

STARR STRUCK

And

BENEATH A MILLION STARS

By

Stephanie Bedwell-Grime

© copyright by Stephanie Bedwell-Grime, April 2005

Cover Art by Eliza Black, © copyright April 2005

New Concepts Publishing

Lake Park, GA 31636

www.newconceptspublishing.com

This is a work of fiction. All characters, events, and places are of the author's imagination and not to be confused with fact. Any resemblance to living persons or events is merely coincidence.

STARR STRUCK

Diamond points of light glowed through shimmering fog, turning the dance floor into a silver wonderland. Swirling through the glittering mist was surely as close to dancing among the stars as one could get. It

conjured memories of the gentle sway of a man's body against hers. It seduced her mind with recollections of velvet kisses that escalated into heated passion, the way his body melded against hers as perfectly as it had on the dance floor....

With a frown, Adriana dragged her thoughts back to the present. The sparkling mist and the stars were no more than a convincing illusion courtesy of the hidden special effects generator imported for her best friend's wedding.

She stared into her reflection in the panoramic window, strains of a familiar melody receding into the background. Their song. Not exactly what she wanted to hear at Zelina's wedding. But the disk jockey couldn't possibly have known. A year later even the opening bars of that song could send tears cascading down her face.

Say for today that you are mine

Before the night comes between us.

For I can't say when next we'll meet--

The love of open space

Forever binds me.

But I'll see your face

In every passing star

As I look out upon eternity,

And I'll hear your voice

In the silence of the night

When loneliness reaches out

To haunt me.

They had danced their last dance here in the ballroom at Rendezvous Space Station, the night before Quillan went missing. Adriana sharply reined in her thoughts. She was the honor attendant at her best friend's wedding. And regardless of the ghosts in her recent past, it was her duty to make sure Zelina's special day was a success. A bridesmaid with heartache written across her face simply wouldn't do.

Forcing a smile, she stared through the huge window. The Rendezvous Ballroom had the best view in the galaxy. Terraced gardens stretched out below, aglow with synthetic candlelight. Couples were scattered throughout the gardens, taking advantage of the subdued lighting. A smile crept across her face. Weddings, no matter on which planet, brought out the romantic in everyone.

Every race in the galaxy was represented on the guest list, evidence of the success of the father of the bride as an intergalactic merchant. Opal lilies sprouted from every table not occupied with food. Sculptures of Antarean ice towered above the banquet table. A strolling minstrel wove his way through the garden, his Octarian harp leaving behind the scent of sky-blue-pink roses to augment his poignant melody.

In the midst of it all, Zelina shone like a star. Her shimmering dress reflected a waterfall of color as she moved. Her eyes positively glowed with the kind of joy only brides could radiate. When the groom gazed upon his new bride, his face positively lit up with delight.

The quiet gardens drew her attention back to the window. Within the dark synthi-glass an image began to form. Faint and ethereal, it took a moment to recognize the jewel-green eyes staring back at her from the glass. Those incredible eyes, framed by blond curls could only belong to Quillan Starr. With a cry, she whirled to face him.

But the floor behind her was empty.

Trembling, she turned very slowly back to the window. But the synthetic glass revealed only the panoramic view of the garden and the station. It couldn't have been Quillan, she told herself sternly. Quillan was long gone. Adriana stared suspiciously at the empty wine glass in her hand.

Must be the wine.

In trying to squelch the memories, she'd perhaps drunk more than she should. The wine and the tangle of emotions this day invoked were what had her conjuring images of Quillan Starr, the man who'd walked out of her life and taken her heart with him.

It was too easy to sink into the memory of his caress, the way his powerful arms felt so right around her. His daring nature brought out the courage in her. He'd encouraged her to become more than she was. Reflected in his adoring eyes, she had felt confident ... beautiful. Prompted by the phantom in the glass, her mind supplied the rest of the details: golden curls that tumbled over his shoulders in an unruly wave, full lips, far too sensual for the hard masculine lines of his face. As Adriana well remembered, he had a smile that could charm the devil.

He'd charmed even the cynical hyperdrive specialist. Charmed her, stolen her heart and then disappeared without a trace. Since then, she'd given up on arrogant pilots. Her new life went on just fine without a man, she'd decided. At least it was predictable. Predictably boring. Setting down her glass on the nearest table, she headed for the ladies room.

The relative quiet of the sleek white cubicle was soothing. The stark lighting and heavy makeup conspired to make her skin appear even paler than usual. Delicate pearls flickered in a cloud of crimson hair, held in place by spray she was sure could double as spaceship hull adhesive. She tucked a curl that had somehow escaped the stylist's attentions behind her ear and prepared herself to return to the party.

Familiar green eyes met hers. A startled cry burst from her lips.

Adriana sprang backward, colliding with the bathroom's cool metal wall. For several seconds she could do no more than stare in disbelief at the ghostly figure in the mirror.

It was Quillan all right. But instead of the adoring gaze she remembered so well, his face was tormented.

Haunted.

Golden curls fanned out from his face in a burnished mane. Even the hard planes of his cheeks were strained as if he fought against a powerful wind. Strong hands struck out before him like claws as he battled against the gale that threatened to toss him into oblivion. His mouth moved, shaping her name.

Then something else.

In rapt amazement, she managed to decipher the first syllable, "Tel--"

Like the afterimage of a bright flash, he faded slowly from view, leaving her to stare back into her own bewildered expression in the mirror.

"Quillan--" She reached for his disappearing image in the mirror, brushing her fingertips against the cold barrier of the glass.

What the stars am I doing?

Beneath her fingers the mirror offered only the reflection of her own hand.

Losing my mind, came the answer.

Could visiting Rendezvous Station for the first time since Starr left unhinge her completely?

Nonsense, the rational part of her brain supplied. I'm a hyperdrive specialist. I'm responsible for quality assurance on light speed engines in an entire sector of the galaxy. I speak ten languages. I've seen things that would make a grown man cringe. I didn't think there was anything in known space that could unhinge me....

The thought trailed off into frightening notions. Was she going crazy?

Certainly she missed Starr. She'd loved him with all her heart. Adriana felt the wound of his betrayal as keenly as if it were only yesterday. But in the months since his disappearance she'd thrown herself into her work, and she had prospered. She now oversaw shipyards on space stations from Rigel to Malvar and everywhere in between.

"If this is some kind of joke...." Her voice echoed off the metal walls of the empty cubicle. "It isn't funny," she finished quietly.

Feeling increasingly foolish with each passing second, she inspected the walls, even the space behind the sanitary facilities. But except for the ventilation shaft and the door, the metal cubicle was without seams. And the toilet didn't conceal anything that could be used as projection equipment.

Adriana leaned against the cool metal and shut her eyes. In her mind's eye she could still see Quillan calling to her, his lips tracing that last syllable, "Tel--"

"Tell me what?" she whispered. "That you're sorry?"

* * * *

"You're cutting it too close," she'd told him on that last day. "What if you get waylaid?"

Quillan had only laughed in that easygoing manner of his. "Stop worrying. A week is more than enough time to make it to Malvar and back. Besides," he'd added playfully. "It's bad luck for the groom to see the bride until the wedding."

But the day before the wedding, Starr still wasn't back at Rendezvous Station. By the morning of the ceremony Adriana was sick with worry. Even when the wedding date had come and gone, still she hoped that it was all a big mistake, that he'd simply been held up.

Then came the news that Starr's ship, The Needle, had been in dock for the past week. And Quillan Starr was nowhere to be found.

He'd always been reckless, old friends assured her. They were surprised this romance had lasted at all. Rumor had it that Quillan Starr left a galaxy of heartbreak in his wake.

Adriana shook her head to clear it of the thoughts that even now hovered dangerously beneath her calm exterior. Zelina's wedding and the coincidence in the dates had turned her thoughts to Quillan. She was tired from the trans-galaxy flight. Once the good-byes were said, she could gratefully retire to her room, sleep off the wine and make a fresh start tomorrow.

Still there was something in that ghostly tortured face, be it vision or delusion, that was so unlike the overconfident Quillan she remembered, it chilled her.

* * * *

She was dreaming, she knew it even as she stared at the stars careening by on The Needle's view screen. Starr had vanished; his ship had been impounded. There was no way she could be on the bridge of The Needle. And then with the cinematic ease of dreams, her surroundings changed and she found herself in the cramped cabin Starr jokingly called the Captain's Quarters.

Strong arms closed around her, pulling her close. There was barely room for both of them on the bunk. His hot mouth covered hers, blocking out the need for thought or breath.

Starr always did know how to end an argument. And had they argued! But neither her pleas nor her threats had succeeded in convincing Starr to change his plans for a last run to Malvar before their wedding.

"Everything will be fine, you'll see," he'd assured her, first with words, then with gentle kisses that soon degenerated to an octopus of fumbling hands.

Within minutes their flight suits lay in a puddle of cloth on the metal floor, and Quillan was devoting the sum of his attention to convincing her to see the situation his way. As usual he tempted her in a way she couldn't resist. Pleasantly sated from their lovemaking, she'd found it hard to object.

Yet, in some foggy pocket of her mind, she knew it hadn't happened that way at all. The dream was all mixed up, as if her memories had been thrown into a giant blender. The argument had taken place in her hotel room on Rendezvous Station. Starr had left the next morning. Against her wishes. In spite of her tears.

