

SIREN PUBLISHING

*Flights of Fancy 1*

Melodee Aaron

**BURNING  
LOVE**

## **Flights of Fancy 1**

In the Immortal Love universe, a small crew of women aboard the science and diplomatic starship *HMSS Daedalus* are on a voyage of discovery. On this mission, six special heroines make first contact with pyrokinetic aliens, cyborgs, vampires, knights and dragons, and paranormal creatures. Falling in love does not always work out as planned...

## **Burning Love**

Lieutenant Star Hawking, a young diplomat on her first assignment, doesn't feel very confident in leading the mission she's drawn, but she knows what she has to do. Pressed for time for more than a year, her career has taken precedence over her personal life. Then from out of nowhere, two males enter her world.

Major Jake "Spence" Spencer has been a Marine for a long time, and he's played the field. A lot. One day, he notices that his feelings for a woman have changed, and it puzzles him. He finds this woman eclipses all others he's known, but exactly why eludes him.

Krell, an alien diplomat, has much to hide about the society on his planet and the plans the Council of Elders has for *Daedalus* and her crew. The survival of Krell's people depends on stealth and deceit. But when Krell falls for a human woman, he discovers all may not be as it seems on his world.

**Sensuality Rating: SCORCHING**

**Genre:** Science Fiction/Paranormal

**Theme:** Ménage à Trois

**Length:** Novel (31,000 words)

# **BURNING LOVE**

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**Melodee Aaron**

**EROTIC ROMANCE**



**Siren Publishing, Inc.**  
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BURNING LOVE

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## Foreword

The *Flights of Fancy* series is set in what I call The Immortal Love Universe. This universe spans the entire galaxy and some twelve *billion* years starting in 1940 AD. You'll sometimes hear it called The Ike Payne Universe.

Even though set in the same universe as *For the Love of Payne*, *Desert Heat*, and *The Polyamorous Princess*, the stories of *Flights of Fancy* are not a part of that series. There are some common characters readers will recognize, but they are mostly in minor roles consistent with the shared setting. The tales of *Flights of Fancy* also take place many years after the stories mentioned above. While you don't need to read the other stories to enjoy *Flights of Fancy*, readers may find additional information about the universe in those earlier tales.

Instead, *Flights of Fancy* deals with an entirely new group of people aboard the science and diplomatic starship *HMSS Daedalus* on a voyage of discovery in the far-flung reaches of the galaxy. On this mission, the crew encounters many strange and wonderful people and civilizations. When people come together, no matter the place and time, their tempers, passions, lust, and love often flourish.

Join me now as we explore the future, or at least one possible future.

Keep Loving!  
Melodee Aaron

## Chapter 1

Lord Admiral of the Fleet, Q, leaned far back in his chair and put his feet up on the ornate, real wood desk of his otherwise spartan office. Watching him through the communications link, Elsa found it hard to believe this man answered only to the Emperor himself. Admiral Q always seemed very relaxed and acted like he had all the time in the universe to chat with his officers, and he never rushed anything. He studied the display on his desk in silence for more than a minute before he carried on with the discussion.

"So, Captain, you think this anomaly is worth investigating?"

"Yes, Sir. The probes we've sent in stopped transmitting after sending a few images of a habitable planet."

His silver-gray eyes sparkled, and Elsa's breath came short. "Tell me why I should allow you to risk one of His Majesty's starships and crews to enter an area where you have lost three probes."

Elsa managed to pull herself together and tapped at the display controls to pull up one of the better images the second probe returned. "If you look here, Admiral, you can see what looks like a city on the edge of the coastline. I'd like to get a better look at that if nothing else."

"Captain Davis, need I remind you that you and *Daedalus* are not on a sight-seeing tour?" The stony set to his face made it all angles and sharp lines, the perfect image for a man wielding such immense authority and power.

"No Sir, but this is why we're out here. A week ago, we didn't even know this planet existed, and now we have evidence that it may be inhabited."

Q nodded. "Or that it may have been at some time in the past. You have no evidence of current inhabitants."

"That's very true, but if we get past this energy barrier caused by the binary stars, we can get sensor readings."

He sat quietly staring at the displays for many seconds. "What do you think happened to the probes, Captain?"

"I don't know."

"That's not what I asked. I don't know either, but what do you *think* happened to them?"

"I think the probes are fine, Sir. I think the energy field is blocking their signal just like it's blocking our scans."

He stared at her through the link, and a small smile played across his face. The man was nearly 4,000 years old, but he looked about thirty-five. He wasn't really a man at all, however, but rather a simulated human with a positronic brain and biosynthetic body. Elsa thought she probably wasn't the only woman in Fleet to wonder just how good of a simulation he was. She could still recall the first time she saw him when she was a sixteen-year-old midshipman; she damned near wet her uniform because he was so cute. Thirty-five years later, her heart still beat a little faster when she saw that smile.

Q nodded. "Just so. I share your opinion on the fate of the probes."

"Then I should take *Daedalus* in?"

*He shook his head. "Captain, we both know the risks, and I can't order you to take your ship and crew into harms way on a mission of discovery. I will not forbid you from doing so, but the decision rests with the ship's captain."*

"I understand, Sir."

"Very well. Godspeed, Captain Davis."

The communicator swam with three-dimensional static for a moment before fading to black.

\* \* \* \*

Star sat in the briefing room along with a dozen other officers as the captain ran down the plans for entering the unknown system.

"We'll enter the energy field in thirty minutes. Once inside, we'll take scans to see what we have." The captain smiled. "After that, we'll play it by ear."

Commander Harris tapped on his data recorder. "Understood, Ma'am. The science and diplomatic teams assigned for this mission are ready."

Davis nodded. "Who's leading the diplomatic team?"

Star spoke up, but she wasn't used to dealing with the captain on such a direct basis. "I am, Ma'am. Lieutenant Hawking."

"Very good. None of us have much experience with this sort of first contact thing, Hawking, but we're all in this together. If you need help, just ask."

"Understood, Captain."

"Alright, then. Let's get this ship moving. Dismissed."

\* \* \* \*

*Daedalus* and her mission presented a bit of a dichotomy to the designers at Fleet. As a ship of discovery, her primary missions were science and diplomacy, and offensive weapons would be out of place. On the other hand, she was a ship of the Fleet and needed to defend herself. Besides, every diplomat knew that the best tool in delicate negotiations was often a loaded gun. Elsa sighed because she had precious few guns to load.

"Tactical, please take us to battle stations."

"Battle stations, aye." Alarms sounded throughout the ship, but unlike aboard the big battle cruisers forming the backbone of the Fleet, most of the crew of *Daedalus* moved to damage control positions. "All departments report battle stations, Ma'am."

"Deflectors and Harbison Field to maximum."



The ensign tapped at his controls. "Harbison Field at full power, deflector screens at 118%."

What *Daedalus* lacked in offensive weapons she made for up in defensive and drive systems. The impulse and hyperspace drives were big enough for a ship ten times the size of *Daedalus*. The in-system impulse motors alone could generate nearly half-a-million Gs of acceleration, five times that of even the Emperor's flagship. She also carried a state-of-the-art Jamison Drive that, through some magic of physics Elsa didn't even pretend to understand, allowed *Daedalus* to move between certain precise points in space almost instantly.

While *Daedalus* couldn't fight, she sure as hell could run.

*Daedalus* also had the most sophisticated sensors of any ship in the Fleet, so she could see threats a long way off. The overall idea was to see a potential threat far enough away that it wasn't really a threat yet, and then run like hell before it got close enough to become an actual threat.

Elsa swallowed remembering that all of this looked really good on paper, but no one had actually tried it yet.

The science officer looked up from her console. "Energy field stable, and the deflectors are adjusted for maximum protection, Captain."

"Very well." Elsa took a deep breath. "Helm, take us through the barrier on heading one-seven-four, one-tenth impulse power."

The helmsman played her controls like a virtuoso would play a violin, making just the right moves to get the perfect performance from her instrument. "Ahead one-tenth on bearing one-seven-four, aye."

*Daedalus* eased forward through space, ready for anything.

\* \* \* \*

She watched the bridge activity on the big monitor screens in the mess hall. As a diplomatic officer, Star's battle station was at the first aid station that took over the mess in times like this. As the energy field grew large on the screens, she braced herself for something, but she didn't know what.

The crossing of the barrier was a bit anticlimactic. Essentially, nothing happened. The ship just slipped through like it cruised through normal space. She heard the bridge crew giving the captain information from scans by the science and tactical stations, but none of it sounded like a threat, and no one on the bridge seemed unusually tense.

Star, on the other hand, fought the urge to chew her nails.

She spent the first twenty-five years of her life training as a diplomat. She spent the last year training as a crewmember on *Daedalus*, the first ship of the Empire to go forth into unknown parts of the galaxy with the express mission of making first contact.

The fact that she wasn't the original choice for the mission only added to her worries. She'd been a backup crewman to another, much older, diplomat who went and killed himself while hang gliding in the New Moscow system. Even as a backup, the Emperor and Lord Admiral personally approved her selection. They thought she could do the job. She wasn't nearly as certain, although Star intended to do the best she could. She just hoped it would be good enough to keep her from killing herself or someone else.

The captain must have been satisfied that nothing threatened the ship, because she secured from battle stations. Star decided to stay and watch the bridge displays as the artificers turned the room back into a mess hall.

\* \* \* \*

"All departments secured from battle stations, Captain."

Elsa nodded. Despite a twelve week voyage from Sol system with nothing going on, the *Daedalus* crew was still tight. "Thank you. Science, anything on scanners?"

"I'm getting various clutter on the life signs systems, but too confused to isolate anything. I'm working on an algorithm now to try cleaning it up."

"Very well. Communications, anything on your bands?"

"Just static so far in the low bands, Ma'am."

She considered for a moment. The exo-anthropologists believed emerging civilizations would develop low-band radio first, and then move toward the higher frequencies and microwaves as they matured. So far, of the more than one hundred species known to mankind, they all fit that pattern. Elsa got this job ahead of captains with far more seniority because she had good instincts. When she interviewed with the Emperor, he smiled the lopsided grin everyone in the galaxy knew from his images on the currency and told her, "I like someone who goes with their gut feelings. I do it all the time."

She smiled. "Communications, please jump to the SHF range and scan."

The communications officer hesitated. "Ma'am, that's not the protocol."

"Noted. You have your orders."

The ensign shrugged and tapped her console switches. She held the earpiece tight against her head as the system scanned the SHF bands, and Elsa saw her suddenly frown deeply. "Captain, I have contact." She played with the controls for a moment. "At 14.721 gigahertz. It sounds like voice in an unknown language."

"Get a linguist up here and try the electronic translator."

"Aye, aye."

Elsa allowed herself a small grin. So far in her twelve years as a skipper, her instincts hadn't let her down.

The science officer spoke from her station. "Captain, I have two major concentrations of life signs. One is in the presumed city on the coast and the other is twenty-five kilometers south-southwest from there."

"Any details?"

The officer looked up from her scanners. "The returns appear humanoid, only some minor variances from humans, but the returns in the city itself are odd." She paused, like she looked for words. "The body temperatures are high, just under forty-three degrees Celsius, and I'm getting a lot of infrared radiation from the area."

Elsa wondered what that could mean, but from the officer's expression, Elsa didn't think she was nearly as puzzled as the scientist.

"Well, maybe we can just ask them about it." She turned to the communications console where the communications officer and the linguist huddled over the console. "Any luck on that translation?"

The linguist answered. "Not yet, Ma'am, but it looks like just idle chatter from the patterns I'm seeing."

"Best estimate to full translation?"

"Maybe two hours, Captain."

Elsa pondered for a moment. She could either keep *Daedalus* where she was, or she could take the ship in closer to the planet. She swiveled the command chair to face the tactical station. "Any evidence we've been scanned or that they know we're here?"

"No, Ma'am. I see no other ships in the system and no satellites in orbit down to fifty centimeters resolution."

She wondered if the exo-anthropologists could be wrong twice in a row. The protocols all said a civilization would develop microwave communications in lockstep with spaceflight, especially unmanned probes and satellites.

Again, her instincts overruled the mission manual. "Helm, take us to the planet, one-fifth impulse power, and insert *Daedalus* into high standard orbit."

"Yes, Ma'am."

*Daedalus* moved through the unknown space toward the greater unknown of the planet.

## Chapter 2

Over the next week, Star was amazed at every turn by the efficiency and skill of the *Daedalus* crew. From the breaking of the language barrier to fully mapping the planet, the teams did their jobs quickly and with few errors or missteps.

Star had few people on *Daedalus* she considered friends, but one was an Imperial Marine Major named Jake Spencer. She never heard anyone call him anything but Spence. He'd been in the Marines for all but sixteen years of his 148-year life, and Spence claimed to have no plans to retire anytime soon. Since she'd been a last-minute replacement, Star missed a good deal of the training with the crew that might have built friendships, but Spence, at least at first, treated her more like a grandchild than a superior officer. Sometimes, though, he most certainly did not look at her like a grandfather.

She mentioned the ease with which the crew established contact and her surprise since no one ever went out and deliberately followed such a mission before.

Spence chuckled. "You have to remember that these people are all professional soldiers. Most of them, a couple of years ago, before they started training for *Daedalus*, were on warships."

"What's that got to do with anything? We're not at war."

"No, but we're doing the same things." He sipped at his milk, his eyes lost in thought for a moment. "When you attack a system, you have to do a few things before you can win. First, you have to make good maps of the system and the planets. You also have to find out where the people are and assess any immediate threats. Then you have to find out what

frequencies they use to communicate, and after that you have to break their language and codes." He smiled. "You, little girl, are the anomaly on this ship."

It was true, too. Star was an officer of the Fleet, yes, but she never planned to serve on a ship for more than a couple of months, going from one diplomatic assignment to the next. Here she was now, leading a team on a ship of first contact, and feeling a little like a fish out of water.

"So this is just like waging war?"

"Basically, yeah." He shrugged. "Besides, we have to assume the people here are hostile until proven otherwise. I can promise you the captain is doing just that."

"How will she decide if they are or not?"

"That's your job."

She blinked a few times. Star didn't want the job anymore, but here, nearly ten kiloparsecs from Earth, it was a little late to walk home. "What?"

"Oh, it's the skipper's call when all is said and done, but she's going to rely on what you and the rest of the diplomats find out when you talk to the people down there."

"That's just great."

"Maybe, but that's your job."

A few Marines came by and chatted with Spence for a minute, and Star was thankful for the distraction. Of course, she'd known going in what her function on *Daedalus* was, but his comments really put it into perspective. It all came down to her.

The Marines left the table, and Spence watched them for a few moments before he turned back to face her over the remains of their lunch. "You know, Mike Shelby there has had his eye on you since we left Sol system."

He looked sad, or maybe it was just distraction she saw there. "Spence, I don't have time to date, let alone have a relationship." She didn't even know which of the young men he spoke of. She'd been far too

busy the last sixteen weeks boning up on how to handle different situations to even think about anything else.

"Ever heard that old saying about all work and no play makes Star a dull girl?"

She laughed. "Everyone's heard that one."

"Maybe, but it also makes Star frustrated."

"I think you're more worried about your Marines being frustrated."

"Maybe and maybe not. They're grunts, and they'll do what they need to do when they need to do it."

She wondered why *Daedalus* even had Marines. They were the closest things to an offensive weapon on the entire ship. "So, what is it that they might need to do?"

"A lot of it is tradition. Marines have been on ships for at least the last 5,500 years. Legend has it they were there to prevent mutinies from breaking out and spreading through the ship." Spence shrugged. "Fact is, we're here to protect the rest of the crew if something goes terribly wrong on one of these first contacts."

"What, are there about fifty Marines aboard?"

"Fifty-four counting me." He laughed. "Don't look so surprised. We wouldn't stand a chance against an entire planet, but we're here anyway. Maybe we can buy the skipper enough time to get off a warning message to Fleet."

She blinked at him, amazed by the casual way Spence dismissed the situation. "That's a pretty fatalistic view."

"It's a pretty fatalistic business." He clinked his glass of milk softly against hers. "Cheers."

\* \* \* \*

The tactical officer turned from the console. "Commander Harris, I'm detecting small weapons fire on the surface."

Chris looked up from his paperwork. "Any threat to *Daedalus*?"

*"No, Sir. It's all small stuff, handheld lasers and blasters." The officer paused for a moment, his face wrenched into a puzzled expression. "And something else strange. It looks like energy waves, but I see no hardware it could be coming from."*

"Show me the location, please." The officer worked the controls, and a map formed on the main bridge screen showing the fire concentrated to a fairly small area about eight kilometers southwest of the city. "Science, can you overlay life sign scans on that?"

"Yes, Sir." The science officer typed a few commands, and two groups of dots appeared. "The red dots are the species from the city, and the green dots are the people living outside."

"Thank you." Chris studied the display. The red dots clustered nearest the city and the green dots concentrated farther away. Traces on the display showed the groups of dots shooting at each other, blue for lasers, yellow for blasters, and the unknown energy weapons in silver. "What the fuck? Has anyone heard these people say they have a war going on?"

No one answered him. He wondered how this would impact the planned descent by the diplomatic team in the morning, but there was no sense doing anything now. He logged the event, and made a note to himself to make sure the captain and the diplomats knew about it at the briefing.

\* \* \* \*

Star didn't like the sound of what Commander Harris saw on the sensors in the wee hours of the morning. It wasn't so much that they would be going into a war zone as it was the fact the Hendri had concealed something from them. In the radio discussions with the people from the city, there was mention of another species calling themselves the Rangor, but the Hendri diplomat she spoke with told her they were a primitive people who lived in the hills. No one said a thing about a war.



From the furrows between the captain's eyes, she was at least as concerned about the events.

"I'm not a diplomat, so I don't know how we should proceed." Captain Davis turned to face Star directly. "You need to tell me what to do next, Lieutenant."

She had thought over how to proceed with the contact since finding out about the firefight on the planet and decided what she needed to do as leader of the diplomatic team. "I'd like to talk to Krell and get his side of the story, and then proceed with the landing, Captain." Star just wasn't sure it was the right thing to do.

"Are you sure about that? It could be dangerous down there."

