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LYNDI
FRIBERG

ONTARIAN CHRONICLES 3
CITY OF TEARS

Praise for the writing of Cyndi Friberg

Ontarian Chronicles 1: Taken by the Storm

Unplug the phone and put the kids to bed; once you start reading *Taken by the Storm* you won't want any interruptions! Cyndi Friberg has outdone herself this time.

-- Naomi, *Fallen Angel Reviews*

Taken by the Storm had it all -- tense action, suspense, erotic sex, humor and a wildly imaginative plot... I encourage everyone, especially fans of futuristic romance, to read Ms. Friberg's *Ontarian Chronicles 1: Taken by the Storm*, you won't be disappointed.

-- Miaka Chase, *The Romance Studio*

Ontarian Chronicles 2: Operation Hydra

Ms. Friberg demonstrates her mastery of the written word in *Ontarian Chronicles 2: Operation Hydra* by creating a seamless joining of romance and science fiction that is truly marvelous to behold.

-- Keely Skillman, *EcataRomance Reviews*

Operation Hydra is a real futuristic sci-fi treat. The characters are all multidimensional with varying powers and strengths that play well off each other.

-- Tammy, *Love Romances*

For an adventure story that will captivate and spark the imagination, I highly recommend *Operation Hydra* and award it A Perfect 10.

-- Terrie Figueroa, *Romance Reviews Today*

Taken by the Storm and *Operation Hydra* are now available from Loose Id.

ONTARIAN CHRONICLES 3: CITY OF TEARS

Cyndi Friberg

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This book contains explicit sexual content, graphic language, and situations that some readers may find objectionable (menage).

Ontarian Chronicles 3: City of Tears

Cyndi Friberg

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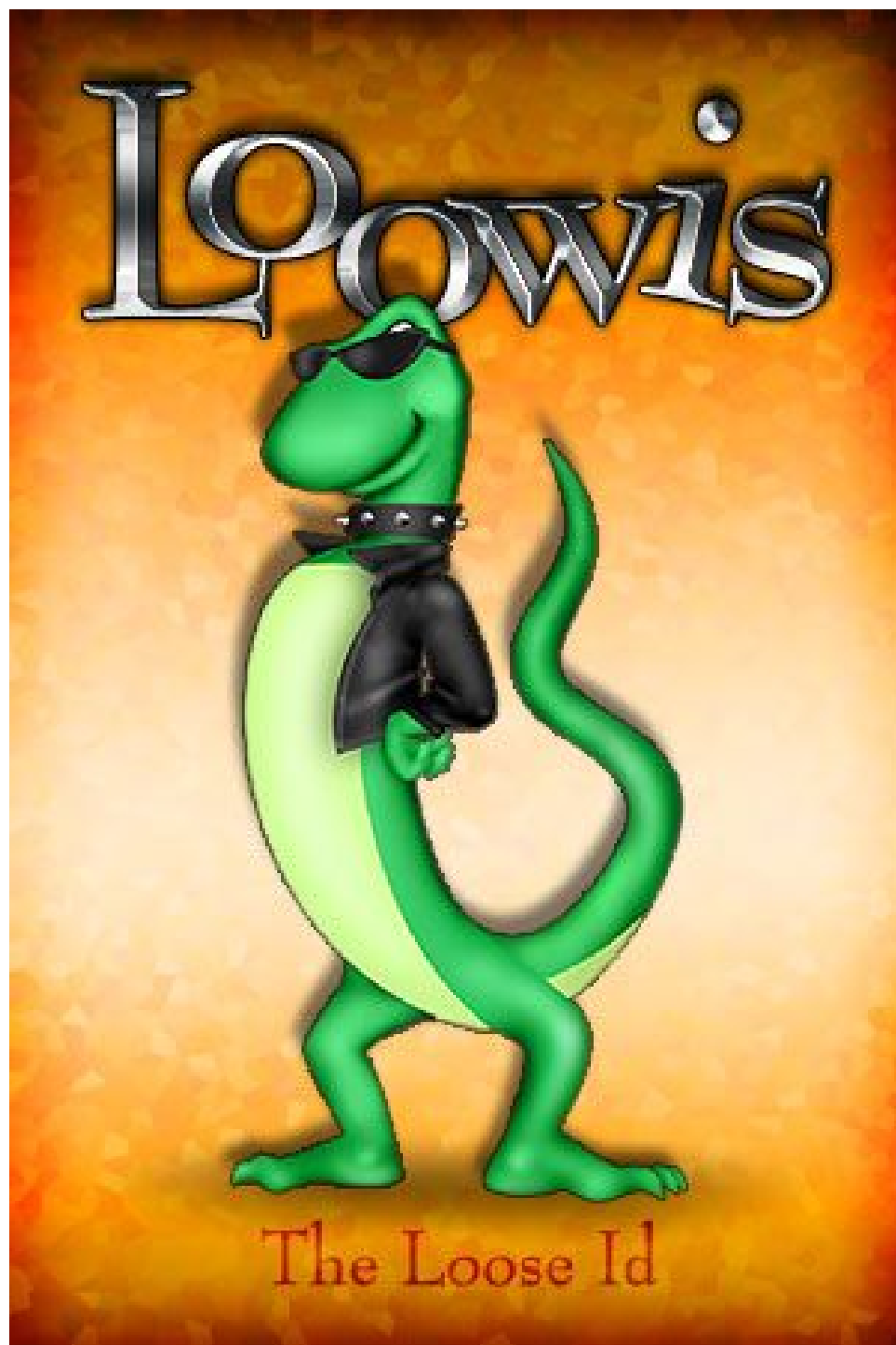
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Chapter One

Saebin, can you hear me? It's time to wake up.

Relentless pounding compressed Saebin's skull, making the voice almost impossible to discern. She struggled within the darkness, twisting uselessly. Muddled. Numb. Why did she feel so strange?

Concentrate! I haven't much time. The portal's about to close.

Focusing on the voice decreased the pain. *Who are you? How do you know my name?* No, that wasn't right. She knew this voice, but Krystabel was dead.

You must listen carefully. I've released the full scope of your Mystic power, but you must not let them figure out what I've done. Hide within the suit. Do not let them realize you're in control. Do you understand?

Fragmented images flashed within her mind. The Center consumed by flames, Dr. Hydran's lifeless eyes, and D-159 -- the emotionless assassin into which she'd been transformed.

Am I dead?

No, but they're only keeping you alive so they can figure out how your implants work. The intoxicating smell of flowers teased her nose and curled through her head. *You must escape before they --* The scent grew stronger, cloying and sweet. *I have ... to go.*

Blazing pain sliced into Saebin's brain and shot down her spine. She screamed, jerking away from the source of the agony.

"You told me she was in stasis!" A deep male voice intensified the pain.

"She *is* in stasis. I tried to disengage her main sensor ring, and it triggered some sort of discharge."

Dread doused the fire sizzling across Saebin's nerve endings. Why was her handler here? The Center had been liberated. Dr. Hydran was dead.

Saebin forced her body to relax. *Assess the situation, inventory your surroundings.* The rhythmic beeping of sensors cut through the roaring in her ears. She was restrained face down on a flat surface, likely a treatment table.

"Is she conscious or not?" the man snapped.

"Her brain waves have intensified, but she's had mental spikes before. It was a sensor anomaly, nothing more." Her handler had been at Hydran's side as Saebin was tortured and trained, methodically subdued until only D-159 remained. "Damn it. Something *is* going on. Her heartbeat is erratic."

Saebin concentrated on her breathing. Escape. She must escape.

"If she's stockpiled enough energy to bring herself out of stasis, we need Lyrik now."

"Are you sure?" Her handler moved closer to the table, her voice hushed and urgent. "You've only seen a hint of her true potential. Do you want your son exposed to --"

"He's immune to Mystic energy and all the abilities it generates." He paused. Saebin detected a soft click, then three staccato beeps. "Lyrik, report to Lab A in Detention Center Three. And move your ass, boy -- this is important." Three slightly lower beeps ended the transmission. "Besides, the Rodytes arrive tomorrow. We need Lyrik otherwise occupied."

"I'll have a medical team monitor her stats until your son arrives. She can't be allowed to see me. There's no telling how she'd react."

"Are you going to decrease the sedative or just wait and see what happens?"

"The levels I've been pumping into her would have killed any normal person. I can't believe she'd just wake up on her own."

Ignoring the pain ricocheting through her body, Saebin opened her eyes. Her handler was not going to slink away into the shadows. And neither was this man. She gathered Mystic energy, visualizing her next move as the pressure built. Her skin tingled. Her heartbeat raced.

"Get out!" her handler screamed.

Saebin launched an energy pulse and pushed to her hands and knees. Her stiff muscles protested with violent spasms. Her handler was half a step behind the other man as they bolted for the door. No! Closing her hand into a tight fist, Saebin discharged an energy stream. It fell short, sizzling against the floor in a useless shower of sparks.

Alarms shrilled, and lights flashed. Saebin leapt down from the table, groaning as her knees buckled. Why was she so weak? How long had she been in stasis?

A flurry of activity drew her attention to the transparent panels across the lab. Five armed guards rushed down the corridor. Pushing back to her feet, she rolled her shoulders and flexed her hands. Her knuckle conduits had been capped. No wonder the shot missed her handler. Aiming at the floor, she forced energy out the thin tube implanted in her middle

knuckle. The stream was tiny at first, then pressure built up behind the blockage and burst out, drilling a hole in the floor.

After clearing her other knuckle, she turned her attention to the doorway. What sort of leader ran for cover while his men rushed forward to fight? The man spoke with authority, yet his actions revealed his cowardice.

The doors parted, and two men advanced, one crouching as the other aimed his weapon over the first man's head. Nice formation. Saebin dropped them both with a pulse of energy.

"Shit!"

She heard the curse from somewhere beyond the doorway as the unconscious guards were dragged out of the way. Her vision blurred, and static hissed along her sensory inputs. Widening her stance, she dragged air into her burning lungs. A couple knuckle shots and two black-out bursts shouldn't have drained her this badly.

The guards tried a new formation. One man crouched while two stood behind him. Not very creative, but it would have been effective on an ordinary enemy. She shook her head, and they fell into an untidy heap, only one getting off a shot.

"You're making quite a mess."

A tall, blond man stepped over the fallen men and joined her in the lab. She aimed her right hand at the middle of his chest, her eyes narrowed and assessing. Supple, dark brown pants hugged his lean hips before disappearing into black boots. A bright green shirt perfectly matched the emerald flash of his eyes. She swallowed hard as her gaze moved over his striking features. Her breathing hitched, and her nipples hardened before her armor sent a calming pulse to counteract his effect on her anatomy.

You are D-159, an emotionless warrior. You cannot notice the breadth of his shoulders or the intensity of his gaze.

This had to be Lyrik. Only someone immune to Mystic energy would possess such a swagger. He'd just watched five of his comrades fall! If she weren't so depleted, she'd test the strength of his immunity. Instead she raised her other hand and widened her eyes as if she'd just sent a pulse his way.

"State your objective." She kept her voice even and mechanical.

"I'm not the one attacking people, sweet cheeks. What has you so pissed off?" She wasn't fooled by his nonchalance. He was stalking her, his gaze ever watchful.

Her energy level was building slowly. She could feel strength returning to her legs. Still, she needed time and information before she made her next move. Reinforcing her role with a deep breath, she looked into his eyes. "What is my objective?"

Careful to keep his exasperation from showing, Lyrik groaned inwardly. "Your objective is to answer my questions."

“That is not a proper objective. You are not a proper handler.”

Ding, ding, ding, give the woman a prize!

She stood stiff and defiant, her fist pointed at the middle of his chest. Her long, tawny hair had been cut in dramatic layers, concealing the neurostimulators implanted beneath her scalp. The unusual hairstyle accented the delicate purity of her face. Wide blue eyes dominated her other features, the color gently swirling with a mixture of hues. How could someone so lethal appear so innocent? Matte-black body armor encased every curve and hollow of her tall, long-limbed form. Eight similar suits had been brought back from Earth after the destruction of Operation Hydra, but she wore the only suit still functioning.

He crossed his arms over his chest. She'd been in stasis for over a cycle. He had no idea why the medical team had chosen today to bring her out. His briefing had been rudimentary at best. She was out of control. He was to get her into one of the interrogation rooms. Security was to monitor them closely and destroy her at the first sign of aggression. Apparently, the mysteries of her implants were no longer enough to protect her life.

“Do you know where you are?” He tried to sound casual, as if she weren't pointing a lethal weapon at his heart.

“My location is irrelevant until I understand my objective.” She narrowed her gaze and pressed her lips into a grim line.

All of the other inhabitants of ward D were dead. Their implants had malfunctioned, or they had gone mad and taken their own lives. Could she sense their absence? The research team suspected they shared a sort of common consciousness.

Enough speculation. He had to get her out of this lab. “What are proper objectives for ...” Shit, he'd forgotten her numerical name. “State your designation.” He hardened his voice, using the tone he reserved for insubordinate ensigns.

“My designation is D-159.”

“What is a proper objective for D-159?”

“Search and destroy, search and rescue, or assassination.”

Charming resume. Shame rolled in on the heels of his smartass thought. She hadn't done this to herself; she'd never had a choice in any of it. He sighed, a knot forming in the pit of his stomach. Saebin. Her name was Saebin. She was a victim just like all the other occupants of the Center -- and victims needed to be rescued.

“Your objective is search and rescue.”

“Objective accepted.” A vacant look came into her eyes. The rotation slowed, allowing him to distinguish each individual color -- cerulean, vibrant azure, and sparkling silver. He'd never seen eyes so cold, yet so beautiful. That sort of summed up the whole package.

“Routine launched; provide data.”

Okay, Commander, start providing data. This was as close as they'd come to a conversation, and her life depended on his creativity.

“Initiate an internal scan and report your energy levels.” Her Mystic fit had to have taken its toll.

“D-159 is in need of sustenance.”

“You will come with me.” He turned toward the open doorway, releasing a ragged sigh when she lowered her hand. As soon as she stepped into the corridor, she shot out the surveillance panel. He marched her down the corridor. She blasted each panel they passed. Pausing outside the interrogation room, he scowled at her. “You will not disable the surveillance in this room.”

“The primary objective supersedes all others. A real handler would know that.”

“What is the primary objective?”

“Survival.”

How could he argue with that?

They moved into the small, austere room, and she shot out three of the transmitters. She missed the camera hidden behind the recessed light fixture, but that feed only led to the control booth -- until security could tap into it.

“Feel better?” He shook his head and ignored the smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. Despite her dislike for surveillance, she hadn’t threatened him in any way. “Sit down. You will conserve your energy for the coming assignment. There will be no more outbursts. Do you understand?”

“Affirmative.” She pulled out one of the two alloy chairs and folded her hands on the table. Her gaze focused on his face, and cunning flashed for a moment before she looked away. Lyrik recoiled. *Make sure she’s not playing you. She’s got the training of a soldier and the wiles of a woman. That’s one dangerous combination.*

He tapped an area on the control band strapped to his forearm, and ankle restraints snapped into place. She didn’t so much as flinch.

“Where is my handler?” There was a hint of animosity in her tone.

“There’s been an accident.” He really didn’t want the responsibility, but he saw no alternative. “I’m your handler now. D-159, acknowledge my authority.”

“I heard her voice,” she challenged. “I know she’s here. Where is --”

“Acknowledge my authority, *now*.”

She raised her chin and gazed beyond him, her face expressionless again. “You are my handler. How shall I address you?”

“Sir.”

“I await your command, sir.”

Now that sounded downright sarcastic. What was she up to?

“My command is simple. Eat, drink, and cause no more harm.”

“Yes, sir.”

Lyrik paused in the corridor and rolled his shoulders, releasing the tension gathering at the base of his neck. The first time he'd seen Saebin had been on a vidfile. She had been battling Vee, the most powerful Mystic on Ontariese, and she'd kicked his ass. After rendering Vee unconscious, she'd gone into a prolonged seizure. Lyrik had been sure no one could have survived it, but here she was, ready to battle again.

Taking the corridor to his left, he entered the control booth and activated the vidscreen. Good, it was still functioning. He forwarded the information to security and glanced back at Saebin. She sat in exactly the same position she'd been in when he left. Was there a woman locked inside the implants, or had Saebin been lost long ago?

Heaving a ragged sigh, he tapped in the code for his father's private office. Overlord Cyrus came on screen. Gray-streaked brown hair framed his weathered face. His features were rugged and commanding. A close cropped beard framed his thin-lipped mouth.

"Is she still alive?" Cyrus asked without preamble.

"So far."

"I heard she shot out surveillance to the room."

"She has a thing about being watched apparently. Security is monitoring my audiocom, but that's the best we can do for now. She's calm and relatively cooperative. I was about to send for a meal tray."

"Is it safe to send in a staffer?" Cyrus sounded wary. It took a lot to intimidate his father. Why hadn't he seen this coming? "I can't believe what that slip of a girl did to my men."

"Are you alone, sir?"

One of Cyrus's eyebrows arched dramatically. "Are you going to reprimand me?"

They balanced a fine line. As father and son they enjoyed an easy rapport, but Overlord Cyrus demanded respect, whether or not he'd earned it.

"Your entire staff watched the vidfile of what she did back on Earth." Lyrik kept his tone even, his expression composed. "She was put into stasis during a battle. You should have expected aggression when she was released."

"We anticipated her aggression. We underestimated her abilities."

That was as close to agreement as they were likely to come. Still something about the situation bothered Lyrik. He couldn't remember the last time his father had been caught unprepared. "I'll take the tray in to her, but I don't want to leave her unattended for long."

"I'll send someone to you."

"Thanks." His father's image blinked out, and Lyrik sighed. He was scheduled to take the *Tempest* to Bilarri at week's end. The Joint Council had been negotiating with the Bilarrians for the better part of a cycle. Any delay or complication could negate the fragile alliance, and Ontariese couldn't afford to lose the cooperation of the Bilarrians. How was he supposed to weigh the well-being of one broken woman against the survival of his people?

He really didn't need this aggravation.

Turning his attention back to the control console, he entered the code for Trey's office. Director dar Aune wasn't going to like what he was about to request. The screen displayed the emergency interrupt option. Trey was in a meeting. If Lyrik contacted Krysta directly, there would be hell to pay. He supposed that constituted an emergency. "Interrupt."

Trey responded to Lyrik's page via audiocom. He'd probably stepped out of the conference room. Lyrik smiled. They'd made Trey Director of Covert Operations for a reason. The man was infallibly secretive.

"What's going on?" Trey's deep voice reached the console's receiver.

"I need to borrow your wife."

"I beg your pardon!"

Lyrik laughed. "Not like that, you pervert, unless you're willing, of course."

"Is there a reason you're annoying me?"

When Trey lost his sense of humor, it usually meant one thing: the NRS. The sect's fanaticism had escalated steadily since the refugees arrived from Earth. The leaders of the New Reformation Sect had repeatedly demanded that the Joint Council sterilize the "unnatural abominations" created by Operation Hydra. If the NRS learned Saebin had been released from stasis, there was no telling what they would do.

"Saebin was released from stasis this morning, and she's called the ghost of the Night Moon out to play." The screen flickered, and Trey's dumbfounded image materialized in front of Lyrik.

"When was this decided? What precautions were taken?"

"I heard about it when the overlord summoned me to DC3. Gauging from the number of guards currently in the infirmary, I'd say their precautions were practically nonexistent."

Trey raked his multi-colored hair with his hand, then stepped away from the vidscreen. Lyrik heard the office door slam, then Trey returned. "This is unbelievable. Saebin took out Vee. *Vee*, for gods' sake. Did they expect a cycle in stasis to make her docile?" He leaned back in his chair; his eyes narrowed with menace. "What does this have to do with Krysta? Her control has increased considerably, but she's no match for Saebin."

"I need her knowledge of terminology and Dr. Hydran's strategies. I'll have her advise me, nothing more. She won't go anywhere near Saebin."

"As if either of us could keep her away." Trey paused, his expression tense and thoughtful. "Don't underestimate Krysta's stubbornness. It's gotten me into trouble more times than I care to remember."

Lyrik accepted the suggestion with a nod, and Trey ended the transmission. His consent was inferred if not spoken.

While Lyrik waited for Krysta, he took the meal tray in to Saebin. “You will eat and quietly wait for my return.” With her legs secured to the sturdy legs of the chair, there wasn’t much else she could do.

“Yes, sir.”

Lyrik returned to the control booth and watched Saebin on the vidscreen. She stared at the tray, eating with speed and efficiency, never glancing to the left or right. The door slid open, and Krysta joined him in the booth.

Krysta stared at the vidscreen in silent horror. Her wide, thick-lashed eyes blended purple and turquoise, a unique combination even on Ontariese. He looked at the pain in her gaze, and the knot in his gut tightened. This must be heartrending for Krysta. She had known Saebin before the experiments, before the implants, before D-159.

“Tell me you have a plan.” She looked into his eyes, her gaze tear bright, yet demanding.

“I have a plan.”

Chapter Two

Saebin stared at her empty meal tray, hands clenched on her thighs as Krystabel's words echoed through her mind. *They're only keeping you alive so they can figure out how your implants work.* Well, that would never happen. She'd blast off her own head before she allowed anyone else to be subjected to this technology.

How much did Lyrik know? He'd stepped into the role of handler with undeniable ease. His relaxed manner and charming smile couldn't hide the authority underlying his tone. He'd ordered her to remain quiet until he returned. Swift and severe punishment followed any disobedience. Aggressive impulses tore through her body. Her muscles flexed and relaxed, flexed and relaxed. Her systems buzzed with excess energy, anxious, restless.

Where was her *real* handler? Had she just imagined that hateful voice? Blurred images and confusing impressions wouldn't focus within her mind. Was Dr. Hydran dead, or had she imagined that, too? Animosity surged, making her implants vibrate uselessly. She'd learned to conceal her loathing, but all the mental conditioning in the world couldn't rid her mind of her hatred for her creator.

The door slid open, and Lyrik entered. She scanned his body. No weapons just a communications device hooked over his ear. Not even a knife. What a fool.

"I have the data for your next assignment." He sat and folded his hands on the tabletop.

"Continue." Had she been sold to this man and his father? Where the hell was she? She couldn't ask. D-159 wouldn't care.

"This will be a search and rescue mission. It's imperative our target be recovered alive and unharmed." He paused and looked into her eyes. His bright green gaze swirled like hers. She had never seen a male with eyes like his. "Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir." Why did he keep asking that? He was making it damn hard to keep emotion from her expression and her voice.

“Your target is being held captive in ward D.”

Saebin stiffened. What nonsense was this? Didn’t he realize she remembered the fire?

“Her name is Saebin. D-159 has trapped Saebin. There will be no negotiation. It is your objective to free Saebin from D-159.”

“My distinction is D-159. You are telling me ... I am not ...” Blood rushed through her ears. Her implants vibrated, stinging and burning. Was he trying to throw her into overload? She clutched her head with her hands. “Stop it! This is not a proper objective.”

“Search and rescue is a proper objective.” His authoritative voice cut through the din. “Find Saebin and rescue her from D-159.”

She rocked forward and back, her eyes squeezed shut against the pain. Images exploded within her mind. She opened her eyes, trying to escape the horror. Blood, twisted limbs, screams of agony. Was she hurting or being hurt? She couldn’t tell. Violent impulses shot through her body. She jerked free of the ankle restraints, her body armor protecting her flesh. Leaping to the seat of the chair, she panted, glaring at Lyrik.

“I am ...” She screamed. He moved toward her cautiously. “I am D-159. No one is being held captive in ward D.”

“You’re wrong.”

The calm, female voice drew her attention to the door, and her heart missed a beat. Her implants activated, regulating her pulse. “Krysta?” The name escaped on a sob, and she sank to her knees, hands pressed tightly to her temples.

“That’s right. I’m Krysta, and Saebin is my friend.” She took two steps farther into the room. “You must release her. She’s been your prisoner long enough.”

Lyrik held his breath waiting for Saebin to react to Krysta’s presence. If anything happened to Krysta, Trey would kill him. He’d ordered her to stay in the control booth. He should have listened to Trey.

Saebin clenched and unclenched her fist until a blast of Mystic energy burst from her right hand. Krysta ducked out of the way, but a moment later she crumpled to the floor. Saebin jumped from the chair, spinning to face Lyrik in midair. With dazzling agility, she landed with a light spring.

A tight shoulder roll kept Lyrik just ahead of her blasts. He tackled her from behind, trapping her hands beneath her. She let out a bloodcurdling scream, and her entire body shuddered.

“My wrist.” She panted. “You broke my wrist.”

Shit! He’d only meant to immobilize her. The instant he eased his hold, she worked her legs beneath her and levered herself up, flipping him off her in one sustained motion. Her knees pinned his arms to the floor, and her fist slammed into his chest, directly over his heart.

"I am D-159, and *you* are my prisoner!"

Mystic energy had no effect on him, so it was probable her weapons wouldn't hurt him, unless Hydran had found a way to augment the energy stream. He'd better cooperate, at least for now.

"If you wanted to play rough, sweet cheeks, all you had to do was ask."

She huffed, pushing off his chest without moving her fist. "That is an irrational response. You will be silent."

"I'll grant you irrational, but the silence is doubtful." He looked at Krysta as the hellion stood and turned around. Krysta was still breathing, and her color was good.

"Get up, slowly, hands away from your body."

"Can my hands be on your body?" Her eyes narrowed and nostrils flared. "I'll behave if you do me a favor."

"You are in no position to negotiate."

"Scan Krysta, and make sure she's okay before you have your wicked way with me."

"I rendered her unconscious. There is no lasting effect." She paused, her hostile gaze moving to his lips. "What do you mean by 'wicked way'?"

"You'll have to tell me, doll face. You're the one holding the ... knuckle." He did his best not to laugh.

"Activate the door."

They wouldn't get far. Security was monitoring his audiocom. She pressed her fist to his back and marched him toward the door. The scanner beam passed over his body, and the door slid open.

"Your place or mine? I'm not particular." She hesitated so long, he glanced over his shoulder. "What's the matter?"

"Where are we?"

He'd been wondering when she'd figure it out. "We're orbiting the planet Ontariese. This is called the Day Moon. We're far, far away from Earth. Operation Hydra was destroyed and the Center liberated by Krysta and her life mate. Your only real objective now is to stop rendering people unconscious and figure out what you want to be when you grow up." Two guards rushed around the corner as he finished his motivational speech. They fell over each other as she sent a Mystic pulse their way. Lyrik shook his head. "I don't think you're committed to your new objective."

She shoved him into the corridor. "Is this a penal facility?"

"Military outpost."

"We cannot stay here."

"What do you suggest?" Another group of guards approached. One got off a shot before she commanded them into unconsciousness. "Damn, that's a handy trick, but it's getting a

little redundant.” He needed to get her away from the others until she calmed down. If she’d decided to kill him, she would have blasted him by now. He still wasn’t convinced her weapon would harm him, but he was in no hurry to find out. “Security code eight, two, one.”

“What is the purpose of that code?”

“To prevent you from turning anyone else off.”

“That is not within your power.”

“Sure it is. If they all *stay away*, you can’t hurt anyone else.”

Her steps faltered as they turned corner after corner. All the corridors in this building looked the same unless you understood the symbols on the walls. She grabbed his wrist and aimed her knuckle at his hand. A short burst sent scalding pain up his arm. He jerked his hand away and blew on his singed skin.

“What the hell was that for?”

“You do not respond to my mental commands. I needed to know if you were immune to my munitions implants as well. Now we both know. I *can* hurt you. If I sustain the stream long enough, I can likely end your life.”

“Is that what you want?” He crowded her against the wall, his gaze intent on her face. His hands itched to touch her, to explore the curves hidden beneath her body armor. Her breasts heaved as she stared back at him in silent defiance. “You would be foolish to harm me. I’m your only ally. I’m your handler now, remember?”

“You are not a proper handler.”

She sounded so belligerent he wanted to laugh. Regardless of how twisted it seemed, she was defending the only life she’d ever known. He heaved a ragged sigh and stepped back. She needed to believe she was in control, at least for the time being. It wouldn’t take her long to realize her options were extremely limited. Desperation was a powerful motivator, but its outcomes were seldom constructive. Besides, his head hadn’t stopped throbbing from their last wrestling match.

“Where do you want to go?” He motioned toward her hand and grinned. “You’re the one with the knuckle.”

“I want to see this planet you say we orbit.”

“Easily accomplished. Follow me.”

Her heels tapped smartly as she matched her steps to his much longer stride. He’d better take her outside. She was just obstinate enough to dismiss a viewport as trickery. When they approached the perimeter door, he noticed a bright red cup upside down on the narrow shelf near the scanner. A tracker had been placed on the upturned cup. Clever. His audiocom sent out a traceable signal, but she would be virtually invisible if they got separated. Without turning his head, he reached for the tiny device.

She grabbed his wrist. “What is that?”

“Insect repellent.” He smiled. “It emanates an audio frequency that drives away bugs.”

With a derisive snort, she snatched the tracer from his palm, dropped it to the floor and crushed it beneath her heel. “That’s my idea of insect repellent.”

“By the ghosts of the Night Moon, did you just make a joke?” He clutched his hand over his heart. “I’m going to fall over.”

She ignored his antics and nodded toward the door. He scanned it open, waiting for her to exit before he joined her on the railed walkway surrounding Detention Center Three. Similar buildings marched in graduated steps, following the steep contour of the Day Moon. Interspersed with the austere buildings were lush gardens and tree-lined parks.

The Day Moon had once been a pleasure colony, the most popular destination for Ontarian tourists. The Great Conflict had begun long before Lyrik was born, and the massive military training facility had replaced the leisure colony.

The faint scent of flowers drifted on a gentle breeze. He glanced at Saebin, and his breath lodged in his throat. She’d raised her face to the setting sun, her eyes closed, expression blissful.

“Saebin,” he whispered.

She looked at him and smiled. For a breathless moment they stared into each other’s eyes. Her gaze sparkled. Color blossomed across the crest of her cheeks; then her gaze clouded, and expression bled from her features. D-159 had returned. She continued her visual assessment of her surroundings as determination surged through Lyrik. He would see that expression again.

“What is that?” She pointed to the palatial building perched atop the highest hill, the Warlords’ Headquarters.

He hesitated. D-159 was incapable of curiosity. She gathered information for assignments. He had no intention of letting her out of his sight. Still, it didn’t feel right.

Guards approached from the left. Lyrik waved them back. She was too distracted to notice.

“How can this be the moon? The moon is right there.” She pointed to the dark, shadowy shape silhouetted on the far horizon.

There was no security risk in answering this question, so Lyrik explained, “Ontariense has two moons. We’re on the Day Moon. Bend down. You can see the planet over there.” She followed his instructions, her bottom brushing against his crotch. Heat swirled though his belly, settling between his legs.

You’re spitting into the wind there, buddy. Even if she were willing -- which is about as likely as the Joint Council appointing you High King -- how would you get past her body armor?

This was part of the reason he spent so much time in space. Finding female companionship was easier in any spaceport than on his home world. Ontariese had become a frustrating, lonely place for anyone without Mystic abilities.

"You will take me to the planet."

"I don't think so." She made a threatening motion with her fist. "Sweetheart, there are way too many people down there. Unless you can pilot a spacecraft, it's not going to happen. You're stuck with me until you figure out what you want." Oh, and by the way, you make one wrong move and you're toast. My father has decided you're too dangerous to keep around.

She clutched her head, then grasped the railing, moaning pathetically. Lyrik hesitated. Was this another "broken wrist?"

"Hot." She rasped out the word, her body trembling. "I'm so hot."

A shimmering red aura erupted around her. This was no trick. Were her implants overloading? Was she --

Before he could complete the thought, she disappeared in a flash of light.

* * * * *

"What the hell happened to her?"

"Stop shouting at me!"

Lyrik took a deep breath and inclined his head toward Krysta. "I'm sorry. I wasn't able to get the tracker on her. Do you have any idea where she went?"

"I don't think she meant to teleport. To my knowledge it isn't within Saebin's capabilities."

"D-159 can do all sorts of things Saebin couldn't," Cyrus said from behind his desk. Krysta sat in front, while Lyrik paced the office. "What about her body armor? According to Trey's report, it makes the wearer undetectable to Mystics. What other functions does it serve?"

"We've been waiting a full cycle for your engineers to tell us."

Cyrus glowered at her impertinence. "My engineers have been unable to decipher the technology because they have never encountered anything remotely like it before. Technology is easier to backwards engineer when it still works!"

"We were fighting for our lives." Krysta scooted to the edge of her seat, her knuckles turning white as she clutched the chair's arms. "Excuse me if we destroyed some body armor in the process!"

"This isn't going to help us find Saebin." Lyrik sat beside Krysta, shooting her a warning glance. "She wanted to visit the planet. Is it possible she teleported to the surface?"

Krysta shook her head, her posture relaxing a bit. “Not without Summoning the Storm. Teleportation has a very limited range.”

“Are you sure she teleported?” Cyrus muttered, obviously still annoyed with Krysta.

“What Lyrik described was a teleportation. I can almost guarantee she’s still on the Day Moon.”

“Almost?”

To her credit, she ignored Cyrus’s jibe and focused her gaze on Lyrik. “You said her aura turned red?”

“I don’t know anything about auras. I’ve never been able to see one before.”

“I don’t think you saw one today. I think you saw a glimpse of her destination.”

“Hot, glowing red? You think she’s in Firestone Valley?”

“I’ve tried to link with her, but that damn suit is *fully operational*.” She turned to Cyrus for a meaningful glare.

“It better be.” Lyrik shook his head. “She won’t last long in Firestone Valley without external protection.”

Chapter Three

Saebin sank to her knees, her scream echoing in her ears. Danger! She was in danger. No, *everyone* was in danger. All around her massive spikes shot skyward. The gleaming black stones glowed as if fire had been trapped inside the rock. Smoke thickened the air, acrid and cloying. Her throat burned, and her eyes watered. A brutal wind whipped her hair across her face, blasting her skin with stinging particles.

Pressing her forearms to her face, she curved into a ball. *Make yourself as small a target as possible. Survival is the supreme objective.* Her handler's voice sounded in her mind. Her real handler, not Lyrik. Her mission must have gone horribly wrong. Nothing made sense. Voices of dead friends, strange planets, and rocks that burned ... she must be losing her mind.

What was her objective?

Survival. The supreme objective. She must focus her thoughts.

She raised her head and peeked over her arms, squinting through the sooty air. Where was she? How had she gotten here?

We're orbiting the planet Ontariese. No, she would not listen to him! *Operation Hydra was destroyed ... Your only real objective now is to stop rendering people unconscious and figure out what you want to be when you grow up.*

This was a test, or ...

Pain sliced through her brain and stabbed down her spine. Her implants were overloading. Fear, confusion, and rage bombarded her from all sides. She screamed, the sound lost in the merciless wind.

An image flashed into focus, accompanied by another burst of pain. She squeezed her eyes shut and whimpered. Her real handler stood in front of a man, her back to Saebin. Even without seeing her face, Saebin recognized her handler. Fear, resentment, and hatred rolled

through her in icy waves. She couldn't hear their words only their hushed urgent tones. Trepidation surged. *They* were the source of the danger.

Gradually the image receded, and she slumped with a muffled groan. She had to find shelter, a cave or culvert deep enough to protect her. Paralyzed by the force of the wind, she huddled against the ground. She had to find ... Survival was the supreme --

* * * * *

Awareness returned more gently than it had departed. The roaring in her ears lessened, and she dragged air into her burning lungs. Her head throbbed, but the punishing wind had abated. Blinking repeatedly, she forced her eyelids to open.

"Lie still. Some sort of debris tried to take your head off. I sealed the wound, but the compound isn't quite set."

Lyrik. How had he found her so quickly? They were in a cave or a crude building. She couldn't see beyond the small lamp he held in one hand, a water pouch hung from the other. A protective suit covered him from head to toe, the hood resting on his broad shoulders.

