

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



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Between Two Tiron

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BETWEEN TWO TIRON

Rebecca Airies

Dedication

To my sisters, Ronnie, Debbie, and Barb, thanks for listening, nodding and cheering me on when I grumbled about these “cats”. I love you all.

Chapter One

The insistent buzz of her communications alarm woke Lina from a light sleep. She rolled over on the soft bunk. Brushing her wavy blonde hair away from her face, she swiveled a nearby monitor around so that she could see the readout. The ID signal showed a familiar origin at Central Command, an agency that held jurisdiction within human-controlled space over hate crimes, terrorism and many other areas.

So much for the vacation, Lina thought as she opened the com-link and, with a groan, rolled to her feet, stretching and yawning.

The smooth silver-gray floor was cold beneath her bare feet. The entire ship had been customized for convenience and use—from hidden storage space to the motion-sensitive camera which would follow her wherever she went within the ship. “Cadian here, are you just checking up on me, Callie, or is there a reason for this?”

Dark-haired and slender, the cheerful image of Callie Meuru grinned at her from a cushy office in Central Command’s headquarters. “There’s a reason, but it shouldn’t interrupt your vacation too much.”

Lina rolled her eyes and began pacing toward the front of the ship. Her long legs quickly crossed the distance and she slid into the pilot’s seat. As if she would believe that avowal—she hadn’t yet received a simple quick mission from them. Idly, she checked the readouts on the advanced instruments on the gray panels in front of her. The last time Callie had said something like that, Lina had been stranded for two months, playing nursemaid and guardian to six scientists at an isolated base until Command personnel could get there.

Lina wasn’t an agent for Central Command, just someone they found useful at times. Although she was a shifter, she had no qualms about working for them. They paid well and when she’d first started taking assignments from them, she had badly needed that money.

“What is it this time?” Lina settled back into the padded black pilot’s seat waiting for the worst. If this was just a normal mission, they would have sent one of their own agents on it. She got the assignments where they didn’t want to be directly connected to the mission or the ones that required a shifter touch.

“A woman on a planet known as Nariu Minor, a large world in Shifter-Protected Space, has gone missing. She was there with a group of researchers studying the ruins on the planet.” Callie paused and thought for a moment.

“Why do you need me for a disappearance?” Lina narrowed her eyes. She knew there was more to this than just a mere missing person report. Missing personnel was a local issue. Central Command wouldn’t even be part of it if someone was simply

missing on that planet. "One of the shifter patrols will take care of it. They certainly won't welcome interference."

"A distress call has come in from her. When I heard it, I thought of you." Callie smiled, an annoying this-is-just-your-type-of-mission encouraging smile.

That drew a groan from Lina. A woman went missing in Shifter-Protected Space usually for one reason and it wasn't pirates. This woman had been chosen by a shifter as his mate and had run. Lina would rather go up against a shipload of the worst space scum in the known universe than mess with a shifter mating. Everyone who entered Shifter Space was informed before they crossed the border that they would be expected to obey shifter law. In the case of women, that meant knowing that should they be the mate of a shifter male they could be claimed.

"Show me the distress call."

Callie nodded, a satisfied smirk crossing her face. "Here it is. Audio only, no vid on this one. The method she used was archaic."

"Help me..." The sound of panting breaths and breaking foliage—as if the woman was running through a forest or an overgrown area—came clearly over the link. "You've got to come get me. They'll come after me. I drugged them, but they know where our camp is. I can't go there. They took me from there." The woman's voice was thready and high-pitched. She sounded panicked, almost incoherent. "They're animals. Please, send someone for me."

"It sounded as if she was dealing with one of your kind." Callie lounged back in her plush blue-gray chair.

"Well, she *is* probably dealing with a shifter. The message did seem to indicate that. My kind, I don't know. I can go there, look for her." Lina pursed her lips as she considered the difficulties of this mission. There were obviously some shifters there or somewhere nearby, which could make things difficult.

"You don't think you can find her?" Callie raised her brows, but her smile taunted, challenged.

"If the man is already mated to her when I get there, she won't want to leave. I won't try to take her from him. As long as she isn't mated, any help I give her won't get me killed." Lina exhaled heavily.

"Why would they kill you?" Callie frowned, clearly perplexed.

Lina ignored that question. Trying to explain the seriousness of a shifter mating to a non-shifter was useless. "If she's still free and not mated, I'll get her off the planet and rendezvous with one of your ships. As I've told you before, even getting her off the planet probably won't help in the long run. He'll find her."

"We'll get her out of Shifter Space. She'll be safe if you can get her to us." Callie's cheerful smile and perky attitude radiated confidence.

"Shifters are persistent. I'll need everything you have on her. If she's hiding, I'll need to know where she's most comfortable." She doubted Callie believed or even

grasped just how intent a shifter male would be in the search for his woman. He would come after the woman he considered his mate. Tracking her across galaxies was normal for a shifter male.

The transmission of the woman's files as well as those of the people with the research group came almost immediately. The files contained no information about the shifters. Lina frowned at that, but it was normal for Central Command. To them, a shifter was a shifter. They didn't differentiate between the various groups. They'd have more success with their missions if they started noticing which shifter they were facing. Different types of shifters had different behaviors, abilities and tolerances for certain behaviors.

She began preparing to go into Shifter-Protected Space. It wasn't only the rescue mission that was risky. For her, just being found in Shifter Space could be the end of her freedom. She put her ship, a Sendar 4 shuttle, into stealth mode. If there was a group of shifters on that planet, they had a ship. She wouldn't give them advance warning of her presence.

"The researchers will cooperate in any way you ask. They've been told an agent is being sent to investigate but not when, who or how," Callie advised. "Be careful."

Lina shook her head as the screen went blank. Callie didn't understand. She had just told Lina to be careful after assigning her to retrieve a woman most likely chosen as a mate by a member of an unknown group of shifters. With shifters, careful wasn't enough.

Lina studied the files on Nariu Minor. From the artifacts logged by the researchers, she knew that it had once been a shifter world, but she couldn't decipher which group of shifters from the images of the artifacts. There was a complete list of the research team as well as some information on each member. The file didn't contain much information about the location of the camps. She would have to do some preliminary scans of the planet to get better information on the topography and just who was where when she arrived there.

The prep work would be extensive and she wouldn't contact the researchers until it was done. After she spoke with them, the chance that her presence could become known to the shifters rose dramatically. And she didn't have the faith Callie seemed to have in the scientists' cooperation. Researchers, just like everyone else, had their own agendas. She had to be prepared for a fast retreat if it was needed.

On the journey to the planet, she sipped at some chilled juice while she studied the files on the missing woman. Nerisa Regal had an interesting history. She had spent most of her childhood with her father, a researcher. The woman was accustomed to primitive conditions and knew how to survive. That would be a plus in eluding those who hunted for her.

If Nerisa hadn't been recaptured, Lina would wager she'd taken refuge in some ruins. She had done that with her father and some other researchers when a flood had swept away their camp and again when a freak storm had made it impossible to return

to camp on another expedition. That was if she had managed to elude those who would have tried to find her.

That was a big if. Even the best trained and most experienced person found that eluding a shifter for any length of time required skill and luck. Nerisa would be a very lucky woman if she was still free. Her training didn't include hiding her trail and her scent as she traveled through the forest.

The Sendar's sensors picked up the ship circling the green and blue world of Nariu Minor as she entered the system. When Lina first saw the scans, she stared in stunned awe and growing horror at the size of the ship in orbit around the planet. This mission had just become very dangerous and damn near impossible.

A Veriga-class battleship stood guard over those on the surface. With its advanced sensors and weaponry, it could pose a considerable threat. She'd expected a small party of shifters patrolling their space. An entire clan hovered over the planet in that gigantic warship. If a large number of shifters were staying on that planet, searching would be difficult. With more shifters on the planet, the chance that she would be spotted and recognized for what she was became even greater than it would normally be.

Arriving at the planet, she did her scans but exercised extreme caution when she did. She knew most scanners wouldn't pick up the signals—but some would. She hadn't established her reputation by being careless.

Two distinct camps had been formed on the side of the planet where the research was being conducted. The researchers' camp was smaller, not as well-equipped as the shifters' camp. On the opposite side of the planet from the group of camps, buildings rose in varying stages of completion.

A few intercepted messages later, she identified the group of shifters as Santir—the same species as she was—and she learned that they hadn't found Nerisa. She did a few extra scans to explain some anomalies she'd found and then began preparations for entry into Nariu's atmosphere.

She knew that, in spite of the sophistication of the large ship, they wouldn't be able to detect her Sendar 4. The modifications she'd made to her shuttle were unique and effective. They'd been tested under much harsher conditions than these. As well, if they knew that anyone had arrived, even in the solar system, a vehement demand for an explanation of her presence would have been issued along with a few threats. That was something she hoped to avoid. Her ship was equipped with weapons, but there was no way it would stand against that large battleship.

She used the first three days on-planet to familiarize herself with the terrain and to stash emergency packs in the areas she was most likely to need them. To get a better idea of what she faced, she sent out tiny remote hover-vid units and piloted them to spots around the Santir camp. With these, she could watch the shifters without too much risk.

Lina kept an eye on the video monitors when she was on the shuttle. On the morning of the fourth day, she gaped at the monitor displaying the Santir camp. The

sight of the two men standing there held her transfixed. Her mouth watered, warmth stirring low in her belly at the luscious male flesh on display. The warmed breakfast bun she'd just taken from the auto-prep station landed unnoticed at her feet.

They stood in front of one of the Dura-tents. The mottled camouflage pattern of greens on the tent only served to focus her eyes on them. Both obvious alphas. Both lick-them-all-over gorgeous.

They were bare-chested and both of them had dark hair. The sight of them held her attention and directed her thoughts to carnal paths. They had dark skin, as dark as the deep brown bark of the manoga tree. From experience, Lina's eyes measured their height against known landmarks. She judged that the men in the tight, black pants were both tall, above average in height.

The one on the right had straight brown-black hair that fell just past his shoulders. She zoomed in on his face. His sparkling green eyes were framed by thick long lashes. Her eyes skimmed downward to the sharp blade of his nose and his full, kiss-inciting lips. He was close to beautiful, but even through the monitor a predatory quality made itself evident. Her tongue swept out over her lips and she took a shaky breath. This man could be dangerous, but Gods, tangling with him would probably be fun.

The dark spots of his *trika* at jawline and ribs appeared as splotches of darker flesh against his dark skin visible only to those who expected to find them. He was muscled and broad-shouldered and of the same height as the man next to him, but he appeared smaller next to the sheer muscularity of the man on the left.

The man on the left had long black hair which hung in spiraling curls nearly to the middle of his back. His dark brown eyes narrowed and he stood with a hand on his hip. The rugged, starkly masculine lines of his face became more noticeable. This was no civilized city boy. His nose had been broken more than once. Those sensuous lips slashed into a fierce frown at the moment. The dark spots of his *trika* at his jaw delineated a very firm jawline. The fierce animal in this man loomed very close to the surface, a predator waiting to pounce. Everything about him—his stance, his attitude, his expression—screamed strength and power.

The flash of red, a bird or something, flying just in front of the vid-unit broke her concentration and brought her back to reality. She took a deep breath and focused on discovering if they'd found Nerisa. If they hadn't found the woman, she had to go talk with that research team. Taking a step forward, she stepped on the still-warm roll. The soft pastry squished under her foot, flattening, oozing up between her toes. *Eww*. Shaking her head, she turned back and prepared another roll while she cleaned up the first one. Finally, she sat down in front of the monitor and began looking.

The camp was well-equipped, even lavish in some respects. All the tents were the luxurious, large model of Dura-tent—even the tallest man wouldn't have to stoop inside them. She saw an abundance of supplies, some still in crates. Tables had been placed in two rows at one end of the camp and were used for work space when not in use for a meal.

As she switched between the images, Lina noted the weapons and kept a running total of the number of people in the camp. Some men and women worked at the metal tables set in a clear area while others made their way through the camp. She couldn't be certain of the exact number as there were a couple of skimmers missing from the line of medium-altitude hovercraft at the side of the camp. She'd seen too many people for her comfort. When she was satisfied that Nerisa hadn't yet been found, she shut off the monitor.

Leaving the bun to cool on a small counter, Lina went to her bag and began going through what she'd need to take with her. She had a variety of gadgets that could be useful if she was spotted. She couldn't use a few of them because of that big ship orbiting the planet. One of her favorite tools, a beacon designed to bring her ship to her, was just such a device.

Selecting the equipment she wanted, she plucked it out of her bag and stashed them in various pockets of her functional brown flight suit. Satisfied that she was ready, she returned her attention to her now-cold breakfast. She chewed on a bit of the bun. It wasn't nearly as good cool as it was warm, but it was filling. She'd need the energy today. Hiding the last few packs would burn a lot of calories and when she finished stashing her packs, she'd really begin hunting. After she'd eaten, she left the Sendar.

The mission wouldn't get any easier and waiting would only increase her chances of being caught. It was time to talk with those researchers. She had a few questions she needed answered.

Chapter Two

Shard Valdón's eyes narrowed as Jaksen strode over to the tables where he and Kaleb Markan, the man who ruled as Ardin with him, were inspecting some artifacts. Jaksen Aledo was carrying something in his hands. Shard didn't recognize the object. Brown, mottled and compact, the edges were rounded and appeared smooth. What was it? Where had he found it?

Other than still being unable to find Nerisa, everything had been going according to plan. The construction of the buildings—a permanent home for the *thent*, their clan—progressed ahead of schedule. They had found enough evidence on the planet to encourage the belief that their clan's symbol was still here. And surprisingly, the researchers had been following the rules that had been set for their stay here. Until now, there had been little sign of trouble.

"Ardin, I found this pack in the forest outside our camp." Jaksen handed the sealed packet to Shard.

"*Outside* our camp?" Shard looked down at the array of browns on the packet in his hand. "How did you find it? Was it just left somewhere?"

"It was stashed, Ardin." Jaksen hesitated a moment as he walked toward them. "I would have missed it if I hadn't fallen on the trailing branches of the bush in front of the hole in the tree where it had been hidden." The admission came out in a rush.

"You fell?" Kaleb raised his brows and a smile tilted his lips.

"A limb broke beneath my weight." Jaksen shifted his feet and slanted his eyes away as a blush heated his cheeks.

Shard lifted the bundle and sniffed. The packet was waterproof and carried no scent. Shard opened it. Inside, clothing for rough travel had been packed along with nice, pale green feminine underwear, a pair of shoes, a pack of food and a filled water container.

"Whoever she is, she has nice taste in underwear." Kaleb fingered the ample *tetri* silk cup of the green bra before taking the pack from Shard.

"You're sure this was stashed and not just put somewhere and forgotten?" Shard looked at Jaksen as he asked the question.

"Yes, it's definitely a Santir or other shifter's stash, but she is good. There was no disturbance of any of the branches or leaf litter near the base. This was an experienced woman." Jaksen looked them each in the eye as he gave them his opinion.

"Gannon, have any ships landed on Nariu since we arrived?" Kaleb looked over at Trane Gannon. If no ships had landed, that left only the women within this camp as the possible source of this stash.

"No, nothing has even come close to the planet, Ardin Kaleb. The only shuttle on the planet is the one we use," Trane reported after he consulted the link they had with the *Ovian*.

"I wonder if any of our women would care to explain this." Shard looked over at two of the women who'd been allowed to come down to the planet. Something seemed wrong about this. Why would one of the women be stashing packs as if in preparation for an escape attempt? "You're certain that this is a fresh stash?"

"Yes, it's fresh, no older than a week at most," Jaksen confirmed.

"Get the women together. They have some questions to answer." Kaleb's hand clenched on the fine fabric in the pack.

Shard mentally went through the list of females on the planet. Every one of them was bonded. It made no sense that they would be stashing packs around the area. That was the behavior of a single woman who thought to escape a mate who hadn't yet claimed her. The married women knew that there was no escape from a bonding and most reveled in the connection.

The women were gathered in the center of camp, near one of the long tables currently being used as a work surface. There were only fifteen females in the group that had come down in the shuttle. They stood in a cluster, curious as to why they'd been called before the Ardin.

"Does this look familiar to any of you?" Shard held up the pack for the women to see.

The women all looked blankly at the pack. Not even a hint of recognition flickered in any of their eyes. Shard frowned. The woman who'd done this was either a very good liar or they all really knew nothing of it.

"What of this?" Kaleb held up the silky bra, dangling it by one strap. It hung from ends of his dark fingers. The endowment of the owner was obvious by the large cups of the garment.

"May I see it, Ardin Kaleb?" Medina Tallen stepped forward.

Kaleb lifted his brow. Lithe and slim, Medina would have space to spare in this garment. "We know that it doesn't belong to you."

"It isn't mine, but it reminds me of a bra I saw on a world we visited. They have a special symbol stitched into them. If it's one of those, it couldn't belong to one of us," Medina explained. "We don't waste that amount of Common Credits on something we rarely wear."

Kaleb handed her the garment. The short woman with curly black hair looked near one of the catches to the bra. She smiled and then held it out to Kaleb.

"See. This is the symbol of Teria Design. It's an exclusive shop. One of these bras costs more than anything in my entire wardrobe. It's made specifically to the body of the woman who will wear it and that decorative stitching is done by hand. If I had one

of these, it would be worn only on special occasions and treated gently.” Medina showed both of the Ardin the distinctive symbol surrounding the stylized letters *T* and *D*.

“How much would one of these bras cost?” Shard fingered the fine material of the bra.

“Well, she has matching panties there. She probably bought them as a set—around three hundred Common Credits or more. If there is a woman who paid that much for underwear on this planet, it’s probably one of those with the researchers.” Medina smiled at the Ardin and looked enviously at the garment they were holding.

“We’ll check that, but the method and expert camouflage indicates that it was done by a born shifter female.” Kaleb looked at all of the women. “In these times, we can’t afford to lose one female of our kind, much less a female from a mated pair.”

* * * * *

Kaleb and Shard stalked into the researchers’ camp. All the busy researchers immediately stopped what they were doing and focused their attention on the two Santir males. A few of the people wore a gloating look, others looked arrogant. They all acted as if they knew something important. That attitude told Kaleb more than any words could that someone had slipped onto this planet, most likely a shifter female.

The lead researcher, a gray-haired man named Vedix Mercia, rushed forward to greet them. “Welcome, Ardin Kaleb, Ardin Shard. What can we do for you? We told you that we would contact you if we saw Nerisa. She hasn’t come here. We assumed that she was with you.”

Kaleb read the lie of that last statement in the man’s eyes. He didn’t need the man’s scent to reveal the deceit. The researcher had known that she hadn’t been found. Kaleb found that very interesting.

“What do you know of this?” Shard held up the pack of clothing, opening it to display the feminine articles.

Fear rolled off the researcher, a pungent smell. “I-I’ve never seen it before.”

He might have never seen it, but he knows something, Kaleb sent the thought Shard on the mental path they shared as *Tierna*, bond-brothers, bound by magic and blood.

There is one way to ensure he tells us. His work means more to him than anything else. Shard narrowed his eyes as he paced closer to the researcher. “Is there something you wish to tell me? Remember, this is Shifter-Protected Space. You are here at our discretion.”

The calm warning had immediate results. Vedix reeled back as if he’d been hit and his eyes opened wide. The man didn’t need the threat to be made any clearer. If he didn’t cooperate, he’d be sent back to his museum without a single artifact. Kaleb knew the moment that the researcher made his decision.

"Nerisa sent out a distress signal the day that she escaped. Galactic Central Command sent someone to look into the situation," Vedix rushed to tell them.

"Who did they send? How many are here?" Kaleb stepped forward and stared down at the man. That they'd managed to slip onto the planet undetected astounded him, but it was the fact that they seemed prepared to take the mate of a shifter that angered him. Any shifter should know better.

"I only know of one and from the way she spoke, I thought she was alone." Vedix shrugged and stepped back intimidated by Kaleb's size. "She introduced herself only as Lina when she came by early yesterday."

"Describe her to me," Kaleb snapped.

"She's blonde, large breasts, tall and long legs. She has the same spots along her jaw as you do, although hers are more visible. They're a light brown against her golden skin." Vedix pushed his hand through his hair.

That would make it much easier to find her and it explained why she was stashing packs. In *tiron* form, she would be golden and unable to blend with the other Santir here. Kaleb wondered just how a female shifter became mixed up with Central Command and just how far she intended to go. *Would she actually try to take a mate off the planet?*

"Did she ask any questions or speak to anyone for any length of time?" Shard stepped forward, looming over the short, thin man.

"The same people you spoke to, she spoke to," Vedix answered quickly.

She probably has the woman's entire history, Shard raged silently. She wouldn't require much outside information if she knows the woman's habits. That's an advantage that we don't have.

"Do you wish to ask anyone any more questions?" Vedix wrung his hands nervously during the silence that had fallen.

"Did she say when she'd arrived here? How did she come to Nariu?" Shard looked at the man. He stepped forward, close enough to smell a lie if the man tried it.

"She didn't say, but I got the impression that she'd been here a few days. She assured us that Nerisa wasn't with you." Vedix shrank back. His fear carried easily to them on the light wind.

She's not only stashing kits in preparation – she has been watching us. Shard's growl rumbled through the researchers' camp. The low, menacing sound startled several people and a piece of old pottery crashed to the ground, breaking into small pieces.

"If we think of anything we need to know, we'll return to ask you," Kaleb informed the man just before he and Shard turned to walk to the skimmers. Now they had to hunt for not just one woman but two – and the second had found a way to get past the sensors of a Veriga-class battleship.

We have more questions now than we did when we came here. Shard activated the skimmer. It hovered and a single toggle took it to a level above the treetops.

Kaleb pulled his skimmer even with Shard's as they turned toward their camp. *Like how she even got close to the planet, much less on it without the sensors picking up her ship, where that ship is and where this little, golden-haired kitten is right now?*

If we can find Nerisa soon, we'll probably come across the woman. Shard turned the skimmer to take it in for landing.

You don't think that she'll try to take Nerisa with her? Kaleb raised a brow. *Since she's on her own, she likely didn't grow up in a thent.*

She has been taught more than the basics. The expert method of stashing indicates that she was taught and lived as a shifter at least part of her life. She'll know the primary laws. Once she finds that Nerisa is on the cusp of transformation, she'll make plans to leave. The assurance was filled with certainty.

We'll just have to make sure she doesn't get the chance. Kaleb clenched his jaw. This woman had lived on the edge too long. It was time she was brought back under the protection of Santir society.

Chapter Three

This part of Nariu was riddled with ruins, some aboveground and some below ground. Dense forest surrounded the remnants of some old civilization. In the end, an offhand remark made by the woman who had shared a tent with Nerisa had led Lina in the right direction.

The woman had said that Nerisa had had an argument with the lead researcher about where they should be searching. Nerisa had believed that there were more buildings outside the valley on the opposite side of the mountain. The lead researcher had considered it a waste of time when the ruins were so abundant within the valley and wouldn't investigate.

According to the Sendar's scans, Nerisa had been right. There was an extensive, mostly subterranean complex on the mountain and more beyond the mountain's slopes. More importantly, someone was in this area. Lina had picked up a sign of life yesterday as she flew a remote scanner drone over the area.

She'd been excited when she had found that sign. She was anxious to get this mission completed. There were too many Santir on this planet. Every time she stepped off the Sendar she took a risk. Just going to the researchers' camp without being seen required intricate planning and a huge amount of luck. With so many shifters roaming the area, it would be impossible to remain undetected for much longer.

This morning, she just had to make sure she had a clear path and then she could go. As early as it was, she hoped most of the men were still in camp. The sun hadn't even fully risen yet. She wanted to know where all the Santir were before she went after Nerisa. She sighed as she watched the screens. Counting the Santir in the camp, she noted thirty men were missing.

First, she piloted a remote bot to the sites the men had been searching for artifacts. She found seven of the men busily at work there. Didn't any of them sleep in? She'd love to be curled up in bed, but finishing this damn mission quickly was too important.

Switching the bots into search mode, she began finding the men in groups of one and two throughout the forest, some much too close to the direction she had to go. She grimaced—going around them was going to take time and care. The bot slowed as it flew through the trees, pausing just inside the tree line at the edge of a clearing.

The large man with the curling black hair strode from the forest. His eyes were focused on the ground. The man was very obviously hunting, but she had no idea what. He wore camouflage-patterned clothing that hugged his body tightly. The only unbroken colors on him were on the pack at his hip and his black boots. He stopped occasionally, looking for signs in the tall grass. She switched the control to manual for a minute, unable to resist the urge to get a closer look. She focused the image on the

man's backside. She sighed in appreciation as his tight pants molded to muscular legs and a gorgeous ass. Those muscles clearly showed as they flexed and relaxed with each step.

Pulling the camera back to a wide view, she noted the man's location and was preparing to put it on auto again when she saw dark shape creeping through the tall grass toward the big man.

It was a *tiron*. She frowned as the Santir in animal form kept low to the ground, moving with absolute stealth toward the man walking toward the trees. He seemed completely unaware that anyone was stalking him.

The huge animal with brown-black fur drew close, within pouncing distance. She saw the muscles bunch beneath the sleek fur and then it leapt. The man spun and his arms lifted to catch the huge feline hurtling toward him. This wasn't anyone's pet kitty. Standing on all fours, it would probably be almost chest high even on the huge black-haired man.

He didn't look shocked or frightened. He smiled. For a moment, she wondered if he was insane. A huge *tiron* jumped him and the man found it amusing.

As the animal's momentum knocked him off his feet, the *tiron* changed into the man with brown-black hair she'd seen earlier standing next to Curly Hair. They wrestled, rolling around the clearing. She watched avidly, unable to tear her eyes away from them. She wished she could hear as well as see them. Her imagination was running wild wondering what they'd do next.

Kaleb pinned Shard to the ground. His lips turned up into a satisfied smile as he saw the heat building in Shard's brown eyes. Kaleb leaned down and ran the tip of his tongue over lips pulled into a tight line. He knew that Shard wasn't angry, just a little annoyed that he'd ended up on the bottom.

"I got you this time." Kaleb went to work on Shard's clothes. He'd known from the tense set of Shard's shoulders this morning that his bond mate needed something to break the tension of the search for Nerisa and the mysterious Lina as much as he did.

Shard's fingers brushed his as he tried to keep his shirt on. "We do have to find Nerisa and the other woman."

"And the others are looking. You know we've looked here. If you'd really wanted to search, you'd be searching fresh territory. You're only upset because you were going to lure me here and didn't get a chance." Kaleb fastened his lips to Shard's, thrusting his tongue deep into Shard's warm mouth.

"But my plan was so much better than this. A nice swim in the river, a long fuck to help us both relax and here you are on top of me in the middle of a field and you don't appear to have any supplies with you." Shard raised a brow in challenge.

Kaleb just couldn't let that go unanswered. He slid his hand down Shard's hard body until his fingers touched the pack. "I might not be prepared, but I'm willing to take advantage of your foresight."

He unfastened the closure and slipped his hand inside, searching until he found the slim bottle of lubricant. Bringing it up, he rolled the bottle between his fingers before he lowered his head to lick his lover's lips.

"We're going to fuck, and then we'll have a swim. After that we'll find those two women and get some answers." He rolled his hips, rubbing his cock against the cloth covering Shard's penis.

Shard's eyes closed and his hips arched, returning the grinding caress. Kaleb tipped his head back, reveling in the sensation of cloth rubbing against his shaft. The soft rasp against his already hard, sensitive cock felt too good. His balls drew tight to his body. He took a deep breath and grabbed for control. He wanted to be inside Shard when he came. And he wanted to give Shard a hard, satisfying orgasm before that happened.

He pulled back, intent on removing Shard's clothes. He'd just pushed the shirt wide when he felt warm fingers brush his cock a moment before they closed around his balls. The hand tightened, squeezing firmly and rolling his balls. A bolt of fire shot up his spine and his pelvis thrust forward involuntarily. At that moment, he knew he'd lost control and needed to get it back.

"No, no, it's my turn. I pinned you this time." Kaleb reached down and grabbed Shard's hand, releasing his aching balls from that too-knowing grip. He didn't doubt his lover's ability sexually or his appetite. Shard would take over if given the opportunity.

"Your turn only if you can keep it." Shard smiled and, with a shove on Kaleb's shoulder, tried to reverse their positions.

Kaleb shifted his weight to the side, resisting the push. He reached down and rubbed Shard's cock through the fabric of his pants. A low growl rumbled through his chest as he arched into the firm touch. Kaleb opened the fly of the pants, freeing Shard's cock.

"I want to be face-to-face with you this time. I want to see your eyes when you come." He pushed the pants down Shard's thighs just before he dropped a hard kiss on Shard's lips.

Shard's tongue drove into his mouth and his fingers clamped around the back of Kaleb's neck. His mouth moved hungrily against Kaleb's and their tongues dueled. Kaleb nipped at Shard's lips as he rotated his hips, rubbing their cocks together. His cock hardened even more at the hot lust in Shard's eyes and in his scent.

"If you don't stop playing, I'm going to show you who's in control here." Shard growled, dragging Kaleb's head down for another kiss.

Kaleb was in total agreement with that demand, and within moments he had Shard completely naked. He wanted to drive inside him now, to feel the hot, tight clasp gripping his cock. Pulling back, he slicked the lube over his cock and moved his oily fingers down to the tight ring of Shard's anus. He pressed, drew back and dropped more lube onto his fingers and then pressed in again. Curling his finger, he stroked the small gland inside and felt Shard tense beneath him.

Withdrawing his finger and dropping the lube, he hooked one of Shard's legs over his arm. He pressed his cock against the tight entrance, pushing slowly forward. Kaleb tensed, hot sensation lancing through him as Shard's muscles clenched around his shaft.

He pressed forward until his balls brushed against Shard's buttocks. Wrapping his hand around Shard's cock, he began stroking as he pulled his hips back. Rocking forward, he set a slow grinding pace, wanting to draw it out just a little longer. He knew he wouldn't last long. The tight, hot, slick channel surrounding him felt too good. Kaleb's hips pumped as he stroked Shard's cock. He saw Shard's muscles tighten and the way he arched into each thrust. Shard's hands lifted and he began plucking at the flat disks on Kaleb's chest. Kaleb jerked, driving his cock deep as piercing heat slammed through him.

His hips surged forward and all thought of drawing the play out for any longer fled. His balls drew tight, seed churning within. He drove into the tight, hot grip of Shard's ass. Stroking his hand down Shard's shaft, he pumped in time with the surge of his hips. Shard's hips rolled up. A low groan rumbled from his throat as he came. Semen spurted, splashing across both their stomachs.

Kaleb's head fell back as he stroked deep. Fire exploded, racing over his body. The intense orgasm hit as his seed spewed from his cock.

Releasing Shard's leg, he collapsed on top of the larger man, resting his head on Shard's shoulder.

Shard's hand stroked through his hair. After long moments, Kaleb slowly stirred, levering himself up on one arm.

"Are you ready to go take that swim?" Shard tugged at Kaleb's hair and smiled.

"We'd better. As much as I'd like it, we can't play here all day." Kaleb slowly withdrew.

"We can play again after we find those two women. Nerisa will be with her mate, but the other one—she could give us some problems wherever we put her." Shard frowned and shook his head.

"What do you mean problems? We'll just take her up to the ship. She won't be able to escape from everyone up there." Kaleb got to his feet and extended a hand to Shard.

"She got past our ship's sensors. That kind of technology isn't sold on the open market. Either she made it herself or had it done. If she made it, playing with what we have up there would be almost too easy for her." Shard gathered his clothing and then took Kaleb's hand.

Kaleb grimaced at the thought of the chaos she could cause, but they'd deal with it if it happened. He turned and began walking toward the river with Shard at his side.

Lina caught her breath as the men's lips touched. Even though she felt like an intruder, she wasn't going to miss a moment of this. She'd never seen anything more erotic than the two men on the video screen. Her heart kicked into a faster beat and her

breasts felt swollen. She wanted to be there with them even if it was just to watch. Her fingers slid to the closure on her body suit. She skimmed her fingers down, parting the material to her waist. Licking her tingling lips, she settled back in her seat and cupped her breast. Her finger flicked over the hardened tip as she watched them.

The sight of the two men fucking seared through her. Her clit ached and she could feel the moisture gathering between her legs. She groaned and slipped her hand down her stomach to her pussy. Her fingers slipped between the lips and she rubbed in slow circles. Her free hand plucked at one of her nipples. Her inner muscles tightened and the building need grew. She wanted more. She pushed two fingers into the tight sheath and slowly withdrew them.

She panted and her hips rocked against her hand. Her thumb brushed over her clit. Her body shook and she desperately reached for the pleasure hanging just out of reach. She drove her fingers deep into her pussy just as she flicked the hard too-sensitive hood. Sharp sensation ripped up her spine, spreading over her body in a heated rush. She trembled and cried out softly.

* * * * *

She tried to concentrate. It was hard to focus on the area around her when her mind kept replaying what she'd seen on vid earlier this morning. She didn't know if she'd seen anything as sexy in her whole life.

She moved slowly through the trees, watching for any sign of other shifters in the area. For the short time that she'd be here today, she should be safe. All the Santir searches focused on the other side of the mountain.

She knew Nerisa was in that complex even as she approached the entrance to the underground structure. She couldn't sense her and would be unable sense her until she was much closer. She could smell smoke from a recent fire and there was a faint trace of female scent in the area around the ruins. Lina stopped abruptly and almost turned around when she realized that the smell wasn't that of a female human.

With a resigned sigh, she shrugged and strode forward. She had a responsibility to see that the woman was safe and to try to explain the way of things now. The woman had a new life to learn and it was time she accepted it. Running certainly wouldn't do her any good and Lina wouldn't be taking her off the planet. After she'd explained the facts and sent Nerisa on her way back to her mate, she would begin the trek back to her ship. It was past time to leave this planet.

An uneasy chill coursed down Lina's spine as she entered the narrow corridor of the entry hall. Something wasn't right here. She stopped, cocked her head and sniffed. The scent of wood smoke and a transforming female lingered in the stale air. She couldn't figure out what had her nerves jangling with alarm. There were no out-of-place smells or even a hint of anyone else in the area.

She took a few more steps until the sunlight would reach no farther. She pulled a light from her belt and clicked it on. Her shifter eyes were very good in the dark, but

there had to be some trace of light for her to see. It was pitch black beyond the entrance. Not even a stray beam of light filtered through a crack in the ceiling. She took a few steps into the passage leading down into the mountain.

Surely the woman wasn't spending her days in complete darkness. She frowned as she paced down the corridor. Lina emerged into an empty, large room. She'd expected to find Nerisa Regal in the first real room far enough away from the entrance to ensure that no light would give her away to any who might be outside.

She could see signs that the woman had been in the room, but she wasn't here now. The smell of smoke hung strongly in the air, very fresh, but the charred bits of wood in the pit didn't glow. Nerisa should be here. Had the woman seen her approaching and run?

Suddenly, Lina sensed a shifter male running up behind her. The tingle of awareness coursed down her spine, a definitive alarm. Fear crashed through her and she responded instinctively. She dropped the light as she spun, claws bursting from the tips of her fingers. Those sharp talons made contact with a hard-muscled, cloth-covered chest as her light clattered on the stone floor. She leapt back, wanting space to move before she even really saw whom she had swiped.

Lina's eyes widened and she shook her head in disbelief as reality slammed home. The big man with the long black spiraling hair she'd seen on the monitor stood before her. His white shirt bore four jagged tears across the chest. Red trails of blood plastered the material to his skin from chest to waist where the shirt disappeared into the tight black pants which encased his long, muscled legs. He looked much bigger, much stronger than he had on the vid-screen and the intimidation factor had multiplied off the charts.

"I didn't just attack someone so obviously alpha." Lina backed up a step as he stepped farther into the room. Without realizing it she'd spoken the words aloud. A strange mixture of uncertainty and anger warred for superiority within her.

"Yes, you did." The intense look in his eyes astounded her. His dark brown eyes almost burned as they ran over her. She couldn't mistake his sexual interest. "You have two choices. You can belly down the easy way or I'll take you down, Lina."

"I won't submit to you. You have no authority over me. No man does or ever has." Lina bared her teeth at him, her body loosening, preparing for a fight. How dare he presume to give her an ultimatum? *And how does he know my name?*

"I think a brighter light is in order for this." A white smile flashed across his dark face. His hand moved to the small black rectangular com-link at his hip, flicked a switch and spoke just three words. "I've got her."

Gods, this was bad. She eyed the trails of blood and held back a groan as she realized just what she'd done. While most people would understand that she'd been startled, she knew that he didn't see the situation in that light. That attack could be viewed as a challenge and he obviously chose to see it as such. Although she doubted it would help, she had to try to talk him out of forcing a full submission. Anything less

and she could sidestep the major issues and slip away at the first opportunity. Not that even full submission was going to change her mind on leaving. Living in a *thent* wasn't for her. It would just make things much more complicated when she left. The Ardin of this *thent* would not only follow her, they'd feel they had a duty to do it.

She licked her lips and took a shaky breath. "You surprised me. Anyone would have come around swinging when they sensed someone running up behind them."

"Especially if that someone was trying to hide something." His eyes swept down her body.

"Well, I didn't expect anyone to be coming up behind me that fast. I pretty much reacted on instinct. Surely you can understand that." She let her eyes fall to the floor, hoping he took it as a submissive gesture.

He laughed. "Nice act. You didn't expect anyone to find you at all. And you can stop trying to explain. I'm not going to fall for the 'I was just scared' story. You admitted you felt my presence. You knew I was Santir. That should have been enough information to know that you wouldn't be hurt."

Gritting her teeth, she managed to keep from yelling at him. She wished she could relive that moment. That one action had taken very many choices away from her. If she hadn't attacked him, there was a good chance that she could have used a little trickery and gotten away from them. Now she had to face the big man in a fight or submit tying herself to the *thent*. Even worse, if her guess was right, the man she'd attacked was one of the Ardin, leaders of the *thent*.

Lights blazed as men filed into the room from three doorways. The men must have been deep in the ruins. She hadn't felt anything until a moment ago. They placed small portable lights on the floor near the walls. Lina saw Nerisa being tugged after one man. When she saw the walls of this room, she no longer wondered why the Santir were here. This had once been a planet held by them. The walls were covered with paintings and carvings of *tiron* and Santir men and women.

