

# BARBARIAN



AMANDA STEIGER

Barbarian  
*by Amanda Steiger*

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## Chapter One

Raina had been washing dishes all morning. Her hands were red and stinging from the harsh soap. "I hate being a novice," she muttered aloud as she dried the last plate. Not that being a priestess would be much better. Their duties were just as demanding, but at least they didn't include washing dishes.

Sometimes she wondered if she really belonged here at all.

She dried her hands on her heavy, shapeless brown robe and left the kitchen. Her mood brightened a little at the sight of the cloudless blue sky outside the window. It was a beautiful day. Maybe she'd spend some time reading in the garden.

The library was just down the hall from the kitchen. The huge room had stone walls, like everything else in the Hold. Tall windows let in most of the light. Dust tickled Raina's nose, and she muffled a sneeze against her robe-sleeve as she browsed through the tightly packed shelves. She'd often wished the library had a bigger selection. There were medical books and old, dry history texts, but very little fiction.

She spotted a slim volume which she'd never seen before, slid it off the shelf and opened it. She could tell immediately that it was a love story. As she scanned the lines, her eyes widened. She'd never imagined she'd find something this graphic in the library. It must have been put here by accident, though Goddess knew how. She knew her superiors

wouldn't approve, if they knew about it. Quickly, she closed the book, tucked it beneath one arm and left the library.

She passed Lydiana, a fellow novice, in the hall. "Morning, Raina." Lydiana looked curiously at the book. "What's that?"

"Oh, nothing. Just something I have to read for class." She felt a flicker of guilt. She knew it was wrong to lie, but Lydiana loved to gossip, and Raina didn't want to take the chance of her superiors finding out about this.

"Oh." Lydiana wrinkled her nose. "Homework. How dull. Well, I'll see you at the midday meal."

"See you," Raina said, and hurried onward.

The garden was a spot of sunlight and green amid the cold stone halls of the Hold. Raina always loved to go there, when she could find the time. She sat on a wooden bench, beneath the shade of a white-flowered tree, and opened the book. Her eyes devoured page after page. It was a story filled with excitement, temptation and danger, and it pulled her in like quicksand.

*His skin gleamed like bronze in the firelight. He smiled, his dark eyes promising a world of forbidden pleasures as he grabbed her slim wrists and pulled her down on top of him. She felt his powerful chest moving beneath her as she looked into his eyes, hypnotized by his dark beauty....*

"Raina? What are you reading?"

Raina looked up, and her heart leapt into her throat. Mother Tabitha loomed over her, hands on her hips, her thin, pale lips pressed together. As always, her graying hair was pulled into a painfully tight bun, and her frown was almost

enough to frighten the garden's chirping birds into silence. Raina lowered her eyes, blushing. "It's just a story."

"Hmm." Tabitha snatched the thin book and scanned a few lines, then closed it with a look of distaste. She held it between a thumb and forefinger, as if it were a soiled rag. "A tawdry love story, from the look of it. Whoever gave you permission to fill your mind with this nonsense?"

"No one. I found it in the library. I didn't see any harm in reading it." She resisted the urge to snatch it back from Tabitha. She had few enough pleasures in life; why did they have to take away everything she enjoyed? Why was everything pleasurable a sin? "I've finished all my chores," she continued. "You know I would never shirk my duties. I want nothing more than to become a sri'dith priestess."

"Do you? I wonder. If you have time to sit in the garden, reading idiotic things like this, then perhaps you don't have enough duties to occupy your mind." She tucked the book under her arm. "I'm going to burn this. I don't know why it was in the library in the first place, unless one of your teachers was using it as a prop in a lesson on the wickedness of carnality."

"But...."

"I'll not hear any protests. Until you learn to bow to authority, you will remain a novice. Perhaps more demanding duties are just the remedy you need."

Raina sighed. "Yes, Mother Tabitha."

"You will spend the rest of the day herb-gathering," said Tabitha. She pulled a slip of paper from the pocket of her long, green robe and handed it to Raina.

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It was a list of plants, along with the amount needed: seven handfuls of jula leaf, five bannic pods, and so forth. Raina's heart sunk as she scanned the list. Many of the things named were rare and difficult to find. This would take hours. "Yes, Mother Tabitha," she said quietly, her eyes respectfully downcast. She had long since learned that rebellion only earned her more chores.

"Don't sound so sullen. Believe it or not, I'm doing this for your own good. A sri'dith must have a disciplined mind; our purpose is to serve our fellow creatures and teach others about the glory of the Goddess. We do not waste time amusing ourselves with fantasies ... and neither should you, if you ever wish to become a priestess." Tabitha handed her a basket of woven reeds and a small trowel. "Be back by sundown. But don't return before then, unless you've found everything on the list."

Raina nodded, staring at her shoes. Basket in hand, she left the Hold—the huge, stone building where she lived and worked with her sri'dith sisters—and walked down the path toward the shore. Most of the herbs she needed could be found there.

She'd been in a good mood before Tabitha found her, sitting in the garden, enjoying a rare moment of free time and an exciting story. Now she would never know how it ended. She sighed, feeling heavy-hearted, and wondering if Tabitha was right; if stories like that were somehow harmful to her. She was committed to the Goddess, after all. She could never have a mate. Maybe she was just tormenting herself, reading about something she could never have.

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By the time she reached the shore, the sun was nearing its zenith. Waves crashed against the smooth rocks. The greenish-blue ocean stretched for miles, whitecaps sparkling in the sun. It looked very cool and inviting; maybe she would take a quick dip after she finished her chore. The thought gave her a guilty little thrill. She had no swimwear, and the other sri'dith would be scandalized if they knew she were swimming naked out in the open, but the chances of anyone actually spotting her were slim. There were few people out here.

Raina's eye caught a glint of silver near the sea's edge. Something metal lay on the sand. She squinted and shielded her eyes with one hand, trying to make out what it was, but the sun's glare was too bright. She walked closer. Whatever it was, it was big; as long as a man's body and just as wide. It looked a like a huge, oblong silver egg.

With a jolt, she recognized the object. A suspension capsule. She had never seen one, but she'd heard descriptions. They were like lifeboats. If a spacecraft broke down, or was attacked, and the only choice was to abandon ship, the crew got into the suspension capsules, which were ejected into space. Their built-in navigational systems guided them toward the nearest planet.

Eyes wide, Raina ran her fingertips over the cool, smooth metal. She knew she should go back to the Hold and tell her superiors about this, but she was reluctant to leave her newfound discovery. She wondered where it had come from and what was inside it. Maybe nothing was. Maybe it was just



a broken, discarded capsule been ejected into space and pulled in by Kira's atmosphere. But what if it wasn't?

Her fingers brushed over a small, round knob on the capsule's surface. A button? Unable to resist, she pressed it. She heard a faint click, and a hiss of escaping air as the capsule's lid slowly lifted. Raina stepped back, covering her mouth and nose to avoid breathing the gas. She waited until the yellow-orange clouds dissipated before leaning forward to peer into the capsule.

Raina gasped.

It was a man, about thirty, wearing the strangest clothes she'd ever seen. They were dark blue and silver, and fit as tightly as a second skin, revealing every ridge and hollow of his lean body. His eyes were closed, his dark hair long and disheveled. His shirt was torn to reveal a long gash on his chest; it was caked with dried blood, and the flesh around it was red and swollen. Why hadn't the wound been tended? Where had he gotten such a terrible wound in the first place?

She noticed the small, silver symbol on the left breast of his uniform, just above the rip: a trident within a circle. With a jolt, she recognized his clothing. It was a Skandrian war-uniform. This man was an enemy soldier.

Raina started to back away ... then stopped. She was a sri'dith, a healer, a servant of the Goddess. Her code did not promote discrimination against any species, race or nationality. To a sri'dith, anyone in need was worthy of help, and this man was clearly in need. The wound was badly infected. She quickly checked his pulse—it was weak, but steady—then lay an ear on his chest. She could hear no

breathing, but that didn't necessarily mean anything. She'd heard that suspension-capsules could slow the body's systems so much that breathing become imperceptible. Still, she had to be sure.

Raina pinched his nose shut and placed her mouth over his. The man's chest rose and lowered slowly as she filled his lungs with her breath.

His eyes opened.

Raina froze, her mouth still over his. The eyes were perfectly black, save for the bright gold flecks around their centers. She stared into them, so stunned that she could neither move nor think. Now, the eyes narrowed, and a hand seized her throat. Raina uttered a small, choked sound. She couldn't breathe. Eyes wide, she tried to pry his hand away, but his grip was like an iron vice.

Slowly, the man stood. The movement tore open his wound and started the bleeding afresh, but he didn't seem to notice. His eyes were fixed on hers, his face hard and expressionless. Raina tried to speak, but she couldn't draw in a breath. Desperate, she mouthed the words *let me go*. Hot tears filled her eyes. For the first time in her nineteen years, Raina was afraid for her life.

The man's eyes clouded with confusion. He released her. Raina dropped to the ground and gasped for breath, rubbing her sore throat. "Why did you do that?" she asked. "I was trying to help you!"

The man shook his head, as if to clear it. "Forgive me," he whispered. His voice was deep and hoarse. "I wasn't thinking. I...." He swayed, crumpled to his knees, and fell forward.

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Raina caught him and was nearly knocked flat on her back. "Goddess, you're heavy," she murmured, lowering the semi-conscious man to the ground.

Her survival-instincts screamed "run." He had nearly killed her, even if he hadn't meant to. He might try again. People, like animals, were apt to lash out blindly when afraid or in pain. But she couldn't leave him. If she went back for help, he might be dead by the time she returned.

The man moaned softly. Sweat glistened on his brow.

"Shhh," she said, placing her hands on his chest. Raina closed her eyes and focused her mind, pushing away her cluttered thoughts. "Don't be afraid. I'm going to help you." She breathed slowly, counting her breaths, willing herself into a state of trance. *Goddess, lend me your strength*, she prayed. Her hands tingled as warm, healing energy flowed into them. She opened her eyes and saw the man's aura hovering around him. She knew instinctively that it should be a strong, bright gold, but now, it had faded to the dim yellow of a dying firefly. An ugly, dark green splotch hovered over his wounded chest. She focused her will, slowly drawing the sickness from his flesh and into her own, spreading it throughout her body so her system could cope.

The man's eyelids flickered, and his head rolled to one side. His breathing was raspy and weak.

"Hold on," she whispered. "Please, hold on." She knew she was pushing herself too hard; she felt weak, sick to her stomach. Her hands trembled, hovering a few inches over his chest as she closed the wound, drawing the gash's ragged

edges together and knitting the torn flesh with new, healthy cells.

At last, the wound vanished, leaving smooth, unbroken skin. Raina removed her hands from him and sat, breathing hard. Trying to ignore the pain and queasiness, she inspected her patient. He was still unconscious, chest rising and falling evenly. All that remained of the gash was a rip in his uniform. There were no other serious wounds, just a few scratches and bruises.

Her eyes moved to his face. She'd never seen a Skandrian up close ... and since sri'dith eschewed technology whenever possible, she'd never seen one in vidcasts either. There was nothing particularly alien about him. He had a long, elegant nose, thin brows and lips, and slightly tilted, almond eyes. From the way people talked about Skandarians, she'd expected some reptilian nightmare. But then, their two species had evolved from a common ancestor, *Homo sapiens*. It made sense that they would look similar.

She pulled a small canteen from her robe-pocket and trickled the cool water into his mouth, watching his throat move as he swallowed. He needed more than water, though. He needed food, rest, and care from a more experienced healer. But how could she get him back to the Hold? He was too heavy to carry. She could try to contact Tabitha with her mind, but her mental powers weren't developed enough to reach the Hold from this distance.

She supposed the only thing to do was to wait until he awakened.

\* \* \* \*

Fire and screams surrounded him. Another explosion rocked the ship, and Talon grabbed a cable to keep his balance. His other hand gripped his blazer.

"Our hull's been breached," said General Misak. He stood nearby, breathing hard, blood trickling from a wound on his gray-haired temple. "We're losing oxygen."

"Where is the breach?" Talon asked, raising his voice to be heard above the thunder of explosives. "I'll plug it."

The general shook his head. "Sire, you must get into the suspension pod. It's your only chance. We can't win this battle."

Talon gritted his teeth. "If I'm to die, I'll die onboard my ship, not drifting through space in a metal shell."

"Sire...."

A ragged snarl cut off his protest, and a huge, dark shape lunged toward them. Talon fired three times in rapid succession, but he wasn't fast enough. The creature's three-inch, titanium claws sliced through General Misak's throat, and the general went down, eyes wide and stunned as blood bubbled from his mouth.

The monster turned its glowing orange eyes to Talon. The beast was a Kiran war-weapon, half flesh and half machine. Its skin was tough and leathery, its skeleton titanium, and its brain a tiny thing of circuits and wires, cold and ruthless, with no room for pity. Blood glistened on its reptilian snout and dagger-like fangs.

Talon raised his blazer. In the same instant, the beast leapt. One thick foreleg shot out, just as Talon squeezed the

trigger, aiming for the beast's eye—the only vulnerable part of its body. The orange eye winked out like a candle, and the beast screamed, a piercing sound which seemed to go straight through Talon's head. Pain seared through his chest as the claws slashed through his armor, through his uniform. He let out a strangled cry. It felt as though he'd been split in half.

Blood poured from the wound, thick and hot. His vision began to gray out, and a wave of faintness washed over him. The beast lay still and silent on the floor, apparently dead, but it might be bluffing. The creatures could be cunning, and they didn't die easily.

Talon shot it again, in the other eye. Breathing hard, he staggered down the hall, one hand on the wall for support. He was losing blood fast. He had to find help.

The blazer slipped from his hand as the strength ran out of him. He sank to his knees, coughing. He tasted blood. When he touched his lips, his fingertips came away red and glistening. Damn. The creature's claws had grazed a lung. Unless he acted fast, he would drown in his own blood.

He could see the suspension capsules, gleaming in a row in the room ahead. They looked like metal caskets. Still, they were his only chance for survival. The gas would keep him in the half-death of suspended animation for awhile, and if he was lucky, a Skandrian ship would find the capsule in time. Talon crawled forward, fighting off the waves of dizziness that washed over him. He reached out one trembling, blood-streaked hand and pushed the release-mechanism on the first capsule. It sprang open, and Talon climbed inside. He held his

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breathe, fighting claustrophobia as the lid descended and orange gas began to fill the capsule. His eyes slipped shut as he sank into merciful nothingness.

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Talon groaned. He could smell salt in the air and hear the cries of strange birds, the crash of waves against a shore, a sound he recognized only from vids. There were no seas on his home world. Where was he? Had his ship really been attacked, or had it been a nightmare?

He thought of General Misak lying on the ship's floor, eyes glazed in death, his throat reduced to bloody tatters.

Please, Suhara, let it be a nightmare, he prayed.

Gingerly, he touched his chest. The muscles were stiff and sore, but there was no wound. It must have been a dream. He could never have survived a wound like that. But if it hadn't really happened, how had he gotten here? Where was *here*?

He opened his eyes and winced at the bright sunlight. A foggy memory tickled his mind. A girl. There had been a girl, with gray-blue eyes and a faintly-glowing green stone in the center of her forehead. But surely *that* had been a dream. Hadn't it?

"You've awakened," said a soft female voice. He turned his head and saw her sitting on the sand with her legs folded. She wore tan robes and sandals, and her long brown hair was bound in a thick braid that snaked over her shoulder. There was, indeed, a dark green stone on her brow, but it no longer glowed.

"Who are you?" he asked. The sound of his own voice, a weak croak, made him grimace.

"My name is Raina," the girl said.

"You healed me?" asked Talon, and she nodded. Realization dawned. "You're a sri'dith, aren't you?"

She smiled, showing a hint of white, even teeth. "You know of my kind."

"I know you're great healers."

"Yes. Well, full-fledged sri'dith are, anyway. I'm only a Greenstone."

His brow furrowed. "A what?"

"A novice. First-level. I haven't gone through the Rites yet."

He sat up with a soft grunt of effort. "Yet you healed a mortal wound, apparently without much trouble."

She shrugged. "It was only a flesh wound."

It had been far worse than a mere flesh wound. He wondered if she was being modest, or if she truly didn't understand what she'd done. Talon rubbed his chest, marveling at her work. There wasn't even a scar. "Thank you, healer." He stood. "Where is the nearest settlement?"

"There's a village a few miles west. Why?"

Without answering, he turned and began to walk.

The healer stood. "Wait! Where are you going?"

"To the village," he called over his shoulder, "and, eventually, to the nearest spaceport. I must return to my people. They need me."

"But you have no food or supplies, and you're on a strange planet with no knowledge of the land or its people...."



He stopped and turned to look at her, raising one eyebrow. "You assume a lot. This isn't the first time I've set foot on this planet. I'll manage. And once I'm home, I'll find a way to repay you for your service."

"A sri'dith needs no payment," she said. "But I think it would be in your best interest to come back to the Hold with me. If you've been in suspension a long time, your body needs a chance to recover. Muscles and organs can deteriorate in suspension."

Talon rubbed his arms. He had to admit, he did feel weaker. "What year is it?"

"407 D.E."

That didn't help much, since their worlds used different calendars. But he'd been taught the Kiran calendar in school. He closed his eyes, doing the mental calculation—and his eyes snapped open in surprise. That would make it 3567 C.A. back on his home world, which meant he'd been in suspension for a full year.

No wonder his legs felt wobbly. Considering the seriousness of his injuries, it was amazing he'd lived that long, suspension gas or no suspension gas. It would probably be wise to rest.

Still, he was wary of accepting the girl's offer. He didn't know much about the sri'dith. He didn't know that he could trust them. "I'll manage," he said, and resumed walking.

"Wait, please!" She started to run after him and stumbled.

He saw her falling, lunged and caught her just before she hit the ground. She lay limp in his arms, panting softly. The

color had drained from her face. "What's wrong?" he asked, alarmed.

"Nothing." She smiled slightly. "Healing takes a lot out of me, that's all."

"'Only a flesh wound' indeed," he muttered. "With an injury as serious as mine, you must have been channeling enough energy to power a small shuttle. No wonder you're tired." He lowered her to the ground. "Rest."

"I'll be fine in...."

"Rest," he repeated firmly. His hands gripped her shoulders, holding her in place. Now that he was closer to her, it was hard not to notice her beauty; her eyes were large and gray-blue, sea-colored, and her skin was a soft, cool cream. His eyes moved to her throat—to the pulse fluttering in the great vein beneath that silken skin. He noticed the bruises forming there, and winced as he remembered grabbing her neck. "I'm sorry for hurting you earlier," he murmured. "I woke up in confusion and fear. I didn't know what was going on, whether you were friend or foe, and I panicked, like a fool."

"It's all right. You were in pain. You weren't thinking clearly."

"That's no excuse. I could have done you serious harm." His gaze slipped down, and he found himself looking at the soft swell of her breasts, visible even through the plain, loose robe. Quickly, he averted his eyes, looking instead at the green stone on her forehead. "That's an odd piece of jewelry," he remarked, trying to take his mind off its current train of thought.

She frowned. "It isn't jewelry. It's part of me."

"You mean you were born with it?"

"Well ... not exactly. It was installed when I was an infant."

"Installed. That's a peculiar way of putting it."

"Um ... I think I can walk now," said the girl.

He nodded, stood, and watched her, ready to catch her again if she fell. She managed to stay on her feet, though her knees did quiver slightly, and her face was still a shade too pale. "How far away is this Hold?" he asked.

"A few hours' walk."

He raised his eyebrows. "That's a long way. Are you sure you'll make it?"

"I made it here, didn't I?"

"But you weren't weakened from a healing, then. If you don't mind me saying so, you look like you're having trouble just staying on your feet."

She blushed. "Well, I have to try. We're forbidden to be outside the Hold after dark. I'll be punished if I return after nightfall."

"I don't see why they'd punish you for something that isn't your fault."

"It *is* my fault, in a way. If I'd had any sense, I wouldn't have opened your suspension capsule. I would have gone straight back for help."

"Maybe. But I don't like the idea of you being punished for helping me."

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"Don't worry about it." She smiled wanly. "The punishment won't be serious. I'll probably just be sent to my room without supper. They treat us like children, sometimes."

They left the empty suspension capsule and made their way east along the beach, the sun at their backs. Talon's legs felt shaky, but he walked in brisk, ground-eating strides, refusing to let his weakness show. He slowed only when he realized that Raina couldn't keep up with him. The healing seemed to have taken a greater toll on her than she cared to admit. When she stumbled for the third time, he stopped and turned to face her. "Let me carry you. We'll get there faster that way."

A flush rose into Raina's cheeks, and she averted her eyes. "I'm perfectly capable of walking. Besides, my weight would slow you down."

"I doubt it. I've lifted training-weights heavier than you. With one hand."

She crossed her arms over her chest. "I'm not *that* tiny."

"You haven't seen my training-weights."

"Are all Skandrians so boastful?"

He chuckled. "I do not boast. I only state facts. Now, are you going to let me carry you or not?"

Her smile vanished. "I told you, I can walk."

He shrugged. "If you say so."

They resumed walking. Raina's feet dragged, and her head drooped with fatigue. She stumbled again and landed on her hands and knees. Panting, she struggled to her feet. Tendrils of hair clung to her sweat-damp brow; her face was flushed, and she smelled of fever. She must have absorbed the

infection from his wound. It was an ability unique to sri'dith ... but apparently, she'd absorbed more than her smaller body could handle.

"I need to rest," Raina said, sitting. "I'll be all right in a minute...."

Talon crouched, grasped her arms, and hauled her onto his back.

"Hey!" Raina cried. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Relax. Just hold onto me."

She tried to pull free of his grip, but didn't have the strength. With a sigh of defeat, she slipped her slender arms around his chest.

Talon stood and began to walk, trying to ignore the feel of her soft breasts pressing against his back. He wondered if it would be easier to carry her in his arms, but decided against it; his arms, deteriorated as they were, would tire too quickly. This was more efficient, and her heavy robes kept it from being truly indecent. Still, feeling the length of her body against his was ... distracting, to say the least.

The sun sank lower, painting the sky with streaks of pink and yellow, tinting the sea the fiery red-amber of molten lava. Talon climbed a hill, and the Hold seemed to rise up before him. Built of rough-hewn stone blocks, it was taller than the trees around it. Tall, narrow windows lined the walls, and towers rose from the main building, cutting clean silhouettes against the darkening sky.

Compared to the palace where he'd grown up, it was a small building, but still rather imposing. "Looks like a fortress," Talon remarked.

"It used to be," said Raina. "Many centuries ago. We remade it into a place of healing."

"I see." He saw light glimmering through a few windows. Aside from that, the place looked cold and empty, and about as cheerful as a graveyard. The only life in sight was the small, shaggy goats grazing in a nearby pasture, and the blue-feathered cobek perched on the fence.

"I can walk the rest of the way," Raina said.

Talon nodded and released her arms, letting her slide to the ground. For a moment, her breasts pressed more firmly against his back, and he willed his heartbeat to remain steady.

"Thank you," Raina said. "For carrying me, I mean. I don't think I would have made it on my own."

"It's the least I could do. You saved my life, after all."

The Hold's main doors were tall and arched, made of stout timbers. They stood open, as if someone had been expecting Raina's return. Raina and Talon walked through the doorway, into the vast, shadowy hall beyond. Torches lined the walls. How odd, thought Talon. He'd always thought the Kirans were a technologically advanced society. "Why do you use torches?" he asked. "Why not light-panels?"

"We believe in living as close to nature as possible," Raina replied. "Technology is not the work of the Goddess. It can only drive us away from Her. We use the light She gave us."

"I see." He followed her, wondering why he hadn't turned back yet. He'd only gone with her to make sure she got safely home; he'd intended to leave and head for the nearest village, so he could get directions to a space-port, as soon as

she was inside the Hold. But now, he found, he was reluctant to leave her. He watched her dark brown braid swaying lightly as she walked. He hadn't been in the company of a beautiful young woman for some time ... and he supposed it wouldn't hurt to rest and bathe. He glanced down at himself and wrinkled his nose. His uniform was ragged and torn, dust clung to his sweat-damp skin, and his hair was disheveled and filthy. It wouldn't do to show up like this in a village. They'd probably run from him in terror, thinking him some woodland savage come to steal their children.

He sensed someone nearby, and tensed, hand moving instinctively to a weapon that wasn't there. Damn, why hadn't he thought to bring his blazer with him into the suspension capsule?

"We would not have allowed a weapon in here, anyway," said a voice. A tall, white-robed woman stepped around a bend in the hall. Like Raina, she had a small, oval-shaped stone on her brow, but hers was transparent. When it caught the light, rainbow colors glinted within.

Raina's bowed stiffly, arms at her sides. "I'm back, Mother Tabitha."

Tabitha glared at Talon. "What is the meaning of this? Why have you brought this man here?"

Raina's brow furrowed. "He needs food and rest. Doesn't our code tell us that we must aid all people in need, regardless of race or species?"

Tabitha's lips tightened. "You don't know who he is, do you?"

Talon cleared his throat. "If I'm not wanted here, I'll leave. I only accompanied the girl to be sure she arrived safely home."

"Wait," said Tabitha, holding up one slender hand. Her eyes moved to Raina's. "Show me where you found him."

Raina nodded and met Tabitha's gaze. As they stared at each other, the stones on their foreheads began to glow faintly.

Talon's nape prickled. He knew what was happening. An ungifted man would have felt nothing, but Talon's sixth sense was strong. He felt the sudden flash of psychic energy as Tabitha sent a probe into Raina's mind. The girl stood still, her face expressionless as she played out the memories for her superior.

The sri'dith were telepaths. Strong ones.

After a moment, Tabitha withdrew. "Your attempt to heal him was bold and foolish."

Raina stiffened. "He would have died."

"She speaks the truth," said Talon. "The suspension capsule was the only thing keeping me alive. If she had gone back for help, I would have been dead by the time she returned."

"That's not the point. It was foolish of her to open the capsule in the first place."

Raina lowered her eyes. She seemed unaware that her hands were clenched into tight little fists. "I didn't mean to open it."



"I don't want to hear excuses. You knew it was foolish to touch that capsule, but you did it anyway. I'm disappointed in you, Raina."

"You're being unfair to her," said Talon. "The girl saved my life. Perhaps she would have been wiser to go back for help as soon as she saw the capsule, but she took responsibility for her mistake. She risked her life to heal me. I've heard about how dangerous it can be for a sri'dith, how some of them have died trying to heal mortal wounds. She acted nobly."

Tabitha's eyes hardened. "You are a foreigner, unfamiliar with our ways. It is not your place to judge."

He smiled without humor. "You never seem to hesitate in judging us."

"Watch your tongue," said Tabitha. "You have no authority here."

"Perhaps you're right. But if you punished her, I would feel responsible. It would shame me greatly. I humbly ask, as a favor, that you pardon Raina."

Tabitha laughed without humor. "I see you're as skilled a diplomat as they say. Though they also say your tongue is a double-edged blade. Very well, the girl will be pardoned."

Raina relaxed and smiled gratefully at Talon, though he could see the confusion in her eyes. Tabitha might recognize him, but she didn't.

"It grows late," said Tabitha. "Do you wish to spend the night? We will tend to your needs."

She certainly changed her tune quickly, he thought. Her offer smacked of false hospitality. It would be safest to move on ... but he was weakened, and it *would* do him good to

have a bath, a proper hot meal, and a night's rest. And, he admitted to himself, he was reluctant to leave Raina. He wanted to make sure they didn't punish her, even if the punishment was just an early bed without supper. His sense of honor demanded it. "Very well," he said. "Show me to my room."

Tabitha nodded. "Raina, fetch him some fresh clothes and a pot of water."

"Yes, Mother Tabitha." Raina darted off.

Tabitha led him to a small room whose only furniture was a pallet and chamber pot. Talon raised an eyebrow. "Such luxury. Do you treat all your guests so, or am I special?"

Tabitha's eyes narrowed. "We believe in simple living, but I wouldn't expect a heathen dog such as yourself to understand."

"To be honest, I'm surprised you're helping me at all."

"Raina spoke true. We serve all the Goddess' children, even those who turn away from Her light. Sri'dith do not have enemies." She bowed to him stiffly. Somehow, she made the bow seem like a gesture of contempt. "I hope you weren't expecting a hot bath. You'll be expected to bathe as the rest of us do."

Raina appeared in the door with clothes and a towel draped over her arm and a bar of soap in one hand. In the other, she held a silver pot filled with water, which she set on the floor. As soon as she'd laid the clothes on the bed, Tabitha said, "Now go get him something to eat. And no dallying."

Raina nodded and darted off again. Talon frowned slightly, wondering if they always ordered her about like this.

Tabitha turned to him. "I'll leave you here to wash up," she said. "Raina will be here shortly with your meal." She left, shutting the door behind her.

Talon stripped out of his grimy uniform and stepped into the pot of water. He dunked the soap in, lathered up and began to wash. When he'd finished, he toweled himself off and put on the dark, rough-woven trousers Raina had left for him. He was about to put on the shirt when the door opened and Raina stepped in, carrying a tray. When she saw him, she froze, staring with wide eyes.

"Something wrong?" he asked.

She blushed and looked away. "Nothing." Raina set the tray on his bed. "I brought you your dinner."

He looked at the food: porridge, bread, a pitcher of dark liquid that smelled like medicine, and a plate of small, yellow apples. "I don't mean to seem ungrateful, but if I'm to recover my strength, I need meat."

"There is no meat here."

"I saw goats and cobeks as we approached the Hold."

"We keep the goats for milk, and the cobeks for eggs. We don't kill our animals."

"I don't think you understand. I'm Skandrian; our bodies aren't like yours. We need a great deal of protein to live."

"I'm sorry. Sri'dith are forbidden to take life, for any reason. We have no meat to give you."

He sighed. "I'll go hunting, then."

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by Amanda Steiger

"But you need to rest! You'll never regain your strength if...."

"I need *food*, healer," he said, his voice a near-growl. "If you can't give me something my body can digest, I'll get it myself."

Raina bit her lower lip. "Some of the neighboring villages sell jerky. If I rode there, I could be back in a little over an hour. Would that suffice?"

He nodded reluctantly. Jerky was not as satisfying as a hot, bloody kill, but it would nourish him just as well ... and he couldn't afford to waste energy hunting.

"At least drink the tea," she said, and left the room.

Talon picked up the pitcher and sniffed the dark brew. The smell was sharp, but not unpleasant. He took a sip and found it surprisingly tasty, a little like the yellowgrass tea back home. He finished it and lay on his pallet, feeling suddenly heavy and sluggish. By the time he realized he'd been drugged, it was too late. His eyelids drooped shut and he sank into the murky depths of unconsciousness.

## Chapter Two

Raina saddled her horse, a spotted gray named Dapple. Her face was hot. She kept thinking about that man's lean, muscular body.

Why was she acting so foolishly? It wasn't as if she'd never seen a shirtless man before. She was a healer. She knew male anatomy—she had studied drawings in books as part of her training—but she was supposed to be detached and clinical about it. There had been nothing detached or clinical about the way her pulse speeded up at the sight of those broad shoulders, that hard abdomen. Cleaned up, he was astonishingly handsome, nothing like the ragged savage she'd found on the beach. She thought about his angular face and his eyes—so dark, intense and full of secrets. He'd looked almost regal, like the princes of old. She wondered if he was someone important back on his home world. He had an air of authority, and Tabitha had spoken of him as if he were someone she *should* know.

She realized, with embarrassment, that she'd never even asked his name.

With Dapple's reins in hand, she led him out of the stables and hoisted herself into the saddle. Dapple broke into a trot as soon as her feet were in the stirrups. He was young and energetic, pleased to be outside, despite the late hour. A half-moon shone through a patch in the clouds, and silver sequins of moonlight glittered on the sea.

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Strange, that Mother Tabitha had granted her permission to travel to the village herself. Tabitha was normally very strict about keeping Greenstones in the Hold after dark. There were dangers in the surrounding wilderness, wild beasts and wild men, and Raina's psychic powers were not developed enough to protect her. She relished the unexpected freedom, the cool wind on her face as she flew over the path. It seemed that Dapple's hooves scarcely touched the ground.

\* \* \* \*

Talon woke slowly, feeling as though his head were stuffed with cotton. His thoughts were gray and sluggish. He sat up, moaning, and rubbed his temples. His eyes opened to stare blearily at the empty pitcher in front of him.

He *had* been drugged. But why? If they'd wanted to kill him, they would have done so already.

His head felt peculiar. He touched his brow, and felt a band of cool, smooth metal, no wider than a finger. It encircled his head, running beneath his hair. Dread cinched his gut like a cold wire. A slave-crown. He wore a slave-crown.

He tried to pry it off and felt a flash of pain, like a spike being driven deep into his brain. It took all his self-control to keep from crying out.

His heart raced. How could he have been so foolish? Why had he trusted them? Had the suspension-gas muddled his thinking?

"Ah, you're awake."

He looked up. Tabitha stood in the doorway, smiling. Her hands were steepled, fingertips pressed together.

Talon clenched his jaws. "You're a fool to think you can hold me here for long."

"Pointless bravado. No one can break out of a slave-crown, not even the Skandrian king himself. Did you honestly think we'd allow a valuable political prisoner to sleep under our roof, then let you go your merry way?"

He glared at her. "And what of your healer's code?"

"Our worlds are at war. With you at our mercy, perhaps your planet will finally waken from its trance of blind pride and surrender to us. By ending the war, we can save countless lives. As I see it, we *are* following the code."

His hands clenched into fists. "Skandria will never surrender. They will fight until every last warrior is dead, with or without me."

"So you say. We will see. In the meantime, you won't find the sri'dith such harsh masters. You will be properly fed and allowed to roam the Hold and the surrounding area ... provided, of course, that you don't cause trouble. Think of yourself as a guest, and your stay here as a vacation from your duties. If you insist on challenging our authority, however, you'll see that we can be very harsh masters indeed."

Rage welled inside him, hot and red, so strong that his brain seemed to pulse with it. In an instant he'd lunged across the room and wrapped his hands around Tabitha's throat. His thumbs pressed hard into the soft hollow. "Release me, or I'll crush your windpipe." His voice was low and steady, belying the fury in his heart.

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*by Amanda Steiger*

A wrenching pain in his head made him gasp, but he didn't release his grip. The pain increased slowly, steadily, and his vision began to gray out. The strength seemed to drain out of his limbs, and his trembling hands slipped away from her throat.

The pain vanished, leaving him clear-headed but weak.

Tabitha massaged her throat, eyeing him distastefully. "That was very foolish. I'll forgive you for that slip up, but just this once. Next time, I may not be so lenient."

"I don't want your forgiveness. Nor your hospitality."

"Suit yourself. This will only be as easy or as difficult as you make it." She left the room without closing or locking the door—a sign, he thought, of how thoroughly they held him in their power. What good was freedom to roam the Hold when he had this damned crown around his head?

He sat on the edge of the bed, forcing himself to push his rage aside and think. He assessed the situation coolly, mechanically.

His objective was to get the crown off. He obviously couldn't do it himself. He knew enough about slave-crowns to know that they could only be removed by the person they were programmed to respond to; the crown contained tiny sensors which would recognize the master's touch, so the crown couldn't be removed by another slave, or by anyone else.

Tabitha had used the crown to give him pain. It responded to her, therefore, she could remove it. But convincing or forcing her to do so would be impossible. There had to be another way. Maybe another sri'dith could remove it.



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*Raina.*

Talon's eyes narrowed. Had she saved his life only so she could bring him here, to this trap? He should have known better than to trust any Kiran, no matter how young or innocent-looking. The people of Kira were his enemies.

He heard distant hoof-beats, and rose to his feet, knowing she brought food. And though he loathed eating the food his captors provided, he knew he had to keep his strength up if he was to escape.

He left the room and walked to the main doors of the Hold. Pushing them open, he stepped outside, into the crisp, cool night air.

\* \* \* \*

Raina dismounted and led the panting, sweat-damp horse to his stall. She unsaddled him, rubbed him down and left the stables, a full pack of jerky strapped to her back. A tall, broad form stood in the Hold's main entrance, and she smiled, recognizing her alien friend. Her smile melted from her face when she saw the cold look in his eyes. "What's wrong?"

"You know perfectly well what's wrong."

She shook her head, bewildered ... then her eyes caught the glint of moonlight on metal. A thin band of metal, all but hidden by his dark hair. "A slave-crown!" she gasped.

"Yes. A slave-crown." His face was emotionless, a granite wall ... but she could see the anger flaring in the depths of his eyes.

She took a step backwards, trembling.

"You are right to look afraid," he said, looming over her. "I don't appreciate being betrayed."

"I had nothing to do with this! I swear by my oath to the Goddess, if I'd any idea, I never would have brought you here. I only wanted to help you."

The anger in his eyes wavered.

"I don't understand why they did this," Raina continued. "I can't imagine why they'd want to keep you prisoner, or what good could come out of it. You're just a Skandrian civilian."

"You really don't know who I am, do you?"

"No! You never told me your name. Who are you?"

"I am Kadir Talon."

Raina gasped softly, hand flying to her mouth. Her eyes were wide.

"You recognize me now?" he asked.

"Y-yes." Talon. The Barbarian King. A man who wielded power over millions, whose very word was the law. Dear Goddess, she had spoken to him, touched him—she'd ridden back to the Hold on his back! A wave of weakness and shock swept through her, and for a moment she thought her legs were going to give out ... but she managed to stay on her feet. "It still doesn't justify their treatment of you," she said, her voice wobbly. "We are sri'dith, sworn to help and aid those in need. We shouldn't be taking political prisoners."

"Can you remove the crown?"

"No. I'm sorry. It's not keyed to my touch."

He sighed. "I thought as much."

Now it made sense, Raina thought. Tabitha had allowed her to leave the Hold so she'd be out of the way, so she

wouldn't make a fuss when they put the slave-crown on Talon. They knew she'd developed a fondness for him. Her cheeks grew hot. Tabitha had been inside her mind, had examined her memories. She must have seen how fascinated Raina was with his eyes, the guilty pleasure she'd felt when she'd ridden on Talon's back, feeling powerful, warm muscles move and shift beneath her.

"I'll talk to them," she said. "I'll try to convince them to remove it. It probably won't do much good—I'm just a Greenstone, after all—but it's all I can offer."

Talon's eyes narrowed. Her heart jumped as that dark gaze locked with hers. His eyes were like blades; she had the uncomfortable, strangely exciting feeling that they could see everything inside her, into the private recesses of her mind. She wondered briefly if he might be a telepath, then dismissed the notion. He didn't have a mindstone—and besides, no Skandrian possessed telepathy.

"Did you bring food?" he asked.

She nodded, averting her eyes from that uncomfortable, strangely thrilling gaze, and removed the backpack from her shoulders. She could still feel his eyes on her, like tiny suns warming her skin, as she removed a package of jerky and offered him a strip. He took it and studied it, turning it over in his long fingers. Then he began to eat, chewing and swallowing mechanically. There was no evidence of enjoyment in his face, but she couldn't help admiring the way his strong, white teeth tore through the leather-tough jerky. Nature had designed him to be a meat-eater; she didn't doubt

that. His canines were sharper than hers—not quite fangs, but sharp enough to make her pulse flutter nervously.

He finished the jerky-strip, and she offered him the backpack, almost shyly. "You can take the whole thing if you like," she said.

He accepted it. "Thank you, Raina." His voice was deeper, no longer a cold monotone, but a velvet purr. She shivered at the unexpected warmth in his tone, and damned herself for a fool. No doubt about it. She *was* attracted, and the knowledge of who he was only strengthened the feeling. There was something exciting about power, about mystery.

He took her hand, eyes never leaving hers. "I apologize for suspecting the worst of you. After all you've done for me, I should have at least given you the benefit of the doubt."

"It's all right." Her own voice seemed to be coming from far away. She couldn't look away from his eyes; those black, gold-flecked eyes. She was very aware of the warmth of his skin on hers, of his clean, healthy scent.

Again, she felt as if she were being examined; as if her heart had been laid bare before him, her secrets exposed. She tried to look away, but her gaze seemed locked in place. Time had grown strange and distorted. She might have been standing there for a few seconds, or an hour—it was hard to tell. Her body felt strange, her breasts round and heavy, the nipples so hard and tender they were almost sore. The rough-woven robe chafed them. She was acutely aware of every sensation; her skin felt hypersensitive, tingling slightly.

A trickle of sweat ran down her neck, between her breasts. She wanted the moment to end; it was too intense, too strange. At the same time, she wanted it to last forever.

At last, he looked away. "It's late," he said. "I'm going to bed. I will see you tomorrow, Raina."

"Goodnight, Talon." Her voice was a whisper; she couldn't seem to muster the strength for anything louder. She watched as Talon turned and walked away, melting into the shadows of the hall. For a long moment, she stared into that darkness, lost in the memories of his eyes and touch ... then shook herself out of her trance. Slowly, like a sleepwalker, she walked back to her room.

Raina closed the door and leaned against it.

A king. The ruler of all Skandria. How in the world had she gotten tangled up with such a man?

Her lids drooped, and she forced them open. Talon had been right; she *was* weary, and her legs and bottom ached from the long ride. So did the tender place between her thighs—though it was a different kind of ache. Raina slipped out of her robes, breath hissing softly between her teeth as the rough fabric chafed her erect nipples.

When she slid beneath her bedcovers, she knew immediately that she wouldn't be able to sleep. Never in her life had she been so feverishly aroused; it seemed that every time she moved, the blankets rubbed against her and sent little thrills of pleasure racing through her body. She wondered briefly if Talon had cast a spell on her using some dark Skandrian sorcery, then quickly squelched the silly, superstitious notion.

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She ached to touch herself. It wasn't the first time she'd been tempted, but in the past, she'd resisted. She'd been taught that sri'dith must be above the desires of the flesh. But maybe, just once—who would know? Who, besides the Goddess, of course—and She would forgive. Hopefully. Raina felt she would die if she didn't quench the burning.

Biting her full lower lip, she parted her tightly-clenched thighs. Trembling fingers touched the lips of her sex, then slid between them, into her warm, wet folds. Raina gasped with pleasure, closed her eyes and tried to imagine it was Talon touching her.

For an instant, she seemed to feel Tabitha's cold, disapproving stare, and her stomach tightened into a knot. She snatched her hand away from her sex, as if the burning need there had scorched her fingertips.

Rolling onto her side, she hid her face against a pillow, her eyes stinging with tears of fear, shame, and desperate need. *Goddess, give me strength*, she prayed. *Let me resist temptation*. But the prayer felt hollow in her mind. It wasn't what she truly wanted.

Raina broke down into muffled sobs of frustrated confusion. At last, exhausted, she drifted into a troubled sleep.

\* \* \* \*

Talon lay silently in bed. His eyes were closed, his breathing slow and even. To any casual observer, he would have appeared deep in sleep; he had even coaxed his

brainwaves into a pattern similar to that of a sleeper, in case the sri'dith were somehow monitoring him.

Talon's mind, however, was wide awake and active, sorting rapidly through possible plans of escape: discarding some immediately, examining others more closely before casting them aside, filing still others away as possibilities. It was imperative that he escape. His people needed him ... and the shame of being held captive was more than he could bear.

He had already decided that Raina was his best chance. Even if she couldn't remove his crown, she was a valuable source of information. Questioning her directly, however, would be dangerous; she might grow suspicious, and even if she had never intended him to be captured, Raina's foremost loyalty was to the sri'dith.

There was another way of getting information, but it was risky ... and unethical. But his situation was desperate. Despite what he'd told Tabitha, his subjects would probably do anything for the return of their leader, even surrender to the Kirans. At the very least, the loss of their king would be a blow to morale: either way, it would weaken them. He couldn't let that happen. If escaping required him to bend his personal code of honor, it was worth the sacrifice.

He sent out a telepathic probe, searching for Raina's brainwave pattern. Locating it, he locked onto it and slowly, gently eased himself into her mind. Immediately, strange images and feelings bombarded him. Dreams. Good. Telepathic exploration was easier when the person was asleep.

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He moved deeper, and the dream-images vanished. As always, he was keenly aware of the danger involved in merging himself with another's mind—the importance of maintaining his sense of individuality at all times. If he wasn't careful, their minds could blend together like two colors of paint and destroy them both.

Deeper still he moved, creeping like mist into her private depths, fascinated in spite of himself. Her mind was an ocean of secrets, filled with sunken treasures and dark caves, desires and fears that even Raina herself was unaware of. He longed to swim deeper still, to see and understand more ... but he restrained himself. He wouldn't violate her privacy anymore than he needed to.

Talon sorted through her memories, hunting for information about the sri'dith, their rules and customs. The more he knew about his enemies, the better his chances. He tried not to be curious about the bits of her past he glimpsed—the difficult, lonely childhood, the suppressed sexual and emotional needs, her private doubts. He tried to focus on locating information about the sri'dith and the slave-crown.

Suddenly, Raina stirred. He felt her brainwaves change as she began to wake, and quickly pulled free of her mind. If she sensed him, all was lost; the sri'dith would know he was a telepath, and would try to control his mind as well as his body.

Talon opened his eyes and stared at the ceiling, feeling dazed and disoriented. He waited for the feelings to pass, then considered what he'd learned ... which wasn't much.



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Most of the information he'd picked up, he had already surmised on his own.

No matter. There would be other opportunities. As a skilled telepath, he could slip in and out of her mind at will. He just had to be very, very careful not to be detected.

Talon sat up and ran a hand through his thick, unbound hair. He wouldn't be getting any sleep tonight. He was as restless as a caged mountain wolf. He might as well get up and do something.

For a moment, he had the strange urge to check on Raina and see what had wakened her. Nightmares, maybe, or a strange noise outside. Then he shook his head, admonishing himself. It was none of his business, and she'd just as likely been wakened by something as mundane as a need to go to the privy.

Standing, he dressed and left his room. Tabitha had told him he was free to roam the Hold and the surrounding land. He wondered if it was true: it seemed odd that they'd give an enemy so much freedom, unless they were so sure of their power over him that they were willing to slacken the leash a little. Not exactly a reassuring thought.

Well, now was as good a time as any to find out just how far his freedom extended.

He left the Hold through the main doors. He'd picked up the basic layout of the area from Raina's mind, and because of that, he had the disorienting feeling that he'd walked through these halls many times before. He walked around to the back of the Hold, where the stables stood. Half a dozen horses dozed in their stalls. He opened the stall of a reddish-

brown gelding and saddled it, a skill he'd picked up from Raina's memory, though his hands felt clumsy and unsure as he fastened the buckles. The gelding blinked its large, liquid eyes, seemingly unbothered. Amazing, how docile these creatures were. If you tried to saddle an akiell—the closest thing to a horse that lived on his home-world—it would split your skull open with a blade-edged hoof.

Talon slipped the bridle, an odd leather contraption, onto the horse's head. The gelding didn't seem to mind. Even when he pushed the torturous-looking metal bit into its mouth, it didn't resist. "You've been a prisoner here so long, it doesn't even bother you anymore, does it?" whispered Talon. He touched the slave-crown. "They'll not find me so easy to dominate." He mounted, gripping the reins awkwardly. The horse trotted out of the stables and onto the path outside the Hold. Moonlight silvered the grass and sparkled on the dark sea. Overhead, the stars burned like pale fires against the blackness.

He gave the horse a kick, urging it into a canter. How far, before the invisible leash snapped tight? How far would the slave-crown allow him to go?

Talon looked over his shoulder and felt a flash of excitement. He was already a good distance from the Hold. Maybe the sri'dith had forgotten to set boundaries for him. A foolish thought, but intoxicating.

As the horse cantered along, hooves clapping on the hard-packed dirt, a sudden uneasiness crept over Talon's heart like a shadow. He slowed the gelding to a walk, looking around for the source of the feeling, but there was nothing amiss. The

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night was still and quiet. When the uneasiness was joined by a strong compulsion to turn around and head back, he realized that the crown was responsible for the feeling. He clenched his jaws and kicked the horse to a trot, trying to ignore it ... but the feeling grew stronger, the unease deepening into fear. His heart pounded, and his breathing grew ragged and quick. His hands trembled so hard that he nearly dropped the reins.

Damn it, he thought, this isn't real!

Real or not, the compulsion to turn back was powerful. It filled his mind, blocking out all other thoughts, eating away at his resolve. He tightened his grip on the reins until the gelding tossed its head, eyes rolling as the bit dug into its mouth. Talon fought the crown, pushing the gelding forward until he could bear it no longer. The fear was like a constant, high-pitched scream in his mind, driving him mad.

He yanked the rein so sharply that he nearly tore the horse's mouth. Whinnying, the gelding turned sharply and galloped back toward the Hold, mane and tail streaming. As Talon rode, the fear slowly lessened, like a heavy weight lifting from his mind one piece at a time. He took a deep breath and slowed the horse to a trot, then a walk. The gelding plodded along, breathing heavily as Talon tried to compose himself. His heart pounded, and his hands still shook as if palsied. Shame burned inside him. He had been defeated by a mere illusion, a false fear projected into his mind by a piece of metal.

Tomorrow, he would try again. Slowly, he would numb himself to the fear, going a little further each day, until he broke through the barrier.

Raina yawned and tugged a brush through her hair. The thick, brown mane tumbled over her shoulders, shining in the hazy morning sunlight. After smoothing out the snarls, she bound her hair back in a braid, fingers moving with a quickness and ease born of long practice. She'd tried wearing it down, but it was too much trouble, always getting tangled and in her face. She supposed she should just cut it. Vanity was of no use to a sri'dith, and she'd seen Tabitha looking with disapproval at her long braid, but she couldn't quite bring herself to part with it.

She glanced out the window, at the sun, and sighed. She'd overslept again. There was no time for breakfast. If her chores weren't done by noon, she'd get double-duty tomorrow.

Raina hurried out of her room, into the hall. Novices hurried to and fro. Some carried baskets or trays, some balanced stacks of books in their arms. Among them were a few priestesses, marked by the clear stones on their brows.

Raina reached the main doors and stepped outside, into the sunlight. She stretched, breathing the cool air deeply. Spindly-legged, blue-feathered cobeks clustered around her feet to await their breakfast. The more energetic ones hopped up and down, chirping. Raina smiled, fetched a bucket of feed from the storing-house and scattered the pellets across the ground. The cobeks snatched it up with their sharp little beaks.

"Raina!"

Raina looked up and saw Lydiana running toward her, her dark curls bouncing. "Good morning, Lydiana," Raina said, with more cheer than she felt. Lydiana was a sweet girl, but she could be very silly sometimes, and had a tendency to show up when Raina most needed quiet and privacy.

"Raina, you wouldn't believe the rumors I've been hearing." Her blue eyes were wide. "They're saying you brought a *Skandrian* to the Hold as a patient."

Raina winced inwardly. Already, people had started gossiping about it. "You mean Talon?" she asked, trying to sound casual.

"So the rumors are true! Raina, you're either the bravest or the craziest girl on the planet. I can't believe you would get close to a creature like that."

"He was hurt. I couldn't just leave him."

"Of course you could! It's what I would have done. They're monsters, you know, especially the males. They fight amongst each other like dogs. They're more like animals than men." She leaned close, her expression serious. "You're not having your ... time of the month, are you? They say the smell of a woman's blood makes a *Skandrian* crazy with need. He loses all control."

She frowned. "Where did you hear that?"

She hesitated, as if caught off guard. "Everyone knows that, Raina."

"I didn't. And I don't think it's true. I've talked to him, and he didn't seem like some crazed animal. He didn't seem much different from a Kiran man, actually."

"Don't be fooled," said Lydiana. "He seems reasonable now, but you just wait. He'll show his true colors."

Raina sighed. She supposed she should just nod and change the subject. Arguments never did much good, and they often resulted in hurt feelings. Still, she couldn't just stand there while Lydiana spouted those blatant untruths. "You shouldn't judge people until you've met them, Lydie. It's true that I don't know Talon very well, and he may very well turn out to be a monster, but he could just as easily turn out to be a saint."

"Listen to you! Those people have been at war with us for centuries and killed millions of Kirans—not just soldiers, but women and children too!—and you're defending one of them?"

"We've killed Skandrian civilians as well, in case you've forgotten," said Raina. "But that's not the point. You have to judge people as individuals, not as whole species. He couldn't help being born Skandrian, anymore than you could help being born with blue eyes."

"But they're all like that! Haven't you heard the stories? They butcher their own children if the food-supply gets low."

"Oh, for Goddess' sake ... I may not be the most educated person on Kira, but I've read enough on Skandrian culture to know that that's completely untrue."

"It *is* true! You're just as crazy as those Skandrian dogs." Lydiana stormed off, pausing to glare at Raina over one shoulder before vanishing into the Hold.

Raina sighed. By tomorrow, Lydiana would probably forget completely about the argument. She was the most mercurial

person Raina had ever known. Still, it hurt a little. Raina had so few friends. She didn't want to risk losing one.

She finished feeding the cobeks, filled the goats' trough, and began grooming the horses. The simple chores soothed her, cooling the sting of Lydiana's words. She loved being with the animals, loved the peace of the morning and the smell of hay. Even shoveling manure out of the stalls didn't bother her. As she worked, sweeping bits of straw off the stable-floor, she sang quietly to pass the time.

"You have a lovely voice."

Raina gave a start and turned to see Talon leaning against the wall, arms folded over his broad chest. "How long have you been watching me?" she asked, unsettled. Normally, she was very attuned to her surroundings; why hadn't she heard him approaching?

He shrugged. "A few minutes. What song was that?"

"Nothing. Just an old ballad." She resumed sweeping, staring down at the floor. Her cheeks were warm with self-consciousness.

Talon chuckled. "What happened to the confident young healer I met on the beach?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, why are you suddenly so shy? Is it because you know who I am, now? I suppose I can't blame you for being intimidated by my status."

She frowned and looked up, annoyed by his arrogance. "I never said I was intimidated. Status doesn't mean anything to me. You could be the ruler of the galaxy or a spoo-farmer from Terra 4, for all I care." She felt her face growing hotter,

knowing her reaction made it obvious that he'd touched a nerve.

