

The Morcai Battalion: Invictus

Susan Kyle

For almost three years Dtimun, the enigmatic and mysterious Cehn-Tahr commander of the Morcai Battalion, has been at war not only with the Rojok Dynasty, but also with his feisty Medical Chief of Staff, Dr. Madeline Ruszel. Now a surprising visitor from the future has charged them with the rescue of the enemy Rojok, Field Marshal Chacon. To ensure success, both Madeline and Dtimun must make personal sacrifices and attempt a dangerous mission behind enemy lines. Sparks fly as each twisting turn throws them closer together than they've ever been before—can they resist acting on desires they have long denied?

If their plans are discovered, they face exile by their own governments and possibly even execution. But if they do not act, the future will see the end of civilization itself....

To all the fine professors at Piedmont College in Demorest, GA, who taught me to look at the world in a new and different way. Especially to those I haven't mentioned in previous dedications, who were my mentors in history and other subjects back when I was a college student in the 1990s: Dr. Ralph Singer and Dr. Al Pleysier in the history department; in anthropology, Dr. Max White; in Japanese, Dr. Jeanne White; in Spanish, Dr. Joe Palmer; and in English, Dr. William Smith, among many others.

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This novel is also dedicated to my family: my husband, James, my son, Blayne Kyle, my daughter-in-law, Christina, my granddaughter, Selena Marie, my sister, Dannis, and her daughters, Amanda Belle Hofstetter and Maggie Cole, my other nieces, Helen Hunnicutt, Valerie Kyle, Kathy Thomas, my nephews Bobby Hansen and

Tony Woodall, Rodney, Paul and James and all their families; my best friend Ann Vandiver (who forced me to take all my manuscripts out of the closet and market them in the first place), my brothers-in-law Doug Kyle and Sonny Merck, my sisters-in-law Kathleen Woodall and Victoria Kyle, my great-nieces and great-nephews, great-great-nieces and nephews and the rest of my wonderful in-laws. And to my extended family, my readers, who keep me going with their affection and loyalty. Love you all.

CHAPTER ONE

Silence, Madeline Ruszel thought, was overrated. In the darkness, all alone, she heard nothing outside the room. It was obviously soundproof. She wondered if the Cehn-Tahr needed perfect silence in order to sleep.

The thought made her curious. Memcache, the home planet of the Cehn-Tahr, had become her home since her rescue from a crash on the planet Akaashe with her military unit. Her former Holconcom commander, Dtimun, had defied his government and her own to save her life. She was recuperating from her injuries, but also facing a new and dangerous challenge once she healed. It was hard to sleep with the most momentous decision of her life hanging over her. She had agreed to a procedure that would change the very structure of her body, and to a mission that might mean her death.

She heard the wind stir outside. She wondered if her former commander had as much trouble sleeping as she was having. This place, this stone fortress, was his home. She was still amazed to find herself here, instead of back on the Tri-Galaxy Fleet's planet, Trimerius, where

wounded military with life-threatening injuries such as hers had been were customarily hospitalized.

She hoped Dtimun wasn't in too much trouble with his government for pulling the Holconcom out of the Tri-Galaxy Fleet in order to rescue her. She, and all the humans aboard the Cehn-Tahr ship Morcai, were now under threat of court-martial and spacing. The Terravegan

ambassador, Aubrey Taylor, had mandated the return of all human military back into Terravegan units, thus forcing the Holconcom's human component to return to its own base. The humans, all fond of Madeline, had refused to comply with the order, which also forbade any attempt to rescue her from Akaashe. So now they, and she, were fugitives from justice. She wished, not for the first time, that ambassadors had less power. They were the equivalent of world leaders in the totalitarian society to which Terravegans belonged.

She drew in a slow breath, delighted to notice that it was not as painful as before. Her injuries would have been fatal, but she'd made a friend during an earlier mission. She saved the life of an elderly Cehn-Tahr soldier. It was he who had come with the Holconcom to Akaashe to get her. It was his powerful mind that had healed her. She owed him a lot.

She shifted in the bed, restless. She wasn't used to inactivity. She'd been in the military since she was very young. At the age of eight, she'd been divisional champion marksman in the sniper company where she'd first served. Her career as a soldier had been satisfying.

So had her career as a doctor, a field that paired diagnostic and surgical functions and specialties in one individual. She was an internist, dealing with Cularian racial types such as Cehn-Tahr and Rojok. She was also medical chief of staff for the Holconcom ship Morcai. Or she had been, until Ambassador Taylor had transferred her to a commando unit in the all-female Amazon Division and put her in harm's way.

It had been a move she hadn't fought. Her helpless attraction to her commanding officer had resulted in a behavior he couldn't control, one which had almost cost

him his career. The Cehn-Tahr had mating behaviors which were violent and quite noticeable. When a human was involved, the consequences would have been deadly. The Interspecies Act forbade any mingling of genetic material between Cehn-Tahr and non-Cularian races, such as humans. Dtimun had often hinted that the Cehn-Tahr—genetically modified to be vastly physically superior to any other race—had many feline behaviors.

