



KIERRA'S THREAD

...The colors of his essence soothed her, stroked through her mind, settled her within a cocoon of pleasure. She caressed his chest, swirled her thumbs over tight, hard nipples, liked the feeling and felt an answering response in her physical body. Swirling fire entered her stomach and veered downward. Her shax released what seemed to be a liquid fire of pure need, and her radiance shimmered brightly. Her breath quickened.

“I want to seal with you, Jarek.”

“Not yet, *na nivia*. You’ve only just begun to heal. I would do nothing to cause you pain. We will go slowly.”

All these years he’d been so patient with her. Yet he’d always had faith her spirit and her body would mend.

She felt the glimmer of unshed tears in her eyes. “I love you, Jarek.” She saw his fingers clench as they rested against his thighs.

“Touch me, Jarek. We can move slowly, but I need you to touch me.”

He raised a hand and placed it lightly over one of hers. She felt a tingle, like an ache, but not quite the same, more a throb of acknowledgment. The sensation was one of excited awareness, the shade of pain was consumed by the pleasure.

“Jarek,” she whispered.

Carefully, he rested his other hand over hers. “I have waited for this moment, dreamed of it.”

The air around them was scented with arousal, hers as well as his, an awareness of need. They sat like that for long moments, as he entered her mind and guided her to sanctuary—a place of safety where his colors would slide through her, pleasuring her in the ways of a Serdionese mindwanderer. Slender shafts stroked her, eased her, teased her, until wave after wave of his passion colors consumed her...

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KIERRA'S THREAD
AN AMBER QUILL PRESS BOOK

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*To my readers who have asked to read more
stories about the Andromeda siblings and Argadia.
This one's for you.*

CHAPTER 1

She'd never expected to see him again. The ship was about to land and within moments she would know Guardian had answered her request.

Her mother turned to her, reached out a hand, and then hesitated. Kierra panicked and stepped away from her. Since her release from Odon's clutches, she'd been unable to tolerate anyone's touch—even her mother's. From the minute she'd arrived on Ednos, Gavrielle had hardly left her side. Slowly their family was being woven back together. Thanks to Eluria Zydon—her brother's true taman. *If only my mind could be repaired as easily.*

“Come, Kierra. I can't wait here any longer. I must be out there when their ship lands.” Gavrielle dropped her hand, and turned to open the door.

Kierra hadn't meant to hurt her. Her retreat was more reflex response. One tended to protect herself from the source of pain if at all

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possible. There had been a time when she'd been unable to avoid it, and everyone she loved now paid the price. Sighing, she followed her mother out to the landing bay.

Eluria, her best friend since they were young Maigens, was the one to rescue Kierra from bondage on their home planet of Argadia. And now she returned with Devon. Kierra's brother had been taken from them seven years previous to serve the Argadian Tribunal as an Elite Enforcer, a Nanus-infused warrior commanded by the Tribunal—more assassin than soldier, more robot than male.

“Mother,” Kierra warned, seeing she was poised to race up the gangway as soon as it descended when the ship landed, “wait. They will come to us. Give them time.” She understood her mother's urgency, but felt they should allow Eluria and Devon to report to the commander on duty before throwing themselves at him.

The Freelion Forces, rebels determined to take back their planet, had discovered a way to successfully neutralize the Nanus technology. Use of the new drug could mean the destruction of the deadly Enforcers, leaving the Tribunal vulnerable to attack, and eventual defeat.

Upon her release, once Kierra had physically healed, she threw herself into assisting with the research, determined to be a part of the downfall of the hated Tribunal. Positive proof it worked was about to be presented to all of those who waited. It was a glimmer of hope they'd sought for so long.

The heavy overhead doors slid open and a ship hovered above the bay, slowly descended to land, and powered down.

Kierra saw Gavrielle tighten in excited anticipation. “I can't believe he's actually here, and alive,” she whispered. “If only Alekos could—”

The door to the ship opened and two figures descended.

“Devon,” she cried, racing forward and throwing herself into the arms of the tall, muscular man who clasped her close. Kierra followed

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at a slower pace, each step seemed to be like trying to wade through quicksand.

“Mother,” his voice was deeper than Kierra remembered. It was thick and husky, filled with deep emotion. She saw his arms tighten around the slender form of her mother. Here was the long-awaited vision of the brother she’d thought lost to them long ago.

Her heart thudded to a halt, her feet rooted to the spot, unable to move at the image of Devon in the flesh. She tried to swallow her fear, attempted not to cringe as her heart thudded in her chest. Her gaze clung to the signature white hair of an Enforcer, so much a part of her nightmares.

Devon had served the Tribunal as an Elite Enforcer, she’d known that, had prepared herself to confront the fact, had even thought she was ready to fight against her fears.

But the reality was that Enforcers made up the brunt of her nightmares. She’d been purchased for a particular purpose by Tribunal Leader Odon—as a way to introduce Enforcers in the use of sexual expertise on their missions. She’d been a thing, a training device. The white hair swirled all around her. She couldn’t do this—the memories bombarded her, bruising, re-opening the wounds.

Jarek. Jarek, in bondage like her, had reached out to her. Jarek protected her mind from the worst of what her body was subjected to during the “training exercises.” At first she’d feared him, yet he would force her outside herself, away from what they inflicted on her physically. How would she have survived without Jarek during those years in bondage to Odon?

He had the mindwanderer abilities of a Serdionese—a planet the Tribunal, with the help of the Enforcers, had ravaged and destroyed. All able-bodied Serdionese who had survived were taken into bondage to Argadia.

Odon had not been Kierra’s first “owner.” But he certainly was the

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most evil. A cruel master who took delight in seeing pain inflicted, he purchased males and females offered on the bondage blocks as trainers for the young Enforcers in his service. He never touched the females himself as it was purported his preference was for males who could last longer beneath his masochistic abuse.

Females acquired for training exercises didn't survive long, and when they disappeared, they were simply replaced by another. On Argadia there was a surplus of bondage servants available, many arrested for political reasons. No one cared what happened to a bond servant—they were simply another form of chattel, bought and traded, to be discarded at their owner's whim.

Eluria had chosen to become a twilight companion, a highly paid courtesan, able to make choices about her companions, but Kierra had been a thing—used and abused to the point of death. If Eluria hadn't found her when she did, Kierra doubted she would have survived much longer, even with Jarek's help. It was only due to his strong, determined presence that she now lived. He'd been her slender thread to sanity—he still was.

Kierra refused to leave him behind when Eluria came for her. She would rather have died first. He'd pushed in her mind for her to go, but it had been the one time she'd refused his request. And Eluria had been forced to locate his cell and release him. It was in his strong arms Kierra was whisked away to safety. It was the last time he'd been able to physically touch her without causing pain.

But Jarek was away from Ednos. No one expected Eluria would end up in confrontation with Devon and be presented with the opportunity to test the antidote. Since his release from bondage, Jarek had chosen to stay and serve the rebellion and was now on just such a mission to secure and return with an Enforcer who could be tested under controlled conditions to determine the effectiveness of the new drugs. If they'd been apprised of Eluria's success, he wouldn't have been away

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now.

Kierra had assured him she would be fine, that he should move forward with his mission. There'd been no episodes of blackness for quite some time. She'd eased her mental guard, thinking it was safe. Obviously, she'd been very wrong.

She tried to halt herself from retreating from Devon. If she turned and ran, her mother would be devastated, and Devon and Eluria as well. She needed to gain control.

Devon slowly set his mother aside and turned toward Kierra, smiling, holding out his arms to her, urging her to come to him.

He was her brother. She looked at him, tried to see Devon, knew his eyes were the vivid blue she remembered as a child, but all she saw was the bottomless coal black abyss of an Enforcer. In her mind the smile twisted to a taunting, cruel beckoning of an emotionless fiend she must submit to.

She blinked rapidly trying to dispel the illusion, but the image wouldn't fade. He took a step toward her, and she knew she couldn't do it. Her body ached with the remembrance of the pain they'd inflicted. She'd been a thing they'd used to teach the location of pain and pleasure points, what sensations would elicit the response they sought to secure—like a cadaver used for a class of medical students, with no thought to what they did to her mind, to her body.

She'd been required to disrobe before them as they mocked and ridiculed her. There were usually two or more of them in a session. It was their task to make her beg for mercy, to determine how much they could torture her before she lost consciousness—and what she would be willing to do to stop the pain. There were times when she was administered an aphrarelaxant to reduce her resistance to the pleasure tests.

"No," she whispered raggedly, as the thought came to her that Devon would have gone through the same type of training. It would

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have been required. “No, Symion, no!” She wheeled around and sprinted away. “Jarek, help me, I cannot do this!”

But Jarek wasn't there to help her. She'd convinced him she was strong enough to overcome her fears.

And she was determined she would. She just needed time alone to come to terms with how much Devon still looked like the Enforcers of her nightmares. She couldn't face him now. Not yet.

“Kierra!” Her mother called after her.

But she couldn't turn back, couldn't answer. She was still running from her nightmares. There would come a time when she must face them or she could never be whole.

She whipped open the door of the reception area and fled through to the corridor beyond. On and on she ran until she arrived at the door of her apartments. She slid the key card into the slot and it opened. Once inside, she turned and engaged the lock. A trembling sigh escaped her. She was safe. They would not hurt her ever again—she would die first.

Dropping onto the lounge, she covered her face with her hands in despair. Devon was her brother and she'd run from him. How was she ever going to face him, embrace him, renew their family bond if she couldn't fight past these nightmarish visions?

She curled up in a fetal position on the lounge, wrapping her arms around her as though trying to keep herself from shattering completely. She would not call for Jarek. She would face this alone.

Mocking laughter filled her mind, echoing and echoing, growing louder as it tried to overtake her—the black eyes, the white hair swirled and surged. Hands and instruments touching her, invading her. She reached up and cupped her hands over her ears, but it didn't help. Because the voices were inside her head and they weren't going away—insistent, demanding.

She receded inward, to the corridors of her mind, followed the dark endless passage to the room inside her head. It was pitch black and

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soundless. Nothing existed in that room, not even Kierra. Her mind started to calm as she saw the open door of the haven in her mind, beyond all the other doors that held substance. In there nothing could touch her—not her memories, not the Enforcers, not the pain. The light in her mind would dim until there was nothing but a vast chasm, allowing her to float free.

She entered the room, and the echo of the door slamming shut behind her was comforting. Now she was safe. It was the room she'd retreated to before Jarek had found his way in. Then he would come and lead her from the room to another place of his creation, a healing place. Sanctuary.

Tears rolled down her face. Jarek wasn't here. She had to do this alone, and the only place she had a chance of recovering was in the secret room she'd created to escape.

She'd failed Jarek and she'd failed Devon. Both of them loved her, and she was unable to give either of them the same in return. Her time in bondage had destroyed her ability to respond. Every time anyone tried to touch her, her body screamed out in anguish. It had been conditioned to pain and so far there'd been nothing anyone could do to heal her.

She'd tried to let Jarek go so that he could have a life with another female who could offer him happiness. He'd steadfastly refused to leave her. She'd tried to break the bond, that fragile, slender thread that bound them, but for some reason it held stronger than the thickest rope. Jarek refused to release her.

And every time something like this happened, she felt the same sense of failure. But so much inside her had been destroyed during her years in bondage. She had yet to be able to reclaim those parts and make herself whole again.

She wanted to seal with Jarek. There were moments, fleeting though they were, that she felt a flicker of sexual desire building inside

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her. It would be dashed as the memory of other hands on her surged to swamp her.

The only place she could be with him was when he came to her in her mind and took her to his sanctuary. It wasn't real, but it was all they had. How long could he be satisfied with that?

But he wasn't here now and she couldn't go to sanctuary alone—it was a place created from his memories. Her secret room was her only refuge. When she entered, she could make every thought disappear and there was silence—no sound, no vision.

She sank to the cold, hard floor. She'd stay just for a little while, just to gain control, to be free of the memories, the pain, to regroup and gain composure. Then she would face Devon. She had to remember, he was her brother. She had to forget he'd been an Enforcer. Not just any Enforcer, but a First Level Enforcer—the most lethal.

No. No more thoughts. Just the numbing void of the secret room. She released a breath into the darkness, released the pain, the memories. No sadness. No happiness. No despair. No joy. There was nothing.

CHAPTER 2

“Captain, you’ve received a hail from Ednos.”

Captain Jarek Bakari looked up at the young ensign who stood at attention before him. “Who from?”

“It’s Gavrielle Andromeda.”

A sense of foreboding rode him, knowing there would be only one reason for Gavrielle to communicate with him. “Did she give an explanation for her hail?”

The young ensign shook his head. “No, Captain, but she said there was some urgency in her need to speak with you.”

Jarek rose quickly from his chair, turning away from the observation window. *Thank Mylonna they were only hours from reaching Ednos.* “Thank you, ensign. That will be all.”

He hoped this mission turned out to be worth the chance he’d taken in leaving Kierra without protection, because he had a feeling she needed him or Gavrielle wouldn’t have issued the request. Usually, he

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only took on the assignments that allowed him to return to Ednos within hours. This one had kept him away for several days. At least he was now close enough to thoughtwalk if need be. But why hadn't Kierra called to him?

The answer was evident before he'd even completed the question. Kierra had an independent stubborn streak that even in her worst moments hadn't lessened in the time he'd known her. She hated giving in to her fears, hated the occasions when the memories swamped her, leaving her vulnerable.

Waves of thought threaded from him to her in mindwanderer fashion. Touching her surface colors, he knew instantly something had frightened her enough to send her retreating to what she called her "secret room."

He pulled back from entering beyond the first layer. He needed to speak with Gavrielle before approaching Kierra's inner thoughts. It was important to know what sent her running into the darkness after so many months without incident.

His mission had been successful and a female Enforcer now lay in stasis below deck. He'd received word of Kierra's brother's successful recovery, and it had been decided that he should try to return with the female so they could determine if there would be any problems with administering the drug to the female Enforcers. Hence, Enforcer Daelyn Kapri had been secured and was being transported back to Ednos.

She'd been as fierce an adversary as her male counterparts and if her weapon hadn't misfired, it would be Jarek or one of the others of his team whose remains would be resting in dispersed molecules right now instead of Kapri restrained and lying in stasis below.

The thought of his Kierra had kept him focused. The need to return to her added speed to his movements in subduing the trained assassin. He would not leave Kierra to face her demons alone.

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She'd convinced him to take this mission against his better judgment, knowing he would lose contact with her once away from the planet. Thank Mylonna it was almost completed. But apparently not soon enough, because it looked like Kierra was in trouble.

He stalked toward the communications room. Everything was in order, and they'd encountered no trouble on the return trip. The medical practitioner who had accompanied them had removed the beamer from Kapri and it had been destroyed. His thoughts turned back to Kierra.

Jarek's home planet, Serdion had been conquered and destroyed by the Argadian Tribunal. He'd been taken prisoner and the rest of his family terminated. Collared quickly, the electrical surges controlled any ability on his part to escape. Hatred fueled his need to survive and one day seek retribution on those who had destroyed his way of life.

Upon arriving on Argadia, he'd immediately been offered on the bondage block. The humiliation of that experience had almost outweighed his desire for retribution. But if he'd fought the collar, he would have been destroyed immediately.

