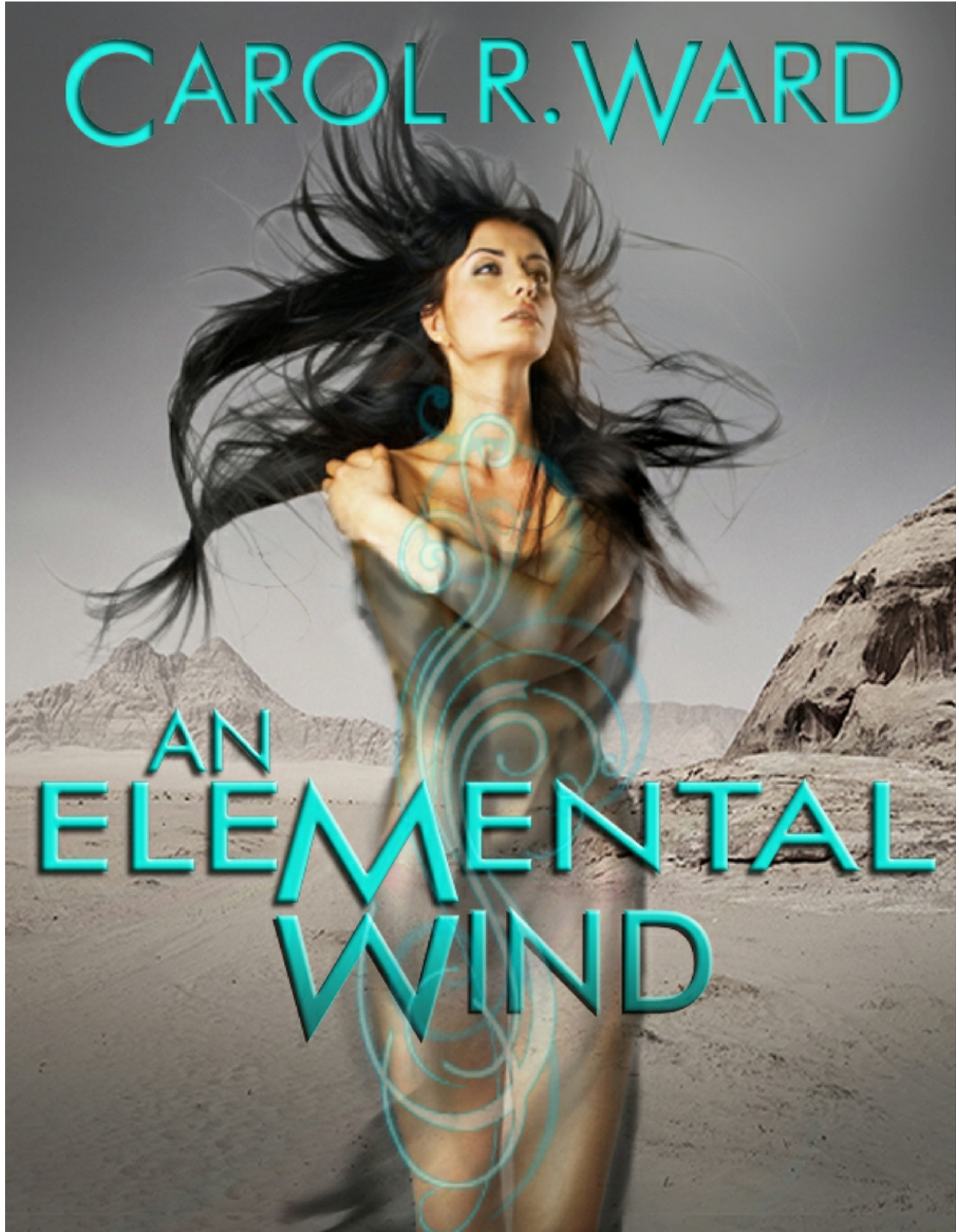


CAROL R. WARD

AN
ELEMENTAL
WIND





AN ELEMENTAL WIND

by

Carol R. Ward

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Sample Chapters

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An Elemental Wind
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AN ELEMENTAL WIND

Chapter One

There were no moons orbiting Temus, but the native predators didn't need light to hunt, which made it dangerous to be anywhere but the T'tenet cities at night. The landing field and loading docks were dangerous for a different reason and this danger was in no way mitigated by the light streaming from the window of the meeting house located just at the edge of the field. In fact, the predators of Temus gave the swath of light a wide berth.