You can keep your kisses, Quillan, because you didn't come back.

She wanted to tell him that. At the moment it seemed desperately important. But the dream stole the thought from her. Starr's tongue mingled with hers, destroying all hope of conversation. He moved, surprisingly agile in the restrictions of his narrow bunk, gathering her under him. He showered her shoulders in a hot rain of kisses. Adriana gasped as he took the peak of one breast in his mouth. Her hands tangled in his golden curls as she pulled his head harder against her.

"Let's not argue, Riana," he whispered as he moved to taste her other breast. "We do have the rest of our lives...."

His tortuous mouth dipped lower, covering her smooth abdomen with a trail of kisses that led to the already moist spot between her thighs. Adriana moaned, maneuvering herself as well as she could in the tight confines to receive more of those ecstatic kisses.

He moved then, covering her body with his own. She felt his erection pressing against her moist opening and she knew he wanted this as much as she did. Their mouths met as he entered her. She felt the pleasant tightness as her body stretched to accommodate him. She groaned in impatience as he withdrew and then pressed gently deeper.

But suddenly he was pulling away from her, fading into the misty layers of sleep. She grasped after his receding form, finding only air where her fingers had been laced through the softness of his riotous curls. Looking up at the shiny metal of the cabin above her, she saw him reflected in the chrome.

"Help me...." She heard his voice as certainly as if he'd whispered in her ear.

"Where are you Quillan?!" The walls threw her voice sharply back at her. "What's wrong, what do I do?"

For a second she saw his face, still faintly reflected back at her in the shiny metal. "Tele--" she thought he said.

"Quillan, no!" she screamed. Her fingertips brushed the smooth metal surface. Helplessly, she watched as his image faded until she was looking into the reflection of her own amber eyes.

* * * *

Adriana sat up, a scream dying on her lips. The Needle's interior dissolved into her dream, leaving only the unfamiliar surroundings of the strange hotel room on Rendezvous Station.

She rubbed impatiently at the streak of tears drying on her face. What's wrong with me? Why am I

dreaming of Quillan? Why now after all this time?

He was trying to tell her something. "Tele--" Even now she could hear his voice in her mind. "Tele--what?" she wondered desperately.

But the night had no answers for her.

* * * *

The intercom beeped, jarring her from the heavy depths of sleep.

"Subspace transmission incoming," the computer informed her. Still half asleep, Adriana pressed the receive button. Zelina's concerned face blinked onto the screen before her.

"Hey Zelina, you're supposed to be on your honeymoon. Don't you have anything better to do?" Adriana asked playfully.

"I was worried about you. You didn't seem yourself last night."

"I'm tired, that's all." She tried to inject some lightness into her voice. Above all she didn't want to worry her best friend on her honeymoon.

"It's him, isn't it?" Zelina asked, with the bluntness only a best friend could get away with.

"Don't be silly. It's like I said, I'm just a little worn out from working so hard."

"Nonsense. I know that look. You had it for months after he left."

"Zelina, please!" Adriana did her best to sound righteously indignant. The last thing she wanted to do was to have a subspace conversation about Quillan Starr. The call must be costing a fortune as it was. Having been friends since they were children, Zelina had a sixth sense when it came to Adriana's moods. If she wasn't careful, she'd have Zelina playing long distance psychiatrist. "Can't we discuss this when you're back from your honeymoon?"

Once on the scent of Adriana's distress, Zelina was not so easily dissuaded. "Are you sure you're all right? I can always teleport back...."

"Are you crazy? You're about to embark on a week's honeymoon on the most expensive pleasure planet this side of Orion and all you can think of is getting back to Rendezvous Station? If you aren't happy with your accommodations, I'd be happy to trade places with you."

There was a long pause. Zelina regarded her suspiciously. "Okay," she said finally. "See you in a week."

By then I'll have myself back together.

With a deep sigh, she lay back on the bed and called to the room's computer for light.

I must really look like I need help if Zelina wants to teleport home.... The thought lingered in her mind, resonating with something else she'd recently heard.

Teleport. Tele-port. Tele.

A blast of cold air from the room's ventilation system shot down her spine. She pulled the blankets snugly around her shoulders. Could the ghost of Quillan Starr actually be trying to tell her something about the teleporter?

"What are you trying to tell me, Starr?" she asked the empty room.

No one answered her.

It was too much to think about before breakfast. Zelina's father was throwing a morning-after brunch to celebrate his daughter's marriage. Since she was practically family, she was obligated to attend.

* * * *

An hour later, Adriana was hurrying through the bright corridors of Rendezvous Station, intent on finding the restaurant Zelina's father had chosen. Ahead, silver doors whooshed open and a pair of Xubians came gibbering out, eyestalks waving vigorously. While it looked to be a furious altercation, she couldn't help hiding a smile. The pair were quite obviously lovers. It was a strange law of the universe that only the people you cared deeply for could make you so angry. She was about to continue on her route, when the flashing red sign above the Xubians' heads caught her attention.

TELEPORTER STATION.

Suddenly the fragments of the dream she had tried to bury in the depths of her mind leapt to the forefront.

"Help me," he'd begged her. Starr had gone missing here on Rendezvous Station nearly a year ago. The first vestiges of doubt echoed in her mind. Could it be he hadn't balked at the thought of lifelong commitment after all, that something terrible had happened to him instead?

Starr's ship had been found in dock, his cargo undelivered. Had Starr's reputation of being footloose and fancy-free prevented the authorities from looking into the circumstances of his disappearance and solving of the mystery?

What had possessed him to take a last minute teleporter trip? Where could he possibly have been going with his ship sitting on dock, full of a cargo he insisted was an urgent delivery?

Surely they would have known something was wrong.... Wouldn't they?

Her feet propelled her forward. Adriana was almost at the arrivals gate before she realized where she was headed.

She leaned against the glass and scanned the stream of arriving passengers. This was lunacy, surely.

Starr was supposed to have made one last run to Malvar, hauling a cargo of heavy machinery parts. While he might have been the best pilot this side of Rigel and a half decent mechanic, he had a deep mistrust of teleporters, wouldn't be caught anywhere near one, preferring the relative dangers of faster than light travel to what he called the scattering of his component parts over half of known space.

A tall Malvarian stepped from the teleporter pad to the noisy welcome of a hoard of family members. Adriana sighed. What am I looking for here?

Waving its eyestalks in greeting, a squat Xubian was the next arrival through the gate. All around her reunions of families and friends were taking place. Joyful hugs, welcoming smiles and squeals of delight filled the arrival lounge. The gate cycled, preparing to spew forth another passenger. Adriana stared into the teleporter's swirling mist and tried to think up excuses for her uncharacteristic behavior.

In the midst of the teleporter's haze, a pair of green eyes began to take shape. A sharp gasp escaped her lips, drawing the attention of the Xubians nearby. Adriana covered her mouth with her hand. Didn't anyone else see the ghostly image of a man forming?

I'm losing it for sure.

And yet from out of the ghostly web of the transporter system, those haunted emerald eyes stared back at her. Blond hair billowed out over his shoulders, barely discernible against the background of glowing atoms. Beneath it she could see the unmistakable outline of a pair of broad shoulders. Adriana pressed her palm against the glass. Then he was disintegrating, lost in the twisting center of the teleporter.

"Quillan," she whispered, squinting to bring him back into focus. Amidst the churning sea of energy she saw the flicker of his eyes. Like a television picture gone to snow, his form faded. For a moment she thought she saw the jagged outline of his jaw, the full lips whose silken feel she could still conjure every time she closed her eyes. His mouth shaped her name. And something else.

"For today...."

And then there was only space above the floor pad of the teleporter's mechanism.

Cool glass beneath her palm brought her back to the present. The tumult of the arrivals lounge came crashing back into her senses. People drew away from her, throwing suspicious looks over their shoulders. Even the Xubians gave her a wide berth as they passed. And no wonder, she thought. To them I must look like a crazy woman talking to an empty sheet of glass.

But before she turned herself in for psychiatric tests, the scientist inside her demanded the riddle be solved. Last night she had been caught up in the sentimentality of Zelina's wedding. Last night she'd drunk more wine than was good for her. Today she stood before the teleporter, awake and sober. And still, she'd witnessed an event that had happened too many times to be sheer coincidence.

His haunted eyes flashed before her mind's eye. And in that instant she was suddenly certain of one thing. Never mind what people said about Quillan Starr. Something awful had happened to him. Adriana intended to find out exactly what.

* * * *

Zelina's father took a suspicious view of her sudden interest in teleporter technology. But she was the best friend of his only daughter and nearly as dear to him. As chief merchant on Rendezvous Station, his influence was considerable, and he reluctantly agreed to accompany her on her visit to the manager of the Teleporter Station.

Annoyed at having his busy day interrupted, the manager glared at her across his pristine chrome desk. From the look the two men exchanged upon greeting, she could tell he was only granting her a few minutes of his time as a personal favor to Zelina's father.

