



Serendipity

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Prologue

Able and Mali crouched in the pantry, watching the kitchen through a crack in the slightly opened door. Mom was out there. She was talking to Jax, the man who had checked into their hostel yesterday. Something about him made Able nervous, although Mali liked him a lot.

Of course, what could you expect from a little sister? Mali wasn't old enough to understand that Jax was dangerous, maybe as dangerous as their father had been. But what could you expect from a three-year-old...at seven, he knew better.

"What are they talking about?" Mali whispered, biting her thumbnail nervously. Able sighed in disgust. Mali never seemed to understand *anything*. It was almost scary how much she didn't know about the world. If he wasn't around to take care of her...

But he would always take care of her, he reminded himself. He was the man of their family now. Mali and mom needed his protection, something he'd better not forget.

"You have to be quiet and listen," he whispered back. "I'll explain everything later, but I want to hear what they're saying. If you keep talking we'll miss everything."

Mom was speaking now. She was upset; he could hear it in her voice.

"You know, I'm sick and tired of men who think they need to take care of women," she said harshly. "I had a husband who *took care* of me regularly, and I wouldn't wish marriage on any woman. It's a trap, and Calla's falling into it. It's a trap," she repeated.

Mom was right, Able thought. They had all been trapped with dad. He hurt them. Of course, Able was able to take dad's licks, but it had been too much for Mali. He looked down at his sister protectively; remembering what her little face had looked like, all bruised. He was glad dad was dead. He wished Aunt Calla wasn't leaving. Mom was right. Marriage was a trap, and Aunt Calla was falling into it. Just thinking about it made the lump in his stomach swell and burn.

Jax was talking now. The sound of his voice made Able's stomach feel worse, but he forced himself to listen.

"That's not true," Jax said. "For a Saurellian—"

"Don't give me your crap," Mom replied. Her voice was strong, and Able was proud of her for standing up to him. She stood and paced across the floor, arms folded in front of her. "Get out of my kitchen, get out of my hostel. You brought him here; you're responsible for this. Go back to Saurellia, because I don't ever want to see you again."

Able's expression turned grim and his head started to throb. Not only was Jax a threat to their mother, it was his fault Aunt Calla was leaving to get married. This was too much...somebody had to do something to stop him. The sound of his voice caught Able's

attention again.

"I'll give you some space, Sarai," Jax said. "But I'm not ready to leave Hector Prime just yet. I'll see you again."

"Don't threaten me," Mom replied, her voice sounding tight and harsh.

"I would never threaten you," Jax said. "And I'll never lie, either. I'm not your ex-husband, Sarai. I'm a good man, and I won't hurt you."

He left the room, leaving mom alone. Able sat back on his heels trying to think. Mali watched him carefully, her small face twisted in concern.

"What's wrong, Able?" she asked in her soft, little girl's voice. She plucked at his shirt, looking for reassurance.

"Well, I think he likes mom, and wants her to go with him like Aunt Calla's going with Seth," Able whispered back. Mali's face crumpled, tears welling up in her eyes.

"You mean mommy might leave us?" she whispered despairingly, her small face pinched in pain. "What will we do without mommy?"

"Oh no," Able said, pulling her small body on to his lap. He held her close, rubbing her hair with one hand. It was so hard sometimes, trying to explain things to her. "Mom would never leave us, Mali. You don't have to worry about that. But Jax might want to stay, and that's not good."

"You mean stay and be with mommy?" Mali asked. "Like a daddy?"

"Yes, although we don't need him," Able said fiercely. "You remember what dad was like. He was horrible. We don't want another one of those, do we?"

"I suppose not," Mali whispered back. Daddy had been mean. He used to hurt her, and hurt mommy. But still...

Jax didn't seem like daddy. He seemed different. Nicer. She had even seen him in the garden earlier that morning, and he'd waved at her. She'd been too afraid to go near him, but she remembered how nice he looked. And he'd been tall enough to get her flying disk out of the tree in the garden. It had been stuck up there for two days. Not even mommy had been tall enough to do that.

"You know," she whispered. "Kally likes her daddy. He plays with her all the time. Kally's mommy seems to really like him, too. Maybe not all daddies are like ours was."

"We don't need a father," Able replied fiercely. "You and mom have me. I'll take care of you."

"I know you will," Mali replied softly. "You've always taken care of me, Able. But sometimes I wish I had a daddy, like Kally."

Able sat up, spilling her on to the floor.

"That's a stupid wish, Mali," he said. "We have to get rid of him. It's just you, mom, and me. That's all we need."

"I don't think it's a stupid wish," Mali said, grabbing the shelf to steady herself. She stood up and looked down on her brother, small fists on her hips. "And besides, I can wish for anything I want, and I want a daddy. There's nothing you can do to stop me."

Able just stared at her in disgust. Sometimes there just wasn't any point trying to reason with a little sister. They just didn't understand.

Chapter One

He was out there. Watching her.

He'd been watching her for days. Seven days, to be exact.

That's how long it had been since Calla left with her new man, Seth. Unfortunately, Seth had forgotten to take his big, stupid friend Jax with him.

Sarai rolled over in her bed, punching the pillow to soften it up. Her room was too hot. She knew how much more cool and comfortable the air would be if she could open the sliding door to the garden, but if she did he might take it as an invitation.

He'd been trouble from the minute he'd set foot in their small hostel. Usually they catered to students. After all, Hector Prime was one of the best places in the quadrant to study biology. From desert to jungle, the planet-wide nature preserve had something to offer everyone. But the only thing Jax wanted was right in her bedroom.

Sarai rolled again, settling on her back. What was it about him? She hadn't been able to sleep that first night, so she'd gone out into the garden, her private refuge. He had been waiting for her then, too. A twist of desire coiled through her at the memory. He'd touched her in the darkness, and she had lost control.

His hands, tugging at her gown, had been rough and calloused. She could still feel the way they caught against the smooth skin of her belly, before dropping lower...

Unconsciously, Sarai raised one hand to her breast and fingered her hardening nipple. He had touched her there, too. She remembered the scrape of his finger, back and forth against her taut flesh. Mirroring his actions with her own fingers, she twisted in her bed as an ache spread through her body.

He had been so hard.

She dropped her hand lower, searching for the space between her legs that would give her relief. She hated how much she needed to touch herself, but she knew from experience that once the ache started, it had to be appeased. Otherwise she would toss and turn for the rest of the night.

She found the small nub, then started slowly rubbing it, back and forth. Slow and steady. What was he doing there in the darkness? Did he ache, too? Was he touching himself like she was? She could just about picture him.

He would be leaning back against the bench, legs splayed out before him. One hand would drop slowly to the bulge in his crotch, testing it. It would grow, lengthen under his hand. Would he grip it? Would he work it up and down between his fingers, or simply finger the head softly?

Her own fingers were moving faster now, and she gave a little whimper at the thought of the smooth, hard length waiting for her in the darkness.

All she had to do was open the sliding door and she could have him. He would be on her in a heartbeat, pressing her back against the soft bed. Being kissed by him was an experience in and of itself. His tongue, thrusting inside her, taking what he wanted. He had no mercy when he kissed. It was a brand, a mark of ownership. Her lips burned with the memory.

She thrust the image from her mind, forcing herself to focus on her own movements. Thinking of him wouldn't help. It would just make things worse. She needed to focus on the pleasure she could give herself. She had been massaging her nipple as she rubbed her clit, but the feelings were becoming more intense now. She couldn't do both things, she couldn't concentrate. Back and forth, harder and harder. She could feel the pressure building, but she wanted more.

She wanted him.

His cock was like a pillar of granite. So hard, so deep. He'd plunged into her like he had something to prove. When he'd come to her that night, it felt like the first time she'd ever been with a man. He'd stretched her open; she'd been splayed beneath his strength. Completely helpless, she had no choice but to give into the ecstasy his touch could bring.

Heat rose in her. Her fingers were moving so quickly now that it took all her strength not to arch up beneath her hand. Was he watching her? She'd pulled the drapes, but they were all too sheer. Did he know what she was doing?

What would his tongue feel like on her? She could imagine it, slippery and hot, darting back and forth against her aching center. Would he tease her, bringing her close to the edge before falling back? Or would he keep moving, bringing her to orgasm time after time? She'd never felt a man's tongue there, but she'd heard it was a wonderful thing. If only she could feel something like that...

The pressure was intense now. It pushed against her, and she felt like she was climbing to the top of a cliff. She could see the end, she was so close to it, but she couldn't quite make it over. Her fingers flew faster and faster, seeking desperately to provide her with some relief. She had to get some relief, or she would die. Either that, or she would call out to him to come to her.

No.

She wouldn't do that.

She pressed harder, her body shaking from the strain of remaining perfectly still. The sensations built up in her, heart pounding. Her breath was coming in ragged breaths, but she held her position. A swooshing sound, the sound of her own heartbeat, filled her head.

Just a little more.

Around and around. Don't think about him, his hard cock stuffing you so full that you feel like you might choke, her traitorous mind whispered. Him pounding against you, your whole body shaking from the force of his thrusts.

Her treacherous body wasn't listening, though. There was an empty hole where his cock should be. Her entire body was ready to explode, but there was no one for her to explode against. Her fingers flew, her mouth opening in a silent gasp of aching need. Against her will, her head arched back against the pillow as the orgasm hit her. She shuddered under the onslaught of sensation, biting the back of her hand to keep from crying out. What would he see if he were watching her now? What would he think?

That night in the garden she'd seen the look on his face as she came, every muscle in her body clenching his tightly. His face had been filled with a pleasure so intense it was painful to watch. But she wanted to watch it again.

Slowly, her breathing returned to normal. She allowed her hand to drop to the mattress. The sound of her heart faded, and she let her hands fall to her sides. After a few minutes her

breath was slow and steady again. The ache was better, although she could still feel a trace of tension.

She rolled onto her stomach, punching the pillow to soften it up. Then she lay her head down and forced her mind to calm. Would the night never end?

Finally, after another hour, she finally relaxed enough to fall asleep. Morning would be there all too soon.

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Jax sat in the dark garden, watching Sarai's room. It would be so easy to go in through the door, to push her back on the bed and kiss her until she gave in to him. And she would give in, he already knew that. Her response to him from the first time he'd touched her had been incredible.

A physical response wouldn't be enough, though. Not to convince her she needed him in her life.

What was she doing in there, he wondered? Was she sleeping, thinking of him? Did she have any idea how much he wanted to be with her?

She was his life mate—he was certain of it. He had spent the first thirty years of his life believing he'd be alone forever. After all, he'd had no life mate among his own people, the Saurellians. Until a few weeks ago he'd never heard of a Saurellian finding a lifemate anywhere but Saurellia.

But now there was new hope. His friend, Seth, had found Calla. And Sarai had been with Calla.

What was life like before Sarai? It had only been a week, yet in those few short days his entire life had changed. He was frustrated, of course. He had made love to her in the garden that first night, but she hadn't let him touch her since. But even though the frustration was maddening, the sheer joy of her presence filled him.

He felt alive, complete.

The sound of her voice curled through him every time she spoke, touching corners of his soul he'd thought were long dead. And her children, they were beautiful. Little Able, a child who thought like an adult. He would be a challenge, Jax realized. He felt threatened by the thought of his mother having a new man in her life. Their father, Calvin, had been a horrible man. He'd hurt the entire family deeply—Jax's only regret was that Calvin was already dead. He would have liked to kill the man himself.

And Mali.

She was a little angel, a smaller version of her mother; only this version accepted him with open arms. She had been shy at first, but now she ran up to him every time she saw him, demanding hugs.

But no matter how much her daughter loved him, Sarai would hardly speak to him. He wanted to sweep her into his arms, to take her with him to his homeworld and make her his. And by Saurellian law he was entitled to do that; she was his lifemate, after all, a bond created by the Goddess herself.

Simply taking her wasn't a real option, though. He'd realized almost immediately that if he ever wanted to win Sarai over, he'd have to woo her. She'd already been forced into

marriage with one man. He had to prove he was different than Calvin, no matter what else happened.

He couldn't prove himself to her unless she gave him a chance, though. He needed to show her that he wanted more than her body, that he didn't need to control her. He wanted a partner, not a servant.

Unfortunately, she didn't seem to want him at all.

He would have to change her mind.

Chapter Two

Sarai was stirring a pot of porridge over the stove when Jax came into the kitchen. She could sense his presence immediately, of course, but she didn't acknowledge him. There was no way she'd let him know just how aware she was of his every move.

She lifted the porridge and turned to pour it into the bowls she'd set out.

"Mali, Able, do you want sweetener in your cereal?" she asked brightly. Then she turned and allowed herself to see him lounging against the doorway, arms folded in front of his chest.

"Yes," Mali piped up, looking excited. Able grunted, glaring at Jax. At least one of her children hadn't gone over to the enemy, Sarai thought dryly.

"Do you have enough for me to have a bowl?" Jax asked softly. The question seemed innocent enough, but his voice was dark and silky. It caressed her ears, reminding her of how he had sounded as he came into her that night.

"No," she said tightly, walking over to the table and setting down the bowls in front of the children. "Food isn't part of the arrangement here. I've told you that before. There are any number of places in town where you can find breakfast."

Jax simply smiled at her, and then sauntered across the kitchen to the table. She glared at him forbiddingly, but he ignored her. Coming up beside Mali, he swung one leg over the bench and straddled it next to the small girl.

"Good morning, Jax," Mali said brightly, carefully balancing her spoonful of cereal and blowing on it. "Would you like some of my breakfast? Mommy always gives me too much."

"No thank you, sweetheart," Jax said, catching Sarai's eye. "I'll get something later. You'll need all your food so you have energy to play today, and do your studies."

Mali nodded, stuffing the spoon in her mouth. Sarai pursed her lips. She'd already asked him several times not to come into the kitchen, but she didn't want to make a scene in front of the children. They'd been through enough without having to watch that. Instead, she filled her own bowl and turned to the table. Jax watched her as Mali chattered on about her plans for the day. Able glared.

"Are you done with your food?" she asked finally, and the two small blond heads nodded in unison. "Put your bowls in the sink, and go on outside."

Mali hopped up and carried her bowl to the sink. Able followed more slowly, watching them carefully.

"It's all right, son," Sarai said, giving him as open a smile as she could manage. "You go on and play with your sister. It'll be time for your lessons before long."

"All right," he muttered, and stomped out the back door behind Mali. Silence fell over the kitchen.

"Mali tells me you had to carry pails of water for the vegetables yesterday afternoon," Jax said in a smooth, drawling voice. "She told me the water wasn't working right. Do you know what's wrong with it?"

"No," Sarai said tightly.

"Have you called anyone to fix it yet?" Jax asked, watching her face carefully.

"No," she replied, refusing to meet his gaze. "I don't want to spend the money right now."

"I can take a look at it if you like," Jax said lightly.

"And what would a soldier know about irrigation?" Sarai said sharply.

"Well, I wasn't born a soldier," Jax replied calmly. "I was born on a farm, and I used to work on the irrigation equipment with my father. They have farms in Saurellia, you know. Even soldiers have to eat."

Sarai was startled. She'd never thought of Saurellians as farmers. They were soldiers, conquerors. They came and took things; they fought the Empire. They didn't fix broken pipes.

"Well, I can't stop you," she said, standing abruptly. She scooped up her plate and turned away from him. "But I don't want you bothering me here. You need to leave."

"Sarai," Jax said quietly. "You can't just brush me off forever. I'm not going away. Why won't you at least give me a chance?"

"I don't want you in my life," she said tightly. "I don't want any man in my life."