"I know that, Ma'am, believe me. I think I can get a good feel for what's going on by talking to Krell, and I'll know even better after I meet him in person." Over the last couple of days, she'd built what she thought was a good rapport with Krell, the Hendri diplomat.

"Commander Harris and I are combat officers, and we agree that the best thing to do is to get the righteous fuck out of here." The captain shrugged a little. "We can't guarantee the safety of the landing party."

"I understand." Star thought for a moment. "How about if I talk to him, and we decide what to do next after that?"

"It can't hurt anything talking. The ship is in no danger." She glanced at Harris. "Any problem with that, Chris?"

"No, not for me, but I would like to hear the conversation. As combat officers, you and I may pick up on something the diplomatic team misses."

The captain nodded. "Good idea. Call him now, Lieutenant."

Star swallowed and activated the communicator. She still wasn't used to dealing with the captain directly, and having the woman looking over her shoulder while she tried to work made things even worse.

Since the planet had no video capabilities, the contact was voice only. After going through a couple of flunkies on the ground, the communicator hissed and Krell's familiar voice came through with its slightly musical, singsong qualities. His English improved each time she

spoke to him, and the Hendri clearly had a much better aptitude for languages than humans.

"Yes, Lieutenant? It's good to hear from you."

"Good morning, Krell."

"Will you and your team be arriving soon?"

"There's a small problem you and I need to discuss first." She paused, gathering her thoughts. "About six hours ago, we detected a small firefight southwest of the city along with life signs of both Hendri and Rangor. I'm hoping you can explain that to my captain and me."

His voice didn't hesitate at all. "Of course, Lieutenant. Sometimes the Rangor raid the granaries outside of the city, and they chose last night to do so. Looking back, I should have told you about these occasional confrontations."

"That would have saved us a good deal of concern up here." Captain Davis slid a note across the table to her, and Star read it quickly. "Why didn't you tell us?"

"I don't mean to insult you, but have you told me about the battles and wars your kind fight? Looking at your ship through our telescopes, it's clear the design is based on a warship. Your structure of command also hints at a military underpinning. You haven't concealed your warlike nature, but you have hidden the details."

Star thought quickly. "But we haven't hidden the nature. There's a good argument that you have."

"Not really. We can see your ship." He laughed. "We have no ships for you to look at, but surely your scans have seen our defensive structures."

The scans by the science and tactical stations had indeed identified probable defensive structures and even small gun emplacements, but nothing too alarming to anyone. Star looked at Captain Davis, and she only shrugged. "Alright, you have a good point there. I'd like to discuss this in more detail when I arrive."

"I'll be happy to talk about the Rangor and all your other questions. When can we expect you?"

The captain nodded at her.

"In about an hour. Goodbye for now." Star closed the link and wondered just what she had gotten herself into.

\* \* \* \*

"I want it perfectly clear that while you're in nominal command of this mission, if things get tense, I'm in command. If I say 'jump', the only thing I want to hear from you is bouncing noises."

The sound of Spence's voice made Star snap out of her ruminations about her small command. In addition to Spence and his four warriors, she had a linguist, a science officer, and two other diplomats. The idea of being responsible for ten souls, including her own, gave Star a bad case of butterflies in her stomach and an even worse case of shaky knees.

"I understand, Spence." She smiled at him. "Thanks for coming along yourself."

He looked good in his battle armor. Solid flat-black, it covered him from neck to feet, and down both arms to meet the gloves. Made from a material that flexed easily as he moved and hugged his body like a second skin, the armor accentuated the bulging muscles of his arms, chest, and legs. Under impact from projectile or energy weapons, the armor changed to a rigid, nearly-impenetrable barrier to protect the wearer.

A helmet with a visor, now flipped up, covered his head and bristled with sensors, cameras, and communications gear. The helmet completely hid his hair, jet black and short even for a Marine, and Star was sorry for that. She missed the way his black hair and gray eyes played off each other.

For some reason, 'delicious' was the adjective running through her mind.

He smiled, and his eyes twinkled like glittering jewels. "I couldn't let my favorite diplomat go down there without someone to keep an eye on her." Spence pulled a formidable rifle from its holster on his back, and

it was far from delicious. He checked a few things on the gun as she watched.

"Well, thanks anyway."

"You're welcome." He stared at her just long enough to make Star feel a little uncomfortable before he turned to his small detail of Marines. "Come on, you apes! Do you want to live forever?"

"Oohrah!" The soldiers ran up the ramp and into the waiting landing craft where the rest of the team had already taken their seats.

She and Spence followed them into the small ship.

\* \* \* \*

He caught himself fidgeting with his armor as the landing craft dropped away from *Daedalus* in a gentle arc that would take it into the planet's atmosphere. He toyed with the straps and, despite the environmental controls in the suit, he could feel sweat running down his body and soaking his armpits. Star sat directly across from him, and, without forcing himself to look elsewhere, she was all he could see. Not that the view was bad at all.

Ever since he'd met her just six months ago, he'd secretly laughed about her name. In his mind, a name like 'Star' invoked an image of a small girl, not much more than a child, petite and pretty. Instead, Star stood only a little shorter than his own 188 centimeters, and the rest of her body had the perfect proportions. Well, except maybe her boobs. Large, firm, and high, he sometimes wondered what her breasts would look like in zero-G. Nude.

She made a move he'd grown accustomed to, even if it did still grab every fiber of his attention and made his mouth want to drop open like a trapdoor. Her hand came up to flip her long red hair over her shoulder. That one simple motion, that casual thing she did so often and probably never thought about or even knew she did, blocked out everything else in his mind, from the mission, to the strange planet and

people below, to the screaming whine of thin atmosphere against the hull of the landing craft.

She turned back from looking at the cockpit and caught him staring. Spence checked to make sure his mouth wasn't hanging open.

Star smiled at him. "What's wrong?"

Her eyes sparkled when she smiled, the green irises throwing fire around the compartment like some kind of wildly beautiful laser light show. Making another quick check, Spence thought his mouth might have enough moisture to talk without squeaking. "My armor was just a little tight."

She laughed softly. "Can't have that."

The window beside her lit up with the fiery glow of plasma as the landing craft started its meteoritic entry into the heavier atmosphere, the colors changing as different elements in the ablative heat shield flashed to ultrahigh temperatures. She turned to watch the tongues of flame licking just a few centimeters away, presenting her profile for him to admire.

Her small nose, turned up slightly at the end, sat in the perfect position below the amazing eyes, and just below that, her full lips curled into a gentle smile.

Spence shivered, shaking himself out of his daydreams. This wasn't the first time he'd had daydreams about Star. Far from it. He'd found himself dreaming about her a lot the last six months, both during the day and at night. For some reason, the thought troubled him a little.

He wasn't sure just how old she was. Thanks to modern medicines, transplants, and prosthetics, the average person today could expect to live about 500 years, looking young until around 300, and only middle aged until well past 400. Spence himself was nearly 150, and yet he looked about the same as he did at thirty. Based on the visual evidence, Star could be anywhere between twenty-five and fifteen times that.

He frowned. Why hadn't he looked up her personnel file? He had access to the files, and he'd done just that with some women in the past. Why did the idea of looking in Star's file feel wrong?

His frown deepened. For that matter, why did he find this woman so fucking attractive? He remembered the day he first met her back at the Jupiter Yards. He remembered thinking then that she was pretty, but not devastating. Spence recalled thinking he'd seen a lot of women prettier than Star. As a 100-plus-year Fleet veteran, he'd been around the Empire a time or two, and he knew a lot of women. In the Biblical sense. He remembered thinking there was nothing special about this new one.

Someplace over the last six months, something changed.

As he sat watching her watching the plasma streamers play over the hull, he couldn't remember a woman any prettier than the one across from him right now. He couldn't remember one even close to being as pretty as Star. And none of them were in her league when it came to just plain sexy.

## Chapter 3

The landing craft came to rest with a slight jar and thump more felt than heard, and Star was ambivalent about the trip being over. She was nervous about the fact that she was now totally on the spot for the mission, but she'd been enjoying the view of Spence sitting across from her. The skintight armor hid nothing of his form, and the big gun resting between his legs only partially hid the protective cup covering the bulge in his groin. On the other hand, he stared at her for the entire trip down, and it made her feel a little self-conscious and embarrassed.

He smiled at her for a moment. "Looks like you're on."

"Yeah, it does." She swallowed and went to the hatch, waiting as the crew prepared to open the door. When the seal was broken and the door opened, a small group waited for her on the tarmac.

Clearly not human, the people were humanoid in the traditional sense with two arms, two legs, and a head with sensory organs. They were all tall, maybe 220 centimeters, and thin, most not massing more than seventy kilograms. Their skin looked like soft leather in a sort of bluish-gray color, and Star could see only blue-black hair on their heads. With small mouths and noses and large dark eyes set far apart on their faces, she recalled some of the old stories from before the Doom Time of aliens as portrayed in movies and books. These people were far from hideous or comical, though, because unlike the theatrical aliens of millennia past, these people were well designed and evolved for a real world and a real environment. The environment here was hot. The sensor display beside the door read thirty-nine degrees.

As she studied the group, her first thought had been that they all looked alike, but now she saw differences in the individuals. One of the group, slightly taller than the others, and his skin just a little lighter in color, stepped forward to the foot of the ramp.

He bowed slightly. "Welcome to Hendri City. I am Krell."

She instantly recognized the voice, the regular rhythm having a soothing quality to it, and not monotonous at all. She walked down the ramp to stand in front of him. Even though taller than most men she knew, Krell towered over her by at least a head even bowing, but he couldn't mass much more than she did.

She smiled. "I see you've learned something of human habits from the videos and books we sent you, but bowing is reserved as a show of respect to the Emperor and royal family, not something between friends." Star held her hand out to him. "I'm Star Hawking."

He straightened and took her offered hand in his. The touch of the large hand with long, delicate fingers having an extra joint that humans lacked, sent a shiver through her body. The skin felt as soft as it looked, like the finest of kid suede, and his grip was firm yet gentle. But his skin felt hot, almost too hot to touch. It definitely felt a little uncomfortable.

"It's very good to finally see you, Lieutenant. Please, have the rest of your party come out to meet us."

While the introductions were uneventful, the Hendri delegation seemed amused by the Marines. When Star asked him, Krell chuckled. "We are a peaceful people, in spite of the minor conflicts with the Rangor. You have no need for warriors here, Lieutenant."

"Please, call me Star. I understand, but this is part of our protocol for first contacts."

He made a dismissive gesture with his hand. "It doesn't matter. Your people will simply be bored and have nothing to do while you are here. Perhaps additional scientific or diplomatic personnel would be of better use for you."

"Perhaps so, once Major Spencer and Captain Davis feel comfortable."



"We shall endeavor to make them so." He glanced around the landing pad for a moment. "Come, let's go to my office and we can talk more comfortably about your concerns and the future for humans and Hendri."

Krell extended his arm to her, and she placed her hand on his elbow. She again felt the slight chill despite the fact that the air was nearly forty degrees and his skin much hotter.

\* \* \* \*

"So you see, Star, the small fight your ship saw was nothing more than our police force protecting our food supplies." Krell shrugged, a movement that made him look even taller while sitting at his desk. "The Rangor are little more than animals."

She nodded, brow furrowed in thought. "But if they're animals, how do you explain the fact our sensors showed them shooting back?"

Spence felt a wave of pride. Even though she wasn't a command or combat officer, Star caught that part. He sat near the door of the office, his weapon across his lap, as he watched the two diplomats play the political games.

"Perhaps animal isn't the right word in your language." Krell thought for a moment. "But I know of no other from my studies of English so far. They are capable of learning and using tools, but they lack any kind of rational thought processes and have only limited problem solving skills."

"Something like an ape or dolphin."

Krell glanced at some papers on his desk for a moment. "Yes, like those creatures. There is no doubt they're intelligent in the strictest sense, but they are not our equals."

Something about Krell didn't sit well with Spence. He wondered if maybe he'd spent too long fighting wars and killing people, but Spence just didn't trust him. If he had to, he couldn't point to anything concrete to

show anyone else why he felt suspicious, but his gut told him that Krell, and the rest of the Hendri, were lying to them.

\* \* \* \*

The rooms provided for the landing party were spacious and comfortable, especially after she explained that the heat bothered humans and Krell arranged for the installation of some kind of air coolers. Another detail Krell dealt with was the moving of one of the two beds from each bedroom to the sitting area of the suites. Originally laid out with two beds in the bedrooms, the problem that Star and the science officer were women and all the Marines were men came to light. It seemed more appropriate to separate the beds. Right now, Spence paced the sitting room while Star sat on the sofa and watched him.

"I can't explain it, Star. I just don't trust him."

"I really need something more than that to go on."

"I know." He slapped the wall with his palm, but not hard enough to hurt his hand. She thought he would escalate to punching with a closed fist if his frustration level didn't drop soon. "I have this feeling in my gut that Krell is lying to us."

She nodded as sympathetically as she could. "About what?"

"For one, this whole thing with the Rangor sounds too pat, like he rehearsed his answers."

"Isn't it just as possible that he's telling the truth?"

"Sure, but I'd rather be wrong my way than yours."

She laughed a little. "I'd rather not be wrong at all. What else is bothering you?"

He managed a small smile. "I just don't trust him."

"There's nothing I can do about that. Maybe as you get to know him and the other Hendri, you'll come to trust them more."

"Remember when we were talking about the military? This is just more of the same. We have to assume the Hendri are hostile until we have facts to prove otherwise."

"I remember, but like I said then, that's a pretty fatalistic view of the galaxy."

"And the galaxy is still a pretty fatalistic place. Stupidity is a capital crime."

She'd spent her whole life learning to think like a diplomat, looking at all options and finding the peaceful ones open to her. She always believed the military mindset was different, closed to options that didn't involve a gun. When she looked up into Spence's gray eyes, though, she could see the worry there. Star didn't know what to do to calm his worries.

She stood, bringing her eyes almost to the level of his. "Well, I think I'm going to bed. Maybe I'll know what to do in the morning to make you feel more at ease about this."

He stepped to stand in front of her, his eyes filling her vision. "You're way to trusting, little girl."

"Maybe I am." She smiled. "I know I trust you."

He looked like he needed a hug, but instead Star leaned and kissed his cheek gently before turning and going to her room.

\* \* \* \*

Spence was fairly certain he didn't react before Star clicked her door shut, but as soon as the sound of the latch reached his ears, he felt his arms bunch and a small shake ripple through his body. He was afraid to move, his fists clenching and relaxing as he watched the closed door. A battle raged in his mind and body, and the sure sign of the conflict was the pressure the protective cup of his armor placed on his hardening cock.

His cheek burned where her soft lips had touched him. When she leaned close to him, he'd caught her scent, and he didn't think it was some kind of perfume; what he'd smelled was her, Star's skin and sweat and breath and, maybe, a whiff of her pussy. It all combined to trigger feelings in him like he never even knew existed before, not just simple lust and

passion. Those things flared in him, but something else he couldn't put his finger on colored and flavored the mix, too.

He struggled against the rising tide of want in him. If he let the flood swamp him, he'd kick the door in. He wrote the building lust off as simple hormones. Here, more than 8,300 parsecs from Earth, it wouldn't be at all unusual for him to have the hots for the prettiest, sexiest woman on the ship. Perfectly normal, in fact, and it would probably be healthy, too.

Kicking in the bedroom door of a fellow officer and taking her would be neither normal, healthy, nor a good idea. He couldn't help the slight chuckle as he thought about that and the outcome. *It would be a bad idea unless she really liked it.*

The little flash of humor didn't help calm him, not even a tiny bit. He paced the room a few times, trying to focus his mind on something else, but no matter what, Star still filled his thoughts.

Spence changed into his fatigues and tried standing on one leg as he took apart his rifle and reassembled it again. Five times. He ran in place as fast as he could for ten minutes. He tried sit-ups, doing 200 in five minutes. Pushups were better, especially one-handed, and he did 100 in three minutes for each arm.

He rolled to sit cross-legged on the floor and wiped the pouring sweat from his face. The planet's gravity was so near Earth's that he couldn't tell the difference even from the way the beads of salty water ran down his skin. He felt better, more in control than before his workout. He could actually think of something other than fucking the beauty in the next room.

At least his cock wasn't as hard as the barrel of his rifle now.

## Chapter 4

Krell walked beside her in the garden of what he called the capitol building as they talked. Spence followed them at a discreet distance, his eyes constantly scanning the area around them for perceived threats, his gun resting easily in his hands.

Star marveled at the plants around them. Despite the oppressive heat, alien flowers bloomed in every color of the rainbow, from blues so dark they looked almost black to reds as bright as a laser blast. She saw no irrigation systems, and felt a little surprise at the explosion of colorful blooms and lush dark green foliage until she remembered that these plants, unlike similar growth on Earth, had evolved for millions of years to perfectly fit this environment.

She smiled. "This is a beautiful garden, Krell."

"Thank you. All Hendri are proud of this place, and it belongs to all of us."

"There are still a few questions I have about that firefight we saw from orbit. My captain wanted me to ask you about some waves of energy we saw. Our science people say it looked like heat energy."

Krell nodded slowly. "Yes, that." He walked a few steps in silence, not looking at her. "There is something you should know about the Hendri. I have studied your language, looking for the correct word, but I'm not certain I've found it."

"Why don't you try what you have, and I'll ask questions if I don't understand?"

"Very well." He took a few more steps. "We have what I think you call pyrokinetic abilities."

She stumbled a little. "You mean you can start fires with your mind and will?"

"Yes, just that."

Star didn't believe in psychic powers like ESP or precognition, let alone something as wild as pyrokinesis. "I don't want to sound like I don't believe you, but I've never heard of such a thing."

He shrugged. "We're not human."

"True, but the idea of being able to start fires by thinking about it seems a little far fetched."

"Perhaps so for a human, but not for a Hendri." They came to small bend in the path and a clump of what looked like dark green grass stood perhaps a meter from the edge of the walkway. He nodded at the plant. "Watch." Krell stared at the plant, his arm reaching out toward it with his palm and fingers held as if he expected to touch an invisible wall in the air.

