

Sky Dancers



C. B. Williams

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Sky Dancers

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Sky Dancers

PRAISE FOR C. B. WILLIAMS

Praise for “The Walkers Trilogy”

“Walkers caught my attention from the first page, and then kept getting better and better. It has just enough fantasy to stretch the reader’s imagination and still make you wonder...what if it really could happen? What if other worlds are right there at the tip of our fingers? Kate and Ash are characters that jump off the page and into your heart. It’s great fun to watch them interact, to question, and to begin building a relationship.”

- L. j. Charles

“While the series may be designed for the oft-overlooked young adult reader, the series is highly readable and entertaining for adults as well. Anyone who enjoys depictions of other worlds, creative creatures and well wrought characters will have a hard time putting this down.”

-A. Adrian

“Williams obviously puts her heart and soul into her characters, and it’s easy to get caught up in the action. Can we be blamed for wanting more? Let’s hope we can read about these characters again in some future volume. Recommended for anyone who enjoys Celtic fantasy with brisk, lean storytelling.”

-R. Kane

Praise for “This Fool’s Journey, Tarot Tales for Modern Minds”

“Part allegory, part fantasy, part fairy tale and very wise, it taught a tarot novice like me how to understand the tarot’s archetypes through a time and space-bending journey filled with colorful characters. A delightful collection of stories!”

-J. Caldwell

OTHER TITLES BY C.B. WILLIAMS

The Walkers Trilogy

Walkers (2012)

The Place Between Worlds (2012)

The Shield (2013)

The PeaceKeeper Corps (2014)

Under the name Cynthia Campbell Williams:

This Fools Journey, Tarot Tales for Modern Minds (2011)

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ONE: SAXTON'S RUBY

"I will not abort my baby," Layla repeated and tightened her arms against her abdomen, tucking herself protectively over her belly while she glared at the two men—one, short, greasy, and fat; the other tall, blond, with an air of authority.

"We cannot have this!" Balisto shouted at Velin, the veins at his temples throbbing. "You must fix this! I am losing money. I cannot take her back. I cannot sell her." He jabbed his fat, sausage-like forefinger. "You must fix this," he repeated.

The slave trader swiped the spittle off with the back of his hand, jabbed his finger at Velin once more, and stormed out of the room. The door slid shut with a soft hiss, and the little room fell silent.

Velin crossed his arms and watched Layla straighten, swallow, and thrust out her chin. The set of her jaw hinted it would be fruitless to argue. Yet, as the ship's Guardian of the Federation, it was his responsibility to resolve problems to keep the peace.

As if aware of his scrutiny, Layla huddled in on herself again, lifting the shoulder nearest him defensively. She shook her red hair from her face and lifted her chin again, meeting his gaze over her shoulder.

She was lovely, with her auburn hair and pale blue eyes. A bit wild, but then he had never been interested in the Exotics. He preferred his women to know what was expected of them. And he preferred them to be free.

However, slavery was a necessary evil.

Velin sighed, “I will consider this situation in depth,” he told her. “There are options, I am sure. I do not relish requiring you to end a wanted pregnancy.”

“I would rather die,” she replied calmly.

Such fire. It was a shame she had been captured.

Velin tapped the bulkhead communicator. “Guard?”

The door slid open, and a young woman dressed in the slave trader’s livery of silver and dark green stood at attention. “Sir?”

“Please escort this woman to her cell,” he instructed. To Layla he said, “I will discuss this with you further once I have considered the alternatives.”

Layla said nothing, her pale face an expressionless mask.

Watching them leave, Velin sighed wearily, wiping his face with his hands. *And to think this was to be a pleasure excursion, he laughed to himself.* Accepting this assignment on board the ship *Saxon’s Ruby* had been meant to appease his longing to study unexplored quadrants...his little hobby, as his mother liked to call it. He’d never thought nabbing Exotics from a little blue planet far from the Federation’s Galactic Center could be such an annoying business.

* * *

The moment her cell door hissed shut, Layla sank onto the sleeping pallet, head in her hands, and allowed the tears to flow. It had required her last ounce of strength to appear brave and defiant, to pretend she did not feel this unrelenting terror.

Her greatest fear was that by giving into the terror she would harm her child. She fought for calm, sending love to the little embryo, even now no larger than a ripe apricot, tightening her muscles to keep the wracking sobs at bay.

Dez’s child. Dez with the laughing eyes. Dez, who encouraged and supported her. Dez, who now needed her and had begged her to take no chances.

But, no, she had insisted on checking out the clinic herself. She had to go and snoop around. She’d been sure something was fishy, something not quite right,

and it was her big chance to land a story, her big chance to see her name under the headline banner of the Portland Tribune.