Jax came up behind her. She couldn't hear him move, but she could sense his presence with every fiber of her being. She tried to look relaxed, but she felt like screaming. She was trapped, she couldn't move.

"I'm already here," he replied, all but whispering in her ear. "I'm not leaving. We can't just leave this thing between us unfinished."

She whirled to face him, startled by how close he was. His chest was just inches from her face. His shirt was open just a bit at the neck, and a few dark hairs from his chest caught her attention. They were coarse and curly. She already knew what they felt like. They had been wiry against her hands that night.

She could smell him, too. He smelled a little like the soap she kept in each of the hostel's rooms, and a little like himself. *Jax*. She took a deep breath, hoping to calm herself. Instead she inhaled more of his scent. A thrill at his presence ran through her body. She could feel herself starting to tremble. Steeling herself, she took a deep breath and stared straight into his eyes.

"You have no idea what I've been through in my life," she said. "I'm free now, and so are my children. We've lived under a man's control before. I won't go back to that. Ever."

Jax reached one hand up, lightly brushing her cheek with the backs of his fingers.

"I don't want to control you," he whispered. He leaned over and brushed a kiss against her ear. "I want to make love to you, and be with you. Nothing more than that."

She held herself still, longing to lean into him.

"Give me a chance," Jax continued. "And I'll prove it to you. I don't expect you to accept anything on faith."

Sarai closed her eyes tightly. He was too intense, too much. She wanted to touch him, feel the smooth silk of his skin under her fingertips, the wiry hair of his chest. What had he said? Give him a chance? She had to get rid of him somehow. Maybe she could use his own words against him, she thought desperately.

"You want a chance?" she said, opening her eyes. His face was only inches from hers, his gaze focused on her mouth. He licked his lips, and something inside her clenched. If she leaned forward even the slightest bit, they would be touching. "If I give you a chance, will you go away?"

A stillness came over Jax.

"Yes," he said slowly.

"I'll give you a week," Sarai said nervously. She could feel tension radiating from him. He was like wild predator, one who wanted to devour her.

"A week isn't enough," Jax replied softly. "I want a month. And during that month you have to let me touch you."

"No," she said quickly. She already knew how dangerous his touch could be.

"Yes," he replied firmly. "You want me to promise to leave you? Well, I'll leave if after a month you still want me to. But you have to let me touch you whenever I want. And I want to sleep in your room."

"I won't have sex with you," she said in panic. "I won't ever have sex with another man unless it's *my* choice. I won't give you that kind of power over me."

"I didn't say you had to have sex with me," he replied smoothly. His eyes were intense, compelling. His fingers brushed her cheek again; it was impossible to think. How did he do it? How did he make her melt like this?

"If you don't want to make the deal, I can't force you," he continued. "But it's the only way you're going to get rid of me. What do you say?"

"Two weeks," she said desperately. "A month is too long."

"Three weeks," he whispered. His lips brushed against hers, his body pressed her back against the counter. She could feel the entire length of him. His frame was hard with muscles, and against her belly an unmistakable bulge jutted.

Against her will, her hands rose to grip his waist. She wanted him to pull her against him, to lift her up onto the counter and thrust into her. She took a deep breath.

"Three weeks," she whispered. Could she last that long? She would have to. She had seen his determination; this might be her best chance to get rid of him.

He groaned as she agreed, his mouth taking hers in a kiss unlike any she'd ever experienced. His lips were rough, commanding her to open to the onslaught of his tongue. His arms came around her like bands of iron, molding her to him even as one leg thrust between hers.

He thrust into her mouth like a marauder, a warrior, and she let her head fall back under his strength. He plumbed her depths, thrusting again and again even as his lower body ground slowly against her pelvis. She could feel her nipples tightening, and moist heat built between her legs. How was she going to survive three weeks with this man? She

couldn't even survive three minutes!

"What are you doing to my mother?" Able's voice cut through the kitchen, filled with disapproval and dislike. Jax stilled instantly, and Sarai all but whimpered as he pulled his lips from hers. He stood back from her, and turned to face the boy.

Sarai's son was standing there, both hands on his hips and his face twisted with dislike. She groaned inwardly, disgusted by her own behavior. She had allowed this man to maul her in front of her child, a child who had seen first-hand the horrors his father had committed.

"I was kissing her," Jax said lightly. "Does that bother you?"

"Yes," Able said, his face grim. Sarai rubbed a hand against her forehead. How was she going to explain this to Able?

"I don't plan to hurt her, and I won't do anything she hasn't agreed to let me do," Jax said, keeping his tone friendly. "But I wasn't making her do anything she didn't want me to do."

"Is that right, Mom?" Able asked, turning his accusing gaze to her. She sighed, knowing he would be upset if she said yes. For a moment she considered saying no, covering up her part in the kiss. But she had never lied to her children before, and now wasn't the time to start.

"Yes," she said. "I agreed to let him kiss me."

"Oh," Able said, at a loss for words. He looked confused, and suddenly very young. "Why did you do that?"

Sarai gave a choked laugh, wondering what to tell him. *Because I can't control myself? Because I made a deal to get rid of him? Because your father only hurt me, but when this man touches me I feel like I'll break into a thousand pieces, and it feels good?* None of them were answers she could give her son.

"Because sometimes men and women like to kiss," she said finally. Able's face grew dark again.

"That's a stupid reason," he said after a brief pause. Then he whirled and ran out of the room.

Sarai slumped back against the counter.

"I'm a terrible mother," she whispered, looking up at him with haunted eyes. "How could I let you do that where my children might see? This deal we've made, none of it can happen around them. They are my life, they are far more important than you. Can you understand that?"

Jax nodded, his gaze inscrutable.

"As long as you understand that at night you're mine, I'll make sure I don't touch you in front of the children."

"Thank you," she replied. "I can't have them getting hurt over this. They've already been hurt enough."

Jax reached one finger to her chin, and lifted her face so he could look at her directly.

"I understand," he whispered, dropping a quick, light kiss on her mouth. He straightened, then spoke again in a louder voice. "I'll go take care of that pipe now. Let me know if you need anything, all right?"

He turned and strode out of the room.

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He could win her over, he knew it.

Sarai was inside getting the children ready for bed. He sat outside her bedroom in the garden, waiting for her. It had been dark for hours; she'd kept the children up well past their bedtime. She was avoiding him, using them as a shield. But eventually she would run out of excuses.

He saw the light come on in her room, and the outline of her body against the drapes. If she had any idea how sheer they were she would faint, he thought with amusement. Every night she gave him a show, as she got ready for bed.

She untied her apron and started removing her clothes quickly and efficiently. Turning as she pulled off her dress, she was briefly silhouetted. Long, slender legs, shapely breasts that were still fairly firm, even after two children. Her blonde hair hung down her back like a curtain. *What would it look like over her naked body?* he wondered. That one night they'd had together had been all too brief. He'd never gotten the chance to see her as he'd fantasized so many times. He wanted her astride him, her head thrown back in pleasure and her breasts bouncing. Her hair would be wild and free, offering him glimpses of her body even as she rode him through the night.

He hardened at the thought, blood rushing to his groin. A familiar ache spread through him, making him groan.

Her room went dark. It was time to make his move.

He rose and walked silently over to the sliding door that separated them. He tested the latch, noting with amusement that she'd kept it locked. As if a lock would be able to keep him out.

He knocked softly, but she didn't respond. Probably hoping he'd go away. She would have no such luck tonight. By promising not to touch her in front of the children he had given up valuable time with her during the day. He wouldn't allow her to waste any of their nights together. He pulled a small laser pick out of his pocket and had the door open within seconds. In addition to being raised on a farm, he'd spent some time in juvenile detention for petty theft during his unruly youth, something he hadn't felt like mentioning to her earlier.

The skills he learned there came in handy at times.

He slid the door open and stepped quietly into the room. She was lying on the bed, pretending to be asleep, but she knew he was there. He could tell by the catch in her breathing that she was as aware of him as he was of her.

"Sarai, you promised," he whispered, trying to keep the desperate need he felt out of his voice. Her presence called to him, it took every bit of strength he had not to press her back against the bed and thrust his cock into her until she screamed. She was so hot, so tight. He bit back a groan at the thought. "You didn't think I'd forget, did you?"

"I had hoped," she whispered. She sat up in bed, clutching the covers in front of her.

"I don't think so," he replied, gliding across the floor to her bed. "I've been dreaming about this moment all day. I can't wait to touch you."

"No sex," she said tersely. "You promised no sex."

"I don't need to come inside you to enjoy being with you," he said quietly. He pulled his shirt over his head impatiently, then kicked off his shoes and pants. She shrank back as he pulled the covers back and slid into bed.

"What are you going to do?" she asked nervously.

"Just hold you," he said, reaching out and pulling her into his arms. She turned away from him, so he gently nestled her back against his chest. Her tight little ass nestled against his hard length and his breathing grew ragged. The only thing separating him from her hot opening was the thin cloth of her shift, worn from many washings.

She was tense, and as his hips pressed against hers involuntarily, she stiffened further. He sighed, and forced his body to remain still. She wasn't going to make things easy.

Her hair smelled clean and fresh, like the flowers she grew in the garden. He dropped his nose to it, inhaling deeply. Her head was resting on one of his arms, the other arm holding her loosely against him. He gave her several minutes to get used to his presence, then slid his open palm along her stomach.

She stiffened again, but this time he ignored her, allowing his hand to slide slowly up her body until he was cupping one of those beautiful breasts he'd seen outlined through the window. The fabric of her shift was so thin it was useless in providing her any protection from his touch. He grunted triumphantly as the nipple hardened against his fingers. He played his fingers back and forth, and her breath caught.

"You like that, don't you?" he whispered against her ear. It was a smooth shell beneath his lips, and he dropped little kisses on it and the back of her neck. She squirmed, murmuring something.

"No," she said, but her nipples betrayed her. Her breasts swelled under his fingers, silently begging him for more.

He let his hand drop, smoothing the fabric of her shift along her stomach. Her stomach muscles twitched as his finger trailed lower, and she shifted her legs restlessly, pressing them together. The motion forced him to stop for a moment, breathing deeply and trying to maintain control. Her ass was wiggling against him so much, he felt like a rocket about to go off. It would be so easy to slide his leg between hers, to hold her open for his thrust.

But he couldn't do that, not until she asked for it, he reminded himself. He had made a promise; he couldn't afford to blow this. Not if he wanted to keep her in his life.

He allowed his fingers to drift lower, until he could feel the thatch of her hair under the fabric. He pushed one finger experimentally toward the opening there, and moisture started soaking the fabric. She was definitely enjoying this, even though she seemed to be doing everything in her power not to show it.

He let the finger trail up, smoothing its way across the tiny nubbin of her clit. She twitched, and his hips thrust against her spasmodically. She pressed back into him, trying to escape his finger. Instead, she pushed against his cock so hard he thought he might explode. He wiggled his finger, and was answered by a wiggling of her little butt. He sighed in pleasure, then started moving his fingers in earnest.

He pressed down against her clit, rubbing it back and forth even as he applied the pressure. The fabric was becoming soaked with her juices, and her breath was coming fast. So was his, and against his will he started rubbing his cock against her ass. It jutted up

against her, sliding back and forth in her crack, cradling his erection.

His fingers moved more quickly, and he tried pushing into her a bit with them. The fabric wouldn't let him, though. He briefly considered trying to work the fabric up, but he was afraid to stop moving for even a second. He didn't want to give her a chance to change her mind; something he knew would happen if he gave her any time to think. Instead he slid one finger on each side of her clit, tugging and pulling it back and forth, increasing the tempo of his movements as her breathing caught and became ragged.

He could feel the blood in his body pooling in his groin, and he started thrusting against her body, rubbing his engorged flesh between them. He realized that by pushing harder against her clit with his hand, he could not only bring her more pleasure, but she would jerk her hips back into him. Each jerk pushed his cock deeper between her ass cheeks. His breath started growing ragged.

She was grinding against his hand now, making ragged, whimpering noises and muttering something under her breath. He pulled her even more tightly against him, his hips writhing slowly against her from one side while his hand worked her harder and harder from the other side. She jerked against him spasmodically, grunting and moaning. He knew she was close. He straightened his index and middle fingers, pulled the fabric taut as he thrust them into the mouth of her cunt. He rubbed back and forth roughly, dragging the fabric roughly across her swollen flesh. She stiffened, spasmed against him and a keening noise came out of her mouth.

Unable to control himself, he thrust against her back violently. In that instant she came, squealing, her ass cheeks tightening around his bulging cock. The squeeze was so strong it was almost painful. He thrust once more, then his own orgasm hit him. He gasped; clutching her pelvis to him so hard there would be bruises in the morning, and spraying his seed into the fabric of her shift. Again and again he jerked against her in ecstasy, grunting harshly into the mass of her hair.

Gradually the sensations faded, and he loosened his grip on her body. Neither of them spoke in the darkness. He had lost control; he'd had no intention of coming himself. His entire goal had been to give her pleasure, not to explode all over her like an untried youth. He would make it up to her.

Gently moving away from her, he pulled her damp shift over her head and threw it on the floor. Then he rolled her onto her back and leaned over her, propping himself up on one arm. She stared up at him with a dazed expression. A wave of smug pleasure washed through him. She'd been as affected by his touch as he'd been by hers, regardless of his lack of control. She opened her mouth and took in a breath, preparing to speak.

Before she could say anything, he covered her mouth with his. His tongue swept in, exploring her depths. His fingers found her clit again, still dripping and hot from her orgasm. She reacted to his touch instantly, her hips rising under his touch and her arms reaching up to clench his shoulders.

He thrust his fingers into her hot opening roughly, this time without the fabric to separate them. She was slippery and wet, pulling him to her. He lifted his mouth from hers, and she stared up at him, eyes pleading for another release.

"Please," she whispered. "I need—"

He cut her off with another long, slow kiss, all the while working her clit and exploring

her cunt. She squirmed against him, moaning into his mouth. Then he sat up abruptly and stepped off the bed. Wrapping one hand around each of her ankles, he pulled her body toward the edge, kneeling between her spread legs. Draping one leg over each of his shoulders, he leaned forward and touched his tongue to her clit.

Delicately, he parted the folds of her flesh, swirling his tongue around the sensitive nub. He opened his mouth wider and sucked gently. She squirmed and bucked against him, her entire body shivering.

"That feels so good," she gasped. He paused, looking up to find her leaning back on her arms and watching him. The sight of her, flushed with passion, her lips bruised by his kiss, was incredibly erotic, but it wasn't enough. He wanted her screaming, losing control and begging him to fuck her.

His head dipped again, his lips and tongue tugging harder on her flesh. Again and again he thrust his tongue into her willing flesh, until she dropped back against the bed and started bucking against him. He wrapped his arms up and around her legs, holding her steady and renewed his attack.

She was twisting and moaning so much that he could tell she was getting close to her completion. He stabbed into her with a series of tongue thrusts, then started wiggling his tongue back and forth against her stiffened clit. She shrieked, her entire body tensing, and came with a heave of her hips against his mouth.

He pulled her down into his arms, cradling her body against his and kissing her forehead and face. She was drenched in sweat and breathing heavily. With shock, Jax realized she was crying. He pressed her head to his chest as a series of sobs shook her body. What the hell was going on? He'd been trying to please her, not make her cry.

Carefully lifting her limp body, he laid her in the bed and crawled in next to her, pulling her against him. She cried in silence for a while, then snuffled noisily, turning her head away from him.

"Let's go to sleep," she said finally, to his surprise. Didn't she want to talk? Women always wanted to talk, especially when they'd been crying. He was out of his depth.

