

Summer Devon

Taken Unaware

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Dedication

For Lindsey and not just because she's patient and she answers every last email. There're other reasons too.

Chapter One

“No aliens in the headlines.” Clutching the newspaper and her coffee mug, Leah settled on the sofa next to the cat, Fluke, that ignored her.

She’d already performed her new ritual of checking reliable Internet news sites. Now she shook open the paper and began a search inside. Two weeks later, and still not a word about the rumors she’d heard at the bar. Good. Maybe the two soldiers from the base were just trying to scare her with their stories. The Dar targeting a town in Wisconsin? They’d be smarter to aim for Florida this time of year.

“How about it? You think there’s a cover up?” she asked Fluke. “Time to stock up on milk and toilet paper? Maybe hide in the basement?”

Every few years, tabloids screamed *They’re Back!* Even those covers with the blurry pictures were enough to send some people rushing for their rifles.

Leah abandoned the search for stories about space invasions and conspiracy theories and turned to the comics. Sipping her coffee, she decided not to move for at least two hours. Pure, lovely laziness in her favorite room.

As if he could read her mind, Fluke stood and shook himself. He batted at her arm with an imperious paw.

She frowned at him over the top of the paper. “Learn to use the box, dammit.”

He jumped from the couch and strolled to the kitchen, meowing the whole way. Leah put down her paper and coffee and followed him.

She opened the door and nudged his backside with her foot. “I’ve ordered a boring birthday, Fluke. I don’t need a present from you so don’t bring me any mice. The last one just about gave me a heart attack.”

He sauntered out into the bright morning air and within a minute discovered something more heart-pounding than a mouse.

One of the massive trucks rumbled up the road. *Hide.*

Halbrut dived behind the bushes next to the small yellow house.

As the roar of the truck died away, someone in the house opened a door, and almost immediately an animal came trotting over to his hiding place.

A cat.

It stopped dead when it spotted him. The creature’s back humped up and it inched sideways, muttering and then hissing.

Halbrut hunkered lower when he heard footsteps.

“What’ve you got? Not another skunk, Fluke, please, no.” The woman’s voice was too near.

A second later her face appeared over him. Her eyes went wide.

“Oh my Go—” the woman shrieked.

By then he was out of the bushes and on her.

“Hush, please,” Halbrut urged as he grabbed her and covered her mouth. The neighbors wouldn’t see but perhaps they’d hear her. He pinned her back against his chest.

The cat hissed again.

He paused, and with his hand clamped over her face, his other arm wrapped around her arms and slender middle, he couldn’t help remarking, “That’s a strange thing the cat’s do—Ouch.” The woman had stamped down hard on his foot. The boots he’d been issued protected him, but he was startled. Not enough to let go of her.

Any moment the big vehicle would cruise by again, looking for him and the others from his group, no doubt. He wasn't going to stick around and flag it down.

The door to the yellow house lay wide open so he dragged the struggling woman inside. "Listen," he murmured in her ear as he pulled her through the door, slamming his elbow on the doorjamb. "I'm sorry you're scared. But I can't let you scream, right? I'm, ah, waiting for friends."

The cat skittered past his legs into the house again.

The woman's mouth moved against his hand and her warm tongue thrust against the chilled skin of his palm. His body's response disgusted him. He hoped she wouldn't notice.

An enraged muffled snort emerged from her. After he slammed the door shut he removed his hand from her face—though he kept a firm grip on her arm to keep her from running off.

She didn't scream, thank goodness. For a moment she glared at him, breathing hard. Her brow furrowed. "You're full of bullshit." Her voice shook but she managed to project an air of anger rather than fear. "What do you mean you're waiting for friends? Behind my bushes?" With a twist she tried to yank her arm from his grip. Not even close to successful. He'd inherited his sire's strength.

He motioned at a chair at the small kitchen table. "If I let go of you, will you just sit down? And allow me to explain."

Still staring at him as if she wished she could kill him with her eyes, she dropped down onto the wooden chair.

He didn't want to sit. Exhaustion might claim him. So instead he loomed over her, examining her angry face, trying to think of a reasonable explanation. Nothing came to him.

"Well?" She tilted her head and the sunlight through the window caught the high cheekbones, the deep red shades in her dark hair and her green eyes that didn't contain a hint of familiar gold. Her hand scrubbed at her mouth as if trying to remove some disgusting substance he'd left there with his hand.

“Don’t look at me like that,” she said faintly.

“Like what?”

“I’m a raw piece of meat and you’re a wolf.”

He answered without thinking. “I am hungry.”

He’d suspected the phrase was a double entendre—and her shiver confirmed it. “What are you anyway? A Peeping Tom?” She sounded less belligerent now.

“A peeping what?”

She gave a noise that might have been a moan, low, deep and, to his ears, thoroughly arousing. Once again, he remembered he hadn’t had a female in a very long time.

But his simple question about the peeping something had changed her somehow. Now she meekly clasped her fingers together and rested them on the tabletop. Those fingers trembled.

“I guess you don’t have to tell me why you were hiding out front. I don’t need to know.” She spoke hesitantly as if she didn’t want to make him angry. That was probably for the best, having her fear him. That would be the right response, if she knew who he was. Or what he was.

He didn’t want her too terrified, so he sat in a chair near her. “I was actually playing a joke on my friend,” he lied.

She shook her head. And, surprisingly, she leaned close to him. Her heat warmed his chilled body and he could smell her musky, exotic human fragrance.

Just as he decided he liked the scent, she gave another of her odd growls. Her eyes opened wide. “You smell like it. Cinnamon.” Her fair skin went even paler. “God. You’re one of them. Oh. No, no,” she whispered. “But it’s true.”

She jumped up so quickly the chair fell with a thud.

She started for the door.

As she brushed him, Halbrut grabbed her again, pulling at her until she tumbled onto his lap. While he held her tight against him, his arms forming bands around her body, he made idiotic, soothing noises. “It’s fine, no, don’t struggle. It’s fine.” But she was clearly not convinced. She twisted on his lap and her feet flailed hard against his shins. Leaning

sideways, she managed to pull her arm from his grasp. With her free hand she clawed at his cheek and the arm he put up to protect his face.

Suddenly her attack stopped. She lifted her hand again only to point at his wrist. Blood oozed from a scratch she'd made. "Red... You can't be one of them."

He'd heard strange fiction that the Dar had green ichor in their veins. He examined the blood on his arm and considered lying. He'd tell her that no, he had no connection to Dar, that he was a human vagrant passing through. He could leave with a goodbye and an apology that he'd frightened and inconvenienced her.

He let go of her. But instead of getting up, she shifted sideways on his lap. He didn't object. Not at all. She hesitantly touched his dark hair and stared hard into his eyes. Her weight on his legs, their locked silent gaze, made him feel more alive than he had in a very long time.

When she breathed out, the soft warm air washed over his face. She gave a quiet whimper. "Jesus. You've got the ring of gold in your eyes."

Ah. He should have pushed her away but he'd done it again. He'd hoped she stared into his eyes because she wanted him. That was twice he'd mistaken her actions. When she'd leaned close to catch his scent and now when their gaze locked. He wished there was some way to turn off his extreme response to her so he could think with his brain.

"What are you?" she whispered.

"I'm a, uh, mix." He tried smiling which he'd understood was common and not vulgar.

She continued to search his face, as if looking for other signs. "Humans and the Dar make babies? That's ridiculous." But she sounded uncertain.

He said flatly, "That's what I am. Dar and humans are the same species. Basically."

"The Dar... You're Dar." She gave an almost imperceptible shudder—if she hadn't been on his lap he wouldn't have noticed.

"Half human," he reminded her.

The tension in her body eased slightly and he sensed that her huge surge of fear dissipated, though her breathing remained erratic and her heart beat rapidly. His hand still

rested on her waist and he wondered if she'd notice if he explored. Up or down, a light squeeze—he didn't care. It had been so long since he'd touched a female and her enticing form lay under his fingers. And he could move his hand over her without fear. On Earth, random motion didn't create deadly consequences.

Her steady examination of him ended and she looked away, turning her head so quickly that a wisp of her hair brushed his cheek.

"I would never have known," she said softly, apparently talking to the floor. "Everything about you looks really human. I mean, I knew you guys didn't have purple skin or anything like that. But it's weird. How you can do that."

"That?"

"Whatever it is. When I look at you..." She swallowed and exhaled a deep breath—so deep her body shifted and his hand slid up the curve of her waist. He accidentally pushed up her shirt exposing a small section of her body.

Too much temptation and he lightly touched her exposed flesh. "I like your skin," he said.

She squeaked and jumped up. Obviously complimenting a woman's skin was not a socially acceptable topic, at least not for a man who'd recently grabbed her without consent.

What had she been about to say? He didn't press for an explanation and he let her move away, though he kept a close watch over her and not just for the pleasure of watching her body. She walked to the sink area. Away from the telecommunications on the wall, thank goodness. The cat wandered over to her and rubbed against her legs. She leaned down and scratched at its head but kept her gaze on Halbrut.

"Have you...they all come back?"

"No. It's not a repeat of years ago. No effort to bring masses of the Dar. Just the mixed, like me." Or so he'd been told. He was sure of nothing.

She straightened up and crossed her arms as if trying to huddle herself for comfort and get as far away from him as she could. "I've heard that there are hundreds of you. The guy, the soldier who told me said that it's a big secret."

Ah. The news had already leaked out. No wonder she'd looked for signs of his breeding.

He sat back in the chair and absently admired the bright yellow and blue cloth covering the table. Why not tell her the truth? They would be sharing this planet after all. "There are only about two hundred of us, most of us conceived during or just after the big Dar migration."

"Invasion," she corrected. She turned to the sink for a moment then faced him again. Staring at him, now with a challenge in her eyes.

For a long moment only the soft tick of the clock broke the silence. "We are not going to repeat the trouble of twenty-five years ago." He knew his words were not convincing—he wasn't convinced himself.

The scowl on her face didn't change.

"I wish I could leave your house," he said at last. "I want to go. But I'm afraid you're going to summon the police, and that would be inconvenient."

For the first time she smiled. Even if her pleasure wasn't genuine and she only wanted to reassure him, he couldn't help smiling back when her mouth curled into such a pleasant shape.

She licked her lips and said, "I-I won't call anyone. I promise. What can I say that will make you believe me?"

"I don't know." He didn't bother to tell her there was nothing she could say. He didn't trust her.

She strolled toward him and his heart sank. She was doing a terrible job of hiding the object in her hand, the thing she'd just picked up from the sink.

"Do you have a name, Dar?"

She moved in close. So close he could feel her heat and, despite the fact that she was probably about to attack him, his body responded. "My human first name is Gabreel."

Her hand went up. Before she could speak or move closer, he grabbed her wrist and squeezed.

The knife dropped to the floor. Holding her at arm's length, he leaned over and picked up the knife. It had a pathetic blade, at most a thousand *petrk*—no, he would think like an earthling—ten centimeters long.

“Damn,” she muttered and put up her free hand. Palm up, a placating gesture. “I wasn’t going to hurt you. I just wanted to keep you from—”

“No? Were you going to threaten me, perhaps?” His grip on her wrist tightened. The anger washed through him. Human emotion. “Hold me here until the police came? Be hailed as some kind of hero for capturing me?” He fought the wretched anger down.

Her eyes grew bright. Tears. “Don’t hurt me,” she whispered. He sensed she didn’t want to beg but couldn’t stop herself.

He looked down at her wrist in his hand. The blue vein pulsed quickly under his fingers. He brushed his thumb over her soft skin twice and then let go of her. “What’s your name?”

She backed away from him, lips slightly parted, breathing hard.

He dropped the knife on the table in front of him. For a moment he waited for her answer. When it didn’t come, he sat again. No need to worry for his safety—she’d pressed herself into the corner as far from him as she could get. “Leah,” she said in a quavering voice.

He tried to make his voice gentle. “I don’t know that word.”

“It’s my name. I’m Leah Parisi.”

“Oh. Leah Parisi. I am not angry. If you don’t attack me again, or try to run away, I won’t hurt you.” The threat was there, of course.

She’d already regained her self-control. Her voice was steady when she asked, “What are you going to do to me?”

“Nothing. Or I should say nothing you don’t want me to do.” There—out in the open, an invitation. She didn’t look surprised, so she must have felt his touch on her skin, the small stroke on her wrist.

She shook her head, a silent refusal. The thought must have frightened or intrigued her, for she folded her arms, the self-hug again.

She still wore heavy backless shoes that looked like potential weapons.

He pointed at her feet. "Take those off. Please."

She went to the center of the kitchen, slid the things from her feet. Without turning her back on him, she retreated to her corner. Watching her, he walked over, picked them up and flipped them into another room.

"Why are you smiling?" he asked after he returned to the chair.

She shook her head. "It's like we did some weird square dance."

"Oh." He wondered what she meant.

She cleared her throat. "You said you're hungry. What can you eat?"

Should he trust she would not try to poison him? He was so hungry he almost didn't give a damn. He was too tired, too cold, too hungry. And too ready to engage in intercourse. Amazing about the last.

"I can eat anything," he said. "Thank you. Or perhaps I should say please?"

She took a bowl from a cupboard then reached into a bag on the floor and brought out a cup full of round brown items.

He held out a hand to take the bowl. "I hope cat food is for the animal and not made of cats. When I was very young my unit had such an animal and I liked it."

She blushed. "Sorry. The picture of the Siamese cat gives it away, huh?"

"And I can read. I suppose you've apologized because feeding me this food is an insult?"

She didn't speak, just dumped the food back into the bag.

Disappointment flooded him. "But I have eaten far worse, I assure you."

She opened the cooler, or maybe they called it refrigerator, and pulled out another bowl from its shelves.

Now that she wasn't attacking him and he sat in a warm place for the first time in days, his body relaxed. He indulged in a yawn and wondered when he'd slept last. He'd slept through the three-year journey but apparently he needed sleep again.

How long had he been here? Maybe two nights ago the machines woke him and shoved him out onto the rough dark field. Two nights, three days—it should be easy to

figure out. Earth days had been his guide all his life, but here it followed their sun's pattern. He stifled another yawn. "I'd heard humans hated the Dar. I can see that, at least, isn't lie."

She'd been opening a drawer and stopped now to aim a dark scowl at him. "It's not a big surprise," she said. "And you. God, you attacked me in my front yard. Plus a couple of decades ago your kind came marching onto the planet and tried to destroy the human race. That might have affected our feelings, yeah."

He didn't bother to point out he had been born after that event. "Why are you being kind to me then?"

She laughed again. Interesting how she managed to make the sound scornful. "I'm not. I'm keeping you from attacking me."

"You offered food when I didn't demand it."

She pulled a spoon from the drawer and glanced over at him. "You said you were hungry."

"Yes, and I say you're showing kindness."

She slowly shook her head as she shoved the bowl into a microwaver thing and pushed some buttons. His unit once had a cooker like that, in earlier days, but the smell issuing from her machine was much more appetizing than the food he recalled.

As the kitchen filled with scent, she leaned against the sink. This time her forehead was smooth and her green eyes didn't blaze with the light of fear or anger. Almost conversationally she asked, "So if you're not here to kill us, why did you come?"

"We were told that we are to help reestablish the goodwill between Dar and Earth."

"Huh. Sounds like an impossible job. Why would anyone want to try that?"

His stomach grumbled and he tried not to think about food. "We half Dar were not asked if we wanted the task. We were deposited here. You're correct—your governments know we are here, though we're to remain quiet unless certain situations arise."

She pulled the food from the cooking unit and shoved the bowl across the table to him. He eyed the bowl and wondered when she might have had an opportunity to put poison in it. But the scent was too tantalizing and he picked up the spoon to eat.

“Situations.” She watched him. “Do you mean like when soldiers gossip in a local bar or some woman’s cat finds you? Tell me, what were you doing in the bushes in front of my house?”

He ignored her sharp tone and spoke through a mouthful of the delicious food. “We were told to spread out within the town limits. Not remain in a group. A contact would meet me and take me to my final destination in this area, this part of your town. I saw a truck that I suspected was military and I hid, as I’ve done for...” He gave up trying to reckon time. “As I’ve done for days. You said that you heard soldiers gossiping?”

“Yeah, there are extra units in the area and someone told me that they had come here because of you Dar.” She no longer sounded frightened of him. This pleased him. She went on, “The soldiers were probably meeting you and taking you to the camp down the road.”

Unit. He put down his spoon. “A military camp then, right? A unit?”

She nodded. “It’s pretty small.”

“Is it like a prison?”

She frowned. “Not a formal prison, but I know that they have a holding pen of some sort. They just refurbished that building.”

“No. I shan’t go back into a prison unit, not even here.” He realized with cold dismay that must be where the others were now, the half Dar, the more enthusiastic “settlers” they called themselves, who’d come on earlier convoys.

He’d been right to hide from his so-called friendly contacts. Unlike so many other halfings, he no longer trusted Dar promises and plans.

“What are you going to do?”

He shrugged. “I’ll leave. I’ll go far away, I promise.”

“Yeah? And what will you do?”

“I promise not to hurt anyone. I won’t allow any person so close they can catch the Dar scent. If they do, I’ll run away rather than use violence.”

She picked up a mug and drank from it. “Okay, that’s fine and dandy. I meant how will you survive?”

He had read about the planet's economy and this country's in particular. He'd thought of this during waking periods on the long journey from Dar. "I have some aptitude with languages so maybe I can get a job translating various Earth languages. So, um, Leah Parisi. What do you do to survive?"

"I go to school and I work in a bar." She moved a little closer to him and in an almost pleasant manner said, "Listen, you can't stay here in my house."

He wished he could. Warmth, food, this mercurial female to watch and learn from—but he was not such a fool that he'd voice the thought. "I think it would be best if I tie you up and leave."

"And go out into the world to hide?"

She dropped into the chair near him. He tensed and waited for her to fling the mug of hot fluid at him, but instead she spoke. "You said you're supposed to establish goodwill. Doesn't that mean you're supposed to admit that you're Dar?"

He watched her small hand that gripped the mug—short nails on slender fingers. She seemed far less hostile. Perhaps she at last understood he meant her no harm.

He wouldn't tell her about the elaborate plan of Dar infiltration, developed years earlier. After all, he suspected the idea had been abandoned long ago.

No one had said outright that the Dar had lost interest in its half-human creations, but clear signs were there. The neglected units that slowly turned into prisons filled with hungry teenagers. The carefully designed Earth-mimicking unit-programs that fell into disuse and were never replaced. Only the printed books didn't fail them.

He surprised himself by telling her at least part of the truth. "There is a word in your language that doesn't exist on Dar. 'Propaganda'. I believe that we were told stories, propaganda, about goodwill so we'd leave their units willingly."

She drank and listened. He didn't sense friendliness but she had given up on trying to harm him.

He said, "I think the Dar and your government know we're to be shut up in a camp here and I would rather be free."

Her eyes narrowed. "Go the hell home then. Back to the Dar."

He spooned up the last of the food. “They don’t want us either. If we somehow return to the Dar, we’ll be wiped out. It would be interpreted as a sign we failed in our mission.” He looked wistfully at the empty bowl. He’d never eaten such delicious food.

“They would *kill* you?”

Interesting that she sounded horrified. He’d heard about all of the ethnic cleansing programs on earth and supposed such a thing would be more acceptable here. Humans... *Murderous. Hot-blooded. Prone to useless, violent, destructive rages.*

“The Dar have a generally low regard for humans, even halflings.” He was pleased that for once he did not display anger and didn’t even have to suppress it. The others had disliked his outbursts and he had to agree raging about the disappearance of Dar was worthless. Especially now. He wouldn’t allow the past to haunt him on this new planet.

“So you’re saying they just dropped you? Like a bunch of unwanted mutts left to fend for themselves.”

“We were trained.” He wrinkled his brow, concentrating on her words. “Mutts. Those are dogs, right? Mixed breeds.”

She bit her lip. “Sorry. Didn’t think of that meaning.” Her apology sounded real, as if she regretted the possibility that she’d insulted him.

“No, it’s not bad.” He didn’t bother to say mutts was a nicer word than the Dar word he’d heard for his kind which translated into something like unintelligent excrement. Of course it wasn’t an emotionally charged phrase. The Dar wouldn’t speak with fury—never with any negative emotion stronger than contempt.

She stood. He braced himself for another attack or an escape attempt, but she only walked over to the fridge. “Want more food?”

“Please. Thank you.”

She opened a white plastic container and handed it to him with another spoon. Their fingers brushed but she didn’t jump back.

“Peach yogurt,” he read. “Peach is a fruit. We had a tree that was brought from Earth.”

They had managed to keep the Earth garden on their unit alive. He'd liked that patch of land in the middle of the compound, and the smell of this food reminded him of the plants growing there. The only bit of his previous life he'd miss was that exotic garden.

The substance she'd given him was sour and sweet and almost as delicious as the stew. He ate quickly while she sat near him and drank her hot liquid.

She said, "You're pretty good at this human stuff, you know? You don't even have an accent. Or much of one."

He gulped down the last of the cold yogurt. "Training." He sighed. "I might be wrong that it is all propaganda. Some of my kind might actually manage to build goodwill."

"How's that going to work if you're all locked up?"

He licked the spoon clean before answering. "Some halflings were told they'd be welcomed by their human-side families. Sponsors, they're called. I hope it wasn't a lie."

"You didn't get a sponsor?"

He shook his head. "My human mother died long ago and I don't know where her family is." He ran a finger inside the white cup to get the last of the food.

She watched him, clicking her nails against the side of the coffee cup and leaning back in her chair. Little motions of impatience, he supposed. He shouldn't have used his hands directly on the food. Or maybe she wanted him out.

At last she shook her head so hard her brown hair flew. "No. No. Impossible for one thing. There's that weird...thing. It's a feeling, I guess." She turned red again and wouldn't look into his face. He began to suspect that she was embarrassed. It was said that sexuality embarrassed most humans. He hoped that was what her blushes meant.

She cleared her throat. "Anyway, no, I won't be your sponsor. Why are you smiling?"

Was he smiling? Odd. Perhaps he'd practiced the motion enough after all. "I would never expect such an offer," he said. "After I jumped on you and dragged you into your house and forced you to listen to me, I should think it very peculiar if you'd be willing to act as my sponsor." He looked regretfully into the empty container.

“I shan’t bother you any longer.” He rose to his feet. “Give me some rope. I can’t think of a better solution, so I’ll tie you up and leave.”

Chapter Two

Leah tried to recall all that she'd heard of the Dar.

Murderous. Cold-blooded. Strong. That last she certainly believed. He'd gotten the knife from her hand with no effort, and after a couple of years of hefting boxes and kegs, she was no weakling. Far worse, in her opinion, was the way lust whispered through her body when he touched her. The Dar's mind-control supposedly didn't work on humans. Then why was she so flipping confused?

The creature had been in her house an hour and she still didn't know what to do. Stop him? Help him? But he appeared to be making the decision for her.

"Rope?" he asked.

Getting him out of her house apparently would be simple and he wouldn't harm her. She should have felt more relief.

"It'll be really difficult to live outside the law," she said, wondering why she warned him. "What if anyone discovered what you are? You might be killed. There'll be mobs after you."

"Yes, so I understand. But that is not the worst thing that could happen. I must say my view of my future is much brighter since I ate such marvelous food. Thank you." A half smile crossed his face again. "And I know that's the phrase I want."

She went to the utility drawer and handed the Dar the length of rope she kept there. Then a sudden wave of panic hit her when she remembered how she'd set up a retreat from her life. Her birthday present for herself had been several days off with no responsibilities—and no one looking for her.

“Sit,” he said.

She sat and immediately twisted in the chair to face him. “Wait. Listen. I might end up tied up here for days. I mean a friend might stop by, but maybe not.”

He crouched in front of her, holding the rope loosely in his hands.

“You could trust me not to call anyone,” she said, halfheartedly.

His quiet voice was firm. “I’m sorry.”

She almost believed him. “You could lock me in the bathroom. It would take me a while to get out of there,” she lied.

“I suppose that would be a solution.” He rose to his feet. “Less uncomfortable for you as well.”

What a strange conversation. Almost as if they were going over plans for a work project.

He tucked the rope into his belt and knuckled his eyes.

“Look,” she said. “You’re exhausted. I can see that. Why don’t you, ah, lock me in the bathroom and sleep for a while.”

He frowned or rather a tiny crease formed on his forehead. He didn’t go for big emotional displays. “I have interrupted your life enough, Leah Parisi. I’ll leave as soon as I can.”

He had to be kidding. She almost felt embarrassed about the fact that she planned to deceive him again.

They walked to the bathroom and her stomach turned when he insisted on going in to examine the room.

“Ah,” he said as he peered into the laundry chute. And without another word he pulled out the rope and undid a length of it.

“What will you do?” Her heart sank. He’d kill her or beat her. At best he’d leave her tied up. When would anyone think to come find her? The blessed peace of being alone for three days now seemed life-threatening.

“I can’t think,” he said. “I am assaulted by your sexuality and my exhaustion. I can certainly take care of one of those problems. And for obvious reasons,” he looked at the chute with that hint of a frown, “I’m now less worried about imposing on you.”

She held back the urge to apologize. For God’s sake, she hadn’t owed an alien intruder the truth.

He carried a chair into the bedroom and made her sit. With quick deft motions, he tied her to the chair. Then he dropped down across the unmade bed, sideways. Fluke, that wretched animal, jumped up next to him and curled into a purring ball.

She studied the Dar who slept sprawled across her bed. Not like she had a choice about the view.

His body lay so quietly he barely seemed to breathe. Perhaps Dar were really some kind of undead creatures. The strange dark figure looked huge against the lavender and blue flowered quilt her Auntie Louise had made for the room.

Leah’s hands began to tingle and she yanked at the cord a bit. She made circles with her feet.

Assaulted by her sexuality, he’d said. Ha. What the hell did that mean?

No, she knew exactly what it meant because the asshole had the same effect on her. His generous mouth, those spooky eyes, the wide, high cheekbones, his long-limbed body. No one had said that the fiery gold of their eyes could be lovely or that the faint scent of cinnamon wood was subtle and pleasant. Not a horrible stench as some described it. Maybe it was stronger on full Dar.

He sighed and a long finger twitched. So much for the notion that he’d died in his sleep. She examined the lean body, but of course he gulped down her food like a starving animal so they must not have fed him enough. Nor had they given him lessons on table manners. He wore drab green trousers and matching shirt. Not exactly a uniform but it

echoed it. And no jacket or gloves or scarf. Great plan to drop him off with not enough clothes. What were those Dar thinking?

He rolled onto his back and the rotten Fluke stretched and lightly kneaded his paws on the Dar's stomach. She wondered if that belly would be hard. Was his skin identical to a human's? Did he have hair on his body?

Holy crap, he was doing it to her again. Assaulted by *her* sexuality? That was a laugh. When he touched her she was paralyzed and her limbs grew too heavy to move. At first she thought it was fear—okay, at first it was. But even as she planned to escape him, run for help, her body planned against her.

Yes, touch me, her skin had begged. *Please keep caressing my wrist, move up my arm*. Oh, her insides twisted when she understood that she hadn't imagined that brief feather touch on her wrist.

She wiggled her hand again and yanked. And pulled on the leg that was tied around the chair rungs. She pulled so hard that there was a sharp crack and the chair broke. Leah tumbled over sideways.

When she opened her eyes again, she was looking at a pair of worn brown boots planted on the rug next to her head.

"Leah Parisi, do you never give up?" He sounded amused, not annoyed.

"Believe it or not, I didn't mean to break my chair. I was just—I was trying to get the circulation going in my legs."

He squatted next to her and unknotted the ropes. Her struggles must have pulled the knots tight yet he easily worked his long fingers into the rope and pulled her free. When he reached under her arms and hauled her to her feet, she felt as lightweight as a child.

She covered her nervousness by picking up the pieces of rope and chair. "Why'd you help? Why didn't you just leave me here on the floor and leave?"

He shrugged, a thoroughly human gesture, yet as exaggerated as Italian opera. "You were lying sideways on the floor and it didn't look comfortable."

She began to laugh. For some reason, his ridiculous concern hit her as hysterically funny. Here was one of the creatures who'd tried to destroy her planet and he was fretting

that she wasn't comfortable. She laughed so hard she had to sit at the edge of the bed. She dropped the pieces of chair and covered her face with her hands.

"Leah? Are you all right?"

She could only nod. Next to her, Fluke who was used to odd human behavior, gave her a cold look and went back to sleep.

The Dar sank to his knee in front of her. "Can you explain why you're laughing?"

She hiccupped and realized her laughter had turned to sobs. Great. Big sloppy tears, a red nose and...wait a sec, why should she care what he thought of her?

"No, this is beyond me. You have turned me into a wreck," she said shakily. "I don't know what the hell is going on."

"Hmm." He murmured the mostly human sound. Then he grasped her thighs. Just like that. But he didn't seize her, just rested his hands palms down on her legs. The desire created by his touch was as violent as his touch was gentle.

"Dar," she whispered.

"Gabreel," he answered and brushed her cheek. "I seem to have made a mark on your skin. I'm sorry."

She touched his wrist and his neck. "I left a bigger mark—two of them. I suppose I'm sorry, too. A little." She smiled and then shifted. Only an inch.

She'd moved close enough to catch the slight scent of cinnamon and human desire, or so she imagined. She licked her lips, his eyes focused on her mouth and his chest expanded as he drew in a deep breath.

Each waited for the signal—and she couldn't stand it.

"Yes," she said.

"Hmm?"

"Yes, one kiss. I would like that." She gave a breathless laugh. "You know what a kiss is, don't you?"

"So you want to be able to say you've kissed one of the Dar." He sounded slightly exasperated, but that didn't stop him from standing and then settling next to her on the edge of the bed. She twisted sideways.

“No, I want to have kissed you. Gabriel. I think that’s the name you’re supposed to have if you’re trying to fit in to this country. Not Gabreel. One kiss goodbye.” She talked to cover her disbelief that she was doing this. *Idiot*. Her hand rested on his shoulder and she slid it to the nape of his neck. Warm skin, muscles beneath, and that was all. No reason to feel as if someone had punched all the air from her and left her reeling with lust. “I’m not sure why I want to so much.”

“Attraction.” His smile was crooked. “I wanted you from the moment I dragged you into your own house.”

Exactly. Dragged into her own house. This was why she should not be feeling even remotely positive about him. This was the man who’d assaulted her and scared the crap out of her. A damned *space alien*. And all she wanted to do was get as close to him as she could, rub her skin on his, pull him into her body. Leah had to wonder if her sexual drive, never huge, had really awakened when exposed to kink. Strange to wonder if she had been turned on because he tied her up or clamped a hand to her mouth. Fear still prickled through her and mingled with the most intense craving she’d ever experienced.

She licked her lips. “I don’t understand. You asked me why I was upset before? This sexuality thing is part of it. I feel like if I don’t touch you I’ll go nuts and start howling.”

“Thank you,” he said. “Or perhaps I mean please.” He smiled and showed extremely white teeth. “Both.”

He slid his lips over hers, gently closed his teeth over her lower lip then licked her mouth, tasting her, easing into a full kiss. He pulled away and she moaned with displeasure.

He rested his forehead against hers for a second and said, “See? Same species.”

She gazed into the vivid gold deep in his eyes. “I think you’re infecting me.”

“Eh?” His brows rose. Was the surprise real or simulated?

She closed her eyes. “I don’t kiss people who attack me. I don’t kiss people I don’t know. Heck, I haven’t kissed anyone for months.”

“That’s the trouble. You’re starving.”

God, she was too. The words made the ache deepen. Even with her eyes closed. She drew in a long breath hoping to pull in some measure of self-control. His lips lightly touched the corner of her mouth. She shuddered. Ever since she'd inherited her dead aunt's house and moved out of her ex-boyfriend's place, she'd been alone and happy. Now she wondered how she could have survived all these months without touching another human. Or half human.

"I want to make love with you," he whispered.

She slowly shook her head. "That is the dumbest idea I've ever heard."

"Yes. It certainly isn't—what's the word? Appropriate." He sounded thoughtful and not at all insulted. "But I'm fairly certain you want me too."

She swore to herself she wouldn't nod.

She nodded.

At least she managed to add, "Just because I want you so much that I could scream doesn't mean I'll do it with you."

"Do it'?"

"You know what I mean."

"Yes, I understood. I only thought it was a funny way to disguise the truth. I'd heard you humans are not open about sexual matters."

"Fine. I'll be straightforward then. We're not going to fuck."

Get up and away from the bed, she told herself. And astoundingly her legs obeyed her. She stood, walked out of the bedroom and went downstairs to the small living room, padding barefoot across the chilly hardwood floor.

