preserve life. I had the feeling, though, that he didn't have a kind and caring bedside manner.

"I have," the doctor said.

"Is it in optimal working condition?"

"It is."

The doctor glanced at me and then back at his leader. "However, I am unsure how much effect it will have upon her mind. Her brain's configurations are vastly different from ours. If you may recall, I had examined the female bodies of the villagers, and—"

"Simplify," Farkeer interrupted in an impatient tone. "I am not schooled in the medical arts as you are."

A chastened expression crossed the doctor's face. "As with all the other test subjects, the device entered their cerebral cortex and I attempted to glean the truth from them. They soon suffered seizures and died. There was nothing I could do."

His words confirmed my suspicions of what had happened to the missing women from the village. They'd been used as lab rats. Sick, these Droogs were beyond depraved. A sudden bout of nausea caused me to heave a little in my

mouth. With an effort, I swallowed the bile, and its bitterness forced me to remain sharp.

"You brought those women here," I said. "You experimented on them?"

My question caused the supreme leader of these goons to nod his head, and he turned to me, wearing that horrible smile again. "Yes, we did. You will never find their bodies, though. After our physician completed his findings, our weapons erased their stinking corpses from this plane of existence."

"You piece of—"

"So, now you know what happened to your fellow villagers and townspeople. You will befall the same fate if you do not tell me what I wish to know."

Although my stomach churned and while I was terrified, outwardly, I wanted to show this arrogant bastard that he had nothing on me. The real Rinarra would have defied him. I could do no less. "Take your best shot."

Farkeer waved his hand at the doctor, signaling him to get to work. "I will be back later. Report your findings to me as soon as you know."

"Yes, sir."

The door slammed shut, and the doctor slowly swung around to stare me in the eye. "You understand what this is, do you not?" he asked.

"No."

He limped over to stand a half meter away. "In our travels, we have visited many worlds, some of which are friendly with our planet. We trade in technology, precious gems, raw ore, and other such goods that may bring prosperity to our people."

"So your high and mighty leader told me. That still doesn't give you the right to invade a planet and kill its people."

The doctor pursed his lips. "I do not make the rules. I obey them. My commander has ordered me to extract the information from you one way or the other. I shall give you the opportunity— now—of telling me what you know, so that in turn I may inform Farkeer. This is the easiest way. The other women who underwent the procedure screamed constantly."

If he was trying to frighten me, he was doing a fine job of it. Still, I couldn't tell them what I knew. My only hope was that Merat was safe.

"Let's get going," I said.

He sighed. "I had the idea that you would be intelligent enough to understand when you are beaten."

"You're only beaten if you've given up hope. I haven't."

He didn't seem to be impressed. "We shall begin." He placed the headset onto my head. It was snug but didn't cover my eyes. I wanted to shut them, but I didn't.

At first, I heard nothing but a faint whine, but then it slowly and gradually built to a higher-pitched sound, driving a spear in my brain and making me feel as though the insides of my skull were being slowly

liquefied.

The pain shot down to the pit of my stomach, making it churn. It was hard to think, but I could still hear the doctor's voice. "Tell us what we want to know!"

"No."

The spear of pain drove deeper. "Tell us who you are! You do not fight like the other women."

Hold on! Tell them nothing! "I...am...Rinarra."

He removed the device and the pain abruptly stopped. When it did, the bile that had been roiling inside me came out and I spewed my essence all over myself. Once everything had come out of me, I looked up, blinking the tears of agony from my eyes. "I am Rinarra."

My interrogator wore a cruel smile. "I am not so sure about that." He looked at the device, and his smile grew broader. "I am not sure about that at all."

He fitted the contraption on my head again, and while I growled and screamed with sheer rage, I could do nothing. "That setting was on low before," he said. "Let us try it a notch higher, shall we?"

Before I could steel myself against the psychic onslaught, he turned the handle and the shaft of white power drove itself into my brain once again. This time, though, it was different. In the same way that the Old One had entered my mind, this machine also intruded upon my most personal thoughts, my deepest desires, and my deepest fears.

My life on the station...the beatings...the explosion that had caused us to escape...the Clavatar...Rinarra...Merat...all those names and facts and figures and many more, all them were wrenched from me by that infernal machine and there was nothing I could do about it.

After a time, I gave up trying to resist and screamed in agony. While doing so, I thought I heard Rinarra's voice blending with mine, but I couldn't be sure...

MINUTES OR HOURS later, a heavy hand slammed against the side of my skull, rocking me awake. I raised my head and found Farkeer staring at me, his evil smile locked in place. "Well, Rinarra, we meet again."

In a casual move, he reached into his toga, pulled out a piece of paper, and proceeded to read out the information on it. "Or, would you prefer to be called Kyle Sorton?"

Damn it, he knew. I'd tried to shut things out, tried to block the waves from finding out what shouldn't have been found out, but the power of the machine had overwhelmed me. "You can call me whatever you want."

He chuckled, and it was a most grating sound. "Well, since you are in a woman's body, I shall call you Rinarra. I wondered why your manner of

speaking was so different, and now I know. I find it ironic that I was searching for you as well as the human pilot, never believing they were one in the same. This is truly something to treasure."

"Glad I made your day."

His good humor died away, and he rubbed his hands together with a businesslike air. "Feelings of joy can wait. I am more interested in the life Kyle Sorton had before he became that which sits before me. While under the influence of the machine, you were kind enough to tell us some bits and pieces of your life, but not everything. You were born on a space station, is that correct?"

No point in lying about it now. "Yes."

Farkeer looked at something on the paper. "It was number eighty-seven?"

"There were a lot of them. I don't know how many."

"I see." He read through the information, stabbing each point with a massive forefinger. "Your parents died, killed by a virus that decimated your world."

"If you already know, why are you asking?"

Farkeer, sighed, put the paper away, and then leaned against the bars. "The device we used to read your mind does not have a name. It is not our design, but one which we purloined from another planet long ago. While it can glean the basic information from the surface of the brain, so to speak, it does not have the capability of providing additional, more in-depth details. That, the subject must provide."

Uh-huh, the fact that he'd mentioned in-depth sealed the deal. He wanted me to rat on the Interplanetary Council. Not that I owed them anything. I didn't. They'd done nothing for me except give me a place to live and then treated me like a disposable commodity. An expendable one. A useless one.

Half of me said a little vengeance was in order, but the rational half told me that the Droogs were infinitely worse. They despised every race but their own, and they were beyond heartless. Therefore, they'd get nothing.

Farkeer snapped his fingers sharply for attention. "I wish to know about the Interplanetary Council's numbers. How many soldiers and ships do they have? Where have they settled? Which solar systems are they exploring? Our ships cannot match theirs in speed, although we do have superior weaponry. Tell me those facts, and you shall gain freedom."

How could I tell him what I didn't know? No one had included me in the loop back on the station! "You don't get it, do you? I was a janitor."

Farkeer's jaw dropped. "A what?"

"I cleaned things, you moron."

He continued to gape at me, and I erupted. "I was—a—I was seventeen! No one told me what was going on because the information was classified. Only the pilots, the soldiers, and the captain knew. They weren't going to tell

me.”

While I ranted, a part of me desperately wished my inner Rinarra would give me some advice, but perhaps that information-extracting machine had driven her out for good. “Anyway, don’t talk to me about freedom. I know what your version of it is. I can’t tell you anything because I don’t know anything.”

My answer did not please him, as he slapped me hard against the side of the head. “Even if you were not a member of their military, you must have had access to data files and other sorts of information,” he bellowed. “You must know something! Tell me how many ships they have.”

“I don’t know.”

Slap, slap. “Tell me how many soldiers they have at their disposal. What kind of weaponry do they possess?”

Slap, slap, slap. “I don’t know that, either.”

By now, a large vein was pulsing in his neck. If only my hands were free...

This time, instead of slapping me, he punched me in the jaw and that jarred me into biting my tongue. “Tell me where they have settled. You must know that, at the very least.”

Actually, I did, but no, he wasn’t getting anything out of me tonight. I spit blood in his face. “Go to hell. I don’t know.”

With a cry of supreme rage mixed with frustration, he bashed me about my head and shoulders unmercifully. Finally, when I was about to pass out again, he stopped, breathing heavily. “You...you are not a woman, Rinarra. You are a demon, one who loves her own, the same sex.”

His certainty jarred me. Did I? I liked Merat, but no...deep down, it was something more than that, and they weren’t Rinarra’s feelings but mine. In any case, I was sure of only one thing. I wanted to see Merat again.

“Even if I do, so what?”

The expression on his face indicated that he might puke. “This is something I cannot comprehend. You were a young man once. Perhaps in your culture, there are such men who desire to become women. Was that your way of thinking before?”

What. An. Idiot. “No.”

He pressed his point. “But among your people, are there not such individuals who love the same sex or who wish to become the opposite sex?”

Farkeer simply didn’t get it. He never would. “Yeah, some, I guess.”

A snort of disgust from him caused some junk to come out his misshapen nose and he wiped it away. “That concept is abhorrent to me. In our culture, we do not.”

Exhausted from getting hit, I wearily raised my head. “You got it all wrong. I became Rinarra to save my life. She happened to be there. And now I’m her. She’s me.”

A tiny light of comprehension sparked in his eye. Perhaps he understood. "Yes, I understand survival. I recall our battle. I was left with this."

He pointed to his eye patch. "I did not know of her powers before we fought. She surprised me. I had only enough time to smite her once, and then she ran off. Is that when you encountered her?"

"Yes."

"You used some kind of machine to transfer your mind to her body?"

Why not tell him the name? It wasn't as if he could use it, anyway. "It's called a Clavatar. It burned out and then the ship caught fire. Don't ask me how it works because I don't know."

Farkeer nodded at each sentence, as if digesting my words. He then gave a gross throat-clearing noise, as if trying to expectorate that which he'd heard. "I still find it incomprehensible that you chose to inhabit a woman's body. I would rather die in such a situation."

"Cut me loose and I'll give you your wish."

My semi-sarcastic comeback earned me another punch to face, this time on my left temple. "I most sincerely doubt it," he said.

Exhausted though I was from the repeated beatings, I had enough strength to lift my chin and lock eyes with him. "Just remember this, Farkeer. When I do get free, I'm coming for you."

A look of what could only be called fear flickered in his eyes before a smirk of superiority replaced it. "Considering that you are tied up, your threat is moot. I shall leave you alone to think your position over, Rinarra. The information about who you were does not interest me, but the information about who you knew and what you knew, does."

He then stomped over to the exit. "I shall return after a period, and perhaps I will bring the device with me. If I do, I will use full power. Think that over while you are debating whether to defy me again or not."

The door slammed shut and I was alone.

Chapter Fourteen

Escape

ANOTHER DAY AND night passed, and my captors kept me tied up. The leather-like ropes cut deeply into my wrists stopping most of the circulation, so much so that I couldn't extend my nails to slash through my bonds.

Summa and another guard who never gave his name but who was just as big and just as ugly, came in from time to time to check my bonds, slap me around, or fondle my breasts, which repelled me on a lot of levels.

The second-in-command was especially brutal. He directed most of his punches and slaps through his massive right arm, and they hurt way more than Farkeer's had. Every strike from him had hatred written into it. "Confess," he screamed at me. "Confess!"

Inwardly, rage overrode everything else. Rinarra's thoughts never intruded, but if she had made them, she would have said the same thing, "Go to hell!" In my case, I had the same response. Hope was all fine and good, but anger saw me through this torture.

Much as I hated getting hit, the fondling was even more wrong. However, it immediately stopped when Farkeer came in and his men snapped to attention. "How is the captive?" he asked them.

"There is no change in her attitude," said the second guard.

"I see," said Farkeer, still checking out my bonds with a wary expression.

It was almost laughable. If he was worried about me getting free, then he was doing it needlessly. My bonds were tighter than tight. No matter how much I twisted my limbs or squirmed, the leather wouldn't give.

"She is being uncooperative," Summa replied. "If I may suggest, sir, should we not use the machine again?"

"You may suggest it," Farkeer said. "You may, but I will not do it."

"Why?"

That came from the second guard. Farkeer abruptly turned wrathful, backhanding the man viciously across the face and sending him into the wall. "Fool, I do not have to give you a reason! Only know that I do what I do for my own reasons. Is that understood?"

Shaken by the slap and bleeding from the nose, the grunt bowed his head. "It is understood, sir. I meant no disrespect."

"Of course, you did not. Go and clean yourself off."

"Yes, sir."

The man walked out, hand to his nose. Summa watched him go, and then spoke in a most humble tone. "Sir, I also do not wish to disrespect you, but why not the machine? It gave us some information before. We now know that this Rinarra is not one person, but two – two minds in one body. We know he, er, she came in that downed craft. We also know from the wreckage that it belongs to the Interplanetary Council.

"If we search deeper in her mind, we may find out where they are settling, so that we may either avoid their forces or conquer planets that they have not yet colonized."