Chaney fidgeted in the poorly ventilated interior. Not only were the T'tenet hideous to look at, they smelled repulsive too. He needed air, badly. How could anyone trust these creatures – muddy green warty skin, bulging eyes, bulbous lips – they looked like giant amphibians. Already one crew member from the Burning Comet had vanished; they needed to find out what happened to him. He wished his skills extended to linguistics, he'd love to know what the T'tenet crowded in the back were muttering about.

"Chaney," Cap's voice was barely a whisper, but it was enough to draw the young navigator to one side.

"It's a set up. Use the E.T.T. to warn Vida to get the ship fired up. We need to get out of here. I'll try to warn Tavis."

A barely discernible nod, then Chaney bit down with his molars.

"I read you, Chaney," Vida's disembodied voice whispered in his mind. "Hook-up complete. Ready for thought transference."

He relayed the captain's message, eyes flickering over the restless T'tenet. Tavis, their interpreter, and the T'tenet leader were in a heated argument. Vida signaled the message received and understood.

A sudden explosion rocked the meeting house. For a moment, everyone froze, then bedlam ensued.

"Run for it!" Cap shouted.

The meeting house was on fire. T'tenet and human alike sought the safety of the darkness only to be caught in a backwash of laser fire. Chaney dove behind a stack of barrels on the loading dock; Cap

skidded to a stop behind a storage shed. The shots from the laser continued as more T'tenet appeared out of the night.

“Tavis, Chaney, where are you?” The captain spoke as loud as he dared into his communicator.

“I’m over by the loading dock, Cap,” Chaney answered.

“Where’s Tavis?”

“The T'tenet got him right before the building exploded.”

Cap swore softly. The meeting house was blazing. Hideous screams came from the T'tenet still trapped inside. The stench was nearly overwhelming. Those lucky enough to escape, T'tenet and human alike, were being picked off by laser fire from the unknown assailant.

“We have to get to the ship before they light the beacons,” Cap whispered urgently into his communicator.

“Between the sniper and the T'tenet that’s not going to be easy.” Chaney squinted into the darkness, trying to pinpoint where the shots were coming from.

Several of the ugly, toad-like creatures were firing indiscriminately into the darkness. They didn’t seem to care who they hit as long as they hit something. The green of their weapons fire was met with blue from the sniper’s laser.

“Listen,” Chaney suggested. “You’re on the right side of the field. You should be able to make it back to the ship. If I’m not right behind you, lift off without me.”

“We need to get that sniper. I need to know if our mission’s been compromised.”

“What if he’s T'tenet? This could all be nothing more than a power struggle between factions.”

“He’s not. Trust me, I have a hunch.”

“I’ll get him,” Chaney promised grimly.

“Don’t kill him, try and take him prisoner.”

Chaney eased himself down off the dock and was lost in the darkness. He kept low, circling around to a point behind where he believed the shots to be coming from. He could see only vague shapes - barrels and dead T'tenet - until Cap made a break for the Burning Comet.

A blue flare, from a laser on low charge, missed the captain by a breath. Chaney made out a figure crouched behind a barrel, almost right under him.

With a soft rasp that couldn’t be heard over the other sounds of the night, he pulled out his blaster and placed it in the center of the sniper’s back. The figure started, then slowly rose. With his free hand, Chaney disarmed him and, indicating he would do well to remain silent, pointed him in the general direction of the Burning Comet.

Twice they stumbled over dead T'tenet in an effort to avoid live ones. The landing field was strewn

with them. The prisoner stopped dead when he caught sight of the cruiser.

Chaney prodded him and the man whirled and hissed something in an alien tongue. He was a good deal shorter and lighter than Chaney but his stance proved him ready for a fight.

“Don’t be a fool,” Chaney said. “By morning the T’tenet will have slaughtered every human left on Temus. I don’t know how you got here, but the Comet’s your only chance.”

