



# Ferals' Legacy: SHADOW AND BETRAYAL

By  
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This is a work of fiction. All characters, events, and places are of the author's imagination and not to be confused with fact. Any resemblance to living persons or events is merely coincidence.

To God for His gift of a vivid imagination, my Momommie for her legacy of the love of romance novels, and to my Mom for all of her help and support.

For the music of Trans-Siberian Orchestra and Josh Groban for providing inspiration in the writing of this novel.

## Chapter One

## Planet Zy-Gan, Near the Kingdom of Cymbaline

Dori felt compelled to go outside, but couldn't explain her reasoning behind such a notion. Night had fallen and, not only that, rain poured down over the land in near sheets, drenching everything in its path. She didn't like being rained on, and her guardians, the Hiroke, had never allowed her any sort of exploration outside after night had fallen. Even with the scanners monitoring the land and surrounding forest, along with the presence of the guards, her safety couldn't be guaranteed.

Danger grew at night and she knew she was safer inside than out, as all Feral-borns avoided this place. Much as this upset her on one level, it comforted her at the same time. She couldn't be attacked or captured by anyone if they couldn't get in.

Still, she felt an odd compulsion to go outside and allowed it to guide her to just beyond the front door. She paused beneath the awning to try and somehow stay dry. The wind didn't help by blowing some of the rain her way. Looking out over the dark land, she tried in vain to find what had drawn her out here. Nothing presented itself, but she couldn't bring herself to go back inside just yet.

Closing her eyes, she listened to the symphony of the rain and the myriad of sounds it made. A blend making for an interesting choir of music to her, tempting her to stay outside a little longer.

As she listened, Dori began to hum, lending her voice to the sound of nature about her. She hummed a lullaby from her childhood as it just felt right to share this song with nature as it shared its own lullaby with her through the rain.

Her parents had used the lullaby she now hummed to soothe her fears and help relax her into sleep. That was a time before the Tatic invaded Citron and destroyed the village and its people. She was one of only a few survivors of the attack. Her sister, Rhiana, only two years older, survived the genocidal attack on Citron, as well--the only other survivor of her family. Psychic, familial bonds, forged when she was born, to her parents and brothers shattered as they died, making the attack worse for her. It left only the one she had to her sister their parents had forged between them so the two could find each other when it became essential. Dori didn't know if her sister still lived or not though, having never found her again after the tragedy.

Dori pushed away the nightmare memory, concentrating only on the sweet lullaby and the tender memories it conjured up. Her favorite being the two of them alternating in their duties of who used it to calm her and Rhiana to sleep. It felt strange it felt so right for her hum *this* lullaby, not any other song she knew. She let herself do so as it allowed her some chance of peace. It let her remember the safe haven it had granted her with her parents so long ago. They lived again every time she remembered and sang the lullaby.

The lullaby had been her only solace when she'd been brought here from Citron's

ashes by the Hiroke. Placed in isolation to ensure none of the Tatic's poisons used in their attacks came with her, the song was her only company. Terrified of the Hiroke from her parents' warnings, she had not even let her savior, Etherson, come anywhere near to try to help soothe her fears. She attacked any who tried to before finally realizing they meant to help her, not harm her.

They had not endeared themselves in attempts to try and befriend her in the way they tested her to ensure her health. It only made her wish to hide from them whenever they came near and be coaxed out with food or toys, like some animal.

She understood now why they had been so careful with her. Before, she'd been a scared little girl, horrified by living nightmares, away from all she knew. And no one of her own kind to keep her company made the agony all the worse. The closest she'd come to having a Zyan, or even a Ganjan, near her were toys cast in their image.

Though happy and well-cared for, she had grown weary of having only the Hiroke and the few Delavan working for them, to call her friends. The Hiroke talked all science, eventually giving her a headache in how complicated those conversations became. And the Delavan were too busy assisting the Hiroke everywhere else to stay with her for long periods of time.

The need for a true companion remained her deepest, most painful wound. It mattered little of how many friends were around her. The ache for a companion still lurked to attack her when she least expected it. A companion who didn't have to rush off on some emergency. Or to some duty that would keep them away from her the rest of the day. She wanted to know the pleasures she had only begun to explore due to one stupid mistake in her past.

Dori's thoughts screeched to a halt as a dark shape staggered forward from the dense brush. She fell silent, afraid of this creature approaching the compound. No, toward *her*. She tried to sense who and what approached, but the pain and rage pouring off it repelled her. Lightning lit the creature's features and she could make out the feline appearance of a Zyan male, but little else. The knowledge that it was a Zyan only escalated her fear as she considered why he would be coming here. The way he moved suggested at the extent of his injuries, reminding her of what she had felt from him only moments ago. It heightened her fear as all Feral-borns, male *or* female, were most dangerous when injured and would attack *anyone*, friend or foe alike.

The Zyan growled, and she could sense his anger directed itself at her silence. Her own fear kept her mute, preventing her from giving him what he wanted. Images of his attacking her chased the lullaby far out of her grasp. He moved forward, now intent on seeking her out. Whether to attack her for denying him, or encourage her to continue her song, Dori wasn't too sure she wished to find out.

She caught the scent of blood and she barely resisted running. With his injuries and the fact that she had become his target, it made the instinct all the harder to resist. The Zyan lifted his head to stare at her and Dori felt rooted to the spot by the anger she could sense from him at her continued silence.

*Mine.*

The sound of the soft-timbered voice in her mind made her jump in alarm. A growl of claim and a caress in one, it sent heat through her, collecting low in her belly.

Her fear melted away, leaving her feeling compelled to go to him. Of its own accord, her body moved forward till she stood at the end of the awning. She watched the Zyan's approach, concern filling her as she noted his uneven movements. In obvious pain, the strong odor of blood she scented on him the rain couldn't mask hinted at how bad the injuries were.

She again felt the need to flee even as the need to go to him tried to take her over, just to make sure he would live. He growled again, the reprimand at her wishes feeling like a caress to lure her to stay in the same swing.

*Mine!* He sent the word again, this time stronger and even more compelling than before.

She felt the need to go to him again, the sensation growing the longer she watched him, or to bare her breasts in an act of pure naughtiness and lure him to her. *That* impulse proved hardest to resist and she wondered if he was compelling her to do so. His reasons for being here helped her resistance, keeping her from going to him. She needed to be cautious now. She didn't need to endanger all here because of her curiosity.

Flashes of lightning granted her the briefest of glimpses of his face since he wasn't close enough for the lights of the compound to illuminate his features any better. The lightning gave him a creepy appearance, though he still proved compelling to her at the same time. Pain twisting his face added to the creepiness of his features—Dori hoped since he made her feel very strange and she did not want to feel this way toward a monster.

The Zyan's approach must have been picked up by the scanners, as well, since she heard the rush of the patrol guards coming her way. She panicked when she saw the male collapse just as security got to him, and she watched as two of them picked him up and carried him toward her. As they drew closer, she moved to meet them halfway, ignoring the guard rushing past her till his arms seized her from behind around the middle, dragging her back.

"No!" she cried, a clap of thunder punctuating her pain. She felt drawn to this male, though she could not explain why, even to herself. She knew only that she *had* to touch him, to feel the life in his body to assure herself he still lived. Till then, her soul wept at the thought of him being already gone.

She needed to feel the life flowing just beneath his skin. Her hands even tried to reach out toward the approaching guards to let even the briefest glide over his flesh tell her something about how strong life flowed through him. Their sense of touch was sharp enough they could feel the very flow of blood in the briefest of glides over a blood vessel. A talent they used in finding the best place to attack an enemy, or when pleasuring a lover, since following the strongest bloodflow could be quite a fun game, she remembered reading. The instinct to feel his life screamed at her since her emotions blocked her from feeling it, clogged her mind, chasing off her common sense.

"You must let him be healed first, Dori," the guard holding her soothed. "He lives, but may not live much longer if we delay. Please allow us this."

Dori felt water on her face, what she thought to be rain alone, before realizing the 'rain' was tears, tears of pain over a man she knew nothing about. She knew only that someone had injured him mortally, from the look of him, and every delay now stole away

another precious moment of his life.

"Save him for me," she whispered, watching the guards moving closer to her with their burden. Her eyes remained on the Zyan the entire time, but she could make out very little. His dark hair, plastered across his face, obscured it from view. She felt a strange flash of anger at being denied a glimpse of his face and chastized herself for such a stupid reaction in so serious a situation.

He wore dark clothing, which were in disgrace from whatever had brought him here. It did little to soothe her as she considered what could have happened to him. She could sense his pain as she tried to force her own emotions to still. The briefest touch of it made her head feel ready to explode and forced her to close her mind again to keep from screaming. How he made it this far in such pain, she couldn't even guess.

Unbidden, images of the war and Citron's falling in flames filled her mind, along with visions of what might have happened to this Zyan. She willed away the images, needing to stay together mentally if she wanted to help him somehow and not make a scene that would delay his being treated. Through sheer force of will, she caged her past away, keeping it from filling her mind.

"Please save him," she whispered again to the guard holding her. She needed someone to tell her hope remained for this male, or she knew her past nightmares would claim her and she *would* fall apart.

"We will do our best," the guard said.

Dori would not allow herself to be swayed in her need for the Zyan to live until he came to her alive and well. The first Feral-born she had seen since her the loss of her pride-clan, she refused to let him die if she had a say in the matter.

As the guards drew closer to the compound, Dori tried to move closer to the male, despite the grip of the one holding her. His grip tightened and she gave a sharp hiss of anger at his denying her this wish.

"Calm, Dori," he soothed her. "We won't harm him unless he proves to be a danger to us all."

"I want to see him up close," she said. She wouldn't tell him the Zyan had spoken to her in her mind. They might kill him as a means of protecting her. Nothing she might say afterward would prevent it with as protective as they were of her.

"I will speak to Etherson for you, but *after* the healer sees to the Zyan, all right?"

"All right." She could trust the guard to keep his word to her on this. He would never lie to her about something like this.

"You should go back inside," the guard said. "Now is not a good time for outside explorations."

Dori let the calm she could feel the guard straining to hold onto guide her back to rational thought. She could feel the instinct to go ensure no other Zyan were out in the storm and knew it was *not* a good idea. If there *were* anymore out there, and they did the same to her as this one had, she would endanger everyone here.

She finally allowed herself to be led back inside and headed for her room when the guard released her. She wanted to go after the guards as they took the Zyan to the medical bay, but she knew they were right in keeping her away from him. The male needed to be seen by Brennan first as the Zyan could have been a danger to her, making

her risk death in such a foolhardy act.

She also wanted a warm bath to chase away the chill of the storm now manifesting in her. Strange. With the male focusing all her attention, the cold of the storm hadn't registered in her until he was taken away by the guards. Very strange indeed.



## Chapter Two

“Watch out! He’s aw--!”

Dori heard the cry just as a burst of rage flared across her mind. She then heard the uncanny sound of a pulse rifle blast, followed by the disturbing sounds of pain. Pain she knew to be the guards, not the Zyan. When she heard a fierce growl coming her way, she froze. He now targeted *her* and with his sense of smell he could find her with relative ease.

She turned around in time to see him down the corridor from her, decisive intent filling his being. Her pulse began to race and she tasted the bitter flavor of terror as he studied her with rage-filled eyes.

Now that she could see him in the light, Dori gaped at his darkly sensual features. He wasn’t at all creepy in appearance. She scolded herself for thinking that of him, though the lightning had not done a very good job of showing his true looks to her.

Standing well over six feet in height and strongly built, he made for a very imposing presence. His long, brown hair, now out of his face, hung to below his broad shoulders, ending in a slight curl where water dripped to the floor. Smoothed back out of a beautifully attractive face with strong features, it made Dori shiver with sudden want. But his dark, expressive eyes drew her most--eyes which grew all the darker as pure desire rose to claim him, chasing away some of his lethal rage. The feline pupils widened and told her of just where his thoughts centered in his study of her.

The very air about him felt charged with energy. An ‘aura’ unique to all Feral-borns due to their psionic ability. It varied in strength for each Ganjan and Zyan and was different for each one, depending on how strong they were in their mental talents. Some could be strong enough to send a person sensitive to it staggering.

She could tell little about the strength of his as weak as his wounds had left him. What she *could* feel of his dimming aura drew her to him, even as it warned her to be wary of him at the same time.

In the harsh light of the corridor, she could also see some of his wounds--wounds from a pride-clan challenge, if she recalled from what little she had learned of her people correctly. An education she now regretted ending, despite the nightmares it had caused even as she read them.

The male must have been in a fight with another Zyan or Ganjan for control of his pride-clan and lost, only to be exiled as his punishment. From the feel of the fury radiating off of him, he must have been the pride-clan leader and lost to a stronger or craftier male.

Instead of fleeing as she should have, Dori remained where she stood. She let the Zyan study her, resisting pressing the panic button on her comm box at her side, knowing he could kill her before security could get to her. The thought did little to help her feel any better about this situation, forcing her to fight her own instincts to stay put.

The Zyan simply studied her, not moving. She began to realize the male was waiting for *her* to make the next move. Even in his injured state, he seemed to know frightening her would only make this worse for them both. She would run and he'd most likely kill her and, hopefully, regret it later.

Again the impulse to bare her breasts to him to tempt him into approaching her filled her mind. And again, she resisted it, not knowing where it originated and not caring either way. She was *not* about to do such a thing before this male, no matter *how* attractive she found him.

Instead, she held out a hand to him, encouraging him to approach. She resisted every thought in her mind, including why the guards weren't coming after him. If she could get him to come to her, he would be calm. Enough for her to try and get him help before his wounds or infection from them killed him.

"I won't hurt you," she assured him. "I wish to help you." She hoped he believed her and didn't think this a trap and attack her. He must have knocked out the guards, she knew, but willed the thought away and prayed he wouldn't do the same to her.

The Zyan purred, his scowl becoming a smile as he moved forward. He had to use the wall for support, leaving blood trails along it and the floor as he did, an unsettling reminder of how he came to be here. The blood proved very hard to ignore, but the need to help him aided her in blotting it out of her focus.

As he moved, Dori felt another more unusual impulse. She felt the need to explore the delectable details of his face with her fingers, then her mouth. This impulse became the hardest to resist as he had a very attractive face that just invited her touch. He also had a body she knew would be just as tempting for her to explore in the exact same way.

This wasn't good. Where had her rational thoughts gone now that she needed them? If he sent those ideas to her, she wanted to order him to stop. She resisted as fury on his face silenced her wishes. She did not want to fight with him. Even injured, the male could no doubt do her serious harm. And she really didn't wish to injure him anymore than someone already had.

He moved to her and she yelped when he grabbed her hand, only to take her down to the floor with him when his knees buckled. She felt him lower into the cradle of her arms, but didn't resist, knowing any on her part could prove disastrous. A purr rumbled in his chest in his need for a gentle touch, even as he lost the battle to stay conscious.

Dori drew him into her lap as best she could as he proved too heavy for her to move on her own. She would need help in both moving him and having his wounds seen to. Her only hope centered on it not being too late for him already.

The Zyan came to again, fighting his way back to consciousness before she could make a grab for her comm box. She felt more determined to calm him as sudden panic filled him as he assessed his situation. His grip on her tightened and she forced herself to remain still so she wouldn't set him off.

"Where ...?" he asked, his voice trailing off in his growing weakness.

"You--you're safe," Dori said. She stopped herself from telling him too much, wanting him to only know he was safe. She didn't want to tell him the whole truth, as the knowledge could upset him. Angry as he felt to her already, it could set off an attack she would feel the brunt of before he freed himself of her grip. She stroked his hair in a

soothing manner, trying to ignore the occasional drip of his blood hitting her exposed flesh. His body calmed with her touch and his purr deepened, taking on a sound of pleasure, instead of his desperate wish for a gentle touch. "There are those here who can tend your wounds better than I can," she went on, sensing the guards now looking for her and this male. "Will you allow their attention?"

The Zyan growled, his grip tightening on her. She could sense that he wanted *her* touching him, not someone he hadn't chosen. The knowledge made her feel better about his thoughts toward her, but she couldn't let him convince her to tend to him on her own. He'd die if she did. No one else could calm him now as closed to all others as he felt to her. Still, she knew he needed someone more skilled to tend him as calm alone wouldn't heal his serious wounds.

"I will stay with you," she promised. It felt too important she not ignore his plight. As if his very life hinged on her decision now. If she ignored him, she knew he would never cooperate with anyone else here. He would die if she dared to ignore him and his demands of now. "I promise not to leave you," she added.

"Then I will allow this," he said.

"Thank you." She gave into the impulse to press a kiss to his wet hair, feeling his fingers curl against her in his delight. He began to purr again as she returned to stroking the wet locks, tension in his body melting away further under her touch.

The deep, compelling sound of his voice made her shiver. Dori shook off the allure of his voice and activated the panic alert on her comm box so the guards would know where to find her. It allowed Etherson to summon her as needed without having to search the whole of the compound for her. It also let her alert security if she got herself into trouble, acting as a beacon for them to locate her with ease.

Several guards filled the corridor on either side of them, rushing forward at the sight of the Zyan male with Dori. They paused a good distance away from the pair when the male gave a warning growl, sensing their approach. Dori could feel anger and pain from some and knew those who had been attacked by this male were in the group. She hoped they would forgive her for getting them attacked. Forgiving herself for *causing* it would take a lot longer for her.

"He's hurt," she said, spotting Etherson in the group. "Please help him." She directed her request to him alone, as he had ultimate say in this.

The Hiroke's eyes moved from her to the grip the Zyan had on her. He looked back to her and nodded before turning to the guards. "Have them both taken to the medical bay and ensure that she is where he can see her at all times or you will never be able to control him," he said.

Dori felt the odd impulse to hiss at the approaching guards. An innate need to protect this male from being taken away from her. She managed to subdue the odd reaction before it could overtake her, but it wasn't easy. The need to safeguard the Zyan fell to the wayside when she began to realize he no longer purred.

His silence upset her, especially when she felt him tensing against her. He stopped purring the moment the security guards and Etherson had joined her. It warned her of the growing danger she faced in ignoring him and how close he drew to attacking all about him.

“Calm,” she soothed. “I’m here. They are only going to take you to where Brennan, the healer, is as I don’t have the knowledge needed to heal you.” She felt him calm against her, though he didn’t purr. His refusal to purr bothered her as it showed her failure to help reassure him. The only thing bothering her more was how to get him *to* Brennan without his attacking the guards and killing them or himself. “Can you walk?” she added. Would he trust the guards to carry him if he couldn’t?

“Not well,” he replied, obviously calmed by her voice and touch.

“Let these men assist you then, please? They won’t harm you and will take you to the healer.”

“They may.”

Dori knew he only allowed this as he trusted her to not allow him to be harmed. She knew, instinctively, that he would do worse than what was done to him as penance if she broke that trust. It wasn’t a pleasant thought, but there wasn’t a way around it. He’d demand something in return she wasn’t sure she could give him, if she tried to supercede that response.

Only when he gave his permission did the guards move to help him up and down the corridor. Even in his weakened state, Dori knew he would use every last bit of his strength to take as many of them with him in death, unless she could prevent it. In his place, she would do the same. She let that knowledge guide her, allowing it to tell her how to proceed with him.

Though awkward, they managed to let the male maintain a grip on her wrist as they carried him to the medical bay. So long as he could feel her wrist in his hand, he would stay calm, making them very careful in moving him.

The Zyan only released her when they entered the medical bay, allowing the guards to usher him toward an exam table. He did so with great reluctance as he wanted her alone to touch him—to tend his wounds.

Dori could feel the anger at his being denied his chosen healer and she felt her heart break for him. He didn’t understand she *couldn’t* give him what he wanted without risking killing him in the process. She didn’t like what she felt from the Zyan and his thoughts about what he would go through here. He felt that Brennan and the other Hiroke would use this chance to experiment on him or steal his DNA for horrible causes.

She wanted to explain to him that the Hiroke weren’t like that, but knew he wouldn’t believe her. It had taken her a long time to trust any of the Hiroke when she’d been brought here years ago. Their people were raised to not trust the scientists. It was a behavior not easily dismissed.

\* \* \* \*

“Stop!”

The guards jerked back from the Zyan at Dori’s order. She could feel him tensing again as they attempted to help him up onto the bed and knew their touch and closeness aggravated him. He wanted none of them near him and ready to attack the whole lot of them if she didn’t intervene.

Dori moved to before the volatile male, reaching out a gentle hand to brush some rain slick hair back from his face. He growled, but allowed her touch when his eyes focused on her. Though she tried to remain calm, she knew his cooperation was tenuous

at best. She needed him to focus on something more than rage if she wished to keep him from making his wounds any worse. And she was the only thing at all soothing to him, forcing her to put herself in great personal risk to protect everyone here.

"I need you to cooperate for Brennan," she whispered, her voice refusing to go any louder. "You are to be healed, not tortured, nor experimented on."

Merrick gave her a curt nod and pulled himself up onto the exam bed. He hissed at the answering pain the movement caused him, but would let none of the guards to touch him in his wounded state. If any other here said this female's words of promise to him, he would never have believed them. She seemed so sincere in her words, he would grant her the benefit of his cooperation. Until she proved a liar and earned his wrath as punishment. Or truthful and earned pleasures untold as reward.

"Stay where I can see you." It would be his only order to her. If she stayed in the room, he knew he would be at peace. His mind had already marked her for his passions in the corridor, even as he committed her scent to memory. The thought of what they would share later eased his boiling rage, replacing it with a growing desire. "Even if I am to sleep, stay near to me."

He wouldn't be able to sense her if he were asleep, of course, but it would grant the little female the chance to learn his face and his scent. He knew, though, she wouldn't place any sort of mental tag on him as he had her. Females went by scent memory or by the allure of a male's prowess in battle. Something leading each male to strive to keep her attention on their lands.

More often than not, his wishes to keep her full attention led to battles between males when her scent lured in rivals. The winner would then face pleasures of the flesh from her, even as she healed him. Losers sometimes won her favor over the winner if his prowess pleased her more than the other. Irritating for the winner, but nonetheless an accepted aggravation.

"I'll stay here unless I'm forced to leave," she said. She hoped he accepted her condition as this strained her to her limits in resisting her instincts and fight against her past.

Merrick could accept that. Cloistered here as a 'guest' of the Hiroke, she must not have been all that use to blood and the results of domination battles in pride-clans.

"Agreeable," he said. He could feel her spirit straining to its breaking point for him and wouldn't harm her by pushing her any further.

"I will need to sedate you," the healer, a Hiroke as Merrick thought, said as he moved to stand by the bed.

Merrick turned to look at him. "Don't trust me?" He couldn't resist his tease. Even injured and in this much pain, he couldn't turn aside his need to harass his 'captors'.

"Awake and this injured, I would be fool if I did."

The grin deepened. "Good." He turned and laid down on the bed, hissing at the burning stick to his neck as the injector drugged him with the sedative. Turning his head to the side, he took the Zyan female's image in so she would be the last thought he had should he never awaken.

## Chapter Three

When she caught sight of Etherson in the outer chamber of the medial bay, Dori rushed over to him. She needed to speak to him on the Zyan male if she wished to have her chance to be face-to-face with him when he woke. She also desperately needed an escape route as the Zyan's injured state was bringing back to her Citron's fall. Much longer in his presence, only able to see his injuries and unable to do anything else for him, she would crumble.

"What will happen to him?" she asked.

"He will be seen to, his injuries healed as I requested," he said, turning his full attention on her. "No experiments or sample collecting will be done without his permission, if that is your fear."

"Then what?" She tried to stifle the desperate need to demand the answers to all of her questions and do this in a sane, calm manner. Her desperation now puzzled her, even as it strengthened her at the same time. She never had been this demanding on anything. Not to the point where she risked violence should she not like the answers Etherson gave her.

"If he is no danger to those outside, he will be set free to continue on his way."

*No!* Dori clenched her teeth and pressed her lips together to keep from screaming her protest aloud. She didn't know why it felt so important the Zyan remain here, but she wanted to scream it from the top of the compound she wanted him here. "I would like to see him before then," she said, managing to find stability.

"I know you've had no contact with another Zyan or Ganjan since--"

"That's not my reason!" Dori closed her eyes and drew in several deep breaths, feeling Etherson's concern rising. She opened her eyes again and saw his concerned ones watching her. An odd look on the gray-skinned race, whose natural, deeply grooved face gave them a permanent, sinister appearance. "Please," she said in as even a voice as she could manage. "I would like to see him before you send him away."

The Hiroke remained silent for a long moment, and she willed herself to not try to read his thoughts. A moot point as their minds were too complex to be read with any ease. Even the strongest telepath could get hopelessly lost in the levels of their minds and risk never finding their way back out again.

"I will see what I can do," he said at last. "I want you to return to your quarters as you've risked yourself enough this night."

Dori nodded to him, not wishing to push her luck now. While she wanted to go back to the Zyan, she knew she needed to let Brennan tend to him first. He could still be a danger to her and she would never know until it was too late.

As she left the medical bay, she spied the guards from outside--the ones attacked by the Zyan before he came after her. They glanced her way and she bowed her head to them in apology. The trio smiled and nodded to her when she looked their way again.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"You didn't do this, Dori," one guard said. "And we're fine, just a little bruised."

"I brought him here--I drew him here." She knew she was to blame for the attack as she had lured him in with her humming.

"We will heal. Now, go and do as you've been told before you make yourself sick with your worry and upset."

Dori nodded to them and finally made her way toward her own chambers. She needed to get away from here and away from the Zyan, despite her promise to stay till he woke. His terrible wounds hindered her ability to follow through on his order. Even two decades later, the rips in her soul still lingered, attacking her even now without mercy.

The wounds he had suffered filled her mind with the images of her slaughtered pride-clan. She squelched the thoughts before they went too far. He still lived and *would* recover from this attack. She reminded herself of that and how she *would* see him again when he woke.

Dori hated herself for failing to follow through on her word to the man in the medical bay. She managed to stay till he had been sedated so she wouldn't show herself as complete coward before him in his time of need. Her response didn't matter in the face of her failure. She still broke her promise and that haunted her, though it wasn't strong enough to force her to go back. She wasn't sure anything *could* be strong enough to outshine her memory of Citron's fall and all of her losses.

The Tatic were now embroiled in their own multi-faction civil war, one of the many they'd had in their history. A war that helped her to not dwell on their attacks on all of the Feral System. It helped her not think of them as a looming threat in any case. Never had she been more thankful for a war than she felt now. The Ganjan and the Zyan needed time to prepare themselves for another potential invasion by those demons. And to improve further on the space vehicle designs they'd captured and developed over the course of their wars with the Tatic. The gods chose this as their intervention to allow them their chance. Her only hope was that none were squandering it.

\* \* \* \*

Merrick awoke to the scent of things cleaned within an inch of their lives, and the sound of scanners and other equipment. He must have been in some sort of medical bay. Well, at least he was alive. When he breathed in, disappointment filled him when he didn't scent the female from before anywhere near him. The one who lured him in so well with her sweet voice and gentle touch on his mind.

Had she been a dream? Pain as he never knew before filled him at the very idea. His own mind betrayed him now. The only thing he could not gain vengeance on now turned against him. It even plagued him with memories of how she smelled and sounded.

When he opened his eyes, he saw Hiroke design above him and growled. He threw himself up into a seated position, wincing at the answering pain in his body when he did. His head swam, unappreciative of his movements.

"You need to rest more," a young Hiroke man, an intern, said in a soothing voice. "You are still healing."

"I am no one's experiment!" Merrick snarled. He would kill any who tried, even this young Hiroke, if they tried to make him some specimen of theirs. Every instinct he

had demanded he rip through everyone here and get back to where he felt safe. An insane voice within him told him he was safe *here*, tempering the instincts calling for blood. They also made him a little ill as they each fought for dominance.

The intern looked confused by his words. No, by his *language*. In his fury, Merrick had spoken in Zyan. And this fool didn't appear to understand him.

"I apologize, but I am still learning your language," the intern said. "You are safe here. None will harm you." He hesitated at the Zyan's continued glare and non-response. "Do you understand my words?"

Merrick nodded, allowing the Hiroke that much. "Stay away from me," he hissed in the common language of the traveler's guild. A language created to allow for ease of communications between races and their planets.

"I need to take some scans of you. I *must* be allowed to approach you."

"You will regret ignoring me, if you dare." Merrick's eyes narrowed when the intern approached him anyway. Fool.

He struck out with his foot as the Hiroke drew closer. His kick caught the male in the chest, throwing him backward so his head slammed against a bed as he fell. Just as Merrick moved to leap onto the intern, a painful force of energy tore across his chest, throwing him back onto the bed on his back, knocking the air from his lungs from the dual impact.

The healer, Brennan, moved into view, holding the control device for the restraining field just as Merrick managed to draw in a breath again. He could only stare at the healer in shock, taken by complete surprise by this capture. The Hiroke glared at him, but said nothing as he turned to see to the younger male on the floor.

"He'll live," Merrick growled, finding his voice as well as his anger. He turned his head to look over at the healer and his newest patient.

"You had best hope so," the healer said, glancing back at him. He turned to face the unconscious intern on the floor, pulling a hand scanner from his pocket to check for breaks before risking moving the male.

Growling, Merrick turned away. He could feel and hear the field just above him and it played havoc with his senses. His psionics could go past the field easily enough, but he couldn't do much as knocking out Brennan would only endanger a male he no longer wished to attack. Away from him, the intern was safe as Merrick could suppress the instinctive need to attack everyone here. He could focus on trying to figure out why he felt so safe here, even as he still wished to attack all here at the same time.

The healer could deal with the fallen Hiroke youth. Merrick would concentrate on calming down as he still felt very weak. Though he needed a much better place than here. He also needed a female to focus his thoughts on something pleasant. Thinking of the Hiroke all around, and especially the Ganjan usurper, Tark, would only raise his stress and slow his recovery further.

If he were stronger and less pained by his attack and journey here, he might have been able to reach the female he remembered encountering. If she even existed. The glum thought made ache within. He couldn't tell himself with any truth if the women were real or not. Or a mere creation of the gods meant to grant him a bit of fighting chance to live.

The thought filled him with pain, but Merrick would accept her as being some



kind of divine intervention meant to save him a little while longer. He would accept any help granted him to allow him the chance for his revenge on Tark and those who had betrayed him. Even the Hiroke's. Tark needed to be stopped before he destroyed more lives. Before he endangered all of the kings' lives.

The rite of challenge was meant to be a one on one attack. In Merrick's case, one between the chieftan and a challenger. In Tark's using a trio of kinsmen to win the fight, he'd violated the sacred act. Connected to the Realm of Spirits through the death of one of the challengers, Pazdar, the God of the Underworld would not be pleased. He could cage his son, Celenis, for a time and do something like this, granting the fallen chieftan a chance at redemption.

Merrick hoped it was something more than that this twist in his fate offered him. The Messenger of Death would come the moment his father released him and wouldn't leave easily. Celenis would only leave if certain Merrick wasn't going to drop dead as well when his challenger died.

\* \* \* \*

Dori strove to relax in her bath, but it proved impossible. No matter how hard she tried, all of her thoughts kept returning to the Zyan male and why he had come here and in the state he'd arrived in. More than that, what he could do to her *while* here.

"Stop thinking about it!" she ordered herself, her voice fierce and determined. Her body's, however, became *more* determined she make up a list of everything she could do to the Zyan male.

She groaned and slipped lower into the warm water, realizing now she should have set the pool for cool, instead of warm. This setting only drew on her need to be touched and taken by the Zyan.

Giving a sound of disgust, Dori rose from the traitorous water and got out of the pool, moving to dry off. She wanted to see the Zyan again. To satisfy her curiosity about him so he would stop haunting her. He could go on his merry way, and she would be allowed to let her life would return to normal once more.

Dori let out a loud sound of frustration, resisting the urge to reach up and pull at her hair. In her state, she risked yanking it right out of her head. The bath hadn't helped at all. While it had warmed her from the chill of the night air, the natural, moving current of the water proved an attack on her overly sensitive skin, feeling like the tender caress of a lover.

This was hopeless. Absolutely hopeless.

She needed to visit Etherson before barging in on the Zyan. Her hormones may have been going crazy in her, but she recognized *that* much about the situation. He needed to know of her wish to visit their guest. And she needed to know if it was even a safe thing for her to do. The guards must have told him of her wishes by now, but she needed to learn his reply face-to-face. He needed to see just her determination to see the Zyan if she had any hope of ever seeing him before Etherson made him leave here.

*I want to see him now!* her body screamed even as she pulled on a dress and slipped on her sandals.

Dori quickened her pace toward her guardian's office. She needed to see him first, then she could go see the Zyan. That finally appeased the demands of her body. More or

less.

## Chapter Four

"I'm giving the Zyan male a clean bill of health," the healer said. He allowed his tone to reflect his opinion of their *guest*. The Zyan needed to go. The farther away the better. Into Zalasar's Forge would have been his choice as the Zyan gave him the creeps in how he watched him as he worked. Almost seeking a weakness to be used to his advantage. The volcano and his patient had much in common; they both scared him in what they could do if given the chance.

"I don't think we should be in such a rush to be rid of him so soon." Etherson said.

Brennan raised a brow. "Do you propose we allow him to stay here?" he asked, indignant. He hid his unease with difficulty. Etherson made it easier with how he argued in favor of the insane path.

"I think he may fight any attempt to make him leave if Dori isn't with him."

This development didn't surprise Brennan at all, knowing the way injured Zyan males became around females. It did little to soothe him as there was only *one* female here the Zyan had shown interest in. And he wasn't so sure how the male would act now in being denied her presence. "So long as he behaves himself and causes us no trouble."

"Unless we interfere with him and Dori, I doubt we will have much trouble where the male is concerned."

"You doubt we'll have much trouble? That feline beast is a menace. Anyone he doesn't want near him, he attacks. He will need to be sedated if he keeps this up." Why he hadn't put the male back to sleep when the study he was under began to bother him, Brennan would never know.

\* \* \* \*

This didn't surprise Etherson one bit. It sounded pretty normal to him. When injured, the danger for anyone around a Zyan rose. However, a male would choose one near them to tend their wounds they felt trustworthy. The normal case being a female they desired to play with once healed. Usually *as* they were healed.

Despite the seriousness of this situation, Etherson couldn't help wondering how this would play out as Dori hadn't been the one to tend the Zyan. Would he still seek her for play now that his wounds had been healed? Or would he cast her aside and seek another to tend to his body's demands, seeing her as just a female who ignored him in his pain? And would he seek some other to tend to his desires now?

"I had to put him in a restraining field to make him stay put," the healer went on, drawing Etherson's attention. "He nearly crippled my intern when Essa tried to scan him." Okay, the male had only *injured* the boy, but *still* it had been the Zyan's intent. The look on the Zyan's face made for a clear picture of his plans had he have gotten hold of Essa.

"There's your problem: your intern is male *and* a Hiroke," Etherson pointed out.

“The Zyan’s memories are probably all a jumble due to his injuries and blood loss. All he knows is the Hiroke found him while injured and might even think we captured him. How would you react if you were a Zyan and in his position?”

Brennan sighed and inclined his head in understanding. “The same, I suppose.”

“Dori’s presence drew him here, the guards have told me. He knows, in the back of his mind, there is a female Zyan here and will demand no less than her presence to soothe him.”

“In his state, he may kill her before he realizes she *is* Zyan. It might be best to keep them apart till he recovers his senses more.” *Far* apart; Brennan wanted the Zyan male to leave. The Feral-borns had it in their heads the Hiroke were a bunch of sadistic, emotionless scientists out to steal their DNA. Dori almost bit him her first day here before he was able to convince the three-year-old otherwise. He didn’t think his patient would be as easy to convince. He wouldn’t have Etherson preventing the attack this time.

“I don’t agree. It may be better to allow them near one another. Dori has never made such an impassioned plea over anything like this before. She’s had no contact with her own kind since being brought here from Citron. She--” a knock at the door interrupted his argument. “Enter.”

The subject of their conversation entered, looking quite determined to get her own way this time. Etherson couldn’t hide his smile at her focus. A refreshing sight after her unwillingness to have anything to do with her own kind as her memories of the war began haunting her. The photographic memories the Feral-borns were known for could be a bane to them in such times, as it proved for Dori.

“Come in, Dori,” he said. “What can I do for you?”

Brennan stepped back, allowing her to approach before excusing himself from the room. He let the door slide shut behind him before he headed back to the medical bay, knowing his patient would be getting a visitor soon. Much as he wanted to feed his spooky patient to the God of Fire’s volcano, he would indulge Etherson in this. Only because he could see how much this meant to Dori *and* Etherson would he do this.

“The Zyan I drew here,” Dori said. “May I see him?”

“He’s very violent, Dori,” Etherson said.

“One of his own kind could calm him. I failed him once. Let me try to repair the damage I’ve done by going to him now.” She appreciated Etherson’s concern for her, but she couldn’t let him talk her out of it. She needed to go to the Zyan if she didn’t wish to go *completely* out of her mind over him.

Etherson looked at her, then the file he had started on the Zyan. He closed it with a sigh and looked at her again. “Very well, but you will call security the moment you are in danger or sense that he is about to attack you.”

Silently, she knew he warned her to attack the male if need be. If the Zyan attacked her, she would have to defend herself by any means available as security would take time to get to her. She could be raped, crippled, or dead before they arrived if she didn’t use her own psionics against him. Or even all *three*. “I will,” she promised.

As Dori headed for the medical bay, she considered the Zyan male. She felt far too desperate to see him and the need scared her. His touch on her mind had done more than teased her. She didn’t know why or how, but she knew he had done something to

her. Something that made her feel more naughty than usual when her monthly cycle came.

The week prior to then, she grew easily aroused and spent most days in her quarters, contacted through her comm box only when necessary. Her drug therapy to control her mating demand grew less and less effective now as her tolerance to it rose and raising the level any further would endanger her life. It still quieted it, but not as much as it should have. Now though, she had a series of toys to keep her occupied till the “crisis point” of her cycle passed and she went into the bleed part of it.

Pain seized her Dori’s middle, dropping her to her knees. She pressed her hands to her stomach in an attempt to quell the pain, but it only worsened. No, not now. Her monthly cycle caused her pain, but in rare times it was debilitating and sent her psionics into an uproar. This time felt the worst of all as every joint locked, then seized, throwing her to the floor, then into the wall in an alternating attack. Her psionics attacked her body as they attempted to free themselves of her, even as she tried to let them loose before they ripped her apart.

“You’re not supposed to be bothering me yet.” The lame excuse felt all the more stupid as her telekinesis began to lash out of her, warping the walls around her, setting off the structural alarm. A welcome sound as she couldn’t move to reach her panic alarm on her comm box in how her psionics immobilized her.

“Out,” she gasped out, frantic, seeing the guards rushing toward her. “Put me out before I do everyone harm.” Her terror rose as the metal screamed around her, threatening fractures and shrapnel. It might miss her, but she knew there would be no way for it to miss hitting the guards as close to her as they stood.

With reluctance, one guard leveled his pulse gun on her and shot her with a stun field. He closed his eyes in pain, watching her crumple to the floor in the twisted metal of the corridor. The only way to end such attacks meant knocking her out to accomplish it, but it never made the decision any easier for the one who had to do it.

As lethally dangerous as her attacks could prove, no guard wanted this order. Moreover, they didn’t want to have to follow through on it. They knew the healing sleep knocking her out would generate would let her own psionics heal themselves. They knew this, but it didn’t make the order to hurt one they cared about any easier to follow.

The sudden shift from violent consciousness to forced unconsciousness was harmful to her, even if it ultimately helped her. Their only recourse would be to let the psionic storm burn itself out and risk destroying this whole wing. It also risked her killing anyone her mind touched near her. A very real threat as it almost happened once when a guard couldn’t bring himself to put her down. The male still carried the mental scarring from the attack, as did Dori for *causing* them.

\* \* \* \*

A flare of energy and the distant sound of an alarm jarred Merrick from his rest within the restraining field about him. *Psionic* energy. Unfocused in its path and strength, he couldn’t even begin to pinpoint where it originated. He closed his mind to the unbalance, sensing a silent warning from whomever it came from.

Maybe Tark getting what he deserved for using his talents for ill gains? A well-deserved punishment in Merrick’s eyes. It made him smile at the thought of the Ganjan

getting such poetic justice.

The smile fell away, however, when the assault ended and he felt something more. Female. The one being so attacked was a female and one very afraid of what she had allowed to happen.

Merrick's heart sank at the thought of enjoying a female's pain. He reached out to find her, but the path to her had already collapsed as the pain she suffered knocked her out. His pain deepened at his failure to recognize her as female sooner and being unable to help her, no matter the reason preventing him from doing so.

The Hiroke healer passed into Merrick's peripheral vision, drawing his attention. He held a reluctant respect for the Hiroke for his efficient capture of him in the restraining field. The gentle care he showed his intern as he treated the young male impressed him just as much. The same care he must have shown in treating *all* patients as it looked natural in his movements. Not what he considered a trait natural to these science lovers.

"I am going to send you to a chamber where you will be more comfortable," the healer said. "However, if you attempt to escape, you will find yourself in a cell where you will not be able to use *any* of your psionics. Is that understood?"

"I will cooperate," Merrick said. He felt the restraining field holding him fall away and sat up with care. "My thanks to you for tending my wounds," he said.

"You're welcome."

Merrick glanced over at the intern, then back to the healer. "And my apologies for my attack on your apprentice."

This surprised Brennan. The Zyan, and especially the Ganjan, rarely ever apologized for such an instinctive response. "I forgive you. I understand your reasons and Essa will heal and learn a valuable lesson from this."

His fear of his patient eased as he saw the Zyan calming. Essa's beginning all this by not listening to his patient when he asked to be left alone helped. His patient was mad at his intern *not* him. Though the Zyan still hated him for being a Hiroke and didn't trust he was coming away with all the parts he came here with.

It made Brennan wish, very briefly, that he'd taken a sample of the Zyan's DNA, just to have something on him. The knowledge that his patient would rip him to pieces if he learned of this quelled that wish.

Merrick couldn't stop his smile. It sounded like the healer was frustrated himself with the intern for ignoring a clear warning from a patient intent on being left alone.

Several guards entered the medical bay. More than Merrick had seen at a given time for escort duty. He chuckled at this sight. Someone was afraid, apparently. He resisted the tease that rose in his mind, wanting to be away from here.

"Go with the guards," the healer said as he eased from the bed. "They will take you to chambers."

Merrick nodded and went with the men. He wanted to get away from the medical bay. It felt too much like he awaited some sort of experimentation to relax there. He hoped this chamber the guards took him would prove better at slaying his current mood. The medical bay certainly didn't as it only made him consider what the Hiroke could do to him *while* he remained there.

\* \* \* \*

Dori's head spun as she came to, her whole body feeling bruised. She looked up at the figure she sensed above her and groaned. Not because she saw Etherson above her, but because there were *two* of him above her, side by side. *One* proved bad enough at times for her.

In his hand, he held a scanner, moving it over her with the greatest of care. His head bowed over it, his eyes were fixed on the readout of the scanner, studying it. The grim line of his mouth did little to set her mind at ease. It only confirmed her thoughts from earlier.

"It's early," she noted.

"I see that," he said.

"Can you see why?" She closed her eyes when the scanner passed over her head. The lights on the underside of it always made her seasick if she didn't.

"Your mating demand has been activated."

Dori wouldn't have been more surprised if he suddenly grew a second head. "How?" she asked in a whisper. Her mating demand was dead for all intents and purposes from medications since prematurely awakening when she was seven.

"Did the Zyan say anything to you when you first saw him?"

She nodded, recalling the sound of the male's compelling voice in her mind.

"In his wish to tag you as his lover and healer, he went a step further than he intended and established a hunter-prey bond with you."

"A *what* bond? I don't understand." So much existed about her own people that Dori didn't know. It left her regretting her decision to halt her education about her people even more. A whole *world* of new problems where it was concerned opened in the face of this development.

"It's a bond left over from your parent race, the Ferals, still existing in your race and in the Ganjan. It's essentially a bond forged by the male meant to act as the catalyst to a chase," Etherson explained.

"I don't want to be chased," Dori said. Though her dark side, where her desire reigned, tried to convince her otherwise.

The Hiroke smiled. "It's not always a physical one, Dori. He will simply focus all of his energies on winning you as he can."

Dori tried not to pale at this knowledge. She didn't need to know that. "Is there a way to reverse it?" The same place that wanted her to be chased by the Zyan hissed at her for her question.

"Do you *want* it reversed?"

She fell silent, then shrugged. "I don't know. Am I in danger?" *Stop hissing at me, I don't know this Zyan and he could be dangerous.* The dark part of her didn't listen to her. It only demanded she find out who the Zyan was and if he *was* dangerous. How, it didn't care.

"No. He won't allow you to be harmed. Right now, though, I believe only you are aware of the bond. He is still recovering and will need some more rest before he realizes all he's done. It may be a few days before then."

"He could leave before then." A wail sounded deep in her soul at the thought of

that happening. She was in trouble. Now, something else joined the fight that she keep the Zyan here and learn all she could about him.

“He may, but I don’t think he will.” Etherson used an injector on her as she sat up. “This will slow your attacks so that you may concentrate on the here and now. It will not stop them altogether.” He wouldn’t tell her stopping the attacks now could kill her. She needed to have as little information as possible on this to keep from trying to halt it. Telling her she risked death in being in a hunter-prey bond would only let her fear attack her.

“Is the Zyan still in the medical bay?”

Etherson sighed. She had *completely* missed the point of what he just told her. “I believe so. I would ask you to go to him as being near him will help you both in your individual recoveries.” It would also help keep her psionics from assaulting her or any other as they would be soothed by the Zyan’s presence.

Dori nodded and slipped from the cot-like bed she’d been laying on. The guard who knocked her out must have brought her here, instead of taking her to her own chambers, or even the medical bay, as she’d believed. Etherson kept the cot here when he didn’t wish to go to his own chambers for the night. It allowed him to be with his lost family through her mosaic of them along his back wall.

Brennan’s absence didn’t bother her, as he no longer tended to her for such reactions, except for consultation. She inadvertently broke his nose when conflicting needs filled her when he had been too close. His nose had been repaired and showed no sign of the incident, and she apologized more than once to him. Still, unless forced to, he carried a great unwillingness to be too close to her should her hormones go into turmoil this way.

Heading for the medical bay a second time, Dori contemplated her reactions surrounding the Zyan male. Why did it feel of dire importance she go to him? Why did she sense that if she ignored this feeling and *didn’t* visit him they would both suffer for her decision? Something must be very wrong with her. Her mating demand activating couldn’t be the reason. It could not have gone from dead to active this way.

Etherson *had* to be wrong about her. He had to be as she knew this wasn’t normal for her at all during her monthly cycle. Her need never became this strong before. His lack of worry should have soothed her, but it didn’t. It only made her worry double as it suggested he had no idea what could be wrong with her to cause this.

Dori considered any other plausible reason for this to explain this, only to sigh when she came up blank no matter how hard she tried. No other explanation, other than the impossible, could account for what had happened. What *was* happening even now. Still, she refused to believe she could be in heat. Something the male had done at their first meeting, if she could even call it that, had caused this. She hoped giving the both of them what they each wanted, her presence near him, this would be stopped. If it didn’t, she had no idea what to do to fix any of this.

She knew some things about the mate-hunt when it came to her race and that of the Ganjan. Not as much as she would have liked to have as she thought about it. As with her education of her people, she shut out the knowledge when any spoke of it around her, picking up only a smattering of things being said. The less she heard about it, the less



likelihood there was of her past attacking her in retaliation. And the less likely her attacking any who understood little of some traditions she knew to be normal, insulting them in their lack of knowledge.

Two males pursued a single female and fought over her till one fell in defeat. She could then choose one combatant or the other as her lover to become her mate if the mesh of minds later 'clicked'. Otherwise, they enjoyed what they shared then went their separate ways to try again.

A nicely upsetting bit of knowledge Dori now wished she had let herself learn more about when offered the chance. She felt lost in a sea of unknowns and unsure what to do now that she had come into a mate-hunt herself.

The worst of unknowns--who would turn out to be the second in this hunt? And would she choose the right one when the time came? She didn't like the idea of the dangers attached to such a thought. Maybe she *should* have let Etherson put an end to this. Mate-hunts and the decisions she might face began to scare her the more she thought on it. The more holes she found she had when it came to this she now needed deepened the fears within her.

Brennan looked up as she entered. "I had to send him to your chambers to finally calm him," he said when she looked around for the Zyan. "He attacked one of my assistants as being here didn't feel all that reassuring for him."

Dori paled. She saw the young man laying on an exam bed near where the Zyan had been. "Will he be all right?" she asked, looking back to Brennan.

"Fortunately, yes. Your Zyan friend only winged him when the fool got too close after ignoring a warning made clear by the feline beast."

Moving to where the young Hiroke lay, Dori looked him over. The Zyan male might have done this, but she felt responsible for his wounds. Luring the Zyan here had caused so many problems, she almost wished she hadn't answered the compulsion calling her outside. People were being injured because of her actions then. How many more would be hurt before he realized none here wanted to hurt him? The question buzzed around in her mind, heightening her wish to get to the Zyan as soon as possible.

"I'm sorry," she said, laying a hand on the Hiroke's forehead when he looked up at her. Deep bruising to his chest drew both her attention and her upset. A special regenerator healing it kept her from placing her hand there. She would have tried to use her own calm to help him with a calming technique granted them by the Ferals, but knew the pointlessness of it. It would only get lost in the coils of his mind. And she didn't know how to properly use the technique of her people anyway.

"I'll be fine," he assured her. "Do better than I did and be more careful of his warnings."

He sincerity made her smile, "I promise." She moved back to the healer and shock filled her as she recalled what he had just said. "Did you say you sent him to my room?"

"Yes—your presence soothed him and I believed your scent would help keep all about him safe."

"Or drive him crazy." She raced from the bay toward her own chambers, hoping to prevent that.

"Well, there *is* that outcome too." He turned his attention back to his notes,

hoping not to have to answer an emergency call by her once she met up with the Zyan again. Much as he wanted the Zyan away from him, he hoped he hadn't made a big mistake. Etherson would feed *him* to Zalasars Forge, if he was lucky, for endangering Dori this way.

\* \* \* \*

Merrick found himself in a female's room--the scent here along with the decor attesting to that fact. A decor that made it hard to tell though if the room belonged to a Hiroke female or not. The design went in a myriad of directions, telling him nothing of the owner's race. Clothing he saw here and there suggested a not entirely tidy female, amusing him. The clothing also suggested a small-framed one from the look of them. His favorite kind.

The scent here calmed him, adding to his confusion as a Hiroke's scent wouldn't be that way for him. He didn't trust the race of scientists, feeling they weren't working in the best interests of any but themselves. He never *had* trusted them.

