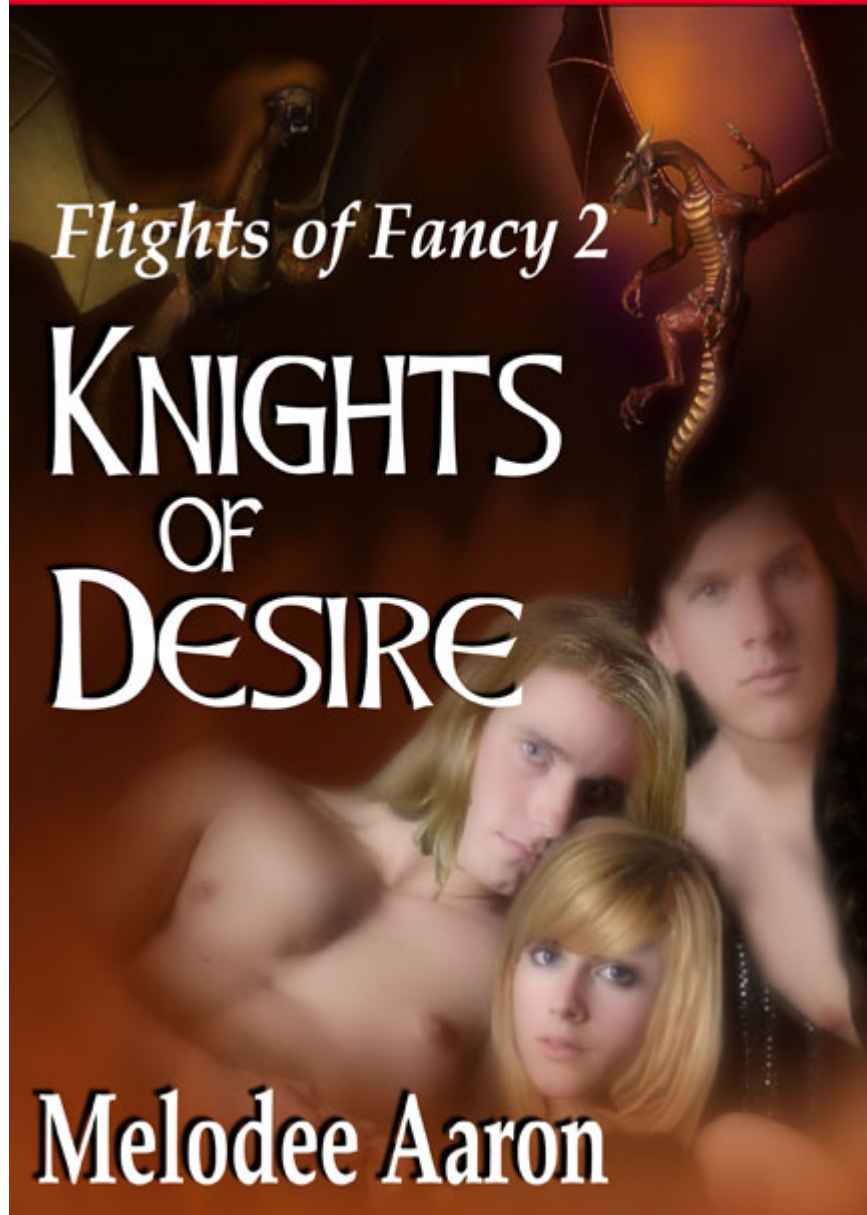


SIREN PUBLISHING

Flights of Fancy 2

KNIGHTS OF DESIRE

Melodee Aaron



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EROTIC ROMANCE



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IMPRINT: Erotic Romance

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FOREWARD

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 it is 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 that will add to their enjoyment.

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.

This second story in the series follows the crew of *Daedalus* further into the nether regions of the galaxy where they encounter aliens very similar to humans. For these people, distance in space distorts the history of time.

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

Keep Loving!

Melodee Aaron
August 2008
Guatay, California

KNIGHTS OF DESIRE

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Melodee Aaron

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Chapter 1 **Happy Landings**

"There's little I can do, my lord." Sir Clemmons shifted nervously in his armor. King Sayid was in a bad mood, and the man had a long history of making people disappear when they made his mood worse. "Without more men, the lizards will keep control of Yamat Valley."

"That's not acceptable, good sir knight." The king leaned sideways on his throne, his crown resting casually far back on his head. "Tell me what you think you need."

"Sir Landis and I could take the valley if we had a thousand more men."

The king's laughter echoed through the throne room. "That won't happen!"

"Even five hundred would help."

"Landis..." Sayid seemed to drift off, his eyes looking at some point far in the distance Clemmons couldn't see. Suddenly, his gaze snapped back to the here and now. "Perhaps it was a mistake to send both of you on this mission. Is your personal relationship interfering with your command skills?"

"No, Sire. What Landis and I share is personal. This is professional." He fought the defensive urges welling up in him. "I would be the first to face that possibility and would resign my command if I thought my life with Landis was affecting my ability to serve you."

The king stared at him for a long time. The love Clemmons shared with

Landis had often been a matter of controversy at court, and many didn't approve. Clemmons knew both he and Landis went far beyond their normal duties to the crown, mostly to prove to the others that two men could be lovers and knights at the same time. So far, for more than six years, it had worked, but he wondered if the king were about to change all that.

"Clemmons, you have served me long and well." A thin smile came to the king's face. "And so has Landis." The smile faded suddenly. "While your personal life is of no concern to me, if it starts to affect your ability to serve the realm, then I will step in."

"I understand, my lord."

"Then we are clear." The smile returned. "I'll see if I can get you more men."

* * * *

Shane adjusted her body armor to get rid of the pinch on her shoulder caused by the strap. New armor was always a pain in the ass, even worse than new boots, until it broke in. Once the pain receded a little, she flipped the helmet visor down and made a quick glance around the rock she used for cover.

Reflexes and skills learned in six decades of training and honed by more than two hundred combat missions in the service of the Emperor as an Imperial Marine allowed her to gather a staggering amount of information in the instant she exposed herself. In her mind's eye the infrared images marking the positions of the other two members of her team still glowed red with white outlines. Sergeant Kyle, the mission commander, lie in wait behind a small moss-covered boulder eleven meters to her right and two meters ahead of her. Private Meyers stood nine meters to her left and a meter behind her, crouched behind a tree.

She also saw the objective, a small gun emplacement protected by five hostiles, twenty-five meters ahead and less than half a meter to her left. The enemies clustered in a loose group, and their higher-than-human body temperature made their images glow orange-white in the infrared vision provided by the visor. The business ends of their laser weapons glowed with searing brightness in the after-image. One of the five sat at the controls of the heavy projectile gun of the emplacement.

Intelligence said the aliens hadn't broken the latest code yet, so the team used the communicators in their helmets.

"Kyle here. I'll lay a grenade up to them, and then we go. Meyers, you take left flank. Rawls, you take center. I'll take right."

Dave Meyers was young and new, but so far he seemed steady enough under orders. "No covering fire, Sergeant?"

"We don't need anything more than the grenade."

Shane smiled behind her visor. The boy had never seen a close-quarters nuclear grenade in combat. She flicked the tongue control of the communicator. "Copy, Sergeant."

"Good." When Kyle jacked a grenade into his launcher, a loud click came through the communicator. "In three, two, one—" A familiar thud announced the launch of the small atomic bomb. "Go!"

The intelligence on ground actions with the aliens was sketchy at best, and they didn't know a lot about what sort of defensive and offensive weapons the enemy had. They knew even less about how well trained the soldiers were. She didn't think of it, so Shane held no animosity toward Kyle for not knowing that the alien gun emplacement had a protective force field that absorbed the nuclear blast of the grenade. Someone had trained the soldiers very well, too—they reacted instantly to the explosion, opening fire as soon as the team left cover.

The explosion created enough of a distraction that Shane was able to drop behind a tiny rock, much too small to hide her fully, but it gave her some cover. Meyers wasn't so lucky. The laser beam from one of the alien hand weapons tracked across his chest, and smoke puffed from his armor. It wouldn't kill him, but the kinetic energy created from the absorbed photons flung Dave backwards as effectively as hitting him in the chest with a sledgehammer. He was going to be sore for a few days. If they lived that long.

The burp of the gun emplacement rang out through the dying reverberations of the grenade, and she realized it didn't sound right. Laser light, glaring white in the infrared of her visor, flickered around her. She used her tongue to flick the helmet to normal light, and saw that instead of the bright green or red hue she expected to see, the beams glowed in a dark, blood red, flickering in and out of visible light as it faded back and forth across the line between red and infrared. She studied the rays from the lasers

and listened to the projectiles from the emplaced gun. The pitch of the whine was off, like the rounds came from very, very far away and receded.

She smiled suddenly as the answer came to her. *Doppler shift*.

The force field worked by absorbing the kinetic energy of a weapon. To get their own weapons to fire through the field, the aliens used low-velocity systems, and the force field red-shifted the total energy.

Shane flipped her rifle over in her hands and worked the controls. The weapon normally fired five-millimeter projectiles at outrageous speeds and rates. The default muzzle velocity was around seventeen thousand meters per second, but it was adjustable, so she slowed it down to the lowest setting, about a hundred meters per second.

She pressed the communicator switch with her tongue. "Buy me some time!"

Kyle came on. "Copy. Light 'em up, Meyers!"

The battlefield came alive with the reports from high-velocity projectiles, the electrical crackling of lasers flashing the air to plasma, and the red-shifted burps of the enemy gun.

Shane leaned out from behind the rock and pulled her rifle tight to her shoulder. Twisting her hand in the shoulder strap to steady the weapon, she calmed herself and her pulse slowed. Controlling her breathing, her finger moved slowly on the trigger as she aimed, not at the aliens but at the flashing muzzle of their heavy gun.

Counting her pulse and respirations, she shut out the sounds and images from her mind and focused on her target. Shane had exactly one chance at this. Her index finger moved slowly, all of her experience and training coming to bear, and she squeezed the trigger smoothly and without jerking.

The dull thumping sound of her rifle was different from the normal sharp crack she was used to. Shane could imagine being able to see the slug winging its way toward the target moving only about twice as fast as the average family car.

Of course, she couldn't see the bullet. She did, however, see the effect.

The low speed allowed her small projectile to slip unhampered through the force field, and it struck dead center in the muzzle of the alien gun, meeting an outbound bullet someplace in the barrel. The resulting explosion ripped the gun apart, the shrapnel flying out in all directions. The effect on the aliens was about the same as putting them in a blender set to liquefy.

Kyle speaking through the settling silence made her snap back to reality. "Well done, Corporal. End simulation."

The holographic simulation wound down and the battlefield faded from view, puréed aliens and all. The emplacement, rocks, plants, and other features dissolved into the plain gray box that was the combat simulation deck aboard *Daedalus*.

As Kyle and Meyers came to congratulate her on completion of her final test for promotion to Sergeant, Shane stood and flicked up her visor.

* * * *

Elsa was a little disappointed when she had to talk to Admiral Reeves instead of getting to see Lord Admiral Q. She was also objective enough to know that the main reason she wanted to see Q was to get some material for late-night fantasies in her cabin. Not that Zach Reeves wasn't hot enough in his own right.

The problem was that, while Q was unattached, Reeves was married. In fact, he was married to Claire—as in Fleet Admiral Claire Reeves, MD—as in *Princess* Claire—as in the eldest child of the Emperor. Rumor even had it that when, and if, the Emperor ever stepped down, Zach Reeves was the heir apparent to the throne.

He smiled out at her from the screen. "Sorry Q couldn't be here, but even the Lord Admiral needs a vacation now and then. What can I do for you, Captain Davis?"

Since when did a simulated human need a vacation? Elsa couldn't help also wondering whom Q might be with on this so-called vacation. "Just a routine report, Sir. The Admiral asked that I provide a report prior to making any new contacts."

"I see. Yet another detail Q left out when he briefed me." The smile broadened. "Might as well get on with it, then."

"Yes, Sir." She sent data on the planet *Daedalus* had found to the Admiral's screens. "Fairly routine. A main-sequence star with a class-M planet. Water, oxygen, and all the rest. We have life signs of a remarkably human-like people down there, as well as a wide array of animals."

He studied the screen to his right for a few moments, presenting his profile for her to admire. Yes, Zach Reeves wasn't bad at all, but he was no

Q. "Any signs of spacecraft?"

"None. We're not even getting radio signals. The imagery shows an agrarian society with lots of what look like farms and grazing land."

He looked away from the data and back at her. "I see no reason to restrict your exploring this place."

"Thank you, Sir."

"Oh, before I forget, the Emperor asked me to pass along his well-wishes on your recent birthday." He grinned. "I can almost remember fifty-two."

Like most of the royal family, Reeves was old. She thought he was someplace around three thousand, but she wasn't sure of her history. He looked about thirty, and his wife didn't look a day over twenty-two, though she was about the same age.

"Thank you, Sir, and please tell the Emperor I said thanks as well."

"I will. If you need anything out there, just yell, but it will take us a while to get to you."

"Understood, Admiral."

He nodded. "Very well. Carry on, Captain Davis."

The screen faded to black.

* * * *

"Speak to us of the war." Handley shifted slowly on his raised dais, the torchlight glittering off the green-gold scales of his long tail.

Handley's habit of speech using the royal plural made Cedric's head hurt. He flicked his long, pointed ears to show his mild consternation. "The men are outnumbered, and they are frightened. Our warriors on the ground and in the air have control of the battle, and we are simply toying with the men to increase their fear."

"Very wise, Cedric, very wise." Handley's yellow eyes sparkled as he relished the thoughts of a thousand frightened men and its worth. "You use their own fear against them."

"Yes, Sire. Stories of this battle will spread among the men and make them reluctant to attack again."

"This pleases us." The greenish-gold tail twitched once with pleasure. "When will you end the battle?"

"I haven't decided that part yet. I wish to get full impact from the situation before letting the surviving men flee." As the senior officer, Cedric had full control of the battle, subject only to a direct order from Handley.

"Very well. Advise us when your plans evolve." Handley grinned his approval and huge white teeth, nearly a quarter of a meter long, showed rapier-sharp. "For now, terrify the men in our name."

Cedric extended his wings, flexing them at the shoulder to raise them high in the air in a salute to his king. "As you command, My Lord."

* * * *

Captain Ells smiled at her. "Well, Sergeant, looks like the landing party is ready, and you're in command of security down there."

"Yes, Sir." Shane hesitated. "I just wish there was an officer in command."

"I understand, but we both know the regulations. Until we get a replacement for Major Spencer, I can't leave the ship for routine missions. That means I have to trust landings to senior enlisted personnel, and that's you for this mission." He grinned a little. "This is all routine, and you know your job. Hell, you've been a grunt longer than I've been alive."

Spence had stayed behind with the cute little diplomat to help rebuild things on that rat-hole planet. Shane understood that part—what man wouldn't stick around to be with a pretty woman? The idea of him also hooking up with a man—an alien man—confused her a bit. She also wondered what made the girl want to end up in bed with two hooked-up guys.

The idea of being in bed with two men always sounded like it could be fun, but in her nearly eighty years of life, she had never had the chance to play that game. She still had plenty of time, though. With transplants, medicines, and other miracles of modern science, Shane expected to live another 350 years, if not more, and to look good for most of that time. Even now, most people took her to be in her early thirties. She knew she'd be able to mark that fantasy off her things-to-do list one day.

But doing it with two gay guys just didn't seem right. She pictured it more as the guys fucking her, not each other. OK, not gay—bi. Somehow, the details of the language and choice of words didn't make it any better. Not

that she had any problems with gay, or bi, men, but she wanted to be the center of attention. The Marine in her let that much of her feminine side out.

She smiled at the Captain, but she didn't think he knew the real reason. "I'll do my best, Sir."

"And that will be more than enough." The landing craft's pilot signaled that they were ready for the descent. "Just call if you need help."

"Yes, Sir." Shane saluted, and as Ells returned the salute, the door slid closed.

* * * *

The lizards again had retreated without doing any actual harm to the men. As Landis made his way back to the camp where Clemmons waited, he thought about the dragon's behavior. While the flying dragons swooped down, their shrill voices letting loose screams that curdled the blood of men, they never grabbed a single victim in their long, sharp talons. He heard the piercing click of the claws snapping closed near him, and Landis knew the fear it triggered in him was only a pale shadow of the terror the men must feel. On the ground, the creatures never came close enough to actually attack a man, only within range of sight, so the men could see the yellow-green eyes with the horizontal slits staring at them with murder and mayhem.

As far as he remembered from the day's fighting, Landis saw not a single casualty on either side. Clemmons was right—the lizards played a game of manipulation, instilling fear without causing harm or risking injury. It was a ploy designed to drive men away, to stop them from following orders, and to make them avoid contact in the future.

Landis reached the camp, and thoughts of the lizards faded from his mind. Clemmons stood outside the tent they shared and, as Landis watched, he pulled his armor from his torso.

The sun was warm here in the valley, and it glittered in rays of gold, red, and bronze as it refracted off the skin of Clemmons's chest, still moist with sweat from the battle. His long blonde hair moved slowly in the gentle breeze, and Clemmons stretched, his burly arms high over his head as he let the sun and wind dry the perspiration from his body.

Watching his lover across the short distance, Landis licked his lips. It

wasn't so very long ago that he was happily married and never thought of a woman other than Anna, let alone another man. But then, seven years ago while he was away on a mission for the king, the lizards came and raided the village.

Everyone knew that no matter what else had happened, no one could have saved the villagers, but guilt still filled him then. He could have at least died at Anna's side, his strong sword arm protecting her until the end. Instead, he knelt over her torn body, weeping openly, as other knights and soldiers searched for survivors that never materialized.

Clemmons had knelt beside him and touched his hand. Without a word, Clemmons led him away from the shredded corpse of his wife, leaving the soldiers to prepare the mass grave for the villagers.

After the priest said some words over the grave, he and Clemmons held an impromptu wake for the dead. As they drank deeply of the wine, Clemmons told the story of how he needed another brave knight to help him fight the lizards, to stop them from raiding more villages and killing more men.

Landis knew then he had finally received the calling all knights await. He vowed his life, not only to his king but also to the death of the lizards.

Over the next year, he and Clemmons fought side-by-side and back-to-back against the dragons, killing many of them. While the lizards had horrendous strength, they lacked the stamina of men. The two knights learned they need only to wear down the dragons, keeping them from taking wing, and then they were easy to kill. It was someplace in that year when the attitude between the men changed, but Landis was hard pressed to say just when.

Clemmons was a well-known ladies' man at court. Rumor had it he had bedded every single one of the ladies-in-waiting at least once, most several times. Based on Clemmons's late night absences, Landis believed the rumors. He never saw Clemmons slapped by serving wenches or ladies of the court for a quick fondling of a tit or ass. In fact, many of the women appeared to encourage such familiarities.

One night, a great distance from this battlefield, he and Clemmons had sat together in the light of the dying campfire, discussing the lessons of the day's combat. Clemmons sipped at his wine and studied him for a time before he finally spoke.

"Have you considered finding another partner?"

Landis recalled wondering at the time what had prompted the question. "I have, but no woman could replace Anna."

He nodded. "Perhaps, but what of a man?"

Same-sex partners sharing life was not unheard of in the kingdom, but Landis knew of no knight with such an arrangement. He laughed. "I never thought about it."

"Perhaps you should."

It suddenly became clear to him what Clemmons was suggesting. What with the friendship between them, they often seemed to be two people sharing one mind. The idea had merit. "Why should I?"

"You and I make a good team in combat and politics. We would be even better personally." He smiled. "Besides, you've got a great ass."

Landis laughed. "Well, you're not too bad yourself."

The rest of that night had faded into a chain of lovemaking, and they had been together as a couple ever since. The new relationship created a few problems at court, but most were from jealous women and of no concern.

Clemmons turned and saw him approaching. He smiled broadly, a look that gave Landis a sad reminder of how Anna would smile when he returned home.

"I see you're safe, Landis."

"As is everyone." As Landis hugged him, the firmness of the bulging muscles of Clemmons's chest pressed against him, stirring thoughts of passion and pleasure. "Any casualties here?"

"Of course not."

"Yes, I know. You told me so, and I've come to know you're right about the lizards playing with us."

"Yeah, I told you so." Clemmons released him from his embrace and stared into his eyes with the familiar look of playfulness on his face. "I saw you looking at me. Are you planning to take advantage of me?" His eyes twinkled. "Please?"

"You're insatiable."

"Perhaps I am."

Something in the corner of his eye caught Landis's attention. He turned to look, but whatever had flickered in his peripheral vision had vanished, and he saw nothing.

Clemmons sounded puzzled. "What's that?" He pointed to a bright object, moving very fast, far above the eastern horizon. It sparkled and flashed like the falling stars seen most nights, but the color was wrong. Instead of the yellowish-white of a star tumbling from the heavens, this object blazed blue and red with tinges of pure, blinding white in the mix.

The object moved far too fast and far too high for a lizard, and Landis felt no fear. Surprised by his lack of alarm, he realized quickly that the object would be on them before they could do anything about it. Resignation clearly took the place of fear.

The moving light swept in a wide arc from the east to the south, moving quickly. It seemed to be falling, but Landis knew from his experiences with the dragons it was an illusion. The light descended in a controlled way, not falling at all, and passed directly overhead as it powered to the north. High above them, he noticed a wisp of white smoke trailing behind the object.

As he and Clemmons turned as one to watch the light head north, a sudden noise swept over the valley. It started low, like thunder in the distance, and then built quickly to a loud, sharp boom, like God clapping his hands together to get the entire world's attention.

The object stopped dead in the air. It hesitated and then seemed to get larger without moving at all.

Clemmons chuckled softly with a hint of nervousness to the sound. "Um, it's coming here."

Just like a ship sailing directly at the shore or a rider heading straight at a guard post, the object didn't move from side to side, it only got bigger. And it got very big.

As large as a city carriage for hauling several hundred people, the object shone like a mirror in a silver color that reflected not only the sunlight, but also trees, grass, and other things. Settling closer to the valley floor, the object kicked up dust and dry grass, and the shimmering reflections of the sides made it hard to see clearly.

It whined and screamed like nothing Landis had ever heard before but he wondered if creatures the sages spoke of in tales of banshees and demons that roam the night woods in haunted parts of the world might make the sound. As a knight, Landis didn't believe the stories, but he wondered if it might be time to start believing.

The object suddenly grew four great legs, like some kind of drink-

induced vision of a horrible insect, and came to rest on the ground. The sound cut off suddenly, and the eerie silence only added to the bizarre scene.

He swallowed. "Well, what do we do now?"

"Hand me your dagger." Clemmons held out his big hand.

"What? Are you going to slit its throat?"

"I wouldn't even know where to start cutting, but I'll feel better with a blade in my hand."

"Good point." He pulled the dagger from its sheath on his chest and passed it to Clemmons. Landis then drew his sword.

As they had done so many times in the past, the two men, lovers and comrades, stood shoulder-to-shoulder and faced an enemy.

But unlike encounters with the dragons, they didn't know what to expect from this strange object.

* * * *

As they studied the view screen, Shane stood beside Lieutenant Talbert. The sensors identified this small cluster of people, but it wasn't until they landed that anyone noticed the people were armed. Sort of.

Shane saw no weapon more advanced than an axe. Two men stood closest to the landing site, and one held a long, nasty-looking sword while the other had only a small knife. Other men hid in the brush around the area, and most had swords, but a few had mace-like clubs or battle-axes.

Talbert sighed. As senior diplomat for the mission, he was in nominal command of the landing craft, but Shane was in charge until she assured the safety of the crew. "It's your call, Sergeant."

None of the weapons she could see or that the scans detected posed any threat to an armed and armored Marine. "I'll go out with a couple of men and see what the situation is. You and the rest stay here until I give the all clear." She turned to the pilot. "If things get crazy, you lift off and wait for me to call."

The pilot nodded.

Talbert frowned deeply. "You're not trained to talk to these people."

"Neither are you, Lieutenant. This first-contact stuff is new for all of us, and every one is a whole new game."

"You've got a point there." He paused, his brow knitted in thought.

"Alright, just remember that the number-one cause of conflict is misunderstanding what the other person says. You'll be using the electronic translators, so there may be a good deal of that."

"Don't worry. I won't shoot until they shoot at me first." Shane turned to the waiting Marines. "Degnan and Crosby come with me." She nodded to the crewman at the airlock controls. "Pass us through."

* * * *

Clemmons heard the other men moving slowly through the brush around where he and Landis stood watching the strange thing that had landed before them. The men did what they had to do despite their fear of the unknown and the terror the dragons rained on them daily. Their steadfastness spoke well of their training and bravery.

