

# Down Came A Blackbird

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## Chapter 1

*Goddess above!* Minuscule women with gauzy wings gamboled with leprechauns in a field of flowers. Cait hastily averted her eyes from the holoivid ad for the newest VR game at Tiny's Emporium. Her face heated up with an embarrassed flush. *We're nothing like that* .

“Do you like it?” Tiny's voice said behind her.

She turned around. At five eight she wasn't short, not by any means, but Tiny stood well over six-foot tall. He towered over her like an onyx giant and unknowingly projected his need for approval at her. His deep booming voice matched his size. He rubbed his left hand across his bald head. A heavy embossed ring of a Navy SEAL glinted on his ring finger.

“It's interesting, but...” She noticed his gaze lingering on the random shades of gold, copper, black and brown of her braided hair. “Tiny...”

“Ma'am.”

She gestured at the ad. The hard part was finding the right words to critique his efforts in a tactful manner. After spending two very enjoyable weeks learning the intricacies of his solar wing VR game, she appreciated the care and intellect he put into developing his programs.

“If you're going to design a semi-accurate VR game about the Sidhe, I think it'll work better if you access Celtic history for your template. Forget all that rot about wings and wee people, cold iron and magic. The Sidhe fought battles with the early Celts and later intermarried with them.”

“The She?” The puzzled expression on his face was priceless.

“Sidhe is the Gaelic word for faerie. It's spelled S-i-d-h-e, but pronounced Shee,” Cait said patiently. “You've heard of the Banshee, haven't you?”

Comprehension brightened Tiny's face. He pulled his sofscreen out of his pocket and unfolded it. “Main net,” he said. “Download all references to Celtic history and folklore to unit 2957 and bill this activity to Tiny's Emporium, Deck Two, corridor thirty seven.”

“Insert credit chip,” the impersonal voice of Sanctuary Station's NetCenter said from his sofscreen's commlink.

Tiny inserted his credit chip, gave a satisfied nod and held the screen out for Cait to see the data dump.

“Nauda's Silver Hand is a good start.” She pointed at the reference as it scrolled up. “When you strip away the ‘magic’ elements, it sounds just like a modern prosthetic device. And here! The stories about the selkie folk and their shape changing sealskins fit the parameters of deep sea divers’ wet suits.”

Tiny's emotions shifted from a defensive curiosity into a sudden flood of eager gratitude. She took her hand off his arm and stepped back. It wasn't his fault he was projecting at her so loudly. He had no idea she was an empath and that touching someone gave her a clearer link with them.

“Cait?”

She stopped. His voice was serious. It didn't sound like he wanted to discuss VR games anymore.

He folded the sofscreen up. “Now that you've learned EVA flight in VR, how'd you like to sign up for real time classes this afternoon?”

“I can't.” Genuine regret colored her words. “I told you already. I'm only here for a vacation. I'm scheduled to fly back down to Earth on tomorrow's shuttle.”

“But this is a chance of a lifetime. A month from today, the mining expedition's going to the Pot of Gold. There are still a couple of berths left open for bid. With an EVA flight certificate and your medical background, you'd be a shoo-in. Two paramedics bailed out of the expedition when Nowan filed its lawsuit.”

Cait tilted her head sideways and gave him a hard look. “Is that why the game was so cheap?” she asked. “Are you using it as a recruiting tool?”

“Hey!” He spread his thick hands apart. “We're only asking the high scorers. Kyle and Dushawn are going to this class. I figured you might be interested too ‘cause your score is even higher than theirs.”

Cait looked away and smothered an irritated sigh. Kyle and Dushawn came up on the shuttle with her last week. Ever since they overheard the customs agent question her visa, they made it their business to follow her around. It was a very simple explanation. Her mother had two husbands. That's why both of them were listed on the visa.

“Well,” Tiny pleaded with her. “What do you say? Try it. You can stay here a couple of more weeks.”

It certainly sounded like a lot more fun than going back dirtside to listen to long lectures on the translocation of genetic factors during meiosis and mitosis. The concentration of metallic ores in the Pot of Gold supported the theory that the asteroids were the remains of another planet. It always made her wonder about an extraterrestrial origin for her people. Especially when she read the old legends and stripped away the magical aspects.

Cait gnawed at her lower lip. Her parents were so proud of her qualifying for Harvard's Pre-med class. “Sorry, Tiny.”

His shoulders sagged. “Okay.” He patted his shirt pocket. “There'll be other expeditions. If you ever change your mind, I have your VR stats right here with me.”

She shook her head. Goddess, she was tempted! The best thing to do was to leave before she agreed. The longer he talked, the more she wanted to go. Empathic sensitivity was a tricky ability to control. She had to make sure it was something she really wanted instead of a reaction to what he wanted. Her gaze focused on the skinsuit draped over her arm. She held it up. “What about this?”

Tiny waved it away. “Keep it.”

She nodded, surprised by his generosity. When you took into consideration the special catheter and microfilament neural fibres for direct input to her spinal column, it was well worth the price she paid for the custom fit. Besides, authentic skinsuits for EVA solar wings were all the rage dirtside.

Cait dodged a clump of customers digging through a pile of used EVA suits and walked outside to Deck Two's lift. Its doors slid smoothly open as she approached and revealed two passengers standing inside it already. Was it a plot by the goddess to test her patience? she thought. It was the only logical way to explain why Kyle and Dushawn were there.

Their salacious excitement washed over Cait as the lift doors slid shut. That didn't help matters any. She moved to the back of the lift, put on her best poker face and stared blankly at the wall. Maybe if she ignored them, they'd leave her alone.

No such luck. Kyle moved in on her first. “Your mama has two husbands. How many do you want?” He tried to pinch her buttocks.

She rolled her eyes and stepped out of his reach. No use trying to explain things to these idiots. Her fathers were lucky they found a human woman to love them and accept their culture. It worked out pretty good for her fathers. The only other Sidhe left were too closely related for them to partner. Of course, as a physician, her mother had a unique perspective when she met her two suitors.

“Yeah,” Dushawn reached out and tried to paw her chest. “How many guys can you handle?”

Cait didn't want to deal with them right now. “Back off,” she told them.

Identical stupid grins blossomed on their faces. They moved closer. Then, with their juvenile lust swirling around her in a red haze, she pushed them against opposite walls. Sidhe strength came in handy sometimes.

The lift shuddered and groaned to a stop at Deck Six. “The next time you make a wrong move, there won't be any warning. I'll just kick you in the nuts,” Cait said when the doors opened.

Both men scrambled out. Kyle wiped the blood dripping out of his nose onto his shirtsleeve. Cait rubbed at her forehead. Something didn't feel right here. She *reached* for them with her mind. Their emotions were a confused jumble. They were in a hurry not to leave her but to go someplace else. Then what Tiny said about the high scorers in the VR game suddenly clicked into place. They were worried about being late for this afternoon's EVA flight class.

The lift door slid shut. “Deck two, please,” she said. Her hands were shaking.

Those punks were going out to the Pot of Gold. What if they found what she wanted to find? She'd kick herself silly if that happened. Especially if they found proof of Sidhe existence and didn't even know what they had. A project of the import of Pot of Gold deserved better than a pair of low class hooligans masquerading as scientific researchers. She could finish her medical schooling any time she wanted. But she might only get one chance at something like this.

Tiny was busy dickering over the price of a couple of used EVA suits when she reentered his store. He glanced at Cait and nodded. She went over to a pile of scuffed boots and sorted through them until he finished his transaction.

A hopeful question filled Tiny's face while she walked up and laid her hands on his counter. “Sign me up for that class. Do you have any spare EVA suits for sale that'll match up with my skinsuit?”

\* \* \* \*

An hour and a half later, Cait shifted her shoulders under the full weight of her EVA gear and stepped out of the maintenance lift into the unheated storage hold of Deck Six. It was worth it to feel Kyle's and Dushawn's astonishment when they turned around and saw her walk over and stand in line with them.

Standing there on the other side of the vast metal cavern of the hold was their instructor. He turned around and unfurled his wings. Tall and forbidding, he looked like a matte-black chimera with his bat wings and black visored helmet. Now she knew who provided the template for the master image in Tiny's VR game. The opaque visor of his helmet completed the illusion of inhumanity.

His jet black boots clicked against the deck's metal grid. “My name's Edelmiro Jesus Santiago de Arroyo” He tapped his finger at the circle name patch on his right shoulder. It had jagged lightning bolts stabbing at the word “Indio.” “But I prefer to be called Indio .”

She liked that. Nice and easy to remember. She didn't feel any emotions leaking out from him. She liked that too. Especially after the incident in the elevator, she'd rather deal with someone with a mature emotional attitude. Their lessons should proceed without any distractions.

Indio pointed his gloved finger at the swollen lip and goose egg that marred Dushawn's dark-skinned features. “What happened?”

Indio's voice sounded very raspy and guttural to Cait. Was it a deliberate distortion of his suit's speaker system? She couldn't tell. All she knew was that it scabbled at her senses like a wounded claw.

“Uh,” Dushawn gulped. “When we picked up our stuff...” His angry gaze flickered towards Cait. Kyle shot him a warning glance. “... I tripped and ran into the door, sir.”

Indioturned to the next victim in the lineup. He tapped the Celtic circle on Kyle's suit, then tilted Kyle's face sideways for a better view of his black eyes and bruised nose. "And you?"

Slanting a swift glare of his own at Cait, Kyle straightened his shoulders and bobbed his head in eager affirmation of Dushawn's feeble alibi. "Yes sir! It was a door!"

Indioturned his helmeted head towards Cait. Even though she couldn't see through his polarized faceplate she suspected he was checking her features out for any bruises or other signs of physical damage.

He leaned closer to peer at the golden eyed calico cat on her nametag and read her name out loud. "Cait, do you have anything to tell me about this door?"

The last thing she wanted to do was file a sexual harassment claim. Running around the station and submitting testimony to a panel of holographic legal representatives was not her idea of fun. Besides, her people avoided publicity the same way they avoided cold iron before they learned about tetanus shots.

She smiled. Mischief danced at the corners of her mouth. "I have good reflexes, sir."

His curiosity washed over her. He reached up with his gloved finger and pushed a loose tendril of hair behind her ear. She knew he was staring at the random streaks of color that patterned her hair.

Indiotook his hand away and stepped back. At the same time, his emotional output shut down. "Good." He peeled off his glove and held out his right hand. "Stats, please."

Tension puffed out in the cold air along with their breath as everyone unsealed their pockets, fished out their VR disks and handed them over. He walked to the wall, placed his hand on the palmprint ID and activated the computer. He inserted the first disk into the slot and studied the results.

He keyed in a series of commands and they waited for the first set of wings to pop out of the wall unit. Solar batwings were custom designed with black photoelectric cells painted directly onto the fabric that powered the wings. Microchips inside the helmets translated external light sources into visible streams of electromagnetic energy. A simple walk on the beach would be transformed on the visors into a kaleidoscope of photons and constantly changing energy patterns.

A light started blinking at the panel beside the computer screen.Indio opened it and removed the first set of wings. He inserted the second disk in the slot. They waited for this process to complete for the next two sets of wings.

She watchedIndio snap Kyle's and Dushawn's wings into the sockets alongside their air tanks and help them fasten their helmets. Dushawn's and Kyle's wings were one third black. Her's were half black.

Cait flexed her arms. Her wings flexed. It was a curious sensation, like, yet unlike, the sims. Her back and shoulders tingled while the wings responded to every move, every random muscle contraction.

A multitude of fiberoptic filaments embedded in her skinsuit pierced Cait's spine and provided direct feedback to and from the wings. They absorbed the energy of the ceiling lights and resent it to her nervous system as surges of cold fire.

She studied the endless stream of infrared and magnetic imaging data on her visor and realized how

much she needed to learn. Indio radiated pure power from head to toe. Dushawn and Kyle radiated uneven blotches and random flares in the data stream on her visor. She figured her readings were most likely just as erratic and uncontrolled. Sweat trickled down her spine. Her nose itched.

Indio's movements were slow and deliberate as he climbed down the ladder to the emergency exit airlock. Figuring out how to balance the wings as she climbed down required total concentration. Energy flashes crackled through her with every move.

Climbing down without snagging her wings took all her concentration. Kyle and Dushawn followed her. Indio reached up, activated the controls and sealed the door above their heads. He positioned them around the exterior airlock at their feet.

The lock irised open. Air hissed out as a cloud of ice crystals into vacuum outside. Everyone's suits inflated automatically, compensating for the pressure differential. Cait remembered to fold her wings, then slowly climbed outside and clung like a leech to the handholds spaced around the opening.

It felt like she was hanging onto the edge of a vast carousel trying to fling her off into the void. A multitude of stars sailed past. The moon swung by. A few minutes later, the sun swirled into view and scorched her with the brilliant roar of its wild energy fields. The skinsuit reacted to the blood rushing away from her head and tightened around her arms and legs. Swallowing the sudden nausea that welled up in her throat, she looked sideways and watched Indio tuck his feet under himself, then walk toward her. The vibration of his boot magnets resonated through her insulated gloves.

When he reached for her, she activated her boot magnets and let him pull her to a standing position. She straightened up too fast and collided with him. Rock steady, he held on and waited for her to catch her balance. There they were, hanging upside down like a pair of bats. He put his helmet against hers. "Easy now," he said. "You forgot to switch your comm link on."

"Goddess!" She looked for the switch.

"Down below your chin on your right side," he said. "You tap the green one once with your chin for a local and twice for the emergency channel. The red one shuts it down again."

"Okay..." Cait blurted out, "Your voice, why does it sound the way it does?" Hot mortification flooded her cheeks. *Why did I ask him that? It's none of my business.*

Indio's gloved hands tightened on her arms. "An old injury," he said finally. He released her, then turned to Kyle and Dushawn. They were clinging to the other side of the airlock.

Cait switched her comm on and stopped watching them while she sorted out the different electromagnetic and radiant energy flows superimposed on her visor. Moonlight splashed around her and eddied into a whirlpool. The solid wind of sunlight crashed over the edges of the station and sucked the moonlight into a massive current swooping through the dark void of space. Earthshine flooded the sky.

Space Station Sanctuary, or Heaven Help Us, as the long term residents called it, looked like a giant top. Around the spindle's base, riding on mag-lev rails, was the vast Lazy Susan upon which the station rotated. Freight elevators raced up and down the spokes delivering cargo and passengers to the rim.

East of the sun and west of the moon was one of the more poetic descriptions of La Grange Point #5. She wondered how the person who wrote that old fairy tale managed to describe this exact location so accurately. Was it just a coincidence?

A wave of nausea slammed into Cait from Dushawn. She turned and watched Dushawn sway while he adjusted to the centrifugal and centripetal forces pushing and pulling at him. Bad enough she had to fight her own nausea; feeling his quadrupled the sensation.

She watched Indio make sure Dushawn's boots were securely planted on the metal wall. Indio turned towards Kyle. But Kyle didn't wait. He pushed himself away from the rim with his arms and started pinwheeling away parallel to the station's curving side.

“Shit!” Indio's voice yelled in her helmet over the comm. He hurtled himself after Kyle's flailing shape. Twin streams of light flared from Indio's wrists. He spread his wings. Kyle's struggles carried him too close to a solar vane. One of his wings snagged the vane and fragmented. Kyle spun out into the darkness. Indio swooped after him. They vanished over the sloping curve of the station.

Cait hesitated. Should they wait? She switched the comm to local. “Dushawn,” she said.

“Uh ... yeah.”

“I think we should switch on the emergency channel and listen for any signal from Indio . Okay?”

“Yeah.”

They waited. Silence reigned. She motioned at Dushawn to switch to the local comm link again. “Dushawn?”

“Yeah.”

“Should we stay here?”

“Don't know.” His response wasn't very enthusiastic or helpful.

“Maybe they flew too far down the line and they're not in range of the relay antennas anymore. I think we should fly ourselves out away from station interference and try the emergency channel one more time.”

“Uh sure. That sounds good.”

Taking a deep breath to steady her racing pulse, Cait focused on the energies surging through her wings down the fiberoptic filaments into her spine. Cold fire burned through her as she silently cursed the sims for inadequate emergency training. She activated the wrist jets. Catheters provided an annoying but crucial source of raw methane for the tiny jets.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw small spurts of flame sputtering out from Dushawn's wrists. At least he was following her example and learning his suit's capabilities before leaping out into the energy flows. She checked her visor's screen.

“Dushawn, did you hear anything from Indio yet?”

“No.”

“Are you ready to go out and look for them?” Cait unclipped her grappling hook and coiled the line

around her right hand and arm.

Dushawn unclipped his. "I'm as ready as I'll ever be."

Bracing herself for the next blast of energy as the station spun sunwards, she eyeballed the vanes jutting out at irregular intervals on her projected flight plan. She deactivated her boot magnets and pushed off onto the crest twisting past the station wall. Her wings snapped open. Back and shoulder muscles protested the sudden changes in direction. A steady stream of urine flowed from her wrist jets.

Twisting and turning her body and wings like a bodysurfer, she rode the energy wave curving away from the station. With her arms lifted overhead, she slowed herself down with the wrist jets. She scudded sideways onto a weaker energy wave, turned and watched for Dushawn. His efforts were awkward but he kept himself in a straight line and rode the next wave out to her.

As he realigned himself beside her, she studied the energy flow of his wings. Looking down at Sanctuary, she compared the patterns of the vanes as they absorbed and transferred solar energy into the station's generators. She hoped Indio managed to drag Kyle back down on the rim. Trying to find them anywhere else would be like looking for a needle in a haystack.

She tuned in to the emergency channel. Nothing. She tabbed the comm back to local. "Dushawn."

"Yeah."

"No distress signal."

"Yeah."

"Any ideas?"

"No."

"Maybe they're unconscious and can't signal," she said.

"Maybe." His voice didn't sound very enthusiastic. "I could send a distress signal out now."

At least the energy streams weren't so erratic out here. It felt like she was floating. "No," she said. "How are we going to give directions for a rescue team if we don't even know where they are? We have to search the rim first. Follow me."

Carefully aiming her wrist jets, she caught a surge of moonlight. Soft and sweet was its energy as she rode the stream around the station and searched. There! A small disordered jumble spluttered on the right hand side of the upper rim. She wasn't sure but it was the closest equivalent she could see of their wings against the station's rim. Cupping her wings into the leading edge of a sun wave, she let it bring her back around to the target area.

Four times she circled the station until she figured out how to drag the grappling hook and latch it onto the vane she wanted. It reeled her down to the surface. She skidded sideways, then remembered to reactivate her boot magnets.

Hand over hand she walked herself to where Indio and Kyle were lying all tangled up in the coils of their grappling lines at the base of another vane. Dushawn whirled past. His grappling hook snagged one of the



vanes a couple of hundred yards ahead. It was going to take him a little while to work his way back down to them. She unclipped the wire cutters from her belt and went down on her knee. Then she cut the line around Indio's arms.

He reached up and pulled her against him. Their helmets were face to face but his visor was still totally black. "Kyle's unconscious," he said. "My comm's damaged. I can receive but I can't transmit anything."

Cait nodded. "Should I send an SOS now?"

"Yes. Tell them to send an ambulance crew out to Sector Five on the outer rim. Level 2 priority status."

While she finished sending out the SOS, Dushawn limped up. Cait motioned him over to press his helmet to hers and Indio's. "What happened to you?" she asked.

"Twisted my ankle when I landed back there."

"That's because you tried to catch up with the rim instead of flying the opposite direction and meeting the rim," Indio's voice informed them.

"Oh..." Cait said in a very small voice. She'd made the exact same mistake as Dushawn.

"Doesn't matter," Indio continued gruffly. "As long as you didn't kill yourself, it counts as a good landing. Now how about cutting me loose?"

Now that Dushawn was there, it didn't take long. Five minutes later, they sat down with Kyle's unconscious form braced between them and waited for the rescue team.

While they watched the rescue pod maneuver closer, Indio bumped his helmet against Cait. "My wings are too damaged for us to fly back and it's too small to carry all of us. Signal them and ask them if they can carry one additional passenger."

"Who?" she asked.

"Dushawn. They need to look at his ankle anyway."

"All right," she agreed, then opened the comm link again.

It took a couple more minutes of consultation and deliberation, but the team finally agreed to fly Dushawn to sick bay along with Kyle. As Cait stood up and watched the rockets flare as they flew away, Indio tugged her close so they could talk helmet to helmet again. "You did good out there," he said softly. "Real good."

"Thanks. Do you think Kyle'll recover?"

"He'll be all right. His vital signs were good."

They trudged along side by side in silence. Cait hoped their next training flight would be a little more sedate.

"Sector Five!" The sudden burst of sound startled her out of her thoughts.

“Y-Yes,” she said.

“Your teammate came to a little while ago. He's conscious and aware of his surroundings. He has a moderate concussion and may experience some short term amnesia.”

“Thanks.”

By the time they climbed up the ladder to the locker room, Cait was tired and crabby. She stripped down to her skinsuit.

Her shoulder muscles cramped. “Ow!” She stumbled forward and leaned against the door of her locker.

Indio's helmet clanged down on the floor and rolled next to hers. “Hold still,” he said. His fingers dug into her back and shoulders and skillfully loosened the knotted muscles. Reassurance and concern flowed into her from his touch.

Cait stared at the helmet lying on the floor beside hers. If he wasn't wearing it then it meant she could see his face. She turned around to look and gasped. A solid mass of glistening scar tissue marred the left side of his face. It ran from his scalp all the way down to the corner of his mouth and left side of his neck. His hair where there wasn't any scar tissue was long and black and tied into a thick braid draped across his right shoulder.

By some miracle, his eyes were intact. She'd never seen such stark eyes. There was nothing soft about his eyes. They were beautiful and dark with uncompromising masculinity.

“I know who you are.” She reached up to his cheek and felt the rough texture of his scars. “My mother was on the surgical team that...”

He flinched away from her touch. His shock flared up and seared through her.

She fell against the locker behind her. He probably thinks I'm some kind of sicko grabbing at his face like that.

“Gotta go,” she flung the words over her shoulder, then fled into the corridor.

\* \* \* \*

Her appetite was shot. She sat in the farthest corner of the cafeteria and stirred the selection of the day into a featureless brown mush on her plate. Mainday shift came in, ate, and left while she sat and rummaged through her memories.

Cait was only five years old when it happened. At that age, she wasn't old enough to pay attention to names in the news vids. It was on all the channels. Indio's grandfather was leading a protest march against legalized gambling halls on their reservation. He claimed the criminal elements associated with the gambling concession were bringing in alcohol and drugs to corrupt their children.

When the pickup truck zoomed past the crowd and tried to run the old man down, Indio jumped out and pushed his grandfather out of the way. The truck pinned Indio against the casino's wall. His left arm and leg were crushed. Flames roared up and seared his face before his grandfather grabbed a fire extinguisher and sprayed foam on him.

Cait's mother was on Indio's surgical repair team. They didn't amputate because his grandfather told them it was against their religious beliefs to die with missing body parts. Instead, they used bone putty, tissue putty, fiberglass tendons, microchip sensors and synthetic skin and grafted all of it to the few shreds of bone and muscle they managed to salvage.

His grandfather's life savings paid for the surgery. Indio sued the reservation and paid his grandfather back. Apparently, he chose not to endure the long and tedious process of repeated plastic surgery and repair on his face and vocal cords.

Ever since then, the bone and tissue putty were being slowly reabsorbed and replaced by his own bone and tissue. Cait shook her head. She should have remembered who he was. Fifteen years wasn't that long ago. The original news vids were probably in the archives.

When she saw Indio walk in with the alterday shift, Cait looked around for a discreet exit. There! Behind the clump of scientists at table number four was a service panel. They were waving their arms wildly in the air and loudly debating quantum space strings. She figured they were drawing enough attention to themselves no one would notice her leave. With her hand held out behind her back she slipped through the crowd to the wall and felt for the panel. Indio walked closer. His head turned. His gaze scanned the crowd.

"Hey! Indio!" Kyle's yell distracted him. Kyle and Dushawn walked in the main entrance. A white bandage decorated Kyle's forehead.

When her groping fingers found the latch, Cait breathed a sigh of relief. She thumbed it open and escaped. The maintenance corridor twisted around the cafeteria. She turned the final corner and stopped dead in her tracks. Indio stood in the exit at the end of the narrow passageway.

He held out his hand. "Don't go."

She didn't know what to do.

"You did good."

He wasn't upset. His eyes were warm and friendly. She relaxed under his intent stare.

"Hey! Wait up!" Kyle's and Dushawn's voices echoed down the corridor. Their footsteps clattered to a stop behind her.

Indio's hand fell to his side. His face stiffened into a cold mask as he looked at them. It felt like a door had just slammed shut between him and Cait. He said, "In a couple of days, we have to repair the vanes we damaged in Sector Five." Then he turned and walked away.

"We have to talk," Kyle said.

"About what?" Cait backed away. She concentrated on the sound of his voice as the easiest way to block his emotions away from her.

"About us," said Dushawn.

"Yeah," Kyle agreed. "We were total jerks."

“Back in the lift,” said Dushawn.

“We want to apologize,” said Kyle.

Cait risked a quick sampling of their emotions. They weren't sorry. Something funny was going on here. Rather than drag this out, she decided to just get rid of them as quickly as possible. “Okay. Apology accepted.”

“Wait a minute.” Kyle grabbed at her hand and missed. No way was she letting him touch her. “We're not finished.”

“Yeah,” said Dushawn. “Maybe we're not as radical as Indio .”

“Right.” Kyle jabbed his thumb towards the spot Indio recently vacated. “You're only twenty. He's thirty six. That's way too old for you.”

“How do you know he's interested?” She tilted her head and studied them thoughtfully.

Kyle grinned. “Hell, it's as plain as the nose on my face the way he was checking you out just now.”

“Anyway, we wanted to make sure you know we're sorry,” Dushawn said.

“Yeah,” Kyle agreed. “Even though we acted like jerks, when the chips were down...”

“You didn't have to do what you did,” Dushawn added. “You could have called the ambulance crew and let them search instead.”

“Yeah,” said Kyle. “We might have run out of air before they found us.”

She waved them off. “All right. I get the point. We're friends now. Goodbye.”

Dushawn grabbed Kyle's arm and pulled him back. “See you later.”

She waited and made sure they weren't returning.

“Damn.”

In that crystalline moment, Cait saw it. She saw the mess she made by reacting emotionally instead of thinking things through.

Time stood still.

She looked at the emotional web, the Gordian Knot she'd created. *Back.* She told herself. *Go back to the beginning. What was I feeling? What was I thinking? What did I do?*

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. *Back to the beginning.* She went on the lift with Kyle and Dushawn because she didn't want them to wonder why she refused to ride with them. They annoyed her with their adolescent sexual assumptions. She reacted.

*Back.*

When Indio spoke, she felt something wrong, out of kilter about him. Her subconscious knew he was wounded. Her conscious mind knew he was reserved and businesslike. He held tight control over his emotions. He felt mature and stable. She liked that.

Kyle and Dushawn felt immature. Their adolescent lusts disgusted her.

*Back.* Cait exhaled slowly, then cut further down and exposed the center.

When she looked at Indio, she opened herself to him. She admired his courage. She wanted to touch him. He flinched away. All the remorse he felt over rejecting her gesture poured into her.

His emotions had gotten all twisted around inside of her. She thought she was the one doing the rejecting and she ran away filled with his remorse.

“Goddess,” Cait said to the empty corridor. “I’m an idiot. Everyone was trying to apologize to me and I kept running away.” She smiled. “I can think and reason. I can choose what I want to feel and what I want to do.”

She stopped and looked around again. “And if someone walks in here and sees me talking to myself they’re gonna lock me in an asylum and throw away the key.” That’s when she decided to look for Indio.

\* \* \* \*

The concourse was glutted with alterday workers ready to shop and party. The crowd’s ambiance flooded her for a couple of seconds. Holograms advertised games of chance, luxury items and porno shows. Indio was leaning against the railing above the concourse.

An empty space surrounded him. Everyone carefully avoided him; avoided looking at his scars. Wrapped up in his pride, with his feelings locked up inside, he stood there, alone and isolated, in the middle of the crowd.

Sharing only the physical aspects of herself with someone never did appeal to her. Cait had to admit the intensity that simmered beneath his tight control attracted her.

*As long as I don't make promises I can't keep, why not ask?* she thought. *He's well past the hormonal surges of a younger man. He'll understand what I'm offering him. I'd rather experience my first real chance at making love with someone I'm attracted to on all levels, emotional and physical.*

Before she walked halfway across the concourse, Indio spotted her. He didn’t move a muscle. The neutral expression on his face didn’t change. He was totally alert and focused on her. She felt it. Tension shimmered between them as she approached him. They stood in a separate region of space and time, just the two of them.

Cait’s heart thundered in her ears. Sudden heat seared her face and body. His eyes were dark, vulnerable pools waiting for her. Her lips were dry. She moistened them with the tip of her tongue.

His gaze followed that tiny movement. He straightened up from his slouch.

“Um,” she said. “I know what I want right now, today...”

He nodded. His gaze seemed to look all the way into her heart and soul.

“But tomorrow...”

He moved closer.

“I can't promise you tomorrow.”

He pulled her into his arm. “I'll take today.” His raspy voice made her shiver.

His kiss was long and hard and greedy and very satisfying. He took her by the hand. Everyone was staring at them. She didn't care. She knew who she wanted to be with now.

## Chapter 2

Thick electrical cables snaked in every direction from the motherboard. Tiny checked his settings one more time. He didn't have to link up to the Station's power grid. The Emporium had its own private generator for that. The audience was getting restless and beginning to mill about behind the barrier grid. His computer screen showed a perfect interface between VR input panel and holographic display.

It should work. He had downloaded all the data from the Celtic history files Cait showed him this morning. Correlating that data into new graphics and storylines had taken up another eight hours of intensive and creative data crunching. But it was worth it. Now he had a truly fantastic game to debut.

He walked over to the control booth's window and peered out. Vu Sheng was waiting patiently in front of the VR terminal. Fiber optic filaments flowed from the scalp and spine of Vu Sheng's skinsuit giving him the appearance of a psychedelic hedgehog.

Tiny raised his fist and pumped it twice as a go-ahead signal. Vu Sheng grinned, then donned his VR masque and inserted his hands into the sensory gloves. The fiber optic filaments around Vu Sheng's skinsuit began to pulse and glow.

Tiny hurried back to the controls. His hands moved rapidly over the keyboard. He flipped the master switch on. A black matte turtle shell and helmet came down from the ceiling and clicked into place around Vu Sheng. Telemetry input flashed onto the motherboard's screens.

The holographic display grid in front of Vu Sheng's terminal blazed into life. Towering granite monoliths formed an irregular circle on the revolving stage. Some of the stones lay toppled in the grass. The center stone had a slight depression worn into its surface, just the right size for a body to lie down upon it. The audience surged forward and pressed themselves against the Plexiglas barrier. Their faces transformed with delighted wonder.

He increased the data flow into the display another increment. Minuscule purplish pink flowers blossomed between the clumps of grass. The ceiling grid darkened into a midnight sky. A comet streaked past and scattered a multitude of stars in its wake.

The image of a young man wearing leather breeches and boots appeared on the holo-stage. The computer generated avatar had shoulder length black hair and deeply tanned skin. His left arm and hand were pure silver, linked to his elbow with no discernible gap between flesh and metal. A silver torc

circled the avatar's neck. A fantastically detailed blue tattoo covered his chest back and arms with Celtic circles and knots coiled around with vines and leaves.

Tiny grinned. Of course, Vu Sheng had selected the Silverhand icon for his avatar's image. Wait 'til he had an opportunity to remove his avatar's clothing during a seduction scene and found out the tattoo also covered the image's legs, ass and penis.

A short sword with worn leather strips wrapped around its hilt appeared in the avatar's right hand. The image sheathed the sword at his hip, walked up to the altar stone and laid his left hand, the silver one, upon the shallow niche in its center. Pale blue fire arced from his hand into the elaborate tracteries of runic symbols incised into the stone.

Tiny switched on his microphone. "The Silverhand Game is ready. It's up to you to learn his powers and the powers of his allies and enemies. Starting now, for the next twenty four hours this promotion gives every user one hour's free access to the game. Remember that anyone pushing or shoving today will forfeit his or her access to the game forever. Use your time wisely, for tomorrow you pay full price."

He flipped the toggle for the barrier. It slid down into a recessed niche in the floor. The audience swarmed the other nineteen available terminals politely, very, very politely. Tiny watched the motherboard schematics while the new players logged on. Everything was up and running smoothly. Time to lock the controls and vacate the booth. With the rest of the Emporium shut down for this promotion, he didn't have to hang around anymore. His contract with Station Security linked his cams directly to theirs. They were duty bound to follow through on all infractions of the rules.

A long hot shower, followed by a leisurely dinner should fit the bill for a perfect ending to this hectic day. Tiny thumbed the control room door open, stepped outside, then used his keycard to lock everything up.

An adolescent with straggly hair and pale pitted skin tugged at his sleeve. "Hey Tiny! This is radical! It's your best game ever!"

"Thanks. Go ahead and enjoy yourself. I'm ready to crash."

"Did you hear about the accidental smash up with the solar wing flyers this afternoon?"

Tiny grabbed hold of the youth's shirt and picked him up. "What accident?"

A multitude of freckles stood out against pale white skin of his hapless victim's face. "Was anyone hurt?" If Indio had screwed up and let Cait get hurt, Tiny didn't know yet how he was going to make the man pay, but come hell or high water, he'd pay.

"Two of 'em were taken to the emergency room. I don't know who. The newsvid didn't list their names. You can let me go now."

Tiny blinked. Pretty lousy public relations to be roughing up his customers like this. He released his victim. "Sorry about that." He straightened out the poor man's shirt and flicked a scrap of lint off his shoulder. "I gotta go."

"Sure thing, man. Catch you later." The man hurriedly melted back into the crowd.

No use in trying the public lifts. They would take forever to bring him around the loop of the station to the emergency room. Tiny pulled out his keycard and accessed the delivery panel behind the control

booth. The panel slid open. He ducked inside and keyed in instructions for it not to open again until he returned.

Tiny walked down an aisle of tall shipping canisters. They filled the racks on both walls. He went straight to the freight lift and pushed at the heavy windowless door. The hydraulics whined, then kicked in. The door flew open.

He punched in the code for a straight line trip down the main axis to the spindle and back up to the docks where they off loaded hazardous waste from the hospital sector. The heavy hydraulic doors crashed shut behind him. Tiny wedged himself into the corner and braced his feet and grabbed onto the take hold bars. Gonna be a rough ride.

The lift alarm clanged once, slammed sideways and up, then swung around upside down. The ceiling became the floor. Blood rushed to Tiny's head. He hung on for dear life while the lift shot itself down the line. Just when his arms felt like they couldn't hold on anymore, the lift gave a hard shove sideways and went totally weightless.

Tiny braced himself. No sense in relaxing. High g maneuvers were due to cut in within the next thirty seconds. Cait! he kept thinking. If she was hurt, it was his fault for talking her into joining Indio's class. Why oh why did he do that?

The lift gave another sudden shove in the opposite direction. The floor became the floor again. Tiny held on and waited. When it stopped, it stopped hard and fast.

He just about slammed into the door before it opened, he ran at it so fast. Yellow sodium lights blazed down from the cavernous ceiling of the loading docks. He ran past row after row of shipping canisters all neatly secured in their racks.

Frost covered their sides. Cold hauler stuff. Bad place to hang around without insulated coveralls and gloves. These cans could suck the heat from his body in no time. Hypothermia and frostbite were not conditions he relished.

A door opened at the other end. Tiny raced up to it and ran right past the dockers standing there.

“Hey!” A man yelled at his back. “This is a restricted area! Who the hell let you in here?”

He kept on running. The metal walkway thrummed under his feet. There! Up ahead! The familiar red X logo of the emergency room sign gleamed at the end of the corridor.

\* \* \* \*

“Are you sure?” Tiny asked.

“Yes.” The white haired doctor checked his sofscreen again. His nametag said Dr. Ukensho Kim. Triple claw marks on both cheeks provided a startling contrast against his mahogany skin.

Were they tribal scars? Tiny wondered.

“We treated two young men for injuries they sustained during the EVA flight. No women.”

“Thanks.” Tiny wanted to hug the guy but he couldn't on account of three husky interns holding onto his



arms.

Dr. Kim motioned at the interns to release Tiny. “A simple call to our patient registration desk would have secured you this information without all this uproar.” He tapped his fingernail on the edge of his sofscreen. “This woman you thought might be here, are you related to her?”

Sheesh! Talk about making an ass of himself. Maybe he could sign himself up under “Infatuated men who are too dumb to let the woman know they're interested” on the Mikail Stefanovich Show. “Uh ... no ... she's just a friend.”

Dr. Kim let his eyebrows scale his forehead.

Yeah. Right. And pigs can fly. Time to vacate the premises while he had a few scraps of dignity left. Tiny nodded at the wary clump of interns leaning against the wall and aimed himself for the exit.

No need to be subtle. Subtlety had flown out the window way back when he ran into the place yelling for the doctor in charge of the emergency room.

“Young man...” Dr. Kim called after him. “You place a high value upon friendship, don't you?”

“Yeah,” Tiny said over his shoulder. “I do.” A quick slap of his hand on the preprogrammed exit panel opened the door. He stepped out into the waiting room and let the door close behind him.

He walked through the waiting room into the main corridor and spotted a public vid-phone. If he wanted to be more than “just friends,” the only way that was going to happen would be if he told Cait how he felt. Asking her out on a date would be a good start.

Tiny punched in a direct request for her apartment. There was no answer. He thought about paging her on the public intercom then changed his mind. Bad enough he'd acted like a lovesick calf in the emergency room, no need to add to it by announcing his interest to the entire station.

He pulled out his sofscreen and slaved it to the main data port. Cait's ID was in his files from the Emporium. He keyed in a request for the most recent usage of her ID. The answer scrolled up on the screen—the cafeteria on deck three. Two levels down and one spoke over. Only fifteen minutes away if he walked. The walk would do him good. Give him a chance to calm down. Maybe he should bring her down to the Emporium, show off his Silverhand game and let her try it out for a couple of hours.

\* \* \* \*

She wasn't there. Kyle and Dushawn were there, though. A nice white bandage decorated Kyle's forehead.

“What happened to you?” Tiny knew better than to ask either one of them about Cait's whereabouts. “Did you run into a door?”

Kyle flushed bright red. “Naw,” he said. “I misjudged things my first trip out. I have a slight concussion.”

Tiny scanned the cafeteria one more time. “Where's Indio?”

“I dunno.” Dushawn shrugged. “He was here but he left.”

“When?”

Kyle waved vaguely at the crowded concourse behind Tiny. “He was here an hour ago and he left. He didn't say where he was going.”

“Thanks.” No use trying to get any coherent information from these idiots. Tiny turned around and walked away.

Where could she be? Gaudy storefronts lined both levels of the concourse. Shopping, maybe? Women loved to shop for clothes, didn't they? Tiny spotted the holographic ad floating over Jean's Lingerie, squared his shoulders, then ducked inside.

Eight stores later, he was glugged. The idea of walking past yet another aisle of micro minis and glitzy skintights was enough to get his head spinning. Besides, she usually wore jeans and t-shirts, nothing fancy. He was wasting his time looking at this stuff.

He walked up to one of the public vid-phones and keyed in Indio 's number. There was no answer. Where in the hell was he?

Tiny unfolded his sofscreen, slaved it to the main data port and keyed in a request for the most recent usage of Indio 's ID. He was at the Starlight Lounge, his usual hangout. Tiny keyed in another request for Cait's ID. Nothing since the cafeteria. He folded the sofscreen and keyed in the number for her apartment. No answer.

He stopped and scratched his head. Where would a twenty year old woman with time on her hands go looking for excitement and nightlife? Moonraker's Row?

\* \* \* \*

Moonraker's Row roared in all its loud and raucous glory. Up and down the station rim, dimly lit bars advertised their wares. Smoke and mirrors and glitter, like Vegas in its prime before the weather changed and flash floods washed it away.

Tiny had been in and out of more bars than he'd ever been in one night. He remembered the distinctive tattoo that spiraled up Cait's left arm and tried every tattoo parlor on the row. They had glow in the dark tattoos now. Maybe he'd come back tomorrow night and order a comet streaking up his arm.

By the time he ducked into the bar with the strobe lights and smoked mirrors, he had his routine down pat. Walk up to the bar, lean his back against it and scan the crowd.

There! In the back! Long multicolored hair flowing down a woman's back. Two spacers had their arms wrapped her waist. Tiny's heart slammed against his rib cage. Oh lord. He wanted her to turn around. He had to be sure. Were these guys the kind of guys she liked?

“Hey! If you're not gonna drink...” The barkeep's voice literally snarled behind him. “Stop hogging space at the bar and get the hell out of here.”

Tiny turned around. He dug some credit chips out of his pocket, tossed them on the bar and pointed at the drink on his left. “Give me one of those.”

It was a pink frothy mix, cold and wicked. Tiny gulped it down in one swallow and angled himself

sideways so he could keep an eye on the woman standing by the back wall.

The trio turned around. It wasn't Cait. The woman's hair wasn't streaked all different colors either. The pulsating strobe lights had tricked his eyes.

Out the door he went. Neon signs invited him inside more bars. His head hurt.

This was stupid. He might as well give it up and head out to the Starlight Lounge. MaybeIndio knew where she was.

\* \* \* \*

The Shuttle Pilots were really jamming tonight. Tiny stepped up to the bar. Dean nodded at him, then poured him a tall brandy over ice.

"Thanks." Tiny tossed a handful of credit chips on the bar. "Keep the change." He took a sip. The brandy went down cold and turned to fire in his throat. Smooth, very smooth transition. He leaned over the bar and crooked his finger at Dean. "Did you seeIndio in here tonight?"

Dean picked up a rag and wiped the dark walnut bartop. "Yeah, he was here earlier with a young lady."

Tiny took a big swallow of brandy. It hit his stomach like a slug of ice this time. "Really. Who was she?"

