

Kiera's Moon

By Lizzy Ford

Edited by Christine LePorte

Cover art and design by Dafeenah
<http://dafeenah-hiddentreasure.blogspot.com/>

* * * * *

Copyright 2011 by Lizzy Ford
OBOOKO.COM Edition

Cover art and design copyright 2011 by Dafeenah

* * * * *

License notes:

Thank you for downloading this free ebook. You are welcome to share it with your friends. This book may be reproduced, copied and distributed for non-commercial purposes, provided the book remains in its complete original form. If you enjoyed this book, please return to obooko.com to discover other works by this author. Thank you for your support.

* * * * *

See other titles by Lizzy Ford at <http://www.guerrillawordfare.com/>

You can follow the GW team on Twitter:

@LizzyFord2010

@cleporte

@dafeenajameel

Twitter hashtags:

#guerrillawriter, #fantasy, #romance, #paranormalromance, #sciencefiction

CHAPTER ONE

Kiera settled at an uncomfortable angle, the sandpapery red roofing snagging her polyester disco clothing and preventing her from sliding over the nearby edge of the three-story row house. A warm, late spring breeze held just a dash of chill, which was kept at bay by the internal warmth of the three margaritas she'd downed less than an hour before. Evelyn, her best friend and landlord, shifted beside her before waving a manicured hand at the clear night above them and asking,

"Ever wonder what's out there?"

"Sure. I think everyone does," Kiera answered.

"Do you think people *reeeeeeally* want to know?"

"That's pretty philosophical for a blonde."

"You're so wroooong!"

Kiera giggled. The dinner party Evelyn threw to celebrate Kiera's first commissioned piece of art had been a success, as was expected. The bombshell blonde always threw good dinner parties with fun themes; this theme had been Disco Night, complete with lava lamps, disco ball, tacky '70s music that still jammed out the open windows, and costumes for those who chose to wear them. They'd gone shopping at the local Goodwill for their polyester outfits.

"Well, do you?" Evelyn whispered.

Kiera's thoughts, warm and fuzzy after too much of Evelyn's special punch, drifted as she gazed into the quiet night sky.

"Do I what?" she asked.

"Think people really want to know what's out there?"

"Probably not. People don't know what they want, Evelyn, or life wouldn't suck."

"It doesn't really suck," Evelyn sang in such a happy voice that Kiera rolled her eyes.

"Not for you! You haven't been home in, like, three months, and when you're here, it's all Rum-ass this, Rum-ass that," she complained.

"Romas!" Evelyn corrected with another giggle. "Stop calling him that!"

"Whatever."

"You're so bitter!" Evelyn's giggle turned into outright laughter.

"Don't laugh at me!" Kiera managed a hurt tone and rolled on her side to frown at her blurry best friend of fifteen years. "Why are you laughing at me?"

Evelyn didn't stop for a full minute. She wiped her eyes and drew a shuddering breath.

"You're so cute, and so funny, Kiera," she sighed, and giggled again.

"Puppies are cute. I'm fierce!"

"Yeah!" Evelyn snorted. "Romas says you're as fierce as a kitten."

"A kitten?" Kiera's tone grew more hurt. "I'm not afraid of him, just because he's twelve feet tall and can bench press me with his toes. It's not nice of him to say that."

"It's nicer than your nickname for him," Evelyn pointed out. "He wants to hook you up with his brother, by the way."

"No!"

"You've never met him!"

"If he's half as alpha-male as Rum-ass, hell no!" Kiera snapped.

"And why did you dump Brian?"

Kiera was quiet and flopped onto her back.

"Didn't you say he was an indecisive sissy?" Evelyn prodded. "He wasn't a lightweight either. I saw him box."

"I'm not interested," Kiera said. "Men are heartache and more trouble than they're worth. Either they're huge babies you have to take care of, or they want to lock you in their palace with eunuchs."

"Well, you could at least meet them. He has seven brothers. Maybe one of them will fall somewhere in the middle of your man-scale."

"Omigod. No!"

"What do you think?" Evelyn prodded again.

"I'm not going on blind dates or being hooked up with hairy alpha males."

"No, about the aliens."

"What aliens?" Kiera asked.

"You know, the ones out there." Evelyn tossed a hand toward the dark night sky again.

"I don't know," Kiera answered. "I imagine if there are aliens, they've been discreet for a reason. I don't see any reason to change that."

"You don't want to see other worlds?"

"Other worlds?" she echoed. "I want to explore mine first! I've never been to Europe, or Africa, or anywhere yet. I paint what I *think* they look like, but I want to see them. I like the sun and sky and ocean-- what is there to say other worlds have those?"

"I guess." Evelyn sounded unusually pensive. "But if it were a world like ours, I imagine it would be okay, right?"

"You mean a kind of other dimension thing, where it's really earth just in a different way?"

"No, a different world completely, but similar in that it has a sun, moon, oceans, grass, and stuff."

"Oh," Kiera murmured. The conversation was almost too serious for her muddled thoughts to follow. She sensed Evelyn's sudden melancholy and tried to focus. "You want to go to another world? Like, with aliens and stuff?"

"It would be neat, don't you think? Hypothetically speaking ..."

"Could you come home when you wanted?" she asked.

"I don't know."

"Could you take your cat?"

"Probably not," Evelyn replied.

"Would there be lots of people there with four arms or something freakish?"

Evelyn giggled, then said, "No."

"There'd have to be some sort of difference, wouldn't there?" Kiera's brow furrowed. "If no two people are alike on our planet, how could we be like anything from somewhere else?"

"I don't know," Evelyn admitted.

"I bet they'd be ruled by spiders the size of your car," Kiera said with a shudder. "Could you imagine?"

"They don't have spiders," Evelyn said firmly. "And the people are pretty normal. I imagine I'd want to know if I could come home to visit you."

"Yes, that'd be cool. I'll take care of your house while you're gone," Kiera offered. Drowsiness was beginning to take hold of her. She closed her eyes, content.

"And the cat," Evelyn added.

"Okay."

"But wouldn't you want to go, too?"

"I'm not sure," Kiera murmured, hovering at the edge of sleep.

"Would you be afraid?"

"Probably."

"Maybe you should stay."

"Probably," she said. "I guess I could visit for a week, if it means so much to you."

Evelyn's happy response was lost as she faded into sleep.

Kiera dreamt of a planet filled with spiders and dinosaurs and awoke in her bed a couple of hours later to the soft sound of her alarm clock going off. She blinked her bleary eyes, unwilling to move for fear of the distant headache intensifying. The lingering images of recliner-size

tarantulas from her dream made her shudder and look around self-consciously to make sure none were in her room. The scent of bacon reached her from the kitchen.

Romas was there. Evelyn only cooked when he spent the night, which would also explain how she ended up in her bed. She recalled falling asleep on the roof and knew Evelyn to be too tipsy to carry or drag her down to her room. Romas had tossed her in bed more than once over the past three months, though he had stopped lecturing her on how unbecoming a lush was to a man looking for a wife.

He had some unworldly views on things, she mused. She rolled onto her back and stared at the ceiling, where she had pinned one of her inspiration posters above the bed. This one showed a determined kitty hanging from a tree branch and always made her smile, even when she was hung-over.

“K-K!” Evelyn sang, her voice muffled through the door. “I’m sending in Romas!”

Kiera scowled at the closed door. Romas had no qualms about invading her bedroom to drag her out of bed if Evelyn directed him to. He had no qualms about ordering dinner for her when she went out with them or telling her what to do with her life. He despised her video game playing and art, instead saying she needed a man capable of keeping her feet on the ground long enough for her to focus on doing something real with her life.

“I’m up!” she shouted.

The fact that he worshiped the ground Evelyn walked on and took care of her made Kiera jealous. She’d never dated a man half as handsome, annoying, or caring as Romas, and she expected there were very few men like him to go around.

She stumbled up and crossed to her bathroom to brush her teeth before going out to breakfast. One look at her disheveled ‘70s garb, and she decided to change into pajamas.

When she walked into the kitchen, Evelyn was gazing with adoration up at the huge man, leaning against him in a purely anti-feministic way. Romas was a towering example of male perfection: blond with golden skin and bright blue eyes, a chiseled face and buff body, and *tall*. Evelyn was six feet tall and Romas a full head taller than her. They made a perfect couple, and Kiera was disgusted at the perfection before her that represented everything she had no hopes of ever attaining.

“Hel-lo, I’m here!” she called. Evelyn gave a brilliant smile, and Romas eyed her. She eyed him back. “You again.”

“Hello, kitten,” he said in his thick accent. She sometimes thought his accent sounded Russian, sometimes Irish.

“Everyone sit!” Evelyn ordered.

Kiera took her usual chair, and Romas ruffled her hair as he passed her. Evelyn brought the last of three trays to the table.

“You didn’t come to the party last night,” Kiera said as she helped herself to eggs before Romas could fill her plate. Serving them was another of his annoying habits. She couldn’t yet determine if the action were pure chauvinism or old-fashioned civility.

“I had business,” Romas said, serving a glowing Evelyn.

“Tell her what kind,” Evelyn urged, squirming in her chair. They exchanged a heated look so intense Kiera blushed. She focused on her food and banged her fork against her plate.

“Romas proposed!” Evelyn exclaimed.

Kiera’s eyes flew up.

“We’re getting married!”

“Wh ... bu... ah ...” Kiera stuttered. “But ... you’ve only known each other for three months! It takes you longer to plan a dinner party, Evey!”

Evelyn laughed. Stunned, Kiera tried to figure out what to say as they both looked expectantly at her.

“Well, what do you think?” Evelyn prodded.

Evelyn had been so happy the past few months, and having Romas around was not *that* bad. After all, he could fix things around the house that she and Evelyn ignored.

"I think it's really neat," she said. "When are you getting hitched?"

"Saturday."

"Saturday when?"

"*This* Saturday."

"In two days?" she asked. "Wow. That's ... wow! Well, congrats!"

Evelyn looked ready to burst. Kiera found she truly was happy for her, though her own happiness was clouded by a sense of sadness and yearning. She'd known Evelyn since they were in elementary school, and she'd been renting a room from her for the past two years since graduating high school. She didn't want to lose the friend she regarded as a sister.

"Oh, but wait!" she exclaimed. "You won't kick me out?"

"Not if you behave," Romas said.

"Of course not! We're a package deal, right, Romas?" Evelyn grinned. He said nothing. Kiera frowned, concerned by his silence.

"You really don't like me, Romas?" she asked.

"You're tolerable," was the response. Kiera stared at him. He winked with a faint smile, and she relaxed.

"Because I know how alpha males like you work," she retorted. "You'll have everything of Evelyn's put in your name and lock her in her bathroom or something."

"The bathroom is big enough for both of you," Romas said.

"Well, congrats anyway," she said with a sigh. And she smiled, happy for her friend and not too unhappy with her choice of husband-to-be. The couple gave each other another heated look, and she wolfed down her food before leaving them in peace.

An hour later, she dismounted her bike and leaned it against the brick front of the art gallery where her work was displayed. The quaint streets of Pacific Grove were quiet during the weekday, with a small group of women lingering in the midmorning sun at the café on the corner.

"Kevin!" she called as she entered the quiet art gallery. From the outside, it looked like the other small mom-and-pop stores lining the street. Inside, the first and second levels had been combined to create a large, tall space whose walls and ceilings were lined with paintings. She maneuvered through sculptures and other exhibits on the floor to the small office in the back.

Kevin, a small man with a quick smile and trendy glasses, smiled as she opened the door.

"Good to see you, Kiera!" he said, rising to kiss her cheek. "I guess you got my message."

"Made my day! How many did you sell?" she asked.

"Two of the three you left me. And the best part-- one of my best customers wants you to paint Cannery Row. This is your second commissioned art project in two weeks!"

"Awesome, awesome, awesome!" she exclaimed, and clapped her hands. "I can start whenever!"

"I did the paperwork for the sales. Just need your signature," he said, pulling a file out of one of the drawers in his desk. "Sign away, and I'll get your cash."

Thrilled, Kiera looked over the paperwork outlining her first sales. Kevin's cut was hefty, but she didn't care: she was a real artist! Kevin crossed his office to the small safe and drew out a small pile of cash.

"I'll have him come in next week to sit down with you and discuss the project."

"The same guy bought the paintings?" she asked.

"No. The guy who bought your paintings I'd never seen before. His name is on the paperwork, if you're curious. It took me some time to convince Mr. Hardy you were the best painter in the area for his Cannery Row project."

She looked more closely at the paper she'd just signed and flipped the page to the receipt he'd stapled there.

Romas Qatwal.

"Oh, damn you," she muttered, irritated her first sale was a pity sale and yet thinking even better of Romas for supporting his fiancée's hopeless friend. "I hope you charged him full price."

"He didn't even flinch. Here's your cut-- two thousand and forty three dollars," Kevin said, and counted out the money on the desk.

She looked at the money, unable to remember when she'd last seen that much in one place before. Her bank account was rarely over two hundred. Her first thought went to Evelyn's wedding, and another thrill went through her as she realized she could actually afford something nice for her friend.

"Congrats, Kiera!" Kevin said.

"I know, right? Took long enough. You want me to bring you a couple more paintings? I've got three more completed."

"Definitely. The Cannery Row project will make you a hot commodity around here. Then maybe, just maybe, you'll go out with me."

She laughed at his latest attempt to hit on her. With his small frame and bright eyes, he'd always reminded her of an elf of some sort. She'd even included him-- in his elf-like form-- in one of her paintings depicting a fantastical scene of sea creatures frolicking on a beach.

"Sorry, Kevin," she said. "You should know better than to date moody artists by now. You've been burned by enough of us."

"I wouldn't own an art gallery if I didn't love artists. The art is a bonus," he said with a wink.

"Keep trying," she replied with a flirtatious smile. "And thank you for talking me up to Mr. Hardy."

Kevin shrugged. She leaned forward to give him a quick hug, gathered her money, and left. Rather than return home right away, she explored several small jewelry stores, looking for the perfect gift for Evelyn before she took her daily trip to the gym.

By the time she returned to the large row house, she was looking forward to an addition to their home who may not fear killing spiders and other bugs. She walked into the living room, puzzled to see Evelyn boxing up her bookshelf.

"Making room for Rum-ass's stuff?" she asked, flinging herself on the couch nearby to watch.

"Um, not really. You might have the house to yourself," Evelyn said. She pushed blonde hair from her face. "We're thinking about returning to his place to live."

"Really?" Kiera frowned. "He's from San Francisco, right?"

"No, his *real* home." Evelyn watched her digest the information.

"You're leaving me," Kiera said.

"You can come," Evelyn offered. "I'd like for you to come."

"To where?"

"You know how you said you'd like to explore other places?"

"I did?" Kiera asked, thinking hard.

"Last night, on the roof."

"Vaguely," she said. "You mean he lives really, really far away?"

"Yeah. Pretty far," Evelyn replied.

"You're okay with just leaving?"

"I want to be with him, and we think it'll be better for us both in his home."

"You're okay with just leaving *me*?" Kiera asked with a frown.

"I don't want to leave you! You're my sister, as far as I'm concerned. I'd like for you to come with us. You said last night you'd go for a week, but you can stay with us for as long as you want."

"That's not really normal though," Kiera said. "You show up on your in-laws' doorstep with your friend in tow? I mean, this is supposed to be you starting your lives together, not hauling around your poor spinster of a friend who's about to be abandoned."

"You're guilt tripping me already?" Evelyn grinned and tossed a paperback at Kiera.

"*Abused* spinster of a friend!"

"As Romas pointed out, you have no real life and nothing really to tie you down," Evelyn said. "You can play video games and paint or draw from anywhere. They might appreciate artists more where he's from."

"I know very well what Rum-ass thinks of my life!" she retorted. "I take it this is his way of hooking me up with a man to keep me in line?"

"He's got seven brothers," Evelyn said. "I've seen pictures. Damn sexy bunch."

"You seriously want me to go?"

"Of course, K. You like adventures, right?"

"Yes, but I'm happy here with my video games and painting," Kiera reminded her.

"Well, you can do those things there. I'll be there. And Romas. He'll protect you from the bad people and spiders."

"I don't know," Kiera said after a pause. "It seems weird, and I'd totally feel like the loser I pretend not to be if you have to take me with you. Can I just stay here and guard your house and cat for you?"

"I know it's far, Kiera," Evelyn said, frowning in disappointment. "Please just think about it some more? We'll leave after the wedding, so you have a couple of days. At the very least, you'll still come for a week?"

Kiera doubted she would change her mind but decided to humor her happy friend.

"Yes, I'll go for a week. The rest is a lot to think about. I just got my first commission ever, and I think my displays at Kevin's gallery are picking up interest. He said someone else is interested in commissioning a piece. I feel like I'm in a good place with all that," Kiera said. "Where is Romas from exactly?"

"You've never heard of it."

"One of those little Eastern European pocket-sized countries?"

"Pretty much," Evelyn said vaguely.

"Wow. Are you really ready to use outhouses and haul your own water?"

"It's actually a wealthy, highly advanced society," Evelyn said with a chuckle. "We'll have servants to haul our water for us."

Kiera had suspected Romas to be independently wealthy by his complete lack of concern for being anywhere but with Evelyn for the last three months. He'd never mentioned working or making or missing appointments, and Evelyn had never mentioned his employment either. Confirmation of the fact was comforting; Evelyn would never have to worry about money again. And, hopefully, Evelyn never raised her rent, either.

"I'll miss you," Kiera said.

"Think about it! I've gotta go get ready. We're going out in a little bit."

Kiera rolled her eyes. There was a soft knock at the door. Evelyn bolted for the stairwell, unwilling to allow anyone but Kiera to see her without make-up, while Kiera went to the door. She let Romas in with a glare.

"Where are you taking Evelyn?" she demanded as the large man folded himself to sit on the couch. Romas's gaze flickered over her in what she now knew to be amusement. The emotions were almost imperceptible, and it had taken her a long time of studying him to read him.

"Another day at home with your invisible friends?" he teased.

She crossed her arms and sat on the arm of the couch, pinning him with a withering look. She'd planned on spending her Thursday evening in a raid for *World of Warcraft* or building her galactic empire in *Homeworld*, which Romas never approved of. He didn't believe she was interacting with real people and instead called the other online players *invisible friends*. She'd given up trying to convince him they were real.

"I'm taking her far, far away," he said. "And you're welcome-- encouraged-- to come."

She softened at the inclusion. It was expected from Evelyn but not from the man himself.

"Why are you leaving so soon?" she asked.

"We'd like to start afresh, preferably in the place we intend to raise half a dozen unruly kids," he said.

"You're really okay with me going for a week? I won't interfere with any honeymoon plans?"

"Of course we want you there. I think you'd be happy in my ... country."

"So you can find me a man?" she challenged, raising an eyebrow.

"I've got several in mind."

"It's very nice of you," she said with an unladylike snort that made him grimace. "But I don't think ... it doesn't make sense for me to go. I'd feel like a third wheel."

"Third wheel?"

Kiera sought an explanation, recalling he was not familiar with most slang despite his mastery of English.

"Out of place," she explained. "As in, there are the two of you being lovey-dovey and happy, and me hanging out by the bushes."

This drew a smile.

"You are not a third wheel by the bushes," Romas assured her. "You would be treated like a queen at my home. You're a guest, and if you happened to be hooked onto a good man, so be it."

"Hooked *up* with a good man," she corrected. "Thank you, but I don't need to be hooked up."

"You'll come," he said. "And I'll find you a man. My oldest brother Kisolm needs a woman. He might object to you, but I can convince him to take you."

He hadn't uttered anything so stupid in a long time, after she yelled at him for talking like that. She couldn't help wondering if Evelyn really understood that going to his home country would mean she'd hear this kind of nonsense all the time. She marched out of the room.

"Evelyn! *That man* is here!" she shouted up the stairwell, and disappeared into her studio. She flipped on her computer and tossed her shoes next to the couch. Her latest painting-- another seaside depiction of Fisherman's Wharf-- leaned against one wall, ready to be delivered to Kevin's shop. Several minutes later, Evelyn's footsteps sounded on the wooden stairs.

Kiera shook her head, perplexed by their odd invitation to stay with them. Evelyn made it sound permanent, as though Kiera would just pick up and leave for another country. Her gaze went to her desk, and she realized she didn't even have a passport. She might have to wait a few weeks just to visit.

She relaxed into the comfortable black desk chair in front of her computer, wondering if Romas had told Evelyn of the half a dozen kids he expected.

* * *

A'Ran l'Anshantuwei, the exiled *dhjan*-- king-- of the planet Anshan, looked over the three women before him, each a specimen of perfection to her people. He turned away from them, his gaze going upward and peering through the skylight in his spacious battle command center.

No one but the *dhjan* could understand that choosing a lifemate wasn't so simple. The *dhjan nishani*-- king's lifemate-- would complete the circle of Anshan's life force. Her presence would make the rivers run with water again and bring new life to the dying planet. If he were allowed to pick his mate, he'd have chosen long ago and saved his planet. But the planet chose for him, according to what his father told him long ago.

He met the gaze of his only ally, Jetr, a man from a distant galaxy who had been an ally of Anshan for three generations. The small man waited next to A'Ran's trusted second-in-command, Ne'Rin, whose sister was one of the three before him. Ne'Rin was a man whose forefathers had been chief advisors to the *dhjan* dynasty since Anshan's inception and had served A'Ran's family for a millennium. Jetr and Ne'Rin were both patient and hopeful, and A'Ran steeled himself to tell them what he must.

None of the three beauties was she, or he'd *know*. His own mother had been far from beautiful, and his father had told him the signs he'd found the right woman were unmistakable. The earth would drop from beneath his feet and the sun pierce his soul. He felt nothing like this when he looked at the three women.

Like his sisters and advisors, he was losing faith that his *nishani* existed. He was thirty-two sun-cycles, beyond the age when his forefathers had found their lifemates. Half the population of his planet had been decimated by famine and war, and for all he knew, his intended was among them. The Planetary Council, his second-in-command, even his sister, had paraded women through his home every time he returned from a battle. His lifemate simply wasn't there.

"None of them," A'Ran said. His second-in-command frowned but escorted the women out.

The *dhjan* had known nothing but war for over half his life, since exiled with his sisters to the tiny moon across the galaxy from his home of Anshan. It was the smallest moon in the Five Galaxies, the section of space under the influence of the meddling Planetary Council. He'd continue the war until he won back his planet and birthright by force, then find another way to heal his planet.

"I think you prefer war, my friend," Jetr said with his gentle humor.

"You know well the bond between the lifemate and the planet. Without her, the rivers are dry, the women are barren, and the mines produce no ore," A'Ran replied, then added pointedly, "And the Planetary Council interferes with everything you try to do to reclaim what's rightfully yours."

"You've refused women from every Council member's family. It's no wonder they don't favor you."

"It has nothing to do with that, Jetr, as you know," he said. "They want the ore only Anshan can produce but don't understand why there will be none until I claim my lifemate."

"In the meantime, you've driven up a debt to them," Jetr reminded him.

"The Council has a selective memory," A'Ran said in irritation. "Every ship, every weapon they own, came from Anshan ore."

"True," Jetr said. "But until they choose to remember that, they ask another favor of you, their last."

"I've heard this before, Jetr," A'Ran said.

"I brokered this one."

A'Ran waited, observing the tiny man with white eyes. Jetr, the only Council member he trusted, had been an ally for three generations of his family without appearing to age. He wore heavy clothing, as if easily chilled, and moved with the smoothness of a warrior. There was a time when A'Ran would've scoffed at Jetr's mention of a favor. That time passed with the suffering of his people and the ability of the Council to coerce all his allies but one to leave his side.

He had to repay the odious debt to the Council. Only then would he be free of their interference and maybe even gain the support of some of their members.

"The Council wants an end to the millennia-old blood war between Anshan and Qatwal," Jetr said. "You have the dominant armies in this galaxy, and the other civilizations in your solar system are sick of the war. The ruler of Tri'trij has vacated his planet and lives on colonies outside the solar system. Too much of the on-again, off-again war has impacted your neighbors."

"And it is up to me to broker a peace deal with Qatwal," A'Ran said. "I have no planet, half an army, no food or water for my people, and I must broker a peace deal."

"I'm not saying I agree, just that it must be done," Jetr said. "And if you do this, the Council will leave you alone."

"A peace deal depends on two parties, not one," A'Ran reminded him.

"If they refuse, they refuse. But we will work with them to come to some sort of terms. Peace will benefit the solar system, and your neighbors will be happy."

"My neighbors will be fortunate if I don't destroy them next. They stood aside while my planet was overrun by the Council-sanctioned vagrant Yirkin forces!"

"Not sanctioned, just not prevented," Jetr corrected. "The Yirkin are wanderers. The Council wants nothing to do with them and views the presence of your father's betrayer and your people on the planet as a sign the Yirkin are willing to share your planet rather than take it over."

There is no negotiating with the Yirkin scum or my father's killer, A'Ran thought but held his tongue, aware his only ally believed himself right in this. His attention turned to the odious favor.

He thought for a long moment, knowing no peace treaty could be reached with Qatwal. Their war was passive-aggressive rather than open, consisting of Qatwal making his ore ships disappear and then reappear without the ore or his affront at the last Council meeting, where A'Ran had Kisolm, the man who would be *dhjan*, imprisoned in his quarters and miss the Council's final vote on who would maintain distribution rights to the ore only Anshan possessed. A'Ran won the vote by one.

He'd done his part to agitate Kisolm and received every bit as much as he'd given. They'd trained together on one of the Council's neutral planets and ended up rivals in everything.

"I'll do it, Jetr, for you, not the Council. You swear the Council will consider my debt to them repaid?" he asked.

"I swear it. Peace cannot be underestimated, A'Ran. Several members, including Qatwal, may be willing to aid you in regaining your planet after you've reached a peace treaty."

"If they do, it will be to steal my ore. I'll do this and go back to war. I've given up on finding a *nishani* for my planet."

"This system is truly unique. I didn't believe the planets died without the *dhjan* and his lifemate until I saw what happened to Anshan."

A'Ran desperately needed allies, food, and water for his people. He clenched his jaw, his pain deep and hidden as he thought of his people and his planet. He fought hard to build alliances the Council destroyed, and bartered, cheated, and stole for the weaponry needed to defeat the invaders, the Yirkin, a sophisticated race whose goal was to claim as many planets as they could in their empire-building. It was the Yirkins' first venture into their system, and they'd chosen Anshan, aided by traitors within his father's government who were wooed with the promise of ruling their own planet.

"A'Ran, there is something else I must tell you." Jetr's voice grew quieter, and he drew near. "My warriors intercepted information from Anshan. Your father's betrayer planted a traitor among those closest to you. I don't know who, but I suspect Ne'Rin."

"Ne'Rin?" A'Ran said, crossing his arms. "His father may have betrayed mine, but he has been loyal for all these years we've been exiled. He saved my sisters from his own father. If he could've saved my father and mother, he would've."

"You must consider this a possibility. The whereabouts of this moon on which you claim exile have been leaked off-planet. My men intercepted it before it went to Anshan, just as they've intercepted other messages from Anshan directed to someone here."

"There are hundreds of thousands of my warriors here," A'Ran said. "Why do you think it's Ne'Rin?"

"He has direct access to you and the most to gain. You forget: I am not a warrior bound by honor but a diplomat accustomed to undermining others," Jetr replied. "Ne'Rin does his part to prevent you from suspecting him. As an observer, I can tell you there's a great deal of motivation for someone in his position to betray you."

The words stung. If they came from someone other than the man who'd supported his father and grandfather, he'd disregard the warning and have the messenger killed. But this was Jetr warning him. Jetr was stacking a new problem on a pile of other problems he couldn't deal with.

"Brother?"

They both turned at the soft voice. His youngest sister, Talal, stood in the doorway to his war quarters, her gaze hopeful.

“Not yet,” he said, aware of what misery he was bringing his sisters. They’d been praying that the last three women would yield his *nishani*.

His people’s hope had turned to desperation in the hands of the Yirkin when every sun-cycle passed and there was no *nishani*. From the *dhjan* came strength and stability; from the *nishani*, restoration and healing. His planet was dying without either, and many had begun to accept this was the planet’s fate. He was helpless to find her. He had to wait for the fates to bring his *nishani* to him.

Talal’s face fell, and he had no words to offer. He’d already broken promises of finding his lifemate by his thirtieth, his thirty-first, his thirty-second birthdays.

“I’ll think on what you’ve told me,” he said, turning to Jetr. “Promise you’ll barter my freedom if Qatwali imprisons me on this peace mission.”

“I’ll do my best. If that doesn’t work, I’ll take your sisters to my planet,” Jetr answered. “It’s all I can offer.”

A’Ran nodded in agreement, knowing it was the best he could do. He had a feeling Kisolm, the crown prince of Qatwal, would not even hear him out but would view his attempt to barter peace as a sign of weakness and keep him as a trophy.

“Talal, send Ne’Rin to the practice fields.”

His sister hurried away. Jetr bowed his head, sensing the dismissal. A’Ran left the command center for the practice fields, the area behind the dwelling where his men fought. He stepped into the bright sunlight and withdrew one of hundreds of grey swords housed in small racks along the back side of the dwelling. The field was empty, his men preparing for another space battle.

He hefted the curved sword and marveled at the grey metal. Only the ore on Anshan could produce the metal that was not only unbreakable but easily molded. All the spaceships, computers, and weapons within the Five Galaxies were made from ore from Anshan mines-- even the swords, the only weapons sanctioned by the Planetary Council as fair and appropriate for man-to-man combat. The Council disallowed lasers or other advanced weapons, instead opting for the traditional weapons of their ancestors, and the only weapons some planets with their crude civilizations in the nearby galaxies used.

Swiping at the air, A’Ran couldn’t help but feel furious that the Council would protect such civilizations from those that were more advanced out of some sense of fairness while sitting by doing nothing as his planet was overrun and his parents murdered. Despite his hatred for the politics, he knew he needed the Council’s help. His people were starving as the planet died, and soon, the Council would realize the planet produced no ore without its rightful ruler.

Anshan-- a chunk of rock in space-- was smarter than the entire Council combined, even Jetr, who was content to mediate between him and the Council without truly choosing sides. Jetr had been loyal to his family for generations, and A’Ran respected him, knew the odd-looking man was the only reason the Council hadn’t ceded to the Yirkins’ petitions to claim the planet officially.

And yet, he couldn’t help feeling as if he alone bore the weight of his planet on his back as he struggled to pay for food, water, and weapons. He was running out of ore and other means to barter; he’d need the Council’s mercy soon.

“I am sorry my sister did not please you, A’Ran,” Ne’Rin said as he stepped into the field.

“She pleased me, Ne’Rin, but she is not meant to be my *nishani*,” he replied.

“What do you wait for?”

A’Ran was quiet. He didn’t know how to explain it and wondered if he should even try with Jetr’s suspicions fresh in his mind. His father said Anshan would tell him, and the feeling would be unmistakable. He hadn’t been on his own planet since his parents were killed, and he wasn’t sure how the planet would choose someone for him when he wasn’t there.

“I’ll know,” he said with more confidence than he felt. “Are the warriors ready for the next campaign?”

"They are."

"You and I have a different mission. A very unpleasant one."

"Jetr told me."

"Ready my personal ship for the flight to Qatwal."

"Yes, *dhjan*."

A'Ran watched him go, sensing the same disappointment and doubt he'd seen in his sister earlier. He wondered if years of disappointment had driven his most trusted friend away as greed did Ne'Rin's father.

He could do nothing but continue to fight. He swiped at the air again, unable to shake his anger.

CHAPTER TWO

The next two days passed quickly as Kiera helped Evelyn set up her sudden wedding. Evelyn handled it all with cheerfulness while Kiera stressed over the shade of flowers clashing with the décor, and the cake containing nuts, which Romas was allergic to. Evelyn's wedding was for a hundred invitees in a small chapel by the ocean followed by a reception for over twice that many guests. Most of the guests were Evelyn's friends and family; Romas's small party consisted of only a handful of men-- cousins, according to Evelyn-- looking like an NFL team dressed uncomfortably in their tuxes.

The newlyweds spent the night at a local luxury hotel-- also an arrangement made by Kiera-- and she was left alone in the row house full of boxes.

Given her first chance to rest in over two days, she sighed, exhausted and irritated at having to dig her own clothing out of a box. The movers had gone crazy and even packed her stuff. Her make-up was smeared from walking through the Monterey mists, her maid-of-honor dress wrinkled from constant sitting and standing. She wove her way to her bathroom through the maze of boxes and took a long shower to ease her tired body. The day had gone beautifully, and the sight of Evelyn's beaming, glowing face stuck in her head.

Kiera had never seen anyone so happy. Hot water ran over her head and down her body, soothing her. Would *she* ever be so happy?

Not if it has to do with a man.

She smiled, finished washing, and emerged from the shower. The new necklace she wore that matched the one she bought for Evelyn glimmered in the mirror. Disappointed her friend was leaving for somewhere across the world, she'd bought them matching necklaces featuring whimsical half moons in rose gold with a single, small, sparkling diamond of a star embedded in the moon.

She left the bathroom, pulling on an oversized, soft T-shirt Evelyn had shanghaied from Romas and Kiera had shanghaied from Evelyn.

The boxes were gone. Startled, she looked around twice. She listened but heard no one downstairs to indicate the movers had been through and glanced at the clock on her nightstand. It was nearly one thirty.

Perplexed as to what kind of movers worked at such an hour, she roamed through the row house from top to bottom. All the boxes were gone. No strangers were in the house, and the doors were bolted. She briefly considered calling Evelyn to ask about her moving arrangements. Evelyn might love her but would probably not welcome a call on her wedding night.

Kiera glanced around again, shook her head, and crawled into bed. Evelyn had a way of ensuring things were done even if she didn't seem to have time to do them. She probably had a mover scheduled and forgot to mention it.

In the morning, she'd clean up the house and then start working on another painting, the portrait of Evelyn and Romas she wanted to give the two of them as their joint wedding present. Mentally, she started on the portrait.

Although tired, sleep didn't come. Kiera rose and trotted down to her studio, happy to see the movers had left her studio alone. She flooded the studio with light, then pulled another blank canvas from the closet and perched it on her easel. She sat at her desk and started to sketch the visage of Evelyn in her long wedding dress and Romas in his dark tux on a piece of paper, glancing up occasionally at the blank canvas as she thought of proportions.

Comfortable in the plush office chair, she propped her feet up on her desk and continued to sketch until the picture began to look as she wanted it to. She dozed as she drew, caught herself twice, then dropped into sleep, unaware that those who removed the boxes were coming next for her.

Soon after confirming she was asleep, the two large men who had emptied the house of boxes returned for her. They ignored her studio and its contents. One placed a sleep patch on her ear to prevent her from waking and scooped her up while the other grabbed the last suitcase out of her bedroom. They left the row house for the park across the street, where a small spacecraft awaited them.

Settling Kiera on a grey slab bench, the first man straightened and motioned the other over.

"Not like our women," he said as the other warrior joined him. "Very small."

"Like a doll," the second agreed. "Pretty for so small a creature."

"You have no mate. Ask for her band."

The second snorted and strode into the cockpit, followed by the first.

"She will mate with no one like us. Her sister is mated to the second son of our ruler. This one is too exquisite. She must be intended for Kisolm," he replied.

"You brought all her belongings?"

"Everything, as Romas said, except the pictures. Not a noble pastime for one who will wed our next ruler," the second said with a frown. "Only Anshan barbarians would use their hands to create pictures."

"I think the pictures are too advanced for Anshan-kind," the first said with a chuckle. "If they didn't own the ore mines, they'd be using rocks to fight."

The second chuckled as he ordered the computer to rendezvous with the massive grey spaceship awaiting them outside the planet's atmosphere. The small woman's soft snores filled the transport ship.