"Sarai, I think—" he started to say, but she cut him off.

"No, I just want to go to sleep," she said. "I said you could touch me. Talking wasn't part of the deal, so shut up."

She was right. Talking hadn't been part of the deal.

Eventually her breathing evened out and he could tell she really was asleep. His own rest was harder to find, his thoughts racing as the hours passed. If he couldn't win her over with sex and she wouldn't even talk to him, what chance did he have of convincing her to stay with him?

Three weeks, he reminded himself. Three weeks, and then he was bound to leave. There had to be a way to convince her she needed him as much as he needed her. He just had to find it.

Chapter Three

Sarai slid slowly and quietly out of Jax's embrace. He was sleeping deeply, his sooty

black eyelashes resting against his cheeks. She'd awakened to find him holding her close, his body wrapped around hers protectively. It felt good to be held, something she hardly dared admit to herself. She felt safe in his arms.

It was a feeling she couldn't let herself get used to.

His touch last night had shattered her control, forcing her to face up to the reality that she wasn't complete and independent in herself. It made her feel weak, useless. Maybe she really was the kind of woman who needed a man to survive...No. She was more than that, and she couldn't let herself forget it.

She padded over to the chest of drawers where she kept her clothes and pulled out a fresh dress. Many of the women on Hector Prime wore jumpsuits or pants, just like the men, but her own upbringing had been more conservative. Despite the fact that she had left the Pilgrim way of life behind for good, she still wasn't quite able to bring herself to wear what she thought of as men's clothing.

That didn't stop her from dressing Mali in the same coveralls that all the other little girls wore, though. For the thousandth time, Sarai looked in the mirror and swore to herself that her daughter would have a better life than she had had. She glanced at the bed as she pulled on her clothing. Falling into the sack with any handsome man who crossed her path wouldn't make it any easier to give her daughter the kind of life she deserved, she told herself sternly. No matter how good Jax made her feel, she had to remember what was really important—her family, and her independence. There was nothing more important than that, nothing.

She quietly opened the door and made her way down the hall. It was still early; hopefully the children wouldn't be up quite yet. They'd had a late night. Time to start breakfast and pretend nothing had happened. Able was already worried about Jax, and Mali was halfway in love with the man. It would be best if they had as little to do with him as possible.

* * * * *

Able crouched in the bushes, watching Jax throw the flying disk to Mali. She was giggling hysterically, thrilled at the attention the man was giving her. Each time Jax threw the disk, he was careful to keep it slow and steady, so she actually had a chance of catching it. Able curled his lip in disgust. Mali was too stupid to see what Jax was doing—he would use them to get to mom if they let him.

The leaves beside him rustled, and he turned to see one of the furry little mammals that lived in the garden watching him. It held a large nut in its paws. Boy and animal held each other's gaze for several minutes, then Mali shrieked in the background. The animal leapt away in fright, leaving the nut behind.

Able reached out and picked it up thoughtfully, turning to eye Jax and his sister. It felt good in his hand, with a nice heft. Able clenched his fingers around it. Mali had dropped the disk, and was running up to Jax. The man swung the young girl up in his arms and twirled her around. She giggled, kicking her legs out and crowing with happiness.

Mali made him sick, Able thought.

Jax set her down, and she ran toward the back of the house to retrieve the disk. Able stood up slowly, careful not to make any noise. He cocked his arm back and took careful

aim with the nut. It was sharp and pointed on one end; if he got it just right he might really hurt the man. Maybe he'd leave, then.

With every bit of his strength, Able launched the nut at the side of Jax's head. It hit him against one temple. He gave a cry, and turned toward Able, eyes searching for his attacker. Bright red blood ran down his face. Able froze. He'd done it, now, he realized. Jax was going to kill him. Mali screamed in the background and took off toward the hostel.

Ignoring the blood running down his face and dripping on to his shoulder, Jax strode through the brush toward Able. It didn't even occur to the boy to flee. He'd run from his father a hundred times, and he always got caught. Jax reached him, and grasped the front of his shirt, pulling him out of the brush. He knelt down and looked him straight in the eyes.

"Why did you do that, Able?" he asked quietly, his face sober. Able gaped at him in surprise. Of all the things he could have imagined Jax might do to him, he hadn't considered being questioned.

"I, uh, I don't know," he said, trying to keep his voice strong. To his disgust, his words came out soft and trembling.

"Did you throw it at me because you thought I was hurting Mali?" Jax asked, searching his face.

"No," Able said. To his horror, he could feel tears building up in his eyes. He sniffed his nose fiercely, bracing himself. He wasn't going to break down and cry, no matter what Jax did to him. He wasn't.

"Did you throw it at me because you think I might hurt your mother?"

"Yes," Able whispered. He couldn't look into Jax's eyes anymore. He could feel more moisture welling up, and his lower lip started trembling. It was so hard not to cry when you knew you were going to get hit, he thought. Too hard. He sniffed again. Jax stood up, surprising him.

"Why don't we go sit down over here and talk about this," Jax said, gesturing to the table where mom sometimes let them have picnic lunches. Jax reached a hand down, touching his shoulder. Able flinched. Jax pulled his hand back, and walked ahead of Able to the table. The boy eyed the distance to the hostel door speculatively, wondering if he could make it that far before Jax caught him. Not a chance...He followed Jax to the table, sitting down across from him. At least this way the table was between them; it might offer some protection.

"Able, I think I understand how you feel," Jax said, looking down at him. Able sniffed again, but this time it came out as more of a snort. This man had no idea how he felt. He wiped a hand across his face, removing the treacherous moisture. Jax was silent, as if he expected a reply. Able just glared at him.

"Able, it's a good thing for a young man to protect his mother," Jax said. "I'm proud of the fact that you take such good care of Mali and Sarai. But I think you need to consider whether attacking me is really going to accomplish anything here. I don't want to hurt your mother, and I don't want to hurt your sister. I like them."

"So?" Able mumbled. He looked up at Jax, then took a deep breath and spoke defiantly. "We don't need you. We had a father, and we don't need a new one. And mom doesn't need you, either. She has us for her family."

He braced himself for the blow he knew had to be coming, his eyes closing.

Nothing happened.

"I'm not going to hit you, Able," Jax said, his voice sounding strange. Almost sad, but that couldn't be right. Why would Jax be sad? "I just want you to understand that it isn't a very good idea to throw things at me, or anyone else, for that matter. Using physical force against someone should always be the last thing you try, when there aren't any other choices left. It's a good way for you to get hurt, and if you get hurt there won't be anyone around to take care of your mother and sister. Do you understand that?"

Able glared at him, hating him. He wanted Jax to go away; he threatened the family. The fact that he was being nice right now was probably just a trick.

"Well, I'm not upset at you this time, Able," Jax said, fingering the cut on his head for the first time. "You sure got me, though," he added with a chuckle. "I knew you were out there, but this was the last thing I was expecting. It just goes to show you should never underestimate someone because he's still young. Let's call a truce for now, all right?"

"What's happening out here?" Sarai's voice was high-pitched and frightened as she came running toward them. Mali trailed behind her, eyes wide. "Able, are you all right?"

"It's nothing, Sarai," Jax said, standing up. "Able is fine. Just a little misunderstanding. He and I have been talking about it."

Sarai stopped short, seeing the trail of blood and the spatters on his shirt for the first time.

"What happened?" she asked again, turning to Able. Her eyes searched up and down his form for damage, but he was fine.

"I think that Able and I have come to an understanding," Jax said firmly. "Haven't we?"

Able stared at him a moment longer, then turned to his mother. Her face was twisted in concern, and remorse hit him. He hadn't wanted to make her upset, or to scare Mali. She was terrified, he could see that. She had crept up behind Mom, gripping her around the knees and hiding her head in her skirts.

"It's fine, Mom," he said, trying to make his voice sound grown up. "Jax and I have just been talking about things. Don't worry about it."

"Jax, I need to know what happened here," Sarai said, hands on her hips. Mali squeaked at her harsh tone.

"Sarai, it's really nothing to worry about," Jax said. He shot Able a quick look, and for a second seemed almost friendly. Able realized that they shared a secret now, a secret just for them. "We were just talking about how a man takes care of his family. Able's going to be a good man some day, you should be proud of him."

Able's chest swelled with pride, although he tried to tamp down the emotion. No one had ever said anything like that about him before. Of course, he wasn't interested in anything Jax had to say about him. Not interested at all.

He gave Jax another appraising stare. He would have to keep an eye on the man, he thought. He was pretty sneaky. He looked back at his mom, who was watching every move he made. He smiled at her, but her face just got tighter.

"Well, you need to take care of that cut on your face, Jax," she finally said. "It doesn't look serious, but I've got some disinfectant inside. You'd better come with me."

Jax nodded, and she turned to walk toward the kitchen, dragging Mali along with her.

Jax gave Able another measuring look, and the boy straightened. He understood what Jax had been saying. There were smarter ways to protect Mom and Mali. Now he just needed to figure out what they were...

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Sarai tried to control the trembling of her hands as she washed the blood off Jax's face. Her heart was still racing; the adrenaline had hit her with the force of an ore transport when Mali had come tearing into the kitchen, screaming that Jax and Able were trying to kill each other.

She'd halfway expected to find her son dead. She had no doubt he'd attacked Jax, a man who was trained to kill. After all, soldiers killed for a living.

She still didn't understand what had really happened out there, but Jax wasn't talking. She was willing to bet Able wouldn't, either. The boy was young, but he had a mind of his own. She might never know what had taken place between them...

"Sarai, this really isn't that serious a cut," Jax said, looking up at her with amusement. "I've lived through much worse than this. You don't need to fuss over it."

"Oh, be quiet," Sarai said, pinching her lips. He was right, of course. The cut did seem to be small, and the bleeding had stopped. She wiped away the last of the dried blood carefully, then placed a small healing patch over the cut, pressing against it to activate it. Within seconds it had bound itself against the skin, and its tiny computer chip was analyzing the wound and medicating it. She was still amazed by these little patches that everyone around her seemed to take for granted. They could heal a cut in a day. Back home, this cut would have left a scar. She still couldn't understand why her people refused to accept such simple pieces of technology to make their lives better.

"There, it's done," she said in satisfaction. "You'll be fine."

"Thanks," he said, giving her a wry smile. There was a tenderness in his eyes that made her think he wanted to kiss her, but then his gaze darted across the table to Mali, who was watching them intently. Jax stood, then reached out one finger to touch Sarai's lips. It sent a tingle of awareness through her. She wanted to kiss it.

"Later," he whispered. He turned and left the room. Sarai stared at the empty doorway, touching her lips where his finger had been. *How did he do things like that?* she wondered. He was going to drive her crazy.

Chapter Four

It was maddening, Sarai thought to herself, as she got ready for bed that night. Where the hell was he? He'd been gone all day, not a word about where he was going or when he'd be back. She hadn't seen him since she'd patched up his temple that morning.

She'd been looking for him, expecting him to appear in his annoying way. He didn't show up begging for lunch. She'd even cooked a bit of extra dinner for him, figuring she owed him after his patience with her son's attack. Nothing. No stolen kisses. No wildflowers on the table. Nothing.

And he wasn't in his room, either. Not that she'd been checking up on him, of course. It

was just that she'd realized it had been several days since she'd put new soaps in the fresher for him. Lazy on her part, she thought. She usually checked on the soaps every day.

She pulled off her dress and stood before the mirror in her shift, staring at her reflection. She was still attractive, she told herself. Her long, blonde hair had lightened in Hector Prime's sun. It was beautiful now, and she knew he liked to touch it. Her breasts were high and firm. Well, at least as high and firm as they could be after nursing two children. Her body was slim, and her stomach was tight. Sure, she had some stretch marks, but they hadn't bothered him before. Why wasn't he here? The night was halfway over!

She sat down at her dressing table with a thump, making a disgusted face at herself in the mirror. Why should she care where he was, anyway? It was nice to get rid of him for the night. Only two and a half more weeks, then he'd be gone. Well, two weeks and five days. And then he'd be gone forever...suddenly it didn't seem like that much time.

She attacked her hair with the brush, willing herself not to think of him. She was glad he wasn't there. She needed to get some good sleep—last night he'd kept her awake until all hours.

But thinking of him last night sent a wave of heat through her. He'd been so strong, held her so close. He had been hard against her, too. She clenched her legs together, feeling herself grow moist. He could slide right into her; he wouldn't even have to touch her first, she thought. What was *wrong* with her? It was like she had completely lost control over her own body. Disgusting.

She finished combing her hair, and moved toward her bed. It was stuffy. She might as well open the sliding door. It hadn't proven much of a barrier to him last night, and he wasn't even around this evening so there was no point in suffering in the heat.

A sudden thought stopped her dead in her tracks. What if something had happened to him? What if he'd been injured? Was that why he hadn't come home? Her heart raced, her mind running through a thousand different scenarios, each worse than the last.

He could have been attacked, robbed. He could have gone for a walk in the rainforest, and been set upon by predators. It was dangerous out there, everyone had told her to watch her children carefully. Maybe his head wound was more serious than either of them had realized. Maybe he had collapsed somewhere, was in a coma and couldn't tell anyone who he was.

You're being ridiculous, she told herself firmly. Settle down. He's probably just in town at a bar. Maybe he had met a woman there, a beautiful woman who didn't have children. For all she knew, he was boffing some floozy at that very minute!

Sure, he told her he wasn't going away, but he was gone already.

She was so caught up in her thoughts that she didn't even hear the knock on her door. Then the knob turned slowly, and he slipped into the room.

"Sarai, are you still awake?" he whispered into the darkness. She whirled to face him, livid.

"Where the hell have you been?" she asked, keeping her voice low. "I thought you were dead! You've been gone all day!"

"Glad to hear you noticed," he replied in an amused voice. She could only see his outline in the darkness. He paced over to her chair and sat down, pulling off his boots. "I took a transport over to the space station for the day. I needed to send some messages to my

family on Saurellia, and it seemed like it might be a good idea to give you and the kids a break from me. I hope you don't mind, but I picked up a doll for Mali, and a game for Able. They just sort of jumped out at me. We can say they're from you, if you don't want them to know I've gotten them a present. I got you something, too."

"Oh," she said, feeling deflated. It seemed so mundane, so normal. "Well, that was nice of you. But you should have left a message for us. We didn't know where you were."

"I didn't realize you'd care," Jax said quietly, sounding pleased. He stood and started pulling off his clothes. She gritted her teeth; the man was too damn confident in himself. "Do you want to know what your present is?"

"I had an inquiry about your room," she said, infusing her voice with sweetness. "If you weren't coming back, I wanted to rent it to someone else."

"Fine with me," Jax said, leaning over her and bracing both hands on the bed. "It's not like I plan to sleep up there any more. You might as well rent it out. I'll move my things into your room in the morning."

"No," she said quickly. He laughed in the darkness.

"Yes," he whispered back, his voice low and sexy in the darkness. "I want your business to be a success. If you can rent out another room and earn more money, I'll do whatever I can to make that possible. Oh, and it's a nightgown. To replace the one I ruined last night. Red silk..."

She tried to protest again, but then his lips were closing over hers. They were soft, warm. He smelled so good. She thought about her vision of him lying dead in the forest, and suddenly she was filled with joy that he'd come back to her. There was no floozy. He was here, and she could touch him all she wanted. And he got her a nightgown. No one had ever gotten her anything like that before.