Summa's speech became more and more impassioned with every sentence, but his commander deigned not to oblige him by answering. He stood like a monolith, not one muscle moving in his face.

Finally, he sighed. "Summa, while your idea is intriguing, I have already asked her about those things you just mentioned. As well, there are certain factors to consider. I have consulted with our physician and I am forced to agree with him."

A doctor...who was...oh, everything swam into focus and I picked my head up to ask, "What did the doctor say?"

Farkeer blinked at my question, as if surprised I was still able to make a coherent sentence. "Ah, Rinarra, you are awake. Good. To answer you, he said that the mind is a most delicate thing. You, meaning the human you, have different thought patterns than the Windeerans do. As your thought patterns and possibly hers are intertwined, he warned me that because of the difference, if we use the machine again it could permanently scramble your mind. Believe it or not, I do not want that for you. I would prefer that you tell me what I wish to know."

"Is that before the torture or after?"

That comeback stung him, and he gritted his teeth. "Woman, or man, or whatever you are, you are annoying me! I will give you one hour to think this over. If you do not tell me what I wish to know, then I may permit Summa to have his way with you, if you understand the meaning of my words."

I did know, and the notion of being raped filled me with terror as well as disgust. Still, potential violation or not, no way would I tell them anything about the council. "I've already told you everything. Take your best shot. I'll still be here tomorrow."

Menace dripped from every word Farkeer spoke. "Yes, you will. And the torture will continue one hour from now. After that, I or one of my men may do more than just torture you. I am sure you are intelligent enough to comprehend the meaning of that."

He and Summa walked out, leaving me alone, and I turned my head around to look out at the night sky. The stars were beautiful. While some part of me wished to get back there one day, right now, I'd have settled for simply going back to the village.

There would be no going back, though. Farkeer had just threatened to kill me. He'd already atomized several of the villagers. What was one more?

In a moment of weakness, I genuinely feared for my life. It hadn't been much of one until I'd switched into Rinarra's body. With that switch came additional thoughts of Merat. She'd been brave, considering she'd had no training and couldn't fight, and the memory of her terror-stricken face near the naretium mine was seared into my brain.

Caring for Merat could be considered the understatement of all time. It wasn't only because Rinarra preferred women, but also because of how I felt. The Old One had said something about two spirits existing as one. Maybe that was true.

And then there was the matter of joining with someone. If it meant being happy, no matter who it was with, then it wasn't anyone else's business. What I was before, well, that had been before. I'd become a woman now, a person, and I was someone who cared for another person. That was enough for me.

The sound of the door opening jarred me out of my daydream. Summa walked in—alone—and sported the biggest grin, like someone who'd been chosen to go to a new world and couldn't wait to tell everyone about it.

Only this time, his grin was beyond evil, if that was possible. He closed the door behind him and sauntered over to where I sat, squatting down in front of me. "Farkeer has commanded me not to use the machine again. It is most unfortunate, as it has always been a most effective method of extracting information.

"Still, there are always the old-fashioned methods. So, before I start, I will give you one last chance to tell us what we wish to know. Speak now, and I will allow you to leave."

No, he would not. The grin, combined with the lust in his eyes, gave him away. It wasn't a lust for sex so much, but a lust for power, for control, and for exacting his will upon someone else. I was that someone else.

In this situation, two courses of action presented themselves. One, I could either repeat what I'd already told them, or two, lie and hope he'd believe it. The only problem was, nothing remotely interesting occurred to me. So, I did what anyone would do.

I spit a glob of mucus on his face. It dribbled down his chin, but he made no move to wipe it off. "Go ahead. Hit me. That's what you want, isn't it?"

It was. Summa's eyes narrowed, and then he went cosmic, standing over me and slapping my face until I thought the skin would come off. With a roar, he lifted me with one arm, stool and all, and tossed me back and forth, slamming me from one side of the cage to the other. It was on the second rebound that I saw stars, and by the fifth, all the nerve centers in my body were on fire and pleading for mercy.

"Tell me what I want to know!"

He yelled out his order time and time again, punching and then kicking me until I thought I'd either throw up or die, whichever came first. And through the beating and the film of blood that I blinked from my eyes, Merat's face was there. She was saying, "Hold on. Hold on."

Summa broke off his attack to walk outside. He stormed in holding a bucket of water and dashed it in my face. That woke me up, and I prepared myself for another round of punishment.

Instead, he leaned against the wall, massive arms folded across his chest. "Are you ready to tell us more information, Rinarra? Or would you prefer your other name, Kyle? Either one is acceptable to me."

Kyle? Kyle was gone. He'd gone the second my original body had taken its last breath. "My name is Rinarra."

Savage was the tone in his voice. "Very well, then, you are Rinarra. I am aware that there are two minds in your body. Tell me, do you love that woman you cohabitated with?"

He would have to ask. Beyond being kind and decent, Merat made me feel good about myself. Nothing else mattered. Everything was clear to me now, so I gave him his answer. "Yes."

Summa expectorated a large wad of phlegm on the ground.

"Disgusting."

"Screw you."

He smirked, and it made him look even uglier than when he scowled. "If there is any screwing to be done, it will be by me. So, tell me, why did you become a woman?"

Hadn't I already told Farkeer of the reason why? Either this moron hadn't heard, or he didn't want to hear. "She...she was there. I wanted to live. She did, too."

He nodded. "Commendable. Life is important. Therefore, if you wish yours to continue, then be so good as to tell us what we wish to know. You are in the position of being able to help us. That ship you came in, it had technology, yes?"

"It was old. I wasn't...wasn't a pilot. I got off my space station in it. The engines malfunctioned. I crash landed here. I already told you that."

Summa stood up and cracked his knuckles. "Yes, you did. It seems you need another lesson. After that, perhaps you will cooperate."

Get ready for round two. Unlike his previous tries at torture, he didn't start with slaps and build up to the grand finale of punches and kicks. No, he lashed out with his massive right arm, and the blow connected with the side of my head. I saw the ground rushing up to meet me...and then realized I was already lying on the ground...

MINUTES OR HOURS later, I came to, found myself lying on my side, and coughed out a wad of mucus and blood. Summa...if I ever saw him again, I'd make him regret this.

If I lived.

Right now, everything hurt, and I couldn't even wipe the film of blood from my eyes. A few drops dripped onto the floor, and they shone black in the moonlight. I'd been out, but for how long?

A bucket sat next to my head. It exuded an awful odor. It smelled like piss, evil, pungent, nose and throat-burning piss. Those bastards really had a lousy sense of humor.

I would have spit but didn't have the strength. It hurt even to take in the shallowest sips of air. I tried moving around, and found that the stool had been taken away, although I was still bound hand and foot. With an effort, I twisted my body up and leaned against the wall. *This is how it will end.*

Sighing aloud, I hung my head and tried not to think of what I hadn't done in life. In a word, everything. I'd never been on a mission. I'd never won a fight, at least before coming here. I'd never kissed a pretty girl, even though I'd wanted to, and the woman I'd been living with for the past few days topped the list. Someone once said that love meant wanting that person even if they weren't there. If they weren't, then life just wasn't the same. The place might have been the same, the air, the surroundings – all them, the same – but if that person wasn't around, then there was little joy to be taken in those other things. Maybe that was what love meant.

A creaking sound of the door opening made me look to my right. Summa had come in, and his smile could only be described as unholy. "Since it is night, it is time for some more education," he said, and scratched his crotch.

If that wasn't a disgusting signal that he wanted to rape me, I didn't know what was. "I bite."

A hoarse chuckle came from him. "You cannot bite me if I turn you over."

Sick bastard. He started toward me, but then I heard a dull thwack, the sound of something heavy meeting bone. Summa's eyes rolled up in his head and he fell on his face. What was going on?

"Rinarra."

My heart skipped a beat. My eyes were half-closed from the beatings, but I knew that voice. A familiar figure stood in the doorway, a blood-stained rock in her hand. She let it fall and quickly stepped over the fallen guard's body to kneel in front of me.

"Merat?"

"Yes." A sob caught in her throat. "What have they done to you?"

"Take a good guess. How bad do I look?"

"I do not wish to say."

She reached into her pullover and withdrew a small knife. "We do not have much time. I crept down from the mountain to find you. The guards on duty had left this place to relieve themselves. Before they went, they were discussing an execution tomorrow – yours."

"Nice to know that I'm so popular."

"Only with me. Wait, I shall cut your bonds."

Her hands moved surely and soon I was free. While I rubbed my arms and legs to get the circulation going again, she took a small jar from that hung from her belt, uncapped it, and dipped her fingers inside.

When she took her fingers out, they were covered in a thick, sticky-looking green paste that had an odd, heavy smell, like a mixture of alcohol

and something else I couldn't identify. "What's that?"

"It is balm. It will stop the pain and accelerate the healing process."

She smeared it on my wounds. Instantly, the pain went down to a manageable level. I got to my feet, and on the way out, another guard walked in. He sniffed the air and wrinkled his nose. Then he spotted Merat, who stood as still as a statue.

"Look over here," I said, and when he turned around, I punched him in the jaw.

Although I felt weaker than a baby, apparently, one punch was all it took, as his eyes crossed, and he collapsed. I tucked his sword into my pullover, but then staggered. Merat whispered, "Lean on my shoulder. We will be out of here soon."

We stole out into the night. As luck would have it, the guards were looking the other way. We hit the grass, waited until they moved off, and then we wormed our way past them into the brush.

Once we felt that we'd put enough distance between us and them, we ran. My muscles cramped up, but Merat supported me every step of the way, urging me on.

Eventually, we reached our cave. As soon as I got inside, the hard ground came up to meet me, and I heard her saying, "Please, Rinarra, do not leave me, do not leave me..."

Chapter Fifteen

Recovery

A HAND SHOOK my shoulder and I started awakening. It was dim here, and warm. Fire...someone had made a fire. My mind was still fuzzy. What had happened? I'd been pent up in a cell, beaten and whipped, and now, where was I?

Then things swam into focus and the events of the past few hours came back to me. I'd been imprisoned. Summa had been torturing me. Merat had shown up to bash him over the head with a rock.

I recalled belting out another guard...we'd escaped, and then...

Stone walls, hard ground, a musty smell—I was back in the cave, and Merat's face appeared in my field of view, her forehead furrowed with worry lines. "Are you all right?" she asked.

Good question. My body still hurt, and every muscle screamed whenever I breathed. "I'm alive. How long...how long have I been out?"

"You have been sleeping for two days. I gave you water and you drank, although you did not open your eyes. The balm worked, I think."

It must have, because my face didn't ache anymore, and when I looked at my arms, many of the cuts had already healed. "Thanks."

Merat bobbed her head. "I was concerned for you."

She'd risked her life to save me. "If they'd have caught you, you know what would've happened."

Passion coated her next words. "It would have been death without you. That is why I came."

I knew, and knew that she was special, special for risking her life to save me, and special because of who she was. "Well, I'm better now."

A look of relief replaced the one of worry. "Then that is good."

With her help, I got into a seated position and together we gazed out on the panorama that lay in front of us. She told me that soldiers had passed by during my mini-coma, but hadn't bothered to check the cave, and she pointed at the rock and scrub brush wall.

Her camouflage job was perfect. Had I passed by this cave, I would have thought it empty. "That's some artistry you have," I said.

"I have moments of ingenuity."

That remark got us laughing, even though it hurt my bruised ribs. Merriment over, I swiveled my head around to look at the landscape once more. It was a beautiful area, unspoiled and pure, something I'd always wanted but had never gotten close to.

All those years growing up in isolation, only the walls of the space station separating me from the icy unforgiving nature of space, all those years of craving a place to plant my feet, to dream of walking on real earth, smelling real smells instead of synthetic ones—they were now here.

However, the smoke in the distance signaled our isolation from the promise of a real life. The Droogs and their base, their jail cell—they still existed. Merat touched my hand. “Was it very bad there?”

The question sent a shudder of fear through me. Tied up like an animal, beaten and whipped, the leering eyes of the enemy on me...call it worse than very bad. The only thing I’d thought of had been Merat. Her acts of kindness had seen me through it all. “I got by, thanks to you.”

She offered a shy smile. “I missed you, you know.”

“Me too.”

Perhaps embarrassed by her admission, she coughed and then moved away to busy herself with something. When she turned back, she asked if it was wise to take a walk.

It sounded all right, but where to? After putting the question to her, she motioned to the right. “There is a stream nearby. The water is cold and clean, and I need a bath.”

Her nose wrinkled. I got the message and quickly sniffed my hands and did the armpit check. I smelled beyond rank, if that was possible. “Count me in. Let’s go.”

Merat helped me to my feet. The room spun for a moment, but then my sense of balance returned, and things straightened out.

She grabbed a small jar and tucked it into the folds of her pullover. We made our way down the path, and for a change, she took point. I kept watch, listening for any grunts and sniffing the air for any of the enemy’s stench. Nothing. It was a lovely summer in paradise, only something devilish had decided to drop in.

