

ONCE UPON A DIFFERENT TIME

Janet Rivenbark

*You see, I have this theory that no matter the time or the place, where, or how they might meet, Vincent and Catherine will still have the same timeless love story. This is just one of my ideas of how that might happen. **WARNING:** I have others. ☐ ☐*

Picture, if you will...

V

"So, you are planning to write a history of the colony," Jacob Wells said, as his adopted son, Vincent, took the chair across the desk from him.

"Someone should tell the story. Someday we may have a larger population and a society that wants to know their history," Vincent said, as he prepared to record their conversation. "I thought you'd be a good place to start. You've been here since before The Corporation left, and I've heard you tell most of the stories. I'll record everyone I talk to. Then I'll edit it all together to make a coherent story before I write it all down."

"Elizabeth and Narcissa have been here the longest," Jacob reminded him. "And you really should talk to all the people who were the original miners. Recording their stories and saving the recordings is a good idea." He nodded at the recorder Vincent had.

"That is my plan, but you were in a position where you had access to everyone, working both Above and Below in both clinics," Vincent said.

"I did. People talk to their doctors."

"Elizabeth is going to tell a big piece of the story with the murals she's been planning for the lobby of the Town Hall," Vincent said, "but please, Father, tell me what you know about The Corporation. It seems the logical place to start."

"Well, it actually started long before The Corporation. It started as 'Pater Corporation,'" Father began with a nod. "It was shortened to PaterCorp, the later it just became The Corporation after the original family, the Paters, sold it to a conglomerate.

"I went to work for them just before the family sold the company. I'd gone to school with their youngest son, John. I started in their environmental department. I experimented and tested chemicals and compounds to which the employees were exposed to ensure that they were safe and that the protective gear the company issued was sufficient.

"Pater Corp started as an Earth mining and oil drilling company in the early 21st Century. They were not using the most ecologically-sound practices back then, one of them being fracking."

"Is that the process of injecting liquid at high pressure into subterranean rocks, old oil, and gas wells and that sort of thing to force out and extract what was left of the oil or gas deposits?" asked Vincent.

"Yes, and it was damaging to local water supplies, and in some extreme cases, it caused sinkholes that swallowed up large sections of land and the buildings on them," Father told him.

"That doesn't sound good," Vincent said.

“It’s wasn’t, and from what I learned from the company literature, it was ultimately what forced PaterCorp off Earth. They were the first company to start mining the asteroid belt in Earth’s solar system. Eventually, they moved on to other planets and their moons. By then, they were using more ecologically-sound practices. But the farther they got from Earth or Earth Colonies, the harder it was to find people willing to sign on to mine for them. And it was expensive to transport those people and the equipment they needed to get the job done.

“That was when the family decided to sell the company; it was a couple of years after I started working for them. A group of businessmen purchased PaterCorp, and that was when it became Astro Natural Resources Mining Corporation. They tried calling it A.N.R.M.C., and they had that as their logo, and it was on all their ships and embroidered on all of our lab coats and other employee uniforms, but it didn’t stick, and everyone just started calling it The Corporation. The new owners started out looking for ways to cut costs, and they came up with the idea of using slave labor to do their mining, since it would increase their profit.”

“Isn’t that against Coalition law, or was that before those laws were passed?” asked Vincent.

“Those laws were already in force, but this far from Earth or Coalition settlements, they found that enforcement of the Sol System and Coalition laws governing space exploration and the exploitation of resources and people were harder to enforce than they were closer to Earth and within the Coalition. Several civilizations that people from Earth have come in contact with, who didn’t join the Coalition, used slave or indentured labor. The Corporation found it cheaper to go back to lower-tech mining methods and use more people and less mechanization. In this sector of space, slavery was the norm, and slaves were cheap to purchase and maintain, and some species are very well suited to mining.

“Once The Corporation took over this installation used the lower-tech mining practices. The mine had been a big producer for years before PaterCorp sold. But shortly after The Corporation bought the company, production started falling off.

“This planet had been ideal from the time PaterCorp’s scouts found it. Not only did it have rich deposits of several different useful ores, but the surface of the planet was Earthlike. Earth crops could be grown and animals raised. It could be pretty much self-sufficient, which was an enormous money saver. There was no indigenous sentient life and no dangerous life forms. The largest animal that is native to the planet is about the size of a medium-sized dog, and they aren’t aggressive and stay well away from people.

“The people who ran the mining operation - the administrative staff, the medical staff, the farmers who managed the farms, security staff - were able to live in homes that PaterCorp built for them. The people who ran the equipment at the mines had dormitories and small houses closer to the mines. The climate is temperate, and the length of the year is very close to that of Earth. That was before PaterCorp sold the company, and the mining was still being done with automation.”

“What about PaterCorp employees; were they all from Earth?” Vincent asked.

“Most of them were, or from Mars Colony. A few were non-human, but all were humanoid.”

“And after The Corporation took over?”

“Only the upper management was replaced. No one was fired. A few people quit or retired and went home. People were shifted around.”

“How long was it before The Corporation started phasing out the mechanized mining and putting people in the mines?”

“That only took about six months,” Father told him. “They moved most of the machinery to mines that were producing better, or they sold it and used the money to buy slaves to use as miners.”

“And those miners? What was their makeup, and where did they live?”

“The miners were a mix, mostly human, but still diverse. The managers and supervisors who were all paid employees lived in the old dormitories and houses near the mine, but the miners lived in dormitories that were set up in some of the shallower chambers that had already been mined. Keep in mind that even some of those who worked Above were slaves. They either had rooms where they worked, or lived in one of the dormitories here in town. The miners didn’t have it as easy, and there were very few amenities. When I got here, they lived in squalor, and it wasn’t unusual to lose several miners to accidents and disease every month. I worked in both clinics, but I lived Below with the miners. I managed to convince the managers that it would be cheaper to give the miners showers and bathrooms with real plumbing and better food; that it was less expensive and more convenient to provide those things, than replacing slaves with new ones every few months. Once they had a little more comfort, the miners started instituting more safety practices on their own.”

“I have a list of the people still here who were in that original group. I’ve talked to a few of them. But in general, do you know how most of them wound up in the slave market?” Vincent asked.

“As far as I know, most of them were kidnapped by slavers and sold,” Father told him. “For a while, many large family groups from Earth were claiming whole small planets or moons and colonizing them. Elizabeth was with one of those groups. Too many of those colonies had no security and trusted in the goodness of beings all over the galaxy, and it turned out that there were a lot who didn’t live up to that trust. People like the Azurans were advanced enough to have space travel, but they were very exploitive, and they cleaned out entire populations of some of those colonies and sold them into slavery.”

“And the Azurans still supply most of the slave markets in this area of the galaxy?” asked Vincent. He’d heard some stories from Devin, who captained the colony’s largest trading freighter.

“One of them. I don’t think the Azuran planet even exists anymore,” Father told him. “I think their sun died a very long time ago. Those who are left are very clannish, but they are really nothing more than pirates. They live on their ships and travel in packs.”

“Is that’s how the slaves got here?”

“Most of them. I wasn’t a slave, and there were a few others like me. I was tricked. After the new management took over, and before realizing that they weren’t completely above board, I was offered a job in the clinic here. I’d never been off Earth, and I had no living family, and it sounded like an adventure, so I took the offer. When I arrived, I was told that I had to pay for my transportation here. I had no money, so I signed a contract and was indentured for a period of 20 years to pay for it. I rotated between the clinic Above and the one Below. And I was on call for anything 24/7.”

“What happened to The Corporation?”

“Well, The Corporation still exists, and as far as I know, they are still doing business the same way. But from what I overheard here, everyone knew that the mine was about finished. They were down to working one shift a day. We should have realized that something was going on when they started giving all the miners a day off every ten days. Then one day, the day after one of the scheduled days off, all the miners woke up, and the supervisors never showed up to start the day.”

“What about those who were living Above?”

“There were rather ramshackle prefab dormitories built on the open area southeast of town, where the servants and menials who worked Above lived. They were far enough away from the main part of town and the landing pads that it would have been easy for The Corporation employees to leave without being detected. Everyone had the previous day off, so any preparations wouldn’t have been noticed.

“All of those Below got up that day. They had breakfast then waited for the supervisors to show up to hand out the work schedules for the day. It was my day to work in the clinic Above. I always arrived early, before the sun came up. The nurse who worked with me, Grace, kept the same schedule. We didn't realize that anything was amiss until no one showed up for their appointments. Those of us above were the first to notice. The day started early for the people who worked as servants, so they realized something was wrong when they got to work and found that the houses had been stripped of personal items. Most of them stayed where they worked for several hours, before a few ventured out to find out what had happened.

“I had more freedom to move about, so I started walking through town. Finally, a few of the men and I walked out to the landing pads and found that most of the ships were gone. By the time we figured out what had happened, it was afternoon, and a few of the miners had ventured Above.

“After a few days, it was evident that The Corporation employees were not coming back. We contacted the people on the farms and in the factories, and the situation was the same there. A vote was taken, and they asked me to take a leadership role. Probably because of my education.

“People were confused and didn't quite know what to do with themselves. Plenty of food had been left, and all the buildings and infrastructure were intact, so I suggested that everyone move Above. People moved into the houses and apartments, and some new places were eventually built. We tore down all the prefab dormitories outside town and used the materials for other things.

“We stayed in contact with all the outlying settlements, and eventually some made their way in from the farms and factories. Some people started working on the ships that had been left behind. By cannibalizing a few of them, they managed to get several of them working. Some people, I think it was a little over half of the miners and farmworkers, decided to take one of the ships and leave. Some still had families in other places and wanted to go home.

“All the equipment in all the settlements still worked; the computer network was intact. There was still power from solar panels and batteries. Much of the equipment and computers were outdated and somewhat obsolete, but the rest of us settled in and decided to see if we could make a go of a colony here.”

“And it seems to have turned out well,” Vincent commented.

“Yes, we've become farmers, tradesmen, laborers, and some of our exploring groups have found deposits of gemstones in the mountains to the north, and we mine then trade and sell those. We've done very well for ourselves.”

“What was the population in the beginning?”

Father opened a book he kept on his desk and checked the first page.

“We started at just over 1200, but right after that first group left, there were 552.”

“Do you know the breakdown of that 552?”

“Breakdown?” Father questioned.

“How many human, non-human, male, female?”

“Initially, there was 89 non-human,” Father said, checking his list, “all male, and there were 463 humans, but only 112 were female.”

“Wasn't a count done recently?” Vincent asked.

“Yes, the census project. We are up to 814 in population, but there are only 102 females, all human except for a few children who are a blending of human and one of the alien species we have. But quite a few of both our males and females are past childbearing age. We've had a few deaths, a few births, and on some of our trading trips, new settlers have come back with our traders.”

“You said that there has been a blending of human and other species. Are all our species compatible with each other, genetically speaking?” asked Vincent, knowing that it was one of Father’s areas of interest.

“Well, since all of our people are *humanoid*, there are instances where two people of different species have paired off, and a few have produced offspring. And in those who have, the children have all been healthy and seem to show a blending of the two genetic makeups.”

Vincent nodded as he made notes.

“Are you going to include your story?” Father asked.

“Everyone’s heard that a thousand times,” Vincent said with a smile.

“I know, but never from you. You should record it.”

“I don’t have a first-hand memory of the beginning,” Vincent told him, “but I’ve heard it many times. I’d like to record you telling it for the history.”

Father nodded and started with a slight smile.

“As you know, I was in a relationship with Grace Devin. She was one of those who were kidnapped by the Azurans and sold as a slave to The Corporation. When The Corporation found out that she was a nurse, they put her to work in the clinic Above. She was there every day, and we worked together when I was in that clinic. After The Corporation people left, we gravitated to each other, and we shared a house. About a year after The Corporation left, we had a son, but Grace died a few days after he was born. It was just too much for her heart. We didn’t know she had a heart condition; if we had, we wouldn’t have taken the chance. I named our son Devin at Grace’s request.

“Some of our men had become merchants on behalf of the colony, and on their trips, they would often put up flyers advertising for colonists. A woman came to them with one of the flyers and asked if she qualified. She was living and working as a seamstress, in one of the more dangerous spaceports. She had a child who had been entrusted to her by a friend who had died, and she was trying to find a place she could live and raise that child in relative safety, and where she could earn her living.”

“They brought her back here. You were that child. Her name was Anna, and I could never get much more than that out of her, except that her friends had been a non-human, feline species. She wasn’t sure where they were from. She didn’t know what their species was called, and since she was never able to pronounce their names, she chose names for them that were as close as she could come to what they said their names were. She called your mother, Nina, and your father, Byron.

“She’d known them about the equivalent of a year when you were born. Shortly after you were born, your father was killed in an accident. And from the story Anna told, the pair were Bonded in such a way that despite having a child, your mother didn’t live long after her mate died. Only a few weeks. You were almost a year old when Anna arrived here. But sadly, she died about a year after that, and that was when I took you in. I already had Devin, who was about five at the time.

“Anna named you Vincent after her father. She said that you had another name, but it was in your parent’s language, and as much as she tried, she could never pronounce it and had no idea how it might have been spelled, even phonetically.”

“And no one has any idea where my family was from?”

“None. No one has ever met anyone who looks like you. That is usually the first thing Devin asks when he meets new people. He carries a picture of you for that reason. So far, no one has been able to tell us anything.”

“Maybe someday,” Vincent said, wistfully. “You’ve filled in a lot of holes for me, Father,” he added. “Thank you.”

Father’s comments about their population set him to thinking about the problem. They’d discussed it many times in their council. Still, beyond their trading ships recruiting new settlers, they’d never been able to agree on a way to increase their population, especially their female population.

An idea occurred to him, and he made some notes and planned to make some suggestions to the council at the meeting later that week. His proposal would likely have to be put to a vote, but he was pretty sure that it was a sound idea and that most of their people would be willing to try it out.

“Vincent, you placed yourself on the agenda under new business?” Father asked, after everything else had been discussed.

“Yes, Father, I did. There is one issue that we’ve discussed before, but we’ve never been able to come up with a solution.”

“And what issue is that?” asked Father.

“The issue of there not being enough women to keep our population stable. I mean, short of compelling all our women of childbearing age to each have several children, I couldn’t see a solution. Or at least I didn’t, but I have an idea that could work.”

“We have had a lot of input on that,” Father commented. “The only ideas that I found to be viable are either contracting with one of the mail-order bride companies or advertising for settlers.”

“The mail order brides are very expensive,” William, their one and only restaurateur, commented.

“And I don’t think that the other works very well either, because we are never really sure that the people who come here aren’t looking for a place to hide out from the law. Or they might turn out to be just generally unsavory characters. We’ve been lucky so far, and that hasn’t happened,” Mary, the only female member of the council, pointed out.

“We could hire someone to do background checks and have a probation period,” one of the other council members suggested.

“It might work,” Mary agreed, “but the background checks take time and are expensive, and a lot of damage could be done in a short amount of time.”

They were the same arguments that had always been voiced.

“Hear out my idea,” Vincent interrupted.

The council members all nodded, and Vincent began.

“I haven’t worked out all the details, but we can work those out if we decide to consider it. I was thinking about the fact that at least half of our people were once slaves. And we all know that most slaves are people who are kidnapped and sold into slavery by the Azurans, or other slavers and pirates.

“I’ve talked to Devin and found out that the Slave Markets will sell groups of one type of slave. For example, if they have a large number who are strong and suited to mining, they will sell the whole group at once, rather than sell them one at a time.

“On one of the trips I took off-planet with Devin, I found that they also do that with groups of females. They sell them as domestic servants or sex workers. Human females, especially, are prized by the

houses in the pleasure districts. I thought that we might consider purchasing one of those groups of females and bringing them back here.”

Mary looked as if someone had hit her. “You mean you want to enslave women and turn them into baby factories?” she asked.

“No, Mary. Please don’t misunderstand. My thought is to bring them here and then tell them they are free to do whatever they want. We tell them of our dilemma, and hopefully, some will want to stay and marry. But if any of them want to leave and try to get back home, then I think we should allow it and help them as much as we can. Our people understand slavery, and I know we don’t want any part of it, but if we did something like this, we would be doing them a service and possibly helping ourselves at the same time.”

“What if this doesn’t work?” William asked. “What if we pay for a large group of women, get them here, and they all decide they want to go home?”

“That is why I think we should start with a small group to start. Perhaps ten or twenty at most. Just to see how it works out.”

The discussion went on for over an hour, but in the end, the council agreed to try it. They set a budget then gave Vincent the task of talking to Devin about it and preparing the possible new arrivals.

“So, you want me to go to Califa and buy a gaggle of women?” Devin asked in disbelief, when they talked the next day.

“Well, I don’t know how many are in a gaggle,” Vincent said with a chuckle, “but the council agreed to start with no more than twenty.”

“And you want women that the Slave Market has earmarked for the pleasure districts?”

“That is where we couldn’t agree. We know that the Slavers always certify that those women are healthy, but sometimes they have been sterilized. We need women who are healthy and willing and able to have children.”

“A lot of the women who are sold by the slavers have been sterilized no matter where they are destined for,” Devin informed him. “Sometimes, it’s only temporary. I think what we want to look at are the ones who are sold as breeders. They are guaranteed to be healthy, have no genetic abnormalities, and they haven’t been sterilized.”

“Oh, God, I never thought I’d ever be talking about women like this,” Vincent said with a shake of his head. “Father raised us better than this!”

“That he did, and just keep reminding yourself that once we get the women back here, they won’t be slaves, and they will have a choice as to whether or not they want to stay, and whether or not they want to marry and who to marry. Do they all need to be human?”

Vincent nodded. “Or at least genetically compatible with humans.” He was having second thoughts about all of it, even though it had been his idea.

“So, are the ones who are sold as breeders more expensive than the others?” Vincent asked.

“I would think so. And often, they are sold individually. Do I have permission to play it by ear?” Devin asked.

“I think that is the way we’re going to have to do it. We are just going to have to trust your judgment. I’d love to go with you, but I need to stay and get the festival, and places for any new arrivals to stay, organized. When will you leave?”

“I was on my way out with a gem shipment for Echo. I was going to see if I could trade for some goods there, but instead of that, I’ll just drop off at Echo and get paid in coin instead of goods this time. That way, I’ll have cash at the Slave Market. I’ll head for Califa after Echo. I was planning to leave in a few days.”

Devin left at the end of the week, and Vincent directed preparations for the new arrivals.

There was a two-story dormitory that The Corporation had built to house the security staff. The rooms were small, but there were twenty of them, ten on each of the two floors. And all the rooms had small, private bathrooms. Plus, there was a common room on each floor and a covered patio outside. The council decided that it would be the perfect place for the women.

The building hadn’t been used very often, and it needed work. A group of volunteers painted, repaired, and made the building habitable, and everyone pitched in to furnish it. It only took a little over two weeks to get it all in shape; they weren’t expecting Devin back for at least a month.

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Catherine looked around at the women who had been crammed into the hold of the ship with her. They all looked as bad as she felt. She knew she’d broken her ankle and probably a few ribs, and her right hand hurt, but she didn’t think anything was broken there. There were cuts on her face, some pretty deep, but without a mirror, she couldn’t really tell how bad they were.

The women had fought the pirates right alongside the crew of the ship they’d been on, but there hadn’t been enough weapons to go around, so eventually, they had lost. But the ship they had been on had been badly damaged, so after the pirates had cleaned it out and all but gutted it, they had blown it up.

Catherine had heard that there were pirates in this quadrant, but they’d never had a problem before. Now they were the captives of pirates of a species she’d never seen before. They were humanoid, in that they had the requisite number of parts and pieces. But their skin looked odd, almost like metallic scales. They all had black hair that they wore in long thin braids.

For the first few days, the women had been separated, three or four to a group, but an hour ago, they had all been herded into the cargo hold.

“Is everyone accounted for?” Catherine asked her assistant and best friend Jenny, who was trying to find something to splint Catherine’s ankle.

“I did a headcount, and the numbers match up,” she said. She came back to Catherine holding a box.

“What did you find?”

“First aid kit.” She rummaged through it and finally held up a rolled-up bandage. “This might help keep it from moving around and making it worse,” she said, as she started to wrap Catherine’s ankle.

Catherine had to admit that it felt a little better once it was wrapped. At least it didn’t feel as if the ends of the bone were rubbing on each other anymore. Jenny tended the cuts on her face then helped her find a comfortable spot on the floor before she passed the first aid kit on to the next person who needed it.

Jenny used a strip of gauze to tie her hair back and handed one to Catherine to do the same.

“Thanks,” Catherine said as she pulled her hair up into a ponytail. “Ugh, I feel so grubby. Never again will I take showers and clean clothes for granted.”

“So what do you think they want us for,” Jenny asked, as she sat down next to Catherine.

“Slaves,” said a woman who was sitting near them. She was one of the few women who weren’t from Earth or Mars Colony. Catherine remembered her beautiful violet eyes but couldn’t remember her name.

“Slaves?” Jenny gasped.

“Yeah,” the woman affirmed. “The ones with the more voluptuous figures will probably wind up in the pleasure houses. Some will wind up being breeders, but the majority of us will be sold as domestic help, factory or mine workers.”

“But the Coalition outlawed slavery,” Jenny protested.

“But Jenn,” said Catherine, “this far out, the Coalition only has jurisdiction on planets that have decided to join.”

“And Califa is making too much money in their slave markets,” the violet-eyed woman added. “They aren’t likely to be joining the Coalition anytime soon.”

Jenny looked worried, and Catherine patted her leg. “We’ll work something out,” she promised. “Maybe I can convince them to let me contact my accountant back home. I might be able to meet their price for all of us.”

“Hey, Cathy,” one of the women called from across the room a few minutes later. “It looks like they brought all our luggage over from the other ship.”

Jenny went over to look and came back carrying a familiar canvas bag and a backpack. Other women went to the pile and left with similar items.

“Maybe if this ship has a wireless network, we’ll be able to hack in and get a message out,” Jenny suggested as she handed Catherine the canvas bag.

“That’s a thought,” Catherine admitted. But when she pulled her tablet out of the bag and searched for a network, nothing showed up.

“Must either be hidden, or this hold is shielded,” she told Jenny.

Catherine wasn’t sure how long they were in the hold. There were bathroom facilities on one side, but no one had any blankets or bedding. They were fed twice; she assumed that it was once a day.

Not long after they’d eaten, on what Catherine was assuming was the second day in the hold but the seventh or eighth since they’d been taken, the ship started to shake, and they heard explosions.

Here we go again, was her first thought. This was how it had started on the other ship. Could it be that the pirates who had kidnapped them were now being attacked by someone, or were they the ones on the attack again?

She quickly passed the word for everyone to arm themselves as best they could. Most of them had pieces of wood or large, heavy tools, but a few had found knives among the luggage and cargo around them.

What she assumed was a battle raged on for at least an hour before things got uncannily quiet.

They heard a series of metallic clanging sounds before it was quiet again. Long minutes passed before the large door at the end of the cargo hold opened. The women all braced themselves, ready to charge, when several men stepped through the door.

These men looked human. They were dressed in loose cotton clothes and were wearing heavy boots. They all had blasters.

There were a few moments when everyone just stood and stared at each other.

“Please,” Catherine called out. “Please tell me that you are friends.”

“That depends on who you consider friends,” said the man with dark hair, who was in the front.

“Right now, I’d settle for anyone who isn’t a metal-skinned pirate,” she said, as Jenny helped her to her good foot.

“Azurans,” the man said. “And their skin isn’t metal; it just looks like it. One of these,” he waved the blaster, “will put a hole in it just as well as it does our skin.” He looked around. “Are you ladies *passengers* on this ship?”

“No, sir, we aren’t. We were on another ship that the pirates took. They gutted it then blew it up, or at least that is what we were told,” Catherine said.

“And you are?” the man asked, walking over to Catherine. “Are you in charge?”

“My name is Catherine Chandler, and I guess you could say that I’m in charge. This is my assistant Jenny Aaronson. We were escorting a group of women from the Sol System to Glavin III. Jenny and I work for Milky Way Wives.”

The man held out his hand. “Pleased to meet you, Catherine Chandler. I’m Devin Wells, captain of the ship that these pirates tried to board a little while ago. We’ve disabled this ship, but I think we can fix what we damaged. Once we’ve figured out a few things, we’ll get all of you out of this hold and into something a bit more comfortable. Then I think you and I need to talk.”

It took a few hours, but eventually, all the women were moved into what had been crew quarters. Quarters that had obviously been hastily cleaned by Captain Wells’ crew.

Catherine was sitting on a bunk with her foot propped up and packed in cold packs when there was a knock.

Jenny opened the door and let Captain Wells in.

“Are you all right?” he asked when he entered.

“I’m pretty sure it’s broken,” she told him. “And I might have also broken some ribs. And we have a few other injuries among the women. Do you happen to have a doctor or a medic on your ship?”

“No such luck. We don’t do long hauls, and we’ve never needed one. We don’t even have a medbed. Just a stasis unit, in case someone is badly injured.” He sat on a stool next to the bunk. “So please, explain to me how you happen to find yourself in this predicament.”

“I work for an organization called Milky Way Wives. It’s more or less a new take on the old idea of mail-order brides.”

“I’ve heard of it,” Captain Wells said. “I’ve also heard scuttlebutt that your company isn’t doing very well.”

“You are correct, and I’m afraid that this might be the last straw for them. They recently opened a new satellite office on Glavin III and purchased the ship that we were on. It wasn’t brand new, but it had been recently refurbished and was the largest in their small fleet. As far as I know, it’s not even paid for yet, and from what the pirates said, it was badly damaged, so they gutted it for cargo and parts and then destroyed it.”

“Yeah, I talked to some of them, and they told me that this ship isn’t in very good shape, and they’ve been trying to find one to replace it. They had hoped that yours would work out, but pirates aren’t

known for their finesse, and they damaged it more than they wanted to when they disabled it to board. They tried to do the same thing to us, but it backfired, and we wound up boarding them.”

“Did you kill them all?” Catherine asked, thinking about the crew of their ship that the pirates had killed.

“No, only those we had to during the fight. Most of the crew is still alive. We patched up the wounded, questioned a few to find out what was going on, then put them all in their shuttles and sent them on their way. It will be weeks before they can make it to a port or one of their other ships, if the Galactic Patrol doesn’t come across them first.”

“But you kept the ship?”

“Spoils of war,” Captain Wells said with a grin. “Our ship doesn’t have room for all of you, so I’m going to split my crew, and after we do some repairs on both ships, we will head back to my home planet, then figure out how to help you.”

“I hope you aren’t considering us to be spoils of war,” she said, referring to herself and the women she and Jenny were escorting.

“Absolutely not!” Captain Wells said adamantly. “But there is something I’d like to talk to you about.”

At her hesitant nod, he explained in great detail the problem at his home.

“You were going to buy slaves and force them to be wives?” she asked. She wasn’t sure she understood completely.

“Not force,” he quickly corrected. “We would offer alternatives. There had been discussion of using one of the bride companies like yours, but the price was a bit too steep. We wouldn’t have been able to match enough of our men to really make a difference in our population. But if we bought slaves, then freed them and gave them the choice to stay and marry, or stay and become members of our community, or even go back to their homes, we might be able to find more women who would be willing to stay. I know it sounds a little harebrained, but believe me, our hearts are in the right place. A good many of our population’s older members were slaves, and they know what it’s like. There is no way that they want to be slave owners themselves.”

“So, you want me to talk to the women in my group and find out if any of them would be willing to stay on your planet?” she asked. “And since you said that you couldn’t afford mail-order brides, how would you reimburse my company for them?”

“Well, that might be an issue, but we could offer this ship as payment,” Captain Wells suggested.

“That might work,” Catherine said. “None of the women are really obligated to M.W.W. until we reach headquarters, or in this case, the satellite office, and they fill out the matching questionnaire. So, I guess that it wouldn’t hurt to talk to them. But I will be advising them that they should wait and see what your planet and people are like before they make a decision.”

“I understand,” Captain Wells said. “And thank you for not dismissing it out of hand.”

“So, how long do you think the repairs and the trip will take?” she asked.

“It will take a couple of days to make all the repairs, then almost a week to get home. I’m afraid that we don’t have a way to let your people know that you are OK. The long-range communications gear on this ship doesn’t work, and all we have on ours is short-range.”

“It will be a while before we are missed,” Catherine told him. “So there’s really no hurry.”

“Good. I’m going to have some food sent over from my ship. There isn’t much on this one since we put some on the shuttles when we cut the crew loose. We will all be on short rations, but it won’t be for long.”

“Thank you, Captain Wells,” she said.

“Please, I may be the captain of my ship, but no one uses that title. I’m just Devin to everyone.”

Devin left the room, and Catherine relaxed back against the pillows behind her. She wasn’t sure why, but she felt that she could trust these men. She usually went with her gut, and it was seldom wrong. She hoped it wasn’t this time.

V

Vincent was in the office in his home when one of the young boys, Kipper, skidded to a halt in the doorway. His front door was always open, and no one ever knocked.

“Devin’s back!” Kipper announced. Pascal, their communications chief, liked to have a small group of boys handy to use as runners. He didn’t entirely trust their digital messaging system for more immediate messages. He said that people weren’t always at their computers, or holding a communications device, and he was right.

“Already?” Vincent said, rising and following Kipper into the hall. “Did something go wrong?”

“Dunno,” Kipper said with a shrug as they left the house. “He just radioed to have the security net dropped, and he asked that you meet him at the port.”

Vincent picked up his pace and jogged to the port half a mile outside town. He arrived just as Devin was setting the ship down.

It was only a few minutes before the ramp dropped, and Devin and came out toward Vincent. Before Vincent could speak, a second ship landed in the next landing area. That ramp lowered, and Devin’s second in command, Kanin, came out.

“What’s going on?” Vincent asked. “Did something go wrong?” he was looking back and forth between the two ships. Their ship was beat up, but the second one looked like it had been through a war.

“Actually, a lot went very right,” Devin said with a grin. “But to make a long story short... almost a week out, we were attacked and boarded by pirates. They needed a new ship because theirs wasn’t in good shape.” He nodded at the second ship. “It seemed their crew was in pretty much the same condition. They’d fought and won a battle, but they’d lost a lot of their crew and the other ship. When they tried to board us, they expected to find a bunch of fat, untrained merchants, but we surprised them. It was over in less than an hour, and we had possession of another ship and its cargo.”

“And...” Vincent prompted.

“And... we made a few repairs on both ships; it took a couple of days. Kanin here piloted the other ship, and we headed home.”

“And...” Vincent prompted again when Devin paused.

“And I think you will find the cargo to be interesting,” Devin said with another grin.

“And that cargo is?”

“Thirty-eight women who the pirates were taking to the slave markets, but who’s original destination was some mail-order bride type of setup on Glavin III.”

“You brought them back with you?” Vincent asked, as soon as he absorbed all that Devin had just said.

“They are on the ship.”

“Have you mentioned to them our situation and told them that they would be welcome to stay?”

“I haven’t talked directly to each of them, but they have a woman with them; she’s an employee of the company. I’ve talked to her, and she said that she’d talk to the women, but she assured me that no one would make any decisions until they’ve talked to someone here and have seen what things are like here.”

“And some of them need medical attention,” Kanin put in. “Nothing serious, mostly just cuts, bruises, and sprains; a couple of broken bones. A lot of the superficial wounds have healed some since we first found them. They must have fought like a bunch of wildcats when the pirates first took them.”

Kipper had followed Vincent, and Vincent turned to him now.

“Run back and tell Father to meet us in the clinic.” Father never carried a communicator. “... and tell Mary that we need a place for eighteen additional women to live.”

“Got it, Vincent,” Kipper said, then took off at a run.

“Can I tell them to come out?” asked Kanin.

“Yeah,” Devin answered. “Do any of them need help?”

“I think they’ve got it. They were helping each other where needed.”

As soon as the rather ragged group of women, some carrying small bags or backpacks, started down the ramp, Vincent began giving instructions and explanations.

“We don’t have accommodations for everyone at the moment,” he told them all, when they were gathered around him. “We weren’t expecting quite so many guests. But Mary and Olivia are finding beds for each of you.” He looked around and noticed that several of the women were supporting other women.

“Those of you who need medical attention, please follow me, and the rest of you can go with Devin. He will take you to a dormitory, and if you will please wait in the first-floor day room or the patio area there until Mary arrives, she will assign all of you rooms.”

As they started to walk, he noticed that one of the women couldn’t walk at all on one of her feet, and she was hopping along on one foot with the help of another woman. He stopped them and lifted the one who couldn’t put any weight on her right foot into his arms. She groaned, and her hand went to her side.

As soon as he touched her, he knew what her injuries were, and he staggered a little at the impact of it.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to hurt you,” he told her. He could feel her pain in his ribs, and he shifted his hand to avoid them.

“I think I’ve got some cracked ribs, and I know my ankle is broken,” she said. She looked over at her friend. “You OK, Jenn?”

“I’m fine,” Jenn answered. “Since you seem to be in good hands, I’ll go catch up with the other group.” She jogged back the way they’d come.

“How far are we going?” the woman asked him. “I hope I’m not too heavy.”

“Not too far. And you barely weigh as much as a child. We are going to the yellow building with the red clinic sign hanging on the front. Does anyone else need help?”

There was a chorus of negative answers from the other women, and Vincent looped Catherine’s bag over his arm and continued leading the way to the clinic.

When they walked into the building, Father was already there with his medical staff. The women were quickly triaged, and when he ascertained that none had life-threatening injuries, he started treating them.

He had three medbeds that could pretty much fix whatever ailed a person, short of surgery, and it only took a short time to get all the women back on their feet. As each one finished treatment, they were escorted to the dorm where Mary took care of them.

The woman who Vincent had carried had insisted that all the other women be treated before her.

“I’m assuming that you are the company representative that Devin mentioned,” said Vincent, sitting beside her as she waited.

“I am. I’m Catherine Chandler. I just feel so responsible for everything that has gone wrong with this group,” she said sorrowfully, with a shake of her head.

“Catherine,” Vincent repeated. “You shouldn’t feel responsible for what those pirates did.” He tried to reassure her. “We are very far away from any authority, and it’s pretty lawless. The pirates are flourishing. That is why we have a network of security satellites in orbit. Your company has customers this far out?”

“Not yet. We just opened a new outpost, and this group was to be the first group there. But I’ll have to admit that I don’t think Milky Way Wives will last very much longer. It’s expanded several times in the last three solar years, and I think it’s been too fast. And now they’ve lost their newest ship. Even before this, I had decided that this was going to be my last group and that I was going to resign and head back to Sol System and look for another job.”

“And what do you do?” Vincent asked.

“I’m an attorney. I specialize in contracts. That is what I was doing for the Milky Way Wives Corporation. I travel back and forth with the groups of brides, and I negotiate their contracts in transit.”

“And you can speak for all of them?” he asked.

“To a point,” she told him. “As can Jenn. She’s my assistant.”

Before she could continue, Kipper skidded to a halt in front of Vincent.

“Devin said to tell you that they’ve unloaded all the cargo from the pirate ship. There are some interesting things on it, and he said that he has a lot of baggage that looks like it might belong to the ladies. What you want him to do with it?”

Vincent glanced at the woman beside him.

“All of it should be labeled with our names. If you could just take it to a central area, and let the women know where it is. They can claim it.”

“Tell Devin to take it to the dormitory. Most of the women will be there.”

Kipper took off at a run, and Vincent turned back to the woman next to him.

“I’m sorry I didn’t introduce myself. I’m Vincent,” he held out his hand to shake hers and was surprised when she took it without a second glance. Usually, his hairy, clawed hand caused some hesitation in strangers.

“Pleased to meet you, Vincent,” she said with a smile.

When Father was ready for Catherine, Vincent carried her to the medbed, but he left a short time after treatment started.

He went to the dormitory where he knew he’d find Mary.

“Are you finding rooms for everyone?” he asked when she walked up to him.

“I have 16 of the extra ladies placed. The young lady named Jennifer is going to stay with me for now, and I’m still looking for a place for the woman who is in charge.”

“That’s Catherine Chandler. You can put her in the guest house at my place,” he said without thinking. “Since she’s in charge, she might need room to work, and the second bedroom doubles as an office in that house.”

“That is perfect,” Mary said with a smile. “I’ll see that her luggage is delivered there and that she gets there as soon as she’s done at the clinic.”

“Thank you, Mary.” He walked away, wondering at his motivation. He’d just given away his brother’s sometimes quarters.

I’ll have to find Devin and tell him that he can stay in one of the extra bedrooms in my house instead of the guest house.

C

By the time the doctor, who had introduced himself as Jacob Wells, was done treating Catherine, it was late afternoon, and all the other women had been placed and were getting settled.

Mary showed up at the clinic just as Catherine slid off the medbed.

Mary introduced herself after Catherine finished stretching and testing her ribs and ankle.

“How does it feel?” Dr. Wells asked.

“Almost as good as new,” she said with a smile. “I’m a little stiff, but there’s no pain.”

“Good. You’ll need to take it easy for a few days, so that you don’t re-injure anything, but other than that, there are no precautions. The cuts on your face might be a little tender for a while,” he told her. “But the dermal regenerator healed them well. I’m a little concerned about the one in front of your ear. There was some infection. The dermal regenerator sealed it and cleared the infection, but there is a scar. Give it some time to heal completely, and I’ll be able to use the dermal regenerator on it again and remove the scar.”

Catherine found the spot he was talking about and felt a slight ridge. It was a little sore but felt a lot better than it had before he started.

“Thank you, Dr. Wells,” she said with a smile. “I really feel much better.”

“And I imagine you are hungry,” Mary said, as she led Catherine out onto the walkway.

“I’m starved!” Catherine told her. “We were on the pirate ship for two days before Captain Wells rescued us, and the pirates only fed us once a day and then not very much. It took a few days to make repairs and then almost a week to get back here, and there wasn’t a lot of food on either ship.”

Captain Wells sent some over to us, but we've all been on short rations for a while. Has everyone else eaten?"

"If they haven't, they are on their way. We have put twenty of your ladies in a dormitory, and there is a kitchen in it. But tonight, William, who runs our only restaurant, has been feeding everyone."

"Where are the rest staying?" Catherine asked as they walked.

"We have a small hotel that is seldom used. Some are there, and the rest have been put into some of the vacant houses, and a few of our people have spare rooms. Your friend Jennifer is in my spare room.

"I found a small house for you. Vincent told me that you were more or less in charge of the women, so he thought you might like to have a desk and access to what passes for communications around here. You won't be able to access any off-world communications at first. You will have to go to the Town Hall for that, but you will be able to message anyone on the planet from wherever you are, even your own women, once you are all assigned devices."

"Am I close to where the others are staying?" Catherine asked.

"We are all pretty close to everything," Mary explained. "This used to be a corporate mining colony, and that tall building you can see from everywhere was the main admin building. It's a pentagon shape, and we call it Town Hall. We have our government offices and school rooms there. There is a mine entrance there, but the main mine entrance is outside town. The town is built in a hexagon shape, with four concentric hexagons around the central one where Town Hall is. And it's next to impossible to get lost as long as you know what direction you are going. We weren't extremely creative with the street names. The inner street, round the Town Hall, is Main, the next one out is Park, since there is a green space between it and Main. All the shops and the restaurant are on Park. The next one out has small one- and two-bedroom houses and some duplexes, and that street is called House. And the outermost one is Wells. It was named after Dr. Wells, who was our first council president. Six streets run like spokes off Main, and they are North, Northeast, Southeast, South, Southwest, and Northwest."

"Do many people live here?" asked Catherine.

"We have a little over 800 total on the planet, but only about 100 of those are female."

"That's not good," said Catherine as they turned onto another street and headed toward what Catherine judged to be north, since the sun was on her left.

"No, it's not. Has anyone talked to you about this?"

"A little. I talked to Devin. And Kanin, who was piloting our ship, mentioned something, and I heard a few things in the clinic, but I really don't know the whole story. And to tell the truth, I'm so tired all I want to do is get clean and sleep for about two days."

"I can't blame you," Mary agreed. "Tomorrow is time enough, or the next day, if that's the way it works out. You are staying in the guest house at Vincent's. It's normally where Devin stays when he's home, but we've moved him into the main house with Vincent. It's not large, but it's private, and there are two bedrooms, two baths, a kitchen, a living room and the second bedroom doubles as an office. It's on the corner of North and Wells, and you have your own gate in the fence on North. Your luggage should already be there, and someone was supposed to leave you a meal in the oven."

They stopped at a small house. Catherine could see a larger one through the trees. Mary opened the door and ushered her in.

"No locks?"

“We haven’t needed any so far,” Mary told her. “But if it would make you feel better, we can have one installed. Although, if this house is like the others, then there are latches on the inside of the bedroom and bathroom doors.”

Catherine took a quick look around. It was small, but it was larger than her cabin on any of the ships she’d been on. She hadn’t had a chance to spend much time in her small apartment on Earth. She could see her bags sitting inside the bedroom door, and her backpack was on the bed.

“This is great, Mary. Thank you so much, and I will try to be more sociable once I’ve had some rest.”

“Rest well,” Mary said. “And don’t forget to eat!”

Mary hurried out and closed the door behind her.

Catherine’s first stop was the kitchen. Mary’s admonition to eat reminded her of her mother, so she found her dinner in the oven and ate until she thought she would pop. Only then did she feel as if she had enough strength to shower.

She dug through her luggage and found a nightgown and what she needed for her shower. She left the rest of the unpacking for tomorrow. She showered and was asleep almost before her head hit the pillow.

The next thing she heard was a knocking sound. She opened her eyes, and nothing was familiar. Her first thought was *Hotel*, but then she remembered what had happened over the last few days. She was up and stumbling to the front door without even thinking.

“What?” she asked harshly, as she threw the door open.

“I’m sorry, did I wake you?”

The man she’d met the day before, Vincent, stood on the porch, and he was staring at her rather oddly.

“What time is it?” she asked, trying to clear the fog from her brain.

“It’s mid-morning,” Vincent said. “I’m sorry. I should have realized...” If he’d taken the time, he would have known she was asleep.

“No, it wasn’t very late when I went to bed last night; the sun hadn’t been down that long, but I have no idea what time it was. I’ve slept way too long. Probably why I’m so foggy. Is there such a thing as coffee here?”

Vincent laughed.

“Why don’t you get dressed, and I’ll make some coffee. I’m sure there is some in the kitchen. Devin always has some.”

Catherine went back to the bedroom and closed the door. Her brain was still half asleep, so she took another shower, hoping to clear the fog. The digital clock in the bathroom said 11:27. She tried to remember what it had said the night before. Seven something? Had she really been asleep for more than sixteen hours? Maybe it was less... or possibly more. She had no idea how long the day was on this planet. She found some dress slacks and a blouse in her luggage and dressed.

She glanced around the room before she left. It was a mess; she really would have to unpack sometime soon... and do some laundry.

The scent of coffee led Catherine to the back of the house where the kitchen was.

Vincent was leaning on the counter, looking out the window when she got there. He'd heard her coming and had turned and was holding a cup out to her as she entered the kitchen, yawning and pulling her long hair back into a ponytail. He didn't speak as she took the cup of the dark brew.

She took a sip and closed her eyes.

"Mmm. That is so good. I haven't had a cup of the real stuff in quite a while, not since the last time I was on Earth."

"Devin loves it too," Vincent told her as he led the way out onto a covered patio off the kitchen. "He prefers the old-fashioned brewing methods over the new machines. He says they make a poor copy of the real thing. He has a French press."

"I developed an *addiction* while I was in Law School. It was the only way I could manage to read all that I needed to read without falling asleep. There were times when I wished that I'd decided to study something a little less... turgid."

They sat on the covered porch off the kitchen, and Catherine sipped her coffee and looked around.

"I'm sorry I woke you and that I was staring at you earlier... It's just that your face..."

"Dr. Wells fixed it," she said. "The cuts, the bruises, even the broken bones."

"You were lovely before he fixed it, now you are..." he hesitated and looked away. "I'm sorry. That was rather out of line."

Catherine was surprised by his words, and although she'd heard similar things said by men trying to flatter and get into her good graces, something about Vincent made her feel that he really meant it.

"This is a beautiful planet," she commented, changing the subject. "Is it summer or winter...?"

"We are near the planet's equator, and this is how it is all year round. We more or less call it wet season and dry season. We are right at the end of the dry season. The temperatures don't vary much. In the wet season, it rains at least a little bit every day, usually at night, and in the dry season, it rains about once a week again, usually at night. And we have very little extreme weather. The rain is usually gentle, the winds are seldom above a stiff breeze, and I've only seen a few thunderstorms."

"Sounds like Camelot," she said with a laugh.

"Camelot?"

"An old musical play from the mid-1900s, based on the King Arthur legends. There's a verse from one of the songs:

*The rain may never fall till after sundown
By eight, the morning fog must disappear
In short, there's simply not
A more congenial spot
For happily-ever-aftering, than here
In Camelot...*

She recited the words; she didn't sing them.

"It could apply in this case, if your ladies decide to stay," Vincent observed.

"It does sound ideal," she said. "Mary told me a little last night, and Devin filled me in a little. I'm going to have to talk to all the women today or tomorrow, after I've learned all the facts. For one, Mary said that you have a population of over 800, but from what I've seen, it doesn't look like there is room for that many people here in town."

“There isn’t. There are small apartment buildings, but none over five floors. We don’t use the dormitory where most of your ladies have been housed. Most of the houses here in town only have one person living in them. We don’t have a lot of couple, since there are so few women. Some of our older people have paired off. Father lives alone, as do I. We usually have about one hundred here in town.

“Most of the population lives in the outlying areas. There are several farms, and the farmers and their work crews live on the farms. We are on a bit of a peninsula here, and the ocean is about twenty miles away, to the south and the west. There is a fishing village to the south. We have found gemstones in the network of caves in the mountains you can see north of town. We mine and sell them for credits, or trade for what we need that we can’t make or grow here. Miners live in the mountains, and there is a manufacturing complex a few miles to the east. And the people who work there live near there.

“They are all represented on our council, and we all share what we have, and we all have enough.”

“If you all share so much, how is it you, who are living alone, have that big house over there?” Catherine didn’t mean that to come out sounding so harsh. But she knew that it was one reason that a lot of the women who left Sol System to become Milky Way Wives had left. There was such a huge chasm between the haves and the have nots.

“Everyone had their choice of houses,” he told her. “Father was living in the house on the corner of Wells Street and Northeast. It has three bedrooms. He had a partner when he first moved in, and they later had a son. And those three bedrooms was the reason he took me when the woman who brought me here died. He had one of the few houses that had three bedrooms. The other large house was the one I live in now. But no one wanted to live in it. It had been the home of The Corporation’s on-planet manager. He lived there with his wife and children.

“He wasn’t very well-liked, so although the people did remove some of the furniture that was in the building, no one really wanted to live in it.

“When I turned 19, I decided that I wanted to move out of Father’s house. Devin had moved out the previous year when he started piloting one of our trading ships. When I looked around, there were no unoccupied houses. And the idea of living in a tiny apartment in one of the apartment buildings didn’t appeal to me. So, I petitioned the council to let me have the old mine managers’ house. They gave permission, with the stipulation that I restore the place, clean it up, and make it all usable.

“The first thing I did was this house. Then I lived here while I worked on the big house and restoring the grounds. All either of the houses needed was cleaning and painting, some minor repairs. I finished the big house and started on the yard. There is a large swimming pool. I found that I enjoy gardening. I have an herb garden that keeps everyone here supplied with herbs that they need for cooking.