"What are you waiting for, kitten?" The big man stripped off his shirt. "Surely you don't think that I'll face you in this form. You're much too likely to be seriously hurt."

Lina swallowed hard. She hadn't given it much thought. She knew why he wanted to fight in *tiron* form, beyond the reason that he'd stated. Instincts were much more dominant in animal form. While in *tiron* form, she was more likely to submit, to acknowledge the dominance of the male before she pushed him too far, before he hurt her. There was also the experience factor. He'd probably fought more as a *tiron* than she had. *Gods, how had they even known I'd be coming after Nerisa?*

She pulled apart the lapels of her brown flight suit, pausing to unbuckle her belt and let it fall to the ground. Slipping the fabric off her shoulders and arms, she pushed it down over her hips. With a glance up at him, she saw that he was already naked. His body was gorgeous. His skin gleamed, a rich deep brown. For a moment, she allowed herself to watch the rippling movement of his muscles beneath the skin. A dart of

heated arousal shot through her as she took in his well-developed thighs and the long, thick shaft between them.

She knelt, loosening the fastenings on her shoes and then stepped out of them and the one-piece suit. For a moment, she stood in her underwear. Her hands went to the front clasp of her bra. She tossed the filmy article on the flight suit. With a grimace, she raged at the tricks of fate. This was one situation she would have liked to have avoided. She pushed her panties down and stepped out of them.

Her only other choice, bellying down, would mean losing the freedom that she had known for so long. The Gods knew that she had no real chance of defeating this big man in any form. Even if she did manage the feat, she suspected she would immediately be challenged by the dark-haired man she had seen with him on that vid. He was probably lurking somewhere close. Kneeling, she folded her garments, placing the belt and shoes on top and then put them out of the way in a corner. Turning to face the large, dark-skinned man, she transformed into a *tiron*.

The man with spiral curls transformed into a large, black, heavily muscled *tiron*. Huge with a broad head, pointed ears and visible canines, he was every bit as intimidating in his feline form as he was in human form. His gaze locked with hers as he paced forward. Once she saw his size, it took every scrap of control over her instincts not to surrender and plaster her belly onto the floor. He would almost be chest high on her if she were still in human form. His paws were almost twice as large as hers. Her mouth dried. She'd never even seen a *tiron* as big as him.

"Submit," he ordered with a rolling cough-grunt as he paced forward.

"Go away and leave me alone, big man. I'm not your concern." Lina's lips pulled back into a snarl. The second language was instinctual, encoded into the subconscious of every Santir at birth or transformation and in spite of geographic differences needed no translation. She vowed he would never know how difficult it was to defy him.

"You entered our domain. We found you. Submit," the big black cat growled, beginning to circle.

Lina's determination to show no fear wavered for a moment as she backed away from him. *This is insane. I can't beat him*, she thought and then shook her head. She took a deep breath and gathered her courage. He was bigger and this was probably a losing battle, but she would try everything before she admitted defeat.

Lina pranced sideways, her body language one of unmistakable challenge. Her head high, her tail swishing, she growled at him. "Not going to happen. I've survived quite well without your protection. Go offer it to a cringing cub."

"You aren't escaping me. You will submit."

The low, threatening rumble of his growl still echoed in the room when he pounced at her. The large head rammed into her hind leg instead of her torso as he intended when she tried to bound out of his reach. His grappling paws failed to find purchase as her sleek, twisting body slid away from him.

A low, angry hiss escaped Lina's muzzle, her ears laid back as she whirled and leaped to a safe distance. She watched through narrowed, angry eyes as his muscled body rose with fluid grace. Something that large and brawny shouldn't be that fast or agile.

It wasn't only the fact that he had nearly grabbed her so easily that infuriated her. She could feel her body coming alive, responding to the situation with unmistakable arousal. *By the Gods, something must be twisted within me*, she thought. She wanted the man whose only purpose was to make her acknowledge him as ruler.

Lina fought her instincts which made her knees wobbly. She didn't want to submit to the dominant male. She was more than her instincts, but she couldn't entirely break their hold. In the past when someone had attacked her like that, she had come back swinging, claws ready to shred their flesh. This time her body seemed to have only two choices—submit or flee. The fleeing option seemed to have been taken away from her. There was a wall of male bodies in front of the door leading out of the ruin.

The large male stalked her. Lina's movements mirrored his, keeping him at a distance. There was no way that she could beat him, even if she could overcome the instinct that seemed to be ruling her. He was too big, too strong. All she could do was make sure that he respected her. She bared her teeth at him.

Lina saw his muscles bunching beneath his fur again and lunged to get away from him. She had known that he was fast, but this time he demonstrated his agility. He landed and in the same motion turned and sprang. He crashed into her, knocking her to the ground. He rolled and was on top of her before she could draw in the breath which had been knocked from her, much less move.

His teeth sank into the fur at her neck. She was pinned on her stomach beneath his much greater weight. Some perverse part of her found that immensely arousing. Her body heated, softened. His larger size made her feel small, delicate and feminine. Her intellect rebelled. She'd been on her own too long to give up her freedom this easily.

She wiggled beneath him, her body twisting and heaving, trying to slip away from him. Those sharp teeth tightened and she felt them slightly break the surface of her skin. It was warning enough. One shake from those strong jaws and she wouldn't reach the normal life expectancy for a Santir. She would die at a mere one hundred thirty.

A growl rumbled into her fur. She needed no further prompting. It was time to listen to her instincts. She laid her muzzle on the ground, pressing her body to the cold stone. Closing her eyes momentarily in defeat, she submitted, relaxing her body beneath the heavy male *tiron*.

She took a deep breath. This one assignment had changed her entire life. She'd never really lived in a *thent*. The group she'd lived in when she was younger had been ruled by a council of elders, but she hadn't been with them for years. Adapting to following someone else's rules wasn't going to be easy.

The male rose and stood astride her. He shifted to human form. Lina stayed as she was, unmoving. He moved around to stand a few paces in front of her, not bothering to

pull on his clothing. The man she had seen with him on the monitor came to stand beside him.

"I am Ardin Shard Valdan. This is Ardin Kaleb Markan. Welcome to Karach Thent, *mate*." The man with the spiral curls smiled with feral menace.

Lina's head snapped up as his deep voice rumbled the word "*mate*". Her eyes went from one man to the other. *No*. It couldn't be true. Aghast, her mouth agape, she stared at them. They didn't look like they were joking. She shook her head minutely. She couldn't have stumbled across her mate...mates. Santir Ardin—two men who ruled over a *thent*, which could easily top ten thousand people—took one mate.

"Transform now." Ardin Kaleb swept his gaze over her as she lay on the floor.

Lina obeyed. She allowed the transformation to sweep over her. Inside she felt as if she was caught in a whirling wind and couldn't find her feet. She didn't want mates, ties of any kind. She wasn't staying here.

Shard watched as the feline body became a female body. The tangled mass of her golden hair trailed halfway down her back. Her sun-kissed golden skin seemed to glow in the bright light from the lamps. His eyes traveled down the line of her back and rested on the taut curve of her buttocks. He watched the play of muscles in her long toned legs. For years, he'd searched. Now he would finally know the true joy of completion.

She seemed more horrified than overjoyed, but considering the fact that she was wandering around on her own that was to be expected. Lina was obviously a woman used to doing what she wanted, when she wanted.

"Stand and approach us, *rah'ki*." Shard growled the order, impatient to have her stand before him, to have his kitten acknowledge him. Blood throbbed in his cock. One whiff of her scent was all it had taken to send a raging lust pounding through him. This woman was mate to Kaleb and to him.

He eyed the golden-skinned woman standing across from him. In either form, she was beautiful. Golden-haired with golden eyes, she was a tall woman, but very curvy. Her breasts were large with long nipples that begged for a man's fingers and mouth. Rolling his shoulders to loosen his muscles, he tried to ease the tension brought by the fight.

With any other challenger, Shard would have been quick to deal a reprimand for insolence such as she had shown and perhaps even left a wound as a reminder, but this wasn't a typical challenger. He hadn't wanted to hurt her, had found it almost impossible to take the offensive. He'd wanted only to take her in his arms, hold her and make love to her.

After he'd inhaled her scent, fighting had been the last thing on his mind. The only blood he'd wanted to draw was with a mating bite. Giving her a choice other than complete submission hadn't been an option. She would have continued looking for a

way to escape, probably still would. He wasn't willing to take the chance that she'd succeed.

Shard's eyes narrowed as he ran them over the beautiful body before him. Those wide expressive amber eyes stared and an interesting pink swept over her cheeks as the silence lengthened. The *trika*, the spots at her jawline, highlighted the rounded contours of her face. As she waited, she worried her full lower lip with her teeth. His eyes skimmed over her trim waist to the mound between her thighs. The lips of her labia were bare, but a diamond of hair remained atop her mons.

Raising his brows, Kaleb took off his shirt and began to work on his belt and pants. Shard could see the bulge of Kaleb's cock tenting the material and he hadn't yet inhaled a whiff of her sweet scent. If she was their mate, he didn't want anything between them, least of all their clothes. He wanted every man gone, but he knew they needed to begin the search for her ship and any other packs she'd stashed.

Are you certain, Shard? Kaleb leaned back against the wall as she walked toward them. *Maybe it's just wishful thinking. You know we have searched for a long time.*

I got a face full of her fur. Yes, I am certain. Shard growled in annoyance. He could feel Kaleb's uncertainty, his hunger for the mating to be real, through their connection. His bond-brother would only truly believe when he caught her scent and felt the connection. Shard knew that it was real and still felt a little awed by this turn of fate. His reaction to her left no doubt. That intoxicating scent hadn't made concentrating easy. *Wait a few moments and you'll smell it.*

Chapter Four

Lina took a deep breath and stood slowly. She paced forward and stood before them, her head bowed. The fact that one of them was naked and the other wore only black pants did nothing to hide the air of power, of authority which clung to them.

"Yes, Ardin," she whispered.

Her voice sounded a little breathy because of the nervous energy running through her. She was honest enough to admit desire also played a part—a big part. By the Gods, fire pulsed through her veins. She felt torn apart by the conflicting desires at war within her. Part of her hoped that he was wrong and she wasn't his mate, but a larger part wanted him to be right. Her mind was confused, but every bit of experience told her that she wouldn't be happy living in a pack. Especially if it was like her mother's pack, her old pack.

She saw *Ardin* Kaleb's eyes flicker over her face and then stop at a point under her eyes. His mouth kicked up in an amused smile, but his green eyes darkened with hunger. Frowning, she wondered just what he found so funny. With a groan, she realized that she was biting at her lip and closed her eyes as she faced just how much that tell had betrayed. Without a doubt, they knew how nervous and scared she was.

"I want to nibble on those luscious lips soon, little *nari*. You have many questions to answer, Lina. That is your real name?" Kaleb's green eyes seemed to glow with heat.

"Yes, *Ardin*," Lina gulped, a little startled at the endearment. Literally, *nari* meant mate.

As for the questions, she had expected it. Now that she was part of their *thent* she would have to account for her actions as well as reveal every detail of her personal life if they asked about it.

"Only one question for now," Shard advised as he stepped forward and tilted her head up so he could look fully into her eyes. "How many packs do you have stashed here?"

"Thirty-five, Ardin," Lina didn't blink at the question, but her mind went into a spin. *They'd obviously found some of her packs.* She just wanted to know if they'd found her packs or if the researchers had informed them of her presence first. Not that it really mattered, but she'd like to know if she'd made a mistake somewhere.

"Jaksen, you and the others have thirty-four packs to find, and see if you can find her ship before she has to show us." Kaleb turned his attention briefly to the waiting men. "Leave us."

The men filed out without comment, taking Nerisa with them.

"Come into our embrace, Lina." Shard held out his hand.

The two men stood at an angle toward each other. Lina stepped between them. She lowered her head first to Shard's chest and inhaled. The heated scent of aroused male hit her. Her tongue flicked out, dancing over his chest and drawing his warm, distinctive taste into her. She knew at that first whiff of his scent that he was her mate.

She turned to Kaleb and inhaled. His arousal was obvious, but under that there was a scent that she recognized even though she had never smelled this particular scent before. Her mate. Her mind whirled, filled with confused thoughts at finding two mates and what she should do, but her body responded, relaxing, softening and heating. She could feel warm juices roll onto her thighs. Her arousal grew as their pheromones hit her system.

This was bad. Her reaction was even stronger than she'd imagined it would be. She couldn't think of much other than getting close to them.

Kaleb hooked his arm around her, drawing her to him. His head dipped, nuzzling waves of golden hair away from her neck. His teeth clamped briefly over the muscle where her neck and shoulder joined. A primitive thrill rushed through her and an excited mewl fell from her lips as her body jerked against his in involuntary encouragement. She pressed her hips against his rigid erection.

"I'm not the one you attacked, *rao nari*. I'm not the one who had to pin you." His tongue traced up the side of her neck. "I want to learn your taste, the feel of your body, *i'ma*. I need to fuck you, to claim you as mate so that no other will dare to come near you, but he will fuck you first."

"We'll have you together after the formal bonding," Shard whispered against her ear. "This time, we'll both come deep in your pussy. There will be no doubts in your mind that this is a true mating."

Shard's arm swept around her and pulled her back against him. Kaleb released her and stepped back. Shard's hand smoothed down her stomach and his fingers traced the edges of the diamond of hair.

"We'll remove this when we get up to the *Ovian*. I want nothing between my tongue and your soft skin here, even if it is only a small patch." Shard turned with Lina and stepped forward until they were near the wall. "Hands on the wall, *rah'ki*."

Lina placed her hands on the wall. A nudge of his foot had her widening her stance. She was so hot and very little of it was because of the pheromones secreted by the two men. Much of it was because of her tussle with Shard.

Before today, she wouldn't have believed that there was one thing arousing about being pinned by a dominant male Santir. From the first, she'd been aware of his size and strength, the differences between them, but then he'd pinned her and her body had flamed. Although she'd been too focused on the fight to recognize it then, her body had known that she'd found her mate. Every moment that he'd held her beneath him, she'd been very aware of how muscled and large his body was and how small she must seem to him. The thought of the contrast between them had roused her lust.

The fact that he held her captive, helpless as no other had ever done had enflamed her wanton Santir soul. She felt hotter now than when she'd last been in heat. She wanted to feel his mouth anywhere he cared to put it. She wanted to feel that dark cock filling her pussy, moving within her.

That desire was different from normal lust as well. She only wanted those two men, not any man she could find.

Shard gathered her hair and pushed it aside, baring her right shoulder. His breath fanned over her shoulder as he stepped closer, his hard shaft sliding between her legs and brushing against her slick, swollen labia. His teeth nibbled on her earlobe, the extension of both upper and lower canines obvious from the sharp scrape against her skin as he nipped at her neck.

"You fought me, ignored my orders. Do you submit to me now, Lina?" Shard's body pressed against Lina's in an imitation of his earlier victory.

Lina arched her neck, baring it for him. "I submit." She pushed her body back against his, undulating her hips and rubbing her pussy along his shaft, trying to induce him to put that rigid organ into her needy quim.

"Are you my mate?" He positioned the head of his cock at her honeyed slit. His right hand held her hips, keeping her from pushing back onto him until he had his answer.

"Yes, I'm your mate."

"Call me by my name." He drove his cock into her slick, tight cunt with a rolling thrust. His right hand moved around her waist to cup the mound of her sex. "You're so tight, Lina. Hot and wet and ready for me."

"Shard, please," she cried, trying to move against him, but he held her still, at his mercy. The realization that he could do it only drove the heat within her higher.

"Yes, Lina," He rubbed his teeth over her neck and then down to her shoulder. A rich chuckle rumbled against her as he felt the shiver of need pulse through her. His teeth clamped over the spot where her neck and shoulder met.

He pounded into her, each thrust driving her clit into the cup of his hand. Cries of need tore from Lina's throat. Her hips rolled, meeting each impaling jab and riding the fingers that brushed that sensitive hood. His growl in response vibrated against her skin, sending a tremor through her and extra honeyed warmth to her pussy.

She loved that dominance, the force of each thrust into her. She drew in harsh, fast, gasping breaths as he fucked her. All thoughts other than the heat and pleasure induced by his wicked touch flew from her head. Gods, she needed more. She could feel her orgasm hovering just out of her reach and thrust her hips back against his, trying to get what she needed.

She'd never had anyone draw such a strong response from her. She was on fire, burning with need.

"Come for me," he growled, using the *tiron* language because he wouldn't release his grip on her shoulder. "Come for your mate."

"Harder, Shard," she panted, a breath away from her release.

He rammed into her, his fingers pushing against the swollen hood of her clit. "*I'ma*, you are so beautiful, so hot. Come for me."

On that growled order, Lina came. She threw her head back, screaming her release. Her body shivered under the onslaught of sensation. Bright lights flashed in front of her eyes and she pushed back into him.

Shard surged into her, focused now on his release. His hands gripped her hips, holding her still, submissive. She loved that strength and just that display stirred another wave of lust as he continued to thrust into her. He pounded into her, his hips pushing against her buttocks. His semen spurted into her in hot jets as his body jerked against hers. His harsh, exultant groan was smothered against her neck.

Lina's legs were trembling a little when Shard began to pull away from her. His tongue lapped over the blood seeping from the marks he had left on her throat in leisurely enjoyment. The hands at her waist ran over her with lingering possessive familiarity.

Kaleb was waiting, leaning against the wall a few steps away from them. His green eyes were locked on her face, those orbs molten with sexual intent. When Shard stepped back, Kaleb paced forward.

His body pressed against her back. With a sweep of his hand, he moved the hair out of his way a moment before his breath brushed over the shell of her ear. His hands moved around her body and cupped the full globes of her breasts in his palms. The hard tips of her nipples poked into his hands.

"I want to taste these hard nubs, to suck at them. Later, I'll see that these get the proper attention they deserve, but the scent of your desire and that of your satisfaction is driving me insane." Kaleb's cock prodded the slick entrance to her cunt. "Now I want to hear you calling my name as I thrust into you. My only regret is that in this position, the one I crave, I can't see your face as you come. Your expressions as passion takes you could make a celibate forget his vows."

Desire, hot and fierce, hit her as his scent wrapped around her. When his teeth scraped over the cord of muscle at the base of her neck, the tension building within her tripled. Gods, she wanted him. Everything female and Santir within her craved the dominance implicit in that single move. She pushed back into the lean muscled body behind her.

His right hand slid down over the flat plane of her stomach. Two of his fingers slid between the honeyed lips of her labia. The tips stroked over the swollen nub of her clit in a circular motion until her hips began to rock into his hand.

"How ready are you, little cat?" Kaleb's fingers began to glide back through the thick nectar. He pushed two fingers into her slit. The walls of her sheath clasped his

fingers, pulling greedily at the digits. "Um, hot, tight...say my name." His fingers stroked deep and then left her.

"Kaleb," Lina breathed on a sigh of satisfaction as his thick, long cock drove into her. Arching into that long stroke, she tipped back her head and moaned. She needed this, needed to filled and fucked hard.

His lips moved over the left side of her neck, his teeth scraping over the sensitive skin. As his lips moved over the silky flesh, her inner muscles clamped around his shaft, pulling at him. With a groan, his tongue flicked over her neck repeatedly, tasting her as his fingers stroked over her clit. "I need to feel that wet pussy wrapped tightly around me and I ache to hear you crying out for completion."

Those words caused her to burn with desire. His teeth clamped onto the muscled area at her neck and shoulder. He growled with feral enjoyment as she gave a needy mewl and bucked back against him.

He withdrew and drove into her. Everything within Lina was focused on the fingers rubbing her clit and the hard shaft driving into her. She rode his hand, her gasping breaths inundating her with the intoxicating scent of aroused male Santir. She writhed desperately, trembling near the edge of climax. The tension within her was nearly more than she could handle. She ached, she needed...

"Please," the whimper of need tumbled from her as sensation stretched within her. Desperately craving more, she shoved her buttocks against his thrusting hips. She needed him to drive deep into her.

His cock rammed into her and his fingers manipulated her clit in a spiral pattern. He growled against her, encouraging the wild moans and sighs which flowed from her lips. Her pussy rippled around his cock, gripping and pulling as if to keep him deep within her.

"Mine," The growl rumbled up from the depths of Kaleb's throat, only muted a little as it hit her skin.

She pushed back into each thrust of his hips against hers. Desperate for the climax that remained just out of her reach, she writhed against him. As his fingers plucked at her clit, sending a wicked bolt of heat through her, she cried out and came. Light burst behind her eyelids as she arched and bucked, the sensations hitting her, seeming to ricochet and intensify with every movement, every breath. Pressed flat against the wall, she wished she could grab him. The pleasure left her shaking and breathless.

Kaleb surged into her. The draw of her inner muscles as she climaxed took the last of his control. He rammed into her and her cunt tightened around him. He pumped against her, his seed pulsing into her as release tore through him. His roar of satisfaction vibrated against her neck. His sweat-slick body pressed against her, holding her in place.

Kaleb lifted his head slightly and viewed the mating bite with primitive satisfaction. His tongue lapped at the blood, laved the four punctures of his bite. He tasted her blood

and the salt of her sweat. He couldn't contain the primal rush of satisfaction at the sight of the mark. A sign of possession, that mark would tell all who saw it that she was claimed. No other would dare touch her when they viewed the two sets of markings.

She was such a responsive woman, everything he could have ever dreamed of finding in a woman. His mate—just the fact that she was his was an aphrodisiac after searching for her in every woman he encountered for many years.

And there was so much to learn about her. Who she really was remained a mystery in spite of how close he felt to her after the thought-destroying sex. He looked forward to every moment of it, learning what made her happy, what annoyed her. Some of those things would take time, but there were more immediate questions that he would have the answers for before they formalized the bonding.

Lina leaned her head against the wall, trying to focus her thoughts. She had expected the heat from the mating, the fierce passion. She'd known that the need to join would be overriding and irresistible. What she hadn't expected were the emotional ties she had felt falling into place from the moment that she had discovered that they were her mates. She had thought that those things would take time.

Testing the strength of the bond, she tried to think of leaving them. She wasn't prepared for the pervasive wave of sadness and panic that swept over her. It was as if she were thinking of leaving part of herself behind. She wasn't suddenly in love with them, but she was bound to them. Their happiness was important to her.

Just that one test had been enough. She didn't need to try to run. The feelings were real even if she couldn't understand them. Although she was nervous about living in an actual *thent*, she would give this mating a chance. She wouldn't try to deny the bond. Instinct, nature and fate had bound them. She would abide by it and try to find happiness with them. At least until she knew if she could live by their rules. It might be hard, but she wouldn't stay in a situation that made her miserable.

"Regrets, Lina?" Kaleb's breath feathered over her ear as he slowly withdrew from her pussy. "Why are you so sad?"

Lina's head came up at that hard edge, alert to the alpha lurking, waiting to pounce if he even thought that he was being denied. "I wasn't having regrets. I was mostly just thinking about how much I didn't know." He definitely wasn't subtle. *At least not right now*, she qualified. Any hope for subtle had ended when she had pushed until Shard had reacted and pinned her.

With a small turn, initiated by Kaleb's hand on her shoulder, Shard stepped forward and Lina found herself caged in their arms. "Tell us about what you didn't know. Anything that puts that look on your face bears discussing."

Lina allowed her head to fall to Shard's chest as she sighed. She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "I knew that if I ever found my mate I would be physically attracted to him, that my passion would rise fast and hard and the first joining was likely to be primitive and wild. They taught us that much, although there were some in

my group who didn't want the young told anything about the males who weren't of our group."

"As you were running free, we suspected that you were from a group that had been part of those on the colony ship *Mekular*." Kaleb brushed a kiss across her shoulder. "Will they miss you, send someone looking for you?"

"I haven't been with them in over ninety standard years. I was sent out with some others to find a woman of our group who had gone missing when I was around twenty-five. We found her. When we got back, everyone was gone. There were only six of us, but we kept in touch with each other. We lived on our own because the risk of being found was greater if we were together."

"You weren't much more than a cub but it does explain some of your attitude. You're talking about more than danger from other Santir."

Something in her tone must have alerted him. Lina grimaced and closed her eyes. There had been some problems with at least one anti-shifter group, but she had never intended to go into specifics just now.

"We had a few problems with anti-shifter groups. I haven't had that problem in years now."

"So what was it that you didn't know?" Shard's hand brushed over her hair in soothing strokes.

"I didn't realize how true this joining would be. I didn't know that my emotions would be tied into my instincts," Lina admitted. "I knew that sexually, I wouldn't want to resist you. Nothing was ever said about the rest."

Shard laughed. "Don't worry, Lina. It isn't mentioned that much to Santir who are reared in a *thent*. I expected it because of the *Tierna*, the bond Kaleb and I share. That bond came with emotional ties, just as this did."

"*Tierna*..." Lina arched a considering eyebrow and she grinned. She had heard stories about the old magic, of how some warriors used it in areas of their life that had nothing to do with battle. It was enough to catch her attention and start her imagination flying. "So you two know the old magic?"

"We do and you'll be getting a taste of it as soon as we're formally wed." Kaleb nibbled on her ear and his hand roved down to her buttocks.

"Get dressed." Shard turned Lina toward the spot where she had left her clothing. "We have much to do."

She dressed in her flight suit, knowing from the rustling sounds behind her that they were dressing as well. Lina secured the clasps on her shoes and put on her belt. She raised her head and her eyes clashed with two intense, feral stares. They were frowning darkly at her. She looked around, behind her, even up, but could find nothing wrong.

"Something is troubling you?" Lina kept her tone light.

"Your clothing is hiding our marks. We want to see them." Kaleb stalked forward and his hand gripped her shoulder. "We want everyone to see them."

"This is the only clothing I have with me." Lina remained relaxed beneath Kaleb's hand.

"Just hold very still." Shard appeared on her other side. He held a knife in his hand.

Shard cut away the collar of the flight suit and a good portion of the cloth at her shoulders. When her hair kept falling around her shoulders and hiding their marks, they cut a ribbon of cloth off the neckline. After securing her hair at the back of her neck, they were finally satisfied with their view of the marks. Before they backed away from her, they took her belt and searched her pockets, taking everything they found.

She felt no soreness from the bites, only a slight tingling sensation. She resisted the urge to rub at them. Those two wounds, mating bites, would take some time to heal. Santir usually healed very quickly, but mating bites were a different matter. Something in a male's saliva during the mating bite slowed healing and encouraged the wound to leave a scar.

"Now we'll go. We won't walk back, as you came here. We have a skimmer that is more than capable of taking all three of us back to our camp." Shard brushed a hand over the soft swell of her breasts. "We'll see how successful Jaksen was at finding your stashes and your ship before we get to the serious questions."

"The one certainty is that we're not letting you out of our sight." Kaleb's hand slid over her face in a lingering caress.

Lina had expected an attitude like that or worse. They probably felt as inclined to stay here and mate again and again as she did, but they were also feeling the desire to know everything about her and the alpha part of them wanted it now, immediately. They had their priorities firmly in place. Mating, questions and then the formal bonding. The first mating had been completed. As soon as they learned what they needed to know, they could seal the Joining formally.

The ride to the camp was a new experience. Lina had been on plenty of skimmers in her life, but she'd never had a ride quite like that one. The two men turned a simple ride into an erotic experience.

Shard took a seat at the front of the skimmer. Lina was urged into the middle position and then Kaleb took his place behind her. Shard wouldn't start the skimmer until she laced her arms around his waist. Kaleb's arm hooked around her waist and his hand slid down her stomach to her crotch.

He began rubbing at her clit through her clothing even before Shard took the skimmer above the treetops. Kaleb's lips tugged at her earlobe before he began sucking on it. She caught her breath. The pulling tug of those lips seemed to be connected by a wire directly to her clit. She moaned and shifted back against him, tilting her hips a little. She rocked her hips against his tormenting fingers.

By the time Shard brought the skimmer to a halt at the edge of their camp, Lina was almost ready to attack one of them. Her pussy was twitching and an empty ache

burgeoned within her. Desire raged through her. After Kaleb's work on the journey, she could feel the wetness of the fabric at her crotch. She could only be thankful for the dark color of the flight suit.

Shard lifted her down from the skimmer. His eyes darkened to near black as his nostrils twitched inhaling the scent of her arousal. She blushed, ducking her head, a little embarrassed. She knew that it was a perfectly natural response to those teasing digits, but it had never happened to her before.

Shard's fingers tipped up her chin and he looked her in the eyes. "You are beautiful and you smell delicious, Lina. You'll get used to us touching you and being aroused at what some might consider odd times."

She smiled at the confident assertion that her being aroused at odd times would be a regular occurrence. Normally she'd roll her eyes and openly scoff at such an assertion, but she could feel her own hunger rising just from being near them. She was fairly certain that his prediction would come to pass. There were two of them and they were sexier than any other men she'd ever encountered.

Chapter Five

Jaksen was waiting for the Ardin at the edge of the camp. He stood near the corner of one of the rows of camouflaged Dura-tents. His search had obviously not gone as hoped. He looked frustrated. His brow was furrowed and a frown curled his lips. Some of his straight hair stuck out at odd angles, loose from the tie at the back of his neck.

"How did your search go, Jaksen?" Kaleb strode forward to hear the report, leaving Shard to follow with Lina.

"We found only fifteen more packs, Ardin Kaleb." The dark-haired, blue-eyed man looked abashed in admitting his failure.

"And her ship, where is it?" Shard laced his fingers with Lina's. Kaleb saw it and recognized the gesture. Possessiveness, the need to know where she was and that she wasn't going to try to wander away from them ran through him as well.

The group began walking into the camp. Women watched with unabashed curiosity as they towed Lina along with them. They knew she was their mate. Even if the men's attitude was missed, the women couldn't miss the two bites on her shoulders.

"We can't find it, Ardin Shard." Jaksen looked squarely at Lina, frowning as if he couldn't understand just how that had happened.

His doubt was understandable.

"I can see why you're so confused over it." She exhaled loudly as a blush rose on her cheeks, tinting the gold with a rush of pink. "My lack of attention to my surroundings and the sheer overconfidence I had as I approached that ruin weren't shining examples of my skills." She shook her head. "I never knew you were even in the area and I should have."

"*Rah'ki*, regardless of your precautions and your best efforts, we weren't about to let you leave this planet once we learned that you were here." Kaleb chuckled, taking a step toward her and brushing a hand over her face. "There are far too few females to let you just wander around the universe and if not our mate, you would have been mate to some other Santir man."

"Ardin, there's more," Jaksen interrupted. "Vellis and some of the others found some destruction at one of the sites we're searching. It was too old to carry any scent, but it was recently done."

Kaleb looked over at her and narrowed his eyes. He didn't want to think that she would destroy Santir history, but they had just met. There was so much that he didn't know about her. "Did you do that? Maybe as a distraction?"

Her eyes rounded and she shook her head. "I didn't want you to know I was here. I don't destroy artifacts or old buildings. If I'd wanted to take the chance of exposing my

presence with a distraction, believe me you would have been distracted, but I wouldn't have done it in that way."

"I'm not going to ask how you'd do it right now. There are more important things I want to know, but we'll get back to it. I think you might just need the calming influence of a male or two." Shard chuckled and cupped the back of her head.

Lina narrowed her eyes and fought the urge to insist that she hadn't needed a man's presence and had done fine on her own for many years. That wouldn't go over well. She had no desire to enrage the *tiron* within them right now.

"That leaves nineteen packs for you to show us as you lead us to your ship. You can answer a few questions on the way there." Shard turned Lina's face toward his.

She nodded, still gritting her teeth. She focused on what they wanted her to do. "But how do I know which packs they've found? I know you found one before I even got to that old ruin. It would take some time if I have to revisit all thirty-five stashes."

"As we found the packs, we marked them on this." Jaksen handed Lina a palm-sized display showing the layout of the area.

"That helps." Lina stepped forward to begin, but turned her eyes to Shard and Kaleb when she noticed that they hadn't followed.

Setting off the beast in them would be very unwise at this point. That could very well happen if they thought she was trying to leave them. Not that she would get far without them knowing. She knew from her scans and forays near here that not far from the camp a surrounding array of perimeter alarms had been placed. They were passable with the right equipment, but they had taken her belt which had held the necessary items.

She spent the time deciding which site to go to first and then next. She'd never expected to have to use even a quarter of the packs, but had placed them to be prepared. Experience had taught her that, when dealing with shifters, being over-prepared didn't hurt. She would rather have to gather the unused packs before leaving than need one and not have it.

"Jaksen just told us that none of the packs he found had any weapons." Kaleb raised an eyebrow. "Were you expecting to run around the planet for a time?"

"I hardly ever put weapons in my packs unless I know I'm walking into a very dangerous situation. Weapons are easy enough to acquire as I go along if I should need them. For instance, one of your guards has a habit of placing his *traser* rifle on that crate over there as he does guard duty at night. If I had wanted it, it would have been an easy pick." She smiled and indicated a crate near one of the shuttles at the end of the row of large tents.

"He what?" Shard's eyes narrowed and a low growl rumbled in his throat.

She hid her smile. That probably wouldn't be happening again. "As well, I knew that I would be dealing with shifters and I really wanted no contact at all. If there had

been a way to know if Nerisa had been truly claimed and the change begun without meeting her, I wouldn't have stayed on the planet this long," she rushed to add.

"How did you get involved with Central Command?" Kaleb took her hand to turn her attention to him.

"Some time ago I stumbled onto one of their missions and helped them out. They pay well and at the time, I needed the money," Lina answered honestly with a shrug.

"You can begin to lead us to your stashes now. We'll continue our questions as we go." Shard stepped up beside her.

She nodded and led them to the first pack which was hidden not far from their camp. Shard and Kaleb stayed near her and three of their men followed, collecting the packs as she handed them to Shard or Kaleb. It wasn't long before the way they hovered and their mere intimidating presence began to make her nervous.

"One of our women says that the lingerie that was found in your packs is from an exclusive store and probably cost around three hundred Common Credits for one set." Kaleb took the pack from her. "Is there a reason you would waste so much money on underwear?"

"Well, it doesn't cost me that much and I like to wear pretty, silky things." She frowned at his accusing tone. Didn't he have a weakness, a secret vice? "Most of the time, I wear ordinary one-piece jumpsuits. The underwear makes me feel good, feminine."

"Why doesn't it cost you as much as most people would pay to get the underwear?" Shard tugged on her arm, stopping her and turning her to him. A smile kicked up his lips. "I can assure you that we will make you feel very good and very much our woman. Is that your secret passion?"

"I own the stores." She grimaced. It was true that she had a sort of obsession for pretty underwear. It was why she'd bought the first store and then expanded when it became popular. "I pay for material and labor. I don't like taking away from my own profits."

"What else do you do?" Shard allowed her to continue to the next pack.

"I invent and design things for the most part." She shrugged, kneeling and moving some branches of a thorny bush to get to one of her packs.

"You design things? Like your underwear?" Kaleb raised a brow as he waited for her answer.

"No, that I pay designers to do. My talents run more to the mechanical and graphic." She turned toward the location of the next pack.

"Explain." Shard paced beside her, casting glances at her face.

"I designed and modified the shields and stealth capabilities on my ship. I have yet to find anyone who can detect it." She smiled at that and raised her brows. Then a grimace twisted her lips. It had been her overconfidence and complacency which had

led to her capture. "As well, I've designed a few sim-games that have been successful...in spite of litigation from paranoid people." She grimaced at the memory.

"What games and what litigation are you talking about?" Kaleb barked the question.

"I have several ongoing series, Ardin. One is called *Quest for Origin*—"

"Cadianco makes those. You're the L.C. Cadian behind that company?" Shard's hand landed on her shoulder and spun her around to face him.

Lina was stunned to see how ferocious his frown was. He glowered down at her and seemed to be waiting for something, as if he expected something from her. He also looked as if he'd grown bigger, taller than when she'd last seen him.

"Is there something wrong, Ardin?" She looked up into Shard's hard, dark brown eyes. A shiver trickled down her spine. She'd never seen brown eyes appear cold before now.

"You allowed Santir to sue you. You allowed the trial to end without trying to take the time to explain the situation or make reparation to Jalan Tavis and Lido Orsal." Kaleb's deep voice was curt and the expression on his face demanded an explanation of her actions. His jaw was clenched and there was a slight tic near the corner of his left eye.

"I didn't know that they were Santir until the trial was nearly complete. When I found out, I tried to arrange a meeting with them. All I got back from them was a response that they were confident of their case and would wait for the verdict." She didn't see how she could have done more. She hadn't started that situation.

"Where did you meet them? How did you get their images?" Shard's leaned close and his face was only a breath away from hers. His eyes were so dark and fierce they were nearly black. "Are we going to have to start this marriage with a punishment? The images in that game mirrored Lido and Jalan, yet you have taken no responsibility for that."

"I've never even met them. The first time that I saw them was at court. I only briefly saw them one day during the trial." What could she say to make them believe? She hadn't used those two men's images in her game. She didn't know why, but their trust was important to her.

"I've seen the characters they speak of. They might as well be vid-footage." Kaleb's green eyes narrowed. "So you never actually spoke to them?" He frowned.

"You should have made direct contact with them. You know enough about Santir custom and law to know that you should have done everything possible to stop that trial." Shard's hand sliced the air.

She could see the determination, the censure in his eyes. The situation was either black or white to him. To him, there would be no room for discussion about that. She'd worried and agonized over what to do after she'd received that reply.

"In their note, they implied that I was trying to buy their silence. I was going to explain, try to keep my own secrets and show them that I hadn't used their images." She glared at them.

She looked from one man to the other. They looked just as accusing as the two men had in court and she hadn't done anything wrong. She hadn't used those men's images as models. By the Hells, even she'd seen the resemblance, but it had been mere coincidence.

"Show them...you had proof of some kind?" Shard asked.

"I still have it." She smiled. That proof was her guarantee against lawsuit. She had made certain that she had documented the invention process. It seemed that she would need it again to soothe their tempers. "I kept it because some of the characters and buildings are ongoing concepts in the series."

"You didn't try to show it to them after their refusal to see you." Kaleb raised a brow and the doubt in his expression could be clearly seen.

"I was busy at that time of the trial. That's why I didn't know until almost the end that they were Santir. I was working on something for Central Command that took me away from the planet for days at a time." Lina's mouth twisted wryly. "I let my advocate handle most of the details. By the time I discovered that they were Santir, the trial was almost over and they wouldn't see me."