He caught up with her and rested his hands on her hips, a touch, not an attempt to stop her. After a moment's hesitation, she decided she'd proved she was still in control. She could risk the pleasure of another kiss, so she turned in his light grip to face him.

She flinched as he leaned forward, but he only nibbled the top of her ear. His whisper filled her with shivers. "A pity you don't want to make love. I want to." He kissed her cheek then looked into her face. "Oh, Leah, I want to give you pleasure. I want to bury myself far inside you."

Jesus, the words made her knees weak. A small mew of hunger escaped her lips and he heard her. The gold filled his eyes and seemed to fill her too.

He lightly brushed her lips with his again. A moment later his mouth on hers demanded the sort of kiss that she usually disliked, greedy and plunging.

She wanted more and fiercely returned his kisses. Urgent need made her clumsy as she pressed against his body, wrapping her leg around him so she could grind her core against him like an animal in heat. His hands clasped her butt and his groan sounded as animal as she felt.

Whoa, the craving seized her, along with a thread of panic. She ripped her mouth from his, panting.

“Shit,” she murmured. “Oh God.” She rested her spinning head on his chest. “I have a choice.”

“Yes. Of course. I won’t fuck with you unless you want it.”

“No, I don’t mean you. I mean me.”

“Hey?” His questioning hum vibrated through her and made her press even closer against him.

“I mean I’m out of control,” she whispered.

He didn’t answer right away but then said, “Yes. I understand. My own response isn’t similar to anything I’ve felt. I think I enjoy it.”

Reluctantly she removed her hands from his shoulders and peeled her body from his. “I’m not sure I do. I mean. Oh, damn.” She moved away from him and dropped onto the couch. Her hands trembled and her body pinged with disappointment. Her underwear was damp with her excitement and her still-sensitive skin had goose bumps. Hell, her whole body remained awake and alert and in need of one thing only.

This was not typical.

She sat cross-legged and tried to steady her breath.

He squatted in front of her again. “Are you all right?” he asked.

“You mean other than the fact that I’m playing hostess to a member of a homicidal race of space aliens?”

He pressed his lips tight and she thought maybe she'd gone too far, but he only said. "Yes. Other than that."

She laughed. "Do you know what? I think I like you."

His golden eyes grew heavy-lidded. "Good. Do you like me enough to take off your clothes then? Leah?"

She wet her unusually dry lips and tried to think of an answer. Her head swam.

His half smile vanished. "But there is something wrong, I think. Your color has changed and your eyes are odd. Bright. Is this normal?"

"I feel weird." Raw, she decided, like she'd just been peeled.

He rocked back on his heels and examined her. "I was going to leave, but now I find it hard to go. No," he interrupted her, "not just because I want to be inside your body. You look too different. Flushed. That's the word."

"I do?"

"Hmm."

He touched her face with the tips of his fingers. "And you're warm."

"Hot." She shivered. "Most of my skin is on fire. Maybe I'm allergic to you."

He gnawed on his lower lip and she wished she could join him, taste his mouth again. His brow furrowed. "Maybe. Not allergic, but I can't think of any other word."

He straightened and went to a chair far away from hers. His distance didn't help. She stared at his legs stretched out in front of him and wondered if they would be smooth or sprinkled with hair. Muscular, no doubt about that. She had to stop herself from crossing the room to find out.

Fluke leapt on the couch and nosed at her hand. She scratched behind the cat's ear and asked, "What do you mean?"

"There is something called the Dar's nonviolent compulsion and it's—"

"Oh yeah, the famous persuasive powers of the Dar. Only it didn't work and so they ended up killing people instead." She pulled in a deep breath and tried to concentrate on the fact that this creature was her enemy. "Thousands of people, dead just because they wouldn't let the Dar take over. And we drove your kind out, don't forget."

“The Dar chose to leave,” he said, mildly.

“I’m not surprised that’s the story you’d hear.”

He didn’t seem to notice her acid tone. “About the mind-shift and why this might work with you. And me. The compulsion, I know the Dar mentioned it when I was young. And they talked about heterosis at my unit.”

She gave up trying to work herself into a fury against him. “What’s that?”

“I think another English phrase is hybrid vigor. Those are rough translations of what the Dar called it. Mixing breeds. Mutts as you said. Not that they spoke of such things so that we could hear, mind you, but one learns to play stupid in such a place.” His body tightened, even more taut and motionless than usual. She wanted to ask what sort of place he meant, but she remained silent, waiting.

“Hybrid vigor and abilities.” His face softened as he looked at her. “The persuasive power you don’t believe. It’s real. I’d heard we could shift our human parents. I seemed to impose my will on you.”

“You’re strong, yeah, but you haven’t really been imposing your will, I mean beyond self-protection. Otherwise you haven’t hurt me. That’s why I…” She trailed off. She’d been on the verge of saying she trusted him. She didn’t, entirely, but something like trust sneaked around the edges of her mind. Perhaps he was warning her now that anything she felt was a sham.

He tilted his head and looked at her as if she were a curious piece of artwork he couldn’t figure out. “I could be wrong. You are one of the first full humans I have seen in years. Certainly the first I’ve attempted to seduce.”

She absently put up a hand to stop Fluke, who’d jumped onto the sofa, from climbing on her lap. “Oh, I get it.” She snorted. “I’m not my brightest today. You mean you’ve tried to use some kind of brainpower to get us into bed. Maybe. Something’s happening.”

She hoped he was right. Better that than she’d suddenly turned into some kind of uncontrollable nymphomaniac.

It struck her that she enjoyed the sensations coursing through her body. What if she gave in entirely? Her bones threatened to melt at the memory of that lust when she imagined doing more. Good thing she was sitting.

“None of this explains why I want *you* so much,” he said calmly. “My own response is severe and almost constant.”

She ignored the sharp throb of desire as his words punched through her. “No. Wait. If you stay here much longer, there is no way we will keep our hands off each other.”

“Is that so bad?”

She groaned. “Do you have to ask?”

After a long pause, he spoke gently. “I don’t see anything evil about fucking, touching, however you like to say it best—but I understand that you dislike the idea.”

“Ha. Nothing evil. What if I became pregnant?” She heard a real question in her own voice and knew she had to fight harder. *Don’t believe the attraction.*

“I know how to prevent babies.” He made a strange hiss through his teeth then grimaced and shuddered as if he was resisting the hunger too. She wondered if she could feel him fighting the flow of lust. Nonsense.

“I’ll go.” He touched her leg, a tiny brush of fingertips. “No rope, and I won’t make you promise anything. Thank you for your food and your kisses. Stay safe, Leah Parisi.”

She nodded, not trusting herself to speak. If she opened her mouth, she’d probably tell him to stay, eat some more, take off his clothes, stroke her body, rub his skin against hers.

He walked toward the kitchen then abruptly halted. Something was wrong, that’s why he’d stopped. Not to tie his shoe or make a joke or ask the way to the nearest bus station. How the hell did she know that?

Her attention shifted away from the odd understanding of him when she figured out what was bugging him. The rumble of trucks out on the road in front of her house. At least one of the engines went silent.

She jumped to her feet and pointed at the front of the house. “Go out the other door.”

He didn't move. There was the crunch of several feet on the gravel path. "It sounds like boots," she whispered. Someone banged on the door.

"Go! Out the other door."

"No." He leaned against the refrigerator, crossing his arms. "You might get in trouble if they find out I was here. They've got new methods of detecting the presence—"

The pounding began again, so hard the glass behind the curtain shook.

She gave him a hefty shove that didn't even rock him. "Please. At least go hide."

He pushed away from the fridge and brushed her mouth with his finger before he strode from the kitchen.

Chapter Three

Leah might have mistaken the four men in olive green uniforms for guys from the base. She might have—if she hadn't just seen a half-human wearing exactly the same sort of trousers. Their shirts had the right sort of nametags on the left side, but she was not fooled. Something about their thick boots was wrong and the way they stood... Straighter and more motionless than regular people.

They were not as thin as Gabriel and most of them had considerably shorter hair than his. Several of them looked straight into her face and gave slight smiles.

The one in front, a tall man with long, curiously ginger hair stepped forward. "Hello, miss. Might we come in? We are canvassing the area, searching for some people who were supposed to meet us near this location."

She wanted to tell them to go away, but she found herself opening the door to let them in. The leader, the one with the strange hair had done something to her. She felt as if she hadn't been given a choice.

She knew it, could feel it in the way the back of her neck prickled.

She managed to remain steady as she fought the power. *Don't show them you know.* "Hello, gentlemen, how may I help you?"

They crowded into her kitchen. One of them whispered something to the man next to her and her calm nearly evaporated.

The tall one only smiled, a reassuring, pleasant smile and she knew he was trying to do whatever it was again. Only now she knew it. Could feel some sort of protection blanketed her from his power.

She plastered a smile to her mouth and stared at him. The faintest hint of gold in his eyes—less than Gabriel’s and it seemed to die away. Could they control even that?

“We won’t stay long because we have many more houses to secure in your area,” he told her in soothing tones. “We’ll just help ourselves to some food. And maybe, ah, Singletary there—” he pointed at one of the men “—will take you upstairs and ask you a few questions.”

A thick tendril of peace curled around her, sinking into her belly. Not her own. How strange. When the one called Singletary stepped forward and touched her arm, she almost smiled at him. Wait. Why did that name seem familiar?

“I’m sorry,” her voice quavered and she couldn’t understand why she sounded uncertain. “You can’t just walk into my house and take my food and—and ask me questions.”

One of them opened his mouth and a strange hiss came out.

The leader must have seen her wince because he flashed a reassuring smile at her and said, “We will only speak English, okay? We won’t keep secrets from you.” The curling, peaceful sensation tried to get inside her again but she didn’t want it.

The hissing one uttered actual words. “This is new. She’s stubborn. Maybe you should work with her.”

The ginger-haired man continued to watch her, but his words, calm and measured, weren’t addressed to Leah. “You’re being rude, Vertrini. Apologize to the lady for calling her stubborn. And then Singletary will do what needs to be done.”

She almost nodded. There were words now and they held more power. *No need to worry. I’ll be fine. No harm... Singletary would cause no harm.*

But wait. Vertrini? She'd met a Vertrini and he was short and balding. One of the guys from the base. Could he have a brother? Maybe that was it...but... No.

His best friend was called Sing-something. Singletary. That's why she knew the name.

She blinked, trying to clear the soothing grogginess from her mind. Vertrini. Not a common name. Vertrini and Singletary. Two of the four guys who'd come to the bar with stories about them. Stories about some kind of invasion.

Certainty spread through her. *You! You are the Dar.* Oh, shit. She knew by the sudden stillness in the room that she must have said the words aloud.

Speaking the truth swept much of the mist from her brain.

She remembered Gabriel as if he were standing there, explaining again that these were half Dar. What were they doing in her kitchen?

She inched away from the one in charge who watched her with a mildly puzzled look. And she backed straight into the one with the nametag of Singletary. His hands, as strong as the other one, locked on one of her forearms.

"I don't enjoy struggles," he said.

She thought he was talking to her, but the one in charge answered. "Get used to it. They can't all be as simple as the first ones."

"I don't mind a bit of a struggle," another volunteered.

A look of disgust passed over the face of the leader. "Yes, and that is why you won't do. Ugly and human. We won't harm her."

Her?

Uh-oh.

The leader smiled at her again. He was the professional. The doctor, the ambulance driver reassuring a victim at an accident scene. *Only there to help. Settle the fear...*

Bullshit. The calming ooze sinking into her wouldn't turn her mind to sludge again. She was protected by the truth.

"It won't take long, I assure you. And Singletary is gentle. We all are."

He put his hand on her other arm as he and the one with the Singletary tag propelled her to the kitchen door. She had to say it aloud to make herself resist. “He’s not Singletary. And that one’s not Vertrini.” The words washed away more of her brain’s haziness.

They both let go of her.

The tall one sighed and gave a loose, odd sort of a shrug she’d seen before. What was his name again? And he was here still. Here. Gabriel. The fog trying to fill her mind dissolved again. “No,” she said and knew it was the right answer. “I’m sorry, but I want you to leave.”

The leader put his hands on his hips. “For some reason she’s almost immune. Might take two of you.”

“Tchah,” one of them said. “When it is so easy with others? We should take this one to the center.”

And suddenly they broke into another language. A very odd one. Almost an inhuman growling garble and hissing. Inhuman.

Dar.

And her mind and memory cleared one more time. It was like falling asleep. She had to keep waking herself up. What had the strange man—strange creature—done to her? Where was the other one?

His name was Gabriel. She pulled the fact to the surface once again, and wouldn’t let go of it this time. Jesus, now she remembered. He was in the house.

She moved away from them while they argued. Slowly she eased backwards toward the kitchen doorway. She’d made it to the hall passage when her careful progress was halted.

Once again, she backed into a solid chest. And once again strong hands grabbed her arms. What was it with the Dar grabbing at her?

“Leah,” Gabriel whispered in her ear. “Hush. Wait. Trust me.”

She swallowed her shriek and allowed herself a small sigh.

He pushed her to the side, out of view and stepped into the kitchen. The strange sounds stopped then started again, louder.

She peered around the corner watching them. They spoke with the bizarre sounds and absolutely expressionless faces. She'd leave, escape her own house, run as fast as she could and find help. These unearthly creatures had taken over her kitchen, would take over her house. Her world.

She inched down the hall, watching, ready to run.

A hand shot out and grabbed her hair.

"Hey, stop it!" she shouted.

It wasn't Gabriel. The other one. He hissed at her in the strange tongue—it could hardly be called a language—and the gold in his eyes was a color she'd never seen and could never be of this earth. Her body quivered with the effort to fight back against whatever it was the creature exuded. The almost electrical power that reached into her.

Still holding her hair, he compelled her to walk slowly backwards again. She stumbled but didn't fall. Her scalp screamed with pain, though he did not yank or even pull hard.

She yelped, "Let go, I won't try to escape again."

The grip on her hair tightened. He touched her forehead and she felt relief, not panic, as the world went black.

Halbrut had learned early on to hide emotion. He watched Leah fall and did not protest or rush forward.

But he pushed aside the halfling he didn't know, the one who'd knocked her out. "Let me," he told the halfling who gave an indifferent shrug. Halbrut hitched the unconscious Leah from the floor onto his shoulder.

Graeb watched from the kitchen. "Put her above. Take all of her clothes and tie her up. She's not complacent. We can wait, see if she changes. If not, she will go to the center."

Halbrut nodded and loped up the stairs. Silently apologizing, he awkwardly unbuttoned and unzipped her blue jeans and pulled them down her motionless body, along with some red undergarments. He hauled her up and tugged off her tee shirt while trying not to notice her soft pale skin. When his fingers brushed the smooth side of her breast, he jerked his hand away.

In the unit on Dar he'd undressed other unconscious beings, even dead ones, but this seemed far more intrusive. He could only guess what she'd have to say if she knew what he was doing.

The Dar had no curses, so he swore in an Earth language, Russian, as he tied the still-sleeping woman to the bedposts. Her arms and legs had to be spread to reach the posts, but he reasoned she'd be more comfortable like this than if he'd put her in a chair. Yet on the bed she looked as if she had been arranged as some sort of display. Worse, he felt himself tighten as he looked down at her.

He noticed a large thin cloth lay bunched under her so he yanked it out and arranged it over her naked body.

Back downstairs he found most of his comrades going through Leah's cupboards and refrigerator.

He was shocked to see Milsom had joined the group. She wore the same green trousers and labeled shirt as the men. "I thought you'd landed in another area," he said.

Milsom shrugged and scooped brown pellets into her mouth. She sat on the table with the open bag of cat food between her spread legs.

"That's for animals, you know." Halbrut pointed at the picture.

"I don't mind. It tastes like the old food. Before they left us alone." She had so much food in her mouth she could barely speak.

He frowned and watched her shovel in the crunchy food. "You must be very hungry. You don't usually eat so much."

"M'breeding." She sounded unenthusiastic.

Halbrut used another Earth oath. "Good God. Who is the sire?"

She shrugged and didn't answer. "Human. Soldier. Got him interested the first day or so. It was horrible and rough. They are barbaric, panting and shoving."

"We've stopped here on this block of housing because we need a break," Graeb interrupted. He took a huge bite of an apple. "We've been at work since six this morning."

"At work doing what?" He continued to watch Milsom. Breeding? She surely had never expressed any desire for such a thing. In fact she loathed the idea—and with a full human?

"We broke from the fort and are now securing the town. And now you'll join us. I'm glad you survived." Graeb's facial change was barely noticeable. He wouldn't grin, for he deeply valued the Dar in him. The words were almost more personal than Graeb would usually allow. Halbrut was touched he'd used them.

"You have devised some sort of arrangement then." Halbrut sat down on a chair. "You always were resourceful, Graeb. I suppose a couple of Earth-months in the prison gave you time to think of a plan."

"No. We have always had a plan. Those of us who came on the first wave knew it." Graeb wiped his mouth on his sleeve and tossed much of the apple into the sink. "Those of the later waves—like you—will join us, but we are the leaders. Do you know why we were informed and you were not?"

Halbrut wanted to shout in the man's face. *Informed about what?* Instead he waited.

Graeb found a cloth hanging on a hook and used it to wipe his hands. He moved close to Halbrut, leaned over in a manner designed to demand his full attention. "I do not lose focus. I do not allow my human side to destroy the blessed calm of the Dar. I know that the goals for which we reach are greater than the individual."

Halbrut didn't bother hiding his amusement. "You forgot to raise your palm to your forehead. If you're going to chant a child's pledge you should assume the correct position."

"They were only words to you, even words to be mocked. They have been my life." Graeb was as solemn as ever. "Our Dar knew they could trust me, Halbrut, for I never

abandoned my pledge. I spoke it every day. You are strong and you are brave, but you lack the discipline. You didn't need to know the truth."

"Of what?"

"Our mission."

He used another satisfying English curse. "Bullshit. Our mission. It was abandoned years ago, just like we were. The Dar lost interest in our units. You forget how many days in a row they sometimes forgot to feed us? Why else would they neglect to give us meds when we got sick? They didn't even bother to give us potable water. I haven't forgotten how many of us died."

Graeb straightened. His mouth twitched—his human side compressing a smirk, no doubt. "Part of the plan. A test for us. Survival of the fittest is a human motto. And we are the fittest. We won and will continue to win."

Halbrut stared at Graeb then studied the other Dar standing or sitting in Leah's kitchen to see if they showed signs of disbelief or even mockery. Milsom only looked slightly miserable. She got up and went out the door. The sound of retching reached their ears.

Halbrut resisted the urge to go after her. He'd frequently exhibited trouble with an encroaching need to intrude in others' pain. The Dar did not interfere in illness or death.

He turned back to Graeb. "Go on. Tell me the plan if you wish."

Chapter Four

Leah awoke, tried to roll over and only managed to twist her torso before something jerked on her arm and ankle. She had been tied to her bed. Worse—if such a thing were possible—her squirming informed her that only a sheet covered her naked body.

An almost familiar voice spoke. “You’re awake? The others didn’t know what to make of you, so they rendered you unconscious.”

The Dar. The one she’d thought of as almost a friend. Gabriel. Jesus, she’d kissed him.

He sat on the edge of the bed near her shoulder, looming over her, gold eyes staring down at her.

She tilted her head to stare back. “You said it wasn’t an invasion. You lied.” Her throat hurt and her voice came out as a croak. “What’s happened to me? Why does it hurt?”

He shifted, backed away slightly and now examined her as if she were something strange and new. Expressionless, but she could feel his concentration on her body and something more. “If I hadn’t met you first, I would have had an easier time,” he said. “I wouldn’t have known better and I’d accept Graeb’s plan. Some of it, at any rate.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about. But excuse me? *You’re* upset? I wanted a quiet couple of days off.” She held her breath for several long seconds until the urge to weep passed. “And then you and your friends come barging in. Where the heck are my clothes?”

He moved away from her, slumped against the bedpost and crossed his arms. “You are to be held until the operation is over. Either here or at the center.”

“What do you mean? What operation?”

One of his theatrical shrugs. “I was never trusted with the plan. I still don’t know all of the details.”

She ached to tell him to go to hell, but she wanted more information and figured she didn’t need to make him angry. Although now she recalled he didn’t often seem to respond with anger. She asked, “Why didn’t they tell you about it?”

He gave a small noise that might have been a version of laughter. “I have too much history of human-like behavior, too little trust of the Dar. It doesn’t matter now. I follow very simple rules, as I always have. I’ll have to be a part of it or die.”

Her insides congealed. “It’s happening again. The invasion.”

He must have heard her anguish for he spoke in a soothing voice. “It is different this time, and better, Leah. No extermination. Now it is only halflings and we move quietly. One house at a time. One woman or man at a time, until the town is occupied. So there will be little or no bloodshed.” He touched the rope on her wrist. “Your hand is turning red. I’ll take this off while I’m in here.”

Once again, he picked the tight knots loose easily. He must have been some kind of bondage master back on his planet.

She tried to control her nauseated fear. “Those men. No, those creatures. They wore names of men I’ve met. Singletary and Vertrini. What’s happened to the real ones, the human soldiers at the base?”

“I don’t know. I suppose if they fought back they’d be locked in the center. The base. That’s where the halflings who’d arrived first were housed.”

“They’d fight. They’re supposed to defend the town.”

“I believe your town is not considered under attack. If they continually resisted, they would be killed.”

A scream formed in her throat. He must have seen her anguish for he added hastily, “I don’t expect many will be killed. I have not been here for long. The others—they’ve been here more than a month. They say that the power to bend the will is very strong.”

She closed her eyes. “The thing you described. The compulsion. God. I felt it and it turned my thoughts into pure moosh. It’s like some kind of perverted Jedi trick.”

“What is that?”

She sank farther under the sheet, wondering if she could convince herself this was a bad dream.

He moved to her feet to untie them. Now he stopped and looked up at her. “What’s Jedi?” he growled.

Right, she’d almost forgotten. He was the enemy again. This wasn’t a dream and she better open her eyes. “Calm down. It’s from a movie, so it’s imaginary, okay? All the Jedi have to do is stare into someone’s eyes and say some words to change the person’s will.”

“They—we have no need for eye contact,” he said slowly. “And I’m not sure it’s a matter of a trick. More like breathing. It comes simply—at least that is how it seems to me.”

“How nice for you.” She shook her hands to get the feeling back into them and sat up. The sheet slid down her body and she quickly hauled it up, wrapping it around herself. From the bottom of the bed he watched, and his expression changed to the look of a wolf slavering over the rabbit he’d picked out for dinner.

“What now?” she said, certain she didn’t want to know the answer but equally sure anything was better than ignorance.

He walked to the head of the bed and perched on the edge again. The way he stared down at the floor might be a typical human gesture of embarrassment or shy avoidance. Who knew what it meant with a Dar? Then the uneasiness touched her—not her own distress.

“Gabriel. Tell me.”

His mouth went tight. When he looked at her again, the predatory gaze was gone.

“You must choose. Me or one of the others.”

“Choose?” But she knew what he meant.

“Fucking,” he said shortly.

“What is this? Some kind of systematic rape for demoralizing your enemy?”

The gold glimmering in the depth of his irises made him look more alien than ever.

“No. Breeding.”

“Please, tell me you’re joking.”

He didn’t speak.

Laughter welled up from somewhere inside her. “It’s the plot to *Mars Needs Women*.”

He seemed to relax. Maybe he mistook her hysteria for acceptance. “We have women too. They have already had success. Apparently at the base they found any number of willing breeders with no trouble.”

The ridiculous remark made it somehow more real and the laughter dried up. Cold filled the pit of her stomach. “Jesus, Gabriel. Why?”

Very gently, he touched the top of her shoulder with his forefinger, traced the line to her collarbone. She held back a shiver, fought off the growing attraction winding through her. Somehow she understood much of the stirring interest radiated from him. Yes, but from her too.

He sighed. “I once knew why, but now...”

“What did you know?”

“I understood that humans were violent, crude and that they acted on emotion without thought. To control their baser impulses would be to improve their race which would improve the planet.”

“Nice of you all to be so helpful.” She swallowed, trying to hold back the useless anger that only made her dizzy. “Okay. So tell me. What’s changed?”

“Nothing. No. I’ve changed.”

She meant to push his finger off her shoulder, but captured it in her hand instead. The large warm fingers pressed into her palm. “You would force me? They were talking about that, those guys in my kitchen. Forcing me to have sex. That’s called rape here and it’s a crime. What did you say about humans? Violent, crude, acting on base impulse.”

The shadow of a grimace crossed his face. “You noticed that as well, eh? A touch of hypocrisy. No, I won’t force you or any other female.”

“You’ll use that mind power though. Plant those alien babies in women’s bellies. Leave them to raise bizarre Dar mixes. Single mothers of freak babies.”

“No.”

She flinched at his harsh voice. She’d pushed too far, calling him a freak. But she wouldn’t let up now. “No what? You mean you’re not going to go brainwash then fuck a bunch of women.”

He gently pried his hand from hers and swung his legs up onto the bed so they sat side by side. His brief flash of anger had apparently dissipated. “No. The mothers would not have to raise the babies. The plan...” He drew in a deep breath. “The plan is to form units. I didn’t know. I’m certain that even *before*—when I thought Dar were basically better than humans—I wouldn’t go along with Graeb and the plan. That’s why I was not a first invader.”

Something caused him pain; she could see bitterness in his face. Hell, maybe she could feel it, inside her as if it were her own phantom pain. Near the heart. At the moment, however, his pain didn’t matter to her.

“What will they do?” She thought of her neighbor’s fifteen-year-old daughter and a shiver of rage and fear shook through her. “All the females? Anyone who can bear children?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. I won’t find out details from Graeb until I prove myself more trustworthy. And even then, I am not of the first wave so I might never learn it all.”

His Dar-like shrug, his lack of interest made her want to scream, to tell him about the lives that would be ruined. She forced herself to choke back the anger and speak calmly. “Graeb. The one with strange hair.”

He nodded and a hint of a smile touched his mouth. “That’s a color typical of Dar. He wears it long for that reason. Unseemly pride.”

He half turned on the bed so he faced her. “I know,” he said in a low voice. “You would like to kill me and all of my kind. I can feel your anger almost as if it were my own.”

She inched away. “You’re a mind reader too?”

“No. I feel you trying to impose your will, your desire to create violence. It seems that such a thing can go both ways.”

“Oh.”

Then he had to feel the river of desire that flowed incessant through her, untouched by the anger and fear—perhaps part of her primitive need for comfort.

“What will you do?” she asked. “I can’t—I won’t sit up here naked while the Dar rampage through my town.”

“You have no choice, Leah Parisi. Neither do I.” He leaned forward and pressed a kiss to her forehead.

Rage filled her again—at herself for responding to his touch and at him for such a glib response. “You can do something. I might be some sort of prisoner, but you have a choice.” She raised her hand.

He grabbed her wrist before she could shove or hit him. “You are something of a fool,” he said as if remarking on the weather. “I am much stronger than you, yet you persist in trying to attack me. Something of what they say about humans is true, you know. Useless destructive rage.”

She pressed her teeth together to keep from shouting and bringing more of the Dar upstairs. “I’d rather be angry than a brainwashed incubator.”

“Would you insist on anger if it resulted in your death?”

She stopped struggling against his grip. “I don’t know,” she said at last. “I don’t want to die. But I must do something. You wouldn’t understand.” She said it to sting, but of course he didn’t take offense. He was a hard creature to insult.

“Hmm.” He relaxed his hold on her wrist but still kept his fingers wrapped around her. “I understand that I would rather be dead than create more units.”

“Oh.” She looked down at his powerful hand and tried different meanings of his words. Finally she said, “So when you say you had no choice, you meant—”

“I cannot allow us to win if the Dar or halfings would do to you what was done to us.”

She studied his face, trying to see the truth. All she felt was that current of desire, and then, something like desperation, deeper than her own. “Oh,” she said again. Could anyone, even a Dar manufacture such emotion? And why bother? She wasn’t even sure she knew how to separate her feelings from the ones she read.

“Gabriel,” she said. “I don’t understand, but I’m ready to listen. Explain it to me if you can.”

Chapter Five

“We are to avoid violence. That much I understand,” Gabriel began, when a door slammed downstairs.

He fell silent and they both looked at the closed door.

“Are they gone?” she asked.

He rubbed at his forehead as if trying to erase pain. “For now they leave two at each house until it’s secured. Someone is downstairs. Waiting.”

“There are only two hundred, you said.”

He released her, though he was so close to her, she could feel the heat of him from her shoulders to her feet.

He looked at the door then in a low voice he spoke. “I was wrong. I didn’t know the truth. There are more, at least twice as many. No, I didn’t lie to you. I had been told that the other ships were sent elsewhere. They weren’t. And the human families are also a myth, it seems. We are to remain isolated in this town. The Dar and your government have made a deal.”

She swallowed. “That’s what you meant. When you said that the town isn’t considered under attack. Oh, Jesus. But how will you Dar deal with the people who don’t want you here? I mean it’s a dinky town, but there are more than five hundred houses.”

“I don’t know.”

“Let me go, Gabriel. Let me warn people.”

“No. I can’t.”

“But why? How can you let it happen? You just said you wouldn’t let the units get started up.” Whatever that meant.

“I don’t...” For the first time he seemed at a loss. “Graeb. The others. Me. We might be destroyed if you warn other humans.”

“This is an invasion. It has to be stopped.”

“Leah. I can’t be the one to harm the halflings. I can’t allow you to, either. But I wouldn’t worry, if I were you.” He stood and paced. “I don’t know the details but I know enough to believe the plan is far-fetched. It’s suicide. It is hard to imagine halflings’ control over human minds is that strong or that they can hold it for so long.” For a moment he slowed and looked at her with something like warmth in his face. “Not if humans are like you. What can they understand that I don’t?”

A voice shouted up the stairs. She tightened her hold on the sheet and shrank back against the headboard.

A dark-haired man appeared in the doorway and gibbered at Gabriel, who gibbered and hissed back. Then the man strode across to her and leaned over and drew in a deep sniff.

She blushed when she realized what he was doing. “You’re smelling for um, sex. Aren’t you. Seeing if I smell like cinnamon.”

He straightened. “You know? The markers? He told you?” He jerked a thumb at Gabriel.

She shook her head. “No. Pretty easy to figure out.”

The other halfling regarded her for a moment and she could feel his puzzlement. The way she could pry into Gabriel apparently meant she had hints of the rest of them.

“You are an exceptional creature. I won’t try to convince you.” His English wasn’t as flawless as Gabriel’s. There was a hiss and flatness to his voice. “You have been given a choice between us. Or perhaps you would like both?”

She held back her scream and waved a shaking hand. “Go. Go away, I mean, sorry. That’s okay. Thanks.”

But he didn’t leave. “You lied to me just now.” He spoke English to Gabriel and sounded almost apologetic. “Why did you say you’d finished with her already?” He eyed her as if she could answer.

Gabriel stared stolidly at the man. “I have no need to lie. You forget I only arrived here a day or so ago and I’m not entirely recovered. Travel coma, you know. My mind is still slipping on occasion.”

“You can’t tell when you’ve had a fema—”

“I will take care of this. A full hour so I might rest too.”

The other man nodded and then lapsed into the bizarre noises that passed for speech. He closed the door and left them alone again.

She began to talk, ask questions rather than let the fun begin. “What did he say in your language?”

“Not much. He knew me back at the unit and said he was surprised that I hadn’t been on the first ships, so clearly he’s not high ranking.”

“Why?”

“He doesn’t know which among us was in the Dar’s confidence.”

“Were you in charge back in Dar? High ranking?”

Gabriel didn’t answer. He went to the window and stared out of it. “He’s given me the hour. If you don’t calm down, if you’re not marked, we can take you to the center instead. Then he and I must move on. We can return later.”

“What will you do? Implant seed all afternoon, you farmers?”

The strange male turned away from the window and came back to the bed. Even his motions, fluid and careful, were exotic. He sat at the edge, obviously trying not to crowd her—yet. “No. We will patrol the streets. Keep the peace.”

She snorted. “Yeah, I suppose you guys are gonna need time off from all that planting. Can’t do too many I guess. Gonna go limp pretty soon.”

He wrinkled his nose as if considering something distasteful. “I hear we have a shorter refractory period than humans.”

“Would you speak English?”

He didn’t move. “That *is* English. Ha, I believe I know your language better than you do.”

She was opening her mouth to argue when she realized he wore the hint of a smile again and was perhaps teasing her. Interesting that a Dar indulged in that. “Okay, you win. What does refractory mean?”

“It’s the recovery time before a male can achieve another erection.”