They'd treated him like an animal, and he'd been inspected by potential owners, his only covering the gleaming gold metal collar controlling his strength.

He was a healthy male, sold quickly, and was led from the exhibition platform to be presented to his purchaser.

All of his hate had centered on his new "owner"—Tribunal Leader Odon, whose reputation preceded him. He'd wanted Jarek to submit to him, and it had been the one thing Jarek would rather die than do. He'd suffered the pain of the collar until losing consciousness, had survived the lash of the electrical whip applied to his body, and still he'd refused to submit.

Odon had come close to killing him on several occasions, yet at the last minute had relented. Jarek had never known why and hadn't been particularly thankful for the reprieve. Yet not a day went by that he

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hadn't planned for escape—and revenge.

Serdionese were a closed, secretive civilization. No outsiders were allowed unless thoroughly screened for acceptance to live on the planet. They were a hard working, peace loving society and prized their tranquility.

There is a certain rhythm of waves within the mind of each Serdionese that allows for the recognition of a lifemate. To find a mate who holds the same passion rhythm is a unique and precious gift. It is an unconscious search of the mind, and when the vibrations touch and intertwine, an immediate bond is created that cannot be broken. The rhythm offers a oneness of mind that transmits to the soul and the surge of power only this level of recognition can hold. It carries its own living presence and bound energy—as though two bodies have merged to create one stronger being.

Jarek had forgotten about the bonding of mates. There was no reason to remember, knowing most of his race had been exterminated. It was unlikely he would ever locate his rhythm lifemate. Therefore, his mind had been solely focused on survival and retribution.

Until the day Kierra Andromeda had been purchased and brought into the demonic domain of Odon. Unbelievably, he'd known the precise moment Kierra arrived. A jolt of recognition so intense the happiness almost brought him to his knees as the waves passed through him. He'd had no choice but to reach out and connect with her, to bind them quickly.

His consciousness jumped from his mind to hers, loving her in an instant, binding her with the thread of his being, and drawing a thread of her essence back to himself, weaving them together.

She hadn't understood what was happening and had tried to retreat from him, but it was too late. The fact that she wasn't of his race bothered him. Would she eventually understand? But in the end he had to trust that Guardian knew what he was doing in binding them

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together.

Jarek's impotence came in knowing why she was there and that he couldn't protect her. The only thing he could do was attempt to keep her alive until he was able to discover a way to free them both.

And thus his descent into Haydon began as he bargained with the only commodity he had available—something that Odon wanted—his own body—to keep her torture to a minimum. And though he knew what lay behind the doors of Kierra's mind, he could never open himself to her fully. For her to ever discover what lay hidden and locked away from her, could destroy her forever.

She had suffered too much. Still suffered with the belief that she couldn't give him the love she thought he deserved. Bonding for Argadians was a physical sealing that he understood and wanted her to experience for her sake.

But for the Serdionese, the true mating took place in the mind. Kierra still didn't understand that what they experienced together when their energies united as one was for him the ultimate pleasure.

He sat at the communication terminal and hailed Ednos through the communicator.

"Yes, Captain?"

"Patch me through to Gavrielle Andromeda, please."

"Yes, Captain, right away."

He waited long moments for Gavrielle to answer.

"Jarek," her voice held a level of tenseness.

"What's happened to Kierra?" There was no time to exchange pleasantries, he wanted to reach Kierra quickly, but needed information first.

"As you know, Devon has returned."

"Yes. And?"

"I can't be certain, but I think it's because of his white hair. He has the look of an Enforcer. When she saw him—" Her voice trailed off.

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Jarek knew exactly what had happened. "I understand. I'll try to reach her from here. Where is she now?"

"She's locked herself in her apartments. She won't answer her communicator or the door. Help her, Jarek. I'm sorry." He heard the tears in her voice.

"It's not your fault, Gavrielle. You know sometimes the blackness descends on her without warning."

"It's not that," she protested. "I didn't think. I was so excited about Devon returning, I didn't think about what seeing him would do to Kierra. I should have known. We could have done it under more controlled circumstances."

I could have been there is what she's saying. "Don't berate yourself. I shouldn't have taken this mission. Never mind. I'll do what I can from here."

"Thank you." He heard the relief in her voice as the connection was terminated.

Rising from the terminal, he left the communications room and walked back to his quarters. When he entered, he pressed the intercom. "I don't want to be disturbed unless there's an emergency. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Captain," the voice affirmed.

"Anything I need to know right now?"

"No, Captain. Everything appears quiet and on course."

He broke the connection and turned away. Stretching out on the bed, he took several deep breaths. Visualizing the slender thread that would lead him to Kierra, he followed it and entered her mind, following the path to her secret room.

* * *

"Kierra."

She heard his voice and opening her eyes, saw a glimmer of light as the door swung open. Shifting to a sitting position, she saw his shape

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filling the doorway. The cocoon of blackness slowly began to lift.

“Kierra, I’m here. Tell me what’s frightened you.” He reached out a hand to her, beckoning her to go to him. She couldn’t refuse.

She’d known deep down that he would come. Somehow he always knew when she needed him. Slowly she rose to her feet. Memories flittered beyond the door—she could feel their shadows waiting for her and halted her progress across the small room.

“Kierra.” His voice was firm, demanding her attention. “I won’t let them hurt you.”

“I know, Jarek.” She reached out and he took her hand, his fingers warm, reassuring. “I wanted to do this on my own. It makes me feel so weak that you have to keep coming to my rescue all the time.”

He pulled her into his arms and out into the corridor of her consciousness. “We are as one here, Kierra. Come with me to sanctuary. Away from the darkness.”

She let him lead her along the corridor of her mind, past the closed doors to her memories. In the sanctuary of his consciousness she could love him the way he should be loved. He took her outside herself, away from Before where they could be only in the Now.

When she followed him along the silvery thread, there was nothing beyond the two of them, the way he touched her, made her feel. There were no scars as reminders—nothing of reality to force her from him.

Jarek knew every room in her mind—one by one he’d made her open to him. And in those rooms holding the monsters, he’d helped her fight their control.

In the place of energy that was his mind, he led her to his sanctuary—that Eden of happiness they could share. Once they entered, colorful rhythms of tranquil beauty would surround them.

It was odd that although she had shared all of herself, even her most intimate of corners, this was the only part of Jarek’s consciousness he shared with her. There were one or two rooms of family memories, but

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further down the darkened corridor he refused to take her.

They stopped at the gate to sanctuary.

“Before we enter, tell me what frightened you?”

She didn't want to talk about it. To have him know how weak she was. He tilted her chin up, forcing her to look at him.

“All right. It was my brother. I knew he would have the white hair of an Enforcer, but the reality of seeing him, knowing that he was like—” She couldn't continue.

“It's all right, Kierra. I'm sure he understands what happened. If he doesn't, we'll explain it to him when I return.”

“How are you here then, if you're not on Ednos?”

He smiled. “The thread that binds us is strong. When I heard from your mother, there was no choice but to come for you.” His gaze met hers. “You knew I wouldn't leave you alone to face these fears. You should have called for me.”

“I didn't want to bother you. I wanted to handle it myself. It's not right to tie you to me. To be with you here is beautiful, but when we are within our physical environment, I can't be with you. And you deserve more—a whole person. I've tried, but the pain of being touched by anyone—particularly any male—is too strong. I may be walking and breathing, but I'm not alive. They've taken it from me and I can't seem to find my way back.”

“Kierra, don't think about it anymore. Each day you are returning. It is slow. Don't you feel it as well? Sometimes I look in your eyes and I see you—like here. It may be a flicker, but it's more than it was when we left the compound.”

“I want him dead, Jarek.” It was her darkest desire, locked away in a small room at the very back of her subconscious. There was a thirst for blood—for revenge—that frightened her.

“I know. I have seen it. One day he will pay for what he's done. We will see to that.”

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"I don't think I can move forward until I can exorcise that room. I can keep it locked, but until I find a way to come to terms with the fact he still lives, still causes pain—and enjoys it—I cannot rest."

"His time will come. I vow to you, all of the Tribunal will pay for their crimes."

"How does Eluria bear it? Knowing her father is one of those who causes the destruction and misery of our people? Knowing that to free them, she must destroy him as well."

"She's made a great sacrifice," he said. "But from what I've heard, Guardian has rewarded her for her dedication. Guardian has made her strong and given her balance in her Union, blessed in ways few are offered."

Kierra nodded. "You're right. She and Devon were always meant to be together. Even I knew it when I first introduced them. She became only half a person when he was ripped from our lives by the Tribunal."

He cupped her face. "And is that what you would ask of me? To make me live as half a person without you? Because that's what it would be. Without you, this sanctuary would be nothing."

Tears flooded her eyes. "In here I can love you, but out there... It seems I'm frightened all the time. I can't control it. The doors won't stay closed."

"Then you will clean them—one at a time. And I'll be there to help you. And out of those rooms we will create a sanctuary of your own design, like this."

"I fear I haven't the strength."

"You have, *na navia*. My love. It will come when the time is right. But for now, come into my garden and let me love you in my way."

She took his hand and let him guide her inside. "In here, I am happy. I feel pleasure and joy—all the things I can't feel in the physical."

"It's why I've brought you here now. To remind you that you're not

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alone. I'm here with you always. We are together and this is Now—no Before, no Beyond. And this bliss is your right.”

He turned and closed the gate, locking out the Before and Beyond, containing the Now. The shimmering waves of color grew brighter, more reached from above to enter her energy and the heat radiated through her.

“Remove your clothing, Kierra,” he asked as he shed his own. “Let there be no barrier between us. Not here.”

CHAPTER 3

He was a magnificent male, his contours honed in solid marble like none other. She knew the sheer strength harnessed beneath the supple skin stretched tight over bulging muscle.

Yet Kierra also knew he would never use that strength against her. In this dimension there were no scars on his body, but she was aware his physical form held deep, ragged reminders of his bondage.

Long, thick dark brown hair hung to his shoulders, his features chiseled, and his eyes, so unlike Argadians. They didn't change shades with his moods or the phases of his lifespan, but remained a steady, vibrant green.

When his passions were high, the rich deep color turned bright, almost vibrating in luminosity, and seemed to reach out from within, mesmerizing to the recipient of his gaze. Like now.

"You shimmer," he said softly.

"My radiance." She smiled. "For you."

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She removed her overdress and dropped it to the ground. His eyes followed her movements. Narrowed as her breasts were freed. She looped her thumbs into the waistband of the silken leggings she wore.

“Slowly,” his voice had turned guttural, infused with need.

And with infinite care she lowered the leggings and stepped from them, leaving her naked.

“Take down your hair.”

She raised her hands and removed the pins. Two caramel-colored braided plaits fell free along her back. She reached around to drape one over her shoulder and release the intertwining strands, then did the same with the second.

“Mylonna, you’re so beautiful,” he said as he stepped toward her.

Her nipples tightened at the thought of his touch, his heat meeting hers. No Before, no Beyond, only Now.

This minute.

That’s all that mattered.

Jarek touched her hair and she leaned into his caress. As he moved closer, she felt his energy color—rich, deep vibrations of blues and greens enclosed them both. The glaze of color stroked her body, his mind directing their path. It felt like fingers erotically massaging every inch, bring her skin to a life of its own.

“Jarek,” she couldn’t help the aching desire as she uttered his name. Her radiance grew brighter, a green fire matching the luminous green of his eyes. Normally, an Argadian female’s radiance shimmered red, but apparently this mating with a Serdionese changed it somehow to match the burning intensity of his eyes. One day she would ask him to explain.

He placed his hands on her hips and drew her flush with his naked skin. She felt his khout, hard and thick, press along her shax, opening her. Her shax-ra released her passion, and she undulated against his long length. The fingers of color were everywhere, seductive,

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addicting, driving her higher and higher. His hands on her hips moved her gently along his shaft as her passion lubricated him, preparing him for her.

A spiraling heat began to build inside. She arched backward and Jarek bent to take a breast in his mouth. Shafts of light and color broke apart inside her as wavering release soared through her.

She twined her fingers in his hair, pulled him tighter to her as her radiance consumed them both.

The lips of her shax were engorged and sensitized from her release. Jarek had stopped all movement allowing her time to recover from her climax. Now he began a long, slow rhythm again. She gripped his back, a primal instinct to feel him buried deep and ride him hard and fast swamped her.

“Jarek, please. Fill me.” She shook with the need, her senses so sharpened by the colors he commanded, unceasingly stroking, never with the same touch, soothing one minute, erotic the next, each sensation different from the last. First at her thighs, then at her bottom, along her arms, her face, her neck. An erotic stroking at her nipples. She was bathed in his passion, his desire. His approval.

He lifted her and impaled her. She wrapped her legs around his taut waist, her arms anchored around his neck. He pumped long and deep, again and again. She didn't want him to stop.

“Yes. Oh, Symion, this is what I want to feel. You are what I need, Jarek.” Tears streamed down her cheeks at the overwhelming pleasure he offered her.

A fierce blue fire encompassed them, a cleansing heat that fused them into one being as Jarek took them both far beyond any known boundaries of the mind into the very core of heartfire, where bodies did not exist, consciousness did not exist. Only love in its purest undiluted energy existed.

* * *

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Jarek gasped as he returned to his physical form. He groaned at the knowledge he was in his ship. And Kierra wasn't with him. His body now ached and he shook from the physical need for her.

He could not let her know how painful it was not to merge with her completely in both the physical as well as the spiritual planes. It's why he only allowed her to know sanctuary. In that place, on that plane, they were one. One day they would have the complete oneness of physical unity as well as that of the mind.

He felt her echoes in his thoughts. He'd urged her back to her conscious before returning to his physical self. For a time she would be well. He sensed the void in her mind receding. When he returned to the planet and met with Devon Andromeda, they would determine how to proceed and minimize Kierra's fear of his demeanor as an Enforcer.

Odon had practically destroyed her. The only reason he'd kept her alive was to control Jarek, but he'd allowed the trainees at the compound to do as they wanted as long as they didn't kill her. They had tread a very fine line and there'd been little Jarek could do to protect her physical self. The knowledge of that always haunted him.

Serdion had been a planet of peace. This solar system thrived on the colors of life, the conscious, and the unconscious. Each race lived differently within the colors. Argadians' emotions were reflected through the changing colors of their eyes, and the radiance of their females. Serdionese were reflected in the colors of emotions, reaching out at the spirit level as mindwanderers. There'd been a time when they had co-existed peacefully. Until the Tribunal. The Tribunal sought to control and to destroy.

It was his fervent hope that the Freelion forces would be successful. But in any event, he had made a sworn oath to himself that Odon and the whole compound would be destroyed and turned to ashes. Not only for what he and his "trainees" had forced on Kierra, but for the many others who had died beneath their masochistic acts in the name of

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“training sessions” in order to maintain the Tribunal’s stranglehold on Argadia.

His planet was gone forever, destroyed by the Tribunal. There was no going back, only forward. Hate and vengeance fueled him. He fought with the Freelions because the Argadian culture would be part of his Beyond. It was a part of Kierra and she was part of him. To protect Kierra he would do whatever it took. And Odon would die.

