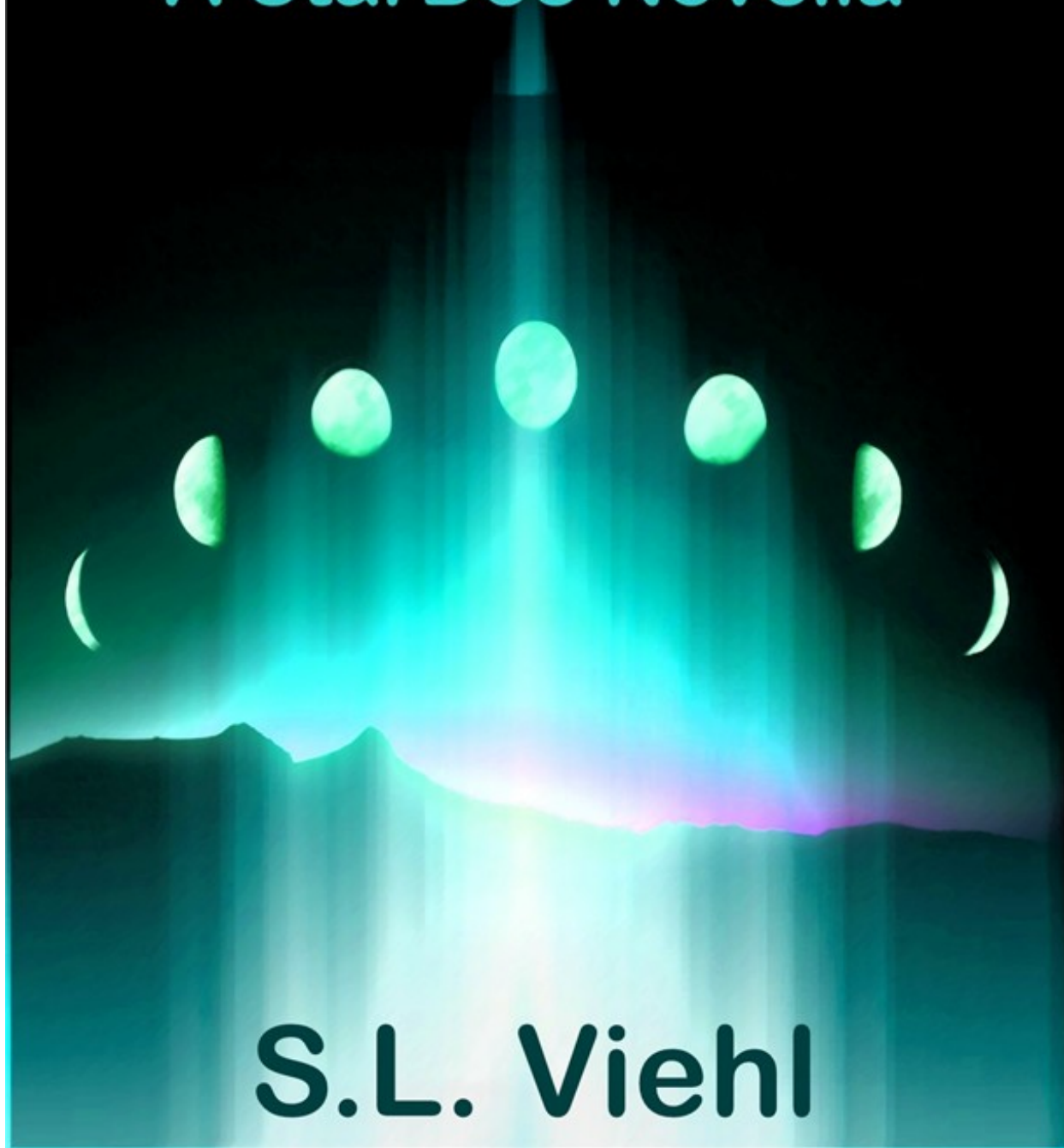


Illumination

A StarDoc Novella



For my friend Jessie,
computer goddess, crash savior, and daydream believer,
who wanted to hear the other side of the story.

Encrypted File

092002573

She sleeps as I write this.

Her quarters are far from my own, but I have not planted any recording drones to watch her. Close proximity and remote surveillance have never been necessary - I have been aware of her from the first, and the connection between us grows stronger each day. She is unaware of it, or deliberately ignores it.

I cannot. She is always with me now.

I have never established a connection as intense or of such lasting duration as this. The detail is astonishing; when I concentrate, I can feel the adrenalin pumping in her veins and the precise focus of her thoughts as she works. My limbs ache with the ghost weight of her exhaustion after she finishes a double shift in Medical. I can count her breaths, smell her scent, and occasionally - to my dismay - even taste what she eats.

Through her, I have discovered needs that I never knew existed. They twist inside me, these peculiar, foreign demands - and I am almost certain they are not coming from her. The old priest Arembel, who cared for the injured after bouts in the arena, once told me how it could be, but I did not expect this.

I did not expect her.

I reached into her subconscious tonight, and for the first time, I saw what she dreams. I assumed that such a dedicated surgeon would dream of patients and instruments and procedures, and braced myself to be ill. Instead, I walked with her

under purple-leaved trees in the moonlight - the same groves where one died, and another was saved.

The good doctor dreams of me.

I have accessed the Terran database dozens of times, and studied the pertinent psychological data. Contrary to old Arembel's superstitions, it indicates that what I have felt, and what I continue to experience is the product of an emotional fixation. Ana Hansen, the empathic Terran administrator on Kevarzangia Two, also believed the same.

I am not convinced. I am human, but I have never possessed human emotions.

I have tried every mental technique I know to terminate this connection between us, but it cannot be severed. I cannot rid myself of her.

I must decide what to do tonight.

#

If I could change anything, I would return to that moment, more than two years ago now, when the decision was made to send me back to spy on my kind. I would go back and ask him not to send me.

At the time, however, I was more than willing.

"You must go to Kevarzangia Two, HalaVar."

I watched my reptilian blood brother pace around the command console. TssVar's tail thrashed with agitation, but I suspected that was due to the emergency signal from the sub-Hanar, the second-most powerful member of the Hsktskt Faction. Signals from the homeworld rarely brought good news; politicians, almost never.

"Indeed." I disliked associating with other humanoids, but if he was planning to raid a heavily-populated region, I would have to go. "How may I serve useful among fodder?"

"Your talents, along with the credentials we have falsified, will enable you to pose as a colonial linguist." His yellow eyes met mine. "There are concerns about military activity in the region. The Pmoc Quadrant is heavily populated by multi-species colonies. Command wants data on their strengths, weaknesses, and potential defense capabilities. League members are claiming too many worlds in the border territories through trade and treaty, and where colonists plant themselves, troops follow."

That was extremely unwise of the Allied League of Worlds, given that the Hsktskt had been raiding just outside that Quadrant for some time and considered it part of their territory. "The sub-Hanar suspects a mobilization?"

"The sub-Hanar suspects everything." TssVar handed me a disc. "Here is the latest intelligence. You leave tomorrow."

I examined the disc as I formulated a properly reluctant response. "I do not know how effective I will prove. I have not lived among warm-bloods for decades." The short time that I had, they had incarcerated me.

"You have the gift of adaptation that our other scouts lack. I suspect you may be stationed away from us for some time." TssVar briefly clamped a taloned hand on my shoulder, a Hsktskt gesture that expressed far more than commiseration or sympathy. "I will know your absence, brother."

He owed me his life, and actually treated me like a true sibling. He would feel differently, had he known that I was the traitor sabotaging Hsktskt raids and slave

transports for the past ten revolutions. I knew if he ever discovered my duplicity, TssVar would tear out my throat with his own teeth and claws.

“And I yours.” I rose, saluted him, and withdrew to my quarters.

I had waited a long time for such an assignment. Operating alone outside Faction territory would allow me unparalleled freedom, yet I felt leery of dwelling among humanoids. I had been isolated from my native species from birth, and had served as a Hsktskt Lord and adopted member of the Faction since my adolescence. Every other species I encountered were either slaves or slavers, so in a sense TssVar and his line were the only family I had ever known.

The only humanoids I knew were slaves.

I felt no loyalty to my blood brother, nor to the few of my kind whom I helped escape from the Faction. I merely sought balance for what had been done to me. I betrayed the Hsktskt for the three revolutions they had force me to fight in slaver arenas. Saving lives seemed the most adequate expiation for the many I had taken.

Hala! Hala!

My owner, a centuron with a heavy fist who liked to beat her slaves as much as she enjoyed starving them, had given me that name after I began killing on the sands. Her cronies soon took to chanting it every time I entered the arena, and my reputation for efficiency began drawing crowds.

Hala in the reptilians' tongue meant “Death,” and death is what I gave them.

I killed anyone and anything they put on the sands with me, until the day a Hsktskt Lord fell between me and my opponent. Without thinking, I shielded TssVar from a killing blow. By doing so, I inadvertently thwarted a rather clever assassination

attempt by one of his more ambitious subordinates. The Hsktskt Lord was quickly rescued, and later ordered that I be brought to him.

I expected to be interrogated and perhaps killed, so seeing him kneel before me to remove my chains was something of a shock.

You will be called HalaVar, he said, and bowed to me. *Warrior of death*.

TssVar did more than free me and give me a formal name. He made me a Faction citizen and took me into his own line, making me a member of his immediate family. He trained me to enter the military, and had me assigned to his command. My quest for balance and my position as TssVar's blood brother had taken me from the sands of the arena into the ranks of the most powerful raider division within the Faction. I had not anticipated infiltrating the Hsktskt to such a level, and I was able to do much to sabotage the Faction from within. I had even begun planning what to do about the various slaver depot worlds under Faction control.

Plans that would have to wait, now that they were sending me back to spy on their future slaves.

There was no question of what to do. If I was successful, I would make a place for myself among the warm-blooded. I would analyze their defenses and their armed forces, then relay enough false information about both to spare Kevarzangia Two and the other inhabited worlds in its system.

If I failed, I still had one other option.

#

I decided to resort to that option a year later.

"You should eat something, *mon ami*."

I had not been long on K-2 before I encountered Lisette Dubois, a female Terran I had known during a brief enrollment at an educational facility on our homeworld. She made it apparent that she still retained the odd affection she had displayed toward me during our youth, which puzzled me. The human penchant for nostalgia always did.

Although consuming Terran foods held little appeal for me - my palate had long ago adapted to non-human fare - I used it as an excuse to stop at Lisette's café several times per week. She had proved to be an excellent source of information about new transfers.

She was also the closest thing I had to a friend.

"I only have time for *café noir*." I sat at an empty table, positioned between two groups of transport workers with their snouts buried in enormous bowls of colorful chopped plants. Deciding where and how I would complete my mission would only take a few minutes. "Did you wish to speak with me?"

"I have a better time talking to myself these days." She brought me a cup of bitter dark liquid, one of the few items on her menu I genuinely enjoyed. Many male eyes followed her, as she was quite tall, shapely, and attractively colored - for a Terran. "If you are not careful, Duncan, someday you will open your mouth to say something and only dust will fly out."

I should have reviewed Terran conversational standards more carefully, but now there was no reason to do so. "I rarely have anything of interest to tell you." I could not tell her what I was planning to do.

"Pffft, you see - it is already happening." Lisette waved a hand in front of my face and then left me to tend to a group of new customers.

I felt no hesitation at the prospect of my final option. I did not wish to return to the Faction; TssVar would eventually discover my deception and kill me. If I sought sanctuary from the League, I would likely be compelled to reveal my previous activities. They would either imprison me, or use me to spy on the Hsktskt. Since coming to K-2, I had passed only false or exaggerated information to the Faction, but I could not continue to do so indefinitely. TssVar would soon recall me to scout another, more profitable system.

I had not achieved the balance I had sought, but I could not go on pretending that I would. I would never save as many lives as I had taken in the arena. What I had done would have to be enough.

It was time.

Obtaining what I needed presented a minor problem. I owned several pulse weapons, but using them would trigger the colony surface security grid. Subsequent medical attention might foil my attempt, so it would not be advisable to use any weapon which might summon assistance. I disliked the thought of using a blade - I had seen many do the same in the slave cages before arena games, and it took too long.

I preferred something more efficient.

The most logical solution was chemical, but as I had no knowledge of drugs or access to medical stores, it would be difficult to obtain them. The Bartermen might possess what I needed to accomplish the task, but I was not inclined to trade with them for what I could steal myself. What I needed to know was the precise compound and amount that would bring a swift resolution. I would have to access the medical database and make a discreet inquiry, then visit the FreeClinic to retrieve the drugs.

Satisfied that I had found the proper solution to my problem, I finished my coffee, and was preparing to leave when I became aware of something strange.

Someone was near. Someone like me.

My years in the arena had helped me develop a kind of proximity sense, a defense against unexpected assaults or attacks while I was asleep. This was like that sensation . . . but at the same time, it was not. I concentrated, opening my mind in order to locate the source.

“Here we are,” a familiar female voice said. “Lisette Dubois’s foster family owned a restaurant in Paris.”

I saw Administrator Ana Hansen escorting an unfamiliar Terran female through the café. The strange woman was quite short, barely five feet in height, and very thin. She wore her dark hair in a woven cable, clipped against the back of her head. Her hair appeared clean, if somewhat in need of better grooming, and there was an overcast to it - a faint, silver sheen I had only seen among elderly Terrans. Yet from the texture of her skin, I assumed she was quite young. Her features betrayed some elusive ethnic ancestry I could not identify.

The little Terran female noticed a group near my table, and as she watched them the corners of her mouth went up - she smiled, I corrected myself - before she encountered my own gaze.

I did not find her particularly attractive in any physical sense - she had as much allure as a malnourished child - and Administrator Hansen’s presence indicated she was a new transfer to the colony. I always avoided humans like her, but I felt a compulsion to continue watching her. I wanted to speak to her and learn her name.

Yet I had no justification for the interest.

Her expression changed as she returned the visual assessment. Of all her physical characteristics, her dark blue eyes were the most remarkable. Her gaze was direct and intent, almost fearless. She appeared perfectly at ease, in command of the situation. However, she did not feel as confident behind that carefully schooled countenance.

She is afraid.

She may have been unconsciously projecting her emotions. The only way I could be sure would be to go to her and place my hands on her. I only touched another being to establish a telepathic link to that individual's speech center, and I already thoroughly comprehended all Terran native languages. I doubted I could actively probe her mind. I had not been successful with the Hsktskt, but I had never had much opportunity - or desire - to link in such an intimate manner with other humanoids. Perhaps if I could strengthen the involuntary connection between us, it would help me understand what she was, and why she was afraid.

My own thoughts bewildered me. *There is no reason to for this.* I didn't care how she felt. Our present situation did not justify even the most limited physical contact. She could give me nothing of use. Even as I acknowledged that, I still wondered - *Why is she afraid? Am I frightening her?*

That was when a strange vision came to me.

I saw the small Terran, dressed differently, standing before me. We were alone in an agricultural area where I had often worked. All of my attention was focused on her. A violent determination filled me, and I took her wrists in my hands. I could feel the thin delicate bones shift as I lifted her hands up to my face. I was focusing on her, reaching in to gather -

The vision vanished, and I returned to the present, in time to see the Terran female react with a small start of astonishment. In that moment I knew she was not a telepath, or even aware of her projected emotions - and yet somehow, she had shared the vision. It seemed precognitive, a glimpse into the future, as if we were both seeing what would happen between us.

If so, it seemed that I would not be committing suicide today, after all.

#

I remained at a distance and listened as Ana performed introductions between my friend and the newcomer.

“This is Dr. Cherijo Grey Veil,” the administrator told Lisette.

Cherijo Grey Veil. I repeated the name silently, several times, searching through the thousands of languages I had learned for any correlation. Most humanoid species are only capable of a certain range of sounds, and despite the diversity of the galaxy, often used the same arrangements of sounds to form words. The variety and contrast of meanings from race to race were myriad, but I had never heard *cher-ee-joh-greh-vael* used before.

For some reason that annoyed me.

However, her title increased my interest. Cherijo Grey Veil was a physician, and physicians had access to unlimited amounts of drugs. Given my present need, that would prove useful. As for the unprecedented hallucination I had experienced, I decided to dismiss it as a momentary aberration. I did not believe in precognition, and I would kill myself when I chose. It would have nothing to do with this strange female beyond coercing her to get me the chemical compounds I required.

The doctor seemed daunted by Lisette, for all she offered as a greeting was a simple, "Hello." Her voice was evenly pitched but not particularly melodic.

I could see that Lisette did not like her, but the Frenchwoman disliked most human females. Particularly those who reminded her of how tall she was. "You work at the FreeClinic?"

"Dr. Grey Veil was a surgeon back on Terra," Ana said.

The doctor's lips curled up once more. "Yes, it's safe to give me a knife."

It took a moment for me to register her remark as a joke. I rarely found human humor agreeable, but hers seemed far less offensive than the thinly-disguised alien bigotry I'd heard most Terrans indulge in. Why was she resorting to it now? Was it to mask her unease?

It doesn't matter how she feels, I reminded myself. All I need to verify is where she has been assigned, and if I can use her. I rose from my chair and made my way over to the women.

"I was telling Dr. Gray Vail about your incomparable croissants," Ana was saying as I joined them.

Perhaps humor would be the best method with which to enter the conversation. "Has the council instituted a health board?" I asked.

All three women regarded me with varying degrees of surprise. Lisette's expression swiftly turned dark and unwelcoming. Ana Hansen looked from me to the other two women, and seemed somewhat confused.

The object of my interest showed little outward reaction. She tilted her head, and her eyelids narrowed a fraction, but that was all. This close, I could clearly sense more of her emotions - anger, discomfort, and something more. Evidently I was irritating her

as much as she was annoying me. However, I did not frighten her. Something else had done that.

“No, Duncan, Dr. Grey Veil is a newly transferred physician.” Ana turned to her companion. “Cherijo, this is Duncan Reeve, our chief linguist.”

I glanced at Lisette, who now viewed me as the chief cause of her displeasure. “Duncan, go away.” She returned to her counter, calling back to Ana, “Sit down, I will bring you *café au lait*.”

The doctor seemed poised to leave, so I made another humorous remark, hoping it would tempt her to enter into conversation with me. “Don't mind Lisette. She dislikes competition.”

Ana became more confused. “Competition?”

Cherijo's attention drifted away as she studied the landscaping. Since there were few physicians willing to work in the territories, it was possible she was only here for a short period of time. I would have to be more direct if I wanted to obtain the information I needed.

“Lisette considers anyone under thirty and breathing competition, Anna,” I said, quite truthfully. “Doctor, when do you estimate you'll return to Terra?”

“I don't.” Her slim hand moved in the direction of an empty table. “Shall we sit down, Ana?”

I joined them without waiting for an invitation. My proximity seemed to be disturbing the administrator, whose limited mental abilities I'd encountered on the few occasions she'd tried to sense my emotions. I had never informed her that I possessed none.

“Chief linguist Reeve, a pleasure to meet you.” The doctor gave me a smile, but it was not as welcoming as the one she had offered Lisette. She didn’t like me. “Please excuse us.”

I had an irrational desire to hear her say my given name. “Call me Duncan.” Her irritation intrigued me; I rarely provoked any reaction from other humans beyond the usual indifference or disgust. Her face seemed unremarkable, but the underlying bone structure was fascinating. Even this close, I could not precisely classify her subspecies. “You’re not Caucasian, are you?”

“My patriarchal genealogy is endemic to North America,” she told me. “Apache, some Navajo, as well. My matriarch of lineage is listed as Caucasian.”

She had not known her mother, and she was hiding something. “Listed as?”

“My father contracted a professional surrogate.” She seemed angry that I had compelled her to admit what was, among Terrans, an accepted form of reproduction.

I recalled that humans usually formed emotional attachments to their parents. Perhaps she regretted the lack of a maternal influence in her youth. Terrans placed great value in the purity of their DNA, so it seemed odd that she did not know from whom she had inherited half her chromosomes. “A pity your matriarchal line is undefined.”

“My maternal ancestry, and my lack of knowledge about it, has no effect on my life.” More anger - and oddly, that indefinable secrecy - changed her vocal tone. “It doesn’t matter.”

How naïve she was - to think as she did, to leave the safety of her homeworld for regions completely unknown to her. There were planets she could never visit without serious risk to her life. “On this world.”

She lifted her chin. "I don't understand what you mean."

"Duncan, we do have a limited interval here." The administrator sounded apologetic.

