



# ASHLER

By

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“You’re getting married, Keelie, not being executed. Don’t look so grim.”

Keelie sighed and leaned back in her seat, looking out the window at the star-scattered blackness of space. “I’ve never even met him, Meg.”

“How bad can it be?” asked Meg. “Ashler House is the largest ruling family on the planet. He owns half the mines on Ria.”

“So?”

“So that makes him one of the wealthiest men in the galaxy.”

“That doesn’t mean anything, Meg. It doesn’t say anything about what he’s like as a person.”

“He’s handsome, too. Have you seen him in those vidcasts? Such eyes! Eyes like that could hypnotize any girl. At the very least, you’ll have more luxury than you know what to do with. I’ll bet there are thousands of women all over the galaxy who wish they were in your position.”

Keelie smiled weakly. “I shouldn’t tolerate such insolence from you, you know. Father says I’m too familiar with servants. But honestly, I think I’d be bored out of my skull if everyone around me was quiet and obedient. At least you don’t treat me like a treasure to be hoarded or bartered away.”

“You’re not being bartered away, Keelie.”

“What do you call it, then? My father doesn’t give a damn how I feel about this. He just wants to open up trade between Tarva and Ria. I’m a gift to gain Ashler’s goodwill.”

“No one expects you to fall in love with him at first sight.”

“And yet I’m expected to be subservient to him.” She placed a hand on the window’s cool plastic as she stared out. Her home world, Tarva, had become a faint blue speck. She could scarcely recognize it among the stars. “I’m frightened, Meg.”

Meg squeezed her hand. “It will be all right,” she whispered. “You’ll see. I remember how frightened I was when I was first brought to your home. Everything seemed so new and strange. But I soon learned there was nothing to fear.”

“You are luckier than most,” Keelie said. “You could just as easily have ended up with someone cruel, someone who would beat you and starve you. How am I to know that won’t be my fate?”

“Lord Ashler isn’t like that. Have a little faith. Your father would not let you fall into the hands of a cruel man.”

“I don’t have faith in anything right now.” Keelie’s vision blurred with tears but she blinked them away. It had been a long trip, but it would be over soon. In a few days, they would land on her new home--on Ria. Keelie’s heartbeat quickened, more with fear than excitement. *At least there’ll be plenty of new plants and animals to study*, she thought. But even

that prospect brought little comfort. She had no idea whether her new husband would even allow her to continue her studies.

She wished she could share Meg's blind faith.

\* \* \* \*

Kalen Ashler sat in his study, a thick book sitting open on the desk in front of him. However, no matter how he tried to immerse himself in reading, he couldn't concentrate. Sighing, he leaned back in his chair, took off his glasses and rubbed his eyelids with long fingers.

Someone rapped lightly on his door. "My lord?"

"Amber, haven't we known each other long enough to dispense with the formalities? Call me by my name. Please."

The door opened. A plump, middle-aged woman stood there smiling. Her curly hair, though still thick, was threaded with gray. "Traditions die hard."

Kalen replaced his glasses. "Maybe so, but I'm willing to club them on the head as many times as I have to. I take it my new bride has arrived?"

Bride. The word felt so strange.

When he first learned that Wendor al'Trega had offered his daughter as a bride, Kalen's first impulse had been to refuse vehemently. He detested the sort of slave-trading that went under the name of arranged marriage. But he knew how proud the al'Trega family was ... and he knew that in Tarvan

culture, to refuse a marriage offer was a grave insult, answerable only with laser-guns and warships. The last thing he wanted was a bloody feud. He'd had no choice but to accept. He wondered how the poor girl felt about the situation. She couldn't be thrilled about being wedded to a stranger.

He took a deep breath and stood. "Where is she?"

"She waits in the great hall."

He nodded and left the room.

Ashler House, his ancestral home, was large and lavish. Intricate frescos covered the walls, depicting great battles, countryside or starscapes. The floor was cool, pristine white marble. Light-globes lined the hall, sitting on golden stands with stylized legs ending in small, claw-tipped paws. The ornate decorations had never suited his tastes, but they had been there long before he was born, and redecorating the house would be such a monumental undertaking that he just hadn't bothered.

He walked through an arched doorway, into the great hall. A tall, bearded man stood there, dressed in carmine silk and furs. He had the pointed ears of a Tarvan and Kalen recognized him as Lord Wendor a'Tregor, his bride-to-be's father. "Lord Ashler," Wendor said, bowing. The bow was stiff and formal and his voice expressed no emotion. "I am honored to be here."

"It is you who honor me. My, ah ... my home is brighter for your presence." He'd had to think a moment to remember the ritual words of greeting. "May fortune always walk beside you."

Wendor must have noticed the slip for his heavy brows drew together. Then the expression smoothed out. “As a gesture of goodwill toward you and your most honored family, I offer my most cherished possession--my youngest daughter, Keelie a’Tregor.” He stepped aside and a young woman stepped forward. Her eyes were downcast, her face expressionless, but he sensed a storm of emotion brewing behind that quiet, obedient façade.

Kalen stared. Keelie’s simple white body-wrap was held up by a single strap on her left shoulder, fastened in place with a disc of gold resting just above her breast. The garment made no attempt to hide the shape of her high, firm breasts or her softly-rounded hips. If anything, it was designed to display her body. Though it covered all the essential parts, the fabric clung to every curve and crevice ... even that most intimate furrow between her slim, tanned thighs. His heartbeat quickened.

“She pleases my eyes,” he murmured. He had not expected to mean the ritual words.

“Keelie,” said Wendor. “Step forward. Allow your new husband to examine you.”

Keelie took a slow, gliding step toward Kalen. Her skin was a soft, rich, light brown, her hair lustrous and dark. Two slim, delicate braids formed a crown decorated with tiny, clear gems. Her mouth was full and lush, a mouth made to be kissed. As he watched, a small, pink tongue crept out to wet her plump lower lip. Though the gesture seemed more nervous than sensual, it sent a rush of fire to his loins.

He wished she would raise her eyes, but she kept them politely downcast, her thick lashes hiding them.

Kalen pulled his gaze away with some difficulty, trying to ignore his pounding heart. “The ceremony shall be tonight, and a banquet will follow,” he said to Wendor. “I pray you will stay and feast with us.”

“I will and with gladness.”

They bowed to each other again. Kalen straightened. “A servant will escort you to your rooms.”

He turned and headed back toward his study.

A sudden twinge lanced through Kalen’s head, and he paused to lean against the wall, raising a hand to his temple.

He felt a soft hand on his arm. “Is something wrong, my lord?” Amber whispered.

“I’m fine,” said Kalen.

“Is it the pain again?”

“I’m fine,” he repeated firmly.

Amber looked at him with concern, but simply nodded. “I’ll escort the young lady to her room,” she said. “Do take some of that medicine the healer gave you. Will you?”

“It doesn’t help,” murmured Kalen. “Not anymore. I’ll go riding. That will take my mind off it for awhile at least.”

“It won’t go away if you ignore it,” Amber said quietly.

“I know,” said Kalen. “I know. But there’s nothing else to be done.”



She hesitated. "There is something. This marriage ... perhaps it was fated. If you...."

"No," Kalen said sharply. He glared at her. "I won't consider it. I can't believe you would even suggest such a thing. Don't speak of it anymore."

Amber sighed. "Yes, Lord Ashler."

\* \* \* \*

A servant led Keelie up a set of marble stairs, through halls so grand and luxurious they made her head spin. Her bedroom, which lay beyond a door of dark, polished wood, was actually made up of three adjoining rooms. There was a privy, a dressing chamber, and the bedroom itself, which was decorated in coral pink and red. A window looked out on the sparkling, greenish-blue sea and orange sky. Tiny sea-dragons wheeled and swooped, glittering like jewels. "Beautiful," she whispered.

"I am glad it pleases you, lady," said the servant, a curly-haired woman in her late middle years.

"It does. Will Meg be staying here with me?"

"Meg?"

"My handmaid."

"Oh, no, she'll have her own chamber. It's right next to yours, though, so you'll be able to call her if you need anything." The woman gave

her arm a gentle pat. “I know how new and strange this must be, but I think you’ll grow to like Ashler House, in time. Lord Ashler is a kind and generous man ... a bit solitary and sad-natured, but that’s nothing a beautiful young woman can’t cure him of.”

Keelie managed a smile, hoping the fear didn’t show in her eyes.

“Your belongings and handmaid will be up soon,” said the servant. “If you need anything, the com is right over there.” She pointed to a small, gray panel on the wall. “We’ll let you know when it’s time for the ceremony.”