“The swimming pool is open to the entire community. I teach the children to swim. There is a large veranda on the back of the house off the living room. I sometimes teach classes here since there is a large vidscreen in the living room and a large table in the dining room. We have classrooms in the Town Hall, but we don’t have many children, so the rooms are sometimes a little large for so few. I’m not the only teacher. Anyone who has knowledge or a skill they are willing to share teaches. And I have an open-door policy. If anyone needs to talk, I’m always available.”

“It sounds like you have built a little utopia here,” Catherine said.

“Not a utopia,” he said with a smile. “We have our problems, but so far, we’ve done well for ourselves.”

“Aren’t you worried that by welcoming in strangers like us, you might be bringing in some less desirable elements?”

“That was one thing that Father asked me to talk to you about. Does your company do background checks on the women who contract with you?”

“We do, but we don’t divulge any of our findings, but we do guarantee that the women aren’t running from the law or have any felonies in their past. The checks are just part of our internal screening process.”

“I’m not asking for specifics,” Vincent told her.

“Then I can tell you that none of the ladies have criminal records, none are running away from responsibilities. A few of them are trying to get away from abusive ex’s and, in some cases, other abusive family situations. I can let you see the checks we did, but I would have to purge the names and descriptions.”

“Thank you,” Vincent told her. “I don’t need that.”

“Just how were you planning on handling this?” Catherine asked.

“How does your company usually do it?” he asked.

“Well, we use a computer program that matches women with prospective husbands. Each man might be matched to more than one woman and vice versa. They are all given time to get to know each other. The men more or less court the women, and hopefully, some decisions are made after three to six months. Most of the matches are good, but they have a year. If in that year either of the partners isn’t happy, the company will put the woman back into our database and try to match her somewhere else. Sometimes we only do small groups of as few as 3 to 5. Our average group is ten to fifteen. This is the largest group we’ve ever had.”

“We thought that we could introduce all the women who decide to stay at the celebration that we have every year this time. It commemorates many things, but mostly it’s a celebration of each other, our freedom, and the settlement’s founding. After everyone has been introduced, we can just let the natural process take over.”

“Well, the sooner I give them that information, the sooner we will know how many will be staying.

“What about your company? Do they have any claims on these women?”

“Not really. Contracts were written but not signed, and no credits were paid. And as far as I know, there were no prospective grooms. We were just on our way to Glavin III, where our new satellite office is. The women were to be processed there and the matches made. With the loss of their newest ship, I honestly don’t think that M.W.W. will be able to continue. They will probably be out of business since I don’t think there was insurance, and I’m pretty sure the ship wasn’t paid off.”

“Once you tell everyone what we have proposed, we might give them about a week to make up their minds about staying. By that time, Devin will be ready to leave again, and he can take those who want to leave,” Vincent hesitated a moment. “I was wondering, will you be leaving?”

“Well, any of the ladies who decide to leave will need to be escorted either on to Glavin III or back home. Either my assistant or I would have a legal obligation to accompany them.”

“And if no one decides to leave?” he asked.

“I had some offers before I left Earth this time, so I’ll probably take one of them. But I’d likely stay until I know all the women are settled in one way or the other before leaving. I doubt you’d have any use for a lawyer.”

“I’m sure we would,” he rushed to assure her. “There are always trade contracts and agreements that need negotiation.”

Catherine drank a second cup of coffee before Vincent suggested that they see about setting her up with network access and a communicator.

“Why don’t we stop and get something to eat on our way?” he suggested, as they headed down the street. “We will be passing William’s Diner on our way.”

They were seated and had given their orders, and Catherine was staring out the window at the foot traffic.

“Do you have any vehicles here?” she asked.

“We have small transports that make deliveries inside town. Some of our older residents use small electric carts, and we also have bicycles, but everything is so close here in town that there really is no need. The traffic from the farms and other outlying areas uses larger vehicles, and we have skimmers.”

After they ate, they went over to the Town Hall, where Catherine was quickly issued a communications device and given access to the network. She ran into several of the women there and asked them to pass the word that she wanted to meet with everyone on the dormitory’s patio after lunch.

“Will you come with me?” she asked Vincent when they finished in the communications section.

“They might have questions that I can’t answer.”

“Of course, I will. And I think we should go talk to Father about what you have in mind.”

“Father?” she asked.

“My adopted father, Jacob Wells,” he clarified.

“We talked about it a little while he was treating me yesterday,” Catherine told him as they walked.

“But I would like to have a more solid plan.”

Father was in his office on the main floor of Town Hall, and he agreed that it was a good idea to talk.

“What did you have in mind?” Father asked Catherine, after they were all seated.

“I think I mentioned yesterday that Milky Way Wives isn’t doing well. They opened the new office on Glavin III in hopes of accessing a new market, but with the loss of their best, newest and largest ship, I doubt that they will be able to stay in business much longer. No money has changed hands for this last group. That doesn’t happen until everyone, the prospective wives and husbands, have completed the detailed questionnaire, which isn’t done until after women reach the office. The men send their questionnaires when they apply.”

“Who pays the fees?” Father asked.

“Both parties share it equally,” Catherine told him, “although sometimes the men will pay the entire fee. But the matching process never starts until the women reach the office, and I’m honestly worried that if I do to take this group on to Glavin III, they will wind up being stranded there.”

“Milky Way Wives is in that bad shape?” Father asked.

“It is. I’ve already written my letter of resignation. I just haven’t given it to the management yet. I was planning to do it at the end of this trip. While I was back in Sol System this last time, I put out some feelers about a job, and there are some prospects.”

“So, what do you plan to present to the ladies?” Father asked.

“That depends on what you want to do,” she said, throwing it back into his court.

Father looked at Vincent, who took over for him.

“We’d like to offer your group a home here. Even if they don’t marry, we can always use more settlers with willing hands to share the work. But would your company expect to be paid?”

“To be truthful, I don’t know. If they are hurting as badly as I suspect they are, they will likely need the money if they are going to try to stay in business, but I doubt it would do them much good,” Catherine told them. “That is if they are even still in business. As of today, we are only two days overdue at Glavin III, but I haven’t had any communication with them since before we left Earth.”

“When do you plan to contact them?” Father asked.

“I thought I’d wait until after I have something to tell them.”

“And how much is the fee normally?” Vincent asked.

Catherine named an amount per match. After a quick mental calculation, Vincent shook his head. It was substantially more than they had on hand.

“We don’t have anywhere near that much available right now,” he told her.

“I think I may have a way around that,” she said with a smile. “Captain Wells rescued these women at great risk and expense to himself and his ship. His ship was damaged, and it cost him time off his normal trade schedule,” she pointed out.

“But we were compensated with the acquisition of another ship,” Father said.

“A ship that is going to need extensive repairs and cleaning before you can use it. If Milky Way Wives asks to be paid, I think we should point out what it cost you to rescue these women, and if they persist, Devin suggested you offer the other ship. But I wouldn’t tip my hand on that.”

“We negotiate,” Vincent put in.

“Exactly. And that is something that I’m very good at,” she agreed with a smile.

“So now you’re on our side?” Father asked.

“It all depends on what the ladies want. If some want to stay and some want to go on to Glavin III, my assistant, Jenny, and I will split up, and one of us will stay until we are no longer needed, and the other will continue with the other group.”

“What if some elect to go home instead of either?” Vincent asked.

“I know that you aren’t equipped to take them all the way home, but if you could see that they get to the nearest port that has passenger transport to Earth, then I think I could make sure they all got home. But I’ve gotten to know this group, and I think they may surprise you.”

Several hours later, Catherine had just finished laying out the choices, and hands were shooting up all over the place with questions.

“What if we decide to stay and don’t find someone to marry. Will we still be welcome?”

“Mr. Wells said that you would. They welcome settlers who are willing to work.”

“And if we decide to stay and then at some later date decide to leave?” someone else asked.

“You are free to do whatever you want. I would try to help in any way I can. I’ll leave contact information.”

“To be honest, I haven’t seen a lot of men,” one woman said. “At least not young men.”

“We have a little over 700 males in the colony,” Vincent told them when Catherine deferred to him. “A few are too young to marry, and some are older. But many of them range in age from early 20s to early 40s, and a lot of them are members of the surrounding settlements. We have farms, factories, a fishing village, and gemstone mines in the mountains. Only a small number of our population is here in town.”

“How will we meet all of them?”

“We have several festivals every year. We have one coming up next week. It’s the major one. As many as possible come in from the outlying areas and are here for at least 24 hours. Some are able to stay longer. There is a large meadow to the east of town, and that is where everything is set up. People who come in from other areas usually camp in the woods surrounding the meadow. We also have harvest festivals twice a year, but they take place on one of the farms, usually the one that is sitting out the season and letting their fields lie fallow.”

“So, if we meet someone, we think we might like, we’re expected to go home with them right then?”

“No,” Catherine rushed to explain. “A courtship period will be allowed, the same as your contract with M.W.W. states.”

“If you want to go and work on one of the farms, or any of the other settlements, you would be welcome to go there,” Vincent explained. “But there is also work that can be done here. Any of you who decide to stay can talk to Mary, and she will put you in touch with someone who can help you transition into a job.”

“We won’t be expected to become *baby machines*?”

“Absolutely not!” Vincent said adamantly. “It’s all up to you. If you decide to stay, if you decide to marry, and if you decide to have children. Or if you just decide that you want a child, but not a marriage.”

“Does anyone else have any questions for Mr. Wells?” Catherine asked.

At the chorus of ‘no’s,’ Vincent nodded at her and left.

“How about it? Does anyone have any questions for me?” Catherine asked.

“What if M.W.W. isn’t as bad off as you think it is, and they decide that they want us all to honor our contracts?” asked a brunette in the rear.

“Well, since you haven’t actually paid anything to M.W.W, and you haven’t filled out the matching questionnaire or signed a contract, the contracts aren’t in effect.”

“We are free to do whatever we want, and M.W.W. won’t be hounding us for payment?” asked a tiny blonde in the front row.

“As I interpret the contract, yes. And since I’m the one who wrote that contract, I think I’m accurate in that assessment,” Catherine said with a smile.

“What about the climate here? What season is this?” asked a tall woman with café au lait colored skin.

“I asked the same question,” Catherine told them. “And when I got the answer, I called this place *Camelot*. Vincent told me that this town is very near the planet’s equator, and this is pretty much how it is all year round. There is a wet season and dry season, but the temperatures don’t vary much. In the wet season, it rains at least a little bit every day, usually at night, and in the dry season, it rains about once a week again, usually at night. Hence me calling it *Camelot*.”

“So, there’s no snow?” mused one woman. “I can live with that. I’m originally from Iqaluit, Nunavut, in Canada. And by this time of year, it’s usually up to the eaves of the house. We woke up one

Christmas morning, and my dad had to dig out the doors. We were lucky that they all opened in, or we wouldn't have made it out until spring. He had my brother's carrying buckets of snow to the bathtubs and sinks until he broke through into the road. I'm sick of snow!"

"Do they celebrate Christmas here?" someone else asked.

"I never thought to ask, but this festival coming up is only a few days before Christmas. And I'm sure that if you want to celebrate any holiday from your home, there won't be a problem with it," Catherine answered.

"How about bad weather? Hurricanes and such," asked a woman with a Southern accent, who Catherine remembered as being from the southeastern coast of North America.

"He said that there is very little extreme weather. He's only seen a few thunderstorms."

"That sounds good to me," someone said.

The women started to talk among themselves, and Catherine let them talk for a while before she called for their attention again.

"I don't need an answer right now; I can give you all some time to think about it. But once you've had some time, I'll need to know who wants to do what."

"What, exactly are our choices, again?" someone asked.

"You can choose to stay here and become a part of the established settlement. You can choose to go on with the original plan and go to Glavin III in hopes that M.W.W is still in business, or you can choose to go home. You don't all have to agree, we can accommodate anything that any of you want to do, but I do need some answers in probably no more than 3 days. I need to contact Milky Way Wives and let them know."

Suddenly there was a crescendo of sound. Catherine could make out very little of what was being said, but she saw a lot of nodding heads.

She waved her hands and shouted a few times to make herself heard, and when they were quiet, her assistant Jenny spoke up.

"I think the decisions have been made," Jenny said, looking around the room at the nodding heads.

Catherine looked around and asked, "Do any of you want to leave? If you do, please stand up."

No one moved; in fact, a few who had been standing against the railing in the back abruptly slid down and sat on the grass, causing a lot of laughter.

"OK, so it looks like this colony just got 36 new citizens."

Jenny caught her attention by waving her hand.

"Yes, Jenn?" Catherine asked.

"Make that 37," she said with a grin. "Since our employer is likely going out of business, this seems as good a place as any to start over, maybe better."

"All right. I'll let Mr. Wells know, so they can get to work finding you permanent housing and jobs."

The excited women left the patio, heading off in all directions. When they were gone, Jenny made her way to the table where Catherine was tapping notes into her tablet.

"Will you do something for me, Cathy?" Jenny asked.

"Sure, what do you need?" Catherine slipped the tablet into the small bag she carried.

"Can you attach this to your transmission to the company?" Jenny held an inch square data card out to Catherine.

“Your letter of resignation?” Catherine asked as she took the card. “What if it turns out the M.W.W isn’t in as bad shape as I think they are?”

“You and I both know that they are on their last leg,” Jenny said, “and have been for a while now. Besides, even if they weren’t, this is a great place. I was talking to Mary, and she says that they are in need of teachers, and you know that was what I went to school for. But I made that choice at a bad time, since schools were just transitioning to virtual teachers and making it so that one holographic teacher could teach hundreds of kids.”

“And I remember your disappointment,” Catherine put in.

“What about you, Cath?” Jenny asked. “What are you going to do?”

“Go back to Earth, I guess. I had several job offers. I was sending out feelers when we were there last.”

“You wouldn’t consider staying here?”

Jenny and Catherine had been friends since their Freshman year in college.

“I don’t know, Jenn. I doubt they’d have much use for an attorney,” Catherine said wryly, echoing her earlier words.

“Consider it?” Jenny prodded. “We’ve been going to school and working together since we were 18. Twelve years of friendship is a lot to give up.”

Catherine stood and hugged Jenny.

“I promise to think about it,” she said.

By the time Catherine tracked Vincent down in his father’s office, word had already gotten to them of the women’s decision.

“They all want to stay?” Father asked incredulously.

“All plus one,” Catherine said.

“Plus one?” asked Vincent looking at her intently.

“My assistant, Jenny, has decided to stay,” she told him. “She has a teaching degree and sees the possibility of using it here.

“And you?” Vincent asked. Father looked at him closely when he heard the note of hope in his voice.

“I had some job offers back on Earth,” she told him. “I’ll probably be headed back there once I get everyone settled here. But then I might stay long enough to see Jenny married, if she finds someone.”

Vincent didn’t stop to analyze why, but he felt relief when he heard that she wasn’t leaving on the next ship out.

“I spoke to Pascal about you contacting your employer, and he said that it will have to go as text, but that he can send it at any time,” Vincent told her.

“Good. Is it all right if we do it now? The sooner I get it done, the less time I have to worry about what their reaction will be.”

The communications section was on the top floor of the building they were in, so all they had to do was take the elevator up a few floors.

Pascal directed her to a console and let her type out her message. The hardest part about the letter was informing the company that the entire crew of the ship had been killed. They were all new

employees, and she hadn't had a chance to get to know any of them in the short time they'd been on the ship. But she knew that there would be grieving families somewhere.

"I have a couple of attachments," she told him, holding up two data cards when she was done with the message.

"Just plug them in here," he pointed at a port. "Then push the button above it. It will ask you what file, there on the screen and download it after you've indicated which one, and when the light goes out, you can take out the first one and do the second one. Our equipment is a little old, but it still works.

"How long do you think it will take to reach their destination?" she asked after she'd uploaded the documents and Pascal had transmitted the message.

"It's not as fast as some of the newer systems, and considering that it will have to go through several relays, and that is where the delays usually are, I'd say at least a few hours. I'll keep my eyes open for a reply and will forward it to you as soon as it comes in," he told her.

Catherine thanked Pascal, and she and Vincent left.

"Would you like to join Father and me for dinner tonight?" Vincent asked tentatively, as they descended to the ground floor in the elevator.

"I'm sorry. I thought I'd go find Jenny and see if she'd like to have dinner with me at the Diner. We have a lot to talk about. Does the Diner take credits?"

"You are a guest of the community right now, so there will be no charge. We feed everyone here."

"How does that work?" she asked.

"We figure that we will eventually have a currency or credit-based economy, but right now, this is what works best for us. We all share in the profits made from the sale of the gems we mine. And we are able to produce almost everything else we need, and we all use what we need."

Catherine used the communicator she'd been given and found out that Jenny was in a small office right there in the Town Hall. She followed Jenny's directions and found herself standing in front of a door with a window. Inside, she could see Jenny talking to Mary. She knocked, and they waved at her to come in.

"You didn't waste any time," she said as she entered.

"We are in dire need of a qualified teacher. Vincent and Father have been teaching most of the classes. We don't have a lot of children, but we have a wide range of ages. One other woman, Olivia, and I take the preschoolers and kindergarteners, but we need someone who has better training for the older children. I've heard them complain that Father lectures, and he puts them to sleep. They love Vincent, but he hardly has time to do anything else. We are on a break right now because of the upcoming festival."

"When do classes start again?" Catherine asked.

"The Monday after the festival," Jenny told her. She picked up a stack of papers and a tablet from the corner of Mary's desk. "I'll go over these and get back to you when I'm done," she promised Mary.

"How do you handle it with such a wide range of ages?" Catherine asked.

"As I said, Olivia and I take the youngest. Father and Vincent usually split their time between the others, with teens in one group and pre-teens in another. And the two of them have been teaching almost everything, except for the cooking classes that William does. There are a few other specialties that others take."

“Dr. Wells and Vincent will still do the math and science for the older children,” Jenny added. “But I’ll take on everything for the younger students, and English and composition for all of the students.”

“That’s going to keep you busy,” Catherine commented.

“It shouldn’t be too bad,” Jenny told her. “There aren’t that many students. There are those here in town, then a few of the students come into town from the factory town for classes every day, and the ones who are too far to commute have their classes by video. There is a camera mounted in the back of the classroom, and I have a monitor where I can see the non-local students. But in total, there are fewer than about eighty students.”

“Can I ask a question?” Catherine asked Mary before they turned to leave.

“Of course,”

“Why does everyone call Dr. Wells, Father? When I met him the first time, he told me his name was Jacob. Vincent calls him Father and explained that Dr. Wells adopted him. But I’ve heard others call him Father. Is he a priest of some kind?”

Mary laughed. “No, not a priest. It’s just something that stuck. It started with Devin and Vincent. Devin was about 4 or 5 and a little bit jealous when Father adopted Vincent. Devin was always quick to point out to Vincent that Jacob was *his father*, but he called Jacob ‘Dad.’ Vincent picked up on the *father* part. I think he wanted a special way to refer to his adopted father. The rest of the children and young people started, and it just kind of grew from there. He has always been somewhat of a father figure to our younger population.”

“So, Vincent is adopted?” Jenny asked.

“Yes, he was brought here by a woman named Anna, and we don’t know anything about his heritage.”

“It’s an interesting story,” Catherine said. “Vincent told me a little of it earlier.

“It is. Vincent is working on a history of the colony. You should read it when it’s finished.”

“If I’m here,” Catherine said, “I definitely will.”

Catherine and Jenny left the office, and on the way across the lobby, Catherine asked Jenny about dinner.

When they were seated in the diner, William came out and introduced himself and welcomed them. He personally took their orders.

“The food has to be good here,” Jenny commented when he’d left.

“Why do you make that assumption?”

Jenny looked at where William was working in the kitchen. “I don’t trust skinny cooks,” she said with a laugh.

Catherine joined her laughter. “Well, breakfast was great, and the menu had all kinds of breakfast food on it. I didn’t know what to pick. I’ve been eating too long from the food fabricator.”

A young woman, who introduced herself as Brooke, brought their drinks.

“So, why did you decide to stay?” Catherine asked when she set down her drink.

“Pretty much what I said. This place is as good as any and probably better than most. It’s clean, no pollution, the people are nice, the climate is good, there’s a job for me...”

“And?” Catherine prompted.

Jenny grinned. “And there’s Devin Wells.”

Catherine laughed. "I thought as much," she said. "Has he shown any interest?" She hoped he had; she'd seen Jenny disappointed too many times.

"Some. He took the time to show me around town and give me a map. And he told me where to find him at the festival."

"Sounds promising," Catherine agreed. "But are you sure you want to stay and take a chance like that?"

"I know you are just being a good friend," Jenny said with a smile, "but the way I look at it, even if nothing develops between Devin and me, the ratio is almost six males to every woman. That gives me a good chance of finding someone I can get along with."

"Did you take into account that some of those males aren't human and some are older and not looking? And for that matter that a few are already married?" Catherine asked, trying not to laugh.

"Doesn't matter how the numbers work out, I still have a good chance," Jenny protested. "I know I sound like a throwback, but everyone needs someone to love and be loved by."

"You always were a bit more domesticated than I am," Catherine agreed. "But you are right. It would be nice to have someone to go home to."

"And you've been on your own longer than I have," Jenny pointed out. "When was the last time you even had a boyfriend?"

"Not that long ago. Tom asked me to marry him before we left on this last trip."

"And you didn't tell me?" Jenny complained. "Now I understand why you said you don't want to stay."

"I didn't say yes," Catherine was quick to tell her. "I just couldn't see myself spending the rest of my life with him. I'm sure he's more interested in the Chandler name and money than he is in me, and he tends to be more than a little controlling."

V

Vincent was floating on an inflated raft in the swimming pool behind his house. There were no classes this week or next because of the festival, and he was enjoying the unusual quiet. His house was almost always noisy: children running in and out, looking for homework help or learning to swim or playing in the pool. It was cheerful chaos, but chaos, nonetheless.

Mary had just told him that she'd recruited Catherine's friend Jennifer to teach. She wanted to meet with him, Father, and Jennifer soon to divide the workload and find out if her plan worked for everyone. It would be nice to have a little more free time to work on the history he was writing.

He was turning over in his mind the strange things that had happened since the two ships had arrived. He'd only spent a short time with Catherine, but he felt as if he'd known her for years. He'd dreamed about her the night before. He couldn't remember precisely what his dreams had been, but he knew she'd been in them. There was just something about her, and when he'd woken this morning, the first thing he noticed was how strong the connection had grown. His first thought was that he had to talk to her again.

Most of the people he was close to knew about his empathic ability, but no one paid much attention to it.

He'd discovered it when he was about thirteen. He could touch someone, and he could tell what they were feeling, physically, and emotionally. Father had passed it off as his imagination at first, but had come to accept it as fact over the years.

The puzzling thing was that when he'd first touched Catherine, picked her up because she couldn't walk, he'd been jolted strongly by her feelings. He knew where every single one of her injuries was, and he also knew that she was worried about all the other women. The feelings had been stronger than he'd ever experienced before.

What was really astounding was that he'd found that the connection didn't go away when he wasn't touching her. Not even when he wasn't with her. Right now, he could tell that she was enjoying herself, and he had a general idea of where she was. He was sure that if he started walking, he would be able to find her without much trouble.

Since he'd discovered his connection with Catherine, he'd spent more than a little time exploring it. He'd started calling it a Bond since that was the word Father had told him that Anna had used to describe the connection his parents had had. He knew he had to talk to Catherine about it, but he wasn't sure how to broach the subject. He didn't want her to think that he was in her head, that he could read her mind. He needed to make sure that she understood that it was only that he could feel what she was feeling.

The next morning Vincent was sitting at a table in William's Diner, checking the list of the things he had to do to get ready for the festival.

He had delegated a lot of small jobs to the children who were so excited that he was sure he would have to follow-up and make sure that all the jobs got done. The more complicated things had been taken over by the adults, but even so, he wanted to check everything. Even the new additions to the community had caught the bug and were excitedly helping William, Mary, Olivia, and some of the other women with the cooking and decorating.

He looked up just in time to see Catherine come in. She saw him, waved, and began moving through the crowded dining room to his table.

"OK if I join you?" she asked.

Vincent stood to pull out a chair for her.

"It would be my pleasure," he said with a smile.

He could tell that Catherine was surprised and pleased by the gesture as she sat.

He resumed his seat, and she smiled at him.

"I haven't seen anyone do that since my dad died," she told him.

"Father insisted that all the children, especially Devin and I, learn proper etiquette, and as far as he's concerned, anything that has come into vogue since the mid-1900s is not proper etiquette."

"Sounds like my father," she told him. "He was born in Virginia, and his family was 'Old South' to the bone. He unlearned his Southern accent, but he never lost his Southern Gentleman manners."

"Father is English, and I think it's almost the same," Vincent agreed.

Brooke came over and took Catherine's order, and when she left, Vincent commented on it.

"Just coffee, toast, and fruit?" he asked.

"I've never been much of a breakfast eater," she told him. "Normally, all I would have is a cup of coffee, then I might grab an apple or a piece of toast with peanut butter on it on my way out the door on my way to work. But I try to eat well the rest of the day... when I have time."

She laughed when Brooke brought their food a few minutes later. Her tray was full, and three-quarters of it went in front of Vincent. Brooke set a plate with a vegetable omelet, bacon, and hash browns down and followed it with toast, a small bowl of strawberries, a glass of orange juice, and a pot of tea.

Catherine looked at her own plate with toast and a bowl of mixed fruit and laughed.

"I shouldn't have bothered," she commented. "I could have just eaten off your plate."

"And I would have gladly shared," he said sincerely.

"How come you got strawberries, and all I got was homemade fruit salad?" she asked with feigned jealousy after a sip of coffee.

"Because you ordered fruit salad, I ordered strawberries." He pushed the bowl toward her. "Help yourself."

She took one, they were all almost as big as plums and bit into it. "Oh, yum! They are so sweet! I didn't see them on the menu."

"They aren't on it. I knew William had them because I delivered several cases to him yesterday when they came in from one of the farms. He makes strawberry shortcake, and that will be on the lunch and dinner menus. And it will be served at the festival, if there are any left by then."

Catherine pushed her bowl of fruit toward him. "You can have some of this if you like."

Vincent speared a piece of cantaloupe and ate it.

"Since you can grow crops all year round, everything must be in season all the time."

"We try. Some things grow better when it's wetter, and there are others that do better in our drier season. But some things are grown year-round. We stagger the planting, so things ripen at different times."

"I love all the fresh stuff. I was just telling Jenny that I'd been eating from the food fabricator too much lately."

"Be careful for a while. I've noticed that some people have a hard time switching back to fresh food after eating the fabricated food for a long time. Fresh requires more digestion and sometimes causes upset stomachs."

"Then maybe it's good that I'm eating light," she said with a laugh. "OK, so tell me about this festival. I have nothing to do until I hear from M.W.W. What do you do, and how can I help?"

"The festival celebrates several things. One is the day that the miners and other slaves and indentured labor discovered that The Corporation had abandoned the planet. It's December, so you'll see some red and green and blue and white. We do celebrations four times a year, but this is the biggest one. It starts at about noon. There are tables set up with food and drink; they are constantly replenished. There are speeches, games, music, and dancing, activities for the children. Families and groups of friends usually camp in the trees that surround the meadow, where we set everything up. After the sun sets, there is a candle lighting ceremony. It commemorates the coming out of the mines into the sunlight. Then there are fireworks. The games stop when the fireworks start, and most of the younger children are taken home to bed after the fireworks. But the rest of it usually goes to at least midnight."

"The day The Corporation abandoned the planet?" she questioned.

“That’s right, you don’t know the history,” he said. “I’m not used to being around people who don’t.” He went on to briefly outline the history of the place.

“That is fascinating,” she said about the story. “And the festival sounds like fun. Does everyone from all the other settlements come in for it?”

“As many as possible. The factories and the mines shut down for a few days, but a few people have to stay behind to look after animals on the farms. But they are volunteers and are compensated.”

“So, there will be as many men as possible here for the ladies to meet.”

“From what I hear, it’s been the older men and women who have volunteered to stay behind on the farms this year. So, I would think that all our unattached males will be there.”

“Good,” she said with a grin. “I just want everyone to be happy. And I repeat. How can I help?”

C

Catherine spent the rest of that day and most of the next alternating between cutting up fresh strawberries for William’s strawberry shortcake and learning how to make the shortcake for them. She ate so many strawberries while she was cutting that she was afraid she might break out in some kind of a rash.

She also learned a few knife skills and managed not to cut off any of her fingers when she was cutting up tomatoes and other vegetables for salads.

When she left the diner kitchen after dinner on the second day, William was trying to convince her to stay and work in his kitchen permanently.

“You are a great prep cook!” he was saying, as he walked with her toward the guest house at Vincent’s; he lived a few houses away from Vincent. “You were even anticipating what I was going to need once we went through the routine once.”

“Being a lawyer teaches you to develop your memory and to think on your feet,” she told him. “When do we start tomorrow?”

“You’ve worked so hard the last two days that I don’t want to see you again until I see you at the festival,” William told her with a grin.

“OK... Is there anything I can do there to help?” she asked as they stopped in front of William’s little house.

“No, you just enjoy yourself.” He pushed open his gate and started up the walk. “Good night, sleep well, and I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Catherine finished the rest of her walk with a smile on her face. She hadn’t looked forward to something this much since she was a child, when her father would take her to museums, concerts, and the theater near their home in New York City.

As she let herself into the little house, she glanced up toward where she knew Vincent’s house was. It was more visible through the trees at night because of the lights, and tonight it looked like all the lights in the house were on. She knew Devin was staying with him. She guessed they were probably doing something to get ready for the festival the next day.

She wondered if she’d see either of them the next day. They would probably be busy, and she hoped Jenny wouldn’t be too disappointed if she didn’t see Devin.

Catherine had just finished getting dressed the next day when there was a knock on her door. It was almost noon, and she thought everyone would be at the festival already. She opened the door to find Vincent standing there.

"I thought you'd be gone already," she said, as she stepped back to let him in.

She had noticed that almost everyone she'd seen so far wore some version of what appeared to be almost a uniform. The pants were loose and made out of medium weight cotton, and they all appeared to just pull up and tie at the waist. Some of the women preferred skirts that went down to about mid-calf but were made of the same material as the pants and also had drawstrings.

Shirts were a little more varied but made out of lighter-weight cotton. Some buttoned, but most just slipped over the head, and they were anything from sleeveless to long-sleeved. Shoes ranged from work boots to soft moccasins or sandals.

But the clothes came in just about any color she could think of. Seeing people on the street was like looking at a kaleidoscope. She'd noticed that a lot of the M.W.W women had adopted that form of dress. She had to admit that it looked comfortable, but since she wasn't planning on staying, she hadn't asked for any clothing.

Today, she decided to raid her wardrobe and find something that would help her blend in a little better. She'd found a pair of white cotton pants with an elastic waistband and a white tank top. Not a perfect match or as colorful, but close enough.

She'd only seen Vincent in the long-sleeved version of the shirt until now. Today, he was wearing the sleeveless version, more like a vest than anything. His arms were magnificent, and she had a hard time, not staring.

"I won't be needed until later," he told her as he closed the door behind him. "Father will be emceeding, to begin with. I just need to be there in time for the speeches. I thought I'd stop to see if you were ready or if you'd already gone."

"I slept a little late this morning," she admitted. "But I'm ready now."

"You should get a sweater," he advised. "The sun can be strong, and you don't want to get sunburned, and it might be a little chilly later tonight."

She went back to the bedroom and came back with a pale green sweater that she tied around her waist with the arms.

"OK, now I'm ready," she said.

When they reached the meadow, the speeches had just started. And she and Vincent skirted their way around the outside of the crowd until they reached the corner of the stage.

"Ah," Father said when he made eye contact with Catherine. "There's the lady I was speaking of. Will you please come up here a moment, Catherine?"

Catherine was surprised to be singled out, but she went up the steps and joined Father on the stage.

"I just wanted everyone to know what you look like," Father told her and everyone else. "If any of you feel the need for a formal introduction to any of the ladies who came here with Catherine, then just find her and ask her. I'm sure that she will take care of it."

"Of course," Catherine said with a smile and a nod for the crowd. "I'd be delighted, but there is really no reason to be shy; just go up and introduce yourself."

There were a few questions from the crowd, and when Catherine left the stage, Vincent was nowhere in sight.

He must have something he's taking care of, she thought to herself. He does seem to be essential to just about everything.

A few minutes later, Jenny found her, and they found a shady spot away from the crowd to talk.

"Is Devin here?" Catherine asked.

"Yes, we walked over together, but he's taking care of one of the kids' games for a while, so I'm on my own."

"You're a fast worker," Catherine said with a laugh.

"I had to be. I noticed a couple of the other's eyeing him, so I had to move. And what's amazing is that he seems to be just as interested in me as I am in him."

"What's so amazing about it?" Catherine asked. "You are a great person. Any guy would be lucky to draw your interest."

"Tell that to all the other guys I've dated," Jenny said with a snort. "But what about you? Have you thought about staying? You said you would."

"I don't know, Jenn. I'm a lawyer, and I don't know that I'd have anything to do here. And I didn't go to school for 6 years to work in a diner. Although William did say, I'd make a good prep cook."

They laughed, but Jenny was serious.

"At least think about staying long enough to come to my wedding," she said.

"You're certainly planning ahead," Catherine said.

They were laughing again when one of the other women, Rona, came up to them.

"Have either of you met that guy over there?" asked Rona.

Both Catherine and Jenny looked to where she was pointing at a tall man with dark hair and tanned skin.

"Not me," Catherine said.

"Me either," added Jenny.

Mary, who had been standing near them, walked over.

"That's Elliot Burch. He's only been here a few years. He manages all our manufacturing. Each factory has a manager, and they all answer to Elliot."

"Is he married?" asked Rona.

"No, like most of the men around here, he's not," Mary said with a smile. "And you aren't the first to ask about him. Most of the ladies seem to be impressed with him."

"What's not to be impressed with," Rona said. "Good looking and gainfully employed! Thank you." Rona grinned, then started drifting, not so aimlessly in Mr. Burch's direction, leaving the other three women laughing.

Mary excused herself to go help Father with something, and a few minutes later, Jenny noticed that Devin was done with the games, and she left. Catherine decided to make a stop at the food table.

A little while later, Catherine was standing at the edge of the woods watching the band and the dancing. All of the ladies seemed to be enjoying themselves. She was glad for that, and a slight smile was on her lips. She nearly jumped out of her skin when someone spoke from behind her.

"Incredible, isn't it? Much better than last year. It's amazing what having a few more women around can do."

After she recovered, she looked at the man, the same one Rona had asked about earlier. She smiled again.

"A clear reflection on life," she commented.

"Women do tend to keep us civilized," he added. "I'm Elliot Burch." He held out his hand.

She placed hers in it.

"Of course, you are..." He looked startled. "I'm sorry, but someone pointed you out earlier. She was saying that most of the women are very impressed with you," she added coyly.

"Really? Why would that be, I wonder?" he mused with a smile.

"I'm Catherine Chandler," she told him.

"I know."

"You do?"

"I asked one of *your* friends, the one with the dark curly hair who you were talking to earlier," he admitted.

"Ah, Jenny. She's trying to give me a reason to stay," Catherine told him.

"You're not staying?" he asked, looking disappointed.

"Not planning to. I'm not one of the contracted wives. I work or worked for Milky Way Wives, and once I'm sure that everyone is happy here, I'll be heading back to Earth."

"And what will you do there?"

"I'm a lawyer. I still own part of my father's law firm, I might go back there, or I could find something more interesting," she said with a shrug.

"I guess it's my turn to be impressed," Elliot said.

"It's only fair... A regular mutual admiration society," she added.

"I have to say I find it enjoyable," he agreed.

"What, the party or being admired?" she asked.

But before he could answer her, a short man with white hair walked up to them and rudely interrupted. He acted as if Catherine wasn't even there.

"Elliot... ah... a moment, please. I need a word with you," he said quietly, as if imparting a secret.

"Lewis, you do realize that we are here to enjoy ourselves, don't you? And to tell the truth, I really don't have a moment to spare right now." He turned back to Catherine. "Lewis is my assistant, and he's all business and a professional worrier."

He turned back to Lewis. "You will be heading back to the factories in two days. I'll be staying a little longer, but there will be plenty of time for us to talk before you leave. Everything is shut down until you get home. There is nothing there to worry about right now. So, go! Enjoy yourself... if you know how."

He grabbed Catherine's hand and pulled her toward the dance floor, leaving Lewis standing, staring after them in exasperation.

V

Vincent had been looking for Catherine for the last half hour when he spotted her on the other side of the dance floor. She was talking to Elliot Burch. Not one of his favorite people, even if he was an excellent manager. Most of the people who worked for him thought very highly of him.

He watched as another man went up and spoke to Burch. His connection with Catherine told him that she was amused and enjoying the conversation. Her enjoyment went up a notch when Burch pulled her out onto the dance floor.

He turned away. He didn't want to admit, even to himself, that her enjoyment felt like a knife in his chest.

He saw her several more times over the course of the rest of the day and evening, and she was with Burch each time.

He saw them leaving right after the fireworks. He still had work to do, and he wasn't able to leave until an hour later. But all the joy had gone out of the festival, and as soon as he could, he left, but he didn't head home.

He headed off into the woods, following the paths that had been worn over the years. As he got farther from the festival grounds, his pace quickened until he was running as fast as he could.

This was his stress relief. He ran, and right now, he felt as if he could run all the way to the mountains and back and not outrun his feelings.

It was well after midnight when he finally made it back to his house. He burst in and went straight to the kitchen for water. When he turned from the sink, he was surprised to find Devin sitting at the table in the dark.

"You're back early," Vincent commented, just as Devin spoke.

"Where have you been?" Devin asked, pouring something into a glass.

"Running," Vincent answered, pulling out the chair across the table from Devin. He slid his empty water glass toward Devin, who poured a little bit from the bottle into the glass.

"Burch had a brilliant idea when he suggested the distillery," Devin said.

"I don't want to hear his name," Vincent growled, then downed the liquid in one gulp.

"Why, what's up?"

"Catherine left the festival early with him," Vincent said.

"And you're interested in her?" Devin asked, getting right to the point.

Vincent nodded but didn't say anything.

"Have you said anything to her?"

When Vincent shook his head, Devin sighed in exasperation.

"Then I don't think you have any right to be upset because she decided to spend some time with someone else."

"I think she might be falling in love with him," Vincent said sorrowfully.

"She only just met the man," Devin pointed out.

"But I knew how I felt the first time I saw her."

“Then you should have said something, or at least acted like you were interested. I’ve only seen you with her a few times.”

“Maybe I should just let her go; let her fall in love,” Vincent mused. “Part of me says I should rejoice for her... she deserves happiness... but my heart... hurts. I’m poisoned by jealousy. I’ve never felt that before.”

“Get used to it, Brother,” Devin said wryly. “If you love, you are going to feel jealousy at some point. But don’t give up! You deserve happiness just as much as Catherine or anyone else. If you want her, then you’ll just have to do something about it. Don’t let her go.”

They were both quiet for a few more minutes before Vincent looked up at his brother and spoke.

“Why are you sitting in the dark drinking alone?” he asked.

“Same reason you just ran yourself into the ground... jealousy.”

“Tell me,” Vincent said quietly.

“I’m not sure what happened. But all of a sudden, Jenny seemed to be pissed off at me and walked away. She started dancing with every guy who asked her, and she left just before midnight with a group of women.”

“Are you going to fight for her?” Vincent asked, throwing Devin’s advice back at him.

“If I want her, I guess I’m going to have to,” Devin said with a chuckle. He held up the bottle. “More?” he asked.

Vincent shook his head, and Devin rose, put away the bottle, and put his glass in the sink.

“I’m going to bed. See you in the morning.”

He left Vincent alone with his thoughts.

Devin’s right, he admitted to himself. Catherine has no way of knowing how I feel, and she has every right to spend time with anyone she pleases. He rose and put his glass in the sink, then headed for his room. I need to talk to her...

C

Elliot had kept Catherine busy for the rest of the day and well into the evening. She had to admit she’d had fun. The candle ceremony was the only solemn point in the whole day.

At one point, children went through the crowd handing out multi-colored candles. Elliot had explained that the three colors progressing from the darker, orange-red, through yellow to white stood for the miners’ emergence from the mines.

A little while later, all the lights around the grounds went out, and a single candle was held up at the front near the stage. Then she heard Father’s voice.

“The world above us was almost unknown. Our world, the one Below, was dark and sometimes cold, so each year, we begin this ceremony in darkness, as our world began in darkness. Long before the town we now call home was even known to us, we sought shelter in caverns. In those days, those tunnels were dark places, and those who dwelt there dwelt in fear and isolation. It was a place of lost hope... of twisted dreams, a place of despair... where the sounds of footsteps coming down a tunnel were the sounds of terror... where men reached for knives and rocks and worse at the sound of other men’s voices. But at last, the oppressors left, and people learned to put aside their fear. We came

into the sunlight, and we came to trust each other... to help each other. And each of us grew stronger... those who took the help, and those who gave it. We are all part of one another... one family... one community. Sometimes we forget this, and so we meet here each year to give thanks to those of us who came before and helped us... and to remember... even the greatest darkness is nothing, so long as we share the light."

As Father spoke, the single candle flame was passed through the crowd, each person lighting the other's candles near them until when Father finished, everyone held a lighted candle high above their heads.

There was a moment of silence, then the lights came back on, a cheer went up, and the fireworks started.

By the time the fireworks were over, she was exhausted, and her feet hurt.

When Elliot asked her to dance again, she shook her head.

"I can't! My feet are killing me. It's time to call it a night." She stood. "I think I'll head back to where I'm staying."

"I'll walk with you," Elliot said as he put her arm through his. "Where are you staying?"

"The guest house at Vincent's," she told him, as they walked across the festival grounds.

The festival grounds were on the southeastern side of town, and the guest house was on the northwestern side, so they walked all the way across town before they headed north.

"Where are you staying?" Catherine asked, knowing that she and the rest of the ladies had taken most of the spare space in town.

"I've got a tent in the campgrounds south of the festival grounds," he told her.

"You'll have to walk all the way back," she said. "You didn't have to walk me home."

"My mother raised me to be a gentleman," he said, as they turned onto Wells Street.

"But it's not as if this is New York City," she said with a laugh. "I'm pretty sure I'd be safe walking home by myself."

"What do you know about New York City?" he asked.

"It's my hometown. I still own a small apartment overlooking Central Park."

"I guess it's a small universe," Elliot said with a chuckle. New York is my hometown too. Only my folks' place didn't overlook the park. Or at least not that park. We were closer to Washington Square."

"At least you had a park. That's more than a lot of people can say," she told him. "My dad used to take me to Central Park to climb trees. He said I was a regular monkey. Or we'd picnic or go to concerts in the park."

They'd reached the gate that opened into the yard in front of the guest house, and Elliot followed her to the door.

"Thank you for walking me home," she said politely. "I did have a great time today. You took my mind off everything else."

"So, you are a workaholic?" he asked, leaning against one of the porch posts.

"A little bit," she admitted. "It's also that I get to know the women on these trips, and I tend to worry about them until I know they are happy and settled."

"What about you?" he asked, moving closer. "Don't you want to be happy and settled?"

"I will be," she told him confidently, "once I get home, find a job, and get settled into a routine."

Elliot stepped closer, then leaned in and kissed her. She was startled and stepped back, but Elliot just smiled.

"I'll be here for a while," he told her. "Can I see you tomorrow? Lunch?"

"I'll be busy all day. I still have M.W.W business to take care of, but I'll be free later."

"Dinner then," he said with a grin. "It's only the diner, but at least someone else is doing the cooking."

He turned and walked away, then she opened the door and walked inside.

She'd really enjoyed her day and evening with Elliot. He was charming ... *and very easy on the eyes*, she admitted to herself with a smile.

But she had a feeling that he was on a campaign to get her to stay here, and she wasn't sure that she was willing to commit on only a few days. She'd definitely have to know a man a lot better before she could even consider something like that.

She put the candle she'd been given on the dresser then went to get ready for bed.

The next morning, she used her tablet to check for messages as she sipped her coffee on the back patio.

True to his word, Pascal had forwarded a message from M.W.W to her. The message was from her immediate boss, Joe Maxwell.

Hi, Cathy,

I was so glad to hear from you. We were a little worried when you didn't arrive on schedule.

I've attached M.W.W's official response to your letter of resignation, but you deserve more than their chilly reply.

First of all, you were right in your assessment. This company is going down the tubes quickly. The loss of the ship just speeded things up. They won't be able to replace it, and the only insurance they were carrying was liability, so that won't be any help.

John said that the company would like to see some compensation for getting the women as far as they did, but he realizes that the contract clearly states that no payment is required until after the matching questionnaires are filled out, and since that hasn't been done, there is nothing the company can do.

Add to that the "pain and suffering" incurred by the ladies when the pirates attacked, I think we will be lucky if they don't sue us. Look at me... still thinking, "us."

Not that there is going to be an "us" very much longer. Half the staff has already resigned and gone home. There are only two left on Glavin III, and the rest of us were just waiting here at headquarters, hoping to hear from you. Now that we have, I imagine we will all be heading out.

There is some talk of selling the business, but I don't know that anyone would want it. One of the other bride providers might be interested in the facilities, but other than that, I don't think there is much that they could use.

Your resignation has been accepted, Jenny's too. And John has written letters of recommendation. They are also attached.

So, please stay in touch and let me know where you end up.

In friendship,
Joe Maxwell

Catherine read the official letter from M.W.W and decided that it needed an official response.

She wrote back to them, taking her cue from Joe's message. She told them that there would be no payment from the women, or the people of the planet where they wound up, pointing out that the contract clearly stated that no payment was required until the questionnaires were filled out. The contract also said that M.W.W guaranteed the safety of the women when they were on any ship owned by M.W.W. She hinted that the women were considering filing a suit against M.W.W for the pain and suffering, not to mention the mental anguish they had suffered at the hands of the pirates.

She also pointed out that the contract specifically stated that no fees were ever charged to the women for transportation or housing.

She sent her response to Pascal, requesting it be transmitted, then forwarded everything, including her letter to Jenny.

She finished her coffee, then went back inside to change before she spent the rest of the morning in the small office at the house. She spent the afternoon talking directly to some of the women who had questions.

She ran into Elliot, as she was leaving the dormitory where most of the women were still staying.

"I know it's kind of early," she said, "but I skipped lunch, and I'm starving."

"If you're hungry, that's fine with me. I'm used to eating early, since I often skip lunch when I'm working." He took her arm and steered her toward the diner. "Something else we have in common."

Over dinner, Catherine found Elliot to be amusing and charming, and they did seem to have a lot more in common than just their eating habits and their place of birth.

"Where did you spend summers when you were a kid?" he asked.

"Well, before my mom died, we would go to a cottage we had a few hours from the city. After that, we stayed in the city most of the time. Daddy and I would travel over the Christmas holidays, and once I was a teenager, I'd often go off with friends of the family to places like the Hamptons or Cape Cod in the summer. Daddy might join us for the weekend. After Mom died, he tended to throw himself into his work."

"He was a lawyer?"

She could tell he was thinking about something. "Yes, he was. I worked at his firm for a while."

