

Walking on the Moon

By

Susan Sizemore

Chapter One

"I'm hungry."

Shift Officer Denys Duchamp tried not to listen as he walked past the men surrounding the information station; he'd heard the complaint too many times in the last month. The crew wasn't hungry, not for nutrition at least. It was lack of variety, lack of interest, lack of female companionship sublimated into food cravings. Or so the medicomputer assured him. A third of the crew had been drafted onto military vessels, leaving the men of the mining ship HATTON overworked as well as bored. Boredom was starting to breed a sort of restless discontent the captain didn't want to hear about. Denys didn't much like hearing about it, either, but he was the one who had to deal with it.

He took the food tray from the serving niche and carried it to the nearest table. He was careful not to look at or smell the glop on the tray as he wolfed it down. It was tasteless; it was good for him.

"I'm hungry," he complained under his breath after he was done.

It was an emotional not a physical lack. The words were a mantra he repeated frequently with every tasteless meal. He liked to think of it as a sort of salt substitute. He sighed, and joined the rest of the men of Second Shift in watching the newscreens.

While the First Shift bridge crew was responsible for monitoring the planet they orbited's information networks for any sign of detection, everybody else on the ship was spending their free time glued to old Earth broadcasts for entertainment. There was nothing better to do. Besides, it was educational; what they were watching was like viewing living history. Except for the reruns of M*A*S*H, which they'd all grown up with anyway.

Denys slid into one of the seats placed in a semi-circle around the bank of nine screens. Every one of them showed a different channel. The big main screen featured a bland-faced commentator on CNN. Cartoons, sports, a film with lots of explosions, music videos, a cooking show, a talk show and a weather channel filled the other screens. Predictably, the sound was turned on for the cooking show.

Denys decided to try for a bit of conversation with his men. "We been spotted yet?"

"No," six voices answered. No one's eyes left the video screen, which showed someone's sure hands enthusiastically chopping onions.

"Good," he answered. "The Stealth field's working." He rubbed his jaw thoughtfully. He felt like he was talking to himself. "You'd think somebody'd notice something. The HATTON's over a mile long. I'll be glad when we make the supply run and get out of here."

No one offered an opinion. Cleary made a shushing gesture in his direction.

"Chili," said Harcort wistfully. "I haven't had chili since..."

"Hotter 'n hell," Sakretis said. "That's what she told the interviewer."

"I'd love to meet her," Cleary added. "She's gorgeous, and she can cook. I'm in love."

"Who's gorgeous?" Denys asked, completely puzzled by his men's comments.

"Claudia Cameron," Toffler said reverently. He pointed toward the screen. "Her name's Claudia. We've watched this tape for three days. Over and over and over." He sighed heavily.

"That's her," Morrison said as the sight of sizzling onions was replaced by the face of a dark-haired young woman.

"Beautiful," Cleary intoned.

"It's been a long time since you've seen a woman, hasn't it?" Fox asked Cleary sarcastically. "She's not that beautiful. But she makes prize-winning chili," he added fondly.

She was very attractive, Denys decided, in an average, brown-haired, blue-eyed, button-nosed sort of way. It was kind of interesting,

how the pink sweater she wore clung to all the right proportion of curves. A very nice double handful of curves. He felt his body heating up as he stared at the woman on the flat view screen. How long has it been since I've seen a woman? he wondered, blinking rapidly to try to break the spell. Only a few weeks, he reminded himself. Get a grip, Duchamp. Set an example for your men, and all that.

She was still stimulating senses when he focused his attention on her again, but this time it was his tastebuds that took notice.

"Chili's about the perfect food," she said to the unseen interviewer. "Deep red and brown and fragrant with all the heat and spice of the desert at high noon. I serve it with cornbread and cheddar wedges, and tart apples dipped in a caramel sauce."

Denys wiped the back of his hand across his watering mouth. He agreed with Cleary; he was in love.

"It sounds like it's worth every penny of your ten thousand dollar cooking prize," the interviewer's voice commented cheerily. "And how are you going to spend your prize money? Start a three star restaurant in Bradden Falls?"

"Oh, no. I'm going on a long, luxurious vacation."

"Someplace romantic?"

The cook smiled, it held a hint of mystery, a touch of wistfulness, and a lot of sardonic amusement. "Who knows?"

That smile, and the touch of sultriness in her voice, had the impact of a nova bomb on Denys's tired brain. His breath caught in his throat. It wasn't just his tastebuds reacting, but his whole body warmed in the glow of her smile. Of her taped and frequently re-run smile, he forced himself to recall. The woman might have a strong personality, but it was canned, she was on a video that had probably been taped weeks ago, it wasn't like he was ever going to experience that smile or voice in any live-action, interactive sort of way. Which was a pity, really.

Denys gave his head a hard shake. "I'm definitely going stir crazy."

"You're just hungry," Cleary sympathized.

Before he could answer, the ship's comm sounded, "Second Shift to the hangar bay," the captain's voice said. "The shipment is in, gentlemen. We can pick it up and blow orbit as soon as you lads get back."

Sakretis jumped to his feet first. "We're about to touch the Earth of our ancestors," he declared. Sakretis was the poetic sort. "Greece. My great-grandparents left Greece in the 21st Century. I'm returning to the home of my people." He rubbed his stubbly jaw as Denys herded them to the door. "I wonder if there's anywhere good to eat?"

Everyone in the crew perked up at the question.

"Food." Cleary breathed reverently. "Hey, Duchamp, can we stop somewhere to eat Earthside?"

Denys didn't like the idea of interaction with the planet natives, there was too much at stake for the crew of the HATTON to risk contaminating their own history, but he also figured he might have a mutiny on his hands if he didn't let the men have at least a quick meal. There was morale to consider, here.

"Affirmative," he answered, hoping it wasn't a mistake.

A cheer went up and everyone's pace quickened as they hurried to the catch the slidecar for the hangar deck.

"Ouzo," Sakretis said to the group as they climbed aboard the slidecar. "My great-grandpa told me about ouzo."

##

Greece was everything Claudia expected, almost. The sun was bright, the sea sparkled by day, and at sunset the water truly was wine dark. The scenery was starkly beautiful; ancient and full of mystery. Olive groves glowed dull silver-green in the heat haze and the air smelled of verbena.

And exhaust fumes, she remembered as she strolled down the dusty street of the little seaside town, a big carry-all purse tucked under

her arm. She'd pulled off the winding mountain road onto a side track after following an ancient, wheezing bus for most of the morning. She coughed and swore a great deal as she followed the side road until she reached the little town her guide book said was Doros.

It was supposed to be a bustling sea port. If this was bustling, she'd hate to see what the book would describe as a sleepy little hamlet. She'd parked her rented car outside the town's small hotel and walked down an empty main street to the harbor. Bustling was apparently defined by the presence of some fishing boats and one small freighter tied up at an ancient stone quay. A large truck was parked alongside the ship. A very large truck, about the size of three tractor trailers. The sun glinted off its smooth, unmarked sides in an almost otherworldly way.

Funny looking truck, she thought. Sort of futuristic. She had never seen anything so sleek and silver in the States. It was sort of like a space shuttle without the wings. Only much bigger. She'd seen a space shuttle landing on a visit to Edwards Air Force Base and this thing could easily hold the shuttle in its cargo bay. She didn't know how it managed to maneuver on narrow European roads, but it must handle just fine or it wouldn't have made it as far as the ancient dock.

"Must have one hell of a driver," she mused, then turned away to enjoy the sights. "Wonder what kind of mileage it gets?"

There was a tang of salt and drying fishing nets in the air. Claudia tilted her face up to the warm Mediterranean sun for a few moments, then scrambled down a short slope to the harbor's rocky beach. There was no one in sight, not a fishing boat in the distance or any kids playing on the shingle. Nothing. It was spooky. She told herself that she liked being alone, she really did. It was just that she wasn't used to it.

She had a big family back home in Iowa. Everyone in the small college town knew her, and she played mother and confidant to the college kids who worked for her. She was hardly ever alone, which was one of the reasons she'd decided that a month or two on her own in a place she'd always dreamed of seeing would do her a world of good. Only, she admitted to herself, that seeing Greece with Mr. Right would be ever so much better. She'd had a firm image of what Mr. Right would be like ever since she was a kid and she'd read a lot of Mary Stewart mysteries set in Greece. Maybe she'd secretly hoped she'd come to Greece and Her Destiny would walk out of a novel and into her life. She daydreamed of sharing a moonlight rendezvous with destiny on the shores of a wine dark sea as she walked through Doros. Destiny would be about six foot, blond, and have a British accent, of course. Well, it never hurt to dream. In the meantime, she'd enjoy the scenery.

She'd already figured out that Doros wasn't the most bustling metropolis in Greece despite the glowing words of the guide book. So far the only activity she'd seen had been from a group of half a dozen

sailors getting happily drunk at the outdoor cafe she'd passed, and a lot of sea gulls occupying the quay. She hadn't seen anyone else, and that didn't seem right. Maybe it was siesta time, she guessed, or whatever the Greek word was for it. The natives probably knew enough to stay out of the midday sun.

I feel like I'm the only person in the world, she thought, as she walked the quiet stretch of beach. Except for him, she added ruefully as she came around a tall boulder and noticed the slender, fair-haired man a few feet ahead of her. He gazed out to sea with narrow-eyed intensity. His hair was windblown, his complexion pink from exposure to the sun, and he was totally oblivious to her presence.

It's him! she thought, stopping in her tracks to stare, her heart pounding hard in her chest. Destiny. Mr. Right in need of sunblock.

She was thinking with her imagination, her heart and her hormones, not wanting her logical brain to start making sense. Still, she knew, deep in her bones, that this was the man she came to Greece to meet. She knew, with unreasonable certainty, that he was the one whose mysterious call had brought her from half a world away. Romance. Adventure. Velvet nights in far away lands...or something like that.

Which was all nonsense, of course. But as long as he wasn't looking, she could pretend in destined love accompanied by soft music. Eric Clapton Unplugged would do nicely, she thought.

She smiled. It was a soft, goey smile; she could feel it spreading itself across her face as a warm glow started much farther down her anatomy. She couldn't help it. He was just so handsome. And he was here....

Probably waiting for his wife...

Even as this cooling thought washed over her Claudia couldn't stop staring. She couldn't help moving closer. She couldn't help looking at him. Her view was of a sharp-edged profile: sharp chin, sharp nose, sharp cheekbones, sharply tilted eyebrows, sharply intelligent, bright blue eyes beneath long fair lashes. Faded jeans and a tight-fitting knit shirt emphasized his tall, wiry frame. He was about the handsomest man she'd ever seen. And so strangely familiar.

No. Not strange at all. I've been waiting for him all my....

Which was ridiculous, since she'd never seen him before in her life. Though he did sort of look like Sting when he still had hair, she decided. Maybe he was Apollo -- though you'd think Apollo'd be a little more beefy...sort of the body of Arnold Schwarzenegger and the face of, well, Sting. Did sun gods wear old jeans, and very nicely too? Greek gods generally hung out in the nude, as she recalled, chasing hysterical dryads and nymphs who seemed to prefer getting turned into trees or mud puddles than fooling around with gorgeous nude gods for some reason Claudia had never been able to figure out. Ancient Greek women's lib, maybe. Which meant that the women of ancient Greece were more sensible than she was at the moment. She knew very well that

romance was just fine and dandy in theory, but the reality was far too emotionally messy to deal with. So, dream on, girl, she told herself. It's okay to look, but the best thing to do is leave the man alone.

She took a mental deep breath and started to turn away just as the man looked at her. Since it was too late to escape without being rude, she gazed squarely into his ice blue eyes, and said, "Hello. Sorry if I'm disturbing you."

The man turned pale beneath his light sunburn and looked like he was going to faint when she spoke to him. "Wh- what -- "

"I didn't mean to startle you," she added in a determinedly pleasant voice.

It's her! Denys realized as she spoke.

It's the chili woman. In the flesh. On the beach. Standing in front of him. This wasn't possible. What happened to her pink sweater? No, that was the tape and that thin gauze blouse she's wearing is very nice, too. Very clinging. She has such lovely, round....

He'd been minding his own business, and marveling at the HATTON's computer's ability to order supplies by tapping into twentieth century computer networks. He'd also been watching the waves and being homesick when he'd noticed someone standing next to him. He'd assumed it was Cleary or someone else from the crew, come to announce their meal was at an end. Then he'd turned to find a beautiful woman staring at him and his reason had fled for a moment. It kept wanting to flee again*STILL HADN'T RETURNED? and urged him to take advantage of the opportunity of meeting a beautiful woman on a romantic beach.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded of the apparition. She jumped back a good three feet at his harsh, near-shout. She looked like she was going to turn and run. He stepped quickly after her. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to startle you."

He had a British accent. Claudia took a step back toward him. She couldn't help it. A British accent on a Greek beach, he was like a hero in a Mary Stewart novel. Like the man of her dreams. He reached out a hand to steady her, and the contact of his fingers on the flesh of her upper arm sent a buzz of heat through her. She wasn't sure which of them stepped back first.

She did catch her breath first. "I'm Claudia Cameron," she said, voice not particularly steady. "American tourist."

He smiled, it lit his severely handsome face like a searchlight. Are you married? she thought. Would you like to be?

"Denys Duchamp," he replied.

"Sounds French."

"I am French. My ancestry's French."

"But with a British accent. Sort of like Captain Picard on Star Trek." I sound like a complete idiot, she added to herself while she tried unsuccessfully to get her mind off the way his brief touch still had her tingling from head to foot. Maybe it wasn't just his touch,

but the added jolt she'd gotten from his smile.

Denys heard her speak, but his mind was momentarily disconnected from his body as it absorbed the impact from just the sight of her. Her skin was so soft, with an almost golden glow in the bright light. The sunlight also brought out deep red highlights in her dark brown hair. He wanted to touch her hair, run his fingers through it. He wanted to step closer to her, to see if the glow from her skin would warm him the way he knew it would. Even from a distance of a couple of feet --

Then Denys's mind finally kicked back into working mode and he caught the reference to what she'd said about spacemen with French names and English accents. He'd been watching a lot of old television lately. He almost let out a hysterical laugh. "Something like that. I'm...Canadian," he added, as he remembered the forged papers he'd signed when they'd taken possession of the freighter's cargo. The equipment they'd purchased was supposedly heading for Canada, wherever that was.

"Ah, that explains it." Not that the man's accent needed explanation. What was the matter with your her tongue? Why was it mouthing such nonsense? Wasn't she supposed to be a sophisticated ex-college professor turned businesswoman? Didn't she know dream men didn't exist? Even if he was standing right in front of her, big as life and twice as gorgeous. "I'm here on vacation," she told him.

"I'm here on business," he answered. His gaze strayed past her, looking up toward the quay. "We're leaving any minute now."

She hoped her disappointment didn't show. She'd been hoping he'd be staying at the hotel. Hoping he was free for a moonlit walk, dinner, dancing, fathering her children. Goodness, but her mind was leaping about in an uncontrolled frenzy all of a sudden.

She cleared her throat. She tried not to feel disappointed; she tried to ignore her instant, overwhelming, ridiculous, attraction to Denys Duchamp. She tried to make commonplace conversation. "Is that your truck? What make is it? I've never seen anything like it before."

The implication of her comments hit Denys like a hammer. Wait a minute, wasn't this attractive, distracting, charming woman supposed to be asleep? Where had she come from? They had put a wide beam sleep ray on the whole village. Were people waking up? He realized he'd better stop thinking about Claudia Cameron and get the crew and get out of here.

"Yes," he answered, surprised at how calm he sounded. Years of dealing with the captain, he supposed. "It's my truck. Did you just get to Doros?"

"Yes. I drove in a few minutes ago. Sleepy little place, isn't it?"

"It better be. Excuse me, I have to go."

He sketched her a quick bow and ran up the beach.

He would have liked to have spent a few weeks taking long walks, watching sunsets, and fooling around on the beach and in every other lovely spot in the village with her, but this was not a vacation. Duty came first. He had to round up Second Shift and get out of here before everyone woke up and witnessed a UFO taking off from their harbor.

Claudia stared wistfully after the running man. His long, powerful legs moving effortlessly across the hard-packed sand were a joy to watch. He had a beautiful, athlete's body. Everything else about him was totally confusing.

Why'd he take off like that? Why'd he bow? Maybe Canadians were more formal than she thought. She shrugged. Maybe this was a dream. Or one of them was crazy. Better for her, really, that he was in a hurry to leave, even if his absence left an immediate lonely spot in her being. How odd, she thought, and how silly.

She decided she was just hungry as he disappeared from sight. A picnic would be nice, she thought. She would not think about how much nicer a picnic might have been if Denys Duchamp had accompanied her on it. She thought she'd seen a food store on her way into town. She would buy some groceries then come back to the beach. Maybe bring along a bottle of wine and toast the beauty of the day and the memory of having met her notion of a hero, even if only for a few confusing minutes.

Too bad Mr. Duchamp didn't hang around long enough to find out what a great cook I am, she mused as she followed his footsteps back toward Doros. The French, and she assumed this applied to French Canadians as well, were supposed to appreciate good cooking.

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"You mean it's alcoholic?" Morrison asked in shock, and slid under the checkered tablecloth. "Ouzo is liquor?"

They'd been passing the ouzo bottles to slake their thirst for nearly an hour. Hand loading a cargo hauler was mighty thirsty work.

"Tastes like licorice-flavored tar," Cleary contributed, voice slurred. He held up his half-full bottle. "I like it."

"I've never had real alcohol before," Fox said. "You know, this planet looks funny." He squinted, peering into the distance. The flat-roofed houses, the big pots of red flowers bordering the perimeter of the outdoor cafe where they sat, the boats in the harbor below all wavered hazily in and out of focus.

"Are we drunk?" Toffler questioned.

"Not like a happy pill," Harcourt contributed.

Sakretis smiled benignly. "No, it isn't. These ancestors of mine have a good thing here." He poked a fragrant mound on his plate. "This grape leaf stuff is good, too. But it's not chili," he added wistfully. "I could really go for a bowl of chili."

"Me too," several voices chimed in.

It took him a couple of tries, but Morrison managed to pull himself out from under the table. "Where's Duchamp? My legs are all

funny."

"Took a walk by the water," Fox said. "New Sydney's a water world. He's homesick. I like the desert. Heat." He licked his lips. "Chili."

"I've got an idea." Cleary declared, climbing unsteadily to his feet. "Let's go grocery shopping while everybody's still asleep. Sleepy's a wonderful thing," he added. "While everyone's asleep we can raid the commissary we saw up the street. Take back some real food."

"Duchamp won't like that," Harcourt said.

"Don't have to tell him," Fox contributed.

"We got an empty storage chest on the shuttle," Morrison added encouragingly.

"Let's do it," Sakretis assented.

"Yeah," Toffler chimed in, then gulped down the rest of the bottle of ouzo.

They wobbled to their feet and trooped drunkenly a few doors up the street. All was quiet and dark inside the little store. They found baskets and began filling them with anything on the shelves that looked like it might be food. Not that the crew's vision or judgment was any too clear by this time.

They laughed and joked and made two trips to the shuttle and were back for a third when the door opened behind them. Cans and bags crashed noisily to the floor as three of the drunken crewmen went for their sleepy's while the others began to speak all at once.

"Duchamp!"

"We'll put it back!"

"We'll leave cash for the supplies!"

"That's not Duchamp!" Fox declared.

Long seconds went by as they came to realize there was a startled woman standing in the shaft of sunlight by the open door.

She was a vision.

The answer to a hungry, drunken man's dreams.

Six desperate men suddenly believed there was indeed justice in the universe.

"It's her!"

"Claudia!"

"Chili!"

"Get her!" Cleary shouted.

Three sleepy's fired as one.

Chapter Two

"Where have you been?" Denys demanded as he climbed into the shuttle from the storage bay's rear entrance.

He'd looked all over the small village for his shift crew before giving up and heading back to use the ship's recall signal. The last place he'd expected to find the crewmen was where they were supposed to be.

Three of them sat down hastily on a storage chest as he entered. The other three started guiltily as he came toward them. Cleary gave him an innocent grin. The one he always gave when he was up to something. Fox began tunelessly whistling. They all smelled of alcohol.

Hmmm. Denys rubbed his chin as he tried to decide whether or not to find out what they'd just stowed in the chest. It's food, he decided. It's what he would have pilfered if his Shift Officer had left him on his own long enough.

Should he confiscate it? Did they have time? There was a wide awake woman running around Doros. She'd probably noticed a few sleeping citizens by now. Why hadn't he thought to put her under? It wouldn't have hurt her. He felt a pang of guilt for something he hadn't even done to Claudia Cameron. It would have just put her to sleep -- but it would have seemed too much like hurting her, or cheating her. Never mind Claudia Cameron. Think of duty. It's better to just get out of here, he decided. Away from Claudia. He'd already had too many thoughts about the woman from the cooking show, even before he met her. Having met her, all he could do was flee the scene before he had an urge to grab her and bring her back to the ship to warm his nights with something more than her spicy cooking.

To keep from thinking about that improper fantasy<,> he looked sternly at his men. "You better have paid for whatever you took," he told the crew.

Several of them turned various shades of red. There were several nods. Fox's eyes closed, and he quietly passed out. The men had either not done the required research about twentieth century Earth, or they had and had decided to try out some of the available stimulants. Duchamp sighed. Good thing he was the designated driver.

"Let's get these supplies to the HATTON. Strap in."

"Yes, sir!" five voices declared enthusiastically. Fox began gently to snore as he was carried into the passenger compartment by Harcourt and Sakretis. Denys followed after them, thinking how glad he'd be to get this mission over and get back home to the twenty second century.

##

"Your load is two hundred pounds on the heavy side," Deck Officer Smid told Denys as he stepped onto the hangar bay deck.

He'd seen Smid waiting for him as he opened the hatchway. Smid had his beloved databoard clutched in his arms and the usual severe expression on his rabbit face. The hangar bay was bustling with activity as robot scooters hurried forward to unload the shuttle.

His drunken crew staggered out the hatch behind him. Denys ignored Smid for the moment. "Head to Medical for some rays," he ordered the men.

There were nods and "Yes, sirs," and they lumbered off. Cleary started singing.

Denys sighed, and turned his attention to the Deck Officer. "They tried a local beverage," he explained.

Smid was glancing at the readings on his databoard. Smid rarely took note of human activity. "Never mind the Shift crew," he said. "What about that extra weight?"

Probably the food, Denys thought. To Smid he explained, "The electronic and computer parts we picked up aren't as sophisticated as ours. Our weight guesses were only approximate."

"This is higher than the final estimate. The Book states -- "

"Captain Andrews give you a peek at the Book, did he?" Denys interrupted.

"No, of course not."

Smid did not recognize sarcasm. He did, however, recognize the authority of The Book. The Book -- the HATTON's secret orders -- was a two hundred year old document. It had been in a sealed vault at Government Prime for most of those two hundred years. Those sealed orders had had EYES ONLY status printed on the locked cover for Captain Charles Andrews since long before he was born. No one but he knew what was in the Book. And Captain Andrews wasn't likely to share any more knowledge than was necessary to his lowly crewmembers.

"Our job was to pick up spare parts we can adapt for a mining operation," Denys reminded the Deck Officer. "We did our job. Now it's time to get on with the mission." Denys planted his hands on his hips and demanded, "You want me to take it all back because it's a few pounds overweight?" And miss the chance at my first decent meal in weeks? No way, Smid. "Or do I let Captain Andrews know you're holding up our leaving Earth for Phobos?"

Mentioning the Captain's name had the desired effect. Smid's nose twitched when he was perturbed. It twitched now. No one wanted to deal with Charles the Terrible if they could help it.

"No need to get drastic, Duchamp," Smid said hastily. He scratched an ear, then tapped a finger on the edge of his databoard. "But I want an inventory done immediately. I want this discrepancy explained."

"Fine," Denys agreed. "I'll supervise the inventory myself. No problem." Anything to soothe Smid's little bureaucrat's mind. Denys was sure they'd find some way to fudge the data; Cleary was an expert at that sort of thing. "Meanwhile," he said as the loaded scooters whizzed past them toward the cargo bay, "I want to let the bridge know we're clear to leave, then get back in uniform."

He didn't wait for Smid's reply before heading toward the hangar's comm board. He was in a hurry.

So was Captain Andrews. Within two minutes of Denys relaying the news of the shuttle's safe unloading, the HATTON was on its way to the other side of the solar system, headed for Mars.

##

Kalamata olives. The last thing she remembered was staring at a big glass jar of kalamata olives. On a shelf. Just inside a doorway. Of a dim room. She'd blinked, waited for her eyes to adjust to the difference in light. Loud, slurred voices came out of the dimness. There was a burst of light behind her eyes. Darkness. Dreams of flying.

Claudia was pretty sure she was awake now, but she was still in darkness. In a small, enclosed space. It felt like she was lying on the jar of olives. She felt like she had a Band-Aid strapped across the space between her lips and nose.

Where was she? What was going on here?

She tried pushing on the sides of the box, on the top. The darkness pressed in on her. She yelled. There wasn't enough room to sit up. She was surrounded by jars and cans and cardboard and plastic containers. She could feel the papery smoothness of onions, smell the sharp tang of lemons. It was like she'd been packed away in a cupboard with a lot of groceries.

"Light? I remember the light. I went into the light? Like I've read happens when you die?" she questioned in a confused mumble. "Don't tell me I died and the friend waiting to greet me on the other side was a bag of onions! That's the dumbest thing I've ever heard!"

I am not dead. This was too ridiculous to be the afterlife. Afterdeath? "No. I'm alive and doing fine. I just don't know where I am. I was in Greece. In a grocery store. So I'm probably in a food locker in a Greek grocery store. Which doesn't make as much sense as being dead, but is slightly more cheering to contemplate. Why am I in a Greek food locker? What's the strategy behind my being here?"

Only one use for locking up American tourists came immediately to mind. She sat up, hitting her head sharply on the top of the box.

"Help!" Claudia screamed into the fragrant darkness. She began banging on the walls of her tiny prison with fists and feet. "Help!" she shouted, hoping someone would hear. "Help! I've been taken hostage by crazed terrorists!"

##

Denys rushed to get to the cargo bay before his shift crew. He wanted to know what they'd brought aboard before they hid it away from him. He hadn't counted on Smid's interference when he'd turned a blind eye to bringing supplies on board. He should have. He shouldn't have let his stomach overrule his reason. What if the contraband was full of disease-laden bacteria that would poison them all?

What if Smid caught them? And told the captain.

He didn't know what the Captain would do if Smid reported any

deviation from the Book's directives.

Deviation from the Book's directives.

Dire words. Everyone knew any deviation from the Book was a capital offense. Everything depended on their bringing back the metaform. It was the edge they needed to defeat the Sirens. He should never have let this happen. How was he going to straighten out this mess?

Maybe he should find the storage container and flush it out the waste disposer.

Good idea, he decided as he grabbed a databoard from the computer station by the bay door. He ordered the lights up and took a quick glance at the location map on the databoard's liquid crystal screen. "I'm looking for cargo box DM-55," he told the cargo computer. An orange light quickly appeared on the map. He checked the grid location. The box he wanted was located in the farthest corner of the stadium-sized hold. "Thanks," he muttered, and started down the long rows of storage aisles.

DM-55 was a seven foot long, three foot square steel-gray box. It sat in a long stack of over one hundred other identical steel-gray boxes. Second box, second row, about waist level on Denys. He approached it with anxious curiosity and quick, determined strides...until he heard the muffled banging and wailing.

He halted in surprise when he first heard the noise, frozen in his tracks, thoughts slammed into incoherence. What the...who...how...why...those idiots! Those fools! Those, those drunken...!

"What have they done!"

A pitiful, frightened wail issued from Box DM-55, the sound dulled by distance and the thick metal walls of the tiny prison. "Please help me! I -- I can't breathe."

"Oh my God!" Denys sprang forward. He pulled the box out of its crib and pressed the release in three quick moves. The lid slid back on a great, gulping gasp of air from the person trapped inside. "It's the chili woman!" he exclaimed as he pulled her up and out of the box.

She crumpled onto the deck, gasping and panting, as her blue-tinged skin quickly turned back to healthy tan. The breather strip someone had been thoughtful enough to tape under her nose stayed bright blue, indicating she'd been on her last minute of oxygen. He'd arrived literally in the nick of time.

"What are you doing here?" he heard himself demanding for the second time today. Then he knelt beside her, concern overcoming annoyance. He tried to take her in his arms as he hastily added, "I'm sorry. I'm sure this isn't your fault. But lady, we are in deep trouble."

Claudia scooted backwards as the terrorist grabbed for her. The light hurt her eyes, her head was pounding, her cramped muscles were screaming and she was so dizzy she could barely see. Her ears were

ringing loudly. She had to get away from the man. What was he babbling about? What did he want with her?

"What do you want with me?" Her voice was a rasping croak. She was hysterical. She knew she was hysterical and being hysterical wasn't going to help. She didn't care at the moment. She wasn't just hysterical, she was terrified and furious.

"I don't want anything with you!" Then Denys remembered that He'd actually thought about bringing her on board? and why he'd wanted to be with her, and blushed deeply. "Really. Not me. I wouldn't really -- I'm not that sort of -- Never mind."

Claudia paid no attention to the man's words as she frantically looked for a way to escape. They were in a wide aisle surrounded by tall shelves of metal boxes. Metal boxes just like the one she'd been trapped in. The aisle looked like it stretched on for miles. The floor was metal, the ceiling high over their heads was also metal, crisscrossed by long strips of lighting tubes. The air felt and smelled subtly wrong. Were they on a ship? The freighter she'd seen tied at the Doros wharf?

"This isn't Doros. Where am I? How long was I out? What are you going to do with me? Where are you taking me? What do you want with all that goat cheese? Who are you?"

"Denys Duchamp. We've met. Remember?" His light, British-accented voice was low, the tone attempting to be calm and soothing.

She was quivering with fear. She remembered him now. Her dream man. She should have known that dreams had ways of turning into nightmares. She worked hard to turn terror into indignation. If she could bury the panic, she could cope. She had to cope calmly and reasonably with this man, no matter how vicious he might turn out to be. "Under false pretenses. I thought you were exciting and adventurous. I didn't know you were a terrorist!"

"A terrorist? Me?" His outraged expression was almost funny. "No! I can explain everything -- almost everything. No I can't. Listen, no one is going to harm you. There's been an accident. A mistake. There's nothing to be afraid of. You'll be -- Goat cheese?"

She pointed at the hated box. "It's full of goat cheese. And onions and olives and and...me!" She began to cry.

Denys wished he hadn't left his sleep spray sitting on the recycler on top of his civilian clothes. Until Claudia started crying. He couldn't stun a crying woman. Especially one who looked like she hated the idea of being reduced to helpless tears. Being trapped in that box had been bad enough, he couldn't inflict another indignity on her strained emotions.

He stepped toward her. She backed against a storage shelf. He put his arms out on either side of her, resting them on the shelf, trapping her in a protective circle. She flinched. He leaned closer and she looked up into his eyes.

"No one is going to harm you," he said. Except maybe the Captain,

he thought. No, he'd take care of her, Denys promised himself with grim determination. This was going to screw up his career. His and the whole crew's careers. They all deserved to be court-martialed. Them for doing this, him for letting it happen even if he hadn't been involved. He was responsible.

Never mind who's was to blame, he told himself. The important thing was to take care of Claudia. He couldn't let anything happen to her.

"I won't let anything happen," he repeated out loud. He didn't know why he felt so fiercely protective of her. Maybe it was the tears rolling slowly down her soft cheeks, or because she was small and vulnerable and lost. He was a sucker for lost things. Maybe because he wanted her, but this wasn't the time or place for that kind of feeling. There would never be a time and place for it. She needed his help. Helping her would have to be enough. And it would be so nice to be needed by a woman for once. "Claudia." He liked the sound of her name. It sounded of old Earth history. They gazed into each other's eyes for what seemed a very long time. "Trust me."

At some point she'd stopped being frightened of him, Claudia realized. There was something...nice about him. He looked dangerous enough, all sharp angles and nervous energy, but there was nothing cold or ruthless about him. Her instinct was to trust him. Her instinct was probably wrong. She was going to have to be on her guard. She was going to have to pull herself together. She was going to have to ignore the concern shining out of his bright blue eyes. She was going to have to ignore the visceral reaction that was still telling her he was the handsomest man she'd ever seen. Visceral reactions and instincts had to be overruled.

She wished she felt threatened by his closeness. The warm stirring she felt by his nearness was totally wrong, inappropriate for the situation. He wasn't touching her, but she found herself half-wishing he would. Which was completely ridiculous, of course. He was a kidnapper. A fiend. Trust me, he'd said, and she wanted to. She couldn't. It's just the English accent, she told herself harshly. She was a sucker for English accents. She forced herself to be logical, rational.

"Why should I trust you?"

He tilted his head, his lips curling in a faint smile. "Because you have to, Claudia." His hand approached her face. She thought for a second he was going to stroke her cheek. Instead, he ripped the Band-Aid out from under her nose.

"Ow!"

He held up a blue band of adhesive material for her to get a good look at. "This is a breather strip. It converts vacuum to breathable air for a couple hours. I haven't the faintest idea how. The magic of modern science -- only it's not your modern science, Claudia, but the science of two hundred years in your future. The science that produced this." He waved the strip then gestured to take in the room where they were

standing. "This space ship, me, everything you see, is brought to you by the Federated Community of Worlds."

He looked at her expectantly after making this declaration. Claudia didn't react immediately. She thought about these odd pronouncements for a few moments first. Suddenly the quiet surrounding Doros became ominous and unexplained. She remembered the futuristic-looking truck on the dock. She thought of the box and the odd shape and look of the room where they were standing. She had no trouble believing she was on a space ship and that Denys Duchamp was from the future. She should have, because it wasn't logical, but deep in the intuitive part of her soul she did believe. Sometimes logic was for Vulcans and Vulcans came from outer space -- yeah, but Star Trek was fictional outer space where parallel evolution and other non-scientific nonsense made sense. This was real. And it was true. And it couldn't be what it seemed.

"Oh, my god!" she exclaimed as the full impact of the situation hit her. "You're an alien!"

"Well, technically, yes."

If he was an alien, he couldn't be what he seemed -- tall, lean, blond and gorgeous. A man. Parallel evolution wasn't possible.