“Thank you,” said Keelie.

The woman smiled, bowed her head, and left.

Keelie walked over to the window and stared out at the sea. She tried to focus on its quiet beauty, clearing her mind of all else, but thoughts of the coming ceremony, and what would inevitably follow, kept pushing into her mind.

She hugged herself, closing her eyes. An image of Ashler filled her mind.

She had to admit, he was handsome, even more so than he’d seemed in vidcasts. She hadn’t allowed herself to look too closely at his face, knowing that a direct gaze might seem insolent--or so her father had told her--but she’d *felt* his presence, a quiet, commanding presence that seemed to fill the room. And she’d felt his eyes on her, like twin suns warming her skin.

A tiny shiver traced its way up her spine. She tried to ignore the feeling. So he was attractive. Why should that matter? She'd seen many handsome young men at her father's court, and none of them had ever stirred her.

She heard a knock at her door. "Come in," she said warily.

The door opened and relief washed over her when she saw it was Meg. Her relief vanished when Meg, smiling brightly, said, "It's time for the ceremony."

"So soon?" Keelie asked weakly. "I only just got here."

"Well, no point in putting it off."

"I suppose." She took a deep breath. "Is there anything I need to know?"

"Just the vows, and you've already memorized those. Oh, and you're to wear this." Meg held something out, and Keelie leaned forward to look at it. A small, sea-green stone on a delicate gold chain sat in her palm. "A gift from your new husband."

"It's lovely," she said ... and it was. The stone, the exact color of Keelie's eyes, seemed to glimmer with a light all its own. Pretty as it was, however, she wasn't sure she wanted to touch it, much less wear it. A gift implied some sort of debt, an expectation of something given in return.

She knew what that something was, of course. After the ceremony and banquet, she would be expected to give him her body, to plant his seed in her. That was her only purpose in this arrangement--a vessel, a means of

bringing Ashler's heir into the world. Tears filled her eyes. "I don't know if I can do this," she whispered.

Meg's smile melted. She leaned forward and hugged her mistress tightly. "What are you afraid of?" she asked quietly. "Going to his bed?"

"That, and ... everything. I don't want a child yet. I'm still so young. There's so much I've never experienced, and now I never will. I'm only twenty years old, and already I'm tied down for life to someone I hardly know." Tears overflowed her eyes and spilled down her cheeks. "I suppose it was foolish for me to hope for more out of life. I'm part of the royal family. My whole life is dictated by form and tradition. I'm as much a servant as you are." She pulled back, wiping her cheeks. "If I resist, it could bring our worlds to war. It's not just Kalen I have to worry about, either. My father would be furious. I know what I have to do, I just ... I'm afraid. I don't know if I can make it through tonight."

"I was told to give you this, as well," Meg said. She pulled a tiny amber pill out of her pocket. "It will keep you calm and give you courage."

Keelie stared at the pill, then shook her head. "No. I don't want false courage. My mind is all I have left, the only thing that's still completely mine ... the only thing they can't take away from me. I won't have it clouded."

"Very well, my lady." Meg's eyes were sad and sympathetic. Keelie stood still and allowed Meg to fasten the delicate gold chain around her head, so the green teardrop-stone rested between her eyes. "Are you ready?"

“As I’ll ever be.” Keelie offered a wan smile and stepped out of her bedroom, her long white dress trailing behind her.

Meg led her downstairs, into a huge, round room with a gold-domed ceiling. In the center of the room was a raised circle of marble. A small, delicate woman--a priestess, judging from her plain robes and hooded head--stood atop it, holding a yellowed scroll. In front of the platform stood her new husband.

Meg waited in the door as Keelie approached, heart pounding. Kalen Ashler wore ceremonial gold and black. A cape flowed from his broad shoulders, the edges embroidered with intricate golden runes. He was a very large man, she noticed, tall and powerfully built. Was every part of him so large? The thought brought a hot flush to her cheeks.

She carefully avoided looking at his face as she stood beside him and tried to keep her own face expressionless. But she couldn’t stop her eyes from widening slightly as she looked around the nearly empty room.

“Is something wrong, my lady?” Kalen asked coolly.

“Nothing. It’s just ... I expected there to be more people.”

“This marriage is a legal arrangement, as I’m sure you’re aware,” he said. “It is to be carried out briefly and efficiently. There is no reason for spectators. I apologize if you were hoping for something grander.”

“No, no. It’s all right.” So very cold. Would he be this brief and efficient when they consummated their marriage?

“Shall we begin?” asked the priestess.

Ashler nodded.

The priestess unrolled the scroll, though she didn't look at it as she spoke. The scroll was only for ceremony. Every priestess, as part of her training, had to commit the sacred scrolls to heart. "Rejoice, for today two paths will join. As a tributary flows into a river, so shall Lady Keeliana a'Tregor become as one with Lord Kalen Ashler." She looked at Keelie. "Do you swear to honor the law of the scrolls in your union with this man, to obey him in all things?"

The words caught in her throat but she managed to force them out. "I swear."

"And do you, Kalen Ashler, swear to honor this woman and provide for her, to be respectful of her needs and the needs of any children she may bear?"

"I swear."

"It is done." The priestess tucked the scroll under one arm and bowed deeply. "May fortune favor you both, and may your years together be many and full."

"So be it," they intoned.

Ashler took her hand and brushed a kiss across the back, a touch so light she hardly felt it. Then he turned and walked away from the platform. "The banquet hall is this way."

She nodded and followed him through the door, Meg trailing along behind.

\* \* \* \*

She was so quiet, so distant. Kalen watched her from the corner of his eye as they walked, wondering what was going on in that dark-haired head.

They reached the dining hall. A table stretched across the room's length, heaped high with plates and bowls. A roast kreli dominated the table's center. Kalen watched as the server cut off slices of the succulent pink meat and distributed it to the diners.

Wendor was there, eating and laughing. He certainly didn't seem too bothered by thought of handing his daughter over to a stranger. Did he trust Kalen that much? Or did he just have that little concern for her?

It didn't matter, he supposed. The marriage had been carried out, the contract sealed. Still, it made his blood boil to see her father making merry while she sat, pale and quiet, picking at her food.

Kalen stayed only long enough to be polite. He had always disliked large social gatherings. The noise made his headaches flare up.

As he walked toward his room, he paused to lean against the hall, fingers rubbing his temples in small circles.

Everyone would expect them to consummate their marriage this night. They could do no such thing, of course ... but a part of him wanted to. When he thought about Keelie's softly-rounded body, his heartbeat quickened. It had been so long since he'd had a woman. He wanted to run his hands over

that cool, beige skin, to feel those lush breasts tighten in his hands, to slide into that young, tight body, to feel her heat and wetness envelop him. He closed his eyes, heart pounding, trying to regain his composure.

“Remember,” he murmured. “Remember Leara.” The memory of her empty, lifeless blue eyes was like a bucket of ice-water to the fire of his lust. He couldn’t let that happen again. He wouldn’t. Not even if it cost him his life.

\* \* \* \*

Keelie made her way down the hall. Amber had told her where to find Lord Ashler’s room. She supposed it was best to get this over with. Still ... beneath the fear, there was a small tingle of anticipation. She wondered what his large, callused hands would feel like on her skin, what his firm mouth would feel like on hers. Would he be a gentle lover? Would he take the time to satisfy her, or simply quench his own desires?

Keelie chewed her lower lip. She was not ignorant of sex. She had studied biology, both animal and human, and she knew about the various parts and their functions. But that told her nothing about how she would feel when he was moving inside her.

She reached the door. It was made of dark, rich wood, carved with an intricate image of a sea-dragon, the symbol of House Ashler. Taking a deep breath, Keelie called out softly, “I am here, my lord.”



A pause. Then the door opened, revealing Ashler's huge form. He stared down at her with those clear, penetrating gray eyes ... eyes now wide with surprise. "Keelie?"

"Yes, my lord." She swallowed. "The feast is over. Do you wish to make use of me?" Her heartbeat filled her ears like thunder.

He blinked. "There is no need."

Keelie felt a stab of panic. Had he changed his mind? As much as the thought of going to his bed scared her, the thought of his refusal--and her father's resulting fury--scared her even more. She had resolved to go through with this, for the sake of maintaining peace between their worlds. "My lord," she whispered, "I am your wife now. I would come to your bed." She was being dangerously bold, she knew, but she couldn't turn back now. She had come too far. Keelie stepped forward into his room and closed the door behind her.