Where had I gotten that thought from? Oh, right, one of the books I’d read on board the station, something about an angel dropping from the heavens into the bowels of the planet where devils ruled with pitchforks and whips. It was so absurd I laughed, and Merat asked what was so funny.

“I was thinking about a book I read when I was small.”

“Book?”

Perhaps she didn’t know what it was. “Well, they’re made of pages and they tell stories about different things. I saw pictures of them on my holo-puter, back on the station. I never read them myself, but I know that they had pages and used ink, and—”

Merat suddenly slapped my arm and it stung. “Ow! What was that for?”

She gave me a look of mock anger. “Do you think of us as being totally ignorant? I read books when I was younger to learn our language and study about our world, but since the invaders came, I have had no time to read. There is a war happening.”

A giggle then escaped her lips. “What’s so funny?” I asked.

“Rinarra, the before you, she always thought that reading was not for farmers. She disliked books and studying. She wanted to run and

experience life, while I wished to stay inside and study. Although I went outside to play with her, I had my ways, and she—you—had yours.”

“I was like that?”

“You were.”

Our path took us to the stream, and after I’d sniffed the air for the scent of the Droogs and found none, Merat took the lead and disrobed. She stepped into the stream and exclaimed, “It is cold, but refreshing! Come in.”

Another case of the shys hit me, but better to be clean than stink. I shed my pullover and got in with her, shivering at first, and then my body adjusted to the temperature. No brushes handy, so my hands did the job. It wasn’t perfect, but it would have to do.

As I washed, I glanced at my reflection in the water. My face had gone back to its normal shape. My figure, lithe and toned and strong, stood out. And there was Merat, naked and sitting across from me, and it felt totally natural to be with her.

“Rinarra, may I ask a favor of you?”

Merat’s question broke my train of thought. “Uh, what is it?”

“Will you wash my back?”

The question startled me. She’d been studiously avoiding my eyes, concentrating on searching the stream bed, and now she’d requested a cleaning task. “Sure.”

She turned around, hugging her knees. I ran my hands up and down her back as gently as possible. “Is this okay?” I asked.

“It is good,” she murmured. “Rinarra—you—often did this for me. We did for each other.”

In that case... “Would you do the same for me?”

“Turn around.”

Her hands went over my shoulders. At first, she massaged the aches away, and her fingers pushed and probed and found the sore spots, making me wince, but eventually the pain went down. “That feels good,” I murmured.

Her hands hesitated only for the briefest of moments before covering my breasts, squeezing them gently. A pleasant shiver ran up and down my spine. “Um, Merat, that’s not cleaning.”

“No, it is not. And I cannot help how I feel.”

Seduction had suddenly become the name of the game. She leaned her upper torso into mine, and the very contact with her body made my stomach flutter. A warmth spread through me, originating in my lower body, and expanding upward.

Oh, wait a minute. This couldn’t be happening, but it was, almost to the point of overwhelming me. What to do now? *Rinarra, are you in there?*

Go with it. We desire her.

Finally, she’d spoken, her thoughts intertwining with mine. Who was I to disagree with myself? Truthfully, I couldn’t help how I felt, either.

“Maybe,” I stammered, “uh, maybe we should go back to the cave, you know, privacy?”

“Yes.”

We got dressed and made our way home. Once inside, we stacked up the rocks and scrub brush, got a fire going, and washed our hands with the water that Merat had brought back. Job over, I said, “Come here.”

Merat approached. I untied her belt, slowly lifted her pullover up and over her head, and then tossed it aside. Her body was beautiful, and the desire to be with her stirred within me, even more strongly than at the stream.

I leaned forward, but she pushed me back gently and asked, “Are you certain that you want me?”

It wasn’t because she’d saved me, and it had nothing to do with her nursing me back to health. It was because she was here— now—and she was someone I cared for. My tongue felt thick, and my voice sounded thicker. “Yes.”

I removed my own garment. Her hands went around my waist, traveled lower, and then cupped my butt. In turn, I slid my hands around her waist and then between her legs, felt the wetness and softness there, and she gasped. “Rinarra, you have never done that before, not in that manner.”

“There’s a first time for everything.”

I kissed her, then, not as Kyle in Rinarra’s body or as Rinarra with Kyle’s mind, but as a fusion of both and neither. Merat’s tongue met mine, and she drew me down with her to the pallet and covered us with the blanket. “The fire is still burning,” she whispered as my tongue explored her ear and then her mouth. “It may alert someone.”

“Let it burn.”

SOME TIME LATER, I awoke, feeling an incredible sense of peace. This had been a first for me, a ritual of sorts that everyone went through. There was nothing wrong about it. It had been the best—and only—experience of my life. Hopefully, there would be more times like this.

A few seconds later, Merat opened her eyes and murmured, “I...Rinarra never touched me that way. She...was not as ardent as you.”

“It was my first time. I’ll get better with practice.”

Merat pressed closer to me, and she stroked my face gently. “Then we shall have to practice until you get it right.”

It was a thought, but my stomach rumbled. Merat heard the sound and giggled. “I am also hungry. Exercise can have that effect upon people.”

With all the exercising we’d done, I now felt more than capable of eating anything and everything. However, vegetables and fruit would have to do. We reluctantly got dressed and made our way to the ground below. Before leaving, however, I grabbed the sword that I’d taken from

the guard, just in case we met the enemy.

Merat started to speak, but a smell, very unlike the flowers and grass, drifted over to my nostrils. It was them. "Be quiet," I said.

"What is it?"

"Droogs."

Merat's lips clamped shut. We hunkered down behind a large rock and waited. The smell got stronger, and then the figures of two large soldiers came into view. "So, Farkeer ordered it," one of the men said as they strode by. "I did not wish to come along, but he thought me the best person for the mission."

His friend commiserated with him. "He said the same to me. We are but playthings for his amusement. Sending us to this world to deal with these inferior beings is nothing short of humiliating."

Merat growled, but I put my hand over her mouth. "Wait," I whispered. "They may say something useful."

One soldier stopped, lifted the front of his toga, and began peeing all over a small clump of flowers. They wilted under the stream of urine, and he spoke in a most conversational manner with his friend. At first, they discussed their mission, that being to find ore to power their world's engines.

"This planet is literally a mine of riches," said the peeing man, who had a finger missing on his right hand. "If we dig deep enough, we will strike a mother-lode."

"Even if we do, we will never see any of it," the second man countered. "Farkeer will claim credit for discovering the treasure, receive the greatest share, and we will be paid a pittance."

Then their conversation turned to other, less stressful topics, including the best way to kill an opponent, life back on their world, and women.

"What do you think of the women here?"

From the way the first soldier spoke, he didn't think much of us. Mr. Pee chortled. "For the most part, they are small and inoffensive. They are easily subdued and beaten, easily killed."

"What about the troublemakers? That woman, Rinarra, she is a terror. Grooda will not return, and as for the others she slew—"

"They were incompetent soldiers who did not guard their position. We will find those women, and when we do..."

He gave a throaty chuckle. Right, tough talk, even though he had nothing to back up his statements with.

"You are right," the second soldier said. "They are nothing. But...would you couple with one of them?"

"I would. They are like toys to be played with. I had one of them a while ago. She was young and ripe." He finished peeing and shook his hands.

His friend gaped at him. "Where did you take her?"

“Where that alien wreck is.”

They began to walk off. “When they are captured, they lose all will to live. She was easy and did not struggle—much. Once I had her, she imparted some useful details.”

Oh, no, Pamka...

Merat gasped and I put my hand over her mouth. “Wait,” I whispered. “We have to wait until they’re out of sight.”

It seemed to take forever, but eventually they faded from view. Merat and I ran through the field, back to the crash site. A body laid near the burned-out hulk of the craft. “No,” Merat whispered, and then cried, “No!”

Heedless of the danger, she ran over to the figure that lay small and still. Her hands trembling, Merat turned the person over. It was Pamka, and I didn’t have to look at her to know that she was dead. Merat’s cries of grief told me everything.

Chapter Sixteen

Battle Plans

TO SAY THAT Pamka had been abused was an understatement. Her pullover was saturated in her own blood. Bruises and lacerations covered her body, and her face was swollen almost beyond recognition. If it hadn't been for the mole on her right cheek, I wouldn't have known it was her.

Merat examined her, lifting the garment to check her downstairs, and her face twisted with a combination of horror and anger. "She has been violated. She did not have any relationship with men before the invaders came."

Damn, damn! Pamka wasn't the only victim of the conflict, but she seemed to be the most tragic. The Droogs had raped her because they could. It served as a warning to anyone who was considering sabotage—that anyone being me and Merat.

My chest heaved with pain combined with rage that soon segued into something even more incandescent. Pamka had been raped and then beaten to death, and for what? She hadn't wanted to fight. She'd been terrified of battle. Even though she'd disliked me and Merat for being what we were, in my heart I couldn't hate her. It wasn't in me, not anymore.

It then dawned on me that she'd been the one who'd probably told the Droogs where they might find us. It didn't matter, though. She'd done it under duress and had paid with her life.

I picked her body up and began marching across the field, not hearing anything and not wanting to listen. All I wanted was revenge. The enemy had used rape as a weapon, and in many ways that was worse than murder.

"Please, Rinarra, stop," Merat implored, once we were a safe distance from the scene. The enemy wasn't following, so we stopped to rest. We'd ended up in the middle of the field, out in plain sight.

"She needs to be buried," I said. "Help me, will you?"

Pamka's body was light, and I carried it to the edge of the tree line. There, we dug a grave and lowered Pamka's body into it. Merat wept, and I felt worse than awful, if that was possible.

After we'd filled in the grave, Merat swept the tears from her face and stared at the ground, her mouth moving, but making no sounds. I sat next to her, scanning the area beyond, but there was no movement. I put my arm around her shoulder, hugging her, and she whispered, "I do not know what to do."

I didn't have a clue, either. Perhaps the Old One would know. It was a wild guess, but when there was nowhere else to turn, take a chance. Merat and I skirted the forest, hunkering down behind fallen trees and periodically testing the air with our noses. Despite their size, the enemy

could hide, but they couldn't mask their smell. That gave them away and gave us a small advantage in eluding them.

"There, over there." Merat pointed to our right. "I smell something."

Yes, that familiar stink was back, and I caught the movement of two soldiers coming our way. One of them I recognized as my chief torturer, Summa. The other man I didn't know. They were armed only with their swords, and walked through the field in a brazen, careless manner. They weren't expecting any opposition.

Wrong bet on their part.

I opened the sword, gave it to Merat, and she crept to her left, while I extended my nails. They were sharp and ready, and I gave a low moan to attract their attention. Summa gestured to his friend. "Investigate."

Obediently, the other man sauntered over to where I knelt. He didn't even bother looking around, so unconcerned was he about the possibility of being attacked. Stupid and careless, that was the enemy, and its name was Droog.

He got close to where I knelt, and his body odor was overpowering. Not only that, there was another smell to him—lust. This man wanted flesh, but he didn't want to caress it, that was for sure. Immediately, his eyes grew round. "You, you are the one who escaped!"

In a quick move, he reached for his weapon. "This is good fortune for me. I will capture you and my commander will reward me."

No, he wouldn't. Merat stole out from her position, and with a fierce cry, she stabbed him in the side with the sword. The blade sank in up to its hilt. He uttered a gasp laden with pain and surprise, yanked out the sword, and then dropped it. His blood flowed into the earth, and a second later, he toppled to the ground, dead.

Merat froze in her spot, hands over her mouth. "I...did that?"

"You certainly did," I said.

Trouble came running in Summa's form. He yelled a fierce battle cry as he stormed toward us, but before he could draw his sword, I vaulted into the air and landed behind him. It was time to bring the pain, and my fingernails sunk into the back of his right shoulder.

As tough as he was, he wasn't invulnerable, and as I yanked my hands out, a chunk of flesh came with it. Blood sprayed in every direction, and he hollered in agony. "You...Rinarra, you are a witch! I should have killed you before!"

"You got one part right."

He twisted around and lunged at me, but falling to my knees and spinning around, I slashed the hamstrings on his middle and right legs. He screamed and fell to the ground, writhing in agony. "Yeah, you should have killed me when you had the chance. Too late for that. So, what are you going to tell me?"

Losing wasn't a concept that he was familiar with. He was more into the torture-and-exact-information thing. Just the torture, but this time, he

was facing two very pissed off women who had their own agenda.

A groan came from him, and he gritted his teeth. "I will...I will tell you nothing. If you wish to torture me, do it. If you wish to kill me, do it. I will answer no questions."

Merat had picked up the sword, and she pricked the hollow of his throat with it, drawing a bead of blood. Another swipe carved open his cheek, eliciting a howl of pain. It would take more than a few cuts to make him talk, though. Summa was tough.