“Captain Bakari?” a voice interrupted his thoughts.

He turned to the communication terminal and pressed a button. “Yes, what is it?”

“We’re nearing Ednos. I thought you would want to be informed.”

“Yes. I’ll be there directly.” He rose from his chair. The aching desire he felt had lessened. It never totally went away. One day Kierra would be his completely. He only needed patience until that day. For now, the spiritual oneness must be enough.

* * *

“Bakari.” Devon held out his hand and after a moment’s hesitation, Jarek accepted it.

“Andromeda.”

“Stop bristling—both of you. And sit down.” Eluria commanded as she took a seat next to Devon at the polished table in the meeting room. “I thought we should get together before Kierra and Devon meet again. Gavrielle has arranged dinner for tomorrow evening. What do you think, Jarek?”

Jarek studied Devon. When he’d first entered the room, his first thought was to draw his weapon upon seeing Devon. He was pure Enforcer, except for the eyes. He understood what had terrorized Kierra, and raged at the knowledge she’d confronted her nightmare alone.

He saw Eluria reach out to twine her fingers with Devon’s and found himself envying their connection. He turned his gaze back to

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clash with Devon's turquoise stare.

"My first instinct when I saw you was to pull my disrupter and send your molecules scattering to the winds. I can only imagine what Kierra felt."

He saw Devon glance at Eluria. A fleeting look of pain crossed his face.

"It's all right, Devon. It's natural to feel pain for what's happened to Kierra." Eluria reached up and brushed a lock of his hair back. "We'll find a way to get through to her without hurting her further."

"The emotion is still difficult to control. So many years without it."

"What if you change the color of your hair artificially?" Jarek asked.

"We tried. Whatever process they used, the follicles have been stripped in some way. It won't hold artificial color. It's the one thing we've been unable to return to normal."

"Well then, I guess that's that. Too bad. It means those who served as Enforcers will be readily identifiable when the fighting is over. It will be difficult for them to return to their former lives."

Eluria pinned him with a steely look. "Thank you for that enlightening observation, Jarek. Your assumption was that we didn't realize the difficulties when this is over?"

Jarek turned back to Devon. "Tell me, Andromeda, how many people did you personally torture during your training sessions?"

Devon vaulted from his chair, ready to attack. Jarek was on his feet and prepared to meet him, with his diffuser out and aimed squarely at his chest.

"Stop it!" Eluria shouted as she forced Devon back and stood in front of him. "Put that away, Jarek. Now!"

Hate surged through him and he'd almost lost control. Had fully meant to send Devon Andromeda into little molecules. If Eluria had been one second slower—

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“Step aside, Eluria.” Devon put his hands on Eluria’s shoulders and eased her away. “This is between Bakari and me. I won’t have you hurt.”

“Devon,” she lifted a hand to his heart. “We are bound. I cannot stand by and watch you killed. You know that.”

Devon’s eyes met Jarek’s and silent understanding passed between them. Neither one wanted Eluria or Kierra hurt. Jarek slowly reholstered his diffuser and sat down.

Devon again eased Eluria aside and into her chair. “I think we understand each other now.” He turned back to Jarek. “I tortured no one. Odon’s is the only compound where bound servants are used, the rest are trained with simulators. There were many stories spread throughout the ranks about his tactics. Enforcers trained by Odon were very easy to spot. I may not have had all my emotions available, but causing unnecessary pain was never my way.”

“Then I guess you better make sure Kierra knows that. Because the thought of her brother causing the same torture she was subjected to is part of what’s destroying her.”

Devon’s head dipped low and Eluria leaned toward him. He turned to her. “She’s always going to think that, isn’t she?” He turned to Jarek. “It’s what you see. You can’t see the male—only the Enforcer. What is it going to take for you to forgive the Before?”

Jarek kept his gaze for long moments before answering. “I don’t know, Andromeda. Turning Enforcers is going to be the only way to breach the security of Argadia. We’re going to have to find a way to get along. The Beyond depends on it.” He brushed a hand through his hair. He was tired of the fighting, tired of the hate and the rage. “We’ll have to take it one step at a time. When Kierra sees you and Eluria together she might come to understand. And it may aid in her healing.”

“Try to talk with her, Jarek. You have a way of reaching her when none of the rest of us can.” Eluria said.

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He nodded. "We are bound in ways you cannot understand."

Eluria looked at Devon. He saw her devotion reflected in her eyes. "I believe we understand."

It came to him in that moment that Eluria was different. She no longer held the look of a woman ravaged by her past. There was a glow of peace about her. His eyes dropped to her wrist and he noticed the mark of Guardian.

"I heard of your Union. You have healed, Eluria."

She turned to look at him. "We have been blessed with another chance at what was lost. Do not give up hope, Jarek. Kierra will one day be healed."

"I would never do that, Eluria. You know that. Kierra's welfare is everything to me."

"Go to her. We have kept you long enough. Try to prepare her for the meeting tomorrow."

He rose from the table. "I'll do what I can to ease the way. She needs her family. I'll try to help her to see through the facade of the Enforcer to the brother she lost."

"Thank you, Jarek. Devon needs his sister as well. Now, if we can just find Alekos."

"I believe Alekos may be beyond redemption. There are many stories of his exploits."

"There is always hope, Jarek. Remember that."

CHAPTER 4

Jarek stood in the doorway to the laboratory and watched her as she sat, staring in fixed concentration at the screen of the microreader. He saw the numbers flash by in rapid succession and studied Kierra as she scanned the screen as they flew past. Periodically she would make notes on the pad setting on the counter before her.

If no one disturbed her, she would sit there all night. He knew she'd done it before. Her caramel colored hair was intricately wound in a braid draped down the center of her back. He had the urge to free it from confinement.

The loose white coat she wore shielded her from him and he wanted to remove it as well, knowing what lush, soft curves lay beneath. His hands spasmed with the desire to touch her, yet knew if he did so it wouldn't bring her the pleasure he wanted her to experience, but the pain of memory.

Unbidden, his thoughts reached for her and he saw her tense. He

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moved from the doorway and walked toward her, increasing the intensity of vibration of his thoughts.

He felt her connect with him and smiled at the sense of colors and numbers flooding the corridors of her mind. She sifted through data, throwing bits this way and that in an attempt to align the equation she sought.

At the moment, her memories were at rest behind locked doors. He didn't relish informing her about the dinner with Devon, but also knew she had to face it at some point. At least he was here to help her through it.

She swiveled around and her face lit up with a smile when she saw him approach.

Mylonna, but she's lovely. He shuttered his thoughts quickly.

His gaze locked with hers and he felt her desire to touch and be touched. But he saw the shadow approach and swerved away before even the thought could cause her pain.

He shifted his gaze to the microreader. "What are you working on, now that the antidote has been perfected?"

Her hesitation whispered through him, her thoughts touching his, retreating back to the equation she worked on. He breathed a sigh of relief at a moment of pain averted.

"Earlier I spoke with Eluria, and I've agreed to take on a little project for her."

"You spoke with Eluria? Did she mention dinner?"

Kierra sighed. "Yes. She also told me that Devon wasn't trained with bonded servants. You all met, didn't you? To discuss me."

He felt the swirl of unrest in her mind. A gathering storm. "It wasn't to hurt you. We want to find a way to make this easier. He is your brother."

Switching the microreader off, she sat and stared at the blank screen. He knew the appearance of calm acceptance was a facade—he

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felt the turbulence roiling inside her.

“You all treat me as a child. Someone unable to act and care for myself. The first sight of him took me unaware. All right, it shouldn’t have, but it did. I was handling it.”

“Handling it? Not from what I felt.”

She turned and pinned him with a glittering splinter of anger. “I didn’t call for you to come rescue me. You took that upon yourself. I would have been fine.”

“Your mother called me, concerned,” he bit back. “I could do no other than go to you. You know that.”

He saw a shudder of defeat glance across her face. “Why, Jarek?” she whispered. “How are we bound? We’re from different cultures, different planets. I don’t want you tied to me like this. Yet you are always there to offer protection.”

How he ached to touch her physically, to soothe the pain he felt racing through her. “It is not for us to question Guardian. I would want no other.”

“I am damaged, Jarek. Possibly beyond help. How many years has it been? And still you can’t touch me. Even after all this time. No matter how hard I try to overcome it—no matter that I try to convince myself it is Before. I can’t alter my body’s responses.”

Her dark emotions swirled around him. He leaned toward her, as close as he dared, without touching her. “I am patient. I will wait. What we have is enough.” Her female scent filled his senses and his khout hardened with desire. The need to seal with her knifed through him, to know her completely, to be taken by her and to take her.

He shifted his mind from the physical throb and reached with his thoughts instead. And in this way they touched and intertwined.

The tenor of her breathing changed. He knew she sensed him. “Jarek.” He felt his name, rather than heard it.

“*Na nivia*, we are one in all ways that matter for now.” He spoke to

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her thoughts, felt her yield to him. “What I wouldn’t give to take you to sanctuary right now.” He was in her mind and the dark shadow clouds began to dissipate, replaced by passion bursts curling around them. He felt the stroke of the wisps against his thoughts, seductive sensations.

He pulled away before her sensual radiance shimmered for all to see, determined not to cause her embarrassment here in the laboratory. If they’d been alone, he most certainly would have taken her to his sanctuary.

She slid from the stool as he stepped away. “You give too much, Jarek. And yet, you hide as well. What lays behind those locked doors you won’t share with me?”

She saw so much, yet he could never share what he kept locked away. To do so might destroy any feeling she had for him and he couldn’t take the chance. She tried to be so strong, but what lay hidden in his mind must stay that way.

He turned away from her. “Come, your family awaits.”

“One day, Jarek Bakari, you won’t be able to hide. I’ll find the right key. You can’t protect me forever, you know.”

He stepped back to allow her to precede him from the laboratory. He prayed to Guardian that never happened. That he could protect her as he had always tried to do.

* * *

Smoothing a hand down the shimmering blue overskirt, she attempted to remove wrinkles that didn’t exist. Nerves consumed her, and those she could not dislodge. She would not fail this time. He was her brother and she loved him. The white hair could not continue to act as a barricade to her showing him that. He’d had no control in becoming an Enforcer and they’d taken his memories from him. But the Enforcer was gone and her brother, Devon, was back.

Eluria would not give her love to someone untrustworthy. From what Eluria had told her, Devon could have killed her and he hadn’t.

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He wasn't like Odon's Enforcers. If only she could believe that. She wanted to believe it.

When she didn't insert her identity card into the slot, Jarek reached around and used his own. "They're waiting, Kierra."

She licked her lips. "I know. I'm ready."

She waited as he removed his card and the door to her mother's apartments slid open. Inhaling deeply, she stepped inside.

Her mother was the first to greet her. "Kierra, I'm glad you came."

She saw her mother glance swiftly at Jarek, who stood behind her. Irritation rose inside her at that look.

"I'm fine, Mother. Of course I would come. Why wouldn't I?"
Symion, why did they keep doing this?

Feeling the heat of a gaze, she turned toward the dining area, prepared herself for the confrontation she knew awaited. Irresistibly she was drawn first to his white hair and she forcibly strangled the memories it invoked. Her gaze dropped and connected with his turquoise eyes instead, and the years fell away, as the bittersweet memories materialized.

It was her brother's eyes staring back at her, colors swirling with love and understanding, fringed with pain and regret. The Devon who had teased her as only a brother could. The one who'd stolen her sweetcakes when their mother wasn't looking, tickled until she called truce. The brother who'd protected her from the bullies who tried to steal her musicorder and discs, who had a passion for old science fiction Earth movies. And the one she'd introduced Eluria to, knowing he'd never knowingly hurt her. Tears flooded her eyes at the knowledge of so much that had been lost.

"Devon, I'm so sorry." She wanted to hug him and assure him. She saw him start to move toward her and instinctively stepped back.

He halted and she saw pain darken his eyes. She wrapped her arms about herself and sank to the lounge.

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“Give her a moment.” She heard Jarek tell them as he sank to his knees in front of her, close, but not touching, shielding her from them.

In seconds he was there in her thoughts.

He touched her mind, sought to calm the deluge of memories. His soothing, warm colors wrapped around her, like a soft, warm blanket, insulating her thoughts.

Offering his assurance. She took a shuddering breath and stood again. “I’m sorry. For a moment the memories of our youth overwhelmed me.” Again, she looked at Devon—each time it was easier to see past the facade of the Enforcer to the man within—her brother. “I’m sure they’ve told you my problem.”

He nodded. “Yes. I forgot for a moment. It’s been a long time, Kierra. It’s good to see you.” Eluria moved up beside him and linked her arm with his.

Kierra’s gaze settled on her. “I wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for Eluria.”

Devon looked down at Eluria and covered her hand with his own. “None of us would be.”

Kierra saw a shadow of pain cross Eluria’s face. “None of you would have the pain if it weren’t for me. None of you would have suffered if it hadn’t been for me—for the power my father coveted. Taeryl wouldn’t be dead.”

“Enough, Eluria,” Gavrielle interjected forcefully. “My husband would not have wanted you to carry the weight of this guilt. He admired you for your strength. You are not responsible for your father’s actions. You have suffered through the years as well.”

Kierra knew Eluria felt responsible for Devon having been made an Enforcer. Her father, Commander Clorial Zydon, had sought to bargain her purity with Union to the son of Commander Odon. He had added Devon’s name at the last minute for induction as an Enforcer in an attempt to thwart any relationship between Devon and Eluria.

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Eluria had discovered his plan and left to become a Twilight Companion, paid for sexual companionship, thereby destroying her value as a pure Maigen to her father. From that point on, Eluria had vowed to return Devon to his family.

Their own father, Taeryl, had become involved in the rebellion after Devon had been taken, and was assassinated by an Enforcer. Gavrielle escaped with Alekos, their brother, but Kierra was arrested and placed into bondage.

Without Eluria's determination they probably all would have perished, yet they were together, here in this room, thanks to her.

Kierra took a step forward. "We will win this battle. Look what we've already accomplished. Discovering the antidote to the Nanus process will make the difference. It's already brought Devon back to us. Without you, Eluria, none of this would have been possible."

"I have done little," Eluria denied. "You are part of the team that created the miracle of the antidote. How is Daelyn Kapri responding, by the way? Do there seem to be any adverse side effects?"

"None that we've encountered so far. She seems to be responding well. We've been able to control the flood of emotions as they returned. Dr. Xander has been helping her with the memories. I don't believe it's caused her as much pain as you say Devon experienced."

"We won't need that many Enforcers to gain access to the Nanus facility," Jarek said. "We've managed to tap into the Nanus computer system and have downloaded the list of Enforcers. Devon has agreed to go through the list to identify the strongest prospects to focus on first. As an Elite, he also has a good sense of which sectors they work in."

"Enough talk of the rebellion," Gavrielle stepped forward, hands raised. "We are a family reunited, we must celebrate and be thankful to Guardian for bringing us together once again."

"You are right, Mother," Kierra turned back to Devon. "And I am most thankful you've been returned to us Devon. And that you and

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Eluria have found each other again.” She looked at Eluria and a little of the old Kierra couldn’t help but break free as good memories took over. “Didn’t I tell you that I thought you and Devon were made for each other?”