Touching him was a bad idea, of course. But she didn't care. She just reached her arms up around his neck and pulled him closer to her. She could feel the tensed strength in his muscles, but he was tender, carefully resting his weight on his arms to keep her comfortable. He deepened the kiss, and she felt him lift his legs onto the bed, until he was lying on top of her, straddling her. His hips pressed down against hers and she pushed back without thinking. Back and forth, they slowly allowed themselves to touch in a rhythm as old as time.

Then he lifted his head and whispered in her ear, "You're so beautiful, Sarai."

She laughed, and brushed her lips along his jaw. It was rough and stubbly—so masculine it made her ache.

"Thank you," she replied. "You're not so bad yourself."

He laughed, and started kissing her again, this time on the neck. She wondered idly if she should try to stop him, but it felt so good. Could it really hurt to let go of herself for just one night, to enjoy him for the moment without worrying about the future? She had worked so hard for so long; was it really that bad to give herself this one small freedom?

His lips moved lower, nudging aside her shift as he moved until he reached the valley between her breasts. She shivered against him, nipples hardening in anticipation. He moved his head to the side, swirling his tongue in circles around the stiff peak. Then he flicked it before catching it with his mouth. He suckled and rolled it back and forth between his lips, starting a fire in her lower body. The night before he had only touched her with his hands,

but tonight she wanted his hard length inside. He'd thrust into her, stretching her most delicate spot open. The thought made her quiver in anticipation.

She pushed her hips up at him, and tried to spread her legs. She wanted to feel him between her legs, to cradle him with her body. A soft, tickling need was building, and she knew that if she could just capture his length between her legs he could take care of that need for her.

Without pausing in his ministrations to her nipple, he shifted his legs, allowing her to spread hers wide enough for him to rest against her. In doing so, he pushed the covers aside, but her shift still separated them. He was naked, she could feel his penis resting in the groove of her clit, and his hips moved slowly against hers. It slipped along that groove with agonizing slowness, tantalizing her but not doing enough to build toward anything bigger. She bucked up at him, trying to get him to move more quickly, but instead he stopped moving altogether, pushing down and holding her prisoner beneath him.

"What do you want, Sarai?" he whispered, lifting his head from her breast. He stretched himself out, laying his head down beside hers on the pillow. She pushed at him, trying to get him to start moving again.

"Oh, no," he whispered. "Not until you tell me what you want."

She sighed, frustrated. He was so close, so hard and warm against her. Why couldn't he just keep up what he had started?

"I want you to keep going," she whispered, straining up toward him with her hips.

"How far do you want me to go?" he asked, reaching out to delicately stroke her ear with his tongue. She shivered, tingles running through her body.

"I don't want you to stop," she replied, her voice sounding raspy in the darkness. "Not tonight."

"Anything you ask, Sarai. I'd do anything for you," he whispered.

Before she could respond, his mouth had taken hers for the second time. Where he had been soft before, almost wooing, this was a kiss of possession. His tongue thrust into her mouth, and his hips pressed down between hers. Hard. She could feel the wide tip of his cock pushing against her shift, searching for the wet slit between her legs. She twisted against him, clutching him close with her arms. She wanted him in her, wanted to feel like he was hers, at least for now.

His hand reached down between them, grasping the hem and pulling it up to gain access to her body. He lifted his hips and she whimpered, not wanting to lose that tantalizing weight that held her pinned. Then his fingers were slipping into her cunt, feeling for her clit. He lifted his mouth from hers and grunted, "You're hot and wet for me already."

"Yes," she murmured, and arched under his touch. "I need you to fill me, Jax. Please."

He answered by positioning his rigid cock against her opening, then thrust into her with all his strength. She was filled to bursting. His size was unreal. Having this man inside her was amazing, a curious mix of intense pleasure and stretching pain. She would adjust to his presence in a second, but for the moment she simply savored the sensation of him inside her body.

He withdrew partially, then thrust back into her again. This time there was less stretching, and she smiled up at him.

"You feel so good," she whispered.

"You feel pretty damn good yourself," he muttered, kissing her again, hard and quick. He started moving within her, and after a second she reached around him with her legs, locking her ankles behind his back. The new angle let him come into her more fully; they both moaned.

Down he thrust, his cock scraping against her clit with each movement, and the tendrils of sensation and lust within her grew. Again and again, harder with every stroke. The pressure was growing within her, and she squeezed her inner muscles in anticipation. He grunted in response, dropping his head down to her shoulder. His breathing was harsh in her ear, and he moved faster against her. They strained against each other; coordinating their movements so that each time he came down into her flesh it rocked her back into the mattress.

She was getting closer. She could feel the tension winding tight between her legs. He was moving so fast against her that she could hardly keep the pace, each thrust hitting bottom, each motion rubbing her clit harder against him. Then he started moving his hips in a circular motion, grinding against her clit and stirring his cock within her. She closed her eyes and threw back her head, every muscle in her body stiffening. He gasped against her neck and she squeezed him, arms, legs and cunt, trying to wring the last bit of sensation out of him that she needed to push her over the edge.

Then her orgasm exploded, and she came with a deep, ragged moan that worked its way from low in her belly out into the night air. She clenched him, spasming, and he thrust against her hard. A sharp pain cut through her, and she realized that he was biting her shoulder, groaning into her flesh as his own orgasm ripped through him. She could feel the hot spurts of his seed hitting her, and she raised her hips to cradle him more closely. She wanted to pull him into her, take possession of him, and bind him to her...

They stayed like that for several minutes, panting in the darkness. Slowly, he allowed his weight to shift off of her, and rolled to her side. She felt his fingers touching her shoulder lightly, then he spoke.

"I bit you," he said, seemingly startled by his own actions. "I have no idea why I did that. I'm sorry, Sarai. I didn't mean to hurt you."

"You didn't," she replied, realizing it was true. His bite had stung, still throbbed a bit, but somehow it had fit in with the moment. Almost as if he had been marking her as his. Her mind shied away from this strange thought—it was too much to think about right now. He would be gone in a few weeks, so she needed to take pleasure in the moment.

"Well, I'm still sorry," he said, kissing the injured spot with soft warmth.

"That's all right," she whispered, nuzzling into his shoulder. She was suddenly very tired. Time to go to sleep...Jax cuddled her against his body, then pulled the covers over them. In the darkness outside the sliding door, she could hear the insects and small night creatures chittering and scurrying about. She drifted off to sleep, content in her decision. Having a man around, however temporarily, was going to be all right.

* * * * *

She awoke early in the morning, hearing a muffled snoring next to her ear. For a moment she couldn't move, and panic filled her. Something was pinning her down,

something heavy. She realized it was Jax, who had sprawled out on the bed, draping his arm and leg across her. She pushed at him with one arm, and he obediently rolled over on his back, still sleeping.

She was free.

She sat up a little, looking at him in the early-morning light. It was amazing to her that this man, so handsome and strong, seemed to want her, of all people. She leaned over him, examining his face closely. There was dark stubble along his jaw, and he was all sharp angles. There was no softness, even in his sleep, yet he had bought her daughter a doll at the spaceport, and a nightgown for her. He certainly seemed to have some softness inside of him.

She tried to sit up a little more, and realized that her unbuttoned shift was pinning her down. She slipped it off her shoulders, then moved closer to him. She let one hand touch the line of his collarbone, then slowly traced it down his body. He was a soldier, she had always known that. But this was the first time she'd really taken the time to look at his body.

There were several scars, small ones that were little more than white lines, and one large one on his side. She touched it in wonder, amazed that he had survived. It was as if someone had melted the skin there, superheating it and twisting it. *Blaster fire?* she wondered. She had never seen a wound like this, but it had to have been terrible.

She trailed her hand a bit lower, pushing the blanket that covered him down with it. She touched the planes of his stomach, taut with muscle. There was no extra flesh on him, only hardness. He seemed so relaxed around her and the children that at times it was hard to imagine what his life must really be like. He said he wanted to stay with her, but he was a soldier. There was no way he'd be content living and working in a hostel on a backwater planet.

A twinge of sadness came over her, and for the first time she allowed herself to consider how nice it would be to have a man like Jax around. Someone to hold her, to teach Able how to be a man. Someone to show Mali that not all men were like her father had been. Someone who would love them not hurt them.

That couldn't happen, of course.

She trailed her fingers along his stomach, watching the tiny black hairs trailing down from his navel stand up under her touch. That wasn't the only thing that was standing, she realized. Directly below her hand, under the covers, his cock was coming to life. She stole a look up at his face, but he was still sound asleep. She wondered if he was dreaming of being touched; if he was dreaming of her. She stifled a giggle, feeling silly and happy all of a sudden. She had been denying herself any joy for so long. It felt good to relax, to enjoy another person's company.

Keeping as quiet as possible, she lifted the covers and pushed them lower, revealing his partially erect penis. It was flushed, hardening before her eyes, lolling to one side. The head was a darker red than the rest, a mushroom-shaped helmet that seemed almost to be watching her, waiting for her touch. She touched one finger to it delicately. His skin there was so soft. She rubbed her finger back and forth along the edge, mesmerized by its silky smoothness.

He was definitely growing harder. Where his cock had lolled to one side before, now it

was straightening. The head grew more flushed as she continued her gentle stroking, and a tiny bit of fluid beaded up on the tip. It gleamed in the early-morning sunlight, and she was struck with a sudden curiosity about what it tasted like.

The thought shocked her.

She'd never imagined such a thing, tasting a man's seed. But why not, she wondered? There was no reason she couldn't taste him. After all, he had tasted her. He certainly liked being touched there; why wouldn't he like the touch of her mouth? A shiver ran through her. It would be so daring to lick him. What would he think as he woke up? She had to find out.

Scooting down on the bed, she made herself comfortable and stole one more quick glance up at him. Still asleep. Good. She moved her head in closer to him, then reached out with the tip of her tongue to touch that small drop of liquid. It was salty, strange. Not unpleasant, but strange. She licked him again, and the length of his penis jumped under her touch. It was much redder now, and very hard. She ran her tongue around the edge of the helmet-like head, enjoying the smooth touch on her tongue. Then she was struck with another idea. What if she sucked the head into her mouth?

She opened her mouth wide; careful to keep her teeth covered by her lips, and slowly sucked his cock in. It was big, bigger than she'd imagined, and hot. She could taste a little more of the salty fluid, and his body shifted slightly under her. She pulled her head back up, and his cock came out of her mouth with a popping sound. She looked up at him suspiciously. Was he awake?

But his breathing was slow and steady, and his eyes were closed. She turned her attention back to his erection, then opened her mouth over it again. She sucked it in smoothly this time, exploring the surface with her tongue. She probed the little hole right at the tip, then swirled her tongue around it. He shifted again, but this time she ignored it. She wanted to see how much of him she could fit in her mouth, and started slowly lowering her head down on him. She made it about a third of the way before her mouth was full, so she pulled back up, sucking on it as she went. It was rock hard now.

He twitched again, and she started to lift her head up to look at him. The movement was stopped when his hand gripped the back of her head, holding her still on his hard length.

"Please don't stop," he whispered, his voice sounding strained in her ears. "You have no idea how much it would mean to me if you didn't stop."

He pressed her down, firmly enough to show her what he wanted, but not so hard she couldn't have gotten away. She didn't feel trapped at all, she thought. She felt powerful; Jax was completely at her mercy. She lowered her head again, reveling in the gasp he gave as she did so. He was hers to play with.

She moved her head up and down along his length, keeping a steady suction. She could feel the tension under her hands. His thighs were tight, and as she kept moving she realized they were actually quivering under her touch. This powerful man was hers.

His hands pushed her down against cock urgently. She took the hint, bobbing her head up and down more quickly. More liquid was seeping out of him now. She could taste the salty warmth in her mouth. His breathing was harsh in the morning air. She sucked him in time and again. Her jaw was starting to ache a bit, but the slight discomfort was nothing

compared to the pleasure she knew she was giving him. She felt strong and powerful, completely in control of the warrior who lay before her. It made her feel almost giddy.

His hands gripped her head more tightly, and he gave a long, low moan. He was close to coming. She could tell every muscle in his body was rock hard. She sucked against him as hard as she dared, and he pushed her face down into his cock again, fingers tightly wound in her hair. She gripped him with her mouth, sucking and massaging him with her tongue, and then he exploded with a groan.

The wave of hot seed hit her and she swallowed, gulping each time he shot into her. His orgasm seemed to last forever. Finally his hands released their tight grip on her head, and she slowly pulled away from him. She sat up, looking over his relaxed, spent body lying on her bed. He smiled up at her, his face softer than she'd ever seen it.

"Thank you," he said quietly.

"You're welcome," she answered, blushing hotly. "I'm not quite sure why I did that..."

"Well, I appreciated it a great deal," he said, a touch of humor on his face. "I'm not really worried about the analysis."

She laughed, then cuddled up next to him. He tucked her into the crook of his arm, hugging her to him.

"So what now?" he asked finally. She stilled, unsure of what to tell him. Then she spoke.

"I still don't think you have a place in my life permanently," she said softly. He grew still against her. "I don't need or want a man, Jax. I know you're not like Calvin was, but I still don't plan to open myself up like that again. But we have a deal, and it's pretty silly to pretend that I don't enjoy sharing a bed with you. Let's just enjoy ourselves for the next two and a half weeks. I don't want to think beyond that."

Jax stayed silent for a moment.

"All right," he said finally. "If that's what you want."

"It is," she said firmly. "I don't think I can handle anything more than that."

Chapter Five

"Jax," Mali asked, delicately licking a bit of porridge off her finger. "How long are you going to stay with us?"

Jax and Sarai shot each other a glance across the kitchen table. Sarai started to speak, but to her surprise, Able cut her off.

"He's going to be here another week, and then he's leaving," the boy replied firmly, a hint of satisfaction in his voice. "Isn't that right, Jax?"

"Yes," Sarai said. She met his gaze and held it. "Jax will be leaving in another week. We've had a very good visit with him, but he can't stay forever."

"Why not?" Mali asked, looking at her mother in confusion. "Don't you like it here, Jax? I thought you liked us."

"I do like it here," Jax said, thinking his answer through carefully. "And I would very much like to stay with you. But I don't think your mother is quite ready for that, and I don't want her to be unhappy. Making your mother happy is very important to me."

"But if you leave I'm going to be unhappy," Mali said, lower lip quivering.

"Sweetheart, this is a grown-up thing," Sarai said quietly. "Just because Jax came to visit us doesn't mean he can stay and live with us. He has his own life. He's a soldier, you know. He has to go and fight the empire with his people."

"Soldiers die sometimes," Able said, a smug note in his voice. Mali burst into tears.

"I don't want Jax to die!" she wailed

"I'm not going to die—" Jax said, but he was cut off by Sarai's tight voice.

"Able, go to your room!" Able stomped out, glaring at all of them. Sarai sighed, then got up and moved over to Mali. She picked the little girl up and held her close. "Sweetheart, you don't need to worry about Jax. He's a very good soldier, and nobody is going to hurt him."

"I'm not a soldier anymore," Jax added, reaching over to touch Mali's hand. She twisted in her mother's arms, sliding to the floor and throwing herself into the man's arms. "I decided to quit being a soldier after I met your mother."

Sarai froze.

"What are you talking about?" she asked. He looked back at her, a funny expression on his face. Mali had quieted, watching both of them intently.

"Well, in Saurellia only men who don't have a lifemate are soldiers. I have a lifemate now, Sarai."

"What is that supposed to mean?" Sarai asked. Against her will, hatred boiled up in her for the woman. She'd kill the bitch! "What's a lifemate? Who is she? How long have you had this woman in your life?"

Jax looked startled, then he began to laugh.