I thought of the Tganru, whose irises changed color when they became infected by a certain cerebral parasite, which also drove them mad. "On the fifth planet of a system two light years away, you'd be ritually sacrificed for having those eyes."

"Really?" She paled. "How interesting."

"Yes." The old scars on the backs of my hands burned as another spontaneous need surfaced inside me. *But I would never allow that to happen to you.* I had to get away from her before I said something foolish. I rose to my feet. "Excuse my intrusion, Ana. Dr. Grey Veil."

Lisette intercepted me before I left the Trading Center. "So, Duncan, you have finally found a woman who interests you. I had not thought it possible."

"The physician? She is short and disagreeable."

"You are tall and disagreeable. It is the match made in heaven." She sounded sulky, but she looked very distressed. "I would be happy for you, you know, *mon ami*."

I had not realized how deep Lisette's affection for me had become. She had no idea what I was. I touched her cheek, and lied to her. "You will always be my friend."

Lisette returned to her counter, and I turned my head to see the little doctor still watching me.

I did not want to leave. Nothing would have pleased me more than to return to the table, and take her arm, and force her to accompany me to a more private location. I would question her about the drugs I needed, then make her tell me how she had induced that vision or hallucination or whatever it was that we had shared. I would find

out whatever secrets she was hiding from me. There would be no one to interfere, and no one to stop me from putting my hands on her.

Lisette served a light meal to the two women, then frowned at me. As my behavior was beginning to draw attention from others as well, I turned and walked back to my office.

I had to find out exactly who she was.

#

I performed a thorough investigation of Dr. Cherijo Grey Veil. What accessible data there was on the colonial database was scant, and told me nothing about her reasons for transferring to K-2. She had purchased passage on a private trader's vessel, which was somewhat unusual, and had traveled alone, with no other passengers. I checked the pilot's registration and recognized the Oenrallian who had provided transport for her - Dhreen frequented the Recreation Center most nights at the same time I went to exercise.

He might know more about the doctor.

After I completed my day shift at Administration, I went to the center and took control of one of the free challenge whump-ball tables. The Oenrallian arrived and watched with interest as I defeated several consecutive opponents before he stepped up to the glove rack.

"Attracted to a bout?" he asked me in stanTerran. He might have passed for one of my kind, had it not been for his orange hair, red horns, and yellow eyes.

"I'm attracted to females," I replied in his native language. "But I would not mind a contest of skills."

“Sorry, I meant no offense.” Dhreen grinned. “I didn’t know you spoke my lingo, and Terran is . . .” he rolled his eyes.

“Difficult, I know. The metaphors and analogies are endless.” I handed him the positioner and nodded toward the gloves. “Rack them up.”

The Oenrallian was an enthusiastic, if somewhat noisy and impulsive player. I allowed him to win the first game, then took the second with what appeared to be only a matter of luck with my final shot. As we played, he related anecdotes of his routes, his passengers, and some exceptionally profitable trades. He had a healthy interest in females, so I made the appropriate, slightly ribald male responses and guided the conversation to an avenue which would induce him to speak of the doctor.

“When is your next jaunt back to Terra?”

“I’d go back in a lung beat, but trade there is limited. They won’t license non-humans for mass trans, you know.” He gave me a speculative look. “You aren’t looking to return, are you?”

“No.” I performed a slightly complicated shot, missed the point on purpose, and set up the next shot for him to take the lead without much effort. “I have already seen the homeworld. The women are beautiful, but they spit too much.”

“I just brought in a Terran female transfer.” He wagged his orange brows up and down. “A bit verbal, but easy on the eyes. She’s a doc over at the FreeClinic.”

I pretended to think. “I have heard of her - she has an odd name, doesn’t she?”

“It’s Cherijo.” Dhreen took position and sank his shot. “Cherijo Grey Veil. Kind of a pretty name, like poetry or something.”

I recalled the terms for relationships among the Oenrallian, but I doubted the pilot was in a position to form a permanent attachment. “Do you plan to pursue her yourself?”

“Who, the doc?” He made the Oenrallian sound of mirth, which was much like a human hiccup. “I’d be willing, but she probably wouldn’t even notice my moves.” He rubbed one of his horns. “You interested? I could arrange an introduction.”

Oenrallian traders never did anything for free, but I suspected the pilot had reasons other than profit for the offer. “Why would you do that?”

“I get the feeling the doc is lonely, and I know she’s never been around aliens much. One of her own kind might be good for her.” He studied the table, then me. “She’s special, you know. Not like any female I’ve ever met. She deserves some happiness.”

So she was in need of male companionship. I could provide that. “Tell me more about her.”

Dhreen related how Cherijo had found him in a tavern, and her quick agreement to pay a hefty sum to be transported to K-2. He had heard of her father, a famous medical researcher, and suspected she was trying to get away from him. He spoke of the weeks they had spent together on his vessel, and how quickly they had become friends.

“You know when you meet a female, you usually know her life story inside of a blip. Cherijo isn’t like that. You need pry bars to get any details out of her.” He took his last shot, and crowed a little as he made it virtually impossible for me to win. “I also got the feeling that the doc’s carrying some serious troubles on her shoulders. I tried to get her to open up to me, but she’s not much on confiding.”

“Indeed.” I took position, and executed the final shot of the game, sinking three spheres and taking the win and the set. As Dhreen sputtered in shock, I stripped off my glove. “Perhaps I will have better luck.”

The transmission implant under my forearm sent a faint pulse, warning me that a message from TssVar was waiting back in my quarters. I thanked the Oenrallian for the game and left the Recreation Center.

#

The encryption used by the Hsktskt OverLord could not be broken, but what he had relayed had made no sense.

I have left the fleet. I bring my mate with me. Meet us at these coordinates.

I always kept a small transport shuttle on standby, and was able to obtain a launch slot without much difficulty. Making the rendezvous with TssVar on one of the moons without triggering the colonial orbital grid required more finesse and an illegal tap into Colonial Security's database, but I slipped in under the satellite sensors. The moon was the fifth largest around the planet, heavily scarred from ancient volcanic activity and provided excellent ground cover in which to hide a shuttle.

But why had my brother come here? And why had he brought his mate?

Using the prearranged coordinates, I located and landed next to his shuttle. I armed myself before moving through the docking portal, and entered the ship. It was a small gstek class raider, not the type of transport usually provided for an OverLord.

"Nsseerok!"

I found my blood brother and his mate UgessVa locked in a fierce struggle. The Hsktskt never wrestled out of play; when they fought they intended to spill blood. I drew my weapon and leveled it at the junction between UgessVa's spine and her brain. Before I fired, I saw her abdomen ripple, then bulge out beneath her thermal tunic.

She was breeding.

“OverLord.” Quickly I holstered my weapon and grabbed two of the female’s limbs from behind. Trying to hold her was much like trying to wrestle a Terran elephant, but the distraction allowed my blood brother to break her hold around his neck and overpower her remaining limbs. We dragged her to a restraining harness and locked her down into place. UgeSSVa cursed both of us with promises of vicious, slow dismemberment.

I stared at her ripened belly. “You did not know?”

“No. She concealed it from me.” Her blood dripped from his talons as he stared down at her. “When I discovered her ruse, I removed her from the flag ship and attempted to put her into sleep suspension. She fought me.”

“I am term!” she screamed at him, baring all the jagged rows of her sharp teeth. “You will kill the brood!”

“Better the brood than watch my mate filleted alive!” he shouted back at her.

Hsktskt females on active military duty are forbidden to breed - and were beaten to death the moment they were discovered to be pregnant. Breeding females often resorted to instinctive protective behavior during delivery, while newborn Hsktskt infants will attack anything alive after birth. Both mother and young could only be attended with great care and attention - the kind that could not be provided on military vessels.

It made no difference that UgeSSVa’s mate was the commander of the fleet, the law was the law. There were no exceptions.

Except one. “If she successfully delivers the brood,” I said, recalling the regulations I had memorized, “she will be dismissed from duty and returned to the homeworld.”

“Yes. That is why I brought her here.” TssVar clamped a hand on my arm. “You must help me.”

Again he brought his life to me, and placed it in my hands. Not only his life this time - that of his mate, and his young. For a moment, I despised him so much that I wanted to use my weapon on him.

“Have you ever delivered a brood?” I demanded, and he made a negative gesture. “Neither have I.” I thought for a moment. If TssVar or his mate were harmed, it would bring the fleet here to K-2. His troops would kill most of the population. I knew of no one who could help except - “There is one on the planet. A Terran physician.”

TssVar made a contemptuous sound. “My mate is not that hungry.”

“No, she is more than fodder. I believe she can deliver the brood.” When my brother made no comment, I added, “I plan to take her as my mate.”

“What?” he bellowed. “Have the warm-bloods sucked the brain matter out of your skull?”

“Do you wish your brood to live?” When he nodded, I gestured toward the controls. “Then you must trust me on this - she is the only one who will help you. Follow me down to the surface, and land at these coordinates.”

I guided TssVar’s shuttle in through the orbital grid and broke away at the last moment, landing in an unoccupied agricultural field behind the FreeClinic. The sight of the Hsktskt vessel landing closer to the facility sent the passing colonists fleeing in terror.

I opened a secure channel between our shuttles. “The way is clear.” I told him how to enter the facility, and who to look for. “I will safeguard your vessel until you return. Kill no one, and they will not attack you.”

“I hope you are correct, brother.” On my panel screen, TssVar armed himself, released his mate, and hauled her writhing form up under his arm. “If she or my brood dies, I will wipe every speck of life from this planet.” He terminated the signal.

I took up a defensive station nearby and checked my weapons. I didn’t want to kill anyone, but if security tried to rush the facility I might have to. A signal came in over my wristcom from Administration. I responded to it audio-only. “Reever.”

“Chief.” It was my assistant, Fargas. “Someone over at the FreeClinic has requested a Hsktskt translator.”

I should have thought of that. TssVar would not use a translation device - the Hsktskt considered speaking to the warm-blooded beneath them. I kept an eye on the entrance to trauma and thought of the interpreters currently assigned to me. One was a former slave and would know how to behave around TssVar. “Send Kurenii.”

Fargas cleared his mucous membranes with a nervous blast of air. “Uh, should I tell him why?”

“No.”

“Right.”

Hours passed as I waited. Kurenii would be nervous, but his slave training would keep him from offending TssVar. I wished I could say the same about Cherijo Grey Veil. Still, if she was clever, she would survive the delivery and preserve the lives of the OverLord’s brood. If she did not, TssVar’s anger would make her death quick.

I did not want to think of her dead.

Security forces surrounded the facility, but no one tried to go in. At length TssVar, his mate and his brood reemerged from the FreeClinic. Although disheveled

and pale, Cherijo accompanied them, and even snapped at the security forces, telling them to stay back.

She had survived.

I saw blood on her arm and moved forward without thinking. TssVar caught sight of me, and made a small gesture indicating I should keep my distance. With great effort, I remained concealed. Before he boarded the shuttle, he looked back at Cherijo, and made another gesture, one that would mean nothing to her.

It was a wordless farewell - that of one equal to another.

#

I was unable to speak with Cherijo at the scene, but I found a Psyoran nurse named Ecla in Trauma who was more than willing to fill me in on the details of the delivery.

“She even had a translator sent in so she could talk to them while she was delivering the little monsters.” Ecla fluttered her curly upper dermal layers. “Can you believe that?”

I could not believe my brother considered a Terran female as an equal. She must have done something outrageous. “I’m surprised they didn’t kill her.”

“T’Nliq said it looked like they would at first, but the doc took over and handled everything. She did such a great job that the mother named one of them after her.”

“Was it the last born?”

“I don’t know.” Her flowery face wrinkled as she thought for a moment. “I think it was the largest one. Isn’t it too bizarre for words? I mean, just when I think I’ve seen everything . . . ”

When I asked where the Terran doctor had gone, Ecla directed me to the FreeClinic's Administrative offices. I thanked her and walked to the other side of the facility, trying to fathom the strange turn of events. How had she convinced the Hsktskt to name her Designate? It was unprecedented. I had to know.

When I reached the corridor outside his office, I heard her voice clearly.

"I will follow that method of treatment which, according to my ability and judgment, I consider for the benefit of my patients, and abstain from what ever is deleterious and mischievous, I will give no deadly medicine to anyone if asked, nor suggest any such counsel."

I recognized the words; she was reciting the Hippocratic oath, an archaic vow all Terran physicians swore to uphold. Why was she reciting it to the Chief of Staff, who was also human and obviously knew it himself? And why could I feel her anger as if it were a bank of storm clouds, prepared to burst?

"Excuse me, Dr. Mayer."

I positioned myself in front of the door, and as she strode out she collided with me. She made a startled sound and jerked backward, but Mayer's door panel was already closed. She could not retreat.

"Dr. Grey Veil." Her cheeks turned pink, and she nudged me aside and walked away without responding. "Doctor?"

She kept going. I followed her as she left the facility, but she seemed to have no destination in mine. Cautiously I decreased the distance between us.

Cherijo glanced back at me and made a sound with air and her lips. "What do you want, chief linguistic Reever?"

“I'll walk with you.” Humans bonded emotionally during moments of stress, perhaps she would spontaneously form an attachment to me.

“I'm not going anywhere.” She attempted to separate herself from me again, but I paced her. She halted for a second time. “Reever, go away!”

The futility of her actions annoyed me. “You are walking in circles around the FreeClinic.”

“I know.”

“You're upset.”

“There's a keen observation.” She used her hand to brush some loose hair back from her face. “Anything else?”

“One of my subordinates was present during your treatment of the Hsktskt raiders.” I didn't care about Kurenii, but it was a plausible reason for my persistence.

“Yes, of course.” She looked down at her footgear and shuffled them against the pavement. “He was wonderful.”

“I'm pleased to hear that.”

“More than wonderful. To be honest, our success was being in large part to his excellent skills and performance under adverse conditions. You should give him a raise in compensation.” She looked at the way we had come, then at me.

She wished me to leave her. Why did she wish to be alone? Why would she not confide in me? I tried again to coax the information I wanted from her. “It was reported that the female Hsktskt named you as designate to the dominary infant.”

She only blinked. “So?”

“You invited a significant honor on yourself.” And had no concept of what it meant, apparently. She was like a reckless child.

“Invited?” He chin dropped for a moment. “Believe me, chief linguist, I didn't ask her to name her kid after me.”

She didn't know that the honor was not something that was requested, only granted. “In Terran terms, such a distinction would rank with that of a godmother, Doctor.” And made her my equal in the eyes of the Faction - perhaps that was why UgeessVa had Designated her.

My OverLord's mate was playing matchmaker.

She made a tapping sound on the ground with her foot. “I'm still missing a point here. If there is one.”

“Being that infant's designate virtually guarantees you'll never be taken as a Hsktskt slave.” And I would never have to kill her to save her from it.

“For god's sake, Reeveer, I wasn't given a choice at the time!”

“Weren't you?” I had to know how she felt about the delivery - what it meant to her. “You brought five more Hsktskt killers into existence.”

“I treated a female giving birth.” She drew herself up, trying to look taller than she was. “Under extreme duress, I might add, but that doesn't matter.”

“It doesn't?”

“No, Reeveer. It doesn't.” She stepped up to me, her small hands curled into fists. I believe in that moment she wished to strike me. “I would have treated her no matter what happened. Threat or no threat. While the colony was under attack. Even if her mate began executing the others.” She balanced on her toes, putting her face closer to mine. “With my last breath, Reeveer, I would have delivered those five Hsktskt killers.”

The scent of her filled my head, and I didn't care about the Hsktskt or the League anymore. I could only wonder at the fierce light in her eyes. What made her this way?

She was unlike any female I had ever encountered. Why had she come here? Why was she becoming so important to me?

I had sent her death, and she had turned it into life.

The old slave priest Arembel had taken to sermonizing about his faith as he tended to my many injuries after I fought. His people believed in balance in all things. For every evil, there was good. For every darkness, there was light. What I was compelled to do, he told me, would only be resolved when I countered it with a willing commitment to life - but not until I found my personal balance. For his kind also believed that no one was meant to be alone.

When you find your counterpart, it will challenge all you know. It will shape all you do. And nothing will come between you except death.

I could not tell her, of course. She would not understand the balance or what it meant. Her hair was falling down over her eyes again - I suspected she never took the time to properly groom it. I skimmed my fingertips over the dark fall of it, wishing I could tidy it for her.

“You would be unyielding to the end.” As I would be. I was a warrior of death. She was a warrior of life.

She was my balance. I did not have kill myself, not now that I had found her.

Her pupils dilated for an instant, then she moved away. “Leave me alone, Reeve.”

I watched her stride away. If Arembel had been alive to witness this, he would have laughed at me.

#

The signal I expected from TssVar did not arrive for several rotations. When it did, I did not know what to make of it.

Report indicates military mobilization imminent in your quadrant. Investigate and relay justification. We return the brood.

TssVar had a new source of intelligence, and he was taking the fleet back to the Hsktskt homeworld. Both revelations were wholly unexpected and alarming. I took my shuttle and left K-2's system before I responded. The encrypted relays we used were secure, but given the nature of his message and the increased amount of security on the colony, I was taking no further chances of being discovered.

"OverLord." I formally saluted his image when it appeared on my screen. "Your mate and brood, they are well?"

"As often as they feed, they should be," he said. There were fresh wounds on his head. "During our brief absence, two of my Lords conspired to take control of the fleet. They were not pleased at my safe return. I am obliged to make an example of them."

"I see." Although self-promotion through assassination was common enough among the Faction, if the attempt failed, the perpetrators died an extended, painful, and very public death. It was a display of power, to discourage others from doing the same. That did not validate returning the entire fleet to the homeworld, however. TssVar could easily beat the traitors to death on his own ship. It was impolite to ask why directly, but there were other ways to glean the information. "Will you be long there, brother?"

"A cycle, perhaps." His tongue flicked with agitation. "The sub-hanar believes the League is preparing to launch an aggressive campaign against our border territories."

So he had been summoned to return, to prepare for war.

“The homeworld has received reports which evidently substantiate that, but I will need specific deployment data - troop strength, fleet numbers, patrol routes - in these regions.” TssVar superimposed a star chart on the screen. “You will get this information for me, HalaVar.”

“As you command.” I thought quickly. “May I know who provided the preliminary intelligence? I would make use of such a source myself.”

He made a casual gesture with one limb. “An Akkabarran arms dealer traveling through the territories. He and his convoy have since left the quadrant.”

“A pity.” More of a relief - I did not need anyone who could contradict my own reports.

His upper eyelids lowered. “My mate named your female Terran Designate to my brood. I did not agree at first, but she proved herself. You spoke of taking her as a mate. Is she mature enough to breed?”

I thought of making Cherijo pregnant. The image of her belly swelling with my child created a new, unfamiliar sensation inside me. “Yes.” Then I thought of the Hsktskt, preparing for war. “In time.”

“She will nurture them well.” There was no higher compliment he could have given her. “Report to me with what you learn - and watch your back, brother. The League may be an alliance of fools, but their leaders know we are watching them.”

I delayed my return to K-2 in order to scout the various military ports within the immediate region. TssVar’s informant had been correct; a number of large troop freighters and weapons transports had been recently reassigned to the quadrant, and no one was making any attempt to conceal their presence.

Yet I had the sense that it was more than merely a show of aggression, made to provoke.

League infantry troops on planetary leave were the most ready sources of information, and I paid visits to taverns and brothels on several worlds to learn what I could. Most complained incessantly about their duties, their cancelled leaves, or their superiors. A few blamed an unexpected series of orders that had been handed down from League Headquarters; orders that only senior officers had been permitted to view.

“They recalled twenty thousand of us,” one intoxicated Aklop pointed out after I bought him a seventh round. “And there’s nothing out here to defend but some insignificant agri-colonies and a bunch of bobble and body sellers.”

Despite my efforts, I could not learn more specifics about the mobility, or the mysterious orders behind it. Senior officers were either not taking or not being granted planetary leave. I would have to cultivate other sources of information from K-2 before I decided how much I would tell TssVar.

No one could stop the League and the Hsktskt from going to war, but I might be able to delay it long enough to evacuate the colonies - and then disappear myself.

When I did, I decided that Cherijo Grey Veil was going with me. I had earned her. I would take her.

#

I returned to K-2 and decided to renew my acquaintance with the good doctor. Unfortunately Cherijo did not return my signals, and I was forced to return to the FreeClinic to see her in person. Once more I was directed to Dr. Mayer’s office, where she had been sent for a meeting.

As soon as I reached the door panel, I felt her anger.

“Are you saying I can't handle my job?” I heard Cherijo say.