Dean leaned closer. "I don't know her name but she was real quality." He rubbed at the bartop again with his rag and buffed it up nicely. "I'd love to find out who does her hair and have them do the same dye job on mine. The way she has it streaked all different colors is fabulous."

Tiny swallowed the rest of the brandy. He didn't even feel it going down. He couldn't believe this was happening. He'd been blindsided by his best friend.Indio had never worked this fast before going after a woman, how dare he do this now! Hell! That took some nerve!Indio was at least sixteen years older than Cait.

He shoved the empty glass at Dean. "Gimme another drink."

Dean refilled the glass and shoved it back at him. Tiny stared at the brandy. What was he going to do now? Crawl under a rock and pretend he didn't care.

Whoa! Just becauseIndio had one date with Cait didn't mean he should give up. He still had a chance. Obviously she liked older men instead of pretty boy studs. The twelve year age difference between Tiny and her definitely put him back in the running.

Indiohad the right idea though. Cait was quality. No low class bars on Moonraker's Row for her. Wine her and dine her and show her a good time at the best club on the station, then, after a couple of dates, make his move on her.

Okay. Tomorrow, he'd give her a call and invite her to dinner at the Botanical Gardens. That should be classy enough for her.

### Chapter 3

When Indio told Cait he'd take tonight, he lied. He wanted her for more than one night. The way he had it figured, when the golden ring from life's carousel falls in your hand, you grab hold of it and don't let go because it might never come 'round your way again.

His first thought was that he wanted to take her to his room. Hell, he wanted to drag her into the first maintenance cubby he found and start banging her. But he didn't. She deserved better. The implicit trust she showed when she gave him her hand and followed his lead shocked him. He didn't want to contemplate her reaction if he betrayed that trust.

Instead, he took her to the cross-station lift and said, "Deck One. Starlight Lounge."

The lift started moving to the station's rim. Cait looked down and tugged at her T-shirt. "I'm not exactly dressed for a night on the town."

"You look fine," he said. "Except..."

She tilted her head and smiled. "Except what?"

"Your hair."

Reaching over her shoulder, she pulled her thick braid forward and studied it critically. "What's wrong? Is it undone?"

He put his hands on her shoulders and turned her around. "I want to see it loose, that's all."

Her hair was the safest place for his hands at the moment. Lovely, lovely, soft hair it was, with its wild melange of colors. He undid her braid and combed it out with his fingers. A long section of her hair tumbled out of his hand and fell across her breasts. He stared at it and wondered how she'd react if he slid his hand up her shirt and stroked her nipples. A clump of passengers stepped inside at the next stop. That stopped him from finding out.

Everyone lined themselves up facing the front in complete silence like a bunch of robots. He smiled. That suited him just fine. No long uncomfortable stares at the scars on his face. The lift slid to a stop. He savored the surprise rippling across the passengers' faces when their destination scrolled up on the door's sofscreen.

A few minutes later, waiting in front of Starlight's door as it performed a retinal and full body scan, Cait said, "My fathers are members here, too."

"Male ID validated," the door said. "Female ID not known."

"Guest privilege requested," Indio said, then stepped back for Cait to hold up her wrist. A small blue laser beam snaked out from the door, circled her wrist twice and imprinted a 24 hour guest ID.

While they walked inside, he said, "I met them. Your fathers. I worked with them on the original construction crew."

She nodded.

He took her by the hand and led her out to one of the balcony tables above the dance pit. A real spacer

club, the entire dance floor was a window; a window that was created out here in space. Its size, thickness and purity were impossible to achieve on Earth. Icicle lights coated the ceiling. Dancing under the surrealistic stars of the ceiling with the starlight coming in through the transparent floor was the closest thing they had to dancing in space.

“Drinks?” he asked. The automatic privacy shield muted the background noise.

“Non-alcoholic,” Cait sat down in the chair he pulled out for her, then peered at the items scrolling up on the table's screen. She reached out and ordered her selections, cola, salad with the spiciest Thai dinner on the menu.

The last thing Indio needed was to have his responses dulled by alcohol. He planned to enjoy her with his brain and body at full function. He ordered cola and a Tex-Mex combo.

The music soared through them as they waited for their server. No holovids here: live performers were part of Starlight's unique ambiance. Must be oldies night, Indio decided when The Shuttle Pilots started up a sax filled rendition of “When A Man Loves A Woman”. That song was way before his time. In fact, it was one of his grandpa's favorites.

Indio touched the indigo tattoo spiraling down the length of Cait's right arm and wrist. “What are all these little blue lines? Some kind of scan code?”

She grinned. “It's Ogham. An archaic Celtic form of writing. My entire genealogy on both sides is written here.”

“I read the bio you submitted with your VR stats. It lists two husbands for your mother. Which one's your father?”

She arched her eyebrows. “I know which one's my biological father, but that's not important. What's important is the relationship they share with my mother...” Her gaze was very cold and irritated. “I honor them by listing both as my fathers on my bio.”

“Ah.” Indio released her hand and sank back in his seat. He sifted through his memories of when he worked with her mother's husbands. One of them, Shiloh Moonsammy, had long black hair, Native American features and tattoo just like Cait's on his left arm. The other one, Nathaniel Harker, kept his face hidden under Taureg veils when he worked on the construction bots.

Hell, Nathaniel didn't even remove his veil to eat. Indio remembered catching a glimpse of a brown beard under the veil once when he leaned over to access some stats on a control panel. Looking at Cait's features, Indio hazarded a guess as to which one might be her biological father.

Cait gave him a slow, measuring look, then said softly, “My twin has black hair.”

Indio nodded. He remembered seeing a docu-vid about a German prostitute's paternity case. The DNA on her fraternal twins tested out as two different biological fathers, one black and one white. Interesting.

Cait was twenty, he knew that from her basic stats. Her father might be in his forties, depending on when he hooked up with her mom. He didn't want to think about that. It made him feel very uncomfortable. Talk about robbing the cradle. He shrugged. No way was he going to let it bother him. “I'm interested in you, not your DNA profile.”

“Good.” She relaxed.

The music shifted tempo. The chords of the newest rave ballad, “Child of the Universe,” floated up to them. “I am the child of my father and mother and the sea. I am a child of the legend that is knowledge deep and real...”

Cait looked at him with an eager expression on her face. Indio smiled and shook his head. “Go ahead.” He motioned at her to go down to the dance floor without him. “Have fun.”

Like a sudden burst of solar wind, she flowed out onto the floor. Her multicolored hair swirled around her face. She moved right into the song, dipping and diving to the music. “I am a child of the mysteries that space and time reveal...”

Moving above the celestial lightshow that shimmered through the transparent floor beneath their feet, the sky dancers generated their own special magic. The Shuttle Pilots were in their element, fused in rapture with their audience. And Cait...

Ruby, their waitress, deftly unloaded a series of covered plates onto the table. “She’s gorgeous!” Ruby’s appreciative voice pulled Indio out of his trance.

Indio slanted an irritated look at her. “I don’t remember asking for your opinion.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Dean, Ruby’s coworker, added from his side of the table. “You brought her here to show her off. You’re gonna get our opinions whether you like it or not.” He turned around and watched her spinning around on the dance floor. “Woo! She moves like smoke on water.”

“Got yourself some real quality this time,” Ruby said with a pleased smile as if she’d picked Cait out herself.

“Yeah,” Indio said. “Not like the last one. You told me she was bad news.”

“But you didn’t listen.” Dean struck a languid pose. “Not until she screwed you over.”

Ruby nodded. “Since then, the only ones I’ve seen with you were porno row entertainers.”

“They were clean.” How much longer were they going to grill him? “I made each one take a blood test before I paid any fees.”

“That is a nice girl!” Illya’s booming voice said enthusiastically over his shoulder. “Maybe I dance with her, too.”

Indio gave him a stare cold enough to freeze fire. “Keep away from her. This one’s special.”

A hearty punch bounced off Indio’s shoulder. “Friends always welcome.” Illya leaned closer. With the feeling of someone waiting for the other shoe to drop, Indio stared at the dance floor.

“Spasi Nas need crazy wolf again,” Illya said sotto voce.

Indio shook his head. When he was young and foolish, with his head filled with dreams, he worked for Spasi Nas. As lobo loco, he helped them nail the coffin lid down on an interplanetary child porn and prostitution ring.

“Find yourself another hero.” He had plans for an entirely different kind of undercover work tonight.

Illya's hand tightened on his shoulder. “Sabotage threat against Rainbow's End. Our best guess is someone on the mining team.”

“No.”

“If you change your mind,” Illya continued smoothly, “you know how to get in touch with us.”

Indio shrugged Illya's hand off his shoulder. “I'm not interested.”

“Her twin's quality too.” Dean said as he came back with the colas and placed them on the table. “I met him last year. Wonderful hands. Her family tends to be bisexual, you know that, don't you?” Ruby smiled as she returned with a cart filled with hot food. Dean moved briskly around the table and helped Ruby offload the cart's contents.

“Really!” Darlene added her voice to the conversation as she and Parvati rose from their table. Their eyes checked Cait out with equally keen interest.

It was getting awfully crowded here all of a sudden. Parvati turned a brilliant smile on Indio. He held up his hand and waved her away. “Scat. Don't even think about it. This is our first date.”

They slithered over to him, arm in arm. “All right, darling,” Darlene purred. “But maybe, someday, we make it a foursome.”

Illya's beefy paws descended on their shoulders. “I join, too. Make it threesome, foursome, or fivesome anytime you want!”

“Nyet!” they said in icy unison.

He backed away with an apologetic grin on his face, then shambled back to his table. Parvati eeled her dusky body onto Indio's lap and wrapped her arms around his neck. Darlene leaned down and the tip of her tongue tickled his ear.

“But...”

“You never asked,” Darlene whispered.

“You're friends.”

Parvati chuckled. “Much better than total strangers.” She brushed his lips with a kiss. “That's what friends are for.” Then she wriggled out of his lap. “Catch you later.” They ambled away.

Cait took her seat at the table and smiled. Ruby and Dean exchanged wicked looks behind her and left.

“Y-you're not mad,” Indio managed to say.

She leaned back in her chair and arched her left eyebrow at him. “Why should that upset me? You're sixteen years older than me. I'm sure you've collected lots of friends, both male and female, before you met me. Who am I to say you have to give up your friends just because you're with me?”

Definitely not one of his “regular” dates. The complexity of her personality was casting yet another spell over him. The more he learned, the more he wanted to find out about her. Feeling like an adolescent with all the clumsy puppy dog confusion of his first crush, he said, “Let's eat.”

She had a hearty appetite. He always hated it when women picked at their food because they were afraid of putting on weight. Flying burned up more than enough calories for anyone, let alone the kind of dancing she'd just done. Good muscle tone, too. He remembered how her shoulders felt under his hands in the locker room. There was nothing frail or weak about her.

When Cait excused herself for a few minutes, Indio seized the opportunity to empty his bladder, also. The sudden glimpse of his face in the men's room mirror woke him up like a bucket of ice water. He stood there in a state of total shock for a couple of seconds. He'd become so comfortable with her that he'd totally forgotten about his scars.

No way was he going to let this one go.

Leaning against the wall just outside the rest rooms, he wiped his sweaty palms on his jeans and waited. When she walked over to him, he took her by the hand and brought her out to the dance floor. A smoky torch song moaned as he pulled her into his arms. There was no hesitation in her eyes when his erection pressed against her groin.

“Do you know the story behind the Shuttle Pilots?” She leaned closer.

He grinned. “The story of how that New York cop heard them goofing off at the skating rink and hired them on the spot for the Sanctuary's Inaugural Ball?”

She laughed. “When they told him they were shuttle pilots, he thought it was the name of their group.”

Indio slipped his hand lower on her back. “And the look on the Space Commissioner's face when they walked into the ballroom wearing full dress Space Academy uniforms and started warming up their instruments.”

She snuggled against his chest for some serious dancing. It felt wonderful. Wailing sax, deep throbbing bass guitar and lovesick vocals wrapped themselves all around and through them both. Giving silent thanks to Dave and Otis for their thoughtfulness in playing only slow songs for him, Indio concentrated on the sensuous grind of Cait's hips against his.

Halfway through the sixth song was all he could take. He twisted his hand into Cait's hair and tugged her head back. “Let's go.”

“All right,” she said, then lowered her eyes demurely.

His erection pulsed harder. He was ready to explode.

Truth is, the only thing Indio remembered seeing was her face until he made it back to the lift and told it the location of his apartment. His brain was fried. He didn't give a damn how many other passengers rode with them, either. He pulled her butt back against his crotch and kissed her neck until the lift arrived at their destination.

Every thought of taking it nice and slow and easy flew out of his head as he pinned her against the wall.



The computer's sensors noted their presence and automatically brightened the lights.

“Don't be afraid.” His voice sounded even rougher than usual to him.

She traced the thick scar that ran down his cheek and neck and said, “I'm not afraid.” She helped him pull her shirt off. Her breasts were lovely, high-tilted and bouncy with nipples that hardened under his teeth and tongue. Sweetest tasting tits he'd had in a long time.

He cupped her chin with one hand and watched her reaction while he tweaked and pulled her nipples tighter with his other hand. The pupils in her eyes were huge and black with desire. She ground her hips against him in a frantic demand for release.

He kissed her again. He reached for the zipper on his pants and stopped.

She studied his face. “What's wrong? Why did you stop?”

“Um.” He cleared his throat. “Contraceptives.”

“No problem.” She grinned, reaching for the zipper on her pants and slowly pulling it down. “I have an implant.”

He unzipped his pants and dropped them to his ankles while she stepped out of her panties. She kicked them aside along with her jeans. He had no idea when or how she got rid of her shoes. At that point in time, he didn't really care. All he knew was that she was wide open and ready for him.

He touched her face, acutely aware of the fact that he hadn't even finished taking his pants off, let alone his shoes. His hormones were in overdrive. “Cait?”

“Yes.”

“Don't know if I can hold myself back. I might do it too rough for you.”

She smiled, lifted her leg, wrapped it around his waist and pulled him to her. He slid all the way up in one fantastic stroke. He pulled out and slammed into her some more.

Harder and harder, faster and faster he moved. She came first, holding onto him like he was trying to escape her grip. When he climaxed, he heard her coming again in one long continuous moan. She ground herself against him and accepted every last drop of semen.

He collapsed against her. Her leg was trembling. He pushed her hair away from her face and rubbed his thumb across her swollen lips. He didn't know what to say. He didn't want it to sound like he was begging.

She sucked his thumb into her mouth and he started getting hard all over again. He pulled his thumb out and watched her smile. “The night's still young,” she said as she reached up to help him pull off his shirt.

Then Cait pushed him back a step and went down on her knees. It didn't take long with her helping him to step out of his pants and boots.

She reached up and cupped him. His penis swelled up and pulsed under her touch. She brushed her lips against the soft tip, then sat back on her heels. “Shall we make love in the bedroom this time?”

Indio held out his hand. She let him pull her to her feet. He was more than ready to perform his end of the deal. Anything she wanted, she was going to get from him with no questions and no hesitation.

He never saw a woman come so many times in a row. It made him feel like he was the best stud in the universe. The more she came, the more he wanted to give her.

When she snuggled up and laid her head in the hollow of his shoulder, his heart was ready to explode with happiness. He pushed her damp hair away from her face and traced the line of her cheek and nose with his finger. "Shower?"

She yawned. "In the morning."

He pulled up the sheet and covered them with it. "Computer's. Lights out."

The lights went out. She rolled over and tucked herself against him. His flaccid penis rubbed against the tight crack of her behind. He had some interesting plans for the morning shower. Oh yes. By then, he'd be well rested and primed to go a couple of more rounds with her.

## Chapter 4

A woman's voice woke them up.

"Edelmiro!" Icicles framed the woman's words. "How could you hire an entertainer? You knew I was coming up today."

"Julisa!" Indio grabbed the sheet and threw it over Cait. "I forgot."

"Obviously!" Julisa continued her verbal assault. "I suppose you also forgot I was bringing your daughter along with me."

Cait kicked the sheet off and scooted away from Indio's frantic grab for her hand. She didn't have to put up with this crap. She felt like crawling under a rock to escape Julisa's scornful scrutiny.

"Cait!" Indio yelled. "Don't go!"

She hesitated in the doorway. There was a young girl, about seven years old, with long light brown hair, perched on the living room couch. A small black kitten was curled up in the girl's lap. Cait sighed. It was too late to do anything about her nudity. She walked past the child and went to the pile of discarded clothing beside the door.

While she wiggled into her jeans and shirt, a muffled thud added itself to the sound effects coming from the bedroom. "Ow! Jule! Get out of my way! You have no right to do this to me."

The girl put the kitten down, walked over, picked up Cait's sneakers and held them out. "Hi," she said. "My name's Socorro. What's your name?"

Cait accepted the sneakers with a wary smile. "My name is Cait."

Socorro stared at her, wide eyed. Her face looked worried. “Are you a paid entertainer?” she whispered.

Cait snatched her panties up from the floor and stuffed them in her back pocket. Heat flared across her cheeks under the child's intent gaze. “No, I'm not,” she mumbled hastily.

More thumps and bumps from the bedroom added an interesting flavor to their conversation.

“Then why were you sleeping with daddy?”

Cait pushed her tangled hair behind her ears. The child deserved an honest reply. “Because I like him.”

“Good.” Socorro gave a satisfied nod.

Cait turned to the door. “Open.”

The door opened. Cait stepped outside and let it slide shut behind her. She ran past a heavy-set man in the corridor down to the lift. Hopping on one foot, she tugged her sneaks on and slammed her hand against the call button.

“Miss!”

She looked back. The man held her panties up and waved them at her. “You dropped this.”

Indio's apartment door opened. There was a sheet knotted around Indio 's waist. He ran out and collided with the man holding her panties. The lift door opened. Cait rushed inside. The door closed behind her. “Deck three. Residence 2934,” she said, then collapsed against the wall and hugged herself. The floor shuddered under her feet and the lift started moving.

Trying not to focus on the humiliation she'd endured, Cait thought about Indio 's daughter instead. Soft brown curls framed the child's olive skinned face. The yellow jumpsuit brought out the gold highlights in her green eyes. Cait wished she'd met her under better circumstances.

It wasn't working. She couldn't stop thinking about that woman. Who was she? Obviously someone close to him, close enough to have free access to his apartment. Close enough to have him call her by her name. Tall and slender, with her dark, brown hair tucked into a bun, she projected a strong sense of responsibility towards Indio .

Was she his girlfriend? Socorro's mother? Cait pushed her hair back and stared at the wall. She didn't know. Not enough data. The woman had brown eyes like Indio . If she was Socorro's mom, it'd take a double recessive gene for them to produce a green-eyed daughter.

The face of that poor man in the corridor flashed across Cait's mind. A wry smile twitched at the corners of her mouth. What was he going to do with her panties? Keep them? Give them to Indio ? Not exactly his size. Besides which, the sheet covered more of Indio than her panties.

Damn! She closed her eyes. Was this going to ruin her chance to learn how to fly? She shook her head. If she kept things on a strictly professional level and didn't give him an opportunity to talk with her privately, there was nothing he could say or do. Hopefully, his sense of personal privacy was too strong for him to air his dirty linen out in public. Hard to say about that part, though. He had no compunction about wearing his sheet out in the corridor. Cait shook her head. No sense in worrying about something

she couldn't control.

The lift rumbled to a stop. The mainday crew that piled in almost trampled her before she exited. She was almost there. Home free. Her door hummed as it scanned and ID'd her, then let her in.

“Cait.” Kevin jumped off the couch, rushed up and swung her into a hug. “Where were you, sis?”

He tilted her chin up with his finger. “You feel like chaos. What's wrong?”

“Nothing.” Cait leaned into his embrace. “Everything.” She started to shake. And laugh. And cry. He held onto her and waited. She laughed some more. He let her pour herself out and pull herself back together again. She was safe. Her brother was here to help her sort herself out.

“Come on. Sit down.” He tugged her over to the couch.

She collapsed on the couch and stared at him. “Your hair. You cut it off?”

He swiped his hand over the stubble on his scalp. “I'm gonna be a spacer. Long hair's a nuisance in zero-g.”

Cait looked up at him and shook her head. So far, in this generation of the sisterlines, she turned out to be the runt of the litter. Kevin was six foot three. Every one of her other brothers and sisters and cousins were over six foot tall.

Kevin snagged one of the bags on the floor with his foot. He pulled it over, then bent down to rummage around in it. “Aha!” He brandished a wide-tooth comb in the air. “This is gonna hurt. But it's only because I love you.”

Cait smiled. It was funny how their heritage manifested itself in a need for grooming during times of crisis.

Kevin slowly worked the comb through a thick knot. “Hold still.” He separated her hair into five strands and started weaving them into a Sidhe braid. “I signed up for EVA classes. With a flight certificate under my belt, I'll qualify for exterior repair duty, too.”

“Kevin, I'm going out to the Pot of Gold. I'm already taking that EVA class.”

“When did this happen? I thought you were going back down on today's shuttle.”

“I changed my mind.”

“Did you tell Mom yet?”

“I'll call her today.”

Kevin took a twisty from his pocket and wrapped it around the end of the braid. “Well, at least I'll be with you and keep you out of trouble.” His complete acceptance of her decision flowed into her through their dru-bond.

“Thanks.” She released her pent up breath and leaned back into the solid warmth of his chest.

“There.” He patted her on the back and turned her around to face him again. His eyes probed hers.

“Now I want you to tell me what had you all upset.”

It wasn't going to do her any good to keep it all locked away inside. Cait knew that. She twirled the tip of her braid between her fingers. “I slept with a man last night. It seemed like a good idea at the time, but now...”

Kevin chafed her hand between his. “Did he hurt you?” The sensation of someone girding himself up for battle hovered behind his quiet voice.

“No,” Cait said quickly. “He didn't.”

“Then what's wrong? Why were you in such an uproar?”

“A woman came into his bedroom and woke us up.”

“And...”

Cait sorted through her memories. “I don't know who she was. She was upset because she found me with him and said I was a paid entertainer.”

Kevin shook his head. “That was a stupid assumption on her part. What did he do when she said that?”

Cait shrugged. “He threw a sheet over me. He was upset with her.”

“Then what?”

It was too much to explain. She decided to censor her response. “I left.”

The door chimed. “Entry request,” it said.

Could it be Indio? Cait hoped it wasn't. She wasn't in the mood to talk to him right now. “State ID of requester.”

“Station security.”

Security? A frown creased Cait's forehead. She hadn't broken any laws. None that she recalled, anyway. She glared at Kevin. Did he do something stupid enough to attract the interest of station security?

Kevin shook his head. Innocence radiated from his pores.

“Door,” Cait said. “State reason for security entry request.”

“Security escort for Ms. Cait O'Keefe.”

Now it was her turn to endure Kevin's intense scrutiny. She scowled and motioned to him not to talk while the door continued its spiel.

“Investigation in process lists Ms. O'Keefe as possible sexual assault victim. Ms. O'Keefe's presence is requested at eight hundred hours at security offices for questioning.”

*Sexual assault? That's ridiculous!* was Cait's first thought. *Eight hundred hours?* That was only a half hour from now. They weren't giving her a whole lot of time to ... what? ... defend herself? According to this statement, she was the victim. Oh boy. Gut instinct wasn't putting a good spin on this at all. She had a sneaky suspicion what answer she was going to hear for her next question. "Name of perpetrator?"

"Edelmiro Jesus Santiago de Arroyo."

Kevin unfolded his personal sofscreen and squeezed its corners to stiffen it. His hands moved rapidly over the screen as he initiated a search sequence.

"Door," Cait said. "Four minute mute."

Kevin looked up from his sofscreen. "He's the EVA flight instructor. When did he assault you?"

"He didn't."

Kevin peered at the mute door.

Cait shrugged. "I haven't the foggiest idea what's going on here. I was upset when I left him but..." Her voice trailed off.

Kevin's eyebrows literally scaled his forehead.

"This morning. After I slept with him."

"Oh!" He frowned and shook his finger at her. "What have you gotten yourself into?"

"It's not what you think." She glanced at the time ticking down on the door panel. Three minutes left before the mute expired. "Ask for a cross reference for old news articles on his name. You'll find some biographical information on him there."

Kevin keyed in his request. The vids scrolled up. When they ended, he studied her intently for a long moment, then asked, "Did you sleep with him because you felt sorry for him?"

"No," she said softly. "It wasn't because of that, it was because I wanted..." Her voice trailed off. Why did she approach him? What was it about him that pulled at her so strongly? Was it that simmering sexuality he kept tightly leashed inside himself? Was it the passion he poured into her over and over again?

His sexual skills were addictive. She had to admit that. The more he gave, the more she wanted. It wasn't like she didn't know what to expect from her body's responses. But with him, it was so much more intense and satisfying. One thing for sure, she damn well didn't want him jailed on false charges.

She looked at Kevin and let him feel exactly how she felt about Indio .

Comprehension filled his eyes. "If that's how it was, then I want to meet him," he said.

"Mute expired," the door announced.

"I'm ready now," Cait said. "My brother's coming along with me."

A fat-bodied security robot waited in the hallway. It stood about three feet high with rounded corners. They waited patiently while it scanned them for weapons, then told them to follow it two decks up to Station Security.

The frosted door opened quietly and let them into the waiting room. A sturdy plastic railing divided the room in half. Along the wall, on the right side was a red padded bench. Along the left wall, on a blue padded bench, sat Indio, the woman, Jule, and Socorro with her kitten. There was a separate entrance for that side of the room.

Why was the child here? Cait wondered. Was she considered a witness too?

At the back of the room, seated behind a U-shaped desktop, a dark featured security officer peered at the bank of computer screens. Indio jumped up and rushed over to the railing. "Cait!"

A plastic security shield came out of the ceiling. It slid down so fast it almost amputated Indio's fingers as it clicked into a slot in the railing.

"Speech between plaintiff and defendant is not permitted," the security robot intoned.

The security officer raised his head. "Please be seated," he said in a bored monotone. "Detective Nguyen will call you shortly." Cait and Kevin sat down on the bench on their side of the room.

Indio resumed his seat beside his daughter. He sat ramrod straight and expressionless. The kitten peeked out from Socorro's arms. The strange woman who had awakened them was sitting on the other side of the bench. Her gaze was wide and startled. She kept staring at Kevin.

What's the connection here? Cait wondered. Why is that woman staring at Kevin?

The door behind the security counter at the back of the room opened. The man from the corridor walked out followed by a small wiry woman wearing a faded green coverall with a security patch on its sleeve. Short steel gray hair framed the woman's almond-shaped eyes.

The man paused. Cait revised her original estimate of his age. Late twenties or early thirties, maybe. The premature male pattern baldness and little bit of extra weight he carried had fooled her into thinking he was in his forties.

The oriental woman escorted him past Indio to the exit. "You may go now," she said in clipped tones. "If we have any further questions, we'll call you."

"Ma'am." He bobbed his head, turned around and left. He paused at the door and gazed at everyone. His face was friendly and open, but his eyes were cold and empty. The look he shot at her sent a shiver up Cait's spine.

Kevin squeezed her shoulder and radiated support into her, the sensation that no matter what, he was there to help her. What was that old Chinese curse? she thought. 'May you live in interesting times.' Well, she was quite willing to trade now for a nice boring day.

The oriental woman walked over to the desk and pressed a few keys. The security partition in the center of the room rose into the ceiling. Her dark eyes flickered from Indio to Jule, to Cait and Kevin. "My name is Detective Mai Ling Nguyen. This is a preliminary investigation to determine if we have enough evidence to file criminal charges. The proceedings are very informal."

Detective Nguyen looked at Cait. She motioned at the open door behind her. "This way, please."

The room had stark white walls and a blue tiled floor. A small table was bolted to the floor exactly in the center. A sofscreen computer was lying open on top of the table. Two chairs were bolted to the floor on opposite sides of the table. "Please, sit down."

Cait took the indicated seat and waited while her interrogator took the remaining seat. Detective Nguyen pointed to a slot beside the sofscreen. "Insert your right hand, then state your name, place of origin and occupation."

The palm ID surface felt greasy. It rippled under Cait's hand and took her print. "My name is Cait O'Keefe. I'm from Lacrimas, North Carolina, in the United States, North America, and I'm training to become a certified EVA flyer." She removed her hand and laid it back on the table.

"Do you wish to speak to a rape crisis counselor prior to answering any questions?"

Cait studied her interrogator. "No."

Detective Nguyen's eyes softened. She said gently, "There's nothing to be afraid of now. He can't hurt you."

Cait blinked. This wasn't really happening, was it? It felt so unreal, like she acting out a part in a bad docu-drama. "I wasn't raped."

Nguyen reached out and patted her hand. "It's all right. You must be in a state of shock right now. His face would certainly terrify any young woman."

Was this woman for real? "I have no reason to be afraid. He's a gentle man."

"Why did you run out of his apartment and drop a pair of panties in the hall? What were you fleeing from, if not him?"

"Nothing happened, Ma'am." Cait inclined her head towards the waiting room. "That man you interviewed earlier, he was in the corridor outside Mr. Arroyo's apartment. I dropped my panties in the corridor. That man picked them up and tried to give them to me but I was in a hurry and I left without them."

"What were you doing in Mr. Arroyo's apartment?"

"I slept there."

"Alone?"

"No."

Detective Nguyen arched her eyebrows.

"I slept with Mr. Arroyo."

"Of your own free will?"



“Yes.”

“Why were you in such a hurry to leave?”

Goddess! The woman was worse than a pit bull. She wouldn't let go. “The woman sitting next to Mr. Arroyo, I don't know who she is exactly...” Cait took a deep breath and exhaled carefully. “He called her Jule. She walked into the bedroom and woke us up. She was upset and accused me of being a paid entertainer. I got out of the bed, went to the living room, put on my clothes and left.”

“I see.” Detective Nguyen pursed her lips and tapped her fingers on the table. “If you put your clothes on, then what happened to your panties?”

“I jammed them into the back pocket of my jeans.”

“Are you in the habit of dropping your panties on the floor in front of strange men?”

“No.”

“Did Mr. Arroyo sexually assault you last night or this morning?”

“No.”

“Did he ever assault you, sexually or otherwise, at any time?”

“No.”

“Have you had any contact with Mr. Arroyo since you left his apartment this morning?”

“No.”

Detective Nyugen stared at Cait for a few moments. “According to your statements then, this is a misunderstanding on Mr. Mackenzie's part.”

“Mr. Mackenzie?”

“The man who picked up your panties in the corridor.”

Cait unclenched her hands. “May I have them back now?”

Detective Nguyen stood up. “Take a seat in the waiting room. After I speak with Mr. Arroyo, I'll let you know.”

Cait nodded slowly and followed instructions. It didn't help matters any to feel Indio watching her every move while she resumed her seat.

He followed Detective Nguyen through the back door. It closed behind them. It took about twenty minutes, twenty minutes of sheer boredom and silence. The security officer at the desktop continued to study his screens. Cait gritted her teeth and did her best to ignore everyone. She counted the ceiling panels. She calculated the volume of the room in cubic centimeters. Anything but think about her session with Detective Nguyen.

The back door opened. Detective Nguyen stood there and looked at Cait. “Come here, please.”

Once inside, Cait waited by the door. Indio turned around, put his arm over the back of his chair and stared at her.

Detective Nguyen walked over to the table. “There was no assault. There are no charges.” She folded her sofscreen up and directed her attention to Cait. “Mr. Arroyo let me access his apartment's vidlogs for the last twenty-four hours.”

Cait nodded. It was embarrassing but it made perfect sense for him to let her do that. Otherwise this would have dragged on forever.

“After I saw them, I purged those vidlogs. Is this a satisfactory arrangement, Ms. O’Keefe?”

“Yes, Ma'am.”

Detective Nguyen pulled an evidence bag out of her pocket, unzipped it and handed the panties over.

Cait accepted them eagerly.

Detective Nguyen gestured at her to leave the room first.

\* \* \* \*

As soon as they stepped outside the security office into the public corridor, Indio rushed over towards Cait only to be blocked by Kevin.

Cait said, “Indio, this is my twin, Kevin.”

Indio grabbed Kevin's hand and shook it vigorously. “Pleased to meet you.”

“I signed up for your EVA class,” Kevin said.

“My next class is at sixteen hundred hours today,” Indio said quickly. He looked at Kevin with badly concealed eagerness. “I'd like a few minutes alone with your sister.”

Kevin turned and looked at Cait. She nodded and he stepped out of the way.

Indio's gaze pleaded with her to hear him out. “It's not what you think. I'm not a married guy screwing around on his wife,” he said quickly. “I was married. She thought I had money on account of the accident. When she found out I didn't, she dumped Socorro's week old fetus into a artificial womb and divorced me. I claimed the fetus when the DNA test said she was mine. Jule's my sister. She helped me raise Socorro.”

Heat flared across Cait's face. She realized her mouth was gaping open, then shut it. Finally, putting the words together like they were an intricate puzzle, she said, “I was upset. I thought you were ashamed of me.”

“I wasn't,” he said. “I'm not.” He reached out and traced her lips with his finger. “I want you to stay and talk to my sister.”

“No.” Her throat was tight, painfully tight. It hurt to breathe. “I can’t.”

He let his hand fall back. She felt him pull his need back inside himself. “Are you mad at her?”

Cait shook her head. “No. It’s not that. How can I be mad at someone I don’t even know?”

He waited.

Cait studied his face. Why would anyone be afraid of him? All they have to do is look in his eyes and see how gentle he is.

She didn’t want to think about it anymore. It hurt to think. “I only promised you one night.” She slanted a quick look at Socorro. “I’m leaving for the Pot of Gold in a couple of weeks. You’re staying here with your daughter. It’s not fair if I promise you anything more.”

His jaw tightened. He exhaled, a slow, ragged breath. “I’ll see you at sixteen hundred hours then,” he said.

Cait nodded. She was doing the right thing. Why did it hurt so much?

He turned and walked away.

Kevin studied Cait. “What are you’re going to do about him?”

“I’m not doing anything. I only promised him one night.”

“His sister...” Kevin hesitated.

“What about her?”

He ran his hand over the stubble on his scalp. “I met her when I applied for my job on Rainbow’s End. She’s one of the biologists on the expedition.”

## Chapter 5

“We have to talk.” Julisa’s voice was adamant.

Indiosighed. He’d much rather try and figure out how to talk to Cait again. “Here? Right now?”

She sat down on his couch and unfolded her computer sofscreen. “This is as good a time as any. Socorro’s busy doing her homework.”

Might as well get it over with.Indio settled himself down on the other end of the couch. It looked like Jule was gearing herself up for a complete lecture.

She laid the screen down in her lap and wiped her hands on her slacks. “I don’t know where to begin. The first time I saw it, it took me by surprise. I wasn’t even sure I saw it until I checked the vid frame by frame.”

What was she talking about? Indio frowned as he replayed her words in his mind. Why was it making her so nervous? Her expectant stare wasn't helping any. "What did you see? What vid?"

She picked up the screen and cradled it to her chest. "Kevin. Cait's brother."

"What about him?"

"When he tried out for the position as emergency repair technician for the science team..." Her voice trailed off.

This was worse than trying to interrogate a hostile witness. Indio had a funny feeling he didn't want to hear what she had to say. He held his hand out for the screen. "And..."

"It might have just been where I was standing that I'm the only one who even saw it..." She made a few more adjustments to the screen. "I wasn't even sure until I took a copy of the vid and went over it frame by frame."

"You said that already." Indio felt his patience wearing thin waiting for her to tell him what was bothering her so much. "What did you see?"

"They're not human," she jumped up and started pacing back and forth with the screen in her arms. "Not completely human anyway."

Indio stared at her. Was her job so stressful she was imagining things? "Okay," he said slowly. "Sit down. Take a deep breath and start over again. What the hell are you talking about?"

"Kevin and Cait. I think they're half human and half something else."

He turned his head, stared at the wall for a few minutes and counted to twenty. He exhaled, then looked at her anxious face. "You're trying to tell me that Kevin and Cait are UFO aliens or..." This was too weird for him to even try to visualize. He'd seen just about every inch of Cait's body and she looked pretty normal to him.

Julisa handed him her sofscreen..

He studied the screen. It showed a close up image of Kevin's face.

"Look at his eyes," Julisa said softly.

"Okay," Indio said carefully. "They're brown."

"Now let the image move up frame by frame for five more frames."

He tapped the control bar five times. A yellowish membrane appeared, over Kevin's eyes. He blinked and the membrane disappeared. "What the hell was that?"

"It's a nictitating membrane." Julisa twined her fingers together and stared at her hands.

Indio shrugged. "No big deal. It's a mutation. Like hemophilia or those people who have six fingers. You've been watching too many sci fi vids, Jule."

Julisa shook her head. "Ask Cait. Let me know what she tells you."

"Here." He handed the screen back. "I'll ask her."

Socorro popped her head around the corner of the door. "What's a nick tick tate ing membrane?" she asked.

Julisa jumped up and folded up her sofscreen. "Nothing, honey. It's just something I saw on Kevin and your daddy's gonna ask Cait about it."

\* \* \* \*

*Hell of a mess.* Indio laced his fingers behind his head and leaned back on the couch. Oh well, live and learn. Indio stood up and stretched the kinks out of his back. No use trying to change the past. One thing for sure, he wasn't letting Cait go off to the Pot of Gold all by herself. He had every intention of accepting that job offer from Illya and going along with her. Besides, a little extra credit in his accounts was always welcome. The only problem with that plan was finding someone to take care of Socorro.

Indio walked into the bathroom and studied his reflection in the mirror.

Knowing what he knew now about Kevin's eyes wasn't making this any easier. He still wanted Cait. She was driving him crazy. He couldn't even touch her without her backing away. He wanted her all relaxed and confident and happy like she was last night. He wanted to see her smile again. She was a special woman, the first one he met who wasn't afraid of his scars.

He opened the jar of cream beside the sink. He took a generous dollop and started rubbing it into his face, neck and shoulder. Better stock up on this cream, he reminded himself while it soaked in. No way to buy some more if he ran out during the trip.

He eased his jeans past his hips and rubbed more cream in on the scars where they reattached his leg. Over the years, he'd adjusted to the aches and pains as his body absorbed the bone and tissue putty and grew new bone and muscle.

Throat lozenges were another item he told himself to stock up on. They eased

the discomfort of his damaged vocal cords. He dug one out of his pocket and popped it in his mouth. Some days they felt so raw and abraded he could hardly speak. He zipped his jeans up and pulled his shirt back on as he walked back to the living room. There, he sat down on the couch again and unfolded his sofscreen. First, he sent a coded message to Illya. Then he transferred some funds into his grandfather's account on Earth and sent a message for him to come up on the next shuttle flight.

"Entry request," the door said.

Indio jumped up. Could it be Cait? He swallowed. His throat was dry again. Damn! "Request granted," he managed to say as he ran his hand over his hair and made sure his braid was intact.

The door slid open. The chubby guy who accused him of assaulting Cait stood there in the corridor. Indio stared at him. "What do you want?"

"Mr. Arroyo."

“Yes.”

“I want to sign up for your class.”

“Go away.”

“Please.” The man held out his hand. “My name's Fergus Mackenzie. That's why I was out in the hallway this morning. I was coming over here to introduce myself and sign up for your class. Call me Fergus.”

“Fergus.”Indio ignored his outstretched hand. “You don't have to do this just because you feel bad about calling the authorities on me.”

Fergus shook his head. “That's not the reason why I'm doing this. I really want to learn how to handle the EVA wings. I checked your records. You're the best.”

“It's dangerous. You'll have to sign a waiver. There were some very spectacular injuries in the past. And deaths.”

Fergus nodded, then lowered his voice. “I want to learn how to talk to women. Looks like you're good at that.

*What's with this guy?*Indio looked him over from head to toe. Short and chubby, with a receding chin and thin hair, he didn't appear very threatening.*First he tries to get my ass thrown in jail on bogus charges. Now he's buttering me up as Edelmiro, Don Juan of the Spaceways.*

“Forget it.”Indio punched in the code that refused any further entry by this intruder. “I don't want you in my class.”

“But I...” The door slid shut and cut off the rest of Fergus’ plea.Indio unfolded his sofscreen. It wouldn't hurt to run a probe on this guy's credentials.

\* \* \* \*

An hour later whenIndio walked into the Starlight Lounge, there were hardly any customers. Ruby was serving drinks at one of the tables. She looked at him, then slanted her gaze from him to the shielded alcove on the right. He strode past her without stopping. The privacy shield opened for him and he took the last vacant seat at the table. Illya, Tiny, Parvati and Darlene occupied the other seats.

Illya rubbed his hands together. “Team is ready now.” He nodded at the supply packs lying on the table. “Standard rates and standard kits. All reports to go through Tiny. Any questions?”

“Something weird's going on with this guy. His name's Fergus Mackenzie.”Indio keyed up his sofscreen and showed them full front and side views of Fergus. “He tried to have me put away on sexual assault charges this morning.”

Parvati leaned forward and fluttered her eyes at him. “I never knew you swung that way.”

Indio sighed, then put as much sarcasm as he could into his voice. “Fergus just happened to be in the hallway outside my apartment. When the lady I was with left my apartment in a hurry and dropped her

panties on the floor, he called security.”

Parvati and Darlene exchanged sardonic looks. “Would this lady happen to be the one you brought here last night?” Darlene asked.

“Yeah.”

“Ah!” Illya leaned forward. “I remember her. Lovely girl. I took the liberty of looking up her name on the guest list. Cait O’Keefe.”

Tiny sat up real straight. He looked like someone had just kicked him. “Panties?” he said in a strangled voice.

Indio slanted a dirty look at Illya.

Where did Tiny know Cait from, anyway? Indio wondered, then he remembered the VR Arcade at Tiny’s Emporium. Indio favored Tiny with a stare that sizzled through the air like a laser. “Yeah. Cait’s panties.”

“What happened to the assault charges?” Darlene asked.

“They were dropped.”

Illya sat back in his chair and folded his hands.

Indio tapped his finger on the tabletop. “After the charges were dropped, Fergus wanted to sign up for my EVA class and I told him no.”

“Did you check out his credentials?” Tiny asked.

