



## JANE'S WARLORD

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BERKLEY SENSATION, NEW YORK

They'd told him he wouldn't feel it when the energy beam ripped him apart. They'd lied. Baran Arvid experienced every burning nanosecond as the hot force blazed from cell to cell, searing him away. For an instant he felt himself falling into a cold, familiar peace. He'd died so often, it no longer came as a surprise.

Then the temporal beam reassembled him again, tormented muscles jerking, optic nerves overloaded by blinding purple starbursts. The dazzle-induced blindness triggered his every combat instinct into roaring protest, but Baran refused to panic. Instead, he locked his knees and concentrated on remaining on his feet while the afterimages faded from his vision.

Gritting his teeth, he ignored the spasming muscles, the nervous system reverberating with residual agony, the stomach fighting to turn itself inside out. He had no intention of showing weakness in front of that bastard from Temporal Enforcement.

"Well, we're still alive, so we didn't trigger a paradox," the bastard said. "Guess you two are supposed to be in the twenty-first century after all."

"Kiss my furry black ass, Enforcer," gasped the timber wolf, gagging violently. Apparently he was as sick as Baran. Freika, however, had the luxury of showing it.

"And you're speaking colloquial English already. Nice processing speed. I'm impressed," the Enforcer said. He'd refused to tell them his name. "How about you, Arvid? You look a little pale around the lips."

Baran blinked his tearing eyes until he could see again. Searching his new vocabulary, he found an appropriate phrase. "Fuck you."

"Very good. Suitably crude and American." The Enforcer laughed, his teeth flashing white, eyes metallic gold against the inky black of his skin. His hair fell in a mop of curly fire around an ebony face so stylized and perfect, he didn't look entirely human. Whoever had tinkered with his DNA had possessed a taste for the dramatic.

"Glad you approve." Baran turned to scan their surroundings for possible threats in a search that was so ingrained he was scarcely aware of making it.

He, the Enforcer, and the timber wolf stood in the shadow of strange Earth trees, a full moon riding bright and cold overhead. The air smelled of vegetation he didn't recognize, and unidentified life-forms buzzed and sang and scuttled all around them. Baran's aching



muscles coiled even tighter. Being on alien planets always made him twitch. Too many unknown threats, too many ways you could be taken off-guard. And Temporal Enforcement's habitual mind games weren't helping at all. "You might have warned me the damn Jump would leave me sick and half-blind."

The dark scales of the Enforcer's temporal suit rippled with an iridescent sheen as he shrugged. "You couldn't have done anything about it anyway. Everybody gets Jumpsick their first time. Though I suppose it would be even worse without a T-suit."

"You might say that." Baran pulled up his sleeve to display the slabs of muscle still jerking in his forearm. He wore nothing more than the twenty-first century garb they'd given him: shirt, pants, and a long rustling coat in some kind of hide. "I feel like somebody worked me over with the butt of a beamer rifle. Temporal armor would have been appreciated."

The Enforcer's smile was faintly taunting. "But then you'd have been able to Jump to whatever time you wanted. We can't have you wandering loose around the time plane causing paradoxes."

Freika lifted his head with a canine moan. "Like I'd want to go through that again anytime soon. I've had more fun being shot."

Though Baran could understand him perfectly, the words sounded oddly guttural compared to the wolf's normal liquid speech. Then again, it always took Baran a few hours to adjust to a new language after the comp had re-programmed his brain to speak it. Even his thoughts felt off-kilter as he automatically used American slang instead of the Galactic Standard he normally spoke. "Your vocalizer working all right?"

Freika hesitated, pale blue eyes going blank as he listened to the mental voice of his computer implant. Then he shook his furry head. "Everything's fine. Guess English is supposed to sound like two cats fighting in a very small sack."

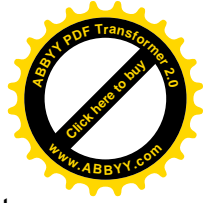
"You both speak as if you were born here," the Enforcer told them impatiently. "We don't give our operatives inferior language files. Or inferior anything else."

"That's reassuring," Baran said, pitching his voice to a tone of silken menace. He was sick of the agent's arrogance. "I'd hate to be ... disappointed." Artistically, he added his best lethal smile, as though imagining just what he'd do to anybody with that much bad judgment.

The Enforcer's gaze flickered. Despite his weapons, despite his training, they all knew he was no match for Baran. He was, after all, only human.

Baran was a Warlord.

His genetically engineered body was a good five times stronger than any human's, and his bones were so dense they were practically unbreakable. As if that weren't enough, a



neuroweb combat computer wove through his brain, giving him access to both a vast data bank and information from the sensor implants scattered throughout his body.

Thanks to his computer, anything Baran aimed at, he hit. And thanks to his strength, anything he hit went down hard. Add his well-deserved and very ugly reputation, and it wasn't surprising the TE agent swallowed visibly. "Oh, you'll be very pleased with our equipment."

"I'd better be. I'd hate to have to show you what I can do with mine."

The agent stiffened, finally realizing he was being played. "You do menace well, Warlord. I hope you can back it up with action, because the Jumpkiller is somewhere out here. And he definitely lives up to his reputation."

"So do we," Freika growled, sitting back on his haunches and wrapping his tail around his toes. "And we've pulled off enough combat missions to prove it."

"But we could finish this up faster if you'd tell us exactly what we're supposed to do." Baran glanced restlessly past the Enforcer to the primitive two-story wooden residence that stood just beyond the tree line. He knew the woman lived there, but that was about it. He hated going on missions blind, particularly when it was so bluntly obvious his superiors knew more than they were telling. "The more information we have, the better our chances."

The Enforcer gave him that dismissive glance again. "You know everything you need to know: your orders. Keep the Jumpkiller from gutting Jane Colby, preferably by killing him first."

"Look," Baran said impatiently, "you obviously have access to historical records from this time, or you wouldn't have known I needed to be transported here. And that means you have a pretty good idea what's going to happen over the next few days. I just want to know where, when, and how I'm supposed to kill the son of a bitch."

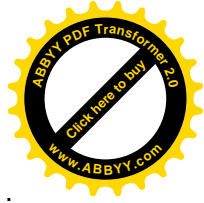
The agent curled a flawless lip. "How do you usually do your killing?"

"In a wide variety of ways." Which he was strongly tempted to demonstrate.

"Fine. Pick one."

"I don't go on missions blind, Enforcer."

"You do this time." Baran opened his mouth to protest, but the agent cut him off. "Warlord or no, Arvid, you're not Temporal Enforcement. You're not trained for time travel. The more information you have, the greater your likelihood of causing a paradox. So I'm not telling you a damn thing. Except this: get the Colby woman under control and wait for Druas to show up. When he does, finish it, and I'll take you home to your war."



Suppressing a violent impulse to plant his fist in the Enforcer's face, Baran folded his arms. "I'd be delighted. But considering he's got a T-suit and I don't, it's not going to be that easy. Even if I manage to corner him, all he's got to do is Jump somewhere else."

"And he will." Freika flicked an ear lazily. "He's not going to want to go against Baran if he can avoid it."

"We've already taken care of that." The agent bent and fished around in the pack that lay between his booted feet. He straightened, holding something small that he handed over to Baran. "Suit neutralizer," he explained as the Warlord examined the intricately filigreed ring. It was set with a red gem cut into complex facets that shattered the cold, pale moonlight into sparks. "When you get close enough, press the stone against the Jumpkiller's suit for several seconds. It'll short out the T-field generators, and he'll be trapped. Then you can take your time killing him."

Baran looked up. "Several seconds? How do I keep him from Jumping before the stone finishes the process?"

The Enforcer gave him a malicious smile. "I'm sure you'll figure something out."

Frowning, Baran slipped the ring on. The metal seemed to squirm as it automatically adjusted to the diameter of his finger. "Sounds like I'll need to stun him somehow. Got any weapons?"

"Are you insane?" The agent snorted. "Take anything with a tachyon power pack on a Jump, and you'd end up at the bottom of a crater."

"Believe it or not, I do have a knowledge of basic physics," Baran growled. "But they've been making weapons without Tach Packs for the past million years."

"Yes, they have. Which is why I suggest you look for one." He picked up the bag and handed it over with a grunt of effort. Baran accepted it, barely noticing the weight. "This has everything else you'll need: twenty-first-century clothing, currency, the usual equipment we "pack for jobs like this. Colby should be leaving in the next few minutes, since the Jumpkiller has already claimed his first victim in this time. Move in, establish your base while she's gone, and take her into custody when she returns. I'll see you soon."

"How soon?"

He smiled in a toothy display every bit as feral as Baran's. "For me, in the next few minutes, since I'm Jumping there right now. For you ... it'll be a little longer. Good hunting, Warlord."

Baran looked at him for a long moment. "Eventually," he observed in a silken voice, "we won't be on your turf anymore, Enforcer."



The agent's eyes widened at the implied threat. Then he recovered and snapped, "Step clear."

Baran and the wolf retreated a safe distance and turned their heads away. Neither had any desire to get caught in the backwash of a Jump.

Even through closed lids, Baran could see the white-hot glow of the temporal field blooming from the agent's T-suit. It intensified, growing brighter and brighter as residual energy danced in stinging waves over his skin. Thunder cracked, and a hot wind blew into his face, smelling of ozone.

When he opened his eyes, the Enforcer was gone.

"You know, you could probably have forced that little prick to tell us more," Freika said as the echo died. "He found you pretty unnerving." He grinned a canine grin. "But then, so many do."

Baran shrugged. "True, but I don't care to end up before a Temporal Court for assaulting an Enforcer. We'll just have to—" He broke off as exterior lights flashed on around the woman's home.

They turned warily. A wooden door opened, swinging outward rather than sliding into the wall as it should. Jane Colby walked out, moving in an intriguing, long-legged saunter that made Baran's eyes narrow with interest. Even across the distance that separated them, he saw her look in their direction and frown. She must have heard the sonic boom of the Enforcer's Jump. He tensed, wondering if she'd come investigate.

Then she shook her head and turned to get into a boxy, wheeled vehicle parked beside the house. It produced a startling roar and a cloud of petrochemicals that lingered even after it backed up, turned around, and rolled off on its thick tires.

"No wonder this planet's a polluted pit, with millions of those things everywhere," Freika commented, watching its running lights recede.

"They'll invent gravlev eventually," Baran said, hoisting his new pack. The long hide coat of his twenty-first century garb swung around his calves as he started toward the house. "Come on, let's get to it."

When they reached the front door, he drew a slim metallic needle from the interior pocket of his coat. Crouching, he inserted it into the lock set in the door's round handle. The forcepick vibrated slightly between his fingers as it sent out a precisely shaped force field that filled the space intended for a key. The field rotated, tripping the primitive tumblers until the lock clicked open.

Patiently Baran used the same procedure on the second lock, the one the computer called a deadbolt. Once it, too, clicked, he turned the knob and pushed the door open.



Moving as one, he and the wolf vanished inside.

Damn, she hated murders.

Jane Colby got out of her SUV and slammed the door, aiming a brooding stare at the swaying strip of yellow plastic strung across the yard. She sometimes felt she'd spent her entire life staring at crime scene tape, waiting to find out how someone had died.

Hunching deeper into her windbreaker against the April chill, she walked to the tape and studied the small home that stood some distance beyond it. Strobing blue light from the patrol cars parked along the street rolled across

the house's neat brick face, casting unnatural shadows between the azalea bushes. Beyond backlit lace curtains, the silhouettes of sheriff's deputies milled around like guests at a morbid party.

In the distance a dog barked in a frenzy at the K-9 team that searched for the killer. Jane could hear the cops' radio chatter through the portable police scanner in the depths of her purse. Their voices sounded grimly subdued. She listened absently, hoping for that rising note of tension and adrenalin that would mean they'd found something.

The hissing rumble of an approaching car drew her around. Stepping back out of the roadway, Jane threw up a hand to shield her eyes against the blaze of its oncoming headlights.

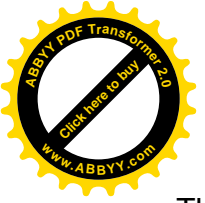
God, she hoped it wasn't family. She'd lost count of the times she'd watched people race toward a scene, eyes wild and tears streaming as police ran to stop them before they saw something they shouldn't. Jane never failed to feel a twist of pity as she listened to the desperate, heartbreaking argument she'd heard over and over, "But it's my..." Wife, husband, father, mother, brother, sister, daughter, son. The relationship changed, but the horror and suffering was always the same, whether it was a car accident, a fire, a fatal fall. Or a murder.

But murders were the worst.

Jane pitied the victims for the terror and agony of their last moments, but she also knew their suffering was over. It was the survivors who really bothered her, because their pain was only beginning. She'd interviewed enough of them to know it never really ended, even years afterward.

But when the primer-flecked Trans Am simply slowed to a stop, she relaxed. Family always slammed, on the brakes and jumped out running. The blond driver leaned across to roll down her passenger window and eye the patrol cars lining the street. "What's going on?"

Jane shrugged. "Evidently somebody's been killed."



The woman's interest took on an avid edge. "Yeah? What happened?"

"They haven't told me yet."

"You family?"

"No, I'm a reporter for the Trib."

The blonde's expression chilled, and Jane saw the silent judgment in her eyes. Vulture. "Guess I'll read about it in the paper, then."

"Guess you will."

The Trans Am pulled off in a gust of exhaust, its tail-lights receding into the darkness.

At least it hadn't been family. Jane knew she'd have to talk to them eventually, but she liked to give survivors at least a few hours to adjust to the shock. Back in Atlanta she'd often been forced to interview them before the bodies had even cooled. Sometimes you got more that way because their defenses were down, but she'd always felt it was dirty journalism. People deserved a chance to process the massive shock of a murder without someone working them over for a quote.

She'd even considered stopping the survivor interviews altogether now that she'd become the publisher of The Tayanita Tribune in the wake of her father's fatal stroke. The Trib only came out three times a week, so any big crime was often old news by the time it made the paper anyway.

The trouble was, without the emotional content from survivors, people read crime stories as a kind of horrific entertainment. Interviews gave families a chance to describe the person they'd loved, to transform him from another faceless victim to a person in the public mind. For Jane, that meant an opportunity to bring the tragedy of murder home to readers who had become numb to it.

Which was why she was standing alone on a country road at midnight when she didn't go to press for two more days.

As for the nagging awareness that a killer might be somewhere out here, too ...

She wasn't going to think about that.

Baran and Preika searched Jane's house with speed, silence, and a ruthless efficiency that left nothing untouched—or visibly disturbed. Unfortunately, there was nothing to find. There was no trace of the Jumpkiller's presence, not even his scent. Kalig Druas had not been here. Yet.



The search did, however, tell Baran it wouldn't be easy keeping him out once he did make his appearance. Every room had fragile glass windows that would take very little effort to break, assuming that the Xeran didn't simply Jump inside. If they left Jane alone for even a moment, Druas could easily slaughter her before they even knew he was there. Which meant Baran and Freika would have to stay with her at all times, whether she bleed it or not. And she wouldn't.

Unfortunately, she had no more choice than they did. Baran himself had another monster to kill back in his own time, but Temporal Enforcement had made it clear this one had priority. Never mind that General Jutka's death would leave the Xeran forces in disarray and save the lives of thousands of Vardonese soldiers. TE wanted its mission taken care of first.

He'd argued he could make the Jump after he'd assassinated Jutka, but the Enforcer hadn't bought it. Once he saved Jane, the agent told him, TE would return Baran to the very moment he'd left his own time so he could kill whomever he chose. Since nobody ever argued successfully with Temporal Enforcement, that plan had trumped his.

The whole thing was irritating. Baran was a Warlord, not a time traveler. He didn't even work for Temporal Enforcement. But TE had found a three-hundred-year-old video recording of him during Druas's rampage in this time. They'd decided if a Warlord had been in the twenty-first century, it was because TE itself had put him there, presumably to stop the Jumpkiller. So they'd drafted Baran to make sure he got back here to do whatever he was supposed to do. Otherwise, they all risked creating a catastrophic paradox, and nobody wanted that.

He only wished he had a few more details about what was actually going to happen. Unfortunately, TE seemed to operate under the theory that once you got where you were supposed to be, you automatically did whatever you were supposed to do.

With a grunt of impatience, Baran continued his inspection of Jane's primitive kitchen. When he turned a round knob on her cooking unit, one of the flat metal spirals on top of it slowly began to heat. His computer implant sent him an image of a metal container sitting on the spiral, bubbling. Might be interesting to experiment. Once when the rations had run low, he'd cooked a treehopper over a captured Xer Tach Pack.

You could do all sorts of things with a Xeran power pack, if you were creative enough.

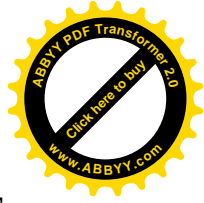
"Baran, it's under the bed," the wolf called from upstairs. "I see its eyes glowing."

"Leave it alone, Freika." He turned the coil off with a snap of his wrist.

"But I'm hungry!" A snarling feline yowl rose. "And do you hear the way it's talking to me?"

"Eating the target's cat would not create the first impression we want." "Just one bite?"





“No. This is going to be difficult enough as it is without you snacking on her furry friends.”

“How could anybody be friends with a cat?”

“Well, for one thing,” Baran said, walking into the living area, “it’s soft, it purrs, and unlike some I could name, it doesn’t mouth off.”

Despite the genetic engineering that gave Freika sentience—and the computer implant that made him a four-legged library—Baran’s partner still had a timber wolf’s personality and instincts. Though useful in combat, those characteristics could be maddening the rest of the time.

“A nibble?”

“No.” Deciding not to trust Freika’s questionable self-control, Baran bounded up the stairs.

It seemed to be his week for saving. Earth residents from predatory time travelers.

Beyond the crime scene tape, a storm door creaked open and closed with a metallic ban£. Jane turned as the detective in charge of the case stumbled down the steps. Good, she could get the details of this thing and go home.

Before she could open her mouth, Tom Reynolds leaned over and heaved the contents of his stomach into the budding azalea bushes.

Jane winced. ‘That’s so not a good sign,’ she called. ‘What’s bad enough to make you toss your crullers,

Tom?’

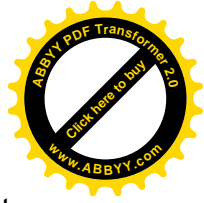
Reynolds jerked upright, a flustered expression on his round face as he hurriedly wiped his mouth. ‘Tell me you didn’t take a picture of that, Colby.’

She grinned and toyed suggestively with the digital camera that hung by a strap around her neck. ‘Would I do that to you?’

“Not if you ever want another exclusive.” Reynolds started toward her, shooting a hunted look around the taped-off perimeter of the yard. “How about TV? Are those vultures from WDRT here?”

“Nope,” Jane said. “I’m the only one circling at the moment. I figure it’ll take DRT another twenty minutes to get here from Deanville.”

“That’s something, anyway.” Tom pulled a wadded napkin out of a pocket and wiped his mouth, aware of Jane’s sympathetic gaze. If he had to catch a reporter on this nightmare



so soon, he could have done worse. She'd never misquoted him, and if he asked her to withhold something to avoid blowing a case, she did it.

And God knew she was easy on the eyes. Jane's long-legged walk was a pleasure to watch even at a crime scene, and he'd caught other cops telling her intriguing cleavage more than they should. Her face always made him think of magazine covers: high cheekbones, big brown eyes, and the kind of wide, sensual mouth a happily married man had no business fantasizing about. With all the dark hair tumbling in curls around her shoulders, she could have done shampoo commercials. Yet he'd never seen her use her looks. She didn't even seem aware of them.

The nasty taste in his mouth suddenly reminded Tom he must have the breath of a frat boy the morning after a keg-ger. He grimaced, shoving aside the memory of just why he'd lost control of his lunch. He really didn't want to throw up again, especially not on Jane's pretty boots.

Observant brown eyes softened as she looked at him. "I've got a bottle of water in the SUV. Want it?"

"Yeah." He sighed and admitted, "Taste in my mouth ain't helping my stomach any."

She nodded and walked to her red Explorer. Tom trailed behind to watch appreciatively as she opened the door and bent over, fishing around in the cooler she kept in the backseat. Jane's heart-shaped ass in those snug jeans would draw any man's eyes, married or not.

She turned and handed him a bottle dripping with ice and condensation. "Thanks," he said, twisting the cap off as he headed for the nearest ditch to take a swig and spit.

Jane watched him sympathetically. Reynolds wore the standard Southern detective uniform of chinos, blue sports coat, and blue oxford cloth shirt, slightly frayed at the collar because he had to watch every dime of his salary. His tie featured Wile E. Coyote and a ketchup stain. Short and balding, he had a face like a bulldog, with a little too much lip and weary blue eyes.

He was the best cop she'd ever known. She shook her head. "Tom, I've seen you eat barbecue after working a house where a guy had been dead three weeks. In July. What's bad enough to make you abuse the

azaleas?"

The detective didn't answer, his eyes shifting away from hers to scan the street. Since the nearest neighbors lived half a mile away, the only illumination came from the cars' blue lights. Judging from the tension in his shoulders, he didn't find the darkness reassuring. "Why are you here, Colby?" he asked finally. "You don't go to press again until Monday. Call me tomorrow and I'll fill



you in.”

“Can’t work a murder over the phone, Tom. Besides, when have you known me to miss a crime scene?”

He sighed and hunched, his gaze now flicking warily across the trees that ringed the wooded lot. “This is not a good time to be conscientious, kiddo. I don’t like you out here all by yourself.”

Jane gaped at him. Despite their long friendship, it was an unprecedented comment for him to make on the job. Police normally treated reporters little better than the vultures he’d called the WDRT crew. The last time a policeman had expressed concern over Jane’s safety, she’d been standing in the middle of 1-85 watching a guy with a sniper rifle hold off thirty cops. The officer’s actual words had been a snarled, “Get your ass back, lady.”

“Okay, what the hell is going on? I’ve never seen you this spooked.” She reached into her purse to dig out a notebook and pen.

Tom shrugged and spat another mouthful of water into the ditch. “We have an unidentified female victim.”

She looked up from her notebook. “Who lives at this address? That should narrow things down.”

“Maybe, but she doesn’t exactly look like herself at the moment. We know she’s a Caucasian blonde, but that’s about it.”

Jane grimaced. “That doesn’t sound good.”

The detective’s eyes went bleak and flat. “Believe me, it’s not.” Something in his tone sent a wave of icy prickles washing over her skin.

Whatever had happened in that house, it wasn’t a typical Tayanita County murder.

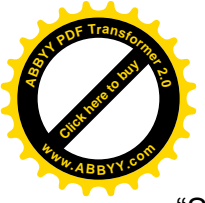
Roaring case of the creeps or not, Jane reminded herself she had a job to do. She shook off her unease, cleared her throat, and asked, “Cause of death?”

“Haven’t done an autopsy yet.”

Sometimes she thought it would be easier mining diamonds with her fingernails than getting details out of a cop. ‘Tom, don’t go technical on me. Gun, knife, fists, what?’

“That’s for the coroner to decide.” He took another swig of his water.

“Like mat ever stopped you before. Look, here’s a clue—if there’s a small round hole on one side and a big ragged hole on the other, that means she was shot.”



“Smartass. She wasn’t shot.”

“Okay, so what was she? Or do we play Twenty Questions until I guess right?”

“Why not? The rest of us are.” Giving his shoulders an uneasy roll, Tom admitted, “Looks like some kind of knife. Sharp.” His lips thinned. “Real sharp.”

“Sharp as in box cutter, or sharp as in steak knife?” Box cutters were the preferred weapon in certain nasty quarters because the blade was short enough for legal carry in South Carolina. In domestics gone bad, though, spur-of-the-moment killers tended to grab whatever they found lying around the kitchen.

Wearily he pinched the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger. “Butcher knife, maybe. Autopsy’ll tell us more.”

“So assuming your victim is the homeowner, how airtight is her significant other’s alibi?” If a woman was murdered in the rest of the country, her husband, boyfriend, or ex- was usually the one who did it. In Tayanita County those odds were a virtual certainty.

“We’re looking for him.” His voice dropped into a harried growl. “And praying like hell he did it.”

Jane straightened, reporter instincts immediately roaring into full cry. “This isn’t your standard redneck soap opera, is it?” she asked slowly. “This isn’t even I-caught-her-with-my-brother overkill. Twenty or thirty piddling stab wounds wouldn’t make Tom Reynolds heave his Ho-Hos. What’s inside that house?”

“The worst I’ve ever seen.” He started scanning the street again, blue eyes brooding. “Tell you one thing, though. We’d damn well better catch this son of a bitch. Quick. He enjoyed himself a little too much.”

“What makes you say that?”

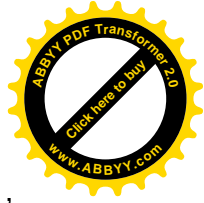
“No comment.”

She watched him a moment and tried again. “What’d he do to her, Tom?”

“Nothing anybody wants to read about over their Wheaties.” He sighed. “Look, I’ll have more for you by the time you go to press. Go home.” His mouth tightened. “And lock your doors.”

Sometimes asking stupid questions was part of the job. “You saying women in this town have a reason to be worried?”

Something in his expression made it all too easy to imagine what was inside that house. “Jane, everybody in this town has a reason to be worried.”



Baran banished Freika from the bedroom and sent him downstairs to keep watch. Jane's cat, thoroughly traumatized, did not stir from its hiding place even after the wolf was gone. When Baran crouched to look under the bed, the poor little beast hissed at him with such frazzled hostility he decided to leave it alone.

With a sigh, he rose to his feet, then paused when a flash of red caught his eye. A length of crimson silk lay spread across the bed's tumbled white coverings. Curious, he picked it up. The fabric seemed to wrap around his hand, soft and sensuous against his weapon-calloused skin. Shaking out its folds, he realized it was evidently intended to drape like a scarf over interesting feminine curves.

Neglige, his computer whispered in his mind, then added synonyms. Nightgown, lingerie, sleep-wear.

Neglige. Even the word sounded sensuous. But as he appraised the gown's whisper-thin folds, Baran realized how small the woman who wore it must be. The top of her head would barely reach his shoulder.

He frowned. If Druas ever got his hands on her, she'd have no chance at all.

The thought made his fingers tighten on the silk. A delicate trace of musk drifted up from the fabric, teasing his senses. Baran inhaled more deeply, letting his hyper-keen senses process it. Perfume, some kind of chemicals his computer identified as being from the body cleanser she used, and beneath that, the woman's own unique scent. Intrigued-, he lifted the gown to his face and breathed deeper. His nose was almost as sensitive as Freika's, and each inhalation carried a wealth of information.

Now one deep breath told him she was healthy, young, female—and intensely, deliciously aroused. Startled, he sniffed again. The rich smell of desire was unmistakable.

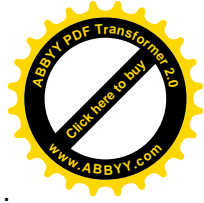
If he'd been able to slip a finger into her sex, she'd have felt like hot, slick cream. Just waiting for a man to... Baran swallowed.

What had aroused her? The only male scents he'd detected in the house were weeks old and confined to the living room. He was willing to wager she had no lover.

Though she obviously wanted one.

Pull up her image file, he ordered his comp. Obediently the implant created a picture in his mind.

Jane Colby wasn't the most exquisite woman Baran had ever seen; in his own time, genetic engineering had made perfect beauty commonplace. Yet there was an appealing warmth in the eyes that were simple human brown instead of the metallic shades fashionable back home.



She was also lushly female compared to the almost androgynous shape he was used to in civilian women. Her breasts rode high and rounded on her narrow rib cage above gently curving hips and legs that seemed to make up most of her height. She reminded him of the Warfems of his own kind, but without the tough, muscled build. The combination of curve and delicacy made her look both feminine and intensely sensual, as if she'd welcome passion instead of rejecting it.

Baran wondered what her soft pink mouth would taste like, how her breasts would fill his hands, if her skin would feel as silken as it looked. His cock hardened, going long and tight, behind his fly. With a soft growl of hunger, he rolled his head against the gown in his hand, drinking in her smell, the slide of the slippery fabric against his face, the rasp of lace. He imagined thrusting into her for the first time, feeling all that wet arousal gripping him, milking him....

It had been far too long since he'd had a woman. Days, weeks—he couldn't remember and didn't much care. All that interested him suddenly was this woman, this Jane Colby, with her pretty eyes and small, lush body.

He breathed in her scent again as his hunger spiraled, tightening in demanding coils around his balls. The same genetic engineering that enhanced his strength made his lust even more intense than a normal man's. Now that hot-burning need sent carnal images spinning through his mind—Jane, naked, on her back, on her knees, spread and ready for him, plump sexual lips slick with thick female cream....

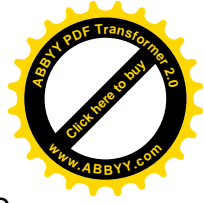
A rumble of hunger vibrating his chest, Baran opened his eyes and glared down at the bundle of red silk in his fist. He ached to open his fly and wrap the cool, slick fabric around his cock.

Better not. Jerking off in her negligee would send a worse message than eating the cat.

He took a deep breath. Blew it out. Fought for the discipline, the control, he'd learned with such difficulty, at such cost. He knew he couldn't afford this kind of lust on a mission, any more than he could afford blind rage. Violent emotion could get a man killed. The Xerans had taught him that when they'd murdered Liisa.

Hoping to distract his inconvenient libido, Baran glanced around Jane's quarters. His eyes fell on a thick sheaf of bound papers lying facedown and open across the sheets. A paperback book, the computer whispered, flashing him images of massive drums spinning words onto long ribbons of white paper. Restlessly he picked up the little book. The English language download he'd absorbed the day before allowed him to read the text.

She writhed, tugging at the silken ties that bound her to the bed as he delicately tasted the tender folds between her thighs. Any thought of resistance disappeared with each wet stroke of his tongue. She found herself begging for him and felt an instant's shame. Then she looked down and forgot everything else as he lifted his head and smiled, lazy and taunting, before he...



Baran blinked as his erection kicked behind the primitive metal closure of his slacks. So that's why her gown smells like sex. Unconsciously, his fist tightened around the fragrant bundle of silk. Her scent drifted up to his nose again, teasing. He licked his dry lips.

Helplessly drawn, Baran's gaze dropped to the bed. A new image appeared in his mind—himself, face buried between her thighs, breathing her scent, tasting her as she lay spread and bound.

No.

Why not? whispered a dark, suggestive mental voice. She dreamed of a lover. If he seduced her, wouldn't she be more inclined to cooperate, allow him stay at her side as her guardian as well as her bedmate?

And while he was there, he could have her however he wanted, however she wanted.

That restless thought blew apart his nascent effort at self-control. Goaded, he reached for his fly to free his aching cock.

No. He dropped his hand and balled it into a fist. He had to keep his mind on the mission. He couldn't afford to let her have even this much power over him. You know better, Arvid, he told himself savagely. The minute you let a civ get control, you're headed for disaster.

Another woman had taught him that lesson all too well twenty years ago.

Following an order he wasn't even aware of giving, his computer plunged him into memories so vivid, they might as well have been real.

Liisa was screaming. She never screamed. He tried to straighten, but the virus they'd used had infiltrated his computer and turned the implant against him. Now it held him paralyzed, bent, as helpless as if they'd locked him in chains.

Somewhere something hard struck human flesh. A male voice—Lieutenant Ullock?—grunted in that distinctive way Baran had learned to associate with a deathblow.

"Baran!" Liisa screamed.

He fought to go to her, fought as his heart thundered uselessly, fought until the blood pounded in his skull.

The only movement he managed was the slow roll of a tear down his cheek.

Shit. Baran shook his head hard as the twenty-year-old memory released its grip. The computer-induced flashback had done what it was intended to do: harden the resolve that was already pretty damn hard anyway.



No civ would ever have the chance to betray him like that again.

Jane Colby would do exactly as she was told, exactly when he told her to do it. If that meant he had to tie her up and fuck her brains out to gain her cooperation, fine. But even then he'd maintain a safe emotional distance.

Which didn't mean he couldn't enjoy himself.

The thought slid through his mind, carried on the black mood the memory of his team's death always inspired. Glancing down at the silky negligee still clenched in his fist, Baran felt a cold, dangerous smile stretch his lips. Maybe he'd have her put the gown on before he...

"Hey, Baran!" Freika called, snapping him from his erotic preoccupation. Claws clicked on the flooring as the wolf raced toward the stairs. "I see a vehicle's lights approaching. I think it's the woman."

"Stay downstairs and hide." Baran dropped the gown back on the bed. "I want to talk to her first." Freika could be terrifying to the uninitiated, and this conversation was going to be tricky enough as it was.

The click of claws stopped, then started again as the wolf trotted off, presumably to find some hiding place large enough for his hundred-kilo body. Good luck, Freika transmitted to him through their communication implants. Somehow I think you're going to need it.

Jane pulled into the paved parking space in front of her beige-and-white two-story contemporary. Turning off the SUV's engine, she stared uneasily into the thick woods surrounding the house. How many places to hide could a killer find among all those trees?

She could almost hear her father's ghostly sneer: Don't be such a little coward, Jane.

Squaring her shoulders, she got out and strode to the front door. Intensely aware of her own vulnerability as she unlocked it, she barely managed to control the nervous rattle of her keys.

Once the door was locked behind her again, Jane blew out a breath and walked across the foyer's parquet floor into the main part of the house. She'd left all the lights on when she'd gone out on the call; working murders always gave her a roaring case of the creeps. William Colby, of course, had considered that quirk further proof his only child lacked the Colby steel.

She set her jaw. Old news, Jane. For years she'd believed she had outgrown her obsession with her father. She'd done a damn good job in Atlanta, winning the respect of her peers and writing stories she was proud of. She'd even begun to believe in her own talents despite years of his verbal abuse.





But since returning home, it seemed Jane saw her father's disapproving frown everywhere she looked. Like the Cheshire cat's grin, it lingered.

Dammit, Jane, cut that out. Blowing out a breath, she made herself scan the living room she'd spent so much money to decorate. The rich cream leather couch and armchairs had not been cheap, and neither had the antique coffee table or the flat-screen high-definition television. Her journalism awards hung between original works of art she'd bought in Atlanta—here a watercolor of an old Southern mansion drowsing in the sun, there a pastel of a child in a straw hat, the sharp, vivid blue of her eyes skillfully captured in fine detail. The wall lamps had stained-glass shades, and the pale rose carpet was thick and plush under her feet. All of it was a silent statement of Jane's capability and success. ^

Take that, Daddy.

Okay, that really was pathetic. Dragging both hands through her hair, she sighed in disgust. Face it, girl, you can't win a war with a dead man. Hell, the only battle that counted was lost when you were ten. Deal with it.

Definitely time for bed. She always got maudlin when she was tired.

"Caller said his neighbor's beating his wife in the front yard," her scanner announced from her purse as she crossed the living room on her way to the stairs, feet sinking into the pile. "Said he's Code Five with a baseball bat. The female half is on the ground. One-oh-two Bridgemont Street. Better step it up, guys."

Typical Tayanita scanner traffic. Not the kind of incident Jane covered unless there was major trauma involved. Besides, she was so damn tired she wasn't going out again unless they caught the killer or he murdered somebody else.

The scanner fell silent. Jane could hear the refrigerator hum in the kitchen. Damn, the house was lonely. Maybe she should get a dog, assuming she could find one Octopussy could tolerate. Her seal-point Siamese was definitely not a canine fan.

A man might be a better idea. These days the closest she got to male companionship were the romance novels that were her secret vice.

Jane had always been too obsessed with her job to devote any real attention to finding a lover. And now that she was back in tiny Tayanita, her options had not exactly improved. Between reporting and running the paper, she never had time to go to any of the local bars, that being about the only place single men congregated in Tayanita. Assuming she could even find anybody there whose name she didn't regularly see on police reports.

Maybe she should get Reynolds to fix her up with a cop.

Nah, that'd never work. Cops viewed reporters with all the warmth Octopussy reserved for yappy little French poodles.



A firefighter, maybe. She liked firefighters.

Jane sighed, imagining warm, strong arms to wrap around her, a sympathetic ear to listen to her gripe about the school board or the mayor. Someone to hold her while she cried for a murdered woman she'd never met.

Somebody to ward off killers.

Paws thumped frantically in the hallway floor overhead. Jane looked up, pausing on the stairs as Octopussy flung herself from the top of the steps. She caught the cat automatically, wincing as her pet dug every claw she had into her shoulder.

Staring into Jane's eyes, Octopussy began complaining furiously in a mix of meows, growls, and hisses. Like most Siamese, she was convinced she could talk.

"What's got you in such a tizzy?" Jane asked, trying to give the animal a soothing ear scratch that was foiled when the cat jerked her head away. "Are you hungry, or do you want to go outside?"

Octopussy's feline gripes rose in volume and bitterness. Jane's mouth quirked as she stepped up into the bedroom. "Or is little Timmy trapped hi the well?" The Siamese swarmed up her shoulder and leaped off to head back down the stairs in desperate bounds. As Jane blinked in bemusement, the cat shot under the couch, leaving not so much as the tip of a chocolate tail visible. "Guess Timmy's on his own."

Muttering about inexplicable feline mood swings, Jane walked down the hall into her bedroom, reaching for the buttons of her shirt. All she wanted was to crawl back into the sheets with her book. She'd just gotten to the good part when she'd heard the murder call over her scanner.

"Jane Colby?"

Jumping with a muffled shriek, she stopped dead in the doorway, her heart stuffing her throat.

There was a man sitting in the armchair across from her bed.

In that first instant of startled terror, Jane saw only size and black clothing and some sort of vivid paint running along one side of his face. "Who the hell are you?" she demanded, clutching her chest with one hand as her heart banged against his fingers.

"I'm Baran Arvid," the man said, uncoiling from the chair. "You're in danger, Miss Colby. I've been sent to protect you."

Protect, hell, Jane thought, staring wide-eyed as he straightened to a height of at least six-foot-five. If I'm in danger, it's from him.



He wore a black cable-knit turtleneck that stretched across impressively broad shoulders. Black pants hugged his long, muscled legs, and soft dark boots covered his feet. A long black duster that smelled like leather fell in folds around his massive body, putting her uncomfortably in mind of Dracula's cape.

"Protect me from what?" She licked dry lips and remembered Tom's gruff warning earlier this evening: Jane, everybody in this town has a reason to be worried.

Oh, God, was this the killer? No way could she fight him off, not judging by the width of those shoulders. Hell, she wasn't sure Arnold Schwarzenegger could fight him off; the man looked like a human tank. Jane backed up another step. "And how did you get in my house?"

"I broke in." He studied her, his expression dispassionate, no doubt reading the terror that was probably written all over her face. "Don't look so frightened. I'm not the threat you need to worry about."

"Yeah, well, personally I don't accept reassurance from burglars."

He lifted a dark brow. "Even if their only intention is to protect you from a killer?"

Jane blinked. "Well, that's certainly preferable to being the killer."

The burglar smiled slightly. "I thought so."

"Just for curiosity's sake, which killer are we talking about?" she asked cautiously.

"Is there more than one?"

"You never know."

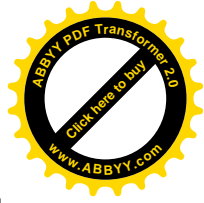
The smile expanded, flashing white and charming across his tanned face. Damn, a housebreaker with a sense of humor. "Actually, I'm referring to the man responsible for the murder you covered tonight."

"How do you know about that?" Jane thought of at least one way he could have gotten that information—he could have committed the killing himself. She took another step back.

"I have my sources." The burglar shrugged. "In any case, we believe the same man will eventually try for you." His eyes were wide and dark, long-lashed, startlingly beautiful. And hard. Very hard. "I intend to stop him."

Apropos of nothing, a thought pierced Jane's unease:

Damn, he's gorgeous. Not in a Gq-pretty kind of way, but in a primal, utterly masculine sense enhanced by his square-jawed face, aggressive cleft chin, even the beard stubble



darkening his angular cheeks. Adding a startling touch to all that rough masculine beauty, a strange design in iridescent red and blue swirled down one side of his face from forehead to cheekbone. Not paint, she realized. A tattoo, though she had never seen one so bright and vivid.

His hair added to the impression of elegant barbarism, falling straight and black around his shoulders. Something glittered against the midnight silk; small jeweled beads, braided into a single dark lock that swung beside one high cheekbone.

Staring up at him, it hit her suddenly that he was standing a lot closer than he had been. While she'd been gazing at him in besotted fascination, he'd been subtly stalking her.

Oh, God.

As Baran watched, the fear deepened in Jane's eyes again. He almost growled in frustration. For a moment there, he'd seen a trace of feminine response in her gaze, but now the panic was back. She had reason to be afraid with Druas after her, but her best protection from that threat was Baran himself. Which was why he couldn't let her run from him.

"I appreciate your sense of civic responsibility," she told him in an elaborately polite tone as she edged away, "but I think I'd rather depend on the local cops." "That wouldn't be wise."

She pointed toward the stairs. Despite her firm tone, her hand shook slightly. "Let me put it another way: Get out."

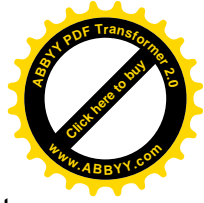
He shook his head and tried a wry smile. "I wish I could. I did have other plans for the next few days." Like the General's assassination, but he didn't think she'd find that particular detail reassuring. "Unfortunately, my superiors have ordered me to protect you, so it seems both of us are going to have to make the best of it."

"What superiors?" Her small pink tongue slipped out to moisten her full lips.

Baran was instantly reminded of that dangerously erotic red nightgown and its clinging scent of sex. A bolt of lust took him by surprise. He suddenly wanted to taste that mouth. And work his way down. He had to fight to keep his gaze from dropping to those pert, tempting breasts.

"What superiors?" she repeated, her tone sharpening, voice rising as her fear visibly increased.

"I can't discuss that." And he couldn't. The Enforcer had warned him repeatedly to keep Jane in the dark. Unfortunately, that presented him with a problem, since evasion wouldn't exactly win her trust.



Then again, neither would tying her up, but if she didn't start cooperating, he might have to try that next. And whatever her taste in reading matter, he doubted she'd like that at all.

Baran edged closer, making up the distance she'd put between them as his mind ticked through his alternatives. He had a set of force restraints in his pocket, but he'd rather try to charm her first.

Jane, however, was not in the mood to be charmed. "Yeah, well, I think the only one I need protecting from is you," she told him, obviously doing her best to bide her nerves under a shell of cool courage. "I'm not bluffing. Get out, or I'm calling the cops."

Baran frowned. He couldn't allow her to contact the authorities. Arousing their suspicions would make his job even more difficult. "That's not a good idea."

"Let's find out." Jane whirled and bolted for the stairs.

Baran growled a curse and lunged forward, grabbing her wrist and spinning her around. "No."

"Let go!" she snarled, and went directly for his eyes with her free hand, fingers curled into claws. She had to reach up to do it.

He snatched her hand out of the air and curled a lip in warning. The ferocity in his gaze would have instantly quelled a woman of his own time. Jane just bared her teeth and tried to knee him in the balls.

He barely sidestepped in time. "If you don't stop this, I'm going to put you in restraints!"

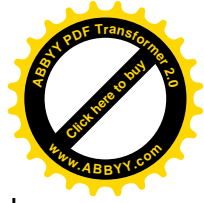
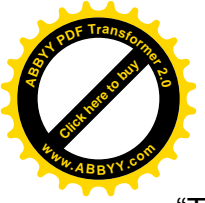
"Try it and draw back a nub!" She darted her head toward his hand, evidently planning to sink in her teeth.

Baran jerked out of range and put her wrists together, transferring them into the grip of one fist. "Fine. Restraints it is."

Jane threw herself back, trying to drag free of his grip, but he held her easily. Given his enhanced strength, there was no way she could escape. She struggled anyway, brown eyes blazing at him. "You can't do this, you son of a bitch!"

"Watch me." Maybe after he tied her up, she'd see sense. Baran reached for a back pocket.

"No!" she spat, and launched her knee at his crotch again. This time she actually made contact with his thigh, though she was the one who grunted in pain at the impact. "What are you, the Man of Steel? Dammit, let go!"



“That’s it!” Before Jane could kick him again, Baran used his grip on her wrists to snatch her off her feet, swing her around, and force her back toward the bed a few feet away. Ignoring her shrieks and kicks, he pushed her down on the mattress and dropped on top of her, flattening her with his greater weight. “Now. You’ll listen,” he growled, riding her slim body grimly as she bucked and fought.

“Do you have any idea of the kind of time you’ll get for this?” she gritted through her teeth, glaring into his eyes. “And don’t think I won’t press charges!”

Despite his anger, he felt a niggles of admiration. She might not know what a Warlord was, but she was perfectly aware he outweighed her by a hundred pounds. It was hard not to admire a woman who wouldn’t give up even when she was so obviously overmatched. “Calm down, Jane. I’m only trying to protect you.”

“Yeah, right, you’ve got my best interests at heart!” She squirmed. In contrast to her rage, her full, soft breasts pressed against his chest so tightly he thought he could feel the bumps of her nipples through her clothing. His cock hardened as he lay in the cradle of her long legs. “That’s obvious from the way you broke into my house and threatened to tie me up!”

His irritation took on an edge of heat. “Judging from your taste in reading material, I’d think you’d like that.”

She froze under him, her eyes going wide at the taunt. As he watched, a mortified blush spread up her face. “You read my book?”

Frustrated and aroused, he gave her his darkest grin. “Oh, yeah. Want to act any of it out?”

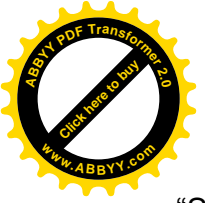
Great. Just great. Break-and-Enter Boy had been flipping through her romance novel, and now he thought she was easy pickings.

Jane fought angry tears. Her legs hung off the end of the bed, and the burglar’s powerful torso rode between them. He felt so damn big, so damn strong, so damn hard as he pressed her into the mattress. If he was the killer, she was dead.

But she still wasn’t a coward. “Creep,” she growled, feeling completely helpless, but damned if she’d show it.

He took a deep breath, visibly trying to rein in his temper. “I realize you’re frightened. I don’t blame you, but you’re in no danger from me.”

She licked dry lips. His dark gaze flicked to her tongue, tracked it with hot male interest. “Then get off.” To her shame, a quiver of arousal shimmered along her nerves. Damn, she thought. What kind of sick bimbo would find this a turn-on ?



“Stop fighting me.” He let more of his weight settle between her thighs. “Otherwise I’ll have to restrain you.” The heat in his gaze intensified, mixed with a cool calculation.

Staring into his handsome face, Jane suddenly noticed glowing striations of bright red ringing the soft, rich sable of his pupils. She stared. She’d never seen anything like that fiery shimmer in anyone’s eyes before. It was as if he wasn’t quite human.

He lowered his head until she felt his breath against her mouth, warm and spiced with some scent she couldn’t identify. “Do I have your word on it?”

Was he getting hard? Oh, God. Distract him, Jane thought. Stall. “Okay. Okay.” If she could lull him into believing she’d given up, maybe she could get a chance to escape. Her chances were certainly better than if he bound her to the bed. Or did whatever it was he was thinking about that put that look in his eyes. “You said ... you said earlier you had orders. From whom? What’s going on?”

He paused. “I was sent by the government.”

“Which government? I know every cop in Tayanita County, and you’re not local. Are you state? FBI?”

He hesitated again as if he didn’t even recognize the terms. Then his expression cleared. “I’m an FBI agent.”

So the Bureau’s new look is facial tattoos and shoulder-length hair? I don’t think so. But she had to convince him he had her fooled. If she stayed pinned under his massive body much longer, he might decide to do something about it.

She licked her lips again. He tracked the movement like a cat watching a mouse just out of reach. The red striations in those dark irises brightened, sending a shiver down her spine. Definitely time to get out from under him. “Okay. Let me up and we’ll talk.”

That hungry cat gaze flicked back up to her eyes. She tried to look defeated and submissive. Evidently she pulled it off, because he nodded slightly and levered off her. She sucked in a deep, grateful breath. He backed up a pace, watching her, his big body loose and combat-ready.

Jane eased off the bed, watching him right back. No way in hell was she going to get away with him eyeing her every move. She had to find a way to put him down before he decided to drop whatever game he was playing and get rough.

Unexpectedly his gaze softened. “I’m not going to hurt you, Jane.”

Damn, she wished she could believe that. At five feet eleven, Jane wasn’t used to dealing with men who were six inches taller. Her height had always made her feel she could hold her own with most “men, but her captor’s sheer size did not permit that illusion.



She needed a weapon. Scanning the room covertly, Jane spotted a cluster of bottles on her mirrored bureau. To distract him, she said, “This killer you mentioned.” She took a deep breath. His attention instantly flicked to her breasts. Jane fought the instinct to cover them. You’re wearing a perfectly adequate shirt, you twit, she told herself. You are not naked, no matter how he looks at you. “Who did you say you were sent to protect me from?”

He shook his head. “I didn’t say. His name is Kalig Druas.”

Okaaay ... Play along, Jane. “From the sound of that, I assume he’s not from around here.” She moved toward the bureau, trying to look casual.

“He’s not. What are you doing?”

She glanced warily over her shoulder. Crimson striations burned a bright warning in his hard, suspicious gaze as he watched her. “Brushing my hair,” she improvised, picking up the silver-backed brush. Yes, I’m the kind of bimbo who’d fight you one minute and primp the next. Work with me here. Think gullible.

Giving the brush a pass through her curls as if to restore them to order, she turned back toward the mirror and surreptitiously checked out the bottles, Beating him with one would obviously be a waste of time, but maybe... “So what does this Caleb Druis have against me?”

“Kalig Druas. He’s got nothing against you, other than that you’re female. He’s”—he hesitated, as though searching for the correct phrase—“a serial killer. He murders for entertainment. And profit.”

A chill slid over her. His expression was so intense and demanding, she almost found herself believing him. But if he was from the Bureau, why the hell hadn’t he told any of this to the local cops?

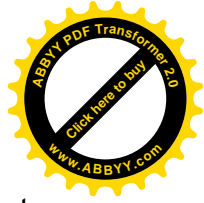
True, it was possible he had and Tom Reynolds just hadn’t mentioned it, but she didn’t buy that. The detective would have been a lot more specific in his warning if he’d thought Jane herself was a target of the killer.

No, this guy was playing some kind of sick game with her, because it was for damn sure he was no cop. She knew cops, knew the vibe they gave off, and he was something altogether different.

So if he wasn’t law enforcement, that made him the killer. And if she didn’t get the hell away from him...

Forcing her fear into a tight, controllable ball, she picked up a tube of lipstick, bending close to the mirror to apply it. His attention never wavered. Pretending to study the results, she reached for the big bottle of White Swan that had been a Christmas present from an





old boyfriend. Casually she uncapped the perfume. “So the Bureau sent you to protect me. Why do you think the killer is targeting me specifically?” She daubed the cap against her pulse.

“We’ve seized evidence that...” He stepped closer.

Jane spun and tossed the perfume into his face. His hand snapped out to snatch the bottle from her hand, but too late. The liquid splashed directly into his dark eyes. He fell back with a startled roar, both hands going for his face in an attempt to wipe away the burning perfume.

Jane shot past him and out into the hall to bound down the stairs three at a time. She sprinted across the living room for the front door. If she could just get to the SUV...

Something black and snarling sprang out of the darkness. She yelped and leaped aside, but it caught the hem of her flared jeans anyway, bringing her crashing to the carpeted floor hard enough to see stars.

Jane looked down to see what held her. And screamed with all the air in her lungs.

The biggest dog she’d ever seen clenched her jeans hem in fanged jaws. It looked more like a wolf than anything else—if wolves grew to the size of Saint Bernards. With another screech, she drew back her free foot.

“If you kick me,” a deep male voice said, “I’ll bite you. And then I’ll eat your cat.” Impossibly it seemed to be coming from the wolf, or dog, or whatever the hell it was.

She looked around wildly, but nobody else was in the room; the burglar was still upstairs.

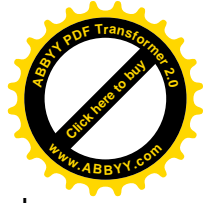
“I’ve got her, Baran!” the voice called. Jane thought she saw blue light flash in the fur around the wolf/dog’s neck.

“Good,” the man growled back. “Hold her.”

Hell. She considered planting a kick across the wolf’s furry black head despite the voice’s threats, but one look into that feral canine stare stole her courage. She licked her dry lips. “Who are you? Who’s talking?”

“Who do you think?” The wolf/dog’s mouth didn’t move when it spoke—its jaws remained firmly clamped on her hem—but she saw lights flash again in its fur. Looking closer, she saw what appeared to be a ring of glowing gems implanted directly into the animal’s skin. LEDs for some kind of speaker, maybe?

Her heart was pounding so hard, she could feel her pulse in her ears. She felt sick. “What the hell is going on here? What kind of game are you playing with me?”



“This is not a game, Jane,” the burglar said, stopping to flick on the light as he descended the stairs. “Not for us, not for you, and not for the man who wants to slit your throat.”