With a shaky sigh, she wiped her face with her fists and dabbed her eyes with the bell-shaped sleeve of the long, green gown they had forced her to put on after removing the last mementos of her home. No mother's ring. No heart pendant from Dez. She felt so alone. The scraping of metal on metal, sounding like some kind of gnawing rodent, whipped her attention to the duct grate in the ceiling.

"Hsssst!"

She sucked in a breath, hand unconsciously slipping to her belly, and looked up, straining to see into the gloom of the duct.

A pair of dark, glittering eyes met her own.

"Is it clear?" a voice whispered. It sounded young, adolescent. It spoke English.

"What?" she whispered back.

"Do you see anything which looks like a monitor or camera or anything like that?"

She looked around the small, windowless cell—metal chair, metal table, sink-type thing, toilet-type thing, and sleeping pallet she was sitting on—scanning for anything out of the ordinary.

"I don't think so," she replied with a shake of her head.

"Good." A pause, then more rat gnawing sounds. "Give me a minute."

Layla rose, smoothing the gown, and crossed to stand close to the vent. Squinting into the gloom, she could make out a pair of tawny hands working quickly, nimbly, with a pocketknife.

"Almost got it," said the voice belonging to the hands. "Can you bring the chair over here?"

"Oh. Yes, of course," she replied, already reaching for the chair as the voice had requested. Its metal back was cold. She placed the chair under the vent and watched the nimble fingers quietly lift the grate.

A head popped out. A boy, perhaps in his early teens, Layla speculated.

"Watch this," the boy said.

With a quick twist of his body, he shimmied through the opening and landed soundlessly on his feet, like a cat, onto the chair seat. He then placed one foot on the chair's back and shifted his weight, riding the chair down as it lightly dipped backwards to the floor.

"Ta-daaaa!" he caroled, arms outstretched. Then he took a bow.

"You could be a cat burglar," Layla said.

He shook his head. "Gymnast."

The boy looked around. "This place is tiny! Do you have any food? All the others are in some sort of suspended animation, with feeding tubes stuck in their arms and earbuds stuck in their ears. I lifted one out and listened for a minute or two. Sounded like a language lesson." He spoke in a soft tenor voice, all the while turning around, carefully surveying the room until his gaze rested upon Layla. He fell silent, taking in a large breath. "You are the most beautiful woman I have ever seen," he said. "Name's Angel. Yours?"

"Layla," she replied and felt herself blushing. "You are certainly the most beautiful boy I have ever seen," she told him.

Angel scowled. "Boy? Really? Boy?!?" he scoffed. "Come on, now. Just because I'm short. I'm eighteen. You?"

"Twenty-two."

"So you can buy drinks, and I can serve my country. We're both adults, here. What's your story?"

"Wha—?"

Angel had taken her hand and now guided her to the sleeping pallet, easing her down so they sat side by side.

Catching her expression, he said, "Think of it as a couch. If you haven't noticed, it's pretty Spartan in here."

After studying his curling dark hair, the large, dark eyes which appraised her from under thick brows, his sharp nose, full lower lip, and tawny skin, Layla decided he must be Hispanic or Italian. His accent suggested she was right. He was slight, like a colt not quite grown, and gracefully muscular, without an ounce

of fat on him. He wore a pair of faded jeans, black T-shirt, and tennis shoes. “You really are the most beautiful,” she paused and smiled, “...*man* I have ever seen.”

Angel flashed her a grin full of even, white teeth.

“My mother is a Latina and my father is Italian. How could I not be beautiful? But you, you I could gaze upon for the rest of my life. You are still the most beautiful woman I have ever seen.” He reached out, lightly stroking her hair where it lay in glossy waves down the middle of her back. “And this red did not come from any bottle,” he continued. “And I should know. My mother’s a hairdresser and I’ve got four older sisters.”

Layla laughed and the room brightened for Angel. “I pity your sisters. I bet you were a terror.”

“Oh, I was! Spoiled rotten, too. With my beautiful yet manly face, I could and did get away with just about anything. Still can, too.” He grinned rakishly at her. “So how come you’re not lying on a bed with all the others, hooked up to the tubes and earbuds?” he asked.

Angel instantly regretted his words when he felt the light leave the room. The beautiful *hermosa* seemed to deflate right in front of him. Something tugged at his heart.

“They can’t because I’m pregnant,” she said quietly. “And they’re not too happy about it.”

She looked ready to cry.

“Don’t cry, please,” he said. “As long as we’re alive, we’ve got hope.” He touched her cheek, willing the smile to return. When it did not, he continued. “Layla, we’re a team now. You aren’t alone anymore, you hear me? Say, why don’t we compare notes and see what we can figure out together?” He took her limp hand, not realizing he had until he felt her fingers nestle in between his own.