"Then that would be Chandler & Coolidge," he stated.

"It is. I still own part of the firm, so they can continue to use the Chandler name."

Elliot was lost in thought for a while. Catherine figured he was contemplating the differences in their childhoods.

"So how about you?" she asked. "Where did your family vacation?"

"New Jersey. We'd rent a place a couple blocks from the beach and then spend all our time either on the beach or the boardwalk. One time we went to Cape Hatteras, in North Carolina, but my dad preferred the Jersey Shore."

"I love the beach. That is one of the things I miss being off-planet so much. Actually, I miss the diversity of Earth. There are other beautiful planets, but none quite live up to home... although this one comes close."

Elliot nodded in agreement. "I did a lot of traveling before I settled here. And I have to say that this planet does come close," he said. "And I think what I missed the most was the food on Earth. It's not that it is that much better, but that there seems to be a larger selection. Every culture has its own cuisine." He laughed. "That may have been what kept me here. William cooks all kinds of dishes, and he features different cultures from Earth and other planets several times a month. He trains the cooks who run the dining halls, kitchens, and diners in the different settlements, and he's always learning something new himself. I bet he asked you if you had anything you could teach him."

"What, how to burn toast and overcook water?" she asked with a laugh. "But you are right; he did ask me if I had a specialty, and when I told him that my skills didn't go much beyond chopping vegetables, he asked if there was something I especially liked that he might be able to put on his menu now and then. I told him about a couple of things that my mother used to make."

"Well, if I remember correctly, he does special menus twice a week. It used to be Wednesday and Saturday."

"I have no idea what day it is, beyond the galaxy date, and that is because my tablet works on that. I can also figure out what the date is back home. I have no idea what day it is here."

"You'd be surprised how few people even pay attention to that except to mark things like birthdays, anniversaries, and the holidays we celebrate here. But just in case, today is Wednesday, December 22nd. Our next celebration will be in four months, on April 31st."

"But April only has 30 days," she argued.

"Not here. All the months have the same number of days, and our system is really very simple.

"The days here are almost the same length as the day on earth. It's a little longer but only by a few minutes. Most people don't use anything in the way of a timepiece, but you will notice that there are sundials all over the place. In the communities around the factories, we just let the computers tell us what time it is. There are speakers all over that use recordings that sound like the old-time clock towers to tell us the time.

"It takes this planet 396 days and some change to make a complete circuit around the sun, and that worked out, so we were able to keep to the Earth calendar, almost. But instead of a varying number of days, there are 33 days in each month. We've also kept the same names for the days of the week.

"Since we are almost on the equator, we don't change seasons, except that part of the year gets more rain. We can plant most crops three or four times a year, but each field is left fallow at least one time each year, and we rotate the crops. I'm not a farmer and don't really know much about that end of it. But I do know that we are able to raise enough that we always have a surplus to trade. A couple of our factories are for food processing, both canning, and freeze-drying, for trade and for use here.

"And since we are farther from the sun here than earth is, the temperatures stay pretty moderate here at the equator all year round."

"And the sun must be similar to that in our home system?"

"Yes, pretty much in every way, size, age, you name it."

"The organizational skills that have gone into this," she commented. "It's amazing. I'm told that Vincent is working on a history; I really must read it, even if I'm not here. I'll have to get Jenny to send it to me when it's done."

"Jenny?" he asked.

“She’s my assistant, or was. Since the company we worked for is going out of business, she’s decided to stay.”

Catherine asked a lot of questions about the planet and the colony, and Elliot was happy to share everything he knew.

On Friday night, as they were sharing the chaise lounge on the porch on the back of the guest house, Elliot brought up the subject again.

“You’re sure you won’t stay?” he asked as he nuzzled her neck.

“Not really much for a lawyer to do here,” she said with a smile. “Although I might come to visit Jenny.”

“Have you thought about contracts and trade agreements? We do a lot of those, and having a lawyer to go over them or write new ones, might ensure that we don’t get taken advantage of.”

“I doubt very much that anyone here is in any danger of that,” she said with a laugh. Although what he’d said did spark her interest. “But do you think there might be a need?”

“I’m not in on a lot of those negotiations, but I do know that a few times, Captain Wells has taken documents to lawyers on the planet where he’s negotiating. He’s never felt very confident doing that, since it could be said that the lawyers might be biased.”

“Well, on earth, lawyers supposedly aren’t biased. We are supposed to go by the law, but even then, it can sometimes be open to interpretation. But that is a point I might think about. Maybe I’ll talk to Dr. Wells before I make my final decision.”

Elliot gave her a warm smile, then a much warmer kiss. Things might have gone much farther except that they heard children laughing and water splashing, and it reminded Catherine that Vincent’s pool was only a short distance away through the trees.

“What is it?” Elliot asked when she pulled away.

“We might have an audience,” she whispered. “We should go inside.”

“It’s getting late,” he said, as he moved away from her and stood. He offered her his hand and helped her stand. “I was up early this morning, and I have to be up early again tomorrow. I should leave.”

Catherine was a little disappointed. Elliot was a good kisser, and she wondered what else he was good at. She walked with him through the house to the front door, where he kissed her again and said good night.

She hadn’t set an alarm on Saturday morning but still woke up earlier than she’d hoped to.

Old habits die hard, she thought to herself, as she waited for the water to heat so she could make coffee.

She had another message from M.W.W, only this time they were doing more agreeing than they were demanding. They even added a statement that the women were all released from any perceived contractual obligations with M.W.W. She made sure that every woman, including Jenny, got a copy of that. Then she got dressed and headed to the diner for breakfast, hoping she’d run into Elliot there.

She didn’t run into Elliot, but he did seem to be the center of attention even though he wasn’t there.

She was eating and reading on her tablet when Rona came over to her table.

“Can I sit, Cathy?” she asked. She looked troubled.

“Sure.” She turned the tablet off and set it down. “Is something wrong?”

“Are you seeing Elliot?” Rona asked.

Catherine was a little surprised at the question, but saw no reason not to answer truthfully.

“I’ve been out to dinner and spent the evening with him a couple of times. Why?”

“I thought so... that sorry...”

“What is it, Rona?”

“I was talking to Alexis this morning, and she was gushing about Elliot, and I found out that he’s been sleeping with her, then spending his days with me and his evenings with you.”

“He what?” Catherine exclaimed loudly, causing everyone in the room to turn and look. *And to think he had me considering staying*, she thought to herself.

She stood, grabbing her tablet and Rona’s arm. “We need to talk. Does Alexis know?”

“She does now,” Rona told her as they left the diner and crossed the street to the narrow strip of park. They found a bench and sat. Rona pulled out her communicator and quickly typed in a message. She waited a minute, then put it back in her pocket. “She’ll join us here in a few minutes.”

“Did you have any idea before you talked to Alexis?” Catherine asked her.

“I thought he might be going out with you, seeing how he spent so much time with you at the festival, but Alexis was a surprise.”

“I guess I wasn’t paying much attention because I didn’t have any idea about either of you.”

Just the idea that she’d invited him to stay the night before had her fuming. But she wasn’t sure if it was only because he was playing all three of them.

Alexis came up and sat on the bench opposite them.

“How about you,” Catherine asked her. “Did you have any idea?”

Alexis shrugged. “He told me that he was busy working during the day and that the only time we had to be together was at night. I’ve heard of a guy two-timing a girl, but this is a new one on me. Three-timing?”

“What are we going to do?” asked Rona.

“I don’t know about you, but I’m going to tell him to go flush himself out an airlock!” said Alexis.

Another woman came up and sat down next to Catherine.

“Oh, please don’t tell me he’s been seeing you too,” said Rona.

“If you’re talking about Burch, then no. I’m sorry, but I overheard what you were saying, and I think I might have something to add to it.”

“The charges just keep mounting,” Catherine said, using legal jargon. “Please, enlighten us.”

The woman looked from Rona to Alexis, then at Catherine. “I overheard Burch talking to his assistant just before the assistant went back. He said that he’d need a few more days here and that he was going to try to hook you, Cathy. He said you’d be his perfect ticket back to earth. He could have you, and live comfortably for the rest of his life, just managing your fortune.”

If Catherine hadn’t been so angry, she would have laughed.

Typical, she thought. *My money is so much more attractive than I am.*

"I don't know about you, but we had no agreement that we were exclusive," Catherine told the other women, "but just the idea that he was using all of us, especially you, Alexis, just goes against my grain. I agree with you. I'll be telling him to take a hike, and if I never see him again, it will be too soon."

When Catherine left the other ladies, she went to find Elliot. She found him in the lobby of the Town Hall.

"Catherine. I was just coming to look for you. I'm thinking about heading back today, and I wanted to invite you to visit."

He reached for her hands, but she kept them resolutely at her sides. It was everything she could do not to put them on her hips and start telling him off right there. But her mother had always taught her to praise in public but to reprimand in private, and she figured that applied here.

"Is there a place we can talk in private?" she asked stiffly.

Elliot looked around, then gestured to a closed door next to the building entrance.

"No one uses that office," he told her, before leading her over to it. He opened the door and allowed her to enter first. The room contained a dusty desk, a couple chairs, and an empty bookcase, nothing else.

Catherine touched the light switch then walked over to the desk where she sat on the edge and crossed her arms. One look from her prompted Elliot to shut the door.

"What is it, Catherine?" he asked.

"To get to the point... I don't appreciate being played or used, and neither do Alexis and Rona. I'm saying this in private because I'm not one to spread gossip. I'm telling you right now that you need to stay away from me and the rest of the women who came here with me. If you don't, then everyone in this settlement is going to hear the story about how you were wining and dining with me, spending the day with Rona, and sleeping with Alexis every night while you were here. Is that clear?"

Elliot looked stunned, then stammered something unintelligible.

"And, I wouldn't go into space with Alexis; she's already suggested flushing you out an airlock. For that matter, I'd stay away from cliffs and other high places for a while."

Catherine pushed past him and left a very stunned Elliot in her wake.

When Elliot left town later that day, there were several women who were considering tar and feathers. He'd only been spending time with Catherine, Alexis, and Rona, but he'd been chatting up several others over breakfast every day.

Catherine was still angry as she walked back to the guest house just before sunset that day. When she reached the house, she remembered the pool at Vincent's.

"I'll let off some steam by swimming laps," she said out loud, as she hunted for her bathing suit.

She didn't know what the style was for swimming here, but she hoped her plain white two-piece wasn't too skimpy.

Doesn't really matter, she thought, when she reached the pool. *It doesn't look like anyone is home.*

She dropped her towel, pulled off the shirt she'd put on over her suit, and dove into the pool. She was finishing her tenth lap when she felt, more than heard, someone else jump in. Whoever it was fell in parallel to her and matched her pace for several more laps.

She finally ran out of steam and anger and stopped at the far end. She rested at the end of the pool, breathing hard. When she looked, she saw that her companion was Vincent. She'd only seen him in passing since the morning of the festival.

As she rested, the sunset caught her eye. It was beautiful, and she leaned on the end of the pool, taking it in. She felt Vincent join her.

"It's beautiful," she said quietly. "I haven't seen a sunset like that in years!"

There was a break in the trees that surrounded the town, and she could see the sky clearly.

"Weren't you just on Earth a short time ago?" he asked, as he leaned on the edge of the pool next to her.

"I was, but I didn't get out of the city, and even if I had, I never seem to have the time to stop and look at things like that."

"We have one like that almost every evening. Sometimes they're even more beautiful," Vincent told her.

"What makes the colors so vivid?" she asked.

"There is a sandy area west of town, between here and the shoreline. Dunes and flat areas. The breeze from offshore lifts some of the sand up into the air and causes some of the colors. The rest is just clouds. It's different all the time, and I never tire of looking at it. But as you said, I don't often take the time."

They watched as the sun sunk lower and was finally out of sight completely. It was dark when Catherine finally swam back to the other end of the pool and used the stairs to climb out.

Catherine had her back to the pool, drying her face and hair when Vincent climbed out.

"Would you like to join me for dinner at William's?" he asked.

She turned around. There was just enough light from the house that she could see Vincent. And the sight took her breath away. He was perfect. She'd had a hint of what was under his clothes when he'd shown up to escort her to the festival in loose-fitting pants and the vest, but now, all he was wearing was loose swim shorts, and those were low on his hips, wet and clinging to his body.

He wasn't overly-muscled, but his shoulders were broad, and his arms were perfect. His well-defined chest tapered down to narrow waist and hips. His legs were long and muscular, like a runner's legs. He wasn't as hairy as she'd expected him to be, and the hair was golden and looked soft. She almost reached out to touch before she realized she was staring. She pulled the towel over her head as if to blot out more water. She was blushing, and she knew it.

She scrambled through her brain, trying to locate what he'd said.

"Not tonight. It's been a long week; I think I'll just stay in," she said when she found it.

"Then why don't you just come over here and eat with me. I know you don't have much in the house. All I had sent was fruit and snacks, and you can't really make a meal off that."

"You'd be surprised," she said with a laugh as she pulled on her shirt. This time she kept her eyes on his face so as not to embarrass herself.

"It's easier to cook for two than for just one," he coaxed.

She laughed again. "OK, but I need to go back and change."

"Come back when you are ready. I'll be in the kitchen."

V

Vincent stood and watched as she followed the path back to the guest house. Then he went back inside to change.

He'd been planning to fix himself a sandwich for dinner, but once he was dressed, he stood in front of his refrigerator trying to make up his mind... which was wandering a bit.

He'd been taken aback at the surge of emotions that he's sensed from Catherine earlier when she'd looked at him. There had been... admiration?

He'd sensed her anger that morning and knew that it had been seething all day. And he'd known he would find her in the pool, long before he got home and joined her. He'd also felt the tension releasing as she swam, and finally the anger disappearing as she had watched the sunset.

Somehow, he was going to have to find a way to tell her about his empathic abilities and the Bond over dinner tonight. Or at least after it.

He started pulling things out of the refrigerator and putting them on the counter. He made a trip to the pantry and came back with a few things. By the time Catherine joined him, the kitchen was starting to smell like dinner, and he had just put the dessert in the refrigerator.

"How can I help?" she asked, when she came in the door from the back yard.

"Salad?" he asked, pointing to the ingredients on the counter. "And I'll go out and start the grill for those." He pointed to the platter which held two steaks.

"Real beef?" she asked incredulously.

"Yes, we have several large herds here. Both beef and dairy cattle. We also have a sheep farm for wool and meat and several small herds of goats."

Vincent went out and turned on the grill, then came back inside.

"Did the mining company leave all that behind?" she asked as she cut up a tomato for the salad.

"No, they only had the basics. Crops like wheat and corn, chickens for meat and eggs. They had a couple of fishing boats. And the only factories they had made ship and machine parts and mining tools. We added more diverse food crops, and both hemp and cotton for fiber, and there are the food processing factories, cattle, and sheep. We also planted a vineyard and now have a winery, along with a distillery and a brewery. And we have some smaller manufacturing where most of our cloth is woven, and some clothing is made. Some of the women have a shop here in town, where those who sew take turns working and making special order things."

"A vineyard? Is the wine good?" she asked.

"I'll let you be the judge." Vincent went to the pantry and came back with an unlabeled bottle. He opened it and set it on the table. He got a couple of wine glasses out of the cabinet and set them out.

He took potatoes out of the oven, then picked up the platter with the steaks.

"I'll cook these while you finish the salad," he told her. "How do you like your steak?"

"Ah, medium rare," she said, finishing up the salad. "It's been so long since I've had a real one, it's hard to remember."

Her mouth was watering. She'd been eating ever since she got here, and she knew that everything was fresh, not from a food fabricator, but just the thought of sinking her teeth into a real steak had her almost drooling.

She had just set the salad and potatoes on the table when Vincent came back with the steaks.

She sat as he poured the wine, then sat down across from her.

When dinner was over, she felt as if she was going to burst.

"Oh, my God! That is the first real steak I've had in years. Even Earth doesn't have a lot of real meat, and when they do, it's usually in small amounts. Even there, a lot is from fabricators. There isn't a huge selection, and it gets very old after a while.

"What did you think of the wine?" he asked, as he poured more into their glasses.

"It's a Pinot Noir, isn't it? It's very good." She took a sip. "Not too heavy, and I like the fruity nose and flavors."

"Nose?" he asked.

She laughed. "My dad was a bit of a wine snob, and he taught or tried to teach me something about good wines. Part of good wine is the 'nose,' the way it smells. But he always despaired of me ever drinking anything but what I liked. And he very quickly found out that I don't like some of what he considered to be the best wines. I don't like wine that is too dry or too sweet for that matter. I like very few of the French style wines. Pinot Noir is one of the few of those I like. I prefer white wines most of the time."

When they were done eating, Catherine helped Vincent clear the table and put the dishes in the dishwasher. Then they finished off the bottle of wine and carried their glasses out to the patio in back.

They had been sitting quietly for several minutes when Catherine spoke.

"You know, it took me several days to figure it out, but there is something missing here."

"What's that?" Vincent looked around as if looking for it.

"Mosquitos. There are some places on earth where if we sat outside at night, they would eat us up."

"I hear there are a lot of biting and stinging insects on Earth."

"Don't you have any here?"

"We have insects, but they haven't decided that we or any of our animals are food sources yet. Some do bite or sting the local wildlife, but so far, they've left us alone. There are even some that look like honey bees, and they do the same thing as Earth honey bees, pollinate flowers, trees, and crops, but they don't sting."

"This place just keeps getting better and better," she said with a laugh. "Is there anything bad I should warn the women about?"

"We have our problems, just like anywhere else," he told her. "It's just that the planet is very hospitable, and most of the time we are able to work our problems out without resorting to violence - although some of our discussions have been known to get a little loud, at times."

"So, you are governed by your council?" she asked.

"Yes, and each of the settlements has representation on that council according to their population. We have one representative for about every 50 people, and so far, that is working. Mary has suggested that we add someone to the council to represent our new residents. It's going to be on the

next council meeting agenda. We might have to rethink all of it if our population starts to increase. Anyone can attend council meetings, and anyone can have an item put on the agenda.”

“How often do you meet?”

“At least once a month. If there is something going on, we call extra meetings.”

“And voting?”

“One person, one vote. Anyone 18 and over is allowed to vote. Some votes are only local, like when they vote for a representative, and some are for the whole population. The council votes for the council president from among their ranks. Everyone in all elected positions serves 2 years.”

“Simple,” she commented.

“We like it that way, although we know that it might get a bit more complicated once we have more people.”

“I remember studying government in school. My dad always had his eye on being a judge, but he didn’t live that long. Most of the men in his family have been lawyers, and there have been several judges over the years.”

“Were you expected to be a lawyer?” he asked.

“Not really. But my dad loved the idea once I told him that it was what I wanted to do. He said that he always expected me to do something a bit more artistic.”

“You’re artistic?” he asked, with interest.

“I was always interested in fashion design. I loved to design my own clothes and learned to sew so I could make them once I’d designed them. I continued doing that through college, and my friends always used to joke that I would go into fashion law.”

“Is there such a thing?”

“You name it, there is a law specialty for it,” she said. “Kind of like medicine.”

They sipped wine and sat quietly for a few minutes.

“What do you do?” she asked. “I know you teach, but is there anything else? I mean, everyone around here seems to have more than one job.”

“We do,” he affirmed. “I teach. I enjoy teaching English and literature the most, but I teach math and science too. I also assist Father in the clinic from time to time, and I’ve gone with Devin a few times in an ambassadorial role. And I sometimes go out to the different settlements to act as a mediator.”

“You stay busy,” she commented.

“We all do. There is no time to get bored,” he agreed.

“What do you do to relax?”

“Swim,” he said, nodding at the pool. “And I run. I take off on my own to explore occasionally. I feel the need to get away from all the *noise* from time to time.”

His emphasis on the word *noise* caught her attention.

“What do you mean by noise?” she asked, tilting her head to one side and listening. “It’s so quiet.”

Vincent saw his opportunity to explain his empathic abilities, and he took it.

“Not actual sound,” he told her. “It’s more like emotional noise. I pick up on what is going on around me and living in town, it’s never truly emotionally quiet.”

“You’re... ah...,” she thought a moment before the words came to her, “...telepathic or empathic?”

“Empathic. It seems to be a trait of my species, whatever that is. The woman who brought me here said that my parents were connected, and that was the reason my mother died so soon after my father was killed in an accident.”

“How does it work?” she asked.

“Everyone broadcasts their stronger feelings to a certain extent, and if I walk into a room where the people there were recently arguing, or laughing, crying... any strong emotion, I can sense it. If I want to know more, I have to touch the person. Father has occasionally called me in to help him diagnose a medical problem with a child too young to express himself, or someone who is unconscious. I can touch the person and tell him where it hurts.”

“And you feel their emotions too?” she asked.

“Yes. As with physical sensation, usually, I have to touch them to pick up the specifics, but occasionally it’s different.”

“Different? How?” She was fascinated by the concept.

“Well, I’ve met one person who I can sense from a distance. I feel what they feel when they feel it... Almost as if they are my own feelings.”

“Wow, that is interesting. Is it OK for me to ask who it is? Is it your father or your brother?”

“No, Catherine...” He hesitated a moment. “It’s you.”

“Me?” she was puzzled. “How did that happen?”

“I have no idea, but when I picked you up and carried you to the clinic that first day, I knew exactly what your injuries were, and that you were worried about something and not paying a lot of attention to your own pain. Sensing that wasn’t that unusual, I was touching you, but later, when I left you, I realized I could still feel what you were feeling. I was very surprised. That has never happened to me before... I think I must be the way my parents were connected,” he added.

“It’s just empathy, nothing else?” she asked warily.

“I can’t read your mind if that is what is bothering you,” he said with a chuckle.

“Good, because sometimes I have some pretty... uncharitable thoughts.”

“You were very angry this morning,” he said, thinking that was what she meant by uncharitable thoughts.”

“That anger was well deserved,” she said with a grim laugh. “And I vented it in the proper way.” She went on to explain about Elliot.

It was Vincent’s turn to look grim. “I never was very fond of him,” he said. “He’s good at what he does, but I think Father should know about this, with your permission. We should probably keep an eye on him and make sure he doesn’t hurt anyone else.”

“Go ahead and tell him, but I don’t think that the story will be kept quiet among the women; I think they will probably share with all of the other single women, both new and those who have been here. We might get a little catty and competitive about some things, but we women do tend to stick together when it comes to things like this.”

“I’m sorry he upset you,” he said.

“Don’t you apologize for him,” she said quickly. “He didn’t even apologize for himself. Not that I would have accepted it. People shouldn’t use other people.” She was quiet a moment. “Come to think of it, most of the men I’ve been involved with were the same: controlling, manipulative, users.”

Vincent could feel her anger building again.

“I broke up with someone just before I left Earth the last time, and I told Jenny that I thought Tom was more interested in the Chandler name and money than he was me. And the guy I dated in law school was trying to get an internship at my dad’s law firm.”

Vincent reached for Catherine’s hand and was almost surprised when she allowed him to take it. When he touched her, the feelings became clearer. Not only was she angry, but she was hurt by the fact that those men hadn’t been interested in her personally, just her money and name.

Those were two things that aren’t of much importance here, he thought. I need to make her see that.

Catherine eventually pulled her hand out from under his. It was nice to have a man touch her with nothing more in mind than offering the comforting touch of a friend. She wouldn’t have minded a hug, but thought he might misconstrue that.

She sat back in her chair and sighed.

“And to think I’m willingly going to go back to that world,” she said.

“You don’t have to, do you? I mean, I’m sure that we could use a lawyer here. You might be better at mediation than I am, and there are always trade agreements and contracts. You could stay a while and try it out. If it doesn’t work out, or you aren’t happy, then you could leave. Devin visits nearby trading centers regularly, and I’m sure that he would see to it that you got to a port where you could get transportation back to Earth.”

“Are you sure?” she asked dubiously.

“Maybe you should talk to Father. He knows more about our needs as a society,” Vincent told her.

“Well, I was planning to stay until all the women were settled. That could be months. I could use that as a try out time. I’ll talk to Dr. Wells tomorrow,” she promised.

“I’m sure there is an office you can use in the Town Hall,” Vincent said.

“There’s a small office off the lobby,” she said. “It’s tiny, but it’s about all I would need, as long as there is a small conference room available somewhere, in case more than one or two people need to see me at the same time.”

“That’s the old security office from when the Town Hall needed guards,” Vincent told her. “I’m sure you can have it, and there is a meeting room that is seldom used just across the lobby from it.”

“OK, then,” she said with a grin. “Then I’ll talk to Dr. Wells tomorrow... will I need an appointment?”

“No. His office door is always open, and he’s there most days from about 9 am until late afternoon. All you need to do is go up and tell him that you’d like to talk.”

C

And Catherine did just that, the next morning. When she reached Dr. Wells’ office, he was sitting at his desk reading a book... a real book, not a tablet.

“Am I disturbing you, Dr. Wells?” she asked.

He looked up from his book and smiled.

“Never, my dear. It’s been a slow morning. No one has been here, no complaints, or even suggestions.” He stood and indicated the chair across the desk from his. “Have a seat and tell me.”

Catherine sat, then he sat in his chair.

“Well, there are a couple of things,” she told him, remembering that Vincent had suggested that he needed to know that had happened with Elliot Burch.

She explained about Elliot, and as she talked, Dr. Wells’ scowl grew.

“I suppose that those particular traits of his have never come out before because there are so few women here. And the manufacturing village has the fewest. But Devin did warn me that Burch was what he called a player. I never quite understood what he meant by that.”

“It means a man who will treat a woman very nicely; act as if she’s the only woman in his life, even though she’s only one of many. As long as all the women know that they aren’t the only one, then it’s OK, but most of the time, it turns out like it did for me, Alexis and Rona. He was playing all of us to get what he could, even if it was only just a little undivided attention.”

“Reprehensible!” Dr. Wells exclaimed.

“I agree 100% Dr. Wells,” she said with a nod before continuing. “The other thing I wanted to talk about was the possibility of me using an office here in the Town Hall.”

She went on to explain her and Vincent’s idea, and it erased the scowl from his face.

“That is a wonderful idea!” he stated. “How long do you think you’ll stay?”

“That depends on how long it takes to get everyone settled. I don’t necessarily have to stay to see every last one of them married, but I’ll be here at least until everyone has made a decision. But I want to use it as a trial period for me too. To see if there would be work here for a lawyer. Both Vincent and Elliot have assured me that there is. Vincent suggested the need for a trained mediator upon occasion, and they both mentioned trade agreements and contracts. If there is a need, I could stay and set up an office. This does seem to be a lovely place.”

“I know that lawyers are usually offered a substantial salary,” he said. “We wouldn’t be able to offer you currency or credits, since our economy doesn’t work like that. But we could offer you one of the two large, still unoccupied houses we have here. You might even be able to set up your office in the house.”

“No, I’m quite happy where I am right now, unless, of course, Devin wants his house back. If he does, I can move into a small place closer to the center of town. I’m used to small,” she told him. “The tiny cabins I usually have aboard ship make my small 800 sq. ft. apartment in New York look huge. Right now, the guest house feels like a mansion.”

“Devin is leaving again at the end of the week,” Dr. Wells told her. “I’m sure he won’t mind. He and Vincent have shared everything since they were children. They get along wonderfully.”

V

At that moment, Devin and Vincent were doing their best to disprove their father’s words.

“But I need a place that is private!” Devin argued as he poured himself another cup of coffee. “Are you sure you won’t let me ask Catherine to swap rooms with me?”

“Devin! You know how I feel about her; it would just be too awkward to have her staying here. Not to mention... well... I doubt that Father would approve.”

“Hell, Vincent. You’re both adults.”

“Exactly, Dev.”

“I’m sure you can control yourselves, especially if she doesn’t return your feelings.”

“Devin, you’re leaving in a few days. I’ll try to work something out while you are gone. Besides, what’s this sudden need for privacy?”

“Well, you never know... Jenny and I... well, we might want to... get a little closer.”

Vincent rolled his eyes.

“I’m glad you and Jennifer have resolved your problem, but now who’s acting like a teenager? Your room here is on the other end of the house from mine. If you want to have her over, then go ahead. Or you could go to wherever she’s staying.”

“She’s staying with Mary at the moment. I don’t think that would work.”

That made Vincent laugh. “OK, I do understand that. But like I said, my room is on the other end of the house from yours, almost 70 feet away. That should be private enough for anyone. If you really want the guest house back, I can talk to Catherine, and we can find her another place while you are gone.”

“No, don’t bother. You’re right. This house is huge, and my room is almost as far from yours as it is when I’m in the guest house.” He turned around and headed out of the kitchen. “Now I think I should probably go clean said room... just in case.”

Vincent looked around the kitchen where he and Devin had been arguing. Had he been greedy when he’d asked for this house? Especially in light of the fact that it had four bedrooms and three and a half baths.

He had to admit that most of the rooms did get used. The Master Suite was huge, and it had its own sitting area and a fireplace. In fact, there was a fireplace in the great room too. Not that he’d ever needed to use either of them.

A long hall ran from one end of the house to the other. There was a bedroom with a private bath on the front of the house, across the hall from the master bedroom. It was furnished but seldom used. The dining room was on the other side of the foyer from that bedroom. He’d never used it to host a dinner; he preferred eating in the kitchen. But the long table in the dining room was usually where he taught his classes or helped with projects for school. There were school rooms in the Town Hall, but more often than not, the classes he taught were held in his dining room.

He had an office next to the dining room. And he often said that he could do the laundry for the whole town in his laundry room. He liked that the great room was only separated from the kitchen by a breakfast counter and that there was a glass wall that slid into the walls at both ends that he could open to bring the outdoors inside. Because the climate was so mild, those doors were open more than they were closed, and there were always children running in and out. He was thankful that the house was equipped with sweeping robots that took care of the floors, or he was sure he’d have a broom in his hands all the time.

My home is more like a community center than a house, he mused, as he put some dishes in the dishwasher.

C

“Do you think you’ll need anything else for this office?” asked Dr. Wells, as Catherine inspected it a bit closer than she had the previous day, when she’d been too busy telling Elliot off to notice much.

“I don’t think so,” she said. The desk is fine, the chairs...” She eyed the desk chair and the two guest chairs in front of it. “...look comfortable.” She ran her finger across one of the shelves built into the wall. “It just needs a little dusting.”

“Do you have a portable computer?” he asked.

“Yes, and a tablet. I haven’t used the computer since I’ve been here, just the tablet.”

“You should be able to use your username and password to get the computer on the network just like you do the tablet. Then you’ll be able to get your off-world messages that you can’t get on the tablet. If you have any problems with any of it, just call Pascal. And if you need anything else... more furniture, a repair, or transportation out to one of the other settlements, get in touch with Mouse or Sam in the motor pool. Mouse can fix almost anything that is broken, or if you need a gadget to do a specific job and it doesn’t exist, he will invent it for you.” Dr. Wells chuckled. “He’s our ‘Manager in Charge of Gadgets and Gizmos’ as he has so aptly named himself.”

“I don’t believe I’ve met him yet,” Catherine said, as they both turned and walked out of the office.

“You will, I’m sure. In fact, I think you need to have your name and title on the door, and Mouse can take care of that. What kind of title do you want to use?”

“I get to name my position,” she asked with a laugh. “I could call myself Attorney General...” When she saw that he was getting ready to write that down, she hastily withdrew it from consideration.

“That is a bit pretentious. How about Legal Aide... with an ‘e’ to make it more of a helper.”

“I think that is perfect,” Dr. Wells agreed. “I’ll let Mouse know.”

Catherine spent the next couple of hours letting Jenny and the other women know where they could find her every day from then on. Then, after lunch, she walked back to the guest house to get her computer and the bag that she used to carry it, and the accessories and files she needed.

When she got back to the Town Hall, her name and title were on the glass window of the door to her new office, but no Mouse was to be seen - although she knew she wouldn’t know him if she did see him.

The office had been dusted, and she had it set up when she had her first client arrive thirty minutes later.

“Can I help you?” she asked, looking up at the woman standing in the open door. She wasn’t one of the M.W.W ladies.

Catherine changed her assessment of the woman. She was really no more than a girl, sixteen or seventeen at most. Then she recognized her.

“Brooke, isn’t it? You work at the diner. Come in and sit down.”

“Hi, I’m surprised that you recognized me,” Brooke said, as she took a chair in front of the desk.

“Why wouldn’t I? I’ve seen you several times a day at the diner since I’ve been here.”

Brooke shrugged. "I don't know. It's just that I know everyone here, and they are expected to know me. You're new."

"So, what can I help you with?" Catherine asked.

"Do you know anything about our laws... well, they're more like rules?"

"Not yet. I was just going to access that on your computer network. I need to familiarize myself with them if I'm going to be of any help here. Was your question about one of those laws?"

"Yes, it's the laws pertaining to legal ages for things."

"Well, I know that everyone here can vote once they are eighteen, but that is about all."

"Well, everything else requires that we be twenty-one," Brooke told her.

"Was there specific law you were concerned with?" Catherine asked.

"Well, the law says that a person must be twenty-one to be married, but that if both of them have the permission of their parents, they can get married at eighteen."

"And you want to get married?"

"Yes, Stephen and I want to."

"How old are you?"

"We're both seventeen. Stephen will be eighteen next month, and I'll be eighteen in three months. We want to get married when I turn eighteen."

"Have either of you talked to your parents about this," Catherine asked.

"We are both orphans," Brooke told her.

"Do you have guardians?"

"Nothing official," Brooke admitted. "Stephen has lived with Cullen since his dad died, and he's Cullen's apprentice. I live with Sarah; she was my mom's best friend, and I went to live with her when my mom died."

"Then I think you should both talk to your guardians," Catherine suggested. "Don't go jumping at them wielding the law like a baseball bat. You need to approach them calmly and reasonably."

"But what if they say 'no'?" Brooke asked.

"Then you continue to show Sarah and Cullen what responsible adults you are, and maybe you'll be able to convince them. If not, you wait until you are twenty-one, and you get married then."

In Catherine's opinion, even twenty-one was too young, but her *opinion* didn't really count here.

"Do you think it will work?" Brooke asked, doubtfully.

"I don't know. I don't know either Sarah or Cullen, so I can't say either way. All I can advise is going about this a logical way."

"OK. I'll talk to Stephen, and maybe we will try it. Thank you, Ms. Chandler." Brooke rose to leave.

"Please call me Catherine or Cathy. That's what my friends call me."

Brooke smiled and left, and Catherine sat back in her chair for a moment.

"They should all be that easy," she mused out loud, before she opened her case journal on the computer and typed out some notes about what had just happened. She had no law library here and no way to check precedent for cases, so she thought she should keep her own notes so she could at least be consistent in what she did.

When she was done, she found what constituted the laws of the colony. They weren't even called *laws*. They were referred to as regulations or rules in almost every instance.

She was reading through them, and some were interesting, when Vincent appeared at her door.

"Are you planning on leaving here tonight, or should I have your dinner sent over?" he asked with a slight smile.

Catherine looked up and then noticed how quiet it had gotten. Her office didn't have a window, so she had no idea what time it was.

"What time is it?" she asked.

"Everyone else left a couple of hours ago," Vincent pointed out. "What have you found so interesting?" He walked over and looked over her shoulder at the computer screen.

"Your rules and regulations," she said with a laugh. "They are thorough and cover everything from running in the corridors of public buildings to getting permission before testing new inventions."

"The first directed primarily at the children and the latter at Mouse."

"All right, I really have to meet this Mouse. I've heard about him several times today. Your father did mention that he invents things."

"And comes up with ideas to improve things. Half the time, they don't work and often backfire."

"But doesn't that mean that half the time they do work?" Catherine asked with a smile as she prepared to leave.

"That is what his friend Jamie says. She's been his champion since they were small."

They left the office and, as if by silent agreement, headed for the diner.

"Tell me about some of his inventions," Catherine prompted.

"The ones that worked or the ones that didn't?" Vincent asked.

"Both?"

"Well, he invented a self-propelled baby stroller."

"Did it work?"

"Too well, you could program a destination or route into it, and it would whiz around town at about 35 miles per hour."

"Oh my... Grand Prix for babies." Catherine smothered a laugh.

"Yes, luckily, at the time, our youngest child was almost seven, so he wasn't able to test it with a child, just a ten-pound bag of flour. Someone didn't get out of its way on its maiden voyage. The stroller hit the wagon they were pulling. The flour exploded, and witnesses said that it took ten minutes for the flour cloud to settle."

Catherine was laughing as they entered the diner.

"So, does he have a room full of failed inventions?" she asked.

"Well, not exactly. That was the incident that instigated passing the rule about testing inventions, but after a little work, it did become useful, but not for babies. He installed the motor and computer on a small cart, and now we use it to deliver packages... at a much slower speed. You will occasionally see small blue boxes on wheels, but they only move at about 5 miles per hour now."

"I guess that would be considered one of the ones that work," she said.

“Not initially, but after a little work, it is useful. William has one that he sometimes uses to make meal deliveries. It’s been modified so that it keeps hot things hot and cold things cold.”

Through dinner, Vincent regaled Catherine with stories of some of Mouse’s other creations.

“Now, when he has something new, he brings it to me, or Father, and we make an assessment on when and where to test it. Most of them are tested in the field where we have our festivals. He’s working on one now that he wants me to look at tomorrow.”

“What is it?” she asked as they left the diner.

“He says that it’s an airborne upgrade of the delivery carts. It’s a drone that can carry packages then drop them by parachute at the destination.”

“That could be problematic,” Catherine mused.

“I was thinking the same thing. Aerial delivery sounds all right, but not the parachute. Wind could carry it off course. But if the drone could land and disconnect from the package, it just might work.”

“Does he take suggestions like that well?” she asked.

“His feelings aren’t easily hurt, and he listens to all suggestions. He’s really quite brilliant, just socially inept and very impulsive.”

When they got back to Vincent’s, there were half a dozen children sitting on his front porch waiting for him.

“I’m giving swimming lessons this evening,” he told her. “And then supervising some water games. Would you like to help?”

It didn’t take much thought for her to decide it was just the thing to help her unwind.

Over the next few weeks, that became their evening ritual. Vincent would stop at her office to remind her that it was time to go home, then they would have dinner at the diner, and she would spend most evenings helping him with whatever he was doing.

It was well into January before she realized that she’d missed both Christmas and New Year’s.

She got to know all the children quite well and loved working with them. They had swimming lessons, a botany class, they all took turns reading Tom Sawyer, and one night the children stayed a little later than usual, and there was an astronomy class.

The children had surprised Vincent with cards and small gifts since it was his birthday.

“We don’t make much of birthdays here,” he explained, as they got ready for the astronomy class, “except for the children. Sometimes they like to remember the adults in their lives. If it wasn’t for them, I probably wouldn’t even remember I was a year older.”

When they finally got around to astronomy, Catherine had almost as many questions as the children.

“Thank you for staying,” Vincent said later, as they gathered up star charts.

“It was fascinating,” she told him. “I took an astronomy class in college, but I think seeing it all from here finally got it through to me just how far from home I am.”

She sat down on the end of one of the chaises they’d been using while they were stargazing. It was a double chaise, and Vincent joined her.

“So you said that Earth’s solar system is in that direction,” she said, pointing upward.

"It's moved a bit since we talked about it," he told her. "It's almost straight up now." He pointed.

"Can the star be seen from here?" she asked, as she moved back on the chair, so she lay down and look up at the sky more easily.

"Not without a telescope," answered Vincent as he joined her. "And it would have to be a strong one at that. We only have one that is strong enough, in the mountains where the gem mines are. And even it can just see the star and not any of the planets."

"Didn't you say that you've been off-world with Devin?" she asked. The wind had picked up, and there was a bit of chill in it. She moved a little closer to Vincent for his warmth.

"A few times. The first time was just out of curiosity. I wanted to see what it was like, and the other times I was acting as a trade ambassador. One time it was the planet I was brought here from. I was hoping that someone would be able to give me information on where my parents had come from or, at the very least, where they might be buried. But no one remembered ever seeing anyone like me, and I was told that they don't bury their dead on that planet. They cremate everyone, and the ashes are scattered unless there is a family member who wants to keep them."

"But Devin asks every time he meets someone new," she stated. "He asked me and then asked me to pass the word and a picture of you among the other women."

"That was why no one was startled by my appearance," he mused. "I wondered, since I usually, at the very least, startle people. At least people from earth, where they know about and have seen lions. I'm told that is what I most closely resemble; a cross between a man and a lion."

"Has anyone ever told you how humans describe lions?" she asked, shifting to her side and propping her head on her hand so she could see him.

"No, not really. The only thing that I've heard is that they are wild beasts, to be feared."

"Well, I wouldn't want to try to pet one, but they are referred to as the 'King of the Beasts.' Males average around 500 pounds and around 6-7 feet long without the tail, which can be 2 to 3 feet long. And they are solid muscle. They are tawny in color, very much like your hair, although some lions have black manes. Mature males usually have what they call a pride that consists of several females and their young. Young males are usually forced out of the pride when they reach maturity, and they go out looking for females so they can accumulate their own pride.

"They are cats, and there are many species of wild felines on Earth, and there are also smaller domesticated cats that are kept as pets."

"I've seen pictures, and I do see the resemblance," Vincent admitted.

"Except for the 'wild beast' part," she mused, before she stretched up and kissed his cheek.

That seemed to startle him, and he looked down at her questioningly.

"Just saying 'Happy Birthday,' I guess," she said with a smile. "You've been such a good friend since I've been here, and I'm sorry I didn't know about your birthday earlier."

She quickly rolled to her other side, then stood before he had a chance to say anything.

"It's getting late," she said. "I've got an early morning tomorrow... so goodnight."

What was I thinking? Catherine questioned herself as she got ready for bed. I have the feeling that he's not had a lot of experience with women. For that matter, a lot of the men here haven't. But he's so attractive, and not just physically. He's a good person. I wonder why someone hasn't snatched him up already. I should have realized that Elliot couldn't hold a candle to Vincent.

She stretched out on her bed and stared up at her ceiling.

I wonder what he thinks of me. And I wonder if it's worth considering giving up my career on Earth on the chance that he might be attracted to me too... Well, it's not like I have to make that decision right now.

V

Catherine hurried off as Vincent sat up and watched her cross the yard and disappear behind the bushes.

His hand went to his cheek. He'd received many kisses in his 30 odd years, but never one from a beautiful woman. It was probably the best birthday gift he'd received since the bicycle Father had given him when he was 7.

He finished gathering everything up, then carried it all into the house and put it away. He went through his nightly routine of closing doors and windows before he went to his room to get ready for bed.

Later, as he was trying to sleep, the sensation of her lips on his cheek kept coming back to him.

Vincent was straightening up the dining room after teaching a botany class the next morning, when his communicator buzzed.

It was Winslow, up at the mines. Winslow never called unless it was important.

"Hello, Winslow," Vincent answered.

"Hi, Vincent. I was wondering if you'd have time to come up here. It's about that thing we talked to Father about a while back," Winslow said, as sparing with his words as ever.

"Of course. When?"

"The sooner, the better, I'm thinking."

"All right, I can be there around noon or a little after. I'll see you then."

Vincent went to his room and put a few necessities into a backpack, then headed over to the Town Hall for a skimmer.

First, he went to Father's office to tell him where he was going and why, then he went to Catherine's office.

He could tell that she was looking forward to seeing him later. He sensed her surprise when he showed up in her office in the middle of the morning.

"I'm sorry to disturb you," he said as he stepped into the office. The door was never closed unless she was with someone.

"You're not," she noticed that he had a backpack over his shoulder and was wearing heavy boots rather than the soft moccasins he usually wore. "Going somewhere?"

"That's what I came to tell you. I won't be here for dinner tonight. I have to go up to the mining town. Winslow wants me to take a look at something."

"So you're a geologist too?" she asked with a smile.

“As Father would say, ‘Jack of all trades, master of none,’” he said.

“Well, from what I’ve seen so far, you are good at everything you do.” She smiled at him. “When do you think you’ll be back?”

“Probably by tomorrow afternoon,” he told her. “I’ll be taking a skimmer, so it shouldn’t take long to get there. It’s not that far.”

“Do you want me to do anything while you are gone?” she asked.

“If you would, make sure that the children don’t use the pool without supervision. Any of the older teenagers, Brooke, Stephen, or Michael, are fine, either to use the pool or to supervise the children. I’ve let most of them know I won’t be there, so it shouldn’t be a problem.”

“If any of them show up, I can swim with them,” she assured him. “I wouldn’t want them to miss out on their fun just because you aren’t there.”

“Thank you, Catherine,” he said, before he turned to leave. Just outside the door, he turned. “Dinner tomorrow evening?” he asked. “I’ll cook.”

“I’d love to. Thank you. I’ll see you then.”

C

The rest of Catherine’s day was slow. She couldn’t believe how disappointed she was that she wouldn’t be seeing Vincent that evening.

She worked late and wound up eating dinner alone, and when she got back to the guesthouse, no children showed up, and she spent the evening alone on Vincent’s back patio reading.

She woke up the next morning anticipating seeing Vincent that night, and there was a spring in her step as she walked to the diner for breakfast, and later as she walked to work.

Dr. Wells had given her a contract the afternoon before and asked her if she could wade through all the formal language and give him a better idea of what it said. She was reading a particularly heavy section when she had a sudden sharp pain in her head. She literally saw stars as if she’d been hit. She put her hand to the spot on the back of her head, expecting to pull her fingers away and see blood.

The pain didn’t go away completely, but when it eased a little, and she could see again, she made her way to Dr. Wells’ office to ask if he had something for a headache.

But on her way down the hall, she got the distinct impression that there was something wrong with Vincent and that the pain wasn’t hers but his.

How am I going to explain that one to Dr. Wells? She wondered as she stopped in the open door of his office.

“Dr. Wells, do you have a moment?” she asked, trying not to wince at the pain pounding in her head.

“Always. Come in. What do you need?” he asked.

She went in and gratefully sat down; she rubbed her forehead.

“I thought I needed something for a headache,” she told him, “but now I’m beginning to think that this pain is not mine, but someone else’s.”

“You’re empathic, too?” he asked in surprise.

“Not usually,” she said, surprised that he would jump right to that conclusion, but of course, he knew about Vincent’s talent. “But as soon as this pain started, and it came out of nowhere, then an image of Vincent popped into my head.”

“There was a time when I would have totally brushed that off as imagination, but Vincent has taught me otherwise... Did you see anything specific?”

“Not really, it was dim, and a loud roar accompanied the sudden pain...”

V

Winslow had wanted to talk to Vincent about a deposit of boazium crystals that had been discovered in one of the old gem mines. He’d done some surveying and had found that it was likely larger than they had originally thought. He wanted Father and he to know about it, but they had agreed not to talk about it over their communicators, or even put anything into writing until they were sure of the size of the deposit and the purity of it. Boazium was a new discovery, and it was worth a lot, and they didn’t want to get any of the other colonists’ hopes up until they were sure of what they had.

Vincent had gone into the mine with Winslow, and he had agreed that it did look promising.

“I’ll have to talk to Devin about increasing his efforts to find an expert,” he told Winslow. “What do you think of the idea of starting to mine it in the meantime.”

“I’d rather wait,” Winslow told him. “Once we put someone in here, the word is going to get out, and people are going to start asking questions. You know how fast information travels around here.”

“Yes, I do. And you are right,” Vincent agreed.

“Are you going back tonight?” asked Winslow.