"Keelie...."

She slipped her arms around him, letting her breasts press against his broad chest. His eyes closed, and she could hear him struggling to control his breathing. She was surprised at the rush of heat that flooded her own body. She placed her hands on his chest. They looked so small on his huge body. "Will you take me?" she whispered. She hardly recognized the voice as her own. It sounded deep, husky with need. What was happening to her?

A pair of large hands settled on her shoulders as if he were going to push her away, but he didn't. She could feel the warmth of those strong

fingers through the thin, silky fabric of her dress. For a long moment, he simply stood, studying her face. His eyes lingered on her mouth. "You are beautiful," he whispered. Then his mouth came down on hers. At first, the kiss was soft, and she felt a peculiar melting sensation in her middle ... then his lips pressed more firmly against hers. One hand slid down to cup her breast. The flesh tingled oddly and began to tighten as his fingertips found her nipple and stroked it through the thin silk, molding it to a small, hard peak. "Beautiful," he murmured. His thumb rotated slowly around the hard nipple. There was a soft ache between her thighs. She pressed them tightly together, trembling. She had not expected this to feel so good! She closed her eyes, panting softly.

His hand slipped behind her to unbutton the back of her dress, letting it slip away to reveal her smooth, tanned shoulders. A little lower and her breasts were exposed. He stared at them raptly, seemingly mesmerized by the way they moved up and down with her breathing. Then, slowly, he bent his head to kiss one of those firm globes. The dress slipped away, falling to the floor. His fingers slid beneath the waistband of her undergarment, the only thing separating her from total nakedness, and pulled it down. Self-conscious heat rose into her cheeks as his eyes lingered on the patch of dark curls between her legs. Her thighs were still pressed together, hiding her most intimate place.

She knew what was expected of her. Slowly, she relaxed her thighs, letting them part just slightly. Her eyes were closed, her heart racing as she

felt his thumb brush against the moist crease in her flesh, first tracing its length, then pushing deeper, into her wetness ... then moving a few inches upward to nudge her clitoris. She gasped as his thumb began a slow swirl around that achingly sensitive little nub, teasing it, making her wet.

He slipped a fingertip into her opening. She could feel it pushing against the tightly-lodged barrier within. The hard bulge of his erection lay against her thigh. It was enormous. When she tried to imagine how it would feel to have that thick length inside her, her knees went weak in a flash of mingled excitement and fear. She closed her eyes, waiting to be pushed down on the bed. But just then Kalen tensed and pushed her away.

Keelie's eyes opened. "My lord?"

"Stars, what am I doing?" he muttered and pressed his hand to his forehead. Eyes averted, he picked up her dress and handed it to her. "Forgive me, my lady. I don't know what I was thinking."

She stared at him in confusion. "But...."

"Go," he said hoarsely. "Please. My need is great and I will lose control if I let myself look at you for another moment."

Keelie hesitated.

"Go!" he shouted.

Keelie scrambled into her dress, fumbling with the little buttons, and hurried from the room, confused and--could it be--disappointed.

\* \* \* \*

Meg was straightening Keelie's bedcovers when the door opened. Keelie entered, looking dazed and flushed. "Keelie!" Meg stood straighter, eyes wide. "Are you done already? That was certainly quick. Are you all right?"

"We didn't do anything," she said.

Meg frowned slightly. "What?"

"He told me to leave." She sat down on the bed. "So I did."

"But this is your wedding night! You were supposed to...."

"I know what was supposed to happen, Meg. Believe me--I don't understand it any better than you do."

Meg's brow furrowed. "Perhaps he has ... trouble ... with that sort of thing."

"Oh no," said Keelie, remembering that thick column of flesh pressed against her thigh, hot, urgent and demanding. A shiver ran through her. "He has no trouble. Believe me." Strange, conflicted feelings swirled inside her. A part of her was glad Kalen had stopped. But his touches had been so sweet. She shivered slightly, remembering the heat of his hands, the searing intensity of his eyes ... and the pain in his face when he had told her to leave. A part of her wanted to go back to him and tell him to finish what he had started, but she knew she didn't have the courage.

Meg fluffed a pillow. “Strange behavior for a man on his wedding night!” She shook her head. “I don’t know what to make of it. But I suppose he has his reasons.”

“If I only knew what they were,” she murmured. She lay down on the bed, one arm resting on her forehead. “There’s so much I don’t understand about him.”

“Well, you’ve only just met him, after all. I expect you’ll get to know him better.”

“Yes,” Keelie said. “I intend to.”

\* \* \* \*

Keelie woke soon after sunrise, as she always did. She opened her eyes and looked around at the strange room. At first she was confused, wondering why she wasn’t in her own bed ... then the memories fell into place.

She sat up, drawing her knees up to her bare chest and wrapped her arms around them, feeling very alone. Meg was nowhere nearby. Back home, she slept on a pallet next to Keelie’s bed, but here she had her own bedchamber. Ashler House was truly a place of excess. Even the servants had luxuries fit for royalty.

Keelie dressed, combed her dark hair, and braided it carefully. Meg usually did that for her, and the braids she made always looked neater, but Keelie still liked to do it for herself every so often.

She heard a knock on the door and lifted her head. “Yes?”

“It’s me, dear,” said a female voice, the older woman who’d shown her to her room yesterday. “I just thought you might like to know that it’s almost time for breakfast. Afterwards, if you like, I could give you a tour of the house.”

“I--I’d like that.” She certainly did have a lot to get used to. Back on Tarva, being called “dear” by a servant would be inconceivable, but she didn’t mind the informality. She rather liked it.

Keelie opened the door and the woman smiled at her. Fine wrinkles radiated from the corners of her eyes and mouth. “My name is Amber. I’ve been looking after Lord Ashler since he was but a little boy no higher than my knee.”

“I’m ... well, you know my name.” She smiled.

Amber laughed. “Indeed! There’s hardly a soul in the house who doesn’t. Come with me, dear. The dining hall is this way. Unless you’d prefer to have breakfast brought to your room?”

“No, that’s all right. I’ll eat in the hall. Where’s Meg?”

“Still asleep, I believe.”

“Oh. I won’t disturb her, then.”

Amber led her down a hall lined with tall, arched windows that offered a view of the sea. Keelie saw something curled up in a pool of sunlight. As she drew closer, her eyes widened. It was an enormous cat, easily bigger than the largest hunting dog she'd ever seen, with tawny fur and dark brown stripes.

The cat raised its head, ears pricked. Its huge, golden eyes were half-lidded and drowsy. She saw a large, loose-fitting leather collar around its neck. "Wh-what...."

"Oh, that's just Sunspot. Don't worry, he's perfectly tame. Lord Ashler raised him from a cub."

The cat rose to its feet and padded over to Keelie. She stared in wonder. "May I pet him?"

"Go ahead."

Keelie cautiously reached out and scratched behind the cat's ears. Her hand looked tiny and delicate atop the beast's huge head.

Sunspot rumbled softly and butted his muzzle into her palm.

"He wants you to scratch under his chin," said Amber, amusement in her voice.

Keelie obliged. As she scratched, Sunspot's eyes closed in pleasure and his purring deepened. His tail--a two-inch stub--wiggled, as if it were trying to wag. "What happened to his tail?" she asked.

"Sunspot was an overly-curious cub. He crawled into a krakta's nest once, and you know how mother kraktas are when their young are

threatened. He got away, but she snapped off most of his tail before he managed to get out of the nest.”

“Poor fellow.” She looked up. “Is Lord Ashler in the habit of keeping such unusual pets?”

“He is an unusual man in many respects.”

Sunspot padded along beside them as they continued their walk down the hall. Amber watched as Keelie reached down to scratch his thick ruff. “You have a way with animals,” she remarked. “He usually doesn’t warm so quickly to people. Did you have pets back on Tarva?”

“Only the horses in the stables. Father only likes animals on the dinner table.” She smiled weakly, though it wasn’t really a joke to her. When she was twelve, she’d taken in a stray dog without his permission, and her father had threatened to have it cooked and fed to the servants unless she got rid of it.

Amber seemed to sense the pain behind that wavering smile. She patted Keelie’s arm and said nothing.

Breakfast waited for them in the dining hall. At the savory aromas, Keelie’s stomach came to life with a rumble. She was surprised to see that they were the only people there. She made a comment about this to Amber, who nodded. “Lord Ashler lives alone, except for his servants. There are only twenty of us.”

“Only?”



“For a house this size, that’s not a large number,” said Amber. “He has no family. His parents passed away some time ago.”