"Getting rid of you might come later," I said. "One of you raped and then killed Pamka, and you and your tough guy friends killed a lot of the other villagers and townspeople. You were going to rape me. I think that deserves retribution."

I took the sword from my wife's hands and traced a path from his throat to his crotch. "You call yourself a man. How about I take that away? How about I take away that which makes you what you are?"

When I was a guy, something like this would never have occurred to me. It had taken a gender switch and seeing what the women here had to endure that made me change my mind. Perhaps women throughout time had to deal with this kind of thinking and treatment. I didn't know for certain, but what I did know was that it was neither fair nor right, and it wouldn't be tolerated, not here, not now, and not ever!

Moreover, this kind of thinking hadn't been Rinarra talking through me. It was me talking through me.

As for our captive, he waited for the end. Summa was vicious and a bully, but he wasn't stupid. He knew what I'd hinted at and a look of terror shone in his beady eyes. "Please," he said, and put up his hands as a sign of surrender. "I was only following—"

"Orders, yeah, I get it. You followed orders to torture me. You followed orders to kill innocent people. One of your scumbag buddies raped and murdered Pamka. That's all you do, steal and rape and kill. Well, I've got a higher calling."

In a swift motion, I raised the sword, tip down, and got ready to plunge the blade into his crotch, only to halt my downward motion when he screamed, "Stop! What do you wish to know?"

With Merat's help, we quickly bound his hands and legs together with strips of cloth torn from the other guards' toga. Summa's shoulder was still bleeding heavily, and since I didn't want him to expire from blood loss before he told us something useful, I bandaged his wound.

In a grudging tone, he said, "Thank you."

"Don't thank me yet."

I dragged him over to a tree and propped him up against it. Then, the questioning began, punctuated by slaps and kicks, mainly from Merat. He took them all without complaint, even when she sliced off his earlobe.

Still, out-and-out torture wouldn't work. Threats to his manhood would, so I kept the tip of the sword dangling over his crotch. "So," I said.

“You know where this sword is pointed. Start talking.”

Fear could be a great motivator and it showed in his eyes. Summa then launched into a list of how many troops were at the base, and what kind of weapons they had and where they were stored.

After reciting the information, he fell silent. It surprised me to find out the Droogs had only one base. I’d figured that they’d had a lot scattered across the planet in key cities. “Why only one camp?” I asked. “Do you think you’re that superior?”

“No,” he ground out through clenched teeth. “When we were passing through this quadrant of the galaxy, our instruments gave us the information about this world. No heavy industry, no weaponry or armed forces of any note, but rich deposits in ore. That is what our planet needs.”

Summa stopped to take in a deep breath and breathed out slowly, wincing in pain. “Our high commander sent instructions for one troop ship to be dispatched, to take samples, and to set up the planet for colonization. The ship landed, we disembarked with our equipment, and then it left. The men here, there were only one hundred to start with, but less now.”

He grunted in pain. “I do not understand your fascination with this world or its inhabitants. They are nothing to you. You are nothing to them. Why do you fight us?”

If he couldn’t understand, then there was no helping him. I barely managed to keep my temper from going nuclear. My sword arm shook, and it took everything I had not to rip him open from his nuts to his neck. “You really don’t understand, do you? This—is—not—your—world. Do you get it now?”

The tip of my sword pressed down on his crotch and he squealed, “Yes, I understand.”

Maybe he had some intelligence, after all. “So, here’s how this is going to work. Since you’ve told us all you know—”

“I have!”

I put the weapon away. “That’s good to know. Now, my wife and I are going to take you to a cave.”

“Your wife?”

Odd, that had just slipped out of me, but...yes. It felt natural to refer to Merat that way. “Yeah, she’s my wife. And we’re going to stick you in a cave. You’re going to stay there, tied up, and if your friends find you, fine. If they don’t, you’ll starve.”

His eyes widened. “You...you are not going to torture me further?”

Merat glanced at me. “Are we not?”

“No, we aren’t,” I answered. Half of me wanted to rip Summa’s head off, but dead, he was of no use to us. “We’re going to tie you up and leave you. If you get free, go and tell your friends. We’re going to attack you tomorrow night.”

Warning given, I took his communication wristband off, crushed it,

and then we dragged him over to a nearby cave and tossed him inside. Then I took Merat's hand and we made our way back to the town.

Along the way, she turned to me, and she didn't sound happy. In fact, she was downright angry and confused. "Why did you tell him that we were going to attack their camp? We should have killed him. He will get free and warn the others. Rinarra, I do not understand your way of thinking."

"That's because we're not going to attack them tomorrow night."

She stopped and faced me squarely. "We are not?"

"No, we're doing it tonight."

Merat started to sputter out an answer, and then she began laughing. "Rinarra, I think you have a touch of madness in you."

She then leaned up to kiss me. "And I love your madness."

My hand found her cheek, caressed it, but as much as I wanted to be with her, there was no time. "We have to go to Renya. I can't do this by myself."

"They will not accept us there. Bineta—"

"Once she hears about this, she'll help."

Merat's face set with determination. "I will be with you," she stated in a firm tone, and then asked, "You called me your...wife?"

"It's the same thing as being joined."

A smile came to her face. "Then we are still joined. And I will fight alongside you."

Her determination meant a lot, but still, we had to face reality. "I know you will, but up against all those soldiers, we'll need more than just us. They'll have weapons, but now that we know where their arsenal is, we can take care of it. We just have to plan things out."

We started to go to the town, but Merat steered me in the direction of the cave where the Old One lived. "She will be in danger if the fighting is bad," Merat said. "We must take her away to somewhere safe."

"Of course."

Once we reached the cave, a rude surprise greeted us. The Old One was there, all right, but in pieces. She'd been torn limb from limb, and her body parts were scattered throughout the cave. The stench was overwhelming, and Merat put her hands over her mouth once she saw the remains and ran from the cave to the side, where she vomited.

When she'd recovered, she asked only one question. "Why?"

I had no answer. This went beyond any sense of decency, and then I realized the Droogs and their leader, Farkeer, had none. "There's nothing we can do for her, Merat. We have to go."

Tears flowed unchecked down her cheeks, but she nodded, anyway, and we made our way over the mountain and then down to the town, constantly checking for the soldiers on patrol.

Once we got near the confines of the town, we got another shock. The huts on the outskirts had been obliterated. As we made our way past

them, only a few of the houses had survived the onslaught.

No one came out to meet us, but then I caught sight of Bineta as she disappeared into the town hall. "We must speak with her," Merat said, and pulled me forward.

As we walked, my eyes roamed over the outskirts. The fields needed cultivation, but no one would risk going out for fear that they'd be attacked. Merat gently asked, "What are you thinking of?"

"What to do." My initial plan was to attack the enemy tonight, but now...I wasn't sure.

She gave a helpless shrug. "We cannot stay here any longer. Pamka is dead, my parents and your parents are dead, and our village will not welcome us. We must leave."

Her voice, lifeless and monotonous, made me think of how my life had gone. If I had to be honest about it all, I'd never had much of an existence. I'd been born inside a large tin can of a home. I'd had no friends, no social life, and no chance of having one.

As well, my parents were dead, taken from me by something I couldn't fight against. They were never going to come back. I couldn't blame anyone, for there was no one to blame.

My old body was gone as well, and why bother thinking about it? For now, I existed in another form, someone healthy and strong and capable of wreaking havoc.

A passage from an old novel I'd read came back to me. The heroine had decided to stand and fight. The odds were heavily against her. She couldn't win, but she had made a promise to protect the forest she and her friends lived in. People had to stand for something, and if they didn't take a stand, then there was no point in living.

Rinarra's voice suddenly echoed in my head more strongly than it ever had before. *You must fight.*

I know, but we're going up against a lot of people. The odds aren't good.

You have my abilities. My strength is now yours. You know the enemy's capabilities, and you have someone to protect. You love her, as I do. So, protect the one you love. I exist because of you. You exist because of me. Life is precious and special and dear. Do not waste it. Do what is right and just. I am with you...

The voice faded. Instead of feeling abandoned or confused, now, everything was clear. I rose and pulled Merat up with me. She gave me a bewildered look. "Rinarra, what are we going to do now?"

I still had the sword in my pullover. I patted it, secure in the knowledge that I'd use it if necessary. "We're going to end it. Let's go talk to the leader."

Bineta was not happy at our knock. She was even less happy when Merat pushed her back and told another survivor to bolt the door. There were six women there, and one of them hastily locked up with a fearful expression. Plain to see she was scared that Farkeer and his men would return. I was fearful, too, but now was not the time to panic. It was time for action.

"I was not expecting to see you again, either of you," Bineta said, once we were all seated. "We...we did not know where you were. The soldiers were here before, but they have gone. Their relief will be coming soon. You must go from this place."

"We will, soon," Merat said. "First, tell us what happened."

The story was all too familiar. The Droogs had come with Farkeer leading six men, and of course they'd wanted to know of our whereabouts. To make matters worse, they'd taken all the available food and had shot several elderly people.

"They slaughtered them for no reason," said the old woman slowly and with great anger as well as sorrow. "They killed without mercy, in retaliation for your raids. That is our punishment, and it is on your head, Rinarra."

Hold on a moment. "On my head?" I said. "I was trying to protect this town. I was trying to protect our village!"

"It is not your village. Neither is this your town or your world. You are an alien here, possessed by a spirit I do not understand and do not wish to understand. Acting as you suggest, you would doom our people to extinction. The invaders will come again."

If they did, then it was time we did something about it. When Bineta heard our plan, she shook her head. "No, I cannot allow it. We have lost so much, already. I shall consult the Old One on what to do."

"I've got news for you, Bineta. We found her remains. She won't be giving you or anyone else advice again."

Everyone looked at me, aghast. It seemed that not only were they shocked that their spiritual advisor was dead, they were also startled that someone had talked back to their leader. *Get used to it.*

I had become someone different. In the old days on Earth, men were known as warriors, and women were sometimes called warrioresses. Since the armed forces had become fully integrated, they were simply known as soldiers, but the old labels still stuck.

My thoughts went a little deeper. Even before I'd landed here, Rinarra had done things her way. Since I was now her, I could do no different. "Whatever you tell me, Bineta, I'm doing things the way I think they should be done."

The stern old woman locked eyes with me. "Rinarra or Kyle or whatever you choose to call yourself –"

"It is Rinarra," Merat interjected. "I have accepted her as she is. That is all you need to know. Why is it that you cannot accept her now?"

"Because she will get us killed," Bineta replied sharply. "We have lost our men. We have lost many others as well. My joined one was murdered –"

"By those things," I said, cutting her off. "I know what they did. I know they slaughtered your people. But now, I'm one of you. I know what Rinarra knows. I'm her, she's me. We have a plan."

For that answer, I got a look of total incomprehension. "So, you speak to

each other? You are truly mad.”

“I have a plan.”

“So, you have said.”

“It’ll work. Trust me.”

Bineta sat back, massaging her legs and wincing as she did so. When she spoke, it was with an ineffable weariness. “I did not want this position in life. I only took it as there was no one else who would. This so-called plan of yours will be the death of us all.”

I got up and bobbed my head at her. “Bineta, you’re the leader here. I respect that. But I need to ask you one question. Why did you lie before?”

She stared at me. “Lie? About what?”

“You lied when Farkeer came here a few days ago. I was watching from the bushes. He asked you if you’d seen me and Merat. You told him no. The other women lied about us, too, even though they don’t like the idea of us being married, er, joined. So, tell me why.”

Her expression indicated her indecision. I pressed my point, glancing at the other women. “It’s because you thought I could help. Or maybe you wanted to protect Merat. You tell me.”

She remained silent, and I spun around to face everyone. “We can’t run. If we do, then they’ll just hunt us down. And if they find their ore, then more Droogs will come. The other villages and towns and cities won’t be safe. Your world won’t be safe. We must try to end this. I’m not asking you to fight with me. I know you can’t. I’m asking you to understand.”

Everyone then began arguing, some for, and most against the plan. Their voices got higher and shriller, and the leader looked from face to face, as if undecided as to which way to vote.

Really, what was the point in voting? Doing nothing meant certain death. Futile or not, it didn’t matter. Doing something would be the ultimate act of defiance.

Bineta called for quiet and she stared at me, the expression of severity on her face softening, if only by a few degrees. She looked at each of us in turn, biting her lip as if wondering which reply would be best.

Finally, she spoke, her voice quiet and yet commanding. “I do not understand exactly what you are. But I have decided that you are correct.”

That was a sudden shift. I didn’t know why she’d changed her mind, but it didn’t matter. Doing nothing was a sure way to get killed, and I wanted to live in the worst way.

“What are you saying, Bineta?” another woman asked. Bineta looked at her. “We must all do something.”

She then locked gazes with me. “The Old One was right about you. You are of two spirits, but perhaps your spirit is with our people now. If that is so, then fight for us. Fight as one of us. Fight like a woman and stand as the man you are.”