Star felt the air temperature climbing, and sweat broke out on her brow and arms. When she glanced at Krell, she realized it wasn't the air getting hot as much as it was radiant heat pouring from his body. Her eyes tracked down from his face and across the length of his long, slender arm. She blinked to make sure it wasn't a trick of light and shadow, but his fingers actually glowed reddish-white.

Suddenly, a ball of flame burst into existence in his outstretched palm and leapt to the plant like a pulse from a blaster. The clump of grass nearly exploded as it erupted in a roaring fire that caused her to take several stumbling steps backwards.

Blinded by the flaming grass, she didn't see who grabbed her arm and yanked her rather roughly away from the fire. A green spot swam in her vision from the white heat of the fire, but she heard Spence's voice as he barked commands in the voice Marines always used to demand instant obedience.

"Star! Get back!"

Krell's attention returned to the here and now from where ever it had been as he incinerated the plant. "Everything is under control, Major."

Spence stood between her and where Krell hovered near the burning grass, his armor blocking the heat radiating from the fire and Krell's body. He didn't exactly point his gun at Krell, but neither did he point it away. "Drop your weapon, Krell."

"I have no weapon." Krell spread his arms and fingers wide to his sides.

"Yes, you do have a weapon. Keep your hands where I can see them."

She needed to intervene before this got totally out of hand. "No, it's alright, Spence. He doesn't have a weapon, and Krell wasn't trying to hurt me. He was just showing me something the Hendri can do."

"Right. They can make fire. Big deal."

"Spence, they can make fire with their minds. Pyrokinesis."

He looked away from Krell long enough to give her a glance that said he thought she'd left her marbles in hyperspace. "Pryo-what?"

"It's a long story, but there's no danger here."

Spence's hands flexed on the gun, his arm muscles bulging and rippling as the big Marine considered what he'd seen with his own eyes and what she told him. She wondered if he would just shoot Krell and be done with it. Star wondered if she could stop him.

Krell hadn't moved from his position with his arms out to his sides, and that was probably a good thing. It wouldn't take much for Spence to open fire. "As Star said, there is no danger here." A small smile played over Krell's face. "If I wished it, your weapon would be a glob of molten metal in your hands."

She thought that was just exactly the wrong thing to say to Spence, but she must have misread him.

Spence chuckled and released her arm as he clicked the safety on the gun and swung it into the holster on his back. He took a step forward, standing very close to Krell, and looked up directly into the dark, alien eyes.

"If you even try to hurt her, I won't need a weapon to deal with you."

\* \* \* \*

Krell felt the pressure of the unhappiness the Elders radiated. The monitor display jumped in seeming random views from face to face as the monotone voice used by all the Elders expressed concern.

One of the Elders finally commanded silence from the others and spoke clearly. "Krell, we agreed the humans were not to know of your powers."

"We did, Elder, but the situation changed. We underestimated the abilities of these humans as well as their attention to details. I had to explain what they saw on their sensors in a way that would satisfy them."

"You could have said you have a weapon able to generate heat energy."

Krell shook his head. "They would have asked to see the machine and a demonstration. The truth is simpler to defend."

The screen image faced to a different old and wrinkled visage, but the voice remained the same. "Is this just your way of carrying out your desired plan?"

"No, Elder. I admit I still think we should tell the humans the truth, but I am loyal to the Council, and I will do as you wish. My actions were merely the best answer to the immediate situation."

Another Elder appeared. "Speak of what the humans will make of this."

"I believe Star is happy with the explanation. She doesn't understand our powers, but accepts they exist. She can make no connection to other things from this."

A slight chuckle came from the Elders through the speakers above the screen. "Proceed as we have planned."

\* \* \* \*



He found himself pacing the suite he shared with Star. Between steps, he'd swear. Between laps, he'd punch the wall hard enough to hurt. Small cuts and drops of blood dotted his knuckles.

Spence argued as best he could, both with Star and then the captain, but to no avail. Star thought it a good way to show trust for Krell if she had dinner with him without an escort. Captain Davis deferred to the diplomats. He considered invoking Article 37 and assuming command of the mission, but other than the thing this afternoon with the burning bush and his own gut feelings, Spence had nothing to hang his claims of a military emergency on, and the inevitable hearing would turn into a circus focused on his paranoia. At least he convinced Star to take a panic button. One press would sound an alarm directly to his communicator and give him her location. He could be there to rescue her in a matter of minutes.

He frowned as he thought about the fire from earlier. What was it Star called it? *Pyrokinesis*? He went to the table and picked up his data recorder, tapping at the keys. His frown deepened as he read the results.

*Pyrokinesis: the ability to set objects or people on fire or to supernaturally project fire from one's own being through the concentration of psychic power.*

He tossed the device back on the table and resumed his pacing. *Psychic bull shit.*

\* \* \* \*

Krell watched the human female across the table from him as they ate and chatted. He'd convinced her to leave her barbaric guardian behind and dine alone with him.

Star smiled. "I guess it's not all that amazing that carbon life forms can eat the same things."

"No, but I'm not a scientist, so I don't really know about that."

"They pay us to talk, not think."

He had a fairly good grasp on the concept of human humor, and saw that she tried to make a joke. As he laughed with her, he wondered. Some of the human researchers said humor was a sign of a failed or interrupted defense mechanism. Krell wondered what Star defended against. He didn't think he'd tipped his hand.

By the human standards he'd seen in the information the ship sent to the Hendri, Star was very attractive. Even by Hendri standards she was attractive and, from the first moment he saw her at the landing pad, Krell knew he had to have her for his own. He wondered how, or if, he should broach that subject with her. Despite her training as a diplomat and her skill with empathy for differing views, she likely wouldn't understand the Hendri way. These human women were independent and self-sufficient, very different from Hendri females.

He also wondered how the Elders would react to that news.

The other woman, the science officer, worried him. As a scientist, she might notice tiny details Star would miss, but otherwise, he paid her scant attention. She didn't have the natural beauty of the woman sitting with him now.

Star finished eating and pushed her plate to the side.

"I hope you don't mind, but I have more questions I'd like to ask."

He smiled at her, mostly because the way her face crinkled into pretty smile lines when she laughed pleased him. "Of course not. As you say, they pay us to talk."

Her brow wrinkled in thought for a moment, then the easy smile returned. She'd done that often enough that he wondered if it was a learned thing, something humans did in negotiations and discussions with some goal in mind as to the impact on the other party.

"I wonder about your pyrokinetic abilities. Do you have other psychic skills?"

"As a people, no, though there are some who have a limited ability you would call telekinesis. They can sometimes move small objects with little mass."

"Can you do that?"

"No, I'm afraid not." Her smile told him nothing of her thoughts. Krell wondered if she found him as attractive as he did her.

He also wondered how his other wives would react to a new addition, particularly an alien.

\* \* \* \*

In spite of her insistence that she could find her suite on her own, Krell insisted more strongly that he walk her there after dinner and their talks. As he walked alongside her, she felt a shiver from where her hand touched his arm. He never failed to offer his arm to her as they walked, and Star wondered if it was Hendri custom or something he'd learned from the information sent down from the ship.

The air was hot, almost sweltering, and more heat radiated from Krell's body, but the shivering chill from his touch ran through her again and again. She couldn't help stealing a glance at him now and then as they made idle chatter while walking through the practically bare halls of the building.

Krell chuckled a little. "Human females are very different from Hendri women."

As he spoke, he didn't look at her, but watched straight ahead, as if he knew she would remain by his side. "Come to think of it, we haven't seen any females since we arrived."

"No, you haven't. Our females take care of the home and children."

"So none hold any public positions?"

He hesitated a moment. "I'm not sure you can understand this, Star, but Hendri women don't do anything outside of the home."

"Are they prohibited from doing other things?"

"No, not prohibited in the sense that we have laws setting that standard." He again paused, but she saw him glance toward her for a moment, and Star wondered if he gauged her reaction. "Tradition is the only prohibition, but that runs strong with us."

"It was that way for much of human history, too." She recalled history classes, particularly one taught by Princess Allison, about how women were treated at various points in the past. "At some times, women were seen as little more than property."

"In some ways, that is the case here, but not all. Many women have a good deal of privilege granted by their husband." He chuckled again. "I cannot see a woman like you tolerating anything less than total independence."

"I think most human women today would feel that way." She paused, thinking about the reality of the Empire. "I should qualify that, though. The Empire of Mankind is very much patriarchal, and women play a very different role than do men."

"How is that?"

"There are very few women in politics outside of the royal family, and Fleet command is dominated by male officers."

He laughed. "What of you and your Captain Davis?"

"I'm a diplomat and the rank is more or less honorary. Captain Davis is a bit unusual, though."

"I can see in my few contacts with her that she's a very strong woman, perhaps even stronger than you."

Star felt her cheeks flush a bit. She realized that she never learned to graciously accept compliments. Even as a middy, she recalled feeling embarrassed when the officers would give her a compliment for a job well done. "Thank you."

"I didn't mean to make you feel uncomfortable, Star."

"No, it's nothing you said, it's just that I get a little embarrassed sometimes."

"You shouldn't." He again looked straight ahead, as if he never doubted she would continue to walk beside him. "You're a very capable diplomat and a very attractive woman."

Heat again flooded her cheeks, and Star wasn't sure what to say in response, but Krell didn't even give her time to answer before he continued.

"I imagine your scientists have learned it already, but we Hendri have multiple spouses." His brow knitted in thought. "I believe you call it polygamy."

"Humans have something similar. Our Emperor has four wives, in fact."

"I see. So a man with several wives is not uncommon for humans, then."

"Well, no, but it's not limited to just men with several wives. A woman can also have more than one husband." She shrugged. "It is more common to see multiple marriages with one man and several women, though."

"Perhaps it's the tradition of the woman caring for the home and children, but a Hendri female with more than one husband is unheard of." Krell frowned. "The Rangor allow that, though."

Something about the trace of distaste in his voice made her focus on the Rangor. "Tell me more about the Rangor. What are they?"

"As I said before, they are little more than higher-order animals."

"I wonder about that. You said yourself they can use tools, and we saw them using weapons in a coordinated manner to carry out an obviously planned raid." Star thought for a moment, considering her diplomatic options. "I'd like for the science officer to have a chance to examine a Rangor close up, and I'd like to meet one, too."

For the first time since she started communicating with Krell, he hesitated before he spoke. She felt the muscles of his arm under her hand tense slightly, and she wasn't totally certain, but she thought his gait stumbled ever so slightly. When he spoke, his voice sounded flat and mechanical, with little inflection.

"I'm not sure that can be arranged. The Rangor are dangerous animals, but I'll look into it."

\* \* \* \*

Krell knew this was coming, he just didn't know when. He hoped it would be later rather than sooner, but something he'd said triggered Star to ask to meet the Rangor as soon as possible. As he answered her, he realized his reaction probably fed her curiosity as well, but the time to change that had already passed.

She nodded. "I'd appreciate that."

He managed to bring himself back under control. "I'll see if it can be arranged in a safe way." He needed to change the subject, get her focused on something else, and her shyness was just the tool he needed. "Returning to our earlier discussion, even by Hendri standards, you are a beautiful woman."

The pink flushing of her cheeks told him he'd found the lever to turn her away from the Rangor. "Thank you again."

He waved his free arm in the manner he'd learned indicated dismissal to a human. "You're welcome, but I'm not the one to thank for being lovely."

They reached the door to the suite she shared with the warrior, and again Krell wondered if she and that beast shared a bed. The thought made the power build in him, and he felt his temperature rising in angry response to the idea.

She smiled up at him, but he saw the smile was a forced thing. The smile Star used was the one all diplomats kept in a little box in their mind for use when cordiality was needed, though not felt.

"Thank you for a wonderful dinner and interesting conversation, Krell."

His own smile in return felt perfectly natural to him, though he hated the things he concealed from her. "You are very welcome, and I hope we can share more such evenings together in the future."

Something flickered across the pretty face before him, far too quickly for him to read accurately, and he couldn't decode the meaning. The off-the-shelf smile faltered for an instant, only to snap firmly back into place. "I'd like that very much."

He'd already decided not to push his luck tonight because of the turn in the discussion to the Rangor, but he couldn't help himself. Krell leaned and touched his lips to her cheek gently, brushing them across the tender skin.

The pheromones in her perspiration were radically different from those of Hendri females, as he knew they would be. Despite the differences, the similarities of all carbon-based life were much greater, and the chemicals lingering on Star's skin slammed his brain and organs like a boulder falling from a cliff. Rising desire welled up in his body and mind, threatening to overwhelm him, and Krell fought to maintain control.

This was a battle he couldn't afford to lose. He couldn't risk a negative reaction from her, and the barbarian warrior would be just on the other side of the door, ready to attack. Krell knew he could deal with the physical attack of the human male simply by setting him to burn, but the impact on Star would be bad in the extreme.

She stood, her eyes wide and unblinking as her fingers touched the place on her cheek where his lips had brushed over her skin. Star's breathing came rapid and in shallow gulps.

Krell managed a small smile, and again marveled at how easily it came to his face while looking at her. "Forgive me, Star."

"Is that a Hendri custom?"

"In a way, yes." He hated misleading her, but he had much to conceal.

"Then there is nothing to forgive." The smile that eased its way to her full lips wasn't the stock diplomatic smile now. "I just could have used some warning."

"You're so comfortable with our ways I forget you may not know them all."

"Perhaps that's it." She tapped at the door controls. "Again, thank you for a wonderful evening. Goodnight."

"Goodnight." She turned and went into the room, the door hissing closed behind her.

## Chapter 5

In spite of Krell catching her totally off guard, Star thought she'd managed to retain some semblance of control when he'd kissed her cheek. She had no time to consider the event, though, because Spence and the science officer waited in the sitting area of the suite.

Spence frowned when he saw her gently rubbing her cheek. "What's wrong?"

The pair obviously wanted something, and this wasn't the place or time to tell anyone about how Krell's brief touch had excited her. "Nothing, but I could ask the same of you two."

He didn't look much happier having her answer than before she spoke, but Spence seemed to relax a little. "Just some things Ensign Harvey found you should know about."

Debi Harvey was even younger than Star, but everyone said she was a genius, and the captain considered Debi among the top scientists on *Daedalus*. She turned her data recorder so Star could see the display, and a picture of a Hendri body appeared in the classical pose Leonardo da Vinci made popular in his works on anatomy.

"The Hendri are really just a simple humanoid variant." Debi pointed to things on the screen as she spoke. "Arms, legs, head, genitals, and all the rest are exactly what we would expect in the gross anatomy picture. Internally, there are also no surprises in the big picture." The image changed to view of the internal organs, the skin fading away to reveal the structures beneath. "Stomach, intestines, lungs, heart, liver, just a single kidney, and what looks amazingly like an appendix."

Star nodded. "OK, so they're a lot like us."



Debi laughed. "A lot more than you might think. We seem to share a good deal of DNA as well, about 70% or so. The idea of sleeping with one probably wouldn't work too well, though. There are, um, mechanical problems."

Spence rolled his eyes. "Now that's way too much information."

Star stifled a giggle. "Alright, they're a lot more like us."

"Right, at least until you get to the brain." Debi touched the buttons on the recorder, and the image zoomed in on the head. "Look here." She pointed at some part of the brain that glowed in a purple hue.

"I have no idea what I'm looking at, Debi." Star smiled. "I flunked biology. Twice."

"That's not brain tissue." Debi touched another button, and the image zoomed in even closer on the glowing structure. "It's metallic, and it's giving off electrical impulses."

"What?"

"Exactly. I have no idea what it is, but it has connections into several areas of the brain, including the frontal cortex and pons." Debi smiled. "It's artificial."

"What does it do? For that matter, what's it doing there?"

"I have no clue. It gets stranger, though. Only males have it."

Star thought about the things Krell said earlier. "You've been allowed to examine females?"

"Just two, but yes. Other than the sexual and reproductive things you'd expect, the females are identical to the males, just like humans. Until you get to the brain and this..." Debi trailed off for a moment, staring at the screen. "Device."

"Have they let you examine a Rangor?"

"No, I asked, but they told me that wouldn't be possible."

Star thought for a moment. She glanced at Spence, and he looked nervous, his arms flexing and bunching as he listened to her and Debi talking.

"We may get that chance. Is the captain aware of this?"

Debi shook her head. "Not yet. I wanted to talk to you first and see if maybe you knew something from your discussions with Krell."

She didn't know what all of this might mean yet, but Star knew it was something the captain needed to know. "We need to talk to the ship." She turned to Spence. "Can we do a secure channel from here, or do we need to go to the landing craft?"

She thought she saw a small smile on Spence's face for a split-second. "I'll get Douglas in here to set it up." He used the communicator on his helmet.

Corporal Douglas quickly set up the secure connection, and soon Star faced Captain Davis. She transmitted the data and explained what Debi had found.

The captain frowned deeply. "And no one there told you anything about this?"

Star swallowed. Rousing her from bed at 0230 didn't help the captain's mood. "No, Ma'am."

"And there's no chance this is some sort of prosthetic device to treat an ailment?"

Debi shook her head. "If that's the case, they have a very high percentage of their male population with treatable brain damage."

"Shit. What's going on here? It seems we're catching them hiding things at every turn." The captain rubbed her eyes. "I'm half tempted to pull you people out of there right now unless we get some straight answers."

"Captain, I think that would be a mistake from a diplomatic standpoint." Star most certainly wasn't used to dealing with the captain when she was in a bad mood. "I think I can get those straight answers."

Captain Davis barked a laugh. "Until the next time we catch them? No, don't answer that." Her eyes tracked to Spence. "Major, what's your recommendation from a military point of view?"

"We need to get out of here, Captain." Spence glanced at Star, but his gaze flashed back to the screen quickly. "My feeling is that it goes beyond concealing things from us and straight into outright lies."

"What have they lied about?"

"I don't know, and that's what bothers me."

"Me too." She rubbed her eyes again. "So, the diplomatic team is saying stay. My military officer is telling me to leave. Ensign, as a scientist, what would you suggest I do?"

Debi shrugged. "I'd like to stay and solve the riddle."

"I thought so." Captain Davis smiled. "That's two against one, but this isn't a democracy. My vote is the only one that counts."