Which raised a question in her mind. Did the Cehn-Tahr sleep at night, like humans, or did they subsist on catnaps? She knew they could eat small mammals whole, owing to the striated muscle in their esophagus. But they also had a detached hyoid bone. That meant that they should be able to purr, like the small cats that occupied space on Terravega. That was an interesting idea. She'd heard the commander growl. She'd heard what passed for laughter among the Cehn-Tahr. She'd never heard one of them make a purring sound. Well, just because they had the anatomical structure to make it possible didn't mean they did it, anyway. The commander had intimated that there were still secrets about the Cehn-Tahr that they'd never shared, even with their human crewmates. She wondered what they were.

She got up, a little stiffly, and walked to the window.

With a soft sigh, she opened the shutter-like wings and let in the night breeze. It carried warm breezes with the scent of the same flowers that occupied pots in her bedroom.

No cut flowers here, she'd noticed, and smiled as she decided that Caneese had been responsible for that. Dear Caneese, who took such good care of her. It was comforting to have a woman's touch. Especially for Madeline, who had been raised in a government nursery on Terravega.

She was so unlike Cehn-Tahr females. Madeline was independent and spirited, a capable soldier, a competent doctor. Cehn-Tahr women were forbidden to join the military at all, much less operate as combat soldiers. It had been a point of contention between Madeline and Dtimun. Their battles had become the stuff of legends. And now she was living in his home, about to be bonded with him in preparation for the creation of a hybrid child. The pregnancy would act as a disguise to gain them entrance to the most notorious den of thieves in the three civilized galaxies. And they would do this, risking execution from their respective governments, to save the life of an enemy military commander. All because a traveler from the future, Komak, had told them that civilization would perish if the Rojok Field Marshal Chacon was removed from his position by the murderous Rojok head of state. It was a frightening concept, that the future could depend on a human female and an alien male and a child that Madeline was still not certain was even a possibility.

She wondered how Komak planned to do the genetic manipulation that would make her strong enough that Dtimun could mate with her without killing her. Probably

by injection, she decided, using a biological catalyst to facilitate the combination of human and alien DNA. It was an intriguing scientific theory put to practical use, if he could pull it off. But why not? The Rojoks had developed similar tech, and her Terravegan former captain, Holt Stern, was proof of it. She'd seen him take on Komak and fight him to a draw.

Not that she planned on trying to deck the C.O. She had considered it the day before, listening to him scoff at emotion. But, then, he had good reasons for his opinion.

How terrible, to lose the one woman he'd ever cared about so violently.

She recalled their discussion about the way Cehn-Tahr marked their mates, about the aggression of mating. She would have to mate with the alien commander, if they were to assure the future timeline. A disturbing prospect, but Komak, who was from the future, had insisted that the mission was vital. Pregnancy would be part of their disguise. In all of history, no Cehn-Tahr had ever mated with a human female. It had been considered impossible, due to the uncanny physical strength of the aliens.

It was unsettling to a woman who had spent her entire life as a neuter. She had no idea what to expect, except for what she knew from a medical standpoint. Probably, she decided, it was better not to think too much about it until she had to.

“Why are you out here alone at this hour?”

She jumped at Dtimun's voice. She hadn't heard him approach.

"I couldn't sleep, sir," she stammered.

He was wearing robes, not his familiar uniform. He appeared somber and out of sorts. He moved to her side, looking out over the dark silhouettes of the trees and distant mountains. "Nor could I."

She leaned on the balcony that ran around the porch.

"I'm sorry I was rude, earlier."

"I was rude first."

She laughed to herself, picturing an altercation earlier between her female physician colleague and a Cehn-Tahr officer during which Dr. Edris Mallory had ended up with a pot of soup poured over her head.

"What?"

“I was remembering poor Edris Mallory, covered in soup.”

He laughed, too. “I must confess that I can understand what motivated Rhemun to retaliate after she threw a soup ladle at him. The only thing that saved you in the past from the same fate was the lack of soup at an appropriate time.”

“I know I get on your nerves,” she said without looking at him. “I don’t mean to.”

The soft, high trill of some night bird filled the silence between them.

“I used to come here late at night when I was a child,” he remarked. “There was a myth about a small winged creature with human features that fed on entots fruit. It grows here, in the garden. I escaped my parents and prowled, hunting. I never found the creatures.”

“Every child should have access to myths,” she said in a soft, dreamy tone. “My childhood was an endless series of close quarter drills and weapons instruction from the

time I was old enough to stand.”

He turned and scowled down at her.

In the darkness, his cat eyes gleamed neon-green. She caught her breath and jumped before she could squelch the giveaway reaction.

He wasn't offended. He only laughed. “Almost three years, Ruszel,” he remarked, “and you still have not lost your fear of me in the darkness.”

“I'm very sorry, sir,” she said miserably. “It's just reaction. I can't help it. I'm not afraid of you. Not really.”

His eyes narrowed as he saw her, quite clearly, in the dark. “A polite lie,” he concluded from her expression. “And if you bond with me, there will be new nightmares.”

You may gain a fear of me which you will never lose as

long as you live.”

“I’m a combat veteran, sir,” she reminded him.

“War is familiar to you. I am not.”

“We’ve served together for...”

“You have seen the soldier, not the hunting male,” he said very quietly. “There is a vast difference in the two. Some females have renounced bonding altogether because of their fear of it.”