Clemmons tried to think of something to say, but he had no idea what it might be. They could only watch and wait for now. They needed more information about this odd object, but suddenly, the time to wait had ended. A small puff of steam or dust came from the side of the object, and a series of lines in the shape of a door appeared in the smooth, mirror-like skin of the thing. A small ramp grew from the flank like a living limb to reach the ground.

A small figure stepped through the door to stand at the top of the ramp, and the motion pulled his gaze from the extending ramp. It was the figure of a woman. Other than the large globes that marked her breasts, he had no way to tell it was a woman, because she wore a suit of solid black, so dark that it seemed to suck the light from the air and gave no reflection. The total absence of reflection from the suit contrasted starkly with the mirror-like surface of the object that brought her here. The suit covered her from her neck to her toes and ran down both arms to the tips of her fingers. A helmet that looked separate from the suit covered her head, and a dark visor hid her face.

In her hands was a club or large stick, though Clemmons knew instantly it was a weapon, probably far more dangerous than a simple club. Her head swiveled around, looking in all directions, and, after a minute, she gave a funny motion with the fingers of her left hand.

As if on command, two more figures darted from the door and ran down

the ramp, taking up positions on either side. The door closed instantly, and the woman moved slowly toward the ground.

The other figures kept the same vigil as the woman, but they were obviously men. Much larger than the woman, they were nonetheless under her command. And the military image was exactly right. These were soldiers, perhaps knights from some other, unknown kingdom.

The object was a ship of some kind that sailed not on water but through the air. Like any ship, this one was only a tool, a piece of technology, though vastly superior to anything he and Landis knew of.

Even though the woman and her comrades offered no harm to them, they might be dangerous if provoked. It would be best to make friends with these people.

Clemmons shifted the dagger to his left hand and raised his right high in the air. "Ho! I am Sir Clemmons, knight of the realm, servant of King Sayid."

A small box on the belt of the woman made strange sounds, and she stopped, looking directly at him. The other soldiers didn't react to him at all. She touched the box, and he heard sound coming from her helmet.

The box tried to speak. "...have...a...arm..." The rest was just random noises.

He waved his hand in the air. "Yes, I have an arm."

Landis snorted.

The woman again touched the box. "...keep...my...need...earn..."

"I don't understand."

Landis sighed. "Don't you see? The box talks for her, but it doesn't know how."

"You think that's a woman, too?"

"Of course. Have you ever seen tits like that on a man?"

"Well, no."

While he and Landis talked, the woman had been doing something to the box. She looked up at him again. "What is your name?"

He smiled. "I'm Sir Clemmons. This is Sir Landis."

* * * *

Shane tried to concentrate on the task at hand, but damn those two were

cute. The two men came in two different sizes—big and bigger.

The big one had black hair the color of a radiator in a thermodynamics lab blackbody experiment, flowing over his shoulders and covering the shining black leather of the armor he wore. Eyes the color of emeralds stared out from beneath his high brow, and he held a long sword in his right hand with the comfort of a warrior accustomed to combat. While the leathern suit he wore covered his body fully, his wide shoulders and muscular neck told of the strength only barely concealed. Fine black stubble covered his chin.

The bigger one had blonde hair that spilled halfway down his bare torso and pale blue eyes that seemed to look through her and out to infinity. A few days growth of blonde beard covered his cheeks and chin, and when he flexed his hands, the muscles of his chest and arms roiled like rocks under his tanned bronze skin.

The two men were clearly warriors. Alien warriors. She smiled behind her visor. *Delicious alien warriors*. Shane shook herself a little. She needed to treat them as dangerous alien warriors until she knew otherwise, no matter how delectable they might be.

She fussed with the translator. So far, it gave her only garbled fragments of words. The lights and dials said it was working on a translation, but it would take a little time.

Corporal Crosby spoke in her communicator. "Sergeant, the others seem happy to stay in the bushes. Scans confirm they are remarkably human-like, no major differences."

She flicked the transmit switch with her tongue. "Copy. Keep an eye on our friends in the brush. Do not fire without my authorization."

"Understood, Sergeant."

Suddenly the translator found something to latch onto. As the bigger one moved his mouth, the box gave its version. "I'm Sir Clemmons. This is Sir Landis."

* * * *

In his eighteen years as king and twenty years as prince before that, Sayid saw it done only once when he was a child of not more than three and his father still lived and sat on the throne. The times when a message was

important enough for the messenger to ride his steed right into the throne room to save time were exceedingly rare, and yet he now heard the clatter of hooves on the stone floor announcing that the rider approached.

The rider and his mount were both soaked with sweat, cloth and fur stained and clumping wetly to their skin. Both also panted heavily, trying to grab just a little more air in each gulping breath. At least the messenger didn't foam at the mouth in frothy white globs that dripped in sticky streamers to the dark stone floor.

The rider jumped from his steed even before the animal had fully stopped, and the man tried to avoid falling. He almost made it, but his foot slipped in the gooey drool of his mount, and he went to one knee. Sayid gave the squire credit for a good, smooth recovery.

The messenger bowed his head, his chest heaving rapidly. "Your Majesty, a message from Sir Landis." He held out a tattered paper.

Sayid took the parchment and waved for footmen to assist the messenger and his animal. He opened the paper and read Landis's clearly hurried writing.

My Lord, King Sayid:

Strangers now visit the land of My King. These unknown men came from the sky in a machine of metal, riding on thunder before which even the sound of the wings of the lizards' pales.

These are a strange people, and they speak through magic boxes they carry on their belts. They hold what are clearly weapons, but Clemmons and I have yet to discern their manner. The men have offered no harm, but they are watchful.

More to follow.

Sir Landis

Sayid wondered if he should go personally to meet these strangers, but that would not only be unseemly for a king, but it might be a trick of the dragons.

Best to stay here until Landis and Clemmons learned more.

* * * *

Clemmons was far more outgoing than he, and Landis knew it, so he was content to stand by while the woman and Clemmons taught her box to talk. He busied himself for a few minutes, sending a quick message to the king.

The woman's box was talking better now, and she made appropriate replies, so he guessed she could understand them, as well.

Clemmons laughed casually. "We mean you no harm."

She hadn't removed her helmet or even raised her visor. Her soldiers maintained their watchful vigil over the men in the weeds and paid no attention to them or the woman. Landis thought that meant they believed this woman could take care of herself even when facing two knights of the realm.

She nodded. "And I mean you no harm."

Landis decided the machine was doing well enough for him to jump into the conversation. "Perhaps then you can tell us your name and where you come from."

"I'm Sergeant Rawls, and I'm from the Empire of Mankind."

"Well, Sergeantrawls, maybe you could show your face." Clemmons rubbed his bare chest with his hands, grabbing Landis's attention. "After all, I'm not even covered!"

"No, not 'Sergeantrawls'." She took a deep breath. "Sergeant is a title. My last name is Rawls."

Landis laughed. "We understand a title, but last name? You have more than one name?"

"Yes, my first name is Shane."

"So what do we call you?"

She seemed to sigh. "Just call me Shane. That will save time."

Clemmons nodded. "Alright, Shane. Maybe you can show your face."

She paused for many seconds, finally calling to one of her comrades. "Degan, cover me."

The man turned, his weapon not quite pointed at them. "Yes, Sergeant."

She leaned forward, and Landis heard a soft buzz as the visor rolled up into the helmet. She pulled the helmet from her head and stood up straight again, facing them.

He'd been imagining she would be attractive, his imagination perhaps running away with him, filling in the blanks the black suit and covered helmet created. She was a small woman, short and slender, except for the ample breasts the skin-tight suit served to highlight.

But nothing prepared him for her face.

Short hair the color of golden sunlight bouncing from ripe flax framed a pretty triangular face. As she shook her head, her hair formed a golden halo around her head, but her eyes never left him and Clemmons. His first thought was that the eyes were the color of flax blossoms, blue with purple tints, that would compliment the color of her hair perfectly, but Landis soon realized he was mistaken. The eyes were the color of sapphires, dark blue with a depth to infinity and hints of flashing white his overactive imagination told him would sparkle like the sun on quartz when she smiled.

The tanned skin of her face told him much, and Landis knew a warrior when he saw one. The woman, this Shane, was in excellent physical condition, trained and sharpened to kill, just as he and Clemmons. He managed to pull his eyes from the gorgeous face, and his gaze drifted down her body. The black suit covered her completely, not an inch of skin showing anyplace except her bare head where the helmet had covered her.

But the skin-tight armor hid nothing of her shape. Her breasts rode high and round on her chest, delightfully inviting, and gave way to a narrow waist before sweeping delectably to full hips. Even the shape of her legs, curvaceous and looking longer than they should on such a petite woman, came through the odd black material.

Even though he wondered what this beautiful woman would be like to talk to in a different place and situation, Landis couldn't help but notice the stirring of his cock beneath his armor.

The hardening of his dick caused a similar stir in his conscience. It dawned on Landis that he never felt any guilt over his relationship with Clemmons—he didn't see a love affair with a man as being any disrespect to Anna's memory. But this sudden and unexpected attraction to a woman somehow felt like cheating, and not just cheating on Anna, but on Clemmons as well.

The biggest problem was that here and now was neither the time nor place to be thinking about his love for Anna and Clemmons or his lust for a woman he just met.

* * * *

Clemmons watched carefully as the woman removed her helmet, but he wasn't sure whom to watch more carefully.

The woman-warrior was nothing less than staggeringly beautiful. Short, blonde hair made a perfect frame for the lovely face. Her chin was narrow and covered with tanned skin he knew would be soft and supple to the touch. Clemmons fought the urge to reach out and stroke his hand down her cheek.

He stared, but he couldn't pull his gaze from her eyes. Once, many years ago, Clemmons had seen a deep spring near a town, and the lizards had claimed the spring for their own, thus leaving the village without a water supply. He led a regiment to secure the spring for the men. The spring wasn't round but an elongated oval, shaped much like nuts imported from the western parts of the kingdom, and one end had a slight twist toward the north. He imagined that from the perspective of a dragon flying high overhead, the spring would have looked much like a man's eye. The locals didn't know how deep the water of the spring was, and some said it was bottomless. Clemmons knew such ideas were nonsense, but he had seen the water for himself. Still and a deep blue with swirling flashes of white, the depths could have gone on forever. The eyes of the woman now standing before him and Landis had that same look—deep and infinite, a blue that grabbed a man and held his every attention, mindless of all else around him.

Her body, details hidden by the black armor she wore, was delicious. Large, firm breasts sat high and pointed on her chest. Her legs seemed to go on to the same infinity reached by her blue eyes. Between tits and legs resided a playground of delectable curves, ridges, and valleys of feminine flesh.

She had a beauty to rival that of any of the women at court, and yet this woman was clearly a warrior. She gave orders to the men who accompanied her, and the attitude of the men was such that Clemmons fully understood she was more than capable of defending herself. Such women were exceedingly rare, and he couldn't recall any in his past.

But as fascinating as Clemmons found the woman, he also noticed how Landis stared at her. His lover's face held a strange, dreamlike expression as

his gaze flowed from the woman's pretty face, down her chest, across the flat stomach, and played down the shapely legs to her feet before moving back up her form.

Sometimes, when Landis spoke of Anna, his face held that same, faraway look.

Chapter 2

Leaping Lizards

Over the last four days, Shane had come to trust Landis and Clemmons. With only one exception, they never withheld information or even hesitated to answer questions as fully as they could. While the translators were working well, the language barrier still cropped up from time to time, often with amusing results. Like when the translator somehow connected the word "hill" to "boob" and "slit" to "pussy." She laughed out loud when Landis tried to tell her about a cleft in the low mountains where his men sometimes took cover from rainstorms.

"I gather it's a bit rare, but the science people tell me parallel evolution isn't unheard of." Lieutenant Talbert's musings snapped Shane out of her thoughts. She'd wondered about why—and how—the people here could be so much like humans. "There's a theory that much, if not all of the life in the galaxy sprang from some sort of common cosmic egg. Different exobiologists use different terms, but they seem to like panspermia the best." He smiled. "I can barely pronounce it."

Regardless of the reason, there were no important differences between humans and the people here. Shane wondered how far that went. She'd seen both Landis and Clemmons without their shirts, and the bones and muscles under the appropriately tanned skin all looked right. In fact, they looked right enough to make her mouth water. The bulges in their pants made her pussy water, too. She giggled—it also made her hills warm.

Talbert frowned. "What did I say?"

"Oh, nothing." Shane changed the subject. "How did your meetings go with the king?"

"Very good." He poked at the campfire with a stick. "Most of the talks are with various ministers and other officials, but the time I spent with King Sayid was good. He was just as tightlipped about this war they're fighting as

the two knights, though."

That was the only area where Landis and Clemmons had been coy. All she'd been able to learn was that the knights fought dragons. As romantic as the idea sounded, it also had a bit of the incredulous about it. "I think it's mostly a translation problem. For some reason, the electronic translators can't grab the emotional side of why they are fighting."

"I agree. Maybe when the linguists get up to speed, they can figure it out. I don't think it's important, though."

Shane glanced at her watch. "I'd better go check on the sentries." She stood up from the campfire. "Sleep well."

She liked to make a check on the several guard posts set up around the camp before she went to bed, not to check on the guards so much as to just take a walk. She used the excuse of making sure the sensors were working right to get out under the alien sky and unfamiliar stars.

She approached post four, and a bright light flashed in her face as a voice called out, "Halt! Identify yourself."

Shane smiled. The guards were well trained and alert. "Rawls, Shane. Sergeant."

"Give the password."

"Alpha niner five gamma."

"Advance and be recognized." She walked toward the light, keeping her hand away from the sidearm she wore. The bright light went off. "Evening, Sergeant."

"Evening, Degnan. Everything all right out here?"

"Just fine. All systems are green and nothing happening." He chuckled softly. "Sort of a boring planet, if you ask me."

"Boring is good for a change."

The scanner beeped softly, and Degnan turned to the screens. "Two people approaching, bearing 187, range 158 meters."

She looked over his shoulder at the infrared display and recognized the outlines of Clemmons and Landis. None of the other men were as big as they. "I'll intercept and identify them."

"Yes, Sergeant."

Shane moved off in the direction of the approaching knights. She was much more relaxed now that she had replaced her body armor with a casual uniform. While the armor didn't restrict her movements, it was sometimes

stiff and would go rigid under what the system decided was an impact. The softer material of the uniform felt good against her skin.

Whatever its exact nature, Shane knew she didn't understand the kind of war the knights fought. The closest things in her experience were the urban combat missions thirty years ago when Palean Liberation Front terrorists invaded the Klendau system. She was stationed near the base camps and she could have returned to the ship every night, much like an accountant after a busy day at the office, but she chose to stay in the bivouac instead. In much the same way, Landis and Clemmons were close enough to the capital of their kingdom to go home at the end of the day, but they stayed at the encampment.

Over the last few days, Shane had noticed the two knights were much closer than simple men-in-arms. It wasn't unusual for soldiers who shared a tent and lived in close proximity to form intense friendships, at least for humans, but Landis and Clemmons seemed somehow different.

Shane experienced the closeness that built between soldiers in combat. She lost count of how many battlefield romances brought on by the stress and danger she shared with a fellow warrior. Most turned out to be nothing more than one-night stands.

She wondered for a short time if the men might be gay, but she dismissed the idea. Clemmons, in particular, flirted openly with her. Landis and Clemmons were nothing more than good friends and comrades.

* * * *

"We are not pleased by this turn of events, Cedric." Handley drummed his sharp claws in irritation, and small sparks flashed from the stone of the floor. "We are less pleased by your inability to provide us with information."

Cedric didn't actually fear Handley. Like most dragons, he feared Handley's henchmen, those who would, at a mere hint from the king, make certain no one ever heard from the king's enemy again. He couldn't quite stifle the wave of shivers that ran through him. "I have given you all of the information I have, Sire."

"And it is less than almost nothing. You say that strange men have joined our enemies, but you do not speak of their strengths, weaknesses, or even their intentions."

"I know nothing of those things."

Handley's diaphanous wings flared out to their full length, nearly touching the walls on each side of the great hall. As he lunged toward Cedric, he flapped them hard as if to emphasize the deep roar of his voice and the yellow flash of his eyes. "Then speak to us of what you suspect!"

"The nature of the new men who have joined the others is hard to discover." Cedric lowered his head, signaling his sorrow for his lack of knowledge. "There are two, a man and a woman, who appear to share command of the group. The man has involved himself with King Sayid and various ministers, but the woman has spent time with the knights and warriors of the king."

"What can that mean?"

Cedric couldn't avoid answering a direct question. "I'm not certain, but I think the man is a politician while the woman is a soldier."

Handley's eyes narrowed, the yellow irises glowing as if on fire. "They plot against us."

"That I do not yet know, Sire. They have offered no harm to anyone."

"What else could it mean?" Handley lashed his tail, and as the green and gold scales crashed into the floor, small chips of stone flew from the rocks. "You will do whatever is needed to protect us."

* * * *

They rarely had the time or energy while at the scene of a battle, but Landis and Clemmons liked to take a walk before bed. Landis wondered about why the dragons had given them the time to walk the past few days since the arrival of Shane and her people.

"I think the lizards don't know what to make of our guests." Clemmons squeezed Landis's hand before he went on. "I know the dragons are aware of the visitors, but they want more information."

The lizards had made no attacks since Shane's arrival, flying only high overhead. Landis knew the soaring dragons could learn much from that practice with their remarkable eyesight, but without hearing the talks between the parties, they would also miss a lot of the information. Landis wondered if that was good or bad.

"Perhaps we should take advantage of their confusion and attack the

dragons."

Clemmons shook his head. "No, not until we know what Shane would make of that."

"You're right, of course, and I don't think it would be the wisest thing we could do, either." Landis still had some concerns about the strangers. Shane and her soldiers made no offer of violence, but it was clear the weapons and tools at her disposal were far superior to the strong sword clicking softly in its scabbard on his hip.

"I'm always right." Landis felt Clemmons squeeze his hand again. "Tell me what you think of Shane."

"In some ways, she frightens me. She's confident of her abilities and those of her people. I don't think she's overconfident, either."

"Nor do I, but that's not what I mean." Clemmons paused a few moments. "Don't you find it odd for such a beautiful woman to be a soldier?"

"For us, yes, but we know little of the ways of her people. It may not be unusual at all for them."

"I think you're wrong. Look at the other women with her."

"Oh, I have, and one of the other warriors is nearly as pretty as Shane, and the woman who is talking with Lord Halstone about the crops is perhaps prettier."

"I think you're wrong about that." Clemmons again hesitated for a second or two. "Don't you find Shane attractive?"

Landis had found her gorgeous since the first time he saw her, but he hadn't mentioned that to Clemmons. "It doesn't really matter."

"Yes it does." He sighed. "I can't recall a woman nearly that beautiful."

It occurred to him that Clemmons was confessing. "You know, there's no harm in looking at a pretty woman."

"I guess not."

"I owe you an answer. Yes, Shane is very attractive."

"Well, it's not just me, then."

"No, it's not." Since confessions seemed to be the order of the evening, Landis had his own. "I have to admit I've wondered what she would feel like in my arms."

"So have I." Clemmons nodded slowly.

He decided to ask the question that had nagged him for the last four

days. "Do you miss being with a woman?"

Clemmons walked in silence for more than a minute. "In some ways, yes." He stopped and tugged Landis's hand, turning him so they faced each other. "But not many."

Landis had thought about this before and even more the last few days. "I think I know what you mean, but never forget I love you."

Without a word, Clemmons slipped his arms around his waist and pulled them together, pressing his lips to Landis's mouth. He pressed his tongue between his lover's lips, and waves of warmth, mixed oddly with shivering chills, rushed through Landis, and he hugged Clemmons tightly. The flavor of Clemmons's perspiration danced across his tongue and filled his nose, the clean saltiness adding to the sensations assailing him.

He and Clemmons moved against one another, and Landis's cock stirred in his pants, the gentle rubbing building his passions like it always did. He slipped his hands down Clemmons's back to cup the firm muscles of the big man's ass and squeezed, pulling their hips tighter together. Clemmons eased his lips from his and kissed across the fine stubble of beard to flick his tongue deep into Landis's ear, swirling wetly around the folds and plunging into the canal.

Clemmons moved his hands to unfasten the buttons of the light shirt Landis wore, and the firm fingers, deliciously rough with calluses gained from years of wielding a sword massaged his chest, darting across his nipples, making them hard with desire.

Leaning his head back with a sigh, Landis allowed himself to fall into the passions of love.

* * * *

Moving through the unfamiliar woods towards the two men, Shane watched her handheld scanner. They had stopped moving, perhaps talking about the strange visitors to their world or maybe just watching the night sky as she did. As she came within twenty meters of their location, a funny sound, a soft moaning came from their direction.

The scanner showed nothing except the three of them in the area, but on a new world it was best to err on the side of caution until she was certain the sensors weren't blind to some unknown animal or other threat. She silently

drew her sidearm and flicked the weapon to stun while disabling the safety with her thumb.

Moving forward through the dark undergrowth, Shane kept quiet, avoiding the sticks and piles of dry leaves on the forest floor. At the same time, she kept her eyes open, watching both the scanner and the woods in the half-light of the full moons filtering through the trees. The sensor showed her only six meters from the men, and the strange moaning pants were louder than when she first heard them. She pushed aside a small branch to peer into the clearing ahead.

At first, she didn't understand the sight before her. Landis and Clemmons were in the clearing, fully illuminated by the bright moons overhead, and the sounds she followed to her hiding place in the underbrush came from Landis. No animals or other people were around them, but Landis moaned nonetheless.

Clemmons knelt in the damp debris of the forest floor. Landis stood before him, his pants around his ankles, as Clemmons slowly licked the length of his cock. The low moans escaped from between Landis's pursed lips each time Clemmons sucked the mushroom-like head of his cock between his lips, swallowing the long shaft deep down his throat.

Shane considered a number of options for her reaction, and the calm, almost clinical way she considered them fascinated her on some level. She considered making some noise to alert the two lovers to her presence, and then pretending she didn't see anything. The idea of simply leaving quietly probably was the best course she could follow. Maybe running away from the pair would be even better.

Instead, she slipped the weapon into its holster, shut off the scanner, and watched.

As Clemmons alternated between licking and sucking his dick, Landis ran his hands gently over the blonde hair that spilled from Clemmons's head like a golden waterfall to cascade down his shoulders and over his bare chest and back. The moonlight, shimmering with a yellow hue, reflected from the slightly warmer sun, made the men's skin glow like bronze armor.

Heat spread across Shane's breasts, and her nipples hardened despite the warmth of the night air. She stared as Clemmons slipped the bulging head of Landis's cock into his mouth, his face moving rapidly as he sucked. Landis tensed slightly, and he gripped the blonde hair, pushing his dick deeper into

Clemmons's mouth. Even over the passionate moans coming from Landis, Shane could hear the soft gagging sounds Clemmons made when the long shaft pressed to the back of his throat.

As she watched from her position in the darkness, Shane rubbed her breasts through her blouse. Pinching her nipples sent shockwaves of pleasure and fire through her, and she considered yet another option for what to do—she thought of joining the two lovers she spied on.

Landis quivered, and Clemmons pulled back, the shaft of the cock he'd been sucking glistening wetly in the light of the moons. Landis thrashed, somehow avoiding falling, as cum erupted from his dick, squirting onto Clemmons's face before he licked at the frothy white fluid, lapping it from his lips.

Shane licked her lips and squeezed her breasts, almost able to taste the hot stickiness of cum on her face.

Landis dropped to his knees, and he kissed Clemmons's face passionately, licking and no doubt tasting his own cum on the face of the warrior. He reached to one of the small bags Shane had seen the men wearing, and Landis pulled out a small container. Opening the jar, he dipped his fingers inside and scooped out a shiny, wet substance and stroked some onto Clemmons's cock that stood out firm and hard from his body. Shane watched as Landis rolled slightly and spread more of the goop around his anus before turning to position himself on his hands and knees, ass high in the air.

Clemmons knelt behind Landis and rubbed the huge head of his raging cock against Landis's ass. Gripping Landis's hips in his big hands, Clemmons thrust forward, and the full length of his dick vanished into Landis's ass.

While the men thrust against each other, trying to get Clemmons's length just a little farther inside Landis's ass, Shane reached down. Shoving her hand inside her uniform, she rubbed her fingers over the hard bud of her clit, causing her to shiver with delight. The wetness oozing from her pussy spread over and between her fingers as she flicked her hand over her slit, spreading her lips to tease at the moist opening.

