

Unfamiliar Territory

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Chapter 1

Cold. That was the first sensation Renata Colby felt as consciousness reclaimed her. She was still in her seat, for which the acceleration harness could be thanked; and although her head ached and she was sure her body was bruised, she was able to move all her limbs and digits when she ran through the check-off list before attempting to get the harness unfastened.

She lay under the open sky, on her back looking upward. The seat's securing bolts (or the local equivalent thereof) must have sheared off or otherwise let go, which annoyed her because on one of her own shuttles that couldn't have happened. But then she finally did get the harness loose, managed to move herself out of that faintly ridiculous flat-on-her-back but with heels in the air position-and then she saw where the deck to which her seat had been attached was now, and she swallowed hard and decided she didn't mind that those bolts had given way.

The shuttlecraft that Admiral Colby and her coxswain had been riding in as VIP passengers had come apart, whether before or after striking the ground Colby couldn't recall. All she could remember was hearing gibberish instead of their hosts' comm traffic coming clearly through the translator units, glancing across the insufferably hot cabin's narrow aisle at Mac-who if he'd been at the controls would have been unflappable, but who as a passenger had been turning green-and then she'd felt the ship dropping out from under her, with only the harness keeping her from banging her head against the cabin's roof. After that she had no memories.

Mac. Oh, lord, Mac! Colby got herself completely loose, and managed to

stand. The little ship's wrecked fuselage lay in one direction; in another she saw two more seats, some meters distant across the small mountain valley where the alien pilot had somehow managed to direct their crash instead of smacking them into a cliff as she'd at first thought might be about to happen. That was the sickening drop she remembered, a drastic course correction that had brought them down before the shuttle could reach the mountain face.

Yes, she did remember that much. Which didn't help a thing, although it did leave her with a profound sense of gratitude toward that orange-skinned young Harimi male for the action to which she was sure she owed her survival.

The two seats she'd spotted contained what was left of both Harimi. They hadn't landed as fortunately as she had; they were on their faces, and when the human woman laboriously turned first one and then the other over she found two smashed craniums.

But then Harimi bones didn't seem to be quite like human bones, she had noticed that when she'd gripped hands with her hosts in greeting. She suspected that it had taken less force to do this to Octi and Octa than it would have taken to do the same thing to her, or to Mac.

She went in search of the cabin's fourth seat. She found it meters away, with its harness unfastened and its occupant lying limp with most of his body submerged in a mountain stream.

Mountain streams were cold here on Sacorra 6 just as they were on Earth and on Deneb Prime, even though this world had an overall warmer climate. Colby dragged her coxswain out of the water, gripping him under his arms and hauling his heavy body with considerable effort. She wasn't out of training, she had not allowed moving up to flag rank to do that to her; but she was of average size for a human female, and Lieutenant Thor MacKenzie was a tall and wide-shouldered young man. Colby was still shaken from the crash, and while she hadn't been wet until now the air here was cold-and she wasn't certain how long she might have been lying unconscious and strapped to that seat before she'd awakened at last.

If she was cold, Mac had to be much colder. Night was coming on, and she had no idea what survival gear the alien shuttle had been carrying or where such gear (if any) had wound up after the crash. But she had better find either that or the comm unit that the crash had knocked out of her hand when she'd been in the act of trying to use it, damned fast, or Mac almost certainly wasn't going to make it through a night here; and she might not, either.

So she left him, murmuring an apology she knew he couldn't hear, and headed for what remained of the fuselage. There she had her third bit of good luck (her survival being the first, Mac's survival being the second). Inside the battered hull she located blankets, and a lumipanel.

Warmth and light. At the moment she could ask for nothing more unless it was to find her comm, Colby thought while she was dragging her companion across what felt like an endless expanse of scraggly grass-like vegetation and exposed ledges that separated him from their critical bit of shelter. His comm was gone from his belt, too; Colby vaguely remembered the Harimi co-pilot turning around and snatching it away from MacKenzie during the last moment before the crash.

Had Octa thought Mac's comm was a weapon, when he had pulled it out to try to let the *Serengeti* know they were in trouble? She and MacKenzie were, after all, the first humans the two Harimi had ever seen-and although they'd been coldly polite, both Octi and Octa had been visibly uneasy with their passengers. Colby had the distinct feeling that if it were up to any of the Harimi she'd met since arriving in the Sacorra system, the evaluation of their climate-altering project on the sixth planet would have been called off the minute she showed up instead of her Denebian deputy whom they had been expecting to greet. And to think that she had been urged to come here personally because someone on the Council had wanted to impress the Harimi, and that she'd agreed to do so because the project had interested her!

Well, she'd impressed them all right; they had looked at her as if they couldn't believe the Council would insult them like this. And whether Octa had thought Mac was threatening her or not didn't matter, both comms were gone and there was no point trying to find them at night. She had to use the lumipanel's weak light as a beacon to guide her over the last few meters, as darkness came to the valley; but she made it. *They* made it.

There was nothing to do now except strip wet uniforms from both their bodies, to roll them up together inside the dry blankets; to hold this boy of twenty-five in her arms, him naked and she in her still-dry underwear, and wait nineteen hours for morning to come.

* * *

"What in bloody hell does he mean, the Admiral's shuttle disappeared?" Commander Kristen Nordstrom asked the question incredulously as much as angrily. She looked at her captain, and she waited for a response.

Thaddeus Worthington held out a hand toward his executive officer. He was usually such a mild person that those who didn't know him well wondered how Thad Worthington had ever come to command a starship; but those who did know him, Nordstrom among them, also knew that when he suddenly got through being mild you didn't want to be the person who had caused him to reach that point. He directed his next words to the viewscreen and the image it

displayed, though, after he'd nodded toward ops so that he would be put through.

Which Nordstrom hadn't been, and for all her hot temper the *Serengeti's* exec would never have been indiscreet enough to ask that rhetorical question if she'd been on comm to-the enemy? Their allies?

Just how should he regard the Harimi? Worthington wondered that even as he started to address the orange-skinned male creature on the planet's surface far below the orbiting flagship. He said, "Organizer, did the shuttle crash from accidental causes, or do you believe that someone on Sacorra 6 is responsible?"

"We cannot know the cause of its crash until we have located the shuttle, Captain." The Harimi organizer inclined his head calmly, and beside him his female counterpart did likewise. "However, we have no reason to believe that any of our citizens at Second Colony would have wished the Admiral harm."