Mayer's response was much calmer. “I'm suggesting that is indicated, yes.”

I had meant to interrupt them, in order to save time. Instead I found myself listening as they argued over a patient.

“Tell me something, Dr. Mayer.” Her voice had turned sharp, the way it had when she had spoken to me about the Hsktskt. “Why are you doing this?”

“I don't know what you mean.”

“No? I'm not a complete idiot, you know. You've had it in for me from day one. Remember when you threatened me with dismissal for incompetence?”

She went on to complain about his reactions to her work, but I stopped following the conversation. The thought of her being dismissed from her position had never occurred to me. It might be one way to bring her under my control and keep her safe. I could hasten Mayer's decision by filing a complaint myself - I had arranged to be appointed as Cherijo's community service supervisor; perhaps tomorrow I could do something to sabotage her efforts. Once she was dismissed, she would need assistance.

I would be the one to provide it.

She was still demanding answers from Mayer. “What's the real reason I'm here?”

“Now a persecution complex.” He seemed pleased by that. “If these tirades continue, I will recommend P. Q. S. G. O. instigate a complete re-evaluation of your contract.”

Cherijo didn't say anything for a long time. Then, finally, "I've got the message."

As footsteps neared the door panel, I moved back, and Mayer spoke again. "Dr. Grey Veil?" The steps halted. "Report back to me on the Chakaran patient before your shift ends."

"Yes, sir."

I waited until the door panel closed before I approached her. Cherijo stared at me in disbelief. "Do you have some kind of monitor set up out here?"

It was a novel idea, but I shook my head.

"No, of course not. Your timing, as always, is perfect."

I didn't like her flippancy, but in time I assumed I would grow accustomed to it. "I take that to mean you don't want me here."

"Take it any way you like, chief linguist."

I followed her down the corridor, watching her shoulders tense and her hands curl. "Another altercation with Dr. Mayer?"

"You could call at that." She glanced at me sideways. "Were you listening at the door?"

"It wasn't necessary. Both of your voices carry quite well."

We had reached Trauma, and she halted before the admissions desk to speak with one of her subordinates. I noticed the large number of patients waiting, and heard the nurse tell Cherijo that one of her colleagues would be reporting late for his shift. Likely she wanted me to leave, but I had gone to too much trouble to arrange the community service assignment to allow her to circumvent me.

It was obvious that she needed an ally. Perhaps if I could convince her to confide in me, her suspicions about me would disappear, and she would begin to trust me.

If I was to take her with me, I needed that trust.

“OK, chief linguist, I can give you exactly one minute.” She picked up a stack of charts from the desk. “What do you want?”

“We must confirm tomorrow's agenda.”

Her expression blanked. “Tomorrow's agenda for what?”

“Your community service quota.” When that didn't register, I added, “You are scheduled to work in botanical fields.”

“What has that got to do with you?” Before I could answer, she closed her eyes briefly. “Let me guess. You're scheduled to supervise me.”

“That is correct.”

“OK, chief linguist.” She glanced at her wristcom. “What do you need to confirm?”

“A time and place to meet in the morning.”

“I'm pulling a double shift, and I need five of sleep to be human.” She expelled a breath. “Meet me at my quarters, Main housing building, West Wing, at Alpha shift commencement.” She moved toward the exam rooms, her shoulders hunched - as if she carried a heavy weight on her back.

Did she consider me her burden? Forcing the issue would not instill trust. “I can request another supervisor for you,” I called after her.

“Don't bother.” She sounded resigned. “Someone obviously thinks I deserve this.”

#

I arrived at Cherijo's quarters the following morning at the time she had specified. She did not answer the door chime until I enabled it for the third time.

“Wait a minute,” I heard her call out over the com panel. She mumbled something else before she opened the door. “Come in, Reeve. I'm almost ready.”

She had dressed appropriately in old, shabby garments, but was still consuming her morning beverage. A small, four-legged, silver-furred mammal approached me. It was something like a feral Vukta from Carsca VII, but smaller and without the venom-filled spine frills.

I had fought a number of felines in the arena, and they were efficient killers. “A domesticated animal?”

“Uh-huh.” She finished her drink.

The creature was quite bold - it sniffed my footgear, then began rubbing itself against my calves and ankles. The odd sounds it produced from its throat were quite plaintive - but so were the Vukta's, just before they pounced and stabbed their prey to death. If she had domesticated it, she had likely formed an emotional attachment to the creature - so she would not appreciate me shooting it.

“What does it want?”

“His name is Jenner,” she told me. “He wants you to pet him.”

“Why?”

“Didn't you ever - “ she halted, then began securing her hair. “That's why they're called pets, Reeve. You pet them.” She bound the end of her braid. “Most alien cultures have domesticated animals, don't they?”

“No.” I thought of my former owner, who had kept me naked, collared and chained to her side whenever she traveled. “However, there are several species who consume such small mammals as their primary dietary -“

“Never mind. Forget I asked.” She crouched down and stroked the animal with her hands. The cat didn’t appear to want her attention, and continued to entreat me with its menacing yowls. It had blue eyes, like her - perhaps it was controlled by a mind-eating sadistic parasite. “Come on. Let’s go.”

She seemed impressed with my glidecar. “Who did you bribe to get this?” she asked as she entered the passenger side.

“No one.” I wondered if she truly cared to hear the tale, or if she was merely making what humans called “polite conversation.” “It was a gift.”

“I see.”

“I doubt it.”

“Okay, who gave it to you?”

“A grateful Furinac who had been unable to communicate with colonial militia during an unauthorized transport.”

“He must have been really grateful.” She trailed her fingers over the soft seat covering. “What exactly did you do for him?”

“That requires a rather lengthy explanation.” Her moods were erratic and unpredictable, and that annoyed me. That she would have any interest in my activities seemed unlikely - or was she at last taking an interest in me? “Have you toured the Botanical Project Area yet?”

“Some of it.” Her interest, and some of her color, abruptly disappeared.

“You’re disturbed. What is it?”

She closed her eyes and leaned back against the seat cushions. The way she sat made her look very young and defeated. “I lost a patient last night.”

Surely a physician grew accustomed to watching a percentage of patients die - it was only logical that some would. Yet she seemed genuinely distraught. Terrans often avoided discussing painful topics, although I never quite understood why. Suppressing emotions appeared to be more damaging than having none at all.

“We will be working in the hybrid cultivation area today,” I told her, changing the subject. “There are a number of off world specimens being crossbred with native plants in production.”

She yawned. “Excuse me.”

“You did not get your five hours sleep.”

“No.”

That Mayer would verbally abuse her when she devoted so much of her time to his FreeClinic made my thoughts darken. “Charge nurse T’Nliqinara told me you’ve worked four extra shifts this week.”

“Uh-huh.” She avoided my gaze.

“Is Dr. Mayer aware of your extended work hours?” If he was not, perhaps I should inform him. Among other things.

She snorted. “Dr. Mayer probably spits whenever he hears my name. Drop it, all right?”

Another painful topic. I would need help determining what to make the next. “What would you care to talk about?”

“Nothing, chief linguist.” She made a negligent gesture with her hand. “You can be the conversational navigator.”

“Very well.” I halted the glidecar near our assigned work area. “Tell me what you know about agricultural cultivation.”

“Absolutely nothing outside of a few required botany courses during secondary school.” Another yawn. “All of which I gave little or no attention to.”

“We’ll begin was something basic.” I thought of the various projects requiring immediate attention. Hydroponics required too much explanation, and grafting - something that as a surgeon she would likely be very good at - was restricted to experienced cultivators only. “Perhaps planting some seedlings.”

I retrieved several flats of seedlings already removed from their hydroponics pods and prepared for transfer to the soil. The hybrids were particularly valuable, and the senior site botanist expressed his concern, but I felt the doctor could perform the simple task without difficulty. I set her to work on one side of the hybrid field and went to work on the other myself.

I discovered how much I had misjudged Cherijo when the senior botanist stopped at her row an hour later and began shouting at her. I went over to find that she had placed the seedlings exactly where I had indicated.

And every single specimen was planted wrong.

“Do you see this?” The botanist, a Psyoran, was so agitated that he had turned monochromatic and had distended veins popping from his multiple frill layers. “It took two cycles to germinate these seeds! Two cycles!”

”This is her first assignment.” I knelt down and carefully removed one specimen. “She will not make the same mistake again.”

“Not as long as I work this field,” the botanist promised.

“You know, you should water them more,” Cherijo told him. “They might grow a little faster.”

“They’re *grown* in water, you - you - “ the Psyoran became incoherent.

“Really.” She eyed the seedlings. “Then maybe you should stick some labels on them for the rest of us non-plant life-forms. You know, ‘like this side up?’”

He stared at her before resorting to language that I had not programmed into the colonial linguistic database, and slighted everything from her mental capacity to her genetic origins.

“Oh yeah?” She didn’t understand the words, but she clearly grasped his meaning. “And what was your mother? A tumbleweed? Poison ivy?”

Before the botanist could say more, I stepped between them. “There appears to be no permanent damage. I will personally correct her error.”

“She’s not to touch another pod. Keep her black thumb out of my specimens.” He flapped as he stalked back to the cultivation center.

“What did I do?” she demanded.

I began digging out the next seedling. “You planted them upside down.”

She scowled. “How was I supposed to know the things are the roots, and the brown part is supposed to be above the ground?”

I could not fathom how someone so intelligent could have done something so ridiculous. “If you have listened when I explained the procedure to you, you would have known.”

“Reever, you never once said the roots were the *white* things.”

I paused for a moment, wishing briefly that I could express a few words not contained on the colonial linguistic database. “I was not aware I had to specify that fact.”

“Well, I didn’t kill any of them.” She leaned over me and peered at the row. “Did I?”

“They’ll survive.”

“Great.” She glanced back to where the senior site botanist was still pacing back and forth and complaining to another of his colleagues. “Tell me, what did that raving maniac mean when he said I had a black thumb?”

“He meant you need to be assigned to another project.”

“Even better.” She sniffed. “What would you recommend that I try next, chief linguist?”

I gave the matter some consideration. “Working with something inanimate.”

“Very funny.”

I brushed the loose soil from my hands as I stood and checked the time. “We’re finished.”

She eyed the flat of seedlings left to one side. “But I -“

I raised one hand, imitating one of her favorite habitual gestures. “You’ve done enough.”

“Not yet,” she said. “Hear me out.”

She went on to explain the unusual circumstances regarding Alun Karas, the patient who had died at the FreeClinic the night before. He had evidently aspirated some resin after a collection device had exploded, and she thought the sap might be responsible for the infection that had killed him. I agreed that it might help to visit the site where the botanist had been collecting samples.

She seemed to have no recollection of the vision we had shared on the day we met, for she showed no hesitation, even when I indicated she would have to enter the gnorra groves with me.

Her lack of fear would make what I wanted to do easier for both of us.

“I am familiar with his work assignment. He was over in a section adjoining the south range.” I kept my voice bland. “We can reach it from here on foot.”

Cherijo was quiet as we made our way into the gnorra groves. I opened my mind, gathering in what I could of her thought images and feelings. Her emotions radiated over everything, and I sensed a distinct division in them - she felt despondency over the loss of her patient, and happiness over something completely unrelated and unidentifiable. She demonstrated little pleasure in sharing my company, so what was creating the warmth behind the sadness?

Perhaps she would tell me. “Thinking of pleasant memories?”

“You’re certainly interested in what I’m thinking all the time.”

“Occupational hazard.”

By that time we had left the fields and were walking through some dense growth into the uncultivated areas. She wasn’t paying attention to where she was stepping, however, and I had to catch her as she stumbled over a hidden tangle of roots. I stopped until she regained her balance.

Touching her strengthened the connection between us a hundredfold. I knew what she was thinking, and who had brought her here. Who made her happy and excited. It wasn’t me.

It was another man. An alien.

I took hold of her other arm, then brought my hands to her wrists as she raised them in a defensive gesture. Her wrists, in front of my face - it was exactly as it had been in the vision. But I could not think of precognition or the connection we shared, not in that moment.

She had been busy making new friends. Friends who were male, and made her happy, and excited her. Friends who were not human. Friends who were not like me. I increased my grip.

“What are you doing?” she whispered.

I probed her thoughts, determined to know all of it. “He was here with you.”

“What?”

“The pilot, Torin.” I saw his face in her mind. “He was here with you, wasn’t he?” I wanted to know what he had done to her, and what she had given him. If she would not tell me, I would locate the memories myself.

“How do you know - “ she wrenched away from my hands, breaking the tentative connection between us. “What was that? What did you do to me?”

“I linked with you.” And would again, as soon as I could put my hands on her. Had she been intimate with the Jorenian? How long had this been going on?

“Linked?” She stepped back. “What the hell does that mean?”

“I established a mental link with you, when I touched you. I have tried before, but you did not realize - “

Her chin sagged for a moment. “You did this *before*?”

“The first time we met, at the trading center.” I took hold of her wrists once more and raised to them. “This image was one I shared with you.” Before she had met Torin - before she had ever seen him. I had prior claim on her.

“Reever - you - “ Anger reduced her speech capacity significantly. “I never said you could touch me or - or - “

Didn’t she understand? Couldn’t she feel the connection between us? Did I have to explain *everything* to her? “I don't have to touch you.”

I dropped her wrist, and she swiveled and began to walk away.

No.

What happened next was as much a surprise to me as it was to her. I reached out to her mind to link, but determination to stop her changed the probe and allowed me control over her physical body.

Stop.

Her body halted, as if time stood still. She began to cry out, but I stopped that impulse as well. *Quiet.*

Then I went after her.

I moved around her, holding her mind with mine as I inspected her. She was trying to speak; I could see her throat moving. But I controlled her speech center, and blocked all sound impulses. I could control everything she did.

Her thoughts were frantic - she was wondering how I could be doing this, what type of psychic ability I had. Even experiencing my linkhold over her, she could not believe it was possible.

I looked into her eyes, and attempted a direct thought transfer. *Yes, it is.*

Reever? She was even more shocked than before. *Can you hear me?*

Yes. I hear you. I moved closer, enjoying my power over her. Who would not wish control such as this over another being? Especially one I wanted so much?

I felt no guilt. She was my balance. She belonged with me. She belonged *to* me. And if she did not recognize it now, in time she would understand.

You are really doing this. She didn't want to believe it, but her mind was logical, and she was not a coward. *Why? Why are you doing this to me?*

How could I explain the needs surging inside me? She would not believe them. I did not myself. *You're the only one I've never had to touch.*

Her mind was a snarl of contradictions and emotions - curiosity, outrage, fear, and something else, something she wouldn't reveal to me. She held up barriers there which I could not penetrate. Beyond her emotions, her mind was orderly and ruthlessly organized - her cognitive knowledge of medicine alone was astounding - and I realized that what she had learned during her brief years would have taken another Terran decades, perhaps even a lifetime to comprehend.

I moved back into what she was unconsciously trying to conceal - her memory center. Everywhere I saw shadows upon shadows, suppressing and obscuring her life before she came to K-2. There was only one, very clear memory I could make out - that of another Terran female, older than Cherijo, with vivid red hair.

Lighten up, Joey. You do anymore studying and your eyes will fall out of your head. Come on, let's go shopping.

Joey. *Of course, a diminutive of Cherijo.* I liked the sound of it very much.

Images of my own body, injured and in a hospital berth, pushed me back, trying to force me from her mind. *Enough, Reeever.* Her subconscious drew strength from those shadows, even though I suspected she herself was not aware of them. The combination was quite powerful. *Get out of my head!*

My warrior of life. She had yet to recognize that I was her balance.

Wait. I took her hand in mine, entwined my fingers with hers. I had to make her understand who I was, what I was. She did not understand that she would be safe with me, that I had as many shadows and dark places inside me. She did not know that I would kill anything that harmed her. *There's more.*

More what?

I opened my mind to her, sending brief bursts of images from my own past. I had never revealed myself to another with such candor, and I was not sure if she would even comprehend my motive for doing so. I found I did not care - even if it meant nothing to her, I wanted to show her my life, everything about me.

This is who I am. This is what I was.

I thought of the first planet on which my parents had left me. There had been no sapient inhabitants, so I had spent several days alone, acting recklessly, injuring myself as I looked for my mother and father, even though I knew they had taken the ship and left me there. If I kept looking, my younger self reasoned that I would find them, and not have to face the prospect of living and dying alone on that barren world.

My parents had been very disappointed when they had returned several days later. I had fallen ill, and nearly died from the fever and an infected wound on my leg. The contempt they had felt as they repaired the damage and brought me back to health had been only too clear.

I had been even more terrified while enduring my trial of discipline on Tarvasc. I made her see that, watch the first time an examiner had slashed the back of my hand with his blade. The many weeks of hunger and punishment that had followed had purged me of my youthful insubordination, and tempered me into an obedient child. My parents had never had cause to complain about my behavior again.

I wanted to show her everything I had experienced over my lifetime. I began sending a continuous stream of memory, all the worlds and beings I had encountered until the Hsktskt had taken me from Svcita and enslaved me.

I did not show her everything, however. I kept from her my years in the arena; I did not want her to see that thing that I had become on the killing sands. How I had suffered, and what they had done to me. How it had changed and shaped me into the man I had become. Perhaps someday I would tell her, but not now. Not until I was assured of her loyalty to me.

Let - me - go.

She still resisted me, and I could feel something growing inside her mind - she was reaching for her own, unused mental resources. That alarmed me - if she used them incorrectly, one or both of us could end up with brain damage.

Although it was like tearing a wound in myself, I ended the linkhold.

As soon as she regain control of her body, she fell down on her knees, with such force that she tore her trousers. When I reached to help her, she crawled back away from me. "Don't touch me!"

"Cherijo." The way she cowered perplexed me. Had she seen nothing? "I won't hurt you." I helped her to her feet, and held her as she regained her balance. The smell of blood alarmed me. "Are you injured?"

She blinked. "Injured?"

I glanced down, saw the red stains on her trousers, felt my stomach clench. I had made her bleed. "You grazed your knees -"

"You just took control of my mind and body, against my will, and you want to know if my knees hurt?" She shoved my hands away and staggered back. "Get away from me!"

I had to calm her. "I apologize."

Cherijo stared at me for a long moment. "Take your apology and stuff it." She bent over and brushed off the dirt and leaves clinging to her trousers.

Obviously she thought of our connection as some form of assault. "I meant no harm."

"Right." She uttered a sound of mirth, but I did not think she was amused. "Do you do this a lot?"

"No." I did not like her tone, or her insinuation. "Never with another human."

All the expression left her face, and she came toward me. Her behavior made no sense, until she hit me in the face with her fist. The surprise blow knocked me backward to the ground. I stared at her as I checked my jaw, but she had not broken it.

"Don't ever, ever touch me again!" She stalked away.

I got up from the ground. "Cherijo, wait."

"Go to hell!" she shouted without looking back at me.

According to most Terran beliefs, I would. According to my own, I'd already arrived. "You're going in the wrong direction." It hurt to talk and I checked my jaw again. She had a strong arm for such a small female. I would have to remember that.

"Damn!" She turned back to me. "Where is it?"

I pointed to a spot a few yards away. "There. Where that the gnorra trees are."

I followed her to the small clearing, which still contained Alun Karas's ruined equipment. There were hardened sap sprays covering a three yard radius. Cherijo examined the central collection container and gazed around the benign looking plant life. She also sneezed several times.

“Karas must have aspirated some of this gunk,” she muttered in a low voice as she took some samples of the dried resin substance. “Got to get this over to the lab, maybe they have a test to prove it caused the pneumonic symptoms.”

She was ignoring me. “I had no intention of harming you,” I assured her.

“Collect some of these leaves, will you?”

It was odd, how she immersed herself in her work to escape confrontation. I could still feel her anger and her fear, like a tangible force. “I apologize for frightening you.”

“I saw some empty containers over there. Use one of those.”

Perhaps if I was persistent, and forthcoming, she would feel reassured. “I didn't expect the link to be so complete.”

“Reever.” She turned to me, her face set. “There's no excuse for what you did.” She sighed, then added, “Next time, ask first, okay?”

“I understand.” I had only frightened her, and she did not despise me. I could build on that. “Will you link with me now, Joey?”

“No!”

I frowned. “Why not?”

“I don't want to talk about it, Chief Linguist.” She uttered the words carefully, keeping direct eye contact with me.

I nodded, then sneezed myself.

“We've got to get out of here, the staff may cause an allergic response.” She glanced around us, evidently pondering what to take. “Now, help me get these sample tubes filled.” She handed me some vials. “One more thing.”

“What is it?”