“Let’s hear your story, Layla.” He liked saying her name. It reminded him of the old song from the ‘60s or ‘70s his father loved to sing at the top of his lungs.

She took a breath and looked at their hands, her hair falling like a curtain, hiding her expression.

“You’re from Portland, too, right? I have been following that big news story about the clinic since day one,” she said, shooting him a glance. “I work for the Portland Tribune,” she added. “In Research, but I want to write. Something about that clinic didn’t feel right to me, you know?” She shook her head. “The whole thing kind of creeped me out...just how quickly it was set up, the mandatory vaccines and quarantines.”

She paused, still looking at their clasped hands, her hair again veiling her face. “What seemed the weirdest to me was that the people quarantined were the healthiest. I knew a couple of them, people I worked with at the paper, who had gone there the day before, at the gym. They were as healthy as we are. It just didn’t add up. I told Dez,” her voice cracked, “my boyfriend.” She looked up at Angel and then back at her hands, swallowing. “He’s an ex-cop...anyway, he just laughed at me. Said I’d been watching too many conspiracy theory movies.

“So I decided to find out for myself. I went to the clinic and told them I had some of the symptoms.” She smiled. “I didn’t have to fake the throwing up bit, on account of the baby,” she said, again glancing in his direction. “Anyway, they ran these weird scanners all over me and, before I could protest, gave me some sort of injection to knock me out. When I came to, I was being disconnected from those tubes you were talking about and some fat guy was yelling at the people—technicians, I guess—who were doing the disconnecting. Then they wheeled me here.” She stopped.

“Then what?” Angel prodded, enjoying the feeling of their hands clasped together, enjoying the smoky sound of her voice.

“Shhhhhhhh!” she hissed, her eyes wide at the faint whistling sound.

Angel listened. “I will return, Hermosa,” he said, quickly squeezing her fingers.

Angel reversed his entrance, righting the chair and jumping, catching the lip of the vent. Soundlessly, he hoisted himself in and refitted the grate.

Just as the rat-scratchings faded, the door to Layla’s cell slid open. A covered tray glided in, steered by an attendant carrying a handheld device. The attendant remained just outside the cell’s door, absently whistling a strange tune. The tray

floated to the metal table, and as soon as it touched down the attendant clicked the controls and the tray settled onto the desk. He nodded respectfully to Layla, and the door slid shut.

She listened to the odd little tune until the man was out of hearing range. Then she walked over and lifted the cover. Unfamiliar but pleasant aromas wafted out. Her stomach didn't seem to care they were strange and rumbled a greeting to the meal. Layla dragged the chair over to the desk and sat down. Whatever it was, it was so delicious that she almost forgot to save some for Angel when he returned...if he returned.

Layla hoped he would.

She sat back, re-covered the tray, and began inventing excuses to keep it in her room, just in case.

* * *

Velin finally reached a decision, although it was more an array of suggested alternatives.

He had spent several hours studying the Federation's Guardianship Manual for negotiating pregnancies. He discovered the level of sophistication of the pregnant woman's home planet determined the manner in which pregnancies were negotiated. Because the girl's little home planet was in a quadrant considered wilderness and unexplored, he was forced to compare what he had observed during his relatively short stay with other planets of similar levels of sophistication.

Since Velin was the first Guardian to render a judgment upon a dweller of that planet, he had to ensure he had covered all contingencies. Although it was certainly noteworthy, to his mind it was a painstaking and tedious effort for such a small matter. Nonetheless, he applied himself with the focus and thoroughness which were his nature. He derived some satisfaction from knowing this case would be recorded and others would follow the trail he had blazed. It almost made the required effort worthwhile.

When he felt sufficiently prepared, he called for the girl to be delivered to his rooms, requesting that a Witness also accompany her.

The chime at his entry panel emitted a soft *ping*. Velin rose from his chair and crossed the room, passing his hand over the door pad. It slid open. Layla, a guard, and another woman stood in the doorway.

“Please,” Velin said with a smile and gestured for them to enter. “I am glad you have come.” The guard remained at the door, and Velin escorted the two women to the small table and chairs. He had arranged the furnishings in what he hoped was a nonthreatening manner. He waited for the two women to sit before he took his place. Gathering his dark blue robes, the Guardianship’s colors, he deftly rearranged his garments and settled into his chair. Once seated, he glanced at the two waiting women and smiled.

“Welcome,” he said. “Are you both ready to proceed?” He did not bother with a translator box, as he had learned the girl had already been implanted with a language chip prior to the discovery of her pregnancy.