"You are going to need watching, *rah'ki*. You seem to have a penchant for creating situations." Kaleb put his hand on the back of her neck and gave a gentle squeeze.

"Jalan said that their suit was the fifth suit in two years." Shard touched her cheek and then trailed his finger down to the dipping neckline of her altered flight suit. "You didn't lose any of the cases."

"I didn't buy the judges. There are hundreds of judges that rule on lawsuits in Galactic Civil Court. I never used anyone as a model for my games. I can't help it if some of my characters resemble living people." She felt a wave of arousal wash through her from that simple touch. "Are you friends with those two men?"

"Very good friends," Kaleb whispered. His smile sent chills racing down her spine. "Get moving. We still have a few packs to pick up and you have to show us your ship."

"You don't need the money from Central Command now. You have more than one woman could ever hope to spend. Why are you still working for them?" Shard kept pace beside her as she moved swiftly through the forest.

"How would you know what my financial situation is?" She shot a perplexed look over at them. He was right, but he shouldn't have any information about her assets. "You just learned who I was."

"We've been looking at L.C. Cadian's finances for proof of the payoffs." Kaleb shrugged. "Most of the Santir Confederation has been conducting an unofficial boycott of your games."

She rolled her eyes. Keeping the balance of justice was a basic part of Santir and shifter culture. It didn't surprise her that they'd been trying to gain some form of vengeance, even if it was economic. "I was...bored, just doing my designing and such. I liked the challenge of completing a difficult assignment."

"We'll ensure that you don't find yourself bored. You'll have to learn to live without the extra income, because you won't be working for Central Command again." Shard's hand stroked over her ass in a lingering caress.

She finally picked up the last pack and began leading the men to her shuttle. She walked into the clearing where her Sendar 4 was cloaked. She asked for the equipment taken from her pocket. She selected a thin, flat, square device and entered a code. A ripple pulsed across the clearing and the Sendar 4 shimmered into visibility.

"A Sendar." Kaleb's eyes ran covetously over the large, advanced shuttlecraft. "You own this?"

"Yes." Lina resisted an impulse to snap out a sarcastic reply. She'd brought them here as they had asked.

"You're the only one who uses this shuttle? You came alone?" Suspicion heavily laced Shard's deep voice.

"Yes, I came alone." She tapped her foot. The arrogant demands were getting old. "The single- and even the double-occupant shuttles were so cramped—little more than just the seats in a cockpit. It felt too crowded in them, even with only me. I did sometimes have to rescue people for Central Command. Getting the Sendar gave me room to relax and work and space for more than one extra person."

At a touch on the little pad in her hand, stairs descended from the large, gray shuttle, and a hatch opened along its side. She took a step forward, but Shard held her back with a restraining hand on her shoulder.

"Jaksen and Marit will search it and secure it before you step back on board." Shard instructed with a hard glance down at her.

He waited tensely to see if she had told the truth. She could practically feel the *tiron* within him pacing and snarling at the thought of her working with someone else, of her lying to him.

"It's all clear, Ardin. Her scent and her belongings are the only ones on this ship." Jaksen appeared at the hatch as he gave his report. "This is nice. It's easily apparent that she has been living on the ship."

Shard nodded and urged her toward the ship. "Don't think that we've finished discussing your lawsuit penchant. You still have much to explain and you owe Lido and Jalan an apology."

"An apology!" She was astonished at this demand. "But they sued me. I didn't go after them or even ask any damages from them."

Kaleb climbed the stairs in front of her. Shard was right behind her, his hand at the small of her back. She walked over to one side of the shuttle and sat down on a lowered

bunk as they began investigating the interior of the ship. Clean clothes tumbled out of a bag on the bunk beside her and she pushed them back into the bag.

The Sendar 4 was known for the space and versatility it offered to the user. She used the auto-prep for food for the most part, but there were appliances for manual preparation. The bunk she was sitting on could fold up into the wall as the others were. She had four seats set up in the shuttle, but up to five rows of four seats could be raised and unfolded from the compartments beneath the floor. Stations could be constructed in moments when needed. Near the back, a small closet enclosed a cleansing area.

"Now where is your proof?" Kaleb sat down in the pilot's seat and raised his brows.

Her jaw dropped open. "I don't carry it with me. It's in a secure safe at my home."

"Where is your home?" Shard's voice was a harsh growl. His brows lowered and scowled at her. He moved over behind the chair Kaleb was sitting in and almost absently stroked his hands over Kaleb's shoulders.

He apparently didn't like her using that word in association with a place away from him. "I have a house on a planet called Mical in Common Space." She chose her words with care as she gave them the address. "It's in the Destira district."

"Very good." Kaleb flicked a couple of the switches to the on position, activating monitors. "We'll get the details on where the safe is and how to open it later. Show us how you watched us."

She stood and walked over to them. Activating the vid, she switched between various angles. They seemed fascinated by it. She thought they were probably trying to work out just where the cameras were.

"Did you see anything interesting while you were watching us?" Shard asked.

"Many interesting things. I was very intrigued. Sometimes I couldn't tear my eyes away from the screen." She leaned back against the wall and smiled smugly. She knew the question had been offhand, that they didn't really expect anything out of the ordinary. They were too engrossed with the Sendar to think too intently about what she could have seen. She was still angry enough with them over the ordered apology to enlighten them.

"What kind of things did you see?" Kaleb leaned forward to study one of the displays.

Irritation niggled at her. Lina frowned. She was actually a little jealous about all the attention they were giving the Sendar. It didn't make any sense. She'd just met them and not to mention that it was a machine. The two men being distracted might just be a good thing.

"You have a nice ass. Do you sunbathe naked or is your entire body naturally that color?" She brought one leg up and hooked her arms around it, wondering how long it would take them to realize just what she'd said and where she would have seen their naked butts.

It took only a moment, the time to draw in a breath. Both men swung around to face her. Kaleb gaped at her.

"Where did you see his ass?" Shard growled.

"You two play some interesting games with each other." She licked her lips, enjoying their astonishment. "Your ass is just as nice as his in case you wanted know."

Shard stalked over to her and leaned in close, his lips in a straight line, his eyes stern. She knew it was supposed to be intimidating to get her to stop teasing them, but she knew she didn't have anything to fear from him physically.

"And did you enjoy what you saw?" Kaleb smiled.

He seemed to be taking the revelation much easier than Shard. She thought she heard a teasing note in his voice.

"Oh, very much. At first I couldn't believe it when you pounced at him..." She let her finger trail slowly down her thigh. Just thinking about them in that field made her hungry again. "I don't know if I've ever seen anything so erotic before in my life."

"Well, sometimes, he needs to see that he doesn't always have to be in control and I like surprising him." Kaleb winked. "But you're right. He does have a nice ass."

"I can handle the surprising him part." She shrugged and looked up at Shard through her lashes.

"You can certainly do that. And now we know that you like watching us." Shard gripped her hand and drew her off the bed.

"Hey, if you don't want to be watched, don't have sex in an open field. Anybody could have seen. I'm sure a few of the women at the researchers' camp wouldn't have minded watching it." She shrugged, refusing to let him embarrass her over watching them. "Maybe next time, I'll invite a few others to watch it."

"Since you'll be involved next time, I don't think so." Shard drew her over to the controls. "We still have a few more questions you can answer."

Calmly, she answered their questions, explained why none of their sensors could detect her when she was outside the Sendar. When they were satisfied she'd answered their questions, they took the two pilots' seats. Lina blinked and her stomach lurched at the thought of letting them behind the controls of her ship. She stood and strode to the chair. Putting her hand on one of the seats, she turned it before they could activate any of the controls.

"No." She shook her head. For all she knew, they could have only recently started flying. They were Ardin. They had people to do things for them.

Shard's brow rose. "No?"

"You're not piloting my ship anywhere. Move. I'll take us up to your ship." She planted her feet and braced a hand on her hip. They'd won all the other battles, but they weren't even getting a chance to crash her ship. She wasn't giving in on this.

"Yes, we are. We're capable pilots." Kaleb laughed.

"Maybe you are capable, but I've never seen you fly so much as a cargo shuttle. Do you know how much this thing costs?" She raised her chin.

"We know it's very expensive. You're now part of this *thent* and we share our assets." Kaleb's voice hardened.

"I have no problem sharing. I have a problem with letting you crash us into a mountain," she grated, getting a little angrier with every word. Why couldn't they understand how she felt?

Shard's head tilted as he looked at her. She felt like he was trying to pick through her thoughts. She knew he couldn't read her mind, but the way he was staring at her still unnerved her.

"You can pilot your craft up to the ship. Kaleb will be your copilot." Shard stood and walked back to take a seat on the bed.

Lina piloted the Sendar up to the ship and followed them into the bay. Curious, she would have loved to explore the vessel, but she wasn't given time to look around the large ship. First, they escorted her to the physician. On the way, she only saw the light cream walls and the dark carpeting of various hallways and a lift. They left her with the physician as the man began to remove the implant that interfered with scanning technology. She knew they were probably arranging for the formal bonding ceremony while they were doing whatever else they had to do. They wouldn't waste even a few hours. By the time they returned, the physician had given her a full physical.

When they returned, Shard and Kaleb wore dress uniforms. The black jackets had white edging, green inlay and green symbols stitched on the shoulder. Underneath the jackets lay brilliant white shirts. Black pants and polished black boots finished off their uniforms. Lina felt underdressed standing between them as they spoke with the physician.

After leaving medical, Shard and Kaleb escorted her through more gray-carpeted, cream-walled hallways to double doors. The doors opened silently onto a large hall filled with people, likely one of the dining halls. Every head in the room turned and the murmuring crowd grew quiet. She swallowed hard. She felt out of place. In the relatively short time they'd been gone, she hadn't expected something like this to have been put together. Or for so many people to be here. For a moment, the urge to run right out of the room almost overwhelmed her.

A path opened through the throng. Thick, gray carpeting padded their path to an older man in green and white robes. This must be the *chatar*, the wise man, the priest of the *thent*. Kaleb and Shard curved an arm around her as they arrived before the robed man.

"We come together to celebrate a new addition to our pack and the joining of the Ardin to their chosen mate. The bond between true mates is sacred and unmistakable. When a true mate is found, it is indeed a blessing," the man with the gray-streaked black hair intoned. "The Ardin will now make their vows to their Lady."

Shard and Kaleb turned to face her.

Shard brushed his thumb over the material above her ribs. "I pledge to you my devotion, Lina. You will be my Lady, my lover, mother to my children and my wife. In this, you have my sacred vow."

Kaleb repeated the vow Shard had made and after a pause recited his own addition. "I will protect you, Lina. Your safety will always be placed before my own. As long as there is breath in my body, you will come first. You have my sacred vow."

Shard's voice rumbled the vow Kaleb had just made. He gazed down at her for a moment. "Your happiness is important to me, Lina. I will do all in my power to ensure you find joy and comfort in this union. I will be tireless in my efforts. I give you my sacred vow."

Kaleb's hand brushed across her back. "Through times of plenty and times of lean, I will stand beside you. Together, we will work to create a union that will nurture and build closeness between us. We will work to make the *thent* stronger and more prosperous. This I do vow."

Lina turned her eyes to Shard as he echoed Kaleb's pledge.

A moment of silence followed. Shard and Kaleb looked down into her eyes as they stood in front of her. Satisfaction and joy flowed over their predatory features.

Their voices blended together as they spoke in unison. "I take you, Lina Cadian, as mate, as wife. Your family is now mine. My family is now yours. You're not alone. From this moment forward, you have the full protection of your mates as well as that of Karach Thent."

With those words, they leaned forward. The kiss Shard dropped on her lips was brief, intense and possessive. Kaleb's lips replaced Shard's as soon as the other man lifted his head. His lips covered hers, his tongue thrusting deep in a blatant sign of possession. His hand molded with familiarity over the curve of her buttocks.

Chapter Six

"Let's go, love." Shard's lips brushed against her ear as Kaleb drew back. "They will celebrate without us. We have a bonding to seal."

Dazed and aroused, Lina took their hands and accompanied them willingly. From the large room, they urged her into one of the lifts. When the doors swished closed, they were the only people in the large, cream-walled compartment.

Shard reached forward and pushed one of the gray buttons for a higher level as he pulled her back against him. His hands parted the seal on her jumpsuit. One hand slipped over her stomach, and then down, his fingers tracing the diamond of soft hair before gliding between the plump lips to stroke over her clit.

Kaleb's hands pushed the v of her jumpsuit wide, baring her breasts. His hands covered the lush mounds of her breasts. He squeezed and caressed, his fingers flicking at the hardened nipples.

Her head fell back against Shard's chest as an aroused moan slipped from her lips. Their touch sent a bolt of desire shooting through her. The scent of arousal blossomed and swirled around her. Answering waves of heady, male lust surrounded her, inciting a rise in the heat within her.

When the lift halted, they reluctantly removed their hands and fastened her clothing. She stood blindly between them, aware of little other than the screaming need raging in her. Her clit throbbed and her pussy ached with emptiness, the demand to be filled by her mates. She shook her head, trying to clear a little of the haze from her mind.

Shard tugged on her hand and she followed willingly. Thoughts of a night filled with the hot, hard sex she craved whirled through her head.

The cream-colored hallway was lined with the slate gray carpet used in the other parts of the ship that she had seen. Shard and Kaleb opened a door about halfway down the long corridor. Cream walls provided a neutral background, but green carpeting personalized their private chambers.

A large desk ruled one corner of the room. Two folded, portable computers held dominion over the glossy, black surface. The large low bed grabbed Lina's attention. Covered with a black spread stitched with green symbols and white accents, it offered hope of getting what she craved.

Shard tugged her toward a door to the right side of bed while Kaleb went to the bed and flipped the spread back, revealing creamy white *tetri* silk sheets. She saw him turn to a nearby small table just before Shard pulled her into a large cleansing area.

Shard left her while she was still taking in the interior with its sleek black and green cleansing shower. He went to a small cabinet and pulled out a slender, rectangular hair remover. With a satisfied smile curving his lips, he returned to her side.

"Undress, *rao nari*." Shard brushed his fingertips across her cheek. "I promised to remove that patch of fur. I intend to enjoy your soft skin as I lick you until you beg us to fuck you."

"I'm close to it now." She undressed with haste, letting the jumpsuit fall to the floor.

"You're nicely heated, but you can get hotter." Shard knelt in front of her, his hand running up the outside of her thigh.

With careful, smooth motions, he removed the diamond of pubic hair. He put the small machine aside and ran his fingers over the warm mound. The tips of his fingers traced back, slipping into the crevice between the swollen lips and tugged at the pink nub of her clit.

A breathless cry escaped her lips as her hips bucked forward in an involuntary demand.

"Now the real test," Shard laughed.

He leaned close and his tongue flicked over her labia and then up over the spot where he had removed the diamond of fur. His slightly rough tongue circled, tasting and testing, sending a wave of tingling shocks through Lina. She shuddered and locked her knees as they threatened to buckle.

"Now that is how I want it, as silky and soft as the rest of your pussy." Shard nuzzled his face against the soft mound.

"Beautiful...all is in readiness." Kaleb stood in the doorway watching.

Shard rose to his feet, a pleased smile crossing his predatory, dark features. "I'm more than ready to taste her."

A small nudge given by the warm hand at her back indicated that she should move. Kaleb turned and long strides carried him out into the bedroom. She followed and Shard was so close behind her that she could feel the heat from his body.

She joined Kaleb at the foot of the bed. She reached over and slipped her hand beneath the jacket of his uniform. She stroked the muscled breadth of his chest through the soft material of his shirt. His heat, his scent reached out to her, ensnared her senses.

"Your bed awaits, *rah'ki*." Shard swept his hand out in an expansive gesture indicating the large bed.

She started to step onto the bed, but stopped, her foot raised. A piece of information from one of the arcane vid-texts she had read when she was very young flitted through her mind. "The new bride always gains the bed as she would if she were in *tiron* form."

Lina knelt and crawled onto the bed. Light flashed around her and she felt a pulling sensation. For a moment, she couldn't see. Spots danced in front of her eyes. Her other senses provided a wealth of information. The sweet smell of flowers, water and grass drifted to her on a soft breeze. Water cascaded onto rocks somewhere nearby.

When her vision cleared, she blinked. She couldn't believe her eyes. Across a grassy expanse dappled with shadows, brightly colored, sweetly scented flowers grew near the base of a silver-leaved *netria* tree. She stood and turned, looking around the area, stunned and amazed. To the right, maybe fifty steps away, water cascaded into a rock-bottomed pool from a high ledge. To the right of that, a thick grouping of arrow-shaped *vetin* trees thrust their leafy branches skyward. Continuing to the right, she spotted a nest of bedding under a wide arch of *minsi-vines* with their lush, yellow and orange bell-shaped blossoms. She looked up and saw a yellow sun shining down through a pale green atmosphere. How had she gotten here? She could feel the warm air brushing over her skin. It was too real to be a dream or some sort of illusion. Her only guess was they'd used the magic they'd mentioned earlier.

She walked to the dark shelter beneath the green-leaved bower. Kneeling, she crawled onto the bed. She lay down and waited for her two men.

The bed was soft, comfortable and so very big. *This was a pretty place, but it would be so much better if I had someone to share it with, specifically two men to satisfy the need burning inside me.* She looked toward the area where she had appeared, expecting Kaleb and Shard to arrive in the same way she had.

Shard and Kaleb simply appeared at her side. She jumped startled, her hands slamming into the bedding, levering up on her elbows. Kaleb laughed and settled a hand on her stomach, pressing her back.

"You honor us with your show of submission." Shard smiled at her and she could see the slightly lengthened canines peeking at her as he spoke.

They were gloriously nude and gorgeous. Hot lust burned in their eyes. Their dark skin gleamed in the dappled light. Their cocks thrust from between their legs, erect and hard.

She licked her lips, a little uncertain, but she had to know. "Where is this?"

Shard smiled. "It's a place we created with magic for you. It's a pocket of space separate from the plane we normally live in. You're perfectly safe here."

She hadn't had any doubt that she'd be safe here. Climbing onto the bed and just appearing somewhere else had taken her by surprise. "Is it going to disappear?"

"No, it's not going anywhere and neither are we." Shard drew his finger over her cheek.

"Now we will enjoy you." Kaleb leaned over to slide his tongue over her lips. "Just enjoy what we do to you."

"Give us your cries of pleasure. Show us how much you like what we do." Shard nipped the creamy skin of her stomach.

"Gods, you're beautiful." Kaleb lifted his hand to cup the back of her head, his fingers threading into the golden hair. "Did you know your amber eyes sparkle with flashes of silver when you're aroused?" His eyes fell to her breasts. His tongue slicked over his lips and he leaned closer to her.

Shard moved down the bed. At his touch, her thighs splayed wide. Her pussy glistened in the soft light, pink and swollen with desire. He leaned close and inhaled her scent. "I'ma, you make it so hard to choose. I want to feel your wet pussy closing around my cock almost as much as I want to taste your sweet honey."

He gripped her ass in his hands and lifted her hips, bringing her honeyed pussy to him. In a long, slow lick, he lashed her slick sex from vagina to clit. A sexy, surprised mewl escaped her lips and her hips rolled in his hands. Shard smiled against her. "I love your uninhibited response and your taste. Give me more."

Lina felt as if her mind might fracture as sensations began to bombard her, pleasure building, her body tightening more with each touch.

Kaleb trailed kisses over her neck and down the slopes of her breasts. His mouth settled over the crest of one full mound as his hand cupped the other. The hard nipple jutted into his mouth as if demanding his attention.

Kaleb's tongue lapped at the nipple twice, before curling around it as he began sucking. Her back arched, thrusting her breast more firmly into his sucking lips and into the kneading caress of the hand at her other breast. Sharp, sweet lightning tore through her with each tug of his lips, each knowing touch of his fingers, adding to the need burning within her.

Shard grazed her clit with his tongue, his teeth scraping over the hood in a tormenting foray. His mouth slid lower and his tongue thrust into her slit, stroking along the walls of her pussy as he gathered the thick nectar flowing from her, proof of her increasing desire. The sounds of his tongue lapping at her, his obvious enjoyment in what he was doing enhanced the need coursing through her.

"By the Gods," she cried, her hips writhing in his big palms, thrusting against Shard's face. "Please..."

They were driving her insane. She was on fire, her body demanding release. The feel of their lips, their hands pushed her beyond any feeling she had ever known before.

"I think she's ready." Kaleb lifted his lips from her breast and glanced down to where Shard was feasting on her honeyed cunt.

"I know she's ready. Taste." Shard lifted his head and in a swift move kissed Kaleb.

Lina groaned. They were already tormenting her. She watched Kaleb's tongue lick Shard's lips before he deepened the kiss.

"Mmm... She tastes wonderful. Are you ready?" Kaleb's hand gripped Shard's curling hair.

"I'm past ready. If I don't drive my cock into her soon, I'm going to explode." Shard lifted his head and licked the creamy juice from his lips.

She looked over at Kaleb. His dark cock thrust outward, hard, erect and ready. If they didn't touch her soon, she was going to do something drastic. Her heart was pounding and her body pulsed with the need they had stirred. She needed them inside her now.

Lina almost shouted with relief when Shard moved up her body, over her, blanketing her. He wrapped his arms around her and rolled with her. She sprawled over his chest. Shard urged her up a little as he reached between them, positioned his shaft and entered her. He pulled her hips flush against his and urged her to lie against him.

Kaleb moved between Shard's legs. A small tube of oil rested in his hand. She felt both of his hands as he separated the two lush globes of her buttocks and gazed at the tight pink ring of her back entrance.

She looked back over her shoulder as she felt Kaleb's slick fingers probing at her tight puckered anus. Her eyes widened as she saw the width and length of his cock. She'd tried anal play before and enjoyed it, but never had anything approaching his size gotten close to her ass.

"Don't worry, *rah'ki*," Shard whispered against her lips. "You'll like it. Your body was made to enjoy everything we want to do. You'll take him and you won't feel any pain."

"But he's big." She anxiously looked back over her shoulder as she felt two slick fingers push into her.

Shard chuckled. "You'll take him. You want us both. Think of it, being filled, taking both your mates into your body, satisfying us both as we see to your pleasure."

Those hot words breathed against the top of her head launched vivid images into her fertile mind. Her body sandwiched between two powerful men, writhing. Possessed and holding them. A slick, hot liquid eased from her slit and coated Shard's balls and pubic hair.

Kaleb's fingers withdrew. He pressed his cock against the glistening pucker. He pushed into the tight muscular channel. It gripped the head of his shaft, at first resisting his entry. He struggled to go slowly. Tension radiated from him as he sought to see to her enjoyment. He advanced in slow increments as she pushed out, until his entire length was sheathed.

Kaleb stretched over her, covering her, enclosing her in a cage of hard male flesh. "You're ours, *i'ma*."

Lina wriggled between them, rubbing her breasts against Shard's chest. Even during her heat, she had never had this burning ache, this need tearing through her. Frustration roused the animal part of her. The *tiron* within her roared, demanding satisfaction, either hard orgasm or the hot blood of captured prey.

"Move," she growled, staring into the deep brown intensity of Shard's eyes. A twinge of pure hot need flashed through her as Kaleb sank in just a little deeper. "Please..."

Kaleb's tongue stroked over his mark. Hot pleasure rippled through her. Tremors tore through her stomach, cunt and anus, a small orgasm that satisfied nothing and intensified everything. Primed as she was, she couldn't move.

"You want us?" Kaleb asked.

"Gods, yes!" She bit at Shard's chest.

"Then tell us who we are." Shard nipped at the side of her neck.

"My mates," she growled. "My Ardin."

Two satisfied growls rumbled around her. Kaleb's hands settled on her hips as he pulled her back with him. Shard's cock slid out of the clasp of her pussy until only the head remained inside her. Shard's hands gripped her hips and reversed the action.

Their cocks drove in and retreated, the rhythm pounding, wild. She sank her nails into Shard's arms. Mewls and groans of encouragement left her mouth. She pressed nibbling, hungry kisses against Shard's neck, shoulder and cheek.

Lina cried out, screaming her release, body arching. Hot sensation rushed over her in a blazing firestorm. Her pussy and anus squeezed around the two thick shafts. She trembled, every muscle in her body tingling with pleasure.

Shard kept thrusting into her even as he felt her climax. Her inner muscles tugged at him, wringing a groan from him with the milking contractions. He came, pumping his seed into her womb.

Kaleb thrust against her, the grasping pull of her anal muscles and her cries of pleasure driving him to his own release. He ground his hips against her buttocks. Each stroke sank deep into her warmth. He roared as orgasm took him.

"*I'ma*," Shard breathed against her neck. "You have taken a long time to come to us. We'll never let you go."

Wrapped in their arms, pressed between their bodies, she'd never felt as satisfied, at peace as she did in those moments. Although she was still a bit uncertain about the future and how she would deal with these two men, she couldn't deny what she felt. Being with Shard and Kaleb seemed so natural, so right. She realized now that for a long time, she'd been longing for somewhere to belong and a very special someone to be with her. To her surprise, she had two special men with her now.

Kaleb withdrew and lay down on the soft bed. Shard rolled to the side and his cock slipped out of her. Lina cuddled up against Kaleb. Her eyes drifted downward as satiation, contentment and exhaustion took their toll.

"Not yet, *rah'ki*," Kaleb said. His hand grasped her shoulder, gently shook her, and then turned her onto her back. "You must listen now."

She blinked up at him sleepily but came alert at the seriousness of his tone, his expression.

"Look around you, love." Kaleb gestured expansively at the clearing, trees and pool. "This is your haven, your protection. If ever you need, you can come here. It will open for you with a mere thought of it. No one will be able to follow or accompany you. You'll be safe here, your needs provided for until we come and get you. Remember, only you can come here. No one can come with you regardless of the circumstances."

She frowned, opened her mouth to tell them that she could take care of herself. Looking up, she stared into two very intense stares. Nodding, she decided to take that up with them later.

Chapter Seven

Lina leaned back into the fabric chair, utterly relaxed. Pleasantly tired, she napped lightly. As she lazed, the heat from the sun seeped into her and ease her minor aches. When she was awake, she let the sun caress her face. They had come back to Nariu Minor in the Sendar early in the morning after the formal joining.

Some things hadn't changed. Shard and Kaleb wanted their marks on display. To avoid alterations to her wardrobe, she wore a sleeveless, thin-strapped green shirt and a long black skirt. She was just glad that she had something other than her flight suits to wear. If they kept mangling her wardrobe, it could get costly. To further aid their continued good humor, she had bound her hair in a tight braid.

She turned her head as a crash broke the relative silence of the camp. Nerisa stormed out of the Dura-tent she shared with the man who had claimed her. She secured the fastenings of her green dress as she stalked away from the large tent. The dark-haired man hurried after her. He stopped her a few steps away from the camouflage-patterned, hi-tech shelter.

"I don't understand and I never will!" Nerisa shouted, trying to wrench free from the man's grip. "They hurt her, but she was smiling, cuddling into their arms when they got back from the *Ovian*. She just sits there now as if nothing was wrong."

"You will understand when—" the man began.

"Don't try to tell me that again." She fought him, yet now calmly sat there as if she had always been a part of the *thent*, as if the Ardin didn't tackle her and pin her. "You say they didn't hurt her. They left marks on her." Nerisa stabbed her finger in Lina's direction.

"Those are mating bites." Medina hesitantly stepped closer to the couple. "They are natural, a physical sign of the mating. When you are full Santir, it will happen to you as well."

"No..." Nerisa adamantly shook her head, a look of fear crossing her face.

Before Nerisa's mate could react to that denial, Shard's hand landed on his shoulder. "Lina, why don't you go for a walk with Nerisa? Talk with her. Tell her about things."

That wasn't a suggestion, Lina noted. She stood and went into the Dura-tent she now shared with Shard and Kaleb. As she thought about the problem, she could understand part of their reasoning. She was the woman Nerisa saw as mistreated. Her bag had been brought from the Sendar along with a few of her personal things. Out of habit, she picked a few things from the bag to take with her and stuffed them into different pockets on her skirt.

She gave a brief nod to Shard and Kaleb just before she walked past them. Kaleb's hand reached out and patted her rounded ass. Lina ducked her head to hide the quick blush rushing up her cheeks.

"Nerisa, would you like to come for a walk with me?" Lina stopped before Nerisa and her mate. She wasn't so sure that she was the right one to talk about this with the woman. Gods, she knew she wasn't. Not only hadn't she been reared in a *thent*, she wasn't so sure about the mating stuff herself. She had only formally met the woman after they'd come back down to the planet. "We can talk about what scares you so much."

Nerisa nodded, stepping forward to Lina's side. Lina led the way out of the camp. She remained silent until they were surrounded by lush thick bushes and the *vetin* and *darasi* trees of the towering forest. She chose a path away from the Santir camp and that of the researchers.

"I really don't know if I'm the one they should have sent to talk to you about this. Everything still feels a little unreal to me and I haven't made up my mind about anything." She shook her head. In truth, she still felt a little in shock over everything that had happened.

"Well, you're here." Nerisa slanted a glance at her, but continued walking beside her.

"Yeah, I'm here, but I have no idea what to tell you. I'm just sort of going with the current right now as far as the mating thing goes, because everything's happened so fast. I didn't want a mate and don't know what to do with the two men who've claimed me. I need time to think." Lina kept her eyes on the foliage around them, not wanting to blunder into anything poisonous.

The truth was she was scared. She'd seen their closeness. Even on a vid-screen it was obvious that there was a lot more than sex and friendship there. She didn't know just where she was supposed to fit in their life or if she even could. She wanted to be more than just easy sex to them. Pushing aside a branch, she saw a small lake surrounded by trees. She led the way to a flat rock and took a seat. Nerisa slid onto the rock beside her.

"Aren't you scared of them after what Ardin Shard did to you?" Nerisa tossed a questioning look at her, impatiently brushing her brown hair back over her shoulder when it fell into her eyes.

"No, they would never hurt me." Lina took a deep breath and ran a frustrated hand through her hair. She felt like a fraud. She wasn't even sure she would be staying with her own mates yet she was supposed to convince Nerisa that everything was fine and normal. Well, she wasn't going to lie to the woman. "But I am a little afraid of the situation. I've never lived in a real *thent*. I know most of the rules, but I don't know if I can take all of the restrictions that go with it. I am willing to give it some time."

The damn men should have sent one of the women who'd been mated for years. One of them would have no problem with explaining everything and would be certain

that most women could make a very satisfying life among the Santir. That woman could have easily told Nerisa the soothing platitudes she'd need to hear without hesitating. Lina didn't know where to begin.

Nerisa's eyes lowered to Lina's shoulders. "Avick told me that I would someday understand how you can seem so happy after what happened. They hurt you. How can you stay with them when they hurt you?"

"You mean these?" Lina frowned and lifted a hand to her shoulder and ran her finger over one of the bite marks. "I didn't even feel them when they were made. I was so lost in the pleasure that was hitting me that I didn't really know about them until I could think clearly. Even then, they didn't hurt."

Nerisa cast her doubting look.

"I know they're there. It's a small ache, but it hurts no more than some of my muscles. I like the way it feels. It's a link to Shard and Kaleb," Lina explained.

"That's the truth?" Nerisa was cautious in her belief.

Lina nodded, unsure of what to say next. She had plenty of questions of her own. Would they let her have enough freedom? She didn't know if she could handle it if they wanted to know where she was and what she was doing at all times. Even now when she'd decided it would be best to just give herself some time, part of her mind was weighing the options. Go or stay. Live on the run or face a future full of uncertainties with them.

"What..." Nerisa's next question died when an arrow stuck in the ground between them.

Lina didn't waste any time with hows and whys. She scrambled lithely to her feet and began pulling Nerisa back into the forest. Her eyes scanned the surrounding area and she listened even as she moved. She saw movement and heard breaking branches. There were three of them, maybe four, and two of them blocked the way back to camp. Muted thumps of the arrows from the men's bows sounded as the sharp points buried in trees around them.

"Shouldn't we go back to camp?" Nerisa resisted Lina's tugging hand as she rushed away from the Santir camp. "Maybe we should call for help." She pulled a palm-sized square com-link off her belt.

"They are between us and the camp." Lina ignored Nerisa's light resistance and towed her deeper into the forest. The combo communication-location device would be perfect if it worked, but she doubted that it would. "You can try that com-link, but they have probably blocked most methods of communication. They're using primitive weapons to keep the Santir in the *Ovian* from knowing they're here. If either of us had a stunner, we could get sure help with it—one blast and that big ship would sense it and inform the *Ardin*."

Nerisa tried to open a communication channel, but got nothing, just blank silence. Her pleas received no answer. At the absence of reaction, she began to run beside Lina.

"What are we going to do?" Nerisa finally gave up on the com-link, stuffing it into her pocket.

"They've gotten closer. We can't go around them as I intended. Is there somewhere we can go, a ruin we can hide in near here, maybe?" Lina's mind ran through all the options.

She could easily outrun them herself, but she wouldn't leave Nerisa. That left getting somewhere she might have a chance of gaining the element of surprise, an edge over her enemies.

"Yes," Nerisa panted, but continued running. "I'll show you."

They ran through the forest, up a slight incline as they approached the mountain. Lina saw the shape of a building sticking up out of the side of the hill as they ran through the trees and brush. It didn't look very big. Bolts thudded into trees, behind and around them.

"Tell me that there is more to it than that. We can't hide in just one room." Lina shot a glance over at Nerisa.

"It goes deep underground. It'll be dark in there and we have no light. We'll probably get lost." Nerisa warned.

"We won't. I have a light and an inborn sense of direction." Lina dodged around a sapling in her path.

Lina screamed as one of the bolts hit her in the thigh. She staggered, but kept her feet. She continued running in spite of the tearing pain each stride brought. She clenched her teeth to keep from groaning or screaming again. She didn't want to give her enemies any more help in tracking her.

They made it to the ruin without further incident. They continued their hurried pace as they moved through the entry passage. As soon as darkness surrounded them, Lina pulled out the small light she had brought. It provided no more than a thin beam of light, illuminating a small section of the sandy colored floor and walls, but they used it and ran deep into the ruin. They put many twisting labyrinthine hallways between themselves and their pursuers.

"We can stop here for a moment." Lina circled Nerisa's wrist with her hand and stopped her. "Help me tear some strips off my skirt."

"We can use some of mine, too." Nerisa went to work on the task at hand.

When they had enough strips of cloth, Lina broke off the end of the bolt and pushed it through her thigh. They wrapped the strips around her thigh tightly to staunch the flow of blood. Lina tied the ends of the cloth and leaned back against the wall.

She dug into her pocket to see what else she'd brought, because she couldn't remember. Most of what she had grabbed had been taken out of sheer habit. She hoped that the same habit that had urged her to grab the light, had given her a tool to get aid. *Come on, be here*, she chanted silently as she checked her pockets. Pulling out a slim cylinder, she shook her head and continued her search, but she was running out of

pockets. She hardly ever went anywhere without it. She held her breath as her hand closed over a small rectangular case.

She pulled the case from her pocket and looked at it. Relief flooded through her. She flipped open the small case and with a smile pushed the power button. She began entering codes.

"Luckily I brought this. Hopefully I can get us some help." Lina lifted the pad slightly as she continued putting in codes. She'd never tested it in these conditions. "This doesn't work on a communications wavelength. Maybe it will pass the dampening fields."

"Why didn't you use it before?"

"I wasn't sure I had it. I just grabbed stuff out of my bag without taking notice of what I had. Anyway, I couldn't have done this on the run. The codes are too complicated. If I'd dropped it, there would have been no hope for help." Lina snapped the case closed and slipped it back into her pocket. "We've got to move deeper into the ruin now."

"What is it?" Nerisa shot a glance down at the pocket in which Lina had put the small device.

"It's a link to the Sendar. I've used it on occasion to get myself out of bad situations." Lina led the way deeper into the old building. "Maybe it will bring us help this time."

At a partial collapse of the walls, they scrambled over the mound of debris and into the corridor beyond. The loose pile of cream-toned stone would provide warning that their pursuers were near if they chose to follow. Here and there chunks of wall had fallen, revealing the dark gray stone of the mountain behind the tooled stone. Lina continued down the old corridor, turning onto another hallway to put some more distance between their pursuers and to get out of sight.

"You could probably slip past them in your *tiron* form," Nerisa offered in a low voice.

"I'm not going to escape, leaving you at their mercy." Lina urged Nerisa into a large room with other doorways. "They probably don't have any."

Lina intended to do something about their pursuers. She checked the other doors and made sure that they led into usable passages. She wouldn't leave Nerisa in a room with a single exit. If anything should go wrong, she would make certain Nerisa had a good chance of getting out of the room.

"We could both die here." Nerisa sat down against the wall and propped her head in her hands.

"We're not going to die." Lina walked over and knelt beside her, squeezing her hand to reassure her. "As soon as I'm sure this bleeding has stopped, I'm going hunting. They won't get to you. I saw several interesting places as we traveled through this section. Although I won't be able to see them until they get close, I'll be able to find

them. I know the path we took and one of the Santir talents is an ability to recall dimensions."

"Hunting?" Nerisa's brown eyes widened. "Shouldn't we wait to see if your link thing worked?"

"There's no guarantee that it will. They've probably divided to have a better chance of finding us. If they come this way, I can take them one by one."

Chapter Eight

Kaleb glanced up and looked around the camp, pausing in his perusal of the progress on the buildings being constructed on the other side of the planet. Everything seemed to be as it should be. Most of the people were busy and others relaxed or talked in small groups. Shard was in the artifact tent, trying to find some clue as to where to look for their *Thent's* Seal.

Any of the *thents* built in this area could conceivably hold the Seal. Finding it was going to be hard. This area had been home to some large, powerful clans, some of which had occupied several of the structures at different times. The ancient Seal of Karach Thent had last been seen in one of those *thents*. Their only problem was the lack of information on just which one had last held it.

Beyond the array of shelters, the Sendar 4 silently raised the steps which had been left in the lowered position. Power levels climbed, systems switched to an auto-homing program. Almost undetected, it ascended to hover for a moment above the trees.

"Ardin, the Sendar!" Jaksen yelled and pointed.