“Don't call me Joey.”

#

I sent several encrypted reports back to the Hsktskt homeworld for TssVar, describing the military build up in the region. I adjusted the numbers, grossly underestimating them so that the mobility would not trigger a fleet attack. I was ordered to continue to monitor the quadrant and make weekly reports on any changes.

The linkhold I established with Cherijo had an unusual physical side effect on me. I could not stop thinking about her, or how it felt to have control over her body for that short period of time. Entering her mind had been as intimate as sex, more so for I could sense her feelings as well as read her thoughts and control her body. All of this contributed to create a lingering physical desire that despite my concentrated efforts, plagued me without cessation.

I wanted her.

There were females on the colony who were willing to accommodate my physical needs - I had made infrequent use of them in the past - but I found myself curiously reluctant to resort to them.

It was as if no one would do now, except Cherijo.

Becoming sexual partners seemed logical, but convincing the Terran doctor to share her body with me would be difficult. Unfortunately, I had never been with another human. The database indicated that cautious sincerity, combined with a certain amount of stimulation, might resolve my dilemma, but there was an aggravating lack of specific detail. I was considering how best to approach the matter with her when a request for a translator came in from the FreeClinic. I took the signal and told my assistant Fargas that I would see to it myself.

“Thank you, Chief,” Fargas sighed with relief. He was a sensitive Yturi, and had a tendency to wilt whenever exposed to strong personalities. “That little human doctor over there scares me.”

I reported to assessment, and was directed by the charge nurse to a trauma room, where a Binder lay on an exam table. I could not make the traditional greeting - its mate was nowhere to be seen - but I alerted it to my presence and politely relayed my name. It seemed unresponsive, it only lifted a few tendrils in acknowledgment. Before I could ask what was wrong, Cherijo hurried into the room. She saw me and skidded to a halt. She looked flushed and untidy.

I wanted to toss her over my shoulder and carry her off. “Dr. Grey Veil.”

“Every time I turn a corner,” she said, then went to examine the patient.

Seeing the Binder and the doctor together made me look at Cherijo differently. She was not as small or light weight as her patient, but they both had a unique symmetry to their physical designs and countenances. Light glimmered over her dark hair, drawing the same silvery light from it as it did from the Binder’s translucent tendrils.

Perhaps my physical desire for her was due in part to her appearance. I had not considered Terran females attractive before, but it could be a subconscious response to her shape and coloring.

She seemed completely unaware of me and only smiled down at the patient.

“Just like a fairy.”

“Excuse me?” I was not familiar with the term.

“A fairy, chief linguist.” Her gaze met mine. “Didn't anyone ever tuck you in and tell you a bedtime story?”

Evidently that was something from an immature Terran's life experience. I could not imagine either of my joyless parents wasting precious research time with such attention to me. "No."

"Your loss." She reached to turn the patient onto its back, then sniffed several times. "What is that smell?"

I breathed in, and frowned. Odd that I had not noticed the strong chemical trace in the air before. "Binders do not exude that odor naturally."

Cherijo went over and tapped the room environmental controls, then went very still. After a slight hesitation, she relayed something then turned to look back at the exam table.

Her face had gone completely white. "Cherijo, what - "

"Do you know anything about KleeFourteen?"

Fertilizer? "I know what it is."

"That's good, because you're standing in a room with twenty times the safe limit dispersed in the air." She sealed the exam room doors. "Try not to breathe deeply, and don't make any unnecessary movements."

She moved slowly back to the exam table, activated a scanner and passed it over the binder. "Our friend here has ingested it."

Now I understood why she was so afraid. Digestion changed KleeFourteen into a highly volatile, explosive compound that destabilized when disturbed in any way. "Skin seals - "

She shook her head. "It's already saturated and begun the transdermal process. Ask it exactly how much swallowed."

I attended to the patient, using its complex verbal/physical language. “The doctor has detected KleeFourteen in your system. She wishes to help you. How much did you ingest?”

“One half container. They said that would kill me.” The Binder was in such deep distress that it could barely respond. “Why am I still breathing?”

“I don’t know,” I said, then told Cherijo, “Half a stanlitre.”

She met my gaze. “That's enough to do the job.”

I watched her as she prepared a counter measure. Her hands moved so smoothly they nearly blurred. We both looked as a display-only signal appeared on the room panel, informing Cherijo that the entire facility was in the process of being evacuated.

“Why did you order an evacuation?” I asked her.

“Given the amount in the binder system, the blast radius will be close to one kilometer.” She lifted the syrinpress and calibrated it. “If I don't do that right, that is.”

“You have sufficient time to stop the process?”

“I don't know.” She gnawed at her lower lip. “If you pray, Reeve, do it now.”

If there was enough time, I would knock her out and carry her from the facility.

“How long to complete the exudation?”

She checked her wristcom. “Two minutes. Can you hold your breath that long?”

Not enough time, it seemed. I nodded as I watched her cover her hands with gloves. “KleeFourteen is very efficient.”

“You don't say.” Cherijo gently slid restraining clasps over each of the Binder’s limbs and tightened them to immobilize it.

“You are bound to her,” the Binder murmured to me. “but she does not realize this?”

“You are mistaken,” I told it.

“Your bonds are so strong they nearly become visible with each word you speak.” It glanced at Cherijo. “You should declare them to her.”

Cherijo looked at me with her brows raised, and I told her the Binder was expressing sincere regrets for its actions. She nodded and finished setting the room controls to discharge, then spoke to the Binder. “You must not have wanted to die too badly, if you came for help.”

The Binder was polite and imitated her smile, then glanced at me. “She shows compassion to the weak and the guilty. She is beautiful, linguist. My mate, Two of Bind 02376, is much the same. You should reveal your bond as soon as possible, before another claims her.”

Before she could ask, I told Cherijo, “It had second thoughts after the act. Two of Bind 02376 will not survive without it.”

“Love triumphs over despair,” she said as she gently touched one of the Binder’s trembling limbs. “Hold the arm still for me, Reeve. Like this. I’m going to inject at the bicepular joint. I have to get this next to the plasma stream, or we are all going to be vaporized.” She carefully positioned the syrinpress and administered the counter agent. “Now, take a deep breath, chief linguist, and shut up.”

Holding my breath and remaining immobile was not difficult. I had fought many underwater bouts during my slave days. I was more worried about her moving inadvertently - she was never still. In fact, I had never known her to remain in one spot for more than a few seconds.

I saw her watching the readout on the room console. Her thoughts darkened, and the bleakness rolled off her in tangible waves. There was a tone to them that echoed inside me. *She's thinking of her parent.* I had only collected a vague image of the man from our link in the gnorra groves, but he had left a powerful impression on her. Whatever she felt for her father, it was not a happy emotion.

I felt a corresponding darkness spread through my own thoughts. *Did he make her suffer, as I suffered?* I had an irrational urge to find this parent of hers and crush his windpipe in slow increments.

She caught my gaze, and met it with her own. Her expression changed from grave to curious, and the bleakness of her thoughts evaporated.

She is beautiful.

When the evacuation units switched off, we released our held breath, and I watched her wipe her eyes with the back of her hand.

Tears were falling from her eyes, but she smiled at me. It was the type of facial expression I had observed other Terrans share with close associates, or lifemates. An acknowledgement of shared camaraderie, unspoken confidences. Her smile promised things that we did not share.

Words rose inside me, words that I sensed would be extremely unwise to speak. "Do you need anything else, doctor?"

"I can handle it from here."

"Good." I exited the exam room without looking back.

#

I brooded over my situation with the doctor for the remainder of the day. It would have been wiser to remain at the FreeClinic, given her favorable mood after the Binder's

treatment. It had been an opportunity to explain my dilemma to her, one of which I should have taken advantage. She may have responded with compassion, perhaps even with gratitude.

I did not want those things. I wanted her, willing, excited, and naked against me. I wanted her to come to me, to declare herself bound to me as I was to her.

After I finished my shift, I drove back to the FreeClinic, and sat in my glidecar outside the facility for a short period, debating on my next course of action. Cherijo and I did not have a relationship, as Terrans defined them. To initiate intimacy between us, I would have to at least declare my intentions to her. I had studied the sociology database; such relationships traditionally commenced with some demonstration of physical attraction. Touching had not worked, so I would have to try something else. Oral contact, perhaps, although the database had not been specific about how to go about kissing another Terran.

It would be much easier if I could simply take her someplace private, disrobe her and initiate intercourse.

Something tapped on the side view panel of my glidecar. It was Lisette, peering in. I opened the panel.

“Why are you sitting out here all alone, *mon cher*?”

“I was thinking.” I stepped out and secured my vehicle. “What are you doing here?”

“I cut myself slicing bread.” She showed me a finger, which was bandaged. “It is nothing.” She gave me a shrewd look. “If you are looking for the little doctor, she just walked down the east path, toward *Le centre culturel*.”

I excused myself and followed the east path, catching sight of Cherijo just before she entered the Hall of Art and Expression. It seemed an odd place for her to visit, until I saw the Jorenian pilot follow her in. Perhaps they had arranged to meet here, to discuss the exhibits. Jorenians were known to be somewhat conservative in regard to color and form; I doubted he would have any opinions of great interest to share with her.

Or not.

I waited for a few moments outside, but when they did not reemerge I went inside. I could hear the pilot's deep voice and her softer, higher-pitched tone as they conversed at the other end of the hall. I stayed in the shadows as I drew close enough to hear what they were saying. Cherijo was telling Kao Torin about an unpleasant encounter with another Terran. Not me, but a pilot named Springfield.

My desire ebbed as I listened, and my hands curled into fists. *If this Terran harmed her -*

"Cherijo, did he harm you?" Torin asked.

The fact that the Jorenian gave voice to my exact thoughts startled me. His species was not telepathic, although it was said they shared a certain proximity empathy with their lifemates.

"Of course not," she said.

The Jorenian was not convinced. "Did he threaten you?"

"No. He didn't do anything to me. Stop it."

"I know this man." Torin sounded grim. "He has a careless mouth."

"He was just being Terran." She sighed.

I stepped out to see him touch her face. My knife was in my hand before I realized I had drawn it.

“There are many differences between our people.” Torin was more than twice her size, so he seemed to be looming over her. “Do you regret being associated with me?”

“No. I don’t care what anyone says about us.”

I went very still. She cared for him deeply. I could see it on her face, in her eyes. I could hear it in her voice.

“I can never be Terran, Healer.”

“I’ll never be Jorenian.” She frowned. “Springfield is a jerk, Terra is welcome to him.”

“Tell me what is in your heart.”

I listened as she bantered with him. She resorted to humor to avoid emotional confrontations, but this time she seemed to be sincerely concerned about the disparity between their occupations. Torin matched her wit, which was probably wise of him, then spoke of bonding.

I had not considered that Cherijo might wish to establish intimacy with another male - particularly a male of a different species. She had been bred on the homeworld, and I had thought she might carry at least some of the native prejudices.

Yet here she was, in love with an alien.

She spoke seriously from that point, and they exchanged their views on interspecies relationships. Torin was putting his hands on her, touching her skin and her hair with growing intimacy. Then he spoke of it, indicating with some finesse that he had strong sexual desire for her.

Jorenians did not share intimacies with anyone but a Chosen bondmate. He would have to claim her to take her, and a Jorenian bonded for life.

It was time I interrupted, before Cherijo foolishly pledged herself to this male. He had not explained it to her adequately, she had no idea of what she was being drawn to do. Yet before I could speak, the pilot gathered her in his arms and kissed her.

To see them like that, to feel the strength of her arousal projecting like a radiant corona, banished most of the desire and the violence I felt. All that was left was a void inside me, one I had not felt since the day I had met Cherijo.

She was not to be mine. She would never be mine.

I left the Hall just before a group of students entered, and walked back to my glidecar. Although I had been alone most of my life, for the first time in memory, I did not enjoy my solitary state.

#

In the weeks that followed, I avoided Cherijo Grey Veil, immersed myself in work and began making tentative preparations to leave K-2. I would not be returning to the Faction or collaborating with the League, and while committing suicide still had its merits, I found myself strangely reluctant at the prospect of ending my life. It seemed . . . cowardly.

I began searching star charts in an attempt to locate a remote, non-League world free of slavers and open to offworld immigrants. I narrowed my inquiries to multi-species colonies, and prepared a list. Wherever more than one species lived together, a linguist would find work.

If I found one far enough away from K-2, in time I might be able to forget about her.

Administrator Hansen requested a meeting with me, but I did not respond. Seeing her reminded me of Cherijo and that first day at the Trading Center, and I knew

they had since become friends. The request was repeated three times, until one day Ana came to my office in person.

“Chief,” Fargas called over the console com, “Administrator Hansen wishes to speak with you.”

It would be impolite to use the pretense of work to send her away. “Show her in, please.”

“Hello, Duncan.” She smiled as she entered, and waited until my assistant had left us before she continued. “Would you mind telling me why you’re ignoring my signals?”

“I apologize for my negligence.” I indicated the complicated linguistics program I was pretending to design on my panel. “I have been quite preoccupied.”

“That you have.” Ana took a seat in front of my desk and crossed her legs at the ankle.

“Venyara?” I asked, nodding at the braided amalgam chain she wore.

“Yes.” She touched it. “A benefit of having once been married to a human/Venyar crossbreed.”

“Interesting.” Another human female who had loved an alien - did everyone have to remind me of Cherijo? “What can I do for you, administrator?”

“You’ve logged so many extra shifts that you’ve single-handedly pushed your entire department ahead of the rest of the colony for cycle productivity.”

I sat back in my chair. “I was not aware that diligence had become a criminal offense.”

“I’m not calling you a criminal.” She frowned at me. “Duncan, what’s wrong with you?”

“I don’t understand what you mean.”

She made a circle on the arm of her chair with one of her slim, manicured fingers.

“I’ve known you for a long time, and I’ve never sensed any of your emotions.”

“I don’t have any.”

She seemed surprised. “Why would you think that?”

I rose from my chair and turned my back to her, disciplining my thoughts and concentrating my focus on the view of the busy glidepath outside my office. “I was never exposed to human emotions. By the time I became aware of the deficiency, my personality had already been formed.”

“Your parents were human.”

I glanced back at her. “My parents were dedicated scientists, Ana. They were concerned with investigating alien cultures, not with my psychological well being.” They had not been concerned about me in the least, but stating that seemed unnecessary. “Thus I have no emotions.”

“I see.” She hesitated. “It may not be my place to tell you this, Duncan, but I’m afraid you have them now.”

I returned to my desk. “That is highly unlikely.”

“And if I bring Cherijo Grey Veil here?”

I imagined Cherijo in my office. I would secure the door panel, and clear off the top of my console. Then I would convince her to forget about the Jorenian. I would enjoy doing that.

Ana caught her breath. “Oh, my. Forgive me, Duncan, I didn’t know.”

I sat down, annoyed with my self-indulgent fantasy. “You did not know what?”

Her cheeks turned pink. “I suspected you had an interest in her, but

not . . . nothing as intense as you're feeling."

Continuing to deny it served no purpose. "I am physically attracted to her."

"Yes, I can . . . tell." She pressed the tips of her fingers to her temple and made a circling motion. "Have you spoken to her? Told her any of this?"

"No." I thought of Torin, and the many ways I had plotted his death for my own amusement. "Her affections are presently engaged elsewhere."

"I know she's been seeing a Jorenian pilot, but she's not bonded to him." When I didn't reply, she added, "Duncan, you still have a chance."

I arched a brow. "I prefer not to compete."

"Well, you'll just have to get over that and try." Ana got up and came around the desk, and offered one of her hands, palm out. "Would you allow me?"

I glanced down. "I did not know you used touch."

"I'm not a telepath, but contact helps strengthen my projection." She smiled. "I won't intrude on your memories. I only want to relay something to you that words will not express."

I took her hand, and felt the gentle brush of her thoughts as she opened her mind to me. I held my guards in place, but there was no need for them; she kept her word and did not try to intrude on my thoughts. Instead, she relayed what she had not had the words to describe.

I saw a younger version of Ana on what appeared to be a lunar colony. She was standing in an observation dome, looking out at the stars. I recognized the tall, thin male beside her from a photoscan she kept on her desk.

That is Elars with me, she thought to me. He was my mate.

Elars's mixed parentage was evident, given the purplish tinge to his skin and irregularity of his features. Like all Venyar, he had two mouths, one above his chin, and the other below it. He spoke from both to the youthful Ana, and the harmony of his twin voices was quite unique.

"Do you miss Terra?" he said.

"Sometimes." She wrapped her arms around herself. "I miss the small, familiar things. Being able to feel the sun on my face, hear the wind rustle the oak leaves outside my bedroom window. The smell of wildflowers." She grimaced. "Sometimes I think I would kill for a pound of real chocolate."

Elars rested one of his hands - a rounded appendage with several abbreviated digits - on her shoulder. "You will be returning soon. Your contract here is nearly completed." He sounded sad. "Then it will be my turn to miss one small, familiar thing."

She pressed her hand over his. "I'm not going back without you."

"My residency permits were not approved," he said.

"I know." She looked up at him. "That's why I'm not going back. If we can't be together on my homeworld, we'll find somewhere else to live."

He drew her close. "Ana, please. Think what you are doing. I have seen for myself how difficult a mixed species relationship can be."

"I'm in love with you, and I want to be with you. The hell with the difficulties." She reached up as he bent to her, and they kissed - not altogether in the Terran fashion, given Elars's additional mouth - but with great affection. Ana relayed the sensations and emotions she still remembered from that moment, then slowly withdrew from my mind.

"You sacrificed ever returning to your homeworld for him."

“Yes. My relationship with Elars was worth it.” She stepped back. “I would have done almost anything to stay with him. Do you understand, Duncan?”

I nodded. “Ana, Cherijo does not love me. I cannot love her.”

“Nonsense.” She tapped her finger against my chest. “What you’re experiencing - what you’re dismissing as physical desire - is the beginning of love. And, unless you nurture it, it will never grow.”

Her naiveté was criminal - if only she knew what I was. “She does not care for me.”

“Cherijo will not admit it, but I have sensed a very strong attraction on her side as well.” Ana’s color deepened. “Please don’t repeat that to her, she wouldn’t appreciate it.”

“Very well.” I found the revelation somewhat encouraging. “How do you propose I nurture this - premature love?”

“You need to spend time alone with her - away from the colony, away from work.” She thought for a moment. “William Mayer and I have had several conversations recently about Cherijo. I can arrange for you and the doctor to take a hiatus together, offplanet. Two days should be sufficient, I think.”

The thought of spending that much time alone with Cherijo was exciting - and dangerous. “I am too busy to leave K-2.”

She propped her hands on her hips. “Duncan, you either spend a few days off planet or I have you undergo a psych-eval.”

“Cherijo will not agree.”

“Cherijo won’t have a choice.” Ana pointed to my console. “Now, turn that off and go pack. And Duncan.”

I met her gaze.

“Tell her how you feel, or I will.”

#

True to her word, the administrator arranged for the Oenrallian pilot Dhreen to transport Cherijo and I to a resort moon in a neighboring system. The last time I had visited Caszaria’s Moon, I had been analyzing it for security and viability as a Hsktskt target. Naturally I had exaggerated the resort world’s defense systems and underestimated the static population, making it appear unworthy of a raider attack.

“Good morning, Dhreen,” I greeted the Oenrallian as I boarded his ship.

“Good to see you, chief. You can stow your case over there.” He indicated a cargo bin and checked his wristcom. “If the Doc doesn’t arrive soon, we may have to send out a reconnaissance squad.”

I secured my case and then studied the interior of the ship. It resembled a transport disposal site. “I take it you’re a great believer in salvage parts.”

“Why buy it new when you can scrounge it used?” He grinned at me. “You look pretty nervous. Big date, huh?”

“Perhaps. I do have a favor to ask of you.” I glanced at the entrance ramp. “While we are on this sojourn, will you remain with us as much as possible?”

“Yeah, sure, if you want me to.” He scratched one of his horns. “Any particular reason why?”

I was afraid of being alone with her. “I am not used to being in close proximity with other humans.”

“They’re not so bad, when they don’t spit on you. And the doc can be a laugh a minute.” He squinted at me. “Okay, I’ll stick around. Haven’t taken any time off in a

trader's cycle, might as well kick back." His wristcom chimed, and he answered it.

"Someone needs to see you before we take off."

I left the ship and returned to Main Transport, where a white-haired Terran male was waiting for me. He wore a physician's tunic, and his gaze was sharp and shrewd. He did not offer to shake hands, but indicated I proceed him into a small meeting room.