"What are you?" she demanded. "Some kind of lizard in a human suit?"

##

"Our ancestors had a funny way of enjoying themselves," Toffler said as the effects of the ouzo slowly faded from his system.

"Happy pill's better," Sakretis agreed. "But they didn't have it, did they?"

Harcort stretched out on the diagnostic bed, skin glowing in the healing rays from the overhead medlights. The medicomputer was humming and tsking to itself, adjusting the lights for their various needs. The hum had a distinctly disapproving air to it. "The food was great, though," he added.

"Yeah," Fox said.

Morrison scratched his head. "There's something I'm trying to remember."

"Something we did," Toffler added.

"Something about food," Sakretis recalled. "We raided a store."

"Yeah." Toffler nodded. "Something else, too."

"Chili." Harcort rubbed his jaw. "Something about the chili -- "

"The Chili woman!" Cleary yelled. He groaned, then jumped to his feet. "What have we done? The chili woman's in the storage box!"

"In the hold?" Fox asked. "You're joking?" There was a great deal of head shaking. "We didn't?"

"We did," Morrison declared. "I remember now."

"We better go get her," Sakretis said.

Cleary was already at the door. "What are we waiting for? Let's go!"
They ran from the room, leaving the medicomputer to chitter on indignantly to itself.

Chapter Three

"You're an alien lizard terrorist, aren't you?"

"You've been watching too many movies, lady," Denys told Claudia. "I'm an engineer. I'm as human as you are. I'm from the colony world of New Sydney."

"What are you doing on a space ship?"

"I was drafted."

"Right," she answered skeptically. Claudia ducked under his arm and began backing down the aisle.

He followed her. "Don't be frightened. This is all a mistake."

"Right," she said again. "Why did you bring me here?"

A flash of annoyance crossed his sharply etched features. "I didn't. You were drafted. By my shift crew."

"What?"

"Do you know about the effects of alcohol on judgment and reason?"

"Of course I do."

"Well, we don't. Except as an historical footnote. We don't use intoxicants in our time. At least, not the same sort as you use, not in the same ways. Never mind." He shook his head, and a heavy lock of blond hair fell across his forehead. He brushed it aside while the pair of them moved slowly toward the door. "What I think happened is -- "

The door opened behind her, six anxious men ran inside. Denys saw them coming.

"She's alive!" A bellowing cheer went up as the crew spotted Claudia.

Claudia turned, and saw a mob of disheveled men rushing toward her, yelling loudly. She screamed, and found herself hiding behind Denys Duchamp. Her hands clutched nervously at his shoulders. "Help!"

He threw an amused glance over his shoulder at her as the men surrounded them, but he didn't try to peel her off as she clung to him. The soft heat of her body felt more than good in the cold cargo bay.

"Cleary," he yelled. "I want an explanation, Mister!"

She peered from behind Denys as a red-haired, freckled man blushed bright pink and said, "Me, sir?"

"Who else is responsible for screwups around here?" Denys's question was etched in sarcastic acid.

"Point taken, sir. Uh... It was an accident, sir."

"She fell into the box?" one of the others offered sheepishly. He hung his head, and mumbled, "We're sorry. We didn't know what we were

doing. It seemed like a good idea at the time. We'll put her right back, sir. Promise."

"How?" somebody asked. "We can't just ask the Captain to turn around. Can we?"

"No," several panicky voices said together.

"We just wanted a decent meal," another one spoke up.

"We're sorry, chili lady. We recognized you from the newscast and thought you could come and cook for us."

"That's all," Cleary added. "No harm intended."

Denys planted his fists on his hips. "No harm? This woman could have been killed."

"She still might be if the Captain finds out," someone chimed in.

Claudia gained courage as she listened to the men's raving. They seemed harmless, they seemed sincere. Most importantly, Denys's indignation and worry seemed real and she was having trouble guarding herself against the emotional effect he had on her. Maybe she'd be able to think clearer if she pried herself away from his hard-muscled back. She made herself step out from behind Denys and address the men who'd kidnapped her.

"Let's see if I've got this straight. You're from the future?"

They nodded. "Okay. Fine. I'll buy that."

"Oh, great," Denys muttered from behind her. "You'll believe them, but I'm a lizard terrorist."

She ignored him and went on. "Your ship was picking up broadcasts from Earth and you saw the cooking show I was on?" There were nods. "Then you got drunk and accidentally kidnapped me?" More nods. "It was a coincidence -- my being in Doros the same time you were loading supplies?"

"Fate," Cleary said. "Serendipity. Karma. Ouzo."

And the ouzo accounted for a lot, she decided. Well, she went to Greece looking for adventure. "All right. I'll buy it," she told them.

"You believe them?" Denys demanded. "I mean, it's true. But why do you believe them?"

She turned to face him. "I walked in on them raiding a grocery store. I got hit by a beam of light and the light knocked me out. I woke up in a high tech warehouse wearing a 'breather strip'. And you all have FCWS HATTON embroidered on the breast pocket of those blue uniforms you're wearing. So I'm going to assume I'm aboard the Federated Community of Worlds Ship HATTON." She crossed her arms and lifted her chin determinedly. "Take me to your captain."

There was a chorus of "NO!" Denys Duchamp's voice was among them. "Are you crazy!" Then her kidnappers began to gabble among themselves.

"She doesn't know what she's asking."

"Does she want to walk back to Earth?"

"And us with her?"

"We'll have to hide her."

"Yeah, but where?"

"The ship is mostly empty. What do you mean, where?"

She exchanged a glance with Denys. He gave her an apologetic shrug. "They're a good mining crew," he said. "but, I think -- "

"I think I've been kidnapped by the six stooges," Claudia supplied for him. He looked vague for a moment, then nodded as he got the reference. He'd had the same look when she mentioned Star Trek on the beach at Doros. She found it, somehow, endearing. She'd have to guard herself from that particular emotional trap around Denys Duchamp. Without any conscious decision, they stepped away from the babbling mining crew. "Why can't I talk to the captain?" she asked quietly.

"We're on a secret mission," he answered. "We can't risk destroying our chance of success by deviating from our orders in any way." He gave her an ironic smile. "Of course, we've already done that, haven't we?"

She nodded. "Looks like it to me."

"But as long as the Captain doesn't find out..." His voice trailed off, and he looked at her hopefully.

Claudia waited for him to go on, tapping her sandal-shod foot on the slightly vibrating metal deck. Denys's men gathered silently around them. Tap tap tap. "Well?" she finally demanded after Denys just stood there looking thoughtful and pleading for a while. It was a very effective, boyish look.

"We're going to have to make another supply run when the back ordered parts come in," he said. "We could sneak you back to Earth then."

His men nodded as one.

Claudia continued angrily tapping her foot. "So? What does that mean?"

"It means we'd probably be able to hide you from the rest of the crew for that long. The ship is practically empty. We're working with a skeleton crew."

"Why do you have to hide me?"

"Because of the captain," the red-head named Cleary explained. "He'd kill you if you were found."

"For the sake of the mission," someone else said.

"Kill us, too."

"Nah, he needs us."

"At least until the mission's complete. Then -- " The man dramatically drew a finger across his throat.

Denys stepped between his men and her. He put his hands on her shoulders and looked her sincerely in the eye. "Captain Andrews is a tyrant. Your being on board won't do any harm, but he wouldn't see it that way." And he'd be right, Denys admitted to himself. Her being here could change history somehow. Maybe she already had. Not her. Them. They were responsible. Do I want to protect you, Claudia Cameron? Or am I just trying to protect my men, and my career? Better to concentrate on

protecting the mission. At all cost. "You'll have to promise not to tell anyone on Earth about this," he went on.

She laughed. She was very beautiful when she laughed. He had to keep from letting that beauty effect him.

"Why shouldn't I tell anyone?" she questioned. "People claim to be kidnapped by aliens in UFOs all the time. No one believes them. They wouldn't believe me, either. It's not like this is going to show up on an episode of Sightings, or something."

Denys wasn't sure he believed her matter-of-fact statement. Why wouldn't anyone believe her? The question bothered him, but he refrained from asking for now.

"Fine. Wonderful. It's decided," Cleary said. "We'll hide you. No problem."

Claudia rounded on Cleary. "I never said I was going along with this."

"But you have to," Sakretis pleaded.

"Please, chili lady," Fox put in.

Denys watched as her eyes narrowed and her nostrils flared angrily. He was suddenly aware that she might be little, but she was no pushover. He could tell she was going to be able to handle his crew, and he liked her for it. Liked and resented it at the same time. Damn, the woman was confusing.

"My name is Claudia," she told them. "No, Dr. Cameron to you louts. Forget this chili lady nonsense. I do not cook for my kidnappers."

"Dr. Cameron?" Denys wondered. "Doctor of what?"

"I didn't always run a catering business," she said, still staring down the eager looks on the crew's faces. She wagged a stern finger at them. "I have," she informed them, "faced a hall full of rowdy, know-it-all fraternity jocks and beaten them into submission in less time than it takes to assign a half dozen research papers. I cook and I manage a cleaning business because I enjoy it, not because I see it as my natural place in the scheme of things. If you brought me on board thinking I was the perfect little woman who would just love to darn your socks and stir your soup, you most definitely have another think coming!"

"Yes, ma'am," a chorus of six voices answered.

"What?"

They came to attention. "Yes, ma'am, Dr. Cameron!"

"Good." She threw a smug look over her shoulder at Denys. "My father was a drill sergeant," she told him.

He covered his mouth in an attempt not to laugh. "Yes, ma'am," he said from behind his hand.

"Uh, Dr. Cameron?" Harcourt questioned tentatively.

"Yes?"

"You do promise not to talk to the Captain, though. Don't you?"

She grimaced, and tapped her foot a few more times, but finally

gave a grudging nod. "I promise."

There was a collective sigh of relief.

"Thank you," Denys said. "It won't be hard to hide you." Suddenly everyone's eyes were turned eagerly to him for leadership, including Claudia's. He smiled into hers, then caught himself and looked swiftly away. He spoke to the crew. "Maybe we can disguise her as a man."

There was general laughter.

He ran a critical eye over her small but lush form. Maybe we could disguise her as a man from the waist down, he thought. No, not with those lovely curved hips and that cute little heart-shaped --

"Yeah, right," Cleary said.

He got the distinct feeling the shift crew were sharing his exact thoughts. He didn't like it. "Just check through stores and pilfer her some clothes that fit." There were nods. "All right, where can we stash her?" he went on.

Cleary spoke up. "Leave it to me, Duchamp. I know the perfect place."

"Fine," Denys answered. Cleary, sober, was the one person he'd trust with getting away with murder. The man had been born to beat the system. "Get her settled somewhere no one will think to look for the next two months."

"I will," he promised. "Leave it to me."

##

Claudia suspected Cleary of being responsible for the whole thing. She distinctly remembered his voice saying, "Get her!" back in the grocery store. She knew she should be distrustful and resentful of the man. Instead she found she'd liked him almost instantly as soon as she got over being frightened and furious at the situation.

She liked the room he brought her to as well. They reached it after about half an hour of skulking along deserted blue and cream painted metal corridors. She liked the room because she got an immediate sense as she stepped inside that she was on board a spaceship. The furnishings, what little there were of them, were all curved and futuristic-looking. She was immediately drawn to the viewport which looked out on the stars.

"That's a projection screen," Cleary explained as Claudia peered longingly out at blacker than black darkness dotted with cold, sharp pinpoints of light. "The only real viewport on the HATTON is the Captain's Walk. It's a corridor up near the bridge; officers' country. This," he went on, running his hand over a control panel next to the fake window as she gave a disappointed sigh, "will show you the view from any point on the ship." The picture changed several times as he pressed the keypad. Actually it wavered and then showed the same dark image several times. "There's not much to see at the moment," he

admitted.

Claudia sighed and moved away from the window. She let Cleary show her the rest of her temporary quarters.

"What you've got here," he said, "is a living area. Table, chairs, entertainment/educational center, shelves, personal lockers, head and bed alcoves." He pointed at each amenity as he told her about it.

Claudia took it all in, then said, "This room's meant for double occupancy."

He nodded. "All quarters on this level are. We sleep six to a room on our deck. I thought you'd be more comfortable here." He gave her a very charming smile, then showed her how to open lockers and run the sonic shower in the head and call up games and information on the e/e screen.

She caught on easily and Cleary soon gave her another of his ready supply of smiles. "Now I'll go find you something to wear."

After he left Claudia sat down on the bed in the sleeping alcove he'd suggested she use and tried not to think about the situation. Or at least not to think too seriously about the situation. All right, it's not exactly believable, she admitted, but it's interesting. Unique. And they seemed to be nice people. She felt like she should trust them, and decided she'd have to guard against that feeling. They might not be what they appeared at all. She was going to have to be careful of her emotions, especially around the formidably handsome Mr. Duchamp.

Still, she was in space even if it might be some sort of sinister plot. She couldn't help but be happy about being in space. Okay, the view wasn't spectacular, or even real, but she was in space.

She'd always wanted to be an astronaut when she was a kid. She'd even gone to Space Camp. She was prepared...more or less. Space Camp was back in college, though, when she was an undergrad. A lot of time and changes had passed since those innocent, idealistic days.

She was not going to worry about it, she decided, sliding back on the waterbed-like mattress. She was going to take things as they came and analyze the situation after she had some more data. That was all she could really do, anyway.

The sleeping alcoves were niches in the wall set on opposite sides of the personal lockers. The niche contained a shelf and an overhead light as well as the single width platform bed. She lay down. The bed's surface molded to her, soft and supporting at the same time.

Very nice, she thought. It almost felt it was giving off comforting vibrations. She yawned and curled up on her side, tucking her hands beneath her cheek. She was tired. It had been a hell of a day. This was nice. It was as if the bed was trying to lull her to sleep, she thought, and fell asleep.

She woke realizing she wasn't alone in the room; Cleary back with some clothes, she supposed. She rolled over and opened her eyes and immediately noticed that Denys Duchamp wasn't wearing a shirt. His chest

hair was dark gold, not too heavy, but it did descend over sculpted muscles in a tantalizing V to his flat stomach. He was wearing a tiny pair of knit briefs. Bright blue. With a pronounced bulge.

Claudia licked dry lips, and forced her gaze to climb back above the man's belt buckle. Or, rather, where the man's belt buckle would be if he were wearing a belt, or anything other than those tiny little Calvin Klein's.

Claudia sat bolt upright. What the devil was she doing staring at a nearly-naked man as though it was the most natural thing in the world?

"Are you hungry?" Denys asked politely as Claudia's gaze met his own. He'd meant to ask her what she was doing in his former roommate's bed, but from the expression on her face the question he'd asked seemed more appropriate. Besides, he could figure out for himself why she was in his quarters.

He watched her face go bright red as she quickly sat up. "What are you doing here?" she yelled.

"I live here," he explained. I..."

"Get out!"

She looked like she was getting ready to scream. "What's the matter?" he asked, voice soothing, trying to make his manner reassuring. He took a step closer to the bed.

Claudia launched herself to her feet and toward the door to the corridor. Denys Duchamp, most of his leanly muscled frame visible, stepped in front of her. "Why haven't you got any clothes on?" she demanded.

"I took off my uniform," he answered reasonably. "I just got off duty. I came home to relax. I found you asleep in Maureen's bed. So I thought we should talk." He peered at her closely. "What's the problem?"

Her eyes narrowed. "Who's Maureen?"

This was hardly relevant, but Denys answered anyway. "She was the ship's cook, but she got transferred to -- "

"Put some clothes on."

Claudia's voice was shrill, and she was still blushing. He didn't like her being so uncomfortable. He got the impression she wasn't going to calm down until he was dressed. He supposed there were some cultural signals he didn't understand despite his knowledge of her time's history.

Must be some sort of body taboo, he decided. Maybe she found waking up to find a nearly naked male looming over her threatening. No, she hadn't looked threatened when she'd first woken up. Well, she was acting that way now. The last thing he needed was her rushing out the door and yelling for help.

He went to his locker and quickly donned his uniform once more. He moved slowly and carefully, not wanting to provoke any panic reaction.

Claudia watched him warily as he teased his way through a reverse strip tease. She didn't know why the man was moving so seductively but

she tried not to pay attention. She concentrated on trying to get a look inside the closet-sized personal locker he pulled garments from while it was open. Gather data, she told herself, it's more important than watching Denys Duchamp.

She saw more uniforms, shoes and a hat on a top shelf, what she thought was the shirt he'd been wearing when they met on the beach hung among the uniforms and other civilian garb. The contents of the locker left her in no doubt she was in Denys room.

"Why did Cleary bring me here?" she questioned when Denys turned back to her. "What's going on here?"

"Cleary." He said the name as though it was explanation enough for everything that could possibly go wrong in the universe. Then he went on, "I was confused about it myself at first. Have a seat." He waved her to the pair of chairs at the room's small table. She tried not to notice how gracefully he moved as they took chairs on opposite sides of the table. Once they were seated, he told her, "It makes a lot of sense, really."

He liked the way her eyes went round with surprise when he said their being in the same room made sense. They both knew perfectly well nothing about this situation made sense. He shouldn't even be talking to her. The less information she had the safer it would be for all of them. He also liked the way her sleep-tousled brown hair framed her face. She rested her hands on the tabletop and leaned forward a little, giving him a better view of her cleavage as her gauze blouse gaped open a little bit. He had no body taboos, just an appreciation of the differences between the genders.

His gaze drifted to the top of her breasts and stayed there as she asked, "What makes sense, really?"

Some massage oil would make a great deal of sense, he thought. Some warm, spicy scent, like capthera flowers. He'd like to spill just a drop, right there, at the spot at the base of her throat and watch it slide down into the soft shadows between her breasts, following it with just a fingertip, smoothing and gliding around and under and up to --

"Denys? Are you all right? Are you hungry?" she repeated his question from earlier.

"Starving," he answered, aware of the tight ache in his groin.

He cleared his throat and sat up straight. He looked at the tabletop rather than at her breasts or meeting her eyes. He had to keep himself under control or this was going to be one painfully long trip. He had to remember that she was a danger to the mission, to the crew. Her lush, inviting body was definitely a danger to him.

"Cleary," he said, determined to get on with an explanation. "He must have realized Smid, or someone else from Third Shift would eventually notice someone using unoccupied quarters. Energy consumption, that sort of thing. So the most sensible thing to do was put you into an already occupied room. Somewhere where any extra energy usage won't be

easily noticed." He managed to finally look at her, and smile. "I've got room, the crew doesn't," he told her. "So this really is the most logical solution. I just wish Cleary'd asked my permission first," he added. "You took me by surprise when I first walked in."

She looked around the room, gave a thoughtful nod, then back at him. "It also looks to me as if Cleary's putting me in here incriminates you first if I get caught."

He nodded his agreement. "I've thought of that, too."

"Explains why he didn't ask first."

"You have a devious mind, Dr. Cameron."

"Yes, I do." He was glad she chose to take his words as a compliment. She sat back in her chair. "I don't like this."

"I'm sorry." Actually, he was getting tired of apologizing for his crew imbecile behavior. It wasn't the woman's fault, he reminded himself sternly. But she was the outsider, the wild element that put them all at risk. He had to keep his dealings with her professional.

He should be polite, no more, fight the temptation to relax his guard. He didn't know why being with her made him want to be charming and accommodating, but he knew it couldn't be good for the mission.

"We're both going to be inconvenienced by this, Dr. Cameron," he said. "We might as well make the best of the situation, don't you think?"

His tone was reasonable, with just a hint of cool condescension. Claudia chafed under his more reasonable than thou attitude, but she had to agree with his assessment. "Fine," she said. "But we're going to need some groundrules if we're going to be sharing quarters for a while."

She looked as if she was uncomfortable with the idea of him as a roommate. She seemed to assume some sexual connotations to the arrangement. Not that he wouldn't have minded getting into a sexual situation with her under other circumstances, but sex and living arrangements had nothing to do with each other. Not in his world. Not that he could expect her to understand that. He was going to have to be patient, and he really wasn't that patient a man. He would just have to humor her as much as he could.

"Of course," he said agreeably. "I'll do whatever I can to make you completely happy, Dr. Cameron."

Her eyes went round again, and the pink blush returned to her cheeks. "You will? I mean...thank you."

He wondered if he'd used an inappropriate term, but didn't ask for clarification. It would be better if he didn't try to get to know her. He kept his tone formal as he asked, "What do you want me to do?"

She bit her lip, then cleared her throat, then said in a tight voice as though the subject were somehow embarrassing. "I'd appreciate it if you didn't walk around in just your underwear."

It was on the tip of his tongue to ask why, then he remembered about her body taboo. "All right," he agreed. It seemed a simple enough

request.

He just hoped he had the willpower to remember her culture instead of reacting to his own behavior patterns. Besides, he wanted to take his clothes off around her, and wanted her to do the same. Maybe this was a case of there being sexual connotations to being roommates. Connotations that he was going to ignore. Somehow.

It was Claudia who voiced his thoughts when she said, "It's going to be two very long months, Mr. Duchamp."

"I'll drink to that, Dr. Cameron," he answered, and got up to get them some of the tasteless hot beverage they laughingly called coffee aboard the HATTON.

Chapter Four

"I'm beginning to have suspicions about the bed," Claudia told Denys as he came into the room.

"Lunch," he announced, holding up a laden tray for her inspection.

Claudia smiled weakly, and tried not to look. Her stomach curdled anyway. "Thank you. About the bed..."

"What about it?"

"I think it likes me." She looked over her shoulder at the bed alcove. "I mean, it's got a mind of its own, doesn't it?"

In the last few nights she'd found that it was very hard to lie down on the comfortable mattress without falling into almost instantaneous, peaceful slumber. There was something odd about it. She always woke refreshed, and with a sense that the bed got an almost smug sense of satisfaction at her rested state. It was beginning to bother her.

"A mind?" He gave her a winning smile. "No. It is equipped with a medisensor, though. It's got an empathic...never mind."

Denys did that a lot; started to explain something, then trailed off and told her not to mind. That was beginning to bother her, too. She was a person who thrived on information. She was, and admittedly, without shame, nosy. Explore Your World, as they said on the Discovery Channel. Or, in this case, explore someone else's world. Which she'd be happy to do if Denys would just let her.

The door swished closed behind him as he carried the dinner tray to the table. "Oh, good," she muttered under her breath as she joined him at the table. "Glop again." She'd been served gray glop at every meal. Three days worth of glop so far. "You seem to have an endless supply of it."

He turned on the smile again as they sat. She concentrated on his face, rather than look at the gray mess on her plate. "That is the

point. Of your being here, I mean," he said. "We have an endless supply of generative nutritional matter, and no one who knows how to do anything with it. Except you, of course."

She look at the glop, then poked it with a fork. It writhed a little. "I haven't the faintest notion of what to do with glop. I remember eating that pasty white glue back in kindergarten. It tasted better than this."

"You could try to learn how to program the kitchen computer, I suppose." He said it with strained artlessness. "I mean, if you're really bored."

He knew she was really bored. It was mostly his fault she was really bored. He'd let her play computer games, but he wouldn't let her read history books. He'd let her watch the view as they approached Mars -- at least space was getting to be a little more interesting -- but he wouldn't let her play entertainment tapes from his century. He was willing to let her learn how to use a cooking computer, but not learn anything else about how the ship was run. He hadn't said so, but she suspected he was trying to protect her. Or trying to protect the future by keeping her from learning too much about it. Maybe he was afraid she'd inadvertently do something to change the future once she was back home if she knew what the future was suppose to be. Well, maybe she would.

And what was a mining ship from the future doing running around the solar system in the 20th Century anyway? She was dying to know what was really going on. She looked at the inoffensive glop on the plate. And she was dying for a decent meal. Maybe she could make a deal with him.

There's so much I want to tell you, Denys thought as Claudia distastefully considered her meal. But he couldn't. Not if he wanted to get her back to Earth. Not that he really wanted her to go back. He liked having someone to come home to.

But I'm just lonely, he told himself. And you're an attractive woman who's easy to be with and talk to and tease and listen to and take care of. I'm going to take care of you, Claudia Cameron. I'm going to ignore this instinct, longing, whatever it is that makes me want to keep you with me, growing in me to be with you all the time. I'm going to get you back to Earth even if I end up hating myself for doing it. I owe it to you. I'm not falling in love with you. I'm just a lonely sailor.

At first he hadn't realized how dangerous it is was for her to be on board the HATTON. Never mind the Captain, Claudia was her own worst enemy here. She was too smart, too curious, too devious. She had this wonderful knack for putting facts together and figuring out the ramifications faster than most computers. If she found out too many facts and figured out too much and, he couldn't let her go home.

I'm sorry if you're bored, Claudia, he thought as he watched her pushing her meal around her plate. But bored is safer than being

permanently stranded in your own future because you have the ability to change it if I let you loose with too much knowledge in your own time.

What he had to do was keep her busy. He knew how. It'd be good for her. Good for the men and morale. He knew what she'd said about not cooking a crumb for her kidnappers. He didn't blame her for being angry with the men.

But, face it, Denys admitted, Cleary had a pretty good idea what the crew needed when he kidnapped her. He wished Cleary hadn't done it, but he was glad that he had because Denys knew he and his men could really use some decent food. He believed that the chili lady would see it that way soon. He was hoping she'd get bored and restless enough to reconsider poking her nose into the kitchen. That was the one place on the ship where her presence could help rather than endanger the mission.

"So, what happened to your cook?" she asked, hoping this was a topic he'd been wanting to bring up. "Maureen was her name, right?"

He nodded. "Maureen Lansky. Best cook in the FCW. That's what Admiral Delvecchio said when Maureen was transferred off the HATTON."

She stirred the glop slowly as an unhappy thought crossed her mind, not for the first time. "Women are the cooks and housekeepers of the future?" She certainly hadn't noticed any women among her kidnappers. "Is that all we do?"

"No!" he said quickly. He threw back his head and gave a short, harsh laugh. "If you only knew...never mind."

"What do you mean, 'never mind'? I do mind. If women are going to make it into space we have a right to make it on equal terms with the men who -- "

"It was Admiral Shirley Delvecchio who snatched Maureen," he interrupted. "Women don't just cook, our cook just happened to be a woman. All right?" he questioned. His icy blue eyes were hard with annoyance, but she got the distinct feeling the anger wasn't completely directed at her.

She relaxed, and gave Denys a conciliatory smile. "Well, I worry."

He nodded, and went on briskly. "Maureen took her recipe codes with her. Erased the files from the computer. We complained, but Captain Andrews agreed with her that she owned the data. She's like you -- won lots of cooking prizes and so forth. But not like you, I mean," he hastily explained. "You're not selfish or petty or that sort of thing." The ice in his eyes had been melting as he spoke. The look he gave her now was warming, his smile mildly teasing. "You'd never deny a man a decent meal, would you, Dr. Cameron? If you were ship's cook, I mean? Which you're not, of course."

Claudia escaped from his charm by hastily looking down at her plate. "This stuff is some kind of nutritional proto-food, right?"

"Correct."

"Where does it come from?"

"Do you really want to know?"

"No. Okay, is cooking in the future done by using a computer to turn glop into food?"

"Essentially."

"It's a cross between computer programming and chemistry, right?"

"Right," he answered cheerfully. "I guess. I'm no good at it myself. Maureen says it's an art form."

"Of course cooking's an art form," Claudia said, half indignant, half amused. "I thought you were French."

He gave a very French shrug. "My family's been on -- never mind -- a long time."

"You've never heard of Escoffier, I don't suppose? Never mind," she added. "I'm not terribly good at French cuisine, anyway."

"How about Greek cooking?" he wondered.

His tone was so deliberately casual she had to smile. His lack of subtlety was endearing. It didn't hurt that his casually inquiring expression was worn on a face she thought was the handsomest she'd ever seen. She'd enjoyed every minute they'd been together in the last three days. It wasn't just that he was her only diversion, or that he was gorgeous. She liked him. He was fun to be with. She was beginning to suspect she more than liked him.

If it wasn't for the bed's friendly determination to give her a good night's sleep, she wasn't sure how she could stand sharing a room with such a thoroughly masculine creature. It was so very tempting, having him in the bed just a few feet from hers. Right now he was only inches away, and it was very tempting.

Things fluttered; her heart, her stomach, her eyelashes. She tried to ignore the pleasant, tingling, warm feeling she got from just looking at Denys Duchamp. She dragged her attention back to the subject of food.

"Of course, you're talking about the supplies I came with. I'd forgotten that there's real food on board."

"I haven't. Neither has the crew. But they're getting tired of olives and tins of fish."

"I'd kill for an olive," she told him.

"Women are so aggressive," he teased back. At least she thought he was teasing.

"And a sliver of goat cheese," she added wistfully. "I bet I could do a lot with the supplies they stuffed into the box with me."

He leaned toward her and said in a low, seductive, conspiratorial voice, "I bet you could do a lot with whatever you set your hands to."

His voice, the softly spoken, beautifully accented words flowed over her; made her feel like she was melting. And all they were talking about was cooking. She wondered how she'd react to more personal comments. Remembering the table was between them, and they were really talking about her cooking skills, kept Claudia from closing her eyes and waiting for him to kiss

her.

What the man is offering you, she forced herself to think logically, is a chance to get out of this room. Getting out of this room would be the best thing for her. She had to do something to get her mind off of Denys Duchamp. Get out, meet people, do things, work off some energy. She needed to remind herself that he wasn't the only person in the world.

I'm only feeling attracted to him due to his being the only contact I've had with the rest of the world, she told herself sternly. This delightful ache I get from looking at him is only because he's the only thing I've had to look at. I'll go crazy -- and jump his bones -- long before two months are up if I can't get out of this room and away from him once in a while.

That's it. That's all it is. Claustrophobia. Okay, it was also good old-fashioned lust. She could deal with lust if she could get some breathing space.

"You want me to cook for the crew?" Before he even had a chance to nod, she said, "I'll do it. Take me," she ordered firmly, "to your kitchen."

##

Clery and the others were already there when they arrived. The big, white room she assumed had to be the kitchen was several decks below the quarters she shared with Denys. They arrived by a roundabout route involving service hatches and catwalks and ladders. Claudia thought it was mysterious and fun.

The door slid closed silently behind her and Denys, just like Star Trek -- or at a grocery store. The crew stood in the center of the room, gathered around a narrow central island stacked high with the foodstuffs they'd liberated from Doros.

She ignored the food while she made a slow inspection tour of the room. Denys tagged along behind; she felt the other men's eyes following her.

The room was white on white on white. More like a NASA lab than a kitchen, she thought. It didn't look a thing like a kitchen, she concluded after a few minutes. She saw control panels and computer monitors instead of stovetops and prep equipment.

"There has to be a stove in here somewhere," she grumbled. "One of those panels has got to be a microwave." She looked to Denys for help. "Doesn't it?"

"We can ask the computer where and what everything is," he assured her. He sat down at a control board. "Just tell me what you need." The men came up behind them as a blank screen above the board turned a pleasant shade of blue.

She thought for a few moments, then said, "I'll settle for a few pots and pans and a good ten-inch French knife."

"Knife?" one of the men questioned incredulously. "Why do women always have to be so aggressive?"

"It's to chop up onions and things with, you twit," She heard Cleary answer. "Cooking, the old-fashioned way."

"Oh."

Claudia turned to face the crowd. "Who are you people, anyway?" she demanded. Introductions were quickly made. Everyone gave her a friendly, hopeful smile. She got a strong impression of a pack of helpful puppies.

"I've found a kitchen inventory file," Denys said.

She turned back to face the screen and ran her eyes down the list Denys had called up. Within seconds she was reading off her selections and the crew was scurrying to storage bins and cabinet panels to fill her order. She soon discovered that there was indeed a microwave -- like everything else she requested, it was considered an emergency backup unit.

"Amazing," she said and went off to examine the utensils the crew had piled next to the supplies. It wasn't long before she was chopping onions and eggplant and measuring olive oil and trying to remember exactly how much nutmeg went into moussaka. Not that she needed a cookbook for every little detail of a recipe. Cooking was chemistry and art, after all.

Denys breathed a satisfied sigh as he watched Claudia work. She was definitely in her element at last. He wouldn't have to worry about her curiosity as long as he could keep her cooking, he decided. Though it was best not to trust completely in her love of cooking to keep her occupied.

He noticed how the Shift Crew were all watching her with rapt devotion and sighed again. He also had to admit to a slight pang of jealousy, but he was able to control it easily enough. She's not mine to be jealous of, he reminded himself. Or any of theirs, either.

It took some effort, but he managed to get the group's attention. He had them follow him to the door, far enough from the preoccupied Claudia to be out of her hearing.

"First," he told them in a quiet, firm voice once he had most of their attention, "hands off." He received six blank stares in reply. Sakretis's stare was not only blank, he was loudly sniffing the pungent aroma coming from the microwave.

"Hands off the food, Duchamp?" Fox asked. "But, sir..."

"No, not the food," Denys answered. "Dr. Cameron. She's to be treated with the utmost respect. Am I understood?"

"We're not supposed to put any moves on her," Cleary clarified for him.

"Oh," Morrison said, nodding his understanding. "Of course not, Duchamp."

"My wife wouldn't like it," Toffler said. He glanced back over his shoulder at Claudia, who was doing something with the knife and a clove

of garlic. "She likes knives too. My wife, I mean."

"Mine's into tae kwan do," Harcourt said.

"Isabella's learning small arms," said Fox. "She said she's getting special forces training in her last letter."

"Never mind your wives," Denys said in some exasperation. "We're talking about Dr. Cameron. I just wanted it understood that she's to be treated as a lady at all times."

"He wants her for himself," said Cleary.

"That's nice," said Toffler. "They make a nice couple."

"I do not want -- never mind." It seemed useless to Denys to try to argue with the crew. "More importantly," he went on, "I don't want any of you discussing any history, or current events, or our mission with Dr. Cameron. This is for her own good. If we want to return her to her own time we have to keep her ignorant of ours." He looked around sternly. "Got it?"

There were five thoughtful nods. Sakretis managed to nod while continuing his appreciative sniffing. "Yes, sir," several of the men muttered. He supposed they must be taking him seriously if they went so far as to acknowledge his rank.

"Good," Denys said, and smiled at his crew.

"Hey, you guys," Claudia called as the group turned back toward her. "Enough of this male bonding." She pointed at a dish she'd set on the table. "Gentlemen, dinner's ready."