Without warning, the sniper swung out, catching Chaney on the side of the jaw with his fist. Chaney cursed as he felt the E.T.T. fracture. It was an expensive piece of equipment and the third time he’d lost one this way. He barely caught the other fist with one hand before it could connect as well. Damn, this sniper was fast! A move intended to twist the sniper’s arm behind his back gained him a painful kick in the shins.

The navigator lost both his patience and temper altogether. He put all his force behind his clenched fist. It met the man’s jaw with an audible crack and he dropped like a stone. Chaney grimaced and shook his hand. He had to admit though, as he swung the sniper over his shoulder, the little guy had guts.

The ship was fired up and ready to go as he sprinted up the ramp, ducking through the air lock as it sealed itself.

“That was cutting it close, Chaney.” Vida’s voice came over the intercom. “Blake wants you to take the prisoner to Nigel.”

Chaney tightened his grip on his mud-covered burden and continued on his way.

“Nigel,” he called, laying his charge down on one of the examining tables of the med-lab, “could you take a look at my hand? I think it’s broken. And the E.T.T. will need replacing.”

“That was the last Esper Thought Transfer we had on board, and at the rate you’ve been going through them I doubt the captain will replace it this time.” The medical officer appeared from another room and clucked over Chaney’s hand. “What did you do this time?”

“He’s got an unaccountably hard jaw.”

Nigel peered over his shoulder in the direction his thumb indicated. “He?”

The light of the med-lab revealed what the Temus night had kept hidden. The slender, feisty sniper was a woman, not a man. She was thin to the point of extreme. Her hair was tucked under the collar of her ill-fitting clothes. Little else could be discerned under the heavy layer of wet, grey mud that covered her from head to toe, but it was definitely a woman’s form lying on the table.

Chaney’s astonishment was comical, but he recovered quickly. “I guess I’d better inform the captain of this, right away.”

Nakeisha woke to the sound of muted voices but kept her eyes closed, assessing her situation. There was softness beneath her, a softness she had not felt in too long a time. The air filling her lungs was clean and fresh with the faint, antiseptic smell of a medical facility. She must be on the ship she'd been shown.

Running a mental inventory she decided she was uninjured, except for where she'd been struck on the jaw, and unrestrained. Her head was foggy but that was probably due more to the lack of food, and exhaustion, than anything that had been done to her. Though her resources were low she could still fight if she had to.

Human voices, drawing closer. How long had it been since she'd heard a human speak?

"I think she's coming 'round."

"I'll let the captain know."

There was a whisper of movement and she felt someone near her. A touch on her arm – the sting of an injection. In a panic her eyes shot open.

"Relax," a gentle voice soothed. "It was just a mild stimulant. It won't harm you."

Her eyes flicked from the man standing beside the bed, to the furnishings of the room, then back to the man. He was of medium height and build, dressed in medical green. Shaggy red hair touched the collar of his uniform. His eyes were brown with just the faintest hint of lines around them to suggest his good nature.

He smiled. "My name is Nigel. I'm the ship's doctor." Reaching for a control behind her he said, "Don't be alarmed, I'm just going to raise your back support so you won't feel at such a disadvantage when the captain gets here. He'll want to ask you a few questions."

There was a hum of hydraulics and with a smooth movement the surface she was laying on reshaped itself, raising her back so she was sitting more or less upright. Her eyes flicked back to her surroundings. Yes, she was definitely in a medical facility. Someone, presumably the doctor, had washed the worst of the mud off her and dressed her in a shapeless synthetic garment of a paler green than his uniform.

She looked at him questioningly.

"I'm afraid there was no saving the clothes you were wearing," he said ruefully.

Movement in the door to the facility pulled her attention away. The captain was a big man, tall and broad, with a hint of grey in his otherwise brown hair and beard. He had an air of command about him which was how she was able to pick him out from the four people who entered the medical facility.

"She's awake," Nigel informed them, "but I don't know for how long."

“Understood,” the captain said.

He seated himself on a stool beside the examination bed which brought him down more or less to eye level. She understood that he was trying to put her at ease, but she wasn't fooled. The others ranged themselves behind him, far enough away to appear harmless but close enough to act should she prove to be dangerous.