"Not even if someone down there thought her report might come out with a negative recommendation?" Worthington kept his growing annoyance inside him for the moment, both because it wouldn't do to antagonize the Harimi if he wanted to get any relevant information out of them-and because he knew that most of his anger should quite properly be self-directed. If only he had put his foot down and insisted that Renata use one of their own shuttles, with her coxswain at its controls, instead of going along with their hosts' declaration that only Harimi pilots were allowed to fly in-atmosphere craft on Harimi worlds! That piece of sky-junk might have been state-of-the-art for local technology, but he damned himself roundly now for keeping silent when his temporary commanding officer had agreed to board the thing at all-let alone ride it from the main Harimi colony on Sacorra 5, all the way to land at their secondary colony on neighboring Sacorra 6.

And no shuttle of any vintage or origin would have dared to crash if Thor MacKenzie had been at its controls-but it was too late for second-guessing now. Since one of Sacorra 6's charms was a natural dissimulation effect which made it impossible for starship sensors to get anything except background readings while scanning its surface, Worthington's task now was to persuade the Harimi to let him send out shuttles and search that world at low altitudes-visually, if that was what it took-until the admiral was found.

He wasn't going to get that kind of cooperation by accusing and antagonizing, so for now at least he must keep his anger to himself. And his suspicions, as well, since he'd already voiced them once and had been told they were groundless.

* * *

Colby woke to daylight. Not the gray dawn that she had somehow expected, but to bright yellow sunlight that sparkled on the ground outside the ruined fuselage that still sheltered her. Sparkled on it, because that ground was covered with a thin layer of pure white snow.

Already it was melting, already the temperature was rising. She was thankful for that, because she wasn't looking forward to having to crawl out of the warm nest of blankets and expose her body and her companion's to the air.

Would he wake up when the cold hit his bare skin, or was he really still unconscious and not just asleep? She was looking into MacKenzie's face and trying to decide whether to attempt waking him, or slip away and let nature take its course, when she heard sounds from outside the shuttle's wreck.

Wonderful, I always wanted to get caught bundling with a handsome kid not much more than half my age! she thought sardonically, and slid out of the blankets and reached for her outer clothing. Her uniform was still damp from the stream, so pulling it on required determination; but she managed to do so, while inside the warm cocoon she'd left Thor MacKenzie stirred and muttered unhappily but didn't wake completely.

There, now she could face a rescue party. Colby ducked out from under the half-crushed hull, and stood immediately so that she would be visible. She didn't want someone getting trigger-happy in an isolated spot on an alien world and thinking the noise and movement she created might be a threat. Worthington's people were well trained, but reflexes could be overpowering things under certain conditions.

Instead of familiar uniforms, she found herself looking almost directly into the face of a being who appeared to be human but couldn't be. However, the one fact she was certain about was that this was no Harimi! It was alone, for one thing, and Harimi always traveled in male/female pairs. It was humanoid, in fact it was eerily like a human male of middle age-but it couldn't be human. There was no human presence anywhere in this sector, she knew that, except for those humans who were aboard the *Serengeti*. And herself, of course, and Mac.

No, the being wasn't alone. Half a dozen others like it, males ranging in apparent age from what looked like the forties down to a boy in his late teens, all fully bearded except that boy, appeared the instant the man she'd seen first uttered a low-pitched but commanding call.

Rough-knit fabrics and tanned hides made up their clothing, which was handsome and well-constructed for all its rude materials. Their feet were shod in sandals, the snow on the ground didn't seem to bother them in the least. And the longer she stared at them, the more Colby wanted to think they were members of her own species. Not that she'd understood the obvious leader's call to his band, but that meant nothing; there were hundreds, maybe thousands, of human

languages and dialects besides the one that was known as “Standard.”

If she was staring at them, they were certainly returning the favor. Behind her Mac groaned, coming to consciousness at last; otherwise she would have gone right on looking these people over, and they her, for some additional minutes. But now she turned away, since she had seen nothing to make her feel threatened by the newcomers’ scrutiny, and knelt at her coxswain’s side and gently touched his cheek. “Mac,” she said, not using his rank as she would have done if others who could understand her had been present. “Easy, you’re okay even if you don’t feel that way right now.”

His eyes came open, and recognition was there immediately. “Admiral,” the deep young voice said, and then there was another groan. “Oh, gods, my head hurts! What happened, what...?”

He saw something over her shoulder then, and his eyes went wide. But his very disorientation made him see things more clearly than she had at first, because the next thing MacKenzie did was smile. He said with relief, “People! I don’t know what humans are doing on Sacorra 6, Admiral, but I’m sure glad to see ‘em.”

* * *

“If you speak very slowly and carefully, and if I do the same, then we can understand each other.” Now that she expected that to be the case, it was; Colby’s brain no longer insisted on treating her host’s words as gibberish. Mac was right, these were humans like themselves-and at one time, their forebears had spoken the language that had since evolved into Standard.

She and the band’s leader were outside the shuttle’s remains, while two of his cohorts remained inside the wreck and helped Mac to dress himself in his wet uniform. Why the quartermaster couldn’t come up with uniform fabrics that would dry more rapidly, Colby was sure she didn’t know-except, perhaps, that being fire-resistant and melt-resistant was a great deal more important in space. And after all, Mac was a pilot and not a ranger who could be expected to be paddling around in the oceans and bogs of an alien world’s surface.

The others of the native party were busily gathering up materials from the crash site, preparing salvage to be packed out of this high valley as soon as Mac could be made ready to travel. Clearly they were nervous about being here, and burying the Harimi dead didn’t seem to enter their minds. Colby made a mental note to ask someone about returning to do that later, and to make a thorough search for the missing comm units; but right now her hosts’ sense of urgency was so strong that it was contagious, and she realized that she and Mac must go with them immediately if they wanted to do so at all.

“You are righ’, I un’erstan’ you now.” The leader had a way of swallowing certain of his consonants, but he was making an effort now to pronounce each syllable clearly. “We mus’ go fro’ here.”

“Will more like those come?” Colby indicated the Harimi remains. If that was the only reason they were in such a rush to leave, she and Mac would be much better off waiting here for rescue than going somewhere else with these people who seemed not to want anything to do with Harimi. But Mac needed warmth, food, and medical care, and even primitive assistance would be better for him now than none at all. They had to take this chance, keeping both of them alive and as healthy as possible was the first consideration.

“I do no’ know. But there are other dangers, and your luck of las’ nigh’ is not likely to las’ if you stay here.” The man turned and looked into the shelter, and nodded approvingly. “Your mate will need help, but we can go now.”