* * *

Evelyn stood in the dark grey room of the spaceship with its cozy, dim lighting and the soft purr of hidden machines. She didn't really care what the dark grey walls, floors, and ceilings were made of or why the floor felt like carpet and looked like gun metal. The room was vacant except for a metal slab that served as a bed and the six-legged, cat-like creature sitting on the edge of the bed watching its sleeping occupant.

She leaned against the wall, pensive. Her plan, while brilliant when plotted the past month, didn't seem quite so wonderful right now. Kiera hadn't wanted to come, even for the proposed week. Evelyn knew-- and Romas assured her-- Kiera would be fine. She could paint anywhere, and her life was otherwise so unfulfilling, Evelyn didn't know how she could stand it. She wanted her friend to be happy, and Romas thought this was the best way. She had few instincts, unlike Kiera's hyperactive intuition, but she felt a definite tingling. She had to bring Kiera with her. It was meant to be.

And then she ran into several of the cat-like creatures roaming the ship. They were furry and about knee-height full grown with similar triangular ears and a tail. The rest of their bodies were unlike cats. They had six legs with little pads for feet instead of toes and claws, a delicate snout not quite the length of an anteater's lined with fine hairs and tiny teeth used to vacuum up mold,

dust, and dirt that was its main food source, and an odd habit of climbing walls with hidden suckers in its padded feet. From what Romas said, every household on his planet had at least one or two of the critters to keep things clean.

One sat perched on Kiera's bed, watching her sleep. Its legs were jointed outwards like a spider's, and its ability to climb walls resembled that of a spider. It didn't spin webs and looked more to Evelyn like a mutated cat, but the moment she recalled Kiera's fear, she also realized that the cat-like creature would easily pass as a large spider.

Therein lies the rub, Evelyn contemplated. Kiera would freak when she saw the cats.

She grabbed the sitting creature. It twisted its odd little face to look at her and sniffed at her arm with its small trunk. It didn't purr like a cat but growled. Turning away, she missed the movement behind her as another of the creatures appeared from beneath the bed. She tucked the creature in her hands under one arm and left the small room for a long corridor in similar dark grey which glowed more brightly from indistinguishable light sources. She trailed her fingers down a wall, smiling when she saw soft glimmers light up beneath her touch, trail her fingers a short distance, and blink out.

The cat-like creature squirmed. She set it down.

"You leave Kiera alone," she ordered sternly.

The creature loped ahead, darting out of sight down another hall. Evelyn followed leisurely, unconcerned with being lost on the massive ship. If she became turned around, all she needed to do was touch the wall and tell it where she wanted to go, and the glimmers would guide her there. Or Romas would come searching for her.

Evelyn hugged herself before looking down at the massive diamond on her ring finger. Bubbling with happiness, she hummed as she strode through the corridors in search of Romas.

He was in their quarters and stood as she entered. He was naked, as if awaiting her. She smiled and flung herself into his arms. They made love for the umpteenth time since their wedding. Afterwards, she snuggled into his arms, content with the sound of his heartbeat and the feel of his arms around her. Just as she drifted into sleep, the spaceship's internal communication system awoke her.

"Your woman's sister needs attending to."

The male voice came from nowhere and everywhere and disturbed the two naked forms on the dark grey bed. Evelyn raised her head lazily, unable to quell the urge to seek out the source of the voice even knowing she wouldn't find it.

Your woman. There had been several dozen mistranslations from the small translator attached to her ear lobe. This one was oft repeated and rankled her whenever she heard it.

"She'll be well," Romas said. He nuzzled her as she started to sit and pulled her back into his body. She relaxed, his warmth and presence lulling her into comfort she didn't want to leave.

"Your woman's sister needs attending to."

This time, the calm male voice was accompanied by a distinctly feminine wail in the background. She shot up and scrambled for her clothes. Romas followed. If she looked, she feared she might find him amused. After Kiera's three months of tormenting him, he would find turning the tables satisfying.

"You have to be understanding," she reminded him again. "You know Kiera well enough. She's really emotional. You have to be less ... you know. You just have to be understanding."

Romas snorted in response. She hurried from the room without her shoes and tucked in the alien clothing: soft, silky tunic into soft, silky pants that adjusted in size to fit her form. She stepped into the hallway, unwilling to await a purposely slower-moving Romas, and touched the wall.

"Take me to Kiera," she said. Glimmers lit up along one wall, guiding her through the maze of the ship. She'd been contemplating how to break the news to Kiera. How did you tell your best friend that aliens were real and oh, by the way, I married one and am taking you with me to

his planet, for your own good? She was doing what she thought was best for her friend, and Kiera would *hate* that.

She mulled it over again as she trotted down the corridors. There was no choice now; she had some explaining to do. What would she say? That there was a better chance of her selling art if she painted something no one else on earth could imagine? That Kiera would have her ocean, sky, and grass on the new planet? That they were going to some other planet millions of light years from earth because Romas knew a few good men they'd like to hook her up with?

Her pace slowed as she thought until she was walking, troubled. Romas caught up to her and swept her into his arms for a quick kiss.

"I've completely forgotten what I should tell her," she said.

"I'll explain things."

"She's not going to like hearing it from you."

Romas said nothing.

"You have to be gentle, Romas."

They heard her before turning the corner. Kiera was cursing and shouting. The softened expression on Romas's face-- only present for her-- hardened as he prepared himself to deal with whichever of his warriors had happened upon Kiera. Romas was all business by the time they rounded the corner; he even released Evelyn's hand and quickened his step into one that befitted a warrior prince.

Evelyn loved his game face. It was sexy as hell, like everything about him. Having spent enough time on the ship to understand the odd society, she knew better than to charge in and handle what he would consider his duty. She hung back when she reached the other three warriors in the hall watching the scene in the room. Romas strode in unasked, and she cursed quietly as she saw the cat-like critter chasing Kiera.

Kiera was yelling at it, her blue eyes large and wild. She clung to one of the warriors, attempting to climb him as the cat-like critter-- convinced it was a game-- wagged its tail and chased her around the large man in the center of the room.

Evelyn would've laughed had Kiera not appeared so terrified and bewildered. The warriors made no move to corner the critter or even calm Kiera down. They watched instead with curiosity.

Romas snatched the critter with one hand and tossed it to one of the warriors at the door. He grabbed Kiera with the other arm and flung her over his shoulder. She stilled and grew silent, then pushed away from him.

"Evelyn!" she shouted, panicked. "What are you doing here? God, this is a horrible dream! There are monsters and big men with funny ..."

At that point her talking became too quick for the translator hooked on Evelyn's ear to keep up. She removed it, irritated. The warrior Kiera had been attempting to scale addressed Romas. Romas's response was abrupt and sharp enough to be hostile. Evelyn glanced between them, uneasy at the exchange. The warrior stepped away.

"Kiera, it's okay, just calm-- "

"Evelyn!"

Kiera was near tears and began to squirm when the six-legged creature came into sight again. Romas strode out of the room and down the hall. Evelyn scrambled after him, jogging to keep pace with his long legs. He didn't slow until they reached their quarters.

Kiera babbled the entire time, convinced it was a dream. Evelyn listened and cringed, not sure how she would explain everything. They reached their quarters and closed the door.

Romas set Kiera down gently. Kiera bounded away from him and flung her arms around Evelyn, who gave a startled laugh and hugged her back. She met Romas's eyes over her friend's head. Romas crossed his arms and raised an eyebrow in silent inquiry. Evelyn shook her head.

“K-K!” she cooed, trying to pry Kiera’s grip off her and break through her babbling. “Calm down, Kiera.”

Neither worked, so Evelyn let her talk and hugged her hard. Romas shook his head and stepped forward.

“No, I can-- ” she objected.

Romas ignored her and grabbed Kiera, pulled her away to face him, and gave her a stiff shake. She fell silent and stared at him, her striking, large eyes even larger.

“Do you understand me?” Romas demanded.

Kiera blinked.

“Yes or no?”

She nodded.

“Be calm. Do you understand?”

Another nod. Evelyn sighed. She elbowed Romas away to stand before Kiera. The smaller woman was still, as if afraid to move.

“Kiera, I need to explain something to you,” she started. “It’s not going to be easy for you to take, but hear me out, okay?”

Another stiff nod.

“Are you holding your breath?” she asked. Kiera released it. She blinked a few times as tears lined her eyes.

“Romas, can you give us a minute?”

He grunted and left. Kiera’s eyes strayed from Evelyn’s, and she twisted all the way around, taking in everything, before she started to cry. Evelyn was silent, debating what to say. Finally, she asked lamely, “Are you okay?”

Kiera wiped her eyes and gazed at her with a deep frown, then said, “I had a dream once about being sent into outer space.”

“So it’s not as much of a shock?” Evelyn asked hopefully. Kiera’s face skewed again as she started crying once more.

“In my dream ... the aliens ... took me ... to a planet ruled by spiders!”

Evelyn sighed. Kiera was bound to be traumatized until she saw for herself there were no monster-sized spiders on Romas’s home planet. Hopefully, *hopefully*, that would be the largest obstacle Evelyn faced in explaining the situation to her.

“Come on. I’ll tell you about Romas and where we’re going.”

* * *

Kiera’s tears stopped sometime during the hours of explanation and history lessons Evelyn gave. She heard very little of any of them but somehow managed to nod when required and even respond with words her shocked mind did not hear or understand. She sat very still on the dark grey bed, her legs folded and hands in her lap, and stared at Evelyn.

She wondered if she had died, for she seemed able to see the conversation occurring from a dozen feet away, as if she were watching television instead of involved in it. She nodded and accepted Evelyn’s far-fetched explanations just as she might nod and temporarily accept the equally unreal world of *Star Wars*. When the movie was over, she would smile, get up, and go home.

But this movie had no end. The world around her was real. And it was uglier than she imagined a spaceship to be. There was dark grey and sterility in the absence of anything remotely friendly, homey, or welcoming. A yellowish glow emitted from some unseen light source in the grey walls reminded her of a late winter afternoon that never ended.

Kiera wasn’t watching *Star Wars* but living it. The only thing that seemed to click was Evelyn’s insistence that there were no spiders. Yet she’d seen the most incredibly huge spider dangling over her head when she awoke. It even slapped her with one of its long legs. She shuddered and asked again, “Are there more spiders on the planet?”

Evelyn looked defeated, and Kiera expected she had already covered the subject exhaustively.

"That was a cat, not a spider."

"It had eight legs," Kiera insisted.

"It has six legs."

"It's still more than four. Cats have four legs."

"Kiera!" Evelyn snapped. "It's their version of a cat!"

"Does their version of a dog have eight legs?"

"No! They don't have dogs, and it only has six legs!"

"What does? The dog?"

"The cat!"

"What else has more than four legs?" Kiera pressed.

"My God, Kiera!" Evelyn sighed and rubbed her face. "You want Romas to come in here and explain things?"

"I want to go home," Kiera replied.

"This will be better than home," Evelyn promised. "And I'll be with you. So will Romas. You needn't worry about anything. Besides, you said you'd stay at least a week, right?"

"And the cats?"

"The cats ... they're domesticated and really very nice."

"Are there other creatures with more than four legs?"

"I really, *really* don't know." Evelyn shook her head. "Can you think of anything else but spiders?"

"Is there air on your planet?" Before Evelyn could answer, another thought occurred to Kiera. "Are *you* an alien, too?"

"No, no, no! I was born in Mississippi. I swear it to you, Kiera. I wouldn't lie to you about anything like that."

"Just keep it from me until I awaken on a spaceship?" she retorted.

"I asked you if you wanted to come," Evelyn reminded her.

"I said no!"

"You said you'd think about it."

"You didn't tell me where we were going!" she said, incredulous.

"It's far away, like I said!" Evelyn said somewhat defensively.

"Omgod! It's so *not* just far away!" Kiera replied. "And women don't have any rights where Romas is from. He said as much! So I'm going to be stuck on a planet far away without a bus ticket home surrounded by spiders the size of basketballs and being bossed around by Neanderthal barbarians who forbid me to talk and lock me in the bathroom!"

"You're adorable even when you're so upset!" Evelyn grinned. Kiera's chest clenched as she began crying again. Evelyn threw her arms around her and hugged her, chuckling. "You'll be okay, K-K. You'll see."

Kiera squeezed her back, feeling very, very lost. She forced herself to withdraw from the surreal world and let herself go numb. After all, when she finally awoke from this nightmare, all would be back to normal, and she would have new inspiration for her paintings. She kept telling herself she'd wake up from this wacky dream soon.

Six days passed on the ship. She awoke six more times willing the nightmare to be over. On the seventh morning-- if there were such a thing in space-- she lay in bed and stared at the dark grey ceiling. The world was becoming more real as the days passed. She'd avoided the galley Evelyn had tried for three days to drag her to and said it would prove they were on a ship after she challenged Evelyn to prove it wasn't a dream.

She sat and crossed her legs, thoughtful. She didn't feel quite as traumatized today. In fact, she felt angry, and she wanted to see the galley to confirm this all wasn't an elaborate hallucination. She tucked in her shirt in the way Evelyn had told her was customary. She liked

the space clothing. It was comfortable, like wearing pajamas all day long. All she had to do was choose the color she wanted to wear-- black for the past several days in silent objection to her presence aboard the ship-- and the ship's computer wove it for her.

At least, that was her version. Romas had attempted once to explain the clothing was not woven aboard the ship but created on his home planet, molecularly broken into invisible pieces and stored somewhere aboard the ship.

She didn't understand. It was safer for her to imagine someone sitting just behind her wall weaving clothing and sending it to her or anyone else as they requested. It made the clothing unit much less intimidating than Romas's lecture on matter and antimatter and how to store the two successfully without blowing up something.

The parts of the room were well hidden. It had taken her two days to work up the courage to walk alone into what appeared to be the rear wall but was really a mirage disguising a grey bathroom with a clothing unit in the corner. She closed her eyes as she stepped into and through the wall and opened them after two steps. A waist-high bathtub and a round disc serving as an alien toilet, also waist-high, were on one wall. If she asked, a mirror would appear on the opposite wall.

"Teal," she said to the clothing unit.

There was no other purr aside from the constant, low hum similar to the hum surrounding electric wires. A flicker of light, and the clothing appeared on a slate grey slab serving as a bench near the door.

She changed into the comfortable clothing. She stood spread-eagle until it shrank to fit her, shuddered at the creepy sensation of life-like silk caressing her skin, and hurried out of the bathroom.

She held her forearm out to the door as she approached, glancing again at the gold band around her wrist that Romas had emphasized she needed to wear *at all the times*. For once, she hadn't corrected his English, only nodded once more and held out her arm for the bracelet. What had appeared to be a thick, gold, hard band of about three inches in width had molded around her arm and felt no heavier than the clothing she wore. It was flexible and moved with her when she tested it by flexing or releasing her forearm muscles.

Romas had felt no need to explain his insistence of her wearing it, but Evelyn had explained it acted as a visual identifying piece and also happened to open all the doors on the ship.

All the doors.

It made her mind leap until she recalled she was supposedly on a spaceship. She couldn't order the exit door open and walk home. And if there were more of those monstrous spiders on board, she probably did not *want* to wander around opening doors at random.

Except for today. Today she wanted to see the window to space in the galley Evelyn wanted her to see.

She placed a dark grey device the size of a small button on her earlobe like an earring. It stuck, but she forced herself not to ask why. It was allegedly her translator and emitted a low-level hum similar to the walls. Without it, the ship wouldn't understand her outside of her room. She exited and touched the wall of one corridor.

"Main galley," she said.

A trickle of lights lit up on the wall to her right. She followed. Several of what Evelyn had called warriors passed her in the hall. She thought she recognized one or two from the men who had accompanied Romas to the wedding.

Evelyn's many history lessons had covered the strange kin of Romas's, explaining they weren't the cousins Romas claimed them to be at the wedding. They weren't relatives at all, but members of Romas's army. Kiera had nodded as was expected while wondering what the hell Evelyn drank to make all this seem reasonable.

Romas's clan was very large and his father's influence the greatest on the planet of Qatwal. The race of warriors was ancient, dating back a hundred millennia. Their planet had been a

barbarian planet, until the Five Galaxies zone, in which Qatwal sat in the middle, was discovered by a master race of super-genius aliens Evelyn referred to as *the Brains*. The Brains set up the Planetary Council-- the alien version of the United Nations-- several generations before to mediate between the warring planets within the Five Galaxies. The Brains also brought technological advancement that--

A massive man passed her in the hall, and she stopped mid-thought to stare at him as he walked away. All the men on Romas's planet were larger than those on hers. She believed Evelyn's tale of a race of people bred for war. The man she just passed was a foot taller than Romas and one and a half times as wide. She felt dwarfed whenever she crossed one of the men aboard the ship.

When he disappeared around the corner, she returned to her thoughts and following the lights. There were still wars, Evelyn had confided, even though it was frowned upon by the Council.

Another giant of a man passed her, and she shook her head, amazed. The warriors never spoke or even gave her more than a passing glance. She continued down the hall, watching the lights. They stopped a short time later and surrounded a metal door. She waved her arm band, and the door opened. The room she stepped into was triangular shaped, consisting of a wall of angled windows, small tables against the other wall, and round seats facing the windows. The galley was occupied by three hulking men at a table.

She gazed out the windows, unease making her stomach churn. She couldn't help feeling disappointed; space looked no different than it had when she was lying on the roof of Evelyn's house. She expected *real* space to look closer if nothing else.

Which way was home? She didn't see any glowing blue planets. She sat in one of the chairs and slid down in it until her head rested against the back. They seemed to be moving very slowly for being on a spaceship, she mused.

"I thought you would come here eventually." Evelyn's voice was soft. Kiera grunted without turning. Evelyn slid into the chair beside her. "You okay?"

"I don't know. I can't make sense of things," Kiera said.

"You overanalyze things. Don't try, just accept," Evelyn advised.

"Is that what you did?" Kiera glanced at her.

"Don't give this blonde the credit for thinking too deeply."

The three warriors at the table relocated several chairs down.

"Take off your earpiece," Evelyn whispered. Kiera did so and set it carefully on her knee. It would blend in with everything around her if she dropped it.

"Neat little things," Evelyn said with some excitement as she placed hers on the chair's slender arm. "I see you're not wearing black today."

"Too depressed," Kiera said. "Needed some color."

"Don't think they like not knowing what we're saying," she said with some satisfaction. "Romas isn't bad, but I can imagine most of these guys have a bit too much testosterone."

"Romas has too much testosterone," Kiera retorted. "I bet this was his idea, wasn't it? Dragging me away from home?"

"No, it was mostly mine," she said. "He agreed you needed a real life, though."

"That's bad enough."

"You'll be fascinating to his people," Evelyn continued. "You're what they might call petite."

"Petite?" Kiera echoed with a raised eyebrow. "I've never been called petite in my life! I'm of above average height by an inch and above average weight by ten pounds."

"The women there are grown bigger, too," Evelyn explained. "Like me."

"Omigod. So I'm going to a planet of models and body builders," Kiera said. "I'll be the rotund brunette no one wants to talk to!"

“Stop! Romas said you’re being a five-year-old, and I agree! They *like* you Kiera,” Evelyn said, and raised her chin toward the warriors near them. “The one who saved you from the cat asked Romas on the spot to marry you.”

Kiera gave an unladylike snort. “I’m sure Romas told him he wouldn’t want to deal with my fiery tongue. That’s absurd, Evelyn.”

“Well, they’re different, hon,” Evelyn said with some frustration. “I have the feeling we’ll both stick out.”

Kiera glanced at her, hearing the nervousness for the first time.

“Are you worried about ... things?” she queried. “Other than being on a spaceship with aliens and super-tarantulas?”

“Yeah. The usual, I guess. Meeting his parents, them accepting me, fitting in with the new place, you know.”

“You’ll do great, Evelyn,” Kiera said. “You’re perfect, brilliant, and beautiful. Rum-ass thinks so, and so do I. There’s no way they won’t be bowled over by you.”

“That’s sweet, K-K,” Evelyn answered.

“If not, we can steal a spaceship and go home,” Kiera added under her breath.

Evelyn giggled. “Not if Romas hooks you up with one of his brothers.” She grinned. “You’ll get to meet them all when we land tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” Kiera echoed.

“Their traditions are a little different.” Evelyn gave her a sidelong look. “You may not have much control over some things.”

“I think I’m already experiencing that.”

“Yeah ...” Evelyn said, and hesitated before continuing. “You might not have a choice in what man decides ... to like you or propose or something.”

“What?”

“You know. Think of it as a tribal warrior society that’s kinda backwards or antiquated in its customs.”

“I’m not following.”

“You’re a guest of Romas right now, but if he decides to put you on the market, so to speak, pretty much anyone can ... um ... claim you as a ... you know, a bride.”

“But I’m going home,” Kiera said blankly.

“Well, I’ll talk to him,” Evelyn said, and rushed into a new subject. “Isn’t this an awesome view?”

Kiera looked at her, attempting to decipher her warning. It sounded very much like Evelyn was trying to tell her Romas could marry her off at his will when he pleased. The idea was absurd, even for someone as chauvinistic as Romas. Her instincts didn’t like Evelyn’s nonchalance on the subject.

“Yeah, nice view,” she murmured. “Do they have anything unusual, like four moons?”

“There are two moons and two suns, but the suns are so close together, you can’t tell,” Evelyn said. “The standard day is longer than ours, about thirty hours instead of twenty-four, with that divided evenly between day and night.”

“Have you been there before?” Kiera asked.

“No. I’ve been interrogating Romas for about two months now,” Evelyn admitted with a smile. “They have green grass, oceans, and blue sky just like us.”

“Is the sun yellow?”

“Yes, Kiera!”

“So the only difference is their animals and the size of their people,” Kiera said.

“Pretty much.”

She shifted in her chair. She had many more questions, but the more she asked, the less she could deny the world around her was real. Tomorrow she would meet Romas’s alien-brothers and parents. Or maybe, just maybe, tomorrow morning she would finally wake up.

They sat for a while before she felt a familiar sense of anxiety at the reality of her situation. She wandered back to the safety of her room, wanting paper and pencils, her favorite jeans ... anything familiar to comfort her. She lay on the bed as she had for several days already, sick of the jerky-like food Evelyn brought her.

She couldn't sleep, even when the computer turned her lights out in the only sign it was bedtime. She spent the night waiting for the nightmare world to end and dressed the next morning with an undertaker's solemnity. Soon after, a warrior came to her door and led her down several halls and into a tiny box resembling an elevator. Unlike an elevator, it didn't appear to move. She felt silly standing in it with the three warrior strangers around her, waiting for something to happen that never did. When the doors opened, she realized everything had changed. For one, she was no longer faced with dark grey. For two, it was not just Romas and Evelyn before her.

There were hundreds, maybe *thousands*, of cheerfully clothed giants and models lining a petal-strewn pathway. Brilliant sunlight blinded her after days of grey, and she blinked at the bright, *familiar* blue sky.

It was morning. She smelled dew. A light, warm breeze brushed her cheek. The sensations made her want to cry. Relieved, she focused on the blue skies, yellow suns, and thick emerald grass that reminded her of pictures from a tour book of Ireland. She felt more grounded as she stepped out of the horrible grey elevator onto a thick carpet of green. She was no longer confined in purgatory, afloat in space. She avoided turning around to see what must have been a hulking grey mass of metal spaceship.

One of the warriors flanking her nudged her forward. Romas and Evelyn were already several dozen feet down the flowered path. Evelyn appeared serene and perfect, as usual. Romas was detached and unreadable, the supreme warrior prince.

Kiera stepped forward, eager to reach Evelyn. Her friend hadn't been joking about her being considered petite and unique. She didn't see one woman under six feet tall or any man who didn't tower over six feet. Romas's people were fair skinned with light hair in varying shades of blond and red. She saw a full range of eye colors, though she noticed with some interest that blue or green eyes were unnaturally clear-- unlike her Mediterranean, green-blue-grey gaze.

She took in their bright clothing, glad she thought to wear light blue today. Any darker color, and she would stand out even more.

She reached Evelyn and Romas and forced herself not to crowd them. She kept her eyes on the couple instead of the crowd. People stare at her with varying looks of curiosity and intensity. Her face warmed and reddened beneath the scrutiny. Evelyn was the queen of handling crowds, but Kiera could think of nothing more than ducking into a safe corner and staying there with her back to the wall.

The warriors with her closed around her, blocking some of the crowd from sight.

The couple before her stopped, and she brought her gaze back to them. They stood in front of an airy, light tent resembling a silk sheet suspended in midair over a table. A man and a woman in their prime stood before them, and the light murmuring of the crowd hushed. They were a handsome couple, the elegant woman's hair so fine and blonde it resembled white silk. The man beside her had dark blond hair, serious brown eyes in a chiseled face, and a form as fit as his son's.

Evelyn's in-laws. Kiera held her breath for her friend as Evelyn stepped forward. Her friend was sure-footed and confident, but Kiera knew she was nervous. Evelyn's words were too quiet for Kiera to hear.

The scent of real food wafted towards her. Her mouth watered, and her eyes dropped to the source. It was not the chewy ship food. It looked like real food packed on the low tables with meat, gravies, and tons of dishes of what might have been casseroles of varying colors. Pillows passed as chairs, and bowls as cups.

She leaned to see past Romas and saw that the tent before her was only the head tent. Tables and pillows stretched as far as she could see to create a massive circle she assumed was large enough to seat the crowd. Her eyes caught movement at the edge of the crowd. Three massive warriors escorted a fourth whose hands were bound. They moved out of sight at her blink, and she wondered how criminals were treated on such a planet.

Evelyn turned, motioning her forward. Kiera went.

“My friend, Kiera.” Evelyn’s voice was quiet and respectful.

Kiera felt she should have curtseyed or saluted or something. Uncertainly, she remained where she was and gazed at the man and woman before her. They looked her over curiously. The woman appeared bright-eyed and pleasant, the warrior-husband unreadable.

“Kiera, this is Romas’s mother, Lishana, and his father, Mison,” Evelyn said.

A slight smile drew up one side of Lishana’s mouth, and Kiera felt the urge to smile as well. There was a gentle air around the woman, and her large brown eyes lacked the rigid stoniness of her husband’s. At first glance, Lishana did not seem the kind of mother-in-law that might cause Evelyn problems.

“You are welcome, Kiera.” Lishana’s voice was as soft as her features. “May the suns long grace you.”

“Thank you,” Kiera responded.

“Will you join us?” The invitation was addressed to all three of them. As if on cue, the crowd began to break up, with cheerful groups moving to various positions around the circle. Kiera watched them, somewhat relieved not to be the center of attention any longer. She trailed the two couples up shallow stairs and took the seat beside Evelyn not occupied by Romas. Her gaze dropped to the feast before them.

Did any of the animals on the table look like spiders while alive?

She stared at a tray of meat for a long moment. Several giants with Romas’s shade of blond hair and similar blue eyes seated themselves across from them. She knew by their similar facial features they were brothers, and Romas’s threat of hooking her up with one made her more self-conscious.

Mison motioned for those at his table to eat, and she reached for the plate of meat before her before Romas or any of his brothers could assist her. She tapped the ear piece as the conversation around picked up but the words faded in and out of translation. Even an elite, advanced society as Romas’s had technical difficulties. She removed the ear piece and replaced it. The translator hummed once more.

“Romas had all the cats corralled and kept elsewhere for this feast, just for you,” Evelyn leaned over to whisper. “Isn’t he just awesome?”

“He’s awesome if he keeps them corralled for my entire visit, which hopefully won’t be long,” Kiera replied. Evelyn frowned and shifted away. Kiera almost apologized, but the approach and introduction of two pre-teen boys with white-blond hair and bright blue eyes distracted her.

“My brothers, Lilan and Hilan,” Romas announced.

The grinning boys were between ten and twelve, already tall and lanky. The two scuffled for a seat next to one of their older brothers across from Kiera before a look from Mison quieted them. They sat dutifully, sharing the pillow, and were calm for several moments before a discreet elbow match broke out between them. She was grateful to see even alien kids behaved like typical kids.

She took her first bite of what looked like beef. It certainly tasted like beef, though the tangy spices were unfamiliar. Evelyn poured clear, steaming broth into a bowl beside her plate.

“This is good. You can dip anything in this,” she said.

Kiera tried it. The clear broth held a tangy, rich flavor, like spiced butter. As a fan of good food, Kiera found Evelyn’s words to be quite true. She dipped everything she tried-- from meat to casseroles with odd textures-- in the clear broth. They even had a version of bread; it was unleavened and came in large, round, flat ears.

She ate until full, then pushed her plate from the edge of the table. The two boys across from her had managed to make messes of themselves and the table in what might have been a competition. They cast several glances her way and appeared as interested in her as they were in looking past her. Romas's eldest brother, who sat across and down the table from her, rose, a look of anger on his face. She watched him circle the table and twisted to see where he went.

Behind the tent and its low, shallow steps was a small group of blond warriors surrounding a fifth man with darker skin and hair. Romas's brother spoke to the group. The boys across from Kiera began giggling. Uninterested in watching people talk, she glanced again at the boys and nudged Evelyn.

"Evelyn, I need to use the little girls' room," she said.

Evelyn leaned to whisper to Romas, whose response was a tad too long for Kiera's impatient bladder.

"He says to enter the main house by the first entrance you find. Your bracelet-- "

The translator cut out on her, and Evelyn's next foreign words were incomprehensible. Kiera removed the translator from her ear. Evelyn did the same.

"Enter the main house using the nearest entrance. Your bracelet acts as a sort of master key, so you can go anywhere in the whole house. There should be a servant or someone posted near the entrance who can guide you to the restroom. If not, it's along the same hallway as the door. Just go four or five doors, and it'll be on your right."

Something splashed Kiera, and she pushed the droplets from her face, concentrating on Evelyn.

"Is it four or five?" she asked. "If it's four and I go five and interrupt someone's conference or walk into a room full of tarantulas, I'm going to go crazy."

"No, no. I think he said four," Evelyn said. "I'm sure there will be someone-- oh, hell, don't look down!"

Something furry dropped into Kiera's lap. The two pre-teen boys laughed.

Kiera's eyes dropped to her lap, and she stared at the mass of furry legs, freezing in place for a long moment. The cats' fur was matted from a bath in her dipping soup. She gave a startled cry, shot up from her seat, and swiped the creatures from her lap in one movement. Two of the cats, young and small enough to be kittens or perfectly sized adult tarantulas, detangled and darted from her pillow to the table.

Kiera took two steps back, shuddering in disgust and fear. God, she hated spiders. Hated them, hated them, *hated them!* A sharp word from Romas, and the two boys looked suddenly abashed. One of the kittens dashed toward Kiera, moving sideways like a spider on its flexible legs, and she skittered farther away.

Romas leaned back and snatched the kitten trotting toward her, and Evelyn rose to her knees, looking both surprised and dismayed. Suddenly, Kiera really, *really* wanted to go home.

"I'm going ... to the restroom," she said, heart thudding in her ears.

"I'm so sorry, K. I'll go with you," Evelyn offered.

"No. I'm okay. I'll go and we can talk about going home when I get back!"

Romas tossed the kitten, which darted for her again. She took another hasty step back as he grabbed it once more. Her left foot found the first shallow step, and she took another step back, her eyes pinned on the second kitten running along the table. She'd just made a complete fool of herself and Evelyn ... how would she react if someone were as terrified of kittens on earth?

Embarrassed, she didn't notice her right foot reaching nothing but air until she toppled backwards. She gasped, waiting to feel the impact of the hard ground. Two hands caught her. An unexpected heat jarred her to her core, and the earth beneath her feet shook violently enough to rattle her teeth. The strange spell left her breathing hard and confused as to whether she'd had a heart attack or worse. The strange fever remained, making her feel as if she'd been

sitting in a sauna for hours. Her head hurt and her body ached from the inside out, like she had the flu.

Unable to understand or control the strange sensations, she tried to help right herself as the hands gripping her ribcage steadied her. The hot energy circulating through her body came from the large, olive-hued hands touching her. She looked up, wondering who she now owed an apology for her embarrassing scene.

Her gaze was immediately riveted to that of an alien unlike those of Romas's clan. His skin was darker, the color of honey as opposed to alabaster, his eyes a rich, dark brown, and his features lacking the delicate, chiseled beauty of Romas's family. This man's features were scarred and masculine with a crooked nose that had been broken more than once. Long, dark hair was held in place at the base of his neck by a thick band of rose gold.

His gaze was so direct it seemed to sear through her. The heat of his large hands made her feel as if she wore no clothing. He held her against him, his dark, spicy-sweet scent seizing her senses. Inexplicable scenes tore through her mind too fast for her to focus on any one of them.

A blue planet, two thrones, a hacienda-style dwelling, an older man and woman, fire in the sky, a red planet, war. The emotions behind the scenes were hot and angry before one more scene emerged-- this one lingering for what felt like minutes.

She held the hand of the man before her, walking on a dead planet of nothing but rocky hills, dried streams, and cracked earth. The planet's energy warmed her, ran through her and into him, and grass grew beneath her feet. She smiled up at him, content to be with her mate.

Another hand clamped around her arm and snatched her away. She blinked out of the spell and saw Romas's oldest brother, his eyes glittering with anger. Her gaze fell to the bound hands of the man who'd caught her. Given his guard of four warriors and his unfriendly gaze, maybe she should be grateful someone wrenched her arm off to get her away from him. And yet, she still felt his hands on her body, smelled his scent, saw the vision from their touch.

Fate. The sense was fleeting and overwhelming. She didn't know the honey-hued man before her, but she couldn't help but feel their paths were entwined.

The idea scared her. She was going home, not staying on some dead planet with some hunky stranger!

The hunky stranger spoke to Romas's oldest brother. The translator was dead and picked up none of the men's terse discussion. She tried not to stare at the man staring at her. He was the most stunning man she'd ever seen despite his crooked nose. Whatever they discussed, Romas's brother was getting more pissed; his grip on her tightened until she gave a verbal, "Let me go!"

Whether or not it translated or whether her voice was enough to alert him, all eyes fell to her before the conversation resumed. It was Romas-- the man responsible for dragging her across the universe-- who rescued her. He took her free arm and drew her away from his brother. Kiera went more than willingly, near the emergency point for reaching the bathroom. He pushed her past him and joined in the conversation. Evelyn smiled tightly from her position a couple of feet away, her attention riveted to the situation before her. Kiera looked at her arm, where a bruise was already forming from Kisolm's grip.

Whatever the men were squabbling about, it wasn't worth hurting her. Kiera looked at them all, her gaze settling on the prisoner. The thrum of warm energy coursed through her again, and she felt again her destiny was tied with his.

He still watched her. He was shorter than the seven-foot giants around him, standing right at Romas's height. His clothing was styled differently, with a dark V-neck tunic, dark pants, and a thick belt around his lower abdomen. He wore a rose gold bracelet very similar to Romas's in all but color, and soft, dark boots. He was, without a doubt, a warrior. His frame was thick beneath the snug clothing, with a tucked waist and flared upper body extending from the tucked waist to his wide, broad shoulders. His brow was low and his eyebrows dark, making his unwavering gaze even more intense.

Heat flared within her body, and her imagination painted an image of the warrior before her without the clothing. Kiera rubbed her arm with a small wince and forced herself to turn away. She wanted nothing to do with this world or its inhabitants, despite that unexpected, intimate connection with the most beautiful man she'd ever seen. She hadn't felt instant attraction to a man since high school.

She was going home, sexy alien be damned. She turned to face Evelyn but still felt him watch her. Evelyn was upset at what was being said, emotions crossing her face quickly. Her look turned to anger, then softened into concern. By the end of the conversation, she appeared relieved.

The prisoner was led away. Kiera relaxed, no longer feeling his gaze on her. Evelyn spoke to her, her words foreign. Kiera tapped her translator and shook her head. Evelyn removed hers.

"You didn't understand anything?" Evelyn asked.

"I have to pee, *now*," Kiera answered.

"Oh. Sorry. I'll go, too."