The nausea rose again. “God, you make it sound so clinical. I suppose you have to. Shoving yourself inside all sorts of women. What about diseases?”

He sighed. “We are immune to nearly every human STD. That’s an acronym that means sexually transmitted—”

“I know that one. Sex means nothing to you halflings then.”

He shook his head. “You’re wrong. I have had only had one partner and we were friends.”

She wanted to keep him talking and she found she was actually curious. “Why only one? Is your society monogamous? I’m getting the impression you guys’ll do anyone.”

“Most females, even halflings, don’t want a halfling.” He rubbed his palms over his face, as if he were immensely weary. “Humans are considered less attractive. Graeb and several of the others believe that impregnating fully human women is a sign of their great loyalty to the Dar way—because earth females are undesirable.”

She closed her eyes and pulled the covers higher. “It’s disgusting. Forced breeding.”

He unlaced and yanked off his boots then slid onto the bed. “Yes. It is.”

“And you’re saying no one wants it. Not even the ones doing the forcing.”

“That’s not entirely true. I want it. I want you.”

She felt a stab of panic or desire. She had no idea which. Both. “Glad one of us will have fun.”

“Won’t you?”

“Yes. Happy birthday to me,” she said. “I’m being invaded by a space alien.”

“Let me make it good for you,” he said.

“Lie back and enjoy it. How can you guys do this?”

“I don’t know. I won’t.” A confusing mixture of emotion and weariness almost overcame the strong sensation of lust she felt. His confusion, their lust. “Listen, Leah. You would have to be a prisoner, but I think it’s possible to keep you from being bred.”

“But if I let you screw me, I won’t have to go to prison?”

He nodded. “Any who are willingly bred go free. But because you are so unusual, you will be tied when you are alone. I’m sorry.”

She choked down another bolt of useless anger and even scooted across the bed. She put a hand on his upper arm and gave it a tentative stroke. “Listen. I don’t want to raise such a fuss that the other guy will come up here.”

He turned toward her. Her breath caught in her throat. This was going to happen. Shit, she’d make it on her own terms as much as she could. “I don’t want to go to prison. You won’t have to tie me up.” She snorted. “I’m not in the mood but—”

He stopped her with his mouth gently pressed to hers. A few heartbeats later, the kiss deepened and she let it. God, she couldn’t stop herself from responding to the taste of him.

She pulled back and whispered, “I know it’s not a choice. But... Can you hold on for a minute? Please. Wait.”

He drew away at once, even removed his hands from her shoulders.

The kisses had befuddled her, left her head swimming, her blood pumping hard. She didn’t know what she wanted. She steadied her breath. “I suppose I can pretend we’re actual lovers.”

“We will be lovers,” he said calmly. “I’ve already decided. No matter what happens, you’re mine.”

She opened her mouth to tell him he was wrong, as well as an asshole, when he said, “Leah Parisi, I can feel that anger boiling in you. I said it wrong because I meant your existence, not you. There’re no words for it in your language. You are important to me.”

She forgot her indignation and gave a startled laugh. “What are you talking about? We don’t know each other.”

He stretched out on the bed on his back again and leaned on his elbows as he recited a list. “You are intriguing and exotic.” The very word she used when she thought of him. He went on, “You’re brave. You’re generous enough to feed a hungry stranger. You can think when you are enraged. And you are attracted to me as much as I am to you.”

“Hey, no, just a sec—”

“No,” he interrupted. He sat up again and for the first time his voice held a note of intensity. “Don’t lie because I can feel it and, more important, it’s a start. Give me something to believe in. I’ve lost anything else. For a long time I’ve had nothing, belonged to nothing. If the bond beyond sexual attraction is imaginary, please, remain silent. At least don’t take it away.”

“You mean some kind of symbol or talisman or something?”

He brushed two knuckles over her cheek. “Yes, good. That is as fine an explanation as any. A totem.”

“Heck, I could use something like that myself.” She nodded. “All right. I’ll pretend it was the way it was downstairs. Back when the world was relatively normal. I guess it can be an hour to forget.”

“An hour to remember,” he corrected her. “The rest we might wish to forget.” He cleared his throat. “There is a way. I can leave a scent and leave you be.”

“Like a dog, you mean? Peeing to mark his territory?”

He frowned. “Nothing so distasteful. But it is less than full intercourse.”

Leah should have agreed eagerly. She should have said, yes, leave a mark and get out of my bedroom. “We’ll play it by ear,” she said instead. “We won’t let anyone else dictate what you and I do. Or—or don’t do.” She hoped he didn’t hear her ragged, uneven breath. Her mind might be filled with shock, horror and dismay. Her body was simply eager.

He reached for her but only rested his hands lightly on her shoulders again, fingertips caressing her skin.

“Am I ugly to you?” he whispered, sounding curious rather than worried.

She shook her head. “No. Not at all.”

“Good. I find you extremely attractive. You hair, your eyes.” He stared down at her mouth. “Your lips.” He slowly leaned in for a kiss—two soft, light brushes of the lips and then, with a shared groan, they sank to the bed.

Halbrut moved slowly, as he might if he were tracking a wild animal. But the hunger to touch her filled him and he soon pushed down the sheet covering her so he could stroke her back, and sweet round behind. She’d put her leg over his hip and he let his fingers slip between her legs. He gasped and pulled back. “You are so—so wet.”

“Um, yeah.” She tried to close her legs.

Halbrut understood she grew self-conscious. He should not have expressed his surprise, not with a human. “It’s lovely,” he said at once and hoped he could convey the wonder and attraction he felt.

Perhaps she sensed it because she squirmed closer, pressing herself against his erection. Astounding that he could feel her heat through the trousers he wore. Could he take off his clothes without causing her alarm? He longed for her naked skin to touch his but he did not want to startle her again. She might not like it. The humans were so prurient.

Ah, but he was soon startled to discover that the strange shyness about sexual events disappeared in private.

She reached for the buttons of his shirt and he quickly obliged by stripping off all his clothes. After a moment’s hesitation, he rolled onto his back so she would take the lead and he would not frighten her.

She sat up and examined him, her gaze moving up and down his body.

He stared back.

“You’re beautiful. I have wondered for hours what you looked like,” she said at last. He shouldn’t have cared, yet he was relieved. When he reached for her, she avoided his

arms. So he used every scrap of self-control to place his hands flat on the bed and not touch her, as she explored his body with more than her eyes.

“It’s embarrassing how long I’ve wanted to touch and taste you,” she said in a low voice, as if he’d forced her to confess.

She kissed and lapped his skin with delicate touches of her mouth and he shivered as she nuzzled at the faint traces of hair on his belly and arms. Her fingers stroked his cock, squeezing. He closed his eyes, willing himself to not erupt in her hand. He had never been so excited. The dry touch of her hand reminded him of the more normal, quiet halfling lovemaking and allowed him to regain the familiar and welcome composure.

Until she licked his penis and put her mouth over the top of it.

He grunted in surprise. “Oh,” he whispered. “Is this something you’ll do willingly?”

She pulled off. “You taste flipping wonderful. Not my favorite activity usually, but yes. More than willingly.” Her head ducked down and she went back to sucking.

Taste. Yes. He squeezed his eyes shut again. “Stop,” he groaned. “I need.”

She ignored his plea and held him and sucked and licked him without mercy.

Her hair fell across his legs, an achingly sweet tickle. Every nerve ending in his body screamed for more and for release. He was going to lose control.

He never lost control.

“Stop,” he said again.

This time she did. He had to recover his breath and his ability to move.

“You are amazing. Now you lie down.” He immediately wished he hadn’t ordered her to, but she didn’t seem to take offense or grow frightened.

“You’re tasty,” she said as she slid down to lie on her back. “Yummy.”

“You’ll let me do similar things to you?” He waited until she nodded before he kissed her skin, licked her breast. The nipple contracted and he took it in his mouth. She groaned so he sucked harder. Very good, but he wanted more, so he kissed his way down her belly. A nice thatch of hair between her legs. He nudged her knees apart and looked. A more flushed and complex slit than the other females he’d seen.

The others had whispered about obscene human female parts, oozing and not tucked decently away, but he thought the opening to her body looked like a decadent delicate flower and the scent was heady. He gave a small, experimental taste. And then another lick.

She wiggled nervously. “Don’t you do that?”

“Hmm.” He couldn’t answer because his mouth was full. There was the clitoris, removed from her opening, and the rest of her, flushed, damp, so exotic. He savored the salty sweetness, sucking at her clitoris.

Oh, the way she squirmed and then when he pressed his fingers into her body, her soft breathy cry, he had to stop touching her or he’d explode.

Why not? Let go of the usual decorum. But he wanted to be inside her and feel that astounding wetness on his cock.

She stiffened under his fingers and mouth. The strangled cry burst from her as the tight sheath pulsed on his fingers. He was startled, though he knew it was not pain, but a wild, fierce release for her. Passion. Dar had no translation for that word.

He moved up so that he loomed over her on his hands and knees. Did she mind? No, for she put her hands on his waist and pulled him down to her. His cock slid against the wet, warm part of her and that would have been enough, that would have given her the stamped odor of him, but she reached between them and wrapped her hand around him, shifting her body so the head of his cock lay just outside her slit. When she let go of him, he slowly pushed, feeling her flesh part and engulf him.

“Does this hurt you?” he managed to ask. The tissue of her cunt was so reactive, so fragile in appearance.

“A bit, it’s good,” she gasped and slanted up to accommodate him. He held himself still then began the measured slide into the heat again. All the way inside, until his body lay against hers. He remained motionless for a second, letting their breathing and her tiny swaying move him.

How could anything be so tight and hot and slick? Even his heartbeat pulsed through him, allowed him to feel her.

“I’ll soon finish,” he murmured. “I don’t want to. This is wonderful.”

He had to move. More important than drawing his next breath—he needed to feel the slippery enclosure of that wonderful wet cunt. Tentatively he slid partway out into the cool air then back into the astounding tight heat. Very gently. Slowly. Again. And the third time, she squirmed under him and bucked up so that he almost slammed hard into her.

Your sheath is too tight, he tried to say. He didn’t want to hurt her. But then astoundingly, she was just tight enough.

“So wet,” he groaned and her warm hands pulled him down into her again. Greedy motions without restraint. No slow dance of copulation and long, blossoming release as he’d once believed to be perfect. No. This was much better.

Leah writhed and he sensed she wanted more activity. She pulled her leg up, bending her knees in a way that meant that he drove even deeper into her. He had not known such a thing was possible.

“Leah,” he groaned. “It doesn’t hurt?”

Her ragged breathing punctuated each word. “No. Please, I want you. Deeper.”

He gave up all caution. He thrust and forgot to think. Only sensation mattered. And the warm body under and around him.

And so unfettered. The rhythm of their bodies meeting and nearly parting became a wild animal rutting. Their skin slicked with sweat. He pushed harder still, and each time his body met hers, he made a small circle to feel that sweet slide of her skin, felt the damp embrace of her wet sex.

He could never have safely moved like this before and the freedom exhilarated him almost as much as the touch of her body.

Suddenly she cursed and wriggled beneath him as if trying to release herself from his impaling cock. He froze. Now at last he’d hurt her.

“Don’t stop.” She clutched him, one hand on his lower back, the other at his waist. “Bloody hell. No, don’t stop.”

And he gratefully pushed deeper into her, as if he could push himself entirely into her. She pushed her open mouth onto his shoulder and his flesh muffled the noise of her shout. Pleasure. Reckless, astounding bliss. The wordless cry against his shoulder was her wild orgasm. Even the pain of her teeth biting him added to his triumph and it bore him forward on a flood of sensation. He exploded.

Almost unbearable pleasure seized him. The world went dark for several heartbeats. The explosion was far faster and far more powerful than anything he'd known.

"Holy shit," she said under him.

Did he crush her? He lay across her, still hard inside her, but with no urge to do more than hold her as close as possible.

"Holy shit," he agreed. He liked the expression though he wasn't sure what exactly it signified—something good, he hoped. With a soft grunt he rolled onto his side, pulling her along so he wouldn't have to leave her body.

"Is it always like that?" She gave a weak laugh. "I mean maybe it's not such a bad thing that you're..." She shook her head. "What the hell am I saying? I'm nuts. Wow."

She touched his shoulder, and he craned his neck to examine the already-fading red marks of her teeth.

"Oh, whoops," she muttered.

He kissed her arm. "It felt good."

"The bite felt good?"

"Everything. Felt. Good. And no, it is not always like that. It has never been." As a Dar, naturally he disliked hyperbole, but this wasn't even close to exaggeration. Good? It was one of the highlights of his life. Too bad it had only lasted minutes rather than hours.

He reflected that perhaps the human embarrassment about sex came because of the rage of lust that overtook them during the act. Such blinding passion could make any being self-conscious once the event ended. Even he felt slightly mortified that he'd allowed himself to indulge in such unleashed fervor. And the wild thrusting would look very odd to anyone watching. He felt his mouth curve into a real smile. No, when he

thought of their sexual union, desire formed his main response. He wanted to feel that again.

Her brow furrowed and she sniffed. “Oh, the scent. It’s like freshly cut wood.” For some reason that made her giggle.

His hands rubbed her back, tracing her spine, feeling the fibers of her muscle. “Is it strange to you?”

“Yeah, but it’s nice. I like it.” She sighed and closed her eyes. “I don’t know how you did that. I’ve never come twice, not like that. And certainly never had my entire body reduced to ashes like that. I forgot everything. But you.”

She tightened the muscles of her sheathe, squeezing him within her. She gasped. “Oh, you’re still hard.”

He gently pumped, hoping she’d clutch him again. “Mm.”

“Wow.” She pulled off of him and sprawled on the bed near but not touching him.

“Will you lie down, stay with me for a little longer?” he asked.

She lay on her side and rubbed her face against his shoulder, a charming rough gesture. Affectionate, he hoped.

She kissed his shoulder and asked, “You could do it again?”

He shrugged. “I want you.”

“But isn’t time up?” She squirmed impatiently yet didn’t move away from him. “No. Damn. This is too weird, Gabriel.”

He breathed in her scent, which blended nicely with the marker of the sex. Clean but musky and perfect. “Yes. It’s nearly an hour.” Regret filled him all the way to his bones. The rare pleasure would end soon. Yet some emptiness had been filled, he thought. Saturated to a core that he hadn’t even known existed.

She rolled onto her back and stretched her arms over her head. “I’d give anything to make the rest of it go away. Everything about the Dar, except maybe you.”

“Not me?”

She shook her head. “You, I like, I think.”

He smiled. “That is better than I would expect. Leah. Leeahhh. Mm. Please, another kiss or two?”

She allowed him to gather her close, press his skin to hers. They kissed.

Gavlut opened the door without knocking. Leah gave a squawk and dove for the cover. Halbrut wanted to hide as well. Gavlut seemed to bring the whole, messy world with him.

The time with her was over.

Halbrut took a moment to accept the truth, as he always had, as befit the Dar. He slid from the bed and looked for his clothes.

Gav leaned over her and sniffed. *Yes, I can tell it's done. Funny scent of these humans. Good. You didn't have to keep her tied up. Is she entirely placid?*

Halbrut didn't get to answer for Leah yelled, “Would you please get the hell out? Don't you know about knocking?”

Gav raised his eyebrows. *No, that's not placid behavior. We will have to bind her then. Can't have her loose and getting into trouble.*

Halbrut sighed as he shoved his feet into the boots he'd been given. He thought about protesting but didn't want to bring any sort of unwanted attention to the silly woman. Of course she didn't understand the conversation and she didn't know that she should not have shown her volatile spirit. *Go ahead and tie her, but only if we come back, because she lives alone*, he told Gav.

Yes, we don't want her to be injured now that she's bred. More valuable.

Halbrut fought an unusually strong ripple of anger and didn't answer. He would not have felt the strangely gut-wrenching, entirely human rage before encountering this woman. The power of unfamiliar, unwelcome sensations almost made him wish he hadn't met her.

Accept the truth, he reminded himself, and the truth for him now was Leah.

He tied his bootlaces while Gav tied up the grumbling Leah.

“I can't believe this is happening again,” she told them. “No wonder you Dar are so good with knots. You spend your days putting people in bondage.”

This one is very different, Gav said as he stood back from the bed. The others didn't talk nearly as much when we entered their houses. It is almost as if we had no influence on her. Could be dangerous.

Have you done any women yet? Halbrut asked to change the subject, as he carefully draped the cover over her body. He couldn't bring himself to look at Leah, squirming and spread across the bed.

One. And she didn't say a word. Just lay there, thank goodness. Ha, but she did smile. And it felt nothing like one of us. Pleasant enough, but they're disgustingly wet down there. You notice?

Halbrut risked a glance at the fuming Leah, glad she didn't understand.

Let's go, he said to Gav. To her he spoke in English. "We'll return within a couple of hours."

He and Gav made their way out the door. Gav began talking about the plans he'd heard. Halbrut wanted to hear these but he stopped on the gravel path and told his comrade, "I have forgotten something."

He went back inside and looked around the kitchen, which was nothing like the neat room he'd first entered that morning. Food and empty containers littered the counters. The refrigerator door stood open. The cat was curled on a chair.

He stared down at the knife in his hand and sighed.

Halbrut had made vows all of his life—the units demanded it. For most of his life he'd sworn a twice-daily oath to the Dar. Later on, after they abandoned him, he took an oath to survive. Now he'd made some sort of solemn promise to Leah. Not even clear to him what it would mean. It would prove something of a nuisance, no doubt.

He bounded back up to the bedroom, taking the stairs three at a time.

Chapter Six

Leah dozed off. Perhaps a combination of shock and fantastic sex and rage. Not a normal sort of combo, but this was nothing like a normal sort of day. The thumping on the door woke her. She released a long breath when she saw who it was.

Gabriel knelt by her and stroked her face for a brief moment. Then he stood and for the fourth time that day, he undid the knots holding her. As he worked he spoke. “Leah. I will trust you. You have told me you are not a friend, but I must release you, just as you must do whatever you believe is best. I’ll return here as soon as I can. If you’re in this town, I’ll find you.”

She didn’t make a smartass remark. His words, solemn as a pledge but ragged with worry, made her speak honestly. “If I can escape, I’m leaving. I have to get out of here. Out of town, I mean.”

”I don’t think you’ll be able to. We are well organized, it seems. My companion says there is some kind of blockade and we are aided by humans.”

“God. I have to try.”

“I understand.” He brushed his lips over her cheek, then gave her mouth a light, almost tentative kiss, as he slipped the handle of a long well-worn blade into her hand. He

stepped back quickly. “If you decide you must kill a Dar, start and finish with me. I don’t want to be responsible for the death of any of my comrades.”

She laughed, but from the way he watched her, she understood it wasn’t a joke.

“I won’t kill anyone, unless someone tries to kill me,” she said at last. She sat up and reached to brush a strand of his dark hair from his face. “It is a nightmare. But listen. Gabriel, if I don’t see you again. Well. I’m just happy you were the one. I’m glad I’ve known you so that I can’t hate the Dar.”

His eyes glowed with the eerie gold. “Precisely. The talisman.”

She slid from the bed.

He ran a hand down her naked back and pressed a kiss to her forehead. “Wait at least five minutes.”

And he was gone, nearly silent on the stairs. Amazing in those large boots.

She dressed and made her way down to her kitchen. The sight of the cupboards hanging open and half-eaten food on the counters made her catch her breath in a sob. This was not going to be enough to push her over the edge—she knew that she would see worse and could not indulge in crying. Yet.

She wasn’t surprised to discover that neither her landline nor her cell phone had a signal. Did the Dar manage to block the towers? Destroy them? She pocketed the cell phone. Maybe she’d have more luck at the edge of town.

She found the bag of cat food, more than half empty now, and poured some into a bowl.

“Goodbye, Fluke,” she murmured as she watched the cat stroll over to the bowl and give a sniff.

One last thing.

In the closet on the top shelf behind the shoebox of Christmas decorations, she found her father’s old service pistol, heavy, black and terrifying. Years ago he’d taught her how to load and fire the thing. Now she wasn’t even sure how to release the safety.

Ignoring the butterflies—more like crows—that had taken up residence in her stomach, she put on her old black peacoat and pushed the gun into one pocket, Gabriel’s knife, wrapped in a towel held on with rubber bands, into the other.

She started to close the kitchen door behind her. No. If she didn’t make it back, Fluke would need an escape route. And it was not as if she could protect her home from the thieves. They’d already invaded. She left her door ajar and walked away without looking back.

Her elderly neighbor answered the door at the first knock.

Mrs. Ludnick wore her steel grey hair in curlers and a large shapeless blue housedress. She beamed at Leah who wanted to cry with relief at the sight of the familiar smile—until the old lady led her into the house.

“I’ve had visitors.” Mrs. Ludnick waved a casual hand at the open cupboards and food-stained furniture. “You’ll have to excuse the mess. They promised to come back later and help clean up.”

The kitchen was decimated, worse than Leah’s own.

Leah squatted and shoveled some garbage back into the can that lay on its side. “Oh shit, the Dar were here too!”

“Dear, I don’t like cursing.”

The round old lady leaned over and picked up the ripped remains of a box of cereal, clucking under her breath.

“You have to understand, Mrs. Ludnick! Those people invaded your home. They were *Dar*.”

“Nonsense. Boisterous young people, but I’d welcome them back. They were cheerful and friendly. And quite taken with Milly.”

Leah’s heart nearly stopped. “Milly is here?”

She ran into the other room. Mrs. Ludnick’s fifteen-year-old granddaughter sat on the couch, mechanically eating popcorn. She smiled at Leah without stopping the steady hand-to-mouth-to-lap-to-mouth action of eating.

Leah moved into the room and peered down at the skinny young teenager. “Are you all right? Milly? Did they...” She swallowed hard. “Milly, did they do anything to you?”

“Oh, I’m fine. They said I’m too young yet, but maybe I’ll get to help out in a year or maybe more. That’ll be fun. They promised.” She sounded as placid as Mrs. Ludnick.

Leah wanted to shake them both. She blurted, “They would have raped you.”

“Don’t talk so dirty.” Mrs. Ludnick stood behind her. “Honestly, Leah, it’s not like you to get all worked up about nothing.”

A phone lay on the table next to Milly and Leah grabbed it up. No dial tone, only silence.

She resisted the urge to throw the phone down, and carefully put it next to Milly instead. She went back to the kitchen to help Mrs. Ludnick clean up.

“Don’t you see?” she asked as she wiped flour off the countertop. “Your kitchen is a mess. They marched into your house and turned it upside down. They almost raped Milly. Don’t you understand? These people are invaders.”

Mrs. Ludnick was on her way back to the kitchen. “Nice young people and not all worked up as you, Leah. Calm and pleasant people are always welcome, if you understand me. Honestly, I think you need to take some time off from work. Would you like a cup of tea? That might help.”

“Did you see they were Dar? Did you notice their eyes?”

“Nonsense. So do you want tea or not? You need to calm down.”

Leah counted to ten. “No tea, thanks. I’ll calm down.” She kept her voice steady—and tried to imitate the soothing tone she could vaguely recall from the halflings who’d come into her kitchen. “The people who came into your house are not entirely human, Mrs. Ludnick. They are half Dar. And they have done some sort of brainwash on you. They’ve made you think they were normal. Certainly you can see that they wrecked your place, can’t you?”

“I don’t think you’re calm enough, dear. They were perfectly nice people, whoever they were. Yes, I can see they did make a mess, but they haven’t had all the advantages we have. I understand that they grew up in very different circumstances. They promised

to come back in a while and I'll show them where everything goes. And, really, it's not up to you to decide who I let into my house."

Leah dusted off the knees of her jeans and straightened up. She'd have to find someone else who hadn't been exposed to whatever it was the Dar did to people. "Okay, Mrs. Ludnick. I'll see you soon. Keep Milly safe, okay?"

Mrs. Ludnick gave a snort that almost sounded like her usual self. "Naturally I will keep that girl safe. You'd best go on back to your place now, honey. They said we should stay home for a while and I think that's wisest. Home is best."

Leah needed to get out immediately. She tried not to slam the door behind her.

She wanted to run but decided she should walk casually, as if on an errand. Hard to look inconspicuous when the streets were empty. Laketon wasn't exactly a hopping place, but some traffic came through town, usually.

Not today. Uncanny silence was broken only by the skitter of a crumpled candy wrapper blowing down the empty street. Leah hadn't thought much about the rhythms of life in the little town, but now that they might have changed forever, she felt as if something precious had been destroyed. She longed for the return of the little world she knew.

Even Laketon's two main commercial streets were empty, the glass storefronts dark. She expected sirens, shouts. Something other than the rustle of the few remaining leaves on trees and the caw of crows. Her steps sped up as she turned onto West Main Street. As she went around the corner she almost ran into two of them.

Tall, foreign, with a touch of the characteristic long nose and round eyes of the Dar. They stopped and stared at her. No, they couldn't read her mind, she told herself and tried to train her face into that smooth expressionless mask Mrs Ludnick had worn.

"Where are you going?" one asked.

"Home," she said and knew the fear made her speak too forcefully.

The other one leaned toward her and drew in a long breath. Oh god, she knew what for. At least he'd smell it; thank you, Gabriel. God. She forced herself to remain still, her mouth drawn into a horrible smile.

They exchanged quiet hisses.

“Go on, then,” they said.

“Have a nice day,” one of them added and she had to bite her lip to keep hysterical laughter at bay.

She waited until they disappeared before she tried the door of the Circle Lounge, the bar where she worked. When she pressed her nose to the glass and peered into the gloomy interior, she saw no sign of Billy or any of the others.

No one stood in the bakery or the craft store, though those doors weren't locked.

Two blocks away, she caught sight of a sign of life. A man pumped gas at the Sheetz station. He had a round pleasant face, greying hair and she recognized him. He'd come into the bar a few times. With a huge sense of relief, she ran up to him. “Hey, hi! You got a cell phone I can borrow?”

“Not working,” the man said. Doonie—that was his name.

“Do you have any idea what's going on? Where is everyone?”

Doonie shrugged. “We got out of work early over at the ball-bearing factory. Everyone just went home.” He pointed his chin at the guy behind the counter. “He said he's closing up. Feeling sort of tired for some reason. I am too.” He yawned. “Just wanna get home.”

She looked around then leaned close. “Doonie, listen. It's the Dar doing this. Making everything so strange,” she said in a low voice. “They're back.”

The man snickered. “I think you been drinking too much of your own stuff over at the bar, Leah.”

“I'm telling you, Doonie. They were in my house and in my neighbor's house. She didn't even stop them from wrecking her place. They were locked up at the fort and got out, managed to escape or something. Don't you see how weird everything is today? I swear, I'm not lying.”

He carefully slotted the nozzle into the pump and screwed on his gas cap. “Okay, so you're not lying. What're they doing? Taking over the world again?”

“Doonie! I’m serious.” She couldn’t ruffle him, apparently. But at least she could try to get some help. “Fine, I’ll prove it to you. Can I get a ride with you?”

He gave her a gleaming smile. “Well of course, little lady, hop in.”

“Have you tried leaving town yet?” She struggled with the seat belt, as he eased into the driver’s seat.

“Why would I? Nothing I need.”

“Would you drive to the edge of town? I heard a rumor there was trouble there.”

He gave her a puzzled look and then the smile was back. “If I do that, how about after that you come on home with me? I’ll rustle us up some lunch.”

“Sure. If everything is normal, I’ll make you lunch.” She turned to stare out the window at empty streets. There was the only car on the road.

“If the guys knew I was with you, they’d be apeshit. You’re called the last bastion at the Circle. Know that?”

“Huh.” She chewed her lip, only half listening.

“Apeshit. And turns out you wanted ol’ Doonie. Who’d have thought?”

She turned from the window and narrowed her eyes at him. “The only reason I’m here is that there is an emergency going on.”

“The guys don’t need to know that.” He nudged her with his elbow. “Just spend a little time with old Doonie and then make up your mind.”

A day ago she would have had a good comeback. Some sort of remark that would make him laugh. Or at least his friends laugh. She knew how to keep her distance without losing her tips.

Now she had no interest in anything but getting out of Laketon. Getting help. Stopping the Dar.

“Slow down,” she yelled, pointing out the windshield. “Look. The side gate to the fort is closed. Have you ever seen that?”

Doonie glanced over then turned his attention back to driving. “Must be some kind of alert or something. That’s all. Bet the main entrance is still open.”

“Drive around front and we’ll see,” she said.

“No, I wanna get to the edge of town, show you nothing’s going on and then get you back home and have some fun.”

What planet did this guy come from? She twisted in the seat. “Doonie. You get out of work for no reason. There is absolutely no one around. Doesn’t this stuff strike you as odd? There’s something wrong.”

He tapped his hands on the wheel. “Of course no one’s around. This is Dullsville, USA.”

He sped up as they reached the end of the town limits, but almost at once he slowed again and gave a whistle. “Looks like something is happening, Leah.”

Men in green uniforms. She slid down in the seat, panicked. The uniformed beings turned to face the car and held up a hand. But they didn’t have the dull olive green uniforms. These were real Army. Humans. They wore gas masks, but something in the way they stood and interacted told her they were not Dar or haflings. Their movements were more hurried, jerkier, than the Dar. Or maybe whatever Gabriel had done to her made her better at spotting the truth.

Almost before Doonie’s car had stopped, she’d jumped out and was barreling over to the nearest uniformed man.

He spoke before she could get a word out. “Sorry, ma’am, this road is closed. The town is currently under quarantine.”

“You know? You know about them?” she said.

“Ma’am. I’m afraid I’m going to have to ask you and your husband to return home.”

Doonie, his hands shoved deep in the pockets of his low-riding jeans, ambled over. “What’s going on?”

“We have to ask you to return to your home.” The man spoke in the same impersonal, calming manner. The mask didn’t make him frightening. It only gave him less affect.

“Some kind of problem with the air?” Doonie nodded at the mask. He sounded only slightly interested. Leah stared at him. Unbelievable.

“No, not the air. It’s the Dar.” She turned to the soldier, trying to hold back her panic. “Tell him. They escaped from the fort.”

She grew uncomfortably aware of the circle of soldiers that surrounded her, but still spoke to the first guy. “They’ve escaped. They’re...they’re out and taking over Laketon.”

“Welcome to it, I say,” Doonie said with a laugh. “Come on, Leah, let’s get going. Don’t want to get sick.”

“Doonie, what is your problem? Are you on drugs? This is just fucking weird.”

One of the soldiers moved closer to Leah. Another spoke to Doonie. “Sir? I’m afraid there’s a problem. Your wife is showing some signs of the illness, excitability and paranoia so we’ll—”

“There’s nothing wrong with me,” she said. “Look at him, for God’s sake. The whole town’s been shut down, you all are out here talking about horrible biohazards and he’s willing to turn around and go home. Don’t you get it? The Dar! They’ve done something to the air or... Or something’s going on! No one seems to care.”

Doonie took a step back from her. “Whoa, hon, you’re awfully excited.”

“You’re awfully calm,” she retorted. “Too goddamn unruffled.”

Someone grabbed her arm. She twisted to glare up at the soldier who held her, but he was looking over her shoulder at Doonie, not her. “Sir? Perhaps you’d best let us deal with this problem. We promise to return your wife the minute we’ve run a detox.”

Doonie was already striding back to his car. “Fine. That sounds good.” He paused and hitched up his jeans and looked around at her. “Listen, Leah, if you need a place to go when they’re done with ya, come on by, okay?”

He slammed the car door and drove off, waving out the window once, like a man pulling away from an outdoor party.

She’d never thought Doonie was a genius, but under normal circumstances even he’d wonder why the hell the whole town had shut down and why the army wasn’t letting anyone out of the city limit. The Dar had done something to him. They had these soldiers fooled too.

Whenever she expressed outrage, she got in trouble. She bit back fear and anger and tried again. “Listen, I didn’t mean to sound alarmist. I’m sorry about that.” The smile hurt her mouth. “But I haven’t seen anyone sick in town.” No need to mention she hadn’t seen anyone at all. “So what’s this about illness?”

The soldiers might have been brainwashed but unfortunately they weren’t asleep. The one holding his rifle raised it slightly. “What is the heavy object in your pocket, ma’am?”

She had been fooling herself—she wouldn’t have been able to use it on anyone. Rather than pull it out and get herself shot she answered, “A gun.”

He silently reached into her pocket and pulled it out. As he held it up in front of his mask to examine it, the other soldier tightened his grip on her arm. “You’ll come with us, please.”

And just like that she’d been loaded into the back of some sort of truck, alone in the rumbling darkness, and driven off.