“He’s not my mate, he’s my pilot,” Colby said, and then damned herself when she saw the way her host’s facial expression changed.

You’re supposed to have had basic diplomatic training, Renata! I know, I know, you’re the scientist and Lana’s the diplomat-your job on this world is to evaluate the impact of the Harimi’s project to warm its climate to their idea of comfortable, you didn’t come here prepared for a first contact situation. But you know better than to give a member of a completely unknown culture personal information that could be offensive, and it looks as if that’s what you just managed to do.

Must have been because he’s human, or at least appears that way. He looks familiar, you can understand each other’s speech, therefore you let down your guard. Damn fool, you’ve known better than that since you were Mac’s age or younger.

“You removed the clothing of a male not your mate?” That came out clearly enough. And to Colby’s mild embarrassment, she realized that Mac was hearing it; the two young men who’d helped him dress were just hauling him to his feet outside the shuttle’s fuselage.

“It was that or risk watching him die from last night’s cold,” Colby said, her voice firm. “I take it that I offended your customs...? I’m sorry, I still don’t know what to call you.”

An acknowledgment that she’d given unintended offense, followed quickly by a distraction. A positive distraction-sentient beings that didn’t enjoy being asked their names and titles were few and far between. Maybe the crash had shaken her up more than she’d realized, maybe the cold had gotten to her too, but her mind was clear again now. She wouldn’t screw up like that again, at least not soon.

“Shand,” the man said, and nodded gravely as if this were the most formal

kind of introduction. “I lead the People. And you are called?”

“Admiral Renata Colby, Environmental Services,” she answered, and returned the nod. “But that’s too long. You use one name, without titles? Then I’m called Ren, by those who address me using just my name. The male is called Mac.”

Shand’s eyes moved from Colby to MacKenzie, and the young officer had sense enough to nod even though moving his head made him wince visibly. Shand nodded back. Then the older man said, “He will not be able to walk far, and attempting to do so out of pride may cause him additional harm. Make a litter, carry him. But quickly, now!”

Was Shand swallowing fewer of his consonants, or was her ear adjusting to his speech still further? Colby wasn’t sure, but she was relieved that her host seemed to have decided to forget about the differences between his people’s sexual customs and hers.

Or had he? When she looked at the native leader again, fully intending to suggest that they hunt for the comm units while the litter was being constructed, he was regarding her with a frown. After a moment’s silence he said, “This is not a matter for a man to decide. When we reach our home, you will join the women and-Mac, that is his name?-will receive the care he needs for his injuries. And then the Wise Grandmother will tell us what is to be done about the two of you.”

Another pause. Once again Colby was about to open her mouth and ask for help in locating the comm units when Shand added a suddenly concerned question: “Is either of you mated to another?”

“No.” The admiral knew enough, now, so that she would have said that even if it had not been the truth. She had an uncomfortable feeling that if the answer was “yes” in either of their cases, the consequences would be far more severe; and she was not about to put either herself or her coxswain in harm’s way because they’d inadvertently violated some primitive tribe’s taboos.

She’d guessed right, Shand was satisfied. And now the makeshift litter was ready, and Mac had been trying to stay on his feet for long enough so that she didn’t have to order him to lie down on it; he did that quite willingly.

* * *

Chapter 2

The woman who watched for the scouting party's return had lived through many winters here in the mountains. Once she and her kind had lived on forested plains, far below this valley that doubtless had been closer to the timber-line in the days of her youth; but their world was much warmer now than it had been then, and her tribe had moved away from the changes the increasing heat had caused. The timber-line was higher on the mountainsides now, and so were the homes of the People.

Once they had been able to range to the ocean's edge, but although the scouts said it was nearer to the mountains now it could be reached only by crossing areas that were far too hot and arid for the People to travel there as a group. The old tales said that there was much ice at each end of their world; the woman was not entirely sure how a world could have ends, but that their stores of ice had melted during the years of intensifying heat she could easily comprehend. So the legends, or that one anyway, must have been true; the seas had indeed risen, although they had retreated to their beds initially after the Great Upheaval.

She was a skeptic, and in her youth that had caused her great trouble. But time had blunted the rough edges of her tongue, from her troubles she had learned wisdom; and the intelligence that had made her so inappropriately outspoken, so dangerously filled with unfemale-like questions, had gradually earned her a certain respect among the People. So when she reached the age at which she was no longer really a woman anyway, but an ancient female whose behavior could no longer bring discredit on a husband-and since she had no son,

and the man who had married her surviving daughter ignored her oddities-she acquired a role she had never sought, but that she relished once she'd tasted its power.

Among all the People's grandmothers, she was the one who sat on the council with the men and represented her gender there. She was the one who arbitrated in those matters that men either knew nothing about, or cared to know nothing about. And although a woman's name was in any case not an important label, hers was forgotten now; to everyone in the village, her title had become her name. She was the Wise Grandmother, and she was called that even by men who were too near her own age to be her children and by young ones who had blood grandmothers of their own.

She watched as the scouting party made its way down the trail, and her interest was piqued beyond measure when she realized that they were not returning alone. They would not have brought any of the orange things, the orange things were only for killing; but who else could have been aboard the sky-ship that had crashed yesterday?

It was a puzzle, and the Wise Grandmother's love of puzzles had been her downfall in her youth and was her chief pleasure in her increasing age. But she stayed back nevertheless, using the wisdom that she'd learned at last and so painfully, until she realized one thing more.

Not only were the two beings the scouts had brought back with them actual people, instead of orange things; one of those people, the one walking at Shand's side instead of being carried on a litter, was female.

The Wise Grandmother smiled, and moved forward to greet Shand and his party. She had that right; the unknown woman's presence gave it to her.

* * *

Renata Colby would have protested when Thor MacKenzie was carried away while she was directed elsewhere, except that the old bronze-skinned woman placed a hand on her arm and gave her what was plainly a smile. A smile from which teeth were missing, in which those that remained had become discolored or perhaps had actually rotted; but nevertheless Colby knew reassurance when it was offered to her, and the hand that touched her comforted but didn't restrain.

"He is being taken to the healing-women," the old one said, and her speech was enough like Shand's so that Colby could comprehend it by paying careful attention. "He struck his head when the sky-ship dropped you to earth?"