“Oh,” Keelie replied. The sight of the vast, empty dining hall was surreal. Her father had always populated his home with guests and artisans and entertainers, and meals were always grand, crowded affairs.

She and Amber ate a quick meal of eggs, kircha, and thick, dark bread spread thick with sweet parmu. They spent the rest of the morning touring the house, which was even bigger than Keelie had imagined. There was marble everywhere--pristine white, cream rippled with dove-gray, shell-pink, midnight black, and half a dozen other colors. They passed through a library with towering shelves filled with books and scrolls. Some were new--some so ancient they looked as though they’d crumble apart at the touch. She stared with a hungry fascination.

“This way,” said Amber, beckoning her toward an arched door. “I’ll show you the gardens. They’re lovely at this time of year.”

Keelie hesitated. She wanted to stay here to explore the library’s secrets. She could read Rian, and there were more books here than she’d ever dreamed existed. But she didn’t want to be impolite, and Ashler might not like her poking through his collection. Reluctantly, she followed Amber through the door and down another hallway of sunlit marble. Sunspot followed, his claws clicking softly against the floor.

The gardens lay ahead. They were beautiful, filled with lush ferns and vines. Star-shaped purple flowers, each larger than a splayed human hand, lined the cobbled walkway.

“Lord Ashler doesn’t come here often,” Amber said. “He spends so much time cooped up in that study of his. It’s a pity. I think a little green and sunlight would do him good.”

“Has he always been like that?” asked Keelie. “So reclusive, I mean.”

A shadow passed across Amber’s face and she turned away. “Not always.”

“What happened?”

“I don’t think I should speak of something so personal. Forgive me, child.”

“It’s all right. It’s really none of my business.”

“On the contrary. You have a right to know about your own husband, but I think it would be best if he told you some things himself. Only ... be careful with his heart. He’s almost like a son to me and I don’t want to see him hurt again.”

Keelie blinked. She thought of Kalen Ashler, tall, immense and quiet, with a deep, rumbling voice like distant thunder. “I don’t think I could hurt him if I tried,” she said.

Amber gave her a long, serious look. “He is more vulnerable than he seems. He has not had a happy life.”

Nervously, she kneaded Sunspot's thick ruff. "Was he hurt by someone?" she asked.

"Yes. But it's not what you're thinking. It's worse than you can imagine." Amber turned away, her mouth tight. "Please, don't ask me to tell you anymore."

Keelie stared at her in bewilderment. What could possibly have happened to Kalen that was so horrible that Amber dared not even speak of it?

After a moment, Amber turned back to her. She was smiling though her face was strained. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have brought it up. Come with me, I'll show you the stables. You enjoy riding, don't you?"

"Yes, I do." Keelie followed her out of the garden, through another grand hallway, but her mind wasn't on her surroundings. She was thinking about Kalen's gray eyes, about the shadows in their depths.

Who *was* this man whom she called husband?

Keelie spent the rest of the day exploring the grounds outside Ashler House with Amber at her side. There was a narrow stone walkway where the forest met the smooth, white beach, and they followed this path, listening to the dull roar of the waves. Keelie had to admit, Ria was far more beautiful than Tarva. Her home planet was mostly covered in sprawling cities and factories whose smoke all but blotted out the sun. As they walked, Amber pointed out different plants and animals, and Keelie carefully filed

each name away in her memory. She wanted to know all she could about this remarkable world. It was so lush, so wild ... almost like one of the holoreels they had in museums on Tarva, the ones that were supposed to represent what the planet had once looked like, before humans settled there.

As dinnertime approached, they returned to Ashler House and Amber showed her to the dining hall once again. "Lord Ashler will be dining with you tonight," said Amber, filling Keelie's goblet with wine.

"Oh." Keelie sat down in the tall, elegantly carved chair. Her mouth was suddenly dry and her stomach filled with an odd, fluttery feeling. After what happened last night, dinner would be awkward, to say the least.

"Don't be nervous, dear. Just make conversation." Amber smiled. "It will be fine."

Keelie tried to smile back, then lifted her goblet to take a shaky sip of her wine as Amber quietly retreated from the room.

She felt Ashler's presence even before he entered--that quiet, imposing presence. She fixed her eyes on her plate, her skin growing warmer as she remembered those large, strong hands on her breasts, those knowing fingers molding her nipples into stiff peaks.

His footsteps drew closer then stopped. "Good evening, wife," he said a cool, formal voice.

"Good evening, husband," she murmured. She heard the rustle of clothing as he sat down, the clink of silverware as he picked up his knife and fork. Servants drifted quietly through the room, pausing occasionally to

dole out food or refill a cup, but aside from them, she and Ashler were the only people in the dining room. Keelie twisted her napkin around one finger. Feeling she should make conversation, she cleared her throat and said, “It must be wonderful to live by the sea. I’ve always found it fascinating. I-I’ve heard there are over twenty species of sea-dragons on Ria 2.” Silently, she scolded herself. Father had warned her against sounding like a know-it-all. Men liked their wives humble.

She looked up and saw Ashler looking at her strangely. “Yes,” he said. “The smallest are only a few centimeters in length and the largest over three hundred meters long.”

“I didn’t know that, my lord,” she said, though she had.

“I saw one of those sea-giants, once,” he continued. His gaze drifted to the window, staring out at the white crescent of beach, where waves broke against the rocks. “I was out in a fishing-boat with my father, and there it was in the distance rising above the water’s surface. It was beautiful, silvery and iridescent, shining in the sun. The sight took my breath away. I’d seen vids, of course, but they couldn’t begin to compare. For an instant, I swear, its eye looked into mine ... and then it was gone.” He was silent a moment, lost in memory. “You aren’t eating,” he said suddenly. “Is there anything wrong with the food?”

“No, of course not. It’s delicious. I just don’t have much appetite this evening.”

A long moment of silence. Then Ashler cleared his throat softly. “My lady ... I’m sorry for last night.”

Keelie blinked. An apology was the last thing she had expected. “There’s nothing to be sorry for,” she said.

“Ah, of course.” He smiled without mirth. “What was I thinking? You were probably relieved.”

“No, my lord! I-I mean, why would I be?”

His gray eyes met hers. “Did you have any say in this marriage? Any at all?”

She bit her lower lip. “My father arranged the marriage. Most noble children are wed in such a way.”

“So you were forced into marriage with a man you’d never met face to face, with no idea how I’d treat you or what your new life would be like, and then you were expected to give your body to me on our wedding night.” His hand tightened on his fork. “You must hate me.”

“No, my lord! Not at all!”

“You needn’t lie to soothe my pride, Keelie. I won’t punish you.”

She bit her lower lip. Her hands, resting in her lap, continued to fiddle with her napkin. “I don’t hate you,” she said. “You are as much a pawn in this as I am.”

His eyes softened. “In a way, perhaps,” he said quietly. “But at least I had some choice in the matter, even if saying ‘no’ would have ended in

disaster. It's not that I find you unsatisfactory in any way, I just wish..." She watched his long fingers drum against the table as he searched for words.

"You just wish there had been a choice," she finished.

"Choice is something I've never had much of," he replied quietly.

"We are alike in that respect, I think." His gaze returned to her face. "I know this marriage was not what you wanted. It's something we both must do. I want you to know that I will not demand anything that you don't wish to give."

"And if I wish to give it, my lord?" The words slipped out of her mouth before she could stop them.

Ashler stared at her for a long moment. "Then I would have to refuse."

"I don't understand," she whispered.

"I'm not looking for a mate right now. That's all."

She wanted to ask him why. She wanted to understand why a handsome, powerful, wealthy man like Kalen Ashler had never taken a wife, though he was approaching his mid-thirties ... and why he had refused her when his desire was plain and she had been so clearly willing. But she kept her silence, her eyes downcast as she cut a slice of meat on her plate. She could feel Kalen's eyes on her.

"Tell me, Keelie ... what do you like to do?"

She raised her eyes. "What do you mean?"

“I mean just that. What do you do in your spare time? Do you have any hobbies?”

“I sketch. And I read, a little.”

“A little,” he repeated. A faint smile hovered about his lips, as if he somehow sensed the half-truth. “Anything else?”

“Well, I go riding sometimes. That is, I used to, when I was a child. My father says it’s not becoming for a young lady to ride astride and I’ve no wish to go riding sidesaddle through the forest.”

“You can ride astride as often as you choose, here. You’ll find I’m not so strict about traditions as some lords. And since you read, I’ll show you the library after breakfast.”