Evelyn made a motion to Romas, who looked grimmer than usual. He nodded and returned to the tent. Kiera followed as Evelyn turned toward the main house, a sprawling, single-story compound made of brilliant white stone and dotted with hundreds of glass-less windows. It was open and airy, bright and cheerful. They walked across the open field before it, the bright sun and solid ground beneath her easing some of her anxiety about the day.

"You didn't understand anything?" Evelyn asked again.

"Nope. Evelyn, I'm so sorry I've totally embarrassed you today," Kiera said. "I wanted it to be special for you and managed to mortify both of us."

"Oh, no, K-K!" Evelyn said. "They know we're from another place. His family has been very understanding."

"Except those boys," Kiera muttered. "Stupid kids."

"Just kids, though, K-K. I'm sorry they upset you."

Kiera shrugged.

"Are you really ready to go home so soon?" Evelyn asked.

"Yeah, I think so."

Evelyn sighed in disappointment. Kiera looked at her friend, guilty for hurting her feelings despite her need to return to her own world. Her thoughts went to the prisoner, and she wondered if she'd see him again if she stayed a little longer.

"If you want, I'll stay for a few more days," she offered half-heartedly. "As your wedding present. I'm not overly anxious to get back on that depressing ship."

"Thanks, Kiera," Evelyn said. "It really would mean a lot to me. The next few days will be nothing but feasts and parties in celebration of our marriage!"

"So then you'll be very happy."

"Even happier because I didn't have to plan them," Evelyn said. "And you'll have fun, too, Kiera. I promise."

Kiera shook tension from her shoulders. Evelyn did have a way of making even the most gruesome day of spring cleaning fun. Perhaps, if Romas kept the spiders away and Evelyn could make the days pass quickly, she might survive her visit. She may go so far as not to be disappointed with it if she saw the handsome man again.

"What did that guy do to be arrested?" she asked. "Steal something? Kill someone?"

"He's more of a prisoner of war," Evelyn said. "A lippy one at that. We need to get you a new translator."

"I thought there weren't any wars right now."

"I guess he's not a war prisoner in the traditional sense," Evelyn replied. "I'm not always sure about things here either. I think there's no openly declared war, but there's lots of unrest and skirmishes among the clans. From what I understood, that guy and Romas's eldest brother have

personal issues with each other and are constantly hazing each other. I guess the other guy just got caught this time.”

“Typical male ego,” Kiera said. “Probably fighting over who stole whose cat when they were five.”

“Something like that.”

“You looked really upset for a while though.”

“Just stupid traditions and stuff,” Evelyn said a little too casually. “They’re fighting over a woman, and I really don’t take to the way they do things here in that regard.”

Satisfied to find the sexy man wasn’t a serial killer or worse, Kiera’s attention shifted to the main house as they approached. The house was as brilliant white on the inside as it was outside. There were no traditional decorations such as pictures or mirrors on the walls, but colorful cords and streams of what might have been silk edging the corners and dangling from high ceilings. The wide hallways were lit by skylights and lined with inset doors whose access pads glowed to the right of each door.

The women counted four doors, and Kiera held out her bracelet to the access pad. The door slid open. Evelyn waited outside while Kiera entered the massive bathroom. She removed the translator and replaced it, satisfied at the faint hum indicating it was working once more.

She went about her business and was about to leave when the door opened and two beautiful, tall women entered. One looked her over with disdain, and the other whispered to the first, “She could not possibly ally to the *dhjan* family, sister. She is too small and *khorj* to bear warriors.”

Kiera offered a smile and hurried past them, heart pounding and face red with embarrassment. The translator was not always good at picking up every word, but she didn’t need the translation of the unknown word. The two women had just called her short and fat.

“What’s wrong?” Evelyn asked, eyes on her face as she exited quickly.

“Oh, nothing,” Kiera lied. “Just not used to their bathrooms yet.”

She didn’t want to stay even a few days, not if it meant she was viewed as nothing more than a short-and-fat foreigner! That reputation could not possibly help Evelyn’s standing in the clan either; the sooner the clan forgot the blemish of a friend, the sooner they’d accept Evelyn. And no sexy warrior-- even a prisoner-- would want anything to do with her at all.

“I’m feeling tired, Evelyn. Could I lie down for a while?” she asked. She hated the disappointed look on Evelyn’s face.

“Sure, Kiera. I’m sorry for stressing you. Can you wait here for a minute, so I can ask Romas where your room is?”

Kiera nodded, content to hide from the crowd. Of all the things to think about, she couldn’t get the prisoner out of her thoughts, even when Evelyn returned with sweet bread she normally would’ve pounced on. She took it absent-mindedly and followed her friend through the mansion.

CHAPTER THREE

Evelyn left Kiera’s room with a frown, uncertain how to make everything up to her friend. Kiera would figure things out soon, especially once Evelyn got her into this new world and its customs. The party tonight would be a perfect way to start. There would be no pressure on Kiera, and Evelyn would be there to support her.

Kiera had no clue how curious Romas’s brothers were about her. To them, she was an exotic little doll with her huge, gem-hued eyes, black hair, and toned hour-glass shape. *Everyone* was fascinated by something so exotic compared to their standards. Even Romas’s mother had inquired about Kiera.

None of your savage brothers would properly complement such a beautiful little treasure, Romas, the woman had said with gentle humor. Though one of them must try. Kisolm has already spoken to your father.

Romas had then been given the painful job of explaining to Kisolm that Kiera would most likely not meld well with their traditions, and Kisolm would have to be disappointed. Evelyn had almost laughed when Lishana's eyebrows shot up in response gave but loved Romas so much more for understanding Kiera well enough to defend her.

"Is she well?" Romas's voice distracted her from her thoughts. She turned to wait for him to join her and smiled.

"I think so. Shocked, upset. Can't blame her," she said. "She thinks everyone here views her as short and fat."

"My brothers are lining up to make her their mate," he said with a shake of his head. "If only she understood our culture better."

"She doesn't," she said with a warning look. "We dragged her here, but that's as far as I can go."

"I know, love," he said, and kissed her on the forehead. "I told them all so."

They hugged for a long moment, her heart singing. How she loved his scent and strong arms! She looked at the band on her arm, then down the hall toward Kiera before propping her chin on his chest to gaze at him.

"You're sure your brother won't try anything after what that guy said? They were fighting over her. That A'Ran guy sounded pretty convincing about kidnapping her."

Romas was thoughtful before responding. "A'Ran and Kisolm have been competing against each other for years. They taunt each other whenever they have the chance and oftentimes want to anger the other but don't intend to follow through. A'Ran comes from the barbarian planet, but he won't disrespect our family. I have warned all my brothers, and Kisolm will respect my wishes."

"A'Ran looked pretty savage," she said with a shiver. "He's locked up, right?"

"He is."

"And someone other than Kisolm has the key?"

"We don't use keys," he answered. "We use honor. He is placed in a room where he must stay, unless someone frees him. He won't leave."

"You *trust* him?" she asked skeptically.

"It has always been this way. Before we had spaceships, we still had war. The only way to protect innocent people from the blood feud that runs between my family and A'Ran's was to use honor." He took her hand as they started to walk down the hall.

Evelyn glanced over her shoulder again, feeling uneasy. If only Kiera had stayed seated or didn't have such a hyperactive bladder or just *waited* five minutes! Romas could have convinced his brother to leave Kiera be, but now, with a blatant challenge from the prisoner, who had *dared* Kisolm to claim Kiera before *he* did ... Romas trusted his brother, but Evelyn had seen the look on Kisolm's face when he looked at Kiera.

"Do not worry, love," Romas said, looking at her.

"I feel like I should've warned her about the arm band," she said. "She doesn't know that giving it to any man she comes across basically makes her his wife."

"Kiera is an honored guest. I've told my family she is your sister. They will not dishonor you or me by doing anything without coming to me first."

Dear God, I hope not!

Evelyn smiled at him but wasn't so sure. She'd keep an eye on her friend to make sure nothing else happened.

* * *

Kiera lay on the bed an hour after Evelyn left, staring at the white ceiling with its brightly corded edges. A midmorning breeze drifted through the windows to her right, and she closed her eyes.

She needed to leave. What had started out as a favor to her friend was turning into something else. Her gaze fell again to the closet in which boxes were stacked. They didn't contain Evelyn's things; they contained *her* things, down to her dirty socks. She'd found them when trying to find the invisible bathroom door.

Evelyn-- or Romas-- never intended for her to leave. There was no way she was staying! Yet home was a very long way away, which meant she needed to go home on a spaceship. Who piloted them? How did she go about getting one discreetly?

She pondered the spaceship dilemma and how to commission one to take her home without Evelyn, Romas, or anyone else finding out. Given that she had no money or belongings that might possibly be of interest to the people of this planet, how could she bribe or pay someone to take her home? As much as she loved her friend, she couldn't help feeling betrayed.

She hid in the room most of the day to prevent any more run-ins with cats or models and to think. It wasn't until dusk, when Evelyn had said she'd come back, that she forced herself up. She sat on the bed and watched the sunset through the window. It was just as spectacular as those on earth, a brilliant mix of pinks, oranges, burnt yellows, reds, and purples. She raised her bracelet to the light, watching the colors reflect off of it and turning it pinkish-gold, like the prisoner's bracelet.

And then it hit her. She needed someone who could sneak her out of Romas's reach and to a spaceship.

Prisoner... personal issues ... hazing ... just got caught this time.

He wasn't a criminal, a thief, or murderer but someone who happened to have a bone to pick with Romas's brother and managed to get caught. Freeing a man should put him in her debt, and he was the last person in the house who would rat her out to Romas's family!

Maybe this was how their fates were tied?

Kiera tossed the thoughts around in her head, guilty at the thought of ditching Evelyn yet offended that Evelyn thought to keep her here without telling her. She'd lost complete control of her life overnight!

She bristled, angry again. What did it matter if she decided to leave and went about doing it her own way? Why was she worried about upsetting her friend when her friend hadn't given her the same consideration?

She felt more guilty about thinking badly about Evelyn. She could not-- would not-- hold Evelyn responsible for everything. If not for Romas, there would be no distant planet, spaceships, or tarantula-like cats!

Her thoughts drifted to the prisoner, the memory of his touch and the strange energy making her blood quicken. There was something about him ... she didn't know what. Another memory crossed her mind, and her face grew warm for a different reason.

Short and fat. As if she needed another reason to want to escape!

"K-K?"

Evelyn's voice preceded her entrance by only a second. Kiera jerked out of her thoughts and twisted on the bed to face her. Evelyn was splendidly dressed in blues and greens, her elegant shape clad in a very earthly, off the shoulder dress.

"You're not ready!"

Her eyes strayed to the closet, as if wondering if Kiera found the boxes. Kiera pretended not to notice and rose.

"I've been sleeping," she said. "You look great!"

"Thanks." Evelyn smiled. "You'll have to go in their clothing since you're not ready yet." She strode to the clothing unit in the corner and ordered her a set.

"Evelyn, I was thinking about the prisoner," Kiera started, debating how to get the information she wanted without alarming Evelyn.

To her surprise, Evelyn stiffened and gave an oh-so-casual, "Oh?"

Kiera felt again that she was missing something but didn't know what. She ignored the instinct and said, "I want to roam around the main house, but I'm really afraid of opening doors to random rooms and finding, you know, hordes of tarantulas that attack me or angry prisoners of war."

"Oh! The cats were moved out of the main house, so you don't have to worry about them. I'm pretty sure the prisoners are kept on the same floor as the warriors. You probably shouldn't go down that way anyway."

"Okay," Kiera said. "Which hall is that in case I start wandering in the morning?"

"It's the first corridor leading out of the main house into what I think is the eastern wing. It's actually where I'm staying with Romas."

"Really? Why don't they have a dungeon or something?"

"I think they believe themselves to be more civilized than that. Up! Change!"

Kiera groaned, dreading the idea of a party with so many strangers who were bound to think of her as the women in the bathroom had earlier.

"It'll be fun!" Evelyn said cheerfully. "All kinds of people to meet, great food."

"I think they already know I don't fit in. I don't expect anyone to talk to me," Kiera muttered as she changed.

"Of course they will! Is your translator working?"

"For now. It fades in and out."

"Tomorrow we'll get you a new one," Evelyn promised. "And I won't leave your side tonight. I want you to have a good time."

"Thanks," Kiera said, doubting her outgoing friend would sit in a corner like she planned on doing. "I'm ready."

"You're adorable, K-K." Evelyn beamed. "I chose a color that brings out your eyes."

"Thanks."

She wore a rich tanzanite blue-purple that was darker than the colors worn by the people of this planet. She sighed, resigned to the fact that she would stick out no matter what she wore. Kiera braced herself and exited behind Evelyn, whose quick step led them back to the main house and outside, where the floating tents were still in place.

She stepped into the crowd with Evelyn, who was soon spirited away by Lishana. Being shorter than everyone else would be a boon this night; she waited until the two were out of sight before fading back toward the house. She passed through the throng without making eye contact for fear of leers or judging looks and reached the entrance foyer. Several people loitered there, and she passed them all with a glance.

First corridor out of the main house.

Kiera almost missed it as she thought of where the cats had been placed. She turned right into the first corridor, urging her courage not to falter just yet. She scoured each side of the hall for signs labeling what doors might lead to what.

One of the doors opened as she passed, and a couple emerged. Kiera's heart jumped, but they ignored her and walked toward the main foyer. She continued faster, and followed the corridor as it curved to the left. The doors lining the halls were unmarked, and she began to suspect her plan would fail fast if she had to open every door in the hallway.

It was as she neared a dead end that she saw the single door with two access pads, the only door with additional security in the wing. She stopped in front of it, adrenaline making her heart quicken. Was she *really* going to free some prisoner in exchange for a trip home?

Faced with the reality of the situation, she paced in front of the door, arguing with herself. Romas's world wasn't *that* bad, and Evelyn might help her get home in due time.

Due time was too far away and too uncertain; she wanted to leave *now!*

She stopped and stared at the door, then began pacing again. She had never been one to take risks such as this. What better place to be a bit more daring in life than on another planet? She was about to walk away in defeat and take her place in a dark corner watching the partygoers when she heard the sounds of approaching footsteps.

Romas. The thought made her panic. On his planet, he'd have no qualms about following through with his threat to lock her in the bathroom if he found out what she was doing.

Her decision made itself. Kiera approached the door in two quick steps, waved her bracelet in front of one then the second access pad, and pushed the door to hurry it. She ducked into the room and whirled to push it closed just as quickly. She pressed her ear to the door. The sound of footsteps grew closer. Just when she was about to dart away from the door and hide behind any piece of furniture she could find, the footsteps stopped. Kiera held her breath. The footsteps started again, this time in retreat.

She rested against the door, jarred when the flash of a grey knife crossed inches before her eyes, followed by a muted *thunk* as the weapon buried itself in the door. After a surprised pause, she waved her bracelet in front of the internal access pad. Before the door could open more than an inch, a large honey-hued hand planted on it and pushed it closed.

She knew before she turned who stood behind her. She *felt* him with an instinct she didn't understand. She sucked in a deep breath and turned to face the music.

The music was every bit as masculine and warrior as she remembered him. He towered before her with one hand planted just above her head. The intensity of his look pinned her to the door behind her.

He felt close, too close. She pushed her heels against the door and gazed up at him, her courage gone in the face of such a man. The odd energy flowing between them held them both in silence for a long moment before he spoke.

"I do no favors for any this night."

"I don't know what that means," she managed.

He stared at her, considering and wary, in a way that made her uncomfortably fevered. For a long moment, she thought her translator had died again. The warrior looked her over from head to toe. Kiera felt her ire rise at the blatant appraisal. Anger awoke her from the odd spell he seemed to cast over her.

"I will consider a favor to you," he recanted.

"I don't want a favor, unless that means you're willing to help me escape," she replied. "I've come to offer you the chance to escape, so long as you take me to a ... to a spaceship."

"You speak of escape?" he asked with a frown.

"Escape for you and for me."

"Escape for you?"

"Yes. I don't want to stay here. I want to go home. I need you to take me to a spaceship so I can arrange to go home," she said with exaggerated slowness to make sure he understood despite her faulty translator.

His gaze turned curious. He dropped his arm and stepped away. Kiera drew a breath as the intensity of his presence left. The massive warrior paced to the window. He looked out for a long moment, pensive, before returning his attention to her.

"You want me to help you leave."

She nodded in response.

"It might onset a war."

"Onset a war?" she repeated. "No, you just have to take me to a ship."

He looked her over once more. She crossed her arms. There was something more than interest in his gaze. If she hadn't thought it impossible for an alleged warrior to feel such a thing, she might have thought him troubled.

"Would you stop that? Where I'm from, that's rude."

He said nothing but let his eyes do as they pleased. She recalled what Evelyn had said about him goading Kisolm.

"It would really upset Kisolm," she added. "If you escaped. You could get back at him for whatever it is you're fighting about."

"No," he said, though his eyes fell to the band around her forearm in consideration.

Surprised, she fell speechless. Even a prisoner on this planet was unwilling to associate with her! Yet another embarrassing event to add to her day's tally! Face flaming, Kiera turned to go. She waved her wrist before the access pad, but once more, the warrior prevented the door from opening. She tensed and waited for him, too, to insult her or boss her around like Romas did before she walked away.

"No, I will not do this to bait Kisolm, as much as I enjoy it," he clarified. "I will help you on three conditions."

"Isn't your freedom enough?" she asked.

"Not for onset of war," he responded, and waved his own wrist in front of the access pad. To her surprise, the door nudged her back. He closed it again. She turned to face him.

"Why would you stay if you don't have to?"

"You are not from here," he observed. "I am honor bound to stay."

He was too close again. She pressed herself against the door, almost wishing Romas *would* discover them. The warrior before her had an intensity that made her breath catch, and the energy between them made her insides tingle. His movements were smooth and controlled, his emotions hidden, his dark, dark eyes alone enough to keep her immobile.

"What are your conditions?" she asked. Her body was doing funny things, like growing warm in places it should not and scattering her thoughts like confetti in a stiff breeze.

"One, your arm band."

She glanced down at it and nodded without a second thought. She hadn't thought to use it as a bribe; if it were gold, it might be worth something. She held up her arm, uncertain how to release it.

"You give it willingly?" he asked.

She searched his gaze and responded with irritation, "If coercion is willing, then yes."

He stared at her with his head cocked, and she judged the words had not translated.

"Yes, I do," she clarified.

He dropped his arm from the door and took her forearm. At his touch, the band loosened enough to slide over her hand. Kiera watched as he slid the band over his right hand to settle it at his wrist before stripping his own band off his left arm. He slid it over her opposite hand, and she looked up at him.

"It's okay. You can keep both," she said, confused. "I won't need it where I'm going."

"Two, a kiss."

"That's ridiculous!" Kiera retorted even as her heart leapt at the prospect.

"You want to leave."

"Yes, but-- "

One moment she was protesting, the next his warm, soft lips covered hers. She froze, surprised by his action as well as the warm shock running through her. He plied her lips gently, testing and encouraging, and she felt herself respond despite her indignation. The kiss grew deep. She yielded to his prodding and parted her lips for him. His tongue slid between them. He licked and nipped her lips, explored her mouth, and pulled her deeper and deeper into a state of compliance. She groaned at tasting him; he was as sweetly spicy as he smelled.

Suddenly, he withdrew. Disoriented, she kept her eyes closed as she savored the kiss. Her breathing was erratic, her pulse flying, her lower belly ablaze with warmth. She leaned against him to steady her balance.

"Do you concur with my three conditions?" the warrior asked in a husky voice.

"Yes," she murmured.

“Good. We go.”

He moved away from her, nearly throwing off her balance. Her eyes snapped open. He was playing with her. Had the thought been able to gather support among her disjointed faculties, she would have walked away from him. The warrior opened the door and strode into the corridor without waiting. Kiera watched him go, startled. She'd expected him to go out the window to avoid detection.

“Do you have a plan for leaving?” she asked, trotting to reach him. The hum of the translator was gone. She tapped it and repeated the question.

“Yes.”

“What is it?”

He said nothing but continued at a quick pace. She tapped her translator again despite the hum and determined he was ignoring her. As he neared the main house, she slowed.

The warrior had no intention of *avoiding* the people he meant to escape. She stopped in the doorway of the main house leading onto the crowded lawn, aghast. She rose on her tiptoes to follow him with her eyes but soon found she didn't need to. The raised tent where she had feasted earlier was still occupied by Romas's immediate family. The moment the prisoner crossed the third step, she saw him.

Disbelief made her look twice to ensure her eyes hadn't gone as crazy as her thoughts. The prisoner went straight to Romas's family, which meant she just made her mess bigger. He would tell Romas of her involvement in the plot to free an enemy and escape, and she would be locked in her bathroom for all of eternity. She felt faint and stepped back into the main house, near tears.

It wasn't fair! Not only had she been dragged to another planet by her best friend, but now she was about to be betrayed by a prisoner she tried to free. She pushed herself away from the doorframe and retreated to her room, only to find the prisoner's bracelet didn't work. She sat with her back to her door, defeated. She was meant to stay here, to marry one of Romas's brothers, and to be miserable the rest of her life. She blinked back tears, emotionally exhausted. Dwelling in her misery, she was surprised when his shadow fell across her.

“We go.” The familiar voice made her frown.

“You've already ruined it!” she exclaimed. She looked up at the prisoner. “You told Romas I was trying to leave, and now he's going to-- ”

“I told him a member of his family freed me. He can do nothing. We go.”

“He knows I helped you?” She rested her head against the door, not understanding.

“He knows a member of his family helped me,” was the response. “He knows not *who*.”

“But they know you're leaving. They won't let you, will they?”

“You freed me,” he repeated. She rose, confused but hopeful once more.

“You'll still help me?”

He responded with a curt nod. She wiped her eyes. He was studying her closely, as if awaiting something.

“I'm ready,” she said uncertainly. “Is something wrong?”

“No.” Still he stared until her face grew warm again. A startled cry drew her attention, and she leaned to see past him.

Evelyn.

She paled. Evelyn stared at the prisoner, then at her, then back. Her gaze settled on Kiera, a wounded look of betrayal there. Kiera was about to grovel to her friend and apologize when the prisoner snatched her, wrapped a thick arm around her neck, and dragged her against his body. Surprised, she froze when she felt the knife against her cheek.

“Do not call out for your man, woman,” the prisoner growled at Evelyn.

Evelyn's eyes widened, and she looked at Kiera again, this time in anger and concern. Kiera squirmed. The prisoner gripped her more tightly, and she stilled.

Evelyn took two steps back and let loose a bellowing, "ROMAS!" She turned and ran down the hall.

"What are you doing?" Kiera asked, and tried to pull away.

"Quiet, woman, if you want to leave."

"As long as you hold to your end of the bargain," she hissed.

"And you."

"I will."

He released her and snatched her arm, starting down the hall. They made it several doors before three of Romas's clan charged around the corner of a nearby intersection. The prisoner tucked her behind him with one hand and met the first attacker's blow, blocked it, and flung him down the hall.

Astonished, she watched the rapid battle. She'd never seen men that big move so quickly, even when watching professional wrestling. The prisoner disabled without killing and without using his knife, which was tucked in his boot. His punch had the impact of a bag of bricks, his kick of a sledgehammer. The giants battled, and she couldn't help feeling awed by the prisoner's abilities as he met the blows of all three foes and remained standing. He dispatched the last challenger and strode toward her, eyes roving for more opponents. Unsettled by the display of power, she started to skirt away. He snagged her arm and pulled her down the hall.

They broke free of the house into the dark night on a side of the house far from the light and merriment of the party. The prisoner ducked down just outside the doorway, dragging her with him. She caught herself with her hands before she did a face-plant on the ground and tried to catch her breath. The prisoner squatted below a window and appeared to be listening for signs of pursuit. She rested on her knees, looking around.

The night was clear and cool, the sky a beautiful pageant of dark blue silk and brilliant stars, of streaking meteors and two glowing orbs. Her attention was caught on the falling stars of the meteor shower. She'd never seen one on earth. Imagine coming so far to see something she might've seen there!

A bug crawled across her leg, and she swiped it away. It persisted, and she looked down, jumping to see one of several curious cats nudging her leg. She leapt up, knocking the prisoner off balance in her haste to escape.

"Omigod those things are-- "

The prisoner righted himself, then grabbed her and dragged her down to her knees once more. He wrapped a thick arm around her and pulled her against him until her back was pressed against his chest. She squirmed, unwilling to be defenseless with the tarantulas so close and uneasy with the warm energy flowing again between them.

"Woman," the prisoner growled.

Her movement upset his balance again, and he shifted twice before finally allowing his knees to drop beside hers. His chin rested at her temple. He nudged her head aside, out of his view. Forced to be still, she glanced down. His thighs rested against hers and extended well beyond hers. They were twice as thick. She looked truly tiny compared to him.

His body was warm against hers, his breathing and heartbeat deep and slow. His thick arms were around her, his muscular chest at her back. He was calm and quiet, waiting.

It had been a very, very long time since any man had held her. His incredible strength, heat, and scent calmed her fear as much as they excited the woman within her. On her walks at Lover's Lane near Evelyn's row house, she'd often seen couples entranced by the rhythmic movement of waves stand at a railing, the man's arms wrapped around the woman in front of him, his chin on her head. They had looked so peaceful, so comfortable, and she never understood the appeal until this moment.

She forgot about the tarantula-cats and watched the meteor shower again, protected from the chill of evening by his body heat and the odd energy running between them. The moment

dragged out for quite a few minutes, and still no one gave chase. His grip loosened, but she made no attempt to move. They waited a short time longer before the prisoner shifted to rise.

Kiera roused herself, climbed to her feet, and stretched before the prisoner snagged her arm once more and began the quick pace again. Irritated at the sudden break of warmth and intimacy, she sighed as she trotted to keep up.

They didn't go far, and she was surprised to see the grassy slopes end at an abrupt cliff. The dual moons seemed to hover somewhere in the middle of the air of a massive chasm, just like the dozen or so hulking spaceships, whose dark grey skins reflected like skins of massive grey whales in the moonlight. Many were distant enough to be the size of her fist, while those closer were the size of football stadiums.

She neared the edge and started to panic again. How did she hire a ship?

Her ill-planned idea was unraveling again, this time at a much more alarming pace. How did she find the one to take her home without telling Romas? There *must* be a way! She blinked and turned, remembering the prisoner. He stood a short distance from her, watching her intently.

"Thank you," she told him uncertainly. "You've fulfilled your end of the bargain. I've reached the ships."

If a warrior could be amused, he was. The emotion was fleeting, more in a subtle shift of his eyebrows than in a smile or sudden change. He waited.

"You can go," she said.

A small, round object twice the size of a dinner plate appeared from the chasm and skimmed over several feet of grass to reach them. She stepped back. It settled into the grass near the prisoner's feet. He motioned her to it.

She shook her head, not understanding what it was. The prisoner took her arm and pulled her forward.

"Noooo," she said, and tugged away. "Our bargain is over. You're free. I'm going my own way; you go yours."

He looked at her hard, then slung her over his shoulder in one smooth movement. She was about to object when the disc beneath his feet levitated and launched them into the air. Kiera grabbed the prisoner's tunic, staring in horror as the ground dropped from beneath them. She squeezed her eyes closed, praying.

They hovered through the air, at last reaching one of the ships, where a doorway yawned open to reveal the damp yellow light and grey corridors beyond. The prisoner stepped into it, the disc soaring away once more. She sucked in deep breaths, on the verge of hysterics after the freaky trip from cliff to spaceship. Her head spun from the journey.

When he did not immediately set her down, she began to wiggle. The prisoner's arm was locked around her. He paid no attention and continued to stride down the corridor.

He was kidnapping her, taking her far away to a place Evelyn would never find her. She'd never see home or Evelyn or earth again! Even *Romas*! She would gladly put up with the man if he rescued her!

Where would the prisoner take her? He could be from some other planet, one far enough away that Romas would never find her!

A door opened, and the prisoner entered, setting her down. Her head spun as her blood dropped from her head to her body, and she sat heavily.

"Wait!" she shouted at him as his blurry form moved away. "Where are you taking me? We had a deal!"

He ignored her. The door closed behind him. Kiera made out a bed beneath her and gripped her head with a grimace. She was a fool, the greatest of them all!

With a groan, she dropped back onto the bed, her head pounding. She was doomed. He would take her to a planet with larger tarantula-cats, where she would be trapped in some room

like this for the rest of her miserable life! All because she was too stubborn to ask Evelyn to leave. No ... all because Evelyn fell in love with an alien ... no, all because Romas was an alien!

* * *

A'Ran, *dhjan* of Anshan, strode from the room in which he'd left her into the secondary control deck, a small room lit up with scenes of space, the planet, their destination, and the internal corridors of the craft. Ne'Rin stood staring at one screen with interest. Wondering how much he should say, A'Ran's gaze went to another screen first, the one listing the details of their unsuccessful peace mission. He'd known it would fail, but the elders of the Planetary Council had called in their last favor. He was relieved it was over with in so short a time; he had more battles to plan and more potential allies to recruit, now that the Council was done with its stranglehold on him. He owed them nothing after his mission, which cleared a path for him to do what he must to regain his throne. He'd contact Jetr when they were clear of Qatwal to let him know everything had gone as he predicted.

Except he hadn't planned on stoking the fire with Kisolm for what would certainly end in another war. He never did anything without planning it carefully ahead of time, and he'd never broken his honor code, even with Qatwalis.

"What is this?" Ne'Rin asked.

His gaze slid to the screen Ne'Rin faced. The woman-- his woman-- was curled on her bed, her back to him.

This wasn't planned, and her appearance was almost too late. His people were decimated, his planet virtually dead. But she was here, and she was his.

His gaze lingered on her, satisfied after years of rejecting lifemates chosen by his advisors and the Council, and even Ne'Rin's sister. He'd spent ten sun-cycles looking for her. For fifteen sun-cycles, Anshan women had borne no male children, and drought and dwindling supplies of the ore that made his *dhjan* wealthy and respected had driven his planet into abject poverty. Now he had the key: his lifemate.

He knew her on sight, felt the connection pierce his tanned hide and rattle his bones. It was as his father had told him, as if the suns burned a hole straight through his head and the ground beneath him shook. While he never believed he'd overlooked her among the throngs of women he'd met, he had heard even his sisters speak of the missing lifemate and how he had refused every woman on the planet and perhaps somehow overlooked her. Now he knew he was right.

A potential war with Qatwal wasn't planned, but he'd seal the fate of his people if he walked away from her. She was worth his honor and his life.

His lifemate was tiny, standing a full head shorter than the average woman and a head and shoulders shorter than him. She was delicate, with long hair as dark as the night sky and large eyes that turned from blue to green to grey. Her shape was firm but lush and had fit in his arms with her shoulders settling between his when he'd held her outside of the house.

She reminded him of the little dolls his youngest sister had rejected several sun-cycles before. Her skin was golden from the sun, which brought out the enigmatic eyes, and made them glow with the otherworldly beauty displayed by her and the one called Evelyn.

Ne'Rin turned to him, and he realized he hadn't answered his advisor's question.

"That is *nishani*."

"I thought so," Ne'Rin said. "She's different, exquisite. She can't be from our worlds."

A'Ran gazed at her, assessing the battle before him. His blatant disregard for the laws regarding his imprisonment and assumed kidnapping of a *dhjan* guest would see him ordered before the Council, if not hurl him into a war he could ill afford. But he'd won her as Kisolm's younger brother, Romas, had decreed, which *should* alleviate any accusations brought on by their clan, if Kisolm's father talked some sense into the arrogant crown prince.

She agreed to give up her armband, the bond to her sister's family. Romas had made no other conditions, for there were none to be made. Once she gave up her bond and accepted

another, she belonged to him. It was no longer kidnapping. Whether or not she wished to accompany him was not his concern. The connection alone might prevent a full-scale war. The two *dhjan* were now bound.

And yet he knew war was not so simple between two clans with a history of blood feud as theirs had. He wouldn't await word from the Council but would warn his counselors and advisors to avoid Kisolm's planet.

The second battle he would leave to his sisters: teaching his lifemate how to behave according to *dhjan* standards. He hadn't met a woman quite as rough around the edges as his was. Even his youngest sister was composed and respectful of her place and a warrior's needs and expectations. His lifemate's expressive eyes prevented her from appearing composed; she had looked either frightened or confused during their short interaction.

From what he'd gleaned from Kisolm and others during his imprisonment, she was new to the planet and their customs. He didn't doubt that once she reached her new home and his sisters reminded her how to act, she would be both exquisite and tame. Perhaps the brief stay on the craft would help her adjust. She'd need more help when she realized the rightful *dhjan* of Anshan and his family were in near-poverty and living in exile. She'd not mated as highly as she might have if she remained with Evelyn and mated with Kisolm, the next ruler of Qatwal. Having been raised as rivals in all areas, A'Ran took a very unwarrior-like satisfaction out of having bested Kisolm finally.

"How do the battle plans come?" he asked without removing his eyes from his lifemate.

"Not well."

He expected the news and turned away from the wall displaying his woman to the wall displaying his battle plans. Ne'Rin didn't have the mind for battle planning, another reason A'Ran hesitated to assume the worst about him. Ne'Rin was the kind of man who took orders, not the kind of man who valued strategy. Someone else would have to do the thinking for him if he were to execute any kind of betrayal.

A'Ran studied Ne'Rin, aware he had more than the potential war with Qatwal to contend with.

CHAPTER FOUR

A'Ran watched her off and on during the several days she spent alone. She was very unlike the women of his society. Where Anshan-- and even Qatwal-- women would wait for their men to direct them, his woman had disassembled everything in the room she could. The access pad was useless, the clothing unit jammed, the communication monitor too covered with handprints from her searching to work right. Her translator had been lost during restless sleep then crushed in her pacing, and the cell was littered with several dozen pieces of colorful clothing.

It took him a full day to realize she didn't know how to exit her room, that her intent at disassembling the access pad had been to make it work for her. The Anshan ships didn't work like the Qatwali ships did; her access needed to be programmed into the computer, but she'd broken the pad before Ne'Rin could do it. Once she disabled her translator, he couldn't communicate with her. Her tampering successfully sealed her in the room.

Which would've been fine, for an Anshan woman, but appeared to be nothing short of torture to her. She was impatient, anxious, emotional ... nothing like the women he knew, which both interested him and warned him. He waited two more days to see if she would settle. She grew worse. It might take all three sisters to rein her in, if even their hands were firm enough.

He liked watching her despite her odd actions. The craft's computer assured him her health was good; she was just distressed. He'd left her door broken and postponed leaving the ship

until she calmed. But as the days continued, he realized that wouldn't happen. On the third day, he decided to land.

A'Ran sent for his sisters to meet them outside the small dwelling they had taken refuge in several years ago. When Ne'Rin signaled all was ready, he strode from the deck into the corridor and straight to her cell. The door jammed at his first attempt to open it. He waited for Ne'Rin to fix it and tried again.

It opened, and the exotic woman within turned to him, surprise on her face. He beckoned her forward and stepped back for her to move into the hall. His woman hurried forward to the hall but stopped in front of him, her intelligent eyes flashing with anger. Without a word, she slapped him.

Women never slapped warriors. In fact, *no one* slapped a warrior full grown, not even his father.

A'Ran stared at her hard, surprised. He conveyed his displeasure with his body rather than his voice. He tensed and straightened, then backed her into the wall. She didn't back down, a trait he was not certain he liked for his woman. She gazed up at him with angry eyes, and he stepped forward until her lush little body was pinned by his to the wall. He felt her racing heart and heard her breathing become uneven. His eyes scoured her face, lingered on the plump lips he had tasted, and glanced lower at the healthy bosom pressed to his chest.

Suns, but she was *perfect*.

Her face deepened to crimson, and her dilating eyes dropped to his lips before flying up again. She tore her gaze away and twisted her head, yielding yet defying him as well. She was tense and waiting while his eyes took in every detail of her face. She smelled of woman, a husky, sweet, faint scent.