There was a collective sigh, and rush for the central counter. This was going to work out just fine, Denys decided as he followed his men. Claudia met his gaze and they smiled at each other over the heads of the crew. Better than fine, he thought, pleased to have made her happy.

##

There was a six foot bunny in the doorway. Closer to seven, Claudia decided as she noted the length of the bunny's ears. He had soft gray fur, big brown eyes, and a pink, twitching nose. The bunny was standing upright. He was wearing a blue coverall uniform like everyone else on board the ship, and carrying a clipboard. Not carrying, she decided, cradling it lovingly. A bunny. In the kitchen doorway. She blinked, but the apparition didn't go away.

"Oh my ears and whiskers," she whispered hoarsely, and tugged on Cleary's arm.

He was standing with his back to the door, having just opened the microwave to peer inside. Denys made sure someone from the crew accompanied her whenever she came to the kitchen. She had no chance to explore on her own. Now that she was faced with her first alien, for the apparition had to be an alien of some kind, she was rather glad she wasn't alone.

She tugged on her companion's sleeve again. "It's night of the lepus, Cleary. I really wish you'd pay attention."

She really wished she had taken Cleary's advice and left the kitchen an hour ago. He'd warned her that the members of Third Shift weren't like Second Shift and it would be best to try not to run into any of them. The furry gentleman in the doorway was definitely not like any member of Second Shift.

Cleary finally turned around. "Hello, Smid," he said. "What are you doing here?"

The bunny came over to the counter. He peered closely at Claudia. "A human female," he said. He looked at his clipboard. "She's not on your cargo manifest."

Cleary gave his most innocent smile. Claudia was warned by it, she'd gotten to know Cleary's rascally ways quite well in the four days she'd been cooking for the crew. She just hoped the bunny wouldn't be warned by his sudden excess of blarney. "She's cargo, Smid," he explained. "Part of the extra two hundred pounds you were worried about. She came from Earth with the rest of the supplies."

He was telling the truth, more or less. Which was the best you could expect from Cleary. She couldn't believe it. She stared at Cleary in dumbfounded consternation. Was he turning her over to the Captain? She'd been given to understand that Captain Charles Andrews made Captain Bligh seem about as cold and cruel as Mickey Mouse.

Or maybe I was told he looks like Mickey Mouse, she thought, eyeing Smid warily.

"The Book said we were supposed to pick up all necessary supplies for the mission from Earth," Cleary went on. "Dr. Cameron's a necessary supply. We're just going by the Book."

Claudia listened closely to Cleary's words. Book. Mission. Necessary supplies. She was dying to find out what the HATTON was up to, what the mission was, but no one would tell her a thing. She was willing to bet Denys wouldn't let them. Need to know and other security nonsense. She'd always hated security nonsense, it was part of the reason she'd left her post with the university think tank. Never mind worrying about the mission now, she cautioned herself sternly. You've got to worry about the rabbit right now.

She managed to dredge up a wan smile for Smid. "Hello," she managed. "I'm happy to meet you."

She wished she had some fresh vegetables to offer him, but they were pretty much out of supplies of any kind. She and Cleary'd been discussing her trying to learn how to program the food computer when Smid walked in on them.

"Care for a snack?" she offered the rabbit. "I think there's a couple of olives left."

"I have come for my dinner," Smid told her. "Welcome to the mission, Dr. Cameron." Apparently he was satisfied with Cleary's clearly

lame explanation. "It's nice to finally have the extra weight explained. Humans," he added with a disdainful twitch of whiskers as he sat down at one of the computer consoles. He carefully placed his clipboard to one side.

Smid had four<->fingered hands; they moved with sure knowledge over the wide rows of keypads on the control board. The computer screen lit, the image of something which looked a lot like a head of lettuce slowly took form on the screen. Claudia and Cleary exchanged surprised glances and drifted over to watch Smid at work.

"You know how to run the food computer?" Cleary asked him as a panel opened near the console, revealing a fresh-looking head of lettuce on a serving tray. "You know how to run it and you never told us?" Cleary added with a pathetic whine.

"Maureen gave me some rudimentary instruction before she left," Smid replied. He turned in his seat to look at Cleary and Claudia. "Maureen knew I was not interested in stealing any of her special recipes."

Maureen sounds a tad paranoid if you ask me, Claudia thought. She stepped back as Smid went to pick up his dinner tray. She knew the lettuce was formed somehow from the nutritional gray glop. What she needed to know was how the rabbit had done it. She'd tried to follow what he was doing with the computer, but knew she'd never be able to recreate the sequence on her own.

It's a code, she thought. If she could get a few pieces of the code she could figure out how to break it. She was good with puzzles. Besides, she wasn't in this alone. There were seven hungry men who were willing to help with the code breaking. All she had to do was convince Smid to show her how he did it. She thought she knew how.

She smiled slowly and stepped forward once, blocking the tall rabbit's exit. "I need your help," she said firmly. "For the good of the mission. By the Book," she added.

Cleary caught on immediately to what she was up to, and persuasively jumped in to explain to Smid just exactly what it was she and the Book required of him. With the authority of the Book as incentive, Smid was more than happy to put off his meal long enough to teach her all he knew about the food program.

##

"You're naked again," Claudia pointed out as Denys came out of the head. She was sitting on the side of her bed, having already taken her turn at the sonic shower and put on the pilfered tee-shirt she used as a nightgown.

"I'm wearing a towel," he said. Then he smiled, looked her in the

eye, and slowly dropped the towel. "Now I'm naked." Watching her cheeks and other parts of her anatomy flame, he added, "You really must get over this body taboo, Claudia."

Denys knew he shouldn't be teasing her, but he liked the way her nipples were stirring beneath the tight fitting tee-shirt as she stared at him. Living with her was driving him crazy. He couldn't help but tease occasionally. She was such a lovely woman. He'd never been attracted to Maureen, though she was an attractive woman in her own way. But not like Claudia. Nobody he'd ever met was like Claudia.

He struck a bodybuilder's pose and said, "There's really nothing wrong with looking."

"No," she agreed, and looked away. "I really wish you'd stop it." What she really wished was that he'd come over to her so she could run her hands and mouth all over his spare, leanly muscled frame. She wanted to touch and taste every inch of him. "Go to bed, Denys Duchamp," she ordered. "Before you wreck all my cultural taboos, and completely spoil me for Earth men forever."

"I wouldn't want that." She heard the smirk in his voice, even though she wasn't looking at the one on his face. "Or would I?"

"You're the one who doesn't want me to know anything about your time." And in a biblical sense, I really would love to know you, she added silently. She lay down on her bed and turned her back to the room. "Goodnight," she said firmly.

He laughed softly, said, "Sorry about the teasing. Sleep well, Claudia."

Do I have a choice? she wondered, what with the magic empathic mattress here to lull me off to dreamland the first chance it gets. Empathic. Responsive? Could the thing be programmed, she wondered. It was sort of alive. Maybe it took orders. She rolled onto her back as Denys told the lights in the room to dim. What if the bed actually functioned like an alarm clock? Or had an emergency wake-up setting? Was it voice activated, like the lights?

"Okay," she whispered, "let's see what this baby can do. Wake me up in four hours," she instructed, speaking slowly and carefully. Four hours would be deep in the middle of Third Shift. Denys would be safely, deeply asleep. She might, if she was careful, be able to get out of their quarters and actually see something of the ship. Alone. On her own. What a wonderful idea.

If this worked she could go down to the kitchen and play with the computer all by herself, she thought as she began to drift off to sleep. The boys had been a lot of help. They'd learned a lot in the last couple of days, but she'd like some time to play with the combinations all by herself. She couldn't really create recipes in a crowd. She needed privacy to practice her art.

And maybe she could get the kitchen computer to talk to other ship computers while nobody was looking. Maybe she could finally start to

indulge her curiosity. Wouldn't that be wonderful. To finally find out what was really going on.

She yawned. Her eyes were getting heavy. Very heavy. All right, she conceded to the mattress. I give in. Have your way with me. Just please remember to wake me up in -

Chapter Five

BOING.

What a strange noise, Claudia thought.

BOING, it came again.

The reading light came on.

As she opened her eyes to the pitiless glare, she realized the bed was bouncing. Well, not bouncing, precisely. The water, or whatever material filled the mattress, was swaying in a gentle but persistent rhythm. The blanket slithered its way down her torso, leaving her legs bare as it folded itself neatly at the foot of the bed.

BOI--

"I'm awake, already," Claudia cut off the sound. The bed immediately desisted from its wakeup efforts; the light dimmed and the mattress stopped moving. "Thank you, Thing," she muttered as she swung her legs over the side of the bed.

She dressed as quickly and as quietly as possible, all too aware of the deeply breathing mound occupying the other bed. He's such a nice, protective mound, she thought fondly of Denys as she tiptoed to the door. Only she didn't need protecting, she added as she tossed one last look his way before slipping through the doorway.

Once out in the empty corridor she felt almost lost for a second, slightly disoriented not to have Denys or one of the other crewmen at her side. "What's your problem, girl?" she whispered to herself as she turned left and headed for the hatch that covered the nearby service duct. "This is what you wanted. Don't be nervous now." Yeah, but Third Shift's supposed to be weird, she argued with herself as she hurried along the well-known route. She spend some time going up a ladder and then down another service passage. She counted far-spaced light panels and service hatches as she moved nervously along.

"What have I got to be nervous about?" she muttered to herself as she ventured alone through the HATTON for the first time. "Maybe there are more aliens on board," she answered her question promptly. "You know, aliens like in *Aliens* and *Independence Day*. Big, nasty things with dripping fangs, lots of dripping fangs. With acid. Ripley, I'm not." Oh, come on, she countered silently, the only alien you've met so far is a bunny rabbit. And if you want to talk movies, Smid's not a thing like Harvey, or Bugs Bunny or Roger Rabbit. He's quiet and totally

uninterested in us humans. She told herself that any other aliens she met were going to be the same way. That she was just nervous because Denys was overprotective. The way he acted, while somewhat endearing, did make her suspect that there was stuff she needed to be protected from.

"There's nothing to be worried about," she told herself as she climbed one last ladder and pushed open the hatch on the kitchen deck. She gave a quick, cautious scan of the corridor. Nobody around. With a sigh of relief, she scuttled out of the hatchway, across the corridor and into her own private domain of the kitchen.

"Lights," Claudia called, and the overheads came dutifully on. She rubbed her hands together as she approached the computer and added cheerfully, "Camera. Action." She sat down to play.

Time passed, and she managed to figure out a recipe for cream sauce. It was frustrating because she was trying to access different programs, not come up with a bland variation of bechamel sauce. She had to console herself with the thought that any new thing she could do with the computer was progress. "If only Marki were here," she muttered, thinking longingly of her faithful assistant back at her catering business. "Marki's a computer science major."

"Is that so?" a masculine voice said from behind her.

It was a British-accented voice, but with a very different inflection than Denys's, a much deeper timbre, older. A stranger had entered her domain, and she been too intent on what she was doing to notice anyone was there. Claudia's fingers froze on the keyboard, her back stiffened tensely.

The voice went on pleasantly. "Studying artificial computer intelligence is this Marki? She'd need some background in it to play with our toys here."

Claudia gulped and forced herself to swivel the chair around to face the speaker. "Uh, yes," she croaked. "I guess she would."

He was tall, strongly built and looked to be about sixty. He had silver hair, a strong beak of a nose and twinkling blue eyes surrounded by deep crowsfeet. He smiled and gave her a cheerful nod, then tugged on a lock of silver hair falling across his forehead and said, "You can call me Charlie, miss." He pulled up a chair and lowered his long frame into it.

Claudia was glad not to have to look so far up to see his face. "Good evening, Charlie," she said politely. "Have you been here long?"

"I was hoping for a cup of tea," was his answer. "I generally come in about this time every evening in hopes the computer will remember what tea is." He looked at her hopefully. "Think you might have any luck with it, miss? I've information that you're quite a hand with the food synthesizer."

Charlie looked so plaintive she couldn't help but turn back to the computer and give it a try. Since Smid had shown her how to work the program, she and her

helpers had been able to figure out any number of fruits and vegetables, something resembling fund-raising banquet chicken, tuna pot pie and quite a few herbs and spices. She fiddled with the herb matrices, looking for a tea combination while Charlie moved his chair closer and peered over her shoulder.

"You are good at this," he commented as pictures formed and reformed on the screen.

"Thank you. You're Third Shift, then?" she questioned as she continued to work.

"Oh, I get around," he replied. "The crew's duties overlap a good deal, you know."

"No, I don't know," she answered, a bit petulantly. "Nobody tells me anything."

"Is that so?" Charlie sat back and crossed his long legs. "That doesn't seem fair. A lass who works hard to feed a lot of ungrateful, hungry men ought to know what's what on a ship."

"I quite agree," Claudia responded. She found herself having to repress the urge toward a self-pitying sniff. It was nice to have <at last found someone at last who understood her plight. "I hate it that no one will tell me anything."

Charlie patted her shoulder. "I'd be happy to tell you anything you'd like to hear."

"Thank you. Your tea's ready." She reached into the serving station next to the console and handed him a steaming mug. It smelled and looked like tea, she was happy to note. "Sugar?" she questioned, prepared to play with the controls again.

"No, thank you." He raised the mug to his long, aristocratic nose and breathed deeply. "Better than brandy," he announced and gave her a grateful look. He sipped, then nodded approvingly. "Almost like Earl Grey. My dear, the stars are yours to command for this," he added gallantly after he'd taken a few more appreciative sips.

She felt herself color. Charlie was quite a charmer. She opened her mouth to start asking questions.

Before she could ask anything, he said, "First Shift is the bridge crew. They work all three watches, of course, someone from every Shift does. They're just called First Shift because what they do is supposedly the most important function. Bah. Second Shift," he went on, "is the mining crew. They do more than mine, of course. They're responsible for supply runs and hull maintenance and engine and equipment repairs. Very important lot, the Second Shift."

"Denys's crew," she said, obscurely proud of him and his men upon hearing Charlie's explanation of their duties. "Denys is an engineer."

"And a very fine one," Charlie concurred. "Only the best for this metaform mining expedition. The Captain's been gathering this fine crew together and training it for two years now. Pity about having to leave the ladies behind, but the quadrant alert was very unexpected. Even with

the Fleet protecting our rear, we were chased all the way forward to transition point. The Book doesn't cover every contingency, I'm afraid. Third Shift," he went on, "is administrative staff. Bureaucratic dataloving clerks to a man, or lepusoid, as the case may be."

Claudia wasn't interested in hearing about Third Shift just now. Her attention was concentrated on some of the other tantalizing things Charlie had said. "Metaform mining expedition? Quadrant alert? Fleet? Transition point? More tea?"

Charlie accepted another cup, sat back, and said, "Metaform's only to be found at the Stickney Crater mine on Phobos. That's the largest Martian moon. Odd that the only source for metaform is to be found in the Human home system, don't you think?"

"I haven't the faintest idea," she replied honestly. "What's metaform?"

"We're not exactly sure," he answered.

"What do you need it for?"

"We don't know yet."

Claudia groaned in exasperation. "I thought you were going to tell me what's going on here."

"I'm answering your questions, dear girl," he replied. "Quite truthfully. Now, stop asking the wrong questions and let me tell you what I know."

The look he gave her, and the tone of his voice, was so commanding, that Claudia couldn't help but answer, "Yes, sir."

He gave a brisk nod. "The Book clearly states that metaform will help the war effort. We think it can be used to form a shielding device against enemy communications beams. At least we hope that's what it's good for, we haven't had enough time to test much ore yet. Should it prove to provide the shielding we need, this trip will certainly be worth all the risk of time traveling back to the twentieth century. Time travel is not at all common. Rare. Actually, we're the first ship to try it, but the theory's sound, I suppose. All this going forward to go back and back to go forward is very confusing to the senses." Charlie let drop this confusing bit of information and held out his cup for another refill.

Claudia was burning with curiosity, but she kept her mouth shut and dutifully provided him with more tea.

He sipped, said, "Ah," and went on. "It's very tricky but quite painless, I assure you. There's always been a theory that space/time can be fiddled with and a properly navigated ship can jump out at precise points in time -- past, present or future. The effect is sort of like winding an antique watch. As the engineers and physicists explain it, the actual time jump was accomplished by a dynamic tension we got from winding our way slowly into the past and then springing forward into the future. Actually, the jumping into the future part is still theoretical. We've managed to trip to the past, so we'll probably make it back."

"By winding into the past in order to spring into the future?"
He flashed her an edged smile. "Supposedly. We'll find out about that in a few weeks, won't we?"

"We?" she questioned back, in a small voice. "I thought I was going home."

"Oh, not you, m'dear." He waved her sudden worry aside. "I meant the HATTON. We'll be the first ship in history to attempt traveling both ways in time. The Book assures us we'll make it. But what does the bloody Book know, I ask you? Its author lived and died a good two centuries ago."

"What is this book?" Claudia asked with sudden suspicion. "Is it some sort of mystical book of predictions? Like Nostrodamus?"

Charlie's eyes twinkled merrily. "I think you're probably right," he agreed. "But it's more than my job's worth to utter such heresy. The Book," he explained. "Is a computer disk -- a CD ROM sort of thingy -- which has been passed down with due ceremony from generation to generation from your time to ours. It was addressed to our beloved captain, and no one but that august personage knows its full contents. Which hasn't stopped generations of speculation about the mission and the destiny of the FCW. Book analysis is quite a lucrative field, or so I'm given to understand. There's all the data you could ever want to read about the Book stored in the ship's computer. Why don't you get your young man to access it for you when he gets back from Phobos tonight?" he added helpfully. Charlie put his cup on the console and stood. "Time for me to turn in." He stretched and yawned. "We must chat again." He turned to go.

Claudia had sat in frozen surprise as soon as he mentioned her 'young man'. "Denys?" she asked as Charlie made as if to exit. "Phobos? What's Denys doing on Phobos?"

"Directing the mining team," he answered. "As he did yesterday."

The members of Second Shift had seemed tired at supper. Tired and too quiet. "But we haven't reached Phobos yet."

She remembered the viewscreen in her and Denys's quarters. She'd been watching them approach Mars. She'd been getting more and more excited about the prospect of seeing the surface of another world as the red ball grew slowly to fill the night sky. She'd chattered on at Denys about her dreams of space travel and adventure and seeing distant worlds and times. She even told him about the Star Trek convention she'd gone to dressed as a Klingon. She'd never told anybody at the university about that. She hadn't been embarrassed to tell Denys.

Denys listened and smiled and told her space travel really wasn't adventurous and not to get her hopes up about setting foot on Mars when they got there because they weren't going to Mars, anyway. But she was determined, and said a Martian moon was almost as good as the planet itself. Denys frowned and she ignored the frown, becoming more determined as the red ball grew slowly larger on the screen.

The red ball had been growing very slowly lately. Too slowly, she realized now. Denys had been fiddling with the screen, hadn't he? Running a tape, probably. Making her think they were on their way to Mars when they had, in fact, already arrived. Denys. Denys who tried to hide everything from her, but couldn't completely succeed. Denys, who for some stupid reason, she thought understood her dreams. He didn't care about dreams, he was worried about security. He knew she knew their destination, but he'd be damned if he'd let her know any more than that.

"Damn you, Denys Duchamp!" she snarled. She swiveled the chair around and hit the console an angry blow with her fist. "I spend my time slaving over a hot computer to make you a decent meal and this is all the thanks I get!? You lie to me! You treat me like a child! You, you..."

"I seem to have said something wrong," Charlie interjected smoothly. "Forgive me." He sidled toward the door, his wary expression clearly saying he was afraid she was going to do something rash. "Good night." The door opened and closed and he was gone.

She felt like doing something rash. But not to Charlie. Charlie was intelligent and civilized and treated her like she was the same. Denys didn't deserve thinking about. "I'm going to get you for this," she vowed, thinking about Denys anyway. "And I'm going to find a way to get to Mars. Or Phobos, at least. It's only a little moon, but I'll take what I can get. And you, Denys Duchamp, are not going to stop me."

She stared at the computer screen. As her fingers played idly over the keypads, she began to come up with a plan.

##

Denys woke up thinking about Claudia. There was nothing new in this. He thought about Claudia all the time. He thought about her smile and her walk and how her body would respond if he gave in and let himself touch her. He thought about her bright, inquiring intelligence. He liked the way she was so insightful and adaptable. There was so much he wanted to tell her, and so much he had to keep to himself. So he listened to her, encouraged her to tell him about herself and her world. The more he got to know her, the better he liked her. More than liked her. Which was a very tricky problem. As the days went past, he was becoming more and more anxious about the time when he'd have to let her go. And he was determined to let her go. He owed it to her. She didn't belong in the future. She deserved to have her life back. To be happy in her own time and world. He was going to make sure she was happy, even if he ended up miserable doing it.

Claudia, he thought, as he swung out of bed. Sweet, funny Claudia. She was going to hate him if she found out how he'd tricked her about Phobos. He wouldn't blame her if she did, but it was for her own good. She'd see that eventually.

It's my problem that the woman of my dreams is from the wrong century, he thought. I'll take the responsibility for your safety and keep my feelings to myself. He sighed unhappily, threw a longing gaze toward the other side of the room, and hurried to get dressed.

When Denys had still been somewhere on the far edge of sleep, with the bed was in its initial, slow stage of the waking process he preferred, he'd heard the door open and her moving about, muttering. That must have been a dream image, he decided, because of course she hadn't left their quarters while he slept. He finished dressing, his mind still on the woman who slept peacefully in the other alcove.

He considered himself lucky that the dreams hadn't been the erotic ones last night. He really should be ashamed of some of the things he and Claudia got up to in his dreams. He smiled to himself as he stepped out into the corridor. I should be ashamed, he thought as he headed quickly for the hangar bay, but I'm not.

It was Sakretis's turn to spend the day on board ship, to keep a careful eye on Claudia. The rest of Second Shift headed back to the cold wasteland of Phobos and continued the work of digging chunks of strange metal out of the mine they'd set up at the bottom of Stickney Crater. The process was time consuming, and a hard day was put in by everyone, but the metaform wasn't difficult to extract. In fact, it was to be found mostly on or very near the rocky surface of the crater.

"I don't know where this stuff came from," Denys mentioned to Cleary as they piled into the shuttle for the trip back to the HATTON, "but I'm beginning to think somebody took a big scoop of molten metal and poured it into the crater. And not that long ago, either."

"Weird," Cleary agreed, settling into the seat next to Denys. It was the only opinion of the metaform the crewman had to offer. He gave a tired grunt, and stared out the front port as the shuttle ascended toward the hangar bay. "Wonder if Dr. Cameron was able to figure out the biscuit recipe she said she was going to try. I'd kill for a big plate of hot biscuits."

So much for any hope of scientific speculation, Denys thought as he brought the ship into the hangar bay. He gave a disgruntled frown. <He'd bet Claudia would be interested. If he could tell her. Which he couldn't.

He and Cleary both sighed, one in hunger, one in frustration, each in anticipation of seeing Claudia Cameron again.

##

"Another biscuit?" Claudia asked, placing the serving tray on the table. The aroma of hot biscuits and chicken stew filled the white on white kitchen. The smell made the coldly functional surroundings seem homey and welcoming. There was honey for the biscuits, and plenty of strong, hot coffee; Claudia'd spent a very busy day at the console,

indeed. She sat down among the men and gave each one a benign and trusting smile. "So nice to have you home."

"Too bad Duchamp's missing supper," Fox said. He piled three more biscuits onto his plate.

"Where is Denys?" she asked, rather glad the handsome officer was nowhere in sight.

"Got called to the bridge as soon as we -- uh -- " Harcort faltered.

"Came in from hull maintenance," Cleary cut in easily. He offered her a falsely confiding smile. "Got to keep the ship looking pretty."

"For when we get to Phobos?" she questioned, and sighed. "More coffee, Toffler?" He eagerly held out his cup. She fluttered her eyelashes at him as she poured.

"Yeah," Morrison said. "This stew's delicious, Dr. Cameron."

She gave him a winsome smile. "I'm so glad you like it. I'm happy to feed such hard-working, honest men."

"Thanks," Sakretis, Fox and Harcort mumbled. They looked at their plates and concentrated on eating.

"Hull maintenance," she said sweetly. "It sounds fascinating. Everything about the ship sounds fascinating, even though I get to see so little of it," she added with a deep sigh.

"It's just a mining ship," Cleary told her. "Nothing fancy or anything. You wouldn't be interested in seeing any more of it."

Claudia turned to him. "Oh, but I would. Let me get you some more stew. You might not think what you do is exciting, but it really is. You get to do all sorts of heroic things I can only dream about."

"We're not heroic," Fox said.

She beamed at him, hoping her eyes were achieving the admiring twinkle she was working for. "Of course you are."

"Maybe a little," Toffler agreed. Morrison gave a modest shrug.

"There's so much I'd love to see and do. So much you could show me," she went on hopefully, her admiration for them shining from her eyes. "Especially Phobos," she added. She looked Cleary squarely in the eye. "I know you're going to tell me it's just a hunk of lifeless rock -- but no one from my time's ever stood on the moons of Mars. We don't even go to our own moon anymore. It would be the best reward I could have for everything that's happened. And," she added, turning her hopeful smile on each of them in turn. "If I could just spend an hour on Phobos, I'd be so happy I'm sure I'd be able to talk the computer into making my chili. My award winning, hotter than hell, some things are worth taking a little risk for chili." If you get my drift, she added to herself. She got up. "Does anyone want more biscuits?"

She left them exchanging questioning looks and shrugs as she went back to the computer console. You are a mean, rotten, terrible woman, she castigated herself as she set the controls for more biscuits. You

shouldn't be manipulating them like this. She was feeling very guilty about her behavior.

But she was not going to back down now. I didn't ask to be here, she reminded her conscience. No, that's childish. It's not the being here that she minded. She was actually having a wonderful time. What she didn't ask for was to be deceived by Denys Duchamp.

If the man would just come out and explain the situation to me, ask me for my cooperation...but no. He acts like I'm incapable of making an informed decision; treats me like a child. I will not be treated like a child. Especially not by someone I care for as much as I... Someone I cared for, she rephrased the thought firmly. I will not care for anyone who treats me like an idiot.

She sighed, knowing that particular vow wouldn't hold up on close inspection. She took the steaming biscuits from the dispenser, changing the vow as she did so to, I'll try not to care for someone who treats me like a child.

"Fat chance," she muttered, then put a hopeful expression on her face and went back to the men waiting around the table.

##

"You're quiet tonight," Denys said. He'd put on a robe instead of coming out of the head in a towel. "It's a silly custom," he continued when Claudia didn't turn from gazing at the tape of Phobos he had running on the viewscreen. "Silly to use a towel after a shipboard shower," he explained to the silent woman, "when sonics don't get you wet." She acted like she didn't hear him. She'd been acting like he wasn't there ever since he'd come in late for dinner and then escorted her back to their quarters.

"I mean, the shower uses sonic vibrations to get bodies clean. It's a silly custom," he repeated lamely. "Just a reminder to lonely sailors of what they're missing back home. On planets." He stepped up behind her. He saw her shoulders tense. "Claudia, are you all right?"

He wanted to reach out and comb his fingers through her long brown hair. He wanted to massage the tenseness from her slender shoulders, to run his hand down her back. Maybe tickle her to get her attention. He'd gotten used to having her attention. "I'm going to miss you when you're gone," he said, and didn't realize he'd spoken aloud until she'd jumped to her feet to face him.

"Stop that!" Claudia demanded, seeing the hurt look on Denys face.

"Stop what?"

"Looking so vulnerable!" She wanted to take his face between her hands and kiss him softly and tell him everything was all right -- when everything was his fault and he had no business looking lonely and uncertain and handsomer than sin. He'd been moping around the room ever since they'd come in and she'd insisted on sulking at the viewscreen instead of telling him what was the matter. She wished it wasn't so hard

to stay angry with Denys Duchamp.

He jumped back, which was good, because it prevented her from putting her arms around him. "What is the matter with you tonight?" he asked, his light, British voice tinged with puzzlement and concern.

"Nothing," she answered. She walked past him to her bed alcove. "I'm just homesick," she told him as she accepted the warm embrace of the mattress when she'd rather have had Denys's arms wrapped around her.

"Me too." He sighed as he walked slowly toward his own bed.

She knew he was watching her, but she didn't look at him. If she looked at him she might actually talk to him. If she started talking to him, she'd end up telling him about trying to con his crew. If she told him about conning the crew, he'd be amused, and if he was amused, he wouldn't be so pensive and she hated to see him pensive.

And if I tell him, she added after a mental deep breath, I will blow my chance of getting down to Phobos. I will blow my one chance at setting foot on another world. I've got to keep reminding myself this is all his fault.

She'd tell him after she got back, she vowed. She'd entertain him with it then. Once she'd asserted her independence, she could stop being annoyed with his overprotectiveness. Which was not endearing despite what her hormones keep trying to tell her.

And she had to stop thinking about the glimpses of his gorgeous body that she kept seeing all the time. It's just hormones, she told herself. Nice, healthy hormones, and proximity. The proximity part was really getting to her. "Sleep," she told the bed. "Right now, before I do something rash."

##

"Duchamp won't like it," Cleary stated the official position. The others looked at him as if he'd grown horns. "Well, he won't."

"She was upset all day," Sakretis said. "But she still said we deserved a good, hot meal."

"She takes good care of us," Harcourt said.

"She deserves something for all her work," Fox added.

"It wouldn't hurt to take her along to the mine," Toffler said. "We could keep her out of the way."

"It wouldn't be dangerous," Morrison decided. "We'd take proper precautions." There were nods.

"Duchamp won't like it," Cleary repeated.

"He wouldn't have to know," Morrison pointed out. "You'll think of something, Cleary."

"Yeah," everyone but Cleary chimed in.

He shrugged. "I suppose," he agreed.

"She said she'd make chili if we took her with us," Fox pointed

out. There was a collective sigh.

"It'd be worth Duchamp getting annoyed for the chili," Harcourt said.

"She'd enjoy it," Sakretis said. "That's more important than chili."

"True," Cleary said. "But not much."

They all smiled.

"We'll do it," he concluded.

Chapter Six

"This," said Cleary, as he held up the black outfit for her inspection, "is an environmental suit."

Claudia looked at the way the identical shiny black jumpsuit he was wearing molded to Cleary's square built form and responded. "That is what fashion magazines call a catsuit. Reminds me of the sort of thing Mrs. Peel used to wear on the 'Avengers'." Maybe I ought to wear my hair in a '60's flip for the occasion, she added to herself as she took the environmental suit from Cleary.

He pointed her toward a locker room, and said, "I'll wait here." He looked furtively around the hangar bay. "Hurry up, please, Dr. Cameron."

Claudia gave him a smile, a nod, and headed off briskly. She shrugged out of the practical blue jumpsuit and sneaker-like shoes which went with it and slithered into the catsuit. The thing had feet and a hood. She found skintight gloves in a pocket though she wasn't sure how anything which fit so tightly could have pockets. She liked the way the environmental suit felt on her, and when she looked in the locker room mirror, she decided she liked the way it looked too. It outlined her form in a way that was downright provocative though every inch of her was covered up.

She smiled. "I wonder what Denys Duchamp looks like in this thing? Wonder what he'd think of me in this outfit?" she asked the image in the mirror. "Never mind," she added. "He's not supposed to see me and I'm not supposed to see him."

The point of the exercise was for her to see Phobos. Her smile widened. She felt like clapping her hands together with joy. "Another world. I'm really going to stand on the surface of another world!"

She had kissed Cleary's cheek when he came to get her this morning, earlier than usual, and told her he had a surprise for her. He was supposed to have kitchen guard duty today. Instead, he'd brought her down to the hangar, told her the plan to grant her her wish and given her the environmental suit.

Now that she had it on, she rushed back out to the hangar. He

waited for her by the shuttle. He looked nervous, and for Cleary, she didn't think that came easily.

He handed her a pair of oversized sunglasses and a packet containing a half dozen breather strips when she stepped up to him. "These are night goggles." She put the breather pack into her pocket while he taped another strip under her nose. "The breather strip creates a protective field around your head," he explained. "Though I guess I shouldn't be telling you that."

"Call it a necessary safety precaution," she said helpfully.

"Yeah," he agreed. He led her into the shuttle cargo bay. There was a familiar box waiting with its lid open. "The container generates a protective field for organic matter, too," he said, waving her forward. "Get in."

It'll be dark in there, she thought unhappily. But she wouldn't have to share it with goat cheese and onions this time, she added on a much more cheerful note. Would she? Before stepping in and letting Cleary put down the lid, Claudia quickly checked the insides to make sure. It was empty. She got in, and lay down.

"Okay, or what was it astronauts used to say? A-okay?"

Cleary shrugged. "I haven't the faintest idea, Dr. Cameron."

"Never mind. Let's go."

He closed the lid. Claudia closed her eyes and tried to pretend she was just going to take a nap. She was too nervous, of course. She missed the friendly mattress. She wished she'd brought a pillow. She worried about what would happen if Denys caught her.

In fact, she worried and fidgeted all the way to Phobos. From inside the box she didn't feel the shuttle take off, or even realize they'd made the trip and landed until the box lid opened and Sakretis stuck his head cautiously inside.

"We're here. Hurry up," he said.

The trip didn't seem to have taken very long at all, but she discovered her legs were cramped as she tried to get up. Sakretis finally reached in and helped her to her feet.

"Thanks." It took her a couple of minutes to be able to move comfortably.

He looked around worriedly while he waited for her. "Harcort stayed behind today," he told her as they made their way cautiously to the airlock of the shuttle, following a thin blue strip of light along the bulkhead to the exit. "Means I have to run the laser cannon this shift." He sighed. "We had to build it out of parts we got on Earth and not all the right parts were delivered. It works, but the setting keeps screwing up and melting what I'm trying to cut."

"Oh," she said, not having the faintest idea what the man was talking about. "Why'd you build something out of modern – old, for you -- parts?"

He shrugged. "Don't know. Book said to do it. Maybe it's some kind

of security thing. Scared of spies finding out what we're up to, maybe. Never mind." He clapped a hand briefly over his mouth. "Duchamp says you're not supposed to know about that."

She blinked and smiled. "Know about what? Come on," she urged. "Let's get out of here." Hope I see Charlie again, she thought as he cautiously opened the airlock. She didn't like the crew feeling guilty whenever they let a bit of information slip. Charlie didn't mind her knowing what was going on, and he didn't have to answer to Denys.