“Thank you, Kalen,” she said, surprised. “Amber took me there this morning but I didn’t get a chance to really look. It was remarkable, though. I’ve never seen so many books in one place.”

“Didn’t your father keep a library?”

She shook her head. “We had a few books, of course, but he didn’t approve of frivolous things ... poetry and novels and the like. And he didn’t want me to waste my time learning useless information.”

Kalen raised an eyebrow. “And what would he consider useless?”

“Just about anything that didn’t have to do with politics.”

Kalen chuckled. “Somehow, that doesn’t surprise me.” He scraped the last bite of rice from his plate and glanced at Keelie, who had also finished eating. “So ... shall we?”



She nodded.

Ashler rose to his feet and Keelie followed him out of the dining room and down a long, broad hallway. Tall windows let in sunlight, and outside, the morning was clear and blue. The ocean sparkled like a sunjewel.

They reached the set of tall, arched doors that led into the library. Kalen held them open for her then followed her into the spacious room.

Windows let in most of the light. Light-globes hovered here and there, glowing a soft, pearly white.

“What sort of things do you read?” Kalen asked.

She averted her eyes. “Oh, trivial things. Nothing that would interest a man of your intellect.” Her cheeks grew warm as she felt his gaze on her.

Kalen sighed. “I wish you didn’t feel compelled to lie to me. Not that I can blame you, I suppose.” He smiled, a weary, sad smile. “I’m going to leave you here. You can explore as you choose or return to your room. Whatever suits you.”

“Is there anything off-limits, or....”

He shook his head. “Knowledge is not something to be hoarded and guarded like jewels.” He turned to go.

“Wait!”

Kalen looked over his shoulder, one eyebrow raised.

Keelie took a deep breath. “Should you ever decide that you wish to be my husband in more than name ... I would be willing.”

Kalen's face remained expressionless, but pain flickered in the depths of his eyes. "Don't tempt me," he said. "The situation is far more complicated than you understand." He took a step closer and gently gripped her chin between a thumb and forefinger lifting her face. "It's not that I find you unappealing, Keelie," he said, his voice a deep, husky whisper. "Far from it. But there can't be anything between us."

Keelie's face was flushed and she felt the honeyed ache of arousal throughout her body. Her nipples had grown hard and tender, and her heartbeat now seemed to be located between her thighs. She wanted his hand there, wanted to feel those strong, knowing fingers exploring her secret flesh, wanted his hot mouth on her skin. "I don't understand," she whispered. "You're afraid of something. I can see that much. Please, tell me what's wrong. Tell me what I can do to help you."

"Nothing. There is nothing you can do." He released her chin and looked away. "It would be best if you kept your distance from me. Live your own life. I won't demand obedience from you. You are free to roam as you choose, and you may continue your hobbies and pastimes. I ... will even allow you to take a lover, if you wish." He spoke slowly, his voice strained, as if he were forcing the words from his throat. "I want you to be happy here, Keelie."

"But what about your happiness?"

He pulled away then turned to stare hard into her eyes. "You are not responsible for my happiness," he said.

His voice was so flat and cold that she took a step back.

Without another word he turned and left.

Keelie took a deep, shuddering breath and turned away, crossing her arms over her chest as she stared out the window. Tears welled in her eyes and she wiped them away with the back of one hand. Why was she crying? She should be happy he had decided to leave her alone! It was what she'd hoped for, that her husband would allow her to continue living as she always had, that he wouldn't force his attentions on her or try to mold her into someone else. Yet Kalen's rejection stung like a firescale's bite.

Perhaps because he was so different from what she had expected. She had been prepared for someone demanding and arrogant, an oversized child who took whatever he wanted without ever considering her own needs, someone like the spoiled noblemen's sons who populated her father's court. She'd never dared to dream that she would be wed to a man like Kalen, someone gentle, considerate ... and powerfully attractive. On their wedding night, he had taken the time to see to her pleasure then forced himself to stop, despite his obvious desire. Why, she didn't understand, but somehow he felt that making love to her would be dangerous. It was for her sake that he had restrained himself.

But it had felt so good. And now that she had tasted his touch she ached for more.

"I don't understand," she whispered, and closed her eyes. Fresh tears slid down her cheeks. "I just don't."

Leara lay in Kalen's arms, unmoving, her skin white and bloodless, and her large, blue eyes wide and vacant. Her full mouth hung open, blood drying at the corner. He cried out her name. He shook her, begging her to be alive, but she wouldn't move.

She was dead and it was his fault. He had killed her.

Kalen screamed....

And woke, heart racing, his sheets drenched in sweat. His body was curled into a fetal position, hands clenched into fists. The silence was broken only by the tick of the chronometer and the roar of waves on the shore outside.

Kalen Ashler let out his breath in a whoosh and pressed the heels of his hands against his eyelids. The image of Leara's vacant blue eyes and her pale face still filled his mind.

Kalen rose from his bed, naked, and walked over to the window. He leaned against the cool glass, feeling its smoothness against his cheek. Outside, sequins of moonlight glimmered on the night-dark sea and the forest looked as dark and lush as velvet. "Only a dream," he murmured.

But it was more than that, he knew. It was a memory, a reminder. A warning of what was to come if he lost control.

\* \* \* \*

Sunspot rumbled softly and laid his head on his master's leg. Golden eyes looked pleadingly up at him.

Ashler kept his eyes on the open book in front of him. "I'm busy." He nudged the great cat with his knee. "Go on. Go chase pufftails or something."

Sunspot didn't budge.

Ashler sighed, giving in, and scratched behind his ears. Sunspot leaned into the caress, purring. "What would your wild brothers think if they could see you now?" he asked, grinning, "you big, lazy thing."

Sunspot rolled onto his back exposing his furry stomach.

"Ah well. I guess it's my own fault for taking you in." He scratched the soft white fur. "What do you think of my new wife, Sunspot? Hm?"

One golden eye opened and regarded him curiously, then closed. Ashler smiled slightly. As far as Sunspot was concerned, Keelie was just one more person to pet and adore him.

Kalen turned his attention back to the book on his desk, though in truth, he was having trouble concentrating.

He needed a mate before his thirty-fifth birthday and Keelie was his wife, but only in a political sense. She hadn't chosen this. Even if they were to live together, she could still have a life of her own. But if they lay together....

A light knock on his door distracted him from his thoughts. He looked up. "Yes?"

The door opened and Amber stepped in. She was frowning, her arms crossed over her chest.

He frowned back, confused. “What’s wrong?”

“What did you do to upset that girl?”

“Who? Keelie?”

“Of course Keelie! She’s been brooding all morning. She thinks you’re angry at her.”

“Well, I’m not. Tell her that.”

“Why don’t you tell her?”

“Because I’m busy right now. I do have duties, you know.”

“How could I forget it? You spend far too much time alone in these cramped, dusty rooms with only your books and that cat for company. You know, most men would be thrilled to have a pretty young wife.”

“I’m not most men,” said Kalen. “I will not force myself on Keelie.”

“I’m not asking you to do any such thing! But you could at least befriend her. Who knows? You might discover that you’re perfect for each other. And you need a mate, Kalen. You don’t have much time left.”

“I know that.” He sighed. “Believe me, I know. And if I ever forget, the headaches are there to remind me.” He rubbed his temple. “But I can’t bond to someone who was forced to marry me. She’s already been robbed of enough of her freedom.”

Amber pinched the bridge of her nose and closed her eyes. “Must you always be so noble? Can’t you be selfish just once in awhile? It might do you some good. Stars know you need to loosen up a bit.”

“It has nothing to do with nobility,” he said sharply. “After what happened to Leara, I don’t dare take the chance. You don’t know what it was like.”

Amber’s expression grew sober. “I do know. I was there when you woke screaming from bad dreams, night after night.”

“You were sheltered from the worst of it. I spent three years in an institution ... or have you forgotten? They can tell you how bad it was.” He could feel a vein throbbing in his forehead. “I was lucky to come out with my sanity intact.” His voice dropped to a near-whisper. “Sometimes, I wonder if I’m really sane at all.”

“You’re the most sane man I know,” Amber said quietly.

“Then perhaps you aren’t seeing me clearly.” He turned away, fists clenched. “I’ll not put Keelie at risk. It’s best that I keep my distance from her.”

“You don’t honestly believe you’re dangerous, do you? Kalen, I’ve known you since you were a little boy. There’s not an unkind bone in your body. This self-distrust ... it’s just fear. Just your mind’s way of trying to protect you from being hurt again. I can’t honestly believe that you’d hurt her.”