Feeling sick and hunted, Jane watched his approach. His eyes were swollen, the whites bright red and bloodshot. The glowing striations in his pupils had expanded until it seemed twin flames burned in his skull. The fury on his face turned her blood to ice. Oh, God, she thought. He’s going to kill me.

And those eyes... human eyes just didn’t glow like that. What was he?

“Damn, Baran, you stink,” the wolf/dog said, Jane’s pants leg still gripped in his jaws. “What did the little bitch do to you—and why did you let her do it?”

“I think she hit me with some kind of chemical weapon.” The burglar moved to stand over them. Even Jane wrinkled her nose at the choking floral stench. She must have splashed the entire bottle on him. “I underestimated her,” he said grimly. “I won’t do that again.”

He reached into a pocket of his leather duster. Instinctively Jane tried to jump up and bolt, but the wolf/dog jerked her hem so hard, she fell back on her butt. Opening her mouth, she drew in breath to scream.

“Shut up,” the burglar said, his voice so low and deadly she found herself obeying. She watched in suspended terror as he lifted something in one hand.

Even as Jane instinctively shrank against the floor, he pointed the object at his own face. A blue light shot out to play over his features. He waved it back and forth several times before running it over his chest and arms next.

“What’s that?” Her shaking voice sounded far too high.

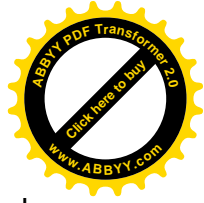
“A chemical neutralizer,” he told her, his tone emotionless despite his molten stare. “It analyzes the weapon you used and renders it harmless.”

Inhaling, she realized the overwhelming smell of White Swan had disappeared. How had he done that? “It wasn’t a weapon. It was just perfume.”

The wolf/dog gave her a look of astonished loathing. “You wear that substance? On purpose?”

“Well, I don’t wear quite that much of it.” And I’m having a conversation with a talking wolf.

Baran reached down a big hand and grabbed her collar to pull her to her feet as the animal released her leg. Her bubble of paralyzed disbelief popped. With a choked scream, she went wild, fighting like a rabid mink to get away.



In two strides he dragged her to the nearest wall and banged her back against it so hard the impact shocked her still again. "I am not the killer!" he roared. "If I were, I would have butchered you by now!"

For an instant they stared at each other. Until, slowly, a realization crept over Jane: He had a point. After the perfume trick, even a psycho bent on playing head games would have slit her throat.

Maybe he wasn't the killer.

But he wasn't FBI, either, not with those eyes. So what was he? Had he been sent to protect her? And if so, by whom?

"What do you want from me?" Her voice shook.

He lifted the corner of his handsome mouth in a snarl. "I want to catch Druas. And you're going to help me whether you like it or not. Turn around and brace your hands on the wall."

Jane stared at him, wide-eyed. "What? Why?"

"I'm going to search you." Catching her by one shoulder, he turned her around to face the wall. "I don't have the patience for any more surprises."

"And I don't have anything to surprise you with!"

He thrust his face close to hers, the pupils of his bloodshot eyes glowing. "Do you honestly expect me to take anything you say on faith?"

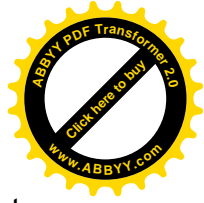
"What did you expect? You broke into my house!"

"And if you don't start cooperating, I'm going to do a lot worse."

At the lethal note in his voice, a shudder shook her. She slowly lifted both hands, flattening her palms against the cool plaster.

The first touch of his big hands on her ribs made her flinch. As if reading her fear, he hesitated. Then briskly he ran his hands up her sides and along the length of her braced arms.

Jane had seen cops pat down subjects before, though male officers rarely searched women if they could help it. Despite his evident fury, the frisk her captor conducted was just as professional and impersonal as the ones she'd witnessed. At least at first.



Until he kicked her ankles just hard enough to knock her feet apart. The kick didn't hurt, but something about the way he did it struck her suddenly as a gesture of pure sexual dominance.

He went still behind her. A moment of silence spun out, almost thrumming with tension. Suddenly that sizzling mutual awareness was back again, rushing in to fill the air between them with heat.

He crouched behind her. She heard the rustle of his leather coat as he moved. He put his hands on her thighs. Even through the fabric of her jeans, she could feel the heat of his long fingers as he slowly ran his palms down the length of her legs. To her horror, Jane felt her nipples peak.

Instead of his earlier cool professionalism, there was now something darkly possessive in his touch, even when he paused to pull up the cuffs of her jeans and explore inside her boot tops for weapons. Yet on the surface there was nothing improper in his technique.

So why did she feel... claimed? Like a slave girl being explored by her master?

Don't be so damned ridiculous, Jane, she snarled at herself.

But when he rose to his feet again, his sheer, brawny size added to her sense of helpless femininity.

His coat rustled again as he stepped closer. He seemed to surround her in heat. The rich smell of leather blended with his own clean musk as he cupped her bottom. Jane stiffened, but his hands didn't linger, sweeping around over her abdomen and upward to her breasts. As if the careful restraint had worn thin, his hands hesitated just a beat, then blatantly cupped her, lifting the soft mounds.

His thumbs brushed the tight, erect peaks of her nipples. She sucked in a breath to curse him, but the heat bolting along her nerves made the words seem hypocritical. She found herself longing to lean back, to ease into his arms.

Dammit, Jane! "Let go," she gritted.

To her relief, he did, dropping his hands and stepping away. But when she looked around at him, she saw dark male satisfaction in his strange, hot eyes, as if he'd tested her somehow. She didn't think she wanted to know the results.

Jane fumbled for a topic that would put them back on safer ground. "You said ... you said you wanted me to help you catch the killer. How?"

"Isn't it obvious?" the wolf/dog said, moving to look up at them. Its jaws gaped, revealing an impressive set of very sharp, very white teeth. "You're going to be the bait."



Jane looked down at the animal, perversely grateful he'd broken the erotic tension. The intelligence she saw in those pale canine eyes was far more human than animal. A sense of vertigo swept over her. "What are you? And don't bother with the FBI bull, because I don't think even the Bureau has a talking K-9 corps."

She looked over her shoulder at her captor just in time to see him pull out a length of what looked like thin gold cable. He reached for her right wrist.

"What are you doing?" Jane started to whirl, but he calmly stepped hi and leaned a broad shoulder into her back, pinning her to the wall as he wrapped the cable around her wrist. Like a snake, it instantly coiled tighter. "Stop it!"

"I warned you, Jane.\*" His deep voice was grim and cold. Using his grip on the cable, he dragged her right arm down even as he seized the other wrist and pulled it back. She squirmed, but he kept her mashed against the wall. To her disgust, she felt another potent snap of sensual awareness at the feel of his hard, muscular body pressed to hers.

"You've got no right!" she spat, struggling against both his grip and her own potent reaction. The effort did her no good in either case. He was so damn strong she couldn't break his hold no matter how she twisted and jerked. She might as well have been a toddler for all the effort he expended controlling her.

Fear slid through her fury. Granted, she didn't make a habit of struggling with men, yet even so his strength seemed somehow abnormal. As if he wasn't quite human. Instinctively she covered her unease with a snarl. "This is illegal!"

He simply ignored her, looping her other wrist in the cable. The thin metal seemed to coil around her arms like a snake, binding her hands. "They call this kidnapping, you son of a bitch!"

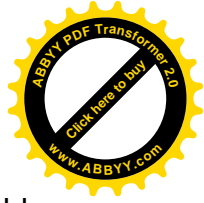
"Yes, and I don't care." He stepped back just enough to grab her shoulder and pull her around. The glowing striations in his pupils were still hot and burning, though the bloodshot red of his eyes had already begun to fade. "I'm going to do whatever it takes to catch Druas and keep you alive. So don't push me. You won't like the results."

She rugged futilely at her bonds. Impossibly, the restraints squirmed around her wrists like something alive, maintaining their grip. She'd never even heard of a metal that could do that. It was impossible.

Impossible. Like the talking wolf/dog. Like her captor's glowing eyes and amazing strength. Like the device that had instantly eliminated her perfume from the air.

The hair rose on the back of her neck. "What the hell are you?"

His handsome mouth took on a mocking twist. The iridescent tattoo on his cheek shimmered. "What do you think I am?"



Jane studied him, taking in the erect carriage, the fluid way he moved, the cold determination on his face. During her stint in Atlanta, she'd interviewed her share of soldiers, sailors, and Marines. He showed all the signs. "Military. Some kind of commando. Maybe."

His eyes flickered in reaction. "Good guess."

She relaxed slightly. That would explain all the James Bond toys. God knew what the government had cooking in the depths of some top-secret lab somewhere.

But what about the glowing eyes and the Big Bad Wolf? Not to mention the hair and beads, which sure as hell didn't look like any recruiting poster she'd ever seen. And... "What does a Navy SEAL—or Delta Force or whatever the hell you are—care about serial killers?"

Just for an instant he glanced down at the wolf, which tilted its head in a gesture curiously like a shrug. It wasn't the kind of look a man exchanged with a pet, or even an animal outfitted with a speaker as part of some elaborate masquerade.

It was the sort of glance you gave a partner when you wanted advice.

No matter what Wolfie looked like, he wasn't an animal. And she'd be willing to bet that turning out sentient timber wolves was beyond even the United States government.

Which left...

"Are you some kind of aliens?" She felt ridiculous the minute she blurted the words.

Baran looked up at her, startled and amused. "Do I look like an alien?"

"I don't know." She glanced down at the animal, who watched them with sardonic intelligence. "But he does. He's sure as hell no dog, whether that's a speaker around his neck or not."

"Dog?" The wolf drew up in an affronted reaction that couldn't be anything but genuine. "I'll have you know I'm a genetically engineered timber wolf. There are no dogs anywhere in my family tree. And that's a vocalizer around my throat, not a 'speaker,' you ignorant hick."

Her lips tugged upward in reluctant amusement at his outrage. "So what's a vocalizer?"

"My body isn't designed for speech," the wolf told her with an outraged sniff. "My internal computer picks up my thoughts and sends them to the vocalizer, which turns them into sound."

"Which is my point exactly," she said to Baran. "Nobody has technology like that in the twenty-first—" Jane broke off, eyes widening as a new and even wilder idea occurred to



her. “Are you from ...” Damn, she couldn’t believe she was saying the words. She took a deep breath and forced them out anyway. “Are you time travelers?”

Baran’s brows lifted in an expression of startled interest. “What makes you say that?”

“The wolf. Your eyes. Your equipment. Like I said before, nobody on Earth has anything like this stuff. Yet aliens wouldn’t look like anything that had evolved on this planet.” Jane felt her tension building, stretching out, as if she were riding a roller coaster toward the top of a grade and the plunging drop on the other side. She took a deep breath and went right over. “But if you’re from the future...”

Baran stared at her a long moment, but not like a man inventing a good lie. Like someone who was calculating how much truth to tell. “Yes,” he said finally. “We’re from the future.”

A rush of goose bumps spread over her skin as Jane experienced a rush of the familiar quivering excitement she felt whenever she was on the trail of a hot story. And it didn’t get any hotter than this.

Unfortunately, this situation also had implications that were far more personal than any story she’d ever covered. Terrifying implications. Swallowing, she asked the question that was gnawing at her consciousness. “Is that... is that how you know this guy is going to come after me?”

“Yes.” Her captor said it so starkly, so simply, she had no choice except to believe.

“And he really is a serial killer?”

Baran’s sensual mouth tightened. “Yes.”

Jane licked her lips. “But you’ll stop him. If you’re from the future, you know what happens. Right?”

“Not necessarily.”

“What does that mean?” A chill rolled over her skin. “You don’t necessarily know or you won’t necessarily stop him?”

He drew his big body to its full height and looked down at her. “I don’t know if I’ll be able to stop him.”

Jane’s heart pounded as she stared at the handsome invader who’d just turned her life upside down. “But you said you’re from the future!”

Baran sighed and dragged a hand through his hair. “Do you know everything that happened centuries before you were born?”



“You know this guy’s coming after me!”

“Temporal Enforcement told me only as much as they had to. Which, unfortunately, wasn’t much.”

‘Temporal... ?’

“Enforcement. They’re the agency that regulates time travel.”

“In the future.” A new question occurred to her, and she asked it cautiously. “How far in the future?”

He shrugged. “Three hundred years.”

“Yeah, that’s definitely the future.” She blinked, studying her brawny captor. Weren’t future people supposed to be scrawny eggheads with big eyes? This guy looked as if he’d just stepped out of the cover of an old Viking romance, the kind where the hero tied the heroine up and pillaged her repeatedly.

Which, she had to admit, sounded like much more fun than it had any business being.

Baran watched as she rocked back on her heels, both hands still bound behind her back. The pose thrust her high, pretty breasts into prominence and drew his attention to the hard pebbled nipples behind her bra. He found himself battling the completely inappropriate urge to pull up her shirt and suck and tongue and tease those luscious points until they flushed red.

Sometimes his Warlord libido had a rotten sense of timing.

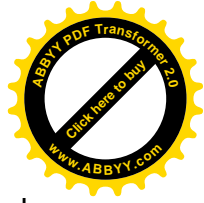
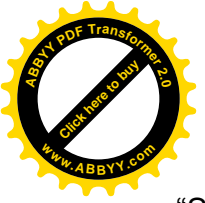
But perhaps the timing would improve. He’d scented her response more than once tonight, particularly when he’d kicked her feet apart. A seduction wasn’t out of the question.

But since she’d apparently decided to cooperate, he’d have to explore that avenue another time. And he would. Now, however, she was too busy trying to process what she was learning—while he tried to decide how much information to give her.

He hadn’t intended to tell her even this much, but she’d seen through the cover story those sloppy bastards from Temporal Enforcement had given him. They apparently hadn’t anticipated how well Jane knew her own government and its workings. And Baran didn’t have enough knowledge of her time to come up with a more believable lie.

So he was stuck with the truth, or at least as little of it as she’d let him get away with telling.





“So this ... time agency ...” Her brows drew down hi concentration over her dark, narrowed eyes.

“Temporal Enforcement.”

“...sent you. What do they care if there’s a serial killer in Tayanita County?”

“This particular serial killer is also from the future.”

Her full lips parted. “Oh.” For a moment she looked rattled. Then she rallied enough to manage an indignant snort. “What, they don’t have women he could kill back in his own time? He’s got to come back three centuries to find somebody to butcher?”

“Evidently.”

“Why me? Why would somebody from three hundred years in the future want to target a reporter at a small-town weekly?” Her soft, sweet mouth curved down in a puzzled frown. “And I still don’t understand why you’d care enough to come all this way to stop him.”

He glanced from her rich brown eyes to her tempting lips, then down to the lush, promising contours of her breasts. “I can think of a number of reasons.”

She blinked. “Umm.” A flush heated her cheeks. “Well.”

Baran smiled, watching those tempting nipples slowly peak under the soft fabric of her shirt. This mission was definitely looking more interesting all the time.

How did he do that?

One look, and he had her feeling as if she was about to burst into flames. It was humiliating.

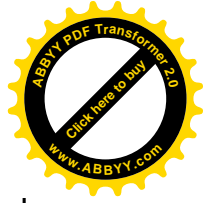
“TE gave me a skull jack crystal on this time,” the wolf announced, breaking into Jane’s embarrassed arousal. “There are a couple of image files of the Jumpkiller in it. Could make things a bit more clear.”

Baran glanced at his furry partner and nodded. “Let’s see them.”

“What’s a skull jack... whatever?” God, her life was beginning to sound like an episode of Star Trek.

“Crystal. It’s a memory unit I insert in my skull jack— that’s die implant at the base of my right ear I can use to access data,” the wolf added, seeing her open her mouth to ask.

“Where is this implant?” She moved cautiously closer and started to kneel, but her bound hands threw her off-balance. Impatiently, she looked at Baran and held her arms out



straight behind her. “Look, can we lose the bondage? I get it now: You’re the good guys. I have no intention of running away.” She grinned. “In fact, you couldn’t drive me off with a stick. I’m dying to learn more.”

He gave her an appraising look, then nodded slowly. “But the minute you start giving me a hard time, I’m tying you up again.”

Promise? her libido whispered. She told it to shut up. It quivered anyway as her handsome captor stepped behind her and went to work on her bonds. As the cable fell away, she stepped quickly away and turned, rubbing her wrists.

He tucked the restraints into a pocket of his coat, giving her a level, warning look.

Ignoring it, she crouched beside the wolf. “Okay, now about that implant...”

Freika helpfully angled his head, giving her access to the ear in question. Something that looked like a glowing blue gem glittered against his dark fur.

“So this crystal is some kind of recording medium?” She touched it. It felt warm and smooth under her fingers. “And it plugs directly into your head?”

“Right.”

“Didn’t that hurt?”

“Nah. I was just a pup when they did the procedure. Don’t even remember it.”

She looked up to find Baran watching her steadily. “Do you have one, too?”

He shrugged. “Not a skull jack, no. Any data I need, I get by downloading it from Freika.”

“That way he doesn’t have to worry about viruses,” the wolf told her.

She sat up. “They still have computer viruses in the future?”

“Yeah, and they can be fatal.”

Jane blinked, feeling more than a little boggled. “Fatal?”

“My computer controls my autonomic nervous system,” Baran explained. “If I downloaded the wrong virus, it could stop my heart or paralyze me.”

“Owww.” She winced. “That doesn’t sound like fun at all.”

He looked grim. “Believe me, it’s not.”



She was opening her mouth to ask for details when a man appeared in midair, floating a foot above the wolf's head.

Jane jumped, but when everyone else studied the figure calmly, she realized he wasn't real. Curious, she rose to examine the image. It was so sharp and three-dimensional, the man looked solid. Which pretty well finished off her last lingering doubt about whether they really came from the future. "Who the hell is that?"

"Kalig Druas," Freika said. "The Jumpkiller."

"He's the one who wants to kill me?"

"Evidently." Baran's face was utterly expressionless, his body so still he could have been carved out of ice.

Looking at him, Jane felt a chill skate her spine. That, she thought, is a man with a very long fuse. But I don't think I want to be anywhere around when he blows.

She turned her attention to the image that had inspired such cold hate. "Huh. Somehow I don't think we're going to have any trouble spotting him in a crowd."

A series of metal rings placed on edge appeared to sink halfway into the man's skull, forming a thick ridge across the top of his shaved head like a steel Mohawk. A second set of rings were implanted around the back of his head, stretching from temple to temple.

"And I thought nose rings were bad," Jane said.

"Skull implants are considered high fashion on Xer." Baran curled his lip. "Among other things."

"What's a Xer?"

"A planet." He moved closer, staring up at the floating figure. "About twenty years ago the Xerans invaded my world, Vardon. It took us five years to evict them."

Jane studied him, reading the cold anger in his eyes. "I'll bet that was unpleasant."

"You have a gift for understatement." He squared his shoulders. "Recently we found out they were planning to have another try at taking us over. We've launched a preemptive strike."

"So what happened?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. The battle hadn't begun yet when the Temporal Enforcement agent showed up and took me off my ship." Baran's gaze turned brooding. "When this is over, I've got to go back and complete the mission he interrupted."



Something about the way he said the word mission sent a chill down her spine. It also thoroughly deterred her impulse to ask for details.

Dragging her attention away from Baran's grim face, she looked back at the Xeran. Despite the gothic hardware in his skull, the Jumpkiller's features looked human enough. In fact, the bone structure of his angular face was almost handsome, though his eyes were a bit too narrow and a bit too small. The color of his irises, though, was a distinctly nonhuman and very demonic red, complete with slit pupils. Add that hawk nose and tight, thin mouth, and you had the poster boy for meanasasnake.com.

Enhancing the reptilian effect, he wore a one-piece suit covered in what looked like tiny black scales. From what she could tell about the body under the suit, he was almost as thickly muscled as Baran. What do they feed them in the future, anyway? Jane wondered.

On second thought, she really didn't want to know the answer to that one, either.

In one fist he held a knife with a long curving blade that widened toward the point, almost like a machete. "What is that? It looks like a bowie knife on steroids."

"A Xeran sevik," Baran supplied.

"He's good with it, too," the wolf said, twisting his massive head around to gnaw at a patch of fur over his haunches. "At least judging from the trid he made for his subscribers."

"Subscribers?" Jane frowned. "What kind of subscribers? And what's a trid?"

Frieka gave his butt a lick. "A tri-dimensional recording."

"And the subscribers are Xerans who pay to see women murdered," Baran added.

She gaped at him. "People subscribe to things like that? And it's legal?"

"Xerans have a... flexible legal system." His tone was so intensely bitter, she wondered what they'd done to him. "The more money you have, the more flexible it is. These men have a lot of money."

"But—"

"If you'd just let me go on, we'll all find out everything we want to know," the wolf interrupted with an impatient rumble.

"Be my guest, furball," she muttered.

Freika chose to ignore the crack. "His name is Kalig Alrico Oth Druas ..."

"Doesn't exactly roll off the tongue, does it?"



“...a Xeran cyborg mercenary with a very bad temper and a tendency to kill those who irritate him. Including his commanders, which would probably explain why he hasn’t worked in several years.”

“So why isn’t he in jail?” Jane asked. “Or on a penal colony, or whatever the futuristic equivalent is?”

Baran shrugged. “As I said, it’s Xer.”

“Aka Planet of the Psychopaths.”

Evidently refusing to dignify her comment with a response, Baran looked at Freika. “Capabilities?”

“Basically, he’s got enough nano-cybernetic muscle implants to match your strength.”

“Even in riatt?”

“I doubt it, but it’ll be close.”

“Can I make a request?” Jane demanded, thoroughly frustrated. “Can we go five minutes without using futurespeak?”

Baran contemplated the question. “Probably not.”

“Smartass. So how did the twenty-fourth century’s answer to Jeffrey Dahmer get into the entertainment business?” If she asked enough questions, maybe all this would start making sense. Maybe.

The wolf cocked his black head, studying the image. “Basically, he needed money. From assorted records TE managed to acquire, it seems he supported himself the last few years working for various criminal enterprises. However, he must have been too unpredictable even by underworld standards, because that finally dried up, too.”

Baran frowned as if a question had suddenly occurred to him. “Where did he get the temporal armor he uses to make his Jumps?” To Jane he added, “Access to T-suits is very tightly controlled. Possessing a suit without authorization is a capital crime. And TE is not picky about legal niceties when they catch you at it.”

She digested the concept and wrinkled her nose. “So where did he get it?”

“The short answer is, TE has no idea,” Freika said.

“But I’ll wager they’re working very hard to find out,” Baran said, stretching his long legs out in front of him and lacing his big hands together over his flat belly.



“You’d win that bet.” The wolf moved to lean against his knees. “Do you mind? That damn jack itches every time I access it.” Baran reached down and scratched the spot obligingly. “Thank you. Where was I? Oh. However he got the suit, Druas quickly started using it in a series of temporal thefts, bringing back two previously unknown Da Vincis and one of Shakespeare’s first folios—“

“Wait a minute,” Jane interrupted. “Are you saying that people go back in time to steal?”

“Why do you think there’s a TE?” Freika yawned, displaying a set of intimidating dental work. “Anyway, in the course of one of his thefts, he ended up murdering the wealthy female owner. Rather spectacularly.”

“And probably raped her while he was at it,” Baran noted, absently running his long fingers through the wolf’s fur.

“Exactly. And either for his own amusement, or because there’s a market for that kind of thing on Xer, he used his computer implant to record the crime. He gave a copy to a distributor, who put him in touch with other sick bastards with the same tastes and a great deal of money.”

“Ewww,” Jane said.

“Indeed. Soon afterward, somebody came up with the bright idea of actually paying Druas to jump through time and commit well-known but historically unsolved crimes. This is his latest release.”

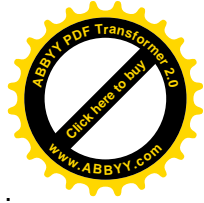
The killer’s image was replaced by a six-foot hole in the air. Inside it, a woman in a long dress walked through a narrow arched doorway built of rough brick.

Taking a closer look, Jane realized it wasn’t really a hole, just another of those three-dimensional images. This one, however, was projected in the shape of a globe. When she tried to walk around it, the angle of the image seemed to follow her, giving the impression that the globe was rotating. “That’s a really weird effect.” She cocked her head and considered it. “So, is he carrying some kind of camera around, or what?”

“He has a computer implant in his brain,” Freika explained. “It records what he sees.”

“Through his eyes,” Jane said, the light dawning. “That’s how you get the three-dimensional effect. And why the angle doesn’t change no matter how you move.”

In the image the woman pushed open a door and stepped inside, then smiled flirtatiously as the killer moved after her. She was plump, pretty, and young, probably in her twenties, with dark hair piled on top of her head. Judging from the unsteadiness in her step, she was also more than a little drunk.



Jane frowned. The brunette wore a long shabby wool gown and a red jacket. “When is this? That dress looks Victorian.”

“Very good,” Freika said, his eyes shuttering with pleasure as Baran absently rubbed the top of his head. “According to the file, this trid was recorded in 1888.”

Jane frowned. There were several famous Victorian murders that immediately leaped to mind, of course, but it couldn’t be one of those.

At least, she hoped not.

The brunette lit a candle, revealing a tiny room. It couldn’t have been more than twelve feet square—there was barely room enough for a narrow bed and a small, rickety wooden table.

A male voice spoke from the trid, sounding very English and upper-class. “Sing for me, pretty Mary Kelly.”

The little brunette smiled and unbuttoned her coat. “Wouldn’t you like me to do somethin’ a little more interestin’ than sing?” There was a hint of Irish music in her accent that gave it a sweet lilt.

“Wait a minute,” Jane said. “Why is she talking to that freak? I’d think a Victorian woman would take one look at those things sticking out of his head and run screaming.”

“He must be using an imagizer,” Baran said.

“Which is what, exactly?” -

“His computer projects a three-dimensional image around him that makes him look like someone else.”

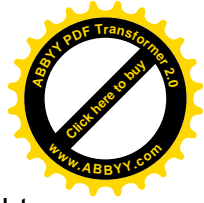
She frowned. “If he can do that, how are we supposed to spot him?”

“I have sensor implants,” Baran explained. “Xeran metabolism is different from the original human rootstock, so I should be able to detect him despite the visual shield.”

“Besides, it’s not a particularly effective disguise,” Freika added. “The first time you touched him, you’d know something was wrong. If you’ll notice, he’s a lot taller than she thinks he is.”

Jane looked closer and saw that the girl’s eyes were aimed roughly at chest level, as if that was where the man’s face was.

“You have such a pretty voice,” Druas said. “What was that you were singing earlier?”



“It’s just a little ditty,” the brunette said, a dimple winking in her cheek. Despite the slight slur in her voice and the fact that she was visibly tipsy, there was a flirtatious charm about the doomed woman that made Jane wince. “It’s called ‘Sweet Violets.’”

“Sing it again. I want to hear it.”

“Oh. All right.” Softly at first, then more loudly, she began to sing, “Scenes of my childhood—“

“Undress for me,” Druas interrupted: There was a note of menacing anticipation in that cultured voice the brunette was evidently too drunk to recognize. “And keep singing.”

That girl is about to be murdered, Jane realized, as the reality of what was happening sank in. Oh, God, I don’t think I want to see this.

Obediently Mary went on singing as she unbuttoned her shabby dress in the flickering light of the candle. “... This small violet I pluck’d from mother’s grave...”

“This is sickening,” Jane said, looking away.

“Granted,” Baran said, his eyes cold and grim, “but I’ve got to review it anyway. I need to know as much as possible about the way this bastard operates.”

She subsided. He had a point.

Mary lifted the gown over her head, leaving only a thin linen chemise that was stained and torn in places. Folding the gown, she put it on the chair before going to work on the buttons of her chemise. Work-roughened fingers busy on the horn buttons, she turned toward Druas, still singing. “... They all have left me in ...”

There was a blur of movement, so fast Jane almost missed it. The girl’s eyes widened as she made a choked, helpless sound.

Two enormous hands were wrapped around her neck, hoisting her into the air as her feet kicked helplessly.

Druas was much, much taller than she was.

“I always like this part best,” the killer told her, his voice bright, laughing.

She kicked at him, clawing at the hands that were slowly choking her to death. Her open mouth gaped as she fought to breathe, her face darkening.

“You’re going to be famous, Mary Jane Kelly,” Druas purred, holding her effortlessly. “For hundreds of years the photograph of what I’m going to do to you will make people stare in horror, wondering what you used to look like before I sliced away your face.”





Her blue eyes widened helplessly in terrified realization.

“That’s right, Mary, sweet Mary,” he said. “You’re Jack the Ripper’s last victim.”

Jane stared at the trid in helpless horror as her head began to swim. “Sweet Jesus God.”

Mary’s face darkened still more, the whites of her eyes going red as tiny capillaries burst. Her frantic kicks weakened.

Finally Druas tossed her on the bed to flop bonelessly. Something silver flashed, followed by a spray of red flung by the knife as he made his first cut.

Baran stepped toward Jane as she swayed, looking as if she was about to fall in a heap. He caught her elbow, and she sagged against him. “Stop the playback, Freika.”

“But we need to—“

“Later.”

Before the wolf could argue, Jane tore herself from his arms with surprising strength and bolted across the room. Baran strode after her as she raced into a small alcove and collapsed on her knees in front of a shiny porcelain chair his computer identified as a toilet. Flinging her head down over the hole in its seat, she began to retch violently.

Baran watched for a moment, instinctively trying to maintain his emotional distance, but her misery was too much for him. With a sigh he knelt beside her and helped her gather her long hair out of the way. She ignored him, heaving in helpless rolling spasms. “Jane, he’s not going to get the chance to do that to you. That’s why I’m here.”

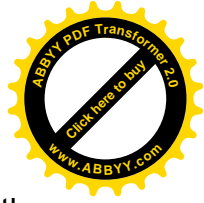
She looked up at him, wild-eyed, her face tinged green. “You mean”—she stopped to gasp—“I really am a target for Jack the fucking Ripper?”

She jerked her head down and started heaving again, more violently than before.

Wincing, Baran could do nothing for her but support her head. He’d seen so much bloodshed and suffering over the years that normally he was able to maintain a certain detachment.

Yet though he’d done his share of killing, there’d been something different in the way Druas had attacked Mary Kelly, a vicious joy that was deeply disturbing.

And then there was Jane. Watching her struggle to control her rioting stomach, he felt a twist of pity. She’d fought him with such clever bravery, it hurt to see her reduced to this helpless, sick horror.



Finally the spasms were over. She climbed wearily to her feet and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. Refusing to meet his eyes, she mumbled, “Thanks.”

Baran shrugged, battling the uncomfortable impulse to put his arms around her. That, he knew, was a very bad idea. It was one thing to feel a healthy lust for her, but anything more was an emotional trap he couldn’t afford to fall into.

So he hung back as she stepped to a small counter with a basin in the center and twisted a knob. Water poured from a metal projection over the basin as she picked up a small brush and started a procedure his computer called brushing her teeth.

Finally she turned to look up at him again. Her skin was still tinted a faint, unhealthy green. “All right, I’m ready. Let’s finish looking at the recording.”

Baran frowned at her. Knowing the Xeran taste for overkill, he suspected it would only get worse. “That’s not necessary. I’ll review the rest.”

She shook her head, that delicate chin taking on a stubborn angle. “No, we need to stop this guy. He can’t be allowed to go on doing this.”

“Granted, but that’s my job.” Leaning a hip against the countertop, he studied her. “You don’t need to be involved in it. Especially considering that the trid is only going to get worse.”

“Yeah, I know.” Jane swallowed and took a deep breath. “But I have to understand this guy, what motivates him. What his M.O. is. And the only evidence we’ve got is what’s on that recording.”

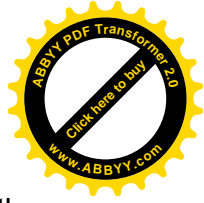
“You’ll be running in here again in five minutes,” Freika said from the doorway. “He starts getting artistic next.”

“Then I’ll run,” she snapped. “And I’ll come back and I’ll watch the rest.”

Any other civilian woman he knew would have been glad to let him handle the whole bloody, revolting mess. “Jane, it’s not necessary.”

“Yes, Baran, it is. Look, you guys don’t know this time, and you don’t know this culture. You need my help, and that means I have to know as much as I can about that sick bastard.”

Baran sighed, caught between admiration for her courage and irritation at her stubbornness. “Actually, I’m more than capable of handling the hunt without your input. Whatever I need to know about your time, my computer implant can tell me.” And if the recording did get worse than what they’d seen already, she didn’t need to be exposed to any more of it. He didn’t want her nerve to break completely. Not when she was supposed to be the bait.



He frowned. What if something went wrong? A chill rippled over him as his mind instantly supplied a terrifying image of pretty, delicate Jane confronting that sadistic bastard. All her courage, all her beauty and intelligence, all destroyed, flayed away by Druas and his knife. Like Liisa.

No, he decided, straightening his shoulders. Not Jane.

This one he was going to save.

Jane glowered at Baran, unaware of his newfound resolve. “Look, it’s my life that’s on the line here! I’m the one that bastard wants to slice like bacon. I deserve to know—”

“Only as much as I think you need to,” he told her, striving for patience. “You’re a civilian, Jane. And I’m not. My job is to hunt Druas....”

“And mine is to be the bait.” There was a hot, angry glitter in her dark eyes, a bitter set to her mouth. “Just writhing on the end of the hook, waiting for that creep to take a bite. Screw that. If you were in my shoes, would you want to be kept in the dark?”

She had a point. Maybe she did need to know.

And maybe once she found out what Druas was capable of, she’d obey orders. He’d already discovered just how difficult Jane could make things when she chose, despite his Warlord strength and cybernetic implants. They’d both be a lot safer if she stopped questioning him. “All right.”

Mouth open as if to launch another argument, she blinked. “What?”

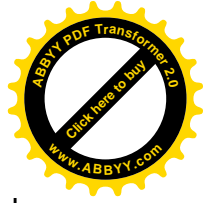
“Maybe a good look at what Druas does for entertainment would convince you to let me do my job.”

Two minutes into the rest of the recording, Jane bitterly wished she hadn’t insisted on seeing it. She forced herself to endure anyway.

At first she tried to pretend it was some poorly made B-movie she had to review. But no director would have kept the camera focused on what Druas did to Mary Kelly. She’d seen cows butchered with less vicious brutality.

In sheer self-defense she tried to think like a cop, noting which hand he used and how deeply he cut. She wasn’t a forensic scientist, but it was obvious from the easy way he hacked into the body that the man’s strength was terrifying.

Yet no matter how Jane fought to stay detached, her stomach heaved with every slice. Her head began to pound in deep, rhythmic surges in time to her heart. She felt dizzy. Locking her spine into a rigid column, she concentrated on staying upright.



Every time Druas did something particularly nauseating, Jane was conscious of the cool, assessing gazes of Baran and the wolf. They're wondering how long it will take me to pass out.

She told herself savagely that she'd been exposed to carnage before. There'd been that shotgun murder last year, when she'd beaten the cops to the scene. She'd held it together then, despite the boneless sprawl of the body in the middle of the street, surrounded by blood and skull fragments; Yeah, it had haunted her, but she'd dealt with it.

And God knew Jane had covered so many traffic fatalities she'd gone numb in sheer self-defense. Then there were all the murder trials she'd reported on. After hours spent listening to gruesome expert testimony about wounds and the suffering of the victims, she should have been inured.

But none of that had prepared her for actually seeing it happen, listening to the killer hum in absent pleasure like a workman singing to himself over some pleasant task.

As the endless seconds ticked past, Jane realized that watching this would leave scars she would carry in her mind until the day she died.

It was only when Druas started cutting Mary's heart out that she jumped up and whirled away. "When you catch this guy ..." She had to stop to swallow bile. "Are you going to kill him, or just arrest him?"

"I'm going to kill him." Baran spoke with such utter emotionless conviction, she knew he meant every word.

Jane took a deep breath. "Good."

None of the usual moral arguments about the rule of law or the value of even a murderer's life meant anything when it came to Kalig Druas. He had to be eliminated just as a rabid dog has to be put down. Not for vengeance or even for justice, but simply because he was a threat to every other human being he met.

When he finally rose from his kill—Jane could feel that last image of Mary Kelly's mangled body searing itself into her brain—Druas turned and picked up a mirror standing beside the bed. The face he saw reflected there was smeared with blood, flecked with crimson bits Jane had no desire to identify.

He addressed the mirror in a foreign language, the words incomprehensible, the triumphant, gloating tone all too clear. She realized he must be talking to his perverted subscribers. His mouth was twisted into a feral grin, his eyes wild in the mask of gore surrounding them.

Then the image, at last, winked out.



“What did he say?” Jane managed. She was standing at the other end of the room as far from the trid as she could get. Her lips felt cold and numb. She suspected she’d recognized a word, and found herself hoping she was wrong.

For a long moment, neither man nor wolf answered. “He said, ‘Wait until I get to Tayanita,’” Baran said.

“That’s what I was afraid of.”

He barely got to her before her knees buckled.

Jane felt. . . strange. She knew she should be asking questions, making plans, but all she could seem to do was sit on the couch, staring sightlessly into space. It was a comfortable couch, thickly padded in cream leather. It had cost her a thousand dollars. She tried to concentrate on the feel of that very expensive couch, tried to lock her thoughts on it instead of... other things. She closed her eyes. And saw blood spray across the soft pale leather.

Her eyes flew open.

Baran was talking. Jane struggled to listen to him, but it was difficult when she could hear Druas humming to himself as he sliced....

Stop that. Freika turned off the trid. It’s over.

But it kept playing in her mind, flashes of red horror, seconds of incomprehensible evil caught in an endless feedback loop.

“... been fighting Xer since I was sixteen,” Baran was saying. She tried to switch her attention to his words, to the movement of his mouth. It was a very nice mouth. “I know how he thinks....”

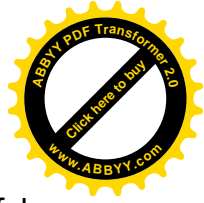
“I very much doubt that,” she said, her voice low.

He rubbed a thumb across an eyebrow. “All right, I don’t. But I am more powerful than he is, and anything he tries, I’ll be ready for.”

How could anybody be prepared for the kind of mind that could conceive of the things Druas had done to Mary

Kelly?

And how could anybody want to watch him? That was the question her mind kept circling back to. People had subscribed to his recordings, had effectively paid him to butcher Mary Kelly the same way men in her own time would subscribe to an Internet porn service.



God, she was cold. Shivering, she looked around dully until she spotted the colorful crocheted throw lying over the back of the couch. Its expanse of warm reds and yellows looked like a spill of sunlight across the pale leather. Jane reached up, tugged it down, and wrapped it around herself, moving slowly, clumsily.

She still felt cold. She wondered if she was in shock. The question emerged so suddenly even Jane was caught off guard. “Why didn’t you save her?” Baran and Freika, engaged in an intense low-voice conversation, looked up as if surprised she was capable of speech! “You could have stopped him before he murdered Mary Kelly. Then that woman he killed here tonight wouldn’t have died, either. And I wouldn’t have had to see—” She stopped, vaguely ashamed that she’d even mentioned herself in the same breath as the others,

Baran sat down beside her. There was a tightness around his mouth, a shadow in his eyes. Futuristic warrior or not, the trid had shaken him. She was glad. She wasn’t sure she’d want to be around a man who could watch that kind of butchery without being affected. “I couldn’t have saved Mary Kelly, Jane.”

“Why not?” If he couldn’t save Mary, did that mean... ? “You said you were stronger, faster...” Her voice rose. Jane could hear the edge of panic in it and knew she should reign in her fear. She also knew that kind of control was currently far beyond her meager resources.

“I couldn’t have saved her because I didn’t.”

“Yeah, but why? Why didn’t you?”

“For one thing, because TE didn’t transport me back to 1888. But even if they had, it wouldn’t have done any good. Druas murdered Mary Kelly, and there was nothing I could have done to stop it. If I’d tried, I would have failed.”

“How do you know that?”

He shook his head. “Because humans have been time traveling for sixty-five years, and none of them have ever changed history. I’ll only be able to save the victims I’m supposed to save.”

There was a strange, high buzzing in her ears. She swallowed hard. “Are you supposed to save me?”

“Yes.” His gaze was fierce and certain.

“You said before you didn’t know.” Jane licked her lips and fought the impulse to scream. She was afraid she wouldn’t be able to stop. “You said they hadn’t told you. Unless ... I’m supposed to die?” Oh, God! To end up like Mary Kelly ...



“No, you’re not going to die.” Something in his determined gaze steadied her. He closed a big, hard hand around hers, encircling her chill fingers in strength and warmth. “I swear to you, I will save you, Jane Colby. Druas is the one who’s going to die.”

The confidence in his voice made the fear recede. She felt her thoughts clear slightly. “So you’re saying, what? You couldn’t have stopped it because it was fate? We have no real control over what happens to us?”

Baran waved a strong hand in dismissal. “No, you misunderstand. Look, time travelers are not suddenly inserted into history. They’re part of the time plane even before they make their Jumps. Hell, before they’re even born.”

Jane stared at him, wondering if he really wasn’t making sense or whether her battered mind simply wasn’t processing the logic. “What are you talking about?”

“Let me see that.” He reached out and gently tugged the throw from around her shoulders. “My computer says that people in your time see time as a river. But it’s more like this.”

“Time’s a giant blanket?” She blinked, puzzled.

“More or less.” He spread the throw across their laps, then picked up one of the tassels that fringed its edges. His long fingers separated the strands down to one. “Let’s say this piece of yarn is a life.” He pointed at the knotted base of the tassel. “This is the moment of conception, and at the other end is the instant when decay ends and the body ultimately vanishes. Take a cross section of the string at any point, and that’s the now, the instant you’re in right at this second. Does that make sense?”

She frowned. “Not sure. Go on.”

“Everything has a time string, a series of ‘nows’—this couch, you, me, the Earth, everything. All of the different strings weave together as they extend forward into time.”

She felt her fear drain even more, banished by the academic tone of the discussion. “So your people see time as a physical dimension—like width, length, and depth.” Jane rubbed a hand over her belly, where the sore muscles still protested her bout of vomiting. “Okay. So?”

“Let’s say when we made the throw, we took one string from here”—he pointed at one end of the throw—“and looped it around to here.” He pointed at a spot in the middle. “Then wove it back in for a few inches, and then we looped it back to the point it came from.”

“So if that string is a time traveler...”

“Everything he did during his Jump happened before he was born.”



She dug her fingers deeper into a particularly stubborn knot of aching muscle. “So that old paradox about going back in time to shoot your own grandfather so you’d never be born...”

“...couldn’t happen, because you didn’t shoot your own grandfather. Your gun would misfire, someone would wrestle you to the ground, something would stop you. That’s why I couldn’t prevent Mary Kelly from being murdered. One theory has it that the only possible paradox is when someone doesn’t go back in time when they’re supposed to, to play whatever role they’re supposed to play. TE makes sure that doesn’t happen.”

“What if they don’t?”

Baran shrugged. “There have been a couple of times TE has decided not to transport somebody, only to have a TE agent from the future pop in and Jump the individual anyway. But theoretically, if you didn’t end up where you were supposed to go and do whatever you were supposed to do... it would create a ripple effect. Every action has consequences that affect other actions, which affect other actions, and so on. So if you’re not there, the things you don’t do cascade into the future, getting worse and worse. Almost instantly, the entire time plane would rip itself to shreds. Everyone who’d ever existed would die, past and future.”

She stared at him, blinking at the image of such sudden, incomprehensible destruction. “But what about the real Jack the Ripper?”

“What real Jack the Ripper?” Freika asked, tilting his head in a gesture of canine puzzlement.

“The original Victorian guy who did those killings. If Druas killed Mary Kelly before the real Jack got a chance, then wouldn’t that have caused one of these paradoxes?”

Baran shook his head. “That’s what we’ve been trying to tell you. There was no Victorian Jack the Ripper. It was always Druas. He went back in time and killed those women, just as he killed the one tonight.”

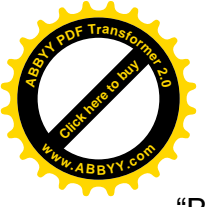
“That’s why they call it ‘time travel,’ Jane,” Freika said, and twisted his head around between his hind legs.

Jane eyed him as he went to work. “You know, if you’re smart enough for sarcasm, you’re smart enough to know it’s rude to lick your own genitals.”

The wolf looked up. “You’re just jealous.”

She opened her mouth to deny it, then stopped. “Well, yeah.” Shrugging, she turned to Baran. “Let me get this straight—Druas went back in time to commit the crimes of Jack the Ripper. But if there really had been a Victorian Jack, Druas would have killed not only the first victim, but triggered the destruction of the entire universe—including himself?”





“Basically.”

“What a lunatic.”

Freika glanced up at Baran. “My. She is clever.”

“I think I like you better when you’re licking your own backside.” To Baran, she continued, “So it’s not really me TE sent you here to save. It’s the universe.”

He shrugged. “Basically. But the end result is the same. I will save you.”

Jane frowned as a new and unpleasant thought struck her. “How do you know that, Baran? What if they just sent you back here because this is where you’re supposed to be?” Her voice rose. “What if that bastard gets his hands on me anyway, and does to me what he did to Mary Kelly?”

“He won’t.”

“What do you care?” She stood up, unable to sit still any longer, red nightmares spinning through her mind. “I’m nothing to you, any more than I mean anything to those sick bastards who’re paying Druas to kill me for their entertainment. I’m just a victim. Just like that poor lady tonight. Just like Mary Kelly.”

Anger stirred behind his eyes. Apparently he didn’t like having his word questioned. “When I say I won’t let you die, I mean it. I don’t make empty promises.”

“How do you know you can even stop it, Baran?”

“How does anybody ever know they can do anything? You just do it.”

“What are you, a Nike commercial?”

“Protecting people is what Baran does,” Freika said. “It was what he was created to do: He’s a Viking Class Warlord. He can no more fail to protect you than he can stop breathing.”

Jane snorted. “I’d probably find that a lot more comforting if I knew what the hell a Viking Class Warlord is.”

He and the wolf exchanged a long look, as though in silent communication. Finally Baran said, “Like Freika, I’m genetically engineered. Almost a century ago, genetic designers on Vardon created a warrior class called Warlords, designed to act as the planet’s protectors. They made us several times stronger and faster than an ordinary human the same size. And I’ve got cybernetic implants in my brain and muscles that enhance my natural abilities even more.”



“And he’s instinctively protective,” Freika added. “They breed the desire to defend into the Warlords. He would literally die to protect you, without any hesitation at all.”

Looking into the wolf’s crystalline blue eyes, she found herself believing him. Jane swallowed and looked away, finding the moment too intense for comfort.

Warm fingers closed around her wrist, drawing her into a warm, dark gaze. ‘Trust me,’ Baran said quietly.

“It’s not as if I have much choice.”

He stood in a smooth rush of muscle and rustling leather. The top of her head barely came to his shoulders. “You’re right. You have no choice—except to trust me and do exactly what I tell you to do. Not if you want to live.”

“And what exactly are you telling me to do?” She folded her arms. Perversely, it felt good to challenge him rather than let herself be borne helplessly along on his strength.

“Cooperate. I’ll have to be with you every minute. And I do mean every minute. The fact that Druas can Jump means he could simply transport wherever you are and kill you before I even know what’s happening—unless I’m right there. At all times.”

Oh, that was going to be fun. “How are you supposed to fight him?” she asked, frowning as she considered the implications. “I mean, if the guy can just teleport or Jump or whatever the hell you call it, how are you going to catch him? Can you Jump, too?”

“No. I don’t have a suit; TE transported Freika and me here. But I can keep him from Jumping.” He lifted a big hand and spread it. She blinked, focusing on the long fingers, the broad, square palm. It looked intensely masculine, that hand. Intensely skilled. “...power pack neutralizer,” he was saying.

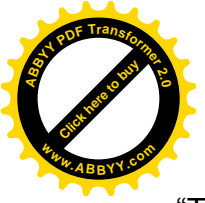
She shook her head. “What? I didn’t hear that.”

The wolf snickered. “No, you were wondering if the size of his hand matches the size of his—”

“Freika,” Baran interrupted in cool warning. He stepped in closer to her, and this time she managed to focus her attention on the gold ring he wore. The band was filigreed, incongruously delicate on such a big man, and the red stone seemed to glow against his tanned skin.

“TE gave me this ring,” he explained. “If I can get close enough to Druas, press it against his temporal suit and hold it there for several seconds, the pulse it generates will wipe out his suit’s power pack. He won’t be able to Jump.”

Jane frowned. “Several seconds is a long time in a fight.”



“True.” He shrugged. “I’m going to have to pin him down somehow.”

“Which puts you back in the same boat—getting close enough for long enough.” She dragged her hands through her hair in frustration. “So what are we going to do, just wait for him to show up and kill me?”

Baran’s ringed hand came to rest on her shoulder, radiating strength and warmth. Startled, she looked up. “He’s not going to kill you, Jane.” His eyes were so dark, so rich, like pools of dark chocolate....

“At the risk of interrupting your mating ritual,” Frieka said, “it’s been three hundred years since I had anything to drink. I have three choices—I could go outside and look for a stream, I could drink out of the nearest toilet, or—“

“I’ll get you something.” Jane turned away from Baran, fighting the niggle of regret as his comforting hold dropped away.

“Food would be good, too,” Freika added. “Though I suppose I could hunt for myself—if you don’t mind losing your cat.”

She eyed him. “Octopussy is not wolf chow, furball. I’m sure there’s something in the freezer.”

“Don’t put yourself out.” Raising his voice, he called, “Here, kitty, kitty....”

“All right, already!” Jane stalked toward the kitchen. What the hell was she going to feed him? She didn’t have any dog food, even assuming he’d lower himself to eat it.

Steak. There were a couple of rib eyes in the freezer.

She pulled it open and reached inside, found the package, and grabbed it. Out of habit she started to check it for freezer burn.

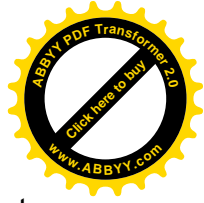
A chunk of meat, dark red, traces of frozen blood on the plastic...

An image rose in her mind—Druas, digging Mary Kelly’s heart out of her chest.... Her ears began to buzz. She stared sightlessly at the steak, fighting to stay upright. It felt as though her throat was swelling shut. Breathe, dammit, she ordered herself. Don’t pass out on the floor in front of them. They already think I’m...

Gutless, her father’s voice whispered in her mind. *I always said you were gutless.*

No, she thought, fighting the well of tears. No, you’re wrong.

He’s going to kill you because you’re too incompetent to save yourself.



Dammit, no. She blinked the tears away. I'm not incompetent. That may have been what you told me for twenty years, but I proved you wrong. I'm aggressive, I'm tough, and I will survive this.

Only if that big hunk of muscle in there saves you. Otherwise you don't have a prayer.

Anger flooded her, welcome and hot, chasing away the chill. Yes, I will. I'm going to beat this.

I'm going to beat you.

Baran and Freika watched as Jane started opening cabinets and rattling crockery. Because he didn't care to be heard, Baran used his computer's com unit to speak silently to his partner. She's beginning to function.

For the time being, the wolf replied. Would you care to bet on how long it'll take her to collapse again?

If she does, she won't stay down. She's got courage.

She'd better. Freika let his tongue loll in a lupine grin. Speaking of going down, when do you plan to spread her? I haven't smelled so much pheromone in the air since the last time you took leave.

Voyeur.

Hey, somebody should get a little pussy on this trip.

Leave the cat alone, Freika.

Spoilsport. The wolf padded toward the kitchen. "Well, I'd better make sure she isn't dumping horsemeat in a bowl," he said, pitching his voice loud enough to make sure Jane could hear him. "I keep telling her I'm not a dog, but I don't think it's sunk in yet."

"A little Mister Ed tartare, anyone?" Jane's voice sounded overly bright, as if she was working hard at being cheerful and unaffected. "Never mind, you wouldn't get the joke. This is steak, hairball. Rib eye, three bucks a pound. You should be very happy together. It's frozen solid, so I'm nuking it for you. You want it thawed until it's just bloody, or do you want it cooked?"

"I certainly don't want it radioactive. Nuked?"

"Not nuked as in bombed. Nuked as in microwaved. Cooked in a microwave oven. You stick it hi the box, push the button, and magic waves of energy bombard it until it's hot enough to scald the roof of your mouth." Something began to hum. "See? You're not the only master of technology in this house."



Baran found himself grinning despite his concern. Jane's effort at humor made him feel a bit better about her chances. She was a fighter. She wouldn't give up, no matter how bad things got. That determination made it easy to like her.

Maybe a little too easy.

His smile faded. Charming or not, she was still a civilian, and that meant she had limits he couldn't afford to ignore. Baran could protect her, joke with her, even seduce her, but he didn't dare forget that when it came right down to it, she couldn't be trusted.

Trusting a civ was a good way to get killed.

Okay, Jane thought, watching Freika devour his dinner, it was time to start taking a proactive approach. "What other information do we have about the killer?"

"Not much," the wolf said, tearing off a chunk of meat with his teeth. Since he didn't use his mouth to talk, he could eat at the same time. "Basically what I've already told you."