Landis rose up on his elbows slightly, and she could see his cock was again hard. It bounced and twitched with each thrust of the dick sliding in and out of his ass, and Shane imagined what it would feel like to have that

hard shaft in her pussy while Clemmons fucked Landis from behind.

She pulled her hand from her jumpsuit and licked her fingers, tasting the sweetness of her pussy, while Landis reached back between his legs to cup Clemmons's balls in his palm. Sucking her fingers into her mouth, Shane imagined Clemmons's huge dick not in Landis's ass but in her mouth, the throbbing head slipping down her throat as she straddled Landis, taking his dick deep in her ass as she writhed in the pleasure of making love to both men.

Licking the last of her juices from her fingers, she reached into her uniform once more, her fingers plunging deep in her pussy and her palm pressing firmly against her clit. Clemmons bucked hard against Landis, and the men both grunted and moaned. Landis twitched as cum again spurted from the throbbing head of his cock to spill onto the forest floor. Her last coherent thought was that it was a waste of cum—she could have taken his load on her breasts and Clemmons could have licked her clean.

Suddenly, every star in the unfamiliar night sky seemed to explode in the death throes of supernovae, each brighter than the rest of the galaxy. Despite the waves of orgasmic passion washing over her, Shane's training kicked in. Turning her head, she bit down on the collar of her jumpsuit, choking off the scream that fought to find voice in the quiet night air.

As the tremors of her climax receded, Shane watched the two men holding each other while the shakes of their orgasms also faded.

* * * *

Landis sat up a little, lifting his head from Clemmons's shoulder. "Did you hear something?"

Clemmons listened but heard only the normal sounds of the forest insects. "No, nothing."

"Just my imagination, I guess."

"We should finish our walk and get back to camp."

"We should." Landis stretched a little.

As he pulled on his clothes, Clemmons watched Landis. Yes, there were a few things he missed about being with a woman but not many, and none of them were physical. Even though most people never suspected he would be interested, Clemmons often missed just talking with a woman, hearing her

feminine opinions and ideas.

They finished dressing and prepared to move off toward the encampment. As they turned, holding hands, a bright light suddenly flashed on, shining directly in their eyes.

He reacted instantly, as did Landis, reaching for his sword, when a voice he recognized came from the undergrowth in the direction of the light.

"Don't move."

They had walked in the direction of the odd ship, and Shane had told them there would be guards in the area. She never mentioned she would be one of the guards in the woods.

The light went out, and Shane made her way closer to them. "You don't need your swords with me."

He chuckled. Clemmons wasn't sure how comfortable he was being close to Shane so soon after making love with Landis. "We know that, Shane."

She stepped into the clearing and pulled out one of the cold torches her people used for light. He'd been right, and when she smiled, her face lit up like the sun. "What are you two doing out here so late?"

"Just going for a walk, that's all." Landis gave him a wink before he turned back to face Shane. "And what of you?"

"Same thing, actually." She hesitated. "Just enjoying your world."

Her talking box learned more with each passing day, and fewer misunderstandings cropped up. It even seemed to have a sense of humor, sometimes making jokes.

Clemmons managed to pull his gaze from her remarkable eyes. "We were just going back to camp to go to bed. Will you be able to take that tour of the area with us tomorrow?"

"Yes, I think so. I'm looking forward to it, in fact."

Landis smiled. "That's wonderful. We'll meet you at your camp about an hour after sunrise." Shane offered her hand to Landis, and he shook it gently. "Goodnight."

Shane offered her hand to him, and Clemmons leaned forward slightly, raising it to his lips. "Goodnight, Shane." He kissed her fingers softly. She blushed and mumbled a hurried goodnight before walking off toward her ship.

Clemmons licked his lips. Not only had he garnered a fleeting scent of

what he was certain was Shane's pussy, he could taste the sweetness of her juices on her hand.

* * * *

Landis hung back a little, letting Shane and Clemmons take the lead on their tour of the area around the camps. He tried for a while to convince himself it was to allow Clemmons to use his verbal skills to learn more, but he realized some time ago he really wanted to watch her ass as she walked.

They had been moving for nearly two hours when Clemmons found a shaded area in the rocks and called for a rest stop. Shane was, as he'd suspected, in excellent condition and showed no signs of being tired, but she was, after all, a woman, and neither he nor Clemmons wanted to tire her. They sat in the shade of a large boulder and chatted.

Shane sipped water from the metal container she carried. "This is a beautiful world you have here."

"You'll have to be patient with us." Clemmons laughed softly. "Until a few days ago, we didn't know there were any worlds other than this one."

"I understand it can be a shock. For many years, the Empire held the position that we shouldn't contact worlds and civilizations that are—well, more primitive than we are. We learned that was a mistake." She shrugged. "The key is to be benevolent. We want to help other peoples grow and reach their full potential. There is a dangerous time in the evolution of every society we have ever studied, a period when the technology is great enough that the civilization can destroy itself, but the society is still primitive enough that they can't manage the technology. Many places we have studied have dead societies that destroyed themselves before they learned how to manage things. We almost did that to ourselves many thousands of years ago."

Clemmons nodded. "So you try to help people through that time."

"Yes, that's right." She smiled, and the day seemed a little brighter. "You're not in any danger yet, but maybe we can help you plan for the future."

Landis wondered about all of that. "Yet you have soldiers, like yourself, and you are armed."

"Yes, I'm a soldier, and I'm armed." She patted the thing she wore on

her side every time he'd seen her. "It's foolish not to prepare for battle and be ready to fight if forced. That's at least as foolish as fighting when you don't need to."

"I can see the wisdom there."

Shane hesitated for a moment and then seemed to make up her mind about something. "That's good to hear, but I wonder about this war you fight. We don't understand what it's all about." She shook her head and frowned. "No, more important, *I* don't understand it. I've come to believe that, despite being soldiers, the two of you love peace more than war."

Clemmons pondered, nodding his head. "I'd like to think you've read us right. I hate war, even with the dragons, but I fight because I feel I must."

"Tell me why."

"The dragons have a long history of attacking men, killing them at random, stealing land and food and water." He shrugged. "They won't talk to our ministers or the king, so what choice do we have?"

"Perhaps you just don't understand them and what they say." Shane laughed and brushed her golden hair from her face. "Look at some of the misunderstandings we've had."

Landis shared the laugh with her. "Maybe you're right, but if the lizards won't talk with us, how can we stop this?"

"I don't know. I'm a soldier, not a diplomat, but I know you have to stop it. In a short time, the history of my people went from the level of your technology to things similar to this." She again patted at the weapon on her hip. Shane looked thoughtful, and then she stood up. "Let me show you something."

She pulled the weapon from its holster and worked at the controls. "This weapon can do much more, but let me show you one of things it can do. It can throw a projectile, a slug, with tremendous force, and you'll probably figure out how to do the same within the lifetime of some children alive today."

She pointed the weapon at a small boulder, maybe five times the size of a man's head, some distance away. A sharp crack rang out from the weapon Shane held, and a large part of the rock exploded into dust, throwing stone splinters in all directions.

Clemmons stood still except for his head swiveling rapidly to shift his gaze between the damaged rock and Shane. He worked his mouth a few

times before any sound came out. "And that's only one of the things that weapon can do?"

"Yes, one of the least damaging things." Shane shook her head. "You have to know how to live in peace before you create such weapons."

"With weapons like that, we could crush the lizards."

"Yes, but at what cost? Is the extinction of the race of your enemies worth it? What about your own extermination?" She shook her head. "No, we've been there. It's not worth it."

* * * *

She'd been debating with herself all morning, but Shane couldn't decide what to say to the two men about the encounter she'd witnessed last night. She finally decided to say nothing at all, and that seemed easiest, despite the fact that she couldn't get the images out of her mind, to say nothing of the raging fantasies the images evoked.

One thing was certain, though—the reaction of the men to the demonstration of her sidearm triggered both fear and desire in her. Shane understood the fear part—Clemmons's face held hatred for the dragons, a need to kill them all and exterminate the species clearly showing on his expression. While somewhat more restrained, Landis too looked like he finally had found a weapon to destroy his sworn enemy. She wondered why the men hated the dragons so much.

She didn't understand the desire part at all. Like most soldiers she knew, Shane hated combat and despised all-out war. While Fleet members tended to be less warlike than the average Marine, she could count on one hand the number of jarheads she'd known who actually liked to fight. Why would the reaction of Landis and Clemmons affect her so? She felt the frown that came to her face as she considered her own feelings. Why did the urges of two men to kill off some species she'd never even seen, make her feel safe?

Landis and Clemmons exchanged a glance, and Landis tried to explain. "We have shocked you, I'm afraid. There is much to why Clemmons and I hate the dragons."

"I gathered there is something I don't know." Shane pushed her thoughts of the men down in her mind. "Why don't you tell me about it? I'd really like to understand."

Clemmons touched Landis's arm, a tender stroking more appropriate to lovers than to comrades. Despite her trying to focus on the matters at hand, Shane couldn't help thinking the men shared a touch even more appropriate to life-partners. When he spoke, Clemmons's voice was soft. "Let me, Landis. It's hard for you."

Landis nodded. "Perhaps that would be best."

A soft smile with a hint of sadness flowed easily over Clemmons's lips. "I think so." He turned to face her. "To make a long story short, this war is personal. About seven years ago, the lizards murdered Landis's wife. She was killed when the monsters raided a village."

In spite of expecting something like that in the men's past, the revelation still shocked Shane a little. She wasn't good at this sort of thing and wasn't sure what to say. Her mind flashed back to a young recruit she worked with ten or twelve years ago. She worked as the Assistant Company Commander of a group of new midshipmen, and the duty fell to her to tell one of the recruits his mother was dead, killed in an accident. She recalled telling the midshipman his mom was dead in very clinical terms, and all she could think of to say after that was that she was sorry for his loss. It wasn't as supportive as it should have been, and she knew it.

Shane looked at Landis, and his head hung forward, his black hair spilling to cover his face. She opened her mouth to speak, but no sound would come out, and that was probably good, because she still hadn't thought of anything to say that wouldn't sound stupid at best and flippant at worst.

She reached out and placed her hand on top of Landis's where it rested on his knee. His skin was warm, but he shivered. Her voice seemed to decide to work on its own. "I'm so sorry. I can only imagine how much it hurts to lose someone you love."

Landis looked up at her, and his gaze locked to her eyes. Wetness gathered in the corners of his eyes, but he blinked a few times, and the tears retreated. "Yes, it hurts, but time has eased it somewhat."

Shane regained some of her composure. "You can't kill an entire race for something one group did. We learned that long ago on Earth. Sometimes, small groups of people would do things, and the natural tendency is to blame all members of the larger group they belong to." She shrugged. "Pretty soon, no one is left."

"Again you speak wisdom." Clemmons sat beside Landis, his face a study in concern for his close friend. "But as we have said, the dragons won't talk to us."

"Maybe we can help you with that. Well, maybe Lieutenant Talbert can help. Like I've said, I'm no diplomat."

Landis brushed at his left eye with his fingers. "Perhaps you can."

* * * *

"I understand the problem fully, Captain, but we still need answers." Admiral Reeves didn't look too happy about things, but Elsa knew the man also understood command and the need to let her handle the situation. "What do you think is going on?"

"Talbert and Rawls think it's a communications problem." She thought for a moment, glancing over the report from the surface again. "We're still relying on electronic translations, and that misses the emotional side of the coin. My people on the planet think there's some kind of deep-seated emotional conflict between the people and these dragons."

"But you haven't even seen the dragons yet."

"That's correct. Well, other than some scans and long-range visual contacts of them flying overhead, we've had no contact with them."

"Exactly. Are they intelligent?"

"From what we've gathered, I think so. The dragons have their own loosely structured feudal society, and they have language, but as far as we've been able to learn, they don't make tools or build what we think of as cities."

Reeves sat quietly, staring out at her from the communications screen, his expression as neutral as thirty centuries of life could make it. Elsa could no more read him than she could Lord Admiral Q. He finally leaned his head to one side, and a small grin played over his face. "Tell me what you think all of this means."

Elsa had been asking herself that same question for several days now, and she didn't have enough facts to reach a conclusion. The memories of her meeting with the Emperor when he gave her this job came back to her. She recalled how he made no secret about the fact that he selected her to command *Daedalus* because she had good instincts and followed them. And her instincts were all she had to go on right now.

"I don't think the people down there are hiding anything from us, but we don't have all of the story yet. I think things could get more than a little tense before we get the full story, though."

Reeves nodded, his grin broadening. "Jim is right. Standby one." He reached for something on his desk, and the display switched to split-screen mode. The image of the Emperor swam into focus.

James the First, By Grace of God Emperor of Mankind, looked up from his desk and smiled. "Elsa, so good to see you."

"And good to see you, Your Majesty."

Reeves interrupted the pleasantries and outlined the situation to his father-in-law. "This is probably nothing, but since *Daedalus's* mission is your personal project, I thought you'd like to know."

The Emperor nodded. "That's just fine. Even with eighteen quadrillion people in the Empire, I like to have some clue about what's going on. On the other hand, I'm paying Elsa to make the decisions."

"Maybe you are, but we need another opinion on this one, Jim."

"That's what you pay me for." The Emperor grinned, the same grin his picture on the currency carried, as he looked out at her from the screen. "What is your gut telling you to do, Elsa?"

She swallowed. Despite the easy way he talked, she was giving advice to the most powerful man in the galaxy. Elsa knew he would follow her suggestions unless they were totally off the wall. She also knew if things went terribly wrong, he would take the heat. Yes, she'd get her lumps but in private. Any consequences from the Senate, media, or public would fall squarely on the shoulders of the men she now faced. It occurred to Elsa that she had, perhaps unconsciously, modeled her own command style after that of the Emperor.

"We should proceed with caution, but we should proceed. Of course, we need to get the information as quickly as possible, but the lack of information is no reason to bail out." She smiled. "I have good people on the ground, and we need to let them do their jobs."

"I couldn't agree more." A lopsided grin flashed from the face of the Emperor. "I have good people out there, and I intend to let them do their jobs."

Reeves laughed a bit. "Then that's all settled."

"As far as I'm concerned, yes. Carry on, folks." The Emperor's image

faded, and the screen showed only Admiral Reeves.

He nodded. "Just keep me informed, Captain." Reeves's picture faded to Technicolor 3-D static.

* * * *

In eight days, the linguists had made little progress in understanding the language of the planet, even though the electronic translators were working fairly well. The delay was causing problems, and the Captain was getting worried. Shane didn't understand all the talk from the linguists about tenses and pronouns, and she really didn't want to understand.

In some ways, the problems with the language also prevented Shane from broaching the subject of what she'd seen in the woods a few days ago. She didn't trust the electronics to handle that for her, because there were too many emotions involved.

So far, all attempts to contact the dragons had failed. Landis and Clemmons had no idea how to make that happen without it turning into a battle, and the king and his ministers said it was impossible. Shane saw the dragons flying high overhead from time to time, but that was all.

Of the other animals on the planet, the most dangerous seemed to be a small creature about the size of a rabbit. Beyond that, it didn't look much like a rabbit. Long, shaggy hair covered the animal like that on pictures she'd seen of some long-extinct dogs, and it had the disposition of a badger on illicit psychoactive drugs. But the animals were all bark and no bite, and if you moved away from them, they would fade back into the brush and run away.

Shane had walked into the woods to think, and her thoughts wandered aimlessly. She wanted to find a way to meet the dragons, a way to make contact and sort out the relationship between the people and the creatures. She'd learned the dragons had a crude society and some kind of language, but they lacked other trappings of intelligence—they didn't build towns or tools. If she used the strict rules defining intelligence, the dragons didn't fit the definition, but they were clearly more than simple animals.

The sound of a breaking twig to her right caused Shane to whirl around and draw her sidearm, her thumb flicking the safety off in one smooth motion. Landis stepped from the low branches and smiled.

"Hello, Shane." He kept his hand far from the sword hanging at his side.

"Landis, you startled me." Shane flicked on the safety and dropped the weapon back in its holster.

"Forgive me." He looked around the area. "You shouldn't be out here alone."

"The same goes for you. Where's Clemmons?"

"He rode to town for a meeting with some of the ministers." He looked around again, and the slight breeze caught his black hair, blowing it softly, like a semaphore flag. His gaze came to rest on the translator hanging at her side. "I hope we'll soon be able to talk without the need for your box."

"That will be nice." It occurred to her that some forms of communication didn't need words at all. "I'm just out for a walk to think a little. What are you doing out here?"

"Same for me." He shrugged. "I guess the real reason is I saw you leaving the camp and followed to make sure you are safe."

"I can take care of myself." She found his thinking she needed protection both comforting and irritating at the same time.

"I know that, but old habits die hard." Landis smiled. "I should go and leave you to your thoughts."

"No, that's OK. I'd like the company." She wasn't sure what made her say that.

* * * *

Standing less than two meters from Shane, Landis fought hard against the urge to tremble. He fought nearly as hard not to tremble as he did to keep his eyes on her face and not let his gaze drift over her petite body. She wore the casual uniform he'd come to know over the past few days, but she'd left the closure—she called it a zipper—on the top half undone to well below her breasts, and the sight fascinated him.

After inviting him to stay with her, Shane held her arm out toward him. "Come and walk with me." Her move was so like that of the ladies of the court that he reacted without thinking. Landis stepped to her and took Shane's arm in his. He knew instantly that was a mistake.

The bare skin of her arm felt warm against him, and his skin tingled where they touched. Reverberations of shocks rolled through his body,

running up and down his arm in waves. The feeling was much like that he had years ago when lightening struck a tree near where he walked during a storm. The hair all over his body stood on end, and his skin tingled and crawled, but unlike the fear he'd felt in the storm, these sensations were pleasant.

As Shane led him off through the forest, Landis realized there was an element of fear, though. He took a deep breath to clear his head, but the tactic backfired. His nose filled with a scent he'd never before smelled, and every instinct in him screamed that the wondrous odor came from her. Something, perhaps the smell, or maybe the touch of her warm body, reached into his brain and grabbed him.

Now Landis had another battle to fight within himself—he struggled with the urge to pull Shane to him, to kiss her full, red lips and run his hands over her soft and supple body. He fought the overwhelming desire building in him with words, his only weapon, but he didn't know if he was winning or not. He reminded himself he was in love with Clemmons. He recalled that, as a knight, he should be able to master his baser instincts. Landis tried to control his cravings by remembering he was representing the king to Shane. He hoped Shane was oblivious to all of this, and she continued to walk beside him, her arm linked in his, and chattered about things he completely missed.

She suddenly stopped and turned to face him, only half a meter in front of him. "There is something I need to talk to you about." She frowned. "Actually, I should probably talk to you and Clemmons both."

Landis looked down into her pretty face, the skin tanned and looking like it would be as soft as velvet. Shane's deep blue eyes sparkled in the afternoon sun, and he thought he could see the wispy clouds floating in the sky reflected there when she stared up at him, the top of her gorgeous hair reaching nearly to his chin. Quivers ran amok in his body while his muscles worked to control his ruffian urges.

A small frown painted itself on Shane's face. "Are you all right?"

Chapter 3

All The King's Men

"I'm curious, Sir Clemmons, why you haven't taken advantage of the lizards' reluctance." The king seemed in a much better mood today than on Clemmons's recent visits. "Why haven't you attacked them?"

He didn't like being away from the camp, Landis, or, if he let himself admit it, Shane, but Clemmons couldn't refuse a direct command from the king to appear at court. "Landis and I don't think that would be wise until we understand how the humans will react to that course of action."

"Since when do we care about what others think of things? This is my kingdom, and we do what I want."

"You don't understand, Sire. These humans value restraint and peace. We would be wise not to offend them."

Sayid made a dismissive gesture. "They are weak and don't understand the ways of our world."

"They are neither weak nor ignorant, my lord." Clemmons decided to risk ruining the king's good mood. "They are different. Shane is a warrior, no less than Landis or myself, yet she loves peace and tries to avoid war. She doesn't fully understand our fight, but she wants to end it."

"Fools."

"No, not fools."

"I won't get into this debate with you, Clemmons, and I won't order you to attack the dragons, at least not yet." Sayid leaned forward on his throne. "But I suggest you consider it carefully."

"Yes, Sire." Clemmons bowed and turned to leave the throne room. As he walked toward the door, he felt something, a sensation he couldn't explain. Somehow, he knew something was wrong back at the camp, and he quickened his stride without conscious thought.

* * * *

Shane studied Landis's face carefully. She'd seen that look before, but it took her a few moments to figure out where and when it had been. Finally it hit her that it was again back on Klendau when her company liberated a school full of children the PLF terrorists had held as hostages. General Damon Hyde, husband of Princess Allison and son-in-law to the Emperor, had personally led the assault Captain Harry Douglas, also the son-in-law of the Emperor and Allison's other husband, had planned down to the last detail. When the smoke cleared, fifty-six terrorists lay dead and two hundred and thirty-five students, none older than seven, were safe and unharmed. She had held one little boy, maybe six-years-old, as he shook with fear. Shane did the only thing she knew to do to help him calm down—she cuddled him.

When the little boy looked up at her, his face looked much the same as Landis's. Yes, there was fear in the expression, but there was so much more. Landis looked like he fought for control, just as the little boy had fought not to cry. Where she still touched his arm, Shane could feel tremors rippling through the big man's body, just as the child had shivered in her arms so many years ago.

Since he hadn't answered her, she decided to ask again. "Landis, are you OK?"

As he stared at her, his eyes flickered back and forth, tracing a path over her face. Black hair spilled down across his cheeks, and the fine stubble of his beard snagged the more wayward locks. The hair spilled over his shoulders to his chest, covered today, not by armor, but by a white shirt whose material looked like satin or, maybe, silk.

She was about to repeat her question for the third time when Landis grabbed her shoulders and pulled her face to his. The flavor of his lips exploded in her mouth like a delicious grenade. His tongue pressed gently against her lips, and when Shane parted them slightly, Landis probed her mouth deeply.

As her arms came up to wrap around Landis's neck, Shane latched onto the last of her reason and pushed him away. She strained to speak through the rapid panting his kiss had started in her. "We can't do this. It isn't right."

He took a half step toward her then stopped, closing his eyes. Landis

stood before her, his body shaking. "Tell me why."

"I saw you and Clemmons in the woods a few days ago." She didn't really want to bring that up, at least not now. Shane felt shame for her desire to bring it up *after* she had Landis. "You and Clemmons are lovers."

Landis still had his eyes shut, and shivers moved over him still. "No, we are life-partners. Being lovers is a small part of that."

She shook herself. Courses of warmth and want had swept over her in the few instants she spent in Landis's arms, and she yearned for the feelings to return, but Shane knew it was wrong. She just didn't know *why* it was wrong. "We can't do this."

Landis opened his eyes, and the determination Shane saw there frightened her a little. He'd already made up his mind. "I want you, and I think you want me." He took a deep breath. "If I have read you wrong, say so now."

He stepped forward, closing the gap between them, and put his bulging arm around her waist, pulling her close to him again. Once more, his lips pressed to hers, and Shane knew his tongue met no resistance as it slipped between her lips.

Shane should pull away, or push him from her, and then run as fast as she could, putting distance between them, but instead she wrapped her arms around Landis's neck, pulling his face tighter to hers as the taste of his lips filled her mouth. His body felt like a rock against hers. From his broad shoulders, working firmly under her arms as he hugged her, to the expanse of his chest, the humanlike pectorals flexing like boulders against her breasts, to the steel-hard shaft in his pants that pressed against her hips, Shane relished the delightful touch of this alien—no, this man—on her body.

Visions of Landis and Clemmons in the woods danced through her head until the feel of Landis's hands cupping her ass and pulling her hips against his hard cock made other thoughts fade in importance.

She pulled her hands from his neck and clutched at his cheeks, his long hair and the stubble of his beard blending silky softness with a coarse sensation into a compound Shane never knew could exist. Landis released her ass, and his hands slid up her sides, tickling and teasing her ribs, to grasp her breasts. As he kneaded and squeezed, fits of shivers rocked through her body. He tugged at the zipper of her jumpsuit, pulling it down to its lowest

point, and then slipped his hand inside her uniform.

When the heat of his palm spread across her breast, another dichotomy of sensations hit her as the roughness of his muscular and callused hand mixed with the softness of the lacy material of her bra. Her nipples, already hard with the excitement of his kiss and touches, burned with a fresh flood of hot desire. Landis moved his hand, sliding it under her bra to touch the bare skin of her breast.