“Sir, it can’t be all that different from the way humans...join.”

He looked away. “Do you think so?”

“I have studied Cularian anatomy,” she pointed out.

“Including Cehn-Tahr.”

“From information we provided.”

She had a sinking feeling in her stomach. "Sir?"

He was staring out over the darkened landscape.

Silvery creatures with luminous bodies in neon blues and greens alighted on flowers, poignantly beautiful in the light of the two moons of Memcache.

"There are still secrets we keep from you, Ruszel," he said.

She was recalling things. The true strength of the Cehn-Tahr, which he revealed to her so long ago in his office. The weight of him, when he rescued her from a fall off the cliff, odd considering the streamlined outline of his tall body. The comments he made about the terror the Cehn-Tahr kindled in enemies. The fear of the Cehn-Tahr, seemingly out of proportion to what Madeline and the other humans knew of their alien crewmates.

"Your mind is busy," he commented.

"It's like trying to see through smoke, sir," she mused.

"Or mirrors."

“Smoke and mirrors. An apt analogy. We are not what we seem; especially those of my Clan.”

“Why do you keep so many secrets?”

He turned, letting her see his eyes, gleaming green in the darkness. “Out of selfishness, perhaps. If you do not know everything about us, you are less likely to be uncomfortable with us. We are fond of our human companions,” he said simply.

“Fond?”

“You have traits that we find admirable,” he continued. “Courage and tenacity and devotion to duty. For such a fragile species, you are indomitable.”

She smiled. “Thanks.”

He narrowed his eyes as he studied her. “We will risk much, if we go to Benaski Port.”

“We will risk more if we don’t go,” she replied. “I for one would love to see the war end in my lifetime. Without

the Rojok Field Marshal, Chacon, to fight the madness of his tyrannical government, that might not happen.”

“I agree.”

“Do Cehn-Tahr sleep at night, sir?” she asked abruptly.

He laughed. “Why ask such a question?”

“Because I’ve never really seen any of you sleep,” she pointed out. “Even at Ahkmau, the Rojok prison camp, the only reason you slept was because I knocked you out with drugs.” She pursed her lips, frowning. “And those microcyborgs, the ones you said gave you such superior strength...”

“What about them?”

“Why would you need artificial boosters for the strength you already have?”

“You see too much, Ruszel.”

“Or not enough. Depending on your point of view. For instance, the readings I get for your anatomical makeup are quite frequently at conflict with what I learned in medical school.”

“Imagine that,” he mused.

“You have a detached hyoid bone,” she persisted.

He moved a step closer. His eyes that, in the light, could change color to mirror mood, began to take on an odd glitter. “And you wonder if the Cehn-Tahr can purr?”

Her heart jumped. “I...wouldn't have put it in exactly those words.”

“We have many feline characteristics, none of which we ever share with outworlders.”

She backed up a step. It wasn't his manner so much as his posture that suddenly started to set off alarms in her brain. He moved like a stalking cat, silently, with exquisite grace, with a singularity of purpose that was chilling.

“To answer your first question, we do not sleep at night, as humans do. We nap at odd times during the day. At night,” he added in a soft, deep tone, “we hunt.”

“Hunt, sir?” She backed up another step.

He was amusing himself. His eyes were twinkling. “To answer the second question, we can control the output of your computers and the information disseminated through your military medical corps. We are not what we seem. Nor, as you guessed, do I require the microcyborgs to augment my natural strength.”

She backed up one more step.

“As to the last question,” he said, bending down. “Yes, we do purr. When we mate.”

It had just occurred to her that they were alone and she remembered, almost too late, the effect he had on her. He

was attractive to her even when she was afraid of him. Her body was reacting now, pouring out pheromones, saturating his senses. And she had no genetic modifications. Not yet. If she provoked him, here, where they were alone, she would die.

“In an instant,” he gritted, and a low, soft growl issued from his throat.

“Oops,” she murmured. She was measuring the distance from the balcony to a locked door and wondering if she could outspurt him when a voice broke the silence.

“This is very unwise. Very, very unwise,” Caneese said, clicking her tongue in a most human manner as she joined them on the balcony. The commander stopped, dead, and turned to face her, straightening slowly.

“You know, I was just thinking the very same thing,” Madeline replied quickly. She eyed Dtimun, who looked decidedly uncomfortable. “I don’t really think I could outrun him.”

Dtimun took longer to react as he fought down his

need. He let out a long breath and glanced at Madeline. "I must agree," he told her. He smiled at Caneese. "You arrived at an opportune moment."

"As I see." She moved between them. "It is not kind of you to frighten Madeline," she chided.

He recovered his equilibrium and laughed softly. "She has the heart of a galot," he said unexpectedly, referring to a species of giant cat. "I would never expect her to be afraid of anything. Not even me."

Madeline grinned. "At least I haven't thrown things at you," she added, alluding to their earlier conversation about Rhemun and Edris Mallory.

“A lie,” he said with a flash of green eyes. “Once, when I refused to let you treat a wound on my leg, you threw a piece of medical equipment at me.”

“It wasn’t anything heavy or dangerous,” she pointed out.

“Should I ask why the two of you were out here?” Caneese asked.

“I couldn’t sleep,” Madeline confessed.