If they came out and revealed what all they were up to, he might have. Maybe. As it stood, though, he wouldn't have trusted them if they told him water was wet. Even though they had healed him, he still didn't trust them and didn't trust the fact that everything he'd come in with had left the medical bay with him.

Pushing those thoughts from his mind, Merrick occupied himself in exploring the room he had been brought to. Never had he seen so many guards for escort duty as he had when brought here. Not even at his brother's castle when they escorted a criminal somewhere. If the Hiroke fool hadn't ignored him when Merrick had warned him away, the man would not have gotten attacked. And the amount of guards as escort for Merrick would not have been at all necessary. They weren't anyway as Merrick would have cooperated with a *single* guard. He wanted away from all things Hiroke and felt he could trust the healer at his word of where he would end up with them.

As he studied the room, Merrick considered his situation. He actually hoped to have stumbled upon Braden, a friend of his among the missing of Zy-Gan's people. As with the other poor souls Merrick knew to be missing, he prayed Braden resided somewhere on Zy-Gan or within the Feral System. A far safer place for him to be than anywhere else Merrick could think of. Coming upon a Hiroke research station was *not* his idea of a better alternative. Already, he prepared himself mentally for an escape from here to head to his brother's kingdom. Once in Farin's castle, he'd be safe. Safe to finally relax and let *all* of his body and mind heal.

Still, the scent of the unknown female compelled him to remain a little longer. Even if it would be only to find out her name and even her *race*. Hiroke, Feral-born, or of another race? It filled him with curiosity. The desire to leave here, where he didn't feel safe, filled his mind and ate at him to forget his foolish plans. He'd feel safe far from here and in his brother's home. Once with Farin in Cymbaline Castle, one of the females *there* could tend to his hungers.

Priority, though, centered around leaving here and getting *to* the castle. He would need help against Tark if the cub decided to pull the same trick he had in the rite of challenge.

The idea of leaving here without the unknown female, or even sampling of her,

made his chest tighten. It grew to the point where he could hardly breathe at the very idea of letting another female take her place.

Very well. He would put other females right out of his mind and not even *think* on it again until much later. Nor would he consider denying himself a taste of this chamber's owner. He only prayed she wouldn't prove to be Hiroke.

The tightness in his chest relented, but refused to ease entirely, leaving him very confused. What *was* going on? He didn't know, but he intended to find out.

Looking about him, Merrick tried to gauge what he could of the mistress of this chamber. He drew a blank, unable to decide on anything about her, other than she had an unusual, eclectic style of decorating. Similar to how he'd thought all Hiroke offices looked. This could be no room of theirs in the way the scent affected him--that much he knew. Further, he knew he wanted whoever owned this room with a desperate, all-consuming need. Her scent burned him and focused every thought on filling her as deep as possible with his cock.

He purred at the image of her beneath him as she drowned in her enjoyment of what he did to her. Her hot and slippery little pussy would feel good around his cock. The bed, however, drew his attention most at the moment. Exhaustion still waged war in him from using his psionics in the fight with the two Zyan and the Ganjan's attack. He knew though, had it been the other way, he might not have survived the battle.

What drained him most had been his resisting mental attacks used against him as well as the physical ones from the trio of betrayers. He had suffered punishing wounds in his attempts to end their battle peacefully before realizing the pointlessness of it. They had already decided he would die and wouldn't be swayed, no matter what he said to them. Attacking *them* allowed him to escape when it gave him an opening before they could end his life.

Closing his eyes, Merrick pushed those thoughts and memories away. His eyes returned to the over-sized bed as he made up his mind of his most paramount need: He wanted sleep. As much as he wanted to wait for his future bedmate and lover to arrive, he needed sleep more. He could wait just a little while longer, but his energy and strength being so low demanded sleep for both to recover.

"Where are you my keeper?" Merrick let his gaze roam over the room. "And *what* are you?"

*Where* his keeper, temporary as she would be, lurked felt more important than her race did. An interesting turnabout as he loathed the idea of being 'kept' by a Hiroke, temporary or not.

Nothing in the room spoke to him of her race, or even her identity as a person, leaving him all the more frustrated. Not knowing what to expect of the female who owned this room bugged Merrick. If it weren't for his weakened state, and his wish to avoid facing Brennan's threat, he might have been tempted to track her down.

In looking around the room of his temporary keeper, his eyes lighted on a growing mosaic spanning most of the room's back wall. "Very nice, my keeper."

The design and style looked like an accomplishment done by the Feral-born mosaic makers. Their kind could build a mosaic such as this in a matter of weeks, even on the biggest of projects. Each castle of Zy-Gan carried one of their creations of the

kingdom's emblem across the floor of the castle's foyer. Mosaics meticulously kept and cared for by one of the creators granted a home in the castle.

This one appeared to have been done across a long period of time from the differing strength of still fading scents of the cementing agent used to fuse the tiles in place. "Well, she *is* doing this on her own and they normally work in a collective force."

His keeper had to be Zyn, Delavan, or Feral-born to be a mosaic maker. Such knowledge of crafting the tiles and the paints remained a close-guarded secret. The act of making and crafting mosaics was very sacred and the Delavan had the knowledge only due to ancient ties to the Ferals. They honored such a tie by keeping the secret safe amongst their people.

Cocking his head to the side, Merrick studied the mosaic, allowing himself to look at it with the eyes of one of the line of the mosaic makers. This Zy-Gan sunset his keeper crafted had already become his most favored creations. She had the talent he lacked. His only mosaic drew eyebrow lifts and a request he not do any more of them. Fortunately, the female who dared to insult him so incorporated his mosaic into one of her next ones made to make up for her words. A good thing as taking it apart would have been an even bigger insult to him and gotten her attacked.

Merrick turned his attention back to the room, his attention drawn to one of the candleabras not lit. He moved to it, suddenly curious why this one was out when the others weren't. The light sources used by their people now were far better than the candles they had once used, safer, as well. A natural resin from the trees glowed brightly when lit on fire, but carried no flame and little heat. It could also be adjusted to dim or bright as needed.

This one, however, was out. He tapped on the metal candleabra, scenting a good amount of resin still in it. The resin burst to life when his finger hit the control valve and he hissed, staggering back from the flare of light blazing into his sensitive eyes. For a long moment, stars winked in and out of his line of sight and left him staggering as he tried to recover. He just managed to turn the level on it down to soothe the pain lingering in his eyes.

Moving away from the wall, he returned to the bed, where he hoped to be safer than around her lights. At least his eyes would be safe from anymore flares of light. Unless she had some hidden resin lights embedded in the headboard of her bed. He hoped not, he didn't need another assault on his eyes so soon after the stars from the first flare had finally left.

Instead of his usual undressing and haphazard discarding of his clothing and boots, Merrick simply stepped out of his boots and carefully climbed into the bed. He then turned to lay against the pillows. He would try and allow himself one final chance of meeting this female who so intrigued him with her scent alone. It wouldn't do to deny himself the face of the female who would be starring in his dreams. The Goddess of Dreams, Ilsha, could give him only so much in such dreams and he did not desire shadows where his dream lover's face would be if he could help it. Not after being haunted by her incomplete image for so long and being this close to seeing her face at long last.

A grin crossed his own when he heard the sound of a running figure approaching

the room. She knew he was here and was quite anxious to see him. This pleased him, though she still needed discipline for making him wait and allowing him to wake to an enemy's face. Still, he let himself purr his delight over not having to guess at the face of his lover before sleep took him.

The only thing that would have delighted him more would have been if she turned out to be a Zyan, or even a Ganjan. Though both kinds had attacked him, *those* had been males. And *any* female right now would be welcome in his bed if she were this eager to be there. *So long as she isn't of a race I loathe*, he amended silently.

## Chapter Five

Dori skidded to a halt outside her chambers, bending over to brace her hands against her knees as she tried to catch her breath. She could feel the Zyan in her room. At least he wasn't vandalizing it in his anger over being here.

Though she didn't wish to risk an attack by entering and facing the unpredictable male, she knew she had to. He didn't like being here, in a Hiroke compound, and all alone. She knew the feeling and would wish it on no one. If she could end his anger peacefully, she would face anything he let out at her. No one deserved to go through the pain she had if it could be prevented.

Gathering her courage, she moved to the door. Though she tried to pick up on whether he was asleep or awake, she couldn't tell. Her own distraction wouldn't allow for any of her psionics to work well. And what she *could* pick up from him suggested he was awake as well as asleep. Very confusing. It left her with no choice but to enter her home and find out which one would prove correct. Maybe she would get lucky and he *would* be asleep.

Dori yelped and jumped back at the fierce snarl that issued from the bed as she entered. Were she not expecting the furious snarl of his claim to the room, she might have fled. Running was no longer an option for her. Nor had it ever been. He would just chase her down and drag her back and hate her even more for failing him yet again.

Instead, she willed herself to be very still and let the door close behind her. She had to let him breathe in her scent and prayed he reacted in a way that would let her live another day. Prayed he accepted her presence here. She didn't have any desire to find out if the consequences she'd felt might come to pass with her absence. Murderous rage was a living, breathing entity in him, filling the room. She had to remind herself why he felt that way to keep her from fleeing, though it didn't help her much. Some of his anger felt directed at her for her abandoning him in the medical bay before Brennan treated him.

Merrick sniffed the air, drawing in the true scent of his intruder, instead of the mesh of scents that drew his rage moments ago. His lips curved in a smile and a rumble of pleasure escaped him. The female from the storm stood before him. She hadn't been a dream after all. That pleased him beyond all measure.

She was real! And, more important, she was *here*!

When no further sounds of anger came, showing his curiosity about her, Dori dared to move closer. He must have recalled her scent if he didn't wish to attack her as he had everyone else trying to aide him. *You aren't helping yourself in thinking on that*, she silently scolded herself.

"I'm unarmed," she told him. "And alone. Though I can call security here in a moment's notice if you attack me."

Merrick chuckled at her bravado. The tremor in her voice and the fear he could sense from her belied any courage she showed. He resisted pointing out that he could kill

her before her call to security could ever be issued as he wanted to keep her here and not chase her off. She must already know that if she had any idea about the abilities of the Feral-borns.

He saw a small tremor shake her, ever so slightly and had to resist his purr. Her fear was easing, allowing her to come closer. He could almost hear her mentally scolding herself for her bravado, but decided against trying to ease this, as well. It could only make things worse anxious as she felt.

Feral-borns, both Zyan *and* Ganjan, were deeply dangerous when injured. It was why only one of the opposite sex came near to them as the injured would choose one to tend them. Others would have been chased off, or even attacked, by them or their chosen healer.

Merrick had chosen this one before him. While he was still upset by her not fulfilling his wishes of her, he still sought her company. His physical wounds healed, his mental ones still plagued him.

"Come closer, *dejah*," he encouraged. "I give you my word of honor I won't harm you." She was ready to flee at any second. He couldn't allow her that if he could prevent it. She had no idea how much he needed her here. Or how devastating a blow to him it would be if he failed again.

When she dared to move closer still, Merrick purred softly. Her courage pleased him. She might have been afraid, but she still chose to see to his needs. He adored such courage in his bedmates.

Merrick studied the female as she came close enough for the lights to illuminate her better. He purred his approval of her. She was perfect!

Slender, yet curvy, she had the pale flesh and long, auburn hair he adored in females. One of the more rare hair colors of their kind--this was a nice gift to him by the gods. The top of her head would reach his shoulder, her delightful spunk a nice contrast to her short stature. What he adored most were her ice blue eyes. A blue he longed to see darken in passion, the slitted pupils wide with her arousal.

Her long hair, she wore brushed back behind her shoulders to reveal the elegant column of her neck, tempting him to nibble. He could also see the swept back point of one ear, natural to their race, peeking out through the mane of auburn locks. A silent growl rumbled in him. She had *far* too many spots on her person he now wished to explore.

Any concern of other females entering his mind and stealing away his focus left him at the sight of this vision before him. No, he would claim this one as his true lover. She made him ache with hunger just looking at her and filled his mind with naughty images. Yes, she would be the one to answer his hungers.

"You weren't with me when I woke."

She stopped at his words and Merrick silently cursed himself. For a moment, he thought he'd lost her to fear again and quickly cleared his mind when he felt the light touch of her assessing scan. "My apologies," she said. "I ... have trouble being in close proximity to the badly wounded."

Merrick could sense more to it than that, but as closed as she felt on the subject, he wouldn't try to breach her guards to learn her reasons. She hadn't abandoned him for

his failure in battle and that would be enough for him. Anything else could wait until she was ready.

"I forgive you then," he said. There were many children orphaned by wars who had this happen to them. They were witness to atrocities that scarred them for life in all things. A fate he wished on none and he prayed her pain stemmed from something else and not from war.

He had to suppress his smile when he felt her angry jealousy at the thought of his rejecting her. The knowledge she might attack him for that smile chased the smile right out of him. Her fire pleased him. It would be fun to see how much he could spark it before it burned him.

Breathing deeply of her scent, Merrick let it calm him before the thought spun out of control. He closed his eyes, curling his upper lip back to taste her scent. She wasn't yet in season fully, but he could remedy that if he wished. The ritual words of the mate-hunt could put her right into heat if he wished.

Not yet. He was still too weak to participate in so strenuous a game. He could play with her, yes, but not enough to burn out the arousal of the mate-hunt. Plus, he wasn't even sure if this little female *was* meant to be his true mate or not. Though she certainly tempted him as he believed one's true mate should.

As she approached the bed, Merrick couldn't help feeling a pain burning somewhere deep within her. Not from a physical malady, but stemming from a traumatic event. It made him wonder if she were indeed one of those orphaned by the war with the Tatic. There were enough of those poor souls with the lethal efficiency the Tatic had been in their attacks.

He pushed the thought away before it led him to questions he knew would upset her. Questions that would only make her re-live her past and open wounds not yet healed within her.

"Join me on the bed," Merrick instructed. If she were on the bed, he would behave. Having her in the room alone would only make him try to lure her into the bed with him. He needed her close to him to quell the need to claim and to ravish her. The need wouldn't be as strong if he were allowed to touch her when he wished, even if she didn't soothe the hunger of his need this night.

It would be far better if she *didn't* do anything for him other than joining him for now. He was in no condition to show her his true appreciation of any attention she might grant him.

"You need to rest," she pointed out, even as she moved to the bed.

Merrick smiled at her. "Join me, and I shall." He resisted every urge to pull her to him as she eased ever closer to the bed. His eyes remained on her face to resist the lure of her breasts. Studying them would only bring him back to the thought of pouncing on her and taking her till they both dropped.

Every thought in his mind about her conjured up images of pleasure, making him that much more willing to ignore his need for rest. Reminding himself he was in no shape to answer *any* of those images didn't help either. His mind just gave him a visual tour of what *she* could do to *him*.

"Will you allow my touch?" she asked.



With all he'd been through, her remembering to ask permission pleased him deeply. Even as his chosen healer, if she touched him without permission, he could attack her before he could stop himself. His instincts were still locked on attack, his body still ready for battle.

"I would *savor* it," Merrick purred. He didn't even try to hide his need for this young lovely. She felt unsure of what to do for him, and he wished to show her what she could. Tempting her into doing so might prove as fun as pouncing on her and claiming her without foreplay. More so as he adored the build up to the sex with a female. Most Feral-borns did.

He had a whole *list* of things she could do for him. A list he kept a tight leash on for the moment. All of his ideas might chase her off with as skittish as she felt to him. He had to be careful in his plans for her and what he chose for her to do now. The barest of touches on his person would please him as it would prove she *was* no dream. It would prove to him she really stood there and not some lovely little dream conjured up by the gods for him.

Dori drew back at his aggressive forwardness, not expecting it. Anger, yes, as he was the embodiment of rage deep within. Seduction, she did not expect from him. He should have been furious with her, but his anger directed itself at being *here*, not at her or her presence here any longer. If anything, he felt immensely delighted by her being here, and even more so for her being Zyan. While refreshing, she found it very confusing.

Her eyes roved over him, taking in his form and what she could make out of the body beneath the black, animal hide breeches and loose-fitting shirt. His full, sensual lips were curved in a smile when she looked back at his gorgeous face. She wanted to ask him his name, but the inviting smile and the desire his eyes had leveled on her chased the idea right out of her mind.

\* \* \* \*

Merrick regretted not undressing now. He so wanted to display his body for her--let her see just how much he wanted her. Oh well, she would see all of him soon. Just as he would be seeing all of *her*, as well. As soon as he freed her of the flattering dress she wore.

He traced a finger over the blanket, his eyes narrowed in his desire for her. A look meant to soothe and coax at the same time. Gods above, he needed her in the bed with him. But he had to be careful and not scare his skittish, soon-to-be bedmate away. Her courage kept her by the bed, but it felt strained to its limits and scaring her now could chase her off.

"Please join me on the bed, *dejah*," he murmured. "I will ask no more of you than this." She looked confused by his endearment, but she stepped out of her shoes and finally joined him on the bed. The pain still lingering in his chest from earlier relented further with her presence. Yes, this was what he needed.

"I know little of our people," she said. "You *are* Zyan, correct?"

"Unless your keepers teased my DNA about, I am," he replied. He wouldn't put it past the science lovers to try such a thing.

"I know there is a calming touch, but I don't know how to perform it."

Her loss amused Merrick. She must have been with the Hiroke since before her

first bleed as they learned about such things at adolescence.

“Lay your hand upon my chest above my heart and allow yourself to be calm and to transfer that peace to me.” he instructed.

“Will it work with you clothed?” she asked.

Merrick could not stop his grin, and he *did* try. He wanted to lie, but she looked *and* felt nervous enough already. She would also sense it and not be at all flattered by his game. “It works best by skin to skin contact, but skin to cloth works well also.” He caught her hand in his, drawing it up to press a kiss to the exact center of her palm before showing her just where to lay her hand against him.

“Is the kiss part of it?” she asked.

“No, *kazi*. That is mine alone.”

“ ‘*Kazi*’ ?”

“It means ‘kitten’. A word granted us by our parent race. Probably some small and furry little creature like our own *kazis*.”

“Ah.”

Dori tried to focus on sharing calm with him, but he wasn’t helping her in the way he stroked her arm, his eyes practically glowing with need for more than this. His innocent touch did *not* feel all that innocent in what it did to her. “I have lived here since I was three,” she pointed out, trying to distract him. “I remember little of our true language.” In truth, for the most part, it was completely blocked from her as she couldn’t even think in her own language without thinking of the death and destruction of her people. She let herself remember bits and pieces of it only as needed.

“My apologies,” he said softly. His tone carried the weight of understanding. She could almost feel the hug he wished to give her to soothe her pains.

Dori jerked back from him when his free hand eased beneath her skirt to caress her inner thigh in a most ‘unrestful’ manner before she could respond. He gave her an innocent look, which only made her glare. His fingers at her thigh curled and uncurled against her in a show of his delight, the caressing sensation sizzling up to her sex, making the area sing with the sudden need to be touched. His silky purr as his fingers curled against her sensitive flesh only added to the need, making her all the wetter for him. Getting on the bed and this close to him was a big mistake. She realized that more and more as he continued his little game, making her fight against the purr rising in her. He didn’t need anymore encouragement.

“Allow my touch and I will do as you ask,” he said.

Dori shivered. She hadn’t meant to do *that* to keep him calm. He didn’t feel strong enough to her for such games. And she knew *she* wasn’t ready herself for it either.

“No, little *kazi*,” he clarified, sensing her alarm. “I want you against me in the bed as I sleep. Games can come later when I am more awake and can ensure your pleasure.”

That wasn’t exactly comforting. Dori barely knew this man and he already had plans of what he wished to do to her. He didn’t help her at all in the way his hand now inched toward her sex, scattering her thoughts. Shivers racked her body at his oh-so-gentle touch and she didn’t know how to tell him how to stop and continue at the same time. Each wish level pegging within her, she needed to make herself stop him before this went too far. But how to do that without causing herself even *more* problems?

“Remove your touch from my thigh,” she said. She needed to halt his caress before he went too far and she could no longer think straight. Thankfully, he did as asked and drew his hand back out from beneath her skirt. She didn’t want to leave him alone, but she knew she would have if he refused her demand of him. She couldn’t stay here if he couldn’t be trusted to keep his hands to himself. They would end up attacking each other and even injured, he could prove more than a match for her as she didn’t have as much skills in battle as he did.

She knew enough about her people to recall something about rules and the other having to obey or face punishment. Her hope was that she remembered it right and that he followed this rule. He didn’t need to be hurt anymore and she refused to harm him anymore than he already had been.

“No games until I will it,” she said, hoping to keep him at bay, especially as she slept.

“Very well,” he agreed. Merrick couldn’t stop his grin. He couldn’t help it. No female ever made such a flimsy restriction of her male. It would be a *very* easy rule for him to follow. It restricted him only to the point where she gave in and made some sort of slip that would free him to play. Aroused as she felt to him, the wait wouldn’t be too long.

Only with his agreement to her terms did she move closer and allow him to pull her closer to him, soon forcing her to lay at his side. She shivered when he purred and nuzzled her hair, relaxing when he did nothing more than that. He gave his thanks to her for her gift with this gesture, not his intention to play with her despite her rules. It should. She had indeed guessed right on both her memory of the rules and on her wording of it.

“I’m honorable, lovely one,” he murmured. “I’m in pain and hate everyone but you right now. However, you may trust me in my word to not do you any harm. I won’t turn my anger on you. And I will obey your rule.”

It made for an amusing struggle for her to pick up on. He knew he needed sleep, and could even feel her trying to keep that in mind in her struggle against her body’s demands. The dual fight they each fought with themselves would have been ridiculous if it weren’t so necessary.

Merrick shouldn’t have taken his eyes from her face when she moved to settle against his side even as she tried to remain above him and continue sharing the soothing touch of their people. He now realized his mistake in doing so as he began to study her lush breasts, hidden by the bodice of her dress. Were he at full strength, he would have untied those laces with a mere thought and already drawn her in for a taste. Punishment at her hands would be well worth a taste of her there. His resistance cracked more and more the longer he studied them. How would they taste? Even better, how would they feel against his tongue?

“I would ask you to do something more than *stare* at me like that,” she said, her voice shaky.

Never had Merrick heard more of an invitation than he did in those sweet words. “As you wish, *kazi*,” he murmured.

Dori gasped when the Zyan pressed a hand to her chest above her heart, allowing his desire to be shared with her through the contact. She grabbed his wrist, intent on

pulling his hand away, only to find herself pressing into his touch instead. His lips curled in a wicked grin and she felt her insides clench.

Merrick used her grip on his wrist to draw her to him. He buried his free hand in her hair, pulling her closer for a kiss. He reversed their positions, swallowing the sound of her shock as he brought her beneath him, deepening the kiss. Her breasts pressed into his chest, his highly-tuned senses picking up on the subtle stab of her nipples against him, even through their clothing. His fingers curled against her chest and she tensed under him as a new wave of his need spilled into her. He purred into her mouth and felt her return the purr as he settled his hips into the cradle of her own, letting his warmth wash over her there. A perfect fit. The thought had him purring to himself at the images that conjured in his mind. The heat of her core added to the perfection of its welcoming caress.

Sliding down her body, he nuzzled her breasts, reaching up to release the ties of her bodice. He told himself that he needed to see them bared just once and he would be fine. However, when he saw them as he drew aside the cloth concealing them, he couldn't resist leaning in for a taste. Her tight, coral-colored nipples were a thing of beauty and made him lick his lips in anticipation of learning their flavor.

Dori gasped again when his mouth closed over one breast before he drew the nipple deep into its warmth. His earlier kiss and the depth of the desire he'd spilled into her had taken her by total surprise, leaving her completely unprepared for this sudden development. The hard feel of his body against hers and the hot press of his erection scalding her, even through their clothing, made her whole body throb. When he took in one of her nipples, his tongue moving to caress it, she wanted to give into every demand he asked of her. She buried her hands in his hair to try and pull him away as he moved to play with the other breast. Again, her own body betrayed her as she merely began to stroke and play with his hair to encourage him.

He moved to give the other breast the same attention at the first, a growl escaping him when she buried her hands in his hair. She knew all Feral-borns adored having their hair played with. The knowledge did little to help her struggle as one touch on his hair made her wish to play more. One hand held him in place, while the other began to stroke the soft length of his mane.

Only when he pulled away and began to descend toward her sex, with the intention of a taste of her there did she begin to panic. The scent of her fear seemed to reach him as she felt him pause. When he drew back to look at her, she pressed her hands into his chest in an attempt to keep him back. It would be futile, she knew, if he wanted to continue despite her protest. She hoped, though, that he would cooperate.

"Allow me this, my *dejah*, you will enjoy my attention," he promised, his tone soothing.

"No," she said, grabbing at his arms when he tried to slide down her body once more. She couldn't let him do this. Even as her body demanded she allow him his plans, it screamed at her to stop him even louder. "Please stop." Her voice bordered on total panic and she could feel her psionics coiling in her to attack and *make* him stop.

Merrick didn't know what put a halt to her desires, but would not force her to continue when she felt uncomfortable. Her denial hurt him, but he welcomed it at the same time. It let him recall the weakness still lingering within. He refused to fail her by

winning her to pleasure and then losing the battle to remain awake before granting her what she might demand of him. And denying her what she desired of him, no matter his excuse, would be foolish indeed if he knew beforehand he wouldn't be able to answer his silent promises to her.

"I will do as you ask, but only if you tell me your name, sweeting," he said, deciding to grant her a compromise.

"Dori," she replied.

Merrick rumbled his approval of her name, the sound of it pleasing him. "A very lovely name you have, Dori. I will wish you Ilsha's blessings as you sleep so that we may continue this after first-meal." He covered her still wet breasts back up before they could sway him anew and forced himself to surrender to sleep instead. His head pillowed in the soft swell of her breasts, he gave himself up to sleep, her presence and scent calming him.

Dori had no idea what had just happened or why she let it. The Zyan had been stroking her arm one second, and touching her so wickedly the next. The connection he'd formed with his touch to her chest sent through her need unlike anything she'd ever felt before. It quickly clouded her thoughts to everything but desire. Only when he began to descend with the intention of tasting her so intimately had her fear begun to rise, making her balk at the last moment. Though even *it* challenged her understanding as she'd both wanted it and also not.

Now, with him sleeping against her, his soft purr rumbling against her did she wonder why she stopped him. No excuse her mind conjured up sounded right. It still demanded she wake him to continue and that she let him sleep and recover at the same time.

Her breasts were aching from his mouth and the desire to have him return to tempt them more. And she could smell the scent of her own arousal as well as his. So why had she stopped him? She didn't know.

*I give up*, she grumbled to herself. Reaching out with her mind, she dimmed the resin lamps. It drained her to use her limited telekinesis, but she wouldn't risk moving. Waking him meant avoiding his seduction again. She didn't think she could do it if he tried again.

A groan escaped her before she could halt it. "I should have asked you your name before letting you sleep," she said to the top of his head. The oversight told her just how bad off she was in his affect on her. With him asleep, she decided against trying to find his name by telepathy. It would definitely wake him and he would be none too pleased with her probing his thoughts that way.

The Zyan shifted against her, his soft purr reaching her as she gave up her struggle with herself. It soon began to lull her into sleep and she finally gave herself up to the lure. She needed sleep more than she needed to figure this out. She closed her eyes at last, letting the curtain of sleep fall over her, settling under the Zyan draped over her.

## Chapter Six

As Dori woke, she felt arms tighten ever so slightly around her and couldn't help her smile. It hadn't been a dream. The Zyan male was real. She turned to look at him with care, trying not to jar him too much and wake him. He gave a low, angry growl and tightened his grip on her, keeping her from moving any further. Her lips curved in a smile when she saw that he was indeed asleep, giving a soft, delicious purr occasionally, hinting at his dreams. He was in a healing sleep, his tight grip on her notwithstanding. She had to be very careful in how she handled him now as waking him would compromise his continued healing. The sleep turned their psionics inward, allowing it to use the whole of its energy to heal them more quickly and thoroughly than sleep could.

She studied him, resisting her purr and the need to touch him as she knew she might wake him. Instead, she took in his handsome face and her need to touch him strengthened further. Relaxed in sleep, his face reflected the peace he felt here in her bed. Again, she had to resist purring. This was a genuine first for her. To have a man in her bed and to have him holding her as he might a lover--it felt very nice.

The knowledge made her burn anew for him, making her struggle again to resist waking him all over again. Again, she wondered why she had stopped him before. And again, she still had no answer for that. A truly bothersome thing for her and filled her mind with the puzzle.

A different priority filled her mind at the same time and she knew she couldn't stay here with him. Not yet. She needed to get away from him, without waking him, so she could gather some information she couldn't get here. The only problem centered around just how to free herself without waking him.

"I need you to let me go," she said in a gentle voice. She sent it to his mind at the same time, hoping he would hear her. Considering his continued affect on her, she found herself brought back to the knowledge she knew precious little about him. Not that her body cared either way as it enjoyed the feel of him pressed into her.

The male must have heard her as he gave an angry grumble, his grip tightening on her. All right, this wasn't going to work. She needed to try something else.

Dori brushed his hair back from his face before daring to lean in and kiss his temple. She sent soothing thoughts to him at the same time, hoping to calm him before even her gentle touch woke him. Her fingers brushed against the lobe of his pointed, swept-back ear as she smoothed more of his hair back from his face. A shape identical to her own, she smiled as she realized this was indeed natural to their kind. Her toys all had their ears hidden by hair and left the ridiculous question floating in her mind till now.

"I will return shortly," she assured him. "Please allow me this." She felt more than she heard his purr as he released her, turning onto his side to claim the area where she'd been laying as she left the bed.

The reaction amused Dori and, on another level, pleased her. He would take in her

scent with his every breath. She couldn't explain it, but the male's acceptance of her this way filled her with warmth.

Dori hadn't gotten the chance to ask Etherson anything about their guest the first time as just the need to go to him had filled her thoughts, chasing away everything else in her mind. Now though, she wanted to know all that she hadn't been able to ask before regarding the Zyan male.

She had to know if she had drawn in a spy intent on seeking vulnerabilities in the compound before a full-scale attack. Or a Tatic in disguise, even. Brennan would have picked up on that in any scans he made of the male while treating him and Etherson would have gutted their visitor. The Tatic had tortured and killed Etherson's family when he refused to aide them in their war efforts against all Feral-borns. It showed Dori that the Hiroke leader trusted this Zyan male that much in allowing him near her. And that the male was *not* a Tatic in disguise, answering the question for her.

She couldn't say either way on him being an advance scout for an attack on the compound. A pride-clan of Feral-borns claimed lands at least a mile from here, their hunting grounds extending well past the compound itself. He *could* have been a spy, but she couldn't sense it as her own concern about him clouded her psionics. She could sense no malicious intent from him, but she couldn't trust what her mind told her completely as her psionics were too cloudy and easily thrown off.

The only one who could start giving her some answers was her caretaker, Etherson. He might not have *all* those she sought, but he could begin filling in the holes for her before she made the Zyan give her the rest. *Beginning with his name*, she stressed. She refused to let their games go any further until she knew his name.

Oh dear gods, she was pathetic! Dori rolled her eyes as she put her shoes back on and headed for the door. This male had really unbalanced her thinking if that was the best reason she could come up with to halt any further play.

A rumble of distant thunder as the storm continued on its way further south mocked her foolishness in her thinking and she hissed at it before she stalked from the room. This continued weirdness was becoming more and more disconcerting in its continued affect on her. Instincts she didn't understand niggled at her, growing increasingly difficult to ignore. Instincts telling her what she needed to do with her guest, even as the thought alone in doing so confused her. What was going on? And why was she reacting so oddly to this stranger?

Rushing down the corridor, Dori headed for Etherson's office, hoping he hadn't yet retired to his bed chambers for sleep. She needed to know about their guest and how he fared. Brennan had given her nothing on the Zyan when she visited the medical bay earlier. She couldn't blame him as he'd been distracted due to Essa's being attacked.

Now, she *had* to know so she could let herself relax around her inadvertent roommate. She reached out to the healer as she considered trying to go to him first and leave Etherson alone this time. Feeling him drowning in his thoughts, yet again, she sighed. Speaking of pathetic ... as usual, Brennan had buried himself in his work again.

And he wondered why he felt so strained when he worked? If he didn't try to do two to three things at once, he would never have that problem. Dori gave up on telling him this long ago when he complained about feeling so swamped. He never listened to

her suggestion anyway.

Dori made it to Etherson's office and relief filled her when she felt him inside working. She pressed the call button and sensed his irritation rise at the interruption. He must have been busy when she came up, though not as bad as Brennan could be.

*"Enter."*

The clipped sound of his tone mirrored the annoyance she felt from him. Undaunted, Dori went into his office. Her need to know about their guest filled her every thought. She couldn't back down now with the answers so close at hand.

"You should be in bed, Dori," Etherson said, glancing up from his files to look over at her.

"I know, but I have questions," she said.

Etherson gave her a knowing smile, already certain of at least *one* of her questions. "The Zyan?"

Dori nodded to him.

"Very well." He set the file he had been working on aside to turn his full attention on her. "Ask."

"What's his prognosis?"

"You should ask the Brennan that," Etherson pointed out.

"He's busy with his usual three-things-at-once work. And he's always nervous around me when I'm like this."

The Hiroke smiled and nodded, well aware of how his friend worked at times and Brennan's reluctance to be around Dori when she was so close to her monthly cycle. He picked up the file started on the Zyan male and leafed through it till he found what he needed before facing her once more. "He will be fine so long as he rests and regains his strength," he said, setting the file aside. "For one exiled from his pride-clan, as his wounds appear to suggest, he was actually in good condition and his wounds easily repaired. No breaks, no vital areas destroyed or too badly damaged. He will recover soon."

Dori let out the breath she didn't realize she'd been holding in her relief. He was going to live. He wasn't sick, nor mortally wounded. Advanced as the Hiroke were, if the Zyan was too badly injured, they could only seal his wounds and numb him to his pain to let him have a peaceful death. In the back of her mind, she knew he would be all right if Brennan felt it all right for the Zyan to be in her room. Still, she didn't let herself believe it until now.

"I must ask something difficult of you, Dori ..."

Dori didn't like the serious sound of his tone. It didn't bode well for his next words. "Please don't make me send him away," she begged. "I want a friend of my own kind here."

"I won't send him away until he is ready. My request is for something different."

"What?" At least he wasn't going to make her send the Zyan away. She knew she would die inside if her first encounter with one of her own race after so many years had to be cut short. If allowed to stay here with her for awhile, she knew she would feel more complete.

"I need you to ensure that he behaves as has been asked of *you*," Etherson said. "I



cannot have him snooping about and disrupting what is being done here, no matter how much he may protest it otherwise.”

“I understand,” Dori said. This conversation, she knew very well as Etherson had given it to her more than once before she managed to remember all of his warnings. She hoped the Zyan would listen better than she had. She didn’t think he would be treated with the same leniency as she had by them.

Dori knew the Zyan wouldn’t be happy about being so restricted. Being unhappy would be an understatement. The male might attack everyone here over being so restricted. She knew she would have to phrase herself with care to prevent that. She didn’t know if she could, but the same insane part of her that woke with this male’s arrival assured her she could. She certainly hoped so, or they were all in trouble.

She hadn’t reacted so well to the restrictions herself and knew what her guest would be facing. Though hers had been due to her innate need to pry into everything about her, occasionally wrecking things as she tried to help them out in their experiments. Her only saving grace, she learned later, as her “help” left many wishing to feed her to the Sirians, huge and fierce serpentine creatures of this world’s vast ocean.

Well, all but Etherson who would have killed any of his fellows if they dared try it.

“Is he safe from all those nightmares Brenna tested *me* for?” she asked. She would never forgive herself if anyone paid for a mistake of hers with their lives.

Etherson wondered if she would ask about anything of that sort with as cautious as they had been with her. “We tested him as we did with you but in a briefer fashion as Brennan didn’t think it wise to keep his patient under for a long period of time. He is healthy and carries no threat of infecting any here,” he said.

The Hiroke waited a moment and smiled when he saw the next monster concern form in her eyes. “We took only enough fluids and tissues for the tests, then destroyed them after all were completed. He will not be used in any other test or experiment without his consent. I don’t relish the idea of being disemboweled by him for something he never agreed to.”

Dori tried not to laugh, despite the gory image his words summoned up in her mind. “Thank you,” she said.

“You’re welcome. Now, return to your guest before he starts missing you.” He knew the Zyan probably still slept, but didn’t want him upset by anything that could be prevented, if possible.

Recalling her promise to the Zyan, Dori rushed from Etherson’s office back toward her own chambers. She didn’t want him to have an attack of rage should he wake to find her missing from the bed.

\* \* \* \*

Dori scented a different male’s scent in the room as she entered. She could also smell the lingering scent of freshly laundered clothing as well. Someone must have brought the Zyan some clothes to change into if he so wished to when he woke.

Hopefully, the man’s presence hadn’t awakened her guest and left him angry about being abandoned. Well, she hadn’t been greeted by a snarl at least. She could rest easy knowing that much. Well, as much as his presence let her, anyway.

Turning to look at said guest, Dori smiled. He now lay on his back, sprawled across the middle of the bed. She kind of wished he had been on his stomach as he probably had a very nice ass. Closing her eyes, she tried not to growl at herself for falling back to thoughts of sex so easily. Her body burned again for him and she found herself wishing for him to wake up and to pick up where he had left off with her.

This was so unfair and she couldn't even begin to make herself think on anything else as she began to breathe in his scent. A delicious mix of the soft, animal hide breeches he wore and his own masculine scent. It sent heat zipping up and down her spine, further cluttering her thoughts.

*I wonder if he honors our people's promise to Kashee to not wear underthings.* Dori slapped a hand to her face, unable to believe *that* of *all* things would choose now to return to her memory.

Often as their races honored Kashee, his daughter, Trista, and grandson, Trey, with games of pleasure, one of the Feral-borns made a promise to the fertility god none would wear undergarments. With the exception of the underage, females in their monthly cycle, and ones not seeking such games for some reason.

Dori still thought the male was a boob and probably drunk or high on *kazi* bulbs. Only Jareth, the High King, could end the decree and, with as ancient as it was, he probably remained unaware of it himself. Most followed the decree as it was always done without questioning it. Except for the insanely curious like Dori. The very old decree was one of the last things she read before ending her education on her people. It also remained one of the more ridiculous things she remembered from her limited readings.

Parting her fingers, she looked over at the sleeping Zyan male. Her eyes moved to the tempting bulge of his cock in his breeches. She lowered her hand and cocked her head to the side.

*Stop it!* she scolded herself, catching her own study of him there as she tried to gauge if he wore undergarments or not. She needed to focus on something else and soon. Something mundane before she completely lost what remained of her senses and she answered the demands filling her thoughts before she felt ready.

Dori tracked down her comm box, finding it on the floor where it had fallen from her belt earlier. She set it down on her bedside table, where it would be in grabbing reach should she need it. She then returned her gaze to the bed and her guest.

He remained in the healing sleep and probably would for another few hours. What Etherson suggested let her know the male must have been very drained from his battles before coming here. Both the Zyan and the Ganjan could attack mentally as well as physically, she knew. It drained both participants with the energy needed to both block *and* attack at the same time. Probably the battle he had faced, if he wasn't as injured as one in a battle for dominance could be. She didn't know as much as she wished about such battles and refused to wake him for something she knew could wait. He had been furious about everything while awake and she didn't think talking about anything regarding such a subject would help keep his anger at bay.

The male gave a low growl as his hand began to move in a searching pattern. Searching for *her*. Even in his sleep, he still demanded her to be near him. The thought made Dori smile as it showed his deep acceptance of her in his life.

She rejoined him on the bed, pleased when he reached out to her and enfolded her in his arms as she laid down, hugging her to his side. This reaction, she could get use to in a hurry when coming from one this deliciously attractive. It also granted her a peace unlike anything she had ever felt before in her life.

His warm scent caressed her, coiling about her--a calming aroma that did evil things to her body at the same time. Hot and achy for him, she could think only of him touching her and soothing every last one of her "pains." These feelings felt very strange, but weren't all that unpleasant to her at the same time. It felt right to her. Even welcome.

It made little sense to her. *All right, he's cute, she told herself. Okay, adorable. But I don't know anything about him or even if he's dangerous or not.*

The Zyan stirred in his sleep and turned his head to brush his lips against her forehead. A soft purr rumbled in his chest as he drew in her scent and her aches worsened.

*I wish to get to know the male better before I allow him that,* she scolded herself. Her desire eased somewhat with her resolution, but not enough to clear her thoughts of much else but the need to get to know this male in as pleasurable a means as possible.

At this rate, she would never be able to sleep. Still, she settled into his embrace to try. His scent filling her nose didn't help her plans as it furthered her need to play with him. If one could die from hunger for another, she knew would before this night ended.

\* \* \* \*

Dori couldn't sleep, no matter how hard she tried. She drew back from her bedmate in an attempt to try and extract herself from his grip, hearing an unhappy sound escape him. She turned in his grip to face him, reaching out to stroke his hair, hoping to keep him from squashing her.

He began to purr and settled back into a peaceful slumber. A slumber that eluded her though as she had questions only he could answer for her. She resisted the need for these answers, not wanting to wake him just to ask him questions that could only enrage him.

"What happened to you?" she asked as she stroked his hair with gentle fingers. He purred and squeezed her in a warm hug before snuggling into her warmth. Much as she delighted in his presence and touch, how he came to be here bothered her. Who could have hurt him so this way?

*Shadow and betrayal.*

Dori started at the sound of his voice in her mind. He'd heard her in his sleep? And what did he mean "shadow and betrayal"? She didn't have an answer for that.

The Zyan nuzzled her cheek as he drew her closer to him, burying his face in the warmth of her throat. His silky purr soon lulled her back into sleep, chasing away all of her musings about him.

## Chapter Seven

The sound of an alarm brought Merrick to full alertness and he leapt from the bed, ready to attack whatever intruder had dared to wake him. Where was he? For a moment, he couldn't remember. Then the memory came back and he smiled. He was with a tempting little female after her keepers had healed him and sent him to her chambers. Behind him, he heard a sound of anger from his violent exodus and turned to face the bed. Merrick looked at the female in the bed behind him, as she shut off the alarm and raised the light level with their remote, smiling sheepishly. She'd received a much ruder awakening than him.

Dori. Her name was Dori. A very lovely little female whom he wished to explore some more. Beginning with another sampling of her tempting breasts and pretty nipples.

"My apologies," he said, bowing his head to her. He looked up to see her still glaring at him, not at all appeased. "I am not use to to your means of being awakened. It surprised me."

"No kidding," she frowned.

"*Dejah--*" he stepped toward the bed, only to be hit by a pillow across the stomach. Unprepared for the assault, it took him by surprise and made him step back to stare at her in question.

She set the pillow aside and got up, moving to stand before him. "We are even then," she said, then headed for the bath chamber. She paused just long enough to snag a dress from her closet, but didn't look back at her guest. If she allowed herself to look at him again, she knew it would prevent her from following through on her plans.

Merrick glanced her way as she disappeared into a chamber at the far wall of her living quarters. She was a most delightful female. Such a spunky little thing. Good. He wanted that in his bedmate. It made for a much more spicy bout of love play.

*May I enter, sweeting?* he sent to her, not wishing to intrude on her privacy anymore than that.

*Only if you wish to watch me pee then brush my teeth,* she sent back.

Merrick couldn't stop his grin. Not especially, as it would be *very* intrusive and rude. *I will grant you privacy then.* he returned. He wouldn't interrupt her personal time. Not unless it proved necessary.

The interruption left Dori exceedingly grateful. She needed time away from the Zyan male to try and collect her thoughts. Even as brief as her morning ritual was, it would help her out some. It would be enough to let her try and make some sense out of just what had happened last night.

And why she had stopped him as she had. She'd enjoyed what he had been doing, but stopped him anyway.

Dori changed her mind. It would take a *whole* lot longer than her morning ritual to figure this all out. She needed a *lot* more time to figure this all out. If she could. At the

moment, she didn't think she could. Her mind hurt from all of her figuring already and she was no closer to any answers than when she'd started.

With a sigh, she flushed the toilet and moved to wash her hands before brushing her teeth then her hair.

Another sigh escaped her as she lifted the toothbrush to her mouth. She could sense her guest moving about in her room. Snooping. He was snooping! Well, she couldn't blame him as he would wish to know all about who he dealt with in her and the kind of person she was. She knew she would have done the same with him were she in his place.

Still, he snooped in her things and it unsettled her to think on what ideas he came up regarding her in what he discovered about her through them. She tried not to take her irritation out on her gums as she brushed her teeth. When she got back to her room, she would show ... oh damn, she *still* didn't know the name of her snoop. She growled around her toothbrush as she realized she would have to learn his name before she could yell at him. *This is turning into such a grand morning*, she grumbled to herself.

Quicker than she ever had before, Dori brushed all the tangles from her hair once done with her teeth. While not as sensitive to "play" here as a male, she was no less immune to it. It maddened her already desperate need to a living breathing entity of lust in her. She could have screamed at how needful she felt for him by the time she finally finished.

\* \* \* \*

Merrick was pleased to find a change of clothes set out for him, along with several others on a hook embedded in the wall. His only qualm being the male's scent clinging to it. No matter, *Dori's* scent here assisted him in ignoring it as it proved a most delicious distraction.

There were several hygiene items resting on top of the outfit as well. He used the brush amongst them to free his hair of all tangles. It proved detrimental to his thoughts and his control as it drew an even stronger need in him to let her touch him as she wished there.

It reminded him of this being a male's favorite game to play with a female, even as it risked much in frustrating her at the same time. A game Merrick truly enjoyed. The female would brush the male's hair, inadvertently teasing him as she did. He, in turn, would play with her to tempt her as she brushed his hair as a precursor to more foreplay and bed games.

Turning to study the room, Merrick found himself even more curious about his bedmate. His soon-to-be lover, if he had his way. First though, he had an inane need to know just who he dealt with in her. And just why she had to be *here*, with the Hiroke of all species. It was unheard of for a Feral-born to be here willingly, as long as it appeared with the look of the room.

Merrick couldn't help his snooping in Dori's chambers as waited for her to return. His need to know all about her overrode his need to be discreet and truly honorable. So far, he knew she was somewhat messy with her things as she'd left several things lying about here and there about in her chambers. She was also a creator of sorts and a decorator. Her mosaic of the Zy-Gan sunset still pleased him as he looked it over and

made him remember spying a few more along the walls as the guards brought him here. He wished now he paid a little more attention to them. Whether she made her own tiles or not, Merrick couldn't tell. She was very artistic either way and made him a mite jealous of her skill when his came up extremely lacking. Clearly, her line to the mosaic makers was far stronger than his.

The sound of her coming back drew his attention, interrupting his snooping, forcing him back to where she had left him. It wouldn't do to upset his female by being caught looking through her things. Well, anymore than she already knew of. She would have sensed his movements and probably had a few choice words for him about it. He couldn't wait.

Dori came out of the bath chamber, surprise filling her she found the Zyan exactly where she left him. As if he hadn't even moved. He was *fast*. She looked around the room, but found nothing out of place. He hadn't been going *through* her things, but she knew he had been moving about snooping in any case.

"A problem?" he asked. He wanted to spark an argument from, just how adorable she would prove in her anger.

*Yes, I have a real problem with you.* She silenced the thought as soon as it formed in her mind. She wasn't exactly mad at him, just feeling vulnerable. Both from his poking about in her room, and his knowing her name while she remained at a disadvantage with him.

She refrained from reaching into his mind and trying to learn it that way. He would no doubt sense it and lash out at her for her dare. Something she really didn't need at the moment. Especially over his name of all things.

She could think of many things to do with him, but fighting with him wasn't anywhere on her list.

"*Kazi* got your tongue?" he teased when she remained silent.

"What is your name?" Dori asked.

Merrick would have to punish the sweet little female for forgetting so soon.

"Have you forgotten already?" he scolded, amused.

"You never told it to me."

Merrick was surprised. This hadn't ever happened to him before. No matter how exhausted he had been before, he never forgot to tell his female his name. A clear sign of just how bad off he'd been for this to happen now. It unsettled him. "My apologies," he inclined his head to her. "I am called Merrick."

"Merrick'."

"Yes, and my name sounds delicious on your lips." He wondered how it would sound when deepened by passion.

She shivered, the reaction pleasing him. He then had to suppress a growl when he felt her suddenly displace that desire. A list of questions then began to fill her mind, amusing him. Her quick shift in emotions and reactions would have made him dizzy were he not used to it. It was a trait of females that male envied as they couldn't do it as easily.

"May I have use of your bath chambers?" Merrick asked. After upsetting her with his prying somewhat into her things and her privacy, he refused to further it by appearing rude and taking advantage of her hospitality. He didn't want to delay her answer quest,

but he couldn't help it. Some things couldn't be ignored.

"You may," Dori said. "Just no snooping."

"As you wish." Merrick gathered up what had been left for him and moved to the bath chamber. She had a whole host list of questions for him and he could only sense a handful that were coherent. He wanted to answer them, but they kept getting in each other's way. It made for an interesting mental struggle to pick up on.

Dori looked around her room again and winced when she saw the clutter of clothing, along with some other items out she forgot to put up when she finished with them. She rushed to clean up her mess, hoping Merrick didn't consider her a slob now.

*I don't.*

The sound of Merrick's amused voice in her mind made Dori jump. As she was the only one here with psionic ability, she hadn't had much practice with telepathy, other than scanning for creatures on her visits outside. Having it suddenly used by someone so casually felt a bit jarring for her.

*I have seen far worse, I can assure you.*

Well, that made her feel somewhat better. Still, she didn't like that he had been witness to her messy side.

"I happen to enjoy a slightly messy side to a female," the male said as he emerged from the bath chambers in the new set of clothing. "It allows for you to display your gorgeous little ass to me as you pick your things up later on." He moved to the hamper at one wall to deposit his discarded clothing.

Dori blushed to the roots of her hair and turned away. Her face burned all the hotter when she heard him snicker. This day was getting better and better. Where was a hole to hide in when she *really* needed one?

"What's 'shadow and betrayal'?" Dori asked as she faced Merrick again, remembering the odd phrase he had said in his sleep to her. It was an unusual question she knew, but it held the strongest grip in her thoughts at the moment.

He looked at her, curiosity filling his dark eyes. "Where did you hear this?" he asked.

"You said it when I asked you what had tried to kill you."

He lifted a brow and she knew she only confused him with her question. As he'd been asleep at the time, she didn't think he'd remember the odd phrase. She now wished she'd phrased herself better. He looked really confused, and somewhat disturbed by her query.

"You *were* asleep when you said it. So I figured you must have been having a most unusual dream to say such to me."

Merrick studied her for a long moment. Perhaps he should have left it at that. No. She needed to know the truth, but not now. He recalled his dreams and knew what she spoke of now, though it wasn't a topic he wished to discuss so soon after meeting her. "Something I will discuss with you at another time, all right?"

