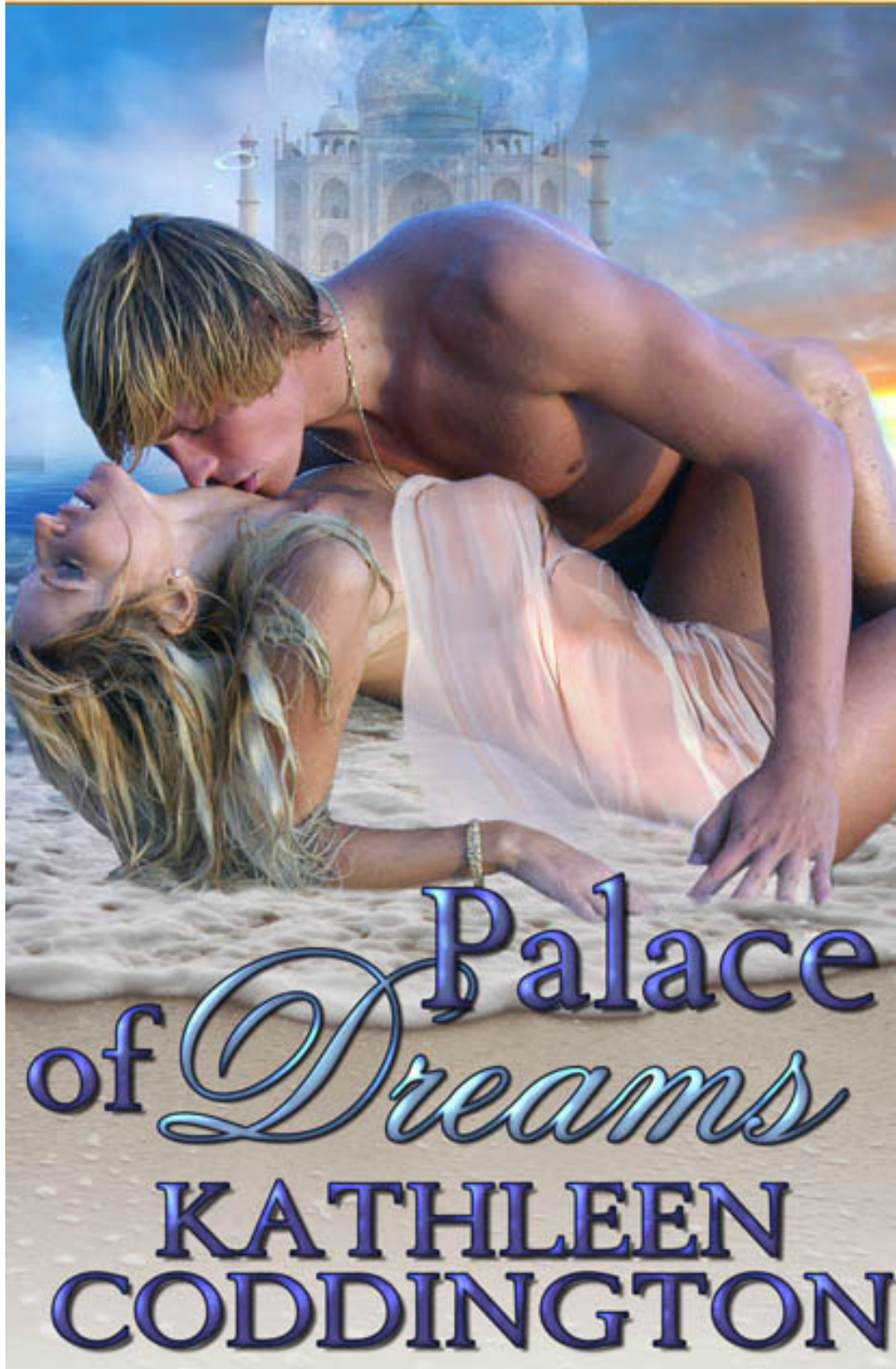


ELLORA'S CAVE **AEON**



Palace of Dreams

Kathleen Coddington

In the dream domes of Cereus Prime, visitors can fulfill their deepest fantasies in sessions led by telepathic guides. The dream scenarios of Inari Rau, the Celestial Crystal's premier guide, are legendary. On her final night as a guide, before she leaves to pursue her own business, she receives a request to lead one last dream. During the session she loses control and is drawn into a fantasy of raw, sexual pleasure with her mysterious client.

Kastel Fane has a mission to complete—give Inari the dream of a lifetime as a farewell gift from her friends. If he succeeds, he'll receive a hefty reward, the first of many he needs to buy out his contract early. Neither he nor Inari expect the passion that ignites between them, or the new psi talent that is born out of their first encounter, an ability that leads to dangerous consequences for both of them. As they fight for a future together, can Kastel prove he is the man who can finally fulfill all of Inari's dreams?

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Palace of Dreams

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PALACE OF DREAMS

Kathleen Coddington

Dedication

To my very special critique group: Kathy Kulig, Karen Rose and Becky Bartlett. This one's for you.

Chapter One

Gemmax City, Cereus Prime

Naked, except for a gold and ruby collar and red high-heeled sandals, the woman bent across the polished Druvian marble conference table, arms outstretched, legs apart, her smooth rounded buttocks tilted at an inviting angle. Her elegant, but prim, gray silk jacket and skirt, along with her undergarments, lay scattered about the floor. Gilt-blonde hair, released from its usual tidy coils tumbled down her back.

This was the way he liked things to be. The way he'd secretly fantasized about her, every day of the ten years of their marriage, especially while sitting through the long board meetings of their corporation. Normally an impossible dream, but here he could use her exactly as he wanted.

"Spread your legs," he murmured in her ear. His voice rose. "Farther. I want to shove my dick all the way up to your throat."

The woman turned her head and smiled at him over one creamy shoulder. "Whatever you say, darling," she purred. She shifted her feet wider and pulled herself forward on the table. The movement thrust her shapely ass higher in the air.

The man ran his hands down her back and around the curves of her ass cheeks, lifting and separating them. His cock was rock hard, pulsing in anticipation of mining the pink puckered entrance presented to him. He rubbed his throbbing cock over the curve of her ass to ease his need, then slipped one hand between her open legs and fingered her clit while pulling the bottle of special oil he kept for just such occasions closer with the other.

The woman moaned and writhed against his fingers as he stroked her clit into a hard, erect bud.

"You like that?" He swirled his thumb in slow circles around her aroused flesh making her moan louder. "Tell me you like it," he ordered.

"Yes, oh yes. I like it." There was no trace of the cold, condescending tone he so disliked in her voice. Instead it was breathless and thick with desire.

He slid his fingers between her slick folds and thrust his middle finger inside her sheath. She gasped and bucked against his hand. He heard her nails scrape across the cold marble table with her growing arousal. "Take me, take me now," she pleaded.

"No need to hurry, love." Her groan of disappointment when he withdrew his hand made him smile. He bent and nuzzled the side of her neck then looked up at the members of the board seated around the long table. "We have all night, right, folks?"

The gathered company nodded and smiled. A few clapped their hands. "Don't rush on our account," Cantile Neshat, head of intergalactic finance said.

“See, Sela, my love, they’re all enjoying this. Hell, most of them have been dreaming of seeing you in this position for years,” he added with a throaty chuckle.

He picked up the glass bottle of oil, removed the stopper and poured some into the middle of one palm. He set the flask aside and rubbed his hands together then reached for her. Separating her dimpled ass cheeks he thoroughly oiled the tight little hole of her rectum before spreading the rest of the oil over his cock. He inserted a finger inside to prepare her then holding her hips firmly, settled the tip of his erection against her opening and slowly pushed forward.

The woman inhaled sharply as he drove himself into her as far as his cock would go. Her splayed hands pressed hard against the cool marble as he began to move in and out, her naked breasts slapping on the table with each thrust. His rhythm built until she screamed his name as they came together.

Drained, he collapsed over her. When he could breathe normally again, he withdrew and pulled her upright. He stood behind her with one hand around her waist the other caressing her right breast.

“You know what to do now, love?”

His wife tossed him a fatuous smile. “Of course, darling. I’ll leave you to talk business. You know I don’t have the slightest idea about off-world mergers and shipping contracts. I’ll draw you a nice warm bath and order up a special dinner.” She stroked his cheek. “Don’t be too late, dear. You know how lonely I get without you.”

He patted her bottom and sent her on her way then turned to face the board and bowed. They rose and applauded. The thunderous applause and cheers were still ringing in his ears as the brightly lit room grew dim and faded away.

In a moment he was blissfully snoring.

* * * * *

Inari Rau opened her eyes and stared up at the softly glowing ceiling of the dream chamber. There was always a brief period of disorientation after the link between guide and client was severed. When her mind had fully cleared she sat up, removed the thin silver dream coronet from her forehead and hung it carefully over the cradle on the table next to the couch. She rose, stretched and smoothed her pale blue gown into place before slanting a smile at Talia Win, the dream technician who was swiftly and efficiently removing a similar band attached to a series of wires from their still sleeping client.

Talia raised the circlet in a congratulatory salute. “Last time,” she said as she placed it back into its cradle.

“Thank the Lords of the Cosmos for that.” Inari glanced down at the sleeping man and grimaced. “This is one dream I’ll never miss.”

Maren Janco had been a client for nearly ten years. In all that time, although the circumstances varied, the theme of the dreams he requested never changed. All his

fantasies revolved around humiliating and dominating his frigid, but brilliant wife, Sela. At home and in the board room of Kelgor and Janco Intergalactic Shipping, Sela ruled. The only place Maren ever got the upper hand was on his visits to the Celestial Crystal Dream Palace.

Inari ran her fingers through her chin-length wavy, chestnut hair, her lips tilting in a smile of mingled relief and joy at the thought of never having to participate in one of Maren Janco's distasteful dreams again. As of this moment she was officially retired.

She cast a last look at Janco. In his dreams he had intense blue eyes, but since he was already sleeping when she entered the chamber she wasn't sure whether or not that was their actual color. Nor did she have any desire to find out. Meetings between guides and dreamers were expressly forbidden.

Asleep his heavy features were relaxed and he looked younger than his thirty-eight years. He was also considerably shorter and paunchier than his dream avatar. It was always a source of amusement to Inari how her customers always saw themselves as taller and more physically attractive in their dreams. But that was part of the allure of the dream palaces.

She padded across the plush violet carpet and joined Talia at her station. The monitors and Janco's gentle snores agreed that he was still deeply asleep. The drugs used for the procedure would keep him that way for another quarter of an hour and then gradually wake him.

Inari rubbed her temples. Even after all these years she still ended most sessions with a slight headache. "I'm off for a bath and a cup of tea. Come and visit before you leave for the night."

"Will do," Talia said. She jerked her chin toward Janco. "As soon as he's gone, I'll be in to see you."

Inari tapped the slender communications message crystal lying on the counter. "Don't forget to give him this." In preparation for her retirement, she'd recorded an individual farewell to all her long-term clients. Although they would never know what she looked like, they would at least hear the true voice of their dream guide.

"Don't worry. I'll make sure he gets your words of heartfelt gratitude for all his years of faithful patronage before I usher him out the door," Talia said, a sarcastic edge to her tone. She took Inari by the shoulders and turned her around. "Now go!"

Inari laughed. "I thought I was in charge here."

"Not anymore." Talia gave her a gentle shove toward the door leading to Inari's private quarters. "You've earned your rest. Start enjoying it."

"You're mighty bossy."

"So you keep telling me," Talia said as she returned to her work.

Inari crossed the room and raised her hand to the door control panel. She hesitated, suddenly reluctant to press the silver and glass plate. She glanced back over her shoulder at the dream chamber. This was it. Once she walked through this door her life

as lead dream guide of the Celestial Crystal Dream Palace was over. She'd been looking forward to retirement with anticipation, but suddenly she wondered if she was making the right decision. It wasn't too late to change her mind.

She took a deep breath and stiffened her back. *Talia is right. You've earned this.* She palmed the control panel and stepped through the door without looking back.

* * * * *

The special privileges of Inari's rank as lead guide included a private courtyard adjoining her spacious bed-sitting room, a small office, her own food dispenser and a bath chamber with a large sunken tub, always her first destination after a long day with clients.

By tomorrow evening all of this would belong to her replacement. As she gathered the items necessary for her nightly routine and carried them to the tub, a slight frown creased her forehead. *Who had Lysa decided upon as the new lead dreamer?* Selecting the proper person was crucial if the Celestial Crystal was to keep its rating as the most prestigious dream palace on all of Cereus Prime. Inari's amazing gifts of imagination and control had drawn customers from all over the Concord of Planets. It was essential that the next guide be her equal.

Not my problem, she reminded herself as she stepped down into the pool of heated water scented with *zara* lilies. And it wasn't. Still she couldn't shake the nagging concern for Lysa, who was a friend as well as employer, and for the other guides who, if the dream palace should lose its status and wealthy patrons, could have their contracts sold to one of the lesser houses in the city.

Despite the warmth of the water Inari shivered. In dream establishments in the more seamy quarters of the city, guides often died young from brain hemorrhages or went mad from prolonged hours of dreaming. Dream palaces like the Celestial Crystal catered to the wealthiest off-world tourists and citizens of Cereus Prime. Lysa Talcott, the proprietor, expected the best from her dreamers. Her guides served a lengthy apprenticeship during which they were permitted to lead only nonsexual requests. Inari had been nineteen before she gained the title and the right to design and guide the erotic fantasies popular with so many off-world visitors.

In return for their expertise, Celestial Crystal guides lived in relative comfort, worked reasonable hours and were able to accrue enough from their monthly wages and the special gifts from customers to buy out their contracts and retire with moderate savings, as she was about to do.

"Enough." Inari scolded herself. "Lysa knows what she's doing. In two days you'll be gone and none of this will matter."

She picked up a sponge and rubbed it slowly down her arms, a soft smile curving her lips. *Retired.* The word flashed like a beacon in her mind. Of course it was a somewhat relative term as she'd soon be CEO of her own dream design company, Dream Scene. Thanks to Lysa, all the preliminary legal paperwork for Inari's new

business venture was almost in place. Naturally her first contract would be with the Celestial Crystal. Two more contracts with smaller dream domes were pending. She even had an outline for a vid-novel.

Port Liassa was the perfect place to set up shop. She loved the ocean. Whenever she could, she'd woven it into the dream scenarios she'd created. Her heart beat faster as she imagined sitting on her deck, a glass of iced *savra* tea in her hand, watching the sun dance on the ocean. Once she settled into her new home and career she suspected that her twenty-seven years at the Celestial Crystal would seem like a dream.

The turquoise and bronze beaded tapestry covering the doorway gave a soft jangle. *Talia!* Inari been so immersed in her thoughts she'd forgotten the time. She'd meant to have the tea steeping by now.

She rose with a splash and clambered out of the tub unmindful of the trail of water left behind on the aquamarine carpeting. Grabbing a towel, she whisked it about her and shook drops of water from her hair. She looked up her lips half open in apology for not having the promised pot of tea ready then stepped back with a startled gasp as her eyes met those of Maren Janco's. His gaze raked over her, from the top of her head to the tips of her bare feet. Heat filled her cheeks at his frank appraisal and she hugged her towel closer.

"What are you doing here? Where's Talia?" she demanded.

Ignoring her question, Janco moved closer, his eyes riveted on her face. "You're certainly not what I expected."

The corners of Inari's mouth lifted in a sour smile. She knew what he'd expected – a slender blonde beauty with big tits, a flat stomach and a tight little ass – in essence, the woman of his dreams. Clients, especially those who frequented a particular dreamer for years as Janco had, always imagined the guide as looking like their fantasy partners. They were doomed to disappointment which was one of the reason why there were strict rules forbidding customers to meet their guides.

Oddly there was no trace of the disappointment she expected to see in Maren Janco's expression at the discovery that his guide was a short woman of forty-one with nice, albeit slightly sagging breasts, a rounded belly and a streak of silver running down one side of her dark chestnut hair.

She pulled herself up to her full height. "As you well know, Mr. Janco, it's a violation of your contract to be here. Leave at once or I'll be forced to call security. If that happens you may be barred permanently from the Celestial Crystal."

Maren Janco appeared entirely unimpressed by her threats. "You can't leave me."

Inari's eyes widened. "Leave you? We've never met before this moment."

He took her hand. "Not like this," he agreed. "But after ten years of sharing our dreams no one knows me the way you do."

She freed her hand and stepped back. "Strictly speaking, Mr. Janco, we don't share our dreams. I merely guide you through a preset fantasy storyline – one that you suggest yourself, if you remember."

He waved away her explanation with obvious impatience. "Maybe at the beginning, but after all these years, there's more to it than that. I know you crave the dreams—need the dreams as much as I do. You can't leave. What will I do without you?"

Without warning he grabbed her and pressed his mouth to hers. *Lords of Cosmos. Janco was a thrall!* Occasionally, despite all the rules and safeguards, customers became psychologically enthralled with their guide. Thralls had a compulsion to meet them—came to believe they were in love with the flesh and blood dreamer rather than the illusionary woman or man created for them as part of the fantasy experience.

She pushed him away and retreated several steps, clutching at her towel. *Where was Talia? Had Janco done something to her?* An icy shiver crawled up her spine as it occurred to her for the first time that she might truly be in trouble if Janco decided to play rough. He'd never displayed a tendency toward violence in any of the dream scenarios, but that didn't necessarily mean he was incapable of it if the circumstances warranted it.

She thought about running, but Janco was between her and the door. There were several security crystals cleverly disguised and hidden among the glass beads that decorated the blue and green tiles on the wall. If she could maneuver closer to one of them perhaps she could activate it. The trick was to distract him so he wouldn't realize what she was doing until it was too late.

Inari focused her attention on Janco. He stood a hand'sbreadth away, his gaze intent on her face. "I know you're retiring. You can be my private dreamer."

She shook her head. "I'm afraid that's not possible."

His expression hardened. "Why? Has someone else bought your services?" He grabbed her arm in a punishing grip. His face was flushed and Inari saw an angry glint in eyes that were brown and not blue at all. "No matter what he offered you, I can offer more."

She bit back a cry of pain and fought to keep her voice calm. "I assure you, there's no one else. It's just that..."

His eyes narrowed with suspicion. "There is someone else. Who is it?" His fingers tightened.

"There's no one," she gasped, tears of pain blurring her eyes. Her calm control was rapidly giving way to panic. She released the towel she'd been holding against her with her free arm. Being naked in front of Janco was no longer an issue. She grabbed his hand and tried to pry his fingers off her arm. "Let go of me."

"I won't let anyone else have you." His heavy features twisted with barely repressed rage.

"There is no one else," Inari screamed, struggling in his hold as her mind cast about for some route of escape. The bathroom walls wavered then disappeared. For a brief moment she and Janco were standing on a beach. Waves lapped at their ankles.

Janco's eyes went wide. He let go of her arm and staggered back. "What the hell..."

As quickly as it happened they were back in Inari's bathing room, plush carpet instead of sand beneath their feet. Disoriented by the strange occurrence, she swayed and almost fell to her knees. Janco seemed equally as shaken. He blinked rapidly as if trying to clear his vision.

What had just happened? Had she linked with Janco's conscious mind? Whatever she'd done, it had accomplished her goal of distracting him. She sprinted toward the nearest wall and slapped her hand over a security crystal. Although she heard nothing she knew it was chiming its alarm in the security office.

Janco's expression cleared and he advanced on her again. Inari evaded him and ran across the bath chamber toward the door, colliding with Talia as she stepped into the room. Behind her were two men in the purple and silver uniforms of the Celestial Crystal security forces. They moved past her with force wands drawn.

It took a few threats, but at last Janco allowed the guards to escort him from the chamber. He flashed a look of raw pleading at Inari as he passed her. "Think about my offer. I can make you a wealthy woman."

Inari gave a short almost hysterical laugh. "Not in your wildest dreams," she said as she took her robe from Talia and wrapped it around her shaking body.

"Never say never." He sent her a look that sent chills racing up and down her spine. She hugged her robe closer and turned her back on him. Twenty-seven years as a dreamer and never a single problem until now. She heaved a sigh. Definitely time to retire.

Chapter Two

Kastel Fane skimmed the contents of the message crystal then keyed his vid-pad to bring up the file he'd been instructed to review before he arrived for his meeting. A woman's face appeared on the screen—his assignment for that night. He read the name at the bottom of the vid-photo. Inari Rau. *Beautiful name*, he thought, as he studied the woman. She had an oval face topped with a chin-length mane of wavy auburn hair with a silver streak running down the left side and wide-set brown eyes. Her nose was a bit too narrow and her mouth a bit too wide to be called truly beautiful.

Beautiful women abounded on Cereus Prime. And why not, when beauty and youth could be purchased at any rejuvenation center? Tiny lines around her eyes and the silver streak said clearly that this woman had definitely never made use of any of the new techniques available to erase the effects of aging. For some reason he found that endearing. He was tired of women with perfectly sculpted faces, with no hint of their true personality or the battles they had fought and won. Or lost.

No, not beautiful, he decided, but certainly not unattractive either. Something about the tilt of her head and the laugh lines around her eyes made him think she was a woman he'd like to get to know. Scrolling past her photo he started to read. He finished just as the shuttle banked and began its descent.

It made a smooth landing, its wheels barely making a noise on the runway. A former engineer he appreciated the physics behind the feat. Since the accident his engineering days were over. *A temporary setback*. If one could call fifteen years in a new career, temporary. Considering the alternatives, he was lucky to have a job he reminded himself as he clicked off his portable reader, tucked it into the pocket of his jacket and merged into the line of passengers exiting the shuttle.

A short time later, speeding along in an air-cab, he looked out the window and took in his first sight of Gemmax City. Cereus Prime's, capital and largest city, with its gleaming crystal towers jutting upward at the center, reminded him of the inside of a geode he'd once seen in a gift shop. The towers of government, commerce, science and health gave way to sprawling residential areas of glass, syn-marble and steel to the north, east and west. Situated at the south end of the city, along the banks of the Geft River, was the entertainment district with its theatres, shops and restaurants. This area also housed the pleasure domes, destination of millions of visitors from various parts of the galaxy, and source of most of Cereus Prime's wealth and status among the Concord of Planets.

The less desirable part of the district, with its narrow streets and tightly packed domes, gradually thinned into green parklike surroundings whose domes and buildings glittered like small gems among the trees. At the highest point of the bluff sat

a white and gold Druvian marble building topped with an immense crystal dome set amid several smaller, but no less impressive domes.

The Celestial Crystal, his destination and new home, was the most famous of all the dream palaces on Cereus Prime—where for a short time all your dreams could come true. He turned away from the window with a grimace as the air-cab spiraled down for a landing. Fifteen years as a guide seemed more like a nightmare. *Stop whining. Prove yourself a worthy successor to the legendary Inari Rau and you'll be able to buy out your contract in twelve years, maybe less. You know you can do it. And he could.* Highly competitive by nature, he had every intention of being the next legend. Once the gold credits came pouring in, Fane Agrotech would be his again.

Kastel emerged from the vehicle and looked around. The landing pad was located in a small hidden glade within a short walk to the main entrance. Grabbing his bag, he followed the path of cream-colored stone as it wound past flowering bushes and softly splashing fountains. The walkway passed beneath two large trees to join with the wide boulevard that led up a gleaming white staircase to a set of etched crystal doors.

He stepped into the lobby of the Celestial Crystal Dream Palace and paused in admiration. He'd seen the public vid-screen promotions and heard tourists on the air-bus talk about it, but words and vid-pictures didn't do it justice, nor had the proprietor, Lysa Talcott, when she'd met with him at the Kinvar Institute for the Study of Psi Talent. He'd visited pleasure domes before, but nothing in his limited experience had prepared him for this.

His eyes roamed up the waterfall spilling down the silver and turquoise crystal wall to his left, continuing up to the crystal dome high above his head. At night faceted crystals set in the glass twinkled like hundreds of tiny stars. The air was filled with the soothing sound of wind chimes, water and the scent of Malian orchids.

If the rest of the dream dome matched the elegance and comfort of the lobby, working here might actually be bearable. His feet sank soundlessly into the plush carpeting as he crossed the lobby to the curved glass and marble counter. Flashing a quick smile at the young woman with the Celestial Crystal's logo embroidered above her left breast in lavender and gold, he introduced himself, "Kastel Fane. Lysa Talcott is expecting me."

The young woman returned his smile as she pressed a button set in the counter next to a small vid-screen. "I've sent for someone to escort you to Miss Talcott's office Mr. Fane." She gestured toward the marble staircase to her right. "If you go up the stairs and through the archway, your escort will meet you there."

As promised, a young woman dressed in the cream, lavender and gold Celestial Crystal uniform met him. "If you'll follow me, Mr. Fane." She led him to a grav-lift. Inside she punched a button that sent them to the top floor. When the door slid open his escort gestured toward the room revealed beyond. "Miss Talcott will be with you momentarily. Please make yourself comfortable until she arrives."

Kastel stepped out of the lift and the door slid shut with a whisper of air behind him. Lysa Talcott's office was sleek and elegant like the rest of her establishment. Sunlight streamed through the glass wall opposite him. Drawn by the vista he knew lay beyond, he walked over and looked out. He wasn't disappointed. The Geft River and the entire pleasure district of Gemmax City with its glittering domes sprawled at his feet. At night he imagined the reflection of the twinkling lights of the domes on the river was magnificent.

"I see you're enjoying the view." A woman's low contralto voice said behind him.

Kastel suppressed a start and turned to face his new employer. She gestured for him to seat himself. He set his bag down and settled into one of the slingback chairs as she took her place behind the polished *safa* wood desk.

Although she was nearing sixty, few people ever suspected Lysa Talcott's real age. Shoulder-length ash-blond hair framed a firm, square-jawed face, kept free of lines and wrinkles by a combination of family genes and an annual visit to her favorite age technician. Her trim figure, the product of years of disciplined exercise, still garnered plenty of male attention. Her mind was equally honed as her body. When it came to business there were few men or women who could compete with her. Practical and confident, she was fiercely protective of the Celestial Crystal's reputation.

Sitting back in her chair, she crossed her legs and smoothed her jade-green syn-silk skirt over her knees. Her clear hazel eyes appraised him. "So, Mr. Fane, what do you think of your new home?"

"It's more than I expected. It has a dreamlike quality." He tilted his head and smiled. "But I guess that's the intent, isn't it?"

Lysa's full lips lifted in a smile. "Just so. I'm glad you figured that out. Some of our clients miss the subtlety of the design and the way it enhances the entire dream experience." She picked up a crystal decanter and poured two glasses of wine. Handing him one, she asked, "How was your trip?"

"Uneventful. I've never been to the capital before. Not that I saw much of it on the trip from the shuttle port."

"Perhaps, later, once you've settled in, I'll arrange a tour for you."

He sipped his wine. "I'm sure I would enjoy that."

"Once we finish here, I'll have someone take you to your quarters. I hope you remembered to pack lightly."

Kastel nodded. "Since the Celestial Crystal takes care of all my food and clothing there wasn't much to bring." Except for a few cherished items, he'd sold most of his personal property to pay off outstanding bills. The process hadn't been as painful as he'd expected. He didn't want too many reminders of the life he'd left behind.

Lysa studied him for a moment over the rim of her glass. "You understand what is expected of you tonight?"

His shoulders lifted in a slight shrug. "It shouldn't be too difficult. I've been successful each time I tried it in the laboratory."

Lysa's eyes glinted with amusement. "You haven't met Inari Rau. Her skills as a guide are exceptional. Not to mention that she's universally loved and respected by everyone at the Celestial Crystal, including me, I might add."

Keeping his expression bland, he said, "Miss Rau appears to be a fascinating woman. I'm sorry I can't meet her in person."

"Normally guides mingle freely at the Celestial Crystal, but in this case, I think it best for you to remain anonymous." Lysa set down her glass and picked up a gold credit chip. "Live up to our agreement and you'll receive your first bonus."

A pleasant way to earn some extra credits Kastel thought, remembering the file he'd read. The idea of touching Inari's mind, even if it were only in a dream, was very appealing. Excitement tightened his gut and his cock twitched. He raised his glass in a toast. "I'll do my best to give your favorite dream lady a night to remember."

* * * * *

Kastel surveyed the small but comfortably appointed bed-sitting room—standard living quarters for an entry-level guide, the young woman who'd acted as his escort had explained. To his right an alcove outfitted with a computer served as an office. A woven hanging in shades of gray, silver and lavender covered a doorway opposite him behind which he assumed was the bath chamber. Silver and glass wall sconces and a few tasteful lamps scattered about cast a soft soothing radiance. The only major drawback he could see was the lack of windows. Guides at this level enjoyed sunlight and exercise in the private staff gardens. Although meals were normally taken with other employees in the common room, he noted a small food warmer and cool box built into a long counter. Atop it sat a decanter of wine, four glasses and a vid-phone.

Thick gray carpet muffled his footsteps as he crossed the room. He placed his bag on top of a set of drawers built into the wall next to the bed. He wouldn't be staying here long enough to bother with unpacking. A neatly folded pair of blue syn-silk trousers and matching shirt lay on top of the silver, gray and purple striped bedspread—his uniform for the next fifteen years. He pulled his vid-pad from his pocket and set it beside them then went and poured himself a glass of wine.

Kastel knew that as lead guide, Inari's quarters were larger and had more amenities—a courtyard among them. Used to working inside a cavernous laboratory or in his office with windows that looked out onto the sweeping vista of the rolling hills of his home province, he felt closed in and slightly claustrophobic. A private courtyard would make his stint as a guide more bearable, he thought, as he sipped his drink.

Glass in hand he made his way to the vid-phone to call his brother. Almost six years older than him, Kirril had landed a prestigious job as adjudicator at one of the largest firms in Dravig Province. Never close as children, he and his brother maintained a cordial but somewhat distant relationship. Recently, Kastel had come to appreciate both

his brother's persuasive skills and his impressive legal connections. After the accident, Kirril had handled all of Kastel's business affairs and had agreed to manage what remained of Fane Agrotech until Kastel was free to take up the reins again.

Kastel tapped out his brother's number. The gray screen cleared to be replaced by a shorter, broader version of him. "Reporting in as ordered," he said with a grin.

Kirril's lips stretched in an answering smile. He pushed away a pile of stacked vid-sheets and leaned back in his chair. His shrewd blue eyes assessed Kastel. "How was the trip?"

"Not bad. How are things on your end?"

"As of today I'm the acting CEO of Fane Agrotech. I hired a couple of new engineers. We'll be ready to start filling contracts again in about a month. I'll do my best to keep things running until you come back."

Kastel lifted his glass. "Thanks. I know I'm lucky to have salvaged anything. With you at the helm, at least I won't have to start from scratch when I return."

"So how are the accommodations?"

"Comfortable, but a tad too pastel for my taste."

Kirril's brows rose. "You have taste?"

"Yes, I have taste," Kastel huffed.

"Hey, don't blame me." Kirril spread his hands. "You're the one who spent most of the time in a white cold room working with robots and engines."

Kastel lips twitched in a rueful smile. "Point taken." He gestured to the room behind him. "These are just temporary. I move into the official lead guide quarters as soon as Inari Rau leaves." He loved saying her name. It lingered like sweet wine on his tongue.

Kirril leaned forward. "Inari Rau. I heard about her everywhere I went in Gemmax City last year. Her reputation as a guide is unequalled. They say the dreams she designs are so vivid some clients will swear it wasn't a dream at all. And the sex... Well you can imagine."

That was the problem. Kastel could imagine the sex all too well. He had a sudden image of Inari lying naked on his bed, her auburn curls tumbled about her face, her full lips bruised and swollen with kisses, thighs spread, her dripping juices coating his eager fingers.

"Cereus Prime to Kastel?"

Kastel realized his brother was talking. He took a deep breath and pushed the vision aside. "What?"

"Have you met her yet?"

"No, and I'm not likely to. There's some rule about it."

"Rules are made to be broken." Kirril winked.

Rules are made to be broken. Not too long ago Kastel would have wholeheartedly agreed. That philosophy had been partly responsible for the turn of events that had landed him here.

"I'm turning over a new leaf." He tried to sound cheerful, but knew a tinge of guilt and grief had crept into his voice.

Kirril's grin faded. He nodded in obvious understanding. The conversation moved into a brief discussion about Kirril's wife, Akiva and Kastel's niece and nephew. After a few minutes Kastel excused himself and said goodbye.

Downing the remains of his drink, he rinsed out the glass and wandered over to examine the shirt and trousers laid out on the bed for tonight's session. He shook his head. More pastels. The blue shimmer of the syn-silk would contrast well with his dark blond hair. Still, a neutral tan or gray would have suited him better.

He glanced at his timepiece. Three hours until the session. Plenty of time for him to bathe, run through the standard meditation routine and drink the required two cups of *fremik* tea. He dug in his bag for the necessary toiletries and headed off to the bath chamber.

Forty-five minutes later he emerged with a towel wrapped around his waist. He walked to the food warmer and quickly brewed a cup of the obligatory tea. Standing by the counter he blew on it. As soon as it was cool enough to swallow he gulped it down. He brewed another and drank it. *Disgusting*. It tasted like moss and twigs with a hint of citrus. He found it amazing that anyone had ever consumed enough of the vile stuff to discover its aphrodisiac effects.

He washed out the cup and set it upside down to drain. Deep in thought, he moved to the bed. Pushing the pillows up for support, he flopped down and stretched his legs out. He grabbed his vid-pad and keyed open the file on Inari intending to reread the information. Instead his gaze settled on her vid-photo. Give her the dream of a lifetime, Lysa had told him. No problem there. He already had a fantasy he was certain would please Inari. And please him as well. Where was it written that a guide couldn't have a good time too?

He grew hard as he mentally pictured how the scenario would unfold. The heat tickling his belly and tightening his balls had little to do with the tea he'd drunk. He pushed the towel aside and stroked his cock. It grew rigid in his hand, its thick head swelling. Grasping it at the root he moved his hand up and down envisioning his head between Inari's warm thighs, his mouth ravishing her pussy.

He'd be the perfect dream lover, considerate and passionate, seeing to it that every inch of her body was worshiped. He'd use his tongue and teeth on tits, pussy and clit until she writhed with pleasure. His breath hitched and his hand moved faster as images spilled through his mind. He could almost taste the honey of her kisses, hear her moans, and smell the sweet musk of her femininity.

He pushed his penis up and down through his hand in a steady rhythm as he thought of Inari. He envisioned her gazing at him, her brown eyes melting with desire.

Felt the silken brush of her auburn curls on his thighs as her hot wet mouth eagerly closed around the swollen head of his cock. He shuddered, the thought of her taking his entire length into her throat almost making him come. Not yet. He wanted to hold off his orgasm.

He tried to slow down, but images of plunging his rampant cock again and again into Inari's hot, slick channel raced through his mind. He'd grasp her rounded ass and lift her legs over his shoulders so he could pump so deep she'd scream with ecstasy. Like a wave rushing to shore the pressure built inside and crested. For a second he hung suspended in that sweet balance between aching need and release. The tip of his penis trembled with anticipation. With his free hand he rubbed the glistening pre-cum across the engorged flesh. One final jerk and his orgasm took him. As the tremors pulsed through him, he imagined Inari in the rapture of her own climax.

Somehow dream sex now seemed distant and unfulfilling. He desired to hold the real woman in his arms. *Don't go there.* But he already had. He wanted to meet Inari Rau in the flesh. And who wouldn't? The woman was a legend among the guides. Think of everything he could learn from her.

There was more to it than that he knew. From the moment he'd seen her vid-photo he'd felt drawn to her. Competition he understood. This strange compulsion was unlike him. It was more than wanting to discover if he could equal her as a guide. He wanted to know the woman behind the legend – the Inari who called to him from her photo.

He shrugged his shoulders as if the physical action could shake away this troubling, unexpected obsession to meet his predecessor. *Follow the rules.* Make Inari's dream memorable as Lysa Talcott had requested. Success ensured that bonus credits would flow into his account.

He rose and went into the bath chamber and washed up. Returning to the bedroom, he pulled on the syn-silk shirt and trousers. By the time he'd settled cross-legged on the floor in the middle of the room, his thoughts were under control again. He took a deep cleansing breath, closed his eyes and began to run through the meditation exercises. Calmness flowed into him. Do the job. Build your reputation. Bank the bonus credits and get out as soon as possible. That was the plan.

In another time and place he and Inari Rau might have shared something special. In this time and place, all that would ever be between them was a fleeting dream. He'd make it a good one – for both of them.

* * * * *

Inari and Talia sat in the courtyard, tea and pastries on the table between them. Inari sipped her hot beverage, savoring the dark smoky flavor then leaned back in her cushioned chair with a sigh.

"How's your head?" She nodded toward the swollen lump on Talia's temple where Maren Janco had struck her. In the flickering light of the beaded lamps strung around the courtyard, Inari could see the puffy flesh was turning a deep purple-blue.

Talia touched the bump and winced. "It's there, but I suspect it looks worse than it is. What about you? Stopped shaking yet?"

Inari smiled and held up her amber crystal glass. "Tea! The universal panacea." Sobering, she leaned forward. "I'm sorry Janco hurt you, Talia. You've always taken care of me, but tonight you went above and beyond."

Talia shrugged. "That's what friends do. Not to say a thank-you gift would be out of the question," she added with a sly wink. The effect was ruined by the loud ouch and grimace of pain from the movement.

Inari's lips curved in a fond smile as she refilled both their glasses. "I'll see to it personally." As she sank back in her chair her expression grew rueful. "Twenty-seven years without a single blemish on my record and on my last night this had to happen."

"It's not your fault. We were all caught off guard. In all the years Maren Janco's been coming to the Celestial Crystal there's never been any indication he might be unstable, let alone a thrall."

"I suppose you're right. I just hope Lysa sees it the same way."

"Janco's the one who needs to worry. After the stunt he pulled tonight Lysa will never let him set foot inside the Celestial Crystal again. If he gives her any trouble he'll find himself barred from all but the lowest establishments in Gemmax City."

"Well if anyone deserves it he does, although I don't envy the poor guide who gets his business next." Inari gazed around the courtyard determined to put the whole ugly business out of her mind. Cereus Prime's twin moons floated above them in the night sky. The larger one, Caliope was nearly full, her smaller sister, Kesta was a thin mauve crescent.

A breeze rustled through the *tulira* trees carrying with it the heady scent of *zara* lilies. She was going to miss her courtyard. Her office contained a computer and a large collection of novels, mythology and sexual practices of every species that made up the Concord of Planets. Everything a guide needed. But she much preferred sitting in the courtyard listening to the singing of the *malla* birds while she designed dreams for her clients. She hoped the next guide would get as much pleasure from this beautiful spot as she had.

She took a sip of her cooling tea and directed a look at Talia over the rim of her cup. "Any news from Lysa about my replacement?"

"Not a word," Talia said. "Which is highly unusual for Lysa."

Inari nodded. "It is a bit odd. I thought for sure she would include me in her interviews of the likely candidates." She felt a twinge of disappointment that her friend hadn't seen fit to at least ask her opinion.

"Which of the guides here do you think she chose?" Talia asked. Her green eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "Carilla Paro is the only one I can think of who has anything near your abilities as a dreamer."

Inari considered Carilla, trying to imagine her as lead guide. "She has excellent control, almost as good as mine, but I've heard that some of the customers complain that her dreams can be flat and uninspired. You know how it is with this business. If you don't keep changing and offering something new and exciting, clients get bored and go elsewhere."

"Well, if it's not Carilla, who's left?"

Inari shook her head. "I haven't the faintest idea. Perhaps she'll bring in an outsider from one of the other palaces. She has the funds to buy out a contract if she needs to, although if there was a new talent who compared with me in any of the other houses, we'd certainly have heard." She set her cup down with a sigh and rose. "It's been a long day and I have packing to do in the morning."

Talia stood up and the two women embraced. When they parted, Talia swiped tears from her cheeks. "You're not even gone yet and already I miss you."

Inari wiped her friend's wet face with her fingertips. "We'll still see each other. You know you are welcome to visit me anytime." She smiled. "We'll swim in the ocean, drink wine and watch the sun set."

"I will visit, I promise, but it won't be the same. That new guide had better be good," Talia finished with a look that didn't bode well for Inari's replacement.

After Talia left, Inari busied herself cleaning up the remains of their tea. She was drying the last glass when her door chimed announcing she had a visitor. Who could it be at this hour?

The door slid back to reveal Talia. She shot a quick glance over her shoulder before stepping inside with an apologetic smile. "You're not going to believe this, but you have another client."

Inari's eyes widened. "That's impossible. I retired, remember?" She put her hands on her hips and regarded Talia with a frown. Her friend bit her lip and shifted her feet. "Okay, what's going on?"

Talia held out a lavender message crystal and a gold credit chip. "These are from Lysa."

Ignoring the credit chip, Inari snatched the crystal, strode across the room and inserted it into her reader. Her eyes widened as she read the note it contained. It was a request that Inari accept this one last customer as a special favor to her employer. In return, Inari would receive a sizeable monetary gift for her inconvenience. Her knees grew weak and she almost fell when she saw the amount. It was more than her entire life savings.

She motioned to Talia to come and read the message for herself. When she was finished she looked at Inari her green eyes glinting with combined mischief and awe. She smoothed the credit chip then handed it to Inari with an envious sigh. "Damn, is it too late for me to learn to be a dreamer?"

