



**Leaving Earth**

Delroi Connection: Book Two

Loribelle Hunt

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## Chapter One

Daggar Torfa, Overchief of the Warrior Caste of the planet Delroi, wouldn't say he was hiding. He stood in the shadows on the observation deck in the Royal Palace keeping watch over his sister in law, Laney. A job that should have belonged to his brother, but the responsibility fell on Daggar while Alrik was away looking into rumors of rebellion. Laney didn't know he was there and he didn't feel the need to clue her in. She'd overreacted already to their vigilance in watching over her, something that was unavoidable since she carried the heir.

As he watched, the shuttle landed in the bay and its ramp lowered. The baby was due in just a few weeks, two months at most, and his growth in his mother's womb was really starting to be obvious. Laney waddled across the tarmac of the landing bay to greet its disembarking passengers. He grinned. Not that he'd ever tell her she was waddling. He valued his skin too much.

If he felt the slightest pang of envy, he rationalized it was natural and forced it away. What red-blooded Delroi warrior didn't want to see his *der'lan*, the mate of his heart, heavy with his child? Unfortunately he had neither mate nor impending fatherhood to look forward to.

The number of females born on Delroi dwindled every year, a fact which had prompted them to invade Earth after his scientists assured him the Delroi would find mates there. The invasion of and subsequent treaty with the other planet had, in large part, been successful. The other planet was recovering from its long years of war with the help of the Delroi people. The trade was a bonus, but the real triumph was the number of mated pairs returning to Delroi in the last few months. The women of Earth may save his planet after all. Not that things were going particularly smoothly. The grumbling on Earth had died down to be replaced by complaints on Delroi—that the process wasn't fast enough, that the Warrior caste benefited unequally.

To appease the people of Earth, the process of merging their peoples *was* cautious going. His detractors claimed it was too slow, purposefully dawdling, and the selection process to rotate to their colonies on Earth was weighted in favor of Daggar's allies. At the same time, very few people had been brought from Earth to Delroi and most of them were male.

But among today's arriving Earth contingent were two single women and he lurked in the shadows, watching with a small seed of hope. He *felt* different, as if his life would soon take another direction. He'd felt the same when his scientists came to him with the discovery of Earth. Somehow he knew his mate was going to step off this shuttle. Or maybe it was just a desperate wish. Foolish hope. He wanted what his brother had, even if he prayed his own mate would be more manageable.

Finally, people began to disembark. There were several men, from Earth and Delroi, a few women escorted by warriors and finally the two women Laney was waiting for. The first was petite, pretty with long black hair. His gaze dismissed her and zeroed in on the other one. He was overcome by a surge of lust so intense he almost hit his knees. *This one*, his soul cried out.

She spoke to the other woman as they walked down the ramp and he drank her in

with a groan. Blonde, tall, curvy. She was dressed in no nonsense slacks and blouse and walked with a military bearing he couldn't deny. This was Laney's friend, the Army doctor who'd come to help deliver the first Delroi-Earth child, a suspicion confirmed when she reached the other woman and embraced her. Alrik would get a good laugh at his expense given how much Dagggar had teased him over the past few months about not being able to control his independent, former-soldier mate. Instinct told him this one wouldn't be very obedient either. Would she at least privately be sub to his dom? He hoped so.

He abandoned his plan to stay hidden and went to the stairs, taking them two at a time down. When he reached the landing bay floor, he paused and took a deep breath. He needed more of a plan in mind than stalking over and pulling her into the closest empty room. Something told him she'd cause a scene if he tried.

It was Laney's laughter, her obvious pleasure in being reunited with her friends that spurred him into movement. But it was the other one, the blonde doctor, who arrested his attention. Her pinned-up hair was a pale, almost silvery blonde. She was taller than her friends, only a couple inches shorter than six feet. But her height in no way hid her curves, the soft voluptuously feminine body designed to drive a man crazy. To drive him crazy.

Her features were not the soft loveliness of her brunette companion or the striking sharpness of Laney's beauty. Her forehead was too high, her nose too straight to be considered a classic beauty. She was stunning all the same, with a calm regal air and an appraising startling green gaze that flared with heat when she met his eyes. To his disappointment she quickly suppressed it and he wondered what it would take to get it back, to make her lose control. He'd find out, and soon.

Laney met his gaze, arching one eyebrow and shifting her gaze back and forth, as if acknowledging the connection that sparked between him and her friend. How could she miss it? He couldn't peel his eyes off the woman.

"Dagggar." She inclined her head. "I didn't think we'd see you until dinner."

"I had a free minute. Thought I'd stop by to be introduced to your friend," he said, reminding her without asking for an introduction.

He didn't want to appear overeager. Hell, who was he kidding? Laney smiled and there was a mischievous gleam in her eyes. She knew precisely what he was thinking. That was the problem with Laney, he and Alrik had both discovered. She always seemed to know exactly what they were up to.

"Of course," she gestured to the short brunette. "Britt Anderson. Dagggar Torfa, Overchief of Delroi and my brother-in-law."

With a reserved smile the woman extended her hand and grasped his long enough to be polite while he gave Laney a disapproving frown. She hid a laugh with a cough.

"Britt is a wonderful painter. I think she's making this a working vacation. And," she said, turning to indicate the doctor. "This is Dr. Kendall Marks, another old friend who's come to deliver the baby."

"Dr. Marks."

When he clasped her hand, awareness surged between them and he had to force himself to release her. His surging cock protested the action, but she wrenched her arm back to her side as if shocked. Her eyes were suspicious and her expression became guarded.

“So, what do people call you?” she asked.

“My lord, usually.” He grinned. “But since you’re a friend of Laney’s, I’m sure we will be friends too. Call me Daggar.”

“Daggar seems too ... informal.”

What had she meant to say? Familiar? Intimate? He knew when he heard his name on her lips it would be both familiar and intimate. He was surprised how much he wanted to hear her use it, surprised at how much he yearned for her approval, because he sensed she would withhold the use of his name until she decided how she felt about him, until she didn’t find him lacking.

It rankled a little that she didn’t immediately fall at his feet, but it also pleased him that she was a cautious woman. If she weren’t she could have easily been married to some human man by now. The idea of her being with another man, of belonging to another, filled him with fury. He tried to control it, push it away. She was free, so *might have* wasn’t important. He wasn’t so successful at keeping the anger out of his eyes though and when he pinned her under his gaze, she flinched and stepped back half a step. He needed to get away, get a grip on his wild emotions.

Bowing low, he took his leave, promising to see them at dinner. He needed to see to their room assignments, make sure she was in one that was easily accessible from the tunnel hidden in his. He had the perfect room in mind. It overlooked the gardens in the family wing and had a bed big enough for his large frame. The four posters would be perfect for securing her. His cock expanded at the thought. If he could get a grip on himself before dinner, it wouldn’t be so hard to arrange another meeting. He knew Laney planned on giving the women a short tour and had a good idea what her final destination would be.

\* \* \* \*

From the shadows, another man watched the unfolding scene between the three human women and Daggar Torfa with dismay. Barak Trace, Commander of Intelligence, hadn’t planned on watching the disembarkment, hadn’t wanted to be here at all, but with Alrik in the Southern Provinces checking up on the usual rebels he’d had no choice. It was easy enough to take time out to observe, easy enough to monitor the arrival of just one passenger. But the traveler, her background, and what he suddenly, achingly realized she meant to him were not so simple to handle.

They ran checks on all humans requesting to visit Delroi of course, and usually those reports were straightforward and easily verified. When Britt Anderson’s application went through his office, he didn’t think much of it. She wanted to travel with a friend that turned out to be a friend of Laney Torfa, General Alrik’s mate. Such requests were not unusual and a small handful of human women had made their way to Delroi in such a fashion. But Lady Torfa was not an average female, even for Earth. Neither were her friends as it turned out.

Many people wouldn’t have been apprehensive, but he’d made a career as a spy, and before that spent his childhood wary, cynical and untrusting. So when Britt Anderson’s background check came back, he scanned it quickly. Then read it carefully. She was a famous painter on Earth, true. She had showings and sales going back two decades. A child prodigy. But there were curious holes in her past. Months or years at a time where she seemed to completely disappear. It alerted him, made him anxious and suspicious.

Luckily, in the last few months he'd cultivated contacts inside the Earth Alliance and was able to get her records. He went through all his lower level contacts before one with a high security clearance found the information he was after. She was a talented and valuable spy, her files indicating she was on inactive duty. It was only his perseverance, his sixth sense screaming at him this woman was not who she claimed that made him take it that far.

He and Alrik had argued over it for weeks before Alrik made the decision to let her come. He rationalized the Earthlings only wanted more in depth information. Information they were unsure of coming from Lady Torfa. Barak was not so sure, but he knew his place, understood his position in the chain of command. He could advise, was often heeded, but the final call would never be his. So with Alrik gone, he'd come here to witness this inauspicious occasion. The arrival of the first spy from Earth.

The problem was—and he admitted his problems were legion at this point—the woman could not be ignored. She was *his* and he did not have time for the complication she presented. Nor did he have the heart to send her home. If he was in a better mood or a humorous kind of man, he might have found it funny. Ironic even. The Delroi master spy's *der'lan* was, well, a spy. Who said the gods didn't have a sense of humor?

He watched Daggar take her hand in his, felt the growl rise in his throat. Daggar released her quickly and she glanced around, her eyes searching the shadows. He felt the weird flare of energy he'd learned to associate with psychics using their power. There was no way she could see him, but she'd sensed his regard and his displeasure at her touching another man. He moved farther back, pressing his spine into the wall behind him, and took deep meditative breaths. He must remain in control, but his job was suddenly complicated beyond anything he'd ever experienced. Ferret out the rebel plot, protect Lady Torfa, the doctor who'd come to visit her and belonged to his Lord if Daggar's reaction to her was anything to judge by, and the other. Britt. His own *der'lan*, though he couldn't afford to claim her right now. Could he ever?

He'd managed to infiltrate the rebel force, but if they discovered what he was, who he was, anyone and everyone that meant anything to him would be considered fair game. He'd protect her at all costs, which meant he must stay away from her. He felt a stabbing in the vicinity of his heart and his Delroi genetics came roaring to the forefront, demanding he go after her, claim her, rut with her. Gritting his teeth, he didn't move. He was better than biology. Smarter than biology. DNA be damned. He'd keep her safe whatever way he had too.

## Chapter Two

Kendall followed Laney and Britt down the wide corridor, listening to their chatter with half an ear. What the hell had happened back there? Who was that guy and why did she want to drag him into the nearest room and bury her hands in his rich dark hair. Rip his clothes off and lick and nibble him all over. Better yet, let him do it to her, along with all the secret things she fantasized about alone in the deep dark of the night.

The sudden lust made her uncomfortable. Scared her a little. Solo fantasy was one thing, but she'd always ruled her life with logic. This attraction, the need she felt crawling over her skin, was so illogical, so unlike her that she wasn't sure how to deal with it. Jumping the alien at the first opportunity was definitely not an option though. She wasn't about to upset her well ordered life for an exotic fling. Besides, this wasn't a vacation. Well, it was sort of a half holiday, because it didn't take that long to deliver a baby really.

She'd jumped at the chance to come to Delroi. Not only to see Laney and Britt, her truest and oldest friends, but because she found the aliens fascinating and wanted the chance to study them up close. The trip had presented the perfect opportunity—time with old friends and alien exploration. A memory rose of the old Earth space-horror films. Daggar Torfa could tie her up and probe her anytime.

She bit her lip and suppressed a groan. How did she go from thinking about studying the Delroi to old movies and back to Torfa again so quickly? She needed to get this out of her system fast and was damned glad she'd brought a toy or two along to help out. Thank God, there hadn't been any customs search leaving Earth or arriving on Delroi. Of course that probably just meant they had some kind of technology that scanned and catalogued everyone's belongings. Would there be a list? Would Torfa see it? Her breath quickened. She felt a blush spread up her face and that just pissed her off.

She was a grown woman. There wasn't any need to feel embarrassment over a perfectly normal physiological response to a good-looking man. But why did she have the feeling he'd be angry about her taking care of her own needs? And why did she care? She didn't even know him.

She was so lost in her thoughts she almost barreled over Britt. She loved the younger woman. Everyone did, but she was so petite and dainty that half the time Kendall had to concentrate on not feeling like a cow when she was around her. Since Britt was tiny and petite and Laney had always been the picture of a female athlete, muscled and sleek, her image of the ultimate in feminine health only improved by pregnancy, it was a good thing Kendall was so self-confident. She'd never be thin and delicate looking like Britt, though she knew that appearance was pure illusion, and she'd never be able to run a marathon with Laney. But she could hold her own. She was smart and skilled and men loved her round ass and generous breasts. She tried to concentrate on those things as Britt and Laney stared at her like she'd missed her half of a conversation. Hell, she probably had.

"What?"

Laney grinned.

"What?" she asked again.

"Daggar is distracting, isn't he?"

Laney smirked. There was no other way to describe it. That witch knew how bad Daggar Torfa was disturbing her equilibrium. The odd thing was her satisfaction of it. Kendall scowled past her discomfort of thinking of Laney so negatively. What was up with these Delroi? She'd seen some woman fall so completely under their thrall they threw all their single friends into the path of single alien males. It was weird and one of the reasons she'd wanted to study them so badly. She'd never figured Laney for one of those women though. She set her hands on her hips and faced off with her old friend.

"I don't get it. I can see you're happy, and I'm thrilled for you, but I never expected you to retire at the height of your career to marry a stranger, Laney, and if you're gonna turn into one of those Delroi wives who throws all her friends to the wolves, I'm outta here."

She'd wondered about male Delroi, no doubt. Was the sex that good? Were their pheromones super-charged or what? Her intuition kicked into overdrive and she suddenly understood she had to figure it out. Somehow she knew it was vital in the truce with the Delroi and the future of her people. Vital to *her* future. Laney sighed and linked her arm through Kendall's.

"It's complicated," she said and led them down a wide corridor.

Kendall finally started to pay attention to her surroundings. From the small windows in the shuttle that had brought them down, the Royal Palace had seemed like a massive red stone edifice surrounded by small but similar buildings in a sea of sand and craggy mountains. She'd heard the planet was mostly dessert, had thought during that limited view coming down it looked like Mars and hoped she'd get the chance to see more of it.

Up close and personal she realized the palace was larger than anything on Earth. Maybe larger than several of their largest buildings put together. She'd assumed when Laney had told her she and Britt would stay with her it would be a private residence. It was obvious as they rounded a corner and entered a cavernous room that there was a bit more to the Royal Palace than she'd assumed.

The room seemed to be a common meeting area with some kind of cafeteria set up on one side. Several other corridors opened into it and groups of people clustered everywhere along the edges. The center seemed to be kept clear for foot traffic.

"When you said Royal Palace, I had something very different in mind," Britt said, her curious gaze sweeping the large open space.

Kendall wondered what the other woman saw when she looked around, what stood out to her artist's eye—to the spy's eye—that no one else noticed. Britt's gaze was sharp, as if sizing the place up, and Kendall felt a twinge of unease. She'd wondered many times over the weeks of preparation for the trip exactly what Britt's motives for coming along were. Was the spy really retired? Was she really here just to paint and visit her friends?

Kendall turned her study to Laney, who looked calm and serene as usual and was watching Britt. Their gazes met, held, and Britt nodded so slightly Kendall almost missed it. She didn't bother to hide her groan. Great. All she needed was to get involved in some intrigue involving a retired Sergeant Major and a not-so-retired spy.

Laney didn't miss her unvoiced protest. She grinned then linked an arm through hers, leading them off into the crowd. "Don't worry, Kendall. Just a little interspecies cooperation."

She gaped at the pregnant woman. Yeah right. She made it sound like goodwill towards the Delroi, but did you drag your best spy out of the mothballs for a little favor?



Kendall snapped her mouth shut and ground her back teeth. No, you didn't and whatever was going on she didn't want to get dragged into the middle of it. She was a doctor damn it.

Since the truce she'd been able to spend her time healing people instead of digging bullets out of bodies. So what if it wasn't as exciting, as challenging as working in the field. She'd like it to stay that way. She pressed her lips together, working up a good mad and glared at Britt. Like Laney, she'd always been an adrenalin junkie. Bet she didn't get pulled kicking and screaming back into active service. Britt just shrugged, unflappable mask firmly in place.

They crossed the room and entered a new corridor. The farther they walked, the thinner the crowds grew. When she was reasonably sure she wouldn't be overheard, she spoke, keeping her voice soft but not hiding her anger.

"What are you two up to? No. Don't answer that. Whatever you're up to, keep it to yourselves. But give me some warning. Who knows about this?"

"About what?" Britt asked turning innocent eyes on her.

She didn't fight her smile, her anger dissipating somewhat. "Oh please. Save it for someone who hasn't seen you in action."

Britt grinned back and Laney laughed. Kendall experienced a moment of déjà vu. How many times had the three of them laughed and fought and cried together? She'd wondered if their friendship, if their bond, would survive the end of all the wars. Now her gut was screaming at her that the wars weren't all over and she knew the friendship would last the rest of her lifetime.

Laney finally answered after her laughter dried up. "No one knows."

Kendall cocked an eyebrow. She'd seen her friend with her new husband and she seemed devoted to him.

"Not even Alrik or his brother?" She refused to name him. Just thinking his name made her heart begin to race again.

Laney shrugged one shoulder. "They know what Britt used to do for us. And that she's retired."

Kendall snorted. *Retired my ass.*

"Look, she's not going to do anything she doesn't already do." She repeated the shoulder action. "Watch. Listen. And report back to me with anything interesting."

Laney had her there. Britt couldn't seem to help gathering intelligence. It had always been that way. The question was why Laney thought it was necessary.

"Why? You married one of them. I thought you trusted the Delroi."

Laney sighed. "They have detractors here too. Just like back home. It's not them though. It's some of the people in the Earth delegation that make the back of my neck itch."

She fell silent and stopped to let two Delroi warriors hurry by them. Both bowed their heads before they moved past the women. Then Laney turned to face Kendall and Britt, met each of their gazes for a long pause before speaking.

"We worked too hard to bring peace to Earth. First with the Alliance and later with the Delroi. I'm not about to let a small handful of idiots screw that up."

Damn. Just like that Kendall was sucked back into her old life. The old life where paranoia may have been a constant, but so was the determination to make things better. Britt watched her expectantly and she sighed, nodding her assent. She'd done a little

intelligence gathering of her own in that other life. Qualified doctors were hard to come by in war zones and they'd been given incredible freedom of movement. Unlike the other two however, she wasn't addicted to the rush. She'd spent those missions terrified of getting caught. The O.R. was where she'd gotten her fix—healing people. Saving lives.

Her heart constricted before it started a steady, fast pound. She didn't want to think about it right now, needed to distract herself long enough for her brain to compartmentalize the rush of trepidation.

"How big is this place?" she asked, switching to a safer subject. They turned, chatting as they started walking again, but Kendall didn't pay much attention. Instead she found herself thinking about the Delroi Overchief again. Daggar. Would he be as commanding in bed as out of it?

Laney snorted. "I have no idea. I haven't even begun to explore it all yet. Massive as you can see. All the Warrior's bureaucratic offices are here and there's a barracks. Plus any representatives from other planets are housed here."

"Under the watchful eyes of the Army," Britt murmured. "Do the other castes have palaces? Here?"

"Yes. In other parts of the city."

Laney nudged her side and Kendall tried to focus on the conversation, on her friends. It was impossible. They exited the hall into another big room, though not as massive as the first one. Her skin tingled and she felt scrutinized. Cautiously, she swung her gaze around the room looking for the source. She felt pinned down when she met Daggar's eyes and her mind filled with images of being tied down to a bed. He stood speaking in the middle of a group of warriors, but his gaze was zeroed in on her. She flushed from her head to toes as a flash of lust swept through her.

Since he made no secret of his interest she let herself look her fill knowing he'd fuel her fantasies for weeks, probably months to come. God, he was gorgeous. Tall enough to tower over her she guessed him to be around six foot four with broad shoulders and chest, thick muscles roping over exposed arms. His dark wavy hair was a little long, brushing his shoulders, and she wondered what the strands would feel like in her hands, twined through her fingers. She imaged it down to the minutest detail, her hands buried in his hair, head thrown back as he nibbled her neck.

His eyes blazed. Hot and territorial and *promising*. Her pussy clenched in response. Shit. She had to get out of here, but she couldn't seem to break free, couldn't force herself to look away first. Someone approached him and leaned in close to speak quietly in his ear. He watched her as he listened and finally nodded at her and broke the gaze.

It was as if a spell was broken and her body was suddenly hers again. She heaved a deep breath and turned to glare at Laney, who was chuckling softly and shaking her head.

"Whatever is so funny, I'm not amused."

Laney sobered. "Neither was I, but it all worked out in the end." She jerked her head to one side. "C'mon. I want to show you something."

She led them to another hall and the path took her only feet from Daggar. It was hard to walk by him. She wanted to turn back and rub up against him, see if he felt as good as he looked. She shook her head. *Snap out of it, Kendall.*

"This is the caste side of the palace," Laney said. "The barracks and training areas are here and our private quarters are smack in the middle."

"Layers of protection for the ruling family," Britt said. "Nicely done."

Laney rolled her eyes. “They think so. Believe me, the protection bit goes overboard sometimes.”

The corridor dead-ended into a hall that stretched to their right and left. Kendall nodded to the right.

“Our rooms are that way.”

Then she turned in the other direction and led them a few short feet to a heavy door. When she pushed it open and Kendall stepped through she looked around in awe. It was like entering a new world. She knew Delroi was a desert planet, but what greeted her here was a tropical paradise. She sputtered a laugh. Even Britt was flabbergasted, her eyes wide and mouth hanging open. Kendall chuckled at her expression and the other woman glared then shrugged, her nonchalant mask back in place in seconds.

“It was a shock.”

“Yeah,” she agreed, entering the mini jungle.

The door opened into a half-moon-shaped clearing. Paths led off of it into the trees and she heard water gurgling somewhere. She looked up and gasped. A huge opaque doom stretched overhead.

“Cool, huh?” Laney was grinning. She knew that was an understatement. She set off on one of the paths. “Come check out the waterfall.”

Despite her advanced pregnancy, Laney set a brisk pace. Kendall had to smile. No matter how their lives changed, Laney would always be the soldier. As they moved through the lush landscape though her smile slipped as anticipation took hold in her chest. She felt watched, pursued. It wasn’t an uncomfortable feeling and when they broke into another clearing, she wasn’t surprised to see Daggar waiting. Her expectation of his presence was so strong she didn’t even notice the waterfall at first.

It wasn’t very big, only about thirty feet high, and obviously manmade, but stunning nonetheless. Water flowed over a ledge into a large clear blue pool. It drained into a small stream that disappeared into the bushes. Mossy banks surrounded the other three sides. She could see why Laney was so enamored of it. It was lovely. And peaceful. Kendall approached the edge and knelt down, trailing her fingers through the warm water. Heated?

She looked up to see Laney standing close to Daggar and laughing up into his face. An unexpected tendril of jealousy snaked through her and she stood slowly. Clenching her hands against a possessiveness she didn’t have a right to, she tried to smile and took a step towards them. Laney winked at her and grabbed Britt’s hand, tugging her down a different path. She called back over her shoulder.

“Don’t forget dinner, Daggar.”

### Chapter Three

Daggar responded something affirmative but it didn't register to Kendall. For the first time they were alone and she'd become completely aware of him, every sense focused on him as he sauntered to her. He crossed the feet separating them in seconds and his hands delved into her hair, pulling out the pins and allowing it to fall down her back. His sexy, masculine scent filled her nostrils and she closed her eyes as he leaned closer.

"What is this fascination you Earth women have with restraining your hair?" he murmured the question but didn't let her answer as his lips fused over hers.

It was not the frantic meeting of lips she'd expected. It was a slow exploration, a gentle claiming. He merged with her effortlessly, as if he'd been kissing her for years and knew exactly what she needed. Gradually it changed. Became commanding, controlling, demanding she submit. One of his hands twisted firmly, with a little sting of pain, in the hair at the nape of her neck, holding her still for his marauding tongue. The other wrapped around her hips and pulled her in close, pressing her against him so she had no doubt of his interest. His erection was a hard shaft against her belly.

She didn't feel him pull her shirt from where it was tucked into the back of her slacks, but suddenly his hand was on her bare skin and it seared her. Lust took over her mind and she forgot all the good reasons that existed for not getting naked with a stranger as she pushed her hands up under his shirt. She wanted him. Craved him. Had to have him or she thought she might combust. Oh God. He was smooth and hard. And oh so hot. His skin seemed to burn under her touch.

Growling, he broke the kiss and leaned back, pulling her shirt completely free of her pants and ripping it open. The buttons on the silk garment flew through the air before he yanked his shirt over his head and tossed it behind him. The shirt was one of her favorites but she didn't have it in her to protest, to think at all, as he moved against her again and her skin came into direct contact with his. A fever of arousal raged through her system.

She didn't protest when he spun her around and unsnapped her bra. She shrugged her shoulders forward letting the straps on the garment slide down her arms and drop to the ground. He shifted her hair over one shoulder, nibbling his way from her ear down the side of her neck, little bites that made her womb clench in need, as his hands closed over her breasts. He cupped their full, generous weight, kneading and squeezing his way to her nipples. He paused when he encountered the gold hoops through them. She held her breath. Waiting, wondering if they turned him on. If he'd be gentle when he continued. Gentle had never done it for her. The connection that seemed to exist between them didn't let her down.

At first his fingers were tentative, tugging lightly on the hoops before moving to the hard points they pierced, his grasp light. She needed more, so much more, and when his fingers squeezed a little she moaned. The sound seemed to edge him on and his grip tightened, pinched. She gasped arching her chest forward. His teeth clamped down on her shoulder and his hands tightened on her nipples, holding her to him, bringing an exquisite combination of pain and pleasure. Her pussy filled with damp heat and her clit swelled. She ground her ass against his erection. She just needed one touch, but if he kept manipulating her breasts she might come without it. All of sudden his grip loosened as if

he knew.