"Yes, that's just what happened." The admiral returned the other woman's smile, and made up her mind to trust these people out of her sight with Mac. She could hardly do otherwise, not without giving serious offense; and she'd done

that already once today, twice would definitely be gratuitous. Besides, she had a feeling—the kind of feeling that she’d learned could be relied upon, during her more than two decades of military life that hadn’t always been in the relative tranquillity of Environmental Services—that if these people had intended to harm either Mac or her, they would have done it back at the crash site.

“Come,” the old woman said firmly. “The council will meet now, and since your man is not well you will be allowed to sit with them in his place.”

“Are you the Wise Grandmother that Shand told me about?” The answer seemed obvious, but Colby asked anyway. She knew enough about aboriginal peoples to realize that this was a title she must not use in addressing the wrong person.

“Yes. Now come.”

Colby was drawn along a path, past huts of wood and animal skins that looked snug enough without managing to give any impression of permanence. The sun called Sacorra wasn’t yet even halfway up the sky; that hike from the crash site had been rugged due to the mountainous terrain, but it hadn’t covered a great deal of distance. A group of ten males, including Shand, was assembled at the pathway’s terminus. They sat on the ground, and when the two women reached the gathering place the Wise Grandmother sat down on the ground too.

Colby sank down almost as gracefully as did the native woman beside her. She sat there, and she waited.

Far too much of what followed was incomprehensible to her, because the men of the council (how odd to think of this group in that way, when Colby was accustomed to using that term to describe a far larger assembly—one that included individuals from many different species) often spoke rapidly and didn’t see any need to enunciate their words for her benefit. Shand had learned to do that; and to her respectful surprise, she now realized that the Wise Grandmother had done it instinctively. But the time came when Shand turned to Colby and addressed her directly.

“Woman called Ren,” he said, and then glanced at his fellow councilors in a way that indicated he had introduced the newcomer about as formally as he was going to. As if this were as much respect as she was entitled to receive. “How is it that you were traveling with the orange things? Were you and your man their prisoners?”

She’d known that question would be coming, because everything she had heard and seen of these people’s reactions to the Harimi had indicated that they regarded “the orange things” as objects of hate. So Colby had taken time to formulate her response, and she drew a breath and gave that response now. And since no one else had risen while speaking, she remained seated.

“We were traveling with the Harimi, those you call the ‘orange things,’ as

their guests,” she said honestly, and then waited to observe the councilors’ reactions.

Horror, disgust, fear. Not good.

Shand asked, “Are the orange things your friends, then?” He sounded puzzled, and his eyes said that he hoped to hear a negative answer.

“Not in the sense I think you mean that, Shand.” She didn’t know whether using his name to address him was presumption on her part or not, but she did it anyway. It felt right to her, and she had long ago learned that the most vital element of diplomacy (for her, at least) was to do what felt comfortable and to avoid doing whatever set off her internal alarms. “My people and the Harimi belong to the same alliance, the same grouping of peoples. We’ve agreed-along with as many other different species as you have individuals in your village-that we won’t fight against each other, and that if an outsider attacks one of our member-groups the others will offer assistance.”

“But the individuals whose lives were ended at last-light yesterday were not your friends, yours or Mac’s?” Shand spoke sharply now. Clearly this talk of many other kinds of peoples meant nothing to him.

“No. I knew their names, but I’d just met them yesterday; and the same thing is true for Mac.”

“That is good,” Shand said, as he expelled a long breath of relief. “The orange things have killed us wherever they have found us, woman who is called Ren. So now we do the same to them. If you were their friends, even though you and Mac appear to be of our kind and not of theirs...”

He left the sentence hanging, unfinished. Colby nodded her understanding, and then asked a question of her own. A risky one, but she could hold it inside her no longer. “Shand, did you and your people cause the sky-ship that Mac and I and the Harimi were flying in to crash yesterday?” She could not imagine how these primitively armed people might have accomplished such a thing, but the suspicion was in her mind and she had to voice it.

That party had arrived so conveniently, at practically the first moment of daylight following the crash-and the Wise Grandmother had surmised the cause of Mac’s injury without anyone having told her what had happened to him, as if she knew where the men had gone and why. Maybe these people had done nothing more than glimpse the shuttle on its out-of-control way down, and had come looking for it in hopes of salvaging something useful from its wreck; but Colby was certain, as she looked at their faces after she’d made that inquiry, that they hadn’t come upon the ruined craft by accident.

There was silence in the council-circle then. A silence that the only other female present broke, her voice calm and her tone dry. “That is not a woman’s concern,” the Wise Grandmother announced. She addressed the whole circle

then, after holding Colby's eyes with hers for a moment-a moment during which the admiral, sitting there in her damp and bedraggled uniform, suddenly had the feeling that she was looking into the eyes of a peer and that the recognition was mutual. And that she was being asked to acquiesce, to participate in a fiction of sorts, for her own protection.

Later, those eyes said silently. Aloud the Wise Grandmother said, "I am told, Ren, that you and Mac spent last night alone together in the remains of the sky-ship. I am also told neither you nor he has a mate among your own people. Have I been told truly?"

"Yes." So now they'd come to the place of which Shand had spoken, the time when the woman who was in authority over all such "women's matters" would decide what must be done about the taboo that had been violated. Part of Colby's mind knew this was ridiculous, she was a senior military officer and she'd kept one of her juniors alive at a time when he otherwise would have died; and no one she knew in her own culture would have dreamed of viewing those events differently. But another part of her knew from the way the males around her were tensing, from the anticipation that suddenly filled the air, that she was going to be lucky to get out of this situation with her life.

Was this how the defendant at an ancient witch trial had felt? She hadn't long to wonder, because the Wise Grandmother was speaking again.

"It is fortunate you are both unmated," the old woman said calmly. "Otherwise the situation would be a difficult one. But if you are willing to resolve it correctly, and if he is willing also...?"

Oh, he'll be willing, all right. If I have to make it a direct order! Colby thought, and refused her lips their sudden desire to smile. She said meekly, "This is your village, Wise Grandmother. While we're here, we will do what your customs require us to do."

What did she sense from the surrounding circle? From most of them, relief; they'd been tensed against possible conflict to come, but they hadn't actively wished for it. Shand, in particular, smiled immediately and frankly. But from a few, Colby clearly perceived disappointment.

"So, then," Shand said, and nodded to the Wise Grandmother with the respect Colby herself would have given a subordinate who had performed well. Not the nod of equal to equal, but close to it. "Now there are preparations to make, provided that the male is recovering well enough for a prompt joining."