They both began to laugh. "Looks like we're working late," Inari said.

“Are you sure you’re up to it?” Talia asked, switching into her professional mode.

Inari smiled saucily over her shoulder as she went to retrieve her discarded blue gown, the one she’d thought never to wear again. “Need I remind you that you are speaking to the premier guide on all Cereus Prime? Go prepare our mysterious client. He is about to experience the dream of a lifetime.”

Chapter Three

While Talia prepared the client, Inari prepared herself. Despite the special circumstances surrounding this dream she had no intention of rushing. After putting on her robe, she went methodically through her normal ritual. She cut a fresh *zara* lily and placed it in a vase, lit the candles, then sat cross-legged on the woven mat in her meditation corner.

After fifteen minutes of deep breathing she felt refreshed and clear-headed. Rising, she went to her food dispenser and dialed up a cup of *fremik* tea. While she waited for it to steep, she quickly scanned the dream parameters Lysa had included at the end of her message. The scenario was of the erotic variety. *Nothing surprising there*, she thought, as she sipped the slightly bitter liquid. What did surprise her was the rather generic scenario requested. Her lips pursed in a disappointed moue. Not much of an imagination. Considering the highly unusual circumstance surrounding her employer's request and the amount of money involved, she'd expected something a bit more intriguing.

"Oh, well, to each his own," she murmured as she took the last swallow and set the cup down. Her nipples tightened and tingling warmth pulled at her belly—the effects of the tea. Time to see this unexpected customer for herself.

She entered the chamber and crossed to the monitoring station, momentarily ignoring the figure sleeping on the thickly padded couch. "Everything in order?" she asked, unnecessarily, since a quick glance at the monitor had already given her the answer.

"All set." Talia looked up from making an adjustment to one of the controls and examined Inari critically. "What about you? Any residual headache from the last session?" Inari shook her head. "Drink your tea?" Inari nodded. Talia smiled and shook her head. "A regular fount of information, aren't you?"

"I'm fine. What about our client?"

"Well beyond the fact that Kastel Fane is one gorgeous hunk of man, he's deep in REM sleep and ready to go."

Inari walked over to the sleeping man and looked down at him, her brow creased in a frown. *Who are you, Kastel Fane? Why are you so important that Lysa Talcott would insist I be your guide on this of all nights?*

She could discern no answers in his face. Her frown faded as she studied him. Talia was right. He was an absolutely gorgeous specimen of the male sex. Thick honey-blond hair swept back from his broad forehead and brushed the strong contours of his cheeks and jaw. His half-parted lips were full and sensual. She imagined those lips roving

freely over her naked body. Her heart began to beat rapidly and she grew wet. The *fremik* tea was definitely working.

Her gaze moved lower. Kastel's arms and the part of his chest revealed by the deep V of his shirt were well muscled. The rest of his body was hidden by a purple silk coverlet. His large hands with their long, lean fingers were crossed atop the cover. The thought of him actually touching her bare skin with those hands made her vaginal muscles clench with desire.

Of course that could never be, she thought, heaving a deep sigh of regret. Tonight they would have sex in half a dozen positions. Both of them would feel pleasure, but none of it would be real.

Occasionally she took a lover from among the other guides, but these relationships were usually short-lived... After engaging in virtual sex, three or four times a day, most lost their desire for the real thing. It was not unusual for them to abstain from sex for long periods of time. She was startled by the realization that it had been several years since she'd made love.

She brushed her fingers over Kastel's smooth cheek. Her hand tingled as if an electric shock shot through her. Then she bent and did something she'd never, ever have dared to do before. It was a definite violation of the contract, but she didn't care. *What's Lysa going to do, fire me?*

Her mouth curved in a slight smile before she pressed it to Kastel's. His lips were warm, but unresponsive under hers. She raised her head and sighed again with regret. He'd kiss her again and again in their dreams, but just once she wished she could experience the real thing. Her dream – one never to be realized. At least not in this life. With a last lingering look she moved to her couch and lay down.

Talia came and settled the dream coronet on Inari's forehead. She'd half expected an acid comment about breaking the rules from her normally opinionated technician, but Talia arranged the circlet and checked the wires in silence. Her green eyes, when they finally met Inari's, contained a sad awareness. "Dream well," she said before she walked away.

Inari closed her eyes, took several deep cleansing breaths and established the link.

* * * * *

Inari stood in a garden. The sky above her was moonless and studded with stars. To her right a wine-red waterfall splashed softly into a pool. Glow lamps, twinkling in the branches of the purple leafed *tula* trees, cast a soft silvery light over the grove.

She was dressed as a Malian dancer, bare-breasted with a knee-length skirt comprised of strands of tiny blue and silver beads. Movement of any kind would reveal the most intimate parts of her body for the viewer's pleasure. On a carpet spread beneath one of the trees, a man lounged amid a pile of silken cushions. She knew by the glint of lust in his deep violet eyes that her dancing wasn't what was uppermost in his mind.

Still, she intended to dance, it was part of the fantasy storyline so he'd have to be patient. A breeze stirred the leaves of the trees and lifted the fall of midnight-blue hair that reached to her waist. She shook back her hair, thrust out one hip, lifted her arms and began to sway to the strains of the pulsing music that drifted through the air.

Crystal bells, threaded through her hair and at her wrists and ankles, chimed as she moved toward him across the cool crimson grass. Her hips rose and fell in time to the music while her milk-white arms and hands wove in the complicated patterns of the Malian dance. The glittering bead skirt parted, revealing the small V of dark blue hair at the juncture of her thighs then swung forward again to hide it. The man's unwavering gaze licked across her skin, as intimate as any touch. Her heart beat faster.

As she danced she studied him covertly from beneath her lashes. Except for the Malian blue hair, milky skin with blue undertones and violet eyes, his features were identical to the man sleeping in the dream chamber. There his body had been clothed and covered. Here it was gloriously open to her inspection.

Like her he was naked above the waist. Her eyes lingered on his broad shoulders and the taut muscles of his chest and stomach. Her lips parted in a sigh of longing and desire. For a moment the garden wavered around her. Startled by her uncharacteristic near loss of control she strengthened the link. *Keep your mind on business. You're not here for your own pleasure* she reminded herself.

Focusing all her attention on the man, she finished the last few steps of the dance and sank gracefully to her knees before him on the brightly woven carpet. Crossing both arms over her chest she inclined her head. From this angle his arousal was very apparent. The corners of her mouth curved in a pleased smile. The dream was well on its way to seducing him.

She raised her head, rested her hands on her thighs and looked directly into his eyes. "Did my dancing please you, lord?"

The man's heated gaze roved over her. Her skin felt scorched by its touch. "It pleased me well, as do you," he said his deep voice rough with desire.

She tipped her head and flicked him a teasing smile. "You have a sweet tongue, lord."

His gaze fastened on her mouth. He set his goblet aside and motioned for her to come closer. "Not as sweet as yours."

Her eyes went to his rampant cock protruding from beneath his short silken kilt then back to his face. He stroked the length of his stiffened rod almost absently. She crawled slowly toward him like a Malian *kesa* stalking its prey.

She knew he expected her to push his short garment aside and use that sweet tongue of hers on his rock-hard shaft, but she had something else in mind first. She straddled him, pressed her damp pussy against his belly, leaned forward and licked one nipple. His sharp inhalation of pleased surprise was followed by a soft groan when she swirled her tongue around the other nipple before drawing it between her teeth. When

she finished playing with his nipples she slid forward, bent and traced his lips with the tip of her tongue before pressing her mouth to his in a long, slow kiss.

He tasted glorious, sweet with a hint of spice like Malian ice wine. His lips parted slightly and she pushed her tongue into his mouth exploring and teasing him with quick forays.

When they parted they were breathing raggedly. "I see I wasn't wrong about that tongue of yours," he managed after a moment.

"It's yours to command, lord. Tell me your pleasure."

His glance slid slowly down her then up to her face again. "Anything you do will please me."

She slipped out of his grasp and knelt beside him. The light from the lamps hanging in the trees cast a silvery glow over his muscular body. She bit back a sigh, ignoring the growing ache between her thighs. *His dream, his fantasy*, she reminded herself, not for the first time.

She kissed a heated path down his stomach to the waistband of the silken kilt. With a deft flick of her fingers she unhooked the jeweled clasp and freed the lower half of his body. His erection was now fully revealed. She took the hardened length of his cock in her hand and stroked him slowly all the way down to the root and back again, relishing the way his jaw tensed around a smothered groan.

Without looking away she reached out for his goblet, lifted it to her lips and took a long swallow. The wine felt like velvet against her tongue. She dipped her fingers into the wine and sucked them dry one by one. She suppressed a smile as she saw his cock jump in anticipation. She bent and delicately nibbled at its deep purple-blue head. Straightening she tilted the cup and poured a thin stream over his hardened appendage then leaned down and slowly licked the wine off his penis. The man stiffened and inhaled sharply as she drew him into her mouth, tasting his male essence mingled with the remnants of the spicy Malian wine.

"Hmmm," she hummed her approval.

Cupping his balls in one hand, she alternately sucked and licked his engorged dick. The man moaned and buried his hands in her hair. Just when she was sure he was about to orgasm, he pulled her up. "Wait!"

Crystal bells sang as she shoved her hair out of her face and sank back on her heels. "Are you not pleased, lord?"

"Very," he said. He caught her hand and pulled her toward him. "But I want to be inside you when I come."

She allowed him to pull her to him until she straddled his stomach. She arched her back. The movement thrust her breasts higher in a blatant invitation for his touch. He cupped her breasts, squeezing them. Drawing her closer, he sucked in one of her large blue nipples, swirling his tongue around it until it became pebble-hard. His mouth moved to the other nipple and he gave it the same attention. Desire pulled at her belly and her pussy throbbed.

She often felt lust in the dreams she designed for her clients, had even, on rare occasions, experienced climaxes. They were usually mild, the sensation distanced by her need to remain focused on maintaining the link. This time was different, more vivid than any dream fantasy she'd ever experienced.

She wiggled down his body until her pussy was poised above the head of his cock then with a slight shifting of her hips she sank down on him and took his length into her slick channel. He groaned as she began to move up and down. He grasped her hips with his hands and thrust upward. Both of them were breathing heavily.

She sat back and widened her thighs opening the hot moist seat of her arousal to his view. His fingers snaked between their bodies to her clit. She threw back her head and moaned at the pressure of his fingers on the sensitive nub. He rubbed two fingers over her clit while continuing to thrust into her. The combined sensations almost drove her mad.

"Do not stop, lord," she panted. Heat coiled in her middle and the muscles of her pussy clamped around him, drawing him in deeper as she came.

As the spasms of her orgasm racked her body, the man on the cushions beneath her, the wine-red waterfall and the star-lit Malian sky blurred then disappeared. For one brief second she thought she saw the softly lit ceiling of the dream chamber. Before her brain could fully process the image, she found herself standing on a beach wrapped in the arms of a man who was kissing her breathless.

* * * * *

Inari yanked herself out of the man's arms. What in the Lords of Cosmos had just happened? Somehow she had lost control of the dream. In all her years as a guide nothing like this had ever occurred. She looked around in bewilderment. Where were they? Three moons in different phases floated above her head in the night sky. A seemingly endless phosphorescent sea stretched out before her.

She caught the tang of salt on the breeze that caressed her skin. In the faint light of the triple moons she saw she was attired in a sheer, sleeveless tunic that ended just above her knees. A belt of tiny seashells surrounded her narrow waist. She held up an arm. Thousands of miniscule pale green scales glimmered softly in the moonlight.

Sucking in another breath of salty air, she fought back a wave of panic. She glanced up at the three moons then out over the glowing aquamarine sea. She knew this place—had read about it in one of her many research sources. She was on Luvia, fourth planet of the Epsilon Delta system. She wrapped her arms around herself and shivered despite the warmth of the night. She hadn't just lost control of the dream. It was more than that. Someone else was controlling it.

She turned and looked at the man standing behind her. Green hair shot with silver brushed his broad shoulders. Like her he wore a sleeveless tunic that bared his muscular arms and legs, a belt of shells similar to hers around his flat waist. The deep V of his tunic revealed a considerable portion of his sleek, muscled chest.

The corners of his mouth quirked upward in a slight smile, but the oval tilted sea-green eyes that met hers were wary. He was the same man from the other dream, the one she'd been weaving, which meant she was still linked to her client, Kastel Fane.

"Incredible view, isn't it?" His voice, deep and sensual sent a ripple of awareness through her.

Ignoring his question, Inari stalked across the pink sand and poked him in the chest. "It's you, isn't it? You're the one doing this."

He regarded her steadily, his expression guarded. "Does it matter?"

"Of course it matters." She swung her arms wide encompassing the scene around them. "I'm not controlling this. And if you aren't either we could become permanently locked in this dream cycle."

The man folded his arms across his broad chest with a thoughtful frown. "According to what I've been told about the process, I didn't think that was possible."

She bit her lip struggling to decide how much she should tell him. Best to be honest. "It's rare, but it has been known to happen."

"And when it does? What happens to the participants?"

Anger made her blunt. "They survive in a vegetative state, until their brains burn out and they die. Of course, they don't realize what's happening. They're happily living their final hours in their dream world. At least that's the theory. No one really knows for sure."

The man she was beginning to think of as Kastel nodded, but despite the seriousness of his expression she detected a glimmer of amusement in his eyes. Before she realized what he was going to do, he caught her in his arms and pulled her to him. "I can think of worse ways to die." He bent and nuzzled the side of her neck.

Caught off guard by his reaction, she didn't resist at first. The heat of his mouth on her skin sent tiny shock waves coursing through her. Struggling to ignore her body's response, she shoved him away, glaring at him with her hands on her hips. "This is no joking matter. Are you in control of this or aren't you?"

The row of dappled dark green spots above his wide-set eyes rose. "What if I am?"

"Then either end this dream and sever the link or relinquish control to me so that I can do it."

"I admit that I'm responsible for our being here, but I have no intention of ending this fantasy."

She gazed at him in amazement. "Lords of Cosmos, why not?"

Kastel gestured with both hands to the sea and the sky. "Look where we are—Luvia, jewel of the Concord of Planets." He glanced down at her, a smile hovering on his full lips. "Have you ever visited Luvia?"

She shook her head. "Only in dreams."

He took a deep breath. "I've only seen vid-pictures. Those images don't do it justice. I know this isn't real, but it's as close to it as either of us may ever get. It's why I brought you here."

Inari listened with only half an ear her eyes fixed on his muscular chest as it rose and fell. More than anything else in the world she wanted to run her hands over those hard, defined muscles. Shocked at the direction of her thoughts, it took a moment for his last comment to register.

"What do you mean it's why you brought me here?"

"I know you love the ocean. Luvia's seas are considered the most beautiful of all the planets in the Concord. I'm only sorry that this is only a dream. I'd much rather take you there in person."

Who was this man who seemed to know her as well as she knew herself? She spun around and stalked down to the sea. A wave of phosphorescent water rushed in to cover her bare feet then retreated again. She jumped at the touch of Kastel's warm hands on her shoulders. His arms came around her waist and he pulled her back against him. She could feel the whole hard length of him pressing into her back. He slowly turned her to face him. His mouth slanted down over hers stopping any protests she might have made.

He deepened the kiss, plundering her mouth with lips and tongue. When he broke off and lifted his head they were both breathing raggedly. He traced his lips down her neck to the small hollow in her throat. Shivers of excitement raced up and down her spine. His mouth quested lower, pressing into the valley between her breasts. Inari's breath caught in the back of her throat.

One hand slid between them to her belt. Before she realized what he was doing he'd opened the clasp and removed it. It landed with a soft thud in the sand by their feet. Slipping his hands inside the opening of her tunic he gently pushed it off her shoulders. It slithered down her body with a silken swish to pool around her ankles. With graceful efficiency he unhooked his belt and shucked off his clothing.

She couldn't help herself. Her gaze skimmed over his lean body to rest on his straining cock. She reluctantly raised her eyes to his. A faint smile curved his lips. He bent and traced a path with his tongue down her throat to her breasts. She moaned as he sucked one glistening green nipple into his mouth.

She knew she should be trying to wrest control from him so that she could sever the link and end the dream. But the sensations assailing every inch of her body made rational thinking impossible. She fought to clear her mind and refocus her concentration, but lost it immediately when his hand cupped her mound and his fingers found the sensitive nub at the apex of her thighs.

"Wait!" She stiffened and tried to pull away.

He loosened his hold on her waist, but kept her close enough that she could still feel the heat of his body. He moved his hand from its intimate caress to stroke her hair back from her face. "It's okay to let go, Inari. You're safe with me."

He stared down at her a surprising tenderness mingled with the lust in his sea-green eyes. This man whoever he was, both thrilled and frightened her at the same time. And for no reason she could name she believed him. Whatever happened she would be safe with him. Later there would be a reckoning, but for now she abandoned herself to him and the dream.

Her arms lifted to twine around his neck and in one smooth motion he swept her up in his arms and walked into the sea. When the water reached his waist he slowly lowered her until her feet rested on the sandy ocean bottom. Luminescent water lapped against them in a sensual massage. His mouth found hers. Their tongues tangled in a silken dance. He tasted like the sea. His lips left hers to sear a path down her neck and shoulders.

He outlined the curve of her small firm breasts and her skin tingled where the sea and his hands touched her. "You're beautiful beyond words."

Inari shook her head. "The real me is nothing like this."

A disbelieving smile curled the corners of his mouth. "You are so wrong, Inari. I can see your true beauty shining through."

A sharp pain stabbed her heart. His words were all part of some scripted scene, but that didn't prevent her from wishing they were true. "No doubt you're blinded by the light of three moons," she said lightly, pulling his head down to hers.

"Not by the moons, by you," he whispered against her mouth. As his lips moved over hers, he caught her nipples between his fingers and teased them into hardened pebbles. One hand strayed from her breast to slide down her stomach and slip between her legs to explore all her pleasure points. She arched her back and moaned, urging him on.

He lifted her, guiding her legs around his waist. Supported by his muscled thighs and the sea she wrapped her arms around his neck and rubbed herself over his erection. Heat flared in the depths of his eyes. He took possession of her mouth in a hard kiss and entered her moist channel in a single thrust. They rocked back and forth, until Inari's body screamed for release.

Each of his thrusts carried her higher until pleasure exploded and swept her away like the incoming tide. As she reached her peak her head fell back. Above her the triple moons shattered into a trail of sparkling colored lights. Caught up in the wave of fierce spasms, she heard Kastel's cry of completion. In that moment he released his control of the dream to her. Everything went black.

Chapter Four

Inari opened her eyes and stared blindly up at the ceiling, her mind still lost in the throes of the dream. She blinked and instantly became aware of her surroundings. She was back in the dream chamber. She turned her head and glanced at the man on the couch next to hers. His chest rose and fell in the slow steady breaths of someone deeply asleep.

Thank the Lords of Cosmos for that! She shoved the silken blanket aside and sat up. Talia's welcome back smile became a frown of surprise when Inari ripped the dream coronet from her head and tossed it aside. She swung her feet over the side of the couch and stood up. "How long was the cycle?"

"Not quite an hour." A look of concern creased Talia's forehead. "What's wrong? You look upset." She left her station and hurried across the room.

Inari waved her away. "Later." She needed to be alone to put her thoughts in order.

Ignoring her friend's hurt expression she bolted for the sanctuary of her chambers. As soon as the door slid closed behind her she headed for the cabinet where she kept several bottles of wine. She needed something stronger than tea. To her dismay her hand shook slightly as she filled the glass. She drained the goblet and filled it again. Holding it in one hand she paced about the room.

She, Inari Rau, the most powerful guide on all of Cereus Prime, *had lost control of a dream!* She gulped down another mouthful of wine. No, it was worse than that. Once she'd realized the situation, she'd relinquished her role as guide with barely a murmur of protest and allowed her client to take over.

Had she completely lost her mind? What would Lysa say when she found out? Inari walked over to her desk and picked up the gold credit chit. Once her employer heard about the night's events, Inari would be lucky to keep her as a friend let alone her new company's first paying customer.

The door chime sounded behind her. Before she could cross the room to slam her hand against the no visitor's button, it slid open. She had a brief glimpse of Talia, who was struggling to cover the open doorway with her body, being lifted out of the way. The man who had lain sleeping a short time ago entered. An angry heat rushed into Inari's cheeks. For twenty-seven years her quarters had been sacrosanct and now, twice in the same day, they'd been invaded by virtual strangers.

Pulling herself up to her full five feet, she marched over to the man. "Get out this instant or I'll call for security." As she tried to brush past him to make good on her threat, he caught her arm.

"Please don't." His tone was firm, but there was a look of pleading on his face.

Talia reappeared in the open doorway, fire in her eyes. The bruise on her forehead stood out against the angry flush on her face. "I'll call them myself if you don't take your hands off Inari."

The man sighed and held both hands up in surrender. "I need to talk to Inari. Alone." He shot a quick look at Talia. "I swear she'll be safe with me. I would never do anything to hurt her."

Talia remained where she was. Inari sighed and moved past him to the door. She squeezed Talia's tense shoulder. "It's okay. I'll be fine. Go home and get some rest. You look exhausted."

Her friend hesitated. "Are you sure this is a good idea?"

"I'll be fine," Inari repeated. As the door shut, she faced the intruder. "What do you mean we need to talk? Who *are* you?"

"My name is Kastel Fane. I..."

"I know your name." She waved an impatient hand. "I meant, why are you so important that Lysa Talcott would take you on as a client, on this of all nights?"

Kastel sighed and raked a hand through his hair. Instead of answering her he moved across the room to the double doors that led to her courtyard. He opened them and stood staring out into the night. "I can see why you like to spend time here, although you'd much prefer to be by the sea."

"That's the second time you mentioned my fondness for the ocean. How do you know so much about me?"

He turned to regard her with a crooked smile. "I read Lysa's files on you."

"Lysa's files!" Inari's eyes widened with comprehension. "You're my replacement, aren't you?" Kastel nodded. "Why this charade? Why didn't she bring you to meet me?"

He shifted his feet and glanced away. "It was a test of sorts."

She stiffened. "A test!"

Kastel raised his head. "Not of you. The test was to see if I was a worthy replacement. Your psi abilities are legendary. If I could seize control and alter the dream scenario, Lysa would know for sure that she'd made the right decision in contracting me to take your place."

"Well, it appears Lysa won't be disappointed." Bitterness tinged her voice. "You took over with barely a fight from me." She stalked past him into the courtyard. Arms crossed around her body she stared up at the twin moons. They had moved lower in the sky and would soon set.

Kastel came up behind her and put his hands on her shoulders. "There's more to all this than testing me." His lithe body pressed lightly against hers.

"What else is there?" she asked trying to ignore the unexpected flare of sensual awareness that his presence awoke in her.

"You, Inari," Kastel said as he bent and pressed his lips to the side of her neck. "I picked Luvia to please you."

The pulse in her throat leaped and warmth kindled in her belly. "What did pleasing me have to do with it?"

He turned her to face him. "It was a gift of sorts."

Inari's eyes widened. "A gift! From whom? I don't understand."

"From Lysa and the other guides at the Celestial Crystal." He smiled down at her. "I'm not sure you appreciate how much your friends love you."

She shook her head. "I still don't understand."

"You've spent your life giving pleasure to others—indulging them in their wildest fantasies. Tonight was your turn. My task was to fulfill your dreams—to give you a night of pleasure to carry with you for years to come." He stroked her cheek. "It was a great honor to have been chosen. I will carry the memory of it with me as well."

She stared into his eyes. Blue. His eyes were blue, the same vivid shade Maren Janco always requested in his fantasies. In Kastel's case the color was genuine. She lost herself for a moment in their cerulean depths. "I...I'm..." she struggled to marshal her thoughts.

"Speechless with wonder?" Kastel supplied with a smile.

She laughed. "Yes, I suppose that fits." Her shoulders lifted in a helpless shrug. "It's just that I..." Her voice trailed away again.

Kastel cupped her face between his hands. "Why do you have so much trouble believing your friends care about you? I've only just met you and already I'm half under your spell."

Inari's lips parted in surprise. Hot tears burned the back of her eyelids. She shook her head. "You shouldn't say things like that."

He caught her hand and brought it to his mouth. "Why not?" He turned her hand over and kissed the palm. "You're an extraordinary woman, Inari."

She drew her hand away and stepped back. "You're confusing me with the fantasy woman in the dream." She gestured to herself. "And in case you haven't noticed, I'm at least ten years older than you."

His blue gaze never wavered. "I'm aware of that, but age has nothing to do with it. I've touched your mind and soul in the dream. Inside and out, you're one very attractive woman."

Sorrow and regret for what might have been stabbed at Inari. She raised herself on tiptoe and laid her hand against his cheek. "We had our dream, Kastel. I will treasure it forever. But it's all there can be between us."

"Where is that written?" His mouth set in a stubborn line. He pulled her into his arms. "Dreams are no substitute for reality."

Inari gave a short laugh. "You know you sound like a thrall?"

His mouth curled in a rueful grin. "I do, don't I?" He ran his hands up and down her spine. "I'm not a thrall, Inari. I'm not even sure that would be possible since I'm a guide. You've had other lovers, haven't you?"

She looked away startled by the bluntness of his question. "Several over the years," she admitted.

He tipped her face up to his. "When was the last time you made love?"

A hot flush crept up her neck to her cheeks. "That's a bit impertinent."

Kastel's lips twitched at her chiding tone. Leaning down, he brushed his lips over her forehead and down her cheek, murmuring next to her ear, "Answer the question. How long?"

She bit her lip then shook her head. "I don't remember."

That's what I thought." He caught her chin between his long, lean fingers and lifted her face to his. "We have all night, Inari. When the sun rises let's have more than a dream to carry with us into the day."

Inari tried to pull her head back. "I don't..." His fingers on her lips cut off her protest.

"You know I'll never hurt you. You'll always be safe with me." He swung her up in his arms and carried her inside.

She had a million sensible reasons for why making love with Kastel would be a foolish mistake, but before she could respond he took her mouth in a slow, deep kiss that streaked through her to the tips of her toes. She forgot all of them.

* * * * *

A tingling excitement coiled in Inari's stomach as Kastel's mouth continued to plunder hers. He set her on her feet without breaking their close embrace. Through the thin fabric of his silk pants his aroused cock pressed against her stomach. She slipped her hands inside his loose shirt, around his waist and ran them up and down the muscles of his back, almost groaning aloud with pleasure at that simple touch. The feel of his warm skin beneath her palms was exhilarating. It had been so long since her last genuine sexual encounter that she'd nearly forgotten how wonderful human contact could be.

She rubbed her breasts, swollen and achy with need, against his chest. Her nipples pebbled at the friction of cloth. She made a soft sound of disappointment when Kastel moved back a step. "I'm not going anywhere," he said with a slight smile. "I'm just going to get more comfortable."

He grabbed the bottom edges of his shirt and pulled it over his head. His hands moved to the waistband of his pants and he stripped them off. Inari's eyes widened with unabashed admiration at his muscular body. Just looking at him made her wet. The ache in her breasts moved between her thighs.

"Your turn," Kastel said, his blue eyes smoldering.

Flushing, Inari bit her lip and looked down. Being naked was no hardship for him. He was young and fit. Uncomfortably aware of all the flaws of her aging body, she turned her back and swiftly shed her robe. Unable to face his intimate gaze, she stood frozen.

She jumped when his warm hands settled on her shoulders. He turned her to face him. Overcome by a wave of shyness, she tried to cover herself with her hands. He caught them between his. "Don't." His eyes traveled slowly down her body then up again. A heated smile curled the corners of his mouth. "There's no need for you to hide yourself. I told you before, Inari, you're a very attractive woman."

She laughed, fighting back a rush of tears. "Not bad for a middle-aged woman, you mean."

Kastel shook his head. "Lords of Cosmos, what does it take to convince you that you are desirable just as you are?" He pulled her into his arms and pressed soft kisses to her eyes, her cheeks and her lips. He lifted his head and looked down at her, his face twisted in a scowl. "And don't say a word about there being two moons to distort my vision instead of three this time. My eyesight is just fine, thank you."

Inari's choking laughter was cut off as he took possession her mouth. His tongue slid between her lips, exploring the moist interior with a thoroughness that left her breathless and weak.

His lips never leaving hers he guided her backward until the bed pressed the back of her knees. He gently guided her down to the edge then knelt in front of her and pushed her thighs apart. His hot gaze raked the damp folds of her slit. "Lie back," he ordered his voice rough with passion.

Inari obeyed. Kastel grasped her hips and pulled her to the edge of the bed. She was glad she was lying down. In this position the slight bulge in her stomach flattened out. All her inhibitions were forgotten as his tongue found and circled the head of her clit. He alternately sucked and licked it until she was trembling with need. She wound her fingers in his hair and pressed her mound against his mouth pleading wordlessly for relief. She almost came off the bed when he slipped two fingers into her hot slick channel and began to move them in and out while his tongue still gave its full attention to her swollen nub. Her muscles tensed and then released in a series of intense spasms. She cried out as the ripples of pleasure carried her away.

For a long moment she lay back floating in the aftermath of her orgasm. Kastel's mouth pressing a string of hot kisses on the inside of her thighs brought her back to the present. Sighing deeply she pushed herself up on her elbows. Feeling her movement he straightened and stood up. His lips lifted in a sly grin as his gaze slid over her limp body.

"Much better than a dream," she admitted to the unspoken question in his eyes.

He reached down and pulled her to her feet. "That's only the beginning." His mouth took hers in a hard kiss. She caught a tang of her own feminine musk on his lips.

The taste was exotic and exciting. She rubbed the wet swollen lips of her pussy against his erection, trying to ease the achy need coiling deep inside her again.

His mouth left hers and traveled lower. He traced circles around one nipple before sucking it into the wet heat of his mouth. He tweaked the other between thumb and forefinger into a hardened nub. Her fingers dug into his back and she moaned with unfeigned desire.

Reining in her body's demands, no easy feat when Kastel's every touch drove her wild, she pulled back. "I saw how you admired my courtyard earlier," she said breathlessly. "I think I know another place you may like even more."

Curiosity lit his eyes as she pulled him across the room. The beaded curtain jangled melodiously as she swept it aside and led him into the bath chamber. She smiled as his eyes widened with pleasure as he took in the bright mosaic tiles on the walls, the plush carpeting and the circular bathing pool beneath the crystal domed ceiling.

Inari touched a control that warmed the water in the pool, setting it to gently swirling. Coming back to his side she ran her hand down his arm. "What do you think?"

His eyes lingered on the moving water then moved to hers. "I think there are lots of interesting things two people could do in that pool."

"Really?" She studied it for a second before glancing up at him. "Perhaps you should demonstrate."

His lips pulled into a sensuous smile. "Perhaps I should." He kissed her hard then swept her up in his arms. He carried her to the pool and stepped down into the swirling water. Warm mist rose around them. Dipping his head he nibbled at Inari's earlobe. Despite the heat in the room her skin rose in bumps of excitement.

Holding her to his chest with one arm he eased her legs into the pool. They stood in the water their arms wrapped around each other's waist, studying each other in the soft light emanating from lamps inset along the top of the tiles.

Inari reached up and smoothed damp strands of hair away from Kastel's face. "I believe you were going to show me something of interest?"

He coiled his hands in her hair, lightly massaging her scalp. "Was I? Looking at you made me forget everything."

Inari's heart leaped in response to the tender expression in his eyes. If only she was younger or he was older, their night of passion might lead to something more. *Don't even think about it*, she told herself. *Enjoy the moment. It's all the two of us can ever have.*

As if sensing her thoughts had drifted, Kastel's hands moved from her hair to her shoulders. "Is something wrong?"

"Not at all." She smiled up at him, making circles on his chest with the tips of her fingers. "Surely you haven't forgotten *everything*?"

His fingers brushed down her neck and trailed across the delicate line of her collarbone. "With a little incentive I'm sure I can recall most of it."

She slipped one hand between them, grasped his cock and stroked the hard, long length of it. "Is this the sort of incentive you were thinking of?" She made no effort to hide her delight at the rough sound he made deep in his throat.

He palmed her breast and gently stroked her nipple. "It'll do."

Familiar heat coiled in her belly and she melted closer, wanting to press every inch of his hard, muscled body to hers. As he continued to fondle her breast, he lowered his head and kissed her. His mouth moved over hers in a long, slow teasing dance that made her heart pump faster and the blood rush like lightning through her veins.

He turned her around then sank onto the ledge running around the inside of the pool, pulling her down to straddle his lap. His erection slid between the folds of her ass cheeks. Reaching back he grabbed a turquoise crystal jar from a mosaic tray by the edge of the tub, removed the stopper and poured a dollop of scented oil into his palm. He replaced the container, rubbed his hands together and began to massage her shoulders and arms.

Inari sighed and closed her eyes in sheer bliss as he worked his way down her spine. Muscles she hadn't noticed were tight relaxed under the ministrations of his strong lean fingers. Her eyes flew open when his hands swooped around and cupped her breasts. Fingers slick with oil kneaded them while he rolled the pads of his thumbs over her nipples. The warm water swirling over her puckered nipples added to her arousal.

His lips trailed over her cheek down to the soft curve where her neck met her shoulder. His tongue flicked out and he lapped up a drop of water clinging to her skin. Nibbling at her shoulder, he continued to ravage her swollen breasts with one hand while the other dipped lower to play in the curls between her legs. Separating her folds he found her clit, rubbing it gently with two fingers.

Inari moaned and spread her thighs wider for his exploring touch. Stroking her swollen bud with one hand, he slid the other between her legs and slipped his middle finger into her. She squirmed on his lap, seeking deeper contact. Her ass rubbing over his erection made him groan. "Too much of that," he murmured into her ear, "and I'll be finished before we begin."

Inari turned her head and sent him a smoldering smile over her shoulder. He bent, his mouth slanting across hers in a hot, demanding kiss. His hands strayed to her hips and he lifted her slightly, positioning her slit over the head of his engorged cock. Then he thrust upward, burying himself in her hot channel. As his hand returned to fondle her clit, the other remained on her hip to support her as she rode him.

Hands on his thighs for balance, she pushed herself up and down faster and faster, drawing his full length deep inside her. Blazing tendrils of desire and excitement rushed through her centering between her legs. She arched her back, rubbing her clit against his hand with each pass.

"Find your pleasure, Dream Lady, and bring me to mine," Kastel groaned as he plunged deeper and twirled his fingers over her swollen clit. Pleasure peaked then

exploded. Her body convulsed in a series of hot, sweet spasms. The sensations were so intense that Inari cried out. As her vaginal muscles clamped down on Kastel's cock his body grew taut beneath her. He groaned against her neck and came with such force she could feel his muscles jerk and shiver.

Totally limp and sated, Inari collapsed back against him with her head on his shoulder. Neither of them spoke for a long moment, the sound of their heavy breathing the sole counterpoint to the soft rush of the water swirling around them. Still breathing heavily Kastel leaned forward and nuzzled the back of her neck. "Much better than dreaming?"

Kastel was right. Their lovemaking had been more intense and more physically satisfying than any dream she'd ever woven. But another realization trickled into her mind as the pounding of her heart slowed and the waves of pleasure faded into memory. Reality carried with it a bitter price that no dream ever demanded—longing and regret.

Ignoring the ache in her heart, Inari twisted in his lap to face him. Curling her fingers in the damp waves of his hair she pulled his head down to her. "Oh, yes," she agreed as their lips met, "much, much better."

* * * * *

After donning her green silk dressing gown, Inari retrieved a bottle of her best red wine and poured two glasses. She handed one to Kastel, who lay at ease on her bed. He drank his wine, his eyes following her as she moved about the room lighting candles. When she finished, she came and curled up next to him. Taking a sip of her wine, she smiled at him over the rim of her glass. "You have an unfair advantage, Kastel. You seem to know everything about me, but I know almost nothing about you."

He settled a pillow behind his head and leaned back. "What would you like to know?"

She dipped a finger in her wine and ran it around the rim of her glass as she contemplated the question. "Everything—where were you born, when did you first become a guide, which Dream Palace you worked in before you came here."

"It's not much of a story," he said with a twitch of his lips. "You'll be snoring in minutes."

Inari arched her brows. "I never snore."

Laughter glinted in his blue eyes. "I'll keep that in mind for later."

Inari winced inwardly at his choice of words. There could be no later for them. Repressing a sigh, she plastered a bright smile on her lips. "I can tell by your accent you weren't reared in Gemmax City."

"I was born in Dravig Province." He cocked a brow. "Ever hear of it?"

She frowned trying to remember her geography. "It's on the edge of the western continent. Mostly agricultural if I remember correctly." He nodded. She looked down at

her wine trying to gather the courage to ask the question that had been hovering in the back of her mind all night.

Almost as if he'd read her mind, Kastel reached out and lifted her chin. "I turned thirty last month."

Inari's eyes widened. Only eleven years separated them instead of the fifteen she'd originally assumed. It might as well have been fifty. *No matter how you do the math you're much too old for him.* Hiding her disappointment, she sipped her wine and moved on. "So how long have you been a guide?"

"Until tonight I've never even visited a dream dome." His free hand swept out in an all encompassing gesture. "This is all new to me."

She jerked upright almost spilling her wine. "You're not from one of the other palaces! Then how did you meet Lysa Talcott?"

"Through my doctor," he said, reaching out to steady her hand.

"Your doctor!" Inari jerked her arm back and scrambled to her knees. The abrupt movement sent wine sloshing over the edge of her glass. "Is there some reason you don't want to tell me the truth?" she demanded, ignoring the red liquid dripping off her hand onto her pale green sheets.

Kastel's eyebrows drew together. "I'm telling you the truth." He took her glass and placed it beside his on the low table next to the bed. The corners of his mouth tilted in a devilish smile. "You know, on some planets wasting a fine wine is a spanking offense." Catching her hand, he brought it to his lips and licked drops of wine away.

Inari glowered at him, ignoring the currents of excitement that raced up and down her nerve endings as his silken tongue traced a path over her palm to lap up the last trickle of liquid. "Be serious."

Her dark frown didn't seem to faze him. He sucked a final crimson drop off the tip of her little finger before responding. "I am being serious. And I am telling you the truth. My doctor introduced me to Lysa Talcott."

She shook her head. "I don't understand."

Kastel pulled her down to sprawl across his broad chest. "Before Lysa offered me a contract, I was an agro-engineer in Okinar, the capital city of Dravig Province. I owned Fane Agrotech, a small, but up-and-coming company." His voice trailed away, his gaze on the wall behind her, obviously lost in an old memory.

"And," she prompted gently.

His expression cleared, but not before she saw a flash of sorrow in the depths of his blue eyes. "And," he continued with a slight shrug, "there was an accident with a piece of equipment. I suffered severe head trauma and was in a coma for nearly a year." He touched his head. "Still have the scar to prove it."

She brushed a thick lock of hair off his forehead. A thin white line ran disappeared into his hair above his left temple. "What does your injury have to do with you

becoming a guide?" Her eyes widened as a possible answer came to mind. "You're a latent talent?"

He nodded. "The trauma affected my brain, switched something on, even the doctors aren't sure. When I woke up they ran a series of tests to determine if there was any residual brain damage."

"One of which was the standard psi test," she guessed.

His mouth curved in a lopsided smile. "Imagine my surprise when they discovered I was dreamer."

"An exceptional one, if Lysa chose you to replace me."

Kastel pulled her closer and kissed her. "No one can replace you."

She made a face. "I know I'm a legend."

His smile faded. "Don't mock me. I've read all of Lysa's files and talked to some of the other guides here. You are an extraordinary woman. One I'd like to get to know better."

Something she wasn't going to allow. Beyond the differences in their ages, Kastel needed to build his own reputation as a guide. He didn't need to compete with the memory of a legend, especially not one who had been his lover, however briefly.

The double moons had set and the candles she had lit around the room were burning low. The sun would soon rise and their night of near perfect bliss would dissipate as quickly as a dream.

Pushing her sorrow aside, she straddled him, pressing her mound against his half-erect cock. After all those years of servicing others, she deserved to indulge herself, even if for only one night. She moved slowly up and down feeling him swell and harden. He tangled his fingers in her hair and pulled her head down, his lips fastening to hers. Lost in the sensations cascading through her body, Inari barely had time to emit a startled yelp when a pair of rough hands fastened about her upper arms and threw her onto the floor.

As she struggled to her knees she saw Kastel half rise from the bed. A flash of blue light hit him in the chest. He uttered a low cry as his body contorted with pain. Then he collapsed, one arm dangling limply over the side of the bed. She called his name and lurched to her feet. A hand closed around her upper arm and spun her around. Her eyes widened with recognition. Maren Janco!

Bloodshot brown eyes narrowed in rage, his fingers dug into her skin with bruising force. In his other hand he held a force wand. "Lying bitch. You swore there was no one else."

"There wasn't. There isn't," she gasped. "You don't understand."

He shook her again as if he hadn't heard a word she'd spoken. Without warning he thrust the wand to her side and pressed the button. She screamed. Her spine arched like a bow as white-hot lightning raced along every nerve pathway in her body. The last

words she could make any sense of before she fainted with the pain were, "I warned you, dreamer. If I can't have you no one will."