He took her nipple between his thumb and forefinger, and Landis squeezed hard as he rolled the rigid nub. A shockwave of pleasure shot through Shane, and for the first time since the kiss began, she pulled her lips from his, and a scream of delight leapt from her mouth. Her head lolled back, and he kissed her neck, nibbling and licking from her shoulder to her ear, where his tongue flitted wildly.

While he kissed her neck, Landis moved his hands to work the jumpsuit from her shoulders, and it slipped down around her waist until he unfastened her gun belt and pushed it and the suit past her hips to fall to the ground. When he lifted her in his arms, Shane kicked the suit from her feet. He carried her like she massed nothing at all, and placed her on a pile of leaves in the shade of a large tree. Despite her total trust of Landis, a small wave of fear hit her when he pulled the dagger from its sheath at his hip. He moved quickly, first slicing the material between the cups of her bra and then that of her panties, leaving her naked on the forest floor. With a casual flick of his wrist, his eyes never leaving hers, he threw the knife, and it buried itself in the trunk of a tree some ten meters away.

Landis pulled the silky white shirt from his body and leaned to kiss her lips. The touch was soft and gentle, like the fleeting passage of a butterfly. He pulled away to look into her eyes again.

A small smile graced his lips. "Shane, you are so very beautiful."

She didn't know what to say, so she said nothing. Maybe it was the way his green eyes seemed to pin her in place, or maybe it was wetness in her pussy that prevented her from finding anything to say to him.

He raised himself up onto his knees and released the buckle of the belt that held his sword at its familiar place on his side. Landis tossed the weapon and belt to the side, and then he worked his pants down and slipped them off, tossing them to join his sword.

His cock stood out like a pole, straight and hard, as he knelt beside her,

and she found the flow of moisture in her mouth matched that in her pussy. He again leaned to her, and his tongue swirled around her hard nipple as he rubbed the other with one hand. His other hand moved down her body, brushing lightly over her stomach until it reached her wet slit.

His fingers dipped into her wetness, and his thumb pressed against her clit, rubbing and flicking the hard button. He pinched her nipple with his other hand. Shane knew her passions were high, and his actions had pushed her far along the way, but she didn't expect that when Landis bit firmly on her other nipple her orgasm would hit her so fast.

She screamed out loud, just a string of incoherent noise, as her back arched high off the floor of the woods and her body jerked in the spasms of her climax. As she writhed, Landis fingered her pussy ever deeper, and he chewed gently on her nipple. As he pressed his hand hard on her clit, Shane's hips bucked against him, and her vision clouded with bright lights that seemed to swim in and out of both existence and focus.

When he pulled his hand from her flowing pussy and released his grip on her nipples with his hand and mouth, Shane flopped back to the ground, her breath racing from her throat in gasping pants. He reclined beside her, and his hard cock pressed firmly against her hip. Shane pushed him onto his back and leaned over him, her tongue tracing the length of his cock from his balls up to swirl around the bulging head. When she sucked the head into her mouth, he flinched and he wrapped his fingers in her hair.

Instead of forcing her head down onto his dick, Landis pulled her away, his cock making a wet popping sound when it slipped from between her lips.

He took a deep breath and smiled. "No, not like that."

Landis gripped her hips and lifted her from the ground, only to lower her onto him, straddling his hips. His hard dick rubbed delightfully between the lips of her pussy, and Shane leaned forward to kiss his lips. The wonderful explosion of his flavor again filled her mouth, and she flexed her hips slightly. The head of his cock slipped over her clit, making her jerk, and then he entered her, his girth spreading her wide and his length filling her fully.

She sat up, taking him deep inside her pussy, and Landis moaned softly. Rocking her hips, Shane rode his cock and her moans joined his.

His eyes fluttered closed, and he tensed under her. Landis grasped her hips tightly in his hands, and he thrust up, slamming his balls tight against

her ass.

His cock twitched and pulsed in her pussy, and his hot cum exploded deep inside of her. She bounced on him as he climaxed, his hips moving like a bull trying to throw a rider, but she stayed in the saddle and rode him until Landis collapsed back onto the floor of the forest with sweat pouring from his body and tremors rocking him.

She leaned forward again and kissed him softly, his softening cock slipping from her pussy. Shane rested her head on his big shoulder and kissed tenderly at his neck.

His arms slipped around her shoulders, hugging her closely to his chest.

"I didn't want that to happen so soon." Landis sighed a little. "It's been more than seven years since I was with a woman."

"Hush." She put her fingers on his lips, and he kissed them. "You have nothing to explain or be sorry about."

Shane knew she was, like all Marines, a bundle of trained reflexes and nerves. She couldn't turn off the reflexes, not even in the afterglow of making love. A small noise, maybe the snapping of a stick under a foot, or perhaps the scraping of dry leaves against a boot, caught her attention, and she reacted instantly and without thought. She rolled from atop Landis, getting her bearings, only to realize too late her weapon lay under the pile of her jumpsuit eight meters away.

She glanced at Landis, and he sat calmly on the ground, staring past her. When she followed his gaze, Shane saw Clemmons standing at the edge of the small clearing, his eyes wide as he stared at her and her lover, who also happened to be his lover.

* * * *

Clemmons didn't feel as shocked or as angry as he thought he might have been. After all, he just caught his lover of the past six years having sex with a woman. He should be shocked and angry.

One problem was he was more or less expecting this to happen. Maybe he didn't expect exactly this, though. Clemmons actually expected he would be the one to end up bedding Shane. He knew he found Shane attractive, and Landis admitted the same feelings. Clemmons just thought he would be first.

The other problem was he couldn't really be angry with Landis for doing

what he himself considered. That wasn't fair.

While Clemmons wasn't really shocked and couldn't find it in himself to be angry, it still hurt.

Landis stood, making no attempt to cover his cock. Sweat glistened on his body, and the juices from Shane's pussy still glittered on his limp dick. He made no move to approach Clemmons when he spoke. "You may not believe me, but I planned to tell you about this, and I love you."

Shane didn't attempt to rise from her kneeling position and covered her breasts with her arms. "I don't know what to say."

Clemmons nodded. "I'm not sure there is anything to say. I actually do believe you, Landis. I know you love me, and I love you."

Landis smiled and walked toward him. "I know we have some things to talk about and work out." Landis hugged him, and it felt as good as it ever did. In a word, it was wonderful.

Clemmons closed his eyes, feeling the warmth and safety of his lover's arms around him. He heard a strange sound from Shane's direction, and he wondered if she might be sneaking away into the woods or going after her clothes.

He opened his eyes to see Shane hadn't moved and a lizard swooped down from the sky, its claws extended to grab her from behind.

* * * *

At best, Shane was puzzled. At worst, she had that old *what-the-fuck* feeling. She grabbed the translator from where it had been next to her and Landis when they made love, hoping that understanding their words would let her understand the situation. Clemmons seemed to be taking the fact that his lover or life-partner or whoever had just fucked her very well—much better than any human she'd ever heard of would have taken the news. Especially when getting the news by catching them in the act.

She knelt where she had landed after rolling off of Landis and sat covering her chest with her arms. She wasn't exactly sure why she still sat there instead of getting her clothes, or what was left of them, but she'd had a few too many curves thrown at her the past hour or so to really think straight.

Landis and Clemmons stood hugging about six meters away, and they

acted like they had a minor issue to resolve in their relationship. Sort of like deciding what drapes to get for the living room. The whole thing just pushed her farther off-balance than she already was.

She saw Clemmons, who faced her as the two men embraced, open his eyes to look at her. She expected him to mouth something like, "You're dead meat, bitch." Instead, his eyes went wide again.

Clemmons pushed Landis roughly away from him and reached for the long sword at his side. As he started to run toward her, he yelled. "Shane! Get down!"

Landis rolled and looked then darted for where his sword rested in the pile of his clothing.

Under normal conditions, Shane would have dropped instantly, flat enough to the ground to make a holed-up turtle look like a skyscraper, but too many things had happened, and she hesitated.

A funny whishing sound behind her made Shane turn her head to look over her left shoulder. She had just enough time to realize that a dragon came at her, flying fast and nearly touching the ground, with its talons out to grab her.

The creature hit her hard, and everything went black.

* * * *

Chris Harris sat on the bridge, trying to figure out how and why the Executive Officer ended up pulling a midnight watch. He occupied his time by catching up on some paperwork. At least the midnight watch was quiet. A beeping sound came from the tactical station, and the officer's reaction to it interrupted his work on the duty roster for next week.

"Commander, we've lost telemetry on Sergeant Rawls."

Chris frowned. That meant the tiny biosensor implant the Sergeant had in her body failed. Or she was dead. "Science, scan for her."

"Working." The Science Officer worked her console. "Too much clutter, Sir. I can't get a fix."

"Shit." He thought for a moment. "Communications get me either Rawls or Talbert."

The Communications Officer tapped a few buttons. "No answer from Sergeant Rawls, but I have Lieutenant Talbert online."

Chris pressed the switch on the command chair. "Talbert, where's Rawls?"

"She went for a walk around the area about an hour ago, but I haven't seen her since she left."

"We've lost her telemetry."

"We'll go look for her."

He thought again. "Negative. Keep everyone there in one place until you hear from us. *Daedalus* out." He slapped at the switch again, breaking the contact. Chris hesitated, but not long before he entered the Captain's intercom number.

"Davis here." She sounded like she was still asleep, not too surprising for 0215.

"Captain, we have a situation. We've lost telemetry on Sergeant Rawls, and we can't find her."

The Captain sounded more awake with each passing second. "Damn it. I'll be there in three minutes." She clicked off.

* * * *

Elsa had managed not to actually run on her way to the bridge—she walked extremely fast instead. Even now, in the briefing room, she didn't have much more information than Chris had given her in the first few minutes of wakefulness. The science, tactical, and communications people had not found any trace of Rawls yet. Talbert reported from the surface that he had everyone else accounted for and at the landing zone. Fourteen minutes had passed since Rawls's vanishing act.

She rested her elbows on the table and leaned her head on her palms. After rubbing her eyes, Elsa looked around the table at her staff.

"OK, people, we have no reason to believe anything bad has happened, no facts to base such an assumption on. All we know is we've lost all contact with a member of the landing party, and nothing more." She took a deep breath. It drove Chris nuts when she followed the instincts the Emperor liked so much, and she suspected she was about to send him right up the bulkhead. "All that said, I've got a very bad feeling about this, and here's what we're going to do. First, Lieutenant Talbert, you and the rest of the landing party will immediately evacuate the planet."

Talbert's face on the display screen looked pained. "Ma'am, that's a bad idea. We're making good progress with the people here, and our leaving suddenly might offend them."

"Noted, Mr. Talbert, but in case you missed it, this isn't a democracy."

"What will I tell the people here?"

"You may tell them your Captain is a paranoid fool. You have your orders."

"Yes, Ma'am." He didn't look any happier, though.

"Second, this ship will go to a level-two alert. Captain Ells, I want a team standing by for immediate deployment to the planet if needed to recover Sergeant Rawls."

"Yes, Ma'am." He paused for a second. "What is the level of acceptable collateral damage?"

"Anything short of reducing the planet to molten slag."

Chris rolled his eyes.

"Understood, Captain. I'll have the team ready in thirty minutes."

"Make it fifteen, and I'll be happy." She took a deep breath. "Thirdly, I want this king..." Elsa checked her notes. "King Sayid aboard this ship in ten minutes."

Talbert's face looked ashen. "What are you saying, Captain? Are you planning on kidnapping the king?"

"Call it what you like, but I will talk to this man. Now."

The Science Officer shook her head. "Ma'am, I don't think I can isolate him well enough to get just the king with the transporter."

Elsa shrugged. "Then bring his entire fucking court up here."

Chris nodded. "What about those two knights Rawls has been talking to?"

"I expected you to be trying to decide if I'm crazy enough to relieve of command."

Chris chuckled. "Oh, you're crazy, but you're right too much for me to get twitchy."

"Fair enough. If we can find them, I want to talk to them, too."

Again the Science Officer shook her head. "I can get you the king and maybe a dozen or two of his closest friends, but I'll never find the knights without a lot of dumb luck."

"Well, let's play dumb, then." Elsa smiled around the table. "That

shouldn't be too hard. Dismissed."

* * * *

Landis reached his sword after Clemmons had already started charging Shane's location. In spite of his head start, Clemmons arrived too late, and that meant Landis was way too late to save Shane.

The lizard grabbed her from behind, and its claws dug into the soft, white flesh of her shoulders and back as it lifted her from the ground. She wailed in pain and surprise, but there was nothing he or Clemmons could do but watch as the dragon carried her away to the mountains looming high above them.

Clemmons strode to stand beside him and sheathed his sword. "Dress yourself. If we move after them now, we may catch them."

In his mind, Landis knew Clemmons was right. They had only a slim chance, but it was the only one they had to rescue Shane. But his heart couldn't believe there was any chance at all to save her. Between the guilt he felt for making love to Shane followed so suddenly by the attack on her, a black mood gripped his soul.

He could still see the talons ripping into her body, blood spurting from the wounds. He heard the scream that tore from her throat as the pain hit Shane. And just as with Anna, all he could do was stand there with his thoughts swirling and do nothing to help.

Clemmons grabbed his shoulders and shook him. "Landis! We are not going to do this again!"

His mind snapped back to the now. "What?"

"You couldn't save Anna. We had no chance to save her." His partner paused, his eyes looking like hard metal. "I admit that, in some ways, I'm not as sorry as I should be for Anna's death, because that's what brought us together. But this is different."

His mind was getting too much information at once for him to process it fully, and he didn't understand. "What do you mean?"

"You obviously have feelings for Shane, and so do I. Right now, all we know about her is she also has feelings for you." Clemmons sighed. "We have the chance to save Shane. I love you, Landis, and I'll die without regret if I can help you keep whatever it is you and Shane might have found."

Landis didn't feel like he understood his emotions or thoughts any better, but he did understand what Clemmons said. "All I know for certain is I love you. I'm sorry I've hurt you."

"No, don't be sorry. I've always felt each of us has a special person meant just for us. It does no good to apologize for fate." He chuckled. "Come on. We have to get moving."

* * * *

As they made their way to the briefing room near the transporter area, Elsa studied Talbert and Harris. Flanking her on each side, neither man looked at all happy. The science people had managed to narrow down King Sayid's location enough that they were able to snatch him and only three of his bodyguards from the palace instead of a couple of dozen people. One of the bodyguards had gotten a little aggressive after the transport and wouldn't put his sword down, so security had stunned him.

Talbert wasn't concerned about the guard. He was upset Elsa had kidnapped a king. Objectively, she understood his concern. This wouldn't make Talbert's job as a diplomat any easier.

On the other hand, Chris was worried about how Fleet—Admirals Q and Reeves in particular—and the government—the Emperor and Senate in particular—would react to the kidnapping. Again, Elsa fully understood his concerns.

But her gut told her this was the right thing to do. Leaving people on the planet, let alone sending more, would expose them to risks they didn't understand. She needed answers, and King Sayid was the man who could give them to her. Maybe she could have asked him to come talk to her, but her instincts told her he would refuse. The man had an inordinate amount of pride and attitude.

She turned her head to the left to look at Harris. "How's the guard?"

"Medical said he's fine, just a little goofy from the stun is all."

Talbert spoke up. "I'd be more worried about the king's reaction than the guard's condition."

Elsa had had it up to her eyeteeth with Talbert's snide remarks. "Lieutenant, I know you diplomatic types aren't regular Fleet, but the sooner you get it through your head this isn't a democracy, the better off you'll be."

"Then why I am here?"

"To advise me, give me a different perspective based on your training and experience. The bottom line is the final decisions are mine, and mine alone." She paused, getting in check the anger that tried to well up. "I'm responsible for the lives of everyone on this ship and for the ship itself. I take that responsibility very seriously. If it comes down to losing a crewmember or pissing off someone, then somebody's going to get pissed off." She hesitated and looked directly into Talbert's eyes. "If I have to, I'll blast a planet back into the stone age to save one crewmember. Do I make myself clear?"

Talbert stared for a moment. "Crystal clear, Ma'am."

"Good."

They reached the door to the briefing room, and the Marine guards stood aside as the party went inside. King Sayid and the remaining two bodyguards sat at the far end of the conference table.

Sayid looked up. "Lieutenant, what is the meaning of all this?" He pounded the table with his balled fist to emphasize his irritation.

Talbert was a good diplomat, and despite his clear personal views, he kept to the plan. "Your Majesty, I offer my apologies for all of this, and I understand you're angry. This is Captain Davis and Commander Harris. They need to talk with you, and this seemed like the best way to ensure that happening in a timely manner." Elsa had to give the young man credit for being smooth.

"This is highly irregular and an insult."

She decided it was time to get to the point. "Perhaps it is, Your Majesty, but this is the way things will be. As you know, one of my crewmembers, Sergeant Rawls, has vanished. The last time we had sensor contact with her, she was with two of your knights, Landis and Clemmons. Now we can't find any of them. Any ideas?"

The king looked confused. "Why should I have any ideas? Other than knowing they are in Yamat Valley, I don't keep tabs on their exact movements."

Elsa expected as much. "Very well. You and I are alike in that regard. We have good people working for us, and we trust them. That means we don't have to watch them every minute. But I need answers about this war you have with the dragons. Talbert and the linguists believe we have a

translation problem." She shrugged. "I'm not so sure of that. I want to know why you're fighting the dragons, and I want to know now."

"Our fight with the lizards is of no concern to you."

"Up until an hour ago, you were right." Elsa leaned on the table, placing her hands palm down so her head towered over the king. "Forty-seven minutes ago, one of my crewmembers vanished, and I think this is somehow tied up with the dragons and your war. It just became a concern to me. A big concern."

Sayid hesitated for more than a minute, his gaze wavering from her to Harris and then to Talbert, before he finally looked down at his hands where they rested on the table in front of him. "Is there someplace you can take my guards so we can speak privately?"

"Of course." She turned to the Corporal leading the security contingent. "Take the bodyguards out, and leave us alone with the king."

Once security had escorted the bodyguards from the briefing room, Sayid looked up at her. "I don't want my people to think me weak."

Elsa nodded. She understood the importance of keeping respect. "I can speak only for myself, but I don't think you're weak."

He smiled a little. "Thank you. This war with the dragons has been going on for many years, since before my father's rule." He paused, his eyes focused on some point far beyond the hull. "I honestly don't know what started it all those years ago."

She considered this. Sayid didn't look like he lied to her—he looked confused. "So why don't you end it?"

"Because I am the king." He laughed. "The war has cost the lives of many of my people, and to simply stop fighting would be weak."

Elsa shook her head. "No, not at all. It takes far more strength and courage to walk away from a fight than to keep on killing for no reason."

"That is the human perception."

"That's my perception."

"My people, particularly my knights, would see it as weak and cowardly."

"I have to disagree. One of the reports from Rawls was that these two friends of hers wanted the war to end as well." She smiled. "Landis and Clemmons have the courage and strength to face the facts that war is bad."

"Do they?"

"I believe so. I see no reason Rawls would have misunderstood or lied about that."

He nodded slowly. "Yes, perhaps you're right." His eyes again looked out past the confines of the ship, and the king chewed on his lip. "Very well."

"What does that mean?"

"I know nothing right now that might help you find your crewmember, but I may be able to learn something if I return to my palace. How can I reach you?"

Talbert looked happy for the first time in an hour. "Captain, I'll volunteer to return to the planet with King Sayid and relay information."

Every rule in the book told her this was not the right thing to do, but the book never meant too much to her. "Very well, Lieutenant. Make it so."

* * * *

Shane hurt all over but mostly in her back and chest. She opened her eyes and found a white, featureless view greeting her. She moved her arm to touch her face and found a damp cloth covering her eyes.

As she tried to remove the wet rag, fingers touched her hand. "Relax, you're safe here, at least for now."

Thankfully, the translator seemed to work and was nearby, because Shane recognized the alien language coming from a feminine voice. "Where am I?"

"You're in a cave of the dragons. You were hurt when they captured you."

The last thing she remembered was the pain from the talons of the dragon tearing through her shoulders. Shane moved her hand and touched thick bandages on her chest and shoulders. They felt dry, and she thought that was a good sign.

Shane asked the most obvious question. "How badly am I hurt?" And she asked the other obvious question. "Who are you?"

The voice hesitated a few seconds. "I'm Alicia. The dragons captured me when I was a girl, and I've been here with them ever since, nearly twenty years. Your wounds need more care than I can give."

That response both was and wasn't an answer to her main question.

There was heavy pressure in the right side of her chest, and her breath was short. Shane wondered if she had a partially collapsed lung. There was one other obvious question she needed answered. "Why did the dragons kidnap me? Why am I here?"

Alicia's voice didn't hesitate this time. "I know only that the king of the dragons is worried about why you and your people are here. He thinks you plan to overthrow him."

Somehow Shane knew this young woman had no impact on the big picture, but she still felt the need to defend herself. "We plan no such thing."

"That doesn't matter. Only what Handley believes matters, and he is a paranoid fool."

Shane pulled the cloth from her eyes. Alicia was not much more than a girl, maybe twenty years old, tops. A dark scar, red and puffy, stretched down her left cheek, detracting from what would have been a pretty face.

Alicia smiled a little. "You should rest. The commander of the dragons sent me to try to care for you."

"This Handley sent you?"

"No. Handley is the king. The leader here, the commander of the dragon soldiers, is called Cedric." The girl shivered a bit. "Handley is coming to see you."

Shane wasn't as worried as she might have been, though. *Daedalus* would find her soon, her telemetry beacon calling a rescue party down like a homing pigeon. She touched the right side of her chest, just above her breast, and felt a lump under the bandage. Despite Alicia's urgings and her trying to keep Shane's hands away, Shane pulled at the bandages until the edge lifted from her skin.

She pulled the lump from under the cloth and found that the impact on her body had punched the telemetry transmitter from her chest. A neat one-centimeter hole from a talon went clean through the case.

* * * *

Clemmons looked down from the ledge where he and Landis rested from the latest steep climb. It was a long way down to the valley floor, and the slips both the men had suffered convinced him Shane and the lizards had the right idea to fly over the mountains instead of trying to scale them. But

neither he nor Landis could fly, so they had to rely on their skills and training to climb the rocks. Both carried a few cuts and scrapes from the inevitable slips but nothing too bad. If either had been alone, it would likely have been much worse.

Landis seemed to have lost some of his black mood, but the climb left little breath for talking not related to surviving the climb itself. As they rested, their conversation, of course, turned to Shane.

Clemmons put the water skin in his pack. "I think we can rest for maybe half an hour."

"If we need to, yes, but I would like to get moving again sooner." Landis watched a bird soar on the updraft for a moment. "Do you think she's still alive?"

"Yes, I do." Clemmons gathered his thoughts. He wanted to word this right, because a misstatement could plunge Landis back into his despair. "The lizard that took her wasn't just grabbing a target of opportunity. They planned the attack, even if on short notice, and executed it with great expertise. The lizards knew what they were doing, and they did it for a reason. They want Shane for some reason, and they came to get her."

"And now they have her."

"Yes, they do, but that's not your fault or mine. It just happened."

Landis nodded. "And now we need to get her back." He paused for a long time, watching the bird again. "I couldn't stand losing you."

He laughed. "The lizard who can best me in combat hasn't been born yet."

"That's not what I mean." His eyes tracked the bird as it swooped and climbed on the winds, banking and spiraling across the sky. "I wish I could undo what Shane and I did back there."

Clemmons looked for the shock and anger again, but he still couldn't find them. When he looked for the hurt he'd felt, he found only a dull memory of its intensity a short time ago. "You won't lose me, no matter what happens. I love you too much to walk away."

Landis smiled and turned to face him. "I guess I understand that." The smile slipped away. "So where does that leave Shane?"

He stood and clapped his life-partner on the shoulder. "In the clutches of the lizards, waiting for rescue. Let's get moving."

* * * *

Cedric moved through the cave to meet his prisoner. Alicia had told him she was awake and in pain, but she didn't know if the woman would live or not.

He hated this business of skulking about. He was a warrior, not a common criminal and certainly not a kidnapper, but Handley had forced him into this. He had to learn what the plans of this woman and her kind were.

Alicia had been with him for many years now, ever since he'd taken her from a village of men during a raid. She'd resisted at first, when just a child, but she'd learned the ways of the dragons and become a valuable member of Cedric's household. At some level, Cedric saw her almost like his own child. He definitely saw her as a funny-looking dragon. Cedric often wondered if she saw him as a funny-looking man.

He entered the chamber where Alicia cared for the captive and the woman was in a chair, dressed in some of Alicia's clothes. The bandages on her chest and shoulders looked bulky, and the woman winced when she breathed.