“The files on record up here say he’s a geologist assigned to the science team for the Pot of Gold. He said he’s from Australia but he doesn’t talk like an Aussie.”

Tiny snorted. “Sounds like a cover story to plant an operative on Rainbow’s End. Let him take your class. Keep an eye on him for us.”

Illya, Parvati and Darlene exchanged glances and nodded. Illya slapped his hands

down on the table. “Good plan. I’ll stay behind on Sanctuary and accept messages from Tiny. Then I’ll send Space Patrol out when you secure incriminating evidence of sabotage.”

“What if we find evidence of espionage, too?” Parvati asked.

Illya shrugged. “Espionage is always around. Destroy any bugs you find. No need for SOS on that part.”

“Okay.” The SEAL ring glinted on Tiny’s hand as he picked up his credit chit.

“We’ll disable any bugs we find. Report to me when you find anything else. I’ll handle that. Demolition devices are my specialty. You find ‘em, I’ll disarm ‘em.”

\* \* \* \*

That afternoon came pretty fast. Indio had just finished introducing Fergus and Kevin to the rest of the EVA flight class assembled in the locker room when Jule showed up with Socorro and her kitten in tow. Kyle was sitting on a bench wearing a tan coverall. A small bandage still decorated his forehead.

Julisa said, "I don't want to leave Socorro all by herself in the apartment." She gave Indio a pleading look. "I have to attend a planning session for the expedition."

"Ah." Indio cleared his throat. "Maybe I should cancel this class."

"That's okay," Kyle pulled a deck of cards out of his pocket and shuffled them. "I'll watch her. I can't go out on EVA anyway. I'm under doctor's restriction 'til tomorrow morning." He straddled the bench and gestured at Socorro to sit at the other end. "Do you know how to play poker?"

Indio snagged the cards and handed them to Socorro. "Just because you can't go on EVA doesn't mean you're not in class." He slapped a set of Power Gloves and Sprag wrench into Kyle's hands, then pointed at the bench on the other side of the locker room. A dented beam assembly robot lay on that bench. "She can play solitaire with..." Indio peered at the kitten.

"Licorice," Socorro said with an aggrieved sniff. "She's a girl."

"..Licorice, while you disassemble this and repair it."

"Yes, sir."

Indio squatted down on his heels and scratched Licorice behind the ears while giving Julisa a look that said, go ahead, here's your chance to apologize.

Julisa nodded at him, took a deep breath, exhaled, then walked over to Cait and extended her hand. "Allow me to introduce myself," she said. "I'm Edelmira's sister. My name's Julisa Teresa Santiago de Arroyo."

Indio smothered a wry grin while Jule plunged on with what she had to say. "I want to apologize for my unwarranted accusation this morning. When I saw the tattoo on your arm, I should have realized you were related to Kevin and not a..." Her voice faded away. She moved closer and peered at Cait's eyes.

"That's okay." Cait shook hands with her. "Apology accepted."

"Maybe later you can come up to my apartment." Jule continued relentlessly. "There's so much I'd like to ask you."

Indio gritted his teeth and found himself counting to twenty again. If Jule kept this up, she'd ruin his chances completely with Cait.

Kevin moved closer, studied Jule's face, then put his arm around Cait's shoulder.

"What kind of questions do you have in mind?"

Jule blinked. She backed away all flustered and waved her hands in a vague gesture of dismissal. "Um. Girl stuff." She glanced at the wall clock. "I have to leave now. I don't dare miss that planning session." Then she fled the room.



Indio shook his head. Damn! That was a close call. Then he turned and glared at Kyle. Kyle hurriedly moved in to work on his appointed task. Dushawn started banging around in his locker looking for something. Kevin picked up Licorice and scratched her behind her ears. Fergus picked up his helmet and peered inside.

Socorro came over and sat down beside Fergus. She peered at his E-book lying on the bench, then tugged at his arm. "Mister."

He looked at her. "Yes."

"Why are you reading 'Love's Savage Embrace'?"

Every head in the room swiveled to watch Fergus. His face turned bright red from the tips of his ears to the thinning patch of hair on his scalp. He cleared his throat. "Um. Research."

"About love?"

He picked up the E-book and tapped at the corner to wipe the screen clear.

"Do you read them a lot?"

"No."

"Are they helping?"

He wiped his head with his hand and shrugged. "There are patterns."

She waited.

"Physical patterns."

More silence greeted his response.

He sighed and let his shoulders slump. "I don't match up to any of the physical types so far."

"Why?"

He patted his stomach. "I'm chubby."

Indio studied the bulkhead. Jeezus! Talk about laying it on with a trowel. If this was the best espionage agent Nowan Corp could come up with, they must be digging in the bottom of the barrel. Time to cut the crap and get down to business or they'd never get any work done today. "Fergus!"

Fergus jumped to his feet. "Sir?"

"Do you have any EVA experience?"

"No, sir."

Indio picked up a ten-foot tether line, walked over to Fergus and clipped it onto

the belt of his EVA suit. Even though he disliked the creep, he wasn't going to take a chance of losing him on his first trip out. "If you experience any symptoms of spacesickness, I want you to let me know immediately."

"Yes, sir."

"Kevin."

"Sir?"

"Do you have any EVA experience?"

"Yes."

"Stay close to Cait and Dushawn."

"Yes, sir."

"Let's go."

\* \* \* \*

"Easy now, Fergus. That's it. One step at a time." Like trying to teach a baby how to walk in an hour's time. Hardest job in the universe.

"Kevin, Cait and Dushawn."

"Yes, sir."

"Triangulate yourselves around the supply net. Make sure the tools and parts are secure inside it. Tow it behind you and follow me and Fergus down the line." Indio programmed the two beam assembly robots to go on ahead of the group. The views from the robot vidcams flowed into the bottom half of his visor screen.

By the time they arrived at Sector Five, his nerves were stretched to the breaking point. He was getting cross-eyed trying to keep track of everything all at once. It was bad enough teaching this, he didn't envy anyone having to carry the responsibility of guiding an entire work crew every day through a massive construction project.

"Over here, Fergus. Clip your line to this handhold and wait." Indio made sure the line was secure before he checked out the rest of his crew.

Kevin climbed into position between Cait and Dushawn and clipped himself in with one smooth move. Indio breathed a sigh of relief watching Kevin work. He really did have EVA experience. No wasted motion there. Minimal effort to achieve the best results.

This might not take as long as he anticipated. Indio opened his wings and felt the power of the solar wind swirling into him through the neurofibre implants in his spine. It was a perfect day to fly. But he knew better than to think about that now. They had a job to do. "Here. Dismantle these sections and clip them out of the way."

With everyone properly positioned, he turned his attention to the robots and told them which sections to pull apart. While Kevin and Dushawn moved the debris into the safety nets, the robots would handle the simple spot welding and splicing detail work.

A half hour later, a vertical spiderweb of components and tools floated in a net hooked up to the solar vane. There were no loose objects ready to spin out of control and puncture anyone's suits or the station wall itself. The soft humming from Kevin as he tackled his part of the project gradually soared into full-throated song. "Sixteen tons, another day over and deeper in debt. I owe my soul to the company store!"

Sweat dripped down Indio's spine while he unhooked the net and clipped it to one of the robots. His suit fans clicked in and sucked the excess moisture away into the proper portals. It raised goosebumps on his skin, it sucked everything away so fast. He ignored the sensation and concentrated on punching in the proper orders for the robot to tow it to the airlock.

Cait's voice rose in counterpoint to Kevin. The work was moving along quickly. Interesting repertoire of songs they had. Indio knew he'd never heard of "The Three Ravens," "Elfin Knight" or "Tam Lin" before. He did recall "Coming Through the Rye" from high school, but not as a song.

Kevin's singing paced the team's work efforts. They finished up to a rousing chorus of, "Big John, big bad John..." over their commlinks.

Untangling the lines and fitting the last pieces of damaged parts into another safety net didn't take as long as Indio had anticipated either. For tomorrow's class, he'd have the time to concentrate on improving their flying skills. Right now, all he wanted was to get them back inside before they overexerted themselves and started making mistakes.

\* \* \* \*

When they climbed back into the locker room, Indio pulled his helmet off, clipped it to his belt, then walked over and inspected Kyle's work. The assembly robot was completely dismantled with its parts neatly sorted, labeled and netted.

"Good job." Indio said finally. "You remembered the safety regs. Never, ever leave anything loose. Under zero-g conditions, sudden changes in thruster direction will transform anything into a lethal object."

Cait, Kevin, Dushawn and Fergus went to the lockers and started removing their EVA suits. Socorro gathered up the deck of cards and gave them back to Kyle. Licorice was curled up in a ball on the bench beside her.

Indio stopped for a moment and stared at the back of Cait's head. His hands itched to turn her around and face him. He didn't. Don't rush her, he reminded himself. Take your time. Let her make the first move. He clumped over to Socorro, went down on his knees and hugged her.

## Chapter 6

Life isn't fair. Tiny learned that a long time ago. He leaned his hip against the counter and turned on the sofscreen imbedded in it. No use thinking about what it would be like having Cait for his girlfriend. Indio

had already snagged her. Some best friend he turned out to be.

Looked like it was going to be a slow day in his Emporium. Tiny shook his head and scrolled through the security camera images. Three spacers were inspecting a pile of patched coveralls at the end of aisle six. The VR arcade was filling up nicely. His newest game, Silverhand, was becoming even more popular than the EVA solar wing simulator. He owed Cait at least a dinner for that. If it weren't for her telling him about the Sidhe legends, he never would have come up with that game.

Lord! There she was, walking in the front door. Tiny directed the camera to zoom in for a close up of her face. Long eyelashes framed her hazel eyes. Two weeks since he spoke to her last and the sight of her still hit him like a ton of bricks. He shouldn't have dithered so much about their age difference.

Was she headed down to the arcade? No. She turned right. Tiny looked up and watched Cait walk past the spacer trio. They turned around with appreciative grins on their faces and gazed at the thick braid of calico streaked hair swinging past her knees.

Tiny thought about undoing it and running his hands through its soft, shiny length.

“Hi Tiny.”

“Cait.”

“I need to buy a spare skinsuit.”

“You're going out to the Pot of Gold?”

“Yes.”

He wished the countertop wasn't between them, and then keyed up the latest selection of skinsuits.

She rested her elbows on the countertop and peered at the prices. “Which one should I get?”

He moved his hand as close as he could without actually touching her. “Used goods won't cut it if there's an emergency.” Lord, she smelled wonderful, like lavender and baby powder mixed together. “Especially with a skinsuit. A custom fit will keep it from chafing you in the wrong places.”

She tilted her head up and smiled at him. Her lips looked nice and full and kissable. “We wouldn't want that to happen, would we?”

Was it hot in here? Or was it just him? Tiny swiped his hand across his bald scalp. Contemplating how nice it would feel to rub some cream onto those sore spots on her legs then moving his hands up higher didn't help matters at all. “Um. No. We wouldn't want that,” he mumbled.

“What ya looking at?”

Tiny looked up and saw Indio along with Socorro and an elderly Amerindian man. Damn! He was really losing it not to have spotted them earlier.

Indio inclined his head at Cait, propped his hip against the counter beside her, then leaned over to scrutinize the images on the computer screen. “You're not trying to con her into buying a used suit, are you?”

Tiny straightened up to his full height. At six foot six, not many people wanted to mess with him. He topped Indio by a good four inches. “You know me better than that. I'd never take advantage of her.” Tiny curled his left hand into a fist.

Indio never even noticed. He was too busy looking at Cait and holding his hand out to her.

Cait looked at Tiny, at Indio, then back at Tiny again. Her eyes widened. The smile disappeared from her mouth. She moved back from Indio's outstretched hand. Tiny damped his anger down when he saw that. He didn't want his lousy temper to screw everything up.

Indio dropped his hand and motioned at the old man standing beside him. “Cait. This is my grandfather, Edelmiro. Grandpa. Cait O'Keefe.”

Grandfather Edelmiro looked her over from head to toe. An admiring smile crinkled up his leathery face. Heavy silver earrings glinted below his thick white braids. He reached out and cradled her hands in his. “If I were a few decades younger, I'd court you myself.”

Indio coughed. “Grandpa!” The warning in his voice was loud and clear.

Grandpa's smile broadened and the wrinkles around his black eyes grew deeper. “I've had seven wives.”

“And seven divorces,” Indio muttered darkly.

“But they were all happy divorces.”

Indio rolled his eyes up and sighed. “I suppose you could say that. None of them sued you for alimony.”

Socorro squeezed herself in between her father and grandfather. Her face glowed with excitement. “Cait! My dad's buying me an EVA suit.” She pointed at the booth behind the counter. “Is that where I get fitted?”

Tiny grinned. Socorro was going to be a real beauty when she grew up. As her godfather he had every reason to be proud of her. In a couple of more years, Indio was going to have to start beating guys off her with a stick. “Yes it is, honey.” He leaned over, picked her up, sat her on the counter and showed her the sofscreen. “But first, you have to pick out your color coding and nametag.”

She nodded and started scrolling though the sofscreen's selection.

Giving Cait a conspiratorial wink, Grandpa pulled her to his side and slid his arm around her shoulder. “If you ever change your mind, look me up. I'll give you a whirl.”

Indio turned his back on this blatant display of affection and stared at a rack of scuffed helmets.

Grandpa shook his head. “Young men nowadays have no respect for their elders.” He unwound his arm from Cait's shoulder, bowed, and lifted her hand to his lips for a brief kiss. “I'll be back to continue our discussion after I sort through this establishment's offerings.”

Socorro tapped Tiny on the arm. “This is the one I want.”

He nodded, then keyed in her request. "Are you ready then?"

Socorro scooted across the counter into his outstretched hands. Tiny lowered her to the floor, then took her by the hand and led her to the booth.

It didn't take long to show Socorro how to program the booth's computer to measure her for a skinsuit. But by the time Tiny stepped out of the booth, Indio had already backed Cait up against the counter and had a tight grip on her arms. Tiny didn't

particularly like the expression on Indio's face. He hurried over in case Cait needed his help.

"I guess this is good-bye." He heard her say, "Rainbow's End is leaving tomorrow."

"No it's not goodbye," Indio said quickly. "I'm going too."

Tiny walked around the counter. He saw Cait's mouth drop open and her hands slide up Indio's arms. Hold it! Tiny told himself. She moved closer to Indio.

"What about Socorro?" she asked. "Who's going to take care of her if you go away?"

"That's why Grandpa's here. He'll watch her."

Cait shook her head, then looked down at Indio's hands cupping her elbows. "You can let go of me now," she said slowly.

It definitely sounded like she needed a little help. Tiny loomed over Indio, cleared his throat, and jabbed his elbow into Indio's ribs.

Indio released Cait and stepped backwards.

Tiny moved in front of him and stared into Cait's eyes. "I'm going too. I'm the foreman. If anyone gives you a hard time, let me know and I'll take care of him."

She reached up, laid her hand on Tiny's cheek and traced it with her thumb. "Thanks, but no thanks. It's not what you think. I have to work something out between me and him."

"Good." Tiny nodded at her, then turned around and gave Indio an apologetic smile. "Who's the cadence singer in your EVA class?"

Indio crossed his arms. "Cait's brother," he said stiffly. "His name's Kevin."

Tiny turned back to Cait. He knew there was a silly grin on his face but he couldn't stop himself. Getting her brother on his crew might help him get closer to her. It wasn't just a matter of knowing how to sing. A good cadence singer needed an instinctive grasp of the mathematics of trajectory in order to direct the docking and

undocking of a fully loaded ship. "Hey! That's great! Is he going to the Pot of Gold too?"

Cait's proud smile matched Tiny's grin. "Yes. The science team hired him for their emergency repair specialist."

Tiny reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out a hologram card and handed it to her. "Have him call me. I might be able to use him for tomorrow's undock."

She pocketed the card. "I can call him now if you want and leave him a message. He has to schedule a fitting for his spare skinsuit anyway. That way you can show him the schematics and stats for Rainbow's End."

"Okay." Tiny motioned at her to turn around. He went to the countertop sofscreen then keyed up his e-mail account for her. "I'll have the passenger list, weights and equipment tonnage ready for his review tonight."

The lavender scent of her hair filled his nostrils while she leaned over and sent the message. He wanted to put his hand on her shoulder, but he didn't dare. "I'll give free skinsuits for the both of you if he accepts the job."

Socorro skipped out of the fitting booth. "I'm finished." She came around the counter and smiled at everyone. "I told the 'puter to send everything to daddy's apartment."

Indio hunkered down on his heels and pushed her hair back behind her ears. "Your grandpa's wandering around the store. Can you find him and tell him we're almost ready to leave?"

Socorro nodded, then went over to Tiny and tugged on his pants leg. "Can you help me find him?" she asked.

Tiny looked down at her. Her face radiated pure innocence. How old was she now? Eight? Nine? That was a damn slick move on her part. She obviously had her daddy's interests in mind and wanted him to spend some time alone with Cait. Tiny

knew he couldn't refuse her without sounding like a dickhead. He took her by the hand and said, "Sure honey, I'll help you find him."

\* \* \* \*

Cait scowled. It was a massive conspiracy to throw her at Indio. That's what it was. She crossed her arms and watched Indio out of the corner of her eye. He turned slowly with a casual glance over his shoulder at Tiny and Socorro walking away, then walked over to the helmets and fingered the connecting hoses. She turned around, rubbed her finger across the smooth acrylic countertop and studied the laser tools on display inside it.

The back of her neck tingled. She knew he was staring at her. She didn't want to have to deal with this. Not now.

She watched his reflection in the mirrored side wall approach the counter. He laid his hands beside hers and stopped short of touching her. "I just want a chance to know you better."

She closed her eyes and rubbed at the side of her head. "I have my whole life ahead of me. I'm not ready for anything long term."

"I'm not asking for that." He wasn't even touching her, yet his need was strong enough that she felt it anyway, clawing at her heart. "The sex can wait. Although I'd be a fool not to admit that it was fantastic with you."

Hearing him say that made her remember just how good it felt to have his hands on her body. She bit her lip.

“I've never been into celibacy, you know...”

Cait frowned. Wait a minute! He'd just told her how great it was with her. Was he trying to make her jealous? She slanted a wary look at him.

“I think about you all the time,” he said in a hoarse whisper. “When I close my eyes, I see your face.”

Goddess! This man was dangerous! He had no idea how strongly he was

projecting his emotions at her. It was too late to shield herself. Making love had forged a bond that left her wide open to him. If he ever realized she was an empath, she'd be in serious trouble every time he touched her. She backed away. “I don't need this.”

He swallowed, then said, “I heard you might be bisexual.”

Cait stopped. Huh? These sudden conversation shifts weren't helping her sort things out properly. “And...” she prompted him to elaborate.

“Is there a special woman you...?” his voice trailed off.

She didn't doubt his sincerity. Not when she was standing this close to him. She'd feel it if he were lying. “What if I said yes?”

He lifted his hands as if he were going to pull her to him then stopped. “I got to thinking that maybe someday you might want to have kids.” Hope leaked from his tight control.

She shook her head. He wasn't going to trap her like that. If children were all she wanted from him, artificial insemination was a viable option. No, it wasn't the children. The thing that scared her the most the fact that his lifespan was so much shorter than hers. She didn't know how to explain that to him. If she committed her heart to him, would she be able to bear the pain of his death?

“You don't want children?” he asked.

“No,” she said. “I mean yes. I want children. But not now.”

“Is there a woman in your life?”

Cait thought about telling him a lie. “No,” she said finally. “There isn't.”

He moved closer.

She held up her hand warning him to keep his distance. How was she going to explain Sidhe beliefs to him? How could she explain their custom of having more than one marriage partner as insurance against the Sidhe tendency to lose the will to live and fade away after the death of a loved one?

“What if I wanted to have another man?” she asked. “What if I wanted to have two husbands, like my mom? What would you do?”



It was painful watching his hesitation while he thought over her words. "I don't know," he admitted finally. "I want you to give me a fair chance before you decide about anything. Let me prove to you that I can give you enough loving that you won't need another man."

Cait looked away and stared at nothing for awhile. Why was it so hard to see things clearly when she was around him? How would he react if she told him about herself and her people? She stared at his clenched fists.

She looked up at him and held out her hand. "Indio."

He grabbed her hand.

"Do you believe in fairy tales?"

His total surprise at her sudden change in conversation rushed through her. Then his confusion changed to serious consideration. If he kept this up, her empathic senses would be overwhelmed. He pulled her closer. "Everything about you feels like magic to me."

"No." It was hard to keep her mind focused when all she wanted to do was let herself go into his arms. "The old tales..." she said, "...buried deep inside them is a kernel of truth. And over the years, everything became exaggerated and changed into something entirely different."

He stared at her for a long moment. "Like dragons," he said slowly. "Maybe they were leftover dinosaurs that someone saw and they called them dragons."

"Yes!" She said eagerly. "Just like the nursery rhyme "Ring Around the Rosy" was really about bubonic plague. And all those stories about my people. The ones that said cold iron was poison for us. It turned out that it wasn't the cold iron. It was the tetanus virus that killed us. We have no resistance whatsoever. As long as I keep my shots up to date, I don't have to worry about that."

"Daddy!" Socorro's voice interrupted them. "We're back!"

\* \* \* \*

Tiny found Grandpa exactly where he figured he'd be. He was in the VR arcade hooked up to the Silverhand game. Watching the older man's holoimage interacting with the other players' images made Tiny wish he'd paid more attention to the old tales his great grandfather, Tavish Barnett, used to spin. A stubborn old Scot, Tavish had turned his back on his clan and married his black "princess" against his father's wishes.

Tiny scowled. He wished he could have a decent chance to sit down with Cait and tell her about his Scottish ancestry.

Socorro tugged at his hand. "I'll get him for you."

Tiny grinned. Kids knew their way around the VR simulations way better than adults. Watching how she did this was going to be just as much fun as playing the game.

He keyed in five minutes time for Socorro. She walked up, put the VR mask on her face and slipped the VR gloves on her hands.

It only took her five seconds to garb her holoimage in a blue tunic, then select a black gryphon for her steed. She climbed aboard, slipped her feet into the leather stirrups, then leaned down and whispered into the bird's ear.

The gryphon sank back on its haunches and launched itself into the air. Thirty seconds later, it deposited her on the top of the virtual mountain behind Grandpa. While Socorro walked up to him and tapped him on the arm with her virtual dagger, the giant bird swooped down and scattered Grandpa's attackers. Grandpa's image

turned around, bowed elegantly to her image and let her lead him back down the mountain to the entry portal.

Grandpa laid the VR equipment aside. "Interesting people," he said. "Those Sidhe."

Tiny nodded. "Cait told me about them."

An abstracted expression crossed Grandpa's face. "Yes, I expect she would know quite a bit about them."

Whoa. What was going on here? Tiny glanced at Socorro. She was peering at the Stonehenge hologram, oblivious to their little conversation. He pulled Grandpa aside. "What do you mean by that remark?"

The heavy turquoise and silver bracelet on the old man's wrist slid down his arm as he patted Tiny on the shoulder. "I had a vision about her and her people. You were in that vision. As were my grandson and great granddaughter. She's not what she seems. She is more. Much more. In time, you will know this."

Before Tiny could respond, Socorro came over and tugged at her grandpa's pants leg. "We have to go back. Daddy's waiting for us."

When they walked back into the main area of the store, Tiny looked across the room. Whatever Indio said or did, it must have been good. Everything was turned around again. Cait was standing real close and holding hands and talking up a storm with him.

That was the other thing Tiny liked about her. He spent too many years watching women shy away from him on account of his size. Cait never did that. She wasn't afraid of Indio's scars and acted a lot older than twenty. Nothing silly or flaky about her.

"Daddy!" Socorro called out.

Cait jumped back from Indio and pulled her hand out of his grasp like she'd been burned. Her cheeks went all red and flushed. She nodded at everyone. "Well, I have to go now. See you tomorrow."

\* \* \* \*

Tomorrow came pretty fast.

A steady flow of dignitaries and Bon Voyage revelers floated from their tether lines on the zero-g pulley while it returned them to Sanctuary. A last minute flurry of passengers and baggage rode the pulley towards Rainbow's End. The ship's airlocks cycled shut and the pulley folded back into the docking port

at the top of Sanctuary's spindle.

Sixteen globular ships were linked together in a circle. This arrangement of ships was Rainbow's End. When the ship arrived at the asteroid itself, some of the modules would remain as permanent living quarters. Other modules would become drone ships sending freshly mined ore back to Sanctuary and Earth.

A haze of excitement linked the EVA flyers into a coherent whole for Cait while she waited with her crewmates. When Tiny signaled them on the commlink, they'd tow the ship a safe distance from the station. Then they'd board the ship and the captain would order the engines ignited for the journey itself.

The Beam Assembly Robots, or BARs, moved into position below Rainbow's End. Thin lines of spidersilk and titanium alloy wove a metallic net around Rainbow's End like a giant web. Cait steadied her wings and checked her grip on the line she held. Indio's position was directly opposite hers. Kevin and the others were equally spaced around the web.

When the BARs ignited their jets and started pushing the ship away from Sanctuary's spindle, Kevin's voice started the cadence. The words he wrote last night scrolled across their visors and signaled the flyers to move out

“Mike and Jean met at La Grange.

Tied the knot at Begger's Cage.”

Tiny's voice lifted in counterpoint as Rainbow's End started moving slowly away.

“Well, he did what he had to do

Even though she named him fool.”

The cadence rhythm flowed through them as they pulled the web close and helped tow the ship away. More voices kicked in and joined the song.

“When he told her he was flying

It broke her heart and she went crying

She said, “I don't give a damn

I can find another man.”

Kevin's voice held their concentration and steadied their pull on the web. The ship started moving faster.

“When they told her he was dying

She stole a ship and went flying.”

Rainbow's End was moving faster. She could see it now. A thrill of excitement rippled through Cait. She added her voice to the mounting chorus.

“If you go out to Moonraker's Node

You'll find their ships encased in stone.”

The Beam Assembly Robot jets stopped. The robots spun around with their claws in the web and ignited their jets in the opposite direction. They were jetting away from Rainbow's End and pulling the web free. Cait released her hold on the tether line in unison with the other EVA wing flyers and watched the robots reel in the web. Rainbow's End moved past them under its own momentum.

Cait opened her wings and let the solar wind flow through her electrodes into her spine. It was a glorious sensation of power and joy. She joined the rest of the flyers and

moved in to catch hold of the grips around the ship's sixteen airlocks. The final chorus soared from the flyers' throats while the Beam Assembly Robots folded up the web and brought in the last airlock team.

“And hear their voices on the wire

Saying, “My love, sweet love.”

## Chapter 7

Tiny pulled himself down the guidepole in the center of the miner's sleeping quarters. The engines had shut down ten minutes ago. They were coasting along at zero gravity.

“Okay guys. Up and at ‘em!” His deep voice boomed in the enclosed space. Thirty sleepover cubicles and two bathrooms lined the circular grid on the walkway around Tiny's guidepole. The sleepovers contained just enough room for a fold down bunk and three storage lockers. “This ain't no cruise ship. If you wanna eat, you gotta work.”

Muffled thumps and bumps echoed around him. Tiny gave a disgusted snort while he watched Sergio exit his cubicle at top speed and collide with Dushawn. They bounced apart in opposite directions, boomeranged into their bunkmates, and created a chain reaction of flailing arms and legs and collisions. These guys were way past newbie status. When would they remember the first rule of zero-g? Sudden moves were hazardous to your health.

Indio floated down to the walkway with practiced ease—no newbie mistakes on his part. Tiny thought back to the first time he laid eyes on Indio. It felt like yesterday, but it was fifteen years ago. He was standing on the dock watching the newest arrivals at Sanctuary Station. With walnut stain skin, long black hair and burn scars on the left side of his face, Indio stood out in any crowd. Add in a titanium alloy exoskeleton for his left arm and leg, and it made an unforgettable impression. It was the exact same rig used by the vets who survived the Mars Tunnel collapse. Neural implants and microchip sensors provided a direct link between the brain and exoskeleton.

All the vets Tiny knew had bitched about the constant “phantom” pain and the

endless hours they endured in the weight training gym. It took a couple of years of physical therapy for their brains to heal enough to utilize the neural implants.

Tiny hired Indio for the construction crew. The whole time they worked together he never heard a complaint about pain or how hard it was to adapt to the implants. They became sparring partners.

The relentless practice sessions paid off. Eleven months and three days after his operation, Indio discarded the exoskeleton. They went down to Moonraker's Row and celebrated. That was one wild week. They picked up a high priced entertainer and...

Tiny blinked. Just about everyone was gathered on the walkway. This was neither the time nor place to be sorting through his memories. He activated a hand held holo projector and flashed an evil grin at the stragglers clinging to the railing. "I'm only showing you this layout once."

A transparent 3-D image of Rainbow's End appeared in front of him. "This is our location at number two nodule." He jabbed his thick finger at the nodule farthest away from their location. "This is number ten where the single women bunk."

The men floated closer. "Science crew has their single men in six and the women in fourteen. Couple bunks for everyone are in section four. Rec room is eight. Laundry

and cafeteria are twelve and sixteen. The captain's cabin and the bridge are in one. Numbers three and nine are sick bay and the exercise room."

"The odd numbered modules contain tools, supplies, mining equipment, EVA suits and vehicles and, of course, the science team's equipment and supplies. When we unload the odd numbered ones at the Pot of Gold, they'll be converted into drone ships bringing ore to Sanctuary. Sanctuary will send them back with more ice, food and supplies."

Tiny took one last look around at his crew. He spotted Kyle's carrot top hair floating wildly around his head like porcupine spines. "Where's your hairnet?"

His victim stared back at him. Tiny rubbed his hand across his bald scalp. "Unless you're naturally endowed for zero-g work, there's a hundred dollar fine for hair

that's not netted, shaved or braided. I'm cutting you a break. Next time, I'm writing you up." More hairnets magically appeared on heads.

"Okay, guys!" Tiny unfolded his sofscreen and squeezed its corners to harden it.

"Here are your work assignments." He transferred the data to the 3-D projector. A few seconds later a list floated in mid-air for everyone to see. "Blue's sanitation. Green is hydroponics. Yellow is laundry. Red is Sickbay. White is repair and damage control and orange is the cafeteria."

Moans and groans circulated while everyone sorted out their duty roster.

Indio hauled himself across the overhead line to Tiny's side. "What's Cait's assignment?"

Tiny tabbed down to the women's schedule. "Let's see now." Technically speaking, Indio was his romantic rival now. At the same time, of all the guys he knew, Indio was the one he'd trust to watch over Cait and guard her with his life. "She's on first shift in the cafeteria today. Tomorrow, she's assigned to sick bay."

"Thanks."

Tiny nodded. "Gonna make you foreman." That was the best place for Indio. He'd be able to check out

the entire ship from end to end. "You'll be in charge of three men and one woman." He pulled a master key chip from his pocket and handed it over. "This lets you access all storage areas and lockers."

\* \* \* \*

Indio logged out another cleaning 'bot and checked its programming. Everything looked great. "Kyle! Dushawn!"

"Yes sir!"

"Make sure you send them into the air ducts. We don't need any skin flakes and hair accumulating and breeding bacteria in there."

Kyle bobbed his head in a quick nod and floated after his herd of cleaning 'bots with Dushawn on his heels. Indio glanced at Parvati. Sergio and Vu Sheng floated upside down behind her. They were peering at the readouts on their sofscreens from the cleaning 'bots scrubbing out the waste lines and checking for blockages.

Parvati raised her arm and displayed a spy eye. It was one of the low tech models. A flat panel with a light activated cam. She laid the device on the floor grid, wedged herself against the railing to keep herself from bouncing around, then crushed the device under her boot heel. A cleaning 'bot rushed over and vacuumed up the debris.

A flash of silver, like the ripple of a metallic snake on the wall caught his attention. Snakes didn't live embedded behind computer consoles. Indio leaned closer and flashed his handbeam on the elongated object. This was a different kind of vermin, another spy eye. It had three interlocking panels for full vid and audio capabilities.

He squirted it with a quick spray of epoxy glue and shorted out its circuits. No one would realize it was ruined until they tried to download the images.

Putting him here was a stroke of genius on Tiny's part. No matter how long it took, Indio knew he'd make sure every surveillance device on Rainbow's End was found and disabled by the end of his shift. He couldn't be in two places at the same time. If anything happened to Cait or Jule because he neglected his job, he'd never forgive himself.

He herded his team into the nodule filled from top to bottom with a massive ore grinder and three tunneling machines. It looked like a child's fantasy playroom filled with giant toys. The ore grinder looked like a giant metal Tyrannosaurus Rex with caterpillar treads for its feet. Two claw hands in front allowed the driver to pick up and manipulate rock and ore quickly and efficiently. The driver's cabin was painted up with a huge mouth and giant teeth right below the windows just like T-Rex.

Kyle, Dushawn, Parvati, Sergio and Vu Sheng herded their cleaning 'bots into position. Indio kicked off from the floor and floated up to the driver's compartment of the ore grinder. Carefully squeezing himself past the serrated edge of a massive tunneling drill, he unlocked the cabin door and climbed into the driver's seat. A few seconds later he powered up the computer controls and ran a full analysis of each system from the main engines all the way down to the hydraulic lines. Everything checked out fine with no evidence of sabotage on the equipment itself.

The entry light flashed at the connecting airlock. Indio looked up and watched Parvati push off from her perch on top of the ore grinder and open the airlock door for Cait. Sergio, Kyle and Dushawn swooped

down to join them. Indio adjusted the vid cam on his dashboard while Cait handed out preheated food pouches and squeeze bulbs of coffee and cola.

The last pouch and bulb dangled from Cait's fingers. She spun around and looked up at him. It was uncanny, almost like radar, the way she knew exactly where he was. Keep calm, he reminded himself while she kicked off and floated up to him. Don't look too eager.

His hands were sweating. He leaned over and opened the passenger side door. Should he drape his arm over the back of the seat? Too late. Cait scooted inside and pulled the door shut behind her.

She reached out, grabbed onto the material of his shipsuit and pulled herself to his side. "Something happened. We need to talk about it."

He felt the heat of her body through his coveralls. Thoughts of holding her close, unzipping her coveralls and slipping his hands inside to touch her skin filled his mind. Her words finally penetrated his brain. He looked at her. "What happened?"

"Not now." She glanced out the window at their attentive audience. "Later, after this shift ends, I can meet you someplace private. Where should I meet you?"

His mind went completely blank. "Meet me?"

She nodded. "Where?"

"Cafeteria," he said finally. "I'll pick you up when your shift ends and bring you with me."

"Okay." She pulled his head down, kissed him long and hard, then left.

Indio stared with unfocused eyes at the dashboard. He remembered when she started talking about herself in Tiny's Emporium. Did she want to continue that conversation? He shook his head. Where should he bring Cait? Not his sleeping cubicle. He didn't think she meant that. But then, maybe she did. That kiss certainly felt like she might want to do more than just talk.

"If you're not going to eat anything, how about giving me that food pouch?" Parvati's voice pulled Indio back to reality.

Kyle wasn't the only one floating outside the driver's cabin looking in at him. The entire work team was grinning at him. He must have really been out of it for them to sneak up on him like this.

"Scat." Parvati slid under Dushawn's arm and climbed into the cabin with Indio. "Make like vultures someplace else while I eat lunch with him." She pulled the door shut and glared until they moved away.

The beads on her cornrowed plaits clicked inside her hairnet as she picked up the food pouch and ripped off the corner with her teeth, then said, "Nice erection you have there," and handed him the pouch.

He looked down at his crotch. "That happens every time she gets near me."

Parvati nodded. "I know what you mean. When she looks at me, my panties get soaked."

Indio gulped, then glared at her. What the hell was going on around here? He shook his head and squeezed some of the food from the pouch into his mouth. It was beef stew. Hard to tell if it was real or synthetic.

"Is she bisexual?" Parvati asked.

Indio hazarded a cautious sip of his cola. "I'm not sure."

She pursed her lips and considered his response.

"What about Darlene?" Indio slanted a wary look at her. "Did you break up with her or something?"

Parvati shook her head. Her beads clicked together. "Darlene likes her too."

"Ah." Indio decided to eat some more beef stew. That was a much safer activity than contributing to this conversation.

"We know she likes you. We were wondering if you'd ask her if she'd consider us."

Indio studied his food pouch. It wasn't drugged, was it? He studied Parvati's face for clues. "This is a joke. Right?"

Parvati winked at him. "We heard how her mom has two husbands. We figure she's pretty open minded about relationships." She flashed him a sultry smile. "Your daughter's a real cutie. We wouldn't mind having a kid or two from you."

He scowled at her.

"You're so proper." Parvati leaned closer. Her voice softened into a sultry murmur. She brushed her lips against his cheek. "Just think about it, okay? We'll talk about this later."

"Um, okay." He slanted another wary glance at her face.

She stroked his lips with her fingertip. "I found six more 'bugs' and disabled them."

Indio nodded and added her tally to his mental list of stuff to tell Tiny. "Yeah. Interstellar Pest Control, that's our job." He cleared his throat. "Parvati?"

She raised her eyebrow. "Yes."

"That stuff about you and Darlene wanting me to make babies. You were pulling my leg, right?"

"No." She opened the door and climbed outside the ore grinder's cabin. "I'm serious."

Indio watched Parvati tuck her knees up to her chest, then flip herself over. She kicked off with her foot from the side of his cabin and propelled herself to the floor below.

Damn! Indio wadded up his empty food and drink pouches and jammed them into his pocket. Better get his mind back on the job before he did something stupid. With four more hours left on this shift, that



should give him plenty of time to figure out a suitable spot to bring Cait. He opened the cabin door and pulled himself outside and followed Parvati.

Ignoring the sidelong glances from the guys, he shoved the crumpled up pouches into the recycler, then pulled out his sofscreen and peered at the job list. “Kyle and Dushawn, check out the cleaning ‘bots and see if they're finished yet. Parvati and Vu Sheng, you have the ventilation system this time. Sergio and I have to check out the equipment in the EVA lockers.” He looked up. “Any questions?”

Dushawn exchanged a wary look with Kyle, then said, “No.”

“Then quit standing around like idiots and get to work!”

A little while later, Sergio called Indio over to the locker behind the ore grinder's cabin. His voice sounded odd, almost frightened. “Oh shit! Look what I found.”

Indio felt his whole body go tense. It better not be a bomb, not on his shift. He grabbed hold of the handholds and hauled himself around. “What is it?”

Sergio reached inside the locker, pulled out the arm of the EVA suit and exposed a long tear from the waist up under the armpit. “It's ripped.”

It wasn't a bomb. Indio's heart remembered to beat again. He studied the damage. This didn't look good at all. How many other suits were ruined? Was it sabotage? Or just an unrelated accident? He passed the suit, helmet and air tanks out to Sergio. “Take everything down to the repair bay and have them go over it from top to bottom.”

While Sergio towed the suit away, Indio leaned against the hatch and peered inside. The locker was about two meters high and a half a meter deep. It would be a tight fit but he figured it was the best he could do on such short notice. At least it was a neutral location. He unclipped the small work light from his waist, fastened it to the ceiling clamp, then backed out and carefully shut the door. Only three more hours to go before he saw Cait. It felt like forever.

\* \* \* \*

There she was! Indio spotted Cait waiting for him on the other side of the cafeteria. It was too crowded for him to kick off from his side and dive over to her. His velcro scratched on the floor's metal grid with every step. He eased himself past a huddle of VR players standing in line at the rec room entrance.

She tilted her head up and smiled at him. “Hi.” There wasn't any hesitation in her eyes.

He grabbed her by the hand. “Come on.” Better get her out before she changed her mind. The day he understood Cait, he'd be too old to do anything with her. When they arrived at the nodule with all the construction equipment, his heart hammered in his ears like he'd just finished a marathon.

“Up here.” He pulled her with him so fast they whipped completely around

the massive grinder before he caught hold of a strut and stopped them. He hung on with his left arm. His arm yanked at his shoulder, and he spun dizzily, cursing himself for acting like a newbie and forgetting to move slowly.

Cait swung her feet up, braced herself against the side of the grinder and waited for him to make the next

move.

He keyed the locker open, backed himself inside and switched on the light.

She floated outside, holding onto the door with one hand. Her eyes flickered up and down, measuring the interior of the locker. Had he guessed wrong? Was she going to slam the door in his face and leave? He spread his hands apart and motioned at her to come inside. Then she shook her head, climbed in and pulled the door shut. It was a tight fit, but not too tight for them to move around a bit.

His throat felt like sandpaper. His hands shook while he cupped her chin and watched for signs of rejection.

Cait's eyes widened. She shifted her position. Her crotch grazed his. She reached up and covered his hands with hers. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to lead you on."

There was a roaring sound in his ears. He pushed himself back and collided with the wall behind him. Every scrap of hurt and pain filled his voice. "Good-bye says it all."

"No!" She wrapped her arms around his neck. "It's not good-bye."

His hands reacted automatically. He circled her waist and found the sweet flare of her spine and buttocks. It felt even better than he remembered.

"Stop it!" Cait slid her arms down and braced herself against his chest. Her pupils were dilated.

He brushed his hands across her nipples and felt them stiffen under his touch. "Stop what? This?"

"Yes." It was a very shaky yes.

"You want me," he whispered. "You really want me."

Cait went real still and quiet. Her gaze was desperate. She held him away with her arms "Please, I can't think when you do this to me."

Indio stopped.

"Socorro's here. I found her this morning. She stowed away on the ship and hid in my cabin."

He stared at her until his brain kicked into gear. His hands stopped moving. "Socorro? Here?"

Cait nodded.

"How? Who?"

"Your grandpa smuggled her on."

Indio banged his head against the wall and groaned.

"Licorice's here too."

Indio slanted a hard look at her.

“She tucked the cat inside her EVA suit.”

Indio closed his eyes. “Damn.”

Cait sagged against him and rested her cheek on his chest.

Lord. She felt good. His penis started to harden. Socorro's face filled his mind. His penis went limp. “We have to tell Tiny.”

She nodded against his chest.