Chapter Five

Inari opened her eyes to a throbbing headache, the common aftereffect of having been stunned by a force weapon. Gritting her teeth, she forced her eyes open a crack. She was still in her quarters she realized with a sense of relief. Turning her head slightly she saw that Kastel still lay in the same position she had last seen him. He appeared to be unconscious. When Maren Janco caught her face and turned it toward him she found herself wishing she was as fortunate. Hiding in the dark was preferable to having to deal with a crazed thrall.

"I know you're awake." Janco pinched her jaw and jerked her head. The pounding in her head intensified and a low moan escaped between her clenched teeth. He looked pleased by her reaction. *Bastard!* If she'd been able to summon the strength she'd have spat in his face.

"What are you going to do with us?" she managed to croak.

Janco seated himself on the side of her bed. He ran the outside of his hand down her neck to the opening of her robe, skimming along the half-exposed curve of her breast, a considering look on his face. Inari repressed a shudder and tried to move away then thought better of it. Perhaps using a calm friendly approach would reach him on some level. She spoke softly, deliberately using his first name. "What's this all about, Maren? You've been my client for years. I've never known you to be cruel, not even in your dreams."

Her gentle words had no effect. His mouth twisted with undisguised anger. "Maybe I just got tired of controlling, deceiving cunts ordering me around."

Inari winced at his crude remark. Struggling to maintain her composure, she tried again. "I've never controlled or deceived you, Maren. All I've striven to do was give you your deepest desires, even if only in your dreams."

His lips curled in a thin smile. He prodded Kastel's unmoving body with the end of the stun wand. "When I offered to make you my private guide, you swore there was no one else. What do you call him?"

"He's not a competitor for my services," she said with a trace of exasperation. "He's my lover."

Janco flicked a quick glance at Kastel then his gaze swung back to her. He tilted his head studying her, a dull gleam lighting his brown eyes. "It appears that there are fringe benefits to having my own guide that I've never considered. Once we're settled, I'll be sure to take explore them."

Inari felt the color drain from her face. Exactly what was Janco planning? "Settled?"

"I've arranged new quarters for you, Inari, someplace quiet and secluded where you'll be comfortable. There's even a newly installed dream chamber. I have to keep my guide happy." He stroked her cheek with the back of his hand.

Her skin crawled at his touch. She wiggled backward, pressing herself against the length of Kastel's body for comfort. "What you're proposing is slavery. You'll never get away with it."

"Oh, but I think I will. You can come with me willingly or..." He held up the force wand and jerked his chin toward Kastel. "I can move this up a notch to emit a lethal shock." He cocked a brow. "Your choice."

Fear for Kastel's safety should have made her compliant, instead a surge of anger rushed over her. Her lips thinned and she regarded Janco through narrowed eyes. She was Inari Rau. How dare Maren Janco ruin the last night of her perfect career as the city's premier guide? The warmth of Kastel's hip and thigh where they touched hers added to her rage. How dare Janco intrude on the few, precious remaining hours she had with the man warming her bed? After a lifetime spent fulfilling everyone else's fantasies, was it too much to ask for one night to indulge one of hers – undisturbed?

When Janco grasped her arm to pull her off the bed, she came bounding up. When the full weight of her body came crashing into his, he stumbled back and lost his grip on her arm. Inari gave him no time to recover. She threw herself at him, clawing and kicking. The edge of her flailing hand knocked the stun wand from Janco's hand and sent it skittering across the floor.

Janco drew himself up, his features flushed purple with rage at her unexpected defiance. When Inari came at him again, he shoved her violently back onto the bed. She landed hard, sprawled across Kastel's limp body. Janco slapped away her flailing hands, grabbed her by the neck and shook her so hard her head snapped back. Dark spots danced before her eyes. Struggling to break his hold, her mind reached for the familiar pattern of Janco's mental energy. The walls and ceiling surrounding them shredded like old paper. She experienced a moment of nausea and dizziness and a brief sensation of falling. The next thing she knew she and Janco were facing each other beneath a moonless sky their feet sunk in crimson Malian grass.

The same thing had happened earlier that day Inari realized, remembering the scene in her bath chamber. Only then they had been standing on a beach. Was this some sort of hallucination brought on by a lack of oxygen to her brain? She didn't think so. Somehow, without the benefit of the sleep drugs and coronet she had managed to link with Janco. Was that even possible?

What did it matter? It *had* happened and at the moment keeping Janco here and off balance might be hers and Kastel's only salvation. Focusing all her concentration she fought to strengthen the mental bond between her and Janco. The hazy edges of the scene around them hardened into crystal clarity. The link had been forged. Now all she needed to do was keep him dreaming until Kastel regained consciousness and called for help.

Praying she could hold the link that long, Inari smiled at the man across from her. "Welcome to Malia."

* * * * *

Janco gazed about his brown eyes filled with confusion. "Where? What?"

"Everything is fine, Maren." Inari spoke in soothing tones. She had changed her image to that of his wife hoping the familiar sight would reassure him as well as trigger the familiar dream response. She moved closer and trailed her fingers down his beefy arm. "Where have you been? I've missed you."

Janco gazed at her through narrowed eyes. "What are you doing here, Sela?"

She pouted and looked up at him from beneath her lashes. "You don't seem happy to see me."

Without giving him a chance to answer, Inari took his hand and led him deeper into the grove toward the mountain of fat cushions on the plush carpet beneath the purple *tula* trees. For her plan to work, Janco needed to be kept off balance as much as possible. Her beaded skirt parted as she knelt revealing the blue V of hair above her slit as she tugged him down to the carpet. She spread her knees slightly giving him a better view of her entrance as he sprawled beside her.

Janco's eyes riveted on her pussy for a moment and he licked his lips before looking up to meet her eyes. "Nice show. Do you flaunt yourself to everyone?"

She widened her eyes. "Only for you, darling. You know that."

He caught her wrist in a punishing grip. "Lying bitch. You'll spread for anyone. Anyone with money if you think it will make Kelgor and Janco Intergalactic Shipping a profit." He pushed her down on the pillows and jammed his fingers into her pussy.

Perhaps choosing his wife as the dream avatar hadn't been a wise idea after all, Inari thought. She kept the smile plastered to her lips wondering how long she could keep the dream scenario going. A dull headache was starting behind her eyes and it was becoming increasingly difficult to concentrate.

Janco's lips curled in a sneer. "I can see I've been too easy on you. I should have used you like the pleasure whore you really are." Before Inari guessed his full intention he drew back his hand and slapped her. The pain of his blow was buffered by the dream link, but surprise at the unexpectedness of his action shook her focus. The Malian garden faded to gray.

As she struggled to reestablish the clarity of the scene, he dug his fingers into her thighs, forcing them apart so he could thrust his engorged cock into her. Pain throbbed in her temples as she fought to hold the link.

"*Tsk, tsk.* That's no way to treat a lady, even if she is your wife," a familiar baritone voice said.

Janco stiffened and looked up. Kastel stood over them, a pleasant smile curving his lips. Inari closed her eyes with a mental groan. Great! Now she was hallucinating. She

half opened one eye. Kastel's image remained clear and steady. His appearance in her dream scenario shouldn't have been possible. On the other hand, this whole link was supposed to be impossible. *Figure it out later*, she told herself. Kastel had found some way to enter the dream and regardless of how he'd accomplished it, she was damn glad to see him.

Ignoring her completely, Kastel's lips curled in a knowing smile as he met Janco's startled glance. Dropping to his knees, he placed his hand on the other man's leg. "Fess up, Janco, you don't just want to dominate, Sela, you want every man she sees to put her in her place." He raked Inari up and down with a scornful look. "Let me help you give this frigid bitch what she really needs."

Even though this was only a dream, Inari couldn't help the rush of nausea that filled her. She flicked a puzzled glance at him. What was he doing? His expression of cool disdain didn't change, but when her eyes met his, she saw a reassuring glint in their cerulean depths. She didn't know what he had in mind, but whatever it was she'd play along. He'd sworn to never hurt her and she believed him.

Kastel took her arm and pulled her up to her knees. He directed a slight grin at Janco. "I think this will please you." After his initial surprise, Janco seemed to have accepted Kastel's presence. And if the condition of Janco's aroused dick was any indication, he was also excited by Kastel's proposition.

"You do want to please Maren, don't you, Sela?" Kastel asked in a husky voice.

Inari's head bobbed up and down in agreement. "Yes, oh, yes. I'd do anything to please my husband." She ran her tongue over her full lips and flicked Maren a smoldering smile.

Janco's flat brown eyes brightened and his cock twitched with obvious excitement. He stroked himself as he exchanged looks with Kastel. "Let's show this bitch who's in charge."

Kastel's lips pulled back in a grin. "Let's do." His fingers tightened on Inari's arm as he guided her into a position astride Maren's thighs. Pushing her head down toward Janco's aroused cock he lifted her ass up. He knelt behind her and rubbed his own erection over her soft flesh. "She'll suck you with that sweet, hot mouth while I take that tight little pussy. We'll show this cold bitch wife of yours what it feels like to have real men fuck her front and back. By the time we finish she won't be able to walk straight."

Inari inwardly winced at the crude words falling from Kastel's tongue. Only the gentle caress on her hip kept her in place. *It's not real*, she told herself. When this was all over, she promised herself a nice hot bath.

With Kastel's hands urging her from behind, she leaned down and took Janco's cock into her mouth as Kastel reached between her thighs and cupped her mound. Gently insinuating his fingers between her folds he rubbed them over her clit. Despite her distaste at having to service Janco, she couldn't ignore the little ripples of excitement Kastel's touch elicited from her. He leaned closer, his hair tickling her

shoulder. She felt his warm breath on the back of her neck. "Hold on a little longer, Inari," he murmured in her ear.

Her mouth occupied with pleasuring Janco's cock, Inari couldn't respond. Ignoring the pain stabbing at her head like hot knives, she strained to hold the dream intact. Even with Kastel's mental support she could sense the link beginning to weaken. *Lords of Cosmos help us*, she prayed. To her everlasting surprise they seemed to be listening. As Janco's body stiffened and she felt the first pulsing waves of his orgasm, a final, searing bolt of pain pierced her head and the dream fractured. She tumbled into reality.

* * * * *

Inari opened her eyes to see Talia bending over her, her expression tight with concern. The technician's brow cleared and she straightened with a sigh. "Good, you're back."

Inari managed to lift her hand in response. "Kastel?" She started to sit up but fell back, smothering a cry at the burst of pain in her head.

Talia gently pressed her against the pillows. "Not awake yet, but he's fine."

As Inari's mind cleared a bolt of panic struck her. Heart pounding, she clutched Talia's arm dragging her closer. "What about Janco?"

Talia jerked her chin toward the other side of the room. Over her shoulder Inari could see Janco sitting on a chair, wrists shackled, in the custody of two grim-faced security guards. His face was ashen and his eyes glazed and confused. How much did he remember? If Maren began to talk about his odd dream, it could lead to awkward questions. With luck, she decided, after studying his dazed expression a moment longer, his comments would be dismissed as the ramblings of a mentally ill thrall.

She still wasn't sure how she'd initiated a waking dream-state or how Kastel had managed to link himself into it, but together they had foiled Janco's mad scheme to kidnap her. Her temples throbbed and she bit back a groan, swallowing hard as a wave of nausea rolled over her.

"Headache?" Talia asked.

"Worst one ever," she admitted.

"I'm not surprised. Considering the situation, I thought you might need these." Talia picked up a glass of water from the bedside table and shook two small blue tablets from a glass vial into her hand.

Considering the situation! Inari rolled the words and their implication around in her mind. How much had Talia figured out? Her friend was an experienced dream technician. Even without the benefit of the chamber and its equipment, she recognized a dream state when she saw one.

With Talia supporting her neck she popped the pills into her mouth and took a swallow of water to wash them down. Kastel stirred beside her. From his muffled groan she guessed he was nursing a similar headache. As she rolled onto her side, she noticed

that the stab of pain wasn't quite as intense as before. The drugs were beginning to kick in.

Kastel's face looked pale and haggard, the residual effects from taking a full charge from the stun wand. As she watched his sleep-clouded eyes cleared. "How do you feel?"

He grimaced and rubbed his head. "Like I was hit in the head by that agro-tractor all over again." He reached out and stroked her cheek. "How about you?"

Her skin tingled pleasantly at the slight caress, reminding her of the feel of his hands on other more intimate areas of her body. "Better now." She motioned to Talia who leaned forward, pills and glass in hand. "These will help." Kastel swallowed the painkillers, handed the glass back to Talia and sank back with a muffled groan. Inari reached up and brushed tangled hair off his forehead. "I'm not exactly sure how you linked with me, but if it weren't for you I don't know what would have happened. Thank you."

Kastel caught her hand and kissed her fingers. "My pleasure." His expression darkened as his gaze swept the room and settled on Janco. "He's lucky the guards got to him first. If I'd gotten my fingers around his throat, his dreaming days would be over," he added in a voice thick with barely repressed rage.

"After this, his days of dreaming at the Celestial Crystal, or any other dream palace, are over for good," Talia said as she set the glass down. "You'll have to settle for that."

Kastel's jaw slowly relaxed. "It'll have to do."

He pushed himself up to a sitting position then pulled Inari up beside him. Breathing heavily, his lips tight with pain, he stood up. As Inari watched him straighten his loose silk pants and short robe, she became aware of just how bad she must look. She quickly ran her fingers through her tousled hair, rearranged her robe and retied it firmly at her waist. Kastel lowered himself onto the bed next to her. Ignoring Talia's knowing look, Inari moved closer, pressing her shoulder to his. Still shaken by what had happened she found his solid presence comforting.

Talia rose. "Both of you stay put. I have to make a call." With a stern look to be sure they were obeying her, she hurried over to the vid-phone. After a brief conversation, she returned and resumed her seat with a tired sigh. "Lysa will be here soon. She's going to have a million questions."

"I have almost as many." Inari edged higher on the bed. "For starters, what are you doing here? I thought I sent you home."

Talia pursed her lips and shot Kastel with a steely glance. "Despite Mr. Fane's assurances, I decided to stay to keep an eye on you."

Kastel's mouth quirked upward in amusement at her confession.

Inari took Talia's hand and gave it a quick squeeze. "Well, it's a good thing you did or we would have been in deep trouble."

Talia made a face. "I would have been of more help if I hadn't fallen asleep. The sound of your door opening awakened me in time to see the outline of a man in the doorway before it slid shut. I knew from the shape of the silhouette that it was Janco. I called security and then let myself in."

"I almost fainted when I came in and saw the three of you in a pile in the middle of the bed. My first thought was that Janco had killed the two of you and then himself." She leaned toward them and lowered her voice. "When I saw the way your eyes were moving under your lids, I realized you were dreaming."

Kastel's gaze swung to Janco and his guards. He nodded toward the two men who stood with their backs to the bed, hands clasped behind them. "What do they think happened here?" he asked, his voice pitched low so that only the women could hear him.

"Janco was just waking up when they arrived. They'd been informed about the problem earlier today and took him into custody before he had a chance to realize what was happening." Talia gestured to the stun wand carefully laid out on a blue towel in the middle of Inari's table. "They think he attacked the two of you and somehow in the ensuing struggle you all got hit by an energy blast that knocked everyone unconscious. I thought it was an excellent explanation. Fortunately they agreed with me."

Kastel regarded her, an approving light in his blue eyes. "Clever girl."

Talia shot him a coy smile. "Thank you for noticing," then added in a low voice. "You do know that forming a link without the dream drugs or coronets isn't supposed to be possible."

The corners of Inari's mouth curled in a wry smile. "Not as impossible as everyone thinks."

In reality, she was nearly as amazed as her friend was. Psi scientists had long ago abandoned experiments linking two or more guides with a dream subject. Even with the use of drugs and coronets, it had proven impossible to synchronize multiple brain waves long enough to create and sustain a cohesive dream. Attempting such a link with subjects who were awake didn't even warrant serious investigation. And yet that appeared to be exactly what she'd done. But not alone, she realized. She had a vague memory of a surge of mental energy right before Kastel appeared in the dream with her and Janco.

She glanced at Kastel. Did they share some physical and psychic bond unknown to the psi scientists? A shiver of excitement fluttered her stomach at the idea. Part of her wanted to explore that possibility. The more cautious side of her told her to forget it. After today they would never see each other again. Besides, neither of them wanted to end up as permanent research subjects if anyone discovered their new psi ability.

Inari sent the technician a pleading look. Tears thickened her voice as she whispered, "Please don't tell Lysa that Kastel and I forged a link merely by touching. If you do, there will be endless tests. You know the corporations and the government are always interested in any new psi talents."

Talia sat silent a moment then shrugged. "No problem. You deserve to enjoy your retirement in peace. And..." She sent Kastel a devastating smile. "I have a new guide to keep happy."

The door chimed and they all jumped. Their gazes met in silent agreement, and then Inari motioned to Talia to go answer it. "Let's get this over with."

Chapter Six

The Celestial Crystal ranked as the most popular and sought-after pleasure dome for both wealthy residents and visitors to Cereus Prime. Despite its position, Inari knew that pleasure seekers were notoriously fickle. The smallest events could topple the dream palace from its lofty perch. Continually worried about such an occurrence, Lysa Talcott fiercely protected the dome's status and reputation. As the door slid open and she stepped into the room, it was clear from the frown lines puckering her usually smooth brow that she was not pleased.

She greeted Talia with a brisk nod, strode over to Maren Janco and stared down at him, her fingers clasped tightly in front of her. Inari had no doubts that there was nothing Lysa would have liked more than to slap Janco's foolishly grinning face for the trouble he was causing her and the Celestial Crystal.

The set of Lysa's shoulders and back became less rigid and her hands slowly unclenched. When she turned, her expression displayed only concern as she moved to the bed to survey Inari and Kastel. After ascertaining they were physically unharmed, the worried frown between her brows softened and her lips tilted in a slight smile. "Well, you two certainly have had an interesting night." Her keen eyes rested a moment on Inari and Kastel's intertwined hands. If she was surprised to discover her parting gift to Inari had moved into other realms, she hid it well.

"You'd better prepare yourselves for a long day," she informed them. "For the moment however, questions can wait. A hot bath is in order followed by a good meal." With Talia's help she gathered their clothing and sent them off to the bath chamber.

When they returned, they found breakfast waiting for them, along with Travek Bosk, Chief of the Celestial Crystal's Security force.

Of average height with a trained fighter's lean physique, Bosk carried himself like the ex-military officer he'd been until he'd retired to become Lysa's head of security. His back as rigid as a Druvian marble pillar, he listened impassively as Inari and Kastel recounted their story between swallows of tea and mouthfuls of fresh, hot pastry and fruit.

When they finished, his gaze swung to Maren Janco then returned to sweep over Inari's diminutive form. His bushy brows furrowed. "Let me see if I've got this straight. After Janco stunned Fane here, you somehow wrestled the wand from Janco, turned it on him and in the process accidentally got caught in the blast yourself?"

Inari met his gaze without flinching. She had no intention of spending the second half of her life in a laboratory undergoing psi tests. As long as they all stuck to the agreed upon story, Bosk would have no choice but to believe them. Fighting an urge to

reach for Kastel's hand, she answered in a steady voice, "It all happened just as I told you."

Bosk's brows furrowed as he studied her. His mouth opened, but before he could say anything more, Kastel interrupted. "What I'd like to know, Chief Bosk, is how Janco got into Inari's quarters in the first place." He crossed his arms over his chest and stretched his long legs out in front of him, a questioning look on his face.

Inari hid a sigh of relief silently blessing Kastel for diverting the direction of the conversation. She picked up her cup of cooling tea and nodded thoughtfully. "I've been wondering that myself."

Lysa Talcott pinned the Chief of Security with her cool hazel eyes. She tapped the end of the force wand. "And how did Janco get one of these? I thought they weren't available to anyone but security and military personnel."

Bosk's face took on a ruddy hue and he shifted in his seat. "From what we can tell, Janco stole the force wand from the weapons' locker at his corporation's private security office. It's likely he gained entrance to our facility by bribing someone for the codes to one of the delivery doors at the back of the dome. Once inside, he appears to have attacked anyone who confronted him. We found two stunned guards locked in a supply closet off the lobby and two more in the corridor outside Miss Rau's room. I'll know more after I have a chance to question everyone involved."

"Find out which of my employees helped Janco and hand them over to the city security force. I intend to press charges." Lysa's tone promised swift retribution. She leaned forward and gave Inari's hands an affectionate squeeze. "I don't know how you managed it, but thank the Lords of Cosmos that you did."

Inari's lips curled in a lopsided smile. "I'm not sure Maren Janco would agree."

"I don't doubt it," Lysa said. "Fortunately, his wife has agreed to keep this entire situation quiet. She doesn't want their business tainted by the scandal."

Kastel jerked his thumb toward Janco. "What does she plan to do about her husband?" The tone of his voice indicated that he had some definite ideas on the subject if anyone cared to ask.

Janco sat slack-jawed, his eyes darting about the room like an insect trapped in a jar. His gaze skittered over Inari then jerked back. He grinned and grabbed his crotch. "Want another taste of my cock?" Despite the shackles limiting his movements he began to stroke himself. "Tried to suck it dry in the dream." He continued to fondle himself, his words becoming a meaningless jumble.

Inari's heart leapt to her throat. Bosk's demeanor earlier indicated he wasn't totally convinced they'd told the whole story. What if Janco's outburst, garbled as it was, raised his suspicions again?

Fortunately, the Chief of Security's face wore the same disgusted look as the rest of the room's occupants. "Get him out of here," he ordered. The two guards nodded, clearly happy to oblige. They grabbed Janco's upper arms and dragged him out of the room.

As the door slid shut behind them, Inari struggled to keep her composure. Lack of sleep, the residual effects of having taken the full force of a stun blast and the stress of the entire situation were beginning to take a toll. Her hands began to tremble and she hid them in her lap. Under cover of the table, Kastel's knee pressed against hers in silent support.

Lysa continued as if nothing unusual had happened. "As I was saying, Sela Janco has made arrangements for her husband to be transported to a private institution far outside the city, a wise decision on her part, considering what I've just seen. He will have the best care money can provide. Perhaps in time, he'll be able to resume his position on the board of Kelgor and Janco Intergalactic Shipping."

Knowing what she did about Sela Janco through her husband's dreams, Inari doubted Maren Janco would be returning anytime soon. Sela was in complete control of the company now and Inari was certain she planned to keep it that way for as long as possible. Which was fine with her. If Sela was occupied with business, she would be too busy to investigate what had really transpired that night.

"Best of all the Celestial Crystal's reputation will remain untarnished," Lysa added. She rose signaling an end to the investigation. "You've explained everything to my satisfaction. Don't you agree, Chief Bosk?"

He studied Inari and Kastel for a moment more then slowly nodded. "I have no further questions at the moment."

Lysa leaned down and pressed her cheek to Inari's. "You've both had an exhausting night. Take whatever time you need. I'll be in touch before you go."

"Well that went better than I hoped," Inari said with a heartfelt sigh of relief as the door slid shut behind them.

Kastel grinned at Talia across the table. "And thanks to you, no one should suspect Inari and I actually wrested control of the situation from Janco with a hitherto unknown psi talent."

Talia's eyes went round and innocent. "Psi talent? What psi talent?" They all laughed. Her expression grew serious. "Janco's outburst almost ruined everything."

Inari nodded. "Thank the Lords of Cosmos that Bosk hustled him out of here before he said something that might have led to more questions."

Kastel rose and stretched then pulled her to her feet. "Stop worrying. Bosk said all his questions were answered. If Janco starts talking about dreams, especially if he mentions your name, it'll just convince his doctors that his ravings are all part of his obsession."

Inari wanted to believe him. Despite the fact that Bosk had agreed readily enough with Lysa that he was satisfied with their account of the evenings events, she still wasn't certain he was entirely convinced.

Talia smothered a yawn and stood up. "I'm going home to get some sleep." She paused at the door, her gaze sliding over Kastel's broad shoulders with unabashed admiration. She heaved a deep sigh. "He's definitely dream material. After all those

years of making everyone else's dream fantasies come to life, you deserve him." A mischievous glint in her green eyes, she palmed the door control with one hand and gave Inari a gentle push with the other. "Enjoy the fantasy."

* * * * *

After Talia left, Inari leaned against the doorframe letting her gaze roam over Kastel who stood with his back to her, staring out into the sunlit courtyard. She understood her friend's lustful glances entirely. Her heart beat faster just thinking about the muscular body concealed beneath his green shirt and tight-fitting tan trousers. She'd love nothing more than to spend the next few weeks making love with Kastel every night in her new house with its incredible view of the sea. Enticing dream, impossible reality she acknowledged with a deep sigh.

She straightened and ran a hand through the tumbled waves of her hair. The situation with Maren Janco was resolved, but now she had to deal with the other man who had entered her life unexpectedly. Careful to avoid Kastel's eyes, she walked into the courtyard and sank into a chair. He came and stood behind her, massaging her neck and shoulders.

Without thinking, she sighed and leaned into his strong hands. "Hmm, that feels wonderful. I'll give you forever to stop." She bit her lip and mentally cursed herself for her slip of the tongue. Her flip words sounded like an invitation to continue their relationship.

"My fingers are at your service anytime. Port Liassa isn't that far from Gemmax City. I can charter a personal air-car and be there in three hours. You know, I bet Lysa would give me a few days to help you get settled. What do you think?"

His comment proved her fear had been well founded. She hated farewells at the best of times. Although they'd known each other less than a day a dull ache filled her heart at the idea of saying goodbye to him. *Don't prolong the moment. It's not as if you love him. The two of you barely know each other.* Then why did it hurt so much?

She reached for his hand and pulled him around to face her. He sat down in the chair next to hers, their fingers still entwined. Forcing herself to meet his eyes she said, "I'm afraid that's not possible. We can't see each other again, Kastel."

His jaw set in a stubborn line. "You don't mean that, Inari."

She gently disengaged her hand. "I do mean it. It's not just the difference in our ages. I've been looking forward to my retirement for a long time. And you need time to explore this new talent of yours."

"We can both do those things and still see each other," he insisted.

She shook her head. "It's not as simple as that."

"It is if you want it to be." Kastel leaned forward, his voice low and earnest. "You can't deny that in some inexplicable way our minds and bodies are connected. How else could we have linked without benefit of all the dream equipment and drugs?"

Her resolve faltered. As much as she hated to admit it, he had a point. Despite the differences in their ages, there was an amazing affinity between them. Even at this moment she could feel it, like an invisible cord, connecting them mentally and physically.

Pushing the knowledge away, she gathered the tattered shreds of her determination, rose and moved to stand in front of a small pool a few feet away. Tiny jewel-toned fish darted among the pink and lavender *hassa* lilies and slipped in and out of the softly splashing waterfall. She watched their joyous dance. It must be nice to lead such an uncomplicated life. Unable to prolong the moment any longer, she turned to face Kastel.

"You have no idea how tempting the thought of seeing you again is." She spread her hands in a helpless gesture. "Please forgive my bluntness, but there's simply no place for you in my life."

"Do you know how ridiculous you sound?" Kastel rose and stalked over to her.

"I am not being ridiculous." Stung by his tone, she stepped back and would have fallen into the pool, but his quick reflexes saved her. He grabbed her shoulders and steadied her. She could feel the heat from his hands through her shirt. Even that slight contact sent shivers of desire rippling through her.

"Listen to yourself, Inari. No room in your life for someone to spend time with you, to care about you? What else do you have, but time?"

Ignoring the warmth blossoming in her belly, she looked away. "For the right person perhaps," she admitted.

"And by that you mean someone of your advanced years?"

She looked up, her shoulders lifting in a shrug. "Well, at least someone closer to my age."

"Age is just a number. Respect, shared interests, compatibility are what count. I like you. I want to spend time with you. Hell, I just plain want you." His fingers slid down her neck to rest on the curve of her breast. "You have no idea how much I want you. Spread beneath me, your fingers digging into my back urging me on, those dark eyes of yours dazed with desire."

Inari swallowed, her mouth suddenly gone dry at the image he described. Her heart rate picked up and moisture pooled between her legs in response to his words and his light touch. Oh, how she ached to give in, grab his hand and drag him back to her bed.

"It all sounds wonderful, but..." She forced the words past stiff lips. "What about later? When this infatuation of yours burns out? When you finally notice the lines around my eyes or the width of my thighs? When you see all the lithe, young women with their perky breasts, while you have me on your arm?"

"Is that really what you're afraid of? That I'll leave you for a younger woman. Or is there more to it than that?"

"Isn't that enough?" she shot back.

"I can't promise you that we'll be together forever. But you can't promise that you'll never leave me either. Despite our talents, neither of us can see into the future." He pulled her into his arms. "Can't we forget about what might happen and concentrate on now?"

She shook her head. "I'm not sure."

One brow slid upward. "Because it would mean not being in control?"

She stiffened and pulled away. "Control? What's that got to do with it?"

"For twenty-seven years you've been the one who's in charge. The legendary Inari Rau. Tell her your fantasy and she'll design a dream to fulfill your deepest desires."

"That was my job."

"Yes, and it was nice wasn't it? Nice to be the one who created the scenarios, the one who set all the limits? But those days are over. Out here in the real world anything can happen. You have to learn to be flexible, to take risks." He shook her. "Let go, Inari. I can't promise you forever, but I can promise that our time together won't be boring."

Before she could marshal her thoughts, he bent and captured her mouth. As his tongue swiped across hers tingles of excitement raced along her nerve endings. He deepened the kiss. Unable to resist, she leaned into his embrace. *I'm probably going to regret this.* Regret be damned she decided as he lifted her in his arms and carried her across the courtyard. No one said they had to fall in love and sign a life-bond license.

"Okay, you can come to Port Liassa," she managed to gasp when he set her down on the floor next to the bed. He leaned down to kiss her again. She stopped him with a hand on his chest. "I have conditions."

The corners of his mouth quirked. "Of course you do."

"You'll agree to live by them?"

"Anything you want, Inari. But can we discuss them later? At the moment, I'm a bit distracted."

"Hmmm." She looked thoughtful.

"Don't push things, woman," Kastel growled against her ear before he sucked her lobe between his teeth.

Inari shivered. Pushing away the doubts lingering at the back of her mind, she slipped her arms around his neck and dragged his mouth to hers. Her days as guide had ended, but the future promised new possibilities. Why not enjoy them? After all those years spent making everyone else's dreams come true, it was her turn.

* * * * *

Inari stood by the railing of her back porch in Port Liassa and inhaled the fresh salt tang of the morning air. The sea glittered like blue satin beyond the low line of dunes

separating her property from the beach. A white and black seabird screeched overhead as it soared and dipped over the waves of the incoming tide.

She smiled as a warm breath brushed by her ear sending a pleasant shiver through her. Kastel wrapped his free arm around her waist and pulled her back against his chest. "Nice view."

"Nice?" Her voice rose.

His chest rumbled at her indignant response to his tepid praise of the spectacular vista in front of them. Her house was small, but it sat on a choice bit of land on a headland where Liassa Bay opened into the Evros Ocean.

"My apology. Incredible view." His arm slid away and he and moved to stand beside her. He surveyed the small patch of brown sea grasses and shrubs surrounded by a low wall of cream and salmon stone on the other side of the railing. "Your garden could use some help though. Nothing my agro-engineering talents can't handle."

Although Inari was reluctant to find anything that wasn't perfect about her new home, she had to agree. Parts of the stone wall were crumbling and the few scrubby plants were definitely on their last legs. Still, the idea of allowing Kastel to landscape the garden made her uneasy. She wasn't sure she wanted him to make himself too comfortable in her new home.

She shrugged and tried to sound noncommittal. "I suppose I'll have to do something about it eventually." Turning her back on the sea, she looked through the long windows behind her at the jumbled mix of boxes and furniture inside. "My first priority is to finish unpacking."

Kastel slung his arm around her shoulders and hugged her to him. "We have all week. I promise everything will be in perfect order before I go back to the Crystal Palace." His smile never wavered, but she suspected he was disappointed by her less than enthusiastic reaction to his offer to restore her garden.

The unpacking could wait. They only had a few days to spend together. After Kastel was gone she'd have plenty of time to get her new home in order. *Maybe I'm getting the hang of this flexibility thing.* Tipping her head back, she sent him a flirtatious smile. "Well, if we're not unpacking, what do suggest we do?"

He nuzzled her neck. "I think we should start with a shower then explore the town." His lips trailed lower. "Later we can swim and take a walk on the beach."

"Hmmm," Inari closed her eyes letting herself relax in his arms as his mouth nibbled at the hollow in her throat. She opened her eyes. "You mentioned something about a shower?"

"Most definitely." Kastel took her hand and pulled her after him, threading his way between boxes and pieces of furniture to the staircase that led to the upper level. Inside the bathroom, he pushed her against the nearest wall and trapped her there with his body. "Now where were we?"

She smiled up at him. "Something about a shower, I think."

"We'll get to that." He loosened the ties of her robe and slipped it over her shoulders. It slithered to the floor in a soft whisper. She reached for his belt and in a moment his joined hers. He kicked their discarded garments aside.

His gaze locked to hers as he grabbed her wrists and pinned them over her head with one hand. With her back against the wall and unable to use her arms, she hung helpless. In this position he could do anything to her. A delicious shiver of excitement replaced a momentary flash of unease. She licked her lips and felt a gush of liquid between her legs.

Kastel bent and ran the tip of his tongue down the length of her neck. A slow smile curved his lips as the skin on her arms rose in goose bumps. "I think I like you like this – completely at my mercy."

He pressed his mouth to hers, as he cupped her left breast with his free hand and rolled her nipple beneath the pad of his thumb. His tongue darted in and out in playful forays that left her breathless. His hand skimmed down her waist to her hip then slipped over the curve of her stomach to rest on her mound.

Inari inhaled sharply when his long fingers parted her folds and found her swollen clit. Dipping lower, he found her moisture then dragged his slick fingers over her erect bud caressing it until she was shuddering with need. His own erection pressed into her thigh tantalizing her with each movement he made.

She moaned and arched her back, instinctively lifting one leg to bring his erection closer to her aroused sex. He grasped his cock and rubbed its head over her wet entrance than moved it higher to stroke her clit. Inari writhed beneath him, seeking release. "Kastel, please," she whimpered against his mouth.

"Please what?" he asked.

She rocked her hips against him. "I want you inside me."

"Soon," he promised. He inserted one finger between her slick folds into her hot, wet channel. He added a second moving them deeper into her in slow, steady thrusts that raised her up to the tips of her toes.

She felt the beginnings of a climax as he brought her close to the edge then backed away before she was carried over. "Not yet, my sweet, Dream Lady. Not until I'm inside you."

He lifted her leg higher on his hip widening her opening for him before guiding the head of his cock to her entrance. He thrust into her, pausing to let her body adjust to him. When he was all the way in, he began to move in and out, each stroke deeper and harder. Inari's position and the angle of his thrusts allowed him to hit the sweet spot at the top of her channel with every move.

Her climax came hard and fast. Her entire body shuddered with pleasure as she convulsed around his cock. He came right after, his own spasms melding with hers. Breathing heavily they leaned into each other for a moment. Kastel gently withdrew. He guided Inari's arms around his neck and drew her up for a long kiss.

Being with Kastel could be as addictive as smoking *senna* weed, Inari thought as his tongue swirled over hers. She tried to tell herself it was just sex – glorious sex to be sure, but that was all it was. Like a shooting star, this desire blazing between them would soon burn itself out.

In that case, enjoy it while you can, the practical side of her mind lectured. *In a few days he'll be gone and you'll have your life back again.* Leaning back, she smiled brightly up at Kastel. "What about that shower?"

His mouth curled in a lazy smile. "I'll wash your back, if you wash mine."

"Who can resist an offer like that?" Inari purred as she took his hand and pulled him after her.

Lords of Cosmos, but she was opening the door for heartache and trouble, she thought, as water sluiced over her shoulders. But when his warm soapy hands slipped from her back to massage her breasts, she discovered she didn't give a damn.

Chapter Seven

That night after a dinner of local seafood and vegetables, they sat on Inari's back porch drinking wine and watching the sun go down. Strands of sea glass tipped with small silver bells, one of the three purchases Inari had made that day, hung from the corner of the porch roof, their soft chime a tinkling counterpoint to the muted sound of the waves.

Spending this time with Inari had been a pleasant respite from the memories and guilt that weighed heavily on Kastel since the accident that had changed his life. He twined the fingers of his free hand through hers. Earlier that day as they'd explored the shops in Port Liassa, she'd avoided physical contact. He could tell that she was worried that people would note the differences in their ages and speculate about the nature of their relationship.

"They'll think I'm your mother," she'd said, pulling her hand away.

"You're too young to be my mother," he pointed out. "Besides you know the old saying." He captured her hand again and flashed a wicked grin. "Incest is best." Despite the scandalized look she'd shot him, she'd laughed.

Now that they were alone, her fingers curled eagerly around his. Perhaps in time she'd feel comfortable with physical displays of affection in front of others. He hoped so. She had no problem responding to him in private. Her passionate sexual response was one of the things he liked most about her. Maybe in time he could convince her that age didn't have to be a barrier.

He leaned back and looked out into the fading twilight. The last rays of the setting sun cast long paths of apricot and gold over the sea. "I can see why you wanted to move here. I've only been here a day and already I don't want to leave. Did you grow up by the ocean?"

Inari shook her head. "No, I grew up in one of the factory towns to the north of Gemmax City. With three children to support, my parents didn't have time to take us on many trips. One holiday my aunt took my brothers and me to the beach. We only had that one day, but by the time she brought us home, I knew I wanted to spend the rest of my life living by the sea." Her lips curved in a wry smile. "My parents had other plans for me."

He heard the lingering traces of sadness in her voice. Her journey to this particular dream had been a long time coming. Empathy tugged at his insides. He knew a thing or two about derailed dreams. "So how did you end up at the Celestial Crystal?"

She was silent for a moment, her gaze on the flame glowing in the aquamarine glass bowl in the middle of the table, her second purchase of the day. He could see from the tiny frown lines around her eyes that the memory still caused her pain.

"I took the psi test at fourteen like everyone else at my school. Imagine my family's surprise when I scored off the charts. Almost immediately, my parents began receiving offers from any corporation or institution where employees with a high psi rating would be an asset."

He turned and stared at her. "They sold you to the highest bidder?"

Her shoulders lifted in a slight shrug. "My older brother wanted to be a space pilot. My younger brother dreamed of attending the university and becoming a terraforming engineer. The payment they received would pay the fees for both of them and there would still be enough money left over for my parents to live comfortably."

"So you were expendable?" His brows swept up in disbelief.

"I don't think they looked at it that way. I'm sure they thought it was a wonderful opportunity for everyone. And who can blame them? In their place, I probably would have done the same." She squeezed his hand and smiled. "Don't feel sad. I had a good life at the Celestial Crystal. It took longer than expected, but I did get my house by the beach."

He gave a rueful laugh. Here he'd been trying to comfort her and in the end she was the one dispensing sympathy. "And you don't resent those lost years?"

Inari stared at the flickering flame for a long moment then shook her head. "Regret them perhaps, but not resent them. I lived comfortably and made many good friends."

Kastel pondered her words and felt more reassured than he had in days. Perhaps the next fifteen years would be more bearable than he'd thought, especially with Inari as his friend and lover.

Inari sipped her wine. Tilting her head, she studied him over the rim of her glass. "What about you. Why did you agree to become a dream guide after your accident? You mentioned your company was doing well. Why tie yourself down with an extended contract to a dream palace?"

It was a logical question and one he'd known she would get around to asking sooner or later. The familiar mixture of shame, self-hatred and frustration rose like an ugly tide. *Because I was a reckless fool. Because I lost my company and my best friend. Because I need money to buy my business back from my brother.* One or all of them was answer enough, but he couldn't bring himself to explain how his bad decision-making had brought him to this place in life. Later, when they both knew each other better perhaps he'd find the courage to tell her about the mistakes that haunted his soul.

Shifting the conversation into less dangerous territory, he gestured at her small garden. "You know sea primroses would do well along your wall. They like sandy soil and the dunes would protect them from the worst of the winter winds."

"I'll keep them in mind next spring." Her tone and expression were noncommittal.

Kastel nodded and sipped his drink, pretending not to notice her obvious reluctance to discuss her garden. Each time he brought the subject up he got the distinct impression that she didn't want him to start feeling too at home in Port Liassa. Not that he blamed her. He knew he was moving too fast. Impulsiveness had always been one of

his problems, but from the first moment he'd seen her face looking back at him from her file, even before their minds had linked in the dream state, he'd felt unaccountably attracted to her. He couldn't even begin to explain the odd mental bond that had sprung up between them. For the moment he was content to drift and see where all this was leading.

As the sun disappeared below the horizon, stars winked into existence. Caliope hadn't risen yet, but Kesta's crescent-shape was visible in the eastern sky. The sounds of insects chirping and the soft rustles of night creatures filled the darkness beyond the porch. Setting her glass of wine on the table, Inari stood up and padded barefoot around the porch lighting the hanging glass oil lamps. The flickering light glinted in her auburn hair and caught the sparkle of the glass bead and shell necklace at her throat, her third purchase of the day. She'd found it in a little shop near the marina. He'd made his own purchase there, one she didn't know about as yet, while she'd browsed nearby in another of Port Liassa's quaint shops.