“My name is Blake Alcott,” the big man told her. “I'm the Captain of the Burning Comet. You've already met Nigel, our doctor, and behind me is Chaney, our navigator; Vida, my second in command; and Libby, the ship's communications officer.”

Her eyes flicked to the others.

Chaney was tall and lean, with not an ounce of surplus fat. His face might have almost been handsome, but for the tribal scars he bore on his right cheek. The black eyes under the bushy eyebrows gave nothing of his thoughts away.

Vida was just as tall as Chaney, although whip cord slender. Her blue eyes showed curiosity, more than anything, and her blond hair was pulled back tightly from her face and confined in a bun.

Libby was of medium height and build. Though her brown eyes and hair might be called ordinary, there was nothing ordinary about her features. She was an incredibly beautiful woman.

“Let's start with something simple, shall we?” Blake asked after giving her a moment to look the others over. “What's your name?”

It would be so easy to pretend she couldn't understand Universal, but she sensed no evil from these people and chose to answer instead. “I am Nakeisha Windsinger.”

“Windsinger? I've never heard of such a planet.”

The ones called Chaney and Vida exchanged a glance behind the captain's back.

“It is not a planet, it is what I am.”

“Where are you from?”

“It does not matter. You will not have heard of it.” If he had, she was in serious trouble.

“Designation?”

“I do not have one.” She genuinely regretted having to add to the frustration the captain was starting to feel.

“Everyone has to have a designation,” Vida said gently, trying to put her at ease.

“I do not.”

“We'll let that go for now,” Blake said to her. “You're not on trial here. Why were you shooting at us down there?”

“I was not shooting at you,” she said indignantly. She didn't even know these people, why would

she attack them? “I was aiming for the Toadies.”

“Toadies?”

She tensed up, unable to mask the bitterness in her voice. “The T’tenet. We had some unfinished business.”

“I don’t suppose you feel inclined to tell us what kind of business?”

Nakeisha let her silence speak for her.

“If you don’t have a designation, then how did you get to Temus?” Libby asked suddenly.

“I stowed away on a T’tenet freighter.” A wave of weakness swept through her. She drew on the last of her reserves, unwilling to show a disadvantage in front of these strangers.

“A scrounger,” Chaney said in disgust.

Her eyes cut towards him. He was very judgmental, this one, but that might work in her favor. There were definite advantages to being thought of as nothing more than a space tramp.

“Not necessarily,” Vida broke in. “No matter how high you’re designated it’s not easy to secure a passage to Temus, unless of course you have your own ship.”

“When was the last time you had a decent meal, or a decent night’s sleep?” Nigel asked.

She shrugged. Though she refused to appear weak, she was not above playing on their sympathy. She let her eyes drift close.

“Captain, I move that we delay further questioning until Nakeisha’s had a chance to rest. We’re not going to get coherent answers from her while she’s on the verge of exhaustion.”

Blake hesitated, torn between the sense of Nigel’s suggestion and needing answers. Nakeisha didn’t wait to hear his reply but let the darkness take her away.

Chapter Two

Chaney made his way quickly down the corridor and into his quarters, engaging the privacy lock behind him. It wasn't that he didn't trust his fellow crew members, it was just force of habit from his academy days. It was always the lessons learned the hard way that were the most difficult to forget.

The command crew quarters on the Burning Comet were generous, by any standards, but right now Chaney found them claustrophobic. He paced restlessly, from the sitting room to the bedroom and back again. What was wrong with him?

A thin, sharp-featured face filled his mind. That sniper, Nakeisha, she disturbed his hard won serenity. He snagged the bottle of Hyrodian brandy from its shelf on his way by and then slumped down in his favorite chair.

Seeing her in the med-lab had been disquieting. She was smaller than he remembered, much thinner. He felt a twinge of guilt that he had struck someone so small and helpless. The livid bruise on her jaw was the only color to her other than her dark hair. Even her eyes were a pale grey. He uncorked the bottle and raised it to his lips.

Chaney snorted at his own thoughts. Small she may be, but she'd proved she was far from helpless. There was something to be admired in the fighting skill she'd shown. That must be what this feeling was, admiration for the skill of a fellow warrior. Not unlike the women of his own tribe. He took another deep pull from the bottle.