Why did everything have to be so complicated? What was he going to do with Socorro? With Cait? It was a pity he couldn't come up with a good solution. Whoa! Maybe he could! “Cait?”

“What?”

“If I ask for a cabin in the couple's area, we can keep Socorro there without having to tell anyone.”

She chewed on her lip. “I'm not ready for that yet.” A wry smile blossomed on her mouth. “Besides, it'll never work. Picture trying to keep a nine year girl and a kitten cooped up in a cabin for four more days.”

Oh well, he gave it his best shot. For now, anyway. “Okay.” Maybe tomorrow he'd have another chance. He stroked her cheek with his finger, then ducked in for a kiss.

“No.” Cait pushed him away. They bounced off the walls, then back into each other. “Not here. Not now. If we get started, I won't want to stop.”

Indio sighed. “All right.” He reached for the latch behind her and opened the door. They tumbled out.

“Wow!” Kyle greeted them happily. “How'd you manage to do it in there?”

Kyle wasn't the only one hovering in midair outside the locker. Indio spun around

and counted at least ten other guys, including Tiny. Looked like there was a very efficient grapevine on this ship. Jeez! Didn't they have anything better to do with their time? Dushawn joined Kyle and peered into the vacant locker.

“Tiny!” Cait kicked off from the side of the ore grinder and launched herself down to meet him.

Tiny stuck his arm out and waited for her to collide with him. The muscles in his thighs bunched up and he held his position while she climbed up his arm, wrapped her arms and legs around him and started whispering in his ear. Tiny looked up suddenly, right at Indio.

“It's your call,” Indio said. It was better this way. They had to bring Socorro's presence out in the open. Sneaking around and hiding her would only cause resentment and disruption among the other miners. Whatever Tiny decided they'd have to accept.

“They must have done it missionary style.” Kyle's irritating voice said behind Indio. “Cause she was on top when they fell out.”

“I don't know,” Dushawn's voice said helpfully. “Maybe they turned themselves around. She's small enough and it was shaking around pretty good while they were inside.”

Indio considered his options, and decided on silence. These two idiots weren't worth wasting his energy on, not when he had Socorro's safety on his mind.

“Kyle! Dushawn!” Tiny's deep voice sliced into their prurient dialog.

“Yes!”

“Tell you what. How about if I toss both of you inside and lock the door? Then, two hours from now, when I let you out, you can submit a full report detailing every sex act you've managed to complete.”

Dead silence greeted this announcement. The rest of the guys in the room suddenly found themselves very interested in the visual texture of the bulkheads.

“Tiny...” Kyle squeaked. “We'll pass on that offer for now.”

Dushawn bounced up and down in the air under his vigorous nod.

Tiny rolled his eyes up and sighed theatrically. “Why, Lord? Why must I be the one to housebreak these puppy boys?” He clapped his hands together. “Heads up! We're going to have a meeting in exactly thirty minutes. Round up everyone, male and female, on the mining crew and bring ‘em here.”

Sergio raised his hand. “What's the meeting about?”

“You'll find out when it happens. Now get!”

Tiny pushed Cait back to Indio with a gentle pat on her behind.

Watching this made Indio squirm inside. He didn't say anything. What could he say? Keep your paws off her ass? Any objection would make him sound like a jealous fool. No matter how you looked at it, it was a perfectly straightforward gesture on Tiny's part, boosting her back like that. “Tiny!”

Tiny had his poker face on. His gaze flicked from Cait back to Indio. “Yeah.”

“Julisa needs to be at this meeting.”

“Go get her then.”

\* \* \* \*

The zero-g conditions made it easier for everyone to fit into the module. Indio squeezed himself past a clump of miners perched on the massive claw arms of the ore grinders. Over by the main hatch, he saw two vivid splashes of color, Darlene's pistachio hair and Cait's multicolored braid against drab gray shipsuits. He watched Julisa float over to Cait's side, reach out and squeeze her hand.

Indio positioned himself beside Tiny. It felt like a traditional pow wow with a War Chief and Peace Chief, two sides of the same coin, drumming up supporters for their plans.

“Okay! I have an important announcement to make.” The quiet roar of multiple conversations dissipated under Tiny's yell. “We have a stowaway!”

Indio stepped forward into the silence. He might as well lay the rest of the cards on the table. “My daughter, Socorro, is the stowaway. She's nine years old.”

It didn't take long for that moment of silence to disintegrate into pure chaos. Arguments both pro and con erupted from one end of the room to the other. Vu Sheng yelled at Indio. “What the hell were you thinking to accomplish by sneaking your daughter on board? That was a pretty stupid thing to do.”

“I didn't.”

Tiny raised his arms. All heads swiveled to look at him. “He didn't know anything about it. His grandfather smuggled her on board and hid her in Cait's cabin.”

Cait's clear voice sliced through the crowd's confused murmur. “I found Socorro and told Indio about her a little while ago. We told Tiny and he called this meeting so we can decide what to do.”

Vu Sheng jammed his hands on his hips and glared at Indio. “I don't understand what all the fuss is about. All we have to do is tell Captain DeAngelo. He'll turn the ship around and dump the kid back at Sanctuary. We'll only lose about three days transit time.”

Kevin hauled himself down the ore grinder and somersaulted over to Tiny's side. His face was dark with suppressed anger. “Back up a bit. It's not gonna be that easy.” He glared at Vu Sheng. “This isn't the Earth/Lunar shuttle run. We're on a specially funded scientific mission to move the asteroid to a stable Earth orbit. We can't hop on the next flight out to the Pot of Gold.”

He crossed his arms, turned slowly and let his gaze rake the crowd. “Where's the money gonna come from to refuel the ship if we turn around to return a stowaway? It's gonna come out of our pockets. You know this and I know this. The profits I was hoping to earn from this expedition were supposed to recoup what I shelled out to join it. I can't afford to pay for more fuel. Can you?”

“He's right!” Tiny yelled. “It's no skin off Captain DeAngelo's nose if he turns around or keeps us on schedule. He gets paid no matter what. We don't get paid until we do our job of drilling those tunnels for the science mission.”

Indio watched everyone's face while Tiny's words sank in. Turning back now would ruin them financially. He raised his voice. “Socorro's nine years old and won't take up too much air, water or food. Rather than lose what I've put in for this trip, I'd rather keep her hidden and continue what we've started.”

That got their attention. Maybe this would work out after all. “The rest is up to you. I'll need everyone's help. If you decide to turn back, I'll go along with that too.”

Tiny looked around. The crowd's grumbles subsided into a thoughtful silence. Vu Sheng rubbed his scalp and stared at the bulkhead with a look of deep consideration. “Okay! No sense in dragging this out forever. It's time to fish or cut bait. All those in

favor of telling the captain about our stowaway and returning to Sanctuary raise their hands.”

No one voted for that solution

“All those in favor of hiding her so we can continue on to the Pot of Gold raise their hands.”

The vote was unanimous.

Tiny clapped his hands together. “Let's get down to business then. Any suggestions on how we're going to accomplish this?”

Cait called across the room. “Since Julisa can't let the science team know about Socorro, she can stay with me in my bunk. There's enough room for the both of us.”

Kevin nodded, then said, “When we land, they're going to separate Rainbow's End back into sixteen ships. I'll rig up an EVA suit small enough for the cat to move around outside.”

Tiny jabbed his thumb at the time flashing on the wall clock. “That's enough for now. Second shift has to report for duty in ten minutes. We'll figure the rest of this out as we go along.”

Indio pushed himself back to the wall, clipped his tether line to the guiderail and watched everyone else floating out of the airlocks. He saw Darlene and Parvati pull Cait aside. If they were discussing Parvati's idea of a cockeyed menage a trois. No telling what might happen next.

Tiny pulled himself up and tucked his feet under the guiderail beside Indio.

“What are they cooking up?”

Indio shrugged. “Trust me. You don't want to know.”

Floating there in companionable silence beside Tiny, Indio started thinking about the great Apache Chiefs, Cochise, Mangas Coloradas and Geromino. They all had three

and four wives. According to his grandpa, his family tree led straight back to Mangas Coloradas through the Mexican wife, Carmen. Hell, if it was good enough for his ancestors, it should be good enough for him. He'd do his best to take care of three of them if that's what they wanted. The Mormons had their own enclave at Sanctuary now because the station didn't have any laws against polygamy.

Tiny's voice jerked him back to reality. “She's something else, ain't she?”

Indio blinked. “Sorry,” he said finally. “I was thinking.”

“I've been thinking, too.” Tiny ducked his head and said quickly. “About Cait. And about her mom having two husbands and all...”

Indio stiffened and slanted a hard look at him. “Where'd you hear that?”

A halfhearted shrug accompanied Tiny's scowl. His eyes flickered sideways at the stragglers clustered around the airlock and he lowered his voice. “Kyle and Dushawn. They're a couple of loose cannons. I heard them yakking up a storm about her mom having two husbands when they used to play VR in my arcade.”

Indio risked a wary nod at this revelation. It didn't sound good at all. Men were worse gossips than women.

Tiny exhaled noisily. "I'm not the only who took notice how you have a thing going on with her. Seems to me she likes guys with street smarts instead of book smarts." His voice mellowed out. "Pretty boys don't impress her. She's deep. Real deep." He turned and looked at Indio. His eyes pleaded for understanding. "I was wondering if..."

Indio shook his head. Oh no! He wasn't going to touch that idea with a ten foot pole. So what if he and Tiny had over fifteen years of friendship between them? So what if they had a wild week together one time with a paid entertainer? That didn't mean diddly squat. Cait was special.

"Oh well." Tiny sagged back, then hunched his shoulders. He sighed, unhooked his feet from the railing and pushed himself off in the direction of the airlock. "See you later."

## Chapter 8

Tiny nodded at Dushawn, then ducked past him into the rec room. Right away he spotted Cait perched on one of the benches in the rear. Her shipsuit wasn't any different than his. Except on her, it looked like a fashion vid. The drab grey material made the colors in her hair seem brighter.

Cait was smiling at the music coming from the new keyboard in the middle. Just about everyone was standing around and singing along. Socorro was playing it. Her feet were strapped down to a foot pump. She was pumping away at the bellows contraption underneath the keyboard.

The words to their song bounced off the walls and filled the room with sound.

"I don't wanna play in your yard anymore,

You can't climb my apple tree.

You can't slide down my cellar door.

I don't wanna play in your yard anymore."

Good! Tiny thought. This way he wouldn't have anyone breathing down his neck. He pulled himself over to Cait by using the handholds on the wall. He wished his hands would stop sweating. It wasn't like he was on a date with her. He handed her his sofscreen. "Here are the maps you wanted."

Cait accepted the sofscreen with a grateful smile. Just knowing she asked him to get them for her felt wonderful. It meant she trusted him.

While she downloaded the files, Tiny hooked his feet around the bar at the bottom

of the bench and pulled himself down to sit beside her. "What are you going to do?" he asked. "Stake out a private claim?"

"Not exactly." She lowered her voice to a cautious whisper. "I'm looking for fossils and maybe even some artifacts. I have this theory..."

His heart hammered in his chest. "You're not going out there all by yourself, are you?"

“Well...” Color flooded her cheeks. “I’m not going to do anything stupid.”

“Tell you what.” He eased his bulk closer and took hold of her hand. No telling what might happen. Wandering around on an asteroid wasn’t exactly a stroll in the park. “If your brother can’t go with you, I’ll go.”

“Tiny!” Indio’s voice behind him shot through Tiny like a laser. Cait looked up. Tiny tried to jerk his hand away but Cait held on real tight and wouldn’t let go.

Indio nodded at Tiny, pulled himself down on the other side of Cait, then peered at her sofscreen.

“What’s that?”

“Survey maps of the asteroid.”

“Yeah.” Tiny almost said “we were just talking” but that sounded like he was hiding something so he changed it to, “She asked me to get them for her.”

“Oh.” Indio didn’t look too happy with that answer.

Cait squeezed Tiny’s hand one more time, then let go. “I really appreciate you accessing this for me.”

Indio moved his head slightly in a blatant hint for Tiny to vacate the area.

Tiny took his sofscreen back and folded it up carefully. No way was he going to jump up and bounce around like a newbie in front of them. He unzipped the pocket on his pants, tucked the screen away, and unhooked his tether line. “Well, see you around.”

\* \* \* \*

The edgy feeling coming from Indio while he watched Tiny leave thrummed through Cait like a sore tooth. One thing for sure, she needed a chance to sit him down

someplace nice and quiet and explain the mechanics of her empathic abilities. But right now wasn’t the time or place to get into that. She had something even more important to discuss with him. “I don’t appreciate what you did.”

“What?” Shock, surprise and incomprehension flowed from him into her.

Cait shut her screen down and folded it up. “You tried to fix me up with Parvati and Darlene. I don’t need your help. If I want more variety in my sex life, I’m perfectly capable of choosing my own lovers, thank you.”

“Whoa!” Indio took a deep breath and spread his hands apart. “I had nothing to do with that. That was their idea, not mine.”

He wasn’t getting off the hook that easy. Her eyebrows scaled her forehead. She took notice how Tiny had positioned himself along the bulkhead where he had a good view of her face.

Indio wiped his hands on the legs of his shipsuit. “Parvati asked me if you were bisexual and I told her I



wasn't sure.”

“And...”

“I h-have no control over them.”

Cait tucked her screen in her pocket, sat back and faked a smile. “I see.” She felt trapped, as if he'd built a cage around her when she wasn't looking. “What about the part where you agree to father any children they might want?” Deliberately infusing her words with bitter anger, she watched them strike. “Don't tell me you knew nothing about that.”

He leaned back against the wall and closed his eyes. “Parvati asked me, but that's as far as it went.”

There! He admitted it! Cait jumped in for the kill. “You discussed it.”

He shook his head. “She discussed it.” He opened his eyes. Quiet reason permeated his voice. “I didn't agree or disagree.”

Cait caught her breath. He was telling her the truth. She shot a look at Parvati and Darlene standing by Socorro. They studiously avoided looking in her direction. A guilty aura surrounded them.

She studied the bulkhead and waited for her anger to subside. All right. Now that she knew where they were coming from, maybe she could defuse the situation before it got even more out of hand.

“I was mistaken,” she whispered.

Indio held out his hand. His eager relief reached out to comfort her. “Hey, it's all

right. I'd rather get it out in the open than let things fester between us.”

She slipped her hand into his. His joy pierced her with that simple touch. Why was he able to affect her like this? It was only one night they shared together. But somehow, that one night was all it took to forge an empathic bond right to her heart. If she didn't have Socorro, she'd take him to her cubicle now and lose herself in the sensations making love to him over and over again.

He rubbed his thumb across her fingers. His emotions seesawed from joy to confused relief into a hesitant encouragement. “They're good women, both of them. Parvati used to be a cop in her country but she left 'cause she didn't agree with the custom of purdah. Darlene's an ex-Marine.”

“How long have you known them?” Maybe if she let him talk it out a bit more, she could figure out what he was trying to tell her.

“A couple of years now. We've worked together on different assignments.”

“Construction?”

Uneasiness flowed from him into her. She felt it as a sense of something hidden shifting within him. He sighed. “I can't explain it here. Too many eyes and ears.”

Where had she encountered that feeling before? Cait let her gaze drift across the room. Tiny was still leaning against the bulkhead and watching her out of the corner of his eye. Ah! She relaxed. It was the

way she and Kevin felt when someone asked the wrong questions about her family. The feeling of certain things left unspoken simply because it was safer not to mention them.

“Parvati's a notorious flirt,” Indio said quickly. “Most times I can't tell if she's flirting or serious with me.”

Cait nodded absently.

Indio pointed at Socorro. “What's that thing she's playing?”

Cait grinned. “Kevin made it. It's a player piano without the piano case around it.”

“Oh.”

“You see that roll of paper with all those punchholes in it that's turning around at the top?”

Indio nodded thoughtfully. “It looks like something from a museum. Like an old fashioned computer programming card.”

“Well, it operates on the same principle as those cards. The foot pedals pump air through the holes. The pattern of the holes tells the keyboard which keys to hit.”

Indio rubbed his thumb across her little finger some more. “The singing's a bit off key.”

She shrugged. “Can't have everything.”

“Different songs too. I never heard that one before.”

Cait tilted her head and listened for a few moments. “Blue was the sky and blue were her eyes, just like the blue skirt she wore...”

She smiled. “That one's called The Blue Skirt Waltz. It came out in the early 1900's.”

Indio gave her an odd look. “How'd you know that?”

“You'd be surprised what's in the attic at my home. Lot's of real old stuff there.”

“I know what you mean. Grandpa hates to throw stuff out. He's turned into a regular pack rat.” He grinned at her. “Did Kevin rig up an EVA suit for the cat yet?”

“He's almost done. Says he has a couple of tests to run on it tonight. The hard part's going to be convincing Licorice to wear it.”

“Huh! That'll be something to watch. Is he selling tickets?”

“No. Parvati cornered the market already.”

Indio shook his head, then a grin twitched on the corner of his mouth. “It figures.”

“When you came over here, there was something else you wanted to talk about, wasn't there?”

His thumb stopped moving. A deer in the headlights look crossed his face. “Yes, there was,” he said carefully. “There's something different about you, about your

family, isn't there? Something you're holding back from me 'cause you don't know how I'm going to react.”

Cait tilted her head and studied him for a long moment. For him to deduce that much implied a very keen intelligence beneath his stolidly gruff facade. Besides, she never did get a chance to finish telling him about herself other than that aborted attempt in Tiny's Emporium. “Yes there is.”

He nodded. “Well, I have an idea what it might be and I don't think it's that big a deal.” His gaze flickered across the room and back to her. “But this is the wrong place and time to discuss it. Maybe later on. Okay?”

“Later,” she agreed. The word came out as a husky sigh. Anticipation tingled between them.

“Yo! Captain's coming!” Sergio's voice called out the warning from the connecting airlock.

Indio pulled Cait to her feet and steadied her against the rebound of his sudden move. “Get Socorro out of here. I'll stay behind and help hold the fort.”

No time to say anything more. Cait rushed over, took Socorro by the hand and waited for her to stuff Licorice inside the top of her shipsuit. Tiny cycled the other airlock hatchway open and waved them through.

The sharp burst of hope from Tiny stopped Cait in her tracks. She stared at him. Sexual tension was normal for such a crowded ship. Something she'd automatically relegated to the background ambiance. He blazed with a passion that scorched her senses and made her want to feel his hands on her body.

Goddess! This was never going to work. Why did their culture have to twist things around and make everything so complicated? A Sidhe man would understand and welcome him into a relationship with her. Indio? He'd never understand.

Cait hardened her face into a mask of indifference and pulled Socorro along. They hurried down the curving corridor to the next compartment. Velcro scratched under their sneaks.

\* \* \* \*

Cait pulled the sleeping net down and secured it over Socorro. Licorice was already tucked inside a sack beside her. “How does that feel?”

Both of them, girl and cat, yawned. “Feels good,” Socorro murmured. “Licorice likes her sleeping bag too.”

“Go to sleep now.” Cait pushed herself away from the bed and sank down to the

floor. She folded her legs under her and picked up her sofscreen. “I have some maps here I need to study.”

Socorro's head popped up over the edge of the bed. “Cait?”

“Yes.”

“What's a nick-tick-tate-ing membrane?”

Cait stopped. “Where did you hear that word, child?”

“Aunt Jule said it when she showed Daddy Kevin's picture on her ‘puter.”

“Ah.” Cait unfolded her screen and squeezed its corners to stiffen it. “When did this happen?”

“The morning after I met you.” Socorro scratched Licorice under the chin. The cat's purr rumbled past her fingers. “She was talking to Daddy and showing him something on her sofscreen. When I asked them what it meant, Daddy changed the subject. When Grandpa came up on the shuttle, I asked him. He gave me a funny look, then said it explained his vision of cat-eyed people and meant he was supposed to help me sneak onto this ship.”

Cait left the sofscreen floating in the air and pushed herself back over to the bunk.

She reached out with her hand and scratched the top of Licorice's head. The cat's eyes

slid shut and the tip of her tongue stuck out as her purring became louder and faster. “Here, I'll show you what it is.” She pulled one of the cat's eyelids open. “You see that inner eyelid that's covering her eye now?”

“Yes.”

“That's a nictitating membrane.”

A frown creased Socorro's forehead. “Then why...?” The rest of the question trembled on her lips.

Cait tilted Socorro's chin up with her finger. “Do you know what recessive and dominant genes are?”

Socorro nodded. “I learned about them in biology class last month.”

“Kevin and I were born with this extra eyelid. They're a dominant gene in my lineage.” Cait studied the blank wall for a few moments, then added thoughtfully, “During the last couple of centuries, we've had quite a few occasions of outbreeding and so far, every child born to our sisterlines has these extra eyelids.”

Socorro reached out to Cait's face. “Can you show me?” She asked breathlessly.

Cait showed her.

“Oh!” Socorro leaned closer for a better look. “Does it hurt?”

“No. It protects our eyes underwater and when there's a strong wind, that's all.”

“Is it a recessive gene for me?”

“I don't know for sure if it is, honey. In the corners of your eyes, there's a little patch of white skin. That piece of skin used to be a nictitating membrane. Way way back in the past something happened to your

ancestors that mutated it into a recessive gene for humans.”

“Except for your family.”

“Yes.” Cait smiled. “Except for my people.” She put her finger on Socorro's lips. “Don't say anything to your daddy yet about this. I want to talk to him first. Okay?”

“Okay.” A huge yawn stretched Socorro's mouth out of shape. “Thanks for explaining. Goodnight, Cait.”

“Goodnight, child.” Cait kissed her cheek. “Sleep tight. I'll join you in a little while.” She pushed herself back down to sit on the floor again.

It was such a simple thing to explain it to a child. Why did it have to be so hard to explain it to an adult? Cait chewed on her lip as she stared at her ‘puter. She reached out and keyed it up to search for cross references about Indio, Tiny, Parvati and Darlene.

An hour later, she studied the results. Lots of commendations for Parvati and Darlene for police work on Earth. Before Indio was injured protecting his grandfather, he

was a policeman on the reservation. And Tiny, he wore a Navy SEAL ring.

Looked there was a lot of stuff going on under the surface here. How long had they worked together? What were they looking for? Drug traffickers? Should she ask Indio? Or just wait and see?

Cait shook her head. When Indio was ready to let her know about this facet of his life, then he'd tell her. The same way she'd have to tell him her secrets if she wanted to keep his trust.

Cait shut her sofscreen off, folded it up and unlatched the storage panel below the bed. Those maps could wait until tomorrow. She pulled out three one-piece jumpsuits and her sewing kit. If she ever saw Grandpa Edelmiro again, she'd nail his hide to the wall. Where were his brains when he stowed Socorro away on this ship without a single change of clothes? They would remain on the asteroid for at least three months. The child's yellow coverall would be in tatters by then.

She fingered the soft fabric of the jumpsuits and wrinkled her nose up at their drab grey color. They were the smallest suits she could find in the supply bin. A single zipper opened them from neck to crotch. The wrists, ankles and neck were snug fitting to keep skin flakes and hair loss at a minimum.

From her sewing kit, she selected a small pair of scissors, a needle and some thread, then used the scissors to rip the side seams open. It took about twenty-five minutes to cut and sew the first suit down to a proper size. Cait spread the jumpsuit out and studied it with a critical eye. The tiny rosebuds she added to the collar and wristbands brightened it up a bit.

And, first thing in the morning, she'd show Socorro how to operate the zero-g

shower. That would be fun. They'd have to climb into a transparent sack with a hose that came out of the wall and spray soapy water all over themselves, then switch the dial over to vacuum to finish the job.

A tingle at the back of her head alerted Cait. Someone she knew was approaching the cubicle. She reached with her mind. It was Kevin. Pushing the door open, she stuck her head out and saw him at the other end of the walkway.

He floated over with swimming motions of his arms, hauled himself up to the door and held up a cube with a tiny airlock in it.

“What's that? The cat's EVA suit?”

He shook his head. “You'll see the suit tomorrow. This is a zero-g kitty litter box with the litter magnetized to stay on the bottom. Bring it to hydroponics when you have to empty it. The bottom folds out.”

Cait motioned at him to lean closer. “Julisa knows about our eyes. Socorro told me.”

“Indio?” He mouthed the name.

“He knows. Julisa told him.”

Kevin nodded slowly. His eyes went distant and unfocused for a moment, then he shook his head. “We'll sort out that part later. There's something funny going on around here. When I ran the last test on the suit, I sensed Fergus coming down the corridor. I ducked into the air vent...”

Cait knew better than to rush him. She waited.

“Fergus has a tight beam transmitter. He used it to send a coded message burst.”

“Ah!” Was this the reason why they had such a tight-knit group with military and investigative backgrounds on board? Such a nice sensation to have her gut feeling about Fergus proven right.

“Find Tiny. Tell him what you found out.”

Kevin gave her an odd look. “Why?”

“He used to be a Navy SEAL,” she whispered. “If anyone knows what to do about it, he will.”

“Okay!” Kevin eased himself back out into the corridor and left.

A few minutes later, Cait curved her body around Socorro and secured the safety netting. No matter what happened, she'd protect this girl child with her life. Anything less would shame her and dishonor her sisterline.

## Chapter 9

Indio peered inside the rec room. “Jesus!” So much for an early start. The place was packed. A solid mass of guys wearing wrinkled coveralls blocked the hatchway. Multiple conversations bounced off the bulkheads. He kicked off, floated to the ceiling where it wasn't as crowded and spotted Kevin in front standing beside a wooden crate on a makeshift platform in the front of the room. A red sheet covered the crate. Magnets tacked all four corners of the sheet down to the metal grid of the floor.

“Edelmiro!” Julisa and Socorro waved at him from the right bulkhead. Indio swam across the ceiling and hauled himself down on the wall's handholds. He pulled out his tether line and clipped it onto the railing

between her and Socorro with an audible snap.

“You cut your hair.”

“Long hair's a nuisance in low gravity.” Jule gave him an expectant look. “Well, do you like it?”

He pulled a corkscrew curl of nut brown hair from her hairnet and twirled it around his finger. “It looks great.”

“Darlene did a pin curl perm for me. It's the latest thing.”

Socorro held up a squeeze bulb of chocolate ice cream. “Do you want some?” Her cheeks were flushed with excitement.

“Uh, no thanks.” He waved her offering away, then peered at her head. “Did Darlene do your hair too?”

Socorro arched her head and turned it sideways. “Cait fixed it just like hers. Do you like it?”

Twisted around her scalp like a crown was a five strand braid. The black hairnet blended nicely with her whiskey colored hair. “I like it a lot.” He rubbed his thumb across the tiny rosebuds on her collar. “This is nice.” He inhaled the faint lavender scent of her hair. It was the same scent from Cait's hair. She must have used her shampoo on Socorro's hair this morning.

“Cait sewed them on for me. Look!” Socorro pointed over his shoulder. “She just came in. Over there. By Tiny.”

Trying not to act like a love struck fool, even if that was exactly how he felt, Indio turned around slowly and looked at Cait. Standing next to Tiny's massive body, she looked small and fragile. He watched her tap Tiny on the arm. Then Tiny leaned his head down close to hers. What were they talking about? Indio's hands itched. He wanted to reach out over the crowd and pull her away to his side.

Tiny put his hands on her waist. What the hell was he doing? Indio straightened up for a better look. Tiny boosted her up to the ceiling. His aim was perfect. Cait flipped herself around, bounced off the ceiling with one foot and propelled across the room with a scissors kick of her legs. Lord, she looked beautiful. The grey coverall showed off her arms and legs while zero g did interesting things to her breasts under the thin clingy material.

Indio reached up to her ankle and steadied her.

Cait braced her hand against the bulkhead and flipped herself around upside down face to face with him. “You got any room for me here?”

Socorro bounced up from where she was standing on the other side of Indio. “You can have my spot.” She started drifting toward the ceiling.

Cait reached out with her left hand, snagged Socorro's tether line and hauled her back down to Indio's arms.

Socorro stuck her squeeze bulb in Cait's face. “Do you want some ice cream?”

Cait handed her tether line to Indio. “Wait a minute.”

He clipped the line onto the railing with his. She tucked her feet under, grabbed his arm and hauled herself down, then hooked her leg around his leg and scrunched her body up against his.

“Thanks.” She accepted the squeeze bulb and took a taste. “Mmmmmmm.” Then passed it back to Socorro and wrapped her arms around Indio's waist.

The first thought to penetrate the happy fog in his brain was, she's going to give me a heart attack if she keeps this up. But he wasn't born yesterday. No way was he going to stop this sensory overload.

“Okay!” Tiny's yell silenced the crowd. “Let's get this show on the road!”

Kevin bowed and flashed a smile at his audience. His coverall was crisp and clean. He must have washed and ironed it especially for today. Indio risked a quick glance at his own coverall. It was wrinkled but reasonably clean.

With a flick of his wrist, Kevin dislodged the magnets and pulled the makeshift curtain off the crate. Licorice, the star attraction, lay on a bright yellow pillow with her paws tucked in under her chest, her black fur an excellent contrast to the pillow. Neatly stacked and folded beside the pillow were the various components of her EVA suit.

Licorice opened her mouth in a tremendous yawn that displayed her sharp white teeth and pink tongue.

Kevin picked up a piece of spandex and unfolded it. He held it aloft and let everyone view the bottom half of cat-sized long underwear. With a deft movement of his right hand, he scooped up the cat, slid her tail through the proper opening, then tugged the pants up over her hind legs.

Licorice's ears went completely flat. Her chatoyant eyes blazed bright yellow.

“Mmmmmmeeeeoooooww!” She twisted and squirmed in a frantic attempt to escape Kevin's grip. He bounced around and compensated for the cat's movements. Of

course, having his sneaks firmly planted on the floor's Velcro strip kept him in place.

Socorro snorted and smothered a giggle behind her hand. Indio caught her squeeze bulb before it floated away. Cait snaked her left hand out from his waist and snatched it. “Can I have the rest of this?”

“Sure,” Socorro said absently. “I'm full.”

“Thanks.”

Kevin pulled the cat-sized shirt over Licorice's head and murmured soothingly. “Shhhhhhuush.”

The cat's ears went flat against her skull. Her tail whipped back and forth. “MMMMMMMMMeEEEEeoooooowwwww!” Her left paw whipped out across the back of his hand while he pulled the material over her right paw. Blood spurted out from the cut. He covered her left paw with the material then pulled the shirt over her stomach and folded the Velcro tabs down and connected it to the bottom half of the long underwear suit. Minuscule clumps of black fur mingled with the beads of blood floating around his hand.

Julisa pulled a plastic baggie from her pocket and unzipped it. Indio glared at her.



She slanted a wary glance at Cait.

Cait's cold lips brushed his earlobe. He hoped that meant she wasn't paying any attention to Julisa.

Kevin flipped Licorice around upside down, pinned her body under his arm and put the tail section on. Her legs flailed and scratched uselessly at his side while he attached it.

“Shhhhh. Shhhhhh.” He flipped Licorice around again, cradled her against his chest and scratched her under the chin.

Licorice's teeth clamped onto his thumb. “MMRRRRRRRRRRHHHHHHHHH!” Her triumphant howl bounced off the walls.

His audience leaned forward and elbowed each other. “That's a girl! You got ‘im a good one!” a man's voice yelled from the rear.

Kevin pried his thumb loose. More blood spurted up into the air. Julisa pushed off from her seat and hurriedly chased the globules around with her baggie. Kevin rolled his eyes sideways at Julisa's acrobatics. At the same time, one of the panels in the wall behind him opened. A hand sized automated cleaning robot rolled out of the opening. It extruded a vacuum hose from its abdominal region and started suctioning up the stray globules of blood and fur floating around Julisa.

More appreciative commentary bounced around the room.

“Ouch!” Indio jerked his head back. Cait had just nipped his ear. “What'd you do that for?”

“If you wanted a blood sample, all you had to do was ask,” she whispered.

“Hey,” he whispered back. “I didn't know she was going to do that.”

Socorro squirmed in his arms, twisted around and looked back and forth between them. “What's wrong?”

Cait smiled at her. “Nothing.”

Socorro nodded and settled down.

Was he ever going to figure Cait out? Indio put that thought aside and watched Kevin hook the tiny air bottles and hoses to the back of the suit. A round of cheers and applause saluted his efforts.

“Fifteen minutes!” A woman's voice yelled out over the crowd's excited murmur. “Five more minutes for the helmet and I win the pool!”

Kevin pinned the cat down to the crate with one hand and held his scratched hand out for Julisa's attention.

Jule zipped her baggie shut, dug a Band Aid out of her pocket, tore the paper wrapper from it and applied it to Kevin's outstretched hand.

“MMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMEEEEEEEEEEEEEOOOORRRRRRRRRRRWWWWWWW!!!!!”

Licorice's yowl climbed to an excruciating pinnacle of outrage and despair.

Kevin rubbed the cat behind her ears. "There. There. Hush a baby. Her's a goooooood little girl. Almost done now." He picked up a tiny black polarized helmet, placed it over her head and clipped it to the pleated neck segment.

Indio watched the EVA suit puff up around the cat's body. It looked like a good job with no leaks from the pressurized air flowing into the suit. Kevin placed her back on top of the crate.

"Ahhhhhhhh! Ain't she cute?" Kyle's voice called from the left bulkhead.

A woman's voice answered him from the opposite side of the room. "She looks a hell of a lot cuter than you. That's for sure."

Licorice's helmeted head swiveled back and forth and surveyed the crowd. She appeared remarkably calm after all her fussing. With the accordion pleating around the middle section and tail, the suit looked appropriately cat like. Indio wondered how much the vid cam operator would charge for copies of this event.

Socorro wiggled around. She tapped Indio on the arm. "Let me go now. I'm going to help Kevin take Licorice's suit off."

Tiny clapped his hands together from the other side of the room. "Okay!" he yelled. "Party's over. We've got work to do. Turnaround's scheduled in forty five minutes."

"Cait!" Parvati called from the opposite side where she was standing with Darlene. "You got a minute."

Parvati's cornrows were gone. She had her black hair pulled back into a smooth knot at the nape of her neck. All she needed now was a caste mark on her forehead and an iridescent sari to impersonate a Hindu love goddess. And Darlene had shaved her pistachio hair into a Mohawk buzz cut. Indio crossed his fingers. Hopefully, they were on their good behavior today.

"Daddy!" Socorro waved at him to come over and help her with Licorice's suit.

Indio flashed a helpless look at Cait. The cat might scratch Socorro. "Hurry back!"

\* \* \* \*

Cait turned and studied the jumbled mass of men and women milling around the exits. She swarmed up the wall, then swung across on the ceiling handholds to Parvati and Darlene. It didn't take more than a minute for her to reach them.

Darlene reached up to Cait's ankle, smiled broadly and pulled her down. Her dark gaze promised extreme intimacy. Cait wondered if she should leave. Maybe this wasn't such a good idea after all.

Parvati whispered, "We've decided to accept your offer."

Cait uncrossed her mental fingers and sagged against the bulkhead.

"Yeah," Darlene said softly, so softly that Cait had to lean over to hear her. "We'll perform that ritual 'awakening' for your younger brothers. We know it's a lost cause for us with you."

Parvati's voice went all soft and husky. "You have no idea how much this means to us."

Cait turned to Darlene. "Are you sure it's not going to bother you?"

"Hey." Darlene's mouth widened into a lascivious grin. "I like the part where we get to 'awaken' your sisters, if we do a good job on your brothers."

Parvati tucked a stray strand of Cait's hair back under her hairnet. "If they're anything like you then that part will be sheer joy."

Cait grabbed hold of their hands and gave them a quick squeeze. "Thanks!" It looked like things were going to work out after all. If they still wanted kids, then after the awakening they could ask one of her brothers to perform that duty with no strings attached.

"You could take the time to, um, show us more details about this awakening." The gleam in Darlene's eyes matched the sensuality she radiated at Cait.

Cait grinned, shook her head, then kissed her and Parvati on their cheeks. "Stop teasing me, okay?"

They grinned back and released her. She turned around. Kyle and Dushawn blocked her exit. Her first thought was to shove both of them aside.

"How's it going?" Kyle asked.

"Fine," she said warily.

"We're headed downside to snag some time on the treadwall," Dushawn said helpfully. "Do you want to join us?"

She reached at them with her empathic senses. It wasn't anything she could put her finger on. They weren't saying or doing anything wrong, yet everything about them screamed 'danger' to her.

"No," she said. "No thanks. Not today."

"Hey! What's the problem?" Kyle floated closer.

She braced her feet on the floor in order to push him away. That's when Tiny's head showed up behind Kyle. He placed his massive hands on Kyle's and Dushawn's shoulders. They gave guilty starts and floundered under his grip.

"I distinctly heard her say no." Tiny's voice promised dire retribution.

"Yeah she did," Kyle mumbled hastily.

Tiny shoved Kyle and Dushawn in the general direction of the exit. He curled his hands into fists and glared at their backs.

Goddess! This was getting way out of hand. The eloquent silence behind her from Parvati and Darlene made the back of Cait's neck itch.

Tiny turned around and looked at her. A hopeful aura shimmered around him. He pulled a piece of foil wrapped chocolate from his shirt pocket. "I saw you eating Socorro's ice cream. Do you want a piece of candy?"

Her mind told her that it would never work. That she shouldn't encourage him like this. Her heart told her not to hurt his feelings by rejecting his offer. "Sure. Thanks."

He laid the candy bar in her hand and folded her fingers over the wrapper. Pure elation flowed into her from his touch. Goddess above! He had no idea how much he tempted her with his need.

"Cait!" Socorro called out. Her sneaks clung to the Velcro strips on the floor while she ran across the room with Indio and Kevin right behind her. She skidded to a stop against Tiny's leg, totally oblivious to her father's caustic glance at him. "Daddy's sneaking me and Licorice into hydroponics. Do you want to go with us?"

Kevin swooped in from the other side. He wrapped his arm around Cait's waist. "Not now honey. I need some quality time with my sister. Okay?"

"Okay!" Socorro tugged at Tiny's hand. "What about you?"

Tiny smiled down at her. "Sure thing, honey."

Indio tucked Licorice into the crook of his left arm and handed the sack containing the EVA suit to Kevin. "Here. Keep this for me. I don't want to lose it."

\* \* \* \*

"You're gonna have to admit it." Kevin opened the door to the medical supply room with a coded chip and motioned at Cait to go inside first. "You're in love with him."

Cait sighed. Her aunt Lilith had carefully explained this Sidhe phenomena to her during her menarche.

*"Take care who you fall in love with," Lilith had said. "Sidhe men and women produce higher levels of pheromones when this happens. The only thing that brings the*

*pheromone level down to a manageable level is the physical act of making love. You'll know the difference when it happens. It won't be sex play. It'll become a compulsion."*

Cait didn't want to talk about it right now. "Where'd you get the entry chip?"

Kevin wiggled his eyebrows. "Light fingers. I made an extra copy."

He slid the door shut and locked it. "Don't change the subject."

She sagged against him and let the familiar thread of his dru-bond wrap itself around her. Love, safety and absolute trust filled her.

"I didn't mean for this to happen. I figured it would be all right. Indio's older and more experienced."

Kevin kissed the top of her head. "So you hopped into bed with him and let him forge a bond straight into your heart and soul."

“I know.” She closed her eyes and listened to his heart beating under her ear.

He rubbed his hand down her arm. “How much does he know?”

Not enough, was her first thought. And there were some things better left unsaid. Things like the fact that her hymen was surgically removed when she was fourteen and Indio was her first lover. “I should have told him about our Sidhe ancestry before I let him into my heart. Everything happened so fast, I didn't think ahead.”

“No use fighting it.” Kevin tilted her face up with his finger. “You better make love to him again before you drive everyone crazy, including yourself. This pheromone thing is getting way out of hand. And what the hell's going on between you and Parvati and Darlene?”

Cait pulled a strand of hair down from her hairnet and wound it around her finger. “You see, they wanted to hook up with me and Indio.” She slanted a look at Kevin. “They're good friends with Indio already. They figured he'd make a good sperm donor and, as for me...” She lifted her shoulder in a half shrug.

“You're the icing on the cake for them...” The left side of Kevin's mouth quirked up in a wry smile. “You know you have a glow about you now.”

“Really?” She jabbed her finger at his chest. “I can remember when you compared it to going ‘in heat’ like a cat.”

A scowl darkened his face. “I was just a kid. Now I understand what Aunt Lily meant. Everything about you glows. It explains why people used to accuse the Sidhe of casting a glamour’ upon them.”

“I took care of the problem with Parvati and Darlene already. They've agreed to ‘awaken’ our brothers and sisters.”

Kevin jumped up and ricocheted off the ceiling. “That's great! They'll have a proper ‘glimorf’ ritual instead of having to rely on masturbation like us.” He hauled himself back down to the floor. “How'd you manage that? Did you tell them we're Sidhe?”

“Well ... not exactly.”

“What did you tell them?”

“I told them about our eyes and...”

“And what?”

Maybe it wasn't such a good idea after all. Cait rubbed her hand across her forehead. “I told them they'd have to meet our fathers first. I figured if they could handle that, then everything would fall into place. It's not like we have a whole lot of choice.”

Kevin bounced back and collided with one of the tall canisters racked up on the opposite wall.

“Stop it!” She yelled at him. “That’s nitrous oxide!”

He peered at the label on the nearest can. “Laughing gas?”

There were times when she wished she didn't have a brother. Life would be so much simpler. “Don't get any ideas. No practical jokes. Okay?”

The clanging sound of the turnaround bell startled the both of them. They had five minutes to find a secure surface and strap themselves in. Cait thumbed the latch for the emergency cot. It unfolded itself from the wall.

Kevin stuffed the sack with Licorice's EVA suit in the corner. It was a tight fit but he scrunched himself over for Cait and secured the safety for them. A subsonic hum vibrated through her teeth. The room tilted and spun around under them. The cot swiveled and the wall became the floor. The rack of canisters slid on a separate track and reoriented itself to wall.

The humming crested, then scaled down. There was a quiet sensation of weight against her body. The fluid in her sinuses settled down. With the ship braking at a gentle one third gee for the next fifteen hours, they could walk around a little easier. No need to strap in again until the final maneuvers at one and two gees.