Eluria laughed. “Not exactly. As I recall, what you said was that Devon and I deserved each other. And I don’t remember you were in a particularly complimentary mood at the time.”

For the first time in years, Kierra laughed with a warmth rooted in true happiness and something within her changed. It was the laughter born of good memories, of shared camaraderie, of innocent youth. “You had just put a huge snag in my very expensive, brand new outfit trying to impress him, as I recall. I hadn’t even had a chance to wear it yet.”

Gavielle shoed them all into the dining room. The warm energy in the room surrounded Kierra, just as Jarek’s soothing colors often did. It was a healing, long needed and long overdue, and she felt it spread through her. She looked around at the people present and felt an overwhelming thankfulness that they were together.

As they sat at the oval glass table, another emotion surged within Kierra. It came from the power of healing. She looked at Jarek and tentatively reached out. He met her gaze, but didn’t move. She felt his stillness. His hand lay on the table, and she knew it would be warm, pulsing with life. She’d felt so cold for so long without the touch of another.

Being here with her family gave her a sense of courage and renewal she’d thought lost to her. Tentatively, she lowered her hand, felt the heat surge through her. A silent waiting lingered in the room, an expectancy. And then she lowered her hand and touched him.

An echo of pain rippled up her arm, but the pleasurable warmth soon overpowered the twinges. Jarek tried to remove his hand—she knew he’d surmised the pain—but she shook her head. The discomfort

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turned to a dull ache, but the energy of the touch mastered it.

She looked into his eyes. "Soon," she whispered.

His soothing colors washed through her mind. "I can wait," echoed through her thoughts. "You're more than worth waiting for. Your healing has begun."

CHAPTER 5

Two weeks later, Kierra sat before the microreader again. She'd promised Eluria she would find a way to break down the Nanus process that was used to prevent conception in the Twilight Companions.

At the time Eluria had become a Companion, she'd held no hope of ever obtaining Union with Devon. She'd therefore agreed to the alteration made to all Twilights. She confided to Kierra how devastated she was to not be able to offer Devon hope of Beyond through conception. As often as Devon assured her it didn't matter, it bothered her. She wanted to hold his child—one they had created together with their love.

Kierra wanted that for her. Eluria didn't deserve to be punished for her dedication to returning Devon, and so she had assured her she would attempt to find an antidote. She was close; she was sure of it.

She thought back to the dinner with her family and the breakthrough she felt she'd made. To touch Jarek was an unexpected,

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pleasant surprise.

It felt as though in accepting Devon she had breached some of the impotent rage she held in her nightmare memories. It was a small step.

Healing. It was like standing beneath the gentle rain of a warm season, washing the pain away. The next night she'd reached out for him again. He never attempted to touch her, but simply waited for her to initiate.

The simple strength of his palm against hers, his heated energy mingling with hers, made her seek more.

It was difficult for Jarek, she felt it in his mind, the iron control he maintained on his desire to hold her, to seal with her. The twinges of pain she experienced were less and less.

Soon. Soon the time would come when she would seal with him, not only in his way of the thoughtwalk, as he termed it, but in the physical sense as well.

Each time she saw Devon it was a little easier to see her brother and not the Enforcer. They were all thankful he hadn't been trained by Odon. Odon warped those he came in contact with. She had been changed by what he'd done.

Jarek had come away altered as well. Instinct told her he hid the full import of that change well away from her. Every now and then she came close to breaching the barrier, but she felt an unusual fear inside him and immediately the barrier would strengthen. What was it that he could possibly fear so much?

Shaking her head, she attempted to clear her thoughts. Her lips curved in a smile as she thought of the night before.

She and Jarek had been alone in her apartments. They'd sat cross-legged on the floor, facing each other. He called it a game of physical quest. One designed just for them.

When he removed his shirt, his broad, solid chest was exposed to her. Ebony, curling hairs thickly splayed across the sculpted surface of

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a solid contour of deep, sun-kissed flesh, teasing her. His dark brown nipples, beaded hard, beckoned her touch.

His green eyes had glowed like when they were in thoughtwalk, an intense, vibrating florescent gleam of passion.

Her own sexual radiance began to emanate, a deep, rich green cloak of color moving outward to enclose them both in preparation.

His mind reached for her, multitudes of color traveling along the slim silver thread that bound them.

“Touch me.” His voice was a thick, rich cream, enticing her.

Extending a tentative hand, her palm flattened against his pecs, the muscle quivered and tightened beneath her touch. His colors stroked her mind, as she stroked his body.

A quiver of pain echoed along her arm and into her chest.

“Do you wish to stop?” he’d asked, feeling the same vibrations run through her with his mind. She couldn’t break eye contact with him and, instead, simply shook her head.

Her other hand rose to his chest, flattened, and they simply stayed that way for long moments as she let the knowledge of his heat and energy merge and pass through her.

The colors of his essence soothed her, stroked through her mind, settled her within a cocoon of pleasure. She caressed his chest, swirled her thumbs over tight, hard nipples, liked the feeling and felt an answering response in her physical body. Swirling fire entered her stomach and veered downward. Her shax released what seemed to be a liquid fire of pure need, and her radiance shimmered brightly. Her breath quickened.

“I want to seal with you, Jarek.”

“Not yet, *na nivia*. You’ve only just begun to heal. I would do nothing to cause you pain. We will go slowly.”

All these years he’d been so patient with her. Yet he’d always had faith her spirit and her body would mend.

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She felt the glimmer of unshed tears in her eyes. “I love you, Jarek.” She saw his fingers clench as they rested against his thighs.

“Touch me, Jarek. We can move slowly, but I need you to touch me.”

He raised a hand and placed it lightly over one of hers. She felt a tingle, like an ache, but not quite the same, more a throb of acknowledgment. The sensation was one of excited awareness, the shade of pain was consumed by the pleasure.

“Jarek,” she whispered.

Carefully, he rested his other hand over hers. “I have waited for this moment, dreamed of it.”

The air around them was scented with arousal, hers as well as his, an awareness of need. They sat like that for long moments, as he entered her mind and guided her to sanctuary—a place of safety where his colors would slide through her, pleasuring her in the ways of a Serdionese mindwanderer. Slender shafts stroked her, eased her, teased her, until wave after wave of his passion colors consumed her.

Later, when she returned to awareness, she'd been shocked to discover her nails had dug deep gashes into his chest. She'd been horrified, but he'd smiled.

“I have many scars, sweet Kierra. But these will always bring pleasant memories—reminding me of you. Soon, Kierra, I promise you, we will seal in the ways of your people.”

Although she'd protested, he had left her with that promise. For the first time, she'd asked him to stay, but he'd refused, telling her his strength could only last so long. And then as she'd held her breath, he'd leaned down and lightly glanced a kiss across her lips.

It wasn't pain that coursed through her, but pleasure. A knowledge of desire she'd thought destroyed forever by Odon and his Enforcers.

And then he was gone before she could protest further. She'd floated back to solid ground. The shadow that always hung over her

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had, for once, disappeared. She would be with Jarek as she was always meant to be. Her lips curved in a smile. Sooner than he expected.

She blinked, trying to focus on the combinations of numbers passing before her on the microreader. She would see Jarek later, but right now Eluria needed her to concentrate and find an answer to her problem.

“Kierra.”

She blinked and looked up when she heard her name. “Eluria, what are you doing here?” There was a tense, closed look about her. “What’s wrong?”

“Come with me, Kierra. Hurry. Something’s happened, but I don’t want to discuss it here.”

Quickly, Kierra slid from the stool, shed the white lab coat, and followed Eluria from the lab. When she entered the conference room, her heart stuttered as she looked around. She clutched a fist to her chest in an attempt to control the rapid beats.

“Where’s Jarek, Eluria? What’s happened to him?” She closed her eyes and concentrated, attempting to follow the thread that bound them. It stretched too far, wherever he’d gone was beyond communication. “Jarek,” she gasped.

Eluria pulled a chair out from the table. “Sit down, Kierra, please, and we’ll explain.”

She dropped to the offered chair and turned her gaze on Devon. “Where is he? Tell me now.”

Once she sat, Devon also sat in the chair across from her. “We received a communication from one of our patrols. They’d been attacked and their ship disabled. It was supposed to be a quick mission to retrieve the patrol, and return to Ednos. Jarek was the only one available to lead the mission.”

“And?”

Devon heaved a heavy sigh and ran a hand across his brow. “They

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were ambushed and from what we can determine, Jarek was captured.”

“Where is he now?” she whispered.

Eluria reached out, hesitated, then lay a hand across Kierra's. A tremor passed through her at the unfamiliar sensation.

“Kierra,” she said quietly, “it was Odon's Enforcers who captured him.”

“Symion, no!” She jumped from her chair. A sense of horror raced through her. “Not Odon.” A desolate calmness followed, as the reality of Jarek's capture seeped through her. She knew what she must do. It was as though fate had played this hand.

Her gaze crept back to Devon. “When do we leave?” There was a quiet determination she hoped he understood.

“You're going nowhere, Kierra,” Devon said.

“Yes. I am. You will not leave Ednos without me.”

“I will not be responsible for taking you anywhere near Odon. If Jarek thought I'd brought you to that compound, he'd beat us both.”

“Well let him try. Once we've found him. I will not rest until Jarek is rescued. And you will not go without me. Once we're on Argadia, I have a chance of reaching him through the thoughtwalk. You won't find him without me. You know that.”

“Kierra—”

“It's settled. No more discussion. If you don't take me, I'll just hijack a solo ship. But I *will* go after him. With your help or without it.”

They glared at each other across the table.

“Enough,” Eluria finally broke in. “We'll have to take her with us, Devon, or she'll try something stupid. We don't have time to argue.”

Kierra saw surprise register on his face. “Eluria, you are not coming on this mission.”

“Oh, like you can stop me? You can't possibly have thought I was letting you go alone.”

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"I would not be alone. I have a team ready, remember?"

"Forget it. You are my taman."

"And as such, you will listen to me."

She drew herself up to her full height, faced him with hands on her hips, chin juttied. "I've told you before, I can take care of myself. You keep forgetting that."

"Female, you try my patience." His anger included both of them, then his glance slid upward. "Mylonna, why have I been saddled with two such stubborn females?"

"You're stuck with us, brother. How soon before we leave?"

He heaved another deep sigh. "Meet me on the flight deck in one hour. If you're not there, I leave without you."

"Don't worry, I'll be there."

"I should just have you both confined until I return."

"It wouldn't work and you know it. I'll see you in an hour." Kierra turned and left the conference room before Devon could say anything further.

As she walked down the corridor, instinctively she again reached for Jarek. He lived. She knew he was alive or the thread would have been severed.

If she stopped to think about the fact that he was again in Odon's hands, pure terror would overtake her and render her worthless in locating him. She could not retreat into her secret place, Jarek needed her to be strong.

Odon must be stopped. She'd come full circle to the source of her pain. She should have known she would be forced to face her greatest fear before she would be allowed to move on. One did not heal without lancing the wound and draining the infection. And Odon was indeed the infection. Not only to her, but to all of Argadia.

She also knew Odon would anticipate their attempt to rescue Jarek and most likely increase the guard. They had escaped once; Odon

KIERRA'S THREAD

would try to make sure it wouldn't happen again. If Devon could get them inside the compound, then Kierra could lead them to Jarek. He would keep Jarek alive just to tempt them. But what condition would he be in when they found him? Odon's specialty was torture and he knew just how to do it, yet keep his victim alive. He had twisted and destroyed more minds than Kierra cared to think about.

“Live, Jarek. Don't let Odon defeat you after everything. Live.”

CHAPTER 6

His hands were bound above his head, his legs shackled in metal bands. A wound to his head seeped blood down the side of his face, and discoloring was evident along the expanse of his chest. Trying to breathe was not a pleasant experience.

Jarek had flown into a trap. The patrol he'd been sent to rescue were all dead. It was Odon who'd sent the message requesting help, using the communication system of the downed Freelion ship. By the time Jarek had realized their situation, they were surrounded by Odon's Enforcers as they attempted to disable his ship. Their retreat was cut off.

Even with the knowledge they wouldn't have a chance to escape alive, he fought, knowing that if Odon captured them, they were all dead anyway. Just like the patrol they'd been sent to rescue.

His one regret was leaving Kierra behind and that he hadn't taken the time to go to her before departing—possibly to touch her once

KIERRA'S THREAD

more. But he'd expected it to be a short and simple mission and that he'd soon return before she discovered he'd even left.

An explosion had rocked the command deck, he'd been thrown against a console, and a black void had overtaken him. He'd woken here, locked securely in the shackles he remembered so well, the hated bondage collar enclosing his neck.

He remembered Odon's laboratory. The scars he carried were vivid remembrances of this hideous place, also known as the training room, or torture chamber, to bondage servants. Odon took delight in his experiments and the pain he elicited during them.

When Jarek awoke, his mind had reached instinctively to follow the silver thread to Kierra, to be assured she was safe. For a moment he forgot she was free and no longer in need of his protection from Odon. He was thankful not to find her, which meant she was not close by. He shut his mind, locking himself off completely.

He attempted to look around, to determine how many guards were in place, and to see if any other of his crew had survived. But he was prevented from movement by the collar attached to the bars jutting out from the wall. He was truly immobilized. Between the arm and leg locks and the collar there was no chance of escape unless they should happen to release him.

As he became more aware, he realized there were small discs with wires attached to his temples. He attempted to follow where they led, which appeared to be a microreader set on a table diagonal to the cage he was entrapped in. A male in a lab coat sat before the microreader. By shifting his gaze to the far left he could just make out the table.

Then he heard movement to his right. He tensed, knowing it came from the entrance to the lab. He heard the door slide open and then echo again as it slammed shut. Heavy footsteps followed.

"Well, well, my property has been returned."

Jarek recognized the voice as Odon came into view. He hadn't

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changed much over the years. Tall, broad, and hairless. His eyes, black and emotionless as death. The smile he offered Jarek did not reach his eyes. There was a look of triumph about him Jarek didn't like.

He strode toward him, stopped, and studied him. Jarek remembered that look. He'd seen it when Odon had first purchased him at the bondage sale. It was the look of someone weighing the cost of merchandise against its usefulness.

Jarek could feel Odon's jubilation and tensed as he reached out to touch Jarek's chest. Laying a palm against the discoloration, he sought to dominate Jarek with a hard black demand for submission.

Jarek refused to look away, to cower. Odon pressed until he saw Jarek wince. "You still color nicely, Serdionese." He leaned forward. "Have you missed our little sessions, pet?"

When Jarek refused to answer him, Odon pulled his hand away, closed his fist and slammed it into Jarek's bruised muscle.

"Answer me, when I ask a question," he barked.

Jarek tried to gather breath, to master the pain. "I've missed nothing you have to offer," he ground out. "You might as well kill me now and get it over with. Where's the rest of my crew?"

Odon's laughter echoed throughout the room. "All dead. I had no use for them. But you? No, no, pet. I have something new to try on you. I've waited a long time for this." He tapped the side of Jarek's temple. "I enjoyed the taste of your rebellious nature. In your mind you fought me, but your body was mine to do with as I pleased. You bartered your body for the life of the female as I remember. But your mind—that you refused to submit."