Shard rushed out of the tent and searched for Jaksen. He found the man and saw him pointing. He followed the direction of his arm and saw the Sendar hovering over the trees. Kaleb dropped the computer he had been holding and ran for the skimmers.

"Vellis, Caron, Vador, Belan, and Avick, come with us. The rest of you stay with the women. Keep them in camp." Kaleb made it to the row of skimmers first and jumped onto one of the sleek machines.

It had taken only a breath to dispel the initial incredulous reaction. The only person even possibly capable of doing something like that was Lina. He was almost certain she wouldn't try to leave them. She'd accepted that they were her mates, even if she hadn't consciously acknowledged it yet. Something must be preventing her from using the com-link they had given her and she had used the Sendar to bring help.

They followed the ship as it flew over the treetops. It came to a stop above a tree-covered hillside. Landing the gliders in the dense vegetation was tricky, but in moments, they were on the ground. As they searched the area, Kaleb saw a man running into the trees. He simply pointed and one of his men ran after the fleeing man.

They found the women's scent trail and that of two human men as they approached the entrance to an old ruin. They followed it to the entrance. From the footprints in the soft dirt near the entrance, they knew that the men had followed the fleeing women into the structure. With *rusu* stunners drawn, they entered the darkened building.

"Do you think we'll find either of these two alive?" Kaleb sniffed, inhaling the mixture of scents.

"I think it depends on how threatened Lina feels." Shard clicked on the light attached to his belt. "If both men took the same direction Lina and Nerisa chose, then we'll probably find both men dead."

"You think that they're together, Ardin?" Avick looked hopefully at Shard.

"There isn't a doubt in my mind that Lina kept Nerisa with her. Lina has a strong protective streak in her." Shard paused as they came to an intersection of two hallways.

The scents mingling in the slightly stale air were unmistakable. One man had followed Lina and Nerisa. The other had chosen the other hallway.

"Vellis, Belan, take the one who chose the wrong path, alive if possible." Kaleb could feel the hair prickling under his skin. The knowledge that Lina was in danger enraged the animal within him.

"Yes, Ardin." The two men moved down the hallway at a steady pace.

Kaleb and Shard continued to follow Lina's scent trail. They found a bloody bow bolt on the floor in one hallway as well as a few drops of blood. Shard knelt and ran his fingertip over the bolt. He raised his finger and sniffed.

"The blood belongs to a full Santir." Shard looked over at Kaleb. Kaleb saw Shard's muscles tense, his shoulders shift.

Kaleb fought the change, the need to rush to protect his mate. Lina had been injured. In pain and forced into hiding, she would definitely consider the man following her a threat, especially if she took *tiron* form. The instinct of the animal would be much more dominant since she was hurt.

Kaleb knew that none of these men were from the research camp. The location of each of the humans with that group was carefully monitored. The mystery of where these men came from, who they were and how they got here was irrelevant at the moment. That issue would wait until he was certain that Lina was safe. If they managed to take any of the men alive, it would be one of the questions that would be asked.

* * * * *

"I bet that wound hurts, doesn't it, you fucking animal?" a harsh male voice called in a taunting tone. "I won't miss the next time. I'll put you out of your misery. I won't let you suffer." A stone skittered in the passageway, kicked by a careless boot.

Golden eyes patiently watched the bobbing light on the wall at an intersection of hallways. Secure in the knowledge that she was hidden from human eyes and senses, she waited with predatory patience. A dull throbbing from her hind leg made the *tiron* edgy, heightened her temper. She listened as his uneven, slow footsteps carried him forward and the sound of his breath, a dry rasp that spoke of some congestion, came closer.

Her muscles tensed, but she didn't move. This man hunted her, would kill her. If given the chance, he'd kill Nerisa. A snarl curled her lips, but she made no sound. She

wouldn't give him any indication, any warning. He wouldn't get the chance to cause any more harm. He'd die before he got close to her.

"Do you think you can hide, little animal?" The man laughed. The beam of light bobbed, weaving across the stone walls and floor as he moved forward along the passage, stepping over some of the debris of small collapses, but small bits of it crunched under his boots. "We have all the time we need to hunt you and get rid of the bodies. No one will hear any message you tried to send."

Come closer, Lina silently urged, her lips pulling back from sharp lethal teeth. She knew exactly where he was and how much closer he'd have to come before she got her chance. *You'll soon discover that it won't be you who will be hiding a body.*

Her body tightened, muscles coiled with tension as she waited for her prey to wander into reach. As soon as he was close enough, she'd ensure that he was no longer a threat to any shifter. He would die now.

"You might as well come out. I'll make it quick and easy," the man coaxed.

You will soon learn what quick and easy is. She waited. Unmoving, ready, all predator.

She heard the scuff of his boot on the floor, just a light scrape. The loud fool was close, moving toward the T-intersection of the hallways one slow step at a time. He came around the corner in a leaping bound, his bow at the ready and pointing straight down the hallway. He played his light over the wall and the debris of fallen sections of wall and ceiling.

He either missed or didn't notice the way two fallen pieces of ceiling seemed to grow out of the wall, blocking half the hallway. She didn't care which it was. The slabs were propped against one another and with all the rubble looked innocent, a solid mass. There was a deep niche between those pieces and the wall.

He paced around the fallen debris and passed her. She attacked from the back, taking him completely by surprise. Her teeth sank into his neck as her powerful, feline body hit his back and legs, claws sinking deep. She wrenched violently and heard a snap as his neck broke, severing his spinal cord.

Lina shifted to human form and dragged the body into a room farther down the corridor, hiding it out of sight, behind some debris. She checked her wound and noticed that a trickle of blood was running down her thigh. Although it throbbed and pain lanced through her with every movement, the bleeding would stop soon. Even now, only thin trails flowed down her thigh.

She shifted back into *tiron* form and returned to her hiding place. There were at least two more men who might come this way. She was certain that they hadn't yet done so. They wouldn't get past her. She would protect Nerisa.

She crouched in the dark, ready to defend her life. When they noted their friend's absence or discovered the end of their own search, they would come. Men like these never ceased to hate and when they thought they had an easy kill, they never walked away from it. She wouldn't let them succeed in their aims.

* * * * *

Shard led the way. They made no effort to hide their presence. They wanted Lina to know they were coming. She'd be edgy and on the hunt, prepared to attack. They wanted her to know before they approached her that those coming down the hallway were friends and not the enemy who had hurt her.

"Lina, we're coming to help you and Nerisa," Kaleb called out, his deep voice echoing down the corridors.

"Lina, call out if you're safe. There was only one man who came down this passage. One ran into the forest as we arrived. The other is in another corridor. Vellis and Belan will deal with him." Shard waited after he had shouted this, giving Lina time to answer.

The rumble of a *tiron* growl came back to them. "I am safe."

"Come out. Lead us to where you've left Nerisa, *i'ma*." Kaleb looked down the hallway, trying to see if there was any movement. "We'll take you home."

Shard waited, listening and watching for any movement.

Shard laughed as he saw her furry golden head peer around the corner. "Yes, *rao nari*, it's really us. Where have you stashed Nerisa and what did you do with the man who came this way?"

"I hid him," Lina growled as the reminder of those who had hurt her stirred the rage of the beast once again.

Shard heard the rising anger. The *tiron* was very definitely in control. It had been injured, its life threatened and probably felt cornered. That was a bad combination in any being, human or animal.

"Take us to Nerisa, Lina." Kaleb hoped that reminding her of the woman she had been protecting would distract the animal within.

She turned and stepped into the darkened corridor. A beam of light spotlighted her for a moment and then illuminated the hallway in front of her. She didn't falter as she led them to the room.

As they entered the room, Nerisa sprang to her feet and ran to Avick. She jumped into his arms and held on tightly. His arms wrapped around her, holding her close as his head lowered. His chin pressed against the top of her head and they simply stood like that for a few moments.

"Change forms and get dressed, *i'ma*." Shard motioned for Caron to go find the body. There might be some sort of identifying marking on it. "We'll see to your wound."

Lina stalked over to her pile of clothing and turned her back to the group. Muscles shifted and fur receded as her body reshaped. With slow movements, she dressed, trying to ignore the spikes of pain shooting through her thigh. It had been easier to do when she'd been focused on staying alive and protecting Nerisa. The burning ache flared with each movement.

She turned and tilted her head as she looked first at Shard, then at Kaleb. "You know being drawn into a *thent* is supposed to be a stabilizing thing. It's supposed to take away some of the uncertainty and most of the danger a lone Santir faces. In all my years alone, I was never shot with an arrow."

"Lina, with you, I doubt we'll have much boredom in spite of the strength of the *thent's* numbers." Shard smiled at her as he walked over to her.

"Who are — were — those men?" She ran her hand over Shard's bare arm.

He wore a mottled brown and tan sleeveless shirt with matching mottled pants. Kaleb wore mottled green camouflage clothing. The body-hugging clothing delineated their muscled forms, making them seem more rugged, dangerous. She had never before seen anyone look sexy in camouflage. Most people either looked dangerous or silly in the battle gear. Shard and Kaleb did look dangerous, but even more appealing in it.

"Except for the one you took down, the others should be alive." Kaleb curved his arm around her and pulled her back against him as Shard knelt to look at her wound.

"As to the men, we don't know who they were. We had no idea that they were here." Shard gently probed the wound and then wrapped it.

"Maybe you could help us to figure that one out." Kaleb brushed his hand over her stomach before he released her.

"It's time to go back to the camp. We'll have our physician look at your wound, but it should be fully healed within a day or two." Shard swept her up, cradling her in his arms.

* * * * *

The interrogation began the moment she'd shown them the device she'd used to bring the ship to her. She knew exactly why they were angry. Because she hadn't told them of her little tool, they were wondering exactly what else she'd kept from them. As if she'd purposely set herself up for just this type of result. At least they were conducting this interview in the privacy of their tent.

"Why didn't you tell us of this device you used to bring the ship to your location?" Shard demanded.

Lina rolled her eyes in exasperation. "First of all, that particular device is so seldom used that I didn't even think about it when I was telling you about the custom modifications that I have made to the Sendar. I don't carry a list of every tool I've ever used or own around with me."

"Don't get flippant." A soft warning growl rumbled in Kaleb's order.

"Second, I haven't had much time to think about the Sendar and if I had missed anything since we returned to the planet." She continued with the explanation, cautious of inciting them further. Not because she was afraid, she'd just had enough drama today. "I didn't have it with me when I went after Nerisa because if I was spotted by

someone on the way there or back using it would have caused more trouble than it would solve. The ship uncloaks when that function is activated."

"Why did you take it with you when you went for a walk with Nerisa? Were you expecting trouble?" Shard narrowed his eyes as he leaned closer to her.

"No, it was just habit to grab it in an unknown situation. I didn't even really know if I had it. I had to search my pockets to make sure. I hardly ever leave the Sendar or my camp without some of my gadgets. It's something I do almost every time I get ready to leave." She glared at him and raised her chin. "Do you think about putting on your belt and weapons when you get dressed?"

Kaleb's head tilted and he seemed to be thinking about it. "You're right. I don't think about it. It's just natural to grab them."

"What kind of missions did you do for Central Command?" Shard smiled as he negligently studied the thin palm-sized comp she sometimes used.

"Almost anything, as long as I didn't consider it a suicide mission." Lina shrugged.

"Did you ever work on any other shifter-human mating rescues?" Kaleb folded his arms and waited for an answer.

"Yes," she answered simply. She wouldn't lie to them about it.

Both men went completely still. She didn't even see them draw in a breath. Suddenly, she was very nervous. She could feel the intent in them. From the fierce frowns on their faces, an observer could understandably believe that this was the first that they'd heard of her dealings with Central Command.

"You mean you did this regularly?" Kaleb asked. "You've succeeded in taking the mates of other shifters?"

She endured the two glares directed at her by the two men standing across from her. Gods, she felt like pacing. Actually, she felt like walking right out of the Dura-tent, but knew she wouldn't make it. She could understand that they were angry that she hadn't told them of it, but this change in subject mystified her. Somehow, they'd gone from her inventions to discussing her missions with Central Command.

"They weren't mated. I never took a woman who had been more than found." She stamped her foot and glared at them as she repeated what she had told them only moments ago. It was either stamp her foot or kick one of them. "I didn't break any shifter laws."

"That's true, but you walked a fine edge." Shard's right hand braced on his hip as he stared down at her, anger still simmering in his dark gaze.

She glared back at him, just as angry. "No, I didn't live a sheltered, protected life. I was doing a job and some of those women were terrified. Nerisa was scared. The women I took were terrified of the men who had found them, of shifters."

"You know that a shifter would never hurt his mate." Kaleb's eyes narrowed and the staccato delivery of the words informed her that he didn't believe her.

"Those women didn't know that. A few of them didn't even know that they were mates to the men. They thought they were going to be eaten or sacrificed or something similarly vile." She threw up her hands and turned to begin pacing, but Shard's hand caught her shoulder and turned her back to him.

"It's not uncommon for a woman to panic, especially if she doesn't know much about shifters." Shard nodded, but the look on his face remained stern.

"The men were idiots. In some cases, I spent most of the journey to the meeting point reassuring them and explaining things so that when the men did find them, they wouldn't be quite so scared." Frustrated, she heaved a sigh and waited. She knew she wasn't going anywhere.

Kaleb's scowl twitched a few times.

Shard apparently decided to redirect the subject back to the original topic. "Is there anything you haven't told us?" Shard raised a brow and waited.

"After that session of 'what is this' that you conducted through my bags and the Sendar, I doubt it," Lina huffed, crossing her arms under her breasts, but then she qualified her answer. "That is it at least as far as what I have with me. I have some projects at my home that are in various stages of completion."

"Your home is with us now," Kaleb barked, his tone hard.

"Yes, it is." She gave her agreement readily. She knew that any qualification or hesitation would draw the beast within them, but that wasn't why she said it. She'd mated with them. For years, she'd tried to ease the yearning inside her but now, it was gone. She didn't feel restless. The *tiron* was content.

Shard and Kaleb both nodded, clearly pleased with her quick answer.

"We'll have to learn as much as we can from the equipment we found and their clothing since the two surviving men committed suicide rather than be captured. As you seem to be familiar with various technologies, you can help us find the rest of their party and their ship." Kaleb stepped forward and wrapped an arm around her.

Chapter Nine

The dampening units the men had used were archaic. It didn't take much time to decide that the group was either poorly funded or the bulk of their money had gone for other things. The same could be said of the sidearm the men had carried. Their clothing had been sturdy and made for rough conditions, but it hadn't been of high quality.

"I think we should recommend the search begin at the anomaly we found on the scan." Technician Meral pointed to a printed version of the scan he mentioned.

"You'd be wasting your time. It's not there." Lina felt obligated to warn the man.

She raised a brow as the technician she'd been working with pointedly ignored what she had said. It wasn't because he was only suffering her presence. It was because she, due to an order given by Shard and Kaleb, couldn't provide proof for her beliefs. She wanted to strangle her two mates, but getting her hands around Technician Meral's throat for a few moments would also improve her mood. His insistence on first seeing solid proof of her claims before he even considered her ideas was driving her insane.

The group of people gathered to learn what they could about these men knew a few facts. They had lived in a small camp. They had had no communication devices on them. Also, they surmised from the taunts and insults thrown by the man who had hunted Lina in that ruin that the men were from one of the hate groups that targeted shifters.

That information seemed to fit with the destruction that had been found in two sites. The destruction had been obviously deliberate. Pottery had been smashed and walls had chunks hacked from them.

Shard and Kaleb returned from their search for the men's companions and she glared at them as they walked toward the table. A small camp had been found, but the lack of supplies and the lack of sign that the men had been hunting for their food had led Shard and Kaleb to believe that that had not been their primary camp.

"Do you have anything for us?" Shard asked.

"There is some disagreement between us on a few things." Technician Meral looked significantly at Lina who gave him a sweet smile. "We all agree that they have been here for some time, most probably longer than we've been on Nariu Minor. We also agree that there are more than those three men on the planet."

"What don't you agree about?" Kaleb looked at her, smiled and then frowned as she glared at him.

"Most of us believe that their ship is somehow hidden on the planet." Meral again looked at her.

"What do you believe, Lina?" Shard stepped forward to the table and fingered a pair of the trousers from the camp.

"Their ship isn't on the planet. I'm certain about that." She clenched her fists, trying to accomplish anything under those restrictions was impossible. "I missed them. I wouldn't have missed a ship."

"You sound confident." Kaleb chuckled.

Gods, they seemed unaware of how far she'd been pushed today. Much more and she'd do something rash. Lina took a deep breath to keep from screaming at them. There had been one point when she'd been ready to walk. If she'd been able to get near her ship, she'd have taken off and considered coming back later. "They showed me the area where they think the ship is and I admit that there are manufactured materials there. I would have shown them how I know that that place is not the ship, but it seems that I'm not allowed on board my own ship, the Sendar, unless either you or Kaleb is with me."

"You know that you're very good with technology. It's just some precautions until we're certain that you've settled in." Shard seemed unconcerned by the fire blazing in her golden eyes, the fisted hands pressed to her side and the tense body posture.

"I know that I've given you no reason to distrust me and that it's an insult." She growled, but closed her eyes as she grabbed for control. "That isn't the point. I need to get into the Sendar and onto one of the monitors there so that I can show them how I know that the site they mentioned isn't hiding the ship you are looking for."

"If it isn't the ship, then what is it?" Shard raised an eyebrow, but made no move to lead her to the Sendar.

"It's an old crash site," she snapped. "The images I have show the impact crater and the debris field much better than your scans."

"These couldn't be survivors of that crash?" Kaleb looked at the blurry blob on the scan they'd been using.

"No, the crash happened long ago. I did closer scans to make sure that it didn't hide an advanced sensing system before I entered the atmosphere and after I landed. The decay of some of the metals produces specific chemical signatures. The only thing there is vegetation and metal, most of it buried." Lina tapped her foot as she waited for Kaleb and Shard to decide what they were going to do.

"Where do you think they hid their ship?" Kaleb took her arm as he began leading her to the Sendar shuttle.

"It's probably on one of the moons or one of the low-gravity, uninhabitable planets in this solar system. There it would be hidden from sight and in an area that isn't likely to be scanned with much intensity or frequency."

After flicking on a monitor, she showed them the scans that showed the crash site and the debris field.

"Why would you think it's on one of the moons?" Meral asked.

"I used that strategy before I modified the Sendar's shields and added the stealth functions when I had to stay on a planet for an extended period. An automated return program is a fairly cheap modification and simple enough to install on your own. Sometimes, it's easier to hide out on the planet, especially if your enemy has better technology than you do. The program will enable the ship at a specific time or at a signal." She shut down the monitor.

"Why do you say enemy?" Kaleb stepped close to the chair and cupped the back of her head, his fingers lightly massaging her scalp.

She bit back a moan. His fingers felt so good, soothing away the tension. "That is one of the few things Technician Meral and I easily agreed on. I told you that the man called me a 'fucking animal'. That is what they consider us. I don't know what they're doing here. You'd know if this planet held some sort of significance more than I would. It's not some innocent pleasure group touring the universe."

"You're sure of that?" Shard asked as he stood just opposite her.

Lina tilted her head up and shot him an incredulous look. "They're willing to kill to protect their presence here. I didn't even know they were there until they started shooting at us. I'm sure you know more about the particular hate groups which target shifters and why they would do something like this than I do."

"We do know quite a bit about the hate groups, but I can't think of a reason that they would be here. This planet holds nothing of import to them." Kaleb frowned as he urged her to her feet.

"That is from our view, Kaleb," Shard cautioned as he followed them from the Sendar. "We don't know what they seek. Depending on which group it is, it could be any number of things or reasons. Remember Timbon. There was absolutely nothing on that planet, but they were there looking for frozen traces of an old disease that they hoped would hurt us."

Kaleb nodded. He reached out and stopped her as she began walking back to the table with the other people who'd been working on the items from the human men's camp. He turned her back to face them.

"We have news for you, Lina." Shard stepped forward and smiled down at her. "Your proof is on its way here as are Lido and Janan. They will arrive at almost the same time."

"I still don't understand why you expect me to apologize to them when *they* sued me." She frowned at the two men who wouldn't bend on the matter. "They didn't even try to contact me before they sued me. I would have replied."

"Oh, you answer all queries from people who think that you have used their images?" Shard raised a skeptical eyebrow.

"There really aren't that many people who find a resemblance to themselves in my games. I read most of the complaints and all those that could cause legal problems are brought to my attention if I don't find them." She suppressed a frustrated growl and crossed her arms under her breasts.

"You're sure about the fact that you or maybe one of your designers didn't accidentally use their images?" Shard smiled.

She saw the predator lurking behind that all-too-friendly showing of teeth. "It's a relatively small company. I do most of the designing still. I did all the designs on those two images. They were creations from drawings and my imagination."

"You're sure? It's a big company." Kaleb watched her and saw her eyes narrow.

"I'm certain. It's only the manufacture and promotion end which has grown too large for me to handle." Lina forced her hands to unclench. "Those men sued me without any queries and I'm expected to apologize." She rolled her eyes. She couldn't understand the logic there.

"We don't simply expect you to apologize. You will apologize." Kaleb's brows lowered over his green eyes as his gaze locked with hers.

She couldn't maintain that intense stare for long in spite of the anger and defiance bubbling within her. Her eyes slid to the side and lowered to the ground. She pushed at the grass with the toe of her shoe. *Why should I apologize?* They could at least give her a reason.

"You should have found a way to explain the situation to them. You have shown yourself to be more than inventive when you want something." Shard's fingers lifted her chin until her eyes locked with his brown gaze.

"Why was it my responsibility to make them listen to what I had to say?" She jerked her chin out of Shard's grasp and stepped back so she could frown at both of them. "They could have tried asking a few questions before they sued me. Admittedly, I didn't stay on Mical for long periods at that time, but I always managed to respond to queries and complaints."

"You can ask them why they didn't look into it, but as a Santir, you should have done everything possible to prevent harm to other Santir because of something you created. Thanks to that lawsuit, they lost legal fees and other expenses." Kaleb's green gaze was intense and hard as he stepped close to her. "You will apologize."

Lina growled. Their insistence that she owed an apology for something she hadn't done infuriated her. She tried to turn away, but Shard's hand on her shoulder turned her back.

"If you thought that someone had stolen the design for your stealth modifications on the Sendar, would you just allow it to stand, regardless of what you could prove?" Shard raised his brows and his mouth tilted in a knowing grin.

"No, but I would get the facts first. Your friends didn't even try to contact me. They just slapped me with a lawsuit." She folded her arms and stubbornly stared at a point beyond the two men.

"You wouldn't just simply go looking for facts. You would get angry and you'd want revenge. You can't fool us with that lie. You'd go after them with everything you have and that would include your entire arsenal of tricks to remove your property from

their grasp." Kaleb moved to the right so she was forced to look at him. "You wouldn't wait for them to create a story."

Silently, Lina admitted that that might be the truth. She recognized the primitive need to defend what she considered her territory. She wasn't about to tell Shard and Kaleb that bit of information. While they'd worked hard to get her to see Ardin Lido and Ardin Jalan's side of this issue, they weren't trying to see her side at all.

"You will apologize, Lina." Shard's brows lowered and the tone was pure intimidation.

A low growl rumbled in the back of her throat. Although the very idea of being ordered to apologize incensed her, she wouldn't defy them. "I'll give them the words."

"Come here." Kaleb held out his hand.

She looked up ready to refuse, but responded to the warmth she saw in his eyes. She stepped forward, placing her palm in his. He tugged her against him. She landed plastered against his chest. Her legs tangled with his and his cock pressed against her belly demandingly as he softly brushed his lips over hers.

"Tomorrow, my wild little cat, after you have learned more of Lido and Jalan, the apology will be more than words." Kaleb bent and ran his lips over the soft skin at her temple.

"Why don't you tell me more of them now?" She rested her head against his chest for a moment.

"Because that story will be your bedtime story tonight," Shard chuckled as she clung for a moment when Kaleb tried to step back. "We still have plenty to tell you."

She took a deep breath. After the last few things they'd told her, she felt like flinching. The information they were so determined to impart had only brought trouble or upset thus far. She wondered what jewel of news they were going to throw at her now.

"What else did you need to tell me?" She met Kaleb's eyes and then Shard's after a final deep breath.

"Not all the men who were sent to get your proof will be returning from Mical immediately." Shard smiled and waited until her curiosity lured her into asking for more.

"What? Why wouldn't they return?" She looked from one man to the other. They were being far too cryptic.

"There is the little matter of selling the house on Mical and moving the design portion of your business here. There are shifters who would be thrilled to work for you." Kaleb shrugged and waited for her reaction.

"But...I already have people working for me on Mical," Lina protested as her brow furrowed and anger lit her eyes.

"If they don't mind the move into Shifter-Protected Space they are welcome to come. Not many humans would be willing to do that, to give up the cities and constant access to other humans." Kaleb gave her a satisfied smile.

"That's an offer guaranteed to be refused." Her hands curled into fists and she gritted her teeth, fighting the urge to take a swing at him. They'd already changed her life. Now they were messing with her business.

"Your work won't suffer," Shard stated, his arm curving around her shoulders and urging her back toward their shelter.

Chapter Ten

Lina wasn't happy with the two men who were her mates or with herself. Their orders and unwillingness to see her side of this issue infuriated her. She also didn't like the fact that because she had been so wrapped up in the drama and details of her own life, other Santir might have suffered.

At the time of that suit, Lido and Jalan had been Ardin over a *thent* which couldn't afford to lose the money required for legal fees.

It wouldn't have been difficult for her to discover their money troubles if she had merely taken a real interest in the case. A small amount of research would have given her that information. She should have at least looked into where they were staying. They hadn't been in one of the luxury hotels as she had assumed. They had stayed in their ship at the port for the whole of the trial.

While she hadn't used their images, she could have easily afforded to lose the trial. The loss of money wouldn't have hurt her. She wouldn't have had to admit to anything. Her lawyers had suggested using such a no-fault settlement if the trial seemed to be lost. Guilt wrapped around her.

She lay flat on the branch which overlooked the camp. Her tail twitched in agitation. Two days had passed since Shard and Kaleb's revelations and Ardin Lido and Ardin Jalan were due in mere hours. Her proof had been brought down to the surface earlier. It had still been in the large, airtight safe. That had raised her brows. That safe had been embedded in a stone wall.

She couldn't blame all the agitation boiling within her on the guilt and anger over the situation with the other two Ardin. A large part of her anger and unrest was because of the restrictions which had been placed upon her and the other women since that attack in the forest. No woman was allowed to leave the camp without a male escort until it was certain that the unknown group of men had been found and caught. Lina ached to go for a run in the forest.

She watched as Shard stalked into camp. He looked around the area and then pinned Jaksen with a stare when he didn't see any sign of his mate. "Where's Lina?"

"In the tree, Ardin." Jaksen pointed to the high, wide limb that she had chosen as a vantage point. It hung over two Dura-tents and offered her a view of the entire camp.

Shard's eyes locked with Lina's defiant, golden orbs and narrowed. "Sulking, *i'ma*? You'd better be down and into some clothing before Lido and Jalan get here or you will earn your first taste of Santir discipline. You had also better not try any cute little tricks such as wearing a shirt in *tiron* form."

Lina bared her teeth in silent defiance.

Shard's sharp eyes caught the white gleam of her teeth. "Push me, *rao nari*." The invitation was delivered in a low growl.

She wasn't quite that brave. Being stubborn didn't make her a fool. He was quite serious in that threat and she wanted to know more about this Santir discipline before she blatantly defied them. As with all other shifters, she knew they would never physically hurt their mate. That would in no way limit their ability to enforce their rules.

She kept close attention on the incoming messages. When she heard that a shuttle was coming down to the planet, she slipped out of the tree and into the spacious shelter she shared with Shard and Kaleb. She shifted and began to get dressed.

She chose a green, sleeveless, scoop-necked top and a mid-calf-length black skirt. Soft-soled black slippers finished her outfit. Just before she stepped outside, she remembered her hair. She turned back and braided it, securing it with a thin band. There was no gain in pushing them over small issues right now. She had done more than enough pushing on the larger ones in the last few days.

Lina slipped out of the large tent and stalked over to join a group of women gathered at one of the long, sturdy metal tables. She wasn't the only woman angry over the restrictions which had been placed upon them as a result of the discovery of unknown men on the planet. The other women were just as angry, but they were far more accustomed to the ways of the *thent*. They knew what issues they had little chance of getting changed and those that they could. This, she'd learned after much argument, was one that wouldn't be modified in any way for anyone.

"I thought that you'd push," Medina offered Lina a cup of hot *dorin* as she directed a significant look toward the branch Lina had vacated.

"Not just yet." Lina lifted the steaming mug and sipped at the fragrant, rich brew.

Marge Larosh laughed snidely. "Still a little cautious because you got yourself pinned, hmmm?"

Lina lifted her head and locked her eyes with those of the taunting woman. Her lips stretched into a feral smile, showing four lengthened canines. A low rumble rolled in the back of her throat.

Marge's eyes widened, then skittered away and she lowered her head.

"They can pin me, but I'll have no trouble with you," Lina vowed in a low warning. It was the only one this woman would get.

"You should talk, Marge. You didn't even get pinned, yet you walked around subdued and submissive for days after Vellis claimed you." Calla, a woman of almost the same age as Lina, chuckled as the woman blushed and dipped her head again. "Our Lady isn't showing any such reticence. She is arguing with them openly."

"She's a true mate for our Alphas," Medina affirmed.

Although Lina was grateful for the acceptance and support the other women were showing, their help wasn't needed. She could take the woman if the need arose. She

didn't think the woman would ever go that far. Marge had been out for a little quick, easy intimidation.

If there had only been women within hearing range, she would have asked about Santir discipline, but men were moving all around the camp. She had the feeling that any man who overheard such a discussion beginning would rush to squelch it. With that kind of interference, she wouldn't learn anything valuable.

She watched the shuttle sweep around as it prepared to land. It seemed that the time had come for her to apologize. She would do it and she would mean the words. The explanations had been informative. She did bear a little responsibility for the way things had gone.

The shuttle landed expertly at the end of the row of shuttles. Two tall redheaded men strode out of the shuttle when the hatch opened. Their light golden skin gleamed in the bright sunlight.

Jalan's body was built for speed more than power with its lean lines. He had icy blue eyes and a handsome face. The taller of the two was Lido. Golden eyes blazed from his rough-hewn face. The man was large and muscled, a warrior.

She saw that they still carried themselves with the same arrogance that she had observed near the end of the trial. When they'd lost the trial, they hadn't acted defeated. They had shot her a hard look and marched from the courtroom. She should have known that they were far too arrogant to merely be two lone Santir.

They smiled as they walked over to greet Shard. A hand wrapped around her arm and she looked up into Kaleb's deep green eyes. She got to her feet without further urging. Kaleb led her to Shard and the two redheaded Ardin where they waited in front of a tent devoted to the artifacts that had been found during the search for this *thent's* symbol.

The trial and its verdict had been public. Shard and Kaleb had decided that her apology would be conducted in public as well.

"Lina, I would like to formally introduce you to Ardin Lido Orsal and Ardin Jalan Tavis of Marich Thent. Jalan, Lido, this is Lina, our mate. She has something she needs to say to you." Kaleb briefly clasped each man's forearm in greeting before he made the introductions.

Lido's golden eyes moved over her face and a frown creased his brow. "She looks very familiar."

"Lina," Shard prompted.

She took a deep breath. *Time to pay for the sins of complacency.* "I owe the two of you an apology. I was so lost in the details of my own life and everything that was happening at that time that I missed so much. I didn't even know you were Santir until the very last."

"You owe us an apology?" Lido's rough, raspy voice made the query more of a growl.

"What is this about, Shard?" Jalan looked to Shard when Lina didn't immediately explain.

"Just let her explain things." Shard turned and narrowed his eyes at Lina.

She got the message. She hadn't yet actually apologized.

"I-I was doing some work for Central Command at the time and was off Mical more than I was on it. I should have looked more into your situation, but I was swamped at that time. I should have done more when I learned you were Santir, but, until that time, I associated you with every other person who sued me hoping for easy money." She looked at the slightly less intimidating Ardin Jalan when she made her explanation.

"Sued..." Lido breathed. His eyes on locked on her face.

"Yes." Kaleb nodded, his eyes sparkling as they turned to Lina. "Lina is L.C. Cadian of Cadianco. She was born Santir, but was living as a human because she was alone. She has been walking the edge for a long time now. She still has more to tell you."

She knew that every eye in the camp was on her. They were all interested in the spectacle.

"I tried to contact you when I realized that you were Santir. I wasn't going to try to buy you out of the suit. I was going to try to explain things to you, show you that I didn't use your image." She shifted her weight nervously from her right to her left foot.

"What could you think to tell us to convince us that we were wrong? We saw the images. Everyone has. What could you show us?" Lido sneered.

"If I had known of your situation, I'd have done more than that. I wouldn't have missed the money of a no-fault settlement. I'm sorry I didn't try harder to make you listen." For the moment, she made no comment about proving them wrong. The look on Shard's face told her that she had better get on with the apologies.

"We wouldn't have accepted a no-fault settlement," Jalan denied coldly, his eyes and his expression displaying his hostility.

"When I really thought about it, I realized that there were many ways that I could have gotten to you, even if you were stubborn. I'm sorry I didn't pay more attention to things. I'm sorry I let it go to judgment when I knew you were Santir." She took a deep breath. Without thinking hard, she knew of four ways to get to them with or without their approval.

"Do you think that anything you said would be of interest to us?" Jalan gave her a contemptuous look. That man was still angry and still believed that she had used his image, regardless of what the judge said.

"You never saw my part of the trial, my testimony. Your advocate was there, but because I was working with Central Command, I was allowed to show my proof late one night before I left early in the trial." Lina laced her fingers together and looked up at the two men.

"You have proof of your claims?" Lido's mouth had fallen open in incredulous shock.

"Why couldn't we sense you as Santir during the trial?" Jalan narrowed his eyes.

"Yes, I have proof," she sighed and took a deep breath. "As to why you couldn't sense me, there's a specialty lotion that contains many of the same minerals as the *mina* stone. It works just like that stone without the giveaway of wearing a piece of gray rock as jewelry."

Jalan's eyes turned to Shard. "Have you seen this proof?"

"No, we waited for you to arrive to gauge the worth of her proof." Shard reached out and took one of her hands in his. He gave it a gentle squeeze and smiled at her.

"A judge found it to be more than convincing." While she appreciated the gentle encouragement of his hand clasping hers, she couldn't stop herself from glaring at him in response to his comment.

"Ah, but, *rao nari*, we have much stricter standards and are harder to convince than a human judge." Kaleb used the tips of his fingers to turn her face to his as he brushed his lips across hers. "Show us your proof now."

"I'll need one of my computers as well as the black box." She looked longingly to where Darik had disappeared into their tent. She could have used that time alone to collect her jangled nerves. Taking a deep breath, she took the box from the man and carried it to a free table.

She opened the sealed safe and took out a large, bound, obviously old tome. She gently placed it on the table and then took out a small red data chip. One of her slim, powerful computers was brought to the table.

"I'll do it. I know what you can do with a computer." Kaleb held out his hand in imperious demand.

She frowned at the implication, but placed the red chip in his hand. "There's a file on that chip named 'Origin Character Development'."

While Kaleb was accessing the files, she reverently opened the book. She turned the yellowed pages with care. She didn't want to damage it.

"What is this?" Lido asked, gesturing to the book.

"This is where I got the basic character faces for many of the characters in 'Origin' including the two that you say were based upon you." She found the first of the relevant pages. "The file Kaleb is opening shows how I went from the one-dimensional sketches to the three-dimensional versions and the differences I added for the game characters, in detail. I learned early in my career to document my work."

The first things she showed them were merely line sketches of Santir males, two of which did resemble Ardin Lido and Ardin Jalan. She turned the pages of the book again and showed the men drawings done in colored inks. The drawings were of excellent quality and detailed. The old explorer who had owned this book had documented his

encounters with a species unknown to his people. Handwritten notes near each drawing told of the men and how they had greeted his arrival.

"You'll want to look at these." Kaleb set the computer down so that the others could look at the images now displayed on the screen.

After they had finished inspecting everything, Jalan's eyes traveled back to the old, cloth-bound book. "Where did you get this?"

"I found it in an estate sale. The family had been related to the explorer who did all the sketches and notes." She ran a reverent hand over the pages. "I was always searching for old Santir artifacts. I had several agents who kept watch for anything that might belong to that time period."

"Have you found others?" Kaleb looked over at her and was struck by how much she had longed for a connection to her people even as she kept herself apart from them.

"Yes, she has," Lido answered before she could respond to the question. He pulled a palm-sized metal disk out of the box.

Lina glanced briefly at the old clan Seal. "I found that in some old ruins on Denao." The sight of the Seal, one meant to be worn by the Ardin as a buckle or medallion, brought back memories, both good and bad.

"Why did you take it?" Shard frowned at the sadness in her expression.

"My mother was a descendant of the Nairan clan. She was so proud of her affiliation to it." She remembered with a smile. She could still hear her mother telling the legends and stories of the clan's proud history. "I wanted to give her something of it, something she could hold. I began looking for one of the seals or a copy of it. I found some old references to it that led me to Denao."

The silence stretched. "What happened next, *rah'ki*?" Shard could tell by her expression that this next part was not easy for her to remember.

"I went to get it. I told the elders only that I was going to get a gift for my mother. I was afraid that if they knew that I was flying into Shifter-Protected Space that they would try to stop me." Her eyes saw nothing of the forest beyond their camp as old memories raced through her mind.

"Something happened to her while you were gone?" Shard reached out and rubbed his hand up her bare arm.

"It took me five days to find it once I arrived on Denao. I came back home, ready to give my mother a piece of her history. She wasn't there. The elders had sent my mother to check some of our contacts with two others." She drew in a shuddering breath. Gods, this hurt. She hadn't ever talked about how her mother had died.

"Nari, you don't have to tell us." Kaleb brushed his fingers across her cheek.

She went on with the story, needing to get it out now that she was telling it. "They were very young and inexperienced. It should have been a routine check. Something went wrong. Their bodies were found naked, mutilated, days later. I should have been there. It wouldn't have happened if I was there."

"You could have been killed just as they were, Lina." Shard's voice roughened. The heat from his body seeped into hers as he stepped closer to her.