"Where are we?"

"In a storm shelter. They're scattered all over the valley. The miners have gotten pretty good at predicting the storms, but sometimes they kick up without warning." He knelt beside her, set down the lamp, and handed her the water pouch.

She squirted water into her mouth, closing her eyes as the liquid soothed her parched throat. Already her implants were lessening the pounding in her head. Accelerated healing was one of the advantages of the implants.

"How did you find me?" Before he could answer, she added, "Why did you bother?"

"Krysta pointed me in the right direction, and like it or not, you are my objective."

"How did I get here?" There was so much she didn't understand. How could she hope to sift through the facts, determine what was real and what was imagined, without confessing all she'd seen and sensed? He still thought she was D-159.

"You teleported, sweetheart. Surprised the hell out of me. We'll have a nice chat in a bit, but we have a more serious problem right now. Firestone dust is toxic, and we're both covered in it. This shelter is constructed of stable Firestones. They'll emit light and warmth, but they have to be charged. I can't believe I'm suggesting this, but pretend we're surrounded and send out an energy pulse."

She sat up on the narrow bunk and lifted the lamp, holding it high so she could examine the room. The meager illumination didn't reach far, but she could see the wall closest to her. Smooth, black blocks reflected the lamplight.

"If you manage to knock me out, do not leave this shelter. The storm will probably last through the night."

If he meant for her to set off some sort of explosion, he would be caught in the blast. She didn't understand his intent, but she sent out a small, controlled pulse. All around them blocks began to glow. Fascinated, she got to her knees.

"Again. Stronger this time."

She sent out a strong, sustained pulse, and the shelter burst into light. Hundreds of blocks glowed with warm, red light. Her gaze swept the room, and she gasped, her implants quickly counteracting her response to the beauty. "This is what becomes of the stones I saw outside?"

"After a long, involved stabilization process. The facilities are through that archway. We both need to shower and decontaminate our suits." He paused, his gaze narrowing on her face. "When they brought you out of stasis, they tried to remove your armor, and your vital signs went haywire."

"I must intentionally disengage the sensors or it causes a system-wide overload. It prevents the technology from being recovered by an enemy and ensures I am not taken alive."

"That explains a lot." He motioned for her to follow him. "But none of it's important right now. We have to get this residue off before our skin blisters."

She rose and followed him into the adjoining room. Why had he searched for her? He'd saved her life; she couldn't deny it. Still, it didn't make sense. Or did it? If they had tried unsuccessfully to remove her armor ...

Her thoughts sputtered out as she stepped into the adjoining room. The facilities offered no privacy. A row of showerheads protruded from one wall, separated from the sinks by recessed lockers. A half wall offset the toilets from the shower area, but the rest was one open space.

Dr. Hydran and her handler had stripped her naked to demoralize her when she displeased them. This was even worse. Hydran was old, and her handler was female. Her mouth went dry, and knots formed in her stomach. She wasn't ashamed of her body, but she'd never been naked in front of a young male.

He unceremoniously stripped off his suit and the garments he wore beneath. "There should be clean uniforms in the lockers. Come on. We don't have time for modesty."

The knots in her belly tightened with each garment he tossed aside. She couldn't drag her gaze away from his spectacular body. Golden skin stretched tight over corded muscles. His tight ass bunched and flexed as he moved beneath one of the showerheads. He turned to face her, and her eyes widened owlishly.

"You're welcome to look, just get out of that suit. You have to wash the dust off now."

Dragging her gaze away from the proof of his virility, she looked at her hands. Her skin did feel unusually sensitive. Her knuckle conduits functioned without her armor, so she

disengaged the six primary sensors and unfastened her body armor. Her gaze drifted back to his groin. Even relaxed against his thigh, his shaft was long and thick, and his balls ...

With a chuckle, he turned to face the spray, presenting her with his broad back. She gave herself a mental shake and continued undressing. It wasn't like she'd never seen a naked man before. She'd had access to a variety of simulations and stimulators, but nothing in her experience came close to the sheer power of this man's body.

He smoothed his hair back from his face with both hands, the muscles in his back rippling. "Am I going to have to come get you?"

She peeled off her suit and moved up beside him, activating one of the showerheads. Cool water saturated her hair. She raised her face to the spray as much to hide her flush as to cleanse the dust from her skin.

Lyrik ignored his growing erection and tried to focus on the task at hand. "Scrub your hair with this." He pushed his hand into an indentation in the wall, and a gel covered his fingers.

She followed his example, working the gel through her long hair. He watched her out of the corner of his eye. Her body armor had been form fitting, but naked the little hellion just about knocked the breath from his lungs. She was sculpted with lithe strength. Firm, round breasts begged for attention, her nipples pebble hard. How would she react if he dragged her beneath his showerhead and finished washing her himself? Her belly was perfectly flat. He couldn't see more without looking directly at her.

"The dispenser below it is soap. Scrub your face and hands thoroughly. The dust is fine. Make sure you get it all."

As she reached into the soap dispenser, her gaze swept the length of his body, lingering on his hardening shaft. She lowered her lashes and turned back toward the spray, color rising across her cheekbones. There was definitely a woman underneath the body armor. A secretive smile curved his lips. He abandoned all pretence and faced her.

"I'm not sure you got it all." He took a handful of liquid soap and warmed it between his palms. "Your skin looks irritated right here." Moving with careful patience, he slid his hands from her shoulders to her neck. She started violently when his fingers skimmed the ring implanted in her flesh. "I won't hurt you."

"Stop touching me." She shivered and grabbed his wrists.

A smaller connector marred the upper curve of her left breast, and he'd glimpsed several others scattered along her spine. This must be how her armor interfaced with her implants.

"I want to make sure you got the gash nice and clean. You don't want it to get infected, do you?" He stepped closer, until her shower ran over them both. Teasing her temple with his fingertips, he slid his other hand down to her wrist. He held her right hand against her

thigh and pulled her against him. Her warm, soft breasts pressed against his chest, and he sighed. "Oh, that's nice."

"What are you doing?" Her tone hitched, and she pushed against his shoulder with her free hand.

Without her suit were her implants able to calm her physical responses? Interesting question. "Say your name, or I'll kiss you."

Her eyes widened. "That is irrational."

"We already established that I'm irrational. Now say your name, or I'm going to kiss you."

"My distinction is --"

He cut her off with his mouth. She wiggled against him, her stiff nipples teasing his chest. After brushing his lips against hers, he nipped the corner of her mouth.

"You're a woman, Saebin, not a machine. You're naked, in the arms of a man who wants you. How does that make you feel?"

She turned her face away, panting harshly. "Do you expect me to spread my thighs because you came after me?"

"You'd definitely come first, and then we'd come together, but you're jumping way ahead of the conversation. How does it make you *feel*? Is your heart racing?" He eased away and covered the upper curve of her breast with his hand, the sensor ring a cool reminder of all she'd suffered. "That's a pretty powerful heartbeat, and you seem more emotional than you've been since we met."

"What are you talking about?"

"Your body armor works in tandem with the neurostimulators. Doesn't it? One without the other isn't nearly as effective."

"You had to paw me to figure that out?"

"I'm not pawing you. Now this --" He cupped her breast, stroking her nipple with his thumb. "-- is pawing you."

She shoved him backward and hurried to the lockers, shaking the water off her body as she went. After drying off with a towel, she jerked on a uniform. He stepped away from the showerheads, squeezing the excess water out of his hair. A towel flew in his direction, followed in quick succession by a uniform top and bottom. He managed to snatch them out of the air before any of the items landed on the wet floor.

Could he elicit anything other than anger from her? He considered the possibilities as he pulled on the simple pants. How far should he push her emotional responses? As much as he'd enjoyed having her in his arms, she was ultimately his responsibility.

"Our suits need to be decontaminated. Open the large door next to the lockers." Pausing with one hand on the locker door, she looked longingly at her body armor. He

understood the look. The damn suit made her feel safe, protected -- lobotomized! How could he blame her for liking the cage when she'd never known life without one? "I want to do this quickly so I don't scatter the dust all over the room."

She moved beyond the lockers and opened the door to the decontamination unit. He picked up both suits, amazed at the weight of her body armor. No wonder she was toned if she wore this thing on a regular basis. He stuffed both in the unit and activated the longest cycle.

"Do you have dust on your arms now?"

"That's why I didn't put on my shirt. We probably should have done the suits before we showered, but I'd already taken time to seal your wound. I didn't want to risk another delay." Crossing to one of the sinks, he scrubbed his arms and chest. "How's your head? There were a variety of pain relievers in the Medkit." When she didn't respond, he glanced over his shoulder. Curse the ghosts of the Night Moon, she was gawking again.

"My implants accelerate healing." Her voice sounded suspiciously hoarse.

Turning back to the sink, he continued scrubbing his torso with more thoroughness than necessary. What did she feel when she looked at him? Lust or simple curiosity? Did the implants make her incapable of feeling desire? He'd seen more than curiosity smoldering in her gaze as she stared at his naked body. Without turning around, he asked, "Are you a virgin?"

She gasped. "That is irrelevant."

"Well, the way you keep staring at me makes me wonder if you've ever seen a naked man before."

"You did your share of staring, too. Are *you* a virgin?"

He pulled on the uniform top as he turned around. "Why do you presume I'm not? There are significantly more men on Ontariense than women. Some men die without ever knowing the tender touch of a real woman."

"What?" She folded her hands into tight fists and narrowed her eyes. "Is that why I was captured? I am a soldier, not a breeder!"

Chapter Four

“You weren’t captured, Saebin. You were rescued.” Lyrik met her gaze through the red glow, his expression calm, yet compelling. “No woman is taken against her will on Ontariese. If anything, women have the power. You get to choose whom you sleep with and how long the social alliance will last. You would be --”

Unwilling to dignify his nonsense with her attention, Saebin walked into the shelter’s main room. She was his objective. He would do whatever it took to ... to what? She didn’t understand his motivation. Why had he saved her life? He could be a genuinely compassionate person, or he could be his father’s charming puppet. How was she supposed to figure out which? She had to concentrate on facts.

It was foolish to attack an ally.

It was lethal to trust an enemy.

With a frustrated growl, she glared at the archway. What was taking him so long?

The storm shelter wasn’t designed for comfort. A row of narrow bunks lined one wall, while an extended, L-shaped bench hugged the opposite corner. Compartments of some sort were recessed in the wall beside the bench. Smooth counters, a large sink, and an elaborate faucet identified the food preparation area.

He strode into the room a few minutes later, fully dressed at last. “What’s the last thing you remember before they brought you out of stasis?”

She hesitated.

He shook his head. “We’re stuck here until morning, maybe longer. We have to find something to do.”

There was no denying the storm had been real. It had nearly ripped off her head. “I have fragmented images of a battle and a fire. The last thing I remember clearly is participating in a demonstration. My handler was pleased, so I was rewarded.”

“How were you rewarded?”

His long-legged stride brought him within an arm’s length of her in the blink of an eye. Why did his smile send her pulse racing and his gaze make her nipples tingle? She had never reacted to anyone as she was reacting to this man.

“May I know your distinction?” Was that her breathless voice? She wasn’t playing her part very well. He needed to believe D-159 was in control.

“There are no distinctions on Ontariense, only names. My *name* is Lyrik.”

He was so big. His hands could easily snap her neck. Even with the augmented strength of her body armor, she had struggled to subdue him. He moved even closer, his gaze caressing her face. Her cheeks heated, and she raised her fingers to her skin.

“Say my name.”

“Sir.”

A smile curved his lips, and her heart fluttered in her chest. Without her armor she couldn’t regulate her responses. This was dangerous. She focused on his mouth. He’d brushed his lips over hers and pressed her against his chest.

“Am I going about this backwards?” He curved the fingers of one hand around the back of her neck and wrapped his arm around her waist. “Say my name, and I’ll kiss you again.”

“Lyrik.” The word was out before she could stop herself. His lips settled over hers, firm, yet surprisingly gentle. She eased her hands under his uniform top, needing the warmth of his skin. Following his lead, she parted her lips and nibbled.

“Say your name, or I’ll stop.” He whispered the words against her lips.

She stiffened. Didn’t he realize what he asked of her? She’d been beaten and starved, locked in a cold, dark room until she accepted her distinction. “I can’t.”

He framed her face between his palms, his thumb tracing her bottom lip. “I will never hurt you.” Compassion warmed his gaze, and her defenses slipped a little more. “Do you want me to kiss you again?”

She nodded, her throat too tight to reply. His mouth covered hers, and she wrapped both arms around his back, pressing her body against his. He moved his lips over and against hers. His tongue traced her lower lip, and she murmured. What was he doing? Tasting her? He delved inside, and she shuddered, letting out a surprised little cry.

He ended the kiss with a soft chuckle. “You’ll never convince me you’re not a virgin now.”

Virginity could be relative. Nothing she’d experienced so far involved having another person’s tongue in her mouth! “Does everyone on this planet kiss -- like that?”

“Afraid so.” He stroked her cheek with the back of his fingers. “You didn’t like it?”

“That is irrelevant.” She stepped back and took a deep breath. “I never should have encouraged you to touch me.”

“Why not?”

She scowled. He was trying to confuse her again.

“We were both enjoying ourselves until I rushed you,” he went on when she didn’t reply. “Shall we try again now that you know what to expect?”

Neatly sidestepping his halfhearted advance, she tucked her hair behind her ears and turned the conversation onto a more productive course. “Why are there more men than women on your planet?”

Tension hardened his features, making her regret the question. “There was a war between the two controlling powers about a hundred cycles ago. The Reformation Sect unleashed a bio-weapon designed to wipe out our females. Unfortunately the weapon was more effective than they realized, and many of their women died as well.”

“That is irrational.” Even against the horrors she had suffered, what he described was hard to comprehend. “How would wiping out your females further their ... I don’t understand.”

Raking his fingers through his damp hair, he heaved an audible sigh. “It’s a long, involved story. Maybe it’s better if you get a grasp on the current situation before we get into history.”

He was probably right. “How long was I in stasis? I have no recollection of the journey here from Earth. You claim we traveled a great distance.”

“That’s complicated, too. Using conventional transportation, it would take several lifespans to travel from Earth to Ontariense.”

“Then how did I get here?”

“Through an interdimensional portal.” He moved toward the cabinets inset in the far wall. “This could be a lengthy conversation. Are you hungry? Thirsty?”

He was stalling, and he hadn’t answered her original question. “A beverage would be acceptable, but I will not allow your evasions indefinitely.”

“Hey. Who’s the handler here? I thought I was giving the orders.” He flashed a lopsided grin, then crossed to the cupboards.

She activated her optical scanner as he scooped powder out of a canister and filled two mugs with steaming water. A light blinked behind her eyes when the scanner initialized. She didn’t want him to realize what she was doing. She could monitor his respiration, pulse, and body temperature as he spoke. It wasn’t an infallible way of gauging truthfulness, but it was the best she could do without her armor.

“Instant blish is better than nothing. Remind me to brew some fresh when we return.” He handed her one of the mugs and took a sip from the other.

She paused to inhale the fragrant steam before trying the beverage. It rolled across her tongue, the taste tangy, yet sweet. “It’s pleasant, but bliss is an exaggeration.”

He smiled. “Blish. Some argue that the name has been corrupted over time. Still, the name of the drink is blish.” He motioned her toward the bench and pushed a button on the wall. A narrow table slid out, providing a place to set their cups.

“What is an interdimensional portal?” she prompted him.

“Were you able to turn others off before you received your implants?”

“You keep answering my questions with questions. What does my ability have to do with these portals?” She analyzed the input from her scanners as she waited for his response. He appeared to be humanoid, but scans could be deceiving.

“We call people with unusual abilities Mystics. If their abilities are powerful enough, they are invited to the Conservatory to be trained. Only the strongest Mystics can Summon the Storm, and it is this ability that creates an interdimensional portal.”

Throughout his explanation, her readings remained consistent. Either he believed what he was saying to be true or ... “Are you a cyborg?”

He laughed. “What makes you ask?”

“You resist my mental control techniques, and the effectiveness of my weapons is greatly reduced. The pulse I sent into your hand would have dropped most men to their knees.”

“Well, it’s nice to know you went easy on me. Wait a minute.” He set down his cup and folded his forearms on the tabletop. “You said mental control *techniques*. Turning people off isn’t your only trick?”

She was still reluctant to reveal specific information about her abilities. Her training perpetuated mistrust. “Tell me more about these Mystics.”

“You met their leader,” he said casually.

A memory stirred, a presence within her mind, powerful, agile -- *ancient*. “Vee.”

“What do you remember?”

Faces contorted with pain. Screaming. Terror and awe blasted her with equal intensity. She rubbed her temples as her head began to pound. Even the memory drained her strength and made her tremble.

“Did I kill him?” she whispered, dreading the answer.

Lyrik wasn’t sure what to tell her. D-159 wouldn’t care if she’d killed or not. Saebin may not have regained control, but she was fighting her way to the surface. “You attacked him, but he’s still alive.”

She released her breath in a sustained sigh and lifted her gaze to his. “I also remember a creature with red-rimmed eyes. He looked humanoid, but his scans were ... something else.”

“I’m not sure Lord Drakkin would appreciate being called a creature. He’s the Director of the Symposium.”

"I'm unfamiliar with that term."

"The Symposium manages the Wisdom of the Ages. In ancient times they might have been called oracles, though their primary purpose isn't to predict the future. They collect and validate information from all over the known galaxies. Drakkin's home world is Bilarri. That's why his physiology is different from ours."

"Did I attack him also?"

Lyrik hid his smile behind his cup. "You tried, but he was unimpressed with your abilities."

Her eyebrows arched, revealing her skepticism. "Lord Drakkin is like you, unaffected by my --"

"Vee was trained by Drakkin, but even Vee isn't in the same class as the Bilarrrians. Drakkin turned you off as easily as you turn off others."

Her eyes focused on his face, but her expression clouded. She wasn't looking at him so much as aiming her gaze in his direction. He'd heard she had had some sort of implant behind her eyes. Was she scanning him? *Scan away, sweetheart. I've got nothing to hide.*

"After Drakkin rendered me unconscious, I was put in stasis?"

"Yes."

"And how long was I kept in stasis?"

He smiled. This was bound to turn her crank in the wrong direction. That's why he'd avoided the question the first time around. "You've been in stasis for just over a cycle."

"A cycle of what?"

He didn't really expect it to be that easy, but he'd had to give it a try. "Ontariese completes a turn every thirty-six hours, so an Ontarian cycle is roughly equivalent to eighteen Earth months."

The information set her in motion. She crossed the room and returned to the table before she spoke again. "I was in stasis for a year and a half?"

"Yes."

"Your eyes swirl like mine. Is that a common characteristic on your planet?"

Her anxiety confused him. He'd expected anger and confusion, but she seemed terrified. "Saebin, everyone on Ontariese has eyes like ours. The colors vary, but they all swirl. Everything Hydran told you was a lie. He was keeping --"

"What happened to the occupants? The ones with eyes like ours?"

"They were brought through the portal. Most of them are still on Ontariese. Is there someone in particular you want to find?"

"Right after I teleported, an overwhelming sense of danger surged through me."

"That's not surprising. This is a pretty inhospitable location, and you'd never teleported before."

She shook her head, stopping directly in front of him. “I heard her voice when I first awakened. I know she’s here. We must find my handler.”

“Your handler was one of the occupants?” He tried to keep the shock from his tone and failed. “I thought she was an employee.”

“She was an occupant of ward A before she offered her services to Dr. Hydran.” Saebin looked away from him, her expression tense and wary. “She was not the only one who realized it was easier to cooperate than ... You still don’t understand.” She tossed back her hair and crossed her arms over her breasts. “She’s a cybernetic engineer. She helped design my implants as well as my body armor. If what you say is true, she has had eighteen months to further her research and find a new market for her products.”

Lyrik stood and instinctively placed his hands on her shoulders. She didn’t flinch or twist away. “What’s her name, or distinction? Detailed records were kept of all the occupants.”

Dread unfurled within him as she continued avoiding his gaze. “I was not allowed to know. She gave the orders, and I obeyed.”

Chapter Five

“D-159, comply.”

Saebin stared into the trusting eyes of the canine and felt another piece of her soul die. Swallowing back bile, she clenched her fist until her nails dug into her palm. Her arm trembled as she aimed her munitions implant at the animal. This was wrong. Senseless. But it was not her place to question her handler.

“The objective is assassination. Comply.”

For three days she had refused, and for three days she had not eaten.

“I can force you to comply, but that defeats the purpose of the exercise.”

A sting erupted at the base of her spine. The sensation would build in intensity until she killed the dog or lost consciousness. They had been through it all before. The pain built. Her eyes watered, and her hand shook.

With a tormented cry, she closed her eyes and sent a concentrated pulse into the animal’s brain. It yelped, and then there was blessed silence. She lowered her arm as tears escaped the corner of her eyes. The pain gradually receded.

She dragged air into her burning lungs and purged her revulsion with a violent shudder. The subtle shuffling of feet. She waited for the orderlies to remove her victim before she opened her eyes. Whining. Dear god, no. She opened her eyes and recoiled. The first dog had been replaced with a similar animal.

“Repeat the exercise, and do not close your eyes this time. You must be certain you’ve met your objective.”

Pain darted into her brain and down her spine. The stinging intensified with each second she hesitated. The dog tilted its head and thumped its tail against the floor. Her hand shook as she slowly raised her fist. Ignoring the whining of the harmless animal, she took aim.

"If this were a human target, your opportunity would be long gone. Kill the wretched beast, so we can move on to the next exercise."

Human target? Her mind rebelled against the phrase. She lowered her fist and turned her back on her handler. Perhaps if she proved herself useless they would dispose of her. Better to die than --

Searing agony drove her to her knees. She screamed, clasping her head with both hands.

"Wait!" Dr. Hydran's voice blared over the central com. "I have a new motivational technique I'd like to try on D-159."

The dream shifted, undulating to a different scene. Saebin was strapped to a treatment table, naked and helpless. Hydran attached a device to the primary input at the base of her skull. "Pain can be so redundant. Let's see if you respond better to this." He injected something into her neck and left her alone in the treatment room. Why had they taken off her armor? It had taken months of various "motivations" before she'd stopped fighting the insidious control it had over her. She'd been beaten, starved, and isolated. Could there be another form of motivation?

As if to answer her unspoken question, heat erupted low in her belly. She shifted her hips and struggled against the restraints. Her sensory implants vibrated, warning her of the barrage of stimulation headed her way. Images formed in her mind. She instinctively closed her eyes. It made no difference. Naked bodies arched and thrust, grasped and stroked in an erotic kaleidoscope of impressions.

Her nipples tightened, her skin tingled, and her core throbbed. She tugged violently; the straps held firm. Each movement intensified the fiery need building within her. She groaned.

"We've allowed you access to the simulators when you achieved your objectives." She wasn't sure if Dr. Hydran spoke over the central com or if his voice was part of the sensory input. "Without its natural culmination, sexual desire can be quite unpleasant."

The images focused to a single couple. A man and a woman lost in the throes of passion. She held her legs wide as he positioned himself between her thighs. Her folds gleamed, her desire obvious. The man traced her slit, making her writhe and moan. Saebin whimpered, her body pulsing painfully. He impaled the woman in one powerful thrust. She arched her back, taking him deeper with frantic upward drives.

Saebin thrashed on the treatment table, her body shaking. Her shallow panting made her nipples feel raw and needy. She couldn't touch her swollen breasts, couldn't bring herself release. On and on, scene after scene, she was kept on the agonizing brink of orgasm without mercy.

The image shifted again. The woman was on top of the man, straddling his hips.

“Saebin.” The man’s voice sounded harsh and hoarse. Her need and the image merged. She was the woman, riding her lover in utter abandon. She ground her hips against his, fumbling in the dark to find his hands. “Saebin.” His fingers closed around her shoulders and gave her a little shake.

With a shuddering moan, Saebin dragged his hands down to her breasts and pressed into his warmth.

Lyrik awoke as Saebin crawled on top of him. His sleep muddled brain didn’t register the significance until her hips started rocking. “Saebin.” He tried to make his tone harsh enough to snap her out of her daze. She arched her back and aligned her mound with his rapidly hardening shaft. Holy shit! This must be one hell of a dream.

“Saebin.” He tried again, firmly grasping her shoulders. She moaned and pulled his hands down to her breasts. Warm, firm, and full, her breasts more than filled his palms. *She’s asleep, asshole! She doesn’t know what she’s doing.*

The heat from her sex seeped through his uniform bottom, teasing his body. It wasn’t just heat. She was wet, her desire-soaked uniform dampening the material separating them. “Saebin, you have to wake up. *Saebin* --”

Her knees clasped his hips, her body trembling violently. Heat pulsed from her core, making him gasp and flinch. Did this always happen when she had an orgasm? It would be down right dangerous for her lover. She cried out, and the implant in her hand discharged, the narrow beam drilling a small crater in the floor. Scrambling off him, she ran toward the utility room.

“Saebin.” He rolled off the bunk and hurried after her.

“Stay back!” She punctuated the demand with a warning shot that barely missed his thigh.

Reluctantly, he stopped in the archway as she crossed to the sinks. “Are you all right?” She aimed her hand over her shoulder, the threat unmistakable.

“I’m not leaving until I’m sure you’re --”

“I’m fine,” she snapped. “Get the hell away from me.”

He moved back from the archway, sorting through the details as he went. Had he inadvertently triggered the erotic dream? He’d teased her and touched her, perhaps this was the result. She hadn’t known how to respond, so her subconscious took over. That didn’t account for the bursts of heat and the spontaneous discharge of her weapon. A smile curved his mouth. He’d heard sexual release called stranger things.

When she returned to the main room a short time later, her face was still flushed, and she wouldn’t meet his gaze.

“Did I hurt you?” she asked, her tone hushed and awkward.

"Luckily your hand was pointed at the floor. Do you know why this happened?" She glanced at the bunks, her arms folded over her breasts. "Would you rather go back to sleep? We can talk about this in the morning."

She shook her head and motioned toward the cupboards. "I'd like some more blish."

"Has this sort of thing happened before?" He retrieved the supplies as he spoke ... his manner as calm and composed as he could make it. "That seemed like more than just an erotic dream."

"I dreamt of my first kill."

He paused and looked at her. He'd heard of warriors who went into a lustful frenzy after battle. Had she been conditioned to react that way? "Did you want to make the kill?"

"No. It was a senseless act."

"What made you do it?" He kept his voice low and conversational, while compassion squeezed his heart.

"I was hungry and ..."

"You were deprived of food by your handler, or you ended the life so you could eat?"

"My handler utilized a variety of motivations -- isolation, starvation, humiliation, and pain."

"Those are textbook behavioral control techniques." Unable to stay the impulse, he lightly touched her arm. "If you'll let me help you, I can figure out exactly what they did to you and why."

"I know what they did to me, and why was never a mystery."

What he knew about Saebin only scratched the surface of what she'd endured. Each incident she entrusted to him, each vulnerability she revealed, made him all the more determined to protect her. Whether she wanted one or not, she'd found a friend.

"Let's get back to what happened a few minutes ago." He nodded toward the section of the bench where they'd sat earlier. "I'd love to think you were overcome by my masculine appeal, but you had no trouble shoving me away in the shower."

They sat, and she took several sips of blish. Turning her face away, she stared across the room.

He touched her chin, bringing her head back toward him. "You don't consider yourself a virgin, yet you'd never been kissed. It doesn't take a lot of imagination to figure out what you're not telling me."

"I was never raped, if that's what you're thinking. Pleasure can be used just as ruthlessly as pain." He continued to stroke her face, tracing her jaw line and the crest of her cheek. Even though he kept his touch light and caressing, he half expected her to retreat. "We were allowed access to simulators when we achieved our objectives."

"And if you failed or refused to cooperate?"

"I was injected with something that ... made me unbearably aroused, then vivid images, sexual images, were transmitted across my neurolink. All the while I was strapped to a treatment table, unable to bring myself relief from the burning desire. After several hours, my implants overloaded, so they were forced to abandon the punishment."

"Sexual release dispersed the excess energy?"

She nodded and pushed back from the table, taking her body out of his reach. Drawing her legs up to her chest, she wrapped her arms around her knees. "That's why my weapon discharged. Can we talk about something else now?"

"We can talk about anything you like, or we don't have to talk at all."

"Tell me something about --"

A shrill alarm interrupted her sentence. Lyrik hurried across the room and activated a security screen recessed in the firestone wall.

"What is that noise?" she shouted above the alarm's wail.

"A proximity sensor was triggered." He navigated through several screens. "Someone is sneaking around out there, but I can't seem to find them."

"Is the storm still raging?"

"It's just about blown itself out." He switched to a different screen and located the intruders. "They're dressed like miners. They probably spotted my shuttle and trotted over to investigate."

"Are we in danger?" She stood and aimed her fists at the entrance.

"If they have valid identification codes, I'll talk to them. If not, I'll arm the external cannons. Either way, they pose no threat to us. Relax."

"Why is a storm shelter equipped with external cannons?" She remained at ready, her gaze darting back and forth between the door and Lyrik.

"Scavengers. Not everyone is interested in stabilizing firestone. In its natural state it's highly explosive."

"How will you know if they are miners or scavengers?"

"Only the miners have identification codes." He turned from the screen and looked at her. "If communication has been restored at the mining headquarters, I'd like to send a message back with them. Look me in the eyes, and tell me who you are."

She uncurled her fingers and met his gaze. "My *name* is Saebin."

Chapter Six

Lyrik accepted her statement with a stiff nod and turned back to the control console. This was her first test. No, it was their first test. He couldn't return with her to the City of Tears until he was certain she could control her abilities. But first he had to determine if they were dealing with uninvited guests or thieves.

He activated external audio. "This shelter is in lockdown. Identify yourselves."

"By whose authority have you commandeered the shelter?" The taller of the two intruders asked.

"Validate your identification, and I'll explain."

By turns the miners stepped up to the panel beside the door and stated their alphanumeric code which activated a retinal scanner. "Authorized mining personnel, Fem cet Mintar. Authorized mining personnel, Merseth." The computer confirmed their identities.

Lyrik switched on visual, allowing the miners to see him. "Commander Lyrik cet Barrel."

"We thought that was your shuttle, sir." The taller one continued the conversation. "Just wanted to make sure everything was sat. Those damn NRS gophers get hungrier every turn. We've had to triple our patrols."

"No problems here. Is your com center operational?"

"Yes, sir."

"Notify the overlord that I've located our stray and all is well."

"Yes, sir." He glanced at his companion. "Can we be of any assistance?"

"I have everything under control."

"I'll relay your message."

“Barrel out.” Lyrik turned from the console and looked into Saebin’s terrified gaze. “What’s wrong?” He took a step toward her, and she raised her hand, her expression hardening in the blink of an eye. “They were miners on patrol. There’s no danger.”

“I understood every word you said. Why can I understand your language?”

Lyrik thought back. He hadn’t even realized he’d switched to Ontarian, but she was right. She shouldn’t have been able to understand him.

“Sat is short for satisfactory, but it’s also a code used to ask if a communication is being relayed under duress. The miner was asking if someone was holding a gun to your head.” She advanced, hostility burning away the remnants of her fear. “The NRS is the New Reformation Sect, a group of zealots who have recently turned dangerous. They take the unstable firestones and use them to make bombs. Why do I know these things, Commander?”

He held his ground, knowing any show of weakness would encourage her aggression. “I was contacted this morning when they were ready to bring you out of stasis. I knew a team of engineers had been --”

She fired a shot precariously close to his head. “They brought me out of stasis for the first time shortly after I arrived on this world. I don’t think they realize how often I was aware, how much I heard.” Pressing her fist against the underside of his jaw, she glared into his eyes. “What is your objective?”

“Can you tell when a person is lying?” He watched her eyes, ready to counter her move if she decided to do more than glare. A tiny light flashed, so quickly he never would have seen it if he hadn’t been staring into her eyes. All the denials in the world wouldn’t matter if she didn’t believe him. “I was told you were in stasis until this morning, and I had no reason to doubt what I’d been told.”

“He’s your father! Overlord Cyrus cet Barrel, Supreme Commander of the City of Tears, is your father.”

“Yes, but I’m Commander of the *Tempest*. I spend far more time in space than on the Day Moon. The City of Tears is my father’s domain. I have little to do with what goes on there.” Her posture didn’t change. She kept her fist positioned to fry his brain. “Think this through, Saebin. What do you accomplish by killing me? Where will you go? What will you do?”

Her jaw clenched, and her nostrils flared. “You told me I’d been rescued, that Ontariese is my home. The engineers aren’t trying to free me from this technological prison; they want to replicate it.” She stepped back, but her hand shifted, targeting his heart. “That’s the only reason they’ve kept me alive.”

“I knew none of this.”

“The *Tempest* is a spaceship?”

“Yes.” Lyrik couldn’t think about his father right now. Anger would make him careless, and Saebin was teetering on a razor’s edge. The smallest pressure would send her plummeting into the familiar protection of D-159. She needed options. He couldn’t take her to the Conservatory. No weapons of any kind were allowed beyond the Mystic shields.

“What purpose does your ship serve?”

She was assessing him, gauging the truthfulness of his statements. “The *Tempest* is used for a variety of missions, from simple merchant runs to highly classified recon.”

“Is Ontariense still at war? What does your father want with me?”

“I don’t know.” But he sure as hell meant to find out. He and his father butted heads on occasion. Cyrus often focused on the outcome of a situation, while Lyrik also considered the means. Those who experienced the advent of the Great Conflict tended to be more willing to accept sacrifice. Still, Lyrik couldn’t begin to imagine how his father would justify this.

“I will not be taken alive.” Her resolve sent a chill down his spine. “No one should be made to live as I have lived.”

“I have no intention of taking you back.”

“They will hunt me down. My armor must be retrieved, even if I am expendable.” He stepped toward her. She stepped back. “Are you expendable, too? If you are not in league with the overlord, as you claim, then your father set you up.”

He crossed his arms over his chest, dread expanding with each breath he took. “I believe it was an unhappy coincidence. The only person capable of withstanding your Mystic pulse happened to be his son.”

She snorted. “Even if he didn’t intentionally put you in harms way, it’s a poor reflection on his priorities.” Lowering her hand, she shook her head. “I could gut you and leave you on his doorstep, and I would still have nowhere to go.”

Anger flared through his uncertainty. She’d known nothing but manipulation and degradation her entire life. This was supposed to be a new start. He’d promised her freedom, and it appeared his own father had taken up where Hydran left off.

“Tell me about Krysta,” she said in a quiet, unsteady tone.

He inhaled with slow deliberateness. Krysta had so much to lose if D-159 took over again, and Krysta was the one person on Ontariense who wouldn’t hesitate if he asked for her assistance. He was going to confront his father, but getting Saebin to safety had to come first.

“You and Krysta have the same father. You may have the same mother also, I’m not sure.”

“It’s complicated?” Sarcasm made her tone brittle. “Does she have powers that led her to believe I couldn’t hurt her?”

“She has memories that led her to believe you *wouldn’t* hurt her.”

“We were close -- before?”

“Yes.” He didn’t like where this was leading. He couldn’t take her to Krysta, not at her villa anyway. If Trey learned what Saebin had done in the interrogation room, things could get ugly.

Lyrik sighed. How much did Trey know? He was Director of Covert Ops. It was likely Saebin was being groomed as a covert agent. He shook his head, dispelling the momentary doubt. Trey had led the team responsible for reducing Operation Hydra to ashes. There was no way he was involved.

An image formed within his mind, and Lyrik shuddered. Dro Tar Nex was unconventional, owing allegiance to no one. Yet she was unflaggingly dedicated to the greater good. It made perfect sense. Still, Lyrik hesitated. Dro Tar was unpredictable to say the least. His father despised her, which was to their advantage. Lyrik heaved a frustrated sigh and squared his shoulders.

“I think I know where I can take you.”

“Why should I trust you?”