"Whenever someone takes a teleporter journey," he explained with strained patience, "a copy of their DNA is placed in a file locked for safe keeping with their own personal password. The password is kept in a special file with their insurance documents in case of an emergency. Now since there was no record of Mr. Starr's alleged teleporter journey, he is deemed to have gone missing under other circumstances. His file has been forwarded to the Intergalactic Police. If you wish to pursue the matter further, you will have to contact them. However, records are purged on a regular basis. So if you have a query to file, I would suggest you do it in within the next oh," he consulted the chrono on his wrist, "five hours."

Adriana sucked in her breath. In exactly five hours, it would be the one-year anniversary of Quillan's disappearance.

* * * *

Adriana left the Teleporter office more frustrated than when she came. She politely thanked Zelina's father, assured him for the tenth time that yes, she was perfectly fine, and headed off down the corridor toward her hotel room.

She had been through all of this a year ago. The fact that Starr was well known to be a scoundrel worked against him. To make matters worse, there was no record of Starr taking a teleporter trip, making it appear all the more as though he had planned to disappear for the rumored reason.

Whatever the reason for his unplanned trip, she had five hours to find out what before all record of Starr was erased forever.

* * * *

Adriana sat before the terminal in her hotel room and watched time creep forward on the chrono. It had taken her fifteen minutes to walk back from the Teleporter Office and another five to call up a drink and a bite to eat from the room's processor, which left her four hours and 40 minutes to solve the mystery before Starr's essence was dumped from the police files.

The chrono clicked. Another minute lost.

It took her another fifteen to navigate her way through the network. And sure enough, the teleporter files were locked as securely as a safe.

Her fingers hovered above the keyboard. If he had taken a teleporter trip, what code could Starr possibly have used to safeguard the essence of his being? She typed in "Needle."

ACCESS DENIED, the screen responded promptly. Adriana swore softly and typed in "The Needle."

ACCESS DENIED, the screen spat back and turfed her out of the system.

Four hours later, she'd tried every possible combination of letters and numbers she could think of, both their names spelled forward and backward, Starr's birth date, hers, even the date they met.

40 minutes left. Adriana drummed her fingers against the desk and tried to calm the cyclone of terror in her gut. The memory of those haunted eyes was indelibly engraved in her mind.

Though malfunctions were extremely rare, there were a million ways a teleporter transmission could go wrong. Interference, crossed signals, technically both were possible. Horror stories dated back from the dawn of space travel. It chilled her to think of Quillan trapped between dimensions, belonging neither to this world nor the next.

Buried in the multitude of facts she knew about Quillan Starr was the key to unlock his fate. Adriana typed 'green' for the color of his eyes. When that didn't work she tried 'amber' the color of hers. Red for the color of her hair didn't prove any more successful.

In the back of her mind was the nagging suspicion there was something she should know, something she should have thought of. What had he been trying to tell her?

Tel--

With trembling fingers, Adriana entered the letters T-E-L.

And found herself barred from the system again.

It took her another ten minutes to evade the system's defenses and get herself back into the teleporter's high-security directory. 'Tel--' she was sure he'd said. Or was it 'Tele-'? Adriana typed T, and prayed to Octarian god of luck. She typed E and held her breath. L was entered with a carefully worded prayer to the Xubian goddess of good fortune. On the final E she shut her eyes and waited.

Cautiously, she opened one eye and swore fluently in frustration. On a black screen, two red words flashed mockingly.

ACCESS DENIED.

"Think Adriana," she whispered. "What else did he say?"

Fragments of a well-known melody echoed through her mind.

Say for today that you are mine

Before the night comes between us...

Their song!

Adriana glanced at the chrono. Nine minutes left. Swallowing hard, she closed her eyes and typed "For Today".

The screen reconfigured and she found herself admitted to the most basic element of Quillan Starr, his genetic code. Now all she had to do was feed that information to the teleporter file. According to theory, when the two merged, it would retrieve the scattering of Starr's component parts and put the pieces of the puzzle back together. According to theory of course, to her knowledge the fail-safe had never been used.

Adriana's fingers hovered above the keys. This was the part she simply couldn't mess up. Trouble was, she didn't have the faintest idea what she was doing.

The chrono clicked. Seven minutes. Do it now, the rational part of her brain argued. Now, or Quillan Starr will be lost forever.

But I really don't have a clue what I'm doing, the doubtful part of her mind insisted. I'm a hyperdrive specialist, not a network expert. From out of the corner of her eye, she watched the chrono count down another minute lost.

It was now or never, Adriana decided. Praying to every God she could name, she located the teleporter file and fed it Starr's data.

For a long moment, she was sure something had gone terribly wrong. The air around her crinkled. Like staring through a waterfall, she watched as reality warped. The atmosphere in the cubicle prickled with static.

Through the twisting air between them, a pair of green eyes stared out at her from a cloud of blond curls. Below she could see the beginnings of a strong, roughly-stubbed jaw forming. Broad shoulders emerged, tapering down to narrow hips and well-muscled legs. Caught in a sea of rippling molecules, he hovered between dimensions.

Finally the net disintegrated and it really was Quillan Starr standing before her.

He looked at her in dazed confusion. "Riana," he whispered hoarsely.

And passed out cold.

Crouching before him, Adriana stretched out a tentative hand. Her fingers brushed the rough material of his gray flight suit, feeling hard muscle beneath. She ran her hands over broad shoulders and across the smooth plane of his chest. He was real, all right. Most definitely solid.

His eyelids flickered, giving her a glimpse of the emerald eyes she remembered so well. A low moan escaped his lips.

"Quillan!" Adriana gripped him by the shoulders and shook him hard. "Wake up, Starr, damn you!"

At her harsh command, he blinked, once, twice. The hard planes of his face softened, his sensuous lips curved into a smile.

He reached for her, pulling her down into his arms. "Riana," he whispered against her ear. "I thought you were an angel."

* * * *

"It was ... cold. Like being pierced by a million needles," Starr told her as they huddled together under the blankets in her hotel room. He shuddered and gulped down a mouthful of strong Malvarian tea laced with brandy. "The cold was in my mind. I couldn't concentrate. All I knew was that something had gone terribly wrong ... and I thought of you."

Beneath the covers he was warm, most certainly a part of this dimension. Whatever had happened, it didn't matter now. Quillan was there in her arms. She hugged him closer. "It's okay, I got you back."

"You got me back," Starr repeated and put the cup aside.

Strong hands tangled in her hair as he cupped the back of her head and tilted her face to receive his kiss. Warm lips teased hers apart. The tip of his tongue traced the outline of her lips. It seemed as if he would continue in his reacquaintance, but suddenly he stopped.

"How long?" he asked, his lips moving against hers. "How long have I been gone?"

Adriana levered herself from his embrace and placed her hands on his shoulders. Under golden brows, his eyes narrowed, as he sensed the bad news coming.

"Quillan, it's been almost a year."

Starr ran a hand through his long blond hair, tousling already disheveled curls. "An entire year?"

She nodded.

"Then my ship--"

Adriana swallowed hard. "I'm afraid it's been impounded."

"They'll have sold it by now," he said hollowly.

"People said you'd run off," Adriana blurted. The words tumbled over each other into the silence. "They thought you were trying to get out of your wedding vows. They wouldn't believe me when I said something was wrong. If I hadn't come back to Rendezvous Station for Zelina's wedding--"

She stopped. No need to tell him just how close he'd come to oblivion.

The horror in Starr's eyes deepened. "I missed our wedding--"

Unable to hold back the tears that spilled over onto her cheeks, Adriana could only nod.

"And you thought I--"

"Everyone said you got cold feet. They told me the worst stories. I thought you'd changed your mind about marrying me."

His face softened into an expression that was at once caring and wounded.

"Riana," he said, looking intently into her eyes. "I went to buy you a wedding present."

"You what?"

"Remember those Xubian diamond earrings you had your heart set on?"

Vaguely, Adriana remembered coveting the matched pair of dazzling stones. During the year that followed Starr's disappearance, a pair of baubles, no matter how fine, just hadn't seemed important anymore. "What about them?"

"I was going to use the first payment from the Malvar run to buy them for you. I talked a buddy who worked at the teleporter station into sending me through for free when no one was looking."

"That's why there was no record of your trip!" The pieces of the puzzle were coming together, and the picture they formed wasn't the one she'd been expecting. "You made that last run to Malvar so you'd have the money to buy me a wedding gift?"

Starr nodded solemnly.

"I was afraid the thought of lifelong commitment was making you nervous. I thought you wanted to get away from me for awhile."

"Now why would I want to get away from you?" He pulled her closer. "You're the light in my life."

"But what about the stories about all those other women?"

"Like all stories," he said laughing, "they're greatly exaggerated."

"They're not true?"

"Mostly fabrications, I assure you. They go with the territory of being a hotshot pilot."

Adriana leaned against him, reassured by the beating of his heart that he was in fact very real and there with her.

"So," Starr asked. "Are we still engaged?" The words were spoken in his usual self-confident style, but the look on his face was anything but.

She smiled reassuringly up at him. "I have a whole slew of wedding plans just waiting to go."

But Starr was shaking his head. "We can have a party later. I want us married before the day is done. I don't want to run the risk of you misunderstanding my intentions again."