She nodded. "Are you in danger, Merrick?" He felt the rise in her concern for him and smiled. It pleased him to sense she so cared about him already.

"I'll be fine if I'm here. With you."

A smile crossed her face. "I'm still not going to forgive you."

Merrick was lost now. "For what?" What had he done to warrant this?

"You were snooping while I visited the bath chamber, remember?"

Ducking his head, he lifted his eyes to look up at her, a sheepish look on his face. "I'm curious about you."

"Well, ask me questions, I'm use to them."

Merrick barely suppressed his growl. Their kind had an instinctive, hard to resist, curiosity, but he didn't like her response. It returned his mind to Hiroke experimentation and what she must have gone through here. "I'm not going to treat you like some rare find to be picked apart, my *dejah*--"

"What did you call me?" He'd called her that before and, as nice as it sounded, she demanded to know what he meant when he called her the odd name.

Merrick grinned at her insulted look. " 'Dearest.' It means 'dearest,' my suspicious one. You are a rare gem to me and I don't want to make you feel like anything less." He did his best to soothe her nerves with his words and tone. Female Feral-borns had the nasty habit of throwing anything and everything they could grab and lift at a male who insulted or angered her. He didn't relish the idea of that now. He might not be able to make things better with her if he sparked her temper now.

"All right, I forgive your snooping," she said.

Merrick bowed his head to her. "My thanks to you, *dejah*." He looked at her once more, offering his hand to her. "Come to me and we shall have a nice, long questioning session." *Maybe more*, he added silently, taking care not to share that bit with her. He wanted to play and tempt her into this game, not give *all* his plans away. Half the fun of their foreplay would be her guessing what he intended next for her.

"It'll have to wait." She smiled at his frown. "I need to make my bed."

Were he a *kazi* himself, his ears would have flattened against his head over this displeasure over her words. She had no idea of how much she had just infuriated him. He would have preferred to *use* the bed with her, not make it up. He resisted sharing that with her as well. He didn't need to get himself into trouble again so soon after earning forgiveness from her. She probably *would* throw things at him. And she didn't look the type to miss with ease once she got started.

Merrick watched as she moved to tend to the bed. He fought to suppress the urge to growl his displeasure over this. He wanted to pull her to him and kiss her with all the passion he held for her before he took her. He wanted to fill her so deep with his cock she would taste him as he came.

Again the need to growl filled him and again he fought it back. Instead, he watched Dori as she began to work on putting the bed back in order. *Dori*. Her name and scent were burned into his mind for all time. She would be his till he quenched his hunger for her and it was about time he showed her. He moved toward the bed in a slow glide, as if to assist her in her task, amused she dared to ignore him.

Naughty little female. She would soon learn the error of ignoring her male when he was in the room and so hungry for her attention.

A startled sound escaped Dori when a body pounced onto the bed, knocking the covers from her hands. "Merrick!" she hissed, seeing his grinning face before her. She let out a yelp of alarm when he pulled her onto the bed to beneath him. "Wait," she managed



to whisper when she sensed his intentions.

Merrick ignored her, leaning in for a kiss. Her fingers bit into his shoulders through the silk of his shirt, but the touch only seemed to encouraged him.

"Mine," Merrick purred, breaking the kiss to nuzzle her chin. He moved down her body to press his lips to the spot above her heart.

"Wait!" she struggled out.

A growl escaped him and he jerked back to glare down into her eyes. *Well, at least he stopped*, she reassured herself. Though she could clearly see that he wasn't all that happy about it. She would have preferred him stopping in a different manner. Not in fury against her for her denying him.

It didn't help that her own need burned her from within, filling her with hunger for him, even as she tried to convince herself this was the right thing to do. Stopping him felt more and more wrong the longer she stared at him. And she fought a desperate battle to keep it from taking her over.

Merrick sensed her need for this bleeding through her denial and purred. He leaned in, intent on swaying her opinion about this. There were *so* many ways of arguing his point in a most tempting way against a female he *knew* wanted what he offered her. He intended to use them *all* if he had to with her.

"Wait please," Dori begged. "We can't bond."

Merrick resisted his rage with difficulty. No female *ever* rejected her male's claim without expecting a reprimand. "Why?" he asked, trying to keep from yelling at her. A very difficult thing with as aroused and hungry for her as he was, knowing she felt the same way for him.

"The mating demand in me activated by accident due to your desperate need for companionship."

She had no idea of what she said if she believed that. Merrick couldn't believe she could dare say such a thing to him. She had little understanding of how the mating demand worked if she said such a thing. Nor would she realize the insult it would be to him. Another clear sign of how long she must have been held here.

"Your hunter-prey bond caused this, nothing more," she went on. "I won't bond to you and risk upsetting your true mate."

Merrick couldn't stop his smile. Ah, such sweet innocence.

"I'll be fine if you could just please go away for awhile," she said, trying to pull free of his grip.

"Really?" His tone was a dark purr of challenge. He leaned back in, stilling her movements, intent on showing her the error of her thoughts.

Dori tensed, expecting an attack. She closed her eyes tight so not to know when the pain would befall her. Her eyes flew open again when Merrick gave her the most tender of kisses before she closed them again to savor it.

*You are safe with me, my dejah*, he murmured in her mind before drawing back. Dori barely resisted crying out when he reversed their positions. She soon found herself perched on top of him, his hands at her hips to steady her, letting her recover.

He reached up to brush her hair back behind her as it fell in a curtain around her face, allowing his fingers to stroke her cheek in passing. The touch sparked a new fire of

need within her. She would burst into flame if he kept this up.

“Explore me, Dori,” he instructed.

Just when she thought he couldn't get any naughtier. She wanted to whimper. He asked almost the impossible of her with his words.

“I have never explored a man before.” Dori felt foolish for her lack of education when it came to males. By now, she should have known much when it came to playing with a lover. It didn't matter she had spent most of her life away from all her potential lovers. She still felt like a failure.

Merrick wanted to purr. “Never?” he asked, trying his best to hide his delight. Could this actually be true?

“I've read about it,” she offered, feeling even more stupid than before. More inadequate.

“*Dejah*, are you an innocent?”

“No.” Her indignance wilted at his assessing gaze. “Yes,” she admitted, bracing for his anger.

He chuckled, taking her by surprise. “Ah, such a delight you are.”

Dori blinked in shock. This wasn't the response she expected of him at all. He should have been angry for her lack of skill when it came to games of pleasure. She had no idea how to respond and could only stare at him, mute.

She was such a treasure. This turnabout only added to his delight regarding her. He wanted her to explore him now more than ever. As her first and *only* lover. “Then I will be most happy to indulge your initial caresses and explorations,” he purred. “Touch me as you will and *where* you will.”

Dori couldn't hide her reaction. Never would she have thought a male would be pleased to have an innocent in bed with him. They wanted an experienced lover who knew what they were doing, didn't they?

“*Dejah*, whatever you are contemplating, I hope it isn't my words,” Merrick soothed. “I have no wish to upset you.”

“No, you just surprised me is all,” Dori said. “I thought you would prefer ...” she trailed off, feeling foolish.

“You believed I'd seek one of experience instead of an innocent?” She had such a miserable look on her face and he couldn't stop his smile. It became a grin when she nodded. “I want *you*, Dori. Whether innocent or experienced, I care little either way. Yours is the touch I burn for now. The only one who stirs me.”

Shivers raced up and down Dori's spine. He was a most unexpected male. She liked that.

“Touch me, Dori,” he said in a silken purr. “I will ask no more of you than that right now.” She was an innocent and inexperienced in this form of play. He would have to resist his need to dominate her even more so not to put this right out of her mind. It would destroy him inside if he dishonored a female that way.

## Chapter Eight

Just as she got courage enough to do as Merrick asked, her comm box chirped from its perch by the bed. She wanted to moan aloud her frustration at the timing of this interruption.

“What is *that*?” Merrick asked, irritation filling him at the loss of her focus.

“An interruption,” she said, leaving the bed to retrieve the comm box.

“A toy of Ba’oc in how it takes you from me.” Merrick turned onto his side to watch her, wanting so much to drag her back into the bed.

“Yes?” Dori hoped she wasn’t making the biggest of mistakes in her life by answering this communication.

“*I’m afraid I must ask you to come assist me, Dori.*” The sound of Etherson’s voice filled the room through the comm box, sounding quite apologetic. As if he knew what he interrupted between them. “*Your last samples were contaminated and need to be redone.*”

Dori wanted to hiss. Much as she wanted to help the Hiroke in their helping the Feral-borns, even *she* couldn’t resist her nature. At the peak of her monthly cycle, she hated being touched by *anyone*. It made her skin crawl, almost to the point of pain. Sometimes even beyond that.

Etherson told her, more than once, it was because she wanted a lover’s touch. Anyone else’s sparked instincts dating back to the Ferals. It didn’t stop the Hiroke from trying to get their samples from her. It just made her miserable and Etherson extremely apologetic when he found out their timing had been so poor again. This extreme reaction could happen at anytime within her monthly cycle and couldn’t yet be predicted.

While the Hiroke wished to try and figure it out, Etherson still forbid it. He didn’t relish the idea of her killing everyone in the room for what would be involved in such an endeavor. And Dori knew she *would* if they tried. She’d come close to it the last time. Probably the reason for the contamination.

Her last “peak” had been her worst. One Hiroke didn’t let her go fast enough, setting off a tantrum in her. Thankfully, Etherson had chosen that time to visit her and saw her reaction. He’d opened the door and let her flee. It took her several hours to silence the instinctive need to attack everyone.

She still couldn’t explain why she’d been so violent then. The best theory was because of her growing resistance to the drugs balancing out her mating drive. Whatever the case, it wasn’t something she wanted happening again. She didn’t think the people in the room would survive if she reacted as strongly as she had then.

Dori pushed away the memory with difficulty, focusing on Etherson’s request. “I’ll be there shortly.” She released the ‘send’ button and hooked the box to her belt before she could throw it across the room. Facing Merrick, she gave him an apologetic look, hoping he would somehow understand.

“I was correct,” Merrick said, matter-of-factly. He hid the largest portion of his feelings on this, not wishing her to pick up on its true extent. Unused the passions of a Zyan male, he wouldn’t force her to face them until he could suppress them no longer. She’d faced enough of it with him so far in his time with her and didn’t need anymore of it thrust upon her if he could help it.

“I’m sorry, but I can’t help this development.”

Merrick sat up, reaching out to catch her by the wrist to draw her to him. “I will allow your absence, but you must meet my price.” His thumb caressed the sensitive flesh of her inner wrist, raising chills. “One sweet kiss from those tempting lips, Dori.”

He sense her mull that over, almost purring when he sensed the moment she agreed. Allowing her to come to him proved his hardest struggle, but he managed to accomplish it. She dipped her head to brush her lips across his, making him purr. When she shivered, he couldn’t resist his demand and seized her mouth for a more passionate exploration. He growled his claim to her against her lips, letting her know the true depth of his hunger for her.

Merrick slid his hands over her back, his whole body and being demanding he take her to the bed with him. He growled again when she moaned, the sound magnifying his needs. It left him scrambling to remember he couldn’t allow this to go any further until fate allowed it. Fate and their fertility god, Kashee, were not being at all kind to him in testing him this way.

Breaking the kiss, Merrick set Dori away from him before he failed this test of his resistance. Instinct screamed at him to claim her and bind her to him. The threat of her attacking him should his attention prove unwanted tempered his lust. She wanted him now, yes, but could outdo even a Ganjan’s rage if he upset her with unwanted attention.

Their kind had strong passions, the women even more so. It was their globe of rule among the pride-clans, while males tended to protecting their family members and those they watched over. Balanced as it appeared to an outsider, it was a dangerous game to play. Attempts to manipulate another’s ‘globe’ sparked fierce reactions. And great delights when one made up for their breach.

Dori shook her head to clear it, a new wave of heat filling her, making her need spiral out of control. Her senses reeled from his searing, passionate kiss. Now, she understood how women could say the heat of a man’s kiss could make them wish to melt. She felt the same reaction to Merrick’s kiss and potent flavor. An accomplishment she could still stand with how shaky her body felt.

Duty to Etherson niggled at the back of her mind, drawing her focus. As her mind began to clear from the fog of lust the kiss caused, Dori remembered something else. Something dangerous in its importance regarding Merrick.

“You may feel some pain from me, but I must ask you to ignore it unless I send you a true impression of panic,” she explained. “One sample draws spinal fluid and, even with their advanced technology, it is still very unpleasant for our kind due to our sensitivities.”

Merrick nodded, thankful for her warning as any pain he sensed from her would endanger all here. He could temper his need to tear asunder her apparent attackers if he knew what to expect now. His own wish to appease her would aide him in that, he hoped.

“And you may explore as you will, so long as you please listen to the Hiroke if you are forbidden to go anywhere. There are very delicate experiments going on here and they will not be as forgiving to you as they are to me.”

He would have preferred to explore *her* instead of the compound, but would accept this. Grudgingly. “I will be on my very best behavior, sweeting.” At least until they were alone again. He wanted to be very naughty with her.

An unsettling thought filled his mind as he considered her words to him on what the Hiroke would be doing to her. “Why are you experimented on?” If the Hiroke dared ... he would flay them alive.

“I’m not.” She gave his hair a sharp tug in reprimand at his doubting look, hearing a hiss escape him at her dare. “I’m one of those they are taking samples from in an attempt to isolate the Feral DNA to help both the Ganjan and Zyan peoples.”

Merrick’s brow rose. “Is that why I am restricted from snooping?”

“Yes.” She braced herself for his reaction, not knowing if he would accept this.

“I will not impede their attempts then.” He knew better than to halt the Hiroke’s attempts to return the existence of the Ferals to the quadrant. No one in their right mind would dare, as the one who did suffered the greatest of revenge.

Centuries ago, the conquering Tatic race had brought their warring ways to the Feral system. Seeing all Ferals and Feral-borns as inferior, they wished to prove the whole of the races would be better off dead or enslaved. In a preemptive strike, the Tatic devastated the population of Ferals on Zy-Gan’s forest moon, Ama’Zyn, the first targets of the invasion. The reason why none claiming to be “just exploring their system” were ever treated as anything but a complete threat to the whole of the Feral System. It was the same lie the Tatic used in their first visit to the system before taking all by surprise in an attack. The Tatic were exploring for places to *conquer* not study for scientific research.

The one attack led to centuries of cold wars and all-out land and spatial battles costing billions of lives on both sides. Though not as much as it had those of the Feral System, due to a nerve gas the bastards used to wipe out the biggest part of the Ferals in their initial battles. A nerve gas mostly harmless to the Zyn and Feral-borns, but lethal to the Ferals.

The last of the Ferals fell in focused attacks on them in the wars following until only the Zyn, Zyan, and Ganjan remained. While the Zyan and Ganjan survived, they lost the whole of their parent race even as they managed to force their enemy into retreat. The Zyn were thankfully spared the same nightmare.

Though not known during the war, the loss of the Ferals cost both child races more than the war had itself. Many of the strongest of their warriors had fallen in the first century of the war and, with them, the part of their genetic makeup responsible for forming the female became severely damaged. The cost of the war showed in how the mate-hunt for females had changed. Where before it was a test of strength and ended in the defeat of one male and the female choosing one to take as lover, now those battles had changed.

More often, one male didn’t survive the fight, even among the Zyan. Something that rarely happened before. Outer bonds, ones in which a Feral-born bonded to one of another race, had become more commonplace as well. These bonds were never as

recognized as normal mating bonds, despite the true links formed between the male and the female. A very disturbing change that showed the Zyan and the Ganjan just how much their war cost them. And made them long to see the whole of the Tatic pay for all of their crimes against their people and other innocents they'd destroyed.

Merrick tried not to consider anything about the war, the Ferals' genocide, or any of those who had gone missing during, and even after, the wars. It brought him back to the unsettling thoughts on *how* their people were being captured. Some of those captured had been from Merrick's own pride-clan, both from the war and from simple explorations off-world, including searches for the missing ones. Someone was using a weapon almost fool-proof against their people, and none were sure if it the Tatic were behind it or someone else. Rumors of what the weapon could be left Merrick shaken to the core.

The thoughts and rumors always worked to send Merrick's mind into a turmoil. The only thing worse was contemplating what the Hiroke were up to, save for the good news regarding their efforts to aide their people. Their attempts to bring the Ferals back.

Bringing the Ferals back would allow the genetics of their races to have a better chance of strengthening and allowing more females to be born, if it wasn't too late for them already. It was the one experiment the Ganjan and Zyan both allowed without argument or prejudice. The Hiroke had yet to reveal *why* they were so willing to aide in the re-creating of the Feral race though, becoming a major source of debate among the whole of the Feral-borns. They all had since given up on trying to worm it out of the science-loving race as they refused to part with that secret.

"I do not like that they include *you* in their plans," Merrick told her at last, "but I will allow this." She reached out to play with the lock of hair she had pulled with his words. The action showed her delight at his acceptance of her restrictions. It made for a devastating touch as the gentle tugs sent heat straight through him. Drawing her hand away, he nipped at her wrist for her tease, making her jump.

The only thing that pleased him more than this little game of hers was how soothed her mind felt. She struggled as hard as him now in resisting her own instincts. How she managed, how *any* female did, constantly amazed him. Males never had this much strength in their fight over their passions. Why the women carried more power within the pride-clan, he was certain. No matter, he liked the spice it added to things.

"Go, my *kazi*," Merrick coaxed, hoping the voice of reason would sound sincere. "Do these tests for the Hiroke, then you may explore me to your heart's content."

She drew back from him with reluctance. He continued to watch her, his eyes caressing in their study as she made a grab for her shoes. His lips curved in a smile when he felt the affect his study had on her.

"If you continue staring at me that way, I'll never be able to leave," she warned.

Merrick forced himself to turn away, delighting in how she scolded him. He wanted to let her do her duty to the Hiroke so she would be free for whatever she wished afterward. If she didn't have such a delectable little body, he could do as she asked of him with some relative ease. As it stood, he ached to do more than merely *stare* at her. *Much* more.

"There is a preparing area just down the hall, where you can get something to eat if you're hungry," she said as she put on her shoes. "I may not be able to make it to share

first-meal with you as the samplings take awhile.”

Merrick faced her, hiding his upset at this development. “I will forgive your absence if that occurs then.” He didn’t like learning his first meal would be alone. His first chance to learn more about his female lost, this did *not* please him. She would have to make up for her absence when mid-meal came around. A whole *list* of ideas of what she could do then to accomplish that goal filled his mind. He did his best to not share it with her. Such temptation could wait until he would not be separated from her again.

“Thank you.”

The Zyan watched her as she moved toward the chamber door, his heart heavy. Every instinct in him demanded he drag her back and make her stay here. He had to fight back every last one of them, forcing himself to let her go as he knew what she did here was important. It was still not an easy thing for him to do.

He waited till she was far enough away from the corridor outside the room before going on his own explorations. If he saw her moving away from him, he would be tempted to chase after her. Instead, he moved to explore, as she had suggested. He couldn’t snoop as he would have liked, but he could learn about those here as best as his senses could tell him. The needs of his body could wait till he had more time alone with Dori.

Merrick considered the female, Dori, and found himself more and more hungry for a taste of her passion than he had ever been for *any* female. Perhaps because she had been just what he needed when injured? No, he refused to believe it to be that alone. It couldn’t be the only thing leading him now in his desires.

What he felt for her was far different than mere lust for a tempting female. This felt different than any other lure he felt from a female. The lure of his ... mate? His *true* mate, he amended. Not just someone he fancied for a fuck or two. Or *several* in Dori’s case.

A deep grin crossed Merrick’s face. Ah, she would not be able to resist the lure of the bond for long. His reactions to her were that of the mating demand. She was his mate. He could taste it in the air--feel it deep in his soul. She was the one made for him by the gods.

No wonder his pursuits had been fruitless till now for his mate. She had been cloistered away from him by the Hiroke. Well, not for long if he had any say in the matter.

As Merrick explored the corridors, memorizing them for later use, he hissed as pain filled his back. Dori now underwent the spinal tap she’d warned him of at the hands of her keepers. It took everything in him to not track her down and kill those who dared to touch her and cause her such pain. He reminded himself why she underwent this, to save their people and their sibling race, and his resolve to resist strengthened. Still, he didn’t like the means by which the salvation came. Not when it involved *his* female.

Merrick scented fresh flowers and fruit as he passed a doorway. Pausing, he returned to it and pressed a control on the wall beside it. The door opened to reveal something most unexpected and he purred at the sight of it. A large and grand garden lay hidden in this sea of sterile, cold metal, the sweet scents of it escaping from a slightly faulty seal. A most welcome surprise for him.

In the distance, Merrick could just make out the frosty, turquoise and green leaves of the *teezee* orchard where the *kazi* bulbs bloomed. A name fitting the trees as they *teased* any Feral-borns who saw them and scented their sweet aroma. *Kazi* bulbs were a paw-shaped fruit as white as snow with a rich, smoky-sweet flavor Merrick enjoyed. They were what the Ferals had called “aphrodisiacs,” and a very dangerous one for them. One of the few that had truly affected them and lost to them their control. While not as strong for the Zyan or Ganjan, they still needed to enjoy them in moderation and ensure a lover or their mate was nearby to soothe the hungers it created.

Merrick’s own instincts kept him from being tempted to go near them. He didn’t need anymore hunger for Dori than he already did. The bare minimum of control left in him, he needed. His female needed him in control if he was to make her grant him her surrender for the bonding mark. A mark no female willingly submitted to without some delicious coaxing by her male.

Still, he eyed the orchard with interest. He could have sworn he heard the fruit calling to him, daring him to come taste some, promising to not away steal the last of his control. With difficulty, he turned his gaze from the orchard and looked back to the remainder of the garden before he could no longer resist the lure.

Flowers of every color filled the garden, scenting the air with their sweet fragrance. Well-manicured trees, bushes, and soft grass gave the illusion of a native forest, benches and a few other inorganic devices the only things shattering the image.

Most impressive. Merrick never would have thought the Hiroke would mirror the castle gardens so closely. This pleased him deeply. Yes, he and Dori would be visiting this place soon. He wished to compliment her beauty with this one.

Sealing the door again, he continued on his explorations. However, he was growing distracted as the scent of the fruit he breathed in from the garden made him begin considering seeking out something to nibble on. *Besides Dori*, he scolded himself with a smile.

Merrick wanted to share first-meal with Dori, but his hunger for food proved stronger than his wish to wait and share her company. He could also sense her keepers were already providing her with her own meal, even as they continued to collect their samples. Not the way he would wish anyone to have a meal of any sort, though she *had* warned him this *could* happen.

*You owe me a shared meal, my kazi*, he sent to her, his tone as scolding as his wish to play allowed him.

*As you wish, but only if you go eat now*, she sent back, the reprimand in her tone light but unmistakable.

He couldn’t help his grin. *As my dejah commands*. He headed for the preparing area she had spoken of, wanting to please her so she wouldn’t deny his wishes about a shared meal later. Being denied again wasn’t a penance he wanted to earn. It would make him even more furious over losing this one. And probably get him into more trouble with her for that slip.

When Merrick entered the preparing area, he resisted the hiss rising in him when he found several young Hiroke here. He saw some Delavan, a neutral race in a neighboring system, working here as well. It was interesting to find them here, but not



unusual as the Delavan could often be found working with the Hiroke and other races. The race had a connection to the Hiroke none had ever really revealed with any satisfactory answers. Something that irked Merrick almost as much as the Hiroke's secrecy did. Though he liked the Delavan and even dallied with a few of their females in his quests for lovers and a mate. It left him a little more willing to overlook that irksome quality more than any other might.

The Delavan resembled the natives of Ama'Zyn, a human race the Ferals pursued on Zy-Gan's forest moon as lovers, even mates. They were one of the few races similar enough to the Ama'Zyn, or *Zyn* humans, as they called themselves, that could mate with all Feral-borns and even bear children by them. Merrick's reason for pursuing them in the first place. Many of the Delavan females were also very beautiful and could be *very* naughty with their lovers.

Merrick shook off his musings as he focused on following his *dejah's* command of him. He didn't need to ruin his appetite by thinking of the Ferals as it would always turn his thoughts toward the Hiroke. There were enough reminders with all the Hiroke here conducting experiments, he didn't want to push it.

One Delavan female approached him and offered him a basket of various fruits, as if she already knew why he was here. It made him wonder if Dori had warned the female of coming visit and to be ready for him. He wouldn't put it past her and delighted in the care she felt for him in doing so.

"My thanks to you, young one," Merrick said, taking the basket from her. This one was a lovely blond-haired female and would have come under his wish to pursue as a lover were it not for Dori. He had no intention of pursuing another female now that he'd found the one he wanted as his lover and mate.

"I am called Paige," she said.

"Among other things," a young Hiroke male said in passing. "Clumsy, flighty--" He jumped when Paige bounced a fruit off his head.

Merrick chuckled.

"Ignore him," Paige said, annoyed.

"A good shot, Paige," Merrick praised. He examined his basket as the Delavan scooted away, blush coloring her face and throat.

There were *kazi* bulbs in the basket. Merrick wanted to laugh aloud at the sight of them. Having already decided to resist going and sampling of them, Paige had dared to give him a new temptation to resist in them. Oh well, he wouldn't upset her by refusing them.

Merrick collected a few more things for his meal before heading back toward Dori's chambers. As he did, he sampled of his meal, soothing the pain of his hunger. He ate none of the *kazi* bulbs. It would be better for everyone here if the first person he saw under their influence was Dori.

\* \* \* \*

With her tests completed, Dori went looking for Merrick, going against the advice of the Hiroke, who wanted her to rest in her quarters. She felt fine and knew she would be all right as she had faced these tests many times before. She would just be a little tired and achy for awhile, then all would be well.

Besides, the golden fungus would be ready for harvesting now. It made a clay she used in her mosaics, but had to be collected quickly if she didn't want to fight off animals for it. She'd already lost out on the last harvest when she had been down due to more rigorous tests. Tests meant to balance out her mating demand and counter the resistance it continued to build against the drugs used to control it.

They had been forced to raise the dosage of the drug, but made her ill before she adjusted to the sensation of it working in her. By the time she had been able to go outside, all the fungus had been eaten or in such shambles it was useless to her. It had *not* made her happy with anyone here and they all avoided her for several days afterward.

"Have you seen Merrick," she asked an approaching Hiroke. "The male Zyan, I mean." She wanted to keep the woman from having to ask anyone else. She didn't need any lectures about disobedience. They took up too much time and got quite loud more often than not.

"I believe I saw him returning to your chambers some time ago with a basket of food," the woman said.

"Thank you," Dori headed for her chambers, trying not to run.

"You need rest, Dori. I *know* you just underwent some tissue sample collections. No games."

"Don't start."

The Hiroke continued on her way, a smile crossing her face. Dori's defiance this time pleased her as it was for legitimate reasons. She, among others, had been hoping and praying for a male Zyan, or even a Ganjan, to somehow show up here Dori might desire. She would have chosen a better way than how the male had arrived though. Dori had enough pain in her life without seeing the result of a pride-clan battle of dominance.

He may have hidden it from everyone, especially Dori, but all here knew Etherson wanted Dori mated. He wanted the threat posed by her mating drive ended. The drug balancing it was becoming less and less effective and risked her life the longer this went on.

Though her finding her mate risked Dori leaving her, the Hiroke here knew Etherson didn't care. He would rather lose her presence here than have her die because of their mistake with the *teezee* orchard. He'd almost burned it to the ground before remembering why it was there.

The sooner Dori found her mate, the better. Etherson's life would be at risk if Dori died from something that could have been prevented. He cared for her as if she were his own child and would kill to protect her if it came to that.

\* \* \* \*

It didn't surprise Dori to learn Merrick hadn't continued in his explorations of the compound after getting something to eat. He must have been well finished with his meal by now and awaiting her return. He wanted to explore *her*, *not* the compound. She spotted a time-keeper on the wall and staggered to a halt. *Hours* had passed since she first went to the Hiroke for the tissue samples. Merrick definitely would have been done with his explorations as it wouldn't have taken *that* long for him to complete them. She only hoped he wasn't too out of his mind with her long absence.

The thought of him exploring her upon her return sent shivers up and down her

spine and she picked up her pace toward her chambers. She didn't want to run as she would pass out before she got there from the drain of all the Hiroke had put her through earlier. Then she would face the greatest of lectures: One part about her not listening to the advice given to her after the tests, the other for making herself worse for ignoring the advice in the first place.

No, not the way she wished to spend her afternoon.

\* \* \* \*

With difficulty, Merrick resisted eating any of the *kazi* bulbs. He would wait for her to return before enjoying any of them with her. That alone aided in his resistance as he knew from experience of how much fun the bulbs could be in the games of pleasure.

Sensing his mate returning, Merrick purred in pleasure. Finally! She was free from her keepers prods and pokes at long last. He could enjoy her alone and continue where they had left off earlier finally. He could explore her after he'd allowed her the same courtesy. His innocent, skittish little female needed her chance to play with him before he asked anything more of her.

Feeling something in his hand, Merrick looked down to see a *kazi* bulb in it and smiled. Eager to play with Dori under its influence, he'd grabbed one without realizing it. His smile deepened into a grin and he turned his full attention to the chamber door. Oh well, some females liked such eagerness in their males. And most definitely when they were in the mating fever as Dori was.

"Those fruits are dangerous, Merrick." Dori said upon entering, seeing him the *kazi* bulb he held.

Merrick frowned. He would have much preferred a "hello" rather than a scolding from her. Or perhaps something more stimulating. "Have you ever tasted one, *dejah*?" he asked.

"Actually, yes. It's not an experience I want to repeat."

Merrick chuckled in amusement. What sort of trouble must she have gotten herself into, he wondered, if she didn't wish to relive it?

"I believe they are the cause of my mating demand waking prematurely when I was seven."

"Possible. Now though, you can answer every demand of them with me here to grant them to you." He wanted suddenly to see her lost to her demands under the influence of the *kazi* bulbs.

"Merrick, *no*."

The Zyan paused at the force of her denial. "What bothers you so, Dori?" He could sense no embarrassment of past events about the fruits. He sensed fear more than anything else, confusing him.

"I'm allergic to the fruit and would have a violent reaction to it if I were to eat it."

Surprised, Merrick could only stare at her for a moment. While he *had* heard of such an allergy before, he hadn't ever encountered anyone with it before.

"I can enjoy the scent of the fruit and touch it all I want, but ever since my first sampling of it, I became highly allergic to the meat of the fruit. Etherson believes it to be a reaction to the drug used on me to save my life to halt the progress of my mating demand's early waking."

"Is it reversible?" he asked. He resisted throwing the lot of the fruit out of the window. If he gave into that, he probably wouldn't stop there. He had a feeling he'd attack the whole of the orchard for this allergy.

"No. It's the sacrifice they were forced to make in order for the treatment to work."

Merrick set the fruit back down in its basket, staring at her. "Why on Zy-Gan do they grant you access to it?" He tried not to roar out the words in his exasperation.

"I'm the only one who can tell when those in the orchard are ripe and it's used in some of their experiments. One helps to soothe the cramps women face during their monthly bleeds ... what?" His wicked grin confused her.

"I never thought of the Hiroke as naughty."

"Oh!"

Dori couldn't believe him. His silky, amused purr unnerved her. She stalked away fuming, missing Merrick's deepening grin. She grabbed a basket and began putting linens and bags of varying sizes in it. She ignored Merrick, his teasing not amusing in the face of so serious a conversation.

"What are you doing?" he asked. She could feel him watching her as she gathered her things together, all amusement gone.

"I need to go outside for awhile," she told him. She turned to look at him, feeling his sudden upset. "Alone, please?" she added in a gentle voice.

Merrick looked even more confused and wounded at this turnabout. "And just why must you go outside now, *dejah*, and alone?" He didn't want her to leave him for *any* reason, or *any* length of time. He wanted her to stay so that he could learn more about her and to tempt her into continuing what they'd tried to begin before being separated.

"I need to go gather some more golden fungus," she said. "My mosaic isn't finished and clay from the fungus is my tool for creating it."

Merrick once more looked over at the Zy-Gan sunset mosaic and smiled. He turned back to her and his smile deepened. "I will allow this, Dori," he said. "but be wary of anything outside that may try to tempt you away from here. You are safe here and dangers outside these walls are many." If she followed his one rule, he would allow her to go alone. Otherwise, she *would* have company, whether she wanted it or not.

"You sound like Etherson."

He snarled at her, indignant. Even knowing the kind of people the Hiroke were to Dori, he did *not* like being compared to one ... for *anything*. "Remind me to spank you when you return for those words."

That wasn't much of a threat, knowing how much enjoyment they'd both get from it. She shook off the desire filling her with as she tried to decide on a way to help keep Merrick occupied for the time she would be away. "There are some books on the bookcase in the corner if you wish to read something while I'm away."

"Thank you." He watched her go, reminding himself that she *would* be back in an attempt to quell the instinct demanding he go after her and force her back. Instead, he moved to the bookshelf to find himself a distraction.

A smile crossed Merrick's face when he saw a few of the books were romance novels--some a little worn from several reads. Ah, her source for the education she had

mentioned to him. Well, he would just have to read one and test her later on what she should have learned from it. And reprimand her in a most delicious way on what she missed.

The smile became a wicked grin at the thought. Yes, he would do just that to his little *kazi*. It would tell him *far* more about her than snooping here could. And keep him from upsetting her as well. His naughty wish felt all the better with such a thought.

## Chapter Nine

Merrick had just picked out his book to read and seated himself at a table when he sensed an overwhelming panic a moment before a flurry of knocks sounded at the door. He set the book aside and sprang from his chair, rushing to the door. His mind reached out to find Dori's at the same time to ensure himself she was safe. He felt her heading for the front doors, calm and readying herself for the golden fungus harvest.

The young woman, Paige, from the preparing area stood outside the door, looking frantic. Fear poured off of her in waves, blotting out everything in him. Drowning him in it.

"The bulbs ... I made a mistake! She's allergic to them! They were meant for the experi--" She fell silent when Merrick held up a staying hand.

"Breathe," he commanded in a soft voice. He waited till she had taken several deep breaths to calm down. "Dori warned me of her allergy to the fruit," he said, using his tone to calm the frantic Delavan. "Neither she, nor I, sampled any of the fruit."

"Oh good." She still sounded out of breath--still a little panicky.

"Calm, child. You will not be punished. You have one of the harder tasks here to tend to. Mistakes happen and you are forgiven for this error." His words looked as though they were beginning to work to calm the poor female. "Wait here a moment," he said. "And you are forbidden to scare yourself over this while I am away."

"Yes, sir."

Merrick smiled as he moved back into the chambers and retrieved the basket, double-checking to ensure all the bulbs were still in it. He returned to Paige and passed the basket to her, feeling her fear drain away as a whole once she had hold of the fruit again.

"Thank you," she said, then rushed away, amusing Merrick.

Closing the door, he returned to the table where he'd left the book he wished to read. The little Delavan female wasn't what he expected and he found her quite amusing. Her total panic and concern for Dori pleased him.

\* \* \* \*

Dori paused when she felt Merrick's mind brush across hers. The caress of his mind on hers was so brief, she knew he only assured himself of her safety. She wondered just what he was up to, but decided to let it go until later. If she didn't go out and collect the golden fungus now, she risked the forest animals getting to it first. The ones the guards kept from entering the compound and endangering everyone with well-placed stun blasts.

So long as no Sira beasts came near. The reptilian-feline *things* were one of the few true threats of the animal world here, aside from the reclusive, spiny *jasarpi*. Sira beasts, though, preyed on people as well as their normal diet, even before they were too old to hunt. They could be controlled by the stun blasts as well, but she never carried

pulse guns and the beasts could move *very* fast. With the fungus, she would be more of a target than any of the guards as the Sira beasts actually preferred the fungus to humanoid flesh.

Exiting the compound, Dori sighed as the cool air brought by the storm caressed her. It helped to cool some of the heat that had become a permanent part of her body of late. She moved to the trees nearest the compound to begin collecting the fungus. Allowing herself to sample a small piece of it, she began to fill her basket with it and some flowers and herbs for making paints.

For every clump of golden fungus she pulled off each side of the trees, Dori dropped a couple of good pieces into a basket by them. One of the guards would later collect the lot of them and throw the pieces into the forest at the compound's perimeter. There, it would be at a safe enough distance away from them it didn't put anyone at risk from the animals seeking it. Her somewhat unconventional offering to Kashee as the Hiroke made her stop putting them and flower garlands she'd made on and around the statue they'd put up for her in their garden. They compromised on the larger-than-life statue of a nude god in the middle of their garden, but drew the line at her making offerings there. Maybe because the garlands went on his permanently erect penis and not on his head, as they thought they should.

This way of offerings to him was better anyway as the animals seeking it had a chance at it. And her garlands always fell apart shortly after she put them on Kashee's statue. She was better at making the tiles she crafted from the golden fungus than making things with flowers. *The tiles never fall apart, anyway*, she thought ruefully.

"If you didn't do that as you did, Dori," a guard nearby said as she dropped another piece of fungus into the collection bucket. "You would stand a better chance of making more mosaics than you already do."

"And I'd insult Kashee by denying him his sacrifice this way," she pointed out. "I can't do that." She continued onto the next tree, missing the guard's smile as he shook his head at her explanation.

The crop was good enough this month she was able to give a bite of the fungus to each guard she passed by. A show of her appreciation of all they did here, along with her apology again for their being attacked. It had a citrus-meaty flavor and very healthy for one to eat.

As she explored, Dori began to get the unsettling sensation that someone watched her as she moved. She'd been stalked by enough Sira beasts intent on both her and her cache of golden fungus to be use to it. This time, however, it felt very different. Not like a Sira beast at all. A guard stood near to her, scanning the area around them, but she wasn't the source of what Dori felt now. This felt malevolent.

The guard didn't look overly concerned over anything she picked up in his scans, so there should not have been anything around to rattle Dori this way. Yet, her anxiety remained filling her with it. Along with an unsettling sense of great danger.

In the back of her mind, she wondered if it was someone seeking Merrick. The "shadow and betrayal" he said caused his presence here and the wounds he had suffered, maybe?

With that in mind, she reached out with her thoughts to try and find the spy.

Strange. It was gone. Not “got up and left”--just *gone* gone. The spy had vanished completely.

The impulse to go investigate filled her further, but she pushed the idea away even as it niggled at her more and more strongly. She didn't know what lurked in the forest here or if the spy had really gone or just somehow shielding their mind from her and lying in wait to capture her. No, she wouldn't allow curiosity to lead her to near certain doom.

Merrick and Etherson were right. She was safe here and vulnerable out in the forest. If a danger lurked out there to her or to Merrick, it would be best for her to stay far away from it. Instead, she made a quick walk around the compound to gather a few more caches of fungus and coloring herbs. The presence didn't return, but it didn't need to. The initial sensation of whoever lurked out there left her rattled enough she scared herself more than a return visit by the spy could.

Unable to stand the unsettling feeling of the spy's return and the thought of them doing more than just staring at her, she decided against collecting anything more. The collecting of the coloring agent plants she needed for her tile-making could wait. She wanted to get back inside where she knew she would be safer. She wanted to return to Merrick and knew some of the plants she needed could be found in the garden. Merrick's presence would calm her, she hoped, and chase away this vulnerable feeling.

\* \* \* \*

Tark reappeared out of the female's range, a smile crossing his face. His body still recovering from the drain of turning the trio on Merrick, this teleportation had set his recovery back another step. No matter. His hunt for the exiled leader looked like it would be ending in failure, the rain washing away the trail, but he no longer cared about that.

A female in season had now become his focus, not Merrick. She picked the golden fungus from around a Hiroke compound and had sensed his presence. Harvesting golden fungus was playing with fire more often than not. It carried a great risk of being attacked by any number of creatures who fed on the meaty fungus. Even protected as the little thing appeared to be, the danger didn't lessen all that much. It just granted her the more likely outcome of being wounded, rather than being killed before being eaten herself.

Both this harvesting such a thing and her sensing him with such ease impressed Tark. Her being guarded by the Hiroke, however, added a complication he didn't need. Capturing his future mate would be interesting indeed with their presence. He would have to come up with a way of occupying them as he took their guest away.

Tark kept finding himself wondering just where Merrick had gone as he had yet to find the dead or dying ex-leader, even as he thought about capturing his mate. It would have amazed him if the Zyan had made it this far. He had seen the fallen chieftain's wounds as Merrick staggered off to find somewhere to die. Merrick would need a will forged by the gods themselves to have made it this far. It left Tark curious of just where Merrick could be, as he wanted to bring the male's head back to the pride-clan as proof of his defeat over the Zyan. He also wanted to quell a rebellion against himself he could already feel growing within it. Merrick no longer ruled them and he wanted them all to learn that lesson. Killing them could wait until it remained as his only option of ridding



himself of any further threat before he turned his attention of more power and more control.

“Clea?” he called, sensing the Ganjan-Zyan hybrid as she moved behind him.

The beautiful, silver-blond haired female moved to stand before him, letting him look over her delicious, curvaceous body. She was at least twice his age, though such things never mattered amongst their races as they could live for centuries. Clea had been his first teacher when it came to learning control of some of his psionics and about pleasures of the flesh.

“You’ve strained your energies, my leader,” she said, clucking her tongue at him as she reached out to caress the side of his face. “Are you all right?”

“I will be in a moment.” He caught her by the hand and tugged her closer, guiding it down his body to cup the bulge of his cock. Her hand tightened against him and he gave a low groan of pleasure, watching her lips curving in a smile when he met her gaze again. She had a *nice* touch.

“On the condition that you use none of your more draining psionics until you are recovered.” she said, tugging her hand free of his grip before moving away.

Tark followed after her, smiling his delight, even as he growled low in his throat to keep away any rivals to her favors. He knew never to question a lover’s rules unless he could manipulate them to better suit his purposes with her. This time, however, he knew she was right. He needed to rest and let his mental energy replenish itself. The rest would just have a bit of fun attached to it with Clea to keep him comfortable, though she would most likely make him work for it, as well.

\* \* \* \*

Merrick looked up from the book as Dori came in. He sensed anxiety pouring off of her, but resisted speaking when she breezed past him, pausing just long enough to feed him a bite of the golden fungus. He licked his lips at the taste of it, watching her as she continued on her way without a word. She moved to her worktable with the basket she’d taken with her. Golden fungus filled the basket, along with many plants meant for pigment making. He winced when she opened a pan of liquid and put the fungus in it before sealing it back.

The liquid would make the fungus inedible, and change it from a fragile fungus into a sturdy clay. She did indeed make her own clay and used it in all the mosaics he had come across in his explorations. Including the sunset growing across her wall. Impressive.

“All their technological know-how, and they *still* can’t make that stuff smell any better,” she muttered. “Yecch!”

Merrick’s amusement at her opinion on this was tempered by what upset Dori outside. He didn’t like how strong it felt. Something happened outside and he wanted to know what.

“Dori?” he asked, concerned when she didn’t face him or say anything more. Her duress made his upset rise and his need to attack the one who caused this grow stronger.

“Someone was out there.”

Dori hadn’t meant to blurt out the words, but they just came out. She faced him, letting him see her, needing to look at something that could help send away her fears.

Black rage stole across Merrick's face. Before it could make her run, he forced it away and she was able to resist the impulse.

"I felt someone watching me, but when I tried to sense where they were and who, they were gone," she explained.

\* \* \* \*

Tark. The cub had the ability to teleport from place to place, and used it to his advantage, despite the draining affect it had on him. He was spying on Dori? Merrick swallowed his curses--they wouldn't help matters any and would only serve to rattle his already jittery mate. Strong of will as she felt, he knew Tark would prove more than she was ready to face now.

His pride pride-clan wasn't much more than a mile or so away, their hunting ground reaching well past here. Their sense of smell very strong, Tark no doubt scented Dori's need and been drawn in as she collected the golden fungus. Many of the males, if not all of them, now hunting on their lands could have scented her desire. The thought made Merrick give a low growl in his rising anger.

He wanted to roar his rage at the Ganjan for both scaring Dori as he had and daring to pursue her here. Well, he could forgive the second, as the males had no control over their reactions when it came to a female's estrus. However, scaring Dori *was* in Tark's control and the bastard would have been able to prevent it upon sensing her alarm. It proved to Merrick the fool's character if he vanished only when Dori tried to sense where he hid from her. All Feral-born males knew how to approach an already skittish female, even if they couldn't control their reactions to her. Ingrained within them from well into their distant past, it protected them from being attacked by her in her fear.

"Mine," he growled, pulling Dori into his lap. He knew she'd never leave him for anyone like Tark, but instinct dictated he not allow her to be swayed by a rival.

"Merrick?"

"Mine!" He seized her hips, forcing her closer to him as he growled in his anger of her ignoring his claim.

Dori jumped at his snarl and laid her hands on his shoulders. "Calm, Merrick." She snuggled her face into his neck, nuzzling him there. One hand moved to caress his cheek, soothing away the tension she felt beneath the soft skin. She then moved her lips to his ear as he began to calm. "I want only you," she whispered.

His reaction should have chased her from the room. Instead, she felt the need to reassure him of his place in her life. The feeling confused her, even as it felt right at the same time.

Dori had the feeling she'd just encountered the second male for her mate-hunt. She wanted to ask Merrick if he knew who this other male was. She wanted to keep her hearing more and pushed the idea right out of her mind.

Instead, she purred low, nuzzling his throat again. She sensed him calming, but he still felt ready to attack. "I want only you, Merrick," she repeated, hoping to prevent that.

Merrick gave a rumble of pleasure, tension in his body melting with her reassurance. Except the delightful one she inspired in him. He released her when she drew back, smiling up at her when she stood up again and took a step back from him. His thoughts returned to this newest threat in their lives and he grew serious again.

"I want you to remain in the compound and only visit the outdoors in the garden till your spy is found and dealt with." he said, getting to his feet.

"Should I tell Etherson?" she asked.

"I will tell him. I think I know who is doing the spying. Will you be all right for a brief time alone?"

He didn't want to leave her. Instinct demanded he stay here and ensure Tarke didn't swoop in and steal her away. It angered him that he had to risk that to warn someone of Tark's threat. It went against the traditions of the mate-hunt.

Well, with Dori being raised by and living with the Hiroke, the traditions were already being broken. This was just the latest shift in it.

*No, I don't want to be alone.* Dori silenced the thought as it formed, not wanting Merrick to know the full extent of her total panic. She knew he would sense her fear, but hoped his wish to speak to Etherson proved stronger than his wish to console. If he moved to comfort her now, in her present state, she would crumble. She could stand to be alone for a little while. It would help her to collect herself and not look anymore pathetic before him.

Etherson needed to know this and if Merrick stayed here, he couldn't explain it without making her feel worse when he used her comm box to convey this development. Instead, she forced herself to nod to him. "If you will tell me as well when you return." She would let herself remain calm while he was gone if he did this for her.

"I will tell you," Merrick promised. "Remain here and indoors until I return. I will try not to be gone very long."

He sealed his promise with a kiss. While brief, it burned her with the passion it carried. It almost made her stop him as he made his way out of the room. Dori held herself back, remembering what he'd said and what had just happened. He wouldn't have reacted so strongly if this rival wasn't a danger to *everyone* here, not just himself. She could wait. His promise helped her to trust that he would do just as he said he would.

Needing a distraction from the direction of her thoughts, Dori turned her attention to the book Merrick had been reading. Paper stuck out of it, like a bookmark. Only there were a great many of them sticking out of several places in the book, as if marking off a multitude of spots read by him. She wondered just what he had marked off in the book this way.

Picking it up, she looked at a few of the marked off areas, curious. She slapped the book shut, color rising up her throat. Dropping the book back onto the table, she cleared her throat, trying to dash the shock from her mind. Any calm the storm-cooled air outside granted her was gone now by her discovery.

Merrick had chosen a romance novel to read. The pages placed in the book marked off every love scene in the book he must have skimmed to find in his brief reading of it. A wonder to her he'd managed to leave the room with the ease he had. Hungry for her as he'd been *before* her leaving, the book would have pushed him over the edge of even *his* control.

The thing that shocked her more were the myriad of smaller pages of handwritten notes accompanying the 'bookmarks'. Pages detailing ideas along the same lines of what the off-world scribe had written. *His*, though, were far more burning in what they did to

Dori than the scribe's words had. He was very creative in his additions for those scenes from the brief look she got of his notes.

Whether he critiqued the author in this, or just being naughty, she couldn't say. All she *did* know was that if he intended to try any of the ideas on anyone, it had better be her. If he dared try them with another, she vowed to lay open a few places on his flesh. She kind of liked the ideas she'd read before closing the book and refused to let him use them elsewhere.

\* \* \* \*

Heading for Etherson's office, Merrick tried not to think about Tark getting to Dori. She was innocent of how conniving and manipulative Tark could be and the danger the cub posed to her, as well as everyone else in his path. She could be harmed deeply by the stupid fool and his allies in Merrick's pride-clan.

This tipped his reasons for killing Tark up another notch. He wouldn't suffer the male scaring his mate and spying on her without retaliation. He knew Tark wouldn't stop there, though. When he learned Dori belonged to Merrick, the cub would no doubt target her and try to steal her away for that alone. Just because she was Merrick's mate. Tark wished nothing more than to destroy him, not just kill him, as his actions with the pride-clan suggested. Stealing Dori from him would accomplish that goal with what a mate meant to his kind. She was his link to sanity and to feeling complete, as he was for her. They couldn't easily live without each other.

Merrick paused when he saw an office bearing Etherson's name. Glyphs along the walls written in Hiroke as well as the Guild language, spoke truthfully in their guidance, pleasing him. He had not expected the directions to be so easy. Still, he studied the door to assure himself this *was* the correct place. Etherson's name was written by the door in the dual glyphs, along with the Hiroke symbol for leader.

Even as much as he hated their race, he wouldn't put them through the danger of what Tark represented. They didn't deserve the danger he would bring to them. The Hiroke didn't need a Ganjan like Tark getting hold of any of their creations to be used against those here or on the general populace. A nightmare scenario that scared Merrick in what it could cost the whole of Zy-Gan.

Just as he moved to tap the "call" button, the door came open and he saw Etherson standing there. He was left staring at the man, unable to speak in his surprise. Distracted, he hadn't sensed the male's approach.

"Yes," the Hiroke asked. "What can I do for you?"

"Did I interrupt something?" Merrick asked. He didn't know if the man had sensors in his office or not and actually felt intrusive for distracting him.

"No, I was just on my way to get something to eat. Come in." He stepped aside to let the Zyan into his office.

"My apologies, then." Merrick didn't like upsetting the male, as the Hiroke had helped save his life. His memory was clear enough to let him recall Etherson's voice ordering him to be seen to at Dori's request.