“I heard her outside,” Dtimun added. “There are dangers at night, even here in the fortress.”

“Yes,” Caneese said, but more gently. She smiled at Madeline. “You should never come out here alone at night. Or with him,” she added mischievously, indicating Dtimun with a faint nod of her head. “He is more dangerous than anything you might discover in the dark.”

“I was just noticing that,” Madeline murmured dryly.

He gave her a long, searching look.

“The ceremony must be soon,” he said to Caneese in Cehn-Tahr, in the familiar tense. “And Ruszel’s transformation must be even sooner.”

“Komak has everything ready to proceed early tomorrow,” Caneese replied. “I will conduct the bonding ceremony myself, but it must be witnessed.”

“It is only a temporary measure,” he began uncomfortably.

“It must be witnessed,” she replied firmly. “I cannot explain. You must trust me.”

He let out a rough sigh. “You risk much.”

“You risk more, by keeping secrets from her.” She moved closer to him, aware of Madeline’s curiosity. She dared not satisfy it. “Dtimun, you must tell her the truth.”

“No.”

“She will see it for herself, when you mate,” she persisted.

“We will conduct the pairing in total darkness,” he said, evading her eyes. “I will make sure that she does not see me. She will not know.”

Caneese frowned worriedly. “Our laws require that we use no artificial means of camouflage during a bonding ceremony. How will I explain that to the witnesses?”

He cocked his head. “You will find a way around that,” he said with affection.

She shook her own head. “You presume too much.”

“I do not.” He bent and laid his forehead against hers. “It will change everything, once she knows,” he said bitterly. “I do not wish it to happen. Not yet.” He lifted his head. His eyes were sad and reflective. “She will have a memory wipe. The child will be regressed. She will go back to the Holconcom and remember nothing. But I will have the memory of it. Of her. I do not wish to remember her distaste.”

“You underestimate the intensity of her feelings for you,” Caneese said simply.

He laughed shortly. “Do you not remember the one time we revealed ourselves to a party of humans, during the Great Galaxy War?”

She grimaced. “They were primitive humans...”

He turned away. “I will not risk it.”

She didn’t press him. It would have done no good. He was too much like her. Neither of them would retreat from a decision, once made.

“The bonding will take place tomorrow, after Komak’s genetic manipulation, Madeline,” Caneese told her gently.

“Are you certain that you are rested and healed enough for the procedure?”

"I'm just sore and a little weak," Madeline assured her with a smile. "We don't have a lot of time, if we're to save Chacon and the princess." Both the enemy commander and the Cehn-Tahr princess had recently gone missing.

"I still do not like it," the older woman said solemnly.

"It is a very great risk."

Madeline moved closer to her. "I'll be the commander's eyes and ears," she said softly. "He'll be all right."

Dtimun's eyebrows shot up almost to his hairline.

"You presume to protect me from harm?" he asked in a hopelessly arrogant fashion.

Madeline grinned at him. "I always try my best to protect you, sir. I'll remind you that when we were in Ahkmau..."

"Not again," he groaned.

Caneese laughed out loud. "What is this, about

Akhmau?"

"I operated on him under battlefield conditions when he went prematurely into the dylete," she recalled smugly, reminding Caneese of an earlier conversation. She frowned. "Well, in one stage of it, anyway. Can you still call it the time of half-life when it's only one of many?" she added thoughtfully.

"Call it what you like," Dtimun said gruffly. "I am going to bed."

"You sleep well, sir," Madeline said. "If I hear anything threatening outside, I'll attack it for you."

He muttered something under his breath, turned on his heel, and stalked back across the balcony.

Caneese was grinning, overcome with mirth. "I have never seen him in such a state," she chuckled.

“I get on his nerves,” Madeline said, grinning back. “It keeps him on his toes. He does tend to brood.”

“Yes. Even as a child, he was like that.”

“You’ve known him that long?” Madeline asked.

Caneese’s eyes softened. “I have.” She studied the younger woman quietly. “You are uneasy about the bonding. You have never known the touch of a hunting male.”

Madeline’s heart jumped. She averted her eyes.

Uneasy was an understatement.

“You must not dwell on it,” Caneese said. “But you must use your strongest sedative. You are frightened of him in the darkness already. This will augment it.”

Madeline flushed. “His eyes glow...”

“We have feline eyes,” Caneese reminded her.

She frowned. “He said something curious. He said that

you keep more secrets than we know, and that you aren't what you seem."

"There have been incidents, in the past," Caneese said carefully. "When humans..."

"Stop there," came a commanding voice into her mind. "Say no more to her."

Caneese grimaced. "Well, it is nothing that concerns you," she amended. She smiled. "You should try to rest. Tomorrow will be stressful."

Madeline hesitated. "What is it like?" she asked, the words almost torn out of her.

Caneese only smiled. "You will understand soon."

Madeline sighed and turned away. "I suppose so. Good night."

"Sleep well." Caneese bit her lower lip as she watched the fragile human female walk away. Madeline was concerned, but Caneese did not dare satisfy the other

woman's curiosity. She hoped that Madeline could summon enough nerve not to run, as she had tried to, just before her own first mating. It was not a memory she liked to revisit, despite the pleasure of the ones that followed.