Maybe that was a compliment. I wasn't sure, but in an uncharacteristically human gesture, she smacked me hard on the shoulders. No other words needed to be said.

It was time to get my war on.

Chapter Seventeen

Sabotage, Part III

DESTROYING THE ARSENAL came first. With no weapons, it would be somewhat easier if the enemy had to fight us hand to hand.

A moment later, I took that thought back. The women here weren't fighters. Most of them were middle-aged or older, and some of them were infirm. No, if any fighting was to be done, it would have to be by Merat and me. We were the only two people capable of doing anything.

My wife's ferocity in killing that soldier had surprised me. When I asked her about it, she shrugged. "I was scared, but you were there. I have seen you in battle. If I am to remain as your joined one, then I must support you."

The old saying of 'til death do us part echoed through my mind. Death was a very real possibility, but it wouldn't happen today, not if I could help it.

Still, the odds weren't in our favor. Rinarra's words of knowing the land came back to me. Merat apparently read my mind, for she brought up the idea of using the aqueduct. "It may be possible for us to use it."

It had been constructed long ago to collect water that ran off from the mountains and pipe it through a village in that area. That village had long since disappeared, but she told me that she was sure the aqueduct had been left untouched. "I will check it tonight."

We made our way back to the cave and waited until dark. Merat stole out into the night, while I paced back and forth, hoping nothing would happen to her. The light sound of her footsteps signaled her safe return and a sense of relief flowed through me. Face sweaty and flushed, she said, "It is still intact."

"Are you sure it's safe?"

"We can make it through. There is no other way of getting in."

We set out with pots of oil strapped to our belts and a few matches to light things up with. Merat led me to the edge of the compound where a double dozen soldiers were marching around, swords at their sides. No sign of their plasma guns.

Either the Droogs were poorly trained or they thought themselves so superior that no one would ever attack them. They hadn't learned from their earlier mistake. Now, they were about to pay for it.

"The entrance is over here," Merat said, and pointed to a small depression in the ground. "We first saw this when we were children. We have crawled through it."

"We have?"

Her teeth flashed in the moonlight. "We were about eight seasons at the time. I wanted to see where it led. You usually suggested doing

something different, but that time, it was my idea. When our parents learned about what we had done, they were exceedingly angry. They forbade us from doing it ever again and covered up the entrance, but I have always remembered it."

"Where does it lead?"

"It goes through their encampment to the side of the mountain, but a section can be opened next to their barracks."

Oh, this was getting better and better all the time. The barracks wasn't overly far away from the arsenal. Merat dug her hands into the earth and pulled off a chunk of sod. A hole was there, and it looked just large enough for one person to move through it at a time. "I will go first," she said. "It will be dark but follow me."

Right, follow her. She disappeared inside, and I trailed after her. The passageway was wide enough for us to move through it easily. However, it wasn't the width of this tunnel that worried me. It was the age.

As we crawled, dust and tiny stones sifted down. The possibility that the whole thing might cave in hit home. I'd already been in one jail and didn't want to be buried alive. There was no sense in asking Merat what we would do in the event it caved in. It wasn't worth it.

"How do we know how far we've gone?" I whispered. "There are notches in the wall."

Sure enough, I put my hand up and felt a single notch. Merat told me that one notch meant the first hundred meters traversed, two for two hundred meters, three when we reached the three-hundred-meter mark, and so on.

We kept going, with her leading the way and me wiping the dust from my eyes. After another twenty agonizing minutes of us inching and squirming and breathing shallowly, she stopped and whispered, "We are here. The entrance is right above us."

As she dug slowly and carefully, more dirt rained down, but this time I saw the stars in the sky and knew that we'd made it through. We emerged just outside the barracks. After making sure the guards were looking the other way, we scurried along toward the arsenal, keeping close to the ground.

Merat suddenly stopped and pointed. A lone guard stood outside the building. He was staring at the perimeter, his head following the path of the floodlight. Not good. Sooner or later, he'd spot us. How to shift his attention elsewhere? I grabbed a handful of pebbles and tossed them over his head to his right. They pinged off a metal basin, and he twisted his head around.

"Now," I whispered, and made a quick dash for him, fingernails extended.

He turned back as he heard my footsteps, but his reaction time was a full second slower than mine, and my nails sunk deeply into his throat. He gasped, gurgled something incomprehensible, and melted into death. Merat helped me drag him inside.

Sure enough, every plasma cannon was here, neatly stacked on shelves. We opened our jars and poured the oil over every square centimeter of the place. I wasn't so sure that the weapons would explode or even melt, but it was a chance we had to take.

Then I spotted two barrels of alumpeter. They were clearly marked with the Interplanetary Council's imprint—that of two suns side by side. More booty the Droogs had stolen from one of the council's colonies.

Scum or not, though, this time the Droogs had done me a favor. Alumpeter was flammable. I flipped open the lids. They were roughly half full, and the stink was incredible. "Light these," I said, tapping the barrels.

"Matches," my wife whispered.

After I'd handed them over, she lit one by striking it hard against the side of a shelf. With a flick of her wrist, the match went in, and the liquid quickly caught fire. Merat struck another match and dropped it on the floor. Flames immediately engulfed the room. "Time to leave," I said, and grabbed her hand.

Back to the tunnel we went with her leading the way. The angry shouts of the enemy reached our ears, and we crawled as quickly as possible. A few seconds later, an explosion rocked the earth. The walls of the aqueduct shook, but did not cave in.

Above the explosions, the angry voice of Farkeer rose. "You half-wits! You idiots! Where is the person who did this?"

Another soldier answered, "Sir, one of the men thought he saw two women escaping. They went in that tunnel."

"Find them!"

Damn, they'd discovered the tunnel. "Have you got any matches?" I asked.

"Yes, why?"

"Just keep crawling. I'll tell you when its time."

Behind us, Farkeer was barking orders in a rage. "Find them!

Find them!"

The sound of something scratching and grunting came from behind me. Farkeer had dispatched some of his men to follow us. They'd be here soon.

"Merat, do you have any oil left?"

"I have two pots. Why?"

"Give them to me."

A moment later, I felt the rough clay jars being fitted into my hands. Quickly, I uncapped one of them. As we crawled, I twisted over on my back and used my legs to push my body backwards, pouring the oil and dousing the walls as well as the ground.

"We are almost there," she whispered.

Good enough for me. One jar finished, I opened the other one and started spreading that out, too. After we emerged back at the mountain area, I emptied the last of the liquid into the hole. "Now, we wait," I said.

“Wait for what?”

An old memory of one of my few training sessions returned. I’d gotten my butt kicked in yet another training session, mainly because I’d swung wildly. Perkins, my opponent, had waited until I’d overextended myself. After that, he’d beaten me bloody.

It was time they learned the same lesson. “Let them commit themselves,” I said. “I want them to get halfway through. Then, we light ‘em up.”

Merat nodded. “That is an excellent strategy. I think I shall keep you.”

We waited. Sure enough, their voices got louder, cursing the dirt, the smell, and the fact that they couldn’t use their weapons. “They will taste my sword soon enough,” one of them said.

“I am first,” his friend replied. “Wait, what is that smell?”

Smell this.

I lit a match and dropped it into the hole. Fire instantly exploded through the pipe, and a moment later the sound of the men screaming came through.

Time to go, and after we’d made our way back to the cave, another line I’d read in a novel came to mind. “Revenge is a dish best served cold.”

In this case, revenge consisted of burned and dead Droogs. Initially, I’d felt remorse over killing, yet I had done so to save my life, and to save the lives of the other villagers, including Merat’s life.

Killing was an ugly, evil thing, but so was war, and so was slavery. The people of Windeeri had suffered long enough. From now on, I vowed there would be more killing, and it was for only one purpose—to take this world back again.

Chapter Eighteen

“Here We Are”

“WHAT IS THE plan?” Merat asked me the next morning.

We’d taken turns standing guard during the rest of the night, just in case Farkeer had decided to send his men out on a search- and-destroy mission. Sleep came in two-hour intervals. When it had been my turn to stand watch, I saw no movement on my end, and my wife reported the same.

She asked me again about our plan. It was gung-ho of her considering her former reticence to get involved, but we’d come too far to back out, and I certainly didn’t want to.

Formulating an answer took time. Lack of continuous sleep hurt, and my mind was still fuzzy. With nothing useful to say, I asked her to wait. “If we do anything, it’ll have to be at night. They don’t see very well in the darkness. So, we wait.”

Merat didn’t seem to be upset. She drew me back to our rough pallet and we lay down together, her head on my chest, and she whispered, “Are you afraid?”

“Rinarra isn’t, but I am.”

She then laughed. “You are really of two minds about this, are you not?”

Yes, and no. It was still sort of confusing, but being with Merat hadn’t seemed unusual or wrong in any way. When we’d made love, it had taken some time to figure things out, but my body had responded to hers most readily. I used to hear the older men on the station bragging about their conquests, using a term that sounded simultaneously interesting and vulgar. They called it liftoff.

Liftoff, but that had to do with a guy’s equipment getting ready. I didn’t have that, not anymore. With Merat, it had been more of a slick slide. And it had been more than incredible. All the same, matters like this were private, although Merat had told me it had been a good experience for her, so, go with it.

She stroked my hair which calmed me down, and then asked again if I had come up with another plan. “Are you that anxious to fight?”

“It is time to act.”

Simple question, simple answer, and it made sense, but coming up with a plan called for a rested mind. We couldn’t use the aqueduct again. “Let’s get some sleep,” I suggested, and she immediately closed her eyes. Soon, she was breathing quietly, and I felt my eyes close as well.

When I awoke, the sun had already begun to sink behind the horizon, and we still didn’t have anything to go on. If all else failed, I was prepared

to walk in and challenge the leader to a one-on-one fight. Doubtful Farkeer would go for it. He'd probably burn me down and then savage everyone else.

As I shifted my position, my foot struck a jar of the healing balm Merat had used upon my wounds and the memory of my unfortunate incarceration returned. Something had happened. She'd applied it in the jail cell where I'd been held...the guard there had recoiled from it.

No, not that. He hadn't recoiled from it. I thought I'd knocked him out, but after thinking things through, I concluded that I'd been too weak to do any damage. He'd fainted.

Merat had woken up and was at the entrance, standing guard. I asked, "What's in this ointment?"

She turned around at the question. "It is something our people have used for centuries. It contains a harmless drug that deadens pain and allows our bodies to heal."

I took a sniff of the remnants. It had a faint alcoholic smell to it...and then I recognized another smell—senno-chlorophorm. It was a derivative of the original chloroform. The older version had taken about five minutes to work. Senno-chloroform worked almost instantaneously.

Doctor Gillman kept some in the medicine cabinet on the station, and he'd let me smell it once. I'd passed out, and later came to feel vaguely nauseous. No doubt—this balm had the same odor.

It had another bonus to it. It was harmless to the Windeerans, but not to the Droogs. If we had enough of the stuff...

It had to be tested. "Wait here. I'll be back soon."

I grabbed a jar and stole out into the dusk. My path took me along the route to the enemy encampment, and with it, a whiff of body odor drifted over to assault my nose.

Follow the smell. Sure enough, I came upon two guards who were patrolling by torchlight.

They had no guns, but did have swords. When they saw me, I cried, "I surrender!"

"That is the right course of action to take," one of them said. He and his partner approached. When they got close enough, I opened the jar and the fumes drifted out. Immediately their eyes crossed, and they collapsed an instant later.

"Yeah, it works."

I snuffed out their torches, took their weapons, and ran back to the cave. There, I asked, "Merat, how much of the balm is in the town?"

Her eyes widened with incomprehension at the question. "There are many such jars. The women make it from the local plants. Every household has at least one."

Oh, yes, a plan was beginning to germinate. "I need at least forty jars of this stuff. Can you dilute it?"

She blinked her eyes in confusion, and then nodded. "Yes, it can be

watered down, but why—”

“C’mon, I’ll explain on the way.”

We skirted the perimeter of the town, our noses on high alert. A gentle breeze was blowing in our faces, and that was a boon. It would alert us to the scent of the enemy, but nothing came our way smell-wise save the aroma of the flowers that grew here. The soldiers were elsewhere.

Once in town, we went on a search for the medicine. Luck favored us. Those places still standing had jars of the balm lying around, most of them intact. We gathered up as many containers as possible and brought them back to the hall.

Bineta opened her door on the first knock and hurriedly waved us in. “What is your news?”

The town hall was full of the survivors. Quickly, I explained to everyone what they had to do. Expecting to get a positive response, I got stares of disbelief. In a voice filled with doubt, one of the women said, “We are not fighters.”

“You don’t have to be,” I said. “But you can throw things. Think of putting out a fire.”

Bineta, who’d been watching and listening, spoke up. “What do you have in mind?”