Alicia looked up at him. "Cedric, this is Shane. She is in pain, but she says she can talk to you." She pointed at a metal box on the table. "That device speaks for her. It knows the speech of men, and it works with dragon speech, though a little slow."

He nodded. "Thank you. You may leave us now."

Alicia bowed her head and moved for the door, brushing her fingers across his shoulder as she passed. When she was gone, Cedric turned to the woman. "I am Cedric, commander of King Handley's troops here in the valley."

"Why am I here?"

"Simply put, I need to know your intentions. Handley believes you are here to destroy him, and I tend to agree."

"That couldn't be farther from the truth. We are here to contact new people, new societies, and nothing more."

"And yet you have become close with the men and their king."

"Of course we have." She coughed, doubling over with the pain, and a glob of dark blood spattered on the floor.

"You won't believe me when I say I'm sorry you were injured."

"I can't say yet if I believe you or not. I need to get medical help from my people as soon as possible."

"How soon that happens will be up to Handley. He will be here soon to talk to you."

"You mean *if* that happens."

He shrugged, his wings flexing. "As you wish. I would advise you to not trifle so with Handley. He lacks my patience."

Chapter 4

The High and The Mighty

In their first contact since sending the king back to the planet, Talbert and Sayid looked out at her from the display. Elsa was glad they had set up visual links to the palace so she could actually see the king. She could read him better that way than by voice alone.

"So we know what happened to them." Elsa thought for a moment. "Rawls was attacked by one of the dragons and carried off, and your knights went after her."

Sayid nodded. "Exactly. Landis and Clemmons went alone, refusing to take more men, because they felt they stood a better chance alone than with an army."

"But the note they sent you doesn't say exactly where Rawls was taken or where they were going."

"No, it doesn't. Only that they were going to the mountains."

She paused again. "Science, what does that do to our chances of finding the three?"

The Science Officer tapped at the screen controls on the conference table, and a topographical map of the encampment and surrounding area appeared on the screen. "There are high mountains all around the camp—" She used the pointer in the screen to trace the higher elevations. "Here and here are the areas where we've seen the dragons clustering. There are also heavy metal deposits in the mountains, and that could be blocking our scans if they are in a deep enough cave."

Sayid shook his head. "It's been only a little more than two hours since Landis and Clemmons went after her. It will take them at least four to reach any of those locations."

"The ore may also be interfering with the scans."

"All right, people." Elsa sighed. "We need to stop looking for reasons

we can't find them and just find them. Let's assume Rawls is underground, and the scans are blocked. That lets us focus on finding where the dragons and the knights are. I want low-level satellites that can enhance the scans put in orbit."

The Science Officer frowned. "That will take some time, Captain."

"I know it will. You have thirty minutes, so I suggest you get on it."

The officer blinked at her a few times. "Thirty minutes?"

"If you need it. Twenty will make me happier."

* * * *

Lizards swarmed around the cave entrance. Landis couldn't recall seeing so many in one place before other than in battles. The gathering of dragons was a sure sign something—or *someone*—important was inside.

Clemmons lowered the spyglass from his eye. "I count twelve lizards milling about outside, and I've seen eight more come and go from the cave itself."

"That's a lot of dragons for one cave."

"That's a lot of new lizard-skin boots." Clemmons's hand caressed the pommel of his sword. "What's your plan?"

He paused, pondering the situation. "We can't be certain Shane is in there, but I'd bet she is. Why else would there be so many lizards here? We'll have to go in to be certain. I'll create a distraction, and you get inside. I'll come in when I can."

Clemmons shook his head. "You mean *if* you can. No, you go inside and find her, and I'll keep the dragons busy." He smiled, but it looked a bit wistful. "You're the one she wants to see."

Landis had thought about this since they started climbing the mountains, and he'd made up his mind. "Maybe so, maybe not, but you have to be the one to go in after her. I'm afraid my emotions will cause me to make mistakes, and that could kill both Shane and myself. We need a cooler head to prevail."

He nodded. "Maybe you're right. Besides, there are plenty of lizards for us both to kill."

"No, I don't want to kill them. Shane is right, and the killing is wrong. I just want her safe."

"I know what you mean." Clemmons smiled softly, the same smile that, for the last six years, Landis had found so attractive. "If we can get her out without killing a single dragon, that's a good thing. On the other hand, I would kill them all to make sure she's safe."

Landis reached into his bag and pulled out Shane's weapon. "Any idea how to work this weapon?"

"Not a one." Clemmons pointed to a pair of slides on side of the device. "I've seen her move these, though."

"So have I." He looked at one of the levers and found it had only two positions. When he studied the other slide, it had three positions. Small markings on the framework matched the catches, but they couldn't read Shane's language. "I wonder what it all means."

"Does it matter much?" Clemmons laughed softly. "We'll probably be dead in short time anyway."

"That's true." Landis hesitated as he stared at Shane's weapon. "I'll move off around to the right. When the distraction starts, you get inside."

"How will I know when to move?"

Landis turned the weapon over in his hand a few times. "I think you'll know."

* * * *

Cedric had frightened her, but Shane thought it was mostly his appearance. He looked a lot like the classic dragons in fairytales and fantasy stories, with his green scales flecked with hints of gold and blue and large diaphanous wings better suited to some kind of bat from a nightmare. When she added in the sharp talons and teeth like small white mountains with jagged peaks, the image was complete. Except for the yellow eyes with horizontal slits like a cat's-eye turned on its side.

Cedric had an air of honor about him. Not unlike her, he was a warrior, a soldier with a job to do, and he did it as best he could. He followed orders, and he followed some code of conduct she didn't understand, but Shane somehow knew Cedric wasn't evil.

While Cedric had frightened her, Handley terrified her.

The dragon king didn't look much different from Cedric. He was a little smaller, maybe, and not as well muscled, but size didn't mean much in this

case. Where Cedric exuded determined honor, Handley radiated pure evil.

She had no doubt Cedric would kill her in a heartbeat if he had to, but he wouldn't like it. He might not feel actual remorse, but he would rather not kill her. Handley would kill her for the pleasure of watching her die.

He told her as much.

The yellow eyes glinted like sparks from a hidden fire. "Your cooperation will save you much pain, human."

She'd told Handley all about humans and how they came here to contact new civilizations, not to overthrow him, and Shane had reached the end of her patience. "I doubt it matters too much on your plans to kill me."

"I never said you would live. You just won't suffer." The pointy ears on Handley's head twitched. "Tell us the truth."

"I have."

Handley struck out with his taloned hand, catching Shane fully in the side of her head. She fell from the chair and a wrenching pain ripped through her right side.

"You lie!" Despite his being smaller than Cedric, Handley still towered over her. "Do you want to suffer before you die?"

* * * *

Landis reached a spot nearly half a circle away from where he left Clemmons watching the cave entrance. Before him was a small plain of boulder-strewn rock leading back to where the dragons hovered around the cave, and behind him was a sheer rock wall rising high toward the sky. He crouched behind some rocks and studied the weapon again.

All he knew was that Shane had fired a projectile—she called it a slug—that shattered a large rock. She also said that was one of the least damaging things the device could do.

The two slides were both at the same end of their travel, nearest to his body when he held the weapon in his fist as he'd seen Shane do. While it was probably a mistake to assume, all he could do was assume she had made the weapon as safe as possible when it was in the holster and not in use.

Landis thought about the settings. One of them, the slide with two notches, was probably something like *on* and *off*. The other slide, then, would be three different functions. If the projectile mode were the least

dangerous, that would be where it was set now. The weapon had a third control placed so his finger rested on it when he clenched the weapon, and that meant it was something like *fire*.

Using his thumb, Landis moved the slide to the presumed *on* position. A red light came on, and in the center of the light were some of the squiggles he assumed were words in Shane's language. At least it didn't blow up.

He pushed the mode control to the middle position, and the weapon changed in his hand. Landis fought the urge to throw the device, and it soon settled down, but it had grown a set of three rings, each containing what looked like lenses from a spyglass, two on the top of the weapon in a line he could look through and the last in front of the barrel. The light had also changed from red to yellow, and a different set of squiggles filled the center.

In spite of his dread, he moved the slide to the last mode. The weapon again writhed in his hand, and the lenses vanished. Replacing them was a globe at the very end of the barrel about the same size as Shane's fist. The orb glowed in an eerie blue hue, and Landis felt the hair on his hand and arm standing on end. The light changed back to red, but now it blinked on and off at about the same rate as his pounding heart. He saw no squiggles of writing on the light now.

Landis considered forgetting about the weapon, but no matter how skillful and determined he and Clemmons were he knew they had no chance against this many dragons. They needed the advantage of the weapon.

He slid the control back to the first detent, and the weapon changed again, the steady red light now staring at him from the device, mocking his hesitation. He had to go forward with this.

Raising the device to sight along the barrel, as he'd seen Shane do, he aimed at the lizard closest to the mouth of cave. He lowered the weapon. Landis had no idea what the shot would do to the cave mouth, and it could cause the entrance to collapse, sealing Shane in her tomb. Instead, Landis took aim at a large boulder some distance away from the cave and the dragons.

Landis slowly squeezed his fist, pressing on the *fire* control, and a loud crack rang out as the boulder's surface fractured and chips flew in all directions.

He smiled at his success until he realized that five dragons all ran

straight at his location.

* * * *

After Landis had moved off to create his diversion, Clemmons crept a little closer to the mouth of cave. Several lizards still moved around outside, but a number had left the area, and he wondered if they had the right place. Clemmons knew from spies he and Landis sent to the mountains that the dragons had a number of caves they used as barracks, and there was no way of knowing if this was the one they had brought Shane to.

Landis said he had no idea what sort of distraction he would create to give Clemmons time to get into the cave, but he took Shane's weapon with him. Clemmons imagined something dramatic would happen, but he didn't know what anymore than Landis did. The real question was if it would be dramatic enough. On their home soil, rested and in numbers, the lizards would be a formidable force to deal with for a small army of men, let alone just two.

Even with Shane's amazing weapon, they couldn't count on an advantage. The simple fact was neither he nor Landis knew how to work the device. Clemmons doubted it would be of much help.

Suddenly, a loud report rang out across the small valley holding the cave, and a boulder a short distance from the entrance shattered. The lizards spun, looking in the direction of the cliff wall that rose far above the valley, and the five ran in the direction of the sound. Apparently, Landis figured out Shane's weapon.

Clemmons moved toward the cave, keeping to the cover of rocks and bushes when he could, but running in the open when he had to. The lizards trotted toward the cliff, their backs to him and their attention diverted.

Long before Clemmons reached the cave, the dragons reached the pile of rubble at the base of the cliff. They spread out, searching for the source of the explosion that damaged the boulder.

A beam of red light, far brighter than the sun at its zenith, stabbed out from the rocky debris. The light touched one of the dragons, and it wailed in pain as its skin bubbled and flowed from its body like lava from a volcano. The dragon ran from the rocks, flames trailing behind it and leaving boiling pools of flesh where its feet hit the ground. It tried to take flight, but its

wings had burned off, and the dragon fell to the dusty ground, twitching and flailing. Soon, the screams of pain stopped, and a smoldering pile of flesh marked the final resting place of the lizard.

Two of the remaining dragons took wing and soared close to the cliff wall, looking down into the rocks to spot their attacker. Clemmons reached the mouth of the cave and had to flatten himself against the stone wall as another lizard ran from the cave to join his comrades in their search for Landis. Now three dragons flew near the wall to direct the other two on the ground.

Before entering the cave, Clemmons turned to look at the cliff to judge how Landis might escape. A loud buzzing sound came from the rubble at the base, but he saw no beam or projectiles whizzing through the air, and yet the wall of the cliff far above where the dragons flapped their huge wings, broke away like avalanches he'd seen in the past.

Huge slabs of stone rained down from above, slamming into the flying dragons, ripping their shattered bodies from the sky and crashing down to join the debris already piled at the bottom of the precipice. The cascade of rock smashed the grounded lizards. They didn't even have time to scream.

Clemmons's heart clenched in his chest, because Landis had no chance to escape the torrent of boulders Shane's weapon had unleashed. Landis now shared a tomb with the dragons.

Clemmons blinked back the tears collecting in the corners of his eyes, and he knew Landis would want him to press on, to find Shane and rescue her from the lizards.

He drew his sword and moved into the darkness of the cave, trying to leave the thoughts of his lost lover, comrade, and life-partner behind him in the harsh sunlight.

* * * *

When she looked up from her console, the Tactical Officer smiled. "Captain, I have high-power laser fire on the surface."

Elsa spun her command chair around a little too fast and had to grip the arms to keep from falling out. "Where?"

"At one-thirty-seven mark one-niner mark twelve mark twenty-six by twenty-two mark eight mark fifty-one mark niner."

Elsa sighed. "Blast your eyes! I'm not a mathematician! Put it on a map!"

"Sorry, Ma'am." The officer worked her controls, and a map appeared on the main view screen. "The blue area is the encampment. The red dot is the location of the laser activity."

The Science Officer tapped a few switches before she spoke up. "Ma'am, the energy profile matches Sergeant Rawls's hand weapon."

"Good work, people." Elsa smiled and reached for the intercom, but the Tactical Officer interrupted before she could call Ells.

"One moment, Captain." The officer again worked her panel. "I just got a huge blaster discharge from the same location. Looks like maximum power, near total discharge."

"God damn it!" Elsa slapped the intercom control. "Ells, I want immediate deployment of your people."

Despite being in full body armor and packed into an assault landing craft with his team for more than four hours, Ells sounded just like he always did—calm, cool, and collected. "Understood, Captain."

"You have the bridge for deployment."

"Copy that. Helm, come to heading one-niner-zero, down angle ten degrees, one-half impulse power, and prepare for emergency launch on my mark."

As of now, Elsa was the only redundant crewmember on the bridge. As had been done for millennia, the commander of the Marine detachment had command of the ship and would keep that command until all of his troops were safely away. All of this was despite the fact Ells was in an assault craft on the hanger deck, about as far away from the bridge as he could get and still be aboard *Daedalus*.

The helmsman worked the ship. "Aye, aye. Altitude six hundred and fifty kilometers, down seventy kilometers per second."

"Hold down at seventy. Arm explosive release bolts. All landing-party team members secure. Lock and load." Ells paused a moment as *Daedalus* dropped from orbit like a falcon diving for dinner. "Down fifty and hold steady."

"Down fifty, aye. Altitude four hundred kilometers."

The officer at the engineering station told everyone what they already knew. "Hull temperature increasing. Now at five hundred and five degrees."

Ells's voice never quivered. "Copy. Helm, hold course."

"Holding down fifty on one-niner-zero. Altitude two hundred and fifty kilometers."

Between the artificial gravity, the deflector shields, Harbison Field, and heavy hull plating, Elsa couldn't sense the motion, but she knew that even at this altitude, the thin atmosphere of the planet ripped at the skin of the ship. But this was all routine operation for a drop, and she'd done it dozens of times. That didn't mean she didn't have to fight the urge to bite her nails.

The Engineering Officer silenced the alarm announcing the hull temperature had hit twenty-five hundred degrees.

"Altitude one hundred and twenty-five kilometers."

Ells barked commands. "Standby to launch in three, two, one, mark!"

Daedalus shook like she'd hit a wall when the assault craft broke free, falling into the thicker air of the planet at nearly a twentieth of light speed. The little ship would be on the ground in less than two seconds, but Elsa had to get *Daedalus* to a reasonable and safe orbit.

"Helm, maintain course, up angle at forty degrees, full impulse power."

"Aye, aye. Altitude seventy kilometers, up at one hundred kilometers per second."

Elsa casually wondered what the people on the ground thought of the tremendous fireball made by *Daedalus* as she streaked across the sky.

* * * *

He encountered only a few dragons as he moved through the cave, and Clemmons easily hid from them. Torches in stanchions set in the walls gave him plenty of light while also creating deep shadows he could slip into. He wanted to avoid contact and thereby conflict. All he had going for him now was the element of surprise.

But he didn't know how that was going to work out for him. He had no idea where the dragons might be holding Shane in the labyrinth of the cave, and the lizards had been so rude as to not put up signs. Clemmons had no idea where to even begin looking, so he wandered more or less aimlessly around in the semidarkness.

A pair of dragons approached him, and Clemmons slipped into a dark crevice letting them pass. He listened to their idle chatting.

"The quake didn't do any damage to the cave as far as I know, but six warriors died when part of the cliff collapsed. Cedric has pulled all the others into the cave in case there are more collapses."

"We didn't even feel it on the third level. Did you know any of the dead?"

Clemmons felt some amazement at the conversation. It wasn't at all unlike how he might chat with another man.

"No, but they will be missed just the same. What were you doing on the third level? There's nothing down there."

"That's where Cedric and Handley have that woman prisoner. They want her away from the others for some reason."

The first dragon snorted. "You can bet that was Handley's idea. He's a mad and power-hungry fool."

"You're right about that, but don't let any of Handley's killers hear you say that. Cedric is good, but even he's afraid of Handley's henchmen."

As they moved farther down the tunnel, the rest of the lizard's ruminations faded away, but Clemmons had what he needed. Shane was still alive, and she was on the third level. All he had to do was find that.

* * * *

"My lord, killing this woman will accomplish nothing." The dragon called Cedric stepped forward, his large feet with their sharp claws very near her body. Shane had the impression he tried to shield her from Handley. "We do not yet know the abilities of these humans, and her death may anger them."

"Your weakness shows you fear these humans." Handley leaned toward Cedric, his teeth less than half a meter from Cedric's face. "Do you fear them more than you fear us?"

Shane took advantage of the confrontation to pull herself from under Handley and used the edge of the table to get to a standing position. "King Handley, I have told you all I know, and we mean no harm to you or your people."

"Silence!" Handley's roar shook the table Shane leaned on for balance.

Cedric stood his ground, not reacting to the outburst, and his gaze stayed locked to Handley's. "Sire, we know only that her people came from very far

away, much farther than we or the men could travel. Their tools hint of power that could destroy us, maybe even the world."

Handley struck out at Cedric with his talons, much as he had at her, but Cedric reacted instantly and sidestepped the crushing blow. A bellow that again shook the walls of the cave chamber ripped from Handley's throat, and he charged at Cedric.

* * * *

Sergeant Kyle slapped the side of Dave's helmet. "Relax, Meyers. It's just like in the simulations."

Dave knew it most certainly *wasn't* just like in the simulations. In the combat simulators, you couldn't die. You could get a few bumps and bruises, but no one ever died in a simulation. Now, he sat with thirty other grunts, all with far more experience than he, as they dropped to the ground at some ridiculously high speed to rescue Sergeant Rawls.

The planet's atmosphere rushing past the hull screamed like a siren, and even with the artificial gravity, the ride was rough. Eight Gs of force pulled Dave against the harness. He hoped it was only his imagination that felt the heat radiating from the outer hull as it blazed at temperatures nearly four times that of the surface of a typical star.

The assault craft hit the ground hard, his form-fitting crash couch slamming down into the shock absorbers to dissipate the impact energy. But he had no time to marvel that the systems had kept him, and his comrades, alive. The big egress doors on three sides of the ship fell open to form ramps to the rocky ground and Kyle and Ells barked orders.

"Come on, you apes! Do you want to live forever?" Ells was the first man off the ship, his head and weapon swiveling around to survey the area for targets or threats.

The last Marine off the craft had to jump nearly a meter to the ground, because the ship was lifting off again. The pilots moved off to provide a sensor platform and to give close ground-support fire as needed. Dave was realistic enough to know they also prepared the little ship for evacuation of the dead and wounded. That was one thing that gave him an odd sense of reassurance. No one knew when the tradition started, but the Marines never left anyone behind.

Dave knew that, one way or another, he would go home.

* * * *

Clemmons had no idea where he was. He'd descended two long, shallow ramps, so he assumed he was on the fabled third level now, but he couldn't be sure. As he moved deeper into the cave, he'd seen fewer dragons, and that was actually a disadvantage, because he'd learned some important things higher up by listening to them talking and, in some cases, following them. Now he had no such help. The torches were also less frequent here in the deeper parts of the rocky web, so he had to rely on his hearing to detect approaching lizards.

He peeked around a corner, and he saw a pair of large dragons standing outside of a door. Stanchions held torches, lighting the area around the door much better than the rest of the cavern. The dragons were large, bigger than most Clemmons had seen in his career of fighting the lizards.

Clemmons ducked back around the corner and smiled. Other than to guard Shane, he could think of no other reason for the dragons to guard a room here in the deep confines of the cave, especially to use two dragons of that size as guards.

He needed a way to get rid of the guards, either killing them or just making them leave their post. Clemmons considered a number of plans but quickly dismissed them all, because they would take out only one of the guards, leaving the other to sound the alarm before attacking him.

Suddenly, the door opened, and a dragon from inside the room spoke to the guards. "Fetch Alicia."

Clemmons didn't know who this Alicia was, and he didn't care. What he did care about was that one of the guards nodded and moved off down the tunnel.

* * * *

Angered by Cedric's sidestep, Handley had struck out at an easier target. He'd caught Shane in the side of her head again, and stars in colors she never knew existed exploded in her vision. Shane's side ached, and her fingers found warm, red blood running from her left ear. Cedric, apparently

unconcerned by Handley's anger, had sent one of the guards for Alicia to treat Shane's wounds.

Handley paced the room, his big feet stomping the stone as he walked. "Cedric, you test our patience!"

Cedric nodded. "I know that, Sire, but I am giving you the best counsel I am able. We must use caution."

"No! We must crush these humans, and then the men will follow them! Putting this creature on a pike for all to see will drive them away!"

As Shane watched, Cedric's demeanor changed. His ears folded back to rest flat against his skull, and his eyes narrowed. "I can't allow that. You'll bring down the wrath of these humans on all dragons."

As Handley wheeled on Cedric, Shane wasn't sure what she heard. From the corridor came a funny whishing sound, not at all unlike that she heard just before the dragon snatched her back in the forest. Following that was a soft thump.

She didn't have much time to consider the sounds, because Handley screamed and jumped at Cedric, intent on death, with his teeth and claws extended.

* * * *

Dave studied the scanner display to be sure he was right before calling for Sergeant Kyle and Captain Ells. He was still new enough to be worried about looking stupid. He was certain.

"Sergeant, Captain! Over here!"

Ells reached him first. "What have you got, Meyers?"

"Looks like residual radiation from a blaster, Sir." Dave held the scanner out to Ells. "This rubble is new and looks to have come from up there." He pointed high up on the cliff where fresh rock was exposed.

Kyle had joined them. "I think you're right. Good work, Private."

Ells nodded. "Well done. Sergeant, get some people over here to scan for life signs."

"Yes, Sir." Kyle turned to the team. "I want ten people watching that cave entrance and everyone else over here. If there's anything bigger than a flea alive in this pile, I want it found."

Ells started to turn to the rubble when his communicator chirped. "Ells

here."

"Assault craft, Sir. We have a dragon flying in on heading two-four-niner, altitude four hundred meters, range two kilometers."

"Noted. Kill it."

"Copy that."

The ruby flash of a heavy laser stabbed out to the southwest from the ship, and Dave saw a small fireball falling to the ground.

"Nice shot. Ells out." The Captain closed his communicator. "Now, let's get moving."

* * * *

Clemmons was never any good throwing a dagger. Over the years, Landis had tried to teach him, but he could never quite get the skill down. A smile came to his face as he remembered Landis flicking the knife with a casual flip of the wrist and the blade plunging deep into a tree or wall. Landis could never understand why Clemmons couldn't do the same.

Reality hit him, and the smile faded. Clemmons had to use his dagger, and he would get only one chance. Dragons had a soft place on the side of their head, just behind the eye socket and a little below the ear. At that point, the dragon's brain was close to the skin, and only a thin layer of bone protected the vital organ from damage.

He turned the dagger over in his hand a few times, feeling the well-balanced weapon almost float in his grip. Clemmons held the blade near the tip and ran his thumb carefully over the sharp edge of the metal. It felt good in his hand, like it was a part of his body, an extension of his hand and arm.

A fast peek around the corner found the lone dragon with his back to the door, presenting a profile view to Clemmons, in the perfect position as a target. Clemmons had to step out, acquire his target, and throw the knife all before the dragon saw him. He wasn't that good, and he knew it.

Clemmons worked to calm himself, to stop the pounding of his heart and the shaking in his hands. The sweat running down his face and arms was a distraction he didn't need, but he didn't think he could stop that, either.

He jumped and looked around when Landis's voice spoke to him. *My love, you can do this because you must.*

Clemmons realized the voice came not from the dark cave around him,

but from inside his head. The soft sound of his life-partner spoke to him again.

You're Shane's only hope, and you must believe in yourself to save her. Just believe in yourself the way I have always believed in you.