* * * *

Two hours later Adriana and Quillan stood before the altar where Zelina had said her vows the evening before. The special effects generator with its sparkling mist and swirling stars had been dismantled and sent back to the rental company. But the altar decorated with sky-blue-pink roses had yet to be taken down. The roses, Adriana noted, were a little wilted, but she didn't mind. Quillan didn't seem to notice at all as he stared around the empty ballroom in awe. He hadn't let go of her hand since they'd left her hotel room. Everywhere they went on Rendezvous Station he remarked on things that had changed in the year he'd been gone. Adriana shuddered to think of what it must have been like for him to have been trapped in the ether while time and life went on around him. Despite his ordeal he seemed happy just to be near her, to touch her.

Once confronted with the undeniable truth that Quillan was still alive and well, Zelina's father had commandeered the grand ballroom for a few more hours. Rendezvous' captain had agreed to officiate. Zelina's father had insisted on giving her away, while his daughter watched on a nearby monitor via subspace transmission.

Turned out they were going to have their party after all. Champagne left over from Zelina's wedding chilled in chrome wine buckets. All the tables had fresh white tablecloths, even though there weren't enough guests to fill more than one. Overhead the stars blazed in blinding white glory set off against the blackness of the sky.

But the handsome blond man before her stole Adriana's attention. Even though dark circles ringed his eyes and it looked as though he might drop with exhaustion, he positively beamed at her. There hadn't been time to arrange for wedding rings or formal announcements. That would have to wait for tomorrow, or perhaps even the day after. They both intended to stay in bed tomorrow morning, Adriana thought with a smile.

Quillan seemed to be having similar thoughts. His eyes roved with approval over the bridesmaid's dress she'd bought for Zelina's wedding. There hadn't been time to buy a new dress either, Adriana thought and then decided she didn't care.

The station's captain read their vows. Adriana repeated the phrases she'd been certain only hours ago that she'd never have a chance to say. Still staring into her eyes as if he feared she'd vanish at any second, Quillan repeated his own vows in a rich voice.

Then the captain pronounced them life-partners. Zelina's father popped the cork on a bottle of champagne.

And the wedding Adriana been sure she'd never have was over. They were married. Zelina logged off her subspace transmission and went back to her new husband.

Adriana smiled. Time for the reception and the honeymoon.

Zelina's dad seemed intent on using up the leftover champagne. He proposed toast after toast in his loud booming voice and served glass after glass of the bubbly brew.

Once the computer records had been scrutinized and Quillan had undergone a quick medical examination, her best friend's father had let go his suspicions of Quillan's sudden reappearance. Now he couldn't be happier for the couple.

Only a handful of people watched as they danced their first dance under the transparent ceiling of the grand ballroom. Stars blazed overhead. Minus the special effects generator, the heavens had an austere beauty. They seemed to shine for them alone.

Recorded music played from overhead speakers. The minstrels and the band that had serenaded Zelina's wedding had long since departed the station en route to their next gig. Quillan's body moved against hers as if they'd been apart only minutes instead of an entire year. They fit together perfectly.

She leaned her head against his shoulder, the way she always had, and he responded by resting his head against hers.

"How soon before we can leave?" he murmured.

Adriana smiled. "Zelina's dad wants a dance."

Quillan groaned good naturedly. "I'm dying here!"

"Shh," she insisted, even though she desperately wanted to leave as well, to be alone with Quillan and make up for all the time they'd lost. "He did give us a wedding."

"That he did," Quillan said. Bowing to Zelina's father, he offered his bride's hand for the dance.

Even Zelina's mother seemed charmed by Quillan as he offered her one of his dazzling trademark smiles and asked her to dance.

The last notes of the music faded. The ballroom, it seemed, was booked for another event. After thanking Zelina's parents for hosting their second wedding in so many days, Adriana and Quillan made their way back to her hotel suite. As she slid her pass into the lock, Adriana realized she only had the room booked for one more day.

"What are we going to do?" she asked as she looked around the sparse lodgings. "You don't have a ship anymore. And I'm currently posted to Centauri Station."

But Quillan gave her another of those heart-stopping smiles. "Then I'll come to Centauri Station with you. I'll work at whatever I can until I have enough money for another ship...." At her stricken look, he hesitated.

"I don't think I can bear the thought of being separated from you again," she blurted.

"Don't worry," he said, pulling her close. "If I have my way, we won't be separated any time soon."

She surrendered to his embrace, still marveling at how solid he felt.

"Whatever we decide together," Quillan said quietly, "the future is ours."

The old Quillan had returned she mused. Hopelessly optimistic, he lived in the moment and considered the future his for the taking. That unshakeable optimism was one of the things that had initially drawn her to him.

Quillan seemed intent on making a mark on her immediate future as he maneuvered them toward the bed. Still holding on to her, he proceeded to rain gentle kisses down her neck to the bodice of her gown. Groaning at the barrier, he reached behind and undid the zipper, so she could step out of the sky-blue-pink silk.

He released her then so he could step back and admire her. His eyes roved over her as if memorizing her form, just in case another disaster befell him and he never saw her again.

It wasn't fair, she decided, that he should be clothed while she stood there only in her lacy underwear. She reached for the zipper to his flight suit and boldly pulled it down.

He shrugged out of the form-fitting material and allowed her to push it off his shoulders and drag it down over his slim hips. He let go of his breath in a rush as she hooked her hands in his underwear and pulled them down too.

She gave him the same thorough perusal that he'd given her. He looked magnificent dressed only in one of his blinding smiles. Time hadn't changed anything. He was as handsome and solidly built as ever.

Quillan reached for her, pulling her against his masculine form. His warm hands roamed over her body, undoing the clasp of her bra, then reaching with calloused hands to pull the lacy thong over her hips and onto the floor.

Reaching for the covers, he drew them back. Then he turned and sat down on the side of the bed, pulling her onto his lap. Evidence of his arousal pressed against her lower belly.

She gazed down into his haunted green eyes, determined to wipe away the memory of this last year spent in oblivion. Taking the lead, she kissed him.

His lips were warm beneath hers, and when she slid her tongue between them, he moaned in invitation. Hungrily, she delved into the depths of his mouth, savoring the feel and the taste of him. He slid his hands up over her shoulders, pulling her closer still, as if he couldn't get enough of her.

Finally, he drew his mouth away and lowered those soft, warm lips to her breast. Adriana gasped in pleasure as his mouth closed on the rosy peak of one nipple. Teasingly, he moved to taste the other. The pull of his lips nearly sent her over the edge and she shifted restlessly in his lap.

"Easy," he murmured, raising his head.

The passion she saw in his heated gaze took her breath away. It had always been that way between them. But for an entire year, she'd believed she might never feel that kind of passion again. Her heart had known that Quillan Starr was the only one for her. And she had never stopped hoping.

After waiting so long, she certainly didn't intend to deny herself now. She squirmed against him, letting him know how badly she wanted him. Especially now that he was really and truly hers ... forever.

Sensing her impatience, he placed his warm, calloused hands beneath her buttocks and lifted, sliding her with agonizing slowness down the shaft of his erection.

The pleasure of his width sliding deep inside her was nearly too much to bear. Adriana's eyelids drifted shut as a sigh of satisfaction escaped her lips. She opened them again to find his green eyes blazing with desire.

He set the pace, starting out slowly, easing them into a gentle rhythm. His powerful arms raised and lowered her. She moved against him, quickening their pace and heard his husky laughter in return. The only sounds in the room came from their quickened breathing and her soft sighs of pleasure.

Tension wound tight inside her. She rocked against him, taking him deeper still. He responded by quickening their tempo even more. She hovered on the edge of release, but still he drove her to greater heights. She cried out, protesting this exquisite torture. His chest rumbled with his laughter.

Then with one last roll of his hips, he drove them both over the edge. Tension shattered into rolling waves of pleasure. She cried out, this time even louder than last, not caring if anyone in the adjoining rooms heard her or not. She heard Quillan's answering shout of release.

Passion and relief left her spent. Her head fell to his shoulder. Falling back into the blankets, he cradled her close as if he were afraid to let go of her.

"I hope the rooms next door are vacant," she said hoarsely after a moment.

Quillan laughed again, the same rich laughter she'd always loved him for. "Well, they probably are now."

"They'll probably charge us extra for all the noise."

"And I'll gladly pay the bill," he replied with a gentle kiss on the tip of her nose. "It will have been worth it."

Exhaustion caught up with her. Quillan reached down to pull the covers up around them, tucking them both into a cocoon of warmth.

"We have so much to work out," Adriana said drowsily.

"We do," he replied sounding even more tired. "But it can all wait until tomorrow."

They were quiet for a moment. And then he said, "This time there will be a tomorrow for us."

Adriana had nearly drifted off to sleep in the sanctuary of his arms. But his words roused her from the comforting depths of her dreams. "Yes," she agreed, knowing it was true. "This time we'll have a million tomorrows."

BENEATH A MILLION STARS

Cassiopeia stared up into the shocking blue eyes of the tall Cetian, and frantically searched her memory for the words to make everything all right. How had such a simple task gone so wrong?

Her first assignment as protocol officer had been to meet the Cetian Ambassador and make arrangements for a visit by fifty delegates from his planet's government. She'd navigated her way through the subtle nuances of the Cetian greeting. Buoyed by her success, she launched into the formality the Cetians called the baring of faces. The ritual was designed to put the bargaining on fair terms, but as the Cetian's scarf disappeared, she discovered he was not the dusty old bureaucrat she'd been expecting, but the most handsome man she'd ever seen. Lightly bronzed skin augmented high cheekbones. Waves of golden hair cascaded over his shoulders. Eyes of sapphire shone like jewels from that perfect face. A quick glimpse of his shrouded form told her that his body was as awe-inspiring as his face. And it didn't help that the young ambassador seemed to be giving her the same interested scrutiny.