"Then let's take it from another direction. What do we know about Jack the Ripper?"

"Freika, what do your files say?" Baran asked, moving to join them.

The wolf lifted his head and swallowed. "There is no other mention of this Jack the Ripper other than the Mary Kelly trid."

Baran grunted. "More TE games."

"Not a problem—I know where we can get all the information on the Ripper we could ever need." Jane turned and headed through the living room to the back room that held her home office. It was nice having something constructive to contribute. "People in this time are fascinated by his murders. There are books and Web sites galore."

"Which may be why TE didn't waste crystal space on it," he observed, trailing her. "They're nothing if not efficient."

"Unlike Jane's compute^," Freika said, having reluctantly left his dinner to stick his head around the doorframe. He eyed the P.C. as Jane sat down at her desk. "What a primitive piece of junk."

She considered flipping him off; it was a top-of-the-line machine, brand-new, with enough power to run all the graphics and layout programs she needed to put the paper together. Of course, by the standards of your average cybernetic talking wolf, it probably was a primitive piece of junk.

No doubt about it, Jane thought, turning the computer on and waiting for it to boot up. My life is getting really, really strange.



When Jane's fingers hit the keyboard, Baran moved to her side to watch. "What are you doing?"

"Hmm?" She used the mouse to click on the icon for Internet access. At least she had a cable modem.

"With your hands."

"Typing on the keyboard. It's the only way to interface with this kind of computer."

He frowned. "Why not just tell it what you want it to do?"

"It doesn't listen very well." She keyed Jack the Ripper into the search engine. The resulting list contained thousands of entries; she clicked on the most likely looking selection on the first page.

The site was loaded with an astonishing amount of information, everything from morgue photos to police statements to transcripts of newspaper articles of the time.

There was even the lyrics of "Sweet Violets," the song Mary Kelly had sung to Druas. Jane printed it all out and went to the next site. Baran picked up the printouts, sat down in the second office chair, and started scanning them, Freika standing on his hind legs to read over his shoulder.

More than an hour later she turned off the computer and sat back in her seat, scrubbing her hands over her face. "Well, now we've got the opposite problem—too much information, most of it unreliable, and no way to tell what Druas actually did. We can't even be sure he killed the five that are usually attributed to the Ripper."

The Whitechapel killer was thought to have murdered five women in London between the dates of August 31 and November 9, 1888: Mary Ann "Polly" Nichols on August 31, Annie Chapman on September 8, Elizabeth Stride and Catherine Eddowes, both on September 30, and Mary Jane Kelly on November 9. But some researchers believed he'd killed other women as well, and there was considerable disagreement whether Eddowes was actually a Ripper victim at all.

"For what it's worth," Freika said, "the file TE gave me indicates they do think Druas murdered all five of the women."

"That makes sense," Baran said. "If the point is to enact the historical murders, he'd do all of them."

Jane picked up a pencil and tapped it restlessly on the desk. "What about all those letters that were supposedly from the killer, including the one they took the Ripper name from—did he write any of them or not?" Even at the time, police believed most of the letters were frauds, written by unscrupulous journalists.



Baran shuffled through the stack. “Who knows? Though the package sent to this George Lusk with part of a kidney in it certainly might be genuine.”

“Judging from my file on him, it does sound like the kind of thing Druas would do,” Frieka said.

“Eeewww.” Jane put the pencil in her mouth and bit down, sinking her teeth in the wood while she thought. “I didn’t know the Ripper strangled those women first, but all the autopsies do seem to indicate that. The mutilations were done postmortem, getting progressively worse as he went along.” She grimaced and tossed the pencil aside. “Which doesn’t sound good for the women of Tayanita County.”

Including Jane herself. Better not think about that. She’d rather not have to race to the bathroom again.

Baran was still flipping through the stack. “What’s really ironic is all these elaborate theories about his identity. An English prince, a writer named Lewis Carroll...”

“Off with her head,” Jane muttered.

“...an artist, a doctor, even a woman. And each and every theory was dead wrong.”

“Funny how a time-traveling cyborg mercenary never made the list.” She rolled her eyes. “What were they thinking?”

They sat discussing the murders until even Jane’s vibrating tension couldn’t withstand the need for sleep any longer. She suggested calling it a night.

Baran nodded. “That’s a good idea. We’ll all be able to think a little clearer in the morning.” He stood, plainly waiting for her to lead the way.

Ohhhhh, boy, Jane realized. He’ll have to sleep in the same room with me. The sensual awareness that had dogged her rose on a gentle wave of heat. Even the horrors of the night evidently hadn’t managed to kill the attraction she felt. “The bedroom is upstairs.”

“I know.” He said the words briskly, without a trace of innuendo.

“I’ll stay down here and keep watch,” Frieka said. “Druas may surprise all of us and actually use the door.”

Jane glanced at him. Despite his bland offer, the look in those lupine eyes was knowing and amused. Damn, she thought, even Wolfie expects us to get it on.

And he was probably right, she thought as she led the way upstairs. At least judging by the warm tingle spreading through her breasts. After the night she’d had, who’d have thought her battered brain could even produce that much hormone?



Battered or not, though, she was acutely aware of Baran's potent male presence as he followed her into the bedroom. Fighting to ignore it, she tried to decide what to wear to bed that wouldn't make her look as if she were inviting a bout of Warlord love.

Despite her body's interest, she knew she wasn't up to entertaining his libido. From the looks of that big body, it would be an exhausting proposition.

On the other hand, she didn't care to bed down in the jeans and shirt she was wearing, either. It would be hard enough to get any rest as it was.

Pretending to ignore her brawny houseguest, Jane crossed to her cherry dresser, hoping to find something unattractive. The first thing she saw when she opened the drawer was a skimpy lace teddy. She buried it a little deeper and dug out a sleep shirt that was so big Baran could have worn it himself. After excavating a pair of baggy gray sweats to complete the keep-your-distance look, she started for the bathroom.

A hand caught the door before she could swing it closed. Baran stepped into the room after her.

"Hey, back off," she protested. "I need to change and ... stuff."

"Didn't we cover this downstairs? I go where you go."

"Baran, you can't follow me into every ladies' room in Tayanita County. That's just not going to work."

"Why not?"

She sighed with elaborate patience. "Because the other ladies will not like it."

"I don't see any other ladies here, Jane."

"Baran..."

He folded powerful arms and lifted a dark brow.

She threw up her hands. "Fine, whatever. Can you at least turn your back?"

"Why?"

"Okay, now you're being a pain in the butt." She reached for patience and gritted, "I don't want to take off my clothes in front of you!"

That eyebrow climbed another fraction. "I hate to destroy whatever illusions you cherish, but I have seen naked women before."





“Yeah, well, you haven’t seen this woman naked.”

Baran sighed at her surly tone. “Jane, I’m a soldier. Half my fellow soldiers are female. In combat conditions you quickly learn you don’t have to have sex with every woman you see without her clothes.” He smiled slightly, rubbing his jaw like a man remembering a right cross. “When I was sixteen, I had a female sergeant once who... Well, I didn’t make that mistake again.”

He was in combat when he was sixteen? She shook her head, deciding to explore that topic some other time. “Regardless of your experience, I don’t undress in front of men I don’t know. And I’m going to change this sweater. It smells like... never mind what it smells like, I’m not wearing it another minute.”

Baran leaned back against the door and looked amused. “Go ahead. I’ll try to control my lust.”

Something about that silent get-over-yourself air ignited her temper. “Fine,” she snarled, grabbing the hem of her top. “You want me to undress? Okay, I’ll undress.” In a single violent gesture she jerked it up and over her head and threw it directly at his face.

He caught the shirt out of the air and tossed it into a corner. His indifferent gaze didn’t even flicker.

She snarled. Suddenly the helpless fear that had battered her all night morphed into full-blown, defiant rage.

Jane twisted her arms behind her back, unfastened her bra, and stripped it off. She was too furious to feel embarrassed when her full breasts sprang free, nipples instantly pebbling. From, of course, the cool air.

Baran lifted a bored brow. So?

Jerk. Jane reached for her waistband and ripped open the button of her fly. Her zipper hissed loudly as she tugged it down and started squirming her way free. Her bare breasts bounced. She could almost feel him watching. Despite her anger, something heated low in her belly.

Her own reaction making her even angrier, she gave her butt a gratuitous wiggle as she struggled free of her pants and kicked them viciously aside. Dressed only in a silky thin pair of scarlet panties, she straightened to her full height and glared at him.

He couldn’t have looked more indifferent if he’d been watching a commercial for feminine hygiene products. He wasn’t even hard. Except...

His eyes were glowing again.



If Baran hadn't instructed his computer to keep him from becoming erect, he would have had a hard-on up to his rib cage.

Yet he'd meant what he'd said. He was used to seeing women—and other men, for that matter—walking around in various states of undress. He barely noticed anymore.

But those were battle-toughened ferns, lithe, muscular warriors who could hold their own, whether in a brawl or in bed. If they were unbonded and you expressed an interest, they'd sleep with you as casually as he'd scratch Freika's skull jack when it itched. They always gave good sex—he'd never had bad sex—but it wasn't anything to get worked up about.

But Jane Colby's deliriously full, pointed breasts were a different matter altogether. He wanted to taste one of those tight pink nipples so badly, his balls ached.

Unfortunately, the look she was giving him was pure, unadulterated go-to-hell. Despite his powers, he strongly suspected if he touched her, she'd make him pay.

But those pretty nipples might just be worth it....

Blithely ignoring how close Baran was to losing control, Jane curled a delicate lip at him and turned her back with a mocking roll of her ass.

His gaze followed the long, sweet indentation of her spine down to her narrow waist and rounded behind. Her butt was clad only in something thin and silky and bright red, and there were two tempting little dimples right above her waistband. He pictured cupping that pretty butt in his hands while he lowered her onto his shaft....

She picked up the shirt she'd brought in with her and started dragging it on over her head. Her long, silken back curved and twisted with the motion, as if daring him to reach out and touch. He controlled his hungry hands with an effort.

She put on the pants next, sliding in one long leg at a time before slowly pulling the baggy fabric up over her thighs. Her firm behind flexed as she twitched the loose bottoms into place. Baran seriously considered bending her over that marble countertop and pulling them down again.

Throttle back, Warlord. Keep it together.

It didn't help that every breath he took was scented with arousal—his own, and hers. Despite her irritation, she was getting just as hot as he was.

Unfortunately, he'd made such a point of being immune to her nudity, he couldn't afford to indulge in any of the things he so badly wanted to do. She needed to trust him, and he needed to remain firmly in control. He knew he'd seduce her eventually, but now wasn't the time.



Maintaining his blank expression, he set his jaw and clamped a grip over his lust.

"I need to use the toilet, Baran," she said, sounding reluctant, as if it galled her to ask. "Step outside a second. I promise to scream if Druas beams in like Captain Kirk."

He grappled for his fraying patience. "Jane, every minute is every minute. I'm not going to risk getting you killed to preserve your twenty-first century concept of modesty."

True, the chances that the killer would Jump into the bathroom at this particular instant were pretty slim. Unfortunately, Baran knew those odds would increase as time went on and the killer took up sensor surveillance. He had to establish standard procedure now so Jane wouldn't balk over it later.

She whirled to glare at him. "This is embarrassing, dammit!" Her breasts rose and fell behind that too-big shirt that didn't hide nearly as much as she thought it did. "It's one thing to do a strip tease, but there are certain bodily functions I don't like to share. Period. And somehow, I don't think women three hundred years from now feel any differently."

"People do all kinds of things in combat they wouldn't normally do."

"This isn't combat!"

"Actually, it is." But he turned his back anyway, the gesture designed to silently underscore that he'd gone as far as he intended to.

He knew he'd made his point.

Jerk.

Jane was still simmering when Baran led the way back into the bedroom a few moments later. He could have stepped out of the room for sixty seconds; he didn't have to be such a dominant schmuck about it. He ..

Slid out of the leather coat and tossed it over the armchair, then grabbed his sweater and pulled it over his head. Muscle rippled up and down his long, powerful back with the movement.

She gaped at the sudden expanse of deliciously bare Baran as he bent to pull off his boots. He looked as if God had sculpted every ridge, muscle, and hollow personally as an illustration to lesser mortals.

That, or the Devil had done the sculpting in order to tempt vulnerable females into sin.

Then he started pulling his pants down his long thighs, and Jane roused from her hypnotized shock. "What the hell are you doing?" She knew exactly what he was doing, of course.



This was payback.

Very effective payback, too. The man had the most gorgeous male butt she'd ever seen, particularly clad only in a pair of tight, white jockies.

Baran calmly turned, folding his pants. The view from the front was even more stunning. His broad, V-shaped torso looked as if it belonged on the cover of a romance novel, the kind good Southern mothers threw in the trash. Most powerfully built men tended to look a little short-legged, but Baran's were as long as the rest of his body. And in between...

Well, he didn't strike her as the type to stuff a sock in his shorts, so that bulge had to be real. Considering that he wasn't even erect, the man had to be hung like a Brahma bull.

And the grin he was wearing as he watched her check him out reminded her of his furry partner downstairs—all white, wicked teeth and dishonorable intentions.

Yeah, this was Operation Payback, all right. "What are you doing?" she demanded again.

The wicked gleam in his eyes intensified. What would you like me to do? But if he was thinking the question, he didn't ask it. "Getting ready for bed."

Jane folded her arms, ignoring the hot, eager trickle she felt somewhere south of her waistband. "You'd better not be about to tell me you sleep in the nude," she said. "Because your butt is going to need some padding when you bunk down on the floor."

"What I've got on now is sufficient," he said coolly. "And I have no intention of sleeping on the floor. I need to be close to you."

"You know, somehow I get the impression you're milking this," she said, eyeing him. "But I've got to be wrong. You couldn't be that big a jerk."

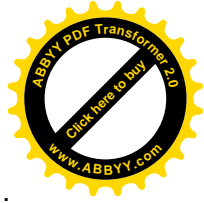
He propped big fists on his hips, silently tempting her eyes back to that intriguing bulge. "Is that any way to talk to a man who came three hundred years to save your luscious ... neck?"

"That depends on what you're planning to charge me for it."

"I don't charge."

But you're not above enjoying whatever fringe benefits you can get, either. She clamped her lips shut before she could say the words. "Fine. Whatever. Just keep your distance."

Jane waited for some silken comeback, but he made no reply. Pointedly ignoring him, she stalked to the bed and flipped back the covers. Her copy of *Dark Passion* flew out of the covers and sailed through the air. He snagged it in midflight and handed it back to her.



“Interesting reading.” The purr in Baran’s voice was a perfect match to the predatory grin on his face.

Her own face heated as she remembered the scene she’d been enjoying when she’d heard the murder call earlier that evening. The hero had just tied up the heroine and...

“If you’d been any kind of gentleman, you would have kept your nose out of my book!”

He contemplated the point, then grinned that slow, wicked grin again. “Actually, if I understand the term — I don’t believe lama, gentleman.”

“I noticed!” With a huff she tossed the paperback on the nightstand, climbed into bed, turned her back on him, and curled tightly into a defensive ball.

He laughed softly. The mattress sank as he slid onto it. “Do you normally sleep with the lights on?”

She hissed and jumped up to flip the switch, then turned back toward the bed.

And stopped dead, the hair rising on the back of her neck. His eyes were glowing again, shining in the darkness like a special effect in a horror flick. And after viewing that recording, she didn’t need anything else gnawing at her fragile composure. “Could you not do that?”

“Do what?” His voice was a velvety male purr, intimate and seductive.

“The glowing bit with the eyes.” Trying not to look at him, she hurried back to the bed and slipped between the covers. “It’s unnerving as hell.”

“Unfortunately, that’s one of the few body functions I have no control over. They’re designed that way.”

“Sounds like a serious drawback in battle.” Small talk. Yeah. Get him thinking about something other than sex. Get herself thinking about something other than sex.

“I normally wear an armored helmet. The visor hides them.”

She rolled over to face him and propped her head on her palm. “So why do they? Glow.”

He sighed. “Jane, I thought the idea of going to bed was to sleep.”

“I just wondered.”

“Let’s talk about it tomorrow.”

“Fine.”



But half an hour later Jane was still awake, 'her burning eyes fixed on the ceiling. She could hear Baran's steady breathing in the bed next to her, feel his solid, comforting presence.

But every time she closed her lids, she saw a flash of silver and a spray of red, heard Druas humming that snatch of song as he ...

She felt so damn cold.

Curling on her side, Jane drew her legs up and wrapped her arms around her body. She shivered. She'd been all right as long as Baran had been awake to fight with, but now in the silent darkness the horror came rushing back.

It suddenly hit her the killer had been humming the same song he'd made Mary Kelly sing.

Jesus. Jack the Ripper intended to turn her into the star of a pornographic snuff video for a gang of perverts three hundred years in the future. And she was sleeping next to a time traveler who'd come back all those centuries to protect her. .

When had her life become an episode of the Twilight Zone!

She was so tired her eyeballs ached, but the idea of going to sleep made her heart pound. She knew she'd find Druas and his knife in her dreams.

If only Baran would wake up and distract her again with one of those mind-bending lectures on time travel delivered with those hot bedroom eyes. Even if they did glow in the dark.

God, she was cold.

Had it hurt when Druas slit Mary Kelly's throat, or had she already been dead?

Cut it out, dammit.

She shivered again, but this time she had trouble stopping. She curled tighter, hugging her knees. And slowly became aware of a sense of warmth at her back.

Baran.

He seemed to radiate heat like a big male furnace. She found herself inching in his direction.

She tried to think of what she would do in the morning, how she'd protect herself. Her father's old .38 revolver was packed away with the rest of his stuff up in the attic, but she hadn't practiced with it in years. Maybe she should go to the firing range....



Damn, Baran was warm. Jane edged a little closer and bumped into his hard, muscular side.

She slid away.

Practice. She needed to dig the gun out and practice with it. And what was she going to tell Tom Reynolds? She might know who the killer was, but she'd never be able to tell the police. God forbid they actually catch him—from what Baran had said, Druas would rip them apart.

Hell, she'd be lucky if he didn't rip her apart.

Don't think about that, Jane. Go to sleep.

She curled tighter into herself and tried to ignore all the man-shaped pools of blackness in the room her imagination wanted to turn into serial killers. Temptingly close to her back, Baran slept, big and warm, breathing quietly. Stranger or not, she wished her pride would let her curl into his arms.

She was so tired, so wrung out from the terror and rage that had filled her night. Her eyelids slid closed, only to snap open again. She didn't want to sleep, didn't want to dream, but she was tired. So tired. So ...

They were fighting again.

Jane crouched under the dining room table, hidden by the drape of the linen tablecloth. Ducking her head, she cupped shaking hands over her ears as her father screamed insults at her mother. Her heart was pounding inside her Cabbage Patch Kids pajamas. They'd fought before, but this was worse. So much worse.

She felt sick.

"If you walk out that door, Jeanine, I swear to God you 'll never see Jane again!"

"You can't do that! She's my child. I'll sue for custody."

"You won't get it. People in this county owe me, and don't think they won't pay their debts."

"And don't think I won't tell them what you've done to me!"

His laugh was dark and ugly. "You can't prove anything."

"Don't bet on it. I've got photos, Bill."



The silence that stretched between them jangled until Jane began to cry, stuffing her pajama top into her mouth to stifle any noise.

“Where?” Her father’s low, deadly snarl made her freeze like a rabbit. ?

“Where you’ll never find them. I’ve got a friend you don’t know anything about. I told her everything. She’ll—“

“She? Or he?” Jane heard the familiar sound of a slap and squeezed her eyes shut. “Is it a he?”

“No!”

“Who?”

“I’m not telling you! But she’ll testify, and the photos...”

His laugh was mocking. “They won’t care, Jeanine. This is South Carolina.”

“And I’m Jane’s mother, and South Carolina judges think ten-year-old girls belong with their mothers. Particularly if their fathers are abusive, wife-beating^.. Hit me again and I swear I’ll go to the police. How will that look in your precious paper? “

Jane could hear him breathing.

“Jane!” Her mother’s shout almost startled a scream out of her. She clamped both hands over her mouth. “Jane, come on. We’re leaving.”

“All right, bitch, you can go. But she’s staying.”

“I’m not leaving without—“

“She’s a Colby, Jeanine. I’m leaving the paper to her, just like Colby s have for a hundred years. You ‘re not taking her out of this town.”

“I’m not leaving without her.”

They went quiet again. Jane, too terrified to move, swallowed hard and fought against the need to throw up.

“If you don’t leave without her,” her father said, in a low, deadly voice, “I’m going to kill you.”

A hot tear plopped onto Jane’s barefoot. She stuffed her pajama top deeper into her mouth.





Her mother laughed, her voice too high, too wild. “They’d catch you, Bill”

“I’ve covered a lot of trials, Jeanine. You think I don’t know how to create reasonable doubt?”

Jane fought not to sob. She knew she didn’t dare give herself away.

“Get out, Jeanine,” her father said, his voice soft and cold. “And you ‘d better not apply for custody.”

Jane heard the door slam. Something hit the wall with a crash. Glass broke. Her father began to curse, his voice vicious with rage.

She curled tighter into a ball and quivered. If he found her..

Jane jolted awake to find herself standing in darkness.

“Jane?”

She whirled, stifling her scream from long habit. Moonlight streamed in the window, silhouetting the big male figure sitting up in the bed.

“Are you all right? You jumped out of bed as if someone shot you, but my sensors say you’re uninjured.” Recognizing Baran’s deep, sleep-roughened voice at last, Jane slumped.

“I’m fine. Just a nightmare.” The oldest one in her collection. She supposed it wasn’t surprising she’d had it, given the circumstances.

Particularly since after Jeanine Colby had walked out the door that night, Jane had never seen her again. Her father had told people for years his wife had left to take care of her sick mother. When Jane had questioned him as a teenager, he’d produced letters addressed to Jane he’d claimed were from Jeanine. The handwriting had matched what she’d found in the family Bible, so Jane had decided her mother had simply gone into hiding.

But the doubts had lingered, so as an adult, she’d hired a private detective to search for her mother. He never found anything.

Maybe Jeanine had done a very good job of covering her tracks from the husband who’d abused her. Then again, maybe William Colby had carried through on his threats. A year ago Jane had finally decided to tell the police about her suspicions, but before she could go through with her plans, he’d suffered his fatal stroke.

Now she’d never know if her father had been a murderer.



“Is there anything you need?” Baran asked, jolting her out of her preoccupation.

“No.” She laughed shortly. “Well, maybe a good therapist.”

“Why don’t you come back to bed?”

She eyed him as he sat against the head of the bed, his glorious bare chest silvered in a shaft of moonlight. He looked big and strong and safe. And just then, she was in desperate need of safety.

Jane crossed the bedroom to slide under the covers he lifted for her. He curled onto his side facing her, silently offering her the shelter of his body. His skin seemed to radiate a seductive heat, as though his natural body temperature was high. She felt too battered to refuse. She eased into the curve of one muscled arm. A hand came up to rub her back, so big it almost spanned the width of her torso.

“Your skin is cold,” he said softly, drawing her farther into his arms as he rolled onto his back. The movement draped her over his chest like a scarf. “Let me warm you.”

Yeah, I’ll bet you’d be good at that, she thought with weary cynicism. The thing was, she felt so traumatized she’d probably let herself be seduced, if only for the illusion of safety she’d find in his arms. •

But he made no further advances, instead rubbing her back in slow, gentle strokes. His chest felt broad and strong and hard under her cheek, and his heat enveloped her. Gradually she began to relax.

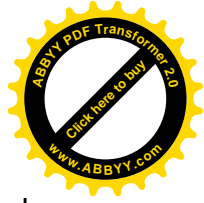
As she settled into him, Jane realized he had an erection. The long shaft pressed gently against the curve of her belly through her sweat pants. She tensed, but he did nothing more. Demanded nothing more.

And he felt so safe. Jane had experienced so damn little safety in her life, she found it difficult to resist. So she stayed where she was, despite that silently tempting erection, and savored his warmth.

She could feel the sculpted ridges of his muscles, the faint tickle of his body hair against her skin. He even smelled delicious. Every time she inhaled, her head filled with the spicy male musk of his scent. His arm lay curved around her shoulder, a comforting weight. She let her eyes close. Surely now ...

Red splattered the walls. Eyes opened wide in shock, a screaming mouth... Jane’s screaming mouth. Or was it Jeanine’s?

She jerked upright out of his loose hold. Sitting up with a gulping sob, she buried her face in her hands. “You were right. I shouldn’t have looked at that damn recording. I’ve tried, but I can’t stop thinking about it....”



“Yes, you can.” Sheets rustled and the bed shifted under his weight. Warm hands closed over her wrists, pulled hers away from her face. “I’ll help you.”

Jane looked up blindly in the darkness, saw the shimmer of his eyes an instant before his mouth came down over hers. She tried to pull away, startled, but long fingers tangled in her hair and held her still. The kiss was an easy, practiced slide of his mouth against hers, carefully undemanding.

Jane had expected skill, but Baran’s tenderness took her by surprise. His tongue caressed her lower lip, then entered her mouth in a long erotic stroke. His mouth tasted of a sweet, spicy something she couldn’t identify. Strong hands closed gently around her shoulders, turned, and lowered her to the mattress. She cupped her palms around the curve of his shoulders. They more than filled her hands. “We shouldn’t do this.”

“Probably not,” he murmured. “But it seems we’re going to do it anyway.”

“Yeah,” she said, and sobbed in a breath as he cuddled her breasts through her shirt. “Just help me not to think. Just keep me from seeing ...” Mother. “... Mary die.”

“I can do that.” Strong teeth closed gently over her lower lip, gave it a cool tug, then scraped softly against the curve of her jaw until they found a tendon. Stopped to nibble. “Just concentrate on this.”

His hands slid up under the hem of her T, pushed it upward. She felt the cool draft on her erect nipples for only a moment before Baran’s warm, long fingers covered one breast. Cupped lightly.

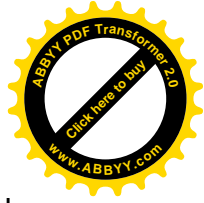
You don’t know him, sanity whispered. I don’t care.

His long hair tumbled across her skin as he lowered his head to find one nipple. The heat of his claiming mouth made her spine arch.

“I’ve been wanting to do that for hours,” he rumbled against her skin, and licked the pointed tip. “Ever since I scented your heat in that pretty red silk gown.” He groaned. “God, that book of yours made you wet.”

She inhaled sharply. He gave her nipple a delicate rake with his teeth. Pleasure danced up her spine. “You ... you could smell that? On my clothes?” She knew she should be outraged, but just now she was too grateful for the distraction. “Mmm,” he said, and laughed, soft and dark. “My nose is almost as good as Freika’s. In fact, it tells me you’re creaming now.” He suckled, making her squirm.

“I can’t believe you sniffed my nightgown”—she had to stop to gasp—“when you’d never even met me.”



That dark laugh rolled over her again, making her shiver. “I not only sniffed it, I seriously considered wrapping it around my cock.” Another wicked almost-bite sent delight throbbing through her nipples as his long fingers squeezed and teased. “It’s been a very long time since I’ve ridden a woman, and you tempt me.”

Something about the rough, dark way he phrased it sent a quiver through her. “Yeah,” she managed through the flood of heat, “I did pick up on that part. Your eyes glow whenever you’re—“

“Aroused. Or angry.” He swirled his tongue over one tight point, then lowered his head to find the curve where her rib cage met her waist. “You’ve got a talent for making me both.”

He laved her belly button until she squirmed. Her giggle was cut off by his fingers hooking into the waistband of her sweats.

“I don’t like these,” he said. “Don’t wear them again.” Before she could work up any outrage at that blunt order, he started pulling them down. “I want to feel your bare legs wrapped around my ass.”

Her head spun. “Okay,” she panted as he stripped them ruthlessly off. “But just so we’re clear, you’re not telling me what to wear.”

Baran’s eyes flashed at her through the darkness, red and bright as coals before he turned to toss the pants across the room. She heard the soft thump as they landed. “Oh, yes, I am. You’re going to do every last thing I order you to do.”

“Not when you’re just being a sexist jerk.”

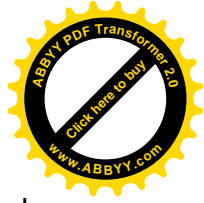
“Every last thing, Jane,” he insisted, leaning close until his breath gusted warm on her ear. “Instantly. Without stopping to parse out whether you agree. Because it’s the only way I can keep you alive.” A big hand wrapped in the fragile fabric of her panties and twisted. The silk pulled at her hips and the tops of her thighs before it ripped.

“Hey!” She glared up at his dark shadow looming over her. “You didn’t have to do that!”

His eyes gleamed as he moved back down her body like the erotic predator he was. “No, but I wanted to. Just like I want to do this.” He dipped his tongue between her outer labia, a wet, tempting stroke along sensitive flesh and soft hair.

She was still gasping at that sensation when she felt him move between her thighs, broad shoulders forcing them wide. His mouth descended to the lips that had grown steadily more creamy with every stroke and lick and hot male purr.

She groaned, instinctively fisting the sheets on either side of her hips. To her shock, his hands clamped down over hers, pinning them to the mattress. “What are you doing?” she gasped.



“Making sure you don’t go anywhere.” That clever tongue flicked between her labia and over her clit, burning hot as he lapped her up like cream. She squirmed helplessly, gasping. With a satisfied rumble, he closed his mouth over her tender lips and drank from her before using his teeth on the delicate flesh.

It was all she could do to form words as he bit and sucked and nibbled. “Just because I... read a book with a bondage scene, it... AH!... doesn’t mean I want to be held down!”

“No, but I want to do it anyway. And where you’re concerned”—he paused to do something wicked with that long, clever tongue—“I do exactly what I want.”

A cascade of fire raced up her spine, tearing a gasp from her lips. She writhed as the orgasm swamped her consciousness, instinctively trying to pull away from his overwhelming mouth. His hands tightened their grip, keeping her ruthlessly pinned as he sucked so hard her every nerve detonated in an erotic Fourth of July.

Jane screamed, convulsing against his mouth, grinding her hips against his face.

The fire took a long, long time to die. She was still quivering when he sat up, grabbed her hips, and flipped her onto her belly.

She opened her eyes, dazed, and looked around at him as he pulled her onto her knees. He didn’t even take the time to remove his briefs—just tugged them down enough to free his putting cock into the spill of moonlight.

“Now,” he said, in a dark voice rich with male anticipation, “it’s my turn.”

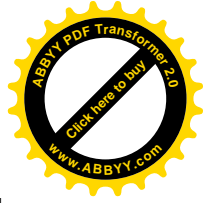
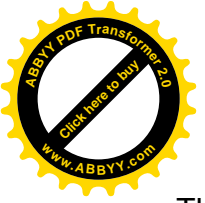
Something hard brushed Jane’s slick opening. Her head jerked up in shock at the diameter of Baran’s shaft as he slowly impaled her, one mind-blowing inch at a time.

“Oh, you are tight.” He came down over her, covering her back in hard, sweaty muscle as he purred in her ear. “And slick. Have a little more of me.”

“Jesus, Baran!” She gasped as he drove in even deeper, slow, thick, and endless. Moaning, she fought to brace her hands beneath her and rise to all fours, but he caught her wrists and pinned them again, trapping her on her elbows with her ass lifted into his stroke.

Finally he was all the way in. “Mmrrnm. How does this feel?”

Jane could only pant. She could feel her own slick interior stretching around his impaling shaft. Stuffed almost to the point of pain, she whimpered. She’d never been so turned on in her life. “Good. God, it’s good. You bastard.” He rumbled a laugh in her ear. “I’ll take that as a compliment.”



Then he started to pull out. Slowly. Silk and width and heat, sliding from her deliciously. Out, And out. And out. And in. And in. And in.

“Just so you ... oh, GOD ... know, just because I let you do this to me ... in bed,” she gasped, “that doesn’t mean I’m going to ... AH!... let you dominate me anywhere else.”

He laughed, low and wicked, and started stroking out. “Oh, yes, you will. I’ll make sure of it.”

“No. No, I...” Out. And out. She whimpered.

“Darling, you won’t be able to stop me. Not that you’ll want to. I’m told I’ve got a talent for it.”

The velvet amusement in his voice barely registered in the hot rise of another climax. The only response she could manage was a scream.

The pleasure spiraled tighter and hotter until it exploded, twisting her into convulsions in the cage of his arms. He kept pumping, hot and hard, in short, ruthless strokes that drove everything else out of her head.

Her orgasm built even higher under that merciless stoking, burning and ferocious, unlike anything she’d ever known in her life. Helpless in the grip of it, Jane yowled, mindless, forgetting Druas and her father and everything else but Baran Arvid’s demanding body.

She was still drowning in the fire when she heard his triumphant roar as he came, deep in her pulsing sex.

Reluctantly Baran slid out of Jane’s hot, delicious clasp. As he collapsed on his back, panting, he heard her whimper once. “Oh, God, that was ... I never felt anything like that.”

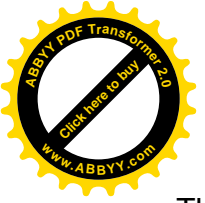
He felt his lips twitch in an automatic male smile that felt distinctly smug.

Though come to think of it, she’d been more than he’d expected, too. There’d been something in the way she’d responded, a pure female heat mixed with a curious ... innocence? Wonder? Something very different from what he was used to.

Desperation, a cynical mental voice suggested.

Well, yeah, that was part of it. He’d had some pretty incredible sex the night before a battle. There was nothing like the possibility of death to add a rough power to passion.

Yet somehow, taking Jane had felt more ... personal than that.



The mattress sank under him, kicking his senses instantly to alert, but it was only Jane rolling onto her side. Her arm encircled him as one small, cool hand came to rest on his chest. He heard her sigh once before her breathing deepened into sleep.

Good. With any luck, he'd done such a good job wearing her out, she wouldn't have any more nightmares.

He only hoped he could say the same.

Her fingers felt so cool and delicate against his hot flesh, so small. Her palm felt like silk, without the calluses of weapon use or combat he was used to in the War-frens he'd bedded.

Vulnerable.

She was so helplessly vulnerable. If he'd tried to hold down a Warfem the way he'd pinned Jane, he'd have had a fight on his hands.

Oh, he could have done it. His partner might even have decided to submit as part of the game. But frens were never truly helpless; their strength was two or three times that of a normal human male. A Warlord was even stronger, of course, but a really determined Warfem could still turn the tables.

Jane couldn't. She couldn't have broken his hold no matter what he'd chosen to do to her.

And if it had been Druas who'd pinned her ...

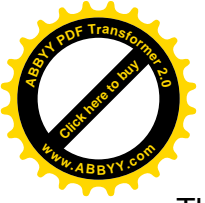
He couldn't move. They'd ordered his computer to lock his body on his knees. Helpless. He heard laughter, then Liisa's voice. Screaming. The sound ripped at him. He struggled desperately to move, to break out of the paralysis, but his computer wouldn't allow it, wouldn't release him.

Then he felt...

Shit. Baran shut the memory down and rolled out of bed in a convulsive burst of motion, barely aware of Jane's slim hand dropping limply away. Adjusting the briefs he'd tugged down to take her, he strode to the window, automatically positioned himself out of the path of fire. Scan, computer. Check for Xeran life indications.

The response came back an instant later. No Xer detected.

He stared out at the darkness, his jaw clamped tight, his hands curled into fists. He shouldn't be here. He should be on Xer with Freika, stalking General Jutka and waiting for his chance to put his ghosts to rest. The General's bodyguards would probably execute him afterward, but he really didn't care. He owed it to Liisa, to Lieutenant Ullock, to Thorp and Ive.



The team he'd failed to die with.

"Wait," he whispered to the darkness. "I'll get it done."

But first he had to take care of Jane.

He glanced back at the bed. She lay curled in a defensive ball on top of the sheets. One of her feet twitched. He hoped she wasn't having yet another nightmare.

Not that he could afford to care.

It was fine to spread her, to play hot games that taught her his strength and conditioned her to yield to him. The obedience he built in bed might pay off later when she followed some crucial order at some crucial moment. If she became obsessed with him, so much the better.

But he couldn't afford to become obsessed in turn. She was a job, no different from the rescue of the admiral's daughter, or that Vardonese scientist, or any of those he'd saved. Just another mission on the way to the only one that counted: looking into the eyes of General Gavoni Jutka and watching the bastard's life drain away.

Baran had gotten all the others who'd tortured and killed his team, or at least all the ones whose names he'd been able to discover. He'd stalked them patiently, challenged them one by one.

All except the bastard who'd murdered Liisa. He'd never been able to discover that one's name. But Jutka knew. He had to. And he'd give Baran that final name before he died.

One way or another.

But not tonight.

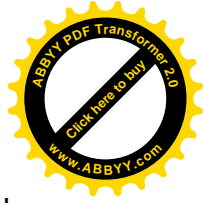
With a sigh Baran moved back to the bed and stood looking down at Jane. With his enhanced senses, he could plainly see the way her lashes fanned over her cheeks in the dark, her mouth relaxed in a full pout. He thought about kissing her again, tasting those velvet lips.

Keep your distance, warned a mental voice. Don't get too close. Don't let her get too close.

He moved around the bed, pulled free the sheet that was trapped under Jane's sleeping form. Climbing in beside her, he covered them both and started to reach for her. He wanted to feel her delicate warmth against him.

He stopped the gesture hi midmotion. Better not.





Instead he rolled over on his side until he faced away from her, leaving a comfortable distance between them. His back felt cool. For a moment he imagined what she'd feel like spooning him from behind, all curves and silken warmth.

Then he shut down the thought and closed his eyes. Computer, enable sleep. Scanners to full. Alert me if you detect anything.

Engaged, the comp said. He felt the tension drain from his body as the comp flooded his brain with the slow, deep wave patterns of sleep.

He knew nothing else.

Jane snapped her eyes open with a choked whimper and stared wildly at the wall bathed in the golden glow of morning sunlight. For an instant she had a memory of bloody dreams. Then the memory fled, and she was left with nothing but an impression of terror and violence.

She was glad. Her current reality was bad enough as it was. Except for ...

Baran.

She turned over quickly, half hoping to discover he'd been nothing but a dream himself. Along with the concept of Jack the Ripper bouncing merrily through time killing people...

No. There he was, handsome and sound asleep, long hair tumbling around his tattooed face as he lay on his side facing her. His chest seemed to loom like a muscled wall, soft chest hair curling in a tempting cloud across its breadth. He was so damn gorgeous, she wanted to touch him just to see if he was real.

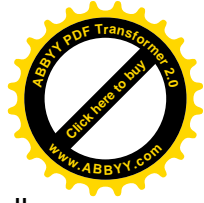
Which was no reason to sleep with the man mere hours after he'd broken into her house. Damn, that was the kind of thing romance heroines did, not real, living people who paid bills and ran a newspaper. She couldn't believe she'd let him seduce her like that.

Then she looked at the soft line of his mouth, the fan of his long eyelashes over his cheeks, the truly outstanding width of his shoulders....

Okay, maybe she could believe it.

She sighed. And promptly grimaced at the nasty taste in her mouth. If Baran woke up and decided to give her one of those incredible kisses, he'd be appalled. Time to brush the teeth.

Among other things, she mentally added, noticing the pressure in her bladder.



Jane started to roll out of bed, then stopped. He'd told her he had to be with her at all times. But what was she supposed to do—wake him out of a sound sleep and say, Hey, wake up. I have to pee? She didn't think so.

She'd make it quick and be back in bed before he—

A strong male hand snapped out to wrap around her wrist. She looked down to see Baran had opened one eye to look at her. "Where are you going?" his voice was sleep graveled. And astonishingly sexy. It just wasn't fair.

"I didn't mean to wake you...."

"You did anyway. Where are you going?"

"Bathroom break."

He lifted his head from the pillow, yawned hugely, let her go, and rolled smoothly to his feet. "One more time, Jane—you don't go anywhere without me."

"For God's sake, Baran, the Secret Service isn't this paranoid!"

His gaze turned abstracted. She realized his computer was probably feeding him the meaning of the term—and probably the complete history of the Service, all the way back to the day it was created. Growling, she bent to snatch her sleep shirt off the floor, then jerked it down over her head. She looked around for her pants and found them on the other side of the room.

As she recovered them and put them on again, she looked around to see him watching her, mouth flattened with displeasure. "Unlike you, your President doesn't have Jack the Ripper after him."

"No, just every other nutball on the planet." Janet turned and stomped toward the bathroom, resentfully aware that Baran dogged her heels. "I know what this is about, by the way. I lived for twenty-two years with a dominant jerk, and I know all the games. Daddy played them, each and every one. I'm the man, and you'll do what I say. Or else! No wonder Mom made for the hills." If she had. If her father hadn't...

"What are you talking about?"

"My father, alpha male of the universe." She plopped down on the toilet. "Turn your back, dammit."

Baran obeyed. "What has he got to do with this?"



“He thought women were naturally inferior, too. An old-fashioned, Southern-fried, sexist...” Wife-abuser, but Baran didn’t need to know that part. “So you can imagine how thrilled he was when his only offspring turned out to be female.”

Baran turned back around to gape at her. “Naturally inferior? Women? I never said that.”

“Yeah? So what’s with the ‘You’re going to obey my every command’ crap? Turn your back, dammit.”

“That’s not about your being a woman! That’s about your being a civilian.”

Finished, she rose and stalked to the sink to wash her hands. “Same difference.”

“No. It’s not.” Baran angled his head down until he was nose to nose with her. His eyes were beginning to glow again. “I will fight Druas for you, Jane. That’s a given. But it’s not going to be easy, because from what Freika said, he’s at least my match in strength. He may even be stronger. And considering what we both know he’s capable of, that may not turn out well for me.”

Jane had to fight the impulse to step back from the red-hot threads of rage burning in his irises. Instead she grabbed a towel and started drying her hands. “Yeah, I’m aware of that. I really am. And I’m grateful. But that still doesn’t give you the right to push me around!”

“The point is, I’m willing to die for you.” He bared his teeth and gritted, “But I’m not willing to die for your stupidity!”

For a moment she stared at him in shock. Then her rage exploded. “Fuck you, Baran.” Throwing the towel into his face, she stormed from the room.

Baran grabbed her wrist, jerking her to a stop just outside the door. She looked down at the hand that gripped her, then slowly raised her eyes to glare at him. In her mind’s eye she saw every time her father had ever grabbed her mother, every time he’d pushed, every time he’d slapped. “Let. Go.”

He glared. Jane peeled her lips away from her teeth as her fury burned hotter. She knew in that moment that if he lifted his free hand, she was going to hit him with everything she had, no matter how much bigger and stronger he was.

Slowly a faint alarm replaced the rage in his eyes, as if he realized just how close she was to the edge. Carefully he released his grip and stepped back.

That backward step was one her father had never taken.

Somehow it pricked Jane’s fury like a bubble. She slumped, deflating as the rage drained away, leaving only weariness behind. “I won’t be abused, Baran. Not even by a man who promises to protect me from Jack the Ripper.”



"It's not my intention to abuse you." His voice was just as low and tired as hers.

"Then you need to work on your delivery, because you're getting awfully damn close." She walked over to the bed and lowered herself to the mattress, the sudden exhaustion weighing at her.

Baran moved to sit down at her side, broad shoulders slumping. "I'm sorry."

"Huh." She snorted. "I've heard that before."

He eyed her, frowning. "Not from me."

"No. From my father. He was always sorry." She laughed shortly. "Every single time he beat the hell out of my mother, he was sorry. Not that it ever stopped him."

"Your father beat your mother?" She saw that she'd somehow shocked him.

She shrugged. "Until she ... left."

He frowned. "And you thought I was about to hurt you?"

Jane lifted a brow at him. "Well, you were pretty pissed."

"But I wouldn't have hit you." He tilted his chin, visibly offended. "I'm a Warlord"

She waited for him to elaborate, but he just looked indignant. "And? Unlike some people I could name, I don't have a computer implant to tell me what that means."

"No Warlord would use his strength against those he's sworn to protect," he explained, still visibly offended. "Particularly women. It's ... dishonorable."

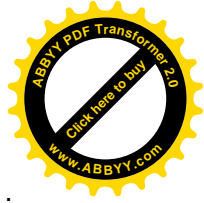
"Yeah, well, you didn't seem to have a problem with holding me down while you were—"

"That," he informed her, "was sex."

She stared at him. "I feel so much better now." "Now you're being deliberately obtuse." The beaded braid swung against his cheek as he gestured sharply. "There's a great deal of difference between playing erotic games and hurting someone under my protection. The only reason I'd ever use force against you is if you were trying to do something that would get you killed. Even then, I wouldn't beat you. Tie you, possibly ..."

"Which sounds awfully damn patronizing," she interrupted. "I'm an adult, Baran. I don't need to be restrained for my own good."

"In principle, I agree. But I've been in this kind of situation before, and I found out the hard way that principles and reality do not always coincide." He sighed. "Which is basically why



this argument began in the first place.” “Oh?” She lifted a brow at him. “I’ve been in this situation before. Or one like it.” “Ah.” Suddenly his earlier fury began to make sense. She turned to stare out the window at the bright morning sunlight. Outside, one of the neighbor’s kids zipped by on his bike. “I gather it didn’t end well.”

“No. No, it didn’t.” Baran braced his elbows on his knees and clasped both big hands between them. “When I was sixteen, the Xerans invaded Vardon, my home world.” She nodded. “I think you mentioned that.” “Yes.” He looked down at his broad, scarred palms. “They tried to wipe out the warrior class, the Warlords and Warfems, all of us who’d been genetically engineered to defend the planet. They killed many of us, but I was one of those who survived. We headed for the highlands and lived as guerillas, striking out of the mountains, killing and running.”

Jane looked at him, trying to imagine the life he must have led, all those centuries away. It was incomprehensible.

Just as incomprehensible as the fact that this wild, alien man had just given her the best sex she’d ever had in her life. Damn, she thought. *I really am in trouble.*

And she wasn’t just thinking about Druas.

“It sounds as if your childhood was worse than mine,” Jane said, dragging her mind away from its hot memories of Baran in bed. “And you grew up like that?”

“Yeah. It was ... difficult. There was never enough to eat, and we lived like, well, predators. And our prey was the Xerans.” His gaze turned grim. “We were so savage we eventually made the price too high for them. They put a puppet government in place and left. The puppet lasted about a week before one of us assassinated him.” He shook his head. “The Vardonese had a hell of a time civilizing the Warlords again after it was over. Me in particular.”

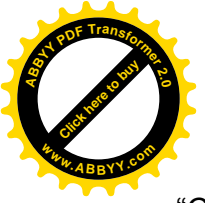
“Oh?”

He shrugged. “The Femmats who run our world are pacifists. They had no frame of reference to understand what torture does to you.”

“Torture?” She felt her eyes widen. “You were tortured? When?”

Instead of answering, he said, “Back when I was sixteen, I was in a combat unit. I’d grown up with them. Lieutenant Ullock, and Thorp, who did demolitions, and I’ve...” Baran smiled slightly at the memory. “I’ve cheated at cards like nobody I’ve ever met, but he was so damn charming you had to forgive him for it. And Liisa. She was ... I...” He stopped and shrugged. “First love. You know how it is.”

“Yeah. I’ve got a pretty good idea.” Oh, this did not sound good.



“Central Command sent us on this mission to rescue a Femmat scientist the Xerans were holding in this compound out in the mountains. It wasn’t supposed to be all that tough a target. We’d done that kind of thing before. Should have been in and right back out. But it didn’t work out that way.”

Jane studied his profile. He’d drawn himself very straight, head up and shoulders back, staring sightlessly out the window. When he didn’t speak for a moment, she prompted softly, “What happened?”

“Liisa and I were supposed to go in and get the scientist out while the others created a distraction. Only when we popped the cell open, the Femmat wouldn’t come with us. Said we had to get her data crystal first. She said it held top-secret results from some kind of experiment, and we couldn’t leave it in the hands of the enemy. I told her that wasn’t the mission, that we were on a timetable and we had to get her out now, no detours.”

“But she didn’t go along with it.”

His mouth took on a hard, bitter twist. “No. No, she told me I didn’t understand, that I was just a child in the body of a human tank, good for nothing but killing people. She said I didn’t have the intelligence to grasp the importance of her work. And she said she wasn’t moving one foot until I got her crystal back for her.”

“Bitch.” She paused to consider the term. “No, that doesn’t do her justice. Stupid bitch.”

“If she’d been anybody else ...” He shrugged. “But she was a Femmat. You don’t even have the concept. They’re ... I suppose the closest term is aristocracy, the ruling class on Vardon. I’d been taught to obey Femmats. I’d been created by a Femmat geneticist, raised by Femmats, taught by Femmats in the Warlord Creche.” He shook his head, the colored gems in his braid swinging. “I didn’t know what to do. She wouldn’t move and I couldn’t manhandle her, because a Warlord doesn’t even touch a Femmat without her permission.” His lip curled in sudden anger. “One punch. One punch, and they’d all still be alive. But I couldn’t make myself do it.”

Jane swallowed. “What happened?”

He laughed shortly. “I went to get her crystal. Liisa was going to try to get her out, but they ran into trouble. I wasn’t even all the way back down the hall when I heard the beamer blast. The Xeran guards had caught them. I turned around and went back, but it was too late. The next thing I knew, Xerans were coming out of the walls. Liisa and I fought them, but they overwhelmed us.”

His face was almost expressionless, his tone coolly professional, but there was something in his eyes, a shadow of loss and despair that made Jane’s heart clutch in pity. It was starkly painful to watch such a powerful man torture himself over his inability to save those he’d loved.



Particularly when she knew there was nothing she could do to comfort him.

“I used my computer to com the lieutenant, tell him how everything had gone to hell,” Baran said. “He in turn commed Central Command and reported what had happened. Then he and the others tried to rescue us. He should have left us to rot.”

“They were captured, too,” Jane guessed. “Yes. And the Xerans ...” His voice trailed off. “By the time Central Command sent in another team to get us out, the others were dead, and I was ... injured.” His eyes fixed on some ugly vision. Baran said softly, “What the Jump-killer did to Mary Kelly ... I’d seen something similar before. It’s not really all that far outside the norm of Xeran behavior. If you allow yourself to be taken, they think you deserve whatever you get.” “Jesus.”

What in God’s name had they done to him? Somehow she couldn’t bring herself to ask. As a reporter, Jane was no stranger to dealing with people who’d suffered profound emotional and physical trauma. Yet she found herself totally unable to think of anything to say in the face of such pain.

She took a deep breath and blew it out. “I’m sorry. God, that’s inadequate, but I’m sorry.”

He turned his head and looked at her, his eyes blasted with such desolation she instinctively put a hand on his shoulder. He flinched.

Then anger flooded his gaze. “Don’t make the mistake of pitying me.” His voice was low, dangerous. Faint red striations began to glow against his dark irises. “I don’t need your pity. I need your obedience.”

“Baran, I’m not like that woman scientist. I’m not an idiot.”

He rose in a rush of angry muscle. “She wasn’t an idiot, Jane. But she wasn’t a warrior, either. Are you?”

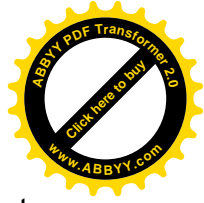
She sighed. “Well, no.”

“You can’t understand combat until you’ve been in it. And the Xerans are like nothing you’ve ever encountered. You don’t know how they think, what they’re capable of. I do. I’ve been fighting and killing them for twenty years.”

Jane stood, finding it to uncomfortable to sit with him looming over her, all angry male strength barely held in check. “You made your point, Baran.”

“You’ll obey orders?” His eyes were narrow, burning like flames in his skull.

“Yeah. Aye aye, sir. Whatever.” She turned away from him, suddenly needing breathing room, time to think. “I’m going to get something to eat. You want anything?”



“Not particularly, but I’m coming with you.” He moved to the bag he’d dropped in a closet the night before and dug in it for something to wear.

“Somehow,” she said dryly, reluctantly admiring the muscular curve of his butt clad only in briefs, “I didn’t expect anything else.”

You smell like sex, Freika combed to Baran as they watched Jane bustle around the kitchen. Why don’t you look happier?

It makes more than sex to make humans happy, Freika.

Which pretty well sums up your whole problem. The wolf flicked his left ear lazily. You all think too much. If you thought less, you wouldn’t make yourselves so miserable.

Baran’s lips curled in an wry smile. You’ve got a point.

Freika nodded regally. Of course.

Jane walked over and plopped a bowl down in front of his paws. “Breakfast is served. You ate the rib eye, so it’s hamburger for you until we can go shopping.”

He sniffed the bowl. “There’s not enough meat in there to keep a Chihuahua alive.”

“Yeah, well, I didn’t expect to have the Big Bad Wolf for a houseguest. That’s what you get when you drop in on people unannounced.”

Suddenly something furry shot past to leap on the kitchen counter. Baran whirled, automatically dropping into a combat crouch.

Only to find himself almost nose to nose with a tan and black house cat. It meowed loudly, looking neurotic. Chagrined, he straightened.

“Perhaps I’ll just have an appetizer,” Freika said, eyeing the animal.