There was a crackle of static, then: "Chaney, Libby, report to the lounge."

Chaney corked the bottle with a sigh. No rest for the wicked, he thought as he levered himself out of the chair. He'd heard that somewhere but damned if he could remember where.

Nigel and Vida were already waiting with the captain when Chaney reached the lounge, Libby close on his heels. They seated themselves at the table and waited.

"We've got some decisions to make people," the captain wasted no time in getting started. "It's down to just the five of us. Do we turn back or continue with our mission?"

They'd started with a crew of twelve, a small enough crew for a master-class cruiser, but given the nature of their mission for the Pan-Galactic Council, Blake had seen no reason for a larger crew.

Vida frowned. "I dislike leaving a task unfinished."

"As do I," Libby agreed.

"Chaney?"

Chaney drummed his fingers on the table. "Seven of us have died. We would dishonor their memory if we were to turn back now."

"I concur," Nigel said.

"All right, we're agreed then," the captain said with approval. "Any suggestions on our next move?"

"The documents that led us to Temus were Tersic in origin," Libby said. "Maybe we should try the Great Library on Tersic."

"It would be well if it gives us the break we're looking for," Chaney said.

"What about our guest?" Vida asked.

They looked at Nigel.

Nigel's normal cheerfulness vanished. "I did a full scan on her . . . I'm keeping her unconscious for the next twenty-four hours to ensure she gets proper rest."

They waited patiently.

He sighed and slid a medical pad towards the captain. "It's all here in my report."

The captain glanced down at the pad and then looked up sharply. "You're sure about this?"

"Not that I've had much experience in such things, but yes, I'm sure."

"What is it?" Chaney asked impatiently.

The medical pad was slid in his direction. He read it, blanched, and read it again.

"But – who did this? The T'tenet?"

"We have no way of knowing, unless she cares to talk about it," Nigel said grimly. "And I, for one, do not care to question her too closely. There's more," he continued. "When she was still semi-conscious she started speaking. I have no idea what she was saying but I made a recording of it."

He set the recorder on the table and pressed the play button.

"It's an Ilezie dialect," Libby said after a few moments. "Few humans attempt to learn it and even fewer are able to master it. She speaks it like an Ilezie."

"Can you translate?" the captain asked.

Libby's brow furrowed in concentration. She listened to the recording once through then played it back, translating as it played.

"They did not know. I was strong E.Z. With your training I kept silent. Pain . . . so much pain." Nakeisha's voice on the recording died to a whisper.

“The secret is safe.”

Libby strained to hear and shook her head. “Something about coming too far to go back and protection.”

There was a pause in the recording, then Nakeisha continued in a stronger voice. “Don’t leave me E.Z., I can’t do this alone!”

After that was only silence.

“What kind of trouble is she mixed up in?” Chaney asked. She was so much more than she appeared.

“More importantly, what kind of impact is this going to have on our mission?” Vida asked.

Blake looked at Nigel. “You have your twenty-four hours, doctor. But we’ll need to question her as soon as she’s strong enough.”

The doctor kept Nakeisha in the sickbay for another day. She accepted his orders with an outward show of docility, but inside she seethed. Every parsec this ship traveled took her further from her revenge. She couldn’t believe she allowed herself to be taken so easily.

Nakeisha paced the confines of the room she’d been given after the doctor finally released her. She should be resting, gathering her strength, planning her next move. Instead, she paced.

She was safe for the moment but knew better than to count on her luck holding out. This had been an ill-fated trip from the beginning. She wished she’d never left the home world.

Is that any way for an Elemental to be thinking?

The disembodied voice stopped her in her tracks.

“What—who—” She could feel another presence in the room with her.

Be at peace, child.

Nakeisha sank down on the closest chair. “I must be ill, I could have sworn—”

You’re neither ill nor mad, the voice said impatiently. Now pay attention.

“E.Z.?”

Yes, it’s me, child. The ship you are on is going to Tersic. You need to go with them. Once you’re there you must get to the Great Library.

“But—you’re dead,” Nakeisha said, bewildered. She glanced around the room as though expecting to see him standing beside her.

There’s dead and then there’s dead. You know only a fraction of my power, child.

“Why are you speaking in my head? Where are you?”