Fearing attracting the dragon's attention, Clemmons silently nodded. Landis always believed in him and supported him, no matter what. It seemed death hadn't changed that. Clemmons took a deep breath, and his pulse slowed as his hands steadied.

He stepped into the passageway, squarely facing the dragon's profile. Clemmons's arm came up, his hand stopping near his ear, and the blade of the dagger glittered in the torchlight. Like he was outside of his own body, Clemmons saw the look of calm concentration on his face as his eyes and brain worked their magic. His hand came forward in a quick, smooth motion, and the dagger flew on its path toward the oblivious lizard.

The blade flickered as the knife moved silently through the air, tumbling end for end, and still the dragon didn't move. In an instant, the dagger reached its target, and just like when Landis would throw his knife at a tree, the dagger struck the lizard's temple blade-first and buried itself to the hilt in the dragon's skull.

The lizard didn't make a sound, but he slipped quietly to the floor of the cave.

* * * *

Dave worked in the rubble with the rest of the team. Other than bits and pieces of dragons crushed by falling rocks, they hadn't found too much so far. It looked like the creatures had Rawls pinned down, and she fired her blaster at the cliff face to bring down the rocks. While he wasn't an expert at ballistics, Dave figured she would have been under the rocks, too. So far, they hadn't detected any life signs, but his briefings had told Dave about the ore in the ground here that could block scans. They needed to move a lot of rock to be sure they didn't miss anything.

Corporal Degnan was working about three meters away when he paused, staring at his scanner. He called out, waving his arms at the Captain. "Life signs! Over here!"

The team converged and started moving the rocks, gently and one at a

time. They lifted a large stone, and the eye of a dragon stared up at them. It blinked a few times in the bright afternoon sun. Ells sighed and swung his rifle around. He fired once, and the eye closed for the last time.

Dave stared at the carnage of dragon brain splattered on the rocks. He couldn't help himself, even though he knew better than to question an officer. "Captain, why kill them?"

"A couple of reasons, son. One is that, right now, these things are our enemy. You never leave an enemy able to hit back. Ever." He slipped his rifle back on his shoulder. "More important, it was suffering and dying. We couldn't save the creature—we just don't have the skill or time. I don't want to see anything, especially a soldier, suffer. Better to put it out of its misery. I'd hope my enemy..." Ells paused for a moment. "Or my troops—would do the same for me."

Dave watched the Captain's back as he walked away to help in the search. Maybe this wasn't the right career for him, but Dave knew being a warrior for more than half a century would have to change people. He'd come to understand that most grunts had a fatalistic streak, and he hadn't had time to develop that worldview yet.

He walked to an area near the base of the cliff where none of the others had worked yet and started to move rocks, checking his scanner as he went. Dave had moved maybe a dozen stones when his scanner beeped. He rolled another rock, and the sensor beeped again. "Life signs!"

The others joined him in moving debris, and Dave braced himself for another bout with gore. Two other grunts moved a boulder, and Dave saw a hand—a human hand.

* * * *

Clemmons heard no sounds from the room to indicate anything in there was amiss, but he had a time limit. The other guard would be back at any moment, and Clemmons needed to get in the room and be gone before that happened, hopefully with Shane in tow.

A sudden crash from inside the room forced his hand before he had a chance to develop a plan. There was one dragon was inside, but as far as he knew for sure, there could be a hundred. Landis's words echoed in his mind once again.

Just believe in yourself the way I have always believed in you.

"I do."

Clemmons grabbed the handle on the door and threw it open wide, rushing into the room with his sword at the ready.

Other than the room holding only two dragons instead of a hundred, the scene confronting Clemmons made little sense to him. He saw the two lizards fighting, claws and teeth snapping and slashing at each other. Their blood covered the floor in bright splashes, and their snarls filled the air as they slammed into the walls and furniture.

The presence of the furniture puzzled him for a moment. A table stood against one wall, and a chair designed for a man rested on the floor, overturned by the struggling dragons. Then he saw her.

Shane sat huddled in the corner of the room, her knees drawn up to her chest, and she watched the dragons carefully. She looked ready to move quickly if their huge bodies thrashed in her direction. He doubted it was fear that made her hunker down. There was no question in Clemmons's mind that Shane simply used good sense in being ready to get out from under a falling dragon before it crushed her.

Her face was bruised and bloody with fresh blood trailing from her ear. Her chest, always so shapely and attractive, looked bulky and padded with bandages that showed underneath the course shirt she wore. Clemmons noted Shane guarded her right side and leaned in that direction, like she protected her body from more pain.

And despite the gore and dirt that covered her, Shane was still lovely, a beautiful damsel held by horrendous dragons and waiting for her knight to rescue her.

The dragons noticed him and turned as one to face Clemmons. The smaller one grinned, teeth glistening wetly with trails of blood trickling down their length.

Clemmons shifted his sword in his hand and smiled. "Come on. I believe it's time for you to meet your maker, and I believe I'm just the one to do the introductions."

The small dragon roared and charged. His training and experience kicking in, Clemmons knew the beast was tired from its fight with the other lizard, so he stood his ground, sword at the ready.

At the last moment, Clemmons stepped sidewise and spun, whipping his

blade up and out then pulling it firmly back towards his body. As the razor-sharp edge bit into dragon flesh, Clemmons felt the sudden absence of resistance as the lizard's head fell from its body. Clemmons whirled to face the larger dragon, avoiding the death throes of the first. A fighting smile came to his face.

"Now, I avenge the atrocities you have done to Shane and the death of Landis." Clemmons pointed at the large dragon with the tip of his sword. "You're next."

* * * *

At first Shane hadn't even seen Clemmons come into the room. She'd been too busy trying to stay out from under the feet of Cedric and Handley and trying to avoid being under them when they hit the floor. She stared at Handley's body on the floor, marveling at how easily Clemmons had dispatched the king.

Then Shane heard Clemmons say Landis was dead.

The room swam around her, and she didn't think it was because of her injuries. Clemmons had to be wrong or, perhaps, he spoke only metaphorically.

She had to snap out of that chain of thought, though, because in the same breath as announcing Landis was dead, Clemmons threatened Cedric. No matter if Landis lived or not, too much blood had been spilled already.

As Handley and Cedric had fought, Shane saw Cedric defended himself but never went on the offensive. He didn't want to hurt Handley, whether it be because Handley was his king or because he didn't want to wasn't clear to her. The only time Cedric pushed an advantage in the struggle was to keep himself between her and Handley. Cedric had tried to protect her.

Shane tried to get to her feet, but the pain in her side ripped through her like a bullet, and she sat down hard on the floor. She held out her hand to Clemmons.

"No, Clemmons! Don't harm him."

"Rest, Shane. I'll deal with this beast." Clemmons traced little figure-eight shapes with the tip of his sword as he pointed it at Cedric.

"No! He tried to help me."

Cedric leaned back on his haunches. "Sir knight, I may be your enemy,

but I mean you and the lady no harm now."

Clemmons glanced from her to Cedric and back again. "I don't understand."

Shane managed to gain her feet. "I don't either, but I believe this dragon is honorable and wants peace with men."

Cedric nodded. "I can speak only of peace. I want to stop the killing before men and dragons are both all gone."

She stumbled to stand beside Clemmons, and he slipped his arm around her waist, pulling her close to his side as he turned to put his body between her and Cedric. His sword never wavered from pointing at the dragon.

Shane almost laughed out loud when the image they must present hit her. She felt a little like Deja Thoris on the arm of John Carter as he protected her from the ferocious Tharks on the surface of Barsoom. The three probably looked like the cover of a two-credit romance novel for teenage girls.

She stifled the giggle welling up inside of her. "Clemmons, I can't say how I know it, but Cedric isn't an enemy." He turned to face her, and Shane felt safe for the first time since leaving Landis's arms. "Trust me."

Clemmons stared at her for a long time, but the tip of his sword slowly dropped to point more at the floor than at Cedric. "I do trust you."

Cedric remained on his haunches. "We must move the guard's body. The other will return soon."

Clemmons nodded. "Shane, you rest." He pointed briefly at Cedric with his sword. "You help me."

Chapter 5

Just Wave Goodbye

He didn't know why, but Clemmons found himself trusting the dragon purely on Shane's word he could be trusted. The idea would have seemed ludicrous just a few hours ago, and it was still ridiculous now. But the fact was that Clemmons felt comfortable sheathing his sword while Cedric helped him move Handley's body to the wall and drag the guard's body inside to close the door.

Clemmons went to Shane's side and righted the chair before helping her sit down. "You're hurt."

"Nothing too bad."

Cedric stood near the door, his pointed ears aimed at the portal, listening for the returning guard. "I have sent for Alicia. She will be able to care for Shane."

Shane touched his arm. "Clemmons, you said something has happened to Landis."

The sadness rose up in him again, but Clemmons knew he had no time to deal with the distraction now. He also had to answer Shane, to give her some explanation. "Yes, he's dead, killed while distracting the dragons so I could get into the cave." He didn't want to cry, not because of Shane's presence, but because of the dragon. Shane would accept his tears and see them only as the expression of grief they were, but Clemmons feared Cedric would see them as weakness.

She tried to stand, but pain washed across her face. Shane tugged his arm, pulling his face to her level. "I am so sorry." She kissed his cheek softly, and a wave of chills run through his body.

"He died to save you, and it's now up to me to finish that task so he will not have died in vain."

Cedric's ears twitched. "The guard returns with Alicia. Be ready, knight,

but I'll try to cover things."

"We can trust Cedric." Shane's beautiful eyes told Clemmons all he needed to know, and he moved off to stand behind the door, out of sight of the guard.

A knock came on the door, and Cedric opened it. The guard hesitated a moment. "Where is Chaucer?"

Cedric blocked the door with his body. "King Handley sent him for something. You may leave Alicia and take your post."

There was a long silence, and Clemmons wondered if the guard might insist on entering. "Very well."

A young woman entered the room, and Cedric quickly closed the door. When she saw Clemmons hiding behind the door with two dead dragons, her eyes went wide, but Cedric gripped her arm and spoke softly. "There is no need for alarm. Stay quiet, Alicia."

She stared at the bodies. "What is happening?"

"This is Sir Clemmons, and he is here to rescue Shane."

"But..." She stared at Handley's corpse. "The king is dead."

"Yes, that couldn't be helped." Cedric used his hand, the talons touching the woman's face with a fascinating tenderness, to turn her to face him. "We need you to treat Shane's wounds. Can you do that?"

Softness played over Alicia's expression, and she reached up to stroke the side of Cedric's face, tracing a line down his jaw. "Yes, of course."

The girl attended to Shane, and Cedric turned to face him. "When Alicia has done what she can, she and I will try to lure the guard away from the room so you can get Shane out of here."

Clemmons shook his head. "No, we stay together. What would stop you from going for more guards?"

"Just my word of honor I won't do that. You have no chance to escape without my help, and I want you to escape."

Clemmons doubted the dragon's motivations. "Tell me why."

"While Handley was paranoid, I did agree with him on one thing—Shane's people are powerful, and they could destroy us. We may have already brought their wrath down on us, but we can hope they will understand Handley was mad."

Alicia placed a fluffy wad of gauze in her ear and Shane winced. "Cedric is right. We need his help, and my people will surely react poorly to

my capture. We have to stop them by showing them I'm alive."

"I don't like this, but I see no options." Clemmons turned to Alicia. "Will she be able to travel?"

Alicia frowned. "She is badly injured, and I lack the skill to heal her."

Shane waved her hand in dismissal. "I can move when we need to. I won't slow us down."

"Then it is settled. Alicia and I will lead the guard away, and you and Shane wait here. One of us will return to lead you out of the cave as quickly as possible." Cedric gestured to Alicia. "Come, we go now."

Alicia went to his side, her fingers brushing over the green-gold scales of the dragon's arm.

When Clemmons had taken up his position behind the door, Cedric pulled the plank aside. "King Handley wants us to go check on Chaucer. Come."

"What is this on the floor?" The guard hesitated, and Clemmons shifted his sword to get a better grip. "It looks like blood."

"It is. The woman tried to crawl away from our king's anger." Cedric laughed. "Handley pulled her back inside with his claws in her body."

The guard chuckled. "As he should have done."

Cedric and Alicia left the room, closing the door behind them.

* * * *

"We haven't found Rawls's body yet, but we found her weapon." Ells ran his hand through his sweaty hair. "We've covered an area more than ten meters in every direction from the weapon, and I can't imagine her having been able to get even that far with all the rock that fell from the cliff."

Elsa had no idea how Rawls could have gotten so far from her weapon, but clearly she had. "You're there, and I'm not. What do you think?"

"I think she's in the cave, Captain. I'd like to go in after her."

"That's very admirable, but also very dangerous. We can't get through the ore to give you any directions with the sensors. We wouldn't even have communications."

"Understood, Ma'am, but we need to go after her."

The Communications Officer caught Elsa's attention. "Captain, we may be able to rig a series of relay transmitters inside the cave that would give us

communications."

"Explain, please."

The officer used the main screen to draw a crude cave. "The team would simply drop a relay station every so often as they go in. Those will pass the link from station to station until it gets to a station on the surface that relays to us."

Ells smiled. "That would work. How far apart do the stations need to be?"

"Unknown. We'd have to experiment a little, but that's just details. We could have the relay stations and all the rest ready in maybe forty-five minutes."

She was violating just about every rule in the book and probably a good number of regulations, too, but Elsa trusted her gut and this was the right thing to do. She nodded. "Make it so."

* * * *

Clemmons paced the room, but Shane wasn't sure why he was so restless. They had made the choices—they would trust Cedric and Alicia to get them out, and she didn't think that was the cause of Clemmons's nervousness.

He moved from the door, walking to first one corner of the room and then back to the door before heading for another corner. His big hand flexed on his sword, the muscles of his arm bunching and twisting as he paced. She could have carved a face from the cave wall to match the flat expression he wore.

Shane knew she was in bad shape. Her chest still felt like a steel band tightened around her, and her head swam every time she moved too quickly. She wondered about internal injuries and how much blood she'd lost. She worried more about anemia and brain damage from lack of oxygen.

She struggled to her feet, trying to keep the ripping pain from her face. "Thank you for coming after me."

Clemmons stopped his pacing. "You should sit and rest. We'll have to get moving soon, and you'll need your strength."

"I'll be fine." She lied, and she knew it. Shane had heard the stories about soldiers knowing, somehow, when their number was up. She could

almost hear the bingo caller announcing hers now.

"No thanks are needed." He brushed at his eyes with the back of his free hand.

"Thank you anyway." She hesitated, not sure if she really wanted to know or not. "Was this your idea or Landis's?"

"Both, actually." Clemmons wiped at his eyes again, but he smiled. "He was always smarter than me, and most of the plan was his idea."

"I think you're pretty smart, too." She laughed with him. "Clemmons, I can't honestly say I wish I hadn't made love with Landis, but I am sorry it hurt you. Even more so now."

He nodded. "Please don't be sorry. You can't help the feelings of love you shared with him."

Shane thought about that for a minute. "I also can't say I'm in love with him. Yes, I am—or was—attracted to him, but how could I love someone in the short time we've known each other?"

"That's true. All I can say is we were both attracted to you."

"You find me attractive?" She wanted to slap herself. This surely wasn't the place or time to let her ego get the better of her just because a man found her attractive.

"What man wouldn't?" Clemmons slipped his sword into the sheath at his side. "As Landis pointed out several times, you're a beautiful woman."

Heat flooded her face. "Thank you."

"Don't thank me for what God has wrought."

"Thank you just the same."

He chuckled. "I always thought it would be me you ended up in bed with."

"I guess it could have been." The heat again moved across her face. "I find both of you attractive, too."

Clemmons stepped close to her, and the scent of sweat-dampened leather filled her head. "Things might be different now."

He leaned and kissed her lips softly. Shane slipped her arms around his waist, and the pain from her side nearly knocked her to her knees. Clemmons moved quickly and lifted her in his arms.

He frowned. "I'm sorry."

"Yeah, the timing is really bad."

* * * *

Fifteen more troops came down with the little relay boxes the communications people had worked up, and the team was getting ready to move into the cave. Sergeant Kyle gave Dave a bag full of the relays, and Ells was laying out the plan.

"Ten people will stay here topside. Anything with wings gets stunned and stays that way. The rest of us go in, and we have no idea what we'll find." He paused. "The relays have an estimated range of twenty meters, but it may be less than that based on the concentration of ore in the cave walls, so those of you with the bags of gizmos watch your communications links. If it looks weak to you, drop a relay, but in no case should you go more than twenty meters from the last one, even if you have full-scale signal strength."

Kyle picked up the speech. "All weapons are to be set to stun and locked. Have your buddy confirm your weapon. We're not going in to kill dragons—we're going in there to find Rawls and bring her out. Unless Captain Ells or I give you a direct order, you are not authorized to use deadly force. Do you get me?"

Dave joined the chorus of replies. "We get you, Sergeant!"

"Good! Saddle up—we move out in five minutes!"

* * * *

Soft taps at the door made him spin quickly, putting himself between Shane and the wood, drawing his sword in a smooth motion. While he stood to the side, Shane opened the door, and Alicia came inside, quickly closing the door behind her.

She smiled. "We must go now. Cedric has cleared this level and is doing what he can to get a passage for us to the first level. We will find many more dragons, many loyal to Handley, but we can hope for luck there."

Clemmons still didn't feel sure about the plan, but he had nothing better. He wished Landis were here to come up with a plan of action, among other reasons. He nodded. "All right, let's get going."

Shane paused. "Alicia, could you tighten this bandage around my chest? I think it will be more comfortable when I walk."

"Of course." Alicia lifted the shirt Shane wore to expose the bandages.

While her breasts remained fully covered by the dressings, a wide expanse of flesh showed between the top of Shane's pants and the white of the bandages.

He found himself staring at her. Bruises and scratches covered her body in some places so densely that it looked like no skin remained at all. Despite the wounds and the bindings, Clemmons still found Shane nothing less than gorgeous, and he struggled to put from his mind the thoughts of where the brief kiss from earlier might have led had her pain not intervened.

When Alicia pulled the bindings tight, Shane winced and grabbed her right side. She blinked rapidly, but he saw a single tear trickle down her cheek. "I think that's better."

Alicia lowered the shirt to cover Shane's torso again. Clemmons had mixed feelings about that. "I'll lead the way. It should be safe, but stay alert for any sounds."

She opened the door and checked the passageway. She led them out and down the corridor, away from the room with the dead king and his bodyguard.

* * * *

Sayid didn't know what to do. Actually, he knew full well what to do—he had to end this war with the dragons. He just didn't know how to actually do it without looking weak to his people. He hoped the humans could help him.

Talbert was a good man, but he wasn't a leader, let alone a king. He didn't understand the weight of leading people.

Davis, though, understood. She wasn't a king—or more correctly, a queen—but she understood command and the need for respect and strength. Perhaps she would be of more help to him in ending the war, but Davis wasn't available now. Finding her missing crewmember had her otherwise occupied.

Even Davis's actions in kidnapping him spoke of her skills and understanding. Despite his indignation, Sayid knew she carefully calculated the effects on not only him but on her own people. He now respected her power and abilities. Her crew respected her determination and focus.

For Davis, the event was a win-win situation.

Talbert took off the headset for the communicator and sighed. "Our troops have entered the cave of the dragons."

"I could still order my men into the area to assist."

He shook his head. "No, Your Majesty. Captain Davis is adamant about your people staying out of this. We worry the dragons will see your men as being an attack for reasons other than recovering Rawls."

"Very well." Sayid doubted the humans would need his help. He'd seen enough of their ship to know they had weapons of staggering power. These warriors the humans sent in for the mission would make his best knights look like children playing at war, even without their blasters and lasers and other tools. He'd learned enough to know the humans could easily see him and his people as primitives.

And yet, Sayid had the feeling the humans didn't see them as primitive barbarians at all. Again, despite his indignation and anger, Davis had treated him more like an equal when she spoke to him. No, he knew that wasn't even correct.

Other than kidnapping him from his own throne room, Davis had respected him and treated him as much as she could, given the situation, like the head of state he was.

A strange peacefulness moved over Sayid. *Yes*, he thought, *these people can help end the death, so men and dragons can both get on with life.*

* * * *

Shane had her hands full. Trying to fight the pain, keep moving, not cry, avoid passing out, and keeping her eyes from watching Clemmons's ass all worked against her ability to focus on getting out of the cave.

Alicia had led them to the ramp to the second level, and they hadn't seen or heard a single dragon. So far, it looked like Cedric had succeeded in clearing the lower level somehow.

Alicia paused and whispered to her and Clemmons, "Cedric told me it would be harder to get safe passage through the next level, so maybe we should rest here for a while. That should be safe."

"Until someone finds the dead dragons we left behind." Clemmons watched Shane closely, and heat flushed her face again. "Do you need to rest? Tell the truth."

As much as she hated to admit it, Shane didn't think she could go much farther without resting for a while. The pain in her side was all she could think about. "Yes, I do need to rest." She turned to Alicia. "The pain is really bad."

"I'll check your dressings."

"I need you to be strong, Shane. Without that help, I won't be able to get you out of here." Clemmons smiled a little. "But you can let me be brave for you."

He lifted her in his arms and carried her into a deep crevice that was in full shadow from the scattered torches. Clemmons knelt and sat her down, her back resting against the cave wall. He stared into her eyes for several seconds before he moved to stand up.

Shane put her hands on his cheeks. "There's not much else I can do or say." She pulled his face to hers and kissed his lips. "No matter what may happen, thank you for coming for me."

Clemmons smiled but said nothing as he stood aside so Alicia could check her bandages.

Alicia lifted Shane's shirt, and the right side of the dressings showed several bright-red bloodstains. She frowned. "I need to reinforce these bandages to stop the bleeding."

Without a word, Clemmons shrugged out of his armor and pulled off his shirt. "Use this." As Alicia tore the shirt into strips, Clemmons removed the harness and dagger from the armor and slipped it over his torso.

Alicia pulled the bindings tight around her chest, and the pain blurred Shane's vision. Alicia's frown deepened. "I'm not sure how much farther you'll be able to go, Shane. You've lost a lot of blood, and you're still bleeding."

"I'll be fine after I rest a little."

He knelt beside her, and Clemmons touched her hand. "I have to agree with Alicia. We've come but a tiny amount of the distance we have to cover, and that was no harder than a walk in the woods."

Alicia nodded and lowered Shane's shirt. "We need a different plan. I wish Cedric were here."

Shane needed a distraction. "Alicia, I saw the way you touched Cedric. You care for him."

A smile spread over the girl's face, and her inner beauty more than

overwhelmed the disfigurement of the scar on her face. "Very much. I have known only a few people, others who, like me, have been with the dragons for many years, but I believe I love Cedric."

Now it was Clemmons's turn to frown. "How can you say that? His kind stole you from your home and family and have killed many men."

"That's all true, but men have killed many dragons, too." The smile never left Alicia's face, and Shane could see that nothing Clemmons said would change the young woman's opinion. "Cedric has been good to me, always kind, and never has he offered any harm to me. He is an honorable man."

"But he's not a man!"

"To me he is. I can see you are also an honorable man. Part of Shane's love for you is because you have that honor, the same as I love Cedric for his honor."

Shane wondered if the translator had finally crapped out on her. Clemmons just stared at Alicia. A noise from the ramp pulled their attention away from the conversation. Alicia held up her hands, indicating for the two of them to stay put, and she stepped from the cleft in the rock. She returned after a minute with Cedric following close behind.

Cedric nodded to Shane and Clemmons. "Alicia tells me you may not be able to travel much farther. That poses a huge problem."

Shane tried to wave her arm in dismissal, but the shooting pain in her side made the motion look choppy. "I'm OK."

Clemmons shook his head. "No, you're not." He turned to Cedric. "We need another way out."

Cedric leaned back onto his haunches. "I know of no other way out, but perhaps Alicia and I can create a disturbance to make the passage easier for you. I have a few allies whom I can trust to help."

"Maybe, but I don't think Shane can walk much farther. I may need to carry her."

She didn't feel good at all, and the pain wore on her nerves. Shane found she was suddenly angry. "Would you two stop talking about me like I'm not here? I can walk, and I'll be fine!"

"It's one thing to fight through the pain, but it's something else to make an injury worse by ignoring it." Clemmons reached out and brushed the back of his hand down her cheek. His touch sent warm shivers through her Shane

didn't understand at all. "Remember, let me be brave for you."

Cedric stood suddenly. "Alicia and I will go to try making the passage easier. I'll send one of my men for you as soon as we are ready." He turned to Alicia. "Come."