"I'll be fine." Etherson closed the door and returned to his desk, seating himself behind his desk. He gestured to the chair opposite, curious when the Zyan moved to it, but didn't sit. He felt the need to introduce himself, but the very look of his visitor and his

stance put the idea out of his mind. Something was wrong.

"I must speak to you on what brought me here. More to the point--*who*."

"Another Feral-born, I would assume. Your wounds suggested a rite of challenge." He'd seen the evidence shared among his people when it came to this aspect of Feral-born ways. Like many of his colleagues, he found the file disturbing, the visuals within it stomach turning.

"True, but mine endangers more than myself or my pride-clan."

"Go on." Rarely did a battle for dominance prove dangerous to any but the pride-clan leader.

"His name is Tark," Merrick said. "In an attempt to capture control of my pride-clan, he manipulated two Zyan males and a Ganjan male into attacking me to kill me for him. I survived only because it wasn't the other way around."

"Is Dori in danger?" Etherson asked. Though impressed about this news, his concern went first to his young charge.

"What is she to you?" Merrick wasn't sure he liked how the Hiroke felt about Dori. He didn't like how strong his connection felt to her. A connection stronger than it should have been for her being his means to an end with their experiments here.

"The Tatic captured my family on their way to visit me in an attempt to make me create weapons for them," the Hiroke said. "My wife, my son, who wasn't much older than you appear, and ... my baby daughter."

Merrick felt pain swell in the man before him. Strong enough it forced him to sit down before it made him collapse. He didn't have to ask to know the Tatic had killed Etherson's family.

Despite the serious nature of this conversation, Merrick couldn't help his amusement at Etherson's comment about his appearance. Though youthful in appearance, Merrick was actually fifty years old. Ferals and their child races could live well into the centuries in age due to the healing influence games of pleasure with their lovers allowed them.

"I went to try to help the Zyan and the Ganjan drive the Tatic away and to let my rage at my family's capture and death tear through the Tatic there," the man went on, oblivious to Merrick's minor distraction. "I arrived in time to see the wreck of where the village had been and a child of no more than three, barely alive. I had to chase down and capture her as one of the Tatic would have because she was so weak even a stun blast would have killed her."

Merrick already knew who the Hiroke spoke of. "Dori."

"Yes. I took her as my adopted daughter to keep safe and to ensure no one would try to take her from me for *any* reason." He sighed and rubbed the back of his neck, this past pain not one he wanted to deal with as a whole just now. He lowered his hand as he leveled a pointed gaze on the Zyan before him. "I don't know if you intend to tell Dori about this Tark or not ..."

"I intend to because I do believe she is in danger from him and I think Tark may be her second in the mate hunt. And, by the gods, I will rip his heart out before I let him get to her to even try that."

There were always at least two males per each female when it came to the pursuit

of their mates. Either could mate with her, but she was usually drawn to only one. It made for a fierce brawl between the two males to be the one to mate with her.

“You have Farin’s strength--your brother must like that.”

Merrick felt his insides fall to the floor in his shock and could only gape at the Hiroke, who gave him an amused smile. “How ...?”

“Your DNA in the blood work we did on you suggested a sibling relationship to the young king. We heard of his condition and had hoped to help him with it by using the same drug we used on Dori to save her. He accepted our offer after hearing how it helped a fellow Zyan and visited our compound for the attempt.”

“Were you able to help him?” Merrick’s shock eased at this knowledge enough he found his voice again. His brother’s mating demand had activated prematurely a few years ago. An incident that increasingly endangered the king’s life as it caused him seizures in his psionics that attacked anything around him. And sometimes even within himself, causing deep injuries.

“Unfortunately, we weren’t. Dori’s activated when she was still developing. Farin’s did too late as he was well past his teen years for us to aide him. Only taking a mate will help to save him.”

Merrick couldn’t stop his smile. “As our mother insists at any chance granted her.” Which happened to be more times than Farin could stand Merrick had heard. The man tried his best to find his mate, but she didn’t appear to be anywhere in his kingdom from what Farin could tell. And it was too dangerous for one as unstable in his psionics as Farin to leave his home where his guards could keep watch over him.

“Farin visited here and Dori never met him?” Merrick asked. It surprised him that his brother, or even Farin’s *guards*, wouldn’t insist on meeting the one who had been aided in their mating demand by the Hiroke. Or Dori to insist on meeting *them* upon learning of their presence in how eager she was for it. It made him very curious about why they had been unable to meet each other. His protective need to keep her from being taken from him with that thought notwithstanding. It may have been his brother, but he still had Dori’s interest and it proved enough of a rivalry to unnerve Merrick at the same time.

“Dori was, unfortunately, very ill from an accidental overdose on her control medications when an adjustment in it was made,” Etherson explained. “I had her placed in an isolation area to protect her immune system in case it collapsed from the overdose. The room is basically mutes everything and they wouldn’t have felt her presence, nor she sense them. I explained it to the king and his men when they inquired about her and Farin honored my insistence that she not be disturbed so that she could heal.”

“I will have to let her meet him then if he made such a personal request.”

“She knows vaguely that we tried to help Farin, but not that he visited here or asked to see her. The girl has a dangerous temper and I didn’t wish to inspire the tantrum it would bring when she learned of a chance meeting of a Zyan had been taken from her due to her medications.”

Merrick just chuckled. *All* of the Feral-born females had such tempers. It came from their hot-blooded parent race’s fierce natures.

Behind Etherson’s desk, Merrick noticed a mosaic of a woman with two young

ones, a male and a female. His family? Why would Dori have put this up *behind* the Hiroke?

“Yes, that is my wife and children.”

The Zyan looked back to Etherson, surprised by the male’s notice, even as he continued to work on one of the many files on his desk. “Why did she place it there?” he asked.

“I asked her to place it where they could watch over me and force me to turn away from my work to spend time with them.”

Merrick looked at the mosaic, then back to Etherson. “She’s very talented.”

The Hiroke smiled. “I fully believe she intends to mosaic the whole of my compound.” His smile deepened. “And if you see any here attempting to dismantle *any* of them, feel free to sling them down the corridor.”

Merrick gave a hoot of laughter, unexpected as this was from the Hiroke leader. It sounded as if Etherson was very proud of his little artist. “I shall.”

“She explained to me her family, rather her *pride-clan*, honored the gods with their creations and I would rather not bring their wrath down on any here, especially her.”

The Zyan nodded, pleased Etherson respected the Feral-borns’ cultures this much. “Which is her first?”

“This one. She began it as a gift to me for saving her life and to give me the family I lost after seeing a picture of them and asking about them. I’ve been told she crafted an image of Qirath *somewhere* since he is her family’s patron god.”

Merrick’s pride-clan had a similar “decoration” for the God of War and Warriors, but a carving instead of a mosaic. Except for Tark’s stupidity, the god had kept true danger from assailing the whole of his people. He hoped the god had blessed this place as well.

“Exactly how dangerous is Tark?” Etherson asked, changing subjects only because of his increasing anxiety over his adopted daughter’s safety.

“He’s still learning his talents, but is kin to Jareth and Blayne by connected bloodlines and inherited the telekinesis allowing for him to teleport short distances.”

“So he can enter the compound from outside scanner range without our knowledge? Lovely.”

“I will sense him.”

“Unless you’re distracted. And, my boy, I’m sorry to say, you have a *major* one.”

“That, I can’t help, but Tark is after *me* and will focus on getting to me--”

“With or without endangering everyone here?”

A low growl was his only warning that he treaded very dangerously in his questions. Etherson ignored it, knowing Dori’s safety was on the line and refused to be intimidated.

“If I could guarantee your safety and that of Dori, I would, but that’s impossible. It’s a risk that must be taken. There is no way around it. If I leave here and he finds a way to kill me, you will never be able to keep him from capturing Dori. He can plant suggestions in even Hiroke minds that can distract you long enough for him to capture her.”

“You know his emerging abilities so well?” He’d be impressed to know someone

could read another's psionic ability so well. Even their scanners weren't that precise; the knowledge learned by trial and error. And much grumbling in Dori's case.

"It's what I believe he did with my attackers. Plus, I know what those with his bloodline can do as several are in my pride-clan. Arkasa is ruled by those of the strongest bloodlines for a reason. It's so they can try and ensure the League Kingdoms stay in harmony with one another."

"Explain Arneth then."

Merrick hissed. The very mention of the dark kingdom was enough to anger him. "I can't. The king there is an idiot, but Jareth is distracted with his brother and this began with their own father as he was ... *damaged* by the death of his mate and let Arneth fall this way. Jareth is trying though, but it's slow going."

The Hiroke nodded. "Understandable. Arneth's king is strong and influential, despite his foolish turn."

Merrick nodded. "There are those seeking his first son who began the king's slide to his fury and idiocy of exiling the lot of his children. If he can be found, he may be able to end it by making his father see reason at long last."

"I pray he is found soon then before the king goes even *more* insane."

Merrick's prayer as well. Clovis needed to confront his father and *end* this at last. Stability within the League Kingdoms would strengthen *all* of Zy-Gan and would help to try and lure back the two Lost Kingdoms, Minos and Slovis, to reform the ancient League of Kingdoms.

"Does Dori know what you consider her?" Merrick's thoughts were beginning to drift back toward his mate as his priorities here were beginning to be fulfilled.

"Yes, she does. She calls me her caretaker only because it would dishonor her father's memory, in her eyes, if she were to call me that. Though she finally allowed herself to remember a title for me from your language that is a name for what I am to her as she has accepted me in a fatherly role to her."

"*Ath-toi-ja*."

"Yes. Your word for 'other father.' I had to look it up as she neglected to tell me what it meant."

Merrick chuckled in amusement. The title meant more than that. It was a title of respect for one to give another. One who they saw as a father figure to them.

"Return to Dori, and be prepared to duck if what you tell her upsets her."

Too true. Feral-born females were known to throw things at any male who upset her. Males had to use every bit of their quick reflexes to dodge any and all things she threw at him. Thinking of all the problems the Hiroke could face with a female like Dori amused Merrick. "My people, well the *males*, are trained at an early age that females tend to throw things in the throes of rage or in the mating fever."

"Do they teach you how to make the female *stop*?"

Merrick chuckled. Something told him Etherson must have faced this aspect of Dori's personality a few times. "Wait until she runs out of things to throw and re-phrase what you said to anger her. Or the same and let her come to you to answer your passions."

"You aren't helping me in the slightest, Zyan."



“Excuse me.” Merrick said with a smile, standing. At Etherson’s nod, he left the office, heading back toward Dori’s chambers.

## Chapter Ten

“You’re a naughty man, Merrick.”

She had a strange habit of scolding him when another might say “hello.” He lifted a brow in question. “I told you that I would return, *dejah*,” he said.

“That isn’t what I mean.”

“Oh? What did I do to warrant a scolding?” His eyes fell on the book she now held and he looked up at her with a sheepish smile. “Can you blame me?” he asked with a grin.

“When you go gathering ideas without my permission of what you intend to do with someone, yes.”

Merrick chuckled. He pulled the book away from her and set it aside. “I ‘intend’ to do those things to *you* and what the scribe wrote is only reference points I plan on touching on. I am merely expanding on them to make them much more enjoyable.”

Dori’s mouth went dry and she felt her stomach quiver. Some of the sex scenes in that book were already hot. Anxiety bloomed in her at the thought of hearing what he might do to make them *more* “enjoyable.” Though it sounded very nice as well.

Just as the pleasant thought of enjoying Merrick’s “additions” to the books filled her mind, Dori’s skin began to crawl in disgust. She couldn’t get the image of the one who had been spying on her out of her mind. She rubbed at her arms to try and ward off the sensation, but the feeling refused to go away so easily.

Merrick didn’t miss her distress, as she watched his eyes draw together in concern.

“What is it?”

“I feel dirty,” she admitted. It felt like the one who had spied on her had somehow polluted her. He gave a low growl, and she sensed he aimed it at the one who’d spied on her, not her. He caught her by the hand and she lifted a brow in question. “What are you up to?” She wasn’t sure she trusted the gleam now entering his eyes.

“Come, I will help alleviate your upset and that feeling with a bath.”

Dori’s eyes widened when she saw his lips curve with a wicked edge before he turned away from her. “Are you planning on being naughty?” He was incredible! She felt awful from being spied on and he wanted to seduce her? Well, now that she thought about it, that didn’t sound too horrible to her at all.

He turned to face her, looking very offended. “Certainly not. I *intend* to be *very* naughty.” He flashed her an evil smile as he tugged her along after him and into the bath chamber.

Dori allowed herself to be pulled along behind Merrick, feeling safe with him and his plans. She didn’t know why, but she knew this would help her more than anything else she might have considered to appease this icky feeling within her.

“I use cleansing oil in the bath,” she told him. She had no idea what sort of soap

he used and wanted to warn him of any danger it could cause in his plans for her. "It works better than normal soap."

Cleansing oil worked similar to soap used in hand washing, but went a step further in actively cleansing the dirt, grime, even germs from the skin. Feral-borns liked this aspect of it as the sensation proved very soothing across their flesh. It turned all of these unwanted things into a harmless foam that dissolved as the oil disapated from the water itself.

"I have used a milder form of it," Merrick said. "Choose a calming scent, but not *too* calming." He released her only when forced to, watching as she moved to a chest she kept on one of the cushioned benches against the back wall of the chamber. He tried *not* to focus on the sweet sway of her ass as she moved to the chest. It proved difficult with its hypnotic spell luring his eyes right to it. "I won't allow the spy to come any closer to you than he dared, Dori," he vowed, sensing the unease still lurking within her. "Focus only on what will be done within this chamber, not on unpleasant memories."

"I'll try," she said.

"That is all I will ask of you, sweeting." He didn't like how upset she was at Tark's spying on her. On the other hand, it pleased him at the same time. She didn't like the second in her mate-hunt. It meant that even if Tark somehow got near her, all of her instincts would work against the fool. The Ganjan already had no chance at all of winning Dori over.

Merrick suppressed his delight before it shared itself with Dori. He didn't need to go explaining this to her. She might not understand and probably wouldn't appreciate this turnabout as much as he did.

The reminder of his plans sent tingles down Dori's spine, which tightened the growing knot below her stomach. She felt ready to pop from the tight feeling within her, but knew it wouldn't happen if she didn't give into her desire for Merrick at last. Ignoring that for the moment, she opened the chest where she kept all of her things for the bath and looked through the dozens of cleansing oil vials made for her by the Hiroke and gathered by them for her from various hawkers.

One the Hiroke had crafted from a plant they called "vanilla" drew her attention first as a perfect candidate for Merrick's criteria for the oil's scent. The plant itself took forever to reach its harvest time, but she was very fond of its soothing, smoky/sweet scent. And the taste of edibles made from it.

"Found one," she said. She returned to Merrick and popped open the cap so she could hold it close to him and allow him to sniff of it in inspection. He gave a purr of approval and she smiled before she moved over to pour a generous amount into the permanently churning water of the bathing pool.

"You tempt me to nibble with that scent," he informed her.

A naughty, secret smile crossed Dori's face, knowing she wouldn't object at all to such an idea at all. She suppressed the image as it formed before her wicked guest could pick up on it. Icky as she still felt from the spy outside, she didn't want to ruin either of their fun with such an interruption as her balking in disgust brought on from an outside party.

"You'll have to wait," she told him.

Merrick growled at her. He did *not* like that word. He didn't like waiting when it came to her. "Only because I owe you this bath," he compromised, reminding himself of her discomfort. The growing scent of the oil she chose helped with his generous side. It was very soothing, but not so much that he wanted to nap. In fact, between it and Dori's own feminine musk, he felt ready to pounce on her and do everything in the book he'd perused and more.

"Thank you."

The Zyan nodded and allowed her to pull a couple of large drying linens from a cabinet before placing them on a table near the pool. Watching her reminded him of an important element still missing.

"Remain here, I will return in a moment." He left the chamber before she could summon up a protest, before moving to retrieve a dress for her and one of the outfits left for him. This didn't necessarily mean he intended for either of them to dress once their bath concluded. On the contrary, he intended them to be naked for a long time afterward and allowed to enjoy the treats of the other till they were both exhausted from the games they would play.

When he returned to the bath chamber, annoyance filled him when he found Dori already within the pool, her clothing discarded carelessly on the floor nearby. "I told you to stay put, *kazi*," he scolded, barely resisting his growl. "Not begin without me." The hair along the nape of his neck bristled with his annoyance. His first chance to see her nude had been stolen away by the impertinence and impatience of his female.

She dared to stick her tongue out at him. "I don't 'stay put' well," she explained, innocently.

"I see that." He moved to the bench where her essentials chest rested to lay the clothes down. As he set them down, he glanced into the chest at the many vials of cleansing oil she owned. One of them, marked with a *kazi* bulb on its label, drew his attention and piqued his curiosity. If his *dejah* was allergic to the fruit, how did she enjoy it in a bath? He tucked the question away for later discussion as he turned, feeling her eyes watching him very closely. The study of a female very much seeking to have her male nude to her greedy gaze.

"What do you wish of me, *dejah*?" he asked, trying not to smile at this little victory over her. Ingrained into the male, it allowed their female to feel in control for a time. To keep her from reacting in anger to what she didn't want done before she was ready.

"I wish to see all of you," she purred.

Merrick inclined his head to her, smiling his delight. "On the condition that you watch me only, sweeting," he instructed, phrasing his words with the greatest of care. "You will be allowed all the time you wish to study me with your hands, as well as your lovely eyes. For now, watch me undress for your pleasure."

Dori nodded to him, eager to watch him display himself to her. She could just remember some of the stuff she'd read about Zyan and Ganjan males and their lures to a female they desired. A favorite game of theirs to do when they had an audience, meant as a temptation to draw her in to play with for the night.

A technique that never failed the male if she remembered right. Though she

quickly grew very frustrated with his wish for her to wait to touch him as she watched his too slow unlacing of his shirt. She didn't want to wait, she wanted to touch him as he undressed for her. Even if it meant denying herself the vision of his nude form.

"Come to me, *now*, Merrick," she growled. She had no idea where this demanding being in her came from, but she knew she would not be denied her chance to touch him as he disrobed for her.

Instead of denying his feisty female her enjoyment of him, Merrick moved to stand by the pool as he removed his shirt, purring when she slid her hands over the strong muscles of his chest. Water from them trailed down the sensitive flesh, feeling like delicate fingertips sliding down toward his waist and his groin. A spot that *ached* to be touched by her now more than ever.

Bracing his hands on the stone wall of the pool, he dipped his head to claim her lips for a brief kiss. "Allow me one more moment, sweet Dori," he murmured against her lips before he moved to draw back from her.

"No." She hooked her fingers in the waistband of his breeches, tugging him back to her. She refused to let him escape so easily.

Merrick allowed her to bring him back, bracing his hands once more on the wall of the pool. She may have been an innocent, but her instincts were whispering to her the demands of a hungry female intent on getting the better of her male. The calm he could feel within her pleased him. She accepted his game so far. He had given her what she demanded of him and allowed her the chance to touch him, instead of foolishly denying her and suffering for it. And this allowed him to aide her in this mate-hunt and lead her toward what he knew she needed.

She was moving into a deeper phase of heat and it made her extremely demanding of him now. He could coax her into submission of a form if *he* played it for *her*. He *had* to if he wished to free her of the pain of heat. Otherwise, *he* would know the pain such a furious creature could cause him. She could live with her frustrations for so long before her own instincts made her attack him.

Merrick closed his eyes, leaning his head back, when Dori dipped her head to trail a long lick up his chest. She purred at the taste of him and he could have happily come right then. Meeting her halfway as she leaned her head back, he granted her another soft kiss. The stone at his fingers bit into his skin as he tightened his grip to resist grabbing her. He'd never be able to stop himself from pulling her from the water and taking her if he touched her now.

"Tempt me more," she whispered as he lifted his lips from hers again.

"Of course, my *dejah*," he purred. Only with her words did he draw back from her, knowing she would now allow his absence. No male, Zyan or Ganjan, ever refused such a request. Nor did he ever tire of it as their female always rewarded him well for his tempting. Or made him pay dearly if he refused her.

Dori looked him over as he stepped back from her. The wish demanding he come back filled her mind again, but her appreciation of his strong form pushed it away. She delighted in his strong arms and well-defined chest, both lightly dusted in dark hairs, hinting at the deadly predator lurking within. Instead of repelling her, his strength drew her in, leaving her longing to trace over the contours of his muscles. Both to learn their

form and to torment him. He exuded both strength and tenderness, telling her without words of his wish to protect her and of his ability to soothe her pains, if she let him.

She let herself purr her approval of him, watching him smile in response. He remained where he stood, allowing her to look him over. Much as she wanted him closer, and knew he wanted to be closer to her as well, she hesitated. This studying him felt important. He was also *very* nice to look at.

Merrick caught himself before he began purring like some unskilled youth with his first female. He quite enjoyed how she studied him, making the wish all the harder to resist. As she let him learn her scent at their first meeting, he allowed her to learn his form, memorizing him for all time.

“I can see all the places you desire to touch me in that wicked gaze of yours, *dejah*.” His lips parted in a grin when she paled and turned her eyes elsewhere. She was such a fun little thing to play with, he knew when they came together at last it would prove a most explosive experience. He couldn’t wait.

When Merrick turned away from her, Dori almost called out in protest, believing he meant to leave. Then he bent over as he slid his breeches down to reveal the remainder of his well-built body. His ass was simply tempting. Perfection. And his long, muscular legs made her melt at the thought of them against her. She purred at his naughtiness and her approval of his form, seeing a smile on his face as he turned to look at her again. He stepped out of his boots so that he stood fully exposed to her greedy gaze. He did indeed honor the old decree to Kashee. *How lucky for me*, she purred to herself.

“Did I feel those pretty eyes of yours on my ass a moment ago?” he drawled, drawing her gaze to his face before she could take him all in.

“No,” she said, indignant. She turned her back on him and moved to the other side of the pool. Her instinct to inspect all of him demanded she turn around again to see that most male part of him. With difficulty, she ignored the demand.

He chuckled, but she forced herself to continue to look at the wall, even as she heard him approaching.

“I didn’t think so,” he purred.

Dori bit back her moan. Her denial hadn’t sounded at all convincing, even to herself. And Merrick knew she was lying to him, even without sensing it. He knew *exactly* where her gaze had been when he bent over to remove his breeches. He’d probably done it on purpose, just to make her look at him there.

Merrick slipped into the pool, pleased when Dori faced him on instinct to see who had joined her. He moved closer to take the opportunity to draw her to him. He dipped his head to nuzzle her cheek, purring low in his throat. The tone was meant to both stimulate her and prepare her for when he would finally enter her. His psionics responded to the purr by trailing along her nerve endings to raise her need just that much more, the soft sound of her moan his sign of it working. He “helped” the water and cleansing oil to wash her as his hands caressed her skin.

He knew she felt icky from being spied on and would never forgive himself for allowing it. When she left him to go outside, he should have insisted on going with her. He now tried to make up for his failure by soothing her and stimulating her at the same time, easing her away from her anxiety.

One hand slid down to trail over her hip, fingers following the bone till he could ease them between her trim thighs to wash her pussy, which had grown very sensitive to the touch. She grabbed hold of him when he let one finger dart past the soft folds of flesh there to touch her clitoris in the gentlest of caresses. Her willingness to allow his touch pleased him, showing her growing trust of him. Her own moans took on a growling tone as they meshed with her purrs, giving it an exotic sound, delighting him. The sound of it made his need to take her spike. She whimpered in loss when he took his hand away and he couldn't stop his amused smile at her frown.

"I am here to help you *bathe*, my *kazi*," he informed her, his tone scolding. "Turn around for me."

When she did as asked, he had to brace himself, certain she would use the opportunity to torment him. He almost growled in disappointment when she surfaced without touching him. She shook her hands to knock the heavy cleansing oil off before presenting her back to him. He granted her a moment so she could wipe the water and oil away from her eyes so she could safely open them again.

Turning away from her, Merrick gathered a generous amount of soap from the built-in dispenser in the pool wall. He rubbed his hands together to build up a lather before moving to behind Dori. She purred out her delight at his touch as he worked the soap into her hair. He grinned, but resisted playing. That could wait a bit longer. Finishing the bath needed to come first.

The attention he gave her hair and scalp drove her crazy. Merrick could feel what it did to her, impressed she could remain still under the sensatin. What she felt was about half the pleasure it caused a male, and why males adored this so much. He massaged her scalp as he lathered the full length of her hair, scraping her deliciously with his nails. She probably would have already gone up in flames if it weren't for the presence of the water with his attention. It delighted Merrick all over again, tempting him to do much more and let her enjoy this all the more.

"You have such a sweet purr, Dori," Merrick murmured. He enjoyed drawing the sound from her and longed to feel it against his skin and especially around his cock. Leaning in, he sipped of her flesh as he drew closer to her. He jerked back with a groan from the mouthful of soap he got when he drew too near to her hair. "Wash off your hair, please," he said, trying to sound commanding, but failing as he tried to get rid of the soapy taste clinging to his lips and tongue.

Hiding her amusement, Dori closed her eyes and slipped under the water to rinse the soap away. She turned toward where she felt Merrick as she did, keeping her eyes closed to spare them the pain of the cleansing oil and soap. Letting her mind guide her to him, she nuzzled his groin and cock, getting a mental image of its size as she did, daring to roll her chin over the head to mark it with the scent gland there. His cock twitched at her touch and her marking of it, showing its appreciation. Merrick, however, growled at her when she surfaced for some much needed air, a scolding look on his handsome face. A look that only made her grin in amusement.

"I don't recall asking you to *tempt* me while you washed, Dori," he scolded.

The amusement in his tone belied his scolding tone, threatening to make Dori giggle at him. He looked like he'd enjoyed her bit of defiance in placing her scent mark

on him. Though the cleansing oil made the intimate gesture moot now.

"The tempting was free," she pointed out, smiling.

He shook his head at her in wry amusement. "Tempt me more then, *dejah*." He drew closer to her, making her tip her head back to meet his gaze. "Assist me in washing my hair."

Dori's smile deepened. "You'll need to get it wet first, *daji*."

The endearment made Merrick's whole body throb. She had just called him 'lover'. A minor thing unless one was Zyan or Ganjan and in the midst of the games. She had no intention of letting another grant her pleasure if she called him lover. Any other would suffer bleeding bite marks that were *very* painful and hurt all through their healing process, no matter the balm used. She electrified the nerves there with her psionics as well in such punishments.

"My pleasure," he purred, inclining his head to her with a wicked smile.

Before he could lower himself beneath the water, she grabbed his arm to stop him. "This oil is far more potent than the mild form you use," she warned, knowing how both kinds worked. "Don't open your eyes for *any* reason while you are under. The oil will cleanse your eyes for you and it's very unpleasant. And it tastes vile."

"Ruin all my fun, why don't you?" He closed his eyes and sunk under the water, surfacing again only a moment later and paused when he felt her wipe the water away from his eyes with gentle fingers. A slight burn sizzled across his eyes when he opened them to look at her again, but it was short-lived as his own tears washed away the small irritation of the remaining oil.

"Um, you need to turn around if I'm to wash your hair," she pointed out when he continued to stare at her.

Merrick did as asked and turned around, angry at the loss of looking at her. He liked watching her reactions to him and enjoying the sight of her breasts moving with her breathing. It pleased him to feel her determination to stay here and tempt him as he did with her. That alone granted him the strength he needed to turn away from her.

Dori got some of the soap from the dispenser, working it into a lather before she gave the gentlest of tugs to his hair to let him know she needed some cooperation. She heard a growl escape him at her audacity. "You have at least a foot of height on me, Merrick," she scolded. "I need a *little* bit of help here."

A snicker of amusement escaped him, but he tipped his head back so she could reach the majority of his hair. He purred as she worked the slippery, warm-scented soap through his hair. She tried to do to him what he did when he washed her hair, earning a low growl of pleasure when her nails scraped lightly across his scalp. She could feel his purr against even without physically touching him and knew he was enjoying this even more than she had.

"You keep leaning back that way and you *will* fall over," she warned with a smile as Merrick arched further and further toward her in his pleasure at her touch.

"I will accept the consequences if you are there to soothe the ache of it, *kazi*," he replied.

Dori pinched his side in reprimand, drawing a sharp hiss from him. She took her hands away from him at last and braced herself for anything as he dipped back below the



water to clean away the soap. Instead of any touches, he simply rose from the water facing her once more as he did, letting her wipe the oil away from his eyes a second time. He looked *really* good wet and only the oil running down his skin kept her from tasting of it again.

"How do you indulge in the *kazi* bulb-scented bath oil with the allergy you have to it?" Merrick asked, recalling his discovery of the oil as they continued their semi-separate baths.

"It's synthetic," she informed him. "The Hiroke female who designed the serum that saved my life created it as she was upset over the side effect it caused me. I used the oil only once as it threatened to make me go insane and undermine her treatment for me. I have been saving it till the time felt right."

"To tempt your mate, hmm?"

"Well ..."

Merrick shook his head, snickering, "naughty girl."

She shrugged her shoulders, not the least bit repentant. "I try."

The smile deepened into a deep grin. "And you are very good in your attempts with me, my *dejah*." He reached out to stroke the underside of her chin with a finger. "Unfortunately, we must leave the pool as the oil is detrimental to all of my plans for you."

"Maybe I should stay in here, then," she yelped when Merrick found her clit underwater and gave it a sharp pinch, scolding her for her tease. "*That* was not nice," she growled before climbing out of the pool.

Merrick savored her reactions, delighting in the unexpected levels he continued to discover in his mate. He had yet to have her, but the agony from the denial of her had yet to tear him apart. Proof positive that she was indeed his mate. Another in her place would have already felt him within her from the need burning him to the depths of his core. Though he would be going out of his mind with it soon if she didn't let him play as he knew she needed of him.

A hiss of true delight escaped him when Dori slipped from the pool, displaying what had to be the most gorgeous little bottom he ever saw on a female. He dared to lean in and brush a kiss of appreciation of it across one mound before grazing it with his teeth to mark it as his. He chuckled at her little yipe he drew before she fled the bath. He growled at her when she grabbed a drying linen, hiding her treasures from him and began to dry off. "Bad girl."

She hissed at him as he joined her beside the pool. "I don't drip dry very well, Mr. Growly."

"Perhaps--" Merrick could barely resist laughing at her words. He fought not to laugh, but could not stop his grin. "Perhaps you will let me dry you then, lovely one." He wanted to lick her dry, but would not push his luck.

Dori stared at him for a long moment, deciding whether she should trust him or not. At last, she passed the linen to him, unable to resist her smile when he purred at the sight of her bared form. His approval pleased her deeply and made her body sing with the wish to be touched more by him.

His hand slid over her breast as he dried her chest a second time. It made for a

nice handful and he couldn't resist tweeking the tight nipple between his fingers. She gave a soft gasp, but did nothing to stop him, merely staring at him in a bit of shock. He let his hand return to her breast, even as he continued drying her off. His thumb worked the bud back and forth, his eyes watching her face. She knew he watched for some sort of protest of his actions, but she could barely find coherence under his play.

"Merrick, stop that," Dori whispered. Even as she said the words, she found herself arching into his touch.

"No." His low, dark purr carried a challenge for her to try and halt his play. He cast the linen aside so it balanced itself on the pool wall as he moved his free hand to play similarly with her other breast. "I wish to continue what we began last eve. I began *here*, yes?"

Dori nodded, grabbing onto the pool wall as he once more shared his desire with her through his touch, making her stagger. Meshing with her own, she once more could barely think. Water from his hair and skin dripped onto her as he had yet to dry off himself, but she paid little attention to it. She paid more attention to his hand as it released her breast to descend toward her thighs. She looked up into his deep brown eyes and saw his interest in her pleasure, but also his silent question of her willingness to allow this.

His eyes narrowed, a purr rumbling in her throat when she leaned her head back, her silent surrender to him in this game. An act of submission to the predator within their people, this gift always demanded a reward if he wished to be granted it again from her. He dipped his head to press a delicate kiss to the arch of her throat, before very gently grazing the tender area with his teeth. His hand eased between her thighs to cup her damp, warm flesh as he soothed his light mark to her throat with his tongue.

Each part of his ritualistic acknowledgement held its own meaning. Dori struggled to remember what she once blocked out to spare herself the nightmares of her past. His delicious touches on her did little to help her in the struggle, turning her thoughts more toward playing than remembering anything.

No words were spoken to show one's acknowledgement of this surrender, if she remembered correctly. Any verbal acknowledgement of this act, from *either* one of them, was a deep insult. Action alone praised one's surrender and showed the other's gratitude. Nothing else.

The gentle kiss was his thanking her for her surrender. His tender bite a show of the predator she gave herself to with it. And the even more tender lick his promise to her that he would never use this to do her harm and his further promise to keep her safe in what he might ask of her next with her surrender.

Would he grant her the same freedom over him? She couldn't stop the question from bouncing around in her mind. She would hope he trusted her enough to grant her the same as she gave him. Her thoughts focused on what she might do to him if he *did* allow it. And how would she show her acceptance of his surrender as she began to remember a female's was never the same as the male's, unless she wished it to be.

"You're all wet," Dori scolded. He undid all his efforts of drying her off with his touch and his closeness. Water dripped off him and onto her skin, teasing over her sensitive flesh in delicate caresses.

“As are you,” Merrick purred, leaning up.

He pushed one long finger up into her, slowly, delighting in her soft moan as he watched her eyes close in her pleasure. “And I think I shall enjoy playing with it for a bit.” His thumb moved to stroke her clitoris as he moved his finger in and out of her in slow, controlled moves. He kept himself from going too deep and harming her by touching her maiden’s mark. He would never resist rupturing it if he touched it in his current mood.

“Oh gods!” Dori let out a gasp when he added a second finger, furthering her pleasure. She grabbed onto his shoulders to remain upright. Her knees weakened further when his hand at her breast moved to the nape of her neck to massage it. An instinct inherited from the Ferals, this was a technique meant to soothe a skittish or upset individual, male *or* female. Used this way, the energy created between her pleasure and his own enjoyment connected the two areas, making for what Feral-borns called “Trey’s Caress.”

Named for the God of Love and Sex, Trey delighted in sparking bouts of frenzied love play, especially between mates. It made for very naughty offerings for himself and for his mother, Trista, and his grandfather, Kashee. The trio shared a connection in their influences over the Feral-born games of pleasure and that of procreation, making for a very unusual explosion of energy between them.

Merrick delighted in watching Dori becoming caught up in Trey’s Caress. The bite of her nails in his shoulders made him smile. He’d seen many males bleed from their females in how much their touch pleased her--*had* experienced it himself. Trista’s Blessing came from this caress in scars on the male’s back from the female’s nails. He carried a light set from a Delavan female he once played with. He would be adding Dori’s many times over, if he had his way.

Dori purred and growled with her pleasure, a hiss escape Merrick when her nails dug into his flesh, nearly drawing blood. His fingers caressing her neck and inside her connected in mini explosions firing off and traveling up her spine and then back down again. He could feel her body tightening for an orgasm and hungered to feel it almost as much as he could sense she wanted it. He then had to fight his laugh when he sensed her fearing the her scream he would draw would bring a crowd to slay whatever beast was killing her.

“Silence none of your pleasure, *kazi*,” he commanded in a soft, deadly dangerous tone, watching her press her lips together. “I want to hear your enjoyment.” He let a bit more of his own delight seep into her, wanting to further encourage her to give into his demands of her.

Dori arched in his grip, letting out a scream that displayed her sharp canines to Merrick. A display he answered with a low growl of appreciation and approval as he savored her orgasm sucking at his fingers. He gently eased his fingers from her as she flattened hers against his back, opening her eyes in time to see him take his fingers into his mouth. He closed his eyes to savor her taste, feeling the smile she gave at the sight.

“You weren’t supposed to reach your peak yet, little *dejah*,” he scolded, lowering his hands and stepping back only when he knew she wouldn’t collapse.

Dori hissed and shoved him away. “I’ve never felt Trey’s Caress before,” she

growled. “And *you* surprised me.” She wanted to hit him for his dare. He was unbelievable! She wanted to scream at his scolding her for coming too soon.

Merrick chuckled at her. She was indeed most adorable when frustrated as he knew she would be. “Name my penance, sweeting.” He hoped for a new game. His hope died when she threw a drying linen to him. “*Dejah ...*” she wouldn’t.

“You can dry off all by yourself.” She turned and moved away, ignoring his mutters.

“As you wish.” The only words he could say that would keep him out of trouble. Anything else and he risked his penance being made worse.

She glanced back at him as she retrieved her towel from the poolside wall and patted at the water he’d gotten on her. At his narrowed gaze, she caught a droplet of water at her shoulder, knocked loose with her movements as it began to track down her skin. She licked it away and he purred in pure male appreciation. He knew this droplet had fallen from him to anoint her flesh and carried his flavor. Her dare showed her delight of his attention and his presence with her, despite his angering her afterward.

It gave him strength enough to do as she asked and answer his penance. His skin protested it though, demanding the fiesty female to be the one to touch him. He ignored the demand, knowing it would only get him into more trouble and earn him further penance if he tried to make her answer this. She was none too pleased with him for his foolish words earlier. Touching him right now would probably entail her hitting him if he dared to try anything before she was ready.

## Chapter Eleven

With reluctance, Merrick allowed Dori to move away from him once they gathered up their clothing and to dress. He felt the blow to his pride deep in losing this battle with her. Fear still led her, even as her instincts tried to find all the chinks in her armor to get out to lead her again. He watched her dress, resisting his hiss as she covered all of that tempting flesh. He allowed himself to look over her nude form only briefly, so not to shatter his control. She was perfect all over and made him burn anew to claim her. As he began to dress himself, he had to force himself, eyes closing against the protest his groin gave as he laced his breeches back up. The pressure reminded him of just how much he needed to sink into the sweet female before him.

Merrick closed off every fantasy forming in his mind before she sensed it. He needed to seduce her--to tempt her into allowing this. His thoughts screeched to a halt, however, as pain began to spiral out of control in her, filling her every cell. Pain that called to him and demanded he ease it.

Dori grabbed onto the side of the pool, pressing a hand to her stomach when it began to cramp. She felt the muscles there twitch, which only made her feel worse. She tensed when she felt Merrick's approach and shivered when he growled. It was a scolding and an invitation for his aide in one as he picked up on what she felt. The only thing more upsetting was when she felt her sex begin to throb with her need, creaming for him to sample of it before he claimed her.

No--she was *not* in heat. She *refused* to be in heat.

"You *are*, my sweet Dori," he argued, sensing her mental struggle. "You are and must allow my help."

"I don't want to be in heat. I don't want to be pregnant," she wailed. Everything was hitting her at once and she knew she had insulted Merrick when she heard him growl. She couldn't help it, she'd never felt this way before and didn't know what to do.

"Please go away," she whispered as he sidled up behind her. He made things worse as her mind scrambled to make sense of what she now felt and the impulses bombarding her. It made it harder and harder to convince herself that she would be fine.

Her blatant attempts to try and force her fever to be gone amused Merrick. She tried to make herself believe that she wasn't in heat, a very foolish thing for her to do. She *was*, and they both knew it. Even if she didn't want to admit it to herself. Their first encounter had sparked it when he touched her mind with his claim. In his need to have her, he had caused this. While he would have been upset had he done this to another, he knew he was right about her. She *was* his mate and he intended to help her as he knew his touch and attention would calm her.

"I'm not in heat. You didn't do anything to cause it."

Even as she said the words, he knew she realized they were a lie. "*Dejah*, you *are* in heat," Merrick countered. "Please let me help you." The scent of her burned him up

with his need. He knew what she needed, as did she, but she would not let him complete the bond for fear of destroying them both. She did not think of herself as his true mate, believing this all an accident brought on by his touch on her mind and claim to her that first night.

"I can fix this myself."

Merrick snarled in rage when he saw her solution forming in her thoughts. "You will *not* use drugs!"

Dori cried out in alarm at his sudden rage and whirled to face him, afraid of an attack. "What am I supposed to do then?" she asked, her voice strained from her need.

"Let me ease your need."

"How does biting me help me at all in this?" She could sense his plans intermittently as her mind didn't want to work properly. Even *it* turned on her now.

"It's more than just my biting you, Dori."

He moved toward her, stepping back when she gave him an angry hiss in warning. She didn't understand what was going on and let fear of it turn on Merrick, even as she knew doing so was wrong.

While she denied the need of her body, it ignored her entirely, preparing itself for his claim. Even the nape of her neck where she knew he would place his mark on her and bind them together burned for his touch. She knew she was being a fool, but she didn't want to believe his one minor touch on her mind, a single word, could undo everything the drug controlling her mating demand so completely.

"This is the Ferals' legacy to us, Dori," Merrick said. "They bonded in this way--less eloquently, but they pursued a female they desired and that pursuit put her into heat. When they finally came together, they bonded by blood. It is how things are done with our people."

"I'm not in heat," she protested weakly, his explanation making her fight against herself falter that much more. "It's an imbalance brought on by your sneaking words into my mind."

Merrick tried not to laugh, but her denial of her being in heat helped. He could *not* let her believe that. Not if he wanted her to survive this and the next few days. "Really?" he asked, his voice a growling purr of challenge. He surged forward, causing her to fall back from him. He could feel panic, but part of her wanted his nearness. She was so caught between her desires, she was completely lost.

"Please tell me what to do, Merrick," she begged, her body in agony. "Make this stop, please. I hurt everywhere."

This wasn't how Merrick would have chosen to show his foolish little female that they were destined mates. Or that she was even *more* foolish indeed if she didn't believe herself in heat. He had no choice but to do as this development demanded of him. And *she* had no choice but to accept it and to accept his attention.

"I want you to gather your skirt up into a tail behind your back so that I may be able to kneel before you for a study of your pussy," Merrick said in a tender voice, recognizing the need for gentleness with her now. If he were cruel or commanding now, he would lose her to her panic and it would destroy them both.

"Merrick!"

His heart broke at her uncomprehending wail. "Do this for me, Dori. I promise it will help you." His poor little Dori. She felt so confused now and refused to recognize what was happening due to how she upbringing here. He had to get her to understand that only he could help her, not drugs. It would only delay the inevitable and kill her that much quicker. She needed a small amount of attention first to soothe this storm and to let her instincts take over and drown out her fear.

"I'm afraid." Dori wasn't sure what she feared most: Merrick and his plans, this desperate need filling her, or the fact that she was beginning to realize that he was right about her.

"Don't be. I won't harm you. I am here to help you. Now, do this one thing I ask of you and allow me to aide you."

Dori did as asked, pulling the skirt of her dress up and drawing it back behind her to fashion into a tail. It took both hands to hold it in place, leaving her legs and hips exposed completely to Merrick's greedy gaze. The purr that rose in his throat at her cooperation showed his approval and made her skin sing with a new wave of need. One that felt welcome this time and let her know she was doing the right thing.

The scent of her drew a deep rumble of pleasure from Merrick and he licked his lips. He could taste her on the very air about them. It whet his appetite for a true taste of her. "Very good, my *dejah*," he praised. "You are doing *very* well." He didn't do anything until he felt her begin to calm with his words. She teetered on the brink of a fight or flight response and he *had* to keep her from either one in order to help her.

Easing down into a kneel before her, he breathed deeply of her most intimate scent to draw it deep into himself. His eyes moved back to her face and he smiled when he saw curiosity at his game. "I am going to sip of your cream, Dori," he informed her in a silky voice meant to entice her. "And then I am going to fill you up with my cock. Your only order is to let me."

She drew in a sharp breath at his sexy tone and wicked words. When he slid closer to her in his kneel, she instinctively parted her legs, only to gasp when he dove forward to feast on her cream. He sensed her grip tighten on her "tail" as she strove not to release it. He growled and cupped her bottom in his hands to drag her forward, delving deeper into the sensitive flesh, making her fight harder. He purred against her, feeling her jerk as the vibration almost sent her over the edge.

She had a very sweet, wild flavor. Decadent. It made him long to sample much more of it. He teased and tickled her with his tongue, encouraging more of that sweet syrup out of her.

Never had Dori been so aroused in her life. So much so, his every touch drove her crazy with need. Only his touch with using Trey's Caress against her made her feel like this. Now though, she cared little about who heard her scream if he made her feel as good as he had then.

Dori lifted her leg to slide up the wicked Zyan's side, just to encourage him more in his wickedness. He slid his hand down her thigh as he turned his head to trace his mouth over the sensitive inner thigh. She gasped aloud when he bit her there, drawing on that bit of flesh to leave a light mark, but careful not to draw blood.

He caught her when she collapsed, pulling back before her skirt fell over him and

lowered her down into his lap. She looked up at him through passion-glazed eyes, seeing his amused smile. “You *must* allow me a full taste of you when we are better suited to enjoy it.” he said.

Dori shivered at the promise in his voice. He wasn’t asking her permission, he was making a decree of things to come to pass for her. And she felt very willing to give him the chance to do just that.

Releasing Dori, Merrick allowed her to stand, pleased by how unsteady she looked when she did. She was desperate for him now and the climax he had denied her. He could see it in her eyes and her unsteady stance, smell it in the air as her perfume filled it. He rose to his feet before her, deciding just how to do this.

“Go to the bed, *dejah*,” he instructed. “with your back to me.”

“I like looking at you,” she said, frowning.

“And I *like* you looking at me, but I cannot grant you what you need with you facing me.”

She smoothed her hands up Merrick’s chest, savoring the ripple of the strong muscles beneath the silk of his shirt. Her fingers played at the ties he’d left unlaced.

“Dori, do as I ask,” Merrick murmured. His commanding tone became lost in the pleasure of her touch.

“Why?” she asked. She dared to reach up to tickle his chin. Though he knew she wanted his touch and his promised attention, something made her resist.

Merrick growled at her. She was an evil little thing for doing this to him. He’d burrowed deep enough to find female mating instincts in her and awakened a monster temptress meant only to drive him mad. “Mine,” he said in a growling purr of claim.

She raised up on her toes to nip at his chin near to where the scent gland lurked. “Prove it.” she challenged before moving to the other room. She added an extra sway to her hips as she moved, purring in invitation.

Turning to look at her, Merrick smiled. He licked his lips as he watched the hypnotic sway of her nicely-rounded hips and the bottom he knew to be its own enticement. If only she knew how tempting a little thing she was to him ... his eyes narrowed in interest and it was all he could do to not grab her and yank her back to him to take her here and now, on the floor of the bath chamber.

*She is a virgin*, he scolded himself. *She is an innocent and if you come off like some conquering barbarian, not only do you risk scaring her but getting your balls ripped off by her or her Ath’toi’ja.*

His reminder, and the looming threat should he forget it, re-focused his thoughts and his fervor cooled somewhat. Not as much as he would have wished, but no matter. He could think straight again and would accept what gifts were granted him.

While she did as he asked of her, he knew she still had a great deal of power here. She could give him a very painful lash to the mind if she didn’t like what he did to her. She also had a lot of fear still living in her that might set that attack off if he weren’t careful. A conundrum as he hadn’t faced before with a female. A welcome challenge, but one he wished he didn’t have to face. He didn’t like that he had to soothe such fear in one he felt such inner strength from.

The cost of the last war for her was great and he only wished he could somehow



ease the wounds it left in her soul. He knew how to ease the demands of her body, but the pain of her past, he wasn't so sure he could. He had yet to really face someone who lost as much as Dori must have. It left him at a loss and hoping he didn't make things worse for her.

Merrick followed after her, knowing he still faced an uphill battle with her. Instinct guided her now, but sooner or later, she would come back to herself and they would be back to square one. If he didn't breach her fear and show her the error of her ways, he would fail and she would be lost. And him along with her when insanity over her loss claimed him. The legacy of her own people lost to her upset him. He would have to point out Etherson's foolish decision to keep that knowledge from her later.

Shaking the thought from his mind, Merrick focused on what Dori needed *now*. She needed his attention and his bond. As long as it had been since his first touch on her mind to start the mate-hunt, he knew she was at dire risk of permanent harm the longer he waited. The window to save her from such an outcome would close very soon, leaving him desperate to save her from herself.

Dori was the one woman he knew he wanted now and for always. She was a beautiful, tempting little thing and maddened him to no end. He reveled in the refreshing change as females weren't typical in this behavior with him. Even as he wanted to scream to the gods for mercy, at the same time he adored this change. Something he knew typical of females around their true mate.

Growling low in his throat, he stalked from the bath chamber to find his mate. The scent of her flavoring the air made him burn, guiding him to the bed. She had done as he asked of her so far, but she was about to face an even greater challenge. One he intended her to follow. He would show her the pleasure in submitting and allow him to free her of the estrus painning her body.

His eyes narrowed in desire when Merrick saw her seated on the edge of the bed, waiting for him. "Move onto the bed, Dori," he whispered, his voice caressing. She wasn't turned away from him as he'd asked, but she wasn't ready for the bond either. He had to earn that gift from her now.

Dori did as asked, crawling toward the pillows, feeling Merrick's eyes tracing over her back to pause at her bottom. He gave a dark growl and she shuddered at the heat it sent spiraling through her. When she turned to lay down on her back, the movement caused her skirt to fall aside to reveal much of her legs to the Zyan male studying her. She froze when he joined her on the bed just as she moved to cover them back up.

"Uncover your treasures, *kazi*." His tone was silky even in that order, encouraging her cooperation.

Pulling her skirt aside, she uncovered herself to the waist once more and he gave her a low purr of praise. The sound sent a riot of shivers up her spine and she wanted to demand he join her and do more than just stand there and give her naughty commands.

"Yes, Dori," he encouraged. "You are doing good. Be brave, my little love, and allow me this. You will enjoy my attention, I promise."

Merrick left Dori dressed, wanting to be tempted by only one thing at a time. If she were naked, he would never resist pouncing on her and simply taking her like some animal. No--she deserved a tender lover this first time. If she wanted a rougher game

later, he would happily oblige her. First though, she would see his tender side.

“Perfect.” he whispered, sliding closer. He lowered himself between her legs, calming her with his purr to keep her from fleeing. She wanted him now, but began to grow very uneasy of his intentions. And he knew it had to come from something in her past. He would work to soothe that later. For now, her physical aches needed tending.

She moaned when he took her into his mouth again, his tongue scraping through her dewy essence to touch her clit. He looked up to see her press into the pillows, allowing herself to savor the caress of his tongue. She buried her hands in his hair to hold him in place as he explored her there.

Merrick chuckled at her desperation. He wanted to torture her, but wanted to give her what she wanted even more. He began to lash her clit with purpose till she shook against him, her breathing growing harsh and uneven. Spreading her legs further, he opened her more to his attention, continuing his feast on her. She began to tremble, then to shake, as he brought her closer and closer to her sweet release. Her body arched against him and she seized up before she threw her head back on a scream. Merrick lapped at her sweet cream as it flowed out of her, dribbling down his chin as he savored the taste of her.