“Touch my cat and die, hairball.” To her pet, Jane added, “Where have you been all night?”

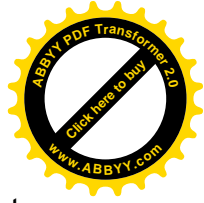
“Hiding under the couch.” The wolf took a fastidious bite from his bowl. “She’s lucky I didn’t just flip it over and snack.” To Baran, he added, “And you say I have no self-control.”

“Leave the cat alone, Freika.”

“Certainly—if Jane starts buying a better cut of meat.”

She looked up from operating something astonishingly loud; Baran’s comp identified it as an electric can opener. “Keep it up and you’ll be munching on the cheapest kibble I can





find.” Dumping the can’s smelly contents into a bowl on the counter, she added to the cat, “Here ya go, Octopussy. Can you believe these guys? They think just because they come from the future, they get to eat us.”

Baran grinned. “I didn’t hear you complaining last night.”

“You caught me in a weak moment.” She grinned at him, then sobered. “Speaking of time travelers, I’ve been thinking. Would Druas be staying in Tayanita, or is he Jumping back and forth from the future?”

Baran leaned against the counter and folded his arms. “It’s possible, but I doubt it. Charging the suit’s power packs after a Jump that long is time-consuming. And frankly, Druas doesn’t strike me as that patient.”

“Think he’d get a hotel room in the present?”

He asked his comp for data on twenty-first century hotels, then paused to consider the results. “It’s a possibility. Though there are a lot of woods in this area. He could have established a camp out there.”

Freika looked up from his bowl. “Assuming he doesn’t just kill somebody and commandeer their house.”

Jane opened a cabinet and got out a bowl, then started rummaging in her refrigerator. “Those are possibilities, but it’d be hard to check them out. On the other hand, there are only three motels in Tayanita County. We could see if he’s at one of them. At least eliminate them as possibilities.”

Baran considered the idea, frowning. “I don’t think I want to confront him with you in the line of fire.”

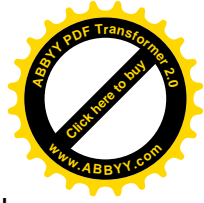
“I don’t intend to get in the line of fire. I can hang back with Cujo here if we find anything. The furball can protect me while you go ... do whatever it is you’re planning on doing.”

“Kill him.”

“Yeah.” She took a deep breath. “Killing him is good.” She shook herself and looked over at him. “So. What do you want for breakfast?”

Jane was heading upstairs to clean up, Baran on her heels, when she realized the implications of taking her clothes off in front of him again. She cleared her throat. “I’m going to need a shower.”

He smiled, slow and wicked. “What a coincidence. So do I.”



She swallowed, remembering the dizzying warmth of his hands, the heat of his mouth. Among other things. “Oh.”

His eyes started to glow.

Well, she thought as her nipples peaked, if my life has to turn into an episode of The X-Files, at least there are fringe benefits.

Jane walked into the bedroom ahead of him with every nerve quivering and alert. This is so not a good idea, the voice of sanity said. The man has more issues than Dad’s National Geographic collection. And that’s aside from the whole business of going back to the future as soon as he kills the bad guy. Assuming Druas doesn’t get us first....

On the other hand, she’d always had a secret fantasy about no-strings sex with a gorgeous stranger. They didn’t get any more gorgeous than Baran.

Or, come to think of it, any stranger.

The only catch was, she had to keep it light. This was the equivalent of a shipboard fling—or at least a doing-battle-with-a-psychopath fling. It would be way too easy to get hung up on Baran, and that would be bad. She’d have enough psychological scars out of this episode as it was—that damn recording alone would probably give her nightmares for years. She didn’t need a broken heart on top of it. • Stepping into the bedroom, Jane looked around just in time to watch him strip off his T-shirt, baring that magnificent chest. Hot eyes met hers over that wicked grin.

On the other hand, what’s life without a little risk?

Baran stared into Jane’s big, dark eyes as he stripped. They got even bigger when she saw the size of his erection. She licked her lips and gave him a nervous smile. And, typically, tried to defuse the rising tension with a joke. “Why, sir, whatever are your intentions?”

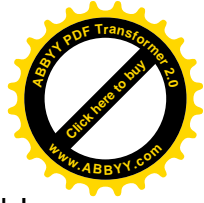
He gave his best feral smile as he pitched his jeans across the room. “Actually, I thought I’d rip your clothes off, pin you against the wall, and fuck you until you scream.”

Jane blinked twice. “Uh, yeah. That’s what I thought,” she said, and fled into the bathroom.

He eyed her retreating back. And grinned.

Baran grabbed the door just before she managed to slam it in his face. Shouldering through, he purred, “Are you running from me?”

She retreated quickly to the glass stall that took up one side of the room. “Who, me?” There was a definite squeak in her voice. Whirling, she started fumbling with a set of



chrome knobs that made water shoot from a nozzle in the wall of the stall. “Why would I do that?”

“Maybe because it’s a good idea?” He strolled over to snatch her against him, grab the hem of her T-shirt, and jerk it over her head. She hadn’t bothered with a bra that morning, and her bare breasts bobbed with the motion. Those pretty nipples were delicately erect, pink, and tender. He swooped in to sample one, sucking it into his mouth as he grabbed the waistband of her baggy trousers and started pulling them down her thighs. “I thought I told you not to wear these ugly pants again,” he growled between nibbles.

“And I don’t... AH!... take fashion advice from a guy with beads in his hair. Baran!” The last word was a yelp of protest as he snatched her off her feet, one hand around her backside, the other arm circling her torso. He bent her back, nestling his erection against her velvet soft nether lips as he attacked both tight nipples in turn, licking and nibbling until she squirmed, giggling.

“All the hot water’s going to run out!” she protested, writhing deliciously against him in a way that made his cock throb.

“Primitive plumbing,” he growled, and stepped into the stall with her. Warm water pelted his skin as he moved to pin her to the ceramic tile wall. He settled against her, savoring her soft, yielding body, the way the silken hair over her sex caressed his hard shaft, the cushion of her tempting breasts.

“Put me down,” she said breathlessly, giving her legs a kick of protest.

Baran smiled down at her darkly, tightening his grip on her tender butt. “No.” She felt so damn luscious. So helpless. Perversely, he found her vulnerability made him want to both protect and ravish her at the same time. “Now what are you going to do about it?”

A grin teased the corners of her mouth. “Apparently,” she said dryly, “not a damn thing.”

Jane squirmed again, testing, but his powerful hold didn’t even falter as he cradled her. Held like this, feet off the ground, immobilized against the cool tile by so much muscle and heat, she felt completely at his mercy.

And wildly aroused.

He stared down at her, the angles of his face stark with desire, his eyes glowing, a hungry smile on his face. The shower stream bounced off his muscled body as if it were rock. And it felt like rock, too, in more ways than one. If any other man had held her like this, she’d be worried that he’d drop her, yet Baran’s grip was so strong, she felt utterly secure in his arms.

But not at all safe.



“Now that you’ve got me, what are you going to do with me?” She’d intended the question to sound flirtatious, but it came out breathless.

His slow, dark grin was not reassuring. “I thought I’d find some tight, wet entrance and force my cock into it.”

Jane swallowed. Perversely, his dominance turned her on even as it irritated her. And she knew he knew it. “You’re really not a nice man.”

Baran bent his head to study her nipples with predatory interest. “No.” Slowly he raked his teeth over one pink tip, sending pleasure bolting up her nerves. “But then, I don’t think you want a nice man.”

Gasping, she let her head fall back against the wall and closed her eyes. “Not right now, no.”

He began to pleasure her breasts in earnest, licking and sucking. He knew just how to do it, too. It was as if he could read her mind, sense when she wanted a hard, drawing pull, when she wanted a gentle scrape of his teeth, when she wanted a swirling pass of his tongue. She’d never had a lover so utterly aware of her—or so determined to use that knowledge to drive her out of her mind. Moaning helplessly, she felt herself going limp in his arms, surrendering to whatever he wanted to do.

One of those moans became a muffled shriek as he shifted his grip and reached one hand beneath her to begin a leisurely exploration of her sex. His thumb strummed her clit as a long, strong forefinger slid deep, stroked.

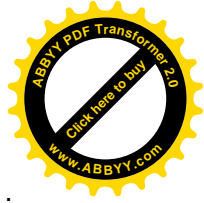
Her flesh was soaked and ready, swollen tight with need. “Mmmm,” he purred against her breast. “Now, that’s tempting.” She felt his cock jerk in lust against her belly.

For several long, delicious moments, he played with her, his mouth busy on her breasts, his fingers delving, first one, then two, stretching and stroking. She fisted both hands in his wet hair and wrapped her thighs tighter around his hips, bucking against him, craving everything he did to her.

He rifted his head so he could press his full length against her belly. His shaft felt long enough to reach her heart. “Ready for more?” he purred in her ear over the sound of the shower spray pounding their bodies with a pleasant sting.

“Yes,” she whimpered. “God, yes.”

“Good.” It was a growl, soft with sensual threat. He wrapped both hands around her backside, lifted her and settled her over the straining head of his cock. And slowly, slowly lowered her as he rolled his hips upward, impaling her by delicious increments on his thick shaft.



“Jesus, Baran!” Jane dug her nails into his wet back and rested her head against his shoulder, gasping at the sensation of being stuffed by him, one aching inch at a time.

He stopped. Only half of his length was inside her. She groaned and squirmed, hungry for the rest, but he held her suspended, helpless.

“Baran, please!”

He looked down at her, droplets beading on his long hair and high cheekbones. His smile held a taunting edge. “What do you want, Jane?”

“More. God, more!”

He lowered her another fraction, but not enough. Her senses clamored. She wanted to be full of him again, the way she’d been last night.

“Is that enough?”

“No! Oh, oh, you’ve got a sadistic streak, you know that?”

His smile was slow and deadly. “I have heard that a time or two.”

And he rammed in to the hilt.

She screamed in startled delight. Skewered on his long, thick cock, she writhed in his arms, overwhelmed, trembling on the knife edge between pleasure and pain.

“You okay?” he asked roughly.

She clung to him, raking his broad back with her nails. “Oh, God! Yeah, yeah, I’m fine. More!”

With a dark, tight smile, he obeyed, rolling his hips. The momentary discomfort faded with his slow, careful thrusts, teased into full pleasure.

Panting, she rested her cheek on his shoulder and closed her eyes, concentrating on the unbelievable feeling of his body against her, inside her. The merciless pleasure was so intense, she might as well have been a virgin again.

“More?” His voice rasped the question. She realized he was afraid of hurting her.

Jane shuddered. “God, yeah. You feel so—“ She broke off, panting, words no match for the raw sensation.

Reassured, he increased the pace. She realized he’d made himself just as hot as he had her. And she was burning.



Baran gasped at Jane's tight, slick grip, struggling to control the need to ram into her. She felt so small and delicate in his arms, even as her creamy sheathe milked his cock. He didn't want to hurt her.

"God, you feel so good," she gasped in his ear. He could feel those sharp little claws of hers raking his back again, pricking him on like spurs.

He yielded to her silent demand, pinning her against the wet wall of the shower and bracing her there so he could fuck her harder.

As many times as he'd had sex, he knew he must have had a woman as good as Jane. He just couldn't remember when. Her soft breasts pillowed his chest, hard nipples teasing his skin as those endless legs tightened over his butt. Her slender arms gripped him with a surprising strength, matching the demanding clasp of her hot cunt.

"Dammit, Baran," she gasped in his ear, "I won't break!"

He laughed even as his head spun. "Apparently not."

Letting go at last, he gave both of them exactly what they needed—long, driving strokes that ground her against the shower wall and stripped his sanity away. The pleasure coiled like a powerful spring, forced tighter with every impact of his body on hers.

Until she convulsed in his arms, screaming out her orgasm in his ear. "Baran! Oh, God!"

"Jane!" he roared back, and stiffened, slamming against her with one last ferocious dig that threw him right over the edge. The orgasm crashed him and out of him, exploding from his cock in jets of heat.

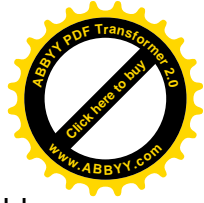
Limp, they collapsed together against the wall with the shower still pelting them.

Baran zipped his jeans, watching with possessive male interest as Jane squirmed into hers. Her pretty breasts quivered with the movement in the cups of a delicate lace bra.

He found himself wondering again what it was about sex with her that was so much hotter than anything he'd had before. It was nothing short of overwhelming, so different from the casual encounters he'd had with various Warfems and civilians over the years.

Maybe it was her delicacy; with his strength, he had to be very careful not to hurt her. He'd never particularly enjoyed using that much restraint in the past, but with Jane, the tension seemed to add to the eroticism of taking her.

And she was so sweetly responsive. Every time he touched her, he could feel her body arching into his touch, writhing for each caress, each stroke, each thrust. His own hypersensitive senses responded to her with just as much intensity—the taste of her skin,



the scent of her arousal, the sound of her erotic moans. He smiled, knowing he could easily become addicted to sex with Jane.

Then the smile faded. He wasn't sure he liked the sound of that \_\_\_\_

"That's it!" She stopped with her knit shirt halfway over her head, then jerked it the rest of the way down and grinned at him. "I've figured out how to explain you to everybody."

He lifted a brow, watching her as she hurried over to an armchair sitting in one corner.

"Explain me?"

"Well, I can't exactly tell people you're my bodyguard from the future, can I?" She bent over a small black bag sitting in the chair. The sweet curve of her butt did a very good job of distracting him, but he somehow managed to follow the conversation as she continued,

"You've got to have some kind of cover story. I've been talking about hiring a photographer for months, but I never did anything about it. I take adequate shots myself, so I didn't think I could justify the expense." She opened the bag and pulled out a black object his computer identified as a camera. Reaching in again, she got out a short, cylindrical object—a lens?—and inserted it into a round opening in the device's body. "I don't suppose you know how to use a Nikon?"

Baran opened his mouth to say no, but his computer interrupted. Skill file present. His brows lifted; it struck him as a fairly esoteric bit of knowledge to have. Knowing Temporal Enforcement, they probably gave him the file because they'd seen pictures he would take sometime in the future. Being TE, however, they hadn't mentioned it.

"Actually, I do know how," he said slowly. "Or I will, as soon as my computer uploads the information into my brain."

Jane eyed him. "Well, that's convenient."

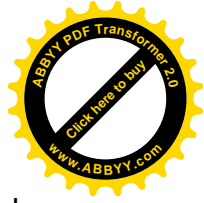
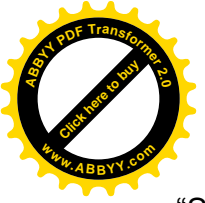
He grimaced. "If you discount the general discomfort of the process."

"Discomfort?" She frowned, dubious. "And how does that work, anyway?"

"My comp can use my neural network to implant a skill directly into my brain, the same way you'd program a computer. That's how I learned English."

"Yeah, I'd wondered about that. You don't have any accent at all, and your slang is dead on. You sound like an American network news anchor."

He snorted. "Probably because TE used news recordings to create the file."



“So how do they get these files into your head? You don’t have one of those skull-jack things Freika was talking about.” She grinned impishly. “I looked.”

“I don’t need one. Freika’s my database unit. His computer’s a lot more powerful than mine; it has to be, because it provides so much of his intelligence. He keeps data files I don’t use all the time, so he needs a way to access big chunks of information more quickly. Sticking in a crystal’s faster than a download.” Transfer ready, the comp interrupted. “Excuse me a minute.”

He braced himself. He always hated this part.

A wall of information and images slammed into his mind like a tidal wave. It was all he could do not to scream.

Baran’s big body jerked as his eyes widened. His mouth contorted, opened, but all that emerged was a strangled gasp.

“Shit!” Jane tossed the camera on the chair without a thought for its two-thousand dollar price tag and ran to catch him. She knew even as she did that there was no way she could support his greater weight.

She needn’t have bothered; he remained rigidly erect, his body quivering. “Baran!”

He didn’t answer. She put a finger to the big pulse under his jaw. It pounded furiously, but he didn’t react to her touch. “Baran, talk to me!” Hell, was he having some kind of seizure? Was this some weird Druas attack? Should she call 911? “Baran!” It was a wail.

His eyes focused. He blinked at her, registered her panic. His body instantly coiled into a combat crouch as he scanned the room, his eyes hard. “What? Where’s the threat?” he barked.

He was all right! Relief flooded her, followed almost instantly by anger. She thumped him hard in the chest. “You jerk!”

He straightened and looked down at her. “What? What did I do?”

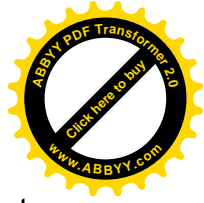
“You scared the daylights out of me! What was that all about? It looked like you were having some kind of attack!”

“I told you, I had to download the skill file.”

“Yeah, but you didn’t mention the flipping epileptic seizure! Next time you have to do some weird future crap, warn me!”

He lifted a brow at her and strolled over to pick up the camera. “You really were worried, weren’t you?”





“Yes, I was, you biped rat. By the way, aren’t you the same guy who won’t even let me out of his sight to use the John? But it’s okay to check out for five minutes to jerk around?”

Baran examined the camera, then reached into the bag and pulled out the flash. “My computer was keeping watch. It would have stopped the data transfer if Druas had Jumped into the room.” He slid the flash into its hotshoe, then cradled the camera, pointed it at her, and started clicking off shots with the skill of an experienced photographer.

She glared at him. “I repeat: You could have warned me.”

He sighed and crouched, moving around her to find another angle. “Yes, I should have. I’m sorry I didn’t realize you’d be alarmed. I’ll keep that in mind in the future.”

Jane deflated, drawing a frustrated hand through her dark curls. “You do that. Okay, I’ll bite, let me see what you shot.”

He stood and walked over to hand her the camera. She flicked a switch to display the digital images on the view screen. And whistled soundlessly.

He’d captured her every expression, starting with angry frustration and finishing with the rake of her fingers through her hair. Each shot was expertly, perfectly framed.

“Damn. You’re good. The computer taught you how to do this just now?” Jane looked up and shook her head. “Where can I get one of those things?”

Baran grinned back and pointed at the ceiling. “About three hundred years from now, eighty light-years that way.”

She looked at him. “Don’t think I want to go quite that far. But...”

Just then a feline yowl sounded downstairs, followed closely by a startled canine yip.

“My nose!” Freika bellowed in outrage. “You clawed my nose!”

Something crashed. Paws thudded on the floor, accompanied by vicious snarls and the sound of breakables shattering. “That’s it, cat! I’m chewing you into pate and spreading your ass on a cracker!”

Jane whirled and raced for the stairs. “Stay away from Octopussy, you fuzzy psycho!”

As she hit the steps at a run, she heard the deep rumble of Baran’s laughter. “One thing about this mission,” he called, loping after her, “At least I’m never bored.”

“Can’t you hitch this thing to a horse or pour in another scoop of coal and get it to move faster?” Freika demanded.



“We’re going sixty miles an hour as it is,” Jane gritted out. “Get your head back in the window before a truck comes along and knocks it off.”

“Sixty?” The wolf was leaning out so far from the backseat, his nose almost level with Jane’s as she drove. His tongue whipped in the wind. “I can run faster than that.”

“Yeah, right. Baran, tell your partner he’s shortening his life expectancy.”

“Freika, get back in the ... whatever this thing is.”

“SUV. Do it, Cujo. It’s always fun until somebody loses a head.” She hit the power button for the rear passenger window, rolling it up and forcing the wolf to pull back inside.

“What’s a cujo?” he asked. “My comp doesn’t have a definition for that term.”

“It’s a character in a book by Stephen King,” Jane told him. “I’d lend you my copy, but I’m afraid it would give you ideas.”

The wolf snorted in disdain. “I don’t need some twenty-first century scribbler to ‘give me ideas.’ I’m more than capable of coming up with my own. You—” He broke off as static blasted from Jane’s dash-mounted police scanner. “Do we have to listen to all that human babble? It’s annoying.”

“Yes, because it’ll tell us if the cops find another body. Or Druas himself, God forbid, since he’d probably eat them.” She slanted a look at Baran, who was belted into the front seat, looking as if he, too, wanted to go faster but was too polite to complain. “Does Fur Boy always whine this much?”

Baran smiled slightly. “Yes.”

“I do not whine,” Freika said in a tone that dripped offended dignity. “I’m simply trying to give you hapless bipeds the benefit of my superior intellect.”

“No, you’re trying to give me a giant, throbbing pain in my—”

“Ten-fifty with Pis and entrapment. Southbound 1-85 at the ninety-third mile marker,” the scanner interrupted. “Car versus eighteen-wheeler.”

“Shit.” Jane threw a quick look over her shoulder, saw nothing behind her, made sure there was nothing in front, and whipped into a U-turn, bumping onto the grass shoulder to do it.

“Where are we going?” Baran asked as she hit the gas and shot in the opposite direction back down the highway. “And what’s a ten-fifty?”



“A car’s crashed with an eighteen-wheeler—that’s a very big truck. All that dispatcher jargon means somebody’s trapped and hurt. Could be really, really ugly.”

He looked at her so sharply, the beads on his braid tapped his cheek as his head swung. “Jane, we need to search for Druas. We don’t have time to run off investigating random police calls.”

“We can take twenty minutes to cover this.”

“Jane...”

“I’m a newspaper reporter, Baran.” Face grim, she concentrated on the road. “I’m not going to stop doing my job just because Jack the Ripper’s in town.”

They entered the interstate at the northbound on-ramp closest to the scene; Jane had known traffic going southbound would be backed up for miles behind the crash, and she was right. As with every other traffic accident she’d ever covered, the scene was chaos. Fire trucks, law enforcement and ambulances blocked the road with lights flashing, while behind them, a line of cars waited for the mess to be cleared away. She’d learned to judge how bad a crash was by the number of emergency vehicles in attendance.

This one was pretty damn bad.

After parking the SUV on the broad grass median behind two fire trucks, she grabbed the Nikon out of the back and thrust it into Baran’s hands. “You shoot the wreck. I’ll talk to the cops and bystanders, see what I can get.” Usually she had to do it all at one time; it was nice to have help from someone she could depend on.

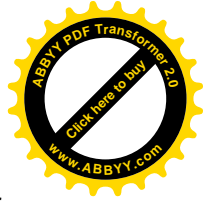
As they got out of the SUV, Jane noticed Freika hopping between the seats to follow Baran. “Fuzzy, get back in the truck. Nobody’s going to want a dog on the scene.”

He gave her a pale-eyed lupine glare. “For the last time, I am not a dog! And I’m coming with you.”

“Keep your voice down, dammit!” she hissed. “And you’d better be a dog, because people around here would shoot a wolf. Which would be a very bad thing, considering that each and every one of these cops has a gun.”

Freika sniffed. “As if they could even hit me.”

“Take my word for it, they could hit you. These are Southern boys. They grew up shooting the four-legged and furry ... Oh, hell.” She spotted a big, boxy truck with a huge antenna and a colorful logo. “You’d better not be a talking anything, because I see a TV live truck, and that kind of media we do not need!” Without waiting to see whether Freika obeyed, she started up the median, grumbling under her breath. “Frigging television poachers.



How'd they get in my county so fast? They must have been passing by, because it's for damn sure they couldn't have beat me here otherwise. Just my luck...."

Baran strode past on his longer legs, his attention focused on the cluster of men and emergency vehicles. Freika trotted at his heels.

Jane sighed and lengthened her stride to catch up. "Well, at least they're getting into the spirit of the thing."

Just ahead, Tom Reynolds waved violently at a driver in the northbound lane, who'd slowed down to stare at the mangled car sitting at a right angle to the jack-knifed semi. "Quit rubbernecking and drive before you cause another wreck, you"—he spotted Jane—"citizen."

"Nice save," she said, pulling her notebook out of her purse. "What are you doing here? I figured you'd be off trying to catch ... the guy who killed that lady." Dammit, she'd almost said Druas. Not good. Tom was far too sharp to miss a mistake like that, and she didn't want to have to answer the questions he'd ask.

"I was on the way to talk to the victim's relatives when the crash happened right in front of me," Tom told her, thoroughly disgusted. "Jerk driving the eighteen-wheeler did an illegal lane change and drove right over the lady. Who the hell is that?" He stared at Baran's profile as the Warlord raised his camera and squeezed off a shot.

"Uh, my new photographer." Which was the truth. "From Atlanta." Which wasn't. She hid a wince of guilt at the lie. "He looks like a fruit."

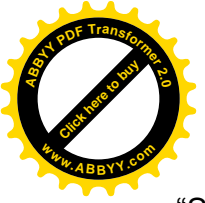
Jane choked, remembering what Baran's massive body had felt like driving into hers in the shower. She grinned. "Well, he's not."

Tom eyed her shrewdly, no doubt reading that grin. "You do realize your daddy's rolling over in his grave right now—you taking up with some guy in a tattoo and beads." Jane clamped her teeth shut against the impulse to tell Tom just how little right her father had to serve as an arbiter of morality. Bill Colby had been far too good at hiding behind a good old boy pose. At least with other men.

Before she could shatter his illusions, Tom's eyes widened as he noticed Freika loping along at Jane's heels like the furry bodyguard he was. "What the fuck is that?" "It's an ... Irish wolfhound."

"Hound, my ass. That's a wolf, period. Get it out of—" "She's dying," Baran interrupted, turning back toward them as he lowered his camera. The muscles in his powerful shoulders visibly knotted under his white T-shirt. "The woman in the wreckage."

"No shit, Sherlock," Tom snapped. "Get that animal out of—"



“She needs treatment now. What are they waiting for?” Baran glanced over at Jane, who silently cursed and reminded herself to buy him a pair of sunglasses. The red striations had appeared in his eyes again. Fortunately, Tom was too busy glaring at Freika to notice.

Glancing at the car, she winced. The little blue Toyota had been crumpled like a beer can in a redneck’s fist. “They probably can’t get the doors open—the car’s too badly damaged. They’re going to have to cut her out of the wreckage.” Giving him a significant glance, she pretended to scratch beneath her own eye. Baran looked back at the mangled car and quickly raised his camera to hide his glowing irises.

He clicked off a shot as a firefighter climbed gingerly on what was left of the car’s mangled roof. Someone handed a power saw up to him. “She’ll be dead before they can get to her.”

“Probably. And there’s not a damn thing any of us can do about it,” Tom said. “Look, I’m sure you’ve been at this long enough to know dogs—or whatever—do not belong at accident scenes....”

Baran tuned out the rest of the man’s protest. I’ve got to get her out of there, he commed to Freika. Even through the noise of idling firetruck engines, his acute hearing picked up the woman’s thin, hopeless cries of agony, more animal than human.

You don’t know if you’re supposed to save her, the wolf replied. You don’t want to cause a paradox.

TE said anything we do now that we’re here is supposed to happen anyway. Which means if she’s not supposed to live, she’ll die. But I can’t just stand around. Everything he was rebelled against doing nothing while any civilian endured such agony.

No, I don’t suppose you can.

I’ve got to get closer. Distract those men for me. To his computer, he gave a silent order: Begin riatt.

Initiating riatt, the comp responded. Baran barely braced himself in time as heat blasted through his veins and his heart began to pound in heavy, frantic lunges. With the fire came a dark, feral joy, a product of riatt neuro-chemicals. He felt his lips stretch into a wild grin.

How a man could kill as many people as you have and still be so softhearted... The wolf commed as he moved off to circle the oblivious firefighters.

I’m not softhearted. Baran laughed, endorphins flooding his brain. I just love doing this.

Oh, yeah, and the metabolic crash afterward is so much fun. Without warning, Freika launched himself at the rescue workers, snarling and growling, his sharp, white teeth snapping together like castanets.



As one, they jumped back away from him. “What the fuck!”

“Somebody shoot that goddamned ...”

His own teeth bared in a grimace of euphoria, Baran shouldered between the startled firefighters, thrust both hands through the shattered car window, clamped down on the door frame, and heaved backward. Steel groaned as something popped with a shower of glass. The door tore free.

He turned to find himself the focus of an astonished ring of eyes. “All you had to do was pull,” Baran said, managing to give his voice a disgusted inflection as he quickly lowered his gaze to the ground. He knew his eyes would be blazing with the effects of riatt.

After thrusting the car door into the hands of the nearest astonished firefighter, he grabbed the camera still hanging around his neck by its strap. He turned around and started snapping away at the moaning victim, knowing instinctively how the rescue workers would react.

“How the hell did you ... ? Hey, you can’t take pictures of that.” Somebody grabbed his shoulder. He let himself be shoved back as the firefighters closed in on the woman and prepared to get her out.

A skinny man dressed in a padded protective jacket glared at him. “Who the hell are you anyway?”

“Photographer,” Baran said, and pointed the camera into his interrogator’s face. The man threw up a hand and backed off.

“Who was that asshole?” one firefighter asked another.

“How’d he do that? I tried that door. It was jammed tight.”

“Must not have tried hard enough. Where’d the dog go?”

“Hey, you,” somebody said behind him. “Clear a path.”

Baran backed up another pace to give the paramedics room to bring the stretcher up to the vehicle. He framed a shot of the firefighters tenderly lifting the woman from her vehicle, the faces under their yellow helmets tight with concentration.

For an instant the woman’s eyes met his, filled with a sort of desperate gratitude even through her pain. He nodded back.

End riatt, the comp said.



Baran winced as the battle neuro-chemicals drained away, taking with them the momentary high. A deep, racking quiver rolled through his muscles, and his stomach twisted with such force, he had to battle the urge to vomit.

The worst thing about going to riatt was the aftermath, as the body reacted to the wild biochemical swings it had endured.

Suddenly he was aware of a hot throbbing in his shaking hands as they cradled the lens of his camera. Blood rolled down his forearms. He wondered when he'd cut himself. How bad is it?

Lacerations to fingers and palms, but no tendon damage, the comp replied. Healing acceleration procedures initiated. Estimated duration five-point-six hours.

Well, it could have been worse. And had been, any number of times.

The heat in his hands intensified as the healing began, pain rolling in behind it. He sighed in disgust. Normally he wore protective battle armor when he went to riatt, since the berserker state multiplied his strength by a factor of ten even as it killed his ability to feel pain. But TE had not allowed him to bring the suit here, and his twenty-first century jeans and T-shirt offered no protection to vulnerable flesh.

Suddenly a huge black barrel thrust itself into his face.

Baran jerked and almost knocked it flying before he realized it was a lens even bigger than the one on his own camera. As he recoiled, a black tube his computer identified as a microphone was shoved under his mouth.

"Bill Clarkson, WDRT News," the man holding the tube announced as his partner focused the video camera on Baran's startled face. The reporter's expression was avid. "That was amazing. How did you do it?"

"Do you mind?" Jane snapped, shouldering past the cameraman. "Quit harassing my photographer and go do your job, Bill. Maybe you can even get the story right for a change."

"Your photographer?" Clarkson lifted a brow and curled his lip. "Since when can a triweekly rag Like the Trib afford a shooter? Especially one that can rip the doors off a Toyota."

Baran tightened his grip on his own camera and licked his dry lips, trying to squelch the racking quiver he could feel building in his body. "Impact ripped the door off," he lied. "It was just hanging there. I only gave it a tug."

"Oh," the reporter said, the gleam in his eyes fading. "Well, that explains it. Why didn't the firefighters do that?"



“Hey,” Jane said loudly, “isn’t that the driver of the semi over there?”

Bill turned, following her pointing finger toward a tubby, bloodstained figure. “Sir!” he called, and strode away, leaving his videographer to scramble after him with the heavy camera.

She watched them go. “Some people in the electronic media are really, really good. And then there’s Bill Clark-son, the human hemorrhoid.” Jane turned to stare at him. “Was that door just hanging there?”

“No.”

“Didn’t think so. Oh, hell.” The last was muttered as a short man with a badge clipped to his belt stalked up.

“I told you to get that fucking dog off this scene,” he growled, thrusting his face as close to Baran’s as he could manage, given that he was seven inches shorter. “I thought it was going to take a chunk out of one of those firefighters. I should run your ass in....”

“On what charges, Tom?” Jane demanded. “You know County Council never passed that leash law. Besides, Baran got the door open, didn’t he?”

The man’s eyes narrowed. “And what the fuck is he, anyway—Superman?” His gaze flicked down, attracted by the bright scarlet dripping from Baran’s fingers. “Jesus, you’re bleeding like a pig. You must have gashed your hands wide open.”

Jane’s eyes widened. “Damn, Baran! What did you do? You’re...”

Ahhhhh, a voice purred through his comp, drowning out her words, / was right. It is you.

Baran jerked. That definitely wasn’t Freika, and the only other person in this time capable of comming him was ...

That’s right, Druas said. It’s me.

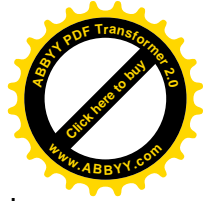
Freika

Yeah, I hear him.

Stay with Jane. Barely aware that the wolf had moved to join them, he thrust his bloody Nikon into her hands and turned to scan the area. Sensors, he ordered his computer. Pinpoint the Xeran’s location.

A flashing bright red X suddenly appeared across the highway from him, covering a human figure standing at the edge of a stand of trees. Baran started toward the- man his computer had targeted, mentally cursing himself for coming out of riatt so soon. He





couldn't go back into the berserker state again until his computer had rebuilt its reservoir of neuro-chemicals. And the synthesizing process would take another half hour at least. Send me back into riatt as soon as possible, he ordered.

"What's with him?" he heard Tom ask.

"I don't know. Freika, dammit, get out of the way!"

Baran didn't look around, but he knew the wolf was deliberately blocking her path. The last thing they needed was for her to get within striking range of the Jumpkiller.

Baran Arvid, Druas commed as Baran crossed the interstate. The Death Lord himself. Now, this is more like it. I knew it was you three hundred years from now, when I saw the vid footage those humans just shot of you ripping the door off that car. The killer's tone was hearty, familiar, as if they were old friends meeting again after a long separation. You do realize the mystery around you is the reason these killings will become so famous? Which is ironic, when you think about it.

Do we know each other? Damn, he wasn't up to a fight with the Xeran right now, but it looked as if he was going to get one anyway. Maybe if he could stall the bastard long enough, his computer would be able to throw him back into riatt.

And luckily, he still had the suit neutralizing ring the Enforcer had given him. If he could tag Druas with it long enough, it would knock the suit offline and he'd be able to beat the bastard to death.

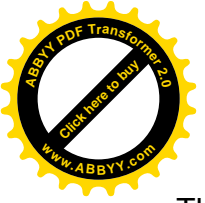
Unfortunately, there was no guarantee Druas would let him get close enough. He had to keep the Xeran talking.

Druas began moving away, retreating slowly even as Baran approached. You have no idea how famous you are among the Xerans. Everyone talks about the Death Lord— all those wonderful duels, all the men you killed. And General Jutka 's put a very high price on your head, by the way.

So I heard.

I do believe you've got him shaking in his battle boots. I assume he is one of your targets? You've killed almost all the others who were present when your team was tortured.

At the moment I'm much more interested in you. Baran lengthened his stride. The man his computer had pinpointed grinned at him. The Xeran must be generating an image field; the figure staying just out of reach was short and potbellied, nothing like the mercenary's true build.



That's refreshing to hear. The man sauntered away again, keeping just ahead of his slow pursuit. Baran thought about breaking into a run, but he didn't want to drive the killer into Jumping.

I was starting to get bored, Druas commed, circling him. The Ripper killings were entertaining, but hardly challenging. It's not like the little bitches could fight back, could they? Though they did squeal well....

Baran snarled, remembering Mary Kelly's helpless struggles.

Still, the killer continued, / was thinking of giving it up until I saw the archival footage of you while I was doing a little research. I recognized you the minute I saw you. Even at a distance the smile on the round, bland face was chilling. That's when I realized the Tayanita killings were my work. I must have come here, and TE sent you after me. Now, there's a challenge, I thought. Me against the Death Lord. Gave me a shiver. He beamed. And no\y here you are.

Eyes narrowing, the Warlord stopped in his tracks. Maybe the bastard would come closer if he didn't follow. The question was, would Baran be able to put the Xeran down at normal strength? Not that he had a choice, with Jane's life at risk. If you want a fight, I'll be more than happy to oblige you.

But not yet, I'll wager. You just dropped out of riatt, so you can't power up again for a good half hour or so. Reading Baran's expression, Druas grinned. Don't look so surprised. I did a little research on Warlords when I decided to play this game. But I wonder—how much research did TE let you do on me?

They gave me all the data I need.

Oh, I doubt that. Knowing Temporal Enforcement, I'll bet there's a great deal they didn't tell you. Though why they're so afraid of causing a paradox, I have no idea. If the universe doesn't die when you make the Jump to begin with, you can do whatever the hell you want. The grin on that round, ordinary face took on a thoroughly inhuman cast. And there's a long list of things I want to do to sweet Jane.

Baran fought to keep his rage from showing. You'll never lay a hand on her.

Won't I?

No. Because I'll kill you before you get that close.

The killer sauntered closer until he was just out of Baran's reach, bland human eyes studying him with cruel interest. You're fucking her already, aren't you? I wondered about that. Is she good?

You'll never know. To his computer, he thought, How much longer to riatt?



Twenty minutes.

Too long. Too damn long.

Actually, Druas said, before this is over I'll find out exactly how good she is. But not yet. If you 'll excuse me, I have women to kill, police to mystify...

Hell. Baran lunged for the killer. He risked getting caught in the backwash of the Jump, but if he could just pin him long enough for the ring to do its work... He clamped a hand around the man's wrist.

"Idiot." Druas's fist slammed into Baran's head so hard he saw stars, but he didn't let go. "You're going to get fried, you fool!" And he was right; Baran could feel the energy of the Jump building as the killer's armor began to glow.

Warning! Temporal field building! The comp blared, its voice seeming to echo in his skull. Step back! Baran ignored it, blocking another hard punch, intent only on holding on. The ring was heating on his hand....

Too late. A blinding white light exploded in the center of his vision as an electric jolt tore through his body. Something picked him up and threw him with an eardrum-shattering boom.

He never felt the ground come up and hit him.

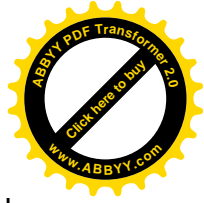
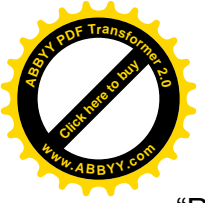
Jane, trapped behind the furry barrier of Freika's body, saw a lightning bolt knock Baran ten feet like the slap of a giant's hand. He hit the pavement flat on his back as a thunderous boom drowned out her scream.

Freika whirled and raced toward his fallen partner, a black streak faster than any dog she'd ever seen. Jane sprinted after him, her heart in her throat, dimly aware of Tom pounding at her heels.

Baran lay sprawled on his back, his eyes closed, his face so pale his scarlet tattoo looked like blood. His brawny arms and legs were flung wide, lacerated palms upward. Freika nuzzled his face, whining like the dog he wasn't. Jane fell to her knees beside him, reaching desperately for the pulse in his strong throat. It throbbed comfortingly against her fingers, but he didn't move. "Baran! Baran, wake up!"

She'd known him less than twenty-four hours. How had he become so damn important to her so damn fast?

Jane looked wildly at Freika. The wolf jerked his head, but she couldn't tell what he was trying to communicate. Unfortunately, they didn't dare talk in front of Tom.



“Paramedics!” the detective bellowed, but the standby ambulance crew was already pounding toward them.

“What the hell happened?” Jane heard one yell.

“Dunno,” Tom called back. “Looked like maybe a lightning strike, but there’s not a cloud in the sky, and I don’t see any power lines nearby.”

“How is he? What’s going on?” Jane whispered fiercely to Freika while the detective was distracted.

The wolf pressed against her and whispered back. “His comp says he’s okay. He just got in too close when Druas Jumped.”

“Druas was here?” She looked around wildly, remembering Mary Kelly’s blackening face, the silver flash of the knife, the spray of blood and tissue.... Instinctively she covered Baran’s big, helpless body with her own.

“He’s gone now.”

“Is he conscious?” Tom demanded, kneeling by Jane’s side as she slumped in relief.

“No.” She picked up one of Baran’s bloodied hands, examined it anxiously. The wound was already crusting over.

Tom frowned. “Then who were you talking to?”

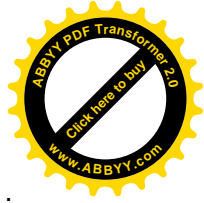
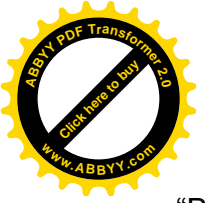
Damn, he’d heard Freika. “He was babbling,” she improvised.

“Get back, miss.” The paramedic pushed her aside. She sat back on her heels. He put two fingers to Baran’s throat, then lifted one of his eyelids. Jane craned her neck anxiously, but the Warlord’s irises were simple human brown. “Pupils reactive, pulse is good,” the man said. “Don’t see any sign of electrical burns.”

The second EMT pulled a blood pressure cuff out of his bag and reached to wrap it around one of Baran’s thick biceps. Jane sensed rather than saw the blur of motion. The EMT yelped.

One of Baran’s huge hands was wrapped around the paramedic’s throat in a stranglehold as he held the man stiff-armed, half off his knees. As she watched in horror, the man’s face began to darken. He gagged, clawing helplessly at Baran’s choking fingers.

Brown eyes blazed as Baran peeled his lips back from his teeth, snarling at the EMT in an alien language. The words might be incomprehensible, but the tone of murderous threat was crystal clear.



“Baran!” Jane cried as both she and Tom grabbed for his hand and fought to pry away his choking fingers. “Let him go! He’s trying to help you! It’s okay!”

Baran’s gaze flicked to hers as the paramedic gagged.

“Let him go, mister!” Tom snapped.

The big hand released its hold. “Sorry,” he said gruffly, and sat up as the paramedic choked in a breath and fell back on his butt. “Didn’t know where I was.”

The EMT steadied his gagging partner and eyed him warily. “Lie back down and let us have a look at you, sir. You were unconscious for more than a minute. You may have a concussion.”

“I’m fine,” he said, and proved it by getting to his feet. Jane scrambled up, ready to steady him. She thought he swayed, but caught himself almost instantly.

“Beg to differ, son,” Tom said, stepping in close to study him. “Looked to me like you just got struck by lightning. You need a ride to the emergency room to get checked out.”

Where, Jane realized, an X ray might reveal entirely too much about the Warlord’s genetically engineered body. But if he really was hurt...

“I don’t have time for that,” Baran said crisply. “I don’t know what you saw, but I didn’t get hit by lightning.” He glanced skyward. “Obviously. There’s not a cloud in the sky.” Dark eyes turned to Jane. “Let’s go.”

“Your hands are badly cut, mister. You need stitches...”

“Let him go, Dave.” The paramedic rubbed his throat and coughed. “Man wants to leave, you don’t want to stand in his way.”

Baran started off across the highway, Freika trotting at his heels. Jane stared after his broad back, worried, then hurried after them.

Behind her, she heard Tom say, “That was thoroughly fucking weird.”

The paramedic coughed again. “Tell me about it.”

“You should have at least let them clean those wounds,” Jane said, running to keep up with his long strides.

“My computer will take care of it,” Baran said. “I just have to get the glass out.”

“There’s glass in the wound? Idiot. Why didn’t you—“



“Because right now Druas is somewhere in this town, deciding who to kill,” Baran interrupted, shooting a quelling glance at her over his shoulder. “And I need to get to him before he makes up his mind.”

Jane cursed and absently clicked her key fob so she could open the door for him, sparing his lacerated palms. “Didn’t your time cops identify the targets?”

“No. Evidently, they don’t want me to save at least some of them.” He shrugged. “The paradox problem.”

“Bastards.”

“That does sum it up.” He eased into the seat.

She caught the shoulder belt and leaned over his lap to fasten it. “I’ve got a first-aid kit in the back...” Jane looked up and found herself face to face with him. Suddenly she realized her hands rested in his lap, inches from the swelling bulge of an erection. His mouth was close enough to kiss. Baran’s eyes kindled into a hot male blaze that made her swallow. She froze, hardly daring to blink, like a woman afraid of goading a tiger into attack.

“He always gets horny after he’s been in riatt,” Freika told her, sticking his furry head around the door. “After he quits wanting to puke, anyway. Hormones ...” He nudged her wrist with his muzzle, jolting her out of her hypnotized fascination with Baran’s blatant lust. “Hey, either step aside or open the back door for those of us without opposable thumbs.”

A hot blush rolling over her cheeks, Jane took a hasty step back and slammed the passenger door on Baran’s feral interest. With a relieved breath, she opened the back to get the first-aid kit and one of the bottles of water floating in the cooler’s melted ice. Freika jumped past her and settled himself in the seat. “You know, I hope this thing has better safety equipment than the one that woman was riding in.”

“Not really.”

The thunk of the closing door drowned out the wolf’s next grumble.

Horny. The man’s hands were sliced to ribbons, and he was horny. Hell, he’d directed so much erotic heat at her, she could almost hear her own body sizzle.

There isn’t time for this, Jane told herself sternly, striding around the SUV to the driver’s side, carrying the bottle of water with the kit tucked under her arm. We’ve got to figure out where Druas is going.

She opened the door and hopped up into the driver’s seat, dumping the water and first-aid kit into Baran’s lap. “I’ll find a place to pull over so we can tend your hands. Though I still say we should let the paramedics—”



"I don't want them getting a closer look at me than they already have." Evidently having flipped off his lust as quickly as he'd turned it on, he opened the kit to assess its contents. He pulled out a pair of tweezers.

"What's this reeatt thing?" Jane asked after she'd pulled onto the highway into the northbound traffic. The cars in the southbound lane were just starting to edge past the woman's crumpled Toyota under the direction of cops and firefighters. The victim herself had long since gone off in the back of an ambulance.

Jane glanced over at her passenger and almost ran off the road when she realized he was using the tweezers to dig into his injury. "Jesus, Baran, let me take care of that! Or at least wait until I pull over."

"I can do it," he said, pulling something from his palm she realized was a bloody chunk of safety glass.

"Doesn't that hurt?" She pointed the SUV for the nearest exit.

Baran shrugged his broad shoulders. "My computer dulls the pain."

"Well, that's something anyway." Sighing, Jane drove up the off-ramp and turned left on a less-traveled street. "So what's this reeatt thing again?"

She asked the question as much to distract herself as him. Jane didn't ordinarily consider herself particularly squeamish—not in her line of work. But somehow it made a difference that it was Baran bleeding all over her front seat, Baran in pain, Baran digging into his own skin with a pair of tweezers....

"Not reeatt, riatt," he corrected absently, depositing the glass sliver in the empty trash bag hanging from the SUV's central floor hump.

"It's kind of a computer-induced berserker state," Freika explained, thrusting his head between the seats. "Increases his strength by a factor of ten. The drawback is that his judgment goes to hell. He doesn't feel pain in riatt, and without combat armor to protect him, he tends to break bones and cut himself all to hell doing something the human body isn't designed to do. Here, let me lick that...."

"Ack!" Jane planted an elbow under his jaw and pushed his head back. "Get away from there. You want to give him an infection?"

"Freika's computer secretes antibiotics in his saliva when I'm hurt," Baran explained, raising his hand for the wolf's swiping tongue.

"Which taste nasty," Freika noted, licking.



Jane fastened her eyes firmly on the road. “Y’all are making me sick. Anyway, can’t your own computer do the antibiotic thing?”

“It does, but Freika does a better job on topical treatment.” He lifted an eyebrow. “ ‘Y’all’?”

“My Southern accent comes out under stress.” Spotting a likely place to pull over, she whipped the SUV off onto the shoulder. Deciding it was time for a subject change, Jane asked as she opened the driver’s door, “What are we going to do about Druas?”

“Personally, I think killing him’s a dandy idea,” Freika observed.

“Dun,” she said, getting out of the truck and leaving the door open as she started around the SUV’s massive hood. “I mean, how are we going to stop him from killing whoever he’s planning to kill?”

“I have no idea, but I’m damn well going to try,” Baran told her as she opened the passenger door and stepped to his side. “There’s another piece in my right hand. I can’t seem to get it out with my left. Can you try?”

She flinched mentally, then gave him a determined smile. “Sure. So what are we going to do now?”

“Exactly what we were doing before our little detour— check the hotels. If he’s at one of them, I should be able to sense him.” Baran handed her the tweezers as she cradled his hand in one of hers.

“What if he’s not there when we go by?”

“Then we’re out of luck, and his next victim’s dead. She may be already. Or close to it.” He clenched the other fist on his knee. “If I hadn’t dropped out of riatt...”

“If you hadn’t, you wouldn’t even have gotten that close to him,” Freika pointed out. “Druas knows better than to allow a berserk Warlord within striking distance.”

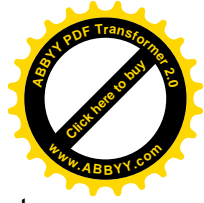
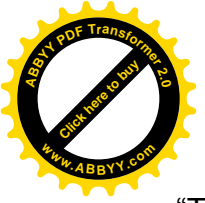
Jane’s delicate probes with the tweezers discovered something hard buried in his bloodied flesh. “You’ve got it,” Baran said.

“Joy,” she muttered between her teeth and tried to close the tweezers around the tiny object. “So in riatt you’re stronger than Druas, right?”

“Possibly,” Baran said.

Her tweezers slipped. She growled.





“Then again, possibly not,” Freika observed, leaning around Baran’s seat. “He’s got cybernetic implants that increase his strength, but it’s not clear by how much. He could be weaker than Baran, but then again, he could be a lot stronger.”

The Warlord nodded. “We won’t know for sure until I fight him.”

Jane clamped her lower lip between her teeth and jerked the piece of glass free. “Has anybody ever heard of the concept of firearms?” She tossed the piece into the trash bag and looked at Baran. “Is that it for the glass fragments, please, God?”

“Yeah.” He extended his hand to Freika. “But nobody but an idiot would try to make a Jump with an energy weapon. The Tachyon power packs would react with the temporal field and blow you to hell and gone.” Jane looked away as the wolf started cleaning the injury. Taking the water bottle out of his lap, she dumped part of its contents over the tweezers, washing them off. After tossing them back in the first aid box, she rummaged around in it for the roll of gauze to wrap his wound with. When she found it, she ripped it open and took his hand again.

“So what about weapons from this time? Like a gun, for instance.” Jane remembered her father’s pistol, buried in his stuff somewhere in the attic. “Couldn’t you just shoot him?”

He shrugged. “Yeah, but it probably won’t do any good. According to the sensor readings I just took, that T-suit Druas is wearing is armored. I doubt one of your contemporary firearms could puncture it.”

Still thinking, she wound the gauze around his hand. “So does he wear a helmet?” She knew from covering cops that all the body armor in the world wouldn’t protect you against a head shot.

“No, but his skeletal system is reinforced, so I doubt a bullet would get through his skull, either.”

“On the other hand, they still haven’t managed to do a damn thing about the fragility of gray matter,” Freika pointed out. “If you battered him enough, you could bounce his brain around in that thick skull until he died of cerebral swelling.”

Baran shrugged. “If he didn’t manage to kill you in the meantime.”

Jane sighed. “Damn. It just can’t be easy, can it?” The Warlord’s hand felt deliciously warm in hers. Suddenly she found herself uncomfortably aware of him.

An image flashed through her mind: Baran moving over her, his head thrown back so the cords stood out in high relief in his powerful throat.

Then she flashed on the sight of his big body, sprawled and helpless on the pavement. Her grip tightened convulsively on his hand. She’d thought she’d lost him.



She still could. If he fought Druas and lost...

You don't have him to lose, Jane told herself fiercely, tying off the bandage. He's not going to stay with you, you idiot. As soon as this is over—one way or another—he's going back to his own time.

And she couldn't afford to let him take her heart with him when he did.

Clamping her lower lip between her teeth, she started wrapping his other hand. Despite the injuries he'd suffered, his palm was broad and square and solid, Ms fingers long, beautiful. She remembered how skilled they'd felt, teasing her nipples into tight points, sliding into her sex in deliciously seductive strokes. Something hot gathered below her belly button.

Cut that out. We don't have time for this.

Which was when she glanced down at his lap—and the thick bulge that swelled behind his fly as she watched. She looked up to find his eyes were locked on her face again, heavy-lidded and hungry.

And glowing.

Jane started to draw back, but a gauze-wrapped hand lifted to cup the side of her face. The touch made her breath catch. Slowly he leaned forward until his mouth touched hers in a velvet-gentle kiss that made her heart pound. His tongue slipped over her upper lip, tempting her into opening for him.

When she gasped, he slid inside slowly, taking his time. She heard a helpless, needy moan and realized it was her own.

"Well, if you're going to do that, I'm going to go catch squirrels," Freika announced. He slid between the seats and hopped out the open driver's door. "Maybe I'll get a little tail."

Jane didn't even register the quip. Her every sense was focused on Baran—the taste of his mouth, the warmth of his gauze-wrapped hand.

So even though she knew it was the wrong place, the wrong time, and the wrong man ...

She didn't care.

They didn't have time for this.