Star sighed, resigned to the fact that her very first assignment as a diplomat fell apart like a cheap tissue. "I understand, Ma'am. Can I at least talk to Krell and tell him why we're leaving?"

"I never said anything about leaving, Lieutenant. Here's what we're going to do." She ticked off points on her fingers as she spoke. "First, you will say nothing to the Hendri about our concerns. Second, you have forty-eight hours to get answers to these questions. Not one second longer. Third, if Major Spencer says you leave, you leave, right then and there. Is that clear?"

Star felt better, but she knew Spence didn't want to stay. She'd have to convince him to give her the time she needed within the captain's limits. "Yes, Ma'am. I won't let you down."

"You're not letting me down, Star." The captain smiled. "You're not even letting down the Emperor or Empire. This is hard work, and we're learning as we go. The only one who could possibly end up disappointed is you. Don't let that happen to yourself, no matter what the outcome."

"Yes, Ma'am."

"Very well. Carry on."

The screen faded to black.

\* \* \* \*

While Ensign Harvey gathered her notes to leave, Spence quietly rejoiced in his head. The captain effectively gave him absolute veto power

of this mission, and he could yank Star out of the situation at any time with no further explanation other than to get her to safety. And the rest of the team would be safe, too.

Star seemed nervous, and she frequently stared at him, her brows knitted in thought. After Harvey left, Star sat down on the couch and seemed to make up her mind about something.

"Spence, we need to talk." She patted the seat beside her. "Come sit down."

He wondered if sitting so close to her would be any better of an idea than kicking her door down. He needed to buy some time to get used to the idea. "Let me get out of this armor first."

She wore her dress uniform for the dinner with Krell, and Spence didn't like it. It fit loose, and the trousers hid her legs and shape. She nodded. "That's a good idea. Think I'll change, too." She stood and went to the bedroom.

He went to the spacious head and slipped off the black protective suit. Catching a glimpse of himself in the large mirror, he wondered if his fatigues would hide the erection her presence recently triggered in him.

He tried thinking about dead puppies, but his cock still stood out like a rapier from his body. Spence tried thinking of baseball, but he liked the sport and it may have even made things worse. He tried basketball, and that worked better. The image of a two-and-a-quarter meter tall black man with orange hair dressed in drag made his hard-on fade like a dying ember in a fire.

After putting on his fatigues, he checked to make sure he looked as presentable as possible under the conditions, fussing over his uniform like a recruit getting ready to stand inspection. Spence stared at the sidearm resting in its holster where he'd hung it on the towel hook. The blaster seemed somehow out of place for sitting next to Star, no matter the situation, but the mission profile was clear that he and his men should be armed at all times. He sighed and slipped the belt around his waist, drawing the weapon to check the charge and settings.

When he was satisfied that everything was in order, Spence stepped from the head and closed the door behind him. He turned to walk to the couch, and Star had just returned from the bedroom.

She stood near the foot of the sofa, wearing the most remarkable robe he'd ever seen. Of a shimmering green material that closely matched her eyes, it seemed to float on the gentle currents of air from the cooling system, rippling and flowing like soft waves on some alien sea. Her red hair streamed in silky cascades down over her shoulders to spill nearly to her waist, and it caught the dim lights of the room casting flickering flashes of ruby to mix with the glint of emerald from her eyes into a myriad of scintillating pulses that threatened to blind him.

Despite its floating flow, the robe hugged certain parts of Star's body with fascinating effect. Her slender neck was exposed and gave way to the satiny material covering her ample chest where the cloth softly clung to the curves of her breasts. Aided by the tied belt, the robe hugged her waist before giving way to her perfectly shaped hips and her amazingly curvaceous legs.

The robe ended nearly at her ankles, but the floating effect gave tantalizing glimpses of her legs, and he couldn't help studying each and every millimeter of the exposed skin. Spence could have no more stopped his mouth from watering or the need to lick his lips and swallow than he could have contained a supernova in his pants pocket. He longed to touch the soft skin of her thighs with his fingers and tongue, but it was all he could do just now to avoid falling down.

And speaking of a supernova in his pants, he felt his cock stirring despite the drag queen shooting three-pointers from center court.

He forced his building desire and emotions into submission. Other than the brief kiss on his cheek last night, Star never gave any indication that she wanted anything more than a friend. She even said she didn't have time for anything more. In spite of decades of training in controlling his emotions and desires, Spence had to fight to contain himself.

She frowned a little. "Are you alright?"

He thought quickly. "Yeah, just thinking about all this stuff with the Hendri." He wondered if she bought that line any more that he did.

"We do need to talk about that." She sat down and crossed her long legs.

The orange-haired hoops star was now throwing shots from full-court and getting nothing but net, but it didn't impress or distract Spence at all. He thought his head probably bobbed up and down as he watched her pretty, bare foot bounce slowly in the air.

He swallowed and tried his voice. "It's your credit."

She laughed. "Come sit down here." Star again patted the couch beside her. He wondered how she could be so relaxed while he was about to cream his jeans.

He sat down and found himself sitting at rigid attention with both his back and dick. His voice seemed to work alright once, so he decided to try it again. "What's on your mind?"

"I think you know how important this mission is, not just for me, but for everyone."

"Yeah, I do, but your safety is more important."

"I think we're safe, at least reasonably so."

She just didn't understand how the universe worked. "No, you're not. These people are, at best, keeping things from us, and that's dangerous. We're blundering around in the dark, playing hide-and-seek with facts we need to know." He couldn't take his eyes off the bouncing foot that brushed against his pant leg occasionally.

"Spence..." She took a deep breath, and the foot gyrated a bit faster. "Listen, this is a big deal. We'll never have another chance at doing this the first time."

"And we may not live long enough to try it a second time."

"All I'm asking is that you not make any snap decisions to pull the plug."

"You heard the captain. If I think you're in danger, we're out of here."

"This isn't about the captain or anyone else except you." She flipped her hair over her shoulder, and her robe slipped down her arm just a little, revealing the gentle curve of where arm and shoulder met. He was glad that she went on, because his own mouth was far too dry to speak. "I just want to give this a chance."

"Yeah, me too." He desperately wanted to have a chance with her.

She stared at him for an instant. "You do?"

He realized they were suddenly talking about two very different things, but she didn't know that. He looked for a way out. "Um, yeah. I want you to succeed."

A small smile came to her face. "Really?"

"Sure. That's important to you, and so it's important to me."

She placed her hand on his where it fidgeted restlessly on his knee.

"That's very sweet."

The touch of her skin against his hand was hot, as hot as the Hendri he'd touched, but despite the heat, the contact sent shivers through him. He fought the urge to snatch his hand away from her soft touch. "Maybe."

Later, when he looked back at things, Spence knew it was then that he made his mistake. Despite the time spent fantasizing about her while masturbating, and the hours she filled his dreams, both waking and sleeping, he'd dismissed the idea of seducing Star like he'd done before with innumerable women on countless worlds. The idea seemed wrong. He wanted to move slowly, carefully, and get an idea of her feelings. But the best laid plans came to naught by one simple, innocent move on his part; he looked up from her hand resting on his and into her eyes.

\* \* \* \*

"Krell, we are concerned your feelings for this human are clouding your judgment."

The Elders used the High Speech, reserved only for their use and then only when they wished to make a point of their position. Krell dealt

with the Elders frequently, but only rarely when they were so clearly unhappy. He bowed slightly to the screen set in the temple wall where the images of the Elder Council swam from face to ancient face.

"I understand your worry, Elder, but your concerns are baseless. Everything proceeds according to your plan."

"We doubt that. This female is not Hendri, and she is independent in her thoughts. She wants to meet the Rangor. Her underling has already examined two Hendri females and knows of the differences."

"It is true that their science is better than expected. I offer my life to you for my failure to correctly assess their abilities."

"You are forgiven that oversight." The image changed to another of the Elders, but the same monotone voice continued. "Speak of what the humans know."

"They know few facts, only interesting questions without answers. They know Hendri females lack the box, and they know the Rangor can make plans and carry them out." Krell wiped perspiration from his brow. Here in the temple, the heat was oppressive, even for a Hendri. "Much of the information they have is jumbled and distorted to conceal the truth."

"As it should be." A ripple of laughter coursed through the Elders, all in the same voice coming from the speakers above the screen. "What is your advice to the Council?"

Krell nerved himself. "The same as it has been since you first saw the humans. We should either tell them the truth or tell them to leave us alone."

"Neither will happen, Krell. These humans provide us the chance to leave this world for someplace better, but they must be made to cooperate." The voice of the Elders paused, and an old, craggy face stared out from the screen at him. "Can you follow your duty?"

"I can, Elder."

"If they learn the truth, we will set their ship to burn."

"I understand." Krell knew he couldn't protect Star from the Council.



\* \* \* \*

Something in the way Spence looked at her grabbed Star's full and undivided attention. He'd been nervous since he sat down next to her on the sofa, fidgeting with his hands, drawing little circles on his knee with his fingertips. No, he'd been spooked before that, ever since he'd met her back in the sitting room.

Even though she'd felt a little embarrassed by the attention, some part of her enjoyed the way his eyes drifted over her body when he saw her standing there after changing into her robe. She almost laughed out loud when his mouth opened and closed rapidly like a fish on the riverbank.

But now, he stared into her eyes, his face only half a meter from hers, and his expression was one she'd never seen before. Oddly slack, the skin of his face hung loose, like all the muscles simply stopped working and left him unable to move. His mouth was open slightly, and she heard the rush of air from his quick, shallow breaths as it whistled softly between his lips. Spence's eyes flickered rapidly, his gaze moving across her face as he looked from one of her eyes to the other, and then back again.

His hand still rested on his knee, but as soon as she placed her hand on top of his, his restless movements stopped. Now, Star felt a warmth flowing up her arm from the contact with him, one that rivaled the heat from the Hendri. As the warmth enclosed her, she suddenly felt safe and protected, though her mind could find no reason for her emotions to be triggered so. Somehow, Star knew Spence's protective streak went much deeper than just his job or even his duty.

Suddenly, Spence's face went hard, and a forced grimace came to his visage. He stood up so quickly that she nearly fell from the couch, and he moved to step away from her.

Star grabbed at his wrist and stood up next to him. "What are you doing?"

His gaze continued to flit over her face as before, but she saw a trident of lines form between his brows, and perspiration ran slowly down his temples despite the coolness of the room. His body tensed again, and his jaw seemed tight when he spoke. "I need to go for a walk."

"Where?"

Spence froze for a moment, his expression blank. "I need to check something at the landing craft."

"What?"

As suddenly as he had moved from the sofa, he seemed to sag in on himself. "It doesn't matter. I'll be back soon." He tried to turn to the door, but Star held his wrist.

"Just a damned minute. We need to talk, and this is important. You're not just going to walk out on me with no explanation to avoid the conversation and then pull us out of here." She caught her breath, realizing what was making her so angry. "I will not give you the comfort of yanking this mission and feeling good about it because you don't know my position."

She didn't know if it was what she said or the shrill anger creeping into her voice that made him turn back to face her, but a smile touched his lips. The smile had a sadness to it, though, almost like Spence reached some decision and resigned himself to follow that direction. In some ways, the resignation didn't surprise her because she'd come to expect that of military people; right or wrong, they would follow the path their sometimes distorted sense of duty and honor painted before them, and everything else be damned.

"Oh, I know very well what your position is, Star. You'd stay here until they come to kill us all in our sleep." He shrugged a little. "You probably don't know it, but I'm very much inclined to do that, too, just to give you the chance you so badly want to prove yourself." The smile never left his face, but some of the sadness faded, if not the resolve behind it. "You don't need to prove yourself to me, though."

His comments left her off balance, and she didn't know what to do with the anger she still harbored. "I don't understand."

"No, I guess you don't. I don't need to go for a walk to avoid what you have to say. I don't need to do anything at the ship, either."

"Then why do you need to go for a walk?"

"The short answer is that I need to get away from you for a while."

What the hell was he talking about? Star's anger hadn't subsided, and it only served to confuse her more in the face of his saying he didn't want to leave. "OK, you've really thrown me a curve here. What's this all about?"

"Yeah, it's a little confusing, even for me." He paused, but his eyes stayed locked to her face. "One of the few things I care about right now is keeping you safe."

He reached up and touched her cheek with his fingertips, brushing softly down the line of her jaw to trace the corner of her mouth.

The gentle touch sent an electric shock through her, the trembles rattling through her body as warmth from his fingers raced through her. In the thrill of the contact, her anger faded a little, and the confusion cleared, and Star saw an answer to the protectiveness Spence displayed.

With her new perspective, she looked at his face again and saw the stony resolution was different from the stubborn dedication to duty she initially thought. Instead, the expression was full of concern and caring, the need to take care of her and protect her from harm. The tension in his body also took on a new dimension, one that she read as him hesitating for fear of somehow harming her. With her mind not fully clear from the jumble of emotions, Star wondered if he waited for some sign of acceptance from her. The only sign she could think of to send was to kiss him. She leaned her head slightly to the side, and parted her lips just a little. Star leaned towards him ever so slowly.

Her acquiescence must have been all he waited for, because Spence put his arms around her waist and pulled her to him, his lips pressing tightly to hers. His embrace intensified her feelings of safety, and she slipped her arms around his neck where they fit perfectly.

His tongue pressed with eager urgency at her lips, and then slipped inside. The tastes of his saliva filled her mouth, a fiery blend of flavors

developed in the alchemy of his body raced directly to the pleasure centers of her brain and caused her to shiver with the impact of the new sensations. Their tongues played at a duel, taking turns plunging between each other's lips.

As Spence's hands moved over her back, the slick material of the robe wafered between her skin and his palms created a curious sensation of rough silkiness like she'd never felt before. Softened by the cloth, she still felt the callused hands of a man who worked hard for his sense of duty and honor, who never shirked his calling, and who fought for what he wanted and believed. She longed to feel his hands on her bare skin, to feel his firm touch without the isolation of the robe.

Her head lolled back, and he kissed down her neck, his teeth nibbling at her skin, and each tender nip made her body jerk with delight. His hands slid down her back as Spence kissed her until his palms cupped her ass, pulling her hips against his. A hardness in his groin pressed firmly against her marking his erect cock, and wetness spread through her pussy as he rubbed his body against hers.

He kissed up her neck, and when his lips reached her ear, he darted his tongue deeply into the canal, swirling madly and causing her to shiver as a sigh escaped between her pursed lips.

He whispered softly, his hot breath in her ear sending more quakes through her. "If you want me to stop, you should say so now."

"If you stop now, I'll shoot you with your own gun."

"It's a weapon, not a gun."

"Whatever." She licked at the skin of his neck, and the flavor of his sweat danced over her tongue, a mixture of salty sweetness with the cologne he wore.

His hands moved up her back as his tongue again undulated in her ear, and he tugged gently at her robe, causing it to slip from her shoulders. Dropping her arms briefly from his neck, the robe fell from her torso to hang around her waist by the belt like a skirt.

Spence lifted her in his arms like she massed nothing at all, and he carried her to the couch, his lips locked tightly to hers, then eased her to

recline. The cool air of the room made her nipples erect, jutting up to point at the ceiling of the suite. Or maybe, she thought, it was more the fact of being so close to Spence and the tender ways he touched her.

His eyes drifted from hers for the first time since they embraced, and he stared at her breasts. His breath halted for a moment, a gasp of someone seeing something remarkable catching in his throat.

"My God, you're so beautiful."

Heat flooded her cheeks to match that spreading like a wildfire through her pelvis, and Star didn't know what to say, so she said nothing at all. He knelt beside the sofa and leaned over her. His tongue traced circles small and large around her hardened nipples, teasing her as it flicked over the protruding nubs and sending wave after wave of chills through her.

When his lips closed around her nipple, she twitched with excitement, and she sucked in a deep breath of pleasure. His hand rubbed over her stomach, the touch so soft that it almost tickled her, until Spence eased his way down to her leg. Stoking her thigh, he pushed the robe aside and his fingers darted over her pussy, the soaked material of her panties passing the gentle caresses of his hands to her swollen clit.

He eased the wet cloth aside, and his fingers moved to circle her pussy, massaging her lips and teasing across the tip of her clit. Spence pushed firmly, and two fingers dipped deep into her pussy with a wet sound as they slipped in and out of her. He pressed his thumb against her clit, and her back arched high in the air, giving him full access.

As her orgasm raced at her at light speed, he suddenly pulled his fingers from her with a juicy smack, and her nipple came from his mouth with a loud pop. She clutched at his head, trying to pull him back to her breast, but he held her fast, turning her to sit on the sofa. He lifted her legs, placing them over his shoulders, and pressed his mouth to her pussy.

Licking through and around the material of her saturated panties, Star felt his tongue swirl wildly around her clit before his lips locked to the hard bud, sucking it into his mouth where his teeth nibbled at the head with teasing tenderness. She wrapped her legs around his head, pulling his

mouth tighter against her pussy, urging him to fuck her ever deeper with his tongue.

Her orgasm hit her hard, causing her to scream nonsensical and inarticulate sounds. Star tried to scream his name, but she doubted anyone else would have heard the coherence in the noise. His fingers moved to replace his tongue in her pussy as he licked at the wetness she felt flowing from her and across her skin. Spence lifted her hips with his arms, and his tongue swirled over her lips and down to circle her anus. With flickering movements, he darted his tongue into her ass, intensifying the waves of climax crashing down on her. The flashing lights of a billion stars dying in the throes of supernova explosions filled her vision, and her breath heaved in her lungs, blowing through her throat like some ancient, maniac steam engine as she writhed with delightful pleasure.

The chain of orgasms Spence brought her went on for what seemed like both forever and an instant until he eased her legs from around his neck. He smiled at her, licking his lips, and the cool air of the room chilled her skin where sweat still poured from her body. The trembles that rocked her were only partly due to the chill, and her vision shook with sympathetic vibrations.

At some point, her robe had come untied and fell from her body and he had slipped her panties from her, leaving her nude on the couch, and only then did she realize that Spence was still fully dressed in his fatigues, his blaster resting casually in its holster at his side. Star leaned forward enough to put her arms around his neck, and pulled him towards her. She pressed her lips to his, tasting the wonderful flavor of him now mixed with the sweet savor of her pussy.