He turned and walked toward the table with the microreader. He looked back at Jarek. "Not this time." He reached into a case that lay on the table next to the microreader and lifted out a syringe. He held it up to Jarek. "This will give me what I want from you. Submission of your body and your mind." He laughed. "And you'll even think it is by your

KIERRA'S THREAD

choice.”

Jarek tensed as Odon came back to him. “The drug will open your mind—every dark and hidden corner, every locked door. I was working on it even before you left. You were a challenge I meant to break. My way.” He reached for Jarek’s arm. Jarek tensed, trying to pull away, but knew it was useless.

His thoughts were the one thing Odon could never force from him. Submission of his body was one thing, but his mind he’d kept free. What was Odon up to? Odon jabbed the needle into his arm, keeping eye contact with Jarek as he did it. Slowly, he pressed the plunger.

Jarek felt a burning sensation run through his veins as the drug entered his system.

“The drug will open all those locked doors you so protectively kept shut.” Odon removed the syringe and tossed it aside. “And once the doors are open, the microreader will alter your patterns. One by one each of your memories will be shifted to the form I dictate. You were the only one I was never able to conquer completely. You refused to surrender. But that’s about to be rectified. I will own everything about you when we’re finished.”

Jarek felt the locks in his mind breaking, disintegrating beneath the onslaught of the acidic drug coursing through him. He fought against it, sweat breaking out on his body.

“No!”

Odon’s laughter echoed inside his head. The locks on the doors melted, hot, molten acid spreading through his mind, and the doors shattered. His mind screamed in impotence.

“Do you see, pet? You are helpless to fight it. Unlike the Nanus process that blocks thoughts, I have created a drug that actually molds the thoughts and memories into the form I desire. A few more adjustments and it will be ready for use on new Enforcer recruits. Much stronger than the Nanus process. More reliable. The antidote your puny

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Freelions have created will be worthless on this new force.”

Jarek could not let him succeed. All they had worked for would be lost. The rebel forces would be defeated. There had to be a way to fight the drug.

But as each door disintegrated and the last one broke free, he knew a bitter defeat. Kierra's thread. He had to find a way to sever the thread. Kierra must never be touched by the horror Odon would seek to create from his memories. His mind felt like it was on fire.

“You will not succeed, Odon.”

“And how will you stop me, pet? Soon, any memory you have will have been created by me. And once altered, it will not be recoverable. In the thoughts I create for you, the female will never have existed.”

Jarek fought against the bonds that held him. He would not succumb easily. He must destroy the link between himself and Kierra. She would seek him out and what Odon would create would be nothing but a monster housed inside the shell of the Serdionese she'd once known.

He was losing the battle, he could feel it. His strength was ebbing. What he must do was find a way to destroy himself from inside his head before Odon could use him for his own purposes. But how? First the thread.

What he needed to do was reach each room before Odon changed the memory and destroy it beyond repair. In that way the memory couldn't be used against him or anyone he loved. Kierra would be safe. What would be left of him he didn't know. Probably a shell with no substance. It was what he must do to protect the people he loved.

“I believe he's ready for us to begin.” Odon spoke to whoever was at the microreader ready to do as he commanded.

Jarek sensed there was little time left to accomplish his purpose.

“You will never own me, Odon. I vow I will see to it and to your death.”

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“We shall see, pet, we shall see. You hold a strong mind and that will make this all the more pleasurable as I mold you like a piece of soft clay. Mine to form in any shape I please. Or to destroy. What I render here will soon be an army to once and for all defeat the rebellion. You are but the first. But you shall not be the last.”

* * *

Kierra paced the command deck. “Are we almost there?”

“Yes,” Devon responded as he punched in the coordinates to the safe landing site well hidden from the compound. “Now sit and strap in.”

She turned and made her way to one of the seats next to Eluria and engaged the safety harness. “Do you have a plan on how we get into the compound?”

“Yes. I’ll explain when we land. Let me get us on the ground first.”

Fear for Jarek had her wound tightly. She knew she needed to control the panic rising inside her. But the same thing kept chanting over and over inside her head. She had to get to Jarek quickly.

Leaning back in the cushioned seat, she closed her eyes and concentrated. They were close enough that she might reach him through thoughtwalk. Concentrating, she found the thread and followed it. Slowly, she allowed herself to float along its luminescent length into the darkness.

She’d never done it like this before. He usually met her part way before she reached him. And then she saw the golden light. But something was wrong. The yellow was tinged with a red mist and the light pulsed as though the colors battled.

As she reached the arch of light, a dark shadow fell over the entrance, blocking her from entering. It materialized and she drew a relieved breath as she realized it was Jarek.

“Do not come further,” he commanded her.

“Jarek, we’ve come for you. It won’t be long. Are you all right?”

KIERRA'S THREAD

There was a loud creaking sound and a crash behind him. She glanced over his shoulder and was shocked to see the carnage of broken hinges and shattered doors. She attempted to step around him, but he stopped her.

“You must go back, Kierra. It is too dangerous.”

She searched his face. His eyes were strangely dark. It was as though swirling gray clouds filtered the light. “What has he done to you?” She reached out to touch him, but he stepped away from her.

“You can’t help me. He’s drugged me and it’s not safe for you. He means to warp my memories. He’s discovered some new way to change the mind. I can’t let him succeed.”

He grabbed her by both arms, intent on turning her away. “We must find a way to cut the thread that binds us.”

She pushed at his arms and finally broke free. “Never!” She ran past him into the red mist.

“Kierra! Come back.”

She ran to the first door and looked inside. The memory that played out held her rooted to the spot. Oh Symion! What had Jarek suffered in order to protect her?

He jerked her away from the door. “You will not stay here. Go back. Now.”

“These are memories you locked away from me, aren’t they?”

He didn’t answer her, but tried to force her back from the broken doorways.

She dug her heels in and refused to move. “Stop it, Jarek. Where does he have you?”

“Leave, Kierra.”

“No. Devon and Eluria are with me. We will get to you. You just need to hold on.”

“The drug has already done its damage. It won’t be long before he begins to warp the memories.” He leaned closer to her. “He means to

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remove my memory of you. I don't know how I will react if he does. I won't take the chance I will hurt you if he succeeds."

"You would not hurt me. Tell me where you are?"

He shook her. "Haydon, Kierra. You know what he's capable of. How can you say I won't hurt you when he attacks the memories?"

"One way or the other we are coming for you. Make it easier by telling me where to find you. Or don't. But if you don't, it will simply put us in more danger as we try to locate where you are."

A hiss escaped his lips. "You are too stubborn for your own good. You're going to get yourself killed."

"Well?"

"I'm in the lab. Tell Devon he must destroy the microreader. Find the drug and destroy all traces of it. It's your only chance."

She reached out to him. "I'll tell him, Jarek. Hold on until we reach you. Promise me."

He looked away from her. She raised her hands and cupped his face, forcing him to look at her. "Promise me."

"I'll do my best. Leave now. There are things I must do."

"Jarek."

"What?"

"Do not attempt to cut the thread that binds us."

"Kierra—"

"No. I mean it. I love you, Jarek. If you are destroyed, we both die whether you sever the cord or not. You are the reason I live. Do you understand?"

"Don't do this, Kierra. He means to corrupt my memory. If he succeeds, there will be no memory of us."

"I'll find you before that happens," she vowed. "Promise me."

He sighed. "All right, I promise." He leaned down and kissed her. "Now go. Quickly."

She turned and passed through the arch to the silver thread. As she

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followed it, all of a sudden she realized just how fragile was the bond. If something happened and the thread was severed, what would she do?

This wasn't the time to panic. He'd promised her and she must trust he would keep the promise.

Through the darkness she passed onward until she settled back into her own mind and memories.

Opening her eyes, she blinked rapidly for a second. The ship had landed and Devon was powering down.

She turned to Devon. "He's in the laboratory. We must hurry."

"How do you know?" He turned his head to study her.

"I thoughtwalked and found him. I don't have time to explain. They've done something. He says there is a drug and that you must be sure to destroy all of it."

"Do you know how to get to the laboratory?"

"Yes. I'll get us there. Can you get us inside?"

"I have a plan," was all he said.

She unbuckled the safety harness and stood. "We must hurry. They are trying to destroy him and we can't let that happen."

CHAPTER 7

“We go in through the main entrance.”

“That’s your plan?” Kierra gasped. “Surely you jest.”

Devon turned to Eluria. “Do you have the lenses I asked for?”

Eluria opened a compartment in the console and pulled out a small case. She walked over and handed it to Devon.

“My appearance of an Enforcer will get us in.” He nodded to the two Frelion crew members who had accompanied them on the mission. “Corbin and Torak will act as my prisoners. Once we are inside the compound, we will disarm the guards and disable the surveillance equipment.”

“Why don’t you simply take us in with you?” Kierra asked. “It would save time. We need to reach Jarek. I don’t know how much longer he can hold on.”

“You will wait outside in the brush until it is safe.”

“He’s playing the big protective taman and brother, Kierra,” Eluria

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inserted before Devon could respond. "It's all right for him to put himself in danger though."

"You do realize, Devon, both Eluria and I survived up until now without your protective presence."

"As you say," he responded, "before my arrival. There is no need for either of you to put yourselves in danger."

"And what if there are more guards than you anticipate? What then?"

A feral look came into his eyes, and what she could only term as an overly self-confident smirk crossed his face. "I'm more than capable of handling the situation." He turned away from her, leaning forward, he inserted the lenses.

When he turned back, Kierra gasped and instinctively stepped away. Her heart thudded painfully in her chest. His eyes now appeared black, and with his white hair, it altered his appearance to that of a seemingly emotionless deadly Elite Enforcer.

He apparently saw her reaction and moved toward her, but again she was unable to stop herself from retreating until she was cornered by the console.

"Kierra, I'm not going to hurt you."

She shook her head, trying to clear the hated memories. It was difficult. "I know you won't. Give me a moment."

"If you can't put your fear aside for Devon, how will you deal with the real Enforcers in the compound?" Eluria asked her. "We'll be surrounded by them."

"I know that. I expect them to look like Enforcers. It's just after these weeks with Devon, the lenses—it was unexpected, that's all. Let's go. We can't afford to wait any longer."

Eluria holstered a diffuser from the weapons rack. She pulled out another belt and second diffuser and handed them to Kierra. "Do you think you can handle one of these?"

KIERRA'S THREAD

"I have no choice," she responded as she clasped the belt around her hip and holstered the weapon.

Eluria turned back to the rack and pulled out two lethal-looking daggers. She sheathed one in the band at her thigh and handed the other over. "For back up. In case they come too close to use the diffuser."

Gingerly, Kierra grasped the dagger. The severity of what she was about to do weighed on her. She'd never taken another person's life. Her time with the rebel forces had been spent in the lab, not out in hand-to-hand combat with Tribunal Forces. Slowly, she sheathed the knife in the scabbard attached to the belt.

Eluria moved to a cabinet and pulled out telecom units and handed one to each of them. Kierra inserted the black disc-like device into her ear. As soon as it was in place, small black wires emerged to secure the device in place.

"All right," Devon said. "Let's do this." He pinned Eluria beneath a hard, unemotional black gaze. "You remember our agreement."

"Yes," she said with an exasperated sigh.

"What agreement?" Kierra asked.

Devon said nothing, but quirked an eyebrow at Eluria. She hissed. "He's the expert here, or so he thinks. I follow his orders without question." She blazed a fierce look back at him. "*Unless* I feel his life is in danger. I will not stand by and watch if I deem he could be hurt."

"You will follow my orders. All of you. I know how they work. You don't."

"You don't know how Odon works," Kierra murmured.

Devon turned to her. "I know his training, I've seen how they fight. I will handle them. Just follow my lead and we will get Jarek out safely and destroy this drug he's concerned about."

He walked over and pushed a button near the outside hatch and it slid open. "The ship is hidden here, but once we are outside I will engage the cloak. Their tracking mechanisms shouldn't be able to pick

KIERRA'S THREAD

up a signal once I do that. Let's get moving."

The others followed him out the hatch and down the gangway. Once they were clear of the ship he engaged the cloaking device.

It was nighttime and no moon was evident. That would work to their advantage.

They did not speak as they covered the ground to the compound. Argadian eyes adjusted to brightness automatically allowing for them to move expediently. Just before they came in sight of the gate, Devon motioned for Eluria and Kierra to the side out of sight behind an outcropping of trees.

"Wait until I call for you. Don't even think about entering until I tell you it's safe." His voice was a mere hint of sound over the comlink.

Eluria motioned to Kierra and they moved soundlessly toward the outcropping of trees and watched as Devon moved with determination toward the entrance with his diffuser trained on Corbin and Torak.

She leaned close to Eluria and whispered, "I'm going to try to reach Jarek through thoughtwalk. I may be able to determine what we will be facing in the laboratory, so we are prepared."

"Is it safe?" Eluria asked.

"Yes. I just need to make sure he's all right."

Kierra stepped away from her and leaned against a tree. She turned her thoughts inward and located the thread. Her first thought was that she was thankful Jarek had done as he'd promised and left the thread intact. What she would find at the other end she had no idea. She could only pray he would still be alive and would know her.

Kierra moved to the thread and followed it to the arch. Turmoil confronted her. Flashing arcs of lightning-like electricity surged one after the other. The red mist had grown thicker almost suffocating the soft yellow luminescent glow. It was as though an electrical storm had taken over inside Jarek's mind.

"Jarek!" Where was he? It was hard to make out anything through

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the thick crimson mist.

Then she saw him on his knees in the doorway to one of his memories. A bolt of electrical energy encompassed him and he was rigid, his eyes closed, arms outstretched as though to bar entry into the room behind him.

“Jarek, no.” She raced forward, reaching him as the bolt dissipated. Jarek hunched forward, hands to the ground, and she heard him gasp. She knelt down in front of him.

He raised his head to look at her, his eyes gray storm clouds of pain. “Get out. Now.”

She reached for him, but he thrust her away. “I can’t leave you like this. What’s happening?”

He shook his head, staggering to his feet. “You can’t help me here. He’s using some sort of program to alter the memories.”

“Come with me,” she urged. “To sanctuary.”

His eyes were dead when he looked at her. “There is no sanctuary. He’s already destroyed most of the memories from my past. He’s now trying to alter what remains.”

He grabbed her shoulders and turned her toward the arch. “Get out now. If you don’t reach my physical body before I return to consciousness, and before he alters what memories are left, there will be no way to reach me.”

He was forcing her to move to the arch and she yanked away to turn and looked at him. “Don’t give up, Jarek. Devon is inside the compound. Come with me, Jarek. Let me protect you the way you did for me.”

“No, it will do no good. They used your body, but weren’t after your mind. If I don’t stay, there will be nothing for you to save. Do you understand? Hurry.” He pushed her toward the thread.

She staggered and then ran, sobbing in the knowledge they could be too late. She stopped and turned. He was there, watching her,

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highlighted by the flashing turbulence behind him. Then she turned and ran.

As she re-entered her mind, she gasped and opened her eyes to find Eluria watching her with concern.