Oh, oh, Colby thought. How was she going to get a chance to explain this to Mac, and make damned certain he cooperated? He would have no idea why anyone was suggesting such an outrageous thing to him, and Colby herself couldn't guess how her coxswain would respond. At best he might laugh, at worst he might be horrified-hell, he might even be revolted. Jumping one's

commanding officer? Some junior officers dreamed of that, some would throw up at the suggestion; and she hadn't a clue as to how MacKenzie would react to being forced to think of her in that light.

The Wise Grandmother rescued her, with a smooth diplomacy that Colby had a feeling had been hard learned. She said, "He will still be with the healing-women. We will go to him now, woman-called-Ren. Normally male would speak of this to male, but he is of your kind, not ours; and it is important that he understand. If you do not object, Shand?"

Another of those nods, of recognition more than of respect. Shand said. "Do what is needed."

* * *

MacKenzie was lying flat on a pallet, in a hut that was occupied by no one else except a woman nearly as old as the Wise Grandmother. A woman who came out as soon as Colby and the female councilor arrived, plainly expecting to give a report. She stared at Colby-something that it was apparently acceptable for one woman to do to another, as long as males weren't present-until the Wise Grandmother firmly sent the admiral on ahead of her into the hut.

"Speak with your man while I speak with the healer," she said. And waited, expecting obedience just as Colby herself would have expected it.

Colby knelt at Mac's side. She said his name, softly but clearly. His eyes came open, and he looked up at her and managed a wry smile. "Admiral?" he asked, and then groaned.

"How are you feeling, Lieutenant?" For just one moment things were normal again. Colby smiled back, and touched her coxswain's shoulder lightly.

"Headache's better. They must have herbal medicines here, primitive peoples often are damned successful with those...." But he had to close his eyes after a moment, and his face was gray.

"Easy." What she would have given for a med-scanner right now, Colby didn't try to calculate. "It looks as if we're going to be stuck in this hotel for awhile, Lieutenant. We can't walk down this mountain now, and these people are willing to give us shelter. There's just one thing they want from us in return."

"What's that, ma'am?" He looked up at her again, with trust in his young eyes.

"They want us to show respect for their customs, and they were terribly offended that they found an unmarried couple together this morning when it was obvious we'd been there alone all night." She said the ridiculous words as calmly as she could, and then she waited.

“What?” He was so startled that he tried to sit up, and then sank back with a groan that was much deeper than before. “Oh, damn! But some primitives are pretty puritanical, aren’t they? What do they want us to do, get married or something?”

“Exactly.” She wanted to smile, and perhaps in another minute or so she could allow herself to do that. But not right now, first she had to make sure he understood and was taking her seriously. “So whatever they have for a—they called it a ‘joining ceremony,’ I believe—we’re going to go through it, and then afterward whenever we’re out in public we’re going to abide by whatever customs they have that govern behavior between two mated people. I don’t like deceiving them, but in this case I don’t see an alternative. And it’s not as if any ceremony conducted here, under this kind of duress, has legal significance once we get back to the *Serengeti*.”

“They must be looking for us right now, Admiral.” MacKenzie made the mistake of nodding, and his face contorted at the pain the motion caused. “And it does look like we’re stuck here, at least for now. Okay, sure, I’ll do whatever I’m supposed to do to make these folks happy—and pretty soon the captain will find us, and we’ll go home.”

He closed his eyes then, exhausted. Colby put her hand on his shoulder again, and squeezed gently.

* * *

Chapter 3

The blankets were made from animal hides, tanned with care and skill to create bedding that was both soft and beautiful. It was a beauty that Renata Colby could appreciate, after encountering many cultures like this one where it was still acceptable (indeed, a matter of survival) to use body parts from other living creatures for coverings and as food. When she'd been a girl just entering her military training, it had been very difficult for her to make herself eat flesh or touch leather; but she'd been obliged to do both or fail during survival training. And later, in field situations like this one, the survival issues had become real-it was no longer a matter of failing a course, and therefore possibly failing to graduate with the proper qualifications for her chosen career.

Here it was eat meat or starve, after having first mortally offended the hosts whose good will she and Mac needed if they were to survive until Thad Worthington's people could locate them. And right now it was use the bedclothes that were offered, or do without; and since she was stark naked underneath the softly tanned hide blankets, she was glad to gather them to her chin.

The village's women had not proven to be shy, as she had thought they might be in this male-dominated culture. Not, at least, when they were among their own. Colby had spent the rest of her first day here, after the council meeting had adjourned, learning names and struggling to understand and to make herself understood. She'd had no further contact with any of the males, after the Wise Grandmother (who seemed not to have a name, who was always addressed and referred to by that title in its entirety) had led her out of the

council meeting.

Mac had been taken away from the healer's hut, at some point during the local afternoon. Colby had been concerned about that, after her coxswain had slept though most of the day she was sure he ought to stay right where he was and continue to rest; but about this the healing-women, and the Wise Grandmother, were adamant.

"He can walk, he had eaten food, he no longer complains of pain in his head," the old woman said firmly when Colby protested as vehemently as she dared. "The healing-women have no reason to hold him, so for him to stay with them longer would be improper. And since he is well now, or very nearly so, the joining must be accomplished. To delay it would be to compound the offense already given. You do not wish to do that, do you, woman-called-Ren?"

Colby had at last figured out that this awkward-sounding form of address was actually her hosts' way of giving her a certain amount of respect. She acquiesced, having been offered that argument, and told herself that it didn't matter anyway. She and Mac certainly weren't going to do anything except sleep, once they were alone together after whatever kind of joining ceremony this tribe practiced.

As it turned out there was no ceremony, at least not in the sense of the two people to be united making any kind of promises to each other-or even, for that matter, seeing or speaking to each other as part of a public ritual. From the side of the village where the men were Colby heard the clear sounds of a party in progress, as darkness approached; and among the women, another kind of celebration unfolded.

She was familiar with many ancient peoples' customs, so this business of putting the bride to bed only surprised her at first; and then only because never had she anticipated becoming the center of such a ritual. She was glad she knew about such things, though, because without that knowledge she suspected she would have found this a very alarming business. To be led to a hut just beyond the village's edge didn't surprise her, but when women pressed inside until there was no more room and when the overflow crowded the doorway and the windows in order to stare-now, that was something she might have found hard to bear with equanimity if she hadn't understood the cultural significance of what was being done to her.