"I kept that with me for years afterward. It was the only link that I had to my mother. I was carrying it the day that I was sent to find the missing woman. That's the only reason I have it now." She closed her eyes. After she had been separated from her group, it had started to remind her of everything she didn't have. She had shoved it into the safe and tried to forget about it.

Kaleb's arm slipped around her, pulling her close, comforting her.

"So did my evidence pass the test?" She thrust her thoughts away from her mother's death, away from her life before she'd been on her own.

"We believe that you didn't use our images." Lido stared at her for a few moments before he gave her his answer. "I would like to look some more at that book."

"But you probably did use their ancestors, *rao nari*." Kaleb laughed at her frowning expression.

"The resemblance between the pictures and Lido and Jalan is astounding. I'm surprised that even a human judge missed it." Shard gave Lina a pleased smile and clapped Lido on the back.

"He didn't miss the resemblance. My book has been authenticated as over three hundred years old. I couldn't have faked it. With the documentation of my work, it was enough." She turned and glared at him.

Jalan stepped forward and smiled at her. "We accept your apology and you have ours as well. We should have been much more watchful, more aware. There were a few instances in that game that did mirror Santir history."

"I tried to dilute anything that resembled our history to a point where it was unrecognizable." She frowned. If they had even thought that it sounded like it, then she hadn't done enough.

"Instead of taking it as coincidence, we should have done our own research. We also should have given you a chance to explain. If we had, you'd likely have left the planet with us because I doubt you would have been able to explain and keep your identity a secret." Jalan raised his brows.

"I wouldn't have minded her coming to us before she did. It might have helped curb this penchant for trouble she has exhibited—working for Central Command, various acts that are on the fine edge of shifter law and also having the sheer nerve to taunt her mates at any time she feels like it. She's a mate who will require constant attention." Kaleb smiled at her with predatory interest.

Lido laughed but continued to look at the passages which accompanied the drawings. "She sounds like just what you two need. This mentions the name of the planet Emtal. That planet was where our clan was founded long ago, before the loss of some of the old gates."

"The explorer must have been one of the first people to visit there. It wasn't long after the first few visitors before our kind was doing our own exploring." Jalan leaned across the table to look more closely at the book.

"There was both good and bad in our traveling the stars." Kaleb raised his eyes and looked over at her. "We lost so much of our history after we began exploring other planets."

"How is your search going?" Jalan looked over at Shard. "Have you found your clan's symbol yet?"

"Not yet." Shard stepped up beside her. His hand ran up and down her back and then settled just over the curve of her right butt cheek.

Lina felt a tinge of red sweep up from her breasts as hot arousal simmered within her. He wasn't even trying to entice her. A breeze swirled around her and the warm musk of her mates surrounded her. The heat and scent of their bodies was an enticement that she had no desire to resist. Shard and Kaleb knew just how to touch her.

Chapter Eleven

The scent of seasoned meat and roasted vegetables floating on a light wind teased Lina's nostrils and drew her attention away from the code on the screen. Her stomach growled loudly announcing that it had been too long since she'd eaten. She looked back at the lines of code. Something was wrong with it, but she couldn't quite put her finger on it. Sighing, she saved her work and put the comp away from the moment. She'd run it later and see if she could discover what was wrong. It had to be almost time for the meal. She helped set the tables and put the last plate on the table just as the platters of food were carried out of the kitchen tent.

A few men walked out of the forest at the edge of camp. Lina looked among the men but didn't see either Shard or Kaleb. She kept looking and a few moments later saw them as they strode toward the camp. They looked a little frustrated, but smiled when they saw her. She met them halfway, hugging each of them fiercely, before she walked with them over to the table. Sliding into the seat between theirs, she eyed the food eagerly, trying to decide what she wanted.

"How was your day?" Shard asked as he filled his plate.

"For the most part it was good. At times a little frustrating, but I'll get everything worked out. Did you find anything useful on your search?" She looked over at him as she put the bowl of vegetables back in the center of the table and reached for a platter of meat.

"Nothing. Not even a trace or a broken jar today to tell us they were anywhere in the area." Shard shook his head and frowned.

Kaleb must have been feeling a little left out. His hand slid over her back and trailed over her ribs. Her lips twitched and she straightened at the light prickling sensation. She glanced over at him. He smiled and she caught the hungry gleam in his eyes. Teasing man. He could have touched her arm. She shook her head. Putting her hand on his thigh, she tilted her head and looked at him through her lashes. The man was persistent. She knew she'd better stop him now.

"Did anything happen while you were searching, Kaleb, or were you with Shard the entire time?" She picked up her fork and speared a juicy chunk of meat.

"Most of the day I was in a different area than he was. I didn't find anything. It's been a long day." His hand slipped up her back and his fingers stroked her neck.

"Sounds like you need to be distracted. I might be able to handle that later tonight." She let her eyes travel over his chest before returning to his lips. She'd like to kiss him.

"Why not right after dinner?" He leaned closer and his lips brushed her cheek.

"I still have work I need to do." She grimaced.

He smiled. "Mmm... Maybe you'll finish early."

She heard an intensity in his voice, but when she looked at him, he seemed to be calm. "I doubt it. I have some things I really want to get finished tonight."

Shard chuckled but kept eating. He looked over at her, but he didn't say anything. She didn't know what he could find so funny. Kaleb's right hand smoothed down her back, drawing her attention back to him. She saw the heat flare in his eyes as he watched her. She shook her head and focused on eating.

"What are you doing? How important is it?" Kaleb asked.

"It could probably wait. Since it doesn't have to and I'm already working on it, it doesn't make sense to stop now. I'm working on some coding for a game." She shrugged.

Kaleb felt his smile widen at her admission. He'd been almost certain that she hadn't had anything pressing to do, but hearing her admit it took away the last bit of his restraint. He was tempted to tell her it could wait. He didn't want to put her on her guard or make her angry. He wanted to make love to her, not fight with her. Just thinking about watching the passion in her rise, knowing they both needed to eat caused his cock to harden.

He slid a little closer to her, but kept eating even though he hadn't tasted a bite of it since she'd mentioned relaxing him. When she didn't seem to notice, he took advantage and slid his fingers up her side. She wiggled a little and her shoulders moved. He didn't take his eyes off her. Turning her head, she narrowed her eyes at him. He clearly read the message in those beautiful gold eyes. She wanted him to stop and she wanted to do it now. He held back a laugh. That wasn't happening. He'd just begun playing. He traced the full curve of her breast. He wondered if her nipples would be hard, waiting for his mouth or fingers. Her arm clamped down, pinning his hand to her side. He felt his smile widen. Did she really think that would stop him?

Lina looked over at Kaleb. The fiend was grinning wickedly and she could see the anticipation glittering in his eyes. She wasn't going to let him tease her when they both knew she had work to do. She bared her teeth at him. He laughed. The soft chuckle infuriated her and she straightened, pulling away from him a little. His hand withdrew. She exhaled, both relieved and disappointed that he'd stopped. She really hadn't expected it to be that easy. Waiting for his next move, she ate slowly. She felt his hand settle over her breast. Her food lodged for a moment at the back of her throat. She swallowed loudly, barely avoiding choking.

His thumb stroked over her nipple. It felt as if there wasn't anything between his fingers and her skin. She drew in a shaky breath. She had to stop the man before he went any further. Blood heated her cheeks. She wondered if anyone had noticed where his hand was. She slid her hand off the table and put it on his thigh. Leaving it there a few moments, she waited to see if he'd get the message. His fingers gently squeezed. She gritted her teeth. He was going to be stubborn about this. She frowned, risking a

glance around the table. No one seemed to have noticed anything out of the ordinary. She slid a fuming glance toward Kaleb.

She saw Kaleb try to hold back a smile. She gritted her teeth. The scent of his arousal only added to the conflict inside her. She wanted him touching her, but she didn't want to be tortured when they couldn't do anything about it. He seemed utterly confident that she wouldn't do anything that would embarrass either of them. The man had a lot to learn. She might be embarrassed but she wasn't going to back down this time. She slid her hand down his thigh, hoping he'd get the message without having to push too far. When he smiled at her and boldly plucked her nipple, she knew she'd have to show him she was serious. He'd already turned his attention back to the food on his plate. Her fingers slid over his cock and then cupped over the ridge. He stiffened and his head slowly turned to her again. Her eyes locked with his and her brow arched.

Her fingers tightened and stroked his cock. His eyes closed and she felt his thigh muscles bunch. She suspected he was trying to regain control. The man pushed her to her limits. His hand fell away from her breast. She relaxed and went back to eating. Maybe he'd realized that he could only push her so far. She wanted to drag him out of his seat and push him to the ground. Soon, she wouldn't care who saw them. He smiled. She knew he wouldn't go too far, that he would have a limit to how far he would go. The only thing that bothered her was that he hadn't found that point yet. He still looked ready to play. He trailed his fingers over her hip. She jumped.

"Kaleb." She pitched her voice low so that it wouldn't carry far. The last thing she wanted to do was draw more attention to them. He had to hear the warning in her tone.

The man just ignored her. She wanted to kick him. Lina grabbed his wrist. She had an idea of what he was going to do next and she knew she had to stop him. His palm slid over her thigh. She tugged at his hand, trying her best to keep the struggle subtle and out of sight. She knew that if he touched her pussy that any resistance might as well have never happened. She already wanted him. Much more of his teasing and she wouldn't care who saw what.

His palm cupped her pussy. She exhaled shakily, doing her best to maintain control. His finger pressed between the lips of her pussy. She gave up all pretense of eating. Her fork clattered to the table and she stood. She grabbed for her last shred of sanity.

"Excuse me, I have to..." She didn't finish as Kaleb stood.

She spun and headed for the tent. Hunger blazed in his eyes. She was just surprised that he hadn't grabbed her already.

She just made it into the tent before his arms closed around her and lifted her off her feet. He laughed low and satisfied. She clutched at his arm as the tent flap dropped closed behind them. Kaleb flicked a small lamp on, giving them more light.

"We don't need a light. Are you an exhibitionist?" She let him feel the edge of her nails.

"I want to watch you. No one's going to see so much as a shadow through the thick fabric." He nipped at her ear as he carried her over to the bed.

Right now she didn't care about that. She only wanted to get him naked and inside her. She reached back and tugged on his shirt. "Let me down."

He put her on her feet. She whirled to face him. Her hands moved to his shirt. The fastenings snagged. She frowned in concentration as she worked to get them free. He pushed the straps of her shirt down to her elbows. She reached for him, but the straps kept her arms near her side. She growled and wriggled, struggling out of the garment. It slipped down to her waist and she forgot about it. He tugged at her bra. She pushed his shirt wide and spread her hands over his chest. His muscles tensed. She laughed, enjoying the way he responded to her. She scraped her nails over his nipples. He growled and she heard a distinct rip. Her bra loosened, the straps sliding down her arms. It hooked at her elbows. Impatiently she freed one arm and went back to her explorations. Trailing her fingers down his stomach, she traced the edge of his pants. He cursed and tugged at hers. He managed to get her pants unfastened. His hand slipped inside the fabric and cupped her panties. The heat of his palm seemed to sear through the sheer lingerie. She gasped and her legs tightened around his hand. She didn't want to lose that contact even for a moment.

"I want these off you." He nipped at her lips and tugged one side of her pants down.

"I want these off *you*." She unfastened his pants and pushed them down his legs. "Looks like I'm going to get what I want first."

She managed to get his pants down to his knees before the feeling of his fingers stroking her clit froze her. He didn't play fair. She groaned. He stepped forward, but gravity had pulled his pants the rest of the way down his legs. They'd bunched at his ankles. He stumbled and fell onto the bed, taking her with him. She gasped and clung until they'd stopped bouncing. Looking up at him, she saw him shaking his head. She grinned at him. He frowned and kicked out of his pants.

"You know even as we were falling, your hand never left me." She licked the darkened circle of his nipple.

"I know what I want." He rolled her under him. His fingers stroked her clit before he tugged his hand out of her pants. He rose to his knees and pulled her pants and panties down. She kicked free of them as he tossed away her shoes. He looked up and bared his teeth. Her heart raced and she wanted nothing more than to make love with him, any way she could. She reached for him. He moved between her legs. His hands smoothed down her thighs. His cock nudged at her entrance. She tightened her legs around his hips. She wanted him now. Tugging his head down, she kissed him desperately. His tongue thrust into her mouth. She hoped he was as ready as she was. She didn't think she'd make it through any more teasing. Her hand trailed down his back.

"Now," she growled against his lips. Wild uncontrolled need boiled through her body seeming to grow with every breath.

His hips rocked forward and she cried out in joy as his shaft slowly pushed into her. Finally. He held himself motionless for a moment. Frustration screamed through her. She needed him to move. She could almost see him trying to regain control of himself. Nipping at his jaw, she arched up against him. That wasn't happening. She didn't want him thinking, guiding every move, every rise of passion. He growled and his hips pressed hers into the bedding. She dug her nails into his buttocks and tightened her inner muscles around his cock. His hips rose. She thrust her hips up, taking him again. His mouth slanted over hers hungrily. She felt the sharp edge of his teeth on her lips and thrilled at that sign of wildness.

His hips drove against hers. She met each stroke with equal force. The feel of his chest sliding against the hard tips of her breast sent waves of sharp sensation straight to her core. Tension coiled inside her. She trembled as she tried desperately to grab the release, but it remained just out of reach. Her nails dug into his buttocks, pulling him closer. His hips ground against hers in a slow circle. Shivers rippled up her spine and pleasure exploded, sending spikes of bliss to her fingers and toes. He continued to rock into her. His body tensed and he groaned. She felt his entire body shake as he came. He relaxed, his breathing gradually slowing. His arms swept around her, holding her tightly to him. She held him, savoring the closeness.

* * * * *

Lina eyed the forest surrounding the camp and a tingle ran through her body. The need to shift to *tiron* form and race through the trees burned inside her, pulsing and growing stronger with each breath. She bit her lip and turned resolutely away from the temptation, heading toward the confines of the tent. Sliding her palms down the tight black fabric of her pants, she took a deep breath.

The feelings only lessened a little, but at least she couldn't see the forest. Seeing the trees only made it that much harder to resist the desire to run, to feel the wind as she raced through the trees and get lost in the freedom of being a *tiron*. She looked around the tent, searching for something to take her mind off leaving camp. She wanted to respect Shard and Kaleb's order, but it was getting harder to do.

She spotted her bag at the bottom of the bed, half open. Groaning, she remembered that she'd had to search this morning for a bra to wear. She picked up the bag and dumped the contents on the bed, keeping the lingerie and putting everything else back inside it.

She frowned as she held up the remains of what had once been her favorite bra. Both delicate-looking straps had been torn completely free of the cups. She narrowed her eyes as she noticed that something more than ripped straps was wrong. The stitching had been ripped along the base of bra and was slowly unraveling. She sighed

and dropped the brilliant green silk onto the bed in the discard pile. Yet another piece of lingerie destroyed.

She'd heard their opinion of her lingerie again and again. Shard and Kaleb for the most part considered her underwear unnecessary, a pretty wrapping. At times they lingered and tormented her as they removed each bit of clothing with deliberate care. At those times, their large strong hands unfastened each clasp with torturous slowness before slipping the fabric from her body.

But when they were wild...

"What are you doing in here?" Kaleb stood a few paces away from her, his head tilted to the side as he looked from the pile of clothes on the bed to her.

She thought better of using the opening to restate her desire to go for a run. They'd already had this argument and she knew it was fruitless. Neither of them would change their mind. Watching him through her lashes as he stalked across the room, she admired the way the green camouflage shirt clung to his arms and chest. Letting her gaze stray lower, she licked her lips. Those camo pants were skintight.

"Looking at my underwear." Lina tossed a frown at him as she noticed yet another torn piece of clothing.

"You have a compulsion about your lingerie," he chuckled, sitting down on the bed beside the pile of clothes.

"And you have no obsessions?" She raised an eyebrow. "Remember...I was watching you when you first stepped onto my ship."

Kaleb's grin widened into a full smile. "I'll admit that I do enjoy flying. I do have other, more powerful compulsions."

Lina shook her head. As if she could miss those compulsions. He was fiercely protective of all those people under his protection. And then there was his possessiveness toward her. She looked over at him and took in the warmth glowing in his brown eyes.

"Why don't you just tell me about one of them?" She raised her brows in challenge as she sat down on the other side of the pile of clothes.

"Pick anything you want to know and I'll tell you about it. Nothing in my life is taboo to you." He brushed his fingers across her cheek.

She peeked up at him through her lashes as she bit her lip. It was all too tempting to ask him about his sexual relationship with Shard. She could see the depth of their bond in the smallest of actions and had seen the way they looked at each other. Sometimes there was enough heat in their eyes to light a fire. The two men were lovers and obviously loved each other. She didn't know if they admitted that even to themselves.

"Anything?" She didn't want to make him feel uncomfortable.

"Ask anything. I'll hold no secrets from you." He picked up her hand and tangled his fingers with hers.

"Tell me about...your relationship with Shard. I only know of the rumors concerning Ardin and the *Tierna*." Her fingers tightened around his as she lifted her head to meet his eyes.

One corner of his mouth kicked up into a grin. "There's a lot to tell. Where do you want me to start?"

"When did you meet him? How did you meet him?" She marveled at how easily he was speaking of it. She was a stranger to them. Didn't he have any doubts about where she would fit in their relationship? She didn't want to come between them any more than she wanted to be left out of the relationship.

"We met when I was ten and Shard was eleven. It's custom for the *chatar* of the *thent* to find pairs meant to be bound by *Tierna*. The *chatar* in my *thent* found me first. When Shard was found by the *chatar* in his *thent*, he was taken to one of the meetings used to bring the pairs together. We met there." Kaleb's eyes were unfocused and she could tell he was remembering those meetings.

"Did you know he was the one meant to be Ardin with you when you saw him?" She turned a little, her body angled toward his.

"No, I didn't know he was the one meant to be bound by *Tierna* to me. I wanted my best friend from my home *thent* to be my bond partner. I was determined to get my way." He shook his head.

She could almost see a younger version of him stubbornly insisting that he knew better than everybody else who should be Ardin. "Did you at least give Shard a chance?"

"After a while I did. I didn't like him at first. I didn't understand just how the other half of the *Tierna* bond would be chosen." He turned toward her, pushing the clothes out of the way.

"Why didn't you like Shard when you first met him? He was a child. You both were. He couldn't have had too many bad habits then. Was it just because you weren't getting your way?" She smiled and pictured smaller versions of the two of them squared off scowling at each other.

"Well, that didn't put me in a receptive frame of mind. We were just different. He thought I was a pampered cub and not strong enough to fight at his side. I thought he was all emotions and no thought. We eventually came to an understanding." Kaleb shrugged his shoulders.

"Were either of you the son of an Ardin?" She tilted her head. That was something that she'd always wanted to know. In most cultures, title and rank passed from father to son. *Was it the same with Ardin?*

"My fathers were Ardin." His eyes never left hers. "The tendency to form the *Tierna* bond is sometimes strong in a family line. But nature and character play a large part in it."

Lina frowned as his words seemed to echo in her head. His wording just seemed strange especially when she'd asked specifically about Ardin. "The tendency to form

the *Tierna* bond..." It would have seemed easier to say that the position of Ardin sometimes passed from father to son. Through the whole conversation when she'd asked about Ardin he'd talked of the *Tierna* bond.

"Is it possible to form the bond and not be Ardin?" She narrowed her eyes and waited for his answer. She'd never heard of anyone but Ardin bound by *Tierna*.

Kaleb ruffled her hair. "There are fifteen other pairs bound by *Tierna* in this *thent*. All bound pairs seem to have alpha tendencies, but only the strongest become Ardin. The *chatars* ensure that only those meant to be Ardin take the position."

"How do you learn everything that you need to know? Is there a place where pairs are trained?" She plucked at a lacy bra caught under her thigh.

"Once a pair is matched, they're sent to train with established Ardin. All new pairs train at two *thents*, usually more than two." He took the bra and tossed it over his shoulder.

"How did you become the Ardin of this *thent*?" She knew that this was a relatively new *thent*. Established *thents* usually held claim to a world or a section of a world.

"We had a choice. We could go to my home world and stay there until my fathers were ready to step aside or we could take the rule of this new *thent* and make our own home." His breath feathered over her neck as he nuzzled aside her braid.

"I'm pretty sure I know part of the reason, but I'm going to ask anyway. Why didn't you stay and rule the *thent* you grew up in?" Lina tilted her neck to the side. A small shiver skittered up her spine as his tongue traced up the column of her neck.

"My fathers are still in their prime. It would be many years before that group needs new Ardin. Why did you think we didn't take it?" His mouth roamed up to her ear.

"Not enough challenge for you. Too easy." She gasped as his teeth nipped at her earlobe.

"You may have a point there." Hot, moist breath rushed over the shell of her ear.

Lina drew in a shuddering breath and decided she'd better try to focus while she could. Desire was fast becoming more of a priority than her questions. "So being linked by *Tierna* isn't that common. There's only thirty people bound by it out of...two thousand people in this *thent*."

"It's very rare, but a high honor." He nibbled on her neck. He grabbed a handful of the nearby silky scraps. "What are you going to do with this?"

"Get rid of what you and Shard have *ruined*. And try to keep the rest from being ripped." She pulled away enough to glare at him. That stuff wasn't exactly cheap.

He tugged her back against him. His lips brushed over hers briefly. "Just don't wear them. I'd love to be able to slip my hand beneath your shirt and feel only the full warm weight of your breasts." His hand fitted to the ripe curve he was discussing.

"I need a bra. Anyone with large breasts needs a bra." Lina rolled her eyes, but leaned closer, opening her mouth beneath his.

After a short teasing kiss, his mouth slid away and roamed over her cheeks. "Your breasts are perfect without a bra. I love seeing them sway and bounce as you walk."

A smile curved her lips. She couldn't doubt that he felt that way. She'd catch his and Shard's eyes on her breasts at odd moments during the day. That attention made her feel like the sexiest woman alive.

He sifted through her pile of discards. "All of these can't be ruined."

She looked from him, to the destroyed lingerie and the support pole at the end of the bed. Oh, she had a use for them.

She grasped a handful of the silky fabric and edged away from him. She scooted back on the bed, closer to where she needed to be. She tried to keep the smile off her lips as he turned and gave her a predatory grin before crawling up the bed after her.

She edged a little farther to the side, running her eyes down his body. He was wearing way too many clothes. She'd have to do something about that. For that matter, she was overdressed, but she wasn't the one who was going to be tied to the tent support. The trick would be actually getting the silk on his wrists.

He knelt beside her, his hands framing her face. His lips brushed over hers in a soft questing kiss. Opening her mouth eagerly, she leaned into him. She curled her arms around his shoulders. Even as she kissed him, she fashioned loops out of the twisted silken fabric in her hands.

Kaleb drew back and raised an eyebrow. "You're not paying attention. What are you doing behind my back?"

"You think I'm not involved? Feel this." Not about to tell him what she was planning, she let the loops dangle from one hand. Grabbing his hand, she brought it to her breast, letting him feel the hardened peak pressing against his fingers through the cloth.

She didn't give him any more time to think. She fastened her lips over his and pressed him back to the bed. He went willingly. His tongue stroked hers. She straddled his hips. In the mood to tease and excite, she circled her hips. The hard ridge of his cock pressed against her pussy, separated only by their clothing. She could feel the slick juices coating her folds. Making him wild only drove her need higher.

Dropping the twisted material out of his sight, she slid both her hands down and began working on his shirt. She pushed it as far apart as it would go, baring his chest to her gaze and her touch.

He chuckled and his hands went to her sleeveless, thin-strapped shirt. Before she knew what was happening, he was pushing it up over her breasts. His attempts to get it over her head frustrated her efforts to remove his pants. The fabric bunched around her neck. With an annoyed growl, she fought free of the fabric. His fingers worked on her belt and then on her pants. He pushed at the snug cloth but couldn't get it past her hips because of her spread legs. When she finally finished with his pants, she got up long enough to strip out of the rest of her clothes and help him out of his.

Licking her lips, she went back to him. Reaching between them, she positioned his cock and slowly lowered herself down onto his shaft. His hands went to her breasts the moment she again settled astride him. His hands lifted and cupped the full weight of the globes. The heat of his palms and the scrape of his fingers across her nipples caused a shiver to tear down her spine. Every flick across the tight peaks sent a sweet sharp sensation shooting straight to her pussy.

She rocked her hips in a slow rhythm. One of his hands lifted and curled around her neck, urging her down to him. His eyes ran over her face and then down to her breasts. Eyes locking on the lush globes, he licked his lips. Heat rushed through her. She knew exactly how good his mouth felt against her breasts and she wanted that, but she had to keep focused. She pulled back, resisting his tugging. Grabbing his left hand, she pushed it to the bed above his head and did the same with his right.

"Mmm, feeling aggressive, aren't we?" He smiled, lifting his wrists off the bed even with her weight pressing on them. With a wink, he let his arms drop to the mattress.

She shook her head. No subtlety at all. "Let's just say I'm going to work out my frustrations."

Her breasts brushed against his chest as she lifted her hips. She lowered her head and sucked at his lip. His tongue lapped at her upper lip, distracting her from her play. She kissed him, her tongue stroking against his as she lowered her hips.

Releasing his hands, she fumbled for the silk loops. Her fingers brushed across the sheet, finally touching the silky twisted cloth. By feel, she found one of the loops and slipped it over his hand, leaving it loose. Twining the fabric around the support pole, she lifted his other wrist.

He nipped her lips, drawing her attention back to him. She rotated her hips in a small circle. The pressure against her clit sent a new flare of desire straight to her core. Her inner muscles tightened around his cock. Gulping, she reached up and tried again, lifting his wrist and managing to slide the loop onto it.

With a tug, she tightened the loops. Sitting back, she smiled down at him as she gently rocked her hips. He tugged on his wrists and the support pole jolted. The side of the tent swayed.

Raising her hips until just the head of his cock was inside her, she smiled down at him. "If that comes down, I get up and leave. There's a dress over there that I can just tug over my head."

His eyes closed and a low groan rumbled through his chest. His hips punched up, trying to drive back into the slick heat of her channel. She let him drive into her and then drew back. Lowering her hips, she took his length and then rose over him again.

"You think I'd let you make it out?" He angled his head to get a good look at what she'd done.

The burning need grew hotter and she forced herself to go slow. She wanted to ride him hard and fast. But Gods, she was having fun teasing him.

"I know I'd make it out." She smiled and plunged down as his hips surged up against her.

She leaned forward and put her hands in his, lacing her fingers with his. His hand tightened around hers as his hips arched. His pelvis pressed against her clit. Her head tipped back as the piercing heat built. She couldn't hold back anymore. She needed to come.

Panting, she began to ride him faster. His hips punched up with every upward stroke, luring her back down onto his thick cock. She felt her climax rising, the tightening of her muscles. Her mouth fastened over his in a fierce, hard kiss as they moved together.

Light burst in front of her eyes and pleasure ripped through her as she came. He arched up against her and she felt the hot stream of his semen splash inside her. Collapsing onto him, she sprawled across his chest, her fingers still laced with his.

When she raised her head, she found him smiling at her. She raised a brow at that smug expression. His fingers tightened on hers as he moved his hands apart, pulling the fabric taut. The pole didn't even move. He pulled harder and the cloth ripped. The pole shuddered but remained standing.

"I like your games, *i'ma*. I'm certain you're going to love mine."

Chapter Twelve

Lina paced restlessly. The confines of the camp seemed to get smaller with every pass. She hadn't left the camp in ten days. A walk with Shard and Kaleb the day after Lido and Jalan had left had been the last time that she'd been outside the camp. Even without solid walls surrounding her, she felt confined, restrained, imprisoned.

She had to get out of this place. The *tiron* within her stirred restlessly, snarling in bad temper. *Much more of this and I'll probably bite someone*, Lina thought with a chuckle.

She stalked over to Jaksen who'd been left in charge of the camp. "I want out of this cage."

"The Ardin have left orders that no one is to leave camp except those going to search the ruins." Jaksen looked at her without expression. "Why don't you wait and talk with the Ardin?"

In no mood to be reasonable, she growled. "Either one of the other men or you goes with me for a walk or I'll go on my own."

"We can't let you do that. We have to follow the Ardin's orders. Everyone is to stay in camp." Jaksen's mouth dropped open in astonishment. He apparently wasn't accustomed to women with the temerity to try to give him ultimatums.

"Then try to stop me. I'm leaving this camp for a little while, one way or another." She stared at him, unimpressed by his greater size.

She saw something that looked like relief flash across the man's face. It should have given her warning, but she was too wrapped up in her need to move among the trees. The first hint of danger came to her in the sheer silence of the camp. That lack of sound in the normally bustling atmosphere raised the hairs on the back of her neck.

"You're expected to obey the same rules every other person does, Lina." Shard's hard voice boomed into the abnormal silence of the camp.

She whirled and found that all the men who had left the camp to go search the ruins had returned. "Your rules are making me insane. I feel like a prisoner. I can't leave the camp. I'm not allowed to go aboard the Sendar without being accompanied by a man. I need to run, to move freely and I no longer care if it breaks your damn rules."

She bared her teeth and didn't back away from them. Shard and Kaleb stood side by side on the other side of the camp. Dressed identically in brown camouflage shirts, brown camouflage pants and brown boots, they'd blend perfectly with the forest of the area where they were working.

Both glowered at her. Those heavy stares fell on her like a block of *vilidium*. In fact, that heavy metal might have felt lighter. It wasn't easy to maintain her defiance in the

face of the two large intimidating men. She knew that they would never hurt her. That didn't mean that she would be able to do what she wanted when she wanted.

"Well, every woman pushes and earns her first punishment from her mate sooner or later. For most women, it's later, but you haven't displayed any sign of timidity since shortly after I pinned you." Shard advanced toward her slowly, watching her for any sign that she was going to bolt.

Lina watched as Shard and Kaleb separated. She recognized the tactic. Divide and surround. They were making certain that she didn't have a chance of getting away if she chose to run.

She wasn't running. They could snarl all they wanted. She was already close to her limits. She needed to get out of this camp.

Kaleb's hand locked around her upper arm. "It's time to pay for your disrespect and your threats."

"You're treating me like a prisoner. You know I can take care of myself. I'm not a helpless female who's never been out of a *thent*. I need some freedom," Lina growled.

She wasn't going to fight, claw, scream or resist in any way. First, it would gain her nothing. They were much too strong for such tactics to work. Second, it would only succeed in infuriating them. They were already angry. She wasn't adding to it. She just wasn't going to back away from them either.

Fate had landed her with two alpha males as mates. Alphas were impossible to manage, at least these two were. She hadn't won an argument since she met them. They all knew that she couldn't beat them physically in a fight—even one on one. As she glared up at Kaleb, a stray thought flickered through her mind. *Who are the lucky women getting all the betas?*

"You'll follow the orders given for your safety. There will be no further discussion about it." Kaleb growled, drawing her toward the tent.

She could hardly keep up with his long, quick strides. "Like there's much discussion about anything else. You've had everything your own way since we met."

They heard the grumbled complaint. They didn't respond verbally, although Kaleb's fingers tightened a bit around her arm. They merely marched her into the Dura-tent.

"Onto the bed." Shard stood with his feet braced apart and a stern frown on his face as he looked at the defiance on her face.

Kaleb drew in a deep breath. "I can't help admiring your courage. Most newly married women would be apologizing, trying to avert the punishment."

"Would they?" Her lips curled. They shouldn't expect her to be like everyone else. She wasn't a kitten who'd known nothing but the safety of a *thent*.

Shard nodded "They'd plead and promise better behavior. You're glaring at us and that glitter in your amber eyes has more to do with anger than it does meek submissiveness."

"And you'd be bored in a day if I was." She sniffed and looked at the wall of the tent.

"You're truly an alpha female and because of it, keeping you safe is a nightmare. But you have to respect our orders even if you don't agree with them." Kaleb's fingers grasped her chin and turned her to face him.

Lina raised her head and stepped onto the bed, blatantly refusing to show them submission. A bright light flashed around her and she felt a pulling sensation in her stomach. Spots swam in front of her eyes, a little worse than they had the last time. When her vision cleared, she blinked, because she couldn't believe what she was seeing.

In the clearing, Shard and Kaleb stood beside what looked to be a low, padded bench with cuffs at the base of the legs on one end. It was entirely black, even the cuffs. The legs were thick, appeared to be metal and looked very sturdy. She swallowed nervously. Oh Lady, she didn't think she could break free of that.

"Strip and lie down on your stomach on the bench with your hands near the cuffs." A muscle twitched along Kaleb's cheek and his green eyes glinted silver.

Lina stared at the two fully-dressed men. No softness lightened either of their expressions, no understanding. She had no doubt that if she refused to do as they wanted, they would strip her and it would make them even angrier than they were now.

She stripped out of her blue skirt and shirt, glared at them one last time, stepped forward and lowered her body to the bench. It was shorter than it looked—just long enough to support her upper body.

As soon as her breasts touched the padded bench, it began reshaping, dropping away and curving inward. She jerked upward at the strange occurrence, but a large hand placed between her shoulder blades pressed her firmly to the cloth-covered bench. The bench kept moving, shrinking, just where her breasts touched it, until it was only a thin strip pressed into the valley between her breasts. The round mounds hung down on either side of it.

"Magic, *i'ma*." Shard knelt beside her and fastened her wrists into the padded cuffs. "We wouldn't want these gorgeous breasts crushed during your punishment." His fingers teasingly plucked at a dangling nipple.

"Get it over with," she growled, tugging on her wrists, trying to move the cuffs. They didn't even jiggle when she used all her strength to jerk the cuff away from the bench. The sure knowledge that they did intend to punish her sounded a warning alarm in her head.

"That isn't a contrite attitude and won't help you." Kaleb smiled because she couldn't see it.

He gazed at the elegant line of her back, so proud, so defiant, even in this position. Slowly, he ran his hand over the smooth, silky skin, from shoulder to the rounded

curves of her ass. The muscles twitched beneath his hand as he smoothed his fingers over her right butt cheek in a small circle.

He watched a shiver roll through her body as his hand slid over her back, caressing her. Her muscles relaxed beneath his touch. He felt her body soften and heat and saw her rising desire in the swollen, wet, pink pussy. He could only imagine the war being waged inside her. The sure knowledge that she would be punished for her defiance battled with rising desire.

Remember not to let her climax. The punishment won't be as memorable if she finds satisfaction. Shard caught Kaleb's eyes. *The spell must be placed at the height of her need.*

Shard lifted Lina's braid and placed it on the other side of her head, allowing both men a clear view of her face. A delightful flush of desire tinted her cheeks a lovely rosy red. Her eyes showed a mixture of confusion, anger and desire.

You'll have to watch her too. If you see that she needs something extra during the punishment, give it to her. Kaleb gripped her hips. Gods, she was beautiful...and aroused. The scent of her sweet, juicy cunt drifted up to him. He wanted to fuck her, but he wouldn't. This was too important.

They had to know that she would obey them when they gave her an order concerning her safety. He grimaced. The mere thought of her in danger shot a bolt of fear and anger straight into his gut. His stomach tightened into a knot, yet still he could feel the churning uncertainty.

Shard's thumb brushed over her cheek and then drifted down to her full, lower lip. With gentle, slow strokes, his finger glided back and forth.

She's heating nicely, Kaleb thought, running his hand from buttock to thigh, roaming from outer to inner thigh in slow sweeps. He brushed his hand over the glistening, pink lips of her sex, flicked his fingers over her clit. She tensed as his fingers slid away from that sensitive area.

"You sought to defy orders given for your protection and you did so knowing that it would earn you punishment." Shard's fingers on her chin ensured that she was looking at him.

"Yes," Lina didn't even think about lying.

Smack! A swat landed with stinging force on her buttocks. Surprise held her immobile for a moment, but then her only thought was to move. Her head shot up and she wrenched her arms, trying to twist the cuffs free, but failed to budge them. She wriggled on the bench, trying to get away from the hot prickles spreading across her rear.

Every nerve in her body froze then burst into frenzied excitement. Outrage mixed with wanton enjoyment. The conflicting emotions heightened every sensation. Hot cream spilled onto her thighs as her pussy clenched. Need pulsed through her, from her hard, tingling nipples to the empty ache within her cunt. The hot throb from her right

butt cheek was the least of the sensations boomeranging through her body. She could feel the blood pulsing through her, a pounding ache in her clit.

A nasty suspicion of just what they were doing, just what the real punishment would be, fluttered through her mind. This wasn't going to be the simple lecture and spanking that she'd expected upon first seeing the bench. They were planning to excite her, spank her and leave her hanging.

"Our *rah'ki* is wet, hot for us. Could it be that you like this, *i'ma*?" Two of Kaleb's thick fingers slid into her tight cunt as he began a circular torment of her clit. With torturous slowness, those digits began to move inside her, shuttling back and forth in the hot, slick channel.

A mewl escaped Lina's lips as her hips pressed back into his fingers. They immediately withdrew from her. Warm hands cupped her breasts. Shard's eyes locked with hers as he plucked at her nipples. Sharp sensation danced through her, tightening the knot of desire low in her stomach.

Kaleb moved to the side and waited until Shard had his fingers in her pussy. Shard twisted the nipple of one breast while he withdrew his fingers from her pussy, beginning a slow, torturous rhythm.

Lina half expected the swat because of all the maneuvering. When it landed, fire exploded across her buttocks. Her pussy clenched tightly around the two fingers sliding slowly out of her. She pushed back, seeking to engulf those fingers within her needy pussy. His thumb flicked over her clit as those thick digits shuttled into her sultry channel.

When they pulled back, she once again pushed back, needing their thickness within her. A swat landed, then another and another. The needy ache in her cunt flared with each stinging crack of Kaleb's hand on her ass. She was shaking with need, panting as she thrust her ass back, meeting each blow, her cunt clamping around those fingers each time they drove into her.

The fingers left her pussy with a wet slurp. Shard's fingers dropped away from the reddened bud of her nipple. She turned and saw Kaleb and Shard standing a few paces away from her. *Damn, they moved quickly.*

"Over the course of the next few hours, learn your lesson well, *nari*. We'll not go so lightly on you again. You will follow our orders." Shard's voice was hard, his face set in hard, stern lines.