The night breeze coming off the ocean rippled the fabric of her syn-silk wrap dress, molding it against her body. Desire blazed in his belly and he grew hard. He caught her hand as she walked past him and pulled her around to face him. His erection bulged against his pants, but he made no effort to hide his arousal. Her eyes traveled down then up to meet his. An answering heat flared to life in the depths of her dark eyes.

He pulled her to stand between his spread thighs. He cupped her breasts and slowly rubbed her nipples through her dress, smiling at her soft intake of breath. Beneath the thin fabric her pebbled nipples were clearly visible. He grinned and kneaded them with his thumbs. "I assure you that I never ever thought of doing this with my mother."

Inari laughed the low husky sound he loved so much. "I'm sorry I ever brought the subject up."

He pulled her closer and nuzzled the cleft between her breasts revealed by the deep V of her dress. Her scent, a mixture of the light floral perfume she preferred and her own feminine essence, filled his nose fueling his desire. He moved lower, running his tongue around the hard buds poking through her dress. The moisture from his tongue left wet circles in the silk. He lifted his head. "I'm glad you see the error of your ways."

She reached out and ran her fingers through his hair then let them trail down his cheek. "And if I hadn't?" she asked with a teasing smile.

He narrowed his eyes. "I'm afraid I would have had to punish you."

Her gaze drifted lower. "With your mighty rod of discipline?"

Kastel hadn't been sure how she'd react to his teasing remarks. Her responses both verbal and physical indicated she was willing to join the game. Of course for most of her life she'd been doing just that, playing make-believe in people's dreams. By now it was probably second nature. Still, he suspected she secretly enjoyed having someone else in control for once.

He slipped his hands beneath the hem of her dress and slid them slowly up the inside of her thighs. Her skin was warm silk beneath his palms. Eyes locked to hers, he rubbed the sensitive spot between her legs with the back of his knuckles. Her panties grew damp. "Sauciness is a punishing offense," he said with mock severity.

She gave an exaggerated shiver. "Oh, dear, I guess I'm in big trouble now."

He hooked his fingers in the sides of her panties and dragged them down. "Very big trouble."

He lifted her legs one at a time, slid the scrap of silk over her ankles and feet and tossed them aside. His hands slipped around her waist and he cupped her ass and squeezed it. "You have one chance left to save yourself."

"Oh and what is that?" He heard the catch in her voice.

The corners of his mouth lifted in a sly smile and he stroked her labia. "Beg for mercy."

"I'm not in the habit of begging," she said, her own smile a challenge. Although he'd barely touched her the insides of her thighs glistened, proof of her growing arousal.

"You will," he promised. He separated her folds and found her clit. As he rubbed it, he inserted the index finger of his free hand inside her wet channel. She shuddered and widened her stance to give him complete access to her most intimate pleasure spots.

His cock pushed impatiently at his trousers, straining to be free. If she didn't cave soon, he'd be the one begging for mercy.

"Please," she whispered.

"Please what?" he asked, his voice rough with passion.

Panting, she arched her back and pressed her pussy against his fingers, seeking release. "Please come inside."

"Since you asked so nicely." He set her back a step, rose and shucked his pants. His rampant cock jutted upward. He sat again and guided her legs until she straddled his lap. His erection, almost as if it had a mind of its own, pushed eagerly at her damp cleft. She shifted her hips and impaled her pussy on his rock-hard shaft, drawing him deep inside.

He pulled her mouth to his, swirling his tongue over hers. She tasted of wine and her own sweet honey. He untied the thin gold cord at her waist and undid the fasteners that held her dress together. Skimming his fingers beneath the wide straps, he slipped them down, freeing her arms. He leaned forward and sucked a puckered nipple into his mouth, delighting in the taste of her flesh. His teeth scraped lightly over the aroused bud; she moaned and arched her back.

As he continued to nuzzle and lave one breast and then the other he sought her clitoris, stroking and teasing it until she was writhing against his hand for release. She moaned deep in the back of her throat as he pumped into her while his fingers continued to work on her clit. She moved with him, half lifting herself off his engorged

cock then pushing herself down in a slow steady rhythm that left them both panting. Her eager response stoked the heat burning low in his belly. Still applying his fingers to her clit, he plunged deeper into her. She stiffened and then he felt the spasms of her orgasm ripple through her. As her interior muscles clamped around his penis his own orgasm followed. He pulled her head down to him, kissing her hard and deep as they climaxed together in a burst of sensation that wiped everything from his mind except the sheer physical pleasure ripping through him.

As he slowly became aware of his surroundings again, Inari collapsed against his chest. He'd had sex before, but the experience never matched the physical and emotional fulfillment he felt after making love to Inari. And it was lovemaking, not mere casual sex. It had been so even in their first shared dream. Tenderness welled up and he pressed a kiss into her hair. As he held her close, his gaze traveled to her yard. Despite her desire to keep him at arm's length, he was determined to prove to her that he was worth the risk.

* * * * *

The persistent buzz of the vid-phone awoke Inari from a pleasant dream. It faded quickly as she opened her eyes, leaving behind only a fleeting memory of the sun and sea and Kastel's warm kisses on her bare skin. He roused next to her, mumbling almost incoherently into his pillow, "You going to answer that?"

"Yes." She pushed the light cover aside and slid from the bed. A glance at the window revealed only the faintest hint of gray light in the sky. Smothering a yawn, she stepped across the room to the vid-screen and hit the sound-only button. "The sun isn't up here, so I hope you have a good reason for disturbing our sleep," she said, making no effort to hide her irritation from the caller.

"My apologies, Inari, but this is important." Lysa Talcott's clipped tones filled the room. "Please turn your screen on. You know how I hate talking to faceless voices."

Inari quickly grabbed her robe. Belting it around her waist, she reached out and flipped on the visual. Lysa Talcott's face appeared. Despite the early hour, her face was made up and not a hair was out of place. Faint lines at the corners of her eyes and mouth hinted that she wasn't quite as serene as she appeared.

"What's wrong?" Inari asked the first stirrings of unease coiling in her stomach.

"Something has turned up in the investigation into the Janco affair. You and Kastel need to return to the Celestial Crystal today."

Inari's eyes widened. "Today!" She glanced back at Kastel propped up on one elbow, his expression reflecting her own surprise. She pursed her lips. "Can't this wait? I've barely begun unpacking. Besides, you promised Kastel a ten-day holiday."

Lysa's face settled into grim lines. "I'm sorry, but you don't have a choice. Your presence is required at an informal meeting in my office this afternoon at four o'clock."

Inari's brow furrowed at her friend's unnaturally harsh tone. "What's this about, Lysa?"

Lysa's eyes as they met Inari's through the screen held a mixture of regret and an emotion that Inari had never seen before in all the years she'd known her – fear. "I wish I could say more, but you'll have to wait until this afternoon. I'll send a car to pick you both up."

"We'll be ready," Inari said. Reaching out, she turned off the vid-phone.

"What do you think is going on?" Kastel asked as he climbed out of bed and pulled on his robe.

She met his inquiring eyes with a troubled frown. "Lysa mentioned Maren Janco. Who knows what kind of earful he's been giving those doctors at the institute."

Kastel gave a snort of laughter. "No one in his right mind would take anything Janco said seriously. Not after everything he's done."

Inari sighed. "I hope you're right. Whatever is going on, I have a bad feeling about it."

He came to her and pulled her into his arms. "It'll be fine," he said kissing her hair. He held her away. "We have some time. How about a hot shower followed by watching the sunrise over breakfast?"

She pushed her feelings of foreboding away. No point in wasting what little time they had left in useless speculation. Her lips curving in a teasing smile, she took his hand and backed slowly toward the bathroom. "Forget the shower. I'm in the mood to investigate that lovely big bathtub."

Kastel's face lit with a wicked grin. "Are you aware that the Shalla folk of Drebnia Five have some very interesting sexual practices involving bathtubs?"

Inari rounded her eyes. "Really?"

He gave a solemn nod. "Demonstrating them could take hours." Before she could react he moved forward and scooped her off her feet.

Inari squealed and wrapped her arms around his neck. "Isn't research wonderful?" she purred in his ear as he kicked the bathroom door shut with his foot.

Fifteen minutes before the appointed time, they stepped off the grav-lift into Lysa's spacious office. She looked up and waved them into seats in front of her desk. "Good, you're early. We'll have a chance to talk before the meeting."

Inari and Kastel exchanged glances. It was obvious from the slant of her shoulders and the tone of her voice that the usually unflappable Lysa was clearly disturbed about something.

"What's going on?" Inari asked. "You mentioned something about Maren Janco."

Lysa poured each of them a glass of chilled juice. Ignoring her own drink, she leaned back in her chair. "I thought everything was settled, but it seems Janco's been doing a lot of talking since he's been at the facility."

“About what?” Kastel asked. Any concerns he had about what Maren Janco might be saying were well concealed. He sat easily in his chair, projecting nothing more than mild interest. Inari forced herself to relax and follow his lead.

Lysa folded her hands on her desk and leaned forward. “He admits that he attacked you, but insists that he wasn’t accidentally stunned in a struggle with Inari. According to his latest rant, he says you linked with him and pulled him into a dream.”

Inari raised a brow. “His latest rant? I think that says it all. Surely no one is taking him seriously.” She sipped her drink and smiled at Lysa. “You know as well as I do that it’s impossible to link without the drugs and the coronet.” Forming a link between two or more waking minds was even more impossible. The fact that she’d somehow managed to accomplish that feat was a fact she intended to keep to herself.

“That’s what I’ve been telling everyone, but still...” She spread her hands. “I’ve seen the vids of his latest sessions and I have to say he’s very convincing. And then there are the studies.”

Inari’s heart leaped at an old memory. “Studies?” she asked fighting to keep her calm exterior.

“Twenty to thirty years ago a small group of scientists postulated that psi talents didn’t really need anything to create a psychic link. The drugs, coronets—all the other computer equipment enhanced the ability, ramped up the power so to speak, but weren’t really necessary.”

Inari nodded. “I remember some sort of tests to that effect when I was in training. Unless I’m mistaken, nothing ever came of them.”

Lysa nodded. “You’re right. That line of experimentation has long been abandoned.” Her gaze went from Inari to Kastel and back again. “But psi scientists are always looking for unknown abilities or new ways to exploit old ones. If it were possible to create a dream link without the aid of the drugs and coronets, they’d be interested, as would most corporations and even the military. Abilities such as these could open all sorts of possibilities.”

“If such abilities existed,” Kastel said. “But we all know they don’t.”

Lysa’s hazel eyes appraised him. “Do we? If it comes to it, are you both prepared to stand by your original story?”

“Of course,” Inari said. “Everything Maren Janco is saying is the product of his deranged mind. Lords of Cosmos, the man broke into my quarters and attacked us. Ask Talia if you don’t believe us.”

“I have and she supports your story,” Lysa said. “But there are others who aren’t as easily convinced.”

“What others?” Inari demanded. She straightened in her chair and set her glass down. “This isn’t like you. The Lysa Talcott I know would never allow herself to be swayed by lies and vague innuendo. You would have laughed if some psi scientist had even suggested that one of your guides might have forged a link without the dream chamber.”

"In the past, that's true. But there have been some changes at the Celestial Crystal."

"This entire mess happened less than a week ago. How much could have changed in that short amount of time?"

Lysa fiddled with a stack of transparent vid-sheets. "I've had some financial setbacks. I stretched myself thin with loans for the redecorating and the new technology I added to the Celestial Crystal. It became necessary for me to take on a partner."

Inari's shoulders relaxed. "So that's it. And your new business partner is a bit worried about his or her new investment?"

"Something like that." Lysa's tone was flat.

Kastel drained his glass. "So we're here to meet the new partner." At Lysa's stiff nod, he looked around with a cheerful smile. "Then let's get on with it. We'll do our best to reassure your partner about what happened the other night and then head back to Port Liassa."

"You need to take this seriously."

Kastel straightened at the warning in Lysa's voice. "Or what?"

Before Lysa could answer the door to the grav-lift swished open behind them. Lysa's mysterious new partner had finally seen fit to make an appearance. Inari saw. Kastel's eyes widen with the same jolt of recognition she felt as the newcomer took the empty seat at the end of the desk.

Lysa gestured to the slim woman dressed in an expensive ice-blue syn-silk suit. "I'd like you to meet the Celestial Crystal's new co-owner, Sela Janco."

* * * * *

Inari met the vivid blue eyes she herself had so often projected in dream scenarios with Maren Janco. What had possessed Lysa Talcott to enter into any kind of partnership with Sela Janco? There was more going on here than paying off a few debts. Whatever force Janco's wife had brought to bear on Lysa, Inari knew, it didn't bode well for her and Kastel or the future of the Celestial Crystal.

Sela crossed shapely legs and inclined her head in their direction. "So you're the guides I've been hearing so much about." Her lips lifted in a polite smile, but her voice and her eyes were cold as she studied them. Her gaze focused on Inari. "You, Miss Rau, are of particular interest to me."

Hiding her unease behind a façade of calm, Inari's mouth tilted upward. "And why is that, Mrs. Janco?"

"Well, if I understand my husband's doctors correctly, you are the source of this odd obsession of his. I'm naturally curious, as any wife would be, to check out her rival."

"Rival?" Inari's raised a brow. "I'm hardly that. My relationship with your husband was purely in my capacity as a dream guide."

Sela dismissed Inari's response with a wave of her hand. "I see the situation somewhat differently, although frankly, now that we've met, I'm at a loss as to why Maren finds you so fascinating." Her gaze swept over Inari. "You're rather ordinary."

"But an extraordinary guide," Kastel cut in. His voice was smooth, but there was an angry glint in his eyes. Inari's heart warmed at his defense of her.

Sela shifted her attention. "Ah, weighing in on the matter are we, Mr. Fane? Maren said some interesting things about you as well. Something about a dream in which you were screwing Miss Rau from behind while she was riding him like a *cinna* cat in heat. His words not mine," she finished with an apologetic shrug.

Kastel gave a snort of laughter. "I'd like some of whatever they're giving your husband at that facility. My only memory of the event is intense pain from the stun wand your husband used on me, followed by a black void."

Sela's expression tightened. "Ah, yes, both you and Miss Rau were supposedly unconscious."

"As I've already told you, according to the technician who found them, they were all unconscious," Lysa interjected in firm tones.

"If you say so. Still, I wonder if perhaps Miss Rau and Mr. Fane shouldn't spend a few days in a psi laboratory. It could mean a great deal of money for the Celestial Crystal if it turns out they have developed a new psi talent."

"There is no evidence that indicates that to be a possibility," Lysa said. "At this moment I cannot countenance such an action."

"And later, if new information comes to light?"

Lysa exchanged an uneasy look with Inari. Clearly she was walking a narrow path with her new partner and she knew it. She shrugged. "If that's the case, we'll call in a team of psi scientists and have them thoroughly tested."

Sela appeared satisfied. "Very well. That brings me to another concern." She uncrossed her legs and recrossed them before focusing her attention on Inari and Kastel. "Exactly what is your relationship to each other?"

None of your business, you nosy bitch. Not the most politic response, Inari decided. Remembering Lysa's earlier warning, she swallowed her irritation. "Since Mr. Fane and I only met a few days ago, I don't know that we have a relationship."

"Then how do you explain his being found unconscious in your bed?"

"He came to my room after a dream session to introduce himself as my replacement. We were talking business when your husband intruded and stunned us."

"Isn't it true that Mr. Fane's been staying with you the past few days?"

"Inari needed help getting settled and I thought Kastel would benefit from a few days rest by the sea," Lysa said. "I thought it would be helpful to him to be able to discuss his new duties in more detail with Inari – to help him adjust to his new life."

Sela tapped a manicured nail against her cheek. "I see. So in that case neither of you will be distressed by our new policies?"

Inari raised a brow. "And what policies would those be? I'm no longer an employee so they don't apply to me anyway."

"But they do apply to Kastel." Sela's gaze drifted up and down him, her lips curling in a slight smile.

"I've barely had time to read through the policy manual as it is and you're already changing it?" Kastel's voice was plaintive. "So what's this new policy you've added?"

Sela leaned back in her chair. "I think I'll allow Miss Talcott to answer your question." Her voice was pleasant, but there was an edge to her smile that said she enjoyed putting Lysa on the spot.

Lysa shifted in her seat and said nothing for a moment. Finally, she squared her shoulders and spoke. "Employees of the Celestial Crystal are no longer permitted to leave the facility unless they are embarking on business for the dream palace and escorted by a team of security guards. It's felt that traveling and personal relationships outside the palace constitute a distraction from their duties."

"What about me? I'm retired. Will I be permitted to visit the dome?" Inari inquired.

"Perhaps, in time. We are still looking into that part of the policy." Sela said, a faint smile curving her lips. It was obvious she was enjoying the power play. "In view of the fact that you are now potentially a client, such fraternization might be viewed as a conflict of interest. While our adjudicator is investigating the legal ramifications, your contact with Mr. Fane will be limited to vid-phone conversations."

Kastel straightened in his seat. "Wait one moment. You can't do this. The contract I signed said nothing like that. I'm not a slave. I have rights."

Sela picked up a transparent vid-sheet and held it out to him. "In point of fact, Mr. Fane, you have few if any rights that we do not give you, for the next fifteen years. If you read the fine print under article twelve you'll notice that you are bound by all policies, those in place and any changes that might occur during your tenure with us."

Kastel took the sheet and scanned it. A look of horror crept over his face. Eyes dark with defeat, he handed the document to Inari and slumped back in his chair, staring silently into the distance.

Bitch. Inari was beginning to have some sympathy for Janco. She skimmed over the sheet, her heart sinking as she saw the words for herself in black and white and Kastel's scrawling signature below it.

Ignoring Sela, Inari handed the vid-sheet to Lysa. "The Celestial Crystal's treatment of its guides has always been above reproach. If you seriously plan to implement this, you'll be no better than the palaces in the entertainment arcades along the river. Are you sure you want to move in that direction?"

Lysa bit her lip and glanced at Sela as if unsure of whether or not she should respond. Inari felt a pang of disbelief. Lysa never acted like this. What had happened to the confident businesswoman she'd known for most of her life? How had Sela Janco obtained such power over Lysa?

Lysa cleared her throat and seemed about to speak, but Sela cut in. "How we conduct our business is no longer your affair, Miss Rau. I understand you have a comfortable home in Port Liassa. My advice is that once this meeting is concluded that you return there and enjoy your retirement." She rose. "I'll leave you to finish up, Lysa. I have another meeting to attend. By the time I return, I'm sure Miss Rau will be on her way home and Mr. Fane will be ensconced in his new quarters as our lead guide." There was no doubting the threat behind her cool smile if she discovered her orders had not been followed.

The moment the grav-doors whispered shut behind Sela, Inari and Kastel came to their feet almost as one. "Lords of Cosmos, what is going on here?" Inari demanded over Kastel's angry questions. "Kastel's practically a prisoner and I can't visit the Celestial Crystal until some adjudicator looks at the new policy? You can't seriously be a party to this?"

Lysa sighed heavily. "I'm sorry, but I have no choice."

"Why?" Inari asked. "Sela Janco might be your partner, but you're still the owner of the Celestial Crystal. She can't force you to change policies to suit her."

"Yes, she can. I'm afraid the situation is more complex than I let on," Lysa said.

"In what way?" Kastel asked.

"Sela Janco didn't merely lend me the money to pay off my debts. She bought my loans outright. Technically she now owns the Celestial Crystal. As part of the agreement I get to administer the day-to-day business, but she makes all the real decisions. Over time as our profits increase, I can buy the company back."

"That could take years," Inari said.

Lysa ran a hand through her hair, leaving its usual sleek style in disarray. Heavy lines were etched around her eyes. For the first time since Inari had known her, she looked old. "Exactly. Sela Janco has us right where she wants us. If the two of you flout this policy she won't hesitate to send both of you for psi testing. She's convinced you're hiding some secret psi power. And if she's right, she plans to be the one to exploit it."

Inari listened with a growing sense of horror and more than a tinge of guilt for lying to her friend when she was doing the best she could to protect them. "We have no intention of allowing that to happen."

"Good," Lysa said. "I'm glad you plan to be sensible about this. In a few months this will blow over and you'll be able to see each other again. Until then, please be careful." She stood up and smoothed her hair back into place. "I'll give you a moment's privacy to say your goodbyes."

The room was silent for a long time after Lysa left. The sunlight had disappeared. Inari's chest felt as leaden as the thick gray clouds outside the windows. She moved to Kastel's side and slipped her hand into his. "Are you okay?"

He shook his head, his gaze on the darkening sky. "Frankly, I don't know." He turned and pulled her into his arms, his mouth seeking hers. She clung to him with the same sense of desperation that she tasted in his kiss.

Dragging his mouth away, he dug into the pocket of his trousers and pulled out a small box. "I was hoping to give this to you tonight under different circumstances."

Inari took the box and opened it. Her eyes widened with surprised delight as she lifted a Luvian shell and glass bracelet from its bed of silver spangled paper. It was an almost exact duplicate of the one she'd worn in their shared dream by the phosphorescent sea. She'd admired the bracelet the day they'd gone shopping in Port Liassa, but the price had been prohibitive so she'd settled for the necklace with its small cluster of Luvian beads and shells.

"It's beautiful. Help me put it on." She handed the bracelet to Kastel and held out her left wrist.

He fastened it in place then slid his fingers down to twine with hers. "It suits you." There was a glimmer of desire in his eyes. She wished she could respond to it, but there was no time.

She touched the shell and glass oval in the center of the bracelet with tender fingers. "I'll cherish this forever." Tears blinded her eyes as she raised herself on tiptoe and pressed her lips to his.

The door behind them opened. She started to pull away, but Kastel's arms tightened. He kissed her hard then released her and crossed the room to where two security men stood, watching them with unsmiling faces. Kastel turned and held the door open with one hand. His gaze locked with Inari's. "Don't worry. It will all work out."

She kept a bright smile plastered to her lips until the grav-doors closed. She prayed he was right, but as her gaze settled on the thickening clouds, she feared the storm brewing outside might not be the only one they'd be facing.

Chapter Eight

After two successful sessions in the morning followed by lunch and a brief vid-phone call to Inari, Kastel entered the dream chamber in a good mood. It had been difficult after his return from Port Liassa to get into the right frame of mind. Today, for the first time in almost two months, he felt like he was finding his stride. He missed Inari's smile and her quick-witted replies to his foolish comments. Most of all he yearned for her warm presence in his bed. His cock twitched in sympathy. He wondered how much longer they would have to wait until they could see each other. Everything had been going smoothly at the Celestial Crystal with no sign of Sela Janco. Maybe her interest in them had waned.

As the door hissed shut behind him, he noticed an extra couch jammed against the far wall. The man sleeping in the middle one wasn't his client. The hair rose on the back of Kastel's neck. Something was wrong. He glanced toward the console looking for answers. Instead of Talia's familiar welcoming grin, a strange tech stood at the equipment. He turned and they silently measured each other. The man was in his late twenties or early thirties. Something about the way he balanced on the balls of his feet and the steel in his gray eyes made Kastel think that being a dream technician was a recent career change. The man had military training written all over him.

Keeping his face impassive, Kastel broke the uneasy silence. "Where's Talia?"

The tech shrugged. "Don't know. I was told to report here." His tone was polite enough, but his expression remained guarded.

The man definitely knew more than he was saying. Choosing to ignore that fact for the moment, Kastel checked out the stranger on the couch. He was about thirty-five with dark brown hair and a neatly trimmed beard. The light snores escaping his lips indicated he was deeply asleep.

Kastel jerked his thumb toward the sleeper. "Who the hell is that? I'm scheduled for a session with Barso Sorax—hunting giant lizards on Ceti Tau." He folded his arms over his chest and frowned at the tech. "Want to tell me what's going on here?"

The tech's shoulders lifted again. For a moment he looked like he might answer then the door to the outer hall slid open and his lips tightened around whatever he'd been about to say. Sela Janco entered followed by a tall man dressed in a gray suit with a crimson logo on one pocket, a short blonde woman garbed in the loose blue robe of a guide and Chief Bosk. The Celestial Crystal's head of security remained near the door, one hand resting on the hilt of the stun wand in his belt. Whatever was being planned, Sela apparently expected Kastel to object—strenuously perhaps. Bosk was here as her enforcer.

Since Sela was clearly the one in charge, Kastel addressed his remarks to her. "What's going on?"

Unlike her usual icy grays and blues, today she was wearing a dark red dress. It did nothing to warm her chilly blue glance. "I've decided after carefully reviewing the facts surrounding the night of my husband's supposed attack, the fastest way to get answers is to see if we can reproduce the circumstances of that event." She waved the tall man forward. "This is Dr. Larik. He's one of the top psi doctors with the Bureau of Psi Research and Development. He'll be in charge of our experiment."

Dr. Larik spoke in a sonorous voice, no doubt the one he used in lectures. "If you will take your place on the couch, we can begin."

Kastel considered retreating into his chamber. Backing off from a fight wasn't in his nature, but he was no fool. Bosk would have his security forces here in minutes and they would simply override the door controls and drag him to the couch. Still, he had no intention of giving in too easily.

He remained where he was. "Not so fast. Before we begin I'd like to know more about this experiment of yours."

Sela's eyes narrowed as she obviously debated whether or not to answer him or to order Bosk to force him to comply. Finally, with a slight shrug of her silk-clad shoulders, she responded. "Very well. The point of the experiment is simple." She waved toward the female guide who had already settled herself on the extra couch. "We want to see if the two of you can link and then simultaneously establish a link with our test subject sleeping there."

Kastel's mouth lifted in a humorless smile. "It's been tried before and has failed every time. I'm sure Dr. Larik has told you that."

"He has. But after listening to my husband, the doctor and I agree it might be time to reexamine the theory."

"Our understanding of psi talents has vastly improved over the past thirty years," Dr. Larik added. "We have better equipment and a host of new drugs that have never been tested in a dream chamber before." He removed a black box from his pocket, opened it and took out a small glass vial filled with a milky green liquid. "I'm interested in seeing the effect of this one in particular. It's derived from the venom of the *riff* spider. Perhaps you've heard of it."

Kastel stiffened. Despite the warmth of the chamber, the flesh on his bare arms rose in small bumps. He'd read about some of the effects of *riff* derived drugs—brain fever and hallucinations were among them, and in a small sampling of people who had never demonstrated the slightest hint of psi talent, a sudden if temporary display, of random psi abilities.

"I've heard of them and what I've heard hasn't been good. At best they're still experimental."

Dr. Larik's thin lips curled into something resembling a smile. "I believe what we're doing here qualifies as an experiment. You have nothing to worry about, Mr. Fane," he

said, picking up a hypo-injector and snapping open the back. "I'm using a relatively small dose and you will be closely monitored."

Kastel eyed the hypo-injector as Dr. Larik slid the vial into place. *Lords, was it possible that the drug would work?* Why or how he and Inari managed to form their link was a mystery to him. He'd always attributed it to their incredible physical and mental connection. There was something almost sacred about it. And now these bastards wanted to poke and pry and exploit it for some ugly purpose. *Fuck 'em. Let them try their experiment.* Drugs or no he'd do everything in his power to see that it turned out to be a colossal failure.

He straightened and unfolded his arms. "Okay. But it's a waste of time."

Sela lips curled in a faint smile. "Perhaps, but I'd like to see for myself." She gestured toward the empty couch. "Shall we proceed?"

Kastel nodded. No point in fighting the inevitable. He walked to the couch and lay down. Dr. Larik approached and held the hypo-injector against Kastel's upper arm. He depressed the trigger and then moved on to administer a dose to the other guide and the sleeping man.

Kastel felt a slight sting followed by an icy numbness that moved rapidly to his fingers and spread across his chest. A stinging metallic taste filled his mouth and his vision blurred.

Fighting the cold lethargy creeping down his legs and other arm, Kastel turned and looked past the sleeper at the other guide. "What's your name?" he managed to croak.

"Nala," she said. Her brown eyes were glassy and wobbled in their sockets. He had no doubt his own eyes were doing the same thing. "Sorry you got dragged into this."

"No choice. It's my job." There was a slight slurring to her words.

Kastel swallowed against a wave of nausea as the room began to spin. He dragged his tongue across his dry lips. "Not sure this is a good idea."

Chief Bosk stepped up next to Nala, his stun wand in his hand. "You're going to like this even less." His face grim, he turned it on and pressed it to Nala's side. She arched in pain and screamed.

"Lords what are you doing?" Kastel tried to sit up, but his muscles wouldn't obey.

Sela Janco spoke from the foot of his couch. "In order to test our theory we felt it was necessary to duplicate the conditions of the original event. You and Inari Rau showed evidence of having been stunned. There's a slight possibility a combination of the electrical charge, the drugs remaining in your system and your psi talent created the link Maren described to us."

"You're out of your mind."

"No." A cool smile lifted the corners of her mouth. "Merely thorough."

As he watched Bosk used the stun wand on the dreamer. His face contorted and his body twitched. Then it was Kastel's turn. Bosk's brown eyes met his for a second, and

Kastel saw the repressed anger. He was as unhappy about his role in this farce as Kastel was. *Almost*. He wasn't the one about to be subjected to the full force of a stun charge.

Bosk touched the wand to Kastel's side. Pain jolted through him. His entire body lifted off the couch and then he went limp. He didn't lose consciousness as he had before. *The effect of the drug?* he wondered groggily.

Dr. Larik and Sela leaned toward him. "Now we begin," Dr. Larik said. He gestured to the technician. "Coronets, please."

The man had Nala's in place already. He settled the thin silver circlet over Kastel's brow then checked the thin wire leads. He flashed a humorless grin. "Dream well."

Bastard was Kastel's final thought as he closed his eyes against the cold, the pain and the nausea. Pushing the physical discomforts aside, he tried to focus on establishing the link. Usually it happened instantaneously, but this time he had the sensation of forcing his way through a thick spongelike wall. He pushed harder at the barrier. White hot pain stabbed between his eyes and with a stomach lurching jolt, he fell.

* * * * *

Gold curtains studded with purple and red beads hung a few inches from Kastel's face. He stared at them baffled. Where the hell am I? He could hear music, low laughter and the sound of voices beyond the draperies. He pushed them aside and stepped through. Small tables, covered with gold mesh floated like islands in the center of a broad swath of dark green carpet. A bar curved around three walls of the room. Long, narrow windows made up the fourth side. Outside the windows, he saw stars glinting like pieces of broken glass in a sky of black velvet. Space! They were in space.

He peered at the few occupants at the bar and recognized the man with the goatee as the sleeper. Okay he'd made it this far. He was actually in the man's dream. Kastel glanced around at the women in the room. None of them seemed likely candidates for Nala. For the moment at least it appeared she had failed to link into the dream.

Kastel studied the man. He suspected he was as much a lab specimen as Kastel and the other guide were, but it was worth asking him few questions. He walked to the bar and perched on one of the padded stools. "What are you drinking?"

"*Oris* brandy." The man frowned at him over the rim of his glass. "I'm guessing you're my guide?"

"I'm Kastel." He picked up the drink that had appeared in front of him and indicated the room. "Mind telling me your name and where we are?"

"Arvid Trin." They shook hands. "Think it's the space-liner I traveled on to Cereus Prime. Looks a little different. Don't remember the carpet being that color." His frown deepened. "What happened to the woman?"

Kastel raised his brows and looked around. "What woman?"

"The blonde. She was standing beside me. I ordered her a drink and when I turned around again she was gone."

Nala. Her momentary presence could explain his earlier difficulties establishing a link. Once his had stabilized, Nala's had disintegrated. He suspected she'd soon be nursing a nasty headache. He didn't wish the guide any harm. She was as much a victim in this travesty as he and Trin were. On the other hand, the realization that the experiment had failed and that Sela Janco would no doubt be profoundly disappointed, pleased him.

He considered breaking the link, but he wanted some answers first. He sipped his drink. It was tasteless, but he didn't mind. He'd have a real drink later, after this was over. He turned his attention back to Trin. "Is this the dream you contracted for?"

The man shook his head. "Chose a scenario in Taria. Wanted to know how it felt to fly. This sure isn't it."

Kastel looked around at the hazy figures of the couples dancing. He set his glass down on the bar. "No," he agreed. "It's not. I wonder what happened."

"Guess it's all part of that experiment."

Now they were getting somewhere. Kastel leaned forward. "They told you about that?"

Trin nodded and held up his empty glass. A disembodied arm filled it. "Yeah, that ice princess with the big tits and Dr. Something or Other who was with her. Said they'd put five hundred gold credits in my account if I'd agree to be part of a new dream process they were testing."

"Did they tell you anything else?"

Trin shook his head. "No. They just wanted to test some new equipment to make the experience even better for the client." He snorted. "What a joke."

"Why is that?" Kastel asked.

Trin downed his drink in one swallow and set the empty glass on the bar. "They promised me I'd fly."

It was the least he could do, Kastel decided. Arvid Trin should get something for his efforts. He smiled and laid his hand on the man's arm. "I think that can be arranged."

The bar faded, replaced by a red sky filled with winged creatures. Kastel and Trin were among them, gliding along with outstretched wings. Trin's human eyes set in the narrow, leathery features of a Tarian met his in amazed delight. "Hey, I'm flying."

Kastel's thin-fleshed lips parted in a brief grin. "So you are. Enjoy it."

The man whooped and climbed higher, the speed of his flight rippled the feathers that covered his head in a tight cap. Kastel patiently allowed him a few swoops and dives. *Okay, dream over.* Reaching out with his mind he broke the link. Red flowed into black.

* * * * *

Kastel heard Sela before he saw her. Judging from the tone of her voice, she wasn't pleased with the results of the experiment. Suppressing a smile, he opened his eyes. The technician was already at his side detaching the leads. Kastel removed the coronet and thrust it at him. The man grabbed it, avoiding eye contact.

Swinging his legs over the side of the couch, Kastel sat up. Next to him he heard Trin stirring. Well, at least *he* would leave with a smile on his face. Kastel glanced over his shoulder at the third couch. It was empty. Sela must have hustled Nala out as soon as she awakened.

As if conjured up by his thoughts of her, Sela appeared at his side. "Did you link with the client?"

Kastel didn't answer immediately. It wasn't much as acts of defiance went, but the slight tightening at the corners of her mouth told him she knew what he was doing and was irritated. "Had some trouble, but yes I was able to link to the client. And no, I could not link with Nala at the same time. No surprise there. This has been tried before and failed every time."

Sela studied him through narrow eyes. "So everyone keeps telling me, except for my husband. While I don't put much credence in most of what he's told his doctors, I can't shake the notion that something unusual happened that night—something that might be useful to me and my company."

Kastel sighed and rubbed his forehead at the first stab of what he could tell would be a killer headache. His stomach roiled and he felt tired down to his bones. He suspected the drug they'd given him was to blame. All things considered, he supposed he should be glad that a little nausea and a headache were the only aftereffects. "Give it up. You're chasing a mirage and wasting a lot of money."

Her full lips thinned. "It's my money. I'll admit that our test tonight was not a success, but I'm still not convinced that you and Inari Rau are telling the truth. If I'm right, I stand to make back all the money I've invested in investigating this and much, much more."

Kastel stood up. "And if you're wrong?"

She shrugged. "Then I still have fifteen years of your service as a guide to get some of it back." Not waiting for a response, she motioned for the technician to follow her and left.

Back in his room, Kastel managed to swallow a couple of painkillers before collapsing onto his bed with a groan. Time and sleep were the only real cures. Sela's experiment had failed, but he'd seen the keen mind already at work behind her cool blue eyes. He didn't know what she was planning, but she'd made it clear she wasn't through yet. It might be a good idea to call Inari and warn her.

He missed Inari—ached to hold her, to caress the silken skin of her cheek, to taste the sweetness of her mouth, to make love to her. His body quickened at the image of him thrusting deep into her wet, luscious pussy. He bit back a groan, tamping down his

sexual urges. *Don't be a fool. You saw Sela today.* It was safer for both of them if Inari stayed right where she was. He'd call her in the morning and explain everything.

He rolled over, trying to ignore the banging in his temples that any movement seemed to aggravate. After a time he began to feel drowsy. The meds were finally kicking in. Halfway between waking and sleep he wondered if she'd taken his advice about the sea primroses. Still wondering, he fell asleep.

Chapter Nine

Inari shifted lower in the tub, smiling at the tops of her breasts floating like islands in the sea of bubbles. She took a sip of wine then set the glass on the wide rim and gazed around with a contented sigh. While not as lavish as the bath chamber at the Celestial Crystal her new bathroom was more than satisfactory. Kastel had shown her the wonders of her new shower, but she still preferred soaking in the deep tub. Candles in holders of sea green, deep blue and aqua glass provided the only light for her nightly ritual. The tiny flickering flames glinted off the line of tiled sea creatures swimming in graceful curves around the walls.

She leaned her head back against a folded towel, inhaling the sweetly scented steam rising around her as she stared up at the two round windows high on the wall opposite the tub. At this particular time of the month, the windows provided the perfect frame for the two moons. At her fullest, Caliope filled the window to the right. The smaller, waning Kesta filled the other.

As she contemplated the planning involved in capturing and framing the moons in their celestial path each month, her fingers trailed over the top of her breast. Her pussy clenched at the sensuous caress. She wiggled her hips and a soft sigh escaped her lips. She imagined Kastel's hands on her most intimate parts, his body on hers, thrusting his cock into her until she screamed with pleasure. Her pussy throbbed with hungry anticipation. Lords, how she wished he was here with her.

She'd always prided herself on being self-sufficient, not needing a man to complete her. During her years as a guide, dream sex blunted the need for physical sex. But since Kastel had entered her life she'd discovered her body craved it, or more specifically him. *Face it, Inari, you want him not just for one hour, or one day, but also for always.* The thought both thrilled and scared her to the center of her being.

Pushing the troubling emotions aside, she concentrated on pure physical sensation. She made slow, sensuous circles around her nipples with the tips of her fingers. They swelled and hardened. Heat flared in her belly. Kneading her breasts with one hand, she tugged and pinched her nipples into hard peaks with the other. The heat in her core moved lower. She sighed deep in her throat and let her legs fall open.

Her fingers skimmed down her sides and over the small mound of her stomach. She felt a sense of satisfaction at the fact that it was getting flatter. All the walking she was doing was paying off. She'd lost nearly ten pounds. Kastel insisted he loved her soft curves. The words were sweet as a *jela* bird's song to her ears. She loved him for saying them, but deep in her heart she knew a woman of her age couldn't afford to believe everything her lover said.

Her hands skated lower. She ran them up and down the inside of her thighs, trailing her fingers over her labia. She moved one of the candles to a safer spot and draped one leg over the edge of the tub to give herself more access to her pussy. It throbbed as her fingers parted her wet folds and sought the plump pearl hidden there.

She rubbed her clit with the soapy tips of her fingers, feeling the excitement building deep inside her. Memories of Kastel's tongue working its magic on her swollen flesh filled her mind. The movement of her fingers became faster, more demanding. She spread her thighs wider and tightened her inner muscles seeking to heighten the sensation.

Pinching her nipples with one hand, the other continued to massage her clit. All her bodily sensations seemed to center on that swollen nub. Her muscles clenched and she threw back her head with a muffled moan of pleasure as a series of spasms pulsed through her.

Inari emitted a deep sigh, filled with the warm, muscle-melting afterglow of her orgasm. Pleasurable as the experience had been, it didn't come near to the intensity she achieved when in Kastel's capable hands.

How much longer would they have to wait until it was safe to see each other again? Surely by now, with nothing to support her suspicions, Sela Janco's attention had moved elsewhere. Inari lay in the tub a few more minutes, pondering the situation. Realizing that the water had grown tepid, she rose with a sigh. She certainly wasn't going to find any answers sitting in her tub. She dried herself, slipped into a sleeveless green nightgown, blew out the candles and headed to bed.

Her moments of self-pleasuring had done little to relax her. Thoughts of Kastel, Sela and Maren Janco chased each other around her mind. She tossed fitfully for most of the night, finally falling deeply asleep in the wee hours of the morning. When she woke the sun was well up in the sky.

"Lords," she muttered as she rolled out of bed into a patch of bright sunshine. She'd planned on being up early so she could run errands before sitting down to work on the dream designs she'd been commissioned to do for Port Liassa's one and only dream dome. After hurrying to wash and dress, she brushed her hair, restraining it with a bronze and blue striped band before heading down to her kitchen. After a quick bite to eat, she grabbed her net bag and set off for the mile walk along the beach to a small open-air market at the edge of town.

It was almost noon by the time she'd done her shopping and retraced her steps to her house. She paused at her gate to look at the ocean. No matter how hectic her day she couldn't get enough of the view. The tide had gone out leaving the usual debris of shells and tangled ropes of seaweed behind.

The sun had moved behind a layer of clouds. A chilly breeze lifted her hair, a reminder that the rainy season was fast approaching. She shivered. As she crossed her yard she couldn't help but notice that the few flowers brave enough to settle there had withered. Depressed by the sight, she vowed that as soon as the rainy season was over

she was definitely going to look into planting some sea primroses as Kastel had suggested.

The chiming of her vid-phone greeted her as she entered the house and set her bag down. Almost simultaneously a melodious tinkle announced someone was at her front door. Inari hesitated, her hand halfway to the play button. The door chime sounded again. Curiosity about her unexpected visitors won and she let the phone take a message.