There was a slight pause before E.Z. answered. *I have been with you since your Tespiro when you became a woman. You are an Illarie.*

“An Illarie? Why was I never told?”

There was another hesitation before he answered. *It was decided it would be in your best interest if you did not know.*

Nakeisha got up and went over to the view port. She fought back the tears that threatened to spill over. “If I am your *Illarie*, then why haven’t you spoken to me before?” she asked finally, staring out at the stars.

I tried, the voice said gently. *But you were too angry. You could not hear me over your rage.*

“Oh.” Shame filled her. She had lashed out blindly, forgetting her training, forgetting her hard won serenity. So many T’tenet dead by her hand, she hadn’t even cared whether they were guilty or innocent.

I would take this burden from you if I could, child, E.Z. said. *But too much depends on the success of your mission.*

“I can’t do this by myself!”

Your uncertainty diminishes us both. You are a Windsinger, you grow more powerful with every passing day. Never doubt this. And I will be with you, as much as I am able.

“Will I ever see you again?”

All things are possible, child.

A knock sounded on her door. She felt the presence vanish but had no doubt it would be back.

“Come in,” she called, turning to face the door.

Vida stood on the threshold holding a bundle in her arms. For a moment the two women simply looked at each other, taking each other’s measure.

“I thought you might appreciate a change of clothing,” Vida said. “It’s probably going to be a little big on you, but it’s the best I could do for now.”

“You’re very kind,” Nakeisha said, taking the bundle.

“If you’re feeling up to it, the captain would like to speak with you.”

“I understand. I am sure he has many questions.” She noted the other woman’s hesitation. “If you care to wait until I’ve changed my clothing, I will accompany you to the captain.”

Vida gave her a faint smile and came in to wait.

Chapter Three

“We’ve got a problem,” Blake said to Chaney. They were alone in the lounge, a perfect opportunity for a private chat.

Chaney raised an eyebrow. “Just one?” So far this trip had been nothing but problems.

“We have a leak,” the captain said grimly. He paced over to the observation port and then turned to face Chaney again.

“I take it we’re not talking about a leak in a fuel or coolant line?”

“I’ve thought so for some time now. We’ve had too many close calls with both Corporate and Sector for it to be mere coincidence.”

Chaney grimaced. You’d think after the seven year war with the Kohl-trin that the beings of the universe would crave peace. But no, instead the civilizations that had allied under the Pan-Galactic Council’s banner had fractured into a myriad of warring factions, the two most powerful being the Corporate Alliance and the Sector Federation. “You think they’re working together on this?” That would be bad, very bad. Not only for them, but for the whole quadrant.

“I can’t shake the feeling that something’s not right . . . I think this whole thing is much bigger than we’ve been led to believe.”

“Why are you telling me this? Aren’t I as much a suspect as everyone else?”

“You’re about the only one I can trust,” Blake replied. “Loyalty is hardwired into your genetic makeup.”

It wasn’t quite that simple, but few outsiders knew of the Paf D’Uron, the seven ordeals that turned a tribesman into a Fedylian. The process was not to be undertaken lightly and many did not survive. But those that did were gifted with unwavering loyalty to a cause, once their word was given. Chaney hadn’t realized the captain knew his tribal rank. “So what do we do now?”

Blake sighed. “I don’t know. Just be extra careful, and extra vigilant. Keep your eyes open.”

“Aye, aye, sir,” Chaney said. “Should I call Nigel and Libby to join us?”

Blake shook his head. “No, I think the three of us will be enough. I don’t want our guest to feel too over-whelmed.”

“So what have you decided to do about her?” Chaney asked.

“If I didn’t know better, I’d say that was a show of curiosity. Better watch it, Chaney, you might start turning human on us.”

The younger man scowled in mock anger. “I am human. I just don’t see the need to be so blatant about it.”

Blake laughed. “In answer to your question, we really don’t have much choice, we’ll have to take her with us for now, but no one is to mention our mission. As far as she’s concerned we’re just traders.”

The door slid open again to admit Vida and Nakeisha.

Chaney straightened against the wall he’d been leaning casually on. Cleaned up and dressed in one of Vida’s flowing, white pajama suits, Nakeisha was even more waif-like in appearance. She looked like a child who’d borrowed her big sister’s clothes to play dress up in, although there was nothing childish about the curves beneath the flowing white.