Even as she still shook from her orgasm, he slid up her body, taking care not to rub his own against hers as he did, letting only his hair brush against her flesh. She was near the point of pain in her sensitivity and he had to take great care in how he touched her so not to harm her. He could have easily remained at her tasty little pussy for another feast, but she needed something more now. And he was ready and willing to give it to her.

First though, he needed another taste her lips before he gave her what she wanted and needed of him. He also wanted her to let her taste herself as he explored her hot little mouth with his tongue.

“Your breasts look good enough to fuck.” he purred, nuzzling the warm, silky mounds cresting her bodice, marking both with the scent gland at his chin. A promise to them of later play.

Dori didn’t even want to try and comment on how wicked that idea sounded. She didn’t need to as Merrick claimed her lips for a kiss. She buried her hands in his hair and sucked his tongue into her mouth to play with it with her own. Her own taste flavored his kiss--a heady taste that somehow tempted her to play more with him. She felt the hot press of him against her thigh through his breeches as he carefully lowered himself to lay against her. It made her want him inside her even more.

“But I think I’ll fill something that will be much more appreciative of it.” he added as he leaned back up, licking his lips.

As he spoke, he unlaced the ties of her bodice, watching her eyes for any sign of upset at this game. She liked how he acted such care with her. It helped to keep her fear at bay.

He uncovered one breast and he slid down till he could lean in to capture the coral-colored bud crowning the creamy mound. His tongue lashed the nipple back and forth as she grabbed onto his arms for some anchor to sanity. Drawing her nipple deeper into his mouth, she gave a tortured moan as he slid a hand beneath the open front of her

bodice to caress the other breast. His fingers played with the nipple, keeping it hard and ready for his mouth.

Dori opened her eyes to look down at Merrick when he released her nipple. She closed them again when his mouth moved to tease the other as he had the first. She tried to voice her need so that he would do what he had promised her, only to give a harsh moan when he released her nipple and nuzzled both breasts, his long hair falling over the sensitive peaks like a thousand tongues.

He eased back and reached down to free the ties of his breeches. The one act made Dori freeze, her desire halting in her as if someone had thrown ice water on her. "Wait."

Oh, how he was beginning to loathe that word. "What now, sweeting?" he asked, leaning up over her.

"It isn't right."

Merrick let out a growl bordering on fury. That had to be the worst of insults to give one's lover *or* mate. Especially if they weren't even bonded yet.

"It doesn't feel right *here*," she clarified. "It feels somehow ... wrong."

Okay, this was different. Why would sex in a bed for this first time feel wrong? His lips curved in a knowing smile. *That's* what was wrong. Not only was this her first time for sex, it would be with her very first *lover*.

"I'm really confused," she said. "I want this, but not here. It makes no sense at all to me at all."

"Where *would* you feel most comfortable for this?" he asked, hiding his amusement. Upsetting her would only make this worse and endanger her all the more in a delay in her attacking him and his attempts to try and soothe her.

"Among plants. Does that make any sense to you at all?"

"As a matter of fact, it does. Run to the garden and hide from me." His words drew a glare from her, threatening laughter from him.

"You want me to run and hide?"

"Yes--it will make this much more delicious for us both."

"Are you sure?"

"Don't you want to be chased and tempted into a game with me?" He sensed her contemplation, willing her to agree, even as he tried not to influence her at the same time.

"Yes."

She liked the idea even more than *he* did. He knew she was a naughty little female and this proved it. "Then run, now. I will grant you a short head-start before I come to capture you and lay all sorts of evil pleasures on your tempting little body."

Ooh, Dori liked his ideas. "No cheating." He could find her too easily with his mind if she tried to hide from him. It would make this game far too easy for him.

"I will rely on what my senses alone tell me. Now run." He moved off her, allowing her to close her bodice. He resisted his growl at being denied a continued look at her there. The promise of a new game granted him the resistance he needed.

"There's a *drindria* outside my room's balcony wall." She fled after giving him that one hint, managing to snag her comm box in passing.

Merrick shook his head with a smile. It had been *far* too long since he'd chased a

lover and enjoyed the thrill of it, then the satisfaction of the explosive play once he caught them.

It had to be some sort of unwritten tradition. The female always chose a garden or forested area for her first time with a new lover. An instinct left over from the Ferals, though it was normally the *male*, not the female, who took their lover into the overgrown areas for that first time. How it began and how it went from the female following the male to the male chasing his female wasn't quite known. None really cared as it was too enjoyable to be picked apart and explained away.

He'd chased his first teacher all over King's Forest near Cymbaline Castle before he caught her. The scream she'd given when he'd pounced on her, knocking her into a pond had been well worth the chase. Their first games had been even better.

Merrick shook the memory out of his thoughts, focusing on this newest chase. He thought up the route back to where the garden was as he eased from the bed to begin hunting his mate. This would be a most enjoyable game.

Dori ran down the corridor, barely avoiding colliding with passing Hiroke. All of who yelled for her to slow down. "I can't--I'm sorry," she called back to each of them. She had little time to make it to the garden and find a good hiding spot to await Merrick's arrival to hunt her down. Even *with* her bit of trickery with him.

When she gave Merrick the warning about the *drindria*, she'd done her own little experiment with him. Distracted as he'd been by her warning, she planted a small suggestion in his mind. It surprised she managed to accomplish the feat as she had no experience in doing so.

If he ran while seeking her, her suggestion would get him lost in the compound and grant her a little more time. The suggestion would melt away, she hoped, as soon as he figured out her little trick. If it didn't, she would be in a whole lot of trouble when he found her at last.

It left her wondering how long her suggestion would last before he realized her games and finally found her. And how angry he would be when he did?

After allowing Dori a good head-start, Merrick went in pursuit of her. He chuckled his amusement as he rushed past already exasperated Hiroke, who roared out orders for him to slow down, clearly having already been ignored by a running Zyan from the look of them. Ignoring them as Dori had, Merrick headed for the garden he'd made note of earlier, following her scent.

A short time into his pursuit, Merrick paused and looked around. He growled when he found himself once more outside of Dori's chambers. "Sneaky, my mate," he purred, impressed. She had planted a suggestion in his mind to cause him to get lost. Even following her scent as he had hadn't aided him in avoiding that. None a very easy trick to accomplish. She must have done it when she warned him about the *drindria*, distracting him at the same time.

Chuckling to himself at the impressive sneakiness of his mate, Merrick went back into Dori's chambers and out onto the balcony. Sure enough, he saw the parasitic vines of Kashee's tree coiling over the railing. He could also sense an energy field here meant to keep the vines from endangering Dori in their growth pattern.

Moving to the railing, he leapt up onto it, crouching down to study the distance to

the garden floor. The thorns of the vine crunched under his boots, spitting the potent, anesthetic venom of the blood-feasting plant harmlessly away from him. He spied the tree itself below and an open area just past it. The vines and distance made jumping up to the balcony difficult, even by a Feral-born as they risked becoming a *drindria*'s meal. However, should the need arise, one could leap from the railing to the garden floor in safety for a Zyan or Ganjan. Yet another sign of Etherson's protectiveness of his adopted daughter. If she were in danger here, she could leap off the balcony and make a safe landing on the grass below.

Merrick straightened and leapt off the railing, landing in a crouch before the *drindria*. He turned to face the tree as he straightened studying it. "My apologies for your lost thorns, Kashee plant," he said, then turned back to his pursuit of his wicked little female. One who now faced a punishment for her trickery, *then* pleasure.

Closing his eyes, he drew in a breath of the scents here, letting it soak to soothe his hungers somewhat before his passions took over entirely and turned him *into* a Feral with his mate. His eyes opened again when he caught scent of female musk. He moaned when she began to hum that lullaby again, the caressing touch of it on his mind granting him the calm he needed, even as it stirred him that much more.

Before, it had coiled around him like a soothing balm when he'd collapsed in the rain, ready to give up before it called him back to life. Now, it proved a burning hot lure meant only to destroy him if he didn't find Dori soon.

Hunger for her filled him to the brim as he let it guide him to her. His groin was a focal point of heat and pain. He again felt the innate need to claim the owner of so tender a voice as he'd felt before when it lured him through the storm. The building had repelled him then, but Dori's sweet voice, humming the lullaby had called to him, displacing everything else. Even his instinctive distrust of the Hiroke building. He was glad for it now. He knew he would have died in the storm and never would have found his way to this naughty little female.

The fantasy of her humming the lullaby while her mouth wrapped itself around his cock filled his mind. She played with fire now in what she did to him. He intended for her to learn of the danger she dabbled in when he found her.

As he followed the sound of her voice, Merrick closed his mind to Dori so she couldn't sense him or his intentions. He wanted to play with his little *kazi* and she had chosen his means with her foolish notions that he wasn't her true mate.

Scents here would mask his approach as well as the breeze that kept his own scent downwind of her. Kashee was being kind to him despite his injuring the *drindria*, or Kashee's plant, as the Feral-borns called it to honor the god it was sacred to. Merrick would honor the fertility god's aide with a very naughty offering to him with Dori. One he knew would please Kashee, Trista, *and* Trey, all at once.

Dori was turned away from him, lost in her study of the garden when he finally found her in the labyrinth of plants. Merrick fought to quell his purr. It wouldn't do to give himself away now. He wanted to sneak up on his female and take her by surprise.

Moving with care, a practiced movement meant to silence his approach, he stalked up on her. He masked his presence from her as much as he could. By the time she knew he had found her, it would be *far* too late.

A squawk of alarm escaped her when he grabbed her from behind, pulling her to him. Purring in pleasure, Merrick buried his lips in her neck, allowing his mental cloak to fall away, letting her feel him and his hunger for her. "Mine," he growled, gently tilting her head back and to the side so he could sip of her flesh.

Dori reached up to caress his face and hair, his purr deepening with the touch. She was unable to resist rubbing herself up against his groin, feeling the scalding heat of his hard shaft against her. She felt the need to taste him there as he had with her as she enjoyed the feel of him pressed into her. Her touch drew a fierce growl of hunger from Merrick, but his attention remained gentle.

"I want to taste your cream again," he murmured in a voice thick with need.

A shiver ran up Dori's spine at his suggestion and the caress of his mind on hers, letting her feel just how much he meant those words. He barely contained the primal, baser self demanding he take her whether she was ready or not. The nape of her neck tingled as her arousal grew with his. His strength of will in his resistance pleased her, even as she realized the danger she placed herself in by making him do this.

"No." She pulled away and turned to face him. Merrick growled, glaring down into her eyes, but she resisted the impulse to back down. "You have been allowed your ways too much already," she scolded.

One brow rose. What game did she have planned for him? "I *need* to taste you, sweetening." Even as he said the words, he felt his priorities shift, demanding he allow her to play a bit more before he bonded them together.

"Then you will have to suffer that need a bit longer." She took him by the hand and guided him away from the trees and deeper into the garden.

Curious, Merrick allowed himself to be pulled along after her as she had done with him when he took her to the bath chamber. He would allow her this for the moment, lest she upset him.

"I want to do the tasting this time," she said.

Merrick stumbled in his shock, grabbing onto Dori's shoulders and pulling her to an abrupt halt to remain upright. His lips curved in a smile, despite his shock at her proclamation. "You may," he said in a growling purr, his lips just behind her ear. His cock twitched its own approval of her demand.

Dori moved away again, leaving Merrick behind to stare after her. Her demand of him still shocked him, giving him pause. Finally though, he forced himself to follow after her. An instinctive growl of his claim to her rose in him, rumbling in his throat as he did. The sound was meant to drive off any rivals seeking to claim her as mate themselves. Even as quiet as it could be at times, it almost always proved enough to intimidate any within earshot.

Though there were none here who would dare to try and claim her from him, he let the sound fill him nevertheless. He would have no other seek her pleasure. No other to steal her away from him.

She moved to stand before a grand, glassy pond, the sound of water splashing meeting his ears. A water spout in the pond's center kept the water moving so it always remained fresh. The sound was calming, granting him a crumb more of focus before primitive instinct took him over.

"You're growling." Dori said, turning to face Merrick.

"An instinctive response," he explained. "Focused on rivals who might try to claim you. It's meant to chase them all away."

"Does it work?"

Merrick growled at her, this time in irritation. "It *can*, if no fools crop up to interfere."

Dori drew back at his tone. There was more to his words than an explanation for her. The one he had told Etherson about? The one he had yet to tell her about just yet due to this shift in focus between them? She had a feeling he spoke of the one who brought him here, but pushed the question away. Something more important needed tending to just now. Playing with a tempting male took precedence over something she knew would be upsetting for him.

"Forgive me," Merrick soothed. "Tell me what you wish of me." He didn't need to think of Tark now. Not when with Dori.

"Come here," she held out a hand to him, a smile crossing her face when he stepped forward and placed his own in hers, allowing himself to be drawn to her.

"What else do you desire?" Merrick closed his eyes, leaning his head back when she unlaced the ties of his shirt and pressed her lips to his chest. He laid his hands on her shoulders when she licked him there. "*Dejah*, that is *my* job. I am supposed to do the tempting in this game." His loins told him to let her play, while instinct demanded he try and win control back again. He liked the former plan more than the latter one. It had more pleasure attached to it for him. It would also keep Dori's fears from trying to take her over again. It would also let her familiarize herself with him and grant her more courage for the games.

"My turn to do the tempting, Merrick." Her voice was a low, sexy sound.

A groan slipped passed Merrick's lips. Yes, he could follow that order. "I am for your pleasure then, Dori." He would indulge her, wanting to allow her to draw courage from controlling him. An innocent of their ways and he didn't wish to frighten her off. He also liked the idea of letting *her* control their play this time. It quieted the primal being in him and let *her* choose what would happen between them, strengthening her courage. He had yet to allow her that and wanted to keep his silent promise to her to let her dominate him in the games this time.

Merrick resisted saying anymore as Dori slid down his body, looking down to watch her movements. Everything stilled in him when her mouth drew close to his groin and the bulge there. He did *not* wish to draw any kind of reprimand from her as he did not want to be bitten here by an angry female.

"Please touch me, Dori," he murmured, allowing himself one last chance to speak to let her know just how much he needed her attention. He closed his eyes on a sigh of relief when she freed his cock, soothing the ache of the pressure across it. A moan escaped him when she took him into her hands, hissing when she dipped her hand in further to draw out his sac, only to groan when she began to stroke him with slow, gentle movements. She built him up slowly, just as he desperately desired of her.

Dori looked up to watch Merrick's pleasure, liking the power in knowing she was responsible for it. He was even bigger than she imagined, making her insides clench. His

head fell back in his enjoyment, his purr deep and rich, and she purred herself in her own wicked pleasure. An occasional growl filtered through them, showing his delight and she felt it begin to wash over her as well.

“Shall I taste you now?” she teased, summoning to her all of what she had read about this in her books. She leaned in to trace her tongue up the underside of his cock, feeling his whole body jerk against her. “Or shall I tease you some more?” she hoped for tasting as her brief sample of him left her hungry for more of him.

He opened his eyes to look down at her. “Give me both,” he whispered. He drew in a sharp breath when her fingers finally brushed over the sensitive head as she let her hand slide back up his length. Oh, but she had a nice touch! His head back fell back when she leaned in again and took one of his balls into her mouth to draw on with gentle pressure before moving to the other.

Her delicious attention left Merrick wanting to stop her and complete the mate-hunt. He wanted to, but the touch of her mouth on him proved detrimental to his plans. His resistance failed him with every sweet touch of her tongue as it caressed him. He would let her play as she willed for now and place his mark of claim on her after.

Gods above, he would never last long under her attention, nor did he care. Her mouth and tongue felt so good on him, he would let her have this. Nothing else existed for him now but the pleasure of his wicked mate’s attention.

She had a mouth just made to be naughty. His breathing grew ragged as she traced her mouth up his full length to take him into her hot, hot mouth. In the embrace of her mouth, he hardened further and moaned when it curved upward with his increased arousal. A curve meant seek the inner pleasure point of her pussy, increasing his own sensitivity, threatening to make him climax far too soon. Each stroke of the head against the centerline of the roof of her mouth made him burn.

He felt her shiver at the taste of his essence as it began to leak out to drizzle onto her tongue. She gave a harsh moan as she began to pick up on what he was feeling. Her mind then closed off to him and he knew she was being driven just as insane by the sensations as he was in feeling it directly. He grabbed her shoulders in a bid to stay upright as his knees began to tremble. He would make her feel *so* good for her sweet attention. “Faster,” he begged. “No, slower.” He couldn’t make up his mind as to what he needed with how delicious her touch felt. “Gods, woman, just make me come so hard I will shatter.”

Merrick hissed when she reached up to caress his sac in her hand. He moaned when she dared to further his torturous enjoyment when she began to hum the lullaby she had lured him here with, the vibration feeling like Paradise itself over his sensitive flesh. This shredded him to the core and he didn’t know if she were answering a fantasy of his she sensed *from* him, or if she were just being naughty. Either way, he vowed to make her feel just as good as she made him feel now. *If* he survived the orgasm now rising in his balls. He wasn’t sure he would from the feel of it. At the moment, he really didn’t care if it *did* kill him. Such a death would be a *most* enjoyable way to go.

Shaking from from his aching need, Merrick threw his head back on a roar, letting his come flood her mouth. His knees buckled and he fell hard into a kneel, hissing at the impact. Still, he kept his eyes closed, savoring the climax she had brought him to, his



whole body still shaking from it. He unconsciously took his cock in his hand to stroke and let the remainder of his seed hit the ground.

Finally though, he opened his eyes to look at her. "Just like that." he praised, his voice hoarse and weak from his pleasure. He moved closer, his eyes narrowed in his delight. "Though, I *will* remember to do this lying down next time." His knees were saying the most unkind of things about him.

"Are your knees all right?"

Her concern at his hard collapse pleased him. "No." He caressed her cheek. "But they will heal. The bruises are well-earned." He kissed her then, purring his praise.

*Mine!* The voice of his more primitive self rose up in him and he allowed it to guide him as he kissed her, pressing into her to force her to lie back in the grass beneath them.

Merrick broke the kiss, dipping his head to lick away his seed from her throat and chin where it had splashed with his collapse. He moved down further, following its path, the last splash painting the area between her breasts. He buried his face there, taking great delight in cleaning up every drop of his seed away.

"I must apologize, Dori, my *dejah* ..." Merrick said as he finally leaned back up.

She stared at him, concern filling her all over again. "Did I do that wrong?"

"Gods, no!" He had a difficult enough time in resisting telling her to do that again in how good it felt. The feeling of her insecurity and fear he wouldn't let her do that again amused him, but he knew not to laugh if he didn't want to make things worse. "I wish to apologize as I sense you wished to show me your pond out here, and I didn't allow myself a true enjoyment of it."

"Pond?" What pond? She shook her head to clear away the growing fog filling it and remembered. Oh, *that* pond.

"You can still enjoy it, if you wish," she suggested.

*I want to enjoy you, Dori.* He silenced the thought and leaned up to lace his breeches closed. "I think I shall," he said aloud, pulling her up with him as he stood.

"All right. Will you let me taste you again?"

Her words delighted him. "Later, my eager one. We have many more games to play before then." She liked the power she had over him when she played with him a bit too much, but he didn't have the heart to deny her. He would let her do anything she wished with him in the pleasure she'd given him then.

She shivered at the sound of his words. He slid up behind her as she turned away to look at the pond. He curled his arms around her waist, pulling her close. He rubbed his chin back and forth over the top of her head in a silent claim and felt the aches his silent claim caused her. She slid her hands over the backs of his, shivering again at the silky purr he gave.

He pressed a kiss to her hair, breathing in her scent before moving away to seat himself in the grass, facing the pond. This was a very beautiful and peaceful place and he could see why she liked it. He looked over at Dori and smiled. The look on her face amused him. She was upset at the loss of his presence against her, but also very curious about his plans for her. It made for an interesting expression.

## Chapter Twelve

“You’re dressed,” Dori pointed out. She knew neither of them had undressed, but his being clothed grated on her nerves now. An odd reaction she didn’t understand as she knew his gorgeous form already. Still, she wanted him naked and to enjoy looking at all of him again. The longer he remained clothed, the more frustrated she became with her wish he *not* be anymore.

He rose to his feet and looked down in question. He looked at her again, a boyish grin crossing his face. “Indeed I *am*, my *dejah*,” he admitted. “What shall we do about it?”

Dori moved to Merrick, wanting to see him revealed to her now. He didn’t resist, pleasing her as she undid the remainder of the laces of his shirt, feeling a minor amount of frustration when her fingers trembled almost too much for her to manage this. She felt him shiver when she leaned in to taste his skin again, loving the flavor of him. He had an addictive flavor, tempting her to taste him all over and learn all of them.

“You have the sweetest of touches, Dori,” he praised. He caressed her hair as she began to descend, freeing more ties of his shirt as she did. The touch encouraged her, tormenting her at the same time.

Dori smiled as she knelt before her *daji* again as if to aide him with his breeches. She giggled when he turned to look down at her, sensing her intentions. His brow rose, but it only encouraged her to follow through on her plans. He *had* said “later” and it *could* be considered “later” now.

Freeing his cock, she took him back into her mouth, drawing a moan from his lips. Both a sound of pleasure and frustration in one, it amused her in how much it showed her his enjoyment.

This female was a naughty little thing for doing this to him again so soon. Merrick wanted to roar out his frustration at being denied her again, even as he wanted to enjoy the feel of her mouth on him at the same time. His head lolled back in his pleasure, savoring her touch. Finally though, he had to pull back, needing to end this before it went too far. *She* needed his attention more than he needed hers.

She gave a sound of protest, but let him draw away from her. Though she *did* allow herself one last moment of defiance by tightening the grip of her mouth on him so he came free with an audible “pop.” Rising to her feet, she pushed his shirt off his shoulders so it fell in a cloud to the ground. He sensed her wish to explore him all over and learn all the places he liked to be touched. He almost gave into her wish before he was able to remind himself that she needed his attention more than he needed hers.

“I wanted to taste that hot little pussy of yours again, my *dejah*,” Merrick said. “but I think you need something more than just my tongue soothing the ache you have there.”

He made a promise to her with his words, tempting her to let him do just that. He

couldn't, as she needed him inside her, but it didn't stop him from planting the idea anyway. Now though, he had to make sure she cooperated and let him play as he willed this time.

"Undress," he told Dori. Aroused as he was, frustrated as she made him in his lusts, he wanted to leave her no choice but to stay here with him. She *would* stay here, or let every Hiroke here have a visual study of her nude form.

"No," she said, defiant.

This both startled and delighted Merrick. Even as he expected the primal part of her to make her deny him, it still took him by surprise. She looked even more surprised than him, letting him know she wanted to do as he asked. Her confusion at her own responses showed him more of how much of her education she'd been denied. It frustrated him, but added a bit of spice to this game.

What other reactions would he draw from her? He couldn't wait to find out.

He moved to undress her himself, only to be tackled when she jumped at him. Her inertia took them both to the ground, his breath leaving him in a rush from the impact. She tried to spring away from him, but he forced the air back into his lungs, even as he seized her around the middle and began to wrestle with her, determined that she would not be the victor. Not this time.

This time, he would show his little *kazi* the delight of submitting to him and his plans. The instinct in her to dominate needed to be quelled and he refused to be defeated by it. She *would* submit to him and she *would* let him play as he wished now.

He wrestled with her, trying to keep them away from the pond as he didn't need the distraction the cold water would bring them. He managed to pin her beneath him, his hands holding her wrists down while his body and legs kept the rest of her trapped. She was breathing hard, drawing his gaze to the enticing movement of her breasts. He licked his lips before meeting her gaze once more.

"Mine," he announced in a low growl.

"You would look quite strange with breasts," she said in a matter-of-factly tone, even as she tried to catch her breath.

Merrick chuckled, leaning in to breathe deeply of her scent. "And how would I look with one taken deep into my mouth?"

The silky caress of his voice made her whole body clench in need. Her cream frothed for him to taste again and he looked very willing to do that very thing.

"Answer me, Mine," he demanded, a harsh edge entering his tone. "How would I look?"

She jumped, closing her eyes in her alarm as if expecting an attack. Finally though, she forced herself to meet his gaze again. "Naughty," she replied at last.

He liked that answer. Far better than "wait" by any measure. He leaned in for a kiss in reward for her answering him so well, feeling her tense. Whether she braced herself for an attack or to throw him off, he didn't know. He hoped for fear this time as it proved easier to tend than an attack. Pinning her anew beneath him against the ground, he claimed her lips for a passionate kiss. He rolled his hips into her, drawing a muffled moan from her, allowing him to delve deeper into her mouth with his tongue.

A purr rumbled in his throat when she sucked his tongue back into her mouth,

ending in a growl when she dared to nip at the sensitive tip. He drew back to give her a scolding look, smiling when he felt her arms straining in his grip to free her hands. She didn't want to get away--he could sense that now. She wanted to touch him and encourage him to continue. Encouragement he didn't need as he was on near autopilot from the globe of desperate hunger existing around them.

"You are a bad little girl and I should spank your lovely ass for that alone *and* for the game you dared to play with me to keep me away," he informed her.

"I wasn't playing ... *entirely*," she said. "There *is* a *drindria* outside my room and I didn't want you to be injured. I just couldn't help trying the other to grant me more of a head-start than you felt sufficient to allow me. And to see if it would work."

He could forgive that. She didn't have many candidates for such delicious experiments. "It worked. But you still must be punished for your trickery."

Dori gave him a loud raspberry and Merrick jerked back with a true, startled look on his face. "Such manners," he scolded. "I may need to add a few more punishments to your tally."

"Pleasure now, punish later," she growled, growing frustrated with this conversation.

"Only because I know what a delay will cause you, sweeting."

Merrick could feel his body preparing itself to claim this female. They'd played long enough. Now, they had a game to finish--the one they began in the bath. He needed to fill her with his cock and ride her until he put them both out of their mutual misery.

"Gentle," she whispered when he shifted against her.

"Always," he replied in a tender murmur. He could feel her unease about his taking her and her innocence of a male's touch beyond what he had done to her. Virgin. She was a virgin and he had to remember that so he didn't harm or frighten her.

"What do I do?"

He wanted to growl at her for feeling so inadequate for what she didn't know. "Turn over."

"Why?" Dori didn't like the sound of this, uncertain she trusted someone enough to be that close to her while beneath them. Not after what she had been witness to during the destruction of her village and pride-clan.

The nape of her neck burned at his words, ignoring her apprehension. Still, she couldn't bring herself to willingly allow this without answers. She hoped he would somehow understand her reactions and not make her explain herself. If she tried to tell him why she resisted his wishes, she would fall apart. She would destroy the passionate atmosphere around them. Something within her demanded she do anything it took to not allow that to happen. Curiosity over why he demanded this over her helped to keep her from disobeying her instincts.

"It's how a male marks his female and binds her to him as his mate," Merrick explained. He wasn't sure if his explanation would help or harm her, but it was the best he could do for her at the moment. His mind refused to offer him a better one to give her.

"And you are certain that we *are* mates?"

"Quite." He wasn't angry this time with her questioning him. Now, it was gentle prodding and not a denial of what she knew by instinct what they were to one another.

“And your attacks of need will only settle if you allow me to prove that to you, *dejah*.”

Dori’s stomach gave a roll of protest to argue its point in Merrick’s favor, making her grab at him with a sound of pain. She wanted to whine out her own protest when he slid down her body till she felt him press his lips to her stomach through her dress. The tight muscles there began to ease with his attention, though not enough to soothe her pain entirely.

*Turn over for me, kazi*, he purred into her mind. *Let me soothe your body with mine*. He drew back and seated himself beside her to allow her movement.

Though Dori did as he asked and turned onto her stomach for him, she did so with extreme reluctance. She couldn’t help it. Even knowing Merrick wasn’t a Tatic and not intending to rape her as they had her brothers and parents, the image filled her mind. It was the last image she had of her parents and brothers before their deaths. Any reminder of it brought the horrible imagery right back to her.

The Hiroke did their best to not remind her of such an awful thing whenever they asked anything of her. Merrick was the first to actually demand her to turn away from him before he did something to her. Something she wasn’t completely sure of. She wasn’t immediately assailed by the images from Citron’s fall, but she knew she would be if she let him do something without explaining himself.

Dori’s extreme reluctance drew on Merrick’s curiosity. This had nothing to do with her resistance to her heat cycle. Something more guided her reluctance for him to take her from behind. He resisted asking her about it as she needed his attention, not queries into what must have been a very upsetting topic for her.

Caressing her back through her dress, he sought to calm her and stop the fear he could sense building in her. He could almost see what she was being tortured by with his request, but pushed it aside. Instead, he focused on stopping it before it claimed her. He moved his hands up to massage her shoulders, knowing how to calm her further. He smiled when she began to purr, his attention chasing away what did its best to take her away from him.

Though he wanted to give her a full massage, he would need her naked and she was desperate enough for him already. And he’d already made up his mind in how he needed to take her. Changing his plans would only frustrate him and further irritate her, even if she ultimately enjoyed it.

Sliding her skirt up, he allowed his fingers to caress her skin as he did. He dipped his head as he uncovered her gorgeous little bottom to press a kiss to the swell of both silken mounds. His lips curved in a smile when she lifted her hips in offering. It sent a new wave of heat straight down to his groin. A spot now demanding he do something more than simply enjoying her without *truly* enjoying her.

“Later, we shall enjoy the velvet caress of flesh on flesh, Mine,” he explained as he eased between her legs, freeing his cock as he did. “But for now, I’m afraid I can only grant you a minor taste of that pleasure.”

She shuddered when the hot, blunt head of his cock rubbed against her cleft. She moaned out her need and lifted her hips again in offering. He pushed into her and she gave a grateful sound at the thick feel of him stretching her. It branded her with his heat and began to soothe the desperate ache filling her there at the same time, encouraging her

to let him continue.

Merrick closed his eyes and licked his lips, savoring the feel of just how hot and tight she was around him. She would ache later from how he would stretch her as he took her, but he knew she would take that ache over the one she had now. He slid into her slowly to let her adjust to his size and the new feeling of him filling her.

"I'm going to rip open," she whispered, fear filling her as she felt herself straining to contain him.

Merrick paused when he felt the resistance of her muscles trying to lock him out. He leaned over her, filling her with calm, silently coaxing her to relax. "You will not tear, Dori," he reassured her. "You were made for me by the gods. I will fit, sweeting, and I promise I will not tear you. Relax for me and let me fill you slowly. I promise I won't hurt you." He nuzzled her hair over the nape of her neck to help soothe her. "There will be one moment of pain when I take your innocence, but that will be all you will feel that is unpleasant."

Slowly, he felt her muscles unlock against him and knew he had earned a degree of trust from her. He flexed his hips and surged forward, stabbing deep as he took her virginity, hearing her gasp at the burning pain. He stilled in her in her again, letting her try to adjust to this newest invasion.

"You lied," she pointed out in a pained whisper. She wanted to be angry at him, he knew, for his lie, but she liked the feel of him buried in her too much to let the anger claim her.

"I had to take it this way or I would have caused you much more harm in I breaking your maiden's mark in a slow fashion," Merrick said. "Please forgive my one white lie. It couldn't be helped." He settled against her, sinking into her those last few inches.

"You burn me within and without."

Merrick chuckled at her poetic words. "Mmm, because you *so* deserve it." He gave her one last moment to adjust to his size before he began to move in her. He caressed her torn flesh from the inside to soothe its pain till it ebbed away entirely.

Sliding his hands under her, he opened the front of her bodice so he could cup and caress her breasts as he slid in and out of her. While it would have been nicer if he were able to feel her bare flesh with his own, he needed the shield her clothing offered him to prevent the primitive side of his soul from trying to claim her. He could do her a great deal of harm with as desperate as he was for her if he lost control.

He so wished he'd been able to tempt Dori into play earlier. He didn't like how he introduced her to pleasure this way, not with him so barely in control of himself. His failure ate at him for his inability to give her what she wanted of him. Her extreme sensitivity to the mate-hunt due to her encounter with the *kazi* bulbs years ago prevented that. Still, his instincts screamed at him of just how wrong this felt. He strove to let her feel as much pleasure as possible in how he took her. He promised himself once she recovered from the bonding, he *would* give her all she desired of him.

Closing his mouth over the side of her neck, he teased the sensitive skin of her neck and shoulder with his mouth as her hair and the material of her dress fell away. He dared to nip at the tender flesh, feeling her jerk against him and whisper his name. His

fingers continued to play over her nipples, sending ribbons of pleasure through her.

The words of the bond of mates filled his mind, but he couldn't get his mouth to form them. He began this mate-hunt with a hunter-prey bond, and it could only end that way. The words for the bond could be spoken afterward, but it would be redundant as she would already be bonded to him and he to her.

Dori couldn't stop moaning as Merrick thrust in and out of her. He stroked her deep, showing her all she had missed out on with her vibe toys. She didn't care as his movements felt so good now no toy could have ever compared to it. Her only regret centered around his inability to touch her sex in how he held her, where she wanted more of his attention. His long, elegant fingers playing at her nipples granted her a semblance of it as an electric current seemed to connect them, leaving her gasping for breath, barely able to keep up with what he did.

"Bare your neck to me, *dejah*."

His purring request burned Dori. She remembered that a male couldn't demand this of her, but not completely why. All she knew is that she could reject his demand in as fierce a way as possible if she didn't want it. The back of her neck burned even more at the thought of whatever he had planned and she knew she couldn't deny him.

When Dori reached back to bare her nape to him, he took the moment to kiss her fingers as they passed under his lips. He buried his mouth in the tender, sensitive flesh, caressing the area with his lips and tongue. Sensing her climax, he sneered back his lips and bit her nape, drawing blood to complete the bond. She let out a scream of pain/pleasure as she came beneath him. Her body pressed into his as she arched up against him, driving him in even deeper.

\* \* \*

Merrick growled when his cock curved upward again, spiking all sensation there. Were she facing him, the curve would have pressed right into the supersensitive region within her, spiking her own climax to a fever pitch. He groaned as he came, spilling his seed into her, savoring the caressing spasms of her muscles.

Her acceptance of his mark made his climax all the more sweet. He couldn't demand her surrender and to do so would have gotten him attacked. She could reject him as painfully as possible if she refused his mark, even if he'd already placed it on her. Dori's willing surrender to him showed him she felt the same for him as he did for her. It seared him to his very soul, soothing the wild storm that had lived in him for decades as he pursued his mate.

Dori felt the fierce need to bite Merrick, but resisted the desire, not wanting to hurt him after he had just calmed the pain in her body. The pain he had *caused* to accomplish that notwithstanding.

Sighing in pleasure, she relaxed into his grip, the demand filling her now easing. The heat of his body at her back felt very nice. Something still felt like it was missing, but she put it out of her mind. The only thing she knew to be missing at the moment was biting him, ridiculous as the notion sounded. She refused to do that to him after such delicious attention.

After a moment, even that wish fell away, letting her savor what they'd shared. She heard Merrick purr as he body gave an occasional spasm around him, the sound

washing over her. It tempted her to play more, even as it lulled her into a light doze.

As Merrick eased from her body, he nuzzled the nape of her neck, licking the wound to the flesh there, soothing the pain. Even as he softened inside her, he remained insanely sensitive, upsetting him that he couldn't do the same for her this most important time. He could grant her that later when he let her face him as he took her. Within her lurked a secret spot that devastated a female when played with just right and would give her the exact same delicious, sensitive exhaustion as he enjoyed now.

Denying her that deep, draining pleasure felt like an insult to her and to himself. He immediately promised himself that he would give her that when he took her again. He wanted her to know the devastation of its pleasure.

Seating himself beside her, Merrick gingerly turned her onto her back. He tugged her bodice closed to hide her breasts. If he saw them bared, he'd never resist leaning in for another taste. He needed to let her rest a moment before they played anymore. Even without the orgasm he wished to give her, she still needed a chance to rest. Only a cruel male would force a virgin to give him more without allowing her a moment to recover from what he'd already done to her.

Dori came fully awake when Merrick turned her over, bracing for whatever he did to her next. When he didn't do anything more than that, she let her body relax. She watched him as he tugged her bodice closed, all the while expecting him to do something more than that. His restraint impressed her, making her wonder if he'd been disappointed in her if he didn't want to play more.

The heat in his eyes as he did and the tension she could feel as he reached toward her let her know the truth. He wanted to play still, but was letting her choose when they continued. She would have reached out to show her appreciation if she trusted herself to not spark his hunger again. Her spirit was willing to play more, but her body demanded she rest a mite more before she tried.

When moved to get into a more comfortable position, she winced at the answering pain between her thighs where Merrick had taken her. She could also smell blood from the loss of her innocence. Sudden concern on Merrick's face let her know he'd felt her pain. The drop of his gaze to her thighs showed he scented her blood. She pressed her legs together to halt his gentle touch when he reached toward her, hissing at the burn that caused her.

"There's a moss similar to the kind that grows on the *secara* tree by the lake. It's not as dangerous to those not Ferals-born, but just as potent in its healing properties," she explained at his growing concern.

She hoped he knew of the *secara* tree. The "felines' tree" as it was called, grew on many planets in this quadrant, mostly on Zy-Gan and Ama'Zyn. Only those related by blood to the Ferals could ever get near the trees without the spores from its moss causing a violent reaction. Why the tree acted the way it did with all Feral-borns remained as unknown to all as the Ferals' full history. It was just accepted that the tree somehow ended up spread throughout their part of the galaxy and a friend to only the Feral-borns.

Merrick nodded to her and rose to his feet, moving to the pond. He found the moss she spoke of and collected two large pieces of it before returning to Dori and seating himself by her. Parting her thighs, he gently cleaned away the blood, allowing the



juice in the moss to spill over the tender flesh of her pussy. The juice wouldn't eliminate her pain, but would lessen it to where it would become less noticeable.

He tossed the spent moss aside and checked to make sure he hadn't left any of it behind on her flesh. Only then did he use the other piece on himself, leaning up just enough to let her watch, amused by her interest in what he did. Such a naughty little female.

He didn't need the presence of her blood left behind on either of them to inspire blood lust in himself or her with as worked up as they still were. It risked primal responses neither were ready for.

Before Merrick was even *partly* through with using the moss on himself, Dori could feel the ache between her legs easing and turned her attention to watching him. The image of him touching himself delighted her. She sat up, but resisted reaching out to touch him, allowing him to concentrate.

He ignored her, but dared to put on this bit of a show for her in letting her watch what should have been a non-sexual act. He was being a very bad Zyan in doing this to her. Well, she hadn't been a shining example of good behavior either with *him*. He had a *really* nice ass and she'd watched him there as he moved had to the lake for the moss. When he'd turned to return to her, she didn't even hide where she had looked, as it let her see that most male part of him again. Even soft, he remained an impressive sight.

Instead of moving to continue their play, Merrick seated himself before her. Dori appreciated his decision as she wasn't ready to play yet, still tender despite the moss' healing balm. She readjusted her clothing, covering herself as Merrick did the same, allowing them some more focus. When he crooked a finger at her, she slid closer, pleased when he stretched out on his back, drawing her down to lay beside him so they could doze under the warm sun and savor what they had shared.

## Chapter Thirteen

Dori idly traced the strong muscles of Merrick's chest and abdomen, her fingers moving in a slow quest toward his groin. The closer she drew to there, the more hungry for it she grew. She could feel him tense under her, even as he allowed her this game. Her sudden wish to see how far she could go before he forced her to do more than merely play filled her thoughts. He gave a low growl, as if sensing her thoughts, but she ignored him, enjoying the game she played.

"You play with fire, little one," he warned.

"You haven't burned me yet," she countered.

"Give me time and I shall."

He should know better than to challenge her. She never backed down from one. She wanted so much to be burned by him again. The first time had been such fun, she hungered to enjoy it again. How long could he resist before his strict control broke? She couldn't wait to find out. A small sense of danger filled her mind with the thought, but she chose to ignore it. She wanted to test him now and listening to such things went the wrong way of her desires.

Merrick hissed at the absurdity of his female. She wanted to be spanked a deep red in the game she played. She didn't realize what danger lurked on the path she walked now. Yet, he couldn't bring himself to stop her. If only her light touch weren't so delicious, he could stop her. As it stood, he savored her sweet touch and would allow her challenge to him. So long as she accepted the consequences of her actions.

Dori let her fingers play in the crisp hairs just below his navel, delighting in his sharp intake of breath. So many hot buttons lurked on him, she would enjoy discovering them over and over again in her playing with him. She drew her finger back up to play at his bellybutton, tracing the little hollow. He began to grow very suspicious of her actions, shown in the tensing of his body, deepening her enjoyment.

"*Dejah--*"

"Shh," she said, laying a finger against her lips. Her finger traced the softness of them and his eyes narrowed in suspicion. "When given a new toy, I must find out *just* how to properly play with it," she pointed out matter-of-factly.

Merrick's lips turned up in an amused smile. "I have been called many things by females," he said, drawing her hand away, "but I think I like being considered a young lovely's toy for a time." He returned her hand to his chest. "So long as she doesn't break me."

"I promise." She gave him a gentle kiss to seal her vow before returning her attention to her game with him. "I never break my toys," she soothed, drawing back as she traced a finger over his chest in a teasing circle, savoring his low growl. "Especially ones I like." And she *really* liked Merrick as her "toy" and how willing he was to let himself be controlled this way.

Merrick allowed her the game, liking her little teasing words and delicate touch on his flesh. She had to have one of the sweetest touches he ever felt by a female before. He closed his eyes on a hiss when her mouth joined her fingers in their exploration of him, her tongue following the path her fingers laid. He fought the instinct to stop her and steal control from her, allowing her what she willed of him.

It proved a hard thing for him to do. His promise from before came back to haunt him now. He wanted to give to her the true pleasure the games could give to her. However, he didn't want to steal away her fun now. The division within him hurt almost as much as the desire she built in him did and he wasn't sure if he would survive either of them. Nor did he know if he cared.

Dori pressed a kiss to his chest above his heart and Merrick shuddered, the touch allowing her present state to fill his mind and he again had to fight the need to take over this game. If he did, he risked raping her as her own need added to his made it begin to spiral out of control.

"Dori, please allow me my clarity," he whispered when her mental state once more tried to claim him. "I risk doing you harm and will never forgive myself if I do." She had enough sense to grant him that and he let out a breath of relief. His little *dejah* wanted to play and explore, not rest. Very well, he would let her. So long as she didn't push him beyond his control. "You may savor me wild later, sweeting," he went on as she drew her mind back from him. "Right now, I desperately need my control."

"What do you desire?" she asked, giving a lock of his hair a gentle tug as she played with it.

Merrick resisted the growl her gentle tug drew, savoring this new game she dared to begin with him. Reserved usually to discipline one's lover by a female, she used now it to play with him. She was an evil little woman. "To please you." It was the one answer a male could give one in the fever, as she still was, that would not spark an attack.

Dori leaned closer, purring in pleasure. "Show me how you would please me."

An answer a male always wished to hear, but rarely ever did. At least now she would only attack him if he angered her with something she didn't want. "I must turn you to please you," he said.

"Making me dizzy will *not* please me," she pointed out.

Merrick chuckled. "No, but if you are under me, I can show you what I intend to do to please you." He drew her to him for a kiss, turning with her so she ended up under him, feeling her arms curl around his neck. Her education in pleasure was proving a most enjoyable thing.

"Such pretty nipples," Merrick purred, studying her breasts with interest before turning his gaze back to hers. Her somewhat surprised look made him want to snicker. "Very pretty," he went on. "And very tasty." With those words, he leaned in for a taste of her nipples.

This was unlike his attention the first time, before she even knew his name. Then, he'd been in a bit of a rush, sucking at her harder than she would have liked. Now, wanting to both please and arouse her, he turned playful. He wanted to make up for what he'd done that first night in his rush and knew just how to grant it to her.

Merrick let his tongue trace her nipple before tickling the tip of it, drawing a gasp

from her lips. He drew her breast in deeper so he could trace her aureole before slowly spiraling in till he could tease her nipple again. He drew on the tight, tender bud, feeling her hands grabbing at him.

“Merrick ...”

Ah, but her sweet whisper pleased him. He gave the side of her breast a playful nip, making her flinch before he turned his teasing assault on her other nipple. How would she feel when he did the same to her clit? He couldn’t wait to find out.

“Your mouth is a dangerous weapon, Merrick.” Dori’s voice shook as she spoke as she strove to catch her breath from what he did to her.

Very *dangerous*, he agreed, his thoughts echoing the chuckle he gave against her skin. He gave this breast the same teasing nip before drawing back, making her flinch again. “But I have a *far* more dangerous weapon in store for you.”

“Oh?” Dori probably knew the very “weapon” he meant, but liked his games and refused to spoil his fun. “What sort of ‘weapon’ is that, my *daji*?”

“Patience, my *kazi*. One weapon at a time.” He dipped his head, returning his mouth to her skin. *This one is far from done with you*, he sent to her in a silky purr.

He followed a similar path she had with her fingers on him as he explored her, mouth and hands mapping her body, pulling her dress aside to expose pale, creamy flesh to his attention. Her ability to resist squirming amused him and made him determined to get that response from her before he gave what she wanted of him. Only then would he move down further--only then would he grant her what they both wanted when he sipped of her sweet cream again.

“Merrick, *please!*”

A low chuckle escaped him. He was beginning to like the desperate wail he drew from her with his exploration. Finally though, he moved down to where he knew she wanted him, drawing her skirt aside. She wasn’t squirming as he would have desired of her, but it was close enough for him as his hunger demanded of him. He lowered his mouth to her pussy, pressing a kiss to the crown of dark-fire curls, breathing in her scent. His tongue snaked out to dip between the soft folds just below to taste her. Their combined juices made for a heady flavor and he eased down to drink in more of it. She gave a soft mew of pleasure and he tickled her clit with his tongue, turning the mew into a sharp gasp of surprise as he showed her just how sensitive that spot was becoming with her arousal.

*Tell me what you need, Dori*, he sent to her, sensing her wish to speak, though the words remained trapped in her throat from his attention.

*You*, she sent back. Even her thoughts sounded breathless to him.

*Where?* He knew where she needed him, but wanted to hear it from her.

*Inside.*

Merrick moved up her body, lifting his head just enough to let his hair dance across her skin, raising chills. Dori moaned when he eased back into her sex, the heat of his arousal easing the ache his first claim caused her. She moaned again when he kissed her, letting her taste their combined flavor on his lips and tongue. Her hands slid over his back and chest as he began to move in her, fingers again mapping the warm, soft flesh.

With a hiss, he captured her wrists in his hands and pulled them away as he drew

back, breaking the kiss. "You distract me far too well with you hands," he scolded. She wiggled her fingers in a defiant manner, just to prove she wasn't entirely submissive to him in this. Ooh, he liked this one.

Despite his wish to keep her his captive, he released her hands, allowing her to touch him again. He wanted to feel her hands on his skin as he took her. She had a touch that was Paradise. Soothing and arousing at the same time, he refused to deny himself its gift.

Dori caressed his arms and chest as he began to move in her once more. He shivered against her, a low rumble rising in his chest, drawing a smile from her lips. He liked to be caressed? She made note of that for further exploitation later.

Merrick gave a purring growl, leaning up to watch her. He drew one of her legs up over his hip, feeling the other curl around his thigh. She wanted him to go fast and free her of the tight pain of her need to come, but *he* wanted to take her slow and build her up to an explosive release. The clash of desires made for an interesting argument before Dori's mind closed itself off again, stealing away both the argument and what she'd been picking up from him.

"Oh gods!" she gasped when his cock curved upward, the head scraping against a supersensitive point within her with his every thrust. Her mind scrambled to everything but pleasure and just what he did to her now. "Don't stop," she whispered. She grabbed onto him, her nails biting into his shoulders, drawing a growl from him. The wish to bite him came to her again, feeling painful in its strength, but she fought it back again, not wanting him to stop.

She held tight to his strong arms, gasping for breath as his hard thrusts took her closer and closer to that sweet release, the caress of his hard cock against that pleasure point fraying her every thought. Unable to take any more, she finally threw her head back and screamed out his name a near painful orgasm claiming her, making her vision go gray. He gave a harsh groan and she felt the hot spurt of his seed pulse into her. She fell against the grass, drained, the color slowly bleeding back into her vision.

Merrick collapsed onto her, breathing hard. He stayed there for a long moment, savoring the caress of her inner muscles milking him, but finally pulled away. She almost cried with the loss of his warmth against her before he lowered back onto her. He let her feel him against her as they rested and recovered, probably feeling her need for it her mind remaining closed to him.

"You're a pride-clan chieftain, correct?"

"Mm-hmm." Merrick said, nuzzling her breasts. It pleased him she didn't call him a 'fallen chieftain'. The derogatory term from her would be a devastating blow for him when he had been so betrayed.

"What exactly does that mean?"

A growl rumbled in his throat. "You are supposed to be savoring what we shared, not interrogating me."

"I *am* savoring. I just have questions my savoring cannot quiet."

Merrick grumbled again. She wasn't going to let him rest until he answered her. He could sense her insistence on pestering him until he gave her the answers. Why she didn't already know this, he couldn't say. Her keepers would suffer for keeping such

things from her.

"I rule my pride-clan much as my brother Farin rules Cymbaline." He didn't like that he had to lift his head to speak to have such a serious conversation. Her breasts felt nice against him, her heartbeat very soothing.

"Farin is your brother?" Dori was shocked. A pride-clan chieftain *and* a king's brother? Merrick was becoming a very interesting enigma. All she knew of the Cymbaline king was the Hiroke had once tried to help him in his mating demand as she had been aided by them. It hadn't worked and she knew the Hiroke were still striving to remedy that and others with similar problems. Etherson shared some of what went on here with Farin, so the king knew of her and her condition, apparently. It irked her at the same time as he'd never come here to seek her out. The king wanted help with his mating demand's premature waking, but didn't want to meet the one who had been responsible for a possible cure?

Oh well, it was probably better he hadn't. What she heard in how dangerous his attacks were because of his drive, she wouldn't wish to be witness to them. If they were as bad as hers could be at the time of her monthly cycles, she *really* didn't want to face it. Hers were bad enough to watch from *her* angle.

"Yes," He touched a finger to her lips. "No more questions."

Dori nodded and let him settle back down against her. She shivered when he nuzzled her breasts as he nestled his head against them. His hair tickled over her sensitive nipples, chasing the thoughts from her mind. Her hand moved to his hair to play with the silky locks, smiling when he purred. Much as she wanted to ask him further questions, she would try and grant him his wishes. Fighting her inner curiosity always proved her hardest battle. It may have been natural to their people, but she didn't have to like how it rose to snap at her and make her endanger herself.

Even as she tried to do as Merrick asked, Dori kept thinking back on everything that had happened. She kept finding herself coming back to the injuries Merrick had come here with. How had they happened? And had he earned them in a battle for rulership of his pride-clan?