“We can’t wait any longer,” she whispered.

“What is it?”

“Odon has already destroyed parts of his memory. If we don’t reach him in time, he will be altered beyond anything we can remedy.”

“We can’t go in yet. You know that. We have to wait for Devon’s signal.”

Kierra shook her head. “Don’t you understand? We can’t wait. Could you, if it was Devon whose sanity was at risk?”

“Kierra, if we go in there before Devon is ready, we could put his life in danger, do you realize that? And if we fail, Jarek will most certainly die anyway. Think about it.”

She knew Eluria was right. She also knew there wasn’t much time left.

“Eluria? Kierra?” It was Devon’s voice over the telecom unit.

Eluria looked at Kierra. “We’re here, Devon,” she responded in a low voice.

“The gate is secured. Get in here as quickly as you can, but keep it quiet. We want to move in before someone else discovers us.”

Eluria unholstered her weapon, checked it, and grabbed Kierra’s arm. “Come on. Get that diffuser ready in case there’s trouble.”

Kierra followed Eluria’s example and pulled her own weapon. She’d never used one before and had no idea if she’d actually be able to fire it. Silently, they raced toward the gate, staying well out of sight of the security beam that queried the perimeter outside the compound.

As they entered, Kierra noticed four bodies in Enforcer uniforms slumped in a shadowed corner.

“They won’t bother us for a while,” Devon said. “They’re tied up

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nice and neat." He looked at Kierra. "Which way?"

She looked around, trying to get her bearings. Then she pointed to the right. "Over there. That's the building where the laboratory is housed. It's below ground. There's a tubulator to take us down.

"Does it require identification to access the tubulator?"

"Yes, I believe it does." She motioned to the unconscious Enforcers. "They should have identification chips."

"Corbin, check for ID chips on our friends there."

Corbin searched each of them and came up with the required chips and handed them to Devon.

Devon held them up to inspect them, then secured the small black discs in a concealed pocket of his skinsuit. "Stay alert. There may be guards ahead. We don't want to be taken by surprise.

"Yes, Captain," Corbin and Torak responded in unison.

He turned back to Eluria and Kierra. "Stay behind me," he instructed. He pinned Eluria with a dark gaze. "Don't argue. I don't have time for it. Let's go." He led the way as they carefully made their way across the compound, dodging the security beam as it tracked across the exposed ground.

They made it to the front of the building. "Wait here. Don't move until I tell you." He motioned for them to step to the side of the entrance. Eluria and Kierra both moved out of the way.

Devon pointed his weapon at the door, then leaned forward and pressed the button. The door silently slid open. Kierra couldn't see inside, but the discharge of Devon's weapon informed her she'd been right to warn him there might be guards.

There was an exchange of fire, then Devon crossed the threshold, stepped to the side, and fired again.

Kierra waited with Eluria. She didn't realize she was holding her breath until Devon stepped back into view. Then she released it on a whoosh of air. He motioned them inside.

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Still holding his weapon ready, he pointed to either side. “There’s a security camera. I disabled it, but we can’t waste time. It won’t be long before they realize the problem and come to check it out. There were four Enforcers. They know we’re coming.”

He pulled one of the ID chips out of his pocket and inserted it in the slot. The tubulator doors opened and he motioned them all inside the small cylindrical room.

“Does this thing open directly into the lab? Or outside of it?”

“It will open directly inside the laboratory.”

He nodded. “Check your diffusers now. Get ready, there’s no room for mistakes. We don’t know how many are in there. Don’t hesitate. We might get lucky and take them by surprise, but don’t count on it. They expect our visit, they’ll be ready.” He turned to Kierra. “I know you’ve never done this before, but you can’t hesitate. You won’t get a second chance. And it’s going to mean life or death for Jarek.”

“I know, Devon. I won’t hesitate.”

He nodded, then leaned forward and pressed the button and the doors slid closed encasing them within the metal chamber.

CHAPTER 8

Kierra's heart pumped fast and hard in her chest. Not only was she about to rescue Jarek, but for the first time in years she would again be face to face with Odon and his odious Enforcers.

These were the males who had made her life torture. They had taken her purity and used it against her. The remembered pain of those years filled her mind. The only thing that had saved her sanity had been Jarek and her link to him. And it filled her with rage to think she was unable to help him in the same way.

But she would not fail him. They would set him free.

"Prepare yourselves." Devon's dark tone brought her back to what lay ahead. Her hand tightened on the handle of the diffuser.

Devon moved to the side of the tubulator in front of Eluria. Without saying a word, he pivoted around to Eluria, sank his fist into her hair, and dropped his head down to kiss her. Before it could register on anyone, he had whirled around and assumed a stance of defense.

KIERRA'S THREAD

Kierra knew her reflexes would not be as fast as the others who had trained and fought before. She stepped to the other side behind Corbin and Torak—not so much for protection, but so as not to hinder their aim. She saw a flicker of emotion pass across Eluria's face just before she crouched and pointed her weapon, one hand steadying the other, her eyes flared burgundy bright with determination.

Burgundy, the color of a tafai, in Union to her brother. So much had occurred in such a short period of time. The return of her brother, their Union, the capture of Jarek. Within weeks everything had changed. This would be a decisive moment. Whether they lived or died would hinge on the opening of the tubulator doors and how quick their reflexes would respond. And how fast the Enforcers would react.

The tubulator came to a halt and the doors slid open. Before she could blink it seemed the others had determined friend from foe and flashes of light surrounded her as the diffusers found their marks and forms disintegrated in front of her. Before she could target and get off a charge they had overtaken the Enforcers in the room.

Devon, moving like a blur, was out the door and into the room, with Eluria following close behind. "Out and take cover," he shouted. Corbin and Torak surged out of the tubulator and Kierra followed close behind.

Sliding to a stop behind a desk, she spotted Jarek and her heart filled with rage. And then she found Odon. A black fog of hate enveloped her—all the memories of Before surging and blinding her.

Odon. Hated, masochistic son of a swinerd. She saw the collar around Jarek's neck, remembered the pain in his mind. And remembered the memory room she'd encountered accidentally. What he had done to Jarek. What Jarek had suffered to protect her.

"No more!" Her scream released an explosive tempest tinged by all her memories. She stood without thought to her own safety and pointed the diffuser at Odon who was crouched behind a desk at the far end of

KIERRA'S THREAD

the room. He was exchanging fire with Devon, as Eluria, Torak, and Corbin pinned two others at the end of the room with their diffusers.

“Kierra, get down!” Vaguely she heard the urgent warning in Devon’s voice. But it didn’t matter. Nothing mattered but destroying once and for all the evil that was represented by Tribunal Leader Odon.

Her diffuser failed to discharge. It didn’t matter. Surging across the room toward Odon, she pulled the dagger from her belt. Ignoring everything, she hurled herself over the desk, directly at Odon with the dagger raised. As they fell to the floor, she brought the dagger down with all her strength and buried it to the hilt in his neck. Yanking it out, she gripped it with both hands and drove it through his chest.

His eyes bulged, his mouth opened and closed like that of a bluefish, and blood and foam gurgled out.

“Never again,” she vowed as she again buried the dagger deep. “You will never hurt another. Never.” Over and over she plunged the dagger, her memories spurring her on. His blood covered her, she wiped a hand across her eyes to clear them. Felt the wet evidence smear across her face, the stench of death overpowering.

A part of her knew he was dead, but she couldn’t stop. She raised her arm to strike again but an iron grip stopped her.

She looked up, and found it was Devon who’d halted her. “He’s done, Kierra.” Great heaving sobs burst from her. Tears mingled with the blood.

She heard a movement and turned her head to see what it was. A man dressed in a lab coat crouched beneath the desk. Moving away from Odon’s body, she turned to the coward beneath the desk.

“Eluria,” she called. “Your ex-betrothed awaits.” Leaning forward, she curled her blood-covered fingers into the lapels of the coat and dragged him forward. Odon’s son, Skorda. This was the man Eluria’s father had sought to buy for her as taman, to achieve more power. What Eluria had managed to elude by becoming a Twilight Companion.

KIERRA'S THREAD

"Let me go! I'll do whatever you want, but don't kill me."

"Why? What value do you have that you think we'd want?"

His eyes shifted back and forth like a trapped rodent as he fought her grip. "I'm the only one who knows the mind altering program."

She felt Devon's hands on her shoulders lifting her away from Skorda.

"Let me handle this, Kierra."

"No, if he knows how to manipulate the program, he can help Jarek."

"I know. Go with Eluria." He helped her to her feet and walked her away to where Eluria stood. "Help her get cleaned up. Kierra, when Jarek awakens, you don't want him to see you like this."

She looked down at her hands and for the first time realized what she must look like covered in Odon's blood. She turned to look back over her shoulder toward where she knew Odon's lifeless body lay, but Devon blocked her view.

"No, Kierra, you don't need to see him. He's dead. He won't hurt you or anyone else ever again. We'll see what Skorda has to barter with. He'll be useful in getting us out of here as well."

Eluria put an arm around her to lead her toward a basin to clean away some of the blood. Kierra looked to where Jarek was still unconscious, still bound. "Release him." She tried to break free of Eluria to go to him, but Eluria's grasp was firm.

"Let Devon do what he must, Kierra." She turned her away.

"I need to go to him. He needs me."

"Don't let her thoughtwalk," Devon said from the other side of the room. "Skorda will attempt to revert what he's done and it could damage her mind, or inadvertently cause a problem with Jarek."

"You don't understand," Kierra sobbed. "I need to let him know we're here, that he's safe and everything will be all right."

"We don't know that yet. Do not thoughtwalk. That's an order."

KIERRA'S THREAD

“Devon—”

“Kierra, let Devon do what he must. Let’s get you cleaned up.”

“I can’t bear to see him like this. What if he severs the thread, not realizing he’s safe?”

“It’s in Guardian’s hands now. Let them do what they must.”

* * *

An hour later, Skorda sat back in his chair. “That’s all I can do. It isn’t everything, but it’s more than he had. The process isn’t supposed to be reversible.”

“Get him out of those restraints,” Kierra demanded.

Corbin and Torak looked to Devon and he nodded. Jarek moaned and Kierra knew he was returning to consciousness. She hurried over as Corbin and Torak helped him away from the wall and settled him into a chair.

Kierra knelt in front of him. When he opened his eyes, she was there. She waited, her breath captive in her chest. Would he recognize her? How much damage had Odon done?

She saw the bruises on his body, the cut to his head, and she knew the damage done to his mind. She wanted to hold him, wanted to thoughtwalk to be with him in mind as well as physically.

She stroked the side of his face and he opened his eyes. At least they weren’t the turbulent stormy gray—they were green. She exhaled when she saw the recognition flare when he looked at her.

“Kierra.” His voice was hoarse. He reached out and cupped her face. She saw him wince at the movement. His face was lined with deep grooves, a reminder of the pain he’d suffered. She wanted to kill Odon all over again.

Then she saw the concern reflect in his eyes. “Are you hurt?”

She looked down and realized although she’d been able to wash away most of the blood from her skin, her uniform was still drenched with it. She shook her head. “Odon’s blood.”

KIERRA'S THREAD

His gaze flickered away from her and scanned the room. "Where is he?"

"He's dead. He won't be causing anyone pain again."

"How?"

"Kierra killed him," Eluria answered. "She got to him before any of us could."

Jarek looked up at her, confusion evident on his face. "What do you mean she got to him?"

"She used a dagger. She's been hiding one great wealth of courage or she was just plain crazy," Eluria said. "You'd have been proud of her though."

He cupped her face. "You shouldn't have come here at all. You could have been killed."

"You know I couldn't have stayed away. Would you have if it had been me?"

He didn't respond, but simply brushed his lips against hers in a gentle kiss. "You saved my life."

"Devon wouldn't let me thoughtwalk to come to you." She shot a venomous look at her brother.

"He was right. You shouldn't have come when you did. You could have been damaged."

"Can you walk, Bakari?" Devon wanted to know.

Jarek looked over at him. "One way or the other. I've had enough of a revisit to this dwelling of Haydon."

Devon nodded. "Our friend here, Skorda, will get us out of here. Won't you, Skorda? You see, he likes life and we've come to an agreement on a few things, haven't we?"

Skorda nodded but wouldn't look at any of them. He fidgeted and Kierra saw him swallow nervously. Who would have thought that Tribunal Leader Odon would breed such a coward. She guessed it served him right.

KIERRA'S THREAD

“This lab needs to be destroyed. Corbin, do you have the explosives? We need to set them and get out of here.” He turned back to Skorda. “Now tell me about this drug and the program you used on Jarek.”

Skorda licked his lips. “Wh-what do you want to know?”

“Don’t be stupid, you white-bellied slitherer. I want to make sure everything is destroyed. Are there any other copies of the program? What about the drug?”

“It was still in the experimental stages. It was contained here in the lab until my father was satisfied with its effect. This was supposed to be the final test.” His glance flickered over to Jarek and then away quickly.

“All right. Get those charges set and let’s get out of here. Skorda, you get to come with us.” Devon lifted him roughly from the chair.

“What do you mean?” he screeched. “I’ve done what you asked.”

“We’re not out of here yet. You’re going to make sure we all get out of here safely. Let’s go.”

Corbin and Torak strode back into the room a short time later. “All set,” Corbin said as he tossed the empty backpack onto the desk after pulling free the detonator. “Once we’re outside the gates, I’ll press the little red button. This place will go up like a skyfire in midsummer.”

“Bakari, you going to make it?”

Jarek rose to his feet, weaved a bit, but managed to remain standing. Kierra moved next to him and put an arm around his waist to lend support. Torak went to his other side.

Kierra looked at Devon. “He’ll make it. Lead the way.”

Devon pushed Skorda ahead of him toward the tubulator. “You first, Skorda. Watch what you say and how you say it and you’ll get out of here with your skin intact. Just remember—we die, you die first.”

Devon pushed the button and the door slid open. He shoved Skorda inside. Torak and Kierra moved slowly, assisting Jarek. Eluria and

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Corbin followed behind.

“Beam us up, Eluria.” Kierra saw Eluria roll her eyes at Devon’s comment and she smiled.

“He’ll never change.”

Eluria punched the button. “He’s so addicted to those old Earth shows. I sometimes don’t know how he stands himself.”

The door slid closed and they waited impatiently for it to arrive at the top level.

Time was short and Kierra now wondered how much of Jarek’s memories were recovered. He’d said sanctuary was gone forever. If it truly was, she would create a new one for them. She knew he’d created sanctuary from the memories of his beloved Serdion. It was his only retreat from the reality of Odon.

She’d never been to Serdion when it had been a thriving planet. She would find a way to give him back what he’d lost one way or the other.

And then she also realized something else. Devon and Eluria had both touched her. That had been something she’d been unable to tolerate in the years since escaping from the compound. It had only been recently Jarek was able to touch her without the veil of pain consuming her. She hadn’t tried with anyone else.

But today there’d been not even a twinge. Had all that rage and anger she’d bottled inside been released when she’d finally confronted Odon? She didn’t know and there was no time to examine the feelings now. Once they were away and safe again, then she would have time to understand what had happened.

For right now she was just grateful Jarek was safe. And Odon was dead.