Caught in his blinding smile, her carefully memorized lessons fled her mind, leaving her to stumble through the conversation with little more finesse than a first year linguistics student. "Wait, please, I've never done this before."

Somehow she'd mistaken the verb to accommodate for one with other connotations entirely. No wonder the Ambassador was beaming at her, his eyes roving over her veiled body with great interest. Caught in the heat of his stare, she felt as though he was undressing her with a simple glance. Flustered, she compounded the error by mistaking the word for wait with a similar sounding word for mate. To which the Cetian responded with assurances of his gentleness and kind nature, as well as that of the fifty male delegates who would be joining him on Epsilon Station.

"Wait!" Cassie repeated desperately as he moved to adjust his cloak, signaling the meeting was at an end. "Ambassador Zolan, there are many more specifics to be discussed." Somehow, she had to find a way to straighten out what could rapidly become an intergalactic incident.

But the Cetian Ambassador merely offered her another of those supernova smiles. "I place my faith in your hands," he said with a sweeping bow. Pulling his hood down over his face, he disappeared down the corridor. As she watched his departing form, she couldn't help reflecting that the ambassador made as good an impression leaving as he had upon his entrance. There was no mistaking the muscular legs of his very masculine form beneath all that exquisitely draped cloth.

She yanked her thoughts back to the impending disaster at hand. In offering his faith he had honored her, she thought with a pang of guilt. To object would be considered an insult, and that would be an intergalactic incident. Cassiopeia sighed as he vanished beyond a bend in the corridor.

Her supervisor was going to have a fit.

* * * *

"So, how'd it go?" Marinda looked up from the vid screen she was studying.

"Okay," Cassie said far too quickly, drawing a skeptical glance from Marinda. She took the seat opposite the Chief Protocol Officer's desk and swallowed hard past the lump in her throat. How was she going to tell her new boss she'd seriously messed up her first assignment? "I guess," she finished lamely.

"The Cetians have already booked a hundred suites."

"A hundred?"

"Fifty for the delegates and another fifty for their servants."

A trickle of dread worked at the pit of Cassie's stomach. She'd assured the Ambassador his servants would be accommodated as well.

"There are a few last minute details to be worked out." Cassie ventured. Hopefully, the boss would clue in to the need for expert intervention before fifty male Cetians descended upon the station looking for mates, or worse, for female accommodation during the week of their visit. "Perhaps you can help me."

Marinda reached across the desk and clasped her hand. "This venture is going very well, even better than I dared hope for. With the revenue from the hotels and the extra money the Cetians will spend on the promenade, our revenue figures ought to be back in the black." With a dismissive pat, Marinda turned back to her screen. "You handle it. I have faith in you, Cassie."

Faith, she thought, leaving Marinda to her revenue calculations. If you only knew. But Marinda couldn't know and wouldn't find out, Cassie vowed. Not until everything was safely solved, the revenue deposited into Epsilon's accounts, and the Cetians safely off-station on their way home without incident.

The only thing to do, she decided, was to visit the Ambassador in his quarters and explain the whole thing. The action went against the strict codes of Cetian social conduct. But they'd bared their faces, and the Ambassador was young. Perhaps he'd understand about it being her first assignment. Perhaps it was his first assignment, too.

* * * *

Cassiopeia stood before the brushed silver door in the station's most luxurious corridor. These were the hotel suites allotted to only the most important guests. A week's salary wouldn't even cover the cost of a single night, but real-water baths rather than sonic showers and silk sheets rather than scratchy synthi-cloth might just be worth it, she decided. She took a deep breath, raised her hand and rang for entry.

Too late, she realized that in her haste to set things straight she'd forgotten her cloak and scarf. The door whisked open before she could flee. A startled servant stared at her through his scarf and gasped.

"What is it?" asked a deep male voice from around the corner.

Cassie opened her mouth to protest, but before she could utter a sound she found herself staring up into the deep blue eyes of the Cetian Ambassador. And he wasn't wearing his cloak.

Cloth clung to every muscle of his broad shoulders, tapering down like a second skin past narrow hips, sculpting the area below his waist in detail that left nothing at all to the imagination. Sensing her perusal, he shifted his weight, which only drew her attention more.

"Protocol Officer Cassiopeia," he said in that voice of burnished gold.

The servant gasped audibly and keyed the door shut, ushering her inside before anyone in the corridor could catch sight of the scandalous scene. If the Ambassador heard the sound, he ignored it. With a flick of his hand he silently sent his assistant to attend to other duties, leaving the two of them standing in the foyer.

"Something is wrong, Protocol Officer Cassiopeia?"

"Cassie, please," she answered, realizing a fraction of a second too late that she'd violated Cetian protocol yet again by asking him to call her by the familiar derivative of her name, a practice reserved for family and betrothed couples.

"Cassie," he repeated with another of those blinding smiles. "I hope it is not something serious. We are...." He paused, searching for the right words, something she wished she'd taken the time to do herself. "Looking forward, as you say, to our stay on Epsilon Station."

"Ambassador--"

"Zolan," he replied. The significance of his request that she call him by his given name was not lost on her. "Come sit and tell me of these difficulties."

"Oh no, I couldn't impose--" To enter a man's home, even a man's temporary home was a serious breach of etiquette. Marinda would have her head.

"It is no trouble. My assistant, Yandi, is otherwise engaged," he said pointedly. He stood back, motioning for her to enter.

If she left now, she'd have to enlist Marinda's help to straighten things out. As it was she had two grievous breaches of social conduct against her. If she stayed, she had a chance to work things out.

But he was already reaching out for her, guiding her with a gentle, yet firm touch on her arm into the sitting room beyond. The warmth of his hand spread up her arm, promising so much more. The man all but oozed sensuality. His fleeting caress sent tingles all down her spine. That one brief touch sparked her imagination, and she had to squelch images of them entwined together minus all the veils.

Cassie yanked her thoughts back to the task at hand. She should never have let him touch her. "Should haves" piled up like dominoes, ready to fall and take all her careful studies, her hard work, and her promotion with them. She had to set Ambassador Zolan straight. This instant.

The interior of the suite had been redecorated to suit Cetian tastes. Curtains and tapestries decorated the walls. Plump pillows served as seating arrangements. He settled her amidst a flurry of silk cushions and sat down beside her.

Right beside her. Not the face-to-face posture of negotiation, but the closeness of intimacy. He sat so close she could feel the soothing warmth of his body through the thin material of his clothing.

"Ambassador--" Cassie stuttered.

"Zolan," he repeated firmly.

"Zolan, I--" She plunged ahead before he could complicate the situation further. "I fear I may have misled you."

His expression darkened and she caught a glimpse of the penetrating gaze that she had first expected from an Ambassador. This was certainly not his first assignment. "You cannot accommodate us here at Epsilon Station?"

"Oh, no! The accommodations," she enunciated the correct word carefully, "are no problem at all. We're delighted that you've chosen Epsilon as the site for your ... conference."

"Good, then there are no problems." He uttered the declaration with the surety of a man well used to getting his way.

"I'm afraid there is one problem." Again that penetrating glance. "A small problem," Cassie corrected quickly.

Before she could elaborate, a whisper of cloth brought her head up sharply. Zolan's servant hovered nervously in the corner, Zolan's cloak and scarf dangling from one hand. The scandalized look he shot Cassie reddened her cheeks.

When he still didn't command Zolan's attention, he cleared his throat. Zolan cocked a burnished eyebrow in his direction.

"Sir, your meeting with the Gridwellian Ambassador rapidly approaches."

Zolan glanced at the chrono on his wrist. "Call ahead and tell him I will be delayed. I must speak with Protocol Officer Cassiopeia first."

"Sir!" he protested, then fell quickly silent as Zolan turned in his direction.

"There is a problem?"

Cassie caught a trace of the annoyance in Zolan's voice. Irritation that creased the golden skin between his brows. The servant, Yandi, Zolan had called him, bowed and vanished, taking Zolan's cloak and scarf with him.

"Now then, Cassie," Zolan turned crystal blue eyes upon her. "What is this small problem you speak of?"

Caught in the web of his glance, it was hard to concentrate. "I'm afraid I may have given you the wrong impression."

"Regarding what?"

"Regarding me," she said quickly and glanced away.

Zolan's frown deepened. "You are not Protocol Officer Cassiopeia?"

"No, I-I mean yes." Words tumbled over one another, slurring her carefully practiced pronunciation. "I am Epsilon Station's Protocol officer. The only one, except for my boss, Marinda." She was rambling, she realized suddenly, filling the conversation with useless words that could easily be misconstrued. Cassie closed her mouth.

"I do not understand. If you are Protocol Officer, Cassiopeia and you can accommodate us here on Epsilon station, then what is the problem?"

Cassie felt her cheeks flush from pink to what could only be crimson and cursed her redhead's coloring. "I believe I may have...." What was the right word, she wondered desperately? "Exaggerated what I was offering."