Then she forgot all about Charlie, and about the mission, as she stepped through the door and onto the dusty, dark surface of Stickney Crater. She was both thrilled and disappointed by the darkness at the same time. She remembered to put on her night goggles and looked around. Claudia stood transfixed, with the shuttle door at her back, as the excitement and significance of this moment washed over her. It wasn't so much at what she saw, which was rocky terrain and a distant cliff face. The pleasure was in knowing the landscape was on a worldlet not her own. And all the immense pleasure she was feeling came out in a delighted giggle. She skipped forward a few steps, kicking up the dust of ages on the alien ground. She turned to Sakretis. "I want to see everything."

He shrugged. "You've already seen it. It's just a little moon, Dr. Cameron. Not like the moons of -- well, never mind."

"The Moons of Nevermind," she repeated, ecstatic with joy. "Now they sound like a romantic place. You must take me there sometime." She whirled around, vaguely aware of activity off in the distance, to the left and on the other side of the shuttle.

"There aren't any --" he faltered. He moved away from the shuttle, most of his attention focused on the mining site. "I'm glad you like it here, Dr. Cameron."

"I love it!"

He shrugged, not at all impressed by rocky moons apparently. "I've got to go," Sakretis said. He indicated the shadows thrown by the bulk of the shuttle, hiding them from the sight of the rest of the crew, Denys Duchamp specifically. "You stay right here, Dr. Cameron. Please. I have to go," he added, and took off at a low gravity run toward the metaform mine.

Claudia crossed her arms and leaned nonchalantly against the side of the shuttle as she watched him bounce away. Low gravity, she thought. Wow. Very low gravity. Phobos was a very little moon. Bigger than Deimos, which was Mars's other moon, but it was still a lot smaller than Earth's moon. She looked up, toward the horizon.

And almost screamed as she saw the bulk of the Red Planet filling the sky above the crater's rim. For a moment she thought Mars was tumbling toward her like a gigantic bowling ball just for the purpose of knocking her over like a pin. The scream froze in her throat; her heart began to race; the pulse pounded in her temples like kettle drums and

she felt, briefly, as if she was going to faint.

But Claudia Cameron was made of sterner stuff. Her good sense kicked in quickly, chasing the fear of the unknown back to the primitive depths of her mind where it belonged. What is your problem? she asked herself. Wasn't the whole point of this expedition to see sights like Mars? Remember those Apollo pictures of Earthrise from the Moon? Well, you're witnessing Mars doing something like that in the sky of its moon.

She looked up once more. "Wow."

After staring in wonder at the sight for a few minutes Claudia moved away from the shuttle, eager to see a little bit more of Phobos. It was really quite beautiful, in a stark, cold desert sort of way. The shadows were sharp and dark, the rocks and the face of the nearby cliff stood out, bathed in faint light and magnified by her night goggles.

She didn't plan to go far. She didn't want to worry the men. She didn't want to endanger herself, or the crew, or, God forbid, the mission. She just wanted to see a little bit more. Then a little bit more. She kept moving toward the cliff that rimmed the crater, toward the distant red ball of Mars on the horizon.

##

"Long day," Denys said. It was a banal thing to say, but the crew had been so quiet for so long that he felt some sort of conversation was called for. It wasn't like Second Shift to spend the whole day working like fiends without complaints or jokes, or his having to spur them on at least a few times. Nobody even bitched when the safety guide lights went out on the laser cannon. They just kept working, hurrying to get the shift over. It made Denys nervous. The working like fiends part was suspicious enough, the quiet was downright eerie.

Nobody answered his dull comment. He got a couple of sidelong looks from various members of the crew, but no one answered. They did that every time he said something, he thought. They were big on sidelong looks today, he noticed. To each other, around the site, toward the shuttle. He'd spent most of his time supervising the preparation of the ore for transport, directing the robot scooters as they moved the packing boxes to the shuttle's hold. He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. The shuttle. What, he wondered, is the crew hiding in the shuttle?

It had better not be the same thing they'd hidden in the shuttle back on Earth. He would bet a month's salary it was. She'd talked them into bringing her down, hadn't she? How? Why?

The why was obvious. Denys, a quiet, gentle man, had a sudden longing to put his fist through something. You did it to spite me, didn't you, Claudia? To prove you don't have to listen to anybody. Somehow you found out I was tricking you. That's why you haven't been talking to me.

The how was pretty obvious too. Got to them through their appetites, didn't you? Think you're clever, don't you Dr. Cameron? Just you wait until I get my hands on you, Dr. Cameron. I swear you're going to spend the rest of this trip quietly sleeping, safe in your own bed!

He stepped casually away from the ore containers, careful to stay alongside a pair of scooters, concealed from view by the box suspended between them. The Shift Crew was so busy concentrating on looking diligent and innocent, no one noticed his departure.

It looks like the Seven Dwarves hard at work, Claudia thought as she moved cautiously toward the mine site. And I know which one's Grumpy, she added with a silent chortle. Poor Denys. He meant well. I'm going to have to be nicer to the man. Actually, instead of seven miners, there were only five. There should have been six, including Denys, but she only saw five as she got closer to them and had a better view of the dark figures working among the shadowy rocks. Her walk had taken her to the other side of the crater and she was going to have to cross the area the crew was mining to get safely back to the shuttle. She moved cautiously, hoping to catch anyone but Denys Duchamp's attention to help get her back into hiding.

She was puzzled for a moment about only seeing five members of Second Shift. Then she remembered that Harcort was supposedly keeping her company in the kitchen. She did a quick check of the five men moving around the laser cannon. The laser cannon itself seemed to be turned off; no light was coming from it. Everyone looked busy, but she couldn't tell what they were doing.

They were big, muscular men, Denys the shortest at about six foot. She didn't see anyone who appeared to be about six foot, or with a slender, wiry perfection outlined by the skin tight environmental suits. She knew she'd be able to pick his gorgeous body out of the identically black clad group. Any identically black clad group. She spent too much time daydreaming about Denys Duchamp's body not to recognize it anytime, anywhere, at any distance.

Nope, she decided, he's definitely not at the mine. Maybe he fell down a mine shaft though she didn't see anything that looked like a mine shaft. Good. With Denys out of the way she'd be able to make a quick run across the area and get safely back to her hiding place without bothering anybody.

##

She wasn't in the shuttle.

No, he thought after a quick inspection revealed nothing of Claudia's presence, she's here someplace. He didn't want to think about where she probably was. Out on the crater rim by now, or wandering around the boulders down at the bottom. She was going to get herself hurt, wasn't she? A knot of worry formed in his stomach. He didn't want

to admit he was worried about her. He wanted to nurse the growing anger into a full-blown rage he could turn on both the crew and their wayward mascot. Especially the wayward mascot. She had no business being on the Martian moon. He knew he never should have let her near the kitchen. She'd had no safety training. She didn't have the faintest idea what she was doing. What if she forgets to change breather strips? What if she fell down or got caught in a rock fall? Is she wearing a monitor?

She was going to be when he get his hands on her. A monitor and a leash.

"I'm going to kill her," he grumbled as he headed quickly back toward the site to confront his men. "If she doesn't kill herself first, of course."

He approached the site cautiously, circling behind the cannon, as he checked the area for any sign of Claudia's presence. He hoped to spot footprints in the moondust heading toward the mine rather than away. He knew that if he didn't find her lurking near the men, he'd have to search around the shuttle to try to pick up a trail toward the cliff. "She wouldn't be that stupid, would she?" he complained.

"Oh, yes she would," he answered his own question as he looked up and saw her starting to cross the open field in front of the laser cannon. The lushly curved form outlined by the skintight environmental suit could be no one else but Claudia. She must have gone up to the rim of the crater, circled around and come back down on this side.

The open field in front of the laser cannon.

The kind of laser they were using didn't throw a visible beam of light. The guide light had gone out earlier in the day. There was no indication to anyone who didn't know that the damn thing was running. Not unless you were watching the glowing spot on the far side of the cliff where the beam was slicing the metaform from the surface of the crater.

The powerful beam was about to slice Claudia Cameron in half.

Denys Duchamp was a runner. He'd run for pleasure and in competition in heavy gravity, normal gravity and in low gravity environments. He could move especially fast in low gravity situations, and the gravity of Phobos was practically non-existent. He didn't waste any breath shouting Claudia's name, or calling for help from the crew. It wouldn't have done any good. He just ran.

##

"Oof!" It wasn't a particularly bright or sophisticated thing to say, but it was the only proper response to being tackled by what felt like the complete front four of the Chicago Bears. Arms came around her waist, a shoulder hit her in the abdomen, a hard head contacted with her stomach, all of it traveling at the speed of a freight train. Claudia and the freight train were borne backwards for several hundred feet

through Phobos's light gravity. She landed on her back with a painful crunch on the rocky ground.

She could hardly breathe because of the heavy body that landed on top of her, but she managed after a few stunned seconds to get out, "Ow! Who the--what the--!"

The heavy body lifted its head, and she got a good look at Denys Duchamp's angry face. It was very close to her own. His expression was so cold his sharp features looked like they'd been carved out of the surrounding alien stone. For the first time since he'd pulled her out of the storage locker in the hold, Claudia was truly frightened by this man from the future. She felt her heart racing, and her breath coming in short gasps. Neither reaction was from the headlong rush or fall.

Even his cheekbones look angry, she thought inanely. He continued glaring out of furiously bright eyes, and she felt her lips lifting in a nervous, mollifying smile. "Hello, Denys," she heard herself say. At this moment it was a totally inadequate and completely stupid thing to say, but her brain and mouth seemed to be momentarily disconnected.

He didn't say anything. He got to his feet, then pulled her to hers. The crew had gathered around them, but he ignored the black circle of bodies and the sheepish attempts at explanations. He took her wrist in an iron grip and marched her back into the shuttle.

He stopped in front of the storage box she'd hidden in on the way to the moon. He glanced at it, then her, then back at the box. "It's very tempting," he told her, voice colder than his expression, "to just stuff you in there and not let you out for the next month." She gulped nervously in response.

She looked terrified, and just now, Denys didn't care. He was terrified himself. Terrified and furious and almost out of control with reaction to the twin emotions. He pulled her into the cockpit and pushed her into one of the seats.

"Lock," he said as the restraining belt automatically fastened her into place. He heard a distinct, satisfying click as the belt obeyed the voice command.

He wanted to yell at her for acting like a rebellious child. He wanted to grab her and shake her. He wanted to hold her tight and tell her it was all right, she was safe now. He didn't do any of these things. She didn't say anything, just looked at him with scared blue eyes the size of plates. Her hands were clasped tight in her lap, the knuckles white with pressure. He left her locked in the chair for ten minutes while he finished getting the last of the robot scooters on board.

She was sitting just as he'd left her when he returned. She didn't look like she'd moved a muscle. He ignored her apologetic expression as he slid past her. He still wasn't calm enough to say anything to her. He sat down in the pilot's chair and pressed the recall switch. "We're out of here," he said into the communicator. Subdued acknowledgment came

from each of the men, and within minutes the shuttle was loaded and the crew strapped in.

"I suppose you realize," Denys said with deadly coolness to his men as he lifted the shuttle off the moon, "that you are all confined to quarters."

"Yes, sir," came five dull answers.

He spared a moment away from piloting to rake his eyes over Claudia. She flinched from his look. "Yes, sir," she responded, in a very tiny whisper.

"Until," he went on, once more concentrating on the ship controls, "I can come up with a suitable torture to inflict on all of you."

He's going to kill me, Claudia thought all the way back to the ship. He's going to kick me out of the airlock, I know it. Or vaporize me or feed me to the Klingons or or...I don't know. Do they have phasers? He doesn't need a phaser, she decided. He can kill somebody with a look from those cold blue eyes if he wants to.

Denys flew the shuttle into its dock on the hangar bay, dismissed the crew and waited until everyone was gone before he turned her.

"You're going to kill me, aren't you?" she asked, frightened, and aware they were totally alone.

He didn't answer her. He said, "Unlock." The seatbelt quickly obeyed, and he grabbed her by the hand once more.

She followed helplessly after him, out of the shuttle, across the bay, and into an elevator. There was no roundabout route this time, no cautious skulking through service passages. He marched her directly, by the shortest route possible, to their quarters.

She saw no one along the way. If she had, she would have screamed for help.

He released her after the door closed behind them, but she wasn't free of him. He herded her backwards, looming over her, radiating anger. She stumbled, and ended up sitting, perched nervously on the edge of her bed. He stood in front of her, quivering faintly with rage, and glaring.

Silence stretched out between them.

Eventually, Claudia thought someone had better say something before her tortured nerves drove her into a screaming fit. So she burst out, "I'm sorry! I know it was stupid. It's all my fault. I talked the men into it. I take full responsibility for my actions. Do anything to me you want which you will anyway from the looks of you. I promised Sakretis I wouldn't move and I shouldn't have but I did and it was wrong. My being there in the first place was wrong and I knew it, but nothing happened and no one got hurt and I don't know why you felt it necessary to knock me down and why are you looking at me like that for anyway, Denys Duchamp!?"

"You almost got killed."

His voice was so calm, so quiet, she wasn't sure she'd heard him at first. She took a deep breath, and asked, "What?"

"You almost got killed."

She was so surprised she stood up. He was standing close to the bed, leaning forward with his palms resting flat against the wall above the bed niche. Standing up brought her within the circle of his arms, close enough for her to feel the heat radiating from his hard body.

She looked him in the eye. His face was very close to hers. "What do you mean I almost got killed?"

"Sliced neatly in half," he went on, voice low and grim. "There would have been no blood, no mess. Lasers are very efficient."

"Lasers?" What laser? What was he talking about. Why did she suddenly want to pull him into her arms and tell him it was all right, everything was going to be okay? How could anyone who looked so coldly angry also look so in need of comforting?

"The beam from the laser cannon," he went on. "It's invisible. The guide light was off. No one saw you getting ready to cross in front of it but me. I barely made it to you in time. Another step and you would have been dead. I couldn't yell. Sound doesn't carry through a vacuum."

She found herself thinking about the advertisement for an old science fiction movie: In space no one can hear you... She gulped.

"You saved my life."

A sense of wonder, accompanied by shaking from delayed reaction to fear came over her. Her knees started to buckle, and she put her hands on his shoulders to keep from falling.

His arms came around her, pulling her close, almost crushing her, his grip was so fierce. "I've never been so afraid in my life," Denys Duchamp told her.

She believed him. She could hear the fear and relief in his voice. "I'm sorry." Her grip on his shoulders tightened. "Denys, I am so sorry."

His eyes were still bright and hard, but not with anger. "If I'd lost you," he said. "I don't know..." He didn't finish what he started to say. He kissed her instead. It was the most serious kiss she ever had in her life.

She kissed back, head and heart reeling. She didn't know how he ended up on top of her again, but it was on the soft contours of her bed this time instead of the rocky surface of Phobos. This felt much nicer. When he touched her now it was to stroke her suddenly sensitized and fully alert body instead of dragging her off to the shuttle. The only thing he seemed interested in dragging off now was both their environmental suits. Their lips clung together while their hands moved with feverish haste. She wanted to touch him, to feel his skin on hers with nothing between them. To have him the way she'd been dreaming of making love to him since first seeing him on the beach.

Denys was well aware he shouldn't be doing what he couldn't stop. He had no intention of stopping because his body simply wouldn't let his mind back

in control of his actions right now. He wanted Claudia Cameron. Wanted and needed and wanted to tell her he loved her but his tongue couldn't seem to form any word but her name.

He said it over and over again. Or maybe he just thought it, because he wasn't sure if any words were spoken at all. He touched her all over, the way he'd been dreaming of doing for a long time. He discovered a spray of pale brown freckles curving across her breasts and made a thorough job of kissing each and every one while her fingers did all the right things to his back and shoulders, and finding the exact spot on the back of his neck that drove him crazy when it was touched just so. Claudia knew instinctively how to touch it just so.

She stroked Denys's sharply angled face, ran her fingers along the tautly corded muscles of his throat and shoulders and arms. His runner's body was spare, lean and hard, but the lips that slanted across her own were all sensual softness.

His mouth circled and suckled the tips of her breasts, then moved back up to taste her lips again. Her hips wriggled beneath him, legs opening to urge him inside. Her body arched as he obeyed her urging. He cupped her buttocks in his hands, lifting her and entered her in one deep, smooth stroke.

She climaxed almost instantly, gasping in shock at the white hot intensity of her reaction to Denys's lovemaking. Then she soared again, her hands clinging to his hard-muscled back as the sweet tension began to build a second time. Their bodies strained and moved together; they joined, blended, became one. The sensation, the complete satisfaction of being made love to by Denys was so intense she actually passed out for a moment at the end.

Well, she thought, as she came to her senses to discover Denys collapsed on top of her, that never happened before. I think this must be love.

He lifted his sweat-shiny face from where it was buried in her hair to look at her. His ice blue eyes were full of sleepy pleasure. "How's that," he inquired, "for a terrorist lizard alien?"

She played with the lock of pale hair which had fallen across his forehead. "So good it was dangerous," she replied. "A girl could get to like that."

He kissed her shoulder. "I should hope so. You taste wonderful."
"You too."

"We shouldn't have done it, though," he added after a pause they spent smiling languidly at each other. He rolled off of her and sat perched on the edge of her bed. He sat with his back to her, tense and brooding.

She scooted into a sitting position. The mattress swayed gently beneath her; she got the distinct impression it was relaxing contentedly, congratulating itself on a job well done. She ignored the mattress's emotional condition and touched Denys's shoulder. "Denys?"

"We shouldn't have made love." He sighed.

She was just glad he included them both in the responsibility of their actions. Also glad when he didn't immediately apologize for any ungentlemanly actions. "Well, we did it," she told him.

"And I liked it."

"Me too. It won't happen again," he added, as she'd been afraid he would. "That was a combination of adrenaline and temper and the strain of living in such close quarters." He looked over his shoulder at her.

"I've wanted you for a long time, Claudia."

She tried to keep her tone light. "Yes, well, living with the most gorgeous man I've ever seen hasn't been easy on me, either. Please don't say we can't do it again because there's a Mrs. Duchamp off in the twenty-second century somewhere." Cause she didn't want to know if there was anyone else, past, present or future. She was willing to settle for now, she told herself fervently. What more was there?

"There's no Mrs. Duchamp."

Want one? she wanted to ask, and had to bite her tongue to keep from speaking. "Ow!"

"You all right, Claudia?"

"Yes. Listen, Denys," she went on, ignoring the pain in her mouth. "We didn't do anything wrong. It was wonderful."

He got up, went to his locker and quickly dressed in his normal blue uniform. He didn't say anything until he was finished. When he spoke to her again, he said, "If I were to start making love to you on a regular basis there would be no way I'd let you go back to Earth. I'm devious enough to find some excuse to keep you on board. You deserve a better life than one I could offer you."

"Not necessarily," she said, smiling sardonically while her heart was telling her delightedly that maybe Denys Duchamp loved her a little.

She told her heart that it shouldn't be getting involved, but she knew it wasn't going to listen. She just hoped her head could keep some control of the situation. She'd never let her heart have its way before. She suspected it wasn't going to let her head overrule it this time, which meant disaster was eminent. She wondered why she was so happy at this sudden emotional recklessness.

He shook his head. "You do deserve better than me. Besides, you couldn't fit in in my time. I don't know if you'd be able to adapt."

"I can be very adaptable." After all, she'd already changed careers and goals rather drastically, and now here she was, naked on a starship and not at all upset about it. She thought she was pretty damned adaptable.

He shook his head again. "We wouldn't be allowed to stay together even if you could adapt. I can't tell you about my time, but it's not the sort of place I'd want to bring a woman I care for. Just believe me when I tell you it isn't safe," he went on. "And don't ask me why. All right?"

He was being serious, he deserved for her to be serious in turn. "All right," she told him. "I won't ask you any questions." I'll ask Charlie instead, she added silently.

She also didn't add that she was going to have to think very hard about a lot of things before he helped sneak her on a shuttle back to Earth. Questions which deserved serious thought. Like did she really want to live in Denys's unknown future? Did she love him? her practical head asked her giddy heart. She was pretty sure of the answer, but it deserved to be thought about. If she loved him, could she leave him? Did she love him enough to abandon everything she knew to risk living in an unknown time and place?

"I have to go," he said.

She jumped out of the bed, pulling the covering around her naked body. "Where?" she asked, suddenly afraid he was going to do something noble and stupid like finally tell the Captain there was a stowaway on board.

"I'm going to have a short, nasty and brutish talk with the crew," he told her. "They are going to pay for today's indiscretion."

She ducked her head guiltily. "It was completely my fault."

"I'm sure it was." He stepped up to her and tilted her chin up with his fingers. "Don't do it again. Promise."

"I promise I won't sneak onto the shuttle again." He dropped his hand and moved away. "I really ought to get down to the kitchen," she suggested, fairly certain of what his reply was going to be.

"Let them starve." He gave her a cool smile and went out the door. "And let me starve too," she said to the closed door. She shrugged. "Well, at least he was polite enough not to point out that I deserve to go to bed without any supper." And without Denys Duchamp too. She sighed and went into the head. She wondered if there was such a thing as a cold sonic shower.

Chapter Seven

As Claudia had suspected, a sonic shower did no more than get her clean. When she came, boldly naked, out of the head, she hoped to find Denys waiting in the living quarters. He wasn't there, of course.

"He," she complained in the direction of the bed, which struck her as being perfectly willing to listen to a girl's troubles, "is probably still down in the Shift's quarters giving the boys hell. Hell they don't completely deserve. It was all my fault."

She picked up her environmental suit from the end of the bed and tucked it neatly into her personal locker. She pulled on a tee-shirt and the shorts she'd worn from Earth.

"Okay," she told the bed as she fell dejectedly into its soft, warm embrace, "Maybe they shouldn't have let me con them. But you have to admit I took advantage of their sweet natures."

The covers stirring and settling around her shoulders were the only comment she received. Claudia got the distinct impression the bed's solution to every problem was a good night's sleep. It was probably right. She turned onto her side.

It wasn't a big bed, and she hadn't ever really shared it with Denys. They'd only snuggled together for a few minutes after they made love. Still, it felt big and empty without him there beside her. She sighed.

"I begin to suspect I have it bad," she said on a yawn. The mattress gave a sympathetic, yet slightly impatient, ripple. "Okay, I'll go to sleep. Just a nap. Wake me up if Denys comes in."

She did sleep, and the bed dutifully roused her just as the door was closing behind Denys. She sat up as he went to his desk, picked up a databoard and turned to leave again.

"Hello," she called as she rose quickly to her feet.

"Hello, love," he answered back with a grin. "Good evening, Dr. Cameron," he amended as his expression changed to one of guarded neutrality. He went to the door.

She stepped toward him. He looked tired, and worried, and embarrassed as she came forward. "Where are you going?" she asked. "Did you kill the crew?"

He gave her a faint hint of a smile. "They're still breathing." He held up the databoard. "I've got a few tasks in mind for them. First, we're going to take a long walk along the hull. It needs dusting," he added. His smile broadened and a wicked glint appeared in his eyes. He reminded her of her father, the Marine DI.

She dropped her head and twisted her fingers together sheepishly. "Maybe I should be joining you on dusting detail."

"Yes, you should," he agreed. "But you are our guest, Dr. Cameron."

Claudia. My name's Claudia, she thought. Or mud, or whatever else you want to call me. She didn't mention her thoughts to him. Or the several erotic tasks he could put her to which came immediately to her mind. Not to mention the ways she'd like to use him. One of them had to do with whipped cream.

"I have to go." He hesitated briefly, took one step toward her. "I have to go." And left

After he was gone, she wandered aimlessly around the room for awhile, touching things she knew were his, staring out the viewscreen. It wasn't a tape anymore, but a spectacular, real-time view of Phobos below. Mars loomed beyond the moon, crowding out all but a few stars which showed on the edges of the screen. She found herself wishing on the stars she could see.

After awhile she came to the realization that her behavior was maudlin, and pretty disgusting for a grown woman. She also realized she was hungry. She checked the time. It was deep in the middle of the ship's night cycle. She didn't want to speculate on how long she'd spent napping and moping. She decided to go to the kitchen and fix a snack instead.

She was trying out various formulas for whipped cream when Charlie put in an appearance. She'd been hoping the distinguished older gentleman would show up. "There's a thermos of tea on the counter," she told him.

"Delightful child!" he said, making straight for the tall carafe and the mugs set beside it. She saved the recipe file and went to join him. They sat down on opposite sides of the counter. He poured her a cup of tea and they drank in silence for awhile.

"Ah," he said at last, setting down his empty cup. "Most refreshing." He looked at her intently, white-haired head tilted to one side. "Now that you've had the tea, I suppose you could use a bit of sympathy."

She blinked in surprise. "That obvious, is it?"

"Your young man giving you a bit of trouble, is he?"

"My young man," she replied, "is not my young man. And I can't make up my mind whether that's good or bad." She sighed, and propped her chin on her hands. "He says I don't belong in the future."

"He's probably right. Horrible place, the future. You wouldn't like it at all. Do you play chess, Dr. Cameron?" He pulled a small box out of one of his uniform pockets and quickly set up a miniature chess set.

"Yes, I play chess," she replied.

"Oh, good." He gave her an eager look. "Could you teach me to play?" She laughed, and set up the game. In between explaining the moves, she said, "If you love someone, you're supposed to be willing to follow them anywhere."

"Are you?" Charlie asked.

"Yes. At least if you're going to be old-fashioned about it. If you're completely, totally in love, which I'm not saying I am, because I don't know for sure. I mean these aren't exactly old-fashioned circumstances."

"You don't strike me as being particularly old-fashioned, for your time, that is, Dr. Cameron."

"Call me Claudia."

"Of course. By the way, what sort of doctor are you, Dr. Cameron. Medical? Philosophical? Home Economics?"

She shook her head at all three. "The doctorate's actually in military history."

He nodded. "A very feminine profession." She could tell he wasn't joking. "You're very good at this game, aren't you?" he went on.

"Very good with computer simulations and puzzles and codes?"

She nodded. "What's all that got to do with cooking?"

"The cooking is a hobby that I turned into a profession when I realized I was completely burned-out from my last job."

"Teaching military history?"

"No. That was only part of it. A very small part of it. I spent most of my time working as part of a research group -- a think tank."

"Playing war games?" he guessed.

She nodded. "Mission analysis is the term we used. If people will keep coming up with weapons, they also have to come up with the most efficient ways to use them. Weapons' systems were my specialty, though I've never used a real gun or tank or missile in my life."

"From the pained look on your face, I can tell that you never want to, either."

She pushed a stray strand of hair behind her ear. "I certainly don't. Fortunately not a single battle scenario I ever came up with has ever been used. They were just games. I got paid good money and spent far too much time just playing games. After a few years of it, I decided to do something real; something with my hands and my heart that gave pleasure."

"The catering business."

"Right. It's a catering and housekeeping business. I hire mostly college students and have a great time. I miss it," she added. She sat up, looking around the high-tech white on white landscape of the HATTON's kitchen. This place did not feel like home.

It wasn't that she wasn't enjoying the adventure; she wouldn't have missed it for the world. She wouldn't have missed spending time with Denys for the world. But this place wasn't home. Home was a painstakingly restored farm house set in five wooded acres on the outskirts of a medium-sized university town. Home was her office and her business and her friends and her garden and her library. Home was her brothers and sisters and nieces and nephews and birthdays and Christmas and Fourth of July and lots of petty and major joys and inconveniences that made up a day of living on Earth.

She knew suddenly that she was afraid. Afraid of being trapped forever aboard the HATTON, in the future, away from everything she loved and knew and understood. Was Denys worth it? Did she love him more than home? Was she brave enough to strike out for an unknown future, literally in the future with only an emotional attachment to one man as her sole protection from loneliness and displacement? My home's in Iowa, she thought, I just want to visit outerspace.

"You look pale, Dr. Cameron."

She'd momentarily forgotten Charlie's presence. She looked at him. "Claudia."

He reached across the counter and took her cold hands in his.

"What's the matter, Claudia?"

"I'm scared," she answered. "Scared of the future." She gulped nervously. "Scared of a future Denys won't let me know about." Though she didn't know why she was scared since Denys won't let her go there. Though she thought she might want to go there because she really did want to be with him. She thought. Maybe.

"I'm so confused. Tell me about the future, Charlie," she pleaded. "Just tell me what your time is like. Please."

"Certainly," he answered promptly. He poured them more tea. "Drink up, m'dear," he urged. She took a sip and he went on. "The Federated Community of Worlds is a very nice place, really. Small and rather cozy on the galactic scale of things. We've got a half dozen human-settled colony worlds and another half dozen alien-populated star systems. There's a lot of trade and cultural exchange and such."

"Doesn't sound dangerous," she commented, as she remembered Denys's objections to her returning to the future with him.

"Unfortunately, it is very dangerous," Charlie responded. "Not on most worlds, I'm happy to say. The Navy does a fair job of keeping the enemy at bay, but everyone's well aware that we live in a wartime culture."

"Enemy? I remember you mentioning about the war before. About the Fleet and the HATTON being chased."

He ran a forefinger down the impressive length of his nose. "The enemy. I don't like thinking about them. No man does," he added. "The war's been going on since before I was born," he went on. "Apparently it's been responsible for the complete change in our society."

"A war will do that," she agreed.

"Yes. It's sad watching the generations of young women go off to fight for home and country, knowing some will never return. Maybe it's harder still knowing the ones who do come back will be changed forever." He sighed unhappily. "We men have to make the best of it, and do our bit to keep society and the war machine going, of course. We may not be able to face the enemy in battle, but we do our part just the same." Another sigh. "We'd hoped to have some women along for protection on the mission, just in case, but the Quadrant Alert got them all transferred onto warships." He shook his head sadly.

Claudia listened to most of this with her chin propped on her hand. Her disbelief was coupled with memories of things the shift had said about aggressive women. It made her totally confused. She raised her head as he finished and looked at Charlie skeptically. "Your military is made up completely of women?"

She was amazed. In her time, women were just beginning to make inroads into the military establishment. Things certainly had changed drastically in two hundred years if, in the future, it was the men who were excluded from fighting wars.

"Has to be, m'dear," he replied to her question. "Men simply can't

face the Sirens and survive."

"Why?"

"They have a secret weapon, of course."

"What?"

"If we knew what was, it would hardly be a secret, now would it?"

She knew about secret weapons. "They generally don't stay secret for long."

He cleared his throat. "All right," he agreed, obviously embarrassed by the subject. "We know what it is. We just don't know how it works."

"What is it?" she persisted.

"I'd rather not discuss it," he answered. He was actually blushing.

"Far be it from me to pry," she grumbled disgruntledly to herself. "But you plan to use the metaform to fight this secret weapon?" she asked Charlie. He nodded. She began nursing hopes of returning with Denys to his home world in a future free of war. Maybe it will be wonderful, she thought hopefully, after they use the metaform to stop the war.

"If we're successful, the war could be over within a few years," Charlie said.

"Years?"

He nodded. "We have to find out if metaform can be used as a shield. Then decide on the best way to use it. Have to try to synthesize it ourselves the way we synthesize food from the nutritional base. We have to equip all our ships once we have enough of the stuff. It shouldn't take long in the grand scheme of time, but it will take several years."

"Oh. Of course."

"And I," he said, getting to his feet, "must now be going." He gave her a polite bow. "Thank you for the tea and the chess lesson, Claudia. I hope to see you again soon."

She could only manage a wan smile in reply.

"Good night, m'dear." He paused briefly before going through the door. "And don't worry too much about you and your young man's future. I'm sure it will all work out quite nicely for everyone involved."

She was glad he was sure; she wasn't sure about anything. She just nodded vaguely as he left, then sat staring morosely into the dregs of her tea cup. She wished she had synthesized some tea leaves she could try to read.

##

"Where is that woman?" Denys complained when he came home and discovered Claudia wasn't peacefully asleep in her bed.

He'd had plans for finding Claudia peacefully asleep in her bed. Actually, there'd been two sets of plans. The fantasy version would have worked out with his waking her up by making slow, passionate love to her. In reality he planned to set the bed's sleep programming on a prolonged setting. This would keep her in a nice, safe, long rest that would last for days. He wanted to turn her into a sleeping beauty for her own good. His good. The crew's. The mission. It was the safest and easiest course of action, and he should have thought of it when she was first smuggled on board. He enjoyed her company. He was going to miss having her sharing his life. But it had to be done. He was glad she didn't snore.

All he had to do was get her into bed first.

Which meant finding her. He checked the head, and wasn't surprised at her not being in so obvious a place. "The kitchen," he decided. "Where else? I hope."

Before going to the kitchen, Denys made a side trip to the medical unit to get a tracer sliver out of an emergency medial pack. While he might be planning to put Claudia to sleep for a few days, he'd made up his mind not to take any more chances. If she happened to wake up and wander off, he was going to know her whereabouts from now on. He carefully palmed the tracer, intending to slip the sliver under her skin without telling her what he was doing. No reason to alarm her. No reason to give away information about future technology. It wouldn't hurt. Not much. He'd be happy to kiss it better if she noticed the slight prick. He smiled at the thought of kissing her as he hurried along to the kitchen.

"Ah, Denys," Claudia said happily as he entered the room. She stood up from the computer console as he came toward her. He held her in his arms and kissed her. It was the sort of greeting she'd been hoping for, even if she did jump from a slight electrical shock as his palm brushed hair aside to caress the back of her neck. The pain was momentary, hardly noticeable as their lips met and held, tongues briefly exploring.

Too briefly. He let her go and stepped back almost before the kiss was properly begun. "Denys?"

He looked her over in a way she thought almost furtive. She expected him to question why she was in the kitchen. Instead he said, "Shouldn't you be in bed? It's very late, you know."

"I know. I'm a night person." She went over to the counter. He followed her. "Have some tea."

"Whose chess game?" he asked, picking up a miniature knight from the tiny board.

She poured him a fresh cup of tea. "Charlie's. He must have forgotten it. Do you like whipped cream?"

He'd been planning on enticing her back to his quarters in any way he had to. He almost forgot about enticement as suspicion and worry

overrode his other emotions. "Charlie? Who's Charlie?"

"Somebody from Third Shift," she answered. "Don't worry. He's sweet."