Komak had used a curious mixture, which contained bone marrow cells and Cehn-Tahr DNA, as well as an accelerant whose properties he would not disclose, to facilitate Madeline's transformation into a human with the strength of the aliens with whom she had served for almost three years. After he finished with the initial procedure, he injected another mixture into the artery at Madeline's neck with a laserdot. "You must not be nervous," he said gently. "I assure you, I know what I am doing."

She managed a smile for him. "For a time-traveling magician, you're not bad, Komak."

He chuckled. "So I am told."

She studied his face. "You know, you do use human facial expressions more than any Cehn-Tahr I've ever

known.”

“You are remembering the traces of human DNA in my blood, when you typed and crossmatched it to transfuse the commander at Ahkmau.”

“Yes.”

He removed the laserdot placer. “We all keep secrets. That one must remain my own.”

“The commander and I think you’re related to someone who lived in this time period.”

“You are both astute. I am.”

“Can you tell us who?”

He smiled and shook his head. "That is one subject we must not visit."

"Do you have human DNA, or was it just a glitch in my equipment, as I thought at the time?"

He put down the laserdot and looked her in the eye.

"Answer your own question. Do I resemble a human?"

She sighed. "No, Komak," she had to admit, smiling.

"You look like the rest of your species."

He was amused. She did not know the true tech he employed, although he had let her think she did, and he had no intention of telling her. To do so might reveal too soon the secret Dtimun kept from her. He smiled back.

"We are all one color, one race. Unlike you humans, who come in all colors and races."

"There's a legend that my people were once all tea-colored," she recalled.

He pursed his lips. He didn't speak.

She frowned. "You know something. Tell me."

"Your race was once tea-colored, as you say, from millennia of racial mixing. Humans rose to become a great space-faring civilization. Then a comet collided with your planet of origin and reduced your species to a gene pool of less than ten thousand," he said simply. "The reduction mutated you, so that the old genetic material was reborn and you split, once more, into separate races and coloring. Your leaders discovered relics of this civilization, but they hid it quite carefully."

"Hid it? Why?" she asked, exasperated.

"Would you reveal to an optimistic, ambitious population with growing tech ability that another civilization had risen to such heights, only to be destroyed in a natural catastrophe?"

She thought about that. "I don't know."

“It would diminish your accomplishments, dull your ambition,” he suggested. “It would limit the achievements.”

“I suppose it might. How did you come to be a time traveler?” she asked. “And who discovered its potential?”

He grinned. “It was me. Building on tech developed by one of my...antecedents,” he said carefully, “I perfected the ability to jump through dimensions, into different time lines.”

“But how?”

“I cannot say. But the Nagaashe are the key,” he added. He sobered. “You made the discovery possible, by convincing them to trade with us. You do not yet realize the scope of that accomplishment. It will lead to untold discoveries.”

“I just crashed on their planet,” she said softly.

He shook his head with awe. “I read about this period of history. But the records were quite scant, and frankly

the first-person accounts of it were grossly understated. All of you were too modest about your actions. And nowhere was it recorded that Chacon himself assisted in your rescue. Or your...old fellow," he added. "There were whispers, of course, but they were dismissed as myths."

She smiled. "I make odd friendships."

He chuckled. "Indeed you do. I am most proud to be included in them," he said gently. "You and the commander are more than I ever realized from my research. The two of you have been a constant delight."

He drew in a long breath as he looked at her. "Serving with you is my greatest honor and privilege." His eyes saddened. "I will miss you both."

"Miss us?"

He nodded. "I must leave. Today."

“Today? Surely not before the bonding ceremony!”

“Yes.” His face tautened. “I must not interfere in any way with this timeline.” His eyes were soft with affection.

“It is precious. More precious than I can tell you.” His face tautened. “There is another matter,” he said quickly.

“You must not return to the Amazon Division, for any reason. Do you understand? It is important.”

Her heart jumped. “Komak, this is only for a mission,” she said. “I can’t tell you what it is, except to say that many lives may depend on its success. But afterward, whatever happens, I will go back to duty.” She averted her eyes. “I’ve already spoken to Strick Hahnson about doing a short-term memory wipe on me. I won’t remember anything...”

“Memories are precious, Madelineruszel,” he said quietly. “Your feelings for the commander are quite intense. Do you really want to forget them?”

Her sad eyes met his. “He’s an aristocrat. I’m just a grunt of a soldier, and I’m human. He must...bond with a woman of his own species, to produce an heir who can

inherit his estates." She lowered her gaze to the table. "He feels nothing for me. I just get on his nerves. And right now, he's locked into a behavioral cycle that could cost him his life or his career, all because of my intense feelings. I have to do whatever I can to save him. Whatever the cost. I can't go back to the Holconcom," she added quickly, conspiratorially. "Don't you see? Even with a memory wipe, I might feel the same for him, all over again, and trigger the same behavior. I won't put him at risk a second time."

Komak's face was grim. "You care so much?"

"I care so much," she said huskily.

“But, if there is a child, as I feel certain there will be...” he began hesitantly.

“The child can be regressed. It’s a gentle process. He’ll be absorbed back into the tissues of my body.” She didn’t look at him. “Nobody must know. It would hurt his career, if it became known that he’d fathered a child onto a human female. It would...disgrace him.”