Her uniform was stripped from her body, and so was her standard-issue underwear. She was bathed, thankfully in warm water that seemed reasonably clean; and only the healing-women touched her. The others reached out from time to time, murmuring in curiosity, but the Wise Grandmother stopped all attempts at pawing with words that were firm or even sharp as the situation required. Being stared at was humiliating at first-but soon Colby found herself

realizing that these other women were, in fact, only curious. They wanted to know for certain that her body was like their own bodies, down to the most intimate of details, and their concepts of personal modesty not only allowed this kind of scrutiny-it was expected, probably she was supposed to be taking it as a great compliment.

She wasn't able to stretch her cross-cultural acceptance quite that far, but at least she didn't reflexively try to conceal herself. She allowed the stripping, and the bathing, and then an herbal anointing between her legs, and managed not to flinch-in fact she even smiled a bit, since she suspected that part of the ritual was intended to guarantee fertility.

Not a chance in hell, she thought as she felt warmth that the herbs had to be generating and resisted a thoroughly undignified urge to squirm. Not that she was on any type of long-acting birth control preparation, that wasn't necessary when she seldom slept with a man and could easily take her precautions at the time or soon afterward-but the one thing that was necessary to cause conception without medical intervention wasn't going to be happening to her tonight, so what did it matter? But she did wish she'd been able to avoid the application of that ointment. Submitting to the procedure before an audience had been bad enough, but she hadn't suspected the preparation itself was going to make her uncomfortable.

After that she was allowed to put her knees down, and she was covered with the skin blankets and the healing-women left her. And with them they at last took the others, leaving only the Wise Grandmother inside the hut; with skin curtains closed now across the windows, and another such curtain closed across the doorway.

The old woman knelt at Colby's side, and stroked her hair. Auburn hair, that in the admiral's girlhood had been almost as light as Mac's red-blond thatch; that in adulthood had become a rich, coppery color, and now had some strands of silver in it. Not that Colby minded, her bio-mother's hair had turned a lovely silver during her forties and now the same thing was happening to her.

One of her early parent-surrogates at the creche-Litabet, who had gone back into the service when the Great War came and had died in its first battle-had sat beside her bed whenever small Renata was sick, and had stroked her hair like this. And she now knew that this woman had a grown daughter, and grandchildren who were almost grown as well; so she accepted the maternal gesture in just the way she knew it was intended, and relaxed and smiled through the hut's deep dusk. "The men are going to bring him to me?" she asked. And didn't add, "Hopefully after I've had time enough to get my clothes back on."

"Yes." The Wise Grandmother seemed to hesitate, then made up her mind

to speak plainly. “The healing-women believe that you have been mated before, woman-called-Ren. Is that the case?”

“Yes.” True enough, for sure and certain; but Colby didn’t volunteer the nature of those matings. There had been men, of course there had been men, and women also-but never anyone to whom she’d bound herself legally, and if that was what the Wise Grandmother meant instead of merely physical relations then the subterfuge couldn’t be helped.

“You bore your dead husband no child?”

“I’ve never had a child, no.” Let the old woman assume what she would about a dead husband, it was better for everyone that way.

“That is a pity. Perhaps tonight it will be corrected, perhaps tonight you will conceive at last. And you know what will be expected of you when your man arrives, so I will not explain that as I would now do if I were beside the pallet of a virgin bride-even though from watching the two of you together today I have become certain that you and this man have never been intimate before.” The Wise Grandmother bent her head and gently kissed the younger woman’s forehead. “Males do not want to be told so, but sometimes a woman’s lack of children is her mate’s fault and not her own. Sometimes a childless widow can have a family after all, once she is mated to a different man. I will hope it may be so with you, woman-called-Ren, because for all the trouble my daughter and her children have given me they have nevertheless been my life’s greatest joys.”

With that she rose, as gracefully as a girl, and exited the hut.

Colby had no time to do as she’d intended, which was to throw back the blankets and get her clothing and put it on quickly. Then back under the covers, of course, so that if any of the bridegroom’s party should be allowed by local custom to look inside the hut they wouldn’t suspect she was anything except naked-but she would just have to tough out the embarrassment as best she could, because there was no pause between the Wise Grandmother’s departure and Mac’s arrival. He came through the door immediately after she left it, staggering as if he’d been pushed.

He probably had been, she could hear the other men outside and they sounded as raucous as any drunken wedding party in any human culture since time immemorial. But thankfully they weren’t going to remain out there and listen; after a chorus of encouraging shouts (in which she detected some clear obscenities!), they moved off down the path and back into the village.

And MacKenzie stood just inside the door and swayed for a moment more, then got his feet under him-and groaned loudly. Then he choked out, “Admiral?”

Oh, gods, how utterly ridiculous her rank sounded to her right now. But Colby sat up, pulling her coverings with her across her breasts, and answered him firmly: “Yes, Mac. Are you okay?”

“No, I’m sure as hell not.” He groaned again, and it wasn’t his head he clutched at in pain. He was wearing what looked like some kind of ceremonial robe-and she suspected that underneath it he was just as naked as she was. “Admiral, this is the most embarrassing thing that’s ever happened to me, but I can’t go back outside. And if I don’t do something about this right now, I think I’m gonna die.”

The herbal cream that was still sinking into her private parts was warmer than ever, and it was that sensation as much as the way the young man was clutching at his groin that made Colby realize exactly what ailed him. She asked in a deliberately calm tone, “Was the aphrodisiac in something they fed you, Mac? Or was it in an ointment, like the one their healers used on me?”

“You, too? Oh, gods.” Walking hurt him, that was obvious. “No ointments, I think it was in the booze. However they got it into me, I’ve got to take care of this...so just don’t look, and if I make any noise try to ignore me. Some noise would probably be a good idea, it’ll make those bastards who did this to me think we’re really doing what they wanted us to do.”

He made his ludicrously careful way to the hut’s darkest corner, while Colby lay back on the pallet and closed her eyes and tried to clear her mind. But the sound of his breathing was somehow increasing the heat between her legs, her nipples were erect and pebble-hard; and she was aching.

If she was uncomfortable, he had to be in agony. And he wasn’t finding much release over there in that corner, for whatever reason his groans of distress were increasing and he wasn’t reaching resolution.

Oh, damn, what does it matter? Colby thought in utter annoyance. Aloud she said, “Mac, this is stupid. Come over here, let’s just do what they expect us to do and take care of each other.”

“Huh?” But there was as much pain in that gasp as there was disbelief. “Admiral, you don’t mean that!”

“I sure as hell do,” she answered. She threw back the skin blankets, got to her feet and walked across the few paces of hard-packed earthen floor that separated her from him.