Good, maybe she got it, and then I went over the details with everyone. Once they understood, they each took a jar in preparation for what was going to happen later, while Merat and I went back to the mountains to rest up. Staying here was dangerous, as the guards were still searching for us.

Inside the cave, Merat gathered some scrub brush and lit a fire. Once it was going, we sat down, and she took my hand in hers. Her voice pitched low, she asked, “You are worried?”

“What makes you say that?”

“Your forehead is lined. Rinarra—you—got that look at times. It showed me you were worried.”

I hadn’t noticed, but then again, there were no mirrors here. I’d take her word for it. “Yeah, I’m worried, more for you than for me.”

Passion coated her next words. “You have been part of my life for all of my life. We were joined long ago, and I see no reason to change my mind.”

There was a time and a place for everything, and I leaned over to kiss her. Her lips were soft, and my body responded to hers. If this was to be my final night of life, then I didn’t want to die without knowing this woman cared for me.

And she did. Her body moved in sync with mine, and her touches sent shivers of pleasure racing up and down my spine.

As the fire grew, so did my ardor. She drew me down to lie with her on the ground. “I love you,” she whispered, and quickly discarded her pullover, putting it under her. “I do not wish to leave this world, but if I

must, then I must. Let this be the best time for both of us."

I also disrobed. "We're not going to die."

It sounded brave and tough, but all the same, I wasn't sure, and my insides roiled with uncertainty.

A wry smile crossed her lips. "You always said that every time you went out on a mission. I was scared that you would not return, but you always did. You always came back to me."

I stroked her hair, so fine and pure, and her arms wound themselves around my waist, her fingers pressing in all the right spots. "And I will this time," I whispered, my mouth close to hers.

"We both will."

Then our lips met, and I didn't think of the upcoming conflict or the possibility of death. I only thought about the beautiful woman who lay next to me and who completed me.

And that would have to be enough.

SOMETHING INSIDE ME made me start out of a sound sleep. I got up, went to the entrance, and peeked out. It was night, pitch black. From the position of the moons, I judged it to be roughly two a.m.

Let's get this started. After waking up Merat, we went back to the town, notified the other women who'd been sleeping in the meeting hall, and then the two of us stole out to the edge of the camp. Torches were stationed every ten meters, casting an eerie glow over the area.

As usual, the guards were on duty, walking in pairs and carrying torches as well. They had swords dangling at their sides. Although the armory had exploded, I wasn't sure that some cannons hadn't been salvaged. Even if they had all been destroyed, those swords were just as lethal.

The rest of the Droogs strutted around like the proud conquerors they thought themselves to be. Supreme arrogance bred carelessness. Apparently, they hadn't learned from their previous mistake. Time for another lesson.

Farkeer was in the middle of the compound, berating his men. He wore the only plasma cannon around, so that was a minus. He was also most displeased, and his angry voice drifted up to our position. His men, those who'd not been on guard duty and had been roused from sleep, stood in a ragged line, half of them yawning.

"You incompetent pigs, you have allowed the enemy to enter this camp more than twice, and almost thirty of our men have already been killed. Our armory is ruined! And you sit in your barracks drinking instead of hunting down the woman who murdered them! May I remind all of you that my second-in-command is missing and presumed dead? You dishonor our world and our culture!"

Good, Summa still hadn't made it back. That was one thing in our favor.

One soldier spoke up. "Sir, we have done what is required. We have questioned the villagers and slaughtered those you deemed unworthy."

"But you have not found that she-demon or her mate! I want her back, standing in front of me, so that I may slay her myself!"

"I think he was talking about me," I whispered, and Merat giggled.

"I do not think of you that way," she whispered back and nuzzled my neck.

Her touch sent my heart racing, but reluctantly, I put my hand on her shoulder to move her back a smidge. "Love comes later. We have to get ready."

Merat then pointed to a spot off to our left. "The women are in position."

Phase one was in motion. The village women and townswomen walked slowly to the edge of the compound, carrying baskets of fruit and vegetables. Jars hung from ropes fastened to their belts and bumped against their thighs as they made their way into the camp.

One of the guards, with a face full of scars that made him uglier than the rest, rudely asked them what they were doing there. "We are here to bring you gifts of food," one woman said in the humblest voice possible. "Although it is an early hour and our fare is simple, we still wish to share the fruits of our fields with our new lords and masters."

What a performance! I'd never seen an actual stage play or a movie, only old video recordings, but this was worthy of an award. The other women pressed forward, proffering the baskets of food. As they moved in, so did the other groups.

The men must have been starving, as they greedily snatched up the offerings and began chowing down. More and more men poured out of the barracks, and Merat murmured that everyone was now in position. The enemy was surrounded, and they didn't even know it.

Farkeer also came forward to take a few of the vegetables and shoved them in his mouth. After chewing and swallowing noisily, he waved his hand in dismissal. "You may leave now."

Arrogant scumbag. But I'd expected nothing less from him.

Still, phase one was now complete. On to phase two, and since all the soldiers had come out, the women bowed and retreated a fair distance away, but didn't leave the area.

Farkeer immediately grew suspicious as he yelled, "You have given us food. Thank you. Now, get out!"

Seconds passed, but no one moved. Farkeer began to scream at the women, but a shout from beyond interrupted him. It was Summa. He limped in, dragging his mangled legs and bellowing something about betrayal.

Wonderful, he would have to show up. "Hurry," I muttered, praying the women would carry out the plan.

Merat then yelled, "Do it!"

They did. En-masse, the women took the jars they had, ran forward, and doused everyone with the healing balm/knockout liquid, including Summa. The soldiers sputtered, clawed at their faces, and began to stagger. More and more jars of the liquid were thrown, and each splash hit their target.

Farkeer must have figured out the ruse, as he put his hand over his mouth and nose and dashed into the barracks. On the way, his cannon fell from his shoulders. He'd made his escape, but his men didn't, as one by one they slumped to the ground.

That was our cue. "Now!" I shouted.

Signal given, the women took the swords from the soldiers and beat a hasty retreat. The soldiers were unarmed and out cold. Merat and I ran down to where one of the women gave me the plasma weapon. "Have we done well?" she asked.

"Perfect. Go somewhere safe. We'll finish this."

She walked off a fair distance with the others, and Merat asked if she could fire the weapon. Since when had she become the baddest in the bunch? "Why do you want to do it?"

"Farkeer deserves to be blown up."

Sound reasoning. I handed over the cannon to her. "How do I work this?" she enquired.

I pointed at the barracks. "Aim and squeeze the trigger."

She shouldered the weapon, fired it, and the blast from her cannon knocked her on her butt. However, she'd aimed it perfectly, and the explosion from the plasma quickly reduced the building to less than nothing. Debris rained in all directions, and Merat looked pleased as she arose. "How did I do?"

"Uh, you blew him up real good."

Not enough, though, as Farkeer crawled out from the wreckage to stand on shaky legs. A helmet sat askew on his head. This one didn't just cover the top of his lumpy head. It was a full-face effort, offering slits for eyes, nose, and mouth.

Additionally, he'd strapped a thick piece of leather around his neck, covering up his most vulnerable area. It was a smart move on his part.

Still, he hadn't planned on getting burned by the explosion. He smelled like overdone meat, and blood flowed from dozens of cuts in his arms and legs. Injuries or not, his muscles bulged, taut with power that could not be denied.

His anger couldn't be denied, either, and he stomped his massive legs in frustration and thinly concealed hatred. "You...you bitch," he growled when he saw us and took a few steps in our direction but stopped short when he saw Merat with the cannon.

"Here we are," I said, putting every bit of sarcasm I could muster into my next four words. "Did you miss me?"

Venom laced his next words. "You have tricked us!"

He could rage all he wanted. I'd built up a lot of my own. "Yeah, we have."

It burns, doesn't it?"

Farkeer grimaced while swiping blood and dirt from his shoulders, and for the first time since I'd had the displeasure of knowing him, he sounded uncertain. "I cannot understand why you did this. You are not part of this world. You are not one of them, and even if you stay, they will never accept you for what you are."

Was he commenting on my birth or the fact that I loved another woman? I didn't know. Maybe I hadn't been born here, but this had become my home. Call it choice, call it circumstance, this village and town needed someone to defend it. I was that someone.

If he was talking about my orientation, then it had no bearing on things. After setting my stance, I gave him another verbal salvo. "You're right, I wasn't born here. But I'm part of this world now. You tried to destroy this place. You failed. And for what you've done not only to these women but also to me, I'm going to kill you."

In a flash his uncertainty disappeared, and a note of civility entered his voice. "I am unarmed."

"So were these people. So was I. That didn't stop you."

The civility remained, although now an edge, almost a challenging tone, crept in. "So they were and so you were. But you will not kill me, not in this fashion."

"Really? Tell me how."

Now the challenge came. "You want to take me on hand to hand. That is how all honorable people do it."

His notion of honor and mine differed radically. Still, if this was how it had to be, so be it.

"If you want honor, let's do this."

He looked at his men. Summa had decided to wake up at that moment, and Farkeer spoke to him. "Summa, heed my words."

"I am listening, sir."

Farkeer pivoted back to face me. "I accept your terms, Rinarra. You fight for this world. I fight for the Droog people! Should I lose, then my second-in-command will know what to do. That weapon your mate holds will not be enough to stop us from tearing all of you apart."

One part of me ached to erase him forever with the plasma cannon. He deserved nothing less. But the other part of me thought it would be too fast, too easy. I wasn't sure about taking him on in a fistfight, but revenge for the torture I'd endured, for the torture we'd all endured, overrode caution. He'd made the offer, and there was nothing more that I wanted than to humiliate him first.

"Glad you accepted," I said. "Let's battle."

He spoke only seven words, but the threat was clear. "I will enjoy taking your life—slowly."

As one, the villagers took the torches and formed a circle around us. Merat's words about tradition came back to me. I saw no reason to break with

it. My nails came out, Merat stepped back to join the other women, and after a moment of dead quiet, she bellowed, "Get him!"

It was on.

Farkeer came at me fast, roaring like the wounded animal he was. He lunged wildly, and I dodged and rolled out of the way, launching a kick to his outside left leg that threw him off balance.

It didn't stop him, though, as he righted himself, threw two more punches, and followed them up by lashing out with a high kick from his middle leg. My reflexes kicked in, and I vaulted over top of him, smacking his head at the midpoint of my leap.

Farkeer staggered but swiveled around on his middle leg to face me. Large though he was, he was far more agile than I'd expected, and he continued to fire punches from all angles. None of them landed as I moved out of range, twisting and turning my body just so.

When the openings came, I slashed at his unprotected arms and shoulders. He winced but didn't back off. My nails scored deep gashes in his helmet, but they couldn't penetrate the metal. Still, I was able to keep him at bay, and his movements began to slow.

Fatigue or not, I had the feeling he'd try something, and sure enough he brought out his sword, clicking it open as he pivoted around to face me.

The flame lit up the night and temporarily blinded me. He took advantage of it by belting me across my chops and the force of his punch knocked me down. I rolled aside just as he slashed at me, but not fast enough, as the flame singed my left calf and I screamed in pain.

"So, you can be hurt, after all," he said. "That was just a taste of what I shall do."

When he spoke, hatred dripped from every word. "Although you were of another body once, you fight like they do, like a woman. You stabbed me in the eye like a coward. You are weak, inferior, and you will die."

Let him pump himself up. Those with fragile egos usually did. He came at me, chopping for all he was worth. I rolled over and over, barely managing to escape his killing blade.

As for calling me a woman? Fine by me. I didn't want it any other way. Injury notwithstanding, I sprang to my feet, fists ready. "I may have come from another body, but now I'll stand as a woman. I'll fight like one, too. Come at me."

Farkeer blinked. Yeah, words were just as capable of rocking his universe as a punch to the face was.

I was going to do a lot more than that.

He charged me, sword high. The laser on it scorched my hair as he brought it down. Like all the Droogs, he slashed in a vertical cut, and without any following twists or attempts to block another weapon. Relying on brute strength was predictable – and stupid.

Once more, I twisted out of his way, and falling to one knee and spinning around, my right leg shot out and connected with the side of his

neck. The kick sent him flying into a pile of metal debris.

Impact time – his sword shattered, and his helmet came off his head, bouncing a good three meters away. Now, he was defenseless, so let him try me. “Get up,” I said, my rage increasing with every passing second. “This woman is going to teach you what it really means to get your ass whipped.”

He did, rising to his feet with a snarl. Fists moving fast, he lunged at me. With good reflexes to aid me, it was a simple matter to get out of his way and do a quick one-two-three rat-a- tat attack on his skull.

Farkeer staggered under the assault, but I’d underestimated his resiliency. He fought back, and he hit hard! Punches from him, heavier and harder than I’d ever felt, smashed into my body. An unholy grin painted his ugly face, but there was no backing off now, and I replied with a three-punch combo of my own.