"Merrick, may I ask you about your injuries?" she said, giving up on the 'savoring' and resting.

Merrick didn't wish to answer that question, but knew he had to. He *had* promised to tell her about Tark, and she chose now to be the time for him give her the answers. He moved to sit beside her, allowing her to cover herself as he did the same. This conversation needed to be truly serious. He couldn't do that with either of them being tempted by the other. His eyes studied her for a long moment as she sat beside him, looking expectant. His promise to her infuriated him now in how it worked to hurt her with his own pain. He didn't want to hurt her, but he had no choice now. She needed to know this--needed to know what brought him into her life and the danger they both faced from it.

"An ambitious and stupid cub named Tark tricked a few kinsmen into attacking me by planting thoughts in their minds about crimes I supposedly committed against the pride-clan. Horrible crimes I committed against the females of my pride-clan. Each tried to kill me for my supposed guilt, driving me off, intent that I not live long to escape their

wrath.”

Dori pulled his hand into her lap, holding it in both of hers. She squeezed it in support. “I’m sorry.” she said.

Merrick stroked his thumb over her fingers, pleased by her support. “As leader, I apparently stood in Tark’s way for his delusions of grandeur. I fear if he isn’t stopped, he may endanger others, maybe even all of the kings.”

Dori shuddered at the thought. She then grew curious about battles between males. She knew both Zyan and Ganjan had such battles, but not much more than that. It sounded like a very foolish thing to do as they had more important problems to worry about than skirmishes between each other. It could lead to a war and make the Tatic try again to invade the system.

She stopped the thought before it woke her past pain again. It wasn’t something she needed to remember just now.

“What are you thinking, *dejah*?” Merrick prodded. He couldn’t hear her thoughts as he allowed her her privacy. Whatever she thought of now felt less than pleasant to him and drew his concern.

“Why do you insist on battles of dominance in your own pride-clans,” she asked. “Isn’t that bordering on chaos?” She kept her past at bay with her need for answers to this insanity he spoke of.

Only because she was an outsider and apparently ill-informed he didn’t hiss at her, though he was sorely tempted to do so anyway. That was a great insult to centuries of tradition. “It is our way, Dori.”

“Well, it won’t be *my* way. I’m not battling *anyone* for rule of a group of people.”

Merrick chuckled. She appeared to have a great many holes in her education. He didn’t know why, but he could help her learn as he could till he found out the reason for the gaps. If it *was* a game, he was *not* amused. This was not the thing to play about with him. “You don’t need to, sweeting. *Females* get to tempt all variety of males into fighting over them for the right to please her as she wishes. Males hold the power of rulership of the pride-clan--females hold the power of the male’s pleasure and what she allows him. If he becomes her mate, she still carries that power, though he *is* allowed to try and win that power away from her for a time.”

“I’m not sure that appeases me or not.”

Snickering, Merrick reached out to brush some hair back from her face.

“Someone has truly upset your education. Such things are taught from an early age--possibly better than my attempts to teach it to you.”

“Oh.”

Merrick grew serious as an unsettling realization dawned on him. “You really don’t know any of this, do you?” This was no game of hers--she really *wasn’t* just playing with him in her loss concerning her education.

Dori shook her head. “No.”

“I’m surprised the Hiroke haven’t taught you of your people.” Surely her caretakers wouldn’t keep her in darkness of her people--her culture.

“They did, but my education on the Zyan ended shortly after I began it.”

Merrick gave a low growl of anger at her words. Moreover that she felt herself a

failure for what she didn't know and afraid to insult him by admitting it to him. He preferred her telling him what she didn't know than scaring her with what she didn't already know. "Why would your education be halted?" He would have to have a few choice words with Etherson on that very subject. How dare she be so insulted!

"Would it have helped me to understand all this mate hunt and heat stuff better?"

Merrick nodded. "Yes. Now, why did they refuse to teach you this part of your education?"

"It wasn't their doing."

Her words took him by surprise and Merrick was left blinking at her. Of all the answers he expected, this was *not* one of them at all. He studied her for a long moment without a word. Finally, he looked as if had managed to pull himself back from his startlement enough to find his voice. "*Dejah?*" he prompted. She wasn't suggesting what he thought of, was she?

"It was *my* choice to end it," she said. "Etherson had nothing to do with it so please don't go blaming and attacking him. It's my fault."

"For what reason?" Why would she deny herself the knowledge of her people and its culture?

"Because of my family. Every time I tried to do my studies, I would see my parents, my brothers, my sister, my friends ..."

Merrick drew her into an embrace, his hand instinctively moving to the nape of her neck to massage. He knew no other way to soothe her than this gentle, ancient technique. He cradled her in his lap as she lowered herself into his arms, similar to what he'd done with her that first night. Purring softly in a soothing manner, he tried to calm her before he lost her to this pain.

She leaned up after only a moment, forcing him to release her. "I think I am ready to try again though," she said. "If you are here, I think I can."

Merrick caught her hand in his, pulling it close. "I would be honored to assist you, Dori." He sealed that vow by brushing a soft kiss across the back of her hand.

"Mostly females were taken prisoner, from what I can remember, few males," Dori said, allowing that day to filter back into her mind. "My sister was one, but she let them catch her so they wouldn't find me." She drew in a sharp breath to resist the tears welling up in her eyes. Merrick laid his hand on hers, the touch giving her the strength she needed to go on.

"My friend, Lynis, was caught when she tried to save Rhiana." She could still remember Lynis, only a year older than her, hopping onto the Tatic holding Rhiana and ripping his ear off before she was captured herself. Lynis' screams for Rhiana to run and her fury when Rhiana refused still haunted Dori well into her dreams at times.

What Lynis thought of Rhiana, if she still lived, Dori didn't know. She tried not to think about it as it only brought her nightmares.

"Why did they capture women and girls more than anyone else?" she asked. She had an idea, but hoped she was mistaken. It only threatened to bring about a new barrage of nightmares.

"Tatics take them as trophies and slaves," Merrick said. "Status depends on how impressive and alluring they are." He wouldn't tell her his thoughts about those captured



by the Tatic. It lent credence to his greatest fear and his only explanation of how so many of their people could have gone missing as they did. His fear of those captured during the war being used to help capture even more of their people.

She didn't need to know what went on still outside of her home if she didn't need to. He didn't like thinking about it himself and wouldn't make her suffer it as well if he could help it. She didn't appear to know about their people being captured still and he wouldn't make her nightmares worse by adding to them.

Dori's stomach clenched in protest. She didn't want to think about the ramifications of that statement.

"I don't believe your sister or your friend would have faced such a fate," Merrick went on. "If they are anything like you, I believe they would have played inept and made themselves appear so useless to the Tatic, they would have been sold off to someone more willing to have one like that."

"Sounds like something Rhiana *and* Lynis would both do." *She* would. She'd make herself appear as dumb and useless as she could before letting a Tatic play with her.

"I believe they may yet be alive then, Dori. And *I* will help you find them and learn their fates."

"I would like that, Merrick."

The Zyan inclined his head to her. "No one should be denied their freedom or to know their family, and we will find your sister and friend if they still live. And I will personally rip out the heart of the one responsible if she or Lynis have passed to the Realm of Spirits."

Dori threw her arms around him in a tight hug. His vow gave her hope of finding her sister and Lynis at last. The Hiroke had been unable to do so, but they were limited to what they could do safely and not bring danger down on them and especially her.

If Merrick could convince Arkasa's king, Jareth, to seek out Rhiana, there was a chance, even if it was a slim one. One of his spies in the Tatic system might have a chance of finding her. And Merrick had a better chance than Etherson did as Merrick was a Zyan and Etherson was *not*.

"First though," Merrick said, drawing back from her. "This situation with Tark must be seen to. I don't need the distraction he would bring to such a quest."

"I understand." She reached out to play with his hair in reward for his promise. A deep rumble of pleasure met her attention, making her smile.

"Why is Tark after you?" Dori asked, drawing back from him.

"He seeks power," Merrick said. He resented being reminded of his rival and the loss of his rule, but Dori needed to know the extent of what he had gone through due to Tark's interference.

"Why?"

Merrick glanced over at the pond, then back to Dori. She really had *no* understanding of their people. "Basically, it exists in his blood. He is of the same line as the High King, several generations away from its purity, but still guided by it." His eyes closed when she trailed her fingers over his forehead as she reached out to move some hair back into place. "The Ganjan in him motivates him also as they like to control, rather than *be* controlled."

“How many Ganjan do you rule?”

Her insistence that he still ruled his pride-clan pleased him as it kept his anger at bay. “Many,” he said, drawing her closer. “They respect me enough to allow my rule without question.” Or they *had*, until Tark wreaked havoc on that in his ambitious ways.

“Is this why you said ‘shadow and betrayal’ brought you here?” she asked.

She rested a hand against his thigh, smiling when he rested his own against her wrist. He liked her to touch him and keep his mind on her, even as he recounted his worst nightmares to her.

“Yes,” Merrick said. “Tark spread lies of crimes of a horrendous nature I supposedly committed against our females. Two Zyan males and a Ganjan one took it upon themselves to champion them against me, acting in Tark’s stead. Somehow, he convinced them he was more deserving as ruler and right in challenging me to overturn my rule. Shadow and betrayal is my rather poetic way of saying Tark’s shadow across my pride-clan led to my betrayal.”

Dori pressed a kiss to his cheek, purring softly as she felt his anger rising again. She knew revealing all this asked much of him, and she wanted to keep it from taking him over. He had done the same for her and she refused to deny him the same courtesy.

“He has potential for some very dangerous abilities, is what his lover, Clea, told me. She told me Tark sought further apprenticeship as I am consulted by a first teacher about such things. I have the influence, as leader, to place them with a stronger teacher if I feel the one with him is overwhelmed by it. Or to call the Guardians in to train him in their talents.”

“ ‘Guardians?’ They’re the order keepers of our world and of Ama’Zyn, right?”

Merrick chuckled. “Close enough, sweeting.” They did more than that, but it would take too long to explain all they were to her. He wished to end her questions and turn to more play. Her gentle attention had inspired more than a feeling of calm in him and he wanted to share it with her.

However, his own questions about her and her past here filled his mind, putting his plans aside in his priorities. “How long have you been here with the Hiroke?” Merrick asked, pulling her hand away.

“Since I was three, when the Tatic destroyed my village: Citron.” she said.

Merrick closed his eyes in pain. Citron had been the last major battle between a combined force of the Zyan and the Ganjan against the Tatic before the invading race was finally driven back to their own space after centuries of warfare. It was also the bloodiest.

Lisha, the small, rogue moon where the village resided was near the Tatic’s border and had been partially conquered before the full invasion of Zy-Gan space. Wanting to cause the most destruction as a parting insult, Tatic soldiers went through neutral villages they had once left alone, Citron being the last, and killed everyone, destroying all they could before retreating. Now though, Merrick understood the Tatic had taken prisoners as well to add to the insult of their genocide of the moon.

Dori must have been one of the only survivors of her village’s destruction and found by the Hiroke before rescue forces made it to Citron. Any other survivors taken from there by the Tatic were now either dead or still prisoners. A fate worse than death,

as the Tatic could be very cruel to captives and even more so to their slaves.

"You have been here since you were three?" Merrick asked.

Dori nodded. She knew where he was going and prepared herself for the coming explosion.

"And in all that time, how many samples have you given to them?" he asked.

"A few every six months. Depending on the needs of different experiments and tests," she said. She felt his anger rising and touched a finger to his lips. "In the experiments they do, everything is stripped away to find the Feral DNA still in my tissues. It falls apart very easily."

Merrick went ash white in sudden panic. "Are *you* all right?"

Dori smiled and teased a lock of his hair, pleased with his concern for her. "I'm fine. It's just when someone goes after the Feral DNA and fiddles around with it is when it disintegrates. You would fall apart as well if someone began taking you apart and stripping out everything with still experimental techniques."

Merrick chuckled in amusement. He needed that after the fright her words gave him. "As would the one taking me apart, sweeting."

Dori supposed that was true. "Our Feral DNA is also not as strong as it should be, is what I have heard. One of the Hiroke's many frustrations." The distance from their parent race was the bane of the Hiroke in their efforts to find a pure DNA strain of it from Dori's. She'd often heard a few curses when the Hiroke found a glimmer of it, only to have it disintegrate just as they began to manipulate it.

"What do the Hiroke do to you?"

"Only what I have volunteered for, which is samples of tissues and fluids on occasion."

Merrick growled. At least they hadn't experimented on her, he reminded himself. He would have crippled the lot of the Hiroke if they had.

"The only time I didn't have a choice in the matter was when I first came here as they needed to know if I was sick, how bad off I was in my malnourishment, and if anything from Citron I may have brought with me in my body was dangerous to those here. I could have done without that, but I understand their caution now and have apologized to all those I screamed at and attacked in my upset."

Snickering in amusement, Merrick nodded to her. It may not have been in their ways to apologize for such things, but they would if they recognized the extreme mistakes in their actions upon another.

"They also had to put me in stasis for two years when I was seven to stop my mating demand from killing me till they found a way to make it dormant again."

"Tell me no more--I do not wish to kill your caretakers for their aide in your life."

Dori giggled and nodded. She was too use to how normal experiments and the like here were to feel angry over the less dangerous ones. Though some of them she knew of *did* bother her, despite the benefits of them. Mostly because they called for her to give samples of tissue to them, or some other person or creature, that rarely proved painless.

A growl interrupted Merrick before he could turn this serious discussion toward more pleasant things. He smiled, realizing it was his *kazi's* stomach, snickering at her embarrassed look. "We shall continue this after mid-meal," he said. He stood and pulled

her up onto her feet. “Come,” he purred. “You will need your strength for the list of games I wish to try with you.” Retrieving his shirt, he slipped it back on and tucked it back into his breeches. He began to lace up the ties, pausing when she touched a finger to just above his heart and smiled. Meeting her gaze, he nodded, knowing she wanted to be able to see some of his skin there. Wanting to keep her tempted for more play, he would comply to her wishes.

With a smile, Dori allowed him to guide back toward the compound. She was beginning to really enjoy his games and already ready for more. Her body was recovering from all he did before and already demanding she ask more of him. Only her hunger for food made her hunger for pleasure relent.

## Chapter Fourteen

Dori gathered a collection of foods for her and Merrick, those in the preparing area leaving them in peace as she moved about. Merrick trailed behind her by a step or two, probably the reason none of the near solid Hiroke staff bothered her. Her friend, Paige, must have been in her own room for her break as she didn't like being out where she could be picked on if sharp objects were around.

As he followed her, Merrick sent images to her of what he could do with some of the items here. Kinky images that soon made her elbow him on the stomach, taking him by surprise. He staggered back, coughing as he tried to regain his breath.

*Very well, he sent to her. I shall have a variety of sex toys purchased for you. As well as a few paddles.*

That earned him a second elbow to the stomach. More prepared for it this time, it didn't send him staggering as much. Growling low in his throat, he sent a clear warning to her to *not* do that again.

*Behave, and I won't, my daji,* she sent back in reply, softening the command with the endearment he so adored.

Merrick remained quiet the rest of the time, both pleasing and disturbing her despite her wish he do so. Her unease grew when he didn't try anything once they were alone and heading for her chambers for mid-meal. She expected him to try *something* again when granted the chance. It proved very disquieting for her when he didn't.

After the games they'd played in the garden, his quiet proved *very* disturbing. So much so, her own desire stilled, as if waiting for him to respond somehow.

There were a few small dining rooms for private meetings here, as she knew there were in the castles of Zy-Gan. However, she didn't want to risk one of the Hiroke walking in on them should Merrick decide to play as he was wont to do at any opportunity granted him. She knew he would *not* react well to their interrupting him. Nor would *she* as her hunger for Merrick began to return to near full force within her.

Instead, she made her way back to her chambers with him, allowing Merrick to go to the small table she kept here for her meals. She followed and began to set out the utensils and plates she snagged from the preparing area as well. He watched her close, saying nothing as she worked, raising her unease another notch. It battled with her desire, making her seasick as they each strove to take her over.

"Merrick," she called, hoping break the silence. "I'm sorry I hit you. *Twice*. But you were getting very ... *distracting*."

The corners of Merrick's mouth lifted in a boyish smile. "I forgive you then, sweeting." He accepted the bottle of fruit juice she handed him, opening it and taking a long pull off it. Their kind couldn't tolerate much alcohol as it made them ill. "I forget you are an innocent," he said, then grinned wickedly. "Or *were*."

Dori sucked in a sharp breath at his words and turned her attention back to the

meal. His heated gaze caressed her as she did, making her concentration waver. He didn't help matters when he sent a few more naughty images to her, smiling innocently when she glared at him. His attempt to set her off against him again.

"Hmm?" he drawled. He chuckled when she turned away with a growl. She was proving to be such fun to play with. She said nothing, amusing him even more, daring him to *make* her respond somehow.

"You make concentration difficult, Merrick." Dori accused, looking over at him again.

"I told you the male will try to steal away control from his female," he said, smiling. "I'm stealing. How am I doing?"

"I would hit you if you weren't so cute."

Merrick gave a quiet chuckle. "Then I am doing well."

Dori gave him a sharp hiss and set the basket aside. She moved to her side of the table to sit. Ignoring him entirely, she went about putting together her own plate.

"Tradition states you serve your guest first, little one." Merrick pointed out.

Dori looked up at him. "You lost that honor in what you did with my friends. You scared them and I refuse to tolerate that from you," she said in a tight voice.

Merrick straightened in shock. He opened his mouth to speak, then fell silent and nodded. "I accept your penance and I apologize for frightening those you call friend." He began to put together his own plate, impressed by how protective she was of her own, very unusual pride-clan. She was very much a chieftain's mate in her protectiveness of those who had become her people.

The need to ease beneath the table and go to the sweet temptress seated across from him filled Merrick's thoughts as he began his meal. He wanted to part her silky thighs to sip of her cream once again. His mouth watered with the image and he took a deep sip of his fruit juice to force himself to resist it. Not his greatest plan in hindsight, as the sweet flavor of the juice only inspired him to compare it to her honeyed essence. Or to even lay her on the table and pour it over her silken mound and tempting labia before licking it all up. He knew she would make a sumptuous dessert.

"Can you please turn your thoughts elsewhere, Merrick," Dori interrupted. "You are being very distracting in whatever it is that you are contemplating so strongly." She blocked out his thoughts with as disquieting as they became for her. His emotions, however, proved harder to ignore and clogged her mind with lust and desire, making it hard for her to think of anything else.

"I am occupied by *you*, Dori," he growled, his tone one of desperate hunger. Color rose up her throat, amusing him. "But I will contemplate on something else so that you may eat."

Dori resisted the urge to purr the question now filling her mind to ask just what he thought of regarding her. She didn't need anymore of a distraction than he gave her already. "I would appreciate that," she said softly. She felt his thoughts shift, but it took her longer to recover from his proclamation and what she had felt from him.

"Were you sending those suggestions to me when we first met?" Dori asked, regarding him with a curious look.

"What sort of suggestions?" Merrick asked. Some of his memory of their first

meeting still remained fuzzy as he had been on pure instinct and nothing else. It made his mind place those memories in another area to be returned to him later when he was ready for them.

“Baring my breasts to you-” Merrick grinned at her. “-Then there was one telling me to explore your face with my mouth and fingers.”

“I must admit, I *did* send those suggestions to you, though I didn’t fully intend to. I wished for you to stay where you were. My need for you to grant me your attention to help me to heal took precedence over everything else. I transmitted some of my fantasies to you in order to entice you to remain. My apologies.”

“Accepted, but why did you wish me to explore your face of all things?” Much as the idea appealed to her then, *and* still did now, she couldn’t explain why.

“A touch there can be very pleasant and calming.” He felt the temptation to lure her into doing that for him now.

“I liked my way of calming you better.”

Merrick smiled at her. “I have to admit, I agree with your technique of appeasing me was an excellent one as well. You have a most delicious touch, my *dejah*.”

Dori let her head drop forward, hiding the extent of her enjoyment of what she’d done for Merrick. Touching him then had been more a mesh of lust *and* her wish to help him more than just to help him. His hunter-prey bond led her then, even as she tried to help him. It had been the right thing to do, she knew, but she couldn’t resist being a bit naughty as well with him with what his touch on her mind did to her. He was a very bad, bad Zyan. And she knew she would have him no other way.

Merrick could *not* get his thoughts off of what he wanted of Dori for long and soon found himself thinking of her and his list from the romance novel again. He turned to look at her, pleased to see her finishing the last bite of her meal. Slipping from the chair, he moved toward her intent on continuing their earlier games.

Instinct demanded he claim her again. As their kind relied on instinct for survival, he couldn’t resist its call. He hungered for her and wouldn’t be denied his wishes of her. She was as needy as him and he knew she wouldn’t deny him, allowing the fierce creature lurking deep within him some peace. Were it not for that, he knew he *would* turn feral and take her as more beast than man. She didn’t need that of him. Even now, with as trusting as she was of him, he wouldn’t take her that way unless she asked it of him.

Before he could call her name, Dori looked up at him, paling when she saw him stalking toward her. He sensed her desire bloom as she met his gaze, seeing his intentions. Her musk filled the air and he knew she grew wet for him even now. He moved to stand at her side, reaching out to stroke her cheek with a finger.

“I’m going to sample of the sweetness of *both* sets of your lips, Dori,” he purred. “These-” he traced his finger over her lips, before trailing the fingertip down her body. “-then these.” His finger paused at her sex, a grin crossing his face when she stiffened in surprise at his touch.

His list of ideas grew by leaps and bounds. Eve-meal would be her only reprieve if she allowed him to show her *all* of his desires of her.

The communicator chirped just as Merrick moved to claim her mouth for a kiss and he gave a sharp hiss of anger. “It conspires to drive me always from my plans,” he

grumbled, throwing himself up onto the table to sit before her, shoving the dishes aside.

Dori slipped the comm box from her belt to answer it, trying to subdue her need to burst out laughing. It would never go over well with anyone who contacted her now. Once she got started laughing, it proved very hard to stop and made conversation very difficult when anything they said could set her off yet again once she calmed. “Yes?” she called. She straightened when Merrick undid the laces of his breeches to free his cock, wrapping his fingers around it.

*“I have need of your presence in my office, Dori. I must speak to you on some important matters.”*

“Okay.” She grew more and more distracted as she watched Merrick begin to touch himself, his hand slowly moving up and down his length. She licked her lips at the enticing sight of him and his naughty game, trying not to drop the communicator now beginning to feel less and less important to her. The longer she watched, the less important it felt to her.

Merrick delighted in her distraction, amused he could win her attention away from this toy of Ba’oc, as he still thought of it in its power over her. He plucked the communicator from her nerveless fingers and sought the “send” button on it. “She will join you in a moment, Keeper,” he said, switching the box off and setting it aside. His attention then returned to her and his game. “*After* she watches me in my pleasure,” he purred.

When Dori reached out to touch him, Merrick gave her hand a light swat, knocking it away. Her irritated look threatened to make him laugh aloud. “I want you to watch me only,” he instructed.

“And *I* want to *touch*,” she returned, annoyance filling her tone.

He swatted her hands away a few more times, soon earning him a hiss from her when she grew angry with his denial of her wants in this.

“Fine,” she growled, pushing back from the table, getting up. “You can play with yourself *without* an audience.” She retrieved her comm box and flounced from the room, not even granting him a backward glance.

Merrick growled once she was gone and fell across the table, rubbing a hand down his face. His groin was now more of a focal point of pain and need than it had been before. He knew better than to deny a female what she wanted of him. They *all* liked to touch and *never* appreciated being denied it by a male by the means he had chosen. Rules. He should have made the rule she not touch him, more than he had in his suggestion to her. Then he would have been allowed his reprimand of her for not doing as he asked.

Luck alone kept him from suffering an attack by her for his dare. She could have reared up and bitten him for that and he would never have been allowed to punish her for it.

Merrick sent an apology to Dori, trying to explain his mistake. He hoped to lessen his coming penance upon her return. While she didn’t ignore him entirely, she didn’t respond either. Her own reprimand to him as it would work on his alarm of what she would do to him when she returned. Until he learned if she would attack him then or not.

It worked. He already felt nervous about her return. And of how he might oppose



her anger when he faced her again.

Dori ignored the growing upset she felt from Merrick, making her way to Etherson's office. She couldn't explain why she was so angry with him, except that she didn't care for his means of stopping her touch. Though his apology and attempt at explanation soothed her, it didn't counter the anger his swatting her caused for her to forgive him entirely.

Thinking back to Etherson, she began to grow very apprehensive of what he had to say to her. She couldn't get her thoughts off of his discovering something wrong with her from the tissue/fluid collections. Her biggest fear as it meant treatments. Treatments she knew would make her ill before they made her better. They always did.

It could send Merrick into a rage against the Hiroke and endanger all here in what she could face. Mad as she felt at him, she did not want to do that to him. Swatting someone, she could accept. However, hurting or killing someone for a natural side effect, she would never accept or forgive.

*Consider something more pleasant, dejah. I will not hurt any of those who care for you so deeply.*

Dori smiled and let some of her anger at him go. She could still feel apprehension from him, but he closed much of his mind to her before she could say anything to him. Her own apprehension at going to Etherson's office relented, allowing her to continue on instead of fleeing. What she had been wanting to do before Merrick spoke to her.

\* \* \* \*

Etherson looked over at Dori as she entered. She was one of the few allowed to enter without permission as she'd hidden from angry colleagues of his here as a child. Colleagues she had tried to help, much to their frustrations.

"You wished to see me?" she asked. When he picked up what looked like a portable computer reader, she tensed. She knew it--something *was* wrong.

"Your guest is distracting to you." he said.

"Merrick."

She drew closer as he wrote the name down on the file made on Merrick, feeling his relief that this file now had a name to go with it. He never did enjoy a file without a name, shown by his obsession to learn her name when she was first brought here. And her being too afraid to even speak to them for any reason. "I forgot to come get my lesson before getting mid-meal, didn't I?" She realized now he indeed held a computer reader. One of those holding her race and culture lesson for the day. She braced for the coming chastisement he would level on her for that as she knew he didn't like her ignoring these.

"You *did*, yes. Though I will forgive it as you have a very good excuse. Merrick is a guest you should not ignore while he is here."

Dori smiled, but knew why he was being so lenient. He, like her, hoped Merrick's presence would help her heal from her past and be allowed to finally learn what had been denied her. "I have a request, since you brought him up."

"I doubt very much that he would have any interest in studying races, child."

Dori giggled at his words. Probably not. "That isn't what I meant."

Etherson's brow rose, her request piquing his interest. What sort of request would she make concerning her guest? His interest rose as he wondered at her wishes. "Tell me

your request. If I can, I will try and grant it for you.”

“Would it be possible for me to begin my studies of the Zyan once more, then the Ganjan?” she asked.

“Of course.” He took the reader back, trying not to show his true delight of her decision. Returning it to the file box, he searched for the one on the Zyan people. Merrick’s presence had done this. His insistence the Zyan remain was turning out to be one of her better decisions.

Finally, Etherson found the well-hidden reader and straightened. “Someone has been re-organizing behind my back,” he said, looking over at her.

“If it was me, I give you my word I wasn’t aware of it at the time.” she said.

The Hiroke chuckled. “I may have done it myself when I grabbed it by accident.” He passed the new reader to her.

“Thank you,” she said.

Dori saw him nod, feeling his extreme delight in this before turning to look at the reader. The plate at the top, permanently embedded in it held the name “Zyan,” pleasing her. This was the very one she wanted him to give her for her to start on.

Turning to leave, Dori spied one of the globes of planets Etherson kept in his office. A blue and greenish orb, it looked so much like Zy-Gan it invited further study. It had too many landmasses to be Zy-Gan--all of which were spread across what should have been an almost full ocean world. Zy-Gan had only two known continents. The Main Island, the bigger of the two, home to the League Kingdoms. The Minor Island, the smaller one just to the south, carried the Lost Kingdoms, Minos and Slovis. Aptly named, in Dori’s opinion, as they were “lost” when it came to contact between them and the League Kingdoms.

Curious, she moved to the table it rested on, reaching out to turn the globe in study. There was even a swirl-storm off the coast of one of the landmasses, but smaller than the normal ones Zy-Gan’s vast ocean could create at times and would have been completely halted by the systems in place to absorb the larger forces of the storms. The resemblance to Zy-Gan was spooky and filled her mind with questions.

“What planet is this?” she asked, looking over at Etherson. She felt his unease at her noticing the globe rise, but ignored it as it left in the same instant she sensed it. Use to the usual swells in Hiroke emotion, she could ignore the reaction.

“A planet in a neighboring system,” he said.

Vague answers. Something else she was use to, but she did not feel very accommodating of the vagueness of his answers this time. “It looks like Zy-Gan, though it has too many land pieces and not enough of the ocean showing.”

The Hiroke smiled at her matter-of-fact statement. “The planet is called ‘Earth,’ ” he said, turning his full attention to her. “My people studied it once long ago.”

“For colonization?” She let her finger trace over the raised continents, counting them as she did. Seven continents--interesting. Giving the globe one last gentle spin after her study, she moved back to stand before Etherson’s desk.

“No, just simple curiosity. They weren’t much unlike the Ferals and the Ama’Zyn.”

He hid something from her and she could sense it. She could also sense his

desperate scramble for answers for her. She couldn't read what he hid from her or anything that might even *hint* at what he kept from her and it irked her.

All the Hiroke were the same way with her when it came to their experiments. Frustrating, but normal, she loathed it.

"The Ferals?" she asked. Anytime a Hiroke said anything about the Ferals, she did her best to chip more out of them. It never really worked, but she wouldn't give up until she had all the answers she wanted.

Etherson wanted to end her prodding before he revealed too much to her. He didn't want her to learn *all* he knew of the planet Earth and its importance. Not now. Such knowledge wasn't ready to be revealed.

"Dori, I need to work on some very important matters," he said, trying no to sound or feel as desperate as he was. "Please go indulge your curiosities elsewhere." She was far too inquisitive for her own good and very dangerous when seeking answers as she was persistent as well.

Dori suppressed her frustrated growl. Typical. "I guess I *will* go back Merrick, then," she said, angry at Etherson for denying her. "Since you are so *drowned* in your work."

She didn't like this. She *never* liked this. Etherson and the other Hiroke always shut her out when she picked at something that sparked this unease. If only they didn't have the natural ability to keep her from reading their thoughts, she wouldn't have that problem. She'd have her answers and they wouldn't have to scramble to find an answer that wouldn't be a lie.

Interesting as it was to see them do that "dance," she didn't like it. She wanted to know what they hid from her and what the Ferals and this planet Earth had to do with it. They weren't going to tell her, she knew, and it only angered her all the more.

Etherson couldn't help his snicker. She was so cute when frustrated. But it couldn't be helped. Such answers for her were dangerous. "I'm sure he will enjoy that." He knew she didn't like her knowledge gathering being cut off. This time, however, he could *not* grant her all she wished to know.

He let out a sigh of relief when she stalked from the room. "I know *I* will." he muttered, rubbing his eyes.

Dori thought about what Etherson had said as she made her way back to her chambers. She thought on what he *hadn't* said as well. Her need for answers tried to force her to go back and try again. A moot point as she knew her *Ath'toi'ja* wouldn't grant her anymore answers than he had already. Not with how brusque he'd been in halting her questions.

*Merrick might have the answer*, she thought. The anger she had for him, for his mid-meal antics, shifted to Etherson for cutting her off in her quest for answers. She wanted answers more than she wanted to punish Merrick.

She hoped he might have the answer. There was nowhere else for her to turn to find them for this latest mystery. It angered her to no end with how she'd been locked off from learning of the Ferals from *any* here.

\* \* \* \*

Merrick paused in his pacing, sensing Dori coming back. He felt her frustration,

but pleased it no longer aimed itself at him. Instead, it had shifted to Etherson, drawing his instant curiosity. Her caretaker had angered her more than *he* had? Interesting.

Shaking off the thought, he braced himself for anything feeling her drawing closer. Her anger at him for his denial of her could return as soon as she saw him. He had to be ready to soothe her as it did if he wished to keep his penance from growing any worse.

Dori saw Merrick waiting for her as she entered. The sight pleased her, even though she knew it stemmed from his need to make up for angering her. Well, he had his chance now.

"Do you know a planet named Earth?" Dori asked, tossing her reader onto the bed for the moment. It could wait till later.

Merrick shook his head. "No--why?" The name didn't sound familiar to him in the slightest.

"Etherson has a globe it in his office. It looks like Zy-Gan with more continents on it. It even has a small swirl-storm on it. He said that their people once studied it."

"My condolences to the Earthers, then."

"Grump."

Merrick frowned at her.

"All right, the Hiroke aren't the nicest of people, but they saved *you* and kept me alive and safe. That has to account for *something*, doesn't it?"

"I'll grant them that much, my *kazi*."

Merrick pulled her to him, hugging her close. "I am pleased you returned to me." He teased her hair, nuzzling the top of her head.

Dori drew back from him, smiling up at him. "It's *my* room," she pointed out. His grin was downright sheepish as he nodded to her. "But, you're welcome." She didn't like that he felt so incensed by the Hiroke, though she didn't feel too happy with them either at the moment. Still, Merrick's filled the air about them, drawing her concern.

"Do not ask me to be pleasant to your keepers, Dori." He could sense her concern at his feelings for the Hiroke and would not let her change his mind.

"All right." She knew some of his reasons for his anger at the Hiroke, though hers stemmed from fear, more than from anger, of what she had been raised to believe. *His* felt far different. He carried something like a boiling, festering rage against them. It deeply disturbed her and raised a multitude of questions in her. More than she had about Earth. She only hoped her mate would be more forthcoming than Etherson had. She refused to accept such silence from a second male she cared about. "Why do you hate the Hiroke so much?" she asked.

"I don't," Merrick replied. Her frown told him she didn't believe him in the slightest. "They know far too much about our people, as well as the Ganjan and the Ferals," he said. "Even the Zyn."

"They *have* been around for a long time, even since before the Ferals."

"Yes, and *that* is where my upset lies with them."

"That they're a long-lived race?"

Merrick allowed himself to smile at the absurdity of how his phrasing had sounded. "No, my *dejah*. There is something very strange about the Ferals and what our

own scientists have discovered about them.”

“What?”

Merrick looked around, drawing Dori closer to him. He didn’t trust they were safe even here. If what he wished to reveal now got him in trouble, he could take it. Dori was another matter. He refused to bring her such pain.

*What is it, Merrick?*

*The DNA of our people contains a feline breed not of our world, or anywhere within the history of our fossil records either. Or even within in our entire system. I am sure the Ferals would have had even more than our people or the others do.* He was growing reluctant to speak out loud and she could sense it. Her willingness to speak this way pleased him. They couldn’t be overheard by any without psionics. He and Dori were the only ones here with that talent here as far as he could tell.

Dori looked confused. *It’s not possible for a humanoid and an animal to produce offspring.*

*Not without help.*

*Are you saying that the Ferals were created by someone?*

*Yes. And the Hiroke are the only ones who have such technological advancement to do something like this.*

Merrick’s words struck her as very intriguing. Something about manufactured creatures dislodged a memory once lain dormant in her from when she was freed from the stasis. *I remember ...* she trailed off, trying to recall the memory. Her life-saving treatments had blurred her memories from then beyond true recognition the closer they were to the time. It always took time and working at the memory to get it back. They *were* clearing, but singling one out became a task for her as they no longer existed in any order for ease of recollection.

*Share the memory with me as you recall it,* Merrick suggested, taking her hands in his. *It will make this easier on your mind to do so.*

*I’ll try.* She closed her eyes and focused on what she was trying to remember. She felt Merrick’s mind creep into hers, lending his strength in aiding her attempts.

*“The Feral’s DNA is more complex than the notes have led us to believe.” a female voice said.*

*The sound of the voice drew Dori’s attention. More to the point, the name “Ferals” had. The extinct race fascinated her, despite what limited things she had been allowed access to regarding them. They were the parent race to hers and she was curious about them.*

*“I warned you against this.”*

*Etherson? He was in on this as well? Now, she was intrigued.*

*“Those fools didn’t even know what they were getting into when they began such experiments. They probably tortured the poor souls from Terra in creating the Ferals before this whole mess was finally cleaned up,” the female said, not even hiding her anger over this.*

*Dori heard someone coming her way and ran off before she was caught. She didn’t need the trouble this could bring down on her.*

\* \* \* \*

Merrick's face twisted with black rage. "We're an *experiment*?!" The last word came out as such a vile curse Dori scurried back from him in terror. This only raised Merrick's fury another notch. The Hiroke had now made him frighten his mate. An unforgivable crime. She was his very life and scaring her away would destroy him.

"Forgive me, Dori," he said softly. "Such news does not sit well with me. Please return to me."

"I understand." She moved to him, feeling him calm as she pulled him to her for a hug. She nuzzled his exposed chest in her forgiveness before stepping back to look up at him again. "I think you may be wrong though."

"About?" The Hiroke? He would be surprised indeed if she offered an argument that changed his opinion about them.

*I don't think that we are the experiment, per say, she sent to him.*

Merrick grew curious. *Go on*, he sent to her. She had a more unique view than anyone else regarding this and he would let her say her piece to see what holes it might fill in for him.

*I think the Ferals were the experiment and the Ganjan and the Zyan were the natural result of their existence.*

This did very little to soothe Merrick. The Hiroke were trying to get rid of the knowledge of everything concerning the Ferals and their possible connection to them. Or their *definite* involvement as this now showed him. She must not have known of this aspect of her keepers. The only reason he didn't allow his anger to spill out again. That and his desperate wish to not scare her off again. She might not come back to him as easily if he did.

*They attempt to seize information about what they have done in the past where it paints them in the wrong light. Our own record keepers need special protection to keep them out*, he informed her.

Surprise filled Dori. She hadn't heard *this* before. Still ...

*The Hiroke are not all bad*, she told him.

Merrick lifted a brow. He would have been the first to argue against that very thing. His own sister, Xhena, had been forced to kill a Hiroke attempting to force her to give up what she knew. She was one of the record keepers of Zy-Gan and one of their many targets.

Dori didn't know how to soothe Merrick with as furious as he felt to her. She began to realize the depth of how much she'd missed in living here.

*If they created the Ferals to begin with, why are they having such difficulty in making them again?* It didn't make sense to him. If the Hiroke created them, they should not have such trouble in re-creating their parent race.

*I don't know*, she sent. *Information about the Ferals' origin is well-protected, even from our own people, it sounds like.*

Merrick nodded in acknowledgment. The record keepers allowed no information to be shared with any ease. Those who learned it from them were bound by their word of honor to not reveal what they had learned. It prevented the Hiroke from seeking out the myriad of places where such knowledge was kept. Until it could be shared safely, none outside of the record keepers and those they trusted outside of their circle who knew the

answers. Even Merrick didn't know what they kept in their archives, despite being related to one as Xhena was bound by honor to not allow him to know. *She* trusted him, but the other keepers did *not*, apparently. A constant frustration for them both.

*Do you think Earth may have some connection to the Ferals? I know the Hiroke lady said 'Terra', but there must be some connection, right?* Dori asked.

*I'm not sure.*

*Whether it does or not, it would be ill-advised to try and investigate it now as we could get in a lot of trouble trying it here.*

Merrick couldn't agree more. *Agreed. I am not too interested in getting into trouble just now.* A wicked smile crossed his face as he thought on his words. *Except in my explorations of a certain little female who tempts me beyond all reason.*

Dori reached up to play with his hair to reward him for his sweet words, drawing a purr his pleasure from him. "Such nice words you say to me."

Merrick chuckled and pulled her hand away, brushing a kiss across the back before releasing it. He moved away from her to seat himself at the table where they had shared mid-meal.

*Could they be trying to learn more about the Ferals to aide in re-creating them?* Dori sent, remembering more of what she had overheard over the years. Something about needing more information about the Ferals' true place of origin. A place she'd almost learned the name of before being caught spying by Brennan.

*They need a better way of obtaining their information than what they try now,* Dori, Merrick sent back.

*Not all the Hiroke are as happy about the resources being used to help the Ferals as it is seen as a waste and useless as we are doomed as a race in their eyes.*

Merrick looked back at her, a growl rumbling in his throat. He didn't like what she was telling him. Learning of someone trying to stop the Ferals' re-birth from within the one race trying so hard to accomplish it enraged him as nothing else could. Not even his own betrayal could eclipse the fury what she told him. Only the vicious, reptilian Letharans, an off-shoot race of the Hiroke, in their wish to capture Feral-born females for pleasure slaves and for negotiations, came close to topping it.

*The memories connected to the one I showed you are still clearing and I remember hearing of fanatics within the Hiroke trying to halt what has been going on to help Feral-borns. The faction is small, but any found are not treated nicely and are often found dead somewhere as the Hiroke aren't big on rehabilitating them.*

Merrick lifted a brow at her words. An interesting turnabout. He never knew the Hiroke were so protective of the Ferals. This was indeed most interesting.

## Chapter Fifteen

“What is this you carry?” Merrick asked, noting the thing she retrieved from the bed. He pushed aside the conversation about the fanatics, Hiroke secrets, and the Ferals, wanting to concentrate on appeasing his mate. Something more important than learning about something that could only anger him.

“My lesson for today,” she told him.

Merrick wanted to purr at what her suggestion offered him. “*I can teach you many important lessons.*” If she wished to learn something, he could teach her in a most enjoyable way.

“The non-sexual kind of lessons.”

The Zyan hissed at her. “What good can they possibly be?” She really knew how to insult him.

“I learn a lot of interesting things this way.” He could sense she felt quite tempted to have one of his “lessons” right now.

No lesson the reader could offer her could compare to what *he* offered her now and he so wanted to argue his point over that. “Ask me questions, I can teach you *far* better than some cold set of readers.” He now recognized the flat, computerized book she held. Though he didn’t know its subject, hoped it would prove to be on the Zyan people.

Dori frowned at him and he wanted to hiss again, this time at her daring to doubt him.

“I need to learn *this* way, Merrick,” she said. “At least at the beginning, I should. Otherwise, I will drown you in questions if I don’t fill in *some* holes first.”

Merrick could concede to that point. She knew very little of their people and he could already sense the list of questions she had in her mind now that he’d granted her such an opportunity. It grew, question after question, the longer they delayed with his suggestion. “Very well,” he said. “Do your lesson first.”

Once more, he wondered about the subject of the lesson awaiting her on the reader. He prayed she carried one on her own people, but wouldn’t get his hopes up about it. If she didn’t yet feel ready for such learnings now, he promised himself to help her on that quest. He would put a dent in her list of questions on them to steer her toward a more detailed education. She deserved to know the people she came from and he would deny her none of the knowledge.

“Not here,” she said.

Merrick growled, affronted. “Don’t you trust me?”

“Of course, I trust you, Merrick. I just find it easier to focus on my lesson out in the garden.”

He smiled, soothed by her explanation, and followed her out the room. “Do your study, *kazi*,” he soothed. “I will amuse myself in my own of your garden.”

“It’ll take awhile.”



\* \* \* \*

Her lessons always took several hours and she knew Merrick would not like her being away from him that long. He proved that whenever she came near him. *She* didn't like the idea of being away from him that long either, now that she thought about it.

"So will my study of your garden."

Somehow, she didn't *quite* believe he planned to study the *garden* all that much. Studying his ideas of what he wanted to do to her *while* there, but not the garden.

"All right," she said at last.

As he escorted Dori toward the garden, Merrick glanced down at the reader she carried. The name stamp embedded into the reader above the screen pleased him. She was indeed attempting a study of her people. This meant she *did* trust that his presence near her would help keep her past pain at bay for her study.

"It's not nice to be nosy, Merrick," she scolded.

"Part of our breed, *dejah*," he replied, nonchalant. "We don't ignore the unknown all that well."

This was true, she had to admit. She was a prime example of that very thing when it came to her earlier years. The Hiroke could attest to her crimes where innate curiosity was concerned.

"You may be 'nosy' with me later as my penance to you," he added in offering.

Dori shivered but said nothing as she didn't trust herself to not babble out a response. Instead, she focused on getting to the garden and doing her lesson. What she and Merrick did afterward could wait until then.

She bit back a growl at that last thought. She didn't need to remind herself of anything that could even remotely bring her back to sex and pleasure. It risked her being unable to focus and getting herself into trouble.

Despite her anger at Etherson, she didn't want to disappoint him by not doing her lesson. Ignoring it to play with Merrick sounded nice, but she knew she couldn't do it. She had to fulfill her duty to Etherson first, then she could play as she willed with her mate.

"I need to go on alone," she told Merrick once they were in the garden, "You ... well, you are a distraction I don't need if I am to focus on my lesson and get it right the first time."

He liked her admission. A compliment he felt go straight through him. It pleased him enough to make him more willing to grant her request. "For one kiss as payment, I will grant you request," he said, unable to resist the chance to tempt her into staying and changing her mind about this. She needed to do her lesson, he knew, but he could not resist his nature.

He certainly liked that price. Well, she liked it as well in how delicious a kisser he was. She expected a brief, tender kiss this one time. Nothing prepared her for the passion he showed her in his claim of her lips. Her knees threatened to drop her from the heat of it. She saw stars when he finally drew back. They cleared in time for her to see his amused face before her. "How am I supposed to think with *that* hanging over my head now?!" she exploded, her body aching with the need to be filled by him now, lessons done or not.

As much as she wanted to do her lessons, this worked in favor of her wish to toss the reader aside and seek one of Merrick's "lessons" instead. He didn't help her case by looking so delicious and willing to do anything she asked of him. It only made her struggle all the worse.

Her anger only made Merrick smile, making the struggle feel as if she waged a war against her duty and her wish to play. The movement of his lips drew her attention, reminding her of the sensuous feel of them on her and her wish to feel them explore again.

You will because I ask it of you," he said. "Now go and do your study."

Dori hissed at him, turning to move away and into the garden. She felt Merrick's eyes on her and did her best to ignore him and not turn and rush back to him. *Stop it.* she ordered, both him *and* herself.

*Stop tempting me with nice sway of that gorgeous ass of yours as you walk away, and I shall,* he sent back.

His words only tempted her to yank her skirt up and flash him. She just barely caught herself before doing just that. Her lessons were supposed to be important and she really needed to do them. *Before* she played with Merrick. She kept reminding herself of that the entire time she forced herself away from Merrick's caressing gaze. Promising herself she would play with Merrick as her reward didn't help her either. It made resisting returning to him to 'study' *with* him far worse.

\* \* \* \*

Dori moved through the garden, reading from the comp book displaying her latest lesson. She could sense Merrick's growing frustrations as he forced himself to leave her in peace while she did. *Merrick, calm,* she sent, hoping she wouldn't make matters worse. *You will hurt yourself if you continue this way.*

*I can help you study,* he sent to her in offering. He accompanied that with a few of his tamer ideas of how he might do that. His desperation made several darkly sensual ones fill her mind, along with the tame ones.

*I have to do this on my own,* she sent back, unable to stop her smile at his study ideas. *Though I may question you on some of the things this reader tells me if they don't sound right.*

*You may. I want my dejah to know just where she came from and all that she must to know to please her male.*

The smile she knew he had now irked her and she growled in her irritation. *Her male is going to find a piece of stiffwood up his ass if he doesn't behave himself and stop that.* A tree with wood almost too hard to break once dried, stiffwood was versatile in its uses. And like falling on spikes if one were to trip and fall into one of the piles they were lain in to dry. A person rarely came out of it without injury when such an accident happened.

Laughter filled her head and Dori let herself smile when she felt him leave her in peace. He felt calmer now and would make it through her absence. Continuing on her way, she read the notes and documents on the Zyan, wandering down the familiar path she took for her studies.

\* \* \* \*

Near one of the walls, she paused, hearing the sound of flies and assaulted with a horrible stench in the same instant. She looked up in a slow move, afraid of what she would find when she did and screamed when she found herself staring into the eyes of a Sira beast. Glazed over and very clearly dead, its naturally snarled expression added to this morbid discovery.

Falling back from the nightmare before her, she could see the beast was tangled in the vines of a *drindria* it must have fallen into from the wall. A thick branch impaled through its chest, it must have killed it instantly in its fall, letting the tree digest it unhindered by a fight. The foul odor of its digestion of the beast left her wanting to throw up.

\* \* \* \*

Merrick moved around the garden, trying his best to conduct his ‘study’ of things here. He failed as all he could think about was going to Dori and feasting on her passion as she did her accused study. The wish to continue what they’d begun would be the death of him if he weren’t allowed it soon.

Finally giving up in his exploration, he stretched out on one of the cushioned benches to await her return. He leapt to his feet again when her scream rent the air. Reaching out to her with his mind, he let it guide him in his run to find her. He staggered a moment when he felt the crushing weight of her panic.

Tark? He couldn’t tell. Her all-consuming panic blotted out everything, making him unable to feel anyone or *anything* else near to her.

\* \* \* \*

Dori heard the distinct sound of running feet, but she could not take her eyes off the dead thing before her. She scented a moment Merrick before he grabbed her from behind and pulled into his warm embrace, forcing her to turn away from the dead Sira beast. His scent and hold helped to calm her, but the sound of the flies behind her she couldn’t ignore. Not with the image it conjured up in her mind of what she had seen.

\* \* \* \*

Merrick felt his heart shatter when he saw what drew such a scream from Dori. A gray-furred Sira beast was impaled on a *drindria* tree at one of the garden walls. The beast was old and frail and must have been so hungry for meat that it went against its instincts and scaled the tree’s vines curtaining the garden wall to find an easy meal in someone it scented in the garden. There was no telling how long it must have been here before she discovered it, but the digestive juices of the *drindria* feasting on it made it appear to have been there awhile. It certainly *smelled* that way.

With difficulty, Merrick suppressed his automatic response to the Sira beast and the memories of his father’s encounter with one. He instead focused on helping his mate. She needed him more than he needed to re-live how he came to be ruler of his pride-clan. The memory swelled to fill his mind despite his best attempts to cast it aside.

A Sira beast, very similar to this one, had nearly ended his father’s life when he tried to protect his mate from the beast. Though Teldrin had survived the attack, he’d suffered wounds to his body that left scars that still had yet to heal. While he ruled Cymbaline for awhile afterward, the lingering pain from them finally left him with little choice but to abdicate his throne to Farin.

Merrick's mother, Larissa, survived the fight without injury, other than terror over her mate's health. It was probably why she so feared for Farin's life now. She'd come so close to losing Teldrin, she didn't wish to lose him if she could prevent it.

As Farin was busy with the rule of Cymbaline, Merrick and the chieftan of his pride-clan, at the time, managed to track down the beast who nearly caused the deaths of both of his parents and slain the beast. Only the scars his father described on the beast had allowed Merrick to find the creature. Teldrin had wanted to kill the Sira beast himself, but Larissa forbid it, leaving Merrick to act in his stead.