Kevin handed her the entry chip. “Here. Put it to good use.”

She pocketed it. “You have an ugly feeling about Fergus. Just like I do, don't you?”

“Yeah.” Kevin unclipped the safety net. “He smells like trouble coming down the pike. And, if and when it happens, it'd be nice to have someone on our side with medical knowledge to access this room.”

Cait sat up and wrapped her arms around her knees. Kevin was right. Until Fergus made his next move the only thing they could do was watch and be prepared for the worst. She hated not having any specific course of action planned out ahead of time.

Knowing Tiny and Indio were aware of Fergus and making plans of their own was a comforting thought.

“What are you gonna do about Tiny?” Kevin asked.

Cait shook her head. She didn't want to dissect her feelings about Tiny right now.

“Neither he nor Indio is Sidhe.” Kevin continued relentlessly. “Their culture's a mess. They'll never accept our customs.”

She unclenched her arms and sagged back against him. “It might work. There's a strong dru-bond between them.”

“No greater love hath a man than he lay down his life for his friend.” Kevin squeezed her shoulder and projected his sad assessment of the situation. “It's not gonna work. They'll never accept a shared relationship with you.”

Cait sighed. “Oh goddess, I wish they could. I guess I'll have to push Tiny away.”

Kevin squeezed her shoulder again. They sat in companionable silence for a few moments, then he said, "I'm gonna have to talk to Julisa. She suspects something. Why else would she go after my blood like she did?"

"She knows about our eyes."

His arm stiffened around her shoulder. "How?"

"I don't know exactly how. Socorro asked me what nictitating membrane meant because she heard Julisa talking about it with Indio."

Kevin sighed. "That means I have to talk to both of them then."

Cait twisted her head back and stared at him. "Are you sure?"

He rubbed his hand across the stubble on his scalp. "Hey! As your brother, it's my responsibility to screen prospective suitors and their families. If they can't handle what I'm going to tell them, then maybe you better rethink your priorities."

Cait looked at the time, then shrugged his arm off her shoulder. "You better leave now. Dr. Kim's scheduled to come on duty in five minutes. I can explain my presence here, but not yours."

## Chapter 10

Something was wrong. Something was missing. Cait tugged a strand of hair out and chewed on it. There was a niggling sensation at the back of her mind. She'd forgotten something. What? Sick bay looked the same as always with clean white countertops, latched cabinets and an empty gurney in the middle of the room. But...

The back of her neck tingled.

Dr. Kim's warm baritone said from behind her. "What a wonderful surprise!"

She turned around slowly and found her gaze drawn to the triple claw marks on his left cheek. Claw marks that stood out against his ebony skin. Were they tribal scars? She wondered. If so, then why did he have a Korean surname?

Dr. Kim's gaze was perplexed. "What brings you here now? I wasn't expecting you to report on duty for another hour at least." His salt and pepper hair was curled so tightly against his scalp he didn't have to wear a hairnet under zero g conditions.

"Oh." Her mind went blank. "I was in the corridor when the strap down alarm went off." She gestured at the open door for the medical supply room. "I used the cot." Goddess! That sounded so fake.

Dr. Kim radiated a keen interest in her words. Should she risk an empathic probe at him to see if he believed her flimsy story? Or continue to spin a story until she tripped herself up with too many inconsistencies? No. Cait decided her safest option was to leave. "I'll get out of your way now."

Dr. Kim smiled reassuringly at her. "Don't go. I need your assistance."

“With what?” Cait asked slowly.

He fingered the material of his coverall. “More and more, I’m beginning to feel like a member of a penal colony. Did you ever see such ugly shipsuits?”

Why was he changing the subject? Was it because of whatever he wanted her to help him with? “Yes. They are ugly.”

He cleared his throat. “Well. It is a rather awkward request. One I’m not too comfortable with…” His voice trailed off.

“What?” She projected encouragement at him.

He twisted his mouth into a half scowl. “Nowan Corp radioed it to Captain DeAngelo a half an hour ago. Something about a security lapse. They want a complete inventory of all medical supplies.”

Cait’s stomach did a flip flop. “W-what?”

Dr. Kim frowned. “Hymph!” He snorted, unfolded his sofscreen, squeezed its corners to harden it and tabbed down to the listing of medical supplies. “Security lapse. In a pig’s eye!”

Cait sorted through what he’d said. She felt her eyebrows scale her forehead. “Nowan Corp didn’t buy any of these medical supplies. The miners’ co-op bought them. Why should Nowan need a list?”

Dr. Kim stared at her. “Now why didn’t I think of that? Their message specifically mentioned the possibility of unauthorized personnel having access to vital medical supplies.” He tapped his finger on the erase code, then folded up his sofscreen with a satisfying thump. “So much for that request.”

Cait felt herself relaxing. Dr. Kim was okay. He didn’t like being pushed around by Nowan Corp.

Dr. Kim slanted an odd glance at her face, then wandered over to the countertop and ran his finger across it. He gazed at the latches on the cabinets. He went to the supply room door and stuck his head inside. “Was this open when you got here?”

Kevin’s stolen copy of the coded entry chip felt like it was burning a hole in Cait’s pocket. She resisted the urge to touch it, walked over to the door and looked inside.

Dr. Kim wandered around the cubicle. He stopped and peered at the gauges on the Nitrous Oxide tanks. He coughed. “Um. Did your crewmates have a union meeting this morning?”

The mental image of Licorice’s valiant struggle flickered into Cait’s mind. She suppressed the smile that trembled on her lips. “Ah, yes. Kind of.”

Dr. Kim nodded, walked over to the emergency cot and reached down to straighten out the cover. He stopped, bent over and pulled out the little sack with Licorice’s EVA suit. “What’s this? Your lunch?”

Cait sagged against the doorway. Panic skittered through her. That’s what she forgot. Now what? Awful hard to cover this up with another lie. She took a deep breath, then exhaled. “A kitten,” she managed to say.



“A kitten?” Dr. Kim raised his eyebrows, untied the string and peered inside the bag.

“One of the miners smuggled it aboard. That's an EVA suit for the kitten.”

“Fascinating!” He walked past her into sick bay. “So that's why we weren't allowed anywhere near your meeting.” He pulled out the tiny helmet and air tanks, held them out and watched them fall in slow motion onto the gurney. “It feels strange to have gravity again. Even if it's only one third g.”

Cait didn't have to probe at him. His silent humor flowed over her. She walked around to the other side, propped herself up on her elbows and looked at him.

He poured the rest of the components out on the gurney. “So. How did it go? The fitting?”

Cait fingered the precise stitches on the cat-sized longjohns. “It went pretty well. There was only a minimal amount of bloodshed.”

Dr. Kim grinned. “Whose? The cat or the, um, person dressing the cat?”

Cait's grin matched his. She couldn't help herself. His appreciative delight was contagious. “The person dressing the cat.”

Dr. Kim leaned forward. “Who was this person?”

His expectant look gave her a funny feeling. It was almost like he wanted her to say Kevin's name. Why? It might be a good idea to distract him by changing the subject entirely. “Dr. Kim?”

“Yes.”

“I don't understand. You're from Africa. But Kim's a Korean name.”

“That's a long story. Are you sure you want to hear it?”

She stepped back and propped her hip against the counter behind her. “Yes, please.”

Dr. Kim nodded. “My name. Well. Where should I begin?” He stroked Licorice's EVA suit. “It was way before your time. Did you ever hear about the slaughter in Rwanda?”

“Yes.”

His gaze went unfocused. “Dr. Lui Kim and his wife, Marie, were working for an organization called Doctors Without Borders. They found me under my mother's body after a massacre at one of the refugee camps. I was two years old. They adopted me.”

“The claw marks on your face, are they tribal scars?”

He shrugged. “They chased away a couple of hyenas eating the bodies. I received my medical degree in England. Do you realize that every planet in our solar system was seeded with life by the comets from the Oort Cloud?”

Cait nodded. Having a common genetic base that developed on another planet in this solar system would explain why her people were able to successfully interbreed with humans.

Dr. Kim took out his sofscreen, unfolded it and fiddled with the control tabs.

He pulled up a vid cam telephoto of the Pot of Gold. “Look at these craters! And the house sized boulders scattered around the surface.” Enthusiasm spilled out from him like a gentle breeze. Cait relaxed and came back to lean against the gurney. She recognized someone expounding on his favorite hobby.

He zoomed the screen in for a close up. “Here's where we're going to land. You see the parallel grooves and ridges crossing this crater?”

“Yes.” She leaned over for a better look. These images were much clearer than the ones Tiny downloaded for her. The time/date in the corner told her this photo was taken within the past hour. This was radical! These photos were brand new.

“Those are signs of underground layers formed by volcanic eruptions. This means the asteroid may have been part of a planet torn apart by a major collision.” Cait felt like hugging him. The idea of actually finding proof of her foremothers’ origin made her giddy with hope. Perhaps she could ask him to transfer these images to her screen.

“But enough about me.” Dr. Kim shut his screen off. “Your hair. Is that your natural color?”

She pulled her hand back. A chill traced her spine. “Yes.”

“It's such a unique color. Would you mind letting me take a DNA sample for my files?”

Wait a minute! He was staring at her eyes. Not her hair.

Dr. Kim twisted his hands together. “That wasn't very subtle of me, was it?”

Cait focused her empathic ability and reached at his mind. He radiated a complex mixture of guilt and wistful curiosity. “H-how?”

He looked away. His gaze flicked back to hers. “It's not Ms. Arroyo's fault I found out. I walked in on her when she had the images up on her sofscreen.”

“Julisa!” No time like the present to find out the worst. “What images?”

“Of your brother's face.”

“Kevin?”

“When he tried out for the position as emergency repair specialist, it was taped. Ms. Arroyo saw something that aroused her suspicions. She downloaded the tape from the vid cam it to her files, slowed it down and advanced it frame by frame.”

Dr. Kim propped his arms on the gurney and leaned closer. His gaze pleaded with her to hear him out. “His eyes have a nictitating membrane. Do you have the same mutation?”

Oh Goddess! What should she do? What was Dr. Kim going to do? How did he feel about her now that he knew? She looked at the door behind him and gauged the distance. Was it close enough for her to make a quick exit?

“Please.” He laid his hands over hers. “Don't be frightened.”

“I'm not a specimen for you to dissect.”

He nodded. She felt his concern and need to explain himself flow from him to her through his touch. “I'm fully aware of you as a vibrantly beautiful young woman. I could never think of you as a specimen.”

She pulled her hands away and held them behind her back. Her heart felt like it was going to jump out of her chest. His compliments echoed in her mind. Was he feeling the effect of her elevated pheromone levels too? Should she use that against him? No! If she did that, she'd feel like slime.

Dr. Kim picked up the pieces of Licorice's EVA suit. “This is a very well thought out effort. Did your brother create this?”

Cait nodded. Dr. Kim was deliberately keeping his voice soothing and non-threatening. She probed at his emotions. He wanted her to feel safe. He desired her friendship.

Dr. Kim fingered the accordion pleats on the tail section. “Ms. Arroyo told me how much you mean to her brother. I'll never betray you or my friendship with her.”

He put the tail section in the sack with the rest of the suit. “I've told no one. When you're ready to trust me. Please talk with me again.” He held the sack out.

Cait reached out and snatched it from him. She walked backwards out of the room. Velcro pulled at her sneaks with every step.

## Chapter 11

While he waited for his turn to use the centrifuge, Indio wondered if he'd ever get a chance to be alone with Cait again.

“Did you ask her about it yet?” Julisa's voice broke into his thoughts.

He turned and looked at her. She was wearing sweats, obviously ready to join him for the mandatory one-G conditioning session. He jerked his thumb at her to join. They went to the treadwall. When the centrifuge started spinning, climbing the treadwall would be like climbing a reverse hamster wheel inside the spinning wheel of the centrifuge.

“You're logged in for forty-five minutes.” The bored attendant hooked them up to the elastic safety bands and telemetry wires. “When your time's up, the

bell will ring. I'll come back inside to unhook you.”

Indio nodded absently. Neither one of them was going to talk until they were

alone. Jule eyed him warily. The eerie squeal of the centrifuge starting its spin reminded them to brace themselves and wait until the floor actually felt like a floor with weight holding them down. With the centrifuge at full spin, it made the treadwall loom over them like an actual wall. The high pitched squeal muted down to a soft hum thrumming under their feet. Weight dragged at their arms and legs when they positioned themselves and started climbing up.

“I told her I knew something was different about her.” Indio peered at the next grip on the wall and pulled himself up. “Told her it didn't matter to me and that we

needed to talk it over alone in more detail.” Jule matched him move for move on the oddly spaced notches of the treadwall.

The familiar motions of climbing made his body remember long hot summer

days spent exploring the canyons and climbing the sandstone cliffs on the reservation with Julisa. “I haven't had a chance to talk to her alone since that day.” He turned his head sideways. “I saw you snag Kevin's blood this morning while he convinced Licorice to wear her EVA suit.”

Julisa caught her breath. Her left foot slipped. She gritted her teeth, swung her foot back into the proper notch, then hung there like an old sack. “I tested his blood. It's type O with a corkscrew reverse twist in the DNA pattern.”

“Are you happy now?”

Julisa reached for the next notch. “When I scooped the blob of blood out

of the air, he gave me a funny look.”

“I'd give you a funny look if I went after my blood like you went after his this morning.” Indio grinned at her. “I'd wonder if you were a vampire.”

Julisa scowled and shook her head. “Cut the jokes! This is serious! He

was waiting for me outside the lab. I ran right into him.”

Indio raised his eyebrows. Obviously, she'd come to no harm from this

encounter. Hopefully she'd fill him in on the details now.

Julisa swarmed up the wall with another burst of speed. “I didn't say anything. I was too embarrassed.” Her words floated down.

Indio rushed up after her. All of a sudden the way she was acting fit into place. She wasn't upset because of the encounter. This went deeper. It was personal. “You like him!”

She looked away. “Yes. I like him.”

Indio's hand slipped. He scabbled against the wall until he regained his grip, then caught his breath. "Damn! Hell of a mess you've got yourself into, Jule."

She rewarded him with a scorching glare. "You should talk. I looked up your medical files."

He pulled himself up to Julisa's side. His mouth felt dry and rough. Why was she bringing this up? The fact that Cait's mother was one of the surgeons shouldn't have any bearing on his relationship with her now. "So what about them? I already know Cait's mom was one of the surgeons. No big deal."

"You know they had to do massive blood transfusions? Do you know who donated?"

He sagged against the wall. He wasn't sure he wanted to hear the answer but he had to know. Not knowing was worse than knowing. "Who?"

"The two men who live with Cait's mom were your donors."

He closed his eyes. Why should that have a bearing on what was happening now? Jule's logic was awfully hard to follow at times. He opened his eyes. "Grandpa was there. He signed all the paperwork for me. They had to have his approval for every little thing they did."

Jule braced herself, leaned sideways and reached over to pat his hand. "I need a sample of your blood, okay?"

What did she expect to find? That was almost sixteen years ago. If there was something wrong with his blood, he should have had a reaction by now. "Sure. But I don't see how it makes any difference."

They started climbing again. Sweat soaked their backs as they concentrated on finishing up their allotted time. "Jule."

"Yes."

"That tattoo on their left arms. Cait told me it's written in Ogham and lists their entire genealogy."

"Interesting."

"You know, Jule. I'm beginning to wonder about you. Just because they

have a mutation that gives them extra eyelids, you're going off on some pretty odd tangents. What's your problem? Are you afraid of them?"

She shook her head. "No. I'm not. Strange as it may seem, I feel like

I can trust them. Cait watches over Socorro like a mother hen. And Kevin..." she shrugged. "Licorice trusts him."

The bell chimed three times. Their session was over. The wall stopped moving. The centrifuge shuddered and squealed to a stop. They pushed themselves away from the wall and down to the floor. By the time the attendant came inside for them, they had unhooked their safety belts and wires and were stretching their arms and legs again in a "cool down" routine.

\* \* \* \*

When they left the exercise room, Indio wasn't surprised to see Kevin leaning on the bulkhead waiting for them. Julisa took a half step, hesitated, then strode over to him. The scratching of her slippers on the floor spoiled the effect when she jabbed her finger in his chest. "What gives you the right to follow me around?"

Indio stopped himself from yanking her back. It was very obvious that

Kevin wasn't upset by her actions.

Kevin shrugged. "Didn't have to follow; you were logged in for exercise. All I had to do was ask the ship 'puter where you were."

Indio smiled. He liked a man who used common sense to figure things out.

Besides which it looked like a good time for him to hang back and catalogue Kevin's physical appearance as if he were writing up a description of a perp.

He estimated Kevin's height as six three, weight as two forty to two fifty, black

hair, brush cut, brown eyes. His skin was swarthy, a couple of shades lighter than Indio's and Julisa's.

His cheeks were smooth. Looked like he didn't have to shave. A gold star glittered in his left earlobe. There was a crooked scar above his right eyebrow. Must have broken his nose at least twice, judging by the bumps in it. Probably played rough when he was a kid.

Knowing he was Cait's twin, her eyes were hazel, changing color with every

mood, brought to mind the undeniable fact that they had two different fathers.

Julisa took hold of Kevin's hand and pushed up the sleeve of his shipsuit.

Indio shifted his attention to Kevin's hands. No rings. He had long fingers with a good assortment of nicks and scars across the knuckles. His right pinky finger was crooked. Possibly broken and healed without being set.

Kevin covered Jule's hand with his. "Want to talk now?" He slanted an oblique glance at Indio that included him in the question.

Indio waved them on ahead of him. "Not here. Let's find someplace a little more private than this."

Jule tightened her grip on Kevin's arm. "How about the lab?" she asked. "No one's using it now."

"Sure." Kevin smiled down at her and started walking. Kevin's jaunty whistle

floated back to Indio. A few steps later, the words to the whistled tune surfaced in Indio's mind. "We're off to see the wizard, the wonderful wizard of Oz..." Add warped sense of humor to that list of personality traits, Indio reminded himself.

\* \* \* \*

Indio positioned himself beside the closed door. He watched Kevin turn off the intercom and security vid cam inside the lab, then pulled out a scanner and checked over the cubicle from top to bottom for surveillance devices.

Looked like an extensive background in security work for Kevin. Maybe it'd be worth his while to try and find out when and where Kevin acquired his knowledge. Julisa unlatched one of the wall's pull down seats and sat down. Kevin boosted himself onto the bolted down table in the center of the room and stared back at her.

Indio decided he might as well be the one to break the ice. "You did a great job on Licorice's EVA suit."

"Yes!" Julisa's face literally glowed with enthusiasm. "I especially liked the telescopic tail and mid-section you designed. It looked very efficient and practical."

Kevin swiped his hand across his scalp. "Thanks. It was bad enough convincing her to wear the longjohns. I couldn't see trying to stuff her tail first into a rigid suit. This way the accordion pleating gave me enough leeway to screw the different components on around her." He pointed his chin in Indio's direction. "Did Tiny tell you about Fergus?"

Indio blinked. Why the sudden shift? Was this an attempt to misdirect them? Or was Kevin touching bases and making sure he was on the same team as Tiny?

Julisa looked back and forth at them. "What's going on with Fergus?" she said finally.

Indio motioned at her to be quiet. "Kevin saw Fergus sending a secret radio signal out two nights ago. He told Tiny and now Tiny's on top of it."

"What's Tiny going to do about it?" Kevin asked.

No time like the present for a judgement call. Kevin wasn't one of the people on their "to know" list. But ... Kevin didn't have to clue them in on Fergus like he did either. Indio shrugged. "Tiny wants to rig up some emergency caches on the asteroid just in case the situation heats up."

"What situation?" Julisa sat up very straight.

Kevin swung his heels back and forth and gazed at the ceiling. “Company bosses don't like independents mining the asteroid,” he said. “Fergus might be a front for them.”

Accusation filled Jule's baleful glare at Indio. “Edelmiro, I thought you quit the group.”

Indio ignored her. This was neither the time nor place to discuss that. Silence pooled in the room.

Julisa broke that stalemate by unfolding her sofscreen. “Kevin,” she said. “I'd like to ask you some questions. May I record this?”

Kevin slanted a wary look at Indio, then nodded.

“What are you?” she asked.

“I'm a living breathing entity.” Kevin pushed himself off the table. His voice sounded irritated and edgy. “I'm not an it, a thing, or an exhibit in a lab.”

Jule held the screen against her chest. “I know that,” she said softly. “I'm very aware of you as a person. I just want to know why your DNA's so different.”

Kevin turned his back to them and braced his hands against the table. “You wouldn't believe me if I told you. You'd think I was making it all up. There isn't any real proof of who we are except for a bunch of old legends and folktales.”

Indio cleared his throat. “I'd believe you.”

Jule leaned forward. Light from the sofscreen flickered on her face. “What legends?”

Kevin turned around.

Indio frowned. Legends? Folktales? Back at Tiny's Emporium, Cait asked him if he believed in fairytales. What the hell was going on around here?

Kevin leaned his hip against the table, crossed his arms and stared at Julisa. “What about my eyes?” he asked. “Don't you want to know about them?”

Julisa gave Indio another accusing look.

He raised his hands. “Hey! I never even had a chance to ask Cait about that.”

Slanting another one of those oblique glances at Indio, Kevin boosted himself back onto the table. “Socorro asked Cait about it two nights ago and Cait showed her. Socorro thinks it's radical that we have extra eyelids like Licorice.”

The pieces were starting to fall into place now. Indio looked at Julisa. “Jule, it's pretty easy to figure out. Remember when Socorro heard you telling me about it and she asked us what a nictitating membrane was, Jule? That's why she asked Cait.”

“Is it a dominant gene?” Jule's attention had already shifted back to Kevin. Nice to have her interrogating



someone else for a change. Having her for a sister wasn't easy.

“Yes. It's been dominant for quite a few centuries. There's a throwback to a more hirsute genotype that crops up periodically.”

Nice to have Kevin so cooperative. Indio rubbed his chin. Why? What was the reason behind this sudden willingness to hand over information?

Jule's fingers rushed across the sofscreen, hurriedly inputting these scraps of information.

Kevin smiled broadly and tapped his eyeteeth. “And then there's our teeth.” Jule's head popped up at this statement. “They're more prominent than the norm and caused many misunderstandings in our past history.”

Indio uncoiled himself from his position by the door and walked over for a closer look. Not as bad as the old horror movies, but definitely longer and sharper than the norm. And it involved all four eyeteeth. “Cait too?” he asked.

“It's not as noticeable in the females. Does that bother you?” Kevin asked.

That first night when he slept with Cait he was focused on other parts of her anatomy. How could he explain this without offending Kevin? Indio shook his head.

“No. It doesn't change how I feel about her. Teeth aren't a high priority on my list of erogenous zones.”

Kevin's gaze went distant for a bit. Then he nodded.

Indio walked back to his wall and resumed his previous slouch. The best way to handle this was by not crowding the guy.

“Tetanus.” Kevin said.

Data entry continued. “What about it?” Julisa asked.

“It's extremely deadly for us. We have to have a tetanus shot every year.”

She gnawed at her lower lip. “That's very similar to what happened to our Amerindian ancestors. They had no immunity against smallpox, measles and chickenpox. When the Europeans came over, disease destroyed more tribes than actual warfare.”

“Why are you telling us this?” Indio knew he should be quiet but not knowing the answer bothered him more. “You hardly know us.”

Kevin pulled his knee up on the table and wrapped his arms around it. He studied Indio with an odd intensity in his gaze. “I was wondering when you'd get around to asking me that. Cait's my sister. I have responsibilities towards her.”

Julisa shut her sofscreen down and folded it up. “What kind of responsibilities?”

Kevin rested his chin on his knee. “When Cait has children, I must be there to cut the cord and bury the

afterbirth.”

“Your culture's different.” Julisa leaned closer. “Completely different than ours...”

This was incredible! Indio found himself holding his breath waiting to hear what the next revelation was going to be.

Kevin's gaze grew even more abstracted. “Cait's safety is my responsibility also. I had to make sure we were safe with you. Now that I've spoken with you, I know we can trust you.”

Whoa! Indio shook his head. What he just heard didn't make sense. It wasn't logical. “How do you know you can trust us? You've only talked with us for about ten minutes at the most.”

Kevin smiled. “I can't explain it in a way that sounds rational, but all I needed was a few minutes alone with you. I know you love Cait. That's why I know I can trust you.”

“What about me?” Julisa stared at him. “Why do you trust me? I don't love Cait. I hardly know her.”

Kevin arched his eyebrows at her and grinned. “You feel like Mom, all wrapped up in your work like her. Our differences don't frighten you. They fascinate you. As long as you remember I'm a person, that doesn't bother me.”

“Oh no!” The pupils in Jule's eyes dilated so much they looked black instead of brown. “I'm very aware of you as a person.”

Kevin dropped his knee and sat up real straight. He tilted his head sideways. It looked like he was listening for a sound that no one could hear but him.

Indio decided to pin down another issue. “I heard you're bi-sexual.”

Kevin blinked. He turned his head and stared at Indio. “But you're not.”

Indio nodded warily. Was this a test? “No, I'm not.”

“Don't worry about it.” Kevin brushed the issue away with a quick motion of his hand. “Our basic template is heterosexual. If you don't swing that way, I don't react that way. But if you were and you loved me, I'd react to you that way.”

Julisa leaned forward intently. “What did you just say?”

Kevin turned to her and shrugged. “Lust is a simple emotion. Love's a lot more complicated to handle.”

“You're empath's,” Julisa whispered. She almost jumped out of her seat with excitement. “You feel emotions and you react to them.”

Kevin nodded. “That's why it doesn't matter what sex the person is. Love's what triggers our response.”

“How do you manage it?” Her voice shifted and became very soft and gentle. “All the input coming at you from everyone. How do you keep it from overwhelming you?”

“Have you noticed our aversion to close physical contact when we're around a lot of people?”

“Yes.”

“That's our first defense. Not letting anyone touch us unless we want them to severely restricts unwanted input.”

More and more, the pieces were falling into place. “When she was good, she was very very good. And when she was bad, she was very very bad...” Indio murmured.

Kevin dropped his knee down, leaned back on his hands and nodded. “You've

got that part right. When we decide to respond, it's very high voltage stuff. That's why we're hesitant about commitment. We have to be sure it's what we want and not just a

echo of the other person's needs.”

“What about Cait?” Indio couldn't stop himself from asking. “Is she only reflecting what I want from her?”

“No,” Kevin said firmly. “She chose you. When she's ready for you, she'll let you know.”

“Ah!” Indio sagged against the wall and closed his eyes. He thought back to that night when she walked right up to him on the concourse at Sanctuary and propositioned him. Kevin was right. Cait chose him that night. All the uncertainty he'd been feeling evaporated. Instead of worrying so much about it, he should just relax, wait and let her make the first move.

Jule's voice pulled him back to reality. “Kevin,” she said. “When your mother

helped with that emergency surgery on Edelmiro, they had to do massive blood transfusions.”

No! Indio wanted to yell at her. Don't screw things up now. Not when

we were getting along so well.

Kevin's voice went quiet, very quiet. “Who were the donors?” he asked.

“Shiloh Moonsammy Harker and Nathaniel Harker.”

Kevin looked away from her and swiped his hand across the black stubble on his scalp. “Interesting! Both of our fathers donated blood. Have to ask Mom about that. I wonder if she...” His voice trailed off.

“What?” Indio asked sharply.

Kevin swiped his hand across his scalp again. “I don't know.” He looked at Indio. “Don't worry. Our blood won't hurt you.”

“Why?”

“I can't tell you that. Not yet. I have to talk to Mom first.”

The muted clang of the landing alarm sounded in the corridor outside the closed door. “Thirty minutes until landing sequence begins. All passengers report to their assigned bunks and strap in.”

Kevin walked past Indio and opened the door. “Gotta go now. Talk to you later.” Then he left.

Julisa walked over and rested her head on Indio's shoulder. “Edelmiro...”

He rubbed the back of her neck. “Yes.”

“He didn't tell us everything.”

He sighed. Jule was far from stupid. “No he didn't. I have a whole list of questions to ask him about the things he didn't say.”

Julisa nodded.

He rolled up the coverall sleeve on his left arm. “Do you want that blood sample now?”

“Yes!” Jule pointed at the table. “Sit down over there. It won't take long. I'll test it after we land.”

Ten minutes later, Indio rolled his sleeve down and watched her. She labeled the sample, put it in the cold storage compartment, locked the panel, then turned around and stared at him. “This hasn't changed how you feel about Cait, has it?”

“No, it hasn't.”

She glanced out at the empty corridor with a wistful look on her face. “Do you think he likes me?”

Hell, he was having a hard enough time figuring Cait out. Indio sighed, then sorted through his memories of Kevin's actions. Kevin's statement about avoiding close contact with people replayed itself in his mind. Indio smiled. “Remember when we came out of the centrifuge? Kevin let you walk right up to him and touch him, didn't he?”

Jule's face brightened. “Yes, he did.”

“Well then, based on what he's told us so far, I think he likes you.”

The corridor intercom crackled over their heads. “Fifteen minutes until landing. All passengers report to their assigned bunks and strap in.”

Indio motioned at her to leave first. “We're running out of time.”

As usual, she looked great. Her hair was coiled around her head under the regulation hairnet. Tiny nudged himself away from the hatch and floated to her side. "Cait." He glanced at the supplies bulging out of the net by her feet. "I can help you pack."

She pulled herself up his arm, wrapped one hand around his neck and said,

"Thanks for the offer, Tiny."

He tucked a loose strand of hair back under her hairnet, then slid his hand

down to her hip. She hooked her legs around his waist and smiled. "Mmmmmm! This feels good."

He leaned his head down to give her a kiss. Just a quick peck on her cheek. She turned her face to his. Lord! Her lips parted under his questing tongue. When they came up for air, she stared at him. The pupils in her eyes dilated until they were all big and black. She unzipped the top of her coverall.

He slid his free hand inside, rolled her nipple between his thumb and forefinger and tweaked it. She gasped, arched her body against him, then pulled the zipper down on his coverall.

He moved too fast trying to pull his coverall off and bumped his head against the ceiling. She pushed herself away from him, peeled hers off and helped untangle the material all tangled up around his feet.

He wedged himself into the corner, picked her up by the waist and eased her down, inch by inch. He wasn't sure if he was going to fit. She wrapped her arms and legs around him and moaned softly.

That moan did it for him. He started banging away at her like a crazy man.

Her voice scaled up higher into a keening cry.

RRRRRRRRinnnnnnnnngggggg!

The alarm clock was ringing.

Shit! He opened his eyes. The bunk's safety net was all twisted up around him and the pillow was wedged between his legs. He'd just humped his pillow.

Duh! What a doofus!

\* \* \* \*

"Hurry!" Cait pulled Indio inside her cubicle. "We only have forty five minutes.

Socorro's with your sister." She skimmed out of her coverall, kicked it aside, then floated backwards to her bunk and crooked her finger at him.

His hands were shaking so much he could hardly find the zipper on his coverall. It took forever before he finally got the damn thing off. He floated over to her bunk, pulled himself down and clipped the safety

net over them.

It felt even better than he remembered. Her skin tasted like honey and wine. She rolled over on her stomach and tilted her lovely ass up for him.

THUUUUUmp!

“Hey!” Tiny's voice yelled from the other side of the cubicle door. “Up and at ‘em! We've got a full schedule ahead of us!”

Indio opened his eyes and stared at his ceiling panel. Damn! Wet dreams were a lousy substitute for the real thing. He reached back, unclipped the safety net, grabbed his sheet and swabbed at the sticky mess decorating his stomach. “I'm coming.”

Gah! He didn't believe he just said that! “Give me a couple of minutes to wash up and change.”

\* \* \* \*

Cait wanted to dump both men into a bottomless pit and never have to bother with them ever again. Goddess! They had no idea what they did to her last night, dragging her into a three way empathic link. Filling her dreams with erotic images. Images that woke her up with soaking wringing wet panties. Her nipples ached! She had to pinch them to stop the itching.

She wasn't ready for this! Not now. In order to focus and use this newly

forged dru-bond they all had to go back to the level of a baby learning how to crawl and walk, then run. Talk about heartache and pain.

There was no one to blame for this mess but herself. None of this would have happened if she hadn't walked up to Indio and asked him to give her one night of pleasure. One night! That was all she wanted. Not this! They were tearing her apart with their opposing emotional needs.

Her only consolation was that Socorro slept through all her tossing and turning.

When she eased herself past the child, Licorice lifted her head and meowed.

At the same time, there was a knock on the cubicle door. Cait closed her eyes and reached with her empathic senses. Definitely a man. That much she knew. He felt familiar, but after five days jammed into this ship, everyone felt familiar to her. Licorice stretched her body. Socorro opened her eyes and yawned.

Cait floated over to the door, looked at Socorro and held her finger to her

lips.

Socorro nodded.

Cait cracked the door open and peered around the edge. It was Dr. Kim. He bounced on his heels and almost dislodged his sneaks from the walkway's Velcro strip.

“Good morning! They're letting us go outside in another hour. I can hardly wait. Did you eat breakfast

yet?"

Licorice's head popped out around the side of the door by Cait's feet. Dr. Kim smiled. "Oh! So this is where you were hiding the kitten!"

Cait scooped up the cat and handed her to Dr. Kim. "Here. Hold her while I get dressed. It'll only take a couple of minutes." She slid the door shut and sagged against it.

Socorro's eyes were wide with fear. "I didn't want to jump down and make a lot of noise," she whispered.

Cait floated over to Socorro's side and hugged her. "It's all right," she breathed into the child's hair. "Dr. Kim knows about Licorice. I'll drag him down to hydroponics. He can help me change the kitty litter. If your daddy comes here before I get back, tell him where I went and why."

"Okay."

Because she planned on going outside this morning too, Cait picked up the skinsuit and ducked into the miniscule shower in their cubicle. She washed and dressed herself in record time. When she exited the shower, Socorro was waiting on the edge of the bed holding the micro-g kitty litter cube. Pretty smart kid here. "Thanks."

Cait picked up Licorice's EVA suit. One more task to take care of this morning.

\* \* \* \*

Dr. Kim sat on the edge of the hydroponics tank and watched Licorice bat her paws at the leafy vine curling up all around them.

Kevin floated out of the connecting hatchway into hydroponics. He just about had a heart attack seeing Dr. Kim with Licorice.

"What's he doing here?" Kevin whispered. His panic seeped into Cait from his grip on her arm. He turned her around so Dr. Kim couldn't see their faces and read their lips.

"It's okay," she hissed back. "All he knows about is the cat. Nothing else"

Kevin gave her a look that said, "Huh? Are you crazy?"

Cait shrugged. "It explains all the sneaking around he noticed."

Dr. Kim cleared his throat. "You're Cait's brother? Her twin?"

"Ah ... yes, I am." Kevin's voice lacked enthusiasm.

Dr. Kim held out his hand. "I'm very pleased to meet you. Did you make

this yourself? How did you magnetize the kitty litter?"

\* \* \* \*

Indio knocked on Cait's cubicle door. This wasn't the way he wanted it to be.

Standing here with Tiny. He hoped to have a few minutes of privacy with Cait.

"Who is it?" Socorro's muffled voice asked from the other side of the door.

"It's me and Tiny."

The door slid open. She popped her head around the side and motioned for them to come in. Socorro was wearing her skinsuit. It fit her real nice.

"Where's Cait?" Tiny asked.

"In hydroponics with Licorice changing the kitty litter. She told me to wait here for you."

Indio looked at Tiny. Tiny shrugged. "Come on." Indio reached out for

Socorro's hand. "Let's find her."

"Are you sure it's okay?" Socorro whispered.

"No one's around right now." Tiny smiled at her. "Everyone's getting ready to go out and get to work."

When they got to hydroponics, Indio heard Dr. Kim's voice. He pulled

Socorro behind him and looked around for a quick hiding place. Tiny pointed at the

storage compartment in the left bulkhead. Indio dug the card key out of his pocket, keyed the panel open and passed the cleaning supplies out to Tiny. Socorro had to sit with her knees scrunched up to her chest in order to fit inside.

"Hello." Dr. Kim's voice said from a few feet away.

Indio turned around.

Dr. Kim stood at the other end of the corridor with Licorice curled up in

his arms. Cait stood next to him carrying the litter cube box and the bag with

Licorice's space suit.

Laughter glowed in Dr. Kim's gaze as he saw the sudden starts and looks of horror on Indio's and Tiny's



faces. "A bunch of grown men sneaking around because of one little kitten." He shook his finger at them like they were a pair of naughty children. "Why didn't you just say something instead of holding secret union meetings?"

"Dr. Kim?" Fergus shouted. His shout echoed around the bend of the corridor.

Cait snatched Licorice and ducked back into the hatch for hydroponics.

Dr. Kim arched his eyebrows, then smiled reassuringly at Tiny and Indio.

"Over here!" he yelled back at Fergus.

Fergus stepped into the corridor. He glared at Tiny and Indio. "What are you doing here?"

Tiny held up his armful of supplies. "Cleaning."

Indio leaned against the closed door panel behind him, crossed his arms and nodded absolute agreement.

Dr. Kim bounced past them. "Let's go," He smiled at Fergus and motioned at him to lead the way out. "I don't want to be late."

Fergus gave Indio one last suspicious look, then turned around and floated out after Dr. Kim.

\* \* \* \*

Lord, what else could go wrong? Tiny waited beside Cait in the shadow of a secondary crater about thirty yards behind the main crater. She squatted down on her heels, carefully compensating for the added bulk of the airtanks on her back, then closed the lid of the robotic carrier pod.

He pulled her to her feet, then leaned his helmet against hers to bypass the commlink channel. "Did you bring extra kitty litter?"

"Yes." She patted the side of the carrier. "It's in here along with the emergency prefab shelter."

"Where's that map I made for you?"

"I have it right here." Cait unzipped the side pocket of her EVA suit, pulled out a sheet of plastic coated paper and spread it out on top of the carrier. A slight tilt of her head shone her helmet's headlight onto the map. Small red X's marked the locations he selected for her to stash caches of medical supplies and weapons. "Do you know something I don't know?" she asked.

“No. I just want to be prepared in case anything happens.”

Two lights bobbed along the edge of the crater, then dropped down. Tiny squinted at the shapes carrying the lights, then relaxed. Indio was right on time with Socorro and Licorice.

A highly agitated male voice yelled over the comlink and nearly blasted a hole in Tiny's eardrums. “No! No! Not there! I told you to set the tunneler up in the left quadrant! Not the right quadrant!”

Damn! Tiny shut his comlink down, tapped Cait on the shoulder and leaned his helmet against hers again. “Look! I've got to straighten them out. Be careful!”

“Don't worry so much.”

He couldn't help but worry. Sending her out like this with just a kid wasn't exactly the safest thing to do. “You have a week of food and air. If worse comes to worst, find a secure spot and dig in. The asteroid has more than enough metallic ores to confuse most radar scans.”

Tiny waved at Indio and Socorro, then jumped up to the lip of the crater. Microgravity had its advantages. He felt like a giant spacesuited rabbit, bouncing across the surface to the landing field. Half of Rainbow's End was already dismantled from the main core.

Two sleeping modules and the cafeteria module were buried in permaplastic in direct sunlight with their solar panels fully extended. A huge chunk of ice waited in the eternal shadow beneath the overhanging lip of the main crater. Three hoses, two feet in diameter, linked the sleeping modules and the cafeteria to the ice. Towing that chunk out here gave them a supply of fresh water. Electrolysis would break the water down into its components of hydrogen and oxygen.

Tiny jumped again and let his momentum bring him over to the right quadrant. A judicious squirt from his wrist jets slowed him down enough to let him land a few feet

away. The tunneler had its back and front claws buried deep into the surface. The operator's helmet nodded at Tiny through the window of the tunneler's control cabin.

With the cabin exterior painted up like a Tyrannosaurus Rex head, you'd think they'd take antropomorphism to the logical extreme and have the giant diamond drill come out from the lower half of the machine. Lower center of gravity and all that rot.

Someone probably objected to that placement as sexist. Tiny couldn't

think of any other reason why they put in the drill in the machine's chest. The operator had to fold the cabin back on its neck and lower the chest to the ground in order to use the drill. Tiny walked around T-Rex and patted its rear end. Worth every cent they put into it, giving them the chance to put in their bid for this contract before any of the major corporations got their act together.

He turned his comlink on. His timing was perfect. The tirade had spluttered to a breathless stop.

No wonder there was an impasse. If they put the tunneler over where the science team wanted it, the entire lip of the crater would collapse. Scientific theory was all fine and dandy. But if you wanted things to work the way they were supposed to, you needed to apply some good old fashioned common sense. Tiny stepped out into the open. "What the hell do you think you're doing?" he yelled.

\* \* \* \*

There wasn't enough time to say a proper good-bye. Indio leaned his helmet against Socorro's. "Take care of Licorice and listen to Cait. As soon as things settle down around here, I'll come out and meet you."

Socorro held her gloved hand out into her helmet's headlight and showed him the leash looped around it. "Don't worry. I'll take good care of Licorice. I won't let go of her leash."

"Good." He placed the suited cat on the ground by her feet. "Wait here a minute. I want to talk to Cait."

"Okay."

It didn't take long. Only five steps to get to Cait's side. But those five steps were just long enough for every word of that nice long speech he rehearsed to fly out of his mind. He stood there with his mouth hanging open like an idiot.

Cait reached up and pulled his helmet down to hers. "Don't worry. I won't let anything happen to Socorro."

"Thanks." What he wanted to do was hold her in his arms and give her a proper

kiss good-bye. Fat chance! "I can't stay long. I've got to let Tiny know we've detected coded radio

signals from Rainbow's End. From the control cabin.”

Cait bobbed her helmet in a quick nod. “Fergus?”

“I don't know,” Indio said. “Fergus might be involved in this but until we have concrete evidence, our hands are tied.” He hated not knowing. This was ridiculous. But, if anything did happen. If they had to fight, he'd rather have Cait and Socorro on the other side of the asteroid where they wouldn't be in the line of fire. Lasers killed just as fast as guns, even if they weren't as messy. “Keep Socorro with you until you get an all clear from me or Tiny.”