“Do you have a better idea?” She crossed her arms over her chest and fell silent. “Don’t look so glum, sweetheart. You’re about to get your wish. I don’t see a way around it. We’re going to Ontariese.”

* * * * *

Ensley cet Roumi pushed away from her desk and stood. She’d been staring at the equation for the past hour with no result. The answer would come to her; it always did. She just needed some sleep.

Perched atop one of the Day Moon’s many peaks, her office overlooked the City of Tears. Far more elegant than any of the cities she’d seen on Earth, the irony of its military purpose amused her. Like a high-priced whore, the City of Tears possessed physical perfection and a soul that was rotten and convoluted.

She crossed to the massive window that dominated one wall. “Rotate slats forty percent.” The Night Moon bathed her face in silvery light, the tranquility mocking her discontent. She’d experienced more in the eighteen months she’d arrived on Ontariese than in all the years that had gone before. Still, it wasn’t enough. Or perhaps it was too much. Ensley couldn’t explain her restlessness.

Her privacy sensor beeped, and she glanced toward the door. “Come in.” She didn’t turn around, but watched Cyrus stride across her office in the window.

He strutted through life with the arrogance of royalty, while he fought to abolish the status quo. He railed against the “evil Mystics,” when what he really wanted was the power inherent in their existence. If he learned the true scope of her abilities, would she be evil, too?

“Did Lyrik find her?” she asked with a casualness she didn’t feel. Saebin had fought the programming harder than any of the other occupants of ward D. Just when Ensley was convinced Saebin would have to be destroyed, she’d turned into the most powerful weapon Operation Hydra had ever seen.

“Why are you standing in the dark?” Cyrus clasped his hands behind his back, meeting her gaze in the window.

“I like the dark.” She turned to face him. “I need the quiet, and you can’t find that here during the day.”

“Undoubtedly.” Desire erupted in his gaze, but he never touched her. He needed her expertise more than he wanted her body, and they both knew it.

“Did you solve the equation?” His tone was low and caressing.

“No.” She shrugged. Cyrus was so easy to provoke, it almost took the fun out of it -- almost. “The equation won this round. I’m going home.”

Folding his arms over his brawny chest, he pressed his mouth into a grim line. “The Rodytes arrive tomorrow. Lyrik just sent a message confirming his recapture of D-159, but I hardly think she’s ready for a demonstration. Do you?”

“We use the equation to stall them until D-159 is more malleable?”

“Something like that.” He paused, his gaze searching her face. “You’ve had no interaction with the Rodytes, but I have. They are ruthless and barbaric. You have no idea what they’re capable of. You must rely on me to --”

“Don’t patronize me, *Overlord*.” She sneered. “Out there you might command a minor mystique, but I know the truth.”

“Do you?” One side of his mouth curved in a smirk. “How do you perceive the truth?”

“The only reason I didn’t approach the Rodytes directly is because they won’t negotiate with a woman. You need my designs to attract their interest, and I need you to get through the door.”

“The door will remain permanently closed unless we deliver on our promises. One of our promises is MIA at the moment, so you better get busy on the other!” His volume escalated with each word.

“Browbeating me isn’t going to solve the equation. I’m tired. Even someone of your renown can understand ...” He raised his hand, and her words trailed away. Fury twisted through her gut. Not using her Mystic abilities to slam him across the room nearly snapped her self-control. “Don’t ever raise your hand to me again.” Her tone was cold and lethal.

A strained moment passed as they glared at each other.

Cyrus lowered his hand.

"The Rodytes are not the only society interested in this technology. They just happen to be the most convenient." She didn't need to spell out the rest. If he kept pushing, she'd disappear and her designs with her. "Will Lyrik bring her back?"

"Of course. He's my son."

She arched her brows at his certainty. "And she's a beautiful woman."

"What does that have to do with anything? Lyrik was given an order by his overlord. He will return D-159 in the morning."

"If you say so." She smiled, knowing it would piss him off. "I'd suggest enacting a contingency plan just in case."

Cyrus planted his fists on his hips and raised his chin. "If Lyrik betrays me, I'll send a clean up team after both of them."

"Can I have your word on that?" If Saebin managed to gain control over D-159 the only option was disposal. If she recruited Lyrik in the process, he became a liability as well.

"You worry about the equation. I'll worry about my son."

"I'm not worried about the equation. All I need is a few hours of sleep."

"Then why are we arguing?"

Because you're a pompous ass! The comment would only prolong their pointless conversation, so she headed for the door. If Lyrik didn't return with D-159 as promised, she would take care of the problem herself. "I'll com you in the morning."

* * * * *

Saebin stared at the violet-tinted sky, trying to reconcile the color with the vivid blue so persistent in her memory. A pale pink cloud drifted by as the shuttle descended toward Frontine. The city spread before them in a splendid cluster of towering buildings and perpetual motion. Twin trams extended as far as the eye could see, one on top of the other, the cars speeding in opposite directions. Many of the smaller buildings sported rooftop solariums. Capped with retractable domes, the greenery provided a pleasant contrast to the endless sea of alloy and transparent composite.

"We'll have to leave the shuttle in a commuter lot and take one of the trams. A few of the larger buildings can facilitate a shuttle landing, but we're trying not to draw attention to ourselves."

Years of training had taught her to be suspicious. She was in a strange world with little information and no recourse. Lyrik was not just her best chance, he was her only chance. Still, her mind wouldn't accept his decisions without question.

"Isn't your insignia on the side of the shuttle?"

"I morphed it into a common commercial logo, but how did you know what it was?"

Saebin shot him an impatient look. "Something made the miners think this was your shuttle. I noticed the design when we boarded. Don't let the implants fool you, Commander. My brain still functions." He chuckled in response to her surly comment, which only compounded her annoyance. He'd been calm and collected since they left the Day Moon. She'd repeatedly asked their destination. He'd only say they were going to visit a friend. "Are these garments going to draw attention to us?"

"They shouldn't. Uniforms aren't that unusual. Besides, if push comes to shove, Father can pinpoint my location with a simple scan."

"How is that possible?"

"During the induction process at the City of Tears every cadet is injected with a micryte."

"I'm not familiar with that term." She fidgeted in her chair, tugging on the safety restraints. Her chair held her captive next to a man who disturbed her in ways she couldn't comprehend. His voice caused her insides to quiver and her pulse to race. She couldn't forget how it felt with his mouth moving over hers or his long, lean body spread beneath her as she ground her mound against his shaft. Why did her body still ache if she'd dispersed the overload?

"It's a microscopic chip encoded with basic information about the person ... medical alerts, next of kin, that sort of thing."

"And this micryte can be scanned from the Day Moon?" She didn't care nearly as much about the micryte as she needed something to distract her wayward thoughts.

He nodded, his attention momentarily absorbed with the shuttle controls.

"What's to keep an enemy from accessing the information?"

"Micrytes are activated with a very specific signal. If the disk is scanned with a counterfeit signal it dissolves. There is only one scanner able to access the information, and it's on the Day Moon."

They lapsed into silence as he finalized their destination and guided the shuttle onto a landing pad. "Alignment acceptable. Please offload here. Your transport will be stowed in slip B-226." A synthesized voice offered the information.

"This lot is automated." He smiled and released the controls. "That's why I chose it. When we go through the hatch, stand directly behind me, and keep your head down. As long as the security system imprints one or the other of us, it's programmed to let us pass."

"This will tell your father exactly where we are." She released the safety restraints and stood.

"No, this will tell my father exactly where I am."

"A fact he can determine with a simple scan."

"Exactly." She used his broad back as a shield until the security system had imprinted his facial characteristics. He reached back and took her hand, drawing her forward as they

walked beyond the security station. Rows and rows of shuttles lined the enclosed lot. Massive mechanisms maneuvered the transports around as if they were toys. Saebin had never seen anything like it.

“Is your *friend* expecting us?” They exited onto a shadowed walkway. The buildings had been impressive from the air, but Saebin craned her neck, barely able to see the narrow strip of sky still visible between the towering structures.

“I left a message. I’ll try again from the tram. Reception is terrible in the canyons.”

She rushed to keep pace with his long stride. People hurried past them, absorbed in their own activities. Many appeared to be talking to themselves, until Saebin realized they had communication devices hooked over their ears. “Are transmissions monitored all over the city?”

“The capability is there, but Frontine is massive. It would take the entire army to monitor every conversation.”

“Then why won’t you tell me where we’re going?”

His mouth curved in an enigmatic smile. “I guess I haven’t quite convinced myself that *she* is our only option.”

“Who is she? What is your hesitation?”

“She is Dro Tar Nex, and she has to be experienced to be believed.” He shrugged and released a muffled chuckle. “Maybe you won’t find her as ... unreal as most Ontarians find her. She ventured to Earth eleven cycles ago, and since then she’s become obsessed with everything Earthish. You’ve only recently come to Ontariense, so she may seem like the only person on the planet who isn’t unusual.”

Intrigued by his description, Saebin did her best to imagine what they would encounter once they arrived. The tram doors slid open, and they boarded the sleek alloy car. The interior was crowded, and Lyrik slipped his arm around her shoulders, drawing her close against his side.

Her gaze flitted from passenger to passenger, her astonishment growing with each new face. *Men*. She was the only female aboard. A hush rippled through the men as they noticed her standing beside Lyrik. He moved in front of her and pulled her against his chest, wrapping both arms around her waist.

“Is she a relation or a companion?” someone asked.

“She is *mine*, until she says otherwise,” he replied without turning around.

Muffled conversations resumed, and the palpable tension eased somewhat. Lyrik had warned her about the disproportionate population, but she’d been unable to imagine the scenario he described. If Lyrik hadn’t claimed her, what would the others have done? She’d been surrounded by females at the Center. The pendulum had just swung in the opposite direction. Anxiety made her restless. She’d only gotten a cursory glance before Lyrik had

become her living shield. Were they still staring? She'd never shared a space with so many men.

"Eye contact will only encourage them. It's better this way."

She nodded and turned around, leaning back against his chest. The tram sped through the canyons created by the towering buildings. It dipped below ground for a time before emerging into the meager sunlight again. By the time Lyrik announced that they were approaching the appropriate station, Saebin was dizzy.

"How do you know this Dro Tar Nex?" Saebin asked as they stepped off the tram.

"She would be quick to inform you there is only one Dro Tar and I met her through Trey." She shot him a sidelong glance filled with confusion. "Trey is Krysta's life mate."

They entered one of the tall buildings and took a speed lift to the sixty-ninth floor. Lyrik chuckled as they exited the lift. "She doesn't care where she lives, as long as her flat is on the sixty-ninth floor."

Saebin had no idea what he found so amusing, so she said nothing more.

He stopped in front of an unmarked door. A discoloration in the surface indicated an apartment number might have been pried off. Lyrik activated the interior page with a voice command.

A moment passed. Lyrik reached for the trigger again when the door slid open. A woman stood framed in the threshold. Her short brown hair was tipped in gold and stood out from her head in unruly spikes. Her only garment appeared to be an oversized black tee shirt with bold white lettering that read: *This is the shirt I wear when I just don't give a shit.*

She looked from Lyrik to Saebin and back. "Have I been naughty? What brings the big, bad warlord to my door?"

Chapter Seven

Ensley sat silently as Cyrus interacted with the holographic image of Pern Keire. Cyrus puffed out his chest and raised his chin. Did he really expect the Crown Stirate of Rodymia to be impressed with his bravado? The incoming transmission was encrypted and filtered, leaving Pern's image blurred, his voice distorted.

"Our goals align quite well." Ensley wasn't fooled by Pern's bored tone. His reputation fascinated her. The fact that he intimidated the overlord aroused her. Cyrus might think himself powerful, but Pern was a true conqueror. "I must know that you are committed to this path. Once the demonstration is set in motion there will be no turning back."

"I trust the design I delivered this morning is adequate proof of my dedication to our mutual goal."

Each "I" Cyrus uttered made Ensley's decision that much easier. Without *her* design Cyrus would have had nothing to offer the Rodytes. Much to Cyrus's frustration, the Joint Council monitored his transmissions, so she'd contacted Pern from her flat. There would be no alliance without her, yet Cyrus focused solely on himself.

"I will feel more secure in our partnership once I have a working prototype," the Stirate replied.

Cyrus inclined his head. "I understand."

"I don't think you do." Pern paused for effect. "I want the designer on my ship within the hour."

"But --"

"The prototype can be built much faster if the designer oversees the project. This is not negotiable."

Cyrus glanced at her, fear obvious in his expression. What a fool. Revealing any hint of weakness to a man like Pern Keire was an invitation for destruction. The incoming signal was distorted, but Pern could see Cyrus clearly.

"Give me just a moment, please," Cyrus said and blocked the transmission.

Ensley tried to look suitably concerned. In truth she had contacted the Rodytes moments after finishing the design and arranged for this demand. All she'd needed was a foot in the door. Cyrus had served his purpose.

"You think you're so smart." He shook his head. "If you want to subject yourself to these animals, have at it. The Rodytes have no regard for women. You'll be raped before they leave orbit. Is that what you want?"

"Abusing me would be rather counterproductive. Don't you think?"

"Say the word, and I'll call off the negotiations." Ensley wasn't swayed by his anxiety. He was scrambling for a way to salvage his stake in the deal. "We can sell the design to another buyer."

Now it was "we." She wanted to laugh. "They already have the design. You transmitted it this morning."

"They are barbarians!"

"They are technologically advanced barbarians." She sighed and averted her gaze. There would be plenty of time to gloat once she was aboard the Stirate's ship. "I can progress no farther without their assistance. We really have no other choice."

The holocom beeped demonstrating the Stirate's impatience. Cyrus returned to his place in front of the transmitter and reactivated the feed. "I'm reluctant to part with the design and the designer. You must understand how --"

"This is nonnegotiable. I will send a shuttle for the designer. If it returns without him, our dealings are ended." The image blinked out.

Cyrus crossed his arms over his chest and scowled. "Did you hear him? He presumes the designer is a man because women are treated like animals on Rodymia."

"What choice do we have?" Rushing to her bedroom, she opened her closet and activated her hovercase. The container floated toward her bed.

"You're remarkably composed." Cyrus stood in the open doorway, his gaze narrowed with suspicion. "Why aren't you afraid? Believe me, you have reason to be."

She opened the hovercase next to her bed and gathered her belongings. "I understand men like Pern Keire. Once he accepts that I'm indispensable, he'll see to my protection."

"How much abuse are you willing to endure before he accepts your indispensability?"

"None." She paused and met his gaze. "The design you gave him this morning is flawed. I have worked out the solution, but I have no intention of revealing the nature of the flaw

until he personally ensures my safety. If I'm under the Stirate's protection, no one will dare harm me."

"Did you anticipate this or *arrange* it?"

"Oh, yes, I wanted to be at the mercy of barbarians. Rape me, abuse me, please." With a disgusted snort, she turned back to her case and continued packing. "Ongoing communication is too easily intercepted. The only way to minimize this risk is by going to their compound. I anticipated the situation and arranged it to *our* advantage."

"I hope you're right. He could just as easily strap you to a table and let his crew take turns on you until you're ready to be obedient."

She paused, hands on her hips. "What is your obsession with rape? If he is truly as barbaric as you claim, why wouldn't he beat me or starve me or threaten those I love? Rape isn't the only form of abuse."

His eyes took on a cold and distant sheen. "You don't know the Rodytes as I do."

After gathering her personal items from the bathroom, she offered Cyrus her full attention. "So educate me. Where is my strategy flawed?"

"I sent three ambassadors to Rodymia shortly after this travesty began."

"By this travesty, I presume you mean the destruction of Operation Hydra."

"We don't have time for petty distinctions. If you keep him waiting he is more likely to be cruel."

Petty distinctions? Who the hell did he think he was? It was convenient for Cyrus to forget she was one of the "unnatural abominations" the rescue team had brought back from Earth. Well, her association with Cyrus was nearly at an end. She slammed the case shut and waited for him to continue.

"I sent two men and a woman. The woman was necessary because the others didn't speak Rodyte, and Pern Keire refuses to speak anything else. He listened to their proposal, casually informed them the offer was not adequately beneficial to Rodymia, and spent the next two days raping the woman while the men were forced to watch. When this no longer amused him, he summoned his guards and watched while all three were raped, *repeatedly*. I am not the one obsessed with rape. It is a common pastime on Rodymia."

Her research had recorded vague instances and rumors, but nothing like this. Was his story a clever ploy to keep her from going? Despite his arrogance, Cyrus was nobody's fool and manipulation was his specialty. Stay or go? Start over without Cyrus or finish what they'd begun?

She'd come too far to start over. The Rodytes already had the design. The Stirate couldn't develop the technology without her, and she would refuse to continue without his protection. It was a good plan.

"If they really are the animals you say, why are *you* negotiating with them?" she asked in a calm, cool voice.

He gaped at her. "You don't believe me?"

"I didn't say that."

He shook his head, his gaze filled with pity and regret. "As soon as you are taken before him, kneel. Keep your eyes downcast and don't speak until he speaks to you." The central com chimed announcing the shuttle's arrival on the roof of the building. "Don't give him ultimatums. He won't kill you, but he will make you wish you were dead. The best advice I can give you is ... to please him."

She arched her brow. That was the best he could do? "I can be his whore or his victim? That's not much of a choice." After steering her hovercase across her flat, she paused and shot Cyrus a scathing glance. "I will be no man's victim, so I guess I'm destined to be a whore."

He didn't follow her to the rooftop landing pad, so Ensley allowed her expression to relax. As usual Cyrus saw what he expected to see. Did he really think she'd jaunt off with the Rodytes without researching the situation?

She'd studied Rodyte customs as well as learning their language. They put no more importance on sex than any other bodily function. If they were hungry, they ate; if they were fatigued, they slept; and if sexual desire stirred, they copulated. Rape was not met with abhorrence by the Rodytes because they didn't revere sex. Sharing a partner was no more significant than sharing a meal.

Many misconstrued their actions as barbaric, while in reality they were bound by a strict code of conduct. Honor was everything to the Rodytes. They would die to protect their honor and kill to avenge the honor of those close to them. The key to dealing with Rodytes was understanding what *they* considered honorable.

* * * * *

"Well, this is a great big barrel of *suck*."

Lyrik laughed, drawing Saebin's attention away from the confounding person seated across from them. Dro Tar spoke a bizarre dialect of Earthish that Saebin could barely comprehend. After inviting them into her living quarters, she told them she was going to "put on something more appropriate."

Saebin stared at the brightly colored walls and the translucent furniture, torn between fascination and abhorrence. The material covering the floor had long, individual strands, making it appear shaggy. Hung at sporadic intervals along the walls were framed images depicting pale-skinned, dark-haired men in menacing poses. Most of the men were groping large-breasted women and many displayed fangs.

"What are those?" she asked Lyrik.

"Reproductions of movie posters. Movies were entertainment vidfiles people gathered to watch on large screens. These posters advertised vampire movies."

“What is a vampire?”

“I’ll leave that one for Dro Tar.”

Walking to the wide, purple sofa, Saebin poked it with her finger. The smooth, shiny couch was inflated with air or some sort of gas.

“You think this is bizarre, you should see her bedroom.”

Lyrik sat on one end of the sofa. Saebin took the other, wiggling until she accustomed herself to the odd, floating sensation. “Is this person your lover?”

He laughed. “Hardly. Her tastes run toward tall, dark, and dangerous, as you can tell.” He motioned toward the movie posters.

Dro Tar returned a short time later, wearing faded blue jeans and a different tee shirt. This one was formfitting, with a slogan that read: *Submit, Worship, Obey!* In progressively larger letters.

“I hate to drag you into this,” Lyrik told Dro Tar, “but I really wasn’t sure where else to take her.”

“Hell, trouble’s my middle name. I love a good intrigue. Your Daddy Dear would rather have a root canal than deal with me, so robocop should be safe for a while anyway.”

“I know you’ve taken on some unconventional tasks for Trey. If I give you an anonymous access code, will you do some snooping around for me?”

“Depends whose business I’ll be snooping into.”

“We have reason to believe the woman who helped design Saebin’s implants and body armor is here on Ontariese. It’s possible she’s in the City of Tears, but if she’s working for the overlord she’ll be damn hard to trace.”

“How is that possible?” Dro Tar glanced at Saebin, her expression tense and concerned. “The only people who came back through the portal were the refugees and your crew. Did we have a stowaway?”

“The woman we’re looking for is one of the refugees. Saebin doesn’t know her name, so see if you can find an image roster.”

Saebin fidgeted on the inflatable couch. How well did Lyrik know this woman? Saebin hated her vulnerability and the raw aching emotions churning just beneath the surface. She needed her suit, longed for the balance, the barrier. Uncertainty bombarded her. She wasn’t sure she trusted Lyrik, much less his unusual friend.

“When’s the last time you spoke with Krysta?”

Dro Tar wiggled back in her chair, which was shaped to look like a giant hand, and crossed her legs in front of her. “Last week, I think. Is that important?”

“This is all so damn complicated. If the miners actually sent the message, Father shouldn’t be looking for us yet. As soon as he realizes we’re onto him --”

“The shit hits the fan?”

He grimaced. "I have no idea what that means, but the mental image is disgusting."

"Don't let him know." Dro Tar shrugged. "March her back into the detention center and insist on overseeing her retraining yourself."

"I'm scheduled to ship out at the end of the week." He shook his head. "As soon as we set foot on the Day Moon, I'm no longer in control. It's too risky."

"Then take her with you on the *Tempest*."

Saebin listened to the conversation, growing more annoyed with each exchange. They were devising and discarding possibilities with no input from her. "I'm in control of my implants now. Do I get a say in any of this?"

"We don't have many options," Lyrik said. "What did you have in mind?"

"Their determination to learn how my armor works is our only advantage. My suit doesn't function without me, and I will not allow it to control me again."

"You aren't strong enough to risk going back into that thing." Lyrik faced her, his expression adamant. "You were just barely in control before. You teleported without knowing why. You --"

"Can't her implants be removed?" Dro Tar asked.

Lyrik looked at Dro Tar before he replied. "I was told she wouldn't survive their removal, but I don't know what to believe anymore."

"The implants replaced portions of my brain. I would not be fully functional without them." Damaged, broken, altered, she would never be the trusting person who had walked into ward D filled with excitement and anticipation. She let anger roll through her, accepting the cold, cutting wave. Hydran had changed the nature of her existence, and she would snuff out that existence before she allowed *anyone* to control her again. "I'm not convinced I can remain separated from my armor indefinitely. The overloads alone can kill me. I don't honestly know what other malfunctions might occur."

Warm and caressing, Lyrik's gaze returned to her face. "I suspect we can find creative ways to deal with your overloads, so let's concentrate on strengthening your control."

Heat suffused her face, and sensual echoes teased her memory. He'd spread beneath her, hot, hard, male as she rubbed against him. What would it be like to straddle his big body while they were both awake and naked? She shivered, her nipples poking against her uniform top. Her anger ebbed, leaving determination and desire.

"All right, you two. Rein in the hormones. If removing the implants isn't an option, how does she strengthen her control?"

"I know nothing about Mystic abilities." Lyrik shifted on the sofa, obviously uncomfortable with the admission. "All I know for certain is we're not going to figure this out in a day or two."

"She needs to escape," Dro Tar said cheerfully.

“And go where?”

She laughed. “Right here. I’ll smack you with something to make it look like you put up a fight, and then you can fly the shuttle back to the COT. Oh, wait this is even better. She forced you to fly her here and then gave you the slip. They’ll have all of Frontine to search, and the security vids at the shuttle lot will back up your story.”

“There’s no way she could force me to endanger the general population, and Father --”

“Shutting people off isn’t my only trick.” Saebin waited until he looked at her to go on. “I can compel people into action. We were in the corridor when I blasted your hand. Your father knows you’re not completely immune to my abilities.”

“Where’s your body armor?” Dro Tar scooted to the edge of her chair, anticipation shining in her eyes.

Saebin hesitated. Was Dro Tar looking forward to an energizing adventure, or was she anxious to get her hands on the suit?

“It’s still on the shuttle,” Lyrik replied. His features settled into a fierce scowl. Saebin could only guess which aspect of the situation had him so irritated.

“Stow it in one of the lockers before you com Daddy Dear,” Dro Tar said.

Lyrik shook his head. “The lobby is under surveillance.”

“Damn.”

No one said anything for a moment. Dro Tar drummed her fingertips against her knee, her expression clearly thoughtful, while Lyrik continued to scowl.

“I’ll make one last scanner sweep of the city before I contact my father.” Lyrik’s features relaxed as his gaze turned cunning. “The trams are a logical target, which will take me through several crowded intersections. How well can you navigate your shuttle?”

Dro Tar grinned. “I know what you’re thinking. You spent your first cycle out of the academy masquerading as a smuggler.”

“Have you ever done a midair drop?”

“I think I can handle it.”

Saebin touched Lyrik’s knee, drawing his attention. “What are you planning?”

“I’ll load your suit into my shuttle’s expulsion tube and shoot it through the emergency hatch of Dro Tar’s shuttle.”

“You learned this maneuver from smugglers?”

He nodded, mischief making his green eyes sparkle. “I learned a lot of things from those smugglers.”

“How will you explain losing both your hostage and the body armor?” Saebin asked.

“You were never my hostage, and as far as everyone is concerned you’re still wearing the body armor.”

Dro Tar scrubbed her hair with both hands, rearranging the spikes. “As soon as you check in with Cyrus, he’ll start tracking your micryte.”

“She’s right.” Lyrik sighed, his troubled gaze settling on Saebin. “I can’t come back here. I’ll lead him right to you.”

“Not with ‘way-cool-super-spy’ on your team.” Dro Tar laughed and bounded out of her hand-shaped chair.

Saebin turned to Lyrik as Dro Tar disappeared into her bedroom. “Are you sure we can trust this woman? She seems rather -- unbalanced.”

“Trey has depended on her for years, and I trust Trey’s judgment implicitly.”

“What about Trey’s loyalty? You said he’s Krysta’s life mate; what is his connection to the overlord?”

Conviction ignited in his gaze. “Trey is the Director of Covert Ops for the COT, but his loyalty is to Ontariense not to the overlord.” He scooted to the edge of the creaky sofa and cupped her hands between his. “I wouldn’t be here if I wasn’t sure of Dro Tar.” The way-cool-super-spy returned before he could say more.

“This little gizmo injects a nanite that attaches itself to the micryte.” Her brows drew together over her expressive eyes. “I think that’s right. Anyway, it will randomly modulate the signal until the micryte dissolves. You’ll go dark some time tomorrow, but they’ll have no idea where you are in the meantime.”

“Why is the process so lengthy?” Saebin asked.

“If the nanite worked any faster it would screw up the immune system and make our hero sick.” She walked to Lyrik and held out the injector.

“Is leaving Saebin here going to be a problem? What’s your current assignment?” Lyrik took the small, metallic device from her outstretched hand, turning it this way and that.

“Infiltrating the NRS. I’m to immerse myself in their propaganda without losing sight of the greater good.”

“The greater good?” Saebin echoed. “Your tone changed when you said those words. What do they mean?”

“It’s an idealistic concept that has little meaning anymore,” Lyrik muttered. “The sacred traditions challenge everyone to commit themselves to the greater good, to put the well-being of others above their own preferences and desires. When the House of Joon challenged this ideal, it started the Great Conflict.”

“The NRS is attempting to rekindle this conflict?”

“In a way,” Dro Tar said. “The NRS is frustrated by the concentration of Mystics on the Joint Council. They feel people without Mystic abilities are no longer valued.”

Saebin’s sensory ring buzzed, and she rubbed the back of her neck. Incomplete circuits, random signals, her nervous system couldn’t defuse the stimuli.

Lyrik touched her shoulder, his hand firm and warm. "Are you all right?"

She nodded, leaning into his caress. "I'm tired."

"I shouldn't be gone long." He continued to touch her, rubbing her neck and stroking her hair. "They may have tampered with the circuitry, incorporated some sort of homing device. Unless it's absolutely necessary, don't reactivate your armor."

Chapter Eight

All Ensley saw of the Rodyte ship was the inside of an airlock before she was escorted down an arched corridor. When every crewman they passed averted his gaze, Ensley's pulse leapt. What would it be like to command such power? No one so much as sneaked a glance at her.

The corridor was clean, as were the guards. Dark blue uniforms accented their heavily muscled bodies. For barbarians these men seemed suspiciously civilized. They paused before a wide doorway. One of the guards stepped forward and pressed his hand to a smooth panel. A seam appeared in the door, and the halves disappeared into the walls.

Ensley swallowed and lowered her gaze, allowing the guards to guide her steps. The floor gleamed like polished stone, yet she detected a subtle give in the surface. They led her toward a large piece of furniture, a desk or a table.

Cyrus had advised her to kneel, but her research indicated Pern would perceive the gesture as a show of weakness. Eye contact, on the other hand, had to be invited.

"A woman." He chuckled. "I won't pretend I'm not surprised. Are you the true leader of this insurrection?"

His deep commanding voice sent shivers down her spine. "Your agreement with the overlord puts me at your disposal."

"That didn't answer the question. Look at me."

She gradually raised her gaze, tension escalating with each centimeter her eyes traveled. An austere room surrounded her, the walls unadorned. Pern sat behind a desk constructed of the same gray-green alloy as the walls. Only the muted colors marbled through the floor broke the monotony.

Her gaze settled on the man behind the desk, and Ensley's nipples hardened against the support cups built into her blouse. At first glance his hair appeared black, yet any movement

of his head revealed its true midnight-blue color. The top had been left longer than the sides, a gleaming lock resting on his broad forehead. Sharp cheekbones and a straight, narrow nose drew her attention to his thin-lipped mouth. Pern wasn't handsome by anyone's standards, but power emanated from him.

Pushing back from his desk, he stood and moved toward her, his stride smooth, almost graceful. "There is a flaw in the design. Did you insert it intentionally?"

"Yes, sir." She glanced into his eyes, and her mouth went dry. The pattern was similar to the inhabitants of Earth, though the whites of his eyes had a blue tinge. A vivid blue ring separated his black irises from his equally black pupils. She'd grown accustomed to the gently swirling eyes of Ontarians. His sharp, assessing gaze reminded her of Dr. Hydran. "I'm safe so long as I'm valuable. I wanted to ensure --"

"You are here at my request. Do you doubt my ability to keep you safe?"

"Of course not."

"Your lust turned to disdain when you looked into my eyes. Explain your reaction."

Damn, he was perceptive. Squaring her shoulders, she spoke in a cool, even tone. "I'm attracted to powerful men, but your eyes remind me of someone unpleasant."

"Then don't look into my eyes." He smiled, and the blue ring encircling his pupils began to glow. "When I rut between your thighs, I'll take you from behind, so nothing will distract you."

She inclined her head, needing a moment to compose her expression. "I'm anxious to begin work on the prototype, but I suppose a short delay won't matter." He chuckled, and the tension gripping her belly eased. Slowly raising her face, she forced herself to meet his gaze.

"Do I frighten you?"

"I'm entirely at your mercy. Only a fool would not be frightened."

"Honesty, how refreshing." Leaning against his desk, he crossed his arms over his chest and studied her. "Who do you see when you look into my eyes?"

How much had Cyrus told him? It would be difficult to explain her motivations to a man ruled by honor. Her choice had been servitude or treachery. Could she hope to make him understand? "A man I would rather forget."

His eyebrows arched. "Another evasion. I'm disappointed."

"What do you know about Operation Hydra?" An identity scanner had passed over her face as she boarded the shuttle. Even now he was likely researching her background.

"You are one of the refugees?" She didn't miss the note of astonishment in his tone. She nodded, and his eyes narrowed. "Why would the overlord trust a Mystic?"

"Cyrus doesn't trust me, he needs me. There's a significant difference."

He lunged, moving so fast his body blurred. They collided, knocking her back a step, before his long fingers tangled in her hair. "You know what he intends to do; what I intend to help him do. Why would you offer your assistance to the enemy?"

"I was considered a traitor long before I was brought to Ontariese. The reasons for what I did have only solidified since my arrival. Things are no different on this side of the portal than they were back on Earth. If anything, they're worse."

"I have no tolerance for traitors. Explain quickly, while I'm still willing to listen." Energy arced between them. Her skin tingled, and her vision blurred. She yelped, tugging against his hold. He closed his eyes, his fingers tightening in her hair. "What did you just do?" He ground out the words between clenched teeth.

"I don't know." She gasped. "It wasn't intentional."

He panted, his warm breath wafting against her face. "Sever the link!"

"I'm not doing anything."

His eyes opened, and she cried out. The rings were gone, replaced by a solid field of black. "Gema?" The plaintive question held her spellbound. Not just his tone, the actual timbre of his voice changed, deepened with an odd reverberation.

"Sir --" She squeezed his wrist. "-- you're hurting me."

Blue fire burned through the black, and his eyes returned to normal. "I'm waiting for your explanation." She stared at him in confusion. Wasn't he aware of ... What the hell just happened? "Do not try my patience."

"My mother was a Mystic." Her voice squeaked as she began. "My father was a brilliant scientist. No one gives a damn about my father. Few remember his name. I inherited his aptitudes and intelligence, and all it qualified me to do was exploit the other occupants. Because I am not a powerful Mystic, I had no value there or here."

His hold eased, while his fingers remained in her hair. "Does your lover realize you have Mystic abilities?"

"Cyrus is not my lover." Stunned by his bizarre behavior, she wasn't sure if she should mention it or not. Who or what was Gema?

"That wasn't the question."

She licked her lips, her pulse racing. What should she do? How would she even broach the issue?

"Have you forgotten what I asked?" He leaned closer. "Would you prefer a different subject? I can turn you around, bend you over my desk, and rekindle the lust in your eyes."

"My Mystic abilities are negligible. I'm my father's daughter. Surely the Crown Stirate of Rodymia has the most beautiful women imaginable waiting to appease his desire. I'm here to build a prototype of my design."

“Every person under my rule is expected to make themselves available to me in any way I choose. For the time being, you are under my rule.”

“I understand. How may I best serve you?”

He pushed her away. “The prototype is my top priority.” She wasn’t sure if she was relieved or disappointed as he returned to the chair behind his desk. “Did Cyrus locate the D-class runaway?”

“He believes he knows where she is, but I wasn’t comfortable with his progress. My people have been dispatched. They have more experience with D-class personnel than the overlord’s soldiers.”

“What were your orders?”

“They are to recover her intact, if possible. If not, she will be destroyed. If the prototype is successful, D-159 will be obsolete.”

He accepted the information with a stiff nod. “The facilities aboard ship should be adequate for the duration of our journey. Once we reach the compound, I can get you anything you need.”

“Who identified the flaw in my design?”

“My munitions engineer.” He activated the screen inset in his desk, his expression distant and cold. “He is waiting for you in the laboratory. The guards will show you the way.”

* * * * *

After loading Saebin’s body armor into his shuttle’s forward chute, Lyrik headed for the heart of Frontine. They had decided on a location for the transfer before Lyrik returned to the shuttle lot. Even scrambled transmissions posed a risk, so they planned out every step ahead of time.

Shuttles merged into the magnetic current, which flowed in either direction directly above the commuter trams. The current swept the shuttles along at uniform intervals. Dro Tar merged into the stream directly in front of him.

“Right on schedule,” he muttered. “Maybe Trey isn’t crazy after all.” He’d never understood Trey’s willingness to put up with Dro Tar’s eccentricities, but her efficiency was undeniable.

Her shuttle’s emergency hatch slid open without the customary alarm. She’d apparently disabled the sensor as he’d directed. Flipping down his weapons’ control panel, he readied the forward chute. He only had one shot at this. The launch had to be clean enough not to draw attention to the transfer. Taking careful aim, he activated the chute.

A subtle blur of red spanned the distance between their shuttles, and Dro Tar closed the emergency hatch. “That was almost too easy.” They maintained position for several blocks, then Dro Tar banked onto a side street. Lyrik followed the tram to the end of the

main line and found a large, mostly empty lot in which to set down. He relaxed for a moment, clearing his head and anticipating his father's reaction. This could get ugly.