He stepped away. She understood him and obviously felt the same energy he did when they touched. It was enough to satisfy him. Warriors were known for their patience and control, but he sensed this woman would test both. He nodded his head to the side in a silent order for her to proceed. She marched away from him. If he channeled that fire, he might find he liked her defiant passion.

A'Ran trailed several steps, watching the way her hips sashayed as she walked. Her walk was unguarded like her mannerisms, a sweet lack of refinement he wasn't sure he liked. Her pace slowed as she caught sight of Ne'Rin. He nodded to his advisor, who waved his wrist before the access pad.

The door cracked open, and his woman shielded her eyes against the sudden sunlight. It was midday. The brilliant suns were overhead, their heat heavy in the still day. He moved around her and stepped onto thick green grasses.

Two of his sisters were waiting, composed and serene in their dark clothing with hands clasped in front of them. The third, the youngest, hurried toward the door, translator in hand as he had ordered.

Both older sisters nodded in deference as he approached, and he glanced over them to assure himself of their health. There was a time before they were exiled where he would've been ashamed to see them in such plain clothing. He'd long since accepted that their health was far more important than where they lived or what they wore. The heavy, masculine features that made him fierce had rendered his sisters too heavy of face to be pretty. They were all unmated despite their *dhjan* blood. The eldest, D'Ryn, bowed and greeted him.

"May the sun shine long on you, brother."

"D'Ryn, Gage," he said in response. "You look well."

A commotion sounded behind him, and he turned. *Nishani* took the hands of his youngest sister, Talal, and began to speak, animated compared to the serene women of his world. For a long moment, he watched. She was meant to be his, this he didn't doubt, though he couldn't stop the trickle of unease that warned him she may not be able to adjust to their world as easily as he wished.

Her tones rose and fell, her hands and arms animated. She appeared to be telling a story, and not a very good one based on the angry shade to her features. His sister appeared calm but glanced at him several times. Something his woman said took her interest; her gaze grew sharper, and she moved closer to *nishani*. Curious, A'Ran neared, hanging back as his other two sisters approached.

His woman was speaking too quickly for the translator to keep up. Her varying tones would have thrown it off as well; it was programmed to the monotonous speech pattern of Anshan. He crossed his arms. *Nishani* fell silent and unsure at their approach, but was prodded by something soft his youngest sister said that threw her into another animated story.

Ne'Rin approached, his eye caught by Gage, who gave a bow of her head but whose face turned pink. A'Ran had long suspected the two favored each other, but neither had addressed him about it.

"You will hold a battle committee despite your mating?" Ne'Rin asked, joining him. A'Ran, assuming his sisters could handle the newest member of their family, turned and started toward the white dwelling before him.

"Yes. We must warn our battle commanders about the possibility of war with Qatwal. I will announce my lifemate at the committee. I believe the Council will be visiting us as well once they receive word of what I have done."

Ne'Rin nodded. A'Ran took in the home he had left several moon cycles before. It was nowhere near as large as their true home but was comfortable and well-maintained, an adequate place for him, his sisters, and now his lifemate. The women would remain until the war was over and he could take them to their rightful home.

That day was near. Now that he was no longer in the slavery of the Council, he would take the last few steps needed to rebuild his alliances and bring his might to full force. With his lifemate discovered, he had everything he needed to reclaim his throne.

"Brother!" The startled cry made him turn. His three sisters knelt over his lifemate's still form. He trotted to them, trailed by Ne'Rin.

"What happened?"

"Brother, she does not understand ..." Gage appeared confused. She drifted off, reddening. He knelt and brushed his woman's hair from her face. She was pale but breathing steadily, her enigmatic eyes closed.

"What was said?" he asked as he scooped her into his arms.

"A'Ran, she believes herself to be your prisoner," D'Ryn said. "She doesn't understand you are mated. When I explained, she became unwell."

"She speaks the truth," he replied as he strode into the house.

"You are not mated?"

"I am," he said.

"She doesn't know."

"No." He heard the troubled note in D'Ryn's voice but ignored it. Instead he strode through the bright hallways into the women's wing and into the first room. His sisters followed, D'Ryn relaying the information to her sisters. He set his lifemate on the bed and sat on the edge of the bed.

"Gage, water," he ordered.

"She's so little," Talal murmured.

"Brother, she is your intended? You felt the signs, as father said?" D'Ryn asked again. There was anxiety in her quiet voice.

"Yes," he said. D'Ryn sighed, and Talal whispered to the eldest sister. It was news they-- and the rest of his people!-- had been awaiting for many sun-cycles. He was relieved to give it at last.

"Where does she come from?" Talal asked. His youngest sister paused beside him, leaning against his thigh while she studied his lifemate with brown eyes a shade lighter than his.

"Far away, outside the Five Galaxies," he said.

"What is she called?" D'Ryn asked.

"Kiera," Talal responded. "Like one of Anshan's moons. It was a sign, brother."

Kiera. He hadn't asked or cared. He knew what she was, and he was content to call her *nishani*, the title given to a warrior's lifemate. Her eyelids began to flutter.

"Leave us," he directed his sisters.

They obeyed. His woman awoke but was instantly stricken with a look of bewilderment. She sat up. They gazed at each other, and he felt a familiar tremor. At last, she reached for his arm. He let her take it and saw her attention shift to the bracelet.

"You can take it back," she said, at once frustrated when the bracelet gave no sign of loosening. She held out her arm instead. "I didn't understand what it meant."

"You agreed," he reminded her.

"I did no such thing!"

"We made an agreement based on three conditions," he said.

"The first was this, which I didn't understand, the second ... you remember the second, and the third ..." She trailed off, pensive. "You didn't name a third."

"The third was for you to agree to be my lifemate."

"I don't remember that!" she exclaimed.

"You never asked for the third condition."

Realization crossed her features and with it another flash of anger.

"This won't hold up in--" Her last word didn't translate.

"*Nishani*, welcome to your new home," he said, and rose. "My sisters will instruct you in the behavior I expect of you."

And he left her sitting on the bed, aware of how much more work his lifemate would create for him.

* * *

The behavior I expect of you.

Refreshed the next morning, she still couldn't fathom the statement. Rather, she couldn't fathom how something so medieval could have been directed at *her*.

The behavior I expect of you.

It bounced around her head, first in disbelief, then in shock, and finally, in anger. As for the remainder of their conversation ...

It was unreal. It made no sense. Yes, he had named three conditions, and yes, she remembered agreeing after that fantastic kiss. But damned if she didn't recall the third condition. Had she been that smitten or so desperate to leave?

Other thoughts were skittering through her brain, those that reminded her she was no longer on her own territory and he hadn't told her something she hadn't heard before. Their last conversation sounded eerily like something Evelyn had tried to tell her.

You're a guest of Romas right now, but if he decides to put you on the market, so to speak, pretty much anyone can ... um ... claim you as a ... you know, a bride.

What else had Evelyn neglected to tell her? The idea of being stuck on some strange planet made her want to panic and run screaming for the first spaceship she found. She tried to push the thought away and distract herself by wandering the mansion. It wasn't anywhere near the size of Romas's, and the dwelling showed signs of wear and use. It was well-kept, if aging.

She wandered until she found an exit and stepped into a beautiful midmorning. A set of boy-warriors were practicing with grey swords in the grassy courtyard. They couldn't have been past thirteen but rivaled her in height. They appeared to be playing rather than training; there were five, two standing and mock battling while the three younger ones watched and cheered.

It was unfortunate the cheerful youths would turn into unsmiling, frozen warriors one day. She drew as near as she dared without disturbing them. They battled with great vigor and

exaggeration to the cheering of the three younger boys until one turned and noticed her. All five rose and straightened, offering her deep bows. They straightened again and stared at her. She stared back.

“Are you enjoying the day?” she asked awkwardly.

“Yes, *nishani*,” the eldest replied. The word did not translate at all.

“You don’t have to stop,” she said. “You were doing well.” The boy seemed unsure how to respond and gazed at her, as did the others. “Or you can teach me a few things.” His eyes widened, and the two smallest boys looked at each other.

“No, *nishani*,” the eldest almost whispered.

“Why not?” she asked.

“*Nishani*, women do not fight,” he answered. Three of the boys nodded vigorously in agreement.

“On my planet, women do fight,” she said. There was no contradiction offered. If anything, she thought she was distressing the eldest boy.

“Please show me. You were doing so well,” she said.

The boy blushed, appeared conflicted, and at last gave a stiff nod. The youngest skittered away in excitement, crowding each other and whispering a short distance away. The opponent of the eldest hesitated before handing her the weapon. It was light, a curved grey sword made of the same material as the beds and spaceships. Kiera hefted it and relaxed, cheered to be doing something other than thinking or pacing.

The youth showed her how to stand and hold the weapon while the eldest watched with a sharp eye. When set, the eldest demonstrated a simple strike and block, then corrected her form as she followed his example. After several attempts, the two older boys were satisfied and moved onto another strike and then another block.

She concentrated hard, intent on distracting herself as well as learning something new. She needed a workout; maybe she could learn to use a sword instead of kickboxing, which she’d been doing regularly for years. She stayed until she broke a healthy sweat. When the midmorning sun grew too hot, she lowered her weapon and handed it to the boy beside her.

“Thank you. You all are really good,” she said. The boys all bowed and watched her walk back into the house, curious and excited. The exercise helped clear her head. She set about wandering the halls once more, pausing to look out of large windows onto expanses of grass.

“*Nishani!*” a female voice cried.

She turned. It was the first girl she met, the tall woman with a long face named Talal. Talal strode toward her, and Kiera waited.

“*Nishani*, we have-- ”

“My name is Kiera,” she corrected.

“Yes, *nishani*. Kiera, we have-- ”

“Is there anywhere to get some water around here?”

“Yes, *nishani*.” Talal motioned to a nearby door. Kiera waved her armband. A door to someone’s private quarters slid open. She hesitated, but Talal entered and reappeared several moments later with a small bowl of water.

“We’ve searched for you throughout the house,” she said as Kiera drank.

“I was out back,” Kiera responded. At the blank look, she assumed the translator didn’t pick up her slang and rephrased. “I was practicing swords with the boys in the yard.”

“Practicing swords? *Nishani*, here women are forbidden to fight,” Talal said with a shake of her head.

“I needed something to do,” Kiera replied. “And where I’m from, women *do* fight.”

“There are many things to do,” Talal said with a nervous giggle. “My sisters and I are to show you your new home.”

“And teach me how to behave?”

"Yes, *nishani*," Talal said. "My brother says your home is very different, that we need to teach you everything."

"Does he?" Kiera felt her cheeks grow red. "Your brother is ..."

Talal appeared apprehensive, and Kiera curbed her tongue.

"Maybe I will teach you how women behave where I'm from," Kiera said, and fell into step beside her.

"My brother doesn't believe your influence would complement us," Talal said.

"Maybe I ought to have a word with your brother," she grumbled, surprised the man could insult her without being present.

"It would not be wise. He wasn't pleased with you for missing his farewell this morn. Maybe when he returns, your behavior will please him."

Kiera didn't know where to start. There was too much wrong with the woman's words, but she dumped her confusion and wounded feelings to ask, "Where has he gone?"

"To the Council and to the Anshan battle commanders."

"Battle commanders?"

"How far is your home?" she asked, giving her a long look.

"Very, very far," Kiera responded.

"I will take you to Ne'Rin first. He may choose what to tell you about the war."

"Thank you."

At that moment, it was the only safe thing for her to say. The woman beside her was far too subservient for her comfort; if their brother expected her behavior to conform, he was in for a surprise. Maybe when he realized that, he'd send her home. The chipper thought was fleeting. There was something about the warrior that warned her he didn't lose his battles.

Talal paused in an open doorway leading to a large, green field behind the dwelling occupied by hundreds, perhaps thousands, of warriors organized into sparring groups of four and five. Talal's gaze sought out Ne'Rin before she stepped out of the house. Kiera trailed. Lines had been drawn on the grass, large squares like those used for wrestling, with a circle in the center. Two men populated each circle, sparring with each other, while the other two or three watched. The battles were silent, the swords clashing without the clang of steel she expected to hear. At her entrance, those in the nearest circle with Ne'Rin ceased their activity and bowed, then stood in a line and waited.

She tried hard not to stare at the men. They were magnificent, wearing nothing but snug, dark pants. Their upper bodies were tanned from exposure to the sun, their dark hair and eyes pinned on her. It was not the polite, curious glances of Romas's people but direct looks that made her skin crawl with awareness.

Talal appeared oblivious and approached Ne'Rin, whose body glowed with sweat. He'd been fighting, but tucked the sword behind his body, as if to protect Talal from it. She spoke to him for several moments before his eyes rose and lingered on Kiera. A brisk nod, and Talal stepped away, waiting. Ne'Rin returned his sword to a rack containing half a dozen similar swords in plain grey and approached Kiera.

Talal followed. Kiera stood aside, not as much out of deference but out of sudden realization that if she didn't, the man was likely to run her over. She didn't know why, but Ne'Rin hadn't seemed to like her. A'Ran's behavior was just as distant, but there was something bordering on resentment in the way Ne'Rin looked at her that made her uncomfortable.

They walked a short distance to an open atrium in the center of the house, complete with a small oasis rising up from white stone and curved benches. Trickling water circled the oasis, its source a small spring in the center. Talal handed a translator to Ne'Rin, who accepted it and motioned for them to sit. Kiera sat beside Talal.

"*Nishani*, your lifemate was called away suddenly. Talal says you have no knowledge of our war."

She nodded.

"We have been in war for fifteen sun-cycles, since the death of the previous *dhjan* of Anshan. He was overthrown and killed when A'Ran was off-planet. On his death, one of his advisors, who betrayed him and allied with the Yirkin invaders, seized the title of *dhjan*. He struck when *dhjan* A'Ran was away at battle along with most of the Anshan men, thus leaving the throne of Anshan unguarded. *Dhjan* A'Ran's family was forced to flee with his few trusted advisors. We have hidden on this moon in an unoccupied galaxy since."

"How is *dhjan* A'Ran going to retake his throne?" she asked, surprised at the information.

"Until now, the Council has obstructed his efforts, but that is no longer true. He has gone to them with word of his breaking allegiance to pursue his title without their mediation or interference."

It then dawned that the tale's hero was one of the men she was angry at: the man who claimed to be her *lifemate*.

"So ..." She trailed off, not sure where to start. Images from their first touch replayed themselves in her thoughts.

"Our people have suffered for fifteen sun-cycles," Talal added. "The mines have gone empty, and the women barren since the rightful *dhjan* bloodline has been cast from the land."

"You're cursed," Kiera said with a frown, thoughts on the dead planet from her vision.

"Is it not so in your home? A *dhjan* is bound to his planet. Should his blood and those who carry it be exiled, the planet dies."

"My world is nothing like that," she assured them. "How long do wars last here?"

"As long as they must, *nishani*," Ne'Rin said almost gently. She eyed him, not sure his patronizing tone wasn't meant to rile her. She took the high road and ignored him.

"The men here are training for battle?" she asked.

"When *dhjan* A'Ran calls for battles, we leave the moon and go to Anshan, where we have a small base."

"Does *dhjan* A'Ran fight?"

"My brother is the best warrior," Talal said proudly.

"*Dhjan* A'Ran endangers himself," Ne'Rin countered. He looked at the younger woman hard, and Talal apologized quietly. Uncomfortable, Kiera cleared her throat.

"Maybe you can convince him not to fight, and then convince him he's made a poor choice of a mate," she said. "Or maybe I can learn to fight and go with him, if there's no time limit to the war."

Talal gasped, and Ne'Rin studied her. When neither responded, she returned to a safe subject.

"What does Anshan mine?"

Ne'Rin's response was garbled.

"That didn't translate," she said, pointing to her translator.

"This material." Ne'Rin pulled a dark grey knife from his boot. "It is rare and native to Anshan. Every ship and weapon in the Five Galaxies is made from it."

"Wow. We just stay here until the war is over?" she asked.

A brisk nod.

"Do you have sketch pads here? Or pens?"

Both gave her blank looks, and she sighed, wondering how she'd be an artist in a world without even pencils.

"Do women have a part in the war effort?" she asked.

"To honor their men," Ne'Rin replied.

"That's what I thought."

"We had hoped Ne'Rin's sister would be made *nishani*," Talal said. "But my brother did not choose her."

“He did not feel the signs,” Ne’Rin said with another sharp look. Kiera sensed his anger on the topic and said nothing. “When the suns fall into night, I’ll speak to *dhjan* A’Ran over the communicator. You may come.”

She hesitated. She had nothing to say to the man, unless it was to condemn him for kidnapping her, wedding her against her will, and dropping her like a sack of potatoes for his sisters to retrain.

“No, thank you,” she decided.

“We expect visitors to arrive soon. As the *nishani*, your duty is to welcome them on behalf of the *dhjan*,” Ne’Rin said with a glance at Talal. “However, I do not feel you are prepared for such a duty. You may accompany me, without your translator, so you do not embarrass the *dhjan* by speaking.”

Offended once again, she said nothing as he rose and returned the translator to Talal. He walked down the hall from whence they’d come.

“He’s angry about his sister,” Talal said. “He feels it was an affront to him because the betrayer who murdered our father came from his family. He is condemned by many people and hoped his sister would restore his family’s honor.”

“He seems like a dangerous man,” Kiera murmured.

“He is, but he’s loyal. Just very angry.”

“I think I need to rest,” Kiera said, beginning to like A’Ran’s trusted commander even less. “Can you take me back to my room?”

“*Nishani*, you have duties you must learn before my brother returns,” Talal said timidly.

“Does he beat women?”

“No, *nishani*.”

“Then take me to my room.”

Talal obeyed. Kiera was hungry and overwhelmed once again. All she wanted was the coziness of her studio, where she could block out everything and paint. Her room on this planet contained none of her comforts. She didn’t stay long in the boring room. Her mind was too busy, and she felt as if she hovered on the verge of a mental breakdown. Instead, she forced herself to leave and find something to do.

After exploring the halls and grounds for an hour or two, she returned to the main atrium, where she heard one of the sisters call her name.

“*Nishani*.”

She turned to face Talal.

“*Nishani*, if you are rested, we must start your behavior training.”

Kiera frowned and rose, walking away.

“*Nishani*, please! My brother requests it!”

“No!” she said over her shoulder. “That’s so ridiculous! I’m not going to anything of the sort, and if you think you’ll make me ...” She stopped, unable to help the tears welling in her eyes. Talal gasped, as if she’d never seen anyone cry, and took a step back.

“Forgive me, *nishani*. Another day,” Talal said. “Are you well?”

“Fine. But I’m not going to training,” Kiera answered. Talal gave one of her small bows and stayed where she was as Kiera walked away again.

The scene would repeat itself several days in a row, whenever one of the sisters tracked her down. They were quick to backtrack when they saw she was upset, but their persistence annoyed her. She could think of only one thing that would turn her into one of the cookie-cutter women of this world, and she refused to be brainwashed. Kiera liked her mind the way it was, liked roaming through the hallways and spending the mornings in training with the little boys out back.

It was toward the end of her first week in the sprawling mansion that was her new home that she wandered down a hall previously unexplored. She opened the only door in the dead-end hallway with a wave of her armband.

The conference room behind it was large and open, its ceiling cathedral and one wall twice the height of the others. Unlike the cheerful white walls of the house, the tall wall was the unwelcome shade of dark grey that she'd begun to despise after days in the spaceships surrounded by it. There were rows of grey chairs and several white benches in the rear, a handful of tables next to yawning windows, and a wall of what looked like constellation maps.

From the layout, she expected it was A'Ran's conference room for meeting with his advisors. She wandered through the room, trailing her fingers across the tables. A round table in the center had an access pad attached to the top, so she passed her armband over it.

To her surprise, what appeared to be a video game popped into 3D life in the center of the table. It reminded her of one of her favorite space empire-building games, *Homeworld*. The table top lit up with a blank grey screen and four dozen multi-hued buttons, with geometric symbols she assumed was writing. The video game showed two holograms at once, a space battle and a land battle.

Excited to see that even this world had video games, she sat in the chair behind the buttons and screen, studying all three in an attempt to figure out how the game worked. The tiny specs indicating crafts or personnel in the 3D image moved and changed; the image itself spun slowly, as if to present her with all sides of the battle at once.

Until that moment, she hadn't realized how much she missed passing away her nights playing her games! She sat and began playing with the buttons to see how they affected the holograms. As the afternoon wore on, she puzzled through what buttons controlled what, which were oriented toward the space battle and which toward the ground. The displays on the table ran through dozens of scenarios based on what she told it, most of them disastrous as she learned what the buttons did. The game consisted almost entirely of strategy, and it was dark outside before she realized how long she'd been at it.

Mentally exhausted from the intricate game, she rose to return to her room for bed. The next morning, she went to the game room after her sparring session and sat the entire day, learning more and more about the game and experimenting with how the symbols on the keyboard interacted with the images before her. Certain symbols pulled up certain features of the ships or angles of battle, similar to how picture-symbols in her video games on earth brought up different functions, allowing her to maneuver characters in the game or review the armament and skills of her opponents. The game room was the only place the sisters didn't bug her, and for the first time since being kidnapped by Evelyn and A'Ran, she found herself having fun.

She spent the next day in the game room, and the next. Two days turned into a week. Ne'Rin only came for her once during the third day, to bring her to stand by him while he received visitors. He removed her translator from her ear as promised after a stern warning about not speaking to anyone.

She liked him even less after that occurrence and chose to hide in the conference room every day after that, unwilling to deal with him again.

CHAPTER FIVE

"You endanger yourself, *dhjan* A'Ran."

A'Ran tested his injured shoulder. It would heal once he reached the main craft with the help of the medical unit but was useless in the meantime.

"A leader is a warrior first," he replied. "We have taken the land advantage, which is all that matters."

He stood in the confined main deck of the transport craft after his own craft had been disabled in an ambush. He preferred land wars to the space wars and had been returning to the main craft when the ambush occurred. He sat in the only seat in the tiny craft, studying Ne'Rin,

who transmitted from A'Ran's battle command center on the moon that was his interim home. He'd chosen to leave Ne'Rin on the moon this trip. If what Jetr suspected were true, Ne'Rin would do less damage if he didn't know what A'Ran did while away.

"The Council contacted me," A'Ran said.

"They weren't pleased with your message about Qatwal," Ne'Rin assessed.

"They have no means to control me, which makes them less lazy than they have been for a millennium."

"How have they decided to react to your freedom?"

"How do you think? By threatening me, by condemning me, and finally, by seeking a discreet audience with me." A'Ran let a rare, mirthless smile cross his features.

"Their support can be won," Ne'Rin said in satisfaction.

"We will meet them soon at our temporary home. I have warned them I no longer play their games."

"They may find a way to temper Anshan's defiance."

"For their support against our enemy? I will owe them my life," A'Ran said.

"We may not need the Council's support if you maintain as you have," Ne'Rin replied. "They need our ore more than we need them. We can risk their anger. Do you need me to write any new battle plans?"

A'Ran was silent, studying Ne'Rin. For over a week, he'd hoped his instincts to be wrong. He'd hoped Ne'Rin to be the one sending him daily updates to the battle strategies and plans. His trusted advisor had never done so before, but A'Ran hadn't thought any member of his household capable of the complexities of battle planning. In the past three days, he hadn't made a single change before releasing the plans to his battle commanders.

Somehow, he had known the plans weren't Ne'Rin's. They were too ... different, too unlike the tactics and war planning taught by Anshan or anyone in the Five Galaxies. Over a period of a week, the tactics had gone from infantile to novice to advanced, as if someone were learning the intricacies of battle planning. Some plans he couldn't use for lack of manpower, timing constraints, or other battle-related reasons, but some were brilliant. Given his experience and lauding as one of the most capable strategic battle planners in the Five Galaxies-- the only reason he hadn't been driven out by the Yirkin despite his tiny army-- he found himself learning a tidbit here and there. And he was impressed. He wondered if all women from his lifemate's planet had such a skill.

"No," he said at last. "You've not mentioned *nishani*."

"She is well," Ne'Rin said with shortness. A'Ran waited. If that were the best Ne'Rin could say of the difficult woman ...

She should have settled by this point, adopted her role and been properly behaved. She apparently wasn't, and it made him uneasy. He didn't need his people to see someone quite so ... unusual. Their confidence in him would fall further.

"She's been ... training with the boys," Ne'Rin said at the long silence.

"Training?" he echoed.

"Swords."

"Women are forbidden to fight." Even as he said it, he knew he was contradicting himself. He hadn't stopped her yet from creating battle plans. Swords, however, were different. The chance for physical harm was too great.

"Your sisters do not possess the temperament needed to deal with her," Ne'Rin said frankly.

A'Ran listened. He intended for the problem to right itself in his absence, once she adjusted. If his sisters could not handle *nishani*, he must.

"You have direction?" Ne'Rin asked.

"I will handle her upon my return," he said.

"Yes, *dhjan*. When will you return to meet the Council here?"

"In two days' time. I have matters to settle first."

"We will make preparations," Ne'Rin said.

A'Ran reached forward to sever the connection. Ne'Rin's face disappeared from the screen. He relaxed and tested the muscles of his arm again, dissatisfied with being injured.

Nishani. Kiera. He could think of one solution to his problem, and his jaw clenched. He altered the course of his tiny craft for Qatwal.

He traveled for a day and slid beneath the radars of Qatwal easily, having stolen the codes needed to jam their tracking systems during one of his scuffles with Kisolm. He landed outside the main city, in the center of which sat the royal family's residence. Waiting until nightfall, he changed into clothing more suited for the Qatwali society and covered his face with a hood to creep into the city.

Evelyn sat at the window seat, gazing at the dark sky as she had every night since Kiera disappeared. One hand rested on her expanding stomach. She tugged gently on the moon dangling from the necklace Kiera gave her for her wedding. She relaxed after a nice, long soak in the bathtub, her thoughts wandering among the stars.

Suns, she corrected herself with a small smile. They didn't call the distant suns stars in Qatwal. One of those distant suns was hers, and maybe, one of those distant suns might be Kiera's.

Evelyn's smile faded. She had already declared her intention of naming the babe Kiera whether it was a boy or girl. Her days were long but peaceful, wrought with duty and rest. It was a good, perfect little life, so much more than she ever expected, with the exception that her best friend in the universe-- Kiera-- might as well have been dead to her as far as Romas and his clan were concerned.

Evelyn had little regret for her actions in life, even those she probably should have. Bringing Kiera here was her one mistake. Even after a month she couldn't go a night without thinking of her friend. She sighed, ready for bed, and twisted to swing her legs from the bench. A shape in the corner drew her attention, and she gasped.

The man was as huge as any warrior but not fair like Romas's clan members. He was tall and fierce, standing so still she thought herself dreaming up a hero worthy of a nightmare. Dressed in dark clothes with dark hair and olive skin with a dark stare, he was both riveting and frightening.

"You!" she exclaimed as she recognized him.

He strode forward, and she moved to place a table between them. She interacted daily with the warrior members of her husband's family, but she'd never seen one quite like this, with soulful, ancient intelligence in his black gaze and a predatory walk. Her first thought was that he had kidnapped Kiera and was now returning to take her.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded, reaching for the communications access pad on the table.

"No." His single word was sharp enough to make her jerk. Her hand wavered. He stopped at the opposite side of the table, within reach if he chose, which she suspected he would if she so much as flinched toward the access pad. Her hand dropped to her side, fingernails digging into the meat of her palms.

"What have you done with Kiera?"

The intruder remained silent for a moment, then said slowly, "Your sister is well."

The simple assertion was a waterfall after a month without a drop of information about her. Evelyn searched his face. "Oh, God! You've seen her! If you've hurt her, you sick son--"

"She is well," he repeated. "*Nishani* is well."

"*Nishani*?" The word made her do a double-take. "*Nishani*?" Kiera would never agree to marry someone in so short of a time, but to agree in any amount of time to a man as lethal in appearance as this? "You haven't hurt her?" she pressed. "Where is she? Is she here? What have you done with her? Why did--"

He held up a hand to silence her, and she waited, circling the table to face him.

"Where is my sister?"

"Are all women of your world unusual?" he asked with impatience.

"We are not unusual on our world," she retorted. "Where is she?"

"She is safe and well."

"Why are you here, then, if not to tell me something's wrong?" she asked, perplexed.

"*Nishani* is unusual."

"You come to tell me she is unusual?" She shook her head. "I don't understand. I know she is unusual. She's a brilliant artist, independent, a complete sweetheart, a little too emotional, but she's an artist ... I don't understand."

Evelyn gazed at him, waiting for more. His jaw clenched. By the look of this man, Kiera hadn't wed him by choice. Romas had decreed that the man Kiera chose would have to have her agreement to be mated. Evelyn just didn't see it happening. Kiera could be the most stubborn and frustrating woman Evelyn had ever met, and she'd sworn off any man, let alone an alien. She'd never fit into Romas's society. Realization played across her mind, echoed in a puzzled smile dancing across her face.

"You can't figure her out," she said. "That's it, isn't it?" And she laughed. Kiera was well indeed if she were able to send a man like this to Evelyn's door looking for advice. Kiera's mate hadn't counted on an obstinate bride.

The man before her crossed his arms, not amused.

Hormones and emotions kicked in at the same time, and Evelyn's laughter turned to weeping. She sat on the table and buried her face in her hands, grateful and relieved to be reconnected with Kiera, even if indirectly. She cried until she could control herself, wiped her face, and drew several shuddering breaths.

"My ... my sister is sweet but stubborn," she managed. "I don't have an easy answer to your problem, if that's what you want. Is she speaking to you?"

She imagined the conversation was nothing short of torture for a warrior. She knew without a doubt that Romas's arrogance would never allow him to admit his inability to deal with her to anyone. That Kiera's warrior was at least willing to do something so painful gave her some hope for her friend.

"I have not seen her in a few days," he replied after a pause.

"So you dumped her off and left," Evelyn summarized, and wiped her face again. "Kiera will never be the woman you warriors want. Get used to that now. I'm sure a woman with intelligence will shock you."

"I know of her intellect," he said. "She's bested my best battle planners with her mind. But she is a poor *nishani*."

"She is a perfect *nishani*," she returned. "Brilliant and beautiful? Can you find fault with that?"

"Her behavior."

"You've not spent even a moment with her, and you complain of her behavior?" Evelyn shook her head and rose. She crossed to the boxes she had stacked in the corner and covered with a square of cloth. Romas had discarded most of Kiera's things after her disappearance, but Evelyn managed to salvage two boxes and keep them hidden. She dug through one and withdrew a thick pad of paper and pack of pencils.

"If you take the time to know her, you won't find fault in her behavior," she said to him, and held out the items in her hand. "Give these to her."

He took them, eyeing them as if they'd bite him.

"And ... someday ..." She trailed off. Even if this man agreed to bring Kiera back for a visit, Romas and his clan would deny permission. "Tell her she'll be an aunt soon. When will you see her again?"

"Tomorrow."

“Good. Tell her I miss her, too.”

He gave a curt nod. Her Kiera was well and raising hell. There was nothing else she could want. Evelyn knew she didn't deserve to feel at peace after the mess she dragged Kiera into, but she did feel it, and it made her genuinely content for the first time since she'd kidnapped her best friend.

* * *

Kiera tugged at the moon on her necklace as she walked down the hall toward the video game room. She'd dreamt of Evelyn last night and awoke missing her friend. And then both Gage and Talal had cornered her that morning with news that made her wish she was more like Evelyn. She wasn't good at handling drama; Evelyn had always been like a perfect older sister, capable of patience and listening. Kiera just freaked out with bad news. She wished hard she could talk to Evelyn as she had in her dream last night and ask her what to do.

Voices came from the conference room, whose door was open. She stopped a few feet from the entrance, debating whether she should just leave, until she heard A'Ran's name. She didn't recognize the first man's voice, but the second she did.

“A'Ran hasn't returned?”

“He took a detour and is on his return trip, Father,” Ne'Rin said. “Have you been successful?”

“Somewhat. It's been hard to break, but I think I found the weak point,” the first man replied. “It'll take me a few days to position myself to take advantage of it. It involves Qatwal. I won't say more, lest this communication is compromised. I'm having some problems with messages being intercepted after they leave the planet.”

“I understand. Our other plan is coming along. I believe Gage is in love with me, a simple emotion for a woman,” Ne'Rin said. “And she's with child, Father.”

There was a short silence. Kiera crept closer.

“So he did find the correct *nishani*, if an Anshan woman is able to bear a child again,” the first man said quietly. “We'd all begun to doubt him. I had hoped he'd choose your sister.”

“His chosen is the *nishani*, but your doubt may be well-placed. She is not from here, doesn't understand her role. She cannot do what the *nishani* must to help Anshan, and once our people see her, they'll lose their faith in him. My sister would've been a much wiser choice, and far more beautiful.”

Kiera frowned, offended Ne'Rin thought so little of her, but not surprised. At least he was ragging on her to his family and not complete strangers. She could almost forgive him expressing his blunt opinion to his father.

“If I fail, mating into his family is the next logical step,” the first man said. “And it sounds like you have this taken care of.”

“Yes, Father, I do.”

“*Nishani!*” Talal's voice jarred her. Kiera spun and darted down the hall, snatching Talal's arm and pulling her around the corner before Ne'Rin saw them.

“You picked a bad time!” Kiera whispered, trotting down the hall.

“I only meant to tell you--”

“Do you know when A'Ran normally calls?” she asked.

“Soon, *nishani*. Do you wish to talk to him?” Talal brightened. “You should, *nishani!* It will shock and honor him.”

“Shock and honor?” Kiera repeated. “Those don't sound like good things. Yes, I do.”

“You should wear his most preferred color, yellow,” Talal advised.

“That sounds nice,” Kiera said, distracted. She heard footsteps from the direction of the conference room and offered a smile as Ne'Rin rounded the corner. He eyed them.

“Ne'Rin, my sister Gage is looking for you.”

“Take me to her.”

Talal struck off without hesitation. Ne'Rin lingered, his hard gaze on Kiera. Kiera bowed her head as she'd seen the sisters do, trying hard not to look guilty like she'd overheard his conversation. He left at last, and she waited for him to disappear from sight before jogging to the conference room. She'd learned how to lock and unlock the doors and entered the conference room, locking it.

She debated what to do about the conversation she overheard. She didn't understand the rules of this world well enough to know if she were jumping the gun, but what she heard made her very uncomfortable.

Maybe it was Gage's involvement. The women of A'Ran's family were sheltered. They couldn't recognize a predator if it sat at their feet, and she was surprised to find her senses much more honed to such a ploy despite their social statuses rivaling those of royalty's on earth. They should have been taught better, she mused with a frown.

She went to the battle game to play until A'Ran called, wondering what he'd say when she told him her news about his sisters and wondering just how safe it would be to talk about Ne'Rin's conversation with his father. His father hadn't wanted to talk over the viewer; she doubted she should either.

Less than an hour after she'd started playing the game, the communicator lit up and beeped. Excited and nervous, Kiera crossed to it and waved her armband over the access pad. She straightened her hair and took a deep breath.

It wasn't Ne'Rin that greeted him for his daily briefing but the woman herself. She was dressed in faded teal that drew out her otherworldly eyes. She perched on the edge of one table, fidgeting hands in her lap and bright features alert as she focused on some point on the screen. A'Ran studied her for a long moment before turning on the reciprocal viewer, curious yet wary as to what his *nishani* had to say in place of Ne'Rin.

"*Nishani*," he greeted her.

"Hello, A'Ran." Her voice was soft and as feminine as her shape. Her pronunciation of his name was pleasantly accented. "How are you?"

"Well, as you see."

"Ne'Rin said you were hurt."

"The medical unit has healed me." He leaned forward, curiosity growing. That she took enough interest in him to ask after his injury pleased him. "Where is Ne'Rin this day?"

"Indisposed." A flicker of amusement crossed her face.

"My most trusted advisor chose not to attend his mandated meeting?" A'Ran raised an eyebrow.