As she strode across her living room she glanced out the front window and saw a sleek black and silver air-car parked on her front lawn. She assumed it belonged to one of her neighbors. She threw open the door, her welcoming smile freezing on her lips as she recognized the woman standing there. An unfamiliar man stood behind her. Inari's first instinct was to slam the door shut in their faces.

"Are you going to invite us in?" Sela Janco asked, arching one thin blonde brow. It was obvious from the amused curve of her lips that she was well aware of Inari's impulse.

Nettled by the other woman's superior attitude, Inari plastered a smile on her face and waved them inside. Questions crowded her mind. First and foremost—*what is Sela Janco doing here?* Hiding her growing unease, she stepped back and gestured for Sela and her companion to enter. Acting the polite hostess, she led them to the living room and motioned for them to sit down. She didn't offer drinks. Politeness only went so far. She chose a chair opposite them and sat down. "Why are you here?"

Looking completely composed, Sela Janco sat erect on the sofa her hands resting in her lap. "Before I answer that question, let me introduce my colleague." She gestured to the man sitting beside her with a silver metal case at his feet. "This is Nolan Var, my adjudicator."

An adjudicator! Inari's chest tightened. Whatever game Sela was playing, the fact that she'd brought private legal counsel didn't bode well. She gave a curt nod to the man. "Mr. Var."

With more grace than she, he inclined his head. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Miss Rau." He had a warm baritone voice, but the smile he gave her didn't reach his eyes.

Both Var and Sela watched her with all the intentness of two hungry birds of prey. *And guess who's the next on the menu,* Inari thought. "I assume this isn't a social visit?"

"I suppose that depends on how cooperative you plan to be," Sela said. She cocked her head in anticipation of Inari's response.

Inari settled back in her chair and crossed her legs, trying to appear calmer than she felt. "Exactly what is it that you wish me to be cooperative about?" she asked with a wary smile.

"Further investigation into the events surrounding the night of my husband's...breakdown requires your return to Gemmax City to undergo a series of psi tests."

Inari's heart leaped in her chest. *Had Sela discovered the truth about that night?* Inari couldn't imagine either Talia or Kastel would reveal the secret they'd all sworn to protect—at least not without coercion. Her heartbeat faster as she considered the idea. On the other hand, the fact that they needed Inari for tests indicated Sela might simply be on a fishing expedition. In that case, it was imperative that Inari not lend credence to anything Sela's husband might have said.

Mentally taking a deep breath, Inari decided it was time to go on the attack. She flashed Sela and Var an amused smile. "Surely you aren't still trying to prove that outlandish theory of the three of us somehow being linked in a dream *sans* any of the necessary equipment?" She looked Sela up and down, her smile growing wider. "The whole idea is ridiculous. If you continue in this vein, people are going to begin thinking that you should join your husband at the institution."

Sela's pale face flushed and her hands fisted on her lap. With an obvious effort she got herself under control. Taking a deep breath she unclenched her fingers and smoothed them over her expensive, black silk skirt. "I'll let that insult pass," she said, her voice colorless. "The fact remains, that whether or not you feel my reasons are ridiculous, I have the legal right to compel you to return with me and submit to testing." She stared hard at Nolan Var who had remained silent throughout the entire proceedings.

He leaned forward and picked up the metal case he'd set at his feet. Opening it, he removed a translucent plastic sheet. "Mrs. Janco is correct. This is an order from the Head Adjudicator of Gemmax City ordering you to return for further questioning and testing, as it relates to the events that took place at the Celestial Crystal on the night in question." He handed the document to Inari. "It's all here, but please see for yourself."

She didn't need to read the lines of legal justification to know that Var spoke the truth. Psi talents were a valuable commodity on Cereus Prime and the laws concerning them were canted in the direction of the government agencies and private corporations who utilized psi skills. The laws concerning psi testing all favored Sela. Inari would have no choice but to submit to the tests.

She took the document anyway, using the diversion of pretending to read it to collect her thoughts. For twenty-seven years she'd worked hard to achieve her dream of a little house by the sea. In a matter of hours, Sela Janco could destroy it. *Is there a way to beat the test?* The pulse in her throat leaped at the thought. Taking a deep breath, she considered what she knew of the way the tests were conducted. Fooling them would be incredibly difficult, if not impossible. Still, there had to be a way.

Hiding her emotions behind a mask of cool indifference, Inari handed the sheet back to Nolan Var. "It appears I don't have much of a choice."

"So it would seem." A barely restrained smile of triumph hovered at the corners of Sela's mouth.

"How long will this testing take?" Inari fought to keep her voice level.

"A few days. Of course your visit will be extended indefinitely if what I suspect is true." Sela made no effort to hide her glee at having gotten Inari just where she wanted her.

A perverse stubbornness stiffened Inari's back. One day she'd wipe that smug look off Sela Janco's face. "I have several contracts for dream designs due in the next few weeks. Since you continue to insist on this nonsense, I'm sure you'll have no problem paying the lost fees."

Sela shrugged. "You've become quite the little businesswoman."

Inari rose. "I'm a quick study. Now if you have no objections I'll pack a few things to take along." Sela waved an indifferent hand.

Fifteen minutes later, Inari was seated in the backseat of Sela's sleek air-car, a small overnight bag on the floor at her feet. The trip to Gemmax City was a little over three hours. Not much time to come up with a plan. Her lips lifted in a wry smile as she absently caressed the cool glass and shell Luvian bracelet on her wrist. *You were the premier dream guide in all of Gemmax City. If anyone can fool a psi test, it's you.* Her smile hardened into a grim line as she leaned her against the plush backrest. Now all she had to do was figure out how.

* * * * *

When she arrived at the Celestial Crystal, Inari was escorted to Kastel's chambers. She'd assumed they'd be kept apart until the test. Since it was unlikely that Sela had developed a heart, allowing them to see each other no doubt served some other purpose. Although she welcomed the chance to be with Kastel, it was clear they would have to be careful not to reveal anything that would bolster Sela's suspicions.

As the door swished open and the two guards pushed Inari forward into the room, Kastel looked up from his portable reader. He set it aside and rose, but not before she noted a flash of emotion in the depths of his blue eyes. Guilt? Fear? She wasn't sure what to name what she'd seen. Neither was very reassuring.

Her lips curved in a crooked smile. "I take it Sela didn't tell you I was coming?"

He shook his head, his expression still guarded. She expected him to come to her, take her in his arms and kiss her, but he remained standing beside his chair. She fiddled with the band of her Luvian shell bracelet, unsure how to proceed. This was *not* the way she'd envisioned their reunion.

"How are you?" The words seemed dragged out of him.

So the infatuation had burned itself out. Pain laced through her heart. She hid her sorrow and disappointment behind a casual shrug. "I'm fine, considering." She crossed the room and dropped her bag beside the bed then turned to look at him. "What about you? You don't seem happy to see me."

"It's not that." Kastel sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "I was afraid this would happen."

Inari tamped down her emotions and tried to focus on his words. "You knew they were bringing me here for testing?"

He shook his head. "I wasn't sure. After they failed with me, I guess it was inevitable."

Gesturing toward the cabinet, she found the nearest chair and sat down. "I think you'd better tell me everything. But first I need a glass of wine."

Kastel's lips quirked in the first hint of a smile she'd seen since she'd arrived. "By the time I'm done, you'll probably want to drink an entire vat." He moved to the cabinet and took out glasses and a decanter. "I called you this morning, tried to warn you, but you didn't answer your vid-phone," he said over his shoulder as he poured the wine.

Inari frowned remembering the early morning call that she'd ignored in favor of the door chime. Events had happened so quickly she'd never had a chance to check her messages. "Your call came in at the precise moment, Sela Janco and her adjudicator turned up at my home."

"An adjudicator?" Kastel's brows arched. "She doesn't leave much to chance does she?"

"No. And unfortunately it appears she has the law on her side."

Kastel's mouth tightened. "So I've discovered." He handed her a glass before sitting down next to her. After taking a healthy gulp, he quickly told her about his own experience in the dream chamber.

As he spoke, Inari gazed around the room. Except for a few personal items of Kastel's, it looked much the same. It occurred to her that with all the technology at Sela's disposal that it was likely listening devices had been planted to spy on their conversation. No doubt that was the reason why they had been permitted to see each other. *Lords, that's going to make everything more difficult.*

Kastel finished his tale and looked at her for a reaction. "They actually used *riff* venom? Sela must be desperate. Well, we told her it wasn't possible," she commented in a neutral tone. She looked around the room again trying to spot something out of the ordinary, but saw no outward evidence of anything that might contain an electronic spy-ear.

A puzzled look on his face, Kastel followed the direction of her gaze. "Apparently she's not yet convinced."

Inari set down her drink, stood up and moved to stand in front of him. "Forget about Sela. We haven't seen each other in weeks. Let's not waste what little time we have together." Lowering herself to his lap with a sultry smile, she nuzzled his ear. "Don't let on, but I think there might be a spy-ear planted in your quarters. Somehow we have to fail whatever tests they put us through," she added as she nibbled on his earlobe.

Kastel stiffened, then set his glass aside and wrapped his arms around her waist, obviously having caught on to her ploy. He kissed his way up her neck then moved his

lips slowly along the line of her jaw. She shivered at the light caress. "Any ideas how we do that?" he murmured against her mouth.

She traced the outline of his lips with the tip of her tongue and whispered back, "No, but we'll think of something."

He mimicked her action, smiling a little as she shuddered with pleasure. "They could be watching as well as listening."

She tangled her fingers in his hair. "Lucky them," she sighed into his mouth. She wiggled deeper into his lap and felt him come partially erect. Her panties dampened. Knowing that someone might be watching them was surprisingly arousing.

Kastel must have thought so too. All vestiges of his earlier reticence vanished as he took possession of her lips, driving away any rational thoughts from her mind.

Their fingers collided as they struggled to help each other undress. Several buttons gave way as she tugged at his shirt. She'd buy him a new one later. They broke apart for a second to shed his shirt and her tunic. She pressed her naked breasts to his bare chest, reveling in the counterpoint of her soft flesh and his hard muscles. The sensation of skin against skin sent hot currents of desire coursing through her. The muscles deep inside her pussy clenched.

Their mouths met, tongues dueling. Kastel gathered her closer and stood up. He crossed to the bed in several long strides. With one knee on the side for balance he lowered her to the mattress. Inari watched through heavy-lidded eyes as he quickly stripped off the rest of his clothes before bending to remove hers. He settled beside her and pulled her into his arms, kissing her until she was breathless.

"So you did miss me," she managed between kisses. She shot him a playful smile and ran her fingers down his chest. "At least a little."

He raised himself on his arm and brushed a stray curl from her forehead. "More than a little. I thought about you every day – about us."

At his admission, the breath she hadn't realized she was holding since she'd first entered the room, escaped her in a soft sigh. She was surprised to discover how important it had become to hear him say he hadn't lost interest in her. *So much for their relationship being just about great sex.*

His fingers brushed over her breast. His eyes still on her he made lazy circles around each nipple, smiling a little as they thrust upward, begging for more attention. He gave it to them, bending and ravishing each one with his tongue. Desire hummed in her veins and Inari groaned softly and dug her fingers into his shoulders. His cock swelled and pressed against her thigh.

As he continued to suck one nipple, his hand moved lower to stroke her labia, tracing the plump folds. Fingers coated with her juices, he found the nub hidden beneath and teased it until it grew hard and aching. Inari trembled with arousal and opened her thighs wider giving him full access to the most sensitive areas of her body.

Kastel took her invitation. Holding her gaze with his he thrust two fingers into her channel. He kept up a steady rhythm while his thumb circled her clit.

Inari grabbed his upper arms and pulled him to her. "Oh, Lords, I need you inside me." Her voice rasped with need. Devouring her mouth with deep kisses, Kastel positioned himself over her. His cock pushed against her slick entrance. Inari lifted her hips and he shoved inside. She locked her legs around him urging him deeper. He rocked in and out, moving fast then slow, then fast again.

Inari's head thrashed back and forth on the pillow. Her breathing came harsh and ragged, every nerve screaming for release. She massaged the hard muscles of his back. Every thrust of his cock into her slick, hot depths brought her closer to the edge. He pumped his hips faster and deeper. The heat coiling between her legs became white hot; she exploded into an orgasm so intense she cried out. Her cry of completion mingled with his as he came, his hot seed spurting deep inside her. Consciousness spun away from her for a moment.

When she opened her eyes, Kastel was looking down at her, a slight smile tilting his mouth. "I guess that proves how much I've missed you." His breathing was still ragged and she could see the veins in his neck still pulsing with residual passion.

She smiled up at him, stroking his honey-blond hair out of his face with tender fingers. He caught her hand and turned it, pressing his lips to her palm. Settling himself in the bed beside her, he pulled her to him, placing her head in the crook of his shoulder. Drowsy she snuggled closer. She felt his lips brush against her hair. The hard muscles beneath her cheek relaxed into sleep.

Lords, she needed this man, she thought, listening to his steady breathing as he slept beside her. The revelation made her mind spin. Unable to sleep, she rose, careful not to disturb him, retrieved her robe from her bag and slipped it on. As she wandered about the room, dread began to push away the warm contentment she'd felt after her and Kastel's lovemaking. In less than twenty-four hours they had to have a plan in place that would emphatically disprove Sela Janco's suspicions about them sharing a special psi-link. Unfortunately, Inari didn't have the slightest clue how to proceed. Lords, she didn't understand this new ability herself.

She poured herself a glass of wine and sank into a chair, staring sightless into the dimly lit room. She vaguely remembered mentally calling Kastel's name that night. No one had been more surprised than she had when he'd appeared in the dream with Maren and her. And that was another mystery. How had she managed to link with Sela's husband while they were both awake? Did Maren also possess some psi talent? Was he an undiscovered latent like Kastel had been until the accident that kicked his talent into high gear?

Her brain whirling with unanswered questions, she set her untouched drink aside and rose to pace the room again. Whatever the explanation, one thing was sure, so far she didn't appear to exercise any conscious control over what happened. She assumed the same held true for Kastel. Which meant when they hooked them up in the dream chamber and put the coronets on their heads, it was more than likely they would link whether they wanted to or not. What she needed was a way to prevent one of them from being able to link.

She sat down again mentally reviewing everything she knew about the way the dream process worked. While sleep might seem like a steady state, it actually took place in several stages. Dreaming didn't occur until the sleeper achieved rapid eye movement, known as REM sleep. Special drugs were used to help clients reach that stage more quickly than they would during normal sleep. As a guide, her training allowed her to immediately reach the REM stage. Her psi talent allowed her to link with her client and with the help of the coronet she could maintain the dream state while she spun the desired fantasy. If either she or Kastel failed to reach REM sleep, there was no possible way for them to link with each other. She tunneled her fingers through her hair with a groan. Fantastic idea, but how was she supposed to achieve it?

Frustration drove her to her feet. Unable to think about the problem any longer, she crossed the room to the small alcove that served as an office. Her gaze skimmed over shelves of vid-cubes coming to rest on a diagram lying on top of the desk. She picked it up and saw that it was a landscape drawing with neat notes about types of plants and shrubs along the side. It was her garden. Further proof that despite Kastel's cool reception earlier, he had not lied when he'd said he missed her.

She selected a cube from among the pile setting next to the diagram, slid it into the reader and clicked it on. As she scrolled through, she saw that it was filled with pictures of plants. Next to each photo was information about the plant—a brief description, where it was found, how to plant and maintain it, uses, and warnings about toxicity. He'd marked several passages on herbs and flowers acclimated for sandy soil that could be brewed into tea.

She was surprised to see how many there were. Some of them had interesting properties. She sat down and read the section more carefully, admiring the beauty of the botanical sketches that accompanied the text. Her fingers paused in the middle of tracing the delicate scarlet flowers of a flowering shrub she'd never heard of before as she read about one of its side effects. She leaned closer and reread the section. Her stomach fluttered with excitement and her heartbeat accelerated.

Clicking off the reader, she straightened with a smile. She almost floated across the room. Curling up beside Kastel, she bent and kissed the corner of his mouth. He made a drowsy sound. She ran her fingers up and down his chest and kissed him again. He opened his eyes. "What?"

She leaned close and whispered in his ear. "I think I have that idea you said to tell you about."

* * * * *

Lysa Talcott answered her vid-phone on the first chime. Her eyebrows lifted as she recognized Inari. Lysa looked tired and for the first since Inari had known her, she was beginning to look her age. Lysa frowned. "I'd like to say I'm happy to see you, Inari, but under the circumstances..."

Inari nodded. "It's not your fault, Lysa. And on the up side, Kastel and I are getting to spend time with each other." Her brow furrowed. "Which I have to admit is a surprise. By now we figured we'd be strapped down in a dream chamber."

Lysa's lips lifted in humorless smile. "If it had been left up to Sela Janco that's where you'd be, but Dr. Larik wasn't prepared. He's scheduled the next session for tomorrow afternoon."

"Good, then there's time." Lysa's expression grew cautious. "Don't worry. It's nothing nefarious," Inari reassured her with a smile. *Lords, but she was getting good at lying.* "I've just decided that in the spirit of cooperation, I'd help Sela out."

Lysa's brows arched. "And you're doing that because...?"

"It's simple, really. The closer we set up the same parameters as the night in question, the more accurate the test. When it fails, as we all know it will, Sela will have to give up this insane line of questioning. Then I can go home and life at the Celestial Crystal can get back to normal...or as normal as it can be with Sela Janco at the helm."

"So where do I come in?"

"I need my special tea, the one I drank that night to prepare for the dream session. That was my last batch before I left. If I give you the ingredients, could you brew a pot for me?"

"Sounds easy enough. What do you need?" Lysa jotted down the names of the mostly innocuous herbs Inari listed. When she was finished she laid the pen aside. "What if Sela objects?"

"Why should she? This is for her benefit as well as ours. If she's suspicious, give her a cup."

Lysa grinned. "I'll do that. Everyone knows about those vile herbal concoctions you drink."

"It takes about an hour for the tea to take effect. Will that be a problem?"

"I don't think so. What about Kastel?"

"Other than some wine, the only thing he imbibed that evening was *fremik* tea. I saw some of that in his cupboard, so he should be fine."

"Okay, I'll see you tomorrow afternoon. We can chat while you drink your tea."

"You're welcome to share it with me."

Lysa grimaced and shook her head. "Thanks, but I think I'll pass."

"Coward," Inari said with a grin. Still smiling she turned off the vid-phone. There was nothing to do now but wait.

Waiting turned out to be harder than she thought. Kastel had listened to her vid-phone conversation, a moody light in his blue eyes. As the evening wore on, he became distant and quiet. Inari didn't push him. She sensed that something was troubling him.

His temperament did not improve the next day. By the time Lysa arrived an hour before the scheduled time of the test, Inari's nerves were stretched almost to the breaking point.

It was obvious from Lysa's sidelong glances as she poured Inari's tea that she too sensed the tension between them. After handing Inari her cup of the steaming brew, she helped herself to a glass of wine before settling into the room's remaining chair.

"Any problem with Sela about the tea?" Inari asked, breaking the uncomfortable silence.

Lysa shrugged. "She wasn't happy with the idea, but since she's insisting on replicating all the events of that night, she couldn't argue against it. I even offered her a cup as you suggested." The corners of her lips lifted. "She declined."

Inari and Kastel exchanged glances. The set of his shoulders eased a bit. "I'm not surprised," he said with a mock shudder. "I've tried a few of Inari's blends."

Inari lifted her cup and took a sip of tea. It took everything she had not to make a face and spit it out. The combination of her usual herbs with the new one was utterly disgusting. Not that she would ever admit it. And if it worked, she'd drink a gallon of it. Assuming she didn't vomit first, she thought, as her stomach rumbled in protest. She forced down another mouthful.

The pot was nearly empty by the time they were summoned to the dream chamber for the test. It would be best not to leave any of the tea behind she decided. As she picked up the pot and carried it to the sink to wash it, her stomach rumbled again, louder.

Lysa and Kastel exchanged worried glances. "Are you okay?" he asked with a pointed look at her mid section.

Inari flushed, waving their concern away. "I'm fine. Although I just remembered why this particular tea is no longer on my list of favorites."

Lysa's gaze shifted between Inari and the empty teapot sitting on the counter beside the sink, suspicion bright in the depths of her hazel eyes. If she'd figured out that she'd been manipulated, she wasn't angry about the discovery. Her reaction was quite the opposite. She smiled broadly as she picked up the pot and began to wash it. "I've warned you before about those exotic blends. Take my advice and stick to local teas in the future."

Inari smiled. "Yes, Mother." She picked up a white towel and wiped the pot dry. Setting it aside, she looked from Lysa to Kastel. "All ready?" They nodded. "Okay, then let's get this over with."

Chapter Ten

Lords, this had better work. With each step Inari took toward the door she grew more uncomfortable. Her nerve endings tingled and she felt hot and dizzy, due no doubt to the scarlet *trellium* she'd added to her tea. The perfect answer to their dilemma, she'd thought after reading the detailed account of the plant's side effects. As her stomach cramped again, she wondered if she'd made a colossal mistake.

Cautious by nature, she'd always been the stable, sober role model for the younger guides. In all her years she'd never been involved in anything as insane as this. A plus for their side she decided. No one would ever suspect her of being capable of devising such a scheme. She swallowed a belch and tasted a disgusting mixture of smoky heat from the scarlet *trellium*, spices from the tea and bile. Now if only she could convince her stomach to cooperate.

Sweat sprang out on her brow as another wave of nausea struck her. She swayed slightly. Kastel's arm snaked around her waist. "Maybe you shouldn't have drunk all that tea."

She wiped her forehead with the back of her hand and slanted him a shaky smile. "I might have overdone it a bit." Glad of the warm strength of his arm pressing into her back, she leaned against him.

One side of his mouth quirked upward. "Just a bit?" Despite the sarcasm in his voice, his eyes were filled with concern. He touched her cheek with the back of his hand. "Maybe we should try to cancel this. Tell them you're sick. We wouldn't be lying – one look at you is all it would take."

Looking into Kastel's vibrant blue gaze always took her breath away. Their color and amazing clarity reminded her of a deep mountain lake. Lost in their depths, Inari momentarily forgot where she was.

"Inari, did you hear me?"

The sound of her name pulled her back to reality. Remembering his original question she sighed and shook her head. "We'd only be postponing the inevitable. Besides, if this works we'll be rid of Sela Janco for good." She forced herself to stand upright. As the door slid open, she flashed him a reassuring smile and walked into the dream chamber.

The technician standing by the monitoring equipment was a stranger. The minute flash of his eyebrows as his gaze met Kastel's, told her he recognized him from the earlier experiment. His mouth opened then clamped shut again at the sight of Lysa Talcott. It was clear from his expression that he hadn't been expecting her. He gestured to the couches. "Please take your places." His tone was respectful. Inari suppressed a smile. *It paid to have friends in high places.*

Her moment of cocky good humor abruptly faded as she noticed the empty third couch. She'd been expecting Kastel's bearded man from the first experiment. So who was the other participant? She'd been counting on this session to follow the same parameters as the last one. She took a deep breath to calm herself. Since that test had failed it was unlikely that Sela would use the same subject a second time. No doubt she'd find a new client to take part in exchange for a pocket full of gold credits.

Fear tugged at her insides as she arranged herself on the center couch with Kastel in his original position on her left. What if her plan didn't work? Her mouth went dry and her heartbeat accelerated.

As if he read her mind, Kastel reached over and took her hand. "Don't worry. It'll be all right," he said, his smile reassuring.

They both turned at the sound of the outer door opening. Travek Bosk and a tall man in a dark gray syn-silk suit entered. Dr. Larik, Inari presumed from Kastel's description. A moment later Sela Janco appeared, arm and arm with her husband.

Maren Janco! Inari's heart thundered in her ears. Her stomach twisted and for a moment she thought she was going to vomit. She clamped her lips together and took a deep breath through her nose. If her plan was going to work she had to stay in control.

Kastel rolled to his feet. "What the hell is he doing here?" Hands fisted into balls at his side he glared at Janco. For a moment Inari feared Kastel might physically attack the other man.

A similar concern must have entered Bosk's mind. He positioned himself in front of Janco. "Get back on the couch, Fane." One hand moved to the butt of his stun wand, in warning. Kastel stiffened at the harsh command then he silently complied.

Inari grabbed his hand. He squeezed her fingers, but she could see from the rigid set of his jaw that he was furious. Without looking at her, he muttered, "I'm sorry."

"Don't be." Her comforting words did little to ease his rigid posture.

Sela seemed unperturbed. "Set your mind at ease, Mr. Fane. My husband is quite recovered. His presence here is as vital to the success of today's test as yours and Miss Rau's." She nodded to Maren, indicating the empty couch.

As he stretched out on Inari's right, Janco shot her a smug look. A shiver of distaste raced down her spine. Perhaps Sela had fooled herself into thinking her husband had recovered, but one look at his eyes and Inari knew nothing had changed. He could barely contain his glee. He fully expected the test would prove that he'd been telling the truth. And after that, Inari would be his own personal dream guide. The promise was written all over his face. How could Sela be so blind?

Dr. Larik turned from the console where he'd been conferring with the dream technician. "Everything seems to be in order. We can proceed with the session."

"This is a waste of time," Inari said.

Sela looked bored. "So everyone keeps insisting. But, after thinking about it for a while I realized that the last time the experiment was missing several important ingredients."

"And those were?"

Her mouth curled upward. "You and my husband. I expect to have an entirely different set of results this time." She gestured to Bosk.

Lysa stepped forward, two hands held out. "Is this absolutely necessary?"

Bosk paused with his hand on his stun wand and looked at Sela. It was obvious from his grim demeanor that he too found the situation distasteful.

Sela sighed and tapped the toe of one expensive white *var* lizard ankle boot on the floor. "As I've said before, the test situation must be as close as possible to the events of that night. A stun wand was part of the original scenario, so it has to be part of ours." She spoke slowly as if explaining the situation to a room of not-very-bright children. A slim hand gestured toward Bosk. "Proceed."

The security chief stepped up to Kastel's couch. His eyes slid away from Kastel's unflinching stare. "Sorry to do this to you again. I have no choice."

"There's always a choice. You're just choosing your job over doing the right thing."

Bosk's face turned red, but he didn't reply. Depressing the small button on the handle of the stun wand, he shoved the tip to Kastel's side. His back arched and he gave a guttural cry of pain. He fell back on the couch, his eyes glazed. The technician jammed a dream coronet on Kastel's head and hurried to stand between Inari's and Janco's couches.

"Ladies first," Janco said with a smirk.

Bosk glanced from him to Inari then back again. Making no effort to disguise his disgust, he shoved the stun wand into Janco's side. From the glint in his gray eyes Inari knew this was one time Bosk actually enjoyed using the weapon on someone. Ignoring Janco's writhing in pain behind him, the security chief turned to Inari. She saw the mixture of guilt and indecision on his face as he looked down at her.

Sela Janco's crisp voice broke the uneasy silence. "Get on with it."

He nodded, his features settling into an expressionless mask. The tech hovered at his right shoulder, the coronet at the ready to shove over her forehead.

"It won't work," Inari said, almost conversationally.

Sela stalked over to Inari's couch. "Shut up, bitch," she commanded through clenched teeth, her icy control slipping for the first time since Inari had met her. "You deserve every moment of pain this is going to bring you."

Struggling to ignore the cramping and nausea tearing at her insides, Inari managed to keep her voice level. "Ah, so this is personal."

Sela's face twisted with anger. "Of course it's personal. You're responsible for my husband's condition. You did something to him in those dreams. There's no other explanation for his mad obsession with you."

Sela's vehemence surprised Inari. Was it possible that Sela's chilly exterior hid a deep attachment to her husband? Inari studied her distorted features. No, not love, control was the real issue here. Sela couldn't stand the idea of anyone having more power over Maren than she did.

Inari's mouth twisted in a knowing smile. "Perhaps he simply preferred a dream to the reality of you," she suggested.

Sela went white. "Do it," she ordered. The tech took one look at her face, placed the coronet on Inari's head and stepped back. Without warning Sela grabbed the stun wand from Bosk. "Dream well," she said with a sneer as she pushed it into Inari's side.

Pain exploded along every nerve pathway of Inari's body. Nausea gripped her and the room swam in front of her eyes. Sela leaned closer, satisfaction written over every inch of her.

Inari's stomach clenched and she broke into a heavy sweat. Although she doubted her ability to link while in this condition, she had to try or Sela would simply insist they do this all over again. She closed her eyes, fought pain and sickness to forge a link. Her head whirled, making her dizziness worse. For a second she thought she saw a long expanse of beach stretching out in front of her then everything went gray.

From a distance she heard Sela Janco ask, "Is it working?"

Forcing her eyes open, she saw Sela standing beside the couch her attention on the technician bent over the screens at his station. Inari's stomach cramped and she moaned. Sela whipped around to face her. A cold fist clenched around Inari's stomach. Groaning, she struggled to sit up. Bitter fluid rose in her throat. Unable to contain it, she clutched her belly and bent forward. Her last clear image was of Sela Janco's face as a stream of vile reddish-brown liquid struck her pristine white syn-silk suit and matching boots.

* * * * *

Even before he was fully awake, Kastel knew the attempt to link had failed—spectacularly from the sound of it. Above the babble of angry accusations and counter-accusations, Sela Janco's voice rose in a shrill shriek. The stench of vomit permeated the air. Inari! *He never should have allowed her to put that damned alien herb in her tea.*

Ignoring the painful thumping of his head, he pulled off the dream coronet and sat up. Inari huddled at the end of her couch, both arms hugging her middle. Directly in front of her stood Sela Janco, her face contorted with a mixture of disgust and outrage. Thick, stinking reddish-brown goo dripped down the front of her suit onto her *var* lizard boots.

A deep guttural sound of pain issued from Inari's lips. She leaned forward and was sick again. Sela leaped back barely avoiding being splattered a second time. She rounded on Dr. Larik, angry red splotches marring her usual creamy cheeks. "You fool. Don't just stand there do something."

Looking as if he was fighting a battle not to lose the contents of his own stomach the older man raised both hands in front of him. "M-me?" he sputtered. "What am I supposed to do? I'm not a medical doctor."

Unmindful of the smell and the mess, Kastel pushed Sela out of the way, bent and scooped Inari up in his arms. She groaned and buried her face against his shoulder. As he strode to the door of his chamber he heard Lysa giving orders to the Celestial Crystal's medical staff.

Shifting Inari in his arms he slammed the door control with his elbow. He carried her to the bed. The door closed shutting out the voices from the dream chamber. As he gently laid Inari on the bed, the door slid open again. He turned, his lips pulled back in a warning snarl. Lysa hesitated mid-step. His expression slipped from anger to chagrin. "Sorry. I didn't realize it was you."

She waved his apology aside. "Dr. Charil and his staff will be here in a few minutes." Moving past Kastel, she stared down at Inari, a worried frown creasing her forehead. "I knew the two of you were up to something. Later I expect an explanation."

Kastel nodded. He sat on the edge of the bed and smoothed back Inari's sweat-drenched hair. She started to shiver. He pulled the edge of the bed cover over her. Her eye lids fluttered open. Her brown eyes were dull with pain and confusion. "Where?"

In my chambers." He laid a finger over her lips when he saw her struggling to speak again. "Shh. Don't talk. The doctor will be here soon."

The door chimed on his last word and Lysa hurried to answer it. Dr. Charil, the Celestial Crystal's Chief of Medicine, entered along with two women attired in dark purple med-tech uniforms.

Kastel and Lysa were unceremoniously hustled out of the way as the medical team took over. After a brief examination that coincided with Dr. Charil's rapid-fire questions, he and his med-techs bundled Inari up and carried her to the bath chamber.

Kastel moved to follow, but Dr. Charil stopped him. "There's nothing you can do for her. Let me do my job."

He searched the other man's face. The doctor met his scrutiny with a calm confidence, his mouth quirking upward in a sympathetic smile. He put his hand on Kastel's shoulder. "I'll bring her back to you in one piece, I promise." Kastel stepped back. Waiting was the hardest part. He was a doer by nature and he hated the feeling of helplessness, but the doctor was right. He was the only one who could help Inari now.

Two hours later the beaded curtain covering the entrance to the bath chamber jangled melodiously as Dr. Charil entered followed by the two med-techs who were supporting a pale-faced, wobbly kneed Inari between them. Her hair was damp and she was dressed in a fresh nightgown. They helped her into bed then stood back as Dr. Charil moved forward, a hypo-injector in his hand. He bent and gave Inari an injection then dismissed the techs.

"How is she?" Kastel and Lysa asked simultaneously as Dr. Charil walked over and sank into the nearest chair.

"She's purged everything from her system. I gave her something to make her sleep. She'll be sore and tired for a few days after she wakes up, but other than that there should be no long-lasting effects." He ran his hand through his cropped dark hair. "The government really should regulate these exotic herbs. I know they're popular for teas and cooking, but the truth is that many of them are highly dangerous." His brow furrowed above his deep-set brown eyes. "I'm surprised that Inari of all people would be foolish enough to experiment with them. I always thought she was more sensible than that."

"Inari's been under a great deal of stress lately," Lysa responded quickly.

Dr. Charil pursed his lips. "In the future tell her to stick to our local *Cereus Prime* teas. She should sleep through the rest of the night." Rising, he added, "Call me if she wakes up in any kind of distress."

Lysa stood up and walked with him to the door. After a brief conversation, she went to the console and poured herself a glass of wine. "I need something stronger than tea, home grown or otherwise. Want some?" she asked over her shoulder. Kastel shook his head. Glass in hand, she returned to her former chair. "Now, would you care to explain which of the herbs I put in that tea caused all of this?"

Kastel's eyes widened. Surely Lysa knew his chambers were being monitored. "I'm not sure," he answered, keeping his face impassive.

Lysa sent him a reassuring smile. She dug into the pocket of her jacket, withdrew her hand and turned it over. In the middle of her palm lay a silver disk smaller than her thumb nail. "It's a jammer. We can talk freely."

Kastel bent forward and examined the disc. "Where did you get that?"

"Bosk gave it to me. He and I go back a long way. And he's not happy about what Sela's been asking him to do."

Kastel rubbed his side remembering the pain from the stun wand. "So this is in the way of an apology?"

"You could consider it that way." She leaned forward. "Bosk is using an unscheduled diagnostic of the Celestial Crystal's security systems as a way of buying us some time to talk privately. He's risking a lot doing this."

"He owes us a lot," Kastel said in a hard voice.

"I agree, but he's not the issue at the moment. I need to understand what happened in the dream chamber tonight. So which one of those herbs was it?"

Kastel sighed and scrubbed his hands over his eyes. "The scarlet *trellium*. The rest of the stuff was for show."

"I wondered about that," Lysa said. "I'd never heard of it before, but it was readily available. What is it exactly?"

"It's a flowering shrub from one of the moons of Imbard IV. Inari found it listed in one of the botany vids I left on my desk. The flowers are used by the Imbardis to make

perfume that they export all over the Concord. But it's the stamens that are really profitable."

Lysa looked puzzled. "Stamens?"

"Ever have *cassilery* soup? Or fried *aku* dumplings? Or roasted *cyric* with red sauce?"

"All three actually."

"Well, that hint of smoky sweetness and the lovely red color in all those dishes comes from scarlet *trellium*."

"Sounds relatively harmless."

"It is in small amounts," he said.

One of Lysa's slender brown brows rose. "And in larger amounts?"

"It inhibits the ability to reach REM sleep."

Her eyes widened with comprehension. "And if a dreamer can't achieve REM, he or she can't create or maintain a dream link."

Kastel's mouth slid upward. "Exactly."

"But Inari appeared to be sleeping for a few minutes. If this scarlet *trellium* keeps you awake..."

"I never said it causes sleeplessness," Kastel interrupted. "There's no problem reaching the first stage of sleep, it simply prevents the sleeper from going any deeper."

"So the person falls asleep but, but can't go any deeper than stage one," Lysa murmured. She raised her head, her hazel eyes sharp. "But wouldn't that show up on the technician's monitors?"

"Absolutely. That was part of the plan."

"Part of what plan?"

"Inari and I needed to be sure that the experiment failed. If I could achieve REM and she couldn't there was absolutely no way for a three-way link to occur."

Lysa's lips pursed. "Are you saying you and Inari actually are able to create a three-way dream link?" she asked after a moment.

Kastel kept his expression bland. "Draw whatever conclusions you want." His gaze traveled to the bed where Inari lay sleeping. Had their gamble paid off? He prayed so, more for Inari's sake than his own. His stomach tightened at the idea of her spending the rest of her life as one of Sela Janco's lab experiments. "What's important now," he added, "is whether or not our plan succeeded. Do you think Sela will give up?"

"Maybe. Dr. Larik appeared convinced that the entire experiment was a failure. Some of the subjects of the earlier experiments suffered similar physical reactions to the ones you experienced. I'm not as sure about Sela. If nothing else, she'll have to replace that white suit," Lysa said with a straight face.

Kastel gave a snort of laughter. "There is that." *Although a ruined suit was small payment for the pain Sela had caused Inari*, he thought.

Lysa finished her wine, stood up and stretched. "It's been a long day. We could both use some sleep. Call me in the morning and let me know how Inari feels—earlier if she needs anything."

"I will," he promised as they walked to the door. He took her hand. "Thanks for everything you've done."

Lysa's mouth twisted in a semblance of a smile. "It was the least I could do. Inari's a dear friend. If I hadn't gotten in over my head financially none of us would be in this situation."

"No one can fault you for that. You were only trying to make the Celestial Crystal the best it could be."

She squeezed his hand and pressed something into his palm. He knew by its shape that it was the jamming device. "Keep this. Don't use it too often or someone may become suspicious." Her gaze traveled to the bed where Inari lay sleeping. "Sela Janco is not going to be happy with the way her experiment turned out. She may decide to take it out on Inari some other way. The sooner she leaves the Celestial Crystal the better."

"I agree," he said as he slipped the silver disc into his pocket. "As soon as she's feeling better, I plan to put her on an air-cab back to Port Liassa." *And see that she stays there permanently.* Something in his heart cracked at the thought.

"That would be best," Lysa agreed.

Best for whom? But he already knew the answer to that question. He walked to the bed and look down at Inari. Her face was still pale, but some of her natural color was beginning to return. He brushed his fingers across her cheek. Sleep had smoothed away the lines of pain and exhaustion from her ordeal. The few left behind spoke of a life before him.

Guilt and regret gnawed in his gut. The future he'd envisioned had been a foolish dream. Worst of all he'd made her believe that dream was a possibility. Give her a night to remember, Lysa had said. It had seemed an easy enough assignment. What he hadn't anticipated was Inari herself. She'd projected an aura of warmth, honesty and compassion that had been like cool water in the desert. He'd felt something he hadn't since the terrible night of the accident—hope.

He couldn't change the past but he could do something to change the future. With Dr. Larik's pronouncement that the experiment had failed, Sela had lost her ally. Before she found some other excuse to conduct more tests, the safest thing for Inari was for her to go back to Port Liassa and never see him again. By now he knew her well enough to know that she wouldn't see it that way. He'd simply have to find a way to convince her.

A deep ache settled in his chest as he slipped into bed and settled her head on his chest. He'd made the mistake; he had to pay the price. Pressing his lips to her hair, he knew it was a price he'd willingly pay.

* * * * *

Inari awoke to the sound of *jela* birds singing in the garden. She lay for a moment listening to their music, before fragments of the events of the previous day intruded, shutting out their cheerful song. Had they succeeded? Except for one very clear memory of being sick all over Sela Janco, details of the previous day were hazy. Kastel would know.

She rolled over instinctively seeking his presence. The other side of the bed was empty. The sheet was still warm and the imprint of his head was still in the pillow next to hers. She gathered the pillow to her chest and buried her face in it, inhaling his scent. Until she'd started sleeping with Kastel, she'd never realized how nice it was to wake up to someone beside her.

The smell of fresh baked pastries wafted into the room through the open doors to the courtyard. Her stomach rumbled and she realized she was hungry. She sat up wincing as muscles in her belly protested at the sudden movement. Memories of gut-wrenching pain and vomiting followed by the dry heaves rushed in. If she never heard the name scarlet *trellium* again it would be too soon she decided as she gathered her clothing and headed to the bath chamber.

Twenty minutes later she walked into the courtyard seeking Kastel and answers. At her approach he looked up from the vid-book he was reading. "You're looking more like yourself. How do you feel?"

"Better," she said with a smile. Eschewing the chair next to his, she sat on his lap. He stiffened then slowly slipped an arm around her waist. She plucked a still warm pastry from a plate on the table next to him, tore off a small piece and stuffed it into her mouth, savoring the mixture of honey, nuts and spice. A low sound of discomfort escaped her lips as she shifted on his lap.

"Sore?" Sympathy gleamed in the depths of his eyes.

Inari sighed. "I guess I'm lucky that I don't feel worse than I do." She set the half-eaten pastry aside. "I don't remember much, but I'm pretty sure I ruined Sela Janco's shoes."

Kastel's chest rumbled with a deep chuckle. "Actually her entire suit. It was the high point of the episode, although I doubt Sela would agree."