CHAPTER 9

As luck would have it, when they exited the building housing the laboratory, two Enforcers pulled up in a hovercade.

“Cause any problems, Skorda, and you’ll be joining your father,” Devon warned. “Keep it simple, but get us the use of that hovercade—now.” He gave him a little push forward, and turned back to the others. “Wait here, until I signal.”

Eluria looked about to protest, but then seemed to think better of it and closed her mouth.

Kierra couldn’t hear the exchange between Skorda and the guards, but saw them vacate the hovercade and race toward the building. Devon turned and motioned to Eluria and the others.

Devon pushed Skorda into the back seat and motion for Corbin and Torak to flank him on either side. Kierra helped Jarek in next to Torak and then crushed in front next to Eluria. Once they were all settled, Devon started the vehicle and turned toward the gate.

KIERRA'S THREAD

“What did you tell them?” Eluria wanted to know.

“That there’s been an accident in the lab and Odon needed help. The shape Jarek’s in helped to convince them.”

“How did you explain us?”

“Skorda told them I was sent to assist with Odon’s secret project and you were part of the new team provided to assess its value to the Tribunal.”

Eluria craned her neck. “Skorda, I’m proud of you. That was some pretty slick thinking.”

Kierra turned around to look at Skorda. Cowardly slitherer—and thank Symion for it. If his life weren’t his first priority, he’d have been dead back in the lab and of no use in helping them escape from the compound, nor in helping Jarek recover some of his memories.

Skorda grimaced when they hit a bump and grabbed for the back of the front seat. “What are you going to do with me? I’ve done what you asked, now let me go.”

“We’ll negotiate that later,” Devon said as they passed the gate. “Corbin, now would be a good time to detonate those charges.”

Corbin pulled out the small black box. “Ready for some fireworks? Cause it’s going to be real pretty.” He pressed the little red button.

Devon didn’t stop the vehicle, but looked in the mirror. Everyone else turned around to watch. They felt the ground rumble beneath them, and Devon swerved the vehicle, then regained control.

The roar was followed by bursts of light cascading in the sky above the compound. Even the walls of the compound crumbled to dust.

“How much explosive did you bring in that little bag?” Devon asked.

Corbin chuckled. “Enough to make an impression. Wouldn’t want anyone to forget we were here. Isn’t it beautiful?”

“Well, Skorda, guess you better come with us. Looks like home isn’t what it used to be.”

KIERRA'S THREAD

“That isn’t what we agreed!”

“I don’t recall any particular agreement other than that you’d get to live. I’m thinking the rebellion could use whatever information you might have, especially regarding this new little technique your father came up with.”

“I won’t help the rebellion.”

“Would you rather be dead then?”

The only sound that met Devon’s question was silence.

“Yes, well I thought so. You may even come to see our side of things. You never can tell.”

There was no more conversation until they came to a screeching halt next to a grouping of trees some distance from the site of the compound.

“Everybody out.” Devon stepped out of the vehicle, pulled out the transmitter, and the ship wavered, then appeared. “Let’s get out of here before whoever is left tries to come after us.”

“They will come,” Skorda said. “The ships aren’t housed within the compound. They’re kept in a bunker several kilometers away, just in case something like this should happen.”

“Well, then, let’s move. We don’t have time to waste.”

Once they were inside and prepared for take off, Kierra turned to look at Jarek. “Are you all right?”

He nodded. “I am now. There’s no need to worry.”

“I almost lost you, I can’t help but worry.”

His gaze slid over her and it was like a shutter came down. “You shouldn’t have come here, Kierra. Look at you. What you were forced to relive.”

“You can’t mean that. How could I not come? Would you have stayed behind?”

“That’s not the point. You’re only just recovering. How many years has it taken?”

KIERRA'S THREAD

“Stop Jarek. Not another word. You’ve been through a lot. You did what you had to do—well, so did I. Did you ever think that maybe I had to do this to recover completely? That I needed to face it to overcome it? Maybe I’ve allowed you to protect me too much.”

He sighed, leaned back, and closed his eyes. “I’m sorry, Kierra. I shouldn’t be yelling at you.”

“As soon as we get back, Dr. Xander can take a look at you. It will be all right.”

He didn’t open his eyes. “There are things that couldn’t be reversed.”

She heard the tiredness in his voice. They needed to get back, and he needed time to rest.

He opened his eyes and looked at her. “Don’t try to thoughtwalk to me. Promise me.”

“Why? I want to be there for you. You’ve always been there for me, you would refuse me this?”

He nodded. “For now. Yes. I told you, there are things that couldn’t be reversed. I need time to assess the amount of damage.”

“Can’t I help you?”

“Not with this. Give me time.”

She was hurt that he didn’t think she was capable of helping him. But as with most males, she knew she needed to give him room. So instead, she reached out to touch his hand.

He looked at her at first in concern, then in surprise. He didn’t move to take her hand, but she felt a tremor pass through him. She threaded her fingers with his. It felt so good to touch him, and not a twinge of pain passed through her.

“All that pain and rage was locked inside me with no way to release it. Today it was purged.”

The ship swerved suddenly. “Hold tight everyone,” Devon said as he punched in coordinates. “We’ve got a tail. I’m going to try some

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fancy piloting.”

“Can we outmaneuver them?” Eluria asked.

“I told you they’d come after us,” Skorda whined.

“Sit tight, Skorda, you haven’t lost skin yet.”

“They’ve got a bigger ship, but we’ve got better maneuverability.”

“What about cloaking?” Eluria asked.

“Power’s low, I don’t want to take a chance right now. As I said, we’re faster and smaller. There’s an asteroid cluster ahead. We might be able to use that to shield us. Once we’re closer to Ednos, I’ll engage cloaking.”

Jarek’s fingers tightened on Kierra’s. The ship shuddered as an energy burst from the other ship skimmed them.

“That was a close one,” Devon said as he veered the ship. “Haydon, there’s another ship coming up. What the—”

“What is it, Devon?” Eluria asked as she rose from her seat to hurry over to read the controls on the console. “It’s not a Tribunal ship. It looks like the Raven.”

Kierra’s heart seemed to shudder to a stop. “Do you think it’s—”

“I don’t know. We haven’t heard anything of him for quite some time.”

“We’re being hailed,” Devon said.

“Hail Freelion ship. Who commands?” the voice inquired.

Eluria looked at Devon and nodded. “It sounds like Alekos.”

Devon turned back to the console. “Captain Devon Andromeda here. Who hails and who do I have to thank?”

There was a chuckle of laughter. “So the stories I heard were true. The vaunted Elite Enforcer himself has turned rebel.”

Eluria made a face and leaned forward. “Alekos come back with us.”

“Ah, Eluria Zydon. I’d know that voice anywhere. Beautiful and deadly still I would imagine.”

KIERRA'S THREAD

“Tafai to your brother as well, whelp. Come home. Kierra is here.”

“Congratulations are in order then. It’s about time.”

Eluria turned back toward Kierra. “Come talk with him. Maybe we can convince him to return with us.”

Kierra rose and went to the console. “Alekos? It’s Kierra.”

“Sweet Kierra. What are you doing so far from home? You sound—different.”

“Alekos, come home. Please. We need you with us. I am better. Come home so we can share our adventures. Odon is dead, as are my ghosts.”

“I’m happy for you, Kierra. I can’t go back to Ednos. I’m far past that point. Devon—take care of our family. I’m glad you’re all safe. I’ll watch your back until you reach safety.”

“Alekos come back with us. We’ve been separated too long,” Devon urged.

“Can’t do it brother. Maybe once the Tribunal is defeated. In the meantime, live long and be victorious, brother.”

Devon chuckled. “You mangled that one little brother.”

“Just checking to see if you remembered. Guess that memory is in good working order. Over and out.”

“Alekos—Haydon, he’s stubborn.”

Eluria smiled. “Reminds me of someone else I know. At least we know he’s alive.”

“Do you think he’ll ever come home?” Kierra asked.

“One day, I hope so,” Devon answered. “Let’s get back to Ednos. Odon is gone, but the rest of the Tribunal still needs to be dealt with.”

“Like my father.”

Kierra reached out and placed a comforting hand on her shoulder as Devon reached for her hand.

“Hopefully, it won’t mean his death,” Devon tried to reassure her.

“He would not hesitate to take mine,” she responded sadly.

KIERRA'S THREAD

Kierra stepped away to return to her seat and give Devon and Eluria time alone. Her gaze met Jarek's green intent stare and she felt warmth flood through her. She wanted what Devon and Eluria had found. And now she had a chance to have it.

With purpose she knelt before Jarek, took his hands, and held them to her face. "I won't let you do what I did, Jarek. I won't let you hide from me."

"I don't plan to do that. I just need time."

"Is it the reversal you fear, or is it because I have now seen what you've kept hidden from me? What are you really worried about?"

His hands against her face were warm and strong. She turned her head and kissed the palm of one hand, and heard his sharp intake of breath. She wasn't sure she could give him the time he seemed to need.

It was as though her body had been in deep hibernation and the tingling awareness she now felt seemed to burn through her. She'd waited years to feel this way and didn't want to wait any longer to seal with him. Her body was alive, primed, and ready for consummation.

Unfortunately, it was now Jarek who needed time. He'd been so patient with her all these years. She guessed it was her turn.

"I never wanted you to know about that time. What he demanded and what I gave. I was afraid it would change what you felt for me. I never wanted you to feel you owed me anything. I didn't want you to know about what happened."

"How could you think what I felt for you is a debt? I may not have known all the locked rooms in your mind, but I knew the essence of who you are. Nothing could change how I feel about you. Whatever secrets you have, you have been by my side, *inside my mind*. I love you. You have stood between me and the darkness for so long. Let me help you now."

He groaned and gently pushed her from him. "Soon, Kierra. It feels I have lost something of myself. Let me find out how much first. It's

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one thing to not be able to control what is done to the physical, but I always had control of my inner being. This time it wasn't just my body, he raped my mind—took away that last vestige of control. He planned to do it in such a way that I wouldn't remember who I was. I would have been a thing he created in every sense."

When he leaned back in his chair, Kierra's heart cried out at the defeat she saw.

"To lose that kind of control and have no power to stop it—I can't begin to express what that feels like." He glanced at Skorda. "One of the things I'm determined is that the process he developed never finds a home with the Tribunal or anyone else. Whatever it takes."

"What are you trying to say, Jarek? I sense something you aren't telling me. Something about you—about us."

It wasn't that he only physically pulled away, but she felt a tightening of the thread that bound them. As though mentally he was trying to pull away from her as far as he could. And that frightened her more than anything.

She would try to be patient, but if he didn't come to her, she would go to him. She was afraid of what he might do in the meantime and she meant to have a word with Devon to be watchful.

"I'll give you what you ask. But don't take too long. I've wasted enough of our time together."

She rose and walked back to her seat. A leaden weight sat in the pit of her stomach. She could only hope he didn't become desperate enough to try to cut the thread that bound them. That she could not allow.

CHAPTER 10

“Eluria, I don’t know what to do. I don’t know how to reach him.”

Kierra’s concern for Jarek had increased since returning to Ednos. Four weeks had passed and he continued to distance himself farther and farther away from her—not only physically, but mentally as well.

She’d tried on several occasions to reach him through the thread, but it was like a set of steel doors had been set in place, barring her entry.

Eluria was the only one Kierra felt comfortable to talk with. She’d come to her out of desperation.

Kierra accepted the cup Eluria handed her. The aroma was soothing, a warm honeyberry blend of tea.

“He’s been through a lot.” Eluria took a sip from her own cup. “You remember what it was like when we first brought you here.”

Kierra nodded. “Though it wasn’t until recently I figured out why I couldn’t be touched or touch anyone. I kept that part of myself locked

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away even from me.”

“Do you think Jarek could be doing the same thing? Or maybe when Odon broke open all the doors, Jarek was forced to face things *he'd* locked away from himself?”

Kierra looked at Eluria, as a new thought surfaced. “Do you think that might be it? There were—things—I saw when I went to him. Things he'd kept hidden from me.” Her heart palpitated in panic. “I may have left it too long. He's built such solid walls now—not only around his mind, but his physical self.”

Eluria nodded. “We've all seen it, he withdraws a little more each day. You may need to do something drastic. But I think you're the only one who can bring him out of it.”

Kierra set the cup down on the table and stood. “You're right. Tears flooded her eyes. “Isn't it strange that the very action that set me free, bound him in chains. I still feel our connection, but I also sense he now denies it.”

Eluria rose from the lounge and clasped Kierra's hands, her expression sympathetic. “Did you know he has no memories of Serdion? He has no memories of childhood to offer him solace. No memories of his family before he was taken into bondage. The only knowledge he's retained is his time with Odon. And you.”

“But I've given him nothing,” Kierra cried. “His memories of me can offer little succor.”

Eluria's hands tightened on hers. “Then give him new memories. You must find a way to break through.”

“I know. I will find a way,” she vowed.

“You know, I'm seeing so much of the old Kierra surface. She's been gone a long time.” Eluria leaned forward to hug her. “I wasn't sure you would ever return and I'm so thankful.”

Kierra returned the warm clasp. “And now I just need to return Jarek to us. Thank you. You've given me some hope that I can find a

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way to reach him. Now, I just need a little guidance from you.”

* * *

As Jarek slid his identity card into the slot to allow entrance to his apartments, the weight he carried in his mind seemed particularly heavy. He'd made the decision he must leave Ednos and separate himself from Kierra.

His abilities at concentration were poor at best. He was unable to assist on missions. He had no memories of his youth, of the world where he was birthed, or the family who'd nurtured him. No memories of traditions, ceremonies, beliefs.

His first memories were of bondage, nothing of freedom. He stayed with the Freelion rebels now because he felt some link of friendship to the Argadians he'd fought with. But there was no memory of hate for the Tribunal who had ravaged his planet. Because he didn't remember it or his culture.

Hate thrived inside him for Odon and what he had perpetrated on Kierra, the woman he was drawn to, had loved in thoughtwalk, was linked to. And for what Odon had forced from him. But Odon was dead. And Jarek felt distanced somehow, cut off from emotions and relationships.

Devon had told him of Serdion and its devastation, but it was as though those things had happened to someone else. He could visualize none of it.

But Odon was another matter. And all he felt now was colored by his service in bondage. He questioned his every response to that man. Had he truly submitted to protect Kierra, or had it been something else? He remembered Odon forcing him to his knees, demanding Jarek service his khout with his mouth. Odon's hand on his head, massaging as he did as he was commanded. And his own khout hardening in the sexual assault, his nipples tightening.

He flung the memories aside as the door to his apartments slid open.

KIERRA'S THREAD

Rather than protecting Kierra had he sought to be forced into submitting? These were the thoughts that drove him farther and farther away from Kierra. The idea that he has used her as an excuse to submit to a masochist.

Or were the memories he thought he had of those moments manufactured by the programming of Odon? The memories, or lack of them, tortured him, and finally made him realize he could no longer stay here.

Kierra deserved a male, not a coward who had let himself be used in such a manner. A male without memories, and what memories remained he couldn't be sure were true or false. He didn't trust himself.