He knew it. Knew he should cage his growling hunger and get back to work. Normally he'd be able to do just that, despite the hunger riatt had touched off. All it would take is a single order to his comp, and neuronet would chemically cool his ardor and let him concentrate again.



But she felt so damn fragile.

Every time Baran remembered Druas's smug voice spewing those poisonous threats, rage and desperation rolled over him, and he felt the driving need to touch her, reassure himself that she was alive.

So very hot and alive.

She shouldn't mean this much to him. She was, after all, only another mission. He'd protected women before in situations every bit as dangerous, and it had never affected him like this.

But there was something about Jane.

Maybe it was the fact that she didn't know enough to back down from him. Every other woman of his acquaintance would have hesitated to challenge, infuriate, or tempt him the way Jane did. A Warlord was not, after all, someone to take lightly. Particularly him. The Xeran did not give a nickname like "Death Lord" for no reason.

Yet he strongly suspected that even if Jane had known what he was capable of, she wouldn't have acted any differently. After all, she was already well aware of his greater size and muscle, but that had never stopped her, either.

Which was why keeping her alive was not going to be easy.

Sweet goddess, what if Druas hadn't been lying when he said this would end in her death? What if Baran really couldn't save her?

No, damn it. No.

With a low, desperate growl he twisted in the seat until he could drag Jane against his body, feel the giving warmth of her belly against his stone-hard erection.

Soon women would be dying, and Baran knew with a black, hopeless despair he'd fail to save at least some of them.

But Jane was here, warm and soft, so deliciously soft, and he was going to protect her no matter what he had to do.

She was his. And right now he was going to claim her.

Even if, one way or another, he'd eventually have to give her up.

Baran had taken her before in calculation and in heat, but this desperation was new.



Jane could taste it in the way he kissed her, open-mouthed and fierce, his long fingers curling around the back of her skull, angling her head just the way he wanted it.

He took her in a long, sweet stroke of tongue and lip, hot and wet and hungry. Somewhere in the endless tumble into delight, she heard the rumble of a passing car, accompanied by the short, mocking toot of its horn. A tiny measure of sanity returned. Prying her mouth away from his, she panted, "We can't do this on the side of the road, Baran!"

"Yes, we can," he growled, and captured her mouth again, the kiss drugging, hungry.

Jane wrestled free and threw a desperate glance around them, trying to determine if they were being watched. She realized she knew the area from her wild teenage years. "There's a spot down by the woods. A stream. We could..."

He looked down at her. The lust in his eyes was so intense, it didn't seem quite human—and not just because of the fiery glow.

His lips pulled back from his teeth in a slow, erotic smile. "Run. Before I take you on the hood of the truck." His powerful hands reluctantly relaxed their hold.

It wasn't an idle threat. Jane whirled and fled as if chased by something that would eat her. And with a little squirt of heat, she knew he intended to do just that.

She ran flat out, recklessly, plunging through the tangle of brush and trees, leaves crackling and flying around her booted feet. Throwing a glance over her shoulder, she saw Baran still standing by the truck, almost crouched, anticipation hot on his face. Even from yards away she could see the erection tenting his jeans.

Then he exploded after her.

Jane sucked in a desperate breath, whipped her head back around, and ran for all she was worth.

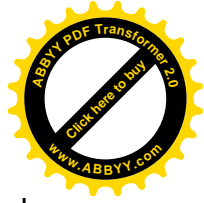
Her heart banged in her chest as she ducked between a stand of trees and jumped a bramble bush. She could hear him gaining already.

God, he was fast.

Her nipples hardened as she imagined just what he'd do when he caught her.

Every running step Baran took chafed the massive erection throbbing behind his fly. He had to consciously drag back on the instinctive need to leap across the distance separating them and take her down. Spread her. Fuck her.

He couldn't remember ever wanting a woman with this much hunger.



And every deep breath he took carried the growing scent of her desire, carried on the cool April wind. She was creaming for him, as turned on by this impromptu game as he was.

Breathing hard from lust more than exertion, he watched her round little ass roll with every step, the flash of her long, jeans-clad legs, the desperate pump of her arms. She was running with everything she had.

But she wanted to be caught almost as much as he wanted to catch her.

His hunger growled, dark and feral, demanding an end to the game. He lengthened his stride and reached for her delicate shoulder, meaning to jerk her off her feet and into his arms.

But to his amazement, she twisted with the instinct of something small and delicious and shot behind a tree, eluding his lunge. He growled and spun after her. For an instant their gazes met. Hers was bright with desire and humor, until whatever she saw in his made those brown eyes widen in feminine alarm. She yelped a giggle and took off again, ducking and dodging, using the trees as barriers to slow him down. He growled and charged in her wake, ignoring the brambles that dug into his shins as he shot through a bush instead of around it.

It was time he stripped that pretty little body and got those long legs spread.

Running for everything she was worth, Jane heard the chuckle of the stream over the crackling crash of the chase. She burst into the clearing with a sense of triumph, skidding into the wide, flat area beside the snaking creek. The spot hadn't changed from the days when she'd been a teenager and it had been the favored make-out spot.

Before she could stop, a big bandaged hand clamped over her shoulder, whirled her around, and snatched her against a hot, rock-hard body. She barely had time to register the raw lust on Baran's face before he was kissing her so hungrily, all the strength ran out of her knees.

One hand tunneled into her hair, holding her still for his mouth. The other clamped boldly over her butt, dragging her lower body into his. His erection felt thick as a baseball bat against her belly.

Heat snaked through her as he claimed her with lips and tongue, licking, sucking at her mouth, gently biting her chin, strong fingers tugging her head back by the hair so he could rake his teeth across her banging pulse.

"Jesus, Baran," she managed as he lifted her off her feet and took her down into the crunching leaves.

No sooner had her back touched the ground than he was dragging up her shirt, then jerking her bra over the curves of her breasts to get at her hard nipples. Before she could



even gasp, he was suckling one, teeth scraping and teasing as his tongue flicked the hard, pink point.

She grabbed at his massive shoulders to steady her spinning world. He went on feasting even as one big, impatient hand plucked at the button of her jeans, got it open, worked the zipper down. Reached inside. Tested her swollen outer lips.

“Mmmm. You’re slick.”

A thick finger slid inside, tore a gasp from her mouth. “Oh, God, Baran, you make me ...”

He grinned darkly. “I noticed. You liked being chased, didn’t you?” With his free hand, he pinched and rolled her nipple. “Didn’t you?”

“Yeah. Oh, yeah.” She whimpered softly.

His glowing eyes narrowed as he studied her with predatory calculation. “You do realize I can do anything I want to you?” The question was asked in a velvet purr that would have made her wet even without the stroke and slip of those possessive fingers. “You’re totally helpless.”

Jane swallowed at the jolt of desire that sliced through her at the dark promise in those words. “Not totally,” she managed, as feminist instincts rebelled.

‘Totally.’ It was a soft growl. The hand tormenting her sex slid away. She looked down just in time to see him reach into a jeans pocket and pull out a familiar length of gold cable. “Or you’re about to be.”

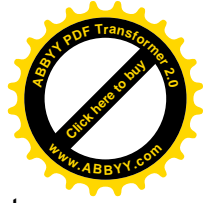
“Oh, no, you don’t!” Jane started to sit up.

“Oh, yes,” he purred, “I do.” Before she manage more than an outraged yelp, he grabbed her shoulder and flipped her over on her belly. She tried to push up, run, but he slung a leg over her butt to pin her. Grabbing one wrist, he whipped the cable around it.

She gasped as he captured her other hand and pulled it down to join her captured wrist, then looped it in cable. The cool, slick metal tightened its grip, binding her hands at the small of her back. As her spine arched helplessly with her position, dried leaves teased her erect nipples. “You big jerk!”

“The operative word there is big,” Baran said, a dark chuckle in his voice. He grabbed the waistband of her jeans and jerked downward. Cool air flowed over her backside as he bared her. “And getting bigger by the second.”

He pulled her jeans down to her knees, trapping her legs in denim as effectively as the cable had bound her hands. Sliding an arm around her waist, he lifted and manipulated



her body until he had her arranged the way he wanted—on her knees, ass thrust out, head pillowed on the leaves. She was so wet and hot, the air felt cold on her spread labia.

He made a deep, rumbling sound of satisfaction. Leaves rustled. Jane squeaked in surprise as warm fingers spread her lower lips and his tongue slipped into the creaming seam. She quivered in pleasure as he licked her like a man enjoying something hot and melting. His tongue played over her flesh with a wicked skill that had her thigh muscles jumping.

He drew away a moment, then slid a forefinger deep inside her, testing her readiness. “Very nice,” he murmured as she writhed helplessly. The dry, papery leaves rasped over her nipples, and she moaned in need.

“You’re driving me insane!” she managed.

Baran laughed softly. “Good.”

Then his mouth sealed over her clit, and she jerked at the sudden, intense pleasure as he began to circle the wet nubbin with his tongue.

Baran angled his head slightly until he could slide two fingers deep into her core while he tongued her. The combination of those thick fingers and that wicked tongue sent pleasure whipping up her spine. Jane, wrists bound and legs trapped in her own jeans, could do nothing but shiver.

Eyes squeezed shut, she gasped, inhaling the rich, loamy scent of the leaves. Birds sang overhead, warbling background music for the tiny wet sounds Baran made as he licked and sucked.

She could feel a climax blooming just out of reach when he suddenly pulled away.

“Baran!” she wailed in protest.

“Ready to be fucked, Jane?”

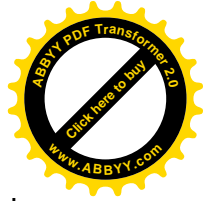
The rough question in that deep, velvet voice was almost enough to make her come all by itself. “God, yes.”

His zipper rasped. She waited, suspended, for that first ruthless thrust.

It didn’t come.

“You sure?”

“Do you want to die?” she snarled in frustration.



He laughed. "Just checking." The round, smooth head of his hot cock brushed the fine hair over her desperate sex.

Jane whimpered in need. She'd never been so turned on in her life.

"You know what happens to pretty little civilians who let themselves get chased into the woods by hungry Warlords?"

"I've got... AH! ... a pretty good idea." She shuddered at the incredible sensation of that slick head beginning to work its way past her lips and into her tight opening.

"Just so you're ready for it."

He worked in another inch. Jane gasped. "I'm ... definitely ready."

"Good." And he rammed to his full length, all the way to the balls.

She screamed at the sensation of being filled so utterly. It was too much, too intense. She squirmed instinctively, but his strong hands held her still as he began to pump.

And she lost all interest in escape.

He rode her hard, his big shaft spearing her in long, delicious thrusts. Each jolting impact teased her nipples across the rasping leaves as he held her bent, arms bound helplessly behind her.

She shouldn't be so damned turned on. The arrogant bastard had chased her down and tied her up. It was kinky and uncivilized and not at all the kind of treatment a modern woman should tolerate.

And she loved it. Loved every hot, wicked thrust of that powerful cock, loved the feel of his hands gripping her hips, hauling her back into his ruthless banging.

The orgasm took her by surprise, kicked her screaming into pleasure. As she cried out, it kept right on pulsing with each slap of his body against her ass.

Baran sucked in a breath as she convulsed around him, her sheathe milking him in sweet pulses. She felt so good, the skin of her behind like silk against his groin. When he swallowed, he could taste her on his tongue, salty and hot.

Each inhalation carried the scent of her musk. He shuttered his eyes and drew it deep as he stroked in and out of her, savoring the essence of sex and pleasure and Jane.

Her pale, narrow torso twisted as she writhed in the leaves under him, her chest left bare when he'd pushed her shirt up to her shoulders. Her delicate wrists were bound in restraint cable at the small of her back. Dark curls cascaded around her head in a river of





sable silk. She moaned his name over and over as he fucked her, the breathy gasps arousing.

His own orgasm rose as her tight inner muscles rippled along his shaft. Spurred, Baran ground against her, reaching as deep as he could, trying to pound his way that last glittering increment into the climax hanging just out of reach.

Then he was there, bursting into light.

Ramming himself to full length, he held himself deep in her creaming grip as the heat poured into him and out of him in a pulsing erotic circuit.

When the storm passed, Baran collapsed over her, bracing his bandaged palms on the leafy ground. Sweating and gasping, he tried to remember the last time he'd fucked anybody this damn good.

Long moments passed before Jane felt her IQ rise enough to manage a whimper. Slowly she lifted her head and shook the mane of her hair aside until she could see her Warlord lover.

Baran knelt braced over her on his hands and knees. She was pleased to see his muscular arms were trembling. At least she wasn't the only one who'd gone completely out of her mind.

"We've got to quit doing this," she groaned.

"Why?" Leaves rustled as he sat back on his heels and pulled out of her tenderly. She groaned at the lost connection. He started unwrapping the cable from around her wrists.

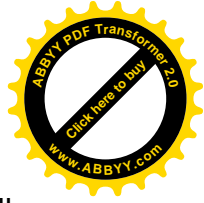
"Because anything that feels that good has to be bad for you. It's a rule." Released, her arms flopped limply to the ground. Whimpering at the delicious soreness between her thighs, Jane rolled over onto her side. The breeze on her bare butt reminded her that her jeans were still pulled down, but she lacked the strength to pull them up again.

"I don't think there's an actual rule," Baran told her, zipping his pants.

"You must not have been raised Southern Baptist. There is. Believe me." She considered the mechanics of dressing herself. And stiffened as a thought occurred. She was on the Pill, but... "STDs." She stared wildly at him. "Oh, God, please tell me you don't have some little Martian whatzits that have now migrated to my—"

"What are you talking about?" He eyed her as she sat up convulsively.

"STDs," she told him grimly.



“What’s an ...” His eyes widened, then narrowed in offense. “I do not have a sexually transmitted disease!”

“That you know of.” She scrambled around until she managed to jerk her jeans up and her shirt down. “I can’t believe we had sex three times already, and it never once occurred to me ... How do you make my common sense take a lunch break?”

Baran folded his brawny arms and glowered. “Evidently, it’s a common occurrence.” “Hey!”

“To begin with, venereal diseases are highly uncommon in my time, and if I did get one, my neuronet comp would discover it and take appropriate action. Just as it has since I arrived and started encountering all the other microbes this medically backward time seems to breed. In other words,” he concluded coolly, “I’m a lot more likely to get something from you than the other way around.”

“I,” she snarled, “do not sleep around. Which, considering the stories you’ve been telling me—”

“Perhaps it would be wise to drop this particular line of conversation.”

“Fine!” Turning on a booted foot, she stomped through the trees. Three hundred years, Jane thought, simmering, and men still haven’t evolved beyond the need to kill a mood.

When they finally made it back to the SUV, they found Freika sitting in the back, wearing a white, toothy grin.

“I caught two squirrels and told a stacked redheaded jogger I was the Big Bad Wolf. Scared the hell out of her,” he said to Baran as they slid into their respective seats. “What did you get?”

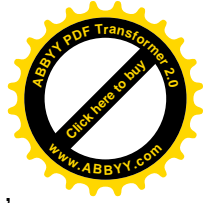
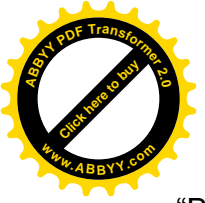
“That,” Jane said firmly, picking a leaf out of her hair, “is none of your business.”

Looking across at Baran, she caught him grinning smugly over his shoulder at his partner. He didn’t say a word.

He evidently didn’t need to. “That’s what I thought,” Freika said, jaws gaping in a silent lupine laugh.

“Didn’t your mother ever teach you not to kiss and tell?” Jane growled, and started the SUV.

“Why is he being so stubborn?” she demanded half an hour later, staring at the entrance to the Sleep Inn Motel. Baran had gone in to question the manager twenty minutes before, leaving her under Freika’s protection in the SUV.



“Because he’s a Warlord,” the wolf told her with a huge, toothy yawn. “That’s the way he’s programmed.”

“Well, programming or no programming, Danny Jackson isn’t gonna tell him a damn thing,” Jane growled, sitting back in her seat. “He can’t. He doesn’t know Baran from Adam, doesn’t know what he wants or why. For all he knows, Baran’s planning to cap the guy.” Which, come to think of it, he was. “If Danny gives him information about a guest, the hotel could get sued.”

“Huh,” Freika snorted. “I think it’s safe to say Druas won’t be suing anybody.”

“Danny doesn’t know that!” Her eyes narrowed. “But I’ll bet he’d talk to me. I went to school with him. Hell, I did a story on his mamma’s collection of vegetables shaped like Elvis.” The wolf poked his head between the seats and stared at her. She shrugged. “Human interest feature. You’d have to be Southern to understand. Point is, I’ll bet I could get him to give me the information, whether he’s supposed to or not. But Baran wouldn’t even let me try.”

“You’re a civilian,” Freika told her, and angled his head toward her. “My implant is itching. Would you mind?”

She reached over and dug her nails behind his ear to give it a thorough scratch. “He doesn’t trust me.” The idea stung.

“Trust is not one of Baran’s best skills,” the wolf agreed. “Over a little. Besides, where we come from, most people take one look at his tattoo and his command beads and tell him whatever the hell he wants to know.”

Intrigued, she shifted her target and scratched some more. “Why?”

“Ohhh, yeah. Right there ...” The wolf produced an astonishingly human moan before continuing with the topic. “Because they either want to be helpful or don’t want to piss him off. Either way, he’s not used to refusals. That’s enough, thanks.”

She stopped scratching and began to stroke his head absently, enjoying the texture of the thick, coarse fur. “So the tat and the beads mean something?”

“Right. The color stands for the House of Arvid, the Femmat clan that birthed, raised, and educated him before giving him into military service. The section of the design above his eye is the personal signature of his genetic creator, while the part over the cheekbone signifies he’s a Viking Class Warlord. The empty circle at the bottom means he’s an unbonded male; when he marries, the circle will be filled in.”

Jane stopped stroking to reach into her handbag and pull out her notebook.

“If you start taking notes, I’ll bite you.”



She looked up into the wolf's hard blue-white gaze. "Oh, come on! I'm just trying to make sense of this."

"You want to cause a paradox? TE told us not to tell you a damn thing, and if we did, not to let you write it down. You don't know who will get his hands on those notes."

"Oh, all right!" Disgusted, she stuffed the notebook back into her bag. "So what's a Viking Class Warlord?"

"Warlord is a really rough translation of the actual term," the wolf explained, hopping up front to sit comfortably in the passenger seat. "It means a genetically engineered warrior. There are different classifications based mostly on weight and specialized skills. Comanche Class Warlords are scouts, built for endurance and speed, while Samurai are mostly bodyguards, specializing in hand-to-hand. Crusaders are good with weapons and make up the bulk of the infantry ..."

"All of those are historical warriors renowned for their skill," Jane murmured to herself. "And Vikings ..."

"Break things and kill people."

She eyed him. "You're making that up."

"No, seriously. They're the heavyweights of the military, the shock troops and raiders. The bitch Femmat civilian who accused him of being a human tank was pretty close to the mark."

"Hmmm." Jane digested that idea. "What about the beads?"

The wolf lifted a hind leg and scratched briskly at his left ear. "Rank and combat decorations. One of 'em also designates his status as a military assassin."

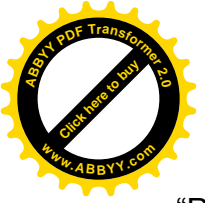
Jane gapped. "He's an assassin!"

Freika stopped scratching as though registering her instinctive revulsion. "It's not like in your time—grassy knolls and sniper scopes. Baran and I slip into guarded military camps and take out enemy commanders during wartime."

She frowned. "That sounds dangerous."

The wolf angled his head in his version of a shrug. "It's the stuff of suicide missions, sweetheart. We're good at it, mostly because Baran doesn't give a damn whether he lives or dies. And hasn't for a very long time."

"Not since the Xerans got his team," she guessed.



“Possibly. I only joined him when he volunteered for the assassination unit six years ago.” He rested his head on her knee and looked up at her, something sad in his eyes. “My orders were to keep him from committing suicide by enemy, but he hasn’t really attempted that, despite some close calls. Unfortunately, I have a feeling that will change when he finally goes after General Jutka.”

“Who’s General Jutka?”

The wolf was silent so long, she had to prompt him. “Freika? Who’s Jutka?”

“I think you’d better ask Baran that. But I will tell you he’s the man we’re supposed to go after when we return to our own time.” Before she could interrogate him further, Freika said, “Whoops, there comes Baran. And he’s not happy.”

Jane looked up to see him striding across the parking lot toward them, his braid swinging angrily against his cheek. She’d stopped off and picked him up a pair of sunglasses before they’d gone to the motel, but she was willing to bet that behind their protection, his eyes were glowing with rage.

He walked over to her car door and pulled it open. “Okay,” he growled, his tone savage. “You try.”

Simmering, Baran watched Jane charm the doughy desk clerk who had coldly refused to tell him a damn thing a few minutes before. He’d done everything he could think of to get the information he wanted, short of hauling the little bastard over the counter and planting his fist in that smug round face. He’d considered that, too, but his computer had warned him there was a ninety-eight percent chance the clerk would call local law enforcement. And he couldn’t afford to go to jail, not with Druas after Jane.

Who, at that very moment, was leaning her elbows on the counter and hanging on to the doughy little bastard’s every word.

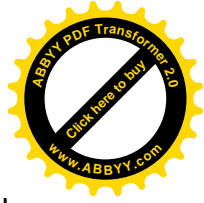
The man temporized. She wheedled. He wavered.

Finally the clerk sat down at the primitive computer behind the counter. “There’s only one guy that’s checked in within the last three days without family members in tow,” the man said, fingers tapping on the keys. ‘Tony Anderson. Atlanta address. He told me he sells farm equipment. I think he’s talking to the guy with Sanders Tractor and Farm Supply....”

“Oh, yeah. Jimmy Sanders. I interviewed him when his guard unit got called up for Operation Iraqi Freedom.”

Was there anybody she hadn’t interviewed?

“What’s his room number, Danny?”



“Now, Jane, you know I can’t tell you that.” At her pleading expression, he hesitated. “Uh, would you like a cup of coffee? I just put on a fresh pot.”

She looked at him a second before a dazzling smile spread across her face. “Sure, Danny. That’d be great.”

The clerk got up and ducked through a doorway behind the counter. Jane stood on tiptoes and craned her neck to check out the computer screen. “Our boy’s in Room 104,” she told Baran and made for the door. “Come on, let’s check it out.”

He caught her wrist as they stepped outside. “No, I’ll check it out, you wait with Freika. If it is Druas, I don’t want you in the line of fire.”

Jane frowned at him, her rich brown eyes concerned. “I don’t like that idea, Baran. “What if you need backup?”

“I won’t.” He eyed her a moment from behind the awkward sunglasses she’d given him. “Why was he willing to give that information to you when he wouldn’t tell me anything even when I all but threatened him?”

Jane shrugged. “Tayanita is a small community, Baran. Everybody knows everybody? But nobody knows you, so nobody’s going to talk to you. You’ll be seriously hampered if you try to investigate this thing by yourself. Like it or not, you need me.”

Baran frowned heavily, watching as she got back into the truck. He was beginning to see that.

And he didn’t like it. Not one bit.

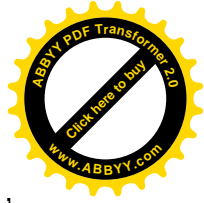
But when Baran stalked back to the SUV five minutes later, it was to say that Tony Anderson was not Druas. He hadn’t even had to talk to him—just scan him through the door. The man was definitely not Xeran.

Their luck was no better at the other two motels, though Baran did allow Jane to do the talking. She was able to get the information they needed at the Avon, but even she struck out with the clerk at the Journey’s Inn. Baran was forced to circle the entire motel, scanning each room for signs of the Xeran or twenty-third-century equipment. He came back simmering with frustration.

“So where the hell is Druas?” Jane said as Baran got in the SUV and slammed the door. She could make out the glow in his eyes even through the sunglasses.

“Probably killing somebody,” he snarled.

On the dashboard the scanner crackled and popped.



They ended up stopping at a Burger King drive-through for a late lunch. At Jane's suggestion, all three of them got out of the SUV to eat at one of the restaurant's cement tables in the shade of a huge, colorful umbrella.

The scanner at her elbow, Jane munched a french fry and watched Baran sniff his burger dubiously while Freika worked his way through a pile of Whoppers on the grass at their feet. "Who's Jutka?"

Baran put down his food and looked down at the wolf, who gazed up at him guiltily. Then he shrugged and went back to eating. "A Xeran general."

"Whom you're supposed to kill."

"It would simplify the war considerably."

"If you don't get killed trying."

He munched and considered the question. "There's always that."

Jane dragged another fry through a blob of ketchup and frowned. "Freika's worried you won't be as careful as you should be. Why? What's so special about this guy—I mean, considering you've evidently been assassinating people a while now."

He looked up at her and chewed, his face expressionless. She was beginning to regret buying him those sunglasses. At times he looked entirely too much like the Terminator in them. "Freika talks too much."

"Well, yeah, but sometimes he does have a point."

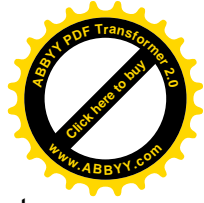
"Thank you," said a voice from under the table.

But before Baran could answer the question—assuming he intended to—a short horn toot called their attention. Jane looked up to see a familiar champagne Crown Vic whip into a parking space not far from their table. Tom Reynolds got out.

Normally Jane would be delighted to see the primary in a murder investigation, particularly when she hadn't interviewed him yet. This time, though, there was something in Reynolds's calculating expression that made her uneasy.

"Taking a break from harassing hotel clerks, Jane?" he asked pleasantly, plopping down on the cement bench across from her and Baran.

Hell, Jane thought. Busted. Maybe literally, judging from the look on Tom's face. She shrugged and pasted a bright smile on her own. "Just working on a story."



“Yeah, and I know exactly what story you’re working on,” he said, his eyes hard. “Stay out of my case, Nancy Drew.” Tom flicked a gaze at Baran. “By the way, exactly when did the Hardy Boy here come to town? He wasn’t with you Friday night at the murder scene. In fact, you didn’t even mention you’d hired him.”

“The subject didn’t come up,” Jane drawled. Oh, God, Tom was suspicious of Baran. She thought fast. “He flew in early this morning.”

“Yeah?” His eyes flicked to the bigger man’s face. “You already found a place to stay?” His smile held a distinct edge. “You’re not registered at any of the motels.”

Baran leaned an elbow on the table and lifted a dark brow. “Actually, I’m staying with my good friend Jane.”

“Uh-huh.” The look he gave Jane was so coolly disapproving, she felt her cheeks heat. “Your daddy wouldn’t much like that.”

“Daddy didn’t like a lot of things,” Jane snapped back. “But since I’m twenty-nine years old, he-wouldn’t have had much say even if—” She clamped her teeth shut over he wasn’t a dead wife-beater.

“Guess not.” She was surprised at how much the disappointment in Reynolds’s eyes stung. He flicked his attention back to Baran. “How you feeling after your little run-in with that lightning bolt?”

“It wasn’t a lightning bolt. And I’m fine.”

“Even the hands? Gashed ‘em up pretty well, looked like. Get ‘em tended?”

Baran shrugged and displayed a broad palm. He’d pulled off Jane’s makeshift bandages after the trip to the second hotel. Now the wound showed as nothing more than a healing red line. “They looked worse than they were.”

Tom frowned at his palm in astonishment. “Damn, I could have sworn—”

“How about the woman in the car wreck?” Jane interrupted, pulling out her notebook more as a means of distracting the detective than anything else. “How’s she doing?”

The detective’s expression turned grim. “She didn’t make it.”

Baran stiffened. Jane glanced over at him. His face was blank, but she could sense his helpless anger at the news. He’d tried so desperately to save her....

“That’s too bad,” she said softly. Straightening her shoulders, she assumed an expression of cool professional interest. “What can you tell me about the crash?”





Tom lifted a sandy brow at her. “I just directed traffic, Jane. You need to talk to the Highway Patrol to get the details. You know that.”

Of course she did, but she also wanted to keep him from grilling Baran. “Oh, yeah. So what about the murder? Can you tell me anything about it?”

Tom hesitated, then sighed. “Let me go get my paperwork out of the car.” He got up and headed back toward his Crown Vic.

As he walked away, Jane looked at Baran, taking in his stony expression. “You tried,” she said softly.

He shrugged, but something in the movement communicated pain. “Evidently I wasn’t supposed to succeed.”

Thirty minutes later Jane tucked her notebook back in her purse as Tom drove away. He’d given her the formal details of the case, including the victim’s identification. She’d have to get the details of the cause of death from the Tayanita county coroner, but she already knew what he’d say: Jennifer Moore had been strangled, then methodically butchered.

She sighed and looked over at Baran, who’d listened patiently during her conversation with Reynolds. “So where do we go from—”

“... Alpha six, caller reports stabbing at 534 Cherokee Lane,” the scanner interrupted.

All three of them froze, looking at the rectangular device as the tension rose, almost vibrating in the air between them. “Is that...” Baran began.

“... white male victim, blond hair, blue eyes. Caller said she stabbed him in the buttocks when she caught him with another woman.”

Relieved, Jane grinned at the Warlord. “Ten will get you twenty the butt in question was bare and between the other woman’s thighs at the time of the stabbing.”

Baran’s lips twitched as he relaxed, sitting back on the cement bench. “In any case, I doubt Druas was involved.”

“Not unless he was the victim, anyway.” She snorted. “Now, there’s a mental image to cherish.”

“We’re not that lucky.”

“Not judging by recent events, no.” Jane sobered. “So, as I was saying before our butt-stabbing friend interrupted—where do we go from here?”



Baran shook his head, beads tapping his cheek. “I have no idea. Unless you want to drive around Tayanita County while I scan every house.”

“God, please no,” Freika said from underneath the table. “I don’t think I could take being cooped up in that truck with both your libidos that long. I’m traumatized enough as it is.”

Jane picked up a cold french fry and threw it at him. He snapped it out of the air. As he swallowed, she looked over at Baran. “Much as I hate to admit it, I don’t care for that idea, either.”

He shrugged and drummed his fingers on the cement table. “It does sound like a waste of time.”

“Besides,” she added, picking the scanner up and tucking it back into her purse, “I’ve got a newspaper to put out tomorrow, and right now I don’t have a damn thing to put in it. Well, nothing anybody would believe anyway, assuming I could even print it....”

“Which you can’t,” Freika said, popping over the lip of the table to lick up a couple of surviving fries with his long pink tongue. “You know, these are good.”

Jane aimed a swat at his pointed ears. He dodged, giving her a dirty look. “As I was saying,” she continued to Baran, “I need to do a couple more interviews.”

He lifted a questioning brow. “With whom?”

She grimaced. “Jennifer Moore’s family.”

Which, she knew, wasn’t going to be any fun at all.

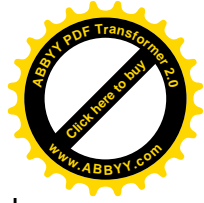
Cars were lined up on both sides of the street in front of the neat brick colonial that belonged to Jennifer’s sister, Rebecca Rogers.

Jane pulled the SUV into an empty spot and got out as she draped the chain of her press card around her neck. Opening the rear door, she reached for the huge peace lily that occupied the seat next to Freika. She’d had to pick it up at the grocery store, since all the florists were closed on Sunday.

Reporters didn’t usually give flowers to survivors, but Jane had gotten into the habit years ago. It was a multipurpose gesture, showing she both sympathized and regretted intruding. Families seemed to get the message; she got cussed out a lot less now, and people were more inclined to talk to her.

“You’re going to have to stay in the car,” she told the wolf when he started to jump out past her.

“I’ve got a better idea,” he said. “Let me out to terrorize the neighbors.”



Jane snorted. “This is South Carolina, furball—even the little old ladies are armed. Somebody’d shoot you.” Turning, she found Baran eyeing the line of cars with a frown.

“I don’t understand why this is necessary,” he said. “They can’t tell us anything about Druas.”

“No, but they can tell me something about Jennifer Moore,” she said, fluffing the plant’s emerald leaves. “And like it or not, talking to the families of victims is part of my job.”

Jane hadn’t even bothered to ask Tom where to find Jennifer’s family—she’d known he wouldn’t tell her. But when she’d driven by the Trib office, she’d discovered that, as she’d hoped, the funeral home had already faxed in the obituary. As was customary, the obit had listed where Jennifer’s family could be reached.

The plant in her arms and Baran at her heels, Jane started toward the brick two-story. Her stomach twisted with that ugly, sick feeling she always got when she had to conduct this kind of interview. She knew families of murder victims often seethed with impotent rage—a rage for which reporters made the perfect guilt-free target.

Unfortunately, without a human glimpse of the victim’s personality, it was too easy for readers to view this kind of story as more titillating than tragic. So Jane gritted her teeth and sought to ignore the knots assembling themselves in her stomach.

Then Baran took her elbow as she started across the neatly trimmed lawn. There was something so comforting about his solid male presence, she felt the knots ease.

This was, she thought, so much easier with a partner.

A number of people were sitting out on the house’s screened-in front porch. One of the traditions of Southern grief was that friends and family always gathered as soon as they heard the news of a death, to sympathize, cry, and bring food. The crowd usually ended up spilling out on the porch; Jane had lost count of the number of interviews she’d done standing on the front stoop.

A pale, subdued young woman came to push the screen door open and take the peace lily from her arms. “Thank you for coming,” she said in a soft upper-class drawl, probably assuming Jane and Baran were friends of the family.

Jane lifted her laminated press badge and met the woman’s eyes. “I’m sorry to intrude on your grief. Jane Colby with The Tayanita Tribune. We were wondering if you had a photo you wanted to run of Mrs. Moore in the paper tomorrow.” Usually the funeral home took care of that detail, but then again, they might not.

The brunette’s expression cooled. “I’ll check,” she said, and turned around to step back into the house.



Jane, with Baran behind her, instantly found herself the focus of five pairs of hostile eyes. “I want to tell you how sorry I am for your loss,” she said, letting the sympathy she felt show in her own gaze. “This is—” she couldn’t think of a word that did it justice and settled on “—horrible.”

A tall, thin girl spoke up from the wooden porch swing. “Did the police tell you anything? Do they know...”

Somebody hushed the teenager, but Jane answered her question anyway. “At this point, they’re still investigating, trying to find witnesses.”

“It wasn’t Barry,” a haggard, potbellied man said. Grief and anger seethed in his voice. “People are going to think it was Barry, but he was at work. Second shift at the Triad plant. This is killing him. And the kids .., Her little kids ...”

She had two, according to the obit. They were six and four; Tom had said they’d been spending the night with their grandmother when it happened. Jane winced at the thought of what Druas might have done to them had they been home.

“It’s good you’re all here. They’re going to need all the support they can get.” Taking a deep breath, Jane added, “I wondered if anyone has anything they’d like to say about Jennifer, about the kind of person she was. As a tribute to her.” She took her notebook out of her purse by way of making clear anything they said would be for the paper.

A silence fell while the little group digested the question. They’d either throw her out now or talk to her.

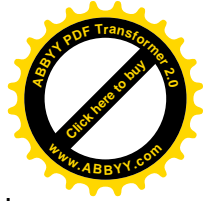
“She loved her kids and she loved her husband,” somebody said.

In the next fifteen minutes a picture emerged of a bright, pretty young woman who did pastel sketches of her friends’ children and homeschooled her own. She’d taught Sunday school and told corny jokes and had evidently never met a single human being she didn’t try to make friends with.

Her husband thought she’d hung the moon. He was somewhere inside, sitting in dazed shock. Yesterday had been their tenth wedding anniversary; they’d planned a romantic dinner that evening. Instead one of the neighbors had called him at the textile plant where he worked third shift to tell him his house was surrounded by police. He’d raced home in a panic only to find his wife dead and himself a suspect.

While Jane was gently extracting her quotes, the woman emerged from the house with Jennifer’s photo and handed it to her. “I couldn’t find one of her by herself,” she said. “All I had was the group shot they took at Christmas.”

“That’s okay,” Jane said. “We can crop it.” She looked down and felt her heart clutch.



Jennifer and her husband sat side by side in the professional studio shot, two cherubic blondes standing in front of them. The two little girls had their mother's warm, broad smile and their father's hazel eyes.

Druas had destroyed that idyllic picture, butchered that pretty woman simply because he could. But Jennifer wasn't his only victim. He'd shattered the lives of her children and her husband, too. Her little ones would grow up with the scars of trauma and loss, and her husband would feel the ache until the day he died. To make matters worse, there would always be whispers, questions, rumors that he'd murdered the woman he'd loved.

"Pretty family," Jane said to Baran, a knot in her throat.

"Yes," he said, looking down at the photo from over her shoulder.

She looked up at him. He wore the carefully blank expression she'd come to realize meant he'd locked down his emotions. Somewhere behind those dark glasses, she knew, hell was banked in his eyes.

Without another word the warlord pivoted and walked out the screen door. It banged shut behind him.

Jane stared at his retreating back, then shot a wide-eyed look at the bewildered group on the porch. "Thank you for your time."

Tucking the photo in her purse, she hurried out after him.

"He's stolen so much from them," Baran said as they got back in the truck.

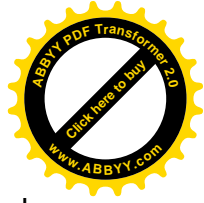
Jane thought of the photo, of Jennifer Moore's shattered family. All her life, she'd lived with the gnawing suspicion her father had killed her mother. Yet she'd never been sure. Maybe that's why she'd been so driven to become a reporter—so that others would never have to wonder what lay behind a shield of lies.

For the first time, she wondered if the truth was such a blessing. Jennifer's little girls would never even have the dim, faint hope their mother might be alive. They'd know exactly how she died; every detail of her murder would be laid out in newspaper and television stories. Hell, if the Tayanita killings did gain the notoriety of the Ripper murders, they'd find themselves sought out for anniversary interviews from now on. Endlessly tormented.

They didn't deserve that.

Yet not knowing ...

Had William Colby killed her mother? If he had, how? Did he use that .38 that even now waited back home in Jane's attic, or had he simply used his fists on her one last time? Had she suffered?



Or was Jeanine Colby alive and well somewhere, daughter and abusive husband forgotten?

Damn, Jane would like to believe that. Unfortunately, everyone who'd ever known her mother had mentioned how difficult to believe they found it that Jeannine would simply abandon Jane.

Was it better not to know? Who was luckier—Jane or Jennifer's little girls?

She...

The cell phone rang in its pocket in her purse.

One hand on the wheel, Jane reached into her purse with the other and fished the phone out. "Jane Colby," she said, as she always did when she was working.

"She's got the most lovely legs," a male voice said. "Not as long as yours, of course, but not bad."

Jane frowned, distracted and puzzled. "I think you've got the wrong number."

"Oh, I don't think so. Tell me—have you been enjoying your handsome visitor from the future? Or should I say— has he been enjoying you?"

A wave of ice seemed to roll up the back of her neck. "Druas."

"Very good."

Baran reached for the cell. "Give me that."

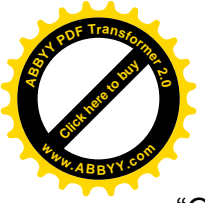
"Do it and I'll kill her now," Druas snapped. "I want to talk to you, Jane."

She licked her lips. Shit. She had to stall him. Waving Baran off, she demanded, "Where are you?"

"Ohh, some Tayanita landmark. Laughing children, dancing water—and a pretty girl, running as if her life doesn't depend on it. But it does."

Laughing children? Oh, hell. Jane fought panic as she tried to figure out what he was referring to. "Leave her alone, Druas."

"I can't do that, Jane. Wouldn't want to cause a paradox, now would we?" His laugh was low and taunting. "When you think about it, I'm not committing murder, I'm saving the universe."



“Oh, yeah, you’re a big hero,” Jane growled, fighting to think where he could be. Dancing water, laughing children...

Her eyes widened. There Were bronze statues of laughing children around a fountain in Cherokee Park—along with jogging trails.

The son of a bitch was about to murder a jogger.

Jane stomped on the gas and shot toward town. Luckily the park was close by. If they could just make it in time ... “Why are you doing this, Druas?” she demanded, hoping to stall him long enough for them to arrive. “You’re a mercenary, a warrior. Those women can’t be a challenge for you.”

“No, but your handsome fuck buddy is. Now, there’s a killer. You do know his body count is higher than mine?”

Baran had whipped off his sunglasses to stare at her, listening hard with his Warlord hearing. His eyes shone as red as a couple of coals. Jane ignored him. “I’m a lot more interested in you at the moment.”

“You should be. I’m going to kill you, Jane.”

She almost lost control of the SUV. “No. You’re not. Baran—“

“... Is going to be too late, just like he was too late to save that bitch in the car this afternoon. My face is going to be the last thing you ever see. And my dick is going to be the last thing you ever feel—after my knife, of course.”

“You’re the one who’s going to die, Druas,” Baran snarled, lifting his voice so the phone would pick it up.

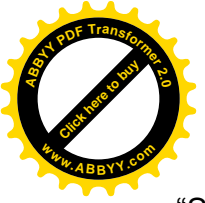
“If I do, it won’t be in time to save you, bitch. You’re going to squeal for me, just like all the others. Just like Baran squealed for my comrades back on Vardon. He was such a pretty boy. I’ll bet he hasn’t told you about that.”

“Yes, he did.” Her skin felt curiously numb, cold. She fought to concentrate on her driving, on getting them there in time. “He told me all about what you sick Xeran bastards did.”

Druas laughed. Something in the sound made her skin crawl. “Oh, I doubt that. I doubt that very much. Some things a man just doesn’t tell the woman he’s screwing.”

“What are you talking about?” Ice slid over her. He couldn’t mean what she thought he meant.

Not Baran.



“Sorry, Jane, you’re just not going to be able to stall me that long. I’ve got to go kill her now.”

The phone went dead.

“Shit,” Jane spat, slamming the gas pedal all the way to the floor as she dialed 911. “Shit shit shit shit.”

“What’s your emergency?” the dispatcher said.

“A woman’s about to be murdered in Cherokee Park. Send everybody you can dispatch. Now.”

“Wait a minute, who is this? How do you know that?”

“Jane Colby with the Trib. The killer just called me on my cell.”

“Ma’am, we’ll send somebody to check it out, but it was probably a prank.”

“It wasn’t a prank, damn it! It was a fucking serial killer, and if you just send one deputy, that girl is not going to be the only one bleeding out on the ground. Your cop is going to end up dead!”

“It’s not necessary to use that kind of language, ma’am.”

“Do you want to be on the front page in fifty point type, lady? ‘Dispatcher refuses to send adequate help: woman murdered.’ How does that sound, huh? ‘Cause I can do it!” She hit the End button and slung the phone back in her purse. “Stupid bitch.” Zipping around a minivan, she screeched up to the curb in front of the park.

Near the entrance, a fountain sprayed a plume of water skyward from the center of a ring of dancing children.

Baran threw his door open and jumped out without bothering to close it behind him. He took off at a run. “Freika, stay with Jane! I’ve got Xeran sensor readings!”

“I’m going with ...” She blinked, watching his retreating back as he raced toward the trees. She’d never seen a human being move so fast in her entire life; he was almost a blur. She started after him.

“No!” Freika’s teeth closed on the hem of her pants, dragging her to a stumbling halt. “He’s right. If Druas gets you out in those woods away from Baran, you’re dead.”

She looked down at him helplessly. “But...”

In the distance a woman screamed, her voice ringing with terror.





Then there was nothing but the sound of the fountain's spray pattering on brick.

Baran went to riatt as he ran, neuro-chemicals roaring through his body in a molten flood, power pumping in after them. This time he would be in time. This time he was going to kill the bastard and end it.

He could see them in his mind, his computer generating the image from sensor data since they were out of direct view. The girl ran easily, not realizing she was in danger as Druas closed in from behind in a leisurely jog. As if he had all the time in the world.

Baran poured on the speed, dodging around the trees that blocked his path.

As if sensing him, the Xeran glanced back over his shoulder. He began to run. The girl turned, evidently hearing him. Her scream rang high and shrill over the trees.

The Jumpkiller didn't bother with the slow strangulation that might have given Baran time to reach them. The computer image painted the flash of steel as he drew the knife, the arch of his arm swinging, the spray of hot blood. The girl crumpled; Baran was close enough now to glimpse the movement through the trees with his own eyes.

Close, so close, but not close enough. Not close enough to be in time.

Druas stepped back. With his sensors engaged, Baran could see the temporal field building around the murderer's T-suit in waves of warping time.

BOOM!

And the killer was gone, leaving only the girl dying in the leaves as Baran skidded up.

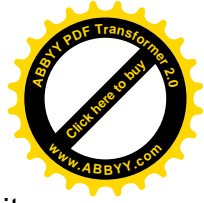
Her eyes met his, wide with horror over her ruined throat, begging him silently for help. Druas might not have taken the time to strangle her, but he hadn't cut deep enough to render her unconscious, either. He'd meant for her to suffer, to know she was dying without being able to do anything to save herself.

Death in 2.3 minutes, Baran's comp told him.

How can I save her? he demanded as he fell to his knees beside her crumpled body. Apply pressure ?

Ineffective. She'll die before medical assistance can arrive.

He had to try anyway. Jerking the T-shirt off over his head, Baran wadded it up and pressed it against the wound, trying to avoid cutting off her breathing as he did so. She lifted a shaking hand and wrapped it around his, fighting feebly to help.



“Hang on,” he ordered roughly, watching the white shirt turn red as she bled out into it. “Stay with me.”

As if in answer, she made an awful, strangling sound. The bewildered pain in her glazing eyes choked him. It was all so vicious, so pointless. Savagery for its own mindless sake.

“I’m going to kill him,” he gritted as he smoothed her blond hair back from her face with his free hand.

She blinked up at him once. Her mouth moved, but no sound emerged. He struggled to read her lips. Something about “husband” and “love.”

Then the life bled away from her eyes, and her hand fell limply to the leaves.

And Baran, who’d killed more men than he even cared to think about, felt his shoulders began to shake.

Jane heard the temporal boom roll out over the trees over the wail of sirens. “Son of a bitch.” She started toward the sound, but Freika grabbed her again.

“We don’t know where Druas transported,” the wolf said. “In those trees he could Jump right in behind you before I could do a damn thing.”

“Fuck.” She was tempted to run hi after Baran anyway, but she knew if she didn’t wait to tell the police he’d gone to help, they might shoot him by mistake.

The first car roared up with shrieking sirens and squealing brakes. The door flew open and an officer scrambled out, gun already drawn. She knew him from a previous crime scene: Tony Garrison. He’d been a deputy barely a year.

“That way!” Jane yelled, pointing in the direction Baran had gone. “They’re in the woods. My photographer went after them.”

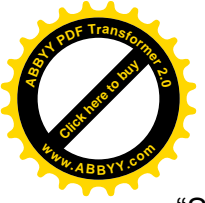
“Gonna get himself killed,” the cop grunted, bolstering his weapon as he grabbed his shoulder mike to radio it in before running toward the tree line.

“Now we can go,” Jane told Frieika, and sprinted after the officer.

“Jane—“

“Find Baran,” she snapped, cutting off his protest. “One of these cops could shoot him if I’m not there to defuse the situation.”

The wolf hesitated, then growled something and shot ahead of both of them. Jane brought up the rear, pouring everything she had into every stride she took.



“Stay back!” the cop yelled at her.

“The wo... dog belongs to my photographer!” Jane yelled back. “Freika’ll track Baran. Since he went in after the girl, if we find him, we’ll find her.”

Garrison muttered something that was probably obscene, but didn’t protest again as the two of them crashed on through the woods.

They found Baran cradling a limp figure in his arms, his broad, bare shoulders hunched, head bowed. His braids trailed in the blood that covered her chest. He’d pulled off his shirt; it lay forgotten in a gory bundle in the dead leaves beside him.

“Put her down and back away,” Garrison ordered, drawing his weapon.

“It’s my photographer!” Jane protested, her stomach twisting as she stepped between Baran and the cop. She’d been afraid of this. “I told you, he came in to help her!”

“I’ve only got your word on that,” the deputy gritted. “And I’m not taking chances. Get out of the way, lady, or your ass is going to jail!”

She knew he was just pissed off enough to do it, but she had to make him listen. “Baran was only trying to save her!”

“But I didn’t.” She looked back over her shoulder and caught her breath. The Warlord’s lethal gaze was fixed on the deputy’s gun. “Get that weapon out of my face.” He still had his sunglasses on, thank God, but he’d been in riatt. She remembered how he’d taken her in the woods and realized just how shaky his control over his emotions really was. If the cop got too aggressive, Baran just might slam him through a tree.

Hell. That was all they needed.

“Put the girl down, sir!” Garrison set his feet apart and steadied his aim.

“If you don’t shift your aim, I’m going to make you eat that gun.” His voice was utterly toneless, matter-of-fact, but something in his face made the cop back up a pace.

Then Garrison stopped himself and steadied his aim. “Sir, I will shoot you.”

And he would, Jane knew. Especially since he’d only gotten out of the Academy a few months before—and this might be the first time he’d ever faced a man over the body of a murdered woman.

Or seen anything like the killing rage in the Warlord’s eyes.

“Put her down, Baran!” she said, raising her voice just short of a yell, trying to penetrate the Warlord’s riatt frenzy. “He’ll do it. And you’re not thinking clearly.”



He stared at her for a long moment before he gently lowered his limp burden to the ground. “She’s already gone. I didn’t get here in time.”

“Down on the ground!” the deputy snarled. “Hands behind your head.”

“Deputy Garrison, he didn’t hurt her!” Jane raised her empty hands to show she wasn’t armed. “The man who did this called us on my cell phone and told us he was about to attack her, and Baran ran in here trying to help.”

“So where is this killer, huh?”

“Getting away while you wave a gun in our faces!”

“My job is to secure the scene,” Garrison snapped. “I’m securing it. Get! Down!”

“Tony, I’m a reporter. You know me!”

“And you should know better than to interfere with a police officer! Down on the ground! Both of you!”

“Do it, Jane.” Baran said heavily, and stretched out beside the body of the woman he’d fought—and failed—to save.

She looked from Garrison’s furious eyes to the bore of his gun, sighed, and obeyed. As the deputy began to pat

Baran down, she pressed her face into the crinkling leaves and tried not to wonder who Druas was planning to kill next.

It might just be her.

Lose the shades,” Tom Reynolds said to Baran as they sat in the detective’s car. “It’s like talking to the Terminator.”

He had no idea who the Terminator was, but Baran obeyed the detective anyway. For lack of anywhere else to put them, he held them in his lap. It was a good thing enough time had passed to give his body time to recover from riatt, or his eyes would have given him away. Unfortunately, he still felt raw, and he knew his control over his simmering rage wasn’t the best! Law enforcement agents on his own world would have understood, but these deputies obviously found his reaction to the aftereffects suspicious.

One of them, watching the tremors shake him, had asked if he was under the influence. Baran had asked, “Of what?” For some reason, the man had not seemed to appreciate the question.



Now Baran eyed Reynolds and hoped he could get through this interview quickly. Jane was being questioned in another car, and Baran did not particularly like having her out of his sight. Freika was sitting patiently by the vehicle she occupied, standing guard, but that wasn't enough. The wolf was deadly in a fight, but it was doubtful he could hold Druas off in any extended combat.

The facts were brutally simple. If Baran was arrested, Jane was dead.

His fists clenched. He couldn't afford to be taken. If he had to fight these men so he could snatch her and run, he'd do it. He would not allow Druas to butcher her as he had the woman Baran had just watched die.

"It's been a bitch of a day, huh, Hoss?" the detective asked in a low, quiet voice, watching his face. "You've tried to save two women and fucked up both times."

Baran's head snapped toward the detective so hard the beads slapped his cheek. It took him a moment to cool his helpless rage and blank his expression. "So it would seem."

"Pisses you off, doesn't it?" The cop settled back in his seat and wrote something down on the little notebook he held. "You cut yourself all to hell trying to get the first woman out of the car, then you go tearing through the woods after a killer, only to get there too late. All you can do is watch her die in your arms. Sucks to be you, huh?"

He almost told the deputy he'd had to watch people die before, but remembered the photographer he was supposed to be. "I've had better days."

"So tell me what happened."

"I have already told you what happened," Baran said, restraining his flare of irritation at hearing the question yet again. "Just as I told the three other officers who asked."

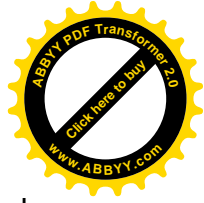
"We just want to make sure we get the details right," Reynolds said blandly. "So when was the first time you met this girl?"

Baran frowned. "What girl?"

"The girl that just died."

He shook his head and drummed his fingers on the car's dashboard, staring at Jane's silhouette in the back of the other patrol car. He wanted to be done with this so he could get her to safety. "As I said before—repeatedly—I didn't know her. All I did was try to ..."

Suddenly a plump, motherly woman ran past the front of the car. Even through the closed window, Baran could hear her sobbing screams of denial.



A cop ran to meet her. She tried to push by, but he stepped to block her. She screamed something and flung herself at him just as a middle-aged man ran up to drag her back. .  
“That would be the momma and daddy,” Reynolds said.