A cold weight settled in his head and stomach. He recognized the feeling as dread. Oh, Claudia, what have you done? "Have you been discussing things with this Charlie?" he asked, voice quiet and deceptively calm.

"He told me about the war," she admitted. "The sirens and their secret weapon and why you need the metaform. Why's it called metaform, anyway? And why do you have to mine it in the past instead of your own time?"

"It isn't available in our time," he answered. He saw her surprise at his answering the question. He was surprised at himself for answering, but, after all, what difference did it make now? If she was going to be stupid enough to indulge her insatiable curiosity against all common sense, who was he to try to stop her? Save her. Get her back home. Never mind the sleeping beauty ploy, she'd already broken the spell herself. All he'd wanted to do was keep her safe. <BUT> She wasn't interested in safety, just information. "It's too late," he said unhappily. He sat down at the counter and drank down his tea in long, miserable gulps. It needed sugar. It didn't help.

She could see he was distressed, but she ignored it for the moment. She perched on the stool opposite him and pressed on. "Why is it unavailable?"

"Because it gets mined out by us. It doesn't exist in the future because we came to the past to get it. You see?"

"No." She wrinkled her brow in thought. "Yes. It's a time paradox. Or time loop. Whichever. You go back in time to make something happen the right way in the future. And if you don't do it right back here, the future will be all screwed up when you get back home. I've seen all the Back to the Future movies, and Time Cop, and Deep Space Nine and Voyager do time-travel episodes all the time, and Bab5 has a time travel thing going where John and Delenn and Lando...never mind, that's all fiction" she added, though she didn't suppose it was a very sensible explanation. Of course, time travel wasn't a very sensible subject, really.

"I can't let it be screwed up," he said.

He looked miserable. She wanted to hug him. "You won't screw it up," she reassured him.

"No," he agreed. The acknowledgment certainly didn't seem to make him feel any better. "I can't let you go home, Claudia. You know too much. You're a danger to the future now. I'm sorry, but you can't go home again."

"What?"

"Claudia." He reached for her hands. She jumped out of her seat, not the least bit interested in his comforting touch. He stood and started to come around the counter toward her.

"Hold it right there," she said before he got too close. She glared. He stayed on his side of the counter. Good God, she thought. Dealing with this man was like being taken on a roller coaster ride. First he saves my life, then he scares me to death, then he makes love to me like nobody ever has before, then he tells me he can't do it again, now he's telling me I can't go back to Earth.

His decision, not mine.

"Are you telling me I have no choice in the matter?"

"You made the choice," he countered. "You asked too many questions. You could change the future if I let you go back now."

"How could I possibly change the future?" she countered back.

"You know what's going to happen."

"Right. And who'd believe me if I told them?"

"I can't take the chance."

"You can't take the chance. What do you mean you can't take the chance? I'm responsible for my own actions, Duchamp." I might want to stay with you, she was thinking, but I will not be forced into it. "I will not be treated like an irresponsible child. Do you treat your own women like that? Do all those admirals and starship captains have to wait around for your decisions?"

"No. But you're not from our time. You need someone to look after you. You are irresponsible. And you know too much." He knew he was putting this badly. He was letting himself get angry, he was getting her angry. This was not the calm, rational discussion it should be. Nothing was as it should be. He wanted to tell her why he wanted her to stay, why he needed her to stay. But those were personal reasons and had nothing to do with the situation her curiosity had created. "Claudia."

"Don't you Claudia me!"

"Dr. Cameron, then. I -- "

"There is no way I could change history," she interrupted, inexorable and furious. "I run a small business in a small town in the middle of a state full of pigs and cornfields. About the worst damage I could do if I told the world about what's going to happen two hundred years from now is get written up on the back pages of the National Enquirer. No one would care. No one would believe me. Science fiction movies are a hell of a lot more interesting than what's really going to happen."

"I'm not going to argue about it," he said.

She planted her fists on her hips. "Well, I am."

"No," Denys said, coming determinedly toward her. "What you're going to do is come home with me and get a good night's sleep. A good, long night's sleep," he added, grabbing her by the wrist and pulling her toward the door.

Chapter Eight

The Shift Crew had adjourned to the recreation room rather than the kitchen to eat their evening meal. It was glop again. Duchamp wasn't allowing them anything but glop. The fact that he was sharing it with them didn't add any sense of camaraderie to the meal. In fact, his presence didn't help the general dark mood at all. Duchamp was sulking, he was surly; he was angry and despondent by turns. He complained or he said nothing. He was acting like a Donakian bear with a toothache and it was driving the men who worked for him crazy. Cleary had ventured to suggest Duchamp was in love. He hadn't said it very loudly, and certainly not in Duchamp's presence. Jefferson Cleary was not a suicidal man.

The crew missed Dr. Cameron. It wasn't just the food. They missed her company. From the furtive glances they dared turn his way, the general consensus was that Duchamp missed Dr. Cameron more than they did. He sat glumly at the far end of the table, shoulders slumped tiredly, eyes on his untouched plate of glop. He'd developed this annoying habit of sighing loudly about once an hour. He did it now.

It had to be connected with Dr. Cameron.

It had been four days since anyone had seen her. It had been noted that Duchamp didn't return to his quarters very often. No one knew what he'd done to her, but they were getting worried.

Cleary put his fork carefully on the table, looked at the anxious men seated around the table, summoned up the necessary courage, and ventured to ask, "How's Dr. Cameron, Duchamp?"

Six sets of shoulders flinched as Duchamp's icy blue gaze rose slowly to take them all in. "Sleeping," he responded. "She's having a nice, quiet little nap." Each word was spoken with clear, cold precision. His gaze dropped slowly back to his plate.

"Oh," was all Cleary said.

Which was about all there was to say considering Duchamp's present mood. Fortunately for everyone's digestion, Duchamp threw down his fork and stormed out, grumbling, a few minutes later.

"What's he mean, sleeping?" Sakretis wondered after he was gone.

"He's off his feed," Fox said. "Looks terrible."

"The sighing's the worst part," Morrison complained.

"Yeah," said Toffler. "Kind of reminds me of me when I first met my wife."

"What's he done to her?" Sakretis persisted. "I worry."

"He wouldn't hurt her," Harcourt pointed out. "He's miserable. It probably hurts him more than it does her."

"Whatever it is," Cleary added.

"He's avoiding her," Fox decided. "I remember that phase with my own missus. Ran till she caught me." He smiled at some fond private

memories.

"Dr. Cameron didn't do anything wrong," Sakretis said.

"We never did get our chili," Cleary added. He looked down at his half-eaten glop. "Sweet woman like Dr. Cameron doesn't deserve him locking her away."

"She certainly doesn't," Toffler agreed. "Why won't he let us use the recipe files she created?"

"Cause he's suffering," Fox declared. "And wants us to suffer too."

"It's our fault he met her," Morrison pointed out. "Personally, I think he ought to be thanking us."

"She's the best thing that ever happened to him," Harcourt agreed.

"He's a lonesome sort," said Toffler. "Could use a wife. Dr. Cameron's not married, is she?"

"No. I remember she said she wasn't on the cooking show," Fox explained.

"Maybe we could get them together," Morrison suggested. "Somehow."

"Yeah," Sakretis agreed. "Somewhere with starlight and a romantic atmosphere."

"What about their quarters?" Harcourt asked. "They see each other all the time."

"No," Sakretis protested. "It has to be somewhere neutral. Somewhere romantic."

"She's probably in no condition to talk," Cleary commented.

"Unless it's in her sleep."

They all looked at him.

"Bet he changed the programming on her sleep unit," Cleary said decisively. "Easiest way to keep her out of trouble."

"Should have thought of that sooner," Morrison said. "Before he fell in love with her." He gave a knowing smirk. "No wonder he doesn't go home much. Bet he can't stand watching Sleeping Beauty waiting for Prince Charming to come along."

"He's not exactly charming lately," Harcourt agreed.

"My point," said Sakretis. "They need a change of atmosphere."

"An airlock?" Fox asked sarcastically.

"I was thinking, maybe, of the Captain's Walk," Sakretis suggested. Everyone looked at him.

"But that's up on top," Fox practically shouted. "Right next to the Captain's quarters."

"Yeah," Sakretis agreed. "But Captain Andrews is usually on the bridge."

"I think it's a good idea," assented Toffler. "The view's got to be romantic."

"It could work," Morrison agreed.

"We've got to get her up there first," Sakretis said.

"And Duchamp," Fox added.

"We have to wake her up first," Cleary pointed out. "When Duchamp isn't around."

Everyone looked expectantly at Cleary.

"All right," he agreed after a suitable two second pause for deliberation. "You create a diversion. I'll go get Dr. Cameron."

"When do we get Duchamp up to the Captain's Walk?" Sakretis wanted to know.

"Give me half an hour," Cleary decided. He got up to leave. "Someday he's going to thank us for this. If he doesn't kill us first."

##

The bed went BOING.

As soon as Claudia heard it, she had the feeling she'd been waiting for the sound for quite a long time. She felt like she'd been asleep for days and days. And she'd had the worst dreams about yelling and screaming and pummeling at Denys's broad chest while he insisted she stay still and go to sleep before he had to knock her out.

Very weird dreams.

Very realistic.

The bed went BOING again.

"Dr. Cameron? Are you all right?" She felt a gentle touch on the shoulder. "Dr. Cameron?" The voice was Cleary's.

She remembered promising the Second Shift crew chili. She must have overslept and Cleary had come to fetch her. She yawned. "Chili," she said. "Coming."

"I wasn't thinking about chili right now, Dr. Cameron," he said.

She cracked her eyelids open so she could give Cleary a skeptical look. "Oh, yeah?" She sat up before the bed got the chance to make that odd noise again. She leaned forward on the edge of the bed and rubbed her face with her hands. "I am so groggy."

"The sonic shower's pretty good for helping people wake up," Cleary suggested. "Why don't I wait here for you while you get cleaned up?"

She stood up. Her legs felt mushy; like they could hardly hold her weight. Her mouth was full of cotton. "My teeth feel like they're growing fur. You wait here. I'll get cleaned up." Hadn't somebody just suggested that? She rubbed numb fingers across her forehead. "Be right back."

He stopped her with a hand on her arm. "Take this," he held out a bundle to her. "Thought you might like a change of clothes," he offered. He shrugged as she took the bundle. "Found the spidersilk on Berengar. Been saving it for my girlfriend, but I think she'd rather have a knife instead." He gave her a charming, encouraging smile.

"Thanks," she said, accepting the gift happily. "Thank you very much, Cleary." Clutching the bundle tightly she stumbled off to the head. She had to go to the bathroom really bad.

By the time she got around to getting dressed, she was feeling much better, though still oddly disoriented. The physical affects of too much sleep were cleared away and she was ready to face herself in a mirror at last. She slipped into underwear, and then opened Cleary's gift. The short, low-necked dress she held up was made of the softest silk she'd ever felt. It was a deep, shimmering scarlet, shot through with copper and gold threads. When she put it on<,> it didn't exactly cling to her, rather it attached itself sensuously, accenting every curve and protrusion of her form.

"I look like I've lost a couple of pounds," she observed, twirling around, enjoying how she looked. "Not bad," she concluded. "Not exactly an outfit for cooking in -- at least not hearty meals for hungry miners," she amended with a giggle. This was a seductive champagne-and-cheesecake-on-a-moonlit-terrace sort of outfit.

Cleary handed her sandals to her when she came out of the head. His eyes swept over her quickly; he gave an appreciative grin. She thought she heard him mutter, "If this doesn't work..."

"Where's Denys?" she asked. She was being haunted by weird dreams featuring making passionate love and fighting with Denys. She wanted to see him. She wasn't sure what had really happened. She wanted to talk to Denys. She hoped and prayed Denys's eyes would bug out when he saw her in the red dress. Especially if the dreams about making love weren't dreams at all.

"Denys wants you to meet him somewhere," Cleary explained. He took her by the elbow, directing her toward the door. "We have to hurry," he added. "Come along."

She smiled amenably at him, the odd disorientation keeping her from questioning anything. "Okay."

He took her along a confusing route to a dimly lit, narrow corridor with a glass wall. There was a rail along the glass wall at waist height. The view was stunning. Through the large window she could see Mars, almost as big as she'd seen it from Phobos, and Phobos itself, and a bright speck of light beyond that must have been the Sun.

She leaned against the rail, pressing her nose to the glass, like a kid staring into a toy store. "Wow." She turned her head to grin at Cleary.

"Pretty, isn't it?" he asked.

She nodded eagerly, then looked back at the view. "What's that?" she wondered, as several objects crossed in front of the sun and were illuminated by reflected sunlight. The objects appeared to be falling toward Mars and its little moons.

"Asteroid shower," Cleary answered. "Hope our shields are up. Got to go," he added.

"But, Denys...?"

"He should be here any moment. I better not stick around. Bye."

She was more interested in the asteroid shower than Cleary anyway.

Though, after he left, she wished she'd asked him what he meant when he said he hoped shields were up. Oh, well, maybe Denys would explain it. Maybe Denys had wanted her to see the asteroid shower. She sighed fondly. How sweet of him.

##

"All right, I've looked at the aft hullplates," Denys told Fox and Sakretis as he came through the airlock from the outside of the ship. "I didn't see any damage."

Sakretis looked at the monitor box he held in his hands. "Must have been a box malfunction," he said. "It's not showing any damage now."

"Maybe it's interference from the asteroid shower," Fox suggested.

Denys graced them with the most scathing look he could summon up while he removed the breather strip from under his nose. He pushed back the hood of his environmental suit and shook out his hair. The men looked uncomfortable. He was getting ready to order them to make a thorough check of every shipboard monitor when the scanner band he wore on his wrist signaled for his attention.

"What the...?" He checked his wrist. "She's awake." Awake and out of his quarters or the alarm wouldn't have signaled. He turned a fierce glare on his men. The fierce glare only encountered empty space. Sakretis and Fox had already fled.

"I'm going to kill them," he declared. "The Shift. Her. Myself. Why didn't I think of that before? It's the only possible solution to the whole impossible mess." While he was complaining, he carefully worked the tiny function key of the scanner to discover Claudia's exact location. He was surprised to discover it wasn't the kitchen. A jolt of fear went through him when he discovered that she'd wandered into an off limits area.

"The Captain's Walk? What's she doing there? What if Captain Andrews finds her? He'll eat her alive! Oh my God!" He had to save her; get to her before the poor lamb ended up walking the plank into the vacuum of space.

##

Claudia was beginning to think Denys would never arrive when she heard the pounding of running footsteps. Before she could turn, her shoulder was grabbed and she was spun violently around.

"Claudia!" Denys hissed angrily as he grabbed her by both shoulders.

She smiled a welcome to him, her groggy haze lifting enough for her to wonder how anyone could hiss a word with no sibilants in it. "Denys," she said, "I'm so happy to see you." She kissed his chin.

"Don't do that." He held her at arm's length. He looked like he was getting ready to yell at her, then his eyes flicked up and down her form.

"I've been watching the asteroids. It's sort of like a meteor shower. Very pretty." She gave him a radiant smile. "Thank you."

She looked gorgeous. What was she thanking him for? There was a great deal of soft, wonderfully curved, soft skin showing. What wasn't showing might as well have been from the way the shimmering spidersilk dress clung to her. The dress was magnificent. She looked stunning in it. He wanted desperately to take it off her.

"Looking like that," he told her, knowing he should have been yelling at her, "is illegal on some planets."

Her expression grew teasing and sensuous. She touched her tongue to her full lips. Her eyes glowed with warm humor. She looked ripe and ready to be kissed. "On yours?"

He found himself shaking his head. He could hardly breathe for the heat rising between them. "No. We definitely approve of beautiful women on New Sydney."

She tilted her head. Her silky brown hair sifted across the backs of his hands. It sent a shiver through him. "You think I'm beautiful?" she asked, her tone more curious than vain.

"The most beautiful woman I've ever seen," he admitted. He'd been holding her away from him, he wasn't quite sure when he'd pulled her close. He ran his hands down her back and felt her breasts pressing against his chest. He rubbed his cheek against her head, reveling in the scent and texture of her hair. She was the most beautiful woman he'd ever known.

She was beautiful, the starry background of the setting was beautiful. The place and the woman were perfect. He'd missed her and worried about her for days. She fitted perfectly against him. She tilted her face up to him, lips parted, offering. He held her close and kissed her.

They were on the Captain's Walk and he was an idiot.

There's something familiar about this, Claudia thought when Denys jumped away from her as though he'd been burned. There's something weird going on here. The way her lips tingled and heat singed her nerve endings she certainly felt like she'd been burned, but the pleasant fire wasn't what bothered her. She blinked as real memories began to separate themselves from dream images.

He grabbed her shoulders again as he questioned angrily, "What are you doing here? What are you doing out of bed?"

His fierce tone jogged her memory a bit more. "Cleary said you wanted to see me." She began to suspect seeing her was the last thing Denys wanted.

He groaned and stepped away. "Cleary. Of course. I should have known." He swooped toward her and grabbed her wrist. "Come on. We have to get out of here."

Denys's deception became suddenly, painfully clear. She grabbed hold of the guardrail with her free hand and refused to budge. "You!" she yelled. "You rat!"

"Shhh!"

"I will not 'shhh', you alien lizard, terrorist rat. You knocked me out," she accused. "You're kidnapping me into the future."

"I'm taking a shot at it," he agreed, pulling on her arm. "Come on."

"No."

"You want us to get caught?" He looked desperately around the nearly dark, empty corridor.

"Yes," she decided. "Take me to your leader."

"No."

"You can't do this to me."

"I'm doing it."

"Not without a -- a fair trial, or something."

"Claudia, you're being unreasonable."

"Damn right I'm being unreasonable. You're trying to ruin my life."

"I'm trying to save it."

He gave an extra hard tug. She let go of the guardrail. The momentum propelled her forward. They crashed together and onto the deck, Claudia sprawling across him.

"Mr. Duchamp," a bored-sounding voice drawled out of the intercom. "Please report to the bridge."

"Oh, God." Denys closed his eyes as if he was in pain.

"Immediately, if you please," the voice added.

The disembodied voice sounded familiar to Claudia. "Who's that?"

"The Captain. Let me up."

She stayed where she was, and looked him in the eye. "How long have I been asleep?"

"Not long. A few days," he confessed.

"A few...days...Denys!" she sputtered, fury and hurt fought for supremacy in her emotions. Hurt won. "How could you? I thought you cared."

"I do. It was for your own good."

"Let me be the judge of what's for my own good. Or at least a participant in the decision making. Where's your captain?" she insisted. "I want to meet him."

"No." Several minutes passed in furious silence as they tried to stare each other down.

She knew from his stubborn look he wasn't going to change his mind. "Denys!"

"I have to get to the bridge," he told her. He grabbed her by the waist and pushed her off him. "Believe me," he said, helping her to her feet, "you do not want to meet our captain. He'll kill you, me and the crew if you get caught. He wouldn't send you home, Claudia."

"Kill me?" She gulped. "The crew? You?"

"Maybe not kill, but we could end up on a prison colony. All of us."

"Mr. Duchamp," the captain's voice drawled sarcastically from out of the air, "I'm waiting."

Denys paled. "He doesn't like to be kept waiting."

"I can tell. Do you think he knows about me?"

"I certainly hope not." Denys looked around as if he was expecting a posse to come bearing down on them at any moment. "You've got to get back to my quarters, and I've got to get to the bridge." He stepped over to a communications outlet. "Cleary," he ordered.

"Duchamp, you're supposed to be on the bridge," came the immediate response.

"And we both know why I'm not there," Denys answered in acid-etched tones.

"I'm on my way to the Captain's Walk," Cleary responded.

"Good." Denys faced her. "Stay here," he ordered. "Cleary will see you get safely back to my quarters."

She put her hands on her hips. "Then what? Another long nap?"

"It was for your own good."

"It was to keep me passive and obedient," she claimed angrily.

"You thought it was the only way you could get me to cooperate. You were wrong. I'll never be sleepy again," she declared dramatically as a door at the end of the corridor opened. "I'll never forgive you, either."

Cleary approached them at a quick trot. "I'll take care of her, Duchamp."

Denys rounded on the other man. "What did you mean by bringing her up here?"

"Figure it out for yourself," Cleary answered. "Come on, Dr. Cameron," he said sympathetically to Claudia. "Let's get you back home."

Denys would very much like to have stayed and argue with the pair of them. Unfortunately, there was somewhere more important he had to be.

##

"Here at last," Captain Andrews said as Denys saluted before him. The Captain ran a mocking eye over him.

Denys tried very hard not to flinch at the man's cool assessment. He'd been told his own eyes could look as cold as ice. The expression in Captain Andrews's eyes was somewhere near absolute zero. The eyes, coupled with the man's aristocratically beaked nose and distinguished gray hair had a devastating effect. Without saying anything the captain was able to make Denys want to confess his and the Shift's transgressions of the last few weeks. He managed not to. Denys stood passively, just barely managing not to squirm with guilt.

"I see by your outfit that you've been messing about on the hull," Captain Andrew said at last.

Denys had forgotten he was still in his environmental suit. "Yes, sir," he responded.

"I suppose that explains your leisurely response to my summons."
It was as good an excuse as any. "Yes, sir."

"Hmm." He rubbed his forefinger across the bridge of his impressive nose. "I see. Note the viewscreen," he went on, dropping the subject of Denys's slow response.

The ship's main viewscreen covered one entire wall of the bridge. The workstations were grouped around the viewscreen in a double horseshoe, the Captain's Chair and control station set in the center of the uppermost semi-circle. Denys observed that the rest of the bridge Shift was studiously avoiding looking at him and Captain Andrews. He concentrated on looking at the screen, while the captain's fingers drummed briefly on the edge of his console.

The view showed the clifftop and dark interior of Stickney Crater. "It's the mine site," he said after it became evident the captain wasn't going to elaborate on anything before he got a response.

"Quite. It was the mine site."

"Was, sir?"

"How are craters formed, young man?" Captain Andrews asked, his dreadful gaze still on the screen.

"Impacts from space debris, usually," Denys answered quickly. He didn't try to voice his confusion.

"Just so. And could asteroids be classified as space debris, do you think?"

"Yes, sir."

"And is it possible for an asteroid to impact Stickney Crater at the exact spot you set up your mining apparatus?"

Denys's mind reeled. No. Impossible. "Yes, sir," he answered calmly, despite the panic trying to take over his brain.

Captain Andrews sighed. "The sensors seem to indicate that is precisely what has just happened. Do me a favor, will you?" the cool voice grated painfully across Denys's already raw nerves. "Take your Shift down and assess the damage for me, if you please."

"Yes, sir," Denys repeated one more time, happy to flee the bridge and the mocking annoyance of the HATTON's commanding officer.

##

"I don't get it," Fox said as they gathered around the damage. "How could it destroy just the laser canon? It doesn't make any sense."

"Fate," Toffler said. "Karma."

"Damn bad luck," Cleary added.

"Right," Denys agreed. He shook his head. Not for the first time since they'd arrived at the mine to discover what a tiny fragment of falling asteroid had done to their most important piece of equipment: flattened it.

"Nothing we can salvage," Morrison reported.

"The thing didn't work right anyway," Cleary pointed out. "What do we do now, Duchamp?" he wanted to know. The rest of the Shift looked at him with the same question in their expressions.

He shrugged. "We have to finish the job," he said. "We'll have to rebuild it, I guess."

"Out of what?" Fox asked. "The Earth ship didn't deliver all the spare parts we ordered."

"Yeah," Toffler recalled. "They replaced some important stuff with 'equivalent' equipment. It didn't work."

Sakretis scratched his jaw. "I remember the hands on the freighter talking real fast about our order. I've been wondering what 'back order' and SNAFU mean, too."

Denys was getting a headache. "I better call the captain," he said. He left his men to finish checking over the bits of fused metal and rock which had recently been their laser canon. He went back to the shuttle to use the communicator.

The conversation was brief, pithy, and mostly one-sided. Denys got to say, "Yes, sir," a lot.

The men were waiting by the shuttle door when he came out. "We're going back to Earth," he told them. "Ship's computer's already working on ordering parts for a new canon. Let's get back to the HATTON." They followed him on board.

Once strapped in, Cleary said, "What about Dr. Cameron?"

"What about her?"

"Well," Morrison ventured. "She can go home now. This is a stroke of good fortune for her."

"You going to put her back to sleep?" Cleary questioned disapprovingly.

It appeared Cleary was somewhat aware of his dilemma. "No," he answered. "I'm not going to put her back to sleep."

Maybe I should, he thought, but I can't. He let his hands work the controls of the shuttle while his mind ranged over the problem of what to do with Claudia Cameron. He couldn't knock her out again. It was a stupid idea, and a cruel and totally unacceptable solution. I may be very stupid, he thought, but I certainly didn't intend any cruelty. I robbed her of several days of her life. I hope she can forgive me for it. I hope she'll let me try to make up for it.

Morrison was right. He should let her go home. This was a perfect chance. A Godsend. Or it would be, if she didn't know too much. She does. He couldn't risk it. He didn't want to hurt her. He'd do anything to keep from hurting her. Anything but take her back to Earth. How did he stop her? She was sure to insist on going home. Once the men told her she was bound to find some way of cajoling them into getting her off the ship. She had them wrapped around her finger.

What she doesn't know won't hurt her.

He caught the stray thought as it flitted across his consciousness

and held it up for closer examination. I tried to keep her from knowing about Phobos, he reminded himself. She found out anyway. Look what happened then. He had fond, as well as frustrated, memories of the experience. It's the only choice I've got, he decided. She has got to be kept completely in the dark this time. Somehow these idiots he called a Shift crew had to be made to understand that she needed to stay on board the HATTON.

He suddenly remembered the aborted rendezvous on the Captain's Walk. He remembered the stunning scarlet dress. It knew it hadn't been by her design, but it gave him an idea.

"Cleary, men," he said as he brought the shuttle easily through the gaping bay doors. "I need your help. About Dr. Cameron and myself and her going back to Earth." The men waited for him to go on.

The bay doors closed and they waited while air pumped into the hangar deck. "Claudia and I are in love," he explained, trying to look soulful and lovestruck. He didn't suppose it was hard.

"We thought so," Sakretis told him.

"If she goes back to Earth, I'll never see her again."

"True," Fox agreed.

Denys sighed. "I don't want her to go back. And she doesn't want to. Not really. But she's still uncertain about making such a drastic change. She needs time to think," he went on sincerely. "I was hoping to have more time to convince her to stay."

"Which is why you put her to sleep, of course," Cleary said, not quite sarcastically, but very close.

"It was a mistake," Denys said quickly. "I was trying to give her...us...myself some time to think. It's not easy falling in love with a woman out of the past."

"Even if she's a great cook." Cleary was not buying this. Denys was tempted to remind Cleary just whose fault this situation was.

"Sure miss her cooking," Cleary added before Denys could say anything. "She was planning on making us chili before you tucked her into bed. Sure would like to have some of that chili. Wouldn't you, boys?" There was a chorus of assent to Cleary's question.

Denys was beginning to understand there might be a price for Cleary and the crew's cooperation. Fair enough. "I'd be happy to let her back in the kitchen if I can just get you to help me," he told the men. "Please."

"You going to marry her?" Sakretis wanted to know. "This isn't just a fling is it, Duchamp?"

"She's definitely the marrying kind," Fox added.

"We wouldn't want to see her get hurt," Morrison said.

Denys sighed. He was willing to tell them anything to get their cooperation. "Of course I'm going to marry her. I'm an honorable man."

The Shift Crew looked at each other. Nods were exchanged. "Okay," Cleary spoke for the group. "We'll do it."

Chapter Nine

Claudia was not only miserable, she was bored. She played with her dinner and wished she was anywhere but at the kitchen counter with only Denys Duchamp for company. Again. It was going to be another long, miserable evening without even the view of Mars on the living quarters' screen to keep her company.

The Captain, Cleary had explained, had, in his legendary dictatorial manner, revoked all viewing privileges for the duration of the mission because of some minor rule infraction. So she had nothing to look at but Denys. Normally this would not be a hardship, but looking at him now just made her miserable. Maybe she should try working on a new recipe after dinner was over.

The kitchen computer was about all she had to keep her company. Denys hadn't put her back to sleep, but he was leaving her alone. And she was leaving him alone. She was too angry with him to admit to craving his company, and that seemed just fine with him. Except that they were always together.

She wasn't quite sure what was going on. She was being encouraged to cook, but the men were keeping their distance. They smiled benignly at her a lot, but they weren't very good company. The surly, silent presence of Denys Duchamp was all she had. She did know that she wasn't going to talk first. So she was being surly and silent too. She supposed she couldn't blame the crew for not wanting to come near her and the Shift Officer.

In the three days since she'd woken up, her constant guide to and from their quarters had been Denys. He sat with her at meals while the men took their trays and disappeared she knew not where. She was too stubborn to ask Denys and he didn't volunteer any information.

The truth was, she wanted to talk to him, but her tongue kept getting tangled up with seething anger at how he'd treated her. She wanted to talk to him, but she wanted an apology first. She wanted an explanation. She wanted him to hold her and make love to her and tell her he'd make it all better. She told herself this last, aching want was ridiculous, superfluous and downright masochistic. He was not her lover or her friend or her confidant. He was a kidnapper, a dictator, a blond-haired, gorgeous fiend.

She remembered how he used to tease her, how she'd enjoyed his

company in her first days on board the HATTON. She'd been happy then. Now they just sat across from each other, in the kitchen, in the living quarters, in frigid silence. She was not happy. She was not having a good time. The hours were dragging by so slowly, she almost wished she was back in her sound, dream-filled sleep again. Almost.

Denys looked at his dinner rather than at Claudia. While it was true he didn't think he could get enough of being with and looking at Claudia, he was going crazy from the way she'd been acting for the last few days. Not that he could blame her, of course. She was right; he was ruining her life. He couldn't expect her to understand how it was necessary to sacrifice her happiness for the success of the mission. Except She wasn't alone. He was sacrificing his happiness as well. She was going to hate him forever and he would always bear the guilt of hurting her. He wanted to tell her how painful this was.

He told himself he was just being maudlin; feeling sorry for himself. He knew his feelings weren't important. The mission was. He was also afraid that telling her one little thing about how he felt would open a floodgate. Next he'd be telling her how sorry he was, how much he loved her, how he wanted her to be happy and how the shuttle was due to land at Athens airport tomorrow morning. He'd offer her a ride home just to see her smile. That would never do.

At least the men were keeping out of this. They were leaving him alone to bear the brunt of her fierce, silent displeasure. He sighed.

She gave him an acid-etched look. She pushed her plate away. "I'm going to bed," she said. These were her first words to him in three days. He got up. "I don't need your help."

He trailed after her like a lost puppy anyway.

Claudia didn't really trust the bed anymore. She knew it wasn't the mattress's fault, but she was worried Denys would mess around with the sleep programming again. She'd tried sleeping on the deck in front of the personal lockers. It had proved very uncomfortable. Denys had looked at her reproachfully, and stepped over her a lot. She'd eventually taken his point and moved back to the bed alcove. She'd finally decided on the alternative of instructing the bed to wake her up every three hours, just in case Denys decided to try anything. When she settled her head on the pillow, she knew it wouldn't be long before the bed went --

BOING.

"Oh, lord, not again," she mumbled and turned over, clutching the pillow to her chest. She was dreaming of Denys, she didn't want to be disturbed.

BOING.

"I'm awake," she whispered to the mattress. "Leave me alone." The noise subsided.

She tried to drift off again. She turned over, put the pillow back under her head where it belonged. She stared at the ceiling for awhile. She listened to Denys's soft breathing from the other bed niche. She

tried, but she couldn't get back to sleep. She got out of bed and got dressed.

She went and stood by Denys's bed, caught between the longing to throttle him and the longing to brush his pale bangs off his forehead and give him a soft kiss. She wanted him. She ached to crawl in beside him and make love to him again. Instead, she put her hands behind her and backed away from his bed. She couldn't touch him; wouldn't touch him. He didn't stir.

She decided to go down to the kitchen while she had a chance to be by herself. She didn't know what she'd do when she got there, but the chance of having some time alone to think was enticing enough. Hopefully she'd find some way not to think about Denys.

She got to the kitchen and turned on the computer, but she wasn't alone for long. When the door opened she jumped, she was sure Denys had come to haul her away by the wrist once more. "I have every right...!" she began as she turned to the newcomer.

It was Smid. He nodded to her and said, "I came for my dinner, Dr. Cameron." He took the place she'd vacated at the console and fed in the formula for his head of lettuce. After he retrieved it from the serving slot, he spoke to her again. "Will you be bringing fresh food supplies aboard tomorrow? I would like to request some fresh carrots if you are."

Fresh food supplies? Tomorrow. She looked at the six and a half foot bunny in stunned consternation. "What?"

"Carrots," he replied. "You will be accompanying the Shift Crew to Earth, will you not? To supervise loading the food provisions?"

All she could think of for a few moments was that Denys had lied to her again. Lied to her with silence. It hurt so badly she couldn't breathe, couldn't think, couldn't see anything but red.

When she came to her senses, she was grasping the terrified Smid by the front of his blue coverall and shouting, "All right, Thumper, I want to see the captain right now -- or I'm going to be trying out a recipe for hasenpfeffer!"

Smid's nose twitched furiously, but he showed no other signs of distress.

Claudia let go of Smid, thoroughly ashamed of her outburst and threatening the poor bunny. "I'm sorry." She took a deep, calming breath, and went on, "I would like to see the captain, Smid. If you don't mind."

"I do not mind. But I'm sure the captain would. He would not wish to be disturbed during Third Shift. I will go now."

Smid left before she could protest, or beg for his help. She stood in the middle of the kitchen after he left, feeling helpless and utterly alone. Denys was determined to save his precious mission, and the crew was on his side. Which was only right and proper, she supposed, saving their world was more important to them than her personal problems. But it left her with

no one to turn to, nowhere to go, powerless. She had no place in the scheme of things.

Place. She remembered the view of Mars from a glass-walled corridor. What was the place called? The Captain's Walk. If it's called the Captain's Walk, she wondered, does that mean the Captain's quarters are nearby? Or maybe it means he hangs out there looking at the view. It may mean nothing.

She paced, and thought frantically. She had to do something. Her heart ached at the thought of never seeing Denys again, but she knew she had to get back to Earth somehow. But how? The Captain had to be the answer.