In spite of the need riding her, she believed their claim. They probably had softened their intended punishment. They stood and looked down at her for a moment and then turned away from her. Her mouth dropped open as she realized that they were leaving.

"You can't leave me like this." She wasn't talking about the cuffs. Right now, restricted movement was the least of her worries. The hot, pulsing need demanded attention...theirs, now.

Kaleb turned back, a smile on his face. "You're right, *i'ma*."

With a wave of his hand, the cuffs released her wrists. Lina rolled off the bench and sat back on the grass, her legs splayed. That wasn't what she had meant, but she could deal with it now. With her fingers free, she could take care of things herself.

She dipped two fingers into the creamy juices flowing from her pussy and slid them up to her clit, rubbing in circles. Her hips rose as sharp pleasure streaked through her.

"That's a pretty sight, *i'ma*." Shard's voice held a hint of amused chuckle and masculine appreciation.

Lina's head jerked up in startled fright. She'd thought they had left. Shard and Kaleb stood in virtually the same spot they had been in moments ago.

Kaleb chuckled. "Not that I disapprove of the show, but it won't do you any good. Magic, *rah'ki*, can be a wonderful thing. You won't climax until we allow it."

Her eyes widened in horror.

"That won't be until you have had time to repent your actions." Shard turned and started walking. "Feel free to roam your haven. Maybe it will ease the feelings of confinement."

They were moving before Lina recovered from her astonishment. They really did intend to leave her wanting.

"*Tamourgi!*" she screamed just as they disappeared.

She didn't take them at their word. They could have been bluffing, intending to discourage her efforts. She tried to bring herself to peak, but all she found was more frustration. Growling, she rolled and bounded to her feet. Magic sucked.

"We're going to have to do something about her language." Kaleb chuckled as he left the Dura-tent a step ahead of Shard.

"If I'd been left in the state we left her in, you'd hear me screaming curses as well." Shard raised an eyebrow. Her desire had been obvious, the scent strong and enticing, her nipples red and hard, begging to be caressed and sucked. "We'll get the love names later, when she has calmed."

"Ardin." Jaksen paced over to them. "There has been a message. Darik's team has found more evidence of other humans on the planet."

"Darik is still at the site he was searching yesterday?" Kaleb asked.

"Yes, Ardin," Jaksen nodded. "He said that it was in one of the rooms they had checked the day before."

Mounting two skimmers, Kaleb and Shard headed for the site. On the opposite side of the valley from the researchers' site, this city was older than most of the others in the valley. They flicked on the lights attached to their belts as they entered the dark ruin.

The walls of the hallway were of yellowish-gold stone and decorated with murals in places. They found their men in one of the larger rooms of this old *thent*. The destruction was obvious even as they stepped into the room. Someone had taken some kind of tool to the walls, leaving gaping gouges in the painted and sculpted murals.

This gave more support to the belief that the group hiding here were of the Pure Believers, as they were commonly known.

The group believed that most humanoid groups, other than pure humans, had been created as experiments by advanced beings long ago. In their opinion, if they had been created, then they shouldn't have the same rights and privileges as other people. They sought to prove their beliefs with fanatical zeal. Shifters were merely one of their targets.

Fossil records meant nothing to these people. They believed that pure humans were genetically superior. They strove to prove that ancient lab experiments done on captured or volunteer humans had resulted in the creation of every other type of being. Men such as these would kill and had killed for their cause.

"I want more patrols. We all know there is no proof of what they believe here. Pairs or more on patrol, they are going to be angry. Devan, warn the researchers as well. Sometimes they aren't choosy about their victims when their anger is high." Kaleb grimaced at the sight of the ruined murals.

Shard narrowed his eyes. This latest discovery was even more reason to keep the women under close watch. That wasn't going to be an easy thing to do. The other women would soon want to leave the camp. Lina had been the first to feel the effects of the confinement because she had done much as she wanted until a very short time ago. Taking orders, following rules, wasn't a habit of hers.

"The search for these men is going to delay our search for the Seal, but it can't be helped. It won't be safe until we've caught them." Shard looked over the destruction and felt anger rise within him. All because these men couldn't accept that life came in forms other than normal human.

Chapter Thirteen

Lina had tried everything. The aching need wouldn't be eased or fade even a little. She'd run through the forest, hoping to burn the desire away with exercise and focus. She'd swum in the slightly chilly water of the rock-bottomed pool, lap after lap. It hadn't even taken the edge off the desire pulsing through her.

She was tense, frustrated, her temper uncertain. Comfort was a memory. She couldn't decide which she would rather do first—hit Kaleb and Shard or fuck them until she was exhausted. She certainly felt wired enough to do both. Feeling vengeful even while in the grips of hot need, she gave the matter serious consideration. Then again, taking a bite out of them held appeal as well. She'd never thought she'd be tempted to attack a man for sex.

She couldn't believe they'd put her through this kind of torture for merely threatening to go into the forest on her own. The frustration pulsing through her seemed out of proportion with the crime. It hadn't taken her long to come to the conclusion that there were very few issues worth this kind of torment. She'd certainly think twice before defying their orders again.

Lina lay on a branch high in the *netria* tree at the edge of the clearing. She remained as still as possible as she waited for them. Her overstimulated body burned and tingled. Moving made the situation worse. She'd found only one advantage to waiting in *tiron* form. In animal form, she didn't feel the swollen heavy weight of her breasts.

Her eyes narrowed as Shard and Kaleb appeared in the grassy area near the bower-bed. A light breeze swirled, carrying their scent to her sensitive nose. Aroused male—her mates. In an instant, the decision was made. She had to fuck them now.

Shard looked around the clearing. They couldn't see her within the concealing lattice of leaves high on the tree, she knew. She wondered if they'd expected her to be waiting for them. Their "punishment" had been more than effective, but they still had a lot to learn about her if they thought they'd come back to find a meek kitten.

"Come out now, Lina," Kaleb ordered.

No games from him, she noted. She wasn't in much of a playing mood herself right now. Rising, she skimmed out of the tree. She landed lightly on four feet at the base of the tree and with a slow, rolling gait paced over to stand before Shard and Kaleb. As she approached them, she took some satisfaction in the hard erections pressing against the brown cloth of their pants. Maybe they had felt some of the need that had raged within her for the past hours. An hour had been more than enough, but being the arrogant alphas they were, they'd kept her waiting.

"In normal form, *rao nari*." Shard grinned. "I can smell your need even from this distance."

Lina transformed. She studied them. They weren't angry, not even tense, but there was a patient waiting quality to the way they watched her. She stood, waiting, desperate with need. *Was she going to have to attack one of them?* After what she'd been through, she wasn't above it.

"Now what did you do to deserve your punishment?" Kaleb stood there, hands on his hips, seemingly unaware of her distress.

The urge to say nothing and live with the consequences blossomed on an insanely defiant impulse, but the unquenched desire overrode the rebellious whim. She really would bite someone if she didn't come soon.

"I threatened to defy orders and go into the forest on my own." Lina shifted from one foot to the other, unable to stay still. "And I showed blatant disrespect for those orders in front of the entire camp."

"That is right." Kaleb nodded, satisfied with the recitation. "And?"

She'd been punished when she was a cub and she knew what they expected. The manner of punishment had been different and had been far less severe, but an apology had always been expected. The words didn't stick in her throat as she'd thought that they might.

"I'm sorry and I'll try very hard not to do it again." Lina meant it. She didn't want to feel this level of frustration again any time soon.

"That was very good." Kaleb stepped forward and tipped up her chin. "Punishment won't become any easier as time passes, Lina. It will only increase if you do this again."

"I learn from my mistakes." She'd remember the experience and the actions that had brought it to be. Were they going to lecture her all day? She was dying of need.

"Did you learn anything?" Shard's body brushed against hers as he stepped up behind her, and then moved around her, his hand trailing over her body.

"I don't like your punishment." She glared at them. "I'll take a week of solitary confinement any day."

"Then it was effective." Shard's smile held predatory satisfaction and hunger.

She would have kicked him, but she had more important goals. "Are you going to fuck me or am I going to have to wrestle one of you to the ground?"

"As to putting you in solitary confinement, it wouldn't work. We don't believe in punishing ourselves for something you did." Kaleb laughed. "*I'ma*, I wouldn't mind wrestling with you, but if anyone's going to be on the ground, it's going to be you."

"As to satisfying your needs, we'll see to that repeatedly." Shard's hand tangled in her hair as two hot male bodies pressed against her. "We're going to ride you hard tonight, *nari*."

Lina gave an inward whoop of joy and felt like dancing with happiness. They weren't going to make her beg for it. She licked her lips and raised her hands to their

chest. Most of her focus was on the expanse of male flesh that was in easy reach. She wanted to stir them, to heat them to the level of lust pulsing through her.

She curved an arm around each man. She ran her hands over their taut asses. She smoothed and cupped, before sliding her hands up to tug at their brown shirts, loosening them from the waistband of the brown pants. She slid her hand up underneath and onto the hot skin.

"Patience, *i'ma*." Shard pulled her hand away from him. "Let's get more comfortable. This is going to take some time."

She was in agreement with anything that kept those hard bodies close, especially if it involved them undressing. She kept her arms around them as they led her to the shaded bed.

"Wait for us on the bed, *rao nari*." Shard brushed a kiss across the top of her hair and waited to see what she would do.

Lina hesitated. She was reluctant to leave them but knelt and crawled onto the bed. She rolled onto her back, bending her knees as she raised and spread her legs, displaying her swollen, glistening, pink pussy.

"That's pretty." Shard took off his shirt without paying any attention to the fastenings. It ripped as he stared at the cream glistening on her needy cunt. "Fuck yourself with your fingers while we undress. Show us how much you need us."

She whimpered, knowing it would only increase her torment, but her right hand slipped down over her stomach to the smooth mound. Trembling fingers slipped between the pink lips and the tips grazed the hard nub of her clit. Her hips bucked as a blaze of need ripped through her.

Her fingers eased lower away from that sensitive bud. She slipped two fingers into her pussy. They moved easily in the honeyed channel.

She withdrew her fingers from the clasp grasp and slowly pushed them back into her slit, her hips rising to meet and engulf the thrusting digits. A mewl of need rolled from her throat. Her eyes stared at the two dark-skinned men taking off their clothing with torturous slowness. They were down to pants and boots and seemed to be in no hurry to get rid of the offending articles.

Shard reached over and curled his hand around the nape of Kaleb's neck. He tugged him closer. His lips slashed over Kaleb's mouth. Lina licked her lips and swallowed. Her need immediately shot into orbit. She didn't know if she could take much more of this. They knew just how much she liked to see them touching each other. They obviously intended to take advantage of it. She'd been burning with need for what seemed like an eternity. Kaleb's hand curved around Shard's back and pulled him close.

"Please..." Lina's voice trembled and fire danced through her body. Her skin tingled and burned, sensitive to the slightest breeze.

They turned and looked at her. Shard's hips rolled into Kaleb. Gods, she felt jealous and almost ready to run at one of them. Not that they were touching each other, but

that she wasn't getting any of the pleasure out of it. She needed to feel them moving against her.

"Do you need us, *i'ma*?" Shard pulled off his boots and tossed them away from him.

"You know I ache for you. I've been burning... Please don't make me wait any more." She pumped her hips against her fingers, her body tight with desire, on a high peak, but she couldn't come.

Shard stepped onto the bed. Gloriously nude, his broad chest gleamed in the soft light. His hard, dark cock thrust out, swaying slightly as he prowled toward her. His deep brown eyes roved over her, molten with lust.

"Wrap those legs around me, *i'ma*," Shard growled, slipping between her thighs and sliding his cock into her pussy.

She wrapped her legs around his hips and slipped one of her hands into the curls of his hair. The long, spiral locks crinkled and wound through her fingers as she clenched a handful in her fist. He wasn't leaving her this time. She wasn't letting him go.

Shard must have read some of the determination in her face. "*I'ma*, they would have to pull me off you. I'm not leaving this pussy until you milk me. Even then, I'll be back and hard again after you do the same to Kaleb."

"Do you think we can rouse you to such heights without going there ourselves?" Kaleb stood at the edge of the bed. "Only the tight fit of the cloth gives me some control to wait until I can fuck you."

Shard withdrew from her until only the round head of his cock remained with her pussy.

Lina reached up with her other hand and clutched at his arm, her nails sinking into the skin. "Please..."

Shard shifted onto his knees, grasping her hips, lifting. He drove into her, withdrew, and then drove into her again. His thrusts were fast, hard and deep.

The feel of his thick cock pounding into her was pure bliss. It didn't take many of those pistoning strokes to send Lina into a hard orgasm. Her pussy clenched and released around his shaft. She arched, tears leaking from her eyes as the explosions of light behind her lids were echoed by the explosions of heat and pleasure through her body. Tremors coursed through her. She opened her eyes, dazed by the height and intensity of her ecstasy and stared into waiting, starving brown eyes.

Shard had stilled within her the moment he felt her reach her peak. He waited until her eyes cleared a little and locked with his. "There's a slight side effect to the spell we put on you today, *i'ma*, although it isn't one that we mind at all."

Confused, unsure of his meaning, Lina remained silent. Then as he withdrew, a thrill pulsed through her and an echoing throbbing beat began in her clit. With each indrawn breath, the ache increased, sharpened to need.

"Your need will come hot and fast until exhaustion takes you, Lina. I'm going to enjoy this." Shard surged against her, driving his pelvis against hers.

She didn't have the breath or the inclination to reply. She was panting, desperate as the ache returned full force. Because of his grip, she couldn't arch into his thrusts as she desperately wanted to. She held on with her legs as he thrust into her.

She came again, screaming his name as his cock rammed into her. Her contracting vaginal muscles tore through his control. As she shuddered with climax, his hot seed spurted into her and a hoarse cry rang through the clearing.

Her sweat-slick skin slid easily against his as he briefly blanketed her. She had come two times in quick succession, but she could already feel her body tightening. The brush of his chest against her hard, sensitive nipples caused her to gasp at the pinpricks of sweet, piercing bliss.

Shard pulled his cock from her pussy with a groan and moved to the side. Kaleb was waiting. With a smile, he flipped her onto her stomach and pulled her back onto her hands and knees.

"You are so beautiful like this." Kaleb traced his hand down the line of her spine, moving behind her.

He pushed his cock into her tight cunt. Her muscles rippled around him, welcoming him. She pushed back into him and her hips undulated in silent demand. She felt him tense against her and heard a ragged groan.

Kaleb's hips rolled against her hips, driving into her in slow, smooth glides. One of his hands slipped around her hips and down over the flat of her stomach to her slick labia. His fingers began playing with the hard hood of her clit, rubbing, plucking at it. Husky whimpers mingled with the sound of panting breath and the wet joining of their flesh. Her hips bucked as she rode those stroking fingers and took that hard cock as deep as she could.

"Yes, *i'ma*, take me." Kaleb leaned over and ran his teeth over her shoulder.

She went over the edge hard and fast. The sharp sensation seared through her as she pumped back against him. Her body shivered with the force of the climax. Her stomach tightened and released in an echo of the contractions rippling through her vaginal muscles. The satisfaction, the need, began to run together, blending into an aching, sweet fevered pang.

Kaleb kept his strokes slow and even as he plucked at her clit to stimulate her. With the effects of the spell, need rose hard and hot, her sexy moans laced the air and her hips rolled back into the rocking pace of his. She was tight and wet. Her need blossomed around him, a sweet scent that heightened his own need.

The scent of Kaleb's need swirled around her, increased with every stroke. He drove into her, sliding hard and deep with every thrust. She screamed his name as the heat and light detonated, and bliss flowed through her again. The clenching muscles rippling over him, dragging at him as he pulled out of her slick channel broke the last of his restraint. He hammered into her, his pace frenzied.

He drove into her, the need to come ruling him. He threw his head back as hot, fiery pleasure seared through him. Semen jetted from his cock as a harsh growl rolled through him.

Kaleb bent over and kissed Lina's shoulder, licking at the salty flesh. His lips traveled up and licked his bite mark, smiling as she shuddered, causing her sheath to clamp around his cock. He withdrew from her and urged her down onto the soft bedding.

Lina looked up and saw her two men kneeling beside her. Heat was already churning within her again. She reached over and ran her hand across Shard's midriff. Her hand gripped the man's cock. She saw his eyes close. She leaned over, nipped at Shard's hip.

"Do you want to know how to make him wild enough to push you to the ground and fuck you?" Kaleb asked. His hand stroked through her hair.

"He hasn't been that wild with me before?" She looked over at him.

He smiled, but it was a little strained. Shard's hand gripped his cock, slowly stroking. Kaleb's hips rocked forward into the other man's touch.

"Not yet." Kaleb raised a brow and appeared to be waiting for her answer.

She swirled her tongue over Shard's thigh. "How do I make him wild?"

"Why don't you let her discover that on her own, Kaleb?" Shard's voice held a hint of laughter, but his body tensed.

"You have to tell me." She lightly trailed her fingers down the length of Shard's shaft.

"First, use your mouth and your hands on his cock at the same time and he absolutely loves the scrape of teeth against the head." Kaleb's hands came around her and he cupped her breasts.

"Are you sure that's not just what he likes from you?" she asked, but she fully intended to give his advice a try.

"Do it and see."

Chapter Fourteen

They weren't joking about that exhaustion comment, Lina reflected ruefully. She'd been well-loved and literally awake and hungry one moment and asleep the next. It had been a spectacular night.

Not that she would be courting punishment again any time soon to get a night like that again. She would still be very careful for a time about when and how she pushed them, because that frustration sucked. She knew enough about herself to know that she didn't handle it well. The pleasure that had come after the punishment had in no way lessened her memory of the hours of unending torment.

For two days, she kept busy in the camp. She worked on modifications for her mobile scanners to help track the men who had caused the destruction at the old ruins. The scanners were equipped with vid and infrared capabilities as well as an advanced AI.

She also helped in the artifacts tent by cataloging some of the artifacts which had been found by the men and brought back to camp before they could be destroyed. One hip-high vase-like artifact, she found very interesting. She smiled. Shard and Kaleb would find it just as fascinating when they knew what it was.

It was elegantly painted, the work of one of the old masters and had two distinct rows of scenes, each surrounded by decorative framing. She moved it to the back of the tent and then covered it with a large cloth. There it would be hidden behind some large equipment boxes. She reasoned that it should be safe there until she could bring it to their attention.

Lina went to the table to check on the scanners which were already scanning. She had set them to scan for body heat and the body mass and shape of adult human males. Once it got a hit, the area would become "hot" and would be scanned numerous times. There were several hits, forming a path traveling toward the mountain to the west. It was just a single man. The scanners tag-teamed and tracked the man. They needed to find the entire group, which could take several days. They believed the man being tracked was probably a messenger taking information between groups. Kaleb and Shard wouldn't make a move on him until he made contact with the others.

Looking up from the computer screen, she noticed some activity around the camp. Men and women were moving around the camp clearing things away. Frowning, she noticed this wasn't just a general cleanup. Everyone seemed to be putting away things that they didn't want seen by outsiders. She wondered if she'd missed an announcement.

"We must put up your things, Lady. The Ardin have allowed a small group of the researchers to come to the camp to look at what we've found. They told them that they

could have anything that we hadn't already claimed. They're coming even though they've been warned that there is nothing extraordinary among what is available." Jaksen held out his hand. "They were told that all we were offering were things we had in large quantity."

"Do you think that the Ardin would mind if I've set something aside, something very special? It's something that they won't want to lose to the researchers." Lina shut down her computer and handed it to him.

"Lady, if you think it's important or special, I'm sure that keeping whatever it is will be fine." Jaksen turned to leave but then turned back to her. "You might want to be in the artifact tent when the researchers are there to make certain that the item you've put aside remains in the camp."

She nodded. "I'll go there now."

She paused long enough to take her hair down from the tight braid, running her hands through it to fluff her hair and hide the marks. Her dark blue shirt was sleeveless and thin-strapped to keep her marks on display. Her legs were encased in tight blue pants in a bid for mobility as she'd been climbing around the tables to get to some parts of the scanners she'd been modifying.

Striding into the large Dura-tent, she went to the place where she'd stashed the large vase. Relief flowed through her as she saw that it was exactly where she had left it.

"I had wondered who'd put that there." Nerisa stood near the table, looking at the pieces which had been left for the researchers.

"I set it aside when I saw it. It's special. I'm going to give it to the Ardin and let them figure out just how special it is." Lina stepped back to make sure that it was completely hidden by the boxes.

"There are still the sketches and vid-images of it. Researcher Vedix will know that it's here." Nerisa tilted her head and looked over to the corner. "I think something like this is the reason for the entire expedition. He had us all looking for things like that. He'll want it."

"I don't care if he knows that it's here. All I care about is that he knows that he won't be taking this artifact with him." Lina smiled at Nerisa.

"Researcher Vedix can be very persuasive," Nerisa cautioned. "He regularly sways hostile tribes to give him what he wants."

"I know what it is. If he came here looking for it or something like it, then he knows exactly what he'd be taking from the Santir people. That makes him a low form of space slime in my opinion." Lina pulled a chair to the side of the tent and then settled down to wait. She wouldn't take a part in this unless the researcher showed an inclination to push for that artifact. "Has he found anything like this?"

"No, while I was there, he was impossible to be around, because of that lack of success." Nerisa sighed and shook her head.

"Good." Lina smiled in satisfaction. The museums and private collectors throughout the territories protected by Central Command had enough of what didn't belong to them.

"What do you mean about this being special?" Nerisa carried a chair with her and took a seat beside Lina. "It's a nice artifact, well preserved, but it's not extraordinary. It's one of many nice artifacts that have been found."

"That's where you're wrong. That is a piece of Santir history that has been the object of many searches. There are those who would kill to have it if they knew what it was. You can number the Ardin among those when they discover what it is." Lina looked over at Nerisa.

"People would kill for that?" Nerisa raised her brows. "It doesn't look like much, but maybe you are right. Researcher Vedix would certainly do much to get it."

"There are some objects of shifter history that humans shouldn't have. Take a look at the sketches and vid-images of it later. See if you can figure out why it's so special." Lina had always been tempted to go after the pieces of Santir history held by the museums and collectors—the precious artifacts which should be held only shifters. Much of it had been gained without permission or through the deceit of corrupt researchers like Vedix. Most of the time the Santir didn't know what they'd lost.

"I'll figure it out." Nerisa shot a determined glance toward the corner.

Two researchers came into the tent. Vedix and his assistant Caril looked over the pottery and old weapons with jaundiced eyes. Vedix picked up the still images of the artifacts and began going through them slowly.

Lina knew the moment he saw the image of the large urn. He stiffened. Eagerness and desire rolled off him, the scent unmistakable.

Vedix head came up swiftly. "This old ceremonial vase, where is it?"

"That isn't one of the items being offered to you. That will never be offered to you." She narrowed her eyes and stared at him.

Researcher Vedix's eyes slid away from her unblinking gaze. "It's a fine example of early pre-discovery technique. The museum would be fortunate to get it."

"You can stop with the ingratiating researcher routine. I know exactly what that 'old vase' is and so do you. That's why you won't be getting it." She stood and a sneer curved her lips. "It's certainly not something that will ever see the inside of a museum. I don't know how many times before this you've stolen from shifter history, but this will be the last."

"How dare you!" Vedix's back straightened as if a rod had been shot through him. He was the picture of offended dignity.

"I dare because you just tried to pass your interest off with a lie." She advanced on him. "Don't bother to try to do it again. I can smell the lie just as clearly as I can scent your fear now."

"I..." Vedix's mouth moved but nothing came from it.

Shard and Kaleb stepped into the tent. The two men's tense bodies radiated anger. From the ferocious frowns on their faces, it was clear that they'd been listening for some time. They strode over to her. Shard stood on her right and Kaleb at her left.

"You're right, Lina." Shard's tone rang with finality. "This will be the last time that he tries to steal from shifters. When you get back to your camp, Researcher Vedix, call for the Central Command ship to come to get you. You and your people will be going home without any of the artifacts from this site. Your credentials and those of your museum will go on the list of those no longer welcome within Shifter-Protected Space."

"While I may not know what exactly is so important about this vase, I do know that there were only artifacts from the late pre-discovery periods in our finds." Kaleb smiled, flashing the lengthened canines at the researcher. "You are no longer welcome here, Researcher. You will be escorted back to your camp and you had better start preparing to leave."

"You can't do this to me!" Vedix screamed, enraged. "I doubt that you even know which object she was talking about. Does she make the decisions now?"

Shard curved an arm around Lina and she nuzzled her head against his chest. She relaxed into his warmth, content to let them take care of the researcher. She had no problem with allowing them deal with the trash.

"Trane, escort the researcher and his assistant back to their camp." Kaleb took her hand in his and his thumb began rubbing in circular motions over her knuckles. "We'll be expecting the transmission within the hour, Vedix."

"You can't do this over a single lie!" Vedix's flushed face and clenched hands signaled his rage as clearly as his strident tone.

"You were here at our discretion." Shard urged her behind him as he stepped forward to confront the man. "You have stepped beyond that which we allow. You lied and would take something which shouldn't belong to you."

Vedix backed away, intimidated by Shard's size and the lethal, cold menace which rolled off him. "We can talk about this. There is no need to go to such extremes."

"You were warned before you came here that you would be expected to conform to shifter standards of behavior. You haven't done so." Kaleb arched a brow at the gray-haired man. "Call for your transport. You can spread the word. All shifters will be far more attentive to the behavior of those in our space."

"You'll regret this." Vedix turned sharply away and then stalked out of the tent. His assistant was left to rush after him or get left behind.

Kaleb and Shard watched until both men were gone. After they were sure that all outsiders had left the camp, they turned and their eyes ran over Lina. They frowned when they noticed that her golden hair hung around her shoulders, hiding their marks. It had been in a braid when they'd left camp.

"What happened to your hair?" Shard paced forward, his hands moving the golden tresses away from her bare shoulders, revealing the healed scars of their mating bites.

Lina's hands flew up to her neck, touching the loose mass of hair there and brushed her hands against his in the process. "I took it down before the researchers came to our camp. I didn't know just how much of Santir custom and practice was known. I decided to be cautious. I have the band here. I'll put it back now." She took the band out of her pocket and held it up to show them.

"Don't cover our marks unless we tell you to do so." Kaleb could feel the *tiron* within him stirring. He wanted everyone aware of exactly what she was to them. He took the band from her hand and put her hair up into a loose tail.

She wondered how long it would be until she could wear her hair down anywhere except the bedroom, but didn't voice the question.

"Where is this vase that was the subject of your argument with Vedix?" Shard looked around the tent. Sharp eyes locked on the shadowed corner where the crates had been placed. "Jaksen told us that you had put it aside because you thought that it was special."

"It's very special." She waited as Shard's long strides took him to the corner.

Shard lifted the carefully wrapped bundle and carried it to the large table. He placed it on a hastily cleared area, before he went to work on the wrappings. The elegant, glossy surface of the large vase gleamed in the bright light.

"It is a nice piece of work, but I see nothing special about this vase." Kaleb tilted his head and studied the scenes painted on the large vase on the table.

"Ah, but you're only seeing it as a nice piece of late period work. You're not really looking at it. You don't see the message that's plainly there if you would only look." Lina smiled as she waited to see if they would see any of the clues without further prodding.

"What makes this vase special and not some of the others we have found?" Shard looked at the vase, but saw nothing special about the scenes or in the way it was painted. It looked like random scenes from a day in an old *thent*.

"I'm not going to give you the answer to this puzzle. You'll just have to discover it on your own." She turned to leave the artifacts tent before she gave them another hint simply because they were making no progress on their own. She wanted them to do this, to solve this puzzle without her giving them aid. Half of the joy of learning the secret was in the discovery.

Shard's large hand tangled in the long, flowing strands of her hair. The move effectively stopped her exit. She looked over her shoulder and sighed. Arrogant man. He would only release her when he was ready. There was no use struggling against his hold.

"Tell us." Shard gave a teasing tug on her hair.

"Are you admitting that two wise Ardin can't solve such a simple puzzle?" Her smile and sassy tone taunted and teased. She cocked a hand on her hip and winked at them. "I thought you were such cunning warriors and astute leaders."

"We'll solve this puzzle." Kaleb's hand cupped her hand and tilted her head until she was staring into his green eyes. "When we do solve it, I want an apology for the slurs and teasing, *rah'ki*."

"If you solve this, I'll apologize to you." She smiled and gave a regal nod.

"I want detailed stills of the entire vase, even the bottom." Shard released her hair just before he paced over to the end of the table where all the documentation on the artifacts was kept. He lifted some of the still images that they had of the large jar. "Closer, and I want more detail than these."

Sauntering out of the tent, she grinned. She had no doubt that they'd discover exactly what was so special about that urn. Especially now that they felt they'd been challenged. She'd enjoy watching them work through the puzzle until they saw the truth.

Shard came out of the tent and with a few long strides caught her as she strode across the camp to the work table. His arm slipped around her waist, pulling her close even as he urged her away from the table and toward their tent.

"Don't you have a puzzle to solve, my Ardin?" She raised her brows in challenge.

"That vase isn't going anywhere." The hand at her waist moved up to cup her breasts. "Your impertinence might just need lessening."

Soft, feminine laughter tumbled from her lips. "I'm still not going to give you any hints. You can threaten as much as you like. I insist that you solve this without help."

Shard's fingers left her breasts to dance over her ribs. "*I'ma*, you'll know when we're threatening. It will be a moment before we deliver on the promise."

"Consider me suitably intimidated." The wide grin curving her lips and the laughter lurking in her voice belied the submissive words.

Shard hooked his arm around her waist more securely and spun her around in a circle. "You're a distracting little thing. You're lucky I don't have time to teach you now. Tonight, *i'ma*, we will impress upon you the wisdom of proper deference to your mates." Shard's hand landed a light swat on the curve of her buttocks just before he left her.

Her eyes followed him hungrily. They were such teases sometimes. Just when she was ready to crawl into bed with him and forget her own work, he had to remember that he had to go somewhere.

Chapter Fifteen

Lina stretched, feeling the delicious aches in the muscles of her legs. They'd been insatiable last night. From teasing to thought-shattering intensity, they had shown her a variety of sexual levels.

Flipping onto her stomach, she couldn't stop herself from thinking about them and everything that had happened. She felt so much with them and not just sexually. Her emotions were definitely deepening. Her feelings surpassed liking and came close to love already, even with the trials of adjusting to life in a *thent* and answering to someone else. She had no idea why or how she had come to feel as she did about them in such a short time.

She had even noticed a difference in the way her feelings for them were growing. Kaleb, generally the more easygoing of the two men, made her laugh. Liking seemed to grow into a deeper caring for him with ease. Shard was a different matter. She admired his strength, the power, the control he displayed. Respect after that first fight had grown along a path of its own into a deep trust and caring.

She rolled from bed with a groan. Raising her arms over her head, she stretched her muscles slowly. She was late rising after the wild night. With a small smile curving her lips, she walked over to a small basin and washed away the last of the fatigue from the night's exertions. She dressed simply in a pale blue shirt with narrow straps, matching undergarments and a black skirt. Resisting a last urge to linger, she left the tent to begin her work.

She went straight to the work table and sat waiting for Jaksen. She had to see if the man the scanners had been tracking had joined with a larger group. Finding that group would be a step closer to freeing herself and the other women from the restrictions that practically confined them to camp.

Lina took the computer from Jaksen and went to work. There was definitely a pattern to the man's movements. Every night he returned to the same place and every day traveled same path almost to the step.

A shout of alarm rang through the air as a stun ray hit a metal crate next to one of the Dura-tents and deflected. She reacted without thinking, falling back, taking the small computer with her. The table crashed onto its side as Jaksen rolled to a stop beside her. Lina frantically exited the tracking program and activated another.

"Go to your haven, Lady," Jaksen urged, looking almost panicked as shots pinged against the table.

Lina didn't argue. She nodded and shoved the computer into his hands. "Here, use the Sendar's weapons systems to provide cover fire. I'd suggest the remote hover weapon."

She thought about the haven and crawled forward. She wasn't surprised to find herself in the grassy glade only a blink later.

She knew that if she hadn't come here she would have had to pay for her defiance of what had been an order. This situation wasn't worth punishment. With the Sendar's weapons, the fight would soon be finished. She had hated leaving the others in those circumstances, but she had done what she could to offer help to those in the camp. She looked around the glade, trying to decide where she should wait for Shard and Kaleb to come to get her.

* * * * *

Shard cursed as a bolt thudded into the tree next to him. He rolled behind some bushes, seeking better cover from the sharp missiles and occasional stunner fire. Kaleb was to the right of him crouched behind two trees which had grown together.

The attack had taken them by surprise. They hadn't sensed anyone close as they had walked through the forest toward the ruin they had just started searching. There had been no sign of strange tracks in the area. He hadn't caught so much as a whiff of human scent. The first indication of trouble had been the first bolt which had thudded into a tree short of its target.

He had seen movement in the trees from two places, but suspected that there were at least five men involved in this attack. The dense forest around them prevented the archers from taking more shots and inflicting severe damage. The location was not conducive to the long-range weapons.

During the first volley of arrows, Vellis had been struck in the shoulder. It was a mere flesh wound, and he was now firing into the foliage opposite his position, providing cover for Trane to slip into the forest. Vellis kept up the intermittent bursts to keep the men pinned into one place.

Shard fired after a shaft struck the ground near his foot. He kept firing, leveling a spray of shots over a wide area. He ducked down after he was assured that he had given Kaleb enough time to slip out of sight of the attackers.

Kaleb kept low, moving fast and with practiced stealth through the bushes and trees around them. The laser pistol was a reassuring weight in his hand. His finger poised over the trigger, ready to fire. His senses, heightened by the rush of anger at this cowardly attack, searched for the slightest movement, the smallest sound. He moved in a wide arc to get behind their enemies. He had complete faith in Shard's and Vellis' ability to keep the enemy busy.

Kaleb found the trail of two human men and cautiously approached. He moved with fluid silence from tree to bush as he approached them. They were in the process of launching more of the metal-tipped shafts. Unaware that the real danger lay behind them, not in front of them, their attention was focused on the trees where Shard and Vellis crouched. With quick efficiency and utter accuracy, Kaleb pulled the trigger

twice. A yellow ray hit the first man. Before the first man even began falling, the second ray hit his companion. Kaleb faded back into the forest, stalking, hunting those who had dared to attack them.

He swept wide again and began searching for tracks or scent to lead him to the next group of men. A small tuft of fabric fluttering on the branch of a stout bush gave him the first clue. A hint of male human scent drifted to him as he moved cautiously. He followed the scent, silent, alert to a trap.

One of the two men in this small area had taken a position behind some concealing bushes and now lay unconscious, stunned by the blast from one of the shots fired to provide cover. Kaleb shot the second man, sending him into unconsciousness.

Keeping his body low and his tread silent, Kaleb moved away from the area, continuing his hunt for others who might hide in the forest, waiting to kill the unwary. In the dense vegetation, he found Trane. With a series of hand signals, he gave his instructions.

They separated, going in opposite directions. The two men swept a wide circle around the area where Vellis and Shard had taken shelter. Only when they were certain that there were no other hidden assassins did the two men give the all clear signal.

Kaleb took out his com-link as he walked back to Shard and Vellis and tried to contact the camp for transport of the eight men who had attacked them. There was no reply, no signal at all. A few moments later, it was confirmed that none of their com-link units were working.

They realized that they should have already known that the com-links were useless. The attackers must have placed units to create a dampening field around them. If the com-links had been working, the *Ovian* would have contacted them when it picked up the stunner fire on its sensors.

Trane had been sent to find the edge of the field and notify the camp of their needs. He ran back to them. The look on his face caused Shard's gut to clench in dread. Something had happened at the camp. He knew without a doubt. There was no other reason for that look or his speedy return. He had been given permission to wait for those who would come for them.

"There was a simultaneous attack on the camp. They've been trying to reach us, both the *Ovian* and the people at the camp." Trane drew in a great gulp of air trying to catch his breath after the long, fast run. "There were only minor injuries, some damage to the camp. Everyone will heal and everything can be fixed."

"Lina?" Shard's muscles ached as he waited for Trane to answer.

Kaleb's eyes narrowed and her tensed. If she hadn't gone to the haven, he would see that she remembered the cost for such defiance. Her rear would glow.

"She awaits you in the haven you created for her, Ardin." Trane relayed the answer quickly, knowing exactly how they felt. He had asked after his own mate as well when he learned of the attack.

Kaleb released the breath that he hadn't known he had been holding. He'd had some doubts that she would actually use the haven if she ever had to do so. She probably didn't realize just yet that that haven had been created more for the sake of their sanity than her safety. They couldn't focus on a battle when they were worried that she might be out there placing her life on the line.

She wasn't the type to hide in safety while others fought. She was the kind of woman who fought at her man's side. He had expected to hear that she had commandeered a stunner and had defied orders to help stop the men attacking the camp.

"How severe was the assault on the camp?" Shard paced as he waited for the details. The transport for the captured men seemed to take an eternity to arrive. He wanted to get to camp, to go to Lina.

"Ten men attacked the camp with stunner pistols. Jaksen used the Sendar's weapons to provide cover fire while men slipped out of camp and behind the attackers. All ten men are alive. They were merely stunned, although Jaksen said there were men who wanted to kill them immediately. The cleanup should be almost finished by the time we get back to the camp." Trane leaned against a tree.

Now Lina's compliance with their orders made sense to them. Only the knowledge that those she left had an advantage over their attackers would have induced her to leave so readily. They knew she wouldn't have been so willing without that knowledge. Lina was a protector. Her compliance with that order would always be questionable.

A shuttle flew over the area before finding a small clearing in the trees and landing in a spot that would have been impossible for any but the most skilled pilots. The unconscious men were carried aboard the shuttle and secured with neural cuffs. These men and those who had attacked the camp would be taken to the *Ovian* for interrogation before a Central Command shuttle was called to deal with the scum.

Kaleb dispatched two men to try to follow the men's trail back to their hideaway. After losing eighteen men in today's attack, the remaining men would be very few in number. They had to have been very certain of their success or very desperate to have sent that many men in one assault.

The large camp almost seemed normal by the time that Kaleb and Shard arrived on the skimmers. There were a few holes in the Dura-tents caused by the rays of the stunners. Those would be easily repaired. A few of the storage crates were singed. Some of the men wore bandages on wounds received during the fray. They saw Jaksen at one of the tables and walked toward him to get a full report on the attack and the damage.