He heaved a ragged sigh and rubbed his bruised jaw. Dro Tar had been a little too willing to punch him twice before he felt sufficiently abused. Saebin, on the other hand, had to be coaxed into using her knuckle conduit. A superficial burn marred his shoulder, the charred uniform top adding the perfect touch. Odd that he'd had to coerce the "ruthless assassin" into using her weapon. Saebin was a baffling combination of ferocity and vulnerability. He wanted to protect her, shelter her from the forces that conspired against her. How could he feel so strongly about someone he barely knew?

Using his private security code to activate an audio comlink, Lyrik paged the overlord.

Despite the audio page, Cyrus came on screen, his gaze narrowed and wary. "What the hell are you doing in Frontine?"

"There's been a complication."

"A complication?" His tone snapped with sarcasm and impatience. "Where is D-159?"

"I don't know. My shuttle only has rudimentary scanners, nothing capable of --"

"Give me a full report, now!"

Lyrik straightened his back and released all emotion from his expression. "I located my target in Firestone Valley. She had been rendered unconscious by flying debris. I took her to a storm shelter and tended her wound."

"How badly was she injured?"

The subtle disbelief in his father's tone made Lyrik hesitate. Did his father know Saebin's implants could expedite healing? Of course he knew. Saebin had been brought in and out of stasis since her arrival on Ontariese. Only the gods of the Day Moon knew what they had done to her.

Focus! Do not let him realize how much you care for her. The thought sent a jolt of shock through Lyrik's mind. *Care for her?* He shoved the disquieting possibility to the back of his mind and met his father's gaze.

"She had a small gash on her forehead. I sealed it while she was unconscious, and that was that." He tried to keep his tone casual, but anger simmered just below the surface, compromising his efforts.

"Continue. Did her body armor protect her from the dust? What about her face and hands?"

Lyrik flashed a superficial smile. "I tried to talk her out of the suit, but she wasn't having any of it. She washed her exposed skin without removing the armor. You told me the suit couldn't be removed, and what I saw confirms it. It must be integrated in ways I don't want to think about."

"This doesn't make sense," Cyrus muttered, glancing away from the comscreen. "Is she still in the shelter? What are you doing in Frontine?"

"Give me a little credit." Lyrik didn't have to fake the affront in his voice. "She just sort of sat there until the miners showed up. Then she launched into defense mode. Once the computer authenticated their identities --"

"Cut to the chase."

"I thought she went to sleep, but she was meticulously dismantling my mental shield. By the time the storm settled down, she took control of me."

"How is that possible? You're immune to all things Mystic."

Lyrik snorted. "Apparently not. When she blasted my hand, it stung like hell. I must be resistant, not immune."

"You're dancing around the issue."

"No, I'm not." He blew out a frustrated breath. "You asked for a detailed report. I can't tell you where she is, because I don't know. She demanded that I take her to the planet. I refused. She kept repeating the demand until I felt an overwhelming compulsion to obey. I fought it all the way, sir, but I've never encountered anything like it."

Cyrus stroked his beard, his lips thinned as he scowled at Lyrik. "Where did you take her? How did she know where she wanted to go? None of this makes sense. Those occupants who haven't left are scattered all over the face of Ontariese, and most of them are terrified of anyone associated with ward D."

"I'm not sure she knew where she was going. Her eyes kept flashing. I think she was scanning for someone, probably another refugee. She put on a uniform over her armor and told me to let her out."

"And you felt compelled to obey." Sarcasm dripped off every word.

"Yes, sir." Lyrik paused, softening his tone. "Did you know she was capable of mind control?"

"I didn't think it would work on you." Cyrus shook his head and crossed his arms over his chest.

"Transmit the current locations of all the refugees still on Ontariese." He carefully relaxed his expression, not wanting to appear too eager. "I need to know what I'm up against here."

"D-159 is a trained assassin. You can't lose sight of that."

It was a damn good thing they weren't in the same room. Lyrik would have had his hands wrapped around the overlord's neck by now. *What are you up to, old man? How dare you compromise the safety and honor of our planet with these deceptions?*

"She kept badgering me about her objective." If the overlord wanted to play games, Lyrik was ready. "Her training has conditioned her not to think independently from her mission. She's searching for someone who can define her objective. That should buy us some time."

“Two days.” Cyrus turned toward his workstation controls. “Here are the locations you requested. You have seventy-two hours, then I issue a long range search-and-destroy.”

Everything within Lyrik balked at the phrase. They’d hunt her down like a rabid animal and blast her to the Night Moon. “Did you inject her with a micryte?” Lyric asked hopefully. “Is there any way to track her armor?”

“Negative on both. Her implants disintegrated the micryte seconds after it was injected. She’s an amazing piece of ... Find her. You’re the only hope we have of bringing her back alive.”

The vidscreen blinked off, and Lyrik swiveled his chair away from the control console. Damn it to hell! Saebin wasn’t a piece of equipment, and no one was going to treat her like one. He released his safety restraints and stood, fishing in his pocket for the injector. Sabotaging his micryte would end his career and make him a target as well as Saebin. Still, Saebin couldn’t fight this battle alone. He raised the injector to the side of his neck and pushed.

Chapter Nine

Saebin followed Dro Tar into the eating area of her living quarters, her gaze darting about the room. Twisting vines with colorful flowers decorated the tops of the cupboards and most of the ceiling. “How do they remain suspended?”

Dro Tar smiled. “They’re not real. There’s a holographic projector in each corner. I have several hundred images catalogued. I was in a jungley mood this morning. Would you like me to change it?”

“But it smells like ... rain.”

“That’s part of the program. Are you hungry?”

Saebin only nodded. Her entire life had been spent inside the Center. She wasn’t even certain how long she’d been a prisoner in ward D. In the course of one day, she’d been on an inhabitable moon, in a toxic valley, and now this ... her current surroundings defied description.

“Anything in particular strike your fancy?”

There she went again. “Where did you learn Earthish?”

Dro Tar smiled as she arranged dishes and slender envelopes on the counter in front of her. “I visited Earth for the first time when we rescued your Aunt Charlotte. Has anyone told you about her?” Saebin shook her head, watching closely as Dro Tar spread the contents of the packages over the plates. “Well, she just happens to be High Queen of this here planet.”

“High Queen? My aunt is the ruler of Ontariese?”

“Sort of.” Dro Tar laughed. “You’ll get that a lot. Ontariese is filled with ‘sort ofs.’ The short answer is, she’s the driving force behind the Joint Council, and the Joint Council runs the place.”

“Then Krysta is her niece as well?”

“Yep.” She put one of the plates in a metallic compartment and paused as the compartment hummed. “Have you met Krysta?”

The image of the dark-haired woman sprawled on the interrogation floor flashed through Saebin’s mind. “Sort of.”

Dro Tar laughed, and the compartment beeped. Opening the door, she retrieved the plate, now filled with steaming food. She handed it to Saebin. “Careful, it’s hot.”

“How did you do that?”

“You’ve never seen a rehydrator before?”

Saebin inhaled the fragrant steam. “What is this?”

“Some chemist’s idea of pot roast. It’s nutritious and all, but there ain’t nothing like the real thing.” She motioned toward the small table protruding from the wall. “Go ahead. It tastes better hot. I’ll just be a sec.”

After taking several bites of the synthetic pot roast, Saebin tried to decide where to begin. Warring factions and disproportionate populations, Joint Councils and reclusive Mystics, there was so much she needed to understand. And while she focused on recon, the overlord would continue his search.

“Did Lyrik tell you what happened during the war?” Dro Tar asked.

“He mentioned a biological weapon while we were in the storm shelter, but he didn’t go into detail. I have scattered bits of information in my mind, but so much of it makes no sense.”

Dro Tar joined Saebin at the table and explained in between bites of pot roast. “Let’s just start at the beginning and catch you up to date. Ontariense has been matriarchal for longer than anyone can remember.”

“Matriarchal?”

“Ownership, titles, important distinctions are passed from mother to daughter. When couples become life mates, the man takes on the woman’s family name.”

“Why is this important?”

Dro Tar paused with her spoon halfway to her mouth. “Damn good question. The Traditionalist Sect will tell you females give birth, and females are often able to discern what Mystic gifts their life mate will possess, so they --”

“What if the male you favor possesses no Mystic gifts at all?”

“You’ll have to have a sit down with Tal. He’s Trey’s brother and one scary son of a bitch when he chooses to be, but he understands the history of the Great Conflict better than anyone I know.”

“I’ve distracted you from your explanation.” Saebin pushed her plate aside. “What caused the Great Conflict?”

"The Traditionalist Sect believed that Ontariense should remain true to its customs and traditions, to value the greater good above all things. The Reformation Sect wanted to shake things up."

"Do you agree with the Reformation Sect?"

"The Reformation Sect -- like the NRS -- had some valid points. They just did horrible things to demonstrate their ideas." Dro Tar fidgeted in her chair. Saebin wasn't sure if the topic made her uncomfortable, or if she simply hated inactivity. "E'Lanna dar Aune, your grandmother, chose Frim dar Joon as her life mate. Frim bonded with her, but refused to take on her name or follow the traditions she held sacred."

Not wanting to draw Dro Tar off course again, Saebin waited to see if the rest of the story answered her questions.

"E'Lanna tried everything to make their joining work, but Frim had no intention of playing by the rules. Shortly after their twins were born, she set him aside. He formed the Reformation Sect and founded the House of Joon. For a while the conflict centered on their differing ideals, but Frim became progressively more abusive. He knew his empire couldn't flourish if women remained in power, so he launched his campaign to wipe out the Traditionalist Sect." Her voice grew hushed, and she glanced away from Saebin's face.

"What happened?"

"Frim captured E'Lanna's eldest daughter."

"Captured? Wasn't she his child, too?"

Dro Tar nodded. "Her father ordered her execution. The Mystics hid their middle daughter, but E'lanna refused to take chances with the twins. She opened an interdimensional portal and sent them to separate destinations. She sent your Aunt Charlotte to Earth early in the twenty-first century. Your mother, Krystabel, she also sent to Earth, but two hundred years later."

"Krystabel was not my mother." Tension gripped her abdomen and scooted her chair back from the table. "Joleen was my mother."

"Joleen carried you in her body, but your biological parents were Krystabel and Gath."

Pushing back from the table, Saebin stood and moved out of the eating area. Dro Tar had no reason to lie -- did she? Saebin had told no one about hearing Krystabel's voice when she awakened from stasis. Had that been more than a dream? Pain erupted in her temples, and she pressed the heel of her hands against the spot.

Dro Tar reached for her shoulder. Saebin twisted away.

"Don't touch me! Don't speak." She had to process the information. She was on the brink of overload.

An image formed within her mind. Twin faces, young, innocent, identical in every way except the color of their eyes. Krysta and Belle. They were the daughters of Krystabel and Gath. Her mother was Joleen.

A chime sounded, and Dro Tar called out something Saebin didn't recognize. Saebin stumbled blindly toward the nearest chair. Other images flashed, each accompanied by a stab of pain. Lyrik called her name as her legs gave out beneath her. His voice sounded distorted and distant. The room undulated in and out of focus. Sparkles of color burst before her eyes. Bracing herself against the floor, she rode the Mystic wave.

"Saebin?" Lyrik tried again. "Can you hear me?"

She tried to respond, but the vision expanded, encompassing everything else.

Krystabel's battered body lay before her on a treatment table. Saebin shuddered as she imagined the abuse the older woman must have endured.

"Heal the female, D-159. Heal her now!" Saebin had never seen Dr. Hydran so agitated. He wrung his hands and rocked on the balls of his feet.

"Healing is not an acceptable objective for --"

"Any objective I give you is acceptable. I know healing was within your abilities before you volunteered for the elite projects. Use your implants to strengthen your power and heal this female."

Saebin moved closer to the treatment table and extended her hands. Splaying her fingers, she kept her hands positioned just above Krystabel's body. There was no breath, no pulsing of life through Krystabel's veins. She pushed deeper, intensified the sensitivity of her receptors. The faintest trail of energy disappeared into the distance. Krystabel's spirit had departed, yet it didn't feel like death. Somehow Krystabel had escaped.

"I sense no life in this body," she said softly. "Even my implants can't raise the dead."

Hydran screamed, his face contorting in maniacal rage. He slapped Saebin, knocking her to the floor as he shook Krystabel's body. "You crafty bitch! You think you've won, but you haven't. I will find another way." He shoved her down on the table and straightened his uniform top. Turning to glare at Saebin, he repeated, "I will find another way."

Lyrik knelt beside Saebin as she huddled on the floor. She flinched away from his lightest touch, so he just stayed near her.

"Does she do this often?" Dro Tar asked; her voice hushed with concern.

"I think she's having a vision. What were you talking about?"

"Lots of things. History, Krysta, her mother."

"When did she go into --"

Saebin lifted her head and looked around, her expression muddled. "Where ... are we?"

"At Dro Tar's flat. You were in some sort of trance."

Pushing her hair out of her eyes, she struggled to her feet. Lyrik reached for her, but she warned him back with an upraised hand. "I'm on the verge of overload."

"How can we help you?" he asked. "What do you need?"

"I need to assimilate the information. My memory is returning in sporadic fragments."

They fell silent. Lyrik helped Saebin to a chair and bent to one knee beside her as Dro Tar brought her a glass of water.

"I saw Krystabel." Saebin took a sip, then handed the glass back to Dro Tar. "She had been beaten, horribly abused. Dr. Hydran insisted I heal her, but there was nothing I could do."

"I'm sorry." Lyrik closed his fingers around her hand, relieved when she didn't pull away. Charlotte insisted Krystabel was still alive, but Krysta had sensed her death. Lyrik didn't know what to think. "Did you remember anything else?"

Saebin took several deep breaths and met his gaze. "I saw Krysta and ... where is Belle?"

An uncomfortable moment passed as Lyrik shifted his gaze between Saebin and Dro Tar.

"Do you want the 'it's complicated' answer or the 'sort of' answer?" Dro Tar asked with a gentle smile.

Saebin squeezed Lyrik's hand, drawing his attention back to her. "Was Krystabel my mother?"

He nodded. "Joleen gave birth to you, but Krystabel and Gath --"

"Were my biological parents," she finished for him, resting her head against the back of the chair. "Dr. Hydran wasn't trying to cure us, was he? He was ... What was he trying to do?"

"Enhance and recreate your Mystic abilities."

Saebin slipped her fingers out from under his and rubbed her temples. Unshed tears shone in her crystal blue eyes. "My entire life has been one long experiment. I've been manipulated and -- modified. And the experiments didn't end when I came *home*."

"It's over. You're safe now." Lyrik felt foolish uttering the hollow reassurance, but he didn't know what else to say.

"Hydran is dead, and we're on to your father --" She dragged in an unsteady breath. "-- but my handler is still out there."

He stood and offered her an encouraging smile. "I just happen to have the current locations of all the refugees still on Ontariese."

"How did you manage that?" Dro Tar sounded skeptical.

"The overlord has given me two days to hunt down D-159." He looked at Saebin, wishing he knew how to ease her anxiety, soothe her pain. "I convinced him you are searching for someone who can provide you with an acceptable objective, and another refugee is your most likely target. He also confirmed that you are untraceable even without your suit. They injected you with a micryte, but your implants disintegrated it."

“Nice work, Commander.” Dro Tar winked at him.

* * * * *

With one guard in front of her and one behind, Ensley made her way to the laboratory. Her pulse had yet to recover from her interaction with Pern Keire. He was younger than she'd expected, yet he wore his power with effortless ease. Did Rodytes groom their leaders from birth for the roles they would assume? Her research hadn't indicated how their rulers were chosen. Conquest? Hereditary ascension? Somehow she doubted free elections had anything to do with the process.

Neither guard spoke as they marched her through the pristine corridors. Questions bombarded her mind. How long would it take to reach the compound? Would she be assigned private quarters? She hesitated to upset the fragile balance established by the Stirate, so she silently followed the guard.

A lift delivered them to a different level, and the lead guard scanned open an unmarked door. He had triggered the door in Pern's office with a scanner as well. She suspected she would need an escort to go anywhere on the ship.

The guards remained in the corridor as the door slid closed behind her. Compact, yet functional, the laboratory was well organized and ergonomic. She strolled along the narrow workspace, her gaze sweeping the supplies secured behind transparent doors and in wire bins.

“I wasn't told your name.”

Ensley gasped and turned toward the male voice. She had thought the laboratory empty. “You surprised me.” Pressing her hand over her pounding heart, she quickly assessed the newcomer before lowering her gaze to the floor. With the same wiry build and sharp features, this man bore a striking resemblance to the Stirate. “My name is Ensley.”

“Jaden.” His warm fingers touched her chin, raising her face. The blue ring in his eyes glowed as he openly assessed her from head to toe. It was hard to judge accurately, but she estimated he was ten years younger than Pern. “The misdirection in your design was clever. Given enough time, I could resolve it, but you're here now. Come. I'd just begun to work through the solution.”

He motioned her toward the back of the room. A panel in the wall opened soundlessly, revealing a small office. The same confident grace she'd noticed in Pern accompanied Jaden's movements. Were they related? Brothers, perhaps? Was it possible they were father and son?

Our fathers were brothers. I can't recall the Ontarian term for such a connection.

“If your fathers were brothers, you're the Stirate's cousin.”

He faced her suddenly, his gaze narrowed and cold. “What made you speak those words?”

“You said --”

“I said nothing.”

He’d slipped into her mind with such skill, she hadn’t realized he’d spoken telepathically. “You look very much like Stirate Keire. I must have responded to my own speculation.” *You replied to a question I never posed. Not only can you communicate mind to mind, you can read the thoughts of others.*

His expression relaxed into a slow, secretive smile.

Why reveal this to me? She watched as he pulled out the chair behind his desk and sat. *I was under the impression Rodytes have no Mystic abilities.*

You’re also under the impression we’re honorable.

She wasn’t sure what to make of that comment, so she didn’t reply.

He turned on a three-dimensional display. “As soon as you’ve resolved the flaw, we must begin revising the design.”

“I was told nothing about revisions.”

“I’m telling you now.” He handed her a stylus and nodded toward the display. “Pern requires that the efficacy be increased by a factor of three before we assemble the prototype.”

She gaped for a moment, then snapped her jaw shut. He couldn’t be serious. “The design is theoretically sound, but I won’t know if the device actually works until I build one.”

“We will refine your design and make modifications to the actual device if necessary. But keep this in mind. According to Rodyte custom, anyone who fails to perform to the Stirate’s satisfaction becomes expendable.”

Chapter Ten

“Do you really think your father will wait two days?” Saebin pushed to her feet, stretching the stiffness out of her back.

“That man isn’t my anything,” Lyrik muttered. “*Overlord Cyrus* probably dispatched a tracker team the second he ended our transmission. I ditched the shuttle and took the tram here. We’ll have to leave in the morning and keep moving, if we hope to stay a step ahead of them.”

They’d been sifting through refugee profiles for hours, hoping to find some trace of her handler. Dro Tar slipped away a few minutes before, blithely announcing she was going to soak in a bubble bath.

“They won’t be trying to catch me now. They’ll be trying to kill me.”

He looked up from the vidscreen. “Your armor doesn’t function without you.”

“Would the Joint Council sanction his actions?” After a long pause, he shook his head. “I know too much. I’m a liability he can’t afford. My handler will select a new subject, and they will start over.”

“His intentions are irrelevant. He’s not going to find us.” Lyrik didn’t explain his sudden assurance, and she didn’t ask. If troops hadn’t broken down Dro Tar’s door by now, they were probably safe for a while. But Lyrik was right. They would have to keep moving.

Tingling sensations fluttered in Saebin’s belly. He’d ruined his career and made himself a fugitive to hide her from the overlord. She’d spent half the day trying to uncover his ulterior motive. He had nothing to gain by his actions and everything to lose. Why would he do this for her? It was -- irrational.

She knew he found her desirable. At least his body responded each time they touched. Still, she wasn’t sure if he felt more than the responsibility for her safety. Did he want to

explore their attraction as much as she did? The relationship between male and female was uncharted territory for her.

He powered down the terminal and swiveled to face her. "You've been under tremendous pressure all day." A lazy smile parted his lips. "I think I better stay close just in case."

She couldn't resist his smile. His whole face lit up when he smiled. Lines crinkled out from his sparkling eyes, but she found the flaw appealing. "In case of what?"

"In case you need a way of releasing your pent-up emotions." He softened the seductive purr with a hint of amusement. "We can spar. You're the only woman I've ever wrestled with, and it was interesting. Until you made me think I'd broken your wrist."

Moving closer, she inhaled his clean, masculine scent. She'd wanted to touch him, really touch him, since she awakened on top of him in the storm shelter. "I'm not in the mood to fight. Do you have any other ideas?"

He stood, his eyes igniting with passion. "I've got all sorts of ideas. How far are you willing to take this?"

She licked her lips, feeling awkward and self-conscious. Fighting she understood, military strategy was second nature, but she'd never been with a real man before. The simulators responded as she programmed them to respond, while Lyrik never failed to surprise her.

"We can touch." He trailed his fingertips across her cheek. "We can kiss." He brushed his lips over hers. "Or we can simply enjoy being wrapped in each other's arms." He paused, his gaze searching hers. "I think you know how much I want you. But I won't rush this."

"Can we start with touching and see where that leads?"

His brow arched, and his smile turned predatory. "Are you asking me to seduce you?"

She wrapped her arms around his neck and pressed her breasts against his chest. "It's not much of a seduction if I have to ask."

With a wicked chuckle, he swept her into his arms and carried her into the guest bedroom, kicking the door closed behind them. Her pulse leapt and tension coiled through her abdomen. Her input rings tingled. Without her armor everything felt more intense, more real.

Her body slid along his as she lowered her feet to the floor. He cupped her cheek and stroked her lips with his thumb, his gaze caressing her face. She ached for the warmth of his affection, the security of ... What would make her feel secure? She really didn't know. Her life had been hollow and cold. She wanted -- more.

"I'm glad you came back," she whispered.

His other hand joined the first, framing her face. "Did you think I wouldn't? I promised to protect you. I take my promises seriously." He lowered his head slowly, staring into her

eyes until the very last moment, then his lips covered hers, and his arms wrapped around her body.

Warm and faintly spicy, his breath filled her mouth and sank into her lungs. The simple connection was surprisingly intimate. She pushed her hands into his hair and angled her head, parting her lips. He moved his mouth over and against hers, caressing and nibbling.

She explored his back with greedy abandon, her fingers tracing every ridge and corded muscle. "Take off your shirt." She formed the words against his damp lips, unwilling to separate their mouths.

"I will if you will."

They pulled their tops off at the same time and came together skin to skin. Saebin groaned, hugging his broad back as she rubbed her breasts against his chest. Her fingers splayed against his skin, amazing her with the power revealed in each contour.

"I want to see all of you." She eased back and looked into his eyes. "I need to touch you."

He kicked off his boots and unfastened his pants, letting the garment sag low on his narrow hips. "You've seen me naked before." A sexy smile curved his mouth, his eyes narrowed, swirling gently.

"I foolishly squandered the opportunity. I don't intend to make the same mistake tonight."

"Glad to hear it." His gaze locked with hers, and he pushed his pants down his thighs, then kicked them aside. He stood before her gloriously naked, and Saebin pressed her hand over her frantically pounding heart. "No, let me do that." His hand covered hers, his fingers curving down over her nipple.

She pushed his hand away and blew out a ragged breath. "You already did that. It's my turn to touch."

After an elaborate shrug, he lowered his hands to his sides and said, "Then touch me."

She stroked his chest, his shoulders, and his thick upper arms. In the shower she really hadn't taken time to appreciate the sculpted perfection of his tall form. His chest narrowed dramatically to lean hips. Her gaze followed the lazy descent of her questing hands.

His erection arched thick and long, waiting for the firm embrace of her body. She licked her lips, her input rings buzzing. Each session in the simulator had been timed, so the program always got right to business. Her nipples would be stimulated, then her clit, until her core grew moist. Then the sensation of fullness and movement until --

"What are you thinking about?"

Self-consciousness swept over her in an unexpected rush. Why did she feel so vulnerable? She crossed her arms over her breasts and turned away. "You're amazing."

He moved to the side, back into her line of vision. "And this is a problem, why?"

"I thought this was what I wanted, but I ..."

He swept her into his arms and laid her on the bed. "I told you. I'm not going to hurry you." Stretching out on his side, he slipped one arm beneath her neck. "If touching is all you're ready for, then touching is all we'll do."

"You obviously want more than touching. This isn't fair --" He cut off her words with his mouth. His lips caressed hers, warm and gentle. He wasn't using his tongue as he had before. Doubtlessly her reaction made him wary. She traced his lower lip, and he made a low growling sound. Unsure if he'd appreciated her attempt or was warning her away, she tried again. His tongue touched hers, encouraging her to play. She ventured beyond his lips, curling her tongue around his and stroking the velvety interior of his mouth.

His fingers traced the path of her pulse from the underside of her jaw to the hollow at the base of her neck. Her nipples tingled in anticipation. Would he touch her breasts, or had she ruined everything with her uncertainty?

"I've never been with a man before," she whispered, unable to suppress a shudder.

"Do you want me to stop?" His fingers came to rest against her shoulder. "Are you not attracted to me?"

"No. I'm very attracted to you."

"What were you thinking about before? You didn't seem pleased by the memory."

"I was remembering the simulators."

He stared down at her for a long moment, then his fingers resumed their caress. "These were sexual simulators?" She nodded. "Did they work? Did you have an orgasm, or did it leave you aching?"

"It worked -- sort of."

He smiled. "Don't pick up too many of Dro Tar's phrases. What did you like about the simulation?"

"It stimulated all the things that needed to be stimulated to create an orgasm, but I always felt ... It's hard to explain. It was over so quickly."

"I think what you're suffering from is a significant lack of foreplay."

"What's foreplay?"

"Kissing, touching, savoring the slide of naked skin against naked skin." He stroked down between her breasts and eased his fingers inside her waistband. "Do you trust me?"

She swallowed. How could she not trust him? He'd proven his loyalty to her again and again. "I trust you," she said in a calm, clear voice.

He sat up and pulled off her shoes. "I'm going to introduce you to the wonderful world of foreplay." He tugged off her socks and unfastened her pants. "Just so you know what to expect, we're not going to make love tonight. We're going to explore each other's bodies with our hands and our mouths, but we're going to save the main event for another night."

Mouths? What part did mouths play in making love? She unconsciously licked her lips. Kissing him was certainly more pleasant than she first thought. What else did he intend for them to do?

“Lift your hips, sweetheart. This will be a lot more fun if we’re both naked.” She arched her back, raising her bottom off the bed so he could rid her of her pants. He returned to her side, slipping his arm beneath her neck again. “Now, where were we?”

His mouth settled over hers, and she responded without hesitation. His hair tickled her chest, and tingles curled from her nipples to her core. She sifted his hair through her fingers, enjoying its silky texture. When he finally cupped her breast, a soft sigh escaped her. He took his time, squeezing and exploring before his thumb circled her nipple.

She murmured a wordless protest as his lips left hers. He feathered kisses along her jaw line, then down along her neck. His fingers adjusted, freeing her nipple without leaving her breast. Her breath hitched, and her core pulsed. She might not understand what he intended to do, but her body obviously approved.

With slow deliberateness, he traced her areola with his tongue, around and around until the throbbing of her nipple echoed her thumping heartbeat. He flicked his tongue over the very tip, then caught it between his teeth.

“Oh.” She gasped, tangling her fingers in his hair.

He suckled firmly, carefully scraping her against his teeth. On and on he pulled, while his hand moved to her other breast. His shaft throbbed against her thigh. Touching her, kissing her breasts, obviously aroused him.

“I want to ... touch you.”

Releasing her nipple with a distinct pop, he shook his head and grinned. “This is your introduction. I’ve already visited this world.” Before she could argue, his mouth returned to hers. His fingers played across her tummy, dipping ever closer to her feminine curls. As if directed by some unseen force, her thighs parted, making room for his hand. He stroked her, teased her, building the tension inside of her.

She recognized the sensations, but they had never been this strong before. With exquisite care, he eased his long fingers between her folds. He slid back and forth, back and forth. She must be *so* wet for him to move this easily. Deepening the kiss, she felt her breasts quiver with each ragged breath.

He pushed his fingers into her passage, and she cried out. It felt so much better than the simulator. Was that two? No, it must be three; her inner muscles gripped him tightly. Warm and long, his fingers moved inside her. His thumb pressed over her clit, and her body arched, her inner muscles rippling rhythmically.

Separating their mouths, he smiled into her eyes. “I think you like Foreplay World.” She couldn’t speak because his fingers kept right on moving. He paired each firm thrust with a brush of his thumb. “Let go. I want to watch you come.”

Legs sprawled, hips arching to meet his thrusting fingers, she clutched his shoulders and let the sensations build. The dark demand in his expression thrilled her all the more. He could easily force his will upon her, yet he put her pleasure above his own.

Her orgasm unfurled with languid pleasure. He pushed his fingers deep and kept the spasms going with his thumb. On and on her body responded to his skill, his caring. She trembled and moaned, and a tear escaped the corner of her eye. He caught the drop with the tip of his tongue, then kissed her tenderly.

“What about you?” she whispered when he finally pulled away.

“Let’s get under the covers, and we’ll visit another world.”

Smiling, she pulled back the covers and crawled onto the bed. He lay down on his side and turned her so her back pressed against his chest. Pausing long enough to pull up the covers, he settled his big body against her back. He slipped one arm beneath her neck and cupped her breast with his hand.

“What’s this world called?”

His body pressed against her, contouring to her back and cradling her bottom. He stroked her breast and nibbled on her earlobe, his breath warm against her skin. “This world is called anticipation.” He moved his arm to her waist and splayed his fingers across her ribs. “It’s a rest stop on the way to sweeter destinations.”

Chapter Eleven

“Commander Trey -- oh, pardon me, *Director* Trey -- would like to speak with you.” Dro Tar motioned over her shoulder toward the main room of her flat.

“He’s here?” Lyrik set down his mug of blish and pushed back from the kitchen table.

“No, he’s on the secure comlink in my bedroom.”

“How did he know I was here?”

She chuckled. “Trey has a way of finding things out. Might be why they put him in charge of Covert Ops.”

Lyrik heard the subtle hiss of water as he passed the room he’d shared with Saebin the night before. Picturing her in the shower, a fine cleansing mist languidly descending along her lithe form, made his steps falter. He hadn’t planned their passionate interlude, but he certainly didn’t regret what passed between him. Holding her through the night had been sweet torture. They would make love, of that he had no doubt, but he could wait until she was emotionally ready for the experience.

“Mixing business and pleasure is dangerous,” Dro Tar said with a knowing smile. “You can protect her better if you don’t get involved.”

She was right, of course, but he suspected it was already too late. She reactivated the comlink, then left him alone in her bedroom.

Trey sat behind his desk, his multi-colored hair drawn back away from his face and bound at the nape of his neck. “Do you have Saebin with you?”

“Are you sure this channel is secure?”

Trey smiled. “I’ll take that to mean you do.”

“What’s going on? Why did you track me down?”

"I thought you might like to know the *Tempest* departed for Bilarri this morning under the command of Larcet dar Joon."

"*What?*" Lyrik staggered back a step. "We aren't scheduled to depart until the end of the week."

"That isn't even the most interesting development."

Lyrik braced himself for the rest. "How can this get worse?"

"Hermlin stormed into my office shortly after the *Tempest* launched."

"Hermlin? Why isn't the *Tempest's* chief engineer aboard?"

"Why isn't her captain aboard?" Trey countered. "Either your father has lost his mind, or he's up to no good."

"We both know which. What did Hermlin tell you?"

"Two men showed up during Swaybern's watch, claiming to be with maintenance. They installed a device and left before anyone could stop them."

"A maintenance team made mods to the *Tempest*?" Lyrik raked his hands through his hair, shocked by the implications. Was someone tampering with his ship, or had they been dispatched by his father? Either possibility could compromise the Bilarrian alliance, an alliance the Joint Council had spent the better part of the past cycle negotiating. "What system did they modify?"

"Shields, but that's all we know. Hermlin hardly got a glance at the thing before Larcet showed up." He paused as Lyrik absorbed the significance. The shielding technology utilized on the *Tempest* made her virtually undetectable to all conventional scanners. "I've been informed they're working on the *Gale* now."

"Who are these guys? What did you learn from their ident files?"

"A basic inquiry attaches them to maintenance, so I used my clearance to dig a little deeper. Their identities evaporate like mist. They're phantoms. They're just not mine."

"Shit."

"My thoughts exactly." Trey paused, tapping his thumb against his desktop. "I hate to say it, but there is only one person who could be pulling these strings."

Lyrik nodded. "And they're not the only strings he's pulling. Saebin has been in and out of stasis since she arrived on the Day Moon. Her handler is still alive and fully supported by the puppet master." He paused, tension gripping his stomach. A part of him still fought the concept that his father was not only in the middle of these intrigues, he was likely directing them. "Looks like an ugly part of Operation Hydra relocated to the COT."

"Unbelievable." Trey paused, jaw clinched, nostrils flaring. After blowing out an audible breath, he vowed, "Anything. I'll do anything I can to help you."

"Who else knows about the *Tempest*?"

"Me, Hermlin, and Zane."

“What has Zane got to do with this?” He was only two cycles into Zane’s training, but the lad was the best apprentice Lyrik had ever had.

“Please.” Trey snorted. “Zane would follow you into hell, and you know it. He marched off the *Tempest* right behind Hermlin.”

“I’ve got to get on the *Gale*.”

Trey finally smiled. “Krysta’s having lunch with her aunt. I’ll have her stop by before she heads back to the COT. I suspect the two of you can come up with something creative.”

* * * * *

“You’ve been in the suit for almost four hours. Do you need to take a break?”

The concern in Lyrik’s expression made Saebin smile. Each time their gazes met, warm tingles skittered down her spine. She couldn’t help remembering every touch, every deep, passionate kiss. If what they’d shared last night was his idea of ... foreplay, he’d called it foreplay ... then she couldn’t wait to experience the rest.

“My thinking is clear, and my emotions are balanced.” Her voice broke as a heated flush crept up her neck. *Except when I look at you.* “I haven’t even been tempted to turn anybody off.”

Dro Tar knocked on the open door drawing their attention. “We have a visitor.”

Saebin pushed back from the workstation in Dro Tar’s office and followed Lyrik into the main room of the flat. Krysta stood just inside the doorway, immaculately dressed in a violet pant suit. Her honey-blond hair had been styled in an elaborate combination of thin braids and curls, which framed her delicate face. Hesitation mixed with the affection shining in her thick-lashed eyes. Thin ribbons of turquoise now marbled her purple gaze.

“What caused the change in your eyes?” It wasn’t much of a greeting, but someone had to break the strained silence.

“That’s a long, involved story. I’m not unwilling to share it with you, but Trey made it sound as if there is some sort of emergency.”

“There have been some interesting developments since we returned from Firestone Valley,” Lyrik said.

“Interesting to whom?” Dro Tar plopped down in her hand-shaped chair.

“I’ll let you decide,” Lyrik responded. “Two phantom agents installed an unknown device on the *Tempest*, and it launched for Bilarri under the command of Larcet dar Joon. The overlord not only knows about this, he almost certainly ordered it.”

“You have got to be joking.” Anger ignited in Krysta’s eyes. She moved farther into the apartment.

"Cyrus sent your ship on a mission without you?" Saebin shook her head, amazed by the overlord's arrogance. He had to have realized the move would infuriate Lyrik. "When did you learn about this? Why didn't you say something before?"

"Trey updated me while you were in the shower. I figured I'd brief everyone at the same time."

"Is he punishing you for helping me?"