She pushed the robe from his shoulders; it was already open, of course, to accommodate what he’d been trying to do to himself. She put her arms around him, pressed her bare body against his, and that was all it took.

They were kissing then, frantically; and that was the extent of the preliminaries. When the kiss ended he hoisted her in his arms, moving awkwardly still from the painful tension in his groin but with purpose because now he knew he would soon be able to find comfort. He carried her back to the pallet, put her down gently, and knelt between her legs.

And then he hesitated, because the curtain at one window wasn’t quite

sealed and several of this world's moons were rising now. A shaft of light was coming through that gap, and it was falling across the woman's body-leaving her face in shadow, but illuminating her breasts and her belly and the dark triangle where her thighs began.

He caught his breath in a sob. And she lay back, and deliberately lifted her knees and opened herself to him.

The first thrust took him all the way inside her, she hadn't expected to be penetrated so deeply and the shock of it made her gasp. But it wasn't painful, he had taken her swiftly but without roughness; and the herbal ointment that had been causing her more and more discomfort with the heat it generated, soothed her now by combining with the natural moisture of her arousal to ease his passage.

She was glad it took as long as it did, because after that moment of initial surprise she savored every second. He was good, oh gods he was good...! A strong young male body in her arms, hardness and heat moving freely inside her; and somehow he had enough presence of mind left to remember that for most human females that motion wasn't enough. He caressed her while he was thrusting, turning their bodies so that he could find the sensitive place that needed his special attention, and when he did that she convulsed almost immediately and began to cry out and didn't care who heard her.

The whole village, probably, she thought afterward; after finally his body shuddered uncontrollably, too, and his voice uttered a deeper version of her own repeated cries. They lay together then in silence, he on top of her now and resting his weight there crushingly even though he hadn't done that during the lovemaking-but she didn't mind. She had her arms wrapped around him, his head was pillowed against her shoulder, and when after a few minutes of quiet she felt him hardening inside her again she didn't mind that either.

Incredible, it had to be the aphrodisiac because even a man of his youth wasn't likely to be that potent on his own. But it was even better this time, because although his need was still real enough it wasn't as urgent; now there was time for gentler and more varied touching, time for pleasuring that didn't have release as its immediate goal.

Oh, yes, it was good. It was wonderful, and when it was over this time she was too exhausted to even think about staying awake any longer. He gently disengaged their bodies, lay down at her side, and pulled the hide blankets over them. She nestled close, put her head on his shoulder; and the next thing she knew there was sunlight, not moonlight, coming through that small gap between curtain and window.

Colby lifted her head from MacKenzie's shoulder, and raised herself up onto an elbow and looked down into his face. He was still sleeping, she could see that the night's activities had taken their toll on him following as they had so soon after he'd been hurt in the shuttle crash. There were dark smudges under both his eyes, and his handsome young face looked sunken-although two days' beard growth probably wasn't helping his appearance in that respect.

She remembered now that his stubble had burned her face while they'd kissed, and had pricked against the sensitive skin of her body. At the time she hadn't noticed it at all.

Yes, he was a good-looking kid; and she was comfortably aware of herself as a woman, never a raving beauty but slim and strong and clear-skinned-and with more smile-lines than frown-lines forming around her eyes and her mouth, as she moved from youth toward maturity. Physical attraction between them wasn't unthinkable, it was just unlikely given the gap that rank and protocol and simply the differences in their life experiences had placed between them. Yet last night's passion had to have been induced by their hosts' primitive but terribly effective herbal pharmacopoeia, because otherwise she couldn't imagine that all she so clearly remembered could possibly have taken place.

He stirred as she watched him, probably because a shaft of light had finally found his face. He opened his eyes, squinted, and then shielded them while he looked up at her.

They both blushed, that was inevitable. But he smiled, and said as evenly as he could, "Morning, Admiral."

Then his eyes moved from her face down to her breasts, and his blush deepened even though she had thought that to be impossible.

Tenderness and amusement mingled in Colby's answering smile. She reached out a hand and touched his cheek, her fingertips caressing him lightly. She said softly, "Good morning, Mac. And while we're here-these people are never going to understand what you're calling me, or why; and if they did figure it out we'd be in even worse trouble with them than we were yesterday. So try saying my name, okay? Just until we get back to the ship, of course."

"Of course," MacKenzie echoed. Now there was a trace of humor in his eyes. "And when we do get back-I like working for you, Admiral, but I think I'm going to have to ask you to recommend me for a transfer. I know we're both going to have to forget all about this, and-and I'm not sure how good I'm going to be at doing that."

"Not 'admiral,'" she corrected, and her fingertips moved from his cheek to his lips. "Ren. We'll cross that bridge when we come to it, Mac. We don't know whether we're going to be stuck here for another couple of hours, or another

couple of weeks.” Or, her mind added silently, another couple of years if something had gone wrong with the *Serengeti*’s search for them; and she was afraid that just might be the case, because they ought to have been found by now. But she smiled at her companion again and continued gently, “Anyhow, at least we got each other through last night! How are you feeling?”

“Tired, but okay. No headache, and that’s the only thing that would worry me.” The answering smile he gave her was a shy one. “Thanks. I’d have had a hell of a night if you hadn’t helped me, Ren.”

“Thank you,” she said, and meant it. “It worked both ways. I wonder what we’re supposed to do now? The Wise Grandmother didn’t tell me whether a new couple here spends time together during the day, or if they’re separated for work and socializing just the same as all the other adults seem to be.”

With serendipitous timing, she heard footsteps on the path outside the hut. These were people whose footsteps weren’t heard unless it was intentional, that they knew how to move quietly was something Colby had noticed during her first encounter with them; so she took the hint, and lay down again so that Mac’s arms and the blankets both concealed her when the Wise Grandmother ducked inside without announcing herself first.

No, she had done so. Letting her approach be heard was announcement enough, in this culture.

The old woman had a bundle in one hand, and a water-skin in the other. She came directly to the pallet, with a lack of embarrassment that indicated she had done this many times before for many other nuptial couples, and placed the offerings on the floor. Then she inquired with perfect calm, “Was all well with you last night?”

But she looked into Colby’s eyes as she asked that question, and it was plain that she already had a very good idea of how last night had gone. No doubt half the village knew, Colby thought as she remembered the sounds she’d made—and those that her partner had made, too.

“Very well,” Colby said, and although she knew she was reddening again she kept her voice steady and she hid most of her smile.