"I'll have to find the Captain's Walk," she said to herself. "I can't depend on Smid, he's not quite connected with human concerns. I'll have to do it myself."

She remembered Second Shift's fear of Captain Andrews. Fear on her behalf. She told herself the man couldn't really be a monster. That they'd just been using him as a bogeyman to keep her under control. She took her courage in hand and left the kitchen. As she began skulking down the corridor, she thought, I suppose I'll just have to find out for myself if he really is a man-eating minotaur after all.

She was totally lost within minutes of leaving the kitchen. In her travels with Denys and the crew, she hadn't had any conception of the size of the HATTON. A few minutes alone hunting up and down unfamiliar corridors soon convinced her the mining ship was enormous. It was in the middle of the ship's night and she already knew her chances of encountering anyone this late were practically nil. Normally she was glad the corridors and elevators were so deserted. Normally the last thing she wanted was to be seen by anyone from First or Third shift. Normally. Now that she was lost and completely confused, she would have been delighted for the captain to arrive in the nearest cross corridor accompanied by a squad of heavily armed marines.

She looked bleakly around and muttered, "This is all Denys's fault." She was seriously considering sitting down in the middle of the lonely intersection and having a good cry when a nearby elevator opened its doors. Charlie emerged into the corridor. He smiled upon seeing her, looking both dapper and elegant in the simple jumpsuit uniform. Denys, she thought as Charlie approached her, looks sexy in his uniform.

Charlie stopped before her, his elderly face a mask of avuncular concern. "What's wrong, m'dear?" he asked.

Claudia couldn't stop the tears.

"He doesn't love me!" she wailed and threw herself into Charlie's arms. It wasn't at all what she'd meant to say, but her misery suddenly overwhelmed her. She needed a strong shoulder to cry on.

Charlie didn't seem to mind her soaking his uniform with tears. He patted her back and murmured the occasional, "There, there, poor lamb," until Claudia was able to get her outburst under control.

"I don't know why I did that," she confessed as she stepped away from him. He produced a large, silver lame handkerchief from his pocket and gallantly handed it to her. "Thanks." She wiped her tears and held it out to him.

"Keep it," he said with a negligent wave. "A present."

"Thanks." She stuffed the crumbled cloth into her pocket.

"Who doesn't love you?" he wanted to know in well-mannered outrage. "Is he a blind fool? Shall I thrash him for you?"

She almost laughed. "It's all so complicated."

"Tell me all about it."

She did. Starting with the clandestine trip to Phobos when Denys saved her life and then their making love and his deciding she might wreck the future so she couldn't go home, not that she was sure she wanted to go home because she really loved Denys. Or she did until he'd put her to sleep and then didn't let anyone tell her they were back at Earth because he couldn't trust her not to run away because he didn't think she was an intelligent human being, but some child who needed to be protected, which was sort of sweet, but completely politically incorrect, and he could at least discuss the situation with her if he cared for her at all. Which he didn't.

"So I want to go home," she concluded breathlessly. "And never see or think about Denys Duchamp again."

"I see," he said, though from the way he was looking at her she didn't think he did. Not really.

Because she didn't.

"I've never been so confused in my life."

"I can tell."

"Charlie, what am I going to do?"

He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "I think you should have some tea and a lie down."

"I've slept quite enough lately," she retorted.

He nodded. "Yes, I suppose you're right. In that case," he went on, "I think you should go home. Get away from the whole situation and think it through."

Go home. Back to Earth. Away from this madhouse. "Yes," she said. "That's exactly what I want. I have to escape." She grasped him by the front of his jumpsuit, looking up at him pleadingly. "Will you help me? Please? I have to get away from Denys."

She knew she had to get away before it was too late... Before I can't stand the silence anymore, she thought feverishly. Before I apologize for making so much trouble for him just because I can't stand him looking hurt anymore. It's not my fault all this happened. I'm the one who's been wronged. I want out of here. Really.

"Please," she pleaded again. "I have to get off the ship. You can help me do that, can't you?" She stepped back to look at him hopefully.

"I was looking for the Captain, but I really don't want to get anyone into trouble," she went on. "It's much better to have someone I know and trust help me than throw myself on the mercy of a tyrant like Captain Andrews. He might do something horrible -- not just to me, but to the whole Shift. Please, Charlie," she ended, once again breathless.

He was frowning. "Tyrant? Denys told you Captain Andrews is a tyrant?" She nodded. "Well, I suppose he is," Charlie conceded. "Wouldn't want you to be found, could be very bad, officially speaking. You being a stowaway and all."

"I am not a stowaway," she corrected him indignantly. "I'm a kidnap victim. They stuffed me in the cargo locker!"

"Very impolite of them," he acknowledged. He ran his fingers thoughtfully up and down his long beak. "Perhaps you could return home the way you were brought aboard."

"I've thought of that," Claudia said. "But I don't know how. I don't even know how to find the hangar bay so I could sneak on board without anybody spotting me. Even Cleary won't help me."

"Yes. I see your problem. You have to get past the Shift crew as well as young Duchamp." He lapsed into another short silence, then said, "I suppose I could arrange it."

"You could? Will you?"

"Hmm. Of course, you'd need a supply of breather strips."

Claudia remembered the breather strips she'd been handed when she'd gone to the mining site. "I've got those," she told Charlie. "And an environmental suit."

"Useful, that." He rubbed his nose again, and gave her a confident smile. "Let me think a moment."

As Claudia waited, she found herself beginning to believe the distinguished older man was capable of performing miracles. It was just something about him.

"Tell you what we'll do," he went on. "You wait in your quarters in the morning until young Duchamp has gone. Then I'll come fetch you and get you on board the shuttle before it leaves."

"But won't they see me in the hangar bay?"

"Oh, I'll manage some sort of diversion." He took her hand and patted it comfortingly. "Never fear. We'll get you in the back of the cargo bay while they're fussing with something in the front. They've been busy adding more Stealth shielding to the shuttle. The projectors are mostly forward of the cockpit. I'm sure those fussy old men in Third shift -- " He smiled winningly. " -- will want them to carry out one last equipment inspection on the forward shields before they let the shuttle lift off."

He was very clever, indeed. She hugged him. "Thank you. I won't ever forget this." She grinned happily. "I'm going home."

"Indeed, you are. Now," he offered her his arm. "Let me escort you at least part of the way back to your quarters."

Claudia was glad to take his arm and accept his guidance. The HATTON was just too big and complicated to try to travel through without a guide. As they went along<,> he asked her about Earth. He'd never been there. It turned out he was from New Sydney.

Denys was from New Sydney.

Denys. She was really going to leave Denys. It hurt. So she tried not to think about it. She tried to convince herself that she didn't belong anywhere but on Earth, in her own time. She was going home. Alone.

I want to go, she told herself as she accompanied Charlie through the maze of corridors. I want to go home. And it's going to hurt.

It already hurt.

##

Claudia was sleeping when Denys left their quarters. He paused to kiss her cheek before he left, and gazed back at her still form for just a moment. He wanted to do more than kiss her cheek. He wanted to make love to her again. Then he wanted to talk to her, get things settled.

Or maybe, he told himself ruefully as he headed to the hangar deck, what we should do first is talk to each other, then make love. Whatever. He wanted her so badly that sharing a room with her was driving him insane. He wondered if the Siren Song was anything like the pull he felt toward Claudia. No. He would not equate her with those things. They were monsters. She was wonderful. He should be ashamed of himself for the comparison. It was proof of how crazy with need for her he'd become that he could compare Claudia to the mindless reaction men had to the Siren Song.

He thought he was lucky to be getting some time away from the ship, and Claudia. Maybe by the time the shuttle made the trip to Earth and back he'd be able to get his raging emotions under some control. He hoped distance and a little time would help him gain some perspective on his relationship with Claudia. Such as it was.

The Second Shift crew were already gathered by the shuttle when Denys arrived in the bay. Once again, it had been adapted to look like a 20th century truck. He approached them and gave a nod in greeting.

"Think I'll inspect the cargo bay and all the boxes," he told them. He got groans and pained looks in response. "Never know what might be tucked in one of those boxes," he added as he climbed on board the small ship to begin the inspection. "Let's pull them all out, shall we?"

The men followed him truculently. They wanted to get the trip over with. So did he. He also knew he'd left Claudia asleep in her own bed. He was wearing a sensor which would warn him the moment she set foot outside the small area of the ship he'd decided was safe for her. He also wasn't taking any risks that she might have somehow fooled him and managed to sneak on board the shuttle. Call me paranoid, he

reasoned, but he was not taking any chances on losing her.

It took about twenty minutes for him to be satisfied there was no possibility she could be on board. Cleary and the others were looking smug, as well as disgruntled, by this time.

"Can we go now?" Cleary wanted to know.

Denys would have been happy to answer in the affirmative but, before he could, the hangar's intercom sounded and a no-nonsense voice announced, "Final inspection of Stealth Field is required before permission to lift off."

There were more groans, Denys's among them this time.

"All right," he said to the grumbling men. "Up front everybody. The sooner we check it out, the sooner we can go looking for dolmata and baklava."

And the sooner I can get back to Claudia, he added to himself. All right, she doesn't speak to me, but at least she's safe. Maybe someday she'll forgive me.

##

Claudia jumped out of bed as soon as Denys was out the door. It had taken all of her willpower not to watch him as he got dressed and moved around the room. To take one more memory of the sight of him with her. She was depressed as she put on the clothes she'd been wearing when she drove into Doros, then managed to squeeze the environmental suit on over her Earth clothing. She checked her purse for wallet and passport, glad the drunken crew had stuffed the leather bag into the box with her. As a final, jaunty touch, she decided to tie the silver handkerchief from Charlie cravat-style around her throat. She checked a mirror and decided the effect was dashing.

She didn't feel dashing. In fact, she felt just awful. She tried to cheer herself up with the knowledge that she was going home; that she'd had the adventure of a lifetime. Instead, she kept thinking about never seeing Denys again.

She was almost ready to tell Charlie to forget the escape when he knocked on her door. It was only by sternly reminding herself that Denys had betrayed her trust that bolstered her determination to go through with this. Besides, he didn't love her.

She sighed, and glumly accompanied Charlie to the shuttle hangar. They hid behind a storage locker until Denys and the crew were diverted to the front of the shuttle.

Charlie took the time to kiss her on the forehead. "This is it, m'dear. Can't say I won't miss you."

She gave him a hug. "Thanks for everything."

"Always happy to help a young lady in distress."

Why couldn't Denys be this charming? She scrubbed a quick tear from her eye. Actually, she was well aware that Denys

could be terribly charming, but she couldn't let it affect her choice.
"Let's do it."

It was a simple process to sprint across the open deck of the bay and sneak into the rear of the shuttle. Charlie showed her how to open the cargo doors from the inside, pointed out a hiding place and was gone. A few minutes later she felt the shuttle rising from the hangar deck. She tried not to cry as the journey began. A part of her really was elated. She was going home. But the elation didn't cancel out her misery at knowing she'd never see Denys Duchamp again.

Chapter Ten

The Stealth shielding did its job flawlessly Denys was happy to note as he brought the shuttle to a halt on the hot tarmac. No one at the Athens airport had noticed him land the truck-shaped shuttle. He parked it at the specified hangar in a far corner of the airport grounds. All was going as it should. They hadn't been detected on their way down from the orbiting ship, either. No radar had picked them up over Europe. He sighed with relief. Now all they had to do was collect the supplies that waited for them in the hangar and get back to the HATTON. It shouldn't take more than a few hours.

He and the men moved efficiently to get on with the job. Safety belts were soon unhooked and they piled out to stand blinking for a few moments while they got used to the bright afternoon glare of Earth's yellow sun.

"Hot," Cleary commented, wiping the back of his hand across his forehead.

"Real hot," Morrison added.

"So hot you could -- "

"Knock it off," Denys interrupted before Fox could finish his contribution to this scintillating conversation. "Let's just get to it, shall we?"

There were offended looks from the crew. Someone muttered, "Sounds just like the Captain, sometimes," but they were happy enough to shuffle into the relative coolness of the hangar.

Denys went to deal with the paperwork, the crew went to check the contents of the waiting boxes. Everything, so far, was going according to schedule.

##

Claudia had the door opened, was outside the hold, and the door sealed again just as the passenger door on the side of the shuttle

opened. She ran, telling herself that freedom was more important than trying to look back for one last glimpse of Denys. It was too late. Besides, he might see her and the escape attempt would be for nothing.

The heat and light from the sun seemed unnatural to her as she sprinted across the hot tarmac toward a terminal building. The air was full of dust and jet fuel fumes. The air felt wrong in her lungs after she ripped the breather strip from under her nose. After a few seconds exposure to the polluted Earth atmosphere, she was wishing she'd left the breather strip on a few minutes longer.

It's too late now, she thought as she reached turned a corner of a building and found herself at the entrance of the international terminal. Everything's too late. Damn it, she was thinking about Denys again!

She joined a crowd of people heading for the door instead of obeying the impulse to return to the shuttle and the man she'd left behind.

I'm back, she thought, I'm home. She looked around her. The people were all strangers, the place was foreign. She felt miserable and lonesome. But she was home.

I'm just tired, she reasoned as she walked through the high-ceilinged, bustling terminal. She felt disoriented. There were too many people. They jostled her and looked at her strangely and spoke languages she didn't understand. I'm just a tourist who's been away from home for too long, she told herself. She tried to make herself believe she'd be fine as soon as she got home. To Iowa. To her own house. Her empty house. With its empty bed.

"Home is all I need," she said, and stepped up to an airline counter, Mastercard ready.

She was in luck, a flight for Chicago was leaving in less than an hour. She'd worry about connecting flights once she got to O'Hare. She'd worry about the price of the flight later, well aware that the price was both monetary and emotional.

As she waited for her tickets to be processed she began to notice the looks her skin tight environmental suit was drawing. Most were curious, some were outright admiring. It was embarrassing, and she didn't want to do anything to make herself conspicuous. She supposed she was being paranoid. There was no one from the HATTON anywhere near this terminal.

The attention was enough to make her slip into the nearest ladies room to peel off the environmental suit and the pretty silver handkerchief she'd been wearing around her neck. Once she had it off, she wasn't quite sure what to do with the shiny black jumpsuit. She stood in the middle of the washroom, thankful she was alone, and held the clothing up before her. In the big wall mirror<,> Claudia saw the reflection of a woman in shorts and a simple gauze blouse, her slightly ruffled brown hair dusting her cheeks and shoulders. The woman looked a

little tired, there was unhappiness in her blue eyes, but she looked normal. A very normal, everyday sort of person. She didn't look like the sort of person who had adventures, who stood on alien moons or talked to six foot rabbits. Or fell in love with mining engineers from far future colony worlds.

Had she really done all those things? The jumpsuit was proof she had, a reminder of wild times, both good and bad. She sighed. She didn't need or want any reminders of her time on the HATTON to intrude on her future. She was going back to a quiet life in a small town. She was going to do her best to forget that the whole incident had ever happened. She was going to work very hard at forgetting Denys Duchamp. She didn't need any reminders.

She stuffed the jumpsuit into the trash container next to the row of sinks and walked out the door. Checking her watch, she realized she had to hurry to catch her plane.

She was firmly belted into a window seat near the wing when she remembered that she'd stuffed Charlie's silver scarf into the pocket of the jumpsuit when she'd taken it off. She had meant to keep his present, now it was too late to try to retrieve it.

She sighed, and settled back to wait in lonely misery for the airplane to take off.

##

Denys had just signed the last of the shipping forms when his wrist went off. He looked at the vibrating sensor strapped to his wrist and swore.

The man standing beside him looked at him strangely. "Odd looking beeper."

Denys tapped the indicator control on the sensor. "Damn the woman!" he muttered in a low, angry growl. "What's she doing here?"

"Huh?" the man questioned as the sensor continued its steady beeping.

"Have to call the home office," Denys improvised the explanation. He shut off the audio, keeping the tracking function lit. "Excuse me."

He ran out of the hangar yelling, "Cleary!"

Cleary jumped out of the cargo bay. "Yeah, Duchamp?"

Denys stalked angrily up to him. "Where is she?"

Cleary blinked. "Who, sir?"

Denys held his wrist up to show the crewman the activated sensor. "Claudia. Where is she?"

"Back on the HATTON, sir," was the swift response.

"No she isn't. Where'd you hide her?"

Sakretis followed Cleary out of the shuttle. "We didn't bring her with us," he told Denys.

"No, sir," Fox said, putting in an appearance.

"You got her bugged?" Morrison asked. He gave Denys a fatuous grin. "Ah, love."

"He worries about her," Toffler added as he joined the crowd around Denys.

"You've got a sensor," Harcort pointed out. "If you want to find her all you have to do is -- "

"I know what I have to do!" Denys shouted. He raced off, following the sensor coordinates.

He'd only gone about a dozen yards when he thought better of his quick exit. He halted just long enough to order, "Finish the loading and don't move from this spot until I get back." He didn't trust them, not for a single minute.

He followed the sensor light into a busy terminal, then pushed through a thick crowd until he reached an empty loading gate. The hard plastic seats were empty, the desk in the center of the gate was empty. The sensor blinked steadily, indicating she was no more than a few yards away. Denys looked around frantically.

"Claudia!" he shouted, as worried as he was angry. He had to get her back. He had to get her home. He didn't know what he was going to do if he didn't get her home. He was going to have to drag her out of the building in front of a crowd, wasn't he? How was he going to manage to get her away from the airport without getting himself arrested?

"Claudia!"

Heads turned his way. He didn't pay any attention to anyone that was not Claudia. Where the devil was she?

Then he noticed the jet easing slowly away from the building. He watched helplessly as it taxied toward a nearby runway, blinding sunlight glinted off its wide wings. The indicator readings began to show his target receding, moving away from the building. Claudia was on the jet.

Of course Claudia was on the airplane. She wanted to go home.

How was he supposed to get her off a moving airplane? Denys swore again, and made his way as quickly as possible out of the building. Once outside he tore at top speed across the baking tarmac, sweating in the hot sunlight.

Back at the shuttle, he shouted at the gaping crew. "Wait here!" He rushed into the cockpit and started the engine. While the systems came on line he made one more quick dash outside. "Don't," he ordered the stunned sextet, "touch anything. And stay away from the ouzo."

With those words of wisdom spoken, he hurried back to the control board, switched on the Stealth shield and lifted the shuttle from the ground at breakneck speed. He made detailed and inventive promises about what he was going to do to Claudia Cameron once he got his hands on her as he set off chasing the unsuspecting airliner.

##

Claudia slept through most of the flight, waking up occasionally to complain that the bed wasn't doing its job. Then she'd remember she wasn't on board the HATTON, and that the seat was just a seat. An impersonal, inanimate object with no dutiful interest in the comfort of its occupant. Which was as it should be, she'd remind herself, and drift off again.

At O'Hare she got through Customs quickly. Lord knew she had nothing to declare but a broken heart, and nobody would be interested in hearing about that. She splashed lots of cold water on her face in a washroom, drank some very bad, overpriced coffee in one of the airport cafeterias, then boarded a commuter plane for Dubuque. Her own car was waiting in the airport's long term parking lot for the three hour drive home to Bradden Falls. She was exhausted, but she made it to Bradden Falls on a fistful of candybars and the radio tuned to a station playing Alternative rock music, which she couldn't stand. Sugar and sheer dislike kept her awake long enough to pull into her driveway.

She got out, unsteady on her feet, and looked with bleary vision at the beautiful, two-story restored farmhouse she called home. The house was painted white, with blue trim. A wide porch full of mismatched lawn furniture wrapped around the front, a bay window thrust out on the side. The house was set on wooded land, with roses in the front and a big vegetable garden out back. A huge oak tree shaded the side with the bay window.

She liked to watch the squirrels and birds gathered around the feeder hung on a tree branch from the bay window. She had a peaceful, normal life, and she loved it. She canned a lot of her own vegetables, baked bread in her high-tech kitchen, and built fires in the living room fireplace in the winter. There was a braided rug her grandmother had made in front of the brick hearth.

She'd worked very hard to make it a picture-perfect, American folktale, Midwestern sort of home. Home. She found herself beginning to sniff. She had a rocking chair. She'd always thought it would come in handy if she ever got around to having a baby.

But she was never going to have a baby because Denys was on a starship hundreds of years in the future and she was stuck in Nowhere, Iowa all by herself! How could she go back to such a dull existence after her adventures on the HATTON? How could she bear to be alone? Even in a picture-perfect, Midwestern sort of house. The picture was all wrong because instead of having anyone to share it with, she was all alone.

"I'm tired," she said, shaking tears off her cheeks. "That's all. Just tired. He didn't dump me here, I came back voluntarily. I don't belong in his world."

She'd forgotten for a moment that this was where she really

belonged, not on board the HATTON. Certainly not in Denys Duchamp's bed. She knew she was just suffering from exhaustion or stress or jet lag. Probably all three. Reaction was making her feel weak and lost and lonely. She told herself she'd be delighted to be home as soon as she got a good night's sleep. All she needed was some rest, and time to put the whole experience on the mining ship into some perspective.

A couple hundred years would probably be all she needed to sort out her feelings for Denys Duchamp.

She dragged herself wearily up the porch steps, found the spare key in the mailbox and trudged into the house. She didn't waste time looking around her home. She knew it was neat and clean, after all, her own cleaning service was contracted to show up twice a week. She didn't bother with checking her voicemail, or the pile of mail on the hall table next to the phone. She had no interest in checking her computer for e-mail messages, either. She didn't care about anything but getting some rest.

He's so handsome, she found herself recalling as she climbed the stairs to her bedroom. She missed him. Even though she hadn't talked to him for a few days, she missed the sound of his voice. Even though he was a rat who never gave her any choices and thought he knew what was best for her and treated her like an idiot, she couldn't forget that he was handsome. And protective, and caring, and intelligent. And handsome. Sexy, too. Incredibly sexy. And a wonderful lover.

Damn.

She entered the bedroom at the top of the stairs and threw herself on the Battenburg lace spread without bothering to slip her sandals off. She grabbed a pillow and buried her face in it.

He had the most devastating cheekbones I've ever seen, she thought as she waited for sleep. And such a nice little rear end. It was always so cute when he forgot his towel and I...

##

Denys parked the shuttle outside the blue and white house and climbed out cautiously to look around. The sensor beeped quietly, its indicator light pulsed rapidly, the distance indicator telling him Claudia was inside. He could only hope no one else was with her.

He stretched tiredly as he squinted in the late afternoon sunlight. If this was Claudia's home, he certainly didn't blame her for running back here the first chance she got. He looked at the white and blue house with its spreading oak tree and rose bushes and gave a wistful sigh. The house and grounds were hopelessly old-fashioned, of course, even in this time. There was certainly nothing on New Sydney to compare with this place's rustic charm. Still, it was just the sort of place he'd like to come home to. Especially if there was someone like Claudia waiting for him there.

No. Not someone like Claudia. Just Claudia.

He sighed, and cautiously made his way to the door. If she saw him and ran screaming for help, he didn't know what he'd do. The nearest house was about a quarter mile away, but if she made a loud fuss, that quarter mile wasn't very far. The last thing Denys intended to do was call attention to his presence. The point was to get in, snatch Claudia, and get out as quickly and quietly as possible. It was a shame he didn't have a sleep spray on him. They hadn't expected to need any weaponry on this supply run.

The porch steps creaked. His steps sounded far louder in his ears than they actually were. No dogs barked, no alarm systems went off. The door wasn't even locked. He moved cautiously into the hallway. The floor was some golden, polished hardwood with a long, rose-patterned runner leading down a long hall. A wide doorway to the left of the entrance led to a living room, one on the right to a dining room with a bay window. A rose-carpeted staircase with a wooden banister led to the house's second floor. There was another doorway at the end of the hall and two more doors halfway to the kitchen entrance, on opposite sides of the hallway.

Denys heard nothing. The house might as well have been deserted. His sensor told him Claudia was on the second floor. He did a quick search of the downstairs to make sure she was alone. Besides, he was curious to see the rest of her home, to know how she lived, what her taste was like, what sort of things were important to her.

One of the rooms was a library/office. There was a computer on the desk; the books on the many shelves were a combination of cookbooks and military history texts. There was a game board set up on a side table with maps and miniature metal figures in ancient armor. After examining the pieces, Denys decided the display had something to do with Alexander the Great. He moved on to the other room off the hallway, and found a small bathroom. He went on to the kitchen.

Denys smiled as he stepped into the big room. The color scheme was gray and mauve and copper, and as complex as the kitchen on board the HATTON. No, more complex, he decided after he took in some of the details of the place. A big window over the triple sink looked out at a vegetable garden; a window shelf held small pots of fragrant herbs. The stove was in the middle of a long center island, it had more controls than the cockpit of the shuttle. There was a wall oven and microwave and a gigantic refrigerator/freezer. Lots of cabinets and work space held what was probably every cooking appliance and gadget known to the late twentieth century.

"I've seen less complicated ship's bridges," he murmured. He smiled fondly as he added, "I think I've just found Claudia Cameron's true home." A stab of regret accompanied the words. He hated dragging her away from this comfortable, creative place.

He could only hope he'd be able to give her something like it someday. If she'd let him. They had to talk. She had to be made to understand that he wanted her in the future with him. It wasn't just the

need to protect history, though, of course, that was the most important reason she had to return with him. Would return with him, whether she wanted to or not. He had no intention of kidnapping her a second time just because he desperately needed her. Duty, he told himself, though he had no intention of examining just how honest he was being with himself.

He headed determinedly toward the front stairs. Fortunately, they didn't squeak. He, however, had to stop near the top of the stairs to contend with a jaw-cracking yawn.

I am so tired, he thought as he wearily finished the climb to the second floor. He didn't know how many hours it had taken him to finally catch up with Claudia but he'd had to be intensely alert every minute. What with concentrating on the sensor, following the various airplanes, monitoring the Stealth field, and avoiding getting hit by air traffic which couldn't see him, he'd had one hell of a day.

He didn't think he could repeat the performance any time in the near future.

When he found the empty bedroom at the top of the stairs, the temptation to take a short nap almost overwhelmed him instantly. Instead he followed the sensor signal down the hall to the second bedroom.

The door was open, and Claudia was there, in the middle of the four poster bed. Fast asleep.

"Lucky woman," he grumbled.

She was curled up on top of a white-on-white, lacy bedspread, her head buried in a thick pile of pillows.

Denys stood frozen in the doorway, drinking in the sight of her as she turned onto her back. She sighed, and mumbled something, but remained soundly asleep. She was dressed in the familiar clothing she'd worn onboard, but she looked different. Her tousled brown hair was spread out around her in a dark silk wave, the white bedcovering emphasized the length and shapeliness of her tan legs and thighs. He was intensely fascinated by the gentle rise and fall of her breasts as she breathed. She was beautiful.

She'd always been beautiful. He thought she was the most beautiful woman in the world. Not just on this world, but on any world. But, somehow, maybe because this setting was where she belonged, she was most beautiful to Denys right here on Earth.

He shook his head tiredly. He was disoriented, the dregs of the adrenaline which had fueled his chase of Claudia were giving out. His head was buzzing and his body wanted desperately to just drop to the floor and get on with being unconscious. He knew he should wake her, force her into the shuttle and take off.

Only he didn't have the strength for a fight. And, assuming she came peacefully, he'd probably crash the shuttle into a cornfield during takeoff while trying to stifle a yawn.

No, he decided, we aren't going anywhere for awhile. He had to get some rest.

The temptation was to lie down beside Claudia, wrap his arms

around her, and sleep for a week. He opted for the spare bedroom instead. No use waking her when he wasn't up to dealing with her hysteria. He dragged himself to the other bedroom and fell onto the mattress. He just barely remembered the bed would have no interest in his well being and set the sensor to sound an alert in seven hours before he fell deeply asleep.

##

Claudia woke, thought unhappy thoughts about Denys, took a shower, and dressed to the smell of coffee. She didn't even notice the aroma until she'd finished combing her hair. Somehow, it just seemed like a normal part of the atmosphere, something that ought to be mixed with oxygen and the scent of roses from the garden.

When she realized someone was in the house, in her kitchen, messing with her coffeemaker she wasn't the least bit surprised. Or worried. She wasn't quite sure what the day was, but if someone was in the house, it was probably Monday or Thursday and the light housekeeping chores were being neatly attended to.

It's probably Lana Kosmiki, she decided, as she went downstairs to join the housekeeper for breakfast. Marki, Elsbeth and Roger, her other permanent employees, were all tea drinkers. Except for Marki, who was from Bradden Falls, the students she employed from the local college were all off for summer vacation.

"That's the problem with hiring college kids," she was saying to herself as she entered the kitchen. "They insist on leaving town when school's out."

And then she was standing in the doorway, gaping like a fool, as Denys Duchamp turned away from the counter and smiled at her. His pale hair was highlighted by a shaft of sunlight from the window. Tight jeans and a t-shirt snugly outlined his wiry, muscled form. This was no dream. This was Denys all right, with his blade-sharp cheekbones and cool blue eyes. Her heart lurched at the sight of him, and her body lit up with a confusing combination of fear, surprise, and longing.

His lips curled up in a friendly smile. He held a mug of coffee out to her. "I figured out how to work the thing," he said proudly. "We have time for a cup before we're on our way."

"What are you doing here?" she shrieked. "Get out of my house!"

"Soon," he agreed affably. "Nice house." He added, "I'll give you time to pack a few things, and grab something to eat, but we have to be going soon." His tone was very no-nonsense.

She didn't pay it any mind. "How did you find me?" she demanded.

His smile turned to a satisfied smirk. "We have our little ways."

She was furious. Not only was she furious, she was happy to see him. Elated. Overjoyed. Being happy to see him was the most annoying part of all. She took an angry step toward him, not sure what she was

going to do. Their eyes met.

She ended up taking the offered cup of coffee and downing a long, bracing gulp. "Damn!" she sputtered when she was done.

"What?" he asked anxiously. He took a step closer to her. They were standing nose to nose next to the center island.

"This stuff tastes great. How dare you make great coffee as well as be the most gorgeous thing I have ever -- "

"You think I'm gorgeous?"

He blushed. He actually blushed. She certainly did. She didn't bother to answer. She drank some more coffee.

He took the cup from her hand and put it on the island. "Claudia," he said, voice low and intense. "Surely you understand we can't stay here."

"Don't call me Shirley." It was a dumb line from an old movie, but it was the only thing she could think to say. Having him so close, his eyes looking deeply into hers, his presence so very masculine and compelling, was totally confusing. Totally wonderful. He came closer. Their bodies touched, heated and totally attuned to each other. She forgot her anger as his lips covered hers.

They were deep in a passionate kiss when the kitchen door loudly slammed shut. Marki's shocked voice exclaimed "Boss!"

It took a few seconds for the interruption to penetrate Denys's consciousness. When it did, he jumped, then lifted his head to glare angrily at the pretty young woman standing just inside the room. His senses were reeling and his body was demanding for him to get on with making love to the woman he loved, and he growled out, "What the devil do you want?" before he recalled where they were and what they were supposed to be doing.

What they were supposed to be doing was leaving. He'd momentarily lost sight of the intended goal. But Claudia's lips were so soft and willing and her body fit so perfectly against his...

Stupid, incredibly stupid! And now he had this girl to get rid of before he could hustle Claudia out of the house.

"Excuse me," the flustered girl said, red from her hairline down to the base of her throat. "I...that is...uh. Claudia." She seemed to catch onto the name like a lifeline.

Denys grabbed Claudia around the waist. He had no intention of letting her go. The girl would assume it was a sign of affection. He shot Claudia a warning glance to make sure she didn't let on otherwise.

The girl came into the kitchen, looking worriedly at them as she did so. "Boss, are you all right?"

"She's fine," Denys answered for her. "We were just leaving."

Claudia's friend ignored him. "We've been so worried," she went on. "You didn't even send any postcards. And then your car turned up in that Greek town where the UFO was sighted."

"UFO?" Denys and Claudia spoke together. They exchanged looks. She

grinned. Denys felt himself going red.

"What UFO?" Claudia asked.

"Who's your friend?" he asked before the girl could go on.

"Marki Anderson. I've told you about Marki."

"The college senior you let run your business. I remember now. I'm Denys," he said, with as friendly a smile as he could manage. He pulled Claudia even closer. She grunted softly at the pressure.

"We're very close," she said. He wasn't sure if this was a complaint or some sort of explanation for Marki. "What UFO?" she questioned again. "What are you talking about?"

"In Doros," Marki said. "Don't you know about it? The tabloids reported that a whole town was put to sleep by a UFO and that you were kidnapped by space aliens." She grinned at Denys as she looked him over from head to foot. "You don't look like a space alien to me." She glanced back at Claudia. "Where have you been, boss?"

"To Mars and back," she answered. "Well, on one of Mars's moons, actually."

Marki laughed. "Yeah, right."

"We were on my ship," Denys explained. "A romantic Mediterranean interlude."

Marki gave a wide, understanding and slightly leering smile. "I bet," she agreed. "I'm sorry I interrupted, but I was so surprised to see the boss. I saw your car in the driveway," she added. "And the fancy semi, and I didn't know what to think. Why the truck? You moving or something?"

"Truck?" Claudia questioned.

"My truck," Denys reminded her. "I chased her all the way home," he said to Marki. "I almost caught up to you around O'Hare," he told Claudia. "But I couldn't find a place to park."

Marki laughed again. "He's cute, boss."

"Oh, he's cute all right," Claudia agreed. She shot Denys an angry look. "Will you let go of me?"

"If you promise not to run away."

She batted her eyelashes at him. "Would I do that?"

"Yes."

She shrugged. "I promise not to run away, Denys."

Of course I'm not going to run away, she said to herself as he gave her one more tight squeeze, then stepped away from her. This is my home and I'm staying right here. You're the one who's going to go away, and without me.

But how could she keep him from dragging her off when no one was looking? The answer seemed obvious. He wouldn't drag her off as long as there were witnesses. He was determined to keep history from changing in any way. If he kidnapped her from the middle of a crowd there would be questions, a manhunt, media coverage, a segment on Sightings. Surely, such goings on would have some small effect on history. Denys

must realize that. So, Denys wouldn't think of kidnapping her with anyone around. All she had to do was make sure she was constantly surrounded by people. Marki was only one person, but she was a start.