"It wasn't a choice," she assured him. "I wanted to speak to you, but I didn't want him around. I locked him out."

The blatant defiance was so sweetly uttered, he didn't know how to respond.

"He won't even let me wear my translator when we have visitors," she complained.

A'Ran knew he should chide her as he would his sisters and remind her of her place, but the words died before reaching his lips. His conversation with Evelyn lingered in his thoughts. Having spent most of his years in battle, he understood when a traditional approach would not work with an unusual opponent. He needed to adapt his strategies when dealing with her.

"What would you say to them?" he asked instead of lecturing her.

"I would just talk to them. I'm curious, and it's absurd I'm not allowed to talk to anyone! I'm not sure what you or he is afraid of. I'd like to know who is visiting and why, where they're from."

"You're seeking my permission to speak to the visitors," he summarized, gauging her reaction. *Nishani's* eyes narrowed, and she clenched her jaw. She was independent, an odd contrast given that she was far too delicate to defend herself if left to face the planet's dangers on her own.

"Yes," she grated, displeased.

"You have it, *nishani*."

"Thanks, I think. How far away are you?"

"Half a day," he answered.

"You're returning?"

"Yes."

"Did you win your battles?"

"I did." He was puzzled by the question given that she had written most of the plans. She should already know he won.

"That's good. Will you stay long, or do you go to fight again?" she asked.

"I will meet with members of the Council. They should arrive there before the suns set, and I shortly after. I'm not certain how long I'll stay," he replied.

"When you go again, I'd like to go with you." The odd request made him pause. At his lack of response, she continued, "Ne'Rin disagrees. Your sisters don't like the idea either, but I would really like to go with you. I wouldn't get in the way. I can take care of myself for the most part, and wouldn't mind rough conditions."

"No, *nishani*," he replied. The thought of her in rough conditions or battle met instant instinctual resistance. "You will stay where it is safe."

She hesitated, then ignored the warning edge in his voice. "You don't stay where it is safe, and you're the only remaining *dhjan*."

A'Ran gazed at her silently, making his disapproval clear.

"We'll have to agree to disagree," she relented. "But I don't consider this matter to be closed."

Her directness and pure *courage*-- there was no other word for her insubordinate address!--amazed him. He understood why Ne'Rin had refused to allow her to wear the translator with visitors.

"*Nishani*," he said with a shake of his head. "You are too bold."

"How else would I speak to you?" she asked. "And if I'm not allowed to speak my mind to you, who do I speak it to?"

"You may speak any mind you wish to *me*. But you must understand my people are not like you, are not as accepting of your loose tongue."

"I know," she said, growing red. There was a long pause where the two assessed each other. "A'Ran, I have to tell you something about Gage."

"What has my sister done?" he asked, making himself comfortable in his chair.

"She's with child."

He stiffened, surprised.

"She's afraid to tell you."

No woman had given birth in many sun-cycles, because the planet's spirit was severed without the *dhjan* and the *nishani*. He was torn between wanting to confront Ne'Rin and demand he make his sister an honorable woman and laughing out loud to know that he had chosen a *nishani* capable of healing his planet, his people.

"It will be taken care of," he said calmly.

"You should let them work it out."

"Ne'Rin will honor my sister."

"I'm sure he will, but you shouldn't force someone into such a relationship," she said, and crossed her arms. "It's not accepted everywhere, you know."

"It is accepted here," he replied. He raised an eyebrow in challenge, and she glared at him.

"And Talal," she continued.

"What of her?"

"She's with child as well. She told me this morning and asked me not to tell anyone, but you probably need to know."

A'Ran said nothing, though he clenched the arms of his chair hard enough for his knuckles to turn white. He sifted through memories to find who might be connected to his youngest sister. No warrior came to mind. In fact, he had never seen any warrior speak to her save Ne'Rin. As much as he wanted to welcome the information of his healing planet, he also wanted to strangle the men impregnating *his* family members.

"Talal," he repeated at last, and leaned forward again.

"There's a man named Ketnan. She's been involved with him for some time now."

The name was unfamiliar, which meant he was not well connected and not among the families of his advisors.

"It will be taken care of," he said once more.

"Please don't interfere," she said with a frown. "They need to deal with things themselves, don't you think?"

"It's my duty as their brother. I must protect them and ensure their honor and mine remains intact."

"That seems to be a very harsh way of regarding your sisters' future happiness."

"Happiness can be restored. Honor cannot," he said firmly. "What other surprises have you for me?"

"No more surprises," she replied. The sudden change in her expression from open to shuttered drew his attention. "I think there are some matters we should discuss when you return."

"What matters?" he pursued.

"This isn't the place, A'Ran."

"Woman," he growled, "you do not tell me my place."

She assessed him again and shifted under his scrutiny before looking away.

"I don't trust these machines and who might overhear," she said. "If it please you, I'd rather wait to discuss this later."

"It does not please me."

"Then you'll have to wait anyway."

She stood, as if to tell him their conversation was over. A'Ran almost echoed her movement. His size might have an impression on her in person, but over the viewer, it meant nothing. She could just as easily flick off the viewer as he could. He didn't doubt the unpredictable woman would do such an incredible thing. At the moment he wanted nothing more than to reach out to her, and he was uncertain whether he wanted more to kiss those perfect lips or shake some sense into her.

He leaned back and drew a calming breath. She was distraught about something, though he couldn't fathom what might distress her if the news of his sisters' impending babes and complete loss of honor did not. That news certainly distressed *him*.

"You're angry?" She studied him.

"I'm not angry."

"You look angry."

"You're trying my patience, woman," he said. He raised his chin to indicate the table to her left. "Have you been using that machine?"

Nishani glanced in the direction he indicated and returned a wary gaze to him.

"Did Ne'Rin tell you that?"

"So you have been."

"Yes, I have," she said. "Ne'Rin *suggested* that I not use it."

"What do you think of it?" he asked, avoiding the direct challenge in her gaze.

"It's a very interesting game, though I don't understand how it works exactly. I think I've got most of it down," she said, relaxing when he didn't lecture her.

"Game," he repeated.

"That's what you're talking about, isn't it? The battle game on that console?"

He was silent in surprise once more, unable to understand how she might consider his battle plans nothing more than a complex *game*. If she were unfamiliar with the accepted societal behaviors of a woman on his planet, he couldn't expect her to be any more familiar with the machine. Yet her naiveté was almost too much for him to bear. How did a woman like this find her way to *him* of all men?

"How do you like it?" he forced himself to ask.

"I like it a lot. I've been spending a lot of time here working with it." She brightened. "I think I've gotten quite good at it."

"I'll inform Ne'Rin you've approval to continue."

"Approval? My world is very different," she said, brow furrowing.

"I've assessed that your men can't control their women," he said.

She gave a startled laugh. "No, and the women wouldn't let them anyway," she said. "It's closer to the opposite."

"If you've nothing more to tell me, send in Ne'Rin," he directed.

"It was nice talking to you," she said. "Have a safe trip."

She walked toward the door. The woman was more peculiar than any ten-legged creature he'd met on any other planet. Her mannerisms, her features, her obliviousness to the world around her, her soft voice. Oddly enough, he was beginning to like the challenging package that was his *nishani*.

He'd see her in less than a day, if the Council didn't absorb all his time.

* * *

The next morning, she started her normal daily routine and made her way to the courtyard where she trained with the boys. Sunlight blinded her as she walked onto the field. When she could focus again, she stopped short.

A'Ran was with the boys.

His naked back was to her. The man was built like a god! Thick, bronze skin coated layers of roped, rippling muscles. His tucked waist and hips were clad in dark brown, his feet bare. Dark hair was tucked into a tight knot at the base of his neck. In the short time since he left, she had forgotten how buff he was. He appeared much smaller on the communications viewer. She watched him move, intimidated by his size.

She *had* been pretty mouthy with him from a distance. She felt the urge to retreat to her room and stay there until he left again. One of the boys noticed her. Instead of the welcoming smile, a frantic look crossed his face.

If the giant of a man before her decided to be angry at her for breaking the rules, she'd panic as well. She was about to sneak away when A'Ran's sword lowered, and he turned, alerted by the boy's reaction. Kiera stared at him, struggling to focus on his face when all she wanted to do was study every inch of his perfect body. His chest was wide and sprinkled with dark hairs that trailed his ridged belly and disappeared into the dark pants.

Her body flushed, her blood pounding. Whatever otherworldly bond connected them prevented her from moving away. She couldn't begin to imagine what a man like that would feel like in bed! To run her hands over the washboard abs or twirl her fingertips through the tight hairs dusting his chest ... Or better yet, to feel his large hands and muscular body against hers

...

"*Nishani*," he greeted her with his normal curttness.

She cleared her throat, forcing herself to focus on his dark eyes. His face was more handsome than she remembered, more rugged with a two days' growth covering his neck and jaw. It made him all the more untamed, unlike Romas's sculpted beauty. Piercing eyes leveled on her, but she could read nothing in them, especially not what he thought of her.

She wondered why she had the sudden urge to know what he thought.

"Welcome home," she managed, and clasped her trembling hands behind her back. A'Ran turned to the boys and tossed his head. It took nothing else to send all five of them scurrying away. She couldn't remember when the outdoors had felt so small or when it'd become so humid she was sweating in place.

A'Ran retrieved one sword from its stand, flipped it in the air, and caught the blade. To her surprise, he offered it to her.

"I know you train with them," he stated.

"I suppose you'll forbid it," she said, eyeing him.

"Come."

Wondering what he was trying to prove, she took the sword and balanced it. He said nothing but dropped into a fighting stance. The sight made her uneasy.

"I'm not good enough to face you," she said, remembering how he'd beaten men bigger than him into a pulp to free her from Romas's clan.

He motioned her forward with one hand. Her heart thudded, her palms damp. He could smash her into a million pieces if he wanted. Given her blatant ignorance of his rules, he had every probable cause to do so. At least he gave her the chance to go down fighting.

She began as she had been taught, focusing on her form. A'Ran met her blows gently, redirecting them without affecting her balance. He said nothing but let her strike several times before shifting to the offensive. She blocked clumsily at first but ordered herself not to look weak in front of such a man and focused hard.

She waited for him to flex his strength and drive her into the ground, surprised when he never did. If anything, he was gentle and patient, traits she hadn't expected from a warrior. They sparred until she grew tired and lowered her weapon. Kiera wiped her forehead, unable but to admire the sheen of sweat on A'Ran's wide upper body. He straightened as she stopped and gave an approving nod.

"They have taught you well."

He replaced his sword and strode toward her. She held out her hand for him to take the sword. Instead, he gripped her sword wrist and moved behind her. His touch sent heated energy through her, and the nearness of his body made her tense. He was heated and *huge* at her back. One massive hand circled her to rest on her abdomen. He drew her into his body.

"Widen your stance," he instructed, and nudged her left leg out farther with his own. "I'll teach you the first weapons form we teach our warriors."

Kiera was dumbstruck both by his willingness to teach her and his touch. Her face felt hot. A'Ran's warm chest was at her back, his intimate touch on her stomach making her feel far more delicate than she ever had. He said something that her spinning mind couldn't catch. Her body was too aware of his. It distracted her until he shifted her body forward to demonstrate and correct her stance. Kiera blinked and forced herself to pay attention. She was too stiff for him to move. He nudged her right foot forward. She complied.

"... your balance lower."

She couldn't register his words and tried hard to focus. A'Ran locked their bodies together with his large hand on her stomach. He used his body to guide hers. His legs and hands applied gentle pressure while his body balanced her in some of the awkward positions.

They went through an entire range of movements, from attacking to defending in motions that resembled a dance. He said little else, and her breathing soon fell into rhythm with his. She eased against him, awed by his pure strength yet determined not to appear as stupid as she felt. Their movements were slow and methodical, controlled, deliberate. Her body strained under muscle fatigue as the form became increasingly complex and slower. A'Ran supported her. By the time she returned to the starting position, she was sweating and breathing hard. Her sword arm shook, and her legs were rubbery. He pried the sword from her clamped hand.

"Yes, you are forbidden from training with them," he said.

Surprised, she pulled away from the comfortable position resting against him and twisted to face him.

"After this, you'll forbid me from learning?" she demanded. She took in his beautiful body as he crossed to place her sword in the sword stand.

"I said *they*'ll not train you."

"*You*'ll train me?" she asked, unable to keep the disbelief out of her voice.

"Yes." He gazed at her, as if awaiting a refusal. She couldn't determine if she'd won this round or not.

"You seem too busy," she said.

"I will make time for you."

"No, no. I'm not ... I know you're waging a war. Don't overextend yourself for me," she said, her face warm once again.

"I was unaware you wished to see me."

Once again, there was too much behind his simple statement for her to address. Worse, she could think of nothing to say in response that wouldn't get her in more trouble.

"You are not so bold in person," he said, raising an eyebrow in challenge.

She looked at him hard. Anger flared at the tone of his voice. *How* could he say such a thing after all he had put her through?

"You kidnap me, trick me into marrying you, dump me here alone without Evelyn or even a pad of paper, with instructions for your sisters to give me *behavioral training*, and run off to fight some battle somewhere else. I'm not allowed to talk to anyone or do anything! You have some nerve to do all that and make fun of me for trying to fit in or ignore me when you do return! I am so angry at you, and if you were half an inch smaller, I'd whip your hide, *dhjan* or not!"

The flurry of words left before she could temper them. She neared him as she spoke until she was toe-to-toe with the massive man and glaring up at him.

"I will make amends," he said, his gaze taking in her features.

It was better than an apology. Being so close rattled her senses, and she thought again of the kiss they had shared over a month before. She focused on his eyes as much as she wished to focus on his warm lips. He smelled of pure, primal man, his own scent mixed with sweat.

"I am pleased to learn I was wrong," he said in a quiet voice. He made no move to close the distance between them. Instead, he stepped away and strode toward the door.

She watched him go, his touch branded on her skin and her emotions muddled. She cursed herself, aware she had accomplished little as far as advancing her rights but managed to draw the guaranteed attention of a man she was not certain she wanted to notice her. The short time together had been enough to remind her just how strong the bond was between them.

It scared her.

As she retreated to the safety of her quarters, her gaze was caught by the objects sitting on her bed: a fat sketchbook and pack of drawing pencils. She reached out and took them, surprised to find them there and even more surprised at how strongly she'd missed them. They were like old friends who came to visit after a long absence. She flipped open the notebook and buried her nose between the pages, breathing the fresh paper smell. She felt tears in her eyes at the small reminder of her past life and hugged the gifts to her chest.

A'Ran.

It couldn't be coincidence that he returned and they appeared! She forgot her shaky body and the whirling of her emotions and strode toward the door, intent on discovering if he had done this and if so, if he had more. Such a notebook would last her a week or two. Kiera stopped in the hallway, considering where the enigmatic *dhjan* might have gone.

She trotted down the hall, toward the practice fields, not surprised to see all the warriors sparring on the field. A'Ran was several hundred meters out, surrounded by a group of over a dozen. Ne'Rin was closer to the door, and Kiera remained in the shadows inside the house, watching.

He was sparring with another warrior, his fluid, destructive movements far from the gentle ones he used with her. She admired the way his body shifted and moved. The muscles of his upper body bulged as he sparred, their changing shapes amplified by a play of shade and sunlight.

She debated returning to her quarters until she could find a more private moment to approach him. She doubted he'd appreciate her embarrassing one of them. For once, she wished she'd listened to Gage or Talal.

Ne'Rin caught sight of her just as she decided to leave. The cool toss of his head-- a blatant dismissal-- changed her mind again. She shot him a look and stepped from the house, moving toward the field with the gifts at her side. She ignored him as she passed. Though he made no move to stop her once she was visible, he did trail her. Those who noticed her stopped to bow as she passed them.

She reached the circle where A'Ran fought and joined the observers. Some of the men were exotic even by Anshan standards. One towered just as tall as the other men but was thinner than any waif-like model she had seen on earth. Another was hunch-backed and dressed in heavy robes despite the heat of the day, and a third man barely taller than her had white irises and silvering hair.

The men watched the silent battle in equal silence, their assessing looks warning her they were looking for something. The man A'Ran fought was more than a foot taller, with light skin and black hair resembling one of the observers. They fought with the grey swords, combining the sword dance with hand-to-hand combat moves for a ferocious battle that surprised her. It was more intense than sparring, and she wondered what was at stake with the simple fight.

She considered retreating but suspected that would draw the attention of the men focused on the battle. She gripped her notebook.

The battle continued, and the men around her grew tenser when the first fleck of blood appeared on A'Ran's opponent. His opponent faltered, and A'Ran smashed him to the ground hard. Kiera was more than a little surprised when he raised his sword for what would have been a death blow. The sword implanted next to the downed man's ear, and her small gasp drew the attention of the observers.

The feel of several sets of eyes assessing her made her heart beat harder and her mouth dry. She resisted the urge to leave, instead riveting her gaze to A'Ran.

A'Ran pulled his opponent to his feet, offered several quiet words, and turned his gaze to her. It was the intense, fierce look of a leader and a warrior, and she was surprised to note a difference in the way he regarded her not more than an hour ago.

She felt silly seeking him out for something as simple as a notebook. He was, after all, equivalent of a king on this world! How ridiculous would she seem? She awaited some sort of reprimand, already wounded by the thought of being publicly embarrassed. A'Ran's intense gaze swept over her before turning to the observers.

"Council members, *dhjan nishani*," he announced.

The men around her offered stiff bows. Kiera looked around uncertainly before returning her gaze to A'Ran.

"We will meet in two. Opal, meet me in the command center," A'Ran directed.

Opal, the tall, thin man, nodded and stepped toward the house. The men around her broke away, the two with dark hair joining A'Ran's opponent while the alabaster giant joined Ne'Rin. She wasn't surprised to see the man in the thick robes move to the cooler shade of the house. The small man with white irises drew near her, his eerie, unblinking gaze making her uncomfortable.

"It is not often I find another smaller than I, *nishani*," he said in a thin voice. "The *dhjan* has granted us permission to address you. Be not alarmed."

"I am not alarmed," she murmured.

"I am Jetr. I come from the planet of Dolsom. My people are Anshan's greatest allies."

"Is your planet far?" she asked.

"Unfortunately far, in the farthest of the Five Galaxies. I haven't seen my home in many sun-cycles."

"You must miss your home as I do mine."

He tilted his head to the side, observing her with a faint smile.

"Jetr, you are welcome to join us." A'Ran's deep voice saved her from filling the awkward quiet. "Please accompany Opal."

Jetr took the dismissal with a bow of his head and moved away. A'Ran waited. He kept the distance between them, and she felt it like a rejection. Even so, he was too stunning for her to look away. She cleared her throat then said,

"I'm sorry. I don't want to keep you from your meeting."

"You received them." His gaze fell to her chest, where she clenched the sketchbook.

"Yes. I just wanted to thank you," she said. "I won't keep you."

She intended to walk away but found herself stuck, gazing up at him. She was curious about the softer side of him and captivated by his steady gaze. There were many things she suddenly wanted to know about the man she was stuck with. His every look was penetrating, as if he sought to capture her thoughts whenever she crossed his path. She had the impression of extreme intelligence and extreme determination, a combination that awed and intimidated her. Uneasy with the stirrings within her, she forced herself to step away.

"Thank you."

Only when she turned did she break eye contact, but she felt him watch her. Kiera squeezed the gifts to her chest and walked back to the house, lost in thought. There was something about A'Ran that flipped her world on end. She blinked as she entered the darker house and forced her attention on her surroundings. She returned to her room, eager to spend the day drawing.

She started with a sketch of A'Ran and found she couldn't focus on anything else. She drew him as she'd seen him in the morning, bare-chested and carrying a sword. She drew him as she'd seen him during their conversation the day before, the quietly fierce leader seated in his ship. She found herself sketching him as she'd seen him in the vision from what felt like years ago when they walked hand-in-hand on the dead planet.

It was past dark fall when she finished, and she gazed at her last sketch, intrigued by it. It was what would happen if for some reason she didn't go back to her own planet. A'Ran wasn't as controlling as Romas, from what she knew of him, and she couldn't help feeling as drawn to the picture in front of her as she was to the man himself.

She wondered what life would be like with someone like him, or if he was so bound to duty, there was no room for real affection. She sketched the planet next and fell asleep at her desk.

CHAPTER SIX

Talal shook her awake far too early. She lifted her head from her desk and blinked, the first fingers of dawn rendering the light of the room grainy and grey.

"My brother awaits you," Talal said. She was glowing and refreshed, her clothes neat and her scent that of one who had recently bathed. Kiera groaned softly as she shifted. She ached as much from her workout the day before as falling asleep sitting with her sketchbook.

"Why?"

"He is to train you," Talal said as she crossed to the clothing unit. "You shouldn't keep him waiting."

"So early?" Kiera asked.

"He will be occupied today," Talal chided. "He favors you with his time."

She was cheerful as usual and brought Kiera a set of clean clothing. Kiera grimaced and rose, changing slowly before leaving her room for the training area. The morning was cool, the sky lightening. A'Ran awaited her with two swords looking alert, as if he'd been up long enough for his first cup of coffee to kick in. She felt sluggish in comparison. A'Ran's eyes didn't leave her as she tied her hair in a knot at the base of her neck. She dropped her arms and gave a long sigh, meeting his gaze.

As if he sensed her irritation at the early hour, a look of amusement crossed his face, visible in the shift of his eyebrows. He wore light colors this day of tan, a shade that brought out the depth of honey in his skin. He handed her one sword. She accepted it. It felt heavier than usual already. She stretched again before settling into an awkward stance across from him.

They sparred lightly until her body grew warm and her mind engaged. Kiera concentrated on her movements rather than the silent form across from her, intent on not looking like a fool in front of a master warrior. When concentrating on the weapons, it was also easier to keep from concentrating on *him*.

Sparring lasted until the sky was clear of night's blue, at which point he took the sword from her. Kiera watched him lean both weapons against the side of the dwelling before he returned.

"Fighting stance," he instructed.

She shifted herself in compliance. He moved behind her, keeping within arm's distance. He tested her balance and adjusted her stance before taking both wrists and moving her hands over her head.

"This is the starting position for this form," he told her.

He released her and moved before her, back toward her. Kiera watched as he assumed the same position and shifted his stance into a new position. He waited, head twisted over her shoulder to see her. She echoed the movement. A'Ran turned to adjust her stance before returning to the same pose.

The slow movements continued for an hour, with A'Ran pausing between each new one to adjust her stance as needed. She recognized the same routine from the previous day, only this time they moved through it without swords. When she returned to the starting position, her arms were shaking and her legs burning. A'Ran adjusted her one last time before stepping back and nodding.

"This is the first weapons form warriors are taught," he said.

Kiera lowered her hands and wiped sweat from her forehead. A'Ran appeared none the worse for the session, but she was ready for a hot bath and a nap. He studied her, dark depths taking her in with quiet intensity she was not yet accustomed to. The training had been nothing but politely professional, as if she were another student. The ensuing silence, however, reminded her once more of their awkward status.

"You may use the command center this afternoon," he said.

"You and the Council will be somewhere else?"

A curt nod.

"I assume it's not a woman's place at the Council."

"It is not," he agreed. Before she could be irritated by his words, he continued, "We will discuss matters later."

"What matters?" Kiera asked. "Good matters? Bad matters?"

"Are there bad matters to be discussed?" he asked, an edge to his voice. He raised an eyebrow, his chin lifting in what she recognized as a look very close to commanding.

"I have nothing to discuss," she said. "But if there *are* issues, I'd like to discuss them now."

"We will discuss matters later," he said once again. "I find nothing alarming in what we will discuss. And I thought you had a matter you wished to tell me as well."

She frowned. She doubted anything would alarm this man if tricking a woman into wedding him and discovering the news of his sisters' impending children did not. There were a *great* many things she could think of that would be dramatic issues to *her*. She wasn't about to tell him

what she'd overheard Ne'Rin say. No, telling him that she didn't like his most trusted friend seemed ... petty.

"I go now to the Council," he said, and strode to the swords. "I will send for you when I am ready."

Kiera grimaced at the distasteful wording. She said nothing as he disappeared into the house, wondering what surprises he had in store for her.

* * *

A'Ran listened to the Council members, uneasy. The Council had been excessively cooperative the past two days, a sign he didn't like. Ne'Rin sat to his right at the largest table within the command center with the Council members arranged by rank to his left.

He didn't like the politicking that accompanied any Council meeting, but he had to be patient with men who might be willing to help him. Today his gaze fell to the white-eyed, small man that had addressed *nishani* the prior day. While he had given them permission to speak to her, he found opportunists distasteful, however loyal they were. Jetr met his gaze with a small smile and deferential bow of his head. A'Ran responded by tipping his chin, and Jetr's attention returned to Opal, who had been speaking too long already.

Jetr was one of the only champions A'Ran had on the Council. A'Ran forced his attention away, certain that this ally was as true as any despite his haste in addressing *nishani*.

Anyone addressing *nishani* irritated him. It was abnormal in Anshan, even if her society held no such apparent boundaries. He'd spoken to his sisters in depth and learned quickly just how different she was, their tales ranging from those that ought to anger him to those that amused him. He understood better the tension between Ne'Rin and *nishani* after several hesitant stories from Talal of their *discussions*. *Nishani* had a tongue and habits that shocked all three sisters and did nothing short of aggravate Ne'Rin.

He suspected Ne'Rin didn't care for *nishani*. Having been raised to serve his *dhjan* within the boundaries imposed on him, Ne'Rin would have little patience with one who trounced the boundaries that should have been emplaced upon her.

A'Ran hadn't yet addressed Ne'Rin's own failing, that of impregnating his sister without making her a *nishani* first. It was very unlike his friend and second-in-command to allow his control to slip in such a drastic way. He hadn't yet discovered who Talal's mysterious man was. It was part of the reason he wished to speak to *nishani* later that day.

If he had it his way, the woman would rarely leave his side. Despite her oddities, she drew him with her large eyes and quick wit. Even though he'd just met her, the bond between them was as strong as his father told him it would be. He wanted to gauge her ability with the strategic battle planning and measure just how intelligent his *nishani* was. If she proved to be as he suspected she was, she might find herself the first woman in his society given the official position of strategy battle planner, a position traditionally held by the *dhjan* alone.

Opal, the head of the Council, rose gracefully, pulling A'Ran from his thoughts. He and the others followed his lead.

"We will meet after we dine this evening," Opal said.

The men withdrew. Ne'Rin caught A'Ran's eye and nodded toward the door. A'Ran gave a curt nod. His second had training for the day.

"A'Ran, a word," Jetr said as he prepared to leave. He waited for the others to file out of the command center. Jetr crossed to the door and closed it before asking, "Have you given any thought to what I warned you of a few weeks ago?"

A'Ran wiped his mouth, already uneasy with the topic. He trusted Jetr as much as he dared trust anyone.

"I only ask because my own personal guards-- who, with your permission, keep an eye on the moon-- have had transmissions from Anshan that did not come from your commanders," Jetr said very carefully.

A'Ran crossed his arms, more hesitant to consider his second in command-- and closest friend-- being a traitor now that his sister was involved with Ne'Rin.

"We traced the communications to be from the personal communications device of the man who claims to be *dhjan* of Anshan," Jetr continued when he did not speak. "Ne'Rin has been talking to his father, A'Ran."

A'Ran pushed himself away from the table he leaned against and paced, thoughts turning to Gage, who would bear Ne'Rin's child. He remembered the look on Ne'Rin's face fifteen sun-cycles ago, when they'd learned what happened. No, Ne'Rin hadn't been a traitor then. Something had changed him.

He'd lost faith in A'Ran. Maybe he missed his home, or maybe he was convinced that what the Council often said-- that the Yirkin and remaining Anshans could live in peace together-- was true.

"I cannot act until I am certain," he said at last, his mood darkening.

"If you hesitate too long, you risk your life and those of your sisters."

"Ne'Rin wouldn't ..." *kill innocents as his father did*. He couldn't speak the words. His father's most trusted advisor had done the unthinkable, and yet, Ne'Rin had borne all the sacrifices that A'Ran had by coming with him.

"You were no real threat to them without your *nishani*, but now, you can rally your people behind you with the promise of healing the planet. And the Council will help you build allies," Jetr said.

"My forefathers rigged the mines on the planet to explode. I've thought more than once I'd like to set them off." A'Ran bit off the words.

"Your forefathers were barbarians. Their threat is taught to us diplomats as an extreme negotiating tactic. They wouldn't destroy their world any more than you would."

A'Ran said nothing, aware his forefathers had never made a threat they didn't intend to execute. The mines were rigged, and he'd never wanted to think he'd need to destroy his home in order to rid it of the blight affecting it. But to know even his most trusted advisor had lost faith in him enough to consort with the man who slaughtered his parents ...

"We'll talk later," he said, disturbed. Jetr said nothing but offered a small bow of his head.

Leaving the command center for his quarters, he glanced out the windows as he strode through the compound. It was mid-afternoon already, another day wasted with the Council rather than concentrating on preparing for battle. Part of him knew the Council was stalling him for that reason, though whether they did so to hinder his efforts or to maintain the appearance of their power over him, he wasn't sure.

He reached his quarters and opened the link to the command center, pausing before it to see *nishani* had already entered. She had her odd gifts with her and sat at the battle planner. He sat at the table opposite his bed and touched several glowing buttons on the table before him. The land and space battle sprung up before him and began to spin. He took in everything, noting the enemies had begun to encroach upon the neutral territory agreed upon in the cease-fire. He disabled the real-time mechanism, engaged the training program, and returned to the point where battle had been when *nishani* last adjusted the strategy.

He was curious to see how she would react. With there being no current battle, there was nothing to test her. He programmed the computer to respond in training cycle mode and glanced at the communication link again.

Nishani put her gifts aside and crossed her legs in her seat before flicking on the battle planner. Ne'Rin might possess the ability to plan, but it would take him days to do what A'Ran and *nishani* could do within moments.

Nishani studied the scene before her. Both hands rested in her lap as she studied it for two full rotations. He took in her perfect features once more, impressed again with his choice. Beauty hadn't been a requirement for a *nishani*, and his own mother had been far from beautiful. He had waited for the signs his father warned him against, intending to take on

whatever woman that brought him. That *nishani* was beautiful was no great disappointment to him!

She was strong for a woman as well, which she'd revealed during their two training sessions. She possessed promising coordination and ability to learn at least the basics of the warrior's trade, skills no other *nishani* had ever needed. Initially fearing her to be brittle by her reaction to the world around her, A'Ran was more assured of her ability to withstand the changes in her life. She was tough but expressive, a combination he found odd but promising.

She shouldn't have to be tough, and if he hadn't failed his people several sun-cycles before, he'd never think twice about training her for battle. But she might need to know how to defend herself. His mother never needed to learn. No *nishani* in his bloodline had learned to defend herself or been exiled from her planet. And no *nishani* in his bloodline had failed to produce an heir the first year.

She had to learn to fight, and he wasn't sure when he'd be able to touch her as a man did his mate. If she were any woman from his planet, he would never have hesitated to take her to his bed, as he should. She hadn't protested to his touch during training. Neither had she sought him in any way since his return. She was scared of him still, and he knew it was their bond as *dhjan* and *nishani* that frightened her.

He watched her over the viewer. *Nishani* started with small adjustments to the battle before her, as if testing for the results of her decisions. She grew bolder quickly. He watched as her decisions turned from thoughtful to instant as she reacted to the battle. Her position at the table shifted as the program grew more complex; she dropped her feet to the ground and leaned forward, taking in the rapidly changing situation.

He leaned closer as well, watching. *Nishani* was not only brilliant, but she was fast in her work. As quickly as the computer tossed a challenge before her, she countered and matched it. He watched for quite a while, until the model reached a level that had taken him years of apprenticeship under his father to achieve.

It didn't seem possible that anyone could learn so fast. In the end, the computer might win, but he suspected *nishani* would not lose the second round. He took a long breath and relaxed, satisfied with his choice once more. As hard as it would be to push her closer to the mold of what a *nishani* would be, it would be well worth it.

He turned both machines off and left his quarters for the command center. *Nishani* was concentrating too hard to notice him when he entered. He approached and stood a short distance behind her, watching once more.

She was murmuring in a frustrated tone. Her small, shapely form grew tenser and closer to the computer as the levels increased. A'Ran shifted forward as well to see. In the end, she made a drastic over-calculation and lost the ground battle. *Nishani* pounded a fist on the table and made a loud sound that was most likely a curse on her planet. It did not translate, and neither did it sound like it could be anything else. He chose to overlook the idea of his *nishani* cursing like a man at battle.

"You did well," he said. *Nishani* jerked and twisted to face him. Her features were flushed, her eyes large.

"Have you been here long?" she asked.

"Long enough."

Nishani at once looked uncertain again, her frame tense. She shifted her body to face him, but he moved to her side and sat on the bench a safe distance from her. She continued to watch him.

"You're taking a break from the Council?"

"How long have you been using this device?" He ignored her question, focused on her for the moment.

"I have your permission," she reminded him, eyes narrowing.

"I know."

"Since you left," she responded. "Against Ne'Rin's wishes."

"You must defer to him in my absence as you do me," he reminded her. One eyebrow rose in challenge, and her jaw clenched. "Rather, more so than you do me, given your usual behavior."

She feigned ignoring him, though he saw the flush of her face grow deeper. He recalled her outburst at him the previous day.

"I'm not comfortable around Ne'Rin," she admitted.

"You're not comfortable around me."

"This is different," she insisted. She paused, as if searching for the right words, then continued. "It's just an instinct I have about him."

"Instinct?" A'Ran prodded. "This guides your judgment on him?"

"Yes, of course, on everything," she said. "Like this game. I don't think when I'm using it. I feel what should happen next."

"What is this instinct about Ne'Rin?" he continued, alerted by her words.

"I don't want to talk about it," she said.

"*Nishani*, you don't determine what we discuss," he growled. Her eyes flew to his once more.

"I don't want to talk about it," she said, but with a tremor of uncertainty. He waited. She looked away before he did but refused to crack. He shifted tactics.

"This ... game, you do very well at it."

"I like it," she said. "Today was difficult, but normally I do much better."

"Today it was on training mode," he said, and reached forward, activating it. He touched a few buttons to take it off training mode. The quiet, uneventful scene on the frontier appeared. He stood and moved to take her place, nudging her aside. *Nishani* rose as he slid into the seat before the console.

"Training mode?" she repeated.

"You understand ground and space battles?"

"Yes." She drew closer until he could feel her presence at his back.

"This is the current battle situation. It's been quiet due to the cease-fire called by the Council," he explained. He flicked buttons, zooming and expanding the scenes and adjusting it until it was as he preferred it: spinning faster than normal with alternating close-ups of each major battle.

"I've been winning up until today," she said. "I don't always understand all the parts. These are large ships, these smaller fighter ships."

"There are three levels of fighter ships."

"I figured that out by the size and speed."

"You know the parts of each ship and can configure the ships' systems?"

"Yes."

"It's not an easy task to learn. Each one has its own specific codes and specifications. I am impressed you learned it."

She was quiet as he flipped through the individual configurations of each kind of ship, from transport to logistic to the hulking carrier ships. He switched to the ground battle and hastened through the size, position, and make-up of each of the major ground armies.

"Why do I have the feeling this isn't a game?" she asked in a hushed voice.

"It is not."

"Then what is it?"

"Strategic battle planning. You've been sending me updates daily," he said. Disbelief spread across her face.

"It's real? But I annihilated the planet when I first started!"

"I approve the plans before they are released," he said. "I've not had to alter the last several you've sent. Judging by the training program, you've reached my level already."

"So I'm helping?" she asked skeptically.

"Yes."

"You'll take me with you to battle?"

"No," he said firmly.

"But if I'm helping you here, couldn't I be more helpful up there?"

He gave her a warning look.

"I'm really as good as you are?" she asked.

"You'll soon be better."