“No?” He lifted his head. At the look in his eyes, Amber took a step back, the color draining from her face. Kalen looked away and picked up a pen. “I have to look over these reports,” he said. “Good day.”

She hesitated. “Kalen....”

“Good day,” he said tightly.

“She cares about you,” Amber said quietly. “She wants a husband. Not a ghost. I daresay she’s already falling in love with you.”

Kalen froze. His pen-tip hovered over the page, trembling slightly, almost imperceptibly, in his hand. “That doesn’t change the situation. She has no idea what it would mean, to go to bed with a man like me. If she knew, she would do everything in her power to escape.”

“She’s not Leara,” Amber said quietly.

“No, but the situation is the same. At any rate, I think you overestimate her emotional attachment to me.” He looked up. “I won’t put her at risk. Do you understand?”

Amber opened her mouth to reply, but something in his eyes stopped her. She bowed her head and said quietly, “Yes, Lord Ashler.”

“Thank you.” He turned his gaze back to his writing.

Amber quietly left the room.

Ashler stared at the page for a moment longer, but he couldn’t focus his mind on it. At last, he sighed and set his pen down.

Sunspot was crouched at his feet, peering up at him with large golden eyes.



“What?” said Ashler. “Don’t tell me you’re on *her* side. I’m doing what’s best for everyone. I ... stars, maybe I really *do* need to get out of this room. I’m talking to the damned cat.” He slid his chair backwards, away from the desk.

He’d go for a ride in the forest. Maybe that would clear his head.

Kalen left the house and headed to the back where the stables stood. He owned several trudgers--large, four-legged reptiles with sleepy eyes and greenish-brown skin--but they were more for labor than for recreational riding. When he wanted to escape from the world, he rode one of the streks. They were beautiful creatures, slim and graceful, with powerful hind legs and supple, jewel-bright hides. Their faces were striped, their eyes large and gold, their reptilian snouts thin and delicate.

His favorite, Mithrina--a Rian word meaning “iron”--paced back and forth in her stall, her whip-like tail flicking. He scrubbed her hide with handfuls of sand to rid it of the dead skin then rubbed in oil to make it smooth and supple before saddling her and slipping a bridle over her head. Then, straddling her back, he clicked softly out of the side of his mouth, and they were off at a brisk run down the path. The forest flew by to either side.

Ria was mostly wilderness. There were a few scattered pockets of civilization here and there, mostly towns which had sprung up around the mines, but the vast majority was forest. Ria refused to be tamed. When you hacked away a vine, three more grew in its place. The trees would bite you with poisonous sticker pods before they let you cut them down. The woods

were filled with choke-vines, sting-bats, and a thousand other dangers that could be lethal if you didn't know how to avoid them. It had never been an easy place to live.

Kalen pulled gently on the reins, slowing Mithrina to a walk, and listened to the sounds of the forest, the soft bird-calls, the chirrup of insects and the rustle of animals slinking through the underbrush. Nimbla blossoms lined the path. Kalen was careful to keep Mithrina away from them. Merely brushing against those purple and blue petals could cause a nasty rash and swelling.

A stingbat swooped down from the trees, intent on planting its paralyzing stinger in his neck. Kalen reached out and swatted the bat away, sending it reeling through the air.

It was odd that he should feel so at peace when he was alone in the forest, a place where one had to constantly be on guard against dangers. Maybe avoiding the dangers just helped distract him from deeper problems.

He slowed the strek as he caught the sound of soft splashing. Kalen paused, listening. The sound was coming from the direction of the sea.

He turned the strek and rode slowly through the forest until he reached the edge. He stared out at the glassy beach where the waves crashed ... and his eyes widened.

Keelie stood waist-deep in the ocean, her long hair hanging loose and shining in the sun. She was naked. He could just see the soft curve of her

buttocks emerging from the water, the coppery globe of one breast, tipped with a jutting, pinkish-brown nipple. Kalen's mouth went dry.

Stars, she was lovely. But what was she doing out here alone? And naked, no less. It was dangerous. The sea was no less full of perilous life than the forest. But he couldn't bring himself to step forward into sight and stop her. He could only stand and watch as his groin stirred and began to ache.

She waded out of the water and began to wring out her wet hair. His gaze lingered on her round breasts, with their large, ripe nipples a moment longer ... then dipped down to the triangle of dark curls between her thighs, the curls which guarded her secrets from view. He stared hungrily at that place, the center of her womanhood. He could just see a hint of pink through those dark curls, a teasing glimpse of her most private flesh. He imagined pushing himself into the tightness and heat of her body, taking her, claiming her. Every instinct screamed at him to grab her, pull her close, and make her his wife in every sense of the word.

Kalen's hands trembled and his heart was beating so hard that it filled his ears like thunder. He closed his eyes but even that didn't help. He could still see her body against the backs of his closed eyelids. It was as if she'd burned her image into his very brain.

When he opened his eyes again, Keelie was getting dressed.

He had to leave. Now. He turned ... and a twig snapped under his foot.

Keelie looked up sharply. "Hello? Is someone there?"

He held still, not breathing.

Keelie's wide eyes darted about, searching the forests. Her tongue darted out to slick her pink, soft lips, and he found himself wondering how those lips would feel around his member.

Damn ... had to get some control, had to get out of here. But if she knew he'd been spying....

If she knew, maybe she'd avoid him. Wasn't that what he wanted?

Hell, he didn't know what he wanted.

"Hello?"

Well, he ought to at least warn her about the dangers of the sea. Closing his eyes, he took slow, deep breaths, trying to master his body. He forced his thoughts away from Keelie and did math equations in his head until his throbbing erection reluctantly faded. Then, opening his eyes, he stepped through the screen of vegetation.

Keelie's eyes widened. "Were you watching me?"

"No. I mean, I saw you but I wasn't spying. I just happened to be riding this way and I heard someone splashing in the water." He cleared his throat and put on a business-like expression. "Keelie, it's not safe to be out here alone. It's easy to get lost or caught in a current or any number of things. If you leave the estate, stay on the trails. Go alone if you must, but it's safer to have someone accompany you."

"Like you?" she asked.

He hesitated. “No. I mean one of the servants. But I’ll escort you back home now, if you like. It’ll be dark soon. We should return.”

Slowly, Keelie approached. Her simple one-piece dress clung to her wet skin. It was an effort to keep his eyes on her face. “Are you sure you weren’t watching me?” she asked. She didn’t sound angry or accusatory, merely curious.

Kalen looked away, cheeks growing warmer. “For a short while,” he said. “I apologize. I had no right.”

“But you do. You’re my husband.”

“Must you keep bringing that up?”

“Do you really hate the idea so much?”

“Keelie ... we’ve talked about this. I cannot be a husband to you, not in the fullest sense of the word. I’m sorry.”

“Yet you accepted the marriage.”

“Out of necessity. I did not expect....”

She touched his hand lightly and his breath caught in his throat. “You took a vow,” she said quietly, “that you would honor and protect me. Didn’t you?”

“Yes.” He looked away. “I did. And I will.”

“But no more?” She was very close. He could feel the warmth of her body.

Damn it. Didn’t she know she was torturing him? “That’s all I have to offer,” he said.

“I don’t believe that. Kalen ... won’t you at least give it a chance? Can’t we get to know each other? I don’t want to spend the rest of my life with a stranger.” Her slender, cool fingers slipped around his. “Will you at least let me be your friend?”

He said nothing.

“You’re so lonely,” she whispered. “So cut off from everything. You have no one you can really rely on or trust, do you?”

“Perhaps I prefer being alone,” he said, and pulled his hand free of hers.

Keelie lowered her eyes. “If that’s how it is,” she said, her voice trembling, “I’ll leave you alone.” She turned away. “You don’t have to escort me home. I know the way.” She lifted her cloak from where she had draped it across an outcrop, slipped it on, and walked away.

Kalen watched her for a moment and then turned away, trying to ignore the dull ache in his heart. But that wasn’t the only pain he felt. He was getting another headache. It throbbed behind his eyes, sending pulses of dull red across his vision. Earlier, he had been so focused on Keelie that he hadn’t noticed it, but now it was too intense to ignore.

He walked over to the tree where Mithrina was tethered and undid the rope. It took all his concentration just to complete that simple task. He felt as if a thunderstorm were brewing in his skull. Stars, this was going to be a bad one. Maybe the worst yet.