"Sarai, you're my lifemate, whether you want to admit it or not," he said finally, smiling broadly at her. "What do you think all this is about? Do you think I just move in with women wherever I go?"

She didn't say anything, having thought just that. He sighed, then set Mali down on the floor.

"Sweetheart, can you run outside to play for a while?" he asked the child. "I need to talk to your mother for a while. Just grown ups."

"All right," Mali said. She headed toward the door, then turned to look at him one more time. "Promise you're not going to be a soldier and die?"

"Promise."

She skipped outside, slamming the door behind her.

"Now what is this all about?" Sarai asked. She looked at him, trying to understand. He leaned forward across the table, and took her hands into his.

"In Saurellia, most men never find a lifemate," he said quietly. "For every woman born, we have at least four or five men. The Goddess only creates one lifemate for each of those women, and they share a unique bond that goes deeper than any other relationship. They can only have children together. Only those men who have a lifemate can inherit property or serve in the local government. Most of us leave by the time we're in our early twenties, because staying there is just too painful."

"Well, that's a stupid system," Sarai said tartly. Jax looked startled, then burst out laughing. He sat back, apparently overcome by some private joke. Finally he gained control, wiping a tear of mirth from one of his eyes. She sat amazed, having never seen him like this.

"Only you, Sarai," he said, shaking his head. "Only you would look through the most sacred traditions of our people and judge them like that."

"Well, it is stupid," she said, feeling self-conscious. "To kick out such a huge part of your population because they don't have a wife. Why don't you just bring more women in?"

"I'm afraid it's not quite that easy," he said, smiling sadly. "You see, it's not like we can just choose any woman as our lifemate. She has to be a Saurellian woman, and she has to be the right one. Otherwise the relationship isn't stable."

Sarai grew quiet, allowing his words to sink in. She hadn't realized until that second that somewhere, deep inside her heart, she had allowed herself to hope things could work out between them. His words cut through her like a knife, severing that hope. It hurt. She kept her face impassive, unwilling to give him the satisfaction of knowing he fooled her. She was about as far from being Saurellian as a woman could be.

"I see," she said casually. "So what happens to all of you who don't have a lifemate?"

"Well," he said. "Most of us become soldiers. During peacetime, we tended to hire ourselves out as mercenaries to different nobles throughout the empire. Of course, now that the Saurellian Federation is at war with the empire, we've all come back. None of us would consider fighting against our own people."

"Wait a second," Sarai asked, holding up a hand. "Seth took Calla away from here claiming they were going to be married on Saurellia. How is that possible? Was the bastard lying to her?"

"Oh, no," Jax said quickly. "You didn't let me finish. Just in the past year or so, we've discovered that more and more Saurellian men are finding lifemates outside of Saurellia. They've discovered that a large group of people within the empire actually have Saurellian DNA. Nobody knows quite why, but it's happening. Perhaps the Goddess has a new plan for us, but that's something for the priestesses to figure out. All I care about is that I've found you. You're my life mate, Sarai."

"How can you say that?" she asked, gaping at him in surprise. "You hardly know me! We only met two weeks ago. That's ridiculous."

"Sarai, a Saurellian man knows his lifemate when he meets her," Jax said, smiling gently. "They don't always know right away, but usually pretty quickly. I knew the instant I saw you. You're mine, Sarai, and I'm yours. The Goddess created us for each other."

"I don't believe that for one second," she said, anger welling up in her. He was lying to her. "I don't know what you're up to, but I don't want to play your twisted little game, Jax. You have no right to just come in here and play with our emotions like this. You saw my daughter—she's afraid that you're going to die because you're a soldier. You can't tell me you plan to just give up your whole life and stay here with us, because I know that's not true."

"Sarai, it is true," Jax said. "You are my lifemate. No Saurellian man would leave his lifemate to serve as a soldier, not unless her life was in danger. And your life is not in danger; you and your family are safe. I'll protect you."

"Okay, suppose what you say is true," Sarai said, thinking desperately. "Why would I be your lifemate? I'm a Pilgrim; we don't mix with people from the empire. How would I have this 'DNA' stuff that you're talking about?"

"Well, everyone has DNA," Jax replied quietly. Sarai blushed, realizing this was probably another piece of common knowledge she'd never learned. Her lack of education was so embarrassing some times...

"But not everyone has Saurellian DNA, right?" she asked quickly, trying to cover her ignorance. "How would I have Saurellian DNA?"

"I have no idea," Jax said. She looked at him, startled. "No one has any idea. As far as we knew, our gene pool had never been mixed. But they've found it in imperial slaves. Why not Pilgrims?"

"None of this makes sense to me," she said finally. "I don't understand all these things you're telling me. But I do understand one thing. You don't have the right to come in here and tell me what to do. I don't have to be your lifemate if I don't want to."

"There's nothing you can do to stop it, Sarai," Jax said. "The Goddess made us for each other. We can't help that. By Saurellian law, we're already married."

"What?" Sarai stood abruptly, sliding the bench back across the floor with a screeching sound. "I'm not married to you! I'm not married to anyone, never again. Being married was the worst thing that ever happened to me. I won't go back to that."

Jax stood too, and leaned his face down close to hers.

"All I meant was that according to Saurellian law, a mated pair is considered married as soon as they first have sex," he said in low tones. "The marriage is usually confirmed at the temple after the birth of their first child."

"Child?" Sarai replied, her voice growing louder. "What the hell are you talking about? I already have two children, there's no way I'm going to have another one. It's all I can do to take care of Mali and Able. I may be ignorant, but I'm not stupid. One of the first things I did after I got away from Calvin was get a birth control implant. I'm not taking any chances, and I don't owe you a damn thing. Like I'm going to go through another pregnancy? I don't think so."

"Why the hell would you do that?" Jax asked harshly. "Do you have any idea how hard it is for a man of my people to find a woman he can mate with? I've been praying to the Goddess this entire time that you were already pregnant. Are you telling me this is just about sex to you?"

"Of course it's just about sex!" she screeched. "We had a deal. You were going to stay three weeks, and then you're leaving. I realized we could have some fun during that time, but nothing more. Do you understand me, Jax? This is *only* about sex. I don't need or want a husband, and I never will. You might as well get used to the idea, because I'm not changing my mind. We have no future together. Nothing. I don't even like you. I just like fucking you."

Jax just looked at her, saying nothing. Then he stood so quickly the bench tipped over behind him as he stomped out of the room. The door slammed behind him, and Sarai sat down heavily. Her heart was racing, and she felt hot. She couldn't believe she'd yelled at him like that. What would Calvin have done to her if she'd raised her voice to him? She couldn't even begin to imagine...

Chapter Six

I don't even like you. I just like fucking you.

Jax took a long pull on his drink, trying not to let the words play themselves over and over in his head. He couldn't believe she'd said that; couldn't believe she meant it. She cared about him. He knew it—it was in every caress she gave him, all the little things she did for him.

If she was just using him for sex, why did she take the time to cook his favorite meals? Why did she wait up for him at night, take him into her arms and hold him even when they didn't *fuck* as she so crudely put it? Just holding her, standing next to her was the most beautiful thing he'd ever experienced in his life. She made him happy, content, for the first time. There was no way he believed what she'd said.

I just like fucking you.

Bitch. She was trying to hurt him; he realized that. And she had done a damn good job of it. What had he done to deserve this kind of treatment? He'd been kind and caring, he adored her children. He would give anything to make her happy, and all she seemed to want to give in return was her body. And even that was on a limited basis. He couldn't kiss her in public; touch her where the children could see them.

She wouldn't even let him move into her room, insisting that he keep his own even though he'd told her to rent it out a hundred times. A clanking noise caught his attention. The bartender, a pretty woman in her early twenties, stood before him, polishing a glass.

"Want another drink, handsome?" she said, giving him a broad smile. Her look was appraising, an open invitation. He squinted at her, trying to focus on her face. But all he could see were her large, impressive breasts. Something was on them, a nametag. Giselle. She gave a throaty laugh and leaned forward on her elbows, giving him a better view. He realized he could have her if he wanted her, and she'd probably be a hell of a lot more open to him than Sarai.

"Sure, I'll take another," he said, smiling at her. But the gesture felt hollow; he wasn't interested in this woman. He'd spent so much of his life chasing after so many women; he'd never dreamed he could be satisfied with just one. But now that he'd met Sarai, the thought of touching anyone else left him cold.

There was no doubt she was his lifemate.

Who was she to deny that? By Saurellian law, he could take her. He could just take her in his ship to Saurellia, and not a man or woman in the entire system would blame him for his actions. She was *his*, and only his. She had no right to turn him away.

He took another drink, warming to the idea. That's what he would do. He'd just take her. He threw down some change on the bar to cover his bill and a little extra for Giselle, and stood unsteadily. His vision blurred, and he wondered for a minute just how long he had been there. He walked slowly and carefully to the door, then opened it.

Someone had turned off the sun.

Wait. No. It was dark outside. He must have been in the bar far longer than he realized. Not that it mattered. He would go collect Sarai and the children and they would go to Saurellia. The people there would explain everything to her, and she'd realize she didn't

have any choice but to stay with him. The thought made him smile, and he started humming a little song as he walked down the street. Everything was going to be fine.

It took him a long time to get home. For some reason he kept turning down the wrong street, and after a while he started getting angry with himself. He had had far too much to drink, he realized. He would have to be careful of that, because Seth had told him that Calvin, Sarai's first husband, had been a drinker. She probably didn't like men who drank.

Calvin.

Now there was a man he'd like to kill, he mused. A part of him almost regretted he was already dead. Sarai had killed him herself, though. To save her children. Seth had been there, and told him all about it. She was such a strong, spunky woman. He loved that about her. She was like a wild feline, willing to do anything to protect her young ones. She might not be a Saurellian woman, but she was definitely as fierce as any daughter of the Goddess. She hadn't given Calvin any mercy when it counted.

An hour later, he arrived at the hostel, and let himself in the side gate. Moving as quietly as he could, he made his way along the side of the building until he reached the little clearing outside Sarai's bedroom. The door was open just a crack to let in the fresh night air, although the light was off. He looked up at the moon, realizing it was quite late. She'd probably been asleep for hours.

He sat on the bench, staring up into the night sky and thinking. Calvin. Damn he hated that man. He had beaten Sarai, terrorized her and the children. He had controlled their every move on that little asteroid mining station. She hadn't seen anyone else for months at a time.

Realization hit him.

If he took Sarai to Saurellia against her will he'd lose any chance of ever winning her love. It was so obvious, he felt like hitting himself in the head. How could he have missed it?

Sarai was afraid to lose her independence, and she was using their sexual relationship to protect her from any kind of emotional dependence on him. As long as it was just sex, her independence wasn't in jeopardy.

He was a dolt, a complete idiot. Pushing her for sex had given her the excuse she needed to keep him distant. With a clenching feeling in his stomach, Jax realized he was going to have to put the sex on hold. He only had one week left, and in the time he was going to have to convince her she wanted him for more than just the physical pleasure he could give her.

He had to convince her to take him as her partner, her equal.

"Shit," he murmured into the darkness. It wasn't going to be easy.

* * * * *

Sarai lay alone in the darkness, wishing desperately that Jax had come home. She couldn't believe she'd said such horrible things to him. Of course, it had worked. He was gone. That was what she wanted. But now she was finding it almost impossible to fall asleep without him, and just kept thinking about the look on his face as she'd screamed at him

He really hadn't done anything to deserve that. He wasn't going to steal her away, Saurellian law or not. She knew it instinctively. He cared about her and the children too much to hurt them like that.

So why are you so afraid of him? She asked herself. *He's not Calvin.*

So maybe not all men were like Calvin. She had come to realize that, started to realize it a long time ago. Before she even met Jax. But she still couldn't quite bring herself to let go of that fear, to put herself into a man's power. It was such a gamble, trusting a man. Was she willing to risk her children's future on Jax? For all his talk of being a life mate, she hardly knew the man.

She rolled over in bed, punching at her pillow and trying to find a cool spot. Jax wasn't with her, and as far she could tell, he wasn't up in his room. She'd been listening. He hadn't taken his things, so she knew he'd be back, at least long enough to pack. She didn't expect him to stick around any longer. Sure, he still had another week of their little "bargain," but now that he knew he wasn't going to get anywhere, he'd be leaving.

Against her will, she sniffed. Her nose was getting stuffed up, she thought in disgust. Her eyes were watering, too. Probably just allergies. One of the bushes outside her window was blooming. She'd have to start sleeping with the door closed. It was a shame, really, because she loved the night air.

She snuffled again, and this time her eyes watered more. She crushed her head down into the pillow and gave in to reality. She missed him already. The thought of him leaving was horrid. Sobs tore through her and she whimpered into the darkness of her room. How was she going to live without him?

Chapter Seven

"Good morning, Sarai," Jax said as he walked into the kitchen. He had a bit of a headache, and the bright light made him want to wince. He wasn't going to show it, though. He already felt stupid about drinking the night before. A lecture was the last thing he needed.

"Good morning, Jax," she replied from her seat at the table, not looking at him. The two children watched them with interest.

"How come you didn't sleep with mommy last night, Jax?" Mali asked brightly. Sarai dropped her spoon with a clatter and Jax coughed.

"What do you mean, sweetheart?" Sarai asked, her voice deceptively soft. Jax could tell the question made her angry.

"We're not stupid, you know," Able said, putting down his own spoon. He looked at them smugly. "Mali and I know all about where Jax has been sleeping. We've been watching you guys. You're caught."

"Well, I won't be sleeping with Sarai any more," Jax said quietly. "Not unless she decides she wants to keep me for good. I love her very much, and I want to marry her."

"Jax—" Sarai tried to say, but Mali cut her off.

"If you marry mommy, will you be our daddy?" she asked, licking her spoon thoughtfully.

"If you'll let me," Jax said, catching Sarai's eyes. She looked livid, but he didn't care.

She'd changed the rules last night. She hadn't been fighting fair, and now he was done fighting fair. He'd do whatever he could to wind his way into her life, whether she liked it or not. He only had a week; there wasn't any time to mess around. If that meant using the children against her, he'd do it.

"I would let you," Mali said with a shy smile.

"Well, I won't," Able said. "You may not be as bad as our father was, but we still don't need you here."

Sarai and Jax both looked at the boy in surprise.

"You think Jax is better than your father was?" Sarai asked quietly. "I didn't realize you were comparing them, Able. They're two very different people, you know. Jax would never do the things your father did."

A wave of warmth swept through Jax. No matter what she said, at least Sarai knew he was better than Calvin.

"I know that," Able said, looking at Jax as if taking his measure. It was the same look he had given him in the garden after he'd attacked him, Jax thought. Clearly, their talk had given the boy something to think about. "But what you need to understand is that you don't need him, Mom. You have me. I'll take care of you and Mali."

"I know that," Sarai said, her face flushing. "You've always done a good job of taking care of me, Able."

"And Mali," Able added.

"And Mali," Sarai repeated softly.

"Mommy, I'm done with my cereal," Mali announced. "I want to go outside now. Did you know that we don't have any lessons today, Jax? We just get to play all day long because our teacher has to go to the spaceport. Are you going to come and play with us?"

"Sure," Jax said lightly. "Why don't we go on a picnic? I'm sure that your mother would like to join us, too."

"I don't think—" Sarai tried to break in, glaring at him, but Mali squealed with delight, cutting her off.

"We're going on a picnic! Can we go swimming? Mommy says we can't go swimming unless we have grownups with us, but Kally's daddy takes us swimming sometimes. Will you take us swimming?"

Even Able perked up at this.