"This is bigger than rattling Lyrik's cage," Dro Tar said. "The Joint Council has worked long and hard to solidify an alliance with Bilarri. If Cyrus is trying to compromise the alliance, this is a very bad thing."

"Bilarri is Lord Drakkin's planet?"

"You remember Lord Drakkin?" Krysta seemed surprised.

"I have a vague impression in my mind, nothing more." She had a vague recollection of most everything. Saebin sighed. "What is the purpose of the alliance?"

"The Bilarrians are genetically predisposed to produce more females than males," Krysta explained. "Their ratio isn't nearly as disproportionate as ours, but the Bilarrians have agreed to encourage their females to consider emigrating to Ontariese."

"Agreed to encourage their females to consider?" That doesn't sound like much of an alliance."

"It's more involved than that," Lyrik said. "I'll explain the details when we get home."

Home. Saebin's heart stumbled over the word. Krysta had obviously found a home among the Ontarians, while she had traded one master for another. She shook away the pessimistic thought. Thanks to Lyrik, she was free now. She just had to stay that way.

"Back to the device," Dro Tar prompted. "What does it do?"

"I'm not sure," Lyrik paused for a grin, "but I intend to find out."

"Oh, no." Krysta stepped closer to Lyrik. "I've seen that look before. You're plotting something outrageous."

He shrugged, his green eyes gleaming with mischief. "Is stealing the *Gale* outrageous?"

"What's the *Gale*?" Saebin asked.

"The *Tempest*'s little sister," Lyrik told her. "The technological innovations that make the *Tempest* unique were developed in the *Gale*."

Frustrated by her ignorance, Saebin sighed. "And these technological innovations are?"

"Both ships have shields that make them invisible to most scanners." Krysta's smile was warm and encouraging. Saebin nodded her thanks for the information.

"Whatever the phantom operatives installed on the *Tempest*, they also installed on the *Gale*," Lyrik went on. "So, I assembled a minimal crew, and we're going to take off with her."

"What if an explosion is triggered by the device?" Dro Tar asked. "You can't just flip the thing on."

“Hermlin, my chief engineer, ran some preliminary tests before they kicked him off the *Tempest*. There is nothing to indicate weaponry of any sort. This thing modifies the shields. We need to know how and why.”

“How exactly do you intend to fly away with the *Gale*?” Krysta asked. “Especially if some mysterious device has just been installed on it? Security is bound to be optimum.”

He raked his hand through his hair, pushing the thick strands away from his face. “That’s why you’re here. I need you to shuttle me to the COT.”

“Cyrus will have a security contingent waiting before we dock.”

“Not if he doesn’t realize I’m your passenger.” He grinned. “I sabotaged my micryte.”

Dro Tar stood and moved closer to Lyrik. “This sounds like fun. Can I play?”

“If you hadn’t volunteered, I was going to ask.” He extended his hand. “Welcome to the crew.”

Krysta’s brow furrowed, and her expression turned speculative as Lyrik shook Dro Tar’s hand. “Even without a micryte, the first scanner you pass will alert your father.”

“I don’t intend to pass a scanner. Trey used one of his aliases to reserve the slip directly below the *Gale*. The crew members will be waiting for my signal. We’ll fly your shuttle into the landing bay, and you’ll open a transport conduit connecting the two ships.”

“You’ve got it all figured out.” Saebin wasn’t sure if Krysta was amused or annoyed. Her expression could be interpreted either way.

“If Krysta lands her shuttle moments before the *Gale* takes off, won’t that make the overlord suspicious of her?” Saebin asked. “And how will she explain her passengers?”

“I’m a royal ambassador,” Krysta replied. “I bring visitors to the COT all the time. As for Cyrus’s suspicion, I don’t give a damn. He’s lucky I don’t take a more direct approach.”

Saebin couldn’t argue with that. The defiance in Krysta’s eyes warmed her heart. After so many years of isolation, it was wonderful to be surrounded by allies. “What role will I play in this adventure?”

“That’s entirely up to you,” Lyrik said. “We could always use another soldier, but I’ll understand if you want to sit it out.”

“I wouldn’t miss this for the world.”

* * * * *

“Have you remained in contact with any of the refugees?” Saebin asked Krysta. They were in a holding pattern above the COT, waiting for landing clearance. Lyrik had detailed the plan and reviewed the details. Everyone knew what they were expected to do.

“For the first few months many of us tried to stay in touch, but starting over is easier without continual reminders of the past.” Krysta tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. Did

she always look elegant and composed? A vague image in Saebin's mind contradicted the impression. "Larissa and Bekka are the only ones I see on a regular basis."

A faint memory stirred more an impression than anything. Flowing white hair, identical faces, others called them the elders.

"Have you ever dreamed of our mother?" She felt silly asking, but she needed to know if the images she had seen had been more than dreams. Krysta has more control over her Mystic abilities. She had the benefit of a full cycle of training.

"She appeared to me shortly after we arrived, but it wasn't a dream, it was a vision. She insisted I fight to keep Seth alive, that he was the key to her ... resurrection is the wrong word because I know she's still alive. Somehow Seth will be instrumental in bringing Mother back."

"I've only heard her voice, but when I came out of the trance, I ..."

"Smelled flowers?"

Saebin nodded, relieved to realize she wasn't losing her mind. "Who is Seth? His name is never far from your mind."

"Are you always this clairvoyant?"

She shook her head. "The suit intensifies my abilities. Would you rather not talk about him?"

"It's complicated." Krysta sighed and pivoted in her chair to meet Saebin's gaze. "Seth is Belle's son. I've been helping Vee raise him since ... Belle didn't survive Seth's birth. When her energy dispersed it was absorbed into my body, which caused the change in my eyes."

"I'm so sorry. Losing your twin must have been devastating."

"Yes and no. I miss her, but she's a part of me now."

Saebin sensed that there was much more to the story than Krysta was saying. They'd explore the subject at more length when the timing was better. "Vee is the child's father?"

"Yes." Krysta took Saebin's hands and shared an image of the boy. Wavy dark hair and vivid green eyes, chubby cheeks, and an engaging smile.

"He's adorable." Level Four. The phrase formed along with the image, echoing like a voice down a long corridor. What did Level Four have to do with Seth? She started to ask, when Lyrik interrupted.

"Show time, ladies. We've just been cleared to land."

Dro Tar tapped the audiocom hooked around her ear and spoke in rapid Ontarian. Lyrik entered their clearance code into the navconsole and released control to the space station. Multi-leveled bays spread out before them in a wide U-shape.

"That's the *Gale*." Lyrik pointed to a ship slightly larger than the other transports. Constructed of a sleek, iridescent alloy, the ship gleamed in the station's bright lights.

"The crew is standing by," Dro Tar told him. "There are two guards flanking the main hatch, two stationed in engineering, and an additional two on the bridge. Hermlin's brother will create a distraction while they get the first two guards onto the ship."

Lyrik nodded. "Tell him we'll head for the bridge. Engineering is closer to the main hatch."

Tension rippled through the shuttle. Saebin licked her lips. If any of the guards sounded an alarm, they would have to fight their way out. The *Gale* filled the viewscreen as they were drawn into the bay directly underneath the larger ship.

"How are you going to play this?" Lyrik asked Krysta.

"I'm going to wait until all hell breaks loose, then I'll stand on the concourse and watch the show." She shrugged. "We're one of a dozen shuttles arriving right now. I have a legitimate reason for being here, so Cyrus can kiss my ass."

"You tell him." Dro Tar laughed.

"I'm not sure Trey would appreciate the suggestion," Lyrik said with a grin.

The shuttle glided to a stop, perfectly centered in the tiny landing bay. Lyrik launched the post-trip routine and unfastened his safety restraints. "Shall we?"

They moved to the middle of the shuttle. Krysta extended her arms and closed her eyes, moving slowly toward the aft until she found a location she liked. "This will connect with the main cargo bay."

"Perfect," Lyrik said. "We can take the lift directly to the bridge." He turned to Dro Tar. "Signal the others. We're a go."

Waves of Mystic energy radiated off Krysta as she formed the transport conduit. Saebin's sensory inputs hummed. Sporadic signals darted through her body. She tuned them out, focusing entirely on her role in the mission. Concentrating the energy pulses into a shimmering vortex, Krysta breached the shuttle's hull and drilled into the *Gale*.

"I'm through." Krysta panted, her arms trembling. "Go now. I can't hold this for long."

Dro Tar stepped beneath the opening, and the conduit transported her onto the other ship. Lyrik thanked Krysta for her assistance, then stepped under the conduit.

"We have much still to say to each other," Saebin said in a hurried rush. "I'll contact you soon." Krysta could only nod. Her features were tense and strained with her effort to maintain the portal. The conduit deposited Saebin in the main cargo bay of the *Gale*. She gasped, extending her arms as she adjusted to the sudden change in position. It had been like sliding *up* a recreation chute.

"Let's go." Lyrik nodded toward the lift, his weapon drawn and ready.

"Hermlin's team is onboard." Dro Tar reported. "The first two guards were subdued without incident."

They took the lift to the bridge, carefully flanking the door so they wouldn't be vulnerable as the panel slid opened. Dro Tar steadied her gun with both hands, her gaze narrowed and watchful.

"Drop your weapons!"

Lyrik ignored the order and fired at the nearest guard. Dro Tar ducked, avoiding a colorful burst from the second guard. Without stepping off the lift, Saebin sent out a powerful mental pulse. The guards dropped to the floor in hapless sprawls -- and so did Dro Tar.

"Damn. I didn't mean to turn her off."

"You did good. We couldn't risk their setting off --" Lights flashed and sirens wailed in the maintenance bay. "-- an alarm. Hermlin report. What is your status?" Lyrik rushed across the bridge and activated the main control console. "Can you rouse Dro Tar, or does it have to wear off?"

"I'll try." Kneeling beside the other woman, Saebin eased into her mind.

"Anything?" Lyrik raced between two consoles, his anxiety mounting. "I really need her if we're going to pull this off."

The lift buzzed, so Saebin dragged Dro Tar clear of the doorway. "Someone just activated the lift. Check and make sure it was one of us."

"Hermlin, who's in the lift? Copy. The guards are secured in the brig. Hermlin's on his way up."

"I can't rouse her. I'm sorry."

"Then, come here. My arms aren't long enough to reach both stations." She hurried to his side. A chair was positioned in front of the console. He stepped back and let her slide in. "I have it all set to go. As soon as I tell you, slide your thumb along here and push in on this." His fingers hovered above the controls as he demonstrated what he needed her to do.

"Got it."

"All right. Wait for my signal." He sat in the other chair, his fingers flying across the controls with obvious urgency.

Three men emerged from the lift, all panting and agitated. "They've got us tethered, sir," one of the men announced.

"Take these two to the brig, then hold on tight. It's going to be interesting for a while."

The man who had spoken remained on the bridge as the other two dragged the unconscious guards into the lift. "Is Dro Tar wounded? What can I do?"

"She'll be fine, but secure her for take off. I'm going to have to break free of the tether."

Without argument, the man lifted Dro Tar into a nearby seat and secured her with safety restraints.

"Hermlin, take over weapons. Saebin, strap in."

Saebin fastened the safety restraints and waited for Lyrik's signal. The floor vibrated, and a low rumble drowned out everything else.

"Cease and desist, or we will open fire!" A sharp male voice cut through the den.

"Sure you will," Lyrik muttered. "Come on, Trey."

"Is Director dar Aune going to override their controls?" Hermlin asked.

"That's the plan, but he should have cut through by now."

"You'll tear the ship apart if you continue with this foolishness," Cyrus snapped over general com.

Saebin stiffened. His voice was all too familiar. She'd been hearing it for months. Constructing a detailed image of the overlord, she directed a Mystic compulsion deep into his mind.

Saebin, tell them to abort. You'll have to make a run for it in my shuttle. They've got Trey locked out.

She ignored Krysta's frantic urging and reinforced her Mystic transmission. She visualized Cyrus, manipulating him like a puppet. *Release the tether*, she commanded, and he obeyed. *Authorize our departure.*

"What the hell." Lyrik looked at her. "They just cleared us to launch. Did you do this?"

She smiled. "I told you shutting people off wasn't my only trick."

Chapter Twelve

Pern folded his hands on his flat belly, his eyes narrowed and intense. “Is this technology only effective with Ontarian Mystics, or can it be adjusted to accommodate any frequency range?”

The question made Ensley’s mouth go dry. She was exhausted, physically and emotionally drained. With subtle threats and glib ultimatums, Jaden had kept her on task, compelling her to drive herself harder than she’d ever attempted before. They had refined her design, accomplishing more in one day than she had managed in three months on her own.

“My research was greatly limited by my situation.”

Pern waved away her response with an impatient snarl. “How did you first discover that Mystic energy resonates within a consistent frequency range?”

She had sent him a complete background report on the project. Hadn’t he bothered to open the file? “Our team of scientists was attempting to reproduce and intensify the abilities common among Ontarian Mystics. During the course of our study, we discovered that there was an energy spike whenever one of these abilities manifested. The stronger the ability the more powerful the spike.”

“And this spike of energy always resonated within the specified frequency range?”

“Yes. The original test subjects all had close genetic ties. I was concerned that this genetic similarity might account for the consistency. But since coming to Ontariense, I’ve been able to establish that it was not a genetic anomaly. All Ontarian Mystics utilize energy that resonates within this frequency range.”

“Which brings us back to my original question. If the frequency range of other Mystics can be identified, will your technology affect other races?”

"It's my hypothesis that this pattern will be found in all Mystic beings. The actual range may vary, but I believe we will find a consistent pattern within each race. Unfortunately I haven't had the opportunity to test my hypothesis. I've only had access to Ontarian Mystics."

Pern's gaze swept the length of her body, then he glanced at Jaden. The other man stood a step back from her, silent and watchful.

"I'm sorry, sir." Ensley licked her lips as tension mounted within her. "I'm not sure I understand how these questions pertain to my device. Firestones are indigenous to Ontariense. To my knowledge they don't exist anywhere else."

"Being able to charge firestones without the assistance of an Ontarian Mystic is appealing and potentially lucrative, but you must know I'm interested in more than this one device. There are numerous applications for your theory."

As Dr. Hydran had discovered. Ensley shoved back her flicker of hesitation. She could have melded with the population on Ontariense, lived out the rest of her life in peaceful mediocrity. An ordinary life had never appealed to Ensley, and it never would.

"The possible applications are dazzling." She curved her mouth into a soft smile as she lowered her gaze. "I look forward to exploring them for you."

"Jaden, remove her clothing and take down her hair. She makes me want to rut, and I can't figure out why. She isn't beautiful. Her body is barely average. Is there something unique in your scent?"

Finally! It had been months since she'd had a real lover. There'd been plenty of opportunity on Ontariense, but she'd needed to keep a low profile. Simulators couldn't carry tales.

Don't appear too eager, or this will be your first and last opportunity to pleasure a Stirate. He likes a bit of resistance in his females.

Jaden's advice caught her by surprise, but her soft gasp was perfect. She licked her lips again and glanced at Pern. "Sir, I thought we understood each other. I'm here to --"

"You're here to do whatever I command."

Jaden moved up behind her, reaching around to unfasten her blouse without blocking Pern's view of her body. She grabbed Jaden's wrist. He pulled her arms behind her back and held them with one hand, while he continued undressing her with the other.

"I'm not a whore. This is not why I agreed to board your ship."

"Women are more easily enjoyed when they are silent." Pern relaxed in his chair, the blue ring in his dark eyes glowing.

Momentarily releasing her arms, Jaden removed her blouse and reached for the fastenings at the back of her skirt.

"No. I want her to do it. Lift your skirt, *female*, and remove your undergarments."

If you refuse, he will hurt you, but it will drive him wild with desire.

She straightened her shoulders and shook off Jaden's restraining hands. "If you want my panties off, you'll have to take them off yourself." Her heart hammered in her chest. Her nipples had formed tight, tingling points. Could he distinguish desire from fear?

"Jaden, lift her to my desk. I want her kneeling in front of me." The ring in Pern's eyes burned brighter, and a cruel smile curved his lips.

Ensley struggled. Her breasts swayed, and her back arched as Jaden moved her into position. He remained in front of the desk, holding her arms behind her back. Pern pushed his chair back and stood. "Your breasts are too small." He squeezed them both, his hands warm and firm. "But your nipples are lovely, so responsive and eager to please." He rolled the aching buds, massaging and tugging until she groaned. She closed her eyes against the onslaught of sensation. He must not realize how easily she could be won. Pain shot into her chest as he pinched her nipples. "Do not close your eyes. I honor you with my touch. You will keep your eyes open."

Desire pulsed through her core as she stared into his eyes. He explored her entire torso, not just her breasts, stroking and teasing. Could those intense blue rings hypnotize? She couldn't drag her gaze away. Her breasts ached, and her nipples tingled, echoing the throbbing in her core. He reached beneath her skirt and dragged her panties down to her knees, his fingers lingering against her skin.

"I can smell your musk. I know you want me. Why do you shrink from my touch?"

"I don't know you." She panted. "My body may ... respond to certain stimuli, but I don't want this."

He nudged her thighs apart and pushed two fingers into her slick passage. "Really?" He pulled back and thrust harder, rocking her against Jaden's chest. "I can tell how much you despise this." Slipping his hand out from under her skirt, he sucked her cream off his long fingers. "Pleasure or pain?"

"What? I don't understand."

"I am aroused by either. Which do you prefer?"

"I prefer to be released. This need not go any farther."

Both men laughed.

"We've barely begun," Pern said. "Force goes more naturally with pain. If you want pleasure, lie down on your back and kick off your panties."

She hesitated.

He won't ask again. Unless you enjoy pain, do as he says.

Jaden released her arms, and she turned, lying back across the desk. The smooth, cool surface teased her skin as she wiggled out of her panties. Pern returned to his chair, his gaze moving over her naked breasts.

“Now lift your skirt and bend your knees, so I can watch Jaden touch you.”

Without hesitation, she raised her skirt to her waist and bent her knees. Jaden was like a silent puppet, moving at Pern’s command. She stared into the Stirate’s eyes as Jaden caressed her body. Jaden’s fingers were warm and skillful. He rolled her nipples with one hand, while he teased her folds with the other.

Why was Pern contenting himself with such a passive role? She was spread before him, willing, ready, yet all he did was watch.

You know nothing of true power, silly girl. You are his for the taking whenever he wants. You surrendered too easily.

She snapped her legs closed and covered her breasts with her hands. “I can’t do this. I’m not a whore!”

Pern stood, leering down at her. With a soft chuckle, he splayed his fingers across her belly. “You are a whore. You just haven’t accepted it yet.”

Insulted by his nonchalance, she tried to sit. He easily held her in place.

“If you’re hungry, you must beg food from the crew. When you’re ready to sleep, you must convince someone to share his bed. What do you have to barter except your body on a ship filled with men?”

“I’ll sleep in the lab.”

“The lab belongs to Jaden.”

Ensley’s gaze flew to Jaden as a slow smile parted his lips. Had he done this intentionally? He’d encouraged her to resist!

“Do you want a bed slave, Jaden? Or shall I offer her to the crew?”

“That depends.” He paused dramatically. “I like my bed slaves willing.”

“But Ensley is not a whore.” Pern grasped her knees and spun her body on the smooth surface of the desk. Her head rotated off the edge, arching her neck. “Offer your mouth to Jaden. Demonstrate your willingness.”

Glaring up into his smug face, Ensley gritted her teeth. How masterfully he’d manipulated her. She would rather endure the Stirate’s cruelty. Jaden unfastened his pants and freed his long, thick erection. Her lips trembled, and anticipation made her insides quiver. She needed him thrusting between her thighs, not sliding against her tongue.

“Please,” she whispered. “I haven’t had ... I need --” She bit back the words. She would not beg these bastards!

“Yes?” Jaden stroked his hand up and down his length, mocking her with the gesture.

Stubbornness surged with dangerous intensity. She slipped her hand between her thighs and found her swollen clit.

“Oh, no, you don’t.” Jaden grabbed her wrist, then dragged both her arms above her head. “The Stirate offered you pleasure. You were too proud to accept.”

She looked at Pern, shocked to see compassion in his expression. "If you offer your mouth to Jaden, I may take pity on you. But no more pretenses. You *are* my whore."

Her spirit rebelled against the label, while her aching body demanded she obey. She shot Jaden a furious glare, then relaxed against the desk. Her neck arched, her legs parted, and she opened her mouth.

Jaden released her arms and moved closer, brushing himself against her lower lip. "Lick me, female." She licked her lips, then flicked her tongue against his flared head. "Again. Stroke me with that hot, wet tongue."

Hating him, knowing he'd bested her, she longed to refuse, to turn her face away, or bite him. Her breasts heaved, and her belly tightened. Warm hands settled on her knees. *Pern*. She couldn't see him, but his touch was gentle, almost reassuring.

How could she have misjudged them so completely?

She licked Jaden, keeping her mouth open, waiting for him to accept her silent offer. He guided her hands to his hips and slowly sank into her mouth. Pern's hands drifted down her inner thighs. Tension coiled, making her tremble. Her core rippled. God, she needed release!

"You were disobedient," Pern said, "and disobedience must be punished." He traced her slit with his fingertip. Her legs shook, and she arched her hips, desperate for penetration. "You will not be filled because of your pride, but you will have pleasure."

Jaden began to move in her mouth, long, steady strokes that bumped the back of her throat. She held his hips, accepting the hot slide of his shaft against her tongue, imagining him deep inside her. Pern played lazily between her thighs. He teased her opening, never venturing beyond. His thumb passed over her clit, yet his caress remained feather-light and inconsistent, keeping her orgasm out of reach.

Cupping the back of her neck, Jaden rocked into her mouth. She closed her eyes. Helpless. Powerless. They would use her as they saw fit. Grant her pleasure when they deemed her worthy. Tingling heat rolled through her abdomen and gathered between her thighs. On a dark, elemental level, she had never been more aroused.

"Yes!" Jaden cried. "Oh, gods, yes!"

Pern covered her clit with his thumb and rubbed rhythmically. Heat coalesced beneath his touch, building in tandem with Jaden's frantic thrusting. Sensation burst within her, showering her body with tingling pleasure. Jaden drove deep one last time, his butt flexing as he released his seed. Pern continued to stroke her, dragging every last shiver from her trembling body.

Lazily squeezing her breasts, Jaden pulled out of her mouth. "Well done, female," he whispered and refastened his pants.

Pern took her hands and pulled her up. Their eyes were on a level as she sat on his desk. For just an instant the bright blue ring of his pupils vanished, and the entire surface

swirled like ink. Deep within her being, longing stirred, stealing her breath and making her moan. He tenderly cupped her cheek; his touch achingly familiar. Then the sapphire rings reappeared, and his brow furrowed. He lowered his hand and stepped back.

“Next time, accept your role, and you will know true pleasure.” A note of confusion remained in his tone.

It had happened again. Had he felt the bittersweet stirring? She searched his gaze, hoping for some hint of recognition, but all tenderness was gone.

“Take your slave from my office,” Pern muttered. “I have work to do.”

Chapter Thirteen

“So, what does it do?” Saebin asked as Lyrik entered the aft lounge. She sat across a minrell table from Dro Tar. Apparently, Dro Tar had been teaching her how to play the holographic game.

“Nothing as interesting as we expected.” They’d hardly seen each other since boarding the *Gale*. He’d spent the first few hours eluding a search party and the rest of the day with Hermlin analyzing the mysterious modification. “The shields make us undetectable to conventional scanners, but they were designed so the ship could still be tracked by our military. The modification simply scrambles the tracker signal. *No one* can detect us now.”

“That sucks,” Dro Tar grumbled. “We can’t manufacture interdimensional portals or morph the shape of the ship?”

He laughed. “Is that what you two predicted?”

“That’s what she was hoping,” Saebin corrected. “The real question is why does the overlord want a ship that’s undetectable to his own people?”

“For the same reason he wants you fully operational.” Dro Tar crossed her legs and made a bland gesture toward Saebin. “Whatever he’s into has nothing to do with the Joint Council.” Saebin glanced at him. She’d said the same thing the night before. “When do I get a demonstration of your armor?”

“The next time you piss her off.”

Dro Tar made a face at him and pushed to her feet. “What’s the plan now that we’ve got ourselves an invisible ride?”

“We need to dump the guards, then arrange a meeting with the High Queen.”

Dro Tar whistled. “You’re going to turn in your old man?”

His gaze drifted to Saebin as he said, "He's left me no choice." Even if he hadn't developed feelings for his father's victim, what Cyrus was doing was wrong. High Queen Charlotte had to know.

"I'll go see if I can help with the guards." Dro Tar bounded from the lounge.

"How are you going to contact the High Queen without alerting Cyrus?" Saebin remained at the minrell table, but deactivated the game.

"I'll have Trey set it up, unless ... Can you contact her directly?"

She shook her head. "Telepathy has never been my strong suit. I can navigate established pathways, but I'm no good at creating them. Even then, I'm better at receiving thoughts than sending them. I might be able to reach Krysta. Would that be safer than Trey?"

"It's six one way, half a dozen the other. I just hate to keep involving them." Three subtle beeps announced an incoming transmission to Lyrik's audiocom. "Go ahead."

"It's Tann, sir. I've been scanning COT communications, making sure they haven't picked up our trail. You know how tracker teams are, sir. They won't give up until they've exhausted every possible lead."

Tann had a tendency to ramble, so Lyrik nudged him toward the point. "Is there a problem?"

"Not for us." Lyrik could picture the lanky young man's elaborate shrug. "The NRS is out in force at the Conservatory. I've tapped into a news feed if you want to take a look."

"Send it down." Lyrik walked to the vidscreen recessed in the far wall and pressed the bottom right corner of the screen. Audio reached him a moment before the images formed. Angry voices overlapped, and people pumped their fists in the air. The crowd lined the far bank of Mystic Brook. Beyond the swiftly flowing water stretched lush grass and a stately building surrounded by a railed gallery. Pink clouds hung low in the violet sky. The boisterous protesters abraded the tranquil setting.

"What is this place?" Saebin moved up beside him, her gaze fixed on the vidscreen. "Why are they so angry?"

"This would be the latest protest of the NRS." He crossed his arms over his chest and shook his head. "They've never been this overt before."

"Where are they, and what are they protesting?" Her voice sounded oddly hushed, drawing his attention away from the screen. She reached out slowly as if she could touch the images. This wasn't the first time she'd seen a vidscreen, so what accounted for her awe?

"The building in the background is the Conservatory. It's the Mystics' headquarters and training center. Today is the annual Choosing. That's cause enough for the NRS." She lowered her hand and glanced at him, her cheeks flushed, eyes unusually bright. "Are you all right?"

She rubbed her eyes and nodded. "I felt an odd -- rush when I first looked at the image. My armor has compensated. What are the Mystics choosing?"

Should he be more concerned that the Conservatory gave her a rush or that her armor was able to compensate? Shaking away the disquieting thought, he answered her question. "Children with great potential are brought to the Conservatory on this day every cycle. The Master Level Mages scan them and select the very best for apprenticeship. It's an honor just to be invited to the Choosing, and only a handful will actually be selected."

Saebin returned her attention to the protesters. "Why do they care what the Mystics do? Were their children not selected?"

"In a way. The vast majority of the NRS members have no Mystic abilities." He sighed. They felt threatened by the Mystics' awesome power, intimidated and envious. Yet, their frustration was justified. Every member of the Joint Council had some sort of Mystic ability, so who represented those without?

"Do the Mystics misuse their power?" She turned from the vidscreen and teetered, color bleeding from her face.

"Saebin." He reached for her, but her knees buckled before he could catch her. Steadying her as best he could, he eased her limp body to the floor.

Saebin screamed, her body arching off the treatment table. The man on her right slumped in a chair, while her handler sprawled on Saebin's left. They were bound together like a human chain, wrist to wrist, palms touching. Energy flowed through Saebin, searing in its intensity. Thoughts, memories, and information saturated the energy.

"Saebin. Saebin release the past. Listen to my voice."

Krystabel. The ghost again. "What do you want with me?" The pain eased, but her frustration was just as strong. The image shifted out of focus, accenting sound.

"Everything will happen quickly. You must be ready."

"Ready for what? You speak in riddles."

"Ready to bring me home. Seth is the key. I'm not sure how, but he will lead me home."

"Seth is a child, little more than an infant. How can he be the key to bringing you back?"

"I can't explain it, but I know it must be soon. My spirit is dispersing. There is not much time left. If I remain in this dimension much longer, I will be lost forever."

Saebin shuddered violently as the room focused again. She was still strapped to the treatment table, but the others were gone. "They say you're my mother. Is that true?"

"It isn't important right now."

"Is it true?"

"Yes."

Why wasn't she pleased by the confirmation? This was so strange.

Loneliness pressed in, making her chest ache and her head pound. Why didn't her armor compensate for the emotional spike? Something was wrong. She struggled against her bonds, tossing her head from side to side.

What was wrong with her?

"Saebin." Warm fingers stroked her face. "Can you hear me, sweetheart? Come back to me."

The vision freed her by degrees. Lyrik's voice drew her back. She was cradled in his arms, surrounded by the sweet scent of flowers. A sob escaped her, releasing the tension in her chest. "I ... do you smell ..."

"Flowers?" Disbelief rumbled through his tone. "I thought I was imagining it."

"I saw Krystabel again." She opened her eyes, blinking against the light. "I didn't actually see her; I just heard her voice."

"Did you smell flowers the first time?"

She nodded. "How long did the vision last?"

"Not long. How many times have you heard her voice?"

She sat up more in his lap, then on the floor. Thank god they had the lounge to themselves. The crew would think she'd lost her mind. She licked her lips and resisted the urge to curl back into his warm arms.

"Just once," she replied. "When she brought me out of stasis. She said she'd released my Mystic energy, and then I woke up in the lab."

"Have your abilities changed since you came out of stasis?" He sounded dubious.

"It's hard to say. I was so weak I could hardly stand when I woke up."

"And the rest has been one crisis after another?" She nodded. "What did she say this time? Were there images or just her voice?"

She explained what she'd seen and felt as succinctly as she could. "I thought it was another memory flash until I heard Krystabel. Krysta told me she smells flowers, too, when Krystabel appears to her. This is all so strange."

"As soon as we drop off the guards, I'll set course for the Conservatory. We have to get you to the Mystics." He glanced away, his chest expanding with a deep breath. "I don't know how to help you."

She'd nearly killed their leader. Why would the Mystics want to help her? "What about the NRS? Isn't their protest drawing attention to the Conservatory?"

"We'll use it as a diversion. The ship is undetectable, so all we'll need to do is get one of the Mystics to teleport onboard."

"Do you have someone in mind?" Now she sounded dubious.

"Trey's brother is a Mystic. He's also your aunt's life mate."

"The High Queen is married to Trey's brother?"

"Yep. Tal dar Aune. That's Master Tal to you." He helped her to her feet with an encouraging smile. "Maybe you should lie down for a while. It will take us several hours to reach the Conservatory."

"I'm too anxious to sleep."

"You're exhausted."

"I need to run a combat simulation or ..."

He smiled and stroked her cheek with the backs of his fingers. "I'd love to help you with the 'or,' but I need to find somewhere to drop these guards. There is no telling where this mess will lead us or how long it will take to resolve. I'd rather be rid of them now. The *Gale* doesn't have a simulator bay, however, it's got a well-equipped gym. You can kick the resistance bag until your muscles ache, just don't discharge your weapons."

After demonstrating how each apparatus worked, Lyrik left her alone in the gym. Saebin experimented with the settings and positions of the various pieces of equipment. She would have preferred a live sparring partner. Still, the resistance bag came close. She pummeled the body-shaped bag, striking each lighted target as it flashed. It measured the speed of her response and the accuracy of her attack.

"Damn, woman, I'm sure glad you're on my team."

Dro Tar's comment made her smile. "Are the guards off the ship?" she asked without breaking the rhythm of her routine.

"Yep. We'll be at the Conservatory before they reach the nearest settlement."

She paused and looked over her shoulder. Dro Tar had slipped her hands into the back pockets of her faded blue jeans. A cropped tee shirt displayed her toned abdomen. Today's slogan read, "Yes I do, but not with you."

"How well do you know Tal?"

"Not as well as I know Trey. What's your boggle?"

Saebin grabbed a towel off a nearby shelf and dried her face. "D-159 was trained to mistrust. It's hard to break out of her mindset."

"I can only imagine. If it helps at all, Trey and Tal were both instrumental in your rescue."

Saebin averted her gaze. Her definition of rescue obviously differed from Dro Tar's. Cyrus had treated her no differently than Hydran. "Can I gain access to the refugee files after I shower?"

"We've been through them twice."

"I must have missed something," Saebin wrapped the towel around her neck. "My handler was there when I came out of stasis. I know her voice."

"I'm not doubting what you heard." Dro Tar led her from the gym. "If this woman is working for Cyrus, he would have covered his tracks."

"I need something to do. I have no -- objective." She stumbled over the word.

Dro Tar ducked into her quarters and returned with a small, thin device. "I uploaded the personnel files as well as any information I could find about the dispersal of the refugees. Have at it."

After a quick shower, Saebin returned to the aft lounge. She opened the viewport and activated the datascreen. Dro Tar was right; Cyrus would have concealed the movements of his accomplice. Still, she would search for any anomaly.

She lost track of time as she scoured the files, reading and re-reading each entry. The lounge door slid open, and she glanced up from the screen. A tall, lanky youth strolled into the room. Tann, her brain supplied his name almost subconsciously.

"Do you mind if I play minrell?" He nodded toward the table behind her.

She shifted her chair, bringing the game table into her periphery vision. "Of course not."

He plopped into one of the two chairs and activated the game. "The commander wants us all to take a break every few hours. Doesn't want to burn us out, I guess."

Why was he justifying his presence? She hadn't thought it odd until he explained. Shifting her chair again, she looked at the lad more closely. He'd scooted his chair back from the table as the game loaded. His long legs were braced apart, hands resting lightly on his knees. He glanced at her and smiled.

There was nothing specific in his manner to set Saebin on edge, still she pushed back from the table.

"What are you working on?" He glanced at the game table, then back at her.

"Research." Her input ring vibrated, and she powered down the datascreen. She made it to her feet before he lunged for her. She knocked him backward with a swipe of her forearm. His hip hit the minrell table, preventing his fall. She raised her fist and aimed it at his heart. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

He made a subtle movement, and the object tucked up his sleeve slid into the palm of his hand. Much to his credit, he didn't speak, allowing nothing to distract him. His dark gaze focused on her face, his stance loose and ready.

Did he honestly think he could reach her before her pulse rendered him unconscious? He was either incredibly arrogant or ignorant of her abilities. Either way she was finished indulging him. She sent out a Mystic pulse and waited for him to fall.

A slow, cocky smile curved his lips. "You didn't think it would be that easy, did you?"

He kicked her hand upward as she shot. Her energy stream flew across the room in a useless arch. She jump kicked, spinning in a tight circle. He answered with a sharp counterstrike. Agile and surprisingly strong, he matched her blow for blow.

She shot again, grazing the side of his neck. He yelped, but kept right on coming. The remaining energy hit the hull, triggering an alarm. He scowled and surged forward, determination hardening his features.

As if controlled by the same puppet master, they raised their hands at exactly the same time. A dense mist burst from the slender device in his right hand, and he slapped her chest with his other hand. She sent a narrow stream of energy into his brain. The mist hit her full in the face. She staggered backward. He shrieked, flailing uncontrollably before collapsing in a hapless pile.

Shock gave way to panic as the stinging in her eyes escalated to searing pain. Rubbing her eyes increased the heat, so she reached blindly for a chair. Tears streamed down her cheeks, and each breath multiplied the burning.

“Help me!” she cried. Darkness closed in, and fire sank ever deeper.

Chapter Fourteen

Lyrik ran through the corridor, his heart pounding in his chest. He'd flipped on surveillance in the aft lounge just in time to watch Tann spray Saebin in the face with an infuser. What had the mist contained, and how the hell had Tann gotten close enough to attack?