"You cannot provide us with one hundred suites?"

"No, no--"

At the word 'no' he looked even more distressed. She should have been honest with Marinda. If she had, she might be out of a job, but at least the situation would be well in hand and she wouldn't be keeping the Ambassador from his meeting. "The rooms are already booked. We are delighted to have you as our guests."

"Then what," Zolan asked in exasperation, "is it?"

"Sir?" The servant, having been brushed off once, now merely poked his head around the corner. "The Gridwellian Ambassador--"

Zolan held up his hand for silence.

"Sir--" Yandi peeped in dismay. "The Gridwellian Ambassador is scheduled to depart on the next flight to Centauri. He insists he must speak with you about the trade agreement before he leaves."

This time Zolan took the offered cloak with no argument. "I'm afraid we must speak later, Cassie," he said, laying a reassuring hand upon her arm. She looked down, seeing the striking contrast between his golden and her pale flesh. Beneath the gentle pressure of his hand, she felt the embers of desire ignite. Obviously, he knew his way around a woman's body, how to encourage, how to seduce.

Who was this man who could evoke such feelings in her? Since she'd come to Epsilon Station, her only thoughts had been for her career, and now she'd nearly thrown it away because of one man who'd reached into her life and rearranged it in a single meeting. Her romantic life until now had been uneventful at best. Yet, with this stranger she felt ... comfortable. His open nature put her instantly at ease. And left her embarrassingly attracted.

And then again, perhaps she was reading far too much into the situation. He was the Cetian Ambassador. He was used to dealing with people from differing cultures, even from different species. Whatever the situation, she couldn't let him go without settling things between them.

"I'll walk with you," she said quickly, realizing once the words had been uttered that she had no cloak, no scarf, that she was again breaking the rules of convention. But Zolan nodded absently, his thoughts

already centered on his upcoming meeting. He stood, motioning for her to precede him through the doorway. As she passed, Cassie saw his servant shoot another disapproving look in her direction.

"Ambassador--" she said when he would have strode purposely down the hall.

Still striding too fast for her shorter legs, Zolan turned his attention upon her. His startling blue eyes gave the impression she took up his whole world when he fixed her with that look. It felt wonderful to be the center of someone's world. No one had ever made her feel that way before. "Yes, Cassie," he said in that resonant voice, "you were about to tell me of your difficulty."

"Yes, Ambassador--"

"Zolan," he said easily.

Zolan came to a stop outside the Gridwellian Ambassador's suite. He had only to ring and their conversation would end abruptly. And she'd already made him late.

"Zolan, I fear I may have led to believe I was looking for more than trade here at Epsilon Station," she blurted finally and dragged in a great breath of relief.

Poised to announce his presence to the Gridwellian Ambassador, Zolan turned toward her. The smile he shot her was like a ray of sun. "Oh yes, your quest for a mate." He lowered his hand, looked her intently in the face. "I must admit, your bold request took me aback. But, you have charmed me." He paused dramatically and his smile grew wider still. "I will consider your proposal of marriage."

That said, he rang the Gridwellian Ambassador's door for entry, leaving Cassiopeia standing in the hallway.

Dismay sunk like a rock to the pit of her stomach. Protocol and manners prevented her from pounding on the door. But somehow she had to separate the Cetian Ambassador from his duties long enough to explain. His schedule would be on Marinda's computer. Perhaps she could find a way to intercept him before news of her gaffe reached Marinda.

Marinda's office was empty when Cassie arrived back at Epsilon Station's Office of Protocol. Luck, it seemed, offered one small mercy on this ill-fated day. Leaving the room in darkness, Cassie walked quietly across the floor.

Overhead lights blazed. Behind her someone gasped. Cassie whirled to face the intruder.

Marinda clutched her chest. "Cassie, you scared me half to death!"

"Sorry." Cassie attempted to sound nonchalant, but she was certain Marinda could hear the pounding of her heart from across the room. "I was just leaving."

"You're here late."

"I was ah -- just double-checking a few details regarding the Cetian delegation. It's such an important contract, I wanted to make sure everything was all right."

"A very important contract," Marinda agreed. "But you're to be commended for your hard work. I knew I made the right decision promoting you."

Guilt stabbed at Cassie's conscience. For a moment she debated telling Marinda the truth. She'd tell her later, she decided. Once she'd rectified her mistake and put things to rights. Cassie forced the tremor from her voice and asked, "What brings you back to the office so late?"

Marinda sighed. "The Malvarian Ambassador has invited our Cetian guests to a formal dinner. Someone from the Protocol Office should attend, but it means I'll have to work late and I promised Timo I'd--"

"I'll do it," Cassie blurted, her outburst startling them both. To her surprise Marinda seemed to be considering the idea.

"Do you think you could handle it? The evening setting means it falls under the conventions of a Cetian social gathering. Their social conventions are particular about such things...."

"No problem," Cassie got out past the lump in her throat.

Marinda brightened. "You've done such a great job so far. I have the utmost faith in you, Cassie."

* * * *

Malvarian formal dinners were a spectacle to behold. Staring through the film of the nearly transparent veil that covered her face in deference to the strict etiquette of Cetian evening social occasions, Cassie marveled at the display of color and light.

From the middle of the sumptuously laid banquet table, the champagne fountain bubbled in rainbow hues. Illuminated circuit boards flashed in the chests of the transparent robot waiters circulating among the guests.

At any other time, Cassie would have delighted in the display. Tonight however, she had only one goal in mind: to find the Cetian Ambassador and separate him from the notion she was proposing marriage.

Her eyes settled on the shrouded form of a man too tall to be anyone else. From beneath the veil of his head scarf a lock of golden hair shone as brightly as the stars outside. Between his robe and his gloves she caught a glimpse of his bronzed skin, as he gestured with his hands when he spoke.

Somehow, she had to get close enough to have a private word with him. But Cetian social conventions were strict. Unmarried female strangers simply didn't demand time alone with single men. Who knew what conclusions the other Cetians would draw if she demanded a private word with him?

Mistakes compounded mistakes, creating more mistakes. Somehow she had to reach across the barriers of culture and galactic space and make Zolan understand.

Except for one small problem. Deep in her heart she wanted the Cetian's attention. She craved far more than his attention. She longed to feel his bronzed skin against her own and the warmth of his lips against hers. If she allowed herself one moment's truth, she had to admit this stranger from another star aroused her like no one else ever had.

"Keep thinking like that and you'll not only lose your job, but create an intergalactic incident," Cassiopeia whispered to herself.

Revealing her face, she headed across the floor toward the Cetian Ambassador.

She planned to catch his eyes, to discretely request a moment to speak with him far beyond the prying eyes of the other guests. But she got no further than a few steps before he caught her in his gaze. His eyes brightened.

"Protocol Officer Cassiopeia," his voice washed over her, warming her with its resonant tones. Unfortunately, it also drew the attention of all the other guests at the banquet. She was underdressed for such an occasion, wearing only the bare minimum of scarf and modest gown. Fine for an office visit, but the grand dinner was far in excess of what she had expected. She should have asked to borrow one of Marinda's long gowns, Cassie thought with regret.

Under the scrutiny of a multitude of eyes, she felt practically naked. As she turned her face to meet Zolan's expectant gaze, she glimpsed Yandi's disapproving frown.

Cassie bowed her head in greeting. "Ambassador Zolan."

"Are you to join us this evening?" He bowed in deference. "I would be honored if you'd be my guest."

The hope in his voice made her heart turn over. "I'm afraid I cannot, Ambassador, I wanted only to--"

"But you must--"

Cassiopeia cast a glance at the other delegates and found them also scowling their disapproval. "Ambassador, I'm afraid I'm not dressed for such an affair--"

"Pah!" Zolan waved her objections from the air. "You look wonderful to me." His brilliant grin left no doubt to the innuendo in that comment. Cassiopeia cursed her fair coloring as she felt herself blushing scarlet. "Better than wonderful," he whispered for her hearing alone. His beautiful voice, so full of emotion, moved her like a exquisitely executed symphony.

In response, Cassie blushed a deeper shade, much to the chagrin of the delegates, all of whom watched the interchange with acute attention.

"I wished only to have a word with you, Ambassador." She couldn't say privately. In Cetian that held other connotations all together. Cassie settled on "Confidentially."

Zolan's eyes narrowed. He said something in a Cetian dialect too rapidly for her to follow. Making no attempt to hide their disapproval, the rest of the Cetians moved a few discreet feet away.

"How can I be of service, Protocol Officer Cassiopeia?"

"Well, I--" Cassie began, then noticed the prying eyes of at least ten other delegates fixed upon them. "Could we--" she glanced at a huge ice sculpture nested in a forest of flowers. "Could we talk over here?"

Zolan moved obligingly behind the sculpture. Cassie couldn't help notice that the situation must have looked even more incriminating from the other side. But in a moment all will be sorted out, she promised

herself.

Eyes as blue as the Great Sea on her home world looked intently into hers.

"Something troubles you, Protocol Officer Cassiopeia?"

Cassie couldn't help but be moved by the concern in his voice. Painfully aware of the seconds drifting by and the interested gazes on the other side of the ice sculpture, Cassie launched into her explanation.