A satisfied smile tilted Inari's lips. Publically humiliating the ice bitch was worth the pain. Inari slanted a look at Kastel. "Was I sick all over you too?"

"A little." He shrugged.

She buried her face in his shoulder with a groan. "Lords, I'm sorry." She straightened. "After all this, please tell me our plan worked."

"We appear to have convinced Dr. Larik. Even if Sela suspects we were responsible for the entire fiasco, without his support, it's unlikely she'll be able to continue her research. Lysa suspects that it will be several days until we know for sure."

Inari walked her fingers up his chest with a mischievous smile. "Hmmm, whatever will we find to do with ourselves while we wait?"

Instead of his usual playful grin at her suggestive gesture, Kastel's expression pulled into grim lines. "Sela isn't known for her compassionate nature. Lysa and I think it would be best for you to go home – this afternoon, if a shuttle can be arranged."

Inari's eyes widened and she laughed. "Are you throwing me out?"

Kastel lifted her from his lap and stood her on her feet. "As a matter of fact, I am." He rose and looked down at her. "Being with me simply isn't healthy for you."

She heaved a sigh. "We haven't seen each other for two months. I was hoping for some time to visit, but I suppose you're right. We should be careful until we're sure this has all blown over." She brightened. "Maybe Lysa can arrange for you to come to Port Liassa for the winter festival," she rattled on, trying to hide her disappointment behind a cheerful façade.

Kastel's mouth thinned and he shook his head. Her smile became uncertain. "The winter festival is months away. I'm sure by then Sela will have forgotten all about us."

Kastel dragged a hand through his thick blond hair. "You're not hearing me, Inari. It's not safe for us to see each other – ever again."

Her eyes widened and her mouth closed on the words she'd been about to say. *Ever again?* Surely she hadn't heard him correctly. "I agree we need to be patient for a few months, but after that I doubt Sela will be a danger anymore."

Kastel shook his head. She sucked in a breath and stepped back, searching his face for some hint that his response was nothing more than a bad joke. He stared back expressionless. "No! What are you saying? You're breaking off our relationship?"

His jaw tightened. "Yes."

She gaped in disbelief. "After everything you said to me, the way you pursued me?" she finally managed.

His vivid blue eyes slid away from her. "You were right from the beginning. You have your new home and your new business. I'm still figuring out this whole dream guide thing. Trying to juggle a long distance relationship won't work in the long run."

"And I suppose that spending your life with a woman eleven years older than you never entered into the equation." She made no effort to hide the sarcasm in her voice.

Kastel's gaze swung back to her. "The age difference between us has nothing to do with this."

Liar! She gave a short, harsh laugh. "You're a man. Perky tits, long legs and a tight ass are always preferable to an aging, sagging body."

He shrugged. "If that's what you want to believe."

Inari's compressed her mouth into a tight line. She did believe it. From the very beginning she'd known the age difference would come between them eventually. At the very least, he could have denied it more vehemently.

He turned and walked away his back rigid then faced her, his hands spread. "I know you won't believe this, but I'm trying to do the right thing here."

"The right thing?" Her voice rose in disbelief. "Well maybe you should have thought about doing the right thing, before you barged into my chambers and thrust yourself into my life." Tears filled her eyes. "Damn you, Kastel Fane. I actually let myself dream of a life with you."

"You have no idea how sorry I am about that. Or how difficult this is for me. But one way or another I'm afraid that Sela Janco will find a way to use our relationship against us. I can't let her hurt you any more than she already has."

Inari gave a short bark of laughter. "So this is all about protecting me?"

"Yes. I want to be with you, Inari, but I refuse to be that selfish."

Her fingers tightened around her wrist, pushing the glass beads from her Luvian bracelet into her flesh. "What if I don't want to be protected?"

He took her shoulders and gave them a slight shake. "Listen to me. Not so long ago I did something rash and foolish and my best friend died. My whole life changed that day. I can't—won't—let something like that happen again." Raw pain flickered deep within his eyes.

She saw the agony, heard it in the tone of his voice. As angry and hurt as she was, she wanted to understand what was driving him to end their future. Sucking in a mouthful of air, she broke his light hold on her and stepped back. She walked to a chair and sat. "Tell me about your friend." She fought to keep her voice neutral.

Kastel came and sat down in his chair. Eyes focused on some distant point in the garden, he started to talk. "I told you about the accident."

"Yes," Inari said. "You spent several months in a coma and when you woke up and they ran brain scans the doctors discovered you had a strong psi talent for shared dreaming."

He slowly nodded his head. "All true, except I neglected to tell you the whole story. I was responsible for the accident. My best friend, Hale Kantos, and I were working on a new robotic harvester to be used on Silvar III."

She nodded slowly. "I've heard of Silvar III. It's a new farming colony that the Concord is looking at to help ease the food shortages for our expanding population."

He raised his head. "That's the place. The first harvest only hinted at what the Silvaran colonists can produce if they are provided with the latest in agro-technology. The market was ripe for my small company to make a huge profit if I could get one of the first contracts. Hale and I were certain our new harvester would be a big inducement to signing with my company over some of the bigger conglomerates. There was only one small problem."

Her brow creased. "Which was...?"

Kastel's firm lips pulled up in a twisted parody of his usual smile. "The harvester had stabilizer problems. Hale insisted we needed more time to work them out, but I was impatient. I wanted to seal the deal before the Silvar Planetary Co-op looked

elsewhere. I made a few changes that I thought would solve the problem." His voice trailed away.

"What happened?"

"Hale was right. The harvester lifted off the ground just fine, but when the robotic harvesting blades were extended, the stabilizers failed. The harvester crashed, one of the blades spun off and hit Hale, killing him instantly."

Decapitation. Inari swallowed hard at the sickening vision of spraying blood and a headless body falling. It had probably happened so quickly that Kastel's friend hadn't felt much. Still, it was an awful way for a young man to die. No wonder the memory haunted Kastel.

"Another piece of flying metal hit me in the head," he continued. "When I woke up, my best friend was dead and my company was in shambles. I vowed there and then that I would never be responsible again for destroying the life of someone I love."

"Love?" The word drove her to her feet.

He rose and caught her shoulders to prevent her from walking away. They stared at each other for a long moment, the only sound in the garden the sweet song of the *jela* birds. Kastel caressed her cheek and stroked her bottom lip with his thumb. "From the moment I saw your vid-photo in the file Lysa gave me, I felt connected to you. I don't know why. I don't particularly care why. It happened."

"Then why are you sending me away?" Inari whispered, leaning her cheek into his palm.

"Didn't you hear anything I said?" His voice was soft, near her ear.

She tipped her head back. "I heard. And I'm sorry. I truly am for the death of your friend. I understand how that must weigh on you. But this is different."

"No, it isn't. Sela Janco can't be trusted. Neither can her husband. I saw the look in his eyes when he saw you in the chamber. One or the other, or both, will keep looking for a way to force you back into a psi laboratory. The only way to be absolutely sure that doesn't happen is for you to go far away...take a trip." His lips curved in a bittersweet smile. "Make yourself scarce. Go to Luvia. Walk on the beach." His smile trembled. "Take a lover. Expand your dream design business. Make a name for yourself so that the Jancos will have to think twice before they make any move against you."

"What about you?"

"There's not much they can do to me. Every experiment they've tried with me as a guide has failed."

Pain battered her heart. She wanted to rail and rant against everything he said, but deep in her heart she feared he was right. Tears burned behind her eyelids. She blinked them away, refusing to make a fool of herself. "Are you sure about this? You're throwing away our chance of a future together."

He shook his head, his mouth drawn down. "We have no future and I was a fool to make either of us think we might have. I can't let anything happen to you. This time I have to make it right."

Inari gazed up into the blue eyes whose heated gaze could make her tremble with desire. She saw the pain and sorrow caused by what he was doing etched all over his face. Anger wiped away the remnants of her compassion. He deserved to suffer as he was making her suffer.

She glanced down at the Luvian bracelet on her wrist. She remembered the joy she'd felt the day Kastel had given it to her. The cool glass burned hot as molten metal against her skin. She jerked at the clasp, struggling to get it off her wrist. It caught, opening halfway. She gave a hard tug, twisting at it with impatient fingers. Fragile filaments gave way and blue-green glass beads and tiny Luvian shells showered onto the stones at her feet, leaving the central medallion hanging by one slender thread.

Inari pulled the remains of the bracelet from her wrist and thrust it at Kastel. He shook his head, but she pressed it into his hand. "Dream well, Kastel." She turned and walked away. It took every bit of control she possessed not to look back.

Chapter Eleven

Kastel swallowed the last of the *fremik* tea, making a face at the bitter taste left behind in his mouth. After all these months, he still hadn't gotten used to the taste. He walked to the courtyard doors and stared out, turning the mug around and around in his hands. The day was gray and a chilly rain was falling. It trickled down the glass and dripped from the trees. Small buds on the thin branches moving in the wind and the tiny green shoots of the *zara* lilies poking up at the edges of the fishpond heralded the arrival of spring.

It would be spring in Port Liassa too. He wondered if Inari would plant the sea primroses he'd suggested. He turned and walked over to his desk. He set down his mug and picked up the sketch showing the layout of the flowerbeds he'd proposed. *Why do you torture yourself? You'll never see her or her garden again. It's been ten months. Move on.*

Sela Janco appeared to have done just that. She'd been furious when she discovered Inari had gone back to Port Liassa. But after a particularly nasty scene, she seemed to lose interest in Inari and the Celestial Crystal. Other than demanding a monthly financial report from Lysa, Sela's attention had shifted back to her own company.

He'd accomplished what he'd set out to do—protect Inari. He should be, if not happy, at least content with that knowledge. In the ten months he and Inari had been apart, his fame as a guide had grown. Clients clamored for a session with him. Those who managed to get an appointment paid well for the privilege. He'd proven himself a worthy successor to Inari.

"If you continue to draw in the customers like this," Lysa had told him, "you'll be able to pay off your contract a year early and still put away a tidy sum to reinvest in your business."

"My brother's business," Kastel had corrected her.

"On paper," she'd agreed as she poured him a celebratory glass of wine. "To protect what was left of the company after you emptied your personal and corporate accounts to pay for Hale Kantos' funeral and to set up a trust fund for the care of his wife and two daughters. Once you've fulfilled your contract, you'll be able to make a fresh start."

He raised his glass in a mock toast. "That's the plan." He didn't add that it no longer held the same appeal to him without Inari to share it with.

He jumped and dropped the sketch, the sound of the vid-phone ringing in the other room pulling him back to the present. Grabbing the folder with notes about his next client he went to answer it. "Kirril!" His polite smile widened as he recognized the face his brother. "You developing psi- talents? I was just thinking of calling you later today."

“Must be something in the water,” Kirril said with a grin. The water comment had been a running joke with them since their teens. They used it to explain everything from unexplained occurrences to the stupid behavior they observed around them. Despite the light tone, there was something off in his brother’s smile. He looked strained and he kept twisting the fastener of his dark blue shirt.

Kastel glanced at the time slot at the bottom of his phone. “We’ll have to make this quick. I have a session scheduled in a few minutes.”

Kirril nodded. He lowered his hand and straightened his shoulders. “I’m afraid I have some unpleasant news.”

“Everything okay with Akiva and the children?”

“Nothing like that. They’re fine. This has to do with Fane Agrotech.”

Kastel’s gut tightened. “What’s wrong? During our last conversation you made everything sound as if the company was doing fine.”

Kirril shifted his weight. He looked uncomfortable. “I thought so. But profits took a dip and...” He huffed and spread his hands. “Truth is I took on more than I could handle. I’ve been given several new clients and I just got a big promotion, so that means even more hours at the office and monthly trips off-world. I just don’t have time to do both jobs.”

“So what are you proposing?”

“Already done.” Kirril’s voice was flat. “If you check your account you’ll see a nice credit balance.”

“Credit balance. What the hell are you talking about? What have you done with my company?”

His brother’s mouth thinned. “You remember the Zolax brothers?”

Kastel nodded. “Sure. Toren and Val Zolax worked in the shop for five years. They’re both honest, hardworking men. What do they have to do with this?”

“That’s what I’m trying to tell you. There is no Fane Agrotech anymore. As of nine o’clock this morning, I sold it to the Zolax brothers.”

Kastel stared at his brother, too stunned to speak. His heartbeat picked up, the vein in his neck pulsing. “You sold my company?” he finally managed past rigid lips. “Without discussing it with me?” His voice deepened to a near growl.

Kirril’s blue eyes widened and he pushed back from his desk, obviously feeling threatened despite the miles between them. He pulled at his shirt collar and cleared his throat. “I had every legal right to do what I did. In reality, Fane Agrotech belonged to me.”

“That was a technicality and you know it,” Kastel said. He felt as if he’d just gotten kicked in the gut. *Betrayed by my brother. And I never saw it coming.*

“It was the company or my promotion. I couldn’t handle both. I had to choose. I have a family, Kastel. Their future was at stake.”

"What about my future?" A look of guilt flashed across Kirril's features. *At least he still has some conscience left*, Kastel thought.

Kirril spread his hands. "I did what I thought was best. Over the next fourteen years, the interest on the credits in your account will come to a substantial amount. You'll have more than enough to start a new business."

"Exactly how much are we talking about here?" Might as well find out the details since there was nothing else he could do.

Kirril named a figure. Kastel frowned. "That's it? Fane Agrotech was worth a lot more than that."

The guilty look flashed again, followed by a glint of anger. "You got half and I got half."

Kastel's breath huffed out in shock. "You took half the profits of the sale of *my* company?"

"I think that's fair. I've been managing it for almost a year. Then there were the fees for setting up the trust and sending out the monthly payments to Hale's family. And the money I put in to the business at the beginning when you transferred it to me. I deserve something for my time."

"I won't argue with that. But half?"

The expression on Kirril's face hardened. "Yes, half. After all, it was I who kept you out of prison. The courts don't look lightly on deaths caused by obvious negligence. And you were negligent, Kastel. You can't deny it."

A rush of sorrow and regret shot through him. No, he couldn't deny it. Or the fact that had it not been for his brother's legal expertise, Kastel might have been sucking in mine dust this very moment on one of Cereus Prime's prison camps. A weary acceptance flowed over him. Losing his company was a blow, but he was helpless to do anything about it.

He gave an abrupt nod. "Point taken." He glanced at the time. "I have to go. I have a client waiting." Without waiting for his brother's reply, he slammed down the off button. Maybe later he'd talk to Kirril. At the moment he couldn't bear to look at him.

He picked up the folder he'd dropped by the vid-phone. He stared at the name realizing after a moment that he'd read it several times and it still hadn't registered. He blinked and took a deep cleansing breath. He had to get his mind back to the business at hand. Later, he'd deal with the emotional blow the sale of his company and his brother's betrayal had dealt him. Rogan Gavix, he read. The name was unfamiliar. Probably some tourist willing to pay the exorbitant fee to experience the best the Celestial Crystal had to offer. He flipped the folder open and quickly reviewed his notes, forcing himself to concentrate.

Gavix had requested a spy scenario set during the Capellian Empire a thousand years ago on Cereus Prime. Recent archaeological discoveries at some of the ancient sites had unearthed some interesting facts about life in the Capellian court. The public

was fascinated and dreams set during that time were among his most popular requests. Intrigue. War. Kinky sex. A winning trio.

His stomach tightened and his cock stirred as he considered the kinky sex part. An image of Inari, silken cords lashing her spread-eagle to a wall, writhing in lust as he stroked his oil-slick fingers between her thighs flashed through his mind. Sometimes he reflected as he palmed the door signal that losing one's self in a good dream was more appealing than reality.

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Inari stood on the small balcony off her bedroom, gazing up at the sister moons, Caliope and Kesta as they floated above the sea. It was after midnight. The air was cool and she snuggled deeper into the blanket she'd grabbed from the foot of the bed. She sighed. *Another sleepless night.* She'd had more than a few in the past months.

Her eyes followed the shimmering path cast by the moons across sea and dunes and over the stone wall at the end of her yard. Earlier in the day she'd noticed a few buds on the plants hardy enough to survive in her overgrown garden. The days were growing longer and warmer—exactly the right time to plant sea primroses. She sighed again. *Some day maybe, but not today.* Gardening brought thoughts of Kastel and along with them, a sad ache in her heart.

She'd left Gemmax City hurt, angry and confused by Kastel's decision to break off their relationship. In some perverse act of defiance she'd followed his advice, at least some of it. She'd packed her bags and bought a ticket on the first space-liner she could find going to Luvia. She might as well enjoy her misery. And the trip had the added benefit of keeping her out of Sela Janco and her obsessed husband's way.

Luvia turned out to be a mistake. She might have escaped Sela's threats, but as Inari walked the beach and watched the sun set on the phosphorescent sea, every ripple of the sequined waves reminded her of the dream sex she and Kastel had shared in the warm glowing Luvian Ocean.

After two weeks, more than enough time to feed the masochist in her, she'd booked passage back to Cereus Prime. At home in Port Liassa, she'd poured herself into her new dream design business and had even completed a vid-novel. It was amazing what one could accomplish when one was trying to forget. Of course she hadn't forgotten. That was the problem. *Inari Rau*, she mentally scolded. *You are in danger of turning into a silly middle-aged woman caught in the past. It was lovely while it lasted—better than lovely even, but time to let it go.*

Her eyes still on the moons, she took several deep breaths determined to control her unruly thoughts. She needed sleep. She had two dream designs due at the end of the week. She went inside and closed the balcony doors, shutting out the night. Shrugging the blanket off her shoulders, she slipped beneath the covers.

The house was quiet making her all too aware that the other side of the bed was cold and empty. She missed snuggling up to Kastel, waking up to his warm smile in the

morning. Her body ached for the touch of his hands. Her lips tingled as she thought of his hot kisses. *What in the Lords of Cosmos is wrong with me?* She huffed impatiently and rolled over, trying to ignore the throb between her thighs.

She tossed and turned, unable to get comfortable. She'd had other bad nights the past few months, but tonight was extraordinary. No matter how hard she tried thoughts of him kept intruding. There was something more, she realized—a rising tide of uneasiness that she was finding harder to ignore. Something was wrong and it had to do with Kastel.

This is ridiculous. I'm feeling lonely and sexually deprived and it's affecting my mind. She sat up, smacked her pillow into shape and flopped down again. Taking a deep breath, she closed her eyes, determined to sleep. One by one she tensed and relaxed her muscles starting with her toes and working upward. Outside she could hear the rhythmic splash of the waves on the beach. Lulled by the soft sound, she finally drifted off to sleep.

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Inari walked slowly across a moonlit garden—her garden to be exact, although it bore little resemblance to the weed-strewn patch of ground beyond her back porch. Her bare toes sank into the thick green sward. Sea primroses in a riot of color, their swollen heads swaying and dipping in the night breeze, festooned the stone wall to her left. *zara* lilies, and other flowers for which she had no names, filled the air with heady scents. To her right a *thanna* tree, its trailing boughs filled with pale pink blossoms, rose above a small pool. She looked around in wonder, recognizing it as Kastel's landscape design brought to life.

"You've come." Startled she turned to see him standing a few feet away from her. His muscled chest was revealed by the deep V of the sleeveless tunic he wore over a pair of tight brown pants. His hot gaze scalded her, naked desire burning in his blue eyes. He came to her, pulled her into his arms and brought his mouth down over hers.

Her knees grew weak beneath the hot kisses he rained over her lips, cheek and neck. *It was going to be one of those dreams,* she thought, her nipples tightening with need. She leaned back, putting some space between them. She slanted him a suggestive smile. "With any luck, we'll both come later."

"That's the plan." His voice was husky with arousal.

She gave a throaty laugh. "Feel free to proceed."

Kastel's hands skimmed down her sides to the hem of her nightgown. She raised her arms so he could pull it over her head. One arm slipped around her back to draw her near as he tossed the scrap of silk to the side. His fingers grazed the curve of her cheek. He rubbed the pad of his thumb over her bottom lip. She opened to him and he slid it inside. She sucked on it, his warm salty taste filling her mouth. He withdrew his thumb, bent and traced the outline of her lips with the tip of his tongue before slipping it into her mouth.

Her breath went out of her. She wrapped her arms around his neck as their tongues darted back and forth in a teasing dance that imitated other things to come. His hot moist mouth trailed down her neck to nibble at the soft hollow in her throat. Inari moaned at the delicious sensations that raced through her centering between her thighs. Lords, but it felt so good to be back in his arms. *It's only a dream*, part of her mind whispered. She silenced it. All too soon she'd wake and face the reality of another day alone. Until then she intended to enjoy every second before her dreaming mind carried her off somewhere else.

In the brief moment her thoughts had drifted, the scene had changed. They were lying on the thick green grass beneath the *thanna* tree. Kastel's clothes had disappeared. Flower petals set free by the night breeze floated down like pink snowflakes onto their bare bodies. He brushed one from her breast, bent and ran the tip of his tongue in a circle around her nipple. She shivered, the flesh on her arms rising in goose bumps at the slight caress. He raised his head and smiled down at her.

She cupped his cheek in the palm of her hand, her lips parted in invitation. His blue eyes blazed with open lust as he took her mouth in a deep possessive kiss that left her breathless. Heat sizzled along her nerve endings as his tongue delved between her lips, ravishing the inside of her mouth. As his demanding kisses continued, his right hand moved to her breast, pinching and tugging the nipple into an almost painful rigidity.

His mouth moved from hers, trailing kisses down the side of her neck. He sucked at her nipples, licking and nipping at them while kneading her breast with his long, strong fingers. Inari's own hands explored the hard sculpted muscles of his back and shoulders. She moved lower, grabbing his ass and pulling him against her mound. She arched her hips, rubbing her wet, swollen pussy over his erection.

Kastel groaned into her breast. He slipped a hand between their bodies and found her clit, rolling it between his thumb and fingers. Her body flushed, a fiery tingling flashed along her nerve endings as if she'd been struck by heat lightning. Inari opened her legs, giving him full access to every inch of her most intimate flesh. "Don't stop," she begged, her voice ragged with desire. It was usually at this point that dreams had a tendency to lose cohesion and wander off into other surreal dreamscapes. So far this one was remarkably stable. Lords, keep it that way, she prayed.

Kastel's fingers found her soaking channel and moved inside as he slid down to position his head between her thighs. His tongue lavished attention on her clit, swirling around its plump head. He caught her nub between his lips and sucked, scraping the sensitive flesh with the edge of his teeth. Inari gasped. Too much of that and she'd come. But it felt so amazing that she didn't have the willpower to stop him.

Fingers tangled in his thick hair and she arched her hips upward in a blatant plea for him to continue. He took the invitation. Stretching her wider, he inserted a third finger, all the while his tongue and teeth kept up their sensual assault on her clit. Unable to withstand any more stimulation, muscles deep inside her pussy clenched then released in pulsing waves.

At the height of her orgasm, her eyes locked with Kastel's. She felt his hot gaze sear through her down to the very marrow of her bones. He belonged to her. No, even better—they belonged to each other. Giddy at the thought, she twined her arms around his neck and smiled up at him. As she pulled him down for a kiss, his face blurred. Not only his face, she realized, but also the entire garden went out of focus. Damn! And it had been such a lovely dream.

No! No! No! Don't go. She clung to the dream, willing it to stay. The scene wavered, went black then reappeared, but as her dream eyes gazed about she saw that everything had changed again. All the color had been leached from the landscape. Black clouds roiled overhead shutting out the moons. The branches of the *thanna* tree were bare. Kastel still straddled her, but his eyes were hollow. His skin stretched over his bones giving him a skull-like look. Her beautiful dream had become a nightmare.

She struggled to sit up. Beyond the curve of Kastel's shoulder she saw buildings. The architecture was all wrong for Port Liassa. She made it to her feet and saw that she was wearing her nightgown again. Kastel, fully dressed, his skin shadowed a ghastly gray and white, stood a few feet away watching her.

"What's going on? Where are we?" she asked, bewildered by the eerie black and white scene. It reminded her of the negatives she'd seen of antique photographs. Kastel stared at her in silence. A wave of bleak despair washed over her. She closed her eyes willing herself to wake. She opened them to see nothing had changed. Kastel stood unmoving, a mixture of fear and pleading in his eyes. Something was terribly, horribly wrong, but she didn't know what it was she was supposed to do.

Wake up! Inari told herself. *Wake up! Wake up!* In the distance she heard the sound of bells chiming. The bells grew louder—irritating now in their persistent shrill tones. Moving closer to wakefulness she identified the sound. A vid-phone was ringing.

Chapter Twelve

"Someone should answer that," she muttered. She groaned and opened her eyes and pushed herself up to a sitting position. *Lords, what a dream.* She peered about the room, lit by the pale green glow of a night globe trying to get her bearings. The vid-phone's high-pitched chime sounded again. Whoever was calling had better have a good reason for disturbing her sleep.

Pain stabbed between her eyes, settling into a dull headache as she struggled from the bed and staggered across the room. Her head thumped with each step she took across the room. Odd, she rarely had headaches anymore. Not since she'd left the Celestial Crystal. She slammed her hand down on the receive button. "This had better be important." Her tone was impatient, rude even, but considering the hour, but she didn't care.

"Thank the Lords, Inari. I've been redialing for half an hour." Talia's worried green eyes stared at her from the screen. "I was beginning to think something had happened to you."

Inari pushed tumbled hair out of her face. She waved her hand at the dark room behind her. "In case you hadn't noticed, it's still the middle of the night here." She considered adding something about being awakened from a sound sleep, but thought better of it as she remembered the last few minutes of her disturbing dream. Maybe Talia had done her a service.

Talia scarcely seemed to notice the rebuke. "I didn't have much choice. I had to speak to you." Her voice crackled and Inari heard a faint buzzing noise.

"Where are you calling from?"

Talia glanced over her shoulder then back at the screen. "Public vid-phone near my apartment. I didn't dare use my own phone to call you. Sela's spy-ears are everywhere."

At the mention of Sela, the nagging sense of unease that had followed Inari from the dream grew stronger. Secret phone calls in the middle of the night were not Talia's style. Whatever she was about to reveal could not be good.

Realizing she was still standing in the dark, Inari reached out and turned on the lamp beside the phone, wincing as the bright light hit her eyes, intensifying her headache. "What's wrong, Talia?"

"It's Kastel."

Inari's stomach knotted with dread. "What about, Kastel?" she asked with careful calm, still clinging to the hope that what she was feeling was nothing more than the aftereffect of an unpleasant dream.

Talia's mouth compressed into a thin line as if she fought to hold back the words that would make the fear reflected in her face real. "Inari, he's caught in a mind-lock." Now that she'd spoken, words tumbled out of her. "We've tried everything, and I do mean everything, to wake him—to break the link." She threw out her hands. "Nothing works." Tears filled her eyes and she choked them back.

Inari's breath left her in a long exhalation. Mind-lock! It was every guide's deepest fear. All the terrible stories she'd heard of guides and clients trapped by the rare, but almost always fatal occurrence raced through her mind. She closed her eyes for a moment trying to shut out the unbearable ache in her heart as she thought of Kastel suffering that awful fate. He was so strong, so alive, it was impossible to imagine him wasting away into a hollow shell of a man.

"How long?" she managed to force the words past her dry lips.

"Eight days." Talia leaned close to the vid-screen. "Most victims' vital organs don't begin to fail until after ten. We still have time."

"Time? For what?"

"Time for you to get back here and break the lock."

"Break the lock! Are you out of your mind? You're a dream tech. You know as well as I do that no one outside the dream can do anything to break the link."

"In the past that might have been true. But this is different. You and Kastel can link without the drugs or the coronets. In all of psi history no one has ever been able to do that. You need to come back, go into the dream and find a way to waken them."

Inari stared at her friend open-mouthed. She spread her hands in a gesture of helplessness. "And you think I can do this?"

Talia's voice took on an impatient tone. "Yes, I do. And may I remind you that every second you spend arguing with me, Kastel and his client slip farther away. So put your ass in an air-car and get back here."

Can I actually do it? Inari wondered. Break a mind-lock? *Maybe. But it's a very big maybe.* She had no real idea how or why she and Kastel shared this hitherto unknown ability. If she entered the dream without fully understanding how their shared link worked, she'd literally be wandering about in the dark. There was a great possibility that none of them would survive. But if she did nothing, Kastel and his client would surely die.

The thought of losing Kastel filled her with unbearable pain. She'd learned these past few months how empty her life was without him in it. She couldn't simply stand by and let him and another innocent human being die—not if there was even the slightest chance that she could help. Still, she hesitated. There were ramifications beyond life and death to consider.

"You realize what you are asking? Succeed or fail, the fact that I even tried will get back to Sela Janco. She'll know that we all lied. You'll be out of a job and Kastel, if he survives, and I will likely spend years undergoing all sorts of psi experiments."

Talia nodded her expression a mixture of sorrow and determination. "I thought of that. That's why it took so long for me to contact you. I don't think we have a choice. We have to try."

Inari sighed. "Yes, we do. As soon as you hang up, I'll book the first shuttle to Gemmax City. I don't have an identi-key anymore, so you'll have to smuggle me inside on yours."

"Not a problem."

"Can you get us to the chamber without anyone knowing?"

"I have a few favors to call in." Her lips curved in a ghost of her old smile. "What about Lysa? Should I call her?"

"Not yet. Plausible deniability, I think they call it. If anything goes wrong, she may be your only hope."

Talia looked puzzled. Her expression cleared and she nodded. "Oh, got it."

Inari smiled. "Right, either she'll dispose of the bodies or pay for a good adjudicator. Which, by the way, we're going to need if this works."

They spoke a few more minutes working out the details of their plan. Such as it was. Inari fought back a hysterical urge to laugh uncontrollably. The whole thing had taken on a surreal atmosphere, like one of her favorite vid-novels. But those were designed for entertainment. This was deadly serious.

For good or for ill, Kastel, I'm coming. Remembering the dream, she wondered, not for the first time whether or not he'd been trying to contact her. Had he been warning her not to come? Or pleading for her to help him? She had no idea. Knowing the consequences of success, she was no longer sure that failure wasn't the preferred outcome.

Life is always better than death, she reminded herself. Somehow she'd find a way to outsmart Sela. *And if I don't?* She refused to think about that. She stifled a fit of giggles. In all her years as a guide she'd never come up with a scenario as wild as this one. Or as fraught with unthinkable consequences, she thought with a sinking stomach, as she punched in the final number for the local air-car company to book a ride to the public shuttle port.

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Inari's shuttle set down as the first rays of the rising sun touched the crystal towers at the heart of the city. Like huge prisms the tops of the buildings shattered the light into a blinding rainbow of color. First time visitors to Gemmax City stood open-mouthed in awe as they experienced a typical sunrise. Deep in thought, Inari threaded her way through the throngs crowding the rooftop landing pad with only the briefest glance at the morning light show.

Talia met her at the gate and hustled her into a waiting air-cab. "Everything's under control," Talia assured her as they settled in for the brief ride to the Celestial Crystal.

"I hope it stays that way." Inari bit her lip and stared out the window watching the play of color on the buildings they passed. "How's Kastel and..." She hesitated realizing she didn't know his client's name.

"Rogan Gavix," Talia supplied. "Holding their own. How about you?"

Inari met her friend's searching green eyes. "Holding my own."

Talia reached over and covered Inari's clenched hands. "This is going to work. I have great faith in you."

"No pressure there," Inari said with a ragged laugh. The air-cab banked and settled into its landing pattern. "I assume you have a plan to smuggle me inside?"

Talia flashed a semblance of her old grin. "Everything's been taken care of on that end."

Less than fifteen minutes later they were standing in the middle of a small suite located near the Celestial Crystal's med-lab. "Whose quarters are these?" Inari asked.

"Unassigned at the moment." Talia moved quickly to the dresser, pulled out a bundle of clothing and handed them to Inari. "Your disguise."

Inari sorted through the garments, standard fare for a tech except for one item. She picked up a bright purple and gold syn-silk scarf, holding it gingerly between two fingers. "I thought the point of a disguise was to *not* draw attention?"

"It's to cover your hair," Talia said. "That silver streak is a dead giveaway. Besides, if people are busy looking at your scarf they won't pay as much attention to your face."

"That's one theory, I suppose." Seeing Talia's glower, Inari shut up and began to strip off her traveling clothes. While she dressed, Talia brewed a cup of *fremik* tea. Inari grimaced as the bitter beverage slid down her throat. As aware as Inari that there was no time for the usual rituals, Talia had made the tea extra strong.

A short time later, attired in the loose lavender tunic and trousers of a dream technician, her auburn curls hidden beneath the gaudy scrap of syn-silk, Inari followed Talia down the hall toward the med-lab. "There must be lab staff on duty. How are we going to get past them?"

"Dream techs are doing all the monitoring," Talia explained as they walked. "We've been coming and going for two days now, so no one will notice us. The med-techs are on stand-by if there's a sudden dip in Kastel's or Rogan's vitals. Since they feel it's a hopeless situation, they pretty much leave us alone."

Cool air washed over Inari as they stepped into the sterile confines of the medical facility. She shivered and tried not to sneeze at the cold antiseptic smell that invaded her nose. A med-tech glanced up briefly as they entered, dipped his head in a quick nod of acknowledgement before going back to working on his computer. Inari's odd head covering didn't elicit even the smallest reaction.

They moved past him to the entrance to one of the private side rooms where Kastel and his client lay. Talia's fingers danced over the key pad. The door opened and they

stepped inside. The tech never looked up from his work. Inari wasn't sure whether or not she wanted to kiss him or slap him for his total indifference.

Inari took in the layout of the room in a glance. The couches with their sleeping occupants had been transported from the dream chamber to the med-lab. In order to fit them into the room the couches were pressing up against each other. A dream monitoring station was jammed into the corner nearest the door. A tangle of thin silver wires ran from the equipment to the men.

She approached the couches. Her gaze skimmed over the unfamiliar features of the middle-aged man with a prominent nose and silver-gray hair, coming to rest on Kastel. Her heart stuttered at his waxy paleness and the thin, pinched look to his full lips. Even his honey-kissed hair seemed to have lost its luster. She reached out and brushed a loose strand off his forehead. His skin felt icy. His breathing was low and shallow, his chest barely lifting the light sheet that covered him. Tears burned in her eyes. He was dying. Rogan too. Her skills as a dreamer and the special bond she shared with Kastel were all that stood between them and death.

Her chest tightened and sweat sprang out on her forehead. She spun around. "I can't do this." She wrapped her arms around her waist, trying to hold in the panic.

Talia grabbed her by the shoulders. "Yes, you can."

Tears of anguish trickled down Inari's cheeks. "What if I fail?"

Talia's mouth pulled into a grim line. "Then you fail. But at least you tried." She picked up the coronet and held it out to Inari. "Time is running out. What other choice do we have?"

None. The answer whispered in her mind. Inari took a deep shuddering breath. She wiped her wet face with her palms. "You're right. Let's get started." Sucking in another lungful of air, she forced herself to calmness. She moved to the couches, bent and pressed her lips to Kastel's. The first time she'd seen him she'd done much the same. Then it had been a passing fancy. This time it meant so much more.

Inari removed the scarf from her hair and let it drop to the floor. She took the coronet from Talia, set it on her head and stretched out on her side next to Kastel. She could feel his hip and arm pressing into her back and legs. The position was awkward, but she found it comforting. She waved to let Talia know she was ready.

Standing by the monitor, Talia raised her own hand. "Dream well, Inari. Dream well."

Inari smiled slightly at the traditional benediction. *Dream better than well*, she told herself as she closed her eyes and focused on establishing the link. For one heart-shattering moment she floated in a black void, somewhere between wakefulness and dreaming. *Oh Lords, it's not going to work.* Unbearable grief twisted in her heart. *Kastel. Kastel.* She called his name, her mind reaching for his, refusing to accept failure. She had to see him one last time.

A pinpoint of light pierced the darkness. She groped toward it. It grew brighter, shredding the black veil enveloping her, letting her see again. The sensation of hanging

in midair ended abruptly. Solid ground pressed beneath her feet. She'd done it. She was in.

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Inari looked around trying to get her bearings. She was standing at the side of a wide boulevard, lined with two-story buildings set back from the roadway and surrounded by gardens long gone to seed. A faint glow came from a light crystal hanging in the front window of the weathered, dilapidated building to her right. Since it was the only lit house on the street she assumed this was her destination.

She pushed open the gate and entered the weed-strewn yard. The structure's lower half was constructed of stone. Its upper story was made of wood. A wide porch ran across the front, its sagging roof decorated with ornate wood carvings of flowers, vines and birds in flight. In the gray light she could make out faint traces of red and gold paint on the delicate scrollwork curling down the porch pillars. Second Capellian Empire design—the Flower District of its famous capitol, Farese, she decided.

The Flower District had been famous for its magnificent homes and gardens spread out like the spokes of a wheel around the Emperor's palace. It should have been ablaze with color. Instead it had a dull, flat, gray look that reminded her all too much of the nightmare she'd had the previous night. The atmosphere surrounding her was cold and heavy. Who would deliberately request such a place for a dream fantasy? No one in his or her right mind, that was for sure.

She walked up the stairs, avoiding the splintered railing and crossed the porch, moving carefully past sprung boards to the window with the light-crystal. Rubbing her hand across the dirty glass, she bent and peered through the small patch she'd cleared. She was looking into a large room. A faded, peeling mural filled the wall opposite the window. Light-crystals in twisted wire baskets were suspended from the ceiling on wide-linked chains. Curtained alcoves lined each side of the room. Most of the draperies were closed or hung in shreds from metal rings. To her left, a naked man sprawled on a wide couch being serviced by a woman with long, red hair. Two other women, in various stages of undress sat at the end of the bed combing each other's hair. A girl danced to unheard music before a man who sat at the lone table in the middle of the room. Inari's heart skipped a beat. Kastel! His lap was occupied by a woman wearing nothing but a large red flower in her hair.

A Capellian brothel! And, by the looks of it, not one of the highest caliber. Inari straightened with a sigh. When it came to dream fantasies, clients had all sorts of tastes. It wasn't for a guide to judge. She adjusted her image to fit the scenario. Her tech uniform disappeared to be replaced by a diaphanous skirt of multicolored scarves attached to a wide gold hip-hugging belt. She added a vest of swinging gold chains that allowed the tips of her nipples to peek out. She made no effort to change her hair and face. She wanted to make sure that Kastel recognized her.

Easing open the door, she slipped inside, her bare feet soundless on the threadbare carpet. Hips swinging to the beat of the throbbing music that filled the air, she joined the dancer. Neither man reacted to her presence. The man on the bed she'd recognized as Rogan continued rutting. Kastel sat staring into space, while the blonde on his lap licked his neck and kneaded the muscles of his bare chest. Inari drifted forward on the tips of her toes, pirouetted and then pushed the girl off his knees, slithering down to take her spot. The woman shrugged and walked away, a blank look on her face.

"Kastel." Inari caressed his jawline and pressed a soft kiss to his mouth. There was no response. He continued to stare straight ahead. Beneath the pleated kilt of a Capellian courtier, his cock remained flaccid. She caught his face in her hands and forced his gaze to hers. "Kastel." She spoke his name again, louder.

His dull, blue eyes met hers with no recognition. Then from wherever he'd wandered, he returned. "Inari?" His voice was uncertain.

She smiled. "I'm here."

He shuddered and leaned his forehead against hers. "Thank the Lords. I called and called, but never knew if you heard me."

"I heard. Or think I did. At the very least I had the strangest dream and woke up somehow knowing you were in trouble."

He let out a long sigh. "Sea primroses and a Thana tree?"

"So that really was you?" She shook her head. "This connection we have is beyond psi shared dreaming."

The corners of his mouth lifted in the slightest of smiles. "So it would seem. Best not to tell Sela."

"Good point. Although sooner or later, she's going to find out the truth."

"That we can link, with or without the dream drugs and machinery?"

"And bring others with us." She straightened and looked over her shoulder at Rogan who had finished fucking and was now lying propped up by pillows being blown by the blonde dancer. "I can't believe this is the dream he contracted for."

"It's not," Kastel said. "It started out as your standard intrigue in the Capellian court scenario—sleep with beautiful courtesans, find the spy passing information to Capella's enemies, topped off by an exciting sword fight with the client as the master swordsman who finishes off his foe in a flourish of amazing strokes. At that point, the dream should have terminated."

"What went wrong?"

His face twisted. "I don't know. I tried to break the link and wake us up. Instead we looped into the dream again. No matter what I did, nothing worked. We were trapped here. Eventually the dream degraded into what you see here. I can't keep this up forever. Once I let go..." His voice trailed away.

Inari stroked his hair with tender fingers. "Just hold on a little longer. Together we'll break the link." His arms tightened around her waist, his lips seeking hers. She

tasted the desperation in his kiss. They were running out of time. She could sense his weariness. Without the extra boost from him she might not be able to break the lock. Giving him a reassuring smile she rose and sauntered over to the bed where Rogan now sprawled, alone.

Not a bad-looking man for his age she noted. The lack of wrinkles in his face hinted at regular visits to a rejuvenation facility. His hawkish nose kept him from being truly handsome, but his silver hair lent him a distinguished air. It was odd that his avatar was an exact duplicate of the man. Most clients corrected any perceived flaws in their dream selves. His choice? Or further evidence that Kastel's control was slipping?