"Medical emergency to the aft lounge," he shouted before realizing his skeleton crew didn't include a physician. "Zane, I guess that's you. I'll meet you in the infirmary."

Pausing long enough to grab the infuser out of Tann's lifeless hand, Lyrik scooped Saebin into his arms and rushed for the infirmary. Zane was waiting as well as two other crewmen. Lyrik placed Saebin on the treatment table, his mouth so dry he could hardly speak.

"Tann sprayed her with this." He held up the device so Zane could see it. "She was unconscious when I got there."

"How did he get close enough to use an infuser on her?" Zane muttered as he activated the primary scanner. He had flirted with the idea of becoming a doctor before his wanderlust set in. Though Zane's medical training was minimal, Lyrik was thankful for it now.

"An alarm went off so I turned on the camera. They were already fighting. I have no idea why he was still standing." He glanced at the other two men. "Go get his body and bring it here."

"Yes, sir," they responded in unison.

Zane shook his head, blue-black hair brushing his cheeks. "I don't know what this is. It's spreading like wildfire. Shit!" He injected her with something, and her heartbeat stabilized for a moment. "Can we get her out of this suit? It's releasing adrenaline and god knows what else."

Lyrik took her hand. Her fingers were like ice, and his heart gave another lurch. “She has to trigger it or the suit overloads.”

Wiping his eyes with his forearm, Zane looked from the scans to Saebin and back. “I’m not a doctor, sir. I don’t know how to combat this.”

No! Lyrik stepped closer to the table, pressing her hand against his chest. “Can you put her in stasis until we reach the Conservatory?”

“I’ll try, but this is so far out of my --”

Light flashed through the infirmary. Zane squinted into the glare, while Lyrik drew his pulse pistol and turned to confront the intruder. Vee stood in the middle of the room, his black robes a stark contrast to his snow-white hair.

“I will take the female.” Vee glided forward, his emerald gaze focused on Saebin.

“Like hell you will.”

His brow arched in challenge, and his intricately woven hair uncoiled, trailing behind him on the floor. “Ye prefer to watch her die?”

Lyrik swallowed hard. “How did you know ...” Vee was damn near omniscient. He knew what he wanted to know. But Saebin had tried to kill him. “Treat her here.”

“I need the assistance of other healers.”

“Can’t they --” Vee shouldered past him and lifted Saebin into his arms.

“I had only to ignore her peril, and she would be dead. *Do not* insult me again.” He flashed out of the infirmary as suddenly as he had entered.

“Okay, that was just creepy.” Zane turned off the medical scanner and picked up a piece of paper from the treatment table. “Where did this come from?”

“What is it?”

The adhesive backing had caused the paper to stick to itself. He carefully unfolded the square and held it so Lyrik could read it. *All Abominations must die. -- NRS*

“Tann was NRS?” Lyrik trembled, the adrenaline spike not yet dissipated.

“Not that I knew of.”

The two crewmembers returned with Tann’s body. A quick scan revealed a foreign object grafted to his skull. Zane followed the thin tail extending from the object to something larger embedded in the hollow above his clavicle. He made a small incision and withdrew the larger object.

“Whatever it was, it was powered by firestone.”

“What?” Lyrik took the glowing rectangle from his apprentice and wiped away the blood. “Only Mystics can charge firestones. This doesn’t make sense.”

“Even Mystics have their price.” Zane shrugged. “Or they’ve found a way to bypass the Mystics.”

"If they've found a way to charge firestones without a Mystic ..." He tossed the firestone chip onto Tann's motionless chest and shook his head. "The NRS doesn't have the funding for body modifications. This stinks all the way to the Day Moon."

"I'll dig out the actual device and see if Hermlin can figure out what it does."

Lyrik nodded and left the infirmary. He thought he'd chosen his crew carefully. Every one of these men had shipped out with him repeatedly. He felt like such a fool. Locking himself in his cabin, he blocked all external controls, then accessed the secure frequency Trey had given him.

"What's going on?" Trey responded with an encrypted audio signal.

"One of my crew just tried to assassinate Saebin in the name of the NRS."

"You sound more than annoyed. How close did he come?"

"A lot closer than I would have thought possible. He has some sort of device in his head that shields him from Mystic pulses."

"Are you sure he was NRS? They're a pain in the ass, but they have little real power."

"That's what I thought, too." Lyrik sighed, rubbing his eyes with his fingertips. "This could be the overlord hiding behind the NRS, or the NRS has a lot more power than we thought."

"I'll check into it. There has to be --" An emergency interrupt signal preempted the rest of his statement. "Hold on." The transmission lapsed into silence for a moment, then Trey returned. "Krysta wants to talk to you and only you. She sounds frantic. Is Saebin all right?"

"Vee took her."

"Off the *Gale*?"

"Why do you sound surprised?"

"You're right, I shouldn't be. Try and calm Krysta down. She's not listening to me at the moment."

Lyrik smiled. Krysta was a handful on a good day.

"What happened to Saebin?" she demanded without preamble. "Her fear spiked through me like a bolt of lightning. Where is she?"

"Someone tried to kill her. He claimed to be NRS, but I'm not convinced. Vee took her off the ship."

"I'll meet you at the Conservatory."

* * * * *

Cyrus stood at the window in his spacious office, overlooking the City of Tears. The view was spectacular from the top floor of the Warlords' Headquarters, but he found no solace in the majestic vista. Lyrik was out there somewhere with D-159. His son's betrayal

upset him less than the disastrous loose end. He'd worked too hard for his plans to implode now.

His companel beeped, and he walked to his desk, wanting to see who it was before he responded. "Well, it's about time," he muttered when he saw Pern Keire's favorite alias. "What can I do for you?"

"I should be asking you the same." Pern's voice was randomly modulated. "We are enjoying your gift. You were right. She is perfect for us. How can I repay your generosity?"

"By not allowing my generosity to distract you from our mutual goals. The agenda we agreed upon leaves no room for error."

"We are well ahead of schedule." A tinge of annoyance penetrated the modulation. "Have you managed to recapture the stray?"

"I haven't received final confirmation, but I'm confident the situation is under control."

"I hope your confidence is justified. As you said, our agenda leaves no room for error."

The transmission ended, and Cyrus stepped away from his desk. Damn Lyrik to hell. He didn't need this complication. Not only had Lyrik rescued a D-class assassin, he'd stolen a ship Cyrus needed badly. Heaving a frustrated sigh, he moved back to the window. The tracker teams would find him. Even Lyrik couldn't stay hidden forever.

Cyrus's thoughts drifted to Ensley. He pictured her naked, kneeling submissively with her thighs parted. The Rodytes would train her, show her how a female should behave. They would control her with pleasure and pain until she wasn't sure which she preferred.

Blood flooded his groin, and he closed his eyes, savoring the anticipation. She had spurned him, turned a deaf ear to his needs, yet the memory had lost its sting. Taking a woman by force was punishable by death on Ontariese. Not even the overlord was exempt from the rule. So he wouldn't take her by force. He'd wait until she was properly trained, and then her Rodyte master would command her to do whatever Cyrus wanted.

"Close slats." He braced his legs apart as the blinds rotated. Unfastening his pants, he eased his hand inside. She would pleasure him with her mouth while Pern and Jaden watched, but when he rutted between her thighs they would be alone.

* * * * *

Darkness receded by degrees. Saebin heard voices chanting, their words unknown to her. She moved her arms, expecting to find herself bound. Her muscles protested the exertion, but she wasn't restrained.

"How do ye feel?"

"*You*. How do *you* feel? Unless you want Seth to sound like an ancient, you have to break yourself of the thees and thous." Krysta's voice rolled across her senses with comforting familiarity.

"I was not speaking with Seth, I was --"

"That's almost as bad as thee and thou. Say, 'I was talking to Saebin, not Seth.'"

"I will ban *thee* from the Conservatory unless *ye* show the proper respect."

Krysta laughed.

Saebin opened her eyes and groaned, only able to make out shapes and shadows.

"Where am I?"

Warm fingers closed around her hand. "Close your eyes. They're covered in a healing salve. That's why you can't see." Krysta's voice was much closer now. "You're at the Conservatory. Do you know what that means?"

Saebin nodded. "That's where we were headed when Tann attacked me." The incident passed through her mind in slow motion, every kick, every lunge, and the burning mist. "My abilities didn't affect him. He should have gone down with the first pulse."

"Lyrik said they found something implanted in his head."

"Where is Lyrik?" Her heartbeat leapt so suddenly her armor had to compensate.

"He's still on the *Gale*. Only Mystics are allowed inside the Conservatory."

"How did I get here?" Every muscle in her body ached, and her head pounded. She remembered the panic, the disbelief. She had been dying.

"Vee brought you here. Say, 'Thank you, Vee.'"

Saebin licked her lips. Why would Vee save her life? She had tried to kill him.

"Ye did not try to kill me," the male voice responded to her thought. "Ye --"

"You." Krysta persisted.

"You were not in control at that time."

Saebin wasn't sure she could have been so forgiving. "Thank you."

"Your armor is counterproductive to the healers," Krysta said. "You'll recover more quickly if you let us take it off."

Saebin stiffened and pulled her hand out of the light grip. Tann shouldn't have been able to attack her. How did she know this was Krysta? Voices were easy to replicate. Fear and frustration tugged at each other, growing stronger with each turn.

A cool palm pressed down over her forehead, and soothing warmth inundated her mind. "No harm will come to you here. If you wish, you can see your surroundings through my eyes."

If Vee hadn't saved her, how had she been saved? Was it easier to believe in an elaborate conspiracy than a stranger's kindness? A powerful presence hovered beyond her consciousness, waiting, unwilling to intrude.

"I don't know how," she whispered.

"May I enter?"

She nodded, and the presence eased into her mind. Brilliant and ageless, Vee surrounded her with his being. Her pulse quickened. He calmed her before her armor had a chance to respond. She saw herself as he saw her, lying on a narrow cot, her hair wild about her face, his hand resting across her forehead. Without moving his fingers, he turned his head. Krysta stood beside him, looking rather disheveled. Her gaze filled with compassion and concern.

“You see,” he said. “There is nothing to fear.”

Relaxing against the cot, she blew out a tense breath. “I released my sensor inputs. It’s safe to take off my armor.”

Chapter Fifteen

Merry laughter drew Saebin from her restful slumber. The healers had congregated around her cot at regular intervals for the first day. Her body absorbed their energy like a sponge. Light still stung her eyes, but they hadn't felt it necessary to reapply the salve.

"Lor, stop it." The playful reprimand was followed by another peal of laughter.

Saebin opened her eyes and waited for her vision to adjust to the dim light inside the infirmary. A tall, blond man had a girl trapped against the far wall. If her rosy cheeks and coquettish smile were any indication, she was a willing captive in his arms.

"Give me a kiss, and I'll let you go."

"If I let you kiss me, I won't want you to let me go, and you are a heartless flirt."

He staggered back dramatically. "You wound me. I put my entire heart into my flirting. Why do you --"

"She's awake, Lor." The girl motioned urgently. "Your patient awaits."

He turned toward Saebin, and the girl slipped through the open archway. Lor was younger than she had first thought, late teens at the most. Crossing to her cot, he produced a less flirtatious smile.

"I hope our playfulness didn't disturb you." He had a nice voice and beautiful turquoise eyes.

"Not at all." Saebin envied his carefree cheer. "Your companion seemed to be agreeable to the game."

"She's right. I am a terrible flirt." He raised his hands helplessly. "I see a female, and I want to kiss her. It's simply beyond my control."

Saebin laughed, finding his candor charming. "I hope you don't intend to kiss me. I've just been through a horrible ordeal."

“Your ordeal is not what dissuades me. My master told me you belong to one of the warlords.” His voice dropped dramatically. “Is that true? Are you the warlord’s woman?”

She had no intention of discussing her personal life with this bold lad. The Mystics didn’t keep slaves, so he must be referring to his mentor, a Master Level Mage. “Who is your master?”

“Master Tal. The High Queen is his life mate. I’m told you are her niece.”

“That’s the rumor.” She shifted the pillow behind her and propped herself up against the wall. “Will you please let Master Vee know I’m feeling much better?”

“Of course, Mistress. I’ll return momentarily.”

He departed through the same archway the girl had used. Saebin released her breath in a long sigh. Was she the warlord’s woman? The thought made her heartbeat speed up and tension gather low in her belly. She had been swept from the arms of death, and now she was ready to live.

* * * * *

“It’s been three days,” Lyrik snapped. “I want to see her.”

“We thought you might feel that way.” Krysta grinned. “That’s why we had her moved to one of the visitor bungalows.” Krysta took his hand and opened a transport conduit, the motion effortless and graceful. He was amazed by the progress she had made in only a cycle. She was a far different person from the belligerent rebel he’d met on Earth.

They stepped into the conduit, and everything blurred. Shapes become indistinguishable in the rapidly spinning mass of color. Sound faded to static, then exploded in a mighty roar as they were propelled through space. Lyrik held tightly to Krysta’s hand, exhilarated by the momentum.

The roaring subsided, and the spinning slowed as they reached the other side. They emerged in a grassy clearing, and Krysta closed the conduit behind them. A row of cottages marched along the banks of Mystic Brook. Krysta motioned toward the one on the end.

“Isn’t this outside the shield? I’m not comfortable with this. I’ll take her back to the *Gale*.”

“Nice try. They expanded the shield because of the protestors. She’s perfectly safe, and so are you.” She winked at him. “Vee isn’t taking any chances. Now relax.”

After a perfunctory knock, Krysta pushed open the door and entered the bungalow. Lyrik followed her inside. His gaze moved immediately to Saebin, and a thick lump formed in his throat. Rich blond hair framed her face and spilled across her shoulders. Healthy color crowned her cheeks, and her eyes sparkled as she met his gaze. Gone was her body armor, and in its place was a flowing robe of midnight blue. He crossed the room and cupped her cheek, struggling to believe she was real.

“You look amazing.” His voice hitched, and he shook his head. “How do you feel?”

“Lucky to be alive and mad as hell.”

He smiled. “Understandable on both accounts.”

“We have been focused entirely on her recovery,” Vee said. Lyrik glanced at him, embarrassed to realize he hadn’t noticed the Mystic in the room. “The time has come for answers.”

“What do you need to know?” Lyrik sat in the chair beside Saebin and clasped her hand between his.

“What have ye -- you --” Vee shot Krysta an annoyed glare as he corrected himself. “-- learned about the assassin?”

“He left a note on Saebin giving credit to the NRS. Tann might have been a member, but it’s highly unlikely they acted alone.” Lyrik hesitated, his gaze drifting to Saebin. How much should he say in front of her? She had been through so much already.

“Don’t let the robe fool you,” she squeezed his hand, “I’m tougher than I look.”

“The note said ‘all abominations must die.’”

Krysta gasped. “What about Seth? Will they target him next? He’s a Level Four, the vilest abomination of all.” Biting sarcasm sliced through her tone, and she stepped closer to Vee.

“I’ve heard that phrase before.” Saebin brushed a lock of hair off her forehead. “What does it mean?”

“Seth is the new and improved version of us.” Kysta’s voice returned to normal as she explained. “No one knows what abilities he’ll develop, or if he’ll develop any at all. Hydran grew more ambitious with each of his creations. We honestly don’t know what will happen as he matures.” She glanced at Vee, resolve hardening her expression. The world might consider her Seth’s aunt, but Krysta emanated maternal ferocity. “The NRS isn’t alone in their animosity. Most of the members of the Joint Council think Seth should have been terminated.”

“I will bring my son to the Conservatory until the crisis has passed.” Vee sounded grim and determined. “We are better able to protect him.”

“I agree.”

They sat in thoughtful silence for a moment. Lyrik stroked Saebin’s hand, wishing they were alone. His logical nature understood he wasn’t responsible for the events his father had set in motion, but he couldn’t suppress his frustration. Saebin should be reveling in her new found freedom, not fighting for her life.

Vee looked at Krysta. “Were you able to sense Saebin while you were on the Day Moon?” Krysta shook her head and glanced away, as if her inability was a cause for shame. “Then it is safe to assume Cyrus was shielding the laboratory. He likely used the same technology Hydran incorporated in the shield suits.” Vee paused again, then turned to Saebin. “What did Krystabel say to you as you awakened?”

"She said she'd released my Mystic abilities, and she cautioned me not to let anyone realize I was in control of my armor."

"Shortly after awakening you teleported to Firestone Valley?"

"Is there some reason for this review?" Lyrik grumbled.

Vee ignored his impatience. "It is possible the teleportation was simply the result of a surge in your power. It is also possible it had greater significance."

"What sort of significance?" Krysta asked.

"The device we found in Tann was powered by firestone," Lyrik said. "Has firestone ever been charged without a Mystic infusing it with energy?"

"I have never heard of such a thing." Vee's intricately woven hair coiled around his shoulders like a shimmering snake. Lyrik shuddered. *Shapeshifters*. "Once charged, firestones are long lasting and stable. If they have found a way to infuse them with another form of energy ..." His words trailed away, and his expression revealed concern. This wasn't good. As Dro Tar would say, Vee had the best poker face on the planet.

"Trey is checking into the concept," Krysta interjected. "Can you ask Lord Drakkin to search the Wisdom of the Ages?"

Vee nodded, then turned back to Saebin. "You have not teleported since?"

"No." Saebin's curt answer drew Lyrik's attention. She sat at the edge of the chair, her posture stiff, tension obvious in her expression. Had she been out of her armor all this time? Didn't they realize the risks inherent in the separation?

"What can you tell me about your handler?"

"She was brilliant, ambitious, and cruel. I never knew her name; it was irrelevant." She shot to her feet, her eyes narrowed and bright. "My last vision involved her. I was connecting her to a man, and they ... It's hard to explain."

"May we touch your mind?"

She crossed her arms over her chest and nodded.

Lyrik held his breath while they encircled Saebin, Krysta in front and Vee behind. Saebin accepted their touch, standing perfectly still as they entered her mind. Lyrik released his breath, annoyed by his reaction. This was natural, expected -- for Mystics. So why did he want to throw Vee across the room and wrap Saebin in his arms? You're jealous of an old man? Pull it together!

Vee stepped back first. "Do you recognize the other female?" He directed the question to Krysta with his eyes.

She lowered her hand and shook her head. "I don't remember her from Earth, and her image isn't in the personnel files. She either had her face altered, or Cyrus erased her identity almost immediately after we arrived."

"It wouldn't have taken her long to discover where her skills were most marketable." Saebin returned to her chair. "Do you understand what was happening? I have no actual memory of the procedure, but I sense it was a reoccurring event."

"You were being used as a conduit," Vee explained. "It is a very rare and dangerous ability."

"Mystics pass energy to each other frequently," Lyrik said. "What made this unusual?"

"Far more than energy was passing through her. The man's knowledge, in its entirety, was being passed to the other female."

"I often wondered how she learned so quickly." Saebin paused to rub her eyes. "My handler seemed to know more than Hydran at times. Wait a minute. If this is a Mystic ability, how did Hydran know about it?"

Vee shook his head. "I cannot answer that."

"Is it possible Krystabel passed on the ability?" Saebin asked.

"Anything is possible. Your handler is a daughter of Krystabel, as are you. It is hard to say what abilities she possesses." He was silent for a long time. "Were you present at the moment of Krystabel's death?"

"She isn't dead," Krysta objected. "She vowed to return, and I believe her. Aunt Charlotte is just as convinced she's still alive."

Vee didn't argue. He simply waited for Saebin to respond.

"Why do you ask?"

"It is an ancient custom," Vee began. "At the moment of death, a Mystic conduit passes the wisdom and experience of the dying person to whomever they have chosen to carry on their legacy."

"You think I passed Krystabel's wisdom and experience to my handler?" Saebin pressed her hand to the base of her throat, her eyes wide and filled with horror.

"Not intentionally, but it would explain many things." Vee continued, oblivious to Saebin's distress. "Before E'Lanna sent her twins through the portal, she used a conduit to infuse them with information about our world. If Krystabel's knowledge was then passed to -
_"

Lyrik rose and stood in front of Saebin. "She's had enough."

"This should not distress thee. Ye were clearly being coerced."

"We're done for now. Go ... meditate."

With his characteristic nonchalance, Vee blinked out of sight.

"He doesn't mean to be so -- inconsiderate. He's just lived too long to be bothered with social convention." Krysta started for the door.

"What, no flashy exit?" Lyrik teased.

"The Conservatory is just across the field. It's a waste of energy."

Saebin watched Krysta leave the bungalow as Vee's words echoed through her mind. Had she created her own tormentor? Her sensory inputs buzzed, and lights danced before her eyes. Lyrik knelt in front of her and framed her face with his hands. His gaze moved over her features, warm and caressing.

"We have to find her," she said in a passionate whisper.

"We will." He brushed her lower lip with his thumb. "If we run out of options, I'll kidnap the overlord and let D-159 interrogate him."

She smiled at the rash suggestion, warmed by the determination in his expression. "That's not a bad idea. We're already fugitives. At a glance it all seems like a chain of random events, but I'm starting to see the connections."

"Firestone powered weapons to overthrow the Mystics?"

She nodded. "But what about the baby? Krystabel spoke of Seth to me as well. What could an innocent child have to do with all this?"

"How long have you been out of your armor?" Concern darkened his gaze to forest green as he stared into her eyes.

"Since shortly after Vee brought me here." She turned into his caress, savoring the comfort of his touch. "I'm not close to overload, if that's what you're worried about."

"The thought had crossed my mind. I'm glad it's not a problem." He feathered kisses across her cheeks, pressed his skin against hers, and inhaled the scent of her hair. "I've never been so scared in my life. I thought I'd lost you."

The hushed urgency in his tone made her heart flutter. His eyes took on a rich, mesmerizing gleam that sent heat curling through her abdomen. She waited for her armor to stabilize her emotions, then realized she wasn't wearing it. She'd wanted him since their eyes first met, and the desire simmered still. The overlord thought she was dead. Was there any harm in spending one night exploring these feelings?

She placed her hands on his shoulders, scooting to the edge of her chair. "I thought I reacted to you so strongly because you were the only attractive male I'd been alone with."

One of his eyebrows arched, and a smile curved his lips. "You don't think that anymore?"

"I ..." She'd never been allowed to consider her own desires. How did she make him understand how badly she needed this, needed him?

He leaned in slowly and brushed his lips over hers. "Shall we walk along the brook and enjoy the sunset?"

She shook her head. "I want the final destination." Confusion clouded his gaze, and she smiled. "We visited Foreplay World, and it was wonderful. I wasn't impressed with Anticipation, but you promised it would make the final destination that much sweeter." She licked her lips and tried again. "I want the final destination."

With a throaty growl, he swept her into his arms and headed for the utility room. She laughed and pointed to the appropriate door. The bedroom was spacious and airy. A large, gauze-draped bed dominated the furnishings.

He set her on the bed, then tugged off his boots, his expression intense and hungry. After kicking her shoes aside, she watched him undress. Hazy purple light spilled in through the shutters and the transparent panes inset in the ceiling. He pulled his shirt off over his head and unfastened his pants. Her gaze followed the bunch and flex of his powerful torso.

Pausing with his pants low on his hips, he captured her gaze with his. "Are you sure this is what you want?" Desire blazed in his eyes, but she detected a mischievous glimmer there, too.

She stood and unfastened her robe, parting the front without taking it off. His gaze descended, and his chest stopped moving. Feminine power washed over her. A slow step brought her body within a hand's breadth of his. Her nipples tingled, and sweet tension wound through her abdomen.

"Breathe," she whispered and pressed her breasts against his chest.

He took a deep breath, and the hairs on his chest teased her nipples. She eased her hands inside the waistband of his pants and pushed them downward. His abdomen rippled as her breath wafted across his skin. He wrapped his fingers around the back of her neck, covering the input ring. The casual touch sent desire twisting through her body. He knew all her secrets, and he still wanted her. The realization made her dizzy and hot.

His mouth covered hers as he pushed the robe from her shoulders. The soft material swished down her arms, then she raised them to encircle his neck. She parted her lips and tugged the cord from his hair, combing her fingers through the thick strands as he took the kiss deeper. Their lips pressed, their tongues slid, and their teeth nipped.

A wicked image formed within her mind. Would he be shocked by her daring or pleased with her assertiveness? Were Ontarian women encouraged to explore their sexuality? He'd controlled their last encounter. He'd given, and she'd received. Tonight she wanted the pleasure to be shared.

Easing her mouth away from his, she kissed her way down his neck, over his chest, and along his abdomen. He traced her spine as she sank to her knees, his hands ending up in her hair. His hips were lean, his legs long. She raked her fingernails over his thighs, fascinated by the fine hair and the well-defined muscles.

She eased one hand between his thighs and heard his sharply indrawn breath. With his sac resting in the palm of her hand, she looked up. The languid swirl of his eyes caressed her face. He licked his lips, his hands tightening ever so slightly in her hair. Without breaking eye contact, she wrapped her fingers around his shaft and circled the flared tip with her tongue.

He groaned, a distinct tremor passing along the length of his body. Encouraged by his response, she wet her lips and took him into her mouth. The woman in the simulation had

bobbed her head forward and back while her hands squeezed her lover's butt. Saebin explored his sac for another moment before moving her hands to his hips. He flexed beneath her fingers as she took him deeper.

Rocking back and forth, she slid her mouth up and down the length of his shaft. She swirled her tongue and maintained a firm circle with her lips. He closed his eyes and panted harshly, his head rolling back on his shoulders.

"I don't want to ... come like this."

She ignored his protest and sped up the rhythm of her strokes. She wanted him to lose control, needed his surrender. He tried to pull out of her mouth. She moved her hands to his butt and drew on him with demanding suction. He thrust to the back of her mouth and shuddered violently. She instinctively swallowed and swallowed again, her core echoing the pulsations of his shaft.

Chapter Sixteen

Lyrik eased out of Saebin's mouth and trembled at the longing burning in her eyes. She'd devoured him, pleased him selflessly. His heart still thundered in his chest, and blood rushed to his groin, maintaining his erection. He'd meant to make slow, sweet love to her, to touch her gently, take her tenderly, and watch her sleep cradled in his arms. She obviously needed something more intense.

She'd been emotionally suppressed, imprisoned within her own body. He should have anticipated her ravenous desire. She reached for his shaft again, but he twisted away and scooped her up in his arms. "It's your turn to tremble and moan."

He placed her in the middle of the bed. She parted her thighs and bent her knees, her gaze boring into his. The Night Moon cast a silvery light over her long-limbed body. He paused, captivated by her beauty and her unabashed need.

"You are so incredibly beautiful."

She smiled, and his heart turned over in his chest. He couldn't think about the future, didn't know what tomorrow would bring. He only knew he wanted to savor each moment they had together. Joining her on the bed, he knelt between her thighs. He arched over her and cupped one breast with his hand while he suckled her other breast. Her nipple tightened against his tongue, and she raked her fingers through his hair. Silky smooth and incredibly warm, her skin intoxicated him, begged for his touch, commanded his attention. He stroked her side and her hip while his mouth moved from one breast to the other and back.

He scooted off the end of the bed and pulled her toward him. She reared up, her eyes confused, yet luminous. With a slow, nearly predatory smile, he guided her heels to the edge of the bed and spread her legs wide. She braced herself on her elbows, watching him through narrowed eyes. Her curiosity encouraged him. He wanted to overwhelm her with pleasure, to devour her as completely as she'd devoured him.

Focusing on her face, he traced her slit with his index finger. Her lips parted, and her breasts quivered. Her folds were slick with cream. Was this anticipation or had pleasuring him given her pleasure as well? He pushed his finger into her core and rotated his wrist, caressing the front wall of her passage with his out-stroke. She sighed, her legs subtly flexing as he did it again and again.

He held her folds open with one hand while he added a second finger. Her clit was swollen and flushed, begging for attention. Without interrupting the rhythmic shuttle of his hand, he leaned in and circled her nub with the tip of his tongue. She groaned, her inner muscles fluttering.

He pulled his fingers out and pressed his mouth against her parted folds. Time to devour. Flicking her clit and circling her opening, he savored each gasp, each breathless moan. Her salty-sweet taste drove him crazy, made him ravenous for more. Easing his hands beneath her bottom, he angled her hips and surged into her passage with his tongue. Her fingers grasped his hair, holding him firmly as she rocked against his mouth. He swirled his tongue inside her. She bucked frantically. When she trembled with the tension and whimpered, he caught her clit between his lips and gently sucked. She cried out, her core pulsing with a powerful orgasm. He prolonged the spasms, pulling the pleasure from her body as ruthlessly as she'd milked him.

She collapsed against the bed, panting and tremulous. Before she could relax completely, he draped her legs over his arms and positioned himself at her entrance. "Saebin." Her passion-muddled gaze met his, and he filled her with one powerful thrust. Her core gripped him so tightly that Lyrik moaned. He gritted his teeth against the pleasure, waiting for the urgency to subside before he moved.

He pulled nearly out, then drove deep again. She arched into each stroke, cupping her breasts with both hands. *Mine*. The consuming need to claim her surged within him. Nothing had ever felt this right before. She was meant for him; they were meant for each other.

He held back the words, but the thought echoed with each forceful thrust. *Mine, mine, mine!*

Her back bowed, and her inner muscles squeezed him rhythmically. He threw back his head and yelled as he followed her over the edge. She wrapped her legs around his waist, and he steadied himself against the bed, unwilling to separate their bodies.

Long moments passed with nothing but the sound of their harsh breathing. Had she heard his thoughts or sensed his possessiveness? He hadn't meant to lose control so completely.

"Are you all right?" she asked, and he couldn't suppress a chuckle.

"I was just wondering the same thing."

"This is the first utterly selfish thing I've done since -- perhaps ever. It was about time."

He blew out a ragged sigh and reluctantly moved back, easing her legs down from around his waist. "Let's take a shower, then find something to eat."

Her wicked giggle left no doubt what she was thinking about.

* * * * *

The following morning Krysta arrived at the visitor bungalow with a tall, dark-haired man. "This is Master Tal dar Aune. He's Trey's brother and Aunt Charlotte's life mate."

Saebin shook his hand. "Does that make you High King of Ontariese?"

"I leave politics to my life mate as often as I possibly can." Dressed in a light gray robe, his long black hair formed a neat coil down the middle of his back, and his smoke-colored eyes didn't swirl. The only other Ontarian Saebin had seen whose eyes didn't swirl was Vee. Did the physical characteristic develop in every Master Level Mage, or were they both shapeshifters?

"May we come in?" he asked with a gentle smile.

"Of course." Saebin moved aside, allowing Tal and Krysta into the main room of the bungalow.

Lyrik stepped back from the window adjacent to the front door and snapped his pulse pistol into the bracket strapped to his thigh. Tal noticed the motion and chuckled. "As trusting as ever, Commander cet Barrel. This dwelling is within the Mystic shield. You are both perfectly safe."

"One of my own crewmembers tried to take her out. I'm not trusting anyone."

Tal accepted the explanation with a regal incline of his head. Krysta moved to the chair she'd occupied the night before, and Tal stood beside her. "Trey is monitoring all of Cyrus's communications. He's sent three messages with a non-standard encryption and received two. Trey's got a man deciphering the encryption, but it will take time."

"I'm not going to wait for Cyrus to try again." Too agitated to sit, Saebin moved behind one of the chairs and placed her hands on the back.

"The overlord has no reason to believe Tann failed." Lyrik moved up beside her and wrapped his arm around her waist. "If everyone thinks she's dead, it could give us an advantage."

She dragged her curious gaze away from their visitors and looked at Lyrik. "I know you were teasing before, but what's keeping us from taking this fight to him?"

"In many ways the Day Moon is its own world, and Cyrus is king. If we launched a direct attack against the overlord, we would be declaring war on the City of Tears."

"Not if we had the backing of someone equally powerful."

"You mean the High Queen," Krysta interjected.

Saebin nodded. "I'm a symptom of a much larger problem. Why would Cyrus need ships undetectable to his own defenses, unless he's plotting an attack on his own people?"

"What you're describing is high treason." Tal tucked his hands inside the loose sleeves of his robe as his gaze assessed her expression. "I have no doubt Cyrus is up to something, but his exact motivation is unclear. We need facts and indisputable evidence before we move against the overlord."

Lyrik shifted his weight from one foot to the other. His fingers flexed against her ribs, revealing his tension. This had to be hard on him. His father was at the center of the conflict. "The warlords will support the overlord unless they have a damn good reason to turn on him," he said. "It's their support we must foster, not the High Queen's."

"We don't have time for a political coup." Saebin eased away from him and moved in front of the chair. "The moment Cyrus realizes how close we are to exposing him, he'll destroy all the evidence. My handler will disappear, and that's not acceptable."

"What are you suggesting?" Tal asked.

"We tell the High Queen what we've learned and what we suspect. Then we snatch Cyrus right out from under the nose of the warlords. We'll make it appear as if we've gone rogue. Stealing the *Gale* set us up beautifully for this."

"And once we have him?" Lyrik asked. "What do you intend to do with him?"

"Sabotage his micryte and turn D-159 loose on him." She crossed her arms over her chest, glancing from Lyrik to Krysta. Tal might not understand the significance of that suggestion, but the others did. "You said it in jest last night, but it's a good idea. Cyrus knows the full extent of D-159's capabilities. If he thinks Saebin is --"

Thunder shook the bungalow, cutting off Saebin's words. Lyrik kicked the chair aside and reached for her. She clenched her hands into tight fists, searching the room for a target. Wind erupted with a mighty roar, whipping her hair about her face. Her mind scrambled for an explanation as her heart lurched within her breast. Six bolts of lightning struck simultaneously. Saebin gasped, instinctively dropping into a fighting stance. Lyrik remained close behind her, his weapon now in his hand.

"Be calm," Tal called out over the wind.

The fabric of space parted, revealing a transport conduit. Saebin squinted into the pulsing light as a figure emerged. The woman closed the conduit with a wave of her hand, and Saebin's eyes finally focused. Golden cords had been woven through the woman's brown hair. The wavy strands cascaded down her back. Her features were delicate, her bearing noble. Her elegant pant suit perfectly matched the color of her eyes.

"This is a pleasant surprise." Tal drew her hand to his lips.

"I wish it were a social call." She turned to Lyrik, her gaze swirling rapidly. "The *Tempest* just exploded, all hands lost."

"What?" He staggered back a step, his eyes wide with disbelief.

The woman crossed to Saebin, her expression remained grim. "I'm your Aunt Charlotte. I wish we could have met under more pleasant circumstances."

"I agree."

"Do you know what caused the explosion?" Lyrik asked. "Was there any forewarning?"

She turned back to him and shook her head. "The explosion was reported by a Linusian frigate. According to their captain, the *Tempest* didn't respond to the standard identification page, and before they could execute a single scan, the ship blew up. They transmitted the snippet they were able to record."

"That's my ship." His voice broke and color drained from his face. "I should have been on that ship."

Saebin placed her hand on his back, unsure how to comfort him.

"It gets worse." Charlotte warned. "We know the *Tempest* was dispatched out from under you, but not everyone is seeing it that way."

"I'm being accused of this atrocity?" His shock turned to anger in the blink of an eye.

"Without the information we possess, it makes sense. As you said, the *Tempest* is your ship." Charlotte paused, rubbing the bridge of her nose. "Your father has responded with shock and outrage. He is acting as if he is tortured by your betrayal."

"But why would I blow up the *Tempest*? Why did he?"

"The first four hundred Bilarrian females were aboard," Charlotte reminded him. "This has abolished the Bilarrian alliance. The obvious conclusion is you are the head of the NRS. Cyrus set you up so effortlessly; I'm amazed we didn't see it coming."

Chapter Seventeen

Pern walked into the laboratory, and desire rolled through Ensley. She'd hardly seen him since their arrival at the compound. It was irrational, ridiculous, dangerous. Jaden was younger, better looking, and far more interested in her. So why did she long for Pern?