Two more soldiers, in the fully sealed strange white quarantine gear courteously helped her from the truck and led her into the fort. Oh Lord, she was almost back where she started. Back on the base.

A tall man in an ill-fitting uniform and no mask met the truck. The ruddy hair, the rounded eyes. A halfling.

How could she get the men on the truck to see and understand? Too late. They saluted the halfling and turned briskly away.

“Come,” the halfling said and gave her shoulder a small push to indicate where he wanted her to walk.

He walked behind her. “Your name?”

She ignored the question. “It’s not your eyes and it’s not the air—they’re wearing those masks. How the hell do you manage to brainwash everyone?” She stopped, glancing over her shoulder at him. “How come I’m not brainwashed?”

The half Dar gazed back at her without any sign of surprise.

“You may ask questions, but we won’t tolerate signs of resistance or of spreading discontent.” He had no emotion.

“But what the hell? Why the talk of quarantine?”

“That’s a temporary measure. We want to avoid panic. The humans aiding us in our work thought it best to use an excuse to keep out anyone who would enter the town.” The droning quality of his voice made her think he’d said these words over and over.

“Keep everyone else out and keep us in.”

He nodded.

“My government won’t allow—”

“The government gave this town to us, ma’am. We would have been forced to use violence otherwise. To prevent unnecessary conflict, your government has wisely allocated a section of territory for us.” No doubt about it. He’d said the words so often, he sounded bored. Tour guide at a new national park. The new home of the halfling invaders.

They’d reached a large barred room. Several people stood inside. She recognized the crazy man who thought he was Buddha’s cousin. There was also the man who heard voices. The one-eyed woman who kept cats. Swell, all of the town’s most famous eccentrics.

“Like you, they are not able to adjust,” the man said as he ushered her into the large room that contained a barred cell of a cage. “We are patient, however, and will allow some time for you to accept the important changes.” He nodded to her, just as he’d done with the soldiers. A dismissal.

He walked away.

Buddha’s cousin scurried over to her. As usual he wore a grubby blanket draped over his torso and he reeked of sweat and alcohol. In an urgent spittle-flecked whisper he spoke in her ear. “They’re back! No one will listen to me. The Dar are back.”

How strange to hear the echo of her own words coming from him. She nodded. “I know.”

“I must tell everyone,” he said. “Get me out of here so I can warn the world.”

The old lady gave them all a scornful stare and said nothing.

“I wish I could,” Leah said, patting his slumping shoulders. “I think we have to wait and figure something out. Don’t worry. We’ll be fine.”

Where was Gabriel—and would he discover she’d been grabbed? No doubt he was out on the streets dragging off anyone stupid enough to wander from home. But no one wanted to leave home—except the lunatics and the one woman who seemed to have developed some kind of immunity to the influence of the halflings.

She didn’t understand it, but supposed it had to do with her encountering him first. He protected her from succumbing to the lies—although she’d guess the protection was subconscious. Either that or she was going crazy like everyone else who could see the Dar clearly.

Gabriel. She wondered if she could summon him. Feel something intensely enough for him to sense her.

Someone howled and footsteps thundered behind the big doors beyond the pen. The atmosphere seemed to thicken and grow ominous as if a storm approached. Leah’s temples began to ache and the pain grew fierce when the door slammed open and a man ran into the area in front of the large cage.

Nothing good will happen. Where did that obvious thought come from? Not her own mind.

The soldiers burst in, followed by two halfling Dar who remained at rest and calm. The humans—soldiers and the man who was clearly some sort of intruder—shuffled uneasily. “Bastards!” the man yelled. “You evil creatures of Satan.” He was tattooed from his shoulders to his wrists and wore only a sleeveless undershirt and jeans. He clutched a gun in his shaking hand and pointed it at the soldiers. They immediately pulled their weapons and shouted. “Drop it.”

Soldiers and intruder stared at one another, shifting and growling.

Leah wondered if she were the only one to notice the halfling walking up behind the man, as nonchalant as if he were strolling to a bus stop.

“Put it down,” the Dar said quietly.

The man spun round and pointed the gun at the halfling. The pain grew more intense and Leah silently yelled at the man. *Drop it or fire.* But it was too late. He'd hesitated.

There was a flash but not from a gun. A hand at his throat, a hideous crunch and the man was dead.

A gasp and moan rose from the crowd in the pen and the soldiers lowered their weapons slowly.

The man's neck was broken. The halfling had jammed his chin up and back and such a simple motion was enough to kill the human.

The Dar murdered easily. As easily as drawing breath. Leah had heard that for years, all of her life, and now she'd witnessed it.

"Why did you kill him?" A soldier's voice was high and unsteady.

"We don't tolerate dangerous people. The recalcitrant, the angry or insane, yes, we will try to work with them." The halfling, who had the strange reddish hair of the leader she'd already seen, looked directly into the crowd. Everyone had instinctively pushed to the back of the pen. Someone moaned.

"For a time, we will try," he added softly and walked from the room.

The soldiers looked down at the body for a full minute then they shouldered their weapons. One grabbed the corpse's hands, another its legs. They heaved it up as a third soldier held open the door. Without a word or a look back at the people in the pen, the small group shuffled from the room.

The old cat lady began to cry. Leah went to her and patted her back, muttering nonsensical phrases of comfort. No one else spoke.

The old lady slumped onto the bench clutching Leah's hand. Leah stood next to her and silently argued with the voice that had told her nothing good would happen. The halfling's act had saved lives, perhaps. But her skin prickled with the horror.

The bloodless calm of the Dar was the stuff of nightmares. Alien.

Would Gabriel have done the same? He hadn't hurt her when she'd tried to get him with a knife, but she hadn't been a real threat.

What the hell difference did it make what he'd do? She wasn't going to see him again. There was the fact that she might be carrying his baby, but it was the wrong time of the month. Or rather, the right time of the month. No way would she be a breeding unit for these creatures.

Willing herself not to cry, she stared at the spot on the floor where the angry man had fallen dead. Murdered.

The old woman let go of Leah's hand. "I'm sorry," she said, stiff again. "I shouldn't have lost control."

Leah sighed. "Don't apologize. The Dar had that, didn't he? Control."

The old lady's voice quavered as she said the words. "They really are Dar."

"Halflings," Leah said. "They've been sent here." And she told them everything Gabriel had told her. "They're getting this town," she said at last. "Unless we stop them. We're the only ones."

The back of her neck prickled and she looked around.

He stood near them, hands loose at his sides, listening to her words.

Gabriel.

"You won't be able to," he said softly. The old lady cried out and clutched Leah's arm. Gabriel went on, "You'll be dead before the end of the day if you try."

He had some kind of metallic object that he inserted in the lock. It beeped and the door clicked open.

The old man rose to his feet. He trembled but his voice was firm as he said, "The girl didn't mean it. She doesn't know anything. She's just crazy. We're all crazy."

She smiled at the grey-haired man. "No it's all right. This one is okay."

The people in the cage gasped. And the old man whirled on her, turning from her protector to a snarling accuser faster than the Dar had killed the intruder.

"You're a spy for them," he said. "You wanted to find out what we know, you bitch. You're a whore for them."

“No. Remember? I was the one who was talking. Telling you what I know.” She waited for a moment but no one spoke. Their pinched and angry faces said enough, so she walked out of the cage and past Gabriel.

“Hold on,” he said, brandishing a pair of handcuffs.

She glared at him as she obediently held her hands out in front of her. “Bondage, again.”

“The soldiers know you’re a recalcitrant and would wonder why I let you loose,” he said under his breath. “Just in case we pass some—”

“I get it. Never mind.” She lowered her cuffed hands.

He pointed at the door. “Go on.”

“There is no one in that pen who wants to help me now, but there weren’t any who could anyway,” she said after he’d marched her from the huge room out to an empty corridor. “The only one with a gun was murdered by a Dar.”

“I understand he’d threatened a large group.”

She didn’t argue. The oppressive, heavy air seemed to have lifted. Something had eased the throbbing ache in her chest and head. The only change had been leaving the cage, but she suspected that wasn’t the reason she could breathe easily again. Gabriel. Her body had shifted because of him. And her mind too. He was the only one who could soothe her the way the Dar had soothed the entire town.

“Are you doing it on purpose?” she asked.

“What?”

“Trying to make me feel better. Turn me tranquil.”

“Huh. Why would I do that?” His astonishment sounded nearly human.

“Come on, you know that’s what the Dar have done. It’s what’s got this town half-asleep.”

They crossed over to another door and both fell silent as they passed the soldiers gathered in the hall. They’d abandoned the gas masks and looked like regular young men. Humans with their shifting feet and nervous gestures. They didn’t watch her or Gabriel though.

Outside the fresh air hit her face and she inhaled the early winter scents with relief. He led her across the large parking lot. As she trotted next to him, she said, “That thing that the Dar can do, you halflings, I mean. I bet that’s what’s convinced the human soldiers to work with you.”

He shook his head. “I’m doing nothing to you, at least not on purpose. And those men are following orders from human superiors who are nowhere near this place. They have been ordered to assist the halflings and keep the peace.”

She gasped and stopped dead. “Help you?”

He put a hand on her shoulder. “Do you finally understand what I’m saying? You needn’t bother trying to escape and alert the authorities, Leah Parisi. Your government knows exactly what’s going on in this town and will do nothing to interfere.”

Oddly enough, his grim tone made her feel better. It reminded her that he’d not wanted to follow the halfling’s plan. She wasn’t the only one who wanted the strange takeover to end.

Her heart sank again as she recalled that he might speak with anger, but he’d never show any defiance. He’d even allowed himself to be used as a breeding tool—and so had she. Defeated before the fight had even begun.

“Let’s go,” she whispered. “If there’s no one who will help, I don’t care where you take me. I give up. I’ll go home and behave and hide.”

“No.” He held up a ring of keys. “Can you operate a vehicle?”

She stared at the keys and at him. His wrist and hand had some bright red scratches. Some of the humans he’d encountered on his patrol through the streets had apparently fought back. She wondered if he’d done any more breeding but then paid attention to where he pointed.

“Over there.” He indicated a red Camry across the parking lot. “It looked new enough that I hoped it wouldn’t have problems. I understand vehicles frequently break down.”

“Where do you want to go?”

“You can’t do anything here. We’ll leave and find another place.”

“No point in alerting the authorities, you said.”

“Leah. You will look for help.”

Calm as always, but something—probably their bizarre connection—made her heart beat more quickly. “What’s going on?”

“I believe that the Dar won’t allow their halflings to remain contained in special areas, no matter what they have told your government.” He gave her a gentle push to remind her to walk. “They—we will move beyond this town.”

She ignored the cold fear his words injected. With an effort she asked, “Do the other halflings know you’re gone?”

“I don’t think so. Not yet. I returned to your home. I told Gav I would rest—I am newly arrived, after all. Gav is not as disciplined as Graeb would expect.”

“And you’ll help me escape even if I try to stop the halflings.”

“Yes.”

“Thank you.” She walked more briskly to the car and waited for him to unlock it. He did it easily, as if he’d opened cars all of his adult life. He unlocked the handcuffs too, and tossed them onto backseat floor.

They got in the car. She inserted the key and then howled in frustration. “It’s a stick shift. I can only manage automatic.”

He laid his head back on the headrest and sighed.

“Don’t worry,” she said and hoped she sounded confident and cheery. “I have the basic idea down, I think. But you might want to buckle your seat belt.”

He covered her hand so she couldn’t turn the key. “I can drive,” he said. “We practiced on simulators.”

“You can do stick shift?”

“That was all we used.”

They got out of the car and switched places. “This is different,” he said as he stroked his fingers over the dashboard and steering wheel. “But that makes sense. They based the simulator on a vehicle that was built almost thirty years ago.” He turned the key. The

engine squealed in protest when he held it too long, but with a thump and a lurch they were off.

He drove better than she expected. Oh—she gave a cry of dismay. “You’re on the wrong side of the road.”

He swerved neatly over to the right lane.

She closed her eyes. “Was your teacher from Great Britain?”

“No idea.”

He only ended up veering onto the graveled shoulder a few times. At last, with the car in third gear, he straightened out and stayed in his lane. They both released deep breaths at the same moment.

She laughed. “Okay, that sigh proves we’re not so different after all. What happens next? What are we doing?”

“Escape first. Do you have any currency?”

“Credit cards, in my wallet. Don’t tell me. They dumped you on this planet without money?”

“I found some.” He leaned forward, pulled a big lump of cash from the back pocket of his uniform and tossed it at her.

“Jesus, there has to be over three thousand dollars here. Where did you get this?”

“A house.”

“You stole it?”

“Yes. Needs must, Leah Parisi. I needed to get you and go.”

She didn’t argue. “How did you know where to find me?”

The corner of his mouth twitched. “I heard about a young human female who was giving the soldiers trouble.”

“Who told you?”

“I overheard the walking talkings.”

“You mean walkie-talkie?”

“Yes, silly name. The other forms of communication are disabled but those are still working.” He pushed his hand through his hair. “I knew they took anyone who was not cooperating to the holding pen. Not hard to guess. You were not going to stay quiet.”

“I would now,” she said, glum at the realization. “You asked what I would do. I would do what it took to stay alive. Smile, nod, whatever it took.”

“There is no shame in that.”

She was horrified to feel her eyes fill with tears. “I’d thought I would be brave. But...”

“Bravery is worthless to the dead. You will have the strength again. I’m certain.” He spoke with such calm assurance, she almost believed him.

She settled farther into her seat and crossed her arms. “I guess I’ll have a chance to prove myself again. We’re almost at the edge of town and the barricade. Will they let you through?”

“I don’t think so,” he said and shifted the car to a lower gear. “We’ll do what we must to get out.”

“What’s that?”

He pointed at the floor. “Get down and hide, please.” After she huddled in an uncomfortable fetal position on the floor, he covered her up with a blanket. She looked around the edge when she heard him thumping around the dashboard and door muttering to himself. “Ah, there’s the button I want.” He pressed the window switch and the window slid down.

At once she curled into a tight ball and the cover of the blanket wasn’t enough to make her feel secure. She shut her eyes as she wondered if there was some way to keep the fear and pain at bay. What would they do?

The guard’s voice floated into the window. “I’m sorry, no one may leave.”

The door clicked and Gabriel slowly got out of the car. “You must understand I am an envoy.”

“Envoy?” The soldier sounded muffled. No doubt a gas mask hid his face.

“Look into my eyes.”

She suppressed a laugh. Gabriel sounded like he was making a cheesy attempt to hypnotize.

No, apparently he was only showing proof of his breed. “I am of Dar. Do you see?”

“Yessir. But, um. No one is allowed to cross the line, sir.” The man’s voice quickened and was higher pitched.

“Ah, I see they haven’t sent the orders yet,” Gabriel said. “Don’t worry, soldier. Thank you.”

He got back into his seat. He started the engine and closed the window. She risked moving the blanket to look at him. Without glancing down at her, he gave her the hint of a smile. A half human would naturally have a half smile.

“Hold on,” he said.

And he floored the accelerator.

They flew through the roadblock, hitting something that sounded wooden, then rumbled onto the grass. There was a horrible crunch as they sideswiped an army Hummer.

“That’s a nuisance,” he remarked calmly.

There were shouts from the soldiers, followed by shots.

She fought off panic, “Oh God! They’re firing on us.”

“No, they’re not.” They lurched and swayed as he casually twisted the wheel. The car thumped and then settled, wheels purring as they drove on pavement again. Gabriel glanced in the rearview mirror. “I wonder what they will do.”

Several more shots rang out. Leah scrambled halfway onto the seat and tried to peer out the back window without showing herself. “What do you mean they’re not shooting at us? The guns—”

“They are firing warning shots over the car. They are allowed to use deadly force with humans, but their orders are to do no harm to the Dar. I made sure of that before coming to get you.” He patted her shoulder and she resisted the urge to grab his arm and hold it for comfort.

“They still might follow us, so it would be best if you returned to the floor.” Oh. He’d been trying to gently push her back into place, not reassuring her.

She nodded and slid down again. Something rustled inside the car. She looked up at him. He towered over her, both hands on the wheel. No unnecessary movement from him as usual—so the noise didn’t come from him.

“What’s that?” she whispered, her heart lodged in her throat.

The corner of his mouth gave a small twitch. “Your animal.”

“Fluke? You brought along my cat?” She suddenly felt like crying. “Is that why you have scratches on your arm?”

He nodded. “It didn’t want to go in the bag, but I couldn’t think of another way to carry it because it ignored me when I called it.”

“Oh, I wish I’d seen that.” She started to laugh and laughed so hard, she had to rest her head on the seat. “Damn, you are brave.”

He raised his dark eyebrows. “It’s just an animal.”

“Thank you for that.” She wiggled so she could look between the seats. The brown zippered duffle bag that had hung in her closet now heaved and surged on the backseat as if it were alive.

“Fluke will be furious.”

When she pulled back, her head brushed his leg and he stiffened, as if bracing for a blow. She laid her cheek against his thigh. “Thank you,” she said again.

His large hand came down and rested on her head. Though her body protested the odd position, she didn’t want to move—unless it was closer to him.

After a few moments he spoke. “They don’t seem to be following us and I don’t believe they’ve dispatched any sort of surveillance air machines. Would you like to sit in the chair properly? Head as far down as possible would be best.”

She hauled herself up and twisted until she was settled on the car seat.

“You obviously have some kind of plan. What next?”

“I’d like to go as far as this vehicle will take us. Other than that?” He gave one of his shrugs. “East, west, north, south. Which way?”

She gazed out the window at the farmland. “We’re about ten miles out of Laketon and the highway is ahead. Get on it and drive.”

“And when this runs low on fuel, I believe we should look for another way to keep moving away from your town. We must go as far as possible.”

“Go where?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Maybe we can get some ideas if we know what people are hearing about Laketon.” She turned on the radio. He gave a startled exclamation.

“Don’t worry. It’s one-way—they can’t hear us,” she said, stifling a laugh. He’d been so efficient she’d almost forgotten he didn’t know a lot of basic facts of her world.

They decided to drive southeast, toward the seat of government.

“Take me to your leader,” she said with one of her laughs that had no humor in it.

As he drove, she played with the radio, trying to find news programs but finding only the twanging music he’d heard much of his life.

She punched the radio button off. “Thank you, again,” she said at last. “For rescuing me.”

“I would not be able to live with myself if I didn’t try.” He carefully engaged the clicking turn signal and passed a minivan.

“You have a strong code for yourself.”

“Code?”

“Don’t you do anything for fun? Just for the hell of it? What about back on your home planet.”

He considered the question. “I read books. And I enjoyed the times I could mate with my friend.”

“Reading and fucking. Not that different from us,” she muttered. “If you could do anything you wanted here on earth what would it be?”

He touched her leg, stirring the compelling contact with Leah. “This. Except I would have you naked.”

A small, satisfying hiss came from her. She covered his hand with hers and they drove in silence. He wanted to pry into all the corners of her, learn all of her, but the exhaustion and sorrow was too deep at the moment. She leaned against the door and dozed. He glanced at her and realized he felt sapped as well.

“We’ve only traveled for three hundred miles, but I think I need to stop,” he told her at last. “Rest.”

She directed him off the highway and to an exit with a red sign for a hotel. “We’ll stay here.”

“A hotel? Rooms and whatnot?”

“Yes. Park around the side and maybe they won’t look at the car.”

The low white buildings with many doors looked almost abandoned but she got out of the car with utter confidence someone would be there to greet her. He carefully pulled the duffle bag from her backseat.

Wait. I have to sign in,” she said. “I’ll give my parents’ address so they won’t know I came from Laketon.”

“Here.” He tried to hand her a wad of currency.

She shook her head. “Not cash. If I use a credit card, they probably won’t ask for ID. My license has an address on it, which is a giveaway. I hope they won’t trace the card though.”

He watched her go, her hips gently swinging as she walked toward a glassed-in part of the building that had the word “lobby” stenciled in gold on the door.

When she disappeared into the building, he leaned against a tree and puzzled over what she’d just said about IDs and cards. He’d considered himself an expert on Earth. He’d loved to study the society, but so much of it made no sense. If he hadn’t dragged her along, he’d be lost.

She came back with two pieces of plastic and led them to one of the many doors. The plastic opened a door into a single room that smelled old and stale, but looked clean. Two

beds, a desk, a chair and a bathroom. With the carpeting, prints on the wall, flowery bedspreads and the television unit, the room struck him as luxurious. Not as pleasant as Leah's house, but better than any of his old quarters.

“Will we sleep together here?” He motioned to one of the beds.

Leah looked up at him then, her eyes unfathomable and he had no notion what she felt at that moment. “Perhaps we will,” she said at last.

Chapter Seven

After she managed to unzip the bag, an angry Fluke fled into the bathroom and into the tub where he cowered and growled quietly. Leah pulled a towel onto the floor for his bed. She opened the dry cat food she'd bought at a gas station jiffy mart and poured some into the lid of the ice bucket. Fluke sniffed, a hopeful sign, so Leah left, softly closing the door behind her. She wandered back into the room where Gabriel lay on his side and watched her.

She scratched her arm, stretched and then flipped off her shoes, conscious of his steady gaze. With a groan, she collapsed on the other bed.

“You are so restless, you humans. Always moving. You'd be dead if you were on Dar.”

“Why's that?”

He said something in his strange hissing language then explained. “That's a kind of serpent. No eyes, no nose. They only detect motion.”

“So you learn to stay still? Sounds pretty horrible, always worrying about being eaten if you fiddle around.”

“The Dar had protective wiring around the unit. It vanished when they abandoned us.” He stretched his arms overhead and yawned as he spoke, giving his words a strange casual quality. “Many of us got eaten until we understood.”

“I thought the way you don’t fidget was another sign that we were different,” she said ignoring the ache in her throat. “And I suppose it is.”

“We are not so very different, are we,” he said quietly.

Desire filled the room and her chest. She couldn’t look into his face, knowing he felt it too. She looked up when she heard a soft squeak. He’d rolled from the other bed and now stood over her.

“Gabriel. What do you think will happen?”

He gave his shrug and knelt by her. “Here?” His voice had gone softer, a slight breathy hiss. Probably the accent of his kind. “I know what I want to happen here. You want me too—I can taste you.”

She considered denying it, but that would be a waste of time. Her turn to roll onto her side. She stroked his chin, only the smallest glint of a beard, with no roughness under her fingertips. But the heat that spread from her light touch made her heart stutter. An image of him, moving inside her, flooded her brain, banished every sensation except harsh lust. No fear, nothing but hunger for Gabriel.

“Do you think if we do it again, we’ll be able to think better? Maybe? Use our minds for something other than lust?”

The gold flared in his eyes and he smiled. “Certainly. Doing *it*, again.”

She returned his grin. “It, again. You and I boinking or at least touching.”

“Both, all of it,” he said. “And boinking, whatever that is. I’ll do it with you.”

“Boinking’s just another euphemism.”

His grin grew. “I know. I was attempting to tease you. I enjoy it.” He buried his face in her shoulder and she put her hand on his hair. His muffled voice said, “Everything with you gives me pleasure.”

“That’s why you came back and sprang me from prison, huh?”

He didn't move, of course, but his stillness grew even more marked. "No, because I gave you my oath. Touching you is a... Oh, what is it called? It is a bonus."

"Gabriel." His hair smelled of cinnamon and dust and sweat. Human sweat. He lifted his head and met her gaze, steady, bright eyes, the gold wash a sign of desire.

An invitation, but she understood that he would not be the aggressor. This time she would have the full choice.

"Take off your shirt, please." She grabbed a pillow and stuffed it under her head to watch in comfort.

He unbuttoned it so slowly she wondered if he put on a show. Long fingers feeling then pressing the buttons through the holes.

"Now your pants."

He stood and stripped quickly. When he stood by the bed, his cock, already on the rise, was at her eye level.

"Does that part of me pass for human?" he asked as she examined it carefully.

"I haven't seen huge numbers of cocks, and this is the first uncircumcised one I've met. It looks about right. Better than right," she said and gave the end of it a small lick.

"How—how many?"

"What?"

"How many cocks have you seen? Have you had many lovers?" He sounded only curious, not judging.

"No," she said.

"You're so good at this," he said, as if amazed. "You have such a, oh...." His voice dissolved into something less than language. "Please, again? Let me kiss you again?"

He knelt on the bed and touched her only with his mouth, his lips lightly pressing hers. When she wrapped her arms around him to pull him closer, he hesitantly put his hands on her shoulders, lightly squeezing her through the shirt.

She wrapped her arms around his naked torso, plastered herself to him and made a small grumbling sound.

"Hug me," she whispered.

“You’re certain?”

She kissed his chest, licked his nipple. “You can’t tell? You can’t feel in your gut how I’m ready to jump you?”

His arms tightened around her.

“Not that, Leah. I don’t want you under some sort of spell.”

“Aren’t you under it too?”

He licked his lower lip. “I want you so much I’m almost frightened by it.”

She ran a finger from the base to the tip of the rock-hard cock pressed to her belly. “So if we’re both victims of the heat, then it’s fair, right?”

His heavy-lidded gold eyes stared into hers. “That’s a good attitude. I don’t want the spell to be broken. You?”

“Nope, not me either.” She wiggled out of his arms and pushed him onto his back. Leah, feeling like a predator, straddled his belly. “I will take what joy I can now.”

He nearly smiled. “Take whatever you want from me.”

She dipped down and took kisses. He plucked at the bottom of her shirt but didn’t make an attempt to remove it.

She whipped it off and unhooked her bra.

Leaning over, she allowed just the tips of her nipples to brush his skin. He growled and arched his back but didn’t pull her down on top of him.

The skin-hunger shivered through her. She needed to have as much of her body touching his as possible.

She pulled off and away from his body to get rid of her jeans. He followed her, sitting up, finally pursuing her, holding her head for long kisses.

Naked at last. She entwined her arms and legs around him, trying to get as close as possible. “What do you do? Didn’t you say it was slow? Do it that way now.”

“*Do it,*” he said. “I will do whatever you want.”

Facing each other, he pulled her leg over his hip then he wedged himself into her excruciatingly slow and careful. Not all the way. It was too much, or rather not enough. Too slow. She grabbed his butt and pushed him so he filled her entirely.

He gasped.

“Like this?” she slowly circled her hips.

“Slower.” He made the tiniest motion, but she could feel it deep inside her body. She whimpered as the delicate motion brushed her sensitive clit. And when he pushed a little harder she writhed against him.

“Impossible.” He panted. “I can’t. It’s. You.” He licked her mouth then sucked in a full kiss, while the gentle lovemaking twisted her into knots. “Even this,” he gasped. “This is so much.”

She closed her eyes, sucking in his sweet cinnamon scent, hungry for more. His arms held her so tight she had trouble breathing. She was buried in him, against his chest, ready for more. She pushed back, and canted her hips so he slid out farther then came after her, pushing hard into her now as if she was trying to escape him.

They rolled so he was on top of her, thrusting into her, growling small curses in a language she didn’t know. Not his—there was no hiss.

He pulled back, rose up onto his arms and she looked into the glazed eyes of a man in the grip of pure excitement. No restraint remained in him and she let herself go too, slippery bodies sliding, heaving, bumping and trying new ways to get in deeper. The slap of skin against skin...and then she froze because her release hit hard, roaring through her.

She yelled out as if it was painful. It was perfect, though, and he must have known, for his own pace didn’t slow or change, he only thrust harder and better. He covered her body with his again, pulling up one of her legs, bending her knee against him to push in deeper. For a moment he halted, his cock at the very edge of her pussy. He kissed her knee and then continued a gentler slide in and out of her swollen pussy, made her groan with satisfaction and nuzzle his shoulder, licking his skin.

“Back to quiet?” she whispered as he shivered.

He grunted. “Nothing like. Oh, Leah. I’m lost in this.” And again deep inside her she felt him as he swelled. The air was still charged with the pulses of his long, sighing orgasm.

“Nice.” She writhed to get closer. “Sweet.”

Against her neck, his steady breath stuttered and she knew he gave a ghost of a laugh. "I think you are learning," he said then hissed a word.

"What's that?"

"A-a form of dainty, polite understatement."

"You mean what we just did wasn't nice and sweet?"

His gave his nearly silent laugh and kissed her neck, her throat, her mouth. He pulled away and cradled her in his arms, pulling her against his damp body.

"This is called spooning," she said.

"Like the implement?"

"Yup. Two spoons together." She held up her hands and cupped one inside the other to demonstrate.

"Of course. A sensible name for it." He sighed and she felt it along her whole body. "You can sleep like this? Spooning is perfect."

"You're learning exaggeration."

His hand stroked her breast, held it. "Yes. I enjoy it. The exaggeration of words, of passion. Strange and perfect."

She dipped her head and kissed his hand. For a little while it was just them, alone in the room, skin and breath and the occasional sigh. Remember this, she told herself. This will be the peace and the reality that matters.

After a few minutes she had to drag herself from the bed to the bathroom where she found Fluke asleep on a towel. The cat didn't even open his eyes when she washed her hands and face. She padded back out to the room and nabbed the television remote. She thought he was asleep until he whispered, "Time to remember the rest of the world."

Leah stretched out on the bed naked.

He rolled onto his side and rested his hand on her thigh. "I like the way you don't mind when I touch you or look at you. I thought you'd be more...shy."

She smiled. If only they could concentrate on touching and stroking—but he was right. The rest of the world waited,

She shoved some pillows against the backboard of the bed and pushed back against them. “Do you think they’ll look for us?”

“Perhaps, but I don’t know how Graeb would conduct a search.”

She turned on the television and flipped through channels until she got to some local news anchor describing the situation in Laketon, Wisconsin, which, according to the news channel, had been threatened by a lethal bioweapon. Reporters in impressive white suits stood near the barricade.

“No one’s talking about the Dar,” she said at last. “And certainly no one mentioned the one that got away.”

“You mean me? Better to let me leave the town quietly than risk leaking the truth of the halflings’ invasion. It wouldn’t occur to Graeb that a halfling would try to work against the Dar. I wonder if there will be a search for you, though.”

She shuddered. “A fugitive. Oh, I bet they’d say I had the disease too.”

He pulled her close to his side.

She laid her hand on his chest, felt his slow heartbeat and the calm at his core. “You’re relaxed. How do you manage that?”

“The discipline of tranquility. Years of practice.”

“To keep those monsters from eating you?”

He nodded and rested his head on her leg, a reassuring weight, the soft hair tickling her skin. They both watched the solemn reporter who spoke about the brave men and women who worked tirelessly to help the sick in Laketon. The mysterious disease had been contained, it needed direct contact to be spread, but people were warned from the area.

“Who do you suppose they have acting as the doctors?” She watched for a while longer then answered her own question. “No one. It’s hearsay. See? No one’s being interviewed who’s been on the scene.”

“The plan is working so far.”

“What happens next in that plan of theirs?” The tension had eased in her body and she could enjoy his palm stroking her lower back, down her spine.

“I did not express too much curiosity about the future. It’s not our habit and I didn’t want Graeb to grow suspicious. But I know that we have patience and he has utter devotion. And your government fears the Dar. I think it will not interfere with Graeb, at least not at first. I suspect he will move from town to town, changing it all.”

Gabriel kissed her leg and rubbed his cheek on her skin, then hauled himself up to lie next to her. “I wonder if there were other units that I did not know about.”

“What do they want? Why are you bothering with us?”

“Inquiry. The Dar are actually as curious as any human. There are rich resources on this planet. And they would improve your race, you know. Doesn’t your country march on others to help spread your way of life? Rather the same thing.”

She wanted to protest and argue with him, but the weight of sorrow was too much and she gave in to that instead.

“The end of everything I know,” she said softly.

“This is the way the world ends. Not with a bang but a whimper.”

“That’s familiar.”

“It’s a human poet. Eliot.”

“Did you study poets?”

“We had a good education. Remember? The books were there even after most things broke down. Poetry. Biographies. Textbooks. I looked through them. Carefully.”

He cupped her face and looked into her eyes. “For a while we can let it go. Talk to me about your life.”

She pulled away from his intense examination and sat up straighter. “It’s over. The part of it I knew, at any rate.”

He ignored her mournful prediction. “I think you said you went to school. What do you study?”

Fine. Might as well make small talk with her alien. “It’s changed. Three years ago, I was going to be a psychologist. Then I dropped out because it was so boring. I only went

back to school so I could get a better job. I told myself I wouldn't bother paying tuition otherwise. And then I got interested in art. Pastels." She grinned remembering her mother's dismay.

"Why is that funny?"

"You don't get a better job when you've studied drawing. I keep trying to get interested in marketing or some other subject, something useful. Nope, it's drawing. I might have to move, though I love my aunt's house and my neighbors. Not a lot of need for art teachers in Laketon and I want to be a teacher." Her smile faded. "Or I wanted to. Now..."