"You're blushing," he said with a grin. "I don't believe I've ever seen someone turn so red."

She ignored the comment. "Why did you seek me out? Do you need anything, or did you just want to tease me?"

His smile faded. "I wanted to ask you some questions."

For some reason, she felt a flutter of nervousness. "I'm a little busy. Maybe after I finish my chores."

"And what are your chores?"

"After I finish with the stables, I have to gather firewood. There's a big alm tree about a half-mile from here that got knocked over in a storm, and I've got to chop the branches off and haul them back."

"They've got you chopping firewood? A tiny creature like you?"

She straightened. "We all do our part. I may be small, but I'm not useless."

"I didn't say you were. Just that you're still ill-suited to the task."

She looked at him sharply, unable to hide the hurt in her eyes. "I'll thank you not to be so rude. I can't help it that I'm not some big, brawny ox." She turned her gaze back to the floor as she attacked it with her broom.

"I've wounded your pride," he said. "Forgive me, youngling. I didn't intend any insult."

She studied his face. His tone was unreadable, but she couldn't see any hint of insincerity in his expression. "Well, perhaps you should be more careful about what you say," she



said. "It's easy to hurt someone's feelings without trying." She finished sweeping and took the broom and dust-bin back to the shed. When she returned to the stables, Talon was still there.

"I'll help you with the firewood-chopping, if you like," he said. "Consider it a gesture of apology."

Raina hesitated. Being around him, alone and away from the protection of the other sri'dith, might be dangerous ... but the offer *was* tempting. If he helped, she might get done before noon and have some free time. "All right," she said. "Wait just a moment ... I'm going to get an apple from the kitchen. I didn't have breakfast."

He nodded and watched her leave. Raina *did* go to the kitchen, but she took more than an apple. Selecting a small knife from the drawer, she tucked it beneath the cord at her waist, arranging the folds of her robe so that it wouldn't show. She doubted she'd have to use it, but it was best to be safe.

Talon was waiting for her outside the hold. Her heart jumped when she saw that he was carrying an axe. "I found it in the shed," he said. "I thought it looked good for the job."

"It's bigger than the one I normally use," she replied inanely. She felt the urge to knock her forehead against the nearby wall in sheer exasperation at herself. Somehow, it hadn't occurred to her that if Talon had an axe, her little kitchen-knife wouldn't do much good.

"I brought one for you," he said, handing her a hatchet. Even *that* was bigger than what she normally used, and so heavy that she knew her arms would be aching before long.

Unless she swung it with both hands, she wouldn't make much of a dent in the wood.

"Thanks," she said.

Raina fetched a small wood-carrying sled from the shed, and they left the Hold, walking down the broad path. To either side, long, golden-green grass rippled; when the wind flattened it, it seemed to shine silver. Dew sparkled on the grass; the sun had climbed up from its bed of clouds and shone bright, bathing them in its warmth. Talon watched the herd of shaggy goats grazing nearby. A picket fence surrounded them. "It seems wrong," he said, "keeping animals confined."

"What do you do with your animals? Just let them roam free?"

"We don't domesticate animals."

"I thought Skandrians liked meat."

"We do. But we get it the same way our ancestors did. We hunt, or hire other people to hunt it for us."

"Wouldn't it be much simpler to raise animals in captivity?"

Talon's face hardened. "Yes, but it would also be a violation of every natural law. It would anger Suhara."

"Who?"

"Our goddess. She is the embodiment of freedom. She would not like to see her children confined."

Raina's brow furrowed. "You think it's all right to kill animals, but not to raise them in captivity? That makes no sense."

"It makes perfect sense. Killing is not unnatural. All things, by being born into this world, accept the chance that they

themselves may die to feed another creature. It would be foolish of me to resent a mountain wolf for trying to eat me. It's simply their nature, as it is our nature to hunt the wild akiell. But to confine another living thing, to keep it behind fences until it's fat and stupid and no longer even remembers freedom enough to want it.... "He shook his head. "That is far crueler than death. It is the murder of an animal's soul."

"I can't believe that," said Raina. "Our goats are happy. We feed them and care for them, and they live longer than they would in the wild. We would never kill them. That's why sri'dith don't eat meat, why our diet is mostly fruits and grains. We believe that all life is precious, that even plants should not be harmed unless absolutely necessary."

"You respect life, but not freedom?"

"What good is freedom without life? The goats are probably getting more out of the bargain than we are, since we protect them against predators and the elements. The fences probably aren't even necessary; they don't try to run away unless something frightens them."

"Of course not. They're raised to be docile and easily controlled. You've killed their spirit. It may be true that freedom is not possible without life, but it works the other way around, as well. Life is worthless without freedom."

Raina sighed, but decided to let the subject alone. There was no point in arguing over something that wouldn't be changed. Still, his odd beliefs intrigued her. Did he feel the same about people? Would he himself prefer death to confinement? Knowing what she did about him, it didn't seem

unlikely. She still didn't agree with him, but she couldn't help admiring his conviction.

They came to the tree, a moss-covered giant with a trunk so stout that Raina could wrap her arms around it and not be able to touch her fingertips. Birds scattered, dark specks against the pale sky, as she and Talon approached.

Talon pried off a piece of bark and inspected it. "The outside is rotted. We'll have to chop it away to get at the core."

"Don't worry about the trunk. It'd take a week to chop off a piece of that. Just concentrate on the branches."

"The wood in the trunk is better," he said. "It will burn longer, and won't smoke as much."

"Do you have alm trees on Skandria?" Raina asked, with a touch of annoyance. It was a rhetorical question. Skandria was mostly desert, and alm trees needed a lot of water to live.

"No," said Talon, "but as I told you, I've been on Kira before. I'm not ignorant of your world." He stripped off his shirt and hefted the huge axe over his head. With a grunt of effort, he brought it down, through the trunk's soft, rotted exterior. He pulled the axe free, then brought it down again, and again, up and down, in a fluid rhythm.

Raina watched, wide eyed. His body moved like a well-oiled machine. Muscles shifted and bulged beneath smooth, bronze skin. Chunks of spongy moss and wood flew through the air.

He paused, looking up. Sweat rolled down his neck and back. "Well? Are you going to help?"

"Oh ... yes, of course." Raina looked away, embarrassed, and picked up her hatchet. She selected a branch, about as thick around as Talon's arm, and began to chop. Her body tingled distractingly, and she found herself stealing glances at Talon from the corner of her eye, but even when she wasn't watching him, she could hear his breathing, his soft grunts of effort.

At last, he stood back, wiping his brow with the back of one hand. A huge pile of wood sat next to him. "When must we return to the Hold?"

Raina glanced at the sun. "I guess we should head back now, if we want to be back in time for lunch." She looked at her own small pile, wondering if she should even bother to take it along ... but pride demanded that she contribute *something*. She gathered up the branches, bound them with a length of twine, and tucked them under one arm, watching as Talon loaded huge, round slabs of wood onto the sled. He grabbed the sled's rope with both hands and began to pull it, dragging it along the path toward the Hold.

Raina glanced at Talon as they walked. He kept his eyes fixed straight ahead.

"You tried to cross the boundary last night, didn't you?" she asked impulsively.

He looked at her sharply, eyes locking with hers. "What makes you think that?"

"It's what I would have done, if I were you," she said, aware that her heart was pounding. Had it been stupid of her to let him accompany her? She thought about how easily he

had wielded the axe, cutting through the tough wood as if it were cheese. "I—I'd hardly blame you if you did."

He relaxed slightly, though his expression didn't soften. "Yes, I rode to the boundary," he said. "And I learned that the crown is capable of influencing my emotions, of making me feel things that aren't real. I'd like to know why a culture that doesn't even believe in killing goats would use such a cruel device." They had stopped walking. His eyes pinned her in place. "Can you explain that to me, Raina?"

"S-sometimes, we treat people who are mentally ill," she said softly. "Some of them are violent. We use the crowns for our own safety, and to keep the patients within the Hold so they won't roam and hurt other people."

"And to hold political prisoners."

"No! We don't involve ourselves in politics. We aren't citizens of any nation, and the laws of other people don't affect us, so we have no reason to care about the outcome of the war or who winds up in power. We only want to help people."

He gripped her arm tightly, and she suddenly felt sick with fear. "Then what is the purpose of this?" he asked, his voice dangerously low as he touched the slave-crown with one finger. "I'm not mentally ill, and I'm only violent to those who would rob me of my life or freedom. So why am I a prisoner here?"

"You aren't." She swallowed hard, feeling his fingers burn into her flesh. "I'm sure they have some other purpose for keeping you here."

Black eyes held her immobile. She couldn't breathe; she felt as if he were inside her head, seeing every thought. Her heartbeat seemed to fill her whole body ... then he looked away, leaving her dazed and shaken. "I don't think you're lying," said Talon. "You believe what you say about them. But I don't think it's true. I don't think these Clearstones are nearly as noble as you think."

Raina blinked. "How did you know the priestesses are called Clearstones?"

He hesitated for only an instant before replying, "You told me, of course."

"No, I didn't."

Once again, his eyes locked with hers, and once again, she seemed to feel his presence in her mind, the subtle pressure of his will against hers. She resisted instinctively ... but a moment later, the uncomfortable pressure vanished and she *did* remember mentioning the Clearstones. "Oh." She touched her forehead, disoriented. "I suppose you're right."

*Raina?* said a voice in her mind. It was Tabitha. *I felt your fear. Is something wrong?*

*Nothing, Mother Tabitha.* Lying mind-to-mind wasn't easy, and lying at all—especially to a Clearstone—was wrong, but Raina couldn't tell the truth. She didn't want to admit that she'd been afraid of Talon. They'd think he had tried to hurt her, and might punish him for something he hadn't done. *I ... I saw a snake, that's all.*

*Show me,* said Tabitha.

She sent a vision of a golden grass-snake with black eyes. Tabitha, apparently satisfied that she was telling the truth, retreated from her mind.

A large, warm hand closed around her wrist, and she gave a start.

"Raina? Are you all right?"

She looked up at Talon. "Yes, of course. Why wouldn't I be?"

"Your eyes lost focus for a moment. And you didn't respond the first time I said your name."

"Oh. Mother Tabitha just contacted me. She wanted to make sure I was safe."

"Probably doesn't trust me with you. Though I don't suppose I can blame her." He released her wrist. She could still feel the warmth and shape of his fingers, branded into her skin. "Are you sure you're all right? You look flushed. Perhaps you should be resting."

Raina rubbed her forehead, feeling the coolness of her mindstone against her palm. "Perhaps you're right."

"Here. I'll carry those." He took the bundle of sticks from under her arm. "If you get on the sled, I'll pull you along."

"Are you sure? You're already carrying so much."

He smiled. "Haven't we had this discussion before? You're too light to be a burden. Get on."

She sighed in exasperation, even as she climbed onto the sled and perched precariously atop the wood-pile. He was clearly accustomed to giving orders and having them obeyed.

A man like that could be dangerous. But then, the danger was part of his attraction.



## Chapter Three

Talon's arms burned as he dragged the overloaded sled along, wishing someone had thought to put wheels on the bottom. He was more tired than he'd let on. His muscles, though still formidable, had atrophied during his year in suspension.

Maybe his wits had atrophied as well. It wasn't like him to make a stupid mistake, like mentioning something he wasn't supposed to know. He'd managed to save himself by tailoring a false memory and slipping it quickly into her mind, but it had been a close call.

He had to stop meddling with that girl's head. Raina was a tempting source of information, and very receptive. He'd encountered almost no resistance the first time he entered her mind, probably because she was accustomed to having her thoughts invaded by the Clearstones. But ethical compromises were dangerous, for himself as well as Raina. The more he made, the easier they became, and the fact that she was one of his captors—sort of—did not justify it.

He'd just have to find some other way of learning what he needed to know.

The Hold loomed into view from beyond a grassy hill. Beneath the cheery blue sky, it looked less ominous than it had yesterday. The ocean was a vibrant sapphire, sparkling with whitecaps. The dark specks of seabirds wheeled in the sky, crying shrilly. Talon dragged the sled down the path to the Hold's main doors, then around to the back of the

building, into the shadowy, quiet shed, which was almost large enough to be called a barn. Hazy shafts of sunlight shone through the windows, illuminating the dust-motes that swirled in the air. Raina stood, brushing off her robes. "It's almost lunchtime," she said. "Would you like to eat with me?"

He shook his head. "I doubt you'd have anything I could eat. I'll hunt."

"Must you? You've already worked so hard today. There's still some jerky left."

"I'd prefer fresh meat." He stared hard into her eyes. "Will they deny me even that? Will they deny me my nature, so that no animals have to die?"

"If it's your nature to hunt, I'm sure they'd allow it. And the wild animals aren't under our protection." Raina's hands nervously wrung her robe, twisting it into a knot. She and Talon had moved unconsciously closer to each other, so close that he could feel the warmth radiating from her small body. With his sharp predator's senses, he could hear her heart beating rapidly. It always raced when she was around him, and he didn't think that was entirely due to fear.

He looked down, into her large, gray-blue eyes. They looked dark in the dim light of the barn, pools of shadow and mystery in her pale face. His gaze drifted lower, lingering on her soft, lush mouth, then lower still, until he was looking at the swell of her breasts. They were high and firm, pushing against her robes with each breath. They fascinated him. Skandrian women tended to be small-breasted and muscular. Some Skandrian men found the extreme femininity of Kiran women distasteful, but Talon had always been drawn to it.

Impulsively—almost involuntarily—he touched her mind and felt her need, a need she was frightened to act on.

The full lips moved, shaping a breathless whisper.  
"Talon...."

Without thinking, he leaned down to press his lips against hers, heard her sharp intake of breath. His hand settled over her right breast. Even through the robe, he could feel that it was perfectly formed, large, round and firm. His first impulse was to squeeze, but he resisted. He didn't have to touch her thoughts to know that she'd never done anything like this before. Raina moaned softly and pressed into the touch. When his hands gripped her thin shoulders, pulling her closer, she tensed. "Easy," he murmured. "I won't hurt you."

He kissed her again, softly, feeling her lips yield against his. The heat and moisture of her mouth beckoned, and he slipped his tongue inside. His hand slid beneath her robe and up her smooth, flat stomach, until he found her breast. It was warm and silky, exactly as he'd imagined. Her nipple hardened as his thumb brushed over it. His mouth left her lips and moved to her pale throat. He slid a hand into her hair and gently tilted her head backwards, and his tongue rasped over the soft, vulnerable spot beneath her chin, making her gasp.

"T-Talon...."

"Your skin is like silk," he whispered. He opened her robes, just enough to expose one pale breast. His mouth dipped down to close over her nipple. She cried out softly, her slender fingers gripping his shoulders, digging in almost painfully. Through their link, he felt her rush of pleasure, her hunger.

"Talon, stop!" she cried, her voice choked.

Bewildered, he released her. "What's wrong?"

She pulled her robe shut, trembling. "Do you even need to ask? You just touched me intimately!"

"I still don't see the problem. You were enjoying it, weren't you?"

"That's not the point." Her face was flushed, her lips swollen. He had to restrain himself from taking her into his arms and kissing her again. "We hardly know each other. And I didn't give you my consent."

He frowned. "Is everyone on Kira so formal about sex?"

"If you mean that we don't become intimate with people we hardly know just because the mood takes us, then yes!" She was trembling, her eyes wet with tears.

"I'm sorry, Raina," he said softly. "I didn't mean to frighten you. Truly. It's just that, things are different on my home world. Men and women approach this matter more casually."

"I'm not frightened," she said. The lie was as transparent as air. "Even if you tried to take me by force, the Clearstones would feel my fear and come to my aid."

"Do you think I would do that? Try to force you?" The thought hadn't even occurred to him; in the past, women had always come to him willingly, eagerly. He was a king, after all, and many women would have lain with him just so they could boast about it afterwards; he'd had his hands full fending them off. "Raina, I've never bedded an unwilling woman, and I don't intend to start now."

"How can I take your word for it?" She took a step back. He could see her pulse fluttering in her throat. "I don't know anything about you."

"Then perhaps we should get to know each other."

Something flickered in her eyes; an emotion he couldn't put a name to. Then she looked away. "I have to go."

"Raina...."

He reached out to her, but she turned and ran from the barn.

Talon thumped a fist against the wall, jaws clenched in frustration. He'd made a mess of this.

\* \* \* \*

Raina didn't stop running until she was in her room. She shut the door firmly and leaned against it, panting.

She could still feel that hot mouth, those strong fingers gripping her breast, lighting her body on fire. Her thighs were pressed tightly together, quivering, as if to hide the aching need between them.

She was glad he hadn't touched her there. If he had, she might have lost control entirely and begged him to take her, begged like a shameless little whore ... which was exactly what she felt like right now. Everything she'd ever been taught about the ways of men and women told her that she should feel disgusted and demeaned. A near-stranger had touched her intimately, without her permission. Yet she ached with desire. A part of her wanted to go back to the barn, to hold him and ask him to teach her about these new feelings,

teach her the secrets of her body. What was wrong with her? He was a stranger ... and a foreigner, at that!

Raina moaned softly, tears filling her eyes.

And then a horrible thought occurred to her. What if the Clearstones knew? What if one of them had been inside her head while Talon touched her, and knew every wicked thought that had passed through her mind?

She pressed her fingertips to her trembling lips and squeezed her eyes shut.

She needed a friend to talk to, but there was really no one she felt comfortable confiding in. Lydie was the closest thing to a friend she had among the other Greenstones, but there was no way she could talk to Lydie about something like this. And she was afraid of telling someone of higher rank, someone with power. They could punish her ... or worse.

She wrapped her arms around herself as the tears ran down her face. She'd never felt more alone.

\* \* \* \*

A stream ran through the forest, babbling softly, the only sound in the cool silence. A red-furred deer grazed by the stream's banks. It was small, with delicate, slim legs and black stripes marking its russet fur. The deer was about half the size of an akiell, and lacking horns, but otherwise very similar to the fleet, dun-furred beasts that roamed the deserts of Skandria.

The deer sensed something amiss; its head lifted, pointed ears twitching, its huge, dark eyes staring into the forest. Seeing nothing, it lowered its head and resumed nibbling the

tender spring-grass. It was young, and overconfident. It didn't flee, as an older deer might have.

That's it, thought Talon. Just a little closer....

The Skandrian crouched on a low bough, hidden by leaves and branches, his eyes never leaving his prey. One hand tightened around the hilt of his knife, a crude weapon he'd fashioned himself from a sharpened stone, twine, and a piece of thick branch, since the sri'dith hadn't allowed him to take so much as a kitchen knife.

The deer moved another step closer, its small, cloven hooves shining like metal in the hazy sunlight. The wind carried Talon's scent away, so the beast's sensitive nose did not alert it to the danger, and its eyesight was not keen enough to spot him amid the branches and shadows. He held his breath as the deer raised its head and seemed to look straight at him ... then lowered its muzzle to the grass and began eating once more.

Talon leapt, landing squarely on the creature's back and knocking it to the ground. Grabbing it by one antler, he yanked its head back and slit its throat. Its body jerked convulsively as its lifeblood ran onto the ground. It died with a dazed look in its eyes, hardly aware of what had happened.

Talon knelt, bowing his head, and murmured a brief prayer to send its soul safely into the spirit realm. He then scooped a shallow pit out of the ground, filled it with wood and dried grass, and started a cook-fire with the flint and steel he'd brought. The sri'dith's living conditions were so primitive that they weren't even allowed matches. They used nothing that they couldn't find or make themselves.

But then, who was he to judge their choice? Young Skandrians went on quests into the desert to meditate and fast when they came of age. The solitude and simple living were thought to clear the mind. He supposed the sri'dith weren't much different, except they never returned to the hustle and bustle of a technological world.

He skinned the deer, spitted a haunch with his makeshift spear, and sat, turning it slowly over the fire. He wondered if Raina would ever speak to him again. He'd allowed his desire to cloud his common sense, and had forgotten that Kirans were a sexually repressed people, particularly the women. They valued chastity and abhorred promiscuity, and the females were expected to keep their virginity until they chose a lifemate. Those who served the Goddess often died virgins. The only women who shared their beds with many men were the jia'hin ... and while prostitution was simply another job on Skandria, on Kira, it was the mark of shame. Raina had probably taken his attentions as an implication that he thought her no different from a jia'hin. If that was the case, he had unintentionally insulted her.

Talon sighed. That was the second stupid mistake he'd made in a single day. Maybe the suspension-gas *had* muddled his brain.

He lifted the spitted haunch from the fire and tore off a mouthful of meat with his sharp fangs. The meat was still half-raw, the way he liked it, and he growled in pleasure; rich juices filled his mouth, mingling with the deer's blood. Jerky simply couldn't compare to the joy of a good, hot kill.



Barbarian  
by Amanda Steiger

Once he'd eaten his fill, he cut the remaining meat into strips, cooked them, and wrapped them in broad, flat mava leaves—one of the few plants on Kira he recognized, since he'd seen similar plants scattered across the desert. It was one of the few things that *could* grow there, and he knew from experience that the leaves would flavor the meat as well as preserve it. By the time he buried the deer's remains, it was night.

With his pack full of meat, he headed back to the Hold, but he didn't go inside. Instead, he entered the stables, saddled up the gelding, and rode out once more. He felt strong and confident, even a little giddy. Tonight, perhaps, he would have a chance. He had a belly full of good meat and a pack with food to last him several days. It was an excellent night to escape.

Before long, however, he felt the subtle pressure of unease trying to push him back, and knew he was approaching the boundary. He began to visualize the halls and rooms of the palace back on Skandria, using the mental trick to distract him from his discomfort. He thought about the vast dining hall, with the sea-dragon's head mounted on the wall, and the council chamber, its round table gleaming with dull luster, tall, narrow windows letting in light.

The fear ate into his consciousness, burning through the pitiful distractions. Stubbornly, he tried to push it aside, but it resisted. His heart pounded. Cold sweat trickled down his back. Muttering a curse, he dug his heels into the horse's sides, urging it to a full gallop. He forced himself to drop the

reins and grasp the pommel. There would be no turning back this time.

He couldn't breathe. The fear pressed in around him, choking him. He closed his eyes, as if that would somehow make it easier, and fought the near-impossible urge to leap out of the saddle. If he did that at a full gallop, he'd crack his skull. Even so, the urge grew more powerful with each passing second. Suhara, give me strength, he prayed. He hadn't felt so terrified since the Trials.

Suddenly, a sharp pain knifed between his eyes, and disorientation washed over him. He lost his balance and toppled out of the saddle, landing with an impact that jarred him to his bones. Rising shakily to his feet, he watched the horse gallop away.

He lost his balance again and stumbled, landing on one knee. Damn it! What was going on with him? After several failed attempts to stand, he forced himself to crawl another few yards, toward the invisible boundary. The air seemed to be thickening, resisting him. His vision blurred and faded to gray around the edges. His instincts screamed at him to turn back.

He groaned softly. It was no use. If he crawled any further, he'd pass out, and they'd find him lying on the ground the next day. That was an embarrassment he didn't need. Talon turned slowly and crept along like a snail until he regained his sense of balance enough to stand. His legs trembled, and he felt as if he were trying to stand on two pillars of jelly. He took one careful step, then another.

Gradually, the dizziness and fear lessened. As his head cleared, he began to think.

So, the boundary had two layers. The first evoked fear. The second added pain and disorientation. It was more effective than the sturdiest stone wall, yet other people—namely, the sri'dith—could pass through it with ease. A devious trap, indeed.

He touched the crown with trembling fingers. He longed to rip the hated thing off, but knew that if he tried, he'd only cause himself more pain.

He'd made progress. He'd gone further into the boundary than he had last night—but getting through it entirely would not be an easy task. Perhaps tomorrow night, he'd try riding through a different part of the boundary. Maybe there were weak spots, where the fear and pain wouldn't be quite so strong. A long shot, maybe, but he was willing to try anything.

In the meantime, he had to keep searching for a way to get the crown off. Even if he *could* get through the boundary, they might still be able to reach him. He had no idea what the crown's range was. Perhaps its range was unlimited. Perhaps, while he wore it, they could reach him even if he fled to the furthest reaches of the universe.

Not a pleasant thought, to say the least.

Once he was outside of the boundary's range, away from the fear, he sat with his back against a sturdy alm and allowed himself to rest. A dull ache surged and ebbed behind his eyes. He had no choice. He had to tap into Raina's mind again. It was the only way he could learn anything from her.

After the incident in the barn, she wouldn't trust him enough to spend a few minutes alone with him, let alone give him crucial information.

Closing his eyes, he cast his mind out like a net, searching. He found her almost immediately. She was in her room, exactly where he'd expected her to be, and she radiated distress. He ached with guilt, both for what he'd done and for what he was about to do.

He eased himself into her psyche—carefully, so she wouldn't feel his presence—and gave her a gentle nudge to send her to sleep. It wasn't difficult. She'd exhausted herself with crying.

Could she really have been that upset? he wondered. Simply because he had touched her? But he'd felt her pleasure ... why should it bother her so deeply if she enjoyed it?

The answer came to him immediately. It was simple. Kiran women were taught to associate pleasure with shame.

Once Raina was deeply asleep, her mind open and unresisting, he moved into her memory. Now that he was becoming familiar with the pathways of her mind, the process went more quickly. Almost immediately, he located a cluster of memories associated with the slave-crown and began to sort through them. One was a faint memory from early childhood, of watching a group of dusty, bedraggled prisoners being led down the street with the silver crowns on their brows. Not much use to him, since it didn't tell him anything about how the crown worked or how to remove it. Another memory, this one of a dangerous lunatic who'd been kept in

the Hold to be treated for the brain-tumor that had driven him mad. He'd been kept in check with a crown. Talon raced ahead through her memories to see if the crown had ever been removed ... but no. The man had died during the Clearstones' attempt to destroy the egg-sized tumor. Raina had cried.

So like a sri'dith, to cry for a maddened criminal.

He probed deeper, fascinated in spite of himself. So many layers. As much as he tried to concentrate on his search, he couldn't help but be intrigued by her more personal memories. If he wanted, he could know anything about her—literally anything. He could examine her deepest fears, or her sexual fantasies, if she had any. He supposed she must have a few, tucked away in her subconscious. She might be innocent, but she had instincts.

There was something undeniably exciting about the feeling of power. But he couldn't allow himself to continue. He had to find the necessary information and retreat from her mind. He couldn't allow himself to forget the moral complications of what he was doing. Invading someone for the thrill of it was rape. It didn't matter whether the invasion was mental or physical.

Just then, he felt a ripple of mingled fear and pleasure travel through her mind. Puzzled and concerned, he floated back to the surface and blended his consciousness with Raina's.

Looking through her eyes, he saw her room—at least, he assumed it was her room. She was lying in bed, naked. He could feel the chilly air on her skin, could feel her excitement

and nervousness at being so exposed. The door was open, and a man stood in the doorway, his features hidden in shadow. The man stepped closer.

With a shock, he recognized himself. The likeness was perfect, down to the tiny, white scar on his right cheekbone, where a blade had nicked him in a fight when he was fourteen.

Talon stared in astonishment. Then realization hit him. A dream—of course. She was still asleep.

And she was dreaming about him.

The dream-Talon stepped closer. He wore black silk pants with a matching shirt and a long, trailing cape. His black and gold belt glittered, and his hair was pulled back in a tight queue, emphasizing the harsh, clean lines of his face.

"Talon," she whispered, drawing the covers over her breasts. "What are you doing here?"

"I think you know the answer to that," said dream-Talon, thin lips curving in a smile. "Open your legs."

Your technique could use some improvement, dream-self, thought Talon. Even he wasn't *that* forward.

He felt Raina's hesitance, her growing fear. Not wanting this dream to turn into a nightmare, he merged with the dream-self and found himself looking through its eyes, at Raina. She was propped up on one arm, clutching the blankets to her chest. Her eyes were wide and uncertain. The faint lamplight outlined the soft, pale curve of her bottom.

Talon sat on the edge of the bed. He had schooled nervous virgins before. He knew how to do this ... and he so badly wanted to give Raina a taste of pleasure, of what her body

was capable of. This was only a dream, after all. There was no risk. "Don't be afraid," he said "I'll be gentle. Unless, of course, you don't want this at all."

"I want it," she whispered. She ran her tongue over her full lips. They glistened enticingly with wetness. He longed to taste that lush, inexperienced mouth, but restrained himself. "I've wanted it ever since I set eyes on you. You give me such strange feelings inside. Whenever you touch me or look at me, my body starts to ache so sweetly. But I know it's wrong, and I'm afraid of what will happen if I give in to my wants."

"It's not wrong, Raina. It's natural. You're a young woman. New needs are stirring inside you, and ignoring or suppressing them won't make them go away." He gently pulled the blanket aside, revealing her soft, round breasts. He brushed his thumb over her left nipple, very lightly, and felt a tremor run through her. "You have a beautiful body. So soft ... and so very responsive." His fingers trailed downward, over her flat abdomen, teasing the tight brown curls that hid her sex. She gasped softly, and he felt her skin warming. His lips moved close to her ear. "If you will let me, I'll teach you what this body is capable of."

Slowly, she parted her thighs. He gripped them gently. His hands looked large and rough against that pale, silky flesh. "Keep your legs open," he said softly, and wet his own lips, staring at her exposed womanhood. He started by simply running a finger down the length of her tempting crease. Already, she was hot and slick, the flesh stained a darker pink with desire. His finger moved lower and probed the entrance to her passageway, feeling her resistance. One quick thrust

would open her for him, and he could submerge himself in her ... but no. He couldn't take her virginity, not even in a dream. He didn't want to do anything that might make her feel used. He wanted this to be for her.

Experienced fingers spread her lips wide, exposing her moist folds. He leaned closer, breathing in the scent of her aroused sex, a hot, musky, primal scent. His other hand, meanwhile, slid up the length of one slender leg, then cupped the small of her back.

Raina held her breath, watching him. Was this a dream? she wondered. It felt so real, but it had to be a dream. If it were real, she would never allow him to touch her like this.

"Are you nervous?" he asked.

Raina nodded.

Black eyes lifted and met hers, holding her immobile. "Would it ease your uncertainty if I told you everything first?"

She nodded again. She couldn't seem to find her voice.

"All right." His lips brushed the satin skin of her lower belly, and fresh heat pooled between her thighs. Warm ooze seeped from her crease, tickling her folds. "Do you know about your pleasure-spot, Raina?"

When she realized what he was referring to, she blushed, but lifted her chin slightly. "Of course. I'm a sri'dith. I know about anatomy, both male and female."

His eyes locked with hers again. "Have you ever touched it?"

Her cheeks grew warmer. Averting her eyes, she shook her head.

"I'm going to touch it now."



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Raina's breath caught in her throat as one large, warm finger slipped between the thick, soft lips that hid her body's innermost secrets. She watched, cheeks hot with self-consciousness, as the finger slid slowly along the length of her furrow, exploring it, then found the aching center of her need—a plump little nub near the top of her cleft, all but hidden by dark curls of hair—and rubbed lightly. Raina shuddered. She felt that gentle touch throughout her whole body, all the way down to her clenched toes. Her breasts were full and aching, the nipples so sensitized that even the air seemed to caress them. She whimpered and pushed forward, into his touch. His finger rotated slowly around that silken nub, and Raina gripped his shoulders, trembling. She'd never felt anything so sweet. It was like quenching a thirst so deep she hadn't even known it was there. Her hips moved instinctively, pushing forward to bring his finger more firmly against her clitoris. He stroked it one last time, then withdrew, and she cried out softly with dismay.

"Shhh." He lay her gently on her back. She panted softly, opening her legs wide in mute pleading. "Patience, little healer," he said, with gentle amusement in his voice. Then he lowered his head. His fingers parted her lips again, and his tongue was on her—inside her!—shockingly warm, sweetly invasive, claiming her secrets. All reason fled. She moaned, tangling her hands in his thick hair as her hips rotated beneath him.

Talon thrust his tongue deeper into Raina's folds, teasing the entrance to her fresh, unspoiled sheath. By Suhara, she was exquisite. The pale, damp globes of her breasts heaved

and shuddered, and her flat belly glistened with sweat. Unable to resist any longer, he slid a hand between his own legs and wrapped his fingers around his erection—though in truth, Raina's breathing was doing more for him than his own hand. She panted, little whimpers escaping with each breath as she twitched and bucked beneath the skillful strokes of his tongue.

Very lightly, he grazed her clitoris with his teeth. Raina cried out sharply.

"Almost there," whispered Talon, and wrapped his lips around that firm little bud of flesh. He could feel her racing pulse inside it as he began to suck. Her short, sharp cries rang in his ears as she approached her climax ... then she stiffened, toes clenching. Clear honey seeped down her smooth thighs.

Raina went limp, breathing hard. Her eyes were wide and dazed. "Goddess," she whispered. "I never knew it could happen like that."

"I'm glad you enjoyed it," Talon said softly. His shaft was still straining against his trousers. He hadn't had a chance to finish himself.

Her eyes strayed to the bulge, then returned to his face. A silent question hovered in the air between them. He could see the fear in those gray-blue depths, though she was trying to hide it.

"No. Not tonight, Raina." He smoothed her hair. "You aren't ready for that yet."

"Shouldn't it be up to me to decide that?"

"Consent must flow both ways, unless you plan to force me." One corner of his mouth lifted in a smile. "It is my choice not to enter you tonight. You would be ashamed afterwards, and I don't want that. I want to wait until you've learned to give yourself without shame."

She straightened and crossed her arms over her breasts, frowning in an attempt to look stern. It was ruined by her mussed hair and pleasure-flushed cheeks. "I'm not as innocent as you think. They teach us about these things."

"Knowing anatomy is very different from knowing the art of pleasure, youngling. You didn't know it was possible to make love in this way, after all. You just said as much."

She blushed. "I just didn't think that men liked the taste of a woman." She hesitated, then asked shyly, "What does it taste like?"

He dipped a finger into her wetness, and Raina cried out softly with surprise. Lifting the finger to her mouth, he said, "Taste for yourself."

She licked once, then wrinkled her nose.

Talon chuckled. "It's an acquired taste. I didn't like it at first, either, but it sort of grows on you." Impulsively, he pulled her against his chest, cradling her soft, naked body. He willed his erection to fade, and it went reluctantly. He felt pride at being able to master his desires, to transcend the needs that bound lesser men ... but at the same time, a part of him was hollow and disappointed.

Raina leaned her head against his shoulder. "Do you think someone heard me?" she asked. "I got pretty loud toward the end."

"Don't worry. We're safe."

"How do you know? I'm surprised someone hasn't already shown up at the door. I wonder why they didn't hear me. Unless ... this is a dream?"

Talon nodded.

"Then you aren't real." She lowered her eyes. "You're just in my mind."

"Raina ... youngling, it's all right. Don't be upset."

"I can't help it. This was so special, Talon. I wanted it to be real. It *feels* real. I've never had a dream so vivid."

He couldn't bear the pain in her eyes. He wanted to tell her that he really *was* with her, in the most intimate way possible. But he'd be a fool to reveal that. So he simply held her, stroking her soft, unbound hair. Closing his eyes, he buried his nose in that cascade of hair, breathing in its scent; a clean, healthy scent, without a trace of the flowery, fruity-smelling shampoos Kiran women often used.

Something poked his back. He opened his eyes...

...and found himself sitting under an alm's wide branches, staring at a field turned pale gold with dawn's light. Bright pink clouds smeared the eastern sky, mingled with yellow and dusky blue, like streaks of paint applied by some celestial brush. His horse stood nearby, grazing. And his muscles were growing stiff and cramped.

He rose to his feet with a soft grunt. Damn ... how many hours had he spent inside Raina's head? It was stupid to lose track of time when linked with someone. He'd never made such mistakes before. Why now?

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Probably the fact that when he was around Raina, there was too much blood in his lower region to have any leftover for his brain, he thought with a sigh.

He walked over to the horse, taking its reins, and led it over to the tree; it followed without protest, then stood placidly as he tethered it. He knew he ought to get back to the Hold before his captors started wondering where he was, but there was something he ought to take care of first. His sex was still full and aching, and riding with an erection would be uncomfortable, to say the least.

He walked a short distance and leaned against a tree, undoing the lacing of his trousers, then wrapped a hand around his shaft, trying to imagine that it was Raina's sheath gripping him. A soft groan escaped into the cool morning air as he thought of her round breasts, her pale throat, the way her belly had heaved after he brought her to climax. He thought of her blue-gray eyes, imagined them glazed with pleasure as he slid into her, claiming her in the most primal way possible....

*Suhara!* What was it about Raina? She was attractive, yes, but he'd known and loved beautiful women before and had never been so consumed with desire. The sight and feel of female flesh had been only a pastime, not an obsession, and lovemaking rarely occupied his thoughts outside the bedroom ... but something about Raina drove him insane with need.

He brought himself to climax and came in silence, spilling his seed onto the soft, green grass.

Once he'd recovered his breath, he laced up his trousers, undid the horse's tether rope, and mounted. With a kick, he

was off, riding toward the Hold. A bright, hard line of sunlight shone on the horizon, chasing away the last few stars, and the air was fresh and sweet. Wind whipped back Talon's lank, sweat-damp dark hair. Grass rippled in the breeze.

Strange, to see so much green. The terrain on Skandria was mostly rock and desert, broken only by the occasional patch of mava or catlip. He felt an ache of homesickness, thinking of the majestic city towers, black silhouettes against an orange sky ... about the way the desert looked at sunset, painted in vivid hues of scarlet and gold, the layered rock-formations like strange sculptures casting their shadows on the dunes.

He thought about his people, wondered how they fared in his absence. He'd been gone for more than a year, traveling to Kira as a diplomat, to negotiate a possible treaty, when his ship had been attacked by Kiran war-vessels. By now, his people surely knew something was wrong. Perhaps they thought him dead. Had they sent out search-parties? Had they found the wreckage of the ship, orbiting around Kira, along with the remains of the crew-members? If they hadn't found his body, perhaps they would cling to hope ... but if they grew desperate, they might appoint a substitute ruler in his place. History had taught them that such emergency-appointments often ended disastrously, but the only other option was to leave Skandria leaderless and let it slowly dissolve into anarchy.

He sighed. He supposed he'd been foolish to think he could ever negotiate peace with the Kirans. They were a prideful people. They would accept nothing less than unconditional

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surrender from Skandria, even if it meant sacrificing millions of innocent lives ... both Skandrian and Kiran.

## Chapter Four

Raina woke with a start.

The vivid, erotic dream was still fresh in her mind; so fresh that she'd half-expected to find Talon lying beside her when she opened her eyes. The place between her legs still ached sweetly, and her thighs were coated with a sticky warmth. Very lightly, she touched her tender cleft and studied the clear, glistening fluid on her fingertips.

It had been so real. Maybe....

She studied the bed-sheets, looking for some trace of him; impressions on the mattress, perhaps, or a dark hair on the pillow. There was nothing. The sheets beside her were cool and undisturbed. Raina's heart sunk, and she berated herself. She ought to be grateful that it had only been a dream, that her innocence had not really been stolen. Still ... a part of her wondered. It had not felt like her other dreams, and even if there was no trace of Talon, that didn't mean he hadn't been here.

There was a way to know for sure, though it was a bit distasteful. Her tongue stole out, licking the sticky desire from her fingertips. A chill prickled up her spine.

It tasted exactly as it had in her dream.

\* \* \* \*

It had been a week since Talon's arrival. Since then, he had learned that there was not, nor had their ever been, a



single male among the sri'dith. There were male patients, of course, but the healers themselves were all girls or women.

It made sense. They valued chastity, and with no men around, they wouldn't have to worry about temptation. Maybe there was another Hold somewhere filled with male sri'dith ... or maybe not. He'd learned from Raina's mind that Kirans associated healing and nurturing with females and regarded male healers as oddities.

He'd also learned that the presence of a healthy and rather formidable-looking foreign male was causing quite a stir within the Hold. More than once, he noticed young women staring at him wide-eyed from around a bend in the hall ... and when they caught him looking at them, they would flee with gasps or giggles. At first it was amusing, but their presence quickly became an annoyance. A few of the older sri'dith treated him decently, but most looked at him as if he were a dead fly floating in a glass of wine. He didn't think they knew who he was, and for that he was grateful, but they seemed to dislike him anyway. Tabitha was the worst, by far. She treated him as if he were a simple child, a barbarian who needed to be educated in the superior ways of Kiran culture.

Talon growled softly as his axe split a log in half. He'd been chopping firewood for the past few hours, simply to have something to do; the massive, dead alm tree still had much good wood beneath its rotted shell. Here, far from the Hold, he could find some peace in the beauty of the sunlit morning and the use of his muscles. The day was warm and clear, the grass speckled with white and yellow flowers that nodded their heads in the breeze; a good day to be outside.

Later, he'd go hunting again and replenish his body with fresh meat. Slowly but surely, he was regaining the strength he'd lost in suspended animation.

The axe fell again, splitting another log. He imagined it was Tabitha's head.

Had she sent a message to his people yet? No, probably not ... first, she would boast to the Kiran government. She would probably want a reward. If not money, then fame or glory, the chance to be viewed as a savior. Her kind always hungered for glory, while keeping up the appearance of being humble.

His hands tightened on the axe. He *needed* to get out of here. If there was anything he hated more than being held captive, it was having a smug, condescending glory-hound as his captor. If he could just think for a few hours with a cool, clear head, he was certain he could come up with a plan ... but thoughts of Raina kept intruding. Gentle Raina, with her storm-colored eyes and her pliant young body which seemed to exude a naïve, untested sensuality.

Perhaps if he finally gave in to desire and took her, his obsession would fade. She had seemed willing enough when he came to her in her dream. In his heart, however, he knew it would not be that simple. His desire went far deeper than an itch that needed scratching. A quick rut would not satisfy him. He wanted to explore every fascinating inch and crevice of her body ... and what he'd seen of her mind was equally fascinating. He wanted to delve deep inside her, to know all her secrets. He felt as if he could take her again and again, until he drowned within her, and still not have enough.

From behind him, he heard whispering. He looked out of the corner of his eye and saw two adolescent Greenstones standing not far away, half-concealed behind a tree-trunk, peering at him with round eyes. Talon dropped his axe, turned and roared like a bear, showing his fangs. They fled, shrieking, back to the Hold.

He picked up his axe and resumed chopping wood.

"That wasn't very kind, Talon," said a voice from behind him.

"No. But it *was* satisfying." He looked up and met Raina's gaze. He felt his groin stirring and firmly squelched his desire. "Why did you come?" His voice came out rougher than he'd intended.

Raina took a step back. A wounded look flickered through her eyes, quickly hidden. "I came to talk to you."

"About what?"

She took a deep breath, as if nerving herself. "A few nights ago, I dreamt about you. Except I don't think it was a dream. I don't think it was really real, either, not in a physical sense, but ... I think you were somehow inside my head."

He looked at her expressionlessly, watching the pulse flutter in her throat. In a flash of realization, he understood the tremendous courage it must take for her to confront him like this. She was small, probably less than half his weight, and she had no reason to trust him, no reason to believe he was not the barbarian that everyone made him out to be. If he wanted, he could snap her in half like a twig. She could call out to the Clearstones if he attacked, but they wouldn't arrive in time to save her life.

"I'm not a telepath," he said flatly.

"I did some research, Talon. When I first met you, I didn't know that telepathy even existed on Skandria. I thought that a person had to have a mindstone installed before they could communicate mentally with another. But it's not hard to find information on someone as powerful and famous as yourself. I know you're a very skilled telepath."

"Your people conjure up the oddest stories about me." He snapped a thick branch in half and tossed the halves onto the woodpile.

"You're lying." She swallowed. "I've felt you in my mind, Talon. I know it was *you* in my dream, not a figment of my imagination. It's no use pretending."

His eyes locked with hers. "And what did I do in your dream, Raina?"

A flush rose into her cheeks.

"Come now. If I was really there, as you say, there's no reason not to tell me."

"You brought me to orgasm," she said stiffly. "With your hands and mouth."

"You make everything sound so clinical." He leaned on his axe. "Are you afraid to say that you had a dream about me making love to you?"

Raina stiffened. "It wasn't love-making," she said. "I don't love you. I hardly *know* you. So how can I have these feelings about you? Am I evil?"

His expression softened. "No, Raina. Despite what your superiors may have told you, these feelings are not evil." He

lay down his axe and stepped forward, closing the gap between them with one stride.

Fear flickered in Raina's eyes, but she held her ground ... even when he slipped a hand into her loose robe. "W-what are you doing?" He didn't reply. She seemed about to speak again, but a sharp gasp cut off her words as his large hand cupped her womanhood.

He stared hard into her eyes. "Do you think your Goddess fashioned this only for childbearing and for men's pleasure? No. It is yours, given to you so that you might taste ecstasy. Why would your Goddess give you desires, if She didn't intend you to fulfill them?"

Raina moaned and gripped his arm, as if to pull his hand away ... but she didn't.

"This feeling is not evil, Raina. Is it evil to want food when you're hungry, or a bed when you're tired? Why, then, should this hunger be any different?"

"Please," she said, her voice deep and slightly hoarse. "Don't." Her hands tightened on his arm as her breathing quickened. "We aren't that far from the Hold. Someone might see us."

He hesitated, torn. Her voice told him to stop, but her body begged him to continue. Her wetness had already soaked through the thin undergarment, and she was pushing against his hand, as if inviting him to move deeper.

Exercising all his willpower, he pulled his hand away. He was breathing hard, and the day suddenly felt too hot. "Go, then," he said hoarsely. "I don't know how long I can resist you."

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She hesitated.

"Go!" The shout rang through the air, startling a flock of birds in the dead alm's branches. They scattered, squawking.

"I—I'll come back later," she stammered. Raina turned and ran. She didn't stop until Talon was out of sight.

\* \* \* \*

Raina tried to go about her duties, but she couldn't concentrate for more than a few seconds at a time. She kept seeing those almond-shaped black eyes, that body, so perfect it looked as if it had been chiseled by a master sculptor. She kept feeling that strong, warm hand between her thighs. More than one person remarked that she looked flushed and asked her if she was coming down with something.

When lunchtime came, she went to the dining hall and sat at one of the long wooden tables with a tray of bread and porridge from the kitchens. She thought about taking it back to her room and eating in privacy, but decided against it. She needed the distraction of other people.

Someone elbowed her. "Raina, you all right? You've been quiet," said Lydie. "You're not still upset about that little fight we had yesterday, are you?"

"No. I think I'm getting a cold, that's all." She picked at her bread, keeping her eyes downcast, as if afraid that Lydiana might see the truth in them.

"Probably caught something from that creature," said Lydie, through a mouthful of porridge. "Skandrians have all sorts of odd diseases."

Raina said nothing, not wanting to get into another argument, but she couldn't help gritting her teeth at Lydiana's stubborn dislike of Talon.

Still, Lydiana was right about one thing. The Skandrian was dangerous. Raina doubted he would hurt her, not physically, at least, but it had occurred to her that he might have been sent by the Goddess—or, heaven help her, the Dark One—to tempt her, to test her spiritual strength.

If that was the case, she was failing the test miserably. She'd let him touch her in the most intimate ways imaginable, had succumbed to her desire, and almost let him convince her that those desires were right and good. And she couldn't shake the terrifying feeling that the Clearstones knew.

Then, as she finished lunch, came the thing she'd dreaded most: a summons, echoing like a knell through her mind.

*Raina, come to my office.*

The cool, level voice belonged to Mother Tabitha. Raina steeled herself, scraped the leftover food off her tray and plates and left them in the sink. She steeled herself and walked down the hall.

\* \* \* \*

Tabitha's office was a deceptively small, rustic-looking room. A thick, woven rug lay on the floor, and the wooden furniture was polished to a warm glow. Tall windows let in slanting bars of sunlight. It was the sort of room where Raina normally would have felt comfortable, but at the moment, her stomach was in knots. She stood with her hands clasped and

her eyes lowered, hoping Tabitha wouldn't notice her trembling. "You wanted to see me, Mother Tabitha?"

"Yes, Raina." Tabitha folded her hands on her desk, her face grave. "I think you know what this is about."

Raina wrung her hands.

"Don't look so frightened. You won't be punished. This is hardly your fault, after all."

"What?" She blinked.

"The alien is manipulating you, forcing you to feel these things," Tabitha said coolly. "He is a powerful telepath, far more powerful than we realized. If we'd known, we would have taken precautions against this sort of thing. I can only thank the Goddess we discovered his trickery. There is nothing to be ashamed of, Raina. He invaded your mind and planted this desire in you."

Raina stared in shock. Somehow, it hadn't occurred to her that Talon could make her want him. But if he was really such a powerful telepath, then he probably had the ability to mold people's minds and emotions. "But ... why?" she whispered.

"So he could use you for his own purposes, of course. He wants to escape, and he thinks you can aid him. He no doubt planned to take your virginity as well, both for his personal enjoyment and as an insult to Kira. By defiling a sri'dith, he strikes a blow at everything we hold dear."

She didn't want to believe it, but it was all so plausible, so logical. Tears filled her eyes.

"There there, child." Tabitha patted her hand lightly. "I know this has been confusing and frightening, but it's over now. Rest assured, he will be punished for this."



"But how do you know it's Talon?" she asked, with a trace of desperation. "How do you know the desire isn't my own?"

Tabitha smiled. "Because I know you, Raina. I may have been strict with you from time to time, but I know you've always been a faithful and obedient servant of the Goddess. Only a whore would lust after that foreign dog. Go now, and worry no more about this. Once we have dealt with Talon, we will remove this unnatural desire from your mind."

Raina nodded woodenly.

"You may go back to your duties," said Tabitha.

"Thank you," Raina replied, her voice seeming to come from far away, and left the room. She walked down the hall, Tabitha's words ringing in her head: *Only a whore would lust after that foreign dog.*

Breathing hard, Raina broke into a run. She had to talk to Talon.

It took her awhile to find him. He was in the woods, skinning a hare. The sight of blood made her stomach turn, but at the moment, it was the least of her worries.

Talon looked up as she jogged toward him, and his eyes widened. She was panting, her face streaked with tears.

"Raina? What's going on?"

"Tabitha knows, Talon." Raina swallowed hard. "She ... she knows my feelings toward you. I think she knows what we've done, too."

"Klish," Talon hissed. She'd never heard the word before, but from the venomous tone, she knew it was a curse. Talon looked up and grasped her arm. His eyes burned into hers. "I won't let her punish you," he said, his voice low and intense.

"Blame me. Tell her that I coerced you, that you had no choice."

"That's exactly what she believes." Raina looked up at him. "Did you, Talon?" Her voice broke. "Did you make me feel these things?"

He released her arm, but his eyes remained locked with hers. "No."

She waited, but no explanation seemed forthcoming. "That's it? Just ... no? How do I know you're telling the truth? I know you've been in my mind. There's no use lying. If you can do that, how do I know you can't manipulate my feelings as well?"

"I can't prove it," he said. "Yes, I entered your mind. It's not something I'm proud of. I wanted to find out more about the crown, to learn a way to break free of it, and I thought you might know something. But I only searched for information, I swear it. I didn't plant this desire in you. I wouldn't sink that low, not even to regain my freedom."

She hesitated, wanting to believe him, but unsure if she should. She felt as if she were being torn in half, forced to choose between the beliefs she had grown up with and the strange new feelings this man stirred in her. It should have been an easy choice. Her beliefs were clearly more important. It was just a matter of resisting temptation ... but somehow, it wasn't that simple. Why did Talon have such an effect on her? If her feelings for him were purely physical, why did it hurt so much to think he might have betrayed her?

Fresh tears blurred her vision.

"Don't," Talon said quietly, wiping the tears away with the backs of his fingers. "It doesn't do any good."

"I know that." She pulled away from that gentle touch, ignoring the ridiculous urge to hide her face against his shoulder. "I can't help it. I don't know what to do or what to believe."

"You have a good head," he said. "Use it. Reason is the only thing you have to rely on right now. I don't expect blind trust from someone who hardly knows me. I can only ask you to think this through and come to your own conclusions. I wish I could say something to make this easier, but I fear that if I try, I'll only tighten the knots of confusion around your heart."

Raina blinked back tears. "I don't want them to punish you," she whispered.

"Neither do I. But there's nothing they can do to me that others haven't done already." He smiled crookedly. "Don't worry about me, Raina. I'll manage. I always have."

"But I feel responsible for you. This is all my fault. I shouldn't have brought you here."

His eyes softened. "You had no way of knowing they'd put this wretched crown on me. You were doing your duty as a healer. I'm the one who should be apologizing. I've been tempting you mercilessly ever since I arrived." He chuckled softly. "You've been tempting me, too, but I doubt it was intentional." His smile vanished. "You ought to go. The Clearstones will come for me soon, no doubt, and I don't think you want to be around when that happens. I have a feeling it's going to get ugly."

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*by Amanda Steiger*

Raina started to protest, but the look in his eyes stopped her. She sighed. Once Talon had made up his mind about something, arguing was pointless. She might as well be arguing with a mountain. She turned and left quietly, feeling like a coward.

\* \* \* \*

Raina sat alone in her room, on the edge of her bed, staring out the window. She was taking Talon's advice, thinking long and hard about the situation and using her head, the only reliable guide she had.

In the short time that Talon had been here, he'd changed her world, opened her eyes to so many things. She'd come to realize just how lonely she was, and always had been.

She'd never known her parents. They'd been too poor to feed her, and had left her at the Hold's doors when she was very small. She'd never had a family of her own, nor had she bonded with any of the Clearstones. They'd all been kind to her, but none went out of their way to make her feel special and loved. She'd grown up a timid and insecure child. She'd had trouble making friends, so she had poured all her time and effort into studies. She'd progressed quickly as a result, but though she was ahead of her peers in some ways, in her heart, she was still the abandoned child on the doorstep.

Maybe that was why she felt drawn to Talon. He made her feel special, desirable. He'd gone out of his way to give her pleasure. But she wasn't naïve enough to think that she was any different from his other women, nor was she foolish enough to believe that her desire for *him* was anything more

than infatuation. There was still so much she didn't know about him ... and he was dangerous, a powerful telepath who could enter her mind at will and strip her of her secrets.