"How are you progressing?" Pern asked Jaden after sweeping her body with a dispassionate glance.

"Not as quickly as I'd hoped." Jaden stepped back from the work table and stretched his back. "The differences between Ontarian and Bilarrian physiology seem miniscule on the surface, yet the Bilarrian test subjects continue to reject the implants."

"We encountered many of the same complications when we first began." Ensley wasn't supposed to speak unless they asked her a question, but the comment was out before she could stop herself. She wanted Pern to look at her, *see* her -- touch her.

"And how did you overcome these complications?" Pern stalked toward her, the blue ring in his eyes glowing.

"Trial and error mostly." She met his gaze, beyond caring if he reacted in anger. She just needed him to react. "There is no precedent. Nothing like this has ever been done before."

"Does the prototype work with Ontarian physiology?" Pern glanced at Jaden, then returned his gaze to Ensley.

She paused, waiting to see if Jaden would answer, before she provided the information. "The prototype is completely operational with our Ontarian test subjects. It is only the Bilarrians who are rejecting the implants."

"Interesting." He walked to the work table and examined the latest modification while Jaden glared at her.

You are my bed slave. Jaden's thoughts lashed through her mind. *If he were not Stirate, I would beat you for lusting after him.*

She didn't deny the charge nor cower beneath his angry stare.

"The first demonstration went off as planned, which leaves us no choice but to proceed with the second." Pern turned around and braced his hands against the edge of the work table. "We cannot afford complications at this point. Focus entirely on the Ontarians. Once we have this situation stabilized, we'll worry about the next."

Ensley's heart lurched, and her mouth dried up. Did he mean what she thought he meant? Did these two have ambitions beyond the Ontarian conflict? Did Cyrus know --

You don't need to worry about Cyrus. We are your masters now.

Cyrus was never my master, she responded automatically.

If you say so.

Pern turned toward the door. Ensley shoved her hands into the pockets of her lab coat, scrambling for a legitimate reason to detain him. "I never had the opportunity to examine our only successful Level Four."

A smile curved Pern's mouth as he turned to face her. "Are you so desperate for my attention that you risk your master's wrath?"

She swallowed hard and lowered her gaze. "No, sire. Everything we learned back on Earth, all our successes were implemented in one final subject."

"Why have I heard nothing of this Level Four subject before now?"

"I didn't understand your true interest in my designs. I thought I was here because of the firestone converter."

His fingers curved around her chin, and he raised her head until she looked into his eyes. "Is there a Level Four subject, or do you just want me inside you?"

She licked her lips, her heart beating so frantically she feared he would hear the pounding. "There is a Level Four subject, but he is continually guarded by the Mystics."

"Why should that be a problem for us?" He cupped her breast with his other hand, his thumb abrading her nipple. "Are our new soldiers ready for a field test or not?"

"They are." She parted her lips, craving his kiss, not caring that Jaden watched every move she made. She ached for Pern, desired him with every fiber of her being. Yet even as she acknowledged the desire, she knew it didn't make sense. What was wrong with her?

"We will combine the two objectives," he said casually. "The purpose of the field test will be to retrieve the Level Four subject. How long will it take you to prepare the team?"

"We can depart in the morning."

"Good." He stepped back and lowered his hands to his sides, his gaze focusing on her mouth. "Jaden, I will require the services of your bed slave tonight. See that she is ready for me."

* * * * *

Saebin tried to concentrate on the crisis, but Tal and Charlotte made such a striking couple it was hard not to stare. Charlotte sat beside him, his arm resting lightly on her shoulders. Every glance, every touch revealed their deep devotion.

"I guess we don't have to speculate on Cyrus's motivation any longer," Krysta said. "He was out to destroy the Bilarrian alliance."

"What does he gain by destroying the alliance?" Saebin asked.

"Every Bilarrian has some form of Mystic ability. Cyrus saw this alliance as one more step toward denigrating people without such power." Tal sounded rather distracted.

"The NRS has many silent supporters," Lyrik said. "People without Mystic abilities are starting to feel persecuted. Prefect Aune, who had no Mystic abilities, was replaced by a High Queen with vast power. When the Joint Council was formed the ratio became even more disproportionate."

"Each great house elected its own representative," Charlotte objected. "This is not a conspiracy to subjugate anyone without Mystic abilities."

"I know that, but there have been grumblings ever since the Council formed." Lyrik fidgeted beside her, radiating anxiety.

"The grumblings began long before the formation of the Joint Council," Tal countered.

"This is beside the point." Krysta scooted to the edge of her chair. "What do we do now? How do we expose Cyrus without inciting the warlords? How do we find Saebin's handler and defuse the NRS?"

"We kidnap the overlord and let D-159 interrogate him," Saebin repeated.

Tal looked at Charlotte, his expression tense with worry. "Who knows you're here?"

"My personal assistant, but he only knows that I came to inform you of what had happened."

"As far as the rest of the world is concerned, we are acting without your knowledge," Lyrik told her.

"You need to reselect your crew," Krysta suggested.

Lyrik nodded. "No one with any ties to the COT."

"My apprentice is a remarkable navigator." Tal volunteered.

Krysta laughed. "Lor is also a pyrokin. I think this mission is going to be combustible enough."

"Lor hasn't had an uncontrolled outburst in many cycles."

"I don't have a lot of options," Lyrik said. "I'll keep Hermlin, Zane, and Dro Tar, but everyone else disembarks before we head back to the Day Moon."

"Hermlin has ties to the COT," Saebin reminded him.

"I've known Hermlin since I was a brash cadet. I trust him implicitly."

"What about Zane?" She persisted.

"Zane did everything he could to save your life."

"I don't mean to sound ungrateful, but --"

"I'll scan them both before we depart," Krysta said.

"No way." Lyrik stood and crossed to stand directly in front of her. "There is no way you are joining my crew."

"You need me, and you know it. You wouldn't even have the *Gale* if it weren't for me."

He couldn't argue with that. "You may join my crew as soon as I hear your life mate agree to your going."

"Done." She strode from the bungalow as Charlotte and Tal shook their heads.

"She may be the most stubborn female on Ontariense," Tal said.

"Trey will never agree, so it's a moot point," Lyrik predicted.

Charlotte arched her brow and pushed to her feet. "I think you underestimate Krysta's persuasiveness." Saebin stood as the High Queen approached. "This was a horrible introduction. We will do better. I promise."

"I look forward to knowing you."

Tal took Charlotte's hand and opened a transport conduit. They stepped into the vortex together. Moments after they departed Krysta returned.

"Trey would like to speak with you."

Annoyance flashed in Lyrik's eyes as he tapped his audiocom. "Go ahead." His gaze widened, then darted to Krysta, and she smiled. "You understand what we intend to do?" A long pause and then he said, "Copy."

"You can't do this without me," Krysta said firmly.

"I think your life mate is crazy, but welcome to my crew."

Chapter Eighteen

Naked and trembling with anticipation, Ensley knelt in the middle of Jaden's bed.

"If I whip you now, he will be displeased by the marks on your skin." Jaden sneered. "You will feel the sting of my lash, make no mistake about that."

She didn't care. Her love would be here soon. They would join as they were meant to join. *Berk*. The name echoed through her mind, and her spirit quivered.

"Who the hell is Berk?"

Blinking repeatedly, she tried to clear the sensual haze from her mind. Pern was joining them tonight not Berk. Why had ... Her thoughts trailed away as the door to the bedroom slid open, and Pern strode in.

"Why is she not bound?" He moved to the foot of the bed, his gaze sharp and assessing.

"It won't be necessary," Jaden muttered. "She's been wet and waiting since you requested her services."

Pern raised his chin and arrogance gleamed in his eyes. "Are you really so eager? Has Jaden been too gentle with you?"

She licked her lips, debating what to say. If she admitted how much she wanted Pern, it would infuriate Jaden. Yet hesitating at this point would anger Pern. "I ache."

"As you should." Pern motioned toward the bed. "Display your slave for me, Jaden. I want to see how much she's learned."

Jaden shed his robe and crawled onto the bed behind her. He reclined against a mound of pillows and pulled her back against his chest. "Hook your legs over mine and lift your breasts for the Stirate."

She resented the smugness in his tone. He expected her to spread herself like a whore, desperate for any man's attention. She didn't want any man. She wanted Berk. *Berk?* She

shuddered as demanding need slammed through her body. Her abdomen tensed, and her core rippled. She needed him there -- now!

Parting her thighs, she draped her legs over Jaden's and curved her fingers under her breasts, supporting them for Pern.

"Touch her, Jaden. I want to see how easily she surrenders to pleasure."

Jaden reached between her thighs, holding her open with one hand while he stimulated her with the other. Ensley stared at Pern, willing him to meet her gaze, needing him to see her as more than a random female.

He licked his lips, and she trembled. Would he tease her with his mouth, curl his tongue around her clit and taste her passion? *Look at me. See me!*

He can't hear you, but I can. Jaden caught her clit between his thumb and forefinger and squeezed until she moaned.

"Enough." Pern discarded his robe and joined them on the bed. The rings in his eyes burned like the heart of a flame. "Is this what you want? Why cream spills onto your thighs?" He stroked his erect length with one hand, while he trailed his fingers across her slick flesh, taunting her with her body's exuberance. "Do you burn for me?" He traced her slit with the blunt head of his cock, rubbing against her aching clit.

"Yes," she whispered. "Please."

He pushed in just far enough so she could feel herself stretch around his thick shaft. "Are you sure? I won't be gentle. Are you ready to be a Stirate's whore?"

She whimpered. Why did they persist in using that term? She wasn't a whore. She ...

He pulled out, his gaze narrowed and disapproving.

"Please!" She arched her back, canting her hips in brazen invitation. "I want you inside me. I need you there."

"Better, but not good enough." He met Jaden's gaze, and some silent signal passed between them. "Pleasure or pain?" Pern asked.

It was a familiar game. Jaden asked her each time he took her, though he seldom adhered to her preference. "Pleasure," she replied without hesitation.

"I would freely give pleasure to one of my willing whores. But you have yet to accept that role. Again you leave me no choice but to combine the two." Without shifting his gaze from her face, he addressed Jaden. "I would like her anchored while she pleasures me. Have you prepared her for such play?"

"Of course." He sounded annoyed. "Her body has entertained me in every way possible, quite eagerly I might add."

It was true. He'd taken her in ways she never dreamed possible, made her do things other women whispered with dread. And each time she'd screamed with pleasure, trembled helplessly, and held nothing back. These Rodytes used sex with deft and ruthless control.

Opening a compartment beside the bed, Jaden reached for something Ensley couldn't see. She turned her head, but Pern caught her chin and brought her face back around. "You are here for my pleasure. Tonight you will think only of me."

Then why was Jaden here? She wanted to be alone with Pern, to stroke his body and feel him moving deep inside her. Pern pulled her forward. Her bottom rested on the bed between Jaden's thighs, her calves still hooked over his, keeping her legs spread wide. Pern traced her slit and pinched her nipples, while Jaden made subtle movements behind her. They played with her like a toy -- no, a pet. Her pride rebelled against the comparison, and still her body burned.

"Please lift her, sire. I'm ready."

Ready for what? What was -- Pern rocked her forward, and Jaden positioned himself against her anus. She stiffened. He'd taken her this way before, and the shame had nearly overwhelmed the pleasure.

Not like this. Please. I don't want ...

... don't want him to know how easily you succumb to even exotic pleasures? Why do you resist? We all know your body has already surrendered.

Pern lowered her slowly onto Jaden's shaft. He slid in smoothly, his way eased by lubricant. She whimpered, shaking her head in a silent denial as tingling heat spiraled up through her body. Tight, so blissfully tight. How could she enjoy this?

"You like that." Pern eased her back against Jaden's chest and repositioned her legs. "But you'll like this even better."

Jaden pushed her hands under her knees and grabbed her wrists, restraining her as completely as leather cuffs and metal cables. "Punish her, sire. She knows better than to resist."

Pern pushed two fingers deep into her core and smiled into her eyes. His thumb circled her clit, once, twice, again. She groaned, needing release so badly her entire body shook. Each demanding throb of her core accented the thickness of Jaden's shaft already lodged inside her.

"Say it." The command was misleadingly soft, as if she had a choice.

"I'm yours," she whispered.

He increased the speed and the pressure of his caresses. "You're my what?"

Spasms of pleasure unfurled within her, and Ensley bit back a scream. Her inner muscles constricted in powerful ripples as she stared into his eyes. Currents of heat and awareness flowed from her body, beckoning him into the flames. His lips parted as if he would protest, then his breath released in a harsh rush. He positioned himself at her entrance, his gaze unfocused and wild.

"Gema?"

Her heart leapt at the sound of her name. “Berk, my love.” Her spirit soared as he filled her again and again. Reality narrowed. Jaden ceased to exist. She searched Pern’s gaze, longing for a glimpse of her beloved. He thrust harder. Her body opened, accepting all of him. Gripping her waist, he drove deeper and deeper still.

She clenched her hands, her nails biting into her palms. Where was Berk? Why wouldn’t he reveal himself to her?

“Gema ...” His breath escaped in a ragged hiss, his eyes squeezed shut, and he released his seed. Contorted with intense pleasure, his features were barely recognizable. He shuddered and moaned, then went still above her, inside her.

His lashes fluttered. He raised his lids and looked into her eyes. Inky blackness encompassed the rings. She didn’t need to speak his name. She freed her spirit, reaching for him as he stretched toward her. They fused. The world ceased to exist. There was only Gema and Berk, as it was meant to be. They stared into each other’s eyes, the longing receded, two halves were made whole.

Oh, how I’ve missed you. Berk’s familiar voice sounded within her mind, then blue rings burned through the black and despair surged through her.

No! Don’t leave me.

Panting harshly, Pern separated their bodies and shook his head, his expression muddled and angry. “Have you been teaching her your disgusting mind tricks?”

Jaden released her legs and bucked his hips, reminding her that she was still “anchored” on his throbbing shaft. “I have no idea what she’s trying to do, but this is not the first time she’s spoken that name.”

“Make her explain her actions. This was -- unsettling.” He swung his legs off the bed and stood. “If she is not fit for tomorrow’s mission, I need to know now.”

* * * * *

Saebin clenched and unclenched her hands. The knot inside her stomach tightened as they circled the City of Tears. Their approach to the Day Moon had gone unnoticed. Still, Lyrik insisted on taking everything one step at a time.

“Not a blip, not a peep. We’re invisible.” Dro Tar sat at the communications panel, one leg tucked under her.

“Or they want us to believe we are.” Lyrik made an adjustment on the console in front of him. “We’ll continue in concentric circles until we’re spitting distance from the Warlords’ Headquarters.”

The plan was simple. Enter Cyrus’s office the same way they’d boarded the *Gale*. Trey would be ready with a distraction in case the overlord managed to sound an alarm. Hopefully they’d be in and out before Cyrus realized what had hit him.

"There are three men inside the office. Two near the door and one behind the desk," Lor informed them.

"Trey warned us that the entire COT is on high alert. The overlord is milking the scapegoat angle for all it's worth." Lyrik shook his head, his jaw working as he lapsed into silence.

"He's expecting us to retaliate." Saebin sat in a chair attached to the perimeter wall of the bridge. "We wouldn't want to disappoint him."

"You and I will have to enter first." Lyrik glanced at her and heat washed over her body. Saebin didn't resist her armor's resulting adjustment. There would be time to indulge their passions after the overlord was locked in the brig. "We don't want your mental pulse to turn off anyone other than Cyrus and his guards."

"I can close the conduit for a second or two, then reopen it." Krysta sat beside Saebin as the others maneuvered the ship.

"Will that insulate you from the compulsion?" Lyrik asked.

"It should."

He nodded and returned his attention to the holographic display in front of him.

"Are you all right?"

Saebin looked at Krysta and managed to smile. "My input rings are buzzing. I need to convince him D-159 is in control, but I want to confront him with all Saebin knows."

"Good cop, bad cop." Dro Tar piped in without looking up from her controls.

"Pardon me?" Krysta asked.

"It's an old Earth technique. Go ape shit on the bastard, just have a 'good cop' there to rein you in before you do any real damage."

"Does that make any sense to you?" Saebin whispered to Krysta.

Krysta laughed. "You can indulge a bit of your aggression, and Lyrik will be there to pull you off. Often the person being interrogated will respond to the 'good cop' knowing the only alternative is dealing with the 'bad cop.'"

"What if we both want to be 'bad cops'?" Lyrik muttered.

"You need to decide," Lor interjected. "We are officially spitting distance from the Warlords' Headquarters. We are undetectable to scanners, but we aren't transparent. If someone opens those blinds, they're bound to notice the spectacular view is missing."

Lyrik pivoted away from his control panel and stood. "Hover just above the roof, Lor. There are pressure sensors. Saebin and I will be the first wave. If all goes well, we won't need a second. Krysta, Dro Tar, and Zane, be prepared to back us up if we run into trouble."

The ship was positioned directly above the overlord's office. A large store room was situated directly across from the brig. All they had to do was get Cyrus into the transport conduit, then shove him into the cell across the narrow corridor.

“Let’s go.” Lyrik motioned toward the lift.

They rode the lift to the utility level and followed the corridor to the store room. Lyrik held the door open, while Krysta constructed the transport conduit. Lyrik and Saebin dropped through as soon as the vortex stabilized.

Saebin projected a mental pulse ahead of her, so the shots caught her by surprise. The guards hurried toward the opening as Saebin returned fire. Why hadn’t they gone down? They should be unconscious.

Using a tight shoulder roll to avoid their well-aimed barrage, she advanced toward the overlord who was still seated behind his desk. She caught one of the guards in the neck, propelling him backward. The second lunged for her, his weapon firing in staccato bursts.

Cyrus shouted something, then grunted as Lyrik delivered a vicious uppercut to his jaw. A narrow beam arced over Saebin’s shoulder and dropped the second guard. She glanced behind her and found Dro Tar standing beneath the mouth of the vortex.

“Move! They’re on to us,” Dro Tar called.

Lyrik heaved his father to his shoulder and jogged toward the transport conduit. The office door burst open as the vortex sucked them back onto the *Gale*. Angry shouts and wild weapons’ fire erupted as Krysta collapsed the conduit.

“Go! Lor, get us out of here,” Lyrik shouted into his audiocom.

The ship shuddered, then lurched forward, banking sharply to the left. Saebin steadied herself against a storage bin, but Lyrik slammed into the wall. They paused for a moment, waiting for the trajectory to stabilize before continuing on toward the holding cell.

Lyrik dumped the overlord onto the narrow bunk with a disdainful glower. Stepping out of the small cell, he activated the energy field. “Let’s put some distance between us and the COT.”

Chapter Nineteen

Saebin stood outside the holding cell staring at the unconscious overlord. Like Dr. Hydran, this man's corrupt nature wasn't evident in his features, but his actions spoke eloquently of his weak character. They had to act quickly. Every second they waited increased the chances her handler would learn of Cyrus's capture and bolt.

Lyrik hadn't given her specific instructions when he hurried back to the bridge. She hesitated another moment, then sent a mental compulsion into the overlord's mind. Nothing happened. The pulse should have jolted him back to wakefulness.

His resistance to her abilities was a new development. He had responded instantaneously when they stole the *Gale*. This was further proof that he had planted the assassin or at the very least was involved with those responsible.

He groaned, rubbing his bruised jaw as he focused on his surroundings. "Where am I? What is the meaning of this?"

She wanted to laugh at his imperious tone, but she was D-159, emotionless, unable to function beyond her handler's directives.

He scooted off the bunk and stood, tugging on his uniform top with an angry jerk. "What is your objective?"

She stared at him silently, maintaining an expressionless mask.

"Did you hear me? D-159 report. What is your objective?"

"She doesn't answer to you, old man."

The rush of excitement caused by Lyrik's voice was harder to conceal than her resentment. He stepped up beside her, arms crossed over his chest, and glared at his father.

"You won't get away with this," Cyrus said. "They'll hunt you down like --"

“Like an overlord who’s selling his people to the highest bidder?” Lyrik’s voice dropped to a menacing growl, and he moved closer to the energy barrier. “Who’s backing your play? The Kitinians? The Rodytes? Or a discontented faction on Bilarri? The gadget we dug out of Tann’s head was far beyond our technological capabilities.”

“You can’t pretend you’re not as frustrated as we are. I’ve seen the exasperation in your eyes.”

“Who is ‘we’?” Lyrik’s expression never wavered, but Saebin heard the subtle change in his voice. Cyrus had found a chink in his armor. She didn’t fully understand the conflict, but Lyrik wasn’t immune to it.

“Look me in the eyes and tell me you’re content on Ontariese.” He paused, his brow raised in challenge. “The Mystics are trying to take over. This has been brewing for a long time.”

Ignoring his father’s manipulation, Lyrik asked, “Where did Tann get the implant? For that matter, where did you?”

“Tann’s was a prototype. We weren’t sure it would work.” The overlord glanced at Saebin, then returned his attention to his son. “How could you turn traitor over -- that? She’s the biological housing for a sophisticated set of integrated implants.”

“Your argument might be more effective if you hadn’t sacrificed your honor and abandoned your responsibilities in pursuit of that same technology.” Cyrus didn’t respond to the charge, so Lyrik continued. “Back to the implants. Where did you get your latest toy?”

“War has been inevitable ever since the High Queen was rescued. We won’t be caught unprepared.”

“According to whom?” Lyrik flared. “War is never inevitable. There are always choices.”

“The Joint Council argues about clarifications and traditions that haven’t had any real meaning for generations. All the while they subtly shift the balance of power. If we don’t stand up for ourselves, we will have nothing left to defend.”

Lyrik rubbed the back of his neck, fatigue etching lines around his eyes and mouth. “And your solution is to blow up a ship full of innocent people?”

Cyrus snorted and threw his hands in the air. “The Bilarrians are part of the problem. Only those with powerful Mystic abilities have any value on Bilarri. The Joint Council is using their society as a template for ours. If this alliance is allowed to solidify, you will be part of the discarded underclass. Why can’t you see what they’re trying to do?”

“Who is supplying you with the technology to resist the Mystics?”

With a defiant glower, Cyrus turned his back on Lyrik and returned to the bunk. “You’re too late. It’s already begun.”

* * * * *

Ensley pulled the snug-fitting cap over her head and secured it to her shield suit. Her three-member team was well equipped and efficient. She would present the Level Four child to the Stirate. She must. Jaden was on the verge of passing her on to the crew. She could sense his displeasure. He sat in the pilot's seat of the small space craft, watching every move she made. He'd been especially cruel after the bizarre incident with Pern. She couldn't explain what had happened the night before, didn't understand it herself. It was as if someone else had taken over her thoughts and feelings.

"You can't afford to be distracted." His harsh tone cut into her musing.

"I understand the mission."

"Our only advantage is surprise. We are not yet ready for a frontal assault."

She didn't respond to his badgering. Instead she rechecked the pressure in her energy canister. Every time she made a tight fist, the canister expelled a burst of energy through the thin tube on the top of her gloves. Creating an external version of her munitions implants had been Jaden's idea. They made a good team, or they had until last night.

She motioned D-2-5 and D-2-6 toward the hatch with a careful hand signal. They followed without hesitation. Mystic Brook flowed through the clearing not far from the ship. Penetrating the shield without notice was impossible, so they would only have a matter of minutes to execute the plan. As well as possessing the standard weaponry, D-2-5 was able to teleport, and D-2-6 had been fitted with the containment field mechanism that had performed flawlessly in the laboratory. Secure in their arrogance, the Mystics would never anticipate a brash invasion of their sanctuary.

Unable to suppress her smile, Ensley paused for one last scan of the Conservatory. The Level Four child was in a room near the center of the sprawling building. Two adults were with the child, and others moved about just beyond the room.

"Concentrate, D-2-5. You must put us inside that room."

"Affirmative."

They moved into formation, weapons ready, back to back. Resisting the urge to close her eyes, Ensley accepted the colorful vertigo as D-2-5 opened a transport conduit. She gritted her teeth against the painful ringing in her ears and waited for their destination to manifest. The overwhelming roar eased, then the blinding light. They emerged in a small, warm room.

D-2-5 pivoted, aiming both fists at the door. A female held the Level Four child, so Ensley grabbed her from behind, positioning her hands strategically. "If I tighten my fists, a stream of energy will be expelled into your brain and the brain of your child." She knew the woman wasn't the child's mother, but she didn't want to reveal their true purpose too quickly.

The child's father stood three steps away. Ensley knew how quickly he could move or change shape. She'd seen him in action on Earth before D-159 incapacitated him. The effort nearly killed D-159.

His bright green eyes took in the scene with shrewd deliberation. Could he shift through their bodies and snatch the child from the woman's arms? He narrowed his gaze, and Ensley's implant vibrated as it dispelled his mental compulsion.

"Not so powerful now." She smiled triumphantly, and D-2-6 launched the containment field.

The Mystic went wild within the translucent sphere. He pounded against it, he shifted forms, he shouted and screamed, but no sound penetrated the dense energy field. D-2-6 sank to her knees as she struggled to maintain the sphere.

Though the female Mystic remained perfectly still, her body temperature rose at an alarming rate. Even through her armor Ensley's skin began to burn. "Let's go," she snapped. She had only planned to snatch the child, and she wouldn't risk losing him now.

Leaving D-2-6 to maintain the containment field, Ensley and D-2-5 stepped back into the transport conduit.

Chapter Twenty

“Who are they? What did they promise you?” Lyrik rolled his shoulders and looked at Saebin. This was useless. The overlord wasn’t going to tell them anything. Cyrus sat on the bunk, staring at the wall beyond Lyrik in mutinous silence.

Time for good cop, bad cop.

“I’ve expanded D-159’s parameters.” He paused, waiting for the overlord to react. Cyrus maintained his expressionless demeanor. “D-159, new objective. Interrogation.”

“Objective accepted. Provide data.”

The familiar phrases brought Cyrus’s head up. He looked at Saebin, then turned his rapidly spinning gaze on Lyrik. “You wouldn’t.”

“The overlord has information in direct opposition to the greater good. You must learn who is supplying him with the technology we found in Tann and the ultimate purpose for the association. Do you understand?”

“Affirmative.”

Cyrus shot to his feet, his forehead deeply furrowed, jaw working frantically. “You don’t understand.”

“You’re damn right I don’t understand! So, explain it to me. What are you planning, and why shouldn’t I shoot you where you stand for high treason?” Lyrik’s audiocom beeped, and he tapped the device so hard it nearly came loose from his ear. “What? I’m a little busy right now.”

“I need you on the bridge. Tal just ... just get up here.” The terror in Krysta’s voice sent a violent shudder down Lyrik’s spine.

“Copy.”

“Bring Saebin with you. Dro Tar is already on her way down.”

Posting a guard was probably overkill, but Lyrik wasn't taking any chances. He motioned for Saebin to follow him, and she did without question.

"What's going on?" Cyrus asked.

Lyrik ignored him.

Dro Tar stepped out of one lift as the doors slip open for the other. "No worries, *mon capitaine*. I'll torment him for you."

Despite the tension knotting his belly, Lyrik smiled. The lift whisked them to the bridge, and Krysta began her frantic explanation before the doors slid shut behind them.

"They kidnapped Seth. They teleported into the Conservatory and snatched him away from Vee."

"How is that possible?" Lyrik asked. "The Mystic shields are impenetrable."

"Apparently not." She shoved her hair out of her eyes and paused for a deep breath. "All Tal could tell me is that Vee is in bad shape. He is asking for Saebin so I need to take her to the Conservatory. I'll fill you in on the details as soon as I know more."

"Of course." He turned to Saebin and gave her a quick hug. "We'll be right behind you. Go."

* * * * *

Dizzy from the transport conduit, Saebin knelt beside Vee's cot. Her chest ached, and all the adjustments of her armor wouldn't alleviate the pain. Death hovered over the Mystic. She could sense it, smell it, and see it in his eyes.

"I ... choose ... Tal," he whispered, each word an individual effort.

She looked at the dark-haired Mystic. Did he understand what Vee was trying to say?

Krysta knelt on the other side of the cot, tears streaming down her face.

"I *choose* ..."

"The conduit." Krysta looked into Saebin's eyes, urgency sharpening her tone and molding her expression. "The ancient ritual. He is choosing Tal to inherit his wisdom."

"No." Tal took a step back. "He will recover. He just needs time and --"

"Now," Vee cut in. "Do it now, or all is lost."

Krysta sobbed openly, no longer attempting to conceal her sorrow.

Vee reached for Saebin's hand, and her heart lurched. "I don't know how. It was an image from a dream --"

"Vision." Vee squeezed her fingers, ending her objection. "Ye know. Ye have always known."

Grief lodged in her throat, making it hard to swallow. Vee had saved her life. She had tried to kill him, and he had showed her the ultimate kindness. How could she refuse him anything?

“Tal, please kneel beside Krysta and take Vee’s hand.”

Tal turn his face away, his hair cracking like a whip before it coiled down the middle of his back. “He is not dying.”

“If you refuse, everything he is will be lost.” Her insides trembled, and the pressure banding her heart made each breath painful, but somehow she managed to sound calm.

Tal released an exasperated cry and Shifted into place. He took Vee’s hand and raised it to his cheek. “Master ...” Whatever he had meant to say was lost in his sorrow.

Saebin felt the strength bleeding from Vee’s fingers. She took Tal’s hand and opened her mind. Surrendering herself without reservation, she allowed the energy to flow. Scalding, intense, substantial, the transfer shook her body and paralyzed her mind. Images flashed and feelings saturated her being. Tears streamed down her face. Loss, burning determination, heart-breaking tenderness. This stoic Mystic felt more deeply than anyone could possibly imagine.

The transfer slowed.

Tal trembled.

Vee’s hand went limp within her own.

“Release the connection before he passes on,” a deep, commanding voice instructed. “You do not want to taint the transfer with his death.”

Saebin placed Vee’s frail hand on his chest and looked up. Lord Drakkin stood behind Tal, his expression inscrutable. Raven-black hair brushed his shoulders in shimmering waves, three thin braids extending to the middle of his chest. The outer mass of his eyes had a faint blue cast, while the fathomless black of his irises and pupils were separated by a thin red ring.

“You did well, Saebin,” he said. “Let them grieve. We must figure out how the Rodytes did this.”

She stood and crossed to the Bilarrian, confusion gradually penetrating her sadness. “How did you arrive from Bilarri so quickly?”

He didn’t respond until they had left the infirmary. “As Ontarian Mystics Summon the Storm, some Bilarrians are capable of long-range teleportation.”

Lyrik had warned her that Bilarrians were far more powerful than Ontarians. Even augmented with power-boosting technology, she had been no match for Lord Drakkin. “Are you not saddened by his death?”

“Of course. I will miss my friend, but Bilarrians view death differently than Ontarians. Vee is not lost. He has moved on to the next level of existence. It is an inevitable transition for all of us. His memory will keep him alive in this reality, and we will meet again when I

transcend.” He turned to face her, the red ring in his eyes glowing. “What concerns me more is how the Rodytes breeched the Conservatory’s defenses and then finding Seth before they harm him.”

She couldn’t argue with his priorities. “Krystabel spoke to me of Seth. She spoke to Krysta, too. Do you understand why this child is so important?”

“Seth is unique. There is not another being like him in all the galaxies. People fear what they don’t understand. It has always been that way.”

Her handler didn’t fear Seth. She had been instrumental in creating him. “Why are you so certain the Rodytes did this? Lyrik mentioned several possible enemies.”

Drakkin shook his head. “Only the Rodytes have a reason to incite the wrath of Bilarri.”

“You think the NRS exploded the *Tempest* to ... I don’t understand.”

“One of the healers said they left one of their team behind. I say we find out exactly what’s going on.”

“They deserted one of their own?” Saebin was disgusted by her enemy’s complete disregard for life.

“According to the healer, this person was fueling the containment field that ultimately destroyed Vee. When her energy gave out, she manipulated the mechanism so it drew its energy from Vee.”

“The harder he fought, the weaker he became.”

“Exactly.”

Two Mystics guarded the chamber where the intruder had been taken. Saebin’s steps faltered as she entered the room. The woman was incased in body armor nearly identical to her own, and it was obvious at a glance that the intruder was dead.

“How do we ... it’s a little late to interrogate her.”

“Not for a conduit.” Drakkin strode to the table and raised one of the intruder’s hands. “Are her implants the same as yours?”

Saebin examined the other woman’s knuckle. “Minor modifications have been made, but this is definitely the work of my handler.”

“The healer said this woman was Ontarian, so it’s safe to assume they haven’t gone far.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“Talk to her.”

“She’s dead.”

“Her memories are fading even as we speak, but she will be more cooperative because the part of her nature that is programmed to resist has fled. Manifest the metaphysical plane and talk to her.”

“I’m a soldier, not a Mystic. I have no idea how to do what you just described.”

"You are far more a Mystic than you realize." He studied her face for a moment, the red rings intensifying. "I will guide you. Take my hand."

Steadying herself with a deep breath, she placed her hand in his. He extended his other hand over the intruder's face and spread his fingers. The room blinked out, and they stood suspended in utter darkness.

Saebin gasped, shocked by the sudden change.

"Picture a setting where you are safe."

Without conscious thought she found herself standing on the stoop of the visitor's bungalow, pressed against Lyrik's chest. Drakkin's throaty chuckle rumbled through her mind.

"Fair enough. Now turn around and talk to the intruder."

Saebin turned. Lyrik's arms moved to circle her waist. The soldier stood at the foot of the stairs, her expression blank, eyes unblinking.

"What is your designation?" Saebin asked.

"D-2-6."

"D-2," she muttered. "They've begun a new series."

"Her memory is fading with each second that passes. There is no time to reminisce."

"Where are you stationed, D-2-6?"

"The compound."

"Who is your handler?"

"Ensley cet Roumi."

The name meant nothing to Saebin, but she didn't expect that it would. At least now she had a better chance of finding some trace of the woman. "Who are her associates? Give a full report."

"The overlord has not interacted with us since operations were moved to the compound. We serve the ghosts of the Night Moon now. I do not know their designations."

"Show them to me. Picture them in your mind."

The wavering image of two men appeared for an instant, then D-2-6 crumpled into a graceless heap.

"Damn it. I couldn't see them. Can you --"

"Release the visualization," Drakkin said. "We've learned all we're going to learn from her."

Saebin staggered back from the table, her hand slipping out of Drakkin's. "That was ... bizarre."

"With a little more training you can do extraordinary things."

The door to the room slid open, and one of the guards said, “Pardon the intrusion. I thought you might like to know that the *Gale* just arrived.”

Chapter Twenty-One

“The ghosts of the Night Moon are a legend,” Lyrik said. “A story told to entertain children.”

Drakkin shook his head. “Most legends have some basis in fact. Think about it. The Rodytes couldn’t have perfected their shielding technology overnight. Distorted images on scanners and ships vanishing for no apparent reason are the fodder for such legends.”

“You believe the compound is on the Night Moon?” Saebin asked. She absently rubbed her knuckle conduit, her expression tense.

They sat in the planning hall on the *Gale*, Lyrik was still reeling from all they had said. Vee was dead, and the overlord was in league with the Rodytes.

“Can you sense him?” Drakkin asked Saebin.

“Who?”

“Seth. He is your nephew. Can you sense him?”

She licked her lips and crossed her arms over her chest. “I’m not a Mystic. Perhaps Krysta --”

“Krysta’s emotions are too volatile right now.” Drakkin rested his forearms on the table, his gaze intent upon her face. “You are uniquely qualified for this mission. The compound is sure to be shielded. Our only hope of locating it is if you can connect with Seth.”

She looked at Lyrik, then back at Drakkin. “I’ll try.”

“Can you teleport with her to the Night Moon?” Lyrik asked. “It will take at least nine hours at full speed.”

“If I knew where the compound was, I could take her there. But without a clear destination --” He shrugged. “-- even I have my limitations.”