“Surely he did not say that to you!”

She didn’t speak. He hadn’t. Not in so many words. But she knew he must have thought about their differences in status. Her jaw tautened. “I’ll do whatever I need to do, for this mission to succeed. Then he’ll go back to his command, I’ll go back to mine. We’ll be quits.”

Komak looked devastated. This was not the history he had read. Surely the timeline was not so corrupted already?

“We don’t always get what we want in life,” she said thoughtfully. “I would have liked to keep the memory.” She drew herself up to her full height. “But I’ll do what’s

best.”

He stood up, too. He moved close to her, his eyes wide and quiet and tender. “I will never forget these years with you,” he said softly. “It has been an honor, to know you as a comrade.”

She smiled sadly. “It has been for me, too, Komak.”

She shifted. “I feel...odd.”

“Odd, how?” he asked, but he was smiling.

She reached impulsively for a metal sphere on the desk and closed her fingers around it. No human could have made a mark on it. She crushed it in her hand. She gasped.

He chuckled. “So. We need not ask if the experiment was a success.”

She looked at the misshapen lump on her palm and
laughed with delight. "No. We need not ask!"

CHAPTER TWO

Madeline was a combat surgeon. She certainly knew about the reproductive process, in animals and humans, even in Rojoks. But trying to get any information about Cehn-Tahr matings was like pulling stones out of a vacuum.

She thought Caneese was the obvious person to ask. Although Caneese was very polite, she was almost mute on the subject.

“You will cope,” she told Madeline gently. “The thing to remember is that you must...yield, and let nature take its course,” she said finally, after searching for just the correct word.

“Yield.”

“Exactly! I am so glad that we had this talk. You will feel better about the encounter, now, yes?” And she walked away, smiling.

Madeline ground her teeth into her lower lip. “Smoke

and mirrors," she said to herself, nodding.

In the end, there was only one person she felt comfortable talking about it with and that was her partner for the event.

She found him standing on a stone patio, his hands behind him, watching the sun set over the distant mountains.

He heard her footsteps and turned. In the robes he wore at Mahkannah, he was like a stranger. She wore robes, too, of course, but was less comfortable in them.

“You have concerns,” he mused as she approached.

“Yes. Nobody will talk to me about it,” she said irritably. “They talk around it.”

He gave her a long look. “You must remember that women in my culture are not as self-possessed and independent as you are. We have traditions that have existed for millennia.”

“I’m not denigrating your culture,” she said. “I just want to know what’s going to happen.”

He raised an eyebrow and gave her a look of mock astonishment.

She actually blushed. “I wish you wouldn’t do that,” she gritted.

He laughed softly. “It is irresistible. The brawling,

insubordinate medical chief of staff who sends her underlings running for cover, reduced to blushes and confusion about a process so basic that it is familiar even to children.”

She glared at him. “I might remind you that I’ve spent the past twenty-nine years of my life as a neuter, basically without gender,” she said curtly. “I’ve never felt...well...the sort of things women feel with men. With males. I mean...” She couldn’t find the words.

He turned and moved closer, so that he could look down at her face. His hand came up and touched her red-gold hair lightly. “Madeline, you are making much work of a natural process.”

She sighed. “Sir, can’t you just tell me, soldier to soldier, what I’m expected to do? Caneese is the only Cehn-Tahr woman I could have asked, and she said that it

was only necessary to yield and endure it." She shook her head. "Is that what the women of your culture do? Simply...yield?"

He cocked his head. "You have seen few young Cehn-Tahr women, but you spent some time with Princess Lyceria. You have also been exposed to Dacerian women. Do you notice a similarity in comportment?"

"Yes," she replied. "They're very docile, gentle females. Intelligent, but not assertive."

"Exactly."

"Then they...simply submit."

"Yes."

She frowned. It troubled her. "Wouldn't such a docile sort of female tend to exaggerate the violence of an encounter if she didn't, well, participate in it so much as endure it?"

One eyebrow went up.

She grimaced. "I'm sorry. I'm finding it difficult to explain what I mean. It's complicated to discuss something so intimate with you."

"Indeed. You and I have engaged in many verbal battles over the years, but our encounters have been nonphysical. This one will be."

She searched his eyes, looking for any sign of what he was thinking. "What do you expect of me, sir?" she asked in a soft, uncertain tone. "What is it like?"

The question, added to the sudden burst of pheromones exuding from her body when he stared at her, kindled a helpless reaction. His face tautened. Like a snake striking, his hand shot out and suddenly grasped her long hair at her nape and jerked, pulling her face up to his. The eyes stabbing into hers were jet-black. "It is like this," he said in a voice which sounded so alien that at

first it was barely recognizable. It was similar to the sound a cat might make when it was angry, except with words instead of hisses. His head bent, so that his eyes filled the world, and the pressure of his hand forced her body close to his in an arc, thrilling and frightening at the same time.

Her heart jumped up into her throat. He seemed, for the first time in their long relationship as commanding officer and subordinate, so alien that she almost didn't recognize him.

"You begin to understand," he whispered, in that same odd tone, and for a split second, in a flash of presence like the blinking of a light, he seemed to be taller, far more massive than he looked. She must be hallucinating, she thought.