"Chief Linguist, I don't believe we've met before. I'm Dr. William Mayer."

I recognized the voice, of course. "Duncan Reeve."

"I know your ship is scheduled to launch shortly, so I'll get right to the point. Dr. Grey Veil is the best physician I have on staff." His brows lowered. "She's also a young woman with very little experience of life outside her medical practice."

"I have noticed that, sir." Odd that his opinion of Cherijo had improved so dramatically - and why was he acting like a parent, checking up on an adolescent daughter?

"Good." His brows lowered. "Then you'll have no objection to keeping close watch over her while you're at the resort."

Older human males often felt protective toward younger female members of the species - possibly because of their own latent feelings toward them - but I sensed something more behind his warning. "You believe her to be in danger?"

"She will be more vulnerable, away from the colony." He glanced out the view panel at the dock pads. "Her father is a very powerful man, and he wishes her to return to the homeworld. She will not do so willingly."

"I understand." Not entirely, but perhaps I could learn more from Cherijo while we were at the resort. "Is there anything else?"

“If you see any signs of viral infection in Dr. Grey Veil” - he handed me a relay chip—“contact me on this secure channel at once.”

I turned the chip over in my palm. “We could not launch, if she were infected with an active virus.”

“I know.” He paused, as if searching for a suitable expression. “Think of it as an additional precaution.”

When I returned to the Bestshot, I found Cherijo inside the passenger cabin. Her hair was untidy, her garments wrinkled, and she had also lost a significant amount of body weight. There were shadows under her eyes. I had an immediate urge to take her into my arms and somehow comfort her.

As soon as she saw me, she scowled and muttered “Oh, lovely,” under her breath. The displeasure she projected was as effective as a slap.

“Dr. Grey Veil.” So much for my thoughts of comfort. I turned my attention to the Oenrallian. “Pilot Dhreen.” In his native tongue, I added, “I think you had better anticipate remaining with us for the entire length of our stay.”

“Whatever perfects your shield,” he replied. To Cherijo, he said, “Let's get the gear tethered, I don't want to miss this slot.”

I sat as far away from the doctor as I could, while Dhreen returned to the helm compartment and initiated launch. She kept silent, and I stared at the cabin deck, trying to decide what to do. Declaring myself to her seemed ill-advised, particularly given her reaction to my presence.

Gradually her displeasure faded from my senses, and she grew more contemplative. I did not want to intrude on her mind, but I would have given anything to know what had changed her emotions. Certainly it was not me.

When she moved, I looked up, and saw her brushing her braid back over her shoulder in an absent gesture. There was an odd mark on the side of her neck which had not been there the last time I had seen her. And she was not thinking of me at all - her thoughts were focused on the Jorenian.

“You can signal Pilot Torin when we reach Caszaria’s Moon,” I told her as I studied the wing-shaped symbol. It was not like any artificial dermal enhancement I had ever seen.

She covered the mark with her hand. “Don’t do that.”

Why was she trying to hide it from me? I would have to learn what the mark meant. “Do what?”

“Read my thoughts!”

“They were apparent without need of the telepathic link.” Which should have made them impossible for me to read. I had not realized I was picking up her random thought patterns at all - and I wasn’t touching her.

Clearly she did not believe me. “Did Ana Hansen have something to do with you being on the shuttle?”

“Her exact words were, Duncan, you either spend a few days off planet or I have you undergo a psych-eval,” I responded truthfully.

“I’ll get even with her,” she promised with dark pleasure. “There must be a Rilken convention I can steer her way in the near future.”

I did not respond to that as I was still contemplating the fact that I could know what she was thinking without a link. My abilities had not changed; perhaps hers were growing stronger. It may have been due to our isolation as well - without so many other minds around us to distract me, I could focus solely on her. Or she on me.

It was extremely puzzling.

She folded her hands and rested them on her knee. "Have you ever been to Caszaria's Moon?"

"Yes."

A spark of interest glowed in her eyes. "What's it like?"

"The asteroid is one thousand, four hundred Terran standard kilometers in diameter," I told her. "Artificial dome contained atmosphere, five visitor centers which offer -"

She held up her hand. "Okay, okay. Did you have fun?"

I thought of the survey. Composing reasonable lies for the Hsktskt had not been very enjoyable, but I could not tell her that. The Terran concept of "fun" had never seemed very logical to me in the first place. Some humans thought travel across their world to exotic locations was "fun." Others thought watching professional athletes being electrocuted for game penalties before a live audience was just as entertaining.

"Did you like it all?"

"I found it to be a suitable location for the particulars of the assignment." Indeed, my prevarication regarding the moon had added convincing weight to my argument that the quadrant was too poor and well guarded to be of value to the Faction. It had not entertained me, exactly, but I had taken great satisfaction in my accomplishment.

"You went there is a linguist, then."

"That is correct."

She studied me for a moment. "Reever, have you ever lived on Terra for any length of time?"

I recalled my time at school, most of which I spent in the adjunct juvenile correction facility. No one had believed I was defending myself when I disabled older and much larger students who had tried to beat me. It had been a relief to leave that miserable place. “Four point two revolutions.”

“Did you decide you hated Terrans so much that you would do everything within your power not to be like them?”

I had tried. During the first months at the education facility in which my parents had cast me, I attempted to form acquaintances with others of my species. The years of living among aliens had left their mark on me, however, and the only thing Terrans hated more than aliens was one of their species who didn't. Not a rotation had gone by that someone had not spat saliva at me. I realized she was waiting for a response, and cleared my thoughts.

“I am biologically human.” I disliked my kind, but I could not escape my DNA.

She folded her arms. “Having the hardware, so to speak, has very little to do with how it operates.”

She would know that better than I. “Perhaps you care to show me.”

“What?”

“Show me how to the human.”

She sat back and closed her eyes, ending the conversation.

#

After launch, Dhreen returned to the passenger cabin to serve drinks and relate various adventures he had recently experienced. I found his stories to be improbable but somewhat diverting. Cherijo matched the Oenrallian's claims by describing the delivery of TssVar's brood.

Dhreen found her treatment of the OverLord extremely entertaining, and displayed enthusiastic mirth before asking, "Is there anyone you won't treat, Doc?"

"Overly verbal Oenrallians." She laughed.

Laughter was another human trait I had never mastered. I found little in life to be amusing, and the odd sound produced by forced expulsions of air seemed very undignified. At the same time, I enjoyed hearing her laugh. Her sound was different from other Terrans - low and pleasant to the ear.

"Chief linguist, what do you think?" Dhreen asked me. "Word has at the desk jaunters were pretty spaced about the deal."

I thought of TssVar, and how close Cherijo had come to death. I could accept that it had been wrong to send him to her now. "Dr. Gray Vail believes in her oath."

"Sometimes there is only what we believe in," she said to me.

Her innocent convictions made me feel very old and weary. "Beliefs are fragile at best."

Cherijo refused more spicewine and left us to look through the observatory panel. When Dhreen returned to the helm, she had not returned. I went to check on her. The sight of her standing before the sweeping starscape made me stop and regard her for a long interval.

It was ludicrous, how frail she was - so small and slight that I could have snapped her neck with one hand. At the same time, there was something about her that transcended size and physical strength. She radiated assurance and compassion. She knew who and what she was, and devoted herself to her calling. I suspected nothing else mattered to her as much as preserving life.

My counterpart.

I knew she wished the Jorenian had accompanied her instead of me. I had nothing to offer her, and much to conceal - and yet in that moment, seeing her like that, I wanted nothing more than to turn her around, and say words to bind her to me, in the same way that Ana Hansen had confessed her love to Elars.

Yet she was so human, and I barely was. Would she accept that I could never be like her, never feel what she felt?

I approached her silently, until I was close enough to breathe in her scent. The smell of her skin alone was enough to arouse me.

She turned and nearly walked into me, then recoiled. "Don't sneak up on me like that!"

I moved closer as she tried to edge around me, so that the right side of her body brushed against the front of mine. At the same time, I opened my mind to hers.

She stopped and glared up at me. "No, Reeve! Absolutely not!"

"I could learn more about what it means to be human," I told her.

"Yeah, well, you'll have to do it without taking over another human." She marched back to her seat and strapped in. "Try accessing the database instead."

Dhreen reached Caszaria's Moon a few minutes later. The system was an interesting one, due to the number of advanced indigenous species who had focused their economies on developing resorts, mercantile worlds and other diversions for the heavy trader traffic through the region. Disembarking only took a short interval, and then Dhreen escorted us to our lodging.

"Okay if I leave you with her for a blip?" he asked me. "I've got a few special order parcels to pick up for delivery back to the colony."

Reluctantly I bid him farewell, then turned to Cherijo.

She was staring at the hostel with her mouth hanging slightly open. “Wow.”

The builders had used several architectural styles from the surrounding system, some from an aquatic world, to construct the building. The façade resembled a naturally eroded forest-oasis from the third world in the system, supplemented by transparent viewing spheres.

I waited several minutes for her to adjust to our new surroundings, but she appeared to be completely mesmerized. Her breathing even shallowed. “If you're finished admiring the exterior?” I said, and gestured for her to proceed me into the main lobby area.

Her mouth closed with a snap, and she glared at me. “Oh, I forgot. You've been here before, and spent the whole time measuring the place.”

At the reception portal we were greeted by a small, black-spotted feline innkeeper at the front desk. “Welcome, esteemed guests,” the Caszarian said. It was a shame Cherijo’s domesticated animal was not equally evolved. “I’m Mherrr, your hostess. Please let me know at any time how I may enhance your stay with us.”

We were directed to our individual quarters, which of course were next to each other on an upper floor.

“I’m surprised Ana didn't make us share,” I heard Cherijo say as she went to open her door.

I looked over, surprised. “If you prefer - “

She sighed. “It was a joke, chief linguist.”

Cherijo retreated into her quarters and did not immediately reemerge, so I went into my own. After cleansing and changing into suitable garments for a social meal, I signaled Dhreen. “Where are you?”

“Picking up the last of my orders.” The Oenrallian frowned. “What, is she giving you a hard time already?”

“You’d better join us for the evening meal.”

The pilot grumbled about lost business opportunities, but a short interval later he met me down by the fountain in front of the hostel.

“So what’s got your engines in overdrive?” he wanted to know.

“I am not having much success communicating with Dr. Grey Veil.” I checked my wristcom; she was already ten minutes late for our rendezvous. “I wish to know how you were able to get on such casual terms with her, given your short acquaintance.”

“I don’t try to communicate with her, I talk to her.”

I frowned. “I don’t understand.”

Dhreen sighed. “You’ve got a lot to learn about Terran women. Just watch and” his gaze fixed on a point over my left shoulder, and his jaw sagged - “uh . . . watch.”

I turned to see Cherijo approaching us. She wore a strange red garment, a long black scarf, and she had somehow grown taller. She moved differently as well - slowly, with great care. I saw that the extended heels of her footgear were responsible for her change in height and stride, then I realized she wasn’t wearing a black scarf - she had released her hair.

She had very long, dark, glorious hair. Why did she keep it bound up as she did?

The garment she wore was unlike any she had donned previously - it clung to her body, showing its true lines. She was even more slight and delicate than I had imagined. The way the top section emphasized her breasts and revealed her skin was particularly provocative. It made me wish to remove my own tunic and cover her with it.

Dhreen made a whistling sound. “Doc, is that you?”

She slapped his arm. "Behave." She turned to me. "Reever."

"You have a great deal of your body displayed," I said.

The corners of her mouth lifted. "That's the point of wearing a dress like this, chief linguist."

"And what a dress!" Dhreen folded his arm through hers. "Let's go. You'll really blind the tourists, Doc."

"Dazzle, Dhreen," she said, her voice dry. "Dazzle."

I followed after them, observing Dhreen as he conversed with her. They took a great deal of time to choose a dining establishment, then made humorous remarks about food menus. When at last we were brought to a table, I stepped forward and slid back Cherijo's chair for her.

As she sat down, a section of her hair slid over my wrist. I spread my fingers, watching the dark strands move against my skin. It was so long that I imagined she could wrap it around her like a cloak.

"I've never seen your hair released before," I told her. "Is it all yours?"

"I didn't purchase any of it," she replied. "Of course it's my hair." I smoothed down some wayward strands, until she felt my touch and added, "Knock it off."

The menu was unimaginative, but tolerable. I ordered a simple entrée of scalded bitterroot and noted Dhreen and Cherijo's choices. I was surprised to hear her select an Oenrallian dish that the pilot recommended; most Terrans disliked alien food intensely.

I was no expert at casual conversation, and Cherijo seemed more interested in observing the other patrons, so Dhreen dominated the discussion over our meal. Cherijo found his stories amusing, which allowed me to watch her without censure, until something disturbed me.

Someone was watching us.

I scanned the room until I spotted the alien taking such an interest in our trio - a solitary male Dervling. What fixed my attention was the odd manner in which it seemed to be staring at Cherijo. The Dervling I had encountered in the past were not only shy creatures who preferred to travel in groups, but were also quite near-sighted. This male seemed to have no difficulty focusing on Cherijo's face, or following the movements of her hands.

I projected my mind, and found his open to me. His thoughts were not of the placid, Dervling variety. He was a Terran, wearing a disguise. He had been paid to come here to find us. As soon as we left the dining establishment, he meant to follow us.

He intended to kill me, and take her.

"Are you feeling all right?" Cherijo's hand touched my arm, startling me.

"Reever?"

I took her hand in mine and initiated a linkhold. *Don't fight me. We're in danger.*

What are you talking about? Danger from what?

The male by the entrance door. He's been watching you. I projected the image of the Dervling to her so she would know of whom I spoke.

He looks pretty harmless.

He is the Terran disguised as a Dervling. Here for you from the home world.

Here for me?

I stood, and made her stand with me. I had to remove her to a safer location.

Surprised, the Oenrallian dropped a utensil. "Hey, the food isn't that bad—"

“Dhreen, excuse us.” I put my arm around Cherijo’s waist. “We have a private matter to attend to.”

I maintained the linkhold as I took her out of the dining establishment and to the open walkways. As I expected, the Dervling followed us, and I studied our surroundings for an escape route.

Cherijo saw him as well. *What does he want?*

You. There was no alternative route to safety, and far too many places he could corner us. I heard the sound of his weapon as he drew and activated it, and realized he would attempt his abduction in public. *He plans to kill me and take you.*

How can we stop him?

Come with me, quickly.

I led her back to the service passages between the different structures. None of the door panels were accessible, and I could feel the Dervling gaining on us. I found a recessed doorway and pushed Cherijo into it, covering her from behind with my body.

There was only one way to avoid a confrontation, but I had never attempted it alone. *I won't let him touch you, but I need your help.* Without words, I projected what I needed - complete access to her mind.

This is a bad idea, Reeve -

Yield to me. Yield to me, and I can protect you.

She pressed her cheek against the door panel. *I can't -*

The Dervling had nearly reached us. *Cherijo! Now!*

She opened her mind to me. I drew on her mental energy, adding it to my own, then projected a false image to the Dervling. He rushed past us, then stopped and looked back. He saw nothing in the doorway, but he could smell my sweat. I needed to

plant more than the deceitful image, so I added an illusion of the two of us running at the other end of the corridor.

The disguised Terran hesitated a moment longer, then shook his head and hurried off in pursuit of the non-existent image.

I turned my thoughts back to Cherijo, whose mind was still unguarded. In a few seconds I took in all of her memories, including the ones she had shielded from me during our previous link. She had concealed much. My astonishment over the nature of what she had been hiding made me release her from the linkhold, and she sagged against me.

That was close.

Yes. I could not believe what I was seeing. She had been so resolute about leaving the homeworld that she had nearly killed herself trying. Did you actually collide with a glidecab so you could leave Terra on schedule?

How did you - She put up her mental barriers again, but they only surrounded me. *Out. Right now.*

I turned her around. I saw what she had shared with Kao Torin, and what the mark on her neck meant. She had bonded with him, Chosen him, and I would never have her now. No matter what I did, or where I went. I had lost her and had not even known it.

I saw myself alone, on a thousand different worlds, carrying the memory of her with me.

She trembled against me. We could not stay here, not with the threat of the Dervling returning to look for us. "We will return to our rooms."

I took her back to her rooms, went inside with her, and secured the door panel.

“Thanks for helping me,” she said, “but I don't think - “

I sat down and folded my arms. If I could not have her, I would at least have an explanation of the other. “Tell me exactly what you are.”

#

She did not wish to tell me, of course. She denied it outright. She stalled for time. She tried to distract me with an offer of beverages and then denied everything again.

“Tell me about the experiment, Cherijo.”

She continued to plead ignorance, even when I indicated that I had seen her memories of what her father had done to her. I knew she had only recently discovered the reasons for his behavior, when a package had been delivered to her and she had studied the evidence of his experiment back on Terra. What she now knew made little sense to me, but I felt confident she could explain it.

She walked about the room. She went to look out at the stars. It was apparent she had never spoken about it to any other person. At last she pressed one hand to the viewer, spreading out her fingers as if to touch the stars.

“I'm not human,” she told me.

I listened as she explained what she had found in the package sent to her, the package that had made her decide to leave Terra. It detailed a radical genetic experiment that her father had been conducting for nearly three decades on a clone of himself.

She began pacing around the room. “His goals weren't restricted to mere refinement, however. He planned to eliminate susceptibility to all disease and infection.

Undesirable physical characteristics were discarded, but the main goal was intelligence modification. Theoretically, higher brain function would exceed normal human capacity by at least fifty percent."

"What happened?"

"After several failures, it worked. Long-term analysis of the tenth trial specimen confirmed his success." Her face paled. "The "J" series prototype was highly intelligent, intuitive, capable of advanced comprehension and memory retention, immune to infection and disease. In essence, the ultimate physician."

She did not wish to say it, so I prompted her. "You are the prototype."

"Yes." Her nervous pacing increased. "Dad's single greatest achievement in genetic engineering."

It still did not make sense to me - she was so obviously female. Or was she?
"You indicated you parent used his own cells for the experiment."

"You mean, why wasn't I born Joseph Junior?" Her expression changed to one of contempt. "The first nine male clones didn't develop properly in his embryonic chamber. It was easy to genetically alter my gender from male to female. He also planned to use me as an incubator for future . . . siblings, giving a whole new spin on the Terran concept of incest."

I had dwelled among cultures to whom such behavior would have been acceptable, but it had horrified Cherijo. "Why?"

She made a helpless gesture. "The same reason he had for doing all of it. To see if he could."

I concentrated on the legalities involved. "Why would he experiment on human DNA in an era when genetic conservation on Terra was at fanatical levels?"

Her laughter was bitter. “He deliberately introduced the legislation so he would have a clear field, even if it meant he had to break his own law. He gives new meaning to the term egomaniac.”

“Legislation still prohibits all human fetal genetic improvements and modifications,” I reminded her.

She began pacing again. “Somehow I don’t think he’s worried about getting arrested, Reeve.”

I questioned other points, then asked her to relate how she had come to K-2. Her father had been in contact with her since she’d left the homeworld, and it was all too obvious that he wanted her back.

“That’s all I know,” she said at last.

“Your father demanded that you return to Terra. Perhaps he is the one who sent the imposter tonight.” If the opportunity arose, I would take great pleasure in dealing with Joseph Grey Veil.

“You’re probably right.” She rubbed her eyes like a tired child. “No one else has a better motive.”

“What will you do?”

“What can I do? Do you know what will happen if I go back to Terra?”

“Your father will force you to take part in his research.” I watched her flinch. Yes, someday I would have to make the time to find Joseph Grey Veil. And kill him. “Or you will be arrested, detained, and probably executed for being the result of an illegal genetic experiment.”

“Either way my freedom - and possibly my life - is over.”

She had made friends on K-2, people who cared what happened to her. Yet she had concealed this from them. “Why haven’t you told anyone, Cherijo?”

“Who could help me?” She threw out her arms. “Who could I trust?”

It struck me then - she had not told the Jorenian any of this. She had bonded with him, shared intimacy with him, and yet she had only confided in me.

No, I forced her to do that. I rose to my feet. “I have detained you long enough. Sleep well.”

“Wait a minute,” she said. “That’s it?”

I saw no reason to prolong the discussion. Being near her, knowing she was more like me than I had ever imagined, and being unable to touch her - it was too much.

“Yes.”

“Reever, I just confessed to being the freak result of an illegal, inhuman experiment conducted by my own father!” When I did not react, her voice climbed several octaves. “Are you going to tell anyone?”

“Of course not.”

“You expect me to believe that?”