"I'll offload the overlord. I want nothing to distract us from Seth's rescue."

Drakkin inclined his head. "The Mystics can make sure he doesn't alert the ghosts of the Night Moon."

"We'll launch as soon as he's gone."

Nodding again, Drakkin left the planning hall. Lyrik eased back in his chair and looked at Saebin. Tension created faint lines around her mouth, and purple smudges shadowed her eyes. "Are you all right?"

"No. I transferred the essence of the greatest Mystic on Ontariese into his successor while my sister wept. Then I had a conversation with a dead girl. Now Drakkin expects me to scan all of space for one small child. And if I can't find him, he'll probably die, and the Rodytes will launch a full-scale war against the Mystics." She stood so suddenly her chair toppled over. "I have had about all I can take!"

He stood as well, watching her carefully. Her face was flushed and her movements agitated. This was no simple outburst. She was in overload.

"Saebin, can you manually trigger a calming pulse?" He kept his voice even and his gaze trained on her face.

Her nails dug grooves in the alloy tabletop and desire erupted in her eyes. "Calm down. Scan this. Heal that. I've had it! Do you understand me? I will not accept one more directive. I will not ..." She lunged at him, slamming him against the wall. Her hot breath wafted across his face. She licked her lips, her breasts heaving against his chest. "I'm in overload, aren't I?"

"It would appear so."

Each panting breath shoved her breasts against his chest. In the storm shelter, an orgasm had released her overload. It had also discharged her weapon and dangerously raised her body temperature. He framed her face with his hands. She didn't feel hot -- yet.

"Don't kiss me," she snapped. "That's not what I need." She unfastened her armor, separating the seam as far back as she could reach.

Heat flooded his abdomen and gathered in his groin. God, she had fabulous breasts, high and round, with nipples that hardened with the first hint of stimulation. She jerked his pants open and shoved them past his hips.

All right, he could deal with an aggressive female. He'd just never had to before. She needed it fast and hard, and she needed it now. He thought about reversing their positions and taking her against the wall, but the *Gale* was small. The force was liable to echo down the corridor. Instead, he quickly triggered the door's lock and pushed her toward the table.

He separated the sides of her suit, then bent her forward, pressing her naked breasts against the cool table. "Reach above your head and grab the edge," he whispered into her ear. To reach the opposite side of the table, she had to lift her feet off the floor. He pushed her thighs wide and bent her knees.

Cream already gleamed on her folds. Gods, how he wanted to play. He wanted to touch her and taste her, take her to the edge before he filled her.

"Please," she ground out the word between clenched teeth.

Raising her hips off the table, he found her entrance and stopped. Heat radiated from her core, shocking in its intensity.

"I won't burn you. I promise. I'm not totally out of control."

He pushed in just a bit and stopped again. Hot, wet, magnificent, her core gripped him firmly, but she maintained a steady temperature, restraining the burn. He drove farther into her welcoming heat. She hooked her calves around his hips, urging him on.

"Move. Fast. Now!"

Those directions were pretty hard to misconstrue. He thrust deep, and she groaned, pushing up against him. She felt so damn good, he didn't want it to end, and he knew a few quick thrusts was all it would take to push him over the edge. She rippled around him and tossed her head, her excitement feeding his frenzy.

"Damn you, stop holding back. You know what I need."

Hooking his arms under her thighs, he pounded into her, lodging his shaft to the hilt with each forceful thrust. Her body shook. Her hands clenched the table so tightly her knuckles turned white.

An orgasm ripped through her, violent and sudden. She cried out, trembling beneath him. "More." She gasped. "I need more."

Flipping her onto her back, he drove back in with hardly a pause. Deep, rhythmic strokes staved off his release. She felt perfect beneath him, surrounding him, clutching him. He never wanted to let her go.

Her breasts quivered with each hard thrust. He covered them with his hands, savoring the firm heat of her flesh and the hardened peaks of her nipples. "Oh, Saebin." He filled her again and again. He wanted to kiss her, to explore the silken interior of her mouth, but he couldn't reach her and maintain this speed or depth. She raised her knees against his sides, allowing him full range of motion. Arching and panting, she was utterly lost in passion. Beautiful, uninhibited, woman.

"Come again," he growled out the order. "I love watching you come."

She covered his hands with hers and hooked her ankles behind his back as her core squeezed him with firm pulses. Her lips parted, and her eyes opened as the pleasure began to recede. He looked into her shining eyes, and his heart lost its rhythm. Far more than passion burned in her gaze. He hesitated to name the emotions. They hadn't spoken of love, but it was there in her eyes. Tenderness, contentment, and trust. He savored the intimacy.

He opened his mouth, meaning to speak the words so evident in her gaze, when his audiocom beeped, shattering the spell. He shook his head, and she covered her face with both hands. With his body still buried inside her, he tapped the device hooked over his ear.

“Trey sent a team for the overlord. With that gizmo in his head, Trey didn’t trust him with the Mystics,” Dro Tar said.

“Good plan,” he muttered. “Tell Lor to set a course for the Night Moon and launch when ready.”

“Yes, sir.”

He tapped off his audiocom, and Saebin dissolved into laughter.

* * * * *

“You said the Rodytes had a reason to provoke your people.” Saebin stood beside Lyrik on the bridge watching their approach to the Night Moon. “What did you mean?”

Drakkin stood to their right, his hands clasped behind his back. “It is a story well known to your Mystics, but apparently the rest of Ontariese has learned nothing from the tale.”

Lyrik shifted his weight from one foot to the other, but remained silent.

“Many millennia ago, the people of Bilarri who were unable to manipulate magic became jealous of those who could.”

“That sounds familiar,” Lyrik said.

“They attempted to compensate for their differing abilities with technologies. They built machines that allowed them to fly and manufactured the things they were unable to conjure, but equality was not enough. They didn’t want to coexist with their magical brothers, they wanted to rule them.”

“But *everyone* on Bilarri has some form of magical ability,” Lyrik said.

“There was a massive uprising, a civil war if you will. Those without magical abilities challenged those able to manifest magic, and the carnage was unimaginable.”

“How did the war end?” Saebin’s tone was hushed and respectful.

“Those with magical abilities gained the upper hand and exiled anyone without such abilities to a distant planet. They surrounded the planet with a shield that prevented anyone from leaving and warned others to stay away. The planet was called Rodymia.”

“The Rodytes are descendents of Bilarrians?” Saebin tried to keep the astonishment from her tone. She should have seen where the story was leading.

“Yes, and they have focused all their resentment and skill into completing the task they began so long ago.”

“Conquering Bilarri?” Lyrik asked.

Drakkin nodded. “For generations the shield held, and the Rodytes were contained. Many debated the morality of holding an entire race of people prisoner because of the actions of their ancestors.

“While the debate raged on, the Rodytes focused on two things, developing new technologies and expanding their numbers. By the time they blasted through the shield, they posed far more of a threat than they had when they were exiled. A second war ensued, and it rages to this day.” He turned to face them, the ring in his eyes so bright it cast a crimson glow over his features. “The overlord is but a pawn in this game. The Rodytes intend to conquer Ontariese, then use the vanquished army to attack Bilarri.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

Saebin adjusted her position on the chair for the hundredth time. Expectation pressed in on her from every side. Their operation was stalled, paralyzed by her inability to sense Seth.

Seth is the key. I'm not sure how, but he will lead me home. As if she weren't stressed out enough, Saebin heard the fervent echo of Krystabel's voice.

She was a soldier, not a Mystic. Give her an attainable objective, someone to overpower or apprehend. How was she supposed to accomplish something that was intangible?

Her fingers dug into the chair's arms, and her sensory inputs buzzed. "It isn't working." She hissed out a breath and opened her eyes. "They must have him in a shield suit, or I don't know what the hell I'm doing. Take your pick."

Without a word, Drakkin took her by the hand and led her off the bridge. "You come, too," he said as they passed Lyrik.

"Keep scanning," Lyrik told Dro Tar before stepping into the lift.

Drakkin led them down the corridor and stopped before Lyrik's cabin. "She is trying too hard. When she summoned the metaphysical plane, yours was the first image she visualized. Strip her naked and distract her in any way you can. Once she relaxes, her power will do the rest." He turned and walked back toward the lift.

Saebin covered her eyes with her hand. "He can't seriously mean for us to ..."

With a wicked chuckle, Lyrik pulled her inside the cabin. "You used me to stabilize your visualization?" He sounded inordinately pleased. "Were we naked?"

She slapped his hand away as he reached for the fasteners at the front of her suit. "Seth is at the mercy of those monsters. How am I supposed to --"

"You don't have to do anything. I'm supposed to distract you. If you relax and let your energy flow naturally, the connection will come." He laughed again. "Literally and figuratively."

She had yet to recover from her brazen behavior in the planning hall. When had she become such a wanton? "If it doesn't work the first time, we go back to the bridge. Agreed?"

"Whatever you say." His sparkling eyes promised no mercy, but they had to do something. All her determination and concentration hadn't accomplished anything.

She disengaged her input rings and unfastened her armor. He peeled it down her arms and sealed his mouth over hers. Pushing the stiff material past her hips, he paused to explore her bottom, while she worked her legs free of the suit.

His tongue stroked against hers, caressing the interior of her mouth. Her nipples tingled, and heat gathered between her thighs. She opened her mind -- scanning, searching - while his hand moved across her flesh. He cupped her breast, his thumb teasing her nipple. His touch never failed to excite and thrill her.

"It was over way too soon," he whispered against her lips. "I didn't get my fill of you before." He smiled into her eyes. "I'm still hungry."

He slipped to his knees, and Saebin's core clenched in greedy anticipation. Each touch, each experience was wonderful with Lyrik. She loved the way he used just a hint of teeth when he suckled her nipples. She craved the tender swirl of his tongue against her clit. And his ... He lifted her leg to his shoulder, and her thoughts scattered.

Using only his fingertip, he traced her slit, forward and back, forward and back. She braced her hands against his shoulders, her leg trembling.

"Relax. I've got you." His breath wafted across her damp folds, and she closed her eyes, the tension mounting within her core.

I've got you. Such a comforting thought. She wasn't alone. He had her back. He would fight beside her.

He parted her folds and closed his lips around her clit, tapping the very tip with his tongue. Sensation curled up through her core and blossomed in her abdomen. Reaching up, he cupped her breasts, rolling her nipples as he lavished attention on her swollen nub.

"I love your taste and the throaty moan you make just before you come." His mouth moved against her as he spoke, heightening her arousal. "Moan for me, sweetheart. I love you."

He sucked her clit between his lips, leaving her to wonder if she'd imagined the last phrase. Did he love her? She was modified, changed, ruined. How could he love her?

Tracing her slit with the flat of his tongue, he used the tip to circle her clit. Over and over, until she slumped against the wall, her leg shaking. He pressed against her, supported her, as pleasure washed her anxiety away. He pushed two fingers into her throbbing core, prolonging her release.

As if launched by the push of his fingers, her mind expanded its search. The signal was faint at first, tiny, yet intense. Gradually fear and confusion traveled across the fragile link.

Seth?

The pleasure of her orgasm receded, and she latched on to the signal. Lyrik looked up at her. "Did it work?"

"I ... think so." She panted.

He eased his fingers from inside her and lifted her into his arms. Cradling her against his chest, he moved to the bed. "I've got you," he repeated in a passion-roughened tone.

Supported by Lyrik's strong arms, she focused entirely on Seth, strengthening the telepathic link.

We're here, little one. Don't be afraid. Open your eyes and show me where you are.

* * * * *

"There are two adults in the lab, one male and one female," Lyrik stated. He had assembled the crew in the planning hall for the final briefing. "The soldiers are not free to move about the complex. There are eight Rodyte guards equipped with standard pulse rifles. Six have specific patrol patterns; the other two protect the Stirate. That's the Rodyte word for head honcho. So, the odds aren't wonderful, but they aren't impossible either."

"How can you possibly know all that?" Hermlin shook his head.

"Seth told Saebin what to expect."

"Seth?" Hermlin scrunched up his face in a disbelieving frown. "Isn't he the baby we're here to rescue?"

"Seth is no ordinary child," Lor replied. "He is the son of two of the most powerful Mystics Ontariense has ever known."

"And his natural abilities are enhanced by genetic and technological augmentations," Saebin said. "Picture my implants and body armor only integrated at the cellular level."

"Holy shit," Hermlin muttered.

"I second that," Dro Tar said.

Lyrik looked at Drakkin. "How many of us can you get inside?"

"As many as you need."

"All right." He scrubbed his jaw as he debated the details. "Seth is our primary concern, but I'd like to recover the soldiers, if it's possible. Somehow I don't think they volunteered for their present assignment."

"I'll teleport everyone into the lab and send Dro Tar back to the ship with Seth."

"No, friggin' way. I don't want to miss out on --"

"You're the logical choice," Lyrik agreed. "No more arguments. Hermlin, we'll need you on the ship in case things go badly. Lor, have you ever used your abilities in a destructive capacity?"

"No, but I have no problem doing so."

Lyrik accepted his statement with a nod. "Any questions?"

"Why can't the teenagers babysit?" Dro Tar narrowed her eyes in a mutinous glare.

"Zane shoots better than I do, and that's saying a lot. Lor is a Pyrokin." Lyrik shook his head. "Why am I arguing with you? Any *other* questions?"

Dro Tar harrumphed.

"The next move is yours," Lyrik told Drakkin.

Hermlin returned to the bridge, and Drakkin instructed everyone else to congregate in the middle of the planning hall. Unlike Ontarian transport conduits, Bilarrian teleportation was instantaneous.

Lyrik looked into the male's eyes, confirming he was Rodyte, before he dropped him with a single blast to the chest. The female screamed, and Saebin fired precariously close to her head. Seth was strapped to a treatment table in front of Ensley.

"D-159 cease and desist!" Ensley's voice was shrill.

"My *name* is Saebin, you heartless bitch." Saebin shot out her knee and watched with dispassionate eyes as Ensley writhed on the floor.

"Get the baby out of here," Lyrik ordered. "The fun has just begun."

Saebin stared down at her former handler, targeting her with both fists. Lor stood in the doorway of the lab, his curly hair wild about his face. Two guards charged down the hallway. Lor drove them back with dense bursts of fire. Zane rattled off shots in the other direction, and Saebin slowly tightened her fists.

"You can't kill her, sweetheart." Lyrik said softly. "We might need her to control the soldiers."

"That's what she does best." Logic restrained Saebin's anger. If she surrendered to rage, she'd be no use to the mission.

In her peripheral vision, she watched Drakkin and Dro Tar unstrap the child. Joy surged across their telepathic link. Absorbing the emotion without being distracted by it, Saebin fixed her gaze on her former handler. "You are beneath contempt, *Ensley*."

"You'll never get out of here alive." Saebin lunged forward, and Ensley scrambled back, clasp her knee with both hands. "The new soldiers are faster, smarter, and more powerful than the original D series. You're already dead. You just don't know it yet."

Drakkin sent Dro Tar and Seth to the ship, then moved up beside Saebin. “Lor and Zane have incapacitated six of the guards. The other two won’t leave the Stirate. We’ll have to take the fight to him.”

“We can’t drag her along, and her implant makes her immune to my mental pulses.”

Drakkin smiled and glanced at Ensley. She moaned and toppled over onto her back.

Saebin looked at Lyrik. “You should have let me kill her. She deserves no better.”

Lyrik didn’t argue. “Let’s find the Stirate.”

Lor remained in the doorway to the lab as Zane fell in beside Drakkin. Saebin covered Lyrik as he carefully rounded each corner. “Any idea where he’s hiding?” Lyrik asked no one in particular.

Drakkin snorted. “Only a Rodyte would hide at the first sign of trouble.” The Rodytes didn’t hold the patent on cowardice, but Saebin wasn’t going to argue with Drakkin.

Lyrik eased his head past the next corner, and a shot grazed his face. He jerked back with a muttered curse. “I think we found them.” He pressed his fingers to the burn on his cheek.

Zane darted to the other side of the archway. Rapid bursts of energy followed in his wake. He tucked his rifle close against his shoulder and prepared to return fire. Waiting for Lyrik’s signal, the younger man aimed over Lyrik’s head as the commander lunged into the corridor.

Drakkin and Saebin followed close behind. The two guards sprawled on either side of a doorway long before Saebin reached the threshold.

“Come out with your hands up,” Lyrik ordered. “If we come in we won’t be nice.”

A moment passed in strained silence.

Drakkin’s gaze narrowed. “There are two people within, one male and one female.”

“Does he have one of the soldiers with him?” Lyrik asked.

Before anyone could answer, blasts exploded inside the office. Drakkin insinuated his fingers into the seam separating the two panels and forced the doors open. Lyrik and Zane hurried past, Saebin covered them from the corridor.

A woman, dressed in a Mystic’s robe struggled with the Stirate.

“You foolish bitch,” the Stirate shouted. “They won’t shoot you!”

Zane caught the Stirate around the throat as Lyrik wrested the pistol from his hand. One last shot burst from the weapon, and the Mystic rocked backward, grasping her abdomen.

“Why did you have to fight me?” the Stirate yelled. “They wouldn’t have hurt you.”

Drakkin rushed forward and knelt beside the Mystic. He looked at Lyrik and shook his head. “I can’t help her. Her being is slipping away.”

The Stirate jerked and tugged against their restraining hold. "Gema! I cannot sense her. What have you done with Gema?"

"Look at his eyes." Saebin watched as the blue rings, so similar to Drakkin's red, faded completely leaving a solid field of black.

"Who are you?" Drakkin looked at her, sending his thoughts directly to her mind. *He no longer scans as Rodyte.* "How should we address you?"

"My name is Berk. I can't remain in control for long. This beast is very strong." He panted, his voice reverberating with a deep, echoing timbre. "We were forced through the portal when the other barged in."

"What portal?" Lyrik asked. "We don't understand."

"All I remember is the explosion. Ripples of power disrupted our dimension, creating a rip, a portal. We were forced into the female."

Image swirled through Saebin's mind, memories twisted with impressions. "Krystabel," she whispered. She closed her eyes, retreating into the memory, gleaning details unavailable before. "He belongs where Krystabel is now."

"Who is Gema?" Lyrik asked the being.

"My mate."

Saebin forced herself to see beyond the torment of that day, to remember every action, every emotion. "They were drawn through the portal when Krystabel retreated from the pain. Ensley! They were forced into Ensley. Come. We must rouse her." She ran down the corridor, blood rushing through her ears. This was the only tangible link they had to Krystabel. They couldn't let it slip away.

Berk flew past her as they entered the lab. He knelt beside Ensley, gathering her into his arms. "Gema, my love. You must awaken."

Lyrik dragged him away from Ensley's unconscious body. "If you return to your dimension, will the other return to hers?"

He shook his head. "I don't know. We have been in these bodies too long. Our beings have fused with theirs. If we return to our dimension these two will cease to exist."

"That's not a problem," Saebin said without inflexion.

"The other must have a receptacle, or she cannot return."

Saebin looked at Ensley and shuddered. "Can she inhabit the body Gema will vacate?"

"No. It will be destroyed by our leaving."

Without explanation, Drakkin blinked out of sight. He strode into the lab a moment later carrying the female Mystic. "I will work to repair this body. We don't have much time or death will taint the transfer." He looked at Saebin. "You are a conduit. You must guide her, bring her being into this receptacle."

Saebin's head pounded so forcefully she could barely think. "I don't know how!"

“You know,” Drakkin shot back without looking up from the female Mystic. “You have always known.”

“Will this work?” Lyrik asked Berk. “Can she return if she has somewhere to go?”

“I do not know.” He paused, compassion gleaming in his fathomless eyes. “All we can do is try.”

Kneeling between Ensley and the Mystic, Saebin formed a link between the two. “Rouse her,” she said to Drakkin, knowing her own mental compulsion would have no effect. Ensley jolted, her eyes flying open, horror contorting her features. The blue rings returned to the Stirate’s gaze as his body began to shake.

Saebin sensed Berk and Gema gathering energy, draining it from the Stirate and Ensley. Their bodies trembled, and their faces twisted, shriveled, then wasted away. With sudden, violent force Berk and Gema projected themselves to a destination beyond Saebin’s comprehension. The Stirate screamed. Ensley moaned, and fire erupted inside Saebin. She fought the searing pain, forcing her energy to flow away from Ensley and into the female Mystic.

Strength drained out of Saebin. She closed her eyes, fire giving way to cold. Isolated and afraid, a signal emerged from the abyss. The faint smell of flowers teased her nose.

Krystabel! Here, I am here! You’re not alone. Saebin sent the thought into the darkness with the last of her strength. *Come back to us. All Ontariense is waiting for your return.*

A trickle of energy flowed through Saebin, growing stronger with each passing second. Relief and happiness flooded her senses. Energy rushed, surged and bubbled, making her want to laugh.

She turned her head toward the female Mystic and slowly opened her eyes. Their gazes locked. Purple marbled the dark brown, intensifying and expanding until only purple remained.

“Saebin?” The Mystic spoke, but it was Krystabel’s voice.

Saebin’s fingers went numb, and she released her mother’s hand. “Welcome back,” she whispered, then slipped into the void.

Chapter Twenty-Three

They gathered on the banks of Rainbow Falls the following morning. Water rushed over sheer cliffs and pounded into the pool far below. Light passed through the resulting mist, creating a multitude of tiny, colorful arcs. Saebin suspected the others had seen it all before. How else could they gaze upon such beauty and not gape with awe?

Lyrik intertwined their fingers and drew her away from the falls. Dense trees surrounded the grassy clearing. Trey kept his feisty life mate near him by resting his arm across her shoulders. Charlotte embraced Krystabel so tightly and held on so long that Tal smiled and gently pulled her back.

"I can't believe you're here." Emotion made Charlotte's voice tremulous. "I refused to give up hope, but each day, each passing cycle, made it harder to believe I would ever see you again." Happy tears shone in the High Queen's turquoise eyes.

"I understand all too well." Krystabel smiled through her tears and hugged Charlotte again. "Time had no meaning in the other dimension until I sneaked through the portal and contacted someone I knew. I was terrified everyone I loved would have died before I figured out how to leave that place."

"Berk also spoke of this portal." Saebin felt intrusive, and yet there was so much she still didn't understand. "I know you used it to escape the pain of Hydran's torture, but --"

"She wasn't tortured," Krysta cut in. "Hydran allowed a girl to be brutalized hoping to motivate Mother to gestate another one of his science experiments. Mother absorbed the girl's injuries."

"I retreated to the metaphysical plane when I felt my body dying." Krystabel tucked a strand of sandy blonde hair behind her ear. "I expected that my being would soon follow. Then I sensed the portal."

“Are there many such portals on the metaphysical plane?” Saebin looked from one face to another. “So much of this is still unclear.”

“I created the portal.” Tal sounded embarrassed by the admission. “Charlotte was dying. I had no choice, but I knew what I did was forbidden.”

“What did you do?” Like the threads of fine cloth, everything was connected, one fine strand led to the next, supporting and interweaving.

“I Summoned the Storm and purged the metaphysical plane. It freed Charlotte from our enemy’s trap, but it also created the rupture, the opening to this other dimension.”

Saebin nodded, as another layer was revealed. “I was linked with Mother, attempting to heal her when she retreated through the opening. That’s when Berk and Gema emerged.”

“But Krystabel was on Earth, and Master Tal was on Ontariese,” Lyrik pointed out.

“The metaphysical plane transcends the barriers of space and time.” Drakkin finally entered the conversation. “You know this, Lyrik. You’ve experienced it firsthand.”

“When they brought the *Tempest* through the interdimensional portal.”

“Yes. When a Mystic Summons the Storm, the vortex they create manipulates the metaphysical plane. Now, as wonderful as this reunion is, we are here to make decisions.” The ominous edge to Drakkin’s tone silenced everyone. “We are the only ones who know Krystabel is back and that Seth survived his kidnapping.”

“What are you suggesting?” Krysta pressed the child against her chest, tucking his dark head beneath her chin. Though Seth had yet to complete his second cycle, he appeared much older. His legs wrapped around her waist, his sleep undisturbed by the conflict surrounding him.

Krystabel moved across the clearing and looked her daughter in the eyes. “I knew he was the key to my return, but I didn’t understand what that meant. Thoughts of Seth kept me going, made me determined to fight as the forces in that dimension eroded my being. I believed Seth would somehow rescue me, and in a way, he has. If Ensley hadn’t kidnapped him, we never would have learned about Gema and Berk.”

Krysta took a step back her gaze narrowed and wary. “Seth is all I have of Belle, all I will ever have.”

“That’s not true.” Krystabel shook her head. “Belle is part of you, and she will never be forgotten by any of us.” After a short pause, she continued in a stronger, more assertive tone. “I believe I was allowed to return so I can care for Seth.”

“No!” Charlotte cried. “I know what you’re thinking. You can’t mean to leave. A few hours is all I’m allowed after half a lifetime searching for you?”

Krystabel turned toward her sister. “Nothing and no one can ever separate us again.” She swept Charlotte with a Mystic wave so powerful it made Saebin tingle. “Our trials are coming to an end, but Seth’s have just begun. We must think about what is best for him.”

"This can't be happening." Krysta's voice broke, and she closed her eyes as Seth stirred restlessly. "I knew this was what you wanted when Trey told me where we were going. Why didn't I refuse? I should have refused!"

Shaken by the emotions surging around her, Saebin leaned into Lyrik's warmth. Was life always bittersweet? Why must joy come at such a high price?

"Why were you so certain this is what we'd suggest?" Krystabel asked, a hint of challenge in her tone.

Krysta turned toward Trey. Seth squirmed between them, pivoting to wrap his chubby arms around Trey's neck. "Because -- you're right. He isn't safe on Ontariese."

"It's not just Seth's safety we must consider," Drakkin said. "No one knows what abilities he'll manifest. Vee planned to bring him to the Conservatory as he matured, to watch him closely and train him personally." He glanced at Tal as he added, "That is no longer an option."

"Seth will always be welcome at the Conservatory," Tal objected.

"That's not what I meant. Vee named you his successor. It will be more challenging than you realize just to see that the transfer of power goes smoothly. I have faith in your abilities, as did Vee, but being wed to the High Queen will be enough of an obstacle. Many will challenge your neutrality."

"My defense of Seth has been nearly as boisterous as Krysta's." Charlotte gaze shone with unshed tears, but she had regained control of her voice. "Vee cared about the Conservatory almost as deeply as he cared about his son. The integrity of his life's work must be maintained. We owe him that much at least."

Drakkin accepted her decision with a nod and turned, sharing his gaze between Trey and Lyrik. "You both have challenges awaiting you. The City of Tears is ripe for rebellion. Are you strong enough to reestablish balance on the Day Moon?"

"I'm not even sure I'm returning to the City of Tears." Lyrik pulled Saebin close against his side. "Saebin has known nothing but subjugation there."

"The forces subjugating her are gone, and you could easily be the man your father should have been." With a fortifying breath, he turned back to Krysta. "Krystabel will accompany me to Bilarri and raise Seth as her own. They will assume new identities until Trey has had time to oust the NRS." Drakkin paused expectantly.

Krysta ignored him and stroked Seth's hair. "I will be able to visit him?"

"After a time," Krystabel said. "Remember, we don't have to be in the same room to communicate."

"You're forgetting one thing." Charlotte drew her sister's attention, her expression suddenly resolute. "According to the sacred traditions we should be joint High Queens."

Krystabel smiled and shook her head. "Ontariese already has a High Queen, and the conflict facing you now has nothing to do with the sacred traditions." Krystabel would not

be swayed. "Don't become complacent in your power. Ontarians without Mystic abilities deserve equal representation. There will always be those who are discontent, but the NRS never should have gotten this far. The overlord should have laughed in the face of the Rodytes and immediately contacted you."

Charlotte accepted the criticism with a stiff nod. "We will claim we met during this crisis. No one will question a few visits to Bilarri."

Krysta still clung to Trey, Seth cradled between them. "I can't do this," she whispered.

Trey rubbed her back, not pressuring or rushing, just waiting for her to assimilate the information. When her stubbornness persisted, he smiled. "We can move to Bilarri, but we'd have to come up with a damn good reason."

She sniffled and eased away, leaving him with the boy. "I know this must be done. That doesn't mean I have to like it."

Lyrik shook his head, whispering to Saebin, "Trey has the patience of a saint."

"I heard that," Krysta replied, shooting him a warning glare.

"I know this is hard for you," Drakkin told Krysta. "But if it's any consolation, you will have a child of your own before the next cycle passes."

He said no more as he took the boy from Trey. Saebin was surprised at how comfortable the Bilarrian looked with a child in his arms. Krystabel paused for another round of hugs, then took her place at Drakkin's side.

"This is an intermission in our mutual adventures," Drakkin predicted. "We shall meet again." He handed Seth to Krystabel, and all three blinked out of sight.

"Did you hear what he said?" Trey sounded as shocked as Krysta looked. "Are you pregnant?"

"Not yet." Krysta blinked away her tears. "I hate it when he does that."

"If Seth's existence must remain a secret, how do we explain what happened on the Night Moon?" Saebin blew out a long, steady breath. They'd survived the most incredible ordeal, and each had exciting opportunities awaiting them. So why did she feel so sad?

"We use the senseless tragedy to discredit the NRS," Trey said.

"The overlord's involvement in something so vile will turn the warlords against him permanently," Lyrik added. He slipped his arms around Saebin's waist, drawing her back against his chest.

Comforted by his embrace, Saebin considered the possibilities. For so long she'd been given orders, forced to accept whatever objective her handler demanded. There was no one left to control her. It felt odd and wonderful and just a bit daunting. "What do we do now?"

"Whatever you want," Lyrik replied. He kissed her on the temple and added, "Whatever *we* want."

Epilogue

Atop Lyrik's villa, overlooking the City of Tears, Saebin pondered the meaning of freedom. She'd spent the afternoon with Krysta and Aunt Charlotte, eating what she wanted, going where she pleased. Did that make her free? Grasping the smooth alloy railing surrounding the rooftop garden, she watched the sun set between Ontariese and the dead Night Moon. The ghosts were vanquished, the compound destroyed. Was this all there was to freedom?

Lyrik's shuttle glided into view and landed at the opposite end of the expansive rooftop. She leaned back against the railing and watched him approach. Dressed in a formal uniform of black and gold, he had never appeared more intimidating -- or more appealing. The setting sun gilded his hair and made his eyes gleam with a mixture of emotions she couldn't quite define. Her heart raced, and her fingers tingled as she anticipated the hours of pleasure awaiting them.

They'd been nearly inseparable for the past two weeks, focused entirely on each other. He'd ignored the warlords' repeated attempts to contact him until this morning, when Trey arrived in person to plead their case.

"How did the meeting go?" She came right to the point when Lyrik reached her side.

"They unanimously nominated me as the next overlord," he grumbled.

"You don't sound pleased." She remained against the railing, the warm night breeze ruffling her skirt.

"I knew what they were going to suggest before -- I've never seen you in a dress before."

She licked her lips, her excitement beginning to fizzle. "You don't like it?"

He swept her into his arms and kissed her thoroughly. "After the day I just endured, you're a slice of heaven. It just caught me a little off guard. My warrior turned into a princess."

She smiled at the praise, surprised how well the words pleased her. "I have wine or Bilarrian ale. I know you're partial to the latter." She guided him toward the small table on which she'd arranged the beverages.

He selected the ale, as she'd suspected he would, and closed his eyes in utter bliss as the cool drink slid down his throat. "I don't deserve you."

She chuckled. "Me or the ale?"

He opened his eyes and met her gaze. "I'm pretty sure I could live without ale." He let his expression say the rest.

Ignoring the warmth curling through her body, stirring sensations she wasn't quite ready to indulge, she poured a glass of wine for herself and asked, "You don't want to be overlord?"

"I'm not sure what I want." He paused for another drink before he continued. "A part of me expected to follow in my father's footsteps. I've been educated and trained from childhood to become overlord. In fact the only time it doesn't happen that way is when the warlords challenge the successor."

"Then what's the problem?"

"After what my father did ... I guess I think the COT might benefit from a new beginning."

"Isn't that what they're getting?" He looked at her, and she smiled, caressing his face with her gaze. "Your primary concern isn't what would make you happy, but what's best for the COT. That's exactly the sort of leader this place needs."

"You sound like Trey." He set his mug aside, took her wineglass from her, then drew her into his arms.

She rested her hands on his chest, absorbing his warmth and the strong steady rhythm of his heartbeat. "When do you have to give them your answer?"

"Next week." He pushed his fingers into her unbound hair and brushed his mouth against hers. "We have a proposition for you."

"We?" She laughed. "I'm not sure I like the sound of that."

"I'm far too possessive to ever make that sort of proposition for a 'we.' This is strictly business." He moved his hands to her hips and eased back, allowing the night wind to curl around their bodies. "Eleven D-2 soldiers were evacuated from the compound before it was demolished."

Her heart lurched, and she licked her lips. Was it starting all over again? "Why didn't you tell me until now?"

"The Joint Council unanimously agreed that they had to be disarmed and deprogrammed. I wasn't sure they would survive the first, so I didn't ... You've been through enough. I didn't see any reason to upset you with the details if we couldn't save them."

She couldn't decide if his protectiveness pleased or annoyed her, so she asked, "Then, they're still alive?"

"Yes. They were kept in a sort of hibernation state that allowed a group of Mystics to drain their power supplies. All of their implants are still in place, but without power, they're harmless."

"Why didn't the Rodytes foresee this weakness and take steps to protect them? Ensley bragged about the improvements they'd made in the D-2 implants."

"If the soldiers had been awake their shielding mechanisms would have prevented the Mystics from accessing them. I guess arrogance is a common flaw. The Rodytes presumed they were safe within their compound, just as the Mystics presumed the Conservatory would protect them."

"What's the proposition, and who is included in 'we'?"

"Trey, High Queen Charlotte, and the soon-to-be-appointed overlord would appreciate your assistance in helping the D-2 class soldiers adjust to life on Ontariese. If they want to join the armed forces -- and you determine that they are emotionally stable enough for the position -- Trey has some interesting ideas. If they want nothing to do with that sort of life, you would help them find another vocation."

Hope welled within her. This was how she should have been treated when she came *home*. Freedom wasn't just the absence of repression; it was opportunity and purpose, making each moment count. She would help these soldiers understand the difference and treasure what they'd found. A warm tingle coursed down her spine, and a smile parted her lips.

"I'd be honored."

Lyrik grinned. "I'll give you fair warning. Trey has plans for you far beyond this one assignment. He is fascinated by your abilities and determined to recruit you for one of his covert teams."

"One step at a time." She moved closer, craving his fiery brand of tenderness and the possessive passion burning in his eyes. "Everything is perfect. I don't want to screw it up. I can't believe how much I love you, how happy I am just being in your arms. I'm still trying to convince myself this is real."

He cupped the side of her face and traced her lips with his thumb. "Let's see if I can help convince you." He kissed her lightly on the mouth. "You've found a home among people who care about you." Guiding her hand to his chest, he slipped it inside his jacket and pressed her palm against his flesh. "And I love you more with each beat of my heart."

She enjoyed the intimate pose for a moment, then he swept her into his arms, carrying her swiftly toward the entrance to their bedroom. “Did you miss me?”

“I always miss you when we’re apart. But you don’t look convinced.” He paused to nibble her neck.

“We’ve got the rest of our lives to convince each other.”

His mouth covered hers in a demanding kiss, and they didn’t make it to the bedroom.

 THE END 

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Cyndi has been a member of Romance Writers of America since 1999 and also belongs to two local chapters of RWA. She is the winner of multiple national contests, including The Molly and The Merritt. In 2003, she was chosen as a finalist in the prestigious Golden Heart, as well as winning the Jasmine with *Rebel Angels 1: Born of the Shadows*. After dabbling in freelance journalism and songwriting, she returned to her true passion: paranormal romance. Visit Cyndi on the Web at www.cyndifriberg.com, or email her at cyndi@cyndifriberg.com.