Spirits around the camp were high and Jaksen was fascinated with the computer in front of him. He hadn't even noticed that Shard and Kaleb had arrived. He tensed in surprise when Shard laid a hand on his shoulder to get his attention.

"Ardin, I didn't realize you were back." Jaksen flushed and then looked back down at the computer.

"You were engrossed in the display on that screen." Kaleb's easy smile and the flash of white teeth showed amusement rather than anger at the lack of awareness.

"She has everything connected to this computer. It fascinates me that she can do so much from it. Until she shoved it at me and told me to use the Sendar's weapons, I hadn't even paused to think about what she could do with just this console." Jaksen gestured to the slim computer, an awed expression on his face.

"Did she give you any argument about going to her haven?" Shard leaned his hip against the table as he looked at the computer screen.

"No, I merely told her once to go to her haven, she shoved the computer at me and she was gone." Jaksen shrugged. "Did you know she has a link to the *Ovian* on here? It's not as extensive as the one she has constructed for the Sendar, but she could contact them if she needed."

"I had guessed that she could probably arrange such a connection if she wanted to do so. I didn't realize that she'd already done it." Kaleb chuckled as he moved away from the table. Having such connections made Lina feel safe. He would have to talk with her about informing him of such connections. She had spent a lot of time alone, able to rely only on the technology she created and used in dire situations.

"If the shuttle from the *Ovian* gets here before we get back with Lina, I want those men secured and watched. Strip them and give them new clothing. They won't get the chance to take their lives. We'll question them in the security of the *Ovian's* brig." Shard pushed away from the table, the staccato instructions delivered as he walked over to Kaleb.

The moment he finished speaking, he and Kaleb disappeared.

Lina sat on a large, warm gray rock by the clear, rock-bottomed pool. Her eyes were glued on the clearing and had been since she had arrived in the haven.

What was taking those men so long? Had they been hurt in the battle when they had come to help fight those who had attacked the camp? She was going insane just sitting here and waiting. The possibilities swamped her, each worse than the last.

She blinked and then they were there on the other side of the grassy clearing. Their durable, brown camouflage clothing was dirty and there was a tear in Kaleb's shirt. Shard's hair had pieces of leaves in it. Kaleb's hair was wild, tangled. They had never looked more handsome to her than they did at that moment. She lunged to her feet and ran to them. She flung herself at them. They both caught her, wrapping her within their embrace.

"I was so worried." She pressed her face to Kaleb's chest, then to Shard's, inhaling their scent, taking comfort in the solid bulk of their bodies. "What took you so long? I've been going insane, not knowing what had happened."

"I'ma, that is a complicated story and we don't have all the details yet." Shard's arm tightened around her waist as he savored the feel of her against his body. Relief soared through him. She hadn't been in any danger.

"Well, tell what you know of it. We're not going to be interrupted here." Lina looked from one dark-haired man to the other, waiting for their answer.

"Demanding little *rah'ki*," Shard chuckled and ruffled her hair.

"We were attacked as well. They ambushed us after we had left the skimmers to trek to the site we were searching. It took us some time to deal with the men." Kaleb's breath feathered through her hair.

"You're only just getting here from your battle?" Her fingers tightened on the material of his shirt. She'd thought they'd rush back, running straight into a battle, not that they'd been attacked.

"We discovered only after we had stunned the last of them that our communications were blocked. We had to wait until someone had reached the edge of the dampening field to call for transport for those we had captured." Kaleb leaned back and looked down into her amber eyes.

"It was only when Trane, the man who had contacted camp, returned that we learned that the camp had also been attacked." Shard's hand slipped around her waist, pulling her against him. She felt his hard muscles against her and the fast, hard beat of his heart against her shoulder. "I've never known fear such as I experienced in the mere moment before I knew you were safe in your haven. If anything had happened to you, I think I would've gone crazy."

"I'm safe." She rolled her hips against his, holding him, wanting to reassure him. That admission tore through her. His voice had been raw and there was no doubt that he'd meant the words. "I can't say that I liked leaving the others when there was trouble. I had real thoughts about staying to help."

"You did go." Kaleb's breath whispered over her ear. "That is what counts, not that you might have wanted to stay. You obeyed orders and kept yourself safe. The thought of you in danger...it rouses the beast within me."

"I hate the waiting. I don't know how easy it will be to continue to do as you say in the future. The delay tonight gave me so much time to think."

Shard pulled her back into the warmth of their embrace.

"This place is our haven, only for our mate, for enjoyment, pleasure and, as you have found, discipline." Kaleb smoothed his hand along her back and up to cup the back of her head. "Now we have to go back to the camp. We have to see to the prisoners' interrogation."

* * * * *

Shard sat at the table across from the unshaven, brown-haired man dressed in a gray one-piece uniform that had replaced the clothing he had worn. He was filthy and he still reeked. The man's body hadn't touched water in over ten days by the smell.

Shard's fury burned hotly, but he controlled the desire to jettison the man out of an airlock. Kaleb had left the room a moment ago, too angry to remain and leave the man

in one piece. He'd come close to ripping out the man's throat and needed time to calm down before he returned.

This man was one of the worst forms of scum. Shard had nothing against mercenaries as a group. Most of them had some principles. This man would do anything as long as he could be assured of the pay. It was what he had been prepared to do today that had the *tiron* roaring for release, fur and sinew rippling beneath his skin.

"What were your exact orders?" Shard focused his eyes on the man across from him. The man seemed unaware of his jeopardy.

"The men wanted us to go to the camp and kill everyone there. They didn't care how we did it or if we left any of the lovelies alive for a little while so we could have fun." The man shrugged and sneered. "They just wanted us to make sure that there was no one alive by the time they got there. The other team was supposed at the very least to delay those who had left the camp, but they preferred it if everyone was dead."

Shard gripped the table and held on to his control by a thread. The man was either suicidal or stupid. Shard felt his claws burst from the ends of his fingers. Taking a deep breath, he reminded himself that they were trying to cooperate with Central Command. Handing these prisoners over to them alive would be a step in that direction.

"Why are they targeting us?" Shard forced himself to focus on the questions, not on their unsuccessful plan.

"They're looking for some kind of proof." The brown-haired man shook his head in disgust. "All we've done is sit and wait."

"How many of them are left? Are any of your men still with them?" Shard gave the man a hard look as Kaleb came back into the room.

"None of my men, there were only sixteen of us," The man laughed. "They didn't want to pay for all my men. They should have. We could've taken care of this if we had had more people. As to them, there aren't many. They kept us split into small groups until we came together for this job."

"Where are they now?" Shard leaned forward and snarled, revealing the lengthened canines.

The man slammed back against the chair. "I don't know where they went. The last time I saw them was when we gathered before the mission."

"Give us a number." Kaleb had control now.

"Maybe four or five," the man said in an uncaring manner.

Shard shook his head. This man showed no loyalty to those who had hired him, but it was typical of some mercenaries. As they'd been caught, they wouldn't be paid for their services and thus felt no qualms about revealing their knowledge.

Kaleb could see the tension radiating off Shard. The man across the table didn't know how close he was to feeling the claws of a *tiron* tearing into his body. He sat there, unafraid and seemingly saying anything that came to his mind. Most men would watch their tongue when confronted by two male shifters just on general principles.

Chapter Sixteen

Lina sat at the table, working at her computer on some vid-images for one of the sim-games with a complete storyline. Nerisa strolled over to the table and sat in one of the chairs arranged around the table. She braced her elbows on the table and propped her chin on her hands, heaving a large sigh.

She'd been listening to intermittent reports of what the men were talking about, brought by any woman who happened to wander close enough to them to hear any information. The talk of those who had remained to guard the camp was all that they knew of the events after the battle. Shard and Kaleb as well as a few others were on the *Ovian*, conducting the interrogations of the captured men. They had been gone for hours.

"They were talking about how strange it was that those men knew precisely when and where to attack us today. That was all I managed to overhear before they asked me if I needed something." Nerisa imparted her news in a low whisper.

"It's not only strange that they knew that. It's rather amazing." Medina frowned as she gave it some thought. "The men had only switched to that site late in the afternoon yesterday."

"Who outside those in this camp knew of that switch?" Lina discounted anyone in the group of Santir as the one who had given these scum aid. Any shifter out of adolescence knew that they would find no shelter among those who hated them. Looking up as she heard the light hum of an engine, she watched as a shuttle swept in for landing.

"The lead researcher was told. The man who informed him hadn't yet heard that he'd been ordered to cease his research. Vedix had been kept informed to prevent the two groups from trying to work the same site. He might have told others in his group." Medina idly turned the mug of *dorin* in her hands.

Lina's lips curled into a snarl at the mention of that man's name. "Vedix was very angry when he left here yesterday. He knows that he'll lose his reputation and probably his position at the museum because of this fiasco. He could've hoped for some revenge."

"You don't like him very much, do you?" Nerisa tilted her head and smiled at the animosity visible on Lina's face.

"He's a liar and a snitch. That man is nothing but trouble." Lina narrowed her eyes. She knew that he'd told Shard and Kaleb of her presence on the planet. That was why they'd been watching for her when she'd finally tracked Nerisa to that ruin. "He's not the first one I've encountered, but it still infuriates me when it happens."

Lina saw them come around the last tent between the landing area and the tables. Kaleb's eyes locked on Lina as soon as he rounded the tent. At that first glance, she knew something was wrong.

"It wasn't the snitch." Kaleb ruffled Lina's hair as he stopped beside her.

She could feel the slight trembling of his hands as he cupped the back of her head. "Who was it then?" What had happened to them? They seemed just barely in control.

"It was one of the snitch's underlings. Their transport will be here within two days. We won't have to worry about their spy after that point. The men will have no one to feed them information." Kaleb moved closer to him until she could feel one leg pressing against her side.

"Holding a grudge against him, *rao nari*?" Shard pulled a chair over to sit next to her. He took her hand, holding it tightly. Lina tugged at her hand experimentally, just to see if he would release her and a low growl rumbled in his chest as his fingers tightened around her hand.

Lina frowned and shot Shard a sharp look. His brown eyes were molten with emotion. More than want swirled in those deep eyes. A light breeze carried Shard's scent to her and what she smelled was intense. A volatile mixture of desire and anger, it only reinforced what she'd learned from their expressions. She could see the tense cords of his muscles. A quick glance up at Kaleb revealed much the same situation. They looked desperate, almost out of control and a very primitive part of her responded. She wished she knew what had caused the anger and despair she'd seen in their eyes.

She squeezed Shard's hand and smiled at him as she leaned into Kaleb. They were her men. Whatever they needed, she'd give them.

"No, I'm not holding a grudge against him, because the end result was probably inevitable. Finding my mates has changed my life for the better. It was worth every bit of stress I experienced trying to elude you. There were too many Santir here for me to hide long. Without his loose tongue, I would have managed a day or two more without discovery." Lina stroked her thumb over Shard's knuckles as her eyes locked with his. Desire blazed in his brown eyes as he stared at her. "I would probably have been found as I gathered my packs."

"Ah, but we wouldn't have met in the way that we did had that occurred." Kaleb lifted Lina and sat down with her in his lap. "I wouldn't have changed the way we met for anything. You were so beautiful, so defiant, even when you had to know that there was no way that you could win against a fully grown male *tiron*."

Kaleb's hand slid over her stomach, slipping under the cloth of her shirt, and roaming higher in sweeping strokes. Just when she thought that she had a prayer of calming one man, the other did something to stir things to a higher level. She could practically feel the hot need swirling within both men.

Without a doubt, this would be some of the fiercest, hardest sex they'd ever had. These two men weren't in any condition to do gentle. Lina felt a gush of cream soak her

panties. She was more than ready for primitive, feral or anything else they could give her.

"You know, you two can be such wild men, sometimes. Are you going to tell me what you learned during your interrogations or am I going to have to pry it out of you with torture?" She wiggled, rubbing her buttocks against the hard ridge of Kaleb's cock. Her free hand slipped down and stroked his muscled thigh. Her fingers slid with ease over the fine cloth of his pants.

Shard released her hand and gave a rough edged chuckle. "You can try your torture, my lovely *rah'ki*, but we have plans of our own."

"Change them." Lina stood, braced a hand on her hip and leveled a challenging look at him. "You have no idea how I hate sitting and waiting when I know that I could be helping. I'm not a tame *tiron* content to stay in a cage."

Kaleb scooped her up into his muscled arms in a dizzying display of strength, startling a shriek from her. Her arms shot up, clutching his neck for a moment in desperate fright. After the initial disorientation and blind fear, her eyes rose and clashed with Kaleb's narrowed eyes. In those green depths, Lina saw something wild, untamed. They might have seemed to have been teasing, but that look held no trace of humor.

"It's not our plans which will have to wait for fulfillment, *i'ma*." Kaleb's breath feathered over the top of her head as he lowered his lips to the crown of hair and nuzzled the bright golden mass.

Lina didn't argue as they carried her toward the tent. Once inside the nearly soundproof confines of the tent, she could argue much more freely. She wouldn't have to worry about showing blatant disrespect in front of the entire pack. With any luck, they would put her down and she could put a little distance between them. She knew just by looking at them that her questions wouldn't be answered, but she could tease them a little.

Shard preceded them into the tent, but remained near the entrance to seal the door, ensuring their privacy after Kaleb had carried Lina past him. Kaleb didn't release her until he was at the edge of the bed. He put her on her feet beside him and started to remove his brown shirt. As she sidestepped, hoping to put some space between them, his hand shot out and manacled her wrist.

"Do you think you're going somewhere, Lina?" Kaleb raised his brows and his eyes briefly twinkled with suppressed amusement as he looked down at her.

Shard chuckled as he walked over to them.

She saw the amusement fade from Kaleb's eyes to be replaced by something much more intense. She glanced down at her wrist encircled by those large, dark fingers. "Umm...obviously not."

Shard stepped up beside her and his hand went to her the soft material of her blue shirt. He gathered it in his large hands and pulled it over her head and tossed it away. "Let's get you undressed, *rao nari*."

Lina's eyes widened as she noticed that he was already nude. His dark skin gleamed in the soft light of the tent. Her mouth watered and she could feel her body warming, liquid pooling within her in eager response to the sensations she knew they could give her. Her body craved that pleasure.

Kaleb had released her the moment he knew Shard's hands were on her. Lina saw him begin to undress. Shard tugged at the front catch of her strapless bra, drawing her attention to the big dark-skinned man in front of her. The fabric ripped before he could get the fastening loose. He flung the scrap of *tetri* silk to a corner of the tent.

Her breasts hung free and Shard's gaze focused on the darker skin of the areola. He leaned down and his mouth opened over her nipple. Wet heat surrounded the crown of her breast and his cheeks hollowed as he drew her breast into his mouth. Lancing heat shot straight to her core. He sucked at her. His tongue played with the sensitive bud, lapping at the hardened crest.

"I love the way you taste. The way your body responds to us at just a touch, you're so perfect, so sensual." Shard smiled as the scent of her arousal rose around him. He scraped his teeth over a hardened nipple and savored the shiver that coursed through her body. Her hand tangled in his hair and pulled his head closer to her. "I don't know why you bother wearing that thing. We like the way you look without it much better and it's so much easier to get to what we want if we don't have to peel away two or three layers of clothing."

Her head fell back as she relished the pleasure rolling through her. The drawing pull as he sucked at her breast caused tingling pulses to course through her. She could feel an answering tug in her pussy which ignited a fierce need to be filled. She pressed her body against his, rubbing against the ridge of his hardened cock. It should be impossible for them to make her feel this much with such a simple caress.

Shard swirled his tongue around the reddened tip and returned to undressing her. His hands skimmed down her curved waist to the fabric of her skirt. His nimble fingers went to the buttons at the back of the skirt. With each flicking movement, a gap opened in the fabric. The v widened until it fell to the floor. He pushed the blue scrap of her panties down until they too joined the pile around her feet.

"Step out of the skirt and your shoes, *i'ma*." Shard reached up and released her hair from the confines of the braid. "*Rah'ki*, I'm almost afraid to touch you because the *tiron* within me is so close to the surface, but that same reason makes it impossible to keep my hands off you. By the Gods, I need you."

Lina obeyed the growled order, slipping her feet from the comfortable, soft-soled shoes he wore. Shard swept her into his arms and carried her onto the bed. He sank to his knees on the soft mattress. He knelt on the green blankets with her still cradled in his arms.

She looked up into the hard lines of Shard's face. Raw lust burned in his eyes. This was not a tame or gentle desire. All hint of teasing was gone. This was a man on the

edge of losing control. The animal within very nearly dominated. He needed to fuck her. It was in his eyes, in the musk rolling off him.

Everything female within her loosened and readied in answer to that need. The heated scent of his need heightened her need. Her breath came in fast, shallow pants. Her breasts began to ache. They were tight, swollen, her nipples hard, reddened points that begged for a man's mouth. She already wanted him. His pheromones merely increased that want, raised it to the primitive level of his need.

Lina laced her arms around his neck and lifted her body against his to kiss him. Her tongue slid past his lips and encountered the extended canines hidden there. She rubbed her tongue against his in silent assurance that whatever he needed, she could give. With a moan, she sucked at his tongue, drawing his dark, male taste deep into her.

"*I'ma*, I have to have you." Shard pulled back to stare into her golden eyes.

"Any way you need me, I am ready. I always want you. You know that. You can make me hot with just the sound of your voice." Lina ran her hand over his hard cheek.

She felt the muscles twitch beneath her palm and knew how much it was taking him to control himself. She could see the struggle within his eyes. The animal was very close to taking control of him right now. His eyes had changed. They were fully feline, slitted, the shift from man to animal close.

"I might go mid-change while I'm inside you. I don't think that I can control it." Shard's lengthened canines flashed.

"I can take you in any form, *nari*." Lina leaned forward to nip the hard flesh above his dark nipple. "I'm a Santir female. My body was made to take yours. You won't hurt me." Mid-change, a halfway form between the man and the animal was taken at times of extreme stress or danger. She felt no fear of him fucking her in that large form.

She turned and looked over at Kaleb. Everything female within her reveled in the heat burning in their gazes. She could tell at a glance that he needed her just as Shard did, but the mood that boiled through them was primal and not inclined toward sharing. In his eyes, a fierce fire burned, but she knew why Shard was going first. While Kaleb's need wasn't in doubt, Shard was perilously close to losing control. That they could want her with such intensity awed and excited her.

She turned her head and looked steadily into Shard's brown eyes as he lowered her to the soft bedding. She rolled onto her hands and knees. She looked back over her shoulder at him and arched her back, pressing back and showing him her readiness.

"Is this how you want me?" She reached over her shoulder and pulled her hair to one side of her neck, revealing the mating mark he had made. Her breasts were swollen, the tips aching, hard points. She could feel the slick cream coating her thighs. Her body was more than ready for him.

"*Rah'ki*, I need you just like that." Shard's eyes locked onto the pink, glistening flesh between her thighs. The *tiron* growled and snarled, craving the reassurance of its mate's slick cunt. He licked his lips, hunger a burning brand within him. He flowed over the

bedding until he was right behind her. "I tried to let the normalcy of the camp soothe me, to quiet the beast. Tried to find reassurance in the facts, that you hadn't been hurt. Nothing could ease this need. I need you to take me, *i'ma*." The animal within him sought his mate, her softness, her warmth.

"I'm here. I need you." Lina pushed her buttocks back against his hips. His hard cock slid between her thighs and rubbed over the swollen, pink lips of her labia. He inhaled and the *tiron* within roared in eagerness as he smelled the sweet scent of her desire mingling with his own.

Shard reached down as he pulled back, just enough to allow him to position his cock at the hot, creamy entrance of her pussy. He pushed forward and the walls of her moist, heated channel expanded, rippled as it took his shaft. Mid-change rolled over him as he sank into her as deep as he could.

Looking back over her shoulder, she watched the transformation. Hair grew on his arms, legs, back and chest. Muscle and bone grew and began to reform. He became larger. His face changed, mouth changing to form a slight muzzle, teeth lengthening, changing to those of a *tiron*. Claws sprouted from the tips of his fingers and brushed over her skin.

Shard felt his cock swell and lengthen inside her tight sheath. Those inner muscles rippled and stretched, encasing him in an almost painful grip. He clenched his teeth. Worried that he would score her tender flesh with his claws, he hesitated to withdraw and plunge hard and deep as he desired. He drew back, slowly pulling out of the slick heat of her pussy. The scent of her desire blossomed around him. She pressed back into him, a hungry mewl sounding when he tried to control the beast raging to drive into her.

At that tortured sound, he quit trying. She needed him to be as wild as the beast demanded. He began to pump into her, driving his hips into her buttocks. She thrust back against him, demanding. His hands gripped her hips, pulling her back into each pounding thrust. A primitive purr rolled through her when his claws scraped over her and gush of fluid welcomed the surge of his shaft into her grasping channel.

The muscles of her pussy rippled around his cock, driving him almost insane as the desperate need riding him grew even hotter. He leaned over her, lowering his chest to her back as his hips pistoned against hers. He scraped his teeth over the mark on her shoulder, drawing a desperate, needy moan from her.

The *tiron* within ruled him and Shard didn't try to deny his needs. His teeth sank into her shoulder as her cunt rippled with the first contractions of her orgasm. The strangled sound of her scream of pleasure combined with his growl as he thrust hard into her milking sheath. He came.

Every pulsing jet that sprayed into her pussy felt as if pure heat was burning through him. The muscles of the tight channel surrounding his shaft rippled and pulled at him, sending tingling jolts of sensation through his body. He was breathing hard and

he could feel her heart racing as his chest pressed against her back. She took in great gulps of air as Shard pulled out of her.

Only a moment later, Lina sensed movement behind her. Kaleb took Shard's place and moved her hair to the opposite side of her neck. She looked back over her shoulder and smiled at him.

Kaleb could feel the need to take her burning through him, but just as prevalent was the need to see to her pleasure. He didn't want to chance hurting her as he fucked her. "I don't have much control left, *i'ma*, but I'll try to ensure your pleasure."

She pressed back against him as his scent began to incite the desire which had just been satiated. Kaleb's hands slid over her back and hips. One large palm slipped beneath her, over her stomach to the slick mound of her pussy.

Gods, she was beautiful. She was wet with her desire and Shard's seed. His fingers slid between the folds and began to stroke over her clit, rubbing the hard hood in a circular motion. She whimpered as her need and desire rose hot and fast. Her hips undulated, riding the fingers giving her such pleasure.

Kaleb could feel the need burning inside him, a need to protect, a need to ensure she was safe, a need to claim, to reinforce the knowledge that she was safe and would remain so. He needed to feel her heat surrounding him, that slick, hot glove taking him deep. He entered her slowly, determined to control the change at least until he was fully sheathed in her cunt. He threw his head back as that hot channel clenched around him. Fur rippled under his skin as the beast leaped for control.

"Fuck me, Kaleb." She pushed back into him, taking his length into her needy pussy. "I want you, Kaleb. Hard and fast, gentle and sweet, however you need, take me. Just fuck me."

The change hit him, racing through him as his control vanished at her husky plea. Fur lightly coated his arms and torso as mid-change swept over him. Larger, he loomed over her. Sweat dripped from his face as he began to thrust within her. He leaned over her. His tongue lapped over her shoulder and neck. He loved her taste, hot, sexy and his.

She was so eager and responsive. Her hungry moans and mewls encouraged him as he began to move faster. With lips, teeth and tongue, he laved, lashed and scraped her shoulders and neck, paying special attention to the sensitive scars of his joining bite.

"Gods, yes, squeeze me, Lina," Kaleb growled as he continued to thrust into her tight, clenching channel.

His teeth latched on to her shoulder. The sharp fangs sank into her shoulder, reopening the four punctures. She went wild under him. Her hips met each pounding thrust and her pussy gripped his cock with pulling contractions. Wild cries, wordless pleas encouraged his surging thrusts. His balls slapped against her labia and clit with wet smacks.

Need throbbed within him, tightening his muscles. She screamed as she came, her body trembling beneath his, the wet sheath surrounding his cock contracted in milking ripples. His shaft plunged in and out of her pussy in a frantic rhythm as the desire coiled into a hard knot. He came, growling against her shoulder. Fiery pleasure burned through him as her muscles squeezed and pulled at him, drawing every last drop of seed from his balls.

Kaleb withdrew and urged Lina to lie down on the soft bedding. He snuggled against her on her right and Shard settled down on her left side. She worked her arms under both of them so that she could hold as well as be held by both of them.

She turned her gaze from Shard to Kaleb, intent on getting the answers that had been denied her because of the intensity of their need. "Now can you tell me what you learned in your interrogations? If you become upset by it, I am right here, ready and willing to provide comfort or anything else you might need, even a fight."

Kaleb turned toward her and his hand settled on her stomach, rubbing lightly. "Most of those men sent after us in this attack weren't the zealots and fanatics that the other three men were."

Lina caught the look of almost desperation which crossed Kaleb's face before he leaned down and kissed her shoulder. "If they aren't fanatics, what are they?"

Shard's fingers brushed over the mound of her breast. He took a deep breath, inhaling the rich scent of sex and feminine desire. "They're mercenaries. They were hired as muscle by this group, just in case they were discovered."

She bit her lip to keep from moaning as Shard's fingers brushed over her hard nipples. She hadn't yet heard anything that explained their actions when they'd returned to camp. "What else did you learn from the captives?"

"They had been ordered to delay us and kill everyone at the camp." Shard cupped his hand over her left breast and felt the steady beat of her heart. It pounded reassuringly against his hand, comfort for the distress the memories caused.

That explained some of their need, but she suspected there was more to the story. "Tell me the rest of it, *rao nari*."

"Gods, *i'ma*, you don't know what it took to leave the room, to leave the scum still breathing when everything in me roared for his death." Rage throbbed in the deep rumble of Kaleb's voice. "Most of their weapons were on stun or a setting meant to cause pain. They intended to stun everyone within the camp. They would kill all the men when they could safely enter the camp and then take their time with the women before finishing them just as they had the men."

Understanding rolled through her. The fanatics hadn't merely hired mercs. They had hired the worst scum, the kind who enjoyed torturing and raping the weak before killing them. She had no doubt that the selection of such mercs had been intentional. Groups such as the one they faced hated any shifter or being which was not completely

human. With information such as that, it was little wonder that they had lost a little of their customary control.

"Are the mercenaries still alive?" Lina looked at Shard through her lashes. She would have been strongly tempted to rip the men apart. They must have felt the desire to kill them raging through them.

"They're alive. Central Command is sending some transport shuttles for them. Although we wanted to tear them into little pieces and jettison their remains, the Council of Shifters has been encouraging more cooperation with Central Command in instances such as these." Shard's fingers began combing through her golden hair in gentle, rhythmic strokes.

"Leaving the men in one piece was been hard, especially when they didn't hesitate to tell of their intentions. For some reason, the men had seemed to want a quick death." Kaleb slanted a wry smile toward her.

"Did they tell you anything about the men behind this? Why they're doing this?" She leaned over and nipped at the taut skin just above Shard's dark, flat nipple.

"Yes." Kaleb tugged at her nipple to get her attention. "They weren't willing to die to protect the fanatics' secrets. They came here to find proof that the Santir were created by alien beings instead of evolution. As this is the oldest known Santir settlement, the fanatics were convinced that they would find proof of their theory here. The mercs didn't care what the men found or didn't find as long as they got paid."

"Did they give you any idea where the last of the fanatics are hiding?" She walked her fingers up Kaleb's chest, scraping her nails across the tight dark crown of his nipple. She smiled at the low growl that rumbled in his chest.

"They were divided into small groups and didn't even know where the rest of their group was until they were brought together for this little venture." Shard slid his hand down to cover her mound.

"I'm really looking forward to a time when we are not under a threat. I'd like to spend some time in the forest and not have to look over my shoulder or be with an escort." She splayed her thighs, giving Shard free access to her pussy. She rolled her hips up in silent demand for more than just the warmth of his hand there.

"We'll work hard to get rid of these last fanatics so that you can roam the forests, *i'ma*." Shard's fingers swirled over her clit. He watched her face. Her eyes drifted closed and her teeth nibbled on her full lower lip.

"How many of the men are left?" She struggled to concentrate as her body undulated when Shard slipped two fingers inside her hot slit.

Shard smiled at the breathy gasp that escaped her lips as he brushed his thumb against her clit and drove his fingers into her cunt. "Not many, the group of radicals was relatively small. There might be five or six out there, but it's probably less."

"You'd better not be heating me only to leave me hot and unsatisfied. If you'll remember, I don't deal well with frustration. I might just have to leave some teeth marks of my own if you're playing teasing games." Lina raised a brow in inquiry.

Making love with them all day would be absolutely fabulous, but it didn't seem like them to ignore duty. They were dedicated to the *thent*.

"Well, we weren't going to leave you wanting, but you've reminded us that there are things we must do." Shard regretfully rolled away from her, trying to hide the smile lurking just behind his lips. If she saw that, she probably would bite them. "We have plans to make."

She rolled over and pounced. She came down on top of Shard, pushing him back against the sheets. "Plans...how can you make plans if you do not know where they are?"

"We don't know where they are, but we have a fairly good idea of what they want now." Shard laughed up at her, the amusement shining in his eyes.

"What is it?" She leaned down and ran her tongue over his shoulder. She opened her mouth and scraped her fangs over his chest in a mock threat.

Kaleb scooped her off Shard. "Now, *rah'ki*, what would be the fun in merely telling you the answer to that?"

"You can try to torture the truth out of us later." Shard stood and walked over to where Kaleb held her. He brushed his fingers across her cheek and smiled as she growled. "It will give you something to think about for the rest of the day."

She growled. "Sometimes I really miss being single and answerable only to myself."

Kaleb set her feet on the floor. He watched the fast sway of her hips as she walked away to get dressed. "You really don't handle frustration well. You're lucky we're in such good moods, Lina, *rao nari*. At another time, we might have wanted an explanation and an apology for the implication of your remark. This time, we'll let it pass."

Lina dressed, but only after she had washed a little. They'd already left the tent by the time she slipped her feet into comfortable shoes. She tugged on her skirt, straightening it before she left the tent.

Shard and Kaleb were already gathered with some of their men near one of the tents. The strategic posting of men throughout the camp kept any of the women from getting close enough to hear any of the details of their conversations.

Chapter Seventeen

There was some relief in the camp when the transport came to pick up the researchers. Their departure took away one of the worries. There was no longer any possible avenue of information for the fanatics. The last threat, the few extremists remaining on the planet, was still out there, but Shard and Kaleb were confident that they would catch them.

Lina hadn't been able to pry what they knew from them. They teased her unmercifully. She did try to pull the information from them. It was hard to torture a man properly with the active interference and disruption of another. Even when she managed to get one of them alone, the other showed up to stop the questions before she made any progress. She frowned. That mind-to-mind connection of theirs gave them an unfair advantage.

After the attack, Shard and Kaleb had kept her busy. They had had her install a link to the Sendar and its weapons onto the handheld units the men used. She instructed all of them on the various weapons. She had no idea what their plan was. Instinct and experience told her that they expected trouble at the camp.

Life continued within the camp. Most of the men, including Shard and Kaleb, left the camp each day to search the ruins for the *Thent's* Seal. The women and the camp were guarded by the small force which had been left there.

Lina sat at a table in the tent she shared with Shard and Kaleb. She had found the activity in the camp distracting, hoping that just being unable to see it would help her focus. She needed to work. The door to the tent was left open so that she could hear what was happening outside. She wanted to be aware if there was trouble within the camp.

Jaksen stepped into the open doorway. The look on his face was utterly serious. "Lady, go to your haven. There will be trouble."

Lina didn't know if it was his tone or something about the look on his face, but she did as he said without question. She thought about the haven and went. She didn't like it, but the men in the camp had enough to worry about without adding her refusal to obey a simple order.

She sighed as she looked around the area. Slowly, she walked over to the *netria* tree and sat under its shade. Eyes focused on a point beyond the trees, she couldn't stop her thoughts from going back to those she had left at the camp. By the Gods, she hated waiting.

* * * * *

Shard waited in *tiron* form, concealed in the high branches of the tree. He and many of the other warriors who'd left the camp earlier in the day had made their way back to camp along a network of connecting branches which created pathways through the trees. Kaleb, he knew, was positioned on the other side of the camp. They'd taken no chances. Just in case the men thought to look at the search site, they had left enough men there to create the illusion of a normal search team.

For two days, they'd kept a silent vigil on the camp without results. It was only a matter of time before the attack occurred. According to the information they had gathered, the fanatics were convinced that their proof was housed within the shifter camp. With the drastic reduction in their numbers, the men would be forced to choose a time when they thought the camp was undermanned, without defenses.

Movement in the forest below caught his eyes. A man crept toward the camp. Shard knew the exact moment he blithely passed the proximity sensor. The signal would alert those within camp that someone was approaching. They would know that it wasn't a Santir.

Although Lina wouldn't like having to leave, she would go to her haven. She still didn't understand the full importance of the haven. While she knew that it was meant to keep her safe, it would allow the men to focus on the coming battle and keeping the other women safe while it was fought. She didn't realize that it was something that provided reassurance to them as much as it provided safety for her.

Shard moved along the limb slowly, following the man as he approached the camp. The *tiron* wanted to take him down now, not let him get a step closer to the camp, but the man within wanted to make certain that they got every man who came to the attack them, to settle this finally.

One man has arrived here. Shard kept his gaze on the man as he contacted Kaleb. *He has tripped the sensors.*

One here as well, Kaleb's terse reply shot back along their link. *We wait. There will be no way that these men can say they didn't intend to attack us when they go before the Central Command Court.*

Shard agreed completely with that sentiment. These men wouldn't be able to say that they had come to talk with the Santir in a peaceful gesture and had been attacked. They would be allowed to show exactly what their intentions were. With the aid of some of Lina's small devices, the men would be caught on vid. It would be used as evidence against them. These men wouldn't walk away from their crimes free as so many of the other men who attacked shifters had.

The man crept toward the camp. With stunner drawn, he cautiously moved along the line of bushes, trying to get a shot at those moving within the camp. Shard kept the man in sight. He would be given enough time to incriminate himself, but the risks to those within the camp would be kept to a minimum.

He crawled slowly forward, careful to place his weight on only the sturdiest of branches. He wouldn't give this enemy any hint that a trap had closed around him. With patience, he waited as the man stopped behind a bush on the edge of camp.

In a rush, the man stood and began firing in a straight line across the camp. On the opposite side of camp, stun rays shot from the foliage. A third man dashed into the chaos of the camp, streaking toward the tents.

Shard moved swiftly along the branch. He leapt, shifting forms in the air, grabbing the man's wrist as he tackled him. Shard's weight pressed the man back into the bush as they crashed to the ground. With a rough impatience, he wrenched the stunner out of the man's grasp and flipped him over onto his back. He pinned the man to the ground with ease. A swift swipe with his fist rendered the man unconscious.

"Do you have him, Ardin?" Jaksen called, approaching the bushes. "We caught the runner without trouble. He wasn't nearly fast enough to outrun us."

"I have him." Shard stood, lifting the unconscious man to his shoulder in an easy move. "And Kaleb, did he get his man?"

"Ardin Kaleb caught the man coming from his direction." Jaksen stood at the edge of the camp as Shard strode out of the brush with the man tossed over his shoulder.

Shard dumped the man at the side of the one caught running through the camp. Kaleb strode out of the bushes on the other side of camp, carrying the last man. This, they knew, was the last of the men on the planet to find proof of their insane theory. The man that Lina's drones had been tracking had been followed the day the researchers had left the planet.

With the spy gone, he had believed that there was no need for him to remain isolated. He had joined his companions at a small cave and all three of them had been watched as they made their trek here. The danger was now over.

"Did Lina go to the haven easily?" Kaleb raised a brow to Jaksen as the man stood nearby securing the three captives.

"She didn't argue with me and she went immediately. She wasn't happy about doing it." Jaksen stood with a stunner drawn, guarding the unconscious men, should they wake. "A shuttle is on its way from the *Ovian*."

"Good," Kaleb stalked toward the tent to put on some clothing. "We should be back with Lina before it takes off. Take extra precautions in the transport and security of these men. I don't want them to be able to take their own lives."

Shard strode into the tent only a moment after Kaleb had done so. They dressed in brown, mottled pants. With a surge of their magic, they went to get Lina. She was undoubtedly worried.

Lina sat in the shade of the trees. She smiled when she saw them appear in the grassy clearing, but remained completely still in the shade of the *vetin* trees.

Preoccupied with her own thoughts, she didn't know if she was ready for this confrontation.

She ran her eyes over her two warriors. Dressed identically in white shirts, brown camouflage pants, and black boots, they looked gorgeous and dangerous, but in a very good mood. She knew that what she was going to tell them would likely sour that feeling.

Shard extended his hand to her. She took it and rose to her feet, but pulled back when he tried to pull her between them. As much as she wished to keep them happy, she couldn't let them take her back to the camp without talking to them first. She tugged until he released her hand and paced a few steps away from them.

"Is something wrong?" Kaleb frowned as she nervously clasped her hands together and shifted from one foot to the other. "You act as if you expected us to be angry with you."

Lina took a deep breath and then dove into the subject. This wasn't going to get any easier. "I don't know if I can do this."

Shard reached out and grasped her hands in his, hoping to reassure her. "What do you think you can't do?"

She slanted her eyes to the side and then swept her gaze around the haven. "This... I don't know if I can come here many more times. Every time I do I feel like a coward. I can fight. I'm in good health, strong, and I've been in bad situations before. I should be out there helping."

"By the Gods, never," A low growl rumbled in Kaleb's throat as he stepped forward. "You're no coward and are under a vast misconception. The other women may still be there, but they don't get involved in the fighting. They gather in one safe place and wait for the fighting to end."

Lina looked up at him through her lashes. His face was drawn into intense lines, his green eyes bored down into hers. "That's the truth?"

"I wouldn't lie to you about it." Kaleb frowned down at Lina.

She grimaced. What he said was true. She would be able to tell if he tried just as any other shifter would.

"The other women are protected and out of danger just as you are." Shard leaned close and looked into her eyes. "You are the mate of the Ardin. Any enemy who seeks to hurt us will know just how important you are to us. That is why any Ardin with the ability to see to the safety of their mate will create a place such as this."