Their eyes met, then hers flicked towards the bandage still on his hand and a slight flush suffused his face before she gave a faint nod. Chaney felt a moment of confusion at his reaction. He had no reason to feel shame at the sight of the mark on that delicate skin, but he did, despite the fact that her nod had been one of acknowledgment, warrior to warrior.

“If you’d all take a seat,” the captain said, “we have a few things to discuss.”

Nakeisha took a moment to study the people in the room with her. They were human in appearance, though just how human remained to be seen. Without realizing it, her eyes lingered longest on the warrior, Chaney. There was something about him . . . She would do well to stay on her guard.

The captain waited until everyone was comfortable before beginning. “We owe you a debt of gratitude,” he said to Nakeisha.

This was so unexpected she was unable to hide her surprise.

“Our trade negotiations with the T’tenet were not going well,” he continued. “If it hadn’t been for your distraction Chaney and I might not have escaped.”

“It is well that my impulsiveness had some merit to it,” she said cautiously. “I hasten to assure you it is not in my nature to be so . . . volatile.”

“We understand,” Vida assured her. “There were . . . extenuating circumstances.”

Nakeisha looked from one sympathetic face to another. “The doctor’s scan revealed I had been tortured,” she said bluntly.

“I’m sorry,” Blake said sincerely. “But we need—”

“You need to know why,” she finished for him.

“This isn’t just morbid curiosity . . .”

“I understand, Captain. We are strangers, thrown together by circumstance.” She sighed and shifted in her seat. “My companion and I are . . . scholars on a pilgrimage. We were making our way to Kendra when the T’tenet captured us.”

“Companion?” Vida asked in dismay. “You mean we left someone behind?”

“No, I—I apologize for my phrasing. My companion is no more.”

“What would the T’tenet want with a pair of scholars?” Chaney asked. It didn’t make any sense. He had a gut feeling there was more to her story, just as something told him there was much more to her as well. Her voice was mesmerizing, he had to force himself to concentrate on what she was saying.

“I do not know,” Nakeisha said softly. “They were seeking information we could not give them.”

Could not, or would not, Chaney wondered. What courage it must have taken to resist. Despite his misgivings his admiration for this woman continued to grow.

“Perhaps it was a case of mistaken identity,” she continued. “Whatever the reason, my companion died to give me the chance to escape.”

“And so you have,” Vida said. “As you said, we’ve been brought together by circumstance and coincidence.”

Nakeisha had no answer for that other than to wonder if it really had been coincidence that brought them together on Temus, or if there was something else at work.

“Kendra is a little out of our way,” Captain Blake said abruptly, coming to a decision. The T’tenet seldom left their own system so they were unlikely to pursue the Comet. “Our next port of call is Tersic – you should be able to find passage from there.”

“Passage to Tersic would suit me well,” she said gravely, careful to let none of her relief show. “I have . . . friends on Tersic.” At least she hoped they were friends.

“In that case, let me be the first to welcome you aboard the Burning Comet,” Blake said.

Nakeisha kept to herself, for the most part, during the journey to Tersic. A part of her craved human companionship, the face of the one called Chaney flashed through her mind, but another part of her did not want these people embroiled in her difficulties. She’d already caused enough trouble for them and despite the captain’s reassurances to the contrary, she felt guilty over the death of the crewman on Temus.

She did not for a moment believe they were a trading vessel – a ship this size should have far more crew, and where was their cargo, and guards? No, something else was going on, but as long as they

took her to Tersic she was just as happy not knowing.

On the second day of her self-imposed exile, her meditation was interrupted by a knock on the door. She opened it to find the doctor, Nigel, holding a flower.

“If we were at a spaceport I could give you a bouquet of real flowers,” he said, holding the bloom out to her, “But since we’re not, this will have to do.”

Standing aside to let him enter, she accepted the flower. Holding it to her nose she inhaled its spicy aroma. “It’s very unusual. What is it?”

“Since we’re short-handed we’ve been doubling up on duties and I was lucky enough to draw the hydroponics bay. It’s an agrae blossom, an interesting addition to any salad. If you’re hungry later you can use it for a snack,” he said with a grin.