“I thought I’d stay for at least tonight,” Vincent said as they turned to leave the mine.

“Sounds like a good idea. We just got a new shipment of beer from the brewery. We can have a few and catch up, and Mom will be thrilled to see you.”

“How is Narcissa,” asked Vincent, referring to Winslow’s mother, who lived with him and kept house for him.

“As hardheaded as ever,” Winslow said with a laugh. “She insists on going into the mines in search of God knows what. And with her eyesight not getting any better, I worry about her.”

Narcissa was happy to see Vincent, and she had his favorite meal ready for them when they got to the house.

“How did you know I was here?” Vincent asked her as she set plates in front of them a few hours later.

She smiled and tapped her temple. “I have my ways,” she said, as mysterious as ever.

Over dinner, he told Narcissa and Winslow about Catherine. He mentioned an idea he had. He wanted to give Catherine a gift. Something that would remind her of this place and him if she decided to leave.

Narcissa suggested a crystal. They had buckets of them as a by-product of their gem mining. Occasionally they would find a few that were worthy of selling, but most of the time, they would just crush them into fine gravel or dust to be used to manufacture other things.

That morning Vincent had gone through the ones that were available, but he couldn't find anything that was perfect enough to be made into a piece of jewelry. He was envisioning a necklace of some kind.

He decided to make a trip into one of the old mines before he left.

"Be careful," Winslow said when he met him on his way back from where his skimmer was parked. "Those older mines are unstable. We've been so busy with everything else that I haven't had a chance to inspect them lately."

"I'll let you know the condition of this one," Vincent said, nodding at the opening in the side of the mountain.

Once inside the mine, Vincent turned on the light he carried. Narcissa had told him approximately how far in the best ones could be found. As he walked, he looked around at the structure. Closer to the entrance, where there was more dirt and loose rocks and boulders, it was damp, and the beams were starting to rot out in places. Those would have to be replaced if they were planning to use this mine. But the farther in he got, the more solid bedrock it was, and those tunnels and caverns were in good shape.

He found the cavern that Narcissa had told him about, and at first, he was wondering if his trip had been wasted. There were plenty of crystals, but none of them were very large. The walls just looked as if they'd been dusted with sugar crystals. But then he saw it from the other end of the cavern as it caught the light from his flashlight.

Perfect! he thought as he carefully tapped it loose from the wall. He gathered several other, smaller ones. He wrapped them in a piece of chamois and started back toward the entrance.

He'd gotten back to the section of the mine where the beams were rotting when he heard a rumble. It quickly built into a roar as he tried to outrun it. But, as fast as he was, he wasn't fast enough, and the last thing he knew was a sharp pain in the back of his head as total darkness engulfed him.

C

Before she could say more, or Dr. Wells could answer, Pascal ran into the room.

"I just had a call from the mining town that there has been a cave-in in one of the old mine shafts. Winslow said that Vincent had gone down there to inspect it, and he thinks he's still in there."

Dr. Wells looked at Catherine. "It seems your *feelings* are as reliable as Vincent's," he said, then he turned to Pascal. "Let Winslow know that I'll send help up to him."

"Can I go?" Catherine asked anxiously.

"Can you drive a skimmer?" he asked.

"Like a pro," she assured him.

"The motor pool is in the basement of this building. Go down and tell Sam that I told you to pick up a skimmer. I'll tell the others to wait for you northeast of town behind my house."

“Thank you. Are you going?” she asked. “He might need a doctor.”

“Narcissa can take care of anything I can. Her methods are a bit unorthodox but nonetheless effective. Now go; the sooner you get there, the sooner you can let me know what is going on.”

Catherine ran out of the room and took the stairs down to the basement rather than wait for the elevator. Sam gave her a skimmer, which she rode back to the guest house so she could change into more appropriate clothing. Ten minutes later, she was headed to meet the others. She had put on her own heavy boots, jeans, and a white t-shirt. She'd grabbed a backpack and had stuffed a denim jacket, a first aid kit she found in the bathroom, and a lightweight thermal blanket in it.

She was surprised that she wasn't the last person to join them, but when the last person showed up, the person she assumed was the leader signaled, and they all sped off toward the north.

Catherine wasn't sure how far it was to the mining town, but the mountains got closer very quickly, and in less than 20 minutes later, they had zipped through the small town and parked the skimmers in a large open area.

She followed the others, all men, to where a small crowd had gathered. There seemed to be an argument going on.

“My God ... look at this,” said a young blond woman. “It's even worse than we thought.”

“How far in was the cave in? Can we clear the tunnel?” asked a large black man.

“Mouse checked. The collapse is about 100 feet in. But it's one of the older tunnels, so it's narrow; there is no room to swing a pick or use a shovel,” the young woman said.

“Then we will have to pass out the stones hand to hand,” an older woman put in.

“One rock at a time, he'll be dead for sure by the time we reached him, if he isn't already,” the black man said.

The older woman gave him a hard look. “Don't say that; he's not dead, and he's not going to die!”

A young boy ran up with an armful of what looked like rolled-up plans or maps.

Kipper had ridden up with them, and he came over started pointing people out to her.

“That's Winslow,” he said, pointing at the large black man. “He's in charge of the mines. The blond girl is Jamie. That's Sarah.” He pointed at the older woman. “You know Geoffrey, the boy who just came up.” He pointed at a girl with long dark hair... “And I think you know Samantha too. Sammie and Geoffrey come up here to work with Jamie and Mouse sometimes.”

Winslow was rolling out maps, looking at them then going on the next one.

“There's gotta be another way in. I thought that tunnel had an outlet into one of the other mines,” Winslow said.

“I don't think this one does,” said one of the men Catherine had ridden up with. She thought his name was Cullen.

“Are you sure these are all the maps?” Winslow shouted at Geoffrey, who stepped back a bit before he answered.

“I got all of them out of the basket in your office, just like you said,” he retorted.

“Don't smart-mouth me!” Winslow shouted.

Catherine saw where she might be of some assistance, and she stepped in and started herding the children off to the side.

Sarah smiled and nodded at her from where she had her arm protectively around Geoffrey.

“Stop it, Winslow, don’t take it out on the boy,” Sarah added.

“Sorry... I’m sorry, Geoffrey. No one here is to blame. We probably should have sealed those old tunnels up years ago if we didn’t want to maintain them.

“The longer we stand around here jabberjawin,” said a man with a Southern accent, “the longer it’s gonna take to get him out of there. If we have to pass the rocks from hand to hand, then we’d best get to it.”

The adults started filing toward the mine opening, and Catherine had an idea. She turned to the half a dozen or so children who were gathered around her.

“I want all of you to go find as many baskets, buckets, and wooden crates as you can. The people working inside the mine can fill them and then move more rocks faster.”

The children scattered and soon were rushing back with an assortment of containers. When they took them to the mouth of the mine, the adults understood at once what they were for and started passing them into the mine. When the containers came back out full, the children dragged them off and emptied them before they carried them back to the opening of the mine.

Catherine moved to the dirt and rock moving line, giving Sarah a chance to rest.

“I’ll go get water for everyone,” Sarah said as Catherine took her place in line.

They worked until long after the sun went down, only taking a few breaks. Catherine was just as dirty and sweaty as any of the others.

Winslow came out of the mine and signaled everyone to stop.

“We’ve cleared quite a bit of the debris, and there’s an opening that we are sure goes all the way through,” he told everyone. “But it’s very narrow. I think we might have to send one of the children through. I called out to Vincent, but he didn’t answer. He must be unconscious.”

Catherine looked around. She wasn’t much bigger than most of the children.

“You can’t send one of them in,” she argued as she stepped forward. “You don’t know what they might find on the other side.” She was sure that Vincent was still alive since her head still hurt.

“Who the hell are you?” Winslow asked, looking down at her.

“I’m...,” she began, but she was interrupted by one of the men from the main settlement.

“She’s the lawyer-lady who brought all those women here,” he told Winslow. “She and Vincent are friends. Father sent her up with us.”

Winslow looked back at her, then glanced over at the group of children who were standing with Sarah.

“Well, you ain’t much bigger than them,” he admitted. “You just might fit.” He turned and started back toward the mine.

Catherine turned to Kipper. “Run back to the skimmers and bring me the pack strapped to the back of the blue one that I drove up... Hurry!”

Kipper ran off, and Catherine hurried to follow Winslow. When she reached the mine opening, he started explaining what they were going to do.

“When you get in there,” he directed Catherine, “the first thing you need to do is find Vincent and find out how he is. Let us know. Then you need to get him as far away from the cave-in as possible. From what I see on the maps, there is a side tunnel about 50 feet back of the cave-in. Get in that tunnel and let us know. Then we can safely use explosives. When I give you the signal, turn away and cover your heads and faces. It’s solid bedrock back there, so you should be safe, but it’s going to take

some time for the dust to clear.” He looked intently at her. “Got it?” he asked as Kipper ran up and handed her the backpack.

“I’ve got it, Winslow,” she assured him. “I love him too,” she added, so that only he heard.

“What’s that?” he asked, as they made their way back to the cave in.

“Just a few things that I might need; a first aid kit and a blanket.”

“Good thinking,” he said.

They’d reached the hole in the rubble that they’d found, and he handed her a flashlight and a small folding shovel.

“Put those in the pack,” he told her. “You’re going to have to push it in front of you, but you should be able to get through. Be careful and try not to knock anything loose. You don’t want the whole thing coming down on you.”

“How long is the tunnel?” she asked, squatting down and shoving the pack into the hole.

“We think it’s between 20 and 30 feet. But the air is fresh; you shouldn’t have a problem.”

She didn’t mention to him that she was slightly claustrophobic.

She shoved the pack in further, then followed it in.

The crawl seemed to take forever. It was total darkness, and she had to feel her way along. There were several spots where she couldn’t crawl, she had to pull herself along, and she was thankful for all the time she spent swimming and building up her upper body strength.

Every few feet, sand and small rocks would sift down from above her. As dark as it was, she couldn’t see, so she kept her eyes closed to keep dirt out of them.

She kept up an internal dialog to distract herself. *You got this, Chandler. It’s not much farther. Vincent needs you.*

She was spitting dirt when the pack suddenly disappeared, and a blast of cool fresh air hit her in the face. She’d reached the end of what had felt like miles. She prayed she wouldn’t find Vincent in too bad a shape to move; otherwise, it could take days to move the rest of that rock.

She slithered down and landed on the pack. She felt around and found the flashlight. It took some time for her to locate Vincent, who was buried from mid-chest down with only one arm free, in the rubble.

She hurried over and quickly checked him over. His pulse was strong, and he was breathing. When she checked his head, she found the source of the pain she was feeling. There was a large lump on the back of his head, but the skin wasn’t broken.

“Vincent,” she said, patting his cheek. “Wake up and look at me.” When he didn’t respond, she brushed his hair off his face and patted harder. “Vincent, wake up!”

He groaned and opened his eyes.

V

Vincent wondered why he was so cold and why his head hurt so bad. But that voice calling his name was familiar.

“Catherine? Am I dreaming?” he asked, opening his eyes

“More like a nightmare. We are trying to get you out.” She glanced down, where he was buried. “Can you feel your legs? Can you tell if you are injured?”

He shook his head slightly, trying to clear it.

“My head hurts,” he groaned.

“I know, Love, but I’m a little bit more concerned with the other end right now. What can you tell me?”

He tried to concentrate; he shifted his upper body a bit before he answered.

“I don’t think there are any major injuries,” he told her. “There is no pain, but I’m numb. I’m cold and wet.”

He had managed to get his eyes open and could now make her out in the dim light. She’d set her flashlight on its end, and the light was reflecting off the ceiling about 7 feet above them.

He noticed that there was water running down one wall and pointed it out to Catherine.

“And it’s all pooling right around you. We have to get you out of it. I’ll let Winslow know, then we’ll get to work digging you out.”

She moved to the hole she’d just come out of and shouted.

“Winslow, can you hear me?”

“Loud and clear,” came the answer.

“Vincent is awake and lucid. He did have quite a knock on the head. He’s also partially buried in mud and rocks, so I’m going to have to dig him out. It might take a while.”

“I’ll pass the word,” Winslow promised. “Let me know when you’ve moved.”

“I will, and please. Have someone let Dr. Wells know that Vincent is injured, but OK.”

“Will do.”

Catherine pulled the shovel out of her pack and went to work.

It was slow going. Vincent could tell she was trying to be careful not to accidentally dig too deep and hit his legs. Finally, she was to the point where she thought he might be able to pull himself out.

She went back to his head. He’d been watching her and knew before she spoke what she wanted.

“Do you think you might be able to pull yourself out?” she asked him.

He looked around and down at where his legs were. She’d dug him out to down around his hips. He raised up on his arms and tried unsuccessfully to push himself back, but there wasn’t anything that he could get a grip on to pull, and he couldn’t bend his legs enough to push. He tried several times but didn’t budge an inch. He looked frustrated.

“Wait a minute,” Catherine said after he tried and failed a third time. She leaned over him and put her hands under his upper body, and gripped her hands together. “Grip my shoulders, and I’ll see if I can drag you out enough so that you can move.”

He followed her instructions, and she found strength she didn’t know she had and managed to pull him out enough so that he could move his legs and push off the rest of the mud and rocks.

“You’re stronger than you look,” he commented, as he rolled to his side, and she moved to check his legs for injuries.

“Winslow wants us to move into a side tunnel about 50 feet in,” she explained. “Then they are going to use explosives.”

It took several more minutes, but Vincent managed to get enough feeling back in his feet to stand and move back where they needed to take shelter. Catherine saw him settled, and she went back to get her pack and let Winslow know they were clear.

Vincent was sitting against the tunnel wall, and now that he was getting feeling back in his lower body, he was starting to feel the chill. He was shivering when Catherine got back. She pulled the blanket out of the pack and wrapped it around him.

“Winslow said that it might take a while to finish setting it precisely; they don’t want to bring the whole mountain down. He’ll warn us before they detonate.”

She rummaged around in the pack and found a couple trail bars and a bottle of water. She handed one of the bars and the water to Vincent.

When he’d eaten his bar and drank half the water, handing the other half to Catherine, he laid down and tried to curl up under the blanket to get warm. But it didn’t seem to be working. His body temperature usually ran a little above what was normal for everyone else, and this wasn’t usually a problem. Finally, Catherine laid down next to him and curled around him as best she could.

“You’re nice and warm,” he commented after a few minutes.

“And probably smelly,” she told him. “I’ve been moving rocks and sweating since around noon.”

“How long have I been here,” he asked.

“Well, I think it was mid-morning when the cave-in occurred. And it was a few hours after dark when I found you. It’s probably been 14 or 16 hours. I’m really not sure.”

“I must have been unconscious for a lot of it,” he said. “It doesn’t seem that long.”

He’d stopped shivering by the time Catherine heard Winslow yell.

“Two minutes to detonation!”

“Got it, Winslow,” she yelled as loud as she could.

Vincent rolled to his knees with his back to the bend in the tunnel. He pulled Catherine close and pulled the blanket over their heads as they both tucked their faces to their knees.

“Keep your mouth open a little and cup your hands over your ears; it will help equalize the pressure and protect your ears,” he told her.

C

No sooner had he said that and she’d done it, and there was a horrendous explosion. It felt as if the whole mountain was coming down on them, but when the dust cleared, and Catherine looked around the corner, she was surprised to see the large mound of debris was all but gone; it had been spread out along the tunnel. There were lights moving toward them from outside.

She was also surprised to see that the sun was up when they left the mine.

What surprised her the most, was that Vincent was moving under his own power. He was covered with mud, but then so was she, and he was moving stiffly and limping a bit, but he was upright and walking without support.

He must have the constitution of an elephant, she thought, as she trailed along behind Vincent and Winslow. She was dragging, and the thought of making the trip back to the main town was daunting.

As they walked through the mining town, an older black woman stopped Vincent. He hugged her gingerly, then she stood back and spoke to him in a lilting Caribbean accent.

"Where are you hurt, child?" she asked, as her hands skimmed down his arms and over his chest.

"Everywhere and nowhere, Narcissa," he said wearily.

She stepped back and looked up at him skeptically. "How can that be?"

"It's just that everything hurts," he clarified. "I have a lot of bruises and sore muscles, but no broken bones or even cuts, beyond a few minor scratches."

"He does have a good-sized goose egg on the back of his head," Catherine said, when she caught up with him.

Narcissa motioned for him to lean down so she could take a look. Vincent leaned on the fence and bent over. Her hands lightly parted his hair, and she found what she was looking for.

"Not much swellin' left," she announced. "Just some bruisin'. I'll let the Father know that *it is my professional opinion* that you will live."

That drew laughter from the people standing around and even a chuckle from Vincent.

"Thank you, Narcissa. I'm sure he will be happy to hear that."

When they finally reached the area where the skimmers were parked, Vincent went over to one and pulled a pack out of a saddlebag. She was putting hers into the saddlebag on her skimmer, but she noticed that he took something out of his pocket and put it into the pack. Then he picked up the pack and walked over to her.

"Do you feel up to driving back?" he asked. "I'm doing all I can to stay on my feet."

"You sure you want to go back today. You could stay and rest," she suggested.

"I think I'll rest better in my own bed," he told her. "After a soak in the spa."

She climbed on the skimmer, and he climbed on behind her.

She started the skimmer, and it started to move forward. But it was moving a lot slower than it had on the way up, and it sounded like it was laboring.

"Are you sure this thing will make it with both of us?" she asked.

"It won't accelerate as quickly," he said close to her ear, "but it will make it."

They did eventually make it up to speed. Catherine relaxed and leaned back against Vincent.

"I'm sorry," he said, still right next to her ear, "I wasn't thinking. You're as tired as I am."

"Don't worry about it. It's not that far. Besides, did you just mention a spa? Where is it?"

It's behind the privacy fence on the other side of the house from the guest house. Right outside my bedroom," he told her.

She stopped the skimmer in the front yard of his house. She was prepared to return it to the motor pool and walk back.

“Leave it in the yard. I’ll let Sam know to have someone pick it up. And someone will get the one I drove up to the mine.”

Catherine climbed off the skimmer and took the pack that Vincent held out to her.

“You are welcome to use the spa too if you like,” he told her. “It will help with the aches and pains.”

“You can feel mine and yours too,” she said with a weak smile. “That just doesn’t seem fair.”

“It’s not bad. I’m just glad that you aren’t sharing mine.”

“Not now,” she mused. “But there was something earlier.”

“What?” he asked, stopping to look at her.

“When you were hit on the head. I felt it and very quickly realized that you were hurt and needed help,” she told him.

“The Bond did go both ways with my parents,” he told her. “At least that was what Anna told Father. I’m sorry you had to share that.”

“I’m not. I’m glad I knew something was wrong. I was in your father’s office when he got the message. I’m glad I was; otherwise, I wouldn’t have been at the mine, and they might have had to send one of the children in.”

“Our children are resourceful,” he said, “but I doubt they would have been as resourceful as you. I’m glad you were there, but sorry you had to take the risk.”

“I glad I was there too... Now I want to get this mud washed off,” she added.

“It’s going to take a hot shower, a hand full of analgesics, and a soak in the tub to ease the aches and pains,” he said, before turning and heading to his front door.

“I’ll join you in the spa in a little bit,” she told him.

“It’s big enough for six people,” he called back over his shoulder, “and I’ll have something to eat delivered from the diner. What do you want?”

“How about breakfast,” she called back, before she headed for the guest house. “I’ll be back in a little while.”

Catherine’s ‘little while’ was closer to an hour. She spent most of that time in the shower scrubbing the mud and clay out of her hair. And there seemed to be sand in the worst possible places.

When she finally found her way to the spa, she thought Vincent was asleep. His arms were stretched along the sides of the tub, his head was back, and his eyes were closed.

As she approached, he must have sensed her trying to be quiet.

“I’m not asleep,” he said, as she dropped a towel on a chair. “I’m just enjoying relief from pain.”

“It’s gone already?” she asked, as she stepped into the tub.

“Not completely, but the analgesic is doing its job, and the hot water jets are helping a lot.”

Catherine settled on the side of the tub opposite Vincent and directed one of the jets at her lower back.

“Oh my God...,” she groaned. “That does feel good.”

They heard someone clear their throat on the other side of the fence and then call out.

“Ah, I’m here with your order from the diner,” William called out.

"In the spa, William," Vincent called. "You didn't have to bring it yourself," he added, as William pushed the gate open, and Catherine sunk deeper into the water, giggling.

Catherine could tell that Vincent had sensed her amusement and slight embarrassment, and she could see when he realized the cause. It just made her giggle more.

"I did. I just wanted to see for myself that you are OK. Father got Narcissa's message, and he would be here anyway, but he's down at the clinic setting an arm. He asked me to tell you to join him for breakfast tomorrow, if you don't feel up to dinner tonight."

"Tell him I'll see him at breakfast." Vincent sat up and watched as William set the bags he carried on the table next to the tub. "Whose arm is he setting?"

"Eric's. The boys were swinging on that old swing. They were pumping it as high as they could then jumping off. You know Eric, he's always trying to be like the older boys, and since he is so much lighter, he was able to get higher and fly farther. And when he landed, he didn't land in the sandpit the other boys were landing in. He wound up in the rocky area just beyond it."

"Poor Eric," said Vincent, shaking his head. "Does his sister know?"

"She is such a mother hen," William comment. "She's with him. She was there to help him to the clinic before any of the boys even thought to call Father."

They didn't stay in the tub very long. Catherine was afraid she might fall asleep, and she was hungry.

"How many children do you have here? Have I met them all?" she asked, as they opened bags and distributed the food. "I know I've met a lot of them here, but I was surprised to see so many more up at the mine."

"Here in town, most are between the ages of eight and eighteen. In the other villages and mostly on the farms, there are more," Vincent told her. "But as with everything else, there are fewer girls than boys. Brooke will be eighteen soon, Samantha and Ellie are both eleven, and Lana is ten. The boys range from Eric, who is the youngest at eight, all the way up to Zach and Stephen, who are almost eighteen. Michael is eighteen, but the next youngest after him is twenty-four."

"I know the children go to school here in town, but what about the other settlements?"

"Some parents send their older children here for school; the commute isn't long by skimmer. The younger children are taught by their parents and in the daycares in the individual settlements. And there are online classes. There are cameras in the classrooms, and there is one in my dining room in case there is a need."

"I'm surprised that you have that many children," she commented.

"Most of the couples who do have children have more than one, and a lot of the ones here in town are orphans."

"Orphans?"

"Devin has a penchant for picking up strays on his trips. Ellie and Eric were living on the street in one place, and Samantha, Geoffrey, and Kipper have always been like the three musketeers. Devin found them on a refueling station. They said that they'd been taken by slavers and had been able to escape, when there had been an emergency that had required the ship they were on to be evacuated. They slipped away into the crowd and had been on their own, living on handouts and garbage in the shopping district of the station, for about a month. Some of the older children were on other planets."

"Where do they all live?" she asked.

“There’s a group home on the other side of town. It’s next door to Mary’s house, and some of the women take turns living there and keeping an eye on the children. And some were taken in by single people or couples who don’t have children.”

“You’ve got a good system,” Catherine said, stifling a yawn. “I can see why Jenny is happy teaching here.”

When Catherine stood to head home, Vincent stood to go with her.

“You don’t need to go with me,” she said.

“You’re so tired, you might stumble,” he said with a smile.

“You’re the one who should be tired,” she retorted. “You spent hours trapped in a mine, half-buried under a pile of rubble... with a hard knock on the head.”

“I am tired, but not too tired to escort you to your door,” he assured her.

They had reached the door from the back patio into the kitchen, and Catherine turned to thank him, but he spoke before she did.

“Catherine,” he paused, as if searching for words.

Catherine was exhausted, and her guard was down; the words just came tumbling out.

“I’ve never been so frightened...”

“I felt your fear,” Vincent put in when she paused. “But you found the courage, and that courage saved my life.” He reached out and pulled her into a hug.

“I couldn’t lose you,” she mumbled against his chest, “not when I’d only just found you.” She leaned back and looked up at him. “Vincent, I would have done anything... it’s wasn’t courage... it was love.”

Vincent surprised both of them when he leaned down and kissed her. Catherine barely had time to respond before he raised his head and stepped back.

“Sleep well, Catherine,” he said before he turned and all but fled across the yard back to his house.

V

Vincent laid on his bed, staring up at the ceiling.

Whatever possessed me? he wondered. He’d never kissed anyone before. All that talk of courage... it had taken a lot of courage for him to kiss Catherine. *Or maybe, I just wasn’t thinking. Did she really enjoy it? It felt as if she did... and she started to return it, just before I panicked and left.*

Just before he slipped off into sleep, another thought came into his mind.

“Did she really say ‘love’?”

C

About the same time, Catherine was also lying in bed, wondering what had just happened.

Why did he run off like that? Did I come across as too eager? I doubt that he's had a lot of experience with women; for that matter, I doubt that many of the men here have, except for the older ones and maybe Devin and Elliot.

She was also contemplating where her words had come from, but she realized they were true. She did love him, and she knew that if she hadn't been able to be there at the mine, she would have been frantic with worry over the possibility of losing him.

She was smiling as she drifted off to sleep.

Maybe I should talk to Vincent tomorrow...

But strangely, she didn't see Vincent the next day, or for several days after that. It was almost as if he was avoiding her. She did get several messages from him, each explaining why he couldn't meet her for lunch or after work.

She was disappointed and baffled.

"You haven't seen him since you got back almost a week ago?" Jenny asked, as they ate lunch together at the diner almost a week later.

"No, and I'm wondering if I did something wrong, or crossed some sort of line when I all but told him that I love him."

"But you said that he kissed you," Jenny pointed out. "That doesn't sound like you crossed a line. It sounds to me like the attraction is mutual."

"And maybe that is it... Maybe it's no more than an attraction for him. Maybe kissing me was just his way of letting me down easy."

"I don't know, Cath. He doesn't strike me as the type."

Catherine shrugged. "Well, whatever it was, we have to talk, and I'm going to corner him at his house tonight. I know he's giving swimming lessons, and if I show up to help, he shouldn't be able to get away after the kids leave."

As they were leaving the diner, her communicator buzzed, and she pulled it out of her pocket to look at it.

"That's strange," she said, as she typed in that she'd be right there.

"What?" asked Jenny.

"Dr. Wells has asked me to come to his office. He says it's urgent."

The two women parted in the lobby of the Town Hall, and Catherine headed down the hall to Dr. Wells' office.

When she walked in, she knew it was trouble. Dr. Wells, Vincent, and Devin, who must have just gotten back from his last trading run, were there, and none of them looked happy.

"What is it?" she asked.

Devin picked a tablet up off the desk and handed it to her.

Catherine started to read, and before she finished the first page, she was looking for a seat. Vincent moved and gave her his, but he stayed standing behind her.

The document was short and to the point: The Corporation was suing in Galactic Court to retake possession of the planet, all the facilities, the *slaves*, and their progeny.

When she looked up at Dr. Wells, his first question was, "Can they do it?"

"They have a few things against them," she pointed out. "There is a statute of limitations on possession of the planet. I realize that they are asking for that to be waived, but they left here over 35 years ago. I'll start with that and find whatever else there is to fight this. I'll need access to the archives."

"Then you'll take the case?" Dr. Wells asked.

"Of course, I will. I can't leave you with this hanging over your heads, and I won't let you all be turned back into slaves! I'm going to need to see whatever files The Corporation left behind."

Some of the archives haven't been digitized," Vincent told her. "I'll help you."

"Thank you." She turned to Dr. Wells. "Are you going to tell everyone about this?"

"I think it would be best to wait until you have a better idea of where we stand," he said.

"How about the Court?" Devin asked. "Some of those judges don't have a very good reputation for being fair."

"It's already been assigned a judge," she said, glancing back at the document. "The Honorable Roselyn O'Grady... I know a little bit about her. She is from the Mars Colony, and she's taken an anti-slavery stand in the past. I'll find out a little more about her, but if we feel that she won't be fair, we can request a jury or a change of venue, or both, for that matter. And the trial is set for a month from now, that should give me plenty of time to prepare and for us to get to Themis where the Galactic Court is."

"Us?" asked Dr. Wells.

"Yes, I'll need someone who is part of the colony, who knows how it's governed and run and is well versed in history. Each side will be allowed, one witness. I'll pose my questions, and then The Corporation's lawyer will question him or her. We don't need to make that decision right now." Catherine stood. "May I keep this?" she asked, holding up the tablet.

"Be my guest," said Dr. Wells.

Before she left the room, she turned back with a question. "How did you get this?" she turned it over and looked at the back. "It's not an official Galactic Court Document Tablet."

"Someone came to me at my last trade stop," Devin told her.

"Did you sign for it, and did you see a badge?"

"No, neither. Why?"

"Strikes one and two against them," she said with a smile. "It was likely served by their own people. It's supposed to be done officially on a Galactic Court Document Tablet by an officer of the court. I'll contact the court and find out if this is legit." She turned to Vincent. "Can we talk later? I'll have a better idea of what I need from the archives in a few hours."

Vincent nodded, and Catherine headed back to her office, where she quickly sent a message off to the Clerk of the Galactic Court, asking about how the document had been delivered.

She was busy finishing up her list when Vincent showed up a few hours later.

She looked up and smiled.

I just got my answer from the Clerk of the Galactic Court, and the documents are legitimate, but the copy we were given wasn't the official one. This one," she tapped the tablet on the desk, "is one of the copies that The Corporation had. I guess they heard that Devin was in port and didn't want to wait on the court to make the delivery. The Clerk is sending me an official copy, and the date for the trial will be 30 days from today."

"That doesn't sound like a lot of time," Vincent said.

"I think it will be enough. After all, you are my only client. If it's not enough, then I can ask for a 15-day extension, and I can do that three times before we absolutely have to appear. I'm sure that 30 days will be more than enough to find what I need, and for us to get there. How long does it take to get to Thesis from here?"

"It's not far, only about two and a half days," he told her.

"Where was Devin when he got this tablet?"

"He was on Echo. That's where we trade most of the gems we mine. We have several buyers there."

Catherine handed him the tablet that she'd been making notes on when he came in.

"Those are the questions that I need answers to as soon as possible, and I need documentation to back it up."

Vincent read through the list.

"I can give you the answers to most of these questions right now," he told her. "And I even know where to find the documentation for most of it."

"That sounds promising. So, what answers don't you have and what documentation don't you have?"

"We probably have documentation to back up all of this. I'm the self-appointed historian/archivist, and I just haven't had the time to go through everything The Corporation left behind yet."

"Then I think you'll need to make time over the next few weeks," she told him.

Vincent was amazed at how businesslike she had become so quickly. He could see that she was probably formidable in the courtroom.

"I will clear as much from my schedule as I can, and I'll get to work on this. Please message the list to me, and I'll get to work." He handed the tablet back to Catherine and looked around the small office.

"There is a big open office space on the third floor. That is where The Corporation kept all their printed files, and there is computer access there also. It might work better if both of us worked there for a while."

"That sounds like a good idea," she said with a nod. "And I think I've had enough for today. I'll see you first thing tomorrow morning."

Vincent nodded. "I think I'll head up to the third floor and make sure that everything is clean and in working order. I'll see you in the morning."

As Catherine headed for the diner and an early dinner, she wondered if he'd pick her up in the morning, so they could walk to work together, or if he would meet her there.

V

Vincent wanted to be sure that they had everything they needed in the office on the third floor. He knew that it was clean, but he wanted to make sure that there was adequate lighting and that everything worked. When he was sure it was, he left. He went home, only stopping long enough at the diner to pick up some dinner.

He was up early and back on the third floor working, when she arrived the next morning.

“You did go home last night,” she said, when she walked in and found him.

“I did. I just don’t sleep long, so I was here early.” He pointed to a desk a few feet away from him. “I’ve written out the answers to quite a few of your questions,” he told her. “And I’ve notated where the backup documentation is, if I knew.”

“I’ll gather all the backup documentation you’ve listed,” she told him. “Then I’ll help you with the rest.”

They worked surprisingly well together, each seeming to anticipate the other’s needs.

One of the things that Catherine was looking for was the reason why The Corporation suddenly wanted it all back. She couldn’t find anything that gave her any idea of the answer to that question. But she was able to find plenty of reasons why any fair judge would rule on the colony’s side.

By the end of the second week, Catherine was able to give Dr. Wells a fairly compressive briefing.

“First of all, they didn’t go through the proper channels to have the documents served, and you can bet I will point that out.

“Second, it’s been quite a bit longer than the limit for them to retake possession of the planet. And I couldn’t find any record anywhere, either here on the planet, or in the Galactic Courts Records, that they ever officially took possession of this planet in the first place. If they had, there should have been some kind of documents in court records. But there is no record anywhere that they ever even named the place. In all their contracts, it’s only ever referred to by their own internal mine number.

“That is one of the requirements for taking possession of an unclaimed planet in an uninhabited solar system... You must be in possession of it for at least five years, which they were, you must file the proper documents with the Galactic Court, and you must name it, neither of which they did.”

“We’ve been here over five years, but we haven’t filed any documents, and we haven’t named it either,” said Dr. Wells.

“But it appears that someone did name it,” she said, holding a tablet out to him. “This is a contract from several years ago, and it lists the origins of several very valuable gemstones that were traded to a large gem house on Echo as Casamia, which, if I’m not mistaken is Italian for ‘my home.’”

He glanced at the signatures on the bottom of the document.

“That appears to be Devin’s doing,” he mused. “It does have a nice sound to it, especially when it’s made into one word like that.”

“But I think that is also how The Corporation found out about the gem mines on this planet. And that might be why they want it all back. They are likely planning to mine those mountains extensively, and probably ruin the ecology in the process.”

“Their record in that direction isn’t very good,” Dr. Wells agreed. “The only reason that more damage wasn’t done here is that they found that lower-tech mining methods worked best with what they were mining. That wouldn’t hold with gem mining in the mountains. Even if we were able to stay here as free people, it wouldn’t be a very pleasant place after The Corporation got done with it.”

“Then I suggest you get the word out that you will be using that as the planet name, for a while at least. Later, after we’ve won this and you’ve filed the official documents for legal possession of the

planet, you can file to have the name changed if you like. But for now, I suggest that we all just use that one.”

Dr. Wells was smiling, for what seemed like the first time since he’d received the original tablet.

“Do we have anything else going for us?” he asked.

“Several things. One is the way that Corporation just picked up and walked out on everything here without one word to any of the slaves or indentured employees. In this sector of the galaxy where slaves are legal, they are considered to be dependents, and there are rules for the way they are to be treated. And desertion for any amount of time over 30 days is grounds for the slaves in question to be considered *free*. So, The Corporation can’t just waltz in here and take all of you back.

“Even if the court rules that they can take the planet, I’m going to fight any move they might make to re-enslave any of you. But that is just our fall back... I’ll only go with that if the court rules in their favor and any appeals fail. And I’m gambling that if they have to buy new slaves, or pay people to work the gem mines here, it won’t look like quite the lucrative deal they think they are finagling, and they will back away from the whole thing.”

“Tell me, Catherine, why were you working for Milky Way Wives, negotiating contracts, instead of working for some high-powered law firm doing courtroom work?”

That question and the look on Dr. Wells’ face made her laugh.

“I wanted to go into space and do something *exciting!*” she said with a grin. “I’m actually still part business owner of my dad’s high-powered law firm back on Earth, although I’m not considered a partner. But that wasn’t exciting enough. Oddly, the most exciting thing that has happened to me since I started working for M.W.W was being kidnapped by pirates and winding up here. This case is the biggest challenge I’ve had since I left home five years ago.”

“Do you think that now would be a good time to inform our people of what is going on?” he asked, betting back to the serious business.

“I think so; now that you have some positive things to tell them along with the bad news... and I was wondering, who are you thinking about sending with as your representative?”

“I’ve been thinking about that. Devin is going to have to go with you anyway, because he’s the captain of the ship that will take you, but Vincent has acted in an ambassadorial capacity a few times in the past. What do you think?”

“Well, the planet where the court is doesn’t allow berthing or low altitude orbiting of any off-world ships unless they are military or government. Devin might want to stay with the ship, since they are going to have to be at least 1000 miles above the surface. So maybe Vincent would be the better choice. And he’s been helping me and is very familiar with what I’m going to present.”

“I was leaning in that direction too,” he told her. “I’ll let him know.”

V

Vincent knew it was going to take two and a half days to get to Thesis, but Devin wasn’t taking any chances; he left Casamia four days before the scheduled hearing.

Catherine spent most of the time aboard the ship working on her statements and the questions she was planning to ask both Vincent and whoever The Corporation was going to have there as their representative, so Vincent was on his own for much of the trip.

Catherine gave very detailed instructions to Vincent and Devin.

“Devin, you’ll have to shuttle Vincent and me down to the surface, then come right back up to the ship and move out beyond the 1000-mile limit. And we won’t be allowed down to the surface before the afternoon before our hearing time. We’ve been assigned a suite in the hotel across the street from the court, so getting there on time shouldn’t be a problem.

“They schedule very tightly, so we must be on time, but we will only have a limited amount of time on each of four days to make our case. On the first day, The Corporation’s lawyer and I will give our opening statements. As the entity that brought the suit, The Corporation will go first, and then I get to speak. We will remain seated for this. The only times that The Corporation’s lawyer and I get out of our seats is when we are questioning you or the other representative. We will be seated in a chair set to the left of and slightly forward of the judge. And we will be facing the judge. The Corporation will be on the other side.

“On the second day, The Corporation’s representative will be in the hot seat for questions. Their lawyer will question him first, then I get my chance, then their lawyer gets to go again to clarify anything that he thinks needs it.

“On the third day, it’s our turn. I’ll question you first, then their lawyer, then I get to clarify. And on the fourth day, we make any closing statements we have, then we retire to our quarters and wait for the decision. The judge has three days, and they usually take every second of it.

“We will go back to court on the eighth day to hear the decision. If it goes our way, we will file all the proper documents for your colony to have official ownership, and then Casamia will go on the star charts. And if it doesn’t go our way, we go with one of the back-up plans.”

“Can we appeal if it doesn’t go our way?” asked Devin.

“That is the first option on the backup plan list,” Catherine assured him.

“How is the courtroom set up?” asked Vincent.

“Thanks for reminding me. It’s different from most other courtrooms. The judge doesn’t wear any robes, just ordinary business attire with a badge on the shirt or jacket. They don’t sit behind a massive desk on a raised dais. They have a small plain table with an office chair, and they use a tablet to take notes.

“The courtrooms are small, compared to those on Earth. There will be two tables big enough for two, one for us and one for The Corporation. Both face the judge. There is room for a jury, which in this court has five members, but this time those seats will be empty. There is no room for an audience, so there will only be seven people in the room, including two guards. But everything will be recorded, so the judges can review anything they need to while they are making their decision.

“In this hearing, the judge is a woman, Roselyn O’Grady. She’s in her 50s, about my height, quiet and reserved, but don’t be fooled; she’s no pushover. I consider us lucky that she was assigned this case. She is considered incorruptible and fair. She rules her courtroom with an iron fist. She is from Mars Colony and is extremely anti-slavery.”

“You’re actually going to take the evening off?” Vincent asked incredulously, after they’d checked into the hotel on Thesis, had dropped off their luggage, and were out in search of a restaurant for dinner. She’d been so focused for the last month that he was surprised that she remembered how to relax.

“I have the same attitude the night before a trial that I did on the nights before a big test in college and law school. I work hard the weeks and days before, but the night before, I relax, eat a good meal, and go to bed early.” She spotted what she was looking for. “There it is. I’ve heard about this place. From what I hear, they serve the best Chinese food on this end of the galaxy.”

Vincent had never had true Chinese food, only a few generic dishes that William served, but with Catherine’s guidance, he chose what soon became some of his favorite foods.

When they were back in their suite, he asked Catherine about breakfast in the morning.

“I think we should order room service,” she told him. “We can put in our order tonight and have it delivered in the morning. I suggest we ask for it to be here at 7:00. That way, we will have plenty of time to eat, get dressed, and get to the courtroom by our 10 am appointment.” She picked up the room service menu and handed it to him. “Let me know what you want, and I’ll place our order.”

Once their breakfast order was placed, Catherine went into her room and came back a few minutes later wearing knit pants and a t-shirt. She was carrying a tablet.

Vincent had been dressed more comfortably than Catherine had been, so he didn’t bother to change.

“What time do you think we should leave here in the morning?” Vincent asked as he idly clicked through entertainment programs on the video screen.

“I think we should give ourselves no less than 30 minutes,” she told him. “I know it’s just across the street, but we have to go through security in the lobby of the courthouse, and that might hold us up. I’d much rather wait outside the courtroom than keep Judge O’Grady waiting.”

For the next hour, they shared the couch while Catherine read on her tablet, and Vincent watched a documentary on the first Mars settlement.

C

The next morning went smoothly, and they were outside the courtroom door with more than 15 minutes to spare. Catherine was surprised that they were the only ones there. In fact, the other side didn’t appear until the courtroom opened, the first group had left, and Catherine and Vincent were seated at the table on one side of the courtroom.

The judge was already in her seat and observed the flurry of activity when The Corporation lawyer and representative arrived.

“You cut that rather close, didn’t you, Mr. Brannigan?” said the judge, when everyone was settled.

Catherine’s head swiveled to look when she heard the name. She knew this man.

“I’m sorry, your honor. We were held up by security in the lobby,” Brannigan said, shooting a look over at Catherine and Vincent.

“Plan better next time,” Judge O’Grady said. “All right, let’s get started. First, Counselors, please introduce your client representatives.” She looked at Brannigan.

“Your honor, this is Mitchell Denton. He the Director in Charge of Mines for The Corporation.”

The judge met Denton’s eyes as if sizing him up. When Denton’s eyes slid away from hers, she shifted her gaze to Catherine.

“Ms. Chandler?”

Catherine had been expecting this, and she had come up with what she thought sounded like a good title for Vincent.

“Your honor, this is Vincent Wells, Ambassador for Trade, for the People of Casamia.”

Judge O’Grady repeated her actions, and Vincent held her gaze confidently. She then looked back at Brannigan.

“Mr. Brannigan, you’re up.”

Brannigan hastily pulled his tablet across the table and started to read his prepared statement. He outlined what The Corporation was proposing and why they felt they had the right to do it.

“Your honor, my client is stating that the planet still belongs to them. They developed it, built all the infrastructure that the slaves are still using...”

Catherine was listening closely and taking notes, but she knew that to Vincent’s ears, it would all sound very arrogant and self-serving. She had told him that they only had 15 minutes each on this first day, and she wasn’t surprised when the judge cut Brannigan off promptly at the 15-minute mark.

“I trust you have sent that document to the court,” she said.

“Yes, Your Honor, I have,” he answered.

“Good then, I’ll read it later, and hopefully, it won’t put me to sleep.” She shifted her focus. “Ms. Chandler? It’s your turn, and I hope you can get to the point faster than Mr. Brannigan.”

Catherine wanted to smile at the comment. It sounded to her as if Judge O’Grady wasn’t too fond of Mr. Brannigan.

“Thank you, Your Honor.” She took a deep breath. “We dispute the Corporation’s right to any of what they are proposing. And we base that on the absence of any documentation that The Corporation ever filed for legal possession of the planet in question. They never named the planet. It was only ever called by the internal company mine number.

“The Corporation abandoned the planet and the *slaves* there over 35 years ago; well over the amount of time, it would have taken for the *slaves* to be considered free. About half of the *slaves* opted to stay and make a go of a colony on the planet. They haven’t filed to take ownership, but they have named the planet, as you can see from the contract that I sent the court. And they have become self-supporting over the years...”

Catherine continued through her points and finished a good minute before her 15 minutes were up.

“Thank you, Ms. Chandler,” Judge O’Grady said. “And Mr. Brannigan. I’ll see all of you here tomorrow, *promptly* at ten.” She looked pointedly at Brannigan.

Catherine picked up her tablet, and she and Vincent rose and left the courtroom. They were surprised when Denton spoke to them in the hall, as they headed for the escalator.

“So, you think you’re gonna win this, girly?” he said, as he and the lawyer caught up to them.

Catherine was surprised. Traditionally, the only contact the sides had was in the courtroom. He wasn’t breaking the law, but he was going against protocol.

“I think we have as good a chance as you do, sir,” she said quietly. “Excuse me.” She took Vincent’s arm and guided him toward the escalator.

“You know, we have a lot more money to throw at this than you do.” He looked pointedly at Vincent, who didn’t answer.

As she and Vincent stepped onto the escalator, Catherine tossed her last word back over her shoulder, "My firm... *Chandler & Coolidge* has taken this case pro bono, and we will give it all the attention it needs."

They finally reached the lobby, and Catherine hurried Vincent out of the building and back to their hotel.

"What was that about?" Vincent asked as their suite door closed and locked behind them.

"Just a little one-upmanship and ball-busting," she said. "He was out of line, and I'm surprised Brannigan didn't stop him. If the judge gets wind of it, she could charge him with contempt, even if it wasn't in the courtroom."

"I noticed you said that your *firm* was doing this pro bono."

"Well, technically, since I still own part of Chandler & Coolidge, and even though I'm not on their payroll, they are *my* firm." She winked at him. "I know Evan Brannigan, or at least know of him. He worked for Chandler & Coolidge about 25 years ago, but he was fired when my father and his partner Jay Coolidge found out that he was less than ethical. Within a year, he and another lawyer had formed their own law firm, Procter & Brannigan. They are also headquartered in New York City. I'm really surprised that one of the founding partners of the firm came all the way out here for this. There must be more to this than meets the eye. Do you know if there is something on the planet The Corporation would be interested in?"

Vincent sat down on the sofa and motioned for her to sit.

"There might be," he admitted. "Only a few people at home know about it; we had decided to keep it quiet until we could find a geologist to verify what we think we've found."

"What is it?" she asked as she kicked off her shoes and tucked her feet under her.

"We think we've found a deposit of boazium crystals in one of the old mines," he said simply. "We just don't know yet if there is enough to make it worth mining."

"And what is that? I've never heard of it."

"Boazium has been discovered to be a new source of energy for space travel. It takes smaller amounts to fuel a ship so they can go longer distances."

"It must be very new," she said. "But as you can tell, I didn't pay a lot of attention in geology class."

"It is new," he told her.

"So, this, if there is enough of it, has the potential to be very profitable," she mused.

"Very," he agreed.

"Who knew about this, and how did The Corporation find out?" she asked.

"We've limited the information to just a few. I know, as does Father, Winslow, and Devin. Devin has been discreetly trying to find a geologist who would be willing to go all the way to Casamia," he smiled as he used the name, "to survey for us. But he's been very careful not to tell them what we want surveyed."

"But there's no way that The Corporation would know for sure that there was a deposit of anything big enough to make it worth their while," she said.

"No one could get to the surface of the planet without someone turning off our security grid, and even if they could, someone would see them land, or they would be seen in the mining town where everyone knows everyone else. A stranger would be stopped and questioned."

"Could it be surveyed from orbit?"

“There is a way, but it takes very sophisticated equipment,” he pointed out.

“Which The Corporation probably has, because they specialize in mining,” she said. “But how would they have found out?”

“Maybe someone heard that we were looking for a geologist. Devin has been careful, but they might have just gone into it looking for anything that was worth mining.”