Layla studied the tall man through her lashes, trying to place his accent and nationality. She thought perhaps he was Irish from the way he softly rolled his r’s and his complexion. But his clothing was completely off. Perhaps he was a mixed race, like Angel...who had not yet returned to visit her. Or perhaps he was Eastern European or Turkish. Based on the robes he wore, she could imagine him Turkish, but then how to place the accent? He was a conundrum.

She had been so focused on figuring out his nationality she had lost track of the conversation. A long pause drew her out of her thoughts, and she glanced up to see the others watching her.

Layla blinked.

“I’m sorry,” she said, feeling her cheeks heat. “Could you please repeat what you just said?”

Velin scowled but did as she asked. “I was making introductions,” he said. “I am called Velin and I am this ship’s Guardian. Across from me is Whin, who

has volunteered to Witness our discussion. And you are?" He paused, expectantly waiting for her to introduce herself.

The girl blinked again, and he wondered if she was perhaps not as intelligent as he had first supposed.

She cleared her throat and leaned forward slightly. "I'm...I'm sorry," she said. "You said you were Guardian of this ship?"

Velin nodded. "Yes," he said, and then realized she probably did not understand the regulations, since her planet was in a wilderness quadrant. "It is mandatory for each trader vessel to carry a Guardian on its journey," he explained, "to handle situations such as this, which require a judgment."

"Ship?" she repeated, eyes wide. "What kind of ship?" She looked around wildly. "Are we in the Pacific? Where are you taking me?"

Velin stood when she stood. He clasped her trembling hands with his own as he struggled to soothe her. "My dear, please calm yourself," he told her. "Too much stress could disturb your child."

He cast a pleading glance at Whin, who had her hand to her mouth, eyes wide with surprise. Guardians did not touch those they were to judge.

"Yes, be calm," Whin echoed. "Remember the child."

Layla took several deep gulps of air, nodding when she had regained her composure.

Velin released her hands, although her pulse rate beating under his fingertips remained high, which concerned him.

"Perhaps," he said gently, "we could continue this conversation later this afternoon, after you have rested." He nodded to the guard, who stepped forward, and Whin also stood.

"No, wait," said Layla, "Where are you taking me? Please, just let me go home," she pleaded. "I promise I won't say anything. Ever."

Velin smiled sadly, with a slight shake of his head. "If only we could," he replied, "It would be best for everyone. Unfortunately, we have already traveled through two jump gates, and Balisto informs me he is behind schedule as it is."

“Jump gates?” Layla asked, grasping the back of her chair with whitening knuckles. “I...I...don’t understand.”

And it dawned on him. Of course she didn’t understand! Her world had just begun space exploration. It would never occur to her they were already light-years from her home planet. And she had been unconscious during liftoff. A wave of compassion washed through him as he looked at her wild-eyed, frightened face.

“Oh, my dear, my dear,” he said as gently as he could. “Of course you do not understand. You have been unconscious for nigh three days, so you would have no way of knowing.” He reached out a hand as if to smooth her hair, but she flinched away, so he paused. “My dear,” he said, his voice barely above a whisper, “we are far from your planet. It is impossible for you to go home.”

“Impossible?” she whispered. “My planet? You mean Earth?” she asked, clearly becoming more confused and frightened by the moment.

“Yes,” he nodded. “I estimate we are some five hundred light-years away from your...Earth, and it is too late to return.”

She gaped at him, her mouth open in a soundless “Oh.” Then her eyes rolled up until all Velin saw were the whites.

He caught her just before she hit the floor.

* * *

Angel had returned.

When Layla opened her eyes she was back in her cell, lying on her pallet. She propped herself up on one elbow, watching him devour the food she had collected for him. He was making small sounds of satisfaction while he licked his fingers and then reached for more. She smiled. It seemed so normal to watch a young man eat heartily and was somehow soothing as well. Normal. Almost. She decided to wait until he was finished and settled back to watch the play of muscles under his tee.

Angel sat back with a sigh and stood, starting to turn the chair toward her, only to drop it clattering to the floor when he saw her.

“You are awake, Hermosa!” he exclaimed happily. “All this food! A banquet! I did not know I was so hungry,” he said, gesturing to the empty plates behind him. “Thank you!”

Layla smiled, sitting all the way up, dangling her legs off the pallet. “I’ve been saving them up for you. I wouldn’t allow them to take the plates away.”

“I would have been back before, but I got trapped.” He shrugged. “The ducts—my highway—became so narrow I could not turn around. And then I had to back up for what seemed like forever, and it messed up my sense of direction. I lost where you were.” He flashed her his gleaming smile. “And now I have found you again! How have you been?”