The action made him ruler of his pride-clan as the previous chieftan gave his mantle to Merrick before dying of wounds the beast gave him. The incidents left the Zyan unable to fully calm around such beasts, even when they were dead like this one. It reminded him of what he'd almost lost. And the best friend he *had* lost.

Merrick knew only a semblance of what Dori had gone through, what she *still* lived with even now. His though couldn't equate his pain to hers. Her loss far outstripped his as she stood as an unwilling witness to the genocide of her pride-clan and her own family. A devastating crime he hoped no other would ever be forced to live through ever again.

"Come, let me take you to your room," he said. He felt her nod and guided her away from the wall, keeping her from looking back at the poor beast.

When Dori began to cry, Merrick felt the pain echo in his own heart. He drew her up into his arms, letting her bury her face in his neck as he made his way back toward the compound and to her chambers. He didn't know what to say to try and make this all better--or if those words even existed.

He soothed her as best he could with the caress of his mind on hers, trying to fill her with calm as he did. The pain of her past swam up to choke her but he did nothing to stop it, only reminding her that he was there and she wasn't alone. He didn't know if he *could* stop it without making things worse and decided not to try so not to hurt her anymore than she already had been. His presence was all he could sense keeping her from falling beyond his reach of aide.

Once back in her chambers, Merrick set Dori down, and allowed her to move away from him. He didn't like what he felt from her. Panic and an abysmal pain he knew had nothing to do with the beast and everything to do with what she must have seen in Citron. He sensed both within her and they staggered him.

"What do you want me to do?" Merrick asked. He didn't know how to help Dori and wanted to try and repair the damage done to her. Frustration as he'd never known before filled him at his inability to aide her in banishing this.

"Just hold me," she said, returning to him and hugging him tight.

Merrick stroked her back as he held her close, reaching up with his free hand to massage the nape of her neck. He pressed a kiss to the top of her head, murmuring in his native tongue words meant to soothe her. She soon began to calm, her grip loosening on him. He let his hand pause as he sang to her the lullaby she had lured him in with, singing it in its true language.

Dori began to relax in his grip, but they both knew there was no way that she would be sleeping right now. Not after the waking nightmare she'd just been through.

Merrick once more lifted Dori into his arms, carrying her to the bed. He released her with great care in case she panicked. When she moved onto the bed, he climbed on after her and pulled her to him as he laid down beside her. His hand returned to the nape of her neck to continue the massage, soothing her further. He wanted to remain with her, but knew he couldn't. Not yet. His mate had been made afraid of a favored place here and he felt the need to express his extreme "displeasure" to her keepers as scanners in the garden, meant to protect this place, failed to prevent this.

"Where are you going? she asked, feeling him begin to pull away from her just as she began to relax in his grip.

"I need to go see Etherson about ... I just need to go speak with him." He felt that not speaking of what she had seen would be better than actually mentioning the nightmare. "I will return in a moment, Dori," he promised as he drew away from her, but didn't leave the bed. "I give you my word on that."

Dori wanted to argue that he stay, but finally nodded. She knew he would keep his word to her. He had before when he told her of Tark at her she'd request. She could handle letting him go for a short time.

Much as she didn't want to be alone, she could trust Merrick to return to her as soon as he promised her he would. He had yet to disappoint her in his promises and she didn't think he would start now.

\* \* \* \*

Merrick made his way toward Etherson's office again. This time, however, instinct clawed at him to return to Dori and find another way to tell the Hiroke of the Sira beast. Had he thought of the comm box Dori owned, he may have done so. Anger over what her keepers caused, inadvertent as it may have been, clouded his mind to everything but fury against them and the need for revenge.

Leaving his mate felt wrong and it ate at him to leave her more and more with his every step. It felt like a danger to her very sanity for doing so. He had to do this for her though and promised himself that he would be swift and return to her as soon as this allowed him. That helped him to continue with some relative ease, limited as it was.

This was a growing disaster. Tark would have been better than Dori coming across a fallen Sira beast. She wouldn't have been flung back to Citron's fall just from seeing Tark. And the cub could have been dealt with easier than this.

How did one fight an enemy made from a memory? An enemy from his mate's own mind? He couldn't combat it, even by removing that memory from her. Such an act would violate her more than the war had, even if she granted him her permission to do so. Something he knew she would never do, despite how horrendous the memory was for her. It made her what she was, though its claws still needed to be removed from their hold over her to give to her the true strength of will he knew to be within her.

Spotting Etherson's office, Merrick rushed forward. He cared little if he terrified the whole lot of those here in his rush to get to the Hiroke leader. All he cared about now was helping his mate. Reaching the office in three leaping strides, Merrick shoved the sliding doors apart when they didn't open fast enough at his command.

"I'm busy, Merrick," Etherson said when the Zyan stalked in. "And you are to announce yourself before--" he fell silent when Merrick snarled. "What's happened?" He

didn't think the male would be this upset over as a simple matter as being chastised by a Hiroke.

"There is a Sira beast caught in one of the *drindria* in your garden," Merrick said.

"What?!" This was *not* the news he needed. Not when he knew where Dori always took her lessons.

"Sira beast. Caught in *drindria*. Out in garden."

Etherson did *not* appreciate how the male chose to repeat the news. Then he remembered what he thought of only moments ago. "Is Dori all right?" If she'd been attacked by the beasts ... he didn't even want to *think* about those consequences.

Merrick was pleased to hear and feel the man's upset. "Yes. It was dead when she came across it." He stepped back when the Hiroke surged to his feet.

"And you left her alone?! Get back to her *now*, before her own memories scare her into catatonia!"

Merrick snarled and rushed from the room and back toward Dori's chambers. He could now feel what his determination to get this over with had been hiding. Dori was growing extremely agitated in his absence. An agitation that grew with every passing second.

Etherson switched on the communicator on his desk. "Get me one of the garden attendants. Now! And have maintenance do their job and *maintain* the security systems out there." He switched off the comm before he received a reply, knowing he would attack them if his words were questioned.

\* \* \* \*

Dori paced in her room, unable to remain still as she fought to chase away the images filling her head. The Sira beast. Her brothers and sister. Her parents. All dead. She grabbed at her head to shut them out but the images swirled about her, mocking her, cursing her for surviving when so many were dead.

She screamed out in terror when someone grabbed her from behind, just as she saw in her mind's eye, the Hiroke moving through the bodies of the dead.

"Dori, calm. It's me."

Merrick's voice broke through her panic and memories. Dori whirled around in his grip to face him, seizing him in a tight hug. His arms curled around her and she felt his mind do the same with hers, granting her a dual hug.

"Forgive me, Dori," he whispered. "I'm so sorry. I didn't think about how my absence would harm you so." His heart broke when he picked up the images swirling in her mind. Her entire pride-clan was dead, wiped out by the Tatic with her seeing the results. She'd been just old enough to understand what happened. Just old enough to know none of the fallen ones about her were ever going to wake again.

"I'm here, Dori," he whispered. "I'm here and I won't leave you again until you are ready."

Dori allowed her fear to drift away with his words and the caress of his mind on hers. Still, she burrowed into his embrace, feeling his arms tighten around her. It wasn't enough--he still felt too far away from her. Even touching her so intimately as he was, it felt as though a chasm stood between them in how far away he felt to her.

*Distract me*, she sent to him unable to speak clearly as close as she was nestled to

him. She didn't know how to make things better and hoped Merrick had an idea of how. The only thing that popped into her mind of how he could distract her didn't feel right. It felt somewhat weird after facing the nightmare of the dead Sira beast in the garden. The one place she'd always felt safe.

Merrick nuzzled her hair, breathing in her scent and pleased that fear was no longer dominated it as much. "Tell me how," he said in a soft voice as he drew her back so he could look at her, but kept a secure grip on her so she wouldn't panic with the loss of his touch.

"Indulge in what you showed me in the garden when you wished to aide me in my studies."

"As you wish," he whispered, releasing her with reluctance. "Go to the bed." He watched her move to the bed, hoping this wouldn't end up harming her further. She needed a distraction this strong, but he hoped it didn't turn out to be a mistake with her fragile state. He wouldn't tell her how odd her suggestion sounded as he couldn't think of anything better to distract her any better than she could.

Merrick moved to her just as she was about to climb onto the bed and caught her by the arm. When she turned to look at him in curiosity, he tugged her back to him and lifted her up against him till her face was level with his. He felt her arms and legs curl around him instinctively to his suddenness. He drew her skirt up out the way so he could press into the heat of her core, rocking his hips into hers, drawing a sweet gasp from her lips.

"More?" he whispered against her as he brushed his lips against hers. He could sense her desire, feel her pleasure, but wanted to make sure *his* wasn't playing games with hers. In her clog of memories he'd picked up, he had caught the image of some of who must have been her brothers being raped over and over before their brutal deaths by the Tatic. He would do nothing to remind her of any of that while the pain still lingered just within her mental reach.

"More," she encouraged, playing with his hair to coax more games from him.

Merrick purred at her coaxing technique on him and reached between them to unlace his breeches. He paused at the last moment and instead turned his hand so he could touch her clit. His light touch drew a sharp gasp from her, pleasing him. Desperate as she grew with the fever rising to claim her again, she reacted to the slightest of touches here.

Moving to the bed, Merrick laid her across it as he seated himself beside her. He pulled her skirt up to expose her fully and returned his hand to her mound, his fingertips stroking the soft curls, encouraging her to allow his touch. He slid one, then two long, thick fingers into her as his thumb moved to stroke her clit.

Dori grabbed at him, her nails biting into him. She gave a sound of protest when he captured her wrists in his free hand and pinned them to the bed above her. Panic filled her at being pinned this way, then Merrick's mind caressed her, filling her with soothing sensations. It swept aside her fear, letting her enjoy his touch again.

It pleased Merrick his gentle touch could soothe her fear. Even if only for a brief time, he would accept it. She needed to have this angry beast slain and he felt now to be the right time to begin such a quest.

“More?” he purred, sliding his fingers in and out of her. All the while his thumb played at her clit, stroking it in time with the thrust of his fingers.

“Merrick!” She screeched his name in frustration and pleasure.

Merrick chuckled. “I shall take that as a ‘yes’ then.” He grinned when she bared her teeth on a growl at his tease. He crooked his fingers forward to stroke against the pleasure point he found earlier. She gave a sharp sound of pleasure and shock, delighting him. More sensitive to the touch than before, she gave a sharp gasp from the caress. She pressed her legs together to keep his hand there, making it *her* prisoner.

He had not wanted to pin her down this way, especially when he felt her brief bout of panic, but felt it very important he do so. It felt important that she not draw his blood yet in the way her grip on him had threatened to. Instead, he decided to give her just what she needed, even if she didn’t know it herself. He liked how she pressed her legs together to trap his hand, forcing it closer and his fingers deeper. It spoke of how much she enjoyed his touch and tempted him to taste her as he continued this delicious touch.

“Merrick ... stop.”

Merrick wanted to rage. She wanted this. He knew she did--he could feel it. Still, he didn’t want to upset her as there was still much fear in her life left unresolved and he didn’t wish to add to it.

“Why did you stop?” she asked, breathless, when he took his hand away.

Merrick gave her a confused look. Now, he was lost. She *hadn’t* wanted him to stop? Then why did she tell him to? “You told me to.” he informed her.

“I was trying to say *don’t* stop. It refused to come out that way.”

An amused smile crossed Merrick’s handsome face. “Ah.” He didn’t think her demand sounded quite right to him. “Then I shall continue.” He took the moment to look her over, facing her again with a wicked smile. “Though you must first be naked so that I may see all of your lovely flesh exposed to me.” Without another word, he removed her dress and tossed it aside, purring his approval at her nude form. “Gorgeous,” he praised in a whisper as he slid closer. Dipping his head, he feathered his lips over her abdomen, memorizing her there with his mouth, tasting of her skin with his tongue.

Dori gasped when Merrick reached her sex in his downward quest, his tongue darting out to caress her clit. She felt him ease two fingers back into her and forced herself to not say a word. A small cry escaped her when he crooked his fingers forward again to stroke her pleasure point, the sensation stronger than before. He chuckled against her. The vibration of it made her flinch, a reaction that only encouraged him even more.

“Please don’t stop,” she begged, reaching down to bury her hands in his hair, keeping him close. She felt his mental smile and wanted to growl at just how smug it looked. Instead, she forced herself to be silent. As much as his delicious attention allowed her anyway.

This time, she wouldn’t let anything, not even herself, stop what Merrick was doing to her. When he began to purr his delight as her fingers played with his hair and scalp, she almost came unglued. Ooh, that felt good against her.

Dori fell against the bed, gasping for breath when Merrick pulled away just before she reached her climax. She looked up at him in confused frustration. “I said nothing.”



she protested. He wasn't stopping because of her *again*, was he?

"No," he assured her. "but *I* did." He made short work of removing his clothes as he eased forward. "I said to myself that if I didn't take you now, I would explode."

She giggled at his words, sensing the level of his need, and the pain it caused him. She could almost feel the painful throb his cock gave to echo his words. "Well, we can't have *that*, can we?"

Merrick shook his head, taking his cock in his hand to guide it to her as he eased between her legs. "No." He slid into her, a rumble of pleasure filling him at her welcoming heat.

"We can't," he added. He took her slow at first, savoring the tight grip of her wet channel around him. He only wished he could share what he felt with her through their psionics, but knew the fever would keep it mostly dormant for its duration. A safety control meant to leave one of them with some measure of control. It wouldn't let either of them feel the other's pleasure constantly until her mating fever ended, if they wished to share it, that was. An encouragement for the male to keep his mate happy if he wanted to enjoy and share that game.

"Faster, please?" she begged, caressing his arms and chest.

Merrick closed his eyes, his whole body shuddering at her touch. Gods above, she knew just how to touch him to drive him insane with pleasure. "Of course, *dejah*," he whispered, then began to pound into her as his need to come began to match hers. He brought her to a fierce climax, her scream of release making him smile in male satisfaction before he let loose his own roar of release, collapsing against her. They fell asleep in a tangle of sweaty limbs, deliciously sore from their romp.

## Chapter Sixteen

As Merrick awoke, he growled when he found Dori missing. Though he felt her nearby, he knew she must have left the room while he slept. The thought alone made him hiss an oath at the stubbornness of his mate. He'd tie her to the bed if it didn't doing her even more harm. She didn't need to be wandering about so late at night. Not after what happened in the garden.

Getting up, he threw on his clothes, not bothering to lace up his shirt or even put on his boots before following Dori's presence out the door. Her scent still perfumed the air, telling him she hadn't been gone very long. He followed the strongest, most recent scent of hers, not happy when it led him back toward the garden. He hissed again and picked up his pace to stop her before she went back out. She had no reason for going back out there and risking re-living her encounter with the Sira beast *or* her past should the memories be triggered again.

When he found her, she stood outside of the garden, staring at the door. From the feel of her, she didn't appear to know where she stood or even what she was doing here. Very strange.

Merrick stopped and stared at her, wondering what she was up to. Why was she standing here this way? And why did she feel half asleep? Sleepwalking? It was his only explanation.

With care, Merrick moved to her. He didn't wish to awaken her too abruptly if she were indeed sleepwalking. "Dori, what are you doing?" he asked. He didn't know if she were aware enough of anything about her to comprehend his words, but hoped he wouldn't have to shake her awake.

"I don't know," she said, her voice reflecting her confusion. "I just looked around and I was here." She turned to look at him, her eyes clearing as she came more awake.

"Let me take you back to chambers." He kept his tone gentle so not to upset her.

"Okay." She curled her arms around his neck when he picked her up, laying her head on his shoulder as he turned to go back to her chambers. "I'm sorry I woke you." she said.

Merrick drew her close to him, pressing a soft kiss to her temple. She was safe and uninjured. That was all that mattered to him at the moment. "No need, sweeting. I am only pleased I found you before you harmed yourself."

"Was I sleepwalking?" she asked.

The question threw Merrick. It wasn't one he expected of her. "Yes." Their kind was prone to it as children and just after their first change due to their developing psionics. He'd been one of the few who hadn't suffered it. Stress, as the kind Dori had been under, could bring the habit back.

"I did that as a child and thought I outgrew it." She yawned and snuggled down into his warmth. "Guess I was wrong."

“Sleep, *kazi*, I will keep you from wondering off again.” He smiled when he sensed she had already fallen back to sleep. He took her back to the bed and tucked her in before moving to lock both the balcony and bed chamber doors. His only hope was that it would be enough to keep her from wondering off again in her sleep.

Merrick kept watch over Dori as she slept for a time, but finally had to give up his vigil over her and seek his own sleep. He turned her to face him, letting her burrow into his warmth as he pulled the blanket over them, curling his arms about his mate. She wouldn’t be leaving this bed again if he had a say in it. Ilsha could be persuaded to aide him if she saw the true extent of his determination to keep his mate here. The goddess could grant Dori pleasant dreams meant to soothe her and prevent any further wanderings.

He prayed to the Goddess of Dreams to show mercy to Dori and grant her the peaceful dreams she needed now. When he heard his mate sigh, then purr, he smiled and thanked the goddess. Dori sounded like she was having some very nice dreams indeed. He only hoped she was dreaming about *him*. Otherwise, he would be very jealous when he learned who she now played with.

\* \* \* \*

“Did I do anything bizarre when I wandered off in my sleep?” Dori asked the next morning after a silent first meal.

“Only upset me when I woke and found my mate missing.” Merrick said. He drew her closer to him when she came to the table where he sat, parting his legs so she could stand between them. “But I am pleased that you are safe and unharmed.”

“I hope you realize it was nothing personal.” She gasped when his mind seized hers, allowing her to feel as if he were taking her as he had done before.

“I know.” His voice was a low, silken purr of pure temptation.

Dori fell forward, her knees buckling and her hands gripping his shoulders tightly. Her nose buried in the wealth of his hair, letting her breathe in his scent. A harsh moan escaped her when he gave the skin above her bodice a swipe with his tongue and she felt it at both nipples. Both hardened to painful points of need for his mouth. His hands caressed her, adding to her pleasure.

Merrick liked this form of play. While meant only for one’s mate, it could be used by male *or* female, Ganjan and Zyan alike, to play with a favored lover. Dori was the first, and only, one who would ever know this game from him.

Females were more prone to tempt a lover with a physical touch, instead of a mental one. She liked nothing more than to feel all those muscles in her mate tense and ripple in the tightening prison of need she wove over him.

It made Merrick wonder just the kinds of seduction games Dori might play with him later. She had burned him alive with hunger with the ones she’d played with him already. Games that whet his appetite for more.

Merrick drew his mind back from Dori, his grip tightening on her when her knees refused to support her. He felt her hands slide off his shoulders and lowered her with care to kneel before him, letting catch her breath and to allow time for her legs to recall how they operated. He’d stopped just short of bringing her to climax as he didn’t want her to lose consciousness from it.

He looked down and smiled when he saw her hair spread across his lap and felt her warm breath near his groin. Such a nice and tempting picture this made. A picture that made his gut clench, knowing just how close she was to his groin. He could still sense her lingering wish to taste him again, which did little to help him resist encouraging her to do as she wished to him.

"You cheated," she whispered, still catching her breath.

Chuckling, Merrick stroked her hair, smoothing it back from her face as she sat up. "By denying you your climax or by taking you this way?" he asked.

"Both--I can't do that."

"All Feral-borns can. Just picture in your mind what you want to do and feel that you are touching me there while in contact with me. It will take time, but I will guide you in its learning." He smiled when he felt her delight at doing just that to him. He looked forward to teaching her now, feeling just how much she wanted to use the skill against him.

"All right."

Merrick gazed up at her as she stood, growing concerned when she drew back, even with her legs still shaky under her weight. "What is it, Dori?" he asked, not liking this sudden shift in her moods.

"I keep feeling this insane need to bite you whenever you make love to me," Dori said. "Including just now with that little bit of naughtiness you just did."

Merrick happened to enjoy being bitten. So long as the female in question didn't draw blood from him when she did.

"I don't *want* to bite you. I like what you are doing to me at that moment, but it only makes the feeling worse." She was at a loss to explain herself and hoped Merrick could tell her what was going on. "The harder I fight it, the stronger it gets and the louder it demands I answer it."

The smile deepened. Now he understood. She felt the need to mark him as her mate and complete the bond between them. No wonder her need and his own hadn't eased any. Their bond was still incomplete. "*Dejah*, it's an instinct left from the time of the Ferals due to my way of beginning our bond that first night."

She frowned at him and crossed her arms before her. Merrick felt the sudden need to find a hiding place, feeling her need to throw things at him rising.

"It's an act of trust as one can do serious harm if not careful in the way they bite. And I ask you to please reconsider before you throw things at me." He added the last in a rush to help forestall her response of anger.

Dori smiled, letting her arms relax at her sides. "I won't throw things at you. For now."

Merrick allowed himself to calm with her words, though he still considered where he might conceal himself from her should she reconsider the idea.

"Where am I supposed to mark you?" she asked.

She needed to stop making him smile. This was a serious conversation. "Anywhere you wish. That is part of your fun. You choose the place that calls most to you."

"Including sensitive areas?"

She wouldn't dare! He glared at her, eyes narrowing at her smile. She would. The thought made his stomach drop. "Within reason." He prayed to Kashee and any other god he could think of who might help him and keep her from feeling such an inclination.

Dori reached out to tease his hair, giggling when he hissed and jerked back from her. He was being extremely cautious with any move she made about him, as if he expected her to lash out at him. Probably a good thing as she didn't know what her mood would make her do to him in how she kept reacting to him. Her instincts were proving dangerous where he was concerned. "I wouldn't do that to you, Merrick. Even if the area screamed to the heavens at me, I would never dare mark a place that would hurt you."

Much as she wanted to punish her mate for keeping this from her, she couldn't bring herself to contemplate doing such a thing to him. Either from influence over her by her instincts, or just her wish to not harm him, she couldn't say. She looked him over, wondering just where that special place on him lurked where she would place her mark.

Merrick allowed himself to purr at her, pleased by her admission. "My thanks to you, my mate." Just as he relaxed, he felt her anger rising again. *Not good*, he thought. He still wasn't use to the sudden mood swings of female Feral-borns, and he'd been trying since his teen years. It was maddening, but made for the spice their kind enjoyed from females.

"Why didn't you tell me about this sooner?" She pinched his nose in reprimand, startling him.

Merrick's smile turned downright sheepish as she took her hand away. "I forgot," he admitted. "I didn't even consider it until you asked about the biting. Known as such things are, I took for granted that you might have already known this."

Her frustration rose and he knew she'd been denied this as well. "Is this taught to *all* cubs even with the variations of their overall education?"

Merrick hesitated, uncertain if he should reveal this to her or not. She sounded none too pleased with him at the moment. "If I say yes, will you attack my nose again?"

Dori giggled and tapped the end of his nose, but didn't pinch it. "No, I'll just withstand biting you a tad longer."

Merrick's face fell at her words. He much preferred her pinching him again. Her penance was a far worse fate as it challenged him to prove his worth to her as a mate. It also kept him from being fully appeased in their play, though forbade him from demanding more from her than she felt willing to grant him.

An argument rose in him, but he silenced it before he spoke. The knowledge she continued to learn had been denied her frustrated her more and more, adding to her mood with him. Not that he could blame her for it. In truth, the Tatic were responsible for it in what they did to her pride-clan as it left her too afraid to learn about her people. The memories they burned into her as a child kept her afraid of the birthright of her people. Any attempt to study her people made it connect immediately to images of death, destruction, and pain.

"Very well," he said grudgingly. He didn't like this, but would accept her punishment as it would teach him the full extent of her own frustrations. His groin, however, made his mental hiccup feel worse. The fire her touch and her taste inspired within him there burned brighter than before. She knew just how to make him want to

cry.

Merrick knew that he had *one* chance to lessen his penance. If he could tempt her just right, she might very well mark him before she planned to. It may have been *her* prerogative to lay the penance on him, but it was *his* to try and make her forgo it.

"I believe I shall lay down and try to seek the sleep your wandering off caused me to lose," he drawled, rising to his feet. He spared her a glance as he headed for the bed, amused by the frown she gave him.

Going to the bed, he climbed onto it, and moved with the feline grace of their people toward the pillows. He granted her the benefit of the enticing sway of his ass to lure her to the bed and to him. A smile curled his lips when he felt her eyes move there. She kept silent on her delight, and her frustration, at his tempting of her.

Instead of turning over, he stretched out on his stomach, trying to ignore the simmering heat of his groin as he did. He smiled again when he felt his mate join him. She seated herself on his thighs, laying her hands in his back, drawing his full attention. He regretted not removing his shirt first as he would have adored having her hands on his bare flesh.

Dori slid her hands up his back, bunching the silk of his shirt up near his shoulders before she smoothed it back out again. He shivered when she teased the hair near the nape of his neck, chills rising over his skin. She then dared to lean over him to graze that skin with her teeth. He let out a low, appreciative sound, but knew she hadn't bitten him hard enough to mark him as she knew she needed to. The need of it still searing him to his very soul attesting the knowledge. She would need to draw his blood. The idea should have sickened her, but in a quest meant to mark him as hers alone it sent heat straight through her.

When she leaned back up, he felt her inch closer so that she now was perched on his hips. The fingers of one hand continued to tease his hair as the other traced patterns over his back, through the silk of his shirt, teasing the nerves there. He didn't know whether to purr or to growl his frustration over this. Keeping still proved the hardest of all. Her touches made him wish to wiggle under her in his appreciation and show her just how much he desired her touch elsewhere.

"Dori, what *are* you doing?" While he delighted in her attention of her fingers in his hair and on his back, both burned him up inside with need, leaving him desperate for far more than she gave him now. He hissed when she gave his hair a sharp tug. Whoever had taught her that form of reprimand amongst the Feral-borns should be fed to the Sirians. They should have been covered in some cream the Sirians couldn't resist and bodily thrust right into the beast's great maws.

Well, *two* could play this trading of reprimands. He raised up on all fours, snickering when she fell forward to grab him around the neck. His lips curled in a sexy grin when she fell from his back and onto the bed beside him when she lost both her grip and her balance. Much better. She looked quite nice in this position. Ready to be tempted and pleased by him in many, many ways.

"We have great balance, *dejah*," he scolded as he moved to lean over her on all fours. "You should not have fallen with such ease."

"You moved," she pointed out.

“Excuses, excuses.”

“Don’t make me pull your hair again, I can’t guarantee it would stay attached.”

He growled at her threat. “Who taught you such a behavior?”

“It’s instinctive. I asked when I had the inclination to do that to a few people who angered me.”

“Really? And do males reprimand in the same way?” He knew they didn’t. They had a much better means of disciplining their females, but he was curious if she knew it.

“They tend to bite things. And growl a lot.”

Merrick chuckled. He was certainly doing that a lot with her. “What kinds of ‘things’ do they bite?” He dipped his head to nip at her chin. “Here?” He lowered himself against her, allowing to feel his warmth and strength against her.

“I’m not sure about that.” She curled her arms around his neck. “I much prefer little nips interspersed with some creativity.” She had grown tired of talking and wanted to play with him.

Merrick’s purr was one of the deepest of pleasures. “I believe I can grant you that, my lady.” He licked the area on her chin where he’d nipped her, making his list of what he would do to explore. A myriad of ideas of what he could do filled his mind. The strongest of those ideas making his eyes narrow in hunger. He raised up on his hands and knees, deciding if he should make such a suggestion or not.

“What is it, Merrick?” Dori asked, growing concerned.

“I believe I would like to take a bath,” Merrick said. Yes, that sounded right for his plans. At first.

Dori hissed at the insult and planted her hands against his chest, giving him a hard shove so that he fell in a sprawl across the bed. She sat up to leave the bed, whirling on Merrick when he grabbed her by the arm, a growl of warning escaping her.

“*With* you, sweeting,” he clarified, catching her other wrist when she moved to slice him with her nails. “*With* you.”

She let her anger drain out of her as delight swam in to replace it, along with her desire. “That’s better,” she said. She slipped from the bed and headed to the bath chamber, hearing Merrick rushing to catch up. When she grabbed her dress from the floor, she heard him growl. The growl became a snarl when she put it on, stepping into a pair of sandals as she did. “Behave.”

Merrick merely growled again. The image of a *kazi* with its fur bristled and its ears flat against its head in anger popped into her mind. She had to suppress the laugh it drew, knowing it would only anger him more.

Every part of him ached. His cock, no doubt, had become an angry shade of the darkest red, his balls a deep blue by now. Summoning his strength, he resisted pouncing on Dori and driving himself right into her. Only *she* could free him of this ache in his loins, but not if she was furious at him for failing this test of strength she wasn’t even aware she was placing on him. Her decision to not complete the bond with her mark on him began the test of him fighting to keep his sanity while waiting for her to claim him as her mate.

Attempting to soothe the ache himself would only make it worse unless she gave him leave to do so. As his mate and chosen female, she held the key to his release from

this ache. The key to keeping him sane.

*If only I had thought to tell her that itty, bitty detail about the marking bite, I wouldn't be in this mess, he thought glumly. And I wouldn't be working on a nice case of blue balls to rival all cases now.*

He sighed and rushed to catch up with Dori, hiding his pain from her. By instinct, Dori wouldn't be moved by his plight. Well, she *would*, but her own body would betray her by keeping her from helping him. A damnable price the males paid for the trade off for them to rule the pride-clans while females ruled over the realm of pleasure and passion. Females had the better deal in Merrick's opinion. They carried a great deal more power in things as males had to the females happy if he sought her for pleasure and he didn't wish to be left to his own devices in it. Especially if she were his mate.

*Kashee, help keep me sane for my mate. She does not know our ways and knows not the danger I am in,* he prayed silently.

"What scent do you wish to have in the bath?" she asked as he barreled in.

He came to an abrupt halt, his eyes narrowing. She stepped back at his narrowed gaze and he knew she couldn't tell what he felt. He wasn't sure himself. Anger and desire were so deeply meshed in him, it was hard to know which was stronger.

"Something that mirrors *you*, Dori," Merrick said, slipping out of his shirt. "Stimulating and delicious." He was very close to a dangerous level of desire from his need for her.

In all Feral-borns, desire could become dangerous as their need could only be soothed by a chosen female when this far into it. The growing pain could cause insanity, what had happened to Jareth and Blayne's own father, and lead them to murder or suicide. Or both. Merrick tried to conceal the full extent of his feelings from Dori. He wanted to please her with his strength to resist, but even *he* had his limits and he was very quickly reaching it.

Dori liked his description of her. She moved to the bath essentials chest, knowing just the scent she wanted, and would fill his description as well. Using it now felt right and she knew Merrick would delight in it as well. She grumbled to herself when she heard him climbing into the pool, turning to find him already hidden from her, his clothing strewn across the floor.

Okay, she had done this to him, but shouldn't he be trying to tempt her into forgetting about his penance? He wasn't winning points so far. Ignoring her irritation, she turned back to the bath chest.

"What scent have you chosen?" Merrick asked as she approached.

"You will see," she said, pausing by the wall of the pool. "Or rather, you'll *smell*."

Merrick shook his head at her playfulness. He adored playful females and she endeared herself to him in how perfect a blend of playfulness and insanity to him she proved.

Dori opened the vial and poured it into the churning water, hiding the label from him, drawing a growl from him. It took only a moment for the oil to fill the churning water and the air with its scent. Merrick gave a deep, growling purr and sunk deeper into the water's embrace, pleasing her. He watched through lowered lids as she sealed the vial



back, setting it aside on the linen table. She awaited his opinion, but he didn't think he could respond in anything but incomprehensible gibberish from he dare.

"Naughty girl," he scolded, even as his desire rose to nearly swallow him whole. "You use *kazi* bulb oil in the bath of one already so hungry for you." His hand drifted toward his groin under the water, needing release now more than ever. He suppressed a hiss when he touched the aching flesh. The warmth of the surrounding water had done little to appease the pain there. He needed a naughty little female to touch him there to appease the ache. Or give him leave to appease himself for her pleasure.

Dori reached out to caress his hair. "Be naughty," she teased. She could sense what he did under the water even as the froth of the water and cleansing oil's bathing of him hid him from her view. He'd been so giving to her in all the time she had been with him, she wanted to give him a reward. One she knew would make him *very* happy. There was an agony in him he couldn't completely hide from her, telling her that her gift would save his sanity as well.

His head went back on a sharp gasp and the water sizzled as he came, spilling his seed into it. The cleansing oil frothed as cleaned his "mess" from the water as it spurted out of him and Dori couldn't stop the giggles the foamy image in the water drew from her. She reached out to play with the foam, hearing a growl escape her mate and turned to look at him again.

"You said you wanted something that mirrors me," she pointed out when he lifted an eyebrow at her. "This is how you described me and how *I* would describe the *kazi* bulb oil."

True, he *had* said that very thing. And his naughty little female chose very well in his description of her. "Join me." He knew he couldn't take her in the water as the oil would burn them both in the most unpleasant of ways if he dared to try, but he needed to play with her however he could.

He barely resisted the urge to grab her and yank her into the water, clothes and all. His body burned again for his release, as if he hadn't done anything to alleviate it. Until the affect of the *kazi* bulb oil left him, he knew he would feel this desperate. Only Dori's presence kept him from becoming completely lost to the sensations it filled him with. Were she not here, he risked going after any female here, and seducing her mad, just to be freed of the need plaguing him.

It was understandable why the Ferals had so feared the bulbs' affect. It was worse for them as very little could focus their attention, even that of their mates under their influence. The bulbs risked them raping any female *or* male who wasn't quick enough to get away or to find a way to calm them.

Merrick didn't like that thought, but he knew he'd never do that to Dori. Even under the influence of the oil, he couldn't even fathom doing that to her. Demanding she play as she saw fit to appease his need was another thing altogether. Right now, he wasn't above begging her to ease his hunger.

Dori wanted to do just that, but even as the scent of the oil began to make her mind scatter to everything but sex and playing with Merrick, it also reminded her of the orchards and her duties there. She needed to go and harvest what fruits were ripe and had already fallen from the trees. The reminder upset her, but she would forget all about them

if she indulged him.

“Much as I would like that,” she purred, the scent of the oil making her voice thick with hunger. “I must go harvest what bulbs I can from the orchard before I forget and they get too ripe to be usable.”

“Bring me some.” Merrick savored the taste of the fruit and what they did to him even now. He knew though that would have to remember to not let her be exposed to its flavor to protect her. Such a thing would make for some very interesting games indeed.

“All right, but you don’t need anymore encouragement, my *daji*.” She dipped her head to kiss him, hungry for him, even as responsibility tugged at her to go to the orchard. Her fingers moved to caress his throat and she felt his purr. She also felt his need to pull her into the water with him.

She almost fell to the floor when he pushed her away. Both from the strength of the movement and her own building need. If she stayed here much longer, she would be in no better shape than him.

“Go. Before we take this too far.”

Merrick’s words were a plea and she knew he fought with himself to get them out. “Then enjoy your bath and the pleasure it brings to you.” She drew away from him and out of the bath chamber, grabbing her basket in passing. Once out of her room, she took in several deep breaths of air. She headed for the garden, letting the fresh air ease the influence of the oil’s scent on her. Being synthetic, it didn’t last long outside of its embrace. A good thing as she needed concentration now.

She only hoped Merrick survived with his mind intact. With how he’d been when she left, she began to wonder if she should have left him alone. She closed her eyes and forced the thought out of her mind. If she thought of him too hard, his connection to her would call to him. And if he answered the summons, the need he felt now would sluice into her and she would never be able to resist racing back to join him.

“I’m going to do this one, little bitty thing, then go back to Merrick and play a nice, hot game or three with him.” She opened her eyes and continued on her way to the orchard. She kept that thought in mind all the time she headed for the garden. It grew easier as the desire brought on by the *kazi* bulb oil let her go, but she still longed to go back to Merrick. His hunger for her reached out to her, even without him consciously doing it. So much so she finally had to close her mind to allow herself to think clearly.

## Chapter Seventeen

Soon after she got to the orchard and began to fill the basket with bulbs, Dori felt an angry presence and a great sense of danger all about her. She paused in her gathering of the fruit, closing her mind again as she pretended to study the fruits for their worth. Even closing her mind off this way allowed her to scan the area about her, but her range and accuracy would be limited, as she worked around the block.

A range that didn't matter as the source of this anger felt very near to her. She tried to act nonchalant as she contemplated her options. They faltered when she heard a growl behind her. Instinct took her over and she turned to throw the basket at the dark figure that leapt out of the underbrush at her. She ran off as the fruit struck him, the basket draping itself over his head to his shoulders.

Tark watched the female fleeing as he threw the basket aside. He chuckled and licked his lips in delight, already imagining her flavor on his tongue. How he loved it when they ran. Clea played that game with him during his first love play lessons, challenging him to catch her before taking off for the denser hunting grounds. It made for an explosive bout of sex when he caught her and bent her to his demands.

This young lovely would be even more molten when he caught her. But not yet. He wanted to let her remain ahead of him and believe herself safe till he caught her. So, he allowed her to race ahead as he gave a half-hearted pursuit, knowing he could catch her at anytime before she could escape him.

Leaping into a tree, Dori scurried up into it and jumped to the next one. She did this a few more times to stay out of reach of the intruder scanning for her. His mind brushed hers and she jumped to the ground to run from him again. Well guarded as the walls of the compound were, she knew he must have had the ability to teleport as part of his telekinesis to be here. Though the skill could be very useful, it was twice as draining as normal telekinesis as it called for a much greater draw of energy.

It did little to calm her as she thought on that. No one else knew he was here. Only *she* knew this male was here.

The one Merrick had told her about was here. And after her! She needed to get to Merrick as she was in little condition to fight this male. The mate-hunt was still influencing her judgment and made focusing on a fight hard. Thoughts of sex and pleasure distracted her wishes to fight, trying to force her to stop running, even as she strove to do just that.

Dammit, why did this have to happen now? Her own lust clogged her thoughts, choking out her common sense. She wanted to stop and let him find her to try to prove his skill to her as a lover. Had she completed the mate-hunt with Merrick, she knew she wouldn't have been in this predicament. The reminder didn't help her feel any better about her penance of Merrick.

*Call to Merrick.*

The thought, sounding so loud in her mind, blotted out everything else in her mind, allowing reason to come back. She knew she needed someone to fight for her. With what Merrick had told her about Tark, he stood a better chance against him as he knew what he'd be dealing with. She didn't and her own need for a male put her at a *very* bad disadvantage.

*Merrick!*

Dori's scream in his mind jarred Merrick from his bath time play with such violence, it felt like ice water being dumped on him. He was alert and out of the pool in an instant. He threw on his clothing with little regard of how wet they were getting as he did. Her panicked cry took precedence over everything else.

When he felt why she had called to him in so frightened a voice, he let out a fierce roar. Tark! That Ganjan usurper was here and chasing after Dori. Fury filled Merrick to the core against the cub. He wanted blood. And Tark's head!

Racing from the bath chamber, Merrick opened the balcony doors with his mind, snapping the lock as he ran toward them. He made it to the railing before the doors had even slammed into the walls behind them and leapt off the balcony to the garden floor below. Throwing his head back on a roar of challenge, he scared away all animals within hearing range of him.

Merrick felt Tark come to a complete stop at the sound of his roar. He couldn't stop his smile and thanked the gods for their strong sense of hearing. It allowed for a distraction to let Dori escape Tark's pursuit. He wanted her as far away from the Ganjan as possible before he found Tark. Getting her out of range of a battle between them would safeguard her life, allowing him to focus entirely on ending his rival's.

*First, you cheat your way into rule of my pride-clan, Merrick sent the words in a wide broadcast so Tark could hear him, but not sense exactly where he was. Now, you seek to take my mate away. What next? Jareth's throne?*

The High King of Zy-Gan had his hands full in dealing with plots against him by his own brother. Merrick knew Tark would be just ambitious enough to add himself to Jareth's list of enemies to take advantage of the High King's distraction.

\* \* \* \*

Tark came to a sudden stop at the fierce roar of an enraged Zyan filling the air. He knew that roar. Merrick! The Zyan still lived? And *here*? The Hiroke had very good technology indeed if they could save the fool after the distance he covered to get here with his injuries.

Too bad he had to ruin all of their hard work by killing Merrick. Oh well, there was a female here who would soothe that upset for him soon enough.

Tark sensed said female fleeing, but let her go. He could find her again. Right now, he had one last obstacle to her to deal with. Merrick's claim to the little *kazi* needed to be ended before he could take her for himself.

*My female*, he sent back, hissing the words as a show of his utter disdain for Merrick's claim. *Her scent touched me first*. Even if it hadn't, he didn't care. The female *would* be his.

Probably a good thing the fools he had sent after Merrick *hadn't* killed the Zyan. Tark would never have thought to look for his future mate in such a place. He tended to

avoid places where collections of the Hiroke could be found.

Merrick began stalking Tark, sensing the Ganjan doing the same to him. *She has far better taste than that, fool boy.*

*I 'intend' to learn if she tastes better than your sister,* Tark returned in a low purr.

Merrick barely resisted his snarl. Tark was trying to throw him off. He knew better than to accept Xhena letting Tark near her. She was more well guarded than most royals as a record keeper. Clea was the only one who he'd ever seen near Tark as the only Feral-born who would have him in his inexperience with females. Though Merrick often felt an undercurrent of apprehension within her at being so close to the Ganjan. It spoke volumes to him of how she wasn't all that happy about the attention Tark paid to her in any case, leaving him curious about their true relationship.

*Her sweet little pussy flowers open around my tongue so--* a sharp cry cut off his words when Merrick sensed where Tark's broadcast came from and sent a psionic pulse back through it to the cub.

*What was that, Tark? I seem to have missed that last bit.*

\* \* \* \*

Dori slid on the still wet grass, grabbing onto the statue of Kashee placed here by the Hiroke for her. She gasped for breath as she looked for Merrick and her pursuer. Risking the latter finding her, she faced the nude, permanently aroused deity's statue. Laying her hands on his chest, she closed her eyes as she focused her mind on her one, true fear.

*Kashee, please keep my daji, Merrick, safe. I love him and claim him as my mate. Don't let him be taken from me,* she prayed silently, not risking speaking aloud and giving herself away in case Tark was nearby.

She jumped when she heard a cry of pain and whirled to look for the source. When she didn't see a body, or a running figure, she tore off toward the compound again. She sent the same prayer she had sent to Kashee to Qirath and to Pazdar as well, knowing she needed the blessing of all three to help her mate now.

Even as she sent the prayer, she cursed herself for leaving her comm box behind. She didn't think she would need it out here and had left it behind. This could have already been over as security could be alerted and have already rendered Tark unconscious. Instead, she had to hope the scream she heard wasn't Merrick's and she could get to security to grant him the help he needed. He could yell at her later for interfering in his fight. She refused to let him die if she could help prevent it.

\* \* \* \*

*Tark? Are you still with me?*

The blast hadn't been strong enough to kill the cub, but as weak as the male must have been after his teleporting here, it may have. Merrick hissed when a psionic pulse hit him, sending him backward and to the ground. Idiot! He should have known better than to broadcast a clear line of thought to an enemy. Not expecting the attack, it sent him to his knees, all his nerves screaming. He couldn't move. Not until his body and mind recovered from the attack.

The only thing worse was he could feel a recovered Tark up and moving again.

Merrick fought the need to let himself close off his mind to quiet his psionics to

aide his recovery. If he did that, he would be vulnerable to an attack.

Tark ... where was the fool? Vulnerable now, the Ganjan could have ended Merrick's life with ease.

Merrick roared and made a lunge to try and regain his footing. His muscles locked and his nerves screamed again, sending him into a sprawl. The Ganjan wasn't after him-- he now sought Dori.

The realization made Merrick rage within as he could no longer move. Not until the pain of the pulse left him. He should have sent the same paralyzing attack as Tark had with him. Dori was on her own until he could recover. Unless her keepers could kill Tark before he, or his allies, could kill *them*.

There were other Feral-borns here and Merrick began to realize what brought him here that first night was going to happen all over again. The Ganjan intended to use others to take away the last thing Merrick had in this world. And he didn't know if he could stop it anymore now than he could the loss of his pride-clan.

\* \* \* \*

It would have been so easy to seek Merrick out and end the fallen leader's life, but Tark resisted the idea. He had a female to claim and defeating Merrick one final time before her would prove to her *who* was the better warrior and male here.

Closing his eyes, he reached out with his thoughts to locate the female. Dori. He licked his lips as her mind betrayed that one thing to him. He focused on an area near to her and vanished from the garden, intent on claiming his mate at last.

\* \* \* \*

Dori raced down the corridor, cursing that she left her comm box behind again. *Stupid mistake*, she hissed to herself. *This could be all over now had you thought to bring it with you.*

Just as the thought crossed her mind, a heavy weight hit her across the back. She hit the floor hard, a body at least twice her own size in weight against her. The hiss behind her let her know a Ganjan was above her, but he didn't have the same aura of rage about him as Tark had. It was another Ganjan with the same ability to teleport as Tark had.

The thought terrified her. She didn't know how many Feral-borns were here or how badly they'd injured all here. It was too quiet for her comfort. Quiet in a sea of chaos scared her more than Citron's destruction had.

"Were you not promised to Tark, I'd mark you myself," the Ganjan purred, nuzzling her hair. He paused at her scent and she felt shock fill him. "Merrick?" he whispered.

Taking advantage of his shock, Dori hit him with the back of her head. He fell back with a howl of pain and she grabbed the back of her head with a cry. Gods above, he had a hard head! She hissed in pain when the Ganjan seized her by the hair, yanking her onto her knees as he stood. She grabbed at his hand to free herself from his grip, wincing when he caught her by the throat in his free hand, barely able to breathe from the strength of his hold on her.

"Where is Merrick?"

His voice sounded from behind her ear, his breath caressing her cheek unsettling

her in how close he was to her. From the somewhat odd sound of his voice, she knew she must have broken his nose in her attack. She gasped when he gave her a hard shake, pain screaming through her skull. His grip loosened just enough to allow her more air for her to answer him, but little else.

"Where is Merrick?" he growled. "You are obviously his fuck toy. Tell me where he is and I won't kill you."

"I don't know." She could feel his intentions for Merrick and thanked the gods she didn't know where her mate could be now.

"Why would he leave such a delectable little toy where any can play with her?"

The silky purr he spoke with now made her stomach turn. "I have no idea where he is. Either kill me or let me go." She let her anger at him, at Tark for attack here, and even at the Tatic fill her and give her strength. "Since you attacked me when I ran, I obviously couldn't be with--"

Her words were cut off in a cry as the Ganjan threw her aside. She hit the wall hard, the bones of her ribs and spine feeling as if they rattled inside her body. Looking up at her attacker, she suppressed her smile when she saw how badly she'd broken his nose. An easy thing to do with as scared for her life as she felt right now.

"Then I shall make you useless to him as his toy." He stepped toward her, a cruel smile twisting his bloodied, split lips.

Drawing in a deep breath, Dori let loose a scream so loud it sent the Ganjan staggering. Their sharp hearing now became her advantage in how disorienting it proved for him. Before he could recover from her first attack, she turned to one side and slammed the sole of her foot into his groin. He fell to his knees, screaming in pain, granting her the chance to flee. She only hoped she could get to help before he recovered and came after her. She would never survive another encounter with him.

When she whipped around the corner, an arm hit her across the chest. The blow knocked her off her feet, throwing to the floor, knocking the wind from her lungs. Before the second blow to the back of her head sent her into merciful darkness, she saw the face of the one from the garden standing above her. Tark.

\* \* \* \*

Merrick shook his head to clear away the remaining weird feeling of Tark's attack and forced himself up as his body was released from it. He sent up his prayers of thanks to the gods before whirling on the compound with a snarl. His mind returned to his need to rip out Tark's heart and raced to find his rival and to save Dori.

The Ganjan would never claim Dori. She belonged to Merrick and he intended to make his lesson to Tark as painful as possible before the little bastard's death.

Barreling down the corridors, fury filled him as he sensed Tark was with his female. The cub was determined to die in the most painful way imaginable. The fact that Tark now tended to the hard blows Dori received did little to sway Merrick's opinion in the least. It merely reinforced the Zyan's blood rage as she would not have been hurt if Tark weren't here.

The lack of security bespoke of how tied up the Hiroke and the Delavan here to Merrick. It heightened his anxiety and desperate need to get to Dori. His need to touch her and feel the life within her with his own fingertips. All others here and their health

could wait until he knew the woman he loved was safe.

“Merrick!”

The sound of his name brought the Zyan to an abrupt halt. He turned to see one of his kinsmen in an adjoining corridor, a look of shock on his face.

“You’re alive!”

“*Obviously*,” Merrick bit out. He had no patience with anyone while his mate remained in danger.

“We ... we were told you were dead.” Perin could barely speak from his shock of seeing Merrick alive and well.

“Tark lies about *many* things and uses others for his own means.” He tried not to sound so impatient and fierce with one who felt still loyal to him, but Dori needed him. “You’ve been deceived.” He would grant the Zyan one chance to prove himself before ripping Perin’s throat out for aiding Tark.

“Your female is in one of the nearby chambers with him. She needs your assistance as she is distracted in her desires.”

This didn’t surprise Merrick in the least. He knew Tark would take Dori to the first place her unconscious mind revealed as safe. Still, Perin pleased him in not showing true loyalty to Tark. And loyalty to Dori as Merrick’s mate.

“Those you hunt here are my mate’s guardians,” he said. “Free them of your attack and begone from here. No more are to be harmed here. Save for Tark.”

He didn’t wait for a response as he ran off. Dori needed him and this would also be his one and only test for his kinsmen to prove to whom they were loyal. Especially in knowing what he intended for their supposed ruler. His mind turned toward Dori and he roared when he felt her awake and facing Tark. The bastard dared to make his crimes against them both worse by trying to seduce her.

\* \* \* \*

Dori came to slowly, her head aching. Bad as her head ached, she had to reach up to make sure she wasn’t bleeding. An alien sensation filled her mind and the pain was swept away before the mind released hers. Tark. He had just touched her mind.

Panic filled her at the thought of anything else he could have done to her then. She squelched the thought and her panic, hoping not to draw his attention to it. He didn’t need any more advantages over her than he already had. Nature had given him enough due to her foolish penance to Merrick.

“You are mine, not that fool’s,” Tark’s voice snarled, drawing her attention.

Dori turned to find the male, freezing when she saw him at the end of the bed. A tall, lithe male at least half Merrick’s age stood there, an open medical kit on the bed before him. It let her know he had tended to her wounds he and the other Ganjan had caused her. She resisted her gratitude for that--he would only use it against her.

The man had a sensual air about him and she found him quite handsome, but he didn’t stir her as Merrick did. He sensed her rejection of him, shown in how he tensed, his sleek muscles bunching for battle. The knowledge that he wouldn’t hurt her as he wished to seduce her didn’t help. He would take it out on everyone *but* her to destroy her as punishment.