The rope slipped from his fingers. His vision had begun to fade in and out. He squeezed his eyes shut and pressed his fists to his temples, trying to will away the pain, but the harder he concentrated, the worse it got. It seemed his skull would split open at any moment. A low moan escaped his throat.

He felt his knees giving out. He was falling, fading. The world slipped away, like water down a drain, leaving only blackness.

\* \* \* \*

Keelie hadn't gone far when she heard a moan from behind her. She turned sharply, just in time to see Kalen fall to the ground, clutching his head. Her breath caught in her throat. She gathered up the long, trailing ends of her cloak and ran toward him, her heart hammering.

When she reached him, he was lying on the sand, eyes rolled back in his head. "Kalen..." She knelt and stroked his hair away from his sweat-damp brow. "Kalen, can you hear me?" She patted his cheek. "Kalen!"

His head rolled to one side. His mouth was open, his breath coming in shallow, labored pants.

"Oh, stars," she whispered. "What's wrong? Please speak to me."

His eyes opened slowly, as if that simple movement took all his effort, and his gray eyes focused on her face. "Help me onto Mithrina," he whispered hoarsely.

“Mith ... who?”

“The strek.”

She looked up at the tall, slim reptile standing over them. Mithrina cocked her head to one side blinking her golden eyes.

“She can carry both of us,” whispered Kalen, “but I’ll need you to take the reins. Sit in front of me. I can hold onto you.”

Keelie nodded and slipped an arm around Kalen helping him to his feet. He managed to climb onto the strek’s back. Keelie undid the tether rope before climbing up in front of Kalen and taking the reins in shaky hands. She felt his strong arms slip around her waist.

Mithrina took off at a brisk trot and Keelie gasped, her legs tightening around the strek’s narrow body. The saddle was little more than a piece of cloth. It did nothing to help her maintain her balance. She clung grimly as Mithrina trotted up the path, away from the beach, toward the keep looming against the night sky.

\* \* \* \*

Kalen lay in bed, his fists clenched tightly on the bed-sheets as he panted for breath. Amber wiped his forehead with a cool, damp cloth. He had been like this for nearly an hour. He didn’t seem to be truly conscious, didn’t respond to anything they said, but he was clearly able to feel the pain. He twitched and groaned. Beads of sweat rolled down his face and neck.



Amber looked up. Her brow was puckered with worry. "I've never seen it this bad before," she said.

Keelie sat by the bedside, her stomach clenched in a tight ball. It tore at her heart to see Kalen in such pain ... and terrified her deeply not to know the cause. "You mean this isn't the first time?"

Amber shook her head. "The headaches have plagued him since he was a child. They've only grown worse with time."

"Hasn't he seen a healer?"

"Many. But this can't be cured. The healers can only give him painkillers, but even those don't seem to help much anymore. I've already given him a generous dose. Anything more might harm his system."

Kalen shuddered and moaned.

Keelie touched his face. His skin was hot, like a stone that had been sitting out in the sun. "You have no idea what causes them?"

Amber was silent.

"Amber?" Keelie looked at her.

Amber drew a slow breath. "I don't know if he would want me to tell you."

"Look at him! He might be dying!" Keelie grabbed Amber's shoulders. "If you tell me the cause I might be able to help him. I'm not a healer but I know a lot about herbs and medicine. I've been reading about them for years."

Amber shook her head. "Child, the best healers in the galaxy have tried to help him and failed. There is nothing you could do that they can't."

Keelie's shoulders drooped. She knew Amber was right, but she hated feeling so powerless. "Please," she whispered. "I want to help him. I want to at least try."

Amber looked at Kalen and sighed. Then she took Keelie's hand. "Kalen Ashler's family has been on Ria for a long time," she said. "Many generations. His ancestors were among the first to populate this world."

Amber paused and Keelie waited, puzzled and frustrated. Kalen was in terrible pain, and Amber was giving her a history lesson? She wanted to shake the woman ... but she forced herself to wait quietly. There must be a point to this.

"Ria is a harsh world," said Amber. "The population has always been low. The colony government began to fear that it would die out completely. And so, with the help of the colony's most brilliant scientists, they thought of a solution. I suppose it made sense to them at the time." She blinked back tears. "They didn't see how ... how cruel it would be. Or they were just desperate. Either way, they tampered with the DNA of the colonies' newest generation of children. They wanted to encourage the people of the colony to mate and breed as early as possible. So ... you see..." She took a deep breath. "If a young Rian man does not choose a mate by the time he is fifteen, the pain begins. It gets worse with each passing year, until he reaches the age of thirty five. If he hasn't chosen a mate by then, he goes

insane. Often, he dies.” A tear rolled down her cheek. “It is the same for the women.”

“That’s horrible,” Keelie whispered. “But I don’t understand. You’re saying that all he has to do to make the headaches go away is to sleep with a woman? So why hasn’t he?”

“It’s not quite that simple. You see, Rians mate for life. Once he lies with a woman, he is bound to her, in mind as well as body.”

“You mean ... like thought-sharing?” She had heard of such a thing, but never encountered it.

“In a way,” said Amber. “They feel each other’s emotions. Once a man has bonded, he can have no other. Needless to say, it is not a commitment to be taken lightly.”

“Then he’s never been with a woman? Ever?”

“There was one. Once. When he was only sixteen, soon after the pain started, his parents arranged the marriage. Leara was the girl’s name.”

Amber smiled weakly. “I remember her. A fierce beauty.” The smile faded. “But she didn’t want the marriage. It had been arranged against her will. She loved another, you see. Even after she and Kalen had bonded, she tried to run away several times ... but the bond makes it painful for life-mates to be away from each other for long, and each time the pain brought her back. Until finally...” She looked away.

“What?” Keelie asked.

“She killed herself. She drank poisoned wine, and they found her the next morning on the floor of her bedroom, white as a ghost. Kalen felt her death, through the bond. It nearly killed him. Death is the only thing that can break a bond, and more often than not, it winds up killing both partners. As it was, it nearly drove him mad. His mind was in shambles ... and the headaches started again.” Amber met Keelie’s eyes, her own eyes wet with tears. “He didn’t want me to tell you,” she whispered. “Because he thought....”

Keelie raised a hand to her mouth in shock. “He thought that I would let him bond to me, to save his life,” she whispered. “And he didn’t want....”

“He didn’t want you to submit to it out of a sense of guilt or obligation. After what happened to Leara, he would rather die than risk losing another bondmate. He blames himself for what happened.” She wiped a few tears from her cheek. “Why did it have to happen to him?” she whispered. “I’ve never known such a kind, gentle, loving man. He was so different before he lost her. So warm. You can’t imagine what it did to him. He’s been suffering horribly ever since. He could have ended it at any time of his choosing. He could have had any woman he wanted. But he was afraid. Afraid it would end as it did with Leara. Afraid of hurting someone.”

Keelie stared at Kalen, her mouth dry. He lay on the bed, motionless except for the slight up and down movement of his chest. “He can bond to a non-Rian?” she asked quietly.

Amber nodded. “It has been done before.”

She knew immediately what she had to do. She could not let him suffer like this. Not while it was in her power to help him. “Let me stay with him until he wakes up,” she said.

“All right,” Amber replied quietly. Her face was solemn, as if she were aware of the decision that Keelie had come to.

Keelie looked at Kalen, her heart pounding in her throat. She should be afraid, she supposed, but she wasn’t. Not truly. Despite her racing pulse and the sweat beading on her brow, she felt only a clear, cool sense of purpose. Gently, she laid a hand over Kalen’s. “Don’t be afraid, my husband,” she whispered. “It will be all right. I promise you.”

\* \* \* \*

Kalen’s eyes opened slowly. The headache had receded, for now. He could still feel a dull pain brewing in the back of his head, but it no longer felt as if his skull were ready to split open. He sat up, rubbing his temple, and blinked in surprise to see Keelie sitting beside his bed.

“Has the headache gone?” she asked.

“Yes.” For now, he added silently. He looked into her deep, clear green eyes. Such a strange expression. “What’s wrong?” he asked.

Keelie hesitated. “Amber told me,” she said quietly. “Everything.”

Kalen’s hands tightened on the covers. “Damn it,” he whispered.

“Kalen...” She reached out to touch his arm, feeling the tension in the muscles. “I want to help you.”

“You don’t understand,” he said. “You don’t know what a bond entails. You can’t comprehend how intimate it is, how much you would be giving up. You would regret it for the rest of your life.”

“Is it that terrible a thing?”

“For some, it is. She told you about Leara, too, I imagine?”

A small nod.

“Then you know what it can do to a person.”