Baran could almost feel the weight of his coolly analytical gaze, dissecting every expression, every twitch. “That’s the thing about a small town. Somebody dies, and two minutes later the family knows it. Poor bastards.” Softly, cruelly, he added, “You want me to introduce you? I mean, you did try to save her, right?”

For an instant Baran considered planting his fist in the man’s face. Unfortunately, he still had so much riatt left in his system, the blow would probably kill the detective. He forced his muscles to relax.

The detective smiled slightly. “That’s better. Thought for a minute I was going to have to shoot your ass right here in the car. You’re a scary bastard when you want to be. Your eyes ... I could have sworn ...” He shook his head and closed his notebook with a tired sigh. “Okay, you can go. I gotta start looking for this’ son of a bitch.”

Baran lifted his brows, wondering if this was some kind of trick. “That’s it?”

“I’ve talked to a lot of people who just killed somebody, and you don’t have the look. You’ve got the eyes of a guy who’s blaming himself for not being thirty seconds faster.”

Baran smiled slightly, dryly. The detective was far too perceptive.

“Besides,” Reynolds continued, “I’ve known Jane since she was twelve years old and coming to crime scenes with her daddy. If she says you didn’t do it, you didn’t do it.”

His muscles cautiously unknitting, Baran reached for the door handle. “Thank you.”

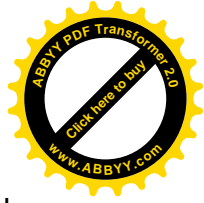
“Don’t forget your blanket.” Reynolds had handed it to him so he wouldn’t have to walk past the crowd of onlookers bare-chested and covered in gore. “None of us needs the kind of rumors that would trigger.”

He nodded and pulled it up around his shoulders again as Reynolds radioed the other officer to let Jane out of his car.

As he got out, Reynolds leaned over and looked up at him. “By the way, tell her she needs to get a new cell number. And don’t give this one out to everybody in town, dammit. The wrong guy definitely got hold of it this time.”

The Warlord nodded. “I’ll make sure to pass along the message.”

“On the other hand, don’t.” Reynolds frowned. “We may need to put a tap on her phone. Might be useful if he calls again.”



With an effort, Baran kept his opinion of that idea off his face. All the police needed to do was listen to one call, and they'd realize he and Jane knew far more about their mystery killer than they should. That, he thought, we definitely do not need.

Baran pushed the door open as Jane get out of the other car and hurried toward him, Freika trotting at her heels.

"Let's get the hell out of here," he growled.

"God, yes," she said, glancing toward two men, one armed with a video camera, who were working through the crowd of onlookers toward them. "There comes that jerk Clarkson from WDRT News. We don't want to talk to him—particularly not with you covered in blood." She led the way back toward the SUV at a speed just short of a run.

As they pulled away from the curb a moment later, she glowered into her rearview mirror at the camera pointed at their truck. "I never thought I'd ever be the one running from reporters. Usually I'm at the head of the pack." She turned her attention to the road, a grim set to her mouth. "Damn, I don't want to end up as that bastard's lead story."

Glancing at him, she read his puzzlement. "There's an old saying in television journalism, Baran—'If it bleeds, it leads.'"

An hour later Jane realized she was a slut.

It was, she decided, the only possible explanation. No decent Southern belle would get this turned on after the day she'd just spent. Not even watching Baran Arvid take a shower.

Dry-mouthed, she gazed through the bubbled glass door at the muscle shifting in his powerful arms as he washed all that long, black hair. She barely noticed the beads biting into her hands. He'd handed them to her when he'd taken down his bloody braids; now she clenched her fingers around them and fought to control the impulse to join him.

Yep. Slut. She had to face facts.

White runnels of soap ran down the rippled planes of pectorals and washboard abs, painting slow and sensual trails that Jane would love to follow with her fingertips.

Yet even through the glass, she could see the tired slump in his body, could tell from the slow movement of his hands that he felt drained, weighted with guilt and failure.

Jane frowned at the surge of tenderness she felt. Lust somehow seemed less complicated than this sudden need to comfort him.

It was hard to believe that this time yesterday, she hadn't even known him at all. The hours they'd spent together had been so crammed with terror and passion they'd felt



elongated into weeks. Now it seemed she knew more about the elemental core of Baran Arvid than she'd learned about her college lover in the entire year they'd dated.

Jane frowned, shifting on the lowered toilet seat. She had offered to shower with Baran, knowing his desire should be running high after spending so long in riatt, but he'd declined. He'd claimed washing away blood was not considered a romantic activity even in his own time, but she suspected the real truth was that he wanted to punish himself.

"You weren't supposed to save her, Baran," she said, knowing his keen hearing would pick up her words even over the hiss of the shower. "Don't torment yourself."

He looked at her over the edge of the door. His hair was slicked tight to his head, shining and black. His gaze was brooding. "And who else am I not supposed to save?"

The bottom fell out of Jane's stomach. "Do you think..." She had to stop to swallow her rising gorge. "Do you think he's going to get me?"

With a sharp, violent gesture he cut off the water. "No." His determined voice rang on the tiles. "No, he's not going to get you."

She tightened her grip on the beads until her fist went white. "How can you be so sure?"

Baran swung the shower door open with a hard thrust of his palm and stepped out, gloriously naked. "Because I'm not going to let him." Grabbing the towel from its rack, he rubbed it roughly over his gleaming tanned skin, his face set as cold and hard as iced steel. "I'm not going to give him the chance."

She knew he meant every word. Baran would die before he let Druas touch her. A cold knot of fear inside her loosened. "Sit down and I'll do your hair."

He took her place on the commode seat as she went to get her comb. He was toweling his black mane when she returned.

She stepped close and pushed his hands aside so she could begin. His hair was surprisingly long; she wondered how many years he'd been growing it out.

Picking up a silken fistful, she started gently working the comb through a knot that had formed while he'd been scrubbing out the blood. The activity was so mindless, so sensual, that she felt her anxiety beginning to fade.

He, however, seemed immune, judging by the way he was restlessly rubbing the towel up and down his belly and wet thighs. "I've killed people, Jane," he said suddenly, his voice sounding strained.

She hesitated, then went back to tugging the comb through the knot. "Yeah, I think you mentioned that."





“Other soldiers, enemy commanders. Mostly with a beamer, some with a knife, some bare handed.” He leaned forward, the towel hanging limply from one big hand. She dropped the handful of smoothed hair and picked up another tangled hank. Patiently she began working out the knots.

“I watched their eyes when they died,” he said. “There’s a look they get—you never forget it. Sometimes I close my eyes, and they’re there, looking back....”

Jane wasn’t sure she wanted to hear this, but she sensed he needed to say it, so she kept her mouth shut and kept combing.

“With a couple of them, I felt a sense of triumph, but most of the time I didn’t feel anything at all. Nothing. Just dead inside. It was a job, one the high command said needed doing. So I did it.”

“I’m sorry.” The phrase felt inadequate, but she couldn’t think of anything else that wouldn’t be.

“I’ve known a few who got a taste for it. There was a soldier in my unit once ... I never liked having him at my back. I often wondered if there’d been a moment when he got the hunger.”

Jane stopped in midmotion as she processed the idea. “Druas is like that,” she decided.

“Yeah.” He sat up. “I want to kill him, Jane. For that girl today, and for Mary Kelly, and Jennifer’s family. And most of all, because he put fear in your eyes.” His voice dropped to a low, deadly register. “I think I’m going to like killing him.”

“You afraid you’re going to like it too much?”

His shoulders stiffened, then slumped. “Yeah. Yeah, I am.”

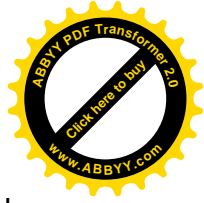
Jane moved around in front of him and knelt between his spread thighs. “Baran, you’re not like Druas. Men like that—there’s something missing in them. Something that makes the rest of us human. But you’ve got it.”

His expression was bleak. “The Femmats always said Warlords aren’t human. Not really.”

Jane snorted. “The Femmats are full of bull.” She reached out a hand and laid it across his high cheek. “Look, I don’t care if you can rip the doors off a Toyota, you’re still human in all the ways that count. If you weren’t, you wouldn’t be doing this to yourself because that girl died in your arms. If you weren’t, you wouldn’t care.”

Jane tilted her face up toward his. “If you weren’t, I wouldn’t want to do this.”

Slowly, with exquisite tenderness, she took his mouth in a slow, deep kiss.



Baran groaned as Jane settled into the kiss, her mouth hot, wet, and silken. Her slim body came to rest against his, all velvet curves and gentle heat. He went still like a man approached by something small and wild, instinctively afraid to do something to scare her off. Before, he'd always been the one to seduce her. To have her reach out to him now struck him as a sweet, dark gift.

Her long hands cupped the sides of his face, fingers threaded through his wet hair as she kissed him, drinking from his mouth, tasting him, filling him with the taste of her. She drew back, just slightly, and his arms tightened in protest around her slim back. He hadn't even been aware of wrapping them around her.

Against his lips she murmured, "Come to bed. I refuse to make love to you sitting on a toilet."

She stepped back, her eyes sultry with invitation. He rose as if hypnotized to follow her as she turned with a roll of her slim hips and sauntered for the bedroom. His erect cock pointed longingly at her sweetly curving backside as he strode after her.

When Jane peeled her top off over her head, Baran felt the breath catch in his throat at the long, sensual line of her torso stretching upward. She tossed the shirt aside with a careless flip of her wrist, then bent to pull off her jeans. His cock jerked in lust. He squelched the impulse to stride to her and snatch her off her feet. Normally it wasn't in his nature to let a woman take the lead, but he wanted to feel the quiet acceptance in Jane's touch.

He hungered for it.

For a moment he started to wonder why, then pushed the thought away. He didn't want the distraction.

She stepped from her jeans and reached behind her back to open the catch of her bra, her elegant spine twisting with the movement.

When she turned toward him, lust stabbed him at the sight of her bare breasts, perfect pale hemispheres topped by long pink nipples drawn hard with need. Saliva flooded his mouth. He swallowed hard.

She stepped up to him dressed only in tiny silken pink panties he was seriously tempted to rip away. Before he could yield to temptation, she touched him, raking her nails delicately across the arch of his chest. He inhaled sharply as she swirled her fingers through the wiry curls covering his chest, then traced the muscled ridges of his rib cage.

Closing his eyes, Baran let his head drop back, savoring the sensation. Then she stepped closer until the head of his erection nudged her flat stomach, and his eyes popped open again. Her breasts were temptingly close to his eager hands. He managed not to reach for them, wanting, needing, to see what she'd do next.



She bent forward as her hands moved to curve around his hips. Slowly, delicately, she pressed a kiss to the center of his chest, right over his heart. The heat of that delicate touch seemed to spear through him. He gasped.

Jane made a purring sound and began kissing her way to one tight male nipple. He shuddered as her hot, swirling tongue danced over his skin.

Then long fingers closed gently around his balls, and his body jerked. She stroked. He moaned. She raked her teeth softly down the ridges of his ribs, stopping only to flick his skin with her tongue. He resisted the impulse to grab her, knowing where that soft, teasing mouth was headed, inch by delicious, maddening inch.

Then she was there, her soft little hand wrapped around his shaft, holding the head of his throbbing cock steady for her mouth.

She used just her tongue to first, swirling it over the velvet flesh until he had to battle the need to force his entire greedy length between her lips. The battle grew fiercer as she gave him more by slow degrees, sucking the very tip first, then a fraction more, then a fraction more.

“God, Jane, you’re playing with fire!” he groaned as she nibbled delicately.

He felt her smile around his cockhead. “I know.”

Suddenly she swooped her head forward and engulfed half his straining shaft, ripping a started gasp from him. Shuddering, he wondered how much of this he could take.

God, it was intoxicating, playing with him like this, taking the lead for once, feeling the tension in his big, male body as she toyed with him.

Jane worked him in deeper and felt him quiver. Savoring the taste and feel of his broad cock, she decided it was like teasing a tiger.

Sooner or later, you’d get eaten.

The thought sent wicked heat blooming through her as she remembered just what it was like to be at the mercy of this particular big cat. Smiling, she drew her mouth completely off his cock to swirl her tongue lazily over its velvet head.

Sometimes it was fun to live dangerously.

“God, Jane, deeper!” The low male growl held a faint note of threat.

She smiled and gave him a teasing lick. A powerful hand came to rest in her hair, capturing a handful of curls in silent warning.



“Jane ...” The growl was deeper now, rumbling as if his control was straining to the breaking point.

She nibbled, feeling herself cream. Finally drawing back, she purred, “Is there something you want?”

The sound he made was closer to a snarl than anything else. Big hands closed around her shoulders, jerked her off the floor, and tossed her lightly on the bed behind her.

Jane shrieked out a giggle as he loomed over her, grabbed the waistband of her little pink panties in both hands, and ripped the silk in two. Without pausing, he snatched her up so only her head and shoulders rested on the bed as he braced a knee on the mattress.

Then it was her turn to gasp as his massive shaft speared between her swollen, cream-slicked lips. He lifted her into his thrust as if she were a doll, nothing more than stuffing and air. Yelping at the depth of his entry, she fisted the bedspread in both hands and held on for dear life.

Standing beside the bed, he held her thighs draped over his powerful forearms as he cradled her butt, pulling her body into an arch while he fucked her in long, deep strokes.

Wide-eyed, she looked up at him from the mattress and writhed with every delicious entry. He felt so damn big, so damn merciless as he took her. And he looked so triumphantly feral as he stared down at her, his eyes blazing red fire, a dark smile on his handsome mouth.

Just the sight of him made her hot. She twisted as he impaled her. “God, Baran, you’re so deep!”

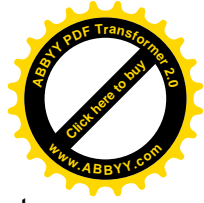
“That’s what you get for cockteasing a Warlord,” he said with a low, wicked laugh.

The orgasm caught her by surprise, swamping her in heat so intense, it dragged a scream from her throat.

He came a heartbeat later, hauling her against his hips as he spilled himself into her, roaring.

Much later they shared cartons of Chinese in the living room, watching television and feeding Freika bites of sweet and sour chicken. Jane’s scanner sat crackling on top of the set, but though they looked up every time the dispatcher’s voice came on, the police did not get called out on another murder.

Later, Jane carried the scanner into the bedroom with them and set it up beside the bed. She fell asleep to its constant chatter, curled in the warm, muscular shelter of Baran’s big body.



She jerked awake from a blood-drenched, confused dream when she felt him jolt against her. “No!” he groaned in her ear. “No ...”

Blinking, Jane looked over her shoulder at him. She could see nothing but his broad silhouette against the moonlit window behind him. “Baran?”

“Get away from me!” he roared, bolting upright in bed, one powerful fist drawn back, ready to take somebody’s head off.

She rolled over quickly and started to grab his shoulders, then thought better of it and turned on the bedside lamp instead. “Baran, you’re dreaming!”

He glared at her, fear and rage on his face. She knew from the look in his eyes he didn’t recognize her.

“Baran, it’s me,” she said carefully, clearly. “Jane. You’re all right. You were just dreaming.”

Slowly recognition flooded his eyes, followed by chagrin. He slumped and raked a big hand through his tangled mane. “Jane. I’m sorry, I just...”

“Must have been a pretty bad nightmare,” Jane observed carefully, taking in the faint quiver in his hands. What could have been bad enough to make Baran Arvid shake?

He swallowed. “Yeah, you could say that.”

“Want to talk about it?”

“No.” He lay down again and turned his back.

Jane eyed its muscled width and frowned, then turned off the lamp and curled into a ball, back to back with him. For a long moment she listened to him breathe in the soft darkness.

Then abruptly he turned over, encircled her waist with a massive arm, and hauled her tight into the spooning curve of his body. She tensed, waiting for another of his delicious sensual assaults.

Instead he sighed in her ear, settled her more fully against him, and relaxed. Something about the way he did it reminded Jane of a small boy cuddling a teddy bear—an incongruous association to make in connection to a man who could bench-press a Buick.

Almost as incongruous as the wave of tenderness she felt.

She settled against the warm width of his body as his breathing deepened and the scanner crackled and droned. It wasn’t long before she joined him in sleep.



After the terrorized pace of the previous day, Sunday was almost ridiculously quiet. Jane carried her scanner and cell phone around the house with her, but there were no calls on either.

“Wonder if the creep’s taking the day off?” she said to Baran as she fixed lunch for them and their furry companions.

“Maybe,” he said grimly, watching Octopussy lunge headfirst into a bowl of tuna. “Or maybe they just haven’t found the bodies yet.”

Jane gave him a sour look. “You’re such a cheery soul, you know that?” She took a ferocious bite of her ham sandwich and stalked into her office to call the Highway Patrol about the previous day’s fatal accident. She spent the rest of Sunday harassing Tom and writing copy, in between listening to the scanner and waiting for the other shoe to drop.

But it didn’t.

Normally, she’d have been relieved, but unfortunately she knew a little too much about the way Druas operated.

What was the bastard planning now?

Jane opened the door on blackness. Her heart gave a single hard thump, and she fumbled quickly for the light switch. Harsh white illumination flooded the attic, but still she hesitated.

“Jane?” Baran asked behind her, sounding puzzled. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” She swallowed and stepped onto the rough plywood floor, picking her way past boxes of Christmas ornaments and the thick white box that held her artificial tree.

Off in one corner, isolated from the Rubbermaid tubs of winter clothing, stood a pile of cardboard boxes.

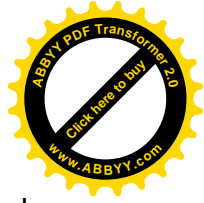
Somewhere in one of those boxes was her father’s gun, Jane told herself. And it was past time she got it out. They might need it. After all, they had a living killer to worry about. That should outweigh the lingering presence of a dead one.

She forced her feet to carry her closer to the stack. Looking down at them, she felt her stomach clench.

Coward, her father’s voice whispered in her mind.

Jane took a deep breath and knelt, aware of Baran’s puzzled gaze as he stood watching.

“You’re afraid,” he said suddenly. “Your heart is pounding. What’s got you so frightened?”



She swallowed past the stale taste in her mouth. “Memories.” She reached out and grabbed a box at random, popped apart the folded cardboard flaps to open it. Looked inside.

Notebooks. Piles and piles of old reporter’s notebooks, jumbled together with ancient floppy disks. She picked one up at random. Her father’s spidery scrawl sprawled over the pad’s narrow cardboard cover: “County Council, January 30, 1986.” Notes from an old meeting.

“Reporters aren’t supposed to keep these,” she told Baran, tossing the notebook back in the box, feeling subtly contaminated. “If you get sued, they subpoena them.”

“I didn’t know that.” There was compassion in his voice.

Jane reached for another box, opening it as she began to talk, trying to drown out the voice of her fear. “I really should have thrown all this stuff away, but I kept hoping I might find answers here sometime.” She pried the flaps apart. “When I could stand to look.”

“What answers are you looking for?” Baran asked, moving to kneel beside her.

She didn’t even hear the question. The box was filled with neat stacks of her father’s clothing. And on the very top lay a leather belt.

Jane felt the blood drain from her face. She could remember the slap that belt made, the bite of the metal cutting into her skin. “He used to wrap the leather end around his fist and hit me with the buckle.”

“What?” Baran sounded startled.

Her stomach churned at the memory. When she’d cried, he’d beat her even harder. If she dared look as if she disapproved of anything he did or said, that bought another beating. He had taught her a perfect doll-like poker face, complete with plastic smile.

And somewhere in these piles of boxes was his gun. The gun he had probably used to murder her mother.

She jumped to her feet and ran from the attic.

“Jane?” Baran said, startled. She didn’t stop.

“I thought we were going to look for that gun.” He descended the attic stairs, sounding puzzled.

She found she couldn’t look at him. “There’s really no point. You said he was bulletproof anyway.”



“Yes,” he said slowly. “I did.”

Dogged by a nagging sense of shame at her own cowardice, Jane settled in front of the television to brood. Baran joined her, shooting a look at Freika.

The wolf turned and silently trotted out.

A moment later they heard crashing overlaid by an offended feline yowl. “Here, kitty kitty kitty!” Frieka called, sounding remarkably like Jack Nicholson playing a psychotic.

“Leave her alone, Cujo!” Jane roared, leaping from the couch. She shot Baran a fulminating look. “Dammit, help me get him before he turns my cat into Octopussy plate.”

She plunged from the room at a dead run, never even noticing the Warlord’s satisfied smile.

Panting, her body still quivering with the aftermath of a savage orgasm, Jane slowly came to the realization that her hand was planted squarely in the middle of a slice of pepperoni pizza. Luckily, it had cooled. Baran had bent her over the kitchen table about five minutes after the delivery boy left.

“The thrill is gone,” she wheezed as he slowly withdrew his softened shaft from the swollen grip of her sex. “You only fucked my brains out once today.”

“The night is young,” he said, leaning down to nip her ear. “There’s still time to get in my quota.”

She whimpered softly.

Baran grinned. “At least you’re not brooding anymore.”

On the table, the scanner crackedled.

The Tayanita Tribune offices were housed in a former National Guard armory building Jane’s father had built and renovated years before. The staff worked in the warren of postage-stamp-sized offices, while the big three-color press reigned over what had once been the main hall.

Most of the employees had at least ten years with the paper, hired in the days when Jane’s father had run the operation like a combination good old boy and despot. Most of them had known Jane since before she was even tall enough to see over his desk.

So when she walked in with Baran Arvid and his wolf in tow, all three of them became the instant center of attention. And it wasn’t approving.





Jane took Baran around and conducted the introductions anyway, ignoring the speculative glances he collected.

“I thought you said we couldn’t afford a photographer,” said Jeff Low, director of the paper’s three-man advertising team.

Baran, expressionless behind his Ray-Bans, said hi a cold, deadpan tone, “I work cheap.”

“You bring your dog to work?” Lillian Russell asked him later, eyeing Freika dubiously.

“He gets lonely by himself,” Jane said hastily, half afraid the wolf would tell the obituary clerk he, too, worked cheap.

“What is he, some kind of faggot?” one of the pressmen demanded of another, sotto voce, as Jane showed Baran the press. “No straight guy wears beads in his hair.”

She winced, and was deeply relieved when she, Baran, and the wolf finally escaped back to her office and closed the door.

“Well, that went every bit as badly as I thought,” she said, pulling a floppy disk out of her purse and booting her Mac. Pulling the scanner out next, she plugged it into its wall charger.

“Your employees are stupid,” Freika informed her over the pop and crackle. “Two of them called me a dog! Do I look like a dog?”

“No, you look like a loudmouthed timber wolf.” She turned up the scanner, hoping to confuse any eavesdroppers who might wonder who was talking. “Hold it down, Rin Tin Tin. We’ve started enough rumors as it is.”

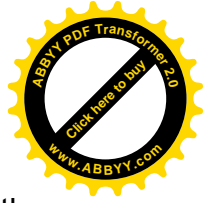
“Why is everyone so interested in my hair and sexual preferences?” Baran settled into one of the chairs Jane reserved for interviewees.

She sighed. “It’s a Southern thing. You wouldn’t understand.”

Visitors from the future or no visitors from the future, she had a paper to get out.

Jane went to work pulling stories up and positioning them on each page of layout, flicking periodic glances from her computer viewscreen to the clock on the wall. The paper needed to be in the mailboxes of Tayanita County before everybody got home from work and started flooding the office with irate phone calls. Fortunately, she’d already done most of the interior pages on Friday, so all she had to worry about were the obits and ensuring the breaking news fit on the front and the jump page.

She was toying with the placement of the photo Baran had taken of the firefighters clustered around the woman’s mangled car when there was a tap on the door. It opened a



crack, and Billi Weaver stuck her bleached-blond head in. “Jane, may I have a word with you? Privately?”

Despite the formal tone, there was a gleam in her best friend’s eye that made Jane’s lips curl in a reluctant smile. She knew what was coming—and it would be just as well if Baran didn’t hear it. She glanced at him. “Excuse us a minute.”

He shot Freika a look. When Jane got up to walk out, her furry bodyguard trailed silently after her.

“Ooooh, what a beautiful... animal.” In the hall Billi dropped to her knees and started to reach out to pet the wolf. Hesitating, she lifted a brow at Jane. “Does he eat reporters?”

“Not so far.”

“Good. You’re a doll baby, you know that?” A seasoned canine-lover, Billi knew just the spot behind Freika’s ear to attack with her manicured nails until the wolf leaned into her hand with a low whine of pleasure. Her busy fingers slowed as she discovered the jeweled implants in his skin. “What an unusual collar.”

Jane winced and spoke quickly, hoping to divert her attention before she realized the gems were sunk directly into Freika’s skin. “I know what you’re going to say, and no, Baran is not gay.”

Billi looked up at her and stood, attention successfully diverted. “Honey, it never even crossed my mind. I see the way he looks at you. Where did you find him, anyway? And are there any more left?”

Jane shifted her feet. She hated lying to Billi, both on general principals and because she was so rotten at it. “Atlanta. I worked with him at the Times”

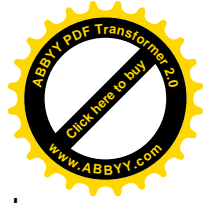
“You never mentioned him.” Billi studied her, blue eyes sharp in her angular face. They’d been friends since grade school, and they’d hashed through every crisis in their respective lives for the past twenty-two years. Jane wished suddenly, violently, she could talk to her about this one. “And you really, really should have. Honey, he looks at you like you’re a bowl of homemade peach ice cream and he wishes he had a spoon.” She lifted a blond brow. “Does he have a spoon?”

Jane flicked a glance down at Freika, who stared up at her blandly. “Yeah,” she admitted.

The wicked gleam intensified. “Are we talking demi-tasse or soup spoon here?”

She couldn’t help it. She grinned. “We’re talking ladle.”

Billi’s eyes widened. “Do you mind if I lick the spoon?”



Jane laughed. “One, the implications of that are kind of disgusting, and two don’t you think George would object?”

“We have an open marriage.”

“You do not.”

“Okay, we don’t, but I’m also not dead. And you’ve got this whole cat-in-a-cream-bowl smile when you look at the guy that’s driving me insane with curiosity.”

She grinned. “Suffer.”

“Bitch. Okay, I’ve got to ask—does he know what to do with his spoon?”

Jane thought back over the weekend. “Oh, yeah.”

“There it is again—that cat smile. So, as far as culinary skills, are we talking the guy at Bill’s Stop N’ Chow, or are we talking Emeril?”

Jane laughed.

“Damn!” Billi gave a mock shiver. “That’s what I thought.”

After listening to her friend segue into a complaint about her teenage son, Jane returned to her desk.

As she slipped past Baran, he purred in a deep velvet voice, “The best thing about cooking is eating.”

Jane’s eyes widened as color flooded her cheekbones. She stared at him, feeling her jaw drop.

“If you’ll close the door,” he continued wickedly, “I’d be delighted to whip something up.”

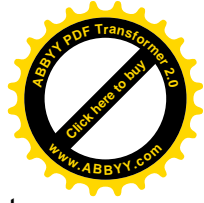
“Newspaper,” she squeaked. “I’ve got to get out the newspaper.”

Baran chuckled in a sensual rumble that made feminine things quiver low in her belly. “Ah, well. Maybe when you break for... lunch.”

“Warlords,” Freika observed, curling up by the desk, “have really good hearing.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Jane said weakly.

It took her another ten minutes to get her mind back on the layout, but finally she sent the last page off through the system for output as a negative that would then be used to burn a flexible metal printing plate.



Jane was about to massage her temples in a vain effort to relieve her habitual post-deadline headache when the phone rang. She reached for it absently. “Jane Colby, Tayanita Tribune”

A male voice said over a loud crackle she at first took for a bad connection, “Better get to 604 Parris Street, Janey. She’s starting to brown.”

And Jane recognized the crackle. It wasn’t static. It was fire.

In the background a woman screamed.

Jane banged the phone down and ran for the door, Freika and Baran lunging after her. They didn’t even ask for explanations; they must have overheard the conversation.

As the three sprinted into the parking lot, she reached into her purse, grabbed her cell, and dialed 911. “There’s a fire at 604 Parris Street. A woman’s trapped, and the guy who murdered those girls is inside with her.”

“What?” the startled dispatcher demanded. “Ma’am, slow down! What are you talking about? Who are you?”

“Jane Colby. The killer called me again. He’s set fire to a woman’s house, and she’s trapped in there with him. Send fire trucks and police to 604 Parris Street!” Jane hit

End as she unlocked the SUV with her key fob. The three of them piled in. A moment later, she was burning rubber down Main Street.

She just hoped this encounter with Druas ended better than the last.

Fire flooded Baran’s mind as his computer pumped the synthetic hormones of riatt into his body until his muscles jumped and coiled under his skin. He knew the feeling from a thousand battles, but with it came an emotion that was new: a cold, sick doubt.

Was he going to fail this woman, too?

Never mind that succeeding when he wasn’t supposed to could theoretically cause the universe-destroying apocalypse. If he failed, she died. And for Warlords, failure was simply not acceptable.

Even less acceptable was the idea of failing Jane.

He glanced at her as she drove. Her delicate profile was set and grim, her hands white-knuckled on the steering wheel. He remembered the pleading eyes of the woman who’d died in his arms. The fear of seeing Jane look at him with that same terrorized despair made his gut clench into a fist.



He had to kill the bastard.

“There’s the smoke,” Jane told him. There was fear in her eyes, but something told him it wasn’t for the woman they’d come to save, or even for herself.

It was for him.

That realization sent another sensation rolling through him—not fear or even anger, but warm pleasure that she cared.

And that, he knew, wasn’t good. A warrior could not afford to feel too much, care too much. That kind of emotion could cloud thought, make you prone to fatal mistakes. Shut it down, he thought.

Besides, it wasn’t as though they had a future. He thrust the thought aside.

The SUV rounded a corner. His eyes locked on a small wooden house off to the right, surrounded in a cloud of smoke pouring from under the eaves. The heat had not yet shattered the windows; he could see the leap of flames through the glass.

Baran unbuckled his seat belt and threw the door open before she’d even brought the truck to a halt. He didn’t allow himself to look back.

Is the Xeran inside? he demanded of his computer.

Yes. Along with a human. Sensors indicate she has been injured. Fire burning at multiple locations, indicating arson.

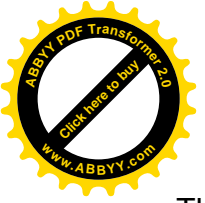
Guide me to them.

Baran was halfway across the yard before Jane got the truck parked, running with that inhuman speed she knew meant he was in riatt. As she watched, he jerked the screen door open and found the front door locked. Without hesitating, he kicked it in so hard she heard the wood crack from the curb. Smoke billowed out in gray, choking waves.

“Dammit, he needs an air pack and protective gear!” She’d worked fires long enough to know how deadly smoke and heat could be for an unprotected human, genetically enhanced or not.

“Well, he doesn’t have them,” Freika said as she flung open the driver’s door and leaped out. He loped after her as she ran across the yard. “And where the hell are you going? We’ve been through this. You can’t go in there. He doesn’t need the distraction.”

Maybe not, but she was damned if she’d let him go into a burning house after that psychopath by himself. With no gear, if Druas didn’t get him, smoke inhalation would. Jane put down her head and ran harder.



The next instant something massive hit her back, sending her flying. The world tilted as she plowed into the grass in an impact that drove the air from her lungs.

“Sorry,” Freika said grimly, settling his considerable weight on her back, “but you’re not going anywhere.”

All she could do was fight for enough air to curse the wolf.

Though it was daylight, the inside of the house was pitch black and flooded with choking clouds of smoke. Baran couldn’t see a damn thing, but his computer painted a sensor image behind his eyes, picking out the shapes of furniture and walls and the glowing heat signature of the flames Druas had set as a blazing obstacle course.

He looked around. Just beyond the next wall, his sensors showed a pair of glowing blue images: a male silhouette standing over a female shape curled on the floor. Druas and the hostage, both in the kitchen, surrounded by a ring of flame.

Baran knew he had less than a minute to get the woman out. The heat would sear his lungs as thoroughly as it would hers, killing them quicker than even the smoke inhalation could.

Took you long enough, Druas commed to him as he leaped a flaming coffee table. Evidently the killer had sensors of his own. / was getting bored. And she’s getting crispy.

As if to punctuate his taunt, a female scream ripped through the air, ringing over the roaring crackle of the blaze.

Baran swore silently. His sensors told him the bastard was wearing combat armor, a helmet and a breathing unit. With that kind of equipment, Druas could swim in molten lava without breaking a sweat. The Jumpkiller could easily trap Baran in the house until the heat finished him off.

That wasn’t a game Baran had any intention of playing. He had to snatch the woman up and get out, even if he had to punch his way through a wall. They didn’t have time for anything else, not even the seconds it would take to disable Druas’s suit with the ring.

What, no pithy reply? No chilling threats?

The kitchen doorway was blocked by flame. Baran dived through it, feeling the heat singe his skin. Without breaking step, he lunged for the woman on the floor. At least lying down there, the air was cooler. Maybe she would sur...

Druas caught him with a vicious kick to the jaw that slammed him into the wall behind him. The entire house shook with the impact.



Somehow he managed to hit the floor on his feet, despite the stars that flooded his vision. So much for taking the bastard off-guard.

Not that easy, Warlord, Druas mocked. You disappoint me. I've been looking forward to this fight.

You want a fight, come outside and face me, Baran commed back. Without the T-suit and the armor—and without a woman as a shield. He snapped into a spinning kick that could have taken the bastard's head off even with his helmet, but Druas somehow jerked aside at the last minute.

But the move had done what Baran intended—created an opening. He swooped down and snatched the woman, then wheeled toward the back door.

You do know Liisa was my first kill? Druas stepped through the smoke to block him, shooting a fist toward his head.

Only training let him duck in time, the woman still cradled in his arms. He didn't dignify the Jumpkiller's ridiculous lie with an answer.

I loved the way she squealed for me. And she was so tight... Despite the smoke, Baran could almost hear the sneering grin on his face. None of the others have been as good. But Jane... Jane has possibilities.

Kakshit! Baran commed, goaded into a reply. You weren't there. You only heard the stories. Even in the deep, hot well of his rage, he felt the woman stir and moan. He had to get her out before the heat killed her. The back door...

Perhaps. Everybody knows why the Death Lord kills.

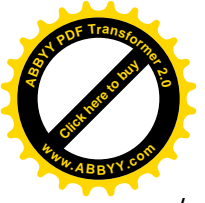
He ignored the mocking words and turned. The heat burned his lungs with every inhalation. He'd have to kill the bastard later.

But do they know what Gelar did to you just before you killed him and escaped?

Baran froze. Unable to help himself, he looked back at his enemy, at the cold, blue gleam that was all his sensors could show him in the choking smoke.

They'd paralyzed you with your comp. I was in the next room, finishing Liisa, when I heard him say he wanted your mouth next. Then I heard him scream. Did the fool free you for that one second? Did he... ?

You're lying. Even as he commed the words, he rammed his foot into the door so hard the flimsy wood seemed to explode. If you'd heard, you'd have stopped me. He leaped, carrying the woman out into the blessedly cool air.



/ never liked Gelar.

You weren't there. I'd have seen you. Gritting his teeth, he ran, forcing himself to carry his limp burden to a safe distance from the house. Glancing down at her in the sunlight, he winced at the burns. And I'd have killed you.

Oh, you'd have tried. The commed words slid into his brain like snakes. Which is why I had no desire to run into a Warlord in riatt after I'd just butchered his girlfriend. But I did take a trophy before I left...

As he bent to lay the woman on the cool grass, Baran looked up to see Druas standing in the doorway. Something gleamed dully through the billowing smoke; a thin gold chain wrapped around the killer's gloved fist. A locket dangled from the chain.

Just as Baran realized he recognized that locket, Druas caught it between his thumb and forefinger.

From its center appeared a hologram image of Baran. Not as the man he was, but as the sixteen-year-old boy he'd been when he'd given Liisa the necklace.

With an incoherent roar of rage, Baran rose from the woman and started toward his enemy. If he could just pin the bastard long enough to disable his T-suit, he could take the Xeran apart.

BOOM! Wood splinters flew as the sonic boom from Druas' T-jump blew out the doorframe.

Leaving Baran staring in helpless fury at the spot where his enemy had been. "Fuck," he snarled, just as a man in a bulky gray and yellow suit ran around the corner, Jane and Freika at his heels.

"Fire trucks just got here," she said breathlessly as the suited man dropped to his knees beside the woman.

The man looked up. "Anybody still in the house?"

Baran clenched his fists. "Nobody."

The SUV was filled with the smell of smoke as Jane drove them all home after yet another interrogation. The silence from Baran's side of the truck was so leaden with fury, even Freika seemed subdued.

The woman had been medevaced to a burn unit in Georgia that was the closest facility available to treat such severe injuries. Baran had miraculously escaped any serious burns, though his face and hands were bright red. He'd seemed grateful for the oxygen the fire





fighters had pressed on him, though. He kept coughing, and the lining of his nose was black with soot.

They'd been lucky the first paramedic had been too busy with the woman to notice the hot coal blaze of his eyes. Jane had barely managed to slip him a spare pair of sunglasses before anybody else noticed.

She'd wanted to take him home, but Tom had other ideas. The detective had grilled them mercilessly yet again.

Before he'd let them leave, he'd told them he was ordering a tap on Jane's phones, both at home and at the paper. She didn't dare protest.

Baran had answered the cop's questions in a low, deadly monotone that made Jane nervous. Judging by the way Tom eyed him, she suspected they were lucky they had an entire newspaper office full of people who could alibi the Warlord for the time the fire was set.

Baran hadn't said a word since.

"You want to tell me what the hell's wrong?" Jane said, unable to endure the icy silence any longer.

He shrugged his powerful shoulders. His face could have been chiseled from granite for all the emotion he showed. "I went in, I got the girl out, Druas played his games. There's not much else to tell."

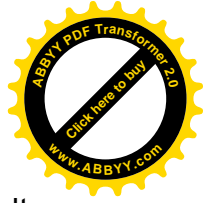
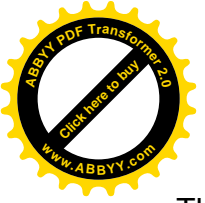
"Yeah, right. That's why I feel as if I'm sitting next to a nuclear bomb, waiting for the explosion. What happened?"

"Nothing I have any intention of discussing with you." The snarl was so low and deadly, Jane felt her courage desert her.

Maybe, just this once, she should leave well enough the hell alone.

Baran had never known who'd murdered Liisa. It wasn't for lack of trying; he'd interrogated every Xeran he'd hunted down for the torture and murder of his team. Even those who'd participated in her rape seemed to have no idea who'd butchered her. He suspected they'd have given the killer up if they had. The Xerans were a vicious lot, but even so, many of them had been disgusted at the sick brutality of her murder.

In retrospect, Baran should have realized Druas was the killer when he'd seen what the Xeran had done to Mary Kelly. Her body had been mutilated the same way as his lover's had been.



The mystery had haunted him for more than two decades. Now it was solved, but he felt no sense of relief, no sense he was close to the revenge he'd thought would bring him peace and lay Liisa's ghost to rest.

Oh, he knew he'd eventually either kill Druas or die in the attempt.

What terrified him was the very real possibility that the Jumpkiller would get to Jane first. And he knew the Xeran had every intention of doing so.

Baran also knew exactly how it felt to be at the mercy of a man like that. Gelar had told him in great detail exactly how he intended to kill him while he was paralyzed and helpless.

He'd never had any interest in having sex with another man. The idea wasn't an anathema to him, but neither did it have any appeal. Yet being raped, having another man take from him what he had no desire to give ...

Baran was a Warlord. He'd been raised to fight, trained to die rather than surrender, taught that failure was never an option. By capturing and torturing him—by raping him—the Xerans had rubbed his face in his failure. And by using his comp, the source of his complete control over his body, they'd stripped away his identity as a Warlord.

And in a way he'd never gotten it back, even though he'd successfully tricked Gelar into freeing him. The fact was, he still hadn't been in time to save the rest of his team. Not even Liisa, who'd believed in him.

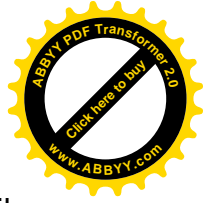
As the years passed, he'd hunted down each and every one of the Xeran murderers he could identify, and he'd killed them—most through challenge and combat, a few by simple execution. Yet no amount of Xeran blood could ever change the fact that he'd failed the team.

Failed the woman he loved.

He'd never allowed himself to be a permanent member of another team again. That was why he'd volunteered to become a military assassin, a job most Warlords considered dishonorable. He'd thought it would allow him to work alone. Instead, the High Command had assigned Freika as his partner. By rights, working with an animal should have been safe, but the wolf had refused to let him keep his distance. Slowly, relentlessly, Freika's intelligence and humor had seduced him into caring again, had broken through his cold emotionless shield.

Yet bright as Freika was, Baran could tell himself the wolf was still only an animal, still as much artificial intelligence as living being.

He couldn't fool himself about Jane.



To make matters worse, she was not only human, she was even more delicate and fragile than Liisa had been. At least Liisa had been a Warfem. Jane was just prey. If Druas got his hands on her, she was dead.

He turned his head to study her as she drove, and was struck again by the clean, delicate lines of her profile. Her full lips seemed to pout slightly, as though begging a kiss. Her breasts rose and fell under her silk blouse as she drove. Looking at them, he thought he could see the gentle contours of her nipples beneath the fabric.

The sudden rise of hunger took him by surprise. He knew it shouldn't have. He'd been in riatt, after all; the downslope from the hyper state was at least part of the reason he was in such a foul mood.

The other part was his fear that he'd fail her. As he'd failed Liisa and his team and all the women Druas had murdered.

It would have been so much easier if she'd been what she was supposed to be: just another human female. Someone to protect and fuck, but without the ability to touch him on any level other than the physical.

Jane was so much more than that. She was as bright and fiery as she was beautiful. What was worse, she was also maddeningly unaware of her own vulnerability. She'd seen what Druas could do, yet she kept insisting on taking a role in the hunt, even if it meant putting herself in harm's way.

And she'd made him care about her as he'd been careful not to care about anyone else in decades.

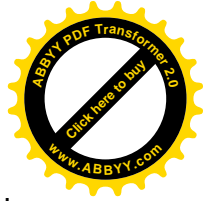
It was all going to end in pain. Even if he did succeed in protecting her, he was going to have to leave, and he'd never see her again. Never even have the possibility of seeing her again; she'd be centuries dead the minute he got back to his own time.

The thought sent a shaft of grief shooting through him. Damn her anyway. She was going to make him suffer for the rest of his life. How had she done this to him? He hadn't even known her that long.

Eyes fixed on her face in a dark combination of hunger and angry despair, he watched her turn the wheel to send the SUV into the driveway of her house. His eyes drifted down to the rise of her breasts again. A hot, angry lust rose.

If he had to suffer, he was damn well going to enjoy himself in the meantime.

Jane turned the key and sat slumped as the SUV's engine growled into silence. She shot a look at Baran. He smelled of smoke, and his face was soot-streaked and red from the radiant heat burn. That ticking-bomb feeling she had about him had not gone away.



She knew why when he reached up and pulled off his sunglasses. His pupils blazed in that particular way she'd come to recognize as a combination of lust and rage. Perversely, she felt her body tighten.

Oh, that's sick, she thought, and jerked the door handle of the SUV. The man wants to give me another dominance fuck, and instead of being pissed, I get turned on. Aloud she said, "Forget it," and thrust the door open.

"Forget what?" Baran said in that low, hot voice he used whenever lust was simmering just under the surface.

She swung out of the truck and strode for the front door. He opened the passenger door and followed, Freika at his heels.

"You're not pinning me against the wall and screwing me because you're in a bad mood." She dug the keys from her purse and reached to unlock the door.

Before she could swing it open, he stepped up behind her and lowered his head. His teeth closed over the lobe of her ear in a gentle erotic bite that made her knees weaken. "Why not?" he breathed, and cupped her breasts in big hands. Long fingers found and squeezed her nipples through the satin of her bra. "You like it when I pin you against the wall. When I pull down your pants. When I start working my cock into your tight little cunt an inch at a—"

"Now you're being a bastard," she managed, the keys rattling desperately as she struggled to get the door open before he seduced her on the front steps in front of half of Tayanita. Though that would probably put the whole gay rumor to rest, she thought wildly.

The key finally slid in and turned, and she shoved the door open. Freika slipped past her, blocking her path for an instant as he scooted inside.

That instant was all Baran needed. He bent smoothly, hooked an arm under her thighs, and scooped her neatly off her feet. "But, Jane," he said, carrying her inside without missing a beat, "I thought you knew—I am a bastard."

At her height Jane had never had a man pick her up and carry her. Baran did it as easily as if she weighed no more than Octopussy. Perversely, she found the sense of helplessness arousing.

And that pissed her off. She squirmed. "Put me down, dammit!"

He looked down at her with a slow, dark smile. "No."

She glared into his eyes. Her nipples were hardening, and that made her even madder. "Are you going to rape me, you son of a bitch?"



Stepping into the living room, he spilled her back onto her feet. "Would you like me to?"

"Asshole!"

"I think we just covered that," he said, stepping in closer as she backed away until he crowded her against the wall. She would have ducked aside, but he extended both brawny arms to cage her between them. The sense of being surrounded by heat and masculinity was dizzying.

His voice dropped. "I also think you know me well enough to know I wouldn't force you to do anything you don't want to do." He met her eyes, his gaze steady. "Are you really telling me no?"

She looked up into those glowing eyes and felt a quiver roll across her skin. "No."

His face shuttered. He pulled away.

Jane reached out and cupped his face in both hands. "No, I mean—no, I'm not refusing you." Slowly she rose on her toes and pressed a kiss to his lips.

When she drew back, a hot white smile spread across his face, and the glow in his eyes leaped into a blaze. "Good."

Before she could pull her hands away, his hands flashed up and wrapped around her wrists. He stepped fully against her body, pinning her to the wall as he lifted her arms over her head, around a curving light fixture that thrust out from the wall above her. Trapping both her hands in one of his, he reached into his pocket and pulled out the gold cable.

She gasped out a laugh as he bound her wrists to the fixture. "Do you carry that for a reason other than tying me up?"

His mouth flattened, and something deadly leaped behind his eyes. "Yes."

"Oh." Wide-eyed, she decided she wasn't going to ask him to elaborate.

He gathered the hem of her knit shirt in both big hands and jerked it up over her head and behind her neck, leaving her torso bare but her arms still in the sleeves. Deftly he reached between her breasts and opened the front catch of her bra. Her breasts spilled free into the cool air and the heat of his gaze.

She blinked at him. She could feel herself getting wet.

He reached down to unbutton her jeans, then caught the tab of her zipper. The hiss of its descent sounded loud against the counterpoint of their rough breathing. Dropping to his knees, he caught the waistband and began to pull it down over her hips, taking her panties



with it. The legs of her jeans were just wide enough that he was able to drag them off without removing her boots.

He threw them aside. Jane looked down at him, twisting her bound hands together, feeling the cool air on her nipples. She'd never felt so deliriously, erotically helpless.

Sitting back on his heels, he was eye level with her sex. He inhaled once, sharply. "God, you're wet." He licked his lips. "I can smell it."

Swallowing, she set her feet a bit farther apart in silent invitation. He took it, reaching between her thighs, touching the soft nest of hair. A long, thick forefinger brushed the tender seam of her lips, slipped between. Inside.

She moaned and let her head fall back against the wall at the delicious sensation.

"I was right." His voice was rough, deep. "Wet."

Slowly, gently, he pumped his finger in and out of Jane's tight entrance. His thumb found the erect nub of her clit, stroked delicately. She whimpered. He drew out his finger, added a second, screwed them deep inside.

"God, Baran," she moaned, arching her back against the wall. The plaster felt cool and smooth against her bare back. "You make me so hot."

"Just wait." He leaned forward. She inhaled sharply as his breath gusted warmly over her wet sex.

His tongue slid across creamy flesh as a third finger joined the ones delving deep inside her. "Baran!" Her body pulled into a hard arch over his head. He reached up a hand and cupped one full, shivering breast.

Barely aware of what she did, she lifted a leg and hooked it over his brawny shoulder, spreading herself more thoroughly for him. He gave her exactly what she wanted, fingering, stroking, licking, thumb and forefinger working her desperately hard nipple until her heart thundered in her ears and the heat coiled tighter and tighter and ...

She screamed, coming in long, endless waves, drowning in fire.

The silken pulses hadn't even begun to fade when he growled, dragged her leg off his shoulder, and rose to his feet with the speed of a man in rut. She heard the hiss of his zipper. Then he grabbed her thighs, spread her wide, and stepped between.

"Baran!" she gasped.

He impaled her. It seemed he drove his entire massive length all the way to her belly button in one stroke. She yelped and grabbed the light fixture over her head.



“Now,” he said against her mouth, buried in her to the balls. “Let’s find out how fast I can make you come again.”

He drew out of her slowly, then plunged back in again. Jane could feel his massive shaft stroking its way up her core. She shuddered and gasped, wrapping both hands around the light fixture.

He pressed against her, all heat and working muscle as he rolled his hips, pulling out, plunging in, fucking her mercilessly. “That’s it,” he said, tightening his grip on her butt and angling her so he could reach even deeper with his long, hard cock. “Let it go. Surrender to me.”

He picked up speed, bucking his shaft in and out in powerful, dizzying strokes. She could only wrap her calves around his muscled ass and hold on for dear life as pleasure battered her like a storm.

“God, you feel so good,” Baran gritted. “So wet, so tight.” His voice lifted into a roar. “I’m coming!”

He shoved deep and stiffened. She screamed as the long, hot orgasm she’d begun under his mouth trip-hammered to an explosive finish. “God, Baran,” Jane cried, “I love you!”

It was minutes later as they rested against each other in the exhausted aftermath that she realized what she’d said.

Baran was trying to remember if anyone had ever said the words to him before. He finally decided they hadn’t, which might explain why such a simple sentence held such dizzying power for him now.

As a child, he’d been raised in the Warrior’s Creche by paid caretakers who stayed only a few years before leaving. They had too many children to oversee to get emotionally involved with any of them. His relationships with the other cadets had been no warmer; the Creche was an environment where competition was as ruthlessly encouraged as discipline and achievement. Open affection was nowhere in the curriculum.

Baran’s emotional horizons had expanded when he’d joined the team. With only five members, his unit had bonded with the kind of desperate intensity combat can foster. Then he and Liisa had become sex partners, and he’d fallen for her as only a sixteen-year-old can. Yet he’d never told her he loved her. Somehow it wasn’t the kind of thing one warrior told another.

The closest he’d been able to come to admitting his feelings was giving her the necklace. In turn, Liisa had presented him with a locket embedded with her trid, then added one of them to her own. For both of them, it had been a silent declaration of love. It was the best they could manage.



After she'd died—after they'd all died—Baran had been left feeling that a hole had been scooped out of his chest. He had sex with women when his Warlord body demanded it, but he never slept with the same woman twice. In the end, he'd become a skilled fucker, but he was coming to realize he'd never been a lover.

Until Jane. Who'd just said she loved him.

Even in the midst of a shattering orgasm, it had felt as though that gasped, "I love you!" had lodged in his soul. He'd almost felt the words expand inside his chest.

Who'd have thought such a simple phrase could hold such majestic power?

He should say something. He knew he should say something, but he had no idea what. Opening his mouth, Baran started to say "I love you" back to her, only to realize he couldn't. The phrase felt too naked, too vulnerable.

Besides, he wasn't sure it was true. Surely it would be worse to say such a thing in error than to fail to say it when it was expected.

And he would be leaving soon. There was a promise implied in "I love you" that he wouldn't be able to keep.

So instead he stood there, breathing hard as he cradled her slim, soft body against him. Like the words she'd given him, she seemed so fragile, so precious.

And she was in so much danger.

Well, that, at least, he could do something about. He had no intention of letting Druas take this woman away from him. He'd kill the bastard first.

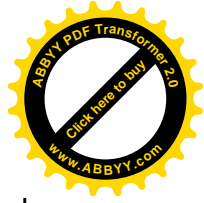
The thought held an odd, serene certainty, as if there was no longer any possibility of failure.

Resting his chin on the top of her head, Baran closed his eyes. And for the first time in his life, let himself just feel. Feel the silken brush of her hair, the soft, sweat-slick skin under his hands, the full breasts pressed into his chest.

For the first time in decades, another human being cared if he lived or died as other than a military asset. The euphoria of that thought was stronger even than the sense of invulnerability riat always gave him.

She stirred against him. It came to Baran suddenly that he reeked of smoke and soot, and she was still tied to the light fixture. Somehow that embarrassed him, as if he'd rewarded a precious gift with boorishness.





“Let me get you down from there,” he said softly, and lifted her so she could pull her linked arms from around the light. When he put her on her feet again, her legs trembled visibly. The sight sent a curious male satisfaction through him.

Never mind that his own muscles were jumping just as hard.

Odd. Normally in the aftermath of a long session in riatt, he wanted only to collapse in a quivering heap. Now he felt energized.