Cait's gloved hand tightened on the sleeve of his EVA suit. “Don't worry

about Julisa.” Her words came through his helmet loud and clear. “Kevin will

watch over her. Find Tiny. Keep things under control.”

“Did Tiny give you the map and the extra supplies?”

“Yes.” She pulled him to her and gave him a hug. Not much of a hug with their suits in the way, but a hug nevertheless. “Go. Work with Tiny. He needs your help.”

One more quick hug with Socorro, then Indio hauled himself up to the crater's

edge. He surveyed the chaotic activity in the main crater. Seeing T-Rex's giant head folded back and its drill thrust into the ground brought explicitly sexual images

to his mind.

Indio shook his head. He needed to find Tiny, not goof off.

\* \* \* \*

It was a relief to get away! From both of them! Their culture would never let

them agree to a three way relationship with her. Cait knew she'd never have a chance to

explain how sex played a major role in amplifying the kind of dru-bond they were forging with her. The only way to bring stability back into her life would be if she walked away from them, both of them, and never looked back.

Cait shook her head. She needed to concentrate on what she was doing right now. Not waste time and energy thinking about her problems with Indio and Tiny.

With no atmosphere to diffuse the light of the sun and stars, the shadows were black and cold. Their suits reacted to the sudden temperature changes every time they stepped from light into shadow and back into light again.

The robotic carrier trundled along behind Cait. Socorro walked beside her

with Licorice on her leash. There was no straight line from Point A to Point B.

Massive blocks of stone were tossed every which way like endless repetitions of Stonehenge.

Hidden within the deepest shadows were crevices and caves. Cait slowed her pace down and focused her attention on finding the safest path past these obstacles.

## Chapter 13

Everything looked good. No one was fighting. They had three tunneler devices and their ore grinders running at peak efficiency. Tiny squatted down on his heels and peered at the numbers scrolling up on the screen. Two of the ore grinders showed almost pure platinum. The third one showed high levels of nickel, iron ore and lead.

The comlinks spluttered into life. "Cease and abate all activities! This is a direct order!"

"What the—"

"Who the hell was that?"

The overlapping voices on the comlink reflected Tiny's confusion. He rose up to his full height and surveyed the area. Helmeted heads swiveled back and forth. More helmeted heads popped out from the control cabins of the mining devices.

Tiny looked up. The fat bloated sphere of a heavily armed class three cruiser was headed straight for them. Its rocket exhaust flared across the asteroid's bleak horizon. A grim knowledge settled down upon him. Now he finally had a concrete enemy to fight instead of running around after rumors and nameless surveillance devices.

Looked like a case of overkill here. Who and what were they afraid of anyhow? An ex-Navy SEAL, a bunch of rock miners, a solar wing teacher and a handful of scientists weren't enough to rate that kind of firepower.

"This is the Lindy Lux! We have received incomplete reports. Our security was compromised. We are here to rectify the situation."

Dr. Kim's angry voice came through on the comlink. "This is a scientific expedition. You have no authority to order us to cease all activities."

Tiny switched his comlink off. Arguments weren't going to stop that ship. Not with the heavy duty lasers it carried. They had ten minutes at the most before it landed. Something bumped the back of his helmet. He turned around slowly. It was Indio.

"Any bright ideas on what we can do to delay the inevitable?" Indio's voice came through along with a faint gritty sound where their helmets rubbed together. "It's too late to rig up T-Rex to throw rocks at 'em."

Actually, that sounded like a pretty good idea. Tiny squinted at the distances involved and ran a quick

estimate of possible trajectories. Nah! Indio was right. They didn't have enough time. What a bitch! Lindy Lux was too close to duck. A couple of house sized rocks might even jam its weapons.

\* \* \* \*

“But...” Socorro's panic washed over Cait.

“Hush.” Cait hugged the ungainly bulk of the child's suited body close to her suit. “We'll find her. If you cry, your helmet will fill up with tears and you won't be able to see where you're going.”

“I'm okay now,” Socorro said shakily. “It's my fault Licorice ran away. When I heard them talking on the radio, I forgot and let go of her leash.” She curled herself even

closer to Cait's suit as if this would merge them into a single entity. “I'm scared. I don't want them to hurt Daddy. Or Aunt Jule.”

“They're safe.” Cait projected reasonableness and calm along with her words. “You heard them. As long as no one resists, they promised not to hurt anyone. They're conducting a roll call from the passenger list. You're not on the list, but I am. We have to hide ourselves before they start looking for me.” She patted Socorro's shoulder. “But

first things first. We have to try to find Licorice. Did you see where she went?”

“Un-huh. She ran into that crack in the rocks we were looking at a couple of minutes ago.”

Cait nodded. The fissure would be a tight squeeze for them. They'd have to crawl in on hands and knees. That's why she hadn't dared explore it. She was worried about getting stuck. But now, with the Lindy Lux searching for them, she figured it made more sense to take that risk. Besides, standing out in the open like this, their heat signatures could be picked up on infrared scan by the incoming ship. If they went inside the fissure it would help shield them from radar scans.

“Socorro.”

“Y-yes.”

“We're going into this crack after Licorice. It's very dangerous because we have to crawl on our hands and knees. We're going to do it real slow and careful because we don't know what's inside. You don't want to get stuck anywhere and rip your suit.”

Socorro nodded.

“Don't use your radio. We don't want them to know you're with me. Anytime you want to talk to me, put your helmet close to mine like we're doing right now. I'm going to reset the carrier pod so it'll lead the way into the cave.”

“Okay.”

Cait went to the pod. Thanks to Tiny's foresight, they had extra oxygen and provisions along with the emergency dome shelter. She leaned over the control panel and

keyed in a new set of instructions. The caterpillar treads under it lurched into motion on the hard surface

and turned the pod around to face the fissure. Socorro slipped her gloved hand into Cait's and they walked behind it.

The landscape was stark and bare, with no atmosphere to soften its textures. There were no in-between areas in this light. It was either blinding sunlight or pure shadow. Each shadow was thick and dark and solid with cold. No air meant no way to transfer heat from the sunlit areas to the shadows. The fact that there wasn't any accumulation of dust on the surface was another factor to help them hide. They weren't leaving any tracks for someone to follow them.

The carrier pod's headlights pierced the stygian blackness of the fissure fifteen yards ahead of them. It wasn't exactly zero-G conditions. The asteroid averaged about a mile in diameter and had enough mass for them to feel a minuscule gravity. Socorro followed Cait's example and slowly sank to her knees at the entrance. They made no sudden moves. Cait focused her helmet's light on the ground directly in front of her hands and made sure there weren't any sharp fragments of stone in the way before she moved. Socorro crawled right behind her.

The pod halted. She'd only programmed it for twenty yards. Safer to take it in stages instead of taking the chance of it toppling over into a pit. There was a slight slope to the ground beneath them, as if they were moving down a ramp.

They rested beside the pod for a few minutes. Cait peered ahead at the section illuminated by the pod's lights. It looked relatively smooth compared to what they'd just crawled through. She looked up. The ceiling was still too close. Not enough room to stand up yet. Knee pads would have been a nice addition to their suits. One more item to add to her mental list of improvements to hand over to Kevin when she saw him.

She reset the cart's program for another ten yards. They followed it. When the cart stopped again, the ceiling felt higher. A little further on and maybe she could actually stand up. The ramp curved to the left. A small wedge of light marked the entrance behind them.

Okay. Cait carefully keyed in a new heading, five degrees to the left, ten more yards.

This time when the cart stopped, they finally had enough room to stand up. Cait stretched out the kinks in her back, then sat down with her back against the cart and looked back. Socorro slumped down beside her. They couldn't see the entrance anymore. Cait stood up, thumbed open a side panel in the cart, selected an emergency light and peered up at the ceiling with her helmet's light. Sticking the light to the ceiling with its adhesive backing didn't take long. She smiled when it switched on. Now they could find their way back without the cart's headlights.

Socorro patted the leg of her EVA suit. Cait hunkered down on her heels and touched helmets with her.

"I saw something up ahead," Socorro whispered.

"What did you see?"

"I'm not sure. It was little and shiny. I think it might be Licorice's suit."

Cait nodded, then reset the cart for another ten yard advance. It felt wonderful to be able to walk upright again. Their suits weren't made for crawling. Compensating for

the mass of the oxygen tanks on their backs while she crawled had been a lot harder than she anticipated.

A few minutes later, they stood beside the cart and shone their lights around the open space.

Socorro tugged Cait's arm. She leaned down and touched helmets with the child.

“Over there.” Socorro pointed to the right. “It looks like a hole in the wall. You see that shiny patch on top of the black stuff?”

“Yes.”

The shiny patch was Licorice's suit.

Socorro's need to touch Licorice and reassure herself about the kitten shot through Cait. She held the child back, then leaned down and peered inside the cat's helmet. Licorice's eyes were closed. An initial flash of concern shot through Cait. Had the kitten passed out and died? But the readouts on the back of the suit said Licorice was still breathing.

She pulled Socorro close. “Looks like she's sleeping. Let's leave her alone for now and set up the emergency shelter and airlock. Then we can bring her inside the shelter and let her out of her suit. We don't have to worry about waking her up with the noise. Sound doesn't travel in a vacuum.”

Forty-five minutes later, after much sweating and silent cursing on Cait's part, the shelter's dome loomed over a rigid framework of metal struts. Socorro helped her spray aerogel insulation foam around the dome, then the bottom and sides of the airlock. Cait hooked up the heat and air generators. Nothing to do now but wait until the airlock light turned green indicating that it was safe to come inside.

They stood back and surveyed the results of their hard work. It looked like an advertisement for a space holiday with the dome lights glowing along every seam and outlining the airlock entrance. All they needed now was a bunch of spacesuited people standing around it singing Christmas carols. A dead giveaway for their location if it was set up on the surface instead of this cavern.

Cait laid her gloved hand on the shoulder of Socorro's suit, tilted her head up and stared at the ceiling. It didn't look like a natural cavern. There were no stalactites hanging down, no rough surfaces. It was smooth, perfectly smooth, as if it had been deliberately carved out of solid rock.

Wait a minute! This was wrong! Her heart stopped in her chest. She pulled her hand away. No sense in letting her fear flow into Socorro. Children were more receptive to empathic signals. She tilted her head down and peered at the ground through her visor. It was smooth and perfectly level. All the rough spots and debris were back at the entrance. Not here.

She turned around slowly and stared at Licorice's niche. The kitten was wide awake now. Her helmet swiveled back and forth. That dark area under the cat's spacesuit wasn't just a patch of darker rock. It looked like ... blankets.

Socorro turned around. She took a step towards Licorice.

Cait pulled her back, bent down and pressed her helmet against Socorro's helmet.



“No.”

“But why?” Socorro's voice wailed through the helmets. “Licorice's awake.”

Maybe she was overreacting. Licorice had been lying on those “blankets” for an hour and nothing had happened. But she'd rather overreact than place this child in jeopardy. “I clipped her leash to the supply cart. She can't run away.” But ... blankets?

Where did they come from? What were they doing here? Of all places? Cait shrugged. Standing here wasn't going to answer those questions. “Wait here. I'll get her for you.”

Slowly, carefully, Cait walked towards Licorice. The kitten stood up and stretched. Cait unclipped the leash from the cart and tugged at it. Licorice responded to the tug by jumping down from the waist high ledge. Her suited body bounced forward. The kitten had already adapted to microgravity conditions. Cait motioned at Socorro to take the other end of the leash, then wait beside the airlock door.

Now that she was close enough to look at them, the “blankets” looked like animal skins. They weren't totally black either. There was a shimmering moiré pattern of gold and blue superimposed on their blackness. They ranged in size from a few inches to over seven feet long. The smallest ones looked like fat round pouches bloated up with something liquid sealed inside them. Other pouches were flat and empty.

Were they dormant because there wasn't any air? Cait unclipped one of the spare

tanks from the cart, held out the hose and sprayed some oxygen at the “blankets.”

Nothing happened. Whatever they were, these blanket thingees didn't react to air.

\* \* \* \*

Tiny wrapped his arms around the tunneler's claw leg and watched Kevin weld the pipe segments around his gloved wrists. The only way to cut him loose now would be with a laser.

Indio placed his helmet against Tiny's. “Are you sure you want to do this?”

No, he wasn't sure. But it was the only thing he could think of to stall things and give Cait enough time to sneak back and maybe change the odds over to their side. Pioneered by Ghandi and Martin Luther King, civil disobedience and sit ins remained risky tactics no matter how you looked at it. That's why he wasn't going to bet anyone's life on it besides his own.

“I topped off your tanks.” Indio's voice said in Tiny's ear. “You don't have to do this. What if you run out of air before she comes back?” Always the optimist, Indio was.

Just thinking about that possibility made sweat spring out all over his body. It rolled down his face and chin, his spine and chest, belly and legs. It itched. Tiny wanted to scratch himself. He wanted to have them cut the cuffs and set him loose. “You just do your part. Okay. Keep everyone calm and watch for a chance to turn the tables.”

“Okay.” With a last awkward pat on his shoulder, Indio turned away and walked off with Kevin.

Keep calm, Tiny reminded himself. Fear burns oxygen. It wasn't as easy as he thought to breathe slowly.

He tried to think about something else. His mind kept circling back to the possibility of Cait not making it back in time to help him. *Stop it*, he told himself. *Don't look at the gauge. Relax.*

\* \* \* \*

They were inside the emergency dome. The “blankets” or “skins” lay in a pile on the floor in front of Cait and Socorro.

“What do you think they are?” Socorro whispered over the prosaic sound of the cat's claws scratching against the side of her litter box behind them.

Cait shrugged. “Your guess is as good as mine right now.”

The pile of black blanket skins looked alive now like they were breathing. But they didn't have any heads or legs or faces or nostrils or gills or anything else.

Socorro reached out to touch one. “They look like sealskins.”

“No.” Cait pulled her back. “Put your gloves on before you touch anything.”

“Yes.” Socorro went to the other side of the shelter and retrieved her gloves.

Cait shivered. Goosebumps raced up and down her arms. She sat down beside their find. Socorro was right. They did look like sealskins. Were they the selkie skins of legend? She reached out with her gloved hand and flipped one of the medium sized ones over. She didn't see any openings or drawstrings. If they were selkie skins, how did they put them on and take them off?

Socorro came over and sat down beside her. “Are they alive?”

“It's hard to say,” Cait admitted carefully. “I'm not a biologist and I don't have any biological testing units with me. They might be a life form that went dormant when the air disappeared.”

Socorro nodded.

“What we can do right now,” Cait said, “is sort them out by size and shape.”

Just when they finished sorting and piling up the last “blanket,” Licorice's loud “Meowwwww!” reminded them they had forgotten about her again. They turned around. Licorice was sitting on top of one of the smaller ones. It didn't look like a blanket anymore. The lower half of the cat's body was covered already as the thing writhed and wrapped itself around the animal.

“No!” Socorro screamed.

Cait reached out, grabbed the child's shoulder and pulled her back.

“It's all right.”

Socorro wiped the tears from her face with the sleeve of her suit. “Are you sure?”

Cait projected serenity at Socorro. “Open your eyes and see for yourself. Licorice's not upset. She's doing fine.”

The strange blanket covered Licorice's tail and body like a skinsuit and bunched up around her neck like a hood. They watched the cat sit back on her haunches, lift her hind leg up and start licking the "skin" just like it was her own fur.

Cait removed her gloves and unfastened her suit at the neck.

Socorro's eyes grew huge as she watched Cait climb out of her spacesuit, then strip down to bare skin. "Are you sure it's safe?"

Cait nodded. "I think they're selkie skins."

"What's that?"

"Your skin protects you from the sun and wind and rain. Right?"

"Yes."

"Your skin also holds in your body's blood and air while you move around. Technically speaking, it functions like a biological EVA suit."

Comprehension shone in Socorro's eyes. She smiled. "I learned that in school."

"So, looking at it from that standpoint, EVA suits are artificial skins that we made in order to keep air around us and protect our bodies from radiation and the lack of air around us."

Socorro frowned. "But what are selkie skins supposed to do?"

"There were lots of old fairy tales about selkies or seal people. These tales said that the selkies wore sealskins when they were in the water that changed them from humans into seals. Then when they came out onto the beaches, they took off their sealskins and became human again."

Socorro's eyes were black with wonder. "Oh!"

What if she was wrong? No! Cait pushed that thought away. The cat was doing

fine. The skins wouldn't hurt her. "I think these are selkie skins. My guess is that they're

a natural parasite biologically engineered by my ancestors."

Socorro blinked, then said softly, "But we found the skins here. How did they get here?"

Cait went down to her knees and stared into Socorro's face. "Because my formothers came from here and migrated to Earth. Something happened out here. Maybe it was a comet. I don't know. Whatever happened destroyed a planet and turned it into these asteroids."

"So that's why Aunt Jule told Daddy she didn't think you were completely human." Socorro slipped her hand into Cait's and peered anxiously at her. "You love him, don't you?"

"Yes."

A satisfied smile lit up the child's face. "Well I don't care then if you're not completely human. He loves you and you love him and that's all that matters."

This was wonderful! Cait hugged Socorro and let the child's acceptance and trust flow into her.

A few minutes later, Socorro asked, "Are you sure it's going to work?"

Cait exhaled a very shaky breath. Goosebumps pebbled her arms and legs. "I'm a little scared," she admitted. "I'm also very excited."

Socorro nodded. "Can I pick Licorice up while you try one on?"

"Yes. But keep your gloves on when you do. We know they react to bare skin. Let's wait and see what happens to me first. Okay?"

"Okay." Socorro walked back and picked Licorice up. "Cait!"

Cait's attention was focused on the skins lying on the floor. "Yes," she said absently.

"Licorice's purring and there's a lump in the back of her selkie skin. It's in the same place as the air tanks on our EVA suits."

Cait nodded. "That makes sense. Some of these sealed pouches must contain the air supply. She put her gloves back on and selected one of the larger skins and placed it on the floor by her feet. Faint tracteries of red and gold rippled within its moire pattern.

"There are two more bumps on the outside of Licorice's hind legs," Socorro announced eagerly.

"Don't touch anything," Cait said quickly. She took a couple of deep breaths, tossed her gloves aside and stepped onto the selkie skin.

\* \* \* \*

The Lindy Lux disgorged EVA suited figures in full battle armor. Just like the armor Tiny remembered from the Mars Tunnel disaster. He shifted his position and peered around the ore grinder's claw leg. Lindy Lux's captain hadn't spotted him yet.

Indio and Kevin waited patiently along with the rest of the miners. So far, so good. Their job was to protect the miners, not send them off to a complete slaughter. All right. Maybe this wasn't the best idea in world, but it was the only one he could come up with on such short notice. Cait was their wild card. Welding himself to the ore grinder only exposed one person, himself, to death. It also gave him six hours to stall them and give Cait enough time to come back and help.

The brusque voice of Lindy Lux's captain came through loud and clear on the commlink. "That's it! Everyone line up and report in. This shouldn't take long."

\* \* \* \*

The skin flowed up Cait's legs. It felt dry and soft against her skin. Images from old science fiction movies flashed through her head, The Blob, the Thing, Alien, Predator ... Would she be trapped inside a

creature, her mind aware and fully functioning but helpless to intervene?

The skin flowed up to her hips and inserted questing tendrils into her anus and urinary tract. Sudden panic washed over Cait. She yelped, grabbed at the skin around her waist and started pulling it down. It retreated easily. The tendrils slid out of her

“What's wrong?” Socorro stood in the middle of the dome and hugged Licorice's skin clad body to her chest.

Cait pulled the skin past her hips. “Nothing.” She exhaled and waited for her heart to slow down. All right. Now that she had a chance to think it over, the tendrils made perfect sense. If this was a symbiote, then it should take over those bodily functions for her. She released the skin and let it flow back up her legs.

This time, when the tendrils inserted themselves, Cait was prepared for the sensation and let it happen. The skin flowed up her waist. She stared the new skin that covered her thighs. Slits appeared in the sides of the skin, just the right size for those little pouches. Okay. The empty ones must be storage pouches for her urine and feces.

The skin flowed up over her breasts. It pooled at her neck like a cowl and flowed down her arms and hands. She felt warm and cozy and comfortable.

\* \* \* \*

Fergus walked up, placed his helmet directly against Tiny's and glared at him through the visors.

The commlink crackled. “You think you're so smart.” The whiny voice grated on Tiny's ears. “You think you're going to rally the miners behind you while we waste our time searching Cait O'Keefe. Well, I've got news for you. I'm too smart to fall for your game. We're gonna solve both problems by using you as bait for her. Instead of wasting our time and equipment searching for her, we'll let her come to us.”

Tiny glared at Fergus. At least it gave them a little more time. Anything could

happen in six hours. The de-humidifier in his suit might overload. Watching Fergus drown in his own saliva should prove interesting.

“You're a fool. Of course, I'm not stupid enough to keep everyone out here to watch you die. That might cause a riot. We locked them inside one of the modules without their spacesuits. When we drag your body in after you die, they'll beg us to let them sign contracts.”

Did Fergus plan to scream at him for six hours? On second thought, maybe this wasn't such a good idea. Six solid hours of that voice would drive anyone insane.

The commlink crackled again. “The alarms are ready to go now!” A strange voice said over the link. “Mr. Mackenzie, you need to get past the perimeter and let us activate them.”

Tiny sagged against the claw leg and watched them leave. Where was Cait? Was she watching this from somewhere close by?

\* \* \* \*

“I’m glad you went first.” Laughter sparkled around Socorro’s voice. She and Cait were sitting cross legged on the floor. Their selkie skins fit perfectly. “Then when it came to my turn, I didn’t yell when it stuck its fingers inside of me. It’s not as bad as the catheters in our EVA suits.”

“True.” Cait grinned ruefully at the memory. “I’m used to that.. But it was rather shocking to feel two natural catheters insert themselves inside me in front and behind. Seeing how Licorice was so comfortable with it was why I relaxed and didn’t fight it too much after that first scream.”

“It makes perfect sense afterwards.” Even though Socorro tried to sound brave, an anxious aura coated her voice.

“Yes, it does. These pouches are very efficient.” Cait reached out and pulled Socorro into her lap. “The larger sealed ones on our backs must be full of water. The smaller empty ones on our legs hold our urine and feces.”

She kissed the top of Socorro’s head and sighed. “I wish I had the equipment to test them properly. I’d love to find out how they change the water into air for us to breathe.”

“Aunt Jule could test them for you,” Socorro said eagerly. “I liked the way it made your eyes look like seal eyes when you tugged the skin over your face. It’s neat the way it covers and uncovers your face when you pull at it.”

“Yeah. But you can’t talk when it covers your face. Everything we try to say comes out like a barking sound.” Cait grinned at the memory, then shrugged. “I wish I could figure out a way to attach my wings to it.”

“Daddy would probably be able to figure that out.” Socorro’s confidence wrapped itself around Cait’s senses. “He invented the wings. He knows everything about them.”

“Knowing him. He probably would,” Cait murmured. “Socorro.”

“Yes.”

“I have to go back and find out what happened.”

Socorro picked Licorice up and hugged her. “I know.”

“It might be dangerous. I don’t want to take any chances. Can you wait here for me?”

Socorro ducked her face into Licorice’s fur. “I can.” Her voice quavered. “Don’t take too long. Okay?”

“I won’t.” Cait held onto Socorro and poured reassurance into her. It was the least she could do right now to alleviate Socorro’s fear. Children were much more receptive to empathic projections. “People can run a mile in four minutes on Earth. The

camp isn’t that far away. I promise to come back in an hour. Cross my heart.” And she would. No matter what happened, she’d come back.

“Be careful.”

“I’ll be very careful. I promise.”

## Chapter 14

They were prisoners, packed like sardines inside one of the grounded modules. Company security had impounded their EVA suits and wings when they herded them inside. Indio shifted his position against the bulkhead and slowly straightened out his right leg. There wasn't enough space for him to walk the cramp off. Keeping his mouth open and taking shallow breaths kept him from smelling the combined odors of stale sweat and sour breath from the tightly packed mass of men and women all around him.

Was this how it felt to be imprisoned in a POW camp? Like fools who walked up and put their necks into the noose? Tiny's oxygen was due to run out in about two hours. Where were Cait and Socorro? When Nowan Corp's ship arrived and started broadcasting their demands, Cait had broken off all radio contact. It was as if they'd fallen off the asteroid itself. Repeated radar and infrared scans by Nowan security had failed to locate them. Did she know about Tiny? Did she know he was bait?

Damn! Indio kneaded the hard round ball of his cramped calf muscle between his fingers. Maybe it would have been better to go down fighting instead of letting the company thugs herd them like lambs to a slaughter. This was a stupid plan. They'd screwed this one up royally, absolutely. Tiny deserved better. That was an ugly way to die, all alone, cuffed to a stupid machine, waiting for his air to run out, gasping like a fish out of water.

And Jule. She didn't have to be here. She could have taken Nowan's offer. But no, she had to be a hero, just like the rest of the damn fools in here. When he tried to talk her out of it, she'd given him one of those looks that said hell would freeze over

before she'd change her mind. Then she turned her back on him and sat down with the science team.

Kevin wasn't saying anything. He'd taken a seat beside Indio a couple of hours ago and turned himself into a zombie. His face was blank. His eyes empty.

Their time was running out. Nothing left to do but sort through his memories like an old photo album. Socorro as a red-faced baby, reaching up and curling her hand around his finger. Her first smile. Her shrieks of laughter at six months when she figured out how to roll across the floor. The sudden joy on her face when she sat him down and made him listen to her read her first story out loud from beginning to end with no mistakes. Tiny's roar when they got drunk down on Moonraker's Row and fought six guys to a standstill. The look on Cait's face the first time he plunged himself into her...

The light over the airlock glowed green. Someone was coming inside. The hatch cycled open. The business end of a laser rifle popped out, followed by the black matte battle armored shapes of two security guards. Fergus climbed in next. His EVA suit gleamed under the overhead lights.

"If you sign and add your retinal ID's to the contract, no one will be harmed." Fergus let his aggrieved voice rise above the outraged rumble inside the module.

Indio flexed his foot and stared at the battle armor and laser rifles. The safeties were off. The rifles were at full charge. No way were they going to get past that. Not yet.

Fergus said, "It's just a matter of cutting your losses and accepting a lower financial reimbursement of your expenses."

Indio felt cold and hot with anger, all at once, and so abruptly, that he trembled with it. Pompous ass! Everything about Fergus, his voice, his bored expression, screamed of selfish unconcern and callous disregard for their lives.

*Never! We'll never agree, you bastard.* The words screamed inside Indio's head

while Fergus strutted back and forth. The only problem was, with his chubby face sticking out of his EVA suit, Fergus looked like a suckling pig instead of a rooster. He wasn't handling the low gravity too well either. He bounced and bobbed with every step like a puppet on a string. Indio snorted. The man was too stupid to even realize how silly he looked.

Vu Sheng pushed his way to the front of the crowd, shook his fist at Fergus and yelled, "Fuck you! Fuck the company! You can pussyfoot all you want with nice legal words like 'hostile takeover' and 'leveraged buyout.' We know it's a pack of lies to screw us out of what's rightfully ours."

Indio shook his head. Fergus wasn't the only idiot in this room. Was stupidity contagious?

Fergus ducked back behind the guards.

Sergio jumped up. "Yeah! Fuck you! Asshole!"

More voices started yelling from every side of the module.

The guards stepped forward. They turned and scanned the crowd. The red targeting dots on their laser rifles locked on Vu Sheng's and Sergio's faces.

A sudden hush fell across the crowd.

Indio crossed his arms over his chest and ignored the sinking feeling in his gut. No sense in giving in to his anger. Not now when he couldn't do anything to alter the odds.

"Cait's here," Kevin said softly. His fingers dug into Indio's elbow. "I can feel her."

Hope surged through Indio like a shot of pure whiskey. He felt lightheaded. "How close is she?" he managed to croak out of the side of his mouth. "What about Socorro? Can you feel her too?"

"Cait's close. Very close. I can't feel Socorro."

Fear shorted out his brain. "Why can't you feel Socorro?" He wanted to grab Kevin and shake the answer out of him. "Is she dead?"

"I can't feel her because she's too far away." Kevin's voice was calm and reassuring. "My sister knows better than to bring a child into a dangerous situation. Besides, if anything bad happened to Socorro, I'd know it. Cait wouldn't be able to hide that from me."

Indio's heart damped down to a slower pace. He glanced over the crowd for Julisa's head. She still had her back turned to him. No way to let her know.

Okay, he thought. The longer they stay inside, the more time Cait has to help Tiny. Indio levered himself to his feet. "What about Tiny?" he shouted. "You're not giving him any choice."



Fergus stopped and stared at Indio. “We didn't cuff him,” he yelled. “You did. It's not our fault if he dies.” He bounced on his heels, then steadied himself. “What about your woman? I thought you had better control of her. Why doesn't she respond to our radio calls? She's due to run out of oxygen in a couple of hours.. Accept our contract and we'll release you to search for her.”

Heads turned to watch Indio. His voice came out low pitched, ragged and raspy. “She's not my woman. She owns herself. I have no desire to control her.”

Liar. A small voice whispered in his head.

Twitching his eyes away from Indio's implacable stare, Fergus focused on another victim. “Dr. Kim!” he called out. “Why are you aligned with these cretins? You're a logical man. Their cause is doomed. Why are you encouraging this folly?”

Three claw marks gleamed on Dr. Ukensha Kim's nut-brown cheeks. His tightly curled hair was pure white. He shifted his position. “I know a despot when I see one, young man. My country has a history of dictatorships. I see no need to aid and abet your cause.”

“What about your colleagues? There's no reason for them to endure this hardship. They have many important experiments to conduct.”

Dr. Kim shrugged. “We chose to remain here with the miners out of our own free will.”

“Fools!” Fergus yelled. “You'll sing a different tune tomorrow after Tiny's air runs out.” He jabbed his finger at the crowd. “No one is exempt! We'll pull your names out at random and cuff you outside one at a time until you agree.” He spun around and almost fell over in the low gravity, then glared at his black-visored guards. “Let's go!”

Keeping their rifles raised, the guards backed out into the airlock with him. The door cycled shut behind them. No one moved. Without their EVA suits, it was suicide to follow them outside.

Julisa rose from her seat beside the elderly scientist and caught Indio's eye. He waved at her and motioned at her to come over to him. She bent over and said a few words to Dr. Kim. He nodded, then sagged against the bulkhead and closed his eyes with a weary sigh.

It only took a few minutes for her to step around and past the tightly packed bodies in the middle of the room. Indio patted the floor between him and Kevin. She lowered herself to the floor without touching Kevin, then asked, “Are you sure they don't have any surveillance devices in here?” Indio linked his fingers with hers.

Kevin was slumped against the bulkhead with his left arm shielding his face from the overhead lights. He lowered his arm. Pain shadowed his face. “They don't want any

physical records for us to bring into court against them. The only records they want are favorable ones.”

“Sounds just about right to me,” Indio said absently. “We can't escape, so they don't care what we say while we're cooped up inside of here. That's why they didn't set up any vid-cams around Tiny. They'll probably list it as an accidental death and we won't have any documentation of what really happened.”

“What can Cait do?” Julisa shook her head. “She's only one person against a shipful of armed men and

women.”

Kevin studied the metal grid of the ceiling for a few moments. “It's not going to be easy. They rigged up proximity alarms for both air and ground approaches.”

His gaze flickered to the airlock then away again. “I can feel her outside now. Our dru bond is strong.” He lifted his shoulder in a half shrug. “I'm not a mind reader. I don't know what's she's going to do. I know she's out there. That's it. I don't know how many guards they have on Tiny. All we can do is hope she can figure something out that won't be too risky for her to attempt.”

Julisa's eyes widened. “Dru bond?” she whispered.

Kevin slanted her one of his enigmatic glances. “We're twins. We're emotionally linked to each other. We call it a dru bond.”

Julisa's voice reflected her fear. “Is Socorro all right?”

Kevin held out his hand. She accepted it with a soft sob and sagged between him and Indio. Indio moved closer and put his arm around her shoulder. Her face felt hot to Indio's touch. Her body shook between them as if a fever raged through her.

“As long as I can feel her, we know Socorro's okay.” Kevin breathed his words out reassuringly. “Cait would never deliberately expose her to risk.”

Jule took a couple of deep, shuddering breaths. “I'm all right now.” She shifted her position to move away from him.

Kevin's fingers tightened on her arm. “Don't go. Please. There's too many people around me. Too many emotions. I need you to help me block the crowd away.”

Jule stared at Kevin, nodded, then sagged against him again. A split second later, she lifted her head and glared at the airlock. “If anything happens to them...”

Kevin's face was as black and empty as his voice. “We'll avenge them.”

“Is this a private party?” Parvati's voice interrupted their thoughts. Dr. Kim smiled down at them. Darlene stood beside them carrying a bunch of red and yellow pillows. “Look who we found.” Parvati pulled Dr. Kim forward. “We thought you might like to compare notes.” Darlene plopped a couple of pillows down on the floor, then helped Parvati ease the older man down between them.

“Oh yes.” Indio uncoiled his arm from Julisa's shoulder. “Take a seat. Make yourselves comfortable. Where were you when Fergus made his big announcement?”

Parvati rolled her eyes expressively. “We were keeping a low profile while you macho men hogged the spotlight. So...” She crossed her legs in a lotus position. “What's the scoop?”

“We're waiting,” Indio said.

“For Cait,” Kevin added.

“She's outside.” Julisa glanced at Kevin. “He can feel her. She's his twin.”

“Ah!” Dr. Kim nodded his head. “May I ask a few questions for my personal gratification?”

Everyone looked at Indio. He wondered when he got promoted to leader. “Sure,” he said. “Fire away.”

“Such colorful idioms you Americans use.” Dr. Kim schooled his face into a dignified expression. “Why are they trying to force this contract upon you? Can't you appeal this highhanded treatment in a court of law?”

Indio sighed. He raised his hand and counted off the issues. “Number one. It doesn't matter how they get them, with retinal IDs and signatures, they have valid contracts. Number two. Without any physical documentation, it's our word against theirs. Number three. They can list any deaths incurred during the takeover as accidental

if they have valid contracts. Number four. We don't have enough money to fight them in court. Their company lawyers can appeal it forever.”

“I see. As long as you refuse the contracts, the company's hands are tied.”

“For the time being, anyway,” Darlene added. A row of five silver rings pierced her right eyebrow. They matched her earrings. She pushed her pistachio colored hair back and flashed a smile at Kevin. “We still have to find a way to neutralize their security and send out an appeal for help. Two things we can't do as long as they keep us confined without access to EVA suits and communication.”

“Tiny gave Cait extra provisions when she left,” Parvati said quietly.

“Ah!” Dr. Kim unzipped the side pocket of his shipsuit and pulled out a deck of cards. “Our only choice right now is to wait.” He shuffled the cards. “Name your poison. Poker? Gin? Bridge?”

\* \* \* \*

What a stupid way to die. Tiny leaned his helmet against the massive claw leg and stared at the multitude of stars wheeling past him in the pitch black sky. His arms had fallen asleep again. He couldn't feel his hands anymore. Time to shift their position lower again and ease the strain on his shoulders.

Fergus had called his bluff, pure and simple. Motion detectors and proximity alarms ringed the perimeter of the silent tunnel. The black tracery of an aerial mesh stretched over the top of the giant machine, just in case Cait tried to approach his position using her solar wings.

He checked the time on his visor screen. Five hours wasted. Two more left. Five lousy, boring hours to regret his decision. It wouldn't hurt half as bad if he'd managed to grab one kiss and had a chance to tell Cait how he felt. Five minutes alone with her, that's all he wanted.

And he had no one to blame but himself. This entire plan was stupid.

The comlink spluttered to life in his helmet. “Mr. Barnett,” said Fergus. “T. J. Barnett! How'd you get Tiny from T. J.?”

Bright flashes of sunlight bounced off the shiny reflective surface of the helmets. Fergus stood about ten feet away from the perimeter. Two guards wearing battle armor and carrying laser rifles flanked Fergus. A string of yellow sodium lights rigged up around the tunnel provided additional illumination to the stark

landscape.

“How does it feel to know your air will run out in another hour and a half?”

Tiny gave Fergus a nice steady down-the-gun barrel stare. No way was he gonna let the little twerp hear him beg.

Fergus walked around the perimeter with his palm sized screen and checked out every one of the alarms. “Have you changed your mind yet? We'll release you if you agree to sign a contract. No hard feelings.”

Turning off the comlink wasn't an option right now. What if Cait needed to contact him and couldn't? Maybe she was out there now, watching and listening in on this. Maybe he'd have a chance to talk to her and warn her away from the alarms. Five minutes. That's all he wanted.

“Are you listening to me?” Fergus yelled. His voice on the commlink sliced through Tiny's eardrums like a knife. “You're going to die! No one's going to rescue you! What are you? An imbecile too stupid to even care about dying?”

Tiny moved his arms to another position. At this point in time, it didn't really matter one way or the other if he cared or didn't care. Life wasn't fair. Death happens.

Fergus threw his arms up and almost fell on his ass with this sudden move. He staggered forward. One of the proximity alarms started clanging. Fergus kicked it, punched in a code on its control and silenced it. Then he punched in the code to reset the device.

The comlink spluttered to life one last time. “Let's go!” Fergus yelled. “I don't even know why I'm wasting my time with this fool.”

You've got that part right, Tiny thought while he watched them leave. I'm a fool with nothing left but a bunch of dreams. He never had a chance.

He sagged against the claw leg and closed his eyes. Nothing left now. Nothing to do but pick out all the good memories and string them up like a line of pearls. That's what he would take with him into the long cold night of his death. Socorro's laugh when he spun her around in his arms on the dance floor at the Starlight. Indio's crooked smile when he tossed that exoskeleton into the trash chute. The first time he saw Cait walk into the Emporium with her calico hair hanging down past her hips in that complex five strand braid. He saw her and wished he could use her face, her hair as the template for the game he was creating about elves and fairies. The bright swirl of sunlight flowing across the moon, showing him the vast craters and canyons that scarred its surface.

## Chapter 15

The longer Cait wore the selkie skin, the more discoveries she made about its capabilities. The world shifted about her into a new perspective. Every time she moved, the movement bounced back against the skin into her and gave her the shapes of the ground and the rocks and the vast emptiness of the sky above her. It felt odd and out of kilter to “sense” with her entire body the shapes and textures of everything in all directions, above, below, in front and behind her.

It was a total immersion, a total awareness fed into her brain by the skin. How did it do that? Was this what dolphins and whales felt every day of their lives? No wonder her ancestors used these skins to swim in the ocean.

When she let the selkie skin cover her face, it linked its eyes to hers and changed her vision too. Colors shifted into various shades of red. She saw the heat from the rocks that lay in the bright sunlight. Gliding across the asteroid's surface, slipping from shadow to shadow was an exhilarating sensation. She felt graceful and unencumbered. Having to wear an EVA suit after experiencing this freedom would be sheer torture.

. She stopped in a deep shadow and looked down at herself with her new eyes.. There was no heat radiating from her hands, legs or body. Yet she felt warm and secure in the absolute cold of the airless asteroid. As near as she could figure it out without any instruments, her excess body heat fueled the selkie skin's life support functions.

Cait stopped and lowered herself to her knees. The camp was only a couple of hundred yards ahead. Watch out, she reminded herself. The selkie skin granted her more freedom of movement, not invisibility. She crept over the ground, taking advantage of every shadow until she reached the edge of the landing field.

She surveyed the area. Her enhanced vision allowed her to sort out and pinpoint heat signatures. It took a couple of minutes for her brain to translate the overlapping layers of red. Over there! The module set aside as sleeping quarters for single males radiated the highest concentration of heat. The other modules showed her the steady patterns of solar panels fueling their life support systems.

She reached into the sleeping module with her empathic senses and let the wave of confused emotions wash over her. She sorted through the overlapping emotions from men and women crowded together into one place searching for the familiar thread of her dru-bond with Kevin.

There! The dru-bond snapped into place. She welcomed its familiar strength and the way it shielded her from the overlapping muddle of unfocused and unfamiliar emotional auras. Held within the rock solid foundation of her bond with Kevin, she basked in the heat of Indio's passionate concern and tasted the still water of Julisa's intellect.

Cait reached again and searched all around but couldn't find Tiny anywhere in the confines of that crowded module. She wrapped her arms around her knees and pulled her senses back into herself. Think! If he's not in there with them, then where would he be? He can't be too far.

Slowly, carefully, she focused her selkie eyes and studied the landing field. The next highest concentration of infrared heat was centered in the company ship blatantly crouched in the exact center of the encampment. Was he there? Without Kevin to anchor her, she didn't dare reach into that ship and try to sort through its empathic ambiance for Tiny. She turned her head and scanned the rest of the encampment. There! On the far side beside the ore grinder was a solitary heat signature. It looked weak and pale, almost drained of energy. Was that Tiny? And, if it was, why wasn't he with everyone else?

The airlock door on the ship that held Kevin cycled open. She crouched back on her heels and watched three suited figures exit the module. Two of them wore battle armor and carried laser rifles. The third figure? Cait tilted her head and studied his clumsy movements. She tasted his emotions with her empathic ability. He felt familiar. Then her impressions solidified into a solid identity. That was Fergus walking with the armored men. Where were they going?

It proved to be a fairly simple matter to follow them. They didn't even bother turning around and looking back to see her standing in the shadows behind them. Cait grinned when she saw where they were headed. The ore grinder. She doubled back and ran around the outskirts of the encampment.

Someone was cuffed to the ore grinder! She crawled up the talus slope beside it and peered down. Tiny! She didn't even have to probe for his emotional signature. The size and shape of his suited figure slumped against the oversized claw foot was enough for her to recognize him. As it was, the sudden shock of recognition almost caused her to lose her grip and tumble off the slope. She clung to the ground for a few seconds, then oozed up between two of the larger rocks, settled into the shadows and waited for Fergus and his companions to arrive.