The young woman and dragon left the hiding place.

* * * *

The team moved through the cave, but the going was slow. They had no maps, no way of using their sensors to spot the dragons, and they had to keep testing the communications links. This was the most dangerous situation Dave had encountered in his short tenure as a Marine. Based on what some of the others were saying around him, he thought it might very well be the most dangerous situation he would ever encounter.

So far, they'd bumped into, almost literally, only three dragons. The stunners had left all three sleeping soundly in their wake. Sergeant Kyle and Captain Ells had no idea where Rawls might be held, if she was even in the cave, and all the team could do was wander around aimlessly, checking and securing each room as they went. They didn't even know how big the cave was. They could be at this for days.

* * * *

He leaned his sword against the wall of the cave and sat down beside Shane. Clemmons didn't want to sheath his weapon, because it took too long to draw the sword while sitting down. When she looked at him, he saw many things in her face, but Clemmons knew he didn't understand them all.

He thought he saw gratitude there, but he wasn't sure. A woman from his world would certainly be grateful for his rescue. Clemmons wasn't so sure about a woman from Shane's world, most especially Shane herself. Her independent streak might actually make her offended by the idea that he believed she needed rescuing. Maybe it was only his own desire for her getting the better of him, but Clemmons thought the brief kiss of thanks she gave him earlier was only a hint of what she really wanted to do to show him her gratitude.

Clemmons could see sadness on Shane's face. He suspected it was a

sadness he shared for the loss of Landis. Shane said she didn't love Landis, but she'd shared herself with him just the same. He knew Landis well enough to know he wouldn't have pushed her into fucking him, though he probably did take command of the encounter. Clemmons kept replaying the words of Alicia in his mind. She'd casually commented, "Part of Shane's love for you is because you have that honor." What could have made the girl have that idea?

Alicia's words made him wonder if he also saw love on Shane's face. Did she love Landis? Did Shane, as the young woman implied, love him? This was all new ground for Clemmons. He'd never loved a woman before. If he faced the facts, the only person he could say he ever loved at all was Landis. He'd fucked a lot of women, but he didn't love them. Clemmons tried to push through his own ego enough to understand if any of those women had loved him. He didn't know how to tell the difference between love, political ambition, and just fucking.

What he did know was he saw mostly pain on Shane's face. She hurt, physically, and he worried for her survival. He'd seen men on the battlefield die from wounds not too different from those Shane now suffered. That she still lived and was conscious was a testament to her training and conditioning.

She touched his arm, and his skin tingled from the warmth of her fingertips. "What are you thinking about?"

"Mostly how to get you to safety and to your people, so they can help you."

Shane nodded, and a small smile broke through the pain. "If you say so."

"What's that mean?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all."

* * * *

The Emperor actually threw back his head and laughed. Admiral Reeves didn't seem to think it was nearly as funny, since he still frowned on his side of the split-screen.

"Oh, Elsa, that's great! That's something I would have done a few thousand years ago!"

Reeves cleared his throat. "Jim, this is serious. She kidnapped the king of a sovereign planet, and the diplomatic detail on *Daedalus* has filed a formal complaint."

The Emperor wiped at his eyes. "Calm down, Zach. You'd have done the same a few centuries ago."

"Maybe so, maybe not."

"Sure you would have. In fact, remember when we had the Samulian Prime Minister as our guest? He didn't want to be here anymore than this king wanted to be on *Daedalus*."

"That was different." Reeves's cheeks flushed.

"How? Other than you went to get him for me." The Emperor laughed again. "And if you can remember back two thousand years, our wives reacted the same way as you're doing now."

A small smile leaked through the Admiral's attempts at being stern. "Yeah. I thought Janelle was going to kill you."

"And Claire was just as pissed off at you. But in the end, they got over it, and it was all for the best."

Reeves nodded. "I get the picture. So, what do you want me to do about this complaint?"

The Emperor shrugged. "I don't really care. You can deal with it or leave it for Q, but it ends here."

Elsa had assumed the Emperor was in his office, but maybe he wasn't. Empress Marilyn walked into the view on the screen and promptly sat on his lap. She leaned and kissed her husband's ear. From the way the man jerked, Elsa suspected the tall, slender blonde ran her tongue about a hundred centimeters into his ear.

James the First, by Grace of God Emperor to Mankind, smiled a little sheepishly. "Well, I need to go. Good work, Elsa." His half of the screen faded to black.

Reeves rolled his eyes. "Those two never cease to amaze me. Carry on, Captain."

* * * *

Shane had a lot on her mind. She needed to focus on getting out of the cave, and that meant she needed to get past the pain that built like a bonfire

in her right side and chest. That was hard, but her training helped. She thought she could do it, keep moving right up until the point she would pass out.

What was harder was resisting kissing Clemmons again. She didn't know if she could do that or not. She tried to look at it logically—she needed to save her strength for getting out of here. *Then* she could jump his bones.

If she lived long enough to get out of here, and Shane had her doubts about that.

She wondered about what Alicia had said. Shane was fairly certain she hadn't fallen for Landis. Maybe. On the other hand, she'd made love with him in spite of knowing about him and Clemmons. She'd felt warm and safe in his arms. Even if she couldn't allow herself the luxury of grieving right now, she did feel an empty pain at his loss. But there was something very different with Clemmons.

First of all, she could admit to herself she'd wanted Landis, even if she didn't know it until he grabbed her. With Clemmons, she wanted him so much she could almost taste his cum in her mouth and feel his cock in her ass and pussy. If she didn't think it would kill her, she'd be all over him right now. She knew she might do it anyway.

But more to the point, she needed him to take care of her, and she wanted to take care of him. They would need each other when the time to grieve for Landis came, and Shane wanted to be there for Clemmons. She couldn't think of anyone she'd rather have there for her than Clemmons.

Maybe, somehow, Alicia had hit the nail on the head. Maybe she did love Clemmons. Maybe not love as in picking out furniture, but she wanted to be with him. The fact was she wanted to be with Landis in the same way, but Shane knew that was out of the question now. The real fact was she'd fallen for two men.

Clemmons interrupted her reflections. "How will we get you to your people so they can help you?"

"You're assuming we'll get out of here." A pained look flashed over his face, and Shane regretted her feeble attempt at humor. "I'm sorry. Of course we'll get out. All I can think of is getting back to the camp."

He shook his head. "No, that's a four-hour climb I know you couldn't make."

"I have no idea, then."

He sat quietly for a time. "We'll work out something." He stared at her, almost to the point of making her uncomfortable. Clemmons took her hand in his, and his face lost all expression. "Shane, can I ask you something?"

"Of course."

"I don't want to hurt you, but may I kiss you again?"

Shane felt the smile come to her lips. "I'd like that, yes."

He leaned towards her, and his lips touched hers with a tenderness that was surprising for such a large man. Shane tried to lift her arms to his neck, but he gently held her, and that was for the best—the motion of lifting her arms caused pain to fire through her chest.

Clemmons's tongue eased into her mouth, and he tasted wonderful, the sweat on his lips mixing with some unknown chemical of his body to dance across her taste buds in delightful ways. Despite the burning pain in her chest and side, Shane's body responded to him, warmth spreading across her breasts and moisture flowing from her pussy.

Shane had decided it didn't matter if it killed her or not—dying in his arms would be worth making love to Clemmons. A small crunch of rock outside of the crevice made Clemmons spring to standing as his hand grabbed the sword, swinging it to the ready.

A voice called softly. "Sir Clemmons? I am Drongly. Cedric sent me for you."

She couldn't decide if the timing of dragons was terrible or wonderful.

* * * *

Drongly had convinced him Cedric's plan might work. Clemmons carried Shane, and Drongly walked behind them. The idea was to convince the other dragons Drongly was escorting a pair of prisoners someplace to meet Cedric. So far, it was working, and Shane was doing well. Besides, she felt good in his arms.

The interrupted kiss had been the hardest thing he'd ever had to do. Clemmons wanted to hug Shane, to run his hands over her soft, small body and pull the cloth from her, but that would have hurt her, and he would rather cut off his sword arm than cause any harm to Shane.

But now he held her cuddled in his arms, and she had her arms around

his neck as they walked through the second level of the cave with Drongly barking orders to turn at certain intersections. The only bad part was that, to make the façade complete, Clemmons had surrendered his sword to the dragon and had only his dagger tucked into his belt.

Drongly whispered from behind them. "We near the ramp to the first level. We can only hope Cedric has been able to get word out that we are to have safe passage."

Clemmons nodded, fearing speaking would draw attention to them. Shane squeezed his neck and her lips touched his ear softly.

As they ascended the ramp, a sudden wailing sound broke out from deeper in the cave. No longer whispering, Drongly screamed out above the racket. "We must run! That alarm means they have found Handley and the guard dead!"

As light as she was, Shane still slowed Clemmons as he ran up the ramp. Drongly urged them on, but Clemmons's feet slipped on the loose rock and sand, and he almost fell.

Shane wiggled in his arms. "Put me down. I can keep up."

"No, I'll carry you."

She twisted and slipped out his embrace to get her feet on the floor. "You'll need your arms free to use your sword. I'll keep up."

* * * *

Dave was on point as the team came around a corner of the cave, and more than a dozen dragons stood in the passageway ahead of them. Following the standing orders, he checked his rifle to confirm the stun setting and fired. Unlike the times before, when the dragons simply collapsed in a heap, the group turned and stared down the corridor at him, wondering what the buzzing sound was.

Dave fired again, but nothing happened. Three of his comrades fired, and the dragons reacted. They all started running directly at the assault team.

Ells yelled into the communicator. "*Daedalus!* We have no effect from the blasters. Going hot! Sergeant Kyle, the use of deadly force is authorized!"

"Copy that, Sir! All team members go hot, rapid fire, short bursts!"

Dave entered the override code and flicked his rifle to projectile mode.

Picking his targets, aiming for the closest dragons first, he fired short, controlled bursts down the passageway. When the ultra-fast slugs ripped through their bodies, the dragons jerked and twitched. The sounds of the reports rang through the cave like staccato drumbeats, and the dragons hit the floor of the cave and lie still.

As the echoes rattled to fading infinity, Dave heard the response from *Daedalus*. "Davis here. You are clear to use deadly force. Science thinks the ore is blocking your blasters."

* * * *

Elsa ran her fingers through her hair and then rubbed her eyes. It had been just shy of twenty-fours since Sayid had left *Daedalus*, and Elsa had left the command chair only to go to the bathroom. She looked a mess, and she knew it.

Ells hadn't slept in that long, either, but it didn't show through the communicator. Like all grunts, he sounded and looked the same, no matter what was happening. Elsa never could figure out how they did that.

Ells chuckled. "So much for the element of surprise."

"Yeah." She rubbed her head again. Her hair itched. "How many dragons are dead?"

"We count sixteen. We tried to wound them, but they just kept coming."

"All right. From here on out, don't risk people on non-lethal weapons."

"Understood, Ma'am."

Elsa heard a wailing siren through the communicator. "What the hell is that?"

Ells looked around. "I'd guess that's the sound of the welcome wagon coming to greet us."

"Great. Carry on."

* * * *

Shane moved as fast as she could, but Drongly kept moving far ahead of her and had to stop to wait for her to catch up. Clemmons ran behind her, his sword at the ready, and he stayed close as he tried to look in all directions at once.

The pain in Shane's chest was getting worse. There was no doubt about that, and her breath burned as she panted. She pushed herself much harder than she should have, and her vision swam and black spots often obscured objects.

Here on the first level, they feared running into a group of dragons responding to the alarm that still screamed its deafening screech. Drongly had stopped, waiting for her and Clemmons to catch up before turning a corner at an intersection.

Shane leaned against the wall and struggled for air. Clemmons watched her carefully.

He turned to Drongly. "We must let Shane rest."

"No! Now that the alarm has sounded, they will be looking for Cedric, Alicia, and Shane. We must go on, or we'll all die!"

Clemmons studied her face before turning back to the dragon. "We thank you for your help, and you should move on. We'll find our way from here."

Drongly hesitated. "Cedric asked me to be your guide, and I'm true to my word. We'll wait a few minutes."

Shane knew some kind of an important breakthrough just happened when Clemmons sheathed his sword and clapped Drongly on the shoulder. "You are a true and honorable friend."

The dragon smiled. "I gave my word to Cedric, and I will defend you and the lady with my life. This war must end, and that will be a small price to pay."

Clemmons smiled back and then turned to her. "How are you?"

Shane couldn't lie to Clemmons and make him believe her. "It really hurts, and I can't breath very well, but if I can rest just a little, we can go on."

"We're both warriors, and we have few other choices." Clemmons pulled the dagger from his belt and turned it in his big hand. Holding the tip of the blade in the fingers of his right hand, he rested the blade on his left arm, extending the hilt to her. "Take this. If we are to die here, we can die like warriors."

She hesitated, looking first at the offered blade and then into the face of the man who offered it to her. It seemed many important things were happening here in the cave of the dragons. Clemmons recognized a dragon

could be not only honorable and true, but also a friend. He also recognized a woman could be a warrior.

But Shane realized she had feelings of more than simple lust. She'd felt the lustful attraction to Clemmons and Landis on sight, but things changed. She'd made love with Landis, and it was more than lustful passion, though she couldn't say exactly how. She'd shared a few kisses with Clemmons, but lust had little to do with it. Yes, she wanted him enough that she would risk death to have him, but Shane knew she would be happy if she could only be close to him.

Shane took the hilt of the dagger in her hand. "I'll take this, but we aren't going to die. Not here and not now."

Clemmons smiled. "I like the way you think."

Drongly glanced around. "I hear others approaching. We should go, if Shane is able."

She nodded. "I'm ready."

The dragon peeked around the corner before leading the way again. He moved a little slower, and Shane was able to keep up better. Drongly approached an intersection, and as he entered the crossing, a club the size of a small tree lashed out from the cross-passage. Drongly dropped to the floor like a sack of wet cement.

Fourteen dragons stepped into the corridor and faced them. Shane recognized the largest of the dragons as the remaining guard from her cell. He kicked Drongly and smiled at them.

"So, we have you. We'll soon find the traitor Cedric and his whore."

Clemmons stood beside her, the tip of his sword tracing small circles in the air. "You don't have us yet."

The dragon laughed. "If you want a quick death, I'd suggest you fall on your sword."

"My death matters not." Clemmons pointed at the big dragon with his blade. "Yours does."

The dragon looked at her, and Shane felt the same evil she'd sensed from Handley. "Perhaps your brave knight will die last, after watching you begging for death."

The pain had faded somewhat, and Shane didn't know if that was good, bad, or just an effect of the rush of facing death. It didn't matter. She pointed at the dragon with the dagger. "Fuck you."

Chapter 6

Departure

Clemmons considered retreating back down the corridor, but that would only prolong the inevitable confrontation with the dragons. Better to make their last stand here, no matter the outcome.

The big lizard's only response to Shane's insulting threat was to smile and walk toward them with his group of henchmen following close behind. Clemmons shifted his sword in his hand to get a better grip.

Shane bumped her hip against his. "I'll give you one thing. You know how to show a girl a good time."

"Don't be flippant. There are a lot of things to say at a time like this, and making jokes isn't one of them."

"I'm not joking. What better time could two warriors have than this?" She looked up into his eyes. "Besides, like I said before, we're not going to die here."

He chuckled a little. "What makes you think that?"

A voice rang out from someplace behind the group of advancing dragons. "Halt! Turn around slowly!"

A few of the lizards at the rear of the small crowd spun quickly to look behind them, and a sound Clemmons had never heard before rang out. It had the sharp cracking of Shane's weapon, but a series of reports came in rapid succession.

Shane smiled. "That does!"

Some unseen force coinciding with the noise of the reports hit three of the dragons, and they jerked violently. They fell to the floor, blood pooling around their bodies.

Shane suddenly looked frightened. She cupped her hands around her mouth and yelled, "Friendly personnel in the firing line! Code delta one gamma three!"

There was a moment of hesitation before the voice at the other end of the corridor responded, "Copy, friendly personnel. Evade via bravo eight one."

The smile again flashed to Shane's face. "Copy!" She grabbed his arm and pulled. "Over here!" She tugged him to fall to the floor, and they rolled to lie close against the right-hand wall. "Clear!"

Clemmons ended up on top of her, but he had only an instant to enjoy staring down into her beautiful eyes before the air of the cave seemed to explode with the sounds of the projectile weapons of Shane's people. The reports echoed loudly in the enclosed space and slugs whizzed through the air around them. An acrid smell filled the cave. Projectiles ricocheted off the walls, and whining sounds accompanied flying chips of stone. The slugs chewed them, and dragons flailed. Lizards—and parts of lizards—hit the floor, and blood ran across the stone.

As the reports faded, Clemmons looked down into Shane's face. She managed a weak smile. "See? I told you we weren't going to die here."

Blood flowed freely from her ear, and when he rolled from on top of her, Clemmons saw bright red blood soaking through Shane's shirt. He looked across at the dead dragons and he could see men moving among the bodies.

He called out to them, waving his arms. "Over here! Shane's hurt!"

A man ran to them and flipped up the visor of his helmet. "Sergeant? I'll get you some help."

She smiled at the young man. "Good to see you, Meyers."

"Medic! Man down!" Meyers knelt beside her and pulled bandages from the pouch at his hip. He pressed them against Shane's chest and leaned his full weight on her.

Shane grunted with the pressure, but Clemmons didn't interfere. Another man with a red cross on the side of his helmet ran up and began to connect tools to her body from a bag he carried. He placed a clear object over her mouth and nose, and Clemmons saw the telltale mist of breathing form on the thing.

The man held her eyes open, and he flashed a bright light into them. "Can you hear me, Rawls?"

She nodded a little, but pain washed over her face. "Yes. Is everyone all right?"

"You're my only patient and problem child."

She looked up at Clemmons and smiled a little. "You OK?"

"I'm fine." He found himself feeling the tingle of tears in his eyes. She would live.

* * * *

The Communications Officer looked up from her console. "Captain Ells on the priority channel, Ma'am."

Elsa still hadn't slept or bathed, but Chris did make her eat a sandwich earlier. That just made her sleepy. "Thank you." She tapped the communicator switch. "Davis here."

"We've got Rawls, Captain. She's hurt pretty bad, but we have her. And the other knight, Clemmons."

She was suddenly wide-awake. "That's amazing! We'll be ready to transport as soon as you're out of the cave."

"Copy that. We have to fight our way out, but a lot of the dragons seem happy to run away. We're in a purely defensive posture now, and the ones that back off live another day. ETA to surface is forty-five minutes."

"Understood. Good work, people." After she signed off, Elsa knew that in maybe two hours she could get some sleep and a bath—maybe not in that order, though.

* * * *

The last thing Shane remembered was Clemmons leaning over her as he held back the arm of the medic who was trying to sedate her. Clemmons had pulled the leather tie from his hair, and the blonde locks had spilled down to tickle her face. He smiled at her. "Yes, you were right. We aren't going to die here." He kissed her softly and then let the medic give her the injection.

Even before she opened her eyes, she knew she was back on *Daedalus* and in sickbay. The air maker removed all smells from the air, and she missed the scent of the living plants of the planet. She also knew Clemmons sat beside her bed, because she felt him holding her hand.

She opened her eyes, and the sterile, functional layout of the ship greeted her, but the splendid vision of Clemmons tempered it. He had his

hair tied back away from his face again, and he'd found someplace to shave.

He smiled. "How do you feel?"

The wrenching pain in her chest and side were gone now, and other than being a little sore, she actually felt pretty good. "Not too bad."

He opened his mouth to speak, but the doctor came into the room, and Clemmons closed it again.

"I thought you might be awake by now." The doctor checked the biosensor readings. "Everything looks good. You had some bad injuries, but they were all easy to treat once we got you here. Besides, with my great bedside manner and medical skills, how could you do anything other than recover fully?"

She laughed. "That's right, doc, put it all on me."

"You bet." He glanced at a few more of the instruments. "I think you can go back to your cabin in a couple of hours, as long as you take it easy."

"I promise."

"Good enough." The doctor frowned a little. "By the way, there are a couple of, um, people who would like to see you if you're up to it."

She wondered what the hesitation was about. "Sure. Send them in."

"Will do. I'll be back in a while to discharge you." He went to the door and waved at someone outside.

Cedric's bulk nearly filled the room, and when Alicia followed him inside, the image of a sardine can was complete.

Alicia almost ran to the side of her bed and hugged Shane. "I'm so happy you're going to be all right."

Shane didn't even try to extricate herself from the girl's grip. "Thanks to you."

Cedric nodded to her. "Shane, we all, men and dragons, owe you a great deal. You've made us look at what we were doing with our war and have the courage to change."

"I'm sorry so many had to die before you reached this point." Tears hit her suddenly, and she longed to feel Landis holding her other hand.

The dragon nodded again. "No more blood will be spilled over this meaningless war. Alicia and I will leave you to rest."

Alicia kissed Shane's cheek and then took Cedric's arm in hers as they left the room.

Shane turned to face Clemmons, and he still smiled softly. She took a

deep breath, hoping that would help keep the tears in check. "I wish Landis were here."

The smile wavered a bit. "The doctor said you could walk with help. Come with me."

Clemmons helped her stand and slip on a robe and then walked with her from the room and down the hall. He stopped her at a door marked with a small placard reading *Regeneration Chamber*, and when he pressed the switch, the door slid open.

Inside the room was a large machine behind a plate of glass, and connected to the machine was Landis. He looked like he was asleep. Shane felt her knees try to buckle, but Clemmons caught her and lowered her into a chair.

"I didn't mean to shock you, but your people found him alive, though badly injured, in the rubble of the cliff. Your doctor had to remove both of his legs, but I'm told this machine will regrow them in a few days."

She had the same *what-the-fuck* feeling as when Clemmons had caught her and Landis in the act back in the forest. Shane wasn't exactly sure what to do next. At some point, she'd admitted to herself she'd fallen for Landis. With him dead, that let her fall for Clemmons. The idea of being in bed with two men still sounded like fun, but being in love was something very different from a romp in the sack.

Just what exactly was she supposed to do now?

* * * *

Elsa waited on hold while the Fleet operator completed the connection to the Emperor. It seemed Admiral Reeves wasn't available, Q wasn't back from vacation yet, and the Emperor wanted to take her report himself. She didn't know how comfortable she was with the idea.

The Emperor came online, and his hair stuck out in about a dozen different directions. Elsa didn't see any of the trappings of his office in the background of the picture, so she wondered if maybe he was in his cabin aboard his flagship *Boone*. She had no idea what time it was there.

He stifled a yawn. "Good morning, Elsa. What's up?"

"Good morning, Your Majesty." She gave him a summary of what had happened to go with the detailed report she had sent.

"So, everyone is back where they belong, there were only a few casualties, and you've stopped a war that's been going on for more than a hundred years." He grinned. "I like it."

"That pretty well sums it up, yes. I think things turned out well, though the path to get there was a little rough."

"I won't debate that part with you."

He was clearly in his cabin, or Elsa hoped he was. Empress Janelle came into the image, and she wore a rather skimpy negligee. She leaned over to kiss her husband, and Elsa suspected he could have seen all the way to her toes by looking down his wife's cleavage.

Janelle looked at the screen. "Oh, hello, Elsa."

"Your Majesty." What else could she say?

In rapid succession, Empresses Tanya, Paige, and finally Marilyn joined their spouses, and they weren't dressed any more than Janelle. Elsa was distracted wondering how the four women could look so good at more than three-thousand-years-old—Tanya and Marilyn were both nearly five thousand—and she missed for a moment that Paige knelt down beside her husband's chair. At least she missed it until the Emperor's eyes crossed.

He panted a little. He was able to focus on the communicator again. "I think that wraps it up. I have to go. Bye." The screen went black.

* * * *

After the doctor released Shane from sickbay Clemmons walked her to her cabin, and she held his arm as they made their way through the passageways. She didn't need him to steady her—she just wanted to touch him and feel him close to her.

The doctor told them Landis would be awake and out of the regenerator by noon tomorrow, and Shane planned to be there when the knight woke up. She knew Clemmons would be by her side. She'd come to realize she had feelings for both men, and the feelings went far beyond simple attraction. She couldn't really put her finger on the details, but the big picture was all that mattered right now.

Shane had learned the doctor had kept her sedated for four days while she healed, and she wondered about something. She squeezed Clemmons's arm. "Have you been going back and forth to the planet?"

"No. Your Captain gave me a room here on the ship so I could be close to you and Landis."

That puzzled her. "What did you do to convince Captain Davis to do that?"

He smiled. "Maybe it was threatening to hold my breath and stomp my feet if she didn't."