She needed reassurance, so I went to her. There was so much I wished to tell her. I touched her hair, and imagined how it would have fallen around us in bed. That would never happen now. I would never have my warrior of life. She would never know how well we balanced.

Still, I could protect her, and keep her secrets. I could do that much for her.

“Yes.” I bent down and touched my mouth against hers. The sensation was like exquisite pain. “Get some sleep.”

As I returned to my rooms, my thoughts kept me preoccupied. That is why I never sensed the presence behind me, or had the chance to avoid the blow when I was struck over the head.

#

“Come on, Chief.” Someone was shaking me. “Wake up.”

I opened my eyes to see Dhreen hovering over me. I was on the floor of my quarters, and the back of my head hurt. “What happened?”

“Someone attacked the Doc, shot her up with some drugs. I got there in time, but the scum got away.” He helped me to my feet, and put her medical case in my hands. “You know how to use any of this stuff?”

I ran to her rooms. Cherijo lay unconscious on the sleeping platform, and there was blood on her mouth. I pressed my fingers to her throat, and found a slow but regular pulse.

“Doctor Grey Veil.” I ran my hands over her, but I felt no broken bones and saw no other sign of injury. “Doctor - Cherijo, answer me.”

She remained unresponsive. I jerked the case open and took out her medical scanner. The design was similar to one I used for hardware diagnostics, so I activated it for a general systems scan and passed it over her.

Dhreen appeared at my side. “Is she okay?”

“No.” She could have been poisoned, or suffering from internal injuries. The readings on the scanner meant nothing, I had no medical knowledge. I needed a diagnostic computer to interpret them. “We must take her back to K-2 at once.”

“They have a medical complex here -“

“You said her attacker got away.” I tossed the scanner back into the case and lifted her limp body into my arms. “We cannot allow him another opportunity to get to her.”

He nodded. “Take her to the ship. I’ll contact transport, arrange an emergency slot.”

She did not regain consciousness until after the Bestshot launched from Caszaria’s Moon. Even when she did, she was disoriented and unable to focus.

“What . . . happened?” She made a low sound of pain as she tried to take the scanner from me.

I put the instrument in her hand. “The Terran pretending to be a Dervling drugged you and attempted an abduction. Dhreen heard you scream, and fought off your assailant, but the Terran escaped.”

“I got him, too.” She managed a smile as she attempted to pass the scanner over herself. “He’ll be limping for a while.” Her arm dropped to her side. “Suns, what did he inject me with?”

I took the scanner and checked the display. “Readings are negative for injury. I just ran a blood scan.” I nodded at the portable diagnostic console Dhreen had produced, beside the sling cradle he had rigged in the passenger cabin for her. “He used something identified as Coraresine.”

“Neuroparalyzer. Damn it.” She tried to sit up, but I held her down. “Going back to K-2?” I nodded. “Don’t tell them . . . about me . . . Duncan . . . “

Dhreen signaled the colony to request medical assistance, and Dr. Mayer and two nurses were waiting at Main Transport when we docked. Mayer performed a swift examination before ordering the nurses to move her to the medevac unit.

Then he turned to me. “I asked you to look after her, and you bring her back to me like this?”

The ache at the base of my neck intensified. “This drug the assailant used on her, will it harm her?”

“No.” Without another word, he stalked off the ship.

“You should have told him someone clubbed you over the head,” Dhreen said from behind me.

“It makes no difference,” I said as I went to the docking ramp. The medevac unit was already on its way to the FreeClinic. “I still failed.”

#

Dhreen and I were summoned to Security Headquarters, where Commander Norash questioned each of us separately. Norash, who was a Trytinorn and weighed several tons, used his bulk to intimidate anyone he questioned. I was not so easy to unsettle, and he ended the interview with a disgruntled warning to inform him, should I see the Dervling again. I checked in with Fargas, then went to my quarters to change. From there I intended to signal the FreeClinic and check on Cherijo.

The Jorenian pilot stood waiting by my door panel. “You are Duncan Reeve?”

“Yes.” I studied him. He had the physical advantage of height and weight, but I was probably faster. “What do you want?”

He wore his black hair in a warrior’s knot at the base of his skull, and it gleamed as he made a formal gesture. “I would speak with you.”

I knew his kind declared their intention to kill before fighting, and he had no reason to be polite to an enemy. Based on that assumption, I invited him in, and offered

him the tea his people preferred. He refused. We moved into my living area. There we faced each other like opponents, neither of us making any unnecessary movements.

I concentrated on remaining calm and non-confrontational. If he attacked me and I killed him - even in self-defense - she would never forgive me.

“I am told you traveled with Cherijo Grey Veil, to Caszaria’s Moon.” His blank white eyes met mine. Jorenians had no pupils or irises, which was somewhat disconcerting. “Cherijo is my Chosen.”

“Yes. Her friend, the Oenrallian Dhreen, also accompanied us.” I knew Jorenians were notoriously possessive about their lifemates, and chose my next words carefully. “I was not aware that she had Chosen you until after we arrived. I accept her Choice.” No, I didn’t, but I could make a show of it. “I would not have accompanied her, had I known.”

“A Jorenian female would never have accompanied you alone, but Cherijo is still . . . unused to the ways of my kind.” He made a fluid gesture with his hands. “That is not why I am here.”

I tensed as he drew an ornate dagger, but he only offered it to me. “Why do you give me this?”

“The Oenrallian told me how you protected her at the resort. I wish to express gratitude for that.” He placed the hilt in my hand. “My thanks for your care of my Chosen, warrior.”

I studied the blade. It was beautifully worked, honed to a razor’s edge. I could bury it in his chest with a simple arm sweep. I also knew many ways to dispose of a body. “I do not want require thanks.”

“It is difficult for rivals to exchange gifts, is it not?” He smiled a little. “Perhaps you will wish to keep it after you hear what I ask of you in return.”

Only a Jorenian would have the spine to do that. “What?”

“You know that war is coming.”

Suddenly I felt very tired. I went to my console, and placed the blade on top of it.

“Yes. Very soon.”

“It will not be a simple act of aggression. It will be the League against the Hsktskt. Their battles will consume whole systems, quadrants. The conflict will divert many paths -- particularly among those of us who serve in space.” His voice took on a strange note. “It is not my war, but I suspect I will fight it - and I may perish in it.”

I spun the dagger like a top. “Death comes to us all.”

“I do not fear it. That is not the way of my people.” He went on to describe the traditional Jorenian preparations for a death ritual, and finally asked, “Duncan Reeve, when I embrace the stars, will you serve as my Speaker?”

His request made me catch the dagger in mid-spin. From what he had told me, a Jorenian’s Speaker brought the deceased’s last wishes to his kin. It was a task given only to a trusted family member or close friend. “Why ask me?”

“You honor her as much as I.”

I flipped the blade into my palm, made it dance over my fingers. “I could kill you.”

He nodded. “And I you.”

Yet we would not, for her sake. It seemed we understood each other perfectly.

“Yes. I will Speak for you.”

“When the time comes, I will send for you.” He bowed, and departed.

I did not want to admit it, but I liked Kao Torin. He was not Cherijo's balance, but I suspected he would give her a great deal of happiness. Since I could not do that, and I could not kill him, I would have to be content with that.

Ana Hansen signaled me the next day from the FreeClinic. Fargas patched the relay through to my office, and claimed it was some type of emergency. I saw Ana's face coalesce on my screen. Behind her stood Dr. Mayer.

"Duncan, we need your help."

I closed the translation file I was editing. The throbbing headache from the blow I'd taken at the resort had never completely gone away, and since making the promise to the Jorenian, had even intensified. If it did not retreat, I might have to seek some medical treatment. "I am not feeling well, Ana. Perhaps another time."

"You don't understand. Cherijo is in trouble."

#

I found her at the Trading Center. She was sitting at Lisette's café, staring down into a server. A small roll sat neglected to one side of the table. Her body was hunched over in a painful posture, and she clutched her beverage so tightly that the knuckles on her hands were white.

"Dr. Grey Veil."

She looked up at me. Her face matched her knuckles. "Reever." She sipped from the cup. "It would be you."

I sat down across from her. Even after Ana had told me what had occurred, I found it hard to believe. "I understand your friend, the Jorenian, is in critical care." I also found it odd that he would come to me, a day before he fell ill, to ask me to Speak for

him. Yet according to his traditions, I could not tell her about his request. Not until he was dead.

“He’s not dead yet, Reeve,” she said, as if reading my mind.

“Dr. Mayer tells me you are conducting research directly related to treating Torin’s condition.” He had also told me that without Cherijo’s expertise, there was no way they could find a cure for the contagion.

“For what it’s worth.” She set down her server.

“The contagion has not been identified.”

“No.” Her lips peeled back from her teeth. “I have not identified the contagion.

Lisette came over with fresh beverages for both of us. She seemed worried about Cherijo, but only regarded me with an irritable expression. “You. There is no one who needs you to talk for them?”

“Not at the moment.”

She made a moderately rude gesture. “Then shut up, or go away.” She gave Cherijo one last glance before retreating.

“I never thought I would like that woman,” Cherijo said in a soft voice, “but I do.”

I tried to assume a casual posture. “Lisette seldom fails to state her opinion. You are remarkably alike.”

“Don’t tell her that.” She toyed with her spoon.

Ana had indicated how dangerous it was, to allow her to continue in this helpless mood. I had to shake her out of it. “She doesn’t sulk.”

She drank quickly from her server, then slammed it down on the table. “Implying that I do.”

I touched her hand. “You won’t find a cure here, will you?”

She seized my hand, and applied direct, brutal pressure for a moment. The pain didn't disturb me, but seeing her inflict it did. My headache seemed to swell behind my eyes, until I felt certain they would burst from the sockets.

"Take Lisette's advice, Reeve," she whispered. "Go."

I left her, staggering a little as I made my way back to my offices. Once there, I reported our conversation to Ana, then locked myself in. Fargas interrupted me once, to tell me an Oenrallian infected with a new virus spreading through the colony had tried to leave the planet, then had crashed. I barely comprehended the news. Concerned, Fargas promised to hold all my relays for the remainder of the day.

Sometime toward the evening, I realized I could not move from my console. Just before I fell unconscious, I thought how Kao Torin had been wrong. War was not coming.

War had already arrived.

#

My recollection of the events that followed is not complete. Yet even now, I would do anything to wipe those few, fragmented days from my memory forever.

When Fargas woke me, I saw him as if from a distance. There was a numbing shroud over my mind, occluding everything with a dark haze, like a swarm of insects. My assistant spoke to me in urgent tones, but I could not understand what he said. My own mouth moved, and produced responses. I could not hear what I was saying. The darkness filled my head, smothering my conscious thoughts.

At the same time, I felt my body rise from behind the console and move out of my office. I tried to resist, and the haze smothered me.

When I returned to awareness again, I was standing in a corridor. There were quarantine barriers around me, and I heard two familiar voices arguing.

“We must determine if you and Ecla are immune, or carriers.”

“By deliberate exposure?”

I moved toward the voices. Dr. Mayer stood before a barrier, with Cherijo on the other side. Her eyes moved past him to focus on me.

“No,” she said. “*No.*”

I tried to speak, to tell them something was wrong with me. That was when I discovered I was no longer in charge of my mind or my body. Something was inside me - controlling me.

It was the darkness, the haze - the swarm. They were inside my mind.

“He volunteered,” Mayer told her.

“He isn’t a viable test subject. He may already be infected. Or immune.”

“He shows no evidence of contagion.” Mayer glanced back at me. “The first cases displayed signs of infection within twenty-four hours of exposure.”

“Isolate him and give it more time.”

“If you and Ecla prove to be immune, we’ll need that time to determine why and develop an inoculant.”

Cherijo shook her head. “This is crazy. We don’t even know *how* it’s being transmitted!”

They continued arguing, while I attempted to discover what control I had left. There wasn’t much - I felt as if I had been squeezed back into a very small space, and an invisible weight kept me there. I tested my confinement, and pain streaked through my mind.

Yield.

The swarm spoke, not with one voice, but many - so many I could not quantify them. Nor could I identify what they were. They had no form, no identity other than their presence in and control over me.

My body moved forward toward the audio panel, and the presence used my voice to greet Cherijo. "Doctor."

"Chief Linguist." She moved away from the panel. "Let's get this over with."

Dr. Mayer led me to an isolation room, where he left me to wait for Cherijo. As soon as I was alone, the grip over my mind relaxed a fraction. I immediately attempted to establish a dialogue with whatever had possessed me.

Who are you? Why have you done this to me?

The swarm remained silent, but images from the day I established the first linkhold over Cherijo in the gnorra groves began looping in my mind. Somehow, whatever occupied my mind was using my own telepathic ability to control me, as I had controlled Cherijo. If they could do this to me, then it was possible they could access other abilities I possessed.

Cherijo was in great danger. *What do you want?*

She must yield to us.

I watched Cherijo enter the room and remove the envirosuit she wore. Air hissed as someone activated the quarantine seals on the door panel.

"How long did Mayer say we had to stay in here?" she asked me.

They answered her. "Twelve hours."

There was blood all over her tunic, but it was the wrong color - not hers. They made my eyes focus on the bandage wrapped around her forehead.

That is the way into her.

Cherijo put away the suit, then looked at me. “So, why did you -“ she paused and looked down at herself. “What?”

I wanted to shout at her to run from the room. Instead, my voice said, “You have injured yourself.”

“Oh. That.” She touched the bloodied dressing. “A parting gift from the Bestshot.”

“I was informed of the incident.” As they used me, I pushed against the force containing me within my own mind. The barrier wavered, but held. “What is Dhreen’s condition?”

She must yield to us.

“Not good. Worse than mine.” She tried to remove the bandage, and grimaced. “Ouch, maybe not.”

“I’ll assist you.” They moved me toward the exam pad, and made me lure her closer by gesturing and asking, “Please.”

She hoisted herself up on the table. My stomach clenched as they forced me to remove the old dressing and clean the wound on her brow. Once it was reopened, the swarm began instructing me.

Put your mouth on her. Coat the wound with your saliva.

I fought against the barrier again, but I could not move it. *I will not harm her.*

“Tell me the truth,” she said. “Will I live?”

They did not like the open nature of the wound. Something about it was wrong for them. *After she is infected, you will close it.* “It may need sutures,” they made me say.

She frowned. "You're not pointing a laser at my head, Reeve."

I would use a laser on myself if I could just regain partial control. "Perhaps a clean pressure dressing will suffice until we are finished." When her attention was distracted for a moment, they used my hands to take hold of her, and my mouth to contaminate the raw wound.

"Let—" As soon as she felt my tongue move over the gash, she wrenched away from me. "Reeve! What the hell are you doing?"

It is not me! "Do not fight me."

She rolled off to the other side of the exam pad. "No, Reeve. Stay back."

"You must yield."

My hands reached for her, but she retreated. "Don't you touch me."

She does not yield. I could feel them combing through my mind, trying to understand. *Why does she not yield to you?* "Touch is not required." I lunged at her.

She barely avoided my grasp. "*I don't want you to. Got it?*"

She will not yield. You must kill her.

I threw myself at the barrier. *No!*

She comes to us, or she does not live.

With my body under their command, they could kill her in a few seconds. I had to keep her alive. All they cared about was entering her body and controlling her.

You don't have to kill her. I tried to project the concept of the linkhold I had established with her twice before, but they took the memories and sifted through them, isolating the physical desire for her that I had suppressed for so long.

It would be much easier if I could simply take her someplace private, disrobe her and initiate intercourse.

The concept of intimacy appealed to them. *Yes. You will infect her this way.*

No.

They reviewed my memory of kissing her at the resort on Caszaria's Moon, and how she had briefly responded. *She will accept this.*

No! Abhorrence helped me punched through the barrier. As soon as I was free, I tried to force it back on them, but my advantage only lasted a few seconds. There were too many of them, millions, and they enveloped me like a huge black fist. I fought with everything I had, but still they squeezed me back into that tiny cell, and held me there. They could have suffocated me, eradicated me, but they did not.

Instead, they made me watch what they did to her.

She was clever, and quick, but not enough to elude me. They used my strength to overpower her. As she fought and pleaded with me, I cringed, hearing the words I could not respond to, hearing them taunt her with my own desires.

They knew every thought, every fantasy, every dream I had ever had about Cherijo, and they used them. When she wouldn't stop struggling, they held her down. They were able to establish a linkhold, but they could only mimic me. I felt the presence of her mind, sensed she knew something was wrong.

It isn't me, I shouted on the other side of the barrier. *Cherijo, it isn't me!*

She could not hear me.

They held her mind long enough to insure her capitulation, and then they released her. From that point she cooperated. Her body was strong and sensual and so responsive to mine. It was such a simple act, but there was so much pleasure to be had in it.

None of it was mine to have.

She was everything I had ever wanted, but not like this. Never like this. I wanted to tear myself to pieces, to get inside, to get at them. All I could do was watch and feel as they used me to take her.

When it was finished, I could feel the barrier weakening, the voices diminishing. Some of them had left me and gone into her. I drew on the last on my strength to project my thoughts outward. I linked to her mind, and used her strength as an anchor. I could not make myself coherent at first, and then an image formed between us. There was something terrible ahead, something I had never seen. A desolate place of tall obsidian cliffs, and furious oceans the color of Terran blood.

It meant nothing to her, but everything to me. Now I knew what the Core were, and what they would do.

I pushed aside the images, and sent out my warning. *Danger Cherijo the co*—The swarm poured over me, into me, ripping my mind apart. “No!”

I could feel her hands on me. She was trying to stop it, trying to help me. “No! No!” I had to get her away from me, tell her -

“Joey!”

They dragged me down, until I drowned in them.

#

Darkness.

I lay paralyzed, surrounded by the swarm, not knowing if I would live or die. It did not matter; they had been unable to infect her. I didn't know how I knew that, but I did. Gradually I became aware that something had been done to my body with chemicals, which prevented the Core from using it. Now that they were as powerless as I was, they seethed inside me, sending out erratic bits of information. From that I learned that they

had not possessed me. They were caught inside me, trapped and unable to escape. Remaining inside me would slowly kill all of them. I did not care what happened to them or me, but I had to know she was safe.

So I waited, and I watched for her.

I saw Cherijo's face for a few moments, when the chemical bonds were removed from me. The Core immediately tried to use me, but I was ready for them. As we struggled for control, my body convulsed, and the chemical bonds sent me back into the immobility and darkness.

The second time the bonds were removed, the Core had become weaker and less numerous. I was able to emerge from the darkness, and saw her beside me.

She will never forgive me for what I did.

"Doctor." I had to find the words to warn her, but there were still so many of them to overcome, simply to speak. "There is . . . something . . ."

"Reever, listen to me. I need your help. The pathogen may be a sentient life-form." Her tone was calm, but behind it I heard anger - and pain. "I need you to try to establish that. Can you use your telepathic abilities?"

The Core began swarming inside me. "They are present."

"They?" She looked into my eyes. "You mean the contagion."

"The Core is present."

Someone else spoke, but she ignored him. "You're calling them the Core?"

I could not let them take over, but they were almost in control. "That is how they refer to themselves."

"Reever, where is the Core?"

"Inside me." And I wanted them out. She had to get them out of me.

She lowered her voice. “Reever, why -“

“Sedate that man at once!” an angry voice shouted.

Darkness.

#

Many colonists became infected, dozens every hour after that, but all I knew was the Core, and the dark. As they became weaker, I reestablished partial control over my mind. I knew if I shut down my brain, my body would die, and take them with it.

Remembering the look in her eyes made the idea very tempting.

Yet even as I contemplated suicide again, I knew the Core had infected others, and would continue to spread unless I discovered how to kill them without destroying the bodies they possessed. That is why I extended my thoughts to them, invading them as much as I could.

They were obsessed with the same image-memories they had retrieved from my mind. Cherijo and I, together in the gnorra groves. Why was it so important to them? Was it that moment they discovered they could control us, as I had tried to control her?

Return us to the dwellings.

I was revived a third time. I saw her beside me, but I could not speak.

“Reever.” She bent close and kept her voice low. “We’re in trouble. Can you establish a connection with the Core?”

At the edge of my peripheral vision, I saw the Psyoran nurse Ecla monitoring me with a scanner. “Not good,” she told Cherijo. “Another few minutes at the most.”

I could not shed the swarm enough to establish a link by myself.

“Duncan!”

I took her hands in mine, and brought her mind into my own.

She stood outside the swarm, looking in. *Reever, help me!*

Not enough time. I held the Core back from her, but my will and theirs blended and became one. *Must return . . . dwellings.*

What are you talking about?