"There will be teachers."

"In the units? Sounds like there's nothing there."

He rolled onto his back. "Very little," he agreed. His face went blank as it did when he spoke of the units. He might have been entirely calm except she saw the bleakness in the corners of his mouth and eyes and felt it with each inhalation. He glanced over at her and at once his expression softened. "But elsewhere on Dar. Beyond the unit. There had to be art, happiness, I assume. The plans for Earth might be like that and not like our unit. I wondered what it would be like to be on Dar proper."

"You never got to see it?"

He shook his head.

"Why not?"

"No need to show us so they didn't. The Dar do not act on impulse with either cruelty or kindness."

She gave up trying to be separate and contained for the moment and settled next to him, resting her head on his belly and spreading her hand over his chest. They'd managed to forget for a time, but she could sense the bottomless fear creeping into their bodies again. Some of it had an unfamiliar taste. Her fear usually lodged near her heart. This new sensation hit her gut. Perhaps it's not even my own, she thought. And suddenly understood.

“You’re afraid. Damn, and you don’t have a clue about what happens next, do you.” She kissed the skin near his nipple, grateful for the signs of his humanity. “You ran out of ideas after we left the town.”

His sigh raised her whole body. “How odd that we only just met. You seem to know my thoughts better than anyone. You’re right, I have no more ideas. But I will calm myself. After all, I’ve survived worse.”

“That’s where my imagination fails,” she said. “Your life. What you’ve lived through.”

He made a small sound, one of his hissing words probably. “Right at the moment I wouldn’t even trade to be a full-blooded.”

“Huh?”

“That was our dearest wish. How we’d say it. ‘Better than being a full-blooded’ was the way to say a really good thing or experience.”

“Meaning full-blooded Dar, of course.”

“Of course.”

“Gabriel. I’m sorry they tried to make you despise your human half.”

“Did they? Perhaps we did more of that to ourselves.” He stroked her hair. Already he seemed to allow himself more unnecessary movements than at first. “I wonder if a full-blooded could have survived what we did. I fought to stay alive and now I understand it was for minutes and hours like these. I didn’t think I’d get more with you, Leah Parisi. I am blessed.”

He spoke calmly but she could feel the way his pulse raced and the choppy quality of his breath.

For a little while they lay silently entangled, watching the news.

Suddenly he rocketed to a sitting position. She tumbled off him. “Jesus, why’re you giving me a heart attack?” she grumbled.

He grabbed her wrist with one hand and with the other pointed at the television. “Who? That man? Who is he? The screen said his name is Nelson Halbrut.”

The familiar grey-haired man had been called to the White House again. His face was so familiar the news station had only flashed his name for a moment.

“Oh. Yeah.” Leah watched the press conference. Hardly a reason for panic. “He’s a politician, a senator. Retired for years. Since the Dar invasion actually. But he’s still involved with the government. He’s been called in on emergencies every time his party’s in power. An advisor to presidents.”

“He had a-a daughter?”

That sounded familiar. “Yeah, that’s right. And she died during the Dar war. He basically stepped down soon after that. I think he said that line about spending more time with his family and for once everyone believed him. Or my mother did, anyway.”

Gabriel stared at the television as if it contained horrifying images. “His daughter didn’t die.”

“Yeah, she did.” Leah scooped closer to him, watching his stony face, but feeling the tension. “The private high school she went to blew up during an attack. Killed a bunch of students and other people in the area. A lot of famous people’s kids. That’s why I’ve heard of it.”

“Tell me some of their names.”

She frowned. “The senator’s daughter’s the only one I can remember. Oh and the vice president’s daughter. So that’s Rachel Milsom and Linda Halbrut.”

“Linda Halbrut,” he said quietly. “Yes, I think her name was Linda. I barely remember her. I was very young.”

“What are you talking about?” She knew, though. Could feel his conviction about it too.

“Linda Halbrut was my mother. And I know the name Milsom.” His hand on her wrist tightened. “The students from that school. They must have been taken by the Dar and...and bred.”

She stared at Gabriel for a long moment then back at the television, where Nelson Halbrut still spoke. There was a ghost of a resemblance: a similar jaw, an indentation on

the chin, something about the set of his eyes and broad forehead. She blinked at the fierce earnestness in Gabriel's gaze, as if he were willing her to believe him.

She had already felt the truth of it, and something clicked into place for her. Milsom, Halbrut. Two very powerful men years earlier.

The other stories.

"Gabriel. God, it's... Listen. Other kids in other countries 'died' about then. Older kids of powerful people. I can't remember the stories exactly but something like a bus in Switzerland, an accident in China, one choked to death in India. But no one could link the incidents and they seemed random. Only die-hard conspiracy theorists believed. But..."

She rested her hand over the fingers that gripped her wrist hard. At once, he loosened his grip. She gently rubbed his hand with hers and said, "But the invasion. We won. Or... What?"

"No. You didn't. Nothing on Earth could drive off the Dar if they wished to take it."

"What do you suppose? They made it look like we won, so we'd relax?" She drew in a long breath to stave off sudden dizziness. "It makes sense, doesn't it. The politicians made the deal because they knew the Dar had their children. But the thing with those students was so long ago."

He had gone pale. His turn to falter and draw in a long breath. "I heard the history of the mission to earth. The Dar decided they'd handled the invasion badly, so they made the decision to leave. They still held power of a sort." He put his other hand on hers and she was absurdly reminded of that childish game, trying to slide your hand on top of a pile of hands.

In a low voice he said, "All this time I thought the fact that the Dar retreated when they clearly were the stronger force and could cause massive destruction...I thought the way they left was proof of their superior nature. They chose peace." He moved so his side touched hers, as if her body could comfort him. "I didn't know about the children. I don't know what it means."

She flopped down onto her stomach. “I’m getting a pretty good idea what it all means. Was your mother the only one who died? Are the kids still alive? Not kids anymore.”

“I don’t know where they are. They left the units about the same time the power went off. I’m sure many of them didn’t want to leave us, but they were gone when we woke up one day.”

“Why?”

“We weren’t told.” Cold and final.

“So,” she said. “What do you suppose we should do? Try to call Halbrut?”

“We’ll go see him. Nelson Halbrut. My grandsire. If we call, someone might interfere.”

She buried her head under a pillow. “Yeah. Okay. That’s a good idea. He’s in D.C. anyway.”

He again moved close to her, pressing his body to hers, and she gratefully breathed the already-familiar sweet scent. “I guess we should rest while we can,” she said.

“We should touch while we can.”

“Refractory period,” she said, but she was eager as she rose onto her knees and then straddled his body for a long kiss.

Afterwards he held her. Spooning. “Do you mind if we stay in the same bed?” he whispered.

“I couldn’t move even if I wanted to,” she said but wondered if she did mind. She considered the point as she dozed off, her naked arms and legs entwined with his. She slept fitfully, finally jerking awake at three, with the sinking feeling that she’d never sleep again.

The Dar didn’t even twitch and she instinctively moved close to check his breathing. Could anything be more foreign than the creature in the bed with her? She lay on her back worrying about her neighbors, thinking about the Dar and alternated between exploring a strange cold misery about sleeping with one of them and wishing she could

wake him up so she could feel his kisses again and let him provide the comfort she needed. At four a.m., she couldn't stand another moment with her own thoughts.

Fluke sulked in a corner of the bathroom, though all the cat food was gone. After a quick shower, Leah threw on clothes.

She paused to examine the sprawled naked figure on the bed, then slipped the keys and keycard into her pocket and went out to the car.

When she clicked on the headlights, she gave a little scream. There, in the flood of light stood a tall, still figure.

Gabriel fully dressed and out of the room in less than a minute. He was otherworldly, all right.

Once she managed to get her heart beating again, she rolled down the window.

He walked over and rested his folded arms on the door. "You are leaving me," he said in a flat quiet voice. She felt the tendrils of despair—his.

"No. I couldn't sleep so I'm teaching myself to drive stick. We have a long trip ahead."

His frown didn't change.

She rolled her eyes. "Hey, look, my cat is still in the bathroom. My stuff is all over the room. Don't you believe me?"

His face no longer looked as if it were made of carved stone. One side of his mouth quirked up. "I do."

She switched off the engine and practiced pushing at the clutch and gas at the same time. "Later on we should steal new license plates."

"Yes. Good plan to get new identification for the vehicle. That would be simpler than stealing another one. Why are you laughing?"

"You sound so matter-of-fact. You do understand that stealing a car is a big deal?"

"I had a bigger deal to take care of. Shall I gather up the cat? Are you ready to leave?"

The early morning damp breeze washed through the stale air inside the car. “I’ll just drive around a bit. Maybe go buy some donuts and coffee. Then I suppose, sure. We’re paid up. We can leave.”

“Now is fine. Shall I get the cat?”

“No need.” She managed to get Fluke into the car without the bag. The cat skittered up the back window and glared out at the world. He showed no interest in trying to escape from the car.

Leah held up the keys. “I’ll drive first if that’s okay? Might as well get used to it before the traffic gets heavy.”

He nodded and she was impressed by how he sat in the passenger seat without making a single comment or so much as twitching even when she stalled out attempting to shift from first to second. On the other hand, he was as still as a statue which was unnerving—especially when she remembered that he’d mentioned remaining motionless was their trained response to danger.

He must have sensed her insecurity. “Your driving is good,” he said.

She held back her snort. “Thanks.”

In Indiana, they decided to stop for breakfast. Leah pulled up to a tollbooth and reached for money. They were out of change and the smallest bill they had was a hundred.

The toll collector scowled as she handed it to him.

Leah leaned out the window slightly. “Sorry about that.”

The guy in the tollbooth grinned. He shoved the bill back at her. “Aw, never mind. You get yourself some change before you get back on the highway.” The bar went up and he waved as she pulled away.

“That was very odd,” she said. “Very.”

Gabriel, she discovered, had a huge capacity for sweets and she watched in silence as he worked his way through three cinnamon buns.

She showed him how to use a knife and fork. He showed her how to use the same plastic utensils as weapons. Feint and attack.

“Ugh. The eyes?” She shook her head. “You fight nasty.”

“I fight to survive,” he said, licking the last of the frosting off his fingers.

“You’re better off knowing how to introduce yourself to people. Wash your hands and I’ll teach you to shake hands.”

In the rest-stop parking lot, surrounded by empty RVs, she showed him how to put out his hand and grasp hers. “Not so hard, and ‘how are you’ works. ‘How do you do’ the way you say it, sounds too formal.”

She’d bought him a pair of mirror shades at a kiosk. The glasses made him look even more dangerous but hid the gold of his eyes. He obediently went through the steps of polite introductions again. Eventually she got him to smile more readily and step forward like a friendly sort of a guy.

“One more time,” she said and she held out her hand.

This time he yanked her hand, pulling her forward. She lost her balance. He wrapped his arms around her. “Glad to meet you,” he whispered in her ear. “I am Gabriel.”

She gave an involuntary little moan and he kissed her neck.

“This isn’t how you greet strangers,” she said, breathless.

“Mm. Neither is this.” His mouth covered hers and for a while she forgot the etiquette lessons.

He pushed his hands into the back of her blue jeans, palming her butt, pulling her close so she could feel the hard ridge of his cock.

“May we fuck? The backseat?” he suggested.

She looked around the busy rest-stop parking lot. “We might get arrested. Public indecency.”

“We could keep most of our clothes on and the only naked part of me would be inside your body. Certainly we have some cover to—”

She gave a breathless laugh. “No. We do not want to end up in jail, you idiot.”

He squeezed her bottom then slowly slid his hands out. “Yes, of course not. I am intoxicated with the feel and taste and scent of you and my brain isn’t used to functioning under the influence.”

He fetched a screwdriver and went in search of new license plates. Gabriel seemed to have no problem with stealing. Not something she needed to worry about. Once this was over, anyway. And her mind balked at considering what would happen then.

He drove carefully, deft, but never abandoning rules. He always used turn signals, and kept both hands on the wheel. Except once.

She was dozing when he made a snarling hiss under his breath. She opened her eyes. “What?”

“Hello,” he said. “Sorry I woke you.” He held up a hand which was fisted except for the middle finger. “Tell me,” he said conversationally. “Is this some sort of terrible insult?”

“Yeah. Someone flip you the bird?”

“No, I’ve seen it though, and just had the urge to show someone the gesture. Flipping the bird. What’s the insult in that?”

“It actually means ‘fuck you’.”

“As in copulation? You’re telling me that an invitation to copulate is an insult?”

“Well, not really, I think. Because it’s definitely not the way you invite someone you actually want.”

“Ah. A false invitation? Perhaps that’s the insult.”

She yawned and rubbed her eyes. “If you wanna discuss the finer points of giving the finger, we’re going to have to stop for coffee. I need to wake up my brain. It’s my turn to drive anyway. And we probably should stop during daylight so your sunglasses don’t look so weird.”

He signaled and pulled into a truck stop.

“Not enough time for a hotel,” he said glumly as they trudged across the parking lot to the diner.

“No,” she agreed. “I wish.”

A wave of sorrow washed through her. They would launch themselves into the fray again. And perhaps she’d never get another chance to hold her alien.

The waiter, a surly man with a huge belly, silently handed them menus. When Leah asked if they had any tea he snarled, “Hell. Maybe.”

He came back and put the cup down so hard, water slopped over, but when the waiter served them food, he’d cheered up. He brought her an extra pot of hot water without even being asked. By the time he brought them the bill, he was laughing and joking with someone at the next table. Must have had some good tips.

Leah and Gabriel drove through the night.

A few hours later, they stopped at a vet’s in Maryland so she could board Fluke. She filled out a form with a fake address then watched her glowering cat being taken to the back room of the vet’s office.

In the parking lot, she walked to the spot where Gabriel watched a dog owner scooping poop. “We can’t forget where we are. I can’t forget Fluke.” She was on the edge of tears.

He turned his attention from the dog walker to stroke Leah’s back. “I have a very good memory,” he said.

Leah dashed back into the office and grabbed a handful of business cards just to make sure. Should she write a note to someone? Send an email to her cousin, perhaps? He didn’t live in Laketon, so he wasn’t trapped. *In the event of my death, go bail out my cat. He’s somewhere in a small town in central Maryland.*

She took the wrong exit off the beltway and got caught in a traffic jam on Connecticut Avenue. As they crept toward K Street near the ex-senator’s office, they agreed only one would go in. No point in both of them getting thrown in jail if things went bad.

Finding a place to park took a half hour of slow going in heavy traffic and by the time she’d used her not-very-good parallel-parking abilities to wedge them into a space, they were both jittery.

Gabriel showed his nervousness by standing absolutely still. “It’s almost too warm here. Isn’t that peculiar for this hemisphere in this month?” he asked. “It’s late autumn.”

“I guess Washington can be like that.” Leah fed quarters into the meter while he stood next to her. She sensed his fascination and figured out he was interested in the machine. Still the alien.

She patted the meter and started toward the corner. “We have two hours. And we don’t want anyone running this car through to give it a ticket.”

“You wait,” he said. “I’ll go.”

“No. Someone might spot you as a halfling before you get to the senator. Let me go.”

He looked like he was going to argue, but she thrust the cell phone at him. “Give me a half hour, okay?”

The dark glasses hid his emotions, although she supposed he’d be as expressionless as always even with them off.

They reached the building. A man clutching a briefcase walked briskly past, almost swinging the case into her leg and Gabriel pulled her out of the way. “All right,” he said. “I will stay here and look as inconspicuous as possible.”

“You still don’t blend in,” she said softly. “You need to move more. Practice twitching. Shift your feet now and then.”

He smiled. “I will. Perhaps if we embrace, anyone who notices me will suspect I’m standing here dreaming of your return.”

“I like that idea,” she said and reached for him. Their kiss tasted almost sweeter because of the edge of fear. She turned and walked into the building without looking back.

The too-warm air hit her. A guard sitting at a large, polished granite counter waved her through a metal detector, asked for some ID that he only glanced at, thank goodness. There had to be word out about her escape by now.

He pointed down the hall when she told him she was going to Halbrut’s office. “Just down that way. No need for the elevator,” he said and picked up the newspaper he’d been reading.

The door to the office had his last name in raised gold lettering placed in the center, and nothing else. No indication of his work. What was his job, she wondered. Lobbyist? She supposed that's what ex-politicians did.

The room she entered was Spartan but elegant. An Oriental rug provided the decor. A couple of padded chairs and a bare coffee table were the only furniture other than two large, dark-wood desks. A young woman sat at one of the desks, working at a laptop. A tall balding man stood near a floor-to-ceiling bookcase. He turned and examined Leah then walked across the room quickly.

"How'd you do?" he said holding out a hand. "I'm Mike Ashton."

As she shook his hand, she gave the first name that popped into her head. "Missy Templeton." She tried not wrinkle her nose—the man wore way too much cologne. The slight scent of tobacco lingered in the air around him too, and she wondered if the cologne was an attempt to hide his smoking habit.

His nostrils flared for a second as if he was sniffing her, too. "Delighted to meet you, Ms. Templeton. What can I do for you today?" He obviously had years of experience of presenting the smooth, friendly face for the public.

"I'd hoped for a private meeting with the senator."

"Just Mr. Halbrut. He doesn't like the honorific. A humble man."

"Yes." She returned his smile. "Of course. It won't take long, I promise."

"Miss Jessup, you can go on break," he said to the woman who'd stopped typing to watch, a puzzled frown on her face.

He ignored the frown and waved his hand to indicate the rest of the offices. "Let me show you to one of our meeting rooms and I'll see if he can spare a few minutes." He ushered her to a smaller, more private room and walked too close behind her. Flirting? Making some kind of move. The skin on her back shivered.

"Very good," he said, and left without looking back.

Very good, what? she wondered and absently picked up an old copy of *Washingtonian* and flipped through it. Wait a sec. How come he didn't even want to know what she wanted to talk about? What if she had a gun in her handbag? No, there

was that guard and metal detector. But still, wouldn't he give a damn about why she was there? And the way he sent off that admin was very strange.

She put down the magazine and backed against a wall to wait. Someone knocked and entered.

In person, Mr. Halbrut looked even more like an older, faded version of Gabriel. The deep grooves on either side of his mouth made him look disapproving. But his eyes were filled with mild interest.

"How can I help you?"

Mike Ashton stood right behind him, nodding in an encouraging manner.

"Ah, I had hoped I could talk to you alone, sir," she said.

"Oh, Mike here knows everything that goes on in my life. He's completely discreet."

"But this is a private matter."

Halbrut's genial manner cooled. "Mike's been with me for more than twenty-five years, miss, ah... I assure you, he has my total trust." *Unlike you*, he didn't need to add.

"I wanted to talk to you about your daughter. Linda."

The senator started and his mouth worked. She thought she heard a quiet moan from him. Mike merely raised his eyebrows. Perhaps he was not the sort of man who displayed shock.

Or perhaps he didn't display emotion for another reason.

She studied his eyes and he stared back.

"Linda," Halbrut said and cleared his throat. "Yes. She died a long time ago in an accident. I don't know what you expect to get from me but I—"

"She didn't die in that accident."

"No," he protested but she could tell he wasn't surprised by her words. He knew she'd been taken by the Dar.

Mike scratched the side of his chin and looked bored.

"She had a son, Mr. Halbrut."

She definitely heard a moan now. "What do you know about this?"

“I’ve met her son. He looks just like you.” She suddenly understood another scent Mike Ashton’s cologne might be hiding. She stared at him with defiance. “Except for the ring of gold in the iris of his eyes.”

Halbrut put his head down on the polished cherry table. His shoulders shook and a small sob came from him. Mike Ashton flashed her an annoyed look and went to stand behind his boss.

As he absently patted his boss’s heaving shoulder, Ashton examined her. “What do you hope to accomplish? I could have you arrested and thrown into jail for transportation of deadly disease. You are from Laketon, aren’t you? That’s where you met this Halbrut?”

She considered asking him what he was talking about, but he was too far ahead. “How much do you know?” she asked, more calmly than she felt.

“Enough.” Ashton made an impatient grunt in the back of his throat. “We are not so ill-informed as you think. For instance, we’ve kept track of your travels from Wisconsin. Credit cards? You are careless. This escape is a peculiarly useless venture on your companion’s part. Yours too. I admit some of the Dar have grown impatient lately but you needn’t get wrapped up in this matter. There’s nothing you can do.”

We have kept track, he’d said. And who were they? An ex-senator? Not likely. “God. You know all of it.”

Ashton didn’t answer.

“I have to do something,” she said angrily. “That’s my home that’s being turned into some kind of breeding unit.”

“Nonsense.” Ashton waved his hand as if sweeping her words from the air. “Don’t be so dramatic. We will have the situation under control soon. The town will open up in a month or two and we’ll all go back to business as usual. Any changes will be subtle.”

“Really? And this we. It’s not my government you’re talking about is it.” She looked around the desk for possible weapons. A heavy paperweight might work. Scissors. “Are you full-blooded or a half-blood like his grandson?”

He watched her hands. “What difference does it make? I have served my employer and this country well for many years.”

“You’re Dar.”

“I arrived before you were born, young lady.”

“You hide your nature. Contact lenses?”

He crossed his arms. “It is because of workers like me that you people are even allowed any sort of power on this planet. I have fought for human rights since I first arrived.”

Halbrut sat up straight. He pulled out a handkerchief and wiped his eyes. “Linda,” he whispered. “I’m only glad Mimi isn’t alive to hear this. It was hard enough for her to let Linda go.”

“Mr. Halbrut, enough. You are overreacting.” Ashton’s disgust was clear as he patted the old man’s arm.

Leah interrupted. “So you came here twenty-five years ago?”

“No. Thirty-five.”

“How can that be?”

“I’m not interested in this discussion. You will come with me, please.”

She almost wished he’d yell instead of simply stating facts. “Where am I going?”

“We can’t afford to have you running around loose, alarming people.” He sounded exactly like the guard at the army base. Unemotional and scary as hell.

“If I don’t return, Gabriel Halbrut will take steps.”

“The half-blood?”

She nodded.

The Dar tapped a finger on his lip—he’d obviously adopted the human habit of fidgeting. At last he said, “Very well. I would like to talk to him.”

She pointed at the phone on a desk in the corner of the room. “Call him. He’s got my cell.”

Without taking his gaze off her, Ashton listened to her recite the number and punched it in. A moment later she felt slightly sick. The man in the well-cut business suit

leaned casually on the edge of the desk, opened his mouth and made a hideous hiss. He spoke in the language of the Dar.

His brown eyes narrowed as he listened.

Halbrut seemed to have calmed down. He gave her a weak smile. "I'll never get used to that language. It's like being around a bunch of leaking balloons."

"How can you joke?"

"I've known Mike for almost thirty years. He's not a bad guy."

She stopped feeling quite as sorry for him. "He manipulates you. He might actually be able to do things to your mood, your thoughts. Come on, don't you remember? Some of the Dar could do that."

He shrugged. "Yeah, I figured that out a while ago. The truth is, I'd do it if I could too." He laughed nervously. "I mean to get some of those votes through, I would have loved that."

"You're kidding me. Senator. He messes with your brain."

"His goals are to keep us from getting blown up. Did you figure that out in your research? Some of the Dar think we should just be eradicated. Or contained. It's the ones like Mike who let us at least pretend to have some power over our fates." He'd recovered enough to sound more like a politician.

"Your daughter. What about Linda? They kidnapped her."

He shook his head a little too hard. "That wasn't Mike. He knew Linda... I know he wouldn't do that to Linda. It was someone else. Some of their radicals."

He cleared his throat. "You see, miss, you have to understand. They've been doing this sort of thing for a long time. I mean the Dar have been coming to this planet for hundreds of years."

Chapter Eight

Leah stared at the ex-senator. “Hundreds of years? But...” She stared at the alien across the room—expensive grey suit, well-polished shoes. The man hissed into the phone.

She sat down in one of the conference room chairs. “No, I don’t believe it. We would have known.”

“Certain people have known. Have always known. The Dar have been peaceful traders.”

“Then what about the invasion? Why did they do that?”

“They’d grown impatient and claimed we’d become sloppy caretakers of the planet. This planet has enough resources for us and them. Copper. Nitrogen. But...”

“But what? They didn’t want to share with humans?”

“Some of our governments wanted to charge more.”

“We charge them? We have regular trade with the Dar?”

He shrugged and darted a nervous glance at the Dar who’d put down the phone.

“He will come.” There was an edge of satisfaction in Ashton’s voice.

“Why?”

“Mostly because I told him I would kill the girl if he didn’t.”

“Mike.” Halbrut’s laugh was nervous.

“The girl and he seem to have very bad feelings about the Dar. I might as well use it, hmm?”

Leah glared at him. “Does this mean you’re going to kill him instead?”

“Let’s stop talking about killing. We’ll find a solution.”

“Fine with me,” she said trying to sound cool. “That is why we’re here.”

She hadn’t actually experienced fear when Ashton casually mentioned killing her. Instead she only felt very tired and wondered if Mike was using his Dar skills to push her into a state of relaxation. One of the rare pure Dar who could affect humans.

Or maybe she’d had too much sex and not enough sleep and that’s why she couldn’t manage panic.

Ashton sat down and templed his fingers. “Now we wait and decide what to do.”

She wished she had some coffee and pinched the inside of her hand to wake herself up. “We have to stop the Dar halflings. They are walking into houses, trashing them and—and doing worse.”

“Not a very subtle strategy, but they have been raised to be savages. I believe the Dar in charge of that project thought they were faithfully reproducing human society.”

“The Dar think we abandon our adolescents to see if any would survive?”

Mike raised his dark eyebrows a quarter of an inch. “That is what they did?”

“You ask the halflings, not me. All I know is what I saw in Laketon. They weren’t showing me what anyone would call a superior civilization.”

She expected him to grow offended. Instead he made a small hissing sound then said, “I would call this experiment a failure then. I suppose it should be scrapped and we’ll try again with another integration scheme.”

“If this has been going on for so long, why aren’t you Dar more direct? Why don’t you just approach the Earth’s governments and try to set up some kind of open trade if you’re so hot for the resources?”

He glanced at his watch. “The so-called invasion a couple of decades ago came about because many Dar had grown tired of making such attempts and being rebuffed. Those

extremists believe we don't need to appease the primitives. I must admit I am beginning to see their point. I have seen very little growth or change for the good in my time here. The natives on this planet use more of the Earth's resources than is necessary and they do little to improve any other aspect of their civilizations."

She made a rude noise with her mouth. "It's up to you guys to make sure we don't screw the hell up. Daddy Dar keeping us in line."

He gave her a mild look. "Sarcasm. An unattractive trait we manage to avoid." The Dar turned back to the senator. "I am sorry but I suspect we must be the ones to take charge in this matter. I've been waiting for others higher up to step in, but I think we must take the initiative."

"Linda," the senator said suddenly as if remembering something. "Is what this woman is saying true? Linda is dead?"

Ashton didn't even blink. "Yes, it is true."

"How long have you known?"

"I decided it wouldn't do you or us any good if I told you."

"Mike." Halbrut's anguish seemed pure sorrow without a trace of anger. "You lied. You didn't have to lie to me."

The Dar considered the notion. "Perhaps you're right. A lie of omission seemed easiest. You already knew you might not see her again. I thought I spared you and Mimi pain."

"You lied. Oh God. Linda is dead." He put his head down on his folded arms and his shoulders shook and heaved. No sound escaped him.

Mike gave him a blank look. No, not entirely expressionless, a faint disgust tucked the corners of his thin mouth. "Mr. Halbrut. Your grief must wait until we have solved this situation."

She understood the rest, as clearly as if he'd said words aloud. Weak human. But she thought perhaps he exuded something like tolerance. Could that be his true feeling or just what he wanted them to sense? When it came to humans, he seemed to care more about expediency than truth.

She studied him and he stared right back at her.

“He is loyal to you,” Ashton said softly.

She thought he meant the old man who now sat ashen-faced and silent in the chair.

“The halfling. I believe he would allow himself to die in your place. I wonder what you have done to merit such loyalty?”

She snorted. “You make him sound like a dog.”

“I wonder if you have some Dar blood in you and are able to use the persuasive power? Or perhaps you somehow reflect his attempts to persuade you?”

“Or maybe he likes me. Or maybe I fed him and he followed me home.”

Mike frowned. “You aren’t particularly funny.”

“No,” she agreed. “You’re right. Actually what I said might not be so far from the truth. I don’t think he’s gotten a lot of kindness from your type. So what are you going to do?”

“Meet this halfling. Hear what he has to say.”

She leaned back and crossed her arms. “His description of your planet didn’t make me want to visit the place.”

“You like him. You had intercourse with him. More than once.”

She didn’t bother denying it. The senator made a small sound that might have been disgust. “He’s Linda’s baby? Linda had a baby? With one of them?”

It seemed to be taking the senator quite some time to absorb the facts. “Yes,” she said, “but he doesn’t remember much about his mother.”

“Linda,” Halbrut muttered. “If she’d lived she’d be in her forties. Forty-one. They said they’d keep her safe. She said she wanted to go.”

Ashton spoke, almost kindly. “She died of natural causes, Nelson.”

Leah couldn’t help asking, “One of those snakes, maybe?”

“No. A blood clot, I believe.”

The door opened.

At the sight of Gabriel, everything inside her body shifted. Her womb grew heavy, her heart soared. She stopped herself from running across the room and jumping into his

arms. There, a palpable sensation—she could feel his relief too. Could Mike? No knowing—and she didn't much care. Feel the damned love, Mike.

Someone gasped. "You are..." Senator Halbrut staggered to his feet.

Gabriel's wide eyes mirrored the older man's. Gabriel recovered first. "Hello." He put out a hand, palm up, not quite the right way for shaking, but he was learning. "Good to meet you, sir. I'm Halbrut."

"Of course you are." The senator pulled him into a shaky two-handed handshake. "I don't care what the hell else you are, but I can see that. You are a Halbrut."

When Gabriel pulled away from the old man, he held a knife. He pointed it at Ashton. "Do you know I've learned to use primitive weapons?" he asked calmly.

Ashton nodded.

The senator gasped. "Son, there's no need." He put a shaking hand on Gabriel's arm. Gabriel gently disengaged himself and stepped toward Ashton.

"How'd you get that past the guard?" Ashton sounded only interested, not alarmed.

Gabriel shifted onto his heels, never taking his eyes off the Dar. "You are not going to kill her."

"True. I said that to get you here."

Ashton walked toward him slowly. Hands up. "I won't kill anyone. I simply wanted you to stop stalling and come here immediately. There's no need for this. You're overreacting. Tired, I imagine. It was a long journey wasn't it?"

Gabriel moved away from the hovering Halbrut and circled so that he faced Ashton.

"Stop trying to soothe me," he said.

Was he? Leah couldn't feel the sensation. She could swear the air was filled with thick emotion, none of it soothing.

Ashton's mouth twitched. "Put down the knife."

"No. I can listen and talk while holding it." Gabriel's hand was rock still. "I won't attack anyone unnecessarily. I promise not to harm anyone who doesn't try to harm me."

"Your turn to soothe," Ashton said mildly.

Something about the way he shifted his feet made Leah start forward, try to grab at him, but it was too late and her hands closed on empty air. Ashton sprang.

She screamed, but by the time her scream had died away, Ashton was making a gargling sound. His back was pressed to Gabriel, who held the knife to the Dar's throat.

Gabriel wasn't calm now. His face was pale and his eyes gold with strong emotion. "You forget that I learned from your kind. Now, for the last time, understand that I will not put down the knife. What am I going to do with you?"

No one answered him.

"You're good at tying people up," Leah said.

The anger vanished from Gabriel's face and he even gave a half grin. She went to the trembling ex-senator and held out a hand. "May I have your tie, sir?"

Halbrut fumbled at his red and blue striped tie. "There's no need for this," he said but handed it over.

"He didn't need to threaten Leah or attack me," Gabriel said.

Leah went to the Dar and with unsteady fingers, she loosened and took off the tie he wore. Yes, she smelled it, cinnamon, but more pungent than Gabriel's scent.

He didn't move as she unknotted his tie, merely stared at her with a cold unmoving face. "Leah," he said, calm as ever. "A much better name for you than Missy."

She ignored him and asked Gabriel, "Will two ties do it?"

Gabriel pushed Ashton into a chair. "Two ties and his jacket. Take it off, Dar."

A package of cigarettes fell out of the jacket pocket as Ashton, Gabriel's knife still at his throat, awkwardly pulled off his jacket.

Leah picked them up. "A filthy habit," she said.

"I don't smoke the things," Ashton said. "I merely find they cover my scent well."