“So, The Corporation may have a lot riding on this,” she said. “We should probably watch our backs while we are here. Do you mind not going out except when we have to go to court? We can order room service, or call for delivery from any of the restaurants around here. Luckily, there isn’t a lot to see on Thesis.”

“If you think that is best,” he said. “Do you really think that they would cause us problems?”

“I don’t know, but Denton gave me a bad feeling. There was just something about him...”

“If you say so,” Vincent agreed. “I didn’t like him either, especially when he was disrespectful to you.”

Since they had more time in the suite than in the court, they had to find ways to fill their time. But with video entertainment available on Thesis, that wasn’t difficult.

Catherine always enjoyed Vincent’s company, and she didn’t doubt that she was in love, and she hoped Vincent returned the feeling. She thought he did, but without confirmation...

Everything was going well in court, too, and by the time they got to the final day, Catherine was confident that they’d made their case.

Vincent had answered both her and Brannigan’s questions with confidence and a cool head. But Denton had been evasive and disrespectful of her and the questions she asked more than once, and had received reprimands from the judge. The only thing that irked her about the way this court conducted business, was that she was not allowed to ask why The Corporation had suddenly taken a renewed interest in Casamia. She would have given a lot to have an answer to that question, even though she was pretty sure she knew.

It was the last day when Catherine got the distinct impression that their opponents were also thinking that things were going more in favor of the people of Casamia than The Corporation.

She and Vincent left the courtroom, and she decided that they might be able to take a chance and stop at the coffee shop next to their hotel.

They found seats in a booth in the back. The booths were separated from each other by tall screens. Catherine ordered an Irish Coffee and a pastry, and Vincent ordered tea and a muffin.

“Irish Coffee?” he asked with a smile. “It’s barely noon.”

“I haven’t had so much as a sip of wine since we got here,” she pointed out. “I wanted to make sure I kept a clear head, but now, I’m going to celebrate.”

“You think it went well?” he asked.

“Unless the judge is corrupt, and from what I’ve heard that isn’t likely, I think we have a great chance of winning this. There were times when both Brannigan and Denton were floundering.”

The waitress brought their orders, and while she was there, someone sat at the table on the other side of the screen from them.

Catherine, whose back was against the screen, held her hand up just as Vincent started to speak. She pointed toward the other table and mouthed the words “Brannigan and Denton.”

They sat back and blatantly eavesdropped on the conversation on the other side.

"Hell, what are we doing here?" asked Denton. "Why can't we go to the hotel bar? I need a drink. Especially after what has been going on the last few days."

"You can get booze here," Brannigan told him. "Besides, this place is set up for privacy. In a bar, anyone can overhear you. And the way you run your mouth; I think we need the privacy."

Catherine looked at Vincent with a raised eyebrow. He nodded.

So, they shared the opinion that it wasn't going well for their side, she thought.

"This is your fault, you know," Denton sneered.

"My fault? How do you figure that?" asked Brannigan. "I told your people upfront that I didn't think you had any claim after all this time."

"Everything those people used to set up their so-called colony belonged to The Corporation. Without that, they would have had nothing. They owe us!"

"The way I see it, you owe them. As a Sol System Corporation, you agreed to not use slave labor anywhere, but you illegally bought and, from what I've seen from records, occasionally sold slaves. Anything your company left on that planet was up for grabs as salvage after 30 days. You'll be lucky if they don't sue you. That Chandler girl is sharp, like her dad," Brannigan retorted.

"My boss isn't going to be happy when he hears this. We paid you solid credits. You should have won this... no matter what it took," Denton said pointedly.

"Look, it was the luck of the draw. We got one of the judges here who can't be bought, and if I'd tried, we'd both be in jail right now."

"We should have taken this to court on Earth where we know the judges."

"I told you before, they don't have jurisdiction this far out," Brannigan sounded as if he'd had about enough of Denton.

"The hell with this," Denton said, and they could hear his chair scraping back. "I'm gonna get a real drink, then call the boss."

The waitress came up while Denton was leaving. She set Vincent and Catherine's orders down, then stepped over to the other table.

"Do you still want to order, Sir?" she asked.

"I'll have a regular coffee and an apple turnover... Make it to go."

He also left as he followed the waitress over to the counter.

Catherine and Vincent watched until they saw Brannigan collect his order and leave the shop.

"That makes me even more confident that this will go our way," said Vincent.

"Yes, but Denton is up to something," Catherine said.

"What makes you think that?" he asked.

"His attitude. He's already accepted that they've been defeated, legally, but he's still cocky, and he's going to call his boss... It's a gut feeling, and my gut has seldom failed me."

"If you say so. What should we do?"

"I think we should let the people on Casamia know that there might be a threat." She tapped her tablet that she'd put on the table. "But it's the middle of the night there. We can wait until morning, their time." She thought a moment. "Tell me about that security grid you have."

“It was state of the art when The Corporation first installed it, and we’ve kept it in good repair and have upgraded it several times.”

“What does it do?”

“It has two layers. The first layer, the highest altitude one, warns us of approaching ships. It can be programmed so that the whole system automatically shuts down when it gets a signal from one of our own ships, but we’ve kept it on manual. We get a signal from the warning grid that a ship is approaching, and we hail that ship. Once we are sure it’s one of ours, we shut down both layers and allow them through.

“The second layer is the actual defensive layer. It has two settings too. One that will just disable a ship trying to cross it, and one that will destroy it. We keep that on the ‘disable’ setting.”

“When we make that call, we might want to advise them to change the setting to destroy,” Catherine mused.

Since they’d had a big breakfast and a snack, they decided to skip lunch. Catherine prepared her message to Casamia, then let Vincent read over it and add what he wanted to say.

It was late afternoon when Catherine said she was going to have a soak in the tub then take a nap. She left Vincent on the couch reading.

V

Vincent had sensed that Catherine had something planned, but he wasn’t sure what it was. He did know that timing was important, so he decided to make himself scarce by going into his room and closing the door.

Catherine’s idea of a soak in the tub sounded inviting, so he did just that. The soak relaxed him, and he decided to take a nap.

C

Catherine didn’t soak, she showered instead, and she skipped the nap.

She was planning to surprise Vincent. It was the 3-month anniversary of the day she and the other women first landed on Casamia, and she’d met Vincent. She wanted to make it a special occasion.

She went through her clothes and found the one dressy dress that she had. It was a soft white material that draped and clung in all the right places. Once dressed, she used the hotel’s internal system and ordered a special dinner.

The dinner was delivered right on time, including the candles she’d ordered. She set them around the room and lit them, then turned the other lights down to their lowest setting, and she found a music channel on the entertainment system and started it playing in the background.

She'd just set a brown leather pouch next to one of the plates on the table when Vincent came out of his room.

He was dressed in plain black pants, a loose white shirt, and the soft moccasins he seemed to prefer.

"What's this?" he asked, looking around the room in surprise.

"Three months ago, we landed on Casamia," she said. "I thought that deserved recognition."

"This is wonderful!" he said with a smile. "And it smells good too."

He held her chair for her and made sure she was seated before he took his chair. He reached across the table and put a small, black box beside her plate.

"I remembered too," he explained with a smile. "Go ahead and open it."

She opened the box and found a large, clear crystal wrapped in gold wire laying on the black velvet inside.

Vincent reached across the table and lifted the crystal out of the box, and held it suspended by its chain, so it caught the candlelight.

"A treasure from my world," he told her. "Worth little, but beautiful." He stood and went around the table to slip the chain over her head.

"It's lovely," she said, gazing into his eyes as he resumed his chair. "And it's value is in more than credits." She smiled at him, then gestured at the pouch next to his plate. "Now, you."

"I guess we were thinking the same thing," he said as he picked up the pouch.

"And you said that you couldn't read my mind," she teased.

Vincent opened the pouch and shook the contents of it out into his hand. It was a small, white ivory rose. It looked a little worn as if it had been well-loved, but it was beautiful.

"A keepsake?" he asked, looking up at her.

"Something my mother gave me. She told me that it was to remind me that she was thinking of me no matter where either of us was. I'm giving it to you to remind you of the same thing... Look at it and think of me and know that I'm thinking of you."

The moment stretched out, but Vincent finally broke the mood by suggesting that they should probably eat before everything got cold.

Catherine was almost as giddy as she'd been on her first date. The food was delicious, but she found that she wasn't hungry, but she managed to eat, anyway.

She was thrilled that Vincent had been thinking the same thing she had: that they should celebrate their first meeting.

When dinner was done, Vincent pushed the cart with all the dishes out of the room and left it by the door, before he joined Catherine on the couch.

She had picked up a book he'd been reading earlier. It was a small red book and looked very old.

She opened it to find the familiar words of Shakespeare's Sonnets.

"You've read them?" he asked.

"I have, but never from a book. Daddy had a real library when I was growing up, but I wasn't allowed to touch any of the books. He always said that the words were the same, no matter if you read it from a book or a tablet, so I read all the classics, but always on a tablet."

"Do you still have those books?" Vincent asked.

“Yes, but they are in my storage unit in my apartment building at home. My tiny apartment wouldn’t be big enough for all of them even if I lined every wall with bookshelves... Will you read something to me? I’ve heard you reading to the children, and I love to listen.”

He took the book, and it fell open naturally at one spot, and he began to read.

When, in disgrace with fortune and men’s eyes,
I all alone beweepe my outcast state,
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries,
And look upon myself and curse my fate,
Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,
Featured like him, like him with friends possessed,
Desiring this man’s art and that man’s scope,
With what I most enjoy contented least;
Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising,
Haply I think on thee, and then my state,
(Like to the lark at break of day arising
From sullen earth) sings hymns at heaven’s gate;
For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings
That then I scorn to change my state with kings.¹

Catherine was very quiet for a moment, and when she looked up at him, there were tears in her eyes. “Is that how you feel?” she asked.

V

Vincent was stunned at her insight. He’d felt her emotions as he read, but he hadn’t felt that she understood why that particular sonnet spoke to him.

“Sometimes,” he admitted, as he closed the book.

“And when you think on someone who makes you feel differently,” she asked, “who is it?”

This time he hesitated, but she deserved an answer.

“There never used to be anyone. I just dreamed that there might someday be someone, but that dream has come true. ‘Haply I think on *you*,’ and it’s all different. I feel that you see me differently, and then I realize I wouldn’t trade one thing about me or my life.”

He watched as his words transformed Catherine’s face. She’d looked sad, to begin with, but as he spoke, her face brightened, and she was smiling when she reached up and touched his cheek.

Without thinking, he leaned down and kissed her.

He'd surprised himself with his actions, and when he pulled back to look at her, she followed him up and met his lips again in a more demanding kiss.

His hands pressed against her back, drawing her closer. Her tongue traced the seam of his lips, then ventured into his mouth. He could feel a niggling worry that something wasn't quite right, but as she kissed along his jaw and down his neck, he pushed it aside. Raising his hand, he captured her breast, kneading it, running his thumb across the nipple through the fabric of her dress as it grew and hardened. Warmth swam through him as she moved closer, running her hands over his chest, then up under his loose shirt. Her touch was electric.

The idea that this was wrong came back, but he could feel the heat rising in her too, as she nipped at him, savoring the way he tasted and felt. He knew she could feel the way his body hardened against her and knew that she wanted more. The desire was becoming overwhelming. He was having a hard time separating his feelings from hers.

He had moved her so that they were laying on the long couch, and Vincent rolled to his side, holding Catherine close as he did. Now he could explore more of her, his fingers trailed down to her stomach, stopping just short of a more intimate area.

"Vincent." Catherine gasped at the way he touched her, the way he felt pressed against her. "I want you, Vincent, please."

The sound of her voice brought him back to his senses; it was almost as if someone had thrown a bucket of cold water on him. He gently grasped her shoulders and pushed her to a sitting position before he rose to his feet and crossed the room to the one small window.

It took a few moments for them both to catch their breath.

C

"What is it, Vincent," she asked. "Why did you stop?"

His next words threw her.

"Because it's not right," he said without turning.

"Not right? What do you mean? Nothing has ever felt that right before."

"It's not right because I'm not like you. It's not right because I would be stepping into a role more suited to a human male, someone who doesn't have claws and fangs and hair all over his body. Someone who is genetically compatible with you and can give you children."

"And don't I get any say in this?" she asked. She stood and went to stand behind him. She reached out to touch him, but his next words stopped her.

"Don't touch me!" He sounded as if he was in pain.

"Then you have to give me a better reason than the one you just gave me! Vincent, I love you. I don't want a *human man*; I want you. I don't know what makes you think we aren't genetically compatible, but we are finding that there are compatible species all over the galaxy. It seems that all humanoid species share enough common DNA to produce offspring, but that isn't the most important thing to me. I want to be with someone I love and who loves me."

"And if I say I don't love you?" he asked in almost a whisper.

"I don't think I would believe you," she said confidently. "You may not have said it to me, but you show me all the time."

Vincent was about to speak again when the doorbell of the suite rang.

Without even looking at her, he went to it. Catherine pressed a button, and the lights in the room brightened. When the door opened, Devin was standing there, and from the look on his face, Catherine knew immediately that something was wrong.

"What is it?" asked Vincent. Catherine was surprised at the harshness of his voice. Devin appeared to be just as surprised.

"Can I come in?" Devin asked.

Vincent stepped back and let him pass, then closed the door behind him.

"What is it, Devin?" Catherine asked. She shot a glance at Vincent as he took a couple deep breaths and appeared to relax.

"I'm sorry if I disturbed something, but I think something is going on at home," Devin said as they all found seats. Catherine noticed that Vincent took a chair rather than sit next to her on the couch.

"What makes you think that?" asked Vincent.

"I got a partial voice transmission, but it seemed to break off in the middle. It was Pascal, and he was saying that there was an emergency and that we were needed at home, then it stopped. I waited, but there was nothing more. I don't know if one of the relays accidentally garbled the message or if it was shut down at the source."

"But we can't leave," Vincent said. "Or at least Catherine and I can't. The future of the colony lies in all this."

"No, if you think this is an emergency, then it's important that you go," Catherine told both of them. "You don't need to be here to hear the judge's ruling. Only I do. And when it goes our way, I'll take care of filing all the other documents so that your people can officially claim the planet and name it. I can sign anything as your legal representative. And if it goes the other way, I'll file the appeal and wait for the second ruling."

"But if we leave, how will you get back?" asked Devin.

"Don't worry about me. I'll find something, even if I have to charter a ship to take me," she told him. "But even if you leave in the next hour, will you be able to get back in time to be of any help?"

Vincent looked at her. "Do you think this is Denton?" he asked.

"We did overhear him tell Brannigan that he was going to call his boss. They might have someone waiting close to Casamia ready to move. It's always a possibility."

Vincent rose and went into his room, and Devin turned to Catherine.

"Denton?" he questioned.

"He was The Corporation's representative for the hearing. And he's a nasty piece of work. I wouldn't put anything past him or past any company that would hire someone like him. But as I asked, can you get back there fast enough to be of any help?"

"Possibly. Sixty hours is the time it takes with the engines running at a speed that uses fuel most efficiently. But if I push the old girl, she can make it in under twenty hours."

"You sure the ship will do that?" Catherine asked.

Devin laughed. "She may not look like much, but there is more to her than meets the eye. We don't show off any of our bells and whistles, as a way to deter pirates. It works most of the time."

Vincent came out of his bedroom, and he was carrying the leather case and the backpack that served as his luggage.

"The sooner we get moving, the sooner we'll know what is going on," he said, crossing the room, opening the door, and walking out.

"I'll be back to Casamia as soon as I can," Catherine called after Vincent, but she wasn't sure if he heard her.

Devin looked at his brother's back, then looked at Catherine.

"What's up with him?" he asked.

"Maybe he'll tell you," she said. "Have a safe trip and try to let me know what's going on if you can. If The Corporation is up to something, I may be able to do something about it here, as long as the judge finds in our favor. And I'll let you know that happens here."

Devin gave Catherine a quick hug then took off after Vincent.

Catherine closed the door and keyed in the lock.

"I'd give a lot to know what Denton is up to," she said to the empty room. "And what is going on in Vincent's head!"

V

Vincent was waiting at the shuttle when Devin caught up to him.

"You couldn't even say goodbye to the woman?" Devin admonished him, as he prepared to head back to their ship. "Did you two have an argument or something?"

"I'd rather not talk about it right now," Vincent said. "Let's just get out of here and find out what is going on. Did you send a message back to Pascal?"

"Yeah, but I left Kanin listening for an answer. He was supposed to message me if there was one, but so far, I haven't heard anything from him."

"What were Pascal's exact words," Vincent demanded.

"I don't know. I don't have that kind of memory. It's recorded; you can listen when we're on board," Devin said sharply. His brother's bad mood was doing nothing to improve his.

It didn't take long for the ship to come into view, and a few minutes later, Devin set their shuttle down in the shuttle bay. Vincent jumped out, headed for the bridge almost before the atmosphere was restored in the bay.

Kanin was going through their preflight when Vincent burst in.

"Anything?" Vincent asked.

"Nothing," Kanin answered.

"I need to hear the transmission from Pascal," Vincent told him.

Kanin pulled up the recording. There was a burst of static, then he heard Pascal's voice.

...Casamia. This is Urgent. You should probably head home as soon as possible. There have been developments here that require your attention and...

The transmission broke off there with another burst of static.

"And there was nothing else?" asked Vincent.

"Nothing. Dev, sent a message back, requesting clarification or that the message be resent, but so far there's been nothing."

"Pascal didn't use any of the emergency codewords, but they could have been lost in the static at the beginning or the end of the transmission," Vincent said. "And his voice didn't sound as if he was under any kind of stress."

"Yeah, but you know Pascal... he's always cool under pressure," Devin said as he reached the bridge. "OK, Kanin, if you've finished the preflight, then let's move out. Maximum."

"Maximum," Kanin questioned, surprised.

"For once, yes. We need to get back as soon as possible."

Vincent turned to leave. "I'm going to my cabin and try to get some rest. We might need it when we get home."

Devin did the same thing, and he met Vincent in the common room several hours later.

"You get any sleep?" he asked as he joined Vincent at a table.

"A little," Vincent said. "You?"

"Same. Now, will you please explain to me what is going on? Who is this Denton, and why do you and Catherine think he's up to something?"

"Nothing concrete, really," Vincent admitted. "But both of us had a bad feeling from The Corporation's representative, Mitch Denton. The Corporation's lawyer introduced him as the Director in Charge of Mines. Catherine and I overheard him talking to their lawyer, and it just seemed as if Denton had some kind of a backup plan in place if the case didn't go their way. Even The Corporation's lawyer seemed to think that they didn't have much of a chance of winning."

"Well, with the way some of the judges on Thesis go about their business, I wouldn't bet the farm on that."

"It seems we already have," Vincent said with a ghost of a smile. "But Catherine said that the judge who heard our case has a reputation for being incorruptible. She is pretty confident that she will find in our favor."

"I hope she's right," Devin said. After a pause, he continued. "So what is up between you two. It was so chilly in that room when I went in that I swear I could see my breath."

"Nothing that concerns you," Vincent said, shortly as he prepared to take the remnants of his meal to the recycler.

"If it concerns you, then it concerns me, Brother," said Devin, putting his hand on Vincent's arm.

"What happened between you two."

"Nothing happened! And that's just as it should be," Vincent said. "Catherine wants more from me that I am prepared to give. That's all." This time he was successful in gathering everything and getting up from the table.

"And what do you mean by that?" Devin yelled after him as he left.

Vincent didn't answer.

C

Catherine didn't leave the suite until it was time for her to go back to court to hear the judge's ruling. Their case was up first that day, and she was seated at the table when Brannigan entered the room. He was alone too. They both rose when the judge entered.

Judge O'Grady looked from one lawyer to the other with a raised eyebrow.

"I know it's not a requirement that the representatives be here for my ruling, but they usually are." She looked at Brannigan as if asking for an explanation.

"Mr. Denton was called back to The Corporation headquarters on an urgent matter," Brannigan said. She looked at Catherine with the same question in her eyes.

"Mr. Wells was called back to Casamia because of an emergency," she said.

"Very well," the judge said. "This won't take long... The Court finds in favor of the People of Casamia. The Corporation waited too long to file any of their claims. The Corporation may file an appeal if they want to. In the meantime, Ms. Chandler," she turned to Catherine. "I suggest that you file the documents to make Casamia official."

"Yes, Your Honor," Catherine said with a smile. "I have everything with me and plan to take care of that before I leave the building today."

She and Brannigan left the courtroom at the same time.

"I'm really not surprised to see that you followed in your old man's footsteps," Brannigan said, as they headed for the escalators.

"I'm surprised you remember me, Mr. Brannigan," she said. "I was only about five when you left Chandler & Coolidge."

"You and your dad were inseparable," he said with a genial smile.

Catherine was on her guard because he was so nice.

"Did you need something, Mr. Brannigan?" she asked, when they reached the lobby.

"No, but I just wanted to warn you. I don't know what Mitch is up to; he didn't take me into his confidence, but I know he's up to something. If I were you, I'd make sure my client is aware of what Denton is capable of."

"Thank you for the warning, Mr. Brannigan. I'll make sure I pass it on."

She turned and headed up the corridor to the office, where she needed to file her documents.

Darn, I should have asked if they were planning an appeal, she thought as she entered the office and went to stand in the line.

Two hours later, it was official. Casamia would be on the new star charts, and it was recognized as an independent, self-ruling entity. She just hoped that everything was going well there.

V

“What kind of emergency is it, then?” Vincent asked once they’d raised Pascal on the radio. To tell the truth, both he and Devin were surprised when Pascal answered.

“We aren’t sure,” Pascal told them. “The grid alerted us that there was a ship in orbit. And we had it on the screen and were trying to contact it. But it didn’t answer and continued to descend. We were trying to warn them about the lower grid being set to destroy, but then the grid went down, and the blip disappeared when it got too low to trace. Then the grid came back up about a minute later. We ran a diagnostic, and there was nothing wrong. When we checked the log, we found that the ship had transmitted a code to the grid satellites to allow it through.”

Devin and Vincent looked at each other. “The Corporation,” they said at the same time.

“Did anyone see anything?” Devin asked. “Do you have any idea how large the ship was or where it landed?”

“No, it was night, and everyone was sleep. No one saw anything, but the ship didn’t look very big on the screen. Smaller than yours. Couldn’t have had more than 10 or 12 aboard, if it was manned.”

“OK,” said Devin, “we are beginning our descent. Drop the grid.”

The green light that meant the grid was down, came on and they headed home.

Father was at the port to meet them when they came off the ship.

“You know what happened?” he asked.

“Pascal just told us. Does anyone have any idea where that ship landed?” Devin asked as they turned and headed back to town.

“Pascal thinks that it landed to the northwest, he wasn’t able to tell if it was north of the mountains or the south of them. Winslow sent out a group to check the area to the north, and Burch has a group out scouring the sand flats and the beaches to the south of the mountains.”

“How long have they been out?” Vincent asked.

“Since right after Pascal alerted everyone. No one has seen anything yet.”

When they got back to town, Vincent went with Father to where they’d set up a command post, and Devin went up to the communications tower to look at a recording of what had been on the screen. He agreed with Pascal on the probable size of the craft and where it had landed.

But it was another day before anyone thought to send Catherine a message letting her know their status.

C

Catherine breathed a sigh of relief when she opened her messages and saw that she had one from Casamia.

It was from Devin, and he told her that they'd arrived at the expected time; he gave her a brief rundown on the emergency.

Her answer back went to both him and Dr. Wells. It was the information that they had won the case and that she'd filed all their documents. She attached everything to the message and hit SEND.

Then there was something that she knew she could do that might help.

She put on her business suit and headed back across the street to the court building where she knew there was a military liaison.

"Do you have any idea who it might have been who landed on Casamia without permission?" asked the uniformed man who had introduced himself as Captain Trask.

"We can only speculate," she said, then gave him a quick version of what had just transpired with The Corporation.

"You think that this Mitch Denton may have taken the matter into his own hands and tried to circumvent the court ruling?"

"I have no proof, but I think it's a distinct possibility," she said, and handed him a hard copy of the message that Devin had sent to her.

Captain Trask read the message.

"And no one else knows the transmission codes to take this security grid down?"

"From what Devin says in that message, only he and his second-in-command have them. They only have them as backup in case of an emergency. Normally, they contact the surface and ask for the grid to be taken down."

"Do you know if the codes were ever reset after The Corporation left?"

"No, I don't know the answer to that," she told him with a shake of her head.

"Well, I'll send a ship, and we can join in the search. If The Corporation is trying to go against the court ruling, that is a criminal offense. We'll just have to see what is going on."

Catherine left Trask's office with a smile on her face. Now the only thing left was to let Devin know that help was on the way and to find her way home.

She went back to the suite, and sent a quick message to Devin, then got on the Thesis internet to see if she could find a ship that was going anywhere near Casamia.

Several hours later, she had an itinerary... sort of. She had three stops with layovers at each stop, some longer than others, and that only got her closer to Casamia, not to it. But she had been assured that she would be able to charter something to take her to Casamia from the last stop.

She hoped so, because as it was, it was going to take her three weeks just to get to the last stop.

V

Vincent was on his way to pick up a skimmer so he could join the group that was searching the south foothills of the mountain range north of town. They'd found the ship three days after he and Devin

had returned, but they hadn't found any people after almost a week of searching. But at least now, they knew that they weren't looking for more than a dozen.

Vincent had used every tracking skill in his repertoire, including scent, but between the rocky terrain and the nightly showers of their "wet season," he'd come up with nothing. They had resorted to searching inch by inch on foot.

One of the things that Vincent could tell was that the group had split up and had gone in three different directions. Knowing their possible target, Vincent had directed most of the searchers to concentrate on the areas around the mines and in the foothills.

Mouse had rigged two of his drones with cameras and had them flying a grid pattern at about 1000 feet. Even with someone watching the monitors every minute while the drones were in the air, no one had seen anything yet.

Vincent was entering the Town Hall heading to the basement to get the skimmer when his communicator buzzed. Pascal wanted him in Communications. Instead of heading to the basement, he pushed the UP button for the elevator.

Most days, he would take the stairs, but he was exhausted from the non-stop work since they'd returned home.

"What is it, Pascal?" Vincent asked, as he walked into the room.

"There's a military cruiser outside the grid. The Captain is requesting permission to land so they can join in the hunt."

"Military?" Vincent was puzzled.

"Yes, he said that he was to tell us that Catherine sent him."

Devin walked in just as Pascal said that, and he laughed.

"She is full of surprises," he said. "Does their transponder match the military frequencies?"

Pascal checked and nodded.

"Then shut down the grid and give them the coordinates of the port. I'll meet them," Vincent said.

"We'll meet them," Devin called back to Pascal, as he hurried to follow Vincent out.

"Maybe they have something we don't that will help with the search," Devin said, as they hurried to the edge of town. "If not, just having more people out there will help."

By the time they reached the port, the ship had landed, and they were already offloading equipment. The ship was huge and black and made the other two ships on the pads next to it look like shuttles.

"There have to be two hundred men on that thing," Devin said as they approached.

"Two hundred and seventy-eight to be exact," a man in uniform said. "I'm Major Oblonsky. And we had a report of a possible invasion force here."

"I don't know about an invasion *force*," Devin said.

"We found the ship, but not the crew," Vincent told Oblonsky. "We estimate that there couldn't have been more than a dozen onboard. It's really not more than a large shuttle, but we couldn't find any larger ships in orbit."

"We didn't see anything on the way in," Oblonsky agreed, "but I'll send a couple fighters up to take a closer look." He turned and called out orders, and men started to scramble. "All right, so tell me what you've done so far and how we can be of assistance."

Even with the military there, Vincent didn't let up. He did radio all their own people and tell them to head back to their homes, but to remain on alert to possibly defend those areas if necessary.

They couldn't reach one group of searchers in the mountains, so Vincent decided to head for their last known location.

"Don't you want someone to go with you?" asked Devin as Vincent was readying his skimmer.

"I can move faster and more quietly, alone," Vincent told him.

"You think you'll need to be quiet?" Devin asked.

"You never know," Vincent said with a frown.

And he did just that. He reached the coordinates that the four men had given them when they called in the last time. He found their skimmers and could tell that they'd spread out to search through the scrub. He followed one trail into a wooded area.

He had a feeling. It was nothing he could put his finger on, but it was as if there was something hanging in the air as he moved into the woods.

The trees grew close together, and there was a lot of undergrowth. There was a path, but he stepped off it and into that undergrowth. Before he'd gone very far, he started to hear voices. He managed to get close enough to see that all four of the searchers were sitting against a large boulder. They appeared to be restrained.

Their four captors were a strange-looking group. Two of them looked like Azuran pirates, and two looked human. And they were sitting on a fallen log, arguing... loudly.

Vincent very quietly crawled through the undergrowth to where the prisoners were tied up. One of the men was Cullen's apprentice, Stephen, and Vincent knew him well. Vincent got his attention before he cut the cord, binding his hands, and then gave him the knife so he could cut the cords on his ankles and pass the knife down the line.

"They have put their weapons down," Vincent whispered, as the men cut the cords. "Once everyone is free, we need to rush them and overpower them before they can get back to their weapons."

As soon as they were able, they did as Vincent directed. It took two of the men to take down one of the Azurans, leaving the other for Vincent. When it was all over, all four of the captors were down with their faces in the dirt, before any of them knew what had happened. But Vincent had been stunned by his reaction to what had happened.

He'd stepped in and broken up fights between people many times. And every time it had happened, his superior strength had been enough. This time, he'd leaped into the fray with claws and teeth bared and a roar. A roar he hadn't even known he was capable of. The other men, his friends, were looking at him with a little trepidation. But there was no time for conversation.

The captors became the captives. The Casamians marched them out of the woods at blaster point, and Vincent called back to town as soon as he was able. Major Oblonsky sent a shuttle out to pick up the prisoners, and everyone else made their way back to town on their skimmers.

"You go on," Vincent told everyone after the military ship had left. "Go as quickly as possible. There are still people out here somewhere. I'll hang back and cover everyone from the rear."

Everyone agreed, jumped on their skimmers, and left. But Vincent was at least as concerned about his own behavior, as he was his friends getting back to town safely. He did follow them, but at a much slower pace.

What was that? he wondered as he followed. One of the documentaries he'd watched while he and Catherine had been on Thesis had been on the animals of the Earth continent of Africa. He'd seen

the lions that he'd heard about, and he'd heard their roars. The sound that had come from his throat, when he and the others had attacked, had been very similar to that of a lion. It had unnerved him as much as it had the others. No one had expected anything like that, least of all him.

And where the others had jumped on their targets from the rear and overpowered them, he had struck out at his quarry and leaving deep lacerations down the side of his face, neck, and onto his upper body. He'd never done that before.

He held his left hand up in front of him and looked closely at it.

I've always known that they could be dangerous, he pondered. I just never realized how dangerous. I must be careful!

When he reached town, the whole place was in an uproar, but the assistance that the military offered paid off, and they took seven more men into custody over the next few days. One of those men was Mitch Denton.

Denton wouldn't talk, but Vincent identified him. And when the military picked up the ship they'd used to get there, they were able to verify that it was registered to The Corporation.

"It must have been a drop off situation," Major Oblonsky told Father. "There may be a scheduled pick up, or possibly the landing party was supposed to call for pick up when they were ready. We'll hang around in orbit for a while to see if anyone shows up."

When Oblonsky heard that no one had ever figured out how to reset the remote codes for the security grid, he sent one of his experts over to show Pascal how to reset them. The expert also advised that the codes be reset at regular intervals, so The Corporation couldn't pull that trick again.

Suddenly, everything was back to normal. And Vincent fell into bed exhausted.

When he woke, he walked out onto his patio to find Devin sitting there drinking a beer.

"Isn't it a little early for that?" asked Vincent.

"What do you mean early?" Devin asked. "It's almost sunset." He nodded in the direction of the sun.

"How long did I sleep?" Vincent asked with confusion. He seldom slept more than six or seven hours a night.

"I don't have the slightest idea. What time did you go to bed?"

"I'm not really sure." Vincent dropped into one of the other chairs. "I went to bed a little after midnight, but I had a hard time getting to sleep." He wasn't sure if he wanted to go into the reasons why he'd had a hard time getting to sleep. "It was getting close to four in the morning the last time I looked at the clock."

"Well, considering the last few days and the fact that you hadn't slept for days, I'm not surprised that you slept as long as you did." He looked over at Vincent. "Something bugging you?" he asked.

"Why do you ask?" Vincent asked, a little defensively.

"Well, having a hard time getting to sleep is a dead giveaway. It's not unusual for you to go without sleep if something is going on, but when it's all over, you usually go right to sleep. What happened that's bothering you?"

"When did you become so intuitive?" Vincent asked, somewhat sarcastically.

"Quit dodging the question," Devin said. "What's up?"

Vincent sat quietly for several minutes before he answered.

"Did any of the men I found say anything?" he finally asked.

“Nope. When I asked, they explained how The Corporation men had found them and taken them prisoner. Then how you’d come along, cut them loose, and led them in an attack on their captors.”

“That’s all?” Vincent asked.

“That’s all they said, but the claw marks on one of the Azurans were interesting. The Azurans have claws, but they only have three fingers and a thumb. There were four deep gouges on that guy. The medic with Oblonsky said that some were so deep it took two passes with the dermal regenerator to close them.”

Vincent was quiet again, but he knew he could trust Devin.

“I’ve never done that before,” he said, with a pained expression on his face.

“Done what?” Devin asked.

“Intentionally inflicted that kind of damage on another being,” he answered.

“What about that time with that girl, Lisa?” Devin asked.

“That was different,” Vincent pointed out. “That wasn’t anger. I was just trying to hold her, keep her from moving away from me. It was an accident. This was totally intentional.”

“One of the humans with them said that he thought he heard something like a big cat roaring. He said that he didn’t know we had big predators on this planet.”

“I was the only predator out there,” Vincent told him. “I didn’t know I could do that.”

“You used to give little *kitten roars* when you were just a little guy,” Devin pointed out. “It was kind of cute.”

“This wasn’t a *kitten roar*, and it was far from cute. It scared even me,” Vincent said adamantly.

“I can understand,” Devin said. “You’ve never been in a position where you had to protect people before.”

“But that was so... animalistic,” Vincent protested

“Hey, all of us are capable of doing things we’ve never thought possible when we are called on to protect ourselves or our family.”

Vincent shook his head. “I don’t know what to think,” he said, sadly. “Maybe I should just stay away from people, to ensure their safety.”

“Don’t be stupid!” Devin argued. “You’re 35 years old, and nothing like this has ever happened before. I doubt very much that it will ever happen again unless you are called upon to defend yourself or someone else.”

“I hope you’re right,” Vincent said, but he didn’t sound very confident.

C

Catherine had just landed on a planet called Vesta. It was a “party planet,” from what the brochure said. She had a three-day layover, and she intended to sleep the whole time. Her transportation from Thesis to Vesta had been on a cargo ship owned by one of the more alien, alien species, and her quarters had left a lot to be desired.

The people who owned the ship were the Quam. They were a beautiful species, humanoid, but very delicate looking, with their alabaster skin and long, slender limbs. They had large, blue eyes that seemed to look right through you. And their skin was pure white with a slightly blue cast.

The Quam were very religious people. It seemed to Catherine that every time she ventured out of her quarters during the three days she was on the ship, everyone was at prayers. She often wondered who was piloting the ship if everyone was always praying.

And she assumed that the religious aspect of their society was probably the reason why everything was so austere. The bed in her cabin was about two feet wide, and there was no padding. It was made of plasti-steel and hard as a rock. And all she had to cover her was something about the thickness of a cotton sheet, and not much warmer. She'd spend three nights trying to sleep on it, and every night she wore several layers of clothes to bed because the ship was cold. It was kept at a constant temperature, and Catherine guessed it was about 45°F. It was no wonder the Quam were blue.

The food wasn't any better. She was given nine tubes of green paste when she boarded. She was told that they didn't serve meals and that the paste was nutritious and would sustain her during her time onboard. It was all the Quam ever ate.

Her first taste of it had almost been her last. If she hadn't gotten so hungry, she wouldn't have eaten any of it. She tried to classify the taste after her first *bite*, if it could be called that. She'd finally decided that it tasted *green*... slightly salty *green*. When she left the ship, she left six of the original nine tubes she'd been given on the shelf in her cabin.

The first thing that Catherine noticed, when she left the ship to catch the shuttle to the hotel where she had reservations for the next three days, was that it was warm, and the sun was shining.

The hotel shuttle was open, and she turned her face up to soak up the heat.

"Came in with the Quam, didn't you?" the driver asked, as they sped along.

"Yes, I did," she said with a slight smile.

"Then you'll be enjoying your time here," he assured her. "The sun and sand are warm, the rooms are comfortable, the food is the best, and even the seas are warm if you want to swim."

"I think I'm going to be sleeping a lot," she told her driver.

"And did I mention that the beds are comfortable too?" He met her eyes in the mirror and winked.

The driver hadn't been lying. Vesta was beautiful, and the temperature everywhere, inside and outside, was perfect. It was late afternoon when she arrived. She decided that since she hadn't had any water to wash with, only a sonic shower in the common bathroom shared with the whole crew, she'd take a shower. Then she'd find one of the restaurants that Vesta was so famous for and have a real dinner before she went to bed.

"Did you enjoy your meal, Ms. Chandler?" asked the host, as she left the restaurant later.

"It was wonderful," she said with a smile.

"Come back and see us," he said, as she headed for the beach.

When she'd walked to the restaurant earlier, she'd walked about half a mile on the street, now she wanted to walk back to her hotel on the sand. In spite of the hot shower earlier, the delicious hot meal, she still felt chilled, and her feet felt like blocks of ice. She wondered how long it would take to get warm again.

She reached the sand and stopped to take off her shoes. The sun had set, but the sand was still warm, and when she reached the water, she was surprised to find that it was warm too.

This place is fantastic, she thought as she walked along. *I'm going to have to come back here sometime when I can stay and really enjoy it.*

When she reached her hotel, she was pleasantly full and sleepy. She knew she was going to sleep well.

And she did. She woke up late the next morning, well-rested and hungry again. She ordered breakfast from room service and decided to check her messages. But she couldn't seem to find a network to log onto. She checked the pamphlet she'd been given when she checked in, and there was nothing about network access.

When her breakfast was delivered, she asked the young man who delivered it.

"I'm sorry, Ms. Chandler. Vesta is for relaxing away from your every day worries. We do not have a network for the guests. If there is an emergency at your home, your family or friends can contact the Vesta Tourist Board, and they will contact the hotel, and the message will be passed to you."

"What if I want to let someone know that I arrived and when I'll be leaving?"

"I'm sorry," he apologized again, "but you should have sent a message before you left your transport here. You will be able to send one from your transport when you leave."

"OK, thank you."

It wasn't like she would have been able to send a message from the Quam ship; they didn't use the same type of communications that most of the galaxy used.

Catherine enjoyed her time on Vesta. She'd eaten well and spent some time on the beach; mainly, she'd relaxed and caught up on the sleep she'd missed on the Quam ship. She was thanking her lucky stars that she hadn't had to spend more time on that ship.

She boarded a ship for the next leg of the trip and was pleased to find that this one was a luxury liner. Her cabin was almost as large as the room she'd had on Vesta. And even though she would still have to endure sonic showers instead of water, at least they were private.

They also had shipwide access to private communications, which she used as soon as they were in space. She sent a quick note to Devin. She contemplated contacting Vincent, but considering the mood he'd been in when he left Thesis, she figured that contacting Devin would work better.

This is my kind of accommodation, she told herself as she walked to the dining room that evening. The food was good, and the bed was comfortable, and she was almost disappointed that she only had two days and one night on the ship.

When she disembarked on a shabby little trading planet in an out-of-the-way part of the galaxy, she was doubly glad that her layover there was nearly non-existent. She claimed her luggage then walked across the tarmac to her next ride.

This ship was a lot smaller than the one she'd just left, but she was glad to find out that they were used to having passengers. The cabin she was given was small, but it was clean, and it had a private bath.

She'd be on board for almost four days, she wasn't at all sure how long it would take her to find someone to take her to Casamia from... she looked on the itinerary for the name of the planet... it was called Gludge. That did not sound promising.

The night before they reached Gludge, Catherine stopped a crew member and asked him about the planet.

“Well, it’s not the nicest place in the galaxy,” he told her. “The name suits it, actually. It’s kind of dark and dirty. Reminds me of what I would think Medieval Earth would have looked like. The government keeps very tight control over the citizens, and the only reason there is even a port there is that Galactic Transport pays a huge fee for it. Then they charge ships to use it.”

“How about accommodations and transport off world?” she asked.

“The Port is a controlled area. None of the citizens of Gludge are allowed in. Around that is an area that has hotels and other commerce. All of that is owned by the government of Gludge and is run by Gludge citizens. You should be able to find someone willing to take you just about anywhere, for a price. That is the only place you’ll come in contact with the people of the planet. Off-Worlders aren’t allowed out of the Commerce Section.”

“Are the people human?” she asked.

“They’re a mix, very diverse.”

Catherine thanked the young man, then went back to her cabin and sent another message to Devin to let him know where she was going to be, and also that she hoped that she’d be able to find her way back to Casamia in a reasonable amount of time.”

Catherine was the only passenger to disembark at Gludge. And as she crossed the muddy yard to a building with a sign proclaiming it as Customs, she decided that the young crewman who had said it wasn’t ‘the nicest place in the galaxy’ had been overly generous. She had decided it was a true hell hole by the time she dragged her suitcase into the Customs building.

At least the man at the desk smiled at her.

“Good morning,” he said cheerily, and Catherine decided he was probably blind. “How may I help you?”

“I’m going to be here for a few days while I look for transportation. I’m told I need to clear customs and that you can direct me to a hotel,” she told him.

He slid a paper form across the counter to her and handed her a pen. “Just fill that out, and we will see what we can do,” he told her.

She filled in the blanks, noting that she wasn’t carrying any contraband drugs, but she was puzzled by the questions about electronic devices.

She handed the form back when she was done.

“I see that you have a portable computer, a tablet, and a watch that communicates with both of those devices.”

“Yes, I do,” she answered.

“You’ll have to turn those in and leave them here while you are on Gludge. They are considered contraband here. But don’t worry, we will lock them up and give you the only key. You can pick them up on your way out when you leave.”

“Is there any communication off world here?” she asked.

“None. This is a backward planet, and the government works very hard to keep it that way.”

Catherine sighed and set her bag on the counter so she could pull out the computer and tablet. She took the watch off her wrist and handed it all to the man behind the counter. He took it all to a bank of

locked cabinets and made a show of putting it inside one and locking it. He handed the old-fashioned brass key to Catherine, then noted the cabinet number on the form she'd filled out.

"What about entertainment?" she asked. "Is there a video network or something?"

"I'm afraid not," he told her. "But your hotel might have some books. They aren't supposed to keep them if guests leave them behind, but sometimes they do and will give them to you if you ask."

I can see where this is going to be an interesting stay, she thought, as she walked out of the building on the other side and followed the man's directions to a hotel down the street.

The Commerce district was only a little better than the port area had been. At least the streets were paved, more or less, and there was less mud. She went into the hotel that she'd been directed to and was pleased to find that the lobby, although small, was clean. She just hoped that the rooms were too.

"Private bath?" asked the man behind the counter.

"Yes, please," she said.

"That will cost you extra," he warned.

"That's all right," she said.

It took forever, but eventually, she was handed a pamphlet and another old-fashioned brass key.

"Your room is on the third floor, second door on the right after the stairwell... and make sure you read the pamphlet."

Catherine looked around. No elevator, so she headed for the stairs and hauled her suitcase up three flights.

Once in her room, she collapsed on the bed, which seemed to be reasonably comfortable, if a little creaky.

The room was small, and the bathroom was smaller than her closet at home, but it was all clean. Scrupulously so; it smelled of disinfectant.

She picked the pamphlet up and started to read.

The first rule was that no off-worlder was to attempt to leave the Port or the Commerce District without a written pass from the Gludge government.

She ticked that one off and not likely to be a problem.

She read over all the rules about technology. Basically, it wasn't allowed outside the Port area.

The last rule she read was strange. Off-Worlders were not allowed to speak to anyone in the Port or the Commerce District that wasn't wearing a red armband or who wasn't obviously another Off-Worlder.

That might make finding transportation off this planet difficult, she thought.

The last thing in the pamphlet was: "If you should have any questions, please do not hesitate to ask the concierge in the lobby of your hotel. We are here to serve."

V

Devin had been off-planet for a while, and when he walked into Vincent's kitchen, he was surprised to find his brother setting food on the counter.

"Cleaning house, Vincent?" he asked, after he dropped his duffel on the floor and picked up a package, and looked at the label.

"I'm going away for a while," Vincent said and went back to his task.

"OK, I know I've only been gone a little over a week, but the least you could welcome me home."

"Welcome home, Devin," Vincent said, without even looking at him.

"I guess that will have to do," conceded Devin.

"If you want your place back, you are welcome to it," Vincent said as he started loading the items on the counter into a large backpack.

"Why?" Devin asked.

"It's been three weeks, and Catherine hasn't returned. She hasn't contacted anyone here since she forwarded all the court documents to Father... She's not coming back."

"She did send the military to help us out," Devin pointed out.

"Which she arranged the same day she registered Casamia with the Galactic Court," Vincent pointed out.

"And what is that supposed to mean?" Devin asked.

Vincent finally turned and looked at Devin.

"It means," he stated, "that she is probably not coming back."

"Do you know how difficult it can be to get transportation to out of the way planets like Casamia?" Devin asked. "Maybe someday we might make it on some regular trade route or even passenger transport route, but right now, we are still outback of nowhere."

"She knew you were close to Thesis when you were on Echo. She could have contacted you."

"You're sure she knew?" Devin asked, beginning to wonder if Vincent was right.

"She had a copy of your schedule and itinerary," Vincent pointed out.

"But she said she would be here until all the women are married or at least settled in somewhere. She promised Jenny she'd stay longer. She wouldn't disappoint Jenny like that. They're like sisters," Devin protested.

Vincent shrugged and went back to packing up the food. "I can't say why," he said with a shrug. "She mentioned that she had some job offers on Earth before she left there last time. Maybe someone contacted her, and she had time constraints."

"I just can't believe that, Vincent," Devin said with a shake of his head. "She'll turn up."

"I doubt it," Vincent said.

Devin watched for a few minutes before he spoke again.

"You going to the usual place?" Devin asked.

"Yes," said Vincent, shouldering his pack and picking up another one from the floor. "I'm not taking a communicator, but you can send someone out if I'm needed. It only takes a few minutes by skimmer."

"Did you tell Dad?" Devin called after Vincent as he left the house.

"I sent him a message, so he couldn't argue with me like you did.

Vincent crossed the yard and headed west to the river, then he headed south following the path worn by hundreds of feet over the years.

His destination was an old picnic area about five miles south of town. The Corporation had built it when they had first arrived on the planet. It had several picnic tables with benches and a few stone fire pits. It was set in a bend of the river where something had deposited several large boulders.

He always pitched his tent in the shadow of the largest boulder, and after his short walk to the site this time, he did as he always did. It took a short time for him to get his campsite set up. He sunk a container weighted with rocks into the ice-cold river to store the food he'd brought that needed refrigeration, then stored everything else in another container inside the tent.

He pulled his journal out of his pack and went to the closest table so he could sit and write. Writing in his journal always helped him sort and clarify his thinking.