The thought was frightening, but somehow exciting as well.

She wrapped her arms around herself and looked at the sky. Above the sea, bright pink clouds streaked the horizon. The sun's rays shone through, piercing the clouds like golden lances. In the darkening sky, she could see the faint outlines of Kira's moons.

Night was approaching. She wondered where Talon was now, what was happening to him. She shuddered to think of what the Clearstones might do to him. Their punishments were harsh even for their own novices. What would they do to a foreigner?

She thought about what Tabitha had told her, that after they punished Talon, they would remove the desire from Raina's mind. The thought gave her a chill. As frightening as these new needs were, she didn't *want* them taken away. They seemed a part of her, now ... but she doubted the Clearstones would listen to her protests, and with this thought came a revelation. She was no longer certain she trusted them.

Raina shuddered. She *had* to do something. She couldn't just sit in her room while they did Goddess-knew-what to Talon.

Raina took a deep breath and stood. She left the bedroom and hurried down the dimly-lit hall, praying she wouldn't run into anyone. Greenstones were supposed to stay in their

rooms after dark, and she'd never been any good at inventing excuses. She paused to think, heart pounding. If the Clearstones had already brought Talon back to the Hold, he would probably be in the west wing. There, she knew, was a row of cells where they kept the most dangerous patients, cells equipped with manacles, where the cots were nailed to the floor. There had not been a prisoner in there for years, and young Greenstones sometimes whispered that those rooms were haunted.

But how would she open the doors? If that was where Talon was being kept, they were sure to be locked. Raina bit her lower lip. She knew that Tabitha kept spare keys to all the rooms in her office, but if she were caught trespassing....

Best not to think about that.

Raina made her way down the hall, trying not to make a sound. Moonlight shone faintly through the windows, making stripes of silver on the floor; the only light. She encountered no one, but it was still nerve-wracking, creeping through the Hold's hallways like a thief.

At last, she came to the door to Tabitha's office. It was shut. She listened quietly for a moment, ear pressed to the door, but heard nothing from the inside. The office was empty. Praying that Tabitha hadn't bothered to lock it, Raina tried the knob, and the door opened with a faint creak that seemed as loud as a firecracker.

Holding her breath, Raina slipped inside. She opened one of Tabitha's desk-drawers and, with a twinge of guilt, began to rummage inside. Strange objects lay within. There were palm-sized black disks whose function she couldn't guess, and

a gray thing about the size and shape of a small book, but completely seamless and unmarked. There were all manner of papers, as well, and Raina studiously avoided looking at the writing on them, not wanting to violate Tabitha's privacy anymore than necessary.

At last, her eyes caught a glint of silver, and she pulled out a ring of keys. There were dozens of them, large and small, bronze and silver, and they were all labeled. She searched through them quickly until she found what she was looking for, a row of six keys labeled WEST WING. Raina tucked the keys into her pocket and closed the drawer. Tabitha would surely know that someone had been snooping. Her eyes were sharp, and Raina wasn't certain she'd put everything back in the order it was supposed to go. But she forced herself not to think about that. If she started thinking about everything that could go wrong, she would freeze up.

Clutching the keys, she left the office.

\* \* \* \*

Tabitha stood, her gray eyes narrowed, her face granite. "Very clever, mongrel, using the girl as your pawn."

Talon sagged in his restraints, panting softly. His hands were manacled to the walls, but the physical restraints were superfluous. If Tabitha wanted, she could immobilize him with the crown. His face was schooled into an impassive expression, but his eyes were clouded with pain. A bead of sweat rolled down his neck. "I didn't use Raina," he said hoarsely. "Not in the way you're thinking. These feelings she has for me are her own."

"You expect me to believe you? You Skandrians lie as easily as you breathe. We've been lenient with you, treated you as a respected guest, but you abused your freedom. From now on, your stay here won't be nearly as pleasant." Fresh pain seared through his skull, and Talon choked back a cry. It felt like claws ripping through his brain. "I'm going to leave you here all night, with the crown's pain burning through your skull. Perhaps you will be a bit more tractable in the morning." She turned and left, shutting the door firmly behind her.

Talon groaned. The agony was almost unbearable. It reminded him of the blinding headaches he'd suffered as an adolescent, when his gift began to surface. Still, he'd endured worse. He would get out of this, somehow. He had to keep telling himself that, or he'd lose courage.

He closed his eyes, trying to think, but the pain made concentration damned near impossible. His thoughts were a blur, lost in the red haze filling his skull. He let out a hoarse cry, yanking uselessly at the manacles, straining against them until his muscles bulged and sweat-beads ran down his neck and back. He fought like a rabid mountain wolf, snarling and snapping at the air. He knew it was useless, that he was only wasting his energy, but he couldn't stop himself. Instinct commanded him to fight, to escape this searing pain. He thrashed and struggled, snarling like a mindless beast, until he exhausted himself and went limp in his manacles, the pain a constant, torturing fire behind his eyes. He didn't even have the strength to scream. When a tear escaped his eye and slid down his sweat-damp cheek, he hardly noticed. Occasionally



he shuddered and twitched in his restraints, moaning ... but for the most part, he hung silent and still, breath rasping weakly in his throat.

Someone touched his arm lightly. Weary, pain-glazed eyes opened a crack. "Raina," he whispered hoarsely. Hope flickered in him—faint at first, then stronger, brighter, as a plan took shape in his pain-ravaged mind. "You found me."

Raina stared at him, wide-eyed, her face drawn and pale. "Oh, Goddess, what have they done to you?" Judging from her expression, he looked as awful as he felt. Tears welled in her eyes as she pressed a hand to her mouth. "I'm sorry, Talon. This is all my fault. If only there was some way I could help you!"

"The crown...."

She shook her head. "If I could take the crown off you, I would ... but I can't. It won't obey me. Only Tabitha."

His tongue stole out, wetting dry, chapped lips. It took an effort to speak, and his voice emerged a rusty croak. "If you want to help, take these manacles off."

"Of course." With a shaking hand and a small, silver key, she unlocked the manacles. They fell away with a click.

"Anything to make you more comfortable."

"Comfort has nothing to do with it." Talon rubbed his sore wrists. He wondered vaguely how she'd gotten the keys, but he didn't have the strength to wonder long; his head throbbed, making him dizzy. "I plan to escape tonight."

Raina's eyes widened. "But how?"

He met her gaze, his expression hard and grim. "Once I'm past the boundary, the crown will have no power over me."

"How did you...? Never mind. But you can't get through the boundary."

"Not on my own, no. I've tried again and again, and every time, the pain has rendered me unconscious. But with your help, I can do it."

Her eyes grew wider still.

"Please, Raina." He gripped her shoulder with one trembling hand. "I realize I'm asking a lot of you, and that you'll be punished if you're found helping me, but I must get back to my people. There is a great deal at stake."

She closed her eyes ... then took a deep breath and slowly opened them. Her face was pale, but determined. "Tell me what I need to do."

Relief washed over him. He managed a smile, though the effect was probably ghastly. "Get a horse, and tie me into the saddle. Bind my feet to the stirrups. You must sit in front of me and guide the horse, for I'll be too muddled with pain to steer."

"Should I pack for a journey?"

He closed his eyes tight and raised his fingers to his temple, trying to think, to clear the haze from his skull. "No." He shook his head. "No need. You'll find a full pack in my room, beneath the bed. Take it. But be quick, and be sure you aren't seen."

She nodded. "I'll be right back."

She returned with the pack moments later, and they left the room, Talon leaning heavily on Raina for support. He could only pray that they wouldn't run into any other sri'dith

on the way out. In his condition, he doubted they'd have a chance against a Clearstone. Or anyone else, for that matter.

At last, they made it to the stables. Moonlight silvered the dusty floor, and the only sound was the soft breathing of horses and the occasional stamp of a hoof. Raina opened a stall door and quickly saddled up a dappled gray, then helped Talon mount. "I'll get some rope," she whispered, vanished briefly, and reappeared carrying a length of thick, coarse hemp. Talon waited, gripping the pommel for support, and watched as she bound his feet tightly to the stirrups. Once she'd tied the last knot, Raina scrambled into the saddle and squeezed in front of him. Luckily, it was large enough to accommodate them both, though it was a tight fit.

"Hold onto me," said Raina.

Talon nodded and wrapped his arms around her slender waist, holding tight. At any other time, he would have enjoyed the feeling of her soft, warm body against his, but pain and exhaustion tended to put a damper on arousal. It took all his strength just to remain conscious.

With gentle tugs on the reins, Raina guided the gray out of the stable. Once they were on the road, she tapped her heels against the gray's sides, and the horse broke into a trot. Raina looked over one shoulder, staring back at the Hold. He didn't know for sure what she was thinking or feeling—he dared not link with her, not with his mind on fire, like this—but he could guess fairly easily.

They hadn't been riding long when the now familiar, prickling unease crept over Talon's mind. They were approaching the boundary. He ignored the feeling, even as it

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deepened into true fear, blending with the pain in his head to turn his world into a twisted nightmare. Fields and trees rushed past to either side, blurring like watery paint. His arms tightened around Raina's waist, clinging to her as if she were the last solid thing in the world.

Raina gave his arm a squeeze, then wound the reins tightly around her hands and dug her heels into the gray's sides. The gray whinnied, tossed its head and broke into a gallop, fairly flying down the path.

Talon's heart pounded as the fear closed in on him, like sheer walls boxing him in. Damn those Clearstones, putting this crown on him, toying with his mind! He clung to his anger at Tabitha, nursed it and fed it, trying to ward off the fear ... but it was no use. He was trembling so hard he could scarcely keep his grip on Raina. There was nothing he hated more than being at the mercy of his emotions. He prayed they would break through the boundary soon.

"Soon," Raina whispered breathlessly, echoing his last thought. "We'll be across any moment now. Hang on, Talon."

He hung on. There was an impact and a wrenching pain that seared down the center of his brain, like a white-hot axe splitting his skull ... then nothingness.

## Chapter Five

Talon woke to birdsong and sunlight on his face, his back cushioned by soft grass. He groaned softly, raising one hand to rub his forehead. Only a faint ghost of that ripping pain lingered behind his eyes, and even now, it was fading. His eyes opened a crack, then winced shut as the sunlight nearly blinded him. His body felt heavy. Mustering his strength, he sat up and looked around.

Trees towered around him, their branches providing a leafy canopy. Sunlight and leaf-shadows dappled the mossy forest floor. Crimson flowers, covered with silvery fuzz, grew here and there. He noticed an orange caterpillar crawling over one of them. Nearby, the horse was tethered to a tree, grazing. "Raina?"

"I'm here." He looked in the direction of the voice and saw the young healer sitting with her back against an elm's trunk. Her face was wan and weary, her robes dusty from the long ride. "We're past the boundary," she said, a smile touching her lips. "The crown has no power over you now."

Talon held his breath and touched the silver band. Normally, the action would have been accompanied by a flare of pain, but he felt nothing. A wide grin broke across his face. He was free. He tried to work his fingers under the crown, to pull it off, but it resisted.

"Here, let me. Once they're de-activated, they're easy to remove, if you know how." Raina closed her eyes and touched her fingertips lightly to the crown. At first, nothing seemed to

happen, then Talon realized the crown was loosening, expanding. In a few moments, it was large enough to slip off. Talon breathed a sigh of relief.

He took it from Raina and examined it. It looked so simple—a thin, unbroken band of silver, shining in the hazy sunlight—yet it was capable of enslaving a man's body and mind, bending him to the will of another. Talon's eyes narrowed. He was about to cast the hated thing aside ... then, changing his mind, he looped it around one muscled forearm like an odd bit of jewelry. He watched as the crown shrunk to fit his arm.

"You're keeping it?" Raina asked.

"Why not? They can't use it to track me, can they?"

"No. We're outside its range, now. It's powerless. But still ... why?"

Talon's face hardened. "To remind myself never to get into a situation like that again, and that a man should never be enslaved, not for any reason." He stood. "Come on. Let's get you back to the Hold."

Raina shook her head. "I'm going with you."

"Don't be ridiculous. I couldn't take you from your home. Your place is here, with the sri'dith."

"You don't understand. I *can't* go back, not after helping you escape. I'm a traitor now. I couldn't bear to face them." She wiped her eyes. "And ... I'm afraid of them, Talon."

"Afraid?" he said quietly. "Why?"

"Mother Tabitha said something about removing the desire for you from my mind, but if the desire was natural, and not

something you put there, I don't know how they could have done that, aside from ... from...."

"Destroying the part of your brain responsible for sexual pleasure," Talon finished. His hands tightened into fists. "That's the only thing I can think of."

Raina stared at him with wide eyes. "Can that be done?"

"It's been done. I guess the Clearstones didn't teach you much about your own government. The officials of your planet use it as a punishment, mostly on sexual predators, and only as a last resort. It's a ghastly form of castration, but from what I know of Tabitha, I wouldn't put it past her."

"No! They would never do that! Not to me ... not to one of their own. Not to anyone!" But she didn't believe her own words; he could see that in her wide, fearful eyes. She was trembling.

Talon looked away. Raina was right, of course. He couldn't send her back to the Hold. He cursed himself for his selfishness and idiocy. He never should have involved her in his escape. He'd condemned her to life as an outcast from the only home she'd ever known. "I'll take you with me, to the nearest town," he said quietly. "You can stay there."

"I don't know how to survive on my own! I've always lived in the Hold. I've never even been to town more than a few times in my life. And they'll come looking for me—Tabitha and the others. They'll try to bring me back!"

"Don't work yourself into a panic." He gave her shoulders a squeeze and looked into her eyes. "It will be all right, Raina. Someone will take you in until you learn how to look after yourself."

"No." She shook her head and swallowed hard, trying to compose herself. "I'm a sri'dith. They don't trust us. They come to us for help when they're sick or injured, but none of them really trust us. Our powers are foreign to them." Tears glistened on her pale cheeks. "I can't hide what I am, because of this." She touched the stone in her forehead. "I'm marked."

He hesitated, looking into her blue-gray eyes, seeing the tentative expectation there. He sighed. "Raina, I can't take you with me. I'm going back to Skandria as soon as I can, and you can't go there. You'd be miserable. Our culture is different from yours, and many Skandrians are not fond of foreigners. You'd be very alone there."

"I know." She lowered her eyes. The hope died in her face, like a rose withering in shadow. "I just don't know what else to do. My only place is among the sri'dith. That path was chosen for me before I was even old enough to know my name. But I can't go back there. Not just because of the danger, but ... I just don't feel like I belong there, anymore. I feel that, by staying, I would betray something deep inside me." Raina drew her knees up to her chest, hugging herself. "I just don't know what to do."

She looked so small, so lost. Talon felt helpless, knowing that to take her with him, back to his home planet, would be the stupidest thing he could do ... and yet, what other choice was there? He had a responsibility toward her. After all, she had given up everything to help him escape.

But why? Why would this skilled young healer give up her life, her future, to help a Skandrian prisoner?



"I won't abandon you, Raina," he said quietly, and pulled her close, holding her head to his shoulder. "We'll figure something out."

"Thank you," she whispered, hugging him back. He felt the dampness of her tears through his shirt.

After a moment, she pulled away and sniffled softly. "Let's go. We can reach Barlyn in a few hours if we make good progress, I think. It's been a long time since I've been there, but I have a good memory for routes." She unknotted the horse's tether rope. "We'll have to ride double. Here, you get on first, and I'll sit behind you."

Talon mounted the gray, who was still saddled, and lifted Raina onto the horse's back. It was cramped with both of them in the saddle, but they managed.

They resumed riding, heading east, in the direction of the town Raina had called Barlyn. Raina was worn out from a night of riding, so Talon took the reins. She sat behind him, arms around his waist, head resting on his broad back. Talon's body was rigid, his face expressionless as he tried unsuccessfully to ignore the feel of her firm, young breasts half-squashed against his back.

By midmorning, they arrived at the edge of town. Barlyn was a small cluster of quaint, whitewashed houses and stores linked together by dirt roads. Wisps of gray-blue smoke rose from the yellow-brick chimneys, and Talon saw candles flickering in a few of the windows. Apparently, the townspeople shared the sri'dith's aversion to technology.

"Well, here we are," said Raina as she climbed stiffly out of the saddle. "You look at it so strangely. Is it different from towns on Skandria?"

"There are no towns on Skandria. There are only the great cities and the desert-tribes, who roam where they please." He dismounted and stood beside her, reins in one hand. "This looks nothing like the cities, though. Back home, buildings are dome-shaped, not square." A sudden wave of homesickness washed over him, and he shook it off. Brooding was pointless. "Come on. Let's get some supplies, and ask for directions to the nearest shuttle-station."

"I doubt there'll be any civilian shuttles going to Skandria. We're at war, after all."

"Then we'll rent a private shuttle. Or steal one, if we have to."

"Steal!" she cried. "But I don't want to steal anything."

"There may be another way. I hope there is, but we may have no choice. My people need me. I can't remain away from them any longer than necessary."

Raina frowned. "Isn't it a little arrogant to think that your world will fall apart without you? I mean, even if you *are* the king, you're only one man. Surely you don't rule Skandria all by yourself. Surely there's someone who can rule in your stead while you're away."

"Yes. I have advisors. A council of seven, to be specific. They will rule in my stead, but if I'm gone for more than sixteen Skandrian months—about the equivalent of a Kiran year—they will appoint the next in line ... and I have doubts about his leadership abilities. He's a good man, but prone to

anger. I fear he won't be wise or level-headed enough to lead our planet in a time of war." He looked into her eyes.

"Perhaps it *is* arrogant to think that they will perish without me, but you must understand, a king is more than a person to them. He is a symbol of all our ideals. If Kira holds me captive, they hold Skandria's spirit captive as well. They will lose heart, and once they do, Kira's greater numbers and resources will overpower them. I can't let that happen. So I'll do whatever I have to—I'll steal, even kill, if I have to—to get back to my world."

"Would you kill me?" she asked.

He hesitated. "I have no reason to harm you, Raina. I wouldn't even be free now if not for you."

"But if I was. If I was planning to betray you to the Kiran government, or something, and the only way to save your home world was to kill me, would you do it?"

He felt the urge to look away from those large, deep eyes, but resisted, schooling his face into a mask of stone. "Yes. If it was my only option, I would, though the deed would haunt me to my death. My first responsibility is to my people." She flinched and looked away. His heart twisted painfully. "I'm sorry, Raina."

"It's all right. I shouldn't have asked."

"You are entitled to the truth. Anyway, it's a moot point. We're working together, not against each other." A good thing, too. Despite what he'd said, he wasn't entirely sure he *could* kill her. It was insane, really. He'd known her for scarcely more than a week, but in that time, he'd become intimately acquainted with her. He'd been deep inside her

mind, seen parts of her that even Raina herself was only dimly aware of. In a way, they were very close.

Raina gasped.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Something just occurred to me. We may be outside the crown's range, but the Clearstones can still find *me*, through my mindstone. More than that, they can read my thoughts. If you take me with you to Skandria, I'll be a threat to your planet's security. The Clearstones will know everything I see, everything I learn."

"Suhara!" Talon smacked his forehead with one palm.

"That should have occurred to me. I've been getting lax in my thinking. But the problem is easily corrected."

She frowned. "How? The mindstone can't be removed. It's a part of me."

"I don't have to remove it. I need only to erect a shield around your mind."

Her eyes widened. "You can do that?"

"Of course. In fact, I could teach you to do it yourself. On my world, shielding is one of the first techniques a young telepath learns. They probably didn't teach you because they didn't want you to block them out."

"Is it very difficult?"

"No. It's the simplest thing in the world, once you get the hang of it. For now, though, you'd best let me do it. I'm more experienced, so my shield will be stronger, and you'll need a strong one to keep out the Clearstones. It'll only take a moment."

"Will it hurt?" she asked.

"Not a bit." He slid two fingers beneath her chin and tilted it upward. "Look into my eyes, Raina. Focus on my eyes. Let the rest of the world fade away."

He stared into her eyes and felt her mental pathways open to him. He entered, immersing himself in the now-familiar world that was Raina. Carefully, he began to weave a web of protection around her mind, blocking off the pathways the Clearstones had built. When he'd finished, he withdrew.

Raina touched her forehead, her eyes slowly regaining focus. "That's it?"

"That's all. Told you it was simple."

"And now they can't read my thoughts?"

"Right. The shield will prevent them from locating you, as well. They won't be able to sense you at all. It will be as if you don't exist."

"Goddess," she whispered. "I don't feel any different, but if what you say is true, this is the first time since infancy that my mind has been completely my own. I never imagined it was possible. I thought there was no way to get around the mindstone's power."

Lightly, he traced the green stone. "What is this, Raina? How exactly does it work?"

She lowered her eyes. "I suppose there's no reason not to tell you. I'm not supposed to know about it, really, but I've listened to Clearstones talking, when they think no one else is around. I've picked up a few things, though I can't say I understand it very well." She took a deep breath. "The stone is connected to a web of wires running through my brain. The Clearstones can tap into those wires, using their own

mindstones. They can see everything inside me, and even control me, if they need to."

Talon's mouth was dry. "Use you as their puppet, you mean?"

"Only if they need to."

"How can you live like that, knowing you're completely at their mercy, that they can take away your free will on a whim?"

"I don't know. It's always bothered me, but I guess I'm just so used to it that I never thought about it much."

"It's still horrible. Can it be removed?"

"I don't think so," she said. "I heard another Clearstone ask Mother Tabitha that question once. She said it wasn't possible, that the web was too intricate. The thickest wires are no bigger than human hairs, and the thinnest are too small to see, even through a magnifying lens."

"Suhara's blood," he whispered. If what Raina told him was true, then this mind-web was the most complex and advanced machine ever created. It was becoming clear now. The sri'dith did not eschew technology for any spiritual reason, though that was what most of them probably believed. They restricted it so the Clearstones could control their underlings more easily. "How did they install such a thing?"

"I don't know. They don't explain those things to us."

Talon looked away and stared at the town, though he wasn't really seeing it. "If it can be installed, it can be removed," he murmured. Whether he was talking to Raina or himself, he did not know.

The horse snorted and stamped its hoof, distracting him from his thoughts. "We'd best keep moving," he said. "The longer we stand here, the longer the Clearstones have to search for us."

"Aren't we going to stop in Barlyn?"

"Depends. Did you bring money? If not, there's no reason, and it would be safer to simply go around it."

"I have a few tabs," she said, and patted the small pouch at her waist. "Maybe you'd best let me do the shopping, though. They might recognize you, and they'll certainly know you're foreign. No Kiran has eyes like that."

"Perhaps you're right. But didn't you say that sri'dith were distrusted among the townspeople?"

"Yes, but that won't prevent me from buying anything. I've been to town before. They're uneasy when I enter their shops, and relieved when I go, but my money is as good as anyone else's." She smiled, but he could see the flicker of pain in her eyes.

Impulsively, he gave her shoulder a gentle squeeze. "I'll wait for you."

She nodded, took the horse's reins, and walked down the road that led through the middle of town. Talon leaned against a stout alm tree and chewed a strip of jerky as he watched Raina. He didn't feel comfortable, letting her go into town alone, though he knew it was the only practical thing to do.

He could link minds with her, though. As long as they were linked, she wasn't truly alone.

Raina looked around, feeling out of place. It had been years since she'd visited Barlyn, and she'd never been here alone. Greenstones were always warned to go in pairs, for safety's sake.

The roads were mostly empty, and the few people who passed stared straight ahead and carefully avoided looking at her. She could feel their unease, their distrust.

She tethered Dapple to the post outside a small shop and walked in. The shopkeeper—a stout, middle-aged woman with graying, bobbed hair—looked up and tensed at the sight of the green stone on Raina's forehead. "Can I help you?" she asked, smiling a little too brightly.

"Yes, please." Raina reached into her pouch and pulled out a handful of bronze tablets, each no larger than a fingertip, engraved with the profile of the First Consul. "I'd like two pounds of jerky and two more of dried fruit, please. And ... do you have any maps? I'm going to the city, but I'm not very familiar with the land around Barlyn."

"Let me see." She rummaged through a drawer, her hands made clumsy with haste, and pulled out a tube of parchment. "Yes, this should do it."

"Thank you," said Raina.

The shopkeeper took the tabs and handed over the packages and the map, smiling stiffly and avoiding Raina's eyes. Raina left the shop feeling more than a little depressed. She remembered, now, why she'd always avoided going to town in the past. It made her feel even more alone than usual.



A stone flew through the air, whistling, and smacked Dapple's rump. The horse whinnied and lurched forward, tearing the reins from Raina's hand. She was too stunned to do anything but watch as he galloped down the street. Behind her, someone laughed—a deep, ominous ripple of laughter—and a chill crawled up Raina's spine. She turned slowly to see two men, one hardly more than a boy, standing behind her. The boy twirled his slingshot and grinned at her, revealing crooked teeth. "Let's see your Goddess help you now, witch."

Raina backed away. Someone grabbed her arm, and she looked up to see a third man. He was broad-shouldered, with weather-roughened skin and long, stringy hair. "What do you want?" she asked.

The men only laughed.

Raina's eyes darted around, looking for someone, anyone, who could help her. A woman saw what was happening, ushered her two children into a house and shut the door firmly. A shopkeeper glanced in her direction, then went on stacking cans on his shelves.

Raina couldn't believe it. She was being assaulted in broad daylight, and everyone was ignoring her. She opened her mouth to scream, but a rough hand clamped over her lips. The man hooked an arm around her throat, dragged her into a nearby alley and shoved her against the wall. The other two gripped her arms roughly, pinning her in place.

"What are you doing in our town?" the man demanded.

She made a muffled noise against his palm. He removed his hand, and she cried out, "I only wanted to buy supplies! Please, let me go, and I'll leave and never come back."

"You lie." His small, pale eyes narrowed. "You sri'dith whores are all the same. You cast spells on our crops and cattle and steal our babies, cutting them up for your twisted sacrifices, then think you can waltz into town and expect us to treat you like anyone else? We've dealt with your kind before." His hand closed around her throat, squeezing until her eyes watered with pain. "My little son died a month ago—a strong, healthy boy. We woke one morning, and he was cold and dead in his bed. How do you explain that, demon-spawn?" His fingers tightened around her neck.

"Children die all the time! They're not as strong as adults. They...."

He slapped her. "I know what happened! A witch touched him. She came to the village one morning, to aid in a birthing, or so she said. My son ran up to her, and she smiled and touched him on the forehead. I thought it was a funny thing to do, but I didn't think much of it. Until we found him dead, the next morning."

"No," said Raina, shaking her head frantically, "it's not what you think. A sri'dith would never hurt a child. We serve the Goddess. We...."

"Shut up!" His fingers pressed harder into the soft skin of her throat. "You're magic-users, and magic can't be trusted."

"Magic comes from the Dark One," the crooked-toothed boy added.

"That's not true," Raina said, but she knew that her words were useless. These men didn't want to listen. She trembled, sick to her stomach with fear. "Talon!" she cried. "Talon, help me!"

"There's no one to help you now." The man drew a long, rusty knife. "They say the only way to kill a sri'dith is with a blade straight through the heart." He grinned, an ugly, gargoyle-like expression. "Ben, open her robe."

The boy nodded rapidly and shakily undid the sash of Raina's robe. It fell open, exposing one breast. The man stared at it fixedly, watching it heave with her rapid breathing ... then caressed it, very lightly, with the blade. He pressed the knife's tip against the smooth, pale flesh, dimpling it, and watched as a ruby droplet welled up. "So, your blood is red after all," he said. "The tales say it's black. But I guess it doesn't matter. Your heart is just as foul, no matter what its color."

Tears filled Raina's eyes. She squeezed them shut, fighting for breath. She was going to die, most likely after they'd had their fun with her. She couldn't even defend herself with words, for the man was gripping her throat so hard she could scarcely breathe. "Mercy!" she managed to gasp.

The man laughed harshly. "I'll give you as much mercy as you gave my son." The tip of the blade hovered over her pounding heart.

Suddenly, the man gasped and stiffened. The knife fell from his hand and clattered to the cobblestones.

*Run, Raina!* The voice rang through her head.

*Talon, where are you?*

*I'm coming to you. Just run. I don't know how long I can hold them.*

She bolted into the street, not looking behind her. Dapple was waiting for her. Why he'd returned, she didn't know, nor

did she pause to wonder. She scrambled into the saddle and gave him a sharp kick, and he broke into a canter. Her robe was open, and the townspeople stared at her open-mouthed, but she didn't care. All she cared about was getting to safety.

At last, she saw Talon standing in the street and dismounted. "Talon!" She ran toward him ... and gasped. Blood trickled from his nose, his eyes were glazed with pain, and his breathing heavy and labored. "Talon, what...."

"It's nothing." He climbed into the saddle and leaned down to place his hands on her waist, lifting her. She twined her arms around him, and with a kick, they were off, galloping down the street.

They rode until the town was far behind them. Only then did they slacken the grueling pace. "Are you hurt?" Talon asked, craning his neck to look over his shoulder at her.

"N-no." She rubbed her sore, bruised throat. "Just shaken." She was an inch away from dissolving into tears, but she managed to choke them down. Still, she couldn't control her trembling, and she was grateful for the warm solidity of Talon's body against hers. "What about you?" She touched the blood beneath his nose. "What happened?"

"Nothing. I over-strained myself, that's all."

"You were holding them in place somehow, weren't you?" she asked, her voice soft with awe. "And you brought the horse to me. With your mind."

"Yes." His hands tightened on the reins. "I should have been monitoring you more closely. It was almost too late when I sensed your fear."

"What about those men? Will they come after us?"

"No. I made sure of that."

She tensed. "What do you mean?"

No answer.

"Oh, Goddess. You didn't kill them, did you?"

"They would have murdered you. They deserved no less ... but no, I didn't kill them. I just scrambled their minds. They won't be able to think or walk straight for the next few days, but there'll be no long-lasting effects."

She breathed a sigh of relief, though she knew the townspeople would only blame the men's condition on sri'dith magic and distrust them all the more. Still, they found a reason to distrust sri'dith no matter what, so she supposed it didn't matter.

She thought about the hate she'd seen in the men's eyes, and felt tears welling up. "How could they despise me so much?" she whispered. "How could that man blame me for the death of his child?"

"Some people don't need a reason to hate. When they become crazed with grief, they blame whoever they can. They thirst for blood, and they don't care if it belongs to the killer or someone who happens to look like him." His hands tightened on the reins. His whole body was rock-hard with tension.

"Talon? Are you all right?"

"As well as can be expected, after nearly losing you."

"There's something more bothering you," she said softly.

He hesitated. "It just reminds me of something that happened back on Skandria. There was an attack on our capital city, a few years ago. Kiran spacecrafts swooped down

and showered it with laser-beams. Many lives were lost, and the people were in a frenzy of panic and rage." He stared into space, as if reliving it, and Raina waited silently for him to go on. "There have always been a few Kirans living among us," he continued softly, "just as there have always been a few Skandrians on Kira ... descendents of those who moved here in friendlier times, when our worlds still traded freely. After the attack, most of the Kirans in the city were rounded up and stoned to death in the streets, right outside the palace. When I saw what was going on I went out to put a stop to it myself, but it was too late; the few still alive were so badly injured that there was no saving them. Some of them were children. All of them were helpless and unarmed. They had nothing to do with the attack, but because they were Kiran, they suffered for the actions of their countrymen." He sighed. "I'm just not very impressed with people in general right now."

Raina didn't know what to say. She could only hug Talon tightly around the waist.

They rode in silence for some time. As the afternoon wore on, the sunlight deepened from gold to amber, and shadows lengthened. They stopped to rest and allow their horse to eat and drink. Talon gently pushed Raina to the ground and began to remove her robe. She tensed. "What are you doing?"

"Checking you for injuries." Strong fingers probed her ribs, her shoulders.

She felt heat rushing to her face—and other places. "I told you, I'm unhurt."

"Yes, but you strike me as the type who would insist you're all right even if your arm was dangling by a thread."

"That's odd. I get that same feeling about you."

He chuckled softly. "And it's probably right." His expression grew serious as he stared at the place on her breast where the knife had pricked her. The blood had dried to a rust-red spot.

"Don't worry about that," she said, trying to sound nonchalant. "It will heal in a day or two."

"Still, I hate to see you hurt." His eyes moved over her one last time, and her belly fluttered as they lingered on the juncture between her thighs. "I don't see any serious injuries, though. Just bruising."

"I think you just wanted an excuse to take off my robe."

"Maybe." He trailed a finger down her stomach, to the patch of dark hair between her legs, and Raina's body seemed to melt from the waist down. "You're a very desirable young woman, Raina. But then, you ought to know that by now."

She started to speak ... then his finger slipped into her tight furrow, driving the words from her mind. He leaned close, his long hair brushing her soft, full breasts. "You're wet," he whispered, lips moving close to her ear. "I think you want this as much as I do."

She closed her eyes, feeling her pulse in her throat. He was close; with each breath, her breast pressed against his shoulder. Goddess, he was torturing her. Her body burned like a torch, but she couldn't allow him to quench that fire. Even if she was no longer a sri'dith, in the fullest sense of the

word, her moral code was ingrained too deeply into her.

"Talon, I ... I can't."

"What's wrong?" he said. "Are you worried I'll get you with child?"

"No ... it's not that. I'm not in season, anyway."

"Then what? If you want this, what's to prevent you?"

"Don't you understand?" She gave him a helpless look. "It has nothing to do with what I want. I took a vow to be chaste, to never succumb to these desires. I can't be intimate with someone, especially someone I don't love."

"But you already have. In here." He touched her forehead. "In your mind, I came to you, and you accepted me. That night was as real as what we're doing now."

"I know. But my body is still intact. I can at least keep the illusion of innocence."

"For whom?"

The question startled her. For whom *was* she keeping it? Not the Clearstones. She was probably never going back to the Hold, and even if she did, she'd already committed so many sins that one more probably wouldn't matter. She supposed she was keeping it for herself, for her own self-respect ... but then, she was no longer sure she believed in the code that told her these desires were wrong. Talon had turned everything upside down in her mind.

Not for the first time, she wondered if he'd been sent by the Dark One. Maybe he *was* the Dark One. It was said that the stealer of souls sometimes came to young girls in the form of a beautiful and sensuous man ... and Talon was the most beautiful man she'd ever met.



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"Let me pleasure you, Raina," he whispered, his deep voice like velvet, soft and hypnotic. His dark eyes burned into hers as he traced a circle around the patch of dark, tight curls between her thighs. Raina shivered and felt her nipples puckering. Her mind hunted desperately for an excuse to resist and found none.

His mouth lowered to her breast, and he pulled the rosy nipple between his lips. His rough, calloused palm covered her sex possessively. She heard herself moaning, and momentarily didn't recognize her own voice. It was low and primal, throaty with need. Her arms slipped around him, clinging tight. He was warm and hard, his smell musky yet sweet. With each breath she took more of that sweet musk into her. It triggered something deep in her brain, a primal rush of emotion, and her fingers tightened on his shoulders.

"Let me into you," he whispered, his voice rough and urgent. His maleness was pressed against her inner thigh. Even through his trousers, she could feel it pulsing, a hard, quick rhythm that matched her own heartbeat.

She had never wanted anything so desperately in all her life.

"Please, Raina." His breathing was ragged.

Raina forced herself to pull away, though her body and spirit cried out in protest. Without his warm hand between her legs, the air felt shockingly cold against her aroused flesh. She scrambled into her robe, tying the sash with shaking hands. She dared not look at Talon's face. She knew that what she saw there would make her change her mind. "I can't, Talon—not tonight. I'm sorry. I—I need to think about

this some more. I know on your world it's different, that it's acceptable for men and women to do this without committing themselves to each other, but I've grown up with different ideals. I can't just cast those ideals aside. Do you understand?" There was a note of pleading in her voice.

"Yes." He rose to his feet, brushing dust and twigs off his pants. His voice was flat and emotionless, though he was still breathing hard, and the raw need was plain on his face as he stared at her. "I understand that you're afraid."

Tears of frustration stung her eyes. "So what if I am? Is that so unreasonable?"

"To be afraid, no. To fight the inevitable, and continue to fight it while tormenting us both in the process, yes. Whether or not you accompany me to Skandria, we're going to be spending quite a bit more time together. Furthermore, we'll be riding the same horse. How many more days of this do you think we can take? Raina, if I have to spend one more day trying to ignore the feel of your body against mine, I'm going to go mad. And you can't tell me that you don't feel the same frustration. Your heartbeat speeds up whenever I brush against you."

She crossed her arms over her chest, hoping the forest-shadows hid her blush. "We'll buy another horse."

"We don't have the money."

"Then we'll take turns riding."

"That will slow us down. We can't afford to waste time. Even if we could, it wouldn't make a difference. It would only delay the moment when our feelings overwhelm us." He sighed, closing his eyes, and rubbed his palm across them. "I

wish I knew what was happening to me. I feel as awkward as a wet-behind-the-ears adolescent with his first woman."

"I've never felt like this," Raina whispered. She looked away and rubbed her arms, as if to ward off a chill—though she felt anything but cold. "It's like being on a raft and being swept away by a powerful current. I have no control, I don't know where I'm going, and it's exciting and scary at the same time."

He touched her hair, then let his arm drop awkwardly to his side. "I'm sorry if I pushed you too hard, Raina. I can be hopelessly thick, at times. I keep forgetting that it's different for virgins." He half-smiled. "I mean, if you want your first time to be more special than a quick rut in the forest, I understand."

"It's not even that. It's just ... it would be admitting to myself that I'm abandoning my old beliefs. And I don't know if I'm ready for that final step. It's just all so new and uncertain." She looked away. "We should get going. The Clearstones may still be looking for us, and the villagers may send out a search party as well."

"Very well. But you're riding in front, this time. I'm not going to spend the rest of the day with your breasts pressed against my back."

A flush rose into her cheeks. "Well, I'm not going to spend the rest of the day with your ... maleness poking my bottom."

"Well, then, what do you suggest?"

Raina thought, but couldn't come up with a solution that wouldn't involve one of them walking beside the horse. "Oh,

very well," she said. "I'll ride in front. Spoiled prince." She untied the horse's tether-rope.

Talon mounted and lifted her into the saddle, placing her in front of him. She took the reins, clucked softly to the horse, and gave it a tap with her heels.

They rode for the rest of the day, and the day after that. The forest slowly thinned, until they were traveling through open plains dotted with trees.

Raina studied her map as they rode. "We should arrive at Renmoore by midday tomorrow," she said, tracing the route with one slim finger. "Pretty soon, we'll be coming to a fork in the road. I think we're supposed to take the left route."

"You think?"

"I'm no good with maps. I've never had a need to use them. Before this, I never went any further than Barlyn, and even then, I was always with someone who knew the way. Still, this map is pretty simple."

"I can't make sense of it," said Talon. "Whoever drew it didn't do a very good job."

"Well, it's all we have." Raina folded the map, and tucked it into her pack.

As night descended, the land began to change. Grassy fields became a patchwork of farms and pastures. Golden, neck-high corn rustled in the breeze, and small clusters of goats and horses grazed behind fences. Farmhouses stood here and there, becoming steadily more frequent. When Raina peered into the distance, she could see a vague shape on the horizon.

They were approaching the city.

\* \* \* \*

"What do you mean, they're gone?"

"Just that," said Anna. The Clearstone sat facing Mother Tabitha in her office. "Raina and the prisoner have vanished, along with one of the horses. And I think if you open your desk-drawer, you will find a ring of keys missing. I don't know how else she could have gotten his cell-door open."

Tabitha opened her drawer. Sure enough, the contents had been disturbed, and her spare keys were gone. She shook her head in disbelief. "But how? There's no way he could have gotten through the boundary! The pain would have rendered him unconscious."

"Unless she helped him. Think about it. She could have ridden the horse herself. Our horses are more than strong enough to carry two people, even if one of them is a great, heavy Skandrian oaf."

"Damn!" Tabitha pounded a fist on the desk, rattling the clay jars that held her quills and ink. "We shouldn't have trusted Raina. We knew the fool girl was besotted with him. She's not in control of her actions."

Anna frowned. "Do you think he really used his telepathic powers to bend her to his will?"

"I don't know. It really doesn't matter. Either way, he seduced her and used her for his pawn ... though I'm sure Raina isn't totally blameless." She tapped her chin with one finger, staring thoughtfully into space. "There's always been something wild about her. Her desires are too strong, too uncontrollable. Even the suggestions I planted in her

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subconscious didn't help much. She fought them every step of the way." Tabitha looked up and met Anna's gaze. "Have you tried to tap into her since you discovered them missing?"

"Yes! That's the strangest thing. I can't locate her. It's as if a curtain's been drawn over her mind."

"It's that alien," muttered Tabitha. "He's shielding her, somehow. Keep trying. If the shield falters even for an instant, we can gain control of her. And send out a search-party."

"Yes, Mother Tabitha." She left.

Tabitha sat, drumming her fingers against the desk as she stared out the window. This was an unexpected and very unwelcome turn of events. She should have prevented it, should have kept a tighter grip on Raina ... but no matter. Soon, they would both be found, and she would see to it that they never escaped again.

## Chapter Six

The city fairly glowed against the pale, morning sky, metal walls reflecting the golden sunlight. People, horses and vehicles moved through the streets, tiny as ants, and just as numerous. Even from this distance, the din of countless voices and footsteps could be heard, carried on the wind like a new, enticing aroma.

Raina stared, open-mouthed. She'd heard the city described, of course, and one of her fellow sri'dith had brought a holosphere of Renmoore back to the Hold—only to have it confiscated by the Clearstones—but not even a holosphere could have prepared Raina for its sheer enormity. Even from this distance, staring down on it from the crest of a hill, she felt dwarfed.

Talon, standing beside her with Dapple's reins in one hand, chuckled at the look on her face. "Which one of us is the visitor from another planet?"

"It's so big! I've never seen so many people or buildings in my life!"

"It *is* impressive. Not quite as large as my home-city, but still a sight. At the moment, however, I'm not interested in sightseeing." He squinted, shielding his eyes from the sun with one hand. "Where's the spaceport?"

"I think that's it, there." Raina pointed to a white, bubble-shaped structure. A cluster of vertical silver shafts stood beside it, like a metal forest. "Those are the ships, beside it."

"And where are the smaller transports?" asked Talon.

"Inside that building, probably."

"We need to discuss our plan for getting out of here. Do you think there's any chance they'd allow us to rent a shuttle?"

"We'd have to lie," Raina said reluctantly, wondering—as she often did these days—what she'd gotten herself into. "We can't tell them we're going to Skandria. And they usually don't rent the shuttles out except to licensed pilots."

"Damn." He sighed. "I don't suppose they'd rent anything to a foreigner, anyway."

"Probably not."

"Then it looks like stealing a ship is our only option."

Raina chewed her thumbnail as she stared at the city. She hated the idea, but Talon was right. If they wanted to get to Skandria, it was their only option. "What will we do with Dapple?"

"Sell him. We can't take him on board the shuttle. There wouldn't be enough room. And even if there was, he would have no idea what was going on. He'd panic."

"I was afraid you'd say that," Raina said quietly. She scratched Dapple's neck and behind his ear, and he leaned into the caress. His soft, warm nose butted into her palm, and she smiled sadly. She would miss him, but she knew she couldn't subject him to the trauma of a shuttle-flight.

With Talon leading Dapple, they walked down the broad, stone-lined road, toward the city's open gates. Traffic flowed in and out, men and women on horseback, or in sleek, silver ground-cars. Raina stared, eyes wide. She found herself



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wanting to look everywhere at once. There were so many new sights, sounds and smells, so much to take in.

They entered the gates. Raina was startled by the variety of people hurrying through the streets. Their skin ranged from milk white to deepest brown. She even spotted a few people with silvery or grayish skin. Some wore robes, like her. Others wore tunics, or tight-fitting body-suits that left so little to the imagination their owners might as well have been naked. Some wore head-wraps or odd, conical head-dresses fringed with beads. Raina noticed one woman who had shaved her head bald and had her scalp tattooed with a gold-winged, scarlet dragon.

She even saw some Skandrians, though they didn't look exactly like Talon. Their skin was paler, their features softer. It was obvious their parents or grandparents had interbred with Kirans. Some of them had only the faintest trace of Skandrian heritage in their features, around the eyes or mouth. Many of these people walked with their heads downcast, not meeting anyone's eyes. Their postures were stiff, their movements edgy, almost fearful. She pointed it out to Talon, who raised an eyebrow. "Does it surprise you?"

"Not really. I just wonder why they live here at all, if they're so unhappy. Why don't they go somewhere else?"

"The situation is the same almost everywhere on Kira, and many of them can't afford a shuttle to Skandria. That aside, this is their home. Some of them have lived here for generations, and feel no more connection to Skandria than they do to the fourth moon of Jaros."

"Still ... I can't imagine what it's like, having everyone treat you as if you had the rot just because someone in your bloodline was Skandrian."

"You may learn what it feels like, soon enough," he said, and a chill crept up her spine. His eyes remained locked with hers. "It's not too late, you know. You can still go back if you want."

Raina squared her shoulders. "I've made my decision. I'm not going back on it."

Talon nodded, once. There was a trace of sadness in his eyes.

After some searching, they found a businessman who expressed interest in their horse, a stout little man with a yellow head-wrap and gold bracelets which clinked together as he moved. After he'd negotiated a price with Raina, he squinted suspiciously at Talon and took a small scanner out of his vest. He held it up, and a glowing red line skimmed over Talon's chest. "Where's your implant?" the man asked.

Talon's eyes narrowed. "What are you talking about?"

"I don't know where you're from, but in this city, there's a law requiring all those of Skandrian descent to have ID-chips. It's the only way we can be sure there are no spies hiding among us."

"What?" cried Raina. "But there are so *many* Skandrians here. And they've obviously been intermarrying with Kirans for generations. I'd bet that everyone in this city has a drop or two of Skandrian blood! Will you give *everyone* ID-chips?"

"Certainly not." The man snorted through his long, gray mustache. "There's a list of qualifications to meet. If you can

prove there's no Skandrian blood in the past three generations of your family—or is it two now? I can't recall. Anyway, if you can prove that, you're all right, and if you don't have the records they can do a DNA test. I wouldn't bother with a test for him, though." He glanced at Talon. "He looks pure Skandrian to me. If you don't want to get arrested, I'd advise you to go to the Office of Registration and get your implant and your papers." He took the gray's reins. "And now, if you don't mind, I'll take this fine beast. I promised you five-hundred, didn't I?" He pulled a flat, rectangular object from his pocket. "Do you have your credit tab with you?"

Raina's face went blank. "My what?"

He looked at her as if she were a dung-encrusted spoo-farmer asking where the sun went at the end of the day. "Don't tell me you don't have one. How am I supposed to pay you?"

"Oh, just take the horse," she sighed. The man raised his bushy eyebrows. "We don't really need the money," she continued. "We just can't take him on the shuttle with us. Speaking of which, can you tell us how to get to the spaceport?"

The man's eyes flashed suspicion. "Where are you planning to go?"

"Ria 2," Talon replied.

The man relaxed. "Going on vacation, eh? Never been there myself, but I've heard the crystal caverns are gorgeous." He pointed. "Spaceport's a few miles that way. You can't miss it. It's the big round building. You probably

saw it as you were approaching the city. Be warned, though, they won't even let you in unless you have your chip."

"Thank you," said Raina. She and Talon turned and headed down the street, toward the spaceport. As they walked, Raina shook her head. "Implants ... I can't believe it."

"I can," he said, his face impassive. "All in all, things haven't gotten too bad here yet. At least the Skandrians aren't being herded into internment camps."

Raina shuddered, wondering if that was what happened to Kirans on Skandria.

"You're afraid," he said. There was neither condemnation nor sympathy in his voice. It was simply an observation.

"Of course I am."

"One last chance," he said, staring straight ahead. "If you wish to remain here, it's probably not too late to get some money from that street-merchant. He's probably hiding a few tabs on him. It would be enough for you to start a life here. This is a big city, Raina. The people are bound to be more tolerant than those villagers."

"I told you, I've made up my mind." She hesitated. "Are there many Kirans on Skandria?"

"Not many. Most are servants. It's the only job they can get."

"I won't be anyone's slave." She tried to speak firmly, but her voice trembled. "If that's the situation, then maybe I'll stay here after all. I'd rather be free and starve than have someone running my life." And yet, she had allowed the Clearstones to control her for so long. Why?

"You won't be a servant," said Talon. "If you go to Skandria, it will be as my personal healer."

She blinked. "Is that allowed?"

"Why wouldn't it be?"

"Well, with all the discrimination against Kirans, I can't imagine people standing for it. And I don't know if I'm skilled enough to be a king's healer."

"You saved my life. I can't imagine a more impressive qualification. As for people making a fuss, they can squawk all they want, but they can't do a damned thing. I'm the king. My word is law."

A tremor ran through Raina's body. Sometimes, she forgot just how powerful he was. He ruled an entire planet. Millions of Skandrians looked to him as their leader. That power was intimidating, but there was something undeniably exciting about it as well.

She noticed him looking down at her with a small, knowing smile, and frowned. "You'd better not be peeking at my thoughts right now."

"I don't have to. Your thoughts are written in your eyes, in the way you move." Strong, warm fingers slid through her hair, lightly stroking her nape.

She felt that gentle touch throughout her whole body. Her breasts tightened, and a soft ache grew between her thighs, a void begging to be filled. These days, it seemed, it didn't take much for her to become painfully aroused. "Don't," she whispered. "Please."

Without a word, he withdrew his hand. A part of her was relieved, and another part wished he had ignored her protest.

They reached the spaceport. Up close, it looked even bigger. It was like a white moon that had fallen from the sky and crashed into the city, and dwarfed even the tallest buildings. Talon studied it, arms folded over his chest, then turned to her. "I need you to find out where the private shuttles are kept."

"You want me to go in there without you?"

He nodded and lowered his voice. "They won't allow me in there without that damned ID-chip, and I can't break into the spaceport in broad daylight. It will make it much easier for me to get a shuttle tonight if I know exactly where they are."

She shifted her weight, uncomfortable about the idea of being an accomplice. Stealing a shuttle was a severe crime, severe enough to land them in a Reformation Center for a few years, if they were caught. "What if they don't let me in?"

"Why wouldn't they?"

"I'm sri'dith. They might not trust me."

He smiled. "Look around you, Raina. This isn't a simple country village, where people fear anything they don't understand. People of all worlds and cultures come here. I'd bet there are even other sri'dith here. You said that Clearstones often travel where they're needed, didn't you? I don't think your mindstone will attract a lot of attention, but if you're really worried about it, you could buy a headdress."

"Of course!" She smacked her forehead with one palm.

"Why didn't I think of that?"

"Probably because, if we *were* in a small village, it would stand out and make it obvious that you were hiding something. Not so in Renmoore. Look, there's a clothing store

right across the street. They probably have something you can use."

"Will you come in with me?" asked Raina. She had never been in a city shop before. She didn't know what to expect.

"I think I'd better not," said Talon, and chuckled. "I'd only make the storekeeper nervous. I doubt they get many full-blooded Skandrians in there."

"Probably not," Raina said, but still hesitated, looking up at him.

"Go on. I'll be waiting right outside, I promise."

She nodded, managing a slight smile, and walked inside.

The store was huge. Clothes of every color and style lined the walls or adorned the white manikins parading up and down the aisles. Some of the manikins were human-looking, others simian or even reptilian in appearance. She wondered if those other species actually came here. All of the people she'd seen outside, no matter how exotic, had been human in appearance. Probably a good thing. If she ever ran into a Mermil or a S'vvargh, she'd probably be too tongue-tied with astonishment to do anything but stare rudely.

A young woman with short, bright green hair and dangling emerald earrings appeared. "Is there something I can do for you, Miss?"

"I, ah ... I'm looking for a headdress."

"What style? We have headdresses to accommodate a wide variety of cultures and tastes."

"Any one will do," she said. "Just give me the simplest one you have."

"Come this way," the woman said, and led her to a row of shelves with displays of headdresses on white manikin heads. Some were truly bizarre. There was one that looked like a pair of curling ram-horns draped in yellow cloth, with tassels dangling from the tips.

"Will this suit your purposes?" asked the saleswoman, showing her a plain white head-wrap.

Raina smiled. "That would be perfect."

Minutes later, she had paid for the wrap (for all its simplicity, it was ridiculously expensive) and slipped it onto her head. Talon was waiting for her outside.

"Ready?" he asked.

"As I'll ever be."

He gave her shoulder a squeeze. "Sure you want to do this?"

"I don't want to, but if I want to go to Skandria, this is my only option. It still feels wrong, but if it's as important as you say to get back to your people, I want to help in any way I can."

"You are very brave," he said quietly.

"Not really," Raina said. She turned and walked toward the spaceport, heart pounding. She'd never been inside a spaceport before. She'd never even been in a *city* before, and being separated from her only companion made her nervous. But she had to do this. He was doing the really difficult part, anyway. He was the one who'd be punished most harshly if they were caught. All she had to do was find out where the shuttles were. Nothing too hard about that.



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Not for the first time, she wondered if she'd gone crazy, deciding to accompany this strange man to his home world. Surely it would be easier to go back to the Hold, even knowing what they'd do to her for helping him escape.

But she knew—had known for some time—that there was no life for her there, just loneliness and discontent. She'd never done a bold or impulsive thing in her life, never followed her heart. This was her chance to redeem herself for the other chances she'd thrown away. She couldn't back out now.

Straightening her headdress, she lengthened her stride until she reached the spaceport's entrance, a set of titanium double-doors.

A young woman with dark, short-cropped hair and a blue uniform stepped forward. She held one arm out, blocking Raina's path. "May I see some ID?"

"ID?" Raina echoed in puzzlement.

"Identification. Your citizenship card or license will do."

"I ... I don't have anything like that."

The guard frowned. "I'm afraid I can't let you in, then."

Raina fought the feeling of helplessness that tried to paralyze her. Maybe she could talk her way through this. It was worth a try, anyway. "I'm sorry," she said. "I'm not from here. I just arrived in the city, and I'm unfamiliar with your customs. Isn't there any other way?"