How did this happen anyway? She couldn't imagine Tiny letting anyone chain him to anything without one hell of a fight.

The arrival of Fergus and his companions set off the proximity alarms. Cait's senses pricked up when her selkie skin tasted the pattern of the alarms' fields. She noted a gap in their coverage. It was just the right size for her to squeeze past, however, it wasn't large enough for Tiny's spacesuit. The only drawback to the selkie skin was not having the ability to eavesdrop on the radio conversation between Fergus and Tiny. The emotional overtones told her Fergus was taunting him.

How long had Tiny been cuffed there? How much oxygen did he have left? Goddess above! Don't let him die! Not now when I'm so close to helping him! She tamped down her impatience and wished very fervently for Fergus and his companions to leave.

It seemed like forever but in reality it took only a few more minutes for her unspoken prayers to be answered. The angry frustration Fergus radiated deepened into rage when he bumped into one of the proximity alarms and set it off.

Cait raised herself to her knees and carefully watched the guards reset the alarm. She nodded. That three digit code was easy to remember. The guards went one way. Fergus turned the opposite way and started walking back to the company ship.

Cait eased herself off the rock pile down to relatively solid ground. This was not a good time to dislodge any stones that might trigger the alarms' motion detectors. Slinking from shadow to shadow, she followed the two guards. They went inside an emergency dome set up about thirty yards on the other side of the grinder.

Now what? Cait sorted through the possibilities. Tiny was her first priority. She had an extra selkie skin strapped to the tool belt around her waist. But, in order to change into the skin, Tiny needed a safe environment with breathable air, not out here. The emergency dome would be ideal except for its current occupants.

Think! Cait told herself. How can I distract the guards? Then she relaxed as the answer unfolded itself in her mind. Those tanks in sick bay. Nitrous oxide.

Now that she'd sorted that detail out, Cait started moving. Very slowly and carefully, she slipped past the alarms. Tiny's helmet jerked up when he spotted her figure creeping across the rocks toward him.

She walked towards him with her empty hands raised in a reassuring manner, then circled behind him and peered at the gauges on his back. There was about ninety minutes

of oxygen left. His vitals looked good but his body temp was too low. She flipped the switch on his heater up to a higher setting. He probably set it low trying to conserve his air. His emotions kept switching back and forth from fear to wary curiosity. What was he thinking? That she was an hallucination caused by oxygen deprivation? Or a monster?

With only an hour and a half of air left, this wasn't the right time to try and explain things to him. It would have been easier if he'd showed her some of the hand signals he used when he was a Navy SEAL. She shrugged. No use worrying about should have beens. With a final pat on the arm of Tiny's spacesuit, she left.

Thank the goddess for small favors, she thought when she reached the medical module. It wasn't guarded. Didn't they realize how vital medical supplies would be for anyone trying to resist them? But then, not everyone had a pre-med background like her and knew what could be used. And having that entry chip Kevin gave her made breaking and entering a simple task. She climbed up the ladder to the airlock and went inside.

It didn't take long, maybe five minutes altogether, to find a couple of ampoules of "knock out" drugs and the surgical laser from the emergency kit and clip them to her belt. The five-foot tall nitrous oxide tank was going to be a bitch to bring out. She went back to the supply cabinets and pulled out a bunch of blankets. More precious minutes ticked away while she waited for the air to cycle out before the exterior door opened. She lowered the blankets the bottom of the ladder.

Back inside the airlock, she tapped her foot impatiently while the interior door cycled open again. She selected a full tank of nitrous oxide. Wheeling it out to the lock as quickly as she could, Cait wished there was a faster way to do this. How long had it been since she left Tiny? A wristwatch would make a nice addition to her selkie suit.

It felt funny watching the tank literally float down and bounce on the blankets after she pushed it out of the lock. She climbed down and uprighted the awkward bulk of the canister. Trudging along behind it on the pitted surface, she hurriedly estimated the

dosages needed for this venture. There were two males weighing about 200 pounds each waiting inside an emergency dome with an area of about 100 cubic feet. A forty percent concentration should be sufficient to render them into a "happy" and relatively "silly" state of mind.

Cait couldn't resist the temptation to wave at Tiny while she circled his position. Poor guy. If she were in his place, she'd be asking herself if this was an extremely vivid hallucination. Seeing a strange creature walking around in a total vacuum on an asteroid's surface pushing a canister with a medical caduceus imprinted on its side would make anyone doubt his sanity.

More and more she appreciated the selkie suit. No clumsy gloves to interfere with her movements while she hooked up the nitrous oxide to the emergency dome's air tanks. Her selkie clad fingers moved easily between the connection points and reattached the proper hoses in the right places. There were two valves on the nitrous oxide canister. She peered at the main valve, turned it on full, watched the gauge and counted off five minutes until it showed forty percent. She shut the main valve down, then flipped on the smaller "regulator" valve to maintain the nitrous oxide at that level.

Cait punched in the standard entry request for the airlock and stepped inside. While it cycled in air, she pulled out two ampoules of "knock out" drugs and held them ready. Her heart hammered in her throat. If they were paying attention to the airlock alarms, they knew someone was coming inside.

The inner door cycled open. The guards were wearing EVA suits with their helmets removed. The first one sat by a monitor, playing a computerized shoot 'em up game and smiling. The other had a VR unit wrapped around his head. She stepped up to the first guard. He turned around. His eyes widened in surprise and he started laughing. She stabbed him in his neck with the drugged ampoule. In the same motion, she spun around to her next victim and injected him too.

The guards slumped back in their seats. Okay, Cait reminded herself. Now she didn't have to worry about them recovering their senses as soon as she stopped the flow of laughing gas into the dome. They should be out for another hour at least. She went back outside, shut down the nitrous oxide and switched on the oxygen to flush the airflow back to normal levels. No sense in exposing herself and Tiny to laughing gas when she brought him inside. They needed clear heads to figure out things out together.

Tiny's helmeted head swiveled around again to face Cait while she slipped up to the control panel and tapped in the code to deactivate the proximity. She refused to reach for him with her empathic senses. He was pouring out enough confused and conflicting emotions that she found it very difficult to concentrate. The last thing she needed was to cut his suit with the laser.

Cait eased the tiny laser scalpel between his glove and the metal bands around his wrist. At the highest setting and narrowest focus, it did a splendid job of cutting his cuffs off. Good!

The first thing he did was reach for her face. She backpedaled hastily away from his hands. If he pulled the selkie skin back from her head, he'd kill her.

Cait studied the image of her selkie skin covered face reflected in Tiny's visor. There were no whites and no pupils for her eyes. Her eyes were totally black and opaque within a black skinned and otherwise featureless face. The emotional turmoil Tiny projected while he stared at her made perfect sense. If the situation were reversed she'd feel the same way.

Slowly, carefully, she raised her hands and motioned at him to follow her. He nodded his agreement. She backed away step by step and watched him follow her. It didn't take long for her to reset the proximity alarms once she got him past them. When they stood outside the emergency dome, he balked and tried to signal to her that it was

dangerous. She backed away around the side of the dome motioning at him to follow, then pointed at the canister of nitrous oxide.

He bent over and read the label. Shocked comprehension flowed out from him into her as he straightened up. More confused hand signals passed between them, then he shrugged and let her lead him inside the airlock. When the interior light changed from red to green, signaling that there was enough air to open the interior lock, he reached out with his gloved hand and stopped her from cycling it open.

His curiosity probed at her. She didn't have to try and read his lips. He wanted to see her face.

She stepped back, raised her hands to the top of her head and peeled the selkie skin back. It parted under her fingers like a velcro strip unsealing itself. Tiny's sudden shock slammed into her, followed immediately by joyous wonder .

His hands were shaking as he fumbled at the latches for his helmet. She helped him remove it.

"Cait!" Tiny pulled her close and touched her hair and face in a desperate need to reassure himself that it was really her. "You're all right. What happened to you? What is this? How?"



“I'm all right.” She smiled. “Let's go inside. I knocked the guards out with an injection after I used the nitrous oxide on them. This is a selkie skin. I found it in a cave on the other side of the asteroid. Socorro's back there waiting for me.”

She opened the inner lock and they stepped inside. Tiny released her, went to the guards, checked their pulses, then gathered up their rifles. He laid the rifles down in the corner, then stepped behind the monitors and started yanking out their wires.

“Help me.” He pulled the first guard out of the chair onto the ground. “We need their suits.”

“Why?” Cait asked.

“Because Fergus locked everyone else up in the sleeping module without any EVA suits. We need these suits to get them out. Besides, they're a good disguise if we want to sneak onto Nowan Corp's ship.”

“All right.”

Dragging the limp bodies out of the suits took a good bit of grunting, pushing and shoving. Cait felt like she was trying to peel a slippery sausage with a spoon. Tiny grinned at her and pulled a roll of duct tape out from the side pocket of his suit. That took care of the next problem.

“Okay.” Tiny lowered himself to the floor and stared at Cait kneeling beside the second guard's body. His gaze wandered up and down the length of her selkie clad shape. He swiped his hand across his scalp. “What the hell is that thing you're wearing and where did you get it?”

Cait crawled over, then sat down crosslegged in front of him. This wasn't going to be easy to explain but she was going to try her best. “Tiny, I came here looking for proof that my people have an extraterrestrial origin.”

He blinked. His total confusion flooded her senses. “What do you mean?”

She pointed to her eyes and showed him her nictitating membranes.

“W-what?”

“Throughout the years that my people have existed on Earth, there were many legends about us. We were called elves, fairies, vampires, selkies, and werewolves.”

A frown creased Tiny's forehead. “Werewolves?” He pointed at her eyes. “What do your eyes have to do with werewolves?”

Cait bit her lip for a second, then decided to go all the way with her explanation. “Some of us are born with hair all over our bodies. One of my fathers was born that way.”

“What way?”

“He has hair all over his body and face.”

Tiny nodded. His face was blank. But total acceptance flowed into her from him while he waited for her to continue.

Cait knew she was babbling but it was such a relief to just spit it out without worrying about the consequences. “The stories about selkies talked about them wearing skins that changed them into seals when they went into the ocean. They also talk about how the selkies changed into people when they removed their skins.”

“Okay.” Tiny nodded again.

“Over the years my people have been persecuted and harassed. We've lost most of our history. I read all the old tales and decided that a lot of it sounds like a higher level of technology that looked like ‘magic’ to humans back then.”

“Makes sense to me.” Tiny rubbed his hand across his bald head. “I remember your fathers. Nathaniel was the one who always hid his face under that Taureg veil. He even had his helmet specially made for him with the visor completely black. Your other father, Shiloh, the one who didn't hide his face, looked like he had a lot of Indian in him. He never had to shave.”

Cait smiled. “He didn't have to shave his face but he shaved the sides of his scalp every day.”

“Yeah. I remember that. He had a three inch strip of hair on his scalp.” Tiny reached over Cait's shoulder, pulled her braid out and peered at it. “He kept it in a five strand braid just like yours.”

“Anyway,” Cait said quickly. Tiny's emotional aura was shifting into the sexual zone. Now was not the right time or place for her to address that issue. “Socorro and I found these selkie skins and now I'm wearing one and it works fine as a spacesuit. It's better than a spacesuit. I think it's a parasite that was biologically changed into a life support unit.” She twisted sideways. “You see the lump on my back?”

“Yes.”

“There's a water pouch inside it. The skin changes water into air for me to breathe.” She patted the lumps on her legs. “And these pouches are for my body wastes.”

His eyes widened. His appreciative comprehension surged over her “Sounds very efficient.”

Cait opened the bag tied to her belt and pulled out another selkie skin. “Here's another one. You have to strip. It reacts to bare skin.”

Tiny sat back. “Does Indio know about your people?”

Cait gnawed at her lip. She took a breath, exhaled, then looked back at Tiny and said, “He knows a little bit, not everything. I'm not sure how he's going to react.”

Hope shimmered across Tiny's face and flowed out to her. “Cait.”

She had a funny feeling what he was going to say next and wasn't sure if she wanted to hear it. “Yes.”

“If he doesn't want you after he finds out, I'm here. There was a time when black people weren't considered human. I don't care what anyone says, I love you just the way you are.”

Cait pushed herself up onto her knees and placed her hands on his shoulders. “Tiny. You shouldn't be saying things like that to me.”

“But it's true.” He put his hands on her waist and pulled her to him. His desire flowed into her. “I know you love Indio and he loves you but if it doesn't work out between you, I want...”

She wanted him too but not this way. Not now. Not yet. It felt wrong. Totally wrong. “No,” she whispered and turned her face away from him and let his kiss brush her cheek instead of her mouth. “Don't say it.”

Tiny sighed. He released her, sat back on his heels, then pointed at the extra selkie skin lying beside her. “Explain how this thing works again. This isn't over yet. We've got one hell of a job ahead of us.”

## Chapter 16

Dr. Ukensha Kim laid down his cards, three aces and two tens. “Full house.”

“That's it.” Indio tossed in his cards and handed over his last candy bar. He put his hands behind his head and steadied his body against the bulkhead. “I'm broke.”

“Me too,” echoed around their huddle. Everyone added their candy bars to the pot.

Kevin's head jerked up. He stared at the airlock. “Cait's here,” he said. “I can feel her.”

Everyone turned around and stared at the airlock. Thirty seconds later the red warning light flashed above it. The air compressor cycled on and started pumping air into the airlock. It only took three minutes for the light to change to green but it felt like forever. The metal circle handle spun around and the door opened. Socorro walked out with Licorice cradled in her arms. Cait and Tiny followed on her heels.

Tiny dumped a pair of armor clad EVA suits on the metal deck. Shocked silence filled the room. Tiny, Cait, and Socorro were all wearing strange black skinsuits. Even Licorice had her own cat-sized skinsuit. Iridescent colors swirled in shifting patterns on these suits.

“Okay!” Tiny's deep chested voice broke the silence. “We're back and we're ready to kick ass.”

Kevin was already on his feet and headed for Cait. Indio hurried to catch up to him. Tiny was alive! Socorro was all right! Cait was all right!

“Daddy!” Socorro ducked past Tiny's legs and lifted the kitten up in the air for him to examine. “Look! This is a selkie skin. Licorice found them for us in a cave.”

They're a lot nicer to wear than regular spacesuits. Our eyes see things differently too when we're wearing them.”

Selkie skins? Where did she come up with such an odd name for these skinsuits? Indio reached out to touch her arm.

“No!” Socorro's face filled with alarm and she backed away from his hand. “Don't touch! You have to wear gloves.” She giggled and held her iridescent arm up for him to study. “They're symbiotes. Cait explained it to me. They react to our bare skin.”

“Is it dangerous for me to touch it then?”

Socorro shook her head. “But I don't want my skin to get confused and try to put itself over the both of us at the same time.”

“Socorro!”

“Aunt Jule!” Socorro turned around and started her explanation all over again for Julisa.

But Indio wasn't paying attention. He looked at Cait. She smiled at him. Tiny was holding hands with her. Something had happened between them. And everything he believed about Cait and Tiny shifted and turned itself inside out.

“Remember that old horror movie we had to watch in grade school, The Blob.” Tiny's voice rose about the excited babble of his audience. “That's what I was thinking about when she walked up to me out there wearing this skin. I was afraid some alien creature had absorbed her and it wasn't really her.”

Indio was aware that his legs were moving and bringing him closer to them. His brain kept flashing back and forth like a strobe light. No! Nothing had happened! He was reading too much into a simple gesture. But ... what if something had happened? No! Tiny was his best friend. He'd never try to steal Cait like that. But ... if they had ... if she had feelings for Tiny ... shouldn't he be happy for them and step aside?

“We had to go back to the cave where Socorro was waiting with the rest of the

selkie skins. Then we brought her and the selkie skins here with us. You have to strip naked before you can put one of them on. They react to our bare skin.”

Indio stopped right in front of Cait. She looked at him and he didn't know what to do or say. Five seconds ago he'd been thinking he should give her up. But now, standing here with her\_\_all he could think was Cait, Cait, Cait...

Her head jerked back like she'd just been slapped. “How could you?” she whispered. “How could you think that I'd ... that we ... just because I ... not good enough for you anymore...”

“Hey!” Tiny reached out to put his hand on Cait's shoulder. “What's wrong?” She flinched away from his touch.

“Nothing!” Indio snapped at him. “Nothing's wrong! Leave her alone!”

Kevin stepped in between Indio and Tiny, put his hands on Cait's waist and pulled her toward him. “No! You leave her alone. Both of you!”

Cait's selkie skin started bunching up around her waist and moving over Kevin's hands. She stopped, then reached down and pulled the symbiote away from his hands.

Indio stood there. Talk about shit for brains. He felt like banging his head against the bulkhead. Kevin had pretty well spelled it out for him yesterday. He and Cait were empaths. He'd already accepted that with Kevin and didn't think it was strange how Kevin could sense his sister's presence without even seeing her.

Yet, knowing this, what did he do? He walked right up to her and let her feel him swing from jealous suspicion to denial and back to suspicion. No wonder she was pissed off at him. And he couldn't even try to explain himself to her. There were too many people around.

\* \* \* \*

Something had happened. Tiny wasn't sure what but this wasn't the time or the place to have heart to heart talks with everyone. They had a more important problem to take care of right now.

He said, "We've got to figure out how to disarm Nowan Corp's Security."

Indio turned around, stared at him, then nodded. He looked at the battle armored spacesuits lying on the floor of the airlock behind Tiny. "How'd you manage to liberate those from Nowan?"

Tiny exhaled his pent up breath. Good! Old habits were kicking in. They were a team and they had a major problem to resolve with Nowan Corp. "Cait did that. She knocked out my guards with laughing gas. We left them tied up inside the emergency shelter."

Indio stepped inside the airlock, squatted down on his heels and peered at the suits. "Two suits. Who gets the other one?"

"Kevin's the right size and height," Tiny said. "We can pull a Trojan Horse switch around on Nowan to pull you and him on the inside. The rest of us can use the selkie skins."

Indio nodded. "Where's the suit's liner?"

Tiny grinned. "You won't need one. You can wear a selkie skin instead. That way you don't have to hook yourself up to the suit's plumbing."

"Hey!" Parvati's voice said quietly behind Tiny. He turned around. She held up a couple of blankets and magnetic clips. "We can clip this across the back corner for a privacy screen while everyone changes."

Tiny exhaled carefully. So far. So good. The sudden tension between him and Indio had diminished. He risked a quick look over his shoulder at Cait. She turned away and refused to meet his eyes. Her back was stiff with anger.

God, that hurt! She didn't have to say a word and he wanted to crawl under a rock. Hell! He felt like shit even though he never even made it to first base with her. Indio was his best friend! He shouldn't have been thinking about Cait the way he'd been the last couple of weeks.

Was that why was she so upset? Because he'd propositioned her before they came back here?

Tiny shook his head. She loved Indio, not him. He should step out of the picture and stop trying to get in between them.

\* \* \* \*

Cait wanted to scream and shake some sense into them. Indio and Tiny were tearing her apart, expecting her to pick over the other when she wanted both. She wasn't a toy, a possession, to be fought over or owned by either one of them. She was a grown woman with a mind and heart of her own. It was never going to work. Their culture would never let them accept what she needed. Cait sighed as she

lowered herself to an empty space on the floor beside Dr. Kim.

“Are you feeling all right?”

“What?” She stared at him. Dr. Kim's dark face radiated concern. There was nothing he could do about it anyway. “I'm fine, thank you.” She leaned against the bulkhead, hugged her knees to her chest and looked away.

“All right!” Tiny's booming voice carried easily above the murmur of the crowd. He turned to Indio and Kevin. “Any questions?”

“No.” Kevin picked up his helmet and balanced it in his hands. “No questions. We know what we have to do.”

Indio loosened the straps on his airtanks, shrugged them into a more comfortable position, then tightened the straps again. Carefully avoiding any eye contact with Tiny, he glanced at Cait. The look in his eyes sliced through her like a laser. She averted her face. It hurt too much to think about not being with him anymore but she didn't see any other choice. No use trying to explain anything to either one of them, they'd never understand.

“Wait a minute!” A thin-faced man with dirty blond hair tied back in a ponytail stepped forward. There was an oriental cast to his features. Cait felt the rage roaring out from him like a flame. “Instead of tiptoeing around with these elaborate plans why don't we just waste them? We have two laser rifles. We can use them to blast holes in their ship.” The iridescent colors on the man's selkie skin deepened into a dark red and swirled faster.

The crowd's murmur deepened into agreement. Tiny reached out, picked the man up by the back of his “skin” and shook him like a wet rag. “Vu Sheng,” he said softly. Quiet menace coated his voice. “Where were you when they handed out brains?”

The colors on Tiny's “skin” shifted and brightened into a golden chatoyance just like a cat's eyes shining in the dark. “I'm only gonna say this once so you better listen real hard. Just because you're one of the good guys doesn't give you the right to kill anyone. This isn't a VR game. This is real life. Murder is murder no matter who pulls the trigger. Comprende? Kapeesh?”

Tiny opened his hand and let Vu Sheng go. He fell to the floor in slow motion. The asteroid's gravity wasn't strong enough to endanger him. “Y-yes,” Vu Sheng said sulkily. “I understand.” The colors on his “skin” muted down but remained red.

“Good!” Tiny spun around with his hands on his hips and scanned the crowd. “Any more bright ideas?”

Standing right behind him with the laser rifles cradled in their arms, Kevin and Indio reinforced him with their equally hard and challenging stares.

There it was! For a brief moment, Cait felt the dru-bond between Indio and Tiny shimmer, then it flickered out again. She sighed and hugged her knees tighter. Why did

they do this to themselves? Destroying the friendship they'd built up over the years with their petty jealousy over her like she had no mind of her own.

The indigo colors on her “skin” moved sluggishly across her arms. She stared, then started looking

around the room and noticed the different variations in color and motion on everyone's "skins." She turned her head and looked into the warm brown gaze of Dr. Kim. "Interesting side effect, isn't it?" he said. "I was wondering if I was the only one to notice that."

The thought percolated through her mind for a moment. "Yes," she said finally. "But not too surprising when you realize that these skins are symbiotes. They're obviously tuned into us at a very basic level."

Dr. Kim nodded eagerly. "Probably something to do with pheromones and biorhythms as the symbiote adjusts to each person." He stroked his arms and watched the colors shift and change. "I can't wait to get to my equipment and start running specific tests on them."

Cait smiled. Talking with Dr. Kim helped. He was giving her something concrete to think about instead of her personal problems. "Wait 'til you go outside with the skin over your face. It changes everything. Your eyes see in the infrared and it changes how your body feels things.." She shrugged. "It's hard to explain. It's like your body becomes a complete sonar sensing unit."

"Really!" Dr. Kim's excitement washed over her. He looked wistfully at the airlock.

The airlock alarm pinged. Indio and Kevin were outside. Cait held her hand out to Dr. Kim. "Later, when this is over," she said with a smile, "I'd like to help you figure out the capabilities of these selkie skins."

"It's a deal," he said. They shook hands on it.

\* \* \* \*

Kevin welded the cuffs back on around Tiny's empty EVA suit at the ore grinder. He stepped back and surveyed his handiwork. Their trap was baited. Indio shifted his shoulders under the additional mass of the battle armored suit and waved Kevin out ahead of him.

Indio stared at his gloved hand, made a fist and opened his fingers slowly. Why was Cait so angry with him? Was it because she wanted to date Tiny, but couldn't because of him? How was he going to explain anything to her if she wouldn't talk to him?

Kevin walked over to the top of the embankment where he had a clear line of sight for his transmission to Nowan Corp's ship, Lindy Lux. "Logan reporting in," he said. That was the name stenciled on his newly acquired helmet. The name on Indio's was Walters.

"Report." The com officer's laconic voice came through perfectly on the com's radio frequency.

"W-we've got a problem sir."

A series of thumps and scrapes came over the link, then Fergus spoke. "What? What happened? What kind of problem do you have?"

"Uh..." Kevin followed his script faithfully. "I think you'll have to come out here and see for yourself sir."

"The hell I will," Fergus grumbled. "You tell me what the problem is. Right now!"

"Well ... uh ... it's very strange sir. You know that guy Tiny?"

“Of course I know that guy Tiny.” Indio could almost see Fergus as he yelled into the mike. “I left him out there with you a couple of hours ago, remember?”

“Well, we went out to check up on him now that his time's up...”

“And...”

“His suit's still cuffed to the grinder but it's empty.”

A moment of silence greeted this announcement. Then Fergus said, “We'll be out in about fifteen minutes. Don't touch anything. Don't move and don't let anyone near until we get there.”

“Yes sir! Over and out sir!” Kevin switched off his com link and jumped down from the embankment. He walked over to Indio and they put their helmets together. “It won't be long now.”

Desperate situations called for desperate measures. He wasn't going to be any use on this mission if he kept thinking about his problems instead of concentrating on his job. This might be the only chance he had to straighten things out between him and Cait and Indio was damn well going to make sure he had the right answers. “What do I have to do to get her to talk to me again?” he asked Kevin. “Should I apologize to her? What should I say?”

“I can't tell you what to do,” Kevin's careful voice said through the helmets. “You don't have to do anything.” He reached up and patted Indio's arm clumsily with his gloved hand. “It's your heart, your emotions. You have to look inside and figure out what you really want.”

Indio shook his head. “Let's pretend I'm very, very stupid. Spell it out to me in nice simple terms. We have plenty of time. We've got fifteen minutes.”

Kevin cleared his throat. “How about if I give you some examples?” he asked.

“I don't care how you do it. Just explain it so I can straighten this mess out between us.”

“You love Socorro, right?”

“Of course I love her. She's my daughter.”

“You love Julisa...”

“Yes.”

“...and your grandfather.”

“Yes!”

“If you had any other children, would this change your love for Socorro, Julisa or your grandfather?”

“No. It wouldn't. Why would it change how I feel?”

Kevin's voice was calm and rational. “There you have it,” he said. “Cait loves me. Now she met you and Socorro and she loves both of you. That didn't change how she feels about me. Each love is unique and specific to the person. Each time you love, you give away a piece of your heart and you can't take it



back. Ever. Once you accept that concept, then there won't be any problems.”

Okay, Indio thought. So far every thing he said made perfect sense. The only problem was, it still didn't change how he felt. His brain understood it but his heart didn't.

“Kevin,” he said.

“Yes.”

“You like Julisa, don't you?”

“Yes I like her. I like her a lot.”

“How would you feel if she went off with another man?”

Even though their visors were totally black, Indio heard the chuckle in Kevin's voice. “It's not gonna work. You keep forgetting I was raised by two fathers.” Then his voice changed into a more thoughtful tone. “It might increase my sperm count though.”

“What?”

“There were a couple of scientific papers published on that aspect. Mom wrote one about it. She can be very cerebral at times. You see, most men react on a molecular level when another man is around their chosen mate. Their sperm count increases dramatically. I have four sisters and two brothers. When you have a happily

married triple, you don't have the complacency that settles in after the first romantic rush. It triggers a very stable and fertile union.”

Indio walked away. The only reason he could think of for Kevin talking like that was because he expected Cait to form a threesome with him and Tiny.

He felt like his head was spinning. He kicked at a rock with his boot and watched it slowly slide down into a small crater.

He turned around and saw six lights bobbing on the horizon. They'd run out of

time to try and hammer this one out. He raised his arm and gestured at Kevin to look behind himself, then walked over to stand beside him.

\* \* \* \*

“What the hell? It's a trick! Fan out! Don't let them sneak up on us.” Fergus was definitely spooked as he peered into the clear visor of Tiny's empty suit.

“It sure looks like something snuck up on him and sucked his body right out of the suit,” Kevin said helpfully.

Indio played dumb. His raspy voice was too distinctive. Fergus might recognize him if he spoke.

The guard whose visor had “Garcia” stenciled on it spun around and pointed his laser rifle at the pile of

rocks beside the grinder. “What's that?” His voice cracked. “I saw something move up there. It looked like a shadow.”

“Stop standing around like an idiot then.” Fergus's voice came through the comm link loud and clear. “Climb up and see what it is.”

Slinging his rifle over his shoulder, Garcia moved closer to the rocks and clambered to the top.

Numerous repetitions of “Shit!” “Fuck!” and “Damn!” punctuated everyone's transmissions as they hurriedly jumped back from the minor landslide dislodged by Garcia's booted feet. Battle armor wouldn't do them any good if a rock smashed their visors and caused explosive decompression.

“Maybe Tiny's body is up there,” Kevin said with impeccable timing.

“Shut up!” Fergus yelled. “Maybe I should send you up there instead of Garcia.”

Kevin backed away with his hands raised. “Hey, no need to get all hot under your collar. It was just an idea.”

“From now on, keep your stupid ideas to yourself.”

“Okay.”

“There's nothing up here, sir,” Garcia reported.

“Fine! Now climb back down without killing anyone.”

More debris tumbled down. “No! Not that way!” Fergus yelled. “Jump down to the other side and walk around. We're going to check up on the rest of our prisoners. Meet us there.”

“Sure thing!” Garcia waved at them, then jumped out of sight on the other side of the rock pile.

One down, four to go, Indio thought cheerfully as they left. Fergus wasn't included in this tally. His acidic tongue didn't match the inherent danger of the guards' laser rifles. With the solid mass of stone and the ore grinder blocking Garcia's short wave com signals, they wouldn't hear any SOS from him. Hampered by his bulky armor and EVA suit, no way was he going to move fast enough to unsling his rifle when a bunch of selkie clad “aliens” popped up out of the shadows and overwhelmed him.

As they left the area, one of the proximity alarms went off. Fergus knocked it over then and kicked it until the whoop, whoop, whoop of its siren stopped shrieking over their commlinks. Indio and Kevin hurried up and positioned themselves right behind Fergus.

\* \* \* \*

The inner airlock door cycled open. Garcia followed Cait and Parvati into the emergency shelter's dome. Their selkie skins mesmerized him. His dark eyes frantically tracked every move they made. He spotted the two unconscious guards lying on the rough plastic floor and stopped dead in his tracks.

Tiny prodded their newest prisoner with the laser rifle. “Stand over there beside your buddies,” he said. “Remember, no sudden moves. I have a nervous trigger finger.”

Garcia bobbed his head and carefully moved over to the indicated spot. Cait went down on her knees and checked the two guards on the floor. Their pulses and breathing were strong and steady. She felt Garcia's terror shift down into a wary attentiveness when he realized his co-workers were still alive. Cait kept her face perfectly calm\_\_no need to let Garcia know he wasn't in any real danger.

Parvati walked over with Licorice cradled in her arms. She provided an interesting contrast of opposites. Tall and elegant in her sleek "skin," she radiated all the sensuality of a Hindu temple dancer with the crisp, clean moves of a deadly commando fighter. Cait pictured her dancing barefoot with bells on her ankles and a hundred gold and silver bracelets covering her arms. Parvati bent down and scratched the cat under the chin. She tilted her head sideways and pursed her lips. "Cait's the only one small enough to fit into this guy's suit."

Licorice jumped out of Parvati's arms. She arched her back, ambled over to Cait, then strolled up the length of the unconscious guard. The cat selected her spot on the guard's stomach, kneaded his shirt and settled down with her paws tucked under her chest. The sparkling pattern of Licorice's "skin" rippled and settled down to a slower, almost hypnotic motion.

"You heard the lady! We need your suit. Take it off." Garcia jumped at the

sound of Tiny's deep voice. Then he bobbed his head and his hands fumbled at the fastenings of his suit.

Cait stood up and walked over to the jumble of electronic equipment piled up on the table. She sorted through the mess and pulled out a surveillance device. Its recording and playback capabilities were perfectly suited for the next stage of their plan. Now all they had to do was get Garcia to cooperate and give them some pre-recorded statements from the script they'd worked out.

She turned around. Tiny was standing in front of the airlock with the rifle cradled in his arms. His soldier's posture, his cold gaze, projected the persona of a grim mercenary ready to rip their prisoner's throat out at the first wrong move. At the same time, she felt the unspoken undercurrent of his desperate need for her approval reaching out to her while he played his part to the hilt.

The more she thought about it, the sadder she felt. Any hope she had of a normal relationship with him and Indio was doomed because of their cultural conditioning. They

had no idea how much it hurt her every time she sensed the dark, twisted remains of their dru-bond.

Cait looked away. She couldn't bear him trying to project his emotions at her. It hurt too much. She walked over to Garcia and projected reassurance as she said softly, "As long as you do what we ask, no one will hurt you."

Garcia stopped half way out of his suit. "Where did you get those things?" he asked. "I've never seen anything like them."

"I found them in a crevasse when I was exploring the asteroid. They're selkie skins." She held the recording device out. "I want you to say exactly what I tell you to say into this."

He hazarded a wary glance at Tiny. "Shouldn't I take my suit off first?"

Cait gave Garcia a reassuring smile and stepped back. Tiny jerked his thumb at the roll of duct tape. Parvati picked it up and handed it to him. He walked up to Garcia and waited. It didn't take long for Garcia to take off the rest of his spacesuit under Tiny's relentless gaze.

Five minutes was all they needed. Garcia said what they wanted him to say into the recorder, then laid himself face down on the floor and let them truss him up. Tiny flipped Garcia over on his back.

The airlock light started blinking. They watched it cycle open. Darlene's selkie clad form slipped into the enclosure. She pulled the skin away from her face and head.

“Indio and Kevin went inside the prison module with Fergus. There are only two guards outside right now.”

Cait nodded at this while she climbed into Garcia's EVA suit. The bulky armor easily disguised her curves. At least she didn't have to worry about inserting his suit's catheter. Keeping her selkie skin on inside the EVA suit was an added bonus.

Parvati squatted down on her heels. Her beaded braids rattled and clicked as she tightened the boot straps on Cait's newly appropriated spacesuit. “Okay,” she said.

“Wait a minute!” Garcia said when Tiny reached out to tape his mouth shut too. “I wanna say something first.”

“Hurry up.” Cait said as she walked over to him with all the lumbering grace of a garbage scow. “We're on a pretty tight schedule as it is.”

Garcia nodded as Tiny picked him up by his taped hands and sat him upright. “I just want you to know I was only doing my job. Okay? I have a wife and kids dirtside and I was wondering if...”

“What?” Tiny prompted him.

“It's no skin off my back if you pull this off. Nowan Corp never did nothing for me. Is it too late for me to buy a berth with you guys?”

Parvati shrugged, a deliberately slow shrug that showed her complete ease under the low gravity condition. She picked up the needle with its measured dose of anesthesia and held it up. “Tell you what,” she said. “After this is over, we'll offer you guys a probationary period.”

Hope blossomed on Garcia's face. Parvati placed the needle on his neck and injected him. He slumped back as the anesthesia started taking effect. “I got no problem with that,” he mumbled. “No problem at all.”

\* \* \* \*

They stood in front of the ship that served as a prison for the miners. Fergus pointed at the two guards standing back at a distance from him. “The airlock's not big enough for all of us. You two wait outside for Garcia and stand guard. I'm not taking any chances, even though there's no way they could have escaped. Their spacesuits are still stacked up inside Lindy Lux's storage hold. I know 'cause I looked before we came out here.”

“Yes sir.” The designated guards unslung their rifles and positioned themselves facing away from the ship.

So far, so good, Indio thought while he and Kevin climbed up the ladder after Fergus.

\* \* \* \*

Cait envied her selkie clad companions. They flitted easily from shadow to shadow while she plodded along the rough pathway. Wearing an EVA suit after experiencing the freedom of her "skin" was sheer torture. The heavy armor unbalanced

her and compounded the problem of moving around without tripping over her own feet. She had to bend her head down at an awkward angle and watch every step she took in the narrow beam of her suit's small headlight.

Just a little bit further now. She raised her arms and made sure her gloved hands were still cradling Licorice. There! She stepped out into the bright circle of light that

marked the ship's perimeter, tapped her chin on the recorder and held Licorice out for the two guards to see.

"Hey! Look what I found."

"What the hell?"

Her victims lowered their rifles and took a hesitant step forward.

Cait walked up to them. She touched the "play" button on the tiny recorder clipped to the inside of her helmet. Garcia's voice continued on her comlink. "It's a spacecat! Ain't she cute?" Hopefully, these guys wouldn't ask too many questions. She only had so many statements recorded on this thing.

Their rifles were now completely lowered. The first guard reached out and touched Licorice's head with his gloved finger. "Holy shit!" he said. "It's alive!"

Cait flipped Garcia's voice back on again. "Yeah. Come on. I'll show you where I found her. It's a little cave with a bunch of kittens inside it. I couldn't carry them all so I came to get you."

"We're supposed to wait right here," the second one said.

"It won't take long. Only a couple of minutes. Fergus will never know. This is a real find! We'll make millions of dollars off these space cats."

Standing in the glare like they were and looking down at Licorice in her arms had both guards at a distinct disadvantage. Tiny and his teammates slipped behind them.

Now! Cait smiled as the selkie clad shapes rushed in. Tiny, Parvati, Darlene and Vu Sheng seized their weapons and pinned the hapless guards' arms to their sides. They didn't argue, not with three laser rifles pointed at their heads. At the same time, they were far enough away from the mother ship that no one would hear their signals for help while their captors frogmarched them away.

\* \* \* \*

Cait thanked all the gods and goddesses she could think of while she led Parvati and Vu Sheng back to the sleeping module. They were getting pretty efficient with switching people and spacesuits. A few more trips back and forth and they'd have a regular highway tramped out between the module and the dome. It

was getting a bit crowded in the emergency dome though. Dr. Kim had to hook up three more airtanks to the dome. After all their trouble, the last thing they needed was to asphyxiate their prisoners.

Licorice was safely back in Socorro's care. Her role was over in this little farce. Stage three of their plan was working right on schedule. Indio and Kevin knew they were supposed to take their time searching the ship from top to bottom under. If Fergus wasn't worried now, just wait a few more minutes.

Cait tilted her head back. There! The airlock light was on. Her heart was pounding in her ears. Take it easy, she reminded herself as she watched five suited figures climb down the ladder to the ground.

“Garcia!” Fergus shouted. His voice grated on her ears inside the helmet. “It's about time you got back here. Did you see any of the miners running around out here?”

She shook her head and gave an exaggerated shrug of her shoulders.

“Let's go!” Fergus turned and started leading them back to Nowan Corp's ship. “This place is giving me the willies. Where in the hell did they go?” Panic tinged his voice.

Cait and Vu Sheng positioned themselves behind Fergus. Indio, Kevin and Parvati took the rearmost position neatly sandwiching the remaining two guards. Of course, in the shadows flanking them were the rest of their teammates ready to move in at the right moment.

## Chapter 17

Like a bloated spider, the giant globular ship crouched on its thick metal legs in the middle of the makeshift landing area. As they approached the Lindy Lux, Fergus started giving orders again. His peevish voice crackled on the commlink in Cait's helmet. “Open the cargo bay.” The cargo bay doors opened in response to his command and a metal ramp lowered itself.

“Move it!” Fergus yelled. “Get inside!”

Cait pivoted her body, making up for her inability to turn her helmeted head sideways. She scanned the right side of the ship's metal skin until she spotted the shape of the exterior vid cam. Kevin's assignment was the one on the left side.

One chance was all they had to take out their assigned targets. She unslung her laser rifle and reached for Kevin through their dru bond. His mind was poised and ready. Out of the corner of her eye she saw a wave of black figures running across the field. She lifted her rifle, aimed and pulled the trigger all in one smooth motion.

A concentrated beam of white light flared from her rifle and vaporized the starboard side vid cam.

Another beam from Kevin's rifle vaporized the port side vid cam. Selkie clad figures boiled over the landing field and joined them. It was uncanny how much faster they could move compared to their group in their bulky spacesuits.

“It's a mutiny!” Fergus yelled over the commlink. “Execute Code Three. Sound the alarm! Shut the ramp down!”

Fergus, Indio, Vu Sheng, Parvati and the last two security guards trotted up the retracting ramp. A wave of selkie clad figures flowed in right behind them.

Cait stumbled trying to run in the awkward bulk of her EVA suit. Kevin slowed down and grabbed hold of her elbow. She planted the magnetized sole of her right boot

on the rising ramp with a solid slap that made her teeth ache. The rising ramp tumbled her the rest of the way inside with Kevin.

Adrenaline was high and running at a fever pitch. Cait's heart pounded. Red emergency lights in the cargo bay flashed on and off. Curses mingled with the angry blare of the klaxon over her commlink. She positioned herself beside Kevin while the jumbled mass of EVA and selkie clad shapes sorted themselves out.

The ramp slammed shut behind her with a clang that vibrated through her like a punch between her shoulders. She saw Indio hug Fergus against his armored chest and snap the antenna off his prisoner's helmet. Kevin yanked open the ramp's control panel and hurriedly pulled out some wires. "Now they won't be able to open the ramp again and decompress this section."

Parvati and Vu Sheng jammed their rifles into the one of the security guards. His gloved hands shot up self-protectively. He placed them behind his helmeted head. Stevens, said the stenciled letters on his battle armored suit.

A cloud of air billowed into the freezing cold confines of the shuttle bay. Cait's EVA suit responded automatically to the rise in air pressure by deflating around her body. Kevin undid the catches on his helmet, removed it and motioned at Tiny's unmistakable selkie-clad shape to come over to him. Tiny pulled the top of his selkie skin back and exposed his face. He went to Kevin's side and listened carefully to Kevin's urgent whispers.

Tiny turned and strode across the floor. The patterns on his selkie skin flared bright red and gold under the strobing emergency light. He stopped in front of Fergus, unfastened his helmet and tossed it aside. It clanged against the metal grid of the deck plates and rolled away.

He picked Fergus up. His fingers dug into the stiff fabric of the EVA suit. Soft menace saturated his words. "What's this Code Three order you told them to initiate?"

Cait turned away from Tiny's activities for a moment, slung her rifle over her shoulder and removed her helmet. The air was cold in the unheated loading bay, a bitter breath-steaming cold that stung her skin. It smelled of oil and chemicals and disinfectant. She watched and waited while Indio and the other suited members of their team removed their helmets.

Fergus laughed. His face reddened with triumph. "It's too late!" he said.