“No. You don’t get to come without my permission, *der’lan*. It’ll be better if we draw it out,” he whispered against her neck, his teeth scraping her over sensitized skin.

She squeezed her eyes shut. She wouldn’t survive drawing this out but what choice was he giving her? She couldn’t walk away and she couldn’t take much more.

“Please,” she whispered, keeping her eyes shut and leaning back into him.

She felt him take a long shuddering breath. Good. He was as affected as she was. Then she felt his hands on the buttons of her slacks and she was grateful for the loose fit. They fell to her feet with no help and she toed her shoes off, kicking free of all of it. She tried to turn in his arms but he held her still and the sensation was a thrill. She was almost nude, only left in her underwear, and he was completely dressed, refusing her access to him. He was controlling her, dictating how she would receive pleasure. She’d fantasized it, dreamed it, but she’d never let a man have this much control. She didn’t want to stop to think why she gave it to this one, this Delroi stranger.

His hand moved between them and she heard the snaps of his trousers pop open. Then he was pushing her down to the mossy ground, arranging her on all fours. She bit the corner of her lip and self-consciously looked over her shoulder. She’d learned to like her full-figured body, but she wasn’t sure about presenting it to a man in quite this fashion. Her concerns were dismissed however, when she saw the rapt attention on his face. It was obvious he wasn’t worried about the size of her ass.

She felt his thighs move between hers and nudge her legs apart. She dropped her gaze down to his cock and sucked in a deep breath. He was long and thick and finally a voice of reason spoke up in her head. There was no way he’d fit! And what the hell was she doing with this alien like this anyway? But before she could try to extricate herself, to slow things down at least, his hands were on her butt. Kneading, squeezing. All thought fled as he spread the cheeks and looped his fingers under the thin back of her thong. One quick rip and it fluttered to the ground. His cock nudged against the entrance to her pussy. Keeping one hand on her hip, he used the other to push down on her shoulder. She went to her elbows, her ass sticking up high in the air, and forgot how to think as he thrust into her in one fluid long move.

He was almost uncomfortably big and he stayed still inside her. She panted, struggling to adjust to the invasion, even as she nearly cried out in frustration. She rocked her hips back. She needed him to *move*. He didn’t oblige. Instead he stroked her back, down and around her sides to brush against her breasts, tug at her rings, before gliding over her belly. Finally his fingers moved between her legs, exploring the sensitive lips that welcomed his cock before discovering her clit. He rested his thumb over the hard, swollen nub, but didn’t stroke or pinch or squeeze it. Her rapid breathing was for an entirely different reason now and under the circumstances she wasn’t above begging.

“Daggar, please,” she whispered.

It seemed natural to use his name and it seemed the spur to action he needed. He slid out of her pussy and back in with a rough slam. The pleasure was so exquisite she would have collapsed to the ground if he hadn’t been holding her up, and on his next retreat and return she was coming, her mind flying apart as the waves of ecstasy overtook her body.

His thrusts didn’t slow or gentle, powering through her shudders and forcing her into another orgasm on the heels of the first. She let her upper body sink to the ground as she gave her body over to him. The orgasms kept coming and finally when she didn’t think

she could take anymore, his body tightened and he rammed into her one last time. He gave a muffled cry against the back of her neck and jettied inside her before they both fell to the ground. He blanketed her a moment while they both struggled to breathe, then he rolled to his side, pulling her into the shelter of his arms.

She pinched her eyes shut not wanting to let reality intrude just yet, and as soon as she opened them she'd have to acknowledge she'd lost her damned mind. Sex in an open area with a stranger hardly counted as the actions of a sane reasonable woman, did they?

He murmured something in his language into her hair and her heart constricted. Odd. She'd been trying to prepare herself to get up and walk away—and ignore him for the rest of her visit—but she found it impossible to move after hearing his voice. She wanted to snuggle closer. What was he doing to her? Her behavior was so out of character it was frightening. She tried to edge away but his hold around her didn't budge. She sighed.

“We can't stay here like this. What if someone comes in?”

“This is the private family garden. No one will enter without my permission.”

So much for that excuse. She had to put some distance between them. The longer he lay pressed against her back, the less resistance she had to the strange pull he had over her. She started to feel a little desperate.

“Laney could come back.”

He chuckled and leaned up on one elbow to look down at her. “She won't. She knows what we're doing.”

Oh God. She groaned and covered her face with her hands. Could it get any worse? She'd accused Laney of throwing her single friends in his path and look what happened? No throwing necessary. Just out of control, raging hormones and a complete lack of willpower. Even now she wanted to roll over and explore him. He'd already had a turn. That didn't seem very fair did it?

He didn't give her the chance. Instead he stood and pulled her to her feet with him. Then he scooped her up like a child with one arm under her back and the other under her knees and carried her to the pool. He stepped into the water and as he descended she realized there were stairs carved into the side. He set her on the bottom step with the water lapping around her breasts, and exited the pool.

Moving to the foliage near the waterfall, he pushed it aside. She was surprised to see it concealed a wall. With the press of a button and part of it slid away to uncover a closet. He removed a stack of white towels and returned to the pool, dropping them on the ground and keeping a washcloth, before rejoining her on the bottom step. He lifted her and shifted so that she straddled his lap.

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Daggar had had a plan when he intercepted the women in the garden, but damned if he remembered what it was. One look at Kendall had been all it took for his Delroi nature to take over. Instinctively he'd known she required dominance just as he also knew sex was the only place he'd ever get her complete obedience. As long as she continued to surrender to the bond growing between them, he thought he could live with that.

She shifted, tried to move out of his lap, and he repressed a growl. Or maybe not. His cock was already hard again so he simply lifted her and guided her onto his shaft. She gasped as she took in his length and he took in the mouthwatering sight. Her head fell back, an expression of rapture on her face, and her breasts thrust forward in invitation, the gold hoops gleaming in the clearing's bright light. Piercing nipples was an old, mostly

abandoned custom of warriors' mates. He wasn't sure how he felt about hers already being done, but he sure as hell appreciated the effect.

He leaned forward to take one into his mouth, rolling his tongue around the metal, learning the unique texture and taste. Her nipple hardened when he scraped his teeth over it and her moan was loud in the quiet clearing. Her cunt clenched around his erection. Satisfaction surged through him and he smiled. His woman, and she responded beautifully. If he could keep her in bed and occupied, she'd never defy him. It sounded like the best battle plan he'd ever come up with even though he knew it wasn't remotely feasible. As if to remind him of that his communicator began a soft beeping. He cursed silently. Now was not the time for duty to call.

As if sensing his distraction, Kendall lifted her body and slowly lowered it back down on to his cock. The hell with duty. He was claiming his mate. Whatever fire currently going could wait. She rose again, this time moving back down faster, harder. He leaned back against the rim of the pool and allowed her take over, watching her through lowered eyelids and struggling to let her have the control she clearly needed. But his grip on the need that raged in him, to claim and dominate, was slipping.

She continued the sensuous torture, smiling a little, until he rolled one hard nipple between his fingers. He watched her reaction carefully as he slowly increased the pressure. Leaning forward he sucked the other one between his teeth, worried the tip with his tongue while biting the base, then tugging at the hoop. She gasped and moved faster, her cunt tightening and loosening around his cock.

When she was panting, when the breathy little cries she made altered and took on the undertone of desperation he'd heard earlier before she came, he moved. Releasing her breasts, he gripped her hips and stood, carrying her deeper into the pool where he braced her back against the wall under the waterfall and pounded into her.

She came with a loud keening cry on his first hard thrust. Her pussy gripped him tightly, her hands clung to his shoulders. He should punish her for coming without permission, but decided to let her skate this time. She liked pain and she'd responded well to his dominance, but she'd probably have to be eased the rest of the way into his world. He'd start her lessons tonight.

His communicator chirped again, and sighing he released her hips, reluctantly let her slide down his body before carrying her out and getting dressed.

## Chapter Four

Ignoring Daggar, she walked around the small clearing gathering her clothes and sighing when she picked up her thong and shirt. Both were ruined. Kendall dressed quickly, knotting the ends of the shirt together, thankful enough buttons remained to cover her breasts. She was embarrassed and put off by his sudden change in attitude. Well, maybe it hadn't changed very much. He was still quiet and severe looking. He just wasn't giving her those hot melting looks anymore. Irritation threatened to take over. He wasn't looking at her at all. That wasn't the sort of thing that had ever bothered her before. She'd had many lovers over the years, but none she felt a particular attachment to, none she wanted to wake up to every morning. She shook her head and muttered under her breath. What the hell was she thinking? He wasn't that man either.

She slipped her shoes on and looked around for Daggar. He moved so quietly she jumped when he came up behind her and set his palm on the flat of her back. With a slight nudge, he turned her in the direction of the door Laney and Britt had disappeared through.

It opened onto a large living room that combined with a dining area. The sofas were low to the ground and looked like plush dark brown leather. Britt and Laney were talking softly on one and looked up when they entered, but before Kendall could greet them Daggar pulled her towards a hall at the other end of the room. He didn't take her down it though. Instead he stopped under the entryway, lifted her face with a grip on her chin, and kissed the hell out of her.

God, the man had a genius tongue. She wondered what it would feel like on her clit, thrusting into her pussy. Could envision him in the act, wanted to order him to do it. As soon as the vision rose in her mind, he pulled away and scowled. She felt his displeasure and disagreement.

"You don't get to make demands, *der'lan.*"

She frowned. She hadn't said anything, hadn't asked for anything. He couldn't know what she was thinking. And what an odd choice of word to use. Demand. She wished she could command him to go down on her, to pleasure her.

"You wouldn't like it," he practically growled. "You don't want to be the one in charge. You want to be taken over almost as much as I want to take you over." His voice was lowered to a whisper and the irritation was gone. It was slightly amused, totally sexy. Coaxing.

She didn't even stop to wonder how he knew what she was thinking. It was probably all over her face. Sighing, she tried to pull away. He never would let anyone order him around and he was right. She probably wouldn't like it anyway. Professionally she was together. Confident and forthright and in no way submissive. But privately, intimately, she longed to submit, to give up control. Craved it. His smile was slow and very masculine. Leaning forward, he kissed her forehead.

"I'll see you in a few hours. And after dinner, I'll be happy to indulge that craving, *der'lan.*"

She gasped. What the fuck? He couldn't know what she was thinking, but his expression was so smug. So satisfied. He turned her around to face the room and slapped



her ass as he whispered in her ear. “Be good while I’m gone, baby.”

She jumped at the hard tap and his use of the endearment, whirled back to give him a piece of her mind but he was already striding off down the hall. Feeling her friends watching, knowing they’d be curious and pester her with questions, she blushed, turned back to the room and approached, grinding her teeth. No way was she telling them anything about what had happened between her and Daggar.

She sat on a couch opposite them without a word, leaning back into its soft embrace. She looked at Britt first then turned to meet Laney’s gaze.

“What does *der’lan* mean?”

Laney grinned. “The most literal translation I’ve heard is ‘mate of my heart.’”

Kendall sucked in a breath and winced as she shifted.

“Are you okay?” Laney asked no longer smiling. Now concern marred her features.

“Yeah. I’m fine.” Oh, was she fine. Her pussy still throbbed from Daggar’s possession, her clit still ached. When she got some alone time, she’d remedy that herself. “Why?”

“Daggar’s reputation is ... well how do I put this?”

“Just spit it out.”

Laney shrugged. “He’s a Dom. You know, as in BDSM Dom?”

Kendall felt the blood drain from her face, knew she’d probably gone unnaturally pale. She fisted her hands to hide the tremble that threatened to overtake her. She could definitely see Daggar in that role, wondered if he had other plans for her. Her pussy flooded with her juices. God, she hoped so.

“And it looks like he’s decided to be *your* Dom,” Laney added with a grin.

Kendall narrowed her eyes. Oh no. No no no. If that got around, her reputation would be shredded. She tried to pretend indifference, mimicked Laney’s earlier shrug.

“That’s too bad. I can’t do that.”

After a moment of stunned silence, both women laughed and it was Britt who spoke first. “Oh honey, we know you’re into the domination and submission thing. We’ve always known.”

Kendall felt a blush heat her face before lowering it into her hands and shaking her head. This was mortifying. If that was true, what did they think of her? Of her dark desires?

Laney leaned over and patted her knee. “It’s okay, you know.” Kendall looked up. Laney’s eyes sparkled. “Alrik gets a little forceful too.”

That may be true, but Kendall seriously doubted Laney let him tie her down and flog her or control her orgasms. The physician in her took over and she glared. At least he better not in Laney’s current condition. The other woman huffed.

“Don’t worry. If anything right now, he’s always too gentle.” She squirmed in her seat. “Which, I might add, is seriously not working for me.”

Britt grinned this time. “Sounds like the man needs some shaking up.”

“You got that right,” Laney answered darkly before sighing. “New subject. He’ll be gone another week and I’m already horny enough as it is.”

Britt and Kendall both stared at her.

“What?”

“Um,” Kendall started trying to find the right words before taking Laney’s own advice and just saying it. “You always used be, well, sexually inhibited.”

It was her turn to stare for a minute and then she threw her head back and laughed. Kendall marveled at the change in her old friend. She was so open now, so unrestrained. Finally she sobered but the smile never left her face.

“I suppose I was. Before. These Delroi warriors have a way of breaking down your walls.”

Kendall scowled. She didn't like that. She was more than happy to indulge in a sexual relationship with Daggar, but she'd be leaving in a few weeks and had no intention of leaving any part of her heart behind. At the thought, she swore she felt strong fingers gripping her wrist, tugging. The sensation was so strong she looked down to make sure no one was touching her, tried to shake the feeling off when she saw her wrist was unshackled. But it didn't matter. She felt Daggar's disapproval, knew he was going to protest her return to Earth. It scared the crap out of her, that knowledge.

“What the hell is this connection?” she whispered to herself, to Laney.

Her friend's expression closed. “You'll have to discuss that with Daggar.”

Fuck. Kendall stared, feeling persecuted. Talk about being thrown to the lions.

“I need to know, Laney. And you're withholding info.” She scowled. That went against their personal rules, their personal code with each other.

“I'm sorry.” She really was. Kendall heard the remorse in her tone. “It's better if it comes from him. Trust me on this.”

Well, shit. Laney had never steered her wrong before, but this felt almost like a betrayal and now she was asking for trust? Kendall sighed. And she would. Had never been mistaken in doing so in the past.

Britt changed the subject and after Kendall changed shirts, Laney decided to give them a tour of the warrior wing of the palace after showing them around the family quarters. Everywhere they went, she looked for Daggar and her disappointment, along with her craving for him, only increased when he never appeared. Maybe it'd meant nothing to him. Maybe he didn't feel the connection, the frantic need that she did. That just pissed her off and she fought it with every ounce of her determination. Even then, she had no idea how she got through the next few hours, especially when he didn't show up for dinner like he'd promised.

She excused herself as soon as the plates were cleared, claiming exhaustion and hurrying along the corridor to her room. Inside, she dug through her bags, relieved when her hand closed around the vibrator. Thank God.

Stripping, she lay down on the bed and turned the thing on, pushed it inside herself with no preamble, no warm up. As horny as she was, as desperate as she was to come, she knew she'd be sopping wet. She gulped back a sob. She hoped this would be enough, but suspected not. She wanted him. Only him.

The toy buzzed inside her, an outside extension of it nestled against her clit, as she imagined him. The force, the command. She pretended he was with her, ordering her to knees, ordering her to take him in his mouth as he stood over her and flogged her back and refused to let her come. She whimpered. She needed to come so badly.

In her mind she saw him cram his cock into her mouth, not giving her time to adjust, and set a steady fast rhythm. Her heart pounded and her pussy gushed. She was so close. Squeezing her eyes shut, she imagined him coming, imagined swallowing every last drop before he told her she could come too.

She exploded. The strength of the orgasm would have brought her to her knees if she

hadn't already been lying down. She sprawled on the bed, letting her knees fall apart as she imagined him there with her, imagined smooth gentle hands stroking, bringing her down from the high. Perfect. Such the perfect fantasy.

Sighing, she rolled over and fell into a deep sleep.

\* \* \* \*

Daggar hated to leave her, but the caste didn't run itself and Barak's call had been disturbing. He hurried and came to an abrupt stop when he reached his spymaster. Why the fuck was an Earthling doctor dead in the Warrior gardens?

He approached, stared down at the man. Tall for an Earthling, almost as tall as Daggar was himself, he kept to the military short haircut of his people. His eyes, frozen open in death, were wide and dark green. Daggar tilted his head to one side and studied the man. He supposed on his own world he would be considered attractive. Had he been meeting someone here? He almost growled. Surely not a mated a woman.

"What do we know?" he asked Barak who stood with his arms crossed over his chest scowling down at the body.

The spy knelt and looked up to meet his gaze, the tip of his finger hovering over the top of the blade that was still imbedded in the Earthling's chest.

"Saber knife."

Shit. He moved closer to get a better look and cursed long and low under his breath. The handle of the knife was short, about four inches in length and ivory white, carved with images of the large cat it had come from. Just fucking great. The Southern rebels were going to have to be dealt with more forcefully. He frowned.

"Why did he leave it behind?" These blades were used by one group of people and their ownership was well guarded. He answered his own question. "Wants us to know who killed this human."

Barak nodded and stood. "That would be my guess."

Daggar set his hands on his hips and glared down. "Why? Why would one of the rebels kill a human and leave us the evidence?"

"No idea, but I'm going to find out, my lord." He said it with a little more force than necessary and Daggar jerked his gaze to him. What the hell was that about? He had enough issues without adding Barak Trace losing it to the list. He cocked an eyebrow.

"Care to explain why this is so personal for you?"

He thought the spy would refuse to answer and was surprised when after a few seconds he did. "One of the women on the ship today." He ground his teeth together and didn't go on, but Daggar's hands fisted against his will. Kendall was *his*. Barak noted his distress and grinned, shaking his head.

"Not yours. The other one. The spy," he added darkly.

Slowly, Daggar smiled. This was good. The spymaster needed someone, a *der'lan*, to temper the steel that was the backbone of the man, but Barak only shook his head.

"I can't take her."

Daggar almost laughed. He couldn't *not* take her, wouldn't be able to resist. He sure as hell hadn't been able to resist taking Kendall, hadn't even been able to slow down.

"No, my lord. I can't. I'm too deep." He hesitated, took in a long breath. "I need you to watch over her. Make sure she stays safe. She won't be safe with me once they make me, and eventually they will."

Daggar couldn't believe what he was hearing. A warrior would have a damned hard time letting someone else protect his *der'lan*, especially if she remained unclaimed. It would drive a man crazy. He wanted to argue, wanted to order, but saw the resolve on Barak's face. He'd hold out as long as he could. Daggar just hoped he didn't do something unforgivable when he gave into the urge to claim her.

He nodded. "It's against my better judgment."

He held Barak's gaze a long moment, saw the fight he warred with himself. Finally, he looked away. "Thank you," he said softly.

Daggar wanted to speak further, wanted to argue the foolhardiness of the decision, but held his peace. Barak handed him a list of names, all known associates of the Earthling, and they divided it having decided under the circumstances to keep the murder as secret as possible.

He left the gardens with his half of the list and went in search of the people on it—mostly Earthlings, but a few Delroi healers too—to question them about the Earthling's murder. They weren't as easy to track down and question as he'd thought. Hours later he glanced at a wall time piece in the healer's bay and growled. He was missing dinner, failing to meet a promise he'd made to his *der'lan*. He glared at the small human sitting before him and was uncomfortably satisfied when the man winced. Only one left after this.

Scowling, he stood to go find the last name on this list. "If you hear anything, get in touch. And no word to anyone about this."

The man gulped and nodded. "I won't say a word."

Daggar didn't bother to respond, just spun on his heel and left. He was in the guest section, had pulled all the Earth delegates here to its small medical clinic to question. Now he needed to return to the warrior side of the palace, to find one of the healers in his army.

He found the man just as he was slammed with Kendall's desire. It was only pride, only knowledge of his station and years of training that prevented him from stopping and sagging against the wall.

The healer, Tallus, told him about the Earthling while Daggar struggled to concentrate on the answers. It was clear from the man's body language he didn't want to be questioned. He sat still, rigid. His eyes gave nothing away. Daggar conceded he could be mistaken though. He was distracted and the healer was from the South, the markings of the area stretching in black ink down the side of his face. Even if Daggar wasn't a witness to his reserve, he knew the man could be guilty of the Earthling's murder, knew he'd probably been trained in the tradition of the South as a warrior first then a healer. Probably had his own Saber blade hidden somewhere close.

Kendall's pleasure filled his mind again and he tried to regain control. Of his body. Of his anger. He was going to spank her ass. And worse. She'd been told she wasn't allowed to orgasm without permission. She'd been warned. Yet she was doing it, using a toy she smuggled to Delroi on herself. Oh she'd pay. That was his cunt, his breasts. His to own, to pleasure. Or torment. He'd been too lenient with her earlier. He wouldn't make that mistake again.

Keeping his mind with hers as she stroked herself, as she brought herself to orgasm without permission, he questioned the healer. Barely heard his answers. Thank the gods, he'd activated the recorder on his communicator. He let the man talk as Kendall came, as

she fell into a deep slumber. Good. That suited his plans fine.

Finally he was able to leave and return to the family quarters, to his room. He slapped his hand against the wall, activating the hidden door that slid open to reveal the tunnel. Moving quietly, he followed it to another door. Her door. He entered on silent feet, moving towards the bed. She lay naked in the center and he caught his breath before bending over and scooping her up.

“Such a bad girl, *der’lan*,” he murmured, but she didn’t wake. She shifted closer to him, her breasts pressed against his chest as she moved, settled into his arms. He bit back a groan at her utter surrender, forced himself to remember it was only in sleep.

The vibrator slid to the floor as he lifted her free of the thin sheet. He stared at it, considered coming back for it but decided not to. No. It was better to let her keep it knowing she wouldn’t be permitted to use it on herself unless he allowed it. He left it where it was and went back into the tunnel.

Then he was back in his room and only concerned with securing her to the bed before she woke. He laid her in the middle, reached for a hidden switch that revealed the chains attached to the bedposts. On the ends of each were leather cuffs and he set about buckling them around her wrists and ankles, spreading her across his bed. Their bed, he realized with an excited jolt.

Perfect. She was spread out, exposed to his gaze, beautiful beyond measure in the submissive position. He nearly groaned aloud at the sight of her, his cock growing impossibly, painfully hard. Ignoring it, ignoring the urge to take himself in hand, he turned to the tall cabinet that took up one wall of the room and entered the code on a keypad that opened the locked side.

Anticipation roared through him. He hadn’t indulged his dominant tendencies in too long. Now he could whenever he wanted to and she’d welcome him. He’d seen the need in her eyes, felt it in her mind. He stood back and studied the contents, his collection, ran his fingers over a flogger. How beautiful would she be wearing the stripes it left behind, being punished? He tried to remember the last time he’d disciplined a woman and couldn’t.

That was fitting. She was different. Important in a way no one else ever had been. She was his to cherish, his to please in whatever way he saw fit. His hands trembled slightly at the privilege, the responsibility. His fist closed over the flogger, pulled it free.

What else would he use on her? Not one of the vibrators. She had to learn that he was the only one allowed to pleasure her body and in whatever way he saw fit. Tonight it would not be quick and easy with mechanical help. He grinned, his fingers gliding over the collection of nipple clamps before choosing a set.

The clamps were connected by a long heavy black chain, a simple screw allowing them to be tightened or loosened. Low tech, but in his experience just as effective as the advanced electric ones. How would they look in contrast to her rings?

She moaned and the chains rattled as she tested the give in them. It wasn’t much. He didn’t turn, looking over the rest of the items leisurely, hand almost reaching for a ball gag. No. Not this time. He wanted her to be able to vocalize. Wanted to hear every sigh, every cry and scream. He shut the cabinet, turned to face her while remembering to keep his expression blank.

He approached, slow but purposeful, while holding her gaze. Her eyes were wide and fearful, but also interested, pooling with lust. He stopped near her chest and held the

chain up, the clamps dangling on the end, watched her eyes widen as he dropped them on her belly. She shivered at the contact, her breath deepening, quickening.

He hid a satisfied smile at her reaction, reminded himself of his purpose tonight. Showing her who she belonged to, what parts of her were his property and not hers to play with, to use for her own enjoyment. He dropped the strands of the flogger from his clenched fist, enjoying the way she gulped, tried to speak as he lightly trailed the ends over her creamy skin.

“What is it, *der’lan*? You have permission to speak.” Ah, the fire in her eyes at the statement. Magnificent. It was going to be such a joy to train her, to watch her learn to submit.

“Permission?” Icy eyes met his even as her chest heaved, breasts rising tantalizingly high and nipples growing into hard tight points. Focusing on them, he wondered what they would look like in his clamps, caught his breath imagining a delicate gold chain connecting the hoops. They’d be covered by clothes as she went about her day, but he’d know the mark of his possession was there. Fuck.

“What the hell are you doing?” The chains in the bedposts rattled as she jerked against them, tried to break free.

He chuckled. “Teaching you your first lesson. When we’re here, like this, you don’t speak out of turn.”

He leaned over and picked up the clamps. “Do you know what these are?”

She nodded her head yes clearly too shocked to speak.

“Anyone ever used clamps on you before?” A possessive rage moved through him. Gods help them both if she answered affirmatively.

She didn’t. “No,” she whispered, shaking her head in emphasis. Did she feel how close he was to the edge?

He sat next to her, hiding his relief and letting the flogger slide free of his grasp. Picking up the chain, he replaced it with his palm, felt her stomach convulse under his touch. He drew a path to her breasts slowly, considered taking one of her hard nipples into his mouth but held back. This wasn’t about her pleasure. Not yet.