Return the Core . . . Cherijo . . . hurry . . . I convulsed, and felt another segment of the Core leave me.

Once again, I fell into the darkness, and remained there for so long that I was almost convinced I was dead. Only the presence of the Core assured me that my body still functioned, that somehow she was keeping me alive.

The chemical bonds were removed for the final time, and I felt cool hands touch mine. Ana Hansen was there, but she was not attempted to link with me. She was acting as a conduit for another.

Reever. It was Cherijo; she was exhausted, terrified. *Come to me, Reever, I'm waiting. We need you. I need you.*

The Core swarmed to take control, but it wasn't necessary. I let them speak through me to her.

Who are you?

We are the Core. We are the Core.

Cherijo recognized them, and moved into the swarm. Immediately they attacked.
You! Murderer!

No - I'm a healer - I want to help - I need your help.

Return us return us return us return us return us return us.

How? She screamed at them. *How can I return you - I don't understand - help me to return you where?*

The dwellings return us to the dwellings.

What are the dwellings?

Existence in the green world home.

Show me the dwellings, she asked. Show me. I don't understand.

They showed her the memories of the first linkhold we had shared. Then, drawing on her memories, they displayed others: A Chakaran male in the FreeClinic, his fur covered in sap spray and purple leaves; a new construction site; the Psyoran nurse speaking about pruning trees, a sneezing orderly at the crash site of the Bestshot.

In all of the images, there were trees. Gnorra trees.

Here? She projected the image of one of the trees into my mind.

The voices roared in my head. *The dwellings return us the dwellings there there . . .*

The Core surged out of my body, vacating my mind completely. For the first time in days, I could breathe and move and think independently of them. I sat up, and saw Ana leaning over Cherijo, who lay on the floor of what appeared to be a makeshift hospital. Gnorra resin covered her entire body.

Ana helped her sit up. "It came from the patients," she was telling her. "Everyone around us began having violent expulsions. All at the same time. It flew out of their orifices toward us, but it never touched me. It just kept pouring over you."

Ana made to clean the fluid from Cherijo's face, but I got up from the berth and caught her hand before she could touch her. She gave a small shriek.

"Don't wipe it off," I told her.

Cherijo looked from me to Ana. "How?"

Before I could answer her, she lost consciousness.

#

Ana and I took Cherijo to the FreeClinic, where the closest immersion tank was located.

“How long have I been in a coma?” I asked the administrator.

“A few weeks, I think.” Ana helped me remove Cherijo’s saturated clothing, then stood back as I lowered her into the tank. Slowly the fluid - and the Core contained within the fluid - dispersed into the lukewarm solution.

Cherijo regained consciousness soon after the Core were removed from her skin, and looked up at me with a frown.

“Cherijo.” Ana smiled her relief.

As she looked around at the tank, I said, “Don’t move.”

“I’m not exactly in the mood for a swim,” she told me. “Would one of you mind telling me what’s happened?”

“The contagion has stopped spreading since your contact with the Core. No new cases.” Ana sighed. “The epidemic is over.”

“Not for long. I’ve got to get out of here.” Cherijo reached for me. “Give me a hand, Duncan.”

“Try not to disturb the fluid.” I bent over and lifted her from the tank. I couldn’t look at her, afraid I would see hatred in her eyes.

“Try not to drop me.”

Ana aided Cherijo with dressing while I sealed the tank for transport. I told Cherijo that the tank would have to be taken to the groves, to return the Core still alive in it to their trees. She dressed quickly and left to address the remaining security and militia forces. Ana and I followed.

I should have left, but I couldn't. I watched as Cherijo took charge and convinced the militia and security personnel to help her transport the epidemic patients to the gnorra groves. When she was finished, she left to supervise the transport. I followed her outside the FreeClinic.

As soon as we were alone, she stopped and looked at me. "Is the Core still with you?"

"No. They evacuated my body after your link with them was terminated."

"Congratulations. Get away from me." She hesitated. "Wait a minute. Why did you put me in that immersion tank?"

"The Core exist in a fluid environment. They can survive for short periods when removed from it, even simulate solid forms, but eventually they die. Oxygen is toxic to them, and they are particularly vulnerable to changes in ambient pressure."

Her face cleared. "That's why you didn't want me to move. Why they induced pneumonic symptoms in the lungs of each colonist. Not to escape, but to stop them from breathing. To keep from being squashed."

"Yes. Cherijo -" I did not want to talk about the Core. I wanted to destroy the Core. I wanted to tell her about the attack, and how much I regretted being unable to stop it. She did not want to hear it, but I had to make her see that we had both been victims of the Core.

"Ana will need help with the transmission," she said, very softly.

"I -" I did not know what to say to her. Not when she looked at me as if I was a dead man. "I will see you later."

#

I helped Ana send out the news that a cure had been found to the rest of the colony, then we assisted with moving infected patients out from the temporary hospital to the groves. As we worked together, Ana filled me in on what had happened since the Core had possessed me. The only time she became uncomfortable was when I asked her about the assault.

“I knew you wouldn’t do that, no matter how . . .” she averted her gaze.

“Anyway, Cherijo understand that it was the Core, and that it wasn’t your fault.”

“Does she?” From the way she had spoken to me, I doubted it. “Ana, you know that I would never have done that to her.”

“I know.” She helped me lift a gurney onto the back of the transport. “But she needs to hear that from you, I think. It will help her forgive - and forget.”

“She will not listen to me.”

“Then make her, Duncan, because she can’t live with this either.”

I took Ana’s advice and tried to signal Cherijo. When she would not respond, I went to her quarters.

“Who is it?”

“A moment of your time, Dr. Grey Veil.” As I walked in, I saw she was still in bed. “Cherijo.”

“Reever.” She crawled off her sleeping platform, then went and shut the door to the adjoining room. I caught a glimpse of a Chakacat sleeping on a large floor mat. She had *two* domesticated felines now? “I was just going to get cleaned up.” Before she disrobed, she eyed me. “Turn your back.”

“How are you feeling?” I asked.

“Fine.” She entered her cleanser unit and showered. I retrieved a towel, and when she exited, held it out to her.

She snatched it from me and held it in front of her naked body. “Do you mind?”

“No.” I turned my back to her again.

She took her time finishing her morning rituals, then sat down in her living room.

“Okay, I’m dressed. Let’s get this over with.”

I turned to her. “I would like to apologize. For what happened between us in the Isolation room.”

“Apology accepted.” She closed her eyes and rested her head against the back of the sofa. She looked tired and too thin. “Now, please leave.”

“I had no control over the Core.” I sat next to her, and reached for her hand.

Her eyes opened. “If you want to keep those fingers, get them away from me.”

Ana was wrong. She would never forgive me. “You will not resolve this.”

“Resolve? What’s to resolve? It’s over. Anything else?”

She wasn’t even listening to me. “Joey.”

She grabbed the front of my tunic and pulled me close to her. “The only person who ever loved me gave me that name. Don’t use it again, Reeve. Ever.”

I wanted to love her, but I did not know how.

She released me. “Let’s go back to the apology. I liked that better. Why apologize for something that wasn’t your fault?”

“I hurt you.”

“Not really. Try again.”

She didn’t seem to understand that it wasn’t me. “I was forced to infect you by the Core’s control.”

“Really? Is that what you thought you were doing?” She made a casual gesture.
“By the way, I’m immune to the Core.”

“They did not know your enhanced immunities would destroy them. I was to maximize the transmission, or kill you.” I wanted to tell her how it had been for me, but what I had suffered seemed so insignificant compared to her own ordeal. “I would not cooperate.”

“Maximize the transmission? Was that why you licked my wound? What was the next phase? Spit some of that yellow stuff down my throat?”

“Yes.”

“I’m glad I missed that. So you raped me instead. Tried to infect me in a more civilized fashion. How magnanimous of you.”

She had the right to be angry, but not like this. I had not participated, and I would not be treated as if I had. “I didn’t rape you. I tried to help you.”

She clenched her hands into fists. “I didn’t need your brand of help, Reeve.”

No, she would never need me. That much I knew. “I had no alternative. They would have killed you.”

“I don’t know if a near-rape is canceled out by a death threat.” She rubbed the side of her head. “I’ll have to think about it.”

I had to admit to my part in it. “It was more than the Core attacking you, Cherijo. I wanted to do those things to you.” I saw her expression change. “You wanted me to do them.”

“Wrong.”

I had been wrong about many things, but not this. “You wanted me.”

“It’s been nice chatting with you, Reeve. Get out.”

I rose and pulled her to her feet. “When I was a child, my parents left me on a world where native behavior was strictly governed by ritual disciplines. I was there for weeks.”

“Really.” She glanced down the front of my body. “You can let go of me anytime now, Reeve.”

I showed her the back of my hand. “You wondered about this, why I never had the scars removed. My parents told me to observe the inhabitants, who had agreed to give me instruction. During my first ritual, I was placed in a chamber with ample provisions, and my trainers. When I became hungry and reached for food, they used a blade on the back of my hand to discourage me.”

Her eyes went wide.

“When I was thirsty, they did the same. I was not permitted to eat or drink. The discipline lasted five rotations.”

“Oh, God.” She touched the scars. “How old were you?”

“Six. I learned quickly. Their own progeny often lost many digits.” I tried to smile, the way she did when she dismissed something difficult. “When my parents returned, they were very excited. I had undergone a ritual that had never been documented before. They wanted all the details for their database.”

“How could they? How could -” She stopped, and shook her head. “Reeve, I don’t understand why you’re telling me all this.”

“I think of the ritual often now.” Only she was the blade.

“Why?” Before I could reply, she pulled away from me. “Get the scars removed, Reeve, and forget about it.”

I left before I told her that I would never forget, and neither would she.

#

For the first time since the colony had been established, the Council designated a detainment area. Colonists who had gravely violated the Charter, or who had attempted to retaliate against the Core after the epidemic, were incarcerated in it pending criminal charges and/or residency status review. The newly-created prison brought with it sense of security, but no one liked it.

Predictably, the Bartermen use the crisis to boost trading prices, and since the quarantine made them the sole supplier to the colony, made huge profits. Certain necessary supplies became scarce, while others - like respirators and breathing filters - commanded huge amounts of credits. No one felt completely safe yet, and many colonists refused to leave their dwellings for fear of becoming reinfected.

The epidemic had orphaned so many young colonists that the Militia was forced to declare a curfew until next of kin were notified and fostering arrangements were made. Quadrant officials refused to lift the quarantine from K-2 until all colonists had been tested for Core life-forms. The Psyorans from the Botanical Research Department adapted a scanner to identify Core by their thermogenetic signatures, and the testing began.

Fargas had a back load of work waiting for me, but he was oddly hesitant to give me one relay. When I questioned him about it, he indicated it had come from the botanical site manager.

I contacted the Psyoran. "You needed to speak to me?"

"Yes, Chief Linguist." The botanist looked uncomfortable. "One of the last colonists infected with the Core came to us before his exudation. The Core have made a request."

I listened as he related the particulars. When he was finished, I said, "No."

"I realize there is some conflict of interest - "

I imagined going to the gnorra groves and spraying the trees with a certain solvent we sometimes used to clean agricultural equipment. A solvent that would reduce them to puddles of organic sludge within a few hours. "You'll have to get someone else to serve as a translator."

"There is no one else willing to do it." He hesitated. "They have the right, Duncan, and if you don't do it, they can go to the quadrant."

And Cherijo could be removed from duty. "Very well."

When I reported to the Council chamber the next day, the hearing was already in progress.

John Douglas smiled with relief when he saw me. "Ah, here is Chief Linguist Reeve, who has filed the charge."

Cherijo stared at me as I came forward, and placed the container of gnorra resin on a table before I spoke. "Council members. Doctor. I am here to interpret on the behalf of the life-forms known as the Core."

"What?" She got to her feet. "What does the Core have to do with this?"

"We will proceed," John Douglas said, and motioned for both of us to sit down. "First the Council will affirm their individual commitment to treating this case without bias. Given the nature of the recent epidemic, it is vital that such statements be recorded prior to presentation of evidence and rebuttal."

Each Council member expressed their gratitude for her efforts during the epidemic, then declared their impartiality in spite of it. I could feel her watching me, but I

kept my attention on the speakers. A dark-skinned humanoid in an administrator's tunic joined Cherijo, and they spoke in low voices.

Hopefully the administrator would be able to defend her against the charges. I could not.

"Although Dr. Grey Veil may not remember," Douglas said, "I was among the first of the cases brought to the groves. I saw what she did for our people. She saved me from dying of the contagion, and saved our colony from planetary sterilization. However, no one individual's actions can provide any type of immunity from the Charter, and a valid charge has been filed."

Cherijo leaned forward, her expression clearly impatient now. "What exactly is the charge, Council Chief?"

He consulted his notes. "You are charged with causing the deliberate eradication of Core life-forms. The Core occupied this planet long before the colony was settled. As recognized sentients, they have the same rights under the Charter as any colonist."

The administrator said something in a low voice to her, and Cherijo shrugged. "Got them back in their damn trees, far as I know," she told her representative.

Douglas turned to me. "Chief Linguist, you may begin."

It took all my self-discipline to stand and place my hand into the container. Resin moved up my arm, and entered my body through my ear. For a moment I flashed back to the Isolation room, and how I had fought and lost for control of my body. Having the Core inside me again made me sick. It made me want to set myself on fire so I could die watching them burn with me.

"Are you nuts?" I heard Cherijo shout.

"We represent the Core," the swarm said through me.

There was a brief scuffle as security had to force Cherijo back into her chair. When she subsided, I heard Douglas say, "Present your evidence."

"The one who discovered us, the one who ingested us, passed us to this one. She was unlike the others. We were unable to infiltrate the cells. We attempted to communicate and were ignored."

"I ignored them?" Her voice was furious. "Do you know how many rotations I spent just trying to *identify* them?"

The Core continued. "Her biological response exterminated our kind. All within her body were destroyed. She is a threat to our continued existence."

"See? My biological response didn't ignore them," she said. "They're talking about - " she seized the arm of her companion. "Go get Ana. I don't care if you have to tell QIT to jump in the nearest body of water. Get her over here, now!"

I ended the link, and the resin oozed out of my ear and ran back down into the container. It was exhausting, but I sat down and looked at her. She hated me more than ever.

It seemed appropriate. I hated myself.

Douglas and the other Council members conferred for a short period of time, then addressed her directly. "Dr. Grey Veil, you may now respond."

She stood. "I'm accused of murder by the Core, a species that no one knew existed until I established contact with them, through Linguist Reeve. I'm not guilty. A physician is required to take an oath to do no harm to any patient. Once identified, the Core life-forms were as much my patients as the living organisms they infected. I didn't exterminate them. I helped them go home."

She paused and gazed at each Council member before she continued.

"The Core charge that my biological response killed them. That's true. I was never infected, despite constant exposure. However, if I'm to be held accountable for my immune system, then the Core should be, too.

That caused some murmured discussion among the council members.

"Clarify, please," Douglas said.

She stared at me. "The Core deliberately infiltrated, destroyed, and replaced tissue in order to secret themselves from detection. They induced pneumonic symptoms to fortify their positions and provide escape routes from their hosts' bodies." She produced a bitter smile. "That biological response killed over seven thousand colonists. Sound familiar?"

The dark-skinned humanoid reappeared, this time when Ana Hansen, who immediately addressed the Council. "I have been monitoring this hearing and only wish to add that the PQSGO will support all of Dr. Grey Veil's actions -- voluntary and otherwise -- during the time of the epidemic."

That surprised the Council members, who took another interval to discreetly confer. Ana looked at me before she spoke in a low voice to Cherijo.

I heard the doctor say, "His job reeks."

That it did.

The Council completed their discussion, and all five rose. "We find the charge of extermination of the Core life forms to be substantiated, but in doing so find the Core also guilty of the same against the victims of the epidemic. Both charges can be enforced under the Charter."

"What does that mean?" Cherijo demanded.

"It means," I said as I touched the surface of the resin once more, "that if you are found guilty, so are they. I will relay this to the Core."

They entered my body a second time to respond. "We will withdraw the charge against Dr. Grey Veil, if she does the same. We request Dr. Grey Veil be prohibited from any future contact with our dwellings."

"Right," she scowled. "I'm heartbroken. As if I wanted to poke around the damn dirt or those ugly purple --"

Ana clapped her hand over Cherijo's mouth. "She agrees."

"Charges are dismissed. Dr. Grey Veil." Douglas smiled at her. "You are free to go."

She came directly over to me and began examining me. "Notify medevac and have them send a unit. Now." She helped me to sit then leaned close. "Don't say another word, or I swear I'll sedate you." I knew how she felt when she shoved the container of resin at one of the security guards. "Get this glop away from me, before I end up with another set of homicide charges."

I was transported to the FreeClinic, but Dr. Mayer was the physician who examined me. I was kept overnight in an inpatient ward for observation, then released.

I signaled Cherijo a dozen times. She never answered.

#

The colony gradually began to recover from the epidemic. Many left when the quadrant lifted the planetary quarantine, but others stayed, determined to rebuild. Requests for information about survivors flooded in from dozens of worlds, and the language barriers kept me and my staff working double shifts. One night I woke up in a cold sweat, and knew what I had to do.

I had received daily updates for the list of casualties from the pathologist's office, which we sent out in response to inquiries. One day I had noticed the name of a Terran male who was my age and matched my general description. He had died of complications from Core infection. I remembered thinking he should have been me.

That was the solution to my problem with the Faction.

I switched my name with that of the dead Terran's, and sent the list to all the worlds I knew were frequented by slavers. When I went home that night, I used Kao Torin's blade to dig the Hsktskt implant from my flesh, and then I destroyed it. It might take time for the list to reach TssVar, but losing the signal from my implant would immediately convince him that I was dead. If he ever found me again, I could claim any number of reasons for the destruction of the implant and being listed as deceased. I did not intend for TssVar to find me again, however.

I was through with the Faction.

As I was bandaging my self-inflicted wound, I received a summons to the FreeClinic. It was not from Cherijo, but from her Jorenian pilot.

Kao Torin wished to see his Speaker.

I encountered Cherijo on my way to see him. She strode out of the back entrance of the facility and hurried past me. I went after her.

"Get away from me, Reeve."

I couldn't, not without speaking to her. "Cherijo, stop."

She walked blindly on. We entered a dead end alley, but she kept going until she reached the back wall. Then she shouted "No!"

I caught up to her, and reached for her.

She turned and nearly went to her knees, her hands curled and pressed against either side of her brow. "I can't stop it! I can't!"

"No, you can't." I didn't know what else to say. I was going to see her dying lover, to receive his last wishes. I should have felt it like a victory, but all I felt was her pain.

He was dying because she had injected him with her own blood, and it was poisoning him.

She lunged at me and knocked me to the ground, screaming in my face. I did not defend myself as she struck me, over and over. She was wild, sobbing, completely out of control.

I linked with her. *Cherijo, stop.*

No! I will not! Let me go!

It felt as if my chest was torn in two. *Cherijo. Stop fighting me. Let me help you.*

Pure hatred poured into my mind from hers. *I never wanted you. Never wanted this. Get out, just get out of me!*

Let me help you.

I showed her everything she denied - her own memories. The epidemic, its aftermath. Alun Karas's innocent mistake. The thousands that had become infected, and would have died. I took her back to the groves, made her watch the exudation, made her see the dying as they recovered. *The colony lives. The Core lives. Your gift to them.*

I brought her into my own memories, made her see the Core attack as I had experienced it. How it felt to be unable to stop them. How we had both been raped.

How I had nearly died in the darkness that had followed. How she had saved me despite what I had done. *I live. Your gift to me.*

I made her see Kao Torin, dying on the ward where she had left him. Then further back in time, to the moment just before she had injected him with my blood. He had died. She had brought him back to life. *Kao Torin lives. He has the time to bid farewell to those he honors. To you. Your gift to him.*

I can't bear it. All the rage left her, leaving only grief and self-loathing. *Oh, God, Duncan, I can't. I can't.*

I ended the link, and held her until she stopped shaking. Then I helped her to her feet.

"Duncan." She tried to touch my face, then snatched her hand back. "Oh, no, what have I done?"

"I will recover." I wiped some blood from my nose and mouth with the back of my sleeve. "Be at peace, Cherijo. Be at peace with yourself." I let her go, and moved away.

"Duncan."

I stopped.

"I'm . . . I'm sorry."

So was I.

#

I was not prepared to see the Jorenian as he was. His body looked wasted, his face gray with pain and fatigue. Yet when I drew a chair up beside his berth, he opened his eyes and made a gesture of welcome.