They laughed together, and it was wonderful to be on his arm as they shared the humor.

They reached her cabin, and the door slid open at their approach. Shane wasn't sure what made her take the tack, but it felt like the right thing to do. "You don't need a cabin of your own. You can stay here." Heat flushed her cheeks. "Besides, I could use a little help getting around for a couple of days."

Clemmons stared past Shane, his blue eyes studying the cabin behind her, and was silent for nearly a minute. He smiled, but it looked a little sad to her, and then he shook his head. "No, you'll want Landis to stay here with you tomorrow."

Shane opened her mouth, but a passing group of crewmembers made her think again about her answer. The corridor of a starship with people traipsing about wasn't the right place to try explaining her confused feelings. She regrouped and went on. "Come inside—we need to talk."

He hesitated but did follow her into the cabin, and the door hissed closed. Clemmons shook his head. "There really isn't much to talk about. You and Landis belong together."

She gathered her thoughts and decided the direct approach was best. "I won't argue that point with you, but I think you and Landis belong together, too." Shane took a deep breath. "And you and I belong together."

His eyes flickered between wide open in surprise and narrowed closely in suspicion a few times. He worked his mouth like he was about to speak, but no sound came out. Clemmons finally closed his eyes for a moment and got his rogue tongue under control. "What are you saying?"

"All I'm saying is that, among my people, more than two people in a relationship isn't all that unusual." She shrugged. "You love Landis, and he loves you. I admit I might love Landis, and I also might love you. I think both of you may have fallen for me." She frowned, trying to get the swirling facts—at least as she understood them—straight in her head. "I think that's

right."

His eyes went open wide and stayed there. "That's insane."

"No, not really. Our Emperor has four wives. That's not really correct, though. Those five people, who just happen to be a man and four women, are all married to each other and very much in love. We have a word for that, but I'm not sure how the translator will handle it. We call it polyamory."

"Say that again."

"Polyamory. Love among many people."

He nodded slowly. "I think I understand the word. You mean a person has love—true love—for more than one other person. Is that right?"

"Yes, exactly."

"And you think that's the case for us?"

"Maybe. I really don't know yet."

Clemmons laughed. "This is much like the conversation Landis and I had when we decided to form a couple."

"I can understand that. It's not an easy concept for most people. Not even me."

"You say your Emperor has such an arrangement. How common is it among your people?"

"I don't really know. Maybe twenty percent of relationships are polyamorous."

"I don't know, Shane."

"All I'm saying is it's something to think about."

He shrugged. "It doesn't matter too much, though. From what I gather, you'll be leaving soon."

Shane hadn't thought of that. *Daedalus* might stay here for a couple of weeks—maybe more, maybe less—before moving on to their next mission, but certainly not more than a month. Now she really had no idea what to do next.

* * * *

Clemmons stood watching Shane as she pondered the idea that, no matter if she picked him or Landis, they would soon be torn apart. From her expression, he didn't think she liked the idea any more than he did. And the

idea of her picking was just as bad.

He'd been willing to die to save her for Landis. Clemmons was objective enough about his feelings to know he loved Landis with everything in him, and, to make Landis happy, he would do anything needed to save Shane. Initially he'd carried on with the rescue to prevent Landis from having died in vain.

But someplace in the darkness of the maze of the cave, his feelings for Shane had changed. Clemmons had been attracted to Shane the first time he saw her, dressed in solid black, no skin, not even her face showing. He'd wanted her almost instantly. But when he thought Landis was dead, his feelings had changed. He still found her attractive, and he still wanted her, but Clemmons found he didn't want her for a single night of passion and pleasure. He wanted Shane forever.

Clemmons knew he needed to shut down that line of thought. With Landis alive and on the mend, Clemmons had to back away. She belonged to Landis. It was really that simple.

Yet he still wanted her. Even knowing she and Landis would be together tomorrow, for whatever time God would allow them, Clemmons longed to feel Shane in his arms, to taste her lips fully, without the pain of her injuries getting in the way to stop the kiss from moving to the inexorable next step.

If his rival for Shane were any man other than Landis, he would fight for her. Clemmons realized he felt the same way about Landis. If anyone were to challenge him for Landis, he would leave him or her in a pool of blood. And yet, just as with Shane being with Landis, he would gladly step aside to ensure Landis's happiness.

Clemmons felt the same way for both Landis and Shane.

Shane stepped close to him and looked up into his eyes. "When Landis is able, I think the three of us need to talk."

Maybe it was her blue eyes. Maybe it was Shane being so close to him. Maybe it was that she was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen or ever would see. Maybe it was that he just didn't care about all the things that should be right or wrong, but something in him snapped. He grabbed her shoulders and pulled Shane to him, his mouth pressing to her lips.

* * * *

About the time Clemmons followed her into the cabin, Shane gave up on holding onto anything even close to rational thought. When he pulled her lips to his, even the last hints of reason fled from her mind, and she wrapped her arms around his neck. Memories from the kisses they shared in the cave flooded her mind, and she waited for something other than the now absent pain to interrupt. The way her luck ran with kissing Clemmons, the ship would probably explode now.

Instead, an explosion of desire swept through her, and Shane knew she wanted him. As Clemmons's tongue darted in her mouth, Shane ran her fingers through his long hair and removed the leather tie, letting the blonde locks spill over his shoulders to tickle her cheeks. His hands moved up and down her back, caressing her with a strange combination of gentle firmness. The strength of Clemmons's hands and arms made it clear she couldn't escape his grip, even if she had wanted to.

Shane didn't want to leave his embrace. She felt a mix of emotions as Clemmons held her, and Shane knew that just a short time ago, the feelings would have confused her in the extreme, but sometime since meeting the knights, she realized she didn't need to understand everything she felt or did. Maybe it wasn't even desirable to fully understand feelings like want and desire and love. Shane inhaled deeply, and as the scent of the man in her arms filled her head, she knew all she needed to do was to let him love her.

When his hands slipped down her back to cup her ass, Clemmons pulled her hips against his pelvis, and the hardness of his cock pressed against Shane. Her mind recalled watching him and Landis in the forest, seeing Clemmons's dick sliding deep into Landis's ass, and Shane wanted to feel him inside of her. The fantasy made a wave of burning shivers rush through her, and heat flooded her pussy as wetness flowed from her.

Clemmons pulled away from her, and Shane lunged at him. With a soft smile, he easily swept her into his arms and carried her to the sofa, where he placed her on the couch and then knelt beside her. With a slow deliberateness that nearly made her crazy, he carefully worked at the buttons of her blouse, unfastening each in order, starting from the lowest and working his way toward her neck. As he moved his hands up her body, Clemmons's fingers touched her through the material of the shirt, and each fleeting moment of contact made Shane twitch with anticipation. When he released the last of the fasteners, he pushed the blouse open and, since she

hadn't put on her bra before leaving sickbay, he exposed her breasts. His fingers danced delicately around her hard nipples, and his palms caressed her breasts.

Shane sighed, and her eyes flickered closed as the roughness of his hands gently massaged her. Clemmons leaned close to her and swirled his tongue around her nipple before he sucked it firmly into his mouth. As visions of passion danced like phantasms in her mind, she felt his hand moving down across her stomach, where he manipulated the fastener on her pants. Through the shivers his mouth on her breast created in her, Shane was aware that he pushed her pants down a little.

Clemmons pulled his lips from her nipple with a pop, and she again lunged at him, trying to connect either her lips or tit back to his mouth, but his strong arms again pressed her back onto the sofa. He stood and pulled her pants from her legs and tossed them across the room before he leaned to lift her from the couch. He carried her this time to the dining room chair, and lowered Shane to her feet. Turning her so her back was to him, Clemmons tenderly pushed her shoulders so she leaned over the back of the chair.

As she gripped the seat of the chair, Shane expected a slight delay as he exposed his cock before feeling him enter her pussy or ass from behind. Instead, Clemmons knelt behind her, and his hands held her hips as his tongue traced wet tracks up her thighs. He licked slowly around the cheeks of her ass before he pulled her hips against him, and his tongue swirled delightfully around her anus. Shane flexed her hips back, and Clemmons flicked his tongue into her pussy, lapping at her and adding the wetness of his mouth to that flowing freely from her.

She leaned as far forward as the chair would allow, and his tongue darted to dance over her clit. Flicking and pressing his tongue against the hard bud, Clemmons pumped his head, and between fluttering passes over her clit, his tongue darted into her pussy, fucking her over and over again.

Clemmons reached around the back of the chair and took her nipples between his fingers. Rolling her breasts with his palms, he firmly squeezed with his thumbs and fingers, and the combined actions of his tongue and hands pushed Shane over the edge. Lights exploded in her vision, and her pulse drummed in her ears. Her screams of pleasure came choppy as Clemmons licked her pussy, and her breath was short and rapid. Between

leaning on the chair and Clemmons hands holding her, Shane managed not to fall to the floor. As she twitched, Clemmons stood and again swept her into his arms. He held her close and touched his lips softly to hers. The scent of her pussy on his breath made a delightful blend that served only to intensify the tremors that rocked her body and the shooting stars that raced through her vision.

As her body calmed from the shaking of her climax, he lowered her to the sofa and knelt beside her. Clemmons smiled at her and brushed his hair from his face.

"You should rest a little. The doctor said you needed to take it easy for a day or two."

She was tired, but there was so much she wanted to say—and do—to him, but her eyes felt heavy and relaxation worked its way slowly over her. He held her close to him and Shane felt sleep overtake her.

* * * *

As he sat on the floor beside Shane's sleeping form on the couch, Clemmons wondered how this would all play out in the end. He'd never had a tendency to mislead himself or mince words, and he knew that sometime over the last couple of weeks he'd fallen in love with this beautiful young woman.

He'd learned from the doctors that Shane wasn't really a young woman. Clemmons didn't understand the situation fully, but it seemed that, despite other similarities, humans aged slower than his people. Even though the conversion between his year and a human year was close, he was about thirty human-years old, and Landis was not quite thirty-five. Shane, however, was nearly eighty. He'd guessed her to be about his age, maybe even a year or two younger. It was, Clemmons believed, her age that made Shane so self-assured and competent.

He also knew it didn't matter to him how old she was. Shane was beautiful, smart, funny, caring, and a million other things that all made her attractive. It was all those things, plus an uncountable number of others he couldn't define, that made Shane who she was, and it was who she was that made him love her.

And Clemmons knew Landis would have the same feelings and

thoughts. He understood fully that Landis had fallen in love with this wondrous woman as well.

Perhaps this polyamory Shane spoke of had some merit; maybe it offered an answer to the triangle formed over the last few weeks. Again, Clemmons knew it didn't matter at all. Soon, Shane and her people would leave here, and he and Landis would again be together, alone and without Shane.

Clemmons wondered what he and Landis would do without Shane and without a cause to fight for. In one fell swoop, he had gained and lost so much.

* * * *

Landis sat carefully on the sofa in Shane's cabin. He hadn't gotten used to the new legs the science—or maybe it was magic—of Shane's people had given him. The doctor denied it, but Landis thought the new legs were a little shorter than his old ones, because he stumbled now and then.

He was more concerned about the changed relationships around him, though. When he woke up, Shane and Clemmons had been there to greet him. Both had hugged him and kissed him deeply, and both had shed a few tears of happiness, though Clemmons tried to hold them back. They had told him an abbreviated version of what had happened in the cave and about Shane's injuries. Landis was happy Clemmons hadn't been hurt and Shane was safe, but something else had happened in the cave, even though neither of them told him so.

Both Shane and Clemmons were attentive to him, and both touched him often, more often than simple social interactions called for, but he watched the two of them react to each other. When Shane looked at him, Landis could feel the tenderness and attraction she held for him. The same applied when Clemmons looked at him. But when Clemmons and Shane looked at each other, he saw the same look on their faces.

Even though he never expected to see either of them again, Landis knew when he insisted on creating the distraction that let Clemmons enter the cave he ran the risk of Shane falling for Clemmons. He was, after all, the one actually rescuing her, and of course, she would be attracted to that. He'd had no choice, though, because Clemmons's skills gave the best chance to rescue

her. Landis tried to feel no remorse over that, but it wasn't working out very well for him.

Shane sat down beside him and kissed his cheek. "How are you feeling?"

"Other than these short legs, I'm fine."

She glanced at Clemmons where he sat across the small table in an armchair. "There are some things we all need to talk about. Clemmons and I have talked about it a little, so we have a bit of a head start on you."

Landis knew this was coming, and he couldn't do anything about it. That didn't mean he liked it, though. "I suppose we do, but I want you both to know I understand. I won't get in the way."

Clemmons chuckled a little. "You don't understand, at least no more than I did before Shane and I talked."

"I think I do understand." Landis took a deep breath. "You two have fallen in love."

"Yes, we have." Shane sighed. "That doesn't mean Clemmons doesn't love you, and it doesn't stop me from loving you."

He shook his head. Landis did appreciate the two trying to soften the blow, but it was better to get it over with. "That's true, but it's not the same. You two are really in love, and that's how it should be."

Clemmons stood and walked around the table to sit down next to him, sandwiching him between the two lovers. "Stop thinking, Landis. You always do that and over-think things. What Shane is trying to say is it's possible to be in love with more than one person."

"That's crazy." Landis wondered if Clemmons had taken a blow to the head while in the cave.

Shane took his hand in hers, and her skin was warm and soft against his. When he looked up and into her remarkable eyes, he again saw reflections of clouds there, even though they were in her cabin on the ship, far from the blue skies of the planet. "It's not crazy. While it's not really the norm, my people have many such relationships. We call it polyamory, and it works."

Clemmons took his other hand and squeezed. "I didn't mean to fall for Shane, but it happened. I love you as much as I ever have, but I love Shane, too."

Landis thought about that. His love for Clemmons hadn't flagged, but he loved Shane, too. While he knew it was a dead-end road, he still loved

Anna. In truth, when he faced the facts, Landis loved three people, each with everything in him. Maybe he'd been living this idea of polyamory for a long time now without even knowing it.

* * * *

Shane leaned forward and kissed Landis's cheek again. The confused look had faded from his face, and he stared straight ahead, his brow knitted in consternation. She wondered what he saw in his mind. He'd had a lot thrown at him in a short time, and she knew he considered the situation the three of them now faced, but she couldn't help wondering if he believed the idea might work.

Landis turned away from her and looked at Clemmons. She couldn't see his face, but Shane heard the smile in his voice. "I do love you, and I hope you know that."

Clemmons smiled brightly. "Yes, I do, and I love you, too."

He turned back to face her, and Landis smiled. It was a soft smile, and Shane knew what he was going to say before he even opened his mouth. "And I do love you, too."

She thought a tear might be trying to escape her eye, so she brushed her hand at the corner. "I know. And I can admit now that I've fallen in love with you, and Clemmons, too."

Shane reached up and put her arms around Landis's neck. As she hugged him, Clemmons encircled them both in his big arms, and the three sat hugging one another for several minutes. Suddenly, Landis and Clemmons broke away from the mutual embrace, and Landis stood up.

He moved to sit on the other side of her, placing her between him and Clemmons. Landis stumbled a little as he sat down. "Fucking legs."

She couldn't stifle a small giggle, but Landis interrupted the little laugh by pressing his lips to hers. The humor flashed off like a light, and Shane pressed her tongue against his lips. His taste filled her mouth, and she trembled with the delectable flavor as Clemmons moved his hands over her back from where he sat behind her.

Clemmons's hands ran up and down her back, kneading the muscles for a few moments as Landis's tongue ran deep into her mouth. When Clemmons slipped his hands to her sides, Shane flinched a little as his touch

tickled her ribs. When his hands reached around to fondle her breasts, waves of desire replaced the playful jerks of delight.

Shane wasn't sure whose hand gripped her hair and pulled her head away from Landis's kiss, but almost as soon as her lips moved away from Landis, Clemmons kissed her deeply, his flavor mixing with the lingering taste of Landis. She turned slightly to better face Clemmons, and Landis's hands slowly stroked her chest and stomach. Waves of shivers ran through her, making her tremble and vibrate as heat spread across her body.

The men stood and pulled Shane to her feet. When she dressed this morning, she'd opted for her casual uniform jumpsuit, and Landis eased the zipper all the way down. Clemmons slipped the material from her shoulders, and the outfit fell from her to rest like a cloud around her ankles. Kicking the uniform from her feet, Shane turned to face Clemmons. He kissed her again, and Landis worked at the clasp of her bra. Once he'd mastered the fastener, Landis pulled her panties down her legs, leaving her naked in the middle of the sitting room of her cabin.

Shane felt a little guilt at losing track of where Landis was while she kissed Clemmons, but not much. The movements of Clemmons's hands over her bare skin and the taste of his lips on hers distracted her in the extreme, and she found herself focused totally on Clemmons.

Shane hugged and kissed Clemmons, and she found out what Landis had been doing when he moved in close behind her. Landis's nude body pressed against her, sandwiching her between the two men, as his cock pressed hard to her back. Again, a hand gripped her hair and pulled her away from Clemmons, and she turned to face Landis. His mouth pressed hard against hers, his tongue dancing in her mouth as the firm muscles of his naked body touched her.

As she kissed Landis, it was now Shane's turn to feel a little guilty about missing what Clemmons was doing and where he was. Her desires and fantasies were running faster than a starship on an emergency call, and all she could focus on was kissing and touching Landis. She slipped her arm from around his neck and traced down his body. She gripped his hard cock in her hand, and Landis trembled as she swirled her finger around the bulging head of his dick.

Suddenly, Clemmons was back, and he stepped in close behind Shane, rubbing his cock with his hand, spreading glistening fluid over the head and

shaft. His arms reached around to pull both her and Landis close to him, and his cock felt like a rock against her body. Landis stepped back a little, and Clemmons lifted her by her hips. Easing her down slowly, the head of his dick pressed against her anus. Shane wiggled a little and relaxed, and Clemmons's dick slipped slowly into her ass as she sighed with pleasure. Landis stepped forward again, and he thrust into her pussy, his cock filling her.

Shane shook as the men pinned her between them, pumping slowly in her ass and pussy. As they fucked her, Landis kissed her face while Clemmons nibbled at her neck and ears.

A million fantasies from the past flooded through Shane's mind as the men filled her, and her orgasm raced at her. Shane knew she had problems to solve, but right now all she wanted was to love the men who loved her. The problems faded as fast as they had come to her mind, replaced by the pounding thunder of her racing heart in her ears and the velvet grip of her climax as she shuddered and rocked between the men.

When the tremors of her orgasm faded a little, Landis stepped back and lifted her from Clemmons's cock. Without a word, the men led her to the bathroom and into the shower. Clemmons worked the controls, and they stood together, hugging and kissing one another as the warm water ran down their bodies and they soaped and rinsed together.

Clemmons sat down on the seat in the shower and pulled Shane to him. Straddling his legs as she faced him, Shane eased her hips down onto his rigid dick. His cock slipped easily into her pussy, and her climax seemed to pick up where it left off. Chills ran through her, despite the warm water of the shower and the hot male bodies pressing against her skin. Shane leaned forward and kissed Clemmons, the moisture of his lips and mouth mixing with the flow of the shower, and her hips rocked rhythmically on his cock, pumping his length in and out of her pussy.

Landis stepped around behind the stool, and his dick rested beside Clemmons's head. Shane pulled her lips from Clemmons's mouth and licked the swollen head of Landis's cock. As she kissed the end of Landis's dick, Clemmons reached up to pull her head forward, causing the huge shaft to slip between her lips and run to the back of her throat. Landis jerked, and his cock pumped in time to the dick filling her pussy.

Clemmons used her hair to pull Shane's mouth from Landis's cock, and

he turned his head to the side. As she watched, Clemmons took Landis's dick in his mouth, his tongue swirling around the bulging head, and she caught herself licking her lips with the desire to taste Landis's cum. Landis pulled his cock from Clemmons's mouth and thrust it into hers. Pumping back and forth, Landis moved his dick from her mouth to Clemmons's and back again.

Just as Shane's climax hit her in earnest for the second time, Clemmons shook under her, and his cock throbbed hard in her pussy. He thrust up, gaining every last millimeter of penetration as his cum filled her. Clemmons grunted, and his fingers dug into her hips, pulling her tight against him.

Landis jerked hard, his legs managing to hold him upright, and he pulled back slightly, his cock popping from between Shane's lips. When cum spurted from his dick, it splashed across her lips and sprayed onto Clemmons's cheek. Clemmons turned to her, and he licked Landis's load from her face as she kissed and licked to get her share of the salty fluid.

When their breathing slowed to something near normal, the three tenderly washed and dried each other, and they went to the bedroom where they all embraced on the bed.

Clemmons, ever the pragmatic one, sighed heavily. "So what now? You leave in a few days."

Shane smiled inside. "I may have a few ideas on that one."

* * * *

Elsa was happy Admiral Q was back from vacation, but she was puzzled nonetheless. She was used to seeing him in his Lord Admiral of the Fleet uniform. Instead of the midnight black uniform adorned with the emblem of the empire and the five gold stars of his rank, Q wore a casual orange shirt covered with pink and white flowers. He looked like a tourist on a beach of some tropical paradise. She could almost picture him sitting in a beach chair, sipping at a drink with a little umbrella stuck in it...with her in a bikini sitting next to him.

The Admiral frowned a little. "This is all highly irregular, Captain Davis."

She snapped back to reality just as her daydream self was getting ready to lose the bikini top. "I know, Sir, but I think the idea has some value." Elsa

swallowed, choking off the last of the fantasy. "These two men will give us some additional points of view on cultures we may contact in the future."

"That may be true, but the entire affair has been irregular from the start." He glanced down at some papers on his desk. "It's good the Emperor likes you. Kidnapping a king is not a good thing."

"I'll agree with that, but it all worked out in the end."

"Perhaps. Admiral Reeves and the Emperor like your style, and if the truth were told, so do I, but the Senate is less than impressed." Q pushed the papers aside. "But since this is purely in the jurisdiction of the Emperor as both safety of the Empire and first contact, the Senate doesn't count."

Elsa nodded. "So what about keeping these two knights on *Daedalus*?"

"It's your ship, Captain Davis, and I won't tell you how to run it, but I will remind you that you can't go around the galaxy picking up passengers along the way. First, *Daedalus* is one of His Majesty's Fleet ships and not a taxi. Second, you have only so much room."

"I understand, Sir."

"I wonder about that."

She couldn't help herself. "How was your vacation, Admiral?"

"Boring." He waved his hand. "Despite being with humans for all these years, I have yet to grasp the need for going someplace and being unproductive for two weeks a year."

"Perhaps you need to find someone to be unproductive with."

"Maybe you're right, Captain." He stared at her for a few moments. "Carry on."

* * * *

Shane watched Clemmons and Landis closely as they sat in the ship's nightclub talking to Talbert. *Daedalus* would make the jump to hyperspace soon, and it was disturbing to most people the first time they experienced the event. She understood only the basics of string theory that made the hyperspace motors work, but it had something to do with the concept that, for a few picoseconds, the ship was still in normal space while it exceeded the speed of light. At that instant, the mass of the ship went literally to infinity, and the rest of the universe tried to fall in on it. The first time she made the jump, Shane was nauseous for three days.

Talbert lifted his glass. "To Sir Landis and Sir Clemmons. You may not believe it, but you'll make valuable additions to our crew."

Clemmons clinked his glass to Talbert's. Their English was improving by the day now that Shane could spend all of her time teaching them. "Our thanks for your faith in us, but I really don't see how." He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed the back. "Other than to be with this amazing woman, I can't see what we can do to earn our keep."

Landis reached across in front of her to pat Clemmons's hand. "We've been all through this. We now know what it's like for these people and their Empire to show up without warning. We can, perhaps, give some insight into that cultural shock on other societies."

"Oh, I know that. I'd rather just be with Shane."

Heat spread across her face. The three had hardly been out of their cabin for the past month, but it was time to get back to work.

Talbert laughed. "Trust me, you're needed."

The ship's bell rang three times, signaling ten seconds until jump. Shane squeezed her men's hands. "Get ready. We're making the jump now."

Landis stood and raised his glass. "To Shane and Clemmons, the loves of my life. And to Anna, may she follow us in our adventures." He smiled. "And to James the First, by Grace of God, Emperor to Mankind."

Everyone at the table stood and raised their glasses. "God save the Emperor."

Daedalus became infinitely more massive than the rest of the universe, but only for a split-second. Then she vanished from normal space to enter the realm of the tachyon and other bizarre constructs of string hyper-spatial theory, moving at speeds Einstein, Hawking, and Newton only dreamed of on her way to the future.

KNIGHTS OF DESIRE

Flights of Fancy 2

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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.

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.



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