She sank down on the side of the bed with a sultry smile. "I can make all your dreams come true," she offered in a husky voice. She rested her hand on his thigh a few inches from his limp penis.

His gaze skimmed over her. Old sorrow moved in the depths of his gray-green eyes. "I doubt that."

"At the very least we can go someplace more cheerful than this." She encompassed the room behind them with a graceful wave.

"And where would that be?" he asked, his tone indifferent.

"Have you ever been to the Capellian Flower Festival? We could float down the river Tasara on a flower boat, drink wine, make love and watch the triple moons rise."

He shrugged. "I'll pass. This place suits me." Despite his sardonic smile, Inari sensed that some part of Rogan Gavix felt he deserved no better than this.

Was his mental state part of the problem? She'd worked with unhappy clients before and it never seemed to have any effect on the dream. This was different. She couldn't put her finger on it, but there was something about him that set warning bells clanging in the back of her mind.

Pushing the troubling feeling aside, she regarded him from beneath her lashes. She trailed her fingers over his cock, taking it in her hand. "Somehow I find that hard to believe. You look like a man who likes fine wines, music and laughter."

His cock stiffened beneath the steady caress of her hand. "A long time ago, maybe." He closed his eyes and folded his arms behind his head. "You can fuck me or blow me, your choice, but get on with it."

Inari sighed. Lords, why can't things ever be easy? She'd hoped to gently nudge the dream to a lighter, brighter location and then from there to a gradual awakening. Instead she was going to have to wrest them into consciousness.

She bent and ran her tongue down the length of Rogan's cock to divert him while she mentally prepared to break the link. She sought and found Kastel's mind and used his strength to bolster her own mental focus. The room around them blurred and began to dissolve. This was it. A pressure unlike anything she'd ever experienced swelled in the middle of her chest. The force intensified. She had the momentary sensation of someone literally shoving her backward. Pain stabbed like a knife in her head.

Chapter Thirteen

She awoke with a jolt. Even before she met Talia's dejected green eyes and saw the slight shake of her head, Inari knew she'd failed. Kastel and Rogan remained trapped in the dream. She sat and pulled the coronet from her head, ignoring the headache throbbing in her temples. "How long?"

"Less than twenty minutes." Talia left her equipment and hurried to help Inari stand up. What happened? I could tell from the monitors that you entered the dream state."

"I'm not sure. There's something very strange about Rogan Gavix though. It almost felt as if he forced me out of the link."

"That's not possible."

"No, it's not," Inari agreed. "What do you know about him?"

A frown creased Talia's forehead. "Just what was listed on his contract."

"Can you pull it up for me?"

"Sure." Talia moved over to the computer console built into the wall near where her equipment was set up. A few taps of the keys brought up Rogan's contract.

Inari came and stood behind Talia, reading over her shoulder. She glanced at his image for a brief moment. Although there were fewer lines of strain around his nose and mouth, it was definitely the man in the dream. She skimmed the rest of the screen. There didn't appear to be anything out of the ordinary, yet every instinct she possessed said differently. She reread the basic information about Rogan. It listed his height, weight, blood type, drug allergies and a brief biography. "Aren't retinal scans performed on all first-time clients?"

Talia shook her head. "Recommended, but not required."

"You have the equipment to do one if you need to though?"

Talia detached a small metal tube from a holder on the side of her monitor. "I have a scanner right here."

"I know this sounds crazy, but I want you to scan Rogan Gavix."

Talia pursed her lips. "What will that prove?"

"I don't know. It's just a feeling I have." Inari looked at the digital time readout at the side of the computer screen. "Just do it. We're running out of time. Kastel is barely hanging on."

Without another word Talia hurried to Rogan's side of the couch. She lifted the lid of his right eye and held the scanner over his exposed pupil. A second passed and there

was a chirp indicating the scan was complete. Returning to her console she inserted the tube into a port by the side of her computer and began punching keys.

Inari waited for the results, her hands knotting and unknotting with impatience. "Hurry."

"It takes a few seconds to download and analyze the scan and then compare it with all known retinal records," Talia said. Her shoulders twitched and she shifted her stance. "I could do this faster if you weren't breathing down my neck."

"Sorry." Inari moved back half a step to give her space to work.

A photo of Rogan Gavix appeared on the screen. Forgetting herself, Inari leaned forward, her chin almost resting on Talia's shoulder. She read the name printed underneath the photo, sucked in a breath and read it again to be sure there was no mistake. The man in the photo was identified as Trag Kovak, owner of Galaxy Corp., renowned for its super-luxurious *Galactic Empress* space-liners. Below that there was a chart of brief statistical facts about Galaxy Corp. and its enigmatic owner.

Inari scrolled down, quickly scanning the biographical information. The more she learned about Kovak, the more of a mystery he became. Why would a man of his stature hide his true identity? A more recent photo showing him with his arm around a beautiful brunette appeared at the bottom along with an article from one of the intergalactic vid-news organizations. Inari drew in a deep breath and her eyes widened as her gaze moved again to the heart-shaped face of the woman in the photo. Her fingers tightened involuntarily on Talia's shoulder. "Oh, Lords, I think I've figured it out."

Talia turned to look at her. "Then you can explain it to me. I'm still trying to work out why Kovak chose to use a false name."

Inari leaned forward her finger hovering above the screen about to point out the portion of the text that had caught her attention. Before she could say anything the door opened with a soft hiss. She and Talia exchanged glances. The shift change wasn't due for another hour and twenty minutes.

"I'll handle this," Talia whispered. Hands on her hips, she faced the intruder. "This room is off-limits to everyone except..." Her voice trailed away.

Alerted by the sudden silence and the tension in her friend's body, Inari turned around. Chief Bosk stood less than two feet away. He crossed his arms over his chest and looked her up and down, an unreadable expression in his gray eyes. "Inari Rau. Why am I not surprised?"

She straightened under his piercing scrutiny. "I wish I could say the same."

Bosk's mouth twitched, obviously amused by the waspish tone of her voice. He glanced over at the two men on the couches then back to her. "So Sela Janco's been right all along." Inari noticed it wasn't a question.

Her chin lifted and without thinking she moved forward her own arms rising to mimic his stance. "Yes."

To her surprise, she saw a glint of admiration in his eyes. In the past she would have trusted this man with her life. That had ended when he'd started working for Sela Janco. Once he touched the com button the room would be swarming with his security men. She briefly considered trying to make a deal with Bosk. *Give us a few more minutes.* Just a quickly she discarded the idea. Bosk wasn't a man who bargained. Her forehead furrowed with a puzzled frown. He'd had plenty of time to call for backup. So why hadn't he?

Bosk's chin jerked toward the couches. "Can you help them?"

"I think so," she said after a moment's hesitation.

He studied her for a moment longer. Finally, as if coming to a decision, he straightened and uncrossed his arms. "Well, if anyone can, it would be you." He reached out and slapped the lock on the door. His hand swung out in a gesture that encompassed the monitoring equipment and the men. "I suggest you get started."

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Inari's mouth dropped open. She glanced at Talia and saw the same stunned expression on her friend's face. "This is a joke, right?"

Bosk shook his head. "I'm deadly serious. If you can help them, I won't interfere."

Talia flipped back a lock of hair. Her lips pulled upward in a sneer. "Sure you don't need to call Sela Janco for permission?"

"Make no mistake," Bosk said. "I plan to file an official report about the entire affair once I know the outcome. I like my investigations to be complete," he added with a chilly smile.

Inari took a deep breath. She'd known from the beginning what the consequences would be if they got caught. Whatever happened afterward with Sela was out of her hands. She needed to focus on breaking the dream lock.

Bosk nodded toward Kastel and Trag. "So what's the plan?"

Excellent question. Ignoring Talia's scowl, Inari motioned for him to join them at the monitoring station. "In reviewing all the information about Rogan Gavix or Trag Kovak, which is his real name, I think I've figured out the reason behind the lock."

Bosk frowned. "Trag Kovak. I know that name. Something to do with space-liners right?"

Inari nodded. "Yes, he's the owner of the *Galactic Empress* fleet."

"Why the fake name?"

"I'm not sure. We provide complete confidentiality, but for some reason he felt it was necessary to use a false name and credentials when filling out his contract."

"Maybe he wanted to avoid the extra attention that wealthy, famous clients receive," Talia suggested.

"More likely," Inari said, "he was afraid of being refused as a potential risk for a dream lock if a skilled technician like you took the time to read his entire file."

"What's in his file?" Talia and Bosk asked simultaneously.

Inari squeezed in between them. "Two things that I think could be the cause of the dream lock." She scrolled down the screen to the vid-news clip. "According to this, Kovak recently lost his wife, Amia, in a terrible accident."

Bosk rubbed his chin. "I remember reading about that when it happened. Something about a magnetic storm. Almost everyone on board perished."

Talia nodded. "Yes, it was all over the vid-channels for days. The shield generators failed and most of the protective doors didn't close properly." She looked at Inari her eyes going round. "Oh, Lords, it was one of his own liners—the *Nebula Empress*. Poor man. I can only imagine what he must be feeling."

"On the surface, intense grief for the loss of his wife," Inari said. "She was on her way home from visiting her parents on Salderus IV. He'd remained here to attend a business convention."

"He should have been with her," Bosk said in a low voice. Inari glanced at him, startled by his perception and obvious sympathy.

"Yes, and no doubt feels tremendous guilt that he wasn't. Add to that the fact that she died on one of his ships. One of his proudest achievements took his beloved Amia's life. How do you live with that?"

"And he never got to say goodbye." Talia's voice was husky with unshed tears. "How sad."

"Exactly." Inari moved her finger down the screen. "Now factor this into the equation." Talia and Bosk leaned forward to read the information.

"Lords." Understanding dawned in Talia's expression. "Kovak's a latent talent."

Bosk frowned down at the screen. "Lots of people are classified as latents. What makes you think his psi score has anything to do with the dream lock?"

"In most cases, the talent is so repressed it doesn't affect a person's life one way or the other. But psi abilities can be unpredictable and in rare cases, they've erupted in unusual and sometimes dangerous ways."

"And you believe something like that has happened here?"

Inari nodded. "I believe Kovak's highly charged emotional state and his latent talent as a dreamer are behind the lock. Consciously or unconsciously, it's quite possible that the reason why Kastel can't bring them out of the dream is because Trag Kovak doesn't want to wake up."

"Why should he?" Talia said softly. Her fingertips brushed the photo of a smiling Amia. "His reality is filled with pain."

Bosk's face twisted in thought. "So how do you convince him to leave the dream?"

Inari walked to the bed and stared down at Kastel's pale sleeping face. How indeed? She understood Kovak's pain all too well. If she lost Kastel, she too, might

prefer a dream world to reality without him. And like a dream he was fading away before her eyes. She had to find a way.

She bent forward and kissed his cool, still lips. "I'll think of something. I won't let this be goodbye." The moment she said the words she knew what to do. She brushed her fingers across Kastel's cheek in a silent promise then crossed the room to Talia and hugged her. "Thank you."

Talia's green eyes widened. "What did I do?"

"It's not what you did. It's what you said – earlier."

Talia looked confused. "What did I say? I don't understand."

"Me neither." Bosk frowned.

Inari waved a hand toward the couch where Trag Kovak lay. "He didn't get to say goodbye. His guilt, his grief, his anger—he might have been able to live with it if he could have seen Amia for just a moment, to tell her one last time how much he loved her. He didn't even have a body to bury and say all the rituals over."

"Even if you're right. How does that help us?" Bosk asked.

"If he could say goodbye," Talia said in a soft voice. "Maybe Trag could let go and move on, move past his grief. If he did that, you might be able to take over and break the link."

"Okay." Bosk nodded. "So once again I'm asking. How do you convince him to leave the dream?"

Inari shook her head. "I can't, but..."

"Then all of this has been a waste of time," Bosk interjected. He muttered a curse then reached out to flip the com-link.

Inari stopped him with a hand on his arm. "I can't, but I think I know who can." She pointed to the smiling face of Amia Kovak. "I think it's time Mr. Kovak got to say goodbye to his wife."

Bosk pursed his lips as he considered the implications of what she was suggesting. For the second time that day he surprised her. He gave an abrupt nod and lowered his hand. "It's worth a try. As I said before, if anyone could pull it off, I'd put my money on you." He moved to stand with his back to the door.

Inari crossed the room with shaking legs and sat down. Temporarily Bosk was on their side. She took a deep breath and mentally praying that his confidence in her wasn't misplaced.

"Do you think it will work?" Talia asked with a worried frown as she placed the dream coronet on Inari's brow.

If it doesn't I'm all out of ideas. She covered Talia's hand and said, "Kovak is an untrained talent. I shouldn't have any trouble breaking his hold." She sounded more assured than she felt. Pushing her doubts away, she lay on her side next to Kastel. Reaching behind her she found his hand. Despite the limpness of his fingers, his presence gave her comfort and courage.

Talia walked over to the monitoring station, made a few adjustments then nodded at Inari.

Bosk regarded her with steady gray eyes. "Bring them home," he said in a gruff voice.

Inari tightened her grip on Kastel's hand. Closing her eyes, she cast her mind into the dream.

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Having already experienced the scenario, Inari was able to control her point of entry this time. Her dream avatar materialized in the middle of the brothel's main room a few feet away from Kastel. Shaking out the gossamer panels of her multicolored skirt, she glanced around to orient herself. On the bed, Trag Kovak straddled a woman, his hips pumping into her. Involved in his fucking, he didn't notice Inari's abrupt reappearance. Kastel hadn't changed his position. He sat at the table with his head in his hands. The blonde Inari had encountered earlier stood behind him, her breasts pressing against his back as she massaged his shoulders and whispered in his ear.

Inari tossed back her hair. Striding over to the woman, she pushed her aside. "Find something else to do." The blonde nodded and wandered away. Inari moved around to Kastel's side. Weariness and despair rose from him in almost palpable waves. It was obvious that his control was frayed to the breaking point. She needed to move quickly or all of them would be permanently lost in the lock. And for what she planned to do she also needed his support—and his approval.

She gently smoothed his hair away from his forehead. "Kastel, look at me."

At the sound her voice, he lifted his head. A look of hope twisted his features. "Inari?" he whispered her name as if not completely sure he could trust the evidence of his eyes.

"Don't look so surprised," she chided with a smile. "Did you really think I'd desert you?"

His brows furrowed. "I thought I'd dreamed you earlier. You disappeared so suddenly." He pulled her onto his lap and kissed her. Her stomach fluttered with desire. Even his dream kisses set her on fire.

Reminding herself of the seriousness of the situation, she gently disengaged herself and sat back in his arms. "We have work to do." At his quizzical look she explained what she'd found out about his client.

By the time she'd finished, Kastel's countenance had brightened and his focus seemed stronger. "So Rogan...Trag," he corrected, "is a latent dreamer. That explains a lot. Every time I tried to break the link, he subconsciously fought my control and kept us here. If we work together we should be able to overpower him."

She stroked his cheek. "You're exhausted and since I'm not completely sure how or why our connection works, I need to get him to loosen his hold on this dream."

"Knowing you, Dream Lady, I have no doubt you've already figured out a way to do that." Kastel captured her hand and pressed his lips to the inside of her wrist.

Inari ignored the leaping of her pulse at his light caress. Delightful as the sensation was, losing her concentration now would be dangerous. "I believe I've found the key to Trag's compulsion to remain in this dream. If I'm right, all I need do is to turn it and we'll all be free." Kastel listened intently, his face expressionless as she outlined her plan. "For this to work, I need your full support."

His lips curled in a smile. "You've always had that, Inari. Whatever it takes, do it."

She studied his face, a slight frown furrowing her brow. "Seeing me with Trag won't upset you?"

"This is a dream. What we have between us is real. Trust me to know the difference. Besides you won't be wearing your own face. And I get to watch," he added with a sly grin as he set her on her feet.

His exaggerated leer lifted her spirits. She laughed. "Naughty boy," she admonished, wagging a finger in front of his nose. Leaning down she kissed him hard. When she straightened her auburn curls had become sable brown and flowed down her back to her waist like a silken sheet. She knew even without the benefit of a mirror that the rest of her was an exact copy of Amia Kovak, down to the pale blue dress she'd worn in the vid-photo.

Squeezing Kastel's fingers for luck, she squared her shoulders and walked across the room to the bed where Trag Kovak lay. He stared blankly up at the ceiling, aimlessly playing with the large pink nipples of the woman beside him. Shaking back her fall of dark hair, Inari sat down on the side of the bed. She aimed a hard glance at the naked woman and she faded away. Trag didn't seem to notice. She covered his hand with her own and called his name. His gaze moved to her. He stared at her in silence for so long that Inari began to wonder if, after all the time trapped in the dream, he still recognized the image of his wife.

An expression of slow wonder crossed his face. "Amia," he breathed. "Is it really you?"

"What do you think, love?"

He sat up and caught her to him. "I never thought to see you again." His voice broke. "Why did you leave me?"

"It wasn't by choice. You must know that." She pressed her lips to his bare shoulder then gently freed herself from his embrace.

"The ship...it was all my fault."

She shook her head. "No it wasn't. It was an accident. You know how quickly magnetic storms can come up. I was simply one of many unlucky souls that day." Inari curled her hand around his. "We had a wonderful life together, didn't we, Trag?"

He looked down at their intertwined fingers, then up again. A sad smile curled the corners of his mouth. "I never wanted it to end."

"All things end," she reminded him in a soft voice.

"But our time was too short. How can I let you go?"

"You must. Would you dishonor me and what we had by refusing to live your life—to look for a chance to love again?"

Grief twisted his lips. "I don't want anyone else but you."

She gestured at the room. "You have to let go of this, Trag, or everything we shared in our life together will be meaningless." She leaned forward and pressed her lips to his. Beneath the hand resting lightly on his bare chest, she felt his heartbeat accelerate.

Acceptance glimmered for the first time in his eyes when she raised her head. "Will you stay for a little while?" he asked.

"I'm all yours." She flashed him a teasing smile, her fingers trailing over his stomach to rest on the top of his thigh. "Any ideas on what we should do?"

Without giving him a chance to respond, she rose and undid the fastenings of her dress. Slowly and deliberately she let it slither over her shoulders. A slight twist of her torso and the pale blue bit of syn-silk slipped to the floor with a soft swish. Eyes locked to his, she removed her undergarments and knelt at his feet. She crawled forward, positioning herself beside him. She stroked the length of his cock then wrapped her fingers around it and slowly moved her hand up and down.

Feeling Kastel's eyes on her, she cast a quick look in his direction from beneath her lashes. His Capellian kilt had disappeared. He nodded and smiled his approval as he stroked the full length of his erection. A warm flush suffused her body and her pussy throbbed. In a strange way she was doing both men at the same time. The idea was arousing.

"It's been so long. I need a little taste." Sending Kastel a knowing smile, she pushed her long brown hair back, bent and nibbled her way around the swollen head of Trag's cock. A drop of pre-cum glistened at the tip. Her tongue darted out to lap it up before she took him into her mouth. She hid a smile as he uttered a guttural moan of pleasure. This part of the plan, at least, seemed to be working just fine.

Cupping his sac in one hand she kissed her way along the rigid length of his shaft then opened her mouth and took him inside. Her mouth moved with long, wet strokes from his root to his head in a steady rhythm. In a few minutes, his thighs were trembling with his obvious effort not to lose control. His fingers tunneled in her hair and he lifted her head. "Stop."

She pouted. "Don't you like what I'm doing?"

He gave a ragged laugh. "I love what you're doing—too much. Any more of it and I'm going to explode." He took her shoulders and drew her up until she was lying over him. He pulled her mouth down to his and kissed her with a fevered, desperation that tugged at Inari's heart. Deep inside, she knew he must realize that this was the last time he'd touch his wife's lips, caress her breasts, spread her thighs and thrust into her sweet, hot channel. Despite the pleasure he was experiencing, inside his heart must be breaking—again.

Doubt assailed her. Although she'd sensed some subtle signs that Trag was slowly growing to accept his wife's presence as their final farewell, when it came down to it, would he be able to let go? Her resolve faltered as she considered the consequences for all of them if that should happen.

Without thinking, she mentally reached out for Kastel. "I'm here." His voice whispered in her mind, and she felt the steady pressure of his support. Warmth and peace flowed through her and she focused again on pleasuring Trag.

His erection pressed against the inside of her thigh. It gave an eager twitch as she shifted position and rubbed her wet pussy over its head. She pressed her breasts into his chest and wriggled her hips. Passion blazed in the depths of his eyes. He rolled over and pinned her beneath him. "My turn."

As he gently kneaded her breast, he nibbled his way down the side of her neck to nuzzle the hollow of her throat. When he finished ravishing that delicate valley, his mouth moved lower, his tongue flicking out to tease her nipples into hard peaks. Inari sighed and pushed herself into his warm lips.

Continuing to lavish attention on her breasts, his hand slid slowly over her belly to rest on her mound. His fingers parted her folds and found her clit. He teased and caressed it until it was swollen with need. She turned her head and saw Kastel's hands moving more rapidly over his engorged cock, his gaze intently focused on Trag's hand between her thighs. He glanced up, his blue eyes locking with hers. Her eyes dipped to his erection. Briefly she wondered what it would be like to really have both men at once.

The thought sent ripples of heat searing through her veins. Smiling, she ran the tip of her tongue over her bottom lip. Kastel's cock twitched and seemed to grow even thicker. She sensed through their bond that the idea excited him too. Opening her legs, she invited Trag to continue his passionate caresses, while continuing to send Kastel seductive glances.

Trag's fingers rubbed across her wet slit and thrust into her pussy. Inari moaned at the sensation. As he tugged and stroked her clit with his free hand, his fingers moved in and out of her channel. Heat sizzled along her nerve endings and coiled in her belly. Seeing that she was on the brink of coming, Trag pulled her under him. He entered her in one swift movement, burying himself to the hilt. His hips rocked against her. She wrapped her legs around him, moving with him as his thrusts grew more rapid. Their ragged breathing intermingled.

He pulled her hands over her head and twined his fingers with hers, his gaze on her face. "My sweet, Amia. I want to see your every expression when you come."

Her release came hard and fast. As the muscles of her pussy contracted around him, Trag took her mouth in a deep kiss and followed her over the edge. Afterward they lay together, her long hair spread over his chest like a silken blanket. He lifted a strand to his lips then released it with a sigh. "This is really goodbye, isn't it?"

Inari pushed herself up on her elbow. Her fingers traced the lines of his rigid jaw. "Yes, my love."

"I just found you again and you want me to let you go?"

"Only the physical part is gone." She leaned over and kissed him gently. "I loved our time together. If it had been left to me, it would have gone on forever. My time is over, dearest, but you have a long life ahead of you yet. I want you to live it."

"Even if that means loving someone else?"

She smiled and brought his hand to her cheek. "Of course I want you to love again. What better way to honor what we had? I can't have been much of a wife, if my death means your capacity to love has died too. Our love was a marvelous gift. Don't fear to give it to another or enjoy the gift of her love."

He looked long and deep into her eyes. "Who are you?"

Inari hushed him with a finger on his lips. "Who I am is unimportant. What truly matters is whether or not you believe Amia would have told you the same thing."

His features convulsed with pain and tears glistened in his eyes. "You must know she would have or you wouldn't have said those words."

Inari knew in that instant that she had won. She kissed Trag again, slowly and tenderly. "Tell me goodbye," she murmured, filling her gaze with all the love she imagined Amia had felt for this man.

His mouth twisted in the semblance of a smile. Tears ran freely down his cheeks. Her own cheeks were wet. "Goodbye, my love."

With those words, Inari sensed something shift as if a key had turned in a lock. Clinging to the image of a door fitted with an outmoded locking system she'd only ever seen in vid-pictures, she met Kastel's eyes and saw understanding reflected back at her. He rose and moved to stand beside her. She reached out with her mind, felt his power flow into her. Using the full force of their joined minds, she turned the imaginary knob. The door swung open. She reached for Trag with one hand. With the other she clasped Kastel's. Together, they walked through the door.

Chapter Fourteen

Inari cautiously opened one eye and checked out her surroundings. She huddled next to Kastel in the small room inside the med-lab. She opened the other eye and released a long sigh of relief mixed with a tinge of surprise. *She'd done it.* Her moment of triumph was rapidly replaced by a stab of doubt. Kastel still lay unmoving on the bed beside her. Beyond him she could hear Trag's deep, steady breathing. Had she succeeded in freeing them too or was she the only one to have escaped the dream lock?

Cramped muscles protested as she sat up. She removed the dream coronet and tossed it aside, dimly aware of it hitting the floor with a clang. As she swung her legs over the edge of the couch and stood, a jolt of pain pierced her temples. She inhaled sharply and swayed. Talia rushed over, her green eyes bright with concern. "Whoa! Not so fast," she warned as Inari staggered and almost fell. "How do you feel?"

Ignoring both the pounding in her head and the question, Inari's gaze fastened on Kastel. His fingers twitched on the sheet covering his chest. A moment later his eyes fluttered open. A rustling sound on the couch to his right signaled that Trag was also beginning to awaken. Kastel regarded her with a wary frown. "Am I still dreaming?"

Inari shook her head, immediately regretting the movement as a white-hot bolt of agony hit her. Forcing a bright smile, she gestured toward the other couch. "Dream's over. We're all awake."

A look of slow wonder crossed his face. "Has anyone ever told you, Inari Rau, what an amazing woman you are?"

She managed another smile in return before the headache struck again, followed by a wave of nausea. Her knees buckled and blackness overwhelmed her. She came to in her old quarters. A swath of moonlight from the waxing Kesta lay like a silver ribbon across the bottom of the bed. The pounding in her head was gone, and other than a little stiffness in her neck, there didn't seem to be any residual effects from the dream lock. There was a movement in the bed and a male arm slipped over her back. "Are you awake?" Kastel asked next to her ear. His warm breath fanned her cheek.

She rolled over and pushed herself up on her elbow. "Wide awake. Now." She reached out brushed her fingers down his cheek to his jawline. His features were sharper, but most of the lines of strain she'd noted earlier had faded. She smiled. "You're looking better. After everything you went through I thought you'd still be in the med-lab."

One side of his mouth lifted. "Dr. Charil wanted to keep me there for a few days to make sure I'd recovered. It took a bit of persuasion, but I finally convinced him that I would sleep better in my own bed...with you."

Dr. Charil was probably right, she thought, as she studied Kastel's face. He and Trag had been trapped in the dream lock for over eight days. No doubt the experience had drained them physiologically and psychologically. "Are you sure that was the right choice? You know firsthand that I steal the covers and..."

"Despite the fact that you are a notorious blanket thief," he interrupted. "I wouldn't have been able to rest in the med-lab. I needed to feel you beside me." His expression grew grim. "Besides, once Sela hears what happened..." his words trailed off.

Inari sighed and nodded. "Our time alone will be nonexistent."

He released her hand and sat up. He tunneled his fingers through his hair. "Please don't take this the wrong way, but it might have been better if you'd stayed in Port Liassa."

Inari pushed herself up to face him in the middle of the bed. Moonlight spilled over their crossed knees. "Don't say that."

"I never wanted you to be in danger from the Jancos again."

"If there was some way for me to help, I had to try. I couldn't sit by and let you and Trag die."

"No I don't suppose you could." He took both her hands in his. "That wouldn't be the Inari Rau I know. You had to come and do the impossible, regardless of the consequences."

Her skin tingled at his light caress. "Not bad for an old lady," she said with a lopsided smile.

He turned her hands and kissed the delicate blue-veined skin on the inside of each wrist. "Oh, Dream Lady, when are you going to realize you're never going to be old to me?"

He leaned forward and captured her mouth in a long slow kiss. His tongue swept over the seam of her lips, parting them and darting inside. Her heartbeat quickened. Kastel moved to his knees dragging her up with him. One hand twisted in her hair while the other sought out the small of her back and held her to him. His erection pressed into her mound. She moved her hips up and down over his hardened cock.

Kastel's breath hitched and his hand moved down to cup her buttocks. He kneaded her ass cheek through the thin syn-silk of her nightgown. His mouth left a path of heated kisses over her cheek and down her throat. He caught the thin strap of her nightgown in his teeth and eased it over her shoulder then did the same to the other. He paused and flashed a sly grin at the sound of her delighted laugh before completely divesting her of the garment. He stripped off his sleep trousers and tossed them aside then gently guided her backward until she lay on the bed.

He knelt over her. "You feel real, but part of me is afraid I'll wake up and find I'm still locked in that awful dream world with Trag." He leaned down and brushed a soft kiss over her half-parted lips.

She smiled up at him. "We're both very much awake."

His brows drew together. "Are you sure?"

She placed her hands on his bare chest and circled his nipples with the pads of her thumbs. They puckered and he sucked in a deep breath as she lifted her head and repeated the motion with the tip of her tongue. "Is that real enough for you?"

He shook his head. "I'm still not entirely convinced."

She pushed at him forcing him to roll over so they could trade places. "Perhaps this will help." Her mouth found his. Their tongues met, dancing and darting until his breathing was as ragged as hers was.

She kissed her way over the hard, smooth expanse of his chest as she worked her way lower, swirling the tip of her tongue into the small hollow of his navel. He jerked at the tickling sensation and she smiled against his stomach. His rock-hard cock pushed at the top of her thigh, all but begging her to tease it the same way.

She took him in her hand savoring the smooth, hard, satin feel of his cock. It twitched eagerly as she trailed her fingers over and around it. Her curls brushed his thighs as she bent and traced the path her fingers had taken with her tongue. Growing bolder, she licked and nibbled her way over its swollen head, breathing in his male musk before wrapping her greedy lips around him.

Kastel moaned, his hips arching into her mouth. A slow heat built in her belly and moisture pooled between her thighs as her own arousal grew. His hand moved down between her legs to her clit. Her pussy throbbed with aching need. One finger slid inside, slipping in and out, adding to her excitement. She made an inarticulate sound as she drew his cock deeper into her throat. A second finger joined the first.

Lords, but this was so much better than anything she'd imagined the past few months. She didn't need to ask to know Kastel felt the same way. A sad awareness that this might be the last time they would be together for months, possibly ever, swept over her. Desperation mingled with need. Her hips jerked against his stroking fingers, demanding even more.

Apparently Kastel sensed something in her mood. Too quick to comprehend how he managed it, she found herself lifted and turned so that she lay on her back staring up at him. He brushed a tear from her cheek. Unaware that she'd been crying, she wiped her face with the back of her hand.

"Don't be sad," he murmured. He leaned over and kissed the corner of each eye.

"I'm sorry. It's just that I realized..."

"That this might be the last time?" he finished.

She nodded. "Sela will never let us be alone together, out of spite, if for no other reason."

He caressed her cheek, his mouth curling in a heartbreaking smile. "Then let's not waste what little time we have in sorrow or regret." His kiss seared through her skin to her core, wiping away whatever she'd been about to say. His lips moved down to her throat leaving a scalding path to her breast. They swelled with desire, begging his

mouth to ravish them. He took the invitation and licked and tugged each nipple into a hard rosy peak.

He kneeled over her, careful to keep his weight on his elbows as he nudged her legs apart. He parted her damp folds and caressed the hard bud hidden inside. Flame raced through Inari's veins. Impatient, she groaned and rubbed her slick slit up and down over his erection.

He teased her opening, slipping inside then moving out again. She arched upward, seeking closer contact. A husky chuckle escaped him. Kastel nuzzled her throat and sucked on her earlobe. Shivers danced along her spine. He lifted his head and their gazes locked. "Tell me what you want."

"You. Inside. Now." She dug her fingers deeper into the muscles of his ass urging him forward.

"Anything you wish, my love." Her eyes widened and her heart stuttered at his choice of words. *His love*. Were they a slip of the tongue brought on by passion? And if he did mean them? What then? Love couldn't save them from the fate Sela was planning. But it might make it more bearable, she decided, as he eased into her.

She bent her knees and opened her thighs further, giving him full access to every intimate body part. He thrust deeper, setting up a steady rhythm. Wrapping one leg over his back, she rocked her hips against him in time to the steady rhythm he set. Heat coiled in her belly, grew until it became almost a living flame blazing its way along her nerve endings until it centered in her achy clit. His fingers found a route between them and he stroked the hard nub.

Inari groaned, thrashing back and forth on the pillow at the intensity of the sensation of his warm fingers on her swollen flesh and the movement of his cock inside her channel. Unable to stand any more, her muscles clenched around him and pulled him even deeper as spasms of her orgasm carried her away. A moment later she felt Kastel let go and with a deep guttural groan follow her over the edge, his cum pumping into her.

For a long moment the sound of their heavy breathing filled the silence. Inari sighed as Kastel slipped free and rolled on his side. Heaving another sigh, she turned over and snuggled her head into the crook of his shoulder. Kesta had set taking her light with her, leaving them in the dark. Morning loomed all too close. Inari shivered feeling worry and dread pushing away the warm contented aftermath of lovemaking.

Kastel drew her closer. "Go to sleep, my love." Those words again. "We'll deal with what's to come in the morning."

Kastel was right. For the moment there was nothing else they could do. And maybe, just maybe, they'd think of some way to foil Sela once again. It was a nice dream Inari decided as she drifted off to sleep in his arms.

* * * * *

The first thing Inari heard when she awoke was the warble of a lone *jela* outside in the courtyard. *Spring has arrived.* She remembered the last time she'd lain in this bed listening to the *jelas* singing their melodious song. That day had ended with her Luvian bracelet shattered and her on a shuttle back to Port Liassa. In a few hours she and Kastel would face Sela Janco and discover the consequences of their months of subterfuge.

For a moment she considered pulling the sheet back over her head. Music and the sound of splashing water from the bath chamber changed her mind. Events were in motion now. There wasn't anything she could do to stop them. What little time she and Kastel still had she didn't intend to waste hiding like a child under the covers.

Pushing the sheet aside, she hopped out, grabbed her bag that someone had conveniently left nearby, and went to join Kastel. An hour later as they sat at breakfast, the door chimed. *So soon?* Heart pounding in her chest, Inari set down her cup and looked at Kastel. He reached for her hand across the table and they rose. Sela wasn't wasting any time Inari thought. She relaxed when the door opened to reveal the smiling faces of Trag Kovak and Lysa Talcott.

"Expecting someone else?" Lysa asked as they entered.

"Chief Bosk and a squadron of security guards," Inari admitted with a wry smile.

Trag finished shaking hands with Kastel, turned and took Inari's between his own. "I apologize for alarming you. Please forgive me," he said in a smooth baritone with the slight burr of the western isles. The lines of strain and sorrow she'd noted in the dream had faded. Awake, his features reflected intelligence, a sense of barely contained energy and a gorgeous smile, all of which overshadowed his large nose.

And he was a man who knew how to say he was sorry. Inari decided she liked him. "You're forgiven. Please come in." She ushered him and Lysa to chairs then seated herself next to Kastel. Slanting Trag a look of mock severity, she said, "You do realize we're breaking half a dozen rules."

"Ah, yes – some policy to do with client and guide fraternization," Trag said with a low chuckle.

"That's the one." Despite her best efforts to look stern, the corners of her mouth tilted.

Trag leaned forward, his gray-green eyes intent. "Meeting the remarkable Inari Rau is worth breaking a dozen rules."

Inari flushed. "Remarkable? I'm not sure..."

"Remarkable," he interrupted in a firm voice. "You broke a dream lock – the first person to ever do that according to everyone I've talked too. Very impressive."

Inari sighed. "I'm sure Sela Janco will be ecstatic."

"Yes, Lysa has been filling me in on the Jancos," Trag said.

"Have you ever met them?" Inari asked, curious to hear what he might know.

"Personally, never. But my company has contracts with one of their sub-companies, Primeco."

"I've heard of them," Kastel said. "They design shield generators, blast doors, hull sheeting and such for space ships."

"That's them." Trag nodded.

Inari's brows drew together as a horrible thought struck her. "Wasn't shield-generator failure the cause of the accident that destroyed the..." Her words trailed away as she contemplated the dark suspicions crowding her mind.

Trag tapped his fingers on the arm of the chair. There was a tension in his shoulders that hadn't been there before. "Generator failure was listed as one possibility although there really wasn't enough left of the ship to pinpoint the root cause according to the Stellar Transportation and Safety Agency's investigation. The few survivors mentioned that bulkhead doors didn't close properly. To my knowledge, AzaCorp, the company responsible for outfitting the ship, doesn't belong to the Jancos."

"The Jancos aside, what would happen if it was discovered that negligence on the part of the company who provided all those things led to the liner's destruction?" Inari asked.

Trag gave a harsh laugh. "The owners would be sued by me and the families of every person who died. No doubt the suits would go on for years in the Intergalactic Court. By the time it was over, the company would be bankrupt and the people responsible would be spending years mining *zacor* ore."

Inari tried to imagine the perfectly coiffed Sela Janco in a dark-brown penal uniform, her blonde hair covered with red *zacor* dust. It was a rather satisfying picture. She sighed. "Too bad we couldn't find some way to connect the Jancos to AzaCorp and the accident."

Lysa's mouth curled upward in a feral smile. "If only. I'd give half a year's profits to prove such a connection existed."

Trag looked thoughtful. "So would I. I think I'll have my adjudicators look into the Jancos' recent business affairs and see what they can turn up."

"Please let me know if you find out anything helpful," Lysa said. "I'd love to have some leverage to use on Sela for a change. If I had enough, maybe I could persuade her to rethink her investment in the Celestial Palace."

"I promise to pass on anything I learn," Trag said as he and Lysa rose. "I'm sorry to cut this short, but I have some urgent business to attend to." Kastel and Inari stood to say goodbye. Trag took Inari's hand in his. "You saved my life and that of our young friend there. More than that you freed me from a burden I've been carrying around for months. And..." He swallowed hard obviously struggling to contain his emotions. And you gave me a chance to hold Amia in my arms one last time. I can never repay the debt I owe you. If you ever need my assistance, all you need to do is ask." He squeezed her hand one last time before he released it.

Inari's face grew warm. "Thank you. I'll remember. The Lords watch over you, Trag Kovak," she said past a sudden lump in her throat.

Trag touched the tips of his fingers to his heart. "And you as well, Inari Rau. Remember what I said about contacting me if you need help."

"I will," she promised.

"Walk me out?" Trag asked Lysa.

"Of course," she replied.

Inari's eyes widened at the look that passed between them. She wondered if there was something other than professional politeness behind her friend's smile. For Lysa's sake she hoped there was. Inari knew from reading Trag's file that he was a few years younger than her friend. Not that it mattered. She hid a smile and glanced at Kastel, wondering what he'd have to say if he could read her thoughts.

At the door Lysa paused and stuck her hand into her pocket. She pulled out a small package wrapped in white paper and handed it to Kastel. "Almost forgot. This came for you." He took it without a word, smiling his thanks. "I've bought you some time. Sela wanted to pull both of you into the laboratory today, but Dr. Charil and I convinced her that you both needed to rest."

"I knew what I was doing when I came here," Inari said. "I'm prepared to face the consequences."

Lysa's arms came around her in a fierce hug. "Whatever happens, I'll be there. I won't let you go through this alone." She straightened and took Trag's proffered arm. After she was gone, Inari walked back to her seat and sat down. Her tea had grown cold and the warm *ajara*-berry-stuffed pastry no longer held any appeal.

Kastel dropped into his seat. He held out the small package. "This is for you."

"For me?" She took it, hefting it in her hand. Whatever was inside weighed almost nothing. She removed the wrapping to reveal a small box. Inside on a bed of blue tissue lay her blue-green Luvian bracelet. The last time she'd seen it the shells and glass beads had been scattered across the paving stones of Kastel's courtyard. She took it out and held it up. "You had it repaired."

"My knees were numb by the time I found every one of those beads. It still needs a final touch," he added with a mysterious smile as he pulled a cloth-covered bundle from his pocket, opened it and spread it out on the table. The silver jamming disc that Lysa had given to them, glittered against the black fabric. She recognized the tiny metal implements lying next to it as jeweler's tools.

Inari shot him a puzzled look. "What do you intend to do with those?"

He took the bracelet from her, flipped it over and carefully lifted away the cover of the mosaic medallion at the center. Using a tiny pair of tweezers he removed two shells in the center and inserted the disc. "If this succeeds, it should jam the electronics on the brain scanner when they test you."

"What good will that do?"

“Hopefully, it will fool the psi doctors into thinking that breaking the dream lock damaged your brain synapses and burned out your psi abilities. If one of us suffered permanent physical damage, we won’t be worth much to Sela.”

“Do you actually think you can make it work?”

Kastel looked hurt. “Give me some credit. I used to be an engineer – a rather good one, actually. There you go.” He picked up the bracelet and slipped it around her wrist.

Her fingers caressed the delicate arrangement of beads and shells. As a shield it wasn’t much, but at the moment it was the only chance they had to beat the tests and ruin Sela Janco’s plans for their future.

“Forgive me for doubting you.” Her voice and her smile were contrite.

He took her hand and pulled her up. “Feel free to show your appreciation.”

She batted her eyelashes. “Hmmm, I’d be happy to, if only I could think of something. Any suggestions?”

He swung her up in his arms. “More than one comes to mind. And I intend to try them all.” They fell together on the bed. True to his word, Kastel demonstrated he had skills that extended far beyond engineering.

They were barely dressed the next morning when the door chime sounded. Kastel hit the control pad and the door slid back to reveal Chief Bosk and two security men.