The only one of them who appeared thoroughly shaken by the episode was Halbrut. He seemed to have aged since the moment he'd entered the room and Leah had shaken his hand. She felt a fleeting moment of guilt. She had to remind herself that she was the messenger and had nothing to do with his daughter's death.

Once Ashton was tied up, Leah moved to Gabriel and allowed herself to lay a hand on his cheek. “Thank you,” she said. “For not abandoning me.” Her heart seemed to slow, relax with the relief of touching him.

He drew his fingertips along her jaw and cupped her face. For a brief second their mouths touched, a light kiss, and her heart sped again.

She took the chair next to him. They all sat in chairs in a circle. Ashton didn’t struggle and if it weren’t for the silk ties on his arms, he’d look like he was settled in the chair for a regular meeting.

“Do you know,” he said, and sounded surprised for the first time. “I actually felt that? And when you came in, halfling, I felt the relief of it too. I haven’t had such a sensation for thirty-five years.”

“What are you talking about?”

“The kiss. Your bond. She likely has Dar blood. Well, well.” He let out a long slow breath that sounded positively human. “Well, well,” he muttered again and hissed some words.

Gabriel’s eyes narrowed. “No, I will not confirm it. You know that sort of activity doesn’t happen in the open here.”

“It is important to understand this phenomenon, young man. Do you understand?”

“How important?”

“It would help. The people here. Your Leah.” And he hissed some more. Gabriel joined in the hiss-fest for a few minutes and Leah tried to breathe deeply to keep from shouting at them to stop.

“Agreed,” said Gabriel at last.

“What?” Leah held her breath to see if that would help her fight the irritation. No, she just felt angrier. “What the hell are you guys talking about?”

“Ashton might help us stop the halflings in Laketon without harming any of them.”

“Why? The Dar won’t do anything that doesn’t benefit the Dar.”

Ashton looked at her with something akin to amusement. “I have been on this planet for years just to benefit humans.”

She put her hands on her hips. “Yeah? Okay. I guess I can be convinced you’d help. But you don’t sell me on the ‘just to benefit you humans’ act. I don’t get the impression you think much of us. You said you kept the Dar from acts of atrocity. So it isn’t protecting the humans—you are worrying about bloodying your own hands.”

He stared at her. “Well, well,” he said once more A funny and rather annoying way to curse. “Perhaps you’re right.”

He spoke to Gabriel again in that strange hissing sound.

Something made Gabriel’s eyes flash. Golden anger? But then he calmed. More hissing and they seemed to reach some sort of agreement. She wasn’t sure she liked the bleak, injured look on Gabriel’s face—hardly anything really, just at the corners of his eyes and mouth. Anyone else wouldn’t notice, but she could read him now.

When he caught her watching him, his face relaxed. “It will be fine. At last we will get somewhere.”

“Gabriel?” The senator’s voice was stronger. Leah had almost forgotten he was there. His gaze on Gabriel was greedy. “Gabriel. That is a family name. Did she tell you that?”

“No.” His grandson looked over at him. “I don’t remember my mother. I only recall her singing. A song about a whale.”

The man’s mouth trembled.

“Nelson,” Ashton said, warningly.

The senator straightened in his chair. “All right, Mike. I’ll stop.”

The Dar did provide some sort of strength and seemed to care that his human charge suffered. There was a friendship there, strange and twisted, but friendship.

For the first time, Leah thought she’d done the right thing coming to this office. She felt a lift of the heart, a glimmer of optimism.

She looked at Gabriel and knew the palpable sensation emanated from him too. Echoing and reechoing louder. Hope.

“Thank you,” she told Gabriel quietly.

Ashton moved his legs. He didn't smile but his mouth relaxed. "I feel it also and I pray it is not sentimental foolishness caused by too many years on this planet. And when will you untie me?"

Gabriel ignored him. "You will make some calls for us, sir?" He spoke to the ex-senator with an apologetic air.

The old man nodded. "You are my grandchild," he said again. "I can't believe it."

Gabriel pushed the phone toward him. "We will need to arrange for an airplane. To go to Wisconsin."

Halbrut looked at Ashton, who nodded once. "Yes, I've agreed to a plan," Ashton said. "Once they get these silly ties off me, I'll have things to do. I think it's time to call in favors."

Gabriel stood next to Leah and gave her the hint of a smile.

"What's the plan?" Leah asked Gabriel quietly.

"First we get your town freed."

"Oh, sure. What'll we do for an encore?" But he'd gone to Ashton to undo the knots on the chair. She didn't bother trying to help.

The plane was small and noisy but the seats were comfortable and she could snuggle against Gabriel at the back as Ashton and the ex-senator sat up front, talking. Behind sat three men in dark suits. Security or advisors. The sort of men who could pass for Dar with their dark glasses and expressionless faces.

Gabriel so close meant she felt calm comfort and the vibration of excitement—an odd combination, especially considering the circumstances. She rested her hand on his thigh and wished she could strip off his clothes and then hers and scramble onto his lap. Skin to skin. He put his hand over hers and tightened his fingers as if he could feel her reckless lust and was telling her to stop. Funny that he would suppose she needed the warning. Even when she could ignore her physical awareness of him, he charmed her. She sighed and tucked as much of herself around him as she could without climbing out

of her seat. He put an arm over her and she could feel the weight of his arm gradually increase as he slid into sleep.

She listened to his slower-than-normal heartbeat and wondered at the strange bond. Away from him, or now as he slept, she could consider the fact that she'd been swept along. Four days ago she hadn't known him. Now a to-the-bone sensation of love filled her for this man—for this creature, rather. She cared for him more than she'd ever loved anyone—or had ever expected to.

Hardly possible so quickly, she argued with herself. But then she would meet his eyes and get lost again in his fascinating golden gaze, or simply remember the way he carefully picked his words to make himself as clear as possible—even though she could feel the truth directly from him and didn't need speech

She tightened her grip on him, and nestled closer, trying to feel their connection as he slept.

That uncanny truth of his passion and the way it bonded her to him was as terrifying and exhilarating as the first time she'd kissed a man. An unknown source of sensation had been uncovered inside her. Something had peeled away, leaving her more exposed than if she'd run down the street naked. Despite her vulnerability, her halfling hadn't barged into her emotions. He'd respected their new strange power, although could she consider something like vision a power? After all, would taste be considered power? And it was limited: her new sense of the world that began and ended with him.

His hand touched her hair and she felt his presence when he woke.

“This affinity is so strange. We're too close,” she whispered “What happens when we fight? Don't we need distance if we get pissed off with each other? I mean what if you think about sleeping with another woman? Will I feel that somehow?”

He began to chuckle, a low, unpracticed breathy sound.

“What's so funny?”

“You are the sort of person who thinks of all possible problems and worries over them.”

“Sort of, maybe.” She tilted her head back and grinned sheepishly into his face. “And that’s why you’re laughing?”

“Not really. I understand worrying, but my fears are that we will be imprisoned, or I imagine the ways we may die.”

“Okay so I’m a—” she started, but he must have felt her defensiveness.

He leaned close and whispered, “I think it must be joy that makes me laugh. I am not used to either the joy or the laughter. Thank you.”

She closed her eyes. Peculiar, how the man could nearly bring her to strange tears just with a sentence or two. For God’s sake, she didn’t even know what on earth moved her.

He went on. “Your worries of our future arguments are like a promise to me, a solace if nothing else. You picture your future with me in it. That’s something like a gift.”

She nodded, serious now. “Yeah. I get it.”

His trace of a smile was playful. “Oh. And also, yes, you are funny.”

Snickering, she whacked his arm. When she looked into his face, she saw the glow in his eyes that could set a woman on fire. Whoa, baby. She turned her head to peer through the tiny airplane window, trying to calm herself. “Don’t you worry that you’re putting too much of your emotional well-being in a stranger?” She wasn’t sure if she was speaking to him or herself.

When she snuck a look at him again, he whispered, “I suppose it is always a risk. I remember reading in one of the books I discovered that to fall in love is to create a religion that has a fallible god.”

Before she could give him another shove on the arm, he reached for and grabbed her wrists. She laughed and wrenched away her hands. “Yeah, you better fear me for I am a goddess of love.”

Funny how they used the word love recklessly, even lightly. Every time she tried to come up with some way to warn him—or herself—to be careful, he managed to easily charm her. Perhaps she relaxed her usual caution with her heart because, as he’d pointed out, she had more concrete things to worry about, like survival.

One of the senator's assistant came back to their seats. "The senator thought you'd like to know that word is spreading." He had to yell over the engines.

"What do you mean?"

"It's starting. Rumors from the wacko Internet sites and then a brief mention in the mainstream that it's more than just an illness at Laketon. There might be some problems. And others are getting involved."

"Other people?" Leah asked.

The assistant shrugged. "Local agent mentioned some names from the Pentagon, current lawmakers. Not sure who'll be on the scene when we get there, though. Mainstream's still calling it a conspiracy theory, which is good." He headed back to his seat, bent-walking in the easy manner of a man who often flew in small bouncy planes.

"Did you understand that?" Gabriel asked.

"Sort of. I just wonder... How in hell do they manage to know so much?"

He put an arm around her and squeezed. "Ashton. He has connections we don't know about."

"Other Dar, I suppose," she grumbled.

"Yes. I suspect that's how they traced us so easily." He sounded calm.

"Don't you resent the Dar still interfering with your life?"

"Resentment is useless."

"I thought the phrase was 'resistance is useless'."

He gave her a puzzled frown then said, "If Ashton causes harm I'll do more than experience emotion."

Leah leaned close to him, craving his heat and the comfort that radiated from him through the broadcloth shirt. Her head pressed Gabriel's chest to hear a steady pulse, she drifted to sleep. She only woke as the plane skittered to a stop. Gabriel went pale and clutched her tight against him.

"Oh. This is the way it is supposed to land?" He let go of her and rubbed his palms over his eyes. "I was reasonably certain we were about to blow up. I already thought the Dar had more advanced technology. Now I know it's true with all forms."

They ducked under the plane's low door and went out into the pale grey light of a chilly morning to the familiar low rolling hills. She'd expected to feel a sense of relief but the dread in the pit of her stomach grew. Her own sensation, not borrowed from either of the Dar in her presence. Only she had an emotional connection to this place and she feared what she would find as they climbed into two waiting SUVs. The assistants got one, and she and Gabriel got into the front car with the senator and Ashton. A balding blond man in a blue suit and that ubiquitous neutral expression waited, then carefully closed the doors behind them. He looked vaguely familiar. Or maybe it was that blank face that seemed like the Dar to her.

"Nice that you can have people meet you anywhere you go at the drop of a hat, sir," she said to Halbrut, and wished she hadn't. The remark sounded like nervous snark. For some reason, the tension in the car was already thick, no need to increase it.

He obligingly laughed—the easygoing public figure. "Yes, even though I haven't been in office for a while, I'm still used to the perks."

Ashton, who'd been gazing out the tinted SUV window, frowned when the phone on his belt shrilled.

He barked a greeting, listened for a moment, said "good" then hung up without another word.

"That's the go-ahead. We're providing the public face," said Ashton.

The balding driver spoke up. "You're meeting with the mayor, sir."

"MacHenry?" Leah looked into the rearview mirror at the driver, who nodded.

She thought of the large once-handsome man who'd run a fishing store and who'd run for office because his fishing buddies promised to support him. "He's pretty useless. You need the guy who runs the ball-bearing plant. Vukalovich—only everyone, even his workers, calls him Vulk."

Ashton turned his flat gaze to her. "I'm glad to have you with us."

She wondered if he was being ironic—but not Ashton.

Leah said, "I'm not sure Vulk lives in Laketon proper so he might not be under the weird-ass spell. Want to stop at his house? See if he's around to take to the meeting?"

“No need, ma’am,” the driver said. “MacHenry listed a few other people who’ll be at the meeting and Vukalovich is one of the names he mentioned.”

She let herself relax against the black leather seat and felt some of the tension ease. The grownups would take care of it. For the moment she could fool herself with that thought. The car slowed as they left the highway. Almost there.

“So your resources tracked us after we left Laketon? Did you know where we were every minute?”

Ashton lowered the window slightly and the cold rush of air felt good. “Not the whole time.” The window thrummed up again. “Glad there’s no snow.”

“When did you lose track of us?”

“Couple of times but never for long,” Ashton said and she knew the topic was closed.

How long had they been running? Four days, though it felt more like months.

Gabriel made a quiet sound that might have been a curse and Leah, peering around him, saw why. The checkpoint had been transformed by a sea of faces. Crowds had gathered outside gates. Stronger chain-link fences had been put up since they’d fled.

As the SUV drew near, the faces turned to it. A soldier motioned for the SUV to pull off the road into a gravel parking lot. The car stopped and a few angry-looking civilians and camera crews drifted closer.

“Wow,” breathed the senator. “We do have a problem.”

“The Dar didn’t take into account how rapidly word spreads these days,” said Ashton flatly. “Phone systems don’t go down as easily as they used to and people have...more ways.”

Gabriel frowned and Leah hesitantly said, “I think he means more connections to the outside world. Internet and cell phones. And if too many things go at once, people’ll panic.” She watched a couple of men in the crowd draw near and try to look in the dark windows. The blank eye of several cameras peered in.

Ashton drew back. Leah asked, “So you sound like you’ve done it before? How often do the Dar do this? Land in small towns and take hostages?”

Ashton didn’t answer but watched the shifting crowd. “I can feel the anger,” he said. She couldn’t.

Gabriel shifted close and whispered in her ear. “I catch fear and doubt. I’m not sure if it’s them or him.”

“Or me.”

“No, not you. You’re far stronger, always.”

The senator, in the front seat, had been chatting up the driver. Leah heard talk of fishing, local wildlife, the best sort of beer in Wisconsin. Now he fell silent. Ashton leaned forward and tapped him on the shoulder. “Time to confront the herd and calm it down.”

Herd, thought Leah. He doesn’t do sarcasm so that’s really what he thinks.

The crowd parted as the driver got out and opened the senator’s door. By the time Leah had scooted out, the old man had already raised his hands for quiet and was addressing the crowd. He pleaded for calm, insisted the government had a handle on the situation and ignored the questions being shouted at him.

Ashton moved close enough she could smell the combination of cigarettes, cologne and under that, almost suffocating cinnamon. How’d he manage to pass for so long? Obviously not by standing near people. “Not good.” He spoke to her under his breath.

“I think he’s doing okay. Amazing that he can shout so loud.”

“He is in good form, but they’re uneasy. Lapsing back into fear. Surely even you can see, miss. There’s an instinctual change in body movement and body language. People gathered in groups pressed back to the edges.”

Why was he bothering to explain?

“I want you to stand near the halfling. Perhaps touch his hand.” His eyes narrowed as he gazed at a knot of hunched and muttering men.

She didn’t know what she and Gabriel could do, but it hardly mattered. He had vanished. Leah grabbed the front door of the SUV, and hauled herself onto the step trying

to see over the thirty or so people in their area. A figure was running, fast, toward the gate where two men held a third person—a woman. Gabriel was the runner.

Leah held her breath, gathering it for a scream when she saw him launch himself at the two men. Heads turned away from the senator. Good, they'd help Gabriel, who was trying to pull the woman away.

Pain, hatred, that was him—and fierce love too. She clutched the door, dizzy from holding her breath and understood that he was defending a woman he cared for. But the fear blazing in her was from the crowd.

Dar.

Somebody in the milling group said the frightening word and someone else repeated it.

The senator paused. He must have been distracted by the struggle at the back, and even his rich loud voice had been drowned out. He shaded his eyes and stretched tall to see what was going on. The SUV driver flipped open the back gate of the car. He pulled out two things—a rifle and a megaphone. The soldiers didn't notice because they trotted toward the gate in no big hurry. Let the fistfight carry on. The military's duty was to keep the Laketon people in and everyone else out. Period. They weren't interfering otherwise.

People were shouting now. *Dar. There are Dar here.*

Through the tumult of shouts, Leah heard the snapping click of the rifle but the explosion still took her by surprise. She stumbled then gave a moan of relief when she saw the man only aimed up into the sky.

The huge noise did the trick. For the moment, anyway.

Almost at once the muttering started up again. *Dar.*

Chapter Nine

“Here.” The driver thrust the megaphone at the senator. “Try again.”

The senator’s words of “situation well in hand”, and other platitudes seemed to calm some of them.

Leah ignored him. Gabriel and the woman were surrounded by the soldiers, who marched them toward town, away from the gates. The woman stumbled. The knot of people stopped briefly. Gabriel swept her into his arms then they moved off more slowly. Still under guard.

“We haven’t heard anything from our family in Laketon. Not a word.” A beefy dark-haired man with small eyes and a big chin stepped out of the crowd. He wore a blue windbreaker with *Go Navy* and he’d apparently been appointed speaker. His bulk came close enough to block Leah’s view of the scene. With a rising note of anger, the big man continued. “And now we see there’s Dar in there. It’s them, isn’t it? Not disease. The Dar!”

“The problem has been contained.” The senator patted the man on the shoulder. “Mr. Ashton and I will be entering the town limits to speak to the officials but we must insist that you remain outside the gates.” He smiled at a cameraman taping the whole

interaction. “Very soon we’ll be able to relink Laketon with the outside world. I assure you there is no problem with the Dar.”

“They’re there, though, aren’t they?” The big man tried to get in the senator’s face.

“Excuse me, sir.” The driver and one of the blank-faced men in a tie pushed him away efficiently. “We don’t have time for more questions.” The driver nodded at a couple of soldiers who strolled over and stood ready. But not quite. Something about the soldiers was too relaxed for military.

Leah walked behind their escort, next to Ashton. They marched past the guards, the soldiers who stood, arms crossed and uninterested.

“You know where we’re going?” Ashton asked the SUV driver.

“Yessir.” He pointed at a shuttle van. “There.”

Another drive through empty streets and Leah looked frantically for Gabriel and the woman.

“Where’d he go?” she asked Ashton. “Where’d they take him?”

“The Dar are now held prisoner,” he said, calmly. “The town managed to contain them after all. Only four full and three halflings have died.”

“Full?”

“Fully human.” He settled into the van seat as if readying himself for a nap. “Hardly the casualties I’d expected, seven altogether.”

The soldier spoke “Sir. It’s not over yet. Some townspeople must still be under the influence. They’re not allowing us to take the Dar and we’re not going to make any assaults unless we see imminent danger.”

Leah looked at him. “What happened? Why did you change your mind about it? I mean, when I was here a couple of days ago, no one admitted there were any Dar.”

He gave her an odd look. “They invaded last night, ma’am. That’s when the trouble started.”

“But that’s not true. They were—”

“Last night? That must be when the halflings’ hold loosened,” Ashton said, not even trying to disguise the truth or his disgust with them. “They must have felt too relaxed, too

at home. That can never happen. They'd be overtaken the moment they allowed their guard down."

For a second she imagined the weight of his thirty-plus years on Earth, always alert and watching for trouble among the humans. A stab of sympathy struck her.

He gave her an amused look but said nothing. Maybe he hadn't felt the burden after all. Or maybe he didn't feel her pity.

She suspected he didn't care for either.

They pulled up in front of a café only half a block from her bar. It felt nightmarish walking into the familiar lunch dive and find it filled by men in suits and soldiers in uniforms. The overhead fans circled lazily as if it were any old regular day and the scent of ancient fried food and coffee filled the air. Only the low drone of conversation sounded different. No laughter, no smart remarks and no orders called to the short-order chef.

They shuffled in the door and stood in a loose circle for a moment. Everyone made a brief introduction and she discovered the blank-faced driver was named Agent Hindsen. She didn't catch which agency he was with.

Then chairs dragged briefly on the floor and counter stools squeaked as everyone found a seat.

The ex-senator took charge. "Where are the two who were arrested at the gates? The, ah, man and woman?" His pause before the word "man" made the truth of Dar echo in the silence afterwards.

Agent Hindsen seemed to know everything, "They're with the sheriff, sir. Not on the base."

"Fetch the man, please. He's a, um, diplomat."

"Yes, sir." Hindsen pushed back from the table with the slight groan of a man who had liked sitting down. He walked away from the table a few feet and pulled out a communication device that wasn't a phone.

A woman brought them sandwiches. She wasn't the usual waitress and Leah wondered where Jenny and her sister, Matty, the cook, were. Hidden at home or gathered with the angry crowds somewhere.

"The town doesn't feel like what you'd call a powder keg," said Ashton.

"No," The mayor nodded and looked at Vulk in the same way the senator looked at his advisor.

Could the ball-bearing factory owner have Dar blood? Were the men in power a bunch of puppets controlled by space aliens? She stifled amusement. Not particularly funny, after all.

The mayor patted his mouth with a napkin. "It's strange, sir, but it was..." He hesitated. "Until about a half hour ago, I could have sworn this was going to be a huge disaster. I was telling Milt here, I had no idea what the hell we'd do to keep mobs from attacking the Dar we haven't captured yet."

Hindsen gave a sniff. "Show me where the Dar are holed up."

"The local law enforcement made a map of where the holdouts are."

Leah looked at it. The clusters were in her neighborhood. She pointed at the middle of the activity. "That's my house."

"Well, well," said Ashton. "Interesting."

"I'm not at the center, only close to it. They were very active on my block," she said defensively. It wasn't all about the bond, she wanted to tell him.

Just then the room grew lighter. Had someone switched on a light or a cloud drifted away from the sun? She should have figured this effect out by now—it was Gabriel who stood in the doorway. Her breath came easier.

He had a bruise on a cheek and his lip dribbled blood. She slid off the stool and went to him. He smiled and rattled chains at her. Oh, she'd been so focused on his injured face she didn't notice the shackles on his ankles and wrists, the kind worn by prisoners in court.

"Take the restraints off," Ashton ordered.

Leah was glad Weekes, the local law enforcement, was the one to drag Gabriel in. He was a nice enough guy though he tended to visit the bar too often on his nights off. Weekes unlocked Gabriel and hauled off the chains. He even took a couple of steps back to allow him his freedom.

To hell with how it might appear to the rest of the room. She went straight into Gabriel's arms. For a long minute they held each other. Leah fought the hunger welling inside her and concentrated on the comfort of his embrace. She allowed her hands to smooth his back for a couple of seconds before they pulled apart.

"This guy is some diplomat," McHenry said. "He's got the bartender on his side. Always a smart move." Almost everyone laughed.

Leah turned to the mayor. "I didn't know you recognized me, sir."

"It's a small town, Miss...errr..."

She grinned as he turned away to hold up his coffee cup. The mayor knew her job but couldn't bring up her name ten minutes after being formally introduced.

The agents and other men at the table returned to the quiet conversation she'd been unsuccessfully trying to overhear. She listened to Gabriel instead now. Too hard to resist standing close enough to feel the back of his hand graze her arm, and allowing the heat of his body to fill hers. She wouldn't go far, now that she had him back, nearly safe. "How's your friend?" she murmured.

Gabriel touched his lip gingerly. "She is bleeding and will probably lose the baby." He spoke in a hushed voice. "Perhaps because someone punched her hard in the stomach. I think the soldiers took her to some sort of medical facility."

She swallowed. The woman had been pregnant. "Was it—did she carry your baby?"

"No, of course not." He looked shocked. "She'd bred with a human, the way the halflings were supposed to."

"But that was your friend that you...ah?"

He nodded and whispered "Yes, I *did it* with her."

Trying to hold back the giggle proved difficult. She coughed and cleared her throat. "Maybe you should go be with her."

“No. She wouldn’t care for that.” He looked toward the table where the mayor and his advisors talked. “What are they doing?”

She gave up trying to figure out how he felt about his old girlfriend. “There’s some sort of standoff here in town and they don’t know what to do. Also I bet they’re drafting an official message. Those people on the other side of the gates aren’t going to wait forever. And the TV trucks are showing up from everywhere.”

She pulled a paper napkin from the silver dispenser and handed it to him. He held it to his lip.

“What do they want us here for?”

“The senator’s Dar want us to hold hands, I think.”

He nodded. “Oh. Of course, that’s it. Ashton envies the ease with which I can influence you. I don’t have to work at the bond.”

She folded her arms. “Yeah, if everyone else in town was like me, it wouldn’t have mattered that the Dar relaxed. There wouldn’t be a standoff. They’d all still be zombies. Like me.”

He gave her a sidelong look. “You are being sarcastic?”

She shrugged. “Maybe. Probably.”

“What he and the other halflings don’t understand is that you hold me as well. That is why it is so strong. Two ways in a bond are so much better than one.”

“What the heck do I know? It’s all new to me.”

He nodded. “It’s new to me too. Yes, there can be something among us halflings but I’ve never had it like this. Nothing, nothing like with you.”

He was right. Two way was fair, not slavery. Comfort filled her, and she relaxed.

She was suddenly starved for sleep. All she wanted was to haul Gabriel home, collapse in her bed with him and stay there for the rest of the week.

Two people yawned.

Gabriel looked at her sideways. “Good,” he said. “Now touch my hand again. Like Ashton said.”

She ran the tip of her finger over his wrist, up to his knuckles, the lightest touch. “Yes,” he breathed. He brought her finger to his mouth, kissed the sensitive flesh between her thumb and forefinger, gently nibbled the flesh of her palm.

The thought of sleep dissolved—but not the urge to drag him home to her bed. She stroked her hand up his arm to rest on his shoulder. Only four blocks away. Her beloved house and the comfortable bed. Gabriel, naked and moving inside her, writhing with her on the soft, worn sheets of her bed.

Two men near them shifted in their seats and straightened. The senator adjusted his tie and the waitress, holding the carafe of coffee, lingered near the mayor’s shoulder. If she’d been Fluke, she would have rubbed all over him, purring.

She looked over at Ashton, who was rolling a cigarette between his fingers. He flashed her what might have been an honest-to-God wink and he spoke in a loud voice, addressing the room. “I think that we will be able to solve the crisis in your town.”

McHenry shook his head. “The soldiers have it under control but just barely.”

“It’s going to be better from here on in.” Ashton tucked the cigarette away in the top pocket of his jacket and got to his feet. “I think the time has come to reveal the truth. I know that the administration and other government officials are for keeping silent.”

The senator looked up, startled. “No, not us—it was your—”

“The truth is,” Ashton rolled over him. “The Dar are going to be here whether we like it or not. They won’t be acting as invaders, but this town has been given over to their, ah, refugee camp.”

“Jesus.” McHenry slumped in his chair. The waitress put down the carafe of coffee and stared at Ashton.

The mayor said, “That’s no kind of answer. What the hell am I supposed to say to the people who live here?”

“That the refugees will be contained and no individual homeowner should be threatened by the Dar’s presence. This town was picked in part because the economy is on the wane, correct?”

McHenry didn't speak but the ball-bearing factory owner did. "S'all right around here. Never have a shortage of workers."

"A shortage of jobs, then?"

One by one everyone nodded. Miss Lilly was the first to speak. "And what are these Dar supposed to do? Will they bring work to the area?"

"They will be harvesting resources, I believe."

McHenry stared at him. "You mean picking peaches?"

"Something like mining, except less intrusive or harmful to the planet than standard techniques."

McHenry grunted. "You sound like some kinda expert. Wouldn't think the senator would be so crazy about a Dar-lover in his employ. Not with Halbrut's history."

"I have a strong interest in this area, sir. I hope to watch it thrive." Impossible to goad Ashton. "And this seems like a good opportunity."

"But they invaded the place. Went into people's homes," Miss Lilly said. "I heard stories."

The fear curled in Leah's belly. She leaned against Gabriel and his strong hand on the back of her neck steadied her. She enveloped his other thumb with her hand.

"And they seduced people. They're still at it." She waved a hand at Leah. "She's been brainwashed."

"Actually, ma'am, she's the one who alerted us to the potential problem. She escaped the quarantine and fled with the help of this young man."

"Dar."

"Half Dar. He's my grandson," the senator said.

"Jesus," McHenry said hoarsely. "I can see it. The eyes. So that explains why you're interfering here."

Someone else spoke up, angry. "Hell. You're on their side. When will we get a real official from the govern—"

"We have the full confidence of the president, and have been authorized to act on his behalf," Ashton said. "Agent Hindsen? Major?"

“Yes, sir.” Hindsen sounded unenthusiastic. “That’s what I understood.”

The army officer gave a single nod. His scowling disapproval was almost comical but he didn’t speak.

Everyone stared at the grandfather and grandson. She wasn’t sure if it would help but she had to try. Think of Gabriel, she told herself. Think of his loyalty. Feel it. *Love. Fill me with love.*

McHenry drank some coffee and broke the silence. “I recall they killed your daughter. I remember the tragedy well.” He glared at Gabriel for a second and his features only relaxed slightly as he turned his attention to the senator. “Senator Halbrut. You had only one daughter and she died, sir.”

The senator’s shoulders had been slumping, probably with exhaustion, poor old man. Now he straightened up and looked around the room. “She went with the Dar. I said she died, but she went back to their planet with them. So did some others at that school. And their children were sent back to us.” Leah waited. Surely would volunteer that his daughter had no choice and was a prisoner of the enemy?

But no, Halbrut looked down at his hands and fell silent.

The mayor said, “Half Dar? They can do that? I mean they look like us but can they do it? Make babies?”

“This bunch has been doing it all over town,” said the waitress. “Bunch of tomcats.”

Leah could feel Gabriel’s tiny amusement at the waitress’s phrase “doing it” and she refused to meet his eyes.

It seemed the townsfolk hadn’t understood the halflings’ motivation to mix human and Dar blood—the halflings weren’t in it for a good time.

She wouldn’t tell that particular truth, not yet, and maybe never, if the damned Dar changed their plan to conquer one town at a time.

“Your friend,” she whispered to Gabriel. “The one who likes being Dar.”

“Graeb?”

“Yeah. Do you suppose he’ll ever manage to be here on this planet without trying to turn the world into some kind of unit thing?”

Gabriel didn't answer for a long minute. The others were arguing about the idea of making a special camp for the Dar away in a desert, so they couldn't influence anyone. "Hold them in camps until we can get the Dar to take 'em away," someone suggested.

She grimaced. Just what they needed, another unit. Maybe it would feel like home sweet home to some of them, like Graeb.

Gabriel crumpled the paper napkin and shoved it in his pocket. At last he spoke in a low voice. "I don't know what Graeb'll do, but maybe. If he meets with Ashton. I think he'll listen to him."

"That's what I wondered. You'd go, too? I want you to listen and make sure Ashton isn't going to do anything bizarre like raise a revolution. Or continue the revolution. I don't entirely trust him."

"Of course I'll go."

Someone was talking about the havoc the halflings had done in a house they'd raided and abandoned.

Leah brushed the edge of her thumb near the bruise on Gabriel's cheek. He gave his half smile. She trusted him, entirely. Trusted him with her life and with her world's best interests. What a relief to have a partner in this.

She spoke up, loud to drown out the argument about why the halflings were trashing houses and screwing anyone in their path. She divulged part of the truth. "I think it's just a matter of, um, culture shock. They haven't been taught how to behave well. I get the sense that sex isn't such a big deal for them, I mean not taboo."

She could feel Gabriel's bemusement and risked a glance at Ashton. Unreadable, of course. "Anyway," she went on, "because of their human side, they might be barred from their planet so they're sort of stuck here. We ought to try to teach them. Rehabilitation. It would be sort of horrible if they ended up locked away for life."

"Expensive for the taxpayers too," Ashton put in. "By the way, I have word that with the, ah, quarantine there is talk of disaster aid. And other funding might apply—if we can all cooperate in this matter the federal funding could be substantial."

Federal money as a bribe: "cooperate" in this case meant "don't drive out the Dar".

Dick Eagan, a council member with grey eyebrows and a dyed-black comb-over, pounded a fist on the table so hard the coffee mugs rattled. “That’s it? That’s all you’ll do? They’ve played with us like we’re their puppets and that’s all we can do?” Dick, a regular at the bar, was pretty good at public speaking. She was used to hearing him tell dirty jokes, though. He went on, “You want us to tell ’em ‘there, there, poor alien’ and send them on their way—maybe even live among us? They took over our homes. They seduced anybody they could.” He glared around the table. “They tried to take over everything.”

“They didn’t succeed though, did they?” the ex-senator asked. “The citizens of Laketon proved too strong, too united in their stand against the Dar’s influence.” His rich mellifluous voice rang through the small café—he should have been addressing a larger hall. “Let the halflings learn our human rules. We can only hope the citizens of Laketon will be merciful in their strength.”

Leah suppressed an eye-roll, but other people in the room nodded slowly. The pandering might work after all.

“Maybe so.” Dick Eagan furrowed his grey eyebrows. “I don’t get why they should be allowed to commit criminal activities and not face any sort of punishment.” He picked up his cup of coffee and glowered at the senator over the mug.