“Excellent.” The old woman nodded. “Today is yours. It will be my task, I should say my privilege, to bring you whatever you need from the village; I waited to bring first-meal until after the sun had risen, but I will bring the others to you at more usual times. If you wish to walk about later in the day, it is customary for a couple in their joining-time to walk by the stream or in the forest and to stay out of the sight and hearing of others.”

“And after today?” Colby asked. She could feel Mac relaxing beside her, and knew that for him at least the idea of not having to see anyone else was a relief.

“Tomorrow morning you will take first-meal with the women at daybreak, and your man will take first-meal with the men,” the Wise Grandmother answered. “You will be given a shelter of your own in the village; this one is used only when a couple is newly joined. At night you will sleep with him there, except when your woman-time comes and he must lie separately. For him to sleep on another pallet within the shelter, so that his skin does not touch yours, will be sufficient separation; we do not follow the practice of some tribes, we do not exile women from their homes each month. Your husband is the only person you may not touch at that time, but you must not even brush against him or it may become impossible for you to conceive by him.” She delivered that information as clinically as any service doctor Colby had ever known, although she carefully didn’t look at Mac as she said it. “But if last night’s joinings between you and your man were as successful as I have cause to believe that they were, after the proper number of days have passed you will give him a son. And that will interrupt your union only for as long as it takes your loins to heal afterward, because the blood of birth is clean blood if the child is male.”

The Wise Grandmother had probably given similar lectures on sexual protocol many times, to many new couples. And this one was over now, clearly Colby was supposed to assume that any child she conceived would be male and wait for instructions on how to deal with the alternative situation only if it happened to her; but she was curious. So she said as the old woman rose, “Wise Grandmother. What happens if the baby’s a girl?”

“Female children are necessary too. Without them there would be no next generation of males.” The answer was spoken thoughtfully, in a tone that indicated this was definitely not part of the prescribed speech for the nuptial morning. “But the blood of a girl-child’s birth is unclean, so although the father may continue to live in his wife’s shelter he may not touch her again until she has been purified.”

“And how long does that take?” Colby wanted to know. Suddenly it seemed to matter, because small though the chance was that last night’s loving might have caused her to conceive-still, it could have happened. And while she had no intention of being in this place nine months from now-again, that too was possible. Besides which she was simply inquisitive, that most inconvenient of personality traits was exactly why she’d put on a service uniform in the first place.

“The man may not take his wife again until after the girl-child has been weaned,” the Wise Grandmother said. “He can touch her as anyone would, though, as soon as her loins have ceased bleeding after the birth.”

“Since that’s how it is-does every woman who has a girl baby keep her child, and nurse it until it’s old enough to eat solid food?” The scientist in Colby

insisted on asking that, because this wasn't the first culture she had encountered where females did not have as much value as males-and selective infanticide of girl babies was a common practice in such societies.

"That is for the father to say, of course. But most men realize that the village needs women, so it is rare for a girl baby to be discarded." The old woman's tone was calm, almost matter of fact; but there was sadness in her face. A sadness that made Renata Colby wonder if the custom she'd just described had ever affected her personally, or had only horrified her when she'd been forced to see it practiced by others. "I must leave you now, this will be your one day together in all your lives. I have taken up too much of it already." With that she turned, and ducked out through the curtained doorway and was gone.

Colby sat up immediately, no longer self-conscious about being naked in front of her coxswain, and got to her feet and tried to locate her uniform. Instead she found a native woman's dress, a plain shift that when she put it on fell to just below her knees. There were sandals to wear instead of her boots, and she put those on too.

Behind her she heard MacKenzie stirring, and when she turned after she was clothed she found that he too had been donning a native outfit. Tunic, breeches, sandals; she knew that clothing was a major investment of time and materials in a culture like this one, and wondered who else was as tall and as wide-shouldered as Mac because what he was wearing actually did fit him. They faced each other, and both of them grinned at once.

"Do I pass inspection?" MacKenzie asked, his tone deliberately light.

"You'll do." He hadn't said her rank this time, but it hung in the air between them anyway. "Let's see what she brought us, I'm starving now. And then let's for gods' sake get out of here and get some air. In fact, let's walk up to what's left of the shuttle and take a look around."

"Isn't that quite a hike?" But he really must be feeling all right this morning, because he was reaching for his share of the grain cakes with an eagerness that indicated he was hungry.

"Not as far as it felt like to you yesterday. And there's a lot of checking things out that I want to do. It's possible one or both of our comm units survived, the crash was nowhere near violent enough to put them out of commission; but it was too dark and too cold for me to look around afterward, and yesterday morning the priority had to be getting both of us warm and fed." Actually the priority had been getting Mac to whatever kind of medical attention the locals could provide, but Colby didn't want to put it that bluntly. Making him feel guilty for anything that had happened during the past day and a half wasn't going to help, and she was discovering a sensitivity in this young lieutenant that she hadn't suspected before.

But then, what had she known about him except that he did one hell of a job as her coxswain? And that he was young and good-looking, and single and unabashedly interested in women of his own age?

"I wonder what the grandma's going to think if she comes back with lunch and we're not here," Mac said now, and grinned with an irreverence that was comfortingly familiar.

"She'll think we took a romantic walk." Colby returned the grin, in a way she would not have returned it before last night's events. Not that she hadn't been at ease with Mac, not that she hadn't wanted him to be at ease with her; but for better or for worse, the structure of their earlier relationship was gone now.

Gone forever, quite possibly. He was right; she would have to transfer him when they got back where they belonged. But in the meantime she wasn't going to waste her energy trying to reclaim what was gone, and she was glad he wasn't going to do that either.

"Back where we come from, I could be a grandma by now," Colby remarked as the two of them left the shelter and filled the water-skin at the stream and then started following yesterday's trail that led up a forested slope. "I wondered at first why they didn't realize I'm old enough to be your mother! But now I know why, women who live the way these ones live are old at forty and dead before fifty. If childbirth doesn't get them earlier, that is."

"Ad-I mean, Ren." Mac stopped walking, and when she stopped also he reached out and put his hands on her forearms. "Let's get something straight, right now. I'd have taken anything female and willing that I could have got my hands on last night, you saw how desperate I was; but I didn't just take you. I made love to you, both times, and I did it that way because I wanted to. Hell, what man with eyes in his head wouldn't have?"

He leaned down then and kissed her, full on the lips but so swiftly that she had no chance at all to respond. And then he let her go and started walking again, obliging her to move quickly and catch up with him after she got her astonished mouth shut and persuaded her feet to resume motion.

* * *

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