Withdrawing he took one clamp, loosened the screw enough to close the opening around her nipple right above the hoop. He watched her closely as he tightened it, saw the point it began to hurt and kept going until her eyes clouded, the lust and pain combined in them. He repeated the action with the other breast then sat back to look at his handiwork. Lovely. Her nipples were already turning a nice cherry red, her breathing was shallow, her face and neck flushed.

“Why are you doing this?”

“Because you used what’s mine without permission.”

He saw her confusion and slid his palm back down her body, watched her suck in a deep breath and hold it as he parted her folds, thrust one finger inside her. Groaning, she tried to arch against the invasion, tried to add to the friction. He immediately stopped and withdrew.

Standing, he picked up the flogger and tugged on the chains connecting her clamps. Moaning, she arched her back again and he tsked.

“Second lesson, *der’lan*. Any pleasure you feel is at my sufferance. Mine to give, not yours to seek.”

The flogger lightly slapped her skin. Again and again, but softly, meant to titillate

not hurt. He was unsure of how far he could go, how far to test himself and her. But she was born for him. He was certain she would welcome the pain, the surrender. The pleasure. He brought the leather down harder, strokes faster, but evenly timed. Soon he was taken by the beauty of her, the act of mastering her until she whimpered and tried to move out of the way.

Fuck. Had he gone too far? Hurt her more than she could take? She hadn't uttered a protest and the signs were in his favor. Her skin was flushed, her breathing labored. Her eyes were closed—a problem he'd deal with later—and the expression on her face was one of ecstasy not pain. He let the flogger fall to the floor and leaned over, thrusting two fingers into her cunt. She convulsed around him, hips arching up as her eyes flew open and met his.

“Please. Daggar, please.”

He didn't speak, but withdrew his fingers pressing them to her lips until she opened them and sucked them clean.

“Ah, darlin'. You beg so prettily. Keep it up and I may even let you come some time tonight.”

Shocked, her mouth fell open into a perfect O he couldn't wait to try out on his cock. She recovered quickly enough though and licked her lips before she spoke.

“Why? Why are you doing this? It's not like I was unwilling before.”

“This.” He slid his hand between her legs again, slid one finger into her channel while resting his thumb on her clit. “Is mine. I won't share it with anyone. Not even you.”

She groaned at his touch, but remained still. Good. She was learning.

“Please. Please,” she begged.

He really should make her call him master, but the idea left a bad taste in his mouth. He wanted to possess her, to claim her, to own her. But he didn't want a slave. He wanted her to know exactly who was taking her. Her mate. Her other half.

“Please, my lord,” she whispered.

His heart constricted painfully in his chest. Dear gods in the after world. She'd just uttered the combination of words he knew would always sway him. Her eyes glowed with surrender.

He struggled to wrest back a trace of control. “Please what?” he asked, colder, harsher than he'd intended.

“Please.” She hesitated so long he was afraid she wouldn't go on. “Use me as you will, my lord,” she whispered.

Gods, she was glorious. Well worth the long years of waiting. He stood, stripped, and was back on her in seconds. He thrust into her quickly but held himself still once he was seated all the way inside her. He was amazed she didn't climax right away. She was wet, so hot and tight, and trembled with need.

Bracing himself on one hand, he lifted his torso and stared down at her body. Slowly he moved his other hand to the chain and tugged it. Her hips jerked against his and she bit her bottom lip. He smiled. She was fighting it, but her body reacted anyway.

“You do not have permission to come,” he said beginning to thrust inside her, short shallow strokes he knew would tease her but weren't enough to push her over the edge into orgasm. She bit her bottom lip and her eyes flashed. Ah, she would challenge him, challenge his domination of her. He was so going to enjoy bringing her to heel. So would she.

He got lost in the feel of her, in the sight and scent of her. He wanted her begging, crying and screaming for him. He leaned down, felt the chains between them, the signs of her submission, and shuddered. He sucked the skin at her nape between his teeth until she gasped.

“Come Kendall,” he whispered against her ear as he increased the speed and strength of his thrusts. Her pussy convulsed around him.

“Oh God,” she cried.

He immediately paused though she shuddered around him, milked him. Icy. Furious.

“No,” he snapped, meeting her glazed gaze. “You scream my name when you come. My name,” he emphasized. He didn’t want to hear anything but Daggar on her lips when she came. Not my lord or master or anything else. It would be his name she yelled or nothing. He reeled from the intensity of that desire and couldn’t begin to explain where it came from. Thankfully, he didn’t have to. She nodded her head in acquiescence.



## Chapter Five

The orgasm exploded through Kendall's body when he told her to come, but the order to use his name, only his name, catapulted her into a high she'd never dreamed could exist before. He watched her silently, angrily, and she wanted to comply, wanted to speak, but her vocal cords were as frozen as the rest of her. She could only nod, could only hope he read the submission, the capitulation in her eyes and face.

"Good girl," he murmured, leaning down and kissing her briefly, just one sweep of his tongue in her mouth. He tugged at the chain connecting her nipples and the sensation shot straight to her cunt. She'd thought after the last one another orgasm would be impossible. Boy was she wrong. She fought against it, fought to hold back like she knew he wanted her too.

He smiled and removed one of the clamps. She snapped her teeth together as the blood rushed back to them, as the fiery pain licked through her. When he reached for the other clamp, she rolled her head against the pillow.

"Daggar, no," she whispered.

Couldn't he give her a minute to recover? He only smiled, leaned over to gently suck her freed nipple in his mouth as he released the other one. The combination of soft suction on one nipple with the surge of pleasure/pain on the other sent her spiraling into another world.

Groaning, he buried his face in her neck and fucked her hard. Gone was the tight restraint, the total control he'd had over his actions, over the need he'd built between them. He was like a man gone mad and she wished she was free, wished she could wrap her body around his and offer what comfort she could. At the thought she felt something snap, something solidify between them and though the power of his thrusts, the speed, didn't change she sensed him calm as if a beast had been stilled.

He came, his roar muffled against her skin, and she wanted to do nothing more than stroke his hair as the hot jets of his cum filled her. She pulled on her wrists forgetting for a moment she was restrained and he shifted, reaching up to unbuckle the cuffs. When those were free, he sat back on his heels and released the bonds around her ankles.

Lying down next to her, he took her hands in his and rubbed them gently, easing the throb of returning circulation while holding her gaze. After a moment he did the same with her legs before returning to her, propped on one elbow and leaned over her. She reached up and brushed a lock of black hair out of his eyes, wondering what to say. If she should even try to speak.

She'd just had the most intense experience of her life, lived out her most secret desires with a stranger. Her heart ached. A stranger it was going to be very difficult to leave in a few weeks. He brushed his lips against hers.

"You aren't going anywhere, *der'lan*," he whispered.

There was that word again, the one Laney had refused to explain. And how did he know what she was thinking? Why did she keep thinking she knew what he was thinking? She narrowed her eyes. There was something going on here and she was decidedly uninformed.

"What does that word mean exactly?"

“Exactly?” His lips twisted into a sexy half smile before he grew serious. Rolling over, he pinned her body under his. She had a hard time concentrating, lust again tightening through her, preparing her body for him. “It means you’re mine.”

He delivered it so casually, so matter-of-factly, it took her a minute to realize he was serious. She laughed and pushed at his shoulders, but he didn’t move. Part of her, the sexually submissive side that craved what he could do to her didn’t protest especially when his hard cock slid back inside her. She clenched her fist and punched his shoulder. He looked amused and didn’t budge.

“You don’t just get to make those kinds of choices without my input.”

He moved, a long smooth stroke coming into contact with her G-spot and making her suck in a shaky breath. He leaned closer and nibbled her neck.

“It’s already decided, baby. Accept it,” he murmured.

Her body was already reaching, straining for orgasm. She groaned. How was she supposed to resist this? *Oh God, I am so screwed.*

Squeezing her hip, he thrust hard and growled in her ear, “what did I tell you about that? *My name.*”

“How do you know what I was thinking?” she managed to gasp out, but if he answered she missed it as she tumbled into another orgasm, this time less primal, less intense. But somehow more, because he wrapped his arms around her and cradled her close as she shook. She felt cherished, protected. The idea made her tremble more than the orgasm had.

He murmured in her ear, quiet encouragement, softly spoken promises, as his hands stroked her tenderly, bringing her down. He slid free of her even though he was still hard and rolled to his side, leaning over her and staring into her eyes. She struggled to remember what she’d just asked him.

“Are you a telepath?” Nothing in her study of the Delroi had led her to believe so.

“No. But if you’re projecting your thoughts I can hear them.” He brushed his thumb over her cheek. She tried to move away, but he threw a leg over her hips, holding her place.

“How?” she asked through clenched teeth.

“The bond.”

She cocked an eyebrow and waited for him to go on.

He sighed. “When we were together in the gardens I said a prayer of my people that binds us together.”

“You did what?” Either she shoved at him hard enough he was shocked and released her or he was humoring her. At the moment she frankly didn’t care. She jumped free of the bed and glowered at him.

“How long does this bond last? How do you undo it?”

His eyes grew hard, cold and he stood to face her. She had to crane her neck back to meet his gaze, which only pissed her off more. “You don’t,” he barked. Like he was ordering one his people around, one of his soldiers. If he thought she would fall into line with that he was crazy.

“You don’t get to just make that kind of a decision without asking me first! *Shit!* Daggar, that’s, that’s caveman thinking!”

“That’s our way. We find our woman and then assure she stays ours.”

“God,” she muttered, wondering if he’d protest the use of the expletive in the context

of the conversation. “And it’s permanent?”

The thought of leaving him made her stomach twist into a hard knot of despair. She knew the answer to her question without having to be told. Still, confirmation would be nice.

“It is.”

She groaned. How on Earth was this supposed to work? Well of course, it *wasn't* Earth. That was how.

“You’ve made a terrible mistake here. I can’t be…” She let the thought trail off and looked at the bed.

“Submissive?” his palm cupped her cheek and forced her to look at him. “I think you know that for the lie it is, Kendall.”

Shaking her head, she stepped back. “In bed, sure.” No point in denying that, but this was just a fantasy. “In real life? No way. I’m a doctor.” She forced herself to take a hard look at her life. “I’m a battlefield surgeon. I’m more accustomed to giving orders than taking them. I have no intention of changing that, no intention of denying that part of myself.”

He sighed and pulled her into his arms. She knew she should resist, should get out of the room, but she couldn’t help herself. Her arms came up to circle his waist.

“I know, *der’lan*. I know you aren’t going to follow orders and I’m going to have to punish you.” She couldn’t help but shiver in anticipation at his words and she heard the smile in his voice when he continued. “And you’re going to like that and make me grey before my time.”

She bit her lip, hung up on the punishment thing. Sounded fun in theory, but there had to be limits.

“We’ll work it out. For now, you follow my orders in here.”

She remembered her earlier fantasy and interrupted. “Don’t I get a turn? I don’t ever get to be in charge?” she kept her voice light, teasing.

He frowned but she saw the interest in his eyes before he shook his head no. He jerked a nod towards the door. “Out there ... as long as you don’t endanger yourself or defy me publicly you should be safe from punishment.”

She bit her bottom lip. Would this work? His face was tight with determination and she knew he wasn’t letting her walk away. With a deep breath, she nodded her assent.

“Good. Get back in bed.”

Wincing a little as she turned, she approached the big bed surprised when he didn’t join her. He disappeared into through a door she hadn’t noticed before and she heard water running as she leaned back into the softness of the blankets.

He returned with a wet washcloth and her cheeks flooded with embarrassment as he spread her legs to clean her with a look of rapt attention on his face. At the first touch of the cloth against her skin she jerked. The sex had been great, from the first time in the garden till the last in this bed, but it was a lot for her for one day, for the last several years truth be told.

“You hurt,” he whispered, leaning over to lightly kiss the outside lips of her pussy. She felt her body responding, couldn’t fight it even though she knew she really shouldn’t indulge again tonight. Slowly, he sat up, replacing his mouth with the cloth and gently cleaned her. When he was finished he disposed of it and returned to her. He tugged the blankets down, resituating her in the center of the bed and lay down behind her. She fell

asleep with his strong arms holding her close and his hard cock, throbbing and unfulfilled pressing against her ass.

\* \* \* \*

She had no idea what time it was when she woke. There were no windows, no clocks, no illumination. None of that mattered. Daggar still lay behind her, spooned, holding her close, but his cock was sliding deep into her pussy. Slowly, but insistent, determined. His arms banded her, one breast in each hand, plumping, squeezing. Owning. Possessing. The utter dominance should have her screaming and running far away, but she couldn't resist him. Couldn't resist the allure, the pull of the attraction between them.

Accepting that a part of her didn't want to fight the pull, that a part of her longed to let him take over, she relaxed, let all the resistance slip away. His thrusts increased, his hands shifted to her nipples and squeezed, tugged on her rings, as if he sensed her capitulation. As if he knew she couldn't battle it. Couldn't resist him.

"You can't fight me, baby. This is the way it's meant to be," he whispered in her ear, but she didn't really hear it, didn't register it. She was flying apart, coming so hard she was afraid her mind and body would shatter. That she would never be whole again. It seemed to last forever. His steady plunging in and out of her cunt, the heady scent of sex in the air, her cries. Begging for it to stop. Begging for more. Her eyes hurt from the sparks exploding behind them and with one last grunt, one last explosion, it was over.

She lay limp on the bed, her limbs like noodles, her energy completely depleted. Replete and exhausted. He fell over, lay next to her breathing hard.

"It'll be the death of me, woman," he said softly, but she heard the satisfaction in his voice, "keeping you satisfied."

If she'd had the energy, she would have punched him in the arm for that comment, but she was grinning. How had they gone from last night to this moment? He rolled to his side and lifted his arm above his head. She didn't even try to follow the movement with her eyes to see what he was doing. After a few seconds, she didn't need to. Over her head, panels slid open exposing the dark sky above them. It was still starry, but purple and she knew the sun would rise soon. She sighed. It had been an exhilarating, sometimes scary night and she'd be sad to see it end. What would happen now? Despite all the talk of *der'lans* and bonds she wondered where they went from here? Their separate ways or on to something else?

He squeezed her hip. Hard. "No Kendall. This is it. Forever."

He'd read her thoughts again. "That's fucking weird," she complained. "You know what I'm thinking and I don't have a clue what's going on your head."

He released her hip, lay on his back, and took her hand in his, lacing his fingers between hers. For some reason the action made her stomach somersault. He pillowed his head with his other arm and stared up into the windows. Into the night.

"You would know if you opened your mind. If you accepted."

Would she? If she let herself go, let herself believe, would she share that connection? But no. It was impossible. She was human and a perfectly ordinary one at that. She wasn't psychic. Couldn't read minds and had never been able to do so.

"I don't have those kinds of abilities."

He smiled, but didn't move. "You don't have to, my *der'lan*. The bond is something else. Something you've never seen before. There is a psychic element to it, but it's not

limited by psychic gifts.”

She frowned. That didn't make any sense. You had the gift or didn't, right? He chuckled.

“You're a scientist, right?”

“Well, yeah.” She practiced medicine but could just have easily had gone into research.

“Just accept that there are things in the universe you haven't encountered yet. Keep an open mind. *Open* your mind, Kendall.”

Could she? Did she dare? There was an instinct, a knowing in her. He wasn't asking for an open mind as much as an open heart. Could she risk that? She rolled to her side and studied his profile. Could she live with herself if she didn't? If she didn't give this a chance? But seriously, despite the curiosity, despite the vague allusions and promises of the previous night, what happened when it was time to go home? When the chemistry, the newness, wore off? Did she take this chance, this opportunity, and experience everything she could?

Because to do so meant risking her heart. She'd felt safe and protected through the night. Rare commodities on Earth even after the peace treaty. She could learn to miss that real quick. No. Better to harden her heart. To accept what he offered in the moment, learn what she could, and return to Earth as soon as Laney's baby was born. Forever wasn't for her. Happily ever after had never been in her cards.

Before she could consider it further, she was on her back, a furious Delroi warrior leaning over her, glaring down at her.

“You aren't going anywhere,” he bit out. “We already covered this.”

She shoved at his shoulders. “You don't get to just decide for me Daggar! Who I marry. Where I live. You don't get to make those choices, to run my life.”

“You weren't complaining last night,” he growled.

“That was *sex*.” Couldn't he make the distinction? “This is *my life* you're talking about! My career. My future.”

“You can have those things here.”

He didn't get it. Totally didn't get it. “You're ordering me to leave my job. My home. My family and friends. You're not even asking, Daggar. You're just ... assuming I'll follow your lead. Like one of your soldiers. Like I don't have an opinion, or options, that matter to me. Like I'm just going to fall in line, no big deal. That's not going to happen. That's not who I am.” She struggled to get free, to leave the bed. “If that's how you want me, I don't want to be here.”

He moved, rolled onto his back pulling her on top of him. “Wait. Baby, wait. Listen.” She was so startled to hear the new note in his tone, almost pleading, that she quit resisting him. He took a deep breath.

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Daggar couldn't believe he was going to try to explain himself like this. To his *der'lan*. Did warriors do this? Had his father? His brother? Alrik must have. Laney understood the Delroi pretty damned well for a newcomer. And their mother, well, she'd been Delroi to begin with. There'd been nothing to explain to her.

He held Kendall close, kept her face pressed close to his chest as he stared up into the dawn. He hadn't thought of his parents, his mother, in years. Hadn't let himself remember in years. He didn't want to, but what choice did he have? He thought now he

might understand how his father had felt that last time he'd seen him, going after rebels that had killed his mate, his *der'lan*. Daggar's mother, but his father's life. He got that now. The woman in his arms meant more than anything. He may not really know her for a year or five or fifty, but she was everything. She was his entire world.

She'd never believe him if he told her that. If he said he loved her strength. If he said he loved her ability to trust, to give herself to him. If he said he loved ... her. He couldn't believe he was thinking that, was glad she refused to use the bond between them to read his thoughts and emotions. She wasn't ready for it. He wasn't sure he was ready for it.

But he knew he couldn't let her get away. Knew the best way to tie her to him was sex. He wasn't above using every weapon at his disposal. His communicator beeped and he repressed a groan. Sometimes duty was a real pain in the ass.

He wanted Kendall again. He wanted to try to explain. But he didn't have time. She didn't budge as he rolled out of bed and walked to his toy cabinet. He opened a drawer and rummaged around before he found what he wanted. Two balls connected by a long string, used to pull them free of whichever cavity they'd been inserted in. He slipped a small black box in his pocket. They balls looked innocuous enough. Kendall wouldn't realize he controlled them until it was too late.

She sat up as he approached the bed. "What?"

He held out his closed fist and dropped the balls into her palm when she lifted it. His comm. unit beeped again and he checked the read out screen. Trace. The spymaster probably wanted to discuss yesterday's murder. He sighed. He'd much rather spend his time investigating every curve and hollow of his mate or delving into her mind, her history, figuring out what made her tick as the Earthlings would say.

The damned thing beeped again and he caught Kendall trying to hide a grin as he looked at the name flashing across the screen. Laney. She'd probably been informed about the murder by now. His efforts to keep it quiet would be futile, but he'd had to try anyway. Rumors flew in army camps and despite its hard walls that's exactly what the Royal Palace was.

He sat on the edge of the bed, ignoring both calls, and stroked Kendall's cheek. Smiling, closing her eyes, she leaned into the touch with a low hum. So responsive. So damned perfect. The lust grew between them and he withdrew, took a calming breath. He stood.

"I better go now or I never will," he muttered. "Don't let Laney do anything today. She's been overdoing it lately."

Kendall stood also and raised an eyebrow. "You should have noticed by now that Laney doesn't follow orders well."

He shrugged. Fuck yeah, he'd noticed. Had enjoyed ribbing his brother about it. But Alrik wasn't here to rein her in so he had to give it a shot. He really didn't want her sticking her nose into the murder investigation. The Earth contingent kept her running as it was. If she kept going in her usual way, she'd collapse under the strain of the exhaustion and Alrik would have his head.

"She won't follow her healer's orders to rest?"

Kendall shook her head. "I don't know. I doubt it."

"If nothing else, you outrank her here. As my *der'lan* you're the most senior Lady in the Palace."

He'd brought her belongings into the room while she'd slept and she moved towards

one of the cases. Opening it, she pulled out garments for the day and tossed them on the bed before facing him again. She shoved hair out of her face and met his gaze.

“What does that mean exactly?”

He shook his head and growled as the damned communicator chimed again. “I’ll explain later. Just remember you can order her to rest and you have the authority to back it up as a healer and my *der’lan*.”

“Right,” she answered ruefully.

He pointed to the balls lying on the bed near her clothes. “Wear those this morning.” He leaned over the bed and kissed her lightly on the lips. Tenderly. “I have to go, but I’ll see you at lunch. Alone, baby.”

## Chapter Six

Kendall reluctantly left the room a few minutes after Daggar. She could feel the balls moving inside her, keeping her on a keen edge of desire as she moved towards the living room where she could hear Laney and Britt talking. Kendall flushed. Would they know? Would they suspect she'd given up so much control to Daggar and look at her differently? Straightening her shoulders, she entered the room. No one looked at her funny, thank God.

"Coffee on the counter," Britt said, nodding towards the other side of the room.

Kendall took a deep breath, inhaling the scent into her lungs. Most soldiers looked on coffee as the elixir of life. She wasn't any different. Maybe after a cup or four she'd start to feel like herself again. She walked to the counter and the balls moved inside her. Or maybe not. She nearly groaned aloud. After pouring a cup, she returned to the couches and sat next to Britt. Laney was stretched out over the other and Kendall knew without asking she was in a foul mood.

She asked anyway, her doctor's empathy not allowing her to sit in silence. "How are you feeling today?"

She kept her tone soft, soothing, but found it hard to repress a grin when Laney glared at her.

"My feet are swollen, I have heartburn from hell, my husband is gone, and my brother-in-law left this morning without speaking to me first. What do you think?"

Kendall bit her bottom lip and Britt burst out laughing.

"Didn't we all make a pact, years ago? No husbands and no babies?" Britt joked. "Serves you right for breaking it."

"I don't think a pact made in the aftermath of a battle when we were twenty-three counts for much anymore," Laney grumbled.

"No," Britt said turning serious. "I don't think any of us really meant it then either." She shuddered. "It was just ... that place."

Kendall shared her revulsion. They'd been on the South American continent, new friends without any history between them yet. The rebels there had been brutal and vicious. They'd heard rumors of refugees who needed aid in a nearby village and Kendall had gone with Laney and Britt's squad to check it out and offer medical help.

They'd known as soon as they arrived something was very wrong. It was eerily quiet, eerily intact. Like a ghost town. It wasn't until they began to enter homes that they discovered how true that assessment was.

Kendall still woke in the night, reliving the horrors of that place. Some kind of gas agent had been used, she'd never discovered what, but the bodies were horribly disfigured, big open blisters covered in dried puss and blood. It was a horrible way to die. The worst were the children, curled into fetal positions, their skin raw in death. That evening she, Laney and Britt made their pact. The promise to each other had been half in jest. They'd known even then that one day one or all of them would marry, would have children. She met the gazes of her friends, saw they were remembering it all too. No. The pact was broken as it had always been intended to be. But the bonds of friendship that had been forged over the horror of that event would never snap.



Laney sat up, swinging her legs over the seat of the couch and placing her hands behind her as if to leverage herself up.

“Whoa, where do you think you’re going?” Kendall asked in her best *don’t mess with me, I’m the doctor tone*. Laney answered with her best *don’t get in my way glare*. Ah, just like old times. Weren’t they great? Kendall was starting to remember what a pain in the ass patient her old friend was.

“One of the research doctors in the Earth contingent was killed last night. That’s why I needed to talk to Daggar before he left. But did he cooperate? Hell, no. So now I have to go over there and smooth all the ruffled feathers and paranoid hysteria.”

She started to stand. “Sit!” Kendall barked. “Britt and I will handle it. That’s why we’re here, remember?”

She was surprised when Laney obeyed. Judging by her expression so was she. Her eyes narrowed and her tone was mulish. “I need to be there.”

Kendall rolled her eyes. “Get over it. Go back to bed and get some rest.”

Laney was going to fight her on it. Kendall saw the protest in her friend’s eyes. But when she opened her mouth it was for a jaw-cracking yawn, not a complaint. “Fine,” she huffed. “Go without me.”

Kendall had a bad feeling that disaster was looming, that sense she used to get going into some battles, so she returned to Daggar’s room and removed the balls before she left. No way was she going to get wrapped up in a murder investigation and kept horny all day. She felt Daggar’s anger at the decision, and shook it off, still not certain she really believed he could get in her head. But as they got directions and hurried out before Laney could change her mind, she swore she could hear him swearing under his breath about her disobedience.

She shrugged it off and followed Britt through the maze of corridors that led them back into the huge common area they’d first encountered yesterday and then down a large hall she hadn’t been in yet. Britt was entirely too familiar without the layout of the Palace.

“Go exploring last night?”

The other woman grinned and Kendall just shook her head. She knew better than to try to curtail Britt’s curiosity. Or whatever it was.

Laney wasn’t joking when she’d said the building was huge. It took them twenty minutes and a couple of false turns to reach the offices that housed the Earth party. No one paid attention to the door, which stood open, allowing them to enter unnoticed. There were few people around and the atmosphere was quiet, somber. Jumpy. The secretary jerked around, his hand on his chest, when Britt cleared her throat.

“Is the Ambassador in?” she asked evenly.

“Who are you?” he countered suspiciously.

The door opened behind him and a tall thin man stepped through. His lips widened in a politician’s smile and Kendall distrusted him instantly.

“Britt Anderson and Dr. Marks unless I miss my guess. Right ladies?”

She let Britt answer. “Yes. We need a word in private, Ambassador.”

Since he hadn’t been introduced and he seemed to know Britt, Kendall assumed they’d met before. He stepped out of the doorway and motioned them in.