"We have to do what mom tells us," he said loyally, but his desire to go swimming was written all over his face. "Can we, mom?"

"There's a lot of work that needs to be done around here," Sarai said. Jax laughed.

"Sarai, there's nothing that can't wait. You don't have any vacancies right now, and none of the rooms need to be cleaned. They were just done yesterday," he said, trying to tempt her. "You haven't taken a day off since I've been here. It won't kill you to take a little break. You have to do fun things in life, too."

"You realize the children can't really swim, don't you?" Sarai said. Her voice was wavering; he could tell she was close to giving in. "They just paddle around in the shallow water. We'll have to keep a close eye on them."

"I'm a good swimmer," he said, smiling broadly at her. "Maybe I can teach them."

"You can teach me how to swim?" Able asked, his face lighting up. "Kally's daddy has been teaching me, but I still don't know how to do it very well. We don't get to go very often to practice. Mom doesn't know how, so she doesn't like to take us by herself."

"There weren't a lot of places to go swimming on the asteroid where I grew up," Sarai said defensively. She stood and started clearing the table.

"Well, it sounds like I'll just have to teach all of you to swim," Jax replied. The thought was appealing... What would Sarai wear to go swimming? He'd never seen her wearing anything but her long dresses. He watched her stack the dishes speculatively, enjoying the sway of her cute little butt as she moved. What would she feel like all wet and naked against him? It was a pleasant thought, and he could feel himself hardening in response...

"I don't want to swim in the deep water, though," Mali said. "I'm scared of the deep water, Jax."

"You don't have to do anything you don't want to," Sarai said reassuringly, turning back toward her daughter and smiling gently. "We'll just pack a little lunch and go play in the shallow places, all right?"

Yep, she was all his, Jax thought smugly. By the end of the day he'd have her hot and ready for him. Now all he had to do was keep reminding himself why he couldn't sleep with her. Not until she acknowledged that she wanted him for more than sex.

His plan was going to be harder to carry out than he'd expected, Jax realized later that day. He stood in water up to his chest, bracing himself against the current.

Sarai knelt in the shallow water of the riverbed with Mali, helping her build a little fort out of sand and sticks. Her white shift clung to every curve of her body, outlining her nipples enticingly and even giving a hint of shadow at the cleft between her legs. She turned away from him, and leaned forward to pull some more sand over for her daughter. The movement pulled the fabric tight against her heart-shaped ass, and he groaned. Even the cold water of the river wasn't enough to keep his erection down. What had started out as his plan to tempt her was turning into his own personal hell.

"Jax, are you ready?" Able called. Jax turned his attention to the boy, who was standing in water up to his waist. His face was pinched and tight with stress, but he insisted on trying to swim out to Jax by himself.

"I'm ready, Able," Jax said, holding out his arms. "I'll catch you, don't worry."

"All right, I'm coming now!" Able shouted, and then threw himself forward into the slowly moving water. He thrashed his arms and legs desperately, slowly inching his way toward Jax. It took all of Jax's willpower not to lean forward and pull the boy to him, but he knew doing it by himself was important to Able. Then the boy was on him, wiry little arms and legs clingy. He twisted in Jax's arms, shouting in triumph.

"Mom, did you see? I swam all the way out here by myself!"

"Oh, no, I missed it!" Sarai called, turning to look at them. "Can you swim back to shore? I'll be sure to watch this time."

"You can do it," Jax said encouragingly. Able twisted to look back at him, scorn on his face.

"Of course I can," he said. Without warning, he pushed himself free of Jax's arms and

started paddling back toward the shore. Instead of watching the boy this time, though, Jax watched Sarai's face. Her expression was a mixture of concern and pride. She loved her children so much it was almost painful to watch at times. He felt like an intruder on their intimacy. Could he ever really be a part of the family?

Able had reached the shore, and Sarai wrapped him tightly in her arms. Mali jumped up and down, squealing in delight and clapping her hands.

"I can do it, too!" Mali said suddenly. She leapt forward.

Before either he or Sarai had time to react, the little girl flung herself into the water, flailing her arms and legs.

Chapter Eight

Jax leapt forward, unsure if she had any idea how to swim. She paddled her arms and legs furiously, just managing to keep her head above water. Then the slow current started tugging her away from him, and he leaped forward to catch her.

She squealed in delight as his arms came around her, clinging to him. He slipped and fell, instinctively holding her above him as he let himself relax and float to the surface. She seemed completely unconcerned, trusting him with the complete faith that only a small child can have. He bobbed up, leaning backward and cradling her in his arms. Then he kicked back, pushing himself upright and finding his footing on the slippery rocks.

Sarai was still standing in the shallows, her face white. She clutched Able to her, although he squirmed against her hold.

"Mom, let go!" he said sharply, and she shook her head, as if coming out of a dream.

"Jax, thank you so much," she said as he started wading slowly toward her. Mali had grown quiet, laying her head against his shoulder and wrapping her arms around his neck. "Mali, you can never do that again! Don't you realize that if Jax hadn't caught you, you could have been drowned?"

Mali turned her head and looked at Sarai in confusion.

"Mommy, if Jax hadn't been here, I wouldn't have had the guts to do that," she said slowly and clearly, as if Sarai were the child and she was the adult.

"I see," Sarai said. She abruptly turned and waded out of the water. "I think it's time for us to go home."

"Mom!" Mali and Able wailed simultaneously. "That's not fair," Able added.

"We haven't even had lunch yet, mommy," Mali said. "Do we really have to go home?"

Jax could see the tension in Sarai's face. Watching Mali fling herself into the water without warning had terrified her, although she was trying not to show her fear. He waded over to the beach, and walked up to her, still carrying the little girl.

"Sarai, perhaps we could eat before we go home," he said in a gentle voice, trying to sooth her fear. "I'm sure both the children will promise not to go near the water again without your permission."

"I promise," Mali said quickly, and Able nodded in agreement. Sarai sighed, and ran a hand through her hair. It trembled slightly, and Jax averted his eyes.

"You know, you might find the water less frightening if you knew how to swim," he said. "I could teach you, too."

"I don't think so," she said with a sigh. She looked up at him, her face full of strain; seeing her like that made him ache. He had to do something to relieve her pain. Without pausing to think, he stuck his tongue out at her. Able and Mali burst into laughter. Her mouth twitched for a minute, then she turned away and walked over to the basket she'd packed their lunches in. He set Mali down, and the three of them exchanged a wicked look.

When she turned back, Jax and the children were all sticking their tongues out at her. Her mouth twitched again, and on impulse Jax raised his hands, spread out his fingers and wagged them along the sides of his head. She burst out laughing, and then they were all cackling.

They laughed until tears ran down their cheeks, and by the time they stopped the tension seemed to be gone. Mali got the hiccups, and Sarai gave her a drink to help her get over them. Inevitably, it didn't work, and the next time she hiccupped, bright red juice came out her nose and they were all laughing again.

By the time they had finished lunch, a sumptuous picnic Sarai served on a large blanket, Mali's eyes were starting to droop. Able was also looking tired. Exchanging a knowing look with Jax, Sarai said, "Do you want to lay down for a little while, Mali? I can scoot over on the blanket so there's room?"

"No, I'm not tired," Mali said instantly, sitting up. Able gave her a superior look.

"Young children need regular naps," he said, his voice a perfect imitation of Sarai's. His mother laughed softly, and padded the blanket next to her.

"I'll tell you what, Mali," she said. "All of us can lay down for a little bit, and I'll tell a story. If you fall asleep, that's okay, but if you don't we'll go for a walk before heading home. Sound good?"

"I want Jax to tell the story," she said, lying down. Sarai raised a questioning eyebrow at Jax, and he nodded back at her.

"Do you want to hear a story that my mother used to tell me when I was a little boy?" he asked softly. Mali nodded. Sarai lay down next to her, on her side.

"Able, you have to lie down, too, before I start," Jax said. Able flopped back on the blanket, and Jax lowered himself to his stomach next to the boy. He propped himself up on his elbows, and started speaking softly.

"Once upon a time there was a beautiful planet where every season was wonderful in its own way. In the spring, all kinds of new plants would grow, and there were parties to celebrate new life. In the summer, everyone would take the time to enjoy the beautiful weather. They would go swimming every day and eat yummy fruits that were only ripe for a few weeks every year. In autumn, they would harvest all the grains, make piles of leaves to jump in and store up lots of wood to keep warm when it got cold. In the winter they would gather in close next to the warm fire and tell stories at night. During the day they would go sledding and ice-skating. They'd even build giant castles made out of snow and ice, and throw balls of snow at each other. Everyone who lived there was very happy.

"Now, the most amazing thing about this planet is that there were four different kinds of people, and each group had their own king or queen. The winter people had very pale skin, so pale that you could just almost see the light blue veins in their arms. They were ruled by a beautiful queen, who had long, straight black hair and eyes like blue diamonds. Her husband was the king of autumn. Like all of his people, he had dark skin, and beautiful

hair full of orange, red and brown streaks. The summer people were all golden, from their skin to their hair. They were the most fun loving of the groups, hosting fairs and dancing from morning until night."

"Every day?" Mali asked, popping her head up to look at him. Sarai reached an arm out to gently pull her back down, and Jax nodded.

"Yes, every day," he said solemnly. "Now, the last group was the spring people. They were magical, because they could make things grow. They had a beautiful queen who was all green, even her hair. Everywhere she walked, little plants would sprout out of the ground and flowers would grow. She was married to the king of the summer people.

"Now, every year all of the kings and queens would take turns ruling over the people. For three months every year, they would open their palaces and have parties and feasts. It was a wonderful place to live, and everyone was very happy all the time. But then one day, something bad happened."

"What?" Able asked, enthralled.

"Well, you see, every 20 years or so they would pick new kings and queens."

"Why?" Mali asked, her face twisted in confusion.

"Well, I think it's because being a king or queen is probably very tiring," Jax said, trying not to laugh. He'd never considered the question before. "But this time, the winter queen they picked wasn't a nice queen at all. All the people had gotten together for a special party to honor the new kings and queens. Now, that new winter queen didn't want to take turns ruling, she wanted to rule all the time. So she invited all the other kings and queens to a special party, and served them a special kind of cake that she made herself.

"What they didn't realize, until it was too late, was that she had put poison into the cake. All of them died that night, except for the king of summer, who didn't eat any of the cake."

"Mommy's cake is very good," Mali said solemnly. "No one ever dies from eating it. Not ever."

"That's good," Jax replied. "Now, because the winter queen wasn't able to kill the king of summer, she put a spell on him, freezing him deep down inside. You see, she knew that if she froze the summer king, there wouldn't be any more summers until he woke up. Since all the other kings and queens were dead, she declared that from that day on, it would only be winter. All the summer, autumn and spring people had to work for the winter people. It was very hard for them, because it became cold all the time. They were very unhappy, but they didn't know what to do to fix things.

"A thousand years passed under the rule of the evil queen, and it was winter the whole time. They learned how to grow all their food in greenhouses, and everyone was cold except for the winter people. The poor summer people were the coldest, and the evil queen forced them to work for her in the mines. No one had any idea how to get rid of her, and she used her magic against anyone who tried to stop her.

"One day, a group of summer people were working down in the mines and they found a magical cave full of ice crystals. Inside of one of those crystals was a frozen man. They realized it was the summer king, still being held prisoner by the queen's spell. They tried to wake him up, but nothing worked. So they took him back to their camp and called a council, inviting all the spring people and the autumn people to help them try to figure out

what to do.

"When the council opened, all the oldest and wisest people tried to wake the sleeping king. They used spells and blankets to warm him, but he stayed frozen. Everyone was very frustrated, and nobody knew what to do. One morning, a young woman who was there with her family woke up very early to find something very strange had happened in the night. You see, when she had gone to sleep she and her family had been camping on an ice field, but when she got up there was a little patch of grass around their tent."

"Where did it come from?" Mali asked, eyes wide.

"She didn't know," Jax replied. "But right in front of her eyes, it seemed to be getting bigger. She started walking around the camp, and everywhere she went grass started growing. In the grass were little flowers, and she could feel the air getting warmer. It was so exciting that she didn't know what to do. So she kept walking until she got to the biggest tent in the camp, where they had placed the frozen king. She walked right into that tent and right up to the frozen king.

"Now, he was a very handsome man, and she was a very pretty woman. She took one look at him and fell in love. She decided she had to give him a little kiss, so she walked over to him and kissed him right on his lips. They were very cold against her skin, but the longer she kissed him, the warmer they seemed to get.

"Then he started kissing her back, right there. He sat up and wrapped his arms around her."

"This kissing part is getting boring," Able muttered, and Sarai laughed.

"All right, I'll skip the kissing part," Jax replied, grinning. "They heard a loud noise outside the tent, so they stood up and walked out holding hands. All around them the people were cheering and running around. There were flowers everywhere, and the all the snow was gone in the camp. They could hear birds singing and then everyone was dancing, because they knew the evil queen's spell had been broken. The king of summer was awake, and with him was a new queen of spring."

"Didn't the queen try to stop them?" Able asked, his voice skeptical. Mali nodded her head against the blanket, sucking her thumb.

"Yes, she did," Jax continued. "As they started marching toward her palace, all the snow was melting and she knew she was in big trouble. But no matter what she did, her magic wasn't as strong as the new king and queen. They got closer and closer to her, and as the air got warmer something horrible happened to the evil queen. She started getting very old, very fast. All her magic was failing her, and she aged a thousand years right then and there, drying up and turning into dust. Then all the dust blew away, and her whole palace fell down into rubble.

"The king and queen returned to the old ways, and a new king of fall and queen of winter were selected. Just like before, they each ruled for three months of the year, and everyone lived happily ever after."

"That was a good story," Mali murmured sleepily. Sarai smiled at Jax from across the blanket, and reached out a hand to run her fingers over Able's hair. The little boy was still awake, but he didn't seem inclined to move. She lifted a finger to her lips, and Jax nodded in understanding. If they just stayed quiet for a while, both children would drift off to sleep.

Jax closed his eyes, listening to the children's soft breathing and thinking about Mali's

plunge into the river. He could understand Sarai's fear. What if he hadn't been able to catch her? She hadn't given him any warning.

He rolled on to his back, flinging one arm across his eyes. The warm sun was making him sleepy, too. Despite the almost constant ache in his loins, he was happy. Just being with her, with her children, brought so much peace into his life. A soft, rustling noise caught his attention. She must have rolled over, too. A twinge of longing wound its way through him. If she were lying beside him, he'd tuck her against his side and bury his face in her hair. It always smelled so wonderful.

They would lay there, watching the children sleep and perhaps even snoozing themselves. Or perhaps they would get up quietly and sneak down to the riverbank, he mused. They would slip out of their clothes, and slide into the cool water in each other's arms. He would let himself float back into the current, and pulled her lissome body across his. She'd cling to him, her legs tangling with his and they would come together for a kiss.

He could imagine the slippery feel of her skin, how her hair would float out behind her in the water, drifting downstream. Then he would wrap both arms around her, pulling her tight against his body. She would slide her legs around his waist. His hard length would be pressed tightly between them, and he'd kiss her again...

He had grown hard thinking about it. Moving quietly, he rolled back on to his stomach on the blanket to hide the evidence of his arousal, and stole a peek at Sarai and the children. All three were sleeping peacefully.

Closing his eyes again, he allowed himself to drift back into the fantasy.

She would clutch his body to hers, laughing softly, and then he'd slide his hard length into her body. They would rock against each other slowly in the water, letting their bodies become one and enjoying the closeness of their touch. He would make only the barest of movements at first, content to revel in the feel of her snug warmth. Then they'd start to move more quickly, squirming against each other urgently. He'd thrust into her harder, their mouths would meet. Their lovemaking would become wild, building to a climax that was as inevitable as it was powerful.