"I can't wait to tell Ne'Rin!" she exclaimed. "You've been bested by a mere *woman!*"

"You've not bested me yet, woman," he growled. "I will announce to the Council that you are being appointed the battle planner for Anshan. I will be here only another few moon-cycles and will work with you to teach you the different units and their capabilities. If I am satisfied, I'll turn over the planning completely to you."

"No approvals needed?"

"No approvals needed."

To his surprise, she was grinning, her multi-hued eyes glowing. He hadn't thought she would be so eager, given her skill at avoiding all her regular *nishani* duties.

"Thank you!" She looked younger than Talal, and he wondered what her age might have been. He restrained the urge to reach out to her. She wasn't yet at the level where she would feel comfortable with his touch. He returned to the console and turned it off.

"I saw your sister," he said.

"Sister? You saw Evey?" *nishani* demanded. "When? Is she here?"

"She is well, in her home."

Nishani waited. When he did not continue, she sat down impatiently, facing him.

"When did you see her?"

"A day ago." He was purposely vague, enjoying the fact that her full attention was on him. He rose and turned to go. *Nishani* followed and gripped his forearm with both of her small, soft hands.

"A'Ran, wait!" she commanded. "You can't start a conversation like that and leave! How is Evelyn?"

She released him when he turned, and he gazed down at her, eyebrow raised. A familiar look of determination was on her upturned face.

"She is well, *nishani*," he stated. "She sent your gifts and said to convey her news of a child."

"Evey's having a baby? How wonderful! Does she seem happy? What about Romas? Will he let her visit soon?"

"Romas is not likely to allow that, *nishani*," he responded. "Our clans are still on the verge of war."

"Because of what I did?"

"Because of what I did. I knew the risk."

She frowned. He turned and approached the door again, interested when she followed.

"A'Ran, if helping me drew you into another war, why did you do it?"

"It was meant to be," he answered. He slowed his brisk stride for her to draw and keep abreast.

"What was? Stealing me and making me a *nishani*?"

"Yes."

"So you feel *we* were meant to be," she clarified.

"I feel nothing, *nishani*. I know it to be true. I believe you feel it, too. It's the bond between an Anshan *dhjan* and his mate. We are bound together and to the planet, which will only come back to life when we return."

* * *

Like from my vision. His weren't the words she expected to hear. She walked beside him, pensive. He didn't regret what he had done, even if it plunged his war-beleaguered people into another war.

"Why are we bound together?" she pushed.

"Perhaps because you are so small," he said with a trace of amusement.

"I'm perfectly average on my planet," she said. "Seriously, why did you feel the need to drag me across the galaxy? Aren't there other women you could take as *nishani*?"

He ceased walking and gripped her by both arms, maneuvering her to stand before him. She looked up at him, awed once again by his size. She could feel his body heat and felt pinned beneath the intensity of his gaze.

"You are too bold, *nishani*," he chided once more.

His grip was warm and firm, as it had been the day he prevented her from falling on her face in front of Romas's relations. She felt the familiar, core-deep connection, the one intimate enough for her body to respond, as he held her gaze. Her breathing quickened, and she sought to break the entrancing spell before she began mewling like a cat at his feet.

"I think I deserve an explanation," she breathed. A'Ran's grip tightened before falling from her. He made no move to walk away.

"The babes my sisters carry will be the first birthed to Anshan in over seven sun-cycles," he said. "A *dhjan*'s mate is bound to his people, to his birthright as he is. From the *dhjan* comes strength, prosperity, stability. From the *dhjan nishani* comes growth, birth, restoration. If a *dhjan* chooses incorrectly, his world suffers. If a *dhjan* chooses well, his world flourishes."

"Wow," she murmured. "I guess that means ..." ... *you'll never let me go home.* She frowned without finishing the sentence. He waited. "You aren't upset with your sisters?"

"They disobeyed me," he said firmly. "Despite the assurance that you will return health and life to my people."

"Glad to do my duty," she said.

"There will come a day when you must choose between duty to Anshan-- and your people-- and duty to yourself," he said. "It is the same choice I made."

She didn't want that burden. She wanted to go home, though a part of her had told her upon meeting this fierce warrior her that she'd never go home again. She met his gaze, wondering if any part of him was capable of affection or if she'd wither like a dried-out flower. She couldn't imagine spending her life with a man who viewed her as nothing more than a duty. Evelyn was right: she was too emotional for such an existence.

Yet she knew, even if this were her fate, the man before her would always treat her as he had: respectfully, honorably, dutifully.

"What is it?" he asked as she gazed at him.

"I'm not like you, A'Ran," she found herself saying. "Or your women."

"I know this."

"No, I mean, I'm nothing like you! Your duty is all you really seem focused on."

"You will learn."

"I don't know that I want to learn," she said, troubled. "If I must learn to be dutiful from you, what will you learn from me, or am I expected to be the only one to compromise?"

He faced her fully, studying her for a long moment.

"What would you have me learn?" he asked in the same wary tone.

Affection. Love. Things a man battling for his planet neither had time for nor needed. They seemed like silly emotions when compared to the enormity of his task, and yet, she didn't think she could survive without them.

"I don't know," she said. "I won't keep you any longer."

And she walked away without another word, confused as to why she had wanted him to say there was more to why he chose her than because it was his duty. She wanted him to say he felt the same thing when he looked at her as she did when she looked at him.

A'Ran's penetrating gaze nearly burnt a hole through her shoulder blades.

She didn't have much time alone to mull their conversation or her troubled thoughts. Ne'Rin sent for her less than an hour later with vague explanations of meeting a visitor. Kiera hid a second translator in her pocket and exited the sprawling house to join him. He turned on his heel as soon as she appeared and strode toward the small area beneath a tree where spacecraft traditionally hovered to release their occupants.

Unwilling to appease the man she didn't like, she made no effort to match his pace. She trailed instead, eyes on the much smaller craft hovering near the tree. It was a single occupant transport ship whose passenger stood several feet from it and looked familiar from a distance.

She heard the runner before she saw him and watched as one of the warriors breezed past her toward Ne'Rin. He caught Ne'Rin before he met the visitor, and the two stopped. She approached, but Ne'Rin headed back to her with the messenger.

"Wait here. Do not greet him," Ne'Rin commanded her.

She rolled her eyes. He started past her, then paused, returning to her side to remove the translator from her ear. She said nothing and turned to watch them jog back to the house. Satisfied they were gone, she withdrew the spare in her pocket, placed it at her earlobe, and moved forward to greet the visitor.

The guest watched her as she approached, and she recognized the distinct features of A'Ran's family. He was much older with a full head of silver hair, a similar shade of dark eyes, and a lean build. His gaze was just as intense, his brow low, but his features not as heavy as A'Ran's.

She didn't doubt he was a relative. She paused before him, resisting the instinct to stick out her hand for a handshake. The guest was relaxed, his penetrating gaze calm and weary.

"May the suns long grace you, gentle lady," he said in a quiet, gravelly voice.

"And you," she responded. "May I escort you inside?"

He inclined his head. They started toward the house.

"I'm Kiera," she said.

"I am Mansr. Normally I am greeted by a member of my clan." There was weariness in his voice that disarmed any offense he felt.

"Where are you coming from?" she asked.

"From Anshan central."

"Where there's a war?" She looked at him more closely. "Is this what tires you?"

"Yes to both, gentle lady," he said. "I bring news to the *dhjan* of his people."

"The cease-fire must make it easier to travel," she observed, recalling the enemy positions around the spacecraft launch sites. "I believe your regular launch sites have been well covered by the enemy. You may not have made it out otherwise."

Surprised, he looked at her more fully.

"How are ... the people?" she asked. "Aside from the battles."

"War-torn and weary."

"I would like to travel there."

"It is not a place for one such as you."

She looked up at him, unable to determine his tone. His face was unreadable, but the skin around his eyes had softened with warmth.

"I think I could help," she said. "And I can take care of myself."

Sort of, she added. If what A'Ran said was true, her presence would stop the suffering of his people. Maybe, just maybe, after that happened, he would let her go home.

"Is the Council still in residence?" he asked.

"Yes. A'Ran is with them most of the day," she said absently. "How far is Anshan?"

"Two turns of the sun."

"Will you stay long?"

"I cannot," he stated, his gaze growing distant. "I have a duty to the people. I will address the *dhjan* and leave."

Her intent gaze lingered on him as they reached the house. The etchings of age, pain, and sorrow were upon his brow and cheeks. She sensed the unseen scars of war and strife, the price of Anshan's struggle, buried deep beneath the surface of the hardened man before her.

"Worry not, gentle lady," he said, aware of her scrutiny.

Kiera flushed and looked away. They stepped into the cooler house, and her attention was caught by Talal, who froze in mid-stride along her path toward the northern wing.

"Uncle," Talal managed, and gave a formal bow. Her eyes went to Kiera in surprise.

"Niece." He returned the bow.

"I will guide you immediately to the *dhjan*," Talal said with apprehension and another bow.

Her unusually swift stride outdistanced both of them. A'Ran's uncle remained at Kiera's pace. He was quiet, and her thoughts wandered to Anshan and her alleged, vague duty to the people. How did one save a planet, and how long would it take?

"You may enter, uncle," Talal said, and stopped in front of the war quarters. "*Nishani*, come with me."

Before she could move, Kiera's arm was caught by the man beside her. She gazed up at him questioningly.

"*Nishani*?" he echoed, his eyes on Talal. Kiera watched Talal smile and bob another bow. His dark eyes dropped to Kiera's features.

"I am honored," he said, and bowed his head.

"Come, *nishani*." Talal took her arm before she could reply. Kiera went, looking back once to see Mansr staring hard after her.

"*Nishani*, you are not to greet alone!" Talal chided her as they marched down the hall.

"It wasn't right to leave him standing in the sun all day!" Kiera replied. "What does your uncle do on the planet?"

"He controls the ground armies. If he is here, he has no good news."

Kiera debated how he could have worse news, curious about the man and the war. They nearly reached the women's wing when the strange little Council member with white eyes called out to her.

"*Nishani*!"

She and Talal both turned as he approached. He gave Talal a short bow she took as dismissal, then waited for her to pad out of sight. Kiera waited for him to speak, wanting to hide somewhere until she could think straight.

"How are you, *nishani*?" Jetr asked.

"Fine, thanks."

"I apologize if I am being too direct. I have a concern to discuss with you."

"Okay."

"My warriors have intercepted a message that may reference you as an intended victim. It seems there are people in this house who do not favor you as a *nishani* and who may seek to harm you."

Her thoughts went to Ne'Rin. He didn't like her, but she wondered how far he'd go, especially since A'Ran trusted him so much.

"I will warn the *dhjan* as well, but I wanted you to be aware. Your people are very unlike those on Anshan. Considering this, I felt it right to tell you," he said.

"Thank you," she managed, uncertain how to respond to a vague threat from a stranger. "I'll be careful."

He appeared satisfied, bowed, and walked away. Suddenly feeling alone and vulnerable in the wide hallway, she returned to her room and locked the door, her mind going to the visitor as she tried not to think about Ne'Rin wanting to hurt her.

* * *

"You did not tell me about her."

A'Ran didn't have to guess which *her* his uncle spoke of. He remained seated before a viewer listing the losses from the most current battle.

"If you're here, the crops failed," he said.

"And the mines give us nothing we can use to barter for more food and water," his uncle added.

A'Ran dropped his feet from the table and rose to face his uncle. Mansr appeared more haggard every time they met. His uncle bowed.

"The people are already starving. They cannot await the results of another planting," A'Ran mused.

"They cannot, nephew." Mansr's scratchy voice was soft. A'Ran's gaze rested on him for a long moment. Mansr awaited a response.

"You met *nishani*."

"I did. Did you await the signs?" Mansr's voice was too casual, too even.

"I did," A'Ran said. "Unfortunately, my lifemate knows nothing of Anshan or even the Five Galaxies. She understands nothing of our traditions."

"Surely women have mates where she is from."

"Her world is very different, uncle."

"She belongs on Anshan. Maybe then she'll see what she must do," Mansr said.

"It's too dangerous for her on Anshan," A'Ran replied. "She couldn't survive if anything happened, and every Yirkin warrior on the planet would be looking for her, once they hear she exists."

"She is yours, and it's your decision, though I think she is stronger than you think," Mansr said. "If it were her decision, she would come."

"It is *not* her decision," he said darkly.

Mansr's presence could not have come at a worse time. With repairs for his armies commandeering the last of the Anshan ore he had to trade or sell, he wouldn't be able to afford to feed his people and fight a war. Yet both must be done. There was always the Council, and the only ally A'Ran still had. Assistance might come from their direction, but any favor from the Council would cost him dearly in another way. Restless, A'Ran rose and paced.

"She fears me, Uncle," he said with difficulty. "She's not ready to take her place."

"*Nishani* was brave with me."

"It was not her choice to come here."

"What choice does a woman have?"

"She is not like ours." He glanced at his uncle, bemused. "Her thoughts and actions are hers alone. I have not the time to spend with her."

"The fate of your people relies on you bonding her to Anshan."

"The fate of my people will not matter if they do not live through the war!" A'Ran snapped.

"You are *dhjan*, but you are also a man, nephew," Mansr said. "Your responsibility cannot always be to your people. Is there no part of you that desires this woman as a man does, as more than a key to save your people?"

"First you ask me to send her to the center of the battle and now you wish me to take my time with her?" A'Ran shook his head. "You cannot have both, uncle. There is not time for both."

"You avoid my question," Mansr insisted. "You can be a man, a ruler, and a battle commander, A'Ran."

"Battle commander first." A'Ran sat once more, calming. Mansr grew grave and leaned forward.

"Son, you are not complete without her. Anshan is not complete and will never heal without her. You may battle all you wish, but you will never win until the balance is struck, until Anshan

has its *nishani*, and its *nishani* is on the planet. You have forgotten how to be anyone but a battle commander.”

“There has been only war as long as I can remember. Anshan needs her, but she can’t stay where it’s so unsafe, and she isn’t adapting the way she should be,” A’Ran said.

“Maybe you must change just as she must. You must grow beyond your role as a battle commander, if you want her to accept her place.”

A’Ran frowned at the truth in his uncle’s words.

“And there must be a solution to the Yirkin,” Mansr said. “Qatwal has supported you before.”

“Her sister is wed to the son of a Qatwal *dhjan*,” A’Ran said. “The Qatwal disowns her, yet seeks to battle me as well for the affront.”

“Qatwal has always been full of itself, but they may still aid you,” Mansr said. “She does not look like one of theirs.”

“She is not,” A’Ran affirmed. “She is from even further.”

“She’s beautiful, like your sister’s dolls.”

“Talal has not had dolls in sun-cycles, Uncle,” A’Ran replied. “But yes, she is.”

“I forget you are all grown sometimes. Do you not ever wish to have a family, to be as happy as your father was so long ago?”

His words struck A’Ran hard. His chest clenched, and he found himself holding his breath. He closed his eyes, recalling how happy he and his sisters were before the war. He recalled his mother, her heavy features nonetheless made beautiful by her radiant smile as she swung a waist-high Talal around.

It was his favorite memory, that which preceded his abrupt knowledge of war and the world at large. He sat with his sisters and mother beneath a brilliant sky atop the small rise overlooking Anshan Palace with its white columns and myriad of windows. Cats wrestled and played around them while D’Ryn’s strict oversight of his and Gage’s actions could not be shaken.

The memory was achingly beautiful, and he remembered seeing his war-weary father approach from the house. His whole face had changed upon seeing his *nishani* and children, had gone from tired to hopeful.

A’Ran hissed as he released his breath and opened his eyes. A distant light was in Mansr’s eyes, a faded glow about his face.

“I remember, before Anshan fell,” Mansr whispered.

A’Ran made no response, unable to quell the tremor deep within him. At the age of fourteen sun-cycles, before he reached manhood, he had lost all but his sisters, been proclaimed *dhjan* of a planet he couldn’t even visit, and made battle commander of a war he knew nothing of.

Since then, he’d known nothing but war, been driven by nothing but revenge, fury, and the elusive glimmer of hope that he might one day feel as he had sitting with his mother and sisters on that hill above his rightful home.

It would never be the same, could never be the same. As he mulled his uncle’s words, the scene in his mind altered and shifted. What if it were his *nishani* on the hill with his sisters? What if she looked upon him as his mother had his father, with adoration and love?

He rejected the thought. It was too fanciful to look so far ahead when he needed to determine how to prevent his people from starving. Nonetheless, he was disturbed far more than he recalled being in many sun-cycles. He’d tried to block all memories of a happier time for fear he’d never see such times again.

“I will find the payment for food,” he said.

His uncle looked deflated and even more haggard. “I cannot stay long.”

“I know, Uncle.” He shook himself mentally to refocus on the dire circumstances before him but was unable to force the thought of Kiera from his mind. “Go and rest, Uncle. I know you get little enough as it is.”

"A final warning, A'Ran. The *dhjan nishani* must willingly accept her place at your side and her role in helping the planet. If she does not, the planet will die."

A'Ran despised the words the moment he heard them. She was beyond his control, and so was her choice of whether or not to accept her place.

"You must look beyond yourself to find a way to win her, A'Ran, or the planet is lost."

Mansr offered no other advice but rose and bowed once more before striding to the door. A'Ran returned to his battle loss assessments. Mansr's words had all been true. The more he considered them, the more he realized that he didn't know how to be anyone but a battle commander. He'd never considered it a fault before. *Nishani* wasn't the only problem; he was, too.

* * *

Though he was physically engaged in swordplay, Kiera sensed A'Ran's distraction the next morning as they sparred. He spoke even less than normal. His touch was mechanical and instructional, his attention elsewhere. She wasn't eager to draw his undivided attention, but his distance struck her as unusual, if not yet another rejection. She lowered her sword long before the sky lightened. His attention shifted to her.

"We don't have to do this today," she said.

A'Ran straightened, his piercing gaze on her. His thick form was tense, his features implacable. Talal's assessment of there being something wrong returned to her.

"You seem to have other matters on your mind," Kiera prodded. "I don't want to keep you from anything."

"What is it you fear of me?" he demanded, lowering his sword and pacing closer to her.

Surprised, she said nothing. He took a step closer. She retreated a step, regretting drawing his intensity. A'Ran compelled the sword into the ground deep enough for it to remain upright when he released it. He leaned forward and took her sword, driving it into the ground as well.

"Are we doing training forms?" she asked as he returned his dark stare to her.

"No."

"We're done?" she asked.

"No."

The odd tension was between them again, and she wondered what it was about her abductor that made her blood burn, especially when he was so unapproachable.

"So," she murmured, "we're just going to stand out here and stare at each other all morning? If so, I can think of better things to do."

A'Ran's gaze swept over her, making her skin tingle with awareness.

"Well, I'm off then," she said, and turned to leave.

"Stay." The command was sharp. Kiera grimaced.

"I'm not a dog, and I want to accomplish something today," she muttered. "If you aren't going to train me and are just going to stare at me, I'm doing something else with my time."

"I leave soon." His words made her pause in the doorway, and she faced him, frowning.

"I expected you to go soon."

A'Ran moved toward her again, stopping outside of arms' reach.

"You and your duties," she added. *I'm just another one of them.* She stiffened at the reality and couldn't decide if it were good to keep the distance between them or if she really wanted more. If there were something more between them, would he ever entertain letting her go home?

"Travel well," she said, and turned away again.

She walked towards her quarters, uncertain why his departure bothered her. She expected to be left behind many more times. He joined her, and she glanced up at him.

"There is a feast tonight," he told her.

"Very well. What's the occasion?"

“War and our mating. The heads of the clans also in exile will come to meet you.”

“Really?” She stopped to face him. He was tense again.

“I will also announce you as the supreme battle strategist. I would be honored if you chose to attend.”

She searched his fierce features. She suspected both meeting the clan heads and the announcement to be big deals for a people with such rigid traditions, but A’Ran looked as if he were discussing the whereabouts of her translator.

“I’ll be happy to be there,” she said at last.

He nodded curtly, as if expecting the response. He turned and walked down another corridor. Kiera watched him, troubled by their morning interaction. The feast must be important, and his attempt to request her attendance-- rather than demand it-- impressed her.

“A’Ran,” she called hesitantly. “I know you’re busy, but ...”

He stopped and turned, his gaze on her again, distracting her. She shook her head to focus her thoughts.

“I made something I want to show you. If you have time.”

He didn’t exactly leap to follow her. When he didn’t object either, she started toward her room. He trailed, as if uncertain he wanted to follow at all. She waved her hand in front of the access pad to her room and entered, crossing to grab her sketch book. She sat down on the edge of the bed and patted the spot beside her, nervous about showing him her art.

“You may not like it,” she said. “And I’ll admit, a lot of these are you. You can just ignore them, if you want.”

A shiver ran through her as he sat close enough for their bodies to brush. He took the sketch pad she handed him and awkwardly pushed the pages around, unaccustomed to a book. She opened the cover for him to show the first drawing she’d done of him. Stone-faced, he stared at it, and her face grew warm at his lack of response.

“I have a better one,” she said, and turned to the second drawing. He didn’t respond. She turned a few more pages, until he rested a hand on hers to keep her from turning. Her face flamed hot as she saw the image from her vision: the two of them holding hands while gazing at each other adoringly and walking on the cracked planet. She tugged her hand free to turn the page quickly. He left his hand in place, preventing her.

“You did this?” he asked at last in a hushed tone.

“I did all of them. It’s what I do on my planet. I draw and paint,” she said, flustered as his gaze stayed on the drawing of them holding hands. “That’s not a good one. I can show you more.”

“No.”

She searched his face, unable to read him or his response.

“This ...” He trailed off, a small frown on his face. “I want this.”

Her heart fluttered at his words, and she grew excited about him wanting the type of relationship like she’d drawn, until she saw him fumbling with the page as if to pull it free.

“Here, let me,” she said. She took the book from him and carefully pulled the page free. “It’s not my best. You don’t want another one?”

“No.”

He folded it in fourths, rose, and strode away, leaving her alone. She stared after him, uncertain what to think.

CHAPTER SEVEN

A’Ran went to his quarters, the thin sheet of what felt like a leaf in his hand. He unfolded it only when in the safety of his locked room and sat it down on the desk to stare at it.

He'd never seen art of this kind, only the statues of his father's court and the multi-hued strands used to decorate homes. The depiction was of him, and her, and Anshan, though how she knew Anshan, he didn't know. He was more interested in them holding hands and the look on her face, one of admiration.

His face, however, was blank. She either hadn't completed the art form, or she didn't know what he looked like when he was content.

Neither did he. Mansr's words returned to him, those that wanted him to be something other than a warrior. He cared for his sisters; they were his blood relations. He'd never cared for another woman in the way his father had loved his mother. He'd granted favors to women as a way of releasing his frustration, but never with any real affection-- just physical need. The concept of something more was as foreign to him as peace, and yet he *wanted* the image on the leaf to be real. He found himself wanting his *nishani* to gaze at him as she did in the image. He wanted them to be on Anshan together and bring peace and life to the dying planet.

He wanted there to be something more than war. It was what *nishani* asked him the day prior: if she learned duty, what would he learn? She knew what the answer was, but hadn't spoken it. If she learned duty, then he must learn *this*.

He raised the leaf again, unable to take his eyes off it.

"A'Ran?" Jetr's voice came over the communicator.

"Yes."

"The Council awaits you."

"I will be there soon," he said, and lowered the leaf.

She must choose Anshan. Mansr's words returned to him. She wouldn't, not if he couldn't become the man on the leaf. He'd hoped she would adjust to his world on her own, never suspecting he'd need to change himself. In the past few days, he'd learned just how unready he was to be the lifemate of his own *nishani*. Disturbed, he folded the leaf and placed it in his pocket.

He carried it with him to the long, pointless Council meeting, to his afternoon sparring session with Jetr, to the banquet and introduction of his *nishani* to the clan leaders. He began to think his own actions had cost him the choice he'd yet to give her: to stay forever or return to her planet.

He watched her throughout the night's activities, seeking to judge whether Mansr's parting words were true. He wanted to believe the woman he-- and Anshan-- chose would in turn choose *them*, but he began to see what Ne'Rin and Mansr had warned him of: she was not one of theirs and would not accept the duties she knew nothing about. Mansr's parting warning, that she must voluntarily accept her role and Anshan as her home, had struck him as odd, for why would she not when he honored her with the greatest honor ever bestowed upon a non-ruling Anshan?

Only now was he beginning to understand that her staying depended less on duty and honor and more on *him*.

Emotions of all kinds played across her face as the night progressed. She greeted the room full of people with apprehension, her interaction with his sisters with pleasure, her introduction to the clan leaders and her position of master battle planner with both excitement and awe. In between her interactions with people and the spotlight, she watched the world with worry and thoughtfulness. Her frown deepened when she looked at Ne'Rin, and her gaze grew intense and considering when she regarded him.

With a sense of deep dread, he felt for the first time that the role he expected of her may not be a role she chose to fulfill.

She doesn't know her place. She's too different, A'Ran, Ne'Rin had said.

She must choose Anshan of her own will, Mansr had reminded him.

That he might lose her was not a thought he had entertained before. It was not possible that any man could take her or that there was any place she could go that he could not find her. The

only possibility-- that *she* might choose to leave-- hadn't crossed his mind. It'd never happened in the history of Anshan that a *nishani* turned down her position. And yet, this evening, the possibility was as obvious as it had not been that morning.

Another tension was in the air of the banquet. The Council members were restless, with messengers discreetly pacing in and out of the room throughout the evening. His own messengers brought him vague news of unrest from the battlefield and news of there being new opponents at the battle. He suspected the Council members knew more and that this night of relative peace was the last he would know for a very long time.

When the evening moved into night, *nishani* appeared too sleepy to stand and took a seat beside D'Ryn. A'Ran approached her then, knowing his journey in the morning would delay the conversation they needed to have.

Nishani followed him from the bustling, warm banquet room to the cool courtyard in front of the house beneath a full sky of stars. He motioned for her to sit but remained standing. She looked at him curiously, and he rolled his shoulders back, prepping himself physically for the verbal discussion to come.

"*Nishani*, have you enjoyed the evening?"

"Yes, thank you. I met all your Council members. I didn't like Ulri but the others were good."

"I travel tomorrow morning with my counselors. It will be some time before I return."

"And you still won't take me with you?" she asked again.

"No, *nishani*," he said quietly. "I go to Anshan."

"I thought I was supposed to go to Anshan."

"Someday," he said. "Do you know why?"

"To save your people and your planet. Then you could send me home, and Ne'Rin could pick you a new *nishani* that he likes."

A'Ran absorbed her words, which fell hard upon his ears. He met her gaze, and she shifted at his intensity.

"What is it?" she asked with a sigh. "What have I said wrong this time?"

"*Nishani*, you must make a choice."

"What choice?"

"You must choose to remain with me or to return to your home."

"You would send me home?" she asked, puzzled. "But I thought I was supposed to save the planet."

"You must choose to stay or return," he repeated.

"Won't Anshan die without me?"

"You cannot remain here at my will," he said with some difficulty. "You must remain here at your will. Or you must go home."

Realization made her blanch. Disbelief and sorrow crossed her face as she began to understand her options. If she chose to stay, she would never see her home again. If she chose to leave, *his* home would be destroyed. It was not a decision he envied; he alone knew what a burden it was to know the fate of a planet and its inhabitants rested upon his shoulders.

"I thought ... I thought ..." Her voice cracked. She drew a deep breath, cleared her throat, and asked, "I can't do both?"

"No."

Her gaze slid to the stone floor. She stood and paced, and emotions flew across her face. A'Ran was uncertain what to expect but found himself disappointed she didn't instantly volunteer to stay.

"I need ... I need to think... about this," she managed. Her eyes welled with tears, and she ducked her head, turning white, then red. "You want me ... to walk away from everything I know, my family ... I knew it was possible, but I didn't think I'd have a chance to go home at all ... but still, I couldn't leave a whole planet to die!"

Her look of soul-deep sorrow touched him, and he recalled what he felt as a youth to find his father and mother dead and his family hunted and forced out of their own home. She turned to leave, and he caught her arm. *Nishani* didn't resist when he wrapped his arms around her but began to cry the soul-deep sobs he remembered from his youth. Her trembling body was warm and small tucked against him. He rested his chin atop her head, knowing there were no words to comfort someone who hurt so deeply and regretful that he caused this pain.

He held her for a long moment, surprised to find her sorrow echoed in his breast at knowing she might choose to leave. He hadn't thought himself attached to the unique woman he chose as a *nishani*. They were bound by fate, and he knew she felt the profound connection between them from the moment they met. Was it possible for such a connection to be stronger than her bond to her own world?

She calmed in his arms, and he focused on comforting her and not his awareness of her soft body pressed against him.

"A'Ran?" she whispered.

"Yes, *nishani*."

She hesitated, then propped her chin on his chest, gazing up at him with stormy, reddened eyes. He smoothed the remaining tears from her face.

"Will you do something for me?" she asked uncertainly. "You can say no."

"What would you have me do?"

"Will you kiss me? Like you did when we met? I just want to know if ... it's important," she asked, face flushing. "You can say no."

"*Nishani*, no man would ever turn down such a request," he said, amused.

Her words floored and excited him for more reasons than one. He'd begun to think he'd lost any chance he had at keeping her. He complied and kissed her deeply, enjoying the taste and feel of her despite the mix of salty tears. Their kiss grew more passionate, the feel of her body against him not enough to sate his growing need. The connection between them flowed with hot energy, the planet's life form itself bonding the two of them together at their touch. She clutched at him, and he tightened his grip around her, dragging their bodies together.

Their kissing grew frantic, their petting setting them both afire. He lifted her at last and carried her to his quarters, senses full of her quickened breath, heady female scent, sweet taste. He'd always intended to bed her when she was ready for him, but he'd never thought that moment would be now, if at all. His body responded with a surge of heat and desire at the idea of feeling her naked body beneath his.

He knew more weighed on her wish than a simple kiss. Deep down, he suspected it was her farewell to him. If she'd chosen to leave, he wouldn't send her away without a night she'd remember for all time.

* * *

She awoke alone. The bed smelled of him, and her body ached from the active night. She stared at the ceiling, enjoying the breeze skating through the windows.

Wow. There was no other way for her to imagine the night, aside from as otherworldly as her new world. Her blood boiled at the thought of another night with him, and she sat, disturbed.

She hadn't expected to be forced into such a decision. She definitely didn't expect the decision to be so hard. She'd wanted to return home since she arrived, yet when presented with the enormity of her importance in her new world ... when she realized how incredible it really would be to have a man like A'Ran in her bed every night ... when she saw he was capable of passion ... when she found out an entire planet full of people would die if she left ...

She couldn't help the tears at such a thought. It was too large of a concept for her to wrap her head around. That *she*, a starving artist who'd been dragged across the universe because her best friend felt sorry for her, was the key to saving an entire race of people was unimaginable.

He'd certainly made her feel like the queen of the universe.

Pensive and troubled, she dressed for a difficult day. A'Ran was gone indefinitely for a surge operation in his war, leaving her alone with her thoughts. There really wasn't a decision to make. As much as she wanted to return home, she could never leave an entire planet to die just because she wanted to go back to the depressing part-time job and the row house where she and the cat would live alone!

She'd wanted to see if he was capable of being anything more than the cold, distant warrior obsessed with war. She didn't expect him to be as passionate, warm, and gentle as he'd been with her. There was a man behind the fierce face, and she'd only confused herself more by spending the night with him!

She gazed around A'Ran's bedroom, conflicted with the idea that her choice would mean she never saw her home, her family again.

She rubbed her face, dressed in grey to reflect her mood, and tucked her spare earpiece into her pocket as she did every day. The house was quiet. The Council would have left at dawn with A'Ran. At the least, she could help him battle plan while she thought hard about what to do with her life. She'd gotten to the conference room when she heard soft footfalls behind her. She started to turn, expecting to see Talal.

A hood made of rough material was thrown over her head and her hands bound before she could scream. Someone threw her over his shoulder and she let out a shout that earned her a blow to the head. Caught between consciousness and darkness, she hung limply for a long time, until the man holding her flung her onto a hard floor. The sound of a door closing and muffled voices outside the door were followed by silence. She tore off the hood, aware she was on a spaceship by the dark grey landscape. The cell where she sat measured six by six with a grey bench.

She sat, confused. She didn't have much time to think before the door slid open, and Ne'Rin squatted in the doorway. The look on his face made her shrink back from him. He reached out to her, placing the translator on her ear.

"Since meeting you, I've felt you were nothing but a curse." His words were hard, his eyes even harder. "If A'Ran had mated with a proper *nishani*, we'd not be losing this war."

"Ne'Rin, what are you talking about?" she whispered.

"I don't know what you did to him, but I intend to repair the damage you've done to our people." He rose and hauled her to her feet, all but dragging her into the hall. Another warrior trailed as he pulled her down the hall.

"Ne'Rin, A'Ran chose me. I do his battle planning. I'm going-- "

"He's gone weak after all these years at battle and lost sight of winning back our planet! Do you know how many of my people have starved this moon-cycle alone? All he had to do was choose a *nishani*-- my sister!-- and the planet would be healed!" His words were accompanied by a squeeze on her arm painful enough to make her gasp. She said nothing and trotted to keep up with his long stride. He led her through the ship to a cargo area filled with pods on the wall. He paused before one and pressed his hand to a keypad. "Instead, he waited for you, and you've made him weak."

The grey wall slid away to display an escape pod, large enough for one person standing. She stared at it, then at him.

"Farewell, *nishani*."

His words were accompanied by a shove. She landed in the pod, and the door slid closed before she could react.

"Ne'Rin!" she shouted, pounding on the door. "Don't do this!"

The pod jolted and dropped, the sickening sense making her nauseous. For a long moment, it was dark and silent, until the interior of the pod lit up with two screens, one displaying the empty space outside and the other displaying a control panel with writing similar to that of the battle planning station.

The pod rotated slowly, revealing the shape of the hulking grey ship as it grew farther away. Kiera stared, unable to fathom she'd been ejected into the middle of *space* to die. There was enough room for her to raise her arms but not sit, and she leaned against the uncomfortable wall, gazing at the world spinning outside her pod.

The ship grew distant. She looked around her, wondering what the hell to do now. Tears rose, and her chest clenched.

He wanted her *dead*. He'd not considered sending her home-- no, he'd decided to kill her! Panic seized her at the thought of floating through space until her air ran out. She looked at the control panel, trying to decipher any of the symbols. There were several she recognized.

Just as the grey ship disappeared from sight, another shape came into view. It was a planet, dusty red, as if it were nothing but dry desert. Her speed was consistent, her destination clear. No, Ne'Rin wasn't stupid enough to send her floating around space. He was sending her straight into a planet!

She rubbed her face and looked at the control panel again. She pressed one button, then another, struggling to understand the symbols that popped up on the screen in response. She'd learned the parts of a warship inside and out while learning the battle planning and looked for the configuration button among her options popping up on the screen. She found it and punched it, looking at the pod from the inside and out.

Its exterior shields were disarmed and he'd disabled the communications capability. Once the planet's gravity sucked her in, its atmosphere would fry her. She swallowed a sob as she realized just how badly someone wanted her dead.

Her hands shook as she manipulated the configuration to arm the shields around it. Ne'Rin underestimated her if he thought she wouldn't be able to figure this much out! Swearing at him, she stared hard at the configuration panels. The air was another issue; he hadn't included an additional air pod on this one. She didn't have much air left, and she couldn't enable the control panel so she could direct the pod elsewhere.

She was headed to the planet no matter what. She hesitated, then looked at what capability the pod did have to keep her from smashing into the planet, even if she made it through the atmosphere. There were thrusters but no way to steer.

The pod jolted. There was a flash of light and what sounded like frying eggs that brought her gaze to the other screen. The red planet beneath her was drawing closer. The pod was well-insulated; she didn't feel the three-thousand-degree temperatures a foot from her. She held her breath, staring at the configuration as she flew through the atmosphere.

