

INTO THE MAELSTROM

First in the Series of
PLANETARY TALES

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C. 2011
WINGED STAR PUBLICATIONS
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TIME TO SAY GOODBYE

(Chapter 1)

This is crazy! Dranda clenched her teeth and grimaced in the murky pre-dawn. *Fool!* She cursed herself. *I must be mad, risking everything for one last meeting.* Her knuckles tightened to white as she clutched the controls of her tiny Skimmer. Hurling too fast and too low through the desolate canyons near the border, she knew she must be getting close. *Concentrate,* she thought. *One slip and it's all over.*

To avoid detection, Dranda turned off the automatic controls in the Skimmer. She needed all her flying skills to maneuver through this obstacle course. *Don't think. Just fly.* Three sharp crags whipped by, their peaks glowing orange in the rising sun. Just beyond, a broad valley stretched into the shadows. *Whoa, better slow down. This looks familiar.*

Dranda scanned the dark terraces of the mountain side for the cave entrance, her eyes darting back and forth. *It must be here somewhere. There! That's it!* The young warrior braked and settled the Skimmer on the steep slope in front of a large cave. *No sign of Stefan yet, but this must be the place.* She maneuvered the one-person craft into the shadowy cavern, making sure it was well hidden behind some large boulders. Switching off everything but the red running lights, she wrapped her arms around herself and stared at her distorted image in the dark windshield.

He'd better hurry. I can't wait long. All the repressed fears and emotions of the past few months came rushing into Dranda's mind. *What if he doesn't make it? What if he can't find me?* Her thoughts whirled, *Oh, damn! What if we never see each other again?*

Scraping sounds interrupted Dranda's anxious thoughts. *That must be Stefan!* She sat up, raked both hands through her thick, red curls and jumped out of her plane into the glare of headlights. *He's here!* Shaking in excitement, she stepped forward. The bright lights switched off, leaving her momentarily blinded. A door opened. A powerful, broad-shouldered man stepped down and turned toward her. Her heart racing, Dranda opened her arms in welcome. "Stefan!" she breathed. But her greeting was cut short. The man exploded into a run and seized her in a fierce grip. He mashed her back against the Skimmer, his hard body grinding into hers. Brutal kisses crushed her face and mouth. Caught by surprise, she couldn't breathe. Instinctively, her warrior's training kicked in, and Dranda grappled with her attacker in the darkness. Groaning and grunting, muscles straining, she tried to gain the advantage. She stomped on his foot and butted her head against his eyebrow with a solid thump. This loosened his grip enough for Dranda to gasp, "Stop it! Damn you! Stop it!"

He grabbed both her wrists and stepped back. In the long rays of the morning sun, Dranda got her first real look at him. With his short, straight hair standing out in sharp spikes, his teeth bared, his blue eyes gleaming almost black under his bloodied eyebrow, he looked like a wild beast. Breathing hard, Dranda struggled to regain control. “What’s wrong with you?” she demanded.

Still crushing her wrists, Stefan growled, “What’s wrong? Ha! You’re leaving me! That’s what’s wrong!”

“Hey, wait a minute! That’s not fair,” Dranda protested.

Stefan glowered down at her and accused, “You arranged this meeting to brag about your new promotion. Well, go ahead and brag!”

“No, I”

He cut her off, “Oh, sure, you’re an Athenian delegate to the Peace Conference on Venus, and I’m a crossbreed without a country. It’s obvious you’ve chosen your career over me.”

“Well, if you weren’t so incurably stubborn, you would come with me!”

“We both know that’s impossible,” Stefan rasped. She saw the fury in his eyes dissolve into pain. His head and shoulders drooped and his macho self-confidence shriveled. In the blink of an eye, he morphed from a dangerous beast into a hurt little boy. To hide his feelings, Stefan released her wrists and turned away. Dranda’s heart twisted. She reached out to comfort him, but he shrugged her off.

What a mess! It wasn’t supposed to be like this. She shrank back against the Skimmer and rubbed her bruised mouth. Stefan shuffled further away into the shadows. “You’re not leaving!” she cried.

“No, just getting something,” he mumbled as he returned to his Skimmer and took out a package. He carried it back under his arm. When he shook it open and spread it on the rock-strewn ground, she saw that it was a sleeping pad. Turning toward her, he reached to brush the hair away from her eyes. She flinched. “No, no, my sweet, I’ll not hurt you again.” Stefan promised. The warm, sorrowing look in his dark blue eyes softened her defenses. This time, when he took her in his arms, she closed her eyes and leaned into him. Every curve and hollow of their lithe, young bodies fit perfectly together. *Now, this is more like it!* Dranda exhaled, surrendering to the warm thrill that swept over her.