Jax squirmed against the blanket, trying to find a more comfortable position. His cock was like stone. He took several deep breaths, trying to calm himself down. He hadn't intended to allow himself to become aroused this way, but the thought of touching Sarai, making love to her in the water was too much. Staying away from her had turned out to be much harder than he'd dreamed possible, and he hadn't gone into it expecting it to be easy.

Another soft noise caught his attention. She was getting up. Both children were still breathing deeply, but she had stood up. Then he heard the soft padding of her feet as she walked away. Where was she going?

Jax opened his eyes, and silently propped himself up on his elbow. He craned his head around, and saw her graceful form walking back toward the riverbank. She was still wearing her white shift, but it was dry now, and it drifting around her body in a manner that was almost surreal. She looked more forest spirit than woman. The image was broken, though, when one corner caught on a branch. She tugged at it, and the worn fabric ripped. A look of disgust came across her face.

For the first time, Jax realized he'd never seen her wearing more than three or four sets of clothing. Was that all she could afford? The children were always well dressed...He'd

assumed that she was doing all right, but he didn't know for sure. He'd have to look into that, he realized. Making a mental note of it, he turned his attention back to Sarai.

Free of the branch, she walked to the river's edge and sat down. He could hardly see her now. He stood quietly, taking care not to wake the children, and reached over to tab on a motion sensor in his pack. If anything larger than a bird came close to Able and Mali as they slept, he and Sarai would know. Then he started walking toward her. She turned to look at him as he approached, and then a smile so lovely it took his breath away came across her face.

"Jax," she said softly. "Come sit by me."

He lowered himself to the beach, stretching his legs out before him. The water lapped at his toes, cool and fresh. She leaned over and kissed his bare shoulder.

"Jax, this is silly," she said. "I'm so sorry for what I said to you. I can't think of anything but how much I miss touching you. Why do we have to do this?"

Her words twisted through him, sweet seduction. He was rock hard for her, filled with a heavy ache of need that had become his constant companion. How easy would it be to simply roll her under him, take her there on the sand? She wanted him; he wanted her. They were both adults. It should be so simple.

"No," he said, pushing down the treacherous thought. "I want more than sex, Sarai. Don't mistake me, I want sex, too. But I want to be a part of your life, and I want to be a father to the children. Hell, I want to have more children with you. I'm not willing to settle for less than that."

She stared into the water for a moment, moisture welling in her eyes. She gave her face an impatient swipe.

"Jax, you know what happened to my first husband, don't you?"

"Yes," Jax said. "Seth told me, and he told me why, too. You killed him in self-defense. You did it to save your children, and you did the right thing, Sarai. I only wish I could have killed him for you."

"But you don't know the whole story, Jax," she said softly. "I enjoyed killing him. I'll never forget the incredible rush that killing him gave me. I felt so free, so powerful! It was disgusting and exhilarating all at once, and I made myself a promise. I decided I'd never let myself get into a situation where a man controlled me again. I never want to face another choice like that."

A wave of compassion swept through him, and he pulled her into his arms. She was crying in earnest now. He pressed her head against his shoulder, and she started sobbing.

She cried for a long time, and he simply held her, marveling at her strength. Despite everything she'd gone through, she still managed to hold herself and her life together. Eventually her sobs quieted down, and she rested against him. He spoke.

"I've told you that on Saurellia only one in five children are female," he said. "We have a legend about that...according to legend, when the Goddess created the world, she made men and women equally strong. But within the first few generations, she discovered that even though men and women had the same strength, the women's lives were so much harder that it wasn't fair. Not only that, society started falling apart. There were wars and famine. Children starved in the streets, and it was an abomination before the Goddess.

"So she started making fewer women, but making them stronger," he continued. "Now

there are more men than women, but our women are so strong that they hold our society together. Any Saurellian man lucky enough to be found worthy to be mated to one of those women is blessed a thousand times by the Goddess. Their relationship can be more wonderful than anything in the imagination, but it will never be unequal. There isn't a Saurellian man alive who can control his lifemate. Our society is matriarchal."

She looked up at him, blinking her eyes.

"What does that have to do with us? I'm not Saurellian, Jax. I'm not that strong."

"Sarai, you are that strong," he whispered, lifting his hand and wiping away one of her tears with his thumb. "Don't you understand? You may not have been born a Saurellian, but you are definitely a daughter of the Goddess. I don't want to control you. I want to be your lifemate, your partner. What makes you happy makes me happy. We belong together, and what Calvin did to you has nothing to do with us. He's dead. He can't hurt you, and I won't. You're safe now. You've made it."

She sniffed, and smiled at him tremulously.

"I did, didn't I?" she whispered. "Jax, I don't feel very strong. I don't know this Goddess of yours very well, but I could use some of that strength you talk about."

"It's there, Sarai," he said. Unable to help himself, he leaned his head down and kissed her softly on the lips. Her head fell back and her eyes closed, then she was opening to him. He deepened the kiss, exploring her depths and trying to control himself. He wanted her so badly he thought he might explode, but somehow he managed to keep himself from simply rolling her over and taking her. Finally, shaking from the effort, he pulled away.

"Sarai, will you be my lifemate?" he asked softly, searching her face. She froze for a minute, as if waging some battle within herself, then she spoke.

"I'll be your mate, but on my terms. I don't promise to do as you tell me, and if I ever feel like I need to leave you, I will."

"That's good enough for me," he said, smiling. She looked up at him in surprise.

"So I can leave you any time I want?" she asked.

"If I'm doing my job as a lifemate, you won't want to leave me," he replied quietly. She sniffed, then gave him a coy smile.

"Well, then I guess you'd better keep me happy," she said tartly.

"That's my girl," he said, abruptly rolling her over into the sand and covering her with his body. She was trapped beneath, a startled look on her face. He kissed her, and her arms came around him. She pulled him close, kissing him back. Then her legs were wrapped around his body, and she was writhing against him. He groaned, pressing his cock against her softness.

"It's been too long," he muttered, pulling his head back. She laughed up at him.

"Silly, it's been less than a day," she replied.

"Too long," he repeated, covering her again. He thought he was going to explode from the exquisite pressure of her body pressing up against his. Her hips moved rhythmically, and he groaned. He had to get inside her. If he didn't, he was going to die.

Her other leg came up, and they both clutched his waist. The soft opening between her legs cradled him, and without thinking he thrust against her. But his briefs and her shift blocked his motion, and he groaned in frustration.

"I hate this damn thing," he said, raising his body and pulling her shift up. "Sarai, I'm getting you all new clothing. I never want to see this thing again. It's caused me too much frustration over the past weeks."

She laughed up at him, then reached down to work on his briefs.

"And what about these?" she asked archly. "They seem to be in my way right now. Do I get to throw them away, too?"

"Yes," Jax replied with a grin. "I'll never wear clothing again. We'll just live naked in your bed, happily ever after."

Then her shift was up around her waist, and his briefs were down around his knees. With a sigh, he reached down to position himself against her. She wrapped her arms around his neck again, pulling him down into her softness. The feel of her hot, moist flesh closing around him was almost more than he could take, and after his initial thrust he stopped for a moment. He rested his forehead against hers, breathing deeply and trying to control himself.

She squirmed against him, kneading him with her inner muscles and pulling him down into her body with her legs. He kissed her, then started moving slowly.

Neither spoke as he thrust into her, his strokes hard and steady. There was a purpose, a tension in their mating that he had never felt before. Almost as if the Goddess herself was there, blessing their union. Even if Sarai wasn't ready to fully admit what was happening between them, he knew they would never be separate again. No matter how far they might be physically, they would always share this connection.

Lifemate.

He kissed her again, deeply. He wanted to mark her as his, make her realize that she would never feel another man's lips again, that his body would be hers for the rest of his life. He thrust harder, and she moaned into his mouth. He took the sound deep within, reveling in it.

Her legs gripped him tightly, and he could feel her body stiffening as she approached her climax. He was close to coming himself, but held back. When they went, they would go together. He wanted to feel her exploding around his cock, to shoot his seed into her body and claim her.

Her nails were digging into his back now, scraping against him and leaving trails of fire in their wake. The slight pain helped him focus. Down, back. Again. Harder. He twisted his hips, deliberately scraping the length of his arousal against her most sensitive spot. She convulsed in response, and he grunted with satisfaction. She needed him every bit as much as he needed her.

He started moving faster, close to the end of his strength. It was time to push her over the edge. He thrust deeper, harder, again and again. She whimpered, and every muscle in her body stiffened. Her face was twisted with the intensity of her feelings, and she whimpered.

Then she exploded around him, clenching him hard inside and out. He stifled her moaning noises with his mouth, taking them inside and allowing her pleasure to wash through his body. Then he slammed down hard into her and exploded himself, pinning her against the sand with his hard cock and emptying his seed into her body. As the joy and release of his orgasm swept through him, he marveled at the gift he'd been given. This

woman was his, and she would be for the rest of his life. He collapsed beside her, and together they gasped for breath.

After what seemed like hours, she stirred against him.

"We should get up before the children see us," she whispered. "But don't think you're getting away from me. We'll continue this tonight, after they go to bed."

"I think they should go to be early," he said, deadpan. She nodded sagely.

"I agree," she replied. "It's been a long day for them. They need their sleep."

* * * * *

Sarai felt light and happy as she they walked back toward town. Able and Mali walked between them, Mali hanging on Jax's hand and giggling. She talked the entire way home, and more than once Able rolled his eyes in disgust.

"She talks too much, Mom," he said for the fourth time. Sarai laughed in response, unable to get upset. She started to reply, but before she could a flash of bright, white light blinded them.

Jax dove, pushing all her and the children into the ditch, covering them with his body. Then sound roared around them, and a terrible wind rose. Sarai wrapped her arms around the children, desperately confused. She could feel herself screaming, but couldn't hear anything. Her ears were ringing, and in an instant she wondered if the world was ending.

Then something hit her head and everything stopped abruptly.

Chapter Nine

She came awake slowly.

The air smelled funny, sterile. She opened her eyes, but she couldn't see anything. She took a deep breath, trying not to panic. What had happened? They had been walking home from the river; how did she get here, and what was wrong with her eyes?

"Please lay still," a smooth female voice said. "You have been injured, and are currently lying in a healing cocoon. If you lay still, I will free you."

"Who are you?" she whispered, her throat dry.

"I am the ship's medical unit," the voice replied in calm tones. "You have been injured, but you are now healed."

"I can't see," she whispered. "And I can't move my arms. Am I blind?"

"No, there are med patches covering your eyes," the voice said. "I am now giving you a sedative. Your heart rate is rising in response to the conditions in which you find yourself, making it difficult for me to extricate you from the healing cocoon. Sleep well."

* * * * *

She woke again, but when she opened her eyes this time she could see. The dim light hurt her eyes. She was lying on a cupped, cushioned bed against the wall. Above her was a canopy, covered in blinking lights.

"You are now free to get up and move around the ship," the disembodied voice said.

"Please exercise caution, as your muscles may be slightly stiff from inactivity."

"Where am I?" she asked, leaning up experimentally. Her arms felt strange, weak.

"You are on board the *Serendipity*," the voice said. "The *Serendipity* is a class four cruiser. Our current destination world is Saurellia."

"How did I get here?"

"That information is not contained within my database."

"Where is Jax?" she asked, her voice rising. Panic threatened her again. "Where are my children?"

"That information is not contained within my database."

"You're not much help, are you?" she muttered, then stood. The healing unit wisely remained silent. She clutched the wall for balance, feeling slightly dizzy. Then she realized she was completely naked. She shook her head, trying to think. Everything seemed fuzzy and confusing.

"Is there any clothing in here?" she asked.

"Clothing is located in the cabinet to your left," the voice said.

Moving carefully, Sarai opened the cabinet and pulled out a loose, lightweight shirt and pants that tied at her waist with a drawstring. Then she walked slowly and deliberately to the door. Time to find Jax and the children.

It slid open and she stepped out into a corridor. There were several doors along on either side, and she opened each. All she found were empty bunks. The effort was exhausting, but she kept moving down the corridor. The ship was clearly a small one; they couldn't that be far away.

The corridor opened into a largish room, one that reminded her of the main living area in Seth's ship. The lights were dim here, too, and across the room was a couch, which had been converted into a bed. Sprawled across it was Jax, one child cuddled in each arm. She gave a sigh of relief, and almost collapsed. She was exhausted, and she knew where her children were. She could rest again.

She dropped slowly to her knees, then stretched out on the floor. A small part of her mind whispered that she'd be more comfortable if she could make it to the couch, but that was too much work. She drifted out of consciousness, secure in the knowledge that the children were safe. It was enough.

* * * * *

"Mommy," a small hand was shaking her, and Mali's voice rang urgently in her ear. "Mommy, wake up! Jax! I think Mommy's dead!"

She opened her eyes, meeting Mali's gaze and trying to smile at her.

"I'm all right, sweetie," she said. Mali burst into tears.

"I thought you were dead again, Mommy!"

Again? Sarai wondered.

Then Jax was there, lifting her into his arms. She could hear Able's voice in the background, shrilly telling his sister to be quiet.

"What happened?" she whispered, looking up into his face. He was smiling down at

her, his expression filled with love and exhaustion.

"Hector Prime was attacked by imperial troops, Sarai," he said, laying her down on the couch with gentle care. Mali bounded up beside her, burrowing against her side. Sarai clutched the child to her, and looked for Able. He stood off to one side, watching her with concern written all over his face. She gestured to him to join Mali, and his face crumpled in tears as he crawled up beside her.

"Oh, Mom, I was so scared," he whispered. "Jax saved us. We thought you were dead, but you weren't. It was really bad, Mom."

She looked back up at Jax, questions in her eyes. He shook his head, then sat down heavily on the couch beside Able.

"The main blast hit the spaceport as we were walking back from our picnic, he said quietly. "Then they started hitting the smaller towns."

"Why?" she whispered, face filled with confusion. "Hector Prime was neutral, and half the people there were imperial citizens. Students!"

"I don't know," he replied, his voice filled with sorrow. "I suspect we'll be able to find out when we reach Saurellia, but I have no idea why they would do such a thing."

"How did we get here?" she asked, looking around the ship's cabin. "How many survivors are there?"

He didn't meet her eyes, and the true horror of what had happened washed over her.

"We can't be the only survivors," she whispered, eyes filling with tears. She thought of the students who had lived with her these past months, and little Kally from down the street. How could they all be dead?

"We're the only ones I know of," he replied, his voice soft. "I scanned for living humans as soon I got you and the children in the ship, but we were attacked by an imperial patrol ship. I had to get us out of there while I still could."

"Wait," she asked, shaking her head. "Wait a minute. How did we get on this ship? Where did it come from?"

"I called it down out of orbit," Jax said, reaching over to touch her face with one finger. "It's pretty standard among my people to keep an escape ship in orbit when you're traveling with family."

"Traveling with family?"

"Well, if you're anywhere other than Saurellia," he replied. "As soon as I realized you were my lifemate, I made arrangements for us to evacuate if we needed to. I did it the day I went into the spaceport."

She jerked away from him, and Mali squawked in protest.

"You knew something like this could happen, and you didn't warn anyone?"

"No, of course not," he replied, looking startled. "It's just a backup. I had no idea this would happen. If I had even dreamt Hector Prime was a target, I would have taken you away weeks ago. I was just being cautious. It's just dumb luck that we survived, you know. I couldn't even fly the ship close enough to see what happened to the hostel. Too much smoke and radiation."