“Certainly.” He shut it behind him and rounded the large desk to take a seat while they took the two chairs in front of him.

“The Sergeant Major sent us,” Britt started.

He cocked an eyebrow. “Be careful who hears you call her that. The Delroi get testy when she isn’t called Lady Torfa. They feel somewhat ... territorial about her.”

Britt’s only reaction was her signature one shoulder shrug. “What can you tell us about the doctor?”

“His name would be a good start,” Kendall interjected dryly. She couldn’t believe she hadn’t asked Laney, but in the rush to get out of the family quarters and leave her behind maybe it was understandable.

“Adam Peters.”

No way. “*The Adam Peters?*”

The Ambassador raised an eyebrow. “Is he famous? He’s a disease researcher or something.”

Yep. That would be the one. Adam Peters was the best-known and most well-respected researcher of infectious diseases on Earth. She hadn’t heard he’d left. What the hell was he doing here? And why had he been murdered?

“Where’s his lab?” Did his death have to do with his work?

“In the hospital in the warrior caste’s side of the Palace. There are clinics throughout the place, but that’s where all the labs are. He’s working with a Delroi healer. Tallus, I think his name is.”

Britt stood and shook his hand. “Thank you. We’ll be in touch.”

He stopped them before they could leave. “Dr. Marks.”

She turned back to face him. “Yes?”

“We won’t have a doctor until Earth sends a replacement. Could you fill in?”

She found it hard to believe the Delroi healers wouldn’t treat the Ambassador’s people and she hadn’t come to Delroi to take on an isolating job like that, but she couldn’t say no. “Call if you have an emergency.”

Hopefully, he wouldn’t call. She followed Britt out of the offices and they made the long trek back to the warrior’s wing in silence. Once they were safely back inside, she turned to Britt.

“Is it me or was that weird?”

“He’s a creep,” Britt answered. “I couldn’t believe it when he was appointed.” She shook her head. “But other than being a smarmy politician I couldn’t find anything to keep him out.”

She changed the subject. “So who is Adam Peters?”

“A brilliant researcher. I sat in on one of his seminars in medical school. Last I heard he was focusing on HIV5.”

She went into lecture mode as she explained it to Britt. “Like the old virus, HIV5 is primarily passed through sex or blood, but several researchers, including Peters, are convinced the next version could make the evolutionary leap to an airborne virus. Considering how quickly and horribly HIV5 kills, that’s a nightmare.” She paused, shuddering as she considered possibilities she didn’t share with her friend. “Once airborne, if the new strain is as aggressive as the last, it will be damned near impossible to contain. A new plague.”

They both fell silent as they walked, lost in their own thoughts. Kendall didn’t want to think about horrible diseases or murdered doctors and found herself wondering where Daggar was. What he was doing. As if the thought opened a floodgate, she felt him, could

almost hear him. He was furious, listening to several raised voices before calling for a silence. She strained to understand him, to really hear the words and not the emotion behind them.

Her focus was shattered by an explosion that rocked the floor under her feet and made her ears ring. She reached out a hand behind her to steady herself against the wall, while shaking her head to clear it and meeting Britt's gaze. The spy was looking back the way they'd come, where they'd passed the entrance to the family's quarters with a slightly sick look on her face. Kendall knew she wanted to go check on Laney without asking.

"Go," she said. "I'm going to the hospital. There'll be injuries."

Britt nodded and hurried back the way they'd come, and she turned to find the healers. The hallway she followed ended on a wide corridor and she saw the entrance to the hospital, thankful Laney had pointed it out the previous day.

It was chaos when she walked in. The room was large with beds set up on opposite walls and a path down the center. The wounded were trickling in and she absently noted head wounds, fractured bones, and various other lacerations. On Earth, her assessment would have been none were too serious since all the warriors walked in on their own two feet. But she'd learned over the last few months that really wasn't a good way to assess a Delroi warrior's health.

She looked around and tried to determine who was in charge, decided it was the mature, though beautiful, woman arguing with a warrior about lying down. Kendall approached and waited until the healer was finished with the man and moving on.

"I'm Kendall," she introduced herself. "I'm an Earth doctor, but I can help."

The woman cocked her head to one side and studied her for half a second. "Laney's friend."

"Yes."

"You have battlefield experience?"

Kendall snorted. "Too much."

She nodded, a flash of sympathy crossing her face. "I'm Cilia. Let's start with the head wounds. I'll take this side of the room."

"No problem."

"Daire," she ordered and a younger woman rushed over. "Assist Dr. Marks."

The young woman, Daire, nodded. Kendall was taking the right side of the room and didn't wait to see if the nurse followed her, but when she picked her first patient her request for instruments was met immediately. They worked steadily, silently, in perfect tandem. Kendall set bones and sewed up lacerations. Several warriors left against her orders but they wouldn't be deterred and she was too busy to argue. She was working on the last, sewing up surface cuts mostly, when there was a distracting commotion at the door.

"Hurry," the warrior on the bed muttered and she tied off the last stitch. He jerked to his feet and barked at the people in the door. "Over here!"

As they approached, she saw they carried someone on a litter and then she noticed who it was. She swore she felt her heart stop beating as they transferred Daggar from the litter to the bed. His hair was matted with blood, his chest drenched and she experienced a moment of panic when she realized he wasn't in her head anymore. She didn't get any sense of him.

Cilia rushed over and glared at her for doing nothing. The expression snapped her back to the moment. "Scissors," she muttered, but Cilia already had them, cutting away his long hair so they could see where the bleeding came from. She caught her breath when the area was exposed, seeing a shard of stone protruding from the top of his head.

"Give me those large tweezers, Daire," she ordered. The nurse had anticipated her and slapped them in her open palm. Cilia caught her wrist before she could proceed.

"Careful. This is the Warrior Overchief."

"I know who he is."

She thought Cilia would argue and take over, but then Barak Trace appeared at the healer's side, leaned over and whispered in her ear. She didn't stop to wonder why the spy was here. Whatever he'd said, Cilia nodded. "You're sure you want to be the one to do this?"

Kendall pressed her lips together and leaned over him without answering. The other healer worked well, but Kendall knew her own skill better than anyone else's. She wouldn't trust anyone but herself with this. She couldn't explain it, couldn't explain anything. But she was not going to lose him like this. Not if she could help it.

He moaned as she slowly pulled the stone free and she found herself chanting his name to herself, as if to hold him to her. Her relief made her knees weak when she saw it removed, saw it hadn't penetrated his skull. She dropped it in a tray Daire held out and went to work on the rest. She and Cilia worked to remove four more fragments from his head, before starting on his chest.

Kendall alternated between terrified and furious. Just how close had he been to the damned blast? She was cleaning out the final cut when he woke. One minute he was out and then next his eyes were wide open staring at her. He didn't budge as she prepared the needle.

"Do you want a pain killer now that you're awake?" The question came out testier than she intended. She was pissed and worried and pissed because she was worried. And she didn't even know this man. Her professional reserve had been gone from the moment they'd laid him down.

"No," he answered, his voice was gruff and she was so damned glad to hear it. There seemed to be a collective sigh of relief from the warriors hovering nearby. He reached for her hand before she could proceed. "*Der'lan*," this time the room's sigh was a gasp, "the others?"

"Britt has her," she answered softly, knowing he was really asking about Laney. She would have felt jealous, but she'd been trying not to worry about the same thing as she worked. "I'm starting now."

He nodded and she slipped the needle through his skin. He didn't move an inch and it was quickly finished. She felt his sigh of relief more than heard it. Dropping the needle on the tray and pulling off her gloves to add them, she turned away but Daggar caught her arm.

"Where are you going?"

"I have to clean up." She had to get out there, catch her breath and get her head screwed back on right. She looked down. And get out of her clothes. She was covered in everyone else's blood. Cilia intervened.

"Come on, dear. I have clothes in the back office."

Kendall slanted her a look. The woman was wearing a tightly cut short shirt and

loose almost see through pants. No way was Kendall putting on something like that. She'd go back to her room to change, but she felt Daggar's disapproval, sensed that he didn't want her out of his sight even for a few minutes. And she didn't have any idea why she was going to comply. Probably because it was so distressing to see him so badly injured. Not that she was about to admit that. Sighing, knowing she was giving in on a battle she probably shouldn't, she followed Cilia into the office.

The woman walked to a wall cabinet and pointed out a door at the back of the room. "Shower. You go first. I'll leave some clothes inside the door."

Kendall frowned. "I can't believe you have anything that'll fit me."

Cilia grinned. "Trust me."

Not likely. The smile wasn't malicious, but it set Kendall's guard up. Fuck it. She didn't have another option right now. She walked into the bathroom, stripped, and stepped into the shower. The door opened and closed as she let the hot water pound over her flesh, as she scrubbed the stink of blood from her skin. None of it had actually touched her, but she smelled it, felt coated with it all the same. It was always like this after a battle triage.

Daggar was growing impatient. She felt him, almost heard him snapping out orders to the warriors around him, while at the same time he tried to command her, cajole her to hurry. She had a sudden image of them together, him leaning over her, holding her hands high above her head. Kissing her gently, tenderly, knowing the dominance to come, knowing how it would thrill her. She hurried up.

After toweling off, she reached for the pants Cilia had left. They were the same style she'd seen other Delroi women wearing, with a fitted waist and loose legs. She groaned. If they belonged to the much smaller woman, they'd never fit. They did and Kendall spared a moment to wonder who they belonged to.

She reached for the shirt with a rising sense of dread. The idea of exposing her belly, of showcasing her boobs, didn't thrill her. Daggar seemed to growl in her head, trying to hurry her up. Better get it over with. She pulled the shirt on.

It molded her body, but it wasn't tight, the fabric soft and supple, cupping her breasts. She stepped back to get a better look in the mirror. It was ... okay. The outfit showcased her curves but didn't make her feel lumpy. It was actually really comfortable. She reached for the doorknob and stepped into the room. Cilia was standing by the door and smiled her approval before slipping into the restroom.

Kendall walked through the small office and paused at the entry to the larger room. Daggar was surrounded by his warriors and she couldn't see him. He must have said something, because the man blocking her view stepped aside. Daggar crooked his finger, motioning her forward while continuing to listen to one of the others.

She approached cautiously, unsure of what to expect and knowing he was angry to find her there. Plus he was the Overchief, king of the warriors to all intents and purposes. What did that make her? He kept insisting she was his and even that she outranked Laney here. That had to put her on at least equal footing with everyone else in the room. She tilted her chin up as she stopped next to him.

He flashed a smile at her, taking her hand in his and gliding his thumb over her knuckles. Fire licked through her body at the contact and she fought it viciously. He was injured. She shouldn't want to kick everyone out and jump his bones. Thankfully, Cilia's entrance prevented her from making the demand.

Like Kendall, the other woman had showered and put on fresh clothes. She went to Daggar's other side and picking up his wrist, took his pulse. Shit. Kendall should have thought of that. He distracted her too damned much.

"You need to go into the rejuvenating tank."

Huh? The what?

"No," he answered, his tone implacable. She knew he wouldn't accept an argument about it.

"What is it?" Kendall asked the other woman.

She nodded towards the end of the room and Kendall turned to see what looked like a glass fronted closet.

"We put him in, fill it with healing gel and it speeds up recovery."

"Let's do it then."

"No."

She turned to glare at him. His hand squeezed around hers.

"No, Kendall. What she isn't telling you is it's a minimum twelve hour stay. I won't leave you or my people unprotected that long," he said softly, but the others heard.

Cilia snorted. "You know you can communicate with us in the tank."

"But I can't get *out*."

Kendall knew he would hate that, not being able to defend the people he was responsible for. She wasn't worried about that. She and Britt could take care of themselves and Laney, and there were plenty of warriors around if they needed help. But there was no mistaking his mulish expression and she felt her own exasperation rise.

Before she could argue, General Alrik Torfa stomped into the room. She'd met him once before, when he and Laney got married shortly before their departure from Earth. She'd thought him cold and austere. Unfeeling. But now his anger was a living, palpable thing in the air. The other warriors in the room, all except Barak Trace, backed away.

"What the fuck is going on here?" he barked at Trace.

"You're brother's an idiot, that's what," she snapped.

Daggar snarled, so low she thought she was the only one who heard it. "Watch it, *der'lan*."

She knew that tone and narrowed her eyes. There was no way he was pulling that dominant crap on her in a medical situation. Here she was the expert. She opened her mouth to give him a piece of her mind, but snapped it shut when Laney and Britt walked in. Both women were armed, and Kendall admitted a small amount of relief over the familiar sight, Laney's gun and knife strapped to her thighs and Britt's pistol in a shoulder holster. Almost like old times. Except it *wasn't* old times. She glared at Britt who held her hands up before her in mock surrender.

"Hey, don't look at me," she said. "I don't have any more control over her than you do."

Laney just gave her that stubborn look that Kendall knew meant it was a waste of breath to argue with her. Exasperated and ready to wash her hands of both of them, she set her hands on her hips and scowled.

"Jesus H. Christ. Can't anyone follow a simple medical order?"

"No," chorused Cilia, Alrik, and Barak.

Laney ignored her and turned to Barak, who was watching Britt oddly, a look of fascination mixed with something Kendall wanted to call fear. She dismissed the idea.

This wasn't a man who was afraid of anything. "What happened?"

"Explosion," he said curtly.

"I'm getting sick of those," Laney said alluding to an event Kendall had heard about secondhand that had taken place months ago on Earth. Kendall had picked up some intelligence, but hadn't been able to get in touch with Laney so she'd arranged a meeting with Barak. He'd arrived just in time to assist Laney in repelling an attack by Delroi rebels against the Overchief, his brother Alrik, and several of their men.

Barak glanced around the room. "We should adjourn to someplace more secure."

Daggar sat up and she whirled back around to face him. "Oh, no you don't. You're staying here in the infirmary. Where I can keep an eye on you."

His lips twisted in a smile that made her stomach drop as Alrik helped him stand and steady himself.

"Dammit, Daggar."

He shifted closer. Circling her waist with one arm and leaning into her a little, he whispered in her ear, "You're not going to win this battle. All you're doing is getting yourself in more trouble, *der'lan*."

The image he filled her mind with made her shiver and not in a bad way. Tied down. At the mercy of his tongue and hands. He stumbled a little as they left for the family quarters, and she realized with a small pang of disappointment, he wouldn't be up for that for some while.

"Don't count on it," he growled for only her to hear.

He was like a grumpy bear. She smiled, almost laughed at the image, but kept the thought to herself.

When they reached the family quarters, Barak stopped next to Daggar. "I want to check a few things out. I'll be back in a few hours."

"Do it," Daggar replied and they followed Alrik and Laney inside the living area. Britt had disappeared, but Kendall didn't think much of it. She could take care of herself and knowing Britt she was gathering information on the explosion. Laney would want that later. So did she for that matter.

She was relieved when Alrik and Laney didn't stick around, instead going straight for the hall that led their suite. Daggar leaned more heavily against her as they walked down the other hall to his room and she worried he was expending too much energy trying to appear normal. He stopped on the side of the bed, bent his head to graze her lips lightly before sitting down hard. She shook her head, kneeling in front of him to remove his boots. She got them off and stood, nudged him so he lay down.

"You should be in the infirmary."

He didn't respond and she thought he'd passed out, but when she looked up his eyes were glittering hard. Possessive and avaricious. She caught her breath and reached for the snaps on his trousers. His cocked hardened under her hand in an instant and she started to lift them away. He caught her, held her hands in his and pressed them against his erection. She pulled free, worked the snaps with clumsy movements.

"You need to rest."

"I need you." Starkly said. Impossible to resist.

She helped him out of his clothes, then stood to remove hers. When she was naked, he reached out and pulled her down, arranging her limbs so that she straddled him. His cock pressed against her pelvis and she slid up so it nudged her pussy, fisted it so she

could guide him inside her weeping slit. His hands closed over her lower ribcage and pulled her up.

“Not yet,” he whispered, before taking one hard nipple into his mouth. He sucked it between his teeth, bit down, and she came screaming his name. The shudders wracked her body and he held her tightly, his tongue gentle now on the aroused tip, flicking the gold hoop, and building the lust between them into an impossibly tight ball of pleasure and pain.

When she didn't think she could take anymore, his hands slid slowly down to her hips, gripping her as he released her nipple and met her gaze. He lowered her slowly onto his hard staff and she trembled as he entered her. Knowing he wanted her to hold back. Trying desperately to do so. But he felt so good and she knew it was a losing proposition.

He smiled. “We'll worry about punishments later, hmm?”

That gave her pause. What was he planning to punish her for? Coming without permission or arguing with him in public? And did she even care? The things he could do with that flogger...

“And I will. Later, *der'lan*.”

He'd read her mind again, but she couldn't care, didn't care as he began to thrust inside her. She met him stroke for stroke, the pressure building, the rising pleasure so intense she thought she'd never be the same again. Sitting up straight, she rode him, let her head fall back as she came with a keening cry she barely recognized as her own. The night and day she had, the orgasms she'd had, left her depleted of energy and she was relieved to hear Daggar's roar of release moments later.

He gripped the back of her head and pulled her across his chest for a kiss that was almost savage, almost brutal, as his hot cum filled her. It finally occurred to her that they hadn't once used a condom. That should worry her, but she liked it, that there was nothing between them. It concerned her, that reckless disregard for her health or future, but not enough to keep her from sighing and rolling aside to snuggle up next to him and drift into a deep sleep.



## Chapter Seven

When all the members of the royal family were safely secured inside their rooms, Barak retraced his steps to the council room where the explosion had taken place. It was only a matter of minutes before he realized he was being followed. Britt. That primitive part of his soul snarled. *Mine*. He smiled grimly. He didn't know what she was up to, but she didn't have a fucking clue who or what she was dealing with.

He considered stopping, confronting her and sending her back to her quarters, but dismissed the idea. Like Laney and Kendall Marks, so to be Torfa, it would be damned near impossible to make this woman follow orders. His heart rate kicked up. He wanted to be the one she obeyed, the one who could control that mile wide independent streak. Not that Alrik or Daggar seemed to be having much luck in that department. Earth women. He couldn't figure them out. Why couldn't they be nice and normal and biddable like Delroi women? Why couldn't they see their men were only trying to protect them the best way they knew how?

Refusing to acknowledge, even to himself, that not all Delroi women were so obedient, he entered the rubble-strewn room. On feet so quiet he didn't hear her, Britt followed him in. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, listened. She was good. He felt no surge of psychic energy this time, as if she knew he could feel it even though he didn't share her gifts. If he weren't connected to her, if he didn't sense her when she was close, he would have missed her presence. Did she distract him so much he lost focus or was she that good? Neither scenario was acceptable.

Opening his eyes, he turned his head to watch her, drinking in the sight of her compact curvy body wandering the room, the quiet cat-like glide as she moved. Perfect profile, striking eyes. His cock had been hard since he'd seen her yesterday and demanded attention. He struggled against his instincts and knew he was screwed. He wouldn't be able to stay near her and resist claiming her for very long. He promised himself he'd only stay in the Palace, in the city long enough to deal with this explosion. Then he'd leave. His chest restricted painfully at the thought, but he knew it was for the best. His past would catch up with him. It was too dangerous to keep her. The knowledge completely pissed him off.

"Why are you here?" he snapped.

She shrugged, nonchalant, as unaffected by his presence as he was distracted by hers. It made him even angrier. She was his *der'lan*. How could she ignore him? How could she not feel what he felt?

"I know a thing or two about bombs," she said. "Maybe I can help."

Eyes narrowed, he watched her walk around the room, kneel and shift through rubble before standing and walking to the wall behind Daggar's chair. Most of it was gone, exposing a large hole.

"Point of origin," she said, turning from it to study what was left of the layout of the room. "Daggar sat here?"

Barak clenched his jaw, part of him refusing to believe she could have anything to do with this. But the other part was a suspicious son of a bitch, and she was Earth's best spy. One of her best assassins, too.

She chuckled, met his gaze across the room. “You don’t trust me. I don’t blame you. I wouldn’t trust me either, General Trace. Or should I call you Spymaster?”

Laney must have told her. Another thing to add to the list of things pissing him off today. Did he say something or could she read him that well? Britt shook her head.

“Not Laney. Did you really think I wouldn’t find out you’d accessed my file?” She shrugged. “Doesn’t matter. I would have done the same if I had the contacts.”

She took a deep breath before frowning and kneeling down, shifting rubble at her feet. “I’m not here to spy on you.” Gods, he wanted to believe that, but she was too damned good. He almost missed seeing her slip something into her pocket. Standing, she faced him again and spoke before he could call her on it.

“And I don’t plan to be here long either. I did my own research before I came, heard some pretty damned disturbing things about you Delroi males.” She gave him a probing look and her psychic energy flared through the room. He was careful to keep his face and mind blank. It passed and she picked her way through the rubble until she stood only a couple of feet in front of him. “Things I’m inclined to believe since our arrival, about Delroi men having the ability to mentally bond with a woman whether she wants to or not.”

It was definitely a probing question, but he didn’t respond. What could he say? He certainly wasn’t giving her the truth, not right now or under the current circumstances.

“I almost didn’t come. I ignored my instincts.” She looked away, but not before he saw the first crack in her composure, the flash of uncertainty and indecision in her eyes. It only took seconds for her to regain control, however. “As soon as I’m sure Laney and Kendall are okay, I’m going home.”

Barak knew that was best. He’d just moments ago intended to put distance between them himself. But he moved before he could recall that, grabbing the back of her head, tunneling his fingers in her hair before pulling her close enough to inhale her scent, to see the flakes of gold in her eyes.

“And what makes you think I’m going to let you leave?” he practically snarled as he lowered his lips to hers. He nipped at her bottom lip and she groaned but refused to allow him entrance. “Open, Britt.”

It was probably the shock of the sharp command that did it, but he didn’t care. He took her, thrusting his tongue into her mouth the way he wanted to stroke his cock into her cunt. Warm, intoxicating heat. The taste of her was an addiction he would never overcome. He released her abruptly, lurched away. Not now. He couldn’t afford this loss of control now.

She stared at him with shocked eyes, lifted her hand to her lips as if she could wipe the taste of him, the feel of him, away. Turning, she started to leave the room but paused under the doorway and spoke coldly without facing him. “That won’t happen again.”

He stood rigidly still as he watched her leave, as he watched her walk away from him, amazed he didn’t roar his anger and frustration and hurt. Like hell it wouldn’t. It was several long moments before he realized he was shaking.

\* \* \* \*

Kendall didn’t know how long she slept. When she woke, she eased away from Daggar’s chest, afraid of hurting him. He grumbled in his sleep but let her go. Smiling, she stared through the skylights guessing by the purple quality of the light streaming in it

was dusk.

She rolled her head on the pillow to watch him. Daggar. Her lover. Her mate? Such an alien thought but it felt right. She'd have to do something about his hair when he woke. It was a mess from where she and Cilia had cut away clumps of it. Sighing, she sat up and gently probed at his scalp with her fingertips. The stitches looked okay. God knew, they'd pumped enough antibiotics into him to kill damned near any infection.

As quiet as she could move, she rolled out of the bed and dressed, carefully opened the door and pulled it closed behind her. She followed the hallway into the living room, relieved to find it empty, and turned into the other hallway, Laney's and Alrik's. And Britt's. She found the right door and tapped lightly. It opened with a snick and she followed Britt inside.

She was quick, already sitting cross-legged on the bed when Kendall entered and pushed it shut softly behind her. Kendall stood in a shock a moment, long enough for Britt to look up frowning. "What?"

She shook her head. "Sorry. It's been a long time since I've seen you out of uniform." Or something close to it. Meaning not long sleeves and pants. Now she wore shorts and a tank top and grinned at Kendall, knowing she hadn't seen the tattoos in all their glory in years.

Kendall approached with a soft laugh as she took a good look. "New ones, I see."

She sat down on the bed and Britt held one leg out, letting her see the new vines, honeysuckles that wrapped up one calf. She shook her head. Britt had made her body a canvas, mostly with trails of flowers going up and down her arms and legs, crossing her back and chest. Pretty and innocuous. But Kendall knew there was another more sinister tattoo that wasn't visible. One that catalogued kills. She'd never understood that and Britt had given up trying to explain.

"So what did you find?"

She'd seen Britt slip away when the rest of them had returned to the family quarters. The former spy paled and Kendall scowled. Surely it couldn't be that bad. Britt held up a small black box and Kendall groaned. Damn it. She recognized that and held her hand out. Britt dropped it into her palm and she held it up to inspect.

Yep. A detonator switch. With Arabic numbers on it.

They were so screwed. "Who? How?"

"It gets worse." Britt inhaled deeply before speaking. "See the numbers?"

Kendall nodded.

"We developed that switch for a little piece of nastiness called X256K, an explosive designed to make a very big hole in a very small place."

"Okay. And?"

"I found it on the ground, but I'm pretty sure it was placed inside an airshaft. In a council room."

"The warriors we treated were in that room then."

"Yeah. And it was in the wall behind the head of the table."

She felt herself grow pale. The Overchief's seat. Daggar's place. "They meant to kill Daggar," she whispered, terrified but getting pissed off. No way in hell was she letting that happen. "Who? And how the hell did they manage to get it here?"

That characteristic shrug. "I dunno. You know about the attack on Earth? After the peace talks started?"

Kendall nodded. She knew. The Delroi had decided to give the Earth forces a demonstration of their power and it hadn't ended quite the way they'd expected. They'd been attacked by their own rebel forces, but no one had ever been able to determine if there were Earth rebels also involved.

That seemed obvious now. Earth technology smuggled on to Delroi to kill the Warrior Caste's Overchief? The two groups had to be working together. That was easy enough to figure out. Identifying them? Not so easy. It might be easier to go at the mystery backwards.

"How?"

"I've been thinking about it," Britt said. "Everything going on to the ship was searched and the same when it was transferred to the shuttle."

Kendall fought a blush. If that was true, there was no telling how many people saw her sex toys.

"But there were two cases I bet weren't opened."