Once more, the light died from the room as she sobered, her lower lip trembling.

“Hermosa! What is wrong?” Angel asked. Quickly he sat down beside her, putting an arm around her shoulders. He would be strong on her behalf. “You must tell me. We are a team, remember?” He squeezed her shoulder.

She looked at him with her light blue eyes. He had never seen such eyes, the most pale of blues with a dark blue band around them. And her lashes were so dark, all of his sisters would have flown into rages of jealousy, even Nina, the prettiest. Had it been another time, he would have tried for a kiss.

“Do not look at me with such hopelessness, Hermosa. Did I not tell you just the other day? We are alive! Now, talk to me.” He shook her gently and smiled.

“Oh, Angel,” she said, with a shaky sigh. “They took me to another room where I met the man with the long robes again. I think he wanted to talk to me about my pregnancy, but I must have passed out before we got that far.” She paused, taking a breath, swiping her hair from her eyes. “He told me we—“

“Wait a minute, he told you?” Angel said, interrupting. “You can understand these people?”

Layla looked at him in surprise. “But they speak English,” she said.

“No, they do not!” Angel countered. “They speak gobbledygook.” He demonstrated with some nonsensical sounds.

“But I understand them all. Perfectly,” she replied, her brow furrowing. “That is so strange.”

Angel was silent while he thought things through. “You were hooked up to the tubes and earbuds with the others, right?”

She nodded.

“Do you know for how long? We’ve been here awhile, you know.”

Layla thought for a moment. “No, I don’t. Oh yes, I do. The man in the robes said I’d been unconscious for three days.”

“Then perhaps,” he said slowly, “the earbuds...maybe you learned their language or something...like that Rosetta Stone program. Speed learning.”

She nodded. “Maybe. Because I certainly can understand them, even the big fat guy whose accent’s really thick.”

“What big fat guy?”

“The one who wants me to abort my baby.” She shook her head. “But we’re getting off track,” she said, reaching for his hand. “Angel, we are not on Earth anymore.” Her mouth quivered. “The tall man, he called himself the ship’s guardian, told me we were two jump gates away from Earth, and we can never go home. Ever.”

Angel looked at her with a half-smile, “You mean, like we’ve been abducted by aliens?”

“It’s not funny. I’m serious.” She squeezed his hand for emphasis.

Angel looked at her again. Really looked at her...her pale face with freckles standing out in stark contrast, eyes wide, frightened and brimming with tears.

A wave of grief washed over him. “Our families,” he whispered. “It’s like they are all dead.”

Layla nodded. “Or we’re dead.” For a moment their expressions mirrored each other.

But only for a moment.

“Hermosa, this is no way to be,” Angel said, pulling her into his arms and resting his chin on the top of her head. “You are a journalist! And I am an adventurer. And we,” he drew out the word, “*we* are a team.”

Slowly Layla nodded. He could feel her soft hair brushing his chin. And then he felt her arms snake around his waist. It felt comforting, and something else.

They sat in silence for several minutes.

Layla's voice was muffled when she spoke, "Dez is dying, Angel. I had broken up with him, and then I found out about the baby. I wanted it, of course, but the timing..."

"Was off," Angel supplied.

"Yeah. The timing was off. So I told Dez before I made any decisions. It was only fair," she paused, remembering. "And that's when he told me he was dying. Some sort of lung cancer caused by asbestos. I knew he coughed a lot. We both thought it was allergies. Asthma. And he didn't have it checked out until it was too late."

She was so quiet Angel wondered if she'd finished her story. He could feel the moisture on his shirt from her tears.

"And so I assured him I'd stay with him, the baby and me, until the end. He wanted us to get married so his insurance could take care of the baby after he was gone. And now," Layla choked back a sob, "now, Dez has to die all alone." She lifted her tear-stained face to his. "He's all alone, Angel."

"Hermosa, you break my heart, you do," he said, drawing her close again, letting her cry it all out while he stroked her hair, trying to remember what his mother would do in situations like these.

"It explains some things I didn't understand," he mused once Layla had quieted.

"Like what?"

"I entered the duct system on a dare," he said. "I always like to take the dares. So I stole in through a grate, much like the one in this tiny room, only much larger and much harder to break into. So, not really like the grate in this tiny little room at all."

He felt Layla's smile. "I was poking around, not finding much and suddenly, there was an alarm. Ai!Yi!Yi! My ears, Hermosa!" he said, adding a little drama to the telling. "I thought I was busted and decided I'd better clear out. Fast. So I

ran back to where I'd gotten in and," he paused, "The opening was gone. Sealed shut! Like it had never even existed!"