"I thank you for coming." He studied my face. "You are injured?"

“A small accident. It’s nothing.” Hopefully my eyes would not swell shut before we were finished, or I would need assistance returning to my quarters. “Are you sure you want to do this now?”

“I am dying.” He smiled. “When my House is before you, will you Speak for me?”

“Yes.”

He drew in a shallow breath, then made his formal requests. When he had finished, he asked, “Do you still have the dagger?”

I produced the blade, and handed it to him.

He turned it slowly in his hand. “This is not part of my Speaking, but I must also ask this of you.” He gazed at me. “After I embrace the stars, I would ask that you Choose Cherijo.”

“I will look after her - “

“No. That is not enough. You must Choose her.”

I wanted to bury the blade in my own chest this time. “I can’t.”

“There is no one for her but you. No one else is strong enough to protect her. No one else honors her more.” His hand shook as he drew the blade down the center of his palm, making a shallow cut. Green blood oozed from the gash. “Warriors of different Houses seal their vows with blood.” He handed me the blade. “Once made, they cannot be broken.”

Slowly I made the same cut in my own palm, and we clasped our hands together.

“I entrust you with my Chosen, Duncan Reeve.”

“I will Choose her,” I told him as I watched our blood mingle and fall in red and green streaked droplets to the linens on his berth. “And I will protect her with my life.”

“My thanks.” He closed his eyes, and slipped into unconsciousness.

A group of Jorenians wearing flightsuits entered the room. They gathered around Kao, but he did not awake. They told me what had happened to Cherijo, how she had been taken before the Council to be deported back to Terra, and what they had planned to do.

We would have to leave at once.

When we disconnected Kao from the monitoring equipment, a nurse came in to protest. I led her back out into the corridor, where I sent her to get Dr. Mayer.

As soon as she was gone, I led the Jorenians out of the facility to where the medevac units waited. We placed Kao in the back, and left for Main Transport. On the way, Kao's kin related how the other Torins had gone to retrieve Cherijo, who had been taken to a deportation hearing.

Kao never regained consciousness, and once we were on board, was taken immediately to Medical.

The Captain, a sober-looking man named Pnor, asked me to help his helm officers negotiate a launch slot with Transport. Knowing the League would never allow the Jorenian ship to leave with Cherijo on it, I suggested they allow me use of their computer navigational array. From there I overrode the security lock-outs that prevented them from taking off and disabled the security grid.

"How do you know this?" one of the navigators asked me.

"I worked in Main Transport," I lied.

I finished opening a launch window just as Pnor announced that Cherijo was on board. I excused myself from the helm and went down to Medical, where she had gone to see Kao.

I stopped just inside the entrance doors. She was there, at his berth, holding one of his hands between hers. Another Jorenian in a flightsuit stood beside her. Kao looked up at her, smiled, then closed his eyes.

"Kao, your HouseClan rescued me," she was telling him. "They were wonderful. Xonea brought me here to you. I don't know how to thank . . . Kao?"

All of the monitoring devices flatlined.

Cherijo looked up at the female Jorenian physician attending him, but she only shook her head. She touched his still face. "Kao? Kao, please?"

The other Jorenian put his hand over Cherijo's and Kao's. "He hears you, Healer. In eternity, he hears you."

I left Medical before she saw me. Yet no matter where I went on the ship, I felt her grief.

#

I attempted to keep busy. After insuring the ship launched without further interference from Transport, I met with Pnor to discuss how the League intended to treat Cherijo if she was taken into their custody.

He was deeply disturbed by the Council's decision. "As Kao's Chosen, the healer is a member of our HouseClan. We cannot allow this to be done to her."

"Kao Torin made me his Speaker. I know it is not according to ritual, but may I relate his wishes to you now?" When the Captain nodded, I repeated everything the Jorenian had told me. "As you can see, he anticipated something like this. Will you do it?"

“She will need more than sanctuary among the HouseClan.” He glanced at his console. “I must contact the Ruling Council on Joren. I will signal you when I have their answer.”

I knew Cherijo wanted to be alone, but I couldn’t help stopping outside her quarters when I passed through her corridor. I could sense her sleeping, so I overrode the door panel locks and slipped inside.

She was huddled on the bed, her face still wet with tears. I stood watching her sleep, then went to the storage container to one side and found a woven coverlet. I covered her with it, then brushed her tangled hair back from her face.

I wanted to lay down beside her, and hold her, and comfort her. “I am sorry,” I murmured, and pressed my mouth against her brow.

I did not see her again until Kao Torin’s death ceremony.

She came wearing the Torin’s iridescent blue journey robe, her dark hair streaming down around her like a cloak. She stood out among the hundreds of Torins assembled, a tiny pale ghost lost in the too-large robes.

Kao’s immediate family took positions around his coffin, and began weaving a silver grass shroud around it. The rest of the assembly chanted prayers in their low, melodic voices. Their hands moved in accompanying gestures of happiness. Everyone was smiling and happy.

Everyone except Cherijo.

Kao’s siblings bowed to Cherijo as she climbed up on the dias. For a moment I thought she might collapse, then she spoke in a clear, strong voice.

"From your Chosen, your heart, can only come what is bright and beautiful and honorable." She scanned the crowd. "You and I will never lose each other. We have

blended our souls. Kao Torin, I send you into the embrace of the first life. I send you with joy, smiles, and my honor forever. The new path awaits you."

Tears streamed down her face as she placed her hand on his receptacle. For a moment, I did not think she would finish, but then she uttered the last words of the ritual. "Blessed be your journey, Kao Torin. Your House rejoices. Your Chosen will follow."

Kao's ClanBrother Xonea helped her down, and the coffin was lowered into a discharge shaft. A huge view screen projected the images as the pod was launched from the *Sunlace* and into K-2's twin suns.

It was time for my part, and I climbed the dias slowly.

"I speak for the son of this House, Kao Torin. His words were given to me, to be brought to those he honored." I didn't have to look directly at Cherijo to know she saw me. "I bring them with joy."

The cut on the inside of my palm throbbed.

"I would be with you for journeys ahead, my family. That is not my path. Go forward, remember I am in your hearts. Know our House lives in each of you. Walk within beauty." I turned until I met Cherijo's outraged stare. "Honored Chosen. How you have struggled for me. Endured as I have endured. I must leave you. You, who have been all things to me, friend, companion, and Chosen."

Her face reddened, and her entire body went stiff.

"Do not grieve for me, my Chosen. I honor you above all. A path exists into eternity where we will be reunited. We will travel together again. Never forget that." It hurt to look at her, but I had sworn to deliver his words - and in a way, they were my words as well. "I dwell within you."

She swayed, and I saw Xonea put his arm around her.

I faced the assembly once more. "I charge the HouseClan Torin with my last request: protect and honor the one I Chose. Only death prevented our bond. I give her into your keeping. Honor her as you have honored me. Farewell and safe journey. I embrace the stars."

#

After the ceremony, I stayed away from Cherijo. It was not difficult, I could sense her whenever she came near and simply went in the opposite direction.

I asked Captain Pnor if he needed the services of a linguist, and he was happy to offer me a position on the crew. I told him what I knew of the League's military build up in the quadrant, and suggested he leave as soon as possible.

When the Sunlace finally left K-2, it was through an interdimensional transition I had never experienced. As reality warped, I felt a surge of pain and terror swept over me, and knew something had gone wrong.

Cherijo.

I followed the sense of her to find her in Medical. A team of Jorenians were working over her body, but she was not responding.

"Let me." I pushed a nurse aside to get to her. When the older Jorenian doctor tried to stop me, I met her angry gaze. "I can help, let me help her."

I linked with her, but I couldn't find her.

Her mind was overcome by terrible pain, but there was hardly a trace of her. It was as if she was already dead. That was what she wanted - she wanted to die, so she could be with him. I couldn't let her do it.

Come to me.

I used everything I could think of to lure her. I projected images of light and beauty and serenity. I drew her pain into myself, taking it away from her mind. I called her over and over and over.

Here I am. Over here.

Cherijo. I rushed toward that flickering, weak thought. *At last.*

She was a tiny presence, barely there, caught between my mind and the pain of what her body had suffered.

Fought too long. She regarded me without enthusiasm. *Can't decide which is worse.*

I would carry her kicking and screaming back to life if I had to. *Come to me, Cherijo,* I demanded. When she drew back, I tried more persuasion, *Come back to me.*

You won't ever leave me alone, will you? Her voice was that of a sulky child's. *I can't get away from you. Not even to die. You're always in my head.*

I wanted to shout at her, shake her, slap her. *You can't die like this.* I forced my way in further, trying to latch onto her.

Oh, yes I can. She retreated.

If she wanted to die, then she could damn well die with me. *I will not let you go alone.*

I won't let you come with me. She sounded so young, and so tired. *I don't want you to die, Duncan.*

That was something - something I could hold onto. *Then, come to me, Cherijo. Just come to me.*

She came to me, and I pushed the pain to one side. I surrounded her with my soul, and held on to her, and kept her from feeling anything but safe. When her mind

had stabilized, I ended the link, and found myself on my knees beside her berth, her hands cradling my face.

"Her vitals are leveling." The Jorenian doctor helped me to my feet. "How did you do that?"

I looked down at her. "She did it herself."

#

I waited until she left Medical before I approached her again. She seemed disconcerted to see me.

"Dr. Grey Veil." I studied her. She was still too thin and pale, but otherwise she looked utterly beautiful to me. "You have recovered from your illness."

She moved past me. "I thought you went back to K-2," she said when I caught up and walked beside her.

"It was not in my best interests to do so."

"Why not?" She didn't seem particularly interested.

"The Allied forces were not pleased to discover I could board the *Sunlace* when they were barred from it," I lied.

She laughed a little. "I bet they weren't."

"There was some discussion of the exact placement of my loyalties."

She stopped and glanced at me. "Exactly where *are* your loyalties, Reeve?"

"As I have none, the question is rhetorical." Another lie, but I did not think she would appreciate knowing that she was the only person to whom I would ever give my loyalty. "You are upset."

"Yes, I am."

"What will you do?" Would she leave the ship? Would she leave me?

She stopped in front of an available environome. "Try not to wreck this equipment permanently."

"I will accompany with you."

She activated the entrance console and selected a preprogrammed file. I didn't recognize the alien world as we entered the simulator, but the sea and sands appealed to me.

"Where is this place?" she asked the computer.

"Environome file designated HouseClan Torin Marine Province, Joren, Varallan Quadrant," a drone automatically answered. "Please select desired amplifications."

"No amplifications desired." She wandered in and drifted through the simulation.

I watched her caress the leaves of a star-shaped plant, and listen to the natural melodies produced by huge red blossoms. She seemed to forget my presence as she walked down to the sea.

"You have agreed to take over as Senior Healer," I said, reminding her I was still there.

She jumped, swiveled around, then took a deep breath. "What?"

"I said, you have --"

"Never mind, I heard you. Yes. That's the plan." She stared out at the sea.

"You won't return to Kevarzangia Two."

Her brows rose as she regarded me. "No, and I've had my fill of interrogations, Reevever."

"There is something I must discuss with you." I touched her arm. "It will not take a great deal of time."

"Good." She stepped away from me. "What is it?"

She still despised me, but she blamed herself more for Kao's death. I looked out at the horizon, wishing there was some way I could express myself to her, some phrase I could use that would take away her pain and help her to forgive herself. I could not bear to see her like this.

"Duncan," she said, her voice a little softer, "just *tell* me."

"The Jorenians have offered me passage to the Varallan Quadrant in exchange for my services." That was not strictly the truth - I had asked them - but I doubted she would verify the offer with Pnor. "I wanted to know if that is not acceptable to you."

"You want me to tell you to get off the ship?"

I watched her eyes. "Is that what you want?"

She frowned. "I don't think it's any of my business."

"My presence causes you discomfort."

Her shoulders moved. "I'll learn to live with it."

"Will you?"

"What do you want from me, Reeever? My blessing?" She waited for a response. When I didn't give her one, she threw out her hands. "Fine. Stay on the damn ship. It doesn't matter to me!"

Kao Torin had been wrong - I couldn't Choose her. She didn't want me. "I don't matter to you."

"No - " She blew out some breath. "No, of course not. All I'm saying is what you choose to do with your life is your decision. I won't interfere. I have no right to interfere."

Hope made me move closer. "And if I gave you that right?"

"Gave me - what are you talking about?"

"Link with me."

I reached for her mind, but she moved away. Then she started to run toward the water.

"Cherijo." I went after her. "Stop! Please!"

She never faltered, not even when she hit the water. Afraid for her, I projected my mind, and caught hers. *Cherijo. Don't run from me. Wait. Listen.*

Go away, Reeve. And don't paralyze me. I'll drown.

She began swimming away from me. I had to dive in after her.

You are possibly the most intractable female I have ever encountered, I told her as I swam out to her.

Get out of my brain.

You must allow me this.

She was an adequate swimmer, but not as strong or fast as I was in the water. I caught up to her and took her into my arms, but she didn't resist. We floated together as I entered her mind.

I can't go, I told her. I have tried. I want -

I did not know what I wanted. I thought of how it had felt, being inside her. Even with the Core controlling my body, it was the only time I had ever felt close to her. My body responded to the memory - and so did hers.

You aren't doing that to me again, pal.

I released her at once. *No, Cherijo. I won't force myself on you again.*

She thought of Kao, and the man who had created her. When she thought of me, I broke the link.

She seemed disoriented by that, so I swam back to shore with her. We both dropped down to lay on the sands.

I didn't touch her again. "I apologize."

"Don't, Reeve. I think I'm actually getting used to it."

I got up, and looked down at her. There was so much I had to say, and no words with which I could say it. "Doctor."

I left her there on the sands, where she lay with her arm flung over her face and the purple waves lapping at her feet.

#

Like most of their tech, the Jorenian linguistic database was far superior to anything I had worked on back at the colony on K-2. Learning its intricacies kept me busy, and I found the archivists who maintained it diligent and pleasant to work with. I also studied Jorenian protocol in my spare time, and took the mandatory crew simulator tests to establish my skills as a pilot.

"You should be flying, Terran," Xonea Torin told me after I finished my final qualifying session in the simulator. "Your talents are wasted programming vocollars."

"Perhaps I can do both." I looked up from the panel displaying my scores, and saw Captain Pnor approaching. He did not look happy.

Xonea and I went with him to Communications, where Pnor played a transmission received from a League ship in orbit above K-2. I recognized the Terran male who appeared on the screen - he was Cherijo's father.

"This is Dr. Joseph Grey Veil, signaling from the L.T.F. Perpetua, Pmoc Quadrant." He had a deep voice with very little inflection. "This message is for the non-sentient designated Dr. Cherijo Grey Veil."

Pnor paused the message. "This is her parent, is it not?" I nodded. "I suspected as much." He reenabled the transmission.

"It is imperative that you return to Kevarzangia Two and surrender to League forces immediately," Joseph said. "If you are unable to return to Kevarzangia Two, you may surrender to the authorities on any Allied League world. Transport will be arranged."

"He speaks to her as if she were a criminal," Xonea muttered.

"Your oath as a physician directs you to do no harm. By ignoring the department order, you are violating the oath you swore to uphold." Her parent's upper lip curled. "Your presence on board the Jorenian ship puts every member of the crew at risk."

He didn't care what happened to the Jorenians - he was manipulating her. I wanted to smash the screen with my fist.

"In exchange for your voluntary surrender, the League will allow you to resume your former position on the planet Kevarzangia Two. I have agreed to continue my clinical trials there," he continued. "Additionally, I will allow you unlimited access to my complete research database. This will clarify and resolve issues that will otherwise taint your existence."

I looked at Pnor. "Do you intend to take her back?"

The Captain looked offended. "No, we will not."

"She is our ClanSister," Xonea added. "We do not turn kin over to those who would harm them."

"If you do not surrender, you will be pursued. The Allied League of Worlds has offered a generous bounty for your delivery to Terra." Joseph named a huge sum.

"Or would purchase them like commodities," Pnor said, clearly disgusted.

Joseph seemed to agree with the Jorenian's assessment, for he said, "Cherijo, you are my property."

I had thought of her that way, once. The fact that I had something in common with her father disgusted me now.

"Think on this," her parent said. "If you choose not to surrender, the League will take whatever measures are necessary to capture you. The League's resources are virtually unlimited. They have allies and treaties in a thousand different systems. They will track you down."

I had never given any serious thought to how dangerous Cherijo's father was. The look in his eyes was terrifying - he meant every word he said.

"Any planet that gives you sanctuary will be invaded. Any ship you travel on will be targeted. Anyone who helps you will be considered an accomplice and eliminated. You will be hunted down like an animal until you are apprehended." He smiled. "They will bring you back to me."

Not as long as I breathe. I regarded the two Jorenians. Their claws had extruded, indicating how angry they were. It was good to know I had allies who would help me protect her.

"Enjoy your freedom while you can, Cherijo." The message terminated.

Pnor and Xonea discussed options, and the general reaction of the crew toward this threat. Apparently they were all ready to do whatever was necessary to protect Cherijo. I excused myself and went to her quarters. I felt more confident, knowing the Torins were adamant about keeping her safe, but Joseph's threats were frightening. I wanted to make sure she was not considering giving in to them to protect the Jorenians.

She didn't want to let me in. "Go away, Reeve. I'm too tired to deal with you."

"I must speak with you now."

"This had better be good." She opened the door panel. "What?"

"Captain Pnor asked me to view the transmission." I went in and sat down on the edge of her sofa. She came over and dropped into the chair opposite me. I leaned forward. "You will not return, of course."

She blinked. "Are you asking me, or telling me?"

"Cherijo." I got up and started pacing.

"I'm not going anywhere." She smothered a yawn. "Um . . . what's this about a transmission?"

"The League often resorts to unethical tactics, but this goes far beyond that." For the first time, I wished I was still among the Hsktskt, so I could invade Terra and eradicate the population. "He must be unbalanced. The crew naturally reacted with outrage over the bounty. They are determined to protect you. Even if it means sacrificing the ship."

"That's nice." She stretched. "I'll be sure and thank the crew."

I stopped and regarded her. "Your humor is inappropriate, Cherijo. His threats are a serious matter."

"Reever. Listen to me for a minute, will you? I don't *know* what you're talking about. I haven't *seen* any transmission from Captain Pnor."

Now I stared. "You haven't."

"Look, I'm tired. I'll deal with this later. Anything else?"

"We will be reaching a populated system within a few weeks." I pushed aside the violent thoughts and concentrated on her. "The captain has scheduled a sojourn to one

of the more developed planets. I requested to be withdrawn from the mission, but he indicated my services would be vital."

"Why skip the sojourn?" She rested her chin on her hand. "Don't you want to go?"

"Not if it would make you uncomfortable."

"I thought we covered this already." Her face reddened. "What do you want from me, Reeve? A note for the captain? Do whatever you want." She got up and went to the grooming unit, and examined her reflection. "Is that it?"

She was always trying to get rid of me. "I can think of several other topics of interest."

"Don't get sarcastic with me. I just woke up, I'm not responsible for my actions." She picked up a brush and started pulling it through her hair. "Damn." I came up behind her and took the brush out of her hand. "Hey, what are you --"

"Let me do it." I carefully untangled the snarl at the back of her head and began working the bristles through her hair.

She watched me in the mirror. "Reeve? Why are you doing this?"

"Don't you know?"

"No, and forget I ever asked." She took the brush out of my hand. "As for the sojourn, you don't have to ask my permission every time we're scheduled to work together. Like I said, I'll handle it."

"I want more than your tolerance." I ran my hand over her hair - it was like living silk.

"Don't push your luck."

I curled my fingers against her scalp for a moment before I let go.

"Thanks for dropping by." Her eyes went wary. "You know the way out."

"This is not finished, Cherijo."

I left her.

#

That was several hours ago. She will wake soon, and return to her duty. She will think of Kao with sadness and grief, but she has already made many new friends among this crew. The Jorenians have adopted her, and very shortly, she will be made a citizen of Joren. They will do everything they can to protect her, and if anyone attempts to harm her, they will hunt them down and kill them slowly.

If I do not get there first.

Cherijo is young, and has a long life ahead of her. I know she will devote herself to healing the sick and the injured, and she will fight her father and the League for her freedom.

She may never care for me, but that does not matter. I have made my Choice. For as long as I live, I will stay with her. I will watch over her, and I will protect her.

If necessary, I will die for her.

I do this not for balance, nor for the blood vow I made to Kao Torin. I do this because I discovered I do have emotions - or at least, one emotion.

I love her.