Kendall had stood with Britt and watched the shuttle loaded. She bet she knew exactly which cases she spoke of.

"The biohazard boxes."

Britt nodded. At the time, Kendall had thought it damned strange, but knowing Adam Peters was here it made more sense. And Britt was right. It was very unlikely anyone would have touched something stamped biohazard. The perfect way to smuggle something.

"So we need to find out who the boxes were delivered to. My assumption would be Dr. Peters."

Britt grinned. "I did a little hacking. And yes, they went to Peters. He even signed for them."

"And now he's dead."

They both sobered at the reminder. "Yeah," Britt replied softly. She stood and rummaged through her suitcase before pulling out a clean set of clothes. Jeans and long sleeves that covered her body art. "Time to get to work."

Kendall nodded agreement as Britt stepped towards the restroom to change. "I'll check out the labs. See who else had access to those boxes."

"I'll meet up with you later then."

There wasn't anything left to say so Kendall left, shutting the door softly behind her. She paused in the living room, gazing down the hall that led to Daggar and barely resisted the urge to go check on him before leaving. If he woke and realized what she was planning, he wouldn't let her leave.

Scowling her irritation, she stomped out of the family quarters and into the corridor. It was nice that there was someone, okay a smoking hot man, who wanted to look out for her. But she had to make him understand there was a middle ground. His protectiveness would suffocate her if he didn't. She'd just end up resenting him and miserable, because as much as she hated to admit it, she knew bond or no bond, she couldn't walk away anymore. He'd got under her skin, sunk his teeth into her heart like some great hunting cat.

She sighed when she saw the infirmary sign and tried to push her worries away, to concentrate on Dr. Peters and his murder. It was calm when she entered, eerily quiet after the excitement earlier. Now that there wasn't blood and trauma everywhere she took a

better look around and noticed a hall in the back corner of the large room. A sign above it bore letters she couldn't translate and she hoped it wasn't some kind of gruesome warning as she stepped under the archway.

After a short walk, she left the hall and grinned. She'd found the lab and saw the biohazard crates stacked against the far wall. She took a step in that direction before noticing the man sitting alone at a round table, watching her. His gaze was intent, measuring. Feeling like a sample under a microscope, she approached silently. He rose to his feet slowly, waited for her.

She stopped a few feet away. "I'm Kendall Marks."

He nodded. "Tallus."

Her smile was tentative. She pulled out a chair and sat, was relieved when he did the same. Not that it helped much. Like all the Delroi men, she'd seen, he was tall and broad shouldered, built like a warrior. But unlike most of the others, intricate tattoos ran down the side of his face and disappeared under his collar. She'd only seen those once before, on the Delroi spy Barak Trace. They gave both men a savage, almost sinister look. What was he doing in the lab?

"Are you a doctor?"

He smiled slightly, the movement transforming his face. She relaxed a little. When he smiled, he no longer looked like a rampaging killer.

"I'm a healer. Doctor is an Earthling word."

She shrugged. Same difference. "I suppose."

This time he grinned. "You'll adjust to our ways soon enough."

She arched an eyebrow. No way in hell was she touching that one. "Did you know Dr. Peters?"

The smile fled from his face and his expression closed down. "Why?"

She felt a wave of sadness for a life lost, a brilliant mind lost. "He was a colleague. A genius Earth really can't afford to lose. What was he working on? Why was he even here?"

"He was working with me to see what the effects of combining Earthling and Delroi DNA will be."

She frowned. There were some mixed marriages, but considering the size of both populations the numbers were negligible. It seemed a horrible waste of resources. "Why? Surely there are more pressing things to spend time and money on."

He hesitated long enough that she knew he was going to put her off. "You should ask the Overchief."

She rolled her eyes. "Why would I do that? He's not a doctor."

He frowned and she knew she wasn't going to get an answer about the research. "That's a question for your mate. It's not my place." His eyes narrowed. "Does he even know you're here?"

Just freaking wonderful. It wasn't just Daggar with the archaic, woman-in-her-place attitude. It seemed to be pandemic among the Delroi. The chair legs scraped across the tile as she shoved back from the table and stood.

She paced a few feet away and stopped, hands on her hips as she stared at the crates. "What was in those?" she asked without turning to face him. He approached to see what she was asking about.

"Blood samples."

She cocked an eyebrow and watched him from the corner of her eye as she moved towards the boxes. He kept pace at her side. "Marked biohazard?"

She flipped the catches on two sides of the top crate and lifted the lid while he shrugged.

"They were contaminated by viruses and though they aren't harmful to Delroi, they are to humans."

Scowling, she turned to face him. The crate had already been unloaded. "I thought you were trying to see what the effects of combining our DNA were?"

"Yes." He turned to a counter, motioning her to follow him to a microscope. She looked through the lens and caught her breath when she saw the HIV5 virus being attacked and killed by foreign looking blood cells. She straightened and met his gaze, waiting for him to tell her what she'd seen. "That's one of the diseased samples combined with Delroi blood."

"You have a natural antigen."

He nodded.

"Is it dangerous to us?"

This time he shrugged. "We don't know yet."

As fascinating as it was, the research wasn't her primary reason for visiting the lab. "Who else had access to these crates?" she asked, trying to sound casual. Maybe he'd assume she was worried about exposure for the humans on planet. He narrowed his eyes but answered.

"Everyone in the lab. They arrived the same day you did. Usually we'd let the techs unload them, but Adam stayed late to do it." Pausing, he ground his teeth together. She just kept from cringing at the soft scraping sound. "You think they have something to do with the explosion."

A statement. Not a question. Was she that transparent? This time she shrugged. She was gathering information, not giving it away. "Who are the techs?"

"You should really let the Overchief handle this. Or better yet, Barak Trace."

She stared him down and with a sigh he continued. "This is dangerous, Lady Torfa, but I can see you aren't going to let it go. There are two techs that work on our project. Daire and Hakon." She ignored his calling her by the honorific and Dagggar's family name. Dagggar seemed to think she belonged to him and apparently so did his men. She'd deal with that later.

"I thought Daire was a nurse?"

"Yes, but she's studying to be a healer and part of the practicum is research."

"I see." And she hoped she was jumping to all the wrong conclusions. She'd liked the efficient young woman. It would suck if it turned out she was involved in the attempt on Dagggar's life.

She looked around the gleaming white lab, overcome with sadness again. She was so sick of death and destruction, had hoped with the peace treaty those days were behind them, but it appeared that hatred was still the rule of the day.

Back in the royal family's quarters, Dagggar shifted, coming awake and she felt him reach out for her, felt the mental probe against her mind. He enveloped her in comfort, support. She wanted nothing more than to return to his rooms and let him hold her until she forgot the world. And she would, but not quite yet. She felt his anger at her determination before he withdrew. She felt the loss like a punch, a big aching hole in her

stomach and almost changed her mind about returning to him right away.

Hardening her resolve, she turned to leave. “Thanks for answering my questions, Tallus.”

He didn’t look like he appreciated the thank you at all, so she left quickly. It was bad enough to get lectured by Daggar, she wasn’t putting up with it from a stranger.

Outside the infirmary, she turned on the corridor that led to the common area and the Earth contingent offices beyond that. She shivered at the thought of seeking the Ambassador out, but no matter how distasteful she found the man, it had to be done. It seemed obvious that someone on Earth had smuggled the bomb to Delroi in the biohazard cases and that person was most likely a human with access to military ordinance. Once on planet, the rest of the task fell to a Delroi. One of the techs or were they merely part of the delivery system? And how far did the conspiracy spread? Did the Ambassador know? Had Dr. Peters known? She thought not, suspected he was dead because he found the device in his blood samples and confronted someone over it. It was nothing but speculation, but it felt right.

Daggar was in her head again, growling mentally. He knew what she believed, knew she meant to confront the Ambassador, and let her feel his disapproval and displeasure. Let her know the punishment for putting herself in harm’s way would be long and unsatisfying. She shivered, knowing he meant to torture her with pleasure, keep her on the edge with no relief. She only hoped he wouldn’t follow through on the promise to leave her wanting. Probably a futile hope. She felt his anger and resolve, his determination to prove once and for all who she belonged to.

She tried to shove him out of her head, not wanting him to see how close he was to achieving his goal. He would be insufferable if he knew he’d already wound tendrils around her heart so strong she could never break his hold. That’s why she had to do this, wasn’t it? Someone had tried to kill him. Her stride quickened as her anger grew. The simmering rage was unreasonable, unexplainable. What was he to her after all?

When she reached the warrior’s commons, Daggar was back in her head, ordering her to stop, and she focused her ire on him as she stepped out of the foot traffic and waited for him to appear. She felt him moving slowly, cautiously through the halls towards her. Why was she waiting? She felt his fury—directed at her—and knew he was going to bitch at her for sticking her nose in the investigation. She couldn’t explain why, but she had to do that. Atonement? She snorted. More like revenge. Her own people had tried to kill him. Maybe he picked up her thoughts because he seemed to get a grip on his emotions.

And then she saw him, walking carefully towards her and ignoring everyone who spoke to him along the way. Her heart pounded, seemed to lodge in her throat when he stopped in front of her. He took her elbow in a firm though not painful grip and pulled her close enough to brush against her chest, bowing his head close to whisper in her ear. His breath was warm, smelled faintly of coffee, and brought every nerve ending in her body to screaming consciousness.

“Just where do you think you’re going, *der’lan*?”

She felt his desire then, both physically and mentally, and knew he was intentionally stoking the flames that raged between them, hoping to deter her from her task. Not fucking likely. She wrenched free, put some space between them, and glared. He swayed a bit, just for half a second, and she had to fight the urge to reach out and steady him.

Damned, obstinate man.

“I’m going to see the Earth Ambassador and you are going back to bed.”

He arched an eyebrow, one corner of his mouth kicking up in a sexy half grin.

“Usually I’m the one giving orders around here. You’ll have to pay for that later.”

She ground her molars together and breathed deeply through her nose. It was the only way to keep from screaming at him. After a moment she smiled with fake saccharine sweetness. “I have limits too, babe, and you ignoring medical orders is really pushing them. That’s the area where *I’m* the expert, not you.”

He edged closer to her. “Exactly. Healing. Not chasing after conspiracies.”

Uh oh. She’d walked into that one, but she wasn’t without a little ammunition. She shrugged. “I’ve done some of that over the course of my career too. Officially, even.”

He frowned and curiosity flashed across his face. “Not this time. I forbid it.”

She couldn’t help herself. She laughed and almost doubled over at the look of shock on his face. How had he spent so much time in her head and not discovered she was no stranger to intrigue? That she was only submissive in the bedroom? She liked to harass Laney and Britt about their inability to follow orders, but truthfully she was no different.

“We’ve already gone over this, baby.” He glared down at her. “You don’t get to put yourself in harm’s way and you don’t get to question me in public.”

She looked around. They were definitely in public, but no one was paying any attention to them.

“And I told you I wasn’t going to submit to your will outside of sex,” she replied softly just in case.

His countenance changed. Became cold and austere and remote. She felt his resolve, his determination to protect her and damn the consequences, down to her marrow. There had to be a way to convince him he couldn’t control her, couldn’t force her. He tensed, waiting for the argument and she was reminded how big he was, how powerful. Well, physically he could compel her and she could see, could sense he was willing to do so.

“Don’t.” She couldn’t keep the sadness, the regret from her voice if she tried. “I’ll only end up resenting you. You think you want utter compliance, but I don’t think you do.” She shrugged. “Maybe I’m reading you wrong. Maybe that’s exactly what you want. I can’t be that woman. And I had the feeling you wanted ... I don’t know. A partner. Not another soldier.”

\*

Daggar took a deep shuddering breath and closed his eyes for a second. Tried to compose himself. He struggled against his need to dominant and protect, and her need for a little independence, but fuck it. She wasn’t talking about spending time with her girlfriends. She was proposing he let her put herself into a dangerous situation. There was no way in hell he’d allow that and she was just going to have to accept that.

Her features set in a mulish expression and he was suddenly weary. His head throbbed from the earlier blast and his body ached. He knew he should be resting, but his first priority was the safety of his *der’lan* and his people. There would be time enough for sleep later. He wondered if he could get her back to bed without causing a big ugly scene. He wasn’t concerned for himself. He certainly wouldn’t be the first Delroi warrior to reign in a recalcitrant mate. The bond between them was growing stronger by the hour so he wasn’t surprised when she blushed and whispered harshly, “You wouldn’t dare.”

He wouldn’t, he knew that was a line she wouldn’t forgive him if he crossed, but he



didn't let her see that. He shrugged, shifting close enough to press her back into the wall. "Your safety comes before everything else, baby."

He wanted nothing more than to take her back to his bed, strip her of all her boundaries, and demonstrate how primitive, how absolute his need to provide for her wellbeing was. She felt it all, her nipples tightened to hard pebbles against his chest, her hips rocked his pelvis. The only thing that stopped him from taking her where she stood was a throat clearing behind him. The interruption infuriated him, but relief was close on its heels. He'd never been so close to losing control and fought to school his expression to one of calm indifference before turning to face the interloper.

But he knew Barak Trace wasn't fooled for a second. Knowledge and something else, something Daggar almost called fear, flashed through the spymaster's eyes before he quickly suppressed the emotion. He nodded to Daggar, but focused on Kendall.

"Lady Torfa. The other Lady Torfa, Laney, is asking for you and Ms. Anderson." He cocked an eyebrow and looked Daggar over. "That's going to get confusing." Then he scowled and turned to Kendall. "Have you seen Ms. Anderson?"

Ah, maybe it was fear he'd seen in the Spymaster's eyes. Trace would despise not feeling in control of his own needs and the man had to realize he was on borrowed time.

Kendall was still flushed, looking drugged from the lust between them, and she answered softly. "No, I haven't. But I was going to the Ambassador's office. Maybe she's there."

Daggar wanted to curse, to take her by the shoulders and give her a good shake. She was still determined to defy him.

"I'll accompany you after you speak to Laney, if that's okay with the Overchief."

Barak met his gaze before inclining his head, and Daggar wasn't sure if he should be amused or chagrined. Kendall's expression turned rueful. She knew they'd both been offered a face saving out. She'd have an escort he trusted, and he'd stay to their quarters where his healers had ordered him. It rankled though, was still an act of defiance he'd punish her for later.

"Stay with Trace," he told her, mentally adding, *or I promise you'll regret it, my heart*. He felt her shiver of anticipation more than saw it and had to grin. She would push him past every limit, but he'd more than return the favor.

## Chapter Eight

They found Laney pacing the length of the common area in the family's quarters, one palm pressed to the small of her back. She was flushed, as if she'd just run a great distance, and Kendall studied her looking for signs of distress, but her breathing was even. Alrik was nowhere to be seen. Kendall sighed. She was sure the big warrior was the only one who could get Laney to go lie down and rest.

"Sit," she snapped, her gaze including Daggar in the order. She felt his amusement, but he complied. Laney ignored her. "Sergeant Major. *Now.*"

Laney paused, faced her and the newcomers in the room, her gaze slowly taking them in, as if she'd been focused on something far away. She grinned. "Of course, Colonel."

She took a place on the couch opposite Daggar, while Barak perched on the arm of one of the big chairs. Kendall joined Daggar as Alrik strode into the room.

"Where's Britt?" Laney asked as her husband sat next to her. He took Laney's hand in his, stroking the back of it with the tip of one finger, and Kendall was struck by his gentleness. There was so much more to these Delroi warriors than she'd first believed. Mentally, Daggar shared a chuckle. *Does that assessment include me, der'lan?*

She shrugged, answering both Laney and Daggar. "I don't know."

"Damn it," Laney muttered under her breath before meeting Kendall's gaze. "There's been a coup on Earth."

Kendall didn't try to hide her shock or anger. 'Damn' was much too mild. Fuck. She stood up and paced. All they'd worked for, all the scheming and fighting, and now what?

"Who?"

Laney half smiled, the expression full of wry frustration. "I don't know. I was hoping Britt could make some calls, find someone who knows something."

"What are the odds that would happen on Earth while someone is trying to kill our Overchief here?" Barak posed the question they all must be thinking.

"Someone is always trying to kill him," Alrik replied. "It could be a coincidence."

His words made her heart hammer in her chest. How had she gotten so deeply involved with a man whose life was always threatened? Would any of those attempts ever succeed? The idea made her throat close painfully. What would she do then?

*Shh, baby. Don't worry. I'm harder to kill than I look.* Did she imagine the teasing note in that mental voice? She glared at him. His eyes were bright, always daring. Nope. It was definitely there.

She nudged his side with her elbow. *This is not amusing. And quit eavesdropping in my head.*

He shrugged. *It's my right as your mate to keep tabs on you. Especially given your penchant for disobeying instructions.*

"Shit." Laney struggled to her feet. "I need Britt here, but I guess the Ambassador will have to do. I don't trust that man," she ended on a snarl and heaved a deep breath. "But my usual communication lines are shut down. He'll have to do. Barak, make sure you get Britt a communicator when you catch up to her."

"Of course, my Lady, but where do you think you're going?"

“Back to bed.” Alrik scowled at her. “Don’t even argue, Laney.” He stood and pulled her close to his side, lowering his head to whisper softly in her ear. Kendall wondered what he said. Laney’s expression softened, the determination morphing to resignation while her eyes brightened and a slight smile twisted her lips.

“Find me when you get back, Kendall.”

“Sure.” A long time after she got back if the gleam in Alrik’s eyes was anything to judge by. Kendall stood, Daggar mimicking the action next to her.

“She isn’t going either. Barak can handle it.”

She tilted her head back to study him, trying to decide whose resolve was firmer. This was one battle she knew she couldn’t afford to lose. If she did, she’d spend the rest of her life giving in to him. Oh it would be little things at first, no doubt. But eventually she’d wake up and discover she had no will left of her own.

“You want us to let your Spymaster go to Earth’s Ambassador to Delroi demanding to know what’s happening back home *and* here?”

Daggar crossed his arms over his chest and glared down at her. Barak wisely stayed out of it, but she read his body language just as easily as she read Daggar’s. It was clear to her that both men wanted her to stay just where she was. Safe and confined in the royal family’s quarters. *Not gonna happen, babe.*

“Kendall needs to go. And you need to let her, Daggar,” Laney said softly.

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Daggar could feel Kendall’s frustration, her worries and he wasn’t sure how he could take it. She believed he was going to take over her life, take away her will. He couldn’t deny he was sexually dominant, couldn’t deny the thrill he got from her submission, and a part of him wished that extended to their rest of their lives. But she wasn’t that kind of submissive. He was backed into a corner and knew it.

He needed her to trust him completely and if he refused to let her go, to let her assist in the investigation, that bit of faith she was developing in him, in them, would disintegrate. He couldn’t have that, couldn’t live with her only being physically tied to him. He wanted all of her.

But fuck, it went against every instinct he had to let her walk out that door without him. He knew he could trust Barak to guard her, but it wasn’t the same as doing it himself, even if he also understood he was not one hundred percent yet. He still felt weak, drained. Too much blood loss. And he acknowledged privately, with a ship full of chagrin, that she was probably safer going out with Barak now. Maybe that’s why he was so pissed. It was bad enough someone had got close enough to kill him, closer than anyone ever had before. But that he wasn’t strong enough to protect his own? That was unacceptable.

“Daggar?” Laney asked.

He nodded, saw the relief flash through his *der’lan’s* eyes before she stepped forward to stroke her finger down the side of his face. “Thank you,” she whispered. *I know this is difficult for you.*

*You have no idea how difficult.*

“Let me know what you find out. Oh, and who’s going to track down Hakon?” Laney asked. Kendall had forgotten about the Delroi lab tech suspected of planting the bomb in Daggar’s council room.

“I’ll take care of it now,” Barak said. “I’ll meet you back here in a couple of hours,”

he said, nodding at Kendall.

“Right. See you then.” She turned to Laney. “Go rest. Doctor’s orders.”

She didn’t protest when Alrik took her hand and led her down the hall. Daggar repressed a grin he sensed Kendall wouldn’t appreciate when he heard her exasperated sigh.

“That’s not restful,” she muttered, but he was the only one left to hear her. He didn’t reply. He had plans of his own that didn’t include taking it easy.

He put his hand in his pocket and pulled out the small black pouch he’d picked up earlier. It had been easy to find and purchase the thin gold chain and he couldn’t wait any longer to see it in place. He lifted her hand and placed the bag on her palm.

“What’s this?” she asked, a smile playing across her lips that affected him like a punch in the gut. Gods, the woman was stunning.

“A gift. Open it and see.”

She drew the drawstring and dumped the contents onto her hand. Frowning, at the glittering pile of links, she stretched it between two fingers. She fingered the tiny hooks on the end that would close over her nipple rings and a blush spread up her neck to her face.

He made quick work of the buttons on her shirt, then unsnapped her bra. Taking the chain from her fingers, he hooked first one side then the other as her breathing quickened into harsh gasps. His fingers grazed her nipples and her head fell back, eyes closed.

“Daggar,” she pleaded.

“Perfect,” he whispered, shoving his fingers into her hair and lifting her face to meet his gaze. “It will drive me crazy watching you walk around the Palace, knowing the signs of my possession are hidden beneath your clothes.”

He lowered his lips to hers, didn’t bother for subtlety. He claimed the way he wanted to, forcefully, almost brutally, sucking and biting at her lips, her tongue. She pressed her body close to his, ground her hips against his, and he entered her mind. Felt her utter trust in him to take her someplace sexually she’d never been before, felt her eagerness. He had every intention of taking her there. Today. Now. He let her go and spun her around, facing the hall to their rooms.

“Go. Strip and lay face down on the bed.”

She cocked an eyebrow, but didn’t argue with the order. At least in this he had her obedience. She walked away and he strove to control his rapid breathing, to slow the accelerated beating of his heart and give her time to comply before he barged in and took what he wanted.

He didn’t last long and entered mere minutes after her. Thankfully she was quick and lay just as he’d instructed, her round ass presented to him. He’d been in her mind enough to know she’d never been taken anally, but the idea intrigued her. He nearly groaned, desperate to take her that way, but knowing she wasn’t ready yet. He’d begin that preparation now. Walking to his cabinet, he opened the door with shaking hands. He didn’t need to study the contents to find what he wanted, lifting out the small plug and tube of lubrication.

She didn’t budge an inch when he came to the bed and sat down next to her, but he felt the heat from her body, the breath rushing from her lungs. Her mind was excited, wondering what would happen next. He set his items next to his knee and reached out to touch her, stroking the round curve of her ass. She rolled up into his caress, and without

even thinking about it, he slapped her rump.

“Be still,” he growled, but the effect of the order and tone was lost on her. She groaned, lost in her own mind, in her own enjoyment.

He climbed onto the bed, sitting with one knee outside of each of her thighs. His own excitement grew to match hers as he touched her ass cheeks, spread them to rub his thumb against the forbidden opening there. She caught her breath and he entered her mind, needing to know what she felt about the coming invasion. He found her mentally, softly, chanting yes.

*Not yet, baby. You aren't ready for me yet.*

He sensed more than heard her groan of protest, but didn't let it deter him. Reaching for the lube, he removed the cap and squirted some onto his thumb then returned to rubbing it around her small hole. She pushed back against him and smiling, he let the digit slide inside to one knuckle, squirting more of the liquid on a second finger to join it. She gasped, squirmed, when he added it just to the knuckle of her opening. He slid them farther in. Two fingers up to two knuckles and she cried out in a mixture of desire and pain. He withdrew and thrust back in several times until it was both fingers all the way in her tight hole. Gods, the feel of that around his cock. But her next cry was more pain than pleasure and he felt the doubt in her mind. He withdrew his fingers and picked up the plug. It was small. Only four inches long and with a circumference much smaller than his cock. He lubed it well and pressed the tip to his goal, slowly pushed. When he got to the point of the toy that was wider than his fingers, she gasped and made to pull away. He pressed his palm to the small of her back, whispered soothing words.

“Hush, baby. Relax and let the plug go in. You'll like it, I promise.”

His tone did the trick and she stilled, waiting for him to go on. He pushed it in swiftly, wanting her pain to stop so the pleasure could take over. The bulbous base slid into place, holding the toy inside her. She gasped and didn't protest when he rolled her over, nestling his hips between her thighs and leaning down to take one nipple into his mouth for a quick bite. When he lifted his head, he smiled down at her.

“Better?”

She jerked a nod and he kept his thoughts, his plans to himself. She wouldn't think so when she realized he was going to leave her wanting. Let the desperation build until she could deny him nothing. He wanted her so desperate, so needy, she'd never consider any life that didn't include him. And maybe it was a kind of punishment too, though he wasn't sure who he was punishing. Her, for being true to herself? Or him, for having such a hard time accepting her independence? It didn't matter. For a time, they'd both suffer, but the later pay off would be worth it.

He kissed her slowly, softly. Teasing. Wanting to build up the anticipation and hold off her release until she thought she would expire from it. He wasn't sure why that was so important. It just was. Before he could kick things up to the next level, he heard the chimes indicating someone had come into the quarters.

Lifting his head, he smiled at Kendall ruefully. He'd love to finish this, but that was either Britt or Barak entering and he needed their information. Kendall's eyes shone with understanding and she gingerly pushed herself up to her elbows.

“Um.” A blush spread up her neck. “You should take out the plug.”

He rose, stood beside the bed and extended a hand to help her up. “No. Keep it in.” He made his voice stern, commanding. “You disobeyed me with the balls. Don't do it

again.”

He bent and picked up the clothes she'd discarded from the floor, tossed them to rest beside her on the bed. “Get dressed.”

Her eyes flashed, but she didn't argue, dressed quickly, and followed him out of the room. Barak paced in the living area, but Daggar was focused on Kendall. Watched as she walked cautiously, adjusting to the plug in her ass to get a cup of coffee. Trace cleared his throat and Daggar turned to face him.

“What news?”

“Hakon has disappeared, my Lord. I have people searching for him. And nothing from Britt Anderson. It's as if the woman dropped off the face of the planet,” he added the last in a mutter, scowling.