She thought about that. She could see their point. The Ardins' Lady would be a valuable hostage. "I can't say that I will still agree, even in a few days, because running to shelter while others do battle is so strange to me, but I'll come back here if there is danger."

She felt an almost uncontrollable urge to laugh. They looked just as triumphant at that concession as they had when they had arrived. Broad smiles spread across their faces and white teeth flashed.

"You're ready now to return to camp?" Kaleb raised a brow and smoothed a hand up her arm to her shoulder.

"Yes, but tell me something first. Why is it that only the Ardin know the old magic?" She placed her hand on Shard's arm and took the hand that Kaleb had extended to her.

"Most Santir know the old magic, *i'ma*. If you're wondering why they don't create a place such as this, the reason is that the spell requires two men, bound by *Tierna*, to perform it." Shard slipped his arm around her waist and hugged her. "Want to watch the short interrogation of the men we captured?"

"Will I learn the reason they attacked the camp regardless of their willingness to talk?" Lina raised an eyebrow and looked up into Shard's deep brown eyes. The men had teased and tormented her for days about their knowledge and she wasn't up to another session.

"We'll tell you if they don't reveal it." Kaleb smiled and squeezed her hand in reassurance.

"Then what are you waiting for?" She stepped forward, tugging at them. "Let's go. I want to know what they were after."

A rich chuckle rippled through the glade as the three of them disappeared.

Chapter Eighteen

Lina sat between them on the way up to the *Ovian*. The captured men had already been taken to the ship and prepared for interrogation. Everything waited for their arrival. She listened as Shard and Kaleb gave her instructions.

"You will be seated in another room, watching it on a vid-monitor. The men will be secured, but we don't want you to be anywhere near these men. They're treacherous. You'll see and hear everything that we do." Shard stroked his fingers up her arm and then traced the thin strap of her white shirt in an almost absent gesture.

"That's fine." She shrugged. Her location during the questioning didn't matter to her. "I don't particularly want to be close to that scum. I only want the answer which you've denied me."

"You've denied us an answer for quite some time, my *rah'ki*." Kaleb placed his hand on her knee and gave it a light squeeze.

She saw his smile out of the corner of her eye. "Ah, but you two only have to figure out what is important about that vase. All the information is there. You merely have to solve the puzzle. You gave me nothing to work with, teasing wretches." She laughed, her eyes sparkling as she leaned her head against Shard's arm.

"When have we had time to solve this puzzle?" Kaleb laughed and ran his fingers up her thigh, pushing her green skirt up with the move.

"I did it and in much less time." She smirked and patted Kaleb's hand in mock consolation.

"We'll solve this little puzzle." Shard grasped her chin in his fingers and dropped a kiss on her lips. "Are you ready to apologize?"

"I told you that you'd get your apology when you solved the vase's puzzle." Lina smiled with ease. An apology would be no problem. They'd probably be feeling fairly happy around that time. "The question is when that spark of discovery will happen for you two."

"Push, *i'ma*." Kaleb's lips curled in a toothy anticipatory smile. "That apology's going to be sweet indeed. It only increases the things you owe us an apology for."

Aboard the *Ovian*, she walked beside them, relaxed and in a good mood. The hallways were more than wide enough for them to walk side by side. They showed her to a room filled with monitors. The man stationed in front of them swung his head around at their entrance, but quickly returned his eyes to the screens.

"Darin, our Lady will watch and listen to the interrogation." Kaleb ushered her over to a chair in front of a set of monitors. "Now just listen. No fooling around with the equipment in here."

"You could do better than this." Lina swept an assessing eye over the equipment, an intent look crossing her face. She settled in the seat, smoothing her skirt over her legs. "I expected more on a ship like the *Ovian*."

"Lina..." Shard pointed a finger at her. The woman was determined to change everything to the most advanced, the most usable model available. "Leave it for now. Watch the questioning."

She smiled at the forbidding expressions on their faces. This place would need to be almost completely redone.

"Sassy *rahki*, you need a lesson in respect." Shard gave her a promising smile as his gaze ran down her body and lingered on the curve of her buttocks. "I know you'll enjoy it."

Kaleb walked into the interrogation room ahead of Shard. A man with shaggy red hair and frigid blue eyes sat in front of the square, gray table. His brown forest attire had been removed and in its place, he wore a gray one-piece suit. His hands were cuffed to the arms of the chair which was bolted to the floor, ensuring that it couldn't be tipped. It would take a stronger man than him to rip it free from its moorings.

Kaleb dropped into the chair opposite the man and Shard stood, leaning against the wall.

"I don't have to talk to you abominations." The man raised his chin and looked through Kaleb.

"Hello, Mr. Rainess." Kaleb had heard it all before and the names didn't faze him. He relaxed into the chair. "There isn't much reason for us to talk. The men you hired gladly said everything that was needed."

"Liar!" Rainess' face turned a bright red. He jerked against the bands holding his hands to the chair. "Mongrel alien spawn, you would lie to your mother!"

"I believe they're trying to avoid placement on a penal colony from which there is no return. Central Command was just as willing to send us your files." Kaleb smiled as he watched the man. "They're seizing your assets, I believe."

"You smug bastard." Rainess wrenched his body violently to the side in an attempt to overturn the chair, probably in the hope that it would break. "You know that you have the proof. You've probably already destroyed it."

"Your misconceptions never end, Rainess." Kaleb laughed. The man was blind to all but his own beliefs. "I'll have to make plans to attend your trial."

"You fucking animal, there won't be a trial. I wouldn't give your kind the satisfaction," Rainess snarled, sagging in the chair, but his eyes blazed with hate.

"It hardly matters to me if it goes to trial, although seeing justice served would be interesting. The depravity and the treachery of your group will become public regardless of a trial. Anyone associated with that group will be ostracized by society

and watched by Central Command for the rest of their lives." Kaleb gave a triumphant smile just to infuriate the man across from him.

"Your friends will find it hard to do something like this again." Shard's voice cut through the silence as Rainess digested what their actions had wrought.

"You can't stop the truth from being found. It will come out at some point. Do you think that that was the only record of it?" Rainess smirked, secure in his delusions. "Other teams will find it and everyone will learn of your true origins, you freak."

"I've always wondered what your kind think would happen even if you came up with proof of your crazy theories." Shard crossed his right leg over his left as he relaxed against the cool wall.

"There are beings who were actually created living on some planets in Protected Space with full rights and recognition under Central Command's laws. As far as I can see there's no stigma associated with being created in a lab or even being a child of one who was created." Kaleb added fuel to the fanatic's temper deliberately. He wanted the man's true responses. While he was angry, he wasn't thinking of lies.

"They're abominations. Soon, everyone will see the truth about them, just as everyone will see the truth about you." Rainess glared at them. "You should be in cages, you're animals."

Shard laughed. "You're truly delusional."

"My curiosity has been satisfied." Kaleb stood and turned toward Shard. "We'll be sure to inform Command personnel of your intent to commit suicide when they arrive to retrieve you and your companions."

"If you make it through the trial, I think you'll find yourself exiled to one of the most isolated, primitive prison worlds. You might just discover what a real wild animal would do to you if it's threatened." Shard smiled, showing his sharp pointed canines.

"My friends will see that I don't face such humiliation," Rainess gloated with a triumphant smile.

"They might end your life, but the motive would be a far different one than you believe. They would want to ensure that you didn't try to trade information for a softer sentence." Shard turned and stalked toward the door. "In the end, their first thought would be to protect their own freedom. How will your family fare at their hands?"

Kaleb smiled as the man's face became solemn. He joined Shard at the door. "You'll be escorted back to your cell now, Rainess."

They walked to the room where they'd left Lina. She sat back in the chair, looking at the screen, a contemplative look on her face, but they could tell that she wasn't seeing the pictures flashing across it. Her mind was turning over what she had learned.

"I know that they believe that we hold the proof of their theory that the Santir were created. I can't understand how they came to that conclusion or how they thought they

could get into even a lightly defended camp and hope to leave with it." She didn't look at them as she spoke.

Shard wasn't surprised that she was aware of their presence. Every nerve ending in his body went on alert whenever she was near. It was nice to know that she was as affected as he was.

"The last was simply overconfidence." Kaleb strode over to her and held out his hand, waiting until she looked up at him and then winked at her.

She took his hand and stepped into his embrace. His arms folded around her and pulled her close to him for a moment. "And the first, what was that?"

"Ah, that." Shard smiled with amusement as Kaleb guided her over to the door. "That was because they'd been given some false information by someone they trusted."

Lina frowned in confusion. "Someone they trusted had given them false information? Did the informant within Vedix's camp turn on them when he was picked up by Central Command?"

"No." Kaleb pulled her hip up against his side. "You're looking for betrayal where there was none. It was a simple misconception."

Were they being deliberately difficult? Lina smacked him lightly on the stomach with her open palm. She glared up at him. "Stop teasing."

"But, *rah'ki*, it's such fun." Shard tucked his arm around her waist and a smile transformed the harsh planes of his face.

"Tell me or else." She stamped her foot. She felt silly afterward, but they could frustrate her more than she'd ever been before in her life.

"Or else what, *i'ma*?" Kaleb stepped forward and she was forced to go along with them.

"Or else, I'll think of something horrible and do it to two characters which resemble you and publish it and you can't sue me," she threatened with utter seriousness. "Under Santir law, a man can't sue his mate."

"Oh, but there are other things we can do to you to get even, wild one." Shard stopped, dragging her to a halt beside him. With a finger under her chin, he tilted her chin up so that she was looking into his eyes.

"It's simple to prevent it. Talk, you big tease." She wrapped a fist in Shard's white shirt and pulled. Not that it had much effect on the big man.

"For the sake of peace." Kaleb rolled his eyes. "Sometimes you two are just too much alike. The informant heard of your argument with Vedix when he was in our camp. He knew only that the object was important to us, not why."

She released Shard's shirt and glared up at him. "That wasn't hard."

"Want to know the rest?" Shard grinned down at her, totally unruffled by her ire.

"Shard, I swear..." She growled wondering what she could make him into that wouldn't be overly obvious. "I have never been so tempted to use a live person's image as I am right now."

"Ah, *i'ma*, do you think we'd let you publish anything with characters based on us?" Shard raised his brows. "Vedix was apparently very angry and not inclined to talk when he got back to his camp. His assistant knew which piece, but not why."

"And?" she prompted, determined to wring everything out of them.

"So the informant jumped to the conclusion that it was important because it was the proof they were searching for. In his mind, that was the only reason we would refuse to let them have it." Shard tucked his arm around her and directed her down the hall once again.

"The idea was solidified in his mind when he learned we were having all of them removed. With Vedix in an uncooperative mood, he had no idea of the true reason." Kaleb's fingers lifted a strand of her golden hair as they waited for one of the lifts.

"And the overconfidence." Lina pressed her palm over the crisp white shirt covering Shard's taut midriff.

She could feel the heat of his body, the sudden tensing of his muscles beneath her hand. In a slow glide, she ran her hand down to the cloth-covered ridge of his cock. She stroked her hand up and down over the firm rod. On a groan, his hips pushed into her hand.

"Lina..." Shard's hand gripped her wrist and pulled it away from the eager, aching flesh which throbbed and pulsed with the desire for more of her touch.

"Well, what was their plan?" She wriggled the fingers of the hand he held. She inhaled the heady scent of male desire and knew that they could just as easily smell her own. It would be as clear to them as if they could touch or see the creamy nectar spilling onto her thighs in a hot flood.

The lift arrived and the moment the doors opened, they almost shoved her into the privacy of its confines.

"Their plan was a simple distract and grab. Two men were supposed to keep the few guards in camp busy while the third ran in and found the vase, you little tease." Kaleb's hand patted her rear, the touch a little too firm for a tender caress.

"I wasn't teasing." She laughed, turning her hand in Shard's loose grasp. A broad smile tilted her lips as she tossed a wink up at Shard. "I was stroking you. Did it not feel good, *rao nari*?"

"*I'ma*, it felt wonderful." Shard ran the pad of his thumb over the underside of her wrist and watched the shiver pass through her body. "You aren't only a tease. You're a lying little tease. It's fortunate that we're here to reform you."

"I hear this from one of the two biggest male teases I've ever met." She leaned over and lightly nipped his upper arm through his shirt.

Shard gasped at the sting, his eyes flaring at the bold move. A growl rumbled in his throat. "The little cat wants to play, does she?"

Kaleb stepped behind her and bent his head. His teeth closed over the strong muscle at her neck and shoulder. Shard crowded in front of her and one of his hands dipped down, gathering her skirt to her waist. He slid his hand over her smooth mound, running his fingers around the swollen pink lips.

Lina moaned and her head tilted and dropped forward, giving Kaleb better access to that sensitive spot. Her muscles loosened and she shifted, widening her stance in encouragement, needing that hand to move to her clit or her slit. She wanted to have them in her, thrusting deep and she didn't care about the location. With a sigh, she grabbed Shard's free hand and drew it to her breast. His palm cupped the firm, round mound, wandering up over it before his fingers plucked at the hard nipple.

Without warning, Kaleb's mouth left her neck and he stepped back. Shard's hand drew away from her pussy, allowing the fabric to fall a moment before his hand rose from her breast. The lift had stopped and the doors swished open a moment later. They took a step toward the door and paused.

Drawing a deep breath, she followed into the giant shuttle bay. Her breasts ached and she was all too conscious of the empty need pulsing within her pussy. Damn it, two against one just wasn't fair.

Kaleb reached back and pulled her between them. He leaned down and his warm breath fanned over her ear. "Aren't you glad you know two such men, *i'ma*?"

Lina growled. There should be a law against doing this to someone. She would have to suffer at least through a shuttle ride to the surface before she could satisfy this ache.

Chapter Nineteen

Lina smiled as she saw Shard and Kaleb sitting at a table with the images spread out before them. Dressed almost identically, they looked dangerous in the brown shirts and brown pants. Other men had joined them there, trying to help them solve the puzzle. They worked on it every day after they'd searched for the Seal in the old Santir ruins. They hadn't made any progress on the puzzle, but so far they'd been good-natured about it. They hadn't pressed her for information or the answer.

"*Rao nari*, I feel like going for a run. Would you like to go with me?" She raised her brows and propped her hand on her hip as she stood at the end of the table. Since the lifting of the restrictions she'd taken a run whenever she had felt the need to be free of the camp.

"No, *i'ma*, we're anxious to get our apology from you. We'll stay here and work on this puzzle." Shard lifted his eyes from the image of one of the scenes.

"Some of the women might want to go." Kaleb barely looked up from his work.

"Nerisa might want to go." Avick sat across from Kaleb. "She mentioned that it would be a nice night for a run earlier."

Lina rolled her eyes, but gave in without an argument. What she'd wanted was a romp with her mates, but a run was still a good idea. The need to move through the forest in the body of the *tiron* coursed through her. She asked the women and six of them accepted the invitation. All went to their tents to undress and change forms.

Shard looked up from the image as Lina and six others streaked through camp and headed into the forest. His eyes fell back to the scene on the paper before him. He couldn't see any message in it. It was just a woman watching as a piece of pottery was being painted. His eyes took in the other scenes. The whole thing together looked like a simple, large vase to him.

Determination flowed through him. He would solve this. If she said the answer was there to see, it was there.

They'd tried to find some meaning in the scenes as a whole, but the images jumped from one scene to another and they weren't even certain which image was supposed to be first or if there was a first. There didn't seem to be a notable order to the scenes which had been painted in two rows on the large vase.

"Do you think Lina was as frustrated as we are before she solved this thing?" Kaleb tried placing the pictures in front of him in a different order. Although he had tried it before, he was getting desperate.

"I don't know. Was anyone in the camp in the artifact tent when she first saw it?" Shard looked around the table to see if anyone knew.

"Calla was there the day your Lady first saw it," Vador volunteered, turning the picture in front of him. "She's still in camp if you'd like to talk to her."

"Call her over here." Maybe knowing what Lina had done when she saw this would help them solve the puzzle. Shard picked up an image of one side of the vase and looked at it. The colors on the vase were surprisingly vibrant, the images detailed.

Vador went to get Calla. He returned with his petite, black-haired mate. She stood at the end of the table waiting for their questions.

"What did Lina do when she first saw the vase?" Kaleb looked up from the images and watched her face as he waited for her answer.

"She smiled, circled the table, and leaned close to look at it a few times. She laughed and rubbed her hands together, wearing a very satisfied look. Immediately, she took it off the table and carried it over to the corner where she hid it. After that, she didn't touch it again that day." Calla frowned at the memory. "Oh, and before she moved it, she took a light and looked into the vase."

"Into it?" Shard frowned. He had requested detailed images of the vase and they had taken a few of the inside of the vase. It was just smooth glazed pottery. There was nothing special about it.

"It sounds as if she knew almost immediately that there was something special about this vase." Kaleb moved a picture and frowned. "That means that she'd seen it before or... Shard, does this look like the symbol of Pryman to you?"

Shard took the image and looked to the decorative drawing around the scene. There amid the curling lines was the symbol of the Pryman, the first of the ancients in old Santir lore. It had sometimes been used to denote first in order in some of the old stories.

"That's Pryman." Shard handed the image back to Kaleb. "Now we need to see if any of the others hold the symbol for Saudane, Naushar, Retarin and so on."

Soon, they had the pictures spread out in an order far different from the one which was on the vase. A story unfolded before them. Now they merely had to figure out what it was telling them. At first glance, it wasn't clear.

"These two men in the first scene are just sitting in chairs all alone in a room." Avick frowned. "Could the meaning be symbolic?"

"They're the Ardin of a *thent*. Look, there's the symbol on the wall between their chairs." Vador pointed to the silver circle in the picture.

Kaleb had been looking at the second scene where the two men gave a woman a wrapped bundle. He scanned the wall between the two chairs in that scene. There was no symbol there. His eyes swung to the first scene.

"It's not in the second scene, Shard." Kaleb looked up and caught the near-black eyes across from him. "In the second scene, the Ardin are giving a woman a wrapped bundle."

"You don't think..." Shard's eyes scanned the pictures, excitement sending a rush of adrenaline through him.

"They would have known that it might be many years before any Santir returned here. They'd have wanted to be able to find it again when it was time. A sort of picture map would make sense." Kaleb moved on to the next picture, his excitement building at the thought of finding the symbol of their *thent*.

The woman had the packet in her hands. She was in a room with various pieces of pottery and a man stood nearby. They both appeared to be looking at a lump of clay.

In the next scene, the woman's hands were empty. She watched as the man pushed a piece of pottery into a kiln. Kaleb's eyes searched the tables and shelves for the packet. There was nothing in the image that resembled the bundle she had held.

"Do we have it out of order? Where is it?" Shard picked up the image to look at it more closely.

"It's the right image." Kaleb had already double-checked. His doubts had flared when he couldn't see the packet. "Maybe it will show the packet in one of the next scenes."

The woman stood to the side of a table now. A large piece of unglazed pottery sat on the table. A woman with an array of paint pots in front of her was looking to the woman at the end of the table. There was no sign of a packet in the scene.

The following scene showed the woman bending and pointing at a half-finished scene. The young painter looked to the woman as if listening to instructions.

The focus of the next scene was the mouth of the kiln as the paints were baked onto the pottery. The woman was to the side of the scene, standing near the man. Both of them seemed to be staring at the kiln.

The last scene showed the two Ardin and the woman near a table on which various sizes and types of pottery had been placed. The two men looked very satisfied as they gazed at the array of ceramics arranged before them. The woman's hands were spread, indicating the table and its contents.

"Does that large vase look familiar to you?" Shard pointed to the large vase amid the others on the table.

"It's the one the woman in scene six was painting. See there is the finished scene she'd been working on." Kaleb pointed to the detail on the vase.

"That I know, but look at the scene the woman was painting and the third scene on our images." Shard pushed the third scene toward Kaleb.

"They're the same." Kaleb sat back in the chair, frowning as he turned the matter over in his mind. "Why would they..."

"A better question is why our mate would let us waste so much time if this is the case." Shard growled as he stared at the images arrayed before him. Everything before him indicated that she'd been keeping a very important secret.

He stood and strode to the artifact tent. Picking up the large vase, he bluntly ordered the man brushing at a piece of mud-caked pottery with a delicate brush to bring the scanner. Shard left without another word. He carried the pot to the table and waited.

The scanner was primarily used to check for voids behind walls or beneath sections of floor, but it could do what they needed it to do. The handheld device was placed into Kaleb's hands. With a flick of his finger, he activated it.

He ran the device around the base of the vase in a slow sweeping motion. He lifted the scanner and waited as the image came onto the screen. He grimaced and handed the device to Shard.

The scan was clear. It showed a large metal disk sandwiched between two distinct layers of clay at the wide base.

"That little kitten has some explaining to do." Kaleb looked toward the spot at the edge of camp where Lina and the others had disappeared into the forest.

"Her run is over." Shard stepped forward and tilted his head back. A roar tore from his throat. He growled and began to pace as he waited.

"Come back now, woman."

The roar resonated in the early evening air. Lina's golden head came up and cocked to the side. The use of the word "woman" didn't bode well, although the tone held only demand. She grimaced.

She could think of only one reason for such a call and the reaction indicated that they hadn't taken her surprise in quite the way she'd hoped. Resigned, she stopped and jumped to the forest floor. She turned back to camp, but paused to tell those with her.

"I have to go back now." Lina looked back over her shoulder to the other *tiron* who had descended from the trees at the roared order. "Continue your run. I'll go back and face them."

"We'll go back with you." Medina trotted up beside her. "We're curious to find out what you've done."

"It's probably about that vase." Lina led the way at a run back toward the camp. "I don't think they appreciated the discovery as I intended."

She wasn't eager to arrive. She knew that Shard and Kaleb were probably furious, but there were times when it wasn't wise to push a man. *This being a perfect example*, she thought wryly. A delay would only anger them further and the two men were difficult enough without infuriating them. Lina entered the camp at a trot, heading straight for the tent.

"Lina..." Shard growled. The rumble in his voice carried no true anger.

Her head swung around and collided with his brown eyes. She couldn't quite read his mood in either tone or those dark, intense orbs. "I need to change."

Kaleb strode out of a gathered crowd of men and stepped up beside Shard. He held a folded blanket in his right hand. As her gaze alternated uncertainly between the tent and them, he raised a brow and then his hand. The blanket flapped in the breeze. With a last longing look toward the large tent, she turned and paced over to where her two men stood.

She wished for just a little time and the comfort of her own clothing. Without a word from Shard or Kaleb, she knew it wasn't going to happen. Kaleb stepped forward and knelt beside her. He wrapped the blanket around her. She shifted to human form.

Tucking the blanket under her arms, she wrapped it securely around her. She stood and pushed the wild tangles of honey-gold hair away from her face. She glanced up and saw that Kaleb now stood beside Shard. They were waiting for their explanation.

"You once again have some explaining to do." Shard's lips were compressed in a firm hard line. "Now begin."

Shard held up the round symbol, a shiny silver engraved disk. It was larger than his hand. The symbol was much bigger than the personal symbol Lina had found on Denao. That metal disk had been meant to be worn. This symbol was meant to be displayed in the home of the Ardin.

She looked past them and saw the pieces of the vase scattered across one of the tables. Her mouth dropped open in horrified amazement. "You didn't have to break it. There was a way to get it out without destroying a piece of history." Her hands slammed onto her hips and she frowned at them.

Shard smiled. She was so appalled by the destruction of the vase that she had forgotten to worry about their anger. "We would have smashed it much sooner if we'd known what it was. Why didn't you tell us?"

"You were looking for your symbol. I wanted you to find it," Lina explained earnestly. It was that simple.

"Why?" Shard tapped his hand on the leg of his brown pants. "I want a full explanation, not the simple version."

"I wanted you to have the satisfaction of solving the puzzle on your own. I wasn't going to take the thrill of discovering a piece of your own history from you. You'd been hunting it for years." She looked first at Shard and then at Kaleb.

"Come here, *i'ma*." Kaleb held out his hand.

The mask fell away from their eyes and faces. She saw the happiness, the amusement in their eyes. Stepping forward, she slid her palm into his large hand. His fingers curled around hers and he pulled her against his chest. He stroked his hand down the length of her back. She relaxed against him, her eyes closing in contentment.

"Open your eyes, Lina." Shard brushed his finger down the bridge of her nose.

She opened her eyes and blinked in confusion. The camp was gone. Her eyes widened as she recognized the haven they had created for her. Her eyes locked with Shard's dark gaze. A frisson of apprehension coursed through her. Surely they weren't going to punish her for trying to give them what they wanted.

"I didn't intend to make you angry. I thought you'd be happy when you found it." She reached out and ran her hand over the strong lines of Shard's dark face.

A smile kicked up the corner of Kaleb's lips as he stepped away from her. "We're not angry. There was a moment...but then we remembered the way you made sure that it didn't leave the camp, the way you challenged us to solve the puzzle."

"It never mattered to us who found it as long as it came to Karach Thent as it should." Shard hugged her against him.

"We weren't interested in the hunt, you see, *i'ma*." Kaleb pressed against her back. "The only thing that mattered was getting it, the end result."

Lina felt his cock pressing against her. She pressed her face against the material covering Shard's broad chest, inhaling his heady, masculine scent.

"*Rao nari*," Shard trailed his hands up the side of her ribs. She wriggled against him, raising her head. Her eyes flashed with suppressed laughter. "You were right about one thing. It did feel good to solve the puzzle."

"Now I think it's time for a lesson in just what we mean." Kaleb curled his fingers beneath the edges of the blanket, tugging it from her loose grasp and letting it fall to the ground.

Chapter Twenty

Shard smiled and stepped back.

Lina had no idea what they intended to do now. She looked from one dark, grinning face to the other. A predatory anticipation glittered in their eyes.

"Run, *i'ma*. Hide if you can." Shard's eyes ran over her golden body as he took off his brown shirt and tossed it away from him.

Her eyes ran hungrily over the rippling muscles of his chest as she took a step back. She wanted just a little more information before she ran. "In any form or just my human shape?"

"Take any form you want. We'll show you exactly what we mean about the hunt." Kaleb's fingers went to his belt, unfastening it and letting it fall to the ground.

A slow heat burned within her. She turned and dashed for the trees, shifting into *tiron* form as she ran. Springing into a tree, she raced along the branches with speed and grace.

She'd had plenty of time to explore this haven and she knew exactly where she wanted to go. She sprinted straight for a rock escarpment within the forest. She had no idea how much time they were going to give her, but she was certain that she could make it to the narrow passage before they caught up to her. They wouldn't be able to fit into that narrow passage, even in *tiron* form.

She leapt out of a tree and cried out in disorientation as her body was caught and spun in some invisible hold. The unseen net wrapped around her, tightening until she changed forms. She blinked trying to clear her spinning vision. Between one blink and the next, Shard and Kaleb stood before her. Both were naked, aroused and smiling with carnal intent.

"This is cheating," she accused laughingly as she was lifted by that unseen net and brought to hang in front of them, suspended standing, hovering just above the ground, immobilized and captive to their whims.

Kaleb chuckled as he circled her. "You still don't understand. Do you, love?"

"We have you." Shard's hand cupped her breast and his lips brushed over her cheek.

Kaleb's hand slid around her, stroked over her hip and slipped down to the silky folds between her legs. His fingers smoothed down, sliding between the swollen lips of her labia, briefly stroking her clit. They probed back, gliding through her creamy juices and into the hot clasp of her pussy.

"Fair, not fair, that's irrelevant." Shard dipped his head and nipped her lips. "All that matters is that you're here in our arms."

"The chase, the hunt, they're merely obstacles to be overcome to get you here. Your body between ours, that's what's important. *That* is all that matters." Kaleb stroked his hands up her body, leaving a slick trail to her breasts. His hands flicked at the hard tips. "The chase is thrilling, but it's the kill, or in this case, the fucking that brings real satisfaction."

"Would you rather be running through the forest?" Shard licked at her lips as his hands replaced Kaleb's. He plucked at her nipples, rolling them between his fingers.

"No." Lina wriggled closer, pressing her body against his hard muscled length. "I want you now."

"And you shall have us, but not here." Kaleb turned her in his arms. "Hold on to me."

She wrapped her arms around him. She closed her eyes and snuggled against the warm strength of his chest. A moment later, she felt movement, a tugging in her stomach and then felt soft cloth beneath her feet. She leaned back to see where they had taken her. The vines of the bower allowed dappled light to shine on the green and black silky coverings.

Kaleb drew Lina down to the bed. His hand slipped between her thighs and stroked over the glistening flesh. "You're so wet, and your scent..." He inhaled deeply. "It's driving me insane."

She rubbed against him and felt the thick ridge of his cock pressing against her thigh. "You're hungry." A sultry purr rolled from the back of her throat.

"He's not the only one." Shard loomed over her and pressed his cock against her buttocks. His tongue lapped at her neck and his teeth nipped at her shoulder.

Not the mark... She gasped and arched as heat streaked through her and her juices dripped onto Kaleb's cock. Shard moved back, giving Kaleb room. Kaleb urged her legs wider as she straddled him. He reached between their bodies and guided his cock into her pussy. Her hot sheath contracted around his shaft, pulling him deeper into her heat.

"So tight and hot," Kaleb groaned and pushed deep, pulling her more tightly to him, his hands parting her butt cheeks.

Shard traced a finger over the pink rosette. Lina's hips undulated and a shiver coursed through her body. Shard pressed the dark oiled head of his cock to the tight pucker.

"Push back for me, *i'ma*." Shard pressed into that tight muscular channel. A fiery pleasure burned him as he slowly pressed into her.

Lina pushed back, a purr rolling through her at the tight, full feeling when they were both hard and deep inside her.

"Fuck me," Lina growled when they remained completely still. Her eyes locked with Kaleb's amused gaze. She sank her nails into Kaleb's arms. "I need..."

"*Rah'ki*," Kaleb growled as his hips punched up against hers.

"Gods." Lina arched as Kaleb's driving cock sent a dagger of sharp sensation slicing through her.

Shard withdrew until only the rounded head of his cock remained in the clenching grip. Kaleb urged Lina to raise her hips and they began to rock her between them. She burned them with her response. She writhed between them, wild cries falling from her lips. Nipping kisses fell on Kaleb's chest.

"Yes, *i'ma*, move like that." Kaleb growled, his hands dragging her hips down to his. Her inner muscles clenched around his cock.

Lina's head went back and she bared her teeth as Shard drove into her while Kaleb withdrew. It felt so good. The feel of their bodies, the solid wall of muscle behind and in front of her, sent a thrill of heat through her. When she was in their arms, she felt so loved. Kaleb's hands left her hips and slid up to her breasts. With squeezing kneading motions, he lavished attention on the swollen, aching mounds.

"Harder," she demanded, driving her hips down.

A low rumble rolled through Kaleb's chest as he lost control, his hips grinding against hers. "So perfect...hot, tight...like a wet fist...yes, *i'ma*, take me like that, squeeze me."

Her hips rose. Shard's shaft thrust into her. She hissed at the piercing pleasure. The feeling where their cocks moved past one another was incredible.

"You're so responsive, *rah'ki*...so beautiful." Shard's hot breath fanned over her ear.

On the descending stroke, Kaleb's hands left her breasts and grasped her hips, his fingers digging into the flesh. He controlled the motion of her hips. She moaned as their strokes drove her close to her peak.

"Faster." Her voice broke as Shard's thrust drove her down into Kaleb's lunging hips.

The feel of them moving against her, the sound of their joining, the wet slurp and slap of their skin as well as the groans and purrs of her lovers enflamed her. Their scent surrounded her. Every inhalation pushed her desire higher, hotter. The world exploded around her. Racking shudders tore through her body as a deluge of pleasure crashed over her. Light exploded behind her lids. Shard and Kaleb continued driving into her. Each powerful thrust sent another bolt of sensation rocketing through her arching body.

Shard surged into her, slamming his hips against her buttocks as she cried out. He clamped his teeth lightly over her shoulder as he stroked into her. He came, a harsh purring growl ripping through his body as his seed sprayed into her.

Kaleb's hips punched up against hers. Her hips moved, accepting every thrust. He drove into her hard, blind to all but the need to come. He arched, his head fell back, his hips surging. He stiffened and came, spurting his semen deep into her pussy.

She lay between them, exhausted. She didn't move, merely lay there, relaxed against Kaleb's chest as Shard withdrew. He pulled her off Kaleb's warm body and she

roused enough to frown at him for disturbing her. Shard laughed at her disgruntled expression and grumbling as he settled her between them.

After a few moments, some of her energy returned. She sat up and moved down the bed so that she could see both of them and was not within easy reach. She was curious about a few things and now seemed to be a perfect time to ask. They were usually relaxed and indulgent after sex.

"You were really angry with me when you found the Seal?" She leaned forward and drew her hand across Shard's chest.

Shard captured her hand, drawing it up to his mouth to kiss the tips of her fingers. "If you had been in camp, you would definitely have felt the sting. It was a good thing that you were out of camp and we had time to think." He nipped her fingers.

Lina tore her fingers away from his loose grip and frowned at him. "Now that you've found your symbol, what are you going to do?"

Kaleb's fingers trailed across her hip. "That's easy to answer. We're going to take you home. The basic housing in the new *thent* on the other side of the planet is almost completed. We'll leave a small group here to continue cataloging and surveying the ruins. It's time for us to see to the future and strengthen our relationship and love."

Outrage vied with a strong sense of longing. If the Gods blessed them with children, she'd rejoice, but she really couldn't let them get away with such presumption. She frowned in a mimic of anger. "Fill it?" She raised a brow. "Maybe we could when I have time, but I'm very busy right now. I have two launches which will require my presence in Common Space as well as a new series that has been waiting for design to begin, and I really need some new underwear. Someone keeps tearing the ones I have. Maybe in the next decade."

"Now this is why having a *thent* and the support and guidance of wise experienced Ardin is a wonderful thing, my beautiful Lina." Shard reached over and took her hand and stroked it as if to soothe her. "You have nothing to worry you. Everything will be taken care of."

"Nothing needs to be taken care of. I'll just go to the two launches and while I'm there, get some new underwear." She frowned as if giving it serious thought. "The only thing that might take time is finding someone to help with the design end."

"We've assigned two people to go to Common Space and handle the product launches. As for the design problem, there are many men and women waiting to see if you'll allow them to design for you." Kaleb's hand slid over her thigh.

"And you already have enough underwear for three women," Shard added.

She pursed her lips to keep them from spreading into a wide smile. They could be such organizers that it was fun to throw something at them to mess with their plans. "Um, no, I don't think that will do."

Shard stretched up and his fingers trailed across her rib cage. Her lips twitched and she turned her body away from those teasing fingers. A gurgle of laughter burst from her lips as Shard and Kaleb pounced. She was tumbled onto her back and their fingers

danced over her ribs and stomach. Her laughter rang as their fingers roved over her body. She writhed and wiggled between them, trying to get away from those tickling digits.

"Please." She drew in a shaky breath, her stomach aching from laughter.

Their fingers drew back from the vulnerable flesh, but remained poised ready to inflict more torment.

"Tell the truth or..." Kaleb trailed his fingers over her stomach.

"I really want to get on with our lives. I was teasing." She tangled her fingers with the ones poised over her stomach.

"And the rest?" Shard's fingers walked up her ribs.

"I have no objection to meeting the men and women who want to design for me. I would have to see what they can do before I say yes or no. As to the launch..."

"We can't leave Nariu right now and there are bound to be other times in our life when it will be impossible for you to attend such events." Shard waited, clearly expecting an explosion of temper.

Lina eyed the two men watching her as if they expected her to rant and rave. They still had a few things to learn about her. She had wanted to attend the launch, for the most part, because she had gone to all those before. It wasn't something she felt was necessary or even worth arguing with them. She certainly wasn't going to pit herself against them for it. "What will you give me if I do things your way?"

Kaleb caught the wicked tilt of her lips. He leaned forward, pinning her right hand to her side using their tangled fingers. "Maybe I won't tickle you into compliance."

"You think threats will get you your way?" She arched her brow.

"We get our way because we are the Ardin. We're giving you a semblance of a choice because you're not accustomed to the way things are done in a *thent*." Shard raised a brow in supercilious arrogance.

She lunged up, not noticing that Kaleb's hand released hers. She hit Shard's chest and his arms wrapped around her, holding her tight against his body. His lips slanted over hers and his tongue drove deep into her mouth.

Growling, she savored his heady taste. She sucked at him. He pulled her hips more fully against him and rocked his pelvis against her, letting her feel his stiff cock. Hot male musk swirled around her, inciting her rising desire.

A hand sliding over her hip announced Kaleb's presence a moment before his warm chest pressed against her back. A trickle of cream seeped from her slit. Excitement flared through her. She loved being held by these two men and reveled in everything they did to and with her.

"You want us, *i'ma*." Shard nipped at her lips. "You love us. Admit it."

Her head came up sharply. She took a deep breath and then admitted, "Yes, I love you, but that doesn't mean you're getting your way."

"Occasionally, you need someone to tell you that you have enough to do. Right now is just such a time." Shard's tongue glided over her lips as if to soothe the tiny sting. "We both love, adore, very nearly worship you and are more than willing to take that job."

Lina's head fell to Shard's chest moved by his admission of love. "Why do I have a nasty suspicion that I'll hardly ever win an argument in this relationship?"

"It will keep life interesting for you, *nari*." Kaleb nibbled on her ear. "Ready to give over, Lina?"

"Or do we have to explore the realms of desire and laughter?" Shard's hand trailed over her rib cage.

"You two really need to remember how many pairs of my panties you've destroyed and I'm not going to mention the bras." She laughed and twisted between them. "Ah, well, since you are the Ardin, I'll let you continue to believe that you make the decisions."

"You little..." Their deep voices erupted simultaneously and fingers attacked her sides. She shrieked with laughter.

About the Author

Rebecca Airies has always loved to read. Futuristic, the classics, mystery or horror, the genre doesn't matter as long as the stories capture her interest and take her on an adventure. She soon discovered a love for writing and characters just waiting to tell their stories. Since that time, writing has become an obsession.

Rebecca lives in the heart of Texas. She loves the outdoors, growing things, and working on crafts when she's not lost in the worlds of her characters. Please feel free to write and tell her what you think; she'd love to hear from you.

Rebecca welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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