The woman relaxed, thinking, perhaps, that this small, timid creature couldn't possibly pose a threat. "Maybe we can work something out. What brought you to Renmoore?"

"My husband and I would like to rent a private shuttle, if we could," she said, fussing with her headdress. When she was nervous, she always needed something to do with her hands. "We're vacationing in Ria 2 this season. I don't have a credit-tab with me, I'm afraid, but I'd like to look at the shuttles and see which one suits our purposes. Is that all right?"

"I suppose I could arrange something, if you'll give me a minute. I have to call someone who can take my post for awhile." She pushed a button on her wrist-band and spoke into it. "Hey, Trev, you there?" She paused, as if listening to a voice, and Raina noticed the small speaker attached to her ear. It baffled her, but then, technology usually did. "I need you to take my post for a few minutes," said the guard. "I've got a lady who needs to be shown around." She pushed the button again.

"Thank you." Raina smiled shyly, still adjusting her headdress. It slipped to one side, revealing part of her mindstone.

The guard leaned forward, eyes wide with interest. "Nice! Where'd you get it?"

Raina uttered a little gasp, quickly covering it.

"What's wrong?"

"You mustn't look at it," she said, desperately trying to think up an explanation for her reaction. She should have just played along. The woman had obviously never seen a sri'dith. "It's my spirit-eye," she blurted. "It's private."

"Oh, I see. Cultural thing, huh?"

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Raina frowned, annoyed at the woman's condescension despite the fact that her "cultural thing" had been invented on the spur of the moment. "Yes."

"Sorry. Didn't mean to offend you. We get a lot of foreigners here, from all different places, and they all have different customs and behavior codes. It's hard to know how to act, sometimes." She removed a remote control from her pocket and punched in a code on the tiny keyboard there. The doors slid open. "Come on. I'll show you to the private shuttles. I'm bending the rules a little, but as long as I stay with you, I think we can get away with it." She winked.

Raina smiled and followed her through the open doors, into a hall with a ceiling so high she had to tilt her head back to see it. People filled the hall, their footsteps and voices echoing. Raina looked down and felt a momentary disorientation; the floor was mirrored, and she could see the ceiling reflected in stunning detail. It was a deep, perfect black, strewn with holographic artwork of stars and galaxies. "Oh," she breathed.

"Like it? The mirrors are there so our guests can see the ceiling-art without getting neck-cramps." The guard chuckled.

"It's amazing," said Raina. "Is that what outer space really looks like?"

She nodded. "Down to the smallest detail. It even rotates to mimic the movements of the stars, though it's moving too slowly to see."

As she walked, Raina felt a presence gently nudge her mind, and Talon slipped into her consciousness with the ease of an otter slipping into water. *Don't be alarmed*, he said. *I'm*

*going to blend my consciousness with yours so I can get a look at this place.*

Before she could ask what he meant, she felt an odd, disorienting sensation, like looking off the top of a tall building. She seemed to be in two places at once. One half of her followed the guard through the vast hallway, while the other stood outside, leaning against a wall, feeling the sun on her skin as she tried to blend in with the crowd.

She blinked. Her vision unfocused, then sharpened again, and she felt her eyes moving of their own accord. She felt a moment of fear and confusion, then realized that Talon was moving them. Through her eyes, he studied the layout of the spaceport, the entrances and exits.

"Ah, here we are," said her guide. She gestured to an arched doorway, and Raina stepped inside. The room was not as big as the entrance hall, but still larger than the average person's house. The walls were a quiet shade of white, and the floor was not mirrored. Raina was grateful for that. It was disorienting to look down and see the ceiling.

Against the far wall, a row of silver shuttles stood. The guard stood next to one and patted it. "Each of these is easily large enough for two people. They have all the basic conveniences. There's a bedroom, a bathroom, and a kitchenette ... and the cockpit, of course. For a longer journey I'd recommend one of the larger shuttles—those cramped spaces can drive you crazy after awhile—but the trip to Ria 2 is only a few days. Would you like to take a look at the inside?"

"Yes, please. You're very kind," she said, keeping her voice meek.

The guide opened the door for her, and Raina entered, looking around. It was cramped, but otherwise pleasant, painted in beige and soft ivory. It looked almost like a little home, with beds, chairs and a metal-topped table.

*It's too small for our purposes,* Talon's voice whispered into her mind.

"Can I see something larger?" asked Raina.

"Of course. I should warn you, though, the larger models cost a lot more."

"I know. I just want to see."

Her guide showed her to another shuttle, almost twice as large as the first. It had the same three rooms, but there was a sitting room as well, with a view-screen on the wall. Raina had never seen a view-screen, but she'd heard enough descriptions to recognize it. Two brown chairs, covered in a crinkly, leathery material, stood side by side in front of the screen. "Thank you." She smiled. "This will be perfect. My husband and I will return tomorrow to make the payment."

"Excellent."

*Ask her how to start the shuttle.*

"One more thing, just out of curiosity. How do you start up the shuttles? Do you need a key, or a card, or...."

"There's a code-number. Once you pay, we'll give it to you, and you type it into the little panel in the cockpit. It's quite simple."

The woman escorted her outside. Raina thanked her again, then walked into the street, toward the alley where she

sensed Talon's presence. At the same time, that peculiar mental duality faded. She exhaled in relief, but felt an unexpected pang of loneliness, as well. The loneliness made her nervous. She sensed that if she got too accustomed to sharing her mind, she would lose something important.

Talon stepped out of the alley. "Good work," he said.

"What now?" Raina asked.

"Now, we wait. When night falls, we'll make our move."

\* \* \* \*

Raina paced the small room, pausing occasionally to glance out the window. The hotel-room was large and comfortable (in cities, you called them "hotels," not inns), but she wasn't in a state to appreciate a soft bed or a tub of hot water. Talon had told her to wait here until he gave her the mental signal. The tension was almost unbearable.

She chewed her lower lip, praying he was all right. She wished she could help him—she felt like a coward, standing here in this warm, cozy room while he attempted a difficult and risky theft—but she knew she'd only get in the way. The only thing she'd ever stolen was a hairbrush, when she was little ... and that had been returned a day later, with many shamefaced apologies. She wished she at least had money to leave in compensation for the shuttle they were going to take, but she had only a few bronze tabs in her pouch. She'd hardly had enough to pay for this room.

*Now, Raina.*

The voice was like a soft whip, smooth yet sharp with urgency. She grabbed her satchel and hurried downstairs.

A man was sitting at the front desk, watching a small vidscreen on the wall. He glanced up at her. "Leaving so soon, Miss?"

She gave him a distracted smile. "I'm meeting a friend." Before he could reply, she walked through the door. It was dark outside, except for the floating light-spheres lining the streets. At any other time, she might have paused to admire this marvel, but a sense of urgency forced her to keep walking. It was all she could do not to break into a run.

The spaceport wasn't far. Within minutes, she reached its thick, titanium double-doors and was surprised to find them open. Talon's doing, no doubt. Heart pounding, she slipped inside. The vast hall was empty and almost completely dark, though the false stars still glowed overhead and beneath her feet, making it seem as if she were suspended in outer space. Dizziness washed over her, and she closed her eyes, concentrating on the firm floor beneath her feet.

Talon's presence tugged at her mind. *This way.*

She walked down the hall, holding her breath. For awhile, her own heartbeat was the only sound ... then her ears caught soft breathing, and she gave a start. Her eyes moved toward the sound, straining to focus. Dimly, she could see a shape huddled against the wall. She leaned closer and could just make out the sleeping features of the guard she'd met earlier that day.

Sleeping on duty? That was convenient. A little *too* convenient. What was going on?

She hurried forward, into the shuttle-room. Talon's mental pull guided her to one of the larger shuttles. The hatch was

open, and she climbed in. Talon was sitting in the cockpit, fingers flitting over the keys on the control panel. The engine hummed to life. "How did you know the start-up code?" she asked, frowning. Then her eyes widened. "The guard. You took the information from her mind, didn't you?"

"Yes." His eyes never left the control panel. "She had a strong will. Gave me quite a fight."

"Please tell me you didn't hurt her."

"Of course not. She'll wake up shortly with a vague memory of what happened, but with no recollection of our faces or other pertinent information." He keyed in another string of commands, fingers moving so quickly they were almost a blur. Raina heard a mechanical whir from above and looked up, through the clear dome encasing the cockpit. A tiny, circular opening appeared in the center of the ceiling, slowly widening as the ceiling opened like an iris to reveal the starry sky.

"Strap yourself in," said Talon. He fired up another engine, and the shuttle began to vibrate.

Raina shakily fastened the straps, heart pounding. She'd never been in space before. The idea terrified and exhilarated her. If she'd had a spare moment to think about the enormity of what she was doing, she might not have gone through with it ... but there was no time for thought, now. Only action.

He glanced at her. "Ready?"

She managed a weak nod.

The shuttle rose slowly off the floor and hovered there a moment, then began to rise. Raina held her breath as they rose through the ceiling, into the sky, and watched with wide



eyes as the world dropped out from beneath her. At first, the white ball of the spaceport filled her vision, then it shrank until it was no larger than a cobek's egg. The buildings around it were reduced to mere toys. All the while, the ship hummed and vibrated, lurching ever upward. "You *do* know how to fly this, don't you?" she asked in a wobbly voice.

"I've gone through basic flight training." He grasped the steering lever. "Brace yourself." He pulled the lever. The shuttle tilted slowly back, until Raina was pressed against the seat ... then the engines roared, and the shuttle shot straight upward. Raina felt like a bug being flattened beneath someone's boot. There seemed to be a terrible weight on her chest, robbing her of breath. She closed her eyes, praying it would be over soon....

And then it was. The awful pressure was gone, and she felt oddly light and buoyant. Slowly, she opened her eyes and saw the serene darkness of space spread out before her. Stars, clearer and brighter than they could be on even the clearest night, scattered like tiny diamonds on black velvet. When she looked down, she could see the curve of a huge, luminous blue ball—her world!—its edge a bright arch. Milky swirls of cloud covered its surface, like swirls of milk in a cup of tea.

"Goddess," she whispered. "It's so beautiful." She felt tears welling up in her eyes. She had never seen Kira from a distance, not even in a vid or holosphere, but even if she had, she doubted it would have prepared her for this. Nothing could have prepared her for this. Leaving the Hold had been worth it, if just to see it.

Talon touched the back of her hand, and she glanced over at him. Embarrassed, she tried to blink away her tears. "Can I undo my straps now?"

"Go ahead."

Raina undid the clasps and gasped softly as she floated toward the ceiling. She grabbed the chair's arms to hold herself down.

Talon hit a switch, and she fell back into the chair with a soft bump. "Artificial gravity," he said. "I don't think we want to float around the entire trip." He tapped another few keys, and the shuttle's engines rumbled softly as the ship turned. "I've adjusted our course for Skandria. Once the shuttle's well clear of Kira's gravitational field, I'll shift it into hyper-speed. If all goes well, we should arrive in a little over a week."

"That's it? I mean, you don't have to stay in the cockpit to steer or anything?"

"We won't be doing much steering over this trip. The nice thing about space is that it's pretty wide-open. Not many obstacles."

He smiled at her, just a slight twist of his firm, perfectly sculpted lips, but the expression warmed her down to the tips of her toes. The realization that they'd be spending the next week together, in this tiny shuttle, hit her like a physical blow. Would she be able to last that long without succumbing to her instincts? Would Talon?

"Are you hungry?" he asked.

She welcomed the distraction. "Yes, a little."

"Well, I checked the food-stores before leaving, and they're full. Nothing very tasty, I'm afraid—everything is

freeze-dried or comes in a tube—but for shuttle-rations, it's not bad." He unbuckled the belt at his waist and walked out of the cockpit, into the shuttle's main cabin. Raina followed.

In the corner of the cabin sat a small, black storage-cooler. Talon opened it, took out a plastic tube, and tossed it to her. Raina unscrewed the cap and squeezed a bit of the thick paste into her mouth. It wasn't bad—it tasted vaguely like oranges—but she could see how easily one could tire of it. "So, what are we going to do with our time while we're on this shuttle?" she asked.

"I'm afraid there's not much to do," Talon replied. "There's a viewing-screen, if you can stomach the insipid stuff they're broadcasting these days, but beyond that...." He shrugged.

"Where will we sleep?" she asked nervously. "I mean, are there separate bedrooms, or...?"

"There's only one bed. This shuttle was designed for a mated couple." He stared at her, his gaze suddenly hot and intense. Her breath caught in her throat as his eyes moved slowly down the length of her body, tracing the soft curves just visible beneath her robes.

He looked sharply away and clenched his fists, drawing a slow breath in through his mouth. "Damn it. What's wrong with me? Our worlds are at war, thousands of people are dying, my planet's fate is practically resting on my shoulders, and all I can think about is pushing you down on the nearest bed and...." He trailed off, leaving a wall of silence between them.

Raina felt herself trembling, but not with fear. She knew they wouldn't be able to last through this voyage without

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succumbing to desire. Why delay it? She wet her lips, heart pounding. "Make love to me, then."

His eyes locked with hers again. "I wouldn't make that offer unless you're serious about it," he said quietly. "I want you very badly, Raina. More than I've ever wanted a woman. Are you sure of this?"

"I'm sure," she said, though her voice was anything but confident.

Talon pulled her close. He stared into her wide eyes, his own filled with naked, burning need. Then, gripping her chin, he pressed his mouth to hers. Raina let out a muffled gasp. He'd kissed her before, but never so forcefully, so passionately. His lips all but crushed hers as his tongue invaded her mouth. It made her dizzy. When at last he pulled back, he was panting. "Unbind your hair," he whispered, his voice a harsh command.

She fumbled with the braid. Her dark brown hair tumbled free, falling over her shoulders. Talon's hands slid into that thick cascade. Then his mouth descended on hers again as one hand moved beneath her robe, into her underwear. Warm fingers invaded her sex, tasting her wetness. "You're beautiful," he whispered. His mouth sought her ear, and strong teeth nibbled the delicate curve. "I want you so much."

"Then take me," she whispered.

He lifted her into his arms and carried her into the bedroom. Slowly, he lowered her to the bed, then straddled her. His hands trembled as they moved over her robe-clad body, and she knew he was exercising every ounce of his willpower to keep himself from simply ravishing her. He was

moving slowly, trying to make this special for her. At last, he opened her robe and slid his fingers around one firm breast. His hands were strong and sure, moving over her slim young body with the confidence of a man intimately familiar with the female shape. At the same time, though, there was a strange, tentative reverence in his touch. He was as experienced with sex as a man could be, yet he looked at her as if she were the only woman he'd ever touched.

As Raina's robe dropped to the floor, Talon's other hand slid down to rest on her flat belly, fingers spread. All the time, his dark eyes never left hers. She felt their mental connection snap into place, and had the strange feeling that this time, he had not initiated it ... nor had she. It had simply happened.

"Your mind is racing," he whispered. "Like your heart."

"So is yours," she whispered back.

"At least we're thinking the same thing." One finger hooked into the waist of her underwear—her only remaining garment—and slid it down, exposing the patch of tight brown curls. Her underwear soon joined her robe on the floor. Talon unbuckled his belt and pulled down his trousers, revealing his erection. Her eyes widened at the sight of it. It was long, thick and formidable looking. His eyes locked with hers again. "Touch it," he said.

She reached out with trembling fingers to touch the organ. It was hard as iron, but the skin was surprisingly soft, almost velvety. Her fingers closed more firmly around it, and Talon moaned softly, his eyes closing. She felt a little thrill of power. Slowly, she began to stroke it.

"That's it, Raina," Talon whispered breathlessly. "Just like that."

Raina continued to slide her fingers along the hard, hot length of his shaft, until Talon was moaning deeply. At last, he caught her wrist. "Enough," he said, "or I'll be finished before we've even begun." He smiled and ran his hands over her soft, white thighs. Raina held her breath, watching as he parted them and lowered his head. He kissed her mound, making her gasp ... then he straddled her body and slowly lowered himself onto her. The tip of his maleness pressed into her wet folds, and she let out a soft cry. "May I open you?" he whispered.

She closed her eyes, feeling her pulse thrum in her throat, and managed a weak nod.

She felt an uncomfortable pressure, felt it building, escalating, until something broke inside her. She sucked in her breath at the stab of pain ... and felt the blunt tip of his shaft slide into her, stretching her. More pain, shockingly intense, and she cried out.

He withdrew, and a wave of mingled relief and disappointment washed through her ... then she looked into his eyes and realized that he wasn't going to stop.

He cupped her sex, almost gently, and slid a long, hard finger into her center. There was still pain, but much less this time—and a sweet, tingling pleasure that spread through her middle like a warm drink. "Wh-what are you doing?"

"You're tight," he said. "Too tight for me to enter you without causing you pain. You need to stretch." Breathing hard, he inserted another finger, stretching her a little wider.

Raina wriggled, biting her lower lip.

"Am I hurting you?"

"No. It just feels odd."

"It always does, at first." He kissed one damp, heaving breast. "By Suhara, you're gorgeous." His eyes roved over her, bright and hungry. "Soft and moon-pale ... so perfect...." His fingers continued to move inside her, working her tight passage. Sharp, carnivore's teeth nipped her breast, making her gasp. She looked down and saw two bright, ruby drops welling from the twin pricks. Talon's tongue rasped gently over the pale globe, lapping up the blood.

She felt a flicker of fear, and raised her wide eyes to his. He looked into her eyes, lightly stroking the side of her face, and the fear evaporated. She wondered if he had done that to her telepathically, or if it was simply the concern in those eyes that soothed her fear.

His fingers withdrew, leaving her cold and empty ... but before she could protest, he drew her closer, cupping her bottom with one hand

Aiming carefully, Talon pushed into her body.

Raina cried out at the feel of the huge, hot, intrusive *thing* inside her, stretching her walls impossibly wide. Then shock gave way to pleasure as a sweet ache blossomed in her middle. Talon gripped her shoulders and pushed forward, filling her again, then again, rolling his hips against hers in a slow rhythm. She heard herself moaning, but it sounded distant and unimportant. Nothing mattered except this wonderful feeling, this connection. It was as if they were melting into each other, becoming one complete being. His

strokes were slow and sure. Each sent a ripple of pleasure through her, down to her toes.

"Move with me," he whispered.

She did—tentatively at first, then harder as their rhythm quickened. His mouth was on her breast again, feeding on the hard nipple as he slid in and out of her slick, hot sheath. His hands slid beneath her buttocks, cupping the soft, round cheeks, and kneaded them like dough.

She felt Talon stiffen on top of her, and a whisper escaped on his breath. "No, please, not yet...."

Before she could even wonder what he meant, a burst of heat flooded her insides.

Talon felt his cock fading and cursed his lack of control. He had failed. He hadn't brought Raina to climax.

He knew what he had to do, of course. He would have preferred to feel her come while he was still inside her, but to end the act now would be selfishness of the worst sort.

He pulled free. Raina stared up at him, eyes clouded with confusion. Kneeling before her, Talon gripped her thighs and spread them wide, thrusting his head between them. His tongue delved into her wetness and began to stroke her, sliding up and down the length of her cleft, probing her clitoris. Raina gasped sharply, her hips arching upwards. She cried out sharply as the spasms of orgasm wracked her young body.

At last, she went limp, panting. Her eyes were closed. Brown curls clung to her sweat-damp brow. When she opened her eyes and saw the blood coating her thighs, she gasped.



"It's all right," he said. "It's normal. It just means your virginity has passed."

"I know," she blushed. "It just ... surprised me, that's all."

He waited, but she didn't seem inclined to speak. "I'll wash you off," he said awkwardly. He left the room and returned with a damp cloth, which he used to wipe her thighs clean. He even slipped it into her sheath, washing away his seed and the blood of her torn virginity. When he was finished, he disposed of the soiled cloth.

And still, Raina said nothing. He looked at her face and winced when he saw the tears on her cheeks. Damn it, he had hurt her. His eagerness had made him clumsy. He'd wanted to be gentle and careful with her, to make her first time an experience to remember, but he'd lost all control and behaved like a virgin himself.

Worse, he had drawn blood. He could still see the twin punctures on her breast; fresh droplets of blood welled up, gleaming bright red, and they stood out like a brand on her white skin. What had compelled him to do that, he had no idea. Blood-sharing was a ritual normally reserved for life-partners, an intensely intimate act ... but Raina didn't know that. It was fortunate for her that she didn't. The implications would probably frighten her. "Raina," he whispered hoarsely. "I'm sorry."

"You haven't done anything wrong," she said, without meeting his eyes. "I gave my consent."

"I was rough with you."

She smiled through her tears. "A little, maybe, but only because you were so excited. It felt good, Talon."

"Then what are these?" He brushed a thumb over her tear-tracks.

Raina lowered her eyes. "I'm ashamed," she whispered. "Because I know what they'd think of me, if they could see me now."

"The other sri'dith?"

She nodded, sniffing. "Tabitha, most of all. I know it shouldn't matter. They're far behind me now. They can't hurt me. But I hear them in my head anyway, yelling at me, calling me a whore." Another tear rolled down her cheek, and she turned her face aside. "I'm sorry. I—I need to be alone," she said in a small voice. "Just ... please, don't think that you've done anything wrong. You were wonderful." She sat up, picked up her robe off the floor and slipped into it, avoiding Talon's eyes.

He hesitated. He didn't want to leave her when she was in such obvious pain, but he had to honor her request. It was the least he could do. Quietly, he left the bedroom, entered the cockpit and closed the door.

They were several thousand miles from Kira now. It was probably safe to shift into hyper-speed. His hands moved mechanically over the controls. The ship vibrated, then shot forward. In an atmosphere, the change in speed would have been jarring, but in space it was so smooth it was almost unnoticeable.

Talon strapped himself into his seat and leaned back, sighing. Maybe now, at least, their desires would leave them alone ... but he doubted it. He also doubted, however, that Raina would be willing to do that again. Even if he'd been

infinitely gentle and patient during their lovemaking, she'd probably feel the same shame. The Clearstones had conditioned her well.

Talon's hand tightened on the arm of his seat. He'd heard of a gruesome tradition on some of the smaller, more primitive planets, in which village priests cut off parts of little girls' genitals so that they couldn't feel sexual pleasure. What the Clearstones had done to Raina was not much different. It was not as bloody or painful, but the effect was the same. Raina would never experience pleasure without shame. Her superiors had taught her to see her natural desires as dirty and abnormal.

A light, tentative knock on the cockpit-door distracted him from his thoughts. "Come in."

The door creaked open, and Raina peeked in. Her eyes looked slightly red. "Talon? I ... I just wondered ... how will we know when it's time to sleep? There's no day or night in space."

"There's a chronometer on this console. In Kiran time, it's about midday, but that doesn't really matter. When we reach Skandria, we'll have to live by a completely different clock, so we'll be disoriented no matter how meticulously we keep track of time." He managed a smile. "So, while we're on the shuttle, we can sleep whenever we're tired. Which reminds me, do you want the bed first or second?"

"I thought we'd be sharing," she said.

He looked at her in surprise. "Do you want to?"

"I wouldn't mind," she said, but she didn't look entirely certain.

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"I won't force you to sleep with me," said Talon.

"I ... I guess it would be better if we didn't. For now, anyway."

He kept his eyes on the console. "You look weary. You can sleep first, if you wish. I'm not tired."

"Thank you." She smiled wanly, then leaned forward to kiss his cheek.

Talon blinked, eyes widening slightly. He couldn't remember the last time he had been kissed like that, so sweetly and chastely. It felt ... good. Better than he would have expected.

Before he could speak, Raina turned and left the cockpit.

## Chapter Seven

Raina lay in bed, staring at the blank ceiling. The room had been darkened, and she'd been trying for an hour, unsuccessfully, to sleep. Her body was tired, but her mind was awake and awhirl with thoughts.

She rolled onto her side and hissed softly with pain. The place between her thighs was still tender, making it impossible to forget what had just happened.

She thought of Talon, of his dark, burning eyes, his strong hands and hot, thrilling mouth. She thought of his maleness, buried inside her, touching her secret, sensitive places. Warm ooze tickled her folds, and her breasts tightened. The nipples puckered, as they sometimes did when it was cold. Right now, though, she felt anything but cold.

Goddess, what was going on with her? She should be mourning the loss of her purity, but already she wanted to make love to him again. It had felt so wonderful, despite the initial pain. Each thrust had taken her to new heights of ecstasy she'd never dreamed of.

She bit her lower lip, trying not to think about it.

When she blocked that path, however, her mind wandered down much darker ones. She was so far from home. She was alone in space with a man who, despite the intimacy they'd shared, was still a stranger to her in many ways ... and she was traveling to a strange, distant world where she would, at best, be regarded as an oddity, and at worst, treated like a slave.

Yet through it all was a glimmer of excitement. At last, she was leaving her safe, cold little universe, seeing new sights and experiencing new sensations. And for the first time in her life, she didn't have to worry that the Clearstones were eavesdropping on her thoughts, judging her.

Soothed, Raina drifted off.

\* \* \* \*

Their journey was nearing its end.

Raina peered through the shuttle's window at the planet hovering in space. It had grown from a red speck to an egg-sized ball. It looked nothing like Kira. There was no ocean or greenery. The single, sprawling continent was reddish brown, and only a few swirls of cloud suggested there was any life on that parched world. As the shuttle glided through space, the planet slowly swelled, until it filled Raina's vision when she looked out the porthole.

"All right," Talon said. He sat in the cockpit, staring at the controls. "It's time to land. Strap yourself in."

Raina nodded, took a deep breath, and sat in the chair next to his, fastening the buckles of the restraints and tightening them until they pinched her skin. She had no desire to find out what would happen if she *wasn't* strapped firmly into her seat.

Talon pulled a lever, and the ship angled downward, preparing to descend. Raina closed her eyes and held her breath. She felt them picking up speed, felt the familiar pressure crushing her against the back of the seat. Nausea roiled in her middle, but she held it grimly in check. She

didn't want to contemplate what would happen if she threw up.

At last, the shuttle began to slow. Raina breathed a sigh of relief ... which turned into a strangled gasp as the shuttle landed with an impact that jarred her to her bones.

"Sorry," Talon said, almost sheepishly. "I never was very good at landing."

"It's all right." Shakily, Raina unbuckled her seat-straps. Her eyes were still closed, and sweat trickled down her forehead. "I just wish we didn't have to go so fast. I feel like I'm being flattened into a pancake." She opened her eyes, wiped the sweat from her brow, and stared out through the transparent plastic bubble that encased the cockpit.

Wind-rippled red sand stretched for miles in every direction, broken only by a few craggy outcrops. The sky was a deep, fiery orange. A pale moon hung over the horizon, pockmarked with craters, so massive that it seemed to fill the sky. Two smaller moons, one with a yellowish tint, one pinkish, hovered over it. In the far distance she could see a jagged mountain range, gray and obscured by heat-shimmers, so far away it was just a fringe on the horizon.

Talon keyed in a code on the console, and the protective plastic bubble retracted. A gust of dry, hot wind whisked back Raina's hair. "What is this place?" she asked.

"The Kiahar. Small, as deserts go, but still formidable to cross."

"Why did we land here?"

"I didn't want to land too close to the city. It's been awhile since I've piloted a shuttle, and I didn't quite trust my aim. The city isn't far."

Raina squinted. "I don't see it."

He pointed at what she'd thought was a mountain-range. "There."

Raina's eyes widened. If that was his definition of 'not far,' she'd hate to see a *long* journey. "How are we going to get there? Please don't tell me we're going to walk. In this heat, I don't know how far I'd get."

Talon chuckled. "You'll have to get used to the heat. This is a cool day, by Skandrian standards ... but don't worry, we won't have to walk. I checked the shuttle's storage compartment before we left. There's a skimmer."

"A what?"

"Never ridden a skimmer, have you?"

Raina shook her head.

"Then this should be an interesting experience. Wait here." He vanished into the main cabin. A moment later, he appeared outside the shuttle pushing the skimmer in front of him. Raina studied the odd machine. It was slim and sleek, and had only two wheels. She'd seen drawings of motorcycles before, in books about ancient Earth, and it looked a little like that. Chrome and translucent plastic gleamed in the sun.

Talon climbed on. "Here." He handed her a ration-pack. "Strap this on and climb on behind me."

Raina strapped the pack on and got onto the skimmer—or tried, rather. "There's no room for me on the seat."

"You'll have to ride on my back, then."



Flushing, she wrapped her arms and legs around him. The position brought her groin firmly against his muscular buttocks. A now-familiar tingling spread through her warming flesh. Though they hadn't made love since that first night on the shuttle, her desires certainly hadn't gone away. If anything, they'd grown stronger. She remembered again the feeling of his hardness embedded in her soft, wet core, moving inside her. "Why is it that I always wind up in this position?" she asked.

He glanced over his shoulder, smiling with one corner of his mouth. "Would you like to try carrying me on *your* back?"

"Point taken." She glanced at the shuttle. "What about that? Are we just going to leave it here?"

"I'll have someone return for it once we get to the city."

"All right." She eyed the skimmer. "Um ... how fast does this go, anyway?"

Talon's smile widened.

*Oh, Goddess,* thought Raina, and tightened her grip.

Talon leaned forward, and the skimmer shot across the sand. Raina's startled shriek was drowned out by the roar of wind in her ears. Sand stung her eyes, and she shut them tight, heart hammering against her chest. When she dared to open them again, she saw the scenery blurring by to either side, so fast that it made her sick to her stomach. She wondered what would happen if they hit a rock at this speed, and decided not to think about it.

"I used to ride these all the time when I was a kid!" Talon shouted over the wind. He maneuvered around and outcrop, and the skimmer tilted so far to one side that Raina was sure

it would topple over. She closed her eyes, and let out a sigh of relief when the skimmer righted itself. Sand sprayed out from under its wheels ... and then, suddenly, they were on a road. It was made of smooth, perfect white stone, and shone like a ribbon of pearl in the sunlight. The skimmer fairly flew, now that there was no sand to slow it down.

The city loomed on the horizon. It was an incredible sight, a collection of tall, slim cylinders. Their silver walls reflected the orange sky. Hundreds of smaller, spherical buildings clustered around the cylinders' bases. From the center of the city rose the largest structure she had ever seen, a palace of staggering size and magnificence. Its base alone, round and silvery-white, was taller than any of the other buildings, wider around than an entire village ... and from that base rose shining domes and a cluster of translucent towers and spires that caught the glow of the sun. The tallest spire seemed to pierce the swollen, pale moon.

Raina stared, open-mouthed. The entire city glittered like a jewel. The sight took her breath away.

As they rode nearer, the city's wall seemed to grow taller, until it blocked all but the tallest spires of the palace. A pair of gates loomed, solid and seemingly impassable. Like everything in the city, they were white, made from smooth blocks of stone. Each block was easily taller than her, and there were thousands of them. Raina's mind whirled when she thought of the time and effort it must have taken to build such a wall.

Talon leaned backwards, and the skimmer slowly coasted to a stop in front of the pale gates. Now that they were

closer, she could see the intricate designs engraved in the pearl-like stone. There were long-bodied dragons, their mouths open and spewing flame, and rows upon rows of symbols.

Talon swung his leg over the skimmer's side and dismounted. Raina slid down to stand beside him. She stared up at the gates, tilting her head back to see the top. "It's incredible," she breathed. "What is it made from?"

"Starmetal," said Talon. "The strongest substance we know of, mined from the Moon of Shandire." He pointed at the largest moon. Raina could just see its bloated curve above the wall-tops. "These gates are three feet thick."

"How are we going to get through?"

Talon stepped forward and placed his hand on a round, dark panel. He raised his eyes and spoke in Skandrian: "I am Talon, Chosen of Thauron, ruler of Skandria, and I command you to open."

A low rumbling filled the air and vibrated the ground as the gates parted, sliding slowly open.

He turned to Raina, smiling his now-familiar little half-smile. "I love doing that."

"Like magic," Raina whispered. "How...?"

"The gates require handprint and voice identification. And a code-phrase. Nothing mystical about it." He took her arm as they walked through the gates, down the broad, paved road, and into the city, leaving the skimmer at the gates.

Raina looked around with wide eyes as they walked past clusters of white, dome-shaped buildings. Talon's city was even busier than Renmoore. People hurried about, shouting

and haggling, buying and selling. "They're all so tall!" she whispered. She'd thought Talon a giant, but he was no taller than most of the people here. Even the women were at least six feet in height, and usually more.

A woman bustled past, carrying a basket of pink, round things which Raina assumed were fruit. A child hurried by, laughing as he chased a tiny, dark lizard. He made a grab for it, but the lizard slipped between his fingers and vanished into a crack between two stones of a house-wall. The people, for the most part, wore loose-fitting white tunics and trousers—except for the elders, who wore robes, and the very young, who wore almost nothing. Their skin was a rich shade between honey and amber, and their hair and eyes were as dark as Talon's. The darkness of the people themselves stood out strikingly against the white city, and it occurred to her that there was a practical function for all that whiteness: it reflected the sun, kept the city from overheating.

Gradually, the ruckus died down around them as the city-dwellers caught sight of Talon and forgot what they were doing. One by one, they gasped and fell to their knees, each planting a fist on the opposite shoulder in what she assumed was a salute. The movement swept like a wave through the crowds, until everyone was kneeling.

Talon returned the salute, his face cool and serene.

"The Kadir!" someone shouted, and Raina recognized the Skandrian word for *king*. "The Kadir has returned! Praise Suhara!"

An instant later, the crowd erupted into cheers, swarming them. Startled, Raina clung tighter to Talon's arm as Skandrians pressed in around her.

She and Talon were pushed forward, swept along with the crowd like a leaf in a river. People threw coins and silk scarves at them, chanting Talon's name. The roar of voices filled her ears. It was overwhelming, dizzying; she simply held tight to Talon and hoped the enthusiastic welcomers wouldn't crush them.

After what seemed like hours of being pushed and pulled through the streets, they were led through a towering, arched doorway, into the cool interior of the palace. Suddenly there was a new crowd all around them, people in much finer clothes, but just as enthusiastic as the city-dwellers. They clamored greetings and questions at Talon, their words lost in the babble of overlapping voices, all blurring into an auditory haze in Raina's brain. She had an instant to take in the grandeur of the entrance-hall—the marble walls and floor, the thick columns with spiraling gold designs of dragons and flame—before they were swept into another room, and then another. No one seemed to notice her.

Then someone took her arm, trying to pull her away from Talon. She cried out, pulling back ... but Talon leaned down and whispered, "It's all right. He'll take you to a private room. If you stay with me, you'll only be overwhelmed by these people. I'll join you shortly, I promise."

Raina nodded reluctantly and allowed the servant—she assumed it was a servant—to escort her out of the crowded room and down a broad hall.

"Don't worry, *T'sana*," a soft voice said in halting Kiran. "If you are a friend of Kadir Talon, you will be well treated here."

She looked at the servant, a slender boy with dark eyes. He offered her a gentle smile, which she tried to return.

He led her to a door carved with vine-like patterns, then opened it and stood aside to let her enter. She thanked him and stepped cautiously into the room, looking around.

"Would you like anything to eat?" the servant asked.

At the mention of food, her stomach gurgled. "Yes, please. Anything."

The boy bowed his head, then left, closing the door softly behind him. Alone in the silence, Raina studied her surroundings.

The room was lovely in its simplicity. White floors, white walls, and a bed in one corner with scarlet curtains drawn around it. There was a window, the panes covered with the same intricate, curling patterns that adorned the door. In the corner of the room, a small, slender tree with fern-like leaves grew out of a red clay pot. Aside from that, the only decoration was a pair of ornate, crossed swords mounted on the wall. Their golden hilts were molded to look like dragon-profiles, each with a glinting ruby eye.

She approached the bed and drew the curtains aside, revealing silken white covers. Slipping off her shoes, Raina lay down and closed her eyes, drinking in the quiet.

Only a few minutes had passed when someone knocked at the door. "*T'sana*? Your food."

Raina rose and walked across the room to open the door, revealing the boy balancing a tray laden with plates. She

smiled, taking it from him and setting it on the bedside table. "Thank you."

"Welcome. Anything else?" His tongue pronounced the Kiran words clumsily.

"It's all right ... you can speak Skandrian," she said. "I don't speak it very well myself, yet, but I understand it. I studied the five major languages in school."

The boy offered a shy smile. His skin, though darker than hers, was a light enough brown that she could see him blushing. "I'm learning them, too. I can read them all, but speaking them is harder." He shifted his weight. "I'll let you have some privacy now, *T'sana*. I know you must be tired."

"Thank you," she said, and watched him hurry down the hall. Bemused, she closed the door. She wouldn't have thought that Talon's people kept servants. They seemed to value freedom so highly. But then, most cultures were riddled with such contradictions. Kira was certainly no exception: a world where women were idealized, yet treated as objects and required by law to marry at age sixteen unless they served the Goddess.

Raina sat on the bed and began to eat, too tired to really examine the tray's contents. It all looked and tasted strange, but it satisfied her rumbling belly, and for now, that was enough. She washed down her meal with the small jug of sweet, tart juice, then lay on the bed, sighing contentedly. Her eyes drifted shut as she began to doze.

The door opened, and she woke with a start. "Talon?" Through the red curtains, she could see a dim shape, large and broad-shouldered, but not tall enough to be Talon. She

licked her lips with a suddenly-dry tongue. "H-hello? Who's there?"

A deep voice chuckled. "Well, what do you know. My friend has brought home a pretty souvenir." A large hand drew aside the curtain.

Raina opened her mouth to scream, but the hand clamped across her lips, silencing her.

\* \* \* \*

Talon leaned against the wall and exhaled, wiping sweat from his brow. It was good to be home, but the homecoming had been exhausting. He'd spent hours answering the same questions over and over while dealing with an endless parade of courtiers, palace servants and relations ... and then, as if that wasn't enough, they'd given him an official banquet to welcome him back. More questions had been asked, some of them awkward and probing.

It was a good thing he'd managed to get Raina away before the *really* awkward questions could start. Poor Raina had looked so overwhelmed—not that he could blame her. Hells, the experience had been exhausting for *him*, and he'd known what to expect; people could be very excitable sometimes. He should have warned her.

Ah well—he was alone at last, and he could retire to his chambers and get some proper rest. But first....

He walked down the hall, to the room where he'd sent Raina, and opened the door.

His jaw dropped.



Raina was naked, her wrists and ankles bound to the bedposts with velvet ropes. A thick ball-gag had been stuffed into her mouth, and her legs were spread painfully wide. She'd been shaved bare from the waist down.

She looked up at him, eyes wide and dark with fear. Tears streaked her cheeks.

Shock quickly gave way to anger. He clenched his fists, the blood pounding behind his eyes, turning his vision red—then took a slow, deep breath, forcing himself to be calm. "It's all right, Raina, I'll get those ropes off." He knelt by the bed, undid the knots, then removed her gag and gently gripped her chin, staring hard into her wet eyes. "Who did this to you, Raina? Was it the servant?"

"N-no. He left as soon as he brought me here."

"Who, then?" Without meaning to, he slipped into her mind, soothing her fear and confusion, a reaction so natural it seemed almost instinctive. "Can you describe him? Or her, if it was a woman."

"It-it was a man. He had black hair and black eyes, and a red earring."

Talon only knew one man who wore a single red earring. He cursed softly and looked around for her robes, but didn't see them anywhere. He opened the closet instead. Whoever had used the room last had been much larger than her. The robes he found folded on the closet shelf would swallow up her small frame, but they would cover her, and that was the important thing. Raina looked like she desperately wanted to be covered. Her arms were crossed over her breasts, her thighs pressed tightly together. A look of gratitude flashed

over her face when he handed her a plain, white robe. "I'm sorry about this, Raina," he said quietly. "I shouldn't have left you alone. I should have ordered someone to guard you."

"It's not your fault."

He squeezed her hand. "Thank you, youngling. But it is. I didn't think, and you suffered for my carelessness. I'll be back shortly." His eyes darkened. "I'm going to have a little discussion with the man who did this."

"Why did he do it?" she asked. She was still trembling, but at least the tears had stopped. "I thought he was going to rape me, or even kill me. When he took out that razor...."

"She shuddered. "I'd never been more scared in all my life. But he just tied me up and left. After ... shaving me." She averted her eyes, cheeks flushed.

Talon hesitated. The truth would probably embarrass her, but a lie would be unfair. "He probably assumed you were my bed-slave," he admitted at last. "Maybe he saw the servant bring you here and assumed that I'd want to make use of you after the banquet, so he decided to ... make things interesting for me. In any case, he'll be punished."

Raina nodded uncertainly. "Hurry back, all right?" She swallowed, pulling the robe tighter around herself. "I don't want to be alone."

"I won't be long." He removed a key from his pocket and pressed it into her hand. "If it makes you more comfortable, you can lock the door."

"Okay."

Talon managed a smile for her, then turned and left the room. He strode down the hall, trying to control his anger. His jaws were clenched so tight that they hurt.

It didn't take him long to find Makkias. The tall, muscular man was leaning against a wall-column, grinning. His ruby earring glinted. "Did you enjoy the little surprise I left for you, Talon? Delectable piece of meat, that Kiran. A bit riper than I usually like them, but still young enough to be interesting." His grin faded when he saw the look on Talon's face. "What's wrong? Oh, don't tell me you're angry. All right, so maybe it was a bit presumptuous to touch your personal property, but we've known each other for so long. I thought...."

"She is *not* property," Talon snapped. "She is a friend, and I expect her to be treated with the respect due an honored guest."

Makkias' mouth fell open. "A *guest*? You've got to be joking."

"Do I look as if I find the situation amusing?" growled Talon.

"For Suhara's sake, Talon, she's one of them!"

"So she is. And if not for her help, I'd still be in Kira, with a slave-crown around my head. What you did to her was unforgivable."

"*Klist!* I didn't know! I thought she was just a bed-slave!"

"Even if she *was* a slave, this wouldn't be acceptable. Report to Captain Gato tomorrow for six lashes."

His eyes widened. "Now I *know* you're joking."

Talon's iron-hard expression didn't waver. "I have never been more serious. Just feel fortunate I didn't give you a

harsher punishment. I'm sorry our reunion had to be like this, but I can't exclude you from the laws of our city ... and I can't allow so disrespectful an act to go unpunished."

Makkias shook his head in disbelief. "After all the times I got you out of trouble when we were boys...."

"This is far more serious than some childhood prank, and you know it. I've never seen her so frightened or humiliated. Let this serve as a warning to think more carefully in the future. Good day, Makkias. I'm going to go check on Raina." He turned and walked away, boots clicking sharply against the marble floor. He could still feel Makkias' astonished eyes on his back, but he didn't turn.

Perhaps six lashes was too lenient a punishment, but in truth, he disliked having Makkias whipped for an act which the young nobleman had probably seen as a friendly joke. He and Makkias had grown up together. They had both been finalists in the Trials, but Makkias had never seemed to resent Talon for being Chosen. Makkias wasn't a bad person—or at least, Talon hadn't thought so.

Even so, his friend had changed. His prejudice against Kirans had deepened and grown. His jokes about wanting to "just blow up the whole damned planet" no longer seemed quite like jokes. And his treatment of Kiran slaves, particularly the women, was abhorrent.

Talon thought about Raina's frightened, tear-streaked face, and his hands tightened into fists. Yes, six lashes had been *far* too lenient—but hopefully, it would be enough to drive the seriousness of the situation into Makkias' head. Perhaps he

would finally learn that he could not treat Kirans cruelly and expect it to go unpunished.

Talon opened the door to Raina's quarters. The healer was curled up on the bed, hugging herself. The oversized robe, wrapped around her slender frame, looked like a nightgown. She looked up sharply as the door opened, then relaxed when she saw his face.

Talon sat on the edge of the bed and rubbed her back with one large hand. He was prepared to pull away if she showed discomfort at being touched, but Raina pressed close to him and hid her face against his shoulder. For a long moment, he didn't speak, just held her and waited for her trembling to subside. Then he slid two fingers beneath her chin and gently tilted her face upward. "I'm sorry for that, Raina. I truly am. He'll be punished for what he did."

"Who is he?" she whispered.

"Makkias. He's highborn, and has a seat in the Council, so he lives in the palace. We've known each other a long time." He noticed the tray on the bedside table. There were a few crumb-covered plates atop it, and an empty jug. Well, at least Raina had gotten the chance to eat before Makkias showed up ... and the servant-boy had been considerate enough to bring her dinner. It was good to know that at least some palace-dwellers knew how to treat a guest. "It's late," he remarked, "and I have to rise early tomorrow. There are a great many matters to attend to. Do you think you can sleep?"

"I don't know. I'll try."

"I'll bring you something that will help you." He rose and pushed the button on the wall-com.

"Yes, my lord?" came a voice from the speaker.

"Silarin, bring me a cup of hot trikka." Several minutes later, a servant—not the boy who had waited on Raina, but a stout young woman—arrived at the door bearing a silver cup. Talon thanked her, took the cup and handed it to Raina.

She stared into the dark brown, steaming liquid and sniffed warily. "What's in this?"

"Herbs, mostly. You wouldn't recognize their names."

A smile twitched at the corners of her mouth. "Try me. Back in the Hold, we often used herbs imported from Skandria, and many other worlds as well."

"Very well. The drink is brewed from a mixture of dried saki, crushed migoon, and jull-sap. I think there's a little kez in there, too."

"Saki is a bush with red leaves that grows in dry climates. It can be used to bring down fever and is also a mild sedative. Migoon is the root of a tough yellow grass called zheli. It's a sedative as well, and is also said to induce pleasant dreams if taken before bed. The jull is a slender, pale-barked tree, and its sap has no medicinal purpose, but is often used to flavor drinks because of its sweet taste. And there's no such plant as kez."

"Correct. The kez is a beetle." He chuckled softly at Raina's expression. "Don't worry, you're not going to find a thorax floating in there. They're crushed to a fine powder and strained through a tea-bag."

"Still ... a *beetle*?"

"They add spice. And they're quite nutritious. The nomads will eat them live, sometimes. They say the wriggling sensation is half the pleasure."

"Now you're just trying to make me squeal in disgust. You're as bad as a little boy, Kadir Talon." Despite the scolding in her voice, her eyes sparkled, and he suppressed a grin of satisfaction. His teasing had had the desired effect.

Raina took a tiny sip of her drink. "It does taste good," she admitted. She sipped again and licked her lips. "Almost like cinnamon."

"Didn't I tell you?"

Raina chuckled. "You don't have to look so smug." Before she had even finished the mug, he saw the herbs taking effect. Her lids were drooping, her muscles languid. Taking the cup from her loose grip, he set it aside and gently pushed her to the bed.

"Rest. You've had an exhausting day."

"Mm."

Talon's eyes flicked over her. She looked very tempting, warm and receptive and open. Her full lips had relaxed and parted, and she didn't seem to notice that her oversized robe had slipped open, revealing a breast as pale and round as a moon. Her nipple was a tiny pink bud, all but hidden by tight creases of flesh. He knew from experience how responsive it was. All he had to do was touch it, and it would rise and harden.

His mouth was dry. If he wanted, he could take her now. Her inhibitions were lowered. She wouldn't resist, and

tomorrow, she might not even remember it except as a pleasant dream.

Raina murmured something incomprehensible, and her long, heavy lashes flickered. Heart pounding, he reached out to touch her breast ... then pulled his hand back. Damn it, what was he thinking?

Talon quickly covered the soft, tempting flesh and stood. His heart pounded. He had to get out of here before his self-control slipped. It was late, and weariness tugged at his mind, but he knew he wouldn't be able to sleep. Exhausted as he was, his body was wide awake and aroused.

Exercise. Yes, exercise would help. He'd go train for an hour or two and when he retired to his quarters, he'd be too tired to think of anything but rest.

He draped a blanket over Raina and tucked her in, hands trembling slightly with the effort of controlling himself. He took a deep breath and turned away. As he walked out of the room, he couldn't help glancing over his shoulder to steal one last look at her. She looked so vulnerable, curled up beneath the covers, a soft tendril of hair lying across her forehead. He hated leaving her alone. A part of him wanted to stay with her, to stand guard over her, but he knew that was out of the question. Her soft breathing, the warmth of her body nearby, would drive him mad. He would send a guard to stand by her door until he returned.

The door made scarcely a creak as he eased it shut.

Raina would not be harmed again. He would make sure of that.



## Chapter Eight

Raina was wakened by a tentative knock on her door.

She sat up, knuckling sleep from her eyes, and yawned. She felt good, refreshed. At first, she didn't know where she was. The room around her was unfamiliar. Then the memories slammed into her, momentarily robbing her of breath.

She was on another world, surrounded by aliens. She had fallen asleep in the palace of a foreign king.

The knock came again, slightly louder, and Raina gave a start. She gathered the blankets against her chest, staring at the door. After what had happened last night, she wasn't particularly eager to let visitors into the room. At last, she cleared her throat softly and called, "Who is it?"

"Just me. Master Talon sent me to bring you breakfast."

She relaxed at the voice of the young servant. "Come in."

The door opened, and the slender, dark-haired adolescent entered, carrying a tray. Eyes lowered, he set it on the nearby table. "Hope I didn't disturb your sleep, sir."

"That's all right." She paused, blinking. "What did you call me?"

"Sir." He raised his dark eyes and looked at her uncertainly. "Isn't that what important people are called on Kira?"

"Yes. Well, the men, anyway. Women are called ma'am."

He flushed. "I couldn't call you that. That's our word for ... something else."

She decided not to ask. "What about that word you were using before? *T'sana*, was it?"

"That's not exactly right, either," he said. "*T'sana* means a highborn Skandrian lady, and you're not Skandrian. I don't want to insult you by calling you a title that isn't right."

Raina laughed softly. "So much fuss over a name! It really doesn't make a difference to me. 'Sir' will be fine, if you find that most comfortable. Or if you like, you can just call me by my first name. It's Raina. What's yours?"

He blinked, as if caught off guard by the question. "Shen."

"Pleased to meet you, Shen." She lifted the covering of the tray. The plates beneath were heaped high with dark bread, golden-red fruit and round, white things which were probably either nuts or vegetables. No meat, she noted, though she knew that meat was a large part of a Skandrian's diet. Talon must have requested a vegetarian meal for her. "This looks wonderful."

"I'm glad." He smiled. She noticed that his teeth weren't as sharp as most Skandrians'. That, combined with his lighter skin, made her wonder if he was a hybrid. Maybe that was why he was a servant. Maybe hybrids didn't have the same opportunities as most Skandrians. They weren't treated very well on Kira, either, or so she'd heard. "Is there anything else you need?" asked Shen.

"No, this will do fine." She paused. "Did Talon say when he would be back?"

Shen shook his head. "He's in a council-meeting, I think."

"How long do those meetings usually last?"

"Anywhere from an hour to all day. And he's got a lot to catch up on. He might be awhile."

"Oh," she said, disappointed. Adjusting to life in the palace would be difficult without Talon nearby, but she supposed there was nothing to be done about it. He was a kadir, a king, with a weighty responsibility toward his people. His duties came first.

Still ... she couldn't help feeling a little betrayed. After what had happened last night, she desperately needed a familiar, comforting presence.

She turned her attention back to Shen. "Tell me, where is the nearest place I can wash up?"

"There's a bathing-pool just down the hall. I'll show you there after your breakfast, if you like. You can ring for me." He pointed to the com on the wall, then looked at the floor, suddenly awkward and shy. "Ah ... I guess I'll leave and let you enjoy your meal."

"You're welcome to share with me, if you like. I don't think I could eat all this anyway."

He flushed again, all the way up to his ears. "Oh no, I couldn't. It wouldn't be proper. But thank you, sir. You're very kind. I, ah, I'd better be going." He hurried out of the room, leaving her to wonder if she'd offended him somehow.

She sighed and looked down at the food.

The servants had brought her dinner last night, but she'd been too exhausted to taste it. Now, as she studied the tray's contents, her stomach awakened with a rumble. She bit into one of the pink fruits, which was tart and juicy. Raina gobbled it down, licked the juice from her fingers, then helped herself

to three slices of the soft bread and nibbled one of the odd white things. They were moist and crisp, like melon, but they didn't have much taste. Water-roots. She'd heard they were often included in Skandrian meals as a substitute for beverages, since real water was so scarce.

When she'd finished, she rung for Shen. She'd never used a wall-com before, but it seemed simple enough. It was just a matter of pushing the small, silver button and waiting. Shen appeared at her door just moments later and led her down the hall, through a beaded curtain in an arched doorway, and into an indoor garden lush with ferns and huge, star-shaped yellow flowers. The floor here was mosaic, rather than marble, and the scarlet and yellow tiles formed patterns of overlapping concentric circles, like ripples in a pond. In the center was a round pool bordered by polished stones. Light glimmered on the water. She followed the light to its source and saw a skylight in the ceiling. The glass was milky and clouded, softening the light.

Beautiful—but not at all what she'd expected. "This is the bathing-pool?"

Shen nodded, looking puzzled at her shock. "Is something wrong?"

"No, not at all, I just didn't expect it to be in a garden ... or for there to be fish in it." She watched quick, dark shapes flitting about near the bottom. "Those *are* fish, aren't they?"

"Sucker-eels. Don't worry, they won't bother you. They're just there to keep the pool clean. They eat the algae and bacteria."

Raina swallowed hard. Beetles in tea and eels in bathing-pools. She had a lot to get used to. "What's to prevent someone from walking in on me? I mean...." She glanced at the beaded curtain. "I can't really lock the door."

"Don't worry, no one will come in. This is the Master's private pool, but he said you could use it."

"Well, all right. Thank you."

"No need to thank me. It's my pleasure to help you," he said, with a formality that didn't fit his adolescent awkwardness. "Enjoy your bath, sir." Shen turned and walked out, brushing aside the beaded curtain.

Raina waited until he was gone, then undid the sash at her waist and let the robe slip down. She felt very exposed—especially now, with her sex stripped of hair. The feel of air on that tender, unprotected flesh made her very aware of her vulnerability. She was a foreigner here, and there were those who didn't respect foreigners. Already, she'd been assaulted once, and the incident had left her frightened and unsure of who to trust. She probably wouldn't have even let Shen into her room, if he hadn't been so young, and if he hadn't treated her kindly before.