"Mom, if Jax hadn't been there we'd all be dead right now," Able said quietly, breaking in to the conversation. His face was pinched with concern, and she hugged him close. "And

he's been taking real good care of me and Mali while you were sick."

"I realize that, sweetheart," she replied. For once, he didn't protest the endearment. "I was just startled, that's all. Thank you, Jax. Thank you so much for saving me and the children."

"You're welcome," he replied with a smile. "We thought we might lose you for a while. You got hit in the head. Fortunately, the *Serendipity* has a pretty high-end medical unit. Otherwise I doubt you'd still be here."

"We thought you were dead, Mommy," Mali whispered.

"Well, I'm not," she replied, squeezing the little girl tightly.

"I know," Mali replied. "Jax took good care of you."

"Yes, he did," she said softly, looking into his eyes. His face was worn, but his eyes were filled with love for her and the children. Realization hit her, and she knew he had been right all along. They were lifemates. Love welled up inside of her. She blinked back tears, unable to speak. He seemed to understand, though, and leaned toward her, kissing her deeply over the children's heads. She closed her eyes, drinking in the sensation of his touch. Despite the horror they had just escaped, life was very good indeed.

Chapter Ten

Saurellia, Three Months Later

She could get used to this, Sarai thought as she lay back in the grass, cradled in Jax's arms. He had arranged for the children to stay with Calla for the day, insisting that he wanted to show her the sights of his boyhood home alone. It had been an excellent idea, she thought with satisfaction.

Once again they were lying on a picnic blanket, only this time they were naked. Jax was asleep beside her, warmed by the sun and the bottle of wine they'd shared over lunch. Perhaps the fact that they'd made love twice had something to do with it, too, she thought wryly. The man was strong, but even he needed a break at times. Of course, getting him to that point was very pleasant.

She leaned up, studying him. There were new lines on his face, the legacy of their disastrous escape from Hector Prime. He'd tried to find out what had happened there, but Saurellian intelligence hadn't been able to tell him. Apparently they were still trying to figure out what had gone wrong...

She still couldn't quite believe everyone she'd known there was gone. For the second time in her life, she'd lost everything. It didn't get easier with practice, she mused. Then she shook her head, trying to clear her sadness. This wasn't a day for regrets. Instead, she focused her attention back on Jax.

He was so handsome. She could hardly believe this strong, kind man was hers. And he hadn't pressured her to do anything, hadn't even asked her to remove her birth control implant. She would, though. She wanted a child with him, a little boy who would grow up to be strong and true like his father. Or perhaps another daughter. He was wonderful with Mali, wonderful with both the children. She couldn't have found a better father for them.

She trailed her fingers down his bare chest, enjoying the feel of the wiry hairs that covered him. He was waking up, she could tell by the way he tensed under her touch. Then

he spoke, his voice a low rumble.

"Just can't quite get enough, can you?" he asked, and she grinned at him.

"Never," she said. She swung her bare leg across his body, rolling on top of him. She wiggled her pelvis experimentally, and his body hardened in response. His hands came down to her hips, pulling her tightly against him.

"That's nice," he said, closing his eyes in pleasure. "Sarai, you feel so good."

She giggled, and squirmed against him.

"So, what should we do now?" she asked, kissing him along his jaw line. His hands tightened in her flesh. He was much harder now, and his hips twitched beneath her.

"I think we should fuck," he said bluntly, and she burst out laughing. He was nothing if not predictable. "Unless you had other plans?" He thrust up at her, and she sighed in satisfaction. She loved the feel of him under her.

Instead of answering, she placed both hands flat on his chest and sat up, still straddling his body with her own. She could feel her nipples tightening in anticipation, and a growing wetness between her legs. His cock was like a pillar of steel between them, and she took pleasure in slipping it back and forth along her vulva and clit. Just the anticipation of that hard length inside her body was enough to drive her crazy.

He reached up to grasp her breasts in his strong hands, massaging them and playing with the nipples. A string of sensation wound its way down through her body from them to that sensitive place between her legs, and she threw her head back and sighed. Then she raised her hips, and reached down with one hand to position his hungry cock. This was going to feel good...

As she sat down on him, taking his length into her body, she could hardly breath. He filled her so tightly. Even after spending months with him she gasped a little as his penis came into her completely. She stilled, allowing herself to get used to his presence. She looked down at him, then slowly leaned over to kiss him. She plunged hungrily into his mouth with her tongue, taking as much as he would give her. For the thousandth time, she marveled at her good fortune. How had she found a man such as this?

She began to move slowly, raising her hips and then sliding them slowly back down over his massive erection. She mimicked each motion with her tongue; enjoying the feeling of power it gave her. She was so free with him; nothing she did threatened his masculinity. She truly was his equal, and she loved it.

She raised her head, braced her hands against his chest and started moving faster. She shook out her hair and laughed as his hands clenched her hips, trying to pull her down against him more tightly. She stopped moving for a second, just to tease him, and he bucked his hips up at her.

"Sarai, you're going to kill me if you don't start moving again," he gasped. With a grin, she started moving, deliberately keeping each stroke slow and steady, twisting as she came down and grinding her clit against his body. It was fantastic. His fingers dug into her, but she didn't care. She was going to take this at her own pace.

But all too soon that pace wasn't fast enough. She moved more quickly, riding him as sensation built up in her body. She was starting to sweat now, and she could feel her heart racing as she moved faster and faster. The feel of him beneath her was incredible. How had she ever thought she could resist this man's touch? They had been created for each other;

being with him made her complete.

He had closed his eyes and his head was thrown back as he strained beneath her. She could tell he was getting close to his orgasm; she was, too. Just a little bit longer now, a little harder and she would hit it. She slid up and down his cock as quickly as she could make her body move, breasts bobbing with every motion. Her breathing was harsh and fast, and the tension in her was so tight it was a challenge to control her movements. Just a little more and she would have it. Down. Again. Harder.

Then it washed over her with the force of a storm. She ground her clit against him, screaming out her orgasm. Every muscle in her body clenched, and she could feel his seed spurting within her as he came, too. He cried out, and she collapsed against his body, panting. They lay in silence for several moments, then he spoke.

"Sarai, that was pretty good," he murmured. She swatted at him playfully.

"That was more than good, and you know it!" she said with a laugh. He laughed back at her, then pulled her close for a kiss.

"Yes, it was," he replied. "But it's still not everything. I have this fantasy about you..."

"Oh really, and what would that be?" she asked archly.

"Let me show you," he replied. He rolled her off him abruptly, and pulled her to her feet. Then he took her hand and started running. She stumbled after him, laughing but confused.

"What are you doing? You're crazy!"

"Just wait and see," he replied.

Within minutes they reached a shallow river, crystal clear water running over rounded stones.

"This way," he said, slowing to a walk. He took her along a little dirt path through the brush along the riverbank, until it opened into a wide sandbar. To one side was the river. A line of stones had been placed across it, creating a swimming hole.

"My brothers and I built this when we were kids," he said, pointing out toward it. "We used to swim here all summer long. My sister's children do the same thing. They've kept it in good shape even after all these years. Come swimming with me, Sarai."

She stilled, looking up into his face.

"Jax, you know I can't swim," she said, her voice serious.

"It isn't deep here, Sarai," he replied in a reassuring voice. "Only about four feet at the deepest spot. The water's slow, and I'll be with you."

"If I drown, I'm coming back to haunt you," she said darkly, but she followed him down to the water. He wouldn't let anything happen to her. They waded into the cool water holding hands, then he let go, falling backward and swimming away from her. Within seconds he had reached the center of the pool, and stood up.

"See, you'll be able to touch out here," he said encouragingly. She nodded, and started toward him. The rocks were slippery and rounded, hard to walk on, and she stumbled. The cold water closed over her head, but before she could panic he was there, pulling her up against his body.

"I've got you," he whispered into her ear. Then he kissed her, running his hands down along her back. She wiggled against him, arms wrapped around his neck. The water gave

her a kind of buoyancy that was new and different. For the first time she realized swimming might be fun.

"I like this," she said, pulling her head away from his. She lifted her legs, effortlessly wrapping them around his waist. Despite the cold water, he was hard for her. Her face twisted in amusement. "Does that thing ever get tired?"

"No," Jax said smugly. "Not when you're around."

Pleased with his answer, she wiggled against him, and he groaned.

"You're trying to kill me, aren't you?" he gasped.

"Nope, just reminding you who's in charge," she replied pertly.

"We'll see who's in charge."

With that, he started striding through the water, carrying her with him as she squealed in protest. Then he was setting her up on a large, smooth rock that almost, but not quite, reached the surface of the water. He pinned her there with his body, legs firmly thrust between hers.

"Now you're at my mercy," he said. He kissed her again, taking her mouth savagely until she could hardly breathe. At the same time, he reached down between them, fingering her aching clit as sensation wound its way through her. She wanted him again—she could never have enough of him. Finally, they pulled away from the kiss, gasping for breath.

"Now that I'm at your mercy," she whispered, squirming against his fingers, "What are you going to do with me?"

"This," he replied, voice tight with tension. The smooth, round head of his penis replaced his fingers, then he was pushing into her with aching slowness. Both of his hands wrapped around her waist, and she leaned back as his mouth came down on her breasts. He kissed her, then pulled one nipple into his warm mouth, sucking in time with the slow, steady movements of his hips. It was exquisite.

But it wasn't enough.

She twisted against him, trying to make him move faster. She wanted to feel his entire length come into her hard, filling her until she couldn't breathe any longer.

"All good things come to those who wait," he said piously, lifting his head to smirk at her.

"To hell with that," she replied. "I don't want to wait anymore. I want you now, Jax."

He grinned fiercely at her, then pulled back and thrust into her with a force that made her gasp. He moved quickly, slamming her back against the rock with every stroke. A part of her realized she'd probably be left with bruises, but she didn't care. All that mattered was the feeling of him pounding into her body.

Each motion brought her a little closer, and the familiar spiral of sensation started closing around her. She clutched him to her with her arms, and tried to wrap her legs around his waist. But the water made everything slippery and she couldn't keep hold of him. Then the sensations built again, and she no longer cared. She went limp in his arms, allowing him to take her as he chose.

The cold water swirled around them, but she hardly noticed its cool kiss on her skin. All she could think about was the tension building in her body. It was urgent, compelling. She had to fix it, to climb over it, to get relief. Otherwise it would crush her.

He angled her hips down slightly, and then his cock was rubbing along her clit in a whole new way. Each stroke pushed her higher, and she could feel her muscles tightening. His erection scraped against her clit again and again, plunging in to hit bottom with every stroke, and her hips started twitching. The sensation was so intense it was painful, but she couldn't allow him to stop. She needed this; she needed him.

"Jax," she gasped, then flew apart in climax, unable to control herself any longer. She broke into a thousand pieces, and sagged against him. He kept moving a moment longer, then joined her. She could feel his hot seed pumping into her body, and for a moment she fantasized about what it would feel like to carry his child.

With any luck, she'd find out before too long.

"I love you," he gasped against her shoulder, and she squeezed him tightly.

"I love you, too," she replied.

They stayed there for several minutes, until the coldness of the water started seeping into her. Startled, she realized she was shivering, and Jax was covered with goose bumps.

"I think we should get out of the water," she said. With a smile, he swung her up in his arms and strode toward the bank.

* * * * *

"All you have to do is sign right here," the beautiful lady told Mali, pointing to a black line on the paper. She looked up at her mother, who smiled encouragingly. Able snorted in disgust. Once again, Mali just couldn't seem to figure out what to do, despite the fact that he'd been practicing with her for days. He looked up at Jax, hoping he wasn't too upset by the delay. The last thing they needed was for him to change his mind now.

Jax just gave him a wink and smiled. Able sighed. If Jax wasn't upset, then things weren't too bad. It would be all right. Mali was now slowly and painfully writing her name, copying the letters that mom had written out for her. Bored, he looked around, trying to remember everyone's names. Jax's whole family was there, along with Aunt Calla. Seth was there too. Able had never liked Seth, but he sure seemed to make Aunt Calla happy. They were even going to have a baby, although Able couldn't understand why. All Mali had ever done as a baby was poop and cry. *Boring.*

The beautiful lady was clapping her hands to catch everyone's attention. Mali was done signing the paper, finally. The lady spoke.

"As Priestess of this temple, I now solemnly declare before the Goddess and these people assembled here that Jax Falconer has asked for and been given legal and spiritual parenthood over these children, Able and Mali. From this day forward, they will be known publicly as Able and Mali Falconer, of the House of Falconer. They will share equally in the rights, privileges and responsibilities of that House, along with their father. Let the Goddess' will be unquestioned."

Everyone started cheering and clapping. Mom was even crying. Then Jax kneeled down, and held out his hand for a solemn handshake. Able responded, trying to keep his grip firm and manly.

"I am so honored to have you for my son," Jax said quietly. "Thank you, Able, for accepting me."

"I'm just doing it for mom and Mali," Able said gruffly. His eyes felt all weird and watery, and his nose was starting to run. For one horrible minute he thought he might start crying. But before that could happen, Jax nodded knowingly.

"I know that," he replied. "You and I have the same job, taking care of them. Good thing we know how to work together."

"Yup," Able said thankfully. He and Jax were the men of the family now. It *was* a good thing they could work together. Mali was flinging herself into Jax's arms, and then mom was kneeling beside him, hugging him close. It felt pretty good, Able thought. He liked being a family.

Jax set Mali down, and she tugged on Able's sleeve.

"It wasn't a stupid wish, you know," she said smugly. He looked down at her blankly.

"What are you talking about?" he asked in confusion, looking around to see if anyone had heard her. No one seemed to have noticed.

"To wish that we had a daddy," Mali said, rolling her eyes impatiently. "Remember, I wished that we had a daddy, and now we have one. What do you think I should wish for next?"

"You just got lucky," Able snorted. "Wishes aren't real."

"Really?" Mali said. "Well, then I'm going to make another wish, just to prove that you're wrong. I wish that you'll meet a girl and fall in love and get all silly. Then you won't be able to make fun of me any more. I'll make fun of you!"

"Mali, that's just stupid," he said.

"We'll see," Mali said smugly. She turned away from him as Aunt Calla swept her up in a hug. Silly girl.

"Able, I want you to come and meet your new cousins," Jax said, pulling him through the crowd. After several moments they broke through the mass of people, and came face to face with a group of five children. They eyed him curiously. They all shared similar features, dark black hair, bright green eyes.

"These are my sister's children," Jax said. "Devon, Julian, Marcus, Luke and Anita, the baby of the family. We call her Nini."

Nini stepped forward, and Able's jaw dropped. She was the prettiest little girl he'd ever seen in his life, and he had the sudden urge to reach forward and pull one of her long, black braids. The largest of the boys, Julian, seemed to read his mind. He stepped forward protectively.

"You can play with us if you like," he said. "But you have to be nice to Nini, or we'll get you."

"You have to be nice to my sister, too," Able said, bristling. Nini laughed, breaking the tension. She stepped forward, put both hands on Able's shoulders and stood on her tiptoes, giving him a quick kiss on the cheek.

"I like you, Able," she said brightly. "We're going to have a lot of fun together."

He couldn't help himself. He didn't think at all, he just reached up and pulled one of those braids as hard as he could. She screeched in protest, and he took off running, dodging through the crowd. All four of those boys would be on him in seconds, and he was pretty sure he was gonna die.

It had been worth it, though. That Nini was pretty cute...

-The End-
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