Unwilling to see her death, she closed her eyes, never imagining she'd ever be hurtling towards some distant planet in an escape pod booby-trapped to kill her! The strange sound continued for several minutes, and she trembled, trying hard not to think of what happened if she made it unscathed to the planet's surface.

Where the hell was she?

Tears streamed down her face. The frying stopped, and she felt another jolt. Her eyes flew open and she braced herself against the side. The pod dropped fast toward the surface, the sight of the spinning world beneath her sickening. She was pressed against the ceiling despite the gravity controller in the pod.

There was nothing on the red planet, no signs of buildings, no life. At least, nothing she could make out as she spun faster and faster. She closed her eyes, dizzy, then stared at the computer screen, watching her speed increase as her altitude decreased. She'd not yet figured out how to convert their measures of distance to miles. She looked again at the spinning ground, waiting until she was able to make out a rock formation clearly before engaging the thrusters.

The effect slammed her downwards, and the pod spun out of control, head over tail, shaking as it fought gravity.

“C’mon, c’mon,” she whispered desperately, her throat burning with acid as she struggled to hold down her stomach.

Of all the things she could be thinking about, she thought only of A’Ran. His face was in her thoughts, and the idea of never seeing him again crushed her as surely as colliding with the planet would. She didn’t know what she felt for him, but he was her destiny. She belonged with him. Everything else would work itself out.

The pod stabilized upside down, and she was crammed into half of the pod, unable to move with her hands tied. The ground approach slowed drastically as the pod’s thrusters roared but was still too fast for her comfort. She braced herself.

The pod bounced once and slammed into the ground. The computer blinked off, and the pod slid, stopping finally.

Bruised, she blinked as brilliant sunlight pierced the cracked door. Almost unable to believe she’d survived, she stared for a long moment, pushed the door open, and tumbled onto the ground.

She vomited, her head spinning from her trip. The air was dry and *hot*, as if she were in a sauna. She struggled to draw deep breaths. Sweat broke out on her skin, and she shielded her eyes against the sun before crawling back to the shade of the pod.

The landscape was open and flat, the heat making the ground shimmer.

She was going to die here, wherever here was. Stricken, she wrapped her arms around her knees and began to cry. If only she’d worked up the nerve to tell A’Ran about her suspicions about Ne’Rin! She wouldn’t be stranded on some foreign, deserted planet!

She cried until too tired to cry more, then leaned against the pod, feeling as if her skin was frying despite the shade. She closed her eyes and rested her head against the pod.

She didn’t think it was possible to sleep in such discomfort, but a stiff, hot breeze tossed hair into her face awhile later, tickling her awake. She swiped it away, soaked with sweat, and opened her eyes.

She shifted with a grimace and looked down at the brush of grass against her hands. She’d thought the planet completely dead, but there was a bright patch of green grass beneath her and the pod. If there was grass, there was bound to be water somewhere.

The suns were setting. She rose to see how far away they were from the horizon, miserable in the heat. She rustled through the pod to see if there was any water or food.

Ne’Rin didn’t plan on giving her any chance to live. She was too hot to cry, and she curled up on the grass. It felt cooler than the air against her fevered skin.

Dusk took away much of the intolerable heat, and a stiff breeze dried her sweat. She remained on the ground, at a loss as to what to do. If she left the pod, she might fry in the morning. If she stayed, she’d never find help!

More tears rose, and she tugged at her hands, furious he’d even thought to cuff her! As if she wasn’t completely vulnerable as it was! He wasn’t taking chances she’d survive.

A’Ran.

She couldn’t think of him, not now. The thought of him made her heart leap and her body ache for him. She wanted to curl up in the pod and sob until he rescued her, even knowing he’d never know where to find her.

A light shined in her face, and she twisted, fear piercing her misery. She pushed herself up and shielded her face with her bound hands. Someone grabbed her and lifted her to her feet. He pushed her sleeve up to see her band.

There was a quiet exchange between two of the four dark shapes around her. She couldn’t help but be grateful they at least resembled humans. She was expecting some sort of alien monster to inhabit the brutal planet. One took her hands while another shined the glowing orb on her bindings. He released them with a touch of his thumb. Furious, she threw them and turned to find two of the beings kneeling by the grass, touching them.

She crossed her arms, exhausted. They rose and shone the light on her again. One took her arm, gesturing at the armband. He faced her, his features dark, and addressed her. She pushed the light away and shrugged, pulling her arm free. One handed her a water canteen, and she drank long and deep, not stopping even when another took her arm and pulled her forward. The light went out.

They walked into the night. Two moons rose, and the four warriors around her kept to a path only they understood. The desert was flat, the rock formations and canyons plentiful.

Beyond a nearby mountain range, lights and explosions lit up both the sky and the air between earth and sky. She watched, unnerved at how close the battles were. They shook the ground, and battleships raced overhead. The men ignored the signs of war, instead keeping to a quick pace along their path. Wherever she was, the battle was intense. Instead of stars overhead, there were ships.

They reached a small encampment at the bottom of a mountain and passed around it, one calling out a greeting as someone trotted out to meet them. They continued up a winding path toward the top of the lowest of the mountains. She lagged, fatigued. Two slowed to keep pace with her while the other three went on ahead.

Night brought a chill as uncomfortable as the heat of the day. Hot, hungry, exhausted, she stopped twice on the trek up the hill to catch her breath. They reached the top, where another set of low buildings were carved from the rock, their doors and windows glowing.

The mountains overlooked an expansive plain lined with encampments, an airfield, small ships, and other war arsenal. The battle waged just past the next range. She watched the flares of color against the night sky with tired fascination.

The men led her into a large meeting hall with warriors clumped in small groups throughout the hall. The air was filled with quiet, serious discussions and with the faint scents of war: sweat and weapons. It was lit with warm yellow light. She paused inside the door, not wanting to deal with anything else. Her body hurt, her head pulsed, and she wanted nothing more than to curl up on a warm rock outside and go to sleep.

The warriors before her looked as if they'd just been released from some sort of meeting. Some left, ignoring her, while others shifted between small groups. She looked around for somewhere to sit or hide, aware the two men who'd followed her up the mountain were still there.

Her gaze stumbled on a familiar face at the other end of the hall, and she gasped. She took in the familiar dress and coloring of the men around her, startled to realize she *did* know where she was.

"Mansr!" she cried, tears filling her eyes again.

A look of astonishment crossed his face as he turned. She raced forward through the men, not caring what they thought, and flung herself into Mansr's arms with enough force to drive him back a step.

He grunted and started to take her arms to pry her away. She shoved his hands away, clinging to him. He relented and spoke, his words garbled. She squeezed her eyes closed, not caring what he said and suspecting he was lecturing her on how not to behave in public. He wrapped one arm around her and touched her ear with his other hand, depositing a translator there.

"*Nishani*," he chided.

"No!" she almost shouted, pulling away to glare at him with tear-filled eyes. "Don't tell me what to do! I just had the most horrifying day of my life! I almost died a million times over, and if I didn't know how to enable the shields on the escape pod, I would have burned up in the atmosphere, and if that didn't kill me, then hitting the planet--"

He held up a hand, planting it across her mouth when she refused to stop.

"I cannot understand you when you speak so quickly, *nishani*," he said, warmth crossing his dark eyes. "Calm down."

She hugged him, and he grunted.

"You want to meet the man who rescued you?"

She wiped her eyes and turned without releasing him.

"This is my son and the cousin of the *dhjan*, Leyon."

Leyon was wiry and tall, his whip-like body unlike A'Ran's, who was far thicker. His features, however, were similar, his eyes identical.

"It is my duty, *nishani*," he replied. He looked hard at Mansr, who chuckled.

"*Nishani*, if you'll let me go," Mansr said, "I'll take you somewhere to rest."

She released him reluctantly. He took her arm and led her through the crowd into the night. Leyon followed, and Mansr took her into a small dwelling on the mountain. He led her to a bench in the middle of the house and glanced at an awaiting servant, who darted away. She crossed her arms.

"Can you call A'Ran and tell him where I am?" she asked.

"I will," Mansr said, sitting down across from her.

Grass tickled her feet, and she glanced down at the swath of green beneath her. Irritated, she pulled her feet up and crossed her legs beneath her. Mansr and Leyon both stared at her, and she rubbed her face.

"Mansr, I really need some food," she said, deflated. "I've had a bad day."

"I would say so," he replied. "Do you know where you are?"

"Anshan?"

"I'm not sure how you made it through the enemy's defenses. We can't get any ship off planet."

"I don't know," she said, eyes watering.

"You are the battle planner?" Leyon asked.

"Yes."

"Tomorrow, son," Mansr said.

"A'Ran can't come get me?" she asked, distressed.

"Not right now. He's got a bad space battle on his hands. Your sister's family joined our enemy."

"This is where you want me to be anyway," she observed glumly. "I'm supposed to be here, aren't I?"

"You are," Mansr said with another frown. "I didn't expect you to arrive this way. Leyon said you arrived in an escape pod?"

"Yes," she said. "The communications and control panels were disabled, but I figured out how to engage the shields. I did what I could. You know he even put bindings on me to make sure I didn't survive?"

"Who?" he asked.

"Ne'Rin," she said in a tight voice. "I don't think he wanted me to survive at all."

The two men shared a look.

"Mansr, I want A'Ran and I want to go home," she said, at an end with her endurance. She started to cry again, too exhausted to stop. He rose and took her arm, leading her into one of the small bedrooms, where a grey bed awaited her.

"Sleep, *nishani*. We'll talk tomorrow."

CHAPTER EIGHT

God, her body hurt! Crashing into the planet left the left side of her torso black and bruised. If not for the painkillers Mansr gave her as soon as she awoke and her newest discovery to distract her from the lingering pain, she'd be too miserable to move.

She made grass grow. The realization made her want to laugh and cringe at the same time. Who the hell could make grass grow?

She planted her hand on the red ground and counted to ten, until she felt the tickle of blades of grass beneath her hand. Astonished, she leaned back and watched it rise, thick and plush, to a height of several inches.

“Leyon?” She turned to find him staring at her from across the dwelling. She motioned to the small patch of grass. “Can you do this, too?”

“Only the *nishani*,” he said. He looked at her the way she looked at the six-legged cat that awoke her that morning.

“Only I can ...” She trailed off, recalling her last conversation with A’Ran. She’d never thought he meant she’d *literally* help revive the planet. She’d thought her role more spiritual or symbolic. “This is good, right?”

“Yes, *nishani*.”

He thought her crazy. She rolled her eyes and finished her breakfast. The dwelling was warm already in the midmorning, and she wondered how she’d survive another day of heat like yesterday’s. Drained despite her long night of rest, she didn’t look forward to anything this day.

“Do you want to talk to the *dhjan*?”

She rose quickly in response from her place kneeling at the small table. He led her into the hot morning. The battle still raged in the distance, the colors duller against the morning sky. Several fighter ships lifted off from the valley as they neared another of the buildings beside the meeting hall.

It was packed with warriors facing a screen with A’Ran’s calm, hard image displayed. Her heart quickened at the sight of him. She couldn’t hear the quiet discussions but saw Mansr at the front, speaking to A’Ran. Leyon waited with her at the doorway as the war discussions continued. Kiera pulled her hair into a ponytail, the back of her neck already damp with sweat. Grass tickled her feet as she stayed in place too long.

Agitated, she glanced down, then back-- kneeling to pull a handful of it free. She placed it in her pocket, ignoring Leyon’s look. The warriors moved and shifted as one, and she backpedaled quickly out of their paths as they exited the dwelling. Mansr and another older man remained. He motioned her in, and she approached somewhat anxiously.

A’Ran was unreadable. He was seated, his fingers steepled and his gaze penetrating. He wasn’t happy, and part of her wondered if she’d done something already to piss him off. Mansr glanced at her.

“Hello, A’Ran,” she said quietly.

“Hello, Kiera.” He’d never used her name before. “Are you well?”

“Yes, I am,” she said. She could feel his angry energy even over the viewer. She withdrew the grass from her pocket and held it out as a peace offering, uncertain how to take his mood. “I can make grass grow! Doesn’t that make you happy?”

“You may be useful yet, *nishani*,” he allowed. A faint smile escaped despite his dark mood.

She rolled her eyes at him.

“You’re hurt,” he said, his mood darkening. She touched her bruised cheekbone and realized doing so exposed her black and blue arm.

“I crashed into the planet,” she said. “It could’ve been worse. I was able to re-engage the shields and the thrusters.”

“She’s fortunate. We saw the pod as it fell,” Mansr seconded. “It’s good you knew a thing or two about configuring a ship, *nishani*.”

A’Ran lifted his chin to his uncle, who bowed in response to the dismissal and left. She glanced over her shoulder as the others left.

“Are you angry?” she asked, returning her gaze to the *dhjan*. His position didn’t change even when they were alone, his gaze direct and hard.

“Not at you,” he replied. “What did Ne’Rin say to you before he ejected you from the ship?”

She looked away and cleared her throat, embarrassed to feel tears in her eyes again.

"I'm sorry," she murmured. "I've never had anyone hate me so much. He seemed to think you'd gone weak and I was the source of your weakness. He said without me, you might win your war." She traced the bruises around her wrists from the bindings. "Are you disappointed with me?"

"I chose you. Anshan chose you."

"Would you choose differently?"

"No, Kiera," he said, voice softening. She crossed her arms, hugging herself.

"I'm so sorry, A'Ran."

"Why are *you* sorry?"

"You have enough to worry about with all your duties," she replied.

"My family should come before my duties. I'll evacuate you as soon as it's safe."

"I can help you from here," she said. "I can help Mansr battle plan."

"*Nishani*-- "

"I want to! I'm supposed to be here!"

He gazed at her, shifting to lean forward, the only sign of his unease. She braced herself for a refusal and a fight. He took her in for a long moment before caving.

"Mansr needs the help."

"You'll let me stay?" Surprised, she met his dark gaze.

"Not too long, and only until the space war is calm enough for me to evacuate you," he said firmly.

"I don't want to disappoint you," she said slowly. "It's my fault Ne'Rin lost his faith in you."

"That has nothing to do with you, *nishani*. Do not apologize for another's betrayal."

She wondered if he felt hurt at his best friend's betrayal but didn't have the nerve to ask. He appeared hard and strong as usual. There was no sign Ne'Rin's betrayal affected him at all.

"I must go, *nishani*. Are you well enough to battle plan?"

She nodded.

"Have Mansr show you to the command center. The ground battle is yours."

Her breath caught at his words. Thrilled, she realized he'd just granted her something he'd never given anyone else: the position as his equal.

"Thank you," she said in a hushed voice. "Will I see you soon?"

"As soon as I can arrange it. You'll see how difficult our position," he replied. "Send in Mansr."

"Be careful, A'Ran."

"And you, *nishani*. Mansr and Leyon will take care of you."

"I don't-- "

"Hush, woman," he said. "Go."

She rolled her eyes at him again, and he offered another faint smile before she left. She joined Leyon outside in the hot morning and waited for Mansr.

"Is everyone from your planet like you?" Leyon asked, his gaze intent.

"For the most part," she replied.

"You have no men on your planet."

"We do!"

He shook his head. Mansr returned and motioned for her to follow him. He led her through the small encampment toward the mountain and up a smooth walkway to the flattened peak of one ridge. In the center was a massive console surrounded by a circular bench beneath the shade of a ledge. Several warriors loitered near the console. Mansr activated the audio communications.

"You'll be able to communicate with me as required." A'Ran's low voice came to her through the unseen speaker.

She approached the console, circling it once as she took in the different symbols. She touched her palm to the activation key, and the ground battle hologram sprung up before her. It whirled slowly.

"A lot changed fast," she murmured.

"It did."

"And not for the best."

"We have reinforcements inbound. The Council split on sanctioning me, and those whose support Jetr swayed for me are sending their armies to battle."

She reviewed the last several days, taking in the swelling number of enemies in the skies and on the ground.

"How many ground forces do you expect?" she asked.

"One and a half times what we have now."

"Where did you learn?" Leyon asked, standing beside her.

"In A'Ran's battle room."

"Check grid 77," A'Ran instructed.

She manipulated the scene before her and saw his concern: the only food repository in the area was under attack. She nudged Leyon aside to punch another set of buttons and issued an order to reinforce the failing efforts there.

"There aren't many good water sources," she murmured. "The next nearest is on the moon and a logistical nightmare."

"I'm sending a list of trouble areas. I've got to go. I trust you to handle these."

"Thank you, thank you," she whispered. "You don't know how much this means to me. You're not treating me like some enslaved woman with no brain."

"I've not given up on righting your behavior," he assured her.

"Good luck!" she retorted. She shook her head as he closed the communication line with a click and concentrated on the scene before her. The grids with issues popped up as a layer over the hologram of the existing battles. She couldn't read the writing, but she knew the numbers well enough to find the grids.

She sat down, growing oblivious to those around her as she manipulated and modified the battlefield. A'Ran submitted changes, and she reviewed the images. The day grew hot fast, though the surrounding peaks shaded her from the sun itself. Mansr sat beside her and remained, watching the scene before her. Only when the pain in her body returned did she lean back for a break with a grimace.

"You must rest," Mansr said quietly. "You've done more this day than I could in seven."

"My body hurts."

"Leyon will take you to the medical facility," he said. "Forgive me, *nishani*, I should have taken you yesterday. I wanted my nephew to see what kind of enemy he had."

She wasn't sure what to say and offered a smile instead. She didn't doubt the impact of her battered visage on any man, especially A'Ran. Leyon motioned for her to follow him and guided her through the rocky trails to another of the low stone buildings at the base of the hills.

An hour later, she left the medical facility, completely healed though still exhausted. Leyon took her into one of the mountains, and she sighed at the blast of chilled air that greeted her. The dining hall was vacant and massive, a cave converted into a cafeteria. He motioned for her to sit and brought her food and water.

"How did you learn to battle plan?" he asked, sitting across from her.

"In A'Ran's battle room. I was bored after he kidnapped me and left me with his sisters," she replied. She was getting used to the hard stares the warriors gave her, the only indication of their surprise at her candidness.

"I pity my cousin," he said at last. At her surprised look, he added, "I know him well enough to know you will change him. I do not know if he realizes how much."

"I'm not sure if you're insulting me or complimenting me," she said with a puzzled smile.

"He chose well, *nishani*."

"Thank you, I think."

"Are there many women on your planet?"

"Yes, there are about three billion. You want one?"

"I may." He was serious enough that she laughed.

"At least I haven't scared you away from them!"

"I want to see what kind of planet produces women like you."

She laughed harder, glancing up as Mansr joined them. He tossed his head to Leyon, who left quietly.

"How do you fare, *nishani*?" he asked.

"Good."

"You've mastered battle planning."

"Not yet. A'Ran is better than me."

"As he should be. He's been doing it for many years."

She ate her dinner, beat. He made no move to leave her in the cafeteria.

"I hoped you would come," he said softly.

"I don't know how long I can stay," she replied. "I don't think grass will benefit the war effort, though."

"It's a start. The world and its people will take time to heal."

She paused and stared at him, unable to comprehend an entire planet that depended on *her*. He seemed to assume she was staying for good, and she didn't know how to tell him A'Ran had given her a choice she hadn't yet made.

"A'Ran chose well," Mansr added. "Even if you are unusual."

"He has a lot on his shoulders."

"He has since his parents were killed. He's been the *dhjan* fighting this battle since he reached my shoulder. He's known nothing else in all these years. I am happy he found you, not only for Anshan but for him. He needs someone to remind him that there is more to his life than war."

"I don't want to disappoint any of you," she murmured. "Especially not him. Mansr, I can't help but think it's my fault that Ne'Rin betrayed him."

"It's not your fault," he said with A'Ran's firmness. "Ne'Rin's father betrayed A'Ran's father. Each man followed in his father's shadow. You were an excuse for him to do what he did."

"Ne'Rin's father?" she echoed, surprised to learn she'd overheard them plotting without knowing what they were doing. "That's awful."

"It is. He's asked Leyon to step into Ne'Rin's role."

"Mansr, what about Gage?" she asked more quietly.

"A'Ran told me," he said grimly. "He's taken on the responsibility of raising her child, if she chooses not to mate with another."

"She'll be heartbroken."

"Likely, but Ne'Rin would have killed you all without a second thought, as his father did the rest of their family. At least she and her babe will live."

"There's no saving Ne'Rin from whatever his issue is?" she asked, upset.

"A'Ran's already acted."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, Ne'Rin is no longer a threat."

She shivered. She didn't doubt A'Ran could be ruthless if he felt his family was threatened. She didn't like to think of how violent the man in control of a world always at war could be. She glanced down absently at the tickle of grass against her feet.

"Can I do anything more useful than this?" she asked.

"It will come," he said. "I know you are tired, but there is a place I'd like to show you."

She hesitated, ashamed to feel a sense of suspicion after Ne'Rin's betrayal. She looked at Mansr, whose sharp gaze took in her features.

"It can wait," he offered.

"No, I'm sorry," she said. "Just a little ..." She didn't finish but sensed he understood.

He rose and started toward the entrance. She trailed, stepping into the chilled desert night. Mansr strode down one of the many paths lining the rocky hills, away from the encampment and into a part of the hills untouched by any but the moons' light. Kiera went, resisting the urge to call A'Ran. She had nothing to fear from these people, especially not Mansr, a blood relative of A'Ran and his sisters.

He walked farther than she preferred before disappearing into a dark crevice. She waited at the top of the sloping walkway until she saw the outline of a door as he cracked it open. The outline turned to a bright square of light, and she followed him again.

Two warriors stood hidden in the dark on either side of the doorway. She jumped when one moved, her heart flipping. The warrior opened the door wider and motioned her in. She entered a narrow, well-lit hall and followed it through smoothly hewn walls. Several more warriors stood at intersections like gargoyles, moving only to point in the direction she needed to go.

She caught up to Mansr at long last. He stood outside a closed door down a short hallway lined with warriors. Her heart quickened as she paced through the silent warriors and joined him. He motioned to a glowing access pad.

"I cannot enter. Only the *dhjan* and *dhjan nishani*."

She hesitated again, not sure she was ready for another trial.

"Inside is one of three temples on Anshan where the heart of the planet and its people is. While I've never seen what lies within, legend says it's the key to the planet's survival."

She wanted to tell him she wasn't ready for this, that she hadn't even decided to stay yet. Her words died on her lips as she took in the deep worry lines and gaunt features of the man before her. After all he'd been through fighting for his home, how could she refuse?

With a nod, she prepared herself for the worst. He stepped aside and she waved her band in front of the access door. She couldn't help but feel surprised when it opened. Inside was another small chamber. She looked at Mansr, who nodded in encouragement, then stepped into the chamber.

The thick stone door behind her slid closed, and there was a pause before another door opened in front of her. She expected another similar chamber with a low ceiling and plain walls and was stunned at the massive cave before her.

The walls were covered with colorful pictographs of couples and Anshan's geometric writing, telling her a story she couldn't read. The tiled floor depicted Anshan and its moons, with the planet at the chamber's center. Two thrones of stone sat opposite her, awaiting their masters. In the center of the chamber was a small fountain whose waters had long gone dry. She walked into the chamber, awed by the drawings and writings on the walls. They were in different hands from different times, the top of the chamber rimmed with drawings of couples holding hands and standing on a ball she took to be Anshan.

She didn't understand the significance of the pictures or writing and frowned, wondering how such a simple place was considered sacred. She crossed the stone tiles to the center of the chamber and circled the plain fountain. More pictographs were carved in the rim, and she circled the fountain twice before finding what she thought was the beginning, marked by pictures larger than the rest.

She trailed her fingers over the first image chiseled into the stone: that of a man. The next depicted the planet, the next a woman holding a knife, then the fountain, a plant, a river. She struggled to understand what the images were trying to tell her. She reached the beginning again and looked around the chamber, perplexed.

The thrones caught her attention, and she crossed to them. One bore the same image of a man, the second of the woman. In the middle of the queen's throne was a low stone box she

mistook at first glance to be the world's most uncomfortable lumbar support. When she saw the king's throne had no such stone structure, she returned to the woman's and touched the box.

It clicked, and she jerked back. The top opened of its own volition, revealing an aged stone dagger with dulled edges and a chipped stone hilt. She withdrew it and hefted it. It was as heavy as it looked, as long as her forearm. She held it with two hands and retreated to the fountain, unable to shake the instinct that said the dagger on the fountain was the same.

She set the knife down on the edge and circled the fountain again until she'd reviewed all three of the pictographs where the female figure held a dagger. She almost slapped herself when she realized how simple it was.

The fountain contained instructions for making it work.

"*Dhjan, dhjan nishani*, dagger. Nishani's blood." She looked at the stone dagger and then at the fountain uneasily. There was no way she could fill it with blood!

She looked at the instructions again and saw the queen depicted with one drop of what she assumed was blood.

Kiera stepped back and spun around, feeling overwhelmed. She felt like panicking and running to her room and never leaving! Instead, she drew a deep breath and approached the fountain. Her hands shook as she gripped the heavy stone dagger, and she leaned against the fountain. With another deep breath, she ran her thumb down the jagged edge of the dagger. Stinging made her curse, and she grimaced as she held her thumb over the fountain. She watched the crimson drop form, stretch, then fall into the fountain.

She leaned over the edge to see the stone tile at the bottom of the fountain absorb her blood. She sucked her thumb and stepped back, waiting for something to happen. According to the pictures, there would be plants. Yet there was no earth or place for them to grow around her.

A long, silent moment passed. She began to think she'd misunderstood the pictures when a green sprout appeared at the center of the fountain. It grew to her height as she watched and then bloomed into an orange-pink flower the size of her head, shriveled and died, and returned. A second flower blossomed and remained.

Kiera waited. When nothing else happened, she retrieved the dagger and replaced it. She looked again at the flower, puzzled.

Suddenly, the ground jolted and shook, throwing her onto her stomach. Rumbling alarmed her as the stone lurched and moved beneath her. The sound of a roaring ocean filled the chamber. The flower moved as if caught in a breeze, not an earthquake.

The pictographs said nothing of an earthquake! Kiera climbed to her feet, barely caught herself from hitting the fountain with the next great tremor of the ground, and bolted for the door. She smashed into it as another quake rumbled beneath her, then rose and waved her hand before the door. It opened, and she flung herself against the second door. It opened only when the other had closed, and she toppled into Mansr's arms.

"We must go!" he said, steadying himself against the wall. The warriors grabbed her and passed her up the hall before he took one arm and another warrior her other.

They raced through the quaking halls toward the entrance, all while the strange roar of an ocean grew louder. Mansr took her a different route than the one she'd used to enter, one that sloped down and then up. Within moments, they burst into the chilly desert night.

Mansr tripped, taking all three of them down. Kiera grunted as she hit the ground, and he wrapped an arm around her.

"Oh, god, Mansr! I'm so sorry!" she exclaimed. "I did it wrong!"

To her surprise, he barked a laugh of half-pain from their fall and half-triumph. She sprawled on top of him, unable to push herself up with the earth's violent shaking. More warriors tumbled out after them until the last closed the stone door.

Two hauled her up and one helped Mansr. She bounced between them, unable to catch her balance.

"Come!" Mansr ordered, waving them toward another small trail up a hill.

The warriors gave her no choice but pulled her up the hill. She didn't understand why until they reached the top, overlooking a deep canyon. Water shot from the bottom of the canyon, forming hundreds of tall columns whose mist cast rainbows in the bright moonlight. Mansr dropped to his knees as the earth continued to tremble. She pulled away from the warriors and dropped beside him, more comfortable on the ground than trying to navigate the shaking earth on her feet.

Mansr's shoulders shook, and she took his arm, alarmed.

"Mansr, what's wrong?"

He was laughing again. She stared at him, then at the water. A burst of wind sent water from the closest column raining over them. Grass tickled her knees, and she shifted, agitated by water and grass.

"Mansr!" she demanded. "What have I done?"

"Water!" he replied, throwing his arm toward the canyon. "We had none before!"

She frowned. As suddenly as it started, the earth stopped shaking. The warriors regained themselves first and crossed to the edge of the canyon, unaffected by the water spraying on them. They were silent, staring.

Mansr regained himself and rose. She watched as he too crossed to the edge of the canyon before she rose. Her knees hurt from her landing. The distant roar of water pouring into the canyon caught her attention.

"Mansr, I don't understand," she said at last.

"Anshan has had no water since the last *dhjan nishani*," he said. "The plants died, the lakes dried up. We had nothing."

Her gaze went to the columns with newfound interest.

"You mean, I didn't do something wrong?" she asked.

"No, *nishani*, you saved us. As long as you are here, there will be life on Anshan."

As long as you are here.

The words made him smile but weighed on her. She looked at each of the warriors, who watched the water as if they'd never seen it before. She'd wondered why A'Ran's water supplies were located on the nearest moon, a logistical obstacle. The thought that they had no water on the planet itself had never occurred to her.

She did this. She didn't know how, but she did it. The men around her were happy despite their stony visages. She didn't know what to feel, except she wanted to cry.

"Mansr, I'm tired," she whispered. "Can we go back now?"

He looked at her, his smile fading. "Of course. You must be exhausted."

She nodded, not trusting herself to say anything else. Her throat was tight, and she didn't think her legs would carry her. They did. Mansr led her back to the small dwelling she shared with him and his son. The encampment was a flurry of activity, and she wondered how much was normal and how much was related to the water.

She said nothing to him but returned to her small room and closed the door. Kiera lay down in the dark and stared at the ceiling. Despite feeling tired, she couldn't sleep.

"*Nishani*." His voice made her jump, and she looked around wildly before she realized A'Ran's voice came from the communicator. She rose grudgingly and crossed to the communications viewer. Unwilling to face him, she turned on the audio portion.

"I'm here," she said, and cleared her throat. She knew he heard the restrained emotion by his pause.

"Are you well?"

"Just tired."

"I'm transmitting a message to Mansr. Our enemy figured out you're alive and on the planet. My reinforcements aren't here yet; you'll need to keep moving until I can neutralize the newest threat."

"No problem."

"What disturbs you?" His voice was softer.

"Just tired," she whispered. Tears gathered in her eyes.

"It is not like you to keep the truth from me."

"I, uh, I went to the fountain and figured out how to make it work. There's water now, A'Ran," she managed, struggling not to cry. "Mansr says there will be water as long as I'm on Anshan."

"Water," he said, an odd note in his voice. "He speaks the truth. As long as you are *nishani*, the planet will heal."

"And if I leave, everyone dies."

"It is the way of things, *nishani*." His voice was even, as if he tried to ease some of the weight of her decision.

"I couldn't live with myself if I left everyone to die," she said.

"We share the same burden," he said in a hushed voice. "My failure to protect my people should not be something another should bear."

She wiped her eyes.

"I will accept your decision, no matter which choice you make," he said.

"I don't know how you can say that," she returned, "when one means your people will be destroyed!"

"You must accept your place willingly. It is the natural way of things here."

"So you're obligated to give me the choice."

"Yes."

She closed her eyes, remembering how she'd felt in his arms: like she wasn't just another duty to him.

"I couldn't walk away from your planet any more than I could my own, if me staying means everyone lives," she whispered. "I must stay and do my ... duty." She waited, expecting her words to please him.

"Very well." His tone didn't change, as if she'd just told him she was going shopping instead of sacrificing the rest of her life for his people. "Prepare yourself to move before the suns rise."

She turned off the communicator, not caring if he said anything else. Instead, she cried, feeling more alone than she had since leaving earth. She fell into a restless sleep that was disturbed long before dawn. Leyon's shake rattled her to her bones, and she pushed at him. He shone a light in her face before hauling her to her feet. She stumbled after him into the central area of the dwelling.

"We must go," Mansr said, tossing a small pack to her. "The Qatwali have landed their army nearby. We can't evacuate you, but we can hide in the hills."

She went to the window at his words. The attackers were down the road. Startled, she froze, watching the giant warriors fight until Leyon wrenched her forward. Their pace out of the dwelling and toward the hills was brutal, too fast for her to keep up, and Leyon ended up swinging her into his arms like a child to keep the fast pace into the rocky hills. The moons hung well above the horizon, and the desert air was chilly enough for her to see her breath.

Mansr led the column of warriors into the hills, not stopping until they reached the canyon she'd last seen several hours before. To her surprise, moonlight glinted off the water of the newly formed lake that filled the canyon. Leyon set her down after they passed it. They were forced to slow their pace when the trail became covered with slippery shale and the path grew steeper. They stopped in the shadow of a hill, and Mansr barked quiet orders at the dozen warriors with them. She replaced her translator as he approached.

"Listen carefully," he said, gripping her arms. "Is your translator working?"

She nodded.

"We're being followed. You will follow this path that leads around the hill back toward the encampment. You remember the chamber where you were earlier?"

She nodded again.

“Hide there. No one will enter. They’re tracking us, and I don’t know how. We’re going to scatter to see who’s followed, and if it’s you, we’ll kill anyone who follows your path.”

“You’re sending me alone?” she asked, surprised.

“I must know who among us has a tracking beacon. Leyon will be near you at all times. You’ll be in no danger.”

She was about to object when he released her to signal one of his other men forward.

“Around the hill,” Leyon repeated. “Stick to the path. You’ll see the trail to the cave.”

He gave her a small push toward the path, and she looked down, squinting in the moonlight to see the darkened trail. The men around her moved silently into every direction, and Mansr lifted his chin in a silent command for her to go. Leyon drew his sword and waited, giving her a head start.

Heart pounding, she trotted down the sloping trail, glancing nervously at the hill to make sure she didn’t suddenly fall off her path. The night was quiet aside from her foot falls and the sliding shale. The hill was wide and her blood thrummed as she moved as fast as she could.

Suddenly, a dark form launched itself from behind a group of boulders onto her path. She gasped and halted, staring at the sword and the giant holding it. She took a few steps back and then whirled to run. He snatched her, jerking her back. His sword flew over her head and his grip fell away too fast for her to catch her balance. She fell hard on her backside and saw her attacker’s headless body land beside her.

“Go. There are more!” Leyon ordered, pulling her up.

She stumbled in the direction he pushed her, horrified. This time, she paid no attention to the shale or placing her feet right. Instead, she ran as fast as she could on the trail. She reached a point that seemed familiar and looked for the dark shadow of the crevice. It was in the near distance, no more than two hundred meters away, down the hill through a boulder-strewn route. She broke from the trail and darted toward it, her heartbeat loud in her ears.

Three figures emerged to block her path. She skidded to a halt, chest heaving.

C’mon, Leyon! she ordered silently.

One headed for her, and she turned to run, only to collide with a large figure at her back.

A’Ran!

Her body jolted in recognition as their bodies met, even though his face was shadowed. He pushed her behind him, sword in one hand. She took a few steps back and flinched at the first silent contact of his sword with another’s. Her eyes pinned to the scene, she couldn’t help the emotions spinning through her. Happiness, fear, awe ...

The gloves were off this night. A’Ran wasn’t sparring; he fought for blood. She watched him systematically behead or run through the three men, her stomach churning at the sight of so much death. He snatched her hand when none of his opponents remained standing and ran with her toward the crevice.

The path to the bottom was unguarded. He pushed her down it and stayed near the top, looking for other attackers. She trotted to the bottom and waved her band before the access pad, waiting as the stone door opened.

He joined her and took her hand again, pulling her into the hall. The door closed behind them as he strode through the lighted, vacant halls, following a familiar path on the way to the chamber. They entered, and she looked up at him, afraid to address the fierce warrior. Only when they were sealed inside the massive cave did he release her.

He said nothing but withdrew a communications device and began issuing calm commands to his men. Shaken, she leaned against the nearest wall and sank into a sit, disgusted to see there was blood on her clothing.

“Nishani, I must leave you here,” he said without turning.

She said nothing, scared yet unsure what else she felt. He turned when she didn’t respond, and his gaze softened. He crossed to her and knelt. His dark eyes took in her face, and she felt

her heart quicken for a different reason. She found herself breathing him in, aching for him to touch her as he had not so long ago.

"Are you well?" he asked.