Raina approached the pool and stared into the clear water, watching the eels wriggle across the bottom. She'd never been particularly squeamish about slimy things—she'd encountered her share of worms and slugs back at the Hold, where she'd spent many hours gardening—but she didn't relish the thought of one of those things slithering up her leg while she was bathing. Still, Shen had said they wouldn't bother her ... and she really did need a bath.

Raina dipped a slender foot into the water and shivered at the coolness. Slowly, she submerged herself.

Fresh water was rare on Skandria. These pools, she thought, must be a luxury enjoyed by a select few.

Raina unbraided her hair, letting it spill over her shoulders, and tilted her head back to wet it. She looked around for soap and found, instead, a small, flat stone, rough as sandpaper. She picked it up, rubbing it between a thumb and forefinger. She'd heard that Skandrian commoners used sand to scrape away dead skin, as a substitute for bathing. This was probably for the same purpose. Gingerly, she rubbed it over her arms and shoulders. It left red marks. Goddess, she thought, these Skandrians must have skin like leather.

"Ah. I wondered where you were."

She turned sharply to see Talon standing in the garden. "I wouldn't use that stone if I were you. It can be very harsh on the skin if you're not used to it."

"Talon!" A flush rose into her cheeks, and she crossed her arms over her breasts, covering them. She supposed she was being silly—it wasn't as if he hadn't seen them before—but old habits died hard. "I thought you were in a meeting."

"I was. I cut it short. I wanted to make sure you were all right." He began to undo the lacings of his shirt.

Raina tensed. "What are you doing?"

"I need a bath." He shrugged. "The pool is big enough for both of us."

Raina forced herself to relax, reminding herself that in Talon's culture, nudity wasn't a taboo. And it seemed rude to chase him out of his own pool. A quick glance over her

shoulder confirmed that he was already naked and slipping into the water, sleek and graceful as an otter. "I'll let you bathe in private," she said awkwardly, and started to climb out ... but he caught her wrist.

She stiffened.

"You don't have to leave," he said.

She dared not look at him. She knew that the sight of his lean, naked body, submerged in that clear water, would undo her. "I should." She climbed out of the pool, slipping into his robe. Her fingers trembled as she tied the sash.

"I'm sorry I wasn't there when you woke," he said. "The council demanded my presence. There were several urgent matters they needed to bring to my attention."

"I understand." She stared at nothing, rubbing her arms. "You have a responsibility. You can't be expected to play nursemaid to me."

"I hardly think of it as playing nursemaid." He climbed out of the pool and stood before her, dripping wet. "Back on Kira, where I was the alien, you were there for me. You taught me and helped me, and made me feel less alone. The least I can do is try to return the favor."

Her breath caught in her throat as strong, warm hands slid over her shoulders. She wondered if he understood the power he wielded over her, if he knew how much a simple touch aroused her.

She forced herself to step away from those gentle, knowing hands and turned to face him. "Really, Talon, it's all right. I'm an adult. I can handle a strange environment. It *is* a little frightening, but I don't want to pull you away from

your duties and your people just so I can feel more comfortable." She hesitated. "What *are* those urgent matters the council wanted to talk to you about, anyway?"

He looked away. "While I was gone, one of our major cities was destroyed by Kiran war-ships. They attacked it from space, bombarded it with lasers. Thousands were killed."

"Dear Goddess," Raina whispered.

"That's not all. Some council-members want to retaliate by destroying Ghedd."

Raina's eyes widened. "Why Ghedd? There are no military or government bases there. They don't manufacture war-supplies. Ghedd's just a group of farming communities!"

"That's exactly the reason they want to target it. If they cut off your food supply, your planet will be weakened."

"But Ghedd is filled with civilians! Don't they care that they'll be killing innocent people?"

"Their minds are clouded by anger. They don't understand that one injustice doesn't justify another."

"But you're the kadir! They can't attack without your permission. Can they?"

He hesitated, then sighed. "I exaggerated when I said my word was law. I have a great deal of power—more than any single person on Kira—but the council can override my decisions with a majority vote. I'll do everything in my power to stop them, but if they outvote me...."

Raina's stomach cramped with dread. Her legs felt like rubber.

He took her into his arms. "I didn't want to tell you. I knew it would only worry you. But I also know that you wouldn't



want me hiding important truths from you. Just try not to think about it. There's nothing you can do. Anyway, even if they outvote me, they can't attack immediately. Perhaps, by the time they've jumped through all the legal hoops, their heads will have cooled and they'll reconsider their decision."

Raina nodded. She couldn't find her voice. Instinctively, she pressed closer to Talon, seeking reassurance.

He was hard and warm, and he smelled clean and very male. As she breathed in that scent, she felt her skin growing warm. His hand slid down her smooth back, stopping just above her buttocks.

She pulled away.

"What's wrong?"

Raina stared at the floor, cheeks flushed. "I don't understand how I can be aroused at a time like this. I'm terrified for those people, for the future of both our planets, and I grieve for everyone who's been hurt by this war ... yet I still want you. I haven't been able to stop thinking about you since we...." She swallowed. "Since we made love."

Warm fingers grazed her cheek, then slid beneath her chin, tilting it upwards. "You've occupied my thoughts as well," he said quietly. "There's no shame in yearning for pleasure and release in times of darkness." His lips met hers, very lightly. The touch sent a tremor through Raina's body.

Talon's breathing had quickened. His tongue stroked her soft, full lips, then dipped into her mouth. When she didn't pull away, his hand moved lower, gripping one smooth, wet buttock. His fingers sank hungrily into the soft flesh. Raina gasped and gripped his arm, trembling as his knee pushed

between her thighs and she found herself straddling his muscled leg.

She panted, torn between need and fear. Last night was still fresh in her memory. After the terror of believing a stranger was going to rape her, she didn't know if she was ready for intimacy. But at the same time, she wanted—needed—Talon to make love to her, as if that would erase the memory of what had happened and plant a new, sweeter one in its place.

She felt her hips moving of their own accord, grinding against the hard knee between her thighs, riding him. Her breasts had tightened, her nipples hardened to small peaks.

Talon knelt, arms surrounding her, and lowered her to the ground. As she lay on her back, Raina's eyes flicked to the bulge between his legs, then back to his face. Hesitantly, she reached out and wrapped her fingers around his hard shaft. Talon shuddered and moaned softly. Raina's heartbeat quickened. It felt so good, so empowering, to affect another person so strongly with such a soft touch.

"Don't stop," Talon whispered hoarsely.

Raina slowly massaged his organ, sliding her fingers up and down its length. "What's your word for this?" she asked.

*"Ketik."*

She repeated the word, tasting it. She liked the feel of it in her mouth. Slowly, she rubbed her thumb over the tip of his ketik. "It's beautiful."

A faint smile crossed his lips. "What? The word, or the thing you're holding?"

"Both."

As she continued her gentle strokes, Talon let out a soft, rippling growl and caught her wrist. "I'm going to burst into flame if you keep this up, youngling." He cupped her womanhood, making her gasp.

Raina lay on her back, the cool marble floor against her hot skin. She tangled her fingers in Talon's long hair. A sudden fear struck her, and she glanced over her shoulder, at the doorway. Only a thin, beaded curtain separated them from the hall. "Talon ... what if someone sees us?"

"No one will. That curtain may look flimsy, but you can't see through it from the outside. This is my private chamber. No one will enter without permission." His fingers slipped into her sheath and moved inside her, stroking her walls. Fresh heat flooded her sex. "And if someone happens to glimpse us, naught will come of it. We're two adults indulging in a little intimacy. We aren't doing anything wrong."

"On Kira, we'd have a lot to worry about if someone saw us," she murmured.

"We aren't on Kira. There's nothing to fear, Raina. Just feel. Let go of your worries and let yourself be pleased."

She looked down at herself, at the place between her spread thighs, a place she had spent most of her life trying not to understand or think about, except in a purely academic way. How strange, to see it so exposed ... stranger still to feel the soft, pleasurable ache growing inside her as it was invaded, stroked, teased and explored by Talon's experienced hand.

The ache grew and grew, until she felt she would burst if she didn't find release. "Talon, please!" she cried. Her hips

arched upward, into his touch, as she panted. "Please ... I need you inside me."

He kissed her flat, damp belly. "All you had to do was ask." Talon's fingers withdrew from her body as he positioned himself over her. A moment later, she felt him sliding into her wetness. She hissed softly at the faint pain of her sheath stretching—then he began to move, his ketik stroking her private, inner places, and the pleasure blossomed inside her. She pushed upwards into his slow thrusts, eyes closed, lips parted. "That's it," he whispered into her ear. "Move with me."

She matched his thrusts as their rhythm quickened. Talon suddenly rolled onto his back, giving her control. The gesture shocked her, but not as much as her own response. She gripped his shoulders, straddling him, and jerked her hips up and down, impaling herself again and again on his hard shaft. She had never known such hunger, such desperate need. She moved up and down and side to side until she found a position that was just right, a position which brought his shaft firmly against her clitoris each time she thrust. She bit her lower lip, hips grinding against Talon's, striving to push him deeper into her. She felt as if she were striving for something, trying to climb a steep, slippery slope. Then, at last, something seemed to burst inside her, flooding her insides with heat. She gasped, her body stiffening. Her sheath clenched tight around Talon's member.

Raina went limp atop him, panting. Talon promptly rolled over again, pinning her beneath him. Another few thrusts brought him to his own climax, and his hot seed flooded her

body, trickling into places so deep and private that not even his shaft could touch them.

For a long moment, they lay together in silence, feeling each other's heat and breathing ... then, with a soft grunt, Talon pulled free. But she could still feel his seed inside her, hot and very alive—a part of him to keep with her, in the depths of her body.

"Who would have guessed there was such hunger in you, little healer?" he whispered into her ear, and she felt heat creeping into her cheeks. She murmured something incoherent in response. She had behaved like a bitch in heat. She ought to feel embarrassed—and while she *was* a little embarrassed, she also felt unaccountably pleased. She could tell that Talon had enjoyed her aggressiveness as much as she had, and it puzzled her, because it contradicted everything she'd ever learned about the ways of men and women.

Talon sat up. "I've gotten you all sweaty ... and just after you've bathed, too. Shame on me." He smiled. "I'll just have to make up for it by washing you off. May I, Raina?"

She nodded, unable to find her voice. Talon lifted her gently and descended the polished stone steps leading into the pool. He submerged her in the cool water. She gasped softly as his fingers moved between her legs and opened her, allowing the water to flow into her body.

Her eyes flicked downward, watching the eels squirm across the pool's bottom, over and around Talon's feet. Talon followed her gaze. "Do they bother you?" he asked.

"A little."

"Try not to think about them. As I'm sure you've been told, they're completely harmless. They like to tickle your feet, but they never bite." He lifted her out of the pool and took a large, soft towel from a rack which she hadn't even noticed until then, hidden, as it was, by a large fern. Talon lay her on the floor and began to dry her off, starting with her face and working his way downward. She shivered as the soft fabric brushed her tender, still-swollen nipples. The towel moved lower still, drying her flat, smooth belly, and trailed over the sensitive folds tucked between her thighs. A tiny moan escaped her throat. "If you keep this up much longer, I'm going to be ready again in no time."

"And I'd be ready to fill you again ... but I'm afraid I can't stay. More damned council-business. If I can, I'll be back again in a few hours to check up on you, and Shen can show you around in the meantime."

"It's all right, Talon. I'll be fine on my own for awhile."

"Still, I'd prefer to check on you. For my own peace of mind, if nothing else." He pressed a soft kiss to her forehead, then to her lips. "And tonight, you'll have to appear before the council yourself."

She stared at him in surprise. "Me? Why?"

"I'm going to introduce you as my personal healer and make it clear that you are to be treated with the respect due a woman of your position. Last night's incident will *not* be repeated."

She bit her lip. "Talon ... what happened to that man? I mean, where is he now?"

"Probably in his room, recovering from the whipping. I wouldn't worry about him. He'll avoid you like the plague now that he's learned the consequences of meddling with you."

Her mouth fell open. "You had him *whipped*?"

"It's a common punishment on our world. I know that Kirans prefer to confine people for long periods of time, but here, we believe that physical punishment is less cruel."

She sat up. "How can you believe that whipping is more humane than a prison-sentence?"

"Easily. Skandrians are accustomed to pain. Even for those of us who live in cities, life is harsh, and we often go thirsty if Suhara is not feeling kind. But we value freedom above all else. Most of us would go mad if forced to spend our days behind locked doors. What would you rather endure, a day of pain, or a year in a small, windowless cell?"

"A day of pain, I suppose. Still ... it seems so brutal. So demeaning." She studied his face, the harsh, chiseled planes, the knife-edge cheekbones and firm mouth. She knew that that mouth could be soft, sensual ... but right now, it looked like the mouth of a hardened warrior. "Were you ever whipped?"

"Many times. Mostly for childhood pranks. Children are not normally subjected to the lash, but since I was a contender for the throne, much more was expected of me. The standards they set were higher, the punishments harsher."

"Contender? I don't understand."

"We are not like most monarchies. Power here is not inherited, but is granted based on intelligence and ability. Children who show great potential are selected at an early

age. Then, as they mature, they are expected to pass certain trials. The one who passes all the trials successfully becomes the king's Chosen, the heir to the throne."

"Oh. So that's what the Trials are. I remember reading about them when I studied Skandrian culture, but the books were rather vague." She looked up at him. "What are they like, the trials? Are they painful?"

"Some," he replied. Raina waited, but said no more on the subject. Not wanting to push him, Raina remained silent, watching as he toweled her legs and feet. He did a thorough job, drying between each toe. Then he stood and handed her the robe.

Raina slipped into it. "This reminds me, I'll need some clothes if I'm to appear before the council tonight. My olds robes were taken from me by...." She swallowed. "By that man."

"By now, the servants should have some suitable clothes in your wardrobe. They've also washed your old robes, if you'd prefer those." Talon quickly toweled himself off, then dressed. "I must go now." He hugged Raina briefly and kissed her forehead. "You know the way back to your room, don't you?"

She nodded.

"I'll see you tonight, then," said Talon, and left.

Raina tied the sash of her oversized robes and returned to her bedroom, closing the door behind her. She sat on the edge of the bed and braided her thick, damp hair. After securing it with a forest-green ribbon that someone had left on the bedside table (perhaps for that very purpose), she



opened the closet doors and studied the clothes within. There were long, white robes, like the one she wore now—but presumably closer to her size—as well as loose, flowing tunics and trousers. She rubbed the material between a thumb and forefinger. She couldn't tell exactly what it was, except that it was fine-woven, soft yet strong, and slightly stretchy. Her old robes, looking like a peasant's garb next to the silky finery, also hung in the closet.

She studied her choices, considering, then selected her old robes and changed into them. If she was going to be introduced as Talon's healer, she might as well look the part. The robes, though plain, were distinct enough to mark her a sri'dith.

It occurred to her that she would never wear the sky-blue robes of a Clearstone, never complete the Rites that would make her a full-fledged healer. The stone on her brow would always be green.

Her throat tightened with homesickness. She thought of her cozy little room, of the woods and fields behind the Hold, the eternal surge and ebb of the sea which lulled her to sleep each night. She wondered if she'd ever hear the sea again except in a vid or a recording.

She wiped away the tears on her cheeks and turned her thoughts away from that path. She'd chosen to leave that life behind her, and it was too late to go back. Even if she *could* go back, the Hold would probably never accept her. She had helped Talon escape his prison, and that act had sealed her fate. Regrets and what-ifs were pointless. On Kira, she would always be an outcast and a rebel.

But what would she be on Skandria?

\* \* \* \*

Makkias sat in his chair, stiff and uncomfortable. The Council Room chairs were large and soft, but he still winced with each movement. The welts on his back burned like fire. He'd had them treated immediately after the punishment, but there would probably be scars, all the same.

Whipped. He, Makkias, second in line for the Choosing, old friend and trusted advisor of the kadir of Skandria, had been whipped. And for what? He'd made a bed-slave into a more appetizing presentation, that was all ... or at least, he'd assumed she was a bed-slave. Wasn't that what any rational person would assume? He wasn't entirely convinced that his assumption was wrong, either ... but of course, Talon's sense of righteousness wouldn't let him admit that he'd taken a concubine. Self-deluding fool.

Makkias gritted his teeth until his jaws ached. He stared at the door, waiting for Talon to appear and take his seat at the head of the table.

Talon had changed. He'd shown such promise at first. He'd been a sharp-minded and relentless young man, determined to see Skandria emerge victorious from the long war. Makkias had been pleased to serve him ... but the years had softened Talon. He felt too deeply for these stupid, sheep-like Kirans, inventing laws to protect the so-called rights of war-slaves, and now, he had the gall to bring one into the palace, not as a prisoner, but a *guest*. It made Makkias' blood pound in his veins.

Barbarian  
*by Amanda Steiger*

The doors opened. Talon entered, wearing a long, black cape that flowed behind him as he walked. Soft-hearted or not, his appearance was just as formidable as ever. His black tunic and trousers, a striking contrast to the white worn by most everyone else, accented his well-defined muscles. He moved like a cat, all lean, sinuous grace, and his black hair was bound back in a tight queue.

Talon took a seat. His chair was enormous, with a towering back of rich, dark wood and velvet-padded arms. It should have dwarfed him, but somehow, it didn't. Of course not, Makkias thought bitterly. Talon was all image. "Good afternoon and good hunting," he greeted, and twelve heads inclined toward him respectfully—including Makkias', though he was feeling anything but respectful at the moment. "As you all know, we have a very important issue to discuss. The fate of the city of Sauric weighs heavily on my heart, as I know it does on yours ... but I pray that we won't act hastily in our anger, and that we'll do everything in our power to prevent the loss of more innocent lives." His eyes swept over them. "As you know, I am against the idea of attacking Ghedd. There are no military bases there, only civilians who are trying to go about their day to day lives in peace. *They* are not the enemy."

"Of course they are," said a female council-member. "They may not be soldiers, but they're still Kiran. They hate us and the ideals we represent. They cry out for our blood, every one of them."

"I see. And you can personally verify this? You've spoken with every man, woman and child on Kira?"

The woman's jaw tightened. "Of course not. But I've seen vids. I've seen enough of their kind to know they're all the same."

"And I say to you, they are not. I have been among them. Their ways are different from ours, and I find some of their customs offensive. But then, they view many of our customs as barbaric as well. Some *do* hate us, despite the fact that they have nothing to judge us by except their biased public vids...."

"Precisely," the council-member interrupted. "They're ignorant fools."

Talon's eyes hardened. "You miss my point entirely, Tihandra. If we hate them for judging us as a collective rather than individuals, why should we judge them in that same way? Why do we seek to mimic what we hate? The Kirans don't *all* hate us. Some do, but some of them sympathize with our plight, and some know nothing of us because they don't wish to trouble their minds with matters of war. What is there to gain by killing those people? If we destroy Ghedd, then we are no different from the Kirans who attacked Sauric."

Tihandra stood, gripping the edge of the table. "How dare you say that! Don't you have any love for your own people?"

"*T'sana!*" snapped an older council-member, "show proper respect for your kadir."

She ignored him, glaring at Talon, demanding a response.

Talon's face remained carefully neutral. "I love my people deeply, and I don't wish to see any more of them hurt, which is why I oppose the destruction of Ghedd. If we start killing

civilians, the Kirans will respond in turn. More innocents will die because of our foolish pride and blind rage."

The table erupted into shouts as everyone tried to talk at once. Talon held up his hands, palms out in a request for silence, and the cries reluctantly died down. "Most of you seem to believe that destroying Ghedd is the proper course of action. Tell me, then: what do you think it will accomplish? What will we gain? Do you expect the Kirans to surrender?"

"Not right away," someone said, "but if we keep attacking, they'll realize that resistance is futile and surrender. The war will end."

"So, you propose that we continue to kill civilians, even after Ghedd has been destroyed—that we destroy cities filled with children who are too young to have more than a vague idea that there is a war going on, and who won't understand why they're dying or what they've done to deserve such a fate—so that maybe, when the Kirans are too broken and defeated to continue fighting, the war will end. But what do you think they'll be doing while we destroy their cities? They'll be attacking *us*, trying desperately to cripple our world so that we can no longer kill their children. *Our* children will die."

"They're already attacking us," said Tihandra.

"Not with their full strength. And even if they were, attacking Ghedd would accomplish nothing except to guarantee that they'll continue their attacks. They will not surrender, because in their minds, doing so would allow us to enslave their planet, a fate worse than death, or so they believe. And if we do as you suggest, if we destroy city after city, then we must commit ourselves to killing millions,

perhaps billions of innocents—and for what? The chance that they might eventually surrender? Even if they do, will it be worth the cost? Will it save more innocent lives in the long run? No. We will have won the war, but in the process we will have become the most despicable murderers the universe has ever seen. Sentient races across the galaxy will hate our name, will curse us as monsters and child-killers."

Tijandra sat down, lowering her eyes. She looked almost ashamed, and Makkias frowned. She'd been talking sensibly until Talon started running his mouth.

"Then what do you suggest we do?" Tijandra said, sounding more cross than enraged. "Sit here and let them keep attacking us?"

"No. I'm suggesting we continue to do what we've been doing. We'll strengthen our defensive measures and attack any battle-ships they send to our planet."

Makkias—who, up until that point, had been silent—finally spoke. "Please explain to me how that will win the war."

"I'm not interested in winning the war," said Talon. "I'm interested in *stopping* it. Why should we continue a war with no purpose? We're not even sure how it started. We can speculate, but we have no real facts. We don't know who struck the first blow. We don't know whose fault all of this is. It may be Kira's, but it could just as easily be our own. How many innocent lives have to end before one of our worlds can finally admit that this is a stupid war?"

The echoes of his voice faded into silence as the council-members stared. Most were looking at him as if he had lost his mind.

"We will vote three days from now, at first moon rising," said Talon. "In the meantime, think over what I have said. Think about your own families, your children. Ask yourselves if you'd be willing to sacrifice them for this war ... because unless it is stopped, it will continue until both our worlds are so devastated that no one can claim the title of victor."

The council-members dispersed.

\* \* \* \*

The palace was, by far, the most beautiful place that Raina had ever seen. Shen had spent the past few hours giving her the grand tour, showing her the gardens, the library and the Great Hall, a room so large that the entire Hold would fit into it easily ... and there was still so much she hadn't seen. Everywhere, she saw carvings or artwork of dragons. They wrapped around columns, danced across the walls and ceiling, and decorated chairs and tables.

"How beautiful," said Raina, running a finger lightly along a marble dragon's snout. The dragon was one of six serpents, twining together to form a towering fountain in the center of the Great Hall. Water gurgled and splashed from the gaping mouth, tumbling to the clear pool below. "Why so many dragons, though?"

"The dragon is the symbol of royalty. They're noble creatures, proud and free. Our leaders study them and try to be like them."

"But they're not real ... right?" She looked at him uncertainly. "They're just a myth."

"Oh no, sir," said Shen, looking at her with wide eyes. "It's been over a century since one's been seen, but they're real. They roam the deserts, far away from civilization, and they're so big that one could hardly fit in this palace."

That was a staggering thought, considering that the palace was as big as a mountain. "Surely you're exaggerating. What would such a creature eat?"

"They eat whole herds of akiell. That's why there aren't many dragons. The environment can't support more than a few. But they're wonderful creatures. I've read all about them. And then there's the Great Dragon, the one who created the universe."

She studied the face of the marble dragon. Its eyes were jet, with chips of inlaid gold. Eyes like Talon's. "So you worship the Great Dragon? What about Suhara?"

"Suhara's just another name for the Great Dragon. The lesser dragons are here to remind us of the goddess' beauty and power."

Privately, she still doubted that there were actual dragons on Skandria, but decided to let the topic rest. There were other things on her mind. "Tell me more about how your kadors are chosen. What are the Trials?"

A shadow slipped across Shen's face. "I don't know much about them," he said. "We aren't really supposed to speak of them. Only the High Circle knows what happens during the Trials."

"And who are they?"



"The priests. The ones who choose the boys and girls who will compete in the Trials." He glanced around nervously, as if revealing even this much was risky.

She suppressed a sigh of frustration. These people certainly seemed to work hard to maintain their aura of mystery. She tried another, safer question. "Who ruled Skandria before Talon?"

Shen relaxed. "Kel-kadir Thauron. He still lives in the palace, and Talon still seeks his council when he needs advice. Thauron's the one who took over while Talon was gone, but the job wore him out. He's getting old, and his health's not so good. They almost decided to put Makkias on the throne if Talon didn't come back in the next moon. He was Second Chosen."

Raina felt a chill. Makkias. She knew that name. "So Thauron isn't Talon's father?"

"Oh, no. The kadir's father is a mason ... or was, before his son was Chosen. Now he's a noble, or something."

"And Makkias ... what's he like?"

"Don't know. I just know that he's Talon's friend, or used to be, anyway. He sort of scares me." Shen hesitated, glancing around nervously, then looked up at Raina. "Don't tell anyone I said that, all right?"

"I won't, I promise. To tell you the truth, I feel the same."

Shen shuddered slightly. "He's got strange eyes. They seem to look right through you ... sort of like Talon's, but not in a good way, you know?"

"I know exactly what you mean." Her skin crawled at the memory. Makkias' eyes had seemed to cut through her like

dark knives. His stare was as intense as Talon's, but the effect was as different as ... well, as rape was from lovemaking.

At least he hadn't touched her, except to bind her wrists and ankles. She didn't think she'd have been able to stand it.

"Are you all right, sir?" asked Shen, frowning with concern as he studied her face.

"Fine." She managed a smile. "I was just thinking."

"Are you sure? You're pale." He touched her arm, then quickly snatched his hand back, blushing. "If you need to rest...."

Raina pressed a hand to her forehead. Her skin was damp. "Now that you mention it, perhaps it would do me good to lie down for awhile."

He nodded, his face solemn. "I'll take you back to your room."

They walked down the hall, past tapestries of black and gold dragons against a scarlet background. Once they reached her room, Shen asked her if there was anything she needed. Raina shook her head and thanked him quietly.

She lay in bed and stared at the ceiling, Makkias' cold black eyes hovering in her mind.

## Chapter Nine

Mother Tabitha sat at her desk, her face bathed in the pale screen-glow of a small, portable computer. Her fingers flitted over the keys, and the soft clicks echoed through her office.

"I thought the sri'dith code prohibited the use of technology," said a wry voice from the door. "Shouldn't you be meditating? Seeking answers from your Goddess?"

"You know me better than that," said Tabitha, without taking her eyes from the screen. "Technology is power. A formidable power. The others are fools to eschew it." Tabitha tapped another key and ran her tongue over her lips. As she scrolled through the information on the screen, her lips curved slowly in a smile. "Ah, here it is. You see? You can find any information you want, if you know where to look."

A man leaned against the wall, arms folded over his chest. He wore simple traveler's clothes which offered no evidence of his true identity. "You've found a way to break through the shield protecting that girl's mind?"

"Indeed I have. The technique is described here. I need only to practice and refine it." Tabitha leaned back in her chair, satisfied. "And if Raina has done as I suspect—has gone to Skandria with that ... creature—she will be a rich source of information."

"Yes, I see," the man said thoughtfully. "Like having a moving camera in the heart of Skandria's largest city, broadcasting constantly to Kira. We could learn all the city's weaknesses, and strike. If it works, of course."

"Of course it will work. The Skandrian is a fool if he thinks he's the first to use that particular shielding technique." She smiled. "How ironic, that Raina's soft spot for the alien might give Kira the very information it needs to crush Skandria once and for all." She glanced out the window, at the setting sun. "You should go. If you remain too long, the others will start to feel suspicious."

"I'll be on my way, then." He reached out to shake her hand across the desk. "If you get any new information, contact me."

She nodded coolly. "I'll be in touch."

\* \* \* \*

Warm fingers brushed Raina's cheek. She murmured softly and rolled onto her side. She opened her eyes and found herself gazing up at Talon's face. He was sitting on the edge of the bed, lightly stroking her cheekbone with the back of one finger. "Sorry for waking you, but I didn't think you'd want to sleep through dinner." He glanced at the tray on the bedside table. "Shen brought this just a few minutes ago. He's concerned for you, you know. I think he knows that you're troubled."

She sat up, knuckling sleep from her eyes, and smiled. "He's very kind. Bright, too. Once you get past his shyness, he seems to know a little about everything, and he's eager to tell you. He taught me a lot today."

Talon chuckled. "Oh, dear, do I have competition?"

"You might, if he was a few years older," she teased, then turned her attention to the tray's contents. "Looks delicious. What's that fruit called?"

"Mobi." He sliced the ripe, golden-red fruit into four pieces. The inside was moist and yellow. Picking up a slice, he offered it to her. "It's considered very sensual, you know. Supposed to be an aphrodisiac."

"Considering that I had some at breakfast and couldn't keep my hands off of you in the pool, that's very possible." She suckled the tip of the proffered slice, drinking its sweet juice. "If that *is* the case, maybe I shouldn't have too much. We have things to talk about."

"Like what?" He set the slice down.

"Like the meeting you just got back from." Her face grew serious. "Did the council make a decision?"

"Not yet. I gave them three days time to think over it. I would give them more, if I could—I think this decision is much better made with a cool head—but our laws prohibit stalling a vote for more than three days."

"That makes sense. Otherwise, nothing would ever get done. Still, for such an important decision...."

He nodded grimly. "It feels rushed, but there's nothing more I can do, for the time. I said my piece. I tried my best to convince them to lay their anger aside and see the situation clearly." His eyes looked suddenly weary. The thin veneer of playfulness had slipped away. "I fear their pride blinds them, though. They're afraid of being seen as cowards if they don't counter-attack. They think that if they slaughter enough civilians, Kira will surrender, but the Kirans are more

determined than they realize. They will fight with their last breath. So the war will go on, as it has for centuries."

"It all seems so hopeless sometimes," Raina said quietly. "I wonder if there'll ever be peace again."

"If enough people want it, there will be." He lightly touched the stone on her forehead. "I disagree with many of your sri'dith ideals, but I admire your peaceful ways ... your compassion for all people, regardless of where they were born or what they look like. Even if the sri'dith don't always live up to those ideals, their code is noble." His thumb stroked her full, soft lips, then trailed down her throat, over her pulse. "You remind me of how precious life is," he said. "When I touch you and feel the warmth and life in your body, I think of how amazing it is that we're here at all ... that we exist and breathe and are aware of the universe ... and I want to guard that life in you."

"Talon...." "She couldn't manage anything else. A lump had risen into her throat, cutting off air and voice.

"It's all right. You don't have to say anything. My day has been far too serious as it is. I need to put it from my mind."

"Can you do that?" she asked. "Just set the thought aside? When something is troubling me, I can't think of anything else."

"It's a skill that develops over time. A kadir has many things to think about, few of them pleasant ... but if I let them dominate my mind, I lose sleep and appetite. A mind clouded with worry cannot think clearly. If I didn't divert myself once in awhile, immerse myself in something simple

and pleasurable, I'd be so frayed and exhausted that I wouldn't be able to make sound decisions."

"Well, if that's the case, I'll be glad to occupy your mind for awhile. I don't think I'll be able to forget about Ghedd, but I can at least try." She picked up a slice of mobi and nibbled the edge. Talon's eyes focused on her lips and tongue. She met his gaze, smiling, and sucked the tip of the mobi-slice. Raina was inexperienced in the art of seduction, and for a moment, she worried that she was making herself look silly. That notion was wiped away when she heard his breathing quicken. His eyes never left her lips for an instant as she finished the slice and picked up another.

"Are you going to let me waste away of starvation?" he asked, his voice soft and husky.

"Perish the thought." She held the slice to his lips.

Talon took it into his mouth, his teeth scraping delicately at the moist, golden fruit. She watched his lips move, and her heartbeat quickened. They were so tempting; firm, yet mobile. "You know...." He paused to lick juice from his lower lip. "It's said that these fruits are only ripe for a single day. If you get them too soon, they're too hard and tart. If you wait too long, they soften and start to lose their flavor. You have to capture that fleeting day of perfection, when the flecks of red start to show through the golden skin. It takes a careful eye to spot that day, but it's worth it. And when you pluck that perfect piece of fruit and, when your teeth slide through that sweet, moist flesh as you take your first bite ... what a moment that is."

Raina stared, hypnotized by his words, by the movement of his mouth.

He sliced another fruit, removed the tiny, round pit at its center and bit into the largest slice. "Here, taste this one. It's even better." He offered her the slice.

She leaned forward ... but instead of taking the fruit, she licked the juice from his fingertips. She heard the breath catch in his throat as she took one long, hard finger deep into her mouth and suckled.

Talon groaned softly, wrapping one arm around her and pulling her closer. "Suhara...."

A little thrill raced through Raina's body. His voice was deep and rumbling, his eyes dark, smoldering embers. One warm hand slid down to cup her breast, squeezing lightly. He undid the sash of her robe and pulled it open, exposing her breasts, then touched the slice of mobi to her nipple. She gasped. Talon smiled and swirled the moist fruit around that little pink bud, leaving a trail of juice. "You're going to get me all sticky," said Raina.

"We always wind up getting each other sticky, with or without mobi," he said, and nipped her ear playfully. He squeezed the slice, dribbling juice onto her flat belly. "We can always wash off afterwards." Pushing her gently to the bed, he began to lick her breasts clean with slow, wet strokes of his tongue.

"Mmm ... oh, Talon," murmured Raina. Her breasts felt achingly full, her nipples so hard and tight they almost hurt. He pinched one, rolling it between a thumb and forefinger. She found herself rubbing her thighs together as a delicious



heat bloomed between them. Warm ooze, her own juice, seeped from her sex. "My turn," she said, taking the mobi from him. She sat up, placed a hand on his broad chest and pushed him to the bed. He lay down, watching her with a smile. With her free hand, Raina undid his belt and pulled his trousers down, exposing his hard cock and full, dark sack. She wet her lips and applied the fruit, now warm from her flesh, to his erection. His dark eyes blinked, widening—then rolled back as a soft moan escaped his throat. Raina stared at his cock. It was so big, heavy with blood and laced with veins. A bead of white welled up from the dark head, glistening. She ran a fingertip along one thick, blue vein, and a shudder of pleasure rippled through Talon's huge body. Leaning down, she wrapped her soft, moistened lips around the tip of his cock, tasting sweet mobi juice and salty male flesh.

His fingers slid into her hair. "Open your mouth," he whispered.

Her lips parted.

"Wider."

She opened her mouth as wide as it would go, and her eyes widened as his thick organ pushed inside. The hard, hot flesh filled her mouth completely, stretching her jaws. For a moment, the tip scraped the back of her throat, and she gagged. He pulled back—but just a little. Large, uncertain eyes turned upward, meeting Talon's.

"Keep going," he said, breathing heavily.

At first, she wasn't sure what to do. His cock felt so big and awkward in her mouth. Then, slowly, she began to slide her lips up and down his length, letting her teeth graze it just

slightly. He groaned, his hands tightening in her hair. "Yes, Raina."

Encouraged, she kept up the gentle motion, caressing him with her lips and tongue. Talon pulled in his breath sharply, then yanked his cock out of her mouth. Semen spurted from the tip, splattering onto the bedcovers. "Suhara," he panted. "You're a very quick learner." He pulled her into his arms. "And now to return the favor," he said, and squeezed her bottom with his long, strong fingers. "Knowing you, you'll have me ready again in no time, and I can make love to you properly."

Despite the heat in her veins, Raina felt a sudden chill. She looked over her shoulder.

"Is something wrong?" Talon whispered, lips brushing her ear.

"Nothing. I just ... for a moment, it felt like we were being watched."

"There's no one here, Raina. If there was, I would sense their presence. No one in this palace is powerful enough to shield his mind from me."

"You're right. I'm sure it's nothing." She leaned her head against his shoulder, trying to ignore the unease. Her nape prickled. It was the same feeling she'd always gotten, back in the Hold, when a Clearstone was spying on her thoughts.

Talon frowned. "If you'd rather not...."

"I want to."

A hand slid into her open robe. Without removing her underwear, he trailed a finger along her crease ... then, through the cloth, began to rub her clitoris. She gasped

sharply and fumbled out of her robe. "Take off your clothes," she said. "I want to feel your skin against mine."

He nodded, stood and undressed within moments, flinging his clothes to the floor, exposing the long, clean lines of his muscular body. Like a predatory cat, he crawled onto the bed, his movements fluid and graceful, yet quick, sharp. She reached for her underwear, the last barrier between them.

"Let me," he said softly, and hooked his fingers beneath the waistband, sliding them off with maddening slowness. As he did, his mouth sought her breast, tongue swirling slowly around the prominent, red nipple. It glistened with his saliva. "Like a little berry," he murmured, stroking it with the tip of his calloused thumb.

He cast her underwear aside with a flick of his wrist and turned her around, pulling her sleek, smooth back against his chest. His sparse chest-hair tickled her. She remembered hearing somewhere that Skandrian males never had much body-hair, and that certainly held true with Talon, but it didn't bother her in the least. It let her see the perfection of his skin.

Talon bent his head to kiss her smooth shoulder as his sensitive, knowing fingers spread her folds. Raina watched, holding her breath, as he slowly pushed a finger into her body. A shudder rippled through her, and she moaned softly as he stroked her from within. He seemed to know instinctively which spots were the most sensitive, and exploited them mercilessly, rubbing and pressing until she thought she'd go mad with pleasure.

The feeling of being watched invaded Raina's haze of pleasure, sharp and sudden as a knife between the ribs. She stiffened.

Talon froze. "Did I hurt you?"

"No." She swallowed hard, eyes darting about.

He withdrew from her slick passage. "If this feeling won't go away, then perhaps you shouldn't ignore it," he said quietly. He handed Raina her robe. She slipped into the garment, trying to ignore the unsatisfied ache between her thighs. "You feel as if someone is watching us?"

"Sort of." Raina chewed her lower lip, still scanning the room. She could see nothing suspicious, no hidden cameras or listening devices in the corners. But of course, if they were there, they wouldn't be easy to see. "It's like a little tickle in the back of my head."

He stared hard into her eyes. "Do you think someone is spying on you telepathically?"

Raina felt a jolt of shock. That hadn't even occurred to her. "I ... I don't know...."

"Look into my eyes. I'm going to enter your mind."

She nodded and relaxed her guard, letting him slip into her thoughts. She felt him probing within, carefully examining the interior of her mind, making sure the shields he'd erected were still firm. "I can sense nothing strange," he said, withdrawing mentally. "I'll check the room for bugs."

"You don't have to," she said, feeling a little foolish now. "It was probably just my imagination. I've been jumpy these past few days."

"Still, it's best to be sure." He rose to his feet, still naked, and began a thorough check of the room, running his hands over every surface, peering into every shadow. She held her breath, watching him. When he'd finished, he returned to the bed. "The room is secure."

She sighed. "You must think I'm a complete ninny, jumping at shadows."

"Not at all. It's wise to be cautious, and to heed your instincts. My life has been saved more than a few times because I refused to ignore that little tickle in the back of my head, but I've had more than a few false alarms. It's nothing to be ashamed of." He stroked her hair. "Shall we continue, or would you rather just finish dinner?"

"Our food's gone cool by now, I'm afraid."

"Have you?"

A teasing little smile curved her lips. "Why don't you check?"

He smiled back and slipped a finger between the lips of her sex. "No. Still warm."

He continued where he'd left off, stroking her most intimate places. His eyes were on her breasts, watching the nipples rise and tighten again. He leaned down, tongue stroking her soft, full lips. Raina's small, pink tongue crept out to meet his, and he wrapped his lips around it, sucking it as if it were candy. His hands slid down her smooth back, over her breasts and belly and legs, as if needing to touch every inch of her. She spread her legs, and his hot, hard cock pressed into her softness, opening and filling her.

Raina moaned unselfconsciously, gripping his shoulders. Talon withdrew until only the very tip of his maleness was still inside her ... then pressed forward again, filling her even more deeply. "Harder," she whispered. A small part of her was still shocked to hear herself begging so shamelessly for pleasure, but the rest of her was consumed with need. She closed her eyes, her hips rising and falling rhythmically to meet his thrusts.

Talon's self-control was admirable. He managed to hold back until he heard her begin to cry out as she rode the wave of her climax ... and only then did he let his iron control slip, and pounded away until he released into her.

They lay together, panting, Talon's fading organ still embedded in her flesh. When he'd caught his breath, he pulled free. "No matter how many times we do this, I still want more," he whispered hoarsely.

"Me too," she whispered back. "I never imagined...." Words failed her, and she simply stared up into his gold-flecked eyes as some fierce, nameless emotion burned in her breast. It wasn't love, exactly, but neither was it simple desire. Whatever it was, it was strong. He had taught her so much, had opened her mind to a world of sensations she'd never dreamed existed. She was glad to be able to give him pleasure and release, and a brief escape from the pressures of duty.

But was it only an escape? Or did his feelings run deeper? For that matter, did hers?

She was still wondering about it when sleep gently claimed her.

Barbarian  
*by Amanda Steiger*

\* \* \* \*

Talon woke to the feeling of a soft, rounded body pressed against his own. He opened his eyes and looked into Raina's sleeping face. Her lips were relaxed and parted, her lashes dark crescents against her pale cheeks. He glanced out the window. It was early morning. The sky was still dark, but pink and golden clouds streaked the horizon, and all but the brightest stars had faded as the daylight crept out from behind the distant dunes. The white city was rose-tinted in that soft light.

He'd had a dream last night, a startlingly vivid, strangely erotic dream. In it, he had been swimming in a lake the color of Raina's eyes, far below the surface yet feeling no need to come up for air. The water had caressed his body like silk. It reminded him of Raina's skin against his, of her sweet, enveloping wetness.

Then the dream had changed. He had felt the presence of something ominous, and had looked up to see a dark shadow near the surface of the lake, outlined by glaring sunlight, an intruder in his peaceful sanctuary. At that moment, he'd awakened.

He stroked Raina's thick, unbound hair, thinking about the dream. It hadn't been a nightmare, exactly, but it was troubling. He was certain it meant something, and it seemed somehow connected to the uneasiness Raina had felt last night. Right now, though, there was no time to muse over it. He had a meeting to attend, and he still had to bathe, dress, and eat.

"Raina," he whispered into one small ear.

She moaned softly and snuggled closer. One slender leg hooked over his body, and his breath caught in his throat. Her firm, silky breasts were crushed to his chest, and his groin stirred. After last night, he should be exhausted and spent. Instead, he wanted to take her again, now, while she was drowsy and open. He wanted to roll her onto her back, spread her creamy, white thighs and slide slowly into her, to watch her awake to the feel of him moving inside her.

He knew there was no time, however. Forcing himself to ignore his growing need, he sat up. "Raina," he said again, a bit louder.

"Mmm?" Her lashes lifted, revealing a glint of soft, sleepy gray-blue.

He couldn't help taking a moment to admire those eyes. They were a mix of colors, soft pearl gray around the edge, darkening to the color of a storm-cloud near the center, a blue so deep it almost blended with the pupil. "I have to go. I have another Council-meeting."

"Oh." The disappointment in her voice was obvious. It made him ache.

"I'm sorry. I wish I could stay." Leaning down, he kissed her softly, then climbed out of bed.

There was no time for a real bath. He stepped into the small, tiled stall adjacent to the room and let a blast of air and chemicals scour him clean. He stepped out and gathered his clothes. Meanwhile, Raina climbed out of bed and tentatively entered the stall.



As he dressed, it occurred to him that he hadn't introduced her to the Council yet. He supposed today was as good a day to do it as any. His mood lightened at the prospect of having her nearby when he faced the Council. Her supportive presence would help him keep his courage. At the same time, he worried about their reaction. He knew that Makkias would be displeased, and several other Council-members had a strong distrust of Kirans ... and Raina had not even been born on Skandria. She was a foreigner in every sense of the word. He knew that someone (or several someones, more likely) would object.

Ah well. He would deal with that problem when it came.

Raina emerged from the stall, rubbing her arms. "What a strange way to take a bath," she remarked, and looked up at him. "Do you know when you'll be back from the meeting?"

"Change of plans," he said, lacing up the sides of his trousers. "I'd like to bring you with me."

Her eyes widened. "Me? Why?"

"I want to introduce you to the Council. Unless, of course, you'd prefer to wait. You can always meet them later."

"I guess now is as good a time as any."

"You sure?"

She nodded.

"Get dressed, then." He took her robe from the closet and handed it to her.

"What should I say to them?" she asked as she shrugged into the robe.

"Whatever you choose. You can remain silent, if you wish, and let me introduce you, or you can just tell them your

name and profession. I'll make sure they understand that you are my personal healer. They must know, above all else, that you are a person to be respected."

She self-consciously touched the green stone in her forehead. "It feels deceptive to give them the impression that I'm a professional. I'm just a novice. I haven't even begun my Rites." She sighed. "And now, it looks like I'll never complete my training."

"You know a great deal of conventional healing, though, do you not? Your knowledge of herbal remedies is impressive, and you have at least a rudimentary command of telekinesis. Who's to say you can't develop that skill on your own? And even if you don't, you're still the equal of an accomplished Skandrian healer."

She frowned. "You really think so?"

"Absolutely." He lowered himself to one knee to fasten his boots and looked up, half-grinning. "Even a die-hard Skandrian chauvinist will admit that Kirans have superior healing techniques. Though most of them attribute it to devil-magic."

"But Skandrians are far superior fighters."

He shrugged. "Every culture has its own strengths and weaknesses. But that's not the point. I'm just saying that it will make sense, even to the most distrustful Council-members, for me to have a Kiran as my personal healer. I doubt they'll know what the color of your mindstone signifies, anyway."

"You're probably right." She smoothed the wrinkles out of her robes and slipped into her sandals. "I just hope no one

asks too many questions. I can't lie, but the truth wouldn't go over too well."

"The truth rarely does," said Talon.

\* \* \* \*

Makkias watched as the slender Kiran entered the Council-chamber. She moved like an akiell, swiftly and gracefully, but with caution in every step. Her eyes darted about as if she expected an attack. Now, she took her seat beside Talon, and anger flared inside him. It made his blood boil to see a common bed-slave being treated like a member of the nobility.

Makkias sniffed the air. Sure enough, beneath the sharp odor of cleansing-chemicals, he could smell fresh semen. Despite all of Talon's nonsense about the Kiran being an honored guest, he was clearly making use of her. Not that Makkias could blame him for being possessive, really. She was quite a prize. Even her baggy robes couldn't hide her ample chest ... or the alluring smell of a ripe, receptive young female. He closed his eyes, trying to control the lust that surged through him.

"Members of the Council," Talon said, standing, "this is Raina, of the sri'dith. From this day forth, she is to be my personal healer."

Makkias' eyes snapped open. "I object!" he shouted, unable to contain himself any longer.

Talon turned cool, dark eyes on him. "This is not open to debate. I am making an announcement, not asking for a vote. This is my decision, and mine alone."

Makkias clenched his jaws. "Forgive me if I speak out of turn, my lord Kadir, but how can you give a foreigner such an important position? How can you trust her?"

"Raina has already saved my life once, and she helped me escape safely from Kira. In fact, I could not have done it without her. I am indebted to her. Furthermore, I have had access to her mind on several occasions, and I've seen nothing within that leads me to believe she is a spy."

"She swears loyalty to Skandria, then?" asked another Council-member.

"She swears loyalty to no world. Only to me. To a sri'dith, nationality is of no consequence. She is not Kiran or Skandrian or anything else, she is simply Raina. I'm aware that some of you may have trouble accepting this idea, but it is the simple truth." He placed a hand on Raina's shoulder.

"This woman is to be treated with the same respect you would give any member of the nobility. Is that understood?"

The Council-members shifted uneasily.

"I said, is that understood?"

A murmured chorus of, "Yes, my lord."

"Good." He sat. "Now, let's move on. Last meeting, Lord Kashton suggested that we cease all trade with Ria 2 due to the fact that they've been trading with Kira. What are your feelings on this? You all know, I trust, how I feel about the matter."

And so it went. Raina sat quietly, staring at the tabletop, uncomfortably aware of the suspicious eyes on her. Her heart pounded, and the room seemed far too hot for comfort. She looked up and saw Makkias staring at her. His gaze slid

insolently downward, studying her breasts, and she felt a flush rising into her cheeks. Instead of lowering her eyes, she sat up straighter, glaring at him. She knew his type. She couldn't allow him to think she was easily intimidated, or he'd just be more inclined to bully her. With her eyes, she let him know just what she thought of him.

Makkias' face darkened. She felt the touch of another mind against hers ... not Talon's, but *his*. A vision flashed through her head, a vision of sweat and skin, of flesh pushed into unwilling flesh. A vision of rape. She gave a start. She didn't know whether he'd purposefully sent it or if she had simply picked it up, but she had no doubt that it came from him. Rage flickered inside her. Narrowing her eyes, she sent him a vision of a bloody and painful castration.

Makkias stiffened. He had seen that. Good.

His upper lip twitched, as if he wanted to snarl ... then he looked away, and she felt a small thrill of triumph.

She knew, though, that she couldn't allow herself to get too confident. She had to be careful around him in the future. He might leave her alone if she stood up to him ... but then again, it might just make him more determined to intimidate her. Raina kept her gaze fixed on Talon's face, content to ignore him for the time being.

At last, the meeting ended. Talon dismissed the Councilmembers, who rose from their seats and filed out. Makkias was one of the last to go. As he walked out, he cast a last, cold glance at Raina, like a dart of ice shooting from his mind into hers. She tried, unsuccessfully, to suppress a shiver.

Talon touched her shoulder. "I noticed him looking at you during the meeting," he said. "Do you want me to deal with him?"

She shook her head. "If he thinks I can't stand up for myself, it will only encourage him. I'll deal with him."

"Brave words, but I'd be careful if I were you. Makkias is a powerful telepath, nearly as powerful as me, and physically strong as well." His hand tightened on her shoulder. "I think it would be best if I had a personal talk with him. I don't know if those six lashes were enough of a lesson."

She nodded reluctantly.

"I know you'd rather face him yourself," said Talon, "but I'm only being practical. At least you didn't let him bully you during the Council meeting. I noticed the looks passing between you two. He was trying to frighten you, but you weren't the least bit intimidated."

She chuckled weakly. "Yes, I was. But I'm glad it didn't show."

Talon smiled. "Come on," he said, "let's get something to eat. I don't know about you, but I'm starving."

"Me too." Raina rose to her feet. Just then, she felt it again, that tickle of uneasiness in the back of her brain, that feeling that unseen eyes were watching them. She tried to dismiss it. She knew it was just her own paranoia, playing tricks on her mind.

They left the Council Room. Talon led her to a small, private dining chamber—well, small compared to the rest of the palace, anyway—and summoned a servant to bring them lunch. It arrived shortly on white plates, steaming. There

were strips of pale meat—akiell, Talon told her—grilled and covered in a dark red, spicy sauce. Raina declined the meat, despite the tempting smell. There were also water-roots, a plate of slender red roots which Talon called kaffa, and a bowl of thick, yellow cream he called parmu. Raina sampled it with a tiny spoon and found it incredibly sweet. It was so rich, in fact, that she couldn't eat more than a few spoonfuls.

Try as she might to concentrate on the food, the uneasy feeling refused to go away.

"Is something wrong?" asked Talon, a forkful of flaky meat halfway between the plate and his mouth.

Raina sighed. "It's that feeling again. I...." She gasped as Talon suddenly penetrated her mind. She felt herself being held and examined. When he withdrew, she was still shaking slightly from the unexpected invasion.

"Damn," he muttered, rubbing his forehead.

"What is it?"

"Someone was spying on your thoughts. They fled as soon as they felt my presence, but there's no doubt about it. Somehow, someone penetrated the shields I set up. I'm sorry for the invasion, but if I'd given any warning, it would have given them time to withdraw."

"Goddess," Raina whispered. Her heart sunk. "Do you think it was Makkias?"

"No. He's not *that* skilled." Talon's expression was grim. "I think it was the Clearstones."

Raina's eyes widened. "Do you think they can reach me? All the way from Kira?"

"To a skilled telepath, distance is of no consequence. They still have a link to your mind, through this." He touched the green stone on her forehead. "The only way you can ever be truly free of them is to remove it."

She covered the stone with one hand, as if to protect it. "I told you, that's not possible."

"And I say that if they were able to install it without killing you, there must be a way to reverse the process. But right now, we don't have time to search for that way. We'll simply have to be careful. If you get that uneasy feeling again, Raina, tell me immediately. They may be using you as a spy, trying to get information about Skandria ... and if that's true, they may have already found out quite a bit."

She swallowed. "As if I didn't have enough to worry about, now there's the possibility of the sri'dith using me against your home world."

"That bothers you?"

"Of course. Why shouldn't it?"

He stabbed a piece of akiell with his fork. "Well, you're Kiran. It seems you should want your planet to win. Are you bothered by the thought of Skandria being defeated?"

Raina frowned. She had the feeling she was being tested, and she didn't like it. "It's as you said to the Council. I have no nationality. I don't care who wins. I just want the bloodshed to end. You should know that ... or were you only saying that to ease the Council's suspicions?"

"No," he said quietly. "I meant it. But it is very difficult, Raina, to remain unbiased ... to not see one's own people as somehow more worthy of rights and life. As wrong and



dangerous as the Council's attitude is, I understand it. Until recently, I shared their opinions. Some of them, anyway. I didn't hate Kirans, but if a Kiran child and a Skandrian child were trapped in a burning house and I could only rescue one, it would have been an easy choice. Now, though ... things have changed, somehow. My feelings have changed."

"What changed them?" asked Raina.

He looked at her quietly and said nothing, but the answer was plain in his eyes.

They finished their meal in silence. When the last bite had been scraped from their plates, Talon rose to his feet. "I must return to the Council Room. Tonight, I think, my personal healer will have her first official job. I'm going to have a monstrous headache."

Raina smiled. "Headaches, at least, I can cure." She paused. "What am I to do while you're away?"