Kissing, kissing, kissing, they dropped down onto the pad. Stefan pushed her back and began unzipping her jumpsuit. Inch by slow inch, he kissed her exposed flesh. A running fire seared down her body. She arched back, all her senses aroused, savoring every touch, every smell, every sensation. His musky male scent, his warm mouth against her bare skin, his strong hands stroking her hips and his hard, muscled body pressing down on and then into her welcoming body. Tears seeped from her

swollen eyes as wave after wave of passion washed over her. Now Dranda had no doubts about Stefan, no fears about the future, no thoughts of any kind. For a timeless time, she floated in ecstasy.

All too soon, the sexual euphoria faded. Dranda noticed the sharp, cold rocks poking into her back. She tried to find a more comfortable position without disturbing Stefan, but no, his dark eyes opened. They lay eye-to-eye for a brief moment. Dranda saw one emotion after another flicker across his face. At first, it was a smile of warm contentment. That rapidly dimmed into gloom as he remembered where he was and what came next. He blinked, frowned and turned away. Wordlessly, they sat up and pulled their clothes back together. When Stefan put his arm around her and drew her head against his shoulder, she sighed against his chest, *This feels so right.*

“Dranda,” Stefan began.

She interrupted, “Don’t say it. Let’s just savor this moment together.”

She could feel, from the stiffening of his body, that reality was returning. “Listen, now,” he insisted. “This may be our last chance to talk.” Stefan hugged her tighter. “Sorry about the rough greeting.”

“Yeah, you should be! What was that all about?” she asked.

“Well,” he began, “When I first saw you with your gorgeous red hair and your sexy curves,” Stefan paused, “You looked so . . . ,” he searched for the right word, “So . . . , well . . . , so desirable! I just wanted to gobble you up!” He took her ear in his teeth and nibbled.

“Ouch! That hurts!” Dranda complained.

“I just didn’t want to lose you.”

Dranda sighed to herself, *I know. It’s the same for me.*

“The fighting between the Athenians and Iryans has already started. We have no choice. If I left with you now, I’d be an outcast.” He buried his face in her springy red curls. “It’s the same for you. We’d both be suspect.” Stefan kissed her ear, “What we had together was wonderful, but we both know its over.”

More out of habit than conviction, she argued, “But you don’t look reptilian. You look like your mother’s family, like the Athenians.”

“Yes, but the fact remains that my father was Iryan. I’m no longer trusted in Athena. I’ve contacted some of my father’s old friends in the Iryan Air Force. When I leave here, I’m flying to their headquarters on Hades to find out if they can get me a commission.”

“Oh,” was all that she could think of to say. Dranda pulled away and gazed into his eyes. With uncharacteristic wistfulness, she suggested, “Maybe we can still keep in touch, still remain friends.”

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"We both know that isn't possible," Stefan stated. "Not now. This is war."

"Yes, unfortunately," Dranda straightened, stiffening her spine and her resolve. "We have to put aside our personal feelings and do our duty," she said in a dull voice.

They stared at the sunlight streaming in the cave entrance in glum silence. Finally, Stefan rose to his feet and pulled Dranda up before him. They both knew it was time to behave like the disciplined warriors that they were. Both knew it was time to say goodbye. Face-to-face, they studied each other for the last time. Dranda winced when she saw the damage she'd done to Stefan's eye. *Oh, dear, it's almost swollen shut.* She reached out to touch it, but he stepped back and took her hands between his. "You're one of a kind, Dranda. I'll never forget you."

She swallowed, refusing to cry.

"Good-bye, Dranda," Stefan stated, his voice husky, his blue eyes dark with emotion.

"Good-bye, Stefan," she whispered.

One more lingering kiss, one more solemn embrace, and then they stepped apart. Determined not to reveal any more fragile emotions, Dranda twisted her face away, clenched her fists and marched grimly back to her Skimmer. Stefan had already climbed into his transporter. He lifted off first, accelerating toward the south. He soon disappeared.

Dranda maneuvered her small vehicle out of the cave. In alarm, she thought, *Oh, no! The sun's much higher than I realized! It's so late!* She sped north, hugging the cliff face as closely as she dared. *How am I going to get back to base before I'm missed?* She shook her head to clear it. *Now pay attention,* she commanded herself. *If I'm detected in this no-fly zone, I'll be shot down, no questions asked. I must not think about Stefan. I must concentrate!* The young warrior squared her jaw and headed back to the Athenian capital.