He paused again. "But I didn't have time to think about it because then the whole building started to shake. Like an earthquake or something. Maybe a bomb. And I was thrown off my feet. I was slammed against a wall and I stuck there, Hermosa. I'm not kidding you. I couldn't move. And my ears! My eyes! I felt my eyes were going to burst from their sockets. My lips felt like they were peeling back off my face."

Angel paused, remembering how he'd believed he was dying.

"But it didn't last very long," he continued. "Things leveled out, and I started to float. It was pretty cool, and I thought perhaps it's what happens after an explosion or earthquake or something like that. But then I was slammed onto the floor again. Then nothing. Everything returned to normal," he shrugged. "And I've been crawling around in my highway system ever since, only I haven't managed to make it to any other floors. Just this one."

"And the food I saved for you? It's the only food you've had? All this time?"

He smiled at her concern. "I did manage to find where they store their food and water. Nearly got caught a couple of times. The doors on this thing are so silent! But there is a click about thirty seconds before it opens. I've learned to listen for it."

"Wow," she breathed. "Where do you sleep?"

"Where I happen to find myself," he shrugged. "It's not cold, and the ducts give a little, so it's not too bad. And," he added, "don't ask where I go to the bathroom. It's not pretty."

Layla giggled, relaxed in his arms. She let out a yawn. "I don't know why I'm so tired right now," she mumbled.

"My older sister Anita slept all the time when she was pregnant. Or," he continued softly, releasing her to gently stroke her soft, red hair, "perhaps it is because you grieve over your losses, and now I must, too. My mother tells me sleep helps people to cope. And to heal."

"Your mother sounds like a wise woman."

“Yes, and I will miss her very much, Hermosa. I will miss them all. But too much missing and being sad are not good for the Team.”

“No,” she said, burying her face in the crook of his neck. He smelled musky, like he badly needed a shower. But she didn’t care. She listened to his steady, soothing heartbeat. “How can you be so calm?” she asked.

“For you, Hermosa,” he replied. “For the Team.”

“Thank you,” she said in a small voice.

He held her, feeling his shirtfront again getting wetter and wetter from her tears. He stroked her silky hair and waited.

He had sisters.

He knew women’s ways.

Slowly, she began to relax.

“I am going to let you sleep now, Hermosa. Your *bambino* needs you strong. When I return, we will light candles for our loved ones. I doubt I will find any, but we will pretend. We will say goodbye, and we will move on. It is how we will survive,” he said.

“For the Team,” she said drowsily.

“For the Team,” he repeated.

Angel rose slowly, lowering her to the bed carefully so as not to disturb her. Drawing the blanket gently over her shoulders, he tucked her in, smiling as she settled into the pillow.

He stood there for a long time, watching her slide into a deep sleep, burning the moment into his memory. For him, he knew, she would always be the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

How had she done it? How had she managed to change him from a boy into a man?

“You do not know this about me, Layla, but you will,” he quietly told the sleeping woman. “I am like the lion,” he continued. “I am loyal. I am fierce. I look after my own,” he paused, “and I mate for life.”

He leaned over and kissed her mouth.

* * *

Back in his suite, Velin paced, taking long strides, hands clasped behind his back. His blue robes swooshed at each turn. Six long strides to one side of the room, turn, swoosh, six long strides back. Again. And again.

He had carried the girl back to her simple cell, her face tucked sweetly against his shoulder. He had gently placed her still-unconscious form upon the pallet and turned to leave. Whin had volunteered to stay with her, but he felt she would wish to be alone when she awoke. He felt she might want a little time to re-gather her scattered emotions.

But what did he know?

Nothing had prepared him for this. It had seemed such an easy thing. Simply describe her options and make the judgment. But the girl had fainted before they could even begin the negotiations.

He paused at the gilded mirror hanging on one wall and looked at himself, pushing his dark blond hair off his forehead. His companions had laughed at him when he informed them of his pending travels. They had told him nothing good ever came from exploring the wilderness quadrants.

His family had smiled indulgently, telling him he had inherited too much of his mother's fascination with primitives, and asked when he would give up his silly notions and settle down into his career as a Guardian.

Then they had praised him, as always, for his fairness and his intelligent decisions, for his unerring accuracy, his error-free judgments. His father had promised to arrange for a high-level mentor for him the moment he returned. Satisfaction and smugness...he saw that now...had crept into his being.

Velin grimaced at his reflection, whirled, and resumed his pacing.