Thank the Gods, Daggar didn't have the same problem keeping up with his woman, but he was careful to keep the thought to himself as Kendall approached. She looked thoughtful, but angry. And adorable. She couldn't fight the desire he'd raised between them, the arousal kept on a high edge by the toy he'd left in her ass and the chain between her breasts. Some of his thoughts must have bled through the block he'd put up because she turned to glare at him.

Before he could try to sooth her ire, Alrik joined them. He nodded in greeting, but spoke to Daggar. “The other Overchiefs want to see you.”

Fuck. They no doubt wanted to know if there was a war imminent within the warrior caste and if he was well enough, strong enough to lead them. He might have an ally there or might not. His aunt Cilia had bonded outside the caste, chosen to become a healer and risen in their ranks to lead. As a girl she'd learned politics well growing up among warriors.

“Maybe Britt is with the Earth contingent,” Kendall said to Barak. “The Ambassador will know.”

“You'll stay here until I return.” He regretted the order as soon as it was spoken. She'd take it as a challenge and he'd already accepted he had to give her some room, some independence. Right? He sighed. “Stay with Trace at all times, my *der'lan*. Do not endanger yourself.”

She smiled very slightly before turning to follow Barak out. “Of course not,” she whispered and he knew his words were wasted breath. She'd do what she thought she had to, no matter how he objected. He almost admired that, would have if it were another man's woman. Knew he had to accept that his woman wasn't biddable, wasn't submissive outside the bedroom, and quick, or he'd lose something he treasured above everything else. Her trust.

She walked out the door and every cell in his body seemed to protest. The hell with it. The other Overchiefs would just have to wait. It didn't have anything to do with trusting her or Barak to guard her. He just had to be near. He knew it was partly the bond in the final stages of solidifying, of making itself unbreakable. Partly because he just wanted to be close to her. Close enough to stroke her hair, to inhale her scent.

He caught up with them, dismissed Barak, and took her hand in his. Something in him, some deep primitive side, seemed to exhale deeply in relief.

## Chapter Nine

Kendall really should have refused to keep wearing the butt plug, but she'd been intrigued, turned on by the idea. As she moved through the corridors it moved with her, lodging itself deeper inside her with each step, and she nearly groaned at the sensation of being so filled up. Daggar had insisted on leaving it there so her mind would fill with images of his cock buried in her ass. Moving, thrusting. Testing her limits in what she saw as the ultimate show of submission. And he'd been in her mind. He knew exactly how she interpreted the act.

The chain beneath her clothes just added to her already over sensitized body. It rubbed against her skin, tugged at her nipples until they were painful hard points. She wasn't sure if she wanted to kill him or reward him for putting her through this unique torture.

Walking silently next to her, Daggar seemed to tense the barest fraction. If they hadn't been leaving the Warrior area and entering the part of the Palace open to everyone, she would have been sure it was her imagination. People watched them as they passed, the warriors openly staring at her. Self-consciously, she brushed a loose strand of hair from her face, wondered if her state of mind, if the heat Daggar fanned between them showed to all these strangers. What a mortifying thought.

*It's nothing, Kendall. They've simply heard the Earthling doctor is my der'lan.*

His voice in her head stoked the fire raging inside her rather than soothed it. She fought panic. She couldn't let anyone see her so out of control, couldn't function in a social setting like this.

*Easy, baby. Breathe. You're fine.*

She almost laughed past the bitterness clogging her throat. Really? Would she ever be fine again?

*Kendall!* His voice was sharp in her mind. *Do I need to take you back?*

Return her to her room like some intractable child? Not damned likely. She fought against the need, the lust she felt. Daggar stayed in her mind, but she felt the desire recede as if locked behind a wall and realized she'd been feeling his need as well as her own. Damn him. Had he swamped her in sensation like that on purpose? To prove what point?

*I didn't realize, baby. I'm under control now.*

Shit. This was so not going to work. How could she stay here, live with him, if she was going to be subject to crazy hormonal meltdowns that weren't even all hers? She sensed him withdrawing somewhat, retreating to his own thoughts, heard the mental sigh that was meant only for her.

*We'll discuss that later.*

Again with the orders. She almost growled, gathered her thoughts, but when she tried to respond to his imperious demand he was gone from her mind. Fine. *She'd* deal with *him* later.

While she'd been distracted they'd made the last turn that led to the Earth contingent's offices. Daggar hung back as she entered the reception room. All thoughts of her irritation fled from her mind.

The place was bustling with activity. The low hum of conversation paused a moment as people noticed their entrance, but quickly resumed as if never disturbed. She walked the few feet to the aide's desk, peering curiously at the mayhem on the piece of furniture. It was covered in papers and files. A box contained a quickly growing stack of errata as she watched. Two closed boxes behind him were presumably waiting to be filled or already had been.

Before she could ask him what was going on, the Ambassador stepped out of his office. He'd removed his jacket and tie, had his shirtsleeves rolled up, and carried several file folders. He smiled, that unctuous politician's smile that turned her stomach, and dropped the files into the open box. She got a glimpse before they disappeared. Name. Comma. Initial. What the hell was going on? Why were they packing up personnel files?

She looked around, tried to keep her voice casual. "Why all the hustle and bustle?"

For a moment she thought he would refuse to answer her. "Non-essential staff has been ordered to return to Earth."

That got Daggar's attention. He straightened from where he'd been leaning against a wall and approached with quick stealth. "By whom?"

The Ambassador narrowed his eyes and Kendall was surprised that he answered. "The Prime Minister."

Did that mean Prime Minister Arnold was still in charge? Did the Ambassador know there had been a change of power on Earth? Or not?

"Why weren't we informed?" Daggar asked.

The Ambassador's eyes shifted so slightly, she almost missed it. "The Sergeant Major has been notified."

*He's lying. Why would he lie about that?*

*I don't know. He checked his timepiece. And I'm afraid we'll have to find out later. I'm late to a meeting.*

She nodded her head once in understanding and turned to follow him out, completely forgetting her purpose in visiting the only other group of people from Earth on Delroi. She didn't feel any sense of allegiance or comradeship with them. Not surprising since they were diplomats and politicians, and she was a military doctor. She did pause before she exited though, turned back to face the room.

"Has Britt Anderson been by here today?"

The Ambassador blinked and her sixth sense kicked in again. He would lie. "No, Colonel. I haven't seen her."

She held his gaze for several seconds but didn't call him out on the deceit or ask why he'd used her former rank. She followed Daggar into the corridor, surprised when they turned right instead of left to go back the way they had come. He smiled.

"Most people think I'm the most powerful person on Delroi. They are mistaken."

"I thought you were the Overchief?"

He nodded. "Of the Warrior caste. The Healers and Artists have their own Overchiefs."

She cocked an eyebrow. There was no way she'd believe one of them was more powerful than he was, but it made her curious about the hierarchy on Delroi. It wasn't like anything she was used to on Earth. He gave her a teasing smile.

"Finally ready to indulge that inquisitive nature?"

"Maybe. How are the castes organized?" She'd seen many men around him, but



never with any kind of visible rank.

“Clans. There are hundreds of clans around the planet. Some small and weak. Some large and powerful. Generally the smaller groups are sworn to the larger ones and every region has a single clan that rules them all. They all answer to me.”

“And are all these Clan leaders sworn to your service?”

“Yes. Anytime a new leader takes control he swears allegiance to me personally for his entire clan.”

She nodded. It was a pretty basic chain of command. “The other Castes operate the same way?”

“They do.”

She huffed her exasperation when he didn't continue. She didn't get how another Overchief could be more powerful than the man every single Warrior clan on the planet was sworn to.

“How do you expect the others to challenge you?” she asked.

“You met my aunt Cilia in the infirmary. She is the Healer Overchief. She controls all the Healers, all the infirmaries and clinics on the planet. She could make life miserable for everyone else if she wanted to.”

“She's a doctor. I'm sure she wouldn't use the services of her people to blackmail everyone else.”

Daggar shrugged. “She's a Healer. She'll do whatever she feels is necessary for the well-being of all Delroi.”

What was he leading up to? “Why would she make such a desperate move?”

The corridor finally ended on another of those large common areas. Daggar pulled her to one side and leaned close to her, whispering in her ear. “If she feels a war is likely in my caste, between my people and the rebels, she might try to interfere. But the rebels won't care. A lack of qualified healers won't deter them from whatever path they decide on. Add the problems on Earth to that ... I just don't know how she'll react.”

Kendall leaned back, looked up to meet his eyes. They were filled with so many emotions. Worry. Anger. Determination. He stroked his palms up her arms and his eyes changed. Tenderness now. And lust. She caught her breath, nodded.

“I'll keep what I know to myself.”

“Good.” His lips brushed hers. “We'll figure this all out before the others even need to be notified.”

She pressed her mouth to his, flicked her tongue over his teeth before withdrawing. “We?”

He heaved a put upon sigh. “You aren't going to leave it alone, are you? At least if I keep you close I'll know what you're up to.”

She bit her lip to keep from laughing. Talk about chauvinistic. But he was trying, right? It was something of a compromise, right? And she definitely wouldn't be complaining about spending more time with him. He reached for the door handle, but paused. “Are you ready to meet the other Overchiefs?”

Was she ready? The question seemed to be about so much more than simply meeting two new strangers. But nothing about them was simple any more than there was anything simple about him. If she stayed here, and she could no longer bear the thought of leaving, her life would be complicated. The politics murky. The social mores unfamiliar. Even what was between she and Daggar would never be easy or uncomplicated.

He stroked her cheek with his knuckles. *What is between us, der'lan, will always be straightforward.*

Again, she almost laughed. Maybe he was right. Maybe she was making things more complicated than they needed to be.

“Of course, I’m right,” he smirked.

She rolled her eyes and reached around him for the handle. “Let’s go before your ego gets too big for the doorway.”

He laughed and let her enter first, slapping her ass as she edged past him. “You’ll pay for that later.”

She shivered. She looked forward to it.

## Chapter Ten

Daggar followed Kendall into Cilia's garden, watching her ass sway enticingly as she tilted her head to look up at the wide clear dome overhead.

"Amazing," she muttered and he groaned. He saw construction in the garden on the horizon. She looked over her shoulder and grinned at him. "We can do this in our garden?"

He hadn't realized how besotted he was till that moment. "We can. There's something you might like better, though."

And his engineers might go on strike when he asked them for it. Taking her hand, he led her down the path where he knew Cilia and Einarr would be waiting for him. It was a short walk and the jungle path opened into a small clearing. One end was flanked by a huge waterfall, the opposite by more of the garden's foliage. But straight ahead, was a wide expanse of glass that had been opened, the panels slid into secret compartments in the walls, to expose a huge colonnade. It was covered to shade its visitors from Delroi's brutal sun and was outfitted with table and chairs.

She whistled, pulled her hand free of his, and approached the railing. Gripping it, she leaned over, seemingly mesmerized by the view, and he realized she hadn't yet seen the similar deck off their room. Ignoring Cilia and Einarr, he joined her and looked out over the sprawling expanse of his desert city, looked beyond that to the empty sands that seemed to stretch forever.

"It has its own kind of beauty, doesn't it?" she asked softly.

"It does." He held his hand out to her. "Come. Let's not be rude."

She set her palm on his, reluctantly turning away from the view and he led her to the table. Cilia and Einarr both stood waiting, both smiled at her indulgently.

"It's a bit of a shock, eh?" Einarr asked with a wink. Daggar's hand closed convulsively around Kendall's. Einarr's womanizing ways were well known.

"It is," she answered with a grin. Surely, she wasn't charmed by this rogue? Her elbow poked him sharply in the side. No. Of course she wasn't. Daggar turned first to his aunt, bowed deeply at the waist before leaning forward so she could kiss his cheek.

"Cilia. I believe you've already met Kendall. My *der'lan*."

Cilia smiled and stretched her hand out. "I have. How are you dear?"

"Fine." She smiled. "Maybe a bit overwhelmed."

"Our men can be a bit much." She studied Kendall with a practiced air. "But, I'm sure you'll adjust quickly."

"And Einarr." Daggar indicated the other man. "The Artist Overchief."

He bowed deeply. "My Lady. The Torfa house is always blessed with the most beautiful and charming women."

Daggar glared while Kendall laughed. *Don't worry, babe. He's as charming as a snake.*

Cilia quickly took charge. "While we're happy you saw fit to finally formally introduce us to your *der'lan*, nephew," he barely restrained a wince, "this is a meeting of the Overchiefs."

He shrugged. "I am only adhering to the wishes of my healer, Cilia. She takes her

profession seriously. Did you really think she, not to mention Alrik, would let me loose on my own yet? They're both mother hens."

*Excuse me?*

*Shh. You may be a mother hen, but she's a dragon when riled.*

Cilia narrowed her eyes at him and he was careful to keep his expression neutral. Beside him Kendall's anger simmered but she kept her thoughts to herself.

"And yet you refused the tank."

He shrugged. "There is prudence and then there is folly."

She knew it was an excuse but couldn't determine why and finally nodded. "Fine. This time." She indicated the chairs. "Have a seat."

He pulled one out for Kendall and frowned when she hesitated, a panicked look on her face. Then he remembered, couldn't believe he'd forgotten, the plug he'd insisted stay in her ass. She would probably find sitting down interesting, especially when she realized the small box that controlled it was still in his pocket. He grinned and cocked an eyebrow, knew his expression was a silent *what are you waiting for?*

Scowling at him, she sat down and he pulled out the chair next to her. He'd let her relax a moment, let her adjust to that deeply penetrated feeling in her ass before he made his next move.

"So why did you call this meeting?" he asked his aunt.

Her expression smoothed into an indifferent mask and he knew this wasn't going to be some easy family meeting.

"You don't have control of your caste."

His suspicions had been correct and he felt Kendall's outrage at the verbal attack. He squeezed her hand, a private signal for silence. He had his own cards to play. His own accusations to counter with.

"I suggest you let me worry about my caste. You have your own issues."

Cilia's eyes narrowed. "My people are fine."

"Really?" He arched both eyebrows. "Then how is it one of your techs was able to plant a bomb in *my* Council chambers?" A not-so-subtle jab at Cilia's lack of control of Hakon, one of her own. As Hakon's Overchief, she was responsible for his actions.

"Don't blame me for your security issues, Daggar."

"Oh, I don't think it's come to that," Kendall said sweetly. "And of course, you won't object to our new security measures."

*Care to fill me in?* He should chastise her. She shouldn't even be in this meeting. But she was his mate, and she'd been weaned on a whole different political animal. Maybe she had some helpful ideas. He shared the thought with her and felt her shock. Realized he was really starting to see her as an equal, as a partner.

"What measures?" Cilia asked suspiciously.

"Oh, you know. The usual." Kendall waved her hand in the air, a completely innocent look on her face. "Check points. Searches. Totally new background checks."

"You can't do that."

Kendall leaned forward, serious now. Face and eyes hard, determined. "On *everyone*. We will not allow our people to be attacked."

"You're a healer. Technically, I could lay claim to your allegiance." Cilia had decided to fight back, but she didn't realize who she was dealing with. Hell, Daggar hadn't realized.

Kendall sat back in her seat. Her smile was grim and focused and almost cruel. “I was a soldier first. First, last, and always. You should remember that.” She waited a moment, let her words sink in before standing. “Any loyalty I might feel here is to Daggar and Laney, not you.”

She looked down at Daggar. “I’m returning to the Warrior Compound. Where I belong.”

He nodded. “I’ll join you shortly.” *You know the way back?*

*I’ll find my way.*

Unlike when she’d spoken, her mental voice vibrated with anger, with outrage. And something else? Uncertainty maybe? He smiled. Yes, that was it. She was afraid she’d overstepped her bounds, but didn’t yet realize he didn’t care. She’d picked a side, aligned herself to him and his people. His cause.

*I’ll join you shortly.* She wouldn’t get far before he caught up with her. He watched her leave the clearing, mentally following along until she stepped out into the corridor before turning to confront his aunt.

“You surprise me,” she stated. “I would have expected you to have more control over your mate.”

He shrugged, masked his irritation over the unspoken criticism of Kendall. “We are in agreement on this matter. The rebellion seems to be spreading into other Castes.” He leaned forward, met Cilia’s gaze then Einarr’s. “Make no mistake here. I will not tolerate any interference in my rule of my Caste. You deal with your own problems or you’ll force me to step in.”

Cilia’s eyes narrowed. “I won’t allow that. And we won’t tolerate a war within the Warrior Caste.”

He shook his head. “It won’t come to open battle now anymore than it has in the last hundred years.”

Her disbelief was clear on her face and he stood. There was no point arguing with her. She also stood.

“There is precedent. The Triumvirate can call for an Overchief’s removal.”

He narrowed his eyes. The three of them were the Triumvirate, but what she was suggesting hadn’t been done in centuries. “I wouldn’t try it if I were you. You’d not only have a war inside the Caste, but against yours.”

“You wouldn’t dare.”

“Try me, Aunt Cilia. It’s been a long time since Delroi had a king. Maybe it’s time to return to the old ways.”

He would never make that kind of power play, but she didn’t know that. He saw the doubt in her eyes.

“Damn it, Daggar.”

“Just leave my Caste to me.” He leaned forward and kissed her cheek. “You worry too much, Cilia.”

He didn’t wait for a response. With a nod at Einarr, he spun on his heel and left the garden, hurrying to catch up with Kendall. As much as he could hurry. Each step echoed the pounding in his head and he could feel fatigue pulling at his limbs. Gods, he hated being injured. The only consolation was knowing he’d be one hundred percent soon and in the meantime, Kendall would fuss over him. Twenty-four hours ago, he would have hated the idea, but now... Well, the idea grew in appeal with each passing hour.

*Where are you?*

*Right here.*

He rounded a corner to find her leaning one shoulder against the wall, waiting for him. She fell into step beside him when he reached her. The walk back to their quarters was long and they made it in silence. He didn't have to direct her when they got there. She went straight to their rooms. He didn't bother to hide the hunger he knew showed in his eyes as she stripped slowly, a faint teasing smile playing across her lips. When she was down to her bra and underwear, he whispered, "Come here."

Hands gripping her hips, he pulled her close enough to wrap one arm around her lower back. With his free hand, he activated the small box hidden in his pocket. The anal plug buzzed to life and she gasped, jerked in his arms. He held her still and nibbled the pounding pulse point on her neck. When he bit down and sucked the soft skin between his teeth, she groaned and sagged against him.

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Kendall was grateful when he picked her up and carried her to bed. There was no way she could have got there on her own. Her heart was pounding and she was lightheaded from anticipation. She was going to do this, was desperate for him to fuck her ass. She knew part of the excitement she felt was his, but it didn't matter. Some time over the past few hours their needs and desires had merged into one, into the same things. She needed to be confident and in charge outside these walls, but inside them she knew she could trust him with everything, knew she could give over all control and he'd take care of her. When had she realized that? Maybe when he hadn't taken advantage of her vulnerability when the other Overchiefs had been present.

*Never, baby. I'd never do that.*

Damn, it was strange to have someone in her head all the time, reading her thoughts and fears and desires. She was growing accustomed to it though, knew she'd miss him if he suddenly wasn't there anymore.

*I'm not going anywhere.*

There was the lightest sting of reprimand in the tone and she understood why, felt his frustration that she hadn't fully accepted that yet. She smiled, propped herself up on her elbows and sighed as he removed his clothing. She was getting there, to that recognition. It didn't hurt that a sexy as hell alien spent so much time trying to convince her.

He lay down next to her and tugged the chain connecting her nipple rings. The pull bit and she bowed her back, wanting more. Leaning over, he took one hard nipple into his mouth and sucked it between his teeth.

*So it's a game, my der'lan? Just looking for more attention?* His tone teased along with his fingers, which had found her other nipple, pinching, tugging. His teeth bit her nipple hard and she cried out as the pleasure/pain shot straight through her core. He slid a hand slowly down her torso and she held her breath, hoped he would touch her clit hard enough to give her relief, to make her come. The vibrating in her ass stopped as his finger brushed the hard nub. He let her nipples go, sitting back on his heels.

"You want to come, baby?"

"Yes. Please, Daggar," she begged.

He pinched her clitoris at the same time as he kissed her. The kiss seemed in direct opposition to the touch, soft and gentle instead of hard and stinging. As soon as his tongue thrust into her mouth, she exploded, all thought fleeing as her body was taken

over by sensation. It went on and on, a fine tremor that she couldn't seem to control. Didn't want to.

When her body was finally her own again, she found herself straddling him. The toy was gone and his hard cock pressed against her ass hole. He held her gaze as he reached between them, coated himself in lubricant before pushing two fingers into her rear entrance. Once. Twice. The feeling was intoxicating. After being stretched by the plug for so long, she felt empty. Wanted to be filled.

He removed his fingers, wrapped one hand around his cock to guide the head inside her. She held her breath, wondering why he was teasing her like this, why he hadn't moved her to her knees.

*I want to see your face. Your eyes. And this will be better for you the first time. I won't be as deep.*

He inched farther inside, pushing against the tight ring of muscle. She cried out when he shoved past it, past where the plug had been. It was more pain than pleasure now, but she held herself still, forced herself to breathe. She knew the pleasure would come back once her body adjusted to the invasion.

"Good girl," he murmured and reached for her clit.

His touch was a light graze at first, then a firmer stroke. He rebuilt her earlier level of arousal until she felt herself soften around his cock, until the pain once again diminished to that level she enjoyed. Then he was pinching her clit, tugging it as he moved. His cock thrust in and out, slowly at first, the rhythm nice and easy, but building, stoking the fires between them. Her skin seemed to tingle as the sensation built.

His strokes grew firmer, harder. Rougher. And when he thrust the fingers of his other hand into her pussy, mimicking the actions of his cock, she lost it. Her body was overcome with pleasure, her mind shattered. She passed out but came to moments later to find him leaning over her, murmuring nonsense about being okay.

Damn right. She'd never been more okay. More protected. More cherished. She stretched her arms over her head and smiled, let herself drift off to sleep to sound of his amused chuckles.

## Chapter Eleven

He held her, kept watch over her, a long time before he felt capable of movement. He'd known taking her ass would be the most incredible fucking of his life, but he hesitated to describe it that way. It felt more like a communion, more like the coming together of two souls he knew it to be. And she'd felt it too, had been so overcome by the pleasure they brought out in each she'd lost consciousness for a moment. He'd heard tales of that possibility, Alrik had even quietly, gloatingly confirmed it one night, but Daggar hadn't been quite sure he believed them.

He stretched his arm above his head and by feel found the pressure plate that would open the wall next to the bed. With a low groan, the ancient pulley system hidden behind the stone went to work, pulling away a large section of wall and revealing the large covered terrace, the city and desert visible on the horizon.

Sighing, he left the comfort of his bed and mate, and made his way to the bathroom, hurrying through a shower before returning to her with a small water-filled basin and washcloth. She moaned as he cleaned her, but didn't open her eyes. The temptation to linger over her soft folds, to stroke her into wakefulness was so strong he finished quickly and withdrew to the deck. She needed to rest. They all did.

He propped his forearms on the railing and leaned forward to study his city. The Palace was built on the side of a mountain and from here he could see the whole expanse. The sky was bright, lit by both moons, and it was early enough that he could see figures still out on the streets far below. Most of the city was constructed from stone and concrete, made with thick walls to keep out the desert heat. Roof patios, brightened by solar lights, showed signs of life and the breeze brought him a hint of laughter from close by.

"It's beautiful."

He smiled, turning to watch Kendall approach and join him. She'd wrapped the bed sheet around her body and her hair and shoulders glowed under the moonlight.

"You're beautiful," he answered.

Her smile was hesitant and he wondered what was wrong with the men of Earth that she found an honest compliment so unexpected.

"Thank you."

Shifting, she faced the city and he mirrored her move wondering what she saw when she looked. If it sparked something in her soul like it did his. If one day she would look out and think home not alien planet.

"What was your home on Earth like?"

She shrugged. "I've been in the Army over fifteen years. Home moves a lot." She nodded her chin at the city. "But I grew up in a place a lot like this." She grinned.

"Except we only had one moon. And no palaces"

"Ah, well. Can't have everything," he joked.

The smile slid from her face. "No. I suppose not."

She fell silent for a moment and he wondered how to bring back the lighthearted mood of moments before.

"Tell me how things work here. Cilia seems to think she has some kind of claim over



me.”

Not exactly what he had in mind, but hell, it was communicating.

“You know we have three castes.”

She murmured agreement.

“All Delroi males enter Warrior training at thirteen, no matter their caste, for two years. At the end of those two years, they return to their clans for additional training.”

“So if we have a son, he’ll be gone for two years and then come home?” she asked matter-of-factly, keeping any hint of emotion from her voice, but his heart swelled at the acceptance he sensed behind it.

“No. He will stay in the Warrior training center until he’s eighteen.”

Facing him, she glared and he held up a placating hand. “It’s not as bad as you think it is. Laney’s seen it. Ask her. The boys are cared for. They’re allowed to visit their families on weekends, for emergencies, that sort of thing.”

She scowled. “But you’re still taking thirteen year old boys and making them soldiers.”

He stroked a finger down the inside of her arm, was rewarded by a shiver she couldn’t repress even as she kept her gaze hard. “We’re making them Warriors. Yes.”

“And when they’re eighteen?”

“They have, as with everyone of every caste, the right to ask for additional training in another caste. They can pursue that training until they are twenty-five when they must choose to return to their own clans or petition to switch castes.”

She arched an eyebrow. “So you aren’t stuck where you’re born?”

“No.”

She smiled. “So perhaps my son will choose to be a healer.”

He shook his head. “No. *Our* son will be Overchief.”

“Ahh. So Torfa’s are the exception to the rule?”

“And the sons of the other ruling families. Clan leaders’ sons rarely switch either.”

“And girls?”

“Ah, well, that’s where things get a bit complicated.”

She laughed. “That wasn’t complicated?”