“But Leara didn’t want it,” she said, her voice quiet and firm. “I am not Leara.”

“Amber told me the same thing,” Kalen muttered. He closed his eyes and pressed the heels of his hands against them. “You’re so young. And we hardly know each other.”

“If I could, I would have gotten to know you better before I committed to this. But we don’t have that sort of time. The headaches are getting worse and worse, aren’t they?” Her voice trembled. “I don’t want to see you in pain anymore.”

“And I don’t want a mate who has given herself to me out of pity,” said Kalen.

“Pity? Is that what you think?” She sounded genuinely surprised. “You are not a man to be pitied, Kalen Ashler. Wanting to help you is hardly the same.” She took one of his hands in both her own, lightly

stroking the back of it with her thumbs. “Won’t you let me? If you need a life-mate, it may as well be your wife.”

“My need doesn’t give me a claim on you,” he said.

“I know that!” Her hands tightened on his. “What do I have to do to make you understand? You aren’t forcing this on me. I’m offering it, freely. Do you think I’m such a child that I don’t know what I’m doing? That I’m not aware of the consequences?”

“I....”

She kissed him, hard, silencing him. His eyes widened as she pressed her soft, full mouth to his. She tasted clean and sweet. At first, he tried to pull away ... then, slowly, his arms surrounded her and he pulled her closer, crushing her firm breasts against his chest. One hand slid into her dark, silky hair as he deepened the kiss. Her body was warm and soft and supple against his. When their mouths finally separated, he pulled back slightly to look into her eyes. “Keelie,” he whispered, “are you sure?”

“I’m sure,” she whispered. She unbuttoned the top part of her dress, then took his wrist and brought his hand down to her left breast. Kalen stared down at it for a moment, feeling the round firmness of it in his hand, then squeezed lightly. Keelie let out a tiny moan.

The last of Kalen’s resistance was slipping away like water. He unbuttoned her dress the rest of the way and pulled it off, exposing her slim, naked body, the patch of dark, silky curls between her thighs. He started to

reach between her legs and hesitated. It had been so long since he had done this and Keelie was a virgin. What if he hurt her?

A small hand reached up to stroke his face. "I'm not made of glass," she said.

He felt his cheeks growing warm. Stars, he hadn't felt this awkward since his first time with Leara. Keelie was different, he told himself. But then, Leara had seemed willing, too. It was only after they bonded that he learned how resentful she was of the entire arrangement, how....

He forced his thoughts away from the past and lightly touched the plump mound between her silky, tanned thighs. A jolt of lust shot through him. Holding his breath, he slipped a finger into that tempting furrow. She was so wet ... so warm.

Keelie's eyes closed, her lips parting in pleasure. Encouraged, he carefully spread the lips of her sex, exposing her slick folds, stained a darker pink with desire. His cock, already hard and aching, seemed to grow even larger at the sight. He felt the primal need to take her, to bury himself in that tight sheath of flesh. But he forced himself to wait. This was Keelie's first time. He had to be careful, to be sure that she enjoyed it ... that she didn't regret it.

Keelie lay on her back, panting softly and aching with need. She had never been so hungry for anything in her life--but still there was the slightest flicker of fear. She opened her eyes and looked at him uncertainly. He surprised her by smiling, a mischievous, almost wicked smile.



He leaned down until his mouth was scarcely an inch from her wet, aroused flesh, and she shivered at the delicious warmth of his breath on her folds. Then her eyes opened wide when she felt the tip of his tongue probe her most sensitive place. As he held her lips open with his thumbs, his tongue swirled slowly around her pulsing clitoris, and for a moment, as dizziness swept over her, she thought she might actually faint with pleasure. His tongue continued to explore her folds, stroking slowly, always returning to that sensitive little bud of flesh ... until he carefully took it between his strong teeth, letting them graze its surface lightly, and Keelie let out a startled little moan.

She was so close ... all he had to do was touch her there, once more, and she would be in paradise. But instead, he withdrew. Keelie blinked pleasure-dazed eyes, trying to focus them, and she realized that he was undoing his belt. His pants slipped down to reveal his erection, and her eyes grew a little wider at the sight of it. Her tongue stole out to wet her lips. It was even larger than she'd imagined it. She wondered what it would be like to wrap her mouth around it, suck it, to do for him what he had done for her with his tongue ... but there was a place she wanted it even more. She opened her thighs wider, exposing herself fully.

His hands came to rest on her full aching breasts, squeezing, as he straddled her body. His gray eyes stared into her wide green ones, piercing their depths with that intent gaze, even as the tip of his cock came to rest against her virginity. There was an uncomfortable pressure, a momentary,

sharp pain, like a hard pinch, and then he was inside her, his hard flesh filling her soft, wet core. She let out a sharp gasp. Then he began to move inside her ... and a sweet, tingling warmth filled her middle, spreading slowly outward to every part of her body, into her fingertips and toes.

Even as he pushed deeper into her body, she felt something strange happening in her mind. Emotions and sensations that were not her own flowed into her, filling her. Kalen's need and passion, Kalen's pleasure. Was this the bond? Each thrust brought more of him into her mind. Memories that were not her own overwhelmed her, flooding her, a raging whirlpool of overlapping emotions and images. All the while, she was aware of his hard maleness pounding into her, again and again, bringing her ever closer to the brink of orgasm ... until at last, she felt his body stiffening atop hers, heard him draw in his breath sharply ... and then his hot seed filled her--so much of it! She felt it trickling into the secret depths of her body.

Afterwards, they lay together quietly. Keelie's head rested on Kalen's shoulder, her slim, sweat-damp body curled up in the circle of one arm. She could still feel him in her mind, though not quite as strongly now. Just a quiet presence, resting intimately inside her.

She had expected it to feel invasive, but it didn't. It was as if an empty place inside her mind and heart, a void she didn't even know was there, had been filled.

Kalen's gray eyes met hers. She smiled. He leaned down to kiss her, his mouth firm, yet velvet-soft. There was no need to speak. Their emotions

flowed between them, as naturally as if they had been bonded their whole lives. How could Leara have given this up? How could she have been afraid of it?

Kalen's warm hands moved over Keelie's body, moving beneath her to squeeze her round buttocks, then one hand slid upward to cup her breast. His thumb flicked over the nipple, which sprang to life, stiffening. Keelie felt Kalen's maleness stirring again--felt it, not through her skin, but through the bond. "I think I'm ready again," Kalen whispered. "Are you?"

"So soon?" she teased ... but fresh wetness was already seeping from her, tickling her folds.

Kalen pinched her hard nipple, rolling it between a thumb and forefinger. He pushed her to the bed, straddling her as his cock slid into her warm, ready opening, filling her again.

\* \* \* \*

The day was warm and bright, the orange Rian sky streaked with pinkish clouds. A gentle breeze moved through the leaves of the forest, and they whispered together, like children telling secrets.

In a small clearing, surrounded by a ring of round, white stones, Kalen knelt before Leara's grave. The marble tombstone was carved with a border of delicate snow-lilies. The engraving read simply, LEARA T'RIN,

BELOVED DAUGHTER AND WIFE. Kalen laid a bouquet of lilies on the grave and straightened.

For years, he had been visiting the grave regularly, offering prayers or flowers. This would be his last visit. He had to let his past go.

He had never blamed her for what she did. The bond between himself and Leara had been a terrible mistake. But it was only recently that he had learned to stop blaming himself. Leara had freed herself from him when she took her own life, but he had been clinging to the memory of her for years, torturing himself, unwilling to take another mate, not just because of the risk, but because he'd believed that he deserved the pain.

No more.

"Good-bye," he whispered, and touched the gravestone lightly. He stood and walked to the edge of the cemetery where Keelie was waiting. He took her hand. "Let's go."

She nodded and gave his hand a light squeeze. He felt the gentle warmth of her concern at the edge of his mind and smiled at her. "I'm all right," he said quietly. For nearly the first time since Leara's death he meant the words. "It still hurts. But it's a cleaner hurt now."

"And no more headaches?"

He smiled. "No more headaches." He was just beginning to understand how much that meant ... a life without pain. A life without the threat of insanity hanging over him like a dark cloud. He hadn't realized just how resigned to his fate he had become, before Keelie had come into his

life. She had changed so much in such a short time, this copper-skinned beauty, with her vivid, leaf-green eyes and gentle smile. She had rescued him from the cold, lonely hell to which he'd confined himself, opened up the doors to his heart and let in the light.

He held her hand firmly as they left the forest and walked up the stretch of pale beach, toward Ashler House.

The End