C

Catherine was beginning to despair of ever finding a way off Gludge. She'd gotten to the point where she was considering taking a regular transport back to one of the more advanced planets and then maybe chartering something.

Too bad I don't have my license, she thought as she scanned the limited menu in the hotel restaurant. *I'd buy a small ship and fly myself to Casamia.*

The waiter came to her table, and she ordered.

One thing she'd noticed in the week she'd been on Gludge, she'd only seen two other women, and both had been Off-Worlders. She hadn't seen one Gludgian female. Not in the hotel, the street, or in any of the shops she'd been in. All the people had been men. She was beginning to wonder if all the people on Gludge were male, or if maybe their females just looked masculine. She'd finally asked one of the human females who was also staying at the hotel.

"It's just that they are very protective and don't allow their women in the Commerce District or the Port," the woman had explained. "Their religion is very strict, and women are seldom seen outside their homes, unless they are with their husbands or several other women."

"Sounds like some of the more restrictive religions we used to have on Earth," Catherine commented. "The men have to maintain control over their females."

The woman had laughed heartily at that. "It looks like that from the outside, but I'm a Sociologist and found this place fascinating when I first visited here. My husband and I pass through here every six or so solar months, and the things that I've discovered have been amazing. I'm writing a book." She'd gone on to give Catherine a basic outline of the Gludgian society.

"You see, the women are actually the ones in charge. The men are in awe of them for the things they can do. They consider the creation of life to be the holiest of things that women do. They revere that, and because of that, they are at the women's beck and call all the time."

"Yes, the women stay home and do all the cooking and cleaning, childbearing and raising, but they are also in charge. They run the whole planet from their homes. In spite of there being little or no

technology, the women have a word of mouth communication network that rivals any electronic network I've ever seen."

After hearing that, Catherine had made sure to get the woman's name with a promise to buy her book when it was published.

When the waiter brought her dinner, he spoke to her, which was very unusual.

"Miss...", he said, looking unsure. "There is a gentleman who would like to speak to you."

Catherine looked up at the waiter. "Did he say what he wants to speak to me about?"

"He says that he might have a solution to your dilemma, Miss."

Catherine looked around. She was in a very public dining room, and there were at least a dozen other people there. That and the status she'd learned that women held on this planet, she decided that it was probably safe to speak to him.

"You can tell him that I'll speak to him," she told the waiter. *I hope he does have the solution to my dilemma*, she thought.

The man that came to her table had dark chocolate skin and was casually dressed; in fact, he was dressed a lot like Devin did when he was on his ship.

"Ms. Chandler?" he asked, when he reached her table.

"Yes. How do you know my name?" It came out sounding cool, but a woman couldn't be too careful.

"My name is Isaac Stubbs, and I'm a friend of Captain Wells," the man told her. "I just ran into him on Echo, and he told me what you did for his planet. You fit his description, and he did say that you were expected back on... What did he call it? Casamia?"

Catherine invited him to sit.

"And I appear to have reached a dead-end on my trip back to Casamia," she said, when he was seated.

"Well, as I said, I just may have a solution to that. I owe Wells a favor... well, several favors," he told her with a grin. "My next run is going to take me close to Casamia, and I have room on my ship. It's not a luxury liner, but it will get us there."

"How do I know you're not scamming me?" she asked suspiciously.

"I know some things about Wells: his first name is Devin; it was his mother's last name. His father is a doctor, his adopted brother isn't human, and Casamia used to be a mining colony, and the original colonists used to be slaves."

Catherine was still looking at him skeptically

"And Dev has a new girlfriend. Her name is Jenny, and she's your best friend," he added.

That decided her, and she relaxed and smiled at him.

"OK," she said. "When do we leave?"

Catherine was on the pad next to Captain Stubbs's ship the next morning even before he arrived.

"You're in no hurry to get out of here, are you?" he asked with a laugh.

"This is probably the dreariest place I've ever been," she told him. "And I spent most of my winters in New York, so I know dreary."

Stubbs escorted her onto the ship and to a small cabin.

“It’s not much,” he told her, “but at least it will be more comfortable than hanging out in the crew lounge for the next two days.” He pointed out the food fabricator. “It’s got a limited menu, so if you want anything else, you can go to the crew lounge.”

“Will I be able to send a message to let someone on Casamia know I’m on my way?” she asked.

“As soon as we are out of orbit. There will be an announcement. You’ll have about half an hour where you can send before we go to FTL.”

“Thank you, Captain Stubbs.”

As soon as Stubbs was out of the cabin, she found her tablet and started composing her message. She decided to send it to Vincent this time.

V

It was the “wet” season, so Vincent hadn’t been sleeping out under the stars as he preferred.

But at least I’m away from people and their constant questions, asking where Catherine is, he told himself.

But the occasional baths in the ice-cold river didn’t do much to cool his libido. Catherine had awakened something that evening before he and Devin had left, and he was having a hard time putting it in the back of his mind. It had been easier to block the Bond he shared with her.

He had gotten to the point where he was wondering what was going on at home, so he was beginning to think it might be time to head back in the next day or so.

Maybe if I go back after the sun sets, no one will notice, and I’ll have a few more hours of peace, he thought as he prepared his dinner.

The sky was clear as far as he could see in every direction, so he took a chance and pulled his bedroll and sleeping bag out of the tent and over to the clearing where he could see the stars.

After he laid down, the first thing that popped into his mind was the evening that Catherine had joined their astronomy class and the short interval afterward.

Are you out there, Catherine? he wondered as he watched the stars. *Are you going home or coming back here?* He’d replaced the short cord that closed the leather pouch that held the rose with a longer one so he could wear it around his neck. He put his hand over it now. *Are you thinking of me?*

C

Catherine had sent her message to Vincent as soon as she’d known she could. She was hoping for an answer, and as soon as they dropped out of FTL, she checked her tablet for it. But after checking it a dozen times in the last couple of hours, she was pretty sure she wasn’t going to get one.

She was in the crew lounge getting something to drink, when the ship intercom buzzed.

“Catherine Chandler, please report to the bridge.”

Puzzled at the summons, she found her way there.

“You needed me, Captain Stubbs?” she asked, as she stepped onto the bridge.

“Yeah, sorry, but I’m talking to someone called Pascal on the planet, and he’s refusing to drop the security grid, and he’s refusing to call Devin to verify I am who I say I am.”

“They had some problems about a month ago; I guess Pascal is just being cautious. What do you want me to do?”

“He said if he could talk to you and verify that you were on board, he’d give us clearance to land.” He motioned for her to sit at the communications console.

Catherine had no idea what the communications protocol was, so she just pushed the button that Stubbs showed her and spoke.

“Pascal? This is Catherine Chandler. Are you there?”

“Catherine,” Pascal answered. “Is that really you? We heard you weren’t coming back.”

“Now, where would you get that idea? I told everyone I’d be back, and I keep my word!” she told him vehemently. “Are you going to let us land?”

“Can you vouch for that Stubbs fellow?” Catherine looked up at Captain Stubbs to see him chuckling.

“I can vouch for him, and if you’d get in touch with Devin, I’m sure he will too.” She hesitated, then went on. “Will you contact Vincent and let him know I’m back?”

“I would, but he’s off on one of his rambles,” Pascal told her.

“Rambles? Oh, you mean he’s gone off by himself. He told me he does that once in a while. Do you know when he will be back?”

“Not sure, but you can ask Devin. I’ve called him, and the grid is down. You’re cleared to land.”

Half an hour later, they were leaving the ship. Devin met them at the bottom of the ramp. He hugged Catherine and then shook hands with Stubbs.

“I see you brought our lost lamb back to us,” he said to Stubbs.

“Hey, I owed you one... or three. Besides, I’ve wanted to see this place since you first told me about it.” He looked around and took a deep breath. “Been looking for a new home base; this could be a good fit.”

“You’ll have to talk to Father and the Council about that,” Devin told him with a grin. “You staying on the ship, or do you need lodging?”

“Ship is easier,” Stubbs told him. “I’ve got some maintenance to supervise. Is there a place we can get together later?”

Devin gave him directions to the guesthouse at Vincent’s, then grabbed Catherine’s luggage and led her away from the landing pads.

“As you probably figured out from that, I’m back in the guest house, but I’ll take you to Vincent’s. You can use the guest room there,” he told her as they walked.

“Pascal said he’s off on a ‘ramble.’ Is he OK?” she asked.

“I think he will be much better pretty soon,” Devin told her with a smile. “I’ll drop you off at his place, then I’ll take a skimmer out to where he is. He’ll be back within an hour.”

"Maybe I should go, instead," Catherine suggested.

"It's OK. He's not that far away," Devin assured her. "I can be there, back in no time."

"No, I mean... he was pretty upset when you left Thesis... if you go after him, he might decide not to come back with you, or if he does come back, he might tell me that I have to find a different place to stay."

"He did seem to think that you weren't coming back," Devin said.

"Where did he get that idea?" she wondered out loud. "OK, I didn't send him a message; I was afraid that he might still be mad and delete it, but I did send a couple to you, telling you what kind of progress I was making, or not making in some cases."

Devin didn't look her in the eye, and she wondered what was wrong.

"Did you send him any messages?" he asked.

"When we left Gludge... I sent something just before we went to FTL. I wanted to let him know I was on my way, finally, and when we'd be here."

"OK, I'm going to have to take the blame for part of this," he told her contritely.

"Why?"

"I've been gone almost as much as I've been here for the last month, and I'm admittedly bad at checking my messages. I haven't cracked a computer or tablet since I've been back... In fact, not even since we got back from Thesis."

"And Vincent has been gone for over a week, so he didn't get the last message that I sent him," she added.

"Exactly... I'm sorry, Cathy."

"It happens," she said with a sorrowful shake of her head. "I'll just have to try to explain and fix it. If I go this afternoon, and time it just right, I can get there late enough that he'll have to be too much of a gentleman to send me back in the dark."

"Thanks for not blaming me, but Vincent might not be so charitable. He might take me apart, piece by painful piece." Devin laughed. "But what you say is logical thinking," he agreed. "It's only about five miles, and if you walk out, he'll be even less likely to try to send you back."

"Did he take a skimmer?" she asked.

"No, he walked."

"Good, then he can't insist I take his skimmer and come back."

They reached Vincent's house. Jenny was there with a group of the children, and they were all playing in the pool.

Jenny ran over and hugged Catherine when she saw her.

"It's so good to see you. I missed you!"

"And I missed you too."

Catherine followed Devin down the hall to a guest room. He put her bags on the bed, then turned.

"I'll leave you two to it," he told them, then surprised Catherine by kissing Jenny. "I'll go out back and keep an eye on the kids." He turned to Catherine. "When you are ready to leave, let me know, and I'll tell you how to get there."

He left, and Catherine turned to Jenny.

“What was that?” she asked.

Jenny laughed. “I moved in with him in the guest house.”

“That’s wonderful!” Catherine said, hugging her friend again.

“Now, where are you going?”

“Well, I’m told that Vincent has gone off by himself, so I’m going to go, and pretty much corner him and make him talk to me. I think he’s convinced himself that I wasn’t coming back, and I need him to know that I’m not a liar and that I keep my promises.”

“He is stubborn,” Jenny said, as she watched Catherine dump everything out of a backpack then start stuffing things back into it. Then she pulled some jeans, a t-shirt, and her walking shoes out of her suitcase. “He wouldn’t listen to anyone, not even me, and I probably know you better than anyone.”

Catherine was pulling off clothes and putting on her jeans.

“What I want to know is why he didn’t just check that Bond he keeps saying he has with me. I’m sure that it would tell him that I had every intention of coming back... Unless it’s diminished by distance.” She pulled the t-shirt over her head.

“I asked him about that,” Jenny told her. “He wasn’t exactly rude about it, but he said that distance didn’t affect it. Devin said that he may be blocking it because it hurts too much to have that constant connection, when he was so sure you weren’t coming back.”

“You’d think that after hundreds of thousands of years, we would have figured men out,” Catherine said as she finished tying her shoes.

She picked up her pack and headed for the kitchen.

“I think we’ve got them figured out better than they have us,” Jenny said with a laugh. “But you would think that with that Bond, he’d understand you more.”

“I don’t know,” Catherine said with a shake of her head as she tossed some fruit into her bag, then went to the refrigerator. She got a loaf of bread and some peanut butter, cut several pieces of bread, and spread a generous amount of peanut butter on both, before wrapping them and putting them in her pack. At the sink, she filled a canteen with water. “When he told me about the Bond, he told me that it seemed to be a trait of his people. The woman who brought him here said his parents had a Bond. I was kind of hoping that it might develop from my side too. But no such luck.”

She put everything into the bag and then hung the canteen from a hook on the side. She carried the bag out to the patio, where Devin was watching the children.

“How long until sunset,” Catherine asked.

“About two hours,” Devin said, as Jenny took over with the children.

“How long do you think it will take me to walk to where he is?”

“About two hours,” Devin said with a grin.

“Good, that sounds perfect. How do I get there?”

Devin led her over to a gap in the hedge that marked the western side of the yard. They stepped through onto a path on the other side. The path headed southwest.

“You just follow this path until you get to the river. Then turn left at the river. You’ll know you’re there when you see several huge boulders beside the river. One of them is half in the river. The campground is on the other side of the boulders. There are picnic tables, fire pits, even flush toilets... If you dawdle a little,” he added with a grin and a wink, “and time it just right, you can get there just as it’s getting dark.”

“Thanks, Devin,” she said as she pulled her pack onto her back and adjusted it.

“I hope I don’t see you again for a while,” he told her. “At least not until tomorrow sometime.”

Catherine started walking. There wasn’t much that was interesting to look at along the way. It only took a few minutes to reach the river, so she slowed her pace a bit and started ‘dawdling’ as Devin had put it.

What am I going to say to him? she wondered as she walked. *When I found out that he thought I wasn’t coming back, I was a little angry, but the more I think about it, the more I can see his side, especially since he didn’t get any of the messages.*

She walked a while, then a thought hit her.

Maybe I should have brought the tablet so I could show him the messages I sent.

Then...

But he should believe me... yeah, like he believed me when I said I’d be back.

She argued with herself like that until she saw the boulders on the side of the path in the distance. She glanced toward the river, and the sun was sitting right on the horizon. She had timed it just right.

V

Vincent had dunked under the frigid water in the middle of the river. Since he’d decided to go home the next day, he thought he should probably bathe first. Sure, he could wait and shower when he got home, but if he met anyone before he made it to his bathroom, he just might offend them. He’d bathed a couple of times since he’d been there, but the cold water didn’t exactly make it a pleasant experience, and he’d settled for just washing up the rest of the time.

When he came up out of the water, he felt eyes on him. He was reasonably sure that it wasn’t one of the coyote-like animals that were all over. They were curious and could often be seen watching people from a distance, but this felt as if a *person* was watching him. His whole body tensed to spring... What if they’d missed someone when the military had helped them find the invaders from The Corporation?

He slowly turned around to face the campground, and he was amazed to see Catherine sitting on the end of one of the picnic tables with her feet on the bench. He was also glad that the waist-deep water was very cold.

They stared at each other for several long seconds, when Catherine seemed to remember herself. She turned so that her back was to him, and her feet were on the other bench.

“Sorry,” she mumbled, but it was loud enough for him to hear.

Vincent left the river and picked up his towel. He quickly dried off then went to the tent where he’d left his clean clothes.

She’s back, he thought, as he finished drying and then dressed. He combed most of the knots out of his hair. He was keeping up an internal dialogue the whole time.

But why is she back? Is she going to stay, or is she here just to tell me she’s leaving?

All he had were questions... no answers

When he left the tent, she had moved to sit on one of the benches, and he sat down across the table from her.

"Devin said that you can shut down the Bond," she stated.

"Sometimes," he confirmed. "But it's more like muffling than shutting it off. I've had to learn to do that, or there were times when the *noise* of everyone around me would have driven me mad."

"So, have you turned *me* off?" she asked.

"To a point," he admitted. "I could still feel you, and I knew that you were all right."

"And if you hadn't shut down that connection, would you have known I was on my way back?"

"Probably," he admitted again.

Catherine was quiet for several minutes, and through the now open Bond, he could tell she was in turmoil. He was relieved when she finally spoke.

"I will admit that I am partially to blame for this *misunderstanding*," she said. "I sent several messages, but I sent most of them to Devin, because I was afraid that you might not read them. In retrospect, I probably should have sent them to both of you. I did send you a message when I left Gludge a couple of days ago."

"And I wasn't at home, so I didn't get it," he said.

"But what I don't understand is what gave you the idea that I wasn't coming back? I told you before you left Thesis that I'd stay there long enough to hear the judge's decision, file all the proper documents or the appeal, whichever was needed, then I would find my way back. You had the Bond; you knew I wasn't lying."

"But it took you so long. I thought you might have changed your mind. Maybe you'd received an offer of a job that was too good to put off or pass up," he argued.

"But if you hadn't turned off the Bond, you would have known that none of that was what was going on." She briefly described what she'd gone through to get back to Casamia. "You would have felt my frustration and impatience, if you hadn't shut down the Bond."

"And your anger and confusion when you hadn't heard from me, or Devin," he added.

"And that," she agreed.

They were both quiet for several more minutes. Vincent was trying to find words to explain his actions, but couldn't come up with anything that didn't sound like an excuse, and a pretty lame one at that.

"What are you afraid of?" Catherine finally asked.

He hadn't expected that question, but it didn't really take much thought to come up with the answer.

"Myself," he told her quietly.

"Yourself? Why? How is that possible?"

"It's a very long story," he told her dismissively.

"Then tell me! I have all night."

Vincent rose, and he could tell she was expecting him to refuse, but he wasn't.

"I made some stew," he pointed at the firepit that was burning low. "I can tell you are hungry, and so am I. I'll tell you while we eat."

He went to the fire and returned with two bowls of stew. Catherine had gone through her bag and found the peanut butter and bread that she'd stuck in her pack before she left. She had put it on the table, along with the fruit.

Vincent set the bowls down and went to the tent. He returned to the table with a lantern. It had gotten dark while they had talked.

Once he was seated, Catherine urged him to talk.

"It started when I was about eight," he began. "We didn't have any formal school here then, and up to that point, Father had been my only teacher. He taught both Devin and me. But we'd taken in a few new people, and one of them was a teacher. She offered to set up a school. There were only about a dozen school-age children on the planet at the time. Devin was one of the oldest, and there was a group of us: Devin, Pascal, Olivia, Kanin, Winslow, Rebecca, and me, who were pretty tight. I was the youngest. We all lived here in town and had known each other all our lives.

"When the school started, several children started coming in from the other settlements. I guess I was a surprise to them. I was the only one who didn't *look* entirely human. Pascal isn't human, and neither is Kanin or Rebecca, but they look like humans, at least on the outside. Pascal was picked on a little because of his size, but I got the worst of the teasing. They called me 'freak' and made meowing sounds, and would call 'Here, kitty, kitty.'" Father was upset about it and even took the boys aside and talked to them, but it did no good. They just got sneakier about it. And it degenerated into physical attacks.

"Devin told me to defend myself, and eventually, it got to the point where I did. And I did some real damage. I discovered I was stronger than the other boys my age and size, and I could hit pretty hard. I even broke one boy's arm."

"They deserved it!" Catherine put in.

"Maybe so, but it upset Father. After that, he was constantly warning me that I needed to be careful around the other children. To be cognizant of the fact that I was stronger than most of them, even the ones who were older and larger than me."

"I imagine he was just trying to protect you," she said.

"He was. He didn't want people to be afraid of me. As I grew, we were beginning to realize that my differences weren't all visible."

He could feel Catherine relaxing and knew that she was using her legal skills and analyzing every word he said.

"Is there more?" she asked.

"When I was almost sixteen, there was a girl."

"A crush?" she asked.

"I thought I was in love," he said with a slight smile. "She was here temporarily with her parents. The colony had saved up enough to purchase new medical equipment, the medbeds, and some other things. The Campbells were here to install the new equipment and train Father and his staff to use all of it. Their daughter, Lisa, was about my age, and she was left pretty much to her own devices while her parents were working.

"Lisa was studying ballet, and she was preparing for a very important audition for a school where she could perfect her talents. She danced everywhere! And I loved watching her. It felt as if she was dancing for me only. And I was her favorite *partner*. I didn't dance, but I would stand, and she would dance around me, using me as her barre.

"Then, the dance she was preparing for her audition required that she dance up to me, or to the male dancer in the piece, put her arms lightly around my shoulders, and put her cheek to mine before she danced away. The male dancer wasn't supposed to move, but I did. It was as if I couldn't help myself. I reached for her. It startled her, and she jerked away, and I scratched her.

"I was so ashamed of myself. I took her to Father at the clinic, and her parents were there. They called me an animal and all kinds of other names. Father treated Lisa. The scratches weren't bad, but she and her parents left the next day, well ahead of when they were scheduled to leave.

"I was beside myself and made myself sick over it. Father was very worried. That was the first time I secluded myself, and it was the first time I felt as if I might not be able to control myself and that I might hurt someone else. I didn't come out here, but I did retreat to the old mines, and I stayed there for almost a month. The only person I saw the whole time was Father, and I wouldn't let him anywhere near me. But when I came back, I felt as if I had myself under control. And I've maintained that tight control ever since.

"That was when Father started telling me that it would be best if I didn't think about girls or women in 'that way.' He said that I was likely not genetically compatible with humans, or even most humanoids, so it wouldn't be fair to the rest of the colony if I claimed a woman, but couldn't produce offspring."

"So your father is the one to blame for this inferiority complex? What gave him the right?"

"As you said before. He was just trying to keep me safe. If I don't have any expectations, then I can't be disappointed."

"But it's not fair! Not to you and not to any woman who might love you."

"But how would I keep that woman safe?" he asked. "Safe from me." He held up his hands.

"Obviously, I can defend her against other threats, but these can be lethal weapons. I proved that a few weeks ago, when I almost killed someone."

He could feel her shock at his words.

"What happened?" she asked.

"You were right to send the military to assist us," he told her. Then went on to describe the few days before and after the arrival of the military.

"I don't know what came over me," he said with a shake of his head. "It was as if there was something, a darkness inside that forced itself forward and took over. I slashed one of the Azurans with this..." He held up his left hand. "And I hit him so hard that the military medic said that he had a concussion. I'm not safe to be around!"

Catherine surprised him by reaching out and grabbing his hands and drawing them down to her mouth where she kissed them.

"There is not a thing wrong with these hands. They are attached to a good man. I've seen how gentle you are; holding the children as you teach them to swim, picking the herbs in your garden, and not bruising them... the way you touch me. They are like any other tool; it's all in the way they are used."

"But the Azuran... I nearly killed him," Vincent was quick to point out.

"And where is the wrong in that?" she asked him somewhat angrily. "He was one of a group who was threatening your way of life, the people you love. You were protecting them. Any of us would have done the same thing, and we would have used whatever weapons we could lay our hands on. Did the other men use weapons?"

"Two of them used the cords that they'd been tied with as garrotes, and one used the pocketknife I'd given them to cut the cords with," he admitted.

“See, if I’d been there, I would have done the same thing or just picked up a rock of that was all that was available.”

“But Father is right. What right do I have to claim a woman and then not be able to give her children?”

“Vincent. Your father has some rather old-fashioned ideas. Children are not the end-all and be-all for a woman. Sure, I’d like to be a mother, but it’s not my primary goal, and I don’t have to give birth to do it. No woman does. You have children here who need families, and they are all great kids.”

Vincent sat for several moments. He couldn’t look at her because he knew he was going to hurt her. Finally, he spoke.

“I’m sorry, Catherine... You can’t love me... I just can’t...”

He got up and went to the tent. He came out a few minutes later with a blanket and a thin pad to sleep on.

“You can have the tent tonight,” he told her. “We’ll go back tomorrow.”

He looked up at her, and he didn’t need the Bond to tell him that she was angry... very, very angry.

“What gives you the right?” she asked, jumping to her feet and walking to him. She poked him in the chest,... repeatedly. “What gives you the right to make decisions for me?”

Vincent looked down at her, surprised at her vehemence.

“I’ve spent my entire life with men who told me what was best for me. They tried to control me, tell me what to do... And I’m sick of it!”

She turned her back to him, crossing her arms. He could tell she was trying to get her anger under control.

“The only man who didn’t do that to me was my father...” She paused a moment in thought. “Then again, he did it too.” She went over and leaned on the end of the table. “He didn’t try to push me into the law, but once I told him that was what I wanted to do, he mapped it all out. He pulled strings so that I’d do my internship at Chandler & Coolidge. When I graduated from law school, he gave me a job there as a law clerk until I passed the bar. Once I passed, he gave me an office. I didn’t have to make a decision.

“When I was in law school, I met a guy. He was very sweet, to begin with. We lived together for almost a year before he asked me to marry him. He wanted to get married right away, but I put him off and told him to wait and ask me again in a few years. Right then, I was so busy with school that I just didn’t have time to get married.

“About a week later, I was reading the news on the web, when I saw an announcement that Catherine Chandler was engaged to Steven Bass, but no date had been set. I called the Times and told them that I was not engaged and that they had to print a correction. The woman I talked to checked and said that Mr. Bass had called them with the news. I told her that he was mistaken. And I packed up and moved back in with my dad that day. I was gone before Steven got back from class. I didn’t even leave a note, just a hard copy of the piece from the news site. Daddy never really liked Steven, so he wasn’t upset when I moved back home.

“Steven showed up at Daddy’s that evening. He was very apologetic at first, saying that he only did it because he thought I needed a little push. That we were already as good as married, that making it official wouldn’t change anything. But when I insisted that I wouldn’t be manipulated, he got angry. We were in the living room, arguing, when he got so angry that he couldn’t hold back. He told me that I was being an uncooperative bitch, and he really spilled it. It seemed I was spoiling all his plans. He

saw me as his route to a cushy job working for his father-in-law, eventually being made partner and being set for life between the job and my money.

“That made me angry, and I started to get loud. Daddy was in the library with a friend, and they came out at that point. Steven was just drawing back his hand to hit me when Daddy’s friend moved. He was ex-military and a master in martial arts. He had Steven on the floor before anyone could blink. He literally carried Steven out of the building and dumped him on the street. Daddy got a restraining order against him, and I never saw him again.

“Then, there was Tom. Daddy was turning some of his clients over to me because he was slowing down a bit, preparing to retire. Tom was one of the clients that he turned over to me. We dated for several years, but when Daddy died a few years ago, I saw my chance to do something a bit more interesting than corporate law, and I went to work for Milky Way Wives.

“Tom wasn’t happy about that. He complained that he’d never see me since his work kept him in New York. His business was restoring the old buildings in the city. But I was usually home for almost a month out of every three.

“Then the last time I was home, he asked me to marry him, and he wanted to get married before I left again. I learned a few things from Steven and from things that some of my friends had gone through, so I told him that I’d marry him, but he had to sign a pre-nuptial agreement. I could tell that it took him by surprise, but he handled it pretty well. He asked for a copy of it so he could have his lawyer look at it. He was still with Chandler & Coolidge, so when he took it to his lawyer, that lawyer, who was also a friend of mine, called me to let me know a few things.

“I hadn’t been back long enough to get caught up on everything, and Sean just wanted me to know that Tom’s company wasn’t doing well. It was all over the news; I just hadn’t seen anything yet. Tom was pushing to get married because he wanted access to my money to try to save his business. In Sean’s opinion, it wasn’t savable.”

“When I asked Tom about it, he got angry and accused me of going behind his back. But I pointed out that it was general knowledge that his company was not doing well.

“And then there was Elliot. He was so charming and attentive, but all I was to him was a perfect ticket back to earth. He could have me and live comfortably for the rest of his life, just managing my inheritance.

She looked up at him, and he could see the pain in her eyes and feel it in the Bond.

“Long story short... they were all manipulating me. All they were really interested in was my money and controlling me. They had to be in charge, and I had to do as I was told. I thought you were different. Granted, I don’t think you are interested in my money... If you were, you’d be all over me. But you are manipulating me, telling me that I have to go by your rules. Telling me that I can’t love you. But I have news for you. It’s too late; I do love you, and if you don’t like that, you can lump it. You can call the shots as far as whether or not we get physical, but you can’t say whether or not I can love you.”

With those final words, she marched across the clearing into the tent.

Vincent spread his pad out and stretched out on it, contemplating her words. He heard her come out of the tent a few minutes later and go down to the river. He heard water splashing then she went back to the tent.

Her words had left an impression.

Am I trying to manipulate her? Am I trying to make decisions for her?

He put his hands behind his head and stared up at the stars.

I was thinking only of myself; I never considered how my decision affected her. I should have been willing to talk to her, listen to what she had to say.

It took a while, but he finally fell asleep.

C

Catherine woke to the sound of rain on the outside of the tent. She also sensed movement inside the tent. She cracked an eye a little to see Vincent putting his slightly damp blanket over a table on one side, then turning to zip the tent door closed.

When she'd come inside the tent, she'd found that Vincent had zipped together two sleeping bags to make one larger one. She guessed he needed the extra room. He had an extra thick large sleeping pad, and it was placed on top of a six-inch-high wooden platform. When she'd crawled into the sleeping bag, she'd started in the center, but she'd naturally gravitated to the far side. No matter how big the bed and whether or not she was alone or with someone, she seemed to always wind up on one side.

She felt it when Vincent hesitated before he joined her on the sleeping platform. He didn't get inside the sleeping bag but laid down on top of it.

When Catherine awoke the next morning, Vincent was gone, and there was no sign that he'd been there, except that the tent flap was tied open.

She got up and made her way to the tiny building with the toilet, then down to the river to splash some water on her face and brush her teeth. Back in the tent, she brushed her hair then pulled it back into a ponytail before she put all her stuff back into her bag.

She was outside, preparing to leave a short time after she woke. She didn't see Vincent anywhere. She figured that he was making himself scarce so he wouldn't have to talk to her again.

If I go back now, she told herself, I can be cleared out of his guest room before he gets back.

She had just slung her pack over her shoulder when Vincent showed up.

"You're not leaving?" he asked. "You haven't had any breakfast." He held up a small dish of some kind of berries. "These are very good in oatmeal."

She was startled by this completely changed demeanor.

"All right, I guess I could eat," she said. She set her pack down on the bench.

"I'm sorry I don't have any coffee," he told her, as he set a pot of tea on the table with a mug. "Let that steep a little while."

He went back to the fire and added the berries to the pot of what she assumed was oatmeal. He stirred it and let it cook a little longer before he took the pot off the fire and spooned the contents into bowls.

He set one in front of Catherine then poured the tea.

Catherine tried the oatmeal, then hunted around for a piece of the fruit and ate it.

"Is this fruit native or transplanted?" she asked. "It tastes a little like raspberries."

“It’s native. We’ve tried to cultivate it, but it doesn’t do well. So, we just give it plenty of room where it grows wild. And it bears fruit all year round. The children do most of the picking because they love it.”

They ate in silence for a while.

“Were you planning to go back right away?” Vincent asked.

“I thought that if I went back early, I could get my stuff and be out of your house before you got there,” she said defensively.

“There is no need for that, Catherine,” he said, looking up and meeting her eyes. “You are welcome for as long as you want to stay. Maybe we can work out our differences.”

“Really?” she asked. “You’d be willing to talk about it and consider what I have to say?” She was surprised; not many of the men she’d known had ever been willing to compromise.

“Really, Catherine.” He reached out and took her hands. “You’re right; I’ve been making all the decisions when it comes to us. I was so convinced that I was doing it for your own good, but I was wrong, and I was letting my fears dictate what I did. I’m not that fifteen-year-old hormone-wracked boy any longer. I’ve learned a lot since then, and one of the things I’ve learned is that I am in control. In spite of what happened with the invaders and what I said yesterday, I know that there is no beast in me who is going to descend upon me, take over and ravage you. I don’t care what the Campbells or anyone else says. But I think that is the same part of me that has given me this connection with you. I know that connection will keep me from harming you, no matter what we do or where our feelings take us.”

Catherine felt tears well up in her eyes. She kept her hold on his hands as she stood and moved around the table. He turned as she moved toward him. He wrapped his arms around her as she settled on his lap and put her arms around his neck.

“Thank you,” she whispered just before he claimed her lips.

He cupped the back of her head as she lifted her face toward his, and he brought his lips down to hers. This kiss was very well-behaved, much more so than what they had shared on Thesis. It was barely a brush of lips, and when he pulled back, Catherine’s eyes were closed. When she opened them, she knew he saw the question in them. The same one she was thinking but didn’t put voice to.

“Not here, Catherine,” he told her, rubbing his nose against hers. “We need to talk first.”

She hugged him tighter and buried her face in his chest.

“As long as we talk,” she told him. She pulled back and looked up at him. “How soon can we leave?”

“I need to break camp; put out the fire, take down the tent, and put everything away.”

“How can I help?” she asked.

“First, finish your breakfast,” he said, setting her back on her feet.

She finished her breakfast in time to help him carry everything to the large storage box between two of the boulders. The sleeping platform was stored next to it.

“Everyone uses this spot?” she asked, as they collected their packs and started walking.

“Everyone is welcome to,” he told her. “But not many want to walk all the way out here for just the day, and if they are going to camp, they’d rather do it in the wooded area closer to town. I occasionally bring a group of children out here for an overnight stay to study the plants and the stars. It’s closer to the ocean, and the plant and wildlife are a little different.”

When they walked through the gap in the hedge hand in hand a few hours later, they found Devin and Jenny floating in the pool.

So much for having some time alone, Catherine thought as she plastered a smile on her face for her best friend.

“By the way,” she leaned toward Vincent and whispered. “I don’t know if you know it, but Jenny has moved in with Devin in the guest house.”

Vincent looked down at Catherine with a smile.

“I thought as much.”

V

So my brother has finally succumbed, Vincent thought, as he watched Jenny slide off the inflatable she was lying on and swim to the stairs, so she could rush across the yard to hug Catherine.

“You’re wet, Jenny,” Catherine said, trying to fend off her friend.

Jenny hugged her anyway, and they were both laughing. But Vincent’s sharp ears picked up Jenny’s whispered comment. “Holding hands, I see. That bodes well.”

“Join us,” yelled Devin, waving a bottle of beer at them.

“Why, thank you, Brother,” said Vincent with a touch of friendly sarcasm, “for inviting us to join you in our own pool.”

Both Catherine and Jenny caught the “our,” and they looked at each other with raised eyebrows.

“You know,” Catherine said. “That sounds good. It does seem to be rather warmer than usual today.”

“And there isn’t a bit of a breeze,” Jenny commented. “Is that unusual?”

“Actually, it is,” said Devin as he climbed out of the pool and walked over to them. “We might be in for one of our very infrequent storms. What do you think, Vin?”

“The air does seem a little off today,” Vincent agreed. “I wonder what the barometer says.” He walked over to the one that hung on the side of the house. “It is lower than normal,” he called back.

“Well, I’m going to go put my bathing suit on,” Catherine said. “If there’s going to be a storm, I think I want to get my swimming in before it arrives.”

She slipped past Vincent into the house, and when she came back a few minutes later, he was in the kitchen talking on the wired communications device that connected all the houses in town.

He held out his arm to her, and she walked over to him and slipped her arms around his waist.

“Yes, Father. I’d advise keeping an eye on the barometer today. It’s down a lot lower than it normally is, and from what I know about meteorology, that usually means there is a storm approaching.”

He listened for a few more seconds, said goodbye, then hung up.

“I thought you didn’t have extreme weather here,” she said, leaning back so she could see him.

“We don’t, normally. In the fifty or so years that there has been a settlement here, there haven’t been more than a handful of thunderstorms.”

“The sky looks clear,” she observed, as they walked back outside.

Vincent walked along the pool deck to where he could see through the gap in the hedge. He pointed something out to her.

“See that dark area, just above the horizon?” he asked. “That could be the ridge heading our way. And something we don’t have is weather radar, or any satellites in orbit that can give us warnings of storms. We have to rely on other methods, like the barometer, or sending a shuttle up to take a look from above. And even though meteorology has been around since about the 18th century, it’s still far from an exact science, especially here.”

“You mean, everyone complains about the weather, but no one ever does anything about it?” she asked.

“You’ve read Twain too, I see,” he said.

“Actually, Twain was quoting Charles Dudley Warner, but I’ll give you that one,” she said with a wink. “But seriously. Will this be dangerous?”

“It depends. Father will send the word out that there is a storm approaching, and we will keep an eye on the barometer. It could just be a thunderstorm, or it could be a hurricane. This planet has them, and the storm is approaching from the right direction for that.”

“Are they strong?”

“Any storm can be dangerous,” he told her. “But none of the hurricanes that have been recorded here get much above 130 mph winds.

“That is a major hurricane on Earth,” she told him. “A category 4 that is expected to do major damage from wind, rain, and storm surge.”

“The fishing village will be warned, and they will be evacuated if it looks like it’s going to be a hurricane. The soil here is sandy and drains well, so even if we have major rainfall, it shouldn’t cause too much of a problem. And the houses have been built to withstand winds up to about 200mph. The Corporation wasn’t sure what to expect when they first got here, and when we built new buildings, we used the same standards.”

“That’s good to hear, but I hope it’s only thunderstorms,” she said.

“Me too. Now go have fun. I’ll go change and be back in a few minutes.”

He walked into the house, but as he did, he went over a mental list. Everyone knew how to prepare, and they would soon know if it was a hurricane. Father was going to send Kanin up in one of their shuttles to take a look from orbit. But from what he could see, whatever it was, they still had plenty of time to prepare. They’d still have time to enjoy the rest of the afternoon.

He stopped on his way back to the pool to call William and ask him to deliver lunch. William told him it would be there in about an hour.

They watched the shuttle take off, then saw it come back a few hours later. But by then, they’d already gotten word that Kanin had verified that it was a hurricane.

There was a flurry of activity around town as people secured large items and took smaller items inside. The four of them started moving things that were outside around the guest house and Vincent’s house, then the men left to go help out in the rest of the town.

“Catherine tells me that Jenny has moved in with you,” Vincent said as he and Devin walked toward Father’s house.

“Yeah,” Devin said with a grin. “I popped the question right after you left.”

“So, you plan to make it official?” Vincent asked.

“I do, but Jenny said she needed some time and that she wanted to wait until Cathy got back. So how about you and Cathy?” Devin asked, turning the tables.

“We are speaking,” Vincent began. “She pointed out to me that I was wrong to doubt her word when she said she was coming back, especially when all I had to do was check the Bond, and it would have told me what was going on.”

“You know, I envy you that connection. You always know what your woman is feeling. If she smiles and says, it’s fine, you’ll know if it really is or not. The rest of us have to guess. It ain’t easy, man.”

C

Catherine and Jenny walked through the yard, picking up anything that could be picked up by the wind and become dangerous.

“So, fess up, Cath. Are we going to be sisters?”

“I thought we already were,” said Catherine referring to the sorority they’d both joined when they were in college.

“You know what I mean,” said Jenny in exasperation. They moved into the guest house, making sure that windows were all closed tight and latched.

“I don’t know, Jenn,” Catherine said honestly. “He hasn’t said he loves me, but he has promised that we will talk about this... this thing... between us... whatever it is. And I don’t think he’s afraid of his feelings anymore.”

They walked to the larger house and separated to make sure everything was closed up tight.

Catherine was checking Vincent’s bedroom and was intrigued by the comfort she found there. It was obviously his sanctuary. He’d done very little to make the rest of the house reflect him, but this room was clearly his. Right down to the warm colors he’d used everywhere. There was a large window wall, like the one in the living room, but it was closed, and there were heavy drapes drawn over them. She wondered if he ever opened the drapes or the windows.

And the bed was huge. She had a king-size bed at home, but this was bigger, both wider and longer.

Catherine and Jenny met in the kitchen when they were done checking the house.

“You know, Devin thought that we might stay over here tonight. Have a hurricane party,” she told Catherine. “But I think we need to go back to our place... just to keep an eye on things. She winked at Catherine, just as Vincent and Devin came in from the back. Then she walked over to Devin and firmly escorted him out.

“I didn’t know how to close the doors in the living room,” Catherine said, pointing to the wall that was still open.

Vincent went to the wall next to the doors and pushed a button, and the glass started moving.

“Will that be OK if there are high winds?” she asked when they were closed. “And the ones in your room?”

“All the windows are high impact glass,” he told her. “The same thing they used in spacecraft. It takes a lot to break it.”

The sky had started to cloud over, and the breeze had picked up.

“Do we know how long this will last?” she asked as they stood at the door looking out.

“Kanin stayed up long enough to judge how fast it was moving and how big it is. His estimate is that we should start getting hurricane-force winds here about midnight and that it should last until at least sometime tomorrow mid to late morning. We are 30 miles from the coast, so it shouldn’t be too bad here.

“And the people who live in the fishing village?” she asked.

“Kanin did say that it looked like the storm was going to make a direct hit on the village. There is a fleet of half a dozen fishing boats, and the crews took them south along the coast to try to get them out of the way. Everyone else has packed up anything valuable and have come here.”

“Is there room for everyone?”

“There is now. While you were gone, most of the ladies who were with you have found permanent places to stay, so the dormitory is empty.”

“I guess I’ve got some catching up to do,” she said with a laugh.

They went to the kitchen to prepare dinner. Vincent found enough to put together a meal and did the cooking, and Catherine cut up some fruit for dessert.

“I guess there is no fear that the power will go out,” she said as she set the bowls in the refrigerator.

“If something was to happen and we had no sunlight for three or four days, we might have to worry, but the clouds have never been so thick that the storage batteries weren’t able to charge. And our water and sewer systems also run on solar power. So unless something damages the battery banks or the solar panels, we should be fine.”

They talked as they worked, and Catherine learned a lot about the infrastructure of the colony and was surprised that Vincent did almost all the engineering work. Everything from keeping everything running to what to replace things with, and even designing and supervising the building of new structures.

“Is there anything you don’t do?” she asked, as they sat down to dinner.

“Actually, not much,” he said with a chuckle after some thought. “I’ve never delivered a baby, but I have helped out during calving and lambing season.”

“That’s probably only because you haven’t had a baby born here in... what? Ten years?”

“About that,” he agreed.

V

After they’d eaten and cleaned up the kitchen, Vincent said that he had some work to do and went to his office. Catherine followed and asked if she could stay and read.

He nodded with a smile. She went and got her tablet and curled up on the couch.

Vincent noticed that she was a little cold. Since they’d closed everything up, he’d turned on the seldom-used air cooling and filtering system.

"If you are cold, there is a blanket in the hassock," he told her.

She thanked him, and he watched as she pulled it out.

As he worked, he would occasionally glance up at her. He liked the feeling of companionship. They weren't talking; they were each doing their own thing, but they were together. And when they did work together, it worked well.

He had teased Devin about committing to Jenny, and he wondered about his feelings for Catherine. He knew that he was committed, and she'd said she loved him, but he wasn't sure if he should accept that love and allow her to make the sacrifices she'd need to make to stay here with him.

"I think I want a snack," she told him, getting up and dropping her tablet onto the couch. "Would you like something?"

"What are you getting?" he asked.

"I thought some herbal tea and some of those cookies that William brought with lunch would be nice," she said.

"The tea does sound good," he said.

He went back to his work.

He finished what he was doing, and Catherine wasn't back yet, so he went to find her.

The tea was steeping in the kitchen, but Catherine wasn't there. He looked around and saw her standing in front of the window wall in the living room.

The storm was starting to get bad, and she seemed mesmerized by the fury. The wind was blowing, and it was raining sideways, reaching under the roofed patio and hitting the glass door. The sky was occasionally streaked with lightning.

He went over to stand behind her. He was about to put his arms around her when he saw one of the shrubs on the back of the lot uproot. Before Catherine even realized what was happening, he'd grabbed her and turned so that his back was to the glass. The loud crash had her looking back.

"What was that?" she gasped, when he turned her loose and went to the wall and pushed the button to close the heavy drapes.

"Shrubby. The soil is sandy, and the shrubs and trees don't root very deep. That one was uprooted." He followed her back to the kitchen. "I should have thought to close the drapes earlier. The glass is strong, but if the wind had been stronger and had picked up something heavier, it might have broken. You need to stay away from the windows, at least on this side of the house."

"Where will you sleep tonight?" Catherine asked. "Your room has a glass wall, just like the living room."

Vincent was thoughtful for a moment. There were three other bedrooms in the house, but two of them were on the back of the house and also had large windows. The room Catherine was in was the only one that was on the front of the house.

"There is a couch in my office," he said quickly.

"That is not a couch," she pointed out quickly. "It's a love seat, and it's all of five feet long, and that includes the arms. You are well over six feet tall; you can't sleep there. There is a king-sized bed in the guest room I'm in; you can sleep in there, and I'll take the couch."

"I won't put you out of your bed," he insisted.

"Then share it with me," she came right back with. "We shared a bed in the tent when it started to rain," she pointed out.

That took him by surprise. He'd thought she didn't know.

"I didn't know you were awake," he said.

"The rain that woke me," she said. "We are adults. We can sleep in the same bed," she added.

He thought that the part about being adults just might be the issue, but he didn't say "yes" or "no."

It was late when Catherine said she was going to bed. He knew she bathed, and when he sensed she was asleep, he went to his bathroom, where he showered and put on the pajama bottoms he seldom wore.

Catherine was sound asleep on the left side of the bed when he entered the room. He was doubtful that he'd sleep well, but he knew that he'd have a lot of cleanup work to do the next day and that he'd need some rest.

He laid down, and the next thing he knew, there was pale light streaming through the windows, and the wind didn't sound so loud. He also noticed that sometime during the night, he and Catherine had gravitated toward each other, and she was using his shoulder as a pillow.

C

Catherine woke and quickly realized that she was curled close to Vincent, and she was using his shoulder as a pillow. And something told her that he was awake.

I could get used to this, she thought, before she rolled onto her back and stretched.

"Are you awake?" she asked.

"Yes," he answered, "but I didn't want to move and wake you."

Catherine sat up and swung her legs off the side of the bed.

"Is the storm over?" she asked. "As loud as the storm was last night, I'm surprised I slept so well."

"It's still raining a little, but there doesn't seem to be much wind." She felt the bed move as he rose from the other side. "I'll go get dressed and meet you in the kitchen. There will be a lot to do today."

Vincent hurried from the room, leaving a confused Catherine without so much as a "Good morning."

Catherine got up and put on her jeans, an old t-shirt, and hiking boots. After brushing her teeth and combing her hair, she headed to the kitchen. Vincent was already there, pouring coffee into a thermal mug. He put a lid on it and held it out to her.

"Breakfast here or elsewhere this morning?" she asked, as she took the mug he held out to her. She watched as he did the same with another mug but filled it with tea.

"I don't have much here since I've been gone for a while," he told her. "But I talked to William, and he's distributing biscuits with meat, eggs, and cheese, or breakfast burritos. We can get ours at the Town Hall where everyone is gathering to form work crews."

"It sounds like it stopped raining," Catherine said.

"It may rain sporadically off and on for the next few hours."

Catherine was still puzzled because Vincent seemed almost unwilling to talk, or get very close to her. Maybe he hadn't slept well?

She followed him into the hall, where he handed her a pair of leather work gloves and headed out the front door. She tucked the gloves into her back pocket and almost had to run to catch up. He did slow down when he noticed.

As they walked, she sipped coffee and noticed the damage. It didn't look like anything major, mostly tree limbs, a few uprooted trees and shrubs, and some fences that had been flattened.