Grinning, he shook his head. “Not yet. Girls are educated in the castes they are born into.”

“Except if they’re Warriors.”

“Yes.” He frowned. “Laney is changing that. She’s been teaching some girls. Even some mates.”

“Good for her.” She smiled. “Maybe I can help her.”

He sputtered and before he could respond, she patted his arm condescendingly. “Poor Daggar. I’m a doctor, but I’m *also* a soldier. Why do I keep having to repeat myself? I have self-defense and weapons training, you know.”

Fuck. He was so screwed. She laughed and he realized he’d inadvertently shared the thought. *Compromise*, she whispered in his mind.

“Compromise,” he responded, resigned and partly thrilled. They were finding a way to come together and he couldn’t deny the appeal that the idea their daughters, if they were graced with them, would be able to fend for themselves. And it would be highly amusing to watch Warrior trained daughters deal with future sons-in-law. Yes, that would be high entertainment indeed.

Kendall laughed. "That's just wrong. And evil. I like it."

He grinned and shrugged. "Surely you wouldn't deny an old man a little amusement?"

Shaking her head, she bit her lip a moment before going on. "Back to the subject. What happens to the girls?"

He sobered. "If they are Artist or Healer, they are trained by their clans. At eighteen, all three castes are allowed to pursue other training."

She nodded understanding. "Like the boys."

"Yes. And at twenty-five, they have the same decision to make. They can change castes. But, for both sexes, once you switch castes it's permanent. For that reason, Warrior females rarely ask for that change. They might train where appropriate and ask to serve with a Warrior clan, usually their home clan, but they don't make the formal request."

She was quiet a moment, digesting this new information.

"There is an exception, of course."

She grinned. "There always is."

"A female can make the formal change, and later leave that caste, if she formally mates with someone in a different caste."

"Ahh, so we aren't formally mated?"

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She almost snorted. Of course there was a catch. Why would he formally take a woman who wasn't even one of them? What did that make her? A mistress? A concubine? He turned to her, set his hands on her shoulders, and gave her a little shake.

"There is only one bond and it's forever." He sighed. He didn't want to explain this to her now. "Laney is formally bonded and you will be too. I just didn't want to spring this on you yet."

That sounded ominous. What the hell did this formal thing entail? He read her thoughts again.

"If it were anyone else, nothing more than meeting with the priests and claiming each other. But I'm an Overchief and it's a bit more ... complicated."

Definitely didn't sound good. Her heart constricted and her skin grew cold in the warm desert night. He watched her a moment before responding. His blue eyes were almost black with intensity and she found impossible to look away.

"We still must meet with the priests."

She began to worry when he didn't go on. Could they deny the bonding? He shook his head.

"No they can't. But to formally recognize an Overchief's bond, they must witness the couple."

She frowned. If the priests met them, wouldn't that be witnessing? Then she caught his meaning, gasped as she stepped away and paced the length of the balcony.

"I am not having sex in a roomful of strangers," she said between gritted teeth.

"There won't be anyone else in the room. They'll watch remotely by vid-screen."

"This is just for Overchiefs? Why?"

He sighed. "Tradition. Why else?"

"Not good enough, Daggar."

"Finding your *der'lan* is a life altering event, but it isn't guaranteed. We consider

mated males stronger for it, whether it actually makes them stronger or not. And in the case of Overchiefs there are also heirs to consider.”

There was something important there. What was she missing? “I don’t understand what children have to do with my letting three strangers watch you fuck me.”

“Chemistry again. We rarely have children outside of matings.”

So she couldn’t have children with anyone else?

“Exactly.” He read her mind again. “But medical interference can make a difference. The witnessing is because of that. There were some past instances of Overchiefs falsely claiming they were mated to further secure their leaderships. Then…” he shrugged, letting the sentence trail off, but she thought she got it.

“Then they met who was supposed to be their *der’lan*?”

“Or the woman in question met her true *der’lan*. That causes nothing but turmoil.”

“I still don’t get it.”

He caught her wrist as she walked near and pulled her flush up against him. Her whole body sparked into lusty wakefulness.

“Someone who is truly mated would never allow another male to witness his woman like that. Naked. Passionate. Vulnerable.”

“I don’t think I can,” she murmured, rubbing her nose against the warmth of his chest. “If we’re bonded anyway, why should we go through with it?”

But he’d already given her the answer to that question. A formal mating would make him appear stronger, and she was well aware of how important perception, real or false, was in politics.

He whispered in her ear, “You won’t even be aware of them. I’ll make sure of that, my heart.”

She fisted her hands so hard her fingernails sharply pinched her palms. She didn’t want to crave him right now, didn’t want to give into the need for him. She wanted to be angry, wanted to bitch and rant. But she couldn’t deal with the information yet and she found herself leaning forward, resting her forehead against his chest for half a second before flicking his exposed nipple with her tongue. His taste exploded in her mouth, tangy and salty and masculine.

Groaning, she tried to move closer, let the sheet slip from her grasp to fall around her feet. His hands were instantly on her hips, holding her still while she explored his chest with her lips and tongue. Tasting. Teasing. She moved lower, dropped to her knees when he released his grip on her hips, to kiss a trail from his navel to one hipbone then across his pelvis to the other. He moaned when she moved lower, when her tongue darted out to catch the drop of pre-cum on the tip of his cock.

She wanted to take him into her mouth, suck him until he was wild and out of control and hers to do with as she wished. But first she had to touch him, had to learn every inch of him. She set her hands on his thighs, thrilled at the way his muscles contracted at her touch. Holding his gaze, she slid her palms to the back of his legs then up to his ass before moving them lower, stroking him all the way to his calves before sliding them around to his shins and then back up to his thighs.

She took the base of his cock in one hand and licked the shaft. It jerked in her hand and he made a noise somewhere between a growl and a moan.

“We still have to discuss it, baby,” he mumbled.

Discuss her giving him head? No wait. He meant the formal bonding. Her mind

shied away from the decision she had to make.

“Later,” she whispered, taking the head of his penis into her mouth. There would be time enough to contemplate the future later, but she knew she’d already made her choice. To stay on this strange world. To stay with this irresistible man. Even if it meant letting others watch them. Even if the only reason to do so was to position him into a more powerful position. It would also strengthen her and if it helped perhaps keep him safer...well, she’d do anything to insure that.

She took more of him into her mouth, widening her jaw to accommodate his girth. It would be impossible to take all of his length. As it was with her hand around part of him, his head was almost to the back of her throat. She adjusted her grip to expose more of him and he groaned as he slid farther into her mouth until he filled her, until his tip did touch her throat.

“Harder.”

She tightened her grip on his shaft, letting her teeth graze his sensitive skin as she sucked harder while drawing back so he slid mostly free of her lips. He moved his hands to her head, twisting them in her hair as he took over and thrust back into her mouth. He pulled out, pushed back in. Experimental at first. Slow. Building to a faster rhythm with each push until he was driving into her in sure strokes, until she had to grab onto his hips for balance.

He groaned when she moved her hands. No longer restrained in any way, his cock hit the back of her throat over and over again. Instead of having to fight her gag reflex, she was amazed at how much the sensation turned her on, at how wet her pussy grew with each stroke. She tasted more pre-cum with each passing second, knew he was close to coming and wished she could go with him.

*Touch yourself, baby.*

She was struck by shyness. She’d never masturbated in front of anyone before.

*Do it. I want to watch you. I want to feel you come. Want to feel your submission.*

His strokes slowed. He was waiting for her.

*Now, Kendall.* She closed her eyes, let the mental order flow through her, excite her. She moved one hand to her collarbone, lingered over her nipple as she slid it down. Tugged at the chain and shivered when she moved again, trying to drag out the pleasure. Her hand reached her pussy and she spread the folds, dipped two fingers inside and gasped. Daggar began to thrust faster, harder. *Your clit, baby. Touch your clit.*

She did, a light caress, a gentle touch that sparked her blood but didn’t ignite the flames between them.

*Harder.*

She pressed down, rubbed small tight circles. It was impossible to gasp her pleasure, to demand more while her mouth was full of his cock.

*Harder. You know how you like it. Pinch your clit, baby. Come with me.*

She wanted to protest that she wouldn’t last longer than him and then she felt him, felt her mind connecting with his and knew he was only waiting for her. Taking the swollen nub between her thumb and finger, she squeezed and exploded at the same time he did, his cum erupting into her mouth, his cry loud above her.

He held her still to accept him, hands still twisted in her hair as she swallowed the salty seed then cleaned his softened cock with swirls of her tongue. With each suckle he grew stiffer until he was once again hard in her mouth. Withdrawing, he reached down

and lifted her, fused his lips over hers with a heated out of control kiss. He broke it too soon and she moaned her protest as he stepped away. Spinning her around, he walked forward, moving her with him until he set her hands on the balcony rail, bending her forward at the waist.

She whimpered as he entered her from behind, her pussy immediately contracting around the welcomed invasion. He was exquisite. Perfect. *Hers*.

“Now you’re getting it, baby.”

He started to thrust. Long slow strokes grew a little harder, a little rougher. She moved with him, trying to encourage him with her body to give her more. She wanted him faster, more forceful.

“Greedy, aren’t you, my *der’lan*?” he queried as his hand landed on her ass in a hard slap.

She groaned, her pussy growing slicker around him at the sting of pain. He repeated the action, the slaps harder, hitting her skin furiously one after the other. His cock slammed into her harder, faster, pushing her higher to a precipice of unimagined pleasure/pain. Then he was in her mind, sharing his deepest thoughts, his darkest needs. For her to surrender to his care completely. For her to accept any pain or pleasure he chose to give her. For her to trust him to catch her, to cherish her, to *love* her, through it all.

He loved her. This incredible, dominant, infuriating man loved her. The realization broke the last bit of control she’d been holding onto, released that last bit of her soul she’d been hiding from him. She shattered, her mind and body both reaching for him, accepting the pain and pleasure he gave her as she came. She clung to the railing as his hips pistoned against her, as the shudders wracked her body. Until finally he was leaning over her, his chest pressed against her back. He sucked the sensitive skin between her neck and collar between his teeth hard enough to leave a mark, and then he straightened, thrust one more time while crying out into the silent night.

She was vaguely aware of him moving several minutes later. Carrying her inside and lying down beside her, holding her close as she drifted off to sleep.

## Chapter Twelve

She woke to a steady, incessant beeping, and sat up groggily as she reached for the communicator Barak had dropped off for her the previous evening. The screen flashed an incoming message from an unknown source. She clicked to open it, feeling the last remnants of rest fall away as she read the request from Britt to meet her at the Ambassador's office. Her friend wouldn't have asked if she didn't believe she'd discovered something important and needed backup.

Her belly rolled as she stood and rummaged through drawers for clean clothes. She hurried through a shower, dressed, slid the comm unit into her pocket and went to find Laney. She had no problem assisting Britt, but the tenseness of their current situation unnerved her. She wanted to be armed when she met her friend.

She entered the common room and found everyone already there. Laney and Alrik argued quietly on the couch and Barak and Daggar watched from the counter separating the kitchen area from the living area. She took a deep breath, the scent of coffee filling her nose and giving her a kick of anticipatory energy. After pouring a cup she joined Daggar and Barak, nodding at the two on the couch.

"What's up with them?"

"Hakon was taken into custody this morning. Laney wants to sit in on the questioning."

"That's a problem?"

"Alrik wants her to rest."

"Good luck with that," she huffed, sweeping her critical physician's gaze over Daggar.

He looked pale and worn, and glared back at her. She must have let the thought slip through her feeble attempt at a mental barrier. She shouldn't have bothered trying; he easily slipped through her guard and she felt his irritation. It wasn't directed at her though. He was frustrated with being less than one hundred percent, with the power plays between the Overchiefs and the rebels in his caste. Sighing, she reached up to finger the short locks of hair falling over his forehead. Sometime between last night and the new morning, he'd found someone to shear off his long hair. It was now short, not so bedraggled looking against the spots she'd had to shave to stitch up the lacerations caused by the bomb a couple of days ago.

Had it really been two days? So much had happened to her, changed in her. She'd felt that unbelievable pull to him, had accepted he was her future. Delroi was her future. Hell, she'd even accepted she was going to let three strangers, three priests watch her fuck him. He'd woken her close to dawn, slowly thrusting into her pussy, lazily playing with her nipples, and explained who would watch, told her he was making the arrangements for later in the day and then she would formally be his. That idea was crazy and wonderful all at the same time. She looked into his eyes and saw the smile there along with a purely male, possessive gleam, and knew he'd read her thoughts.

"It's not nice to eavesdrop," she said softly.

He wrapped an arm around her waist, pulled her close to nuzzle her neck. "It's my right to listen in. Especially when you're thinking about me."

He bit her neck, not hard enough to hurt but it definitely got her juices flowing. She shivered at the promise in it, but pulled away, reminded herself of her task. Before she could bring it up the argument behind her grew more heated. She turned and watched Laney struggle to her feet, hiding her smile when Alrik tried to help her and she swatted his arm.

“I’m not an invalid and I’m getting sick and damned tired of being treated like one.”

He sighed. “I have a right to protect you and our son, Laney.”

“And how the hell is sitting in on an interrogation potentially dangerous to either one of us?”

Alrik set his hands on her shoulders, squeezed a little. His expression was dark and tense, and he looked like he wanted to shake some sense into her. Kendall shifted, preparing to move to interfere if it became necessary. Laney was an excellent fighter but Kendall doubted even under the best of circumstances she could best the big warrior. Several months pregnant was sure as hell not the best circumstances.

Daggar moved behind her, wrapping one arm around her waist as he bent his head to whisper in her ear. “Let them handle this. He would never harm her. It is not our way.”

Anger rose swiftly to the surface of her mind as he held her back. She’d seen what men were capable of, even those she’d once considered the best of them.

*Earthling males. Not us.*

She struggled to find the right words to argue with him, but it wasn’t necessary. Laney lifted her hands and cupped Alrik’s face in her palms, her gaze was at once imploring and determined.

“You have to stop this over-protectiveness. Stop smothering me.”

His hands slid to the back of her shoulders, then to her back in a slow sliding caress before pulling her closer, rotating his hips, the bulge of his hard cock clear. Kendall wanted to turn away from the scene, felt like an intruder, but found she couldn’t.

“After the baby is born,” he whispered before fusing his lips to hers. To Kendall it seemed as if he inhaled her, as if his need for her was so consuming he had no other options.

She felt relief from Daggar. *That is exactly what it is like for us. You understand now.*

The kiss didn’t last long and Laney looked disappointed when Alrik pulled back. “Stay here with Kendall. We won’t be long.”

She cleared her throat and they both turned to look at her. “Actually, I’m going to meet Britt at the Ambassador’s office.”

Laney thought it over, biting at her lower lip before nodding. “I’ll go with you then.”

“No,” Kendall replied after studying her a moment, the physician in her more concerned for her patient than the soldier with having backup. She held up a hand when Laney opened her mouth to argue. “You need to rest. You’re pale and you have black circles under your eyes. Like it or not, at seven months pregnant your body is no longer all yours and it isn’t so forgiving when you push too hard.”

“Shit,” she muttered. “I want a full report from both of you ASAP.”

Kendall grinned. “Of course you do.” She sobered quickly however. “Um. You got a weapon I can borrow?”

“Of course,” she mimicked and slipped free of Alrik to go get it.

“I don’t think that will be necessary,” Daggar said, making Laney pause in mid

stride, turn half way to look over her shoulder at him. He shook his head. "Neither of you is going anywhere."

Laney turned fully around, her face setting in a neutral expression. "I'm sure I don't have to remind you of the hoops I had to go through to get permission for Britt and Kendall to come here. Of the assurances I had to make to the Council that they would be my responsibility. She may have a bond with you, but it's not formally accepted. That means of course, she still works for me. Besides, you'll find Kendall is, in fact, twice as stubborn as I am."

It was just too much and Kendall burst out laughing. Both turned questioning looks on her, but it was several minutes before she could control the gales of amusement enough to answer.

*What is so damned funny?* He was curious despite his irritation. It almost set her off again.

"All of you," she answered, meeting his gaze. "I don't think anyone has ever fought over me like this. You, Cilia, Laney. And she's right. I'm just as stubborn. I'll make my own damned choices, no matter what any of you believe."

His mind grew uneasy and she smiled at him. *Don't worry, baby. I've already chosen you.*

"But that doesn't mean I'm going to follow blindly."

"I hate it when I miss half the conversation," Laney grumbled with a glare at her.

She shrugged. "Some of it's private. So," she continued, making her voice brisk and leaving no room for argument. "I'm going to meet Britt. You're staying here and going back to bed."

Laney huffed, but kept quiet. Daggar, she knew, was her real problem. Laney trusted her to take care of herself. For some reason Daggar was unwilling to bend that much.

*That's not it and if you would really embrace the bond, read me as easily as I read you, you would know that.*

*I understand your need to protect me, Daggar. I really do. But you have to realize you can't do that all the time. You have to give me the space to be an active participant in our safety. In the caste's safety. Otherwise, I'm not really your partner, your mate, am I?*

He swore, mentally and out loud, in his own language.

"I'll escort her, my lord, while you and Alrik deal with the traitor," said Barak.

Daggar wanted to protest even that and she felt his struggle against his instincts. A part of him, the primitive untamed side she was so drawn to in bed, determined to tie her up and hide to keep her safe if necessary, but his logical side finally won out realizing that such an action would drive a wedge of distrust between them. He nodded, but he let her feel his anger at her and himself, his determination to take his own private revenge later for her refusal to follow his orders.

"Her safety is in your hands," he told Barak. "Don't fuck up."

\* \* \* \*

Daggar watched his mate leave with one of his most trusted soldiers. His fury had faded some, and instead he found himself fighting against a sense of dismay and unreality. The introduction of human *der'lans* would change his people irrevocably and he wasn't sure they were ready for the coming shift of dynamics.

It only took a moment for Alrik to escort Laney back to their bedchamber.



“Things are changing quickly,” Alrik murmured, careful so that none of the nearby warriors overheard, as they walked to the brig that housed the interrogation room.

“Hopefully for the best. Either way it’s out of our control.”

Both knew that was true and not true. One could control one’s mate completely, but to do so would slowly destroy her spirit, erode her free will, and no one wanted to live with that burden, that sorrow.

“The women are the catalyst for more dangerous changes, Daggar.”

He nodded. “I know.”

How could he miss that? The rebels were getting more brazen and perhaps were growing stronger. To attack him in his seat of power spoke of more organization than they’d had in generations. Someone must have united all the different factions. Someone they would all follow.

They entered the brig and followed the short hall to the interrogation room. Two warriors stood guard over Hakon, the Delroi healer they suspected set the bomb and killed the Earthling doctor to cover his crime. Daggar was willing to bet he was near the bottom of the rebels’ chain of command and wouldn’t be able to tell them much. He’d have to send Barak south soon.

Alrik spoke softly to the two guards before dismissing them. Then he approached the table, pulled out a chair and sat while Daggar stood back and studied the man. His face was free of the identifying tattoos, but the man had been stripped of his shirt and they stretched down his side. As usual, his brother was thinking along the same lines as he was.

“You’ve finally learned to not make yourselves such easy targets. Bet it galls though.” Alrik grinned. “Bet all the other warriors in your clan have the full tattoo.”

Hakon narrowed his eyes but didn’t respond. Alrik only shrugged and continued. “We were going to do the full interrogation, but why bother? We know what you did. We even know how you did it. Any words you’d like us to carry to your mother after your execution?”

His only betraying reaction was a brief fisting of his hands. “Your own laws say I get the Tribunal, Torfa.”

“That doesn’t really apply to traitors,” Alrik answered with mock sadness.

“You are the traitors,” he spat back. “Making deals with the Earthlings. Not seizing what should be Delroi’s. You keep it all for yourself.” He met Daggar’s gaze while he made the accusation that Daggar was keeping Earth’s women to a small group of warriors he’d selected. “Safe here in your guarded palace. Well, you aren’t so safe anymore are you, Overchief?”

The man’s words and disrespect should have angered him, but they didn’t. He’d heard the argument too many times, had counter-argued too many times that the Delroi weren’t marauding monsters. Honor demanded they treat the Earthlings with respect. Their women would save Delroi. That was a tribute that could not be equaled and as long as he was in charge would not be answered with a senseless bloody and protracted war.

Before he could frame a response the warriors who’d been dismissed returned and handed a comm unit to Alrik. “Last communication came from Saber City, my lord.”

Not particularly helpful information. Saber City was the southern stronghold, held by the Saber Clan, the only warrior clan on Delroi that could possibly challenge Torfa rule. Vasin Trace, chief of the Saber clan, wasn’t likely to challenge Daggar. However, he

oversaw several minor clans and the allegiance of all of them was questionable.

Alrik stood and joined them at the door. "Anything else?"

One of the warriors shifted nervously and curious, Daggar moved closer.

"The techs think they've narrowed it down to the district held by the Trace Clan."

Daggar immediately reached for Kendall with his mind, relieved to find her calm and well. Alrik sent the warriors away.

"Barak is trustworthy. You know that." Who was trying to convince? Daggar or himself? He saw a glimmer of doubt in his brother's eyes. "Barak has always served us well. There are thousands of clan members. Hell, the communication could even be from another clan hoping to throw us off by being in the wrong district."

Daggar nodded. It was possible, but he had a nagging feeling something wasn't right with that scenario. He didn't doubt Barak's loyalty. His clan's, on the other hand, was up for debate. He turned to Hakon.

"Why now? Who's organized the rebels?"

He refused to answer and Daggar repressed an exasperated sigh.

"It's obvious someone has. We'll find out sooner or later and cooperating might earn you a little leniency."

Hakon's laugh was more of a bark. "You'll kill me without ceremony. Without a trial. Just as Vasin said you would."

Daggar hid his reaction, didn't stiffen and run from the room after Kendall the way he wanted to. Vasin was a common name, especially in the south. There was no reason to assume Hakon was talking about Barak's father. None but his paranoia.

"Your friend Vasin isn't very well informed. You're a traitor, Hakon. We don't have to take you to the Tribunal."

"No." His eyes took on the fervent light of many of the rebel fanatics Daggar had questioned over the years. "I'm a patriot. You are a disgrace, a betrayer to the warrior caste."

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Like he hadn't heard that before? He met Alrik's gaze. "Nothing new. Throw him back in his cell."

His sense of unease was growing urgent. He wanted to get to Kendall. The two guards were back in the room to escort Hakon. They weren't gentle as they yanked him up from the table and around the table to the door. Hakon passed within spitting distance of Daggar and grinned.

"How's your *der'lan*, Overchief? Hope you enjoyed her while you could."

Alarm escalating, he signaled the guards to hold. "What are you talking about? Speak!"

"It's too late. Your spymaster led her straight into a trap. Yes. We know what he is. Did anyone really believe his father would let him free? His first loyalty must be to his clan chief. Some traditions never die."

Daggar didn't respond with words. Instead he threw a very satisfying punch that not only broke the man's nose but knocked him out.

"Lock him up," he ordered the guards and hurried to leave the room despite the fact he really wanted to stay and pound him to a pulp for threatening his *der'lan*. There was no time for that. Kendall was calling for help.

## Chapter Thirteen

After it was decided Barak would accompany the new Lady Torfa, both she and the Overchief had visibly relaxed. She fussed over him quietly for several minutes, once again bringing up the rejuvenation tank. He didn't think she noticed his lord's shudder of revulsion, a feeling Barak shared. The green viscous liquid may speed up healing, but there was something revolting about it. He knew Daggar's refusal to use it had more to do with the disgusting nature of the machine than the time required to be spent in it.

Finally Daggar, who definitely looked the worse for wear, left to go question Hakon and Barak set off for the Ambassador's office with Kendall. The look he'd exchanged with the Overchief made it clear he held Barak personally responsible for his mate's safety. Barak scowled at her as they turned into the corridor that led to the Earth contingent's quarters.

"What?"

"You Earth women are impossible." He should have kept his thoughts to himself, but he was frustrated with his investigation, with all the time he was spending watching over the Torfa women and Britt. And he couldn't shake the feeling the problems were just beginning, not only with the women, but also with the rebels and Earthlings on planet.

The disturbing new rumor he'd heard, that his clan, his father, was now involved with the rebels didn't help his state of mind. He should have gone straight to Alrik with that news, but he wanted to be positive, to have concrete evidence one way or the other.

Kendall laughed and shook her head. "See, and we think the problem is just the opposite. You Delroi are the impossible ones."

She seemed remarkably cheerful for a woman whose mate was frustrated with and fighting against her independent streak and his need to protect her. If he didn't know better, he'd think she wasn't aware of it, but with the bond she had to know. Maybe she just didn't care. Gods, that better not explain her attitude. If it did he was certain Britt would be worse and he was not nearly as tolerant of defiance as Daggar and Alrik were.

He was so lost in his thoughts, he didn't notice when they turned into the Earth offices, registered too late the unnatural silence of the place. Kendall stepped ahead of him and pushed the Ambassador's office door open before he could stop her. He followed her in with a sinking sensation in his gut, warred with rage and despair when he saw Britt crumpled on the floor. He could discern no movement from her, no rise and fall of her chest. No signs of life. Kendall rushed to her side, but he focused on the man standing behind the desk, still holding the weapon, a long baton, he must have used on her. The Ambassador froze when they entered, gaze zeroing in on Barak's face. He took one long stride forward, imagining the man's throat crushed between his hands, when Kendall stopped him. From where she knelt on the floor, she drew her pistol, leveled it at the Ambassador.

"Barak." He met her gaze, knew his eyes were wild, but he just didn't give a fuck.

"I need to get her to the infirmary. *Now.*"

And then he saw it. The shallow rise of her chest, the fluttered eyelashes. He squeezed his eyes shut briefly. She lived. Barely. But she lived. He swung his head back towards the Ambassador, who hadn't budged a muscle. He had the wild look of a

cornered animal in his eye. He would die. The one who'd dared touch Barak's *der'lan*. His mate.