It was this smugness which had crept into his thinking that had created this episode, not some exotic, wild girl. Velin experienced a deep regret as he realized the girl was now his responsibility. She could not be sold while pregnant. She would not abort the child. She could not be sent back to her home planet. She

could be terminated, but he shuddered at such a barbarous thought. She was in limbo, and it his responsibility to resolve the situation. He groaned, knowing he must purchase her from Balisto. And knowing Balisto would overcharge tenfold.

He stopped pacing and groaned again.

What then? Once he owned the beautiful, wild, exotic, and pregnant girl. What then?

* * *

Layla had been given a new room. It was larger and more comfortable. Rather than the industrial grey walls of her cell, this room was a soft sage green. The bed looked like one she would find in a mid-range hotel room, as did the small sofa, chair, and desk ensemble. The small bathroom and shower were in an alcove with a privacy curtain. The small closet contained two changes of clothes, an extra pair of shoes, and underwear like what she would wear to the gym. There was even a window, a small, circular porthole, with blinds she immediately closed.

After her investigation, which took mere minutes, Layla decided she liked her new room, but with one exception. It was on another floor.

How was Angel going to find her?

Crossing over to the sofa, she sat, hands listless in her lap, and listened to the quiet drone of the ship flying through space. As she listened, she heard a small “click.” She counted to thirty and, sure enough, the door to her room slid open. She expected a tray of food to come sailing through. Instead, she heard a small cough. In spite of herself, she began to turn her head toward the sound, although her eyes refused to relinquish their fixed focus on a scrap of lint on the floor until the very last moment.

It was the man in the long blue robes.

She turned her head and looked again at the lint.

“May I come in?”

She could hear the hesitation in his voice and replied with a slow nod, not bothering to look at him. A swath of dark blue and one manicured hand crossed her field of vision before he sat. She could hear his robes swishing softly as he arranged them. After a moment, he spoke again.

“I have something for you.”

From her peripheral vision, she saw he had held out his hand.

She turned her head.

“It is customary the purchaser receive all the belongings of the purchased, along with the person,” he explained. “But I thought you would value these more than I.”

She was not listening to his words; her eyes were riveted on the two things she never thought to see again: her mother’s sapphire ring and the heart-shaped necklace given to her by Dez the day after he had learned of her pregnancy. Her lips parted as she reached for them and put them on, each back where it belonged.

“Thank you,” she said. “Where did you get these?”

His dark brows shot up. “I just explained our customs to you.”

She sighed and smoothed her hair. “I’m sorry. I wasn’t listening,” she said, looking at him for the first time. Although his features were austere and he seemed somewhat aloof, she was surprised to find him handsome. His vivid green eyes caught her attention.

Velin was silent for a moment, tapping his lip with the tip of a forefinger. “Would it be helpful if I explained these customs to you once again?”

“It would be even more helpful if you explained why I was abducted from my home in the first place.”

Ah, the old fire has returned. Velin had been somewhat alarmed by her apathy.

“Allow me to apologize,” he began. “I should have explained to you earlier. I have behaved inappropriately and offer you my regrets.” He paused, watching a crease appear between her brows. When she made no comment, he continued. “I am called Velin LeTour. I am this ship’s Guardian of the Federation. I render judgments when they are required. And you are called?”

“Layla,” she answered. “Gordon. Layla Gordon.”

Her voice was low and melodious. He thought of a dark, sweet liquor.

“Layla,” he repeated, pronouncing it Lie-ya. “Layla of Earth, as you have named it. I am Velin of Cantos. Cantos is in the 2nd Quadrant and is a Class 5 planet, a ruling planet. Earth is in the 4th Quadrant, a wilderness quadrant. Some would classify it as a Class 4 planet, but personally, I think it has not quite reached that level. Our ship, *Saxon’s Ruby*, is on a course to Pernaan, where it will sell its cargo, a group of Exotics. Is this helpful to you?”

Her eyes reflected her interest as she nodded, twisting her ring.

“What are exotics?” she asked.

“Exotics’ are what we term those captured in wilderness quadrants such as your 4th Quadrant.”

The crease between her brows reappeared.

“Are you saying people are Exotics? I am an Exotic?”

“Please, try to remain calm,” he said, reaching out a hand, frowning when she flinched. “Please, rest assured you are safe. Your child is safe, if you wish it. I have purchased you. You are under my protection.”

Layla closed her eyes as her ears began to ring.

For the Team, for the Team, for the Team.

She took a deep breath and noticed her hands had crept to her belly, cradling it. She took another deep breath, willing herself to regain her composure.

For the Team, she silently commanded again.

“Okay,” she said, exhaling. “What else do I need to know?” Her eyes flashed, “Do I thank you for buying me? For stealing me from my home? For taking me away from everything familiar and everything I love?” She nearly choked on her emotion, but caught herself.