"Ambassador, I fear I have misled you." She couldn't bear to keep looking into those soulful eyes. Cassie fixed her gaze on the tiled floor instead. "Cetian is a difficult language for me, and I am still learning...." The truth sprang from her lips. She had meant to admit nothing of the sort.

Tiny lines creased the corners of his mouth as his smile faded into a frown.

Cassie began to talk faster. "I believe I have misled you in my intentions." Her eyes flickered upward. He caught her gaze and held it. "And I fear I may have erroneously given you the impression I was looking for a mate."

Hurt flashed within those devastating eyes. "Am I to take it," Zolan asked solemnly in near-perfect Standard, "that you do not wish to be my bride, Protocol Officer, Cassiopeia?"

Cassie's heart sank. She felt her stomach coil tighter with tension. She'd expected him to be relieved, perhaps even to think her gaffe humorous. Instead, he looked genuinely hurt.

"That's not it, Ambassador. You see--" She held out her hands in a helpless gesture and found them captured by his. Even through the thin leather of his gloves, she could feel the heat of his skin. "I just didn't want you to think I was propositioning you." The words slid from her lips, far more blatant than she wished them to be. But she couldn't risk another misunderstanding between them.

Zolan's expression brightened. "Then you do wish to be my bride!"

"No Ambassador." It was impossible to think while his thumbs traced lazy circles on her wrists and his smile held her rooted to the spot.

The smile faded again. "You do not find me attractive?"

"No, Zolan," she stammered, then gathering her wits, tried again. "Yes, Ambassador, I do but--"

"But what?"

Cassie raised her head to find his face mere inches away from hers. Full lips closed the distance between them. Warm breath bathed her cheek."

"What is it, Cassiopeia, that you wish to tell me?"

She opened her mouth to reply and found instead her lips captured by his.

Feather-soft lips brushed hers. She felt the flicker of his tongue. Her resolve crumbled and her traitorous mouth opened, allowing his tongue to slide inside. Like savoring a delectable treat, he sampled the deep recesses of her mouth. She'd never been kissed so languidly, so sensuously or so fully. How she'd

dreamed of kissing those lips, wondered how his long, lean body would feel pressed against hers. Until Zolan, she hadn't known a kiss could be like that. The unexpected sensual onslaught got the better of her and Cassie moaned in spite of herself. Relentless in his possession of her, he swallowed the sound. He spread his fingers and laced them through her curls. Long tapered fingers massaged the back of her head. Every nerve in her body sprang to life. Her hands grasped his shoulders, whether to push him away or draw him closer, she didn't know. Dimly aware they were barely hidden behind the ice sculpture, she pressed her body against him, wanting more and not knowing how to ask for it.

His body understood even if she didn't. Obliging, he pulled her hard against him. She could feel every muscle in that sculpted body. Strong arms cradled her against him. Long, lean legs made her wonder how they would feel between hers. Zolan was obviously wondering too because she could feel the evidence of his arousal hard and insistent and nested between her thighs. For an instant she almost told him to stop, but then another slide of his tongue smothered the last of her protests.

Hesitantly, she returned his kiss, sampling the depths of his mouth with her tongue. He tasted vaguely alien, but not unpleasant. Nothing about Zolan was unpleasant, she reflected. Absolutely everything about him screamed pleasure and sensuality. He responded to her bold advance by growling low in his throat. That primal sound sent her passion soaring to even greater heights.

His hand slid down over her shoulder, massaging and stroking, until he reached the swell of her hip. She gasped as he explored the curve of her buttocks through the sheer material of her dress. If he did anything else she might simply die, Cassie thought.

But even while she reveled in his sensuous onslaught, alarm bells rang inside her head. She was supposed to be straightening things out, not complicating them further.

A loud gasp tore through the hubbub around them.

Zolan's lips left hers. Instantly, Cassie felt the loss of him, followed swiftly by sheer horror as she recognized the source of that gasp: Zolan's assistant, Yandi.

"Ambassador!" Yandi's shout of dismay brought the other delegates clustering around them in a tight circle. Her dismay deepened as over Zolan's shoulder she saw Marinda hurrying toward them.

It looked bad, very bad, Cassie realized, with her hands still locked on Zolan's shoulders, her face flushed, and their headscarves askew. One of his long gloved hands was still tangled in her hair. The other rested on her hip in a blatant display of his possession.

"Ambassador Zolan!" another of the delegates gasped.

"Cassiopeia!" Marinda echoed.

One of the Cetians separated himself from the crowd. From the elaborate way his scarf and cloak were arranged, Cassie guessed he was a personage of some importance, likely outranking even Zolan. "Ambassador Zolan, this is most inappropriate!"

"You have a great deal of explaining to do, Protocol Officer Cassiopeia," Marinda bristled.

To Cassie's dismay she felt Zolan's warm, gloved hands smoothing her headscarf back in place. She risked a glance at him and was startled to find him looking not a bit chagrined. He winked back at her. Grateful for the veil, Cassie blushed a deeper shade of crimson.

"No explanation is necessary." Zolan's resonant voice silenced the multitude of objections. "Protocol Officer Cassiopeia is--I believe you say--my fiancée."

Marinda's gasp covered another round of outraged objections from the Cetians.

"An explanation is necessary," Cassiopeia's voice cut through the commotion. "As I was trying to explain to the Cetian Ambassador, I made a mistake in my translation." From the corner of her eye, she watched Marinda's mouth tighten. "I--" She faltered, realizing she had no choice but to blurt the embarrassing details of her error to this audience of alien delegates and her own boss. "Unfortunately, I led the Cetian Ambassador to believe that I was looking for a mate. I'm not the Ambassador's fiancée. It was just a mistake, that's all."

"A mistake!" Marinda bent to one knee before Zolan and bowed her head in deference. "Please forgive my office for such a terrible--"

"That's not all," Cassie interrupted. If she didn't continue, she'd lose her nerve entirely. "I believe I also gave the Ambassador the impression we would find mates for the fifty delegates that will be visiting Epsilon Station."

Marinda leapt to her feet. Whirling upon Cassie, she snatched the station identification badge from her cloak. "Protocol Officer Cassiopeia, you are hereby relieved of your duties and your employment with the Protocol Office of Epsilon Station."

Tears choked off the rest of what she wanted to say. Cassie glanced up at Zolan, saddened to find him staring pensively in her direction. "Forgive me," she whispered.

Ignoring his anguished calls, she fled the banquet hall.

* * * *

A curt message appeared on the vid screen several hours later, informing her officially of her termination. Marinda, it seemed, had only dropped in on the banquet to check on Cassie's progress, but it had taken her most of the night to assure the Cetian party no insult had been intended. Ambassador Zolan, Marinda wrote, had been too upset to speak a word.

Back to the fishing farms of Octavia, Cassie thought dimly. The gleaming chrome of Epsilon Station had seemed so exotic compared to her green, wet world. Perhaps that was where she belonged after all.

A chime signaled a visitor at her door. She wasn't dressed to receive anyone with her eyes swollen from crying and her hands grubby from packing. The door chimed again. Deciding it no longer mattered, Cassie palmed the entry.

It opened with a whoosh, and she found herself staring up into those blue, mesmerizing eyes. He wore neither cloak nor headscarf. Silver cloth clung to every muscle. He looked like a silver statue come to life. Cassie choked back a gasp.

"Ambassador Zolan!"

"Zolan," he insisted quietly. His eyes wandered past her shoulder at the narrow confines of her quarters. "This is where you live?"

"It is where I used to live," she corrected. "I'm taking the first transport back to Octavia."

Zolan strode past her without invitation. "It is far too small for you. A beautiful woman requires beautiful things." His forehead wrinkled with distaste. "Too shabby, this." Cassie opened her mouth to object, but he interrupted her. "Ah, but first I must apologize."

"Apologize? Oh no, Ambassador, it is me who owes you an apology."

"Nonsense." Zolan reached out a burnished hand to tuck a stray curl behind her ear. "The fault is mine. I hope you will forgive me my indulgence."

The Cetian Ambassador should not be standing uncloaked in her quarters. If Marinda found out about this one, she'd have Cassie vented through the air lock. She should not be having a conversation uncloaked with the Cetian Ambassador, Cassie corrected herself. But inexplicably he stood before her, and in spite of all that had happened she found herself desperately wanting to kiss him again. He stood so close, far closer than Cetian social conventions allowed. She felt the heat from his body through the thin material of the loose pants and tunic he wore. Ignoring his proximity, she forced her brain to work.

"Indulgence? I don't understand, Ambassador."

"Zolan," he said again. Long golden lashes lowered as he looked intently down at her. "I never meant for you to be hurt." He framed her face with his hands and lowered his mouth to kiss her.

One touch of those feather-soft lips and she was nearly lost again. That fleeting caress sent an avalanche of sensation coursing through her. Images of their earlier encounter dangled tantalizingly in her mind.

Oh, how she wanted to kiss him again. Kiss him and more. "Zolan!" Cassie stopped him with a hand against his chest. A very muscular, warm chest covered with golden down, her fingers told her.

He stopped and pulled away slightly, his lips inches from hers. A deep sigh escaped his lips. "There was no misunderstanding, Cassie."

"No--what? You mean you--"

"Understood you completely," he finished. "You must believe that I never meant you any harm, Cassiopeia."

She blushed again, and this time she had no veil to hide behind.