He knew he'd loved her in thoughtwalk, but what if his physical body didn't respond in the same way? What if the altered memories changed him so he was unable to react to her in the ways of a male for his female mate?

In his conscious mind he wanted to be with her, but what if something reared its ugly head and he failed to respond? She'd already suffered so much, and he couldn't bear the thought of causing her pain by not being able to provide what she needed.

But how did he tell her he was leaving? For good. And where would he go? Argadia was not home to him. Serdion, at least in his mind, didn't exist. Where could he find peace from his thoughts, ones that he wasn't even sure were his own?

There should be colors in his mind, but he felt none of them. His mind was gray, unable to focus, hiding the speculation he couldn't deal with, rationalizing the rest so he could function on some level. Every now and then a fracture of memory would be revealed to taunt him—bits and pieces—rootless images. He remembered the colors because they were part of his life with Kierra. He'd studied the information available on the Serdion culture, but that could only tell him so much. And some of his responses were instinctive in some way—done

KIERRA'S THREAD

without memory. His mind was a ruin of what it had been.

Although Odon was dead, Jarek was his legacy—a male without direction, half programmed, half free—and useless to all. A male should have purpose and he had none. He should not be wallowing in self-pity, but could find no way out.

He pulled away to the present, realizing the illumination in the apartment wasn't as bright as it should be. He turned and walked toward the controls.

“Don't,” a feminine voice behind him halted his hand. He whirled around and stopped. Blinking rapidly, he was positive his eyes played tricks on him. Contrary to what his dark thoughts had anticipated, his khout quickly hardened at the vision kneeling in his greeting room.

“How did you get in?” he rasped, then swallowed, attempting to clear his throat.

As he watched, she smiled. “I have connections.”

“Why?”

Her solemn gaze slid up to meet his. “Because you wouldn't come to me. In fact, you're moving away from me. And I didn't want to wait any longer.”

He couldn't let her do this. Haydon, but he found he couldn't just tell her to leave. The vision of her kneeling on the woven red rug, naked pearlescent skin, the jade-colored glow of her radiance emanating all around her—an indication of her sexual desire.

She was any male's vision of beauty and passion. Encompassing a fantasy realized. Her hair fell around her shoulders in a silken cloud. Full, rounded breasts teased his senses. He wanted to savor with his mouth and tongue their firm, decadent flavor.

His gaze wandered downward, across her defined, luscious curves to the shadow of her shax, a hinted glimmer in the dusky light. He wanted to tell her to spread her thighs wider so he could see the sensitive, pink lips. His fingers trembled at the thought of touching her,

KIERRA'S THREAD

piercing the entrance to her shax-ra, sliding through her sweet nectar, to a paradise that awaited.

He felt the colors in his mind begin to surface and he turned away from the visions and his traitorous thoughts.

Fuck her. Those were the first words to enter his mind. Take what she offers. Possess what you crave.

He tried to stop them, but the colors of his own sexual desire swirled inside his head. Hues of scarlet and gold clung to him, calling him.

“Go away, Kierra.”

“No. Not this time. I have healed, Jarek. And now it’s time for you to heal. I’m not just here to be touched by you, but to touch you. I know you’ve lost memories, and I’m here to give you news ones. I hope, beautiful ones.”

“You have no idea what you’re asking of me.”

“Take a chance, Jarek. You were so patient with me. But I’m afraid I don’t have the same patience as you. I’ve given you as much time as I can. I’m only sorry it’s taken me so long to come to you.”

“You don’t understand the memories I have. And what I don’t have.” How could he make her understand? Especially when his body, and what was left of his mind, were demanding he take what she offered.

“Tell me, Jarek. You’ve locked me from your mind and I feel so lost without you.”

He turned away from her, unable to continue looking at what he coveted more than anything else. “I don’t want you touched by what’s left to me. I don’t know what’s real and what’s not. What are my memories and what are manufactured? I have no memories before bondage. Or rather what I do have are so splintered as to be worthless. And those—I don’t know what they are made of.”

He heard a soft breath of movement and then felt her body pressed

KIERRA'S THREAD

to his back. Tightening his body—denying her impact on his senses—he closed his eyes.

“Let me in, Jarek,” she whispered, wrapping her arms around his waist. “Let me give you more memories. Let me show you that your memories of Odon hold no substance. I’m here for you.”

“How can you know? I don’t know. I feel as though I’m alone in a worm hole of darkness without direction.”

“Let me help you find your direction.” She began to undo the fastenings on his uniform. Her hands touched the flesh of his chest. It was like being branded, except it was silk brushing against his skin.

Her hands moved upward, forcing the suit down his arms, falling to his waist. He could think of nothing but her hands shifting over his shoulders, down his arms, swirling over his back.

“Kierra—”

Her hands skirted to his waist and pushed the uniform off his hips. “Let me show you how much I love you.” She moved in front of him and knelt at his feet. “Allow me this. Please.”

Unzipping first one boot, then the other, as he balanced a hand against the wall, she pulled them from his feet and tossed them aside. Then she removed his suit and tossed it aside.

She rose, stepped away from him, and smiled. “You’re as magnificent in your physical body as in our thoughtwalk. What I’ve been missing all this time. I know that your people revere the melding through the mind higher than the physical. But, Jarek, we shall know both. And the colors we create—there will be none like them anywhere.”

He reached for her, but again she stepped away. “We will go slowly. I want you to know every moment of pleasure. And to know it is through us—you and I—that you know it. I’m going to give you such memories, they will usurp all previous ones. I promise you a new sanctuary.”

KIERRA'S THREAD

“Sanctuary?” He had a vague sense of it, but most of that memory had been destroyed. Fragments. All fragments littered his mind.

She touched his jaw. “You once shared your sanctuary with me. It was a beautiful place filled with colors, your colors, that seduced and pleased me more than I thought possible. It was a place of no Before or Beyonds. Right now you fear me in your mind, but I’ll bring you to a place where you will know I could never judge you for anything you’ve ever done.”

“How could you possibly not?” His body tingled with awareness of her in ways he’d never known. He wanted to open his mind to her—wanted her words to be true.

“Do you judge me for what happened in our years of bondage? When my body was taken time and time again?”

“How can you ask that?”

“Then do you think me weak? That my love is such a poor thing it can’t be trusted not to judge? None of the Before matters. Not to me and not to you.”

“I don’t know how to let go of it. I have no certainty that anything I remember is real.”

“What about the thread that connects us? Do you think that is fashioned by Odon?”

“No—I—” The thread linking him to Kierra was different. He was sure of it. There was some inner sense that denied it was part of anything that Odon had created or altered. “It is real.”

She linked her hand with his. “Then come with me. Trust me. Let us share some of the bliss that is waiting for us.”

“Where are we going? Hopefully not too far since we’re both naked.”

He heard her throaty laugh, and his khout hardened even more.

“We’re about to begin a journey. A cleansing that is long overdue.”

CHAPTER 11

She'd been fearful he would reject her out of hand. That she had left it too long. Eluria attempted to impart the knowledge she'd learned as a Twilight Companion, skills and arts an ordinary female would not know. But in the end, she'd told her to go with her instincts and they would guide her.

What instincts? The only thing she'd ever known of physical joining was what the Enforcers had taught her through pain and drugs. Jarek had offered her the sensual mind bonding, but she'd shied away from physical contact. Now, when she was finally ready, he'd been so damaged, he'd pulled away from her. Did she have what it would take to heal him?

She led him into the shower enclosure. The automatic motion indicator engaged and a warm rain of water fell over them. She reached for a bottle of fragrant liquid body cleanser and poured some into her hand.

KIERRA'S THREAD

Turning back to him, she spread the liquid into the thick bed of dark hair on his chest. She spread the foamy liquid along his shoulders and down across his ribs.

Moving closer, she brought her body flush with his and rubbed her sensitive breasts against his chest, enjoying the feel of rough hair as she moved her hands to his back and down over the curve of his muscled buttocks to skim the back of his upper thighs.

The heat of his body penetrated the cool water that streamed down their bodies. Without touching his khout she progressed along the curve of his hip, to the inside sensitive flesh of his upper thigh. "Spread your legs," she whispered.

"Kierra, do you know what you're doing to me?" He repositioned his feet, making room for her to continue roving over his body with her now frothy, slick hands.

"So many years," she breathed. "I've wanted to touch you like this. To know the pleasure that awaited. But this," her hands slid down to his knees and back up to the crease at his thighs. "You are so much more. Your strength has supported me, protected me."

She gripped his thigh and she felt the muscle flex. "Oh Jarek," she sighed. "All this strength, do you know what you do to me?"

She pressed her body closer, rubbing sensuously against him. Gripping a cheek in each hand, she felt the muscles tighten as she kneaded and caressed.

"I'm going to climax right here, if you don't stop what you're doing, Kierra. Symion, look at your radiance. You have all you can do to contain it here."

"Where are your colors? When I feel their touch it is like so many fingers stroking my body, yet I know they all belong to you. It is you who give me so much pleasure."

The suds rinsed away, she raised her hands to cup his face, and drew his lips to hers. His hands gripped her hips and the heat in her

KIERRA'S THREAD

abdomen flared hot. She wanted to feel him inside her. But not yet.

As they were about to kiss, she flicked out her tongue and licked at the drops of water that clung to his lips. “I would cleanse Before from both of us. See the drain beneath our feet? Watch the nightmares seep away. Before is beneath us, Beyond awaits. And Now, I give you memories to fill the void between.”

She drank from his lips, sucking his tongue deeply. His strong arms molded her to him. He lifted his head to look into her eyes.

“How have I deserved you—merited your forgiveness?”

“Forgiveness? There is nothing to forgive. We have both suffered at the hands of a madman. This is a re-affirmation that we live and have each other. Life has dealt us hard. Before is gone. You are the male I want at my side—inside me. And I want to be inside you.”

She drew away from him and urged him from the shower. Pulling out a drying cloth, she proceeded to thoroughly dry him, then led him back to the living room, where the candles flickered and the scent of jasmine and rose mingled, offering an erotic atmosphere made for sealing.

She encouraged him to lie on his stomach on the scarlet rug.

“Now what are you planning?” he asked as he stretched out.

She reached for the bottle of oil on the table and poured a little into her hands. She straddled him and spread the oil over his back. A twinge of pain struck her at the ragged scars that littered at angles all across his back and down his legs. She forced the thoughts away.

“When was the last time you had a massage?” She spread the oil in long, flowing strokes.

“I-I don’t remember ever having one.”

She shouldn’t have asked. His memory and what was real and not real was painful to think about. She did not want to remind him of his loss.

“I’m about to give you a memory—the first of many pleasant ones,

KIERRA'S THREAD

I hope.”

She hunched up until her sensitive shax rested against the ridge of his cheeks and as she began the long circular strokes with her hands along the length of his back, she undulated her hips, causing a pleasurable friction as her shax lips moved against his rounded, smooth rear.

“*Na nivia*, you’re destroying me.”

“Does it please you?”

“More than that. It is exquisite pain.”

“Will it give you good memories? Or should I stop and try something else?”

He groaned. “Don’t stop. Symion, don’t stop. Where did you learn to do this?”

She smiled to herself. Eluria had been right, thank goodness. Continuing for a few more minutes, she then stopped. If she didn’t, she knew she was about to climax with the friction and she didn’t want that just yet. Her shax was dripping with her juices, her shax-ra pulsing for immediate attention.

She lifted a leg and moved aside. “Turn over,” she instructed him.

He did so and lay on his back, watching her, his eyes flaring green emeralds. Again, she straddled him. His khout lay thick and hard, shooting upward from his abdomen. An iron shaft needy of piercing her willing flesh. She enclosed it with her hands, feeling the silken hardness, hot to her touch. Pre-cum glistened along the slit on the engorged purple head. It looked to be ready to burst, the pressure of so much pleasure prepared to erupt.

She took one hand and splayed it against his groin, sweeping upward to his stomach. She looked at his eyes, green blazing fire. “And do you now doubt your response to me? I certainly don’t.”

“No,” he gasped. “Seal with me, Kierra.”

“Who do you think of as I open my body for you?”

KIERRA'S THREAD

“Symion, you, *na nivia*, no one but you. Always.”

Lifting up, she rose above him, her shax opened to him as she dropped down to encase him within her desire. “As I thought—as I knew. I want to feel every inch of you enter me. Every. Inch.”

She gasped as her shax-ra stretched to accommodate his thick length. Tingling pleasure consumed her. He grazed her pleasure nub as he entered and spasms of desire flooded through her. She lifted and dropped down again, crying out with her desire.

“So good, so very good. Oh, yes.” Back and forth she slid on his length, bringing him deeper and deeper, her juices lubricating his khout, and she felt him harden even more.

Once he was fully sheathed inside her, he sat up and she wound her legs around his hips. They stayed like that, without moving. Tears rose to flood Kierra's eyes. “Too much,” was all she could say as she sobbed against his shoulder, her nails digging into his back.

His arms tightened around her as he rubbed along her spine. “Too much what?”

She sniffed and smiled. “Too much happiness. Never will we be parted in any way again, Jarek. Never, do you hear me? We have fought too hard to reach this moment. Finish it.”

He lay her back on the rug and proceeded to thrust in a long, slow rhythm. “Faster,” she gasped. “Deeper.” She lifted her hips and mirrored his deep penetration by undulating her hips against him.

As her climax moved closer and she felt his throbbing release begin, she grabbed at his ass and forced him deep. “Hold,” she gasped. Then she felt what had never occurred before, as her threads wound about the base of his khout and her anstillia cord released.

It lubricated and penetrated his anal canal. She felt every inch penetrate him. Slowly. Intensely. Not only did the powerful waves of her orgasm overtake her but she felt his as well. He roared with his completion as he wrapped her closer in his arms, tight to his body. Two

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physical bodies sealed as one in sensual, pulsing completion in the Argadian way.

Then she felt the Serdionese rise within him. He entered her mind and she offered him the haven he'd been denied by the loss of memory. His sensual colors wrapped around her, through her, stroking every part of her. She saw the lights of her radiance mingle with his colors as their souls merged into one bright, passionate body of energy. A complete balance and mingling of physical and spiritual—two souls meant to be one for all time. Once a single thread bound them, now it was woven so tightly through them both, never to be severed, stronger than the finest metal, more beautiful than the brightest star.

The healing light of life filled with love enveloped them and carried them through the void of darkness from Now into Beyond.

ADRIANNA DANE

Theresa Gallup uses the pen names of Tess Maynard and Adrianna Dane. Theresa has been writing since the age of 10. A legal secretary for 30 years, she is currently working on another erotic romance, as well as a full-length romantic mystery/suspense. She has been married for 30 years and has three grown children (a daughter and twin sons), and is a new grandmother.

Writing as Tess Maynard, her first published short story appeared in the ezine, *The Whispering Forest*, in January of 2004. Writing as Adrianna Dane, where adding sensual heat to romance is her motto, *Esmerelda's Secret* was her first foray into the erotic romance genre.

Having traveled and lived from the East Coast to the West Coast, Theresa receives inspiration for her stories from a variety of sources, including music and poetry, and her tastes are eclectic.

For more information about current projects, visit Theresa's websites at www.tessmaynard.com or www.adriannadane.com.

* * *

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