He moved to sit beside her, and his blaster touched her bare hip, the cold metal of the gun adding to the tingles that rippled through her.

She pulled her lips from his and smiled. "Are you packing a blaster or just happy to see me?"

"Both." The smile faded quickly from his face, and again he looked at her with a tenderness she'd never seen before. "Star, I want you."

Men told her that before, but not like this. Somehow, she knew Spence meant more than just a night or a few weeks or months of pleasure. He wasn't saying what she wanted to hear just to get into her bed. His expression spoke volumes to fill in around the few words his mouth brought to her. Instead of answering, she kissed him again, their tongues locking in a duel to see which could enter the other's mouth deepest.

Her hand moved down his chest, the bulging pectorals feeling like boulders under her touch as his breathing moved the muscles. The corrugated ripples of his stomach felt as defined as anything she'd seen in biology books or art museums showing the perfect male form.

Even through the material of his uniform, his cock felt hard as steel, and his pre-cum left a damp spot on the front of his pants. She gripped the hard shaft firmly, rubbing and stroking as they kissed. His breathing came in irregular gulps, and his body twitched as she touched him.

She leaned to his ear and whispered. "Stand up."

He stood beside the couch and she stood before him, running her hands over his body. Unfastening his shirt, she stroked her fingers up and down the chiseled muscles of his chest and abdomen. Hugging him, her lips again touching his, the hard pecs pressed firmly against her naked breasts, the ridges teasing her still firm nipples.

After pushing his shirt from him and letting it fall to the floor, Star knelt before him, and undid his belt. She took the time to gently place the blaster, still in its holster, on the floor and push it under the end table. She wanted Spence to go off, not his gun.

She unfastened his pants and let them fall down his legs. His cock thrust out at her, hard and long, the mushroom-like head only centimeters from her face. A glistening drop of pre-cum sparkled on the tip, and she leaned forward to lick it away.

The flavor of his cum filled her senses. She as much smelled the musky aroma of him as she tasted the salty sweetness of his seed. Star longed to feel his cock filling her mouth, and she moved to take the huge

head between her lips, swirling her tongue around the glans as she sucked to pull him farther into her mouth.

A soft moan came from Spence, and she looked up at his face. His eyes were closed, and his head lolled back as his body trembled and shook. He stroked her hair, his fingers moving over her head as his hips moved in slow undulations to match the bobbing of her mouth on his cock. Star moved her head faster, her mouth taking all of his length into her throat. His knees quivered, like he might fall at any moment, but she still sucked his cock, anxiously awaiting his climax to fill her mouth with his hot cum.

He pulled away suddenly, his dick popping from her mouth with a loud smack. She almost dove at him, trying to get the tasty shaft back in her throat, but Spence lifted her to her feet with strong hands on her shoulders.

When she looked into his face, he smiled a little. "This is going to sound crazy, but I don't want you to make me cum that way." He eased her to the couch again, and knelt between her legs, his dick shining wetly as he hovered over her pussy. Lowering himself, Spence slipped his length into her, filling her pussy more than she'd ever felt before.

She gasped as the head of his cock touched the deepest part of her and his balls pressed tightly against her ass. He rocked, slowly at first, sliding his cock out until only the head parted her slit, then thrusting deep inside her again. As he penetrated her again and again, he leaned down to kiss her, his tongue plunging in and out of her mouth in time to the thrusting of his dick.

His breathing came in ragged gasps, and his body tensed as he fucked her with long, slow strokes. Her orgasm again sprang on her, and Star wrapped her legs around his hips, pulling his full length into her. Her body bucked against his, thrusting to meet him, as they climaxed together. She felt his cock throbbing deep inside her, his steaming cum filling her, as he pushed against the arm of the sofa with his feet to gain just another millimeter of entry into her.



Sweat poured from them both, and wet trails trickled down her sides as it mingled and flowed in the cool air of the sitting room. Spence grunted and moaned meaningless noises to match those she voiced around their kissing lips.

Spence collapsed on top of her, his softening dick slipping from her pussy to slap against her thigh. When he tried to move from atop her, Star hugged him, not caring that his mass made it hard to breath. She wanted to touch him with as much of her body as she could, to feel his warmth against her skin.

Star didn't know how long they lay on the sofa in each others arms, sometimes kissing, sometimes talking quietly, usually just staring at each other, but at some point, they fell asleep. Her dreams were different that night. She rarely remembered her dreams, but the ones that came to her after making love with Spence felt safe and warm. She knew he would protect her when she needed protection, even if she didn't know she needed it.

## Chapter 6

More than a century as a Marine built certain reactions, and the chirp of his communicator brought Spence instantly awake. He reached for the communicator, still attached to his uniform where it lie piled on the floor, and fell off the sofa. He grabbed the device from his shirt and pressed the answer button.

"This better be good."

There was a long pause before Debi Harvey's voice came through. "Major?"

"Yes, Ensign."

"Is Star OK? She doesn't answer."

He looked up from the floor at Star. She slept soundly, a soft smile on her beautiful face. The sight of her nude body on the couch made his cock stiffen a bit.

"She's fantastic. What's up?"

Again, Harvey hesitated a moment. "Just some more things I think you two should know about."

He never considered himself a romantic, but it seemed just plain wrong to spend the morning after making love all night to the most wonderful, fascinating woman he'd ever known trying to figure out if a bunch of aliens were going to kill them all. Then again, other than the making love all night part, the situation wasn't even remotely romantic. The fact was that it was their job.

He sighed. "Give us about forty-five minutes."

\* \* \* \*

Confusing images of DNA swam on the display of Debi's data recorder and mixed in Star's head with the wonderful erotic images of Spence from the night they shared on the sofa. She shook her head trying to make things fall into place.

Debi tapped the screen. "These plants aren't old enough to have evolved here to the point they have."

"I don't understand." Spence rubbed his eyes. "What do you mean they aren't old enough? How old can a plant be?"

"No, not the individual plants, Major." Debi took a deep breath. "I mean the species isn't old enough. There are a lot of variables we don't understand about this world yet, but genetic mutations happen at a predictable rate. In other words, we can look at the DNA and tell how old a species is based on the mutations."

Star caught the detail part. "What's this about variables you don't understand?"

"Sometimes, certain conditions can change the mutation rate. Things like background radiation and a few others." Debi grinned. "But it doesn't matter. Enough radiation to make mutations happen fast enough to see a species this young would kill all carbon-based life here."

Spence stopped with his coffee halfway to his mouth. "Eh?"

"Yeah. This plant species is only about two hundred years old."

Star stared at the screen for a moment. "But you said there are variables that could change that."

"There are. By as much as a factor of five." Debi tapped her finger against the screen as she spoke. "Best case, this species is only a thousand years old."

Spence shrugged. "So what? It just recently evolved."

Debi shook her head. "It's one of the oldest I've found so far. And there's evidence of artificial manipulation of the DNA."

"You mean it was made?" Star remembered the artificial device in the brain of the Hendri males.

"Exactly. Genetically engineered. We have the technology to do it, but from what I've seen, the Hendri don't." Debi smiled again. "These people don't even have tri-v."

"Have you advised the ship about this information?" Star had a bad feeling.

"No, I tried to send my data uplink just before I came over here, but there was too much interference."

Spence tapped his communicator. "*Daedalus*, this is Major Spencer." A soft hissing came from the receiver. "*Daedalus*, this is the landing party, acknowledge." Again only quiet noise.

Spence tried calling each of the other landing party members, but no reply came. He grabbed his armor as he ran to the bedroom. "You two stay here. No one leaves and no one comes in who isn't human."

He stepped from the bedroom as he fastened the last of the straps. Star touched his arm. "What's going on?"

He smiled, but she could tell he forced it. "I don't know. Probably nothing, just the energy field, but I'm going to find the others and bring them all here. Then we'll get to the landing craft and get out of here." He took her shoulders in his hands as he stared into her eyes. "No arguments, OK?"

"None from me." She didn't like the fear she felt welling up inside of her, but Spence's presence and calm command made her feel better.

"That's good." His smile looked a little less faked. "I'll be back soon." He kissed her deeply before turning and trotting out the door and down the hall.

Debi nodded her head. "Oh. Now I understand."

\* \* \* \*

Spence tried to get a handle on things as he ran the corridors of the capital building on his way to find the others. He tried their rooms, and found them all empty. He hoped they were in the dining room.

He tried his communicator as he jogged, but no one answered, not from the landing party or the ship. The sensors in his helmet gave him no alarming information from his surroundings, but that offered little consolation. Every instinct in him, built and sharpened by 130 years of combat experience, screamed that things were coming apart at the seams and there was nothing he could do to stop it.

He nearly kicked the door of the dining room from its hinges as he burst in, and four armed Marines dropped into defensive postures.

Sergeant Kyle pointed his weapon at the ceiling. "Major! What are you doing?"

"Is everyone accounted for?"

"Yes, Sir. Everyone is here other than you, Lieutenant Hawking, and Ensign Harvey."

"They're back at my suite." Spence thought for a moment. "We can't contact the ship or each other, and I don't know why. Let's get everyone back to my suite, and we'll go from there."

Kyle nodded. "Aye, aye." He turned to the other Marines. "Saddle up, people. We move out now." The other Marines herded the small group of diplomats and scientists toward the door.

Spence considered. "Sergeant, I want all targets verified, but go hot. The use of deadly force is authorized." He swallowed. "Authorization code delta-five-niner-bravo."

"Understood, Major." He turned to the others. "Lock and load, you grunts! Verify all targets, but kill 'em if you have to!"

"Oohrah!"

The small group moved into the halls, heading for Spence's suite, the Marines watching in all directions at once.

Moving slowly through the corridors, they were almost halfway there when Corporal Douglas came up beside Spence. "Sir, I can't get the ship, but I have the communicators working for us here on the surface."

"Good work. What's the problem?"

"There's a jamming field. I can't tell from where, though."

Spence nodded, and he wasn't at all surprised.

The team rounded the corner and Spence saw the door to his suite was ajar. Using hand signals, he flagged the Marines, and they instantly flattened against the walls, all eyes on the cracked door. The sergeant signaled two of the privates, and they edged down the hall, one moving in darting steps as the other covered him. When they reached the door, they took up positions on either side, weapons trained on the opening as the rest of the team moved forward.

When everyone was ready, Spence stepped out and kicked the door open. The five Marines swarmed inside like angry hornets, weapons searching for a target. The room was empty, but several chairs lie overturned, as was the table at the end of the couch.

A soft moaning made all the warriors spin to face the bedroom, and a weak voice called out.

"Major?" It was Debi Harvey.

Spence rushed to the room and found her leaning against the foot of the bed, blood from a gash above her left eye covering her face. "Medic!"

The other Marines came in and searched the room as the corpsman tended to the wounded woman. The medic smiled. "She's OK, just a cut and a little dazed is all."

Spence asked the inevitable question. "Debi, where's Star?"

She wiped at her face with the cloth the medic gave her. "They took her."

"Who?"

"I think they were Rangor." Debi suddenly smiled. "And I scanned them." She held up her data recorder.

Spence shook his head. He didn't care about scans, only getting to Star. "Where were they taking her? Did they say?"

"No, but this is important." She played with her scanner for a moment. "Major, the only difference in the Hendri and the Rangor is that thing in their brain." She smiled again. "They are the same species."

He still didn't care. "Can she be moved?" The medic nodded his affirmation. "Sergeant!"

Kyle came to stand beside him. "Sir."

"Get these people to the landing craft, and try to contact *Daedalus*. Wait for us if you feel safe doing so, but get these people to the ship. Is that clear?"

"Us, Sir?"

"Yes. I'm going after Star."

"I'll come with you, Major."

"Negative, Sergeant. You get these people to the ship."

"Yes, Sir."

"If anyone or anything not me or Star approaches you, kill it."

"Understood, Major."

\* \* \* \*

The wail of the alarms still rang in her ears even though Elsa gave the order to silence them. At some point, the violent buffeting of *Daedalus* damaged the control circuits, and the computers couldn't send the commands to stop the racket. The fail-safe systems decided it was better to let them scream.

The tactical officer worked furiously at her console. "Deflectors holding at 61%. Harbison Field at red."

The Harbison Field worked not by absorbing or deflecting energy, but by moving it around. As energy of any kind poured into the Field, the generators converted it into heat, and the heat was then pumped to cooler places where it radiated away safely to space. If the Field couldn't radiate the energy, the heat was stored in the Field generators. Some point inside the generator would get hotter and hotter.

But something attacked *Daedalus* now by pouring heat into the field from all directions at once. There was no place to get rid of the energy, so the generators stored it deep in their complex workings. As the energy stored built to ever higher levels, the Field changed color. Starting the same as the blackness of cold space, the Field would change colors, moving up through the visible spectrum through red, to yellow, to blue, to

violet. When it reached white, the Field would fail, releasing all the stored energy at once, both outwards, away from the ship, and inwards. When a Harbison Field failed, ships died a burning, flaming death at temperatures far hotter than any star.

"Time to Field overload?"

"Two hours, forty-two minutes, Captain."

Elsa turned to the science officer. "Any luck?"

"No, Ma'am. I can't get through the interference to scan the planet."

Else nodded as she looked to the communications officer. "What about contact?"

"Still no response to our hails on any frequency, Captain."

The ship rocked again as the Field tried to radiate energy and the pulse acted like a thruster. The artificial gravity reacted and compensated.

Commander Harris looked up from his damage control console. "Do you want my recommendation?"

"No." Elsa took a deep breath as she glanced at the status board. Half the board showed red or yellow lights, the telltale signs that her ship was slowly dying. "Helm, prepare to leave orbit in two hours, thirty-five minutes. Full impulse power in any direction you care to pick, as long as it's away from this planet."

The helmsman hesitated before she plotted her course. "Aye, aye."

\* \* \* \*

Star's head hurt. At least she thought it did. The blow the intruder gave her when she resisted had rattled her teeth, and she felt some surprise at being able to feel anything at all, lucky that she wasn't dead. When she opened her eyes, the light pained her head even worse, but she kept them open.

She was lying on a bench or cot in a small room. *No*, she thought, *a small cell*. The door was closed and heavy. Sunlight flooded the cell through a tiny barred window. A small table with three chairs sat in the



center of the room, and when she managed to move her head enough to look around, another cot hung suspended from another wall.

And Krell lay crumpled on the cot.

She struggled to her feet, stumbling to the other cot, and knelt beside it.

"Krell? Can you hear me?" She shook his shoulder gently.

The touch of his skin startled her because he felt cool. For the first time, she noticed that the room was also cool, maybe twenty-five degrees or so. She wondered if he might be dead.

She didn't know much about Hendri anatomy, but she felt around on his neck. Debi said the Hendri were similar to humans, so there must be large arteries running to the brain. Star felt a rapid, faint pulsing of blood under her fingers, but she didn't know what that might mean other than his heart still worked.

Star rolled him to his back on the cot, and Krell stirred slightly, his eyes flickering a few times before they opened. His expression looked confused for a moment as he came fully awake, but he finally smiled a little.

"Are you hurt, Star?"

A sense of relief swept over her, and she returned his smile. "Other than a bit of a headache, no. You feel so cold, though."

"Yes, that's not normal for me. The Rangor are trying to prevent me from using my powers against them." He sighed. "They know this will work, too."

"Rangor? Is that who these people are?"

"Yes."

"This is not the sort of thing I would expect from animals." Her addled brain seemed to work well enough to tie all the facts and suspicions she had together. "You need to level with me, Krell."

He managed to work himself up to sit on the edge of the cot. "Yes, I do." He took a deep breath. "The situation is complicated, but the Hendri and Rangor are the same species. The Council long ago favored the

Hendri, the city-dwellers, and gave us the pyrokinetic powers so we could rule the world and the Rangor."

"The Council? Who are they?"

"The elders of our world, the leaders."

Her head swam with the new facts, and no small amount of questions about Krell's motivations. "Why didn't you tell me about this sooner?"

"Because the Council wants you to help us, the Hendri, leave this world to escape the Rangor." He paused, his eyes watching her closely. "I wanted to tell you, but the Council ordered otherwise."

"So why tell me now?"

He laughed. "The Rangor have clearly decided to make their move now. We hoped they would wait so we could leave, but they have other ideas." He sighed, a raspy breath pulsing from his lungs. "Besides, it doesn't matter now."

A foreboding filled her. Much like Spence's fatalistic views of the universe, something about Krell's attitude frightened her. "Why not?"

He shrugged. "Because the Council will have destroyed your ship by now."

"What?"

"The Council will destroy *Daedalus* to prevent word of the situation here getting out and ruining any chance of our escaping." He stared at her for several seconds. "I so wanted things to end differently for you and I, Star."

Her heart leapt between racing and nearly stopped. The thought of *Daedalus* and her crew gone was unthinkable. "I think your Council will find destroying *Daedalus* easier said than done. Captain Davis will get the ship to safety."

Krell only shook his head. "The Council will set the ship to burn. The ship and crew will die."

She didn't believe it. She couldn't believe it. But then it occurred to her that compared to the ship and crew, the landing party would be expendable. The lives of ten people on the planet were not worth risking

the ship and lives of more than 800 crewmembers. No matter what else, the events would leave her and the others stranded here.

Krell watched her for a moment. "There is something else that doesn't matter now."

The laugh that jumped from her throat sounded more like a bark. "Oh, there's good news!"

"Perhaps so, perhaps not." He shrugged. "I have fallen in love with you, Star, though it's not the kind of love humans imagine."

"What in the fuck are you talking about?"

"We, humans and Hendri, could never have physical love, but there is more."

She shook her head. The effects of the blow clearly hadn't worn off. Maybe on top of being stuck on an alien world to die she had a concussion. "You're crazy."

"Of that there is little doubt." He smiled. "Let me show you something." Star still knelt beside the cot, and Krell placed his hand on her forehead, his long fingers feeling unnaturally cool against her skin. "You see, one of the things the Council wanted kept from you are some of the innate abilities we have."

The pain in her head vanished, not fading, but like turning off a light switch, it was just gone. Replacing the pain was a feeling of quiet solitude, a peace like she'd never known before. A simple relaxation washed over her, and Star's worries seemed to drift off into the distance, not forgotten, but placed in perspective.