He moved towards the Ambassador, stopped and frowned at the door. Did he hear footsteps running down the hall or only sense a coming attack? The man laughed and Barak jerked his head around to face him, noticed Britt stirring back to consciousness. *Wake up, sweetheart*, he willed. *I need you with me now*. Why did it seem so natural to assume she'd stand at his side? It was completely contrary to the instincts of the male of his species. He should be thinking about getting her away, not enlisting her help. She wasn't in any position to do that now. The safety of both women was in his hands.

He quickly strode to the outer office, slammed and locked the door before returning inside and repeating the action on the Ambassador's door. He stalked the Earthling across the room and slammed him against the wall with one hand gripping his throat. From his peripheral vision, he noted Britt sitting up, then using the edge of the desk to climb to her feet. His relief was immense, but he didn't have time to focus on it. His fingers convulsed around the man's neck and he leaned in close enough to smell his rising fear.

"What the fuck is going here, Ambassador?" he asked, but didn't loosen his grip enough that the man could respond. He was too focused on Britt, who approached carefully, one hand pressed to the back of her head. When she reached his side, she stroked his back with her fingers, the touch so light he wondered if he'd imagined it.

"This one is mine."

He shook his head. "No. For daring to touch you, his death belongs to me."

Her answering smile was rueful. "How did I know you would try to claim it?"

A delicately cleared throat. He spun his head around, found Kendall watching them with her eyebrows arched. "Before you get to the killing, could we get some answers?"

He fought his first instinct, a resounding hell no, and forced his hand to release the Earthling's neck. He sagged against the wall, gasping for air, as banging started on the outer doors. Fuck.

"Did you call Daggar?"

Kendall nodded. "He's on his way. That's not him out there."

"No." He had a good idea who was out there, the rebels who'd until recently believed he was one of them. It had long been believed by the southern clans that the Torfas kept him close to ensure cooperation from his father. No one knew he'd stayed willingly, that he worked with the brothers. That was why he'd been able to infiltrate the rebels and he still didn't know how they'd discovered he was a spy. Even knowing he was Vasin Trace's son wouldn't exonerate him of that crime. He unlocked the door and prepared to step into the reception room. He'd hold them off until Daggar arrived with reinforcements. Britt stopped him before he could open the door.

"What are you doing?"

He rested his palm on her cheek and she turned just slightly into the caress. So beautiful. "Delaying them long enough for the Overchief's men to get here."

"I'll help."

"No." Hell no. He jerked his head in the direction of the cowering Earthling. "I need you to get answers out of him and guard Kendall."

She wanted to protest, he saw it in her eyes, but she only bit her bottom lip. He couldn't resist, bent his head to hers and kissed her. He wanted to inhale her, to own her. To claim what was his. Before he knew it, the words were coming out, whispered against

her lips with all the craving he felt for her. He didn't know if it would work without sex, but he thought it might, felt relief when the bond snapped into place. She was psychic, like him, and he'd thought that would make the difference.

The banging grew louder out in the corridor and he reluctantly released her. She clung to him a moment. *Later, der'lan. Keep Kendall safe.* Her eyes widened at the mental contact, but she stepped out of the way so he could exit. When the door closed and locked behind him, he hoped to the Gods there would be a later.

\*

Kendall watched Barak leave with a sense of foreboding and silently urged Daggar to hurry. He was closer, moving through the Palace much faster than she would have believed he could in his current condition. He was still irritated with her, but was more focused on his worry now. Britt prowled the room, never turning her glare away from the door.

Kendall jumped when the outer banged open, followed immediately by the sounds of fighting. The noise spurred Britt into action. In a blur so fast, Kendall almost missed it the other woman was in the opposite side of the room, a knife Kendall hadn't seen before in her hand and pressing against the Ambassador's throat.

"Start talking," she snapped.

He gulped and a drop of blood trickled down his neck. His eyes were wide, wild and afraid. Kendall stepped closer.

"Who killed Dr. Peters? Why?" They were pretty sure they knew some of those answers, but she wanted confirmation.

He tried to shake his head.

"She *will* kill you." Britt pressed the knife against his skin harder and the drop became a trickle. The physician in her cringed at what they were doing, but the soldier recognized necessity when she saw it.

"The lab tech. Hakon. Peters wasn't supposed to get into those boxes."

"Who else in the lab is involved?" She hoped no one else. She'd liked the healers she met there.

"I don't know. Hakon is the only name I know. The only one I deal with here."

And finally they were getting somewhere. "And on Earth? Who is your contact there?"

"Jeffrey Scott." The name shocked her and she saw her surprise mirrored in Britt's eyes. Scott was the former Prime Minister, forced to resign for conspiring to kill Alrik Torfa and derail the peace talks. Resigning hadn't denied him his contacts or support though. Shit. So the two sides were involved. Britt indicated the reception room behind them where the fighting was still taking place with a nod of her head. "How do you explain that then?"

"You were asking questions yesterday." He almost smirked. "I called Hakon. He must have had them waiting for your return."

"Why are you people stupid enough to get involved with Delroi rebels?"

"They didn't want the invasion. The occupation. When they take over here, Earth will be ours again."

Britt snorted. "Really stupid. If anything, the rebels want to use more force, a bigger presence on Earth."

"That's not true."

“It is,” Kendall replied understanding the coup on Earth now. “Scott intends to grab as much power for himself as he can, and he’s willing to hand Earth over to get it.” She wondered if he had a plan for dealing with the rebels once he unleashed them. He wouldn’t be able to control them and she doubted they would put up with him very long.

Silence fell abruptly outside and all three of them jerked at the sudden lack of noise. They both stepped away from the Ambassador, Britt to the door and Kendall to punch the speaker option on the desk’s comm console, allowing them to hear what was happening in the chamber beyond. A rough voice barked over the unit.

*“The Overchief’s close. Bring Trace and let’s get out of here.”*

*“The Earthling?”*

*“Leave him for the Torfas.”*

The Ambassador jumped forward at the words, rushing for the door, but Britt was there, her movement so fast Kendall didn’t see the knife plunge into his chest. She stared at him for half a second, before flinging the door open. She knew without checking that the Ambassador was dead and stepped out behind Britt.

She counted three dead bodies. The furniture was toppled and moved around, the big reception desk shoved in front of the doorway but the door lying on the floor in the hall. Britt was climbing over it when Daggar and Alrik appeared, several men behind them. Alrik caught her wrist before she could run down the hall and Kendall did what she was sure was the only sensible thing. Threw herself into Daggar’s arms, clinging to him for all she was worth.

## Chapter Fourteen

Daggar ran with Alrik at his side, pain and fatigue forgotten in the rush of adrenalin, the need to get to Kendall. He slowed as they approached the door, arriving just in time to see Britt climbing over a desk blocking the way, Kendall right behind her. Alrik grabbed Britt before she could run off, but he didn't pay much attention to their argument. All he saw was his blonde mate and when she flung herself into his arms, he caught her, squeezing her so hard he was surprised she didn't protest.

She was shaking and he soothed her, whispered assurances of safety before looking up. What he saw made his gut turn. There were dead bodies and no sign of Barak. Alrik barked orders to his warriors and Britt explained that the rebels had taken Trace, that she'd killed the Ambassador.

Kendall shivered at her words and he wanted to shake her, to punish her for daring to put herself in such danger, but decided to wait until they returned to their rooms to yell at her. Damn it, this time he'd make an impression and it would have to be with words. He was too shook up, too out of control to dare lift a whip against her perfect, smooth skin.

"Brother." He turned to meet Alrik's gaze. "Let's get them back to our quarters. We can find out there what happened."

Alrik looked around and Daggar knew he was worried about securing the area. He didn't say a word, just led Kendall away. Behind him, he heard Britt quietly arguing with Alrik. She wanted to search for Barak, was sure they hadn't had time to get far away. It seemed unusual for the Earth spy to take such an extreme interest in Barak, even if they were mates. Barak had done his best to avoid her, to not forge any ties between them. He turned his head to look at her, narrowed his eyes at what he saw. She looked shell-shocked but also a little frantic. Both reactions he'd come to know were totally out of character for her. Maybe Barak hadn't been successful in avoiding her after all.

*What's wrong with your friend?*

She shrugged. *I don't know.* She frowned. *I didn't realize they knew each other. He kissed her before he left. Whispered something to her.*

He felt her suspicion and shared it. Fuck. Why would Barak use the binding prayer on the woman under those circumstances? He hoped for her sake, that the spymaster was okay.

They finally entered the family's quarters. Laney was pacing angrily and demanded answers as soon as they crossed the threshold. "What the hell happened?"

Kendall sighed and sank into the deep couch. He was torn between fury and admiration when she spoke and revealed everything she and Britt had discovered. Alrik swore under his breath before speaking quietly into his communicator, ordering the detainment of the rest of the lab's employees. They'd be questioned for involvement later. Laney grumbled something about notifying Earth before stalking out of the room. For now, they had everything under control. It was his turn.

He took Kendall's hand and pulled her to her feet, led her down the hall to their room. Adrenalin still surged through him and he planned to take full advantage of it. Inside he pushed the door closed behind them with a soft click and turned to face her. She waited quietly in the center of the room, hands clasped before her, eyes downcast. Not

quite perfect.

“Strip, Kendall.”

She caught her breath, lifted rebellious eyes, but didn't protest his command. While she removed her clothes, he opened his toy closet and activated two switches. One lowered restraints from the ceiling and the other rolled back two sections of floor that revealed more. He found three more items and dropped them on the bed as he passed it. He didn't speak as he returned to her, fastening first her wrists above her head, then her ankles to the floor. Stepping back, he admired her, arms and legs spread, flushed skin. Hard nipples. The blindfold went on. Almost perfect.

He reached behind him and picked up a fur-covered paddle from the bed. He stroked it softly over her skin, loving the way her skin flushed, the way her breathing grew panted. He felt the anticipation in her mind, the need. Here at least, he was the master.

He tapped her bottom with the paddle lightly. Testing. Teasing. She moaned and moved into the next stroke. And the next. He kept the hits soft, just this side of stinging. Smiled at the way she strained against her ties trying to move closer, trying to edge him on. She bit on her bottom lip and he felt her protest in her mind, felt her desire for more pain, faster. He wasn't about to comply with even unspoken demands.

Moving back to the bed, he picked up the small mechanized balls and returned to her, shared the picture she made in his mind. With one hand, he spread the lips of her sex, found her wet and wanting. Her hips jerked into the touch and he slapped her clit.

“Still,” he growled. He inserted the balls, flipped the switch concealed in his pocket to turn them on to a low buzz. Then he flipped the paddle around, to the hard leather covered side and began in earnest. He tried not to channel anything but his love for her, his concern for her safety and worry over her rash behavior, but his need to punish her crept in anyway. His need to dominate, to make her understand he would not bend in this.

The balls rested against her G-spot, the hard leather of the paddle quickly turned her ass and thighs a nice rosy red. She hung from the restraints, panting, an expression close to bliss on her face. Perfect. Absolutely perfect and all his. He wanted to fuck her, just like this, but he still felt the twinge of defiance buried in her mind. She thought she was submitting, but as long as she tried to keep that part of herself hidden it wasn't truly possible.

He pulled off the blindfold, needed to see the greedy lust in her eyes, then sank to his knees in front of her. She cried out when he leaned forward and blew a hot breath across her sex. Stopped breathing when he flicked her clit with the tip of his tongue. She wanted to come, trembled with the need and he was pleased that she held back. And she would continue to whether she liked it or not. He went to work on her, with his mouth and his fingers. He was merciless, kept her riding a sharp edge of pleasure and pain. He was desperate, needed her to feel his hunger, his anger, his fear. His total *need* of her. He refused to let her come and then she was crying, begging him to stop.

“Daggar, please.” He stood and met her gaze. His cock was so impossibly hard it was a wonder he didn't die from the strain.

“What, *der'lan*?”

“Don't punish me, us, for acting to protect you. Just as you would have done. Don't do that to me. To us.”

Her words made him pause, consider. He searched her mind, brutally pushing his way past all her barriers. He thought she'd only meant to assert her independence again,



but he found a worry as deep as his. And something else. Acceptance. Of him. Of the bond between them. Still, he couldn't let this go.

"Security is my expertise. You have to leave that to me."

She narrowed her eyes, glared. "Like you deferred to medical expertise?"

He had to smile. She would be defiant till the end. He was starting to realize he didn't want her any other way. "So neither one of us is any good at acceding to another authority."

She smiled back, but her reluctance was clear. "I guess not."

He couldn't wait any longer, had to have her. He stripped his clothes off and then released her ankles, slowly pulled the balls free from her cunt. Stepping forward, he gripped her hips and lifted her so she could wrap her legs around his back.

"I can't wait," he whispered, but he should. For a bed, for some sense of tenderness to come back to him.

"No, don't wait," she gasped as he plunged into her.

\* \* \* \*

Kendall woke alone the next morning, and stretched her arms over her head, flinching a little when worn-out muscles protested. Sighing, she rolled out of bed, not ready to leave the warmth of the blankets, not sure if she could face Daggar this morning. But he'd left the door cracked open a bit and the scent of coffee beckoned to her.

She hurried through a shower, dressed and joined the others. She stopped dead in her tracks when she entered the living area, staring at a huge picture window that hadn't been there before.

*Works like the wall in our room, baby.* She heard the amusement in Daggar's tone.

She didn't approach, though she wanted a better look. The city stretched out below them and the landscape beyond it was stark, barren, vast desert. She wanted to see it by daylight, but it could wait. Britt sat on a seat before the glass and seemed to wear solitude like a cloak. It was clear to Kendall she didn't want to be bothered, so she turned the other way, got a cup of coffee and joined the others on the couch. Daggar pulled her close and nuzzled her neck.

"What's wrong with Britt?" she asked Laney quietly.

"No idea." Laney shrugged but her eyes were anything but indifferent. "I was hoping you could get it out of her. She hasn't said a word."

Kendall sighed and went to sit on the long seat next to Britt, who was staring outside. "What's up?"

"I have to go after him," she said without looking at Kendall. She sounded anguished, and when she turned to meet Kendall's eyes she could see the woman hadn't slept at all. "The smart thing to do would be to get on the first transport back to Earth."

"Then why don't you?" she asked gently. She already had an idea of what was going on.

Britt's eyes were shadowed. Sad. It was alarming to see so much emotion from the former spy, who rarely showed any. "I tried. I can't leave him." She sighed. "I don't *do* relationships."

Kendall didn't remind her that not long ago they'd all said that. She wouldn't go back for anything.

"I really suck at them," Britt continued, covering her face. "But I can't get him out of

my head. Somehow he's under my skin."

Britt's attitude, her despair, alarmed Kendall. She hadn't thought the bond could be formed, could be fully functioning without a physical connection and she hadn't thought things had progressed that far. "Did you sleep with him?" The hell with being too personal. Technically she was Britt's doctor. That gave her the right to ask uncomfortable questions.

"No!" Britt's answer really was shocked, not faked at all.

Daggar was in her head, eavesdropping and just as worried. He thought the two were fully bonded and never would have believed it was possible without a sexual connection. Was it a testament to how strong Barak's spirit was? Or Britt's? He came over and sat, pulling Kendall into his lap.

"Do you know where he is? Can you track him?"

Kendall forced the denial from her lips. Someone had to go after Barak, but did it have to be Daggar?

*Don't worry, my heart.* He lifted her hand to his lips, nibbled her knuckles. *I'm not going anywhere. We'll send Jaxon.*

*Who is he?*

*He's in charge of Laney's Guard. One of Barak's men.*

Britt eyed them suspiciously. Kendall hated to see her old friend looking at her like that. "What are you two talking about?"

Kendall didn't reply to the odd question. How did Britt know they were speaking to each other?

"There's a certain energy, when you communicate with someone psychically," Britt added.

"Ah, I think I understand now," Daggar said.

"What?" Kendall asked, surprised and a little hurt that her old friend was a psychic and had never told her.

"I always suspected Barak had the gift. He's too good at his job for it to be all paranoia and instinct. Stands to reason it would strengthen an existing talent since it forges one where none has been before."

Instead of reassuring Britt, his words seemed to frighten her. She looked cornered.

"Did you get a look at the attackers?" he asked Kendall.

"No."

"They were like him," Britt whispered. "I saw it in his mind. Tattoos on their faces. They've taken him someplace ... far away."

"Gone to ground in the South then." He nodded at Britt. "I'll make the arrangements."

She held his gaze a long moment, before also nodding and standing. "I'll pack."

When she was gone, Kendall turned to Daggar. "We can't let her go alone."

"She won't." He stroked her cheek and she struggled to keep the touch from distracting her. "She'll have Barak's people with her. You know her. She'll be fine."

It hardly seemed fair that he trusted Britt to take care of herself but no other woman. She glared at him. "If it was me or Laney, you'd be raising hell."

"Yeah, well." His grin was wry. "I've read her file."

She narrowed her eyes. "But not mine?" She could read his discomfort easily now and nodded. "You did. And still don't trust me to take care of myself."

“I trust you implicitly, baby. To take care of yourself and me. And I hope one day you can repay the favor.”

He moved her from his lap and to the seat, then stood and held out his hand. “For now, we have an appointment we’re going to be late for.”

She gulped and stared at his hand, knowing she had to go through with it, but not sure if she could. She rose slowly and placed her palm in his. Searched his gaze for ... something. And found reassurance. He nodded once and they left the room first, then the warrior’s compound.

He led her through a new maze of corridors until finally they were in another of those big common areas. Like the others, several halls led into it, like spokes on a wagon wheel. But unlike the others it was not a bustle of activity. Many people lingered, but it was quiet, somber. Then she noticed the temples, great stone columns carved into the high walls with double doors behind them. There were four of them and she looked at Daggar with confusion. He’d said they worshipped three Gods. That there would be three witnesses.

He squeezed her hand, not answering the questions he must feel in her mind, and walked to one of the temples on one end of the row. She hesitated, turning to look at the building next to them. It looked empty while the other three showed some signs of life. Three priests waited on the steps before the door of the one they approached and one stepped forward to join them. He bowed deeply to Daggar then turned and did the same to her.

“You are curious about our fourth temple, my lady?”

She met his gaze evenly, hoping she was successful at channeling the icy façade she was known for. It was a sham, but he didn’t have to know that. “Yes.”

His eyes flashed respect and something else. Hope maybe? “It is said that the people of Delroi once worshipped three Gods and a Goddess. That she embodied all that we cherish in women. The skill of the healer. The eye of the artist. A mother’s fierce protectiveness.”

“And what happened to her?”

He smiled, but it was sad. “The clans fought. The castes fought. Over whom she should belong to. Over who could worship her best. She despaired and left this world until the time comes when she is once again appreciated by all, protector of all.”

She looked over her shoulder wondering why the abandoned temple seemed to call so much to her, but she pushed it from her mind. She was here for another reason entirely. “A sad story.”

“Yes. It is said,” he paused and she groaned inwardly hoping the priest wasn’t going into lecture mode, “that one day three women will come to us, representing each aspect of the Goddess. That her worship will resume then. That power will once again be equal and shared on Delroi.”

She looked at Daggar, wondering if the priest’s words were a dig against his rule and the warrior caste.

*No. He’s talking about power between the sexes.* His disapproval was evident in his tone but he never tried to silence the priest.

The priest turned and led them up the steps, walking next to her. “I understand you’re a friend of Alrik’s *der’lan*? You’re a healer?”

She wondered at his familiarity. It hadn’t been her experience that people spoke of

Alrik or Daggar by their first names. *He's our uncle. The warrior god's High Priest.*

"Yes," she replied.

"And another journeyed here with you?"

She arched an eyebrow, suspected she knew where this conversation was going and pretty damned sure her friends would share her sentiments. They didn't want to be seen as the heralds of a new religious order.

"Yes. Another soldier like Laney." She kept Britt's other occupation to herself.

"Ah. I see," he muttered. "Unfortunate."

"Of course," she responding dryly, glad she'd gone with her instincts in replying. This was a conversation she'd have to relate to Britt and Laney as soon as possible. Daggar remained silent at her side, his mind closed to her and concealing his own thoughts on the matter. Did he see her as this symbol of change also?

He squeezed her hand, his tone teasing. *If it was my choice, I'd hide you away and keep you all for myself.*

She shared a mental laugh, but sobered quickly, her stomach rolling when the big doors were opened to admit them. *Let's just get this over with. I'll worry about everything else later.*

They entered and she didn't pay much attention to the cavernous room. Wide steps were directly in front of them and they followed the High Priest up onto a long balcony. Halls disappeared into blackness on each end. He turned right and they trailed after him, the other two priests bringing up the rear. The corridor seemed never ending, but finally he stopped before a door, unlocked it for them before backing away. There was absolutely no expression on his face as he bowed again.

"I'll speak to you later, Nephew."

Daggar returned the bow and responded formally. "Of course, Uncle."

All three priests left and Daggar, with his palm on her lower back, guided her into the room. It wasn't what she expected. Big and airy, with a nice sized balcony overlooking the city.

"I hope they don't expect us to do this out there," she grumbled.

She thought the room would be clinical. Was disturbed that it wasn't. Ignoring the big four-poster bed with its silk and fur coverings, she walked outside, hugging her arms around her and feeling panic rise. She couldn't do this. Could she?

Then warm hands were on her shoulders, thumbs digging skillfully into tense muscles. She relaxed despite her best intentions not to.

"It's only us, my heart," he whispered against her ear, lips trailing enticingly down her throat. She moaned, her body as always ready for him, but her mind wasn't totally with the program yet.

He chuckled. *Such resistance. You know I'll take care of you, Kendall.* She shuddered as his hands slid under the hem of her shirt, up her belly to tug on the chain connecting her nipple piercings. She grew wet between her thighs, muscles contracting to hold him inside her. Her body was ready, knew what he could do for her. No doubt about that. But intellectually ... people were watching them. They may not be in the room, but there was a screen somewhere nearby, where they would gather round and see everything. Rumors would spread. What exactly was this little ritual going to entail?

*Nothing like that, baby.* He knew she was wondering if he'd hurt her. If he'd give her the pain that equaled pleasure for her. *That's between us. No one else.*

He moved up behind her, pinning her against the rail. His fingers found the buttons of her blouse, started at the bottom and worked slowly up, while he whispered that no one would see them. That they were all alone up on the balcony. Part of her knew that those that were supposed to see would, but that knowledge in his mind was hidden. She was a little surprised that nothing else in his mind was hidden from her. She felt on guard in this place. Nervous. He was unconcerned. Confidant in his ability to protect them both if need be and she relaxed some, knowing, feeling his determination to shield them both from any harm.

*That's it, my heart,* he whispered in her head as his hand dipped under her waistband and she pushed her butt back against him. Felt his erection, hard and throbbing against her. He bit her in the hollow between her collar and neck, sucked the skin carefully, almost tenderly into his mouth until she was panting, straining against his cock. *So perfect. All mine.*

She released her hold on the railing, moved her hands up and behind to link her fingers together behind his neck. The pose left her exposed in a way she hadn't felt before, her submission to his mastery, his dominance, a clear choice even when there were no bindings, no agreements or power struggles involved. He sucked in a harsh breath and she almost smiled, knowing, feeling him in her mind. Feeling his knowledge of exactly what she was offering to him now. In this place. Complete and total trust. Not just to protect her against attack, but to protect her heart, her soul, from his own primitive instincts. He would take care of her—she knew that unequivocally—whether she liked it or not. And today, in this moment, she could admit she did like it. Liked knowing there was someone in the world who was as devoted to her as she was to him.

*Now? You have to realize this now?*

*Bad timing?* She couldn't keep the amusement from her voice. Or the love. He took a long, deep and unsteady breath.

*Gods. You're going to kill me woman.* He retreated, swung her up into his arms and carried her inside to drop her onto the bed.

*You've said that before.* She grinned, propped herself up on her elbows to watch him remove his clothes. He did it slowly like an old time strip show, smiling at the enjoyment and anticipation he felt in her mind. The sleeveless tunic came off first, then his boots and pants, until he stood only in his underwear, his hard cock barely restrained by the restrictive garment.

She rose to her knees and walked on them to the edge of the bed to lift her hand and stroke him through the fabric. She teased him, leaning forward and placing her mouth over his covered erection, blowing a hot breath on its head. With a groan he took a step back and yanked them down. She immediately reached out to wrap her fingers around the base, tugging so he moved closer to her lips. Before she could taste him, he gave her shoulder a gentle shove. Sharing his mind, she felt his desires, dark and needy.

She sprawled back on the bed, lifting her arms over her head and spreading her thighs, leaving herself open and exposed to his hungry gaze. He came to her, covering her body with his and claiming her mouth with his at the same time as his cock thrust home. There was no seduction, no finesse, no skill. But with Daggar she didn't need it, didn't want anything between them in this moment but blinding need.

Her body exploded with the first swivel of his hips, but she never came down from the height of her orgasm, realized as she hung on to him with her legs wrapped around his

waist and her fingers digging into his shoulders that she never would. She hoped he felt the same, that he always would.

He stilled inside her, gave her body a moment to settle and then took her face between his palms, cradled her close. "You're everything, my *der'lan*. The breath in my lungs. The beat of my heart."

Well, when he said it like that. "Damn. I love you."

He grinned. "I know."

She punched his arm. "Wrong answer."

He started moving again. Long, deep, measured strokes that made her gasp and bow her back, her body careening towards another orgasm.

"I love you, baby. Forever. For always."

They came together and she cried out with the joy of it, his words whispering over and over in her mind. Forever.

## **The End**

### **About the Author:**

As a native of the South, is it any wonder Loribelle has a love of storytelling? She started writing seriously as a teenager and finished her first manuscript, a mystery, when she was nineteen. After a few bumps along the way and stints as an Army MP, a waitress, a book store manager, a student, and a wedding photographer, she turned to writing full time. Now she divides her time among a husband, three kids, writing, and a part-time photography gig.

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