Her hands flattened against his robes, feeling the strength and warmth of his chest under them.

"I am not what I seem," he said.

She was a little intimidated, but she didn't let it show.

She nodded. "I know. My instruments and my senses

don't coincide." His eyes changed color yet again, to a burnished gold, almost glowing. She didn't know what it meant.

His hand lessened its pressure on her hair and became oddly caressing. "Weakness is prey. It invites brutality. Do you understand that?"

Her lips parted. "The more a female yields control, the more a male exercises it."

He nodded. His gaze dropped to her throat, softly vulnerable at the angle. "We are a passionate species," he whispered, bending his head. His mouth opened and slid over her throat. She felt the faint edge of his teeth. Even they felt different than they looked, different than her instrument readings described them. The slow rasp of

them against the vulnerable skin of her throat should have been frightening. It was only exciting. Her heart began to race.

His nostrils splayed as stronger pheromones rushed up into them. "Delicious," he rasped. And suddenly his tongue slid over the soft flesh, abrasive and stimulating.

Her nails stabbed into his chest and she gasped audibly.

He laughed.

She was alive as she'd never been alive, on edge, shivering with sensation and curiosity. He lifted his head and looked into her eyes. His own narrowed. His chin lifted arrogantly. He looked at her as if she already belonged to him. She recalled that expression from earlier, non-physical encounters and realized that he had been possessive of her for a long time.

"We are a warrior culture," he said in a deep, velvety tone. "We conquer. For generations, our women have been taught that submission to the violence is the only

way to survive it.”

Her breath was coming in little spurts. “Is that why they’re so afraid of it?”

“Yes. They dread the onset of the mating ritual, because they fear the aggression of the male. They have been taught that it is not feminine to meet passion with passion.”

She was seeing things she’d been blind to. His calm demeanor was a front. He could control his actions, except when he was exposed to Madeline’s involuntary pheromones. What she was seeing now was the true male, the true creature, without the veneer of civilized conduct.

“That is essentially correct,” he said curtly. His hand contracted again on her hair and brought her face very

close to his, so that she could almost taste his clean breath in her mouth. "I have forced a change in the protocols. The mating will take place in total darkness."

Her senses were heightened, but the odd statement kindled her curiosity. "Doesn't it usually?"

"No," he said flatly. "It is an innovation." He couldn't bring himself to tell her why.

He stared down at her with mingled concern and hunger. Her taut features betrayed her fear, even as she tried to hide it from him in her mind. "You are already afraid of my eyes in the absence of light. Added to that, you will experience the violence that goes with the feline response to desire." His voice rasped. "I cannot control it."

"I know that. Your eyes startle me at night. But I'm not afraid of you. Not really."

"You know that I will not hurt you deliberately."

"Of course," she said simply.

His hand contracted harshly. "But remember this," he said in a harsh, alien voice. "If you bend your neck to my teeth, I will make you pay for it!"

Her neck. If she bent her neck to his teeth. She suddenly remembered something from her biology courses. The great male cats of the human planets mated from behind. Did the Cehn-Tahr as well?

His face lowered and his cheek rubbed hard against hers. At the same time, he lifted her and pushed her against the stone wall, pressing her there with the weight of his powerful body. She became aware of gigantic size and strength, despite her reengineered body. The familiar commander was suddenly someone else, something else.

"Submit," he whispered roughly at her ear, and pressed harder against her.

His mouth opened on her throat, warm and feverish and exciting. She caught her breath and shivered at the sudden rush of sensation.

He growled. The sound she made, involuntarily, sent him over the edge....

“What are you doing?” Caneese demanded belligerently. “You are not allowed to touch her before the bonding ceremony!”

He was so far gone that he growled at Caneese.

She cuffed him hard enough that the sound echoed. She growled, too. Madeline, almost mindless with her own responses, barely registered that Dtimun obeyed the older woman at once. He let go of Madeline and moved back, grasping at control and dignity.

“It is all right,” Caneese told him gently. She touched his cheek lightly. “It is all right.”

Madeline was getting her breath back. She was flushed. “I’m sorry,” she told Caneese. “It was my fault. I

only wanted to know what was going to happen.”

Caneese smiled at her. “There is no need to apologize.

I understand.”

“The bonding ceremony is tomorrow anyway,”

Madeline began.

“Yes, but the mating must be witnessed, that is the law,” the older woman said gently.

Madeline had heard that odd phrasing before, but never thought about it until now. Witnessed?

Dtimun had recovered. His head bowed slightly, in deference to Caneese’s position. “We were discussing certain...aspects...of the ceremony,” he said with a straight face. “Madeline was curious.”

Caneese’s eyes were wide and shocked. “And you were telling her?”

He moved forward, took Caneese's face in his hands and, smiling, touched his forehead to hers. "I was not," he lied. "She wanted reassurance. Our customs are disturbing to her. I was attempting to explain them when things got out of hand."

"A little out of hand," Madeline said blithely. The look she gave Dtimun, unseen by Caneese, was wicked enough to make his eyes flash green.

Caneese melted. She touched Dtimun's cheek with her hand. "I had to interfere. But you must not tell her anything further. I do not want you to make her more frightened."

"Not to worry," Madeline quipped. "I've had all my shots, and I'm experienced in six martial arts."