"I'm fine," she replied.

He studied her.

"Go. I'll be safe here," she heard herself say.

"This is not my *nishani*," he said quietly. He cupped her cheek with one of his large hands, and she was embarrassed to feel tears gather.

She wasn't expecting his kiss or the passion behind it. He kissed her hard and deep, his intensity making her hunger for him flare even as she tried to suppress it. Her senses filled with his taste, scent, the heat of his body, enveloping her yet never enough. He withdrew and kissed her cheeks and forehead, then drew her into a hug. She savored the feel of his body against hers, unable to deny what she felt toward him and terrified he'd never feel the same.

"I must go. I will return soon," he said, releasing her. She nodded. His dark gaze lingered on her before he stalked to the door. She had the unsettling feeling that he was about to disappear from her life forever.

She rose after a few minutes and stretched. The single flower still stood in the fountain, and she crossed to it. It grew straight from the stone; there was no dirt or planter. She sat on the edge of the fountain and looked up at the glyphs on the wall.

The sound of a muffled explosion from beyond the door made her rise. Silence followed, and she wondered if her paranoia had caused her to imagine it. She'd just sat down again when the inner door exploded into rocks that flew across the room. She ducked behind the fountain and saw someone shoving the broken stone door open, shocked to recognize the man leading the charge into the sacred chamber.

* * *

A'Ran fought his way through the Qatwali invaders to the secret battle planner hidden within one of the hills. He broke free of attackers before reaching the camouflaged door and waved his band in front of what would look like just another boulder to someone unfamiliar with the path.

His legs trembled, but he forced himself on. The small chamber holding the battle planner was silent, and he waved the computer on, unable to hold himself up any longer. He dropped to his knees, his body shuddering at the energy-- Anshan's life force. It surged up through his feet to his head, making his whole body tingle as the planet welcomed back its king.

He hadn't set foot on the planet since being made the *dhjan* upon his father's death. The feel of the planet's life force through his body was staggering, the sensation similar to what he felt the first time he'd met his *nishani*. He'd dreaded his first steps on his planet, fearing it, too, would've lost faith in him.

The planet welcomed him home, reminded him that his own life-- and those of his people-- was tied to it. The initial sensations passed, and he breathed deeply, finally able to focus as his body adjusted to the feel of the energy flowing through him.

He'd wondered what his initial greeting as *dhjan* would feel like. It stunned him to feel the planet breathing, struggling back to life after hovering so long on the edge of death. The sensations humbled him, and he thought again of Mansr's words, that he needed to be more than an exiled war planner. His planet needed him. His people needed him. He'd waited too long for the Council to support him instead of returning to the planet that needed him.

A'Ran sat at the battle planner and watched the scenes before him. Qatwali was as ruthless in battle as he was. That they'd ally with the dishonorable Yirkin was his fault; his affront at taking Kiera from them was enough for them to overcome their distaste at dealing with the Yirkin, whom they viewed as even less civilized than the Anshan. His reinforcements would come too late; he had one choice to save his planet.

He touched the communications device to activate it.

“Mansr.”

There was a pause, then his uncle’s familiar, strained voice.

“Here, A’Ran.”

“I’m at the battle planner. My communications capability is limited. I want you to issue the evacuation order for the planet.”

“Evacuate?” Mansr asked. “The space battle won’t allow anyone off-planet.”

“Qatwali is distracted with the land battle and the Yirkin won’t be looking where we launch.”

“I’ll issue the warning. We’ll need half a day to evacuate the planet.”

“You’ll have it,” A’Ran said. “I’ll activate the emergency facilities on the moon.”

“Very well. Is *nishani* well?”

“Yes, uncle, she’s safe.”

There was a click as Mansr closed the connection. A’Ran returned his attention to the battles twirling before him on the planner. He watched, confirming the far side of the planet wasn’t the focus of either Yirkin or Qatwali forces.

He sat back for a moment, heart pounding at the prospect of what he was about to do. *Nishani* had proven she could bring the planet back to life. She had looked less than happy about staying, but she would do her duty, as would he. He would decimate all life on the planet using the very ore that had brought his family wealth and power. The dust emitted from mining the ore was poisonous in its raw state. Long ago, his ancestors had rigged the planet to blow the mines and turn the atmosphere into a toxic mix no one would survive.

Long ago, it had been a negotiating point with the Council: allow Anshan to control its own mines without Council peacekeepers’ presence, or the planet would be too polluted for anyone to mine at all. What the Council didn’t know was that Anshan would heal with its *nishani*, even if it took many sun-cycles for the mining industry to repair itself. The Council had only thought the Anshan rulers barbaric enough to threaten to blow up the only source of ore.

A’Ran’s fingers flew over the command panel as he thought of how wise his forefathers had turned out to be. They’d been right to use force over reason with the Council, a lesson he’d learned almost too late.

He spent a few hours setting up the explosive mechanisms and issuing new battle plans for the space war and ordered his ground troops to evacuate the planet. The Qatwali would think themselves winning as his men withdrew. He watched as Mansr expertly organized the evacuations and aligned the space battle to keep the Yirkins’ attention off the ships fleeing the planet’s surface for the nearest moon, Kiera. Talal had been right; Kiera was a fateful name for his *nishani*!

He opened the communications device and touched two buttons on the flat control panel.

“A’Ran?” Jetr sounded curious.

“I apologize for disturbing you,” A’Ran said.

“I am pleased to hear from you. Where are you?”

“Anshan. I need your help, my friend,” A’Ran said. “I’m evacuating the planet. The moon can hold us, but we’ll need food and supplies until the space battle is over.”

“Evacuating?”

“You’re my only true ally of any influence with the Council. Keep them out of the galaxy.”

“I’ll dispatch my own cargo ships to your moon. The Council will want to be involved, even if this becomes an intra-galaxy war.”

“It’s been an intra-galaxy war for generations!” he said with some impatience. “Let us end it once and for all, not with the Council manipulating each of us for its benefit!”

“You are forbidden from destroying another’s planet,” Jetr reminded him. “The force of the Council will be at your door if you touch Qatwal.”

“I’m destroying all Qatwali and Yirkin on the surface of Anshan. I don’t care about Qatwal or destroying its people. I want my planet back, Jetr, and the Council has done nothing in all these sun-cycles but impede me. Keep them out of the galaxy!”

"Suns," Jetr breathed. "I thought the stories of your barbaric forefathers threatening to destroy Anshan were bluffs."

"They weren't," A'Ran confirmed. "And soon, you'll see just how serious they were."

"I'll do what you ask, A'Ran, but isn't there another way?"

"No," A'Ran said. "There's not."

Jetr was quiet for a long moment before he said, "Very well."

"Thank you, friend."

"You're welcome, A'Ran. I have some work to do to keep the Council out of your way. Contact me when you're safe," Jetr said.

"I will."

A'Ran closed the connection and checked the evacuation progress. He was pleased to see it was nearly complete. The civilians were off the planet while his armies remained. He set the timer for the explosions to start on the opposite side of the planet, startled when the first went off as soon as he gave the order. Just as fast, Mansr called him.

"The warriors aren't off the planet yet!" came his uncle's surprised voice.

"It started too soon. I just issued the evacuation order for those remaining. The mines will chain-detonate. Get everyone off now!" A'Ran ordered. He watched the visual before him as one mine, then the next and the next, exploded and spewed toxic dust into the atmosphere. They were going fast, much faster than he expected.

"I'm on my way to get you and *nishani*," Mansr said.

A'Ran stood, furious the timing was early. He shut down the battle planner and locked it. As he emerged into the early morning sun, he was again surprised to see clouds already forming over the eastern horizon.

He ran toward the sacred temple, suddenly thrown off his feet as a mine in the valley where his men were based exploded. Fountains shot up from the newly formed lake nearby, and the ground rumbled again. The explosions were coming faster, and he launched to his feet, ignoring the bruises and scrapes along his side.

Mansr's small spacecraft dropped from the sky and hovered above him, following as he darted toward the sacred cave. Another nearby explosion knocked him off balance. He caught himself against a boulder in time to see the ground ahead of him ripple, tear, and fold.

The craft above him opened its door and lowered itself as close as it dared to the ground. A'Ran launched himself upwards, catching the door as the ground beneath him crumbled and gave. The door pulled him in, and he sat in the doorway, coughing at the ore dust cloud and staring.

His destination, the cave hidden at the end of the draw where he'd left *nishani*, had been swallowed.

"Mansr, take us lower!" he ordered.

"A'Ran."

Mansr's calm voice sent a tremor through him.

"Lower, Mansr!" he said again.

"There's no life anywhere down there. The temple is gone."

A'Ran heard Mansr's words as if in a dream. Mansr closed the door as another mine exploded and guided the spacecraft farther off the ground. A'Ran crossed to the cockpit and gazed at the viewer.

There was nothing but a gaping chasm where the temple had been. Mansr still scanned for signs of life, and A'Ran watched as they grew farther from the temple.

He'd left her there to die, assuming she'd be safer in the temple than anywhere else. He watched explosions wrack his planet until they rose high enough that the toxic dust storm he'd started marred the surface of the planet from view.

The space battle stopped completely as Qatwali, Anshan, and Yirkin alike watched the devastation of his planet. A'Ran could only stare. He heard Mansr issue orders to others to rally

on the moon and Jetr's voice come over the speakers. None of their words registered, nothing but the sick feeling at the pit of his stomach. His people were safe. His planet was destroyed, yet all he could think about was *her*.

"A'Ran!" Mansr shouted. "Suns, man, I need your help here!"

The words jarred him out of his daze, and he blinked, turning to look at Mansr. The momentary pause of the space battle quickly turned to chaos, and Mansr was struggling to outmaneuver the ships darting away from the planet. A'Ran took control of the ship, forcing himself to focus.

Forgive me, Kiera.

He hadn't just destroyed any hope his planet had of recovering, he'd destroyed the woman he needed, too.

CHAPTER NINE

"Romas, no!" Her latest protest was lost on the warriors, who dragged her aboard yet another ship. "I want to stay!"

"Not with these people," he said, once again the egotistical protector who knew better than her. His quick pace forced her to trot to keep up, and the two warriors behind her let her go to pursue their leader. "I promised Evey I'd rescue you when we went to war."

"I don't need rescuing!" she argued. "I want to stay there with A'Ran!"

Romas whirled at the name, and she ran into him before taking a quick step back. His gaze was cold, his jaw ticking.

"That barbarian has dishonored you and my family! If it were up to me, I'd take you back to Qatwal and mate you to one of my brothers, but Evey forbade it," he snapped. "You should be grateful I rescued you before he could sully you."

Her face felt hot as her fear turned to anger. He spun and strode away before she could formulate a response. She continued after him.

"Romas, he's my mate. I can't just leave him!" she tried again. "And I have to stay and help the planet."

"The decision is made. You're going back to your planet. Evey was right-- it was a mistake to bring you with us."

His words stung, and any further argument died on her lips as she realized how serious he was. She stopped in the hall. He motioned for the guards to take her down another corridor, and she went.

She awoke from the nightmare she'd had every night since being dragged off Anshan. It was past sunrise, so she rose and flung off her bed covers. Her things and most of the furniture had been returned with her to the row house. She'd refused to unpack everything, instead digging out only what she needed as the days passed.

She didn't expect her sense of loss to be so deep. It'd hit her on the spaceship ride home and had only grown deeper. Romas hadn't even accompanied her to the row house but sent her on a small shuttle to the local park and left her there. No farewell, no apology, nothing. She'd cried for two days before finally realizing on day three that no one was coming for her.

She looked around her room. Her feet were cold on the wooden floor, and she'd caught herself looking down many times to see if she made grass grow here, too. She didn't, and the disappointment brought tears to her eyes once again. Wiping them away, she padded into the hall, down the stairs, and to her studio, which overflowed with paintings she'd done in the eight days since returning. She stood before her favorite, an image of A'Ran the way she remembered him from the day they'd first met.

Even the sight of him immortalized in paints made her chest tight and her knees weak. She hadn't realized what she felt for him until it was too late to tell him. She may have been a duty for him, but he'd been so much more ... and Anshan...

Her gaze went to her cold feet again. Anshan's energy had kept her feet warm, even on the rocky terrain. Grass had sprung up from boulders she touched, and she'd felt truly a part of her world for once in her life.

And now she had ... nothing. She shivered and twisted to see the rest of her paintings. Talal, their home in exile, the canyon filled with hulking grey ships in the moonlight near Romas's home, the flower in the fountain of the sacred temple.

She missed them. She sat down at her desk and grabbed the waiting sketchpad. Food had become an overlooked stranger, and she'd found herself leaving her studio only for the bathroom and the bedroom. Otherwise, she drew and painted. Today, she returned to the drawing she started long ago on the portrait she had intended to give Evelyn for her wedding.

Her eyes watered as she recalled when she'd last worked on it, the night she was kidnapped. She'd thought that the worst night of her life until now. Wiping her tears, she concentrated on sketching.

The sun brightened up the studio a short time later, her reminder it was time for her midmorning walk. She'd forced herself to walk daily, if for no other reason than to keep her mind off the paintings and memories.

The Monterey mists were in full effect, filtering the sunlight. Moisture clung to her skin as she started down the familiar path to Lover's Lane. The ocean was hidden beneath the fog and the air chilled, so she walked fast until she warmed up. She was happy for the mist; it kept the seaside lovers off the Lane and made her feel more invisible. She'd been ignoring Kevin's calls for two days without caring he was the only person who could help her put food on the table.

She returned to the row house just as the sun began to burn off the mist and the blue sky appeared in the distance. Rather than feel energized by the activity, she felt more drained. She stood for a long moment in the cramped, silent foyer. An odd scratching sound came from the kitchen, like Evelyn's cat scratching at the door after it returned from its morning prowl.

Frowning, she went to the kitchen, worried Evelyn's cat found its way home from its adoptive parents up the street. Not that she wouldn't mind some company; the house was too quiet this morning, and her memories refused to leave her in peace.

She walked into the kitchen and stopped.

A tarantula cat.

Both surprised and horrified, she snatched the broom she'd left leaning against the counter. It ignored her, focusing instead on scratching at a spot of dirt, one of its main food sources. She stared at it, as irritated by its unwitting acknowledgment of her housekeeping prowess as she was about having this of all creatures in her house. The kitchen table, like much of the rest of the house's furniture, had been disassembled in anticipation of moving before Evelyn's wedding. She tugged the top of the kitchen table to block the doorway, hoping it would keep the creature in the kitchen.

Suspecting it was a stowaway from one of the boxes, she took the broom upstairs, where most of the boxes were. She rifled gingerly through the boxes, afraid of uncovering a stash of tarantula cats. When she found none, she returned to the living room, where the rest of the boxes had been deposited, and searched them.

She found no more and returned to the kitchen. The tarantula cat was sucking up dirt and dust from the kitchen corners. She leaned the broom against the wall, unhappy to see the creature but feeling bad for it. It, too, was alone now, somewhere it didn't belong. At least she'd never have to worry about feeding it; the house was a mess.

She left the door blocked, took a quick shower, and opened the door to her studio.

Evelyn stood in the middle of the room.

Kiera gasped, drawing Evelyn's attention from the paintings to the door. Kiera stood dumbly, staring at her friend.

"Happy to see me?" Evelyn asked with a hesitant smile. She wore the alien clothing, though her stomach was starting to protrude.

Kiera closed the door to the studio slowly, uncertain what she felt. She couldn't let her sense of hope seize her for fear of being devastated. She didn't know why Evelyn was there. She wouldn't assume anything.

"I guess not," Evelyn said at her silence. "You don't look too well."

"I'm okay," she replied with effort. "I am happy to see you."

Evelyn frowned. Kiera felt the awkward silence but didn't know what to say. She'd lost the ability to feel anger-- or feel at all-- and just wondered what her friend wanted. To date, nothing Evelyn had done was for anyone else's benefit but Evelyn's, a realization she'd come to when she'd stopped crying a few days ago. She loved her friend but understood if Evelyn was there, it wasn't necessarily for *her*.

Evelyn turned to the paintings she'd been perusing. "These are beautiful, Kiera. This might be some of your best work."

Kiera's eyes went over all her paintings, settling again on the one of A'Ran. Evelyn caught her look as she turned.

"I didn't think ..." her friend said, looking from Kiera to the painting.

"I know you didn't," Kiera said with no heat. She didn't have the energy for a fight. She crossed to sit where she couldn't see any of her paintings and instead gazed at Evelyn.

"I had that coming," Evelyn replied. "I haven't really taken your feelings into account lately, have I?"

"Not really. A little late to matter," Kiera said with a shrug.

"I didn't come to argue, though I am sorry if I hurt your feelings, Kiera," Evelyn said with a small sigh, as if irritated by the apology. Kiera said nothing, trying to think the best of her friend while anger stirred. "I know I haven't been the best of friends, so if you don't want to talk to me anymore, I'll understand."

"It's fine, Evey. You made the effort to come. I just hope you're not raising my rent. Haven't felt like working lately."

"Rent? Kiera, please. The least I could do is stop charging you at all," Evelyn said, chuckling. "I came for ... a favor."

Kiera wasn't surprised and felt bad for admitting it to herself. She looked at the ground instead of Evelyn, feeling bereft once again.

"The Five Galaxies have just exploded with war. Anshan went crazy and just started wiping out everyone. Qatwal has been under attack directly since Anshan was decimated by that lunatic A'Ran. Kisolm was killed on the planet surface, and Romas will now inherit the planet from his father, if there's anything left to inherit."

Kiera listened, interested despite trying not to be. She'd seen how brilliant A'Ran's battles were. He'd fought forces five times the size of his and won. He didn't lose. He never would. If he wanted Qatwal destroyed, he would find a way to do it.

"I'm four and a half months pregnant and wondering if I'm better off here," Evelyn said, a troubled look crossing her features. "The Council can't talk any sense into A'Ran, and they're amassing this ginormous army to destroy him. But it'll take awhile, and in the meantime, Qatwal is on its own."

"Like Anshan was for all those years," Kiera couldn't help but add.

"No, this is different," Evelyn continued. "Qatwal is under attack. The Anshan *dhjan* was usurped, maybe because this craziness ran in the family."

Kiera looked at Evelyn, astonished by her callous words. She'd known her friend to be a little arrogant, but this was something different. This was the type of attitude A'Ran had been forced to deal with since his parents were murdered. While she could never fully understand

what it was to have the weight of a planet on her shoulders for fifteen years, her resentment toward A'Ran's rigid sense of duty began to thaw as Evelyn went on.

"We've left the capital city for the other side of the planet. Can you imagine? Romas is off fighting all the time. It's just ... god, it's so awful, Kiera."

"Is that why you're here?" Kiera asked, trying hard to control the anger building within her. "To escape the war?"

"Not exactly," Evelyn said. Her gaze returned to the painting of A'Ran. "It's for a favor."

"What kind of favor?"

"Well, I think A'Ran went crazy partially because we took you. I've got a shuttle waiting for me. But, I thought, if you would come out and talk to him, see if you can dissuade him, it might help. Romas said I was crazy with hormones, but I spoke to someone on the Council who thought it was a good idea. I guess they told A'Ran you were killed, not taken. Was the nail in the coffin, no pun intended," Evelyn joked weakly.

Kiera's heart leapt at the information. She'd never allowed herself to ask why A'Ran didn't come for her. She hadn't been able to face the possibility he might not want her or worse-- he was dead. She was making it day to day telling herself neither of those things was true.

"I know it's a lot to ask after your ... ordeal."

"You want me to go to the shuttle and talk to him over the communicator?" she asked.

"Yes. You don't have to do anything else."

Kiera rose and turned away, wondering how her friend was so clueless while standing in front of her painting of A'Ran.

"You'll have to take me to him," she said. "He can't be reasoned with over the viewer."

"I wouldn't do that to you."

"Do *what*?" Kiera asked, at the end of her patience. "I told Romas not to bring me back here! You dragged me to space, Evelyn, and you told him to drag me back here. For once, I want to make a decision about my own life. If you want my help, you'll take me to him!"

"Are you sure?" Evelyn asked after a startled pause. "You're kind of upset about it."

"I'm not upset for the reason you assume I am!" Kiera snapped. "Just take me and the damn tarantula in the kitchen home!"

"You *are* home."

"No, Evey, I'm not."

Evelyn's gaze fell to the painting again. "So that is why he's destroying everything," she said softly.

"I don't know why, but I really don't blame him!" Kiera replied. "I'm ready. You can get the tarantula."

It took a full minute for Evelyn to realize just how serious she was. Evelyn moved after a long, considering look, leaving the studio for the kitchen. Kiera released a deep breath and trailed her. Evelyn removed the obstacle from the door and snagged the tarantula cat as it darted past her.

Silently, the two left the row house for the park across the street, where the spacecraft was hidden in the Monterey mist. Kiera's heart still did somersaults, and she felt both doubtful Evelyn would follow through and ecstatic at the prospect. She didn't doubt Jetr had reached out to Evelyn, or her friend would never have come. The odd little man was the loyal ally A'Ran considered him! The spacecraft's door opened, and her excitement grew. She followed Evelyn into the craft, seeing only one Qatwali warrior to pilot the craft.

She sat across from Evelyn, who continued to give her the odd look, and clasped her hands together hard to keep them from shaking as they took off. After a thick moment of silence, Evelyn rose to place the tarantula cat near the pilot and sealed off the door between the tiny cabin and pilot. She reached into a drawer at the back of the craft.

"I've got snacks," Evelyn said. "Oh, and you may need one of these."

She produced an armband. Kiera raised the arm of her sweatshirt to reveal the band she already wore. Evelyn looked at her hard again but said nothing.

Kiera lowered the shirt, glad she'd never convinced herself to remove the band. It was her last connection to Anshan and its *dhjan*. Her stomach churned as the day grew on. There were no windows on the tiny craft, only the two of them and two benches long enough for them to stretch out on. She didn't want to talk to Evelyn and lay down soon after the feeling of the craft ascending-- similar to the pressure felt in a plane-- stopped.

Her mind went crazy with thoughts and emotions, and she wondered if A'Ran would be happy to see her. She didn't know if the choice she made was the right one, but she knew staying alone in the row house had been the wrong one. She wondered how he'd destroyed his own planet, whether his sisters were still safe. If he wanted to see her.

She returned to this thought often as they traveled for two days. Of all the things she felt, she feared he'd reject her once and for all. She'd never given him an answer about staying with him on Anshan. But he if thought her dead, and he was taking revenge on Qatwal, then some part of him must've cared! She recalled their last kiss, as hot and passionate as she'd ever hoped, despite his aloof sense of duty.

Evelyn tried to get her to eat twice, but she couldn't stomach it. She couldn't remember when she'd last eaten, hadn't had a reason to care. Now, she was too uneasy to eat. The two days were longer than any other two days had been in her life, and she grew more and more nervous, afraid the connection she had to A'Ran wouldn't be enough to make him want her again. She wasn't sure Qatwal deserved a peaceful existence after refusing to help Anshan, but for Evelyn's sake, she wanted the wars to end, even if A'Ran didn't want her anymore.

She agonized over what it would be like to meet him again. By nature, he didn't smile, but would he turn away from her or tolerate her? Would he go so far as to welcome her? Or would the fact that she never gave him an answer to stay or go make him unwilling to give her a second chance?

She slept fitfully between her busy thoughts, sheer exhaustion claiming her in spurts. By the end of the space journey, she was convinced he'd want nothing to do with her and desperate to see him. Near the end of her patience trapped in the tiny box of a spacecraft, she shot up when she felt the familiar pressure of them descending. Evelyn rose, looking as tired as Kiera felt. Kiera had bathed in the bathroom in the back of the craft, but it was too small to have a clothing unit. She stripped off her sweatshirt to be certain people could see her armband in her T-shirt.

The descent felt as long as their two day trip. She pulled her hair back in a scrunchie at the base of her neck, growing nervous once again. There was a gentle bump as they landed. She waited for Evelyn to go to the door first, uncertain what to expect from wherever they'd gone.

The door slid open. It was dark, the dual moons high in the sky. Several figures awaited them, and she saw a low building with glowing lights in the distance. One female figure moved forward, wrapping a shawl around Evelyn's shoulders and placing a translator on her ear. She handed Evelyn a small bowl of water and then moved to Kiera, handing her a translator.

Kiera took it and put it on her earlobe. She heard no signs of war but saw the distant night sky light up with orange and red flashes.

"They're getting closer," Evelyn said in a tight voice.

Kiera said nothing, her mind racing. The night was chilly and quiet. She looked to Evelyn only to find the group had already moved away toward the distant dwelling. She trotted to catch up to them, trailing. The group was silent and tense, the warriors flanking Evelyn eyeing Kiera as much as the distant flashes of light. She shivered.

Evelyn's entourage shepherded her into the dwelling. Kiera looked around, speechless at the soaring ceilings, the atrium with a waterfall in the foyer, and pristine white walls covered with the multi-colored roping. She hadn't noticed how rundown A'Ran's home in exile was until she saw the house of the Qatwali refugees. It made her angrier at Evelyn and Romas, knowing A'Ran and his sweet sisters had been forced out of their home into a life of poverty.

The group continued without her. She couldn't remember feeling such rejection. The Qatwali warriors had looked her over in full light, as if to ensure she was no threat, then dismissed her with a look that said she ranked lower than the tarantula cat clinging to one wall. Even Evelyn walked away without so much as a glance.

Any resentment she had at A'Ran melted further. She wasn't sure how he'd lived with this type of treatment since he was a boy. She couldn't handle it!

She followed the group down several corridors into a massive conference room filled with people in tight groups talking. There was barely room to maneuver, and she found herself standing on her tiptoes to keep track of Evelyn, who had no trouble with the people around her parting the seas for her. Kiera made her way through the crowd to an area with far fewer people. She was surprised to recognize the Council members, from tall, thin Opal to the Council members whose names she'd never learned. Her eyes sought out a familiar form and found him.

Evelyn waited at the edge of another group, in the middle of which was Romas. Kiera maneuvered through the crowd, out of place in her jeans, T-shirt, and armband marking her as Anshan. Only a few people looked long enough to take in her armband, and she shied away from one who stared at her in alarm. Nervous, uneasy, she made her way down the wall toward the Council members, who held court with themselves.

She stopped within full view of Jetr and waited, not wanting to draw the attention of the entire Council to her. Jetr listened and spoke, glancing over after a few minutes. He looked again, this time meeting her gaze. She gave a nervous wave, watching for his reaction and relieved when he offered a warm smile. He excused himself and crossed to her, motioning for her to follow him out a nearby door into a corridor.

"I knew you'd come, if given the means to return," he said. "You look worn."

"I'm fine, Jetr," she replied. "What's going on?"

"The Council is gathering an army to retake this galaxy," he said. "It's slow to form. Many of it requires negotiations with headstrong warriors like A'Ran. Qatwal will be destroyed or taken over in mere days."

"Did he really destroy Anshan?"

"He destroyed the mines. The atmosphere is contaminated beyond repair but the planet lives, a distinction I've kept from many others."

"I can heal it," she said hesitantly.

"Maybe. No one really knows but A'Ran."

"If you knew he'd go crazy, why didn't *you* come for me?"

"I'm a diplomat. I influence others without choosing sides," he said vaguely. "What's important is that you're here, and here-- in the Five Galaxies-- is where you'll stay?"

"Yes."

"Good. Mansr won't try to talk sense into A'Ran. I'm afraid you're all that stands between the Council and him. I've been a friend of his family for generations. I don't want to see him assassinated."

"Assassinated!" she breathed. "The Council would do that?"

"The Council believes he's destroyed one planet and is about to destroy a second."

"But if he doesn't destroy Qatwal and the war stops, will they leave him alone?"

"After this display? I don't think anyone will want to cross him for a long time," Jetr said, amused. "That I can influence. When he's running around destroying planets, I cannot help him."

She shivered, wondering just how cunning the small man with the warm smile was.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

"Ready for what?"

"You'll see. Wait here. I'm bringing others with me. Follow us to the battle quarters." He squeezed her arm and returned to the room.

She hugged herself, scared and uneasy. It was hard to trust Jetr when he seemed so ... squirrely. She leaned against the wall and drew a deep breath, praying A'Ran trusted this Council member for a reason.

A few minutes later, a group of Qatwali left the room. She recognized Romas and his father, two other Council members with Jetr, and a few more strangers. She trailed them as directed down the corridor to a battle quarters that put A'Ran's tiny room to shame. There wasn't just one battle planner but dozens, with every wall featuring viewers. Jetr motioned her to the side, and the men gathered in the center of the room, facing the largest viewer. The lights dimmed as Jetr brought the viewer online.

"A'Ran, I want to try one more time to discuss a peace deal. This one will make reparations for the loss of your planet," Jetr said. "I ask for your attention one last time, as a personal favor to me."

His words were followed by a long silence. The men around him shifted with Romas shaking his head. No image appeared on the screen, and she began to wonder if A'Ran would respond, even to her. Jetr's confident gaze remained on the viewer.

"The Council and Qatwal has nothing I want," A'Ran's low voice said at last. Her heart soared at the sound despite his sharp tone. She fidgeted, waiting to see him on the viewer.

"First, the Council offers to fund the relocation of your people from the Anshan moon to a suitable planet. The Council will fund everything."

"There is nothing new in your offer, Jetr."

"Second," Jetr continued, unruffled. "Mison has an offer for you." He turned to Romas's father.

"I require peace with the Anshan," Mison boomed. "An end to the blood feud that has existed between my family and yours."

A'Ran said nothing. Jetr glanced at Mison, who glanced at her.

"I will offer one last compromise before the Council sends in its armies to destroy you," Mison continued. "A prisoner exchange."

"You can have your men. You'll need them after I destroy the rest of them," A'Ran replied.

Romas motioned her forward. Surprised, she hesitated before crossing to him. Jetr stepped beside her, and Mison looked hard at her.

"You have not asked what I offer you," Mison said.

"You've captured none of my men, and Jetr is no more a prisoner than anyone else in your house," A'Ran growled. "If this is all you-- "

"Your *nishani*."

"My *nishani* is dead!"

"For which you blame me, even though you destroyed her!"

"My greatest mistake was not destroying you sooner," A'Ran said with chilling calmness. "Jetr, ask no more favors of me."

Romas motioned for her to speak. She felt panicked and sick at her stomach, uncertain what to say. In the end, she spoke his name.

"A'Ran."

Silence. Jetr nudged her.

"Romas rescued me from the cave before you blew up the mines. He took me to the planet I came from. Evelyn returned for me a few days ago." As she spoke, the words became easier. "I don't know what happened, but I want to come home. I shouldn't have left. I shouldn't have been so stupid as to not be able to see that what I wanted was right in front of me. I want to come home."

She could almost see him thinking. When the quiet stretched uncomfortably long, she spoke again. "A'Ran?"

"I'm here, *nishani*," he said in a hushed tone. The edge of cold rage was gone from his voice. "Jetr, I will accept the Council's offer. Mison, I accept your prisoner exchange and will

release your men on the moon nearest to Qatwal. I am coming to your location. I can track *nishani*. If you try to harm her or me, everyone in your compound will be destroyed."

"I understand," Mison said with a frown.

"It will be an honor to see you again," Jetr said.

The click of A'Ran hanging up was audible. It broke the men around her from their frozen apprehension, and several of them moved away. Mison and Romas spoke quietly while Jetr turned to her.

Her thoughts were flying again in anticipation of seeing A'Ran. Even her breathing was quick as she waited.

"Come. We'll await him outside," Jetr said, and took her arm. He led her through the men, who stared at her warily, and down several halls.

She'd never thought she'd ever hear A'Ran's voice again, let alone see him! Tears rose, and she wiped them away, scared something would go wrong at the last minute. Mison might try to blow A'Ran up, or the Council change its mind, or A'Ran would destroy everything to win his war, even if it meant losing her.

The emotions she'd buried when she'd thought no one was coming for her bubbled. Her body shook from the inside out before they stepped into the chilly night to await her fate.

Fate.

She thought of the image she'd seen so long ago when she met A'Ran, the vision of them walking together on the dead planet. She'd been destined for him-- and Anshan-- since before she ever met him! She tossed her head back to stare at the stars. They'd escaped Qatwal on a night such as this. All she could think about was seeing, touching, kissing A'Ran and experiencing the odd energy that ran between them.

Her emotions tumbling, her body shaking, she stepped away quickly from the doorway when Romas and his father stepped from the dwelling into the night. Neither spoke to her, only stood quietly while their warriors remained in the hallway behind them. One of the warriors emerged, spoke to Romas, and retreated.

"The attacks have stopped," Romas reported.

She looked in the direction where orange and red lights had bloomed earlier. The sky was dark and peaceful. The hum of a spacecraft made her pulse leap again, and her eyes found the small craft descending from the sky to a landing point a hundred meters away. The craft door opened, and a figure strode out. She felt the energy even from the distance and started forward. Jetr caught her arm, shaking his head.

Agitated, she waited. Mison drew abreast of Jetr, and Jetr stepped forward as A'Ran stopped a safe distance away. She gazed at him in the moons' light, tears building again. Everything from his unshaven jaw to his crooked nose drew her hungry gaze, and she took him in, feeling as if she'd never truly seen him before. His fierceness took her breath away, and the dark circles beneath his eyes drew her sympathy.

"You both know how agreements are recorded," Jetr said, holding out his arm with the armband. Mison did so as well. "You both must agree to the terms you made, and I will agree on behalf of the Council."

A'Ran held out his arm as well, saying, "I agree." Mison echoed his words, as did Jetr. The three bands lit up and faded, and all three men dropped their arms. Jetr stood aside. A'Ran's gaze turned to her. Despite the piercing gaze she'd never quite gotten used to, she stepped past Jetr and looked up at her mate, taking him in breathlessly once again. She doubted she'd ever get used to his towering size or strength. He was beautiful in the moonlight, with the gentle light of the moons clashing with his ferocious warrior body. His large frame radiated heat. She couldn't quell the deep ache within her that longed for his touch.

They gazed at each other for a long moment, each taking the other in.

"I made my choice," she whispered. "Thought you might want to know."

"I do," he replied in a tone just as quiet.

"Anshan is mine. You can come with me, if you want," she joked.

He touched her face gently, the slightest smile crossing his features. The hot energy of Anshan branded her from the inside out, and she shuddered. She needed him too much to wait and closed the distance between them, wrapping her arms around him. His heat and the charged Anshan life force washed over her, through her.

She was home.

"Did you really blow up Anshan?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Wasn't that a little brash?"

"It was a high-risk, strategic choice, like kidnapping my lifemate from the Qatwali," he replied, wrapping his arms securely around her. A laugh bubbled from within her, along with tears. Her gaze blurred, and hot moisture burned down her cheeks.

"*Nishani* ... Kiera ... " he said softly. She pulled away enough to look at him. He wiped the tears from her cheeks with a large thumb. "Forgive me. I've been a warrior for too long to understand how to be the lifemate you deserve. It should not have taken this to make me appreciate what I have."

"I've been a fool, too, A'Ran." They stood in silence, comfortable and whole in each other's arms. She wanted to curl up in a ball and sob until she fell asleep, relieved and ecstatic to be with him again. "We better go. I have to clean up the mess you made of Anshan."

"No, *nishani*. First, we will go to the other moon of Anshan, where we can be alone for several days. I will make amends for my behavior." His voice was husky and low, his grip around her tightening. Desire fed into her swirling emotions. "Then we go to Anshan."

"Together?"

"Yes, Kiera. We will create a new beginning for our people and heal our planet together."

She managed a smile, too overwhelmed by her emotions to speak. He pulled away to take her hand, and they walked hand-in-hand toward the small spacecraft. Her gaze went once more to A'Ran's face as they walked.

Fate, she thought. *I owe you one.*



This is a legally distributed free edition from
www.obooko.com

The author's intellectual property rights are protected by international Copyright law. You are licensed to use this digital copy strictly for your personal enjoyment only: it must not be redistributed commercially or offered for sale in any form.