For the Team. For the Team. For the Team.

“Slavery is a necessary part of life in advanced cultures,” Velin explained. “We have a high regard for their care. Balisto is extremely reputable. He commands high prices for his products, so he takes good care of them. And, since his cost

is so high, only those with the means to provide similar fine care can purchase them. This group of Exotics will be well cared for. They will find good homes.”

“It’s barbaric,” she said with a shudder.

Velin sighed. “It is one way of looking at the situation,” he agreed, running his fingers through his dark blond hair. “Others feel it is a good way to introduce the less advanced worlds to the higher realms. They are forced to adapt, to get along with different races and species from the other worlds.”

“But freedom is better,” she countered, fisting her hands. “Freedom to make choices. To find myself unable to have any say in what happens to me...” her voice trailed off.

Velin did not notice. “The Exotics are being readied as we speak. Throughout the journey, they are educated, although they will not be made completely docile. A little subdued is all. Balisto leaves them with some fire.”

“The earbuds,” she whispered, still pale. “Why not me?”

“You are with child. There are laws,” he replied.

“How is it I understand you?” she asked suddenly.

“A language chip. We all acquire them upon reaching puberty.”

Then there was silence.

Velin studied her as she gazed into a place only her thoughts could follow. Her profile looked carved from alabaster, smooth and creamy. Her lips, full. Her freckles, charming. Her small nose, straight; forgettable as soon as she looked at you with her unusually light eyes.

She was looking at him now.

Layla watched his flush bloom under her scrutiny. She felt a small flicker of satisfaction when he lowered his eyes first.

“What will you do with me?” she demanded.

It took Velin a moment to gather his thoughts.

“I have uncertainties,” he managed to say. “Since you are my first purchase, I suppose what I do with you depends upon you. You first must select from a series of options regarding your child.”

“I will not abort this child.”

“So I understand,” he said dryly. “You still have two other alternatives.”

“And they are?”

“You can accompany me to Cantos, where you will complete an accelerated pregnancy. Your child would be raised according to my planet’s customs. I would treat it as my own, adopt it perhaps. It would have the best of everything. Or, you can be placed on a planet with customs similar to your own, most likely a Class 2 or 3. Either way, you will have the protection of a Guardian and will be safe from harm.”

“What is an accelerated pregnancy?”

“We have the means to stimulate the fetus and it grows more rapidly. It will come to term in one trimester, rather than three. Many of our women wish to experience childbirth but do not wish to be with child for such a long time.”

Laylah nodded, expressionless.

“There is another option as well, one I have just remembered.”

She cocked an eyebrow.

When had she gained the upper hand? “On Cantos, some choose to extract the embryo, and it is then incubated until term. The pain of childbirth is thus avoided.”

“What are Cantos’ customs regarding child rearing?”

“Ah,” he said, steepling his fingers, “upon completion of birth, the child is taken to live with others. It is raised with many other children.”

“And the parents? Are they involved?”

“Good gracious, no. We do know who our parents are, of course, and will receive occasional visits from them. But we do not live with them until we reach puberty. I had a lovely childhood. I remember it fondly.”

He did not know why he felt the need to defend his home planet’s customs. Cantos produced the highest number of Guardians and leaders of the Federation. It was the government headquarters of Quadrant 2.

“And what would it be like to bear a child on the Class 3 planet you mentioned?”

“I would need to carefully select such a planet. One does not come immediately to mind. Nonetheless, you would most likely carry the child to term and raise it yourself.”

The girl appeared thoughtful. “Thank you, Velin. May I rest now and think over my choices?”

“Of course,” he said. “I am sure you have a great deal to consider.”

He rose. For some reason Layla felt she should accompany him to the door, which she did. As the door slid open, she noticed there was a guard stationed just outside.

Velin paused, noting how her hair flowed freely to the middle of her back. It seemed to have a life of its own. “Would you like to accompany me while I dine?” he asked, admiring its color.

Her eyes flashed. “You own me,” she reminded him. “Do I have a choice?”

“I will send Whin to escort you,” he said abruptly, not understanding why her remark would injure his feelings. “In three hours.”

His robes swished and swirled as he exited.

* * *

Layla eyes fluttered open and she wondered what woke her. Aside from the steady hum of the ship, it was dark and quiet.

And then she heard it—the scratching sounds of a rat in her air vent.

She threw her covers off and bolted from her bed. “Angel!” she called as loudly as she dared, darting across the room to stand beneath the vent.

The scratching stopped.

“Angel!” she called again.

The scratching began again.

Layla squinted into the darkness of the vent. Had she just seen a glint of an eye?

“Hermosa! I have found you at last! Stand back.”