Talon leaned close and spoke quietly. "I think you should start learning self-defense."

Raina didn't have to ask why. She shivered at the memory of Makkias' eyes on her. "Where shall I go? Who'll teach me?"

"Tika will. She's very good. I'll summon Shen to lead you to the training room." He leaned down to plant a soft, almost chaste kiss on her cheek, then left. Raina sat, still feeling the warmth of his lips. She touched the spot lightly with her fingertips.

## Chapter Ten

Shen appeared a few minutes later. He led Raina down a marble-columned hall and into a large, plain room with white walls and a floor of sand—to cushion falls, she supposed. Shen vanished as quickly as he had appeared, leaving her alone in the room with her new teacher.

A tall, lean Skandrian stood before her, arms crossed over her chest. She wore a black jumpsuit and knee-high boots. Her hair was cropped close to the scalp, and a thin, white scar ran across her cheek. "You are Raina?" she asked. Her voice was as hard as the rest of her.

Raina nodded, her cheeks growing warm as she thought about how soft and weak she must look to a woman like this.

There was no judgment in Tika's black eyes, however, just cool, neutral appraisal. "Have you ever used a weapon before?"

"I've never fought at all," said Raina.

"Well, you can't train in those robes." Tika pointed to a door on the other side of the room. "Change into a jumpsuit, and we'll begin."

Raina walked across the room and entered the small changing-closet. As she closed the door, a light came on overhead, revealing stacks of jumpsuits folded neatly on shelves. She slipped out of her robes and into one of the dark, close-fitting garments. Turning, she faced the full-length mirror.

The jumpsuit was so tight she might as well have been naked. It looked as if she'd been dipped into black paint. She felt a moment's horror at the thought of leaving the closet in *this ...* but then, only Tika would see her, and Tika was wearing the same thing. She had less to reveal, though. At the moment, Raina almost envied her for that.

Raina folded her robes, leaving them on the shelf, then stepped into the Training Room. Tika's eyes skimmed over her. "Hm. No muscle at all."

Raina tensed, but did not look away. "What did you expect? I'm not a fighter."

"So you said. Well, let's start with the basics." Tika beckoned.

Raina slowly approached and stood before the trainer.

Tika moved so quickly that she was almost a blur. One hand lashed out like the head of a striking serpent, aiming for Raina's shoulder. With a cry, Raina leapt to one side, losing her balance and landing painfully on her bottom. Tika stood over her, hands on her hips. "Well, your reflexes aren't bad, at least."

Raina scrambled to her feet and took a step backwards. "You tried to hit me!"

"Of course I did. How did you expect to learn? Now, stand and hit *me*. As hard as you can."

"I ... I don't know if I can do this."

"You want to call off the lesson?"

Raina hesitated. She thought about Makkias' cold stare and shook her head.

"Then hit me."

Clumsily, she bunched one small hand into a fist and thumped it against Tika's shoulder. It was like hitting a brick wall. Tika, predictably, didn't even flinch. "That," she said, "was pathetic."

Raina's cheeks were hot with a mixture of anger and embarrassment. "Insulting me won't help. I tried, didn't I?"

"You weren't hitting with your full strength. Try again, and don't hold back. Don't worry about hurting me. I've faced men three times your size and left them bloody and unconscious."

Raina struck her again. It hurt her hand, but didn't faze Tika in the least. Breathing hard, Raina pulled her fist back to strike a third time, but Tika caught her wrist. "Enough. I have a lot to teach you. You are a healer?"

Raina nodded uncertainly.

"Good. That will work to your advantage in a fight. You already know what parts of the body are weakest and most sensitive."

"I don't like the idea of using my healing knowledge to cause harm."

Tika raised an eyebrow. "Why not?"

"It's a violation of the sri'dith code, and everything I believe in. I took an oath to never use my gift or my knowledge to hurt anyone."

"Well, it's time to learn a new code, if you want to protect yourself. In case you didn't realize, self-defense usually *does* involve hurting people. If you're so firm in your convictions that you'd rather die than hurt your attacker, then stop wasting my time."

Raina sighed. "Will I learn hand-to-hand combat?" she asked.

"Yes ... eventually. But you won't be able to defend yourself effectively for some time. In the meantime, we must find a suitable weapon for you." Tika pulled a blazer from the sheath at her hip and placed the hilt in Raina's hand. "Hold it like this." She wrapped Raina's slender fingers around the hilt. "Firmly. How is the weight of the weapon? Is it too heavy?"

The metal was cool, but it seemed to burn her fingers. She had an idea that any weapon would feel too heavy to her, but she said, "It feels fine."

"Good. You must keep it with you always." Tika's eyes were grim. "You were right to come to me. The city is not safe for Kirans. Those who can't fight don't last very long, even if they live in a palace."

Raina's mouth was dry. "What do you mean?"

"Accidents happen. They aren't really accidents, of course, but no one gets punished for killing a foreigner. Just be careful."

\* \* \* \*

The lesson was long and hard, and by the time it was over, the inside of Raina's jumpsuit was soaked with sweat. Still carrying the gun that Tika had given her, she headed immediately for the bathing-room. Once within, she pulled the beaded curtain shut, set her gun down and stripped out of the suit. Tight as it was, it was surprisingly easy to peel off.

She wondered if she should take the gun into the bath with her. Tika had told her to always keep it near. But how was she supposed to wash while holding a gun? Besides, she still didn't feel comfortable touching it. Tika had shown her how to use it and gone through a few shooting-drills with her, but she was still afraid she'd point it the wrong way and shoot herself.

Raina sank into the cool water with a sigh of relief. Too tired even to be bothered by the silvery eels flitting around near the bottom, she floated on her back, unaware of the eyes watching her.

Makkias stood outside the doorway, peering through the beaded curtain. His heart thudded against his ribs.

The Kiran floated, half-submerged, her long, unbound hair floating around her. Her lips were parted, her eyes closed. Drops of water clung to her full breasts and trim, flat abdomen, glistening like beads of crystal. The hallway felt suddenly, stiflingly hot. Makkias' tunic stuck to his sweat-damp back as he struggled to control his breathing. He could smell her—warm skin, musky womanhood, hair and sweat, the moistness of her secret flesh, mingled with the faint tang of Talon's semen still deep inside her—and the smell nearly drove him insane.

His eyes strayed to the gun lying near her discarded jumpsuit. It was far enough from the pool that she might not reach it in time—but then again, she might. He didn't know how fast she was, and he preferred not to take the chance.

The Kiran suddenly opened her eyes and looked around uneasily, sensing his presence. "Hello?"

Makkias stepped away from the door and pressed his back to the wall. Seconds ticked by ... then the Kiran laughed, as if embarrassed by her own uneasiness.

Oh, but she had reason to be uneasy.

He returned to his place by the door, knowing she couldn't see him. From a distance, the bead curtain appeared as solid as a wall. Only by standing close, his nose a few inches from the long strings of colored beads, could he see through the tiny openings between them. He ran his tongue over dry lips as he watched her bathe, her white skin flashing in the beam of sun from the skylight. Unsurprisingly, his ketik was hard and throbbing.

Ever since he and Talon were boys, Talon had gotten the finest things. But never before had he possessed something that Makkias so desperately wanted. The unfairness made him want to scream. Talon had everything. He was kadir. He could have any woman he wanted. Why couldn't Makkias have this one thing?

Makkias took a deep breath and slowly stepped away from the door. The time was not yet right. He had to be patient, or he would set his own trap.

Soon, though. Soon.

\* \* \* \*

Three days passed uneventfully. Raina spent her time exploring the palace and training, seeing Talon only in the mornings and at night. His life was eaten up by Council-meetings. She didn't know what they were about—she never asked—but he was always exhausted by the time he returned

to the bedroom. Already, she'd begun to think of it as *their* room. He'd slept with her every night since their arrival, and each night, before they made love, she eased his headaches and soothed the tension from his sore muscles.

She wished she could do more.

Then came the day they both dreaded, the day the Council would make its decision. The fate of Ghedd hung in the balance. The lives of a million innocent men and women, going about their daily routine without the faintest notion that they might be vaporized before the next dawn. Raina had thought about warning them somehow, but she had no idea how to get a message to Kira—and even if she succeeded, would they take her seriously? Would they evacuate Ghedd based on the word of one person?

It was torture to stand by and do nothing, but there seemed to be nothing she *could* do.

Raina ate her breakfast in slow, mechanical bites, eyes downcast and heart heavy. The only sound was the clinking of silverware. Talon reached across the table and gave her hand a reassuring squeeze, but said nothing. It was just as well. There were no words to ease the crushing burden on her heart. He could only offer the comfort of his presence.

They finished breakfast and left the dishes outside the door for the servants to pick up.

"I have to go now," said Talon. "The meeting will begin any minute."

Raina nodded. They shared another long look, trying to say, with their eyes, all the things that could not be put into



words ... then Talon turned and walked down the hall, his ceremonial cape trailing behind him.

Raina waited for him in her room, sitting in bed with a book propped open on her lap, but she couldn't concentrate. The words might as well have been gibberish, and she kept glancing at the chronometer, seeing how much time had passed, though she had no idea when the meeting was supposed to end. It would last as long as it needed to. Her stomach was a cold knot, sitting like a stone inside her.

At last, the door opened. She set her book aside and sat up straighter, looking expectantly up at Talon. When she saw the look in his eyes, her soul sunk. He didn't have to speak a word. She knew what the decision had been. "No," she whispered. Tears filled her eyes.

Wordlessly, Talon pulled her close and buried his face against her hair. "I tried," he whispered hoarsely. "I'm sorry, Raina. I tried to save them...."

"Shhh." Trembling fingers stroked his thick, black hair. "You did all you could."

They stood together for several minutes, locked in embrace, taking what comfort they could from each other's arms.

\* \* \* \*

Fire and debris exploded across the vidscreens of homes across Kira. The Kirans watched, numb with horror, as Ghedd was ripped apart by Skandrian war-weapons. Caught off guard, Ghedd had no chance to defend itself. Buildings and people alike were reduced to dust in the blink of an eye. As

Barbarian  
by Amanda Steiger

Ghedd fell, eight billion throats unleashed a cry of rage and loss that echoed across the planet.

Before the ashes had settled, the Kiran government had begun planning a counter-attack.

\* \* \* \*

Raina lay quietly in Talon's arms, listening to his breathing. He'd made love to her that night—not with passion, but with desperation, as if he were trying to lose himself within her. The usual exquisite foreplay and playful banter had been cast aside. Not that she could blame him. She was hardly in a playful mood herself.

"The Council sent a vidcast to the Kirans, requesting their surrender," he whispered, and she gave a start. She'd thought he was asleep. She looked up and saw Talon gazing into space. Lamplight glinted in his black eyes. "They're fools if they think Kira is going to surrender after what we did to them."

"Not 'we,' Talon. They. You had nothing to do with it. You tried to *stop* it."

"I only wish I could have done more." He hugged her close. "We must prepare. Kira will retaliate, and it will be an attack the likes of which our world has never seen. Unless...." He trailed off, and she could tell he was deep in thought. Questions crowded into her mind, but she bit her lip and remained silent, letting him think. "Raina, do you know how this war started?" he asked at last.

She shook her head. "I don't think anyone really knows."

"That's true. No one knows for sure. But most scholars believe that it started with a dispute over the moon of Shandire. It's still a coveted piece of property. No one lives there, because there's no atmosphere, but it's rich in valuable minerals and fuel-sources, and right now it belongs to Skandria. Perhaps if I gave it to Kira as a sign of goodwill, they would be willing to talk peace."

"But the Council...."

He smiled thinly. "They have no authority in this matter. I am the sovereign of this world. Skandria and its colonies belong to the kadir, and they are his to give or keep as he chooses."

"You would be willing to give up Shandire? Just for a chance at peace?" she asked.

"I'd be willing to do anything to end this war." He stroked her unbound hair, letting his fingers wade through the soft, brown cascade. "When I was younger, I was convinced the war would go on forever. It seemed right and natural, because it had been that way for so long. But you've changed my outlook on many things, Raina. I can't allow the slaughter of innocents to go on." He rolled her gently onto her back, gazing down into her eyes. "And now, let me love you properly. I was rough with you tonight, and I didn't give you a chance to finish before I let go."

"I did finish," she protested, though the flush in her cheeks gave her away.

Talon smiled and stroked her soft cheek with the back of one finger. "You faked it. I appreciate your consideration for my ego, but I'd prefer to give you real pleasure." He kissed

her throat, then her collarbones, and cupped her breast with one large, calloused hand. His thumb stroked her nipple, molding it to a small, hard peak, then his hot mouth closed over it.

She gasped as she felt his fangs pressing into her flesh. "Your teeth are so sharp."

He looked up. "Did I hurt you?"

"No. It's exciting."

A smile spread slowly across his face. His dark eyes were hot and feral as he gripped her wrists, spread her arms wide and pinned them to the bed. His knee nudged apart her thighs. "I'm going to take you slowly," he said, his deep voice rough and velvety at the same time. "Very slowly. You'll beg for release before I let you come." His tongue flicked over her swollen nipple, then his mouth moved down, lips brushing her flat belly. His mouth hovered over the downy patch of hair between her thighs, his breath hot on her secret flesh. She squirmed in anticipation, but he didn't touch her. "You're very wet," he whispered.

Raina closed her eyes, panting softly. She felt her clitoris swelling as his hot breath stirred her the thick curls guarding her sex. His mouth was tantalizingly close, barely an inch away from brushing that sensitive nub. His tongue flicked over it, very lightly, and she moaned, half with pleasure and half with frustration.

He chuckled. "It's amazing, how sensitive the body can be."

"Take me," she said, breathing hard. "Please. I need you inside me."

"Not yet. I want this to last. When I enter you, I want you open and hungry. I want you to want my *ketik* more than you've ever wanted anything."

"I do!"

"No. Not yet." His lips brushed the moist, aching place between her thighs. His tongue-tip traced that crease, very lightly, then probed between her lips, seeking her wetness. It explored each private fold thoroughly and slowly, then slipped into her tight sheath and stroked its walls, giving her a sample of what was to come. Raina's breathing grew harder, and she whimpered, struggling, needing more. Her hips pushed upward, trying to bring his tongue deeper inside her, but he pulled back. "Be still," he whispered, a rough command.

Raina shivered and forced herself to lie still, legs wide open. His deft tongue found her clitoris and began to toy with it, stroking and probing until she thought she'd explode.

"Talon!" she cried.

He looked up, his eyes meeting hers. "Now," he whispered. "Open wide."

In one hard thrust, he drove his cock deep into her aching center. Raina's body seemed to blossom open, taking him in, then clenched tight around him as they rode the wave of climax together.

\* \* \* \*

A long, dark shape slunk through the halls of the palace, making no sound, despite its size. Titanium scales glinted silver in the moonlight drifting in from a narrow window.

Barbarian  
*by Amanda Steiger*

Orange eyes glowed in the darkness. Sensitive nostrils flared, leading the creature ever closer to its prey.

It had killed every person it encountered, with no care for whether they were actually a threat. Its small, reptilian mind could not discern between guards and servants. When it smelled human flesh, it struck with its long, curved, lethal claws, ending lives with swift, cruel efficiency. Now, those claws were retracted, allowing it to walk on feet as silent as velvet. The creature came to a locked door and stopped, head raised, nostrils flared. The orange glow in its eyes brightened as the filmy membranes slid away. Prey-smell drifted around the edges of that door, seeping out into the hallway, firing the creature's brain into a killing frenzy. Gleaming silver claws slid from their sheaths and sliced through the door as if it were cheese. With an open-mouthed hiss, the creature leapt and crashed through the door, heedless of splintering wood, its mouth open to expose rows of inch-long, dripping teeth.

\* \* \* \*

Talon sat bolt upright in bed, eyes flying open just in time to see the huge, dark shape hurtling toward him, orange eyes ablaze.

A drune.

There was no time to think. His hand shot out and grabbed the blazer from his bedside-table, but an iron-hard claw knocked it from his hand. He cursed, fumbling for it with his other hand. His right had been numbed by the force of the blow. "Raina!" he shouted. "The gun!"

"What?" Her voice pierced the darkness, confused and frightened.

The drune's head swung toward him, glowing eyes fixed on his face.

"The gun, Raina!" he shouted. "Aim for its eyes!"

The drune leapt.

Three quick shots echoed through the room. The flare from the blazes illuminated Raina's pale face and wide eyes. She held the blazer tight in her small hands, aimed at the reptilian cyborg's face.

The drune fell back, landing in a heap on the floor. Two of the shots had gone straight through its eyes. The third had deflected off its armored scales. Blind now, it shrieked and struck out again, guided by the smell and sound of its prey. Raina scrambled off the bed. Talon rolled to one side, but he wasn't quite fast enough. Needle-sharp teeth grazed his shoulder, branding lines of searing pain into his flesh. Talon's breath hissed between his teeth.

Raina stood with her back pressed against the wall. The blazer trembled in her hands.

"Hold still, Raina!" he cried hoarsely. "Don't breathe!" Drones were attracted to movement. Maybe it wouldn't notice her. It was his only hope. With the creature's body blocking the doorway, there was no way she could make a run for it.

The drune's blind head swung toward them, and its teeth snapped shut a few inches from Talon's face.

There was no doubt. It was him it wanted, not Raina.

Its jaws gaped, preparing to snap again. Raina fired the pistol into the drune's open mouth. Its body jerked

convulsively and lurched to one side, smashing into Talon's desk. The wood splintered and cracked like porcelain. The drune went limp, smoke curling from its ravaged eyes. Thick, black blood oozed from the sockets. Within those bloody holes, Talon could see a tangle of silvery wires. A red light blinked on and off, growing a little dimmer with each blink ... then went dark.

"Come on." Talon gripped Raina's arm. "Let's get out of here."

"It's dead, isn't it?" she asked, her voice squeaky with fear.

"Yes, but I don't want to take any chances." Raina's robe hung from the bedpost. He grabbed it and tossed it to her, then quickly fumbled into his own clothes. Raina followed him out of the room, knotting the sash of her robe as she walked and looking over her shoulder. Talon gave her arm a gentle squeeze. He wasn't surprised to find that his own hands were shaking.

Raina looked down at the gun, as if surprised to find she still had it—then offered it to him, almost pleadingly. He took it in his left hand. His right still tingled, slowly regaining feeling.

"What was that?" Raina asked. Her voice sounded very small in the silence.

"A drune," Talon replied. "A Kiran war-weapon."

"Weapon? It looked like an animal."

"It's a cyborg. Half flesh, half machine. You have to shoot their eyes or straight into their throats. It's the only way to kill them. Their hides are plated with titanium." He leaned



against the wall and waited for his heart to stop racing. He wasn't surprised Raina had never heard of drunes. The Kiran government kept a tight lid on its secrets. No one except the drunes' engineers knew much about them, because the few who saw them rarely lived to talk about it. "Drunes are used to hunt people. Their target's scent and image is programmed into their computerized brains. They care about nothing except reaching and destroying their target. They're relentless, and nearly unstoppable."

Raina swallowed. "And I killed one." She stared down at her own small, pale hands. "Guess I got lucky. When I saw that thing, I thought we were going to die."

"I have to admit, I'm astonished that you managed to kill it. It takes luck, yes, but it also takes incredible aim and a steady hand." He smiled thinly. "Guess that self-defense training paid off. How did you know to shoot it in the throat, though?"

"You told me. Didn't you?" She looked up at him in puzzlement. "You shouted and told me to aim for its mouth."

"Maybe I did," said Talon, though he was sure he hadn't. A tiny chill crept up his spine. He hadn't even attempted to send a thought to her, yet somehow, Raina had picked up the information from his mind. Their link was growing stronger. It seemed to have a life of its own, and a will which neither of them could control. Right now, though, there was no time to consider the implications of that. Talon wiped sweat from his brow. His whole body trembled as the adrenaline rush died down. "We have to tell the Council about this."

A sudden explosion shook the hall, followed by a patter as chips of ceiling-plaster rained to the floor. Raina staggered and clung to Talon for balance. "What was that?"

"Self-destruct mechanism." He walked down the hall, an arm around Raina, as much to support himself as to comfort her. His legs felt unsteady.

How had that damned thing gotten into the palace without setting off any alarms? They would have to tighten their security ... though if the Kirans sent more drunes, even hundreds of armed guards and laser-traps might not be enough. They had been lucky this time, but they might not be so lucky again.

He shuddered and pulled Raina closer. "It was after me," he murmured. "No doubt about that. It never attacked you, or even looked at you." He growled softly in his throat. "I warned those fools. I told them there would be retaliation for the attack on Ghedd. The Kirans have never sent a drune to Skandria before. They signed a treaty, over a century ago, promising that those monsters wouldn't set foot on our soil. It's one of the few agreements they've honored. Until now."

"But why would they target you? You voted against the attack!"

"They don't know that. Or if they do, they don't care. We're all the same to them, a single, faceless enemy. They needed a target to lash out at, and I'm the most powerful person on Skandria, so they chose me. Who I am or what I believe doesn't matter to them." He stopped in front of a wall-com and pushed a series of buttons, then leaned forward and spoke into the com. "Tijandra, I need to speak to you

immediately. Summon the other Council-members and come to the Hall."

"What's going on, Kadir?" asked a female voice.

"I'll explain once we're there."

"Does this have to do with that explosion we felt a moment ago?"

"Yes." He released the button before she could reply.

Gently, he took Raina's arm. "Come on."

She noticed the lines of pain in his face, the sheen of sweat on his brow. His breathing was raspy, labored. "You're hurt," Raina said. "Where?"

"My shoulder. The drune's teeth grazed me. It's nothing. You can tend it once the meeting's over."

"I'd prefer to tend it now. I don't like to see you in pain."

"It'd be best to get this over with. I don't want word to get out that I'm wounded. If the Kirans think their attempt was even partially successful, it will encourage them."

"Talon.... "But he was already striding down the hall, toward the Council Room. Raina sighed and followed.

\* \* \* \*

Raina sat next to Talon in the Council Room as he explained what had happened. The Council-members faces grew grimmer with each passing minute. When he finished, Talon slumped forward, looking tired and pale. Raina ached for him.

"This is grave news indeed," said Tijandra. "The Kirans are fighting dirty. They've broken a treaty and made a direct attempt on your life."

"The implications are even more disturbing," said Lukes, a stout, bearded Skandrian with a black eye-patch. "A Kiran war-weapon has penetrated the most heavily-guarded building on our planet. If they're capable of breaking down the palace's defenses, what other unpleasant surprises do they have in store for us?"

"I don't know," said Talon. His eyes were dull with exhaustion. Raina could feel his pain through their mind-link, a throbbing, red pain. She rubbed her own shoulder in sympathy.

"What do you propose we do, my lord?" asked Lukes. "Should we alert the Guard?"

"No, no, we've got to keep this under wraps," said Talon. "The last thing we need now is more panic and anger."

"Then what can we do to prevent this from happening again?" asked Tijandra.

"Tighten palace security," said Talon. "At the moment, it's all we can do."

"What about retaliation?"

"What about it? We already blew Ghedd to dust. How many more have to die before you're content?"

"Sir," said Tijandra, "we can't just ignore this. They tried to assassinate you."

"I'm aware of that," Talon snapped. He was close to the breaking-point. Raina felt the tension humming in his mind, and the image that came to her was a frayed rope, slowly unraveling as it was stretched and stretched. "Tighten security. Have the main doors replaced with neo-titanium.

Have the largest windows sealed up. Post extra guards at every entrance and exit in the palace."

The Council-members exchanged glances.

"Those changes will be very expensive," said Tijandra, "not to mention noticeable, not only to the people in the palace, but to the public. By the time we're done with them, everyone will know that something is wrong. If you're hoping to keep this a secret...."

"Are you questioning my orders?" Talon asked.

"I'm merely saying...."

"Well, don't!"

"Talon," Raina said softly, "please postpone this decision. You aren't thinking clearly right now."

He turned to glare at her ... but her expression was so open and concerned that his features softened. "I know what I'm doing."

"Please," she whispered. "Wait just a few hours. The pain is muddling your thoughts. Let me treat your wound."

Tijandra must have caught the last word. She frowned. "Sire, are you injured?"

"Just a small cut. My healer takes her job very seriously, that's all." He rose to his feet. "Dismissed."

Tijandra blinked. "That's it? You're ending the meeting?"

"What else is there to say? I've given my orders. Oh, and send someone to clean the mess out of our bedroom." Turning, he strode out of Council Hall. Raina followed, relief and dread swirling within her: relief to be away from the staring faces of the Council-members, to have a chance to

tend Talon's wound—which was undoubtedly more serious than he'd let on—and dread at everything that had transpired.

"Suhara," murmured Talon, raising one long-fingered hand to his brow. "This is just what I need. I don't know if I can keep this a secret, Raina. Even if the people don't figure things out on their own, the Council-members may let it slip ... and once the rumors spread, everyone will be crying out for Kiran blood. The war will never end."

"We'll find a way to deal with it," Raina said. "Don't worry."

"Don't worry? Are you insane?"

"No. Just practical. Worrying won't help anything, and it will prevent you from getting the rest you need to recover from that wound." She took his arm and guided him through a nearby door, into a spare bedroom, the kind normally reserved for important guests. She closed the door and turned to face him. "Take off your shirt. Let me see this 'little cut' of yours."

He smiled wearily and stripped off the tight, dark shirt. Raina had been prepared, but she still gasped at the sight of the ugly gash on his shoulder. His entire arm was soaked with blood. Because his shirt was so dark, the bloodstain hadn't been visible. She took a deep breath, composing herself. "Lie down," she said.

He stretched out on the bed.

"Now, don't move. I'll be right back." She fetched a bowl of soapy water and a clean cloth. Dragging a chair up to the bed, she sat and began to clean his wound. Talon lay quietly, eyes closed, his expression blank. Though she could still feel

his pain, she saw no trace of it on his face. "It's nothing to worry about," said Talon. "I've survived worse."

"That doesn't mean you're invincible, or that everyone expects you to be."

"Everyone *does* expect it of me, and rightly so. If I can't withstand physical pain, I'm not fit to lead my people."

"That's an odd concept of leadership."

"To you, perhaps."

She frowned slightly and lay her hands over the wound. Concentrating, she drew the lips of the gash together, stimulating the growth of new cells to knit the torn flesh. Talon stiffened slightly, but made no sound. "Was that what you meant when you said that some of the Trials hurt?" she asked. "Did they make you endure pain?"

A slight nod.

"Tell me what they did to you."

"There is no need for you to know. What is done is done, and it would only upset you."

"Tell me," she said. "You're my mate. I want to understand you."

He was silent for a moment, looking into her eyes. His deep, searching stare seemed to probe the depths of her mind. "They put me in a room and bombarded me with a type of psionic wave ... like sound-waves, but perceived by the mind, not the ear."

"I know about psi-waves. They're sometimes used to relax people, aren't they?"

"Not these. They affected the part of my brain responsible for pain. The waves were harmless, but it *felt* as if I were

burning alive, as if my skin was trying to tear itself from my body and my bones were cracking to pieces inside me." His face remained expressionless, but his eyes were distant and shadowed.

Raina's mouth was dry. She couldn't even swallow. "And ... how would you pass such a test?"

"There was an unlocked door in the room, an easy way to escape the pain. If we used it, we failed the Trial."

"How old were you when you went through this?"

"Twelve."

"Oh, Talon...."

"I *chose* to endure it, Raina," he said firmly. "And I could have ended the pain at any time."

"To fail the Trial would be a horrible disgrace, wouldn't it?"

"Yes, but...."

"So you were being asked to choose between pain and disgrace. That's not much of a choice at all."

"That was part of the risk that I agreed to take." He lay a hand over hers. "I know many of our practices seem barbaric to you, but we believe that nothing is truly barbaric if it is chosen freely. To me, it seems barbaric that your people installed that thing in your brain before you were old enough to give consent, that your women are taught to feel shame if they seek pleasure, that they are required to legally bind themselves to a man before they are old enough to have tasted freedom, making themselves subservient to him in every way ... or serve your Goddess and die without ever tasting the joy of love-making."

"But I broke away from all that," she said.



"Yes ... you did." He smiled, though his eyes were serious. "Sometimes I wonder if I did the right thing, taking you away from Kira. You deserve so much more than what I can give you."

Raina laughed. "Well, let's see ... you've shown me pleasure beyond my wildest imaginings, given me a beautiful palace for a home, and more freedom than I ever had back at the Hold. What else *is* there?"

"I can't give you a normal life," he said quietly. "I can't give you stability or security. What happened tonight reminded me how dangerous my life really is, especially now, with the situation between our worlds more turbulent than ever before. I can't give you my heart, either. Not entirely. My first responsibility will always be toward my people."

The words hurt, but Raina nodded. "I understand."

He smoothed her hair with one large hand, then cupped her face. "My dear healer."

Raina's eyes stung with tears. She had nearly lost him tonight. The realization struck her with a painful force. Already, she'd begun to entertain the horrible thought that it might be her fault, that the telepath who'd been spying on her—if that *was* the case—had used the information in her memory to locate the palace's weak points, and program the knowledge into the drune. Talon had recently erected new, stronger telepathic shields around her mind, but who was to say it would be enough? If the spy had broken through the first shield, maybe it could break through this one, as well.

"What's wrong?" Talon asked.

Barbarian  
*by Amanda Steiger*

"Nothing." Raina climbed into bed and slipped her arms around Talon, holding him tight. "Just ... nothing."

\* \* \* \*

The next day, Talon arrived in the Council Room dressed in ceremonial scarlet and black. His hand rested on the golden hilt of his sword, and his hair was bound back, drawing attention to the elegantly sculpted, aquiline planes of his face. To Raina, he had never looked so dashing ... or so solemn.

He sat tall and straight in his huge chair, his gaze sweeping over the Council-members. "I have made a decision," he said. "As you all know, it is my goal to stop the war in any way possible, even if that means making sacrifices."

Already, the Council-members looked wary. Makkias sat stiffly with his arms folded over his chest and his face pinched, as if he had bitten into something sour, but he held his tongue.

"In order to stop the war, we have to trace it back to its original cause. Not an easy task, since the war has been going on for centuries, and tension between Kira and Skandria had been building long before that. The reports we *do* have are often contradictory. As you may know, however, most scholars believe that this war began with a dispute over the moon of Shandire. Billions, perhaps trillions of lives have been lost over that damned rock. I am going to give the moon to Kira."

There was a momentary stunned silence ... then the Council-members erupted into shouts of protest. Talon held

up a hand for silence, but the noise continued: a frantic babble of voices, everyone trying to get the first word in. Strangely, only Makkias was silent, but Raina saw his eyes darkening with a cold, dangerous expression.

Talon's jaw tightened. "Enough!" he shouted.

The Council fell silent as the room rang with echoes of his deep voice.

"I am open to hearing your views, but if you can't even give me a coherent opinion, then stay silent. I have thought long and hard over this decision, have sought the counsel of my closest advisor...."

With a flicker of surprise and pride, Raina realized he was talking about her.

"...and I firmly believe that this is the correct path. I'm not certain that this will stop the war, but the gesture will at least show them that we *want* peace."

"We've tried to make peace with them," Lukes pointed out. "Or are you forgetting your recent mission? You were traveling to Kira to discuss a truce when your ship was attacked."

"They didn't know we were on a peace-mission. We tried to send messages, but the Kirans never received them. We were planning to wait until we were closer to their atmosphere and try again, but we never got that far. Their scout-ships spotted us and probably assumed we were attacking. Can any of you tell me truthfully that we would not have reacted the same, had we seen a Kiran ship entering our atmosphere?"

A hush hung over the Council Room.

"As I thought," said Talon. "They attacked because they were frightened. I will not make the same mistake this time. I'll send a vidcast announcing our intent, and I won't leave Skandria until the Kirans have replied."

One of the younger Council-members spoke. "I can't say I'm optimistic about your plan, Sire, but I will respect your decision and hope for the best. You are the kadir; I will follow you."

Talon's face softened, almost imperceptibly. "Thank you. It is good to know there are those who still respect my authority."

The other Council-members squirmed in their chairs or frowned at the implied insult. "Are there any questions?"

Lukes opened his mouth as if to speak, then closed it and looked away.

Talon waited another few seconds, then nodded and rose to his feet. "Dismissed." He turned and left the Council Room. Makkias' eyes followed him the entire way. He had not spoken a word during the Council-session, but there was no mistaking the hate in that gaze. Raina shuddered as she followed Talon back toward their bedroom.

He placed a hand on her back. "I pray the Kirans will be open-minded about this. They'll undoubtedly fear treachery. I don't know what to do to put those fears to rest."

Raina chewed her lower lip. "You could let me talk to them."

He looked at her in surprise.

"Over the vid, I mean. They might be more receptive to your message if it's delivered by one of their own."

"They may," he said, but there was a strange reluctance in his voice.

"What's wrong?"

"I just don't like the idea of using you as a political tool. I don't want you involved in this mess anymore than is absolutely necessary."

"You're not using me. It was *my* idea," she said. "I want to help, Talon. I want the war to end just as much as you do. I can't afford to be uninvolved while so many people are losing their lives."

He smiled and placed a hand on her shoulder. "In that case, I accept your help." The smile faded. "I just pray it will not bring harm upon you. I'd still prefer it if you let me handle this."

"And you think I'll be safe if I remain an innocent bystander?" Tears filled her eyes, and she blinked them away. "The people of Ghedd and Sauric were innocent. It didn't save them. No, Talon ... I can't remain uninvolved. I'm as much a part of this as you are."

He sighed. "How did one so young become so wise?"

She gave his arm a squeeze. "I think you had something to do with that."

## Chapter Eleven

It was the strangest room Raina had ever seen. There was a huge screen on each wall, and counters with slanted tops lined the room's perimeter, each covered with keypads, blinking lights, knobs and other bewildering things. A small Skandrian woman—the Chief Technician, Talon had called her—stood before a console, fingers flitting over the controls. At last, she nodded, as if satisfied, and stepped back. "All we have to do now is record the transmission and send it," she said to Talon.

He gave Raina a gentle nudge. "Go ahead, youngling."

It had been awhile since he'd called her that, but right now, the nickname seemed appropriate. She *felt* young, not to mention scared, and inadequate for the immense task facing her. She rose to her feet, heart pounding. She would be addressing an entire planet today. Whether there would be war or peace might hinge on what she was about to say. She'd rehearsed the speech a dozen times, but now her mind was a blank.

Talon gave her shoulder a squeeze. Raina tried to smile. Then, turning, she approached the console.

"When you're ready to start, just hit that button," said the technician.

Raina nodded, took a deep breath, and pushed the blinking green button. Nothing seemed to change. She gave the Chief Technician a questioning look, and the woman nodded. Raina turned back to the console, wetting her lips and looking up at

the camera. "Citizens of Kira," she began. Her voice was too soft. She cleared her throat and continued, louder. "I am Raina, a sri'dith. I left my home to accompany Kadir Talon to Skandria, because I wished to learn more about this world we have been fighting for so long." That was a half-truth. She *had* always been curious about Skandria, but her motives for accompanying Talon were quite different. The real story, however, was too complex and personal to announce to the planet. "I have learned that Skandria is inhabited, not by demons or barbarians, but by people: people with hopes, dreams and fears ... people with families, who desperately want to protect their children from the sadness of war. Yes, there are those who hate and fear Kira—no matter what the planet, there are always those who hate and fear what they don't understand—but for every ignorant soul who wants war, there is a gentle heart who yearns for peace. These people do not deserve to die." She took a deep breath, trying to steady her fluttering heartbeat, and continued. "Kadir Talon wants the war to stop. He no longer cares who wins or who loses, if anyone can be said to win a fight like this. He is tired of seeing innocent people butchered. As a gesture of peace, he offers the moon of Shandire, which sparked this pointless war so many centuries ago. Citizens of Kira, I propose that our two worlds cease all attacks and commit ourselves to the mutual goal of ending the pain and fear. I beg you, do not throw this chance away." Her throat was tight. She swallowed, blinking rapidly. "Already, millions of innocent lives have been lost in the destruction of Sauric and Ghedd. Both our worlds have suffered. Let it end here. Don't let

anger rule your hearts. Give your children the chance to grow up in a world free of hate. Shandire is yours, as is Skandria's promise to end the bloodshed, if you will accept this offer." The screen winked out as the technician shut off her recording devices.

Raina sighed, embarrassed. "Can I try again?"

"Why?" asked Talon. "You did fine."

"My voice shook the whole time. And I got choked up toward the end."

"But that's good," said the technician. "It'll show people you're sincere. If you didn't sound like the words meant something to you, they might think you were coerced into saying it."

"They may think so anyway," said Talon. "But we'll deal with that when the time comes." He glanced at Raina. "In the meantime, I'm starving. Care to join me for dinner?"

Raina nodded gratefully. She hadn't had much appetite at breakfast, and had barely picked at her food. Now, her stomach felt hollow and tight, and her mouth watered at the mere thought of crunchy kaffa roots.

They headed back to Talon's room, and the servants brought them a tray of finely-sliced strips of akiell, and an assortment of fruits and vegetables. As usual, Raina declined the meat, filling her belly instead with rich, sweet mobi and tart kaffa. The light-globes had been dimmed, casting the room in soft shadow.

"You're beautiful," Talon murmured. Raina looked up, blinking, and Talon chuckled. "Why do you look so surprised? Surely I've told you before." He captured her hand, and his



thumb brushed gently over her wrist. "Your eyes look so dark in this light, like great pools of night-water reflecting the starlight."

Warmth flooded her cheeks, and she smiled, lowering her eyes self-consciously. "Thank you."

He turned her hand over, tracing the lines of her palm, then nipped her soft fingertips. Her heartbeat speeded up to feel his sharp teeth on her flesh.

Talon's mind, however, didn't seem to be on amorous matters. He stared down at her hand, his thumb stroking her soft palm, but he didn't seem to be really seeing it. His eyes were distant and troubled.

"Talon?"

He looked up. "Am I being a fool, Raina? Am I naïve, to think that a simple gift and a few words of friendship can erase centuries of hostility between our worlds?"

"It's worth a try," she said. "Most of the Kirans are just as tired of war as you are."

"But there's always that small faction whose hatred is so strong that they'd be more than happy if the war continued into eternity. And so many people can't see past their anger and grief. Their pain over the lives lost is so great that they're willing to do anything, even jeopardize more lives, to achieve vengeance." He closed his eyes, his face lined with weariness. "The Council thinks I'm going soft-headed. Maybe they're right. I'm juggling the fate of worlds, and I'm not even sure that I'm thinking straight. So much has happened, so many factors to consider. I'm afraid, Raina ... afraid that I'll

misjudge, that people will die because of the choices I've made."

She ached for him, but she didn't know what to say to soothe his fear. At last, she simply climbed into his lap and hugged him tight. He hugged her back, hiding his face in her soft hair.

"My Raina," he murmured. "You're my refuge from the world. When I'm inside you, I don't think about the war."

She smiled gently. "I'd be a poor lover indeed if you thought about politics while we were together."

He chuckled. "Well, it takes a lot to take my mind off of my duties. Only when I'm with you can I truly escape. I don't mean to imply that you're just a distraction. My feelings go so much deeper than that. I just don't know how to put them into words. All I can say is that you make all of this worthwhile." He lay down on the floor, pulling her on top of him, and slid a hand beneath her robes, rubbing her sleek back. She arched into the touch like a cat, making him smile. His hand slid down to her left buttock. "You're developing some muscle."

She laughed. "Tika's been working me pretty hard."

"I can see that." His hand moved to her thigh, squeezing. His long fingers almost encircled the limb. She could feel their strength as they pressed into her flesh, testing its firmness. "Muscles here, too." He continued his exploration, rubbing her flat stomach, then cupping her breast. "These are still soft."

"I should hope so." She smiled, her own hands resting on his broad shoulders as she gazed down into his eyes. "Talon ... is there marriage on Skandria?"

"Not really. People choose life-partners, of course, and sometimes there's a ceremony to acknowledge their choice, but there are no legal ramifications. It's not like on Kira, where there's a dowry and papers to sign and all that. To be honest, your marriages seem almost like business transactions to me. We're much less formal about it."

"Oh."

He slid his fingers into her hair and stroked the back of her neck. "You sound disappointed."

"It's just ... I always dreamed of getting married. I never really *expected* to, being a sri'dith, but it was one of my fantasies, and I thought...." She trailed off, embarrassed.

He smiled. "You could still have a ceremony if you wanted. If two people love each other and are already committed in their hearts, what does it matter if the ceremony is legally binding? Mere laws can't strengthen or weaken a heart-bond."

"You're right." She lay her head on his shoulder, wondering how to read this conversation. Was he talking about them, personally, or just people in general? Raina wanted to ask him, but the moment was so perfect in its silence. She lay atop him, feeling his broad chest rise and fall with his breathing, his warm skin. Not wanting that moment to end, she said nothing.

\* \* \* \*

"Sire, we've received a transmission from Kira," said the Chief Technician. She stood before the console, looking over one shoulder. "It just came in a few minutes ago."

Talon took a deep breath. He'd been waiting for this moment. He closed his eyes, silently praying, then opened them. "Let's hear it."

Beside him, Raina gave his hand a squeeze.

An image flickered onto the screen. It was a tall woman with iron-gray hair, wearing scarlet robes.

Raina recognized the black symbols on that robe. "The First Consul," she whispered in awe.

"It surprises me that the most powerful person on Kira is a woman," remarked the Chief Technician. "Your people don't seem to hold women in very high regard."

Raina shrugged. She had always known the First Consul was a female, and women on Kira were discouraged from holding jobs, but oddly, it had never struck her as a contradiction. "She doesn't have much real power. She's mostly a figurehead."

"We have received your transmission," said the recorded voice of the consul. Figurehead or no, her voice rang with authority. "We would be willing to talk to you at length, but request that your king—" Raina could hear the faint distaste in her voice at the idea of a civilized planet being led by a monarchy. "—come to the People's House himself, as planet-to-planet communication can be slow and awkward. We request that you bring no weapons of any kind. If you do, we will assume that this offer for peace has been a deception and react accordingly." The transmission ended.

Talon stared at the blank screen, his eyes distant and thoughtful.

"Sire, forgive me if I speak out of turn," said the technician, "but I hope you're not considering their offer. To walk into the center of the Kiran government without weapons ... it's insane. Like covering yourself with tallow and walking naked into a mountain wolf's den."

"How else am I to show them I'm sincere?" asked Talon.

"There's got to be a less risky way. Just tell them you'd rather continue the conversation through transmissions."

"That would lead them to believe that I'm refusing the offer out of fear. How can I expect them to trust my intentions if I don't trust theirs? What the consul said is true. Long-distance transmissions are slow. This message alone took days to arrive."

The technician sighed. "It's risky, Sire."

"I am prepared to take risks."

Her jaw tightened. "Permission to speak bluntly?"

A slight nod.

"Who will take the throne if you're killed? The next set of Trials will not take place for another seven years."

Raina's breath caught in her throat, and she shared a meaningful glance with Talon. Makkias was next in line. Talon's gaze returned to the technician. "I will select someone to serve as a temporary monarch in the unlikely event that I don't return. Then, once a new kadir is selected by the Trials, the monarch will be replaced."

The technician frowned. "That's unconventional, my lord."

"So is the situation."

"Permission to speak bluntly again, Highness?"

He sighed and nodded.

"I know you don't like Makkias, but he *is* next in line. He has a right to the throne."

"Makkias is insane," Talon said flatly. "He hasn't been the same since the Trials. The pain unbalanced something in his mind. He has a deep, irrational hatred of Kira and all its people, and if he takes the throne, he will plunge both our worlds into darkness and war for the next century. I will *not* let that happen."

The technician stared at him in surprise. "You honestly believe he's mad?"

"Hatred is not a sane emotion. Especially not when it's applied to an entire race of people."

"Perhaps you're right. Or perhaps it's just a matter of differing views and methods. There are those who believe you're a traitor who's planning to sell your own world into slavery under the Kirans."

"That's rubbish," said Talon. "I'm trying to *save* our world."

"I'm sure Makkias would say the same thing about himself. I'm not saying he's right, just that you'll have a difficult time convincing everyone else that he's mad. And perhaps he's not as extreme as you think. A lot of his 'death to Kirans' talk might be hot air. Makkias often speaks before he thinks."

"I can't take the chance. If he's even half as extreme as I believe, he's too dangerous to be on the throne. I am the kadir, sworn to use my best judgment to protect my people, and that's what I intend to do. Prepare the equipment. I'm going to send a transmission telling them that I accept their offer."

The technician did not look satisfied, but she nodded and turned to the console. She hesitated. "Wouldn't you like to prepare a speech first, Sire?"

"I already know what I want to say," he said. "My message is simple enough. I'll tell them that I accept their terms, that I will bring a small crew and a pilot, but no guards and no weapons." He turned to Raina, his eyes softening slightly, as they always did, when he looked into hers. "If there's anything you'd like to say to your people, you're welcome to."

She shook her head. "I said everything I needed to during the last transmission." It felt strange, hearing the Kirans referred to as "your people." She didn't think of them that way anymore—if she ever had. To be Kiran was to oppose Skandria, and she didn't want that. She'd only been on Skandria a short while, but she had already developed an admiration for its people. Their belief in freedom and their strong, wild hearts struck a chord within her.

But then, she didn't feel comfortable calling herself Skandrian, either. She still found some aspects of their culture brutal and unfair, and there was so much she didn't know about their ways. A wave of loneliness and uncertainty washed over her. She was suspended between two worlds, belonging to neither.

Raina retreated to the back of the room and stood, out of the camera's sight, as Talon delivered his speech. He did a good job. His gaze was direct and earnest, his voice firm but reasonable. She hoped fervently that the Kirans would accept his peace-offering and his terms. If they did, centuries of war might finally come to an end ... and if Kira and Skandria were

at peace, then maybe she could finally stop feeling like an outsider, and she and Talon would be allowed to love each other without opposition.

Talon finished his speech, and the technician shut down the recording devices.

"Excellent," she said. "I'll edit it and send it at once."

"Thank you," Talon replied. Turning, he took Raina's hand and smiled. A sheen of sweat glistened on his brow. Though he'd appeared calm during the speech, it was plain that he'd been nervous—and why not? The fate of planets rested on his shoulders. "I could use a long soak in the bathing-pool," he said. "Care to join me?"

"Sire, may I speak to you first?" the technician said.

"Of course," he said, a hint of impatience in his voice. "Go ahead."

Her gaze flicked to Raina. "I mean, alone."

Talon hesitated. His eyes moved back and forth between Raina and the technician.

"I'll go," Raina said, and retreated from the room. The loneliness was back, a sharp, cold pain in her heart. She knew she had no right to feel that way. The technician probably just wanted to discuss some political issue that didn't concern her. But that didn't change the fact that, once again, she had been shut out.

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Once Raina was safely out of earshot, the technician turned to Talon. "You understand, my lord, that I have



complete faith in you, as do your subjects. But as I've said, there are Council-members who doubt your loyalty to Kira."

"And?"

"And, it doesn't ease their doubt to see your healer constantly by your side. She has attended several Council-meetings when there was no need for her presence, and you're often heard exchanging words with her in low voices. It doesn't look good."

His eyes hardened. "Raina is my mate. I don't care who knows that. She accompanies me to Council-meetings to offer moral support, and if you hear us speaking together in low voices, we're probably just indulging in love-talk. What we say to each other is no one's business but our own."

"I know that, but what *I* think isn't the issue. I told you, I don't doubt your character. But others do, and if their fear and distrust becomes great enough, well ... it's occurred to me that that drune might not have been sent by Kirans."

He stared at her, rigid. "You think one of my own people tried to assassinate me?"

She averted her eyes. "I hate to say this to you, especially now, when you need the support and encouragement of your subjects, but I wouldn't feel right hiding my suspicions. There are factions who would be happy to see you removed from the throne. There are always such factions, of course—but your sympathy toward Kirans has angered a lot of people. Extremists, mostly, the sort of people who would try something like assassination. I don't know how they got their hands on a drune, but it would be the perfect weapon, since it

directs the blame toward the Kirans and would destroy any hope of a truce."

Talon was silent for a long moment, his eyes troubled. "Do you suggest I launch an investigation?"

"It might be wise."

"I'm not sure about that. It would create an atmosphere of tension and distrust, and lead to rumors and speculation ... and we don't have any evidence that this was Skandrian work."

"It's your decision," she said.

Talon nodded and left the room.

Raina stood at the end of the hall, waiting for him. Even from a distance, he could see that she was tense. Talon managed a slight smile. "Don't look so worried." He rested a hand on her shoulder as they walked back toward their room. "It's nothing too serious. Nothing you need to worry about, anyway."

Raina nodded and looked away, but he felt her emotions—discontent at being excluded, concern for him—pushing at the edge of his mind. He picked up her feelings so easily ... more easily, it seemed, than he ever had in the past. The bond between them was strengthening, and it worried him. If something happened to him—if, Suhara forbid, he were killed on this peace-mission—would Raina feel his death? He'd heard that psychically-bonded pairs always followed each other into death because the mental trauma of losing their bondmate was too great.

Another horrible thought occurred to him, causing him to freeze in his tracks. If the assassination-attempt really *had*

been the work of Skandrians, the faction responsible might see Raina as his co-conspirator and try to kill her as well.

Talon's heartbeat quickened.

Raina clutched his sleeve. "Talon, I can feel your fear," she whispered. "Please, tell me what's wrong."

He took a deep breath and shook his head. "No. There's really nothing we can do about it, and it will only worry you."

"Whatever it is, it can't possibly be worse than wondering and dreading."

He knew she was right. The unknown was always worse. Almost always. "I'll tell you," he promised, his voice hoarse. "Once we have some privacy. The hallway is not a good place to talk about such things." It pained him to see the fear in her eyes. Their color always seemed to darken when she was sad or afraid. Now, they were a deep, murky blue, like the oceans of Kira at sunset. "Please. Don't be afraid, Raina."

"I can't help it."

He couldn't blame her. It seemed that everything was closing in on them: the war, the suspicious Council-members, the mysterious telepath spying on Raina, the assassin who might or might not lay in their midst. Their only hope lay in this mission to Kira. If the Kirans refused the peace-offering....

But Talon didn't dare think that far ahead. If he allowed himself to consider that possibility, the ever-present fear would overwhelm him. He couldn't bear to see any more of his people killed. "I may need your healing-skills when we get back to our room," he said quietly. "My head is pounding like a war-drum."

"I know. I can feel it." She smiled at the surprise on his face. "Did you think our link only flowed one way?"

"You pick up my thoughts?"

"Not thoughts so much as feelings. Right now, for instance, I can feel that you're tense and worried about the future ... though I guess that's not a very good example." Her smile was bit weaker now. "Anyone with half an eye could see that."

"Didn't think I was so transparent," Talon murmured. Was either of them strong enough to handle a bond like this? If a link became too deep and invasive, it could merge two minds ... or destroy them both. He'd heard stories of telepaths going mad after forming some experimental new mind-bond.

At the moment, though, he couldn't afford to worry about it. There were other things at stake.

They entered their room, and the cool, quiet sanctuary of those white walls was a great blessing. Talon closed the door, lay down on the soft, thick bed and closed his eyes. Raina climbed onto the bed, lifting his head into her lap. Her fingertips massaged his temples in slow circles as she released a flow of warm, healing energy into his mind, simultaneously soothing his nerves and easing his headache. Talon moaned softly, and his eyes slipped shut.

"Talon?"

"Hm?" He half-opened one eye.

"Who will rule Skandria while you're on Kira?"

He paused, thinking. "Normally it would fall to Thauron, who ruled before me, but I don't feel right placing the burden on his shoulders. He's old, and his health is beginning to fail.

He needs and deserves rest. And I can't appoint Makkias. It has to be someone I can trust, but I trust so few people in this whole damned palace." He looked up at her, half-smiling. "How would you feel about being a temporary monarch?"

"You're joking," she said. "I'm not even Skandrian. I don't understand your laws or culture. And it would probably make people so angry to have a Kiran on the throne that they'd launch a revolution."

"Yes ... I guess I am joking." He sighed.

"Besides," she continued, still massaging his temples, "I'll be with you, on Kira."

"Oh no. You're staying here, in the palace. This mission is going to be dangerous."

She blinked. "Why? It's a peace-mission."

"Yes, but we don't know what will happen. We'll be traveling unarmed to a planet which has been our enemy for centuries. It may be as those old cynics in Council say, that we are walking into a trap. I think it's a risk worth taking, but it's still a risk."

"It might make them more receptive to your offer to see a Kiran with you."

"No," he said firmly. "There's no reason both of us should risk our lives. And I'll feel a lot better going on this mission if I know you're safe."

Raina's jaw tightened. "You're letting your feelings cloud your judgment. You know as well as I do how important it is that I go with you. Keeping me here makes no sense, anyway. It's probably safer for me on Kira than it is in the palace. You know there are people here who distrust me, who

might even be happy to see me dead. The Kirans probably won't harm me. At worst, they'll think you've brainwashed me and try to separate us."

Talon sat up and raked a hand through his thick hair, frowning. For some reason, he felt a powerful reluctance to bring her to Kira ... but her argument made sense. The palace might be a very dangerous place for her without Talon around. "All right," he sighed. "I yield."

Raina smiled. "How rare. A man who's not willing to let pride stand in the way of reason."

"Well, I'm right so often that I can afford to admit it when I'm not." He chuckled as she batted him lightly with a pillow. His hand darted out to capture her wrist, and he rolled over, pinning her to the bed like a big, playful cat. "I still wish I could keep you here. It just *feels* safer. Though I have to admit, it will be good to have you by my side." He stroked her cheek with his fingertips.

She lay her hand over his. "You can do this, Talon. I know you can. You're strong enough to end the fighting."

"When you're with me, I am." He lay atop her like a shield, a barrier between her small body and the world. "You're my strength."

She shook her head. "You were strong long before you knew me."

"Maybe ... but it was a different sort of strength. It's difficult to explain. I just know that so much has changed since I met you."