Venting.

Leah suddenly understood that now everyone was burning off the anger, the last grumbling before they came up with something that would work for the town and, astoundingly, the halflings.

She wanted to give Ashton a triumphant thumbs-up. See? Humans aren’t unforgiving animals.

But then another councilman shoved back his chair and jumped to his feet. “Dick’s right. We need protection from those assholes. I’ve got a daughter and I’ve got a rifle and I’m not afraid to use it when they come knocking on my door. I don’t care if she thinks she wants it.”

The emotion flowed and ebbed and her head throbbed. Leah wondered if she should attempt to do the trick of the Dar. She might be able to redirect some of the unpleasant currents. She concentrated, trying to drown out the muttering in the room.

Hope and love this time. And not just love for Gabriel but for all the unshaved and dirty and shocked people in the small café who would be willing to forgive the invaders, eventually.

Gabriel's chair creaked as he leaned to her. He rested his fingers on her thigh, his hand a warm and soothing weight. Ashton looked over at Leah and one corner of his mouth quirked into a ghost of a smile. He pulled out the cigarette again. No one stopped him as he lit it and drew a deep drag.

Distracted, Leah watched. She wasn't sure she trusted Ashton or his ghostly smirks that passed for smiles, but she liked him better for his frailty. "Not a smoker," she said. "Yeah, right."

He shrugged, the large, extravagant shrug of a Dar, Gabriel's shrug, and she felt like laughing.

Leah switched her full attention to Dick. Love, she thought. Just the word, because she couldn't manage more with her head about to explode. Would she always feel this sensitive to tension when Gabriel was near?

Someone muttered about the gun in the back of his pickup for taking on the last stronghold of the Dar.

Dick leaned back in his chair and ran a careful hand over his comb-over. "Now wait a minute, folks, I didn't say nothing about vigilante action. The senator there says it's some kind of misunderstanding. Culture shock, I think you called it, Leah."

She nodded. "Yeah, that's a good name for it, sir."

Dickie is reasonable, she thought as hard as she could. A peaceable man.

He cleared his throat and went on, "So the aliens keep their peckers in their pants from now on, I say, okay, we don't blast 'em. I just think maybe, well. We might be owed. Expenses and so on. I mean, what if all that, uh, partying meant babies are gonna

start popping out in nine months? You say this one—” he jerked a thumb at Gabriel “—had a human mama? So is it nine months for ’em?”

Miss Lilly wrinkled her nose in distaste. “Maybe they’re like elephants. Years later.”

The waitress had settled into a chair near McHenry. She giggled. “Gracious, labor and delivery will smell like a bakery, right? Cinnamon.”

Someone else snickered.

“I make a solemn promise.” The ex-senator had also gotten to his feet and addressed the entire room which fell silent. He’d had even more practice than Dickie Eagan at holding a crowd. “If there are any unforeseen problems with the actions the halflings undertook—the mistaken shocking actions they will regret—we will be more than willing to come to the aid of the affected individuals and families with whatever services they require.”

“And if they try any of this funny business again—” someone started.

“They will be arrested and tried, like any other citizen,” Ashton finished calmly. “Once they understand the rules, they will follow them.”

“Ignorance of the law is no excuse—”

“Aw, can it, Will. They didn’t even know there was a law, I’ll bet.”

The air eased. The thunderstorm had passed. Leah knew she could rest now and closed her eyes, half listening to the talk that swirled around the small café. Anger, distrust, fear, housing, jobs, money, education, reconciliation—the shreds of anger weakened, though they didn’t disappear. Maybe they never would.

Yet, she thought she felt the rising thread of excitement that reminded her of spring. Something new growing. A promise.

Gabriel. She saw him in her bed again, and wished she could convey images to him. Maybe she could, because his big hand on her leg gave a sudden squeeze and his breath shifted, less regular inhalations punctuated by sighs. Or maybe she heard herself.

“Soon,” he whispered.

Something made him frown and look over at Ashton. Uneasiness shifted from him to her and she rose to her feet. No one else appeared to notice—the ex-senator and Vulk

were talking in spirited terms about housing and the council members were interrupting eagerly.

Gabriel whispered, "Something's wrong. Can you hear it?"

She shook her head.

He ambled to the door of the café. Ashton followed. She heard it then, the harsh whistle that could have been mechanical, except now she knew better. The strange language of the Dar. "It's angry," she whispered.

"Mm," Gabriel looked back at the circle of men and women who'd clustered close around a computer. The agent leaned over the senator, one hand on his shoulder as the agent muttered into the walkie-talkie. He was the only one she feared would stop them. Or maybe one of the soldiers—they had guns after all. But still no one paid any attention as Gabriel and Ashton opened the door and walked out into the empty main street.

"No," Ashton said to her, so she followed at a distance.

The angry shouts came from less than a block away, not so far from her house. Gabriel and Ashton slowed as they drew near the house.

"I'd thought it a mistake to allow you to come along," Ashton said, trotting back to walk next to Leah. "But I think those are humans outside the house and it's just as well you're here. Wait outside, please. See what you can do to control them."

He pulled out his federal ID and flashed it at a soldier next to the house, who stood propped against a fence, watching the crowd.

"Holed up in there, are they?" Ashton asked, casual.

"Yessir. You're one of the Washington contingent?"

Ashton nodded. "And you can help me get through so I can, um, negotiate with the aliens without interference." The soldier pushed aside the dozen or so Laketon residents. Ashton and Leah trailed after him, Gabriel right behind, his head bent as if he were avoiding photographers. The soldier chased a couple of the civilians off the porch.

Gabriel stopped Leah with a hand on her shoulder. She stood on the step above him and turned to face him.

"You stay out here, okay?" he said. "Stay safe with your neighbors."

His mouth was grim and she wondered what the hissing inside the house meant. He gave her shoulder one more squeeze then slid past her.

She trotted across the porch. “No, I’d like to go with you. Don’t you think that thing we have—”

One of the men on the sidewalk called out, “Leah, you were right.”

She stopped and searched the crowd. “Hello, Doonie. What are you trying to do?”

“Get rid of ’em. Drive ’em out.”

She was just about to tell him he was an ass when the front door slammed shut. Gabriel and Ashton had gone inside without her. She tried the handle. Locked of course. The soldier pointed at the sidewalk. “You too, ma’am. Please get off the porch.”

Leah made her way down the three cement stairs. She ignored Doonie’s invitation to join him and his pals. Instead she shuffled through leaves to a sycamore tree in the yard and leaned against it to wait. Hissing and more hissing. Exhaustion hit her and she sank down to sit cross-legged on the cold ground. She must have dozed because when the explosion came, she woke certain she was in the crowd on the Fourth of July and the fireworks just started.

The shouting brought her to her feet and she ran, scrambling up the steps to the house.

Chapter Ten

A full Dar who'd managed to live years on this planet. Even Graeb must be impressed by Ashton. But he only demanded the man take out the lenses.

Ashton removed the lenses and his eyes went from a grey brown to almost fully golden. He immediately put the lenses back in.

“You should not have to disguise yourself. None of us should. We will see an end to this.”

“I feel naked without them.” He clicked the lenses case shut, blinked a couple of times and wiped at an eye. Only after he'd tucked the case in his jacket pocket did he bother to respond. “You are young and human enough to enjoy risk for its own sake.”

Graeb went pale. “Do not insult me.”

“Neither word, human or young, is an insult. Even the fully Dar would not say so. What have they taught you in those units?”

Gabriel tried to feel the warmth of his connection with Leah and discerned only hostility and a faint disgust between the men near him. Neither emotion took any special strength to detect.

Gabriel said, “Graeb, listen to him. He knows this world better than we do. He knows our own better if it comes to that.”

“You. Traitor.” Graeb’s voice was low with suppressed emotion. “You went to fetch another who’d lost all loyalty.”

“I am Dar,” Ashton started.

Graeb turned to the side, a shoulder hunched, the sign of disrespect. The Dar version of the bird, thought Gabriel. Giving the finger.

“I am Dar,” Ashton said again, still calm. “You are but a tool of some misguided Dar who knew too little and wanted too much from this planet.”

Graeb walked away, up the stairs. Gabriel followed, but Ashton went to a sofa and sat down. This was an obvious show of patience, deference even.

Up in a small room, a group of the halflings sat on the floor and on the bed, silent and still as if surrounded by a nest of the snakes that struck at movement.

Graeb went to the window and peered out at the crowd gathered outside the gate. Without turning around he said, “We hear Milsom was attacked. They will be punished for this.”

“Punishment? Revenge sounds human to me.” Gabriel settled on the floor near Havlut, who nodded. Perhaps he showed agreement or he’d adopted one of the casual greetings of Earth.

Gabriel gentled his voice. “You have been stopped and no use blaming me. Your reign ended before I returned.”

Graeb gave a hiss of disgust. “You have brought a traitor to us.”

Gavlut shifted on his haunches and looked at Gabriel with mild curiosity. “Graeb, you told us Gabriel was the traitor.”

“Another. A full-blood. A human lover.”

“So? We’ve all had human lovers these last few days.” Decker, one of the youngest of them, almost smiled as he said the words. “And I have grown a taste for humans.”

Someone fizzed contempt at Decker.

The silence fell again. Only Graeb still burned. His allegiance proved stronger than defeat. The others were tired—almost ready to walk out to whatever fate the humans planned for them.

“Less than an hour ago, I listened to the humans in charge. They’ll let you go eventually.” Gabriel rolled his shoulders trying to stay alert. “The Dar among them is your advocate.”

“The Dar is downstairs?”

“He won’t force his presence and will wait.”

The proper way of a Dar, to wait out of sight. They used good manners the way humans did, when it might get them somewhere. He’d heard humans preferred lying to the truth.

Leah was not prone to sneaking or lying. He almost smiled, remembering how she’d tried to attack him that first morning in her kitchen and tried to deceive him in the bathroom. Not the work of an experienced liar, or perhaps he was fooling himself. Eventually he’d find out because he had only one plan left: find her and keep her safe.

That second wouldn’t be necessary. Life here didn’t require protection, she’d told him. Vigilance wasn’t necessary in this world so she wouldn’t need him or his bond soon. A brief tingle of fear spiked through him, more real than the tension in this room. He’d wait his fellow halflings out—until they understood they had no other choice—and then find Leah.

“We’d live like humans?” someone asked, expressing disapproval mingled with stoic acceptance.

“We would talk to the Dar with you, Halbrut,” Decker said, rising to his feet.

“No.” Graeb went to the doorway. “Don’t let your way be turned by traitors. You took the oath. Live the oath.”

His growling hiss of speech seemed to annoy and stir the humans outside the window.

“They’re looking up here,” Bleek reported from the window. She laid a hand on the glass and swayed a little. “They are still holding weapons, some of them.”

“We leave this house and they’ll use the weapons on us,” Graeb said, too loud again. Gabriel wondered if the others noticed how on edge their leader was. *Emotional.*

Deliberate, loud footsteps came up the stairs. A slow, even tread that spoke of composure. Ashton stood in the doorway. “I beg pardon for the intrusion. I was not impatient and would have remained below, but I fear that, ah, the natives are growing restless.”

His flawless Dar must have helped. Most of the halflings rose to their feet. They hadn’t seen one of the full-bloods in so long they were almost starved for the attention of their masters. For a brief moment Gabriel agreed with Graeb who snarled at Ashton. “Let us be.”

“I am not here to force anyone. That is not the true Dar way.”

Gabriel turned his snort into a cough. He could feel Ashton’s attempts to soothe them.

“He calls himself Ashton,” Gabriel said. He had to swallow his dislike and speak the truth. “He has been on Earth longer than any of us have been alive. He works for a powerful human and they will be the true link for us. Sponsors.”

“Stories of sponsors were lies,” Bleek said. “I have no way to reach the ones who were to be my sponsors. The other Bleeks are not here.”

“So you see? More lies, another reason to abandon the plan.” Gabriel folded his arms. “I trust this Ashton and the truth of the offer. It won’t be easy but we are not used to an easy life. We shall probably start contained in units here.”

None of them looked concerned. After all, that had been their plan.

“We might no longer hold sway on the ones below, but there will be new ones,” Gavlut’s confidence might have been bravado, but it gave them an excuse. An out. After all they’d easily manipulated humans and once it all calmed down, why not try again.

Another shrugged and moved toward the door and capitulation. Feet scraped as the last of them stood.

“No.” Graeb produced a bulky black object from a back pocket—a gun. “All these years of planning, all our work. No.”

His hand remained steady as he pointed it at Ashton. Even as he watched Graeb’s finger tighten on the trigger, Gabriel couldn’t believe the halfling would be so reckless.

“Graeb what are you—” he began, but saw at once that, yes, his old comrade could be such a fool.

And so Gabriel lunged, pushing Ashton over.

The bullet slammed into Gabriel’s arm, knocking him to the ground next to Ashton. Something smashed against his head as he fell. That’s it, then, he thought as the world went black.

When the gun went off, everyone in the yard stopped talking and looked up.

Leah was across the porch before the echo of explosion stopped ricocheting around the houses.

Two of the large blank-faced halflings blocked her at the entrance of the room, looking as if they expected her.

“Gabriel,” she called out.

They looked down at her with mild interest. “Halbrut,” she tried again.

“Yes, he’s shot,” one said as if remarking on the weather. She butted her head between them and shoved through. Neither of them stopped her.

Blood covered the floor and the bed. Ashton half sat on the floor, wheezing. But the blood was coming from Gabriel.

“Help him, you idiots,” she shouted at the halflings who stood and watched the blood flow.

Then she noticed the one with the gun held in both hands, the weapon slightly lowered. He was the one with the longish auburn hair. The leader.

She knelt next to Gabriel, still watching the one with the gun, who didn’t move. She tried pleading with the leader. “Please. Tell them to help.”

“I’m not in charge any longer.” He looked down at the gun as though surprised to find it in his hands.

She gave up and turned all of her attention to the one thing that mattered. “Wake up. Gabriel.” She tried to feel for his pulse in his throat. Oh, the blood still came. That must

be stopped. She yanked the cover off the rumpled bed and tried to wrench off a piece. Too thick. Oh Christ, this was taking too long.

At last she got a hunk of torn sheet wrapped around his upper arm, stopping the horrible rhythmic spill of blood.

By now more footsteps and shouts came from downstairs. Time must have slowed down—it couldn't have taken them that long to respond. Humans, not halflings, crashed around down there.

“Call an ambulance,” she shouted. “Get one now.”

“That you, Leah?” Doonie yelled back. “You okay?”

“Yeah. But get a damned ambulance.”

Doonie and one of his friends were in the doorway. The friend turned and thumped back down the stairs. Leah tried to pull Gabriel around so she could boost his injured arm in the air. He shivered and she wondered if that was a good sign or bad.

“Holy shit, what're you doing?” Doonie shouted.

“What does it look like I'm doing,” she said, frantic. “I'm trying to stop his—” But Doonie hadn't been shouting at her.

Once again, the gun went off. Leah screamed and threw herself on top of Gabriel. This time the body that hit the ground was dead. Leah saw grey bits among the blood spatters on the wall and closed her eyes.

From under her, Gabriel's voice, weak, but alive. “Did he get Ashton?”

She found his hand on his uninjured arm and clutched it tight, trying to draw comfort. “No. Himself.”

They loaded up the body of the leader first. EMTs hesitantly knelt on the floor. One asked Gabriel questions as the other unwrapped an IV. “Any drug allergies?” “Any previous hospitalizations?” The EMTs asked the questions belligerently, clearly struggling with their dislike of the invaders.

Ashton stood nearby answering for Gabriel. Apparently almost all the Dar were allergic to sulfa drugs.

Leah moved away from the busy crowd around Gabriel. As long as she could feel the heat of his presence she'd be okay. He was here, awake in the room with her. No need to distract him with her fears. She'd take care of her own panic.

The halfling that had been in her house leaned against a wall. "Why didn't you stop him from shooting himself?" she asked.

"He saw no alternative." At least the halfling was pale and wide-eyed as he watched the body wheeled from the room. It would have been too goddamn much to bear if he'd stayed entirely calm.

"You saw an alternative. Come on. You know you did." She felt tears rising in her throat.

"They've been taught to not interfere in private matters." Ashton moved from the circle formed by the two men who were sliding a backboard under Gabriel. He sat heavily on the edge of the bed near Leah. "It is considered extremely poor taste to decide matters like that for someone else."

"Gabriel did. He interfered. All the time." The halfling twisted to look at Gabriel. "He going to be okay?"

No thanks to you. But she didn't say anything more than, "Sure. He's tough like all of you halflings."

She had to go to him. Screw the rules about that.

As she pushed through the crowded room to him, she was stopped by a touch on the arm. Ashton again.

"I'm leaving," said Ashton. "Do you know if there is a back entrance to this place?"

"I expect so. Why not go out the front?"

"I'd rather not be seen in this group in public."

She examined his long, bland face. He'd put in the lenses but something didn't fit. "Yeah, I get it. You show up with them, it'll be clear you're one of them. It'll be easy to

see what you are in photographs. None of that woo-woo stuff you do that stops people from noticing.”

He twitched a corner of his mouth up, his version of smiling. “I do nothing other than stay out of the way. The halflings might have some of that persuasive power, but I remain behind the scenes. As most of my kind have for hundreds of years.”

“Your kind?” She glanced back at Gabriel who looked wide awake, thank goodness. “You mean other Dar?”

“Yes. Some have had the, what do you call it? Woo woo? The charisma to interact, but most of us remain silent to the world. Advisors to kings, presidents.”

“Right. I bet your kind could have given Machiavelli some advice, huh.”

“No.”

It wasn't until after he left that she understood what he meant. As one of the EMTs looked her over, she distracted herself trying to guess which other famous people in history had been Dar.

Gabriel. They wheeled him from the room which was now empty of everything but far too much blood, plastic wrappings and the stench of old fear. He'd gone. They'd put him in the ambulance and she was alone.

“You were right—nothing wrong with you,” the EMT told her, shoving his stethoscope into his top pocket and the blood-pressure cuff into his bag.

“Can you give me a ride to the hospital?” she said. “Take me where you've taken the Dar.”

“Nope.” He pushed the Velcro tabs on his kit closed. “We have enough craziness today. I don't need a healthy human taking up space in our truck.”

“Yeah, sorry. I know you're not a taxi service,” she said.

“Damn straight.” He sounded mollified. He looked more closely at her face. “Hey, you work at the Circle Bar, don't you?”

She nodded. “Or I did, when this town operated like a real place.”

He shrugged the kit onto his back. “You’re not kidding. What happened here in Laketon? They finally let us in—I’m a paramedic and they’re keeping health workers out? During a ‘health emergency’?” He made air quotes with his fingers.

She followed him down the stairs and picked her way over the trash that seemed to have accumulated in the kitchen.

He stopped and looked around the place. “What kills me is that now we’re supposed to act like the Dar are just fine with us.”

“That’s how you were told to act? When did you hear about the Dar?”

“About an hour ago. And that’s when I heard that’s what all the isolation crap was really about. Plus, Doris, my partner, says she’s been hearing stories about orgies and brainwashing and crap. Didn’t see any of that stuff, did you?”

“No. Whatever was going on then, it’s over now,” she said firmly and followed him out the door.

He waved to a woman dressed in the uniform of the ambulance company. She stopped talking to a curious group of kids and looked over. The paramedic jerked a thumb at Leah. “We’re giving her a ride.”

“Thanks,” Leah said and followed them out to the ambulance, wondering what had changed his mind. So many people had been shifting in her presence. The waiter in the restaurant who’d been nasty and became pleasant, the toll booth operator. She climbed up next to the driver, wondering if Gabriel’s charisma through their bond was contagious. She was turning into some sort of Goddess of Happy Land.

“Do that belt,” the man snapped. “We gotta get going.”

Funny how grumpiness was reassuring.

Chapter Eleven

Gabriel had been whisked to an isolation ward, a sneering admin at the front desk told her. All of the aliens were to be isolated.

He lay in a room alone, and she had to put on a scrub suit to find him. He sat up in bed when he saw her. “Leah.” He breathed the word. “I hoped that’s what I felt. You. Leah.”

She went to him and he gave her a two-armed hug.

“Careful. You were shot in the arm.”

“This wound is nothing,” he said. “Why do they bother with this? Could they wish to put me in some sort of prison here?”

She looked at the bandages and the IV. “No, I think your standard for a wound being ‘nothing’ isn’t the same as ours. You passed out and might have a concussion. And it looked to me like you lost a lot of blood.”

He shrugged. “Much of it was from Graeb.”

The calm way he said it spooked her.

“I am sorry he killed himself,” he said softly, and she knew he only spoke to reassure her. “But he would not have fit this world and could not have gone back.”

“Are you so certain of that?”

“No. But he was. And I knew him. He could not change or compromise without feeling he’d lost too much of his...his, oh I don’t know the word. Soul, maybe.”

She was silent, leaning against the side of his bed, barely touching his body but suffused in his calm—even while she didn’t understand, couldn’t understand him.

A loud voice in the outer room was belligerent. Agent Hindsen.

His twang was noticeable. “Sorry ta say you’re just going to have to decontaminate it again. I need them fast.” The door swung open even before the blasting air had finished.

His face was less blank than usual. Unfortunately anger wasn’t an improvement.

Leah got to her feet. “What’s wrong?”

He managed to train his expression back to its usual blank stone. “You left town and it slid back to hell in a handbasket. You have to go back.”

“What?”

“Laketon. That thing you two have. It’s what keeps the place from getting ugly. I wouldn’t blame the residents if they kicked all you Dar out after what your buddies did. But somehow you two settled everyone the hell down. And unlike the thing you Halflings did to turn the town into a whole lot of mush-minds, around you two, people can still use their brains.”

“Oh. Why do you think it’s us?”

“Ashton briefed me. He knows this stuff better than anyone alive on this planet.” She didn’t think he had much of a sense of humor but this came close. Or maybe he didn’t know the truth.

Hindsen pulled out a PDA and started typing with his thumbs. “Okay, so we got an ambulance for you—along with a couple of doctors and a fleet of nurses.”

“Why so much?”

“Anything happens to him, or to you, we’re back at square one. Too damn much work to do and people’ll get hurt.” He kept typing, occasionally stopping to scowl.

“So we’re valuable commodities all of a sudden.”

He nodded without looking up.

“What if we don’t go back?” She asked only because she was curious, but he must have heard belligerence in her tone. He dropped the PDA in his jacket pocket and put his fists on his hips. She didn’t think it was a coincidence that that particular pose pushed back his jacket to show his gun holster.

“All righty. What do you want? We might be able to temporarily hire you if you’re looking for money. I don’t know how much I can promise you.” His voice was flat, disapproving.

She was still gathering ideas about possible answers when Gabriel spoke. “My only wish is to eventually be considered a legal alien here and to be allowed to move freely about. No units. I won’t live in a unit.”

That sounded good. She smiled at him.

Gabriel added, “And I want Ashton to break the pledge.”

Leah tried to remember pledges. “Which is that?”

“I won’t return to Dar.”

“You promised to go back? What are you talking about?” Leah stared into his face, wishing she could somehow pry things straight from his mind.

The nurse rapped on the door. Maybe twenty people stood outside, waiting. “Come on,” Hindsen said. “Showtime.” He turned to Leah. “What about you?”

She’d backed into a corner and was watching everyone stand around while Gabriel changed, pulled off the hospital gown. He demanded his jeans and she was surprised that he would be modest and that they’d give in to his demands.

She turned back to Hindsen. “Huh?”

“What kind of demands are you making? How can I persuade you to cooperate with the Laketon office?”

Office of what, she wondered but didn’t ask. He seemed tense enough. She said, “Actually if someone could go get my cat. He’s in Maryland.”

His grim expression relaxed. “That’s it? I expected you both to start demanding millions.”

“We’re worth that much?”

“You didn’t hear it from me. Jeez, I’m going to put you on a payroll just for being so cooperative.”

Or maybe he was paying them because she and Gabriel exercised their influence over him without anyone—even Leah and Gabriel—being aware of that strange power.

“How long should we stay there?”

He pulled out a handkerchief and blew his nose and carefully tucked it away before answering. “No clue.”

“Where are we supposed to go? Maybe my house,” she said, wistfully.

“We’re supposed to go to city hall.”

They moved through the corridors of the hospital. Gabriel had been pushed into a wheelchair despite his protests. The doctor team walking in front of them reminded Leah of Laurel and Hardy. One was gangly, the other had so much padding he waddled slightly. Soldiers walked in front and behind them.

“I feel like I’m in a parade,” she told Gabriel.

“I saw a picture of one of those,” he said after a moment. “Don’t we need horses and some people playing musical instruments?”

The fatter doctor slowed so he walked next to Gabriel in the wheelchair. “This will do for a parade in a hospital. Hey, listen.” He leaned over the wheelchair and tapped Gabriel’s arm. “I can’t help wondering about all the questions you couldn’t answer. No idea if you had measles, chicken pox? Cripes, you’ll have a miserable adjustment period here on Earth.”

The thin doctor laughed heartily as if his colleague had made a great joke. “We’ll be seeing a lot of you, uh, people here, I’ll betcha. Any of you trained doctors?”

“No,” Gabriel said. He closed his eyes. “We’re not trained for much more than survival.”

“Those Dar know how to do something else, judging by all the morning-after Plan B moving through the Munderson Clinic,” a nurse behind them began, but someone shushed her.

In the hospital parking lot, Gabriel refused to stretch out on the cot. He vaulted into the back of the ambulance, so fast the nurse clutching his IV bag had to clamber up quickly.

Hindsen walked Leah to the front of the ambulance. She got in then paused, door open. "I guess Ashford's left town?"

"Yep."

"Did the senator leave too?" She glanced into the back of the vehicle at Gabriel who was resisting getting his blood pressure taken again.

"Yep. But he said he would come back soon. Wants to talk to your friend. Probably show him family photo albums," Hindsen said under his breath.

Another ride in an ambulance and Leah smiled as she listened to Gabriel arguing in the back when they pulled into the parking lot. He refused to go into the town hall until they removed the IV.

The bulky doctor closed off the IV and slid off tubes. He told the thinner one, "No point in arguing. He's a stubborn sonofabitch."

"No wheelchair either." Gabriel ignored the medical team that followed after him pushing the empty chair.

They strode through the corridors. The only sign that Gabriel had been shot was the bandage and sling.

"Either you have an incredibly high pain threshold or these guys are overanxious about you," Leah said, glancing back at the doctors.

The nurse trotted along next to her. "I'll betcha both," she said.

Hindsen went to the wide double doors of the largest meeting room and, acting as a scowling doorman, held one of them open for Leah and Gabriel.

Leah had been in this room before and it had struck her as far too large and plush for the government of a small Wisconsin town, especially one that was close to dead. The room featured carpeted floors and walls, large leather armchairs on wheels, recessed lighting and two massive oak tables.

Some of the comfortable chairs of the room were already occupied. Familiar faces, she realized—the same crowd seemed to have moved over from the café. Now they appeared more unwashed, scruffy and snarling. Vulk dozed standing, his head propped against a carpeted wall.

She and Gabriel walked to the far end of the longest conference table, away from most of them. Hindsen joined them and the medical team settled close by. The doctors were still annoyed with Gabriel but he ignored them, so they contented themselves with glaring over at him now and then.

Leah spotted pads of paper arranged in the middle the polished tabletop and looked around for a pen or pencil. Drawing might pass the time. “So we just stick around? And that’s it?” she asked Hindsen.

“We’ll see.” Hindsen put a cell phone on the table in front of her. “They’re working again. Anyone you want to call? I’ve been told to allow you and the Dar a few calls.”

Leah called her mother who was so relieved to hear from Leah, she burst into tears. After many reassurances that Leah was better than fine, she switched over to the subject of her favorite show and how it had been interrupted when news of the quarantine had broken out. Her mother liked long calls and would stay on the line until Leah came up with a good excuse.

“Got to go, Mom. People are waiting to use the phone.” She hung up, promising to call as soon as she could.

Despite the “people waiting” remark, she was surprised when Gabriel reached for the telephone and handed it to Hindsen. “Ashton. Call him. Tell him I won’t agree to stay in Laketon for more than a half hour. I’ll leave unless he abandons his plan.”

“What are you talking about?” Hindsen said.

“Just give him that exact message, please.”

Hindsen walked away holding the phone.

Leah leaned back in the heavy, leather-covered chair and eyed him. “I knew you and the Dar were up to something. What sort of plan are you talking about?”

He touched her hand and she enjoyed the tingle, the warmth of his fingers trailing over her knuckles. “He’d send me back,” he said.

For a moment she thought he meant to D.C. “Dar?” she squeaked. “So you weren’t kidding at the hospital. Permanently?”

He curled his hand around hers. His lack of answer, the way he didn’t look into her face was answer enough.

“Dar? That’s insane. Why? You said that you’d be killed.”

“No. Not anymore.” He lifted her hand and kissed her knuckles, brushing his lips over her skin.

She had to concentrate on his words and not the sensation created by his mouth. “But still. Why should you go back? They kicked you out. I need my hand back. I know you’re trying to distract me. ”

“Yes, I am. Trying to distract myself too.” He gave each finger a final kiss then clasped her hand in his.

“Gabriel. Why would you go back?”

“We left Earth years ago. The governing body has changed and is less militant, I think the word is. And then there is some curiosity. They want to understand the bond between you and me.”

“What do you mean?”

“Ashton said that the bond is unusual and strong, and the Dar would want my return. He’s right, they do. They’d like to know what is happening, what chemical compounds are produced.”

“Or magical craziness.”

“Yes. Or that. Now they must pick their priorities. Do they want to keep the peace here between halflings and humans using us, or is finding out how I’ve changed more important?”

“They’d want me, too.”

He looked down at their interlaced fingers. “They did. But I said no to Ashton. I told him I’d only return if they’d leave your town and you alone.”

“How can that work? How’d they find what they’re looking for only in you?”

“I’m changed by our bond. They’d be able to find the indicators in me.”

His gaze flickered to a corner of the room. Aha. A tiny sign that he hid something from her and she hazarded a guess about where the secret might lie. “Why didn’t Ashton or the Dar ignore your demands and just grab you? I mean what sort of power do you have to threaten them with?” But even as she asked, she suspected his answer.

He shifted his chair a little closer to her though he still stared off into the corner of the room. “They wouldn’t find answers if I was dead. They hate wasting resources that might prove valuable.”

She sat up straight and glared at him. “Jesus, you’re as bad as your friend. Graeb. Threatening to kill yourself if they didn’t do what you asked, right?”

“No. I’d die kicking and cursing.”

“But you’d die.” She didn’t want to ask but the words just slipped out. “Why? That damned oath?”

At last he met her eyes. “Yes, and love.”

“Oh.” She blinked. “You love me?”

“I suspect I do.” He smiled at her. A full smile, a no-holds-barred, teeth-gleaming, eyes-lit human smile.

She sucked in a deep breath and battled the surge of affection so she could keep fighting. “Nuh uh, that’s not fair. If you love someone you’re supposed to tell them when you’re putting your life at stake or you’re making decisions about their future or—”

“Don’t you expect me to protect the one thing I love?”

“But you didn’t ask me. You didn’t even consult with me.”

“There wasn’t time. Ashton and I discussed it back in that office in the city. In Washington. He said he’d only cooperate and help with Laketon if I agreed to go back.”

She remembered the hissing fest in Halbrut’s office.

“But goddamn it, Gabriel.” Her indignation was real, but where could she put it now? “Damn it,” she said weakly.

Venting. After all, she was human.

His golden eyes stared into hers. “I would not have done anything else,” he said. “I couldn’t have.”

She raised their joined hands and bit the ball of his thumb. His breath hissed through his teeth and the air grew thick with the start of his arousal. Oh ho, he liked a touch of pain? She licked the top of his thumb then decided she wouldn’t be distracted. “If anything like that ever happens again.” She snorted at the absurdity but was determined to finish. “You should tell me before, I mean. Please.”

“I promise.”

No point in pushing that particular subject any longer. She’d seen what he did when he made promises. He kept them.

Her turn to look around the room. Most of the people talked in small groups. The mayor was doing a crossword puzzle. Someone who might have been an army major—she never could keep the insignia straight—was talking quietly into the phone. The two nurses were hunched over a laptop.

No one was bothering with them, not even the doctors. Leah rested her other hand on his uninjured arm. “So why do you think they’ll decide to let you stay and keep the peace?”

She had grown adept at reading his expressions but now she couldn’t guess what he was feeling. Surprise, perhaps? Chagrin?