What I need is a crowd, Claudia thought. A big crowd. "I know," she said to Marki, as she crossed the room to throw open the wide freezer door. "Let's have a picnic. Call all the relatives and the staff -- everybody in town -- and get them out here for a party." She grinned triumphantly at Denys. "A welcome home party. Right now."

Denys had been content to bide his time, be friendly and wait until Marki left. "Now, wait a moment -- "

"We are having a picnic," Marki chimed in. She bounced over to join Claudia at the freezer. Marki, Denys observed, was nothing if not perky. She reminded him, somehow, of Cleary.

Cleary. And the others. What were they doing? He'd let them loose on an unsuspecting city. Well, Athens was just going to have to manage to survive on its own. He had to get Claudia away from here.

"A picnic?" Claudia questioned brightly. "Who? Where?"

"At Chatswell Pond. It was your Mom's idea. The whole town's going to be there. I came by to get a few dozen of your homemade hamburger buns from the freezer."

"Oh, Denys," Claudia gushed. "We can go too!"

She began pulling out plastic bags full of baked goods. She smiled over her shoulder at him as she and Marki began packing them in a canvas bag Marki had with her. "Isn't that wonderful? I can hardly wait. You can meet my folks."

Claudia never gushed. She was doing this to him on purpose. He knew what she was up to. And he couldn't see any way out of it. Not without causing a scene that was sure to be remarked on. The whole point of this fiasco was that he wanted to leave history alone, not to cause a single ripple in time. He couldn't hit her over the head and run off with her with people watching -- as tempting as it might be. And she knew it, too. Very clever, Dr. Cameron, he thought, with grim amusement. But it won't work. Not for long, anyway.

"All right," he agreed, forcing his tone to be cheerful. "We'll go on your picnic. I can hardly wait to meet your folks."

It didn't help his mood to realize that there was a part of him that was happy to have an excuse to stay on Earth a few hours longer. There was a little boy inside, jumping up and down with glee at the prospect of going on a picnic.

He did, however, insist on driving his 'truck' to the picnic sight, just so he'd be ready for a quick getaway once the festivities were over.

Chapter Eleven

There was one out, and Cousin Joey was at bat. The pitcher stood slim and poised on the mound, considering the situation with all the gravity it deserved. Claudia strained forward from her perch on the picnic table to watch. She could feel the tension mounting in the two people flanking her. Her mother was holding her breath, and Dad was muttering under his.

Cousin Joey was already responsible for the opposing team's three runs. He had two strikes and three balls. The next pitch would be decisive. The score was three to two and it was the bottom of the seventh. The game was dragging on through the middle of the afternoon as the sun and the barbecue grills were heating up. The mingled aromas of hot dogs, hamburgers and brats permeated the air.

Claudia's stomach was of the opinion that it was time for the game to be over. Just about everybody in town was either playing or gathered around the field to watch. The shouting was loud and partisan. The members of the two teams were among the loudest and rudest of the noisemakers.

The pitcher coolly ignored all the activity around him. He nodded to the catcher's signal, wound up, and threw.

"Strike three!" Uncle Carl shouted.

Joey threw down the bat and stomped away amid loud boos and cheering.

Claudia was nudged in the ribs by a bony elbow. "That boy of yours sure throws a mean fastball."

Claudia eyed her father worriedly. This was the first time in living memory Sergeant Marcus Cameron, US Marines, Ret., had ever expressed any approval of a man she'd brought home.

And it had to be Denys. Dad liked an alien lizard terrorist kidnapper when his opinions of two university professors, a race car driver and a photographer had been that they were all lower than pond silt. Denys he liked.

So did she, of course, which only served to make her father's approval of Denys Duchamp even more disconcerting. Of course, Denys had been absolutely charming to both her parents. He'd kissed Mom's hand. And Aunt Kate's, and Grandma's, too. To make things more embarrassing, the Tysan twins, who were sixteen and full of hormones, had been flirting with him all day. They'd nearly died when he'd helped them shuck a couple bushels of corn. She knew from the looks she was getting from everybody that Marki had spread the story about finding them kissing in the kitchen to the entire population of Bradden Falls. She'll probably fax it all over the state tomorrow,

Claudia concluded with a dismal sigh.

"I like him," her mother contributed.

"Looks like Claudia's got a good one this time," her father judged.

"About time." The senior Camerons had always had this way of holding discussion as if their children weren't present. The children were used to it. Claudia sighed, almost not hearing the conversation that went on as if she weren't sitting between the older couple.

"She met him on a Greek island," her mother said. "How romantic."

"No. It was on the mainland," her dad corrected. "The one the Enquirer wrote all that UFO nonsense about."

"That's right." Her mother reached across her to pat her dad's hand. "You're right, dear."

Dad's right, Claudia agreed silently. We met on the mainland. And the tabloids got it right for once, there was a UFO involved. Or maybe it was an identified flying object. And what would the tabloids make of our kissing in the kitchen? she wondered. Would the headlines read Alien Follows Lover to Iowa?

She glanced at the cloud-dotted blue sky overhead, then to the pond where a group of shrilly-shouting kids were splashing. She looked at the laden picnic tables under the trees, the barbecue grills set up downwind of the tables, the edges of the field where most of the community was gathered, and finally back at the center of the baseball field. Denys stood there, in the center of it all, poised and slender and incredibly handsome, the intense concentration of his expression emphasizing the severe attractiveness of his features.

What's he doing out there? she wondered. How did he get to be in the center of it all? Of my town? My life? And why does he look like he belongs there? She sighed heartily, exasperated, though her toes were curling with longing at the sight of him and there was a fluttering around her heart she thought was pride and she also had a feeling there was a certain smug possessiveness about the way her lips couldn't help but curl into a smile at him every now and then.

It didn't make much sense. She'd forced him to come to a crowded picnic to escape being kidnapped by him, and here she was, feeling like she was showing him off to all her relatives and the populace in general. And he was acting like he was having the time of his life. Shouldn't he be trying to hustle her off to the HATTON?

"He's got such a lovely accent," her mother went on. "Doesn't sound at all like I expected an Australian to sound."

"Australian?" her father questioned. "He from Australia?"

"He told me he's from somewhere around Sydney. That's the place with the opera house, dear."

"I know that."

"He must have gone to college. I mean, most Australians talk like Crocodile Dundee, don't they?"

"Mother!"

"Says he's an engineer," Dad went on over Claudia's exclamation. "It's about time Claudia brought home somebody with a decent job. Knew she'd get sick of those artsy fartsy types eventually."

"Dad!"

"Not that Claudia isn't doing very well supporting herself," her mother went on. "But she's thirty four and the only one of the children who isn't settled down yet."

"I have mortgage payments. People with mortgage payments are settled down!"

"You just want more grandchildren, woman," her father teased her mother.

"Nothing wrong with that. Denys is gorgeous. Just think what handsome grandsons he and Claudia will give you." Dad chortled.

Claudia decided she couldn't take any more of this. She got up and strode purposefully away. Denys had just struck out Uncle Tony and the teams were switching on the field for the eight inning.

Denys was standing by the bench gulping Gatorade from the bottle when she came up to him. One of the Tysan twins, Brittany, she thought, was standing next to him, watching him with adoration. She gave the girl a stern warning look, which the teenager promptly ignored. Brittany remained close by even after Denys finished drinking and handed the bottle back to her.

Claudia knew she should be glad there was no privacy to be had in the vicinity. She had, after all, arranged for them to be spending the day in the most public place possible. She knew she should be delighted she was here among her friends and family, foiling Denys from dragging her off. She was having a good time. It was just galling her that he was too.

"Why aren't you gnashing your teeth in frustration?" she demanded, ignoring Brittany since she couldn't get rid of her. The Tysan twins were known for sneaking off to rock concerts in Chicago and were widely supposed to be deaf as posts anyway.

"Why? We're winning the game," he answered. He looked slyly amused, with just a hint of triumphant glee in the curl of his lips.

"And where did you learn to play baseball?"

"I've played baseball all my life. It's New Sydney's national sport. Well, surfing is, actually, but baseball's very popular."

"My parents like you."

"I like them too." To demonstrate this, he leaned around her and waved in the direction of her family's picnic table. "Nice people. Lovely town. I like big families. Come from a big family myself. I like small towns, though towns on New Sidney don't exactly look like this. Geography and architecture's different but -- "

He rambled on. She tried not to be effected by the wistful pleasure he was taking in the day. She tried to stay angry at him, instead. He obviously didn't understand that she was trying to warn him.

"You better get out of here," she said.

"Not without you, love."

"I'm not going anywhere."

"Then neither am I. Besides, I'm hungry and I'm looking forward to sampling the potato sala-- "

"Fine. I hope you won't mind large weddings."

"Large weddings are lovely."

He was grinning at her, totally oblivious to the danger he was in.

"You had better get on your ship and never see me again."

"Can't do it. You're coming with me."

"No, I'm not."

"Then I'm staying here until you change your mind."

Claudia crossed her arms and gave an emphatic nod. "I see. Would you prefer a short or a long engagement?"

"A short or long what?"

"I don't know about where you come from, but around here an engagement is a period of time between the proposal and the wedding."

He rubbed his jaw thoughtfully. "I see. What's that got to do with us?"

It was her turn to give him a triumphant smile. "My family has decided we're engaged," she informed him. "You better get in your shuttle and get out of here before they drag us off to the altar."

He rubbed his jaw again. He didn't seem the least bit terrified of the scenario she'd just presented. "Your father did mention something about your starting to get a little long in the tooth, and that it might be wise if we hurried along the courtship so we could start having babies before it was too late," he answered. "So I suppose a short engagement's what he was getting at whe-- "

"My father said what?" Claudia exploded.

"Shhh," Denys advised. He looked around.

She followed his glance. Brittany had become just one member of the crowd gathered around them. A crowd of friends and relatives who were all watching and listening avidly and had probably heard most of the conversation. Most of them were grinning like idiots.

She'd completely forgotten they weren't alone. She'd arranged for them not to be alone. This public scene was all her doing. It was Denys's fault, but it was her doing. Denys who she wanted to strangle and kiss at the same time. Her mother had once told her that she frequently felt the same way about her father.

She decided to ignore the crowd.

"My father said what?" she repeated.

Denys gave a quick glance at the listeners, and then concentrated his attention on Claudia. She was looking both furious and lovely. He liked the combination. Her combativeness didn't bother him, and he found her flustered confusion adorable. He liked her stubbornness, her resourcefulness -- He knew he liked her long legs and her really great behind and the way the vee neck of the red blouse she was wearing dipped

down to show the cleft between her firm -- Which had nothing to do with this conversation. But was distracting nonetheless.

He wanted to put his hands around her slim waist and pull her close. He didn't care if they were in the middle of an amused and gawking crowd, her mouth looked luscious and he was going to do it.

But just as he started to reach for her, his name was called.

It was his turn at bat.

"Where are you going?" Claudia demanded as he started to turn away.

"I'll be right back," he promised, and trotted off, determined to promptly strike out.

He hadn't been paying attention, it turned out to be the third strike out and he was back on the mound to pitch the bottom of the inning before he could get back to Claudia. By the time he got a chance to look over at the crowd, she wasn't there. He swore, but the catcher called for his attention and he decided the best way to get back to Claudia was to get the game over as quickly as possible.

"Why'd I ever get involved in this stupid sport anyway?" he asked himself as he wound up for the pitch.

Claudia, he answered himself. Obviously. Claudia had been skittish and suspicious and altogether too brightly cheerful when they arrived at the picnic. She had made effusive introductions, and made sure he was surrounded constantly by her kith and kin. He'd known what she was doing, known she was just trying to put as many people and as much time between his getting her alone again as possible.

He'd known it, and he'd still gotten caught up in the spirit of the day. He liked her family, he liked the community atmosphere, he found himself having a wonderful time. It was a beautiful day, the picnic was set in a park with rolling hills, a nice-sized pond with woods behind it. There was a playground and the baseball diamond; everything was green and blue and earthy. It was different than home, but it still felt like home, and he was a very homesick man. So he got caught up in the spirit of the day.

And he was enjoying impressing Claudia's family and friends. Somehow, for some insane reason, it was important for him to impress the people she loved. Maybe it was the way she kept looking at him. First with annoyance which relaxed grudgingly throughout the day to the pleased and affectionate and occasionally jealous glances he'd been catching when she didn't think he was looking at her looking at him.

And he enjoyed looking at her whether she was looking at him or not. She was in her element here, even more than in a kitchen or in her lovely house. Here in Bradden Falls, surrounded by her family, was obviously where Claudia Cameron really belonged.

It really was too bad they couldn't stay. Too bad she couldn't stay, rather. Of course he couldn't stay. While he was having the time of his life, he had to get back to his men and his ship and his mission.

And Claudia was coming with him.

He was just glad she would have this perfect day with her family

to remember once she was living in the future. He just had to get her back to the future and it was taking more time and energy than he'd been prepared for. God knew what was going on in Athens and on board the HATTON while he was pitching a friendly game of baseball in an Iowa community.

"What am I going to tell Captain Andrews?" he muttered. He made it a quick three up and three down inning then told the coach he was out of the game.

The coach was Claudia's sister, Julie. She favored him with a pleased smile. "I heard the news. Congratulations. Make it a short engagement. And don't let Claudia do the catering for her own reception. She'll have enough to do just being the bride." She patted him on the rear as he turned away. "You go find her and we'll finish pitching the game."

Her family likes me, he thought. The knowledge was warmly pleasing. He headed toward the picnic tables, but a half dozen people pointed toward the path leading into the woods. Several called out, "She went that way."

He headed into the woods to the sound of applause and cheering. He savored the moment, but was also aware that, if he and Claudia didn't emerge from the woods with a formal engagement announcement, things could get ugly. He found himself wondering if lynchings were as much a form of entertainment as baseball in rustic backwaters like Bradden Falls. Probably not, but he had run across the term 'shotgun wedding' in his exhaustive research for his liaison duties between the HATTON and twentieth century Earth. He hoped he wasn't about to find out exactly what the term meant.

"Not that I mind marrying you," he said as he turned a corner, pushed aside a low hanging tree branch, and caught sight of Claudia perched glumly on a boulder beside the path.

She jumped to her feet. "What do you mean you don't 'mind'?"

"I mean I don't mind." He stepped up to her. "Your family thinks I'm going to marry you and I don't mind them thinking it."

"Of course you don't mind," she countered. "You won't be here much longer. You can make them believe whatever you like and then just go back to the future and leave me with all the explaining to do."

"You won't have anything to explain. You're coming with me."

"Am not."

"Are too."

Denys realized that while the intelligence level of this conversation wasn't high, there really wasn't any other way of stating their positions. She was determined to stay. He was determined she return. There was no room for compromise on either side.

He could hear the gurgling of a stream not far away. The air smelled of moss and wildflowers. The droning of insects, the occasional call of birds, and the shouts and laughter from the picnic area filled

the background. It was all very soothing. He didn't want to fight.

Denys held out his hand. "Come with me," he suggested.

Claudia bristled. "Back to the HATTON?"

"Not right now. Come on," he coaxed. "Show me the stream. Please."

She couldn't resist the look in his eyes. The way he said 'please' melted her inside. He managed to combine the tone of a helpless little boy with the sultry suggestiveness of a lover with just one word and the way he ducked his head and looked at her from under half->lowered eyelids. If he ever said please about returning to the ship, she supposed she would be lost. She had it bad. Very bad. If it wasn't for the little matter of his wanting to take her away from her home without her permission, everything about Denys Duchamp would be perfect.

She stood and took his hand. It was very warm and strong and masculine. "This way," she said, and guided him down the narrow path down to the stream bank. He didn't follow her, but put his arm around her waist, fitting his body close to hers so they could walk side by side. She could feel every slender muscle on his wiry frame as they moved along. She was very tempted to stop and explore every muscle in loving detail.

When they reached the stream bank Denys gave a contented sigh. "Water," he said. The stream was narrow and quick running here, the banks covered in velvety moss and deep orange wood lilies. He knelt on a flat boulder and dipped his palm in the cool water. He turned a bright smile on Claudia. "I like it here," he told her.

"It's pretty," she agreed. "I remember swimming here when I was a kid."

He bounced to his feet. "Can we go for a swim?"

Claudia looked around the small clearing. She was delighted with the suggestion, but -- "Aren't you supposed to be kidnapping me?"

"Later." He gave her his coaxing look again. "I'm sweaty and sticky and hot and I love water. This is a hundred times better than a sonic shower."

That was certainly the truth. "Okay," she agreed. "We can go for a swim."

She gave him a wicked smile, put her hand flat on his chest, and shoved. He landed with a whoop and a mighty splash. Claudia cackled, kicked off her sandals and jumped in after him. She bobbed to her feet in chin high water. He surfaced beside her and grabbed her around the waist, his laughter filling the air, his presence filling her senses.

She thought she might be in for a dunking, until their hips touched and his hand came sliding up, pushing aside the clinging material of her blouse. His hands covered her breasts, her nipples growing hard against the pressure of his touch. The combination of cold water and the heated texture of his palms sent a shiver of desire shooting through her.

"Denys," she said, and covered his mouth with hers before he could answer.

Claudia's tongue slid smoothly against his, teasing and erotically demanding at once. His hands moved from her breasts to cup her buttocks and pull her closer. Her bare breasts pressed against his chest, the peaks pebble hard against his sensitized skin.

He groaned, and pulled his lips reluctantly from hers. "If we keep this up," he warned, "we'll drown."

She wrapped her thighs around his, letting the water and his hands support her. "Good," she murmured, then began kissing his throat.

His wet, clinging jeans were growing very uncomfortable as his body responded to her every seductive movement.

"Claudia."

Her mouth moved up to nibble on his earlobe. "Hmm?"

He didn't want to think. He didn't want to talk. He wanted to drag her out of the water and make love to her for hours and hours. But he couldn't, because love, not just sex, was the issue here.

It took all his willpower, but Denys firmly pushed her away. He kept his hands around her waist, lifted her and settled her on a flat boulder which thrust out into the stream. It took him a few fumbling seconds to pull himself out of the water and join her. By the time he did she'd readjusted her clothes, and he was able to move more comfortably in the clinging denim which constricted his thighs.

Sunlight was pouring down onto the boulder. Claudia turned her face up to it. A stiff breeze combined with the heat was already starting to dry her clothing. She felt both cool and warm, and the sensations were utterly wonderful. Denys had felt utterly wonderful. She was still tingling, inside and out, from their watery embrace. She still wanted him, she didn't know why he'd stopped. She didn't know whether she was angry or glad they hadn't gone any further. She shouldn't want to make love to him. She was supposed to hate him.

She didn't hate him. She just didn't want to run off to some other time and planet with him. She wished he could stay here with her.

And why hadn't he wanted to make love to her?

She opened her eyes and gave him a baleful look. "Afraid of scaring the fish?"

He looked down at the water. "Are there fish in there?"

"Yes."

"I love to fish."

"Denys!" she hissed. "What is the matter with you?" What's the matter with me? she meant, but didn't dare ask him that.

He took her by the shoulders, turning her so they were face to face. "I love you, Claudia," he said, earnest sincerity in every line of his face. It filled his bright blue eyes.

A melting sensation spread from her brain to her toes. "You do?"

"I want to marry you," he went on, more earnest still. "To be with you forever."

"Oh." She sighed happily. She leaned forward to kiss him.

"And I want you to come back to the ship with me right now," he added before her lips could touch his.

"Damn!" She jerked back. All the sincerity had disappeared from his expression, like it had never been there at all. He'd lied. And he was letting her know he'd lied.

"How could you -- you -- " Indignation overwhelmed speech.

He was smiling a little, but his eyes were serious. "I see you take my point."

"P-p-point?!" His thumbs began stroking her collarbone slowly. It did nothing to help calm her down. But it felt nice.

"If I tell you I love you," he explained, slowly, as if speaking to a child. "If I make love to you, you're bound to think it's because I'm trying to get you back to the ship. And to be honest, it will be."

"It will?"

Not really. Not entirely. Hardly at all, actually, he thought. He didn't share his thoughts with her. He watched the hurt and anger growing in her eyes and hurried to explain. "I don't want to seduce you into returning to the HATTON with me. I don't want to do that to you. I do care for you."

More than you know, he added silently, but I won't use love to manipulate you. What chance would we have later if I told you the truth now? Even if I didn't try to use it, you'd think that that was what I was doing. That's what I'd think if you tried to use love to get me to stay here with you. Which, he had to add though he didn't like the thought, you might be trying to do. Not consciously, of course, he automatically defended her theoretical behavior. You're not like that.

"You care for me?"

He nodded. "You know I do."

"Then leave me alone!"

The words exploded out of her. She wanted to hit him, and might have if he hadn't grabbed her wrists. He was very strong. He was very masculine and very confusing and she didn't know what she was going to do about it. She wished he hadn't followed her, not to Earth, not into the woods. She wished she hadn't followed him into the water. She wished he hadn't tossed her right back out.

"Leave me alone," she repeated. "Go away."

"I can't, Claudia."

"You don't love me." She didn't know why she was harping on this. It's not as if love is the most important thing in the universe, she told herself sternly. My freedom's at stake here. That's more important. Isn't it? If he said he loved me, I might go with him.

"I didn't say I don't love you," he pointed out, voice coolly reasonable. "I just said I wasn't going to use it to manipulate you."

"You love me?"

He frowned. "I didn't say that, either." He was so frustrated he was tempted to shake her. Where was the sensible woman he remembered?

"Don't you see what I'm getting at?"

"No."

"Bloody hell! Why not?"

"Just go away, Denys."

"That's no answer."

"No, it isn't," she agreed. "I don't have an answer. All I've got is this -- longing. Which, by the way, I don't like one little bit. You're an alien lizard terrorist and I don't want to be in love with you. Go away."

She didn't want to talk about it. Fine. She didn't want to be in love with him. Well, that was fine, too. It wasn't, of course, but he'd deal with the pain of it later. Right now, he had to remember the Mission. He had to get her out of here.

"I should never have come to this picnic. I thought it would help to let you say good-bye to your family. It was a stupid, bloody, sentimental mistake."

"I'm not saying good-bye to my family. You shouldn't have followed me."

"I didn't have any choice."

"I'm not going back," she told him firmly. "I'm just going to run away again. Run so far and hide so well, you won't be able to find me. You'll have to go back to the HATTON eventually." She gave an emphatic nod. "Then the captain will kill you for taking so long with the supplies. And I'll get on with my life."

"The captain will probably kill me," he agreed. "But I'm not going back without you." He ran his fingertips up her cheeks and through her damp hair. He couldn't help the gesture, and she didn't try to pull away. "I'll follow you wherever you go, love."

She wished his words were a declaration of undying devotion instead of a declaration of his nuisance value. "Oh, yeah?" she challenged. "How you gonna find me?"

"The tracer implant I -- " Denys bit down hard on any further explanation.

Claudia grasped on to what he'd just said. "Tracer? Implant? You've got some alien whatchmathingy inside me?"

He nodded, bleakly.

She thought she'd been angry with him before, but this new revelation of his duplicity, of his need to control her life, was more than she could take. Her skin was suddenly itching all over.

"Take it out," she demanded, voice cold and hard. "Right now."

"I can't. And I wouldn't if I could," he added. "I don't know how you managed to block the transmission yesterday. You had to come into contact with silversilk somehow, that stuff's the only substance that'll block it. But there's no silversilk on Earth and you're not getting away from me again."

Silversilk? Charlie's scarf was silver. Was it made of this

silversilk stuff? Could Charlie's scarf block the signal from whatever Denys had put in her? How'd he done it? Where'd he put it? And why'd she forget and leave the scarf in an Athens bathroom?

"Go away," she told him.

"Come with me."

"No."

"Yes."

They glared at each other, both equally still, both equally determined, equally silent while the sun beat down, the stream gurgled, and brown and black butterflies flitted between the wood lilies. They might have gone on like this for hours if a hesitant voice hadn't eventually intruded upon their wordless argument.

"Ahem. Excuse me. Dear. CLAUDIA LIVINIA CAMERON!"

Claudia winced and turned her head. "Yes, mother?"

"Livinia?"

She shot a scathing look over her shoulder at Denys. "My grandfather Tiberius was into Roman history, all right?"

"Sure." He snickered. "Fine. Claudia Livinia."

She ignored him and said sweetly to her mother, "Yes?" She got to her feet. "Want me to come help with the food?"

Her mother stepped off the path and up to them. "Not exactly."

Denys got up and took Claudia's hand, tightly. "What can we do for you, Mrs. Cameron?"

She beamed at Denys. "Don't be so formal, dear. I think Mom's appropriate, don't you?"

"No," Claudia said.

"Mom it is, then," Denys said over her objection.

She snarled at him. Her mother ignored her. She was smiling benignly at Denys. Claudia wanted to object to her mother's obvious affection for Denys, but how could she tell her the truth without sounding like she ought to be locked in a padded room?

"What do you want, Mom?" she questioned sharply instead.

"She gets jet lag," her mother said, explaining Claudia's tone to Denys. "Makes her grumpy."

"I've noticed," he answered agreeably, as though it was a secret they'd agreed to share.

"What do you want, Mother?" she tried again.

"I was hoping I could get the two of you to run to the grocery store. The Mactaggert clan just showed up and they totally forgot to bring food."

"What do you mean, 'forgot'?" Claudia questioned irritably. "All fifteen of them?"

"They're a forgetful family," her mother apologized. To Denys. "So we thought we'd send to the store for some more hamburgers and buns and,

well, you know, everything. And since you brought your truck, dear, and Claudia's such a wonderful shopper -- did you know she's the thriftiest shopper you'll ever want to meet -- and you'd probably like to see more of Bradden Falls and be alone together -- "

"We'd love to run your errands, Mom," Denys interrupted this flow of words. He squeezed Claudia's hand. "Wouldn't we, love?"

"No, we wouldn't." No way was she letting him get her alone in the shuttle.

"No even for your mother's sake?"

The question was put gently, he was looking at her with open warmth and affection. And she got the distinct impression he was threatening her mother. He was a desperate man. She knew he had a temper.

Was it possible? Was Denys -- ? Could Denys -- ?

"Nooo..." She said the word on a long, drawn out breath.

He nodded slowly. The glint in his eyes was icy, despite the sweet tone of his next words. "You know I'll do whatever's necessary, Claudia."

It was a bluff. Had to be. But she didn't dare call it, did she? This was her mother -- who was smiling at him like he was her long lost darling and had no idea what a vicious rat she was dealing with. She had to protect her mother.

"You lizard," she said softly.

He tugged her forward along the path. "Come along, love. We better hurry. Wouldn't want the Mactaggart clan to starve," he added to her mother. "Back shortly."

"I should have threatened bodily harm sooner," he whispered in her ear as he hustled her toward the roadside where the shuttle was parked. "I'm sorry," he added. "But this is really for the best."

"I hate you."

"I know. You should." When they reached the shuttle, he added, "Let's go."

Chapter Twelve

Denys supposed he should be elated to finally have Claudia's cooperation, but all he felt was a nasty sense of guilt. He didn't know what he would have done if she'd called his bluff. He supposed it didn't matter now, since Claudia was seated beside him in the cockpit of the shuttle.

She glared at him and said, "Lizard."

He flinched and started the engine. The engine itself was silent,

but the simulated rumbling of a mighty diesel engine could be heard by the picnickers as he drove slowly away.

"First to Athens," he said, trying to sound cheerful about the prospect of the journey.

"Nope."

"Claudia," he snarled in exasperation. "This is not the time to start fighting about it again."

"I'm not fighting with you," she answered coldly. "I'm going back to the HATTON, and I hope you're happy."

"Not really," he admitted. "About your -- "

"We're going to a grocery store," she cut him off. "Just a quick stop for some fresh vegetables, then we can be on our way." She crossed her arms, set her jaw, and looked stubbornly out the window instead of at him.

"Vegetables? What do you want vegetables for?" You're just trying to make my life miserable and complicated, he added to himself. And he didn't blame her a bit.

"Smid asked me to pick up some carrots," she explained.

"Carrots. I see."

"And I might as well pick up a few other things while we're there," she added. "If I'm going back to work as the ship's cook, I want to use ingredients I know for awhile."

Denys considered while he carefully drove the shuttle down the empty country road from the park toward Bradden Falls. He could just take off, there was nothing but cornfields out here, no traffic. No one to see the shuttle disappear from regular to Stealth mode. But he had Claudia's psychological well-being to consider. And the crew's. And his own. Especially his own, as rooming with Claudia was going to be really miserable for awhile anyway. The less upset she was, the easier it was going to be on both of them. Might as well make a friendly gesture, let her have her vegetables.

It'll help her adjust to the inevitable, he told himself. And it won't take all that long.

"All right," he agreed. "We'll stop at the store before we leave."

"Fine."

"Then you can call your folks from Athens."

She finally looked at him. "What?"

"To explain our disappearance," he said as the shuttle reached the outskirts of the small town. He spotted a large building with a Super Foods sign on top and a large parking lot. He turned in to the lot as he continued. "You can tell them we decided to elope and are heading for Australia."

"Australia." She sighed, and went on listlessly. "Yes, of course. Australia." She sighed again. "Let's just get the carrots and get out of here." Before I start crying, she added to herself. Not that he'd understand.

##

There was a lot of crowd noise in the background, music and laughter and the occasional dismayed shout. Claudia tried to ignore it all. Sakretis was standing next to her in the alcove near the doorway, doing guard duty while Denys rounded up the rest of the crew. She didn't know how he'd tracked them to this small taverna in one of the less savory neighborhoods of Athens, and she didn't particularly care. She was tired and suffering from jet lag, though the trip from the grocery parking lot to Greece had only taken two hours. They'd still crossed several time zones and she was feeling the effects.

The alcove had a pay phone. She was trying to make an overseas call.

"Retsina?" she heard Denys's voice clearly cutting through every other noise, including the echoing ring of the phone she held to her ear. "Didn't I tell you to stay away from -- "

"Ouzo," Cleary finished for him. "We did. This is different. It's wine."

"Sneaks up on you," Fox added. "But we were ready for it. We're sober."

"Almost," Harcourt added.

"Hello?" her mother's voice finally answered.

Claudia gave Sakretis a quick look. He was alert and sober and knew what she was supposed to say. "Mom," she said cheerfully.

"Where have you been? The Mactaggert's -- "

"Sorry. We forgot about the groceries."

"You forgot?"

"And those ladies," Morrison's voice came from the bar. "Why do they keep taking off their clothes?"

It's a strip joint, she thought. I'm not sure those guys are really sailors. She made herself stop thinking about the crew to concentrate on talking to her mother.

"Denys and I -- "

"Where are Denys and you?"

"We tried paying them to put their clothes back on," Toffler said.

"It was embarrassing. We didn't want any trouble. Cleary said he liked it."

"Uh. At O'Hare," Claudia improvised. "Waiting for a flight to Australia. We talked it over and decided to elope."

"Elope!"

"Sorry. We -- we decided -- Mom." She couldn't go through with this. "I love you, Mom. I -- "

"When will you be coming home?"

Sakretis must have heard the question, because he shook his head. Denys herded the others through a bead-curtained doorway and she was suddenly surrounded by the crew. Denys's hand came around her wrist.

"Claudia?" her mother's faraway voice questioned.

"I don't know," she answered. She met Denys's eyes. The look of sympathy in them almost overwhelmed her hatred of him. Why did his touch feel so reassuring? Why was his presence beside her almost welcome? He was dragging her off to an unknown fate in the far future. She should be yelling into the phone for help. Instead, she had the distinct feeling she wouldn't be minding this at all if he had seduced her into it.

Did she love him enough to abandon her home and family for him? The disturbing answer was, yes, maybe she did.

Not that she was going to let him know it. What he was doing was wrong, it was foolish, it was completely unnecessary. He was just being paranoid about his damn fool Mission.

"I love you, Mom. Tell Dad I love him, too. I'll miss you. Have to go. Bye." She hung up the phone and glared at Denys. "There. Happy?"

"Lovely. All right," he addressed the crew. "Let's get back to the airport and finish loading the supplies."

They all looked at him as if he were crazy. Which, Claudia agreed, he was.

"We were finished loading," Cleary said.

"That's why we thought it was kind of crazy when you took off without us," Sakretis explained.

Denys's fair skin colored as his lips thinned to a narrow line.

"Right. I forgot."

"You were acting pretty crazy," Fox commiserated.

"We could have helped you look for Dr. Cameron," Harcourt said.

"But you -- "

"Let's just get in the shuttle and go," Denys announced loudly.

"Right now."

"Calm down, Duchamp," Cleary advised. "We're going."

"I get the copilot's seat," Claudia chimed in as Denys tugged her out the door with the others. Denys didn't argue, but she defended her choice of seat anyway. "If I have to abandon my homeworld, I want a good last view of it."

He groaned as they took their seats. "Go ahead. Make me feel more guilty than I already do."

She settled in the chair beside him. The crew stumbled with half-drunken gracelessness into the other seats.

"Am I making you feel guilty?" she asked with acid sweetness.

"You know you are."

She sighed again, this time with a certain amount of feigned contentment. "Good."

##

Three days after leaving Earth to return to Phobos, Denys was still suffering the affects of the tongue lashing Captain Andrews had

given him. He'd told the captain they'd had to wait for the supplies to arrive at the Athens warehouse. The Shift crew had backed his story. They'd been dismissed. Captain Andrews's reprimand had been for him alone. He'd been accused of goldbricking, dereliction of duty, misconduct, incompetence, lying, sightseeing and fraternizing intimately with the female natives in the captain's cold, precise tones. He'd gotten off with a dire warning and threats about black marks on his permanent record.

"But only because you're the only mining, electrical, laser, and mechanical engineer I've got. Now get out of my sight, rebuild your bloody laser cannon and make sure it works ten times better than the last one. We're just going to have to backtrack those days through the time spiral to get back on schedule -- and you know how expensive that is."

Denys had hurried off the bridge, and stayed in the design shop most of the flight to Phobos, doing exactly what the captain ordered. It was done, and it was going to be the best, most efficient laser cannon built out of antiquated parts anybody had ever seen. Building it had been the perfect excuse to stay out of his quarters and away from Claudia.

He couldn't stop thinking about what the captain had said, though. The worst part was that Andrews was correct on all counts. Denys had almost been tempted to tell him what was really going on, to ask for his advice and help, to turn Claudia and the situation over to the captain's competent hands. It was only the fear of certain death for all concerned that kept him from spilling his guts to the fierce, high-handed, older man.