At the same time, her body responded to the gentle waves of tenderness washing over her mind. From out of nowhere, she felt her pussy moistening, and a climax moved slowly towards her as Krell probed deep in her thoughts.

In some ways, the feeling wasn't unlike the safety she felt last night in Spence's arms, the knowledge that he would protect her from harm. In the clouds of sensations billowing inside her, Star also connected the pleasure to when Spence made love to her, his cock sliding slowly inside her, but Krell's face filled her mind's eye.

She knew she should pull away, break the contact with the long, soft fingers touching her head to end the thing Krell did to her, whatever it was. But the pleasure centers in her mind and body had control now, and Star could no more pull away from Krell than she could have left Spence hard and frustrated on the couch last night. Whatever this was, she wanted to see it through to the end, and she wanted Krell as badly as she wanted Spence.

Her mind swam with a jumble of images and thoughts, flicking between Krell, his skin hot as a stove, brushing his soft lips over her cheek, followed by Spence staring down into her face as he mounted her, his vision seeing only her. The remembrance of Spence's hands moving over her hair and his hips gently thrusting his cock between her lips morphed into Krell's large eyes watching her as he somehow stroked her mind, stimulating her like no cock, fingers, or tongue in her pussy ever could.

The tangled mass of visions drove her to the edge, and without warning her orgasm closed in around her, her body shaking and jerking as she moaned and panted. She realized that Krell pulled his fingers from her brow and wrapped his arms around her, but the waves of pleasure still cascaded over her, and he held her as she trembled.

When her shakes subsided a little, he lifted her chin with his fingertips until she looked up into the dark eyes. A sad smile played over his lips. "You see, Star, there are many ways to make love."

\* \* \* \*

Spence ran through the building, but he didn't know where he was going. He checked Krell's office, fully intending to kill the lying fuck, but he found the office empty and trashed. He found several burns on the walls, and one of the chairs was a mound of slag like something dumped from a blast furnace at the end of the work day.

He was objective enough to know he was more or less just running because he didn't know what else to do. His communicator chirped, and he tongued the control in his helmet to answer.

"Spencer."

"Major, this is Corporal Douglas. Sergeant Kyle asked me to advise you that we've reached the landing craft. We have the area secured, and I'm working on contacting *Daedalus* now."

"Well done, Douglas. Any word from Star?"

"No, Sir, not a word."

He thought for a moment. "Put Ensign Harvey on."

After a moment, Debi's voice came through. "Yes, Sir?"

"Debi, can you get anything on the sensors? Something that might tell me where Star is?" He paused. "Or Krell."

"I've been working on that, but no luck so far. I do have a large group of Rangor located, though."

"Where?"

"That's the part that bugs me. The readings can't be right, because it shows them inside the capital building."

"What?" Spence thought furiously. How would the Rangor get inside in any numbers? Getting a small group in to kidnap Star was easy, but the Hendri would see a large group. Unless they had inside help. "What about Krell?"

"Nothing on him."

"OK, where are these Rangor?"

"Best I can give you is on the northeast end of the third floor."

"Good enough. Can Kyle hear me?"

"Kyle here, Sir."

"Sergeant, your first priority is the safety of your personnel. If there is any threat to them or the LC, you will lift off and make for *Daedalus*."

"Understood, Major. Godspeed."

## Chapter 7

Star couldn't decide if she was pissed off, scared, in love, brain damaged, or just plain confused. She was an officer in His Majesty's Star Fleet, and she should be looking for a way to get out of here, wherever here was. Instead, she kept thinking about the two men who made love to her in the last twenty-four hours.

One of them touched her physically in ways she'd never been touched before. Earlier today, she knew that she'd fell right off the cliff and was in freefall for Spence. It would only be a matter of time until she would tell him she loved him. She had enough experience with men to believe that he would likely never be able to open up emotionally to her.

The other touched her mind and emotions like she never knew possible. She suspected Krell could do much more than what he showed her. She couldn't deny the attraction she felt for him since the first moment she met him. She knew enough about Hendri to believe they could never share true physical love.

Along with the confusion at her inability to focus on the real problems she faced, Star felt guilt closing in around her. She made love to two men in less than a day. She could have stopped either of them, or both, but she didn't. She wasn't sure who she cheated on, but she was certain she cheated on at least one of them.

*Maybe, she thought, I really cheated on myself.*

That was probably it. She got greedy and now was paying the price with guilt pangs.

The real problem was that she wanted them both. The thought of making love to Spence and Krell at the same time triggered a series of fantasy images she knew were totally out of place.

\* \* \* \*

"Deflectors at 38% and falling, Harbison Field at green with blue flecks, Captain."

Elsa shifted in her command chair. "Time to Field collapse?"

The tactical officer studied the instruments for a moment. "Eighty-six minutes, Ma'am."

"Thank you. Communications, anything?"

"No, Ma'am."

She nodded. "Science, any luck?"

"I have the source of the energy waves narrowed a bit, but it still covers the entire city."

"Tactical, what would be the collateral damage of firing on the city with a cluster of torpedoes?"

The officer glanced at Harris for a split second. "Probably two million civilian casualties, Captain."

Chris spoke up from the damage control console. "The mission manual prohibits that kind of collateral, Captain."

"Noted, Commander."

Elsa stared at her status board. With each passing minute, more and more systems failed or went marginal. She wasn't willing to leave ten people on the planet below, but she couldn't risk her ship and crew, either.

She took a deep breath. "Science, I need that target isolated better. Tactical, I need a tighter cluster on the torpedoes. Helm, prepare to leave orbit at maximum thrust in seventy-five minutes."

A chorus of confirmations echoed through the bridge as the crew set to work.

\* \* \* \*

The clicking of the door lock jolted Star out of her ruminations. An alien stepped inside, and while he looked like a Hendri, she somehow knew this was a Rangor.

"I am Harnlan." His English was understandable, but not nearly as good as Krell's. "We mean you no harm."

"Then why am I a captive?" She stood from her cot, but didn't approach the man. Her head hadn't started hurting again, and she wanted to keep it that way.

"For your own safety. The Council can't reach you here."

That hadn't occurred to her. If the Council could reach across hundreds of kilometers of space to burn *Daedalus*, why couldn't they reach her? Too distracted. She pushed the thoughts of Krell and Spence down in her mind. "Where is the rest of my landing party?"

Harnlan glanced at Krell, then back to her. "Eight are safe in the small ship you came to the planet in. The other is on his way here."

Her heart raced again. She knew it was Spence, coming after her. Only he would be crazy enough to come alone. Star pushed her emotions down again; she needed to focus. "What of *Daedalus*?"

"The ship is not destroyed, though the Council is attacking it and will destroy it soon."

A ruckus in another room announced what she knew was Spence's arrival. Star heard him yelling, again in that special voice Marines used for command.

"Get down! Get down, mother fucker, or I'll blow your fucking head off!"

She heard no shots, though.

"Spence! In here!"

When Spence charged into the cell, Harnlan's only reaction was to raise his long arms over his head.

"On the floor, shithead!"

Harnlan slowly knelt, then sprawled facedown on the floor.



Spence stood in the door, loaded for bandersnatch, and stared at her. "Are you hurt?"

"No, I'm OK." Other than her heart trying to fly from her chest and fighting the urge to throw herself against him, she didn't lie.

Only then did he look at Krell. The look in Spence's eyes frightened her. It spoke of mayhem and death. Star opened her mouth to speak, but Spence simply held his palm out towards her. He spun the rifle around and over his shoulder until it clicked into the holster on his back. Taking two steps forward, he looked up into Krell's eyes.

"You worthless fuck. I should kill you now, but I won't."

Krell didn't back down. "I am not the one you need to fear."

"That's good, because you don't scare me."

"There are those we should fear, though."

"Yeah. You need to fear me." Spence struck out and up with his fist, connecting with Krell's jaw.

She wasn't totally sure, but Star thought Krell's feet left the floor with the force of the impact. He crumpled to his knees, and looked up at Spence, pale pink blood running from the corner of his mouth.

Krell wiped at the blood before he spoke. "You and I know what this is really about, don't we? I doubt we can say the same for Star. Be that as it may, we must put our personal conflict aside and see to her safety."

"What do you mean 'we'? I haven't even decided if you'll live to leave this room."

She'd been unable to move, watching the two men fight, but it suddenly dawned on her what Krell meant. These two had been, casually perhaps, fighting over her since they landed.

Star reached out and put her hand on Spence's arm. "We need to talk, and I want you to promise you won't hurt Krell."

He turned to face her. Spence stared into her eyes for several moments, then his face went slack. "What are you trying to say to me?"

She tried to smile, but wasn't sure how well it came off. "I'm pretty sure I'm falling in love with you." The smile must not have been all that good.

"And?"

She cared more than enough to be honest with him. "I have feelings for Krell, too."

"That's it." Spence drew the sidearm from its holster at his side.

She wasn't sure just why she did it, but Star stepped between the men. "No, Spence. Please? This is all confused, and we don't have time to sort it out right now. Promise me you won't hurt him."

She knew Krell's life hung in the balance, but he didn't react. He just knelt on the floor where he'd collapsed when Spence hit him.

His eyes never left Spence's face as Krell dabbed again at the drying blood. "We both seem to care for Star. I know you must care for your comrades on *Daedalus* and here in Hendri City as well. After we get them all safe, you and I can return to this matter."

Spence stood still for many seconds, his hand flexing on the grip of the blaster. He finally dropped the gun back in its holster.

"You're damned right we will."

\* \* \* \*

'I have feelings for Krell, too.'

Star's words echoed through his mind as he trotted through the capital building with Star, Krell, and Harnlan following close behind him. Spence knew he needed to focus on the current situation, but he couldn't stop thinking about what she said.

He could have focused instead on the other, much more positive, thing she said; 'I'm pretty sure I'm falling in love with you.' The fact that she gave him wonderful news like that in nearly the same breath as telling him he was number two in the race didn't distract him at all from his obsession over her desire for Krell.

Spence forced himself to remember that he needed to protect her, and the only way to do that was to find this temple of the elders Harnlan spoke of. If *Daedalus* was indeed under attack, the only way to save Star was to save the ship. He had to find these elders and stop them.

Krell moved up to run beside him. "Major, this is foolish. You have no chance against the elders, and we should get to your landing craft and then to your ship."

"If I want your opinion, I'll beat it out of you."

"The elders are powerful, and they'll kill us all."

"If you're scared, then get out of here." Spence smiled. "Besides, you might get hit by friendly fire in the fight."

"They will only set you to burn."

"Only if they know I'm coming."

His mind suddenly flashed to a new scenario, and Spence skidded to a halt. Star stumbled into his back before she could stop running.

He grabbed Krell by the arm and jammed the muzzle of his rifle into the alien's throat. "Just a fucking minute! They already know I'm coming, don't they, Krell?"

For the first time since he'd known Krell, he saw that the man was scared. "They probably do."

"And you told them!" He slammed Krell against the wall and wondered where it would hurt the most when he opened fire.

Harnlan spoke from where he stood watching at Star's side. "Major, Krell is with the Rangor. He is working against the elders."

"What?"

"How else could we have reached the inside of the capital building without being seen?"

Star stood, her eyes wide as she watched him decide if Krell would live or die. "But, you had Krell in the same prison as I was in, and you made it so he couldn't use his powers to escape."

"You weren't in a prison, only someplace safe from the elders. We didn't kidnap Krell, though we fought his guards and the elders trying to stop him from leaving. The room had to be cold to keep the elders from killing you both." Harnlan shrugged. "We always do that to protect ourselves from the elders and the Hendri loyal to them."

Spence tried to block his personal emotions, the ones telling him to kill Krell here and now, from his professional instincts. He managed to

push things down enough to see that the only thing that mattered was to protect Star and get her to safety. "Alright, you live for now, but all I need is a halfway decent reason to kill you."

Krell nodded. "You and I have the same motivation right now. Going to the temple is suicide, though."

Star shook her head. "So is going to the landing craft. If the elders can threaten *Daedalus*, they could crush the landing craft like a walnut."

"Yeah, the temple is our only chance." Spence thought for a moment. "Harnlan, tell me about the elders and this temple."

"The elders live there, ever since they gave the Hendri the power to burn things. No one ever sees them, though, and they talk through a box on the wall of the temple. Though it's only legend, it's said they have changed so much they can't live outside the hot rooms of the temple."

Spence's communicator chirped. "Spencer."

"Ensign Harvey here, Major. I have some news for you."

"Go ahead."

"I have this temple place located. It's really hot in there, about seventy-five degrees or so." She hesitated for a moment. "And there's a lot of electrical activity, including some sort of energy beam aimed at where I think *Daedalus* is in its orbit."

"What kind of energy beam?"

"Heat." Debi paused again. "If my readings are correct, I can't see how *Daedalus* could stand up against it for more than a couple of hours."

"Alright, how do I get there the fastest way?"

"I just sent two routes to your navigation system. One is the way you're going now. The other is faster, but you'll need to blast through some walls."

"Good work, Ensign."

The communicator hissed for a moment. "Sergeant Kyle here, Sir. You'll need some help with that. I can join you on the way."

"Negative, Kyle." Spence chuckled a little. "Your job is to protect those people."

"Major—"

"Stand down, Sergeant. There's enough fighting to go around."

"Aye, aye, Sir." Kyle paused for a moment. "I don't want to take you home in a body bag."

"I appreciate that, but we both have a job to do right now, Bob."

"Yeah, we do. Godspeed, Spence."

The communicator fell silent.

\* \* \* \*

Spence changed the order in line of his small command after getting the new route from Debi. Now, Harnlan followed directly behind Spence, and Star ran behind Harnlan with Krell bringing up the rear. Spence gave Harnlan his blaster, and while Spence still carried his big rifle, Krell was unarmed. Spence didn't offer him any weapon, but Star suspected Krell would prefer to rely on his pyrokinesis anyway. She didn't even know if Spence had anything left to offer.

They'd already blasted through several walls, Spence pumping a slide on the underside of his rifle twice as it spit small round objects that exploded with the white flash of nuclear fusion on impact with the stone. When the smoke and dust cleared a little, a four-meter hole gaped through to the other side.

Spence raised his left arm in the air, fingers spread wide, then clenched his fist and lowered it quickly to his chest. She thought she might be figuring out the hand signals Marines were so fond of, because she immediately knew the signal meant 'stop'. The small group gathered around him as he studied his navigation console.

"OK, on the other side of this wall is a little plaza. Thirty meters away, on the other side, is the entrance to this temple." Spence chewed on his lip for a moment. "I wonder if there will be guards."

Krell nodded. "Yes, there will."

Harnlan shook his head. "I wonder about that. We've seen no one so far."

Since they'd left the area the Rangor controlled, they hadn't seen a soul. Star wondered about that, and Krell's comment about the elders knowing they were coming haunted her.

Spence must have had the same thoughts. "Yeah, and that worries me. I'm beginning to feel like we're being herded here."

Harnlan looked puzzled, and Krell spoke to him for a moment in the language of the planet. Harnlan nodded. "Perhaps we are, but does it matter? We have few choices."

"That's too true." Spence absently checked his rifle. "Alright, here's what we'll do; I'll blast this wall, then me and Harnlan will go through. You two wait until you hear three clicks on the communicator, then give us five seconds before you come through. There are trees and stuff out there to hide behind, so get to cover as quick as you can."

Something in her head, or maybe it was her heart, told her this was dangerous. The entire situation was dangerous, but something about going through this wall and into the open, literally on the front porch of the temple, was even more so. She was still trying to formulate her arguments against the idea when Spence finalized the plan.

"Get against the wall." He worked the slide on his rifle again. "Fire in the hole!"

A soft thud from his gun preceded the deafening explosion of the wall into motes of dust.

\* \* \* \*

The fucking alarms still screamed, and Elsa was about ready to have someone turn a blaster on them to get some quiet. Nearly 80% of her status board displayed either red or yellow lights now, and more green ones disappeared as she watched.

Without her having to ask, the tactical office reported. "Deflectors at 17% and falling, Field at blue with violet streaks. Time to Field collapse is thirty-two minutes."

She wondered if it might be just idle curiosity, but she asked anyway. "Field generator core temperature?"

"Fifteen million degrees Kelvin."

Elsa nodded. That was about right, at least for the core of a sun. The difference was that they weren't talking about a sun, but some infinitely small point inside her ship. In thirty-two minutes, all that stored energy would break free from the string dimension containing it to fry anything within five hundred kilometers of the point. That radius included *Daedalus*.

"Communications, launch an emergency probe toward Sol system with the logs of the last three days and all information gathered since entering the energy barrier."

"Aye, aye, Captain." The officer typed commands. "Probe away."

Before she could acknowledge, the tactical officer spoke again. "The heat destroyed the probe, Ma'am."

No surprise there, but she had to try. "Thank you."

\* \* \* \*

Star listened closely at the communicator in her hand, but she'd heard nothing so far, and the men had gone through more than a minute ago. She flinched at the hot touch on her arm and turned to see Krell staring down at her.

"Star, I'm sorry I misled you."

"You didn't mislead me. You lied to me." She knew she should be angry, but she couldn't find anger inside of her. Only hurt and disappointment.

He nodded. "Yes, I did, and I admit that. I want you to know I'm sorry and I'll do whatever it takes to make things right."

She pushed her emotions as far to the side of her mind as she could. "This is not the time or the place for this."

"No, it's not, but just in case something happens, I want you to know that." Three soft clicks came from the communicator she held, and

Krell didn't give her time to answer him. "Come, we have to go." Star followed him through the hole in the wall.

In her brief glance at the plaza, she didn't see anyone in the open area or near the large building on the far side, the one she assumed to be the temple of the elders. She and Krell joined Spence and Harnlan where they took cover behind a large statue of some Hendri or another.

She took Spence's hand in hers and squeezed. "Anything?"

He managed a smile when he looked at her. "Not a soul we can see. We don't have much time to waste, and that's the place." He pointed at the big building with the barrel of his gun. "We go in now."

"I don't know your plans, but I should go with you." Krell shrugged. "Harnlan has never been in the building, and his knowledge is from maps I've drawn."