"I find the way you do this," Zolan stroked her cheek, "endearing. It is called blushing, yes?"

Cassie nodded automatically. That he drew her attention to it was even more mortifying. Still there was one thing she had to know. "If you understood me, why did you still want me to marry you?"

Zolan didn't blush, she noted. But he did look uncomfortable. "I must marry," he said quietly. "For state reasons." He sighed. His warm breath smelled faintly of spice, "But, I have found no one among my

people I wish to marry. You ... touched me in a way I had not expected."

Truth was, he touched her in a way she hadn't expected either. No one had aroused her passion the way he had. No one made her burn with a single glance. No one's voice set every nerve on fire the way his did.

His golden eyebrows drew together in concentration. "With you I felt ... comfortable, even though we come from different stars. It is strange, is it not?"

"Not so strange," Cassie said. She had felt exactly the same way about him.

"You charmed me, Protocol Officer Cassiopeia." He wound another crimson curl around his finger and seemed to marvel at its color.

A million objections rose to mind. Instead, Cassie said, "I am no longer a protocol officer." She had one chance to make this all right. "And you shouldn't be here, Ambassador. Not like this!" She indicated his unshrouded form. "We shouldn't be together like this."

Zolan silenced her with a finger against her lips. "I have explained the situation to your employer, Marinda she is called, yes? I told her there was no mistake, no misunderstanding. Our delegation will still hold its meeting here on Epsilon Station."

"But what about the other Cetians, the older man who looked so shocked?"

Zolan's face brightened. "The older man is my father, who wishes most of all that I be married."

"Wouldn't he want a Cetian bride for you?"

He offered her a devilish grin. "I have had a very long discussion with my father and we have come to an agreement. He will respect my wishes. Especially since he married a beautiful foreigner himself."

Cassie opened her mouth to protest and found instead her lips brushed tantalizingly by his. "Marinda will offer you your job back, if you wish it," Zolan said softly. "But I wish you to consider a proposal of another sort." He smiled tantalizingly down at her. "I will say this in Octavian, so there will be no misunderstanding between us. It is our custom to begin a relationship with courtship. May I have your permission to court you, Cassie?"

It was all too impossible. A ticket lay in her pocket, transport on the next shuttle out. Due to leave in an hour. "But, you will be traveling all over the galaxy!"

He nodded solemnly. "I suppose I will have to arrange much business on Epsilon Station."

She couldn't help smiling. Marinda would certainly be happy enough about that. "What does a Cetian courtship involve?"

Zolan's lips brushed hers again. "A little bit of this," he murmured, teasing her further. He deepened the kiss. "A little bit of that."

Her head still spinning from all the things Zolan had told her, Cassie returned his kiss. It seemed impossible that a few minutes ago, she'd been ready to get on the next transport far away from Epsilon Station, never to return. Now, she had her job back and a suitor as well. A suitor who could steal her

breath with a mere glance. Not to mention what he did to her with his scorching kisses.

But there was no mistaking the reality of the man kissing her. No veils separated them now. His golden skin gleamed in the lighting of her cabin. Long lashes brushed her cheek as he closed his eyes and surrendered to the passion they were creating.

"And a little bit of this," Cassie echoed, adding a variation of her own. Boldly, she slid her tongue into his mouth, taking in the heady taste of him. He moaned softly at her intrusion. His tongue caressed hers, giving her a hint of what he'd like to do to her body. She reached up and wove her hands through his golden curls. His hair was coarser than hers, yet still downy soft. She wondered at the texture of it. Everything about Zolan was potent and sensual.

Stripped of his habitual veils and away from the constraints of Cetian courting rituals, they had only themselves to please. And Zolan seemed intent on pleasing her thoroughly. His warm lips left her mouth to explore the hollow between her neck and shoulder. The light, tantalizing caress sent pleasant little shockwaves to her very core. No wonder the Cetians controlled courtship so rigidly, she thought. They possessed the most potent sensuality she'd ever experienced.

She tugged on the neck of his silver tunic, determined to return the favor. Her lips teased his collarbone. She heard him suck in his breath at the unexpected caress. His skin was slightly warmer than she was used to and a trifle more salty, yet not unpleasant. She could smell the unfamiliar, yet tantalizing herbs of his soap. His scent enticed her further and she dipped her head to explore the soft golden hairs in the center of his chest.

The material parted by some mysterious fastening. She gazed up to find Zolan staring down at her with those jewel-like eyes. The passion in his gaze nearly scorched her.

"Cassie," he said in that burnished voice. "It is obvious that we are ... compatible, but I would not push you too fast."

"Not too fast," she repeated. A few minutes ago she'd been jobless and homeless. Now she had lover who stirred her passion unlike any other. Of one thing she was certain, she wanted to explore all that Zolan was. "Not fast enough."

"Ah," he murmured, his head dropping lower still, brushing aside the material of her neckline to explore the tender flesh of her breast. His breath was hot against her skin. "So it's true what they say about Octavian women."

"What do they say?" she managed to croak out as his tongue teased the peak of one breast.

"That they are passionate."

Until Zolan, she wouldn't have said that about herself. Her career absorbed all her time and energy. This stranger seemed to have streaked across the heavens and lit her aflame.

She caught her breath as he moved to give equal time to the other and Cassie felt her knees go weak. Zolan raised his head. His sapphire eyes flickered around the tiny cabin, taking in the few boxes packed for moving and the furniture that came with the tiny unit covered to protect it while the space was vacant. In a slow sensuous dance, he moved her backward, toward the couch that doubled as a bed. With one hand, he snatched up the sheet and dumped it on the floor. Alarm bells rang in her head. Zolan seemed content enough to be doing what he was doing. He'd straightened things out with his father and her boss,

but their passionate encounter violated everything she knew of Cetian rituals.

"Zolan," she whispered.

He froze, his lips poised against hers.

"Should we really be doing this?"

A slow smile crept across his face, like the sun coming out after a day of clouds. He placed a chaste kiss on her lips. "Cetian courting rituals are often misunderstood."

"They are?"

He nodded. "Because we veil ourselves among strangers, people assume that we are cold and...." He searched for the proper word. "Shy ... yes?"

She nodded. There was nothing cold or shy about the golden man touching her. Not his slightly warmer body heat, nor the passion with which he caressed her. "But actually the reverse is true," she ventured.

"Because we don't speak of it in public, doesn't mean we don't enjoy lovemaking," he said softly. "But what happens between a courting couple is strictly private. No one will ever ask."

"So we are free to do as we please?" she asked.

"We are free to please ourselves however we desire," he clarified.

It was all the clarification she needed.

His fingers grazed her skin as he parted the cloth of her jumpsuit and stripped the material down over her hips. Clothed only in her underwear, she stepped out of the pool of cloth and looked up at him.

But he was gazing down at her seemingly in awe of her smooth, white skin so unlike his own. Slowly, languidly, he stripped away the rest of her clothing until she stood naked before him.

Taking her hands in his, he placed them on his own shoulders, encouraging her to strip the silver cloth from his broad frame and down over his tapered hips. He stood like a golden god in the puddle of silver cloth. Burnished skin covered every inch of his body. A tangle of downy blond hair began in the center of his chest, then narrowed to a thin line that ran between the rock-hard muscles of his stomach. Her eyes dipped lower, taking in all his glory. Unclothed, he couldn't deny his desire for her.

Zolan settled her against the cushions and lowered his weight on top of her. Reaching up, she pulled him closer still. His warmth surrounded her as he supported his weight on his elbows and leaned down to kiss her softly and thoroughly. Every inch of his golden skin pressed against hers.

He renewed his onslaught on her mouth while his hands continued to stroke and encourage her. She moaned out loud.

"Yes, I do believe we've been taking things far too fast," he murmured with that teasing grin. He put a hand between them and gently caressed the sensitive skin on the inside of her thighs. She felt the tip of his thick erection pressing against the apex of her thighs and opened her legs.

With agonizing slowness, he eased inside her. She caught her breath as her body stretched around him. She looked up into startling blue eyes glazed with passion that echoed her own. He withdrew and plunged gently deeper. Each stroke drove her passion higher. Her body tensed, holding him tightly within her.

He kept up that slow sensuous rhythm until she was moaning incoherently. Only then did he increase his speed. She moved against him as together they raced toward the summit of their desire.

Orgasm hit in a shower of stars. Her head cradled in the crook of his shoulder, Cassie cried out loud enough to be heard in the corridor. Zolan's chest rumbled as he moaned in his own release, then eased down against her.

By now the transport to Octavia had departed, Cassie thought distantly. Her ticket was useless. But she couldn't have cared as Zolan rested his head against hers and cradled her close. For a moment they dozed contentedly, then he turned, pulling her with him until he was lying on his back with her draped over him. Cool air from the ventilation system brushed her heated skin. She looked down into his thoroughly contented face. His eyelids drifted closed, but as she stirred, they flew open again. The look of love he offered her nearly stopped her heart.

"I guess I should unpack my blankets," she said.

His chest rumbled with laughter. "Perhaps you should," he agreed.

They said nothing further for a long time.

About this Title

This eBook was created using ReaderWorks™Publisher, produced by OverDrive, Inc.

For more information on ReaderWorks, visit us on the Web at "www.readerworks.com"