Of course, he realized as he sat alone with the newly complete laser cannon, competent as the captain was, he couldn't solve Denys's problem with Claudia.

Denys ran his hands through his hair and said, "Claudia."

Her name echoed through the open, empty space of the big room. He'd been doing nothing but think about Claudia while he worked the days away. The work had been a good excuse to stay out of her presence. Not that she was in the cabin the few times he'd come in to shower or change or sleep. The ship was very nearly at Phobos, and they hadn't spoken at all during the journey. She'd kept to the kitchen, he supposed. He knew the men were well-fed and content. He was anything but content. He was lonely and miserable and confused.

"And it's got to stop," he said, coming to the decision he'd been working toward all through this lonely period. He stood and dusted imaginary grime off his long-fingered hands. "And it has to stop right now."

He took a deep breath, squared his shoulders and walked with determined strides to the kitchen.

She was sitting in front of the cooking computer when the door

opened, chin resting on her raised fist, staring glumly at the screen.

"Claudia," he announced, stepping up to her. "I love you."

Perhaps he should have started with more explanation, but he somehow didn't feel as if he had much time.

She jumped to her feet, and turned to face him. "Pardon me?"

"I love you," he repeated. He crossed his arms over his chest and went on determinedly. "I may have been wrong -- not letting you stay on Earth, I mean. The more I think about it, the more irrational my behavior seems. Maybe you were right. Maybe you couldn't affect history. I don't know. Maybe I just couldn't let you go."

She was staring, blue eyes getting wider and wider. "Excuse me?" she questioned. "Did you say -- "

"I'm sorry I took you from a place and people you love," he went on earnestly. "You have every right to hate me for what I did. But I don't want you to hate me. I -- " He gulped. "I love you," he repeated. He was vulnerable and afraid of rejection, but he forced himself to speak his mind and his heart. "I want us to spend the rest of our lives together. I know we're from different times and worlds and you feel like I betrayed you and perhaps I did. But I've loved you since the moment I saw you and I think we belong together. I'd like to try to make you happy if you'll have me."

Then, courage spent, he turned and walked from the kitchen before the stunned woman could say a word, either of rejection or acceptance.

Claudia sat down again, mostly because she was shaking too hard to stand. It was a struggle to even try to speak and by the time her tongue was able to form words he was long gone.

"Denys?" she said. "Oh, my."

She sighed, folded her hands in her lap and stopped thinking. She'd been thinking for days while, all the time, her emotions had been struggling to come to grips with just how she really felt about Denys Duchamp. She'd tried to ignore her emotions. Tried to make the fiery love she felt for him turn into cold ash. It would seem the ashes had no intention of burning out. All the man had to do was say 'I love you' and all the heat and intensity sprang instantly back to life.

"But -- He -- I -- "

She banged a fist in frustration on the cool, white counter. Her fingers brushed across the keyboard and the computer beeped reprovingly at her. She stuck her tongue out at the screen.

"Denys."

She just said the name, and feelings and repressed memories of the man came tumbling to fill her mind.

Denys trying to calm a terrified stranger he'd just pulled out of a storage chest. Denys teasingly whipping off a towel to shamelessly display his gorgeous body. Denys saving her life and dragging her off in monumental, righteous fury. Denys making love to her. She remembered his touch and taste, smooth skin and hard muscles, the sculpted tension of

his face transformed by passion.

Denys -- manipulating and high-handed and self-righteous and obsessed with duty and responsibility.

Denys -- who made the best of a crazy situation. Who did what he thought was right. Did the best he could.

At what cost to him? she wondered, at last.

He says he loves me. Do I love him? Is love enough? You're thinking too hard, her emotions accused. Will you just go with your gut reaction for once, Claudia Cameron, and get on with your life?

You're stuck in Denys's time. Could you ask for more than to be stuck with him?

She didn't know. She did know she had to see him.

She found him in a room that reminded her of a high school shop class, only more high tech. He was sitting next to a complex, dangerous-looking device. He was gazing into a heads-up display on the device's control panel. He didn't look up as she approached.

"I know a weapon when I see one," she said. Though that wasn't what she'd intended to say.

"Of course you do," he answered. "You're a girl. Besides, it's not meant to be used as a weapon. It's for mining."

"Oh."

"Our laser cannon was hit by an asteroid."

"Cleary told me."

"Oh."

"He told me I'd find you here, too."

Denys finally raised his head to look at her. "Oh."

The unhappiness in his expression, the bleak chill in his pale blue eyes hurt her. She instinctively rushed forward, taking his hands comfortingly in hers.

"You said you love me," she told him.

"I do."

"I love you, too," she admitted. The words came easily. She smiled, as much in surprise as in joy.

Some of the pain left his eyes. "You do?"

She nodded. "I wish we'd met differently. No, I don't," she added, the sudden recollection striking her sense of humor. She chuckled. "No. It was perfect." He was looking at her curiously, so she explained, "I just remembered that I went to Greece to find the man of my dreams."

He tilted his head to one side, causing blond bangs to fall across his forehead. A teasing tilt captured his lips. "I'm the man of your dreams?"

"I think, maybe -- "

"Mr. Duchamp," a cool, familiar voice announced over the ship's intercom, "I will be wanting you on the bridge immediately."

Denys pulled his hands from hers. "The captain!"

"Captain?" Claudia felt as if she should quickly find a place to hide. "What does he want?"

He gave her a reassuring smile and pat on the shoulder. "Nothing important. Probably just wants to discuss setting up the new laser cannon at the Stickney mine. He always sounds like it's the end of the world." Denys started toward the door. He threw her a look over his shoulder. "When I get back, we'll -- "

"And do bring Dr. Cameron with you, Duchamp," Captain Andrews added, his cool, precise drawl filling the room.

And chilling both their bones.

##

"I'm not going in there," Claudia said as the elevator reached the bridge. She pressed the hold button and looked around desperately. She suspected she was as pale as Denys, but not as resigned to meet her fate. Or the captain. She'd heard too much about Captain Andrews to want to meet him. All right, once she'd demanded to meet him, but she'd been hysterical at the time. Upon hearing her name spoken by the dreaded Captain Andrews, all she had wanted to do was hide.

Denys had squared his shoulders and insisted they face the consequences manfully. She'd pointed out she wasn't a man. He'd dragged her to the elevator anyway. She'd sworn at him a lot.

He gave her an exasperated look. "Let's just get it over with," he insisted. "What's the worst he can do?"

"I don't know. You tell me."

He shrugged. "Maybe he'll send you home. And he can't kill me until after the mission's over. He needs me."

"But Denys I don't want to go -- "

"Will you two stop bickering and get in here?" the caustic voice of the captain came through the elevator's communications speaker. The door slid open despite her finger pressing firmly against the hold button.

Denys took her hand, gave her a reassuring smile and stepped bravely forward. She sighed, and followed after.

The room was dominated by a giant viewscreen showing Mars, its moons, and a small streak of silver light. Claudia gave the impressive view a cursory glance, then took in the rest of the place. The room was cool, and chillingly silent, even though there were people at the rows of workstations that curved around the bridge. The people came in two categories, she noted, those staring at her openly, and those concentrating determinedly at their consoles. The ones staring wore mingled expressions of shock, horror and hope.

She didn't get it.

She didn't have time to stop and ask anyone as Denys led her swiftly to the man standing by a chair in the exact center of the room.

The man was tall, big-boned but slender, silver-haired and hawked-nosed, his expression stern and commanding. He exuded fierce energy and

intelligence, and a definite impatience with lesser beings.

He held out his hands and smiled as she approached. "Claudia, my dear. So good to see you."

Claudia stopped before him. "Charlie," she demanded. "What are you doing here?"

"Got drafted," her tea-drinking friend answered affably. He rubbed his forefinger along the length of his nose, and winked. "Then an admiral handed me the bloody Book and told me it was my destiny to save the Federated Community of Worlds. I've been a bit difficult to live with ever since."

"Difficult! That's putting it mildly," Denys muttered under his breath. "Wait a moment," he went on, addressing the captain. "You're Claudia's Charlie?" For some reason his fear of Captain Charles Andrews had disappeared. For some reason Claudia's being involved with the captain made perfect sense. It was as if there was some reason for it. The light was dawning on him. "You knew she was going to be brought on board," he accused Captain Andrews. "It's in the Book, isn't it?"

"Precisely, my boy," Andrews answered with an encouraging nod.

Claudia wasn't sure what to make of any of this. She wasn't sure if she was outraged or amused. She was certainly confused. "You're the captain? But you helped me escape!"

"He did?"

"We'll discuss all that later," Charlie said, brushing both her and Denys's comments aside. "If there is a later," he added.

The serious tone of his last words sent a chill up Claudia's spine. "What do you mean, if?"

Charlie faced the screen. "Look at this. Magnify."

There was an audible gulp from one of the men at the control consoles. Charlie sent the man a vehement look which galvanized him enough to get his fingers moving over his keypad.

"Can't get decent help," Charlie grumbled as the image on the screen altered, concentrating and magnifying the silver streak, showing it to be a sleek-hulled starship.

Fear nearly overwhelmed Denys. He did not scream. He wanted to. He grabbed Claudia instead, and held her close. "Sirens! Don't look!"

Claudia pushed away from Denys's chest. She saw the terror in his eyes, and the struggle to remain calm. "It's all right," she soothed. She touched his cheek. "What's the problem?"

Somebody said, "I can hear them."

"Nonsense," Charlie answered the shaky voice. "That's your imagination. They aren't close enough yet."

"They followed us," Denys said. "Somehow caught on to what we're doing. Followed us through the time vortex."

"Afraid so," Charlie answered. He favored Denys with a reproving look. "Nothing in the Book about this, my boy. Any suggestions?" The question wasn't for Denys, but for Claudia.

"What's a Siren?"

Everyone gaped at her, but no one rushed to give any explanations. She knew there was a war on with the Sirens, and that the HATTON's mission was to acquire a weapon to use against them. That wasn't very much information. Claudia grimaced in exasperation back at the staring men. She looked at the screen. She had no idea how close the enemy ship was. Hopefully much further than the screen's magnification made it look like.

"Why aren't you doing something?" she demanded of Charlie.

"Calling a red alert or whatever."

"This isn't a fighting ship," Denys told her. He took her hand.

"There's nothing we can do against the Sirens. We don't have any women on board, so we're going to die. I'm sorry."

"Of course we have a woman on board," Charlie pointed out. "What I'm doing about the approaching Sirens, Dr. Cameron, is relying on you."

"What?"

"She's not a fighter," Denys told Charlie. "She's not like our women. She can't help us."

"What do you mean, I can't help?"

"I'm sorry, darling."

As she looked at Denys, she saw his eyes were full of protective tenderness and sorrow. She wanted to slug him. "What's having women on board got to do with anything?" she demanded. "Why won't anyone explain about the Sirens? Wait a minute," she remembered. "Men can't fight them, can they?"

Charlie cleared his throat. She returned her attention to the captain. He was blushing bright red from his silver hair to the collar of his blue uniform.

"It's a hormonal problem, you see. When we hear the Sirens' call we become, um, uh, how can I put this? Preoccupied."

"Preoccupied?"

She didn't get it. She looked from Charlie, to Denys, to the rest of the men on the bridge. None of them would meet her eyes. Everyone but Denys and Charlie were staring in blank terror at the approaching ship. And there was a noise. As she waited in confused silence for someone to offer her a proper explanation, she began to become aware of a faint, almost imagined, humming.

She swung to face Denys. "What's that?" she questioned.

A languid, seductive smile quirked the corners of his lips.

"Sirens," he said. He didn't seem terrified anymore. "It's the Siren Song beginning."

All she could hear was an irritating buzz which had grown just a bit louder as Denys spoke.

"Siren Song? Wait a minute." She grabbed him by the shoulders and shook him as the explanation became clear to her. "Like the Sirens in Greek mythology? The creatures who lured men to their deaths with their

singing? The ones whose song no man could resist?"

"Got it in one, love," Charlie answered. "Help us. You're the only one who can."

Help them? How could she help them? "Do they drive you mad? Or what?"

A faint sheen of sweat was forming on Denys's skin. "Mad," he agreed hoarsely. "With longing."

"For them. Only for them," someone's voice said in the background. The noise was growing. Several of the men began humming and swaying back and forth. "Beautiful. So beautiful. It's beautiful."

Claudia closed her eyes. She listened, and tried to concentrate. She supposed that all over the ship the crew was hearing beautiful, seductive music. Hearing and being paralyzed by the aching longing of the Siren Song. She didn't hear it. She heard noise all right, but it wasn't beautiful. What she heard were words. Words spoken in harsh, arrogant demand.

"This is the ship METAFORM. Alien vessel you will surrender to us and die. This is the ship METAFORM. Alien vessel you will surrender to us and die. This is the ship METAFORM. Alien vessel you will surrender to us and die. This is the ship -- "

"Metaform?" She shook Denys's shoulders again. "Did you hear that? The enemy ship's called the METAFORM."

But the metal they were mining was called metaform -- The metal Denys had told her looked like it had been poured molten into Stickney Crater. If metaform the metal was also METAFORM the ship -- An idea was beginning to occur to her.

"Denys!"

He blinked stupidly at her. "What?"

Charlie touched her shoulder. "What did you say?" She could hear the fight for control in his strained voice.

She turned her attention to Charlie. "Has any Siren ship ever been captured?"

He took several deep breaths and shook his head as if trying to clear it. "No," he said. "Never. They self-destruct before they can be captured."

"Atomize themselves," Denys added.

More of the men were humming along to the Siren call. It reminded Claudia of a bad a capella version of 'Stairway to Heaven'. She ignored the noise.

Denys licked his lips. The look in his eyes was sultry. She felt his skin growing warm with desire under the material of his uniform.

Thankfully, he managed to give her a few pertinent facts despite his condition. "We think the Siren ships are completely computerized. That the Song is a computer program. They've enslaved races with the Song, but no one's actually seen a Siren. We haven't been able to communicate with the ships. Haven't been able to shield against them. Or

bounce the Song back to them off our own shielding."

"The Book says the metaform will shield us from the Song," Charlie added.

Because it's made from the same material as a Siren ship, Claudia thought. No. "It is the Siren ship. That's the time paradox. You destroyed the METAFORM so you could mine the metaform," Claudia told them triumphantly. She pointed at the screen. "So destroy the ship, already!"

Charlie and Denys just gaped at her. The rest of the bridge crew continued humming, with eyes glazed and lascivious smiles plastered on their red faces. She began to realize that the men weren't going to be any help at all.

"This is women's work," Charlie told her.

She wanted to scream. Instead, she recalled that mission analysis -- military strategy and tactics -- used to be her job. This was woman's work -- since she was the only woman around and the men were going to be writhing on the deck in orgasmic ecstasy pretty soon. She wondered how long they had before the Sirens opened fire on the helpless mining ship.

Was there time enough to set a trap? Time? Time. Time was the answer, wasn't it? She had an idea, but she had to have help if she was going to be able to pull it off.

"Listen," she said earnestly, "you've got a hold full of metaform and a brand new laser cannon."

"Yes?" Charlie asked eagerly.

"What do you want us to do?" Denys wanted to know. "Hurry. We can't hold on much longer."

"Charlie, you said you the ship has to go backward in time before it could spring forward to the future."

"Yes."

"Can you do that now? Go back to before you arrived? Can you get the METAFORM to chase the HATTON back through time?"

Charlie nodded slowly. The effort to concentrate was evident on his strained features. "We're already on a backward spiral. I could speed it up. It would look like an evasive tactic."

"Good. Do it. First get non-essential crew into the hold with the metaform," Claudia suggested. "Denys and I will work on modifying the shuttle. We can modify the shuttle, can't we?"

"Yes," Denys said.

"Right," Charlie agreed. "We better get moving. Not much time."

He turned to the communicator and began bellowing orders. Claudia hoped fear of the Dread Captain Andrews would overcome the Siren Song long enough to get the men to the hold. She grabbed Denys's hand and pulled him toward the elevator.

"I'll fill you in on the rest of my idea on the way to the hold," she told him as they ran.

Chapter Thirteen

This will work. It did work. It has to work. The words rolled over and over in her head. She was scared, and using the words as a focus for all her nervous emotion.

"Please, God, let it work," Claudia prayed fervently as the shuttle sank into the darker-than-night shadows under the belly of the gigantic mining ship. To all intents and purposes, the HATTON was dead in space, all its systems abandoned, the men completely under control of the Siren Song after the short, futile chase. Claudia just hoped it wasn't true. The HATTON was supposed to look like it was drifting toward Phobos, about ready to crash into the wide crater at the moon's north pole.

In reality, all the men but Charlie and Cleary were in the hold with the metaform. Charlie was carefully piloting the ship with the aid of backup systems. Cleary had volunteered to help him navigate, claiming his sense of direction was better than any multibillion credit navigation system. Both men were wearing lumps of metaform, imperfectly shielding themselves from the Siren Song.

She and Denys were out here in the shuttle. With the laser cannon hastily attached to the front. It stuck out at a sharp point, reminding her of a mosquito's stinger. She just hoped it was more effective than a mosquito against the oncoming menace of the METAFORM.

"Please, God," she repeated. "Let this work."

"Amen," Denys added. He was beside her, in the pilot's seat.

She looked at him. He was sweating, his features strained, but he gave her an encouraging smile.

She smiled back. She looked at him, drinking in his form and presence, just in case they were about to die and this was the last time she ever saw him. Then, refusing to be maudlin, she looked pointedly at the conspicuous bulge near his thigh and asked, "Is that a lump of metaform in your pocket, or are you just happy to see me?"

He looked surprised for a moment, then he threw back his head and laughed. "Claudia Cameron," he declared. "I love you, but it's mostly metaform." He turned his attention back to the controls. "I have to concentrate. I can still hear them. My body's going crazy with need, but at least I can think. Can you hear them?"

"Yes." Not the Song, but the message, over and over. It made her very angry. Angry enough to almost forget being scared. Angry and possessive. How dare the Sirens do this to her man! How dare these creatures try to capture Denys with their mechanical seduction? Not only were they trying to strip away his free will, they were stealing the

sexual attraction that was rightfully hers to evoke from the man she loved. And it was a computer program doing it!

"I want to melt that ship," she said angrily.

"We will," Denys assured her. He gave her a quick, sidelong glance. "They get to you, don't they? Make you furious? Make you want to destroy them? That's how our women react."

She nodded. "Oh, yes. I've never been so angry in my life."

"Now you know how our women got to be so mean. Now you know why we men don't want to talk about it. It's humiliating to have to give in to the Siren Call. When we take the metaform back we'll finally have a chance to fight for ourselves. They're closing," he added.

The shuttle had been hiding beneath the HATTON, waiting to swing up behind the Siren ship when it came in to attack. The HATTON appearing dead in space was a diversion. The diversion appeared to be working. It was time to set the counterattack in motion.

Denys wished he could spare another quick look at Claudia as he piloted the shuttle away from the HATTON, but his hands were full, controlling the overburdened little ship. Her job was to fire the laser from a jerryrigged remote control panel. "Just point the thing and push the button," he reminded her.

"I know," was the tense reply.

"You remember which button?"

"I remember!"

"Fine. Will you marry me?"

"Yes."

"Good."

No more time for conversation. He couldn't help but smile as he maneuvered the craft carefully into position, coming up behind the enemy vessel as quickly as he could. There were lumps of metaform hastily welded to the surface of the shuttle. It was hoped they'd shield the little ship from detection.

Denys was happy to note that the METAFORM stayed intent on the much larger prey of the mining ship as they drew closer and closer to it. The HATTON tumbled a mile above Stickney Crater, the METAFORM hovered over it, like a hawk above its helpless prey. The mining ship looked like it was heading for certain doom, from the enemy's weapons, or impact with the moon.

Denys checked his instruments very carefully, then checked again, concerned that his physical condition was interfering with his judgment. He wanted to get this over with, to grab Claudia and make quick, passionate love to her. Not the Sirens, but Claudia. The enemy was responsible for the burning need that was driving him crazy, but the need wasn't focused on them. Maybe it was the metaform shielding him. Maybe it was just love. He couldn't let himself think about it. He could not let that longing get out of control.

He licked dry lips, scanned all the readings on the control panel,

then spoke one word. "Now."

The HATTON's engines roared to sudden life. The ship veered sharply away from the moon in an incredible rush of speed, leaving the METAFORM silhouetted against the dead background of the deep crater.

"Got it?" Denys asked Claudia.

"In my sights."

"Fire!"

She had aimed for what she hoped was the enemy ship's weapons array, a rounded projection on the front of the METAFORM's wedge-shaped hull. Her guess must have been correct because a bright, silent explosion destroyed the projection the instant the laser beam touched it.

"All right!" she shouted triumphantly.

"Keep firing," Denys advised.

She did, intensifying the beam, slicing it back and forth across the alien ship. The metal began to melt like butter. The ship was close enough to Phobos's slight gravity field so that the molten metal fell down into the crater instead of dispersing into space.

"It's working," Denys said. His sigh of relief sounded loudly in the shuttle cockpit.

Claudia barely heard him above her own muttered mantra of, "It has to work. It did work. It's working."

She repeated it continually until the last of the METAFORM disappeared into the crater – where, next week, it would be mined as the metaform now sitting in the HATTON's hold. Time paradox. Claudia decided she didn't want to think about it.

Instead she sat back in her chair, grinned at Denys and said, "Now I know how Luke Skywalker felt when he blew up the Deathstar."

Denys soared with the elation. "We did it!" he crowed, beaming joyfully at Claudia. "You did it!"

He set the controls to auto-pilot on a slow orbit of Phobos. Then he jumped out of his seat and pulled Claudia up out of hers. She came into his embrace and he kissed her with eager hunger.

She responded with possessive thoroughness, all her nerve endings sizzling. She held him tight, reveling in the smooth hardness of the body beneath her hands. They were alive! They were together -- and nothing and no one meant as much to her as Denys Duchamp!

"Did you mean it?" he questioned when they came up for air.

Claudia didn't understand him at first. "Mean what? Oh. Marry you?"

"Yes." He looked worried.

"Of course I meant it," she assured him.

The teasing light came back into his eyes, mingling with the heat of desire. He pulled her closer. "Good. Because this," he said, pressing his masculine hardness against her thigh, "isn't just metaform I've got in my pocket."

"You're happy to see me," she announced with sultry humor.

He ran his hands swiftly over her, heating her blood with his

touch while he expertly unfastened her blue coverall. He quickly repeated the same process with his own.

Claudia began to shake -- with laughter, with joy, with relief. She brushed her lips lightly across his and said, "You're crazy, and I love you."

"I need you," he told her.

"Won't the captain be worried if we don't get right back to the ship?"

He arched one pale eyebrow at her. "Do you care?" he intoned, in a perfect mimic of Charlie's sarcastic drawl.

"No," she admitted. "I don't care." After the fear and danger and excitement of the last hour, she needed the release as much as he did. She welcomed the physical confirmation that his desire was for her, and not caused by the Siren Song. "Charlie can wait."

He smiled knowingly, and guided her to one of the passenger seats. He adjusted it to horizontal. They lay down together, bodies joining immediately in quick, urgent arousal. He covered her and she rose to meet his swift entry. She gasped at the shock of flesh against flesh, and soared out of her self.

Desire built with hurricane swiftness, coiling into tighter and tighter spirals of raging pleasure until the tension exploded through her in a lightning flash of release.

She held Denys tightly as his passion followed hers to completion moments later.

It ebbed into a sweet, sweaty afterglow, leaving them sated, gently cuddling, exchanging slow, enervated kisses and whispered endearments.

Meanwhile, the shuttle swung in a slow orbit around Mars's little moon. And Captain Andrews voice occasionally squawked for their attention over the communicator.

##

Charlie was waiting for them in the main corridor when they stepped hand in hand through the hangar airlock. He was a big, distinguished looking man, all hawk nose and arrogant dignity. As she looked at him now, Claudia was surprised she hadn't realized sooner who her tea-drinking friend must be.

He gave them a typically scathing once over as they stopped before him. "About bloody time," he announced. "I assume you made the most of this little interval?"

Claudia blushed. Of course what they'd been doing was probably obvious, but he didn't have to be so -- She tossed her head, ignored the jibe, and said, "Hello, Charlie."

"Hello, m'dear," he answered, a familiar, paternal smile breaking over his stern features. "Nice to see you two have finally made up. I

was quite worried for a time."

Denys looked at the captain in blank confusion. "You were worried about us?"

"Most desperately concerned," Charlie told him. "Didn't want to risk changing the future."

"Huh?" Claudia asked.

"What?" Denys added.

Charlie waved them into the nearest elevator. "Let's have a spot of tea while we get on with the debriefing, shall we?"

They followed him to the kitchen in stunned silence, where a pot of tea and a plate of scones was waiting. They took seats around the central counter and Captain Charles Andrews, terror of the Space Service, ceremoniously poured the strong, hot liquid into cups for them.

"Cheers," he said, raising his own cup. "Congratulations on saving the Federated Community of Worlds."

"And our behinds," Claudia added.

"The destruction of the METAFORM was spectacular," Charlie said, looking at them with fond pride. "You did a fine job. So did Cleary and I," he pointed out. "Did you know Cleary was a navigation officer before he was busted for insubordination? I've offered to recommend him for promotion, but he says he prefers his present employment, thank you. He'd rather have cash."

Claudia giggled. "That's Cleary all right."

"I'd be happy to take a promotion," Denys offered. He gave Claudia a significant look. "I'll be needing the extra income."

Which left Claudia wondering just what she was going to do to earn her keep once she got to the future. She decided not to think about it just now, not when there was a victory celebration to get on with.

It was a subdued celebration, but she figured Charlie had arranged this little get together so she and Denys could satisfy their curiosity. Well, she had plenty of questions for now. And plenty of time to worry about the future later. Maybe if she had some of her questions answered, she wouldn't have so much worrying to do.

"What are you going to do with the new metaform?" she wondered. "I mean, you've already mined the metaform once but now it's there again. Only now it's there for the first time waiting for you to come and get it. So you could mine it again right now. Or could you?" She scratched her head. "Or...if you mine it now, would it be there when you came back to mine it the first time, which you did in the past but you haven't yet done in the future. But the future -- "

Charlie reached over to pat her hand. "There there, m'dear. It's all right. Let's not worry about it. I have every intention of leaving the remains of the Siren ship in Stickney Crater. I'm taking my load of metaform and going home. Where," he concluded, "I'm going to turn it over to the Admiralty and give up time traveling for good. I think I'll retire and go to cooking school. Always wanted to be a chef. Runs in the

family, you know."

"Does it?" Denys inquired politely.

"Oh, yes. Famous for it on me mum's side."

"Why did you help me escape?" Claudia asked, suddenly remembering their scheming, and his gift of silversilk. "If you knew you needed me to destroy the Sirens -- "

"I didn't know I needed you to destroy the Sirens," Charlie corrected her. "The attack wasn't in the Book. We're lucky you did come back. I didn't even know you would come back. Thought Duchamp might stay with you."

"Sir!" Denys exclaimed indignantly. "Why would I -- ?"

"And why did the Book mention me in the first place?" Claudia cut in over Denys's protest.

"One question at a time," Charlie chided. "If you must know about our little escape drama," he went on. "I suppose I'll have to confess that I was trying my hand at matchmaking. You were so miserable, m'dear. Crying and making a fool of yourself because you didn't think Duchamp loved you."

"You were?"

"Be quiet, Duchamp. Well, I helped you get back to Earth because I assumed Denys would go after you."

"You did?"

"Yes. I thought Claudia's home in Iowa might prove to be a neutral ground where you could work out your differences, but I didn't think Denys would then bring you back to the HATTON."

"I thought she'd change the future if she stayed on Earth."

"Hmmp. You weren't thinking with your head, either. Not that I'm complaining now, of course. If it weren't for Claudia, we wouldn't be alive. Don't blush, m'dear, it's true."

"But what do we do now?" Denys wondered.

"First off, I think you should make an honest woman of her. Especially since your most recent amorous episode in the shuttle."

Claudia giggled. She was not normally given to giggling, but she felt as giddy as a teenager. "Yes, Denys," she said. "You really must make an honest woman of me. And I'll do the same for you."

"I'm not a woman."

"An honest man, then."

"Good," Charlie said. "We'll make it official right away. Won't we, Duchamp?"

"Yes, sir," Denys acknowledged. "As soon as possible, sir."

"I shall be delighted to officiate."

Claudia and Denys exchanged a quick hug. "Wait a minute," she said, curiosity reasserting itself. "How did the Book know about me? It was all an accident. Wasn't it? The men did just get drunk and throw me into the box by mistake or because they're idiots, or...whatever."

"Fate," Denys said. "It must have been meant to be."

"What do you mean, 'meant to be'? Meant to be what?" She eyed Charlie suspiciously. "How could your Book know about me?"

He was looking at her with bland amusement. "The author of the Book knew every detail of the mission," he told her. "Every little thing." He gave a Denys a sour look. "He just left out a few pertinent details toward the end."

"You really didn't know the Sirens were going to attack?" Denys questioned. "The author probably wanted to save it as a surprise. Add a bit of dramatic tension to my otherwise calm life," Charlie said sarcastically. "The bastard."

Claudia was still very confused. "But how could the Book know everything?"

Denys gently stroked her cheek. "That's the question we've been asking for two hundred years."

"But who wrote the Book?" she wondered. "How was it transmitted to your time?"

Denys shrugged. "No one knows."

"Ahem."

They looked at Charlie.

"I know," he reminded them. "My destiny and all that."

"Well," Claudia demanded. "Who wrote it?"

The Captain of the HATTON took a sip of tea. He pushed the plate of scones toward her. She realized she was starving and bit into one of the currant-dotted buns. It tasted marvelous. The silence grew as she drank her tea and finished the scone and gazed questioningly at the Captain. Charlie gave her a teasing smile. It was familiar expression, though she was used to seeing it on Denys's face.

"I'll get to that presently," he promised.

"I'm glad this is over," Denys said. He put his arm around her shoulder. "I just want to take Claudia home to New Sydney and get on with life."

Charlie scratched his beak of a nose with a long forefinger. "Hmm."

"Hmm?" Claudia echoed suspiciously. "What do you mean, 'hmm'?"

"I mean," Charlie explained, "that you won't be going home to New Sydney with Denys. You're going back to Earth, Dr. Cameron. It's in the Book," he added, trying to cut off Denys's shocked protest.

He didn't cut it off for more than a second.

"I don't bloody care what's in the Book! Claudia's coming home with me. We're going to get married."

"Yeah!" Claudia agreed loudly. "You volunteered to perform the ceremony. Remember?"

Charlie gave a firm nod. "So I shall. It will be a lovely wedding. It will be on the Captain's Walk. A very romantic setting. Cleary will catch the bridal bouquet. We will all cry. Then we will drink toasts with the Greek wine Cleary smuggled on board. It will be a lovely party."

"Is all that in the Book?" Denys asked.

"No," Charlie replied. "I have a vivid imagination. And Dr. Cameron is still returning to Earth."

"No," Denys stated, rising to glare down at the still seated Captain Andrews. "I won't let you send her back. We belong together."

"Especially after such a nice wedding," Claudia agreed. She was beginning to be amused. She could see where this was leading.

Denys didn't know what to think. "But -- She -- I -- We belong together. Claudia Cameron, what are you smirking about?"

She covered her mouth and mumbled, "Nothing." She decided he deserved a bit of teasing, since he was so good at it himself.

Denys's arms came around her. "If you send her back, I'm going with her. The hell with the mission. I'm staying on Earth. Besides," he added, whispering in her ear. "I really like your house and family and wouldn't mind living in Bradden Falls -- or anywhere as long as you're there with me. Can we have a dog?"

She looked into Denys's eyes and said, "I feel the same way about you. Anywhere's fine as long as you're there with me. I suppose so."

"Oh, Lord, spare me," Charlie snorted in disgust. He waited until they looked back at him before adding, "Of course you're going to Earth with Dr. Cameron, Duchamp. Who do you think wrote the Book?"

"Who?" Denys asked, eyes narrowed suspiciously.

"My great great, great, grandfather, that's who," Charlie answered. He pointed at Denys. "You."

"Me?"

"You. Denys Duchamp is the author of the Book. And it's been handed down with due ceremony from generation to generation until it was dumped in my lap. We've circled through time and come back to the beginning. You have to write the Book because you've already told us in the Book that you did. Will. Whatever. It's all a load of rubbish, really."

"Make's perfect sense to me," Claudia said. She looked Charlie over suspiciously. "You're our descendant?"

"Why do you think I took the trouble to play matchmaker for the pair of you?" Charlie demanded. "Because I want to get born, that's why."

"Ah."

"Besides, you make a charming couple."

"I'm going to write the Book?" Denys was really too stunned to be paying much attention to the rest of what was going on. The Book was the most important thing in his life. He couldn't quite equate himself with authorship of such an important, world-shaping document. It didn't make any sense. He couldn't deal with it.

So he ignored this bit of information and concentrated on the most important aspect of his trip through time. He'd met the woman of his dreams. They were going to be together. Have a home. Have babies. Who cared where or when it was? It just was. It was wonderful.

"I'm going to return to Earth with Claudia?"

"Yes, you do," Charlie said, speaking slowly and gently, as though Denys were a little simple-minded. "We will leave you in Greece, where you will have a long, peaceful honeymoon. You will then return to Bradden Falls and have many children. And a dog. All the documents you need to get along on Earth are prepared. New passports, Social Security Number, academic credentials, that sort of thing. You'll end up teaching engineering at the local college. You'll have a wonderful time. Then, when you're eighty or so you'll write the Book, including the access codes I'll give you so our computers will verify the Book's authenticity to future generations. Nothing to worry about. So you can stop looking as if a large weight just dropped on your head."

Denys smiled wanly. "I'll pull myself together in a moment," he promised Claudia.

She kissed his cheek. "I'm sure this will take a while to get used to. It'll be fine. We're going home."

"Yes. Home," he agreed. "I don't care about the Book. I care about you."

"I know."

Claudia didn't care about the Book, either. She didn't care about the future. At least, not the grand scheme of things. She cared about the fact that she'd set off for Greece to find romance and adventure. She'd found more than she'd bargained for. Her heart was full and her life was full and she and Denys were going to be together forever and ever.

She sighed contentedly, and kissed him, deeply and passionately. And to think, it was all because she made a great bowl of chili.

The End.