"No way." Spence shook his head firmly. "Star, you stay out here with flame boy while Harnlan and I go in there to tear the fuck out of the place."

She had time to interject on this one. "I think we should all go."

"It's dangerous in there, and it's going to get pretty tense."

She laughed a little. "Spence, it's dangerous out here and will get pretty tense, too. Remember, the galaxy is a pretty fatalistic place."

He smiled slowly. "Yeah, it is."

"I think Star is right." Harnlan nodded toward Krell. "And so is he. Krell knows the temple far better than I and can save us time in finding the elders."

Spence fidgeted where he stood for a moment, his face running through a gamut of expressions, none of them looking very pleased to her.

After many seconds, he nodded. "Alright, we all go. Stay behind me as much as you can, and use any cover you can find."

He turned to face her directly, and something in the way he stared into her eyes made it clear Spence could see nothing but her. After spinning the rifle to its holster on his back, he placed his big hands on her shoulders and pulled her close to him. His kiss was brief, but full of passion that fired through her like lightening.



When she opened her eyes again, he smiled at her. "Just in case." The smile slowly faded to a serious look, one she'd never seen on any man's face before. "I love you, Star."

Without another word or waiting for her to reply, he released her shoulders and spun the rifle into his hands again. "Alright, let's move out."

The group moved toward the waiting temple.

## Chapter 8

Spence wondered just exactly what he was going to do next. *Shit*, he thought. *If I had three Marines instead of a pair of aliens, one I don't trust at all, and Star, I could do this.* He wasn't so sure now.

Nothing opposed them as they climbed the stairs and entered the building. The heat slapped him in the face, and he lowered his visor as the environment controls whined in protest at the work of keeping him cool. The aliens could handle it, but he worried about Star. In the quick glances he could spare from watching the area around them for threats, he saw sweat streaming down her face and staining her uniform. Despite the seriousness of the situation, his mind flashed back to the night of passion they shared and the sweat running down their bodies to mix as one. It seemed so long ago now, but only a few hours had passed since they snuggled together.

Krell led them to a large door, a huge metal affair, reaching at least eight meters high and nearly as wide. Ornate carvings with what Spence took as writing covered the surface of the metal plates, and what looked like gold decorated many of the runes. Stones of many colors glittered in settings scattered around in the pictures, highlighting scenes he didn't understand and words he couldn't read.

"This is the place where I talk to the elders." Krell shrugged, a habit all Hendri seemed to have. "I have no idea where they actually are."

"Then we'll start here." Spence checked his rifle. He'd used six of his twenty close-quarters nuclear grenades, but the projectile magazine was still full. He jacked a grenade into the launcher.

Harnlan touched his shoulder. "That door is more than four hundred years old."

Spence squeezed the trigger, and the launcher gave its familiar thud as the small fusion bomb lobbed towards its target. The door rang like a church bell, and fell into the room from its hinges.

Krell sighed. "It also contained more than a tenth of the wealth of the Hendri."

"Sorry." Spence shrugged. He must be catching the habit. "Let's go!"

As soon as he entered the room, he felt the temperature spike in spite of the environmental controls. The cooling system screamed in his ear, running at full power, but he felt the sweat spring out on his body as he staggered. Spence looked quickly at Star, and saw her stumble and fall, her face red and dry, the signs of heat prostration hitting her almost instantly.

Spence fell to his knees and lifted his rifle, the trigger already compressing under his finger even before he found a target. Far too late to stop the motion of his trained reflexes, he saw the barrel was red hot and slumped from the heat. The projectiles whizzing from the chamber at almost three thousand meters per second hit the bend, and the barrel exploded with amazing energy, ripping the weapon from his hands and throwing him back against a column in the center of the room.

As he slipped to the floor, he saw Harnlan charge into the room, but his chest exploded in flames, just as the grass in the garden had erupted. The alien collapsed, dropping the blaster, and rolled around trying to put out the fire that covered his torso. The heat made it hard for Spence to focus his eyes, but he saw the alien roll over the last of the flames, finally putting himself out, but then Harnlan lay very still.

A voice spoke from the wall, and when he looked, he saw the image of a Hendri, but distorted by age and time, looking out at him from a video screen.

"You fool. You could have simply accepted things and lived."

Spence found some energy someplace, and he lurched to sit up and lean against the column. "Humans are curious. We want to know the truth."

"Fools." The image on the screen changed, but the voice remained the same. "Now you will die." Again the view flickered to another face. "Even we will die. The Rangor will kill us, but not before we kill you."

"That hasn't been decided yet." Spence smiled. "You may die yet, and well before the Rangor can come to kill you."

He heard a soft moan, and looked around. Star was in a pile on the floor, her face fire-red and dry as desert sand. She looked at him with eyes that wouldn't focus, but she moved her lips. He read, 'I love you, too.'

As he watched her dying, Spence realized he couldn't save her, but he had to try anyway.

Using reflexes sharpened over more than a century of combat and muscles honed to perfection by countless exercises and real battles, he made one, smooth motion. Lightening fast, and without looking away from Star, he snatched the knife from its sheath on his hip and threw it directly at the speaker above and to the right of the view screen.

\* \* \* \*

Star couldn't concentrate, what with her body feeling like it was on fire as she'd seen Harnlan burst into flames. Somehow, though, she hung on to consciousness and had enough sense to wonder where Krell was.

*This is, she thought, how it all ends. Spence was right and wrong; right to be suspicious of the Hendri, and wrong for waiting till now to tell me how he feels about me.*

Maybe it was only her poor brain, addled once by a blow to the head and now battered by the searing heat, but she thought it suddenly seemed cooler. Her rattled neurological status may also have caused her to see Spence's motion flow like quicksilver as he threw his knife.

The elder on the screen shrieked in terror as the knife reached the wall, throwing his slender hands over his face just before the knife buried itself in the speaker, sparks showering in the shimmering heat to come to rest on the floor, skittering about like living things as they slowly faded and died.

As if he had all the time in the world, Krell stepped calmly into the room and picked up the blaster Harnlan had dropped as he burned. He pointed the gun at the screen, and she thought she saw a small smile play over his lips.

"You will not harm this woman or her people." Krell pressed the trigger.

The wall seemed unchanged for a moment, and Star wondered if the heat might have damaged the weapon. Then, in the slow motion some movie directors are so fond of, the wall slumped; it seemed to slowly dissolve, fading away to dust that ran to the floor.

The sound from the remaining speaker came as cacophony of screams, the elders all speaking at the same time, but having only one voice to speak with. Without the images provided by the screen, she couldn't tell which of the elders spoke, but the sound was of all of them screaming at the same time.

Behind the screen, Star saw a maze of electronics. It looked very much like the so-called brain core of *Daedalus* she was allowed to tour before they left the Jupiter Yards, consoles and displays everywhere showing flashing patterns of lights that must mean something beyond her knowledge.

Still very calm, Krell nodded toward the room. "Major, these are the elders."

Spence sat staring at the room for a moment, then crawled for his shattered rifle. The barrel had swelled and split, the metal ripped back like a peeled banana, but he flipped the gun over in his hands. He fumbled with the weapon for a second, and Star saw one of the small grenades drop into his hand. He pressed a button on the sphere, then tossed it past where the wall once stood.

"Take cover!"

Krell dropped the blaster and jumped on top of her just as an explosion rang out.

\* \* \* \*

Chris stood beside the command chair, keeping his voice low. "Elsa, we have to go. Now."

She glanced at the status board. The deflectors were down to 7%, and the Field was violet with some flickers of white showing.

He touched her arm. "We can't do anything for them."

"I know." She took a deep breath. "Helm, take us away from the planet. Full impulse power on head—"

The tactical officer interrupted. "Ma'am, the energy beams just cut off."

"Helm, belay that." As Elsa watched, the Field dumped heat to the surrounding space, the color already fading to blue.

"Captain, I have the source of the energy waves pinpointed now." The officer checked the scanners. "I can get a single torpedo in with no collateral damage."

She thought for a minute. Following her instincts, Elsa kept *Daedalus* here despite the threat, and that worked out, though she didn't know what lasting damage the ship had yet. Her gut now told her to wait, not to fire on their attackers, but she had no defense for the action. Elsa wondered how long it would be before Chris decided she was taking too many risks and relieved her of command.

It didn't matter. It would take time for him to get another command officer and the ship's doctor behind him. "Lock torpedoes on target. Do not arm."

"Aye, aye, Captain."

Chris' raised eyebrows told her all she needed to know. He thought she was crazy, but couldn't prove it.

Yet.

"Captain, I have the landing party." The communications officer smiled. "Sergeant Kyle on the line."

She thumbed the switch for the communicator on her command chair. "Sergeant, what's your status?"

"Everyone except Major Spencer and Lieutenant Hawking is here on the LC, Ma'am. Their status is unknown. We have no immediate threats to the LC and crew."

Elsa glanced to the science officer. "Find them. Now." She smiled at the communicator. "Very well. Standby, but be ready to evac if you're attacked."

"Understood, Captain."

"Stay in contact with us." She clicked off. "Science, anything?"

"Not yet, Ma'am. I started at their quarters and I'm spiraling out from there."

"Good. Keep at it."

"Damage reports, Captain." Chris didn't look terribly happy.

"Go ahead."

"Mostly minor stuff. The most serious is a plasma leak in the starboard hyperdrive tubes."

"Get crews on it."

"Already done." He smiled a little. "We got lucky."

"Very."

\* \* \* \*

He'd been just a little slow on his dive behind the column. Spence tried to justify it by thinking he'd been looking to make sure Star was safe, but the fact was that he tripped over his big feet. The explosion rang his chimes better than Betty Higingbaum did back when he was fourteen and in the ninth grade under the bleachers at the football game.

He looked up and saw Krell kneeling next to Star. His first try at standing resulting in the room spinning furiously and Spence sat down hard enough to cause his teeth to click together. He crawled instead.

Star was unconscious, and her breathing was rapid and shallow. Krell looked up. "I know nothing of human physiology, but I fear for her."

Her skin was hot, hotter than a Hendri's, and her skin felt dry and crackly. Spence leaned close to her, stroking her cheek. "Star? Come on, honey. Can you hear me?" She didn't respond.

He tongued the communicator control in his helmet. "Spencer to LC." No answer came.

Krell went to Harnlan's still form. "He's dead."

"Shame, that." He thought for a moment. "We need to get Star out of here, someplace cooler."

He nodded. "May I help you carry her? The heat is getting to you as well."

Spence considered. Krell obviously had his actions with the elders planned, but didn't reveal them for some reason. He trusted the man just a little more now. "Sure."

They carried Star from the temple and into the empty plaza. They found some shade under a tree that looked like some mad cross between an oak, pine, and palm tree and placed her on the dark grass. Spence pulled off his vest and rolled it into a pillow for her head.

"I want you to know that I care for Star deeply, but I won't come between you and her." Krell shrugged again. "The physical aspects of love are important to humans, and I can never give her what you can."

He felt a little off balance by Krell's sudden foray into the topic of Star. "That's big of you." It sounded flippant, and maybe he intended it to.

"Love between Hendri—" He stopped suddenly, his face wrinkled in thought. "Love between Hendri or between Rangor is more emotional. Perhaps spiritual is a better word."

"I don't understand." Spence chuckled a little. "Then again, I wonder just what she sees in you."

Krell shrugged and reached out his hand to touch Spence's forehead.

In an instant, the details of the situation they were in seemed to fade into the background. Spence knew they had problems and he knew they needed to solve them, but the urgency faded in perspective.



Like waves he once saw on a beach in the Sandusky system, undulations of peace and tranquility washed over his mind, relaxing him and letting him focus on the important things in life. In his mind's eye, Spence saw two faces staring at him.

One was human and beautiful, piercing green eyes set in soft, tan skin and surrounded by billowing red hair. A soft smile touched the lips of the face, and he felt things no Marine should feel, or at least admit to feeling. The warmth and safety promised by the loving smile rocked through him, and he found himself wanting Star to hold him.

The other was alien, with large black eyes placed far apart in blue skin that looked like suede. Bluish-black hair danced at the edges of the face, and the small mouth and thin nose were almost not noticeable at first. But the feelings of safety and warmth were the same, and the urge to cuddle didn't fade at all.

He'd bumped his head hard when the rifle exploded in his hands, and the pain had settled into a nagging throb. Suddenly, the pain vanished. It didn't fade away as his worries did, but just turned off, like someone pulled the plug on a laser. Just gone.

Just as suddenly, Spence realized exactly what it was that Star saw in Krell. It was Krell, somehow, doing this to him. He manipulated Spence's thoughts and perceptions in some way, and Spence knew Krell could do far more than this, and probably had with Star.

He knew he should push away, break the contact with Krell, but he couldn't bring himself to do it. The fact was that he liked the way it made him feel. It was almost as good as the feelings he had when Star held him close to her. Spence could feel her breath on his neck and cheek as they embraced, and there was something new in the mix, too. While her soft hands caressed his body, the gentle tendrils of Krell's mind touched his brain. His erection strained against the body armor, and he wondered if the rigid suit could contain him.

His eyes dropped away from Krell and fell on Star's still form in the grass. Through the peace and rising tide of passion in his mind, Spence could think clearly.

He grabbed Krell's arm and pulled it away from his head. "Wait! You can help her!"

Krell stared for a moment, his eyes slowly focusing on the here and now. "I don't see how."

"Make her injuries better! You made my head stop hurting!"

A trio of lines appeared between the wide-set eyes. "Perhaps." He reached out and touched Star's head, the long fingers resting gently on the hot, red skin. After a moment, Krell pulled his hand away. "I need your help."

"How?"

"Just touch her with me."

He had no idea what he could do or how Krell expected that to help, but Spence knew that someplace in the last ten minutes, all doubts about Krell had vanished. If he thought this would help Star, then it would, and he would do anything Krell asked.

Spence placed his palm on Star's forehead, the skin nearly burning him, and Krell moved to put his delicate fingers on the back of his hand.

Again, the ebb and flow of peaceful feelings rushed over him like the tide, placing everything in perspective. At the same time, he felt energy flowing through him and from him to Star. He fought the urge to pull his hand away, but the power threatened to burn him as the transfer proceeded, the life force coursing across the small area of his palm and into her lovely body.

As he watched, Spence saw the redness in her face fade a little, and sweat broke out on her skin, rolling slowly down to the dark grass as her body fought to regulate her temperature again. Her tongue darted out briefly to lick at her lips, the chapped skin soaking up the moisture in an instant.

Krell suddenly stumbled and fell to his side, breathing hard and breaking the contact. He tried to sit up, his hand clutching for Star's forehead.

Spence broke the contact with her, and took Krell's hand in his. "No, just rest. She's better now."

"Is she better enough?"

"I don't know. Just rest." He poured a little water on his fingers and touched them to her lips, and she licked at the moisture. "I think she's much better."

The noise of clattering behind him reminded Spence he was totally unarmed now. He turned just as Kyle and three other Marines swept into the plaza, weapons ready.

After a corporal gave a hand signal, Kyle nodded. "Clear! Secure the area!"

Twenty more Marines moved through the plaza and took up defensive positions.

Spence smiled. "I thought I ordered you to stay put."

"Yes, Sir, you did, but after getting the rest of the non-combat people to *Daedalus* and sending me some help, the Captain told me to come get your sorry ass."

"That's OK, then." He glanced at Star. "We need to get her to the ship."

Kyle followed his gaze. "Right. Medic!"

The corpsman came and hooked up several instruments to her. "She's near heat stroke. We need to get her to the ship ASAP."

Kyle handed Spence a communicator. "This will work."

He flipped the switch. "Spencer to *Daedalus*."

"Davis here. Good to hear from you, Major."

"Thank you, Ma'am, but Star is hurt, we need immediate evac by transporter."

"You're in luck. The system just came back up. How many?"

"Three." He glanced at Krell where he'd managed to get to a sitting position next to Star. "No, make it four."

"Copy that. Standby."

Star, along with the corpsman, Krell, and Spence twinkled out of existence on their way to *Daedalus*.

\* \* \* \*

At least her head didn't hurt this time as she woke up. This passing out crap was for the birds.

She was on a bed, but she couldn't see. Despite this she knew a few things about her surroundings. She knew she was on *Daedalus* because of the total absence of smells that was the signature of the air processing systems. She figured she was in sickbay because she felt tubes in her arms and she was either blind or her eyes were bandaged. The sheets also had that precision folding medical people were obsessed over.

And she knew that both Spence and Krell were at the bedside because she could feel them holding her hands.

She couldn't help smiling a little. "Hi, you two."

Spence spoke first. "Hi. How do you feel?"

"Surprisingly good, actually."

The singsong of Krell's voice made her shiver a little. "The doctor tells us you'll be fine."

"That's good. Why can't I see?"

"The doc needed to bandage your eyes for a while." Spence squeezed her right hand. "They got a little too dry, but they'll be fine in a few days."

Krell squeezed her left hand. "The blindness shall pass, though."

"Are you both alright?" They seemed a lot more cordial than the last she remembered.

"We're fine." She heard Spence chuckle a little. "In addition to the stuff on the planet, there are some things we need to work out."

"Spence is right, but you need to get well first." She realized that Krell felt cool, like he did in the Rangor cell. "Nothing that can't wait."

Star heard someone else come into the room. "I see my only patient is awake. Star, this is Doctor Hinkle. How are you feeling?"

"I'm just a little tired, that's all."

"Good, that's normal. I'll assume these two told you about the bandages on your eyes. Nothing to worry about, and they'll come off in the morning."

"They told me."

"Good, good. I'm going to run them out of here so you can rest. Five minutes, gentlemen." She heard the door close.

She thought for a moment. "I guess we do have a couple of things to deal with."

"Yes, we do." Krell squeezed her hand again. "Nothing that can't wait a little while. For now, goodnight." He moved, and Star felt his lips touch hers for an instant.

"Krell's right, honey. You concentrate on getting back on your feet." Spence leaned and kissed her softly. "We'll see you in the morning."

After she heard the door close, she wondered what two good looking men would do on their own aboard a ship with a crew that was 59% female.

The thought worried her a little.