Back and forth we battled. He took the punches without complaint and got in a shot to my nose that caused it to bleed. The force of the punch sent me reeling. “Hah, you are not the superior fighter everyone thinks you are,” he said.

He followed up his statement by grabbing my left wrist in a surprising burst of speed. In a quick, economical move, he effortlessly threw me onto my back, five meters away. That knocked the wind out of me. A cry of pure rage came from him, and he ran over to where I lay.

Merat tried to fire the plasma gun. It merely clicked, out of power. She then rushed Farkeer to intercede, but he swatted her aside. “Not you, woman,” he snarled. “Your mate is my quarry.”

In another quick move, he bent down to lift me up in a choke hold. His strength was enormous, and as he squeezed, the air rushed from my lungs and black spots appeared in front of my eyes. “Weak, you are weak,” he grunted, and squeezed harder.

Strength aside, he’d made one fatal error. He’d forgotten to trap my arms, and with the last of my strength I whipped my now-extended arms behind me. My fingernails came out and slammed into his sides. They didn’t go in deeply, but then again, they didn’t have to. My only purpose was to make him let go.

It worked, as he howled in pain and released his hold. Once he did, I pivoted around and stabbed him in his one remaining eye. A cry of agony erupted from him while he swung wildly at the empty air around him. “You have blinded me!”

Gasping for breath, I spit out, “That’s not the worst that could happen.”

With a primal scream, I drove both hands into his throat. The nails easily cut the wrap around his neck and came out the other end. Once I yanked my hands out, half his throat came with it. Blood sprayed in every direction, and he sank to his knees, dying. A moment later, he slumped to the ground, stone cold dead.

A few of the village women cheered, and their cries woke the rest of

the Droog scum that had been knocked out. They sat up, shaking their heads. Summa was staring at me, open-mouthed. When the rest of the men saw that Farkeer had fallen, they rose and unsteadily made their way in my direction.

However, a click sounded, and the rest of the Droogs stopped in the tracks.

I did as well. "Damn," I muttered. This had been unexpected.

Captain Fawcett and ten other men, all armed with plasma cannons, had come on the run and stood five meters away, mini- flashlights mounted on their shoulders. They were primed and ready to obliterate the enemy. Once a soldier, always a soldier.

Clad in a dull blue jumpsuit, armed with his weapons, he held a small device, something that I recognized as a primitive kind of universal translator, and he spoke into it. "Sit down and raise your hands. We have the drop on you. Make one move, and we'll burn you down."

Abject failure, thy name is Droog, and they did as Fawcett ordered. The heavily armed planetary forces surrounded the Droogs. Merat ran over to plant a kiss on my lips in full view of everyone, and who cared, anyway?

"That's...sick," one man said.

I turned around. It was Perkins. He wore a sneer that all those who were bullies and jerks wore and gestured to Fawcett. "Lesbian aliens. What else am I going to see on this mission? You should have left me on the ship, Cap. This is beyond low."

General knowledge of interplanetary culture and common sense should have gone hand in hand, but in Perkins' case, he had neither. After taking Merat's hand and leading her over to him, he gave me a quizzical look and asked, "What? You don't understand me, do you, so why are you staring at me, huh?"

A cheeky grin followed, as if daring me to do something about it. The grin disappeared when my fist connected with his jaw and laid him out. "Actually, I do," I replied in English. "And your attitude stinks."

Fawcett stared, but oddly enough, neither he nor his men turned their weapons on me. He did find his voice, though. "You...you speak our language?"

"It's me, Kyle Sorton."

Immediately, his eyes grew round as saucers. "Kyle?"

I didn't really care for my old name, anymore. The past had passed, and it seemed more natural to use Rinarra. However, using my preferred name would have made an already confusing situation even more confusing.

A few seconds went by without him saying anything, and then a few seconds more. Merat whispered in my ear that she was going home. "I will wait for you."

"Okay."

Her eyebrows arched in a suggestive manner, a very human one. "And I

will keep the fire burning.”

It didn't take a mental giant to figure that one out. However, first things first. “See you later.”

After giving me a peck on the cheek, she ran off. Fawcett stared at her and then me. “Kyle, you've,” he noisily cleared his throat, “you've changed.”

Call that an understatement. “Yeah, I guess.”

He pointed in the direction Merat had taken. “Is that, er, who is she?”

“She's my wife.”

Fawcett continued to gape and then said, “I think I'm going to have to change the report.”

Epilogue

FAWCETT IMMEDIATELY ORDERED one of his crew to patch me up. He then instructed the rest of his men to escort the Droogs over the hill to where the council ship had landed. Order given, he turned to me. "I've called in a request for a few more ships. This slime needs to be locked up."

As he explained it, they'd be taken away to the council's prison cells and eventually set free, probably in return for some concessions to be decided after further negotiations with the Droog higher-ups.

Quite honestly, I wasn't interested. Once their doctor had finished bandaging my leg, Fawcett then told his men that he wanted to speak to me alone. "I'll be back in one hour."

We set off in the direction of the forest with me leading the way. My body hurt all over and my leg felt stiff, but it would heal in time. Now, time was on my side, so I gave the captain a basic rundown on what I'd seen here so far. Despite the darkness, he took great interest in checking out the forests, the streams, and the unvarnished, untouched nature.

Along the way, he asked a few questions as to the kind of wildlife there was, what the weather was like, and if there were any other indigenous people or only the Windeerans.

After I'd filled him in on most of the details, Fawcett offered a grunt of what might have indicated approval. He then proceeded to tell me about what he'd been doing, although he still glanced at me from time to time, as if unable to believe what he was seeing—me. "When the space station went, we kept track of the Mephisto until it veered off-course and you escaped in the life craft."

"Didn't you pick up the emergency beacon?" I asked. "I turned it on after I crash landed."

He shook his head. "No, we never received the transmission. Your ship was damaged, so that's why, I imagine. Remember, Kyle—"

"Call me Rinarra."

Darkness or not, the surprise that jumped from his eyes was unmistakable. "Do you really think of yourself as a woman?"

I swept my hands up and down my body. "Take a good look at me. Yeah, I do."

And I did. There was no shame in being what you were. The Old One had mentioned it and since I felt comfortable in this body, go with it. "I'm still me. Take that any way you want."

Fawcett shrugged. "All right. Anyway, as I was saying, we couldn't pick up the signal. We listed you as missing. We wanted to search, but there was chaos among the survivors, and we had our own problems getting to the Vega system."

Their problems consisted of engine failures, power system shutdowns, and one crewman who had gone space happy and had tried to kill everyone on his ship. "It was madness. Forty-eight hours of madness until we reached the Vega system, and then we had to coordinate the landing and resettlement of the passengers."

Curious about how long I'd been listed as missing, I asked him. His eyebrows arched so high, they almost met his hairline. "You've been gone almost two weeks."

Two weeks—it had seemed like a lifetime. Actually, it had been two lifetimes. I led him over to the remains of the life craft, and he squatted down to poke through the twisted metal with a stick. Finally, he rose, taking out a small device from his pocket as he did so. "What is that?" I asked.

"It's an old-style flight recorder I saved from my ship. It had the coordinates of your last position in the Mephisto logged in it, so once the resettlement on Vega Seven was done, I asked their permission to search for you. It took a while to get them in line, but finally, they did."

I wondered why. The council wanted healthy, able, and most of all, productive people who would serve on new worlds. I'd been none of those things. Then I realized why Fawcett had been asking me all those questions, but I said nothing and let him talk. "The council allowed me to take one ship and twenty men," he said. "There are only three planets in this quadrant capable of supporting human life. We scanned the first two, but found no traces of humanoid life. This planet was number three on the list. We came here, scanned for human life, and found one body."

That had been my old form. Fawcett continued with, "We then found evidence of other kinds of life."

He meant the Windeerans as well as the Droogs, and then he added, "It's a good thing we met you. I was worried about contacting the natives."

How nice for him to think that. I was still thinking about Perkins' comment about me and Merat. "If your attitude consists of insulting people based on who they're with, you won't find this planet very welcoming."

Half-expecting him to get angry, he received my comeback without batting an eye. "Well, Perkins has always been a bit of a jerk," he admitted.

"A bit?"

He laughed. "Okay, a lot. Decking him was probably the best course of action."

Maybe so, but all the same, if someone's attitude was set, then there was little anyone else could do to change it. I wasn't in the business of changing anyone's attitude, not anymore. I had my own life to lead, and it consisted of doing things the way this planet did things. Call it a simplistic way of thinking, call it stubborn, or call it both—I didn't really care. They were the visitors, not me, not anymore.

We decided to go back to the village, and our walk continued in

silence until we reached a small hut. Early hour or not, an elderly woman was sweeping some leaves away from the door, and she smiled when she saw me. "Rinarra, thank you for ending this conflict."

She nodded at Fawcett, who bowed politely in return. Oddly enough, she didn't seem frightened by his presence. After what the Droogs had done, humans would probably be less threatening.

"You are welcome," I said. "May I be offered some refreshment?" It was the custom of this world, after all.

The woman beckoned us inside. "It is yours to take. Please come in and be seated."

I translated for Fawcett, and he bobbed his head as a gesture of respect. Inside, we sat at a simple table, and she gave us two cups of Kler. Then she excused herself, saying that she had to help in the fields. It was still dark out, but even so, it was a nice gesture on her part. Once the door had closed, Fawcett looked around at the simple furnishings, sampled his drink, and declared, "It's rather sweet."

He then drained the cup, put it down, and cleared his throat. "All right, I've given you my story. So, do you want to tell me what happened to you?"

Exposition time, and he listened carefully, his fingers occasionally tapping the table. His eyes grew round when I mentioned the Clavatar. "So, that's how you did it. I think Doctor Gillman would be pleased to know it worked. He's on Vega Seven with the rest of the settlers, and he probably wouldn't mind getting a report."

"The Clavatar is gone. It burned up after the transfer. I don't know why it worked, but I'm glad it did."

Perhaps it had worked due to Rinarra's brain being in good shape, but that was only a guess. Maybe luck had a hand in it as well. I didn't know, and sometimes it was better not to.

Fawcett stopped tapping the table. "Well, Gillman will be pleased to know, anyway. Continue."

There really wasn't much more to say. I went through the landing, the battles with the Droogs, and then he asked me if we were prepared for any future invasions. "I don't think the Droogs ever managed to contact their home base. If they did, we might have visitors. If not, maybe someone else will come."

"Aren't you worried about another invasion?"

Truthfully, yes, I was. "The people here, they aren't into modern tech. Not yet. It's an agricultural world. But if something happens, we'll deal with it."

Fawcett drummed his fingers on the table. "Well, considering this world is somewhat backward in terms of technology, if our people settle here, and if the Interplanetary Council votes on providing assistance, I don't think you'll have to worry about invasions. Uh, what is this planet called, anyway?"

"Windeeri."

He turned the name over silently on his lips for a few moments.

“Windeeri? It’s got a good sound to it. The nature here is amazing. Preliminary reports on the topography and geology are most promising. I think that we might like it here.”

From our just-completed nature trek, it didn’t surprise me at all that he was thinking of bringing the survivors of Earth to this planet. He’d been leading up to it since we met, hadn’t even bothered mentioning the people, and now he’d pitched the idea of Earth’s finest settling down here.

However, his pitch had gone wide of the mark. “Captain, let me be honest with you. When it comes to the people from Earth settling down, that’s up to the elders of each village and town and city. Not me. I don’t make the rules. I just live here.”

A faint smile crossed his face. “That answered one question I was about to ask you, but there is something else I need to know.”

It was obvious, but I went ahead, anyway. “How many people are you thinking of bringing in?”

“Around five thousand over the next few months. We need to spread the human race over as many planets as possible. You must admit, Kyle, er, Rinarra, this world is perfect. Since you’re one of them, you can—”

Time to stop his roll-on perfection, and I put my hand up. “You’re forgetting one thing, captain. Like I said, I don’t make the rules. I’m also not going to be your mouthpiece.”

His face got a belligerent expression on it. “Wait a moment—”

“No, you wait. You came here, asking for help. We can give it, but it has to be on our terms.”

Now the belligerence turned to surprise. “*Your* terms? Since when did you assume command?”

All right, enough of this. “Since I crash landed here. Since I helped defeat an invader that’s been plaguing this galaxy and a lot of others for a long time. And since, as you put it, now that I’m one of them.

“And as one of them, we don’t need you. Helping us to rebuild is fine. If the elders agree to some people staying, then no problem. But I won’t help you overrun this world with people like Perkins or anyone else who doesn’t care for who I live with. And I won’t be a party to settlers disturbing the environment here.”

Fawcett received my little speech with a tight-lipped mouth and narrowed eyes. Plainly, he didn’t like being talked down to. Things had changed in the biggest of ways, and that was something he apparently couldn’t handle.