Stevens, the guard, motioned rapidly to his helmet, mimicking its removal. Vu Sheng nodded slowly. The guard removed his helmet, clipped it to his suit's belt and stood at attention. His dark brown hair matched the stubble on his cheeks. "Code three means..." His worried eyes flickered from Fergus to the flashing strobe lights.

Parvati shoved her rifle harder against his chest. "Tell us!" Her voice was harsh, laced with a palpable frustration.

Stevens nodded at her, exhaled, then spoke in a hurried rush. "It means they're going to take off and fry everything on the surface with the ship's lasers."

Indio wrenched Fergus from Tiny's grasp and shook him like a wet rag. The tiny servo motors for his armor hummed as he spoke. "My sister and daughter are on the surface."

A strange silence settled upon the room. Cait wasn't exactly sure how he did it, but she felt Indio wrestle his killing rage down into a grim determination. She sensed the familiar tug of the dru-bond snapping back into place between Indio and Tiny.

Indio's raspy voice pierced the silence. "Is there a counter order to stop Code Three?"

"Sir," Stevens said. "There's no counter order."

Cait turned and reached for Stevens with her empathic senses on a narrow focus. His aura matched the bitterness in his voice as he added, "It means a death sentence for my men. Our quarters are on this deck. Code three shuts down life support for this sector."

Darlene dropped to her knee by one of the air vents and listened. "He's right!" she yelled. "I can't hear the air pump. It's stopped."

Indio released Fergus and let him fall to the deck. He strode over to Parvati and Vu Sheng. Fergus scuttled frantically on his hands and knees for his helmet. He pulled it over his head and fumbled to fasten it.

An excited murmur filled the bay as people hurried to check the other vents.

"That's okay," Tiny announced. "We don't have to worry about lack of air. The selkie skins will take care of us."

The pale ember of Indio's rage simmered under his tight control and pulled at Cait's senses. He asked Stevens, "How many of your men are on this level?" Indio's voice was quiet, revealing nothing of the turmoil boiling up within him. "Will your men obey if you tell them to join us?"

Stevens nodded. "I have twenty men down here. When I tell them we were sold out, they'll obey."

"What security precautions does Nowan have on this ship for any boarding attempt?"

"Tasers and electro shock generators."

Kevin joined them. "What about engineering? Did they shut down the life support in there?"

"No."

Kevin nodded. "How many on duty?"

"Four, maybe five. I'm not sure."

"Automated security defenses?"

Stevens shrugged. "Tasers and electro shock."



Tiny unslung his backpack and started handing out explosive gel packs. “The timers are set for one minute. They'll blow any security doors you find along the way.” He stopped and looked at Fergus. “Cuff him to the mainbrace.”

It didn't take long for six selkie clad miners to carry out these orders. They silenced his yells and pleas with duct tape.

Cait exchanged glances with Kevin. They started undoing the connections for their spacesuits.

“Why're you doing that?” Parvati asked.

“We're not going to be able to do anything if our suits are disabled by electro shock.” Kevin shrugged the air tanks off his shoulders. “We have a much better chance of dodging tasers wearing just selkie skins.”

Cait laid the top half of her suit on the floor, then started climbing out of the bottom half. She stopped and jerked her thumb at Stevens. “And this way, he'll have a couple of extra suits for his men if they need ‘em.”

“Thanks.” Stevens bobbed his head at her. “My men will appreciate that.”

Indio removed the top half of his suit. “How many decks ‘til we reach the bridge?” The patterns on his selkie skin glowed red with blue and gold highlights.

“Six,” Stevens said .

Parvati and Vu Sheng nodded. They were busy climbing out of their spacesuits too. The patterns on their selkie skins glowed orange and gold.

Tiny exchanged a long look with Indio. “Me, Kevin and Cait will go to the engine room. The rest of you go with Indio and see if you can take the bridge.”

Cait stopped. Sudden resentment at their automatic protectiveness flared up and

shorted out her thought processes. Then she looked at Kevin and let their dru-bond tighten and stabilize her mind.

She added it up, the logic behind everything, then nodded acceptance of Tiny's orders. Indulging her selfish needs could cause Indio's death. He'd endanger himself trying to watch out for her safety. But ... The look she sent Kevin surged across their dru-bond and promised him that as soon as the engines shut down, she'd follow Indio and guard his back.

Kevin sent his absolute agreement back to her through their dru-bond..

“Let's go then.” She shouldered her rifle and went to the lift. The buttons on the lift panel didn't respond. Kevin didn't hesitate. He started taking the panel apart.

Indio walked over to the rear bulkhead and unbolted the service access door. He went to his knees and peered inside with a small hand held flash. “Parvati, Vu Sheng and Darlene will go this way with me. Stevens, you take the rest of our people along with you to pick up your men and continue up on the lift to

the bridge level. Your team will never fit inside the air ducts wearing armored suits. We'll sneak onto the bridge while you distract them with an attack from your side.”

He pulled his selkie skin over his head and face, then climbed into the service shaft. The other members of his team pulled their selkie skins over their faces and climbed up inside the opening after him.

On the other side of the loading bay, the panel lights for the lift flashed on. Kevin reached inside the tangled mass of wires and chips, pulled out a small red box and reprogrammed its controls. The familiar clank of an arriving car answered his summons. He tossed the control box to Stevens. The front doors on the lift opened. Kevin leaned his head around the corner and peered inside.

The rear entrance doors flew open. The sizzling bolt of a taser shot arced across the empty car directly at Kevin. A corona of eerie radiance like Saint Elmo's Fire glowed

all over his selkie skin from head to toe. He hurled his glowing body through the door and bowled over his attackers.

Another taser weapon flared into life. Screams and shouts filled the air. Everyone scrambled in all directions to avoid the crackling arc of electricity. It splashed up at the ceiling panels. One of the lights exploded and sent more sparks flying at random.

“Stop!” Stevens yelled. “Hold your fire!”

Bodies stopped rolling around. Kevin pinned his attacker face down on the metal grid of the deck. Rifles and tasers lowered as Stevens stepped forward. “That's it. Take it easy.”

The deck plates rumbled under their feet. The ship started moving with a hard kick that slammed into them with the sudden onslaught of g-forces.

A woman's angry voice sliced through the sudden silence. “Damn fools! We're taking off. What do they think they're doing?”

Stevens raised his armored arms. “The company screwed us,” he yelled. “They initiated a Code Three order. We don't have any other choice except to go up and try and take over the bridge. Are you with me? Or not?”

“Yeah!” they roared.

Kevin 's prisoner said, “I'm with you guys.” He released his prisoner and let him join the others in the lift. Stevens looked at Kevin and jerked his thumb at the corridor. “The engine room's at the other end. Good luck!”

Cait and Tiny walked over and flanked Kevin.

“Are you all right?” she asked.

Kevin held out his arm. The flickering glow of the selkie skin slowed and faded back down to its normal soft iridescence. “It wasn't that bad. It tingled a bit and felt just like the microcurrents from the solar wings.”

Cait turned and raced down the corridor with Tiny and Kevin on her heels. A sealed bulkhead and an

airlock with “restricted area” written on it awaited them. She

stepped back and watched Kevin and Tiny place minute wads of plastique at the airlock's seams.

Tiny hustled them around the corner. They pulled their skins over their faces and flattened themselves against the walls. The explosives shattered the lock with a sudden whump.

They propelled themselves past the smoke and flames into the engineering section. Cait saw four men struggling to unfasten the belts on their acceleration couches. The men froze with their hands raised under the threat of three laser rifles aimed at them.

Tiny pulled his selkie skin from his face and Cait and Kevin followed suit. “We'll take care of them.” Tiny jerked his thumb at Kevin. “See if you can shut the engines down.”

Cait handed her rifle over to Tiny and snagged a roll of duct tape from his belt. She walked over to the men and started taping their arms and legs to the couches.

“No funny moves now.” A laconic wave of his rifle accompanied Tiny's advisement. “I've got a real nervous trigger finger.”

“No can do,” Kevin announced. “They have dual arming keys and passwords on their control board.”

“Hmmm.” Tiny eyed the keys that dangled around the necks of two of their prisoners. “We can do this the hard way or the easy way.” Cait taped shut the mouths of the other two prisoners and waited beside the two with the control keys.

Kevin started pulling out wads of plastic from Tiny's backpack.

The skinny man with black hair and eyes said quickly, “Whoa! Wait a minute! Let's talk.”

The heavysset man with brown hair and beard glared at his companion.

“Look,” the skinny man said. “This is piracy! Pure piracy! The Company's

planning to blow everyone on the asteroid away with the ship's lasers. I don't want that on my conscience. Do you?”

“There's a child on that asteroid,” Cait said. “She's only nine years old. Do you want her death on your conscience too?”

Kevin squatted on his haunches and waited with plastique in his hands. The steady pressure of one and a half-g acceleration weighed down their arms and legs.

“Okay,” the bearded man said sullenly. “Bring us over to the control panel and we'll shut the engines down.”

“Here,” Tiny handed the rifles to Cait. “Any wrong moves out of either one of them and you blow them away. Okay?”

She slung one rifle over her shoulder and pointed the second one at the bearded man. Kevin returned the plastique to the backpack and joined Tiny. They removed the

keys from both men and pulled them erect and taped their hands in back before walking them over to the control panel.

“Where?” Tiny asked.

The bearded man in his grasp jerked his chin at the right of the panel. “My key goes in that side.”

Kevin positioned his man on the left side. Then he and Tiny inserted their keys and turned them.

“Shutdown mode request,” the neuter voice tones of the computer said. “Password?”

“Klaatu, Veratus, Icto,” the skinny man said.

“Phase one initiated,” the computer said. “Password?”

“Live long and prosper,” the bearded man said.

“Phase two initiated. Password?”

“Make it so,” the skinny man intoned.

“Phase three initiated. Password?”

“Tau zero event horizon,” the bearded man finished with a grating sigh.

“Shutdown complete,” the computer said. Zero-g accompanied the sudden cessation of the engines.

\* \* \* \*

Indio heard shouts and the sound of electrical discharges on the other side of the wall. Then he heard the lift working. Whatever happened had happened. They were leaving. Or rather, someone was leaving.

He risked a small flash of light on the ladder, then flicked it off. Hoarfrost coated the metal rungs. If he'd been fool enough to climb bare-handed it would have ripped the skin off by now. These selkie skins were a godsend. The ladder vibrated under his hands. The sudden rumble of the ship's engines shook the crawlway. The steady pressure of increased acceleration tugged at his arms and legs like he was climbing a treadwall. His selkie eyes adjusted to the darkness. He saw the glowing swirls on his hands and arms as he reached up. It almost looked like a computer simulation of blood circulating through his body.

Up and up he pulled himself up the endless rungs until he reached the sixth level. There should be a crawlspace here that cut straight across to the bridge, if this ship followed the same layout he recalled from his work shift on the mining ship modules.

Holding onto a rung with his right arm, he reached out with his left hand and felt around for a side shaft. From the weight dragging at his joints, he estimated the acceleration at about two g's. Would Kevin be able to shut the engines down? His hand fell into nothingness. Leaning over with extreme care, he placed his arms over the edge of the opening and pulled himself inside the side shaft, then braced his hands

on the slight incline. The last thing he needed right now was to slide back down upon the other members of his team and knock them back down the shaft. He clipped his light to the opening so they could find it

and follow him.

It was a slow, slithering progress in total darkness. At least they weren't wearing suits, he thought. This way they didn't have to worry about the sound of metal or plastic banging against the metal wall of the shaft that would warn anyone of their location.

Muffled clangs and bangs vibrated the walls of the shaft. The acceleration stopped. Zero-g resumed. Indio pushed with his legs against the side walls and aimed for the pale circle of light at the end of the shaft.

He folded his arms over his head and crashed into the metal screen. It gave with a crash that echoed behind him. He rolled out, hit the floor with his knees, and then aimed his body at the nearest gimbaled chair swinging wildly around on the bridge.

Parvati, Darlene and Vu Sheng tumbled out of the access panel onto the floor. They took advantage of the zero g conditions and bounced up towards the ceiling away from the direct line of fire. People were yelling and frantically trying to unstrap themselves. An explosion blew away the security bulkhead at the main entrance. This triggered the electro shock modules embedded in the walls and ceilings.

Armored EVA suited men poured onto the bridge from the breach in the security wall. Indio slammed into the occupant of the gimbaled chair. He laid his arm across his prisoner's throat, stopped and stared at his arm. An aurora of light lit up his selkie skin. It was absorbing the electricity splashing around him from the ceiling array.

“Okay!” Stevens yelled. “If anybody moves, we'll shoot to kill!”

Nobody moved.

## Chapter 18

The largest cluster of celebrants milled around a table on the left side of the ship's rec room. A large plastic sphere filled with a clear liquid was the table's main attraction. Indio picked up a small squeeze bulb from the net clipped to the side of the table then held it against the sphere's injection nozzle. He watched the needle insert into the bulb's cap. The needle stopped its flow automatically and retracted when the bulb was filled.

“Pretty good hooch these science geeks cooked up, huh?” said Vu Sheng as he lifted a squeeze bulb to his lips and took a hefty swallow.

Indio turned around and spotted Tiny standing by the entrance with his arms crossed. He swallowed against the sudden tightness in his throat. Time to get this over with, no matter what. And putting this encounter off wasn't going to get any easier the longer he waited. If he kept walking towards the right side of the room, he'd be at Tiny's side in a couple of minutes.

The familiar strains of Spiral Road's latest tune erupted from the loudspeakers. A cheer rose from the crowd. “Way to go!”

“Hey,” Indio nodded at Tiny. “Is this spot taken?”

Tiny studied the empty space beside him and shrugged. "It don't bother me if you want to stand there."

They watched the happy crowd for a few moments. "Nice party, huh?" Tiny asked.

"Yeah," Indio said absently. He watched Cait accept a squeeze bulb of liquor from her brother.

"She's not talking to you either, huh?"

"No." Indio lifted the squeeze bulb to his lips and hazarded a quick taste. Surprisingly enough it tasted sweet like someone had mixed honey into it. "That's a pretty nice outfit she's wearing."

She wore a silver knit shirt and slinky pants. Silver ribbons bound the arms and legs of her clothes close to her body. Silver bells were woven into the thick braid clipped to her shoulder and waist. Kevin's midnight blue pants, shirt and ribbons were almost the same as hers. The only difference was he didn't have any bells in his short black hair.

"I like those little bells." Melancholy tinged Tiny's voice. "I wonder where she got them from."

Indio nodded. He wasn't too surprised by the change in subject from Cait not talking to them over to her current attire. Tiny wasn't comfortable with the idea of discussing their problem with Cait in public either. Maybe they should vacate the room and find a more private place to talk. Except he didn't want to go yet. He wanted to stand here with Tiny and watch her for a little while longer.

The music switched tracks into a faster tempo. Cait smiled at Kevin and shoved her empty squeeze bulb into the recycle chute. Kevin said something. She nodded her head and accepted his outstretched hand. They stepped forward in the exact same motion as if they were a duo of skaters in an Olympic competition. The crowd melted away. Cait's bells chimed in soft counterpoint to the music.

They lifted their arms, stood back to back and dropped their hands. At first it didn't even look like they were moving. Then the subtle movements increased their tempo. They swayed and shook their hips in a deliberate grind. Cait's breasts bounced

and moved in unison with her hips. The sound of her bells swelled to a crescendo that matched their undulating bodies.

"Whoa!" Tiny said worshipfully.

Memories tumbled through Indio's head. Cait's face flushed with desire. Her multicolored hair spilling past her lovely breasts when she pushed him back onto the bed and climbed astride his jutting penis. Her pupils shining huge and black while she climaxed. His heart thundered in his ears like a runaway rocket.

Indio exhaled a shaky breath. Now was as good a time as any to bring up the subject. "I'm a jackass." His voice reflected the rough bitterness he felt. "I don't know what to do about Cait. I'm not even sure why she's upset with me."

A wry grimace twisted the side of Tiny's mouth for a second, then he gave a half-shrug. "Hell! I don't what I did wrong either."

Indio turned and stared at the dance area again. The only problem was he never really had her in the first place. Parvati, Darlene and couple of other guys whirled into the cleared space. They were doing a pretty good job of duplicating Cait's and Kevin's moves.

“Look at her. Why in the hell did I ever think I could put her in a cage?” Indio muttered.

“So.” Tiny's voice was thoughtful. “What ya gonna do now?”

Indio jammed his hands in his pockets. “I don't know. I'll think of something.” He turned to Tiny. “But right now, I want to say that no matter what happens, I don't want it to ruin our friendship.”

Tiny uncrossed his arms. The expression on his face was wary, yet hopeful. “What are you saying?”

Indio rolled his eyes. “You're not making this very easy on me, are you?” He held out his hand. “We've been friends for a long time, haven't we?”

“Yeah.”

“I don't know about you, but I miss that feeling. I miss how it felt knowing we were friends, no matter what. I miss knowing you were there to back me up in a bad situation and vice versa.”

“I know what you mean.” Tiny nodded slowly. “You were always there when I needed help. I miss that too.”

“Well, I don't own Cait. I never did. All I'm saying is that no matter what happens, I want it to be the way we were before. Okay?”

A very thoughtful look settled on Tiny's face. “You know I was gonna say pretty much the same thing you just said anyway.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

They settled in and watched the dance floor some more. Indio gave a quick look out of the corner of his eye. Tiny was staring at Cait as if she were the only woman in the room. Indio sighed.

Tiny gave him a weird look. “What?”

“I won't stand in your way if you want to date her, you know.”

“Okay!” Tiny reached out with both hands and grabbed hold of Indio's arms. “No matter what happens, we'll still be friends.”

Standing there clasping arms with Tiny felt good. Like another vector in Indio's life shifted back into its proper place. Even if nothing else went the way he wanted it to go, at least they were still friends. And if Tiny wound up with Cait, he'd do his best to pretend he wasn't jealous or upset. It wasn't going to be easy, but he'd try.

Then, all of sudden, Tiny said, “What if she says she wants both of us?”

Indio stared at him. Was this a trick question? No. Tiny was serious.

“What gave you that idea?”

Tiny swiped his hand across his scalp. "Well, you know, her background and..."

"And what?"

Tiny ducked his head down and mumbled. "... her not being totally human."

Indio arched his eyebrows. Something had happened between her and Tiny. Something that revealed her differences. Pussyfooting around the topic wasn't going to get him any straight answers. "What do you know?"

An abstracted wave of Tiny's hand accompanied his response. "She showed me her eyes."

An elbow jabbed Indio's back. He turned around. "Isn't this a wonderful party?" Julisa said cheerfully. She was holding onto Kevin's arm. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes were excited and happy. "As soon as we get a decent lab facility set up, we're going to try and see if we can find a way to attach the solar wings to one of the selkie skins."

"That's a great idea!" Tiny's voice boomed with enthusiasm. "We'll help you set up the lab in between guarding the prisoners. We have five days before the authorities arrive and claim our prisoners. Nowan Corp's gonna pay through the nose for those two ships they destroyed with their lasers."

Kevin slanted him an odd look, then said, "Considering how they happened to be the ships we leased from Nowan Corp in the first place, that'll be one mixed up court suit."

Julisa chuckled. "At least we have our selkie skins. Otherwise, we'd really be up a creek without a paddle. They destroyed all of our spacesuits when they blasted the second module. Thank god no one was inside either one when that happened. At least we have our selkie skins to wear instead while we get the expedition back on schedule with the drilling."

Indio extended his hand to Kevin. "I appreciate the fact that you're letting us all share in the profits we're gonna make off the skins after we figure out how to duplicate them."

"Don't thank me." Kevin jerked his thumb at the approaching figures of Cait and Socorro. "They found 'em. Thank them." He turned to Julisa and smiled. "I know a place where we can be alone."

She looked away. The flush on her cheeks deepened. "Sounds like a good idea to me," she said huskily.

"Catch you later." Kevin grinned at Tiny and Indio, then walked away with Julisa.

"Hi." Cait said quietly. Her face looked sad. "It's nice to see you talking to each other again."

"Oh yeah. Everything's fine," Indio and Tiny said with a simultaneous eagerness. "How about you?"

"She's taking me and Licorice back to our cabin." Socorro shifted the cat into a better position in her arms. "I'm tired."

"Bye." Cait waved at them and backed away holding hands with Socorro.

Great! Indio thought while he watched them leave. Now what am I supposed to do?



Stevens walked up. He rubbed his newly shaved chin with his hand. "Was that your kid?"

Indio exchanged glances with Tiny, then shrugged. "Yeah, that's my daughter."

"Mighty pretty lady friend you have there." Stevens craned his neck and peered through the doorway at the departing figures.

"Um," Indio said diplomatically. Even though he'd just told Tiny it was all right if he went after Cait, he wasn't ready to encourage every other guy to do the same thing.

"Who's the guy that started the dance out with her?" Stevens continued.

"That's Kevin," Tiny said helpfully. "He's her brother."

"Oh, okay." Stevens refocused his hopeful gaze on Tiny and Indio. "Do you have any extra 'skins? I'd like to buy one."

Tiny coughed. "We haven't decided on a price yet. But I'll let you know when we do."

"Great!" Stevens shook hands with them happily, then left to join the line waiting to sample more of the liquor in the sphere.

"Hey," Tiny poked Indio with his elbow.

"What?"

"I got the captain's suite. How about if we go there and talk this out a bit more. I got a funny feeling we better do something before the other guys get any bright ideas about her."

Indio pondered this idea for exactly two seconds. "Sure. Let's get out of here."

\* \* \* \*

"Pretty classy digs here." Indio stroked the smooth varnish of the computerized bar. Thick green carpets covered the floor. The couch and chairs were bolted down. No chance of anything flying around during ship flight.

"Yeah." Tiny grinned as he opened a side door. Plush black carpeting covered the bedroom floor.

Indio leaned against the doorframe and crossed his arms while Tiny prowled around the king sized bed. "Not bad."

Tiny rubbed his hands together. "We have five days before the authorities arrive." He turned around. "What do you think?"

What the hell kind of question was that? Indio wasn't sure how to respond, so he said, "It's a nice bed."

"No. Really. What do you think?"

"About what?"

“Do you think we might be able to talk her into coming in here before the five days is up?”

When did this “we” stuff start coming into their conversation anyway? Indio

shook his head. He couldn't believe they were even discussing this. “I don't remember hearing her say she wanted both of us, do you?”

Tiny stopped and swiped his hand across his bald scalp. “Yeah. You're right.” His shoulders slumped. “She didn't.”

This entire conversation felt bizarre. Maybe Tiny was comfortable with the idea of sharing Cait but Indio knew he needed to think it over first so he decided to switch to a neutral topic. “Where do you think Cait's going after she puts Socorro to sleep?”

Tiny stared at Indio as if he were crazy, then said, “I don't know. Why?”

Indio shrugged. “I'd like to get a chance to talk to her without everyone and his uncle standing around us, that's all.”

Tiny rubbed his scalp. “What cabin did she pick?”

“I have no idea,” Indio admitted.

“Oh.” Tiny snapped his fingers. His face brightened. “The security system! They have vid cams in all of the ship's corridors. Let's check them out and see if we can find her.”

They walked over to the console. Tiny turned it on.

“Do they have vid cams in the all cabins too?” Indio asked.

“Nah. Just in the corridors,” Tiny muttered while he tabbed through the images. “There!” He stopped the cursor, tabbed back up and enlarged the image. “She's in Sector Five. That's right around the corner from here.”

Indio peered at the image. “She must have put Socorro to sleep already. She's alone.”

“Whoa! Wait a minute!” Tiny leaned closer. “That's Kyle and Dushawn behind her. I don't like the way they're looking at her. What are they up to?”

“Does this system have a mike?” Indio asked.

“Sure.” Tiny tapped in a series of commands and flipped a switch. “I set it to record.”

Kyle reached out for Cait's wrist. “You looked real good out there dancing.” His voice came loud and clear over the console's sound system.

Cait pulled her hand away and moved back against the bulkhead. She eyed both men suspiciously.

“You looked real sexy,” Dushawn said while he took up a position along the bulkhead on her right side.

Kyle moved in and positioned himself on her left side. “Since you're not talking to Indio anymore, we

figured you might be interested in spending a little time with us.”

Tiny looked up from the monitor screen at Indio. “Well?”

Indio unclenched his fists. “I don't know. It's her choice. Let's wait and see what happens first. We don't want her pissed off at us if this isn't what we think it is.”

“Why are we whispering?” Tiny asked. “They can't hear us.”

Indio shrugged. They leaned closer and listened carefully to Cait's voice on the vid. “No thank you,” she said firmly. “I'm not interested.”

“Let's go!” Indio straightened up. “This might get rough. This isn't the first time she had a run in with them.”

“What?” Tiny grabbed his arm. “When? How?”

“I saw some bruises on them when they showed up for their first class.”

“On Cait?”

“No, on them.” Indio said over his shoulder as he slapped his hand on the door control. Tiny strode out with him.

“Ow! Fucking cocksucking bitch!” Kyle's yell echoed down the corridor. Indio and Tiny broke into a run. The velcro on their sneaks kept them from flying off and bouncing against the ceiling.

## Chapter 19

“Are you still mad at Daddy?” Cait didn't have to probe. Socorro's desperate hope stabbed at her. Licorice moved down to the foot of the bed, curled up in a ball and yawned.

“No.” Cait pulled the net down and secured it over the cot. “I'm not mad. Just a little upset with him, that's all.”

“Then why don't you sit down with him and talk about it?”

She brushed Socorro's hair back from her face. “It's not that simple.”

Socorro clung to her hand. “Are you still gonna be my friend?”

Cait smiled. “Always.” She kissed Socorro's cheek.

“Good.”

“Tell you what. I'll talk to him first thing tomorrow morning. Okay?”

The tension that clouded the child's aura dissipated.

Cait pushed herself to her feet. "I'm going to take a walk now to clear my head. I'll be back later on after you're sleeping."

"Okay." Socorro mumbled sleepily.

\* \* \* \*

Goddess above! Now what? She'd already decided the best way to handle this entire mess was to walk away from it all. Socorro had no idea how hard it was to for her to be in the same room with the both of them, let alone talk. They'd never understand what she wanted. If she chose one over the other, she'd destroy their friendship. And she couldn't live with that either.

No. She couldn't talk to them. It wasn't going to work. Their cultural conditioning would never allow them to even think about the idea of a three way relationship with her. No sense in wasting her thoughts on a fantasy that could never be. Cait sighed and kept on walking. The Velcro on her sneaks scratched under her feet. The curving wall of the corridor looked like every other corridor in the ship.

She had no one to blame for this except herself. She should never have jumped into bed with Indio without thinking things through ahead of time. Over and over, her fathers had cautioned her against her impulsiveness. And they were right. Her impulsiveness had caused everything..

Sharp claws of anger and lust reached out for her. Cait stopped and turned around. Kyle and Dushawn stood in the corridor behind her. She glared at them.

Their need to possess her, to have control over her felt like spiders crawling over her body. If her skin was capable of twitching away from their touch, it would have.

Kyle reached out for Cait's wrist. "You looked real good out there dancing."

She backed away from them and felt the solid bulkhead behind her body.

Dushawn walked up and positioned himself on her right side. "You looked real sexy."

Kyle moved in and placed himself on her left side. "Since you're not talking to Indio anymore, we figured you might be interested in spending a little time with us."

Cait swallowed the taste of vomit that rose in her mouth. "No thanks. I'm not interested."

Kyle reached for her arm. She slapped his hand away.

"Ow!" he yelled. "Fucking, cocksucking bitch!" His rage slammed into her and distorted her perceptions. She felt dirty and disgusting.

"What's the matter, cunt?" Dushawn lunged at her. "Ain't we good enough for you?"

"I don't want you!" She shoved Dushawn away with her right arm across his throat, hard enough to dislodge his feet from the Velcro on the floor. He fell backwards and crashed into the opposite bulkhead. That shove dislodged Cait's shoes from the floor too. She bounced back and hit her shoulder on the bulkhead behind her.

Kyle jumped at her. His fingernails scratched her wrist. He tried to pin her right arm against his body.

“Get it through your thick skulls.” She brought her left arm back around, curled her hand into a fist and punched him in his solar plexus. “I don’t want you!”

Air whooshed out from his lungs under the sudden contraction of his diaphragm and he doubled over. She stepped in and lifted her knee into his descending chin.

Kyle collapsed on the floor.

She looked at Dushawn. He held his empty hands out in front of him in a placating manner. “It was all his idea anyway,” he said quickly. “I’m not going to bother you anymore.”

The sound of running footsteps echoed down from both directions in the curving corridor. Indio and Tiny came around the right hand side and Stevens came around from the left side. When they saw Kyle and Dushawn on the floor and her still standing, all three men slowed their headlong pace down to a walk.

Kyle pushed himself up to a sitting position, then sagged against the wall. “Bitch. Cunt.” He moaned with his arms held protectively over his stomach.

Tiny and Stevens walked up to Kyle.

“You kiss your mama with that mouth?” Tiny asked.

“Huh?” Kyle gaped at him.

Indio went to Cait. He reached out to touch her, then pulled his hand back. “Are you all right?” His concern hovered over her.

She hugged herself. She was shaking all over. “I’m fine.”

“I’m gonna sue that bitch!” Kyle said. “She assaulted us for no reason at all.”

Tiny snorted. “You’ll look like a damn fool in court when we show ‘em the vid record.”

“Vid record?” Dushawn’s worried voice asked.

“Yeah.” Indio turned and positioned himself to block any attempt by Dushawn to approach Cait. He jabbed his thumb at the ceiling. “It’s still recording everything right now.”

Stevens picked Kyle off the floor by the back of his shirt. “Want me to toss ‘em in the brig with the others?”

“Sure.” Tiny stepped back and motioned at Dushawn to walk in front of Stevens.

Dushawn looked back. There was a very worried expression on his face. “Are you gonna press charges?”

Everyone looked at Cait. Her head hurt. She felt sick to her stomach. She didn’t want to think about wasting time and money in a prolonged courtroom battle. She didn’t want the publicity that might bring her and her family on all the vid channels. The best thing to do would be to let these idiots sweat it out first, then decide not press any charges. “Stick ‘em in the brig,” Cait said while she rubbed her hand

against the stabbing pain in her forehead. "I'll let you know later what I decide."

"Ma'am." Stevens bobbed his head at her. She watched him take her assailants away. It was a good excuse to avoid any eye contact with Tiny and Indio. Everything was so messed up between them, she didn't want to do or say anything that would make it worse. Goddess above! What was she going to do? She didn't want them reacting to a lifetime of cultural conditioning and start fighting like she was some kind of prize in a contest.

"Are you all right?" Tiny's concern hovered over her. Damn! It hurt! She wanted his arms around her. She wanted to feel his comfort flowing into her and soothing her.

"I'm fine."

"Are you sure?" Indio's concern struggled to make contact with her. Pain stabbed through her. She wanted his comfort too.

The tattered remnants of violence swirled at the edges of her mind while she stared at the plated deck. "I'm fine." She exhaled shakily.

"We need to talk," Indio said.

"Yeah." Tiny's voice echoed his.

A small tendril of hope uncurled itself and lifted its head inside her. She hugged herself tighter, then shook her head. No! It wasn't going to work.

"Just for a couple minutes, that's all." Indio's desperation pulled her towards him.

Tiny stepped back and gestured down the corridor. Hope glowed in his eyes. "The captain's suite. It's not far. You can leave anytime you want."

Did she dare? Cait hugged herself tighter. She couldn't think clearly anymore. She wanted to feel their arms around her and let their love wash away the slimy residue of violent rage that clung to her skin.

"No," she whispered. Letting her emotions rule her wasn't going to change anything. "Leave me alone. I'm all right."

"No, you're not." Indio reached out to touch her and she flinched away from his hand. "We need to talk."

"Yeah," Tiny said softly. "Look at you. Those guys have you all shook up. You know us. We'd never hurt you. All we want to do is talk. Okay?"

Cait peeked at them with sly, quick glances from lowered eyes. She reached for them with her empathic senses and felt only love and concern from Tiny. Indio felt hurt and rejected around a solid core of desperate love. Goddess! She was tempted!

"Please..." Indio's voice came out in a raspy whisper that sent shivers down

her spine. She remembered the raspy sounds he made when he touched her skin that night in his bed.

Cait exhaled her pent up breath slowly and carefully. She unwrapped her arms and looked at them. "Okay."

They walked beside her, not touching, not speaking. Both of them afraid of shattering the fragile agreement they'd secured.

Tiny coded the door open. She walked in. They followed her. The door slid shut. Her sneaks sank down into plush black carpet.

She turned around. Tiny swiped his hand across his scalp. Indio wiped his hands on his pants. Their eyes watched her with wistful intent.

"I'm not human, you know. Not completely, anyway."

Tiny exchanged a long look with Indio. They shrugged.

"We don't care," Indio said.

"No, it's important. My biological father has fur all over his body. That's why he wears Taureg veils when he's in public."

Indio and Tiny exchanged another long look, then they both grinned.

Indio made an awkward move of dismissal with his hand. "I don't care if he's purple and has feathers instead of fur. I love you."

Cait almost said, it's important. What if our kids have fur? What would you do? But she didn't. Asking that would tell them she wanted more than just friendship with both men.

Tiny coughed and cleared his throat. "I love you too."

Indio tilted his head and gave Tiny a very puzzled look. He opened his mouth as if he were going to say something, shook his head, then shut his mouth again.

Silence settled upon them like a thick blanket. Cait felt like she was poised on the edge of a cliff. Her thoughts settled on an oddity. Tiny's name. That should be a neutral

topic of conversation. She looked up at Tiny and asked, "The computer files list your name as T.J. Barnett. What do the initials T.J. stand for?"

Indio cocked his head. "Now that you mention it..." His voice had a bemused quality to it. "... we've been best friends for fifteen years and you never ever told me your real name."

Tiny glared at him. "It's Tamerlane Jehu Barnett, okay? And I tell everyone to call me Tiny 'cause it's a hell of a lot better nickname than Tammy"

Cait smothered her laughter at this revelation and stared at the floor for a few moments. She exhaled another shaky breath and let her hands fall to her sides. "Just hold me, please. I need to be held."

Indio and Tiny exchanged a long look with each other. Hope surged across their dru-bond. They went to her and held her.

Their arms were warm and strong and caring. Indio brushed his lips across the top of her head. "It's okay," he murmured.

Tiny's hand stroked her hair, then her spine and stopped at the curve of her buttocks. "Yeah." His voice came out as a soft groan. "It's all right."

It felt wonderful. She closed her eyes and leaned into the firm support of their hands and arms. Love, comfort, concern swirled through her and coiled around her.

Their penises started to harden against her body. She pushed them away, frightened by the implications of this sudden flare of sexual interest from both men. This was happening too fast, like an avalanche going out of control. What if they started to fight over her? What would she do?

They stepped back and tried to look casual and unaware of the tension simmering and bouncing back and forth between the three of them.

Cait rubbed her arms, then turned around and walked away to explore the room.

"This is nice." She ran her fingers over the smooth texture of the bar's console. "Real nice."

Tiny walked over to a side door and palmed it open. "You want to see the rest of the place?"

She walked over to the doorway. She felt hot and cold at the same time under their eyes. Her throat hurt. Her nipples were hard and stiff and rubbed against the thin material of her shirt. She looked inside at the king sized bed with its pale blue sheets and netting.

Cait shook her head and walked around the bed. The soft chime of the bells in her hair accompanied her movements. There was another door on the other side of the bedroom. She pointed at it and looked over her shoulder at Tiny and Indio standing beside the bed. "Is the bathroom in here?"

"Yeah," Tiny said.

She palmed the door open, stepped inside and collapsed against the wall. Gleaming white porcelain and pale blue carpeting met her gaze.

Cait looked in the mirror. Her pupils were dilated. Her cheeks were flushed. She reached up to her hair and removed the bells. She placed them in the net bag clipped to the side of the sink. She undid her braid and ran her fingers through her hair. It tumbled past her shoulders.

What was she going to do now? Take a shower to wash all these confusing emotions away?

She stopped, turned around, leaned her hot face against the cool tiled wall, cracked the door open and peeked out. They were sitting on the bottom of the bed with their backs to her.

"You're an idiot," Indio said. "She went in the bathroom 'cause she has to pee."

"But..." Tiny said.



“Well, what did you expect? Show her a bed and she's supposed to jump in it and open her arms and legs for us? Duh!”

Tiny's shoulders fell. “Yeah. You're right.”

“We don't want to scare her off. She let us hug her. That's good. If she wants to leave. Fine. She leaves. We'll see what happens the next time we see her.”

Cait shut the door and collapsed against the wall. They wanted to try it her way! Her own prejudices about human culture had blinded her to the possibility that both men were extremely intelligent, intelligent enough to think past their hormonal reactions to her. They weren't so culturally conditioned that they couldn't think and figure things out on their own.

She stumbled over to the sink, grabbed a washcloth from the towel bag, opened the cold water faucet, held the washcloth inside the plastic netting, dampened it, then wiped her face with the cold wet cloth. Her heart thundered against her chest like a runaway rocket.

She knew exactly what she wanted to do. Could she? Did she dare take that chance? Yes!

It only took about thirty seconds to strip off her shirt and pants and sneaks and stuff everything into the clothes bag. She curled her toes into the thick carpeting, pulled herself over to the door and cracked it open again.

“I think we should do everything together. You know, like dinner and dancing and whatever. Present a united front so people know exactly what's what and don't try to play us off against each other.”

“We haven't even gotten to first base with her. Let alone dinner and dancing. This isn't one of your VR scenarios where you plan every little detail out ahead of time. Take it easy. Go with the flow. Don't rush her. If anything's gonna happen, it's her call.”

Cait slipped out into the bedroom, shut the door quietly behind her, and flipped her hair back. No coy Lady Godiva routine for her, she didn't have to veil her body with her hair. “That sounds like a good plan to me,” she said.

They jumped up so fast, they pulled their sneaks free from the floor. Both men

bounced off the ceiling, reoriented themselves and hauled themselves back down to the floor hand over hand on the bedposts.

“Her pussy's all different colors, just like her hair,” Tiny said with awestruck tones. “You never told me that.”

Indio stopped and gave him a look that said, You're crazy. Why would I tell you something like that?

But Tiny was too busy taking his shirt off to pay attention to anything else. Indio hesitated for a split second, then started removing his clothes. Cait pushed herself across the carpet to them. Heat raced down her throat and breasts. Moisture dripped from her crotch and clung to the inside of her thighs. She took a deep breath and inhaled the musky fragrance of her arousal. Her hair floated up and billowed behind her like a cloud.

Indio and Tiny hurriedly wadded up their clothes and sneakers and jammed everything into the netted bag hanging from the bed's frame.

Indio's penis stiffened. The foreskin slid back and exposed the soft bulbous head. A drop of clear fluid clung to the little hole at the top.

Tiny's erection was just as hard. His penis was circumcised. He had no foreskin. Clear fluid dripped from the purple black head of his penis.

Cait tilted her head and looked at Indio. "This wasn't supposed to happen. I didn't plan on falling in love for at least another ten or twenty years."

"That's okay," he said gruffly.

"I love you."

"I love you too," he said.

She turned to Tiny. "I love you."

He took a deep breath, then said in a rush, "I fell for you the first time I saw you. I just didn't know how to tell you."

She smiled, sat down on the bed and scooted backwards. They crawled in after her, Tiny on her right side and Indio on her left. Their smiles matched hers. Indio

reached out, tabbed the button for the net and it came down over them. No need to bounce off the bed while they made love.

It was quite obvious that this wasn't the first time they'd shared a woman. Cait wondered who that woman was, then let the thought drift away. It wasn't important. That happened before they met her. What mattered now was the fact that they were with her and eager to please her. She smiled and opened her mind to the love and desire that flowed from them into her.

Indio's rough fingers smoothed the damp tendrils of hair away from her face. Tiny's hand covered her breast. Indio leaned down and kissed her, long and hard and hungrily. Tiny's hot mouth found her nipple. She moaned under the doubled sensation of their increased passion filling her mind and body.

Indio's tongue probed her mouth. Tiny sucked harder on her nipple. One finger, two fingers slid past her nether lips and into her vagina. Their fingers moved in and out together. Indio released her mouth.

He lowered his face and licked her other nipple. "Sweet titties," he said. "They taste so sweet." And then he sucked them.

Faster, harder. She couldn't think. She cradled their heads in her hands and arched her back under their fingers going in and out of her. There was only sensation, glorious sensation. They loved her! They wanted her! Faster, harder, her hips pumped with a will of their own and rode their fingers to a shuddering climax.

She opened her eyes.

Indio smiled at her. His hands stroked her stomach and breasts. Tiny propped himself up on his elbow, tilted her chin to him with his finger and kissed her very thoroughly.

When they came up for air, Indio asked, “Are you ready for another round?”

She looked at him and smiled. “Yes!”

He slid his hand over and under her hip and turned her towards him. Tiny slid his hand down her back and tilted her buttocks up.

She couldn't tell which one entered her first, it happened so fast and hard. Goddess! It felt wonderful feeling their eager hips pumping and grinding into her. Their shared excitement spiraled up and up into her and pulled her into yet another climax.

They lay there gasping together for a couple of minutes, then slowly untangled their legs and bodies. Cait rolled over onto her back.

“Whoa!” Tiny stroked her neck with his finger. His breath gusted past her ear.

“Yeah.” Indio ran his thumb across her lip. His pupils were black and dilated.

Hot, wet semen clung to the front and back of her legs. It felt good, very, very good, knowing they loved her.

While they lay there and enjoyed the total relaxation of their climax, Cait looked at the ceiling and smiled a long, lazy smile.

“What ya thinking?” Tiny asked.

“Mmmmmm!”

“Mmmmmm what?” Indio asked.

She scraped her fingernails down his stomach and sensed his excitement responding to her touch. “Are you guys ready for another round?” A lascivious purr tickled her throat. “In the shower?”

Their penises pulsed against her legs.

“Girl!” Tiny said softly. “Are you sure?”

Cait nodded. Oh yes! She was absolutely sure she was going to spend the rest of her life loving both men.

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