Dtimun burst out laughing. Caneese stared worriedly from one of them to the other.

"We will not embarrass you," Dtimun assured her. He hesitated. Madeline's reaction to him was extremely stimulating. "We will not deliberately embarrass you," he

corrected. "It might be...wise—" he considered his choice of words "—to double the mute screen in the mating chamber, however."

Caneese now looked horrified.

Dtimun held up a hand. "She has been known to throw things at me when she lost her temper," he said quickly, looking for an explanation that would not disturb Caneese.

"Wouldn't it be easier just to remove the ceramics from the room, sir?" Madeline asked him cheekily.

"Sir?" Caneese echoed. "Madeline, you must refrain from addressing him so."

"Sorry," Madeline replied with a smile. "Habit."

“You must consider that this is the lesser of two evils,”
Dtimun agreed. “She has, at least, refrained from saluting
me.”

“Oh, I rarely do that,” she said. “In fact, we have this
new guy, the kelekom tech, Jefferson Colby, that the
commander stole...excuse me, borrowed,” she added
when Dtimun glared at her, “from Admiral Lawson.
Colby saluted the C.O. so often that he was getting a crick
in his neck. So we told him that we never salute the C.O.
because it affects his ego. Right, sir?” she asked Dtimun
with a grin.

He glared at her. “When we are at Benaski Port, if you
refer to me as ‘sir’ in front of possible spies, even your
pregnancy will not be enough to ward off suspicion that
we are enemy agents.”

“Point taken. Sorry, sir. I mean...” She hesitated.

“Well, what the hell am I supposed to call you, then?” she
asked.

“Madam!” he gritted.

“Madeline!” Caneese echoed.

Madeline threw up her hands. “I give up. I’m never going to be able to pull this off. I mean, look at...?”

She stopped, fascinated, as Rognan came dashing toward her as fast as his injured leg would allow.

“You must deal with this,” Caneese told Dtimun helplessly. “He has been told that he will not be permitted at the ceremony. He is very upset.”

“But why can’t he be?” Madeline asked.

“Because he considers you his mate,” Dtimun said with a flash of green eyes. “We would never make it past him into the mating chamber.”

“And when she becomes pregnant, there will be no place where she can go without him,” Caneese groaned,

missing Madeline's flush. "He will consider the child his as well."

"Meg-Ravens are quite fascinating to study," Dtimun mused as the bird came closer. "It is best to do it at long-range however," he sighed.

Rognan paused in front of them and flapped his wings angrily. "Rognan must come to ceremony. Rognan is family!" he muttered.

Madeline reached out and stroked his feathered head, scratching it gently. He calmed at once.

"Yes, Rognan is family," she agreed gently. "But there will be many people, and you don't like strangers around you. Yes?"

He hesitated. He ruffled his feathers. "Strangers make Rognan nervous," he agreed.

"So you can watch from a closed vid screen," she suggested, pointedly looking at Caneese.

The elder Cehn-Tahr nodded. "That will be possible."

Rognan sighed. "Very well."

Impulsively Madeline hugged him. "You must stop worrying so much about things. It isn't good for you."

He enveloped her with a huge black wing. "Rognan will try. Rognan is happy that you will be family," he added in a hesitant tone.

She drew back and smiled at him. "Thank you. That's very nice of you to say."

"You have amazing skills in diplomacy," Caneese remarked when Rognan had hobbled away. "They may be quite useful one day."

"They already are, when dealing with some individuals," she said, and glanced wickedly at her commanding officer.

He chuckled.

“What sort of witnessing are we talking about?”

Madeline asked suddenly. She hadn’t wanted to bring it up, but it was disturbing.

“We require proof of parentage in, shall we say, our aristocratic circles,” Caneese explained solemnly. “The first mating requires witnesses.”

She gaped at the aliens. “You mean people are going to stand around and WATCH us...?”

Dtimun burst out laughing at her expression.

“No, of course not,” Caneese assured her quickly.

“There will be a closed chamber with guards at the single entrance, to ensure that everything is correct and that only the two of you enter the room. So that there is no doubt of the child’s parentage.”

“But I thought that was a tradition only in royal families, when an heir was involved,” Madeline said thoughtfully. “And besides,” she added solemnly, “this child is temporary.” She didn’t add that she was quite uncertain if a child was even possible, unless Komak had

put something quite unusual into that injection he'd given her. Even her Medcomp was unable to analyze its contents.

"We must follow the law, even in covert circumstances," Caneese said gently.

Madeline sighed. "I suppose so."

Dtimun walked along with them back toward the fortress. "Sfilla has arranged transport and facilities on Benaski Port. We will wait only until the pregnancy is sufficiently visible to leave." He glanced at Madeline, who looked as uncomfortable as he felt. "There is another matter. What if it is impossible for us to breed?"

"Komak assured me that it was not," Caneese interjected. "And that this first mating will bear fruit. Now

let us worry no more about it," she told them firmly. "I have had a meal prepared. We can discuss the details of your journey while we eat."

Madeline followed them inside, more confused than ever. She hoped she wouldn't disgrace herself.

She glanced at the commander with a slight frown, her mind full of his behavior earlier. She was just beginning to realize that she didn't know him at all.