Carefully Baran unwrapped the cable from Jane’s bound wrists, rubbing his thumb over the indentations it had left in her delicate skin. “I’m sorry about that,” he said.

She shrugged.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

“Fine.” Her tone was brusque.

He frowned and silently ordered his computer to do a sensor scan. He’d taken her hard; he knew she’d been ready for him, but had he hurt her anyway?

No, according to the comp’s readings, she was probably a little sore, but that was all. Baran relaxed. Everything was fine.

Caught up on a wave of buoyant pleasure, he bent, swept her into his arms and carried her toward the stairs.

Jane stiffened in his grip. “Wait—what are you doing?”

“I don’t know about you, but I could use a shower,” he said, smiling down at her.

“I don’t... I’m not—not really up to making love again right now,” Jane said. “I’m a little sore.”

“I know.” His smile broadened. He suspected the tenderness he felt showed in his eyes, but for once, he didn’t try to hide it. “Don’t worry, I’m not planning to attack you again. I just thought you’d feel better after a bath.”

And it would give him a chance to pamper her, he decided.

It was the least he could do.

Fifteen minutes later they were soaking in her big garden tub together. After examining her collection of bath oils and bubble baths, Baran had picked one and dumped so much into the water that they were now surrounded in a cloud of foam.



Unlike every other man of Jane's acquaintance, he evidently felt no qualms about smelling like Passion Peach.

Now he sat slowly rubbing a cake of soap over and around each one of her fingers as she lay back against his powerful chest. She'd expected another flaming seduction; instead he gave her such tenderness, she felt her heart swell in her chest.

Too bad all that pretty warmth didn't mean anything.

It was obvious he'd taken her at her word when she'd blurted that she loved him. Any other man would have assumed she'd gotten carried away in the throes of orgasm, particularly given that they'd only known one another three days. Baran evidently believed she'd meant exactly what she'd said.

Worse yet, Jane suspected he was right. Oh, this was just not good. "I don't think we should do this anymore."

Having rinsed off her hand, he'd begun slowly rubbing his soapy palms over her breasts, cupping and squeezing with a breathtaking tenderness. "What, bathe?" He smiled slightly. "Wouldn't we get a little smelly after a while?"

"No. I mean, make love." She swallowed and corrected herself. "Have sex. We shouldn't have sex again."

He went still. "Why not?"

"I just don't think it's a good idea."

"Funny," he said, his tone going so chill that despite the warmth of the water, she shivered. "You seemed to think it was a very good idea when you were screaming that you loved me."

"That's what I'm talking about." Jane started to pull out of his arms and sit up. For a moment his hold tightened until she thought he wasn't going to let her go. Then he slowly released her. She stood, water sluicing around her naked body, and stepped out of the tub.

"We're getting too involved with each other," she said, reaching for one of the towels she'd hung over the rack. "You're going to be leaving after this is over, and—"

"Did you mean it?"

Jane turned to look at him. He lay in the bath surrounded by a cloud of bubbles. Yet somehow, he'd never looked more masculine as the delicate white foam provided an intense contrast to his big, tanned body.



“Mean what?” she asked carefully, though of course she knew.

“Did you mean it when you said you loved me?”

“No.”

His nostrils flared and anger flashed in his eyes. “You shouldn’t lie to a man with sensor implants. It’s a waste of time.”

“Baran, it’s only been three days.” She wrapped the towel around her body, using the process of tucking it in as an excuse to look away from him. “Nobody falls in love in three days. What I’m feeling—I don’t even know if it’s real. And you haven’t—” She broke off.

“What?”

Jane swallowed. “You haven’t said you loved me.”

He closed his eyes and leaned his head back against the tile.

“And why should you?” she added hastily. “It’s only been three—”

“Nobody has ever said they loved me.” He didn’t open his eyes as he spoke. “Ever.”

That stopped her. She fought to regroup. “Liisa ...”

“... Never said the words. Our culture doesn’t exactly encourage romantic attachments. Especially not in the middle of a war. It’s bad luck. If the woman you love is in danger, you’re going to be thinking about her instead of the mission and the safety of the unit as a whole.” He smiled, but the expression held no humor. “In fact, my lieutenant lectured me on that topic more than once.”

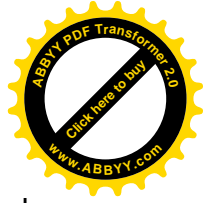
“Oh.” She blinked rapidly. “Your mother and father ...”

“Mother,” he corrected. “A Femmat genetic designer who constructed my DNA and grew me in a uterine vat with ten other fetuses. I’ve never even met the woman. Well, once. She came to my graduation from the Creche when I was twelve, but somebody had to point her out to me. I got to shake her hand.”

Jane winced. She realized that despite his cool tone, his bland expression, she had somehow managed to find the one spot of vulnerability he had. “Baran,” she said softly, miserably, “you’re going to leave.”

“Yes.” He looked at her steadily. “I can’t stay. The chance of a paradox—”

“I know. But every time we touch, what I feel gets stronger.”



A silence spun between them, so intense the faint foaming pop of the bubbles sounded loud. “So you’re saying if we don’t have sex again, you’ll be able to stop loving me.”

“No, it’s not going to be that damn simple.” Looking into those rich brown eyes, Jane realized she had to be honest. Somehow he needed it, and she needed to say the words to him. “I’ve had lovers before, been in love before, but this is different. You’re different. I don’t know if it’s because you’re ... what you are, but this is so damn intense. It scares the hell out of me.”

“It scares me, too.”

She blinked at the revelation, then fumbled to go on. “I’ve been telling myself this relationship is just the equivalent of a shipboard fling—that we’ve bonded so fast and so intensely because of the danger we’re in.”

“I’ve been in danger before,” Baran told her. “I’ve protected women before. It was never like this.”

“So ...” She took a deep breath, gathered her courage, and asked, “You do feel it. Are you in love with me?”

He rose from the bath in a sudden rush of restless power. Water sluiced down his hard contours, trails of bubbles sliding along ridges and hollows. She had the sudden, uncomfortable feeling she’d remember the sight of Baran rising from his bath when she was a very old, very lonely woman.

“I feel... something,” he said as she mechanically handed him the towel she’d hung on the rack for him. “It’s different than it was with Liisa. It feels deeper, a little less ... giddy.”

Jane couldn’t help it. She grinned. “Giddy?” Somehow that wasn’t a word she associated with Baran.

He shrugged. “I was a teenage boy.” Flipping the towel over his head, he began to dry his damp mane. She watched the muscles and tendons shift in his round, hard biceps. “My computer says there are biochemical changes in my brain, but I don’t have a baseline to compare....”

“Damn, Baran, you are a romantic.”

He lowered his towel. She could tell from the bewilderment on his face that he had no idea what she meant.

She took pity on him. “In my time, nobody consults a computer to discover if they’re in love.”



“In your time, nobody has computers Implanted in their brains.” He gave his head another brisk rub with the towel and sighed. “Something unusual is happening to me. I’m just not sure what it is.”

Jane felt a little bubble of pleasure expand in her heart. He did love her, whether he realized it or not. Then she squared her shoulders and pushed the delight away. “Which is why I think we should back off. The separation is going to be bad enough as it is. Knowing I’ll never see you again...”

He turned and threw the towel across the room with a sudden, violent flip of his wrist. “That’s why I think we need to seize every moment we have together.” Moving toward her, he took her shoulders in his hands. “Jane, in my profession, I’ve learned life can be snuffed out in an instant. It’s stupid to waste it.”

She gazed up into the pure, strong lines of his face. “Dammit, I know that. I’m a reporter—I’ve seen it. One minute you’re going to the store to buy a loaf of bread, the next minute a train caves in the side of your Toyota, or some asshole shoots you from his car just for the hell of it. But you have to live as though that’s not going to happen, or you’ll drive yourself nuts.” She sighed. “And frankly, I’m going to be in some serious fucking pain when you leave. I don’t want it to be worse.”

“And I think you’ll end up regretting the chances you lost,” Baran said, lifting his square chin at her. “I don’t intend to allow that.”

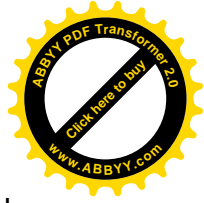
“So you’ll... what?” Her heart began to pound. He smiled slowly, darkly. “Seduce you every chance I get-Jane swallowed. “That’s what I thought you’d say.”

For the next three days Druas made himself scarce. Once again, Jane found herself carrying around her scanner and cell phone, waiting for the next call that would mean somebody was dying.

Meanwhile, the tension grew thick enough to cut. Tom Reynolds carried through on his promise to install taps on her phones. Jane signed the paperwork giving her permission, inwardly reluctant, but knowing she couldn’t afford to raise his suspicions,

But when so many days passed without a call from Druas, she soon realized they’d been raised anyway. The detective started dropping by the paper and questioning Baran, Jane, and her employees, grilling them over and over on the same details until he managed to get on everybody’s nerves.

“Look,” she finally exploded after he’d asked to speak to her privately in her office for the fourth time. Baran had allowed it only because Freika was curled up under her desk. “It’s not Baran. He didn’t do it. I’ve told you repeatedly, I was with him when the killings occurred, and he did not do them. Do you think I’m lying? Hell, the entire paper staff saw us leave after we got the tip on the fire. Do you think they’re lying?”



Reynolds glanced up from his notebook, his gaze cool and assessing. “Maybe he didn’t do that one.”

“Dru...” Jane barely caught herself before she said the killer’s name. “... The murderer called us. He told us it was happening. We did everything we could do to stop it. Hell, Baran charged into a burning building to save that girl. As she’ll tell you when she regains consciousness.”

The victim was in an induced coma while her body healed from the burns she suffered.

“If she regains consciousness.” Tom scrawled something in his notebook. “She may die.”

Jane dragged her hands through her hair in frustration. “Why would I lie, Tom? Just tell me that. You’ve known me since I was twelve years old. Do you really think I’d protect the kind of monster who’d do these crimes?”

Suddenly the bland cop facade cracked. Tom sat forward in his chair to glare at her. “Dammit, Jane, I don’t want to believe that, but I know you’re hiding something. I can smell it, I can see it in your eyes. And there’s a hell of a lot about this situation that stinks. I don’t like the way Arvid never wants to leave you alone. I don’t like the timing—he appeared the day after the first woman died. I don’t like the fact that he keeps playing hero, but the people he ‘saves’ always die anyway. I don’t like the fact that nobody, not even your best friend, has ever heard you mention this guy, and yet now he’s grafted to your ass. It all stinks, Jane, and you know it!”

“He didn’t kill those people, Tom!”

“Yeah? Well, who has he killed?”

She froze. Under the desk, Freika lifted his head from his paws.

Grim satisfaction gleamed in Tom’s eyes, and he sat back in his chair. “Yeah, you know something.”

“He’s a photographer, Tom. He’s just a photographer.”

“Bullshit. I’ve met a lot of photographers in my line of work, and none of them moved the way he does, had the look in their eyes he’s got—when he deigns to take those fucking sunglasses off so I can see his eyes. He smells like former military to me. Some kind of really nasty former military.”

“He’s not the killer.”

Tom leaned forward and lowered his voice. “Jane, is he threatening you? Is he forcing you to cover for him? I can provide protection....”



She laughed shortly. “No, he’s not threatening me, and I’m not covering for him. I’m telling the truth. He’s not the one who’s doing these things.”

“Well, somebody sure as hell is.”

Her temper snapped. “Yeah, somebody is, Tom. Why don’t you get out of my fucking office and go look for that somebody?”

Reynolds flipped his notebook shut and rose from his chair. His eyes locked on her. “You’ve got all my numbers, Jane. When you get tired of letting women die, give me a call.”

He stalked out of the room and slammed the door behind him.

Jane slumped back in her chair, covering her face with both hands. “Damn. Damn damn damn.”

“Well,” Freika said from beneath the desk, “that did not go well.”

She sighed. “You’ve got a gift for understatement, fur-ball.”

When Jane wasn’t listening to the scanner, trying to get out a newspaper, or fencing with irate police detectives, Baran was teaching her just how thin her willpower was.

His promise to seduce her had not been an idle threat.

She might have been able to resist him if he’d approached her with his usual pose of erotic dominance, but he didn’t make it that easy for her. There was a tenderness now in every touch, every kiss, every whisper. Where before he’d overwhelmed her with sheer, blunt-force sensuality, now he seemed to be saying with each brush of his fingers what he couldn’t put into words: that he loved her.

And God help her, she found it impossible to say no.

Even knowing what it would eventually cost her.

\* \* \*

The way he knew her scared her sometimes, such as the night she finally yielded to the urging of common sense and went back into the attic after her father’s gun.



Baran had simply walked into the room, moved two boxes out of the way, opened a third and reached inside. He'd turned around and handed her the gun. "Sensors" was all he said.

Yet he didn't ask her what it was about that stack of cardboard that terrified her so. She had the feeling that somehow he knew.

Later that same night Jane lay sprawled across the width of the bed, limp and helpless, staring blindly up at a ceiling washed in gold light. Baran had collected every candle in the house and lit them one by one before arranging them around the bedroom and turning out the lights. He'd even turned on her CD player and set it to spill something soft and jazzy into the room. The singer's voice crooned past the snap and crackle of the police scanner as Baran's hair slid like silk over her thighs.

He was feasting on her sex, his tongue swirling lazily. One big hand teased and pinched her nipple, as two fingers of the other stroked slowly in and out of her core. He seemed to savor each creamy lick for its own sake, rather than just engaging in foreplay to get her hot enough for his pleasure.

Not that she needed any more foreplay. She'd already come twice. She knew he'd bring her with his mouth again in a moment.

And she didn't want that. She wanted him. In her. "Baran," she moaned. "Please. I... AH!... need you."

"You have me."

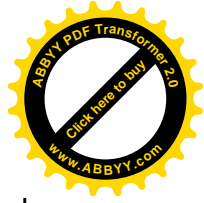
Somehow she managed to force her lax neck muscles to lift her head so she could look down at him. He watched her over the plane of her body, his dark eyes burning in the soft darkness.

But instead of the male triumph she'd seen before, there was a hint of something lost and desperate in his gaze, as if he was storing away the taste of her, the sight of her, the feel of her. Saving those sensations in some mental memory bank for the day she was gone. "Now," he whispered, "you have me."

He rose to all fours. Muscle flowed through his shoulders and arms as he crawled up her body like a great cat, the head of his erect shaft brushing her skin. She found herself unable to look away from his intent stare. He settled over her, his body surrounding hers in strength and heat, a blanket of hot muscle. His gaze never left hers as he lifted just enough to aim himself.

Then he sank inside, a\*long, slow thrust, and she caught her breath.





Baran lowered his head, his long hair curtaining her face. He reached up an absent hand to sweep it aside. Then he found her mouth with his and kissed her as he began a slow, teasing thrusting. His lips felt hot and soft and slick.

Jane kissed him back as the pleasure rose in a warm wave, swamping them lazily. Arching against him, she came with a moan even as he groaned and poured himself into her.

It was only later, as she lay curled in the cove of his body staring blindly at the dancing flame of one of the candles, that she felt a tear slide down her face. "Baran, when you leave, it's going to be..."

The hair-roughened arm around her waist tightened. "Yeah. I know." He pulled her closer.

The scanner crackled.

She woke from a light doze to the feeling of his tongue swirling over her nipple. Whimpering helplessly, she threaded her fingers through his silken hair and lost herself in him.

"Tayanita One-Eight," the scanner blared. "Reported stabbing, one-oh-two Bajor Lane."

Jane jerked up her head. "Shit. Baran ..."

He lifted his head. "I hear it."

"Caller describes a white male, over six foot, long hair, wearing jeans and a T-shirt. Code five with a knife."

"May not be him," Jane said as he rolled off her and grabbed his pants off the floor.

"Female victim suffered a laceration to the throat."

"It's him," Baran said, jerked the slacks up his long legs. "He's using his imagizer to change his appearance again."

Jane shot out of the bed and started pulling on the clothes he'd stripped away. "Why didn't he call us this time?"

"I have no idea, but I don't like it. He's broken the pattern." He sat down to pull on his shoes. "Freika!"

"I hear you, boss." The wolf trotted into the room from the hallway, where he'd been curled outside the door.

"Where the hell is Bajor Lane?" Jane jerked on her boots. "I've never even heard of it."



“TE gave me a map,” he said, frowning. She looked up to see his eyes slide out of focus. “It’s at the other end of the county, eighteen-point-two miles from here. Looks like a heavily wooded area.”

“Hell, it’s going to take us twenty minutes to get there.” She jumped up, grabbed the scanner and headed for the stairs, Baran and Freika at her heels. “I wonder why the hell he didn’t call us this time....”

They were halfway there when she remembered the gun, tucked away in her nightstand drawer. Jane cursed; they didn’t have time to go back for it.

Just as well. She didn’t want anything to do with the fucking thing anyway.

\* \* \*

It was a harrowing trip in the dark. Jane strongly suspected that without Baran’s flawless directions, she’d never have found the place.

Bajor Lane was a gravel road that snaked through thick woods. Trees loomed on either side, ghostly in the SUV’s headlights as she drove. Something about the whole scene made the hair rise on the back of her neck. That feeling was intensified by the knowledge that Druas was probably somewhere out there, watching. What the hell was he up to now?

They rounded a bend in the road to see the revolving blue-and-white glow of patrol car lights casting shadows on a lone double-wide mobile home. Jane spotted Tom’s champagne Crown Vic and knew they were in for another grilling on their whereabouts during the time the woman had been murdered.

She spotted something lying under a bright blue plastic tarp in the center of the gravel road; the victim, waiting for the last crime scene photos before the coroner took her away.

“Too late again,” Baran growled. Jane could almost feel his rage burning in the darkness like something molten.

After parking behind the farthest patrol car, she got out carrying her notebook, Baran and Freika moving around to join her. The Warlord had the camera looped around his neck, but his eyes flicked restlessly over the surrounding woods, and she knew he was scanning for Druas.

Then he stopped in midstep. “He’s here,” Baran murmured.



“Yeah, I see him,” Freika said, pitching his voice too low for the cops to hear. “He’s talking to Reynolds in that group of cops.”

Startled, Jane looked toward the group as her stomach laced into knots. A tall, skinny blond man she’d never seen before was standing with the detective, the lights of the surrounding cars throwing grotesque shadows as he gestured violently. His lifted voice carried clearly up the street. “I don’t know what the fuck happened. We’d just got out of the car when this guy walks up and grins at her, and then he fuckin’ cut her, and she ...”

“The blond guy?” she talked softly.

“Yeah,” Baran said, his tone grim. “I don’t like this. Let’s get the hell—”

“That’s him!” the blond shouted suddenly. Jane jerked, feeling her stomach plunge. He was pointing right at them. “That’s the guy that did it! He had a tattoo on his face....”

As if in slow motion, Jane watched the group of cops turn toward them, Tom’s eyes narrowing. As their attention was diverted, something nasty and triumphant flashed across the blond’s narrow face.

A couple of feet away, two deputies standing beside a patrol car pivoted in their direction. Jane registered the wariness flashing over the face of the nearest man, a burly black officer. The eyes of his fellow cop widened under a shock of carrot red hair. “Sir,” the black deputy said to Baran, reaching for his sidearm as he stepped toward them, “we need to talk to—”

“Look out!” Druas shouted.

The Warlord grabbed the cop’s shoulder and jerked, pulling him off-balance. The man staggered past them. Baran slammed an elbow in the back of his head. As he fell, out cold, the Warlord pivoted and punched the redhead in the face. The deputy collapsed in a boneless heap on the gravel road.

It had all happened too quickly for anyone else to react.

Jane heard Tom roar, saw several of the cops reach for their guns as the whole herd started forward. Druas, grinning maliciously over their heads, winked and blew her a mocking kiss.

Then the world flew sideways and something hard slammed into her stomach. Jane screamed before she realized Baran had jerked her off her feet and tossed her over one shoulder in a fireman’s carry. One powerful arm clamped across the back of her thighs as he started running, bounding toward the woods.

“Stop!” somebody bellowed. “Stop or we’ll shoot!”



Baran didn't even break step.

Something popped, sounding more like a child's cap gun than the 9mm Smith & Wesson Jane knew the cops carried. She cringed and covered her head with both hands.

"Hold your fire!" Reynolds bellowed. "You'll hit the woman!"

Thank you, Tom!

Her head almost slapped into Baran's butt as he leaped over something. Yelping, Jane flailed around until she managed to hook her fingers in the fabric of his T-shirt. Between bruising impacts with his shoulder, she gasped, "I've ... got... a car!"

"They could catch us in a car!" Freika yelled back, racing through the dark at Baran's heels. "Nothing human can keep up with a Warlord on foot."

She realized he was right as they plunged into the trees. Jane had no idea how fast they were going, but even Freika was running like hell to keep up. How was Baran doing it? She wouldn't have thought it possible to carry a grown woman at a dead run through thick woods, yet Baran didn't even seem to notice her weight. Must be in riatt, she decided woozily as her stomach protested jolting against his rock-hard shoulder.

Clutching his shirt, she looked up to spot the swing and jitter of flashlight beams. The deputies had charged into the woods after them. She clamped her eyes shut and prayed nobody popped off another shot. Given her position, any bullet would probably end up in her head.

The flight through the woods seemed endless. Jane could barely see the trees Baran dodged around or the brush he either bulled through or leaped over. Yet he ran without breaking stride. With his sensors, the woods must have looked as bright as day, or he'd never have been able to do it.

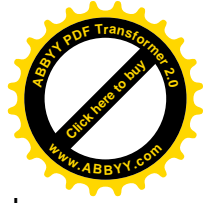
She, on the other hand, jounced along in the center of a black, half-seen world with his shoulder pounding into her belly. It was all she could do not to vomit down his back.

Somehow Jane managed to hold it together until the shouts of the deputies faded behind them. Finally, unable to take any more, she yelled, "Baran... stop! I'm going... to... be ... sick!"

He kept going.

"I... mean ... it!"

Something in her tone must have told him Jane was serious. He slid to a halt and lowered her to her feet. She promptly collapsed onto all fours, swallowing desperately as she fought to control her gastric rebellion.



Freika flopped onto his side, panting like a bellows. Even Baran was breathing hard. Managing a glance up at him, she saw his eyes glowing in the dark like a pair of coals. “What the ... hell are ... we doing?”

“Keeping you alive,” he gasped, and braced his hands on his knees.

“Yeah, well...” She rolled onto her back with a groan. “I can’t decide whether... we’re Butch and ... Sundance or Thelma and Louise. Either way... it ain’t... good.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Movie references.” She took a deep breath, blew it out, and managed an uninterrupted sentence. “Both from flicks with heroes who ended up dead after a run in with the cops.”

He straightened to look down at her. She could see the burn of his eyes in his silhouette. “I can’t go to jail, Jane. You’d be dead before they closed the cell door.”

“Freika...” she began.

“Does not have opposable thumbs,” the wolf said from the darkness. “I’m good, but I’m not that good. I can hold Druas off for a while, but he’d gut me eventually. And then it’d be your turn.”

Jane sat up wearily and braced her palms behind her in the crackling leaves. “What the hell are we going to do, then? We can’t stay on the run. I’ve covered manhunts before, I know how it works. They’ll saturate the area with law enforcement. Cops’ll come in from three counties, they’ll have helicopters, dogs ....”

“Huh. Any dog that comes after me is kibble,” Freika growled.

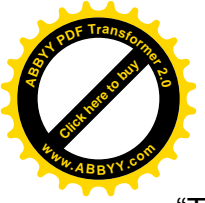
Jane ignored him to focus on Baran’s shimmering eyes. “As far as they’re concerned, you’ve butchered three women and taken a fourth hostage. They won’t stop until they get us.”

“I’ve infiltrated enemy armies, Jane. I can handle a few twenty-first-century policemen.”

“Of course you can.” She braced her elbows on her knees and sighed. “If you’re willing to let the situation blow completely out of control. You can’t kill these people, Baran. One, they’re just doing their jobs, and two, you could trigger a paradox.”

He looked off into the darkness. “Anything I do here I was supposed to do.” She felt him brush her shoulder as he extended a hand to help her up. “Come on. We need to get moving again. They’re getting closer.”

“Not that close. I don’t hear a damn thing.”



“That’s the idea. If we stay far enough ahead of them, they won’t hear us, either.”

“So, now what?” She put her hand in his and let him tug her onto her feet. “We run around in the woods indefinitely, dodging cops? That’s not going to work, Baran. Eventually, they’re going to corner us.”

“And I’ll take care of them,” he said, wrapping his fingers around hers and tugging her forward through the darkness. “Eventually Druas is going to get tired of playing games, and then we’ll finish it.”

“Baran, dammit, these men are my friends! I don’t want them hurt.”

“And I don’t want you dead!” He reached up and pushed a limb aside for her to pass under. She was lucky he was there; she hadn’t even seen it.

Frustrated, Jane stopped\* pulling at his hand in an effort to get his attention. “Look, this is what he wants! Why are we following that bastard’s game plan? That’s not the way to win this.”

The full red glare of his eyes focused on her face. “And what do you suggest?”

She blurted the idea that had been teasing the edge of her consciousness for days. “Work with Tom to set a trap for him. He could pretend to arrest you. When Druas shows up to come after me—“

“Forget it.”

“It would work!”

“Jane, in case you haven’t noticed, Reynolds is leading that pack back there. If he arrests me, it’s not going to be ‘pretend.’”

“If we told him the truth...”

“That he’s after Jack the Ripper? Oh, that’ll go over well. He’s not going to believe us.”

“He will if you show him the Mary Kelly recording. It’s pretty damn evident that thing is not the product of contemporary technology. It sure as hell convinced me.”

“Out of the question,” he said coldly. “I’m not going to put your life in the hands of some human who could get us all killed. I’ve been that route before, remember?”

Jane winced, remembering the civilian scientist whose stupidity had resulted in the slaughter of Baran’s entire unit. Which sounded like her cue for a change in tactics. “Okay, let’s say it plays as you think it will. You lead the cops around by the nose until Druas gets



tired of waltzing and comes out to play. You kill him. What happens then? Are you going to leave his body for the cops to find?"

"You know I can't do that. They'd do an autopsy. Given his implants and reinforced bones, that would raise too many questions."

"So as far as the cops are concerned, this case will be unsolved."

Leaves crunched as he shifted his weight. "It'll have to be. Otherwise Druas would have had no reason to come here—and that would cause a paradox."

"Okay, I'll buy that. But what about me?"

"You go back to your life."

She shook her head. "No, I don't. I'll end up under a cloud of suspicion I'll never escape."

"What?" Jane could almost hear the frown in his voice.

"Baran, as far as they're concerned, I brought you here. I vouched for you, I supplied you with an alibi while, they believe, you killed three women. I could be charged as an accessory."

"That's highly doubtful," Freika said. "There's no evidence."

"Which doesn't mean a damn thing. People will believe I'm guilty. Tayanita's a small town; that kind of public doubt would ruin me. The paper my family ran for more than a century will go under. And if the story goes national—and it could, given the serial-killer angle—I won't even be able to get work as a reporter anywhere. For the rest of my life, I'll be the woman who covered up for the Tayanita Ripper."

"Hell."

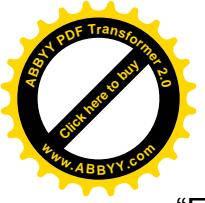
Hearing the sick realization in his voice, she knew she finally had her opening. She had to take advantage of it. "My only chance is to talk to Tom and get his help. He can clear both of us when this is over."

"He won't cooperate."

"Yes, he will," she said, praying she was right. "I'll convince him."

"Before or after he slaps me in jail? In either case, you won't have much time to convince him. Druas was back there, Jane. And I guarantee, the minute the cops take me into custody, he's going to be all over you."

"Not if I'm with Tom."



“Even if you’re with Tom.” His tone was grim and certain. “You’d outlive your cop friend by about two minutes.”

She frowned. “But would Druas risk killing him? Wouldn’t that cause a paradox?”

Freika snorted. “If Druas gave a damn about paradoxes, he wouldn’t have started the whole Jack the Ripper scheme to begin with.”

“For that matter, he doesn’t even have to kill the cop,” Baran pointed out, “just incapacitate him long enough to get at you.”

They had a point, and yet... “Well, we’ve got to do something. This sure as hell isn’t working.”

There was a tense silence. In the distance Jane thought she could hear shouts.

Finally, reluctantly, Baran said, “I have an idea.”

Tom Reynolds emerged from the woods five hours after he went in, feeling as if someone had beaten him. He could hear the helicopter circling overhead, along with the bay of distant tracking dogs, but it wasn’t looking good.

At first he’d thought it would be easy. The two dogs had picked up a scent quickly enough, following the trail Arvid and Jane and that damn wolf-whatever had left as they’d run into the woods.

Then suddenly the animals had stopped dead and begun casting around as though the trail had vanished. He’d seen that behavior before, of course; it usually meant the perps had gotten into a car and driven off. But it was the middle of the fucking woods. There wasn’t room for a car. And there was no stream around the three could have used as a scent-free pathway. It was as if they’d somehow erased the trail.

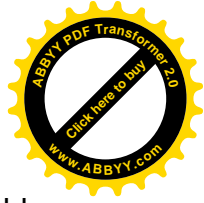
Where the hell had they gone?

And how had Arvid run like a freaking gazelle carrying the weight of a full-grown woman—in the dark, in brush so thick even the cops had a hard time forcing their way through? What was the son of a bitch, Superman?

Tom sighed, rubbing his stomach as he trudged toward the victim’s house. They had no choice but to continue the search, though the sheriff had grumbled he’d rather wait until there was more light. Unfortunately, they couldn’t afford to do that, not with Arvid holding a hostage. Jane could be dead by morning.

Assuming he hadn’t butchered her already.





None of this shit made sense. She must have been covering for him, but why? Tom would have bet his badge Jane Colby was not the kind of woman who'd turn a blind eye to murder. He'd known women who rationalized their lovers' crimes, up to and including the rape of their own children, but Jane just didn't fit the profile.

Yet she'd looked Tom in the eye and sworn Arvid wasn't the killer. He'd believed her, too, though he normally had a pretty damn good idea when he was being lied to.

So what the hell was going on?

Adding to the general fun and games, he now had to go talk to the victim's roommate, who'd been cooling her heels ever since she'd arrived more than an hour ago. All the poor woman wanted was for someone to tell her what the hell happened, and since the coroner was off talking to the vic's immediate family, the sheriff had sent him out to handle it.

The deputy had put the woman in a patrol car; they didn't want her going into her house until they'd had time to finish processing the scene. Cynthia Myers had been killed outside, but they still needed to go over the house, if only to close any loopholes Arvid's defense attorney might use later.

As he approached the car, the front passenger door opened and the woman got out. "Are you the detective?" she asked. "Can you tell me what happened? Nobody's talking. Who did this? They said Cynthia's dead. What...?"

He sighed and gestured toward the open passenger door. "Why don't we sit in the car, Miss ..."

"Terri Jenson." She knotted her shaking hands together and obediently got back in.

With a sigh, Tom walked around to the driver's side. He always hated dealing with survivors, but unfortunately, it was part of the job. And a good rapport with family and friends of the victims could be invaluable to solving a case. He got in the car, pushing aside the officer's clipboard and ticket book so he could sit down.

"I was at work when one of the neighbors up the road called and said there were police at my house," Jenson told him. "She said ... she said Cynthia was dead." Her eyes filled.

Tom studied the woman sympathetically. She was a short, slender brunette, dressed in blue jeans and a T-shirt, both clean. Not quite thirty, he decided, scanning her haggard face. She was probably pretty, at least when not dealing with the murder of a close friend.

"I'm afraid your neighbor was right," he said gently. "Cynthia was attacked outside your house earlier tonight by a man with a knife."

She flinched. "Do you know ... who did it?"



“Her boyfriend identified—“

Tern’s eyes widened. “Who?”

“Her boyfriend.” Tom reached into a pocket and pulled out his notebook, flipped it open. “Jason Anderson. He told us—“

“I don’t know who you talked to, but it wasn’t her boyfriend.”

Tom blinked at her. The woman stared back at him with an expression of indignant alarm. “You seem pretty sure about that,” he said cautiously.

“I should,” she told him, her voice sure and cold. “Cynthia and I have been lovers for the past five years.”

Shit. Shit, shit, shit. He dragged a hand through his hair, fighting the cold, sick feeling that was trying to take root in his guts. “Are you sure she didn’t have a male friend you don’t know about?”

“Cynthia did not date men,” Terri gritted. “If a man told you he was her boyfriend, you were talking to her killer.”

By the time Tom pulled into his own driveway, it was pushing dawn. His eyelids were gritty, and a headache was throbbing a relentless bass beat behind his forehead. He’d spent the past three hours trying to find Jason Anderson, who had mysteriously vanished.

As far as he could determine, Terri Jenson was right. Virtually every word hi Anderson’s statement had been a lie. The address he’d given them was a vacant lot, the phone number was a dummy, and they could find no mention of anybody named Jason Anderson in Tayanita County, either in the phone book or in criminal records, not even as an alias.

Tom had also done a computer search on the name with the South Carolina Law Enforcement Division. Half a dozen Jason Andersons had popped up, all in other counties, but the ages and descriptions hadn’t matched.

It was beginning to look as if what Terri said was true.

Anderson—or whatever his name was—had killed Cynthia Myers, and possibly the other women as well. He’d accused Baran Arvid to throw off the cops while he escaped. But why had Arvid run? Even if he hadn’t realized it made him look guilty as hell, Jane damn well should have known.

The sheriff had called off the search for the two—a manhunt was ungodly expensive—but he’d still issued a Be On the Lookout for them. He hoped the BOLO would eventually bear



fruit or they'd emerge from hiding on their own. Either way, Tom was going to question them thoroughly.

And then chew Jane out for stupidity above and beyond the call of duty.

Yawning, he pulled into the two-car garage of the brick colonial he and Christine had shared for the past fifteen years. It was dark in the garage, and he reminded himself to buy that replacement lightbulb he'd been meaning to pick up.

Wearily, he got out of his Crown Vic and trudged toward the cement steps that led up into the house.

He sensed the motion barely an instant before the hand closed over his throat, jerking him back against a body that was a lot bigger than his own. Another hand reached into his shoulder holster and neatly removed his gun.

"We want to talk to you," Baran Arvid said.

"What a coincidence," Tom gasped around the fingers circling his throat. "I want to talk to you, too."

Then he drove an elbow back into his captor's ribs in a blow that should have made the man keel over and gag. Arvid didn't even grunt.

"We had nothing to do with the murder, Tom," Jane Colby said from the darkness.

"That statement would fill me with more confidence," he wheezed, "if the Man of Steel here wasn't choking the shit out of me."

The hand around his throat disappeared, but he heard the warning click of his own gun being cocked. He rubbed his throat and glared in the direction of the sound. "Did it ever occur to you to just come to the sheriff's department and fucking talk to me?"

"I couldn't risk being arrested," Arvid said. "The killer has targeted Jane. If I leave her alone, she'll end up like the others."

"All you had to do was ask for police protection..." Tom bit back the "dumbass" he wanted to add to the end of that sentence. "Under the circumstances, the sheriff would be happy to assign the manpower."

Jane sighed. "Y'all can't protect me from this guy, Tom."

"And Bead Boy can?" His headache gave a particularly nasty throb. "Look, I would feel a lot more comfortable if I could see who the hell I'm talking to. Let's go to the Sheriff's Department."



“No.” Arvid’s tone did not invite debate.

Shit. He didn’t want them in the house, not with his wife in there asleep. “Then let’s go out on the deck. Christine left the lights on out there.”

As he led the way out of the garage, he heard the distinctive ring of Jane’s boots on the cement drive. “Just for curiosity’s sake, does the phrase ‘assaulting a police officer’ mean anything to you?”

“Yeah, and I’m sorry about that, Tom. We just don’t have a lot of options right now.”

He grunted. This melodramatic shit was getting on his nerves.

Tom walked across the lawn and up the steps that led onto the deck. Leaning a hip against the railing, he watched as Jane followed, the big photographer on her heels. That damn wolf melted out of the darkness after them. He thought about protesting its presence, then decided that would probably be a waste of time.

Jane fell into the nearest lawn chair with a tired sigh as Arvid took up a post against the railing protectively close to her. The wolf sat on his haunches at her feet.

“So,” Tom said, “you want to tell me what the fuck is going on?”

“That,” the wolf said, “is a very long story.”

An hour later Jane rubbed the throbbing spot between her eyebrows and eyed the detective. Tom was staring at the frozen playback of the Ripper recording with his jaw hanging open.

“Shit,” he said at last, “I’ve died and gone to an X-Files rerun. Where are the fucking gray aliens?”

“About four hundred light-years that way,” Freika said, tilting his muzzle skyward.

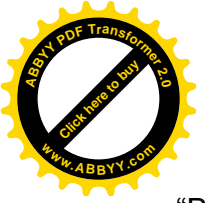
Tom shot him a wild-eyed stare.

“He’s playing with you, Tom.” Jane said.

“No, I’m not.”

She ignored that. She really didn’t think she wanted to go there. “You can see why we couldn’t allow Baran to be arrested.”

“Yeah.” He shook his head and sat back in the lawn chair he’d dropped into about halfway through their explanation. “But what I don’t get is why you’re telling me all this.”



“Because we need your help falsifying paperwork,” Baran said.

Tom gaped at him. “What?”

“We need to make it look as though I’m under arrest for at least the next three hours.”

“Aside from costing me my badge, what would that do?”

“We’ve got to lure Druas in. He needs to believe he has an unrestricted path to Jane, but he’s not going to believe I’m going to just walk off and leave her.”

“Because he’s from the future, he’s probably got access to the paperwork surrounding this case,” Jane explained.

“Three hundred years from now?”

She shrugged. “Why not? Look at all the paperwork that survived from the Ripper murders. And record-keeping wasn’t nearly as good in Victorian England as it is now.”

Tom frowned, considering the idea. “So how would my falsifying a report help you?”

“If you leave a paper trail that shows Baran in custody during a particular period of time, Druas will think he’s got a clear field to me.”

Tom’s eyes widened. “But that means the fraud would have to be rock-solid. If it ever came out that I hadn’t had you in custody, the creep would know it was a trick.”

“Yeah.” Baran folded his arms, his expression grim. “You’d have to keep the secret until you died.”

“Shit. It’s not that easy, Arvid. Even at this hour, there are people at the department and people at the jail. They’d know you were never there. And I’d lose my badge.”

There was a desperate, thrumming silence while they tried to figure out a solution to that problem.

“What if you were questioning him somewhere else?” Jane asked suddenly. “It doesn’t have to be that you actually arrested him, just that you could attest that he was in a given location at a given time. Maybe you could say he attacked you here.”

“But that wouldn’t get you alone,” Baran pointed out. “I’d never have let you out of my sight.”

“Druas doesn’t know that. Look, Tom could say I was horrified that you’d actually attacked him, so I ran off. You held him for a while, but then he escaped and you ran. It would create a window of time when I’d be left unprotected.”



Baran shook his head. "Druas wouldn't fall for that."

"If it's in the paperwork and Tom swears it happened that way, why wouldn't he?"

"Neither of us would be that stupid."

"People are uncharacteristically stupid all the time," Jane said. "Besides, Druas believes he's smarter than the rest of the universe. He wants to believe we're that dumb."

Tom sat forward and braced his hands on his knees. "You have no way of knowing whether this guy is going to take the bait. You're asking me to put my career on the line on the off chance this is going to work. If it doesn't, I'm fucked."

"If it does, no other women will get killed," Baran told him. "Including Jane."

He sighed. "Shit, when you put it that way ... But what if he does take the bait and you can't beat him?"

Baran's eyes narrowed. "That's not going to be a problem. One way or another, Druas is dead."

Tom and sat back in his chair. "I'd object to that just on general principles, but practically speaking, I can't offer an alternative. Even if I arrested the bastard, I doubt a prison would hold him, not given the abilities you describe."

"And you'd lose a lot of cops during his escape."

"You sure I can't help take the fucker down?"

Baran shook his head. "Too risky. If he got his hands on you, you wouldn't have a prayer. I'm going to have my hands full keeping Jane alive as it is. I don't need to worry about triggering a temporal paradox by losing you."

"So how do you know telling me all this won't cause one of those paradoxes all by itself?"

"It won't," Baran said.

He lifted a brow. "You sound pretty damn certain."

"He is." Freika said from the floor of the deck. "We're all still alive, aren't we?"

Tom stared at the wolf. "You mean... Never mind." He sighed and looked over at Baran again. "So, have you got a gun? I figure if I'm committing career suicide, I might as well do it right."

"I've got one at home," Jane told him.



Baran shook his head. “Wouldn’t do much good anyway.” He told Tom about Druas’s armor and reinforced bones.

“Huh.” The detective contemplated the problem. “How about a knife?”

“That’d work.” He shrugged. “I could always slit the bastard’s throat. Better than being unarmed.” He grimaced. “Actually, I should have picked one up earlier.”

“I’ve got a bowie knife with a sheathe I use for deer hunting, if you want to use it.”

“Are you sure, Tom?” Jane asked. “If Baran uses that knife to kill Druas ...”

The detective waved a dismissive hand. “That asshole needs to go down. Whatever I can do to help, I’m going to do. Give me a minute.” He got up to open the glass door and slip inside.

Baran took a deep breath and looked at Jane. “Well, you were right.”

Jane shrugged. “Tom cares more about protecting people than career building.” She looked at him steadily. “He’ll keep the secret until he dies, Baran.”

“Yeah.” For a moment they fell silent. Baran stared off across the yard at the moon riding just over the trees. “This plan is risky as hell,” he said, his voice low. “I don’t like it.” She shook her head. “You know I’m the only one who can pull it off.”

“Maybe, but it’s so damn risky....” He straightened from his pose leaning against the deck railing and walked over to her. His expression going even grimmer, he slipped the suit-nullifying ring off his finger. Then to her surprise, he knelt on the deck beside her and took her hand. Solemnly he slipped the ring on her finger. Its alien metal automatically shrank to fit. “I’ll keep you safe.”

Staring into the fierce vow in his eyes, Jane curled her fingers around his. “Yeah,” she said softly. “I know.”

Jane’s heart thudded so hard it seemed to choke her, and her mouth was utterly dry. She fought to concentrate on the road and ignore the clawing terror she felt.

She was aware of Baran’s eyes on her in the darkness as he crouched in the floorboard of the car, his big body coiled uncomfortably. Freika was stretched out across the bench seat in the front, his furry head almost in her lap. They were both sensor shielded—using their computers to generate a nulling field to keep Druas from picking up their life signs. But the field didn’t work on visible light, so they had to stay out of sight.

For the purposes of the trap, they needed to make it look as if she was driving home alone in Tom’s “stolen” patrol car.



The detective had decided to let them borrow the car, since that was the only way they could be sure of smuggling Baran and the wolf in past Druas. Unfortunately, since his report would claim Jane had taken it without his permission, there was a distinct possibility she could face charges for it later. She'd decided she'd worry about that problem if she managed to live through the next hour.

And she wasn't making any bets on that.

As they'd made their way toward Tom's house earlier that night, they'd decided Jane had the best chance of getting close enough to Druas long enough to use the ring. If she could distract him while she touched him with it, he might not realize what was happening until it was too late. As soon as the ring disabled the suit, Baran and Freika would attack.

Of course, the really tricky part of the whole plan was the period while the two were hiding just out of Druas's sight. Even though they'd be watching, if he went after her before she managed to disable the suit, she could get hurt before they could come to the rescue.

Fortunately—though that might not be the right word— Druas's M.O. was to strangle his victims before he used the knife, which should give Baran and Freika enough time to interfere. Unfortunately, as strong as Druas was, Jane could still end up dying slowly with a crushed larynx.

The whole plan was risky as hell. Baran hated it; it went deeply against his grain to take a risk of that magnitude with Jane's life. Unfortunately, every other option they came up with carried a virtual certainty that Druas would simply Jump to freedom and return to attack Jane later. And there was no telling how many women he'd kill in the meantime.

All of which had made perfect logical sense when she'd argued for the plan during that hike through the woods. But now, in the car on the way to face a monster, it seemed a hell of a lot less convincing.

He'll kill you, Jane, her father's ghost whispered, sibilant in the darkness. You're not smart enough to fool him. He'll see through the act and slit your throat on the spot.

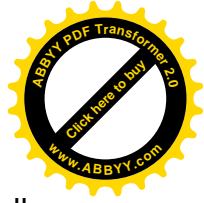
No, she told herself. / can do this. Baran will protect me.

Glancing down at the ring gleaming dully in the light of the dashboard, she remembered the look in his eyes when he'd slipped it on her finger. The knot of fear eased fractionally.

Baran reached up from the floor of the car and cupped her knee, giving it a gentle squeeze. Jane looked over at him. He didn't speak, yet something in his gaze spoke of love and determination. Tears welled in her eyes. She blinked hard and returned her attention to the road.

Jesus, she realized suddenly, / really am in love with him.





Jane knew she should probably find that realization disquieting—after all, even if they all survived this fight, he was going to disappear from her life within hours. She'd never see him again. Yet as she contemplated the love that had been quietly growing over the past few days, she found herself grateful.

She needed all the strength she could get.

Baran watched the single tear roll down Jane's cheek and felt his heart contract in his chest. He wanted to take her in his arms. Hell, he wanted to tell her to turn the car around and forget the whole thing. There were a dozen ways this insane plan could go wrong.

Unfortunately, he also knew that in combat, you sometimes had to take a chance because it was all you had. This was one of those times.

He had every intention of minimizing the danger as much as he could. He and Freika would conceal themselves as close as possible, and they'd never take their eyes off Jane and Druas. But he still couldn't eliminate the risk completely.

The moment of greatest danger would come when she touched Druas with the ring. If the Jumpkiller realized what she was doing...

Baran would have to get to him first. And he would.

That bastard was not going to hurt Jane. Baran had already lost Liisa to him; that was more than enough.

Odd. For years he'd been driven by the obsession of finding Liisa's killer and giving him as bloody and painful a death as possible. Yet now Baran realized he would happily forgo his vengeance if it would mean keeping Jane alive.

Nothing he did would bring Liisa back to life—but it might prevent Jane's death. And that was all Baran really cared about. One way or another he was going to keep her safe. And he didn't much care what he had to do in the process.

Jane pulled into her driveway with her stomach coiled into a solid knot. "Is he here?" she murmured, scarcely moving her lips.

"Yeah," Baran whispered. "I've got him on sensors, waiting out in the trees."

She swallowed hard and lied. "Good."

Her hands so damp with sweat it was all she could do to turn the wheel, she backed the patrol car into the SUV's customary spot. She ordinarily parked facing the other direction, but she needed the driver's door next to the house. In that position the bulk of the car would block Druas's view while Baran and Freika got out.



It was a good thing she didn't have a porch, she thought; the extra elevation would have made them impossible to miss.

Jane got out and walked to open the front door, leaving the car door standing open. As Baran duck-walked inside with the wolf slinking at his heels, she pretended to remember to lock Tom's car.

A moment later she slipped back inside and closed the door behind her. "How long do we have before he comes in?"

"I have no idea," Baran said, straightening from his crouch to look toward the woods as if he could see right through the wall. Which, given his sensors, he evidently could. "He's maintaining position now."

"Okay. Let's head upstairs." There were several places they could conceal themselves up there.

She just hoped they had time to do it.

Baran and Freika slipped up the stairs ahead of her. Jane, following, thought there was something dreamlike about anyone as big as the Warlord moving so silently.

When they walked into her bedroom, Freika immediately headed for the walk-in closet. Before he slipped inside, he shot them a long-suffering gaze. "Hiding in a closet—really, this is so undignified. Not to mention clichéd. You do realize I'm mortally embarrassed?"

Jane grinned despite her clawing nerves. She'd had no idea a wolf's face could even do disgruntled. "Yeah, it sucks. I appreciate your sacrifice, Freika."

He sniffed. "See that you do." He slipped inside and hunkered down on the floor, ready to spring.

Baran, meanwhile, eyed the closet's doors dubiously. Jane realized what he was thinking; they were designed to open by folding to either side, a process that might take too long. He shrugged and looked at her. "Hell with it. I'll be in riatt—I'll just smash 'em."

Jane nodded shortly. Her heart was pounding so hard she could feel the pulse in her ears. She badly wanted to run to the bathroom and throw up.

Baran's hard expression gentled. "You'll be fine," he said softly, and took her chin in his hand.

The kiss he gave her was hot enough to burn as his lips moved hungrily over hers, his tongue sweeping inside to stroke and claim. His body felt so big and warm against hers. She let herself lean into him, greedily drinking in the comfort.



As the kiss spun out, his mobile mouth seemed to make another one of those silent vows of protection and passion. Something about it drove back the fear beating at her.

Then they both heard the front door open downstairs. Baran deepened the kiss, then stepped into the closet.

Jane's heart gave a hard thump as the folding door slid closed. At least they'd be able to see through the slats, while Druas would be unable to see them.

She turned and moved quickly to the nightstand to open the drawer. Her father's gun lay inside, loaded and ready. For once, the weapon was a comfort instead of a symbol of doubt and fear.

Hearing a tread on the stairs, Jane pulled out an old romance novel and slid the drawer partially closed.

I'm not going to throw up, she told herself fiercely. / can do this. All I've got to do is rest the ring against his suit for a few seconds. I can do that.

You're going to die, her father's ghost hissed.

Fuck you, Daddy.

The bedroom door opened. Baran walked in. But he'd just stepped into the closet....

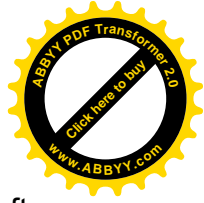
For an instant, Jane was confused. Then it hit her. It was Druas. The son of a bitch was using his imagizer to look like Baran. He thought the Warlord was still back at Tom's house, as the report Tom would falsify would claim he was.

The killer smiled Baran's smile at her. "I decided you were right. I'd never be able to convince the detective I didn't do it. Taking him hostage was a mistake."

Suddenly Jane's fear was gone, washed away by pure rage. The bastard was playing a game with her, planning to use her love for Baran against her.

For once, years of hiding her emotions from her abusive father stood Jane in good stead. Her face automatically fell into the sweet, doll-like smile she'd learned under Bill Colby's belt. "I'm glad you saw the light," she said. "Once Tom gets an idea into his head, you couldn't pry it loose with a crowbar."

"Yeah," Druas said in Baran's deep voice. He tried a smile of his own, but now Jane realized how unlike her lover's it really was. Evidently the computer used the expression he was actually wearing on the face of the projected image. The result was like looking at a perfect mask of the man she loved—worn over the face of something cold and reptilian.



He moved closer to her. "I thought we might as well make use of what time we've got left together."

I'll just bet you do, you son of a bitch. But did he really want to have sex, or was he just trying to get close enough to kill her?

Either way, she had to play along just long enough to rest her hand on his chest until the ring disabled his suit.

If he didn't kill her before it could do its job.

Baran had never felt such rage in his life, not even when he heard Liisa's last scream. The idea that Druas had dared to wear his face while planning to murder Jane made him want to pound the killer to a bloody bag of shattered bone. He'd been about to drive right through the closet door when Freika had caught his hand in fanged jaws, jolting him back to his senses.

Now he crouched, seething in the darkness, watching through the door slats and praying to all his people's gods he'd be in time to stop whatever Druas was planning.

He had to go to riat at just the right moment. If he entered the berserker state too soon, he wouldn't be able to maintain it all the way through the battle; too late and he might not have the strength to save Jane when he needed it.

At least she was playing her role to the hilt. He'd been afraid that she couldn't control her justifiable terror. Yet the minute Druas had walked in, she'd gone icily calm.

Now she was smiling into the murderer's face, projecting seductive warmth, almost glowing with sensuality as she flirted, quite literally, with death. Even Druas looked fascinated. Despite his fear, Baran felt the rise of admiration mixed with a curious pride. A week ago he would never have thought a civilian capable of such cool, brassy courage.

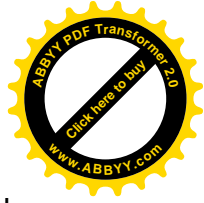
But then, Jane was no typical civilian.

He just had to make damn sure he was ready to snatch her clear when the killer made his move.

Jane decided she needed to work closer to Baran before she touched the Jumpkiller. Ideally, she wanted Druas beside the closet so the Warlord could take him in one easy lunge. The trick was maneuvering the killer without giving the game away.

Smiling that not-Baran smile, Druas reached for her. With a light, flirtatious laugh, she stepped back and slipped past him, giving her hips a taunting little sway.

"Oh, you do enjoy playing with fire," Druas said, dropping his reaching hand as he watched her saunter around the bed.



She shrugged and gave htm a wicked smile. “What can I say—I like it hot. But then, so do you.” And you ‘re about to get seriously burned, you bastard.

“The hotter the better.” He grinned and swaggered after her. How he thought anybody could mistake him for Baran with those empty shark eyes, she did not know.

“So,” Jane purred, suppressing the instinct to step back as he stopped right where she wanted him. “Just how much heat can you generate?”