She could see that Vincent was looking too.

"It doesn't look like there is any structural damage," she commented as they walked.

"There might be a few minor leaks, but everything is pretty well built," he told her. "The chainsaws will be used a lot today." He nodded at a downed tree in the greenspace outside the Town Hall.

Thirty minutes later, everyone had eaten and had picked up tools to work with. Catherine had a shovel and a rake; Vincent had a chain saw.

"I think we can work as a team," he told her. "I can cut up the trees, then we can both pull the limbs out to the street for pick up."

They worked their way around the entire green space. Catherine was shocked that there were so many trees down, but Vincent had said that the soil here was sandy and nothing rooted very deeply.

They did their best to save some of the smaller trees and shrubs, pulling them back into an upright position and shoveling the dirt back around the roots.

When they broke for lunch, they had finished the green space. Lunch was a bag lunch with sandwiches, fruit, and bottled water. She and Vincent ate sitting on one of the benches on the green space. They had hardly spoken except when it was necessary to work together.

"Where to next?" Catherine finally asked, as she and Vincent gathered their trash and deposited it in a bin.

"I talked to Devin when I picked up our lunches; he said that several of the hiking paths in the woods outside town have been blocked by downed trees. Everyone else is concentrating on yards and common areas; I think we should walk some of those paths and see what we can clear."

"That sounds good. The sun is kind of warm today. At least doing that, we will be out of the sun."

"Your face is a little sunburned," he commented. He reached out with his thumb and rubbed something off her cheek. It was the first time he'd touched her since they'd gotten out of bed.

"Just a little dirt on your face," he said with the first smile of the day.

"We are getting a lot done," she commented. "Do you think we will need the rake and shovel?"

"I doubt it. All we will be doing is clearing trees and branches off the paths."

And they spent the afternoon doing just that. Several times there were trees across the paths that had to be denuded of branches then cut up and moved. But most of it was branches and small trees that could just be moved. And Vincent was a little more talkative in the afternoon.

"You worked hard today, Catherine," Vincent said, as they headed back into town as it started to get dark.

"And I'm tired and hungry!" she told him with a smile. She could feel her stomach growling. "Or maybe that should be hungry and tired."

“We’ll stop at the diner,” he told her. “Nearly everyone has gone home, and I doubt that William will be very busy.”

He was right; there were only about half a dozen people in the diner.

They sat in a booth, and Brooke came over and took their order.

“I don’t suppose the hot tub is usable,” Catherine said, when she came back from washing her hands.

“No, I took a look at it and the pool, and both of them will have to be cleaned before they are usable. Since so much got done here in town today, I’ll concentrate on those and the yard tomorrow.” His brow furrowed. “You’re sore, aren’t you?”

“And I’ll probably be stiff when I get up from here,” she said.

“You can soak in the tub your bath when we get back,” he suggested.

“It’s probably a good thing that the hot tub can’t be used. I’d just go to sleep. Same for the tub, I’ll settle for a shower.”

“Use the shower in my bathroom,” Vincent suggested after Brooke brought their food.

She gave him a questioning look.

“It’s about twice the size of the one in your bathroom, and it has three showerheads, one that is a handheld, and all of them have massage settings.”

“Oh! That sounds heavenly,” she said with a grin.

She was stiff when they got up from the table half an hour later.

“That shower is sounding better and better,” she said as they walked.

“When we get there, go on and use the shower. I want to take a look around the yard and check the house for leaks,” he told her. “I’ll leave some analgesics in your room for you. Take them before you go to bed.”

When they got to the house, Catherine went right to her room to get her nightgown and towel. Vincent stayed outside.

When Catherine had been checking the house the night before, she hadn’t looked in Vincent’s bathroom because she knew there weren’t any windows in it, so when she walked in now, she was floored.

The rest of the house was comfortable but quite spartan, except for his bedroom. The bathroom was an extension of the bedroom. The room looked like the inside of a sauna. The walls were what looked like teakwood, but when she looked more closely, it was actually all tile. The shower was in one corner, and it was huge. It was so big that one end was open, and the floor was the same level as the rest of the bathroom. And as he’d said, there were showerheads on both walls and a handheld that was clipped to the end wall.

Ah, the luxury of living on a planet that has plenty of water, she thought, as she reached into the stall and used the panel on the wall to turn on the water and regulate the temperature. I’d better scrub down first, then use the massage settings... I wonder if it’s possible to fall asleep standing up?

V

Vincent crossed the yard in front of the house and met Devin coming from the other direction.

“How did it go?” Devin asked as he joined Vincent.

“Very well. All the common areas look good. There was no real damage. Everyone will be able to concentrate on their own homes tomorrow. How were things at the port?”

“Some damage. The wind blew in the big door on the front of the warehouse, but at least there wasn’t anything in it that water could damage. We spent the day drying things out and sweeping. Did you hear anything from the fishing village?”

“The evacuees went back as soon as the rain stopped this morning. There was a lot of flooding from storm surge, but since the houses are all up on pilings, they are all in good shape, and the fishing boats were able to make it far enough down the coast to avoid the worst of it. They headed back, and the crews were able to help out with the cleanup. Like you, they were drying things and sweeping.”

“Where’s Catherine?”

“Showering. She worked with me today. She worked as hard as me or anyone else,” Vincent said.

“You need to hold onto that lady,” Devin said. “She and Jenny are two real gems... and speaking of gems. Jenny is fixing dinner, and I’m going to go eat it. I’ll talk to you tomorrow. We’ll get an early start on the yard so we can enjoy the pool and the hot tub as a reward later.”

Devin left Vincent, who finished his circuit of the house and went inside. Devin’s words kept running through his mind.

He got the analgesics from his desk and took them into Catherine’s room, where he left them on her dresser.

When he got back to the kitchen, he grabbed one of the beers Devin had left and took a seat at the breakfast bar. He picked up the tablet he used for his grocery list and started adding things to the list.

But his mind wandered, and he didn’t get a lot of things added. He’d known that Catherine had been confused by the way he’d acted that morning. But he hadn’t known how to tell her the reason. Waking to find her in his arms had been a true awakening.

I love her, he admitted to himself, but do I have the right? She’d be giving up so much if she stayed here... but then I’m doing exactly what she got so angry about... I’m making decisions for her because I think that is what is best for her.

The feelings he was getting from Catherine through the Bond distracted him even more. He could almost feel the hot water beating on her sore muscles.

C

That feels fantastic! Catherine thought as the hot water pounded her shoulders. She turned the temperature up a little, then moved the other showerhead until it hit lower on her back. She groaned as steam rose around her, and she started to feel her muscles loosen up.

I’m going to do this again in the morning, she promised herself. I’m probably going to have to if I’m planning to do anything.

Washing off the grime had felt good, but this was pure bliss. She put her arm up on the wall and leaned her forehead on it, and let her mind go blank.

She almost did doze off, but managed finally drag herself out of the shower. She reached for her towel to dry off then wrapped it around her wet hair after she'd put on her nightgown.

Back in her room, she found the pills that Vincent had left. She took two and went to work drying her hair.

It was then that she noticed that her nails were a wreck. She put on her robe, found her nail file, and went into the living room where the light was better.

She passed Vincent in the hall.

"How are you feeling?" he asked.

"Better. That shower is the quintessence of luxury!"

Vincent smiled and went on to his room, and Catherine went to the living room.

The drapes were open again, and so were the doors. The air smelled fresh as if the storm had washed it clean.

She was sitting on the couch filing the rough edges off her nails when Vincent came back. He was wearing his pajamas and a robe also. He didn't look nearly as tired as she felt.

I guess he's more used to physical labor than I am, she thought, as she smiled up at him.

He was watching the process of her filing her nails very closely.

"What is it, Vincent?" she asked. She thought he might be using her nails as a distraction.

"You're filing your nails?" he asked.

"Yes," she said, holding her hand out so he could see. "Even though I had gloves on most of the time, the work still did a number on my nails. It's a good thing that I don't do fancy manicures and usually keep them short."

He took one of her hands and inspected the nails closely.

"Do you think that would work for me?" he asked.

"What do you mean?" she responded, puzzled.

"Do you think I could file the sharp points and edges off my nails? Make them blunt so that there wouldn't be any danger of scratching someone."

It dawned on her what he was driving at, and she dropped the file and took both his hands in hers.

"Vincent, you don't have to change anything. I told you before, these hands are beautiful. I love these hands. I love you. I'm not Lisa... If you touch me or want to hold me, I won't pull away."

He was surprised when she kissed the back of each of his hairy hands, as she had before.

V

Vincent was startled when a drop of water appeared on their joined hands. He realized a tear had slipped down his cheek.

Before he could think, Catherine's arms were around him, and she was stroking his hair, his back and pressing kisses to his face.

He'd been afraid that once she knew his insecurities, she'd leave, but he should have known better.

But being in her arms scared him even more than the idea of her leaving. Now that he knew how good it felt to have her hold him; to hold her, he knew how empty his life had been up to this point. How horribly empty it would be without her.

Had those feelings been clearer, less confusing, he might have given in and wrapped his arms around her too. Instead, he kept himself very stiff and still, clenching his teeth on the words he wanted to say so badly.

She brushed away her own tears and smiled at him.

"Something tells me that Lisa is the one who missed out when it comes to you."

"You shouldn't love me," he began.

"There you go again, telling me how to feel. Don't you dare tell me how I should feel about you! I love you, and that is it. No qualifications, no limits!"

"Catherine. It wouldn't be fair to you. You deserve a normal life with a normal, human man. One who can give you children."

"How do you know that you can't?" she asked. "Have you ever had a DNA study done? Do you know for a fact that Humans and whatever your species is, aren't compatible? I've spent a lot of time traveling, and I've killed a lot of time on those trips, reading. I once read an article that said that most of the humanoid species we've met since we went into space are genetically compatible with us. And that most life on earth shares a lot of the same genetics. One of the species we share the most DNA, somewhere around 90%, with is the feline species. If your genetics are similar to the felines on Earth, then we might very well be able to make babies." She leaned in a little closer. "It might be interesting to see if we can." She dropped a quick kiss on his lips.

The information she'd just given him was something he'd never heard. His father hadn't done any DNA testing on him, although he had on a few of the other non-humans who were on the planet.

"Is there something else bothering you?" she asked.

Yes! he thought, but kept it to himself. although there was so much more he wanted to say to her.

He wanted to tell her that she'd brought so much joy, but also despair into his life in the short time he'd known her. He knew that the despair was his own fault; if he'd just not been so stubborn and had kept the connection with the Bond open, he would have known she was working very hard to find her way back to him.

"What are you afraid of, Vincent?" she asked, interrupting his internal dialog.

"I'm afraid of this," he said, indicating the way she held him. His heart was pounding so hard that he could feel it in all the pulse points of his body. "I'm afraid of how I would react if you ever changed your mind and decided that you had to leave. But I know you deserve so much more than I can give you."

"Why, Vincent?" Catherine not only insisted she wasn't leaving, but she obviously wasn't afraid to question his fears. "What makes you think you're not good enough to not only be everything I need and deserve, but everything you deserve too?"

Before he could answer, she leaned in close again and put her arms back around his neck.

"Especially when I've known for a while now that you are everything I need."

Again, before he could respond, her mouth was on his, and he was lost in the gentle passion and absolute love of her kiss.

C

Catherine poured every ounce of the love she felt into that kiss.

She felt his pain and all the guilt he carried, and his shame over what had happened with Lisa. She wanted him to be able to share all of it with her. A burden shared is a burden halved, as her father had always said.

What Vincent needed tonight wasn't a reminder of all that darkness; he needed light and joy. She wondered if he even believed her when she'd said, "I love you." He hadn't said it back, although she was sure he felt it.

She decided that she'd just have to convince him in another way... with her lips, her hands, and her body.

She briefly wondered if she would be enough to convince him. But she pushed the negative thoughts aside. She was sure that it was time they both realized that they were more than enough together. Again, as her father had said about his relationship with her mother. "Neither of us was perfect, but we were perfect for each other." She'd never quite understood what he meant... until now.

She was deeply certain that they would be good together; in every facet of their lives, even if the road ahead had a few bumps. That would only make the journey more interesting.

She smiled against his lips, and he must have felt it because he drew back and looked at her questioningly.

"You make me happy," she told him. She hoped that she'd soon see him smiling too. "And you also make me feel as if we are both wearing way too many clothes."

The look of surprise on his face almost made her laugh, as she stood, shrugged her robe off her shoulders, then grabbed the hem of her nightgown and pulled it up over her head and tossed it aside. All she was wearing was the white silk panties she'd put on earlier.

Catherine watched closely as Vincent's eyes darkened, but he still made no move toward her. In fact, his hands were clenched at his sides as if he was working very hard at holding himself back.

She laid her hand on his chest and could feel his heart pounding against her palm, pounding hard and fast.

"Anything you want," she whispered, "I want too." She wouldn't force it, though. It was all up to him. "But if you don't want to make love to me, I won't..."

"I do!" He covered her hand with his. "I've never wanted anything more in my life. But I would never forgive myself if I hurt you!"

"You couldn't," she insisted. "You won't. It's not in you."

"But you deserve a gentle lover. And I want you so much, I'm afraid I won't be gentle."

She smiled again as she moved closer. She pressed the length of her body to his. "I don't want gentle," she whispered. "I want you!"

V

Vincent never dreamed that he'd ever be this close to heaven... or that getting there would push him so close to hell.

Catherine was in front of him, radiant. How could he do anything except reach for her... and tear the white silk off her beautiful body.

He didn't realize what he'd done until she laughed, and he looked down and saw the fabric in his hand.

"I knew that loving you was going to be incredible!" she said with another soft laugh.

"You're the one who is incredible," he said in a soft voice. "You're more beautiful than I dreamed."

"You dreamed of me?" she asked slyly. "Like this?"

"How could I not?" he asked.

She had delicate curves in all the right places; her skin was soft as a rose petal and the color of the palest peach. Even where the sun had reddened her skin across her nose, it didn't detract from her beauty.

He dropped a scrap of silk and finally reached for her.

He carefully settled his hands on her hips and pulled her to stand against him, then covered her mouth with his.

He savored the kiss, relishing the barely audible sounds of pleasure she made as she stroked his tongue with hers. He followed her lead and did the same before lightly nipping her bottom lip.

I might not be able to give you the forever you think I can, but at least I can learn how to pleasure you, he thought as they deepened the kiss.

He settled her on the rough fabric of the couch, never breaking the kiss. Then slipped to the floor to kneel in front of her between her knees. With her seated and him kneeling, they were face to face.

"I want to kiss and touch every inch of you." He kissed her neck. "I want to learn what pleases you; what gives you pleasure." He nipped her ear before he whispered, "Teach me how to do that, Catherine."

"Yes!" she whispered back.

He threaded his fingers through her hair and kissed her again. She was so sweet; he knew he'd never get enough of her. He kissed slowly along her jawline, then down the side of her neck over to the curve of her shoulder. He felt her shiver as he nipped at the line of her collarbone. He did it again, just to feel the way she tightened her grip on him and tried to pull him closer.

Her skin was more sensitive than he thought it could be. She arched into his touch without fear and with a smile. She had said she wouldn't pull away.

That smile turned into a gasp when he cupped her breasts in his hands. And she wasn't the only one gasping as he caressed the soft flesh. He slid his thumbs over the nipples and reveled in her moan when he took one of them into his mouth.

Giving her pleasure was turning out to be the greatest pleasure he'd ever known. The Bond communicated every sensation, and it went leagues beyond anything he'd ever experienced before. He couldn't imagine that it could get any better.

Just the thought made him tighten his lips on her breast. And she pulled him even closer. Every taste just made him want more and made him even more determined to give her the ultimate pleasure.

Control slipped completely out of his grasp as he feasted on her breasts. Her moans got louder, and from the way she was pushing against him, he could tell he wasn't the only one who wanted more.

His heart nearly jumped out of his chest in anticipation of *more*; the thought of the ultimate joining and even more cries of ecstasy.

Forcing himself to move slowly, he kissed his way down from her breasts to her stomach. "You are so beautiful," he murmured against her before he started working his way back up.

He placed one hand behind her neck and the other at her hip and stretched her out on the couch before he moved over her. His hand carefully covered her sex as he took her mouth in another passionate kiss. But he drew away to look at her as his fingers found the slick little bundle of nerves that he'd read about.

He watched her as his fingers circled the gem. He needed to know that he was doing it right and was giving her the pleasure she deserved.

Her eyes were closed, and her head was thrown back, and before long, her body surged against his as she climaxed. He was startled when she opened them again. She looked into his eyes and threaded her fingers into his hair.

"I love you," she whispered, then pulled herself up to his mouth. She kissed him and gave him every bit of her pleasure, and the smile on her lips when she kissed him finally made him smile too.

C

Catherine was sure that she'd never felt this good in her entire life. Vincent holding her so tightly she could barely breathe, but she wanted to wrap her arms and legs around him and never let him go.

She decided it was his turn. She kissed his neck, then gave it a lick; he was a little sweaty and salty, so she did it again.

He lifted his head and looked down at her. "You're beautiful."

Now she was at a loss for words. No one had ever made her feel this way. She felt loved and cherished, maybe even a little adored. The notion made her smile. He made her feel special.

"I was just going to say the same thing," she told him with a smile, as she drew her fingers down the rough velvet of his jaw. "And now it's your turn. I want to give you the same pleasure you just gave me."

"You don't have to do that, Catherine," he protested. "Tonight is for you. I just want to make you happy."

"You do, and making you happy will make me happier. Tonight is for both of us."

"You don't have to..."

She kissed him again. "Nothing we do here tonight, or any other night, goes just one way. For everything I give you, you are giving me back just as much, if not more. She kissed him again before he could argue. "And right now," she said when they finally came up for air, "all I want from you is yourself."

His use of the word “tonight” hadn’t been totally lost on her, and it was a little disturbing. She knew that he was thinking in terms of one time and one time only. He was determined not to ask her to commit to him, but what he didn’t realize was that she already had.

“All right. Tonight, I’ll give you anything you want,” he said.

There’s that word again, she groaned inwardly. But she knew how much it had taken for him to go that far. *One step at a time*, she told herself. *It might take a little longer, but we will still get there.*

She pushed him up and squirmed out from under him. She turned and held her hand out to him.

“If you really mean that you’ll give me anything I want, then what I want is you naked and in bed... Now!”

He took her hand and let her lead him into the hall. When she hesitated in the hall between their doors, he tugged her toward his.

“My bed is bigger,” he pointed out.

When they stopped next to the turned-down bed, she reached for the belt of his robe and untied it before pushing it off. He hadn’t bothered with a pajama top but wore the bottoms.

God, he’s beautiful, she thought as the robe dropped to the floor. She had been impatient to see him without clothes. She’d seen his perfect chest and muscled abdomen with its light covering of soft golden hair before, but now she couldn’t wait.

Her hands were a little unsteady as she untied the drawstring that held the pajama bottoms. She hesitated, willing them to be steady.

“Catherine? What’s wrong?”

She looked up and saw fear in his eyes. His muscles went rigid under her hands.

“Nothing!” she insisted as she stretched up and kissed his lips. “It’s just that you are so outrageously gorgeous that I’m a little...” she stopped, searching for the right word, then she smiled. “... Overwhelmed.”

That surprised him, and then he surprised her by laughing.

“You always know the right thing to say,” he told her with a kiss.

She had finally steadied her hands and finished untying the cord of his pajama bottoms. She eased the fabric down over his erection, and both their smiles disappeared. She let the pants drop to the floor, and he stepped out of them. She reached out and took his erection in her hand.

Mine, was the only word that came to her, and when she said it out loud, “Mine.”

She heard Vincent groan. She’d never been possessive before, not with any of her boyfriends. But this was different. What she felt for Vincent was different.

She looked up and into his eyes.

“You’re mine!” she repeated, moving her hands to his face and pulling him down for a kiss.

“Yes, yours!” he affirmed when they pulled apart.

He hadn’t said he loved her when she’d said it, but now he agreed that he was hers.

“And I’m yours,” she added in a whisper. “Always!”

She’d put everything on the table. Now it was up to him whether or not he accepted it.

She reached for his erection again, and he stopped her hands.

He pulled her back toward the bed; he sat and slid over, then pulled her closer. She was stunned when he lifted her as if she weighed nothing, and she found herself sitting astride his hips seconds later, and then he was kissing her.

"I love it when you touch me, Catherine, but I can't wait any longer for you... all of you."

The need she heard in his voice nearly brought tears to her eyes. But she was pretty sure that tears at this point would be misinterpreted, so she managed to hold them back.

She closed her eyes. His erection was pressed between them, and she moved slowly up and down the hard ridge. Both of them were soon slick with her arousal.

Vincent reached up and held her head so he could kiss her.

This kiss was different. It was wild, maybe even a little reckless, considering how sharp his teeth were. She found herself lifting her hips, preparing to take him inside.

His hands, firm on her hips, stopped her descent.

"You're sure?" he asked, the strain obvious in his voice.

She nodded, not able to find her voice.

Before she could blink, she was on her back, and he was hovering over her. She wrapped her arms around his neck as he slid his hands under her hips. He stared into her eyes, and even though she'd told him how much she wanted him and loved him in every way she could think of, she felt that he needed to hear her say it again.

"Make love to me, Vincent."

The words were barely out of her mouth when he moved into her. It was perfect pleasure as her body welcomed his, his strength, his sweetness, and his love, although he'd yet to say it. She smiled at him, and it came from her heart, the deepest, purest part of her soul.

"My beautiful Catherine," he breathed, as he sunk into her.

They started to move together. They started slow and sweet but quickly progressed to fast and maybe even a little rough. She would have made the moments last forever, but the pleasure, the climax was inevitable.

She was flying high, higher than any other lover had ever taken her. When the pleasure finally exploded in her, the euphoria was unlike anything she'd ever experienced before.

When Vincent followed her off the precipice, she knew that this was perfect, that they were perfect together, and that nothing had ever matched that moment in the arms of the man she loved.

"I love you," she whispered against his ear.

Vincent smiled and kissed her forehead. She didn't have to tell him. He could taste it on her skin and feel it in the Bond.

V

"I love you," he answered, but he wasn't sure if she'd heard him before she descended into a deep, sated sleep.

Neither of them slept a lot; they woke twice during the night and made love. When he woke the next morning, Vincent was a little worried that he'd been too demanding.

She was curled on her left side facing him, and he could feel that she was waking.

She stretched, and when she opened her eyes, she found him looking at her.

"Were you watching me sleep?" she asked.

"Uh-huh," he said. "You're beautiful, and I was having a hard time believing that everything that happened was real."

She reached over, picked up his hand, and meshed her fingers with his. Then she stretched up and kissed him.

"This real enough for you?" she asked.

He had pushed her over onto her back, and the kisses were just beginning to heat up when they heard the back-door slam and someone call out.

"Hey, Brother." It was Devin. "Yesterday too much for you? You sleeping in today? I thought we were going to get an early start on the yard."

They heard water running in the kitchen.

"It sounds like Devin starting the water for tea and coffee," Vincent whispered as they pulled apart.

Catherine sat up, letting the sheet fall to her waist.

"Where did I put my nightgown?" she whispered as she looked around.

"I think you left it in the living room with your robe," Vincent said as he swung his legs off the bed and stood.

"Incriminating evidence on the living room floor," she said with a giggle.

"Use my robe," Vincent said, picking it up off the floor and holding it out to her.

Catherine took the robe and put it on as Vincent picked up his pajama bottoms and pulled them on.

She stretched up onto her toes and kissed him.

"I'll see you in the kitchen in a few," she said.

He watched as she crossed the room in the oversized robe, then paused at the bedroom door and looked up the hall before dashing across to her room and quietly closing the door.

Vincent tied the drawstring of his pajama bottoms and walked out to the kitchen.

"Do you think you are making enough noise?" he asked as he entered the kitchen. Devin was pouring hot water into the teapot, then he shifted and poured into the French press.

"You sleeping in? That's headline news," Devin answered sarcastically. "I ran out of coffee, and I needed another cup. I knew you had some." He pointed at the teapot. "At least I made your tea."

"Thanks," Vincent said, trying to keep the silly grin off his face. He hoped Devin wouldn't notice.

"What time is it anyway?"

"About three hours later than the time you usually get up," Devin said as he got mugs out of the cabinet. Vincent noticed that he got three.

Devin was pouring coffee when Catherine padded barefoot into the room. She'd taken time to brush her teeth, Vincent could smell mint, and she'd put on her another of her robes.

“Did I oversleep?” she asked, as she gratefully accepted the mug Devin handed her. “What’s on the agenda for today?”

“It’s not that late,” Vincent said, shooting a look at Devin. “We’re just going to clean up here today. You can take it easy if you like.”

“Actually, I’d like to take all the original documents I got on Thesis to your father,” she told them, suddenly all business. “Their office actually gives a large document with the name of the planet, coordinates, everything. I thought he might like to frame it and hang it in the Town Hall somewhere. I will probably be back here in time to help.”

Vincent could sense that Catherine was still a bit stiff from the day before, not to mention their nighttime activities.

“If you are still sore from yesterday,” he started, trying to keep the smile off his face, but he noticed that Catherine had just the same kind smile. “We should have the hot tub cleaned and ready to use this afternoon.”

“That sounds delicious,” she told him with a wink. “I’ll hold you to that.” She turned and went back to her room, taking her coffee with her.

“So, you gonna stand there staring after her all day, or are we going to get some work done?” Devin finally asked.

“I’ll go get dressed, and you can find something for breakfast,” Vincent suggested, before he turned and went out.

While Vincent was dressing, Devin managed to find some eggs and bread for toast; there was enough for three.

“Do you know if Dr. Wells is at home or in his office this morning?” Catherine asked after she returned to the kitchen.

“He said he was going to stay home today and take it easy,” Devin told her. “He was on his feet a lot yesterday, and his hip is bothering him.”

Catherine finished her coffee, then left with a long cardboard tube under one arm and her case on the other shoulder.

“Catherine is quiet this morning,” Devin commented, as he and Vincent left the house a little while later.

“I think she’s tired,” Vincent said, as he handed Devin one of the rakes leaning on the back of the house. “We were, uh... up a little late last night...”

Vincent picked up a shovel and the shrub that had uprooted and hit the glass doors night before last.

“And I imagine she’s not used to doing the kind of work she did yesterday either,” Devin commented, following Vincent to the back of the yard to help him replant the shrub in hopes of saving it.

C

Catherine’s body was screaming for Vincent’s shower, but she made do with the one in her bathroom. She stood under the hot spray for a long time. It took her less time to dress, and once she

was dressed, she grabbed the tube that had the certificate and her case with all the papers that she needed to give to Dr. Wells. She took two more of the pills from the bottle Vincent had left and headed for the kitchen, hoping there was still some coffee.

Vincent had saved her a plate with some scrambled eggs and toast and, bless him, another cup of coffee.

She ate quickly, finished her coffee, and headed out after she found out where Dr. Wells was. She wanted to stop and kiss Vincent goodbye, but she figured she should probably wait until Vincent had time to let Devin know about the change in their relationship.

As she started walking, she started slowly because she was more stiff and sore than she wanted to admit, but she was sure that it was more from the work of the previous day than what she and Vincent had done. By the time she was about halfway to Dr. Wells' house, she was warmed up and moving more freely, and she had a smile on her face.

When she knocked at Dr. Wells' door, Mary answered it.

"Good morning, Mary," she said with a smile. "Is Dr. Wells in? I have something for him."

"He's in the study with Mouse," Mary said. "I'll show you."

"Am I finally going to get to meet Mouse?" Catherine asked.

"I'm surprised you haven't met him before this," said Mary with a laugh, as she led Catherine to the study.

"Well, I'm told he was at the mine the day we rescued Vincent, but I don't think I saw him," she told Mary.

The first thing Mouse noticed when Catherine walked into the study was the crystal Vincent had given her. She hadn't worn it the day before because she was working and didn't want to take a chance on losing it, but she wore it almost all the time otherwise.

She was surprised that Mouse looked so young. From what Vincent had told her, he was in his mid-twenties, but he didn't look much more than sixteen with a mop of blond hair and big blue eyes.

"Vincent's crystal," he announced as she walked in. "Good crystal. Coulda made data storage chips, but Vincent said necklace was better."

"You've seen this?" she asked, touching the necklace.

"Mouse made it!" he announced with pride. "Vincent needed help. Mouse always helps. Mouse had gold wire, good chain."

"And it's beautiful," she said with a smile. "Thank you for helping him."

Dr. Wells greeted her and made introductions, and Mouse left a few minutes later.

"So that is your resident genius inventor," she commented as she sat down.

"That's Mouse. His language skills aren't very high on the charts, but sometimes I think that it is more that he just doesn't want to waste time with too many words."

"Vincent said that he was found when he was quite young."

"Yes. One of our ship captains found him. He'd somehow gotten aboard the ship, foraging for food, I think. He was small, and we estimated his age at about five years. He'd obviously been on his own since he was very young, or at the very least, he'd been grossly neglected. He had no language then.

"Vincent was about fifteen at the time, and he took Mouse under his wing. For a long time, the only person Mouse trusted was Vincent, and he was the only person who could get near him."

“How did he come by the name Mouse?” she asked.

“Vincent started noticing that during the night, the boy would disappear from his bed, but he was always back in the morning. So, one night he followed him. He was going to the diner and stealing food. It wasn’t as if he wasn’t getting enough to eat during the day, but he was so used to being hungry and doing that just to stay alive, that it was a hard habit for Vincent to help him break. He was quite feral when he first came to us. It took several years, but Mouse eventually started to speak. We were all surprised that once he learned to read, he proved to be quite brilliant.”

“Where does he live?” Catherine asked, expecting to hear that maybe he was living in a group home or with someone.

“He’s living in one of the duplexes on the south side of town. He lives on one side, and his friend Jamie lives on the other. She keeps an eye on him and makes sure that he comes up for air long enough to eat meals and bathe. Sometimes, she has to remind him what behavior is acceptable and what isn’t. At least now, he remembers to put clothes on before he leaves his house. That wasn’t always the case, early on,” Dr. Wells added with a chuckle. “So, to what do I owe the pleasure of this visit?”

Catherine opened one end of the tube and pulled out the large certificate. She unrolled it and held it up so Dr. Wells could see it.

“I thought you might like to frame this and hang it in Town Hall,” she said.

Dr. Wells took it and carefully read all of it.

“So, we are officially and legally responsible for this planet now,” he stated. “Yes! This will definitely need to be displayed in a prominent place.”

She handed him a folder with the other papers.

“Those are just the originals of the digital copies I sent you a month ago.”

“We will have to get Mouse to work on opening the vault in the basement of Town Hall,” Dr. Wells said. “It’s an old-fashioned one that opens with a numeric combination. It would be a good place to store these and some of our other official papers.”

“What kind of papers?” she asked, curious. “Don’t you keep digital records?”

“We do, but there are some things that people just like having to lay their hands on. It’s mostly land records, marriages, births, and deaths so far. We have it all on computer, but it’s also on paper, recorded in books.”

“Like keeping an old Family Bible,” she observed.

“Something like that,” he agreed. “But maybe just a little more like the Registration books kept in the parish churches in England a few hundred years ago. We record everything in the books then give the people involved a birth certificate or a marriage certificate. People like to have those things.”

“I’ve still got a paper copy of my birth certificate and my degrees and licenses,” she told him.

“Do you have them with you?” he asked. “You could hang the degrees and licenses in your office.”

“No, they are back in my apartment on Earth,” she said. “Maybe I’ll send for them.”

I want to stay, she thought. But should I if Vincent doesn’t ask me to? Why am I so unsure after last night?

Catherine was on her way to her office, when she heard Jenny calling her.

“Where are you going?” Jenny asked when she caught up with Catherine.

“To my office,” Catherine said.

“Do you have a minute?” Jenny asked.

“Sure, what is it?”

They’d reached Town Hall, and Jenny followed Catherine across the lobby and into the office. When Jenny closed the door behind them, Catherine knew that it must be serious.

Catherine sat on the small loveseat that was against the wall and patted the seat next to her.

“Sit, and tell me,” Catherine directed.

Jenny sat, took a deep breath, then blurted it out.

“Devin has asked me to marry him,” she said in a rush.

“That’s fantastic!” Catherine exclaimed, reaching out and hugging her friend. “Congratulations!”

“Well, I haven’t accepted him yet,” Jenny was quick to point out.

“You haven’t? Why not? You’re head over heels!”

“Well, you know how I’ve always wanted that big, fancy wedding? With the Chuppah, Seven Blessings, and everyone yelling Mazel Tov when he breaks the glass - but they don’t usually do religious ceremonies here. They’ve got their own way of doing it.”

“Is that any reason not to say yes?” Catherine asked. “Maybe you can drag him back to Earth sometime and do it over again your way.”

“That’s a possibility,” Jenny conceded thoughtfully.

“Just how do they do it here?” Catherine asked. “I haven’t gotten to that part yet. Can it be adapted somehow?”

“Well, it’s all very private, just between the couple,” Jenny explained. “One asks the other if they want to get married, and if the other person says ‘yes,’ then they can do it right then, or at some other time in the future. They just kind of say their vows to each other, and it’s pretty much whatever they want to promise each other.

“Then they throw a party or a family dinner, and they invite the important people from both sides, and they make an official announcement... sort of. They introduce each other to the other’s family and friends as their husband or wife. Everyone congratulates them, and at the first opportunity, they go to Town Hall and sign the book.”

“That must be one of the books Dr. Wells mentioned earlier,” Catherine said. “But I don’t see how that has to exclude some of your traditions.”

“How’s that?”

“Well, both your parents are gone, so not having someone to escort you to the Chuppah won’t be an issue. You could still use the Chuppah; make your introductions from there. I could escort you to it, or maybe Mary, since she’s kind of been your teaching mentor since you’ve been here. You could do a gathering at Vincent’s, since his place is bigger than the guest house. You could even still have Devin break the glass, and I’m sure that if I yell ‘Mazel Tov’ loud enough, others will take the hint and do the same. When you go to sign the book, it could be like when you sign the marriage contract at the synagogue.”

By the time Catherine finished talking, Jenny was smiling.

“You’re right,” she said with a happy sigh. “The only thing I wasn’t looking forward to was the fancy dress and all the stress of planning a wedding, but I can still have the parts I want and not what I don’t want.”

“Then go and tell the man ‘yes’ and let’s get to work planning this!” Catherine said with a laugh.

Jenny gave her a quick hug and left at a trot. She left Catherine with a smile on her face.

Catherine found the tablet she’s been using to read Casamia law and dropped it in her bag. She had some suggestions, but she needed to read over what there was first. She also wanted to read over their marriage laws and traditions, so she could advise Jenny or any of the other women who needed it.

V

Vincent and Devin had accomplished a lot in just a few hours. The only thing they had left was cleaning the pool. Vincent said he’d finish it once the excess water from the storm was drained.

“Has Jenny given you an answer yet?” Vincent asked as they worked.

“She hasn’t talked to Cathy yet. She said she would today.”

“I thought she loved you,” Vincent said, perplexed.

“She said she does. But when I asked her, she asked who performs the ceremonies here. That was when I described our tradition. She seemed to be a little... I don’t know... disappointed, I guess,” Devin said.

“But she didn’t say ‘no,’ did she?”

“No, she just said she wanted a little time.”

“Maybe she’s been looking forward to one of those fancy white weddings that Mary has described,” Vincent suggested.

“That could be it,” Devin agreed. “Maybe I should tell her that we can break from tradition and do something along those lines.”

“You might try that,” Vincent agreed. “Some of the other women in that group have done some things a little differently. Father says that all it really takes for you to be married here, is that you make promises to each other that you intend to keep, and that you sign the book.”

Devin reached out and slapped Vincent on the shoulder. “Thanks, Brother,” he said. “I should have known you’d straighten me out. Jenn said something about coming home for lunch, so I’ll see you later.”

Vincent was smiling and shaking his head as he walked into the house. He crossed the kitchen and went into the living room and smiled when he saw Catherine’s robe and nightgown under the coffee table. He picked them up and took them to her room. He walked back outside and sat on one of the patio chairs.

Devin’s announcement had started a train of thought that he didn’t think he was going to be able to derail anytime soon.

Devin was going to be married; nearly half of the women who had arrived with Catherine were in relationships. Some had married, and all of them had decided to stay, even if they didn't find someone.

But what does Catherine want to do? He wondered. She's talked about staying, but she hasn't said that she is absolutely going to stay. Is she waiting for me?

C

Before she left Town Hall, Catherine stopped and sent a message to Vincent and asked him if he wanted her to stop and pick something up from the diner.

"Yes, please. I forgot all about food. I'll get some groceries after lunch."

When she asked him if he wanted anything special, he told her to surprise him. That made her laugh as she wondered what he would think of dessert before lunch.

She found Vincent on the patio outside the living room, and she left the bags with him.

"I didn't get drinks," she called back over her shoulder. "Do we have anything here?"

She dropped her things on the couch and went into the kitchen.

"Only some beer Devin left and water, at the moment," he said.

She walked back out with two open bottles of beer, two glasses, plates, and eating utensils.

Vincent had moved to the table and was setting out the food.

"I got enough to share," she pointed out needlessly.

"And enough for dinner too, from the looks of it," he said.

They both sat and started passing the food back and forth.

Catherine told him about meeting Mouse, and he told her what Devin had told him about asking Jenny to marry him.

"I'm pretty sure Jenny has already said 'yes,'" Catherine assured him. She explained why Jenny had hesitated. "I think we've figured out how she can keep some of her traditions and still be in keeping with Casamia's."

Catherine had hoped that talking about Devin and Jenny's plans might prompt Vincent to say something, but he didn't.

After they were done eating, they cleared the table and put away the leftovers.

"I'm going to go over to the market," Vincent told her. "There are enough leftovers from lunch to make a meal for dinner, but we ate the last of the eggs and bread for breakfast this morning."

"Would you like me to come with you?" Catherine asked, stifling a yawn.

"Why don't you go take a nap," he suggested with a smile. "You didn't exactly get a lot of sleep last night."

This time, Catherine followed her instincts and went to him and kissed him.

"Ah, but it was worth a little lost sleep," she told him with a wink. "But I could use a nap." She covered another yawn, then laughed.

Vincent surprised her when he picked her up and started walking toward her room. He set her on her feet next to the bed and bent to kiss her.

“If we didn’t need to get some food in the house, I would love to join you.” He kissed her again, then turned and left the room.

Catherine stood, shaking her head.

Cool, calm, and collected one minute, and the hot the next.

She kicked off her shoes and stripped down to her underwear before crawling into the bed. She was asleep in minutes.

V

Vincent wondered what Catherine would have done if he’d decided to stay and ‘nap’ with her, instead of going to the market.

When he walked into the market, he found himself reaching for one of the larger wheeled carts rather than the small basket he usually used.

Cooking for and feeding more than myself is a lot more interesting, he thought, as he walked through the large building on the southern side of town.

“I’m going to need to borrow one of these carts, to get all this home,” he told Rebecca, who was in charge of keeping an eye on things that day.

“Get one of the children to bring it back,” she suggested, as she checked his name off her list of authorized shoppers.

“Is Catherine on your list?” he asked before he turned to leave.

Rebecca ran her finger down both columns of her list then flipped the page up to check a second page.

“I don’t see her name,” she told him. “She probably hasn’t said whether or not she plans to stay, yet.”

Maybe she’s not planning to stay, he thought to himself, as he absently walked up and down the aisles. *Or Maybe she wants time to think like Jennifer did. I should probably not do anything that she might see as pressure.*

C

Catherine woke to the smell of something delicious. A quick glance at the clock told her that she’d been asleep for almost three hours and that it was nearly dinner time.

She dressed quickly, splashed some water on her face, and went out to the kitchen to see what the wonderful smell was.

“What are you cooking that smells so divine?” she asked as she entered the kitchen.

“Roast chicken, stuffed with onions and basted with herb butter, herb roasted potatoes, and mixed vegetables. There is flan for dessert.”

“Where did you learn to cook like that?” she asked, as she peeked through the oven window.

“William. All of us have worked for him at some time or another. And he teaches anyone who wants to learn.”

Vincent had set the table on the back patio. It was dusk, and he lit candles before serving dinner. There was even a bottle of wine from the planet’s winery.

But Catherine was a bit puzzled. Vincent had set a very romantic table, served a delicious meal, but he’d said very little while they ate. He asked how her day had gone, told her that the pool and the hot tub were clean and all the work around the house was done. He even mentioned that he had replanted the uprooted shrubs and hoped that he could save them.

When they were done with dinner, there was no lingering at the table to talk; Vincent was all about cleaning up and putting away the leftovers.

Catherine helped, and they were done quickly.

“Do you cook, Catherine?” he asked, as he closed the dishwasher door and turned it on.

“A few things,” she said. “I can do breakfast stuff, omelets, French toast, pancakes, bacon, that sort of thing. And I learned how to cook a few dinner items, like pot roast. But with everything usually coming out of food fabricators, at home and on ships, I’ve gotten out of practice. Maybe I should go spend some more time with William and get him to teach me a few things.”

“He would love to do it,” Vincent told her.

“I thought that we might watch something on the vid tonight,” she suggested, as Vincent turned off the kitchen lights.

“I’m sorry, Catherine. I have to go over my lesson plans for the rest of the week. The storm break will be over tomorrow, and I have a couple of classes scheduled.” He turned and went to his office, leaving Catherine standing in the middle of the dark kitchen.

V

Vincent had just lied to Catherine. He no more needed to go over lesson plans than he needed to repaint the house.

He’d told her that because if he’d spent the evening with her, he knew that they’d wind up in bed again and that he would likely beg her to stay. And he knew that he couldn’t do that. He concluded that she had to make that decision, and if she decided that she had a life to live and it wasn’t here on Casamia, he would accept it. He’d already made the mistake of telling her he loved her, even though he wasn’t sure if she even heard. He didn’t want to compound it by asking her to stay.

He knew that she loved him, he could feel it every time she looked at him or got anywhere near him, but he didn’t want her to give up her life or her career to bind herself to him. He was sure that she would eventually regret doing it and resent him for asking it of her, especially if it turned out that he couldn’t give her children. He’d watched her working with the children. He sensed that she wanted children, and he knew she was good with them.

He stayed in his office with the door closed until he was sure she’d gone to bed and was asleep.

His sleep that night wasn't good; he woke more than once and found himself reaching for Catherine. It had only taken one night of sleeping with her in his arms to convince him that he was going to miss her very much when she left.

C

Catherine had no idea what was going on with Vincent. He'd barely spoken to her in almost a month. The romantic dinner the day she'd given the certificate to Dr. Wells had made her think everything was just fine, but then he'd spent the evening holed up in his office while she soaked in the hot tub, hoping he'd join her. She's finally gone to bed and read until she fell asleep.

Living under the same roof with him was becoming incredibly stressful. She spent her days helping Jenny plan the ceremony or in her office at Town Hall, or out talking to people who wanted legal advice, but she spent all her evenings alone. She'd even taken to eating at the diner before she went back to the house.

This has got to stop, she told herself as she went in search of Jenny.

Jenny was stacking tablets in her classroom.

"Got a minute, Jenn?" Catherine asked from the open door.

"Sure, what is it?"

"I just need to talk, and I need to know who is in charge of assigning lodging?"

"The lodging manager is Olivia. Her office is on the second floor. But why?"

"That's what I want to talk about."

Jenny sat on the edge of her desk and motioned Catherine to one of the student desks.

"Something is up with Vincent," she said after she was seated. Luckily, it was one of the desks for the older students, and she fit on the chair.

"What do you mean?"

"He's stopped talking to me. I don't know what is wrong. We had a nice evening during the hurricane, in spite of the storm, then we worked together the next day and then that night..." she hesitated. She knew Jenny told Devin everything, and she didn't know how much Devin already knew. "...Well, let's just say we got a lot closer. The next night he cooked dinner, and we ate in a very romantic setting, but he hardly spoke, and he's been like that ever since. He's hardly ever home. When I try to talk to him, I get very short answers; I feel as if having me in his house is disturbing him, so I think it might be a good idea to find another place."

"You're not thinking about leaving Casamia, are you?" Jenny asked.

"I kind of am," she admitted. "I mean, hanging around and having to see Vincent all the time would be difficult if this continues."

"But you can't leave. Devin and I haven't done our 'meet the family thing' yet," Jenny protested.

"Don't worry. I won't be leaving tomorrow. I've promised Dr. Wells that I'd look over some of their standard contracts, rewrite them where necessary and help them turn some of their rules and regulations into laws. That will take some time."

“But you will be leaving?” Jenny looked troubled. “You’ve never let a man get to you like this before.”

“I realize now that I’ve never been in love before,” Catherine admitted. “It seems obvious that Vincent has decided that I’m not what he needs or wants, and it would just hurt too much to hang around and watch him wind up with someone else.”

“Have you told him how you feel?” Jenny asked.

“Yes! Several times and he said he loved me, but then the chill set in. Maybe he just said it because of the circumstances. Now he’s definitely not acting like he meant it.”

“Just don’t jump ship too quickly. Take your time. I don’t want to have to communicate with you long distance. I like having you right next door.”

“Me too, Jenn.” Catherine stood and went to hug her friend.

A few minutes later, she found Olivia in her office. Olivia asked almost the same questions as Jenny.

“I’ve been staying in Vincent’s guest room,” she told Olivia, “and I’ve begun to feel as if I’m getting in his way. He’s a very private person, and I’m more or less invading his space.”

“Do you need a permanent place? There are a couple of small vacant houses on the south side of town. Or if it’s only temporary...,” she looked up at Catherine with a raised eyebrow, “...there’s room in the hotel.”

“I think the hotel will do,” she told Olivia. “I have a couple of projects to complete for Dr. Wells, then I’ll probably be leaving a short time after.” She didn’t mention Jenny and Devin’s *wedding*. She wasn’t sure how many people knew.

“Then it’s easy,” Olivia told her. She reached into her desk and pulled out a small card with a number written on it. “This is actually a very nice small two-room suite, and since you are the only person staying in the hotel, you can have it. It’s on the top floor. Turn right out of the elevator and go to the end of the hall. This is the room number. It’s unlocked, but if you prefer to lock it, there are instructions for keying it to your thumbprint on the back of that card.”

“Thanks, Olivia. And would you do me a favor and keep the fact that I’m thinking about leaving to yourself until I get a chance to tell a few people.”

“Of course, Catherine.”

Catherine headed back to Vincent’s to collect her things. She hoped she could be out before he came home. He’d been coming back pretty late every night. She always traveled light, so packing was an easy task.

She was packed and left the luggage by the front door in the hall, then she went back to the kitchen to leave a note for Vincent. She dropped her backpack and briefcase on the counter and picked up his grocery list tablet.

She was typing when she heard the front door. She looked up as he walked into the kitchen.

“Is that your luggage by the door?” he asked, in an almost accusatory tone, eyeing the backpack on the counter.

“It is,” she said, abandoning the note. She set the tablet down and started across the kitchen toward him.

He avoided her, stepping around her and going into the living room, where he sat on the couch with his back to her.

“Where are you going?” he asked.

“For now, I’m going to the hotel. I have a few projects I’m working on for your father, but when I’m done, I’ll be heading home.”

She was shocked at his reaction. His hand went to his chest, and his head dropped to the back of the couch.