He whispered, “They want to keep us safe after all. They care about the halflings.”

“Oh.” She could feel something clearly like anger—not hers. She wrinkled her nose and considered. “You’re going to have to forgive them. And that pisses you off.”

His eyes widened and he hissed something in his strange language. “Leah. Sometimes I understand why you’re—what’s the word? Spooked. You see clearly what I didn’t see in myself.” Gabriel laughed, still breathy, not well practiced, but a real chuckle. He moved close to her. “I don’t have to go back to Dar. I won’t go back.”

“What will you do?”

“Anything. Everything because I may stay here. I’m free.”

She and hummed her agreement.

He nibbled her earlobe, then whispered so his warm breath gusted over her neck, “I think you love me.”

“Maybe,” she growled. “But don’t get too smug, okay? I have no idea what kind of relationship people like us can have. It’s not normal. Mind reading.”

She rested the top of her head against his unbandaged shoulder.

“I don’t read your mind,” he said, complacently. “Just your heart. And you should know.”

“Yeah. I know.” Each beat, when he was close to her, like this.

After all that had happened in the last few days, she was surprised at how nervous she felt as she opened her mouth to make the offer. “You can come stay with me for a while. If we’re supposed to spend time together.”

He waited for a few seconds, perhaps trying to gauge her before answering. “Thank you. Yes, please.”

“It’s small, but I don’t want to leave my house.”

“No, of course not. It’s the loveliest house I’ve seen.”

She almost gave a snarky response but then realized perhaps he was being honest. How many houses had he seen? And there was that thing Ashton said about Dar never doing sarcasm.

He stroked her hair. “You don’t have to be my sponsor.”

“Yes, she does.” Their private moment was over. Hindsen put the phone on the table. “Mr. Ashton had a lot to say. I got the impression he’s not normally such a chatty guy.” Hindsen rubbed a hand over his mouth.

Leah said, “You look sort of beat. Want to sit down?”

Hindsen dropped heavily into one of the padded chairs. “Ashon said that you must stay together or he won’t agree. I guess he meant agree to whatever the hell you were talking about, Dar. He talked, but didn’t want to tell me much. And you both have to remain in Laketon for at least two months. So you’ll stay with her, Dar.”

“He has a name,” Leah said hotly.

Hindsen folded his arms and stared at the phone on the table. “Yeah, yeah. It’s gonna be hard. I’m a vet and lived through the fighting. That last time.” He shook his head and repeated. “It’ll be hard.”

For the first time he looked as worn as anyone else in the room.

“Yes,” Gabriel said. “But the alternatives are harder.”

Hindsen’s smile pushed his face into a surprising number of folds yet somehow he looked younger. “Goddamn.”

“So Gabriel will come live with me,” she said and suddenly felt giddy. “No fighting for closet space, I think. You didn’t arrive loaded with luggage.”

“You don’t have to say yes to this, Leah.”

“Because you and Ashton have pushed me into a corner, huh? Feeling guilty?”

He didn’t say anything. Hindsen shifted back in his chair, put his hands behind his head and watched them with interest.

Leah leaned in close to Gabriel so only he could hear her. “You think you know so much, tell me. What do I feel now?”

He touched her cheek. She turned her head so he could put his mouth near her ear. “Excitement, fear, joy. Or perhaps that is me,” he murmured.

“Nope, you’re right. Me too.” Leah straightened and in a loud voice said, “Let’s go home.”

A town councilor jumped up. “No, not yet.”

“It’s not a good idea,” the skinny doctor said.

“Yes, it is.” Gabriel didn’t raise his voice, yet the doctor flinched. Rising to his feet, Gabriel said, “She has saved your town. Now she needs rest.”

Hindsen started to open his mouth, but Gabriel interrupted. “You know where she lives. Find us if you must, but only if it is necessary.”

Gabriel refused the ride in an ambulance so Hindsen drove them to her house in his SUV.

“Good job hustling us out of there. Are you always so bossy?” Leah asked as they slowly walked up her path.

“No.” He gave one of his shrugs, but stopped short and grimaced at his arm. “Only when I can protect you.”

“I don’t usually need protection.”

“I understand. That’s why I just said no. But I can feel your exhaustion and your eyes are ringed with shadows. I suspect that most of those people are frightened of me so I decided to use their fear.”

She yawned. “Thank you,” she said. “And I might look like a raccoon, but you look positively battered, you poor thing.”

“You don’t look like a raccoon. Where’d you get that idea?”

“Never mind.”

They were at the door of her house which was slightly ajar. God, her heating bill would be terrifying. She smiled at how her fears had shifted again. Back to sweet, dull life she thought. Only not so dull with her new...roommate. Even without the adventure ahead, the one called Gabriel, she’d never take life in good old Laketon for granted again.

She pushed into the chilled house and stopped dead in the kitchen. “What a mess.”

“Sleep first.” Gabriel took her hand and pulled her up the stairs. He sat down on the bed with her. “Hours and hours.”

“What about you?” She lay down without even taking off her shoes and closed her eyes. “Gabriel. You...” She might have said something else, but when he leaned forward to listen, her breath came slow and even.

His arm ached. He went downstairs and did the best he could, one-handed. Not very efficient, but he put things away in storage areas they seemed to belong and closed cabinet doors. There was a broom thing, but employing it was too painful. He looked forward to experimenting with it later when he’d recovered.

He kept moving to stay awake. When the halflings all slept, they lost their grip on Laketon. He and Leah couldn’t both rest.

The throbbing in his arm reminded him that one of the nurses had given him some sort of pill she said would help with pain. At last he turned on the water tap and gulped down water with the pill.

The house was silent. Nothing outside stirred. Perhaps it was safe to relax his guard and go upstairs, just to rest.

He climbed onto the bed next to the slumbering Leah and had enough strength to gather her close.

Gabriel was back in one of the crumbling unit buildings with unsafe walls. He must lie like the dead. He tried to remain still, but one of them found him, got him, stabbing fangs into his arm before dragging him to its hole.

He flung out, ready to fight.

“Hey!”

English?

Earth. Everything flew into place including himself. Earth and better still, Leah’s bed. The pain was nothing, only a hole made by a bullet.

He sat up, suddenly worried. “Did I hurt you?”

“No, but you practically murdered the pillow.” She was standing next to the bed, rumped and pink-cheeked. She must have just awakened too.

“Leah Parisi,” he said hoarsely.

She smiled at him. “You had a bad dream. When you’re asleep, I don’t feel anything coming from you, but I can see a bad dream happening. You whimpered and then wham.”

A new fear seized him. “We slept long?”

“Yes. Hours and hours.”

“But what about the town?” He didn’t know the street patterns of his new home, or the habits of its residents but he already felt the responsibility of his job—the promise he’d made to Laketon. It was the first pledge that he’d taken gladly because the town was a part of Leah. When he’d promised himself to Leah, he’d no idea how much pleasure the oath would bring him. He’d no idea so much joy was possible.

“I haven’t heard a thing. It’s still out there, I guess.”

He padded to the window and saw that the town slept under the dark sky of exotic star patterns. They could lie down and rest again He stretched out on his uninjured side so he could watch Leah.

She stretched and a sliver of her belly showed above her jeans. Gabriel recalled the warmth of that skin.

She rubbed at her arms. “Ugh, I hate sleeping in my clothes.”

“Take them off then.”

Their eyes met. She knew what he wanted, of course. Even a woman who didn’t share a bond would be able to taste his sudden extreme lust. She cocked her head and gave his body a speculative look that warmed him. “What about your arm?”

“It’s still attached.”

“It hurts though?” She unbuttoned the soft flannel shirt she wore. Under it lay a T-shirt. And under that, pure delicious Leah.

“Seeing you without clothes will help. I’m sure of it.”

She gave her easy laugh. “Okay, I’ll play Nurse Leah and you can be my patient.”

“I don’t want to play any games.” He pushed to the edge of the bed and wrapped his arms around her hips, buried his face against the skin of her stomach. “I want to fuck you. Oh, so much, Leah. Please.” Never mind the arm, the pain of needing her was far greater.

“I know,” she whispered and he could feel her melting with his touch. The rich sensation of her lust mixed with his. Slowly, slowly, he reminded himself. He tongued her skin, breathed her in. He used his teeth to unbutton the metal of her jeans.

“Yikes,” she whispered.

Splaying his hands on her back, he slowly slid his palms and her jeans and undergarments down the dip at the base of her spine then over the curves of her bottom.

She rocked and laughed as she tried to stand on one foot to untie and pull off her shoe and the leg of her trousers.

So much laughter. Playing, she’d said. This was close to his memory of play, echoes from early childhood. He had a lot to learn from her.

And quite a bit to show her, as well. He put his foot behind hers, and as she tripped, squawking, he caught her with his good arm. With one motion, he scooped her up and tossed her lightly on the bed. She bounced and went up on her hands and knees.

“All the clothes must come off,” he said, adding, “thank you. Please.”

It only took her a few seconds—yet any moment not touching her was wasted.

She beckoned him onto the bed. At last he could run his hands over her, kiss her. She plucked at his clothes then helped him take them off, wincing at the bandage. “This isn’t a good idea.”

“It’s the best idea I’ve had for days,” he said.

“It’s practically the only one I’ve had.” She stroked his chest, fingers tracing down his body. “Surrounded by rampaging Laketonians, all I wanted was to pull you into a dark corner and have my way with you.” She grasped his penis in her warm dry hand.

She squeezed a little and gave an appreciative growl. “That thrumming. I love it.”

“That’s the mating I’ve known, before you.” Her grip was familiar, the dry silky sensation of penetrating a female Halfling, but he didn’t volunteer that fact.

“That’s right. You’re going to show me from start to finish.”

“Not yet.” He slid down her body. “I’ve grown addicted to your decadent slick body. I want you writhing and shouting and so wet.”

She only whimpered and clutched his ears as he licked her belly, her thighs and at last rubbed his entire face in her exotic musk. He used his good hand, his tongue and lips until she thrashed and moaned.

A single touch more, and she quivered, so close the tension knotted inside his own body. Just a stroke or two more.

He drew away and knelt to examine her flushed body. She sighed with fretful need and as she pulled in the breath he felt it too, the thick craving for release that he teased in them both. She reached up for him then hesitated.

“Your arm. Oh. Damn. Okay. Lie on your back,” she said. “Or I’ll have to kill you.”

He lay on his back. She straddled him on her knees, her gaze fixed on his face.

“Good,” she breathed as she lowered herself onto his cock.

They exchanged hungry kisses, as if they could devour each other, melt together, joined together as many places as possible. Kisses that made him hungry for even more kisses, deeper. He protested when she sat up, depriving him of her mouth and tongue.

She braced her hands on his chest and rode him with the violence that should have torn her flesh but only created more astounding sensation. He could feel her tension grow and allowed himself to move under her. Not so tired now, more in control, he could let himself grow more swollen. The thrumming, she called it.

She gasped then pushed down harder. Her body clenched tight and pulsed around his cock until he broke too. Released with a wild cry and reckless thrusting that drove her up.

She dropped down to lean over him so her breasts barely brushed his chest. She pressed her mouth to his for more kisses. Slow exploration now without the demanding appetite. These were the best kisses, he decided.

“More?” he asked soon as the kisses grew more focused and her hands stroked the sides of his face.

“Refractory period?” she said.

He nodded.

“Seriously. Show me how you do it.”

“Do it?” He couldn’t resist teasing her. “How we fuck?”

“Yes.”

“It is much the same but less active.”

“More thrumming?”

He nodded and moved deeper. Her body, still engorged with blood, was tight around him, sensitive to every move.

She squeezed her muscles around him.

“Yes, like that,” he murmured, nuzzling her hair and gently responded, the slow cautious motions of copulation. Measured, with only perfect angles, canted just so.

“You’re barely moving but—Oh, shit,” she lost her breath. “Effective.”

He watched her and felt every tremulous breath she took.

“It’s. All inside.” Her eyelids fluttered then she closed her eyes. “Ah.”

With one careful finger, he brushed her clitoris. “You like this, though.”

Her breath hitched and she squirmed against his delicately circling finger. Each twist of her body was so strong he almost howled and lost himself to the other, more robust fucking. The human passion.

“Shh, shh.” He kissed her cheek and neck. “Not so much motion.”

Her face glistened with perspiration despite the chilled air. Her eyes glowed with discovery, and inside him and on his cock he felt each tiny throb and twist as if they were new to him too.

“It’s impossible. Oh. So perfect. Oh.” She groaned, and suddenly she was so tight around him it was almost too much for his own deliberately contained movement. Ripples of her growing orgasm coaxed him toward his own, but he wouldn’t thrust hard, just the slight shifts with each of Leah’s pulses. Wrapped up in her, breathing her breath, careful not to lose that awareness of Leah’s body around his with each spasm of his pleasure.

He almost blacked out with the intensity of his controlled release.

They remained entwined and breathing together.

“Oh Lord,” she moaned at last. “It’s concentrated. Potent.” She shuddered. “So that’s boinking halfling style?”

“Usually there is less...” He stopped to consider the words.

Her muscles uncoiled and she smiled up at him. “Less squealing and grunting?”

“Yes, but I was going to say less passion or ecstasy. I suppose however we touch each other there’ll be intensity.”

They disengaged. Drawing back limbs and composing themselves into separate beings. He liked the way she allowed him to touch her and she even scooted close to press against his front. Cuddling she’d told him. He approved.

She brushed his hair from his forehead. “Heck, if our woo-woo bond crap is going to save all of Laketon it ought to give us some fun too.” The glow of her affection warmed him. “Fun like I’ve never known,” she said softly.

“Thank you,” he said.

“Please and you’re welcome. But why do you keep saying thank you?”

He considered the matter seriously, though he supposed she was teasing him. “Perhaps because you’ve rescued me.”

She put her arms over her head and stretched, raising her breasts, the pink nipples appetizing points. He needed to pay more and better attention to those sweet breasts, eventually.

He traced her upper lip with his finger. “I think of Graeb. Belonging nowhere, lost in a strange world. I escaped despair because of you, my totem.”

She shook her head. “You would have found someone, something, Gabriel. You got so much love, you are infectious with the stuff.” Leah shifted onto her side. “And you hated the unit. You would have stopped them forming more too. Listen, Gabriel, you’d have gotten away from Laketon somehow. Escaped. And if you’d stayed you’d have found a way to stop Graeb, I bet. You have plenty of strength.” He could feel her frustration, as if she tried to get him to understand something important.

“Physical strength. Only that without you.” He didn’t think she understood how much her passion, which could never exist on Dar, awoke in him.

Separation, disagreement could exist between them without strong conflict. Good.

“That sort of strength counts,” she grumbled.

Certainly physical powers mattered back in the unit. How could he employ it here? And he imagined supporting her, bracing her against a wall, holding her up and pushing into her again and again in the reckless lovely dance of fucking. Once his arm healed. His penis twitched at the thought. “Yes, that sort of strength can be useful,” he said.

So many things to explore.

They had two months promised together. After that, perhaps she’d let him stay even longer. Perhaps forever.

He knew that locally they had ways to accomplish that. “I know we’ve met people who are spouses. That’s remaining popular? Humans still enact that marital thing these days?”

“What?”

“The habit of marriage,” he said.

“It’s not a habit.”

“Custom—that might be the word I want.”

“Yeah, we still do. Why?”

He felt her tingling alarm. Good, she took the custom seriously. Nothing more, not yet.

“Just asking,” he said. “Just curious. I have a lot to learn.”

She made a surprisingly rude sound with her mouth. “You know plenty. Except perhaps you could learn to play.”

“Oh, yes, you wanted to play doctor, you said. A game in the bed. I like it. Only, I think, I will be the doctor the first time.”

He pressed her down and pushed his palms in circles over her flat stomach. “I need to examine you very, very thoroughly.”

Her laughter ended with a thick gasp. “Doctors don’t use their mouths to examine their patients.”

He kissed the inside of her leg. “This one does. Don’t you humans always say to use your imagination?”

But she must have lost interest in arguing for she only shifted up and offered herself to him.

“I like these games,” he said and went back to work.

About the Author

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Look for these titles by Summer Devon

Now Available:

Learning Charity
Revealing Skills
The Knight's Challenge

Is he the hero of her childhood dreams...or the death of them—and her?

Prophesied

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On the day of her birth, Lia fulfilled a prophecy that ended a 5,000-year war, and became a wife. But being the fulfillment of a sacred prophecy makes for a stifling childhood—not to mention a dangerous one. When an assassination attempt goes wrong, Lia takes the opportunity and runs from her destiny—as well as from her absent husband.

Talon isn't sure what to expect when he rescues his bride from a mining colony on a barren moon. What he doesn't anticipate is her lack of gratitude and her repeated escape attempts. Determined to convince his wife to accept her duties, Talon knows he also needs to keep her safe, even if he has to lock her up in his own quarters to do it.

As they get closer to their planet and Lia's coronation, the danger around them increases, and so does the tension between them. For their growing attraction to turn into something more, they need to stay alive and learn to trust each other—a tall order when Lia's experience in life has taught her that trusting people can get you killed.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Prophesied:

Lia's eyes, accustomed to the dark mines, burned under the harsh office light. Blinking the tears back, the face of the speaking soldier wavered briefly, before coming into focus.

Her heart stuttered, and she managed to keep her jaw from dropping. Just when she thought things couldn't get any worse—or any better, she wasn't sure which.

His face was leaner than she remembered, giving his cheekbones a sharp edge. He had lost the soft features of a young man. The roundness of his cheeks had faded, making his square jaw more pronounced and giving him a determined look. He regarded the rep with gray eyes, the color of melted xyreon ore when light struck it. Unlike the ore, however, his flinty eyes were ice cold. The word "ruthless" flitted across her mind and a shiver danced down her spine.

His body had been long and lanky when she had last seen him, but the man before her was not the awkward boy she once knew. His chest had filled out, making him easily three times her width. His upper torso tapered to a lean waist. Body armor hugged trim hips and strong legs. The red emblem of an elected planetary official gleamed on his shoulders.

He barely glanced at her, and the feeling of disappointment that swept over Lia surprised her. She hadn't wanted him to recognize her and had no business feeling hurt because she had gotten her wish.

As she studied him, he glanced at a soldier behind him and jerked his chin in her direction. A man with blond hair and the flush of youth still in his cheeks stepped towards her. He smiled at her—the first courtesy ever offered to her in the rep's office—and extended his arm.

“This will only take a moment,” the young soldier assured her.

Staring at the device he was holding, Lia took a cautious step back. The rep still had a death grip on her arm—her fingers were going numb—so the step was small, but it was enough for the soldier to hesitate.

“What is that?” she demanded, relieved she sounded angry rather than panicked.

“It won't hurt.” His tone was polite, if condescending, but he didn't lower the device.

“What ‘won't hurt’?” Lia snapped out.

The young man actually blushed. “It's a simple DNA scan. It will take less than five seconds, and you won't feel a thing.”

This time Lia wrenched her arm free from the rep as she leaped backwards. “Absolutely not.”

“I promise it won't hurt,” the youth reassured her.

“I said no.”

Then *he* spoke, and he had the audacity to sound amused. “Madam, we are looking for someone. The DNA scan will help narrow our search by eliminating you. We will compensate you for your time.”

She snorted. Even if they gave her money, the rep would be the one “compensated” for her time. “I still refuse.”

“We must insist.”

Ignoring the furious glare of the rep, she stood her ground. “Under League privacy laws, a DNA scan cannot be compelled unless an individual is under arrest. Am I under arrest?”

He lifted an eyebrow. She resisted the urge to reach up and yank it back down.

“You are not under arrest—” he conceded.

“Then I am free to refuse the scan.”

“Neither are you in League territory,” he continued. He gestured towards the youth. “Caden.”

Lia’s stomach sank. They had her. League laws meant nothing on Tmesis. The only thing she could do was endure the scan with dignity.

The young soldier stepped forward, pointing the scanner at her.

Dignity be damned. With fury fueled by fear, Lia kicked out, knocking the scanner from the unsuspecting soldier’s hand. She spun and darted for the door.

She didn’t make it three meters, before slamming into another one of the soldiers who had circled around to block her path with inhuman speed. Her breathing hitched when she took in his glowing red eyes, wide-spread jaw, and sharp pointed teeth. An Inderian. A proud and fierce race of warriors steeped in tradition, blood feuds, and honor. If their inherent skills weren’t enough to inspire fear in those they met, the rumors of ritual sacrifice and cannibalism were. They rarely left their home system, but those who did usually hired out as assassins.

Were the soldiers seeking her out to ensure her death?

The Inderian turned Lia to face the others, lifting her completely off her feet to do so, and she hated that her face was flushed. The impromptu flight embarrassed her. Where did she think she was going? There weren’t a lot of hiding places on a barren moon. Especially when you needed pesky little luxuries like water. Fortunately, the dirt and grime smearing her face hid her blush. At least she hoped they did.

He stood in the same place, his arms crossed and that infuriating eyebrow still cocked, making no effort to hide his amusement.

Caden held the scanner again, his gaze flicking back and forth between Lia and his commander who met Lia's narrowed eyes for a brief moment before nodding.

Caden approached her cautiously, like drawing near a nest of vipers. Lia felt a crazy urge to laugh. The Inderian held her immobilized. She could barely turn her head, much less attack a trained soldier. She wasn't fooling herself. The only reason she'd succeeded in kicking him before was the element of surprise.

No miner in their right mind would attack a League soldier. Lia supposed that meant she was no longer in her right mind. Not that it mattered, seeing how they were probably going to kill her.

She had feared for her life for as long as she could remember and had half-expected to feel relief at finally facing death. She didn't. She was pissed-off, plain and simple. And under the anger, her heart ached that the one good thing she remembered from childhood—this cold and *amused* man—was an illusion.

An illusion that was probably going to kill her.

Caden pressed a button and a beam of orange light moved over her. The crucial procedure took mere seconds. The light disappeared, and Caden began inputting data into the scanner.

Scrapping together what little dignity she had left, Lia addressed the Inderian. "You can release me now."

A nod from their leader, and she found herself standing on her own two feet. The Inderian shifted behind her and she knew he prepared to catch her if she bolted. He needn't have bothered. With the scan completed, she felt oddly resigned and drained of energy. With her anger gone, the long day, the cave-in and her injury finally caught up with her. Not to mention the strain of the last five minutes. She wanted to sit down. Actually, she wanted to curl into fetal position. She did neither.

A pair of boots stepped into her field of vision and she looked up into the face of the man from her past.

"That wasn't so bad, was it?" The brisk tone lacked warmth, but Lia sensed he was trying to be kind. Her anger had amused him. She wondered if her dejection bothered him.

She decided to answer his question honestly. “Yes, it was.”

He blinked, and she realized she had surprised him. Instinctively, she knew very little surprised this man.

He inclined his head politely. “I apologize for the inconvenience.” He hesitated before dropping his voice to prevent the rep from overhearing. “We only seek to find a missing person. The scan will be used to eliminate your DNA as a match for hers. Once done, you will be free to go. We will not be passing scan results on to authorities or storing them in any public database. Your privacy and secrets will remain intact.”

He thought her a criminal afraid of being caught. She was about to surprise him again.

He turned away from her, dismissing her. “Caden, I believe we have taken up enough of this young lady’s time. Record her as a non-match and reset the scanner for the next subject.”

“I can’t,” Caden sounded nervous.

“You can’t? The scanner is malfunctioning?”

“No, sir. I just ran and reran a diagnostic on it. I also ran the results four times,” Caden rushed to assure him.

“Then what seems to be the problem?”

“There’s no problem. It’s just that...” He hesitated.

“That what?” the commander barked.

“I’m a match,” Lia said wearily. “I’m your wife.”

A masked man with a burning secret is her only hope.

Icy Heat

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A Heat series story.

Aidan has only days to acquire a magic Globe to exchange for her brother's freedom. With the clock counting down, she turns to Warwick the Enforcer for help. As her lies pile up and the passion between them builds, Aidan tries to keep her mind on her mission and ignore the man who lights her fire.

Warwick has spent his life preparing for revenge against the man who killed his parents and sentenced him to an existence behind a mask. But when Aidan calls in a debt he owes her, he cannot say no. The attraction he thought was one-sided explodes between them and he is shocked to find himself burning to possess her. One thing after another goes wrong—and Warwick discovers Aidan is working for his hated enemy.

As things spiral into danger they could never have imagined, passion burns into a love that could destroy them both.

Warning: This book contains out-of-this-world sexual content!

Enjoy the following excerpt for Icy Heat:

Damn, War thought, she caught that he knew her financial situation. Her tall, willow-thin body had gone completely still and her eyes narrowed into slits. He could almost hear her thinking it through.

“How do you know I have the money?” The soft purr of her voice twisted his insides with desire. He'd wanted her from that first time she'd flown for him.

“I know how much I paid you and I know you work almost constantly. It doesn't take a genius to assume you've got enough balseems to pay a gambling debt.” What he didn't tell her was he had made it his hobby to track her movements over the last four months.

She rolled the playing piece between her hands. “True,” she conceded, then sighed. “But he won't take that kind of payment. Zach defaulted.”

“You didn’t know about it in time to pay?”

“No.” Her fingers tightened on the dark king, a piece he’d carved with his own hands. “Out of the options left to me, I chose the lesser of the two evils.”

“Steal or what?” He could guess what was coming. He wasn’t naïve enough to think he was the only person to desire her.

“I’ll leave it to your imagination.” There might be sarcasm in her tone, but a frown marred her face. She didn’t like the position she was in one bit. It didn’t surprise him. The mission they’d flown together had shown her to be a fantastic pilot and a bit of a control freak.

Warwick dropped his hands to his hips and blew out a breath. He’d dangled the favor before her, hoping she would call on him when she needed help and he would be able to spend time in her presence again. Pathetic, really, to have a crush on her. But he did. Thirty years old and he had the desires of a boy half his age. Just being in the same room with her made chill bumps rise along his arms.

He didn’t kid himself, no one as pretty as Aidan would be attracted to him. There was a reason he wore a mask. People wouldn’t spend time in his presence without it. The realization brought him crashing back to reality.

“There is only one way I can get you into Reed’s Palace without raising red flags. You know that, don’t you?”

She nodded. “I’d need to come in as your woman.”

“Yes.” There was no way she’d go for it. Not in a million years.

“I figured that would be the case.”

War slashed the air with his unscarred hand. “Do you know what that means?” He shook his head. She didn’t, so he’d spell it out for her. “You would have to act as if we were truly lovers, Aidan. You couldn’t pull away when I touch you or jump when I speak.”

Her mouth fell open. “I don’t jump.”

“Everyone does.” But she hadn’t towards the end of their last adventure. He figured she would flinch when he caressed her. He had no doubt that intimacy would change everything.

Her mouth snapped shut and her green cat eyes turned stormy. “Because you’re scary. You mean to be. What do you expect?”

“Lovers don’t act that way, and you would come in as mine.” He growled in frustration. “Hell, we’ll be assigned the same room, the same damn bed.”

“Look, I have twenty-eight days to return the globe or my brother is dead. I think I can control my reactions to you.”

Dread snaked along his spine. If he stayed the whole week in the same room with her, she would eventually have to see the scars. They would be living on top of each other. Better to stop it now than have their cover blown in the middle of Reed’s celebration.

But Gods he didn’t want to do it. One look at his face and she’d never get near him again. It would be over and he wouldn’t even be able to lie to himself that there might some day be a chance. He didn’t have much choice.

“There’s one way to find out,” he said. “Come sit on the sofa.”

He agrees to her challenge, but only if she's the prize. And this dragon never loses.

The Knight's Challenge

© 2007 Summer Devon

I Dream of Dragons I

Sarkany has collected a fine hoard, including much of a small New England city.

But Miranda knows his true nature. To drive this dragon from her home, she issues Sarkany a challenge—give it up or get out.

He's more than ready to play her game, but only on his terms. After all, what could be better than to add the beautiful knight to his collection?

Enjoy the following excerpt for The Knight's Challenge

“They think you've lost your mind,” she said without dropping her steady gaze.

“I have.” He stood and walked to her, slow careful movements. A predator trying to keep the prey from starting and running. Her heart thumped hard but not just with fear. God, at last. At last.

For an hour, she'd said.

“An hour with the blood oath not to cast any sort of spell on me or harm me.”

“Nothing more than you've done to me,” he whispered in her ear. “My sweet knight.” He slid his flattened hand along her spine. His voice died away as she found his mouth and pulled him into a kiss, greedy hot followed by more kisses. Hands explored and each touch brought a gasp.

She ran her fingertips along his muscular side, over his belly, pulling out his crisp shirt. No hair, silk over the iron muscles. “You were right. So warm. I love the feel of you, Sarkany. More.”

He tightened his hold, pressing her so close she couldn't breathe. She squirmed in his grip. He loosened his hands at once and mumbled, “Sorry.”

She even believed he meant it. Grabbing his hand, she hauled him to her bedroom. “I want you. No more clothes.”

“Miranda.” He reached for her shirt and yanked it off her body. She lifted her feet one at a time as her shoes, her jeans, were all shucked expertly.

She sprawled naked on the bed. He lay next to her still fully dressed except for jacket and tie, which had gotten lost somewhere near the couch.

“Time for you to get naked,” she said, unbuckling his belt. “Please.”

Sarkany pulled away. He smiled, but his eyes glittered dangerously. “You don’t honestly think I’d expose myself to a member of the guild, do you? The scale remains secret.”

She was confused for a moment then recalled the lore. Another bit of information that Linus had right, apparently. The single scale he retained for his power. “I forgot.” She laughed without humor. “Unbelievable, Sarkany. I only thought of this and this.” She touched his mouth with her fingers, and reached to stroke his belly and through his trousers his long, extremely hard cock.

He groaned and pushed against her fingers.

She moved closer to him, impatient to feel the heat and shape of his body. “Touch me, then. Your skin on mine where you want. Anything you want.” She closed her eyes, moved in for another kiss, only pausing to sadly smile and ask, “Have you ever in all your long years met a worse knight?”

“Never.” His kiss was almost tender. The next tasted more demanding. And then he slid down her naked body. Swift, relentless and determined in his apparent goal to savor every inch of her with his fingers, and mouth.

He licked her belly. “Hold still,” he commanded

She twisted from his loose grip on her thighs. “No. I can’t. I don’t want to. Dragon, come up here.”

He ignored her pleas and grabbed her legs again. She relented when his warm hands coaxed her legs apart and he flicked his tongue over her clitoris. “I’ve dreamed of this, my morsel,” he said and went to work, sucking and licking with relish. “I’ve promised myself a feast of knight. So rich. Yes, curls.”

The tingle of his stroking tongue added to growing waves of relentless pleasure. “Dragon,” she cried out. “Here.”

He kissed her knee. “Oh, very well. I obey.”

And the kisses worked slowly back up to her mouth.

He’d managed unfasten his trousers, and his hard cock grazed along the trail left by his mouth.

He rested much of his weight on her, and their kisses began again, saltier and wet now. Her eager writhing had turned serious. She pushed against him, growling with need.

“Now.” She reached down and grabbed his thick, unyielding cock to put it where she needed him. He slid over her, teasing, but not into her pussy.

“Beg,” he whispered.

“I have, dammit.”

“Give yourself to me.”

“Sarkany.” She reached between their warm bodies and squeezed him tight. His cock throbbed and swelled in her hand, grew warmer.

His eyes staring into hers narrowed. She whispered, “You beg me.”

He said nothing but gently, persistently pushed. She wanted him too much, so she moved her hand and he sank slowly into her. Her breath went ragged as he pushed so far inside her. Lord. She would never be able to escape. “Never. Oh. Never. Beg. Please.” Nonsense words she barely noticed speaking poured from her, as she writhed, impaled, skewered, penetrated by solid heat.

He cupped her butt, his large hands holding her as he relentlessly pressed deeper, filling her. He stopped at last. Each made tiny tentative motions that made the other moan. Inside her he seemed to grow, pushing her to the verge of too much again. She opened her mouth to bellow against his cloth-covered shoulder. But then she tilted her hips. More.

“Wait,” he commanded, and then something shifted, no, a tangible shiver passed between them, warmth rising from where he lay unmoving, buried deep inside her. As if he’d orgasmed and the heat from his come spread. But he hadn’t. This must be something different.

The tingling in her skin grew, and every inch he'd kissed felt the touch of him again. More than tactile sensation, her body opened to something more. Taste? Scent?

“Oh, it's perfect,” she moaned, greedy. If he moved again, the sensation would throb through her. She craved it. Greedy as a dragon, clutching for it, she hitched her body up and down as far as his hands holding her firmly would allow her to move. Just out of reach.

“Dragon, dragon. Give more to me.”

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