## Chapter 9

"As I told you, I can't give Star the things she needs and really wants." Krell shrugged. "You can, and though I care for her, I'll stand aside."

"No, that's not right." Spence tossed off his drink in one swallow. Krell couldn't see what attraction alcohol held for humans, but coffee was delicious. "You saved her life."

"As did you. I couldn't have helped her without you both suggesting it and helping me."

"Maybe." He waved at the server for another drink. Alcohol had an interesting effect on humans, causing them to lose their inhibitions. "Yeah, I tossed the grenade into the elder's computers, but you figured out where they were and made the hole to get to them. OK, I helped you heal her, but you did most of it." He sipped at his fourth drink. "Oh, and how did you know where the elders were? And why didn't they know you were there?"

Alcohol also made humans have flight of ideas, jumping from subject to subject without warning. "I was able to hide my mind from the elders by cloaking my thoughts behind Star's and yours." Krell shrugged. "They were so focused on you two, particularly you, they didn't see me. As for knowing where they were, I didn't until you threw your knife at the screen. When I saw them duck, I knew."

"How's that?"

"I'd long suspected the elders weren't real and were instead some kind of machine. They reacted too fast when you threw your knife. The most logical place for them to be was behind the wall."

Spence drank deeply. "Wait a minute. You hid behind me and Star? How?"

"The elders saw in the people of my planet some innate psychic abilities. One is the ability to touch the mind of another, like I did to you and Star, and I used that ability to mask my thoughts. They picked the city dwellers to enhance that power with the box in our head and gave us pyrokinesis so we could control those living outside the city. We became the Hendri and Rangor. At the same time, several hundred of your years ago, the elders built all the plants and animals on our planet."

"Wow, that's strange. Maybe I've had too much to drink."

Krell didn't think Spence meant it because he tossed off the remains of his alcohol and waved the empty glass at the server again.

"Perhaps. Be that as it may, you and Star should be together." He hesitated, recalling the softness of her mind in the Rangor safe room. "I saw in her mind that she loves you, Spence."

"All I know is that I fell for her hook, line, and sinker."

"What's a sinker?"

"It doesn't matter."

"I assume that means you love her, too."

"Yeah, it does." Spence rubbed at his eyes. "What was that you did to me back there in the plaza?"

"The same thing I did with Star. To us, that's how we show someone we care." He shrugged. "We can give someone peace and tranquility, help them put things into perspective by letting them relax."

He chuckled. "So that means you care about me?"

Krell wondered how, or even if, he should bring this up to Spence. "Yes, I do. If for no other reason, Star cares for you, and I care for her. What matters to her also matters to me."

"Well, then."

"But she belongs to you."

Spence shook his head. "No, my friend, she belongs to no one other than herself. She'll be the first to tell you that, too. She'll decide on her own who she wants to be with, if anyone."

"Yes, she will."

"So, until she decides that, we're both on the line."

"That's a very fatalistic view of things."

"I guess it is, but the universe is a pretty fatalistic place." Spence smiled as he clicked his glass of whiskey against his coffee cup. "Cheers."

\* \* \* \*

Her eyes wouldn't focus on things too close to her, but otherwise, she felt good. The doctor released her from sickbay, but she was still technically off duty until 0800 tomorrow. That didn't stop her from reading the reports from the teams on the planet. Or at least trying to read them. She had to increase the size of the text on the screen and scoot the chair back about half a meter to see it at all. Added to that, Spence and Krell kept after her to leave it alone.

Between the reports and the things Krell told her, she had a good idea of what happened a few hundred years ago. Some alien species came to the planet, but only a few members of a dying race survived. They found a species with some limited psychic powers, telekinesis and a form of empathy that fringed on what most people thought of mind reading. The primitive people on the planet had separated into two groups, one living in towns and villages with an agrarian society, and the other living in the hills as hunter-gatherers.

The aliens favored the townsfolk, using technology to enhance their innate skills and give them pyrokinetic powers. She didn't know much about these strange aliens who played god here, but they set themselves up as elders and ruled the city dwellers. They instilled a hatred of the mountain folk and even gave the groups the impression they were of different species, the Hendri and Rangor.

At some point, the elders knew they were dying, and built a complex computer system to rule in their absence. That was about two hundred years ago. Before they all died, they genetically engineered a



number of plants and animals to make life easier for the Hendri and harder for the Rangor.

Then came *Daedalus*.

The computer sensed the ship approaching, and decided the Hendri could escape the planet by using the humans to carry them away. In the logic circuits of the computer, the Rangor were destined to take over the planet, and they needed to avoid that.

She thought one could argue with the logic issues all day and still not reach a conclusion, but the fact was that's what happened. She also wondered about the social structures the elders created, both before and after their deaths. Did it reflect their own?

She had a meeting scheduled with the Captain tomorrow to give her opinion of how things should proceed, and she needed to reach her own conclusions. Spence had other plans.

He pulled a chair up beside her and sat down. "Why don't you let your eyes rest a while?"

"I'm fine, and I need to get this all straight in my head for the captain."

Krell dragged another chair to her other side. "Spence is right. You should rest."

"You two are worse than my mother."

Spence reached out and turned off the display. "Yeah, we're far worse. Come on." He pulled her from the chair, and she had no choice other than to follow, him leading her by the hand. Krell stood and followed.

She knew the three of them needed to talk, but she dreaded that more than the meeting with the captain. Star also knew she loved Spence. Since her release from sickbay, he'd stayed with her in her cabin. They made love often, and she fell deeper in love with each passing minute.

At the same time, Krell had stayed with them, sleeping on the sofa and spending time with her when duties called Spence away. He'd touched her mind again, making love to her with only his long fingers wavering on

her forehead. She knew she'd fallen for Krell, too, but in a very different way.

The fact was that she was in love with two men. She knew all about the multiple marriages all through the empire, but she never saw herself involved with more than one person. The idea seemed like something distant, something for the royal family and aristocrats of the empire, not for an average girl like her.

The front of her mind told her the feelings she harbored for Spence and Krell weren't fair to either man, but the back of her mind wanted them both. She wanted to be greedy. That made guilt well up in her when she faced the desires.

Spence suddenly stopped, and she ran into his chest as he turned to face her.

He laughed. "Sorry about that. You know, we need to talk. Maybe."

His arms slipped around her, and he pulled her close, pressing his lips to hers. She felt so right in his arms, she couldn't resist hugging him tight against her as his tongue flickered between her lips.

She'd been careful to avoid being too attentive to Spence in Krell's presence, and vice versa, remembering the conflict between the two men in the cell of the Rangor, but she couldn't seem to stop herself. Spence felt so good against her now, and she wanted him. From the growing pressure of his swelling cock against her, he must feel the same, and yet the thought of Krell standing somewhere in the room kept playing through her mind.

She discovered where Krell was when he moved up behind her, sandwiching her between him and Spence. His hands moved over her back and up the sides of her head. She felt Krell's fingers touch her forehead, and the familiar calmness came upon her as things gained a new perspective and order in the universe.

Spence pulled his lips from hers, and she opened her eyes. As he kissed down her neck, she saw that while Krell's left hand was on her head, his right fingers touched Spence in the same manner. She knew Krell was giving them both the same gift of peace.

Even when Krell pulled his hands away, the sense of tranquility remained, and she felt four hands moving over her body and removing her clothes. Spence slipped the zipper of her jumpsuit down, his rough hands gently massaging her skin as he went. She felt Krell's long fingers pushing the material from her shoulders, gathering it at her waist, as he kissed her shoulders.

Spence slowly slipped from her embrace and knelt before her, pulling the jumpsuit down to her ankles and helping her step out of the cloud of material. He kissed her thighs as Krell placed his fingers on her forehead again, turning her head to the side where his lips met hers.

Through the intense waves of desire, she felt Spence lift her leg until she stood on one foot with the other draped over his shoulder. His tongue traced her thigh and teased across her clit, causing her to jerk with pleasure. At the same time, Krell reached down and placed his free hand on Spence's head.

As Krell's tongue played in her mouth and Spence's darted into her pussy, Star sensed her orgasm closing on her. Krell pulled his lips from hers and whispered in her ear. "Relax, Star. There is no hurry."

She knew he was right. In the cool light of the calmness he brought to her, she knew all was well with the universe. She only need to relax and love the men who loved her.

Spence lowered her leg to the floor, and the men acted together to lift her from her feet. Krell pulled a cushion from the sofa, and they eased her to the floor and placed it under her head. Spence pulled his uniform off, and lay beside her, his skin hot and moist against her body. Free from the effects of the elders, Krell's skin had cooled, but when he lay against her other side, he too felt warm to her as the men explored her body with their hands.

Krell's fingers moved hesitantly over her pussy, the long digits teasing the very tip of her clit as Spence sucked her nipple, his tongue dancing around the swollen bud between his lips.

Krell spread her lips, and his finger slowly entered her, reaching deep inside, probing and rubbing as he moved. Her hips thrust against his

hand, and he stroked her clit with his thumb, causing her to moan with pleasure.

Spence reached with his hand to stroke her face, his fingers tracing the curve of her cheek and to the corners of her mouth. She licked his fingers, sucking them into her mouth and swirling her tongue around them as visions of his cock filling her mouth swam in her head. As she pumped her lips on Spence's fingers, she felt his cock throbbing against her side and Krell's free hand came to rest on her head again. The vision of feeling Spence inside her mouth intensified, and her pussy clamped hard on Krell's fingers as they rubbed her G-spot.

Her climax seemed to come from nowhere. Despite Krell's earlier admonition that there was no hurry, she could no more stop her orgasm than she could have walked home to Earth from here.

With Spence's fingers acting as an ersatz dick in her mouth, her screams came as a series of grunts and garbled words. She didn't think they would have made much more sense if her mouth were empty. Her hips pushed hard against the long fingers filling her pussy, and the sounds of wet smacking as Krell fucked her faster reached her ears even over the noise of her moans.

As she moaned, Krell pulled his hand from her pussy and placed it on Spence's head. Spence flexed his hips, and his cock rubbed firm and hard against her hip, but when Krell touched him, Spence went tense, his body quivering. His mouth fell away from her nipple, and he moaned loudly, his dick throbbing as cum erupted from him, spraying across her hip and thigh.

Spence collapsed, his body going limp beside her, as the waves of her climax receded to a roar and Krell removed his hands from them both. For the first time, she noticed Krell's breathing was as rapid and irregular as hers and Spence's.

The three lie together for a time as their breathing slowed, and the men hugged her close from each side. The feeling of safety, satiety, and love she felt had nothing to do with how Krell or Spence touched her from the outside.

She somehow knew it was all about how they touched her inside, and how they loved her.

Krell chuckled, sounding amazingly like Spence. "Perhaps this human fascination with physical love has some merits."

\* \* \* \*

"The Emperor sends his apologies for not being able to make this meeting." Admiral Q smiled, and Elsa shivered a little. "He said his wives reminded him of a more pressing matter."

She laughed. The scuttlebutt said the Emperor was pussy-whipped, but Elsa believed he was just deeply in love with all four of his wives, even after being together for more than 3,000 years. "That's alright, Sir, but we do need to get this settled. *Daedalus* needs to move on in her mission, one way or another."

"Quite so, Captain." His image on the communications screen looked to Star. "So, Lieutenant, you believe the Empire should leave a contingent on this planet to help rebuild. Is that about right?"

In the last few weeks, since settling into the strange relationship she had with Spence and Krell, Star seemed more confident. Elsa knew she'd always been competent, but now Star knew it without being arrogant.

Star nodded. "Yes, Sir. The elders, or at least the computer that pretended to be the elders, may have been a poor form of government, but it worked. Now they have nothing. They need help."

"I won't dispute that point, but you're talking about taking a number of key personnel away from *Daedalus*, yourself and Major Spencer among them."

"I understand, Admiral. Captain Davis and I have discussed this, and we believe *Daedalus* will be fine for five months until replacements can be picked up at a port of call."

"Replacements..." Q gave the smile again, and Elsa couldn't help wondering how he would be in bed. Did he ever get tired? "I'm not so sure

there are replacements. Both you and the Major have proven very valuable."

Spence cleared his throat. Like most Marine officers, even high-ranking ones, he wasn't used to dealing with Fleet officers higher than a captain. "Sir, you and I have been in the service of the Emperor long enough to know that's crap. No one is indispensable, and honestly, a trained monkey could do my job."

"I'll speak to Empress Marilyn about finding such a monkey, then. She has a bizarre fascination with pygmy marmosets." Q laughed. "Krell, do the Hendri and Rangor need our help? The Empire isn't in the business of building or running planetary governments."

"I believe we do need that help, at least for a while."

"How long?"

Krell shrugged. Elsa found the behavior a bit annoying, and recently, a number of her crew on the ground had picked up the habit. Star and Spence were the worst of the lot. "Perhaps a year, maybe a little less, maybe more."

"Not very definite." Q glanced at a display screen to the side of his desk. "And if Lieutenant Hawking and Major Spencer don't stay, you want to stay aboard *Daedalus*."

"Yes, that's correct."

"So." Q stared at each person in the room for a few moments. "Why do I feel like I'm being blackmailed?"

"We don't mean it that way, Sir." Elsa squirmed in her chair, her mind still wondering about Q. "I think this is a good solution all around, both for professional and personal reasons."

He sighed. "I played matchmaker for the Emperor many years ago, and I thought he was crazy." The smile again touched his lips. "I sometimes still do. Be that as it may, you have discretion in this matter, Captain Davis. Do what you think is right for all involved, and I'll explain it to the Emperor when his wives let me. Carry on."

The screen faded to black, his smile lingering like a Cheshire cat's.

\* \* \* \*

"Helm, prepare to leave orbit, heading one-niner-seven at one-half impulse power."

"One-half impulse on one-niner-seven, aye."

"Communications, get me Lieutenant Hawking, please."

"Yes, Ma'am." Elsa waited while the link to the surface was established. "On channel two, Captain."

"Thank you." She flicked the switch on the command chair. "Star, we're ready to leave orbit. Do you have everything you need?"

"Yes, Captain. Things are going just fine, and the new water system you sent down did the trick."

"Good. Fleet advises me the supply ship with the rest of the things you need and the teams from the Foreign Office will be here in eighteen weeks." Elsa paused. Her gut told her this was all going to work out just fine. "We'll be back in sixteen months to pick you up. All three of you."

"That sounds great, Ma'am."

"We'll see how anxious you are to leave then. Good luck, Star."

"Thank you, and Godspeed." The communications line went dead.

Elsa smiled, wondering what she had to look forward to between now and when she would next see the odd trio she was leaving behind to rebuild a world.

"Helm, get us out of here." She waved her hand at the big view screen at the front of the bridge. "Out there."

**THE END**

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## AUTHOR'S BIO

Melodee was born in 1971 in the Ozark Mountains of Missouri. Anyone who has ever watched the Beverly Hillbillies will know that the Ozarks is absolutely awash in storytellers. One of Melodee's earliest memories is sitting in the front porch of her great-grandma's house listening to the old woman tell stories about the old days.

"Fanny" by name, great-grandma could remember the days before airplanes. And she talked about men landing on the moon. The stories blended modern technology and society with old values and down-home common sense. The blend didn't always coexist perfectly.

Be that as it may, coming from a long line of storytellers, Melodee soon tried her hand at the craft. Writing stories in grade and high school that often invoked the ire of her teachers, she was never able to fit into the mainstream of "proper" literary attitude. Even non-fiction work drew the attention, all negative, of her teachers and school administrators. A paper she wrote in 7th grade supporting the death penalty by means of public hangings for sex offenders gained her three days off from school.

Attending SEMO university, Melodee soon came to the attention of several frat houses for her habit of reading Penthouse Forum in the school cafeteria. She also came to the attention of the dean and, eventually, the chancellor. After three years of study, a year off to work at Steak 'n' Shake waiting tables, and another year of school, Melodee finally received her degree in Liberal Arts.

Comment from Melodee:

Engineering majors ask HOW something works.

Philosophy majors ask WHY something works.

Liberal Arts majors ask if you want fries with that.

Sometime around 1999, Melodee discovered that she could actually make money telling stories. She took a job at a local library reading to kids after school. Oh, and sorting books on the shelves. Sadly,

the job lasted less than a year because Melodee usually ignored the books she was reading and told her own stories.

Because of being a voracious reader of science fiction, most of Melodee's stories took on a sci-fi spin. She has sold, under several other names, a number of short stories and articles that have appeared in magazines and Internet publications. In addition, she has a good list of print novels published.

In 2005, Melodee turned her attention to Erotic Romance. This seemed a logical step since all of the stories she writes have a romantic element in the plot. The addition of erotica to the mix simply leaves the bedroom door open.

Melodee lives near San Diego, California now in a small town whose claim to fame is that it is the former home of Dennis the Catman. The high desert is an interesting place. Between getting about 4 inches of rain a year, the annual wildfires, the occasional 16+ inch snowfall, and 100+ degree heat, it never gets boring! But it's never really green.

She lives with her 6 cats (Alexa, Chaos, Kittles, Tanner, Jake, and Lilac) and her three-legged dog (Tripper). Yes, she will probably die a crazy old cat lady.

Now, a few facts about Melodee:

- Born February 27, 1971
- Favorite Food: Italian, especially pizza. No fish, no fruit on that pizza, thank you.
- Favorite Color: Purple/Lilac
- Favorite Sport: Ice Hockey. Go, Blues!
- Favorite Author: Larry Niven. This is a tough one, but I have to stick with Niven. So many greats in this field.
- Favorite Book: Ringworld. Not the sequels.
- Favorite Music: Classic Rock. I like everything, though.
- Favorite Bands: Inquisitor Betrayal, The Moody Blues. Travis Tritt is also close.

- Favorite Song: Nights in White Satin. Question is a close second.
- Favorite Movie: Somewhere in Time
- Favorite Actor: Harrison Ford. Damn, he's cute!
- Favorite Actress: Sandra Bullock. See above!
- Dream Car: Toss up between a Prowler and a real military Humvee.
- Dream Home: A 10,000 square foot log cabin near Tablerock Lake on about 2,000 acres. Overlooking the lake, of course!

Please visit Melodee at [www.melodeeaaron.com](http://www.melodeeaaron.com).



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