Raina smiled. "Funny, that's exactly how I feel about you. You turned my world inside out and rattled everything up in

my mind until what was right was suddenly wrong and what was wrong was suddenly right. You took me away from my safe, cold little world ... and I love you for it." She rested her cheek against his shoulder, clinging to him tightly. "Thank you, Talon."

He stroked her hair and said nothing ... but vowed silently that he would fight anything that threatened their happiness, fight with every ounce of his strength and will. No one would take him from her.

No one.

\* \* \* \*

"How long will you be gone, sir?" asked Shen. He was in Raina's bedroom, helping her pack her few belongings.

"At least a month, probably," she replied. "The trip to Kira will take a little over a week. We'll need another week for the trip back, and plenty of time in between to talk things over with the Kirans."

"I wish I could go with you." He sat on the edge of the bed, sighing. "I've always wanted to see Kira. My father was from Kira, you know."

So he *was* a halfbreed. She wondered what circumstance had led to his birth, if his mother had been raped or had fallen in love with a Kiran.

"What's it like there?" Shen asked.

"It's very different from Skandria." Raina snapped a suitcase shut and stared out the window, her eyes distant. "There's so much green and blue. The ground is covered with soft grass, and there are trees everywhere, some of them as

tall as this palace. When night falls, the ocean darkens to the color of wine and moonlight sparkles on the water."

"Do you miss it?" Shen asked quietly.

"Yes, I do." She folded a dark green, silk robe that one of Talon's artisans had made. It mimicked the style of her sri'dith robe, but was far more expensive and beautiful, with delicate gold vines and leaves embroidered along the edge. She loved it and wore it whenever she appeared in Council or the Dining Hall, but she hadn't had the heart to get rid of her old robes. They were frayed and worn, but they were all she had left of Kira. "I think I made the right choice, leaving my home-world, but a part of me will always miss it. It will be good to see the ocean again."

"And after you come back, the war will be over?"

Raina smiled. "I certainly hope so." She looked into his dark eyes. He was going to be a very handsome young man in a few years. Already, palace-girls swooned over those large, long-lashed eyes, but Shen never seemed to notice.

"You'll probably need a personal servant on the journey, won't you?" he asked hopefully.

"Not on this journey, I'm afraid."

"But who'll bring your meals? And change your bath-towels, and clean your room?"

"I will," she said, and chuckled. "I've been doing it for most of my life, after all."

"Oh." He stared at the ground, shoulders slumped.

Raina's eyes softened. "I know you want to come with us. I wish you could, but there won't be much room on the shuttle. Only the people who are absolutely essential to this



mission can accompany us. Talon says that more than seven crew-members would be risky."

"Why's that?"

She wasn't sure, but she offered a guess. "Too many people, and there wouldn't be enough food and air to go around."

Shen half-smiled. "I'll breathe shallow." Raina laughed, and Shen chuckled softly in return ... then his smile faded. "I truly will miss you, Raina."

Raina was startled to see tears glistening in his eyes. "Oh, Shen..." She reached out to touch his cheek. "It's only a month. You'll see. I'll be back in no time at all." It occurred to her that, for the first time, he had called her Raina instead of "sir." Now, she felt his cheek growing warm beneath her hand, and the pieces fell into place. "Oh," she whispered.

At the realization that he'd been discovered, Shen's eyes widened. "S-sir, I'm sorry, I meant no offense...."

"Shhh." She squeezed his hand gently. "It's all right."

His breath caught in his throat. "Does that mean...."

Raina shook her head. "I'm in love with Talon," she said.

"I'm sorry. I should have known." He tried to smile.

"Shen...."

"I ... I have to go," Shen whispered. He stood and hurried from the room.

Raina's heart ached. She knew his pain would fade, and that, sooner or later, he would fall for another girl, one who could return his affection. His feelings toward Raina were only infatuation ... but infatuation could be powerful, especially at

his age, and rejection always hurt. Shen was such a sweet, intelligent boy. She hadn't wanted to hurt him.

Sighing, Raina resumed folding her clothes.

She felt a sting on her bare arm, and rubbed it absently. Only a mit. The tiny black flies were everywhere in the city, and their bites, though irritating, were harmless.

Another sting, sharp and painful. Gritting her teeth, Raina swatted the spot, but the swat had no effect. If anything, the pain got worse. She scratched, with the same effect.

A dull gray lassitude crept over her mind. Her thoughts grew weak and sluggish, like fish trying to swim through thick, muddy water. She tried to cry out to Shen, hoping he was within earshot, but her voice wouldn't emerge. It was as if the muscles of her throat had locked up. She tried again, and a dull, slurred sound emerged. What was happening?

She heard footsteps. Frightened, Raina raised her eyes and saw a huge shape looming in the doorway. Talon, she thought. Please let it be Talon.

But no. The man's frame was broader than Talon's, and not quite as tall. Raina willed her eyes to focus, and the man's features sharpened momentarily. Her heartbeat quickened, and panic welled up inside her.

No. Dear Goddess, no.

"Hello, little healer," said a low, silken voice. Makkias took a step forward, smiling. His eyes were like cold fire, burning into hers.

Raina wanted to run, to scream, but her body wouldn't obey her. Her limbs felt like lead weights. She couldn't even lift her arms more than a few inches. It was all she could do

to keep from collapsing, and her vision refused to stay in focus. It kept blurring in and out, making her queasy.

Makkias took another step toward her, reached out and plucked a hair-thin, shining quill from her arm. "Gimris darts. Cunning little things, aren't they? Small enough to be nearly invisible, but the chemical they contain is very potent. You should be feeling the first effects right now. But there's more to come. Temporary blindness, hallucination, paralysis. All sorts of fun." He tucked the quill into his vest-pocket, then leaned down to pick her up. Raina wanted to thrash, to struggle, but her body only twitched. Makkias' grin widened. "And now, my little whore, you will come with me. I'll take you someplace more private."

*Talon will kill you*, she thought, her mind smoldering. *And I'll spit on your corpse.*

He chuckled. "Such naughty thoughts for a sri'dith. Shame on you! I knew there was some fire in you, healer. But no such thing is going to happen. I may not be as skilled a telepath as your arrogant lover, but I do have a few skills. I can block other people's memories, for instance. After I have my fill of you, I'll return you to your bed, where you'll awaken, safe and sound, with no recollection of what's taken place. Oh, you'll be sore, no doubt about that, but you'll probably attribute it to Talon being unusually rough with you."

He carried her down the hall. She had no idea where they were going. She couldn't focus enough to see the details of her surroundings. Everything around her looked warped and

clouded, as if seen in a broken, dirty mirror. She closed her eyes, fighting the effects of the drug. Her heart raced.

She felt Makkias' lips moving close to her ear. "Oh, and don't bother trying to call him. Your mind-link is closed, for the moment." He opened a door and stepped through, then closed it behind him. Raina heard the click of a lock. Makkias dropped her onto a bed. She hit the mattress with a soft thump and lay there like a rag doll, limbs splayed and limp.

*Talon!* she screamed with her mind, praying that Makkias had been bluffing. Raina could barely move. Right now, it seemed that rescue was her only hope. Maybe someone had seen them while he was walking down the hall. Maybe....

"No one saw us," he said. At the look in her eyes, he smiled. "Oh yes. I can read your thoughts, Raina. I can see *everything*. I wouldn't send me any playful little insults, though. I don't take jokes very well." He grabbed her robe in both hands and yanked it off, ripping it. Rough, unfeeling hands squeezed her exposed breasts, and tears stung her eyes. "Oh, I'm going to enjoy this," he whispered hoarsely. His eyes were glazed with need, his breathing rough and heavy. "You have no idea how much I desire you. Whenever I think of him touching you, I want to kill him. You should have been mine."

He stepped back and unlaced his trousers, letting them slip to the floor. His maleness protruded, its tip glistening wetly, and Raina nearly gagged at the sight of it. It wasn't as long as Talon's, but it was obscenely thick. Not a sword, but a club, a crude, barbaric weapon made to crush and inflict pain.

Barbarian  
*by Amanda Steiger*

Anger flashed in his eyes. "I'd advise you to keep your uncharitable thoughts well-shielded, little whore. If you behave well, this won't be so bad. You might even enjoy it. But if I feel even the slightest hint of insolence from you, I'll make this very painful indeed." He climbed onto the bed, straddling her.

Unable to run, unable to fight, Raina closed her eyes and prepared to bear it as stoically as possible. A tear trickled from the corner of her eye, down her temple.

But Makkias was not ready to begin yet. He pinched her breasts and thighs, twisting the soft flesh until fresh tears streamed from her eyes. And she knew, with a sinking dread, that this wouldn't be quick.

"You're right about that." Makkias grinned, an ugly expression. "I've been waiting for this a long time. I intend to enjoy it."

## Chapter Twelve

Tears of humiliation blinded Shen as he hurried out of Raina's room. What a fool he'd been to hope that Raina might choose him over Talon! He was a servant boy. Talon was a grown man with wealth and power. Shen had never stood a chance.

He sniffled and wiped his eyes with the back of one hand. When he heard footsteps, he ducked behind a marble pillar. He didn't want anyone to see him cry. He'd had more than enough embarrassment for one day.

The footsteps slowed. They grew softer, as if the person was trying to walk on tiptoe, then stopped entirely. Shen peeked around the edge of the pillar and saw a man standing outside the door to Raina's room. The man eased the door open just a bit and aimed a thin tube through the crack.

Shen's eyes widened. It was Makkias ... and that was a dart shooter!

Makkias must have heard his sharp intake of breath, for he turned his head, eyes narrowed. Shen pressed his back to the cold marble pillar and held his breath, heart thundering in his ears. He waited and waited, but heard nothing. At last, craning his neck, he peered around the column just in time to see Makkias vanish into the room, then re-emerge moments later, carrying Raina's limp form in his arms. She was alive—Shen could see her twitching, trying to struggle—but she had clearly been drugged. A red haze of anger crept across Shen's

vision. He'd seen Makkias eyeing Raina. He knew what that piece of *mam* was planning to do to her.

He knew he ought to run and find the nearest guard, but by the time they got back, it might be too late. Swallowing hard, Shen darted into Raina's room and looked around for a weapon.

A glossy black statuette of a mountain wolf stood on the dresser, its nose pointed at the sky, its mouth open in a howl. Shen picked up the cold, heavy figure. It would have to do. He didn't have time to search for something better.

He crept out of the room and down the edge of the hall, toward the room where Makkias had taken Raina. Shifting his burden to one arm, he tried the knob. Locked. Damn!

Trying to control his rapid breathing, Shen closed his eyes. He hated using his gift. More than anything, he just wanted to forget about it. But he did know how to control it, at least a little—one of the priests had taught him, when he was younger—and there had never been a better time to use it.

Shen tapped into the center of calm, slowly drawing power from that mysterious place deep inside him. Focusing, he visualized the inside of the lock. It was an old-fashioned pin-and-tumbler. He knew that—he *felt* it, somehow—just as he knew how it could be opened. The knowledge seemed to rise up from the depths of his mind like wood floating to the surface of a lake. Biting his lower lip, he sharpened the image of the lock's insides and, one by one, began to move the pins. Each one clicked as it slid into place, and he winced, wondering if Makkias could hear those faint noises. Probably not. He was busy whispering to Raina. Shen could hear his

voice through the door, but couldn't quite make out what he was saying. Just as well. He didn't want to know.

The last pin slid into place. He tried the knob again, and the door opened. Makkias was on the bed, bare from the waist down and straddling Raina. Raina was sprawled across the bed with her robe torn and hanging in tatters from her body.

Rage blazed in Shen's heart, a rage stronger than any he'd ever known. With a roar, he brought the heavy sculpture down on the back of Makkias' head. There was a sickening *crack*, like an egg breaking. Makkias slumped forward and fell across Raina.

Dropping the blood-smeared sculpture, Shen grabbed Makkias' limp arm and pulled, grunting with effort as he dragged the unconscious man off Raina's body. She lay very still, staring straight ahead at nothing. The blankness in her eyes terrified him. "Raina," he said, patting her cheek. "Raina, let's get out of here. Please?"

No response. Aside from the pulse fluttering in her throat, she might as well have been a corpse. Shen looked around frantically, as if searching for help. He didn't think he was big enough to carry her out of here, but he couldn't just leave her ... not with Makkias so close. There was no telling how long he'd stay unconscious.

At that moment, Makkias groaned faintly. Shen's eyes widened. He started to pick up the statue, prepared to give him another bash on the head, but Makkias' hand shot out and grabbed his throat. His bloody, scraggly-haired head lifted, and narrowed eyes stared up at Shen. "That was very



stupid, boy." His hand tightened, and Shen gasped for air. His own, smaller hands flew to his throat, trying to pry away Makkias' grip. The hand squeezed, and Shen fought for a breath as a gray fog crept across his vision. It was a losing battle. The gray soon darkened to purple, and then to black. His chest felt hollow and tight, and his lungs screamed for air.

*I'm sorry, Raina, he thought as his consciousness faded. I failed you.*

\* \* \* \*

Raina watched in horror as Shen's struggles grew weaker, until he finally went limp. Makkias released him, and he dropped to the floor in a heap. "Nosy brat," said Makkias. He kicked Shen, then planted a heavy, booted foot atop the boy's narrow chest, which was still moving weakly as Shen fought for breath. "I should crush your ribs right now."

*No!* Raina struggled against the heavy lethargy of the drugs and forced a whimper from her throat.

Makkias turned and smiled at her. The look in his eyes was hard and ugly. "So, you have a soft spot for this gallant little idiot. How touching." He slid a knife from his belt, and Raina's eyes widened. "I really ought to kill him," Makkias drawled, "but that would be difficult to explain in court. In the old days, no one made a fuss when a half-breed slave turned up dead. At worst, you'd have to pay a fine. But Talon changed all that. Stupid, soft-hearted bastard, watering down the lifeblood of our culture with his foolish laws." He cut two long strips from Raina's torn robe and used them to bind Shen's wrists and ankles. Cutting off another piece, he balled it up

and stuffed it into the boy's mouth. "There we go. Trussed up all nice and tight. And if he happens to regain consciousness, he can watch what I do to you. That should be fun, shouldn't it?"

Raina felt sick to her stomach. She wondered how anyone could be so evil.

"Of course, he can't be allowed to tell anyone. I'll erase his memories of the incident after I'm through with you. Or maybe he can have a little accident." He glanced at Shen. "Never did like him much, anyway." Makkias climbed onto the bed and roughly gripped Raina's thighs, spreading them painfully wide.

Raina looked up at his flushed face, his eyes, bulging with lust. She felt something dark and ugly swelling in her heart, a blood-curdling revulsion mixed with hot, searing hatred. The feeling grew and grew, until she knew she must release it, or explode. She wanted to hurt him, to make him suffer for his smug arrogance, for the pain he had caused.

There was no time to think. Raina blasted the full force of her hatred into his mind. Makkias recoiled, eyes wide and stunned. A tiny, choked gasp escaped him as his eyes glazed over ... then he began to cough, blood bubbling from his mouth, and Raina's anger turned to an icy fear.

What had she done?

Makkias continued to cough, wet, strangled sounds. He raised a hand to his throat as he blood dripped onto the bedcovers, then fell to the floor with a thud. He let out a final, gasping wheeze, then there was silence. For a hellish stretch of time—how long, Raina couldn't say—she was unable to

move. She lay as still as a corpse, her heartbeat filling her ears like thunder. Then, at last, feeling began to return to her limbs. She sat up slowly, feeling groggy and unsteady. Dreading what she might see, she looked at the floor.

Makkias lay motionless, eyes empty and staring, mouth glistening with blood. More blood stained his chin and the front of his shirt.

Raina shuddered and looked quickly away. She forced herself not to think about what she'd done. If she dwelled on it for longer than a moment, she'd break down into tears, or start screaming, and wouldn't be able to stop. She wrapped her torn robe around her trembling form as she climbed out of bed and walked across the room on wobbly legs, over to where Shen lay. She dropped to her knees, undid his bindings and pulled the gag from his mouth. Goddess, he was so still. "Shen," she whispered, smoothing his hair. "Oh, Shen, please be all right." Raina placed an ear against his chest. She could hear his heart fluttering, a rapid, weak beat, like a bird struggling in a trap. She couldn't tell if he was breathing.

Then, faintly, he coughed.

Raina exhaled a breath of relief. He was alive ... but badly hurt. She raised her head and shouted, "Help!"

Silence.

"Someone help!" she shouted again, louder. She added a telepathic cry to the vocal one, praying that Talon would hear it. Still, no one answered. She shouted again, and again, until at last she heard footsteps running down the hall. "In here!" Raina yelled.

A guard appeared in the doorway, flanked by two younger men. Their eyes widened at the scene in the room. Raina knelt on the floor, cradling Shen's head in her lap, a torn robe draped loosely about her shoulders, while Makkias lay motionless and bloody nearby.

"Suhara!" cried the guard. "What happened?"

"I'll explain, I promise," said Raina. "Just ... take me to Talon first. Please."

"Of course." He helped her to her feet. "Come with me. One of my men will see to the boy."

Raina nodded weakly. Dizziness washed over her, and her vision began to fade once more. It was not an effect of the drug, this time, but of simple exhaustion. Only the arm around her waist kept her from collapsing as she stumbled down the hall on numb feet. When blackness stole over her, she didn't fight it.

\* \* \* \*

Talon had just finished packing his few personal items when he received a call on his portable com. Lifting it to his ear, he pushed the call-answer button. "Hello?"

"Sire, we need you in the infirmary immediately."

He frowned. "Why? What's going on?"

"I wish to Suhara I knew. All we know is that Makkias is dead, there's blood everywhere, a servant boy is injured and your healer is in severe shock."

Talon's insides went cold. "Is Raina hurt?"

"Not physically, no."

"I'll be there immediately." He shut off the com and headed for the infirmary.

When he opened the door, he saw Raina lying in bed, wearing a plain white tunic, the covers drawn up to her chest. She was trembling visibly, her eyes open but unseeing. "Oh, Raina." He knelt, taking her hand. It was cold and limp. "Youngling, can you hear me?"

She gave a start and looked up at him, eyes so wide that the blue-gray irises were ringed completely in white. The blankness and confusion in those eyes frightened him. "Raina, it's all right," he whispered. "I'm here now. I don't know what happened, but it's over. You're safe." He smoothed her hair and tried to smile. His mouth was dry. "Please say something."

"Murderer," she murmured.

He blinked. "What?"

"I'm a murderer." Tears filled her eyes, and she turned away, shuddering.

Talon stared at her in bewilderment. What was she talking about? She couldn't have killed Makkias, could she? Not Raina. She was so gentle she wouldn't even kill a house-lizard.

Whatever the case, something horrible had happened, and he hadn't been there to protect her. Shame burned in his chest. Why hadn't he felt her distress? Their link was so close now that it should at least alert one of them when the other was in danger. Unsure of what else to do, he continued to stroke her hair, trying to calm her and wishing desperately

that he were a healer himself. He cast a helpless glance at the physician. "Isn't there anything you can give her?"

"I'm afraid to sedate her," he said. "She's Kiran. Her physiological make-up is different from ours. I don't know how our drugs will affect her system."

"We aren't that different," he snapped. "I've given her trikka. It's never hurt her."

"Regardless, I don't feel comfortable giving her anything stronger than that. Also ... I took a blood-sample and found traces of gimris in her system."

"I've never heard of gimris."

"It's rare. In Skandrians, enough of it can induce a trance-like state, slow down reactions, or even paralyze the body completely. I don't know if it was put there or if it occurs naturally in Kiran bodies, but I'm afraid sedatives might react with it in unpredictable ways."

Talon sighed in frustration and raked a hand through his hair. Raina was lying here, suffering, and there was nothing he could do for her. Or maybe there was. Tentatively, he reached out with his mind, feeling for their link. He found it and latched on, projecting a feeling of calmness and safety into her brain.

Raina's breathing slowed and she grew still, her lashes drooping. He touched her throat and felt her rapid, agitated pulse slowing. "That's it," he murmured. "Relax, my love. Focus on my eyes and voice." His hands slid down to her shoulders, rubbing gently.

Her eyes lifted. They still looked cloudy and unfocused, but at least the look of panic had left them. A tear slid down her

cheek. "He really is dead, isn't he?" she whispered, as if realizing it for the first time.

Talon nodded. "He can't hurt you anymore."

"He drugged me." She swallowed hard. "I couldn't run or call for help. I couldn't even move. I'd never been so afraid in my life."

The situation fell into place, and Talon's jaw tightened. Makkias. That bastard. Talon had the sudden urge to find his corpse and spit on it, but he dared not leave Raina's side. Not now, when she needed him most. "I'm sorry for what you endured," he said softly. His fingers slid into her thick hair, holding her head to his shoulder. "I should have banished him from the palace years ago. I knew he was dangerous."

"You couldn't have known he would go this far. Even I never suspected...." Sudden fear flashed in her eyes. "Shen! Where's Shen? Is he all right?"

"He's fine," said the physician. "His throat's badly bruised, but that's about the extent of the damage."

"Is he awake?"

"Awake and babbling. Something about him being a failure and a weakling. He tried to save you, I take it?"

"He *did* save me." She sat up, her eyes a little clearer now, and pushed the covers aside. She was wearing a light blue infirmary-gown. "If Makkias hadn't taken that blow to the head, I might not have been able to...." She trailed off, biting her lip, and looked away.

"Raina?" Talon said, taking her hand.

"I'm all right." She gave his hand a weak squeeze. "I need to talk to Shen."

"Let me," he said. "You need to rest."

She shook her head firmly. "No. He needs to hear it from me, I think." Raina looked up, her face pale and determined. "He risked his life for me. I can't let him think he's a failure."

Talon nodded, feeling a twinge of guilt. While he'd been folding his shirts, Raina and Shen had been struggling for their lives. But guilt, as his father had often told him, was pointless and tiring. Best to push it aside and make the best of the situation.

Easier said than done, of course.

Raina swung her legs over the side of the bed and stood. "Where is he?" she asked the physician.

"The next room to the left."

Talon rested a hand on her shoulder and whispered, "Do you want me to go with you, or would you rather go alone?"

Raina hesitated. "I think it's best if I go alone."

Talon nodded and released her.

Slipping her bare feet into the pair of soft shoes by the bedside, Raina walked out and opened the door to the next room. Shen lay in bed, his throat bandaged. "Raina," he whispered. His voice rattled in his throat. "I'm s-sorry, sir. I ... I tried...."

"Shhh." She knelt by the bedside, taking his hand. "You didn't fail, Shen. You saved me. When you hit him on the head, it broke his control over me, and I was able to defend myself. I hate to think of what would have happened if not for you."

He looked up at her uncertainly, his long lashes wet with tears. "S-so he didn't ... hurt you?"



"No. He didn't have the chance." Raina smiled and smoothed his dark hair, trying not to think about what she'd done; trying not to see the glazed look in Makkias' eyes, the blood bubbling from his mouth. "You were very brave." Leaning down, she placed a soft kiss on his forehead.

Shen closed his eyes, as if savoring the touch. "I tried to be," he whispered, and coughed softly.

She touched the bandage. "Does your throat hurt?"

"It's not so bad."

She smiled a little at the obvious bluff. "Let me see...." She peeled off the bandage and winced. The flesh beneath was puffy and swollen: a mass of bruises, black and purple upon yellowish-brown, darkened his skin. Gently, she lay one hand over his throat. "Hold very still, Shen. I'm going to heal you."

His eyes widened. "But you're the kadir's healer. I'm only a servant. I'm not supposed to be treated by someone so important."

"Nonsense. You think I can't spare a bit of my power for the young man who risked his life for me?"

Shen blushed and held still as Raina channeled her power through her fingertips. Slowly, the darkest bruises faded to blue and then to yellow, and the lighter ones melted away entirely. When she removed her hand, his throat looked as good as new.

Shen sat up, eyes wide as he rubbed his neck. "Thank you, sir."

"Call me Raina, please." She rose to her feet. "I have to go, I'm afraid. They'll probably want me to tell them exactly

what happened. No more of this nonsense about having failed me, all right?"

He smiled. "All right."

Raina gave him a long, gentle hug, then left the room.

As she approached the door to her own infirmary-room, she heard voices behind it. Talon and the physician were talking. Something about the physician's tone made her frown. She placed her ear against the door, straining to make out his words.

"...couldn't possibly have killed him. Makkias' windpipe was crushed, and several of his ribs were broken. It would take a person of tremendous strength to do that, someone your size or bigger." A pause. "It's strange, though. There's no bruising on the surface. It's almost as if the injuries were inflicted from the inside."

Raina began to tremble. She straightened and took a deep breath, composing herself, then opened the door.

Talon turned and moved quickly to her side, wrapping an arm around her. "Raina, are you all right? You're as white as a sheet."

"Fine. Just ... shaken." She leaned against him.

The physician studied her face. "*T'sana* ... I must admit, I'm perplexed. Talon and I were just discussing the situation, and we can't find any answers. Tell me, how did Makkias die?"

She froze.

Talon growled at the physician. "She's in a very delicate state right now. I won't have her interrogated. She needs to rest."

The physician stepped back, holding both hands up as if to shield himself. "All right, all right. But eventually, she'll have to be questioned. She's the only one who actually witnessed the death. We'll question the boy as well, but I don't think it will do much good. He was already unconscious by the time Makkias met his end."

Talon nodded stiffly. "Is there any reason Raina has to remain here?"

"I suppose not."

"Then I'm taking her to our room." He lifted Raina into his arms, as if she were a child. "We are not to be bothered. Understood?"

The physician bowed his head. "Yes, Sire."

"Good." Talon turned and strode into the hall, carrying Raina.

"I can walk," she protested. All the same, she didn't seem inclined to move. Her slender fingers twined into his hair as she lay her head against his shoulder. "I'm all right, Talon, really. He didn't hurt me."

"Hush. Since I failed to come to your rescue, the least I can do is care for you."

"You're just as bad as Shen when it comes to silly guilt," she said. "You didn't fail me. You had no way of knowing I was in danger. Makkias blocked our link."

"I should have been more careful. It's my responsibility to protect you." His arms tightened around her. "It makes me shudder to think of what could have happened. What almost *did* happen."

"It's over," Raina whispered. "Don't think about it."

Their room wasn't a long walk from the infirmary. Talon closed the door behind him. "Lie down," he said, and Raina obediently stretched out across the large, soft bed. He sat on the edge of the bed, and his large hands moved over her gently, smoothing her hair and rubbing her shoulders. "Are you hurt at all?"

She shook her head and lay quietly, enjoying the feel of his hands, so calloused and strong, yet so sensitive and knowing. They were a balm on her skin, soothing away the pain of Makkias' touch.

"I can't say I regret his death," Talon said quietly.

Raina looked at him in surprise. "He was your friend."

"No. The man I knew and admired has been gone for years. His hatred warped him into something else, something wild and dangerous. It took me awhile to realize how deep the poison went."

"But it still pains you, to know he's gone."

Talon looked away. "I would be lying to say it didn't hurt."

Shame twisted inside her like a knife, and tears stung her eyes. One slipped down her cheek, and Talon traced its path with a fingertip. "What happened?" he asked.

Raina tried to speak, but her throat tightened, cutting off air and voice. She swallowed hard. "I don't know if I can say it."

Talon took her face gently between his hands, tilting it upward, and looked into her eyes. "Then just think it."

Raina nodded and steeled herself. Even thinking about it would be painful, but she wanted Talon to know. She didn't want any secrets between them.

Raina played out the memories, starting with her conversation with Shen, then recalling the sting of the gimris darts ... the terror as the drugs began their work on her body and brain. Talon's jaw clenched as he watched Makkias carry her into his room and lock the door. A vein throbbed in his temple as he watched him tear off her robe. "That bastard," he hissed. Talon took a deep breath, obviously trying to calm himself.

He watched as Makkias strangled Shen, leaving him unconscious by the door. Then came the part that Raina dreaded most, the horrible sight of death stealing like a filmy veil across Makkias' eyes as he fought for air against the invisible force squeezing his chest and throat.

When at last it was over, Talon sat back, regarding her quietly.

"You see?" Raina whispered, her voice trembling. There were tears on her cheeks, but she didn't bother to wipe them away. "I killed him. In cold blood."

"No, Raina. You didn't intend to."

"Yes I did. I wanted to hurt him. You *felt* my anger!"

"Of course you wanted to hurt him! He was trying to rape you!" Talon shouted. He sounded angry himself, now—though at Raina or Makkias, she couldn't say. "How can you think it's wrong to be angry at him? How can you expect not to want to hurt the man who drugged you and tried to force himself on you? You may be a sri'dith, but you feel the same emotions as anyone else. Even if you'd killed him intentionally, you'd be within your rights."

"By your code, maybe." She stared down at the bedcovers, eyes blurred with tears. "But I took an oath never to do harm to another living creature, even if they intended to harm me."

"That's foolish."

"To you it is! How could you be expected to understand? Killing is a way of life to your people!" She saw the shock and pain in Talon's eyes and was immediately sorry for the words, but it was too late to take them back. She broke down into tears, unable to hold back anymore.

He sighed softly. "Raina, come here." He pulled her into his arms and slid a hand into her hair, holding her head to his shoulder. "You're not a murderer, love. Even the Clearstones wouldn't blame you for what you did." He rocked her slowly back and forth, holding her tight, until her tears subsided.

"I'm sorry I said that about your people," she murmured. "I didn't mean it."

He shrugged. "You spoke the truth. Our world is a harsh place, and it has made us in its image. Nothing soft survives here for long—not plants or animals, nor even people, unless they find ways to protect themselves. The harshness is embedded in our very genes."

"I don't believe that," she said, wiping tears from her cheeks. "You're always gentle with me."

He chuckled. "You're an exception to the rule." He kissed her softly, then his face grew serious. "Do you still want to accompany us on the mission to Kira, Raina? The shuttle leaves tonight. I realize how difficult it is to undertake such a journey so soon after what happened...."

"I'm going," she said firmly. "And nothing you say is going to change my mind."

He smiled. "I would not try to. I want you close to me, where I can protect you. I still can't figure out how Makkias managed to block our mental link."

"He said he shut down that part of my mind. I tried to call out for you, in my head, but it felt like the calls were being absorbed, somehow. Being swallowed up."

Talon's eyes darkened. "Makkias is—*was* a more skilled telepath than I thought. I never dreamed he might know such a sophisticated technique. I broke the first rule of being a successful kadir and assumed my enemy was stupid, and you suffered for my mistake." He was silent for a moment, one hand resting on her back. "We still have some time before we have to board. Would you like to bathe? There won't be a chance to have a proper bath once we're on the shuttle, and those sterilization chambers aren't very pleasant."

"A bath sounds good," Raina said.

"I'll understand if you don't want me to join you...."

She slid her fingers into his thick hair. "Don't be silly. I know you aren't Makkias."

Talon smiled and lifted her from the bed, carrying her into the bathing room.

\* \* \* \*

Afterwards, Raina went to the Court-officials for questioning about Makkias' death. The experience was almost as bad as the near-rape itself; she sat in a small, dimly-lit room, across from a Skandrian with cold black eyes who

asked her intimate, probing questions. He wanted to know everything, including where Makkias had touched her and how.

Procedure did not permit Talon to be there physically, but she could feel his presence in her mind. She might not have made it through the questioning if not for him. Whenever she started to tremble, he would send a wave of comforting warmth into her, soothing her agitated nerves. She managed to make it through the interrogation without breaking down, but she was profoundly relieved when she left the airless little room.

As the sky darkened with the coming of evening, she and Talon left the palace, guards flanking them to either side. The space-station was only a short walk away. The shuttle stood on the launching-pad. It looked like a big, silver bullet with a row of windows around the middle, reflecting the orange glow of sunset.

They boarded the shuttle—Raina, Talon, and seven crew-members—and strapped themselves into cushioned chairs as they waited for launch. Raina's heart pattered. She remembered how jarring it had been the first time they went into space, the incredible speed, the disorienting moment when they broke free of the planet's gravitational pull and their bodies seemed to have no weight. Talon reached over and squeezed her hand before fastening his own straps.

The countdown ended, and they took off with a bone-jarring blast. Raina felt herself pushed back against the seat, but she managed to turn her head enough to stare out the small, round window, watching the city grow smaller and



smaller, until it was only a spot of white against the dun-colored sand. She felt a tug of nostalgia as she watched it disappear, and smiled at the irony. She'd spent most of her time on Skandria missing Kira. Now that they were leaving Skandria, she missed it already.

They broke free of the atmosphere, and Raina sighed in relief as the overwhelming pressure vanished. She felt the familiar weightlessness of space for an instant ... then Talon said, "Switch on the gravity," and a crew-member flipped a switch. The artificial gravity pulled her back to the seat.

The crew-members unbuckled their restraints, opened the hatch and stepped out of the cockpit. Raina followed and found herself in a narrow hallway with metal walls and floor. A sudden wave of dizziness washed over her. She closed her eyes and felt Talon's strong, warm arms slip around her, holding her up. "Space sickness," he said. "It'll pass." He led her down the hall, into a small room with a bed. "Here, lie down...." He pushed her gently to the bed and sat on the edge, pillowing Raina's head against one firm, muscular leg. His musky scent filled her nostrils, making her giddy despite her dizziness.

"Talon...." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "Will we have a chance to make love while we're on the ship?"

"I'm surprised you want to, so soon after what happened. Not that I have any objection to the idea, but I don't want to push you into anything you're not comfortable with."

"We might not come back from this mission. This may be our last chance to be together."

"I pray that won't be so." Strong, blunt fingers explored her features, caressing her cheekbones, her full lips. His eyes were distant and sad. "Nonetheless, you're right. We should take advantage of the time we have together. We won't have as much privacy here as we did back in the palace, but yes, we can make love." He climbed onto the bed and covered her slender, robe-clad body with his own. His hard chest pressed against her breasts, making them tingle sweetly as his mouth sought hers. He nipped her full, soft lower lip, then pressed his mouth against hers. Her pulse drummed in her throat as his tongue traced her lips, then slid between them, invading and stoking her wet mouth. One large hand pulled down her robe to reveal a smooth, white shoulder, the soft roundness of a breast. He cupped it in his palm, thumb toying gently with her hard nipple.

It felt so good, so right, when they were together like this, their bodies so close it seemed they could melt into each other. She lost herself in his scent, in the touch of his strong, knowing fingers. One hand slid beneath her robe, pulling down her underwear. Warm, calloused fingertips traced little circles onto the cool silk of her inner thigh, tantalizingly close to her sex.

His mouth suddenly closed over her throat, making her gasp. His sharp teeth pressed into her flesh, not quite hard enough to penetrate. She held very still as he pushed a long finger into her wetness. Raina moaned. Her flesh was so sensitized that this small invasion nearly brought her to climax. Her sheath clenched around his finger...

Then he withdrew.

Raina let out a soft cry of protest.

"Shhh." Talon kissed her racing pulse. "Not yet, Raina." His black eyes burned into hers, and she felt a hard bulge pressing against her thigh. "When you come, I want to be deep inside you, touching places so private you never knew they existed." He kissed his way slowly down the length of her body, until he reached the juncture between her thighs. His breath was hot on her aroused flesh. He spread her lips wide with his thumbs, exposing her moist, pink flesh to his hungry eyes, and kissed her swollen clitoris. His tongue flicked against it a few times, then he stretched out atop her, his eyes staring deep into hers, and pushed the blunt tip of his cock into her cleft—but he did not penetrate her yet. Instead, he slid slowly up and down the length of her wet, aroused slit, stroking her folds with his cock, rubbing it against her aching nub. At last, when she thought she could bear it no more, he slid his thick, hard length into her welcoming heat, filling her completely. Slowly, he began to move inside her. Raina clung to his broad shoulders as a sweet ache blossomed inside her, growing with each thrust. She made small sounds of encouragement, and Talon pushed harder, deeper, as if trying to penetrate her very womb. She wrapped her legs around him and bit his shoulder, her teeth pressing into his skin as his cock slid in and out, pumping her tight sheath.

"Come for me," he whispered hoarsely.

That breathless command pushed her over the edge. Her toes clenched as orgasm shuddered through her body, and

her walls tightened around Talon's member. Moments later, he released his seed into her, filling her depths with his heat.

For several long moments Talon lay atop her, panting, warm and heavy ... then pulled free and wrapped his arms around her. They didn't speak; just lay close together. Talon's hand absently stroked Raina's soft hair. "Still space-sick?" he asked.

She chuckled. "Not anymore."

They lay close together for a long time, leaving the deeper words unspoken. Raina was thankful for that. If they tried to talk about how much they loved each other and feared for each other, she would start to cry, and she didn't want to spoil the moment with tears.

Their mission loomed ahead of them. So much depended on it. So many lives hung in the balance. If this was a trap, they would both die. They had no weapons, no way of defending themselves. She wished she could give her own people more credit than that, but she knew that Kira's government could be every bit as ruthless as Skandria's.

"What are you thinking about, love?" asked Talon.

"Nothing."

"You're lying." A smile touched his lips. "I always know when you're thinking."

She smiled back, faintly. "Just worrying about the future, is all. Let's not talk about it. I want to enjoy our time together. It might be our last."

"You mustn't think like that, Raina. We...."

A sudden rapping on the door cut him off. "Sire!"

Barbarian  
*by Amanda Steiger*

At the urgency in that voice, Talon's expression grew grim.  
He climbed out of bed and dressed quickly. "What is it?"  
"We've found a stowaway."

## Chapter Thirteen

"Get dressed," said Talon. He handed Raina her robe. She slipped into it and tied the sash, then followed Talon out of the room, down the hall. She felt painfully self-conscious. Her face was still flushed from their lovemaking, her hair rumped and disarrayed, and she undoubtedly smelled like spent desire, a smell which the Skandrians' sensitive noses would catch from across the room. She smoothed her hair and robes, hoping no one would notice ... or if they did, they'd be tactful enough to ignore it.

Her space-sickness reasserted itself almost immediately. There might be gravity on this ship, but it felt different from the gravity on Kira or Skandria, in a way she couldn't define. She wondered why she hadn't felt this sick on the first voyage. Maybe she'd just been too occupied trying to keep her mind off Talon's allure.

There was no time to wonder, however. The crew-member led them down the hall and into a large, metal-walled room.

The other crew-members were gathered around a small, terrified-looking form: Shen. He spotted Raina and began a frantic explanation. "I wasn't trying to stow away, sir, honest, I just wanted to see you one last time and say goodbye to you, but then I saw someone and hid and then the launch started and...."

"Quiet, boy," snapped a tall Skandrian woman: Kalra, by name. She looked up at Talon. "What's your decision, Sire? Should we turn around and head back to Kira?"

Talon shook his head. "A complete turn would use up too much fuel. We'd have to refuel, and that would delay the mission by a day or more. He'll have to stay."

Kalra frowned. "Is that wise? He might get in the way."

"No, he won't. I know this boy. He's as respectful and intelligent as they come. He won't make a nuisance of himself."

"What *I* want to know is how he got past security," said another crew-member, a tall, thin male called Fenro.

Talon looked down at the boy. There was nothing accusing in his expression, but Shen flinched under that steady gaze. "Well, Shen?" asked Talon, keeping his voice gentle. "How did you get through the guards?"

"They let me past, Sire."

"Why?"

"I don't know." His face was flushed, his eyes downcast. "Because I'm Raina's personal servant, I guess."

"There's no need to look so nervous," said Talon, and offered a slight smile. "We're not going to jettison you into space. Now that you're here, however, you'll be expected to help out in whatever ways you can."

Shen breathed a soft sigh of relief. "I will, my lord. I promise."

The crew-members looked displeased at their kadir's decision, but didn't question it.

"What about the food and air-supply?" asked Shen.

Talon frowned slightly. "Pardon?"

"Will there be enough food and air to go around?"

He laughed. "I wouldn't worry about that. We've got plenty of spare oxygen tanks and extra rations ... and even if we didn't, I doubt a mite like you could make a dent in our food-supply."

The rest of the crew chuckled, and Shen's blush deepened. "I know I'm small," he said, with a defensiveness in his voice that Raina had never heard there before. "You don't have to remind me."

Raina's eyes softened with understanding. Shen's small size was a result of his half-Kiran heritage, something he'd probably been teased about as a child. "Of course not," she said gently, taking his hand, and gave Talon a disapproving frown. "Really, Talon, I would have expected better from you."

Talon spread his hands and gave her an open, bewildered look. Several of the crew-members hid smiles behind their hands.

Raina, however, had already turned back to Shen. "Well," she said, smiling, "it looks like you'll get a chance to see Kira after all. Are you excited?"

"Oh, yes! It'll be great. I've never been on another planet before."

"This isn't a sight-seeing tour," said Kalra. "We're on an important mission, and if it fails, we might all wind up dead."

"Kalra, stop that," said Raina. "There's no need to scare him."

"I'm just letting him know what to expect," said Kalra. "I don't want him doing anything to jeopardize our mission. If you're not comfortable with the idea of him risking his life,



then perhaps we should take him back. If this turns out to be a trap, there won't be any way to save him."

Raina hesitated, torn.

"It's all right, Raina," said Shen. "I know this will be dangerous, but I want to help in any way I can. If I die, I'll at least have died doing something important." He smiled, and a chill crept up Raina's spine.

It seemed wrong, for one so young to be so comfortable with the idea of death.

\* \* \* \*

The landing went smoothly. They touched down on a huge, white landing-pad in the middle of an empty field outside Karthia, the Kiran capital. The sight of all that green, after the barren deserts of Skandria, made Raina a little giddy—but at the same time, she felt an odd wave of longing for the golden dunes and reddish-orange skies of Talon's home-planet. She sighed in exasperation at herself. Couldn't she ever just be content?

Cars waited for them outside the ship, filled with Kiran officials. The ship door opened, and a ramp slid out, bridging the gap between door and ground. As the crew descended, fist-sized silver spheres whirled around them like strange birds. Raina tensed as one flew close to her. The sphere had a small, black, circular window that seemed to stare at her. She saw her reflection on its glossy surface.

"Cameras," said Talon. "They won't hurt us. Try not to look nervous, though. There are probably a lot of people watching us right now."

It wasn't the most reassuring thing he could have said. Raina's heart pounded as she walked at Talon's side, aware of the spheres following their every move, wondering if her fear showed in her eyes.

A blue-uniformed Kiran man waved to them, beckoning them toward a white ground car.

"We won't all fit in there," said Kalra.

"Only your kadir will be allowed into the city," said the Kiran. "The rest of you will stay on board the ship."

Kalra bristled and opened her mouth to reply, but Talon held up a cautionary hand, his eyes never leaving the Kiran's face. Kalra closed her mouth reluctantly. "Is it all right if my healer accompanies me?" asked Talon.

The Kiran's eyes skimmed up and down Raina's body, as if trying to gauge whether or not she was a threat. "Very well," he said.

Talon started toward the car.

Kalra reached out, as if to touch him. Her arm dropped at the last moment, but Talon stopped and turned to face her anyway. "Be careful, Sire," she said quietly.

"You know I will," replied Talon.

Kalra gave him a salute, which he returned. Then he and Raina got into the car.

Two more uniformed Kirans closed the doors. A restraint snaked across Raina's lap and clicked automatically into place. The car started up with a rumble and glided down the road, toward Karthia, the largest city on the planet.

Raina had never been there before. The size and splendor of the buildings astonished her. Everywhere she looked,

flawless white marble and silver metal gleamed in the sunlight. Many-faceted glass domes winked like diamonds, shining so brightly that she had to squint. The car pulled to a stop in front of a huge building, and they all climbed out. A circle of stone tiles, as large and open as a field, lay in front of the building, and a roped fence surrounded the circle. Crowds stood outside the fence, watching.

Raina looked up at the building and realized, with a jolt, that she was standing in front of the People's House.

Though not as large as the palace on Skandria, it was still a magnificent structure. Three white domes, the center one twice as large as the others, dominated the top of the great House, and hundreds upon hundreds of windows lined the front. The House's walls were gray, laced with thick veins of crystal and cream. Two marble eagles, their wings outstretched, flanked the main doors. The legendary birds looked proud and stately. One had its right foot upon a sheathed sword, the other, upon an open book.

A Kiran woman, robed in scarlet, stepped forward to meet them. Raina recognized her as Maura, First Consul, and her heartbeat quickened. She lowered herself to one knee and touched her forehead respectfully. Talon followed her example.

"You may rise," said the consul. They stood.

She shook Talon's hand, studying him with cool gray eyes. "You have agreed to come here with no weapons," she said. "But we know that you, Kadir Talon, are a powerful telepath. Your mind can be considered a weapon."

He hesitated. "True enough, but I couldn't leave my mind back on Skandria."

"But you can allow us to block its powers, for the time being." She pulled something silver from her robe, and Talon's breath caught in his throat as he recognized it. A slave crown. Through their link, Raina felt his fear and hatred of that silver ring, his memories of the time he'd been under its power.

He closed his eyes for a moment, as if to regain his composure. "No," he said quietly.

"Pardon?" said the consul.

"No. I can't wear that. I'm sorry. If you fear my powers, you may summon as many telepaths as you like. Two or three skilled telepaths could certainly overpower me ... but I will not wear that symbol of slavery."

The crowd watched, tensely.

Maura's lips tightened. "We already have many skilled telepaths within the People's House, but we don't know how powerful you truly are. We have no reason to trust you. If you are sincere in your desire to end the war, you have nothing to fear from us. You will be asked to wear the crown only during your time in the House, and its power will not be used against you unless you attack us."

"Please, consul," Raina blurted out. "Talon is trustworthy. He wants peace more than anything, but he has been held under a slave-crown before, as a prisoner. Already, he is placing himself in a vulnerable position. It's unfair to ask more of him."

The consul looked sharply at Raina. Raina closed her mouth, cheeks flushed.

"And what is your purpose here, young woman?" Consul Maura asked, her voice cool and level.

"I am Raina, Talon's personal healer."

"And closest advisor," Talon added. "She goes with me."

Maura raised an eyebrow. "A Kiran is your closest advisor?"

"Raina claims no allegiance to any world. Her only loyalty is to me," said Talon.

Maura turned her gaze to Raina, studying her closely. Raina desperately wished to be anywhere else. She was conscious of the crowds around them, the countless cameras and listening devices, the press of minds surrounding her, crowding into her thoughts. Dizziness swept over her, and for a horrible moment, she thought she was going to faint, but she managed to stay on her feet.

At last, Maura's eyes turned back to Talon. "I'm afraid I must insist on this precaution," she said. "We have heard too many tales about your formidable mind-powers."

"And if I refuse?" asked Talon.

"Then there will be no treaty."

Talon took a slow, deep breath and opened his eyes. There was weariness there, resentment ... and resignation. "I will wear the crown." He bowed his head silently, allowing the consul to place it around his brow. The crown shrank, tightening around his head. His expression was unreadable, his eyes flat, impenetrable black disks. Only Raina felt the turbulent emotions roiling behind them.

"Your cooperation is appreciated," said the consul. "Follow me, and we will discuss this offer of yours." She turned and walked down the marble pathway, through the open doors of the People's House.

Raina's cheeks were still flushed ... not with embarrassment, but with anger. Talon had come here seeking peace, offering Skandria's largest moon to seal the agreement. The Kirans should have welcomed him. Instead, they greeted him with suspicion and forced him to wear a slave-crown, the mark of lunatics and criminals—and in front of the entire Kiran public!

As soon as they were within the doors, out of the crowd's sight, a guard stepped up and ran his hands over Talon's body. Talon stood impassively as the guard patted his back, legs and ankles, searching for concealed weapons.

The guard turned to Raina and ran his hands over her, as well. Something dangerous flashed in Talon's eyes, and he bared his teeth, a growl building in his chest. Raina sent him a warning look, and he reluctantly sheathed his fangs. Nevertheless, the guard quickly stepped away from Raina as soon as his task was done.

The consul turned to them. "Before we begin the proceedings, would you like to rest and eat?"

Talon glanced at Raina, but she shook her head. "We're ready," he said. "We'd prefer not to delay this meeting."

"Very well, then." She turned to a black-robed young man nearby. "Summon the chancellors."

He nodded and walked briskly away.

The consul led them deeper into the House, through halls lined with statues of Kiran saints and past consuls, into a huge, elegant chamber. The walls were paneled with lustrous wood, the floor covered in lush red carpet. A round, wooden table dominated the room, and busts of long-dead chancellors lined the walls. The Second Consul, a tall, slim man in scarlet, sat in a high-backed chair, hands resting on its ornately-carved arms.

The First Consul sat next to him. There were other officials here as well: the Chancellor of War, the Chancellor of Justice, and others whose functions and titles Raina didn't know. She felt very small and unimportant as she took a seat next to Talon. She could feel his anger, hot and intense, at being forced to wear a slave-crown. She wanted to give his hand an encouraging squeeze, but this was a formal meeting. They weren't supposed to touch.

Instead, she looked around the room, taking in the faces of the Kiran diplomats. Her eyes widened as she spotted a face she recognized all too well: Tabitha's. What was *she* doing here? Clearstones were powerful and respected, in their own right, but they were *never* involved with the government. The code did not allow them to take part in politics.

Did it?

Tabitha's eyes locked with Raina's, giving her that probing, appraising stare that Raina remembered all too well. Raina looked quickly away, but it didn't help much. She could still feel those eyes on her, seeming to penetrate her mind and judge every thought.

Paper rustled as the Second Consul unrolled a scroll. "This meeting has been called," he droned, "to discuss a potential agreement with Skandria. Full ownership of Shandire, Skandria's largest moon, shall be given to Kira on the condition that Kira cease all attacks. If Skandria attacks us, the truce is nullified, but the moon remains in our possession. If Kira attacks, the entire agreement shall be considered nullified. Correct?"

Talon nodded.

"Our senate has discussed this proposal and finds it more than reasonable. We have already put our names to the document. If you will sign, Kadir Talon, we will consider it done."

"Pass me the document, then," he said.

"There is one more thing," the First Consul interrupted. "Will you agree to be telepathically scanned so that we know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that your intentions are honorable?"

Raina's heart sunk. So that was why Tabitha was here.

Talon's eyes flashed. "My intention is to give you the moon of Shandire in exchange for your promise to cease all attacks. It's a very simple agreement. There is no room for trickery or deceit. I have already submitted to the indignity of a slave-collar. How many more hoops must I jump through before I can sign this treaty?"

Raina sent him a mental caution. Their words were undoubtedly being recorded, and it wouldn't look good for him to lose his temper.



Talon ignored her, however. "I will *not* submit to a telepathic scanning. It is a dishonor, an insult and an invasion of privacy. Now, please pass me the document and let me sign."

The chancellors were exchanging uneasy glances. The Second Consul made no move to hand over the treaty. "If you refuse," he said, "there can be no treaty. I'm sorry, but that's the agreement we reached in Council."

Raina touched his arm, unable to help herself. *Please, Talon, she sent. For the sake of your people.*

*NO!* His voice crashed in her head like thunder, making her wince. *No and no again! I am willing to risk my life for peace, but I cannot compromise my honor! I have placed myself at their mercy, worn their mark of servitude, and they still aren't satisfied!*

*I know it isn't fair, Talon, but they leave us no choice.* She felt like a bully, forcing him to submit, but it was the only way. *If you don't let them scan you, there can be no peace. Think of the lives you could save.*

Talon exhaled a shaky breath. She could feel him trembling, and her heart ached for him. Like all Skandrians, he'd been raised to believe that submission and compromise were signs of weakness ... and now, he was forced to choose between his honor and his people. Talon's eyes closed, then opened slowly.

"Very well," said Talon. His voice and eyes were hollow. "Who will perform the examination?"

Tabitha stood. Her expression was inscrutable, but Raina thought she saw a faint smile hovering around the woman's lips. "I will," she said.

Talon lurched to his feet. "I object. This woman is hostile to my interests. She held me prisoner when I was stranded on Kira and accused me of telepathic manipulation." His eyes narrowed. "I refuse to be scanned by someone so obviously biased. There must be another telepath who can perform the examination."

"There is no one else," said the First Consul, her voice as cool as ever. "Tabitha is the most skilled telepath in this city, or in all Kira, for that matter. She has told us about the incident and expresses her sincerest regret. At the time, she was only doing what she thought best."

Tabitha pressed her hands together and bowed in his direction. "I hope you will accept my humble apology."

Talon was silent. Raina watched him quietly, aware of the countless eyes staring at them. If he said no, if he demanded another examiner, it would set a tone of distrust for the future ... distrust which might erupt into a new war, ending the fragile peace. Talon knew this. She could see it in the tenseness of his jaw, the terrible deadness in his eyes.

At last, he gave a single, curt nod. "Be quick."

Tabitha's eyes locked with his across the table. Raina felt the tingle of psychic energy between them as Tabitha searched his mind. Talon stood stiffly, his face a granite mask ... but Raina noticed a slight, almost undetectable twitch in his left eye.

At last, Tabitha leaned back in her chair. Her face reminded Raina of a still, deep pond with water so reflective that you couldn't see anything below the surface. "He is lying," she said.

Raina gasped.

"What?" Talon's voice was soft and calm, his face as blank as ever ... but something flashed beneath the surface of his eyes. Something dangerous.

"This offer is but a ruse," Tabitha continued, raising her voice so that every shocked chancellor could hear. "He intends to lull us into a false sense of security, and then attack with his full strength. He is convinced he can destroy Kira, or at least cripple it, and take back Shandire."

Talon's eyes remained locked with Tabitha's. He spoke slowly, as if choosing his words with great care. "If that were true, I would not have submitted to a scanning."

Tabitha lifted her chin, her gaze cool and hard. "You thought to guard your intent from me." Her tone was supremely self-confident and in control. It sickened Raina, to know she could lie so easily. "You thought yourself a stronger telepath."

The First Consul had recovered from her shock and wore a grim expression. "Guards," she said.

Two blue-uniformed Kirans stood by the door, so still as to be almost invisible. Now, they suddenly came to life and pointed their blazers at Talon.

Talon's calm cracked. "She's lying!" he shouted. "For the sake of your people, don't do this! If you kill me, you'll destroy any chance at peace between our worlds!"

"Sri'dith never lie," snapped the First Consul. "To question her honor is a grave insult."