She would have preferred him attacking *her* as opposed to any other. And he must



have sensed that as well if he wasn't attacking her for her insult to him. That, and the fact he wanted to win her away from Merrick due to her estrus and how it tempted him.

"I apologize for striking you, *dejah*," Tark purred. "I believed you to be someone else."

And if she believed that, she would have declared herself the biggest idiot in existence. "What did you do with the Hiroke?" she asked. She didn't want to get his mind on Merrick, as she wasn't sure how he might react. In the quiet of her mind, she prayed her mate still lived and coming for her. She couldn't risk scanning for him as Tark would sense her actions and could lash out at *anyone*.

"They're a little tied up with a massive computer virus they *think* they have," he said.

Dori froze, her fear doubling. There were few strong enough to plant suggestions in the minds of the Hiroke. Someone with this male had to be very strong indeed in their telepathy to do that. Tark was too young to have the skill or strength to do that himself, and be able to teleport here. He would have collapsed from sheer exhaustion from multiple teleports and influencing any of the Hiroke, much less the hundreds in the compound.

"On that, I will admit that I had some help, but I can't worry myself with them when the prize lies here." He climbed onto the bed, crawling toward her in a sensual glide meant to seduce her. "A lovely little *kazi* I shall enjoy exploring."

Dori hissed and punched him across the face, knocking him aside. She leapt from the bed and raced for the door.

"Hmm, *taming* will work, as well," Tark purred. He much preferred taming anyway. She would be made to obey him, even if it meant he had to break her to garner her obedience.

## Chapter Eighteen

Merrick caught Dori in mid-stride as he entered. He brushed a kiss across her cheek as he set her aside, getting her out of Tark's direct focus.

*Stay out of the fight, Dori. I don't want you harmed,* he sent even as he turned his full attention to the Ganjan on the bed.

Tark grinned as he turned onto all fours to face Merrick. "You should have *stayed* dead," he said.

"I never died, stupid fool," Merrick countered.

The Ganjan's grin deepened. "I can remedy that." He leapt at Merrick, who shoved Dori out of the way before he hit both of them. Tark clamped his hands around Merrick's throat, his inertia taking them both to the floor.

Merrick snarled at the hard impact of the floor on his back, struggling to free himself of Tark's tightening grip. He kned the Ganjan, throwing him off, hearing Tark's angry curses from pain. Drawing in a deep lungful of air, Merrick flipped up onto his feet and turned on Tark with a hiss.

"Stay down, stupid boy," Merrick growled. "And I will make your death quick." He wanted to end this and was willing to let Pazdar handle dishing out an appropriate punishment in his stead.

Tark returned his growl and forced himself up. "Yours will be slow and *agonizing*," he snarled and charged Merrick.

Dori watched the fight between Merrick and Tark, an unwilling spectator as she knew trying to help would only prove a disaster. She would distract Merrick from his focus on Tark. Distracting Tark could prove just as disastrous for Merrick as he could become reckless in his wish to save her from harm.

Instead, she was forced to try to stay out of their way and range to keep from becoming a participant in the fight. Her comm box was no longer on the table where she'd left it, leaving her loathing Tark. He must have hidden it and she risked life and limb to find it with the males fighting so near to her. She couldn't risk turning away, even for a moment, in case anything came her way.

As if to cement the danger of not paying attention, Dori cried out in alarm when Tark threw Merrick her direction. She dove out of the way, hearing him hit the wall, things falling from it as he landed. He didn't get up fast enough and she panicked anew as Tark stalked forward.

*Up*, she sent to Merrick, risking distracting him in her desperation. *Get up!* She calmed only when he got to his feet and met Tark halfway, sending the cub into another wall. *And you, stay down!* she hissed to herself, glaring at the cub.

Merrick looked over at Dori and smiled his gratitude for her aide, touching a finger to his lips to warn her again against interference. When she nodded to him, he charged a recovering Tark. He gave a roar of anger as he leapt on the Ganjan, attacking

again.

Dori kept an eye on them as she tried to find a new cubbyhole to hide in. She tried to make her way to the bed to hide under it, the only place she could keep from getting hit with ease. Focused as the two were on knocking the Ba'oc out of each other, they wouldn't be throwing anything about the room with their minds. If they started that, only the bed wouldn't move as it was too heavy for an unfocused attack.

She turned away from the males when her finger brushed glass. A glass vase of hers lay in pieces, risking injury if she'd kept going and laid her hand on any of them. If she was to be injured, it would be in killing Tark if he got anywhere near her in this battle. Instinct within her buried the need of her hunger as it prepared her to take up Merrick's fight if it became necessary. It surprised her just how willing she felt to fight Tark to protect her mate and all of those here with as sick as the idea of fighting and killing had been to her since Citron's fall, she never believed anything would make her able to contemplate it. That was before Merrick and she found a new strength within her to protect what she loved.

A hiss and a sound of rage had her looking over at the two in panic. Her heart fell when Merrick collapsed. She heard something drop to the floor just before Tark turned to face her.

"No," she whispered. She immediately tried to feel if Merrick were still alive, but her own emotion choked her, making that impossible. Her eyes moved to Tark, unable to believe this was happening. This *couldn't* be happening. She refused to believe Merrick could be dead.

"I win," Tark announced, stepping toward her.

"Bastard," she growled, throwing a large shard of the broken vase at him. She leapt at Tark when he dodged the glass shard, knocking him onto the bed. She raked her nails down his face and throat, leaving bloody grooves. Tark threw her off, forcing her to twist her body so she landed in a crouch on the floor. She sprang to her feet just as Tark got back up, turning to face her.

"A little warrior, mm?" He licked his lips in delight. "Even better," he purred. "It makes the taming so much more rewarding."

"I won't be tamed by *any* male." She charged him, determined he would pay for what he'd done to Merrick.

Tark met her halfway, taking her to the floor as he wrestled with her, even as she clawed and punched at him. He tried not to strike her as he could damage her with his fierce lust for blood. Instead, he grabbed her as they fought, halting her strikes, draining off that much more of her strength to take into himself.

He would drain her as much as it took to make her surrender, even if it risked killing her in the process. Bloodlust clouded his mind and he would have her heel to his demands. No woman acted this way with him if she didn't want to feel pain a thousand fold for what she caused him.

Dori managed to get free of him and staggered to her feet only to fall to the floor again, breathing hard. He had a siphoning ability and used it against her to drain off her strength, probably the same way he had defeated Merrick. Merrick ... she wanted to cry at the thought of his being gone.

Merrick lay near her and she could now see his chest move as he breathed. He was alive! Tark had used a sedative against him to defeat him. The hypo-syringe by him attested to his trickery. Tightness from fear of Merrick's being dead eased, focusing her thoughts on how to keep him alive as he was still in danger.

"You will do as I ask, little warrior," Tark said, wiping at the blood dripping into his eye from the cut above it. "Or I *will* kill Merrick."

Dori spared a glance over at Merrick. He still lived and was counting on her to complete this battle for him. "You'll kill him anyway--no matter *what* I do." She knew he would. He would kill any he considered a rival to his claiming her.

"True," he admitted. "I *would*. However, *how* I kill him depends solely on you and how well you cooperate with me."

Dori refused to speak. She would give him no more fodder to use against her. He had enough to gloat over, making her ill. Instead, she focused on willing herself to do what she knew she had to for this to end. A surprisingly simple task as she thought about what would happen if she allowed Tark to continue breathing.

"Come with me willingly, his death is quick and painless," Tark said. "Resist me, and he will *beg* me before allowed to die at last."

He lied and she could sense it. She knew he would torture Merrick to death no matter what she did to the contrary. Still, she had to play along, or appear to, to get Tark closer. She felt too weak to get up and move to him without collapsing and she loathed the idea of him touching her again. She also risked him reading her plans if he touched her, giving her more of a reason to follow her other plan.

Sealing her mind from him before he could read her, she let her eyes drift half shut in a look of desire. She felt her stomach give a roll of protest, but ignored it. She had to save Merrick's life. Being ill would have to wait for a more convenient time.

While she *had* attacked him, Dori knew he still hungered for her. Her scent and need made him react on instinct, even if his mind knew better. He attacked her before out of pure bloodlust. Now somewhat past that, studying her as he did, another equally primitive need took him over. His need for her would be her last advantage over this walking corpse. Merrick's life depended on her ending this, no matter how repulsive it felt. Ill feelings, she could handle. Merrick's death, she knew she never would.

Tark purred at the look of desire she gave him and moved closer. Much as he wanted to sample of her, he hadn't when he brought her to this room from the corridor as she needed tending. Now though, he would sample the sweet taste of victory over her and his rival before he killed Merrick, then teach her a lesson for daring to attack him.

She was a lovely little thing and he could see why Merrick had gone after him. The fool had marked her, but when he died, Tark could place his own on her and she would be his forever. Even if she died before him, she'd still be denied to Merrick. His mark would mean little as long as her true mate's mark remained on her flesh. Merrick would live in torment, knowing that another man claimed the woman he thought to be his mate.

When Tark stood only mere steps away, Dori let out a roar of rage and pounced onto him. She tore into his leg where his pants had been ripped open in the fights and sunk her teeth into the bulge of his cock, sharp canines shredding his breeches and

several layers of skin. Tark arched backward with a scream, staggering back before he fell to the floor in an attempt to escape the pain. She pulled away from him, hearing him curse her, before she turned to throw up. If only she could remove his blood from her skin as easily. The feel of it on her felt like a disease.

Dori felt Merrick rousing and fear clogged her mind, choking her. She couldn't let Tark turn back to attack him. Even injured, the Ganjan still remained at an advantage over Merrick. With the sedative still working in him, he was in no shape for a fight. She alone had to end this.

Forcing herself up, stars exploded before her when Tark struck her in the face, sending her back to the floor. She hadn't even noticed his getting back up in her focus on Merrick and how to save him. Ignoring her own pain, she struck out with her hand, clawing at the wound her nails had inflicted in Tark's leg. Her mind lashed him simultaneously, ripping veins in the already weakened areas. She immediately felt the further drain on her strength from her attack, but forced herself to ignore it. Weakness could be dealt with later. For now, she needed to save her mate and all of those she cared for here.

Tark staggered back, screaming at the pain threatening to drop him to the floor. He stared at her in shock, realizing the strength of her attack as his leg began to grow very hot from leaking blood. His face twisted in rage as he turned his thoughts back to punishing her.

"You will *pay*, bitch," he snarled.

"You have to catch me first." she challenged, slamming her foot into the weakened leg. Tark screamed in pain and fell back, granting her the chance she needed to get up and flee.

"I shall." Tark ran after her, ignoring the agony in his leg now making him limp. Merrick could wait till he broke this female.

Dori raced out onto the balcony, taking her fight with Tark as far from Merrick as she could manage. At the last moment before reaching the balcony railing, she threw herself aside, screaming to the gods for help. Tark tried to turn as she had, but lost his balance when he hit a loose stone and staggered hard onto his injured leg. His forward inertia took him over the side of the balcony, taking several vines with him. The scream of rage he issued at losing her went silent with a sickening crunch.

*Please let this be over. Let him be dead and this nightmare be over.* It would be the first time in her life she would make such a wish. She inched forward, approaching the balcony wall with care. Apprehension of what she would find warred with her need to find out if Tark still lived. She could no longer sense him, but she didn't know if she could trust her own senses now. Peering over the railing, she gasped and turned away in disgust.

Impaled through the back on a branch, tangled in the thorny vines of the *drindria*, Tark's body lay ripped open in its grip. His heart completely bisected, he must have died on impact.

What surprised her was Tark's death and his horribly mangled body should have assaulted her with every image imaginable from the destruction of Citron and the deaths she witnessed. Or even her encounter with the Sira beast, which had died in a similar

way.

Instead, all she felt was relief Merrick was safe and this was over. If only she could convince her now queasy stomach of this being a good thing. The scent of Tark's blood on her and the taste of it in her mouth made her sick. She wanted to throw up, but fought it and prayed Merrick would be here soon.

## Chapter Nineteen

Merrick fought away the effects of the sedative used on him by Tark, using a nearby chair to pull himself up. The only good thing the drug did for him was it allowed him to recover from Tark's siphoning off his strength. Young as Tark was, he displayed an amazing level of strength in his abilities. Had he not been after Dori and rulership of everything he could get his greedy hands on, Merrick would have sent him to train as a Guardian.

Thinking of Tark let his memories focus enough to remember. ...

"Dori," he whispered. Where was she? He would bathe in Tark's blood if she had perished. He needed to find her and ensure himself she was all right.

Ignoring everything else, he let his mind reach out to find her. Scenting blood, he looked down and saw it on the floor near the balcony where he could sense Dori. If she were injured, he would never forgive himself for letting it happen.

He stalked forward, ready to attack anyone who got between him and Dori, friend *or* foe. When he stepped out onto the balcony, he spied his mate a short distance away, leaning against the wall. Blood stained her skin and clothing. He could feel her disgust to have it there and knew it all belonged to Tark. She hadn't marked him--she had lain open his flesh in multiple places in a fight.

However, Merrick focused on the growing black and blue area on the side of her face, where Tark had hit her. He seethed with rage at the sight of it and the pain he could sense it caused her.

"Where is Tark?" he growled, trying to locate Tark with his mind. The cub was nowhere in his range, drawing his curiosity. It was too soon for the cub to teleport again. Especially wounded.

Dori covered her mouth and raced back inside, knocking Merrick aside. He staggered and turned to watch her flight, only to see her disappear into the bath chamber, slamming the door behind her. He then caught the scent of blood again, stronger than before. Dori wasn't bleeding, nor what had been on her strong enough to be the source. That left ...

Stepping over to the balcony, he looked over and smiled when he saw his rival. Or what was *left* of him. "Feed well, Kashee plant," he said, then turned back to return to Dori's room. His mate had saved not only his life, but the lives of *all* the innocents in his pride-clan and anyone else that Tark might have targeted. She might not have intended to do so, but he was grateful to her nonetheless.

*My love, do you need me?* he sent to her. He didn't know if she needed his presence or not, but wouldn't intrude if she didn't want him near her now. She felt somewhat ill to him, but he could tell it wasn't serious. This was a reaction to slaying Tark and his inadvertant reminder of it.

*I will be fine in a moment, she returned. I want to bathe first. His scent makes me*

*ill.*

Merrick could smell Tark everywhere and knew it would upset her if she came back out to it. He found a small stain lifter in the things of hers spilled across the floor. Grabbing it, he moved to the puddle of blood, the main source of Tark's scent here. The scent of some medicinal oil filled the air from the bath chamber just before he heard Dori begin her bath. It wouldn't heal her injuries, but *would* soothe her pain and remove the blood from her easily and eliminate its scent in one action.

Switching on the stain lifter, Merrick began to working on the blood. It gave an electronic sound of protest at his choice of stains. The device hadn't been designed for this level of cleansing. Still, it sucked up and destroyed the stain nonetheless.

At the same time, Merrick switched on an air purifier he could sense still standing with a thought. One she probably used while working on her mosaic to prevent the glue fumes from getting to her. It would aide in freeing the air of his rival's scent, leaving only a clean scent behind. He'd seen the wounds she had given Tark before she caused him to fall to his death and didn't wish to remind her of that.

The stain lifter gave one last, weak sound of protest before it shorted out and went dead. Merrick smelled ozone and knew the little machine had died. It pleased him though that it rid the carpeting of the blood before it shorted out. Switching it off, he straightened and set the device aside for possible repair later as he sensed his mate returning.

Dori came out of the bath chamber clean of the blood and wearing only a robe. Merrick wanted to go to her and to soothe her upset, but he held himself back, waiting for her wishes so not to upset her anymore. He would grant her that much for what she would done for him.

"It smells better in here--thank you," she said.

Merrick inclined his head to her with a smile. He knew he couldn't remove *all* the reminders of what had happened here. Though removing Tark's scent went a long way toward soothing her. The mess here from the fight still lingered. Merrick would deal with it soon enough.

"Go bathe, please," Dori said. "You smell like him and it's unsettling."

He could feel her wish to move to him so he could help soothe her, but the stink of Tark all over her repelled her. It angered him, as he knew the upset she felt at being denied her most basic wish. To be allowed to touch her mate and know he was all right and to allow him to soothe her. It hurt her deeply and enraged him all over again against the Ganjan. He wouldn't argue with her, but he refused to leave her alone at the same time.

"Dori?" Blue eyes turned to look at him, pain filling them clawing him to the core. "Join me in the bath chambers--I do not want you to be alone," he said in a tender voice.

He wanted to touch Dori, to somehow soothe her pain, but resisted the inclination. The stink of Tark covered him and he refused to make her suffer its insult on her again. Instead, he followed after her as she made her way to the bath chambers and allowed her to go where she willed as he closed the door. Keeping his eye on her as she moved about the chamber in a restless action, he undressed and tossed the garments into a hamper where he saw hers.



Dori depressed a button to make the hamper recede into the wall, meant to hinder all scents from deeply soiled clothing before it would go for laundering. Merrick sent gentle, mental caresses to his mate, as much as his dwindling psionic strength allowed, before easing into the pool. She still felt very rattled to him and he needed to prevent her from fleeing and making herself even worse off. His brief, gentle caress appeared to be enough as she no longer felt ready to flee if granted the chance.

"Stay with me, Dori," he murmured. "I don't want you to be alone." She nodded and he calmed watching as she busied herself with a bit of straightening up in here. Whatever she did to keep her thoughts off what had happened and kept her here with him, he would allow. Until he could go to her and help her better than he could now.

They said nothing more to each other as he bathed, ridding himself of his rival's scent. The medicinal scent of the water wasn't one he would have chosen for his bath, but he would ask nothing of her right now. He finally left the pool and dried off, pulling on the robe she had set out for him on the linen table.

"Dori, come to me, please," he whispered. He pulled her to him when she moved to him, hugging her close. "You reacted on instinct, nothing more," he told her, feeling her misery. "You saved my life and the lives of all those here."

"I feel awful," Dori said, pulling back from him to meet his gaze.

"He was a murderous, scheming cub who would have killed anyone in his path of getting what he wanted."

"You aren't helping me at all, Merrick."

Merrick rubbed his hands up and down her arms in a soothing manner, smiling at her unhappy words. "I know." He had no words to help her as none came to him to make this any better. Similar to his failure at helping her before with her past haunting her, this destroyed him all over again.

"Please tell me you're all right," Dori whispered the words even as she let her hands roam over his robe, seeking wounds. She wanted to rip it off of him and feel his bare flesh to prove to herself her mate was uninjured. Bruises, she could handle. True injuries, she would feel horrible over for drawing Tark here.

He felt fine to her; he even *looked* fine. She refused to believe it until she saw for herself that his body was all in one piece. The fierce fight between him and Tark had to have caused him some deep, irreparable harm she couldn't sense. Fear of losing him all over again choked her. She let her hands and mind wander over him, seeking those dangers, knowing something had to be wrong with him.

Merrick closed his eyes on a low rumble of pleasure, delighting in the feel of her questing hands over his body. "I am fine, my *dejah*." Reaching back, he stilled her hands, pulling them to between the two of them as he stepped back. "Believe me, Dori, my injuries are minor and I will heal."

"Forgive me for drawing--"

His growl startled her, stilling her words. "It is the way of our people. The mate-hunt demands two males to pursue a single female."

"I know the way the mate-hunt works, somewhat. It's so the strongest genes go to the next generation. Blah, blah, blah."

She winced at his growl, going silent all over again. This one knew just how to

both amuse and insult Merrick in such a unique way. A trait he found most endearing. Teaching her to leash this trait around his, rather *their*, pride-clan would be a most enjoyable thing. He had a feeling she would prove a terrible student and would have to be punished in many delicious ways before she got it right.

"I'm sorry. Our traditions, what I know of them, and allowed myself to learn of them, don't translate well to the Hiroke. I tended to close out what proved irritating in its insult and confusing. It kept me from attacking them or having nightmares."

Merrick nodded, understanding her reasonings. "Accepted. I ask only that you don't question what your instincts tell you. They will not lead you wrong. What happened here with Tark, I hope, showed you this."

"I hope so as well. I don't feel I did right at the moment, except in choosing to save *you*."

Pride for his mate swelled in him. Yes, she proved herself a true pride-clan chieftess in her words. Words of one who would fight to the death to protect those in her care, a natural instinct inherent in a pride-clan chieftess. Something that could make her very dangerous to any who appeared a danger to those she protected.

"You please me, Dori. A true chieftess lives within you in how you protect your charges." He brushed a kiss across her forehead. "And especially your mate. I thank you for your courage and willingness to aide me in my quest."

His words soothed some of her ill feelings, though he could still feel her stomach remained uneasy. His presence helped her in chasing those pains away. Mostly. They refused to go away as a whole, upsetting him all over again.

"Unpleasant as it sounds, I need you to try to get some sleep," Merrick said, releasing her hands. "Tark's siphoning attack has greatly weakened you and only sleep will help you recover."

Dori hugged him close, unwilling to let him go. "Stay with me."

Merrick nuzzled her hair, kissing the top of her head. "I will stay as long as you need me." He had no intention of leaving her now. He would tell the Hiroke another way about this latest nightmare in her life while she slept.

"Forever."

Delight filled him at her words. "My very thought, *dejah*." He guided her out of the bath chamber and to the bed. "I will help ease you into sleep so that you may rest."

Dori nodded, wincing when the movement made her face ache anew where Tark had hit her. Merrick immediately cupped her undamaged cheek, stopping her before she reached up to touch the bruised area. Dipping his head, he very tenderly licked the bruised area, feeling her tense, even as the touch stilled her fear.

"Sleep, *kazi*," he murmured, "Trust me to tend to your injuries and to allow no other to come near you." He stepped back when he felt her incline her head, allowing her to move to the bed.

Waiting until she had settled against the pillows, Merrick let his mind slide into hers, filling her with calm and gentle prods toward sleep until she fell into a peaceful slumber. He wanted to draw the covers over her, but knew he couldn't yet. Any wounds she had needed to be seen to first before he allowed her the warmth of the covers.

Seated beside Dori, Merrick stayed there until he felt her slip into a deeper level

of sleep. She entered the Realm of Dreams and he knew she wouldn't wake with ease. Ilsa granted his mate peaceful dreams and Merrick sent the goddess his thanks for her gift before forcing himself from the bed.

He found the medical kit and rummaged in it till he located the regenerator still within, despite it being knocked into the floor. He returned to Dori and used it to heal the bruise to her face, putting it on its highest setting to heal even the delicate bones that could have been broken here. When he finished healing the bruise, he let his mind rove over her body seeking any further wounds, healing them as he located each with the regenerator. All the while he checked her for injuries, he let his free hand run over her skin, feeling the warmth and life flowing through her. Only in feeling this did he finally let himself begin to relax. She was alive and safe.

When he finished healing her, he tucked the regenerator back in the medical kit and left Dori to sleep. He sensed that she had entered a healing sleep and he would do nothing to disrupt it. This would do much more than he could for her at the moment.

With his mate seen to, Merrick began to look for Dori's comm box. He wouldn't risk her waking to find him gone just to tell Etherson about Tark. The Ganjan had hurt her enough. Closing his eyes, Merrick tried to sense the comm box' presence from the near constant energy pulse it gave out.

He sensed where it was ... and sighed. It was under the bed. Of course--where *else* would it be?

Crouching down by the bed, he used the broken off part of a broom handle to knock the comm box over to him. He'd used too much of his psionics already and needed to let its energy build again before it took too much out of him.

Looking the device over, he depressed the "send" button and drew back just a bit from Dori. "I need to speak to Etherson." he said into it, certain this had no direct line to any specific person here. His eyes remained on Dori, wanting to know the moment his conversation jarred her. He would move the moment he sensed it to ensure she got all the sleep she needed.

There was a long pause, then the comm box connected to a different line. "*I'm here, Merrick,*" said Etherson. "*I'm a little busy cleaning up a mess made by a computer virus scare.*"

"You have a Ganjan responsible for the scare in one of the *drindria* of your garden." Merrick would grant Tark no more ceremony than that.

"*This Tark you spoke of?*"

Though Etherson sounded calm, Merrick could almost feel the Hiroke's growing fear over this development. The Hiroke would know Dori must have been involved and endangered, as well. His restraint impressed the Zyan. "Yes. He and a small group of supporters tried to remove Dori from here. She's fine but drained from her encounter with Tark as he had a siphoning power." He heard Etherson hiss something he could only assume was the Hiroke's native tongue. A curse of rage, no doubt. It became a string of violent words and Merrick stepped back from the bed before they found their way into Dori's sleep.

After a long moment of silence, Etherson seemed to pull himself back together. "*Has she placed her mark upon you yet?*" Anger still hung in the Hiroke's voice, along

with more than a minor degree of true fear for his adopted daughter's life he couldn't hide.

What did that have to do with anything? "No."

*"Then you had best do anything asks of you when she wakes. Those in the fever don't recover well as another might from such an attack."*

Oh, *that*. Merrick silently cursed himself for forgetting that part of the danger a female faced when a siphoning attack was used against her while in heat. "I will help her as I can." His eyes returned to the bed and he tried not to let his worry over what he might face plague him.

*"What do you want done with the body? And are the others gone or still a lingering threat?"*

"They are retreating." Merrick could sense those from his pride-clan moving back toward their lands and that Dori and himself were the only Feral-borns still here. "As for my betrayer, treat him as one who betrayed *you*," he added. He would allow the Hiroke to deal with Tark as he refused to leave Dori for even a moment. Not with the warning Etherson had given him. She would need him as never before when she woke.

*"As you wish."* The line went silent and Merrick set the comm box aside.

## Chapter Twenty

As he waited for Dori to wake, Merrick began to work to try to straighten up the mess left by his and Tark's fight. It would take some time as everything here was in near total disarray. Good. He could use the distraction. The cleanup would also force him to dress as his robe would only hinder his work. Bad. He was comfortable in the robe and ready for whatever his mate might demand of him upon waking.

Oh well, she would enjoy unwrapping him as a very wicked present to her.

When he looked toward her prize creation-in-progress, the mosaic, his eyes closed in pain. It was in shambles from when Tark had thrown him into it. He cursed the cub anew and vowed to help Dori rebuild it.

The sound of voices drew Merrick's attention to the balcony and he moved to close the doors. The Hiroke had come to the garden to tend Tark's body. He didn't care if they destroyed the cub's remains or used what they could from his corpse in their attempts to resurrect the Feral race. Dori didn't need to wake to the sound of the Hiroke outside. She didn't need reminding of what had happened so soon after waking.

"Merrick ..."

The Zyan moved to the bed at her voice, catching her reaching hand as he seated himself beside her. "Yes, Dori?" he asked. He prepared himself for any request she would ask of him now.

"I need ..." she tugged at his hand, wanting him closer than he already was. It angered her he didn't stay with her after she fell asleep. He could make up for it now in how he behaved with her in the next few minutes.

Merrick obediently eased closer, reaching out to caress her face, sensing her anger and knowing he was to blame for it. He had much to make up for from the feel of it. "Tell me your needs and I will appease them." He smiled when she turned her head to take one of his fingers between her lips. His eyes closed on a sharp breath at the answering touch in his loins. Her mind reached out to grant him a "physical" touch of what she wanted of him, leaving him aching for the real thing.

Releasing his finger, she pulled him completely onto the bed with an impatient growl. She pushed him onto his back, leaning over him to gaze into his dark eyes, even as she shed her own robe. "Mine," she growled with a low purr.

Merrick returned her growling purr, luring her to him with the sound. He *was* indeed hers, as she was his. To cherish and to love for all time. "Find where my flesh calls for your mark, my love." he murmured. He wanted the bonding mark now more than ever. Not just to bind them together and complete the mate-hunt. He wanted the mark of her claim to him on his flesh to remind him of the feisty little thing who both owned and loved him.

Dori smiled and gave him a soft, brief kiss in reward for his submission to her before leaning up to begin unlacing his shirt. She smiled when she saw him lean his head

back, showing his complete surrender to her and her plans. Yes, that was just what she wanted of him. His fingers brushed her side as she leaned over him, tempting her even as he gave her the surrender she demanded of him.

Sliding her hand up Merrick's throat, Dori let her nails bite into the flesh very gently. His fingers curled against her sides and she smiled when she felt the vibration of his purr under her palm. She teased the tender flesh of his throat with her finger, tracing in small circles, her nail very lightly scraping against him. His purr deepened and she felt him relax further beneath her, even as her teasing drove him mad with the need to re-claim control of this. He pleased her in his fight to give her what she wished of him.

With his complete surrender to her, she rewarded him with a low, silky purr before she granted him another kiss. He gave a low growl, warning her of how close he was to pouncing on her. Finally, she leaned up to continue in her undressing of him, wanting to see all of him revealed to her. Her hands irresistibly returned to his shirt, unlacing the last of the ties. Pulling it open, she leaned back in, tracing her mouth down his skin. His purr of pleasure only encouraged her exploration, as did the warmth and scent of his skin.

Oh, but her touch was *nice*. Merrick fought against doing *anything* she might take even remotely as resistance on his part. Instead, he hid none of his enjoyment, purring to her of how good her touch felt. How much she made him burn for her.

Merrick hissed when Dori freed his cock, her hot mouth burning him as she took him into its silken embrace. He arched under her as her nimble little tongue explored, fraying every last one of his nerves. She didn't fight fair and he loved every second of it. He adored being at his mate's mercy in this mark quest. She would know the same pleasure as she gave him when allowed the chance. He needed to show her what he'd silently promised her in his notes in her romance novel.

She drew back from him and Merrick sensed her complete offense at the touch of his clothing on her skin. He could also feel her anger at it daring to obscure her enjoyment of both her touching him directly and seeing all of him exposed to her. He could get use to such a reaction very quickly.

"I want you naked!" she growled, tugging at his breeches.

It was all Merrick could do to not laugh aloud at her anger and frustration. Knowing she might bite him for it, he decided against it. He wanted her bite to be the naughty marking bite that would complete their bond. Not the painful bite of a pissed off female.

Merrick lifted his hips, remaining silent as she removed the offending article. He shrugged out of his shirt while she saw to removing his breeches. She was such an amusing little thing like this. He delighted in the angry little growls she gave as she fought with his breeches, ignoring him when he sat up to remove his shirt. Tossing the shirt aside, he grinned at her angry hiss when she threw his breeches aside. His smile was lost on a groan when she leaned back over him, taking his cock back into her mouth. He collapsed back onto the bed under her, allowing her to do what she willed.

"More please, Dori," he whispered--begged. He needed her to make him come. One last time with her sweet mouth before she marked him. Then he intended to sear her with pleasure for her attention. So much pleasure he had planned for her. She would be

sleeping *very* well by the time he finished with him. And maybe dream up a few more things they could enjoy, perhaps? He smiled at the thought.

When she reached up with her free hand to caress and play with his balls, he grabbed onto the headboard to keep from grabbing *her*. Her touch was tentative and gentle, but devastating to him as desperate as he was. “Don’t stop,” he moaned in a gasp. Just as he said the words, he felt his orgasm rising and threw his head back on a roar as he exploded into her mouth.

After she brought her *daji* to his orgasm and took in every drop of his seed, Dori let her mouth and hands move to his abdomen to explore. She sought out just where she wanted to mark him. There were so many places she could place the scar that would mark him as hers. But none of them felt like the one special place worthy of bearing her bonding mark.

The slide of her hair over his skin as she explored his lower body was as much a torture as it was a delight. She could feel the affect that caress had on him and it made her whole body burn. Ignoring it as best she could, she let her hands and mouth slide over him in a slow, careful glide. She liked the feel of his skin, the scent burning her anew with hunger. Her focus on her marking quest alone kept her from being driven mad by what she felt now.

Merrick’s unease rose with her exploration as she moved down toward his groin. She ignored this as well, instinct not letting her focus on anything but finding the spot for her mark on him. She also enjoyed making him squirm as he’d done with her so often.

“*Dejah*, what *are* you doing?”

His growing anxiety screamed in her mind and she could tell her explorations were really beginning to bother him. Dori felt it, but chose to ignore him again. Instead, she laved the area she now explored with her tongue, smiling when she felt him shiver in response. He gave a sharp hiss when she grazed the area with her teeth. He then gasped aloud when she bit the area near the top of his inner thigh. The pain/pleasure of her bite went straight to his groin, making him rock hard in an instant.

Merrick released the headboard, only to grab the pillow under his head, growling through clenched teeth. He allowed her to lick away the blood she drew from the shallow wound, desperately trying to stay still as he did. The wound was a mirror of the one he had given her: a shallow wound that would heal to a permanent scar of their bond. A scar made possible by influence of psychic command to the very flesh to form it.

“Naughty little female,” he accused in a low growl as she drew back.

“Well, you *did* say to mark the place that called to me the most,” she said, her mind clearing from the fog of lust. “There yelled the loudest.”

Merrick returned her smile. “Now, what are your wishes, Dori?” He knew what she needed as she just barely cresting the fever now with the completion of the mate-hunt and her drain by Tark. He would let her ask it of him so he knew how she wished to start. She still commanded him until she made her wishes of him known. Then it would be *his* duty to fulfill them before he could ask anything more of her. *After* he let her nap, he reminded himself as his list of ideas tried to spill into his mind again.

“I want you to fill me with your cock,” she said, tracing a finger up the underside of it. He closed his eyes in pleasure at the touch. “And begin showing me your additions

to all those sex scenes you were marking off,” she added in an inviting tone.

Merrick’s eyes opened, a rumble of approval rising in his chest. Her request pleased him on a level that had his heart pounding with it. They would be quite busy in his answering of it. Before they were done, she would be free of the last remnants of the fever and know his pleasure as he would know hers. “I will be happy to do this for you, my sweet, wicked female,” he promised.

Merrick sat up as Dori moved aside to allow him movement. He gave a low growl of hunger and invitation and she smiled, reaching out to trail her fingers down his chest. Much as he adored the feel of her hands on him, he could feel she enjoyed it more than him. Well, he would have to let her indulge in that as often as she wished. Then he would do the exact same to her. It was only fair. *And fun*, he added silently.

With another low growl, he pounced onto her, only to turn with her so she once more perched on top of him. Her hot little core settled over his groin, her essence anointing him. He pushed up into her, catching her by the hips when she fell forward with a gasp, her hands pressing into his chest for balance. His lips curved in a smile, his eyes settling on her breasts.

“I would ask that you do something more that *stare* at me like that.” She tried to use the same commanding voice she had before, but her desire made it shake.

The smile deepened. “As you wish, my *dejah*,” he purred before turning to pin her beneath him. “What would you suggest?”

She smiled, caressing his sides until he was rumbling deep in his chest in pleasure. “Show me your additions to my romance book. I have told you my wishes already, my *daji*. Do not anger me by forgetting so easily.”

Grinning, the Zyan dipped his head to brush a kiss across her lips. Her irritation amused him, but he knew she would lash out at him if he pushed her much more. Or dared to ignore her demands of him. “Anything you desire.”

“Only if I get to play with you as well, Merrick, not just be played with.”

“I love you, my wicked mate. You may play with me whenever and wherever you desire. And *how* you desire.” Yes, she was a most delicious mate and he savored how she refused to take from him without wishing he feel just as nice as he made her. And he would make her feel *very* nice indeed before they finished here.

“I love you, too, Merrick. And I think I shall enjoy doing *just* that.”

She reached up to play with his hair as he leaned in for another kiss. He purred into her mouth and shifted against her, drawing a gasp from her when he thrust into her, filling her to the hilt. He began to slide in and out of her, his thumbs moving to play with her nipples, remembering how much she enjoyed his touch there. Though he wanted to taste of them again, he had other plans for her before he sampled them. Other places to taste before enjoying the feel of them against his tongue again.

Merrick broke the kiss and nuzzled her hair, murmuring to her of his love and what all he had planned for her in their native tongue. She only understood a fraction of what he said from the confused look on her face. He would have to teach her their language once they picked up on her education about the Zyan and Ganjan races. But that could wait.

Later, *much* later he would also guide her in the ritual lighting of the spirit candles



for her lost pride-clan. A ritual meant to appease some of her grief while lighting the way for lost souls to find their way to Pazdar's kingdom. A beacon for them to follow for Celenis to find them so they could rest at last.

Now though, he had his orders and they entailed him making her scream out her pleasure as he made her *very* happy. And he wished to prove to her he was *very* good at following such orders for his mate.

"Merrick, more," Dori whispered, reaching up to caress his chest, her fingers quickly finding his nipples. "Please more."

The Zyan moaned in pleasure at her touch, pinching her nipples in response, in reward, delighting in her gasp. "All you wish, my *dejah*," he promised, sliding in and out of her in a slow glide, letting her savor each caress of him inside her. "You shall scream to the gods in your enjoyment before I finish with you."

She giggled at him. "Only if I get to do the same to *you*."

Merrick rumbled low in his throat, leaning in to nuzzle her hair, breathing in her scent. "My very thought." He looked forward to allowing her dominance again, knowing she would make his surrender more than worth it.

The End

## Pronunciation Guide

Arkasa - are-caw-zuh  
Ba'oc - bay-awk  
Celenis - si-lynn-iss  
Cymbaline - sim-buh-lynn  
daji - dah-jhee  
dejah - dee-jhuh  
Delavan - del-uh-vun  
Essa - the letter "s"-uh  
Farin - fair-in  
Ganjan - gone-jhun  
Hiroke - he-rowk  
Ilsha - ill-shuh  
jasarpi - juh-sar-pea  
Kashee - caw-she  
kazi - caw-zee  
Lisha - lee-shuh  
Qirath - key-roth  
Rhiana - ree-ann-uh  
Sirian - sear-e-in  
Sira beast - sear-uh  
Tatic - taw-tick  
Zy-Gan - zy-gun  
Zyan - zi-un  
Zyn - pronounced like "zen"

## Glossary

Ama'Zyn - the forest moon of Zy-Gan where it is believed the Ferals originated. It is also, incorrectly, used as the name for the native human-like race of the moon.

Arkasa - the High Kingdom of Zy-Gan and once the total ruler of the League of Kingdoms. While still the center of the rule of Zy-Gan, its influence slips more and more as internal conflicts within the kingdoms and lack of communication breaks the delicate ties more and more.

Arneth - called the "dark kingdom" due to its king falling to insanity from the loss of his mate, causing him to exile his children from his kingdom.

*Ath'toi'ja* - word of the Feral-borns' native language for 'other father'. It is a title of great respect given by a Zyan or Ganjan to one they consider a father figure to them.

Ba'oc - within the Realm of Spirits, the place where the evil souls of the dead go for eternity.

bond of mates - a linking tie between Ferals or Feral-borns and their chosen mate formed by a marking bite to the flesh of said mate. It activates a psychic tie between their minds.

Celenis - son of Pazdar and the Messenger of Death. He takes the souls of the dead to the Realm of Spirits for judgment.

chieftain - male leader of a pride-clan. While it can be a Zyan or Ganjan, but sometimes hybrids of two races are known to rule pride-clans as well.

chieftess - female leader of a pride-clan. Mate to the chieftain and extremely dangerous in her protectiveness of all of those her mate rules.

Citron - a village of the rogue moon, Lisha, where the last battle between the Tatic and the Feral-borns occurred. It was also the bloodiest due to a shift to genocide by the Tatic as they were driven out of the Feral System.

cleansing oil - a bath oil superior to normal soap as it cleans the skin by removing dirt, germs, and grime from a person. It turns into a harmless foam as it works, dissolving as the oil dissipates itself from the water it's used in.

common language - a language created by the travelers' guild to allow for ease of communication between races.

computer reader - a flat, book-like device, used mainly as a storage device for filing, it is also used as a teaching device.

cub - young Feral or Feral-born. They are considered this until they are past the learning phase of their psionics.

Cymbaline - one of the League Kingdoms of Zy-Gan's Main Island, ruled by Farin, a Zyan male.

*daji* - an endearment used by female Feral-borns for a male. Derived from the Feral word for “dearest” it means “lover.” When said to a male, it means that she chooses him alone as the one she wishes to please her. Any other will be attacked viciously. Her chosen lover will only be attacked if he upsets her.

*dejah* - an endearment used by male Feral-borns for a lover they care for deeply. It is derived from the Feral word for “dearest”.

Delavan - a human-like race known to aide other races as they can. They have an unknown connection to many races, including the Hiroke and the Feral-borns.

*drindria* - a symbiosis of a tree and a parasitic vine, native to both Ama’Zyn and to Zy-Gan. They are used as natural barriers due to the toxin carried in its vines. While most human life is safe from the potent toxin, it is deadly to much of the moon and planet’s animal life.

fallen chieftain - a derogatory term for a chieftain who has lost their rule over a pride-clan in the rite of challenge. It is a deep insult as it is a reminder of what has been lost.

fanatics - a faction among the Hiroke who see the attempts to bring back the Ferals as a mistake and strive to put a halt to it. They consider the resources being used to attempt it as a waste as the Feral-born races are too far gone to be helped.

Feral System - solar system containing the planet Zy-Gan and its forest moon, Ama’Zyn. It is the home of the Zyn, the Zyan, and the Ganjan. It is also the former home of the now extinct Feral race.

Ferals - a psychically inclined, feline-human race of a mysterious origin who gave birth to the child races, the Ganjan and the Zyan. They were lost as a whole in the wars with the Tatic. This devastated their child races as their bloodlines and those of the strongest of the Zyan and the Ganjan were wiped out as well. The child races are now on the verge of extinction with each successive generation.

Feral-borns - child races of the Ferals, the Zyan and the Ganjan.

first change - adolescence for Feral-borns, when the full brunt of their psionics wake and they begin to learn of their abilities and to answer their sexual demands in taking their first teacher. Usually between the ages of 18 and 20 for both male and female.

games, the - word for foreplay and/or sex for the Zyan and the Ganjan.

Ganjan - one of two the child races of the Ferals, who are the more aggressive of the pair. They highly protective of their lands and very prejudice of any ruling them they see as inferior. For a Zyan to rule over them, they must see something deeply honorable about said Zyan. They will rule over a pride-clan of both Zyan and Ganjan with equal protectiveness, risking death to any who might try to harm their charges.

golden fungus - a large, edible fungus native to all the trees of Zy-Gan and Ama'Zyn. It has a citrus-meaty flavor and used by tile makers for making mosaics by a process that turns the fungus into an inedible, hard clay.

Guardians - kingdom keepers, who protect lands and people from danger, including invasion by other kingdoms and pride-clans to prevent kingdom-wide wars. They are most known to protect the royals.

Guild - another name for the travelers' guild.

High King - overall ruler of Zy-Gan, ruling from the kingdom of Arkasa.

Hiroke - a scientist race with a secretive connection to the Ferals and its child races. They are highly protective of both the Zyan and the Ganjan and strive now to re-create the lost Feral race to save the two child races.

hunter-prey bond - an ancient technique in the mate-hunt in which a Feral, or Feral-born, lays psychic claim to a female and pursues her, focusing all of his intentions on winning her. This can be either a physical or mental chase, resulting in an explosive bout of love play when the two finally come together.

Ilsha - the Goddess of Dreams.

*jasarpi* - a reclusive, spiny creature of the forest, rarely seen by any who survive without provoking an attack.

Kashee - the God of Fertility, whose nude, permanently-aroused statue is found in all gardens and even in the forests of Zy-Gan and Ama'Zyn.

Kashee plant - a name used by the Feral-borns for a drindria as a sign of respect to both the tree and to Kashee.

*kazi* - an endearment used by male Feral-borns for a female close to them. It is from the Feral word for "kitten." Also, an animal of the same name identical to the "cats" of the Ferals' world.

*kazi* bulb - a snow-white, paw-shaped fruit that is an aphrodisiac to Ferals and Feral-borns. The bulbs are one of the only ones that truly affected the Ferals, losing to them their focus and control to everything but their lust and need for sex. While not as strong in Feral-borns, it still affects them as an aphrodisiac would in humans.

League Kingdoms - the seven kingdoms of the Main Island of Zy-Gan.

League of Kingdoms - the true name for the Nine Kingdoms of Zy-Gan, before they broke into the League Kingdoms and the Lost Kingdoms.

learning phase - time when a Feral or Feral-born begins to learn about their psionic ability and answering their sexual demands by taking their first teacher to aide them.

Letharans - an off-shoot race of the Hiroke, they are known to enjoy capturing female Feral-borns as pleasure slaves and for negotiations.

Lisha - a rogue moon near the border of Tatic space with many villages where the Ferals and their child races lived. It was the site of the last battle of the war between the Tatic and the Feral-borns. This battle was the bloodiest as the Tatic turned to near-total genocide of their enemies even as they were forced into retreat.

Lost Kingdoms - Minos and Slovis, somewhat outcast kingdoms with no contact with the League Kingdoms. They are in a state of chaos and ruled more by warlords than by their kings, who each seek to capture the other half of the island for total control.

Main Island - the bigger of two islands of Zy-Gan, where the League Kingdoms reside. They are overseen by the High King of Arkasa.

marking bite - a bite made to complete the mate-hunt. While light, the forming of the psychic tie between the two forces the wound to heal to a scar. The male's almost always rests on the nape of the female's neck, showing her willingness to submit to him and prove her trust in him. The female's goes anywhere on a male where she feels drawn to, showing the male's trust that she will not do him harm in his submitting to her for it.

mate-hunt - a hunt initiated by a male by way of a myriad of ways when he feels a true draw from a single female. It's rarely ever wrong. It *does*, however, endanger both male and female as it risks insanity in the male from increasing desire. It is especially dangerous if denied the marking bite of his female or is denied her attention for any reason. The female's mating drive causes a form of heat that can kill her within days unless she allows the male to tend to her to complete the bond between them.

mating demand - also called "the demand," a drive awakened by psychic claim by a male, leading a female to let him claim her mate. It can also activate in a male, either by influence from a female in the throes of heat, or spontaneously. The drive disrupts both male and female psionics, due to the balance mating affords them. It can be the most dangerous time them as separation can kill the female if not bonded to her true mate within a few days. The male can suffer external psionic attacks, which can endanger anyone and anything around them. Internal attacks happen as well and can eventually kill the male. While external attacks are common for females, internal ones are rare.

Minor Island - the smaller of the two islands of Zy-Gan, where the Lost Kingdoms reside. This island is mostly in chaos and many warlords aide one of two kings in a fight to capture the whole of the island.

Minos - one of the Lost Kingdoms and named for the first king to rule it.

monthly cycle - name for a female Feral-born's menstrual cycle. Their psionic ability can become disrupted and will assault them and anything or anyone about them at the first symptoms of it. These attacks usually ease after the woman sleeps.

mosaic makers - those of the Feral-borns who craft mosaics from clay formed from the golden fungus. Those outside of their “breed” are forbidden to make mosaics as it’s considered an insult to the gods.

Paradise - within the Realm of Spirits, the place where the good souls of the dead go for eternity.

Pazdar - the God of the Underworld.

pleasure point (inner) - a sensitive area within a Feral-born female, which can drive her into a frenzy during sex when stimulated.

preparing area - kitchen to Feral-borns or anywhere specifically dedicated to the preparation of meals.

pride-clan - a group mainly consisting of both Zyan and Ganjan who reside together in a given area. Usually joined by familial bonds, they can be made by any close ties among the races.

psionic storm - also known as a mind burst, the complete loss of one’s psionic ability. While more common in females at the beginning of their monthly cycle, it can happen to males as well.

psionics - the psychic ability of all Ferals and Feral-borns.

Qirath - the God of War and Warriors.

Realm of Spirits - realm of the dead ruled by Pazdar, including Paradise and Ba’oc.

rite of challenge - a fight between a ruler and one seeking to take their rule from them. It is sacred to Pazdar, due to its connection to life and death. It is also sacred to Qirath due to its connection to rule and the strength of a ruler.

*secara* - a tree of questionable origin native to the Feral System, it has a natural moss on it with healing properties. The tree releases spores only those of Feral descent can be exposed to without a violent, allergic attack. It is known as the “felines’ tree” for this reason.

siphon(ing) - a very dangerous psionic ability used to draw strength and energy off another to strengthen the wielder. It is a rare ability and can kill if the wielder isn’t careful in how it’s used.

Sirians - great, reptilian serpentine creatures who live in the oceans of Zy-Gan and Ama’Zyn. They are considered somewhat sacred to the Ferals and the Feral-borns. They can only be out of the water for short bursts due to the heat of the sun.

Sira beast - a feline-reptilian creature native to Zy-Gan and Ama’Zyn known to attack people, as well as animals, for prey, even before they are too old to hunt.

Slovis - of the Lost Kingdoms and named for the first king to rule it.

spirit candle - ceremonial candle lit by one who has lost a loved one and said to light the way for lost souls to find their way into Pazdar's kingdom. It's exclusively done by the Feral-borns and the Zyn.

stiffwood - a tree with very hard wood, it has versatile uses. The wood from the trees doesn't break easily once dried.

swirl storm - a violent, swirling storm native to Zy-Gan's vast ocean.

Tatic - a race of conquerors always seeking to expand their territory. An early encounter between the Ferals and the Tatic launched a multi centuries-long war, interspersed with several cold wars. The end of the war resulted in the extinction of the Feral race and an unknown devastation the Feral-borns, which is just now showing in a dwindling female population.

*teezee* - tree on which the *kazi* bulbs grow; a frosty blue and green tree well-known to Feral-borns due to the inherent dangers the bulbs can pose to their kind.

travelers' guild - a mix of races who created a universal language to allow for ease of communication between different races.

Trey - the God of Love and Sex, who delights in sparking sexual fantasies amongst the Feral-born races.

Trey's Caress - a sexual touch a Feral-born male uses to pleasure his chosen female. A touch at the nape of the neck in a massage as his fingers tease her sex, inside as well as out. It causes the energy of their dual enjoyment to combine for an explosive release.

Trista - Trey's mother and the Goddess of Love, Sex, and Beauty.

Trista's Blessing - spawned from Trey's Caress, scars left on the male's shoulders from wounds made by the female's nails grip on him. The Caress doesn't always end in the Blessing. It only occurs when blood is drawn by the female's nails.

Zalasar - the God of Fire.

Zalasar's Forge - a volcano of Zy-Gan and named for the God of Fire.

Zy-Gan - a near-total ocean world with two known islands once ruled by the League of Kingdoms. What caused the division between the Main and Minor Islands isn't fully known, lost to the centuries. The division is now beginning to domino as the League Kingdoms due to unrest with each kingdom's rulers.

Zyan - one of the child races of the Ferals, who are a bit more in control of their animal instincts than the Ganjan. They are still just as dangerous due to conflicting desires within them. They will rule over a pride-clan of both Zyan and Ganjan with equal protectiveness, risking death to any who might try to harm their charges.



Zyn - the more correct name for the native, human-like race of the forest moon of Zy-Gan, Ama'Zyn. They are the race the Ferals chose as their mates and as lovers. The Zyan and the Ganjan pursue them as mate.