Bosk stood at full attention, his gaze focused on the wall behind them. “I’ve been ordered to take you to the psi lab for testing.” His tone was clipped, but Inari sensed the effort it was taking for him to maintain his rigid discipline.

“We’ve been expecting you.” She smiled up at Kastel as they linked hands. The guards surrounded them and they moved forward in a tight military-style formation.

And so it begins.

* * * * *

Inari sat in the syn-leather recliner, exuding an aura of calmness she didn’t feel as a lab-tech checked the thin cables running from the coronet resting on her forehead to the diagnostic chair and from there to the psi-scanning instruments. She’d known what the outcome would be when she’d returned to the Celestial Crystal and she was determined to face the consequences with her chin up. Breathing slowly and deeply, she thrust her fear aside and wiggled deeper in the chair, feigning indifference to the activity going on around her. They were in one of the small private rooms in the med-lab that had been set up as a temporary psi laboratory. She presumed Kastel was in a similar room about to undergo the same procedures.

On the other side of the room Dr. Larik fussed with the monitors. Despite the tech’s assurances that everything appeared to be in order, the doctor came to see for himself. Clucking under his tongue, he ignored Inari as he methodically rechecked each wire. From all appearances, she might as well have been invisible. She could sense his

excitement at the coming experiment. As he hurried back to his console he was almost rubbing his hands in anticipation.

A grim smile twitched at the corners of her mouth. If Kastel's jamming device worked the doctor was about to be seriously disappointed. *Lords, let it be so.* She fought the urge to look down at her left arm stretched along the padded support of the chair. She could feel the cool weight of the Luvian bracelet on her wrist, hidden under the long sleeve of her tunic. As yet, no one had noticed it.

The tech returned to her side, a long silver wand in his hand. "Whenever you're ready, Doctor," he called. His gaze skimmed over her. Despite his professional air, he hadn't quite perfected Larik's ability to ignore the test subject.

Fighting to keep up her façade of serene indifference, Inari smiled at him. "Having fun?" His cheeks reddened and his lips tightened. Her smile widened. "Guess the lab *patiks* don't normally chat with you, huh? Not that any of this can be considered normal."

The man looked at her and she thought she detected a hint of sympathy mingled with irritation in his brown eyes. "The pain is only temporary," he said, a defensive note in his voice. He raised the wand and ran it in a wide circle over her head. He repeated the motion several times, narrowing the circumference with each sweep.

Dr. Larik turned from his console with a frown. "Something's not right. Her brain waves are practically flat." He stalked over and tugged at several wires then looked down at Inari. "Are you wearing any metal?"

Her throat tightened and her heart began to pound. She kept her eyes away from her left wrist. *Distract him.* She reached up with her right hand and pushed back her hair to reveal a small silver earring. "Could these be the problem?" She gazed up at him with wide innocent eyes.

"That must be it." He held out his hand. "Give them to me." She complied, removing the metal hoops one-handed and dropping them into his outstretched palm. "Are you wearing anything else that is metal?"

The Luvian bracelet was mostly glass and shell—if you discounted the tiny jamming device, so she felt quite virtuous saying, "Nothing I can think of."

He placed the earrings into a small tray atop the instrument console and returned to checking his equipment. After a few more pushes and tugs, he gestured to the tech. "Proceed." The tech waved the scanner over her head. Once again, Dr. Larik's monitor screens displayed puzzling readings. It appeared the jamming device in the bracelet was working.

Larik marched back to her and checked each wire and connection twice. Finally, he stood back and studied her. "I'm not at all convinced, Miss Rau, that you have told me the truth. Something on your person is interfering with my scanners. Search her." He gestured to one of the security guards standing near the door.

Inari's heart sank as the man strode forward. She sat very still, refusing to give them the satisfaction of an undignified struggle. It took only seconds for the guard to

find the bracelet. He removed it and handed it to the doctor who deposited it with the earrings. Larik's lips pulled up in a thin smile. "I have no idea why you lied about this trinket of yours, Miss Rau. As you can see, your resistance was useless. I intend to run my tests."

Four grueling hours later, Inari's head pounded from the various psi exercises he had put her through. As he went over the results of the last one, she sat with her eyes closed, listening to the hum of the equipment and Larik's low mutters as he worked at his station. She shifted gingerly in her chair, moving carefully so as not to add to the throbbing behind her eyes. Her mind wandered to Kastel. A part of her longed to see him. The more sensible part knew that Larik would eventually need both of them to further his studies. No need to rush the reunion, since she suspected those tests would be even less pleasant than the ones she'd endured alone. If only there was some way to spare Kastel that discomfort. At the moment she couldn't think of a single one.

"I have something else I want to try." Dr. Larik's voice brought her scattered thoughts back with a jolt. She opened her eyes to see him approaching with a hypodermic. She stiffened in the chair and tried to draw her arm away. "What's this?" Until now none of the tests had included drugs of any kind.

The doctor grasped her arm above the elbow and held it still. "It's a drug I designed from riff spider venom. The results from my first test proved to be inconclusive. Since then I've developed a new formula."

Inari's heart began to race. She remembered Kastel telling her about the drug. Her lips parted in protest, but before she could get the words out, Larik pressed the syringe to her arm. She felt the cold sting of the injection. A moment later a sharp metallic taste filled her mouth. Cold fire crawled through her veins. The room began to spin and her vision blurred. Breathing deeply she struggled to clear her head. Not for the first time she wished desperately that she was safe at home in Port Liassa.

Larik turned away and spoke to the tech. Inari was only vaguely aware of what he was saying until the tech appeared at her side, holding a stun wand. Not again. She remembered her other painful encounters with the weapon. She reached out a shaking hand and grabbed his wrist. "Please...don't." Her voice sounded hollow and far away.

The technician hesitated. A look of guilt flickered across his face. His expression hardened. "Dr. Larik can't proceed without monitoring the effects of his new drug."

He used his free hand to pry her fingers loose. The lethal-looking wand moved closer. As his finger tightened on the trigger switch, she grabbed his arm again and fought to push him away. As it had twice before when she felt threatened, something deep inside shifted. The room shimmered then melted like hot wax. Everything went gray.

She blinked to clear the fussiness from her eyes and saw that she was standing on her back porch with the sun shining on the sea and her wind chimes singing in the breeze. Hallucination? Perhaps, but it felt more like one of her dream scenarios. Another waking dream? More likely it was some sort of side effect from the riff drug. But the first two times something like this had

happened, no drugs had been involved. It had to be her – something she was doing. Lords, have I developed another psi ability? She groaned. Dr. Larik would be ecstatic.

She heard a sound and for the first time realized she wasn't alone. The technician stood less than a foot away, his mouth open in a wide O of surprise. His gaze swept from the wand dangling in his hand, to the ocean vista, to her face. Fear settled in his eyes. Inari smiled. She wasn't sure what had happened, but for the moment she was in control. "Not as much fun anymore, is it?"

The man blanched and stepped back. "Where...?"

Inari shrugged. She didn't know how long this temporary respite would last and she was curious about a few things. If this was akin to the dream state, she wanted to see, what if anything, she could do to guide it. She narrowed her eyes and stared at the sun, her brows furrowing with concentration. It disappeared and the sister moons hung in the sky. A wave of elation swept over her. She barely had time to register her moment of triumph.

Pain lanced through both temples, and as abruptly as she'd found herself on her back deck she and the tech were back in the lab. After a moment, the agony in her head subsided and she was able to focus on her surroundings again. Her fingers still clutched the tech's arm. They felt numb with the pressure she was applying to keep the wand an inch or two away from her. Sweat beaded his brow and his pupils were dilated with shock.

"How did you do that?" he whispered.

She managed an innocent smile. "Do what?"

Dr. Larik turned from his instruments. "Something's not right. The readings on my monitors don't make any sense." He hurried over to investigate for himself. His gaze settled on the stun weapon. "I told you to stun her. Did you or didn't you?" He pressed his thin lips together in obvious irritation.

The tech shook his head as if trying to shake free of some invisible hold. "I don't know what happened. She grabbed me as I was about to stun her. I guess I got caught in the energy blast."

Larik stared hard at him then stalked back to his monitoring station muttering about incompetent assistants. Inari took a deep breath and released it. The room still had an uncomfortable tendency to spin and thinking clearly was a chore, but the icy fire in her veins had faded. The effects of the *riff* drug seemed to be wearing off.

She took another breath and started to relax when Larik turned, another hypodermic in his hand. He waved to the guards standing at the door. "I require your assistance."

Inari stiffened, her head pounding in protest at even that slight movement. Something in Larik's eyes warned her that this time he was determined to see that nothing went wrong. As the guard moved toward her, the door opened. Larik spun around with an exclamation of annoyance.

"Something wrong, Doctor?" Sela Janco asked as she and her husband entered. Sela's adjudicator, Nolan Var, stepped in behind them, followed by Security Chief Bosk with Kastel in tow.

"Your timing is impeccable," Dr. Larik said. His voice vibrated with excitement. "I was about to try something, but having all three subjects participate will give me a clearer understanding of how these psi abilities work." He waved to the two empty recliners on either side of Inari. "Take the one on the left, Maren, if you don't mind. Chief Bosk, place Mr. Fane in the other one." Taking Sela's arm, Dr. Larik led her over to the long bank of equipment, explaining his morning's findings in a low voice.

Maren shot Inari a smirk as he walked past her and took his assigned seat. "It looks like you're going to be my own personal guide after all."

"Be careful what you wish for, Maren," Inari said. A feral smile titled the corners of her mouth. "I could turn out to be your biggest nightmare." Turning her back, she moved as far away from him as her chair allowed. The position was awkward and the movement set her head to aching again, but she needed to put some distance between her and Janco.

Kastel sank into the recliner next to hers with a stifled groan. She had no doubt that he was in as much discomfort as she was. His blue eyes met hers in a searching stare. "How'd it go?"

She lifted her wrist. "They found the bracelet."

He swore under his breath. "I'm sorry."

"Me too." Bracing herself on the arm of the recliner, she reached out and gently brushed a strand of hair back from his forehead. He looked haggard and older than his thirty years. She decided it was best not to contemplate her own appearance. She pushed the negative thought aside. "How are you?"

He massaged his temples. "As good as can be expected. Horrible headache, thirsty, tired. You?"

"The same. Larik tried some of that *riff* stuff on me. I think he plans to use it on all three of us. He's convinced it affects the dream process in some way."

"What do you think?"

She hesitated wondering if she should tell him about the strange occurrence with the lab tech. "Maybe," she said finally. Before she could elaborate, Sela stalked over to them.

She held out Inari's bracelet. "Did you really think you could fool us with this?"

Inari met her mocking gaze with silence. She refused to engage in a futile battle of words. Maren Janco watched them, his brown eyes lit with an unnatural excitement. Her skin crawled as she thought about the part he would play in her future. She continued to stare at Sela without speaking. As if losing interest in the subject, Sela marched back to the console and dropped the bracelet into the tray as she addressed Dr.

Larik. "Now that you've done some preliminary tests, I believe we are all curious to hear the results."

Dr. Larik picked up his vid-pad and tapped a key at the bottom. He cleared his throat and began to read from the screen. Inari listened with only half an ear as he droned on about various scores. She gave her attention to Kastel. The corners of his mouth lifted. Hiding her growing fears, Inari forced a smile in return. She'd done the right thing by returning to break the lock. Kastel and Trag Kovak would have died otherwise. But now, looking at Kastel, she wondered if she'd made the right choice. Perhaps death would have been preferable to years spent as one of Larik's lab *patiks*.

Her earlier bravado dissipated as the reality of their situation began to take root. Sela had won. If they were going to be saved, someone else would have to do the saving, she was all out of ideas. Sensing her mood with his usual uncanny perception, Kastel pressed his lips into her palm. She sighed at the tingle that ran up her arm. His lips moved to her wrist. Her pulsed leaped under his mouth. Even in the midst of all this, she felt a warm wave of desire wash over her.

"Do you remember that night on your porch at Port Liassa?" he asked in a husky voice.

"Yes," she responded breathily. They both knew this wasn't the time or the place for such a discussion, but she welcomed the distraction, brief and unfulfilling as it might be.

His lips lifted in the sexy smile that always made her stomach drop. "If we were alone, I'd strip you naked, spread those luscious thighs of yours and take you right there in that recliner."

She swallowed hard and sent him a sultry glance. "I was thinking much the same. Only I planned to be on top."

"And I'll watch." Maren Janco's voice destroyed the sweet intimacy of the moment. Inari fought the urge to turn and slap him across his disgusting mouth. Apparently feeling emboldened by the topic of the conversation he'd overheard, he ran his hand down her back and over her ass.

Murder in his expression, Kastel half rose. "Keep your filthy hands to yourself, Janco." Inari grasped his shirt and held him back. As much as she'd personally love to see Kastel beat Janco to a pulp, it was too dangerous.

As if to prove her point, Bosk and the two guards moved away from their places by the door. "What's going on?" the chief of security demanded.

"An excellent question." Sela Janco stalked over and frowned down at her husband. "Perhaps you'd care to explain?"

Maren lost his swagger beneath his wife's cold glare. "It's nothing."

"Good." Sela turned to Dr. Larik. "I think you've accomplished all you can at these facilities. It's time we move Miss Rau and Mr. Fane to their new accommodations at your private institute."

Larik reached for the vid-com. "I agree. I'll arrange for transportation."

Sela stopped him with a raised hand. "Thank you, Doctor, but I already have two air-cars waiting for us." She gestured toward Bosk. "You'll ride with Miss Rau and Mr. Fane. Maren, you and Nolan will be with me and Dr. Larik."

His mouth twisted in a sullen scowl, Maren rose and joined his wife. Kastel stood and helped Inari to her feet. His smile was reassuring as he removed the coronet from her forehead. She knew he was maintaining his composure for her. "I'm getting too old for this," she said with a grimace as she stretched stiff muscles.

"Age has nothing to do with it. I feel like shit too." His expression was so droll she laughed, winced and put a hand to her head. He brushed her hair back gentle fingers and massaged her temples. "We're going to survive this."

For his sake, she forced a smile on her lips. "Ever the optimist."

He took her hand and threaded his fingers through hers. "Always."

Bosk waved them forward. As they moved into position between the two guards, the lab door slid open. Everyone paused in mid-step as Lysa Talcott and Trag Kovak stepped into the room.

Lysa's gaze swept over the silent tableau and came to rest on Sela. "Going somewhere?"

Chapter Fifteen

Sela recovered first. Striding forward, she confronted Lysa. "What are you doing here? This meeting is private."

"As a partner in the Celestial Crystal, I have every right to be here," Lysa responded with a cool smile.

"No," Sela snapped. "You don't. You're a junior partner at best, and as such have no authority to be anywhere unless I say so. As for your companion, he's trespassing on my property." She gestured to Bosk. "Remove them."

The security chief straightened and clasped his arms behind his back. "I don't think so." After exchanging startled glances, his men moved to stand beside him. Not for the first time, Inari wondered whose side he was really on. Seeing the small smile that flitted across Lysa's face Inari suspected his loyalty had always been to her.

Sela's marble-pale skin flushed an unbecoming red. After a moment, during which she obviously fought to master her outrage at Bosk's insubordination, she managed to gain control. Her features settled into an expressionless mask. "Very well, do as you please. I'll deal with you later." Despite her emotionless tone, Inari noted a flicker of unease in the depths of her ice-blue eyes.

Trag's baritone drawl broke the uneasy silence that had fallen. "We've never met, Mrs. Janco, but I presume you know who I am?"

Sela's gaze shifted back to Trag. "I'm well aware of who you are."

"Good. That will make our transaction go more smoothly."

"And what transaction would that be?" Sela asked, arching one perfectly plucked blonde brow.

Trag looked unperturbed. "I've been thinking about acquiring a dream palace."

"Gemmax City has several," Sela said. "I'm sure you can find an owner who is willing to part with one."

"Actually, I've decided on the Celestial Crystal."

Maren Janco glanced at his wife and gave a disbelieving snort of laughter.

"The Celestial Crystal is not for sale," Sela said, her voice as icy as the smile that lifted her sculpted lips.

Trag casually propped one elbow on the console next to him. "You haven't heard my offer yet."

Sela lifted slender fingers in a dismissive wave. "Whatever it is, I'm not interested."

"Don't be hasty, Mrs. Janco. Once you hear what I have to say, you might want to reconsider."

Sela gave a tinkling laugh. "I rather doubt that, Mr. Kovak."

Trag's smile broadened and Inari had the feeling he was secretly enjoying this. She glanced at Kastel. His puzzled expression mirrored hers. He appeared as bewildered as she was, as to what Trag hoped to accomplish.

Lysa, who'd silently watched everything that had transpired, handed Trag the file she'd been holding. He held it up for everyone to see. "A few months ago my wife, Amia, and nearly nine hundred other poor souls, died during a magnetic storm while on route from Salderus IV to Cereus Prime. One of your subcontractors, AzaCorp, supplied the shield generators and the hull plating."

Sela shrugged and looked bored. "We do business with a great many subcontractors."

"So I've noticed. Do they sell substandard parts as well?"

Maren's shoulders jerked and he looked at his wife, an odd expression flickering across his face. His forehead beaded with sweat. He wiped it away and began a detailed examination of his fingernails. No one but Inari seemed to take note of his odd demeanor.

Sela's eyes were locked on Trag. "What are you talking about?"

"The magnetic storm the *Nebula Empress* encountered wasn't more than a class four. The ship should easily have been able to handle the stresses of a category six or seven, but shield generators and hull plating supplied by AzaCorp failed during the storm. Because of your lax standards, my wife died, along with the husbands, wives, children, brothers and sisters of many other citizens of the Concord of Planets."

Sela shrugged. "A regrettable accident to be sure, however it's my understanding that the Stellar Transportation and Safety Agency investigated the accident and found no proof that Kelgor and Janco Galactic Shipping or any of its subcontractors was at fault."

Trag's expression didn't change, but Inari sensed that what Sela said was true. Despite his own investigation, Inari suspected he hadn't been able to find any hard evidence that substandard parts or equipment provided by AzaCorp had caused the disaster. From his expression Maren must have reached the same conclusion. His shoulders relaxed and his lips curled in his familiar cocky smile. He knew as well as Inari did that without proof, there was no way to induce Sela to give up her hold on the Celestial Crystal or on them. Unless...

Inari examined Janco from beneath lowered lashes. As much as she hated to admit it, Sela might actually be innocent. On the other hand, it was obvious from Maren's reaction to Trag's accusation that he knew something about the disaster that had befallen the *Nebula Empress*. Something that up to now, Maren had succeeded in hiding from everybody.

Inari bit her lip, her brows furrowing. If only there was some way to make him confess his involvement. She'd been Janco's guide for over ten years. She knew from the pattern of the dreams that he requested that he both hated and resented his wife's hold

over him and the company that they should have controlled as equal partners. She sifted through her memories. One of Maren's favorite scenarios was acting as the Prime Director of a fictitious company. Sela usually appeared naked and submissive, servicing him sexually in a number of degrading acts, the role he wished for her in real life. Was it possible that Janco, tiring of Sela's blatant disdain and heavy-handed control, had decided to make at least part of his dream fantasy a reality?

It was a wild idea. Yet she couldn't shake the feeling that she was onto to something. Her heart speeded up and a tingling excitement raced through her as her certainty grew. Her gaze moved to the lab tech standing by his monitoring station, a bemused look on his face. Earlier that day she'd reacted instinctively when he'd approached her with the stun weapon. Without conscious thought she'd linked and pulled him into a waking dream. What if she could deliberately do it—create a scenario that would force Janco to reveal his guilty knowledge about the *Nebula Empress'* accident? And take everyone in the room with her as witnesses?

It was a big risk. She wasn't even sure she could pull it off. On the other hand, Trag Kovak had taken a similar one trying to blackmail Sela with nothing more than an educated guess. What Inari had in mind was every bit as mad and as big a gamble. Then again what did she have to lose? And if she succeeded? She couldn't bear to contemplate the implications of that yet.

Inari squared her shoulders. Standing there wouldn't help her attain her goal. She gently released her hold on Kastel's hand, flashing a reassuring smile in response to his puzzled frown. The ache in her head had subsided, but her steps were unsteady as she walked over to stand beside Trag. "You told me once that if there was ever anything you could do for me all I had to do was ask."

He caught her elbow to steady her, the corners of his mouth curling upward. "I haven't forgotten. Ask away."

She took a deep breath. "I think I might be able to prove there was a connection between Kelgor and Janco Intergalactic Shipping and AzaCorp."

"Stay out of this," Sela snapped.

Trag waved her protest aside. "What do you need me to do, Inari?"

She stared into his gray-green eyes. "Trust me."

His gaze never faltered. "With my life."

Inari's confidence rose. She looked at Lysa. "What I'm about to do may seem crazy and I'm not at all sure it will work."

Lysa reached out and squeezed Inari's shoulder. "If there's even the smallest chance you can succeed, I'm behind you."

Sela started to object again, but Nolan Var interrupted her spate of angry words. "It might be wise to go along with this. You'll have a stronger case if you wish to pursue a suit against Miss Rau and her friends later."

Maren puffed out his chest. "Excellent point, Var." Behind his bluster, Inari detected a glint of fear in his eyes as he regarded her. Although he had no idea what she planned, he was getting rattled. With luck, it wouldn't take much to push him over the edge.

Her full mouth pressed into a tight line, Sela jerked her chin up in agreement.

Realizing she needed to proceed before she lost her temporary advantage, Inari moved to the monitoring station and picked up the hypo-spray injector with the *riff* drug. She handed it to technician. "Is there enough in here for everyone in this room?" He shook his head. "Then fill it." He hesitated then did as she requested. When he was finished he handed it back to her.

"You can't be thinking of using that on us," Sela said.

Inari's lips curved with amusement. "Why not? You had no compunctions against using it on Kastel and me. Admittedly it's an unpleasant experience, but the effects are short-lived, as I'm sure Dr. Larik will tell you."

"Well, of course," he sputtered. "But—"

Trag cut him off. "What do you have in mind?"

Inari shot him a grateful look. "I need everyone in a circle." He held out his arms. Lysa and Kastel moved to flank him. Lysa pulled Nolan Var up beside her. As the technician started to move forward, Inari shook her head. "I need you to monitor everyone and get help if something goes wrong." He nodded and remained at his station. Maren stepped up next to Inari. That left Bosk and Sela.

Sela shook her head, her fingers clenched tightly in front of her. "I have no intention in taking part in whatever foolish plan Miss Rau has in mind."

Bosk strode forward took her arm and yanked her into the circle. "You've had your chance to experiment. I'd say it's only fair to give Inari a shot." He settled a hard glance on the two security men as he grabbed Maren's hand. "See to it no one leaves the circle until this is over." They saluted and unholstered their stun weapons.

"What next?" Kastel asked.

Inari smiled up at him. "Pray that what I have in mind works."

He bent over and pressed a quick kiss to her lips. "I have no idea what that is, but whatever you're planning I'll be right beside you."

She leaned into him a moment breathing in his scent. With a soft sigh she straightened. "I think it would be best if we all sit down for this. Once the drug hits, staying on our feet won't be an option." Everyone complied. After they were all seated cross-legged, she tapped the hypo-injector. "I'm sending this around. Each of you will inject yourselves. I'll be last and then we'll all take hands. If anyone has a problem with these directions," she indicated the two guards with a nod. "These gentlemen will do the honors."

The room was silent as each person in the circle injected himself or herself with a small dose of the *riff* spider drug. When it came to Sela, she stiffened and shook her

head. One of the guards started forward. Shooting Inari a glance as cold as the venom in the hypo, Sela held it to her arm and depressed the plunger. "I won't forget this," she hissed.

Inari smiled. "I'm counting on it."

Maren grabbed the syringe from Sela and gave himself a dose then handed it to Inari. Without giving herself time to think, she injected the drug and let the hypo-injector fall to the floor. It landed with a clatter that seemed to come from far away. The metallic taste hit the back of her throat and icy pain raced through her veins. This time she was ready for it. Checking to see that everyone had joined hands, she dragged in a deep lungful of air and reached out with her mind, first to Kastel and then to Trag. Linking with Kastel was easy. Whatever the strange bond was that existed between them it appeared they didn't need to be asleep for it to work. Linking to Trag was more difficult. Despite the strength of his recently discovered gift, he was untrained. Using Kastel to boost her, she fought through what felt like a thick spongy wall. With a last push she punched through it to Trag's waking mind.

"What," he began as his awareness merged with hers. Then they were elsewhere.

* * * * *

They stood in the center of the *Nebula Empress'* engine room. Or what Inari envisioned as a star liner's engine room, since she'd never actually seen one. She sought Trag's mind and with his help the hazy shapes on either side of them sharpened into banks of instruments. Rows of long cylindrical shield generators filled one half of the room. The AzaCorp logo appeared on each piece of equipment. To add to the realism of the scene she filled it with avatars representing the ship's engineering crew. As they worked at their stations they called out to each other, their voices rising with controlled panic.

"Shield generator one and three failing," one of them shouted, frantically typing something into the keypad in front of him.

"Hull plate compromised on deck eleven aft," another voice rang out. Alarms screamed. Other voices joined the chaos, calling out directions and readings from instrument gages.

Inari drew her attention from the unfolding scenario to watch the reactions of the group she'd brought into her waking dream.

Lysa, Bosk and Nolan Var stood off to one side, silently taking in their surroundings with open curiosity.

Sela observed the scene with her cool demeanor intact. "Very impressive," she remarked with a thin smile as her eyes met Inari's. "One more ability for Dr. Larik to investigate when this little farce is over."

Larik nodded in agreement, his fingers twitching with obvious longing for his ubiquitous vid-pad to record his impressions. "To my knowledge the phenomena is quite unique in psi research."

Inari bit back a sarcastic response. She didn't have time to argue. Even with Kastel and Trag's help she didn't know how long she could keep everyone in this state.

Alone, of the entire group Maren Janco appeared ill at ease. His eyes darted about the room like a *jela* bird looking for a safe place to land. Inari saw his jaw quiver when one of the crew avatars yelled there'd been another hull breach. "How long are you going to keep us here?" he demanded.

"As long as it takes for me to get answers to my questions," Inari said. "Of course if something goes wrong we could get locked in here permanently."

Sweat sprang out on his forehead and he tugged at the collar of his shirt. "That can't happen with you in control can it? You'd be able to wake us up."

Good. He was nervous. A slow smile tilted the corners of her mouth. "Maybe," she said. Her shoulders lifted. "Maybe not. I never linked with so many minds before. Who knows what could happen."

Let him stew on that for a while. She turned her back and motioned for Kastel and Trag to follow her across the room to the rows of generators.

Kastel leaned against the side of one of the cylinders. "What you said to Janco isn't a lie, is it?"

"No," she admitted. "Frankly I'm as astounded as everyone else that I can do this."

He shook his head and grinned. "I don't why, but for some reason I'm not at all surprised. Although I'm not sure what you hope to achieve."

"Neither am I," Trag said with a frown. "Sela may be impressed, but I doubt it will force her into some sort of confession."

"It's not Sela I'm after," Inari said. Both men exchanged puzzled glances.

"Then who?" Kastel asked. His lips pursed as he studied the others. His gaze came back to Inari. "Janco?"

She nodded. "I think Sela was telling the truth, or at least the truth as she knows it, when she denied AzaCorp supplied faulty equipment. But Janco knows something and he's terrified I'm going to expose whatever it is he's been hiding." She frowned and ran her fingers over the AzaCorp logo. She glanced up at Trag. "Have you ever heard of a company called Seladon Tech?"

"I don't think so. Why?"

"It's something I caught from Maren's mind as we linked."

Kastel's eyes widened. "You can read minds now?" Inari smiled at the incredulous note in his voice. It appeared she'd finally done something that surprised even him.

"Not in the way you mean. Sometimes as the link is forged I pick up stray images and thoughts from my clients. Besides this isn't the first time I've heard of Seladon Tech. It's the name of the company Janco heads in some of his fantasies." She faced the

shield generator and narrowed her eyes. The red logo with the company name below shimmered and changed. It now read Seladon Tech a division of AzaCorp.

Trag's gray-green eyes brightened with understanding. "You think Janco might have been using AzaCorp as a shell corporation to hide his own company, one he's kept secret from his wife?"

"It's possible. If so, he hid the connection very carefully since you didn't find it in your investigation. If I'm right and we can force him to admit it in front of all the others, Sela will have no choice but to negotiate with us. If the truth ever came out that her husband was responsible for selling substandard equipment through AzaCorp that led to the subsequent destruction of the *Nebula Empress*, the lawsuits would leave their reputation and their company in ruins."

"So how do we get him to confess?" Kastel asked.

"I'm hoping that Sela will do it for us." Inari turned and waved her arms. "If everyone would gather round, I think we can get to the point of why I brought us all here."

Sela stalked over. "It's about time," she huffed.

When everyone had assembled, Inari pointed to the logo on the side of the generator. "We've all been led to believe that the shield generators were supplied by AzaCorp, but that doesn't seem to be the case. Are any of you familiar with this company?"

There was a moment's silence as all eyes moved to the logo, followed by a general shaking of heads. Janco shifted his stance and rubbed his nose.

Despite the slight negative movement of Sela's head her brows drew together. She examined the red lettering on the side of the silver cylinder again then glanced at her husband. He met her eyes and quickly looked away. Her frown deepened. She turned to Inari. "If this is what you brought us here for, I fail to see your point, Miss Rau?"

"I suggest you ask your husband. I think he's the only one here who really knows that answer."

Janco stiffened. He crossed his arms and glared at Inari. "Why ask me? I don't know anything."

"I think you're lying," Inari replied in a level voice. She saw agreement in the expressions on most of the others' faces as their attention focused on Janco.

"Think whatever you like," he snarled. He looked at his wife. "This is nothing but a waste of time. Make her end this."

"I have no intention of ending this," Inari retorted. "We're going to stay here until we find out what really happened to the *Nebula Empress*."

"Come clean, Janco," Bosk said. He moved closer, resting his hand on his stun wand. "It's obvious you know something."

Janco stepped back. His gaze shifted from side-to-side as if looking for an escape route. "I told you before I don't know anything. I never heard of Seladon Tech."

Sela's gaze moved back to the logo on the shield generator, her lips moving as she silently mouthed the words printed there. Her eyes were blue ice when she turned them on Janco. "You wouldn't dare," she whispered.

Inari felt a fleeting pity. Betrayal was an ugly thing and she suspected the other woman was about to experience it firsthand. "Wouldn't dare what, Seladona?"

Sela's slim shoulders jerked at the use of her full name, the name she used so rarely that most people had forgotten it.

"Seladona," Lysa murmured. Her eyes grew round. "Seladona. Seladon!" She sent Janco a look of disbelief.

It didn't compare with the expression that filled Sela Janco's face. "You foul, disgusting prick," she spat. Her eyes blazed with naked hatred. "After all I've done for Kelgor and Janco Intergalactic, you went behind my back and started your own company and then had the audacity to use my name." The last words were a scream.

Nolan Var took her arm. "Calm down, Sela. I think it best if you let me handle this." His eyes met Inari's. "I think you've made your point, Miss Rau. I suggest we discuss this in more comfortable setting."

Inari let her gaze sweep over the group. "I think that can be arranged."

Hiding her relief behind a smiling mask, she reached for Kastel. Warm and comforting, his fingers curled around hers. Trag took her other hand. He had remained silent as Maren Janco's connection to the *Nebula Empress'* destruction had been revealed. Although Sela might personally be innocent of the star liner's accident, from the cold promise Inari saw in the depths of his gray-green eyes when they met hers, she had no doubt Trag was going to make the Jancos pay dearly for the loss of his wife and the other passengers. Despite the storm of emotions that must be racking him, Trag's lips tilted in a slight smile as he looked down at Inari. "We're going to wake up with one bitch of a headache aren't we?" he asked.

"We are indeed."

* * * * *

"I can't believe I missed the whole thing," Talia said later that afternoon as she handed Inari a glass of sparkling ice wine. She lifted her own in a toast. "Here's to the best damn dream guide the Celestial Crystal has ever seen. May your legend live forever." She tilted her glass and took a deep drink then broke into laughter at Inari's horrified grimace.

"Lords, I'm never going to live this down am I?"

Talia took her arm and drew her closer to the windows overlooking the Geft River. "Probably not," she said with a cheerful smile. "Now, I want to hear all the details. What happened after everyone woke up?"

Inari sipped her wine and admired the view. The late afternoon sun glinted off the crystal domes of the other dream palaces dotting the river bank. When she judged her

friend was about to explode with curiosity she took pity and started to talk. "Well, after the techs fortified Kastel, Trag and me with pain meds, we all moved to Lysa's office."

"And then?"

"And then Trag and Nolan Var, Sela's adjudicator, worked out all the legal details."

Talia huffed. "For someone who designs dream fantasies for a living you are the worst storyteller I've ever heard."

Kastel chuckled as he joined them. "Inari's too modest to crow about our success. I, on the other hand, don't have that problem." He launched into a detailed description of the meeting. He left the final outcome to Inari.

"Trag got the Celestial Crystal, and Kastel and I received a hefty sum to make up for any physical or psychological trauma we may have suffered during the psi tests."

"Enough for me to buy out my contract," Kastel added. "A good thing, since I'm not sure how valuable I'd have been as a guide after the dream lock incident."

"And in return for all of this Sela and Janco get to keep their company and avoid any lawsuits?" Talia asked. She sipped her wine and looked pensive.

"For the moment," Inari said. "There are a lot of Concord citizens who deserve to know what happened to their loved ones on the *Nebula Empress*. One day the truth is going to come out. When it does, I wouldn't want to be the Jancos."

"Neither would I," Talia agreed. "What about Dr. Larik? If the military ever gets its hands on his report, you and Kastel could be forced into testing again."

"Trag saw the danger too. He suggested to Dr. Larik that his report should go missing. Larik must have reached the same conclusion. He left it on the desk after the meeting was over."

Talia glanced over at Trag who was in deep conversation with Lysa. "Hmm. I think it's time I got better acquainted with my new boss." Shooting them a mischievous smile, she walked away.

Inari's gaze moved back to scene outside the window. Kastel slipped an arm around her waist and she leaned her head on his shoulder. *They had won*. She was still struggling to wrap her mind around the concept. From the dazed expression on Kastel's face, he felt the same way. "So that's it?"

She tilted her head back and smiled up at him. "I think so. Sela and Janco have more pressing concerns to worry about. And Trag made it plain what he'd do if either of them made any moves against us."

He took her glass of wine and set it on the windowsill next to his then pulled her into his arms. Totally oblivious to the fact that they weren't alone, he kissed her with such abandon she had no choice but to respond with a similar enthusiasm. They were both breathless when they parted.

No one seemed to have noticed. A ripple of laughter filled the room. They turned to see Trag whispering something in Lysa's ear. She laughed again and put a hand on his arm. Inari shot them a wondering glance. *Was Trag flirting with her former boss?* It was a

good sign if he was, since it meant his dream farewell to his wife had allowed him to move on.

"Thinking of matchmaking?" Kastel asked.

She shook her head. "They don't need my help. I hope it works out though. I think they'd be great together."

Kastel's blond brows arched impossibly high. "Did Inari Rau say that? Lysa must be at least seven years older than Trag."

Inari shrugged. "Life is short." *Sometimes shorter than any of them realized.* Sharing Trag's grief during the dream had taught her that. She didn't want to waste one more day of her life worrying about inconsequential things like age. She wanted to be with Kastel for as long as he wanted to be with her. She hoped their love would last a lifetime. If it didn't...well, that was a risk she was prepared to take. "If two people care for each other, age shouldn't matter."

"Does that apply to us as well?"

She wrapped her arms around his neck. "It does."

Kastel rested his hands lightly on her waist. "I have to warn you that I'm unemployed."

Her forehead creased. "You could use the money coming from the Jancos to buy back your engineering company. Isn't that what you originally planned to do once you left the Celestial Crystal?"

"If you'd asked me that question eight months ago I'd have said yes. Now..." His shoulders lifted. She caught a twinkle in his blue eyes. "Know anyone who'd be willing to hire an ex-dream guide?"

"Well," her voice lowered to a husky purr. "I do have some sea primroses that need to be planted."

Heat simmering in his eyes, he drew her to him. "As luck would have it, I know a thing or two about gardening."

"Consider yourself hired." Impatient to close the deal, she pulled his mouth down to hers. When she and Kastel finally pulled apart it took a moment to realize that they were no longer alone.

Trag, Lysa and Talia regarded them with broad smiles on their faces. Trag hefted the bottle he was holding. "Now that that's settled, how about some more wine?"

Still holding Kastel's hand, Inari accepted a glass with her other. She raised it toward Trag. "Thank you for saving us from a dismal future as the Jancos' pet dreamers."

"Believe me when I say that ruining Sela Janco's plans was a definite pleasure." He took a sip of his wine then smiled down at Lysa. "Besides I think owning a dream palace will be a fascinating new enterprise."

Lysa sipped her wine with her usual composure, but her hazel eyes sparkled when they met Trag's. It would be interesting Inari decided to see what developed between

them in the future months. At the moment, her future was calling. She set down her glass and whispered in Kastel's ear, "If we leave now we can be in Port Liassa in time to watch the sun go down."

They made a quick farewell. Amid the warm hugs and warmer words of affection, Inari invited them to her house for a meal of fresh grilled seafood the following week.

"At long last, I'm going to get a chance to see the sun set over your ocean," Talia said, her green eyes shimmering with tears as she and Inari traded one last embrace.

"I'll be looking forward to it," Inari called over her shoulder said as Kastel pulled her toward the lift.

Four hours later they stood on the small balcony of Inari's bedroom watching the stars began to wink on one by one. Kesta, waiting for her tardy sister, hung full and glowing just above the horizon.

Kastel's warm lips brushed her hair. "Are you sure you want me to stay here? I can find quarters in town and still work on your garden."

Inari faced him. He gathered both her hands and held them to his chest. "That's up to you," she said. "But I hope you'll choose to remain here with me."

"Easier to keep an eye on the hired help that way?"

She tipped her head to the side and pretended to consider his comment. "Well, there is that," she said. "Also, it would be more efficient when working on dream designs to have my partner here. Ideas always come at the weirdest hours."

His eyes widened. "You want me to help you design dreams?"

"My business has been taking off. I was going to hire an assistant soon. And the trip to Gemmax City has put me way behind. How do you like the sound of Rau and Fane Dream Scenes?"

One brow arched. "You're offering me a partnership?"

"Think you can handle it?"

He grinned. "I'll manage somehow. Although I sort of like the sound of Fane and Fane even better."

Her mouth dropped open in a silent gasp. She stared up at him wide eyed. "Are you serious?"

"Deadly." His grip on her fingers tightened. "You spent years making everyone else's dreams come alive. If you'll let me, I'd like to try to make some of yours come true."

Inari gently retrieved her hands. Worry darkened Kastel's blue eyes. She could tell by his expression that he was preparing himself for rejection. The tenseness in his jaw and shoulders didn't ease even as she slipped her arms around his neck.

"A wise young man I know once told me that all that dream stuff was highly overrated. Considering the events of the past few days, I think I agree with him. I'm far more interested in making memories." She raised herself on the toes of her bare feet and pressed her mouth to his in a long, slow kiss.

Kastel scooped her up. "Enough to fill a lifetime," he promised as he strode across the room and deposited her on the bed.

Inari raised eager arms to pull him down beside her. "Just to let you know I plan on living a very long time."

Kastel's teeth flashed in a grin. "Good thing you picked a younger man. I understand they have more stamina."

"Excellent point," she purred, stroking the muscles of his chest. "Think you can keep up?"

He kissed her forehead, her jaw and her throat. Love mingled with the desire blazing in his eyes when he raised his head to look down at her. "I'll give it my best shot."

Inari's heart stuttered and she almost forgot to breathe as she stared up at him. She laid her palm on his cheek. "Are you sure you won't regret this later?"

"Regret being with you?" He shook his head and responded without a trace of reservation in his voice. "Never."

Closing the distance, Kastel took her mouth in a deep possessive kiss that drove all doubt from her mind. In the days to come he would be her partner, her friend and her lover. Much better to her way of thinking, she decided as his warm lips skimmed down her jaw to nestle in the hollow of her throat, than any dream she'd ever conceived.

About the Author

Kathleen Coddington wrote her first romance in sixth grade. While it was vastly entertaining to her classmates, her teacher was less than amused. It was over thirty years before she began writing again. When she did pick up her pen, she looked to the things she loved most for inspiration. Her stories reflect her passion for history, magic, fascinating future worlds and a firm belief that love conquers all.

She is a member of Romance Writers of America, the Pocono Lehigh Romance Writers, and the Greater Lehigh Valley Writers Group. She has received awards from the New Jersey Romance Writers' Put Your Heart in a Book contest and the Golden Rose contest. She has three books published through Cerridwen Press.

A retired school librarian, Kathleen enjoys reading and travel. A member of two Civil War reenacting units, she is a frequent lecturer at historical societies and women's groups. She has also published several articles about the fashions of the mid-19th century. She and her husband and three cats live near their son in a tiny town in eastern Pennsylvania, where she teaches a novel-writing course at the local community college.

The author welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at www.ellorascave.com.

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