Raina moaned. This was a nightmare. It had to be.

"Give the word, and we'll fire," said a guard.

Raina stood and positioned herself between Talon and the guards' blazers. She turned her desperate gaze to Tabitha.

"Why are you doing this? Why do you hate him so much? He's not our enemy!"

"Poor child," said Tabitha, speaking loudly for the benefit of the listening-devices. "He's brainwashed you so thoroughly. But we'll break his hold over you, never doubt it. We'll take you back to the Hold, where you belong, and this will all seem like a bad dream."

The Second Consul eyed Talon closely, then looked at the guards. "Take him to a holding-cell. He will remain there until we have discussed this matter at length."

The guards nodded. "Come with us, sir," one said, his voice mocking the title of respect. His blazer remained pointed at Talon's head.

"It seems I don't have much choice." He shared a long, weary look with Raina, seeming to apologize silently for dragging her into this, then turned his gaze to the consuls. "I would *strongly* urge you to find another telepath. An unbiased one, or at least an honest one. If my planet finds out that I have been wrongly accused and confined, the results will be disastrous."

"Take him away," said the First Consul.

"Get moving," said one guard, and nudged Talon with his blazer.

Talon growled and turned sharply to face him, and for a terrifying moment Raina thought he would attack the guard and be shot. Talon's eyes narrowed. Then, slowly, he turned and began to walk.

The guards followed Talon from the room, blazers trained on his back. Raina tried to follow, but someone caught her arm. "Let me go!" She tried to pull away, her eyes blurred with hot tears. "You're insane, all of you. He offered you a chance to end this stupid war, and you spat it back in his face!"

"Sedate her," said Tabitha. "She's hysterical."

"No!"

Two more guards pinned Raina's arms to her sides as she struggled. She felt a sharp sting in her neck. For a moment, she seemed to be falling, and then there was blackness.

\* \* \* \*

Talon paced the small, white-walled room. He groaned, pressing the knuckles of one hand to his forehead. Damn him, and his stupidity! He should never have let them put that crown on him. He should have listened to experience, and to the little voice of warning in the back of his head.

But then, how could he have rejected this one chance at peace?

Again, he tried to reach out to Raina with his mind, but he couldn't feel her. The crown blocked all his psychic talents, even the ability to sense his mate. Talon clenched his teeth and slammed a fist against the door. What now? Would the consuls take his advice, and send for another telepath to

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verify Tabitha's claims? Or would they simply swallow her lies and keep Talon locked up like a rabid dog?

And what would become of Raina?

Talon leaned against the wall and closed his eyes, forcing himself to think calmly and clearly. No situation was hopeless. There had to be a way out of this.

But if there was, he couldn't see it.

## Chapter Fourteen

Raina woke to a dull ache behind her eyes. She felt as if her head had been stuffed with wool. A soft groan escaped her lips.

"So, I've found you at last," said a voice. "The little lamb who strayed from my flock."

Tabitha.

Raina's eyes opened. She was lying on a soft, white bed, covers pulled up to her chin, in a lavish bedroom, probably a guestroom in the People's House. Tabitha sat in a chair by her bedside, smiling. The clear stone in her forehead glinted in the soft lamplight. "You always *were* very weak and impressionable, Raina. So easily confused, so easily led astray. I am not surprised that you fell under his spell."

"He didn't brainwash me," said Raina. Her tongue felt thick. It took an effort to speak. She tried to sit up, but a wave of dizziness pushed her back to the bed. "I went with him of my own free will, because I was tired of living as one of your sheep."

"That's undoubtedly what you believe. But you're in no condition to know your own mind. Talon has been manipulating you ever since he first came to the Hold. You've become his puppet, a political tool and a pretty bed-toy rolled into one. I saw that broadcast you sent to Kira. A very clever ploy on Talon's part, trying to win our trust by speaking to us through one of our own. He's *using* you, Raina, can't you see that? He doesn't love you, and your love for him isn't real.

He's a telepath. He can manipulate your emotions, make you feel whatever he wants you to."

"No." Raina shook her head, tears of frustration stinging her eyes. Tabitha had always had a way of making her feel small and weak. But she couldn't allow herself to be intimidated. She had to stand up for what she knew was true. "You're wrong about him, about everything. You don't know anything about Talon ... or me! Why don't you just leave us alone? What difference does it make to you?"

"It makes all the difference to me." Her voice was low and silky-smooth. "How can you say I don't know you? I've known you since you were too small to walk. I've been inside your mind more times than I can count. I know you better than you know yourself. You are one of my own, Raina, and I will not abandon you."

"Why should I believe anything you say?" She glared up at Tabitha, anger burning like bile in her chest and throat. "You said that Talon's peace offering was a trick, and it's not. He's not planning to attack Kira. You can't tell me that he lied to me about that. I was with him during council-sessions on Skandria, and I *know* he doesn't want war. I heard him arguing about it with his council-members."

"Those council-sessions did not happen," said Tabitha. "They were an illusion he planted in your head."

For a moment, Raina felt a flicker of doubt and fear. Could it be true? Had Talon only been using her? She felt dizzy, confused. She didn't know who to trust. How could she trust anyone, if she couldn't even trust her own memories?



"No." Raina shook her head. She sat up, breathing hard. "I don't believe you."

"It doesn't matter what you believe. I will take you back to the Hold, and you will be treated. Soon, you will not even remember Talon."

A chill crawled up her spine. "What do you mean?"

"His brainwashing runs too deep to be reversed. Your memories of him will be destroyed entirely. Then, everything will be as it was."

Raina stared in horror. "No!" She sat up, so quickly that she almost fainted from the ensuing dizziness. Her mouth was dry, her insides cold with fear. "I won't let you do that to me!"

Tabitha's eyes hardened. "You have no choice, I'm afraid. Now, lie down, Raina."

Raina shook her head.

"Lie down," Tabitha repeated. "You will sleep now, and when you wake up, you will be back home and all of this will be forgotten."

Raina felt the Clearstone's will pushing against hers, trying to force her compliance. She fought it, pushing back with all her strength, and felt Tabitha's surprise at the resistance. Encouraged, Raina pushed aside the covers and stood. Her legs felt wobbly, but she managed to keep them beneath her. "Get out of my head, or...." She took a deep, shaky breath. "Or I'll hurt you. I've learned something about my power, Tabitha, something you and the other Clearstones kept from me. I know it can be used as a weapon. I've already killed a man. I'm not proud of it, but I'm not ashamed of it, either."

Not anymore. I had no choice." She kept her eyes locked with Tabitha's, knowing that if she showed the slightest hint of submission, she would lose her chance. "If you don't let me go, I'll use my power against you."

Tabitha took a step back, eyes wide, and Raina glimpsed something in them that she'd never seen there before: fear. Tabitha was afraid of her.

"I mean it," said Raina. "Stand aside and let me pass."

"You don't know what you're saying." Tabitha's tongue darted out to wet her lips. "Listen to yourself, Raina! You would attack one of your own? The woman who took you in and raised you, who taught you everything you know? And for what? Some Skandrian dog? Are you such a selfish, ungrateful child, that you would betray me for him?"

Raina could feel the pressure boiling just beneath the surface of her mind. Never had she felt so tremendously alive, so powerful. The blood seemed to sizzle and dance in her veins. She lifted her chin, eyes narrowed. "I'm not a child. I don't owe you anything, Tabitha." She knew, instinctively, that her tenuous grip on the power was the only thing holding it back.

Now, she let go.

Tabitha flew across the room, as if slapped by some enormous hand. Her head struck the wall with a sickening crack, and she slid to the floor, unconscious. A dark splotch of blood marred the wall.

Raina's anger drained away, and cold fear squeezed her heart. "Oh Goddess," she whispered. "What have I done?"

Raina knelt beside the limp form and placed two fingers against the artery in Tabitha's neck. A sigh of relief escaped her when she felt the slow, steady pulse. There was blood soaking through Tabitha's hair, but chances were, she would wake up with nothing more than a bad headache.

Raina left the room. She had to find Talon and get out of here. The only problem was that she had no idea where he was ... or where *she* was, for that matter. She might not even be in the People's House. Tabitha could have moved her to another building while she was unconscious.

She closed her eyes, searching for Talon's mind, but felt nothing. Of course. The slave crown hid him from her as well as suppressing his powers.

Raina knew what she had to do. She didn't like the idea, and she wasn't even certain she could do it, but it was her only chance.

She returned to the room where Tabitha lay unconscious, breathing in thick, wet snores. Raina crouched next to her, biting her lower lip. She'd never probed a mind for information, but she knew how it was done ... sort of.

She rested her fingertips on Tabitha's forehead and closed her eyes. Sensations flooded her, overwhelming her. She withdrew, slowly sorting through the tide of images and concepts, trying to make sense of them. It was like untangling a clump of hair-thin threads tied together in complicated knots ... but eventually, she found the cluster of memories she was looking for, memories of following a guard down a long hallway, watching him lay a small, limp form—herself—on a bed.

Raina opened her eyes. She felt slightly dizzy, her forehead damp with sweat ... but she'd done it. She knew exactly where they were in the People's House and, more importantly, where Talon was.

She ran through the maze of marble corridors, past elegant statues and elaborate mosaics, until she came to a staircase leading down. She took it and found herself in another hall. She could tell that this part of the House was not used often. The walls were plain cerra-stone, whitewashed and porous, and the floors were of dull tiles. She ran until she reached a plain gray door. This was where they had taken Talon. She called his name softly, but there was no response. The door was probably soundproof. She tried the door-handle. Locked. Of course. There was a keypad next to the door which required a four-digit password. If she could guess the combination, she could get in, but there was no telling how long that might take.

Raina bit her lower lip. She'd never used her sri'dith powers to pick a lock before. She knew it was possible. If she could knit torn flesh and soothe sore muscles, she could probably manipulate objects, too, but she didn't know how this type of lock worked.

She wondered ... was her power strong enough to break down the door?

Raina took a deep breath and stood back. She tried to summon her power, but it would not come. Panic clutched at her chest, but she forced herself to take a deep breath, calming herself.

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She had used her power in self-defense against two people: Makkias, and Tabitha. And on both those occasions, she had been angry and frightened. Maybe she could only summon the violent side of her power when her emotions were roused. But if that was the case, how could she summon her powers now?

That was simple enough: she had to make herself angry.

Raina closed her eyes and thought about the lies Tabitha had told to tear her away from Talon. Something seemed to glimmer inside her, like an ember.

She thought about the stupid, blind pride which had fueled the war between their two homeworlds for centuries, about the thousands of innocents randomly killed to avenge the actions of a few corrupt leaders.

The glimmer grew into a flame.

She thought about the prejudice which threatened to destroy the fragile happiness that she and Talon had achieved, about people's unwillingness to accept anything that threatened their narrow view of the world. She thought about Makkias and the Skandrian councilmen who resisted peace with all their strength ... the Kiran consuls and chancellors, blindly distrustful and unwilling to believe that a Skandrian could truly desire a truce between their worlds, yet unwilling to doubt the word of one of their own, even if there was no evidence to support it. She thought of the countless lives that would be lost if the war continued, all because of their blind cynicism.

The flame roared into a bonfire, so hot and powerful that Raina feared it would consume her. A loud shriek rent the air,

though she wasn't sure if it was coming from her or from some other source.

There was a loud *thud*, and a huge dent appeared in the metal door, as if an invisible cannon-ball had hit it. Another thud, then other. Again and again, her will slammed into the door, hammering it into a crumpled mass, then finally punching through it, ripping the thick steel as if it were cloth. The hinges snapped and fell apart, and the door crashed to the ground.

Raina stood, panting and trembling as she stared at what she had done.

Beyond the remains of the door, she could see Talon, his back pressed against the wall at the far end of the room. His eyes were wide.

Raina took a step toward him. The strength drained from her limbs, and she crumpled to her knees. The world spun, and colors blurred together like runny paint.

Strong arms surrounded her, holding her up.

"Raina," he whispered. One hand cradled her face as he stared into her eyes. "How did you...?"

"I'll explain later." Raina sagged in his arms, exhausted. She felt hollow, as if she had burned up her supply of anger, and only cold ashes were left. "I just ... needed to get to you."

"By Suhara." He touched her cheek, looking into her eyes. "Who could have guessed there was such power in that tiny frame?"

She gave him a tiny smile. "Not me, that's for sure. A few months ago, if someone told me I'd hammer down a steel

door with my will alone, I'd have called them crazy." She pressed a hand to her forehead as dizziness washed over her again.

"Can you walk?" asked Talon.

"I think so."

Talon slipped an arm around her waist, and they slowly made their way down the hall. "So tired," murmured Raina.

"I'm not surprised. You were pouring out a tremendous amount of energy. I could feel it. It was like a supernova. Y—" He froze, staring at her.

She tensed. "What is it?"

"Your mindstone," he said quietly. "It's not green anymore. It's clear."

For a moment, the words refused to sink in. She stared at him blankly. "This is a poor time for jokes," she said.

"I'm not joking."

Raina shook her head. "But ... that's impossible."

"Impossible or not, the stone is clear."

Raina's head spun. She'd never heard of anyone jumping from the rank of Greenstone to Clearstone in a single moment. She touched the stone. It felt hot beneath her fingertips, like metal pulled from a fire.

"Raina ... do you think you could remove my crown?" he asked. "If you're a Clearstone now, you should be able to."

"I'm not a Clearstone!" Panic edged her voice. "It takes years and years to become a Clearstone!"

"Try. Please, Raina. While I wear the crown, I'm helpless. I can't escape until it's removed."

Raina exhaled a shuddering breath and nodded. Reaching up, she touched the crown and closed her eyes. Trying to ignore her fatigue, she reached into the calm within and drew strength from it, focusing that strength on the point where her flesh made contact with the cool metal. She heard a low hum, then a snap.

The crown fell to the floor.

Raina's eyes opened, wide and dazed.

"You did it!" Excited, Talon hugged her tightly. "Thank Suhara! Now, let's get out of here."

"I don't know if I can run."

"I'll be your steed." He flashed a quick smile at her and crouched. "On my back."

Raina climbed on, winding her arms and legs around him tightly. Talon stood and ran down the hall. Raina clung to him, breathless, praying she didn't lose consciousness.

A pair of guards appeared at the end of the hall, pointing stunners at them. "Stop!" one shouted.

Talon lunged to one side, avoiding the stun-rays that flashed through the air. Even with Raina clinging to his back, he moved with a liquid, muscular grace. One flattened hand lashed out, striking the first guard's temple, and he fell to the floor in an unconscious heap. Another blow felled the second one. Talon relieved them of their stunners, handing one to Raina, who took it reluctantly, keeping her other arm wrapped around his chest.

Talon stood, panting as he stared down at the unconscious guards. "They're poorly trained," he said.



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Raina's mouth was dry. Those guards were among the best-trained on the planet ... but they still were no match for the reflexes and prowess of a Skandrian. The old saying was true. When a Kiran and Skandrian fought hand-to-hand, one on one, the Skandrian would always win. Always.

Talon moved on, walking on cat-silent feet. Raina could feel his heart pounding against the walls of his huge frame.

\* \* \* \*

The Skandrian crew-members stared at the vid-screen, horrified, as they watched the armed guards lead their kadir from the room. Shen stood among them, eyes wide. His stomach tightened as he saw Raina being overpowered and sedated. The announcer's voice boomed through the speakers: "Today, the hope for peace vanished when Tabitha, Clearstone telepath, discovered the true intent of the Skandrian prince's 'peace mission.' As it turns out, the seemingly generous gift of Shandire was only a ruse to win the trust of the Kiran government and facilitate another attack...."

"That lying bitch!" Kalra shouted. "I can't believe everyone's just taking her word for it!"

"I knew this peace mission was a bad idea," Fenro said bitterly. "Kadir Talon is too idealistic. We should have known the Kirans couldn't be trusted. Now they'll come for us, as well. Just watch. We'll all be dragged off to prison, maybe even executed."

Shen was silent as he stared at the vid-screen, tears running down his face. He was afraid for Raina, afraid for

Talon, and afraid of what this would mean for the fate of their two worlds.

"I say we go after him," Kalra said. "What sort of Skandrians would we be to sit here, safe on our ship, while our leader is imprisoned?"

"But there's only seven of us. Maybe if we sent for help...."

"No," said Fenro. "By the time help arrived, the fight would be over. We may be few, but we're better fighters than they are. We can defeat them easily when they aren't hiding behind their war-machines. I say we find him and break him out." Fenro's eyes narrowed. "We've got nothing to lose. The Kirans have already shown us that they're not interested in peace."

"Talon ordered us to stay here," said Jadik, a burly engineer.

"I don't think he was expecting to be captured." Fenro's eyes swept over the crew. "I don't know about the rest of you, but I will not abandon my kadir. Are you with me?" He held out his hand.

Kalra placed her own hand atop it. "I'm with you."

"And I," Jadik said reluctantly. His large hand covered both of theirs.

One by one, the crew-members added their hands to the pile. Shen stepped forward and placed his own small hand atop theirs. "And I," he said.

\* \* \* \*

The main doors stood at the other side of the entrance hall, beyond a sea of polished marble.

"They look unguarded," Raina whispered. She and Talon stood behind a thick marble column, back pressed against the wall.

"Might be a trap," muttered Talon. "This is far too easy." He stared at the door, stroking his chin, eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "Well, the coast appears clear, and I don't hear anyone approaching. I guess we'll have to take the chance." His eyes locked onto Raina's. "Are you ready?"

She nodded.

"Let's go." They inched along the wall, toward the door. Talon couldn't see any cameras or motion sensors, but that didn't mean they weren't there. Best not to take chances. All his senses were alert, eyes moving constantly, ears open and nostrils flared.

They had almost reached the door when a deafening, high-pitched alarm blared.

"Suhara's blood!" growled Talon. Abandoning stealth, he rammed a shoulder against the heavy doors, forcing them open. "Go!"

Raina darted out, closely followed by Talon, just as armed guards began to pour into the room. Talon ran, and Raina struggled to keep up on her shorter, less muscular legs. Behind them, the guards had begun to fire their weapons. Blazer-fire grazed Raina's leg, and she cried out, stumbling. Talon wheeled around and darted back just in time to catch her. The delay cost them dearly. When Talon looked up, seven guards had surrounded them. They stood in a circle, blocking all paths of escape, weapons trained on Raina and Talon.

"Come with us," one said, "and you won't get h—" He cried out and fell forward.

Raina looked up, and her eyes widened.

Talon's crew surrounded the soldiers, one ring outside another. The Skandrians were all armed, their expressions hard. "Drop your weapons," said Fenro.

The Kirans hesitated.

"Drop them, damn you!" he shouted.

Reluctantly, they set their blazers on the ground, and the Skandrians stepped forward and bound their wrists.

Raina stared wide-eyed at the fallen soldier. A gentle hand touched her arm, and she looked up to see Shen standing beside her. "It's all right, s ... Raina," he said. "He's alive. It was only a stun-ray. We weren't allowed to bring any real weapons on this trip, remember?"

Sure enough, the soldier had begun to moan and twitch.

Shen smiled. "Of course, there was no need for *them* to know that."

The Kirans scowled darkly.

"Somehow, I don't think our joke pleases them," said Kalra, grinning.

Talon did not look pleased either. "I was not aware there were stun-rays on board our ship," he said.

"Well, ah.... "An abashed look crossed Kalra's face. "We didn't feel quite safe coming here *completely* unarmed, and stun-rays don't do any harm anyway, so...."

"So you smuggled them on board, without informing me," said Talon.

Kalra dropped to one knee, head bowed. "I know it was wrong, Kadir. If you wish to punish me...."

"No time for that," he said. A reluctant smile twitched at the corners of his mouth. "I don't think I'd feel right punishing you, anyway. Your disobedience saved my hide. Come on. We'd better get to the ship. There'll be a larger force after us at any moment."

"What should we do with them?" asked Raina, glancing at the bound Kirans.

"Take them with us," said Talon. His eyes darkened. "Maybe if we have a few hostages, people will listen to us."

"Hostage-taking won't be good press for us," said Jadik, "and right now, the success or failure of this mission depends on the goodwill of the Kiran people."

"Well, we don't have their goodwill right now, so we have nothing to lose," said Talon. "I tried everything. I wore a slave-crown for them, something I swore I'd never do again. Then, as the sole judge of my character, they presented a woman with a very obvious bias against me. I've tried to be reasonable, but they've taken that choice away from me. Much as I dislike it, my only option is to force them to listen."

"So be it," said Jadik, and bowed, touching his forehead in salute. "Your will is ours."

They picked up the blazers the Kirans had dropped and herded the soldiers down the street.

Raina looked around. At the moment, the streets were empty. The crowds had cleared away, but there was no telling how long that would last. "How are we going to get out of the city without being seen?"

"We can't," said Talon, "but with any luck, we won't be attacked if we keep them at gunpoint."

As they walked, Raina saw people in the streets. The people gaped at them, but no one attacked. Most, in fact, seemed to have no idea what to do. They looked at each other with wide eyes, faces pale, then darted back into their houses. Their cries rang through the streets. Doors slammed. Mothers grabbed gaping children by the hands and dragged them inside.

"Sheep," muttered Kalra.

"Don't underestimate them," said Talon. "Remember, we're in their city. Hostages or no hostages, they have the advantage. And you can bet that someone has alerted the Guard by now."

"I don't like this a bit," said Jadik.

"Neither do I, but I don't see any alternative. If we let them go, we'll never get out of the city. They're our only protection against the Guard."

Raina walked close to Talon, her face hot under the contemptuous looks of the captive Kiran soldiers.

The walk seemed endless, and the soldiers did their best to make it difficult, dragging their feet and balking like mules once they realized the Skandrians were not going to hurt them. Crowds of people watched from the street-sides, making Raina feel as if they were part of some bizarre parade. Hot sun beat down on her head, making her robe stick to her sweat-damp back and shoulders. She could feel the weight of the countless eyes staring at her. By the time they reached the outskirts of the city, ground-cars were

following them and aircrafts circled overhead—along with dozens of silver camera-spheres—but the Guard, unwilling to risk the lives of the hostages, did not make a move to attack. Raina wondered how far that caution would stretch. It would be so easy for someone's patience to snap ... then their lives would all end in a rain of laser-fire. She swallowed hard, her mouth dry. Shen passed her a canteen, and she gratefully took a drink.

She saw a nearby soldier licking dry lips, and offered the canteen to him. He turned his head away.

Their ship stood just outside the city. Despite her fatigue, Raina had to restrain herself from breaking into a run as they neared that beacon of safety. Hastily, they herded the soldiers up the retractable ramp and into the ship. The door slid shut, sealing them inside. Through the window, Raina saw the aircrafts and groundcars circling.

"You'll pay for this, Skandrian dogs," said one of the soldiers. "Our army will crush you. You're lunatics if you think you nine can defeat our entire planet."

"Don't you understand?" said Raina. "We don't want to fight you."

"You shut up," said the man, glaring at her. "Why should we listen to you? You're a traitor. And a whore." He spat, and a warm, sticky glob of spittle landed on her cheek.

Talon was between them in an instant, glaring down at the man. "You're lucky I'm not the sort of man who'd strike a bound hostage," he growled. "Apologize to her at once."

"For what? For calling her what she is?"

Talon snarled, showing sharp fangs. The man took a step back, fear flickering across his eyes.

"It's all right, Talon," said Raina, wiping the spit from her cheek. Her eyes were filled with tears, but her voice was steady. "You don't have to."

"It's *not* all right. I won't stand here and listen to my mate be insulted." He narrowed his eyes at the man. "You are not worthy to wash the mud from Raina's sandals, you mindless, bigoted little grub. And if I hear you insult her one more time...."

"You'll what? Cut out my tongue? That would look very good on the news-vids, wouldn't it? Not only have you taken hostages, but you're mistreating them, as well. Oh yes, I'm sure our government will be very eager to talk peace with you."

"Can we gag him, Sire?" asked Fenro.

"Be my guest."

Fenro stuffed a gag into the soldier's mouth and tied it in place.

"Come out of your ship, Skandrian!" boomed an amplified voice from outside. Raina recognized it as the First Consul's. "We have detonators, and we won't hesitate to use them."

Raina's eyes widened.

"They're bluffing," Talon said, though he couldn't hide the faint glimmer of fear in his dark eyes. "Stay here. I'll deal with them." He picked up a voice amplifier and stepped forward, keying in a code on a wall-panel. A large section of the ship's wall slid away, and a metal shelf extended from the bottom, forming a small balcony. Talon stepped out onto it.



"Wait!" cried Raina. "They'll shoot you."

He looked over his shoulder and smiled thinly. "I doubt it. I'm more valuable to them as a prisoner than I am dead." He turned back and pushed the button on his amplifier, speaking into it. "If you destroy us, you destroy your own soldiers, as well." He gestured to the crew, who pushed the hostages forward, into sight of the Kirans. "I have a few simple requests. I don't think you'll find them unreasonable. If you meet them, the soldiers will be released."

"State your requests, barbarian."

Talon ignored the insult. "I ask that Tabitha, the sri'dith who spoke against me, be examined by an objective telepath, one with no strong loyalty to either Kira or Skandria. I think you'll find that her accusations were blatant lies. I will allow myself to be examined by that same telepath. I wish to convince you that my intentions are true, and hopefully arrive at some sort of peace agreement."

Another long moment of silence. Raina's heart pounded.

"Your demands will be met," replied the First Consul.

"Now, release the prisoners."

"I will release them after both Tabitha and myself have been examined."

"You question our honor?"

Talon's eyes narrowed. "I trusted you when I first came to this world to strike an agreement. You abused that trust. Now, I must be more cautious. I cannot release the hostages until I am certain that I won't simply be thrown in prison or shot."

"You push your luck," said the consul.

"I have no choice. I assure you that your soldiers will not be abused. They will be given food and water and allowed as much freedom as it is safe to give them."

Yet another silence as the Kiran officials debated their next reply. The First Consul's voice rang out once more. "Very well. You will have your telepath. But if he confirms Tabitha's findings, you and your crew will be imprisoned."

"I'm aware of that," said Talon. "But I have no fear. Every word I've spoken is true." He stepped back from the balcony and pushed a button on the wall-panel. The balcony retracted, and the doors slid back into place.

Raina leaned against the wall, let out her breath in a whoosh, and pressed her fingertips to her temples. She had a pounding headache, possibly a side-effect of the sedative she'd been given earlier, possibly just from stress.

Shen lightly touched her arm. "Sir," he said, "your mindstone...."

Raina touched the stone self-consciously. "Is it really clear?"

"See for yourself." Kalra passed her a small, round mirror.

Raina examined the smooth, oval stone in her forehead. It was as clear as water. "I don't understand," she said. "There's no way I could have advanced so quickly."

"How do sri'dith advance?" asked Shen.

"It just happens. As our power increases, the stone slowly changes. But it never happens like this. I've never heard of a Greenstone suddenly turning clear. Maybe something's wrong with it."

Barbarian  
*by Amanda Steiger*

"Or maybe you're just remarkable," said Talon. "I'd bet there aren't many Greenstones who can use their power like that, either. You were able to overpower Tabitha, weren't you? And you freed me, battering down a door which would have given even a drune pause."

Raina leaned back in her chair, eyes wide. The implications made her head spin. "I need some water," she said, and Shen darted off to fetch some.

Raina drank, slowly calming herself. She would think about what it meant later. Right now, they had more than enough problems to occupy their minds.

## Chapter Fifteen

For a day, they remained within the ship, guarded by Kiran aircrafts and ground-cars. The soldiers were given personal quarters and offered food and water. Most accepted, but one—the one who had spit at Raina—refused.

Shen, who was distributing the rations, shrugged. "Suit yourself." He handed the rations to the next soldier, who avoided the eyes of his comrade as he ate.

"Got to live," he muttered, his mouth full. "No point in starving yourself. These Skandrians don't seem so bad, anyway. Maybe they really do want peace."

The soldier snorted in disbelief. "Oh, for Goddess' sake. Have they brainwashed you as well, Mik?"

"It's not brainwashing. Just common sense."

On the morning of their second day aboard the earthbound ship, one soldier tried to break out by forcing open a hatch. As he squeezed through, the hatch snapped shut, breaking several ribs. The Skandrians managed to pull the screaming man out of the hatch. Raina healed him, mending the ribs easily with her power, and he was sent back to his room without punishment.

Some of the soldiers' convictions about the rottenness of Skandrians began to waver. Most of what they knew about Skandrians, they'd learned from vidcasts, and from face-to-face combat, which didn't tend to bring out the best in anyone. By the end of the second day, a few of the soldiers

had actually begun to have civil conversations with the Skandrian crew-members.

At that time, they received a transmission from the First Consul. "We have found a telepath whom we believe you will find suitable," she said coolly. "He is a freelancer from the moon of Obita. Please step outside your ship, and take your hostages with you. There will be guards waiting to escort you to the People's House." The transmission winked out.

"From her expression, I'd guess she doesn't think highly of 'freelancers,'" said Talon."

"They aren't held in high regard," Raina replied. "They're looked upon as no better than wandering fortune-tellers." She felt a personal distaste at the idea of a telepath using his skills for profit. Telepathy was a gift from the Goddess, given so that people could serve their fellow creatures. Right now, however, this person might be their only hope for peace.

They gathered up the soldiers, preparing to leave.

"Shall we come with you, Sire?" asked Jadik.

Talon shook his head. "No need. Stay here and guard the ship."

Jadik frowned, clearly not enthused with the idea of leaving his Kadir in the hands of Kirans, but nodded. He began to bind a soldier's hands. "Sorry about this, but we can't take chances."

Talon and Raina left the ship, with the soldiers walking in a line ahead of them. A pair of ground-cars waited for them below. A guard held open the door as Raina and Talon climbed inside. The People's House loomed in the distance, a

great, columned structure, its white marble tinted pink with the light of sunset.

A short drive brought them to the towering main doors. They entered and walked through the entrance hall, their footsteps echoing. At the end of the hall, the First and Second Consul waited. With them was a short, pudgy man, wearing blue and gray robes. "This is Meevus Konrad, of Obita. As you can see, he has no mindstone. He is not a sri'dith, and therefore has no loyalty to Kira."

"His only loyalty is to the almighty credit," the Second Consul added wryly, and Meevus offered a slight smile. He looked nervous to be in the presence of so many important people. Sweat glistened on his brow and bald spot.

"Has he examined Tabitha yet?" asked Talon.

"No. We thought you might want to be present during the examination. Now, may we unbind the hands of these soldiers and let them go home?"

Talon hesitated.

"We would not have gone through with the trouble of finding a freelance telepath and bringing him here if we didn't intend to go through with this," the First Consul said, irritation plain in her voice.

"Very well."

The guards unbound the hands of the Kiran soldiers and escorted them from the room.

"Follow us," the consul said, and turned. Raina and Talon followed her out of the room, down a marble hallway, to a pair of sliding metal doors. She punched a code into the keypad on the wall, and the doors slid open.

Tabitha sat inside, and Raina tensed at the sight of her. The Clearstone's eyes met hers, filled with cutting scorn. When she saw the color of Raina's mindstone, the scorn vanished, replaced by shock.

"Tabitha," said the First Consul. "You are to be examined by this man." She indicated Meevus with a nod. "Do you give your consent?"

Tabitha managed to tear her eyes from Raina's mindstone. Her lips tightened. "Does it matter?"

"It will look better in the reports if you give your consent."

"I cannot agree to this. I can't believe you're bending to the will of this ... *dog*. The kadir has released his hostages. Why do you have to go through with it?"

"Because we have an agreement," said the First Consul. "If you have done no wrong, Tabitha, you have nothing to fear. Why do you resist this examination?"

"Because it is an invasion! It's demeaning!"

"No less demeaning than the examination you gave Talon. Remember, it was *your* idea to probe his mind. Why did you suggest it, if it was such a brutal, dehumanizing thing?"

Tabitha's eyes narrowed, but Raina sensed her fear as she realized she was trapped. "I will not submit to it."

Meevus glanced from Tabitha to the First Consul and back again, looking increasingly nervous. "I don't know if I can force an examination on someone, especially a Clearstone. I'd like a guarantee that she's not going to fry my brain."

"She'll do no such thing. If she doesn't cooperate, she'll be given a drug that will relax her psychic defenses and facilitate examination."

"I will not be drugged!" said Tabitha.

"Then cooperate."

The Clearstone drew in a shuddering breath. For a moment, Raina felt almost sorry for her. "Very well."

The First Consul gave Meevus a nod, and he stepped forward, placing his hands over Tabitha's head. "You're sure you're not going to fry me?"

"Yes. Now get on with it, you credit-worshipping whore."

Meevus, apparently used to this sort of thing, ignored the insult. He closed his eyes, and Raina recognized the look on his face as he tapped into the center of calm within. In the past, she hadn't thought it was possible to do a telepathic reading without a mindstone—she'd always assumed, along with everyone else, that freelances were phonies—but she sensed the psychic energy humming in the air between them.

After a few tense minutes, Meevus stepped back, opening his eyes. He had a look of distaste on his face.

"Well?" said the First Consul.

"She lied to further her own agenda," he said. "When she examined Talon, she saw that his desire for peace was real, but she is not interested in peace with Skandria. She's been involved with a political faction called the Brotherhood. You've undoubtedly heard of it."

The First Consul nodded grimly. "Anti-Skandrian extremists. Yes, we know all too much about them."

Meevus continued. "She's been sending them information, most of which she obtained by probing Raina's mind while the young woman was on Skandria. She made it possible for



them to send a drune to Skandria to assassinate Kadir Talon, though the attempt failed."

The consuls turned their eyes on Tabitha, who sat stiffly, face flushed. "Is this true?" the Second Consul asked. His voice was level, but his eyes were hard.

"Yes," Tabitha said between gritted teeth. "It's true."

"Are you mad?" asked the First Consul, her voice rising to a near-shout. "Why would you try to destroy our only chance for peace?"

"How could *you* consider signing a treaty with this monster?" Tabitha stood. "They've destroyed countless innocent lives! They're monsters, soulless, blood-drinking demons, every last one of them! Signing a treaty with them is like selling Kira into slavery. They'll never stand for equality, they'll only try to take advantage of our trust! If we had any sense, we'd blast the damned planet to dust and be done with this whole wretched business, once and for all."

"Tabitha, listen to me, please," Raina said. "They aren't demons or monsters. I've lived among them. They're just *people*. What about their children? Would you kill them, as well?"

"Gladly." Tabitha glared at her, fanaticism burning in her eyes. "The children are no different. They grow up to be monsters, just like the rest of them."

"I think I've heard enough," the First Consul said. She turned to a nearby guard. "Put a control-crown on her. Place her under custody."

"I'm not sure if we have any control crowns available at the moment, ma'am," said the guard.

Talon removed a delicate silver hoop from around his arm. "You may use this one, if you like," he said. "It's the crown she used to keep me captive in the Hold. I never thought I'd want to put a slave-crown on another living creature, but if there's anyone who deserves it, she does."

"Thank you, Kadir Talon." The First Consul accepted the crown.

Tabitha took a step backwards, her eyes widening. "No!"

"Yes. I would advise you to cooperate. Nothing can be gained through resistance, save a harsher penalty." The consul's face was granite. "You may yet escape with only a few years in prison, but falsifying a telepathic reading is a very serious crime. It doesn't matter if the person you examine is a Kiran or a foreigner."

Anger flared in Tabitha's eyes. Raina felt the air beginning to crackle and hum as Tabitha gathered power.

Without thinking, Raina drew the power into herself and hurled it back at Tabitha. Tabitha let out a strangled cry and sunk to her knees, holding her head between both hands.

The First Consul quickly slipped the slave-crown over her head. It tightened, cutting off the flow of power with an almost audible snap.

Raina slowly unclenched her hands. She'd curled them into fists without realizing it.

The guard gripped Tabitha's arm, pulling her to her feet, and half-led, half-dragged her from the room. Tabitha struggled, but without her power, there was nothing she could do. She shot one last, hate-filled glare over her

shoulder, a glare that scorched Raina to her soul ... then the guard pulled her into the hall, and the doors slid shut.

Raina let out a shuddering breath. Talon's large, warm hands settled on her tense shoulders and kneaded gently. "It's all right," he said. "The worst is over."

"I felt her rage," Raina whispered. "Such terrible rage."

"She's powerless now. She can't hurt anyone." His hands continued their slow, skillful massage until the tension seeped from her muscles. "We did it, Raina."

"Not quite," said the First Consul. "You still have to be examined by Meevus Konrad, though I'll admit that it seems a bit redundant. We've already learned that Tabitha's charges against you were lies."

"I'll submit to the examination if it will ease your minds. I want there to be no doubt about my intentions. I will not jeopardize this peace-treaty for any reason." He bowed his head. "Begin, if you will."

Meevus placed his pudgy hands on either side of Talon's head. Talon looked uncomfortable, but held still, his eyes fixed on the floor.

Meevus straightened. "Everything he's told you is true," he said. "The moon of Shandire is simply an offering, not a trap. He wants an end to the fighting, nothing more."

"Then," said the First Consul, "we shall give him what he wants." She extended a hand to Talon, and he took it. Her cool gray eyes met his. "I'm sincerely sorry for the way you've been treated," she said. "We allowed our fear and suspicion to cloud our minds, and as a result, we almost lost

a valuable ally and a long-awaited peace. On behalf of all of Kira, I offer my friendship."

Talon blinked, and Raina realized that his eyes were wet with tears. "I accept, with all my heart," he whispered hoarsely.

\* \* \* \*

Shortly after, they all sat together around the table in the council room. An orator read the treaty aloud. Both the First and Second consuls signed. Talon signed as well, in large, bold script, then shook the consuls' hands.

"I feel as though we have profited unfairly from this arrangement," the First Consul admitted. "You've given us the moon of Shandire, after all, and we have nothing to offer you in return except the promise of peace."

Talon smiled. "That promise is more valuable than any property. I think both our worlds have profited."

To celebrate the new treaty, they held a banquet. There was fresh, leafy treeka, loaves of golden-crust bread, ripe, speckled apples and roast cobek. Raina abstained from the meat but ate her fill of the rest. It had been so long since she'd had anything besides the dry, bland space-rations.

The table was full. All manner of Kiran officials had been invited, as well as Talon's crew, who ate as heartily as the rest of them. Shen sat to Raina's left, cutting his meat, which was red and still bloody, the way most Skandrians liked it. He was also blushing up to his hairline. One of the Kiran chancellors had brought his daughter to the banquet, and the pretty young blonde kept batting her eyelashes at him.

When the banquet was over, Talon and Raina lay together in a large, comfortable guest-room, cocooned in silky sheets. Raina snuggled against Talon's broad chest as he stroked her soft, unbound hair. "It all seems too good to be true, doesn't it?" she asked.

"I know what you mean. This treaty wouldn't have happened if not for you, you know."

Raina smiled. "You're flattering me. I didn't do anything. You're the one who made the decision to come here. You probably would have found a way to escape from that cell, even without me."

"That's not true. I had all but lost hope when they locked me in there, and I never would have come here in the first place if not for you. The idea of this peace treaty wouldn't have even occurred to me. Before I fell in love with you, the idea of our planets warring until the end of time seemed inevitable, even natural. It had always been that way. I didn't hate Kirans, but I didn't feel any real sympathy for them, either. Trite as it sounds, you taught me that it's a person's heart that matters, not what they look like or where they were born. You taught me to revere life. You're the gentlest person I've ever met, but also the most courageous."

Raina smiled, shyly lowering her eyes, but Talon lifted her chin. "You don't believe me?" he asked.

"It's just that I've never really thought of myself as brave."

"But you are. You had the courage to examine the beliefs you'd grown up with and admit that you didn't really believe them, the courage to leave the world you knew and follow your heart. You had the courage to stand up to your old

mentor." He looked deeply into her eyes. Raina stared back, held immobile by that steady gaze. "I've seen a great deal of false courage. I've seen young soldiers, their heads filled with illusions of glory, going off into battle. People see them laughing fearlessly and think they're brave, but more often than not, they simply don't know what they're going into. They can't comprehend the horrors they'll see. I've seen old battle-hardened warriors whose hearts have died within them. People see their numbness to horror and mistake it for bravery. They forget that cutting a deadened limb is no way to measure a tolerance for pain.

"But you, Raina ... you have seen suffering, you understand what it is, yet you are not numb to it. You feel the suffering of others as though it were your own. Yet you still stand and fight, unwilling to surrender to fear. That is true courage, Raina." He placed a soft, reverent kiss on her forehead.

Raina couldn't speak. There was a lump in her throat, cutting off air and voice. She simply held him tightly, her heart overflowing with love.

\* \* \* \*

They remained almost a week on Kira, but Talon knew they couldn't stay longer. The crew-members were restless and eager to return home. They said their goodbyes, replenished their food and fuel, and left the planet.

Raina leaned against the ship's wall and stared through a small, round window.

"Do you ever regret leaving?" Talon asked.

"I miss it sometimes. But regret? Never." Still, she felt a tug of pain and nostalgia in her chest as she gazed down at the blue and green ball, the swirls of clouds over its surface. "A part of me wishes I'd visited the Hold one more time, but I don't know whether they would have been happy to see me. Some of them would, I'm sure, but some are like Tabitha. They see me as a traitor. I sent them a letter, so they'll at least know I'm safe and well." Her hand drifted to her forehead, to touch her mindstone. There was no longer any doubt in her mind that she was now a Clearstone, though she still didn't understand how it had happened. She no longer had to worry about anyone spying on her telepathically, and she wouldn't need Talon to create her psychic shields, either. She could do that herself, now that she had the power.

So much had changed in the past few months. Her own life, the fate of whole planets ... and all because she had taken a chance and followed her heart. The Goddess had indeed chosen an unusual path for her.

Which reminded her....

"Where's Shen?" she asked.

"He's in his room," said Talon. "Why?"

"I just want to ask him something. I'll be right back." She walked down the hall and knocked on the door to Shen's room. "Shen?"

A pause, then the doors slid open. The young Skandrian sat on his bed, a book open in his lap. "Hello, Raina." He smiled.

Raina sat next to him. "What's that you're reading?"

"Oh, just a book on healing techniques. A Kiran lady gave it to me."

"Are you interested in healing?"

He nodded. "I never knew that being a sri'dith was so complicated. Or so hard."

"It's very difficult, but very rewarding." She looked into his eyes. "There was something I wanted to ask you, Shen. When you saved me from Makkias, you were able to open the door, even though it was locked. How did you do that?"

Shen paled. "It wasn't locked," he said.

Raina frowned slightly. She hadn't expected a reaction like this. "Yes it was. I heard him lock it. As I was lying there, just before you came in, I thought I sensed a flash of psychic energy. I just wondered...."

"Please don't tell anyone," he whispered. His eyes were wide and desperate. "It's true. I do have the gift, but I don't want anyone to know. I don't use it unless I have to. Please?"

"All right, Shen," she said quietly. "I won't tell. I'm just confused. Why is having the gift such a bad thing? Talon has it too, you know. So do I. It's not looked down upon."

He closed his eyes and took a slow, deep breath. "I know. But if they find out I have it, they'll want to send me away to some training house to learn how to use it, and then I'll have to take a job that requires the gift."

"What makes that so horrible?"

"I don't want them to take me from my home," he said, "and I don't want to be somebody important. I just want to be your servant."



"But you're so intelligent, Shen, and you have such a talent. You're wasted as a servant. Your life could be so much more fulfilling if you learned how to use your gift."

"My life *is* fulfilling." He looked away, blinking rapidly. "No one understands."

She placed a hand over his. "Shen ... no one's going to force you to become something you don't want to be. But it would be best, safest, for everyone if you learned to control your talent."

Shen's brow furrowed. "What do you mean?"

"The gift can be unpredictable, especially when a person's mind is untrained. It can get out of control, cause all sorts of problems."

"Like what?"

"It depends on the individual. Sometimes, in a moment of stress or pain, a person can lash out unintentionally with his gift and cause a lot of damage. That's what I did when Makkias was trying to hurt me. In that case it saved my life, but it just as easily could have hurt someone I cared about. I'd never trained that aspect of my gift, or even been aware of it, so I didn't know how to properly control it."

Shen bit his lower lip. "Isn't there any way I could just get rid of my gift? I don't want to go away. My place is with you."

"What if I trained you myself?" asked Raina.

His eyes widened. "Would you?"

"If you like. I could even teach you some healing techniques. It may be difficult, since you don't have a mindstone, but I'm sure it's possible. If you can manipulate a lock, you can mend flesh as well. And I could use an

apprentice." She gave his hand a squeeze. "You could still be a servant, if you like. In a way, a healer *is* a servant. Sri'dith spend their lives serving the people, helping people in need. Would you like that, Shen?"

"Yes," he said. "I think I would."

\* \* \* \*

When they landed on Skandria, an excited crowd awaited them. The people cheered wildly as Raina and Talon left the ship. Raina smiled and lowered her eyes, cheeks flushed with a mixture of pleasure and self-consciousness.

A sleek aircraft awaited them at the base of the ship. They climbed inside, and the ship lifted off the ground and flew toward the palace looming in the distance. Raina leaned against Talon's shoulder, gazing at the majestic spires and towers silhouetted against the huge, orange-tinted moon.

The aircraft landed in the palace hangar, and a servant held the door for them as they stepped out. Arm in arm, Raina and Talon walked into the palace and up a marble staircase. "Would you like to eat dinner in the Hall?" asked Talon. "Or shall we retire to our room and have it brought to us?"

"Let's go to our room. I want to be alone with you."

He grinned. "I was hoping you'd say that."

They entered their room. Talon pushed a button on the wall-com, contacting the kitchen-staff, and they ordered their dinner. Then he placed his hands on either side of Raina's waist, lifting her, and tossed her onto the bed, making her squeak with surprise.

He climbed onto the bed, straddling her.

Raina giggled as his mouth sought her throat. "Aren't you even going to wait 'til after dinner?"

"Don't know if I can. I'll just have to eat you instead." He pulled open her robe, nuzzling the silken warmth of her breasts like a huge, affectionate cat. As he slid down her underwear, his mouth moved lower, until his breath stirred the soft, thick fuzz between her thighs. Raina moaned as his tongue dipped into her, sampling her juice.

Her fingers slid into his hair, lifting his head. "Let me, Talon. Let me pleasure you."

Before he could reply, she had undone the lacings of his trousers and pulled them down. He gasped as she took the tip of his member between her soft, full lips. "S-suhara...."

Raina's eyes sparkled as she took him deeper into her mouth, her hot, wet tongue sliding across his head. Talon's hands gripped her shoulders, then slid lower, along the length of her pale, sleek back, to cup her buttocks. Strong, thick fingers sunk into the soft flesh, kneading the round cheeks.

Raina moaned through a mouthful of hard flesh. Her head spun with pleasure, but she managed to keep her wits about her enough to continue the delectable task of pleasuring him. Her lips slid slowly up and down his length as she nursed him, tasting the hot salt of his desire.

There was a knock at the door. "Your dinner, Sire."

"Leave it outside!" Talon called breathlessly, and Raina giggled.

With a deft, quick movement, Talon flipped her onto her back. "I want to be in you," he whispered huskily. "May I, Raina? May I claim you?"

"Yes," she breathed. "Goddess, yes!" She felt his length sliding into her, filling her sweetly. He began to move atop her in slow thrusts.

"Merge your mind with mine," he said softly.

She opened the link between him and felt his thoughts flow into hers, his pleasure merging with her own. It heightened the sensations to an almost unbearable degree. In all her life, she'd never experienced such an intense connection.

Talon's thrusts quickened, his hips grinding against hers. Her body surged upward to meet each thrust. His hot mouth was on her breast, his tongue circling one hard, tight nipple, then his hands separated her breasts, letting him kiss the sweat-salty flesh between them.

Another thrust carried her over the edge. She stiffened beneath him, toes curling, her sheath clenching tightly around him.

He reached his own climax a moment later, then the two lay together, spent and damp with sweat, feeling each other's breathing. Talon pulled out of her and took her into his arms.

Raina squeezed him tight. "Thank you," she said.

Talon laughed. "You're thanking *me*? That was hardly a chore."

"I know. But still ... thank you."

"You're welcome." He played with a few tendrils of her hair, winding them around his fingers. "There's going to be a

welcome-home ceremony for us tonight. We should probably eat our dinner and start getting ready."

Raina nodded and reluctantly untangled herself from his arms. Talon stood, put on his trousers, and retrieved their meal tray from outside the door.

Raina curled her legs beneath her and fingered the edge of the covers. "Talon?"

"Yes?" He set the tray down between them, frowning slightly as he studied her face. "Is something wrong?"

"No, it's just ... I come into season pretty soon."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you may know this already, but Kiran females have reproductive cycles. We're not like Skandrian women. We're only fertile one season out of the year."

"Ah." His face relaxed. "Is that all you're worried about? I'll have Teeka brew you some contraceptive potions."

"Well, actually, I was wondering if I would need them. I mean...."

"A child?"

Raina nodded.

He lay a gentle hand on her leg. "Are you sure, Raina? You're still very young, and a child is a great responsibility."

"I don't know. I've been thinking about what it would be like to hold a baby, to have something small and soft to love, but maybe you're right. Maybe I should wait."

"It's your decision," he said.

"It would be your child too."

"Yes, but I'm not the one who'll carry it in my body. I don't know how these things work on Kira, but here, it's the

woman's decision alone." A smile touched his lips. "What would it look like, I wonder? Would it have gray-blue eyes flecked with gold? Would it be as beautiful as you? I would like to find out." The smile faded. "But I wonder what sort of life it would have. Hybrids are not looked upon very kindly by either of our worlds."

"But things are changing," said Raina. "We have peace now. I know it takes more than that to erase centuries of prejudice, but we can't live our lives according to what other people think, and we know the child will have a home and plenty of love."

"That's true." Talon stroked her leg, his eyes lingering on her belly, thinking, perhaps, about the life that might soon be stirring within. "You don't have to make the decision yet. We have plenty of time, after all."

She nodded. "For now, I'll take the contraceptive potions. Then ... we'll see." They were silent for a moment, eating their dinner. Raina swallowed a bite of water-root and looked up. "Talon?"

"Hm?"

"There was something else I wanted to mention. When I'm in season, my body is much more sensitive, and my ... appetite is bigger. I'll be very demanding for awhile."

A smile spread slowly across his face. "I'll do my best to oblige."

## Chapter Sixteen

Raina stood in the sun-dappled shade of a mobi tree. The tree dominated the palace garden, looming almost as high as the white stone wall that surrounded it. The fruits were ripe. She could tell by the flecks of red showing through the rich yellow-gold. Reaching up, she squeezed one lightly, testing it. Sure enough, it had just begun to soften. It was still firm, but slightly yielding. She smiled, plucking the fruit, and placed it in her basket.

She felt a flutter in her belly and placed a hand over it.

Warm, strong hands settled on her shoulders, rubbing.  
"The little one is feeling lively today, I see."

"Yes." Raina laughed. "She's strong and restless, just like you. I can tell already."

"You seem certain it'll be a daughter. Any reason?"

"I can feel her mind. At first, I thought it was my imagination ... the whispers were so faint. But they're stronger, now that her mind has started to wake up. I know when she's content and when she's upset, and I've started to have dreams about being in a dark, warm place, all curled up ... but the place has started to seem too small. She wants to come out, I think."

"Well, she'll have to wait a little longer. It's not quite her time yet. But at least we know she's got her mother's spirit. How is Shen progressing, by the way?"

"Wonderfully. He learns so quickly, you wouldn't believe it. He has a sri'dith's heart, as well."

"Oh?"

"Yes. He's become quite the humanitarian. He's started talking about wanting to travel to disadvantaged planets, where health-care isn't very advanced, and lend a helping hand once his skills are fully developed."

"It's just as well," said Talon. "There isn't much of a future for him here, I'm afraid. We Skandrians are hypocrites, in a way. We talk so much about the value of freedom and equality, but most of us still treat hybrids as if they were subhuman." One hand absently rested on Raina's swollen stomach, and she knew he was thinking about the future of their own child. "Many have no choice but to become servants. It's the only path open to them. It's no wonder Shen wants to help disadvantaged people. He's had precious few advantages, himself. His parents abandoned him when he was a baby, and he would have died if a kitchen-worker from the palace hadn't found him."

"It won't be like that for our daughter," said Raina. "She'll always have us."

"We can't shelter her from the outside world forever."

"I know, and I wouldn't want to, but we can at least give her a safe place to come back to when the world becomes too much for her to bear. Which reminds me, Talon ... ," she traced a vein on his hand with one finger, "you still have to introduce me to your parents."

He groaned. "Do I have to?"

"Of course you do!" She laughed. "Why that long-suffering expression? You've told me a thousand times how well they



raised you and how proud they were when you became Kadir."

"Well, yes. They're wonderful people, just a bit overwhelming. My father was born a nomad and spent his youth roaming the desert before he settled in the city. It's made him a little wild. He's covered with tattoos and tells jokes crude enough to make a Bulgarian blush. And he chews kez and spits out the husks, sometimes at the dinner table." He chuckled at Raina's expression. "Yes, people actually eat those beetles. You thought I was joking about that, didn't you?"

"What about your mother?"

"She's worse. In every regard. And don't even get me started on my younger sibs."

Raina laughed and kissed him. "I'm sure they're all wonderful. I can't wait to meet them."

"Well, all right, but don't say I didn't warn you." He smiled and looked up at the mobi-tree. The branches were laden with clusters of the pinkish-gold fruit, sagging slightly with their weight. A soft breeze rustled the leaves. "They're beautiful at this time of year, aren't they?"

Raina nodded, sighing softly with contentment. Her child stirred in her belly. Talon's arm was warm around her shoulders.

She'd never dreamed she could feel so complete.

A strong hand squeezed her breast, and she grinned. "You really are a barbarian."

"Indeed." His lips brushed her hair. "Shall I show you just how barbaric I can be?"

Barbarian  
*by Amanda Steiger*

"But the baby...."

"Use your imagination, love. There are other ways I can bring you pleasure." He lifted her gently into his arms and carried her to the bedroom.

The End

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