She returned his smile and sniffed the flower again before filling a glass with water to set it in.

“I thought you might be getting a little bored,” he continued, “and as your doctor I’d advise strongly against that.”

“And what do you advise to combat boredom?”

“I’d advise a tour of the ship,” he said. “With yours truly as your guide of course.”

“Of course,” she echoed.

It was nothing she could put her finger on, but there was something about the doctor that was a little off. He was just a little too friendly, a little too eager to please. Maybe it was just that it had been a while since she’d been around humans.

Nakeisha hesitated.

Oh, why not? E.Z. whispered in her mind. You have a handsome young man dancing attendance on you and I’m as interested in seeing the rest of the ship as you are.

I wish you’d stop doing that, she thought back at him, her face giving nothing away of her inner turmoil. *It is most disconcerting.*

What’s even more disconcerting is your longing for others of your own kind and your refusal to acknowledge it.

She turned her snort into a cough when Nigel gave her a concerned look.

“Perhaps you would rather I came back at another time?”

“I’m sorry,” she said, laying a hand on his arm. “My thoughts were elsewhere for a moment. I would be happy to have you give me a tour of the ship.”

He grinned down at her and tucked her hand beneath his arm, leading her towards the door. “Then why don’t we start with hydroponics and I can impress you with my skills as a gardener.”

Nigel was both a charming and entertaining tour guide, and after an hour in his company Nakeisha found it easy to forget why she was on board the ship in the first place.

“You have a great many empty berths,” she commented as they wandered through the lower decks. “How large is the crew?”

“The Comet can accommodate a crew of thirty. We usually keep it to around half of that. Unfortunately, we’ve run into some bad luck this trip and it’s down to just the five of us.”

“And are you all from the same world?” she asked, genuinely curious.

Nigel laughed, a not altogether pleasant sound. “Not even close. Captain Blake and I come from *Colora Prime*. Vida is *Uprien* and Libby is from *Bediali*.”

She nodded. “I have heard of *Bediali*. It is well known for its hospitality, and its people for their great beauty. I fear I know nothing of *Uprien*.”

“It’s not surprising. *Uprien* is on the far edge of the galaxy. It’s as cold and inhospitable as its people.”

Was that a thread of bitterness in his tone? Nakeisha hid her surprise. Vida had seemed neither cold nor inhospitable. Perhaps there were some ill feelings between the doctor and the second in command.

“And what of the navigator, Chaney?” Though she kept her voice casual, her pulse rate sped up slightly.

Nigel shot her a look. “The man who attacked you? He’s from *Soropo*,” he said, as though that explained everything.

This time Nakeisha let her surprise show. “What is a desert tribesman doing in space?”

The doctor shrugged. “Who knows?” he countered. “He’s been with Captain Blake for years; I’ve only been part of the crew for the last two.”

They bypassed the empty cargo bay and meandered back up to the main part of the ship.

“What is this?” she asked as they approached a plain, white door.

“This is probably the least used room in the ship,” he told her, as the door slid open. “I’ve found my duties keep me in good enough shape that I don’t really need to work out much.”

“Which is why you’re so soft,” said a voice from inside.

Nakeisha quickly smothered her grin as a look of annoyance flashed across Nigel’s face. “I’m sorry, I didn’t know anyone was here. We can come back another time.”

“It’s no bother,” Chaney said. “I was just about done anyway.” He disengaged himself from the machine he was working on and stood up, draping a towel around his neck.

A shiver went through Nakeisha. The navigator was dressed only in a pair of tight, black shorts and

his dark hair was pulled back off his face and confined in a tail. The muscles rippling under the sun bronzed skin glistened with sweat. It was obvious that he made very good use of the work-out room.

“I should probably get you back to your room,” Nigel said, pulling her, none too gently, towards the door. “I’ve been enjoying myself so much in your company I forget that you’re still recovering from your ordeal on Temus. You should get some rest.”

She went without protest, a fact Chaney was quick to note. It made no difference to him who she chose to spend time with. She’d be gone soon anyway. He stared moodily at the punching bag and then lashed out with a series of lightning fast strikes. It made no difference at all.

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