“You’re leaving?” he asked. He sounded as if he was in physical pain.

She walked a little closer but didn’t move in front of him.

“I don’t think there’s anything here for me,” she stated. “Once I go over your standard contract forms, then I’m sure that Devin will be able to handle it. There’s really not much need here for a lawyer.”

“But you said you would stay,” he protested, finally turning to look up at her.

“I said that when I thought *someone* might want me to stay,” she told him, working to keep her voice firm. “Apparently, I was mistaken.” She turned as if to leave, and he called her back.

“Catherine. There is plenty here for you to do. There is always a need for mediation...,” he began.

“That’s not good enough,” she said, not turning around. “If you don’t want me to leave, then tell me. All you have to do is ask me to stay.” She crossed her arms in front of her but kept her back to him.

“Catherine... it’s not that easy.”

She turned back to face him and was surprised that he was back on his feet, although the couch was still between them.

“Yes, it is, and I don’t understand why you think it’s not,” she said. Her anger was starting to show.

“You said you loved me; all you have to do is ask me to stay.”

“I can’t!” he insisted adamantly. “I can’t ask you to tie yourself to me like that.”

“Then why should I stay?” she asked. “Just so I’ll be here if you get horny and want a night in the sack?” She knew she sounded crude, but it was a question she needed an answer to. “You can’t have it both ways. I won’t stay here for your convenience. I *want* to spend my life with you. I *want* to be tied to you. I *want* to wake up with you every morning and go to sleep with you every night. Not just when you feel like it. If you aren’t ready for that commitment, then fine. I’ll go; I have a life to get on with. But if you want me to stay... *all you have to do is ask*... Tell me what you want.”

She turned quickly and was almost to the front door, when Vincent called after her.

“Catherine, please. Don’t go... I want you to stay... to stay here with me. Please.”

When she turned, he was standing in the doorway from the kitchen. She launched herself into his arms and almost knocked him down she hit him so hard. His arms went around her, and he buried his face in her neck.

V

It had been a long day. He’d scheduled a field trip for his botany students, and they’d been wandering in the woods that surrounded the town since lunch. He hadn’t been sleeping well, so he was unusually tired when he finally made it back to the house just before sunset. He’d been home late every day for the last month, and he’d seen very little of Catherine. She was usually in her room by the time he got home, and he was gone in the morning before she got up.

He walked in the front door and noticed suitcases in the hall.

When he walked into the kitchen, he saw Catherine's backpack and case on the counter, and Catherine was typing something on a tablet.

"Is that your suitcase by the door?" he asked, quickly realizing that he sounded angry.

"It is." She dropped the tablet and started walking toward him.

He moved away from her as quickly as she moved toward him. He went to the couch and sat with his back to her. He wanted to invite her to sit, but the Bond told him that she was in no mood to negotiate.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"For now, I'm going to the hotel," she answered. "I have a few projects I'm working on for your father, but when I'm done, I'll be heading home."

Her words sent a wave of shock and pain through him. It felt as if someone had stabbed him in the chest.

"You're leaving?" He barely got the words out.

She walked a little closer but didn't move in front of him, and much of what she said after that point was lost on him. He was too immersed in his pain.

She's leaving me, was the only thing he could think.

"But you said you would stay," he protested, finally turning to look up at her. It was completely opposite of what he'd been telling himself for the last month, and he knew it was a feeble protest, especially when he didn't really have anything to add. He liked having Catherine in the house with him, knowing she was close, but knew he wasn't being fair.

She kept talking. And he knew that he responded, but he wasn't even sure what he'd said.

Finally, what she was saying started to register. "If you don't want me to leave, then tell me. All you have to do is ask me to stay." She crossed her arms in front of her but kept her back to him.

"Catherine... it's not that easy," he protested.

She turned to face him.

"Yes, it is, and I don't understand why you think it's not," she said. He could feel her anger in the Bond, but she was still in control. "You said you loved me; all you have to do is ask me to stay."

"I can't!" he told her. "I can't ask you to tie yourself to me like that."

"Then why should I stay?" she asked. The Bond told him that she was fighting, but he wasn't sure what it was. Was she fighting just the anger or sadness or despair? Or all of it? Her feelings were so chaotic he couldn't tell. "Just so I'll be here if you get horny and want a night in the sack?"

He was shocked at the way she put it but knew he owed her an answer.

"You can't have it both ways. I won't stay here for your convenience. I *want* to spend my life with you. I *want* to be tied to you. I *want* to wake up with you every morning and go to sleep with you every night. Not just when you feel like it. If you aren't ready for that commitment, then fine. I'll go; I have a life to get on with. But if you want me to stay... *all you have to do is ask*... Tell me what you want."

Vincent was shocked at the ultimatum, but it did spur him to action, and he followed her into the hall. She was almost to the door when he called out to her.

"Catherine... please... Don't go... I want you to stay... to stay here with me. Please." He was praying that she would listen... and come back to him.

Before he could even take another breath, she had turned and was in his arms. She hit him so hard and fast that he had to step back and catch himself. His arms tightened around her, and he buried his face in her neck.

C

Catherine was amazed by the relief she felt when he said the words. She'd never been the type to give ultimatums, but she'd never loved anyone like she loved Vincent. She'd had the feeling that he needed a push of some kind, but she'd been praying that she wasn't pushing too hard or going too far.

When she rushed to him and his arms closed around her, she knew she'd done the right thing, and she breathed a sigh of relief as his lips met her neck, and then he worked his way up to her mouth.

This kiss was different from all the rest. It was a little desperate on both sides, as if they both realized how close they'd come to letting the other walk away.

She was even more surprised when, after the kiss ended, he swept her up into his arms and carried her into his bedroom. He sat her on the bed, and she was reaching up to wind her arms around his neck and pull him down beside her when he pulled away, turned, and walked out of the room

What the...? "Vincent, what are you doing?" she called after him.

He was back in seconds, and he had all her luggage. He dropped it by the door, then came back to her and sat down next to her.

"I'm moving you into this room," he informed her as he put his arms around her again. "And since you were already packed, it just made it easier."

This time his kiss was gentler, more seductive. Catherine leaned back against the pillows and pulled Vincent down next to her as they continued.

Finally, they both had to breathe, and Vincent drew back, leaning on his elbow next to her.

"Something is bothering you," he said after a moment.

She was thoughtful for a moment. "It's just that I feel as if I owe you an apology."

"An apology? For what?" he asked, his brow furrowed.

"I pushed you... pressured you into saying what you did, and I said I wouldn't do that. I'm not sorry that you did, and I feel that you meant it, but I shouldn't have given you an ultimatum."

"You didn't give me an ultimatum," he assured her. "Not really, and the only push you gave me was to make me realize that if I didn't speak up, I was going to lose you forever. I'm still not sure that I deserve you, but I can't let you go."

She rolled onto her side so that she was facing him. She reached over and caressed his cheek, then took his hand.

"Vincent, you deserve everything, all the same happiness, and fulfillment as anyone else. You love, and you deserve to be loved in return. I believe in you; who you are now and who you will become in the future. I love you, and I promise to love you until my last breath and beyond. I accept that you aren't perfect, but then, neither am I. I promise that I will be by your side through all of our life together; your happiness is my priority. You are my lover, my teacher. You are my other half. I

promise to love you, honor you, respect you, and encourage you through everything that comes. I've read that love is magic, and I am more than a little inclined to agree." She stopped talking and kissed his hand. "I love you."

Vincent's eyes had gone big at her words.

"Do you realize what you are doing?" he asked, not sure if she did, although the Bond told him she was confident and resolute.

"I do," she told him with a slight smile. "You can take it as you want; do with it what you will."

Vincent was quiet for a moment, then he picked up where she had left off.

"They say love is magic, and I couldn't agree more. When I first met you, I wasn't prepared for the reality of you or what I felt for you. I was totally focused on you, trying to solve the puzzle of who you were. But then I realized that you weren't the puzzle, but that we, together, were that puzzle and that we had to work out how we fit. You deserve so much more than I can ever give you, but you have faith in me, so I must have faith in myself."

He continued, paraphrasing her words. "And I believe in you, who you are now and who you will become in the future. And more than that, who we will become together. I love you, and I promise to always love you; until I draw my last breath and beyond. I accept that you aren't perfect, but then, neither am I, but we are perfect together. I hope you realize that. I promise that I will be by your side and on your side through all of our lives; your happiness is my priority. You are my lover, my teacher. You are my other half. I promise to love you, honor you, respect you, and encourage you through everything that comes."

He finished his promise with a kiss also, but he bestowed his on her lips.

They snuggled together for several minutes while Catherine's mind flew.

"Does that mean what I think it does?" she whispered.

"It does if you want it to. I wouldn't have answered you in kind if I hadn't wanted it. You are my wife... if you want it to be so." He drew back and looked at her.

"And you are my husband," she stated. "Yes, that is so what I want."

He pulled her close and kissed her half senseless.

When she started to slide off the bed, he tried to pull her back.

"Where are you going?" he asked as she slipped free and stood beside the bed.

"You brought my luggage in here," she told him with an impish grin. "I thought I'd unpack."

"You can do that in the morning," he suggested, sitting up and reaching for her.

"I at least need to get a few things out... my toothbrush, body wash..." She teasingly backed up a few more steps.

"You can do that later when you need them. Right now, I need you here beside me."

Vincent was successful in getting his arms around her waist, and he pulled her into the V of his legs. He peeled her shirt off over her head and was untying the drawstring at her waist before she could think.

She started to laugh as she followed suit. He stood to help her along, and they were quickly successful in getting each other naked.

His arms loosened a little allowing Catherine to put her arms around his neck. She stretched up on her toes and kissed him.

Catherine had never been one to take charge in the bedroom, but she let her lover know what she liked and didn't like, and right now, she really liked the feeling her body pressed against Vincent's as they deepened the kiss.

"I love you," she whispered when they came up for air.

"And I love you," he answered.

Their kisses deepened, becoming needy and possessive. Catherine moaned before breaking away again to catch her breath. Vincent held her close, their lips almost touching. He'd once told her that direct contact enhanced the Bond, and she wondered what he was feeling. She wished the Bond was a two-way street.

She could tell that holding her wasn't going to be enough; he wanted more. The erection growing between them was proof of that. He leaned back to look down at her before he picked her up, and she wrapped her legs around his waist. He kissed her again, trying to get closer.

"This might be easier in bed," she suggested between kisses.

He looked a little stunned, then looked away.

"You're right. I'm sorry..." he began.

"Don't apologize," she told him as he set her back on her feet and reached to pull the covers down. "Please don't ever apologize for wanting me. I surely won't apologize for wanting you." She took his hand and pulled him onto the bed as she slid back.

Catherine gently pulled Vincent onto the bed, and he stopped kissing her long enough to move to a sitting position in the middle. He drew her into his lap until they were in almost the same position they'd been a few minutes earlier. She wrapped her legs around his hips and kissed him, still trying to get closer. She was the one in a hurry now.

Catherine sighed as he finally pushed himself into her. His thrusts were controlled, almost too controlled. He slid into her slowly and pulled out again over and over, driving them both crazy.

"Catherine, I can't get close enough to you." His voice was husky with emotion and passion.

Vincent had his hands on her hips, pressing closer. He kissed her deeply as if he wanted to kiss her very soul. Catherine returned his kiss, matching his passion, wanting it to go on forever. His tongue darted in and out of her mouth, keeping time with his languid thrusts into her body. Time seemed to disappear. For them, there was no one else in the universe.

"God Vincent, it feels so..." She didn't get the rest of the words out when he tilted his head to change the angle of the kiss.

Vincent must have been using the Bond because just when she needed air, he pulled back a little. "I know, I feel it too."

Catherine moved closer, her hands moving under his arms and up over his back. She had only known him a few months, but she knew him. And here she was, loving him and him loving her as if fulfilling destiny.

She moved to his neck and kissed him there, then rubbed her nose along his jaw while he continued to move inside her. It was heaven.

"I think I knew, almost as soon as I saw you and touched you that first time, that this was destined." He stopped moving but did not pull out of her. "But I was afraid to allow it."

"Why?" She moved her head back slightly so that she could look at him.

"History... my history." He looked away for a moment, then looked back at her.

She knew then what he meant.

"I told you before: I'm not Lisa. And I think you know now that I will never pull away."

"If we hadn't taken the chance..."

Her brow furrowed. "Go on?"

Vincent looked a little bewildered at her question.

"I think you already know, Catherine," he mumbled into her ear.

She moaned when he started moving again. Vincent grabbed her hips and pulled her to him. This time he let Catherine take over the rhythm of their lovemaking. She continued with their previous slow pace, but when she saw his pupils dilate and almost consume the blue, she knew he needed more. Leaning back slightly, she trailed her hands down his back, then forward over his hips. She brought one hand down to where they were joined.

She took control, and every time he slid in or out, she ran her finger gently along the top of his shaft until it disappeared again.

It was such a little thing, but Vincent gasped, throwing his head back, eyes closed.

"Ohhh Catherine..." he moaned. She could tell he was savoring the feelings she was creating.

She could tell he was trying so hard to keep a tight rein on himself, and she was doing her best to make him turn loose, just a little; let go and lose himself in the ecstasy. She wanted this to never end.

Catherine knew what he was trying to do, but she knew they were both almost there. They could no longer hold back. She started moving faster, her hands moving up to his shoulders. He felt so good, so strong in her arms. Vincent buried his head in the crook of her neck and scraped his fangs across her throat. He picked her up and gently laid her back on the bed, never breaking their connection or their rhythm. He took her hands, entwining his fingers in hers, and held them on either side of her head. He kept his face close to hers, kissing her and maintaining the intimacy.

He took over their loving, thrusting into her. She could feel that the need was growing more urgent. She met his every move, wanting to give him as much pleasure as he was giving her. Their breathing became ragged as they moved toward climax. Vincent pushed Catherine's hair back from her neck and buried his nose there, scenting her.

It was too much. As much as she wanted it to continue, she knew it wouldn't.

"Catherine..." he managed to get out before his fangs sunk into the skin of her neck, never quite breaking the skin. Catherine writhed under him in ecstasy as she came undone around him. Vincent kept thrusting, his own climax hitting him seconds later.

He finally collapsed on her, rolling to his side, pulling her with him. They lay there tangled together in the darkness, content to just hold each other close.

When their breathing finally evened out, Vincent reached over and touched the panel that turned on the bedside lamps. It had gotten dark out as they loved.

He pushed up onto his elbow and inspected her neck.

"What?" she asked.

"I bit you," he said rather sheepishly. "I was just making sure I didn't do any damage."

"Did you?" she asked, knowing he hadn't broken the skin.

"No, just a slightly reddened spot that should fade quickly."

He turned the light off and laid back down, curling his body around her.

"I don't have the words to describe how being with you makes me feel," he whispered to her. "I think I know," she said on a sigh. "I feel the same way."

V

Vincent was beginning to understand the concept of a Honeymoon.

"What are you reading?" Catherine asked, putting her arms around his shoulders from the back where he sat on the couch in the living room. It was midafternoon, and they were both finally fully dressed for the first time since the previous evening.

"I was curious about the origins of the term 'Honeymoon,' so I looked it up. It's an interesting concept.

"The word comes from the Old English 'hony moone.'" He read, pointing out the different spelling. "*H-o-n-y, a reference to honey, refers to the 'indefinite period of tenderness and pleasure experienced by a newlywed couple, and how sweet the new marriage is. Moone refers to the fleeting amount of time that sweetness would last. While honeymoon has a positive connotation today, it was first used as a term to warn newlyweds about waning love'.*

"The first recorded description of the word came from 1542 when Samuel Johnson wrote: '*The first month after marriage when there is nothing but tenderness and pleasure; originally having no reference to the period of a month, but comparing mutual affection of newly-married persons to the changing moon which is no sooner full that it begins to wane...*'"

"Wow, talk about being cynical," Catherine retorted. She leaned over his shoulder and continued to read where Vincent had left off. "*Honeymoon also has origins that date back to the 5th century, when cultures represented calendar time with moon cycles. Back then, a newlywed couple drank mead (the 'honey') during their first moon of marriage. Mead is a honey-based alcoholic drink believed to have aphrodisiac properties.*"

"I wonder if the distillery has ever thought about making mead," Vincent said thoughtfully, as he guided Catherine around to sit next to him.

"Ah, I don't think we need an aphrodisiac," she told him.

That made him laugh, and he felt as if he'd laughed more since he'd asked Catherine to stay, than he had his entire life. It felt good.

"I thought that we might go tell Father today," he suggested after a moment.

"Can we wait?" she asked hesitantly.

"Of course, but why?"

"I don't want to horn in on Jenny's day. She and Devin are doing their presentation ceremony in a week, and I promised to help her."

"You won't even tell her?" he asked.

"I'll tell her we've sorted out our problems and that I'm staying, but I won't mention anything else until after they have their day. Then we can do ours. We can do it however you want to do it. A big party like Devin and Jenny are doing, or a private thing with your father and Devin."

"Whatever you want, Catherine," he assured her. "I just want you to be happy."

Catherine kissed him and smiled.

“Then I really hate to say this, but Jenny and I are supposed to meet with Cullen this afternoon. He’s building the chuppah; it’s a kind of wedding canopy, for her. She wants to incorporate a few of her traditions into Casamia’s traditions. Instead of being married under the chuppah, she and Devin will make their announcement from it.”

“Is Devin going to break the glass?” Vincent asked.

“You know Jewish tradition,” she said with a grin. “Yes, he is, and I’m going to yell ‘Mazal Tov’ in hopes that everyone else will catch on and do the same.”

“I’ll see that he has a suitable glass. When are you supposed to talk to Cullen?”

“I’m supposed to meet Jenny in Cullen’s workshop this afternoon.”

“Then we have time for lunch at the diner,” he suggested.

“That sounds good. I could use one of William’s real burgers and a lot of fries,” she said, as they walked out hand in hand.

When Catherine got to Cullen’s workshop, Jenny wasn’t there yet, and while they waited, Catherine tried to explain to Cullen, who was human, but not from Earth, what a chuppah was. She was showing him pictures on the tablet she had with her.

“It’s a canopy a couple stands under during their wedding ceremony,” she said, pointing out things in the picture. “It’s a cloth or sheet, sometimes a tallit, supported by four poles. A chuppah symbolizes the home that the couple will build together. Jenny wants to stand under it while Devin makes the introductions.”

“And what is a tallit?” Cullen asked.

“It’s a kind of prayer shawl that is worn by Jews. I know Jenny has one that has been handed down through her family for a couple of centuries, at least. But I’m not sure if she’ll want to use it for this, since it’s so old.”

When Jenny came in a few minutes later, she was carrying a black and white cloth in her arms.

“That’s a tallit,” Catherine said to Cullen before turning to Jenny. “You’re going to use it? Are you sure? It’s so old. I’d be worried that it could be damaged.”

“My parents were married under it,” she told Catherine, “and so were generations of Aronsons back to the 19th Century. I’m not going to break that tradition now.” She held up some clips. “Besides, I have these. They will be attached to the poles, then the cloth will be held with these clips.” She turned to Cullen and handed the clips to him.

“How big does this chuppah need to be?” Cullen asked.

They went on to discuss the dimensions, and when they were done, the last question that he asked was, “Is it going to be a permanent structure or temporary?”

“Can you make it temporary for that location in Vincent’s yard, but sturdy enough to eventually be permanent wherever we finally wind up living? I thought that the wooden frame might make a nice arbor with some kind of climbing plant on it. We could put a bench under it and put it in our yard.”

Cullen smiled and nodded. “I think I know just how to do this,” he told her. “And I can have it ready in time for someone to pick it up the day before your ceremony.”

The women left as Cullen turned to his woodpile and started selecting lumber.

Jenny looked over at Catherine.

"You are positively glowing," she said with a grin. "I take it you and Vincent have made up your differences."

"We have," Catherine told her with a smile.

"So, when's the wedding? Can we make it a double ceremony?"

"Jenn, please. Give us time. Besides, I would never horn in on your day."

"You wouldn't be horning in on anything. We've shared since we first met. We could share this too."

Catherine just laughed and shook her head. She wasn't even sure if Vincent would want to make his announcement to the whole town like Jenny and Devin were doing. She was pretty sure that he would want a quieter ceremony.

They spent the rest of the afternoon with William, talking about food and whether or not they wanted to feed the whole town a full meal, or just finger food on a buffet.

"How about heavy hors d'oeuvres," Catherine suggested. "That would be kind of in between the two extremes."

"That would be easier to do and wouldn't take as long to set up," William agreed. "And you would only need a few people to keep the table stocked and the glasses filled."

"That might work," Catherine agreed. "People who are hungry could eat more, and those who aren't could eat less. What would you make, William?"

"I can guarantee that the people will be hungry," he said with a hearty laugh. "This bunch is always hungry. I could make small sandwiches with different fillings, cheese with crackers, bruschetta with tapenade. We have a fish here, which is very much like salmon, and after it's smoked, you can't tell the difference. I can fill small pastry shells with things. I also know how to make miniature empanadas and egg rolls. And don't forget the crudité platters with fresh vegetables and dips. Platters of fruit and cake cut into bitesize pieces. And don't worry, I know just the amounts to make. I feed these people all the time."

He sent Jenny off with reassurances that it would all be done and set up on Vincent's back patio in time for the ceremony.

"Oh my God," Jenny said as they were leaving the diner. "I didn't think this was going to turn into such a production."

"It's your *wedding*; you deserve to have as much of a production as you want." Catherine put her hand over her stomach and laughed as it growled. "I had a huge lunch just a little while ago. I can't believe how hungry talking about all those goodies made me." She hooked her arm through Jenny's. "Now, what are you going to wear?"

"Well, believe it or not, I have my mom's wedding dress with me."

"How long have you been carrying that around with you?"

"Since we left home that first time. You never know what is going to happen."

Catherine laughed. "What does it look like?"

"It's very simple," Jenny told her. "Mom and dad got married on kind of short notice."

"A little like you and Devin?"

"Yeah, actually, they planned everything in about a week too," Jenny said with a laugh. "Mom went looking for a dress, but none of the wedding dresses off the rack fit her, so she started looking at

other stuff. She found a pale pink silk dress that she fell in love with. It's sleeveless, but it came with a little jacket. It's about knee length on me and fits perfectly. I won't look overdressed. What about you?"

"Me?"

"You said you'd walk me to the chuppah, so you'll have to look nice too. Just remember, you can't look better than me," Jenny said with a wink.

"Oh, I think I can find a flour sack somewhere," Catherine said with a laugh.

"Cathy!"

"No, I have a couple of dresses with me. One is plain silk that buttons up the back. Nothing fancy, and it's dark teal."

"That color is gorgeous on you!" Jenny agreed. "It will be perfect."

Catherine got back to the house just in time to kiss Vincent goodbye.

"Father called an emergency meeting of the council," he told her.

"Is something wrong?"

"No. Elliott Burch just told him earlier today that he is leaving at the end of the month. Father wants everyone on the council to know and to see if we can come up with someone who is qualified to take over for him."

"How about his assistant, Lewis?" Catherine suggested.

"He's leaving with Burch. But I think any one of the other factory managers can handle the job. Burch trained all of them, and they are all competent."

"Hurry back. What about dinner?"

"I left something in the warmer for you. I'll get something with Father after the meeting."

Vincent left, and since she'd worked up such an appetite talking about the food for the ceremony, she went to find what Vincent had left for her.

After eating, she went and got her case and brought everything out to the table on the patio, and started going over her calendar, trying to come up with a work schedule since she was staying.

As she was looking at her calendar, she noticed something. She was supposed to have had a period over two weeks ago. Usually, she was on birth control and didn't have periods, so she hadn't even noticed. But when she was off birth control, she was very regular. It wasn't like her to be two weeks late!

She was on her feet, heading across the yard, when she made herself stop. She couldn't talk to Jenny about this before she talked to Vincent, but she had to make sure before she talked to Vincent.

Mary, she thought. She knows about these things. I know that, along with all the other stuff she does, she's also a midwife.

She wasn't sure when Vincent would be back, and she hoped she'd be back before him.

Mary didn't live very far. She was about halfway between Vincent's house and Dr. Wells'.

She knocked, and Mary answered the door quickly.

“Catherine. How are you? It’s lovely to see you.” She opened the door wider, inviting her in. “Is something wrong?” she asked when Catherine didn’t answer.

“Well, not wrong exactly,” Cathy said. She hesitated, then blurted out. “I might be pregnant. Is there some way to find out without going through Dr. Wells?”

“Um... OK. Well, yes. There is a blood test that we can use that can tell pretty early. Were you intimate at a time when you might have been able to conceive?” Mary picked up her sweater and led Catherine back to the door. “We have to go over to the clinic for this,” she explained.

“Yes, it was about a month ago. I just noticed that I’m about two weeks late for my period.”

“You still do that?” Mary asked. She knew that not many women did, unless they were trying to get pregnant.

“I’ve been traveling for months and haven’t had time to get another shot.”

They arrived at the clinic, and Mary walked in, flipping on lights as she went.

“All I need is a couple drops of blood,” she told Catherine. “It takes a couple of minutes. I mix your blood with a solution that changes color if the pregnancy hormone is present. The deeper the color, the farther along you are, and it can detect a pregnancy within hours of conception.”

Catherine watched as Mary prepared the solution. When she turned back to Catherine, she held a small lancet in her hand and held the other hand out to Catherine. Catherine placed her hand in Mary’s. Mary pricked her finger then let a little of the blood drop into the solution. She set that aside then handed Catherine a piece of gauze for her finger.

“Put some pressure on that, and it should stop bleeding quickly.” Mary went over to the chair at the desk and sat down. She motioned to the other chair.

“Thank you for doing this,” Catherine said as she sat. “I was in a bit of a panic.”

“I take it this wasn’t planned,” Mary commented.

“Most thought it wasn’t even possible,” Catherine mused.

“Vincent?” Mary asked, rather anxiously.

“Of course, it’s Vincent,” Catherine said, sounding a little put out. “There’s been no one else, in... Well, I’m not even sure, but I was on birth control, and it was ages ago.”

At Catherine’s words, Mary’s face lit up with a smile.

“You are right about no one thinking it was possible,” she said. “Father will be stunned.”

“No one ever thought to test him?” Catherine asked.

“Jacob was so convinced that a relationship with a human woman was not in the stars for Vincent, that he never included him in his genetic testing.” Mary looked at Catherine closely. “This is all right, isn’t it? I mean, you said it wasn’t planned, but you’ll be going through with it?”

“As far as I’m concerned, yes. But I don’t know how Vincent will react. There have been so many changes in his life lately...”

“He used to get a little overwhelmed by things when he was younger, but since he’s grown up, he does seem to take things in stride better. If they get to be too much, he might retreat into himself for a time or go down to the campground, but I think you’ll find him to be pretty easy going. He loves children.”

Catherine had to smile at that last part.

"I know he loves the children. I got the feeling that it was one of the reasons he was so into finding a way to bring women here for the men to marry. I don't think he wanted to run out of children to teach and mentor."

"Now he may have his own," Mary said with a smile as she stood and went to take the tube out of the rack where she'd placed it. She held it up so Catherine could see it. The liquid was clear and hadn't changed color.

"What color was it supposed to turn?" Catherine asked.

"Anything from pale lavender to deep dark purple, depending on how far along the pregnancy is. It looks like it didn't happen this time." Mary discarded the tube and started straightening up.

Catherine stood and leaned on the counter.

"I'm relieved, but in a way, I'm kind of disappointed too," she said. "And I never miss periods when I'm not on birth control."

"How long have you been off it?" Mary asked.

"When I was on earth it was too early to get another shot, then when I was back a few months ago, I could have, but things were in an uproar, because my boyfriend asked me to marry him and I turned him down. Then we broke up; I didn't even think to go to my doctor. But it's been a few months."

"And you had normal periods from that time?"

"Yes, three of them."

"You've been under a lot of stress lately," Mary pointed out. "Would you like a shot now? I can dispense it if you like."

Catherine thought for a moment, then nodded. "I think that would be a good idea," she said. "That way, it will be a choice that is left up to us, not nature."

Mary went to a cabinet for a hypospray and then to a small refrigerator for the vial. She filled the hypospray and went back to Catherine, who had pulled her sleeve up. There was a faint hiss as the medicine was dispensed, and Catherine put her sleeve back down. Mary put the hypospray into the tray to be cleaned and started tidying the area.

"Change and stress do seem to upset some women's cycles," Mary said as they walked to the door and out onto the sidewalk.

"I guess. All that traveling, worrying because I knew Vincent had been upset when he left Thesis, and the last month trying to figure out what was going on in his head." She smiled weakly. "I guess that could qualify as stress."

The two women walked all the way back to Mary's house in silence.

"Don't worry, Catherine," Mary said, reaching out with a hug for her. "Whatever happens will be what is supposed to happen. I don't know if that is reassuring or not, but it is the way I've found that things happen."

Catherine returned the hug.

"I know, and I agree, but I think that Vincent and I need to talk about this subject. I guess I could call this a wake-up call."

Catherine left and walked up the street to Vincent's house. She was back at the table, clearing up the mess she'd left when Vincent came in the front door.

"Is something wrong, Catherine?" he asked, as he crossed the room to take her in his arms.

“No, nothing. I just had a little... I’m not sure what to call it. I guess it was a bit of a disappointment.” She pulled free of his arms and finished putting the tablets and her computer in her case.

“I really need to reconfigure my office to make room for another desk,” he said as he watched her. “Or we could turn one of the guest rooms into an office for you.”

“No, a desk in your office will be fine, if you don’t mind me invading your space.”

“No, I love having you there while I work.” He took her hand and led her over to the couch. “Now sit and tell me what disappointed you.”

Catherine had considered keeping the almost pregnancy to herself, but she knew they had to talk about the possibilities. So she jumped right in with both feet.

“Well, earlier, I was looking at my calendar, working on a work schedule, when it dawned on me that I hadn’t had a period in a while.”

“Period?” Vincent said with a frown. “I didn’t think women put up with those anymore.”

“And I normally don’t, but with all the traveling I’ve done lately, I just haven’t taken the time to get another birth control shot. Mine kind of ran out several months ago. I’m so used to not having a period that it just slipped under my radar.”

Vincent was very quiet for a moment, staring at his hands. He looked up at her.

“And you’re pregnant, and that disappointed you.” It wasn’t a question but a statement. And he looked very hurt.

Oh, God! He’s misunderstood. She lunged for him and put her arms around his neck.

“NO! Just the opposite. I’m *not* pregnant, and even though we should talk about that big a step before we take it, I was still disappointed that I wasn’t.”

She felt Vincent’s rigid body relax in her arms, as he sighed with relief and leaned back, pulling her into his lap.

“But we don’t even know if I can father a child; at least we don’t know if it can happen with a human woman.”

“Then you need to talk to your father and get him to test you, just like he has all the other non-humans in the colony,” she told him. “Because, if you can, and you want to, then I want to have your babies... a lot of them.”

“A lot?” he asked with a surprised smile.

“Well, at least two or three,” she qualified. “A boy first, then whatever comes. I was an only child, and I’d always wished I’d had an older brother and a younger sister.”

“Then we need to have a boy, then two girls,” he said, playing along with her scenario. “But do you mind if I wait to ask Father to test me until after we’ve made our announcement?”

“As long as you do it. If and when a pregnancy happens, I don’t want it to be a surprise. I want it to be planned. Once I knew that I wasn’t pregnant, Mary gave me another birth control shot, so I’m good for the next 6 months.”

V

Vincent was in bed, holding his sleeping wife in his arms as he pondered Catherine's revelation from earlier. She'd thought she might be pregnant and had been disappointed that she wasn't.

He'd never really thought about being a father. His father had always told him that since he was so very different from humans, the chance that he could become a father in the usual way was very slim unless he somehow met someone like him. And since the chances of that happening were just as slim, he'd just put it out of his mind.

The only thought he'd had that was anywhere close to that, was that he shouldn't allow himself to develop feelings for a woman, because he didn't want to deprive one of the men of the privilege of having a wife or that woman of having children.

But, then along came Catherine. The thought made him smile. He knew that the Bond he had with her didn't go both ways, but it was almost as if it did because she knew just how to get around his resolutions. And now she was his wife, and they were talking about the possibility of having children. It was mind-boggling.

Catherine took a little time off every day that week to help Jenny plan for the ceremony. There were a lot of whispered conversations between the two women and with William.

Jenny insisted that she couldn't take time off school because it might give something away, but school was only part of the day, so she had afternoons to conspire with Catherine.

Vincent and Devin picked up the chuppah. It was in pieces, and Cullen came back with them to help them set it up.

"Is it supposed to rain tonight?" Jenny asked when she showed up with the tallit.

"This time of year, that's hard to say," Devin told her. "You can leave that here, and Vincent and I will attach it to the poles tomorrow."

"But it's not supposed to rain tomorrow?" Jenny asked anxiously.

"It hardly ever rains during the day here," Vincent assured her. "Unless there is a hurricane, Since we just had one, and we usually don't get them, I think that there is a good chance that we won't have one tomorrow and that it will be a lot like today."

Catherine came out and put her arm around Jenny and led her back into the house. Jenny was determined to keep some of her Earth traditions, so she was spending the night in their guest room. Vincent had a feeling no one was going to get a lot of sleep tonight.

"She'll be fine once this is all over. She's so into tradition," Devin said. "I don't know where it all came from."

"Does she know?" Vincent asked.

"I'm not sure," Devin said with a chuckle.

"Because of our traditions, we've kept our balance for many, many years.

Here in Anatevka, we have traditions for everything...

How to eat, how to sleep, even how to wear clothes.

For instance, we always keep our heads covered and always wear a little prayer shawl...

This shows our constant devotion to God. You may ask, how did this tradition start?

I'll tell you - I don't know. But it's a tradition..."ⁱⁱ Vincent recited.

"What's that?" Devin asked as he tightened one of the clamps that held a cross piece of the chuppah.

“Just a line from a very old musical play from the 1960s. We’ve been studying that art form in my theater class.”

“Well, I think, it pretty much says it. ‘*How did this tradition start? I’ll tell you – I don’t know.*’” Devin laughed. “I get the same answer when I ask Jenny.”

“Vincent,” Catherine began later. “It might be a good idea if you spent the night at Devin’s.”

“Why?” he asked as they finished the dishes from dinner.

“Because I don’t think Jenny is going to sleep much tonight, and I doubt that I will because she won’t. We will be up all night. You might stand a better chance of getting some sleep if you stay with Devin in the guest house.”

“You’re throwing me out of my own house,” he asked with a smile.

“No, but like I said. If you want to sleep tonight…”

“I understand. But I’ve never seen a woman so nervous about this step. She and Devin have been married for weeks; this is just a step in the process… Part of *our* tradition.”

Catherine hadn’t been in on his conversation with his brother earlier, but he could tell that she understood.

“And Jenny is all about tradition,” she agreed. Maybe if I can make her see that she’ll calm down a little.” She started to leave the kitchen. “Oh, do you have a glass for Devin to break?” she asked, turning back.

“A small plain glass, and a ring, even though we don’t exchange rings here. But don’t tell Jennifer about the ring. It’s supposed to be a surprise. And I looked up that thing you mentioned: The Seven Blessings, and I think we have that covered too.”

Catherine rushed back and hugged him, then headed off down the hall to the bedroom Jenny was using.

C

Catherine didn’t think that she was going to be this nervous when she and Vincent had their ceremony. She didn’t understand why Jenny was.

“Why are you so nervous? Technically, you and Devin have been married for weeks. This is just to make it official.”

“I know, and it’s not that. It’s the part where Devin introduces me to his family as his wife. What if his father doesn’t like me?”

“Jenn, you see Dr. Wells almost every day. He visits your class several times a week for story hour, and he’s never been anything but complimentary of you.”

“But that is without the complication of being involved with his son.”

“First of all, everyone knows you are *involved* with Devin. You moved in with him over a month ago. Jacob would have to be blind not to know. And believe me, Jacob knows everything that goes on in this colony.”

“What if he doesn’t like the idea of me living with Devin without being married?” Jenny said.

“But you are married. The marriage vows are a private thing between two people, remember. The only other requirement is that they show up at Town Hall and sign the book. This presentation thing is just a tradition, not a requirement. A tradition, just like your chuppah, tallit, and breaking of the glass.”

Jenny took a deep breath and suddenly looked calmer than she had in over a week.

“You’re right,” she said with a grin. “And I was raised hearing the word tradition all the time.”

“So, you should be able to handle this like a pro!” Catherine said. “And I think we should relax with a vid and go to bed early.”

V

“You know that thing you quoted earlier today? About tradition? Can you tell me more about it?” Devin asked later, when Vincent was settled in the small second bedroom in the guesthouse.

“I can do better than that,” Vincent told him. “We have the *movie*, as they used to call them, in the vid library. We can watch it.”

Three hours later, when the movie ended, Devin had a frown on his face.

“Didn’t you enjoy it?” Vincent asked when he saw his brother’s expression.

“Yeah, but... Is that the tradition that Jenn is talking about? I mean, that wedding was rather elaborate. We are doing nothing like that. Is she going to be disappointed?” Devin was obviously very worried. “And the ring. I had it sized for her ring finger on her left hand, but when Tzeitel and Motel were married, he put the ring on the index finger of her right hand. Is that how she will want to wear it.”

“Relax, Devin. I believe that is the Orthodox Jewish tradition. I don’t think that Jennifer is orthodox. If she was, she wouldn’t be marrying a gentile,” Vincent said, putting his hand on Devin’s shoulder.

That had Devin jumping to his feet and starting to pace.

“And that is something else. Is marrying me going to separate her from her family? Tevye said that Chava was dead to him when she married Fyedka.”

“Devin, you have to calm down! From what Catherine told me, both of Jennifer’s parents are dead, and again, I believe that is only if the person is Orthodox.”

It took the better part of the night, and the better part of a bottle of the vodka that was made in the Casamia distillery to get Devin calmed down enough to sleep. But then he was up again 4 hours later, stressing over the same things.

“He’s worse than Jenny was last night,” Catherine commented as she and Vincent watched Devin out in the yard, picking up stray leaves, straightening the tablecloth on the buffet table. He’d gone back five times and straightened the tassels on the tallit that he and Vincent had stretched across the top of the chuppah.

“I quoted something from one of those old musical movies you introduced me to. It caught his imagination, and he wanted to know more, so we watched it last night.”

“What did you watch?” she asked.

“*Fiddler on the Roof.*”

“Oh, my,” Catherine said with a laugh. “You should have quoted from something like *Westside Story* and watched that.”

“We should have watched *Music Man* or *Oklahoma!*” Vincent agreed. “How’s Jennifer?”

“She was fine once I told her what you told me. We both slept like babies.”

Vincent chuckled. “I should have stayed here last night.”

“No, if we were all back on Earth, you’d be Devin’s ‘Best Man,’ so it’s probably better that you kept him company,” she told him.

“I guess I couldn’t leave him to drink alone,” Vincent commented.

“And he’s hungover too?” Catherine laughed. “That’s just the icing.” She looked up at him. “How about you?” she asked.

“Alcohol doesn’t affect me like it does humans,” he told her. “I get relaxed, but I’ve never been able to consume enough to actually get drunk. And I’ve never had a hangover.”

“Lucky you,” she said. At that moment, the front door opened, and William led an army of people in carrying boxes and platters.

Catherine showed them to the tables and then went to find Jenny so they could get dressed.

C

When the guests started to arrive, Catherine was dividing her time between them and Jenny. At one point, Vincent had managed to drag his brother back to the guesthouse to get him to dress. Mary, who Jenny had confided in, was helping Jenny, and Catherine was greeting people.

She was intrigued when Dr. Wells arrived, carrying a large old-looking book under his arm.

“Is there someplace I can put this?” he asked, indicating the book.

She led him to the dining table and watched with interest as he set it down and opened it to a blank page.

“Is that ‘*the Book*’?” she asked, peering over his shoulder.

“It is; I just thought I’d save Devin and Jennifer a trip to Town Hall,” he said with a smile.

“Who told you?” Catherine asked. She knew that there were only a few people who knew the real reason for this gathering today.

“No one told me,” he said, as he walked around the table to her side. “But I wouldn’t be much of a father if I couldn’t tell when my oldest son was up to something, or when he was in love, for that matter.”

“But, Dr. Wells, they wanted to surprise you,” she protested.

“Then I’ll pretend to be surprised, but I doubt that anyone will be truly surprised today.” He peered at her over his glasses. “And don’t you think it’s about time you called me Father, or Jacob, like everyone else?”

Catherine smiled and give him a quick hug. "I'd love to."

Not long after that, Mary signaled to Catherine that Jenny was ready, then Catherine messaged Vincent. A few minutes later, she saw Vincent and Devin crossing the yard toward the chuppah.

"You ready to do this?" she asked, opening the door to the bedroom where Jenny was.

Mary gave Jenny a hug and hurried out to the yard.

"As ready as I'll ever be. And thank goodness you were able to talk some sense into me last night," Jenny said as they walked toward the open doors in the living room. "At the rate I was going, by now, I would be a wreck and probably throwing up if you hadn't talked me down."

They hugged just before they stepped out onto the patio, where Catherine took Jenny's hand and escorted her to the chuppah where Devin and Vincent stood. When they reached it, Catherine put Jenny's hand into Devin's. Vincent handed Devin something, then he stepped over to one of the tables and picked up two glasses of champagne before joining Catherine and handing one of the glasses to her.

Catherine slipped her hand into Vincent's as Devin began to speak.

"You are probably all wondering what all this is about." Devin looked surprised at the chuckle that ran through the crowd, then he turned toward where his father was standing. "Or maybe not. Anyway... Dad, Vincent, and everyone else, I'd like to introduce you to my wife, Jennifer Wells."

Jennifer smiled up at him, then turned to the crowd. "Cathy, my sister in all but blood, and the friends I came here with and all those I've made since I got here, I'd like to introduce my husband, Devin Wells."

Jennifer's smile got even bigger when Devin captured her left hand. He slipped a ring on her finger and kissed it.

Vincent bent and put a small glass on the paving stone in front of Devin, and Devin stepped on it and broke it.

"Mazel Tov!" Catherine shouted, holding her glass up to toast the couple. Vincent joined her, and just as she'd hoped, most of the others caught on and did the same.

Jennifer was beaming as they stepped out from under the chuppah to greet their guests. It became somewhat of a receiving line as everyone wanted to congratulate them.

The first person who hugged her and congratulated Devin was one of the women who had come there with them.

Her words were, "May you be blessed with love. May your admiration, appreciation, and understanding of each other foster a love that is passionate, tranquil, and real. May this love between you be strong and enduring and bring peace into your lives."

Catherine could see that Jennifer was a bit surprised at the formality of the words.

A few more people passed then Pascal stepped up. "May you be blessed with a loving home filled with warmth, humor, and compassion. May you create a family together that honors traditions old and new. May you teach your children to have equal respect for themselves and others, and instill in them the value of learning and making our world a better place."

By the time the third person gave their speech: "May you be best friends and work together to build a relationship of substance and quality. May your sense of humor and playful spirit continue to enliven your relationship. May you respect each other's individual personality and perspective and give each other room to grow in fulfilling your dreams." Jenny had caught on. She was getting her "Seven Blessings."

“May you be blessed with wisdom. May you continually learn from one another and from the universe. Together, may you grow, deepening your knowledge and understanding of each other and of your journey through life.”

“May you be blessed with health. May life bring you wholeness of mind, body, and spirit. May you keep each other well-balanced and grounded, and live long that you may share many happy years together,” was Mary’s blessing.

“May your life be blessed with the art and beauty of this world. May your creative aspirations and experiences find expression, inspire you, and bring you joy and fulfillment. May you find happiness together in adventures big and small, and something to celebrate each day of your lives.”

And finally, Vincent finished with, “May you be blessed with community. May you always be blessed with the awareness that you are an essential part of a circle of family and friends. May there always be within this group love, trust, support, and laughter, and may there be many future occasions for rejoicing in their company.”

Someone followed that up with another “Mazel Tov,” and they even heard a “L’chaim” from someone in the back as there was another toast to the happy couple.

“Now,” said Father, as he walked back toward the house. “I think it’s time you signed the book.”

“You brought it with you?” asked Devin, as they followed him into the house.

“I had a hunch,” was all Father said as he handed Jenny an old-fashioned fountain pen.

Jenny signed, then handed the pen to Devin, who signed under where she’d signed, then he added the date they had made their vows to each other. He then handed the pen to Catherine.

“Witness,” he said. “Then Vincent.”

Catherine signed and handed the pen to Vincent, who signed his name. He was about to put the pen down when Father spoke up.

“What about you?” he asked, looking, pointedly back and forth between Vincent and Catherine.

Catherine had been adamant about not stealing Jenny’s day, but when she looked over at Jenny, she was smiling and nodding. Catherine gave Vincent a slight shrug and a nod.

V

Vincent was surprised by his father’s question, he looked to Catherine for guidance, but Catherine was looking at Jenny with a surprised frown. But Jenny was smiling and nodding. When Catherine looked back at him, she shrugged and nodded.

He reached for her and drew her over into his side. He put his arm around her and looked across the table at his father.

“Father and Devin,” he said in a loud enough voice that it drew the attention of the other guests who were near. “I’d like to introduce you to my wife, Catherine.”

Catherine looked up at him adoringly before she looked over at Jenny.

“Jenny, who I agree is my sister in all but blood, and all my friends here, I’d like to introduce you to my husband, Vincent.”

Vincent bent down and kissed her. “I’m sorry I don’t have a ring for you,” he whispered.

Catherine’s hand went to the crystal that was beautifully displayed against the teal of her dress.

“Don’t worry, I don’t need one,” she whispered back.

Epilogue

C & V

They had been married for nearly six months, and Catherine was learning to cook. She and Vincent were splitting the cooking chores. She had been right about one thing, there wasn’t a lot for a lawyer to do on Casamia, at least not yet, but for the time being, she worked mornings, five days a week, and spent three afternoons a week in William’s diner helping out and learning to cook. The other two days a week, she taught civics to the older students. She was almost as busy as Vincent.

She was in the kitchen, getting ready to serve dinner when Vincent came in.

He called out a greeting before going straight to the bathroom to wash up. When he came out a few minutes later, he handed her a paper.

She took it and looked down at it. “What am I looking at?” she asked.

“It’s my DNA test,” he said, leaning on the counter next to her.

“What is it telling me?” she asked, trying not to let the excitement build.

He pointed to one line of black marks. “This is typical human DNA,” he told her, then pointed at the line of black marks above it, “and this is my DNA.”

“OK, I’m no geneticist, so what am I looking at?”

“Father says that my DNA is more compatible with humans than Kanin’s is.”

She looked up at him and broken into a grin. “And Olivia is pregnant with Kanin’s son right now.”

“And they’ve only been married and trying to get pregnant for a short time,” he added.

“So, we shouldn’t have a problem when we decide to start trying,” she said. “I’m due to get my next birth control shot next week. Should I keep the appointment or cancel it?”

“Are you ready?” he asked.

“I am!” she said emphatically.

“Then so am I,” he said with a smile as he pulled her into his arms. “Catherine, you are fulfilling all my dreams.”

“Then we are even because you are doing the same thing for me.”

She stretched up and kissed him.

End?

iSonnet XXIX, William Shakespeare

iiFiddler on the Roof, Tradition, music by Jerry Bock, lyrics by Sheldon Harnick