A cautionary note tinged with a slight air of menace coated his next words. “You know, I wasn’t going to bring up the idea of allegiances, but since you mentioned it, we could always step in and take this place. The council would sanction it, if necessary. And they might even question your ties to this world. There are laws, you know.”

Damn it, it had come down to this. I’d never really thought about invaders

coming to my world, but that's because I'd never had a world to begin with. I'd never had a home, and any connection to family had ended three years ago. But if I'd learned anything, when one had something, they didn't like it being taken away.

From the way Fawcett spoke, he seemed intent on taking it all away. Well, not on my watch. Not anymore.

"Yes, you could," I replied, and put out my hand. "You mentioned studying the geology. That means you found naretium. This planet has a lot of it. That's why the Droogs came here, and that's why you're here. Right?"

His mouth opened in surprise, and then he clamped it shut. He'd been caught out, and now it was time for a little deception to make him rethink his position. My fingernails came out, and his eyes widened at the sight of the flesh-ripping bone. Dried blood shone dully on the tips. I'd have to wash them later.

"Your hands...your nails," he stammered. "Are all of you like this?"

"You should see us when we get angry."

That seemed to seal the deal, and his eyes grew even bigger when he saw my weapons melt away. "You'd really fight against us?"

My mind was made up. "If it comes to that, yes, we will. If you're coming here for mining purposes, and if you try to ruin this world, then guess what'll happen? You saw what we did to the Droogs. They had superior weaponry, and they're a whole lot bigger than we are. And we don't have any plasma cannons or conventional weapons, just these." I held up my hands as proof.

Fawcett seemed taken aback. A battle-hardened hardass like him had been taken down before he could even throw a punch. From the look in his eyes, it appeared he'd lost the will to argue.

Still, there could be a rapprochement, if he was willing to listen. "I do have a suggestion, though."

His voice came out quietly enough. "What is it?"

"Let me run the numbers past the elders. If they agree, then they'll talk to their king and queen. It's their world, even more so than mine. I *will* ask for you, but there aren't going to be five thousand people landing here and trampling over this land. You'll have to start with a lot less. No mining or drilling. You can take samples, but that's it, and that's my offer."

To his credit, Fawcett didn't get angry. "I'll take it up with the Interplanetary Council. They won't like it, though."

"They don't have to."

With that, the meeting was over. He got up to leave, and as we walked in silence back to the camp, the sky slowly but steadily got lighter. Dawn was approaching. When we arrived, only one Droog remained—Summa. He sat bound and tight-lipped and angry and humiliated. I took the translator from the captain and spoke into it. "Summa?"

He stared at me. "What is it?"

"Since Farkeer is dead, that makes you the commander, doesn't it?"

A growl of barely suppressed rage came from him. "It does."

"You know that you're under arrest, don't you?"

"I know."

"Good. The Interplanetary Council soldiers will allow you to contact your leaders. Once you tell your high command to stay off this world—forever—you'll be set free. Do we have a deal?"

A sullen look clouded his face. "I do not have the power to enforce such a decision."

I extended my middle finger's nail and stuck it under his right eye. He flinched. "Make them understand."

His lips trembled. "I shall do so."

I retracted my fingernail. "That's good."

After I'd handed the translator back to Fawcett, a few council soldiers came over to take Summa away. Some of the Windeeri women had stayed on guard, jars at the ready, just in case. Although they should have gone home, they'd stayed, so maybe that meant they'd developed a measure of trust.

Even though most of them hadn't accepted me or Merat for being what we were, they'd done the impossible. Perhaps they finally understood the duality I'd had to work through.

I didn't think of myself as being two separate people, not anymore. Rinarra and I were one, and after the fight ended, she'd spoken to me, albeit briefly. *Take care of Merat. She is yours now – and ours.*

Her voice had then faded away, and I felt grateful that she'd hung around long enough to help when help was needed most.

The captain wandered off to speak to one of his men, and the other man seemed very excited, gesturing animatedly. He held a small box, pointing to it as well as gesturing at me.

Fine, let them blabber away. While they conversed, I surveyed the land. It was pitted with potholes from the plasma blasts, the smell of smoke still hung in the air, and some of the fields had been torn up as well. In addition, much of the grass where the drill had been was scorched by waste products.

But the land would eventually return to its former state, and we'd rebuild our wrecked homes. I'd make sure of that, and I would do everything in my power to make sure that the people here, the people in the town as well as the others I'd met, would never be used this way again. If any invaders decided to come here in the future, they wouldn't like our kind of greeting.

Fawcett finished talking to his subordinate, took the box and walked over, sporting a jaunty smile. "Well, Rinarra, it seems that things don't have to escalate, after all. I have good news for you."

Surprise, surprise, he'd used my correct name. "And that would be?"

"We're leaving."

“Leaving? Just like that?”

He nodded. “Yes, just like that.”

Fawcett went on to explain that the council’s scout ships had discovered an additional world not far from the Vega System. “It’s big enough for us to inhabit. Class M, oxygen-nitrogen atmosphere, no indigenous people, only animals. Preliminary scanning also indicates deposits of ore in fairly large amounts. We can handle that. If it’s acceptable—”

“Yeah?”

“We’d like to make this world a member of the council.”

It figured he was still thinking about mining rights. I had to think that one over. “Not my decision, but I’ll tell those in charge what you said.”

The captain received my answer without batting an eye, and then handed over the box. It was a portable interstellar transmitter. “This has a power supply of almost one hundred hours. If you decide yes, then send us a message. We’ll bring a ship, supplies and protection...whatever you need. This means security for your people and this planet, and from my point of view, it’s a pretty fair deal.”

Fawcett was entitled to his opinion. Even though his offer sounded genuine, I knew there would be a price to pay for such generosity. There always was. While this needed to be thought through, I had the feeling that I’d never use it. “Thank you, sir.”

“My pleasure,” he said, “and thanks for helping us out.”

Fawcett turned to leave, but then stopped and swiveled his head around. “There is one more thing to clear up. I must think about what to include in my report. The council has to know.”

No, they didn’t. It wasn’t really their business. Still, no need for me to spread any ill will. “I was a civilian, and underage. I was never a member of the council. I didn’t belong to any world, not really, and Earth is gone.”

As I spoke, my voice got a catch to it. My decision meant giving up my heritage. Even though my parents had never shown me much affection, they’d given me life. But I’d received a new life here and had gained so much more in return. “If you want, just call me missing in action, or say that I burned up with the escape craft. No one has to know.”

A crooked smile tugged at the left corner of his mouth. “That’s what I was going to write down. Take care of yourself, Rinarra.”

With that, he was gone.

A cool wind blew away the heat and smoke, and as I looked out across the fields, some of the farmers were already busily taking away the debris, getting their fields ready again. It would take a lot of work, it wouldn’t be easy, but we would make it right.

My mother’s words echoed in my head. *You must have hope.* Hope had sustained me and had kept me alive. Sometimes, hope was all a person had, but it had the ability to get that person to perform the impossible.

As I walked over the ridge leading to the village, I thought of how I’d

come to be here, and then decided to stop over-analyzing things. Fate or luck—who knew? The only thing I was sure of was that I had my life back, and that would have to be enough.

In my mind, somewhere a little sack of thought remained—the essence of Rinarra. I didn't know much about science, but I felt that our thought patterns were now inextricably linked. Perhaps one day all her memories would resurface. If they did, would they take over my consciousness? I had no answer to that. If they did, well, they did, but for now, she remained dormant and we co-existed peacefully.

Thinking it over, we'd both been given second chances. Not many people could claim the same. From my standpoint, it was an equitable tradeoff.

The sun had already risen. Its golden rays warmed the land, and it looked to be a glorious morning. At the hut Merat and I shared, I knocked on the door and she opened it, a smile on her face and an inviting look in her eye. Suddenly, my day became a little brighter.

The end

About the Author

J.S. Frankel was born in Toronto, Canada, many moons ago and managed to scrape through high school and university, earning a BA in English Literature and leaving no book unopened during his time at the University of Toronto.

Shortly after graduation, he moved to Japan in order to teach English to anyone who was brave enough to step into his class- room. In 1997, he married the charming Akiko Koike and their union produced two sons, Kai and Ray. Frankel and his family make their home in Osaka where he teaches during the day and attempts to write YA fiction at night. *Fight Like A Woman* is his sixth novel for Regal Crest.

More Young Adult Titles from J.S. Frankel

Twisted

Chivalry isn't dead. It just wears a skirt.

Highschoolers Charlie Matthews, Martin Anderson, whose parents adopted Charlie, and Sharon Collins win a contest to play an interactive medieval game as the avatars of their favorite characters. Their mission: fight off the monsters, storm the castle, and capture the evil king.

But things go terribly wrong. Charlie is dismayed to discover he is Angella of Avernon, the lead female character in the game. Fortunately, she's the most powerful avatar around, but he also finds out that he, Martin, and Sharon have been infected with a virus that will kill them outside the game, so they have to stay inside the scenario.

Trapped and beset on all sides, Charlie has to deal with the sexism of the characters circa 1430, his stepbrother's distaste for his female form, and his feelings about becoming a woman. In addition to fighting off the various monsters within the scenario, Charlie tries to fight his attraction to Sharon...and then realizes Sharon is attracted to him, which makes it all the more confusing.

When the deadly opponents in the game get the upper hand, Charlie must summon all of his love and courage to save the day and rescue Sharon. Will he understand that love is where you find it and that the gender of the one you love doesn't matter at all?

ISBN 978-1-61929-140-9

eISBN 978-1-61929-141-6

Lindsay Versus the Marauders

Shy Lindsay Fleming has just summoned up all her courage and come out. All she's ever wanted is to be accepted for herself, but though her best friend, Myra, is okay with her sexual orientation, many of her high school friends are not. Her parents don't understand at all, leaving Lindsay angry and confused. During the Christmas season, Lindsay attends a meeting for the "newly out," but she leaves when that turns into a disaster. On her way home, she saves a young woman from being mugged – by four red-skinned aliens!

The woman, Jonephra ("Call me Jo") is a resident of the planet Carinna, located in another dimension. The red-skinned men, known as "Marauders," are a mean, ruthless bunch who stole jewels that power Jo's home world, and she's on a mission to get them back. Turkel leads the band of heartless pirates, and they'll kill anyone who gets in the way of their looting and pillaging. Lindsay is reluctant to get involved, but she agrees to help Jo, who she is attracted to. Jo is tall and self-confident, and Lindsay thinks Jo might like her, but she feels so shy and awkward. Will she be able to shed her shyness and gain enough confidence to win Jo's heart? Even more risky: will Lindsay survive the dangerous Marauders, find the jewels and return them before Jo's planet runs out of reserve power?

ISBN 978-1-61929-164-5

eISBN 978-1-61929-165-2

Lindsay, Jo and the Tree of Forever

In this sequel to *Lindsay Versus the Marauders*, Lindsay Fleming returns to her humdrum life on Earth, still reeling from falling in love with Jo, a young woman who hails from the distant planet of Carinna.

Lindsay's life does not stay idle for too long, as Jo returns bearing bad tidings. It seems a madman has loosed a plague on her universe causing its inhabitants to age rapidly. Conventional science has failed, but there are compelling tales of the magical healing properties of the Tree of Ayeni.

Skeptical of this tree's powers, but willing to fight for her love, Lindsay sets off to save Jo's planet. Things are never as they seem, and as time starts to run out, everything becomes a matter of trust. Lindsay has to put her faith in two strangers, one of which is a rival for her girlfriend's affection. Can she save both this planet and her deep affection for Jo?

ISBN 978-1-61929-198-0

eISBN 978-1-61929-197-3

Lindsay, Jo and the Well of Nevermore

Lindsay Fleming of Tacoma, Washington, has married Jo of Carinna, a world set in a distant galaxy, and the couple is attempting to carve out a life for themselves on Jo's planet.

However, nesting will have to wait. Frala, the leader of the Carinnian people, asks the two young ladies to investigate the disappearance of planets in their galaxy. It seems that an ancient evil, the Well of Nevermore, has somehow been resurrected and is now devouring planets. He asks them to find out what they can.

Lindsay and Jo's search takes them to the farthest point of the universe where they encounter a shape-shifting siren, a living computer, and an old enemy intent on destroying all light and life. In a desperate race against time, Lindsay fights for what is most important to her: Earth, and the woman she loves.

ISBN 978-1-61929-239-0

eISBN 978-1-61929-240-6

Be sure to check out our other imprints,
Blue Beacon Books, Carnelian Books,
Mystic Books, Quest Books, Silver Dragon Books,
Troubadour Books, and Yellow Rose Books.

VISIT US ONLINE AT
www.regalcrest.biz

At the Regal Crest Website You'll Find:

~ The latest news about forthcoming titles and new releases

~ Our complete backlist of romance, mystery, thriller and adventure titles

~ Information about your favorite authors

Regal Crest print titles are available from all progressive booksellers including numerous sources online. Our distributors are Bella Distribution and Ingram.