“How much do you want?’ He reached for her again. She managed not to flinch under his touch. He might look like Baran, but his hands didn’t feel the same as they rested on her hips. The shape and size were wrong—chunky palms, short, stubby fingers. If she hadn’t already known he wasn’t her lover, his touch would have told her.

Luckily, Druas thought women were stupid. And that was an advantage she could use to destroy him.

Stretching her lips into a feline smile and dropping her lids to hide the revulsion she knew rilled her eyes, she reached for his chest. Pretending to study those illusionary Baran pectorals, she laid her left hand there.

And felt the scales of his T-suit under the illusion.

Hell. If he realized she should feel the suit, he’d know something was up when she didn’t react.

To distract him, she rose up on her toes and took his mouth in a kiss that was as deep and sensual as she could make it. His mouth had an odd, metallic taste, but she ignored it, ignored her own clawing revulsion, and pressed her body fully against his\* One way or another, she had to distract him long enough.

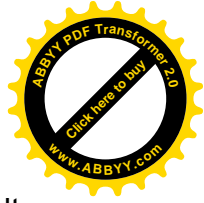
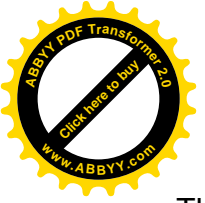
The ring was growing warm around her ringer. She hoped to God that meant it was working.

He moaned into her mouth. Something about the note of perverted excitement in the sound made Jane’s skin crawl. You’d better work, ring, she thought grimly. This bastard’s about to kill me.

Suddenly the ring spiked so unbearably hot she jerked back with a startled yelp.

“What?” Druas gasped. He looked down at himself in shock. “My suit! What did you ... ?”

As she stared up at him, his eyes widened with stunned realization. He looked down at her, his face contorting in fury. He lifted one hand. “You little b—“



The crash of rending wood and a roar of raw male rage drowned out the rest of the insult. Jane fell back as Baran barreled into the killer so hard the impact carried both men across the room to slam into the wall. The Sheetrock cracked around their bodies.

"I hope you know a good carpenter," Frieka said to her, emerging from the closet as the two men fell to the floor.

His furious partner managed to roll on top and slam his fist into Duras's face. The killer bucked in the Warlord's grip, but Baran ignored his struggles, jackhammering blow after blow into his head.

Then Druas twisted around and got some leverage, sending Baran flying with a kick.

The Jumpkiller rolled to his feet even as the Warlord regained his own. Druas snarled at Jane, "You're going to die for that, you little bitch!"

"No," Baran hit him so hard his head snapped back, spraying blood. "She's not. But you are."

"Oh, she'll die all right." Baran's image wavered around the killer and disappeared, leaving a hulking figure dressed in black scaled armor, a foot-long blade in his hand. "And so will you."

"You may be hell on unarmed women..." The Warlord reached behind his back in a blur of motion and drew Tom's hunting knife from its sheathe at the small of his back. "But I'm neither."

"Oh, this should be good," Frieka said as the two big men began to stalk each other. He moved back toward the doorway. "Come on, let's give 'em some room to play."

Jane stared at him, outraged. "Play, hell. Go help him!"

The wolf shook his head. "Sorry, already got my orders. And they say my first responsibility is to keep you from becoming Jane Kabob."

Frustrated, she growled, but the wolf was right. As long as Baran knew she was relatively safe, he could concentrate on fighting for his life. And distracting him was a very bad idea. Reluctantly she joined Frieka in the hall and poked her head around the doorframe to watch.

The fear and rage were gone.

Now that the battle had begun, all Baran felt was a cool, empty silence filled only with the flicker of Druas's eyes and the pattern his knife described as it moved. The comp whispered a constant stream of sensor data into his brain, but Baran was scarcely aware



of processing it. He was in the killing space, and he wouldn't come out until one of them was dead.

The trouble was, his opponent was wearing armor and he wasn't. That gave Druas a lot more targets to work with, while the suit would turn away all Baran's knife attacks. He only had only two real ways of killing the bastard—either an attack to the eyes or cutting that thick bull throat under the jaw, where the protection of the T~ suit ended.

But Druas was too strong and too fast to make either strike easy. Baran was going to have to wear the bastard down by hammering at him. The suit could absorb penetration impacts, but part of the force still got through. And in riatt Baran could generate a hell of a lot of force. At least for a while.

Unfortunately, he couldn't sustain the berserker state for long before his body ran out of reserves to burn. Too, he'd begin to spike in temperature as the body heat generated by his elevated metabolism overwhelmed the cooling system of his genetically engineered body. He was already streaming sweat, almost steaming as he circled Druas.

"You're not going to be able to save her," the killer hissed, his red eyes burning, the pupils contracted to narrow vertical slits. "She's mine. And I'm going to make you watch while I cut her open and fuck the cooling remains."

Baran's foot whipped out so fast even the mercenary's nano:injected muscles had no time to react. The scything kick slammed into the side of Druas's head and spun him around.

But before Baran could close in on him, the mercenary sed the momentum of the kick to whip around again. His knife flashed out, slicing a bright red path diagonally across Baran's chest.

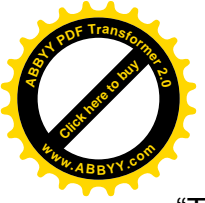
The Warlord snarled and drove his own blade right for one of those red snake eyes. Druas barely jerked back in time to avoid taking the point halfway through his brain.

"You don't really think you'll win, do you?" The killer danced away, blood smearing his face from his busted Up, one eye rapidly swelling shut. Baran was in no better shape. He could feel blood soaking his shirt from the knife wound, and half the side of his head felt numb. Something grated ominously in his chest; his comp whispered of a broken rib. And the room felt cold as an icebox as his body temperature rose.

"Oh, I'll win," Baran growled. "I'll win and I'll mount your head on a pike over Liisa's grave."

"Even if you do, it'll be too late to save your pet bitch," Druas taunted. "Jane's fated to die, Warlord. And if you don't let me kill her, you'll cause a paradox that will kill us all!"

Baran didn't even dignify that lie with a response.



“Think about it, Death Lord. If I knew she was supposed to survive, would I have strolled into this trap? Would I risk causing a paradox?” Druas smiled, cold and ugly. “Eventually she dies. If I don’t kill her, you’ll have to. Isn’t it better to let me do it?”

Baran’s only reply was a blurring attack that sent the killer scrambling back.

Jane stared in horror, then looked down at Freika. “Oh, God, please tell me he’s lying!”

The wolf flicked a dismissive ear. “He’s lying.”

“But why? If he killed me when I wasn’t supposed to die...”

“Jane, Druas doesn’t give a cat’s ass about paradoxes, or he wouldn’t have decided to become Jack the Ripper in the first place. If he’d been wrong, he’d have caused a cataclysm the minute he arrived in Victorian England. So he’s fully capable of trying to trick Baran into letting him kill you, just to see what happens.”

A flurry of motion dragged her eyes back to the combatants. They moved so fast, attacking and blocking with such blurring speed the fight didn’t look quite real. It was as if somebody had decided to stage a road show of *The Matrix* in her bedroom.

But the blood and sweat were real. Droplets of it flew with every impact, splattering everything in the room. And the snarls and grunts of pain were more animal than any soundtrack she’d ever heard.

For a moment they slammed together, body to body, straining against each other. Then there was a quick grunt and twist, and suddenly Baran had Druas on the ground. Each man had one bloody hand wrapped around his opponent’s knife wrist.

Slowly, inexorably, Baran forced his own blade closer to the killers throat, lips peeled back in a horrific snarl.

Then Druas twisted his right arm somehow. Baran’s hand, slick with blood, slipped on the scales of the T-suit. He grunted.

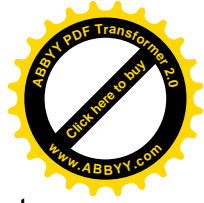
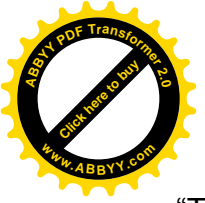
The Jumpkiller shoved Baran’s knife away from his throat and kicked him airborne. Jane and Freika barely ducked aside in time as he rocketed through the hallway door.

Druas barreled through the doorway after him, ramming into him as he lay on the floor. The two tumbled together, writhing as they fought, knives and fists swinging.

“Shit,” Freika growled. “Druas tagged him.”

“Baran?” Jane stared at them, feeling panic rise. “Where?”





“Through the right side.” The wolf looked up at her, pale eyes grim. “He says for me to get you out of here. He’s not going to be able to keep this up, losing that kind of blood.”

“No!” Jane gasped. Now that Freika had pointed it out, she could see the bright red soaking from the wound in Baran’s side as the two men fought. “I’m not leaving him!”

“Maybe not willingly.” The wolf reared and slammed into her, knocking her back against the wall. Before she could straggle free, he sank his teeth into the collar of her shirt and dragged her to the floor, then started hauling her toward the stairs.

“No!” Frantic as a trapped mink, she batted at him, but he scrambled around so he was at her head and kept right on dragging her. “Dammit, Freika, let go!”

“There’s nothing you can do for him, Jane!” the wolf said, his synthesized voice strained. “There’s nothing either one of us can do.”

Situation critical, Baran’s computer whispered.

Fuck, tell me something I don’t know, he thought back, straining to keep Druas’s knife from his throat. The Jump-killer sneered at him, snake eyes blazing.

The damage is too severe for conventional healing. I sent nanounits to clamp the bleeding and begin tissue repair, but you’ll still lose too much blood.

How long before I crash?

Given Druas’s strength, you have forty-eight-point-three seconds of effective combat time left.

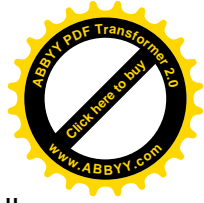
It’ll have to be enough. Blow the reserves, comp.

Inadvisable. Body temperature already too high.

Blow ‘em!

“Bleeding out, Warlord?” Druas panted, struggling to drive the knife into Baran’s chest as he fought to hold it back. “Let’s see if we can speed it up!”

Then the power hit like an explosion of pain and fire, so hot and ferocious it tore a scream from Baran’s throat. The Jumpkiller’s eyes widened as Baran’s hand clamped down convulsively on his knife wrist. Bones grated, crunched. Druas howled in agony as the Warlord’s comp forced his body to pour out every ounce of power it had left, crushing his wrist despite the armor, despite the mercenary’s reinforced skeleton.



Baran thrust Druas's broken arm away so violently the knife spun off to lodge in the wall. Maddened, he slammed his fist directly into the killer's face, once, twice, again. Druas fell back, stunned by the savage blows that jarred his brain even through his reinforced skull.

Baran exploded off the floor, grabbed him by the shoulder, and rammed his fist up into the Jumpkiller's gut so hard he would have slammed Druas into the ceiling if he hadn't had a grip on him. The knife fell from Baran's hand, but he didn't even notice. Frenzied by the biochemical storm racing over him, all he wanted to do was beat his opponent to death with his bare hands.

Halfway down the stairs, still dragging Jane, Freika stopped and stared upward as Baran began pounding Druas like Rocky assaulting a side of beef. "Oh, shit," the wolf said, "he's blown the reserves. If Druas doesn't go down now, Baran's dead."

Jane took advantage of his distraction to jerk away from his teeth, ignoring the ragged sound of her shirt ripping.

"Wait a minute!" The wolf lunged for her pants leg, but she dodged. "Where do you think you're going?"

"To get my gun!" She raced up the stairs with Freika at her heels, slipping past Baran as he methodically pounded his struggling opponent.

As fast as it came, the last of Baran's berserker reserves drained away. Druas's limp body suddenly seemed to weigh more than Jane's truck. Unable to hold him up anymore, Baran staggered back and watched the killer fall in a heap in the hallway floor. Black spots danced in front of his eyes.

Blood pressure dropping, the comp said.

No shit. "Gotta... kill you now," Baran panted, and looked around for the blade he'd had a minute ago.

His eyes fell on something sticking out of the wall. Druas's knife. He wondered vaguely how it got there. He tried to pull it out, but his bloody hand slipped on the hilt. Bracing his other palm on the wall, he fought to pull the blade free. It came loose so suddenly he reeled back, hit the opposite wall, and fell on his ass.

Blinking, he stared at his fallen enemy, who glared back at him with malevolent hate.

"Oh, that's rich," Druas said with a wheezing laugh. He coughed. A bubble of blood formed over his mouth and popped. "You used it all up. You don't have enough left to kill me."

"I do," Jane said, stepping into the hall. She held her father's gun in her hand.



Fear flickered behind Druas's snake eyes before the killer laughed again. "I'm wearing armor, you stupid slut."

"Maybe." Her face cool and grim, she stalked down the hall to stand over him and point the gun at his face. "But you're not wearing anything on your head."

"Won't do you ... any good." He peeled his bloody lips back from his teeth. "My skull's reinforced."

"I'm not aiming at your skull."

Baran blinked, realizing the weapon was pointed at one of the killer's snake pupils.

The gunshot boomed, astonishingly loud in the confined space.

\* \* \*

"Damn," Freika said, watching the body slump sideways to the floor, "I didn't think you'd do it."

"Neither did he." Jane turned and dropped to her knees beside Baran. He looked up at her, his eyes unfocused. They were bright red—not from riatt this tune, but from burst capillaries. She laid a hand against his cheek. His skin was so hot it seemed to burn.

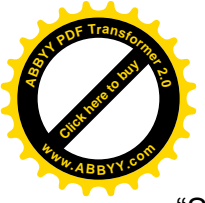
"Damn, your fever must be over a hundred!" she said, alarmed.

"One-oh-three," Freika said. "I'll call 911..." She stood.

A boom from the bedroom shook the house. "Don't bother," Baran said, his voice faint. "I think our ride's here." Jane turned toward the bedroom just as Octopussy darted out at a dead run, fur on end from ears to tail. Without hesitating, the cat hurled herself into her arms. Jane caught the little animal automatically just as a figure appeared in the bedroom door.

"Well, you evidently lived up to your reputation, Warlord," the man began as Jane gaped at him. His skin was an inky black with shimmering blue highlights that was not even remotely human. The darkness stood in stark contrast to the fiery shimmer of red curls tumbling around his ethereal face. "You've completely wrecked this...."

Then the man's metallic gaze fell on her, and he looked every bit as dumbfounded as she felt. "You're alive!" He look a half-step back. "You aren't supposed to be alive!"



“Shit,” Jane said, clutching Octopussy so close the cat began to squirm. “I knew it.”

Baran struggled to focus on the TE agent despite the hallway’s slow revolutions around him. “What do you mean, she’s not supposed to be alive? You told me ...”

“You were supposed to try to keep her alive—you weren’t supposed to succeed!” The agent gave him a wild-eyed look. “You have to kill her now!”

Baran looked at him, feeling even colder and sicker than he had a moment ago. “Fuck off.”

Accurately reading his snarl, the Enforcer looked at Freika, who stood at Jane’s side as she cradled Octopussy in one arm, the gun held awkwardly in the other hand. “Forget it,” the wolf told him. “I wouldn’t even touch her cat.”

The Enforcer squared his shoulders, taking on a grim look. “Then I’ll do it.” He took a step forward.

Jane, standing on the other side of Baran, began to back up toward the stairs. Terror grew in her lovely eyes as she read the menacing intent in the agent’s.

Hell, Baran thought. Give me something, comp. I’ve got to...

No reserves left.

The Enforcer started to step across his sprawled body. Never mind, I’ll use what I’ve got. He lifted one leaden hand, wrapped it around the agent’s ankle and jerked.

With a startled yelp the Enforcer went down as Baran forced his drained body to roll onto hands and knees and scabble after him. He didn’t so much pounce on the agent as fall across him.

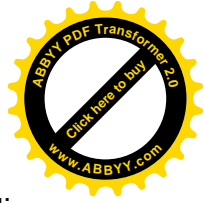
“What the hell are you doing, Arvid?” the Enforcer roared, struggling to escape as the Warlord wrapped his legs around his body and curled an arm across his throat.

“You’re not killing her!” Baran gritted, glad the bastard didn’t have sensors. Otherwise he’d know how close he was to passing out.

“Do you want to cause a paradox! She’s got to die!”

“Did they find a body?” He held on desperately as the Enforcer writhed in his grip. It was a good thing the little bastard was a standard human, or he’d be screwed.

“Yes!” The agent tried to tear loose, instead managing to roll Baran onto his back. The Warlord kept his grip, but it felt too damn good to lie there. He fought his body’s need to collapse as the Enforcer panted, “She had a .38 bullet in her brain!”



Baran felt a spurt of relief as his comp reported the man's bouncing heartbeat. "Never lie to somebody with sensors, asshole. They didn't find a damn thing."

The Enforcer snarled, white teeth flashing against the blue-black of his lips. "All right, you bastard, she disappeared! But she was never seen again—she had to have died."

Baran looked up at Jane, who was staring down at them, frozen. Disheveled, her shirt torn, clutching her cat and the gun she'd used to kill Druas, she'd still never looked more beautiful.

The realization hit him in an explosion of warmth and joy. Somewhere inside him a voice said, Of course. 'That's because she goes back to the twenty-third century with us.' I

Jane's brown eyes widened in astonishment.

"Are you insane?" The agent's voice rose in outrage. "Or do you want to cause a paradox!"

"No, I don't." Baran tightened his grip. "Which is why I want her transported with us. She's supposed to go. It's fated." The black specks were dancing faster before his eyes. Keep me'Conscious, dammit, he ordered his comp. The specks thinned.

The Enforcer tried to wrench himself free. Baran barely managed to tighten his grip in lime. "I'm not going to risk destroying the universe so you can have a piece of ass, Arvid!"

"She's not a piece of ass, you arrogant little prick," Baran snarled, and shifted his hold to wrap his hand around the curve of the other man's skull. "She's the woman I love. And if you don't bring her with us, I'm going to break your neck." Ruthlessly he began to apply pressure, praying his strength wouldn't fail him.

The agent gasped in pain and subsided, panting. Suddenly he went still, staring hard at Jane. "Do you want to be responsible for the destruction of everything?" he asked her in a low, ugly voice. "Are you that selfish?"

She gaped at him. "No, I—"

"Use the gun, Jane," the Enforcer ordered. "End it. Die a hero's death and save us all."

Her pale lips moved. "Commit suicide?"

"No!" Baran roared, knowing he didn't dare turn loose his captive to try to stop her—even assuming he could make it to his feet. "We're supposed to be together!"

Jane clutched the cat and the gun, staring into Baran's wild bloodshot eyes. He was pale as a sheet, blood seeping across the carpet under him, yet the force of his will blazed out at her. It's probably the only thing keeping him conscious, she thought.



“If you cause a paradox, you’ll die anyway,” the Enforcer told her, his metallic eyes narrow and hard. “But you’ll die knowing you killed everyone and everything that ever was.”

Oh, hell. How could she take that kind of risk?

Jane looked down at the gun. It felt heavy and cold in her hand. She wondered once again if her father had used it to kill her mother.

“Don’t do this to me, Jane,” Freika said suddenly.

She blinked and shifted her gaze to his. “What?”

“If you don’t come back with us, Baran won’t return from our next mission. And neither will I. You can see it in his eyes.”

Automatically Jane looked at Baran. There was such desperate pleading on his face, she felt her chest clench.

“Please, Jane,” he said. “I love you.”

“Love?” the Enforcer sneered. “He’s off his head, high on riatt and blood loss. He’s an assassin—what the hell does he know about love?”

Jane straightened. “You’d be surprised.” She lifted the gun and pointed it at the Enforcer. “Take us to the future. Now.”

The agent stared at her, incredulous. Then his eyes narrowed. “Kill me, then!” he spat. “Unlike you, you selfish little bitch, I’m not willing to risk a paradox to save my own life.”

“We won’t be causing a paradox!” Baran snarled, tightening his grip on the agent’s jaw and bending his neck painfully back. “I know I will not allow Jane to die, so therefore she lives, so therefore”—he forced the Enforcer’s head back another inch, tearing a gasp of pain from the man—“you’re going to Jump us all back to our own time.”

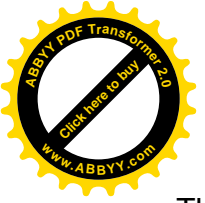
“I’m not Jumping you anywhere!”

“Do you know the sound a man’s neck makes when it snaps?” Baran said, his tone so cold even Jane felt a chill. “I do.”

The Enforcer’s eyes rolled in their sockets. Jane could have sworn he paled even under that midnight-blue skin.

Suddenly he went limp. “All right, dammit. Let me go, and I’ll do it.”

“Uh-uh.” Baran jerked his head another inch. “Now.”



The agent closed his metallic eyes and reached for the belt of his suit.

“Come on, Jane,” Freika said, stepping closer to the two. “Gather around and brace yourself.”

Hurriedly she joined them, still clutching Octopussy and the gun. The cat squirmed. She dropped the weapon on the carpet and tightened her grip on her pet.

A wave of hot, burning energy suddenly slapped into her, as if she was standing too close to a furnace. Jane tensed, staring wildly down into Baran’s wild, determined stare.

Just before the energy beam hit, she heard Freika say, “But do you have to bring the cat?”

Then the beam hit. As she felt it rip her apart, Jane screamed, “Baran, I love you!”

The beam assembled Jane inside out.

Or at least, her stomach thought it had. Her guts went into such instant, violent rebellion that she dropped Octopussy and fell on her knees, clamping both hands to her mouth to avoid throwing up. Purple starburst explosions filled her vision until she couldn’t see a damn thing. Desperately she fought to hang on to her stomach contents and remain upright.

She almost lost the battle when the starbursts faded and she realized she was looking at Druas’s body. His one remaining eye stared sightlessly at her.

“Well,” Frieka said, sounding a little strained himself, “we’re all still alive. Guess Jane was supposed to come here after all. Huh, Enforcer?”

The agent replied in a foreign language, but from the tone, she could guess the content. Dazed, she watched him tear himself out of Baran’s arms, get to his feet and stomp away, armor creaking, still snarling alien curses.

The Warlord didn’t move.

Looking down at him, Jane froze in horror. Like Druas’s, his eyes were fixed and empty, staring at the ceiling.

“Baran!” she screamed.

Life flooded his gaze again. He sucked in a desperate breath and began, weakly, to cough.

“Shit,” Freika said. “Medtech! Oh, hell, wrong language.” He paused, then bellowed something incomprehensible.



Glancing around wildly, Jane saw no one around. They were lying in the middle of a long, curving corridor. “Did anybody hear you?”

“They’re coming.”

“They’d better.” She scrambled to her lover’s side as he lay far too still on the floor, staring up at the ceiling with eyes that didn’t seem to track.

“Baran?” Jane reached for his hand. In contrast to his earlier blazing heat, his fingers were ice cold. Slowly his head turned until he could look at her, but there was no recognition at all in his gaze. “Baran, it’s me,” she said urgently.

His expression warmed. His lax grip tightened. “Jane?”

She clamped her fingers over his, praying the contact would keep him with her. “What can I do? How can I help you?”

“Be ... fine.” His voice was slurred, weak. “Gotta...” His eyes slid closed.

“Freika!” Jane looked at the wolf desperately.

“The medtechs’ll be here in a second.” He moved over to look down at his partner. “They’ll save him.” He didn’t sound nearly as confident as she’d like.

“It looked like he was dead,” she said, squeezing the big, limp hand. “And he feels so cold.”

“Shock,” Freika told her. “And he probably was dead, at least for a few seconds. I’ve seen it happen before. His comp jolted his heart back into beating.”

“Jesus. This happens a lot?”

“Well,” the wolf said, sounding grim, “not a lot.”

Running footsteps drew Jane’s head around. A woman and a man towing something that looked uncomfortably like a floating glass coffin raced down the hallway toward them.

The woman snapped incomprehensible orders at them, waving her free hand. Reluctantly Jane stood and moved back with Freika so the two technicians could reach Baran.

The pair positioned the floating transparent box over his lax body. It began to lower over him like a lid. The moment it had him covered, it flooded with some kind of pink vapor before rising again, lifting Baran with it.





A glowing trid display appeared in midair over him, displaying what was evidently a schematic of Baran's body. Ominous sections were colored bright red. The two medtechs stepped in close and started touching parts of the trid with their fingers.

Jane watched nervously. At her feet Octopussy meowed pitifully. She bent absently and picked the cat up. The little animal felt warm and solid in her arms.

The skin of one of the medtechs was a bright emerald green. His hands seemed misshapen; she realized he had twelve fingers.

"Is he an alien?" she asked Frieka in a low voice, cuddling Octopussy.

The wolf snorted. "Nan. If he was, he'd look much weirder than that."

"Oh."

The glass box began to float away. Automatically Jane started to follow. The female medtech turned toward her and gestured, her tone sharp. Jane shot a questioning look at Frieka. The wolf said something back to the medtech in the same language. The woman replied over her shoulder as she followed the box off down the corridor.

"What was that all about?"

"They're taking him to the ship's hospital. He's going to be in regeneration for the next five or six hours. Then we've got a mission."

"A mission?" Jane gaped at him. "The man was dead a second ago, and they're going to just patch him up and send him back into combat?"

The wolf glanced up at her as he started down the hall in the opposite direction from the one the medtechs had taken. "Well, yeah."

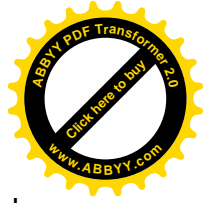
"That sucks."

Freika flicked an ear. "Not compared to the situation we were in ten minutes ago."

Ten minutes ago, Jane remembered, they were all back on Earth trying to keep the Enforcer from executing her while wondering if the alternative would destroy the universe. "Okay," she said, "you've got me there."

Sitting on Baran's bunk several hours later, Jane looked up just as a muscular blond Warlord strode by, stark naked. Catching her stare of wide-eyed amazement, he looked puzzled, then glanced down at himself. When he realized what she was gazing at, the grin he gave her needed no translation whatsoever.

"I," Freika announced, "am going to tell."



Covering her burning cheeks with both hands, Jane muttered, "I'm in love, not blind. Jesus, Baran meant it when he said his people are casual about nudity."

The wolf yawned, revealing impressive fangs. "No reason they shouldn't be. You all look alike anyway."

"That was a racist comment. Or maybe a speciesist comment. I'd think somebody from this time would be more..."

Resting his head on his paws, Freika flicked an ear at her. "You're babbling."

Jane sighed. "Going nuts does that to me. Shouldn't Baran be back by now?"

"Evidently not, since he isn't."

She eyed him as he lay on the bunk beside her. "You're disgustingly literal, aren't you?"

The wolf lifted his head and eyed her. "And you're terrified out of your mind. It's going to be all right, Jane."

"Yeah, right." Absently she stroked Octopussy as the cat coiled in a neurotic, shivering ball in her lap, a thoroughly traumatized Siamese. Jane knew just how she felt.

They sat in a huge round room filled with what looked like several hundred bunks. All around them, people talked, did incomprehensible things with strange bits of equipment, or watched trid images that danced in the air.

Jane had never felt so lonely surrounded by so many people. The fact that they all spoke a language she didn't understand wasn't exactly a help, either.

Jane sighed. Her eyes fell on a brawny blond woman on the bunk opposite hers. The woman—a Warfem?—seemed to be making some kind of adjustments to something that looked like a weapon. For all Jane knew, it was actually the twenty-third century equivalent of a Salad Shooter.

"I'm three hundred years in the future, I don't speak the language, and two of my only three friends in the entire universe have tails," Jane said.

Freika grunted. "Do not include me in any category with that cat."

"Methinks the wolf protests too much." She grinned suddenly, unable to resist the opportunity to twit him, if only to distract herself from her misery. "You know, back home we say that anybody who professes to hate somebody that bad must have a secret...."

"Forget it."



“Well, you know what Freud would say about all those jokes about eating pussy.”

Freika gave her a look of such horrified revulsion it was all she could do not to fall off the bed laughing. “Sick. You’re just sick. God, we’ve brought a pervert to the future.”

She snickered.

“You take it back.”

“I’m just saying—“

“Get away from me!” He jumped off the bed. “I can’t believe you’d even think something like that. That’s not natural!”

Jane hugged the cat and collapsed into giggles. Octopussy gave her an offended meow and struggled free before leaping onto an empty bunk.

“See?” Freika glared at her. “Even the cat is disgusted.”

“Freika loves puss-y,” she singsonged in a schoolyard chant, unable to resist. “Freika loves—“

“Here I hurry back, thinking you’ll be heartsick with worry,” interrupted a deep male voice, “and instead I find you in hysterics. I’m hurt.”

“Baran!” Jane threw herself off the bed and into his arms.

“Just in time,” the wolf growled, glaring at her. “You can hold her down while I bite her.”

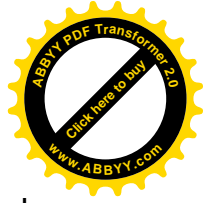
“Actually, I was planning to hold her down while I bite her,” Baran said, pulling her tightly against him.

He felt so big and hard and safe. She burrowed into him, inhaling his clean male scent. No blood, no dirt, just Baran. Drawing back slightly, she looked him over anxiously. No wounds, either. “Boy, medicine in this time is amazing.”

“As long as you’re not dead for too long, yeah.” He looked down at her, searching her face with hot, dark eyes. “God.”

Then she was plastered against him, and he was kissing her with a passion that seemed to singe the roots of her hair. She moaned against his ravenous mouth and twined her body around his, arms around his neck, legs circling his waist.

“Chi di rath ki, Baran!” a strange voice called, and laughed.



“Roughly translated, that means ‘Get a room,’” Freika told them. “Though personally, I wouldn’t want to be alone with her, considering what a deviant she is.”

They ignored him.

Jane finally came up for air while he strung nibbling kisses along her collarbone. “Isn’t there somewhere we can go where we won’t have a fascinated audience?”

“Yeah.” Baran got in a last nibble and lifted his head reluctantly. “Unfortunately, we don’t have time to go there. Freika and I have to go kill Jutka.”

“Now?” She drew back to study him in dismay. She realized he was dressed in some kind of futuristic black body armor. “But you just got out of the hospital, or sickbay, or whatever they call it here.”

“There’s a war on, Jane,” Baran told her grimly. “And victory will be a lot easier with the general dead.”

New anxiety attacked her. What if something happened to him? They finally had a future together, and now he had to risk it again.

But one of the things she loved about Baran was his devotion to duty. She knew she had to let him do his job, even when it terrified her. Fighting the impulse to, cling harder, she pulled away from him and straightened her shoulders. “So kill the creep and hurry back.”

He grinned, eyes lightening. “Believe me, I’m going to wrap this thing up as quickly as I can.” He reached into one of the pouches attached to his belt and pulled out a small object. “By the way, I’ve got something for you.” He took her hand and put it in her palm. “Had a hell of a time getting my hands on one. Finally just ordered the ship to synthesize it for me.”

Jane opened her fingers and studied the small, curving piece of gold. “It’s ... nice.” What the hell was it?

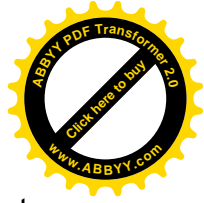
“It’s a personal comp,” he told her, taking it back from her and taking her chin in one hand. Tilting her head, he slipped the little device around her ear so it rested snugly against her skull. “When I get time, I’ll re-program it for English. Then it’ll be able to teach you Galactic Standard.”

“Oh!” Jane brightened. “That’s neat. How does it...?”

He winced. “Hell, they’re calling us. Freika...”

“Yeah, I’m ready,” the wolf said, moving to join him.

“When will you be back?”



“As soon as we can.” Baran dragged her close again for another hug. Something about the ferocity of it told her he was worried.

Suddenly she remembered Freika referred to the job he and Baran did as “suicide missions.” She lightened her grip, feeling her heart leap in fear. “You come back to me,” she said, her voice low and hard. “I lived for you, Baran Arvid. Now you live for me.”

He drew away and looked down at her, his gaze just as determined as she felt. “I will.” He turned his head, as if hearing a voice she couldn’t. “I’ve got to go.”

Baran turned and strode off down between the bunks, Freika trotting at his heels. Jane watched them go, feeling forlorn. “Bye,” she whispered.

At the other side of the room, the doors slid closed behind them.

She sat down. Octopussy crept out from under the other bunk and jumped into her lap. Gathering the cat against her, she settled back to wait.

Something loud startled Jane awake. She jerked upright on Baran’s bunk and looked around, blinking hard. She couldn’t see the source of the noise, and she had no idea what the hell it was. A warning of some kind?

But none of the people moving around the room reacted. Blinking, she fell back on the bunk and scrubbed her hands hard over her sandy eyes. Her heart still thumped hard from surprise.

Baran was still nowhere to be seen. Where was he? Was he back? Had he been hurt again?

Was he dead?

Calm down, she told herself sternly. Don’t borrow trouble.

As she sat there curled in a ball, Octopussy suddenly jumped onto the mattress. She startled. “Damn, cat, don’t do that to me.”

The Siamese looked at her and meowed plaintively. She sounded hungry. Come to think of it, Jane wouldn’t mind a bite or two, either.

And to make a bad situation worse, she needed to use the bathroom desperately. Unfortunately, she had no idea where it was—or even how to use twenty-third-century plumbing.

He’s not going to come back, her father’s ghost whispered. You’ll be stuck here, unable to speak the language, knowing no one, with no means to support yourself.



Jane felt the rise of helplessness. It was bitterly familiar.

Incompetent. She was so damned incompetent. She'd stranded herself in a time long after everything and everybody she knew had disappeared, without a way to meet even her own most basic needs. And the man she loved was God knows where, fighting and perhaps even dying while she sat in bed and did nothing.

Incompetent, whispered her father's ghost.

So how did I kill Jack the Ripper?

Jane straightened, remembering the moment when she'd looked into those snake eyes and pulled the trigger.

If I'm so incompetent, how did I trap the most infamous serial killer in history, deliver him to Baran, and finish him off afterward?

For once, her father's ghost made no reply.

Jane swung her legs off the bed and stood. She could, by God, find a fucking toilet and figure out how to use it.

She looked around until her eyes fell on the brawny blond in the opposite bunk. This time the woman was working on what looked like a futuristic suit of armor, the parts of which were scattered all over her bed.

She'd know where to find a bathroom. The problem was, of course, communication.

Hell with it. Jane would figure it out as she went along.

She stepped over to the woman's bunk as the Warfem looked up at her in surprise.

"I need to go to the bathroom," Jane announced, "Can you help me?"

"Ke ta?"

"Bathroom." Ignoring her instinctive embarrassment, she began making gestures, a couple of which felt remarkably lewd addressed to an utter stranger.

The woman, however, didn't look the least discomfited. An expression of understanding entered her shimmering cobalt eyes. "Aaah. Sherirqi daritho an dak. Av ka." She stood up and started across the room.

Jane followed her.

So much for you, William Colby, she thought. I'm done with you now.



She was three hundred years from the life she knew, and the man she loved was off trying to kill a tyrant. But suddenly Jane Colby felt like dancing.

Baran gulped a bottle of Charge as he strode down the corridor, Freika trotting at his heels. The drink was obscenely sweet, but it was loaded with all the nutrients his depleted body needed after that extended session of riatt.

The Xerans had damn near had his ass that time. He'd barely made it off the base before they discovered Jutka's body, dead with a neat beamer hole in his forehead. If it hadn't been for the knowledge that Jane was waiting back on the ship, Baran might have ended up taken prisoner.

But he'd been damned if he'd die and leave her alone and friendless, unable even to speak Standard. He'd been determined to get back to her, no matter what he had to do.

So he'd killed a Xeran transport crew, stolen their craft, and roared back to the ship, ducking and darting through Xeran fire in the greatest display of piloting skill he'd ever given in his life.

Now he was finally back home, and all he wanted was to feel her warm and silken body in his arms.

"She's probably starving," he said to Frieka. "I should have made sure she had something to eat before I left. That was thoughtless. Hell, I should have made sure she knew how to find the head."

"And a litter box," the wolf said. "That stupid cat's probably shit all over the ship by now. The captain's gonna shoot her furry ass right out the airlock."

Baran looked down at his partner and grinned. "Why, Frieka—you actually sound concerned."

The wolf glared up at him defiantly. "All I'm saying is, Jane wouldn't like it if they kakked her kitty cat. You know how she is about that useless little hairball."

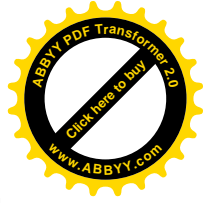
Baran poked his tongue into his cheek. "Uh-huh. So you're not actually concerned about the cat."

"Of course not."

"Right."

"Why would I be? It's weak and stupid and it's a cat."

"And it's cowardly."



“Well, no. It got in a couple of really good rakes across my nose once, and I outweigh it by at least ninety kilos. You can’t really say it’s—“ The wolf broke off and eyed him suspiciously. “You’re grinning at me. If you’re getting ready to imply I have some kind of disgusting sexual intentions toward that cat, I’m going to bite you.”

“Well, of course not,” Baran said honestly.

“Good.” Freika sniffed and trotted ahead of him. “Step it up. They’re probably hungry.”

But when they walked into the dormitory deck, Baran realized his bunk was empty. His heart jammed into his throat.

“Where the hell are they?” Frieka said.

“Let’s try the mess. Maybe somebody thought to give them something to eat.”

\* \* \*

They found Jane sitting over the remains of a meal with T’May Vajo. Baran felt that shiver of unease any man feels when he sees the woman he loves with a former bed partner. He pasted a bright expression on his face and walked over to join them.

Jane looked up at his approach. Her face lit with such joy he had to grin right back. “Baran!” She leaped up and threw herself into his arms.

Closing his eyes, he basked in the sensation of her body pressing against his, warm and solid and safe. His universe settled silently into place.

“Good Goddess,” T’May drawled in Standard, cuddling Octopussy in her lap, “The Death Lord has been domesticated.”

He considered flipping her off, but realized she wouldn’t understand the twenty-first century gesture.

Instead he whispered into Jane’s ear, “God, I missed .you.” His voice sounded hoarse.

“Yeah,” she said, equally strained. “Me, too.”

They fell into a mutual famished kiss, drinking in the sensation of holding each other again, tasting each other again. Being together again.

Dimly he heard Freika’s voice. “So how are you, T’May?”





“Holding steady. Are they always like this?”

“Pretty much”

“It’s kind of... sweet. That, or nauseating.” She sighed. “So much for my fond hopes.”

Reluctantly Baran drew away from Jane’s mouth, silently promising his body it would get more of her very soon. “Hello, T’May,” he said in Standard. “Thanks for taking care of her for me.”

T’May waved a hand. “My pleasure. She picks up things fast.” She pointed to one of the colorful mounds on her plate and said to Jane, “Tere va.”

“Unidentifiable vegetable, presumably alien,” Jane said to Baran in English. “Tastes kind of like asparagus with a hint of tangerine.”

T’May shook her head. “I don’t know what she just said, but it sounded like two cats fighting in a sack.”

“That’s English for you,” Freika said.

“So,” Jane said to Baran, “y’all used to sleep together.”

He choked. “You discussed my romantic past between trying to learn Standard?”

She shrugged. “I could tell by the way she says your name.”

“You,” Baran said, “are frightening.”

“The relationship wasn’t all that serious though,” Jane decided. “At least from your end.”

He lifted a brow. “What makes you say that?”

“You don’t look panicky enough.”

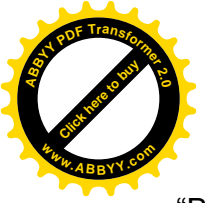
“I’ll take it back—you’re not frightening.”

“No?”

“You’re terrifying.”

She nodded, satisfied, and curled her arms tighter around his neck as she settled against him. “Good. Remember that.”

He felt a wicked grin steal over his face. “And maybe you should remember that so am I.” He bent and scooped her neatly into his arms, barely feeling the weight.



“Baran!” Jane protested, laughing. “What are you doing?”

“You’ll see.” He looked at T’May as she watched them with amusement, scratching Octopussy behind the ears. “Excuse us. I feel the need to show my future bondmate another area of the ship.”

“Like, say, the pleasure chambers on the recreation deck?”

“Oh, yeah.” He laughed and headed for the doorway, Jane kicking her feet in mock protest.

“So,” Frieka said to T’May just before the door closed behind him, “I haven’t had gevalope steak in a week. Mind carrying the plate for me?” To the cat he added, “I may even let you have a bite, you primitive hairball.”

“You know,” Jane said to Baran as he carried her down the corridor, “I am capable of walking.”

“That’s true.” He kept going.

“You could put me down.”

“I could.” He smiled down at her, so handsome he made her breath catch. “But I’m too busy establishing erotic male dominance.”

She settled happily back against his muscular chest. “Kinky.”

He laughed wickedly. “Oh, love, you haven’t seen my idea of kinky yet.”

Jane lifted a brow at him. “This doesn’t involve a riding crop or a rubber chicken or anything, right?”

“Certainly not.”

“Good.”

“I have no idea where to even get a rubber chicken.”

She stiffened. “Baran!” Her tone of outraged warning made him laugh.

Until, as he looked down at her, the humor was replaced by something warmer, softer. “God, Jane,” he said in a low voice, “I love you.”

She blinked at the moisture welling in her eyes and cleared her throat. “We’re in serious danger of getting gooey here.”



“Well,” he said, stopping before a door that obediently opened, “not exactly gooey. More like hot, wet and ...” He tossed her into the air. “Creamy.”

Jane yelped as she landed right in the midst of something that sank under her weight, then rebounded so gently she barely bounced. Whatever it was immediately cuddled around her, feeling warm and far too friendly to be inanimate. She struggled to sit up as Baran stepped into the room, the door closing with a whisper behind him.

“What the hell is this?” she demanded, eyeing her surroundings warily.

She lay on the biggest bed she’d ever seen in her life. In fact, there was no room for anything else in the chamber. The mattress stretched from wall to wall, except for a small space next to the door just big enough to allow entry.

The bed itself was covered with a thick silken blanket that reminded her of a comforter. She ran her hand over it cautiously.

“Not quite what I have in mind,” Baran said. “How about...”

To her astonishment, the comforter began to grow hair. Jane yelped and recoiled, but before she could leap up, the whole thing had morphed into a huge expanse of black fur. She touched it warily. It was as soft as a kitten’s pelt, though of course no kitten could ever grow that big.

She didn’t think.

“It’s not... real is it?” Half-hypnotized by the sensation, Jane found herself stroking the comforter/pelt/whatsit.

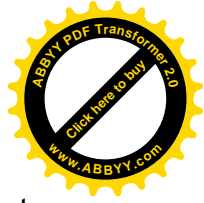
“You mean, am I holding some poor alien hostage and forcing it to grow fur on command?” Baran asked dryly. “No, it’s not real. It’s a... Well, you don’t have a word for it. Call it a machine.”

“Damn.” She petted the silken pelt again. “You just want to get naked and roll around on it.”

“That’s the idea.” There was a note of lustful anticipation in his voice that made her look up. And blink.

He’d stripped off his armor while her attention was diverted. And he was definitely happy to see her.

“Urn.” She licked suddenly dry lips. “Hi.”



“Yes, I am.” He put one brawny knee on the bed-thing and climbed onto it. All that fascinating muscle rippled under smooth, tanned skin as he crawled toward her. “I’m also hard, thick, and long.”

“I’ve noticed that about you.” Cautiously she backed up on the bed. His expression was distinctly predatory, and it made her nervous.

“You, on the other hand, are small, creamy and tight.” He gave her a feral smile. “Not to mention overdressed.”

Jane swallowed, feeling something melt deep inside her in the heat of his stare. “And what are you planning to do about all that?”

“Actually,” he told her softly, “I thought I’d rip your clothes off and fuck you to a screaming orgasm.”

She blinked again. Swallowed. “That’s fair.”

“Glad you approve.” He pounced.

Jane yelped, discovering he’d meant the “rip your clothes off” part literally. “Hey, cut that out!” she protested as he shredded the rest of her top with the gleeful ruthlessness of a small boy attacking a Christmas present. “What am I supposed to wear?”

“Sleek, lovely Jane Colby skin,” he told her, jerking the cups of her bra apart. “Always in style, no matter the era.”

Ducking his head, he fastened his hot mouth on one eager nipple. In seconds he had her squirming from the pleasure he inflicted with nibbling teeth and swirling tongue.

Finally he sat back on his heels, grabbed the waistband of her jeans, and jerked. The tough denim stood no chance at all against his ruthless Warlord strength.

Neither did the delicate silk of her panties.

She was still gasping when he took her thighs in both big hands, spread her legs, and started driving her insane with his mouth.

God, it felt good. That tongue of his should come with a warning label. She writhed helplessly, gasping, as he fluttered the very tip of it over her most tender flesh, driving her mercilessly toward an orgasm.

“Stop!” she gasped, unable to take any more.

“I don’t think so,” he growled, and gave her another long, long lick.



“No!” she panted. “I want... I want...”

That got his attention. He stopped and looked at her, leaning his face against her thigh. “What? Anything you want me to do, I’ll do.” Turning his head, he gave her thigh a tempting little nibble.

“I want to be on top!” she gasped.

He lifted a brow. “Of course.”

“No, I mean ...” She drew in a deep breath and managed to bring her desperate pants under control. “I want to be in charge this time. Dominant.”

He lifted his head in surprise, then shrugged. “Your wish is my command.”

Jane managed a cheeky grin. “That’s the idea.” She sat up. “Lie down on your back. I want to tie you up this time.”

Because she was looking directly at him, she saw his eyes flicker. “All right.”

That moment of unease reminded her of that horrific story he’d told her of being paralyzed while the Xeran tortured him. They hadn’t discussed it, but she strongly suspected the abuse had been even worse than he’d let on.

And yet, he was willing to allow himself to be bound if she wanted it that way.

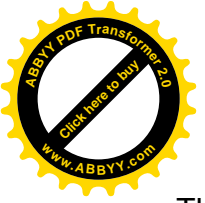
“Just... extend your hands over your head,” she said, hastily modifying the game. “Grab one wrist, and keep them there. Don’t let go.” She watched while he obeyed, slowly stretching his big body out, assuming the position she directed. His cock bobbed, its violently blushing head touching his belly button. She eyed it hungrily, remembering all the times he’d used his mouth with such hot, devilish skill.

It was her turn now.

Jane rolled onto her knees and moved to straddle the powerful arch of his chest. The muscle felt rock-hard between her thighs as she let her weight settle on her heels.

He looked up at her, his eyes shuttered. Lust made his pupils glow bright red as a hungry smile teased the corners of his lips. Delicately she reached out to thumb his tiny dark nipples with both hands. He caught his breath. She smiled.

Gently, slowly, Jane started running her fingertips over his skin, exploring the ridges and hollows of his powerful body, savoring the outlines of the hard male shapes. She combed her sharp nails through his silken chest hair, gently raking him with the tips. He made a rough, hungry sound.



That became a muffled snort of laughter as her delicate touch found ‘the broad hollows of his armpits. He squirmed. She grinned, wickedly delighted. “Ticklish?” she purred.

He shot her a warning look. “Not as much as you are.”

“Uh-uh-uh!” she chided. “Thou shalt not threaten Mistress Jane. She doesn’t like it.” Rising from her crouched position, she swung off him—but only so she could turn her attention on his deliciously massive cock. “Mmmm.” She reached out and took it in one hand. He was so thick, her fingers couldn’t close completely around the base. “What have we got here?”

“What do you think?” he asked in a rough growl.

“I think,” she said, “it looks edible.” Lowering her head, she ran her tongue gently up the flushed shaft, stopping just at the head.

He actually quivered.

Jane grinned, relishing the sense of erotic power she felt. Slowly she began to lick the thick rod, stopping now and then to nibble gently at the thick ropy veins that ran up its length.

“Jane,” Baran gasped, and started to reach for her.

“Hands!” she snapped, fighting to sound stern instead of breathless and aroused. “Did I say you could move?”

He groaned and reluctantly stretched his arms over his head again.

She rewarded him for his obedience by gently cupping his full, tight balls, stroking and cuddling them as she worked him over with her mouth. She could feel his big body shudder with each slow lick and nibble.

And she loved every minute of it.

Finally she lifted her head, opened her mouth, and took his cock inside. His heartfelt groan of pleasure made her lips curl around his width. Bobbing her head, she squeezed his balls with careful delicacy.

“Jane!” he gasped, and began to pump his hips in short, shallow thrusts.

She felt so wet, so desperate to have him strong and hard and deep inside her. But first, she wanted to show him what she was capable of.

Baran clamped his right hand hard around his left wrist to keep from reaching down, grabbing her, and plunging himself in to the hilt. She felt so damn good as her mouth



moved up and down over his shaft, sucking the sensitive head and rolling her tongue over it as though it were something juicy and she wanted to draw out every last sweet drop.

He groaned in need.

He was far too close to just shooting right down her throat. Briefly, he considered telling his computer to help him back off the pleasure, but it just felt too good to give up. Instead he gasped, “Jane, I can’t last too much longer!”

She lifted her head, depriving his cock of her hot, sweet mouth. “No?” She smiled slowly.

Baran wanted to howl. “Jane!” Goaded, he started to grab her.

Her brown eyes flashed. “Hands!”

He considered showing her just what he could do with those hands. But God, it felt so good lying here, letting her use that incredible mouth on him. He growled and clamped a grip on his wrist again, suspecting he was leaving bruises. He didn’t give a damn.

But instead of bending over him, Jane rose to her knees and straddled him again. She took his aching cock in those small, soft fingers and aimed it upward at her entrance. Feeling velvet lips even softer than the fur he lay on, he shuddered.

Then slowly, taking her time, she slid down over him, one bare fraction at a time.

She was so wet, so tight.

He tossed his head on the pillow. She came on, taking more and more, plunging in him by fractions into the sweetest heat he’d ever known. Until, at last, her silken little butt rested on his thighs.

“There,” she said. She was wearing that siren’s smile again, but her eyes were very wide. As tight as she was to him, he must feel huge to her. He smiled smugly.

He lost the grin in a hurry as she began to rise, slowly, slowly, silk and cream and fire.

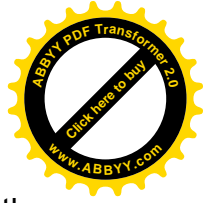
Too slowly.

He needed to plunge deep.

But her cheeks were flushed and lovely, and her eyes sparkled with triumph. He knew she relished being in control, feeling him yield, for once, to her.

He could stand this.

Maybe.



Still, Baran couldn't resist arching his spine, lifting her on his pelvis. She braced both hands on his tightly laced abdomen and threw her head back. Dark curls slid around her shoulders. Her pale, perfect breasts lifted and fell with her quick breathing. Her nipples were dark pink and stiffly erect.

"Let me taste you," he demanded hoarsely.

With a soft, arousing moan, she bent forward until Baran could reach one exquisite tip. He suckled it, caught halfway between the pleasure of her taste and the frustration that she'd had to rise half off his shaft to reach his mouth. Her hair tumbled around his head in a sweet silken cloud.

Suddenly she wrapped her arms around his head, gathering his hair into fierce little fists. "For a while there, I was afraid I'd lost you," she said. "I was afraid they'd taken you away."

He released her nipple and encircled her body with his arms in a hard, comforting hug. "You'll never lose me. I'll always come back to you."

Then he rolled her over on her back and plunged his cock in to the hilt.

It was all Jane could do not to scream as Baran began riding her. His strokes were long and strong and powerful, yet she had the impression he was carefully gauging their depth and force to make sure he wouldn't hurt her.

He'd taken her before, of course, but this was different. Before he'd claimed her, overwhelmed her. This time he seemed to be giving himself to her with every hot, mind-blowing plunge. With a whimper of pleasure, she lifted her legs and wrapped them around his muscular ass, opening herself, surrendering herself.

Returning his gift.

His gaze met hers. His eyes were blazing again, but the fire no longer seemed alien. There was too much love in them.

By rights, her own should be glowing right back at him.

"Jane," he said, his voice low, intense. "I love you."

"I love you," she gasped. Such common words, such simple words, but she realized suddenly she'd never really felt them, never really meant them, until this moment.

And she'd never felt so loved in return. Never been so loved in return.

Then he drove in his deepest thrust yet, and threw her headlong into fire. She screamed, barely aware of his simultaneous roar.





Writhing together, they tumbled into heat and light.

Jane lay draped over Baran's damp, heaving chest, limp as a scarf. Her entire body still twitched and vibrated like a plucked violin string from the violence of her climax.

Baran had one arm wrapped around her. Judging from its weight, he felt just as wrung out as she did. She sighed, aware of a niggle of uncertainty. "Where are we going to go from here?"

"Before I came down," he said softly, "I told Command I wouldn't be taking any more wet missions. General Jeffers offered me a command post."

She lifted her head to look up into his eyes. "That's wonderful!"

Baran shrugged. "He'd mentioned it before, but I'd always turned him down. I had too many monsters to kill."

Jane smiled and cuddled into him. "But all the monsters are dead now."

He closed his eyes. "Yes. We got 'em all."

They lay together another long moment, deliciously content. Finally she roused herself enough to ask, "What about Frieka?"

"He'll be my aide. We've been together too long to break up."

She took a deep breath and expressed the fear that had been lurking at the back of her mind. "And what about me? I don't know a damn thing about this time."

"You'll learn. You're up to the challenge."