



Loose Id

THE TA'E'SHA CAESURAE

BITTER WINE

THEOLYN BOESE

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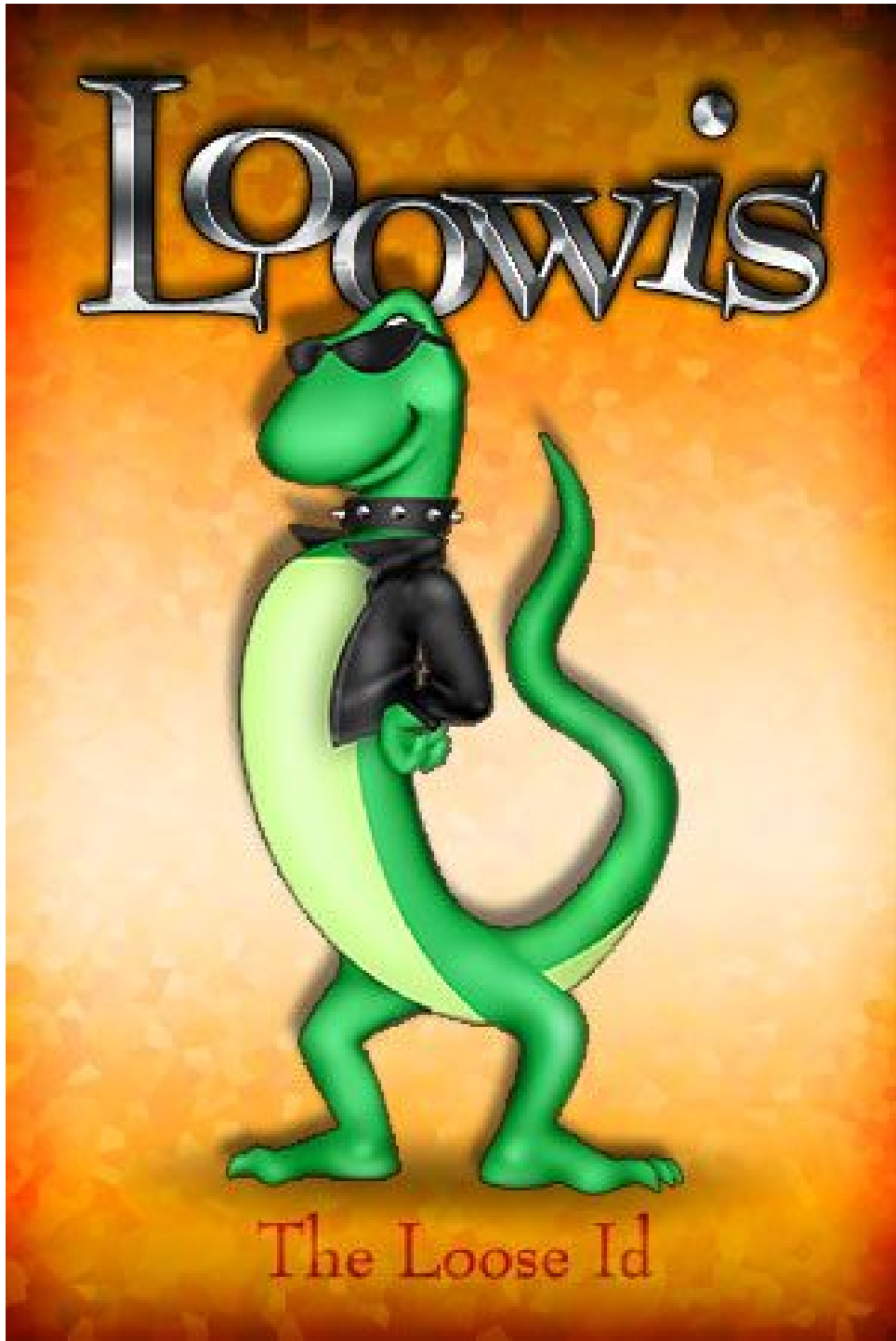
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Chapter One

Ruri stared at herself in the mirror. Her long black hair fell over her shoulders in a silken curtain, bone straight and heavy. Light golden brown skin glowed with health under the white rice flour makeup she had applied, but her black eyes were shiny with nerves.

She pulled her hair up into a ponytail and knotted it with a few deft twists before sliding ivory and jade hair sticks in to hold it in place. She inspected the results carefully. It looked good and sharpened her cheekbones. Not that they really needed it. Her whole body was sharp angles and muscles with only the slightest hint of soft curves.

Taking a tiny brush, she slowly painted her full lips with a red stain. Once she finished the small chore she shrugged into an ivory kimono with jade green embroidery. It had been a gift from her mother, passed down from her grandmother. They had hoped she would wear it for her wedding.

Ruri didn't remember her wedding. She had slept through it.

Over a year had passed since she had awakened to find a strange man leaning over her. He was strange in more ways than one. His hair was a pale rose-gold. She had no idea how much dye he had used to create that color and wondered a bit wildly if she had been kidnapped by a gay serial killer. His pale red-brown eyes were solemn as he watched her.

He had spoken to her in a liquid language she should not have been able to understand. “Hello, lovely blossom, I am Kiger. Your husband.”

The he had leaned down, lips puckering slightly.

He’s gonna freaking kiss me! she had thought hysterically. Not one to tamely accept anything, she had swung a fist, sending him stumbling back when it connected with his cheek.

And that had set the tone of their marriage. She had not handled being taken with good humor. Not that she was the most even-tempered woman to begin with. Polite people called her tempestuous.

Not so polite people called her bitchy.

Her husband had spent several months trying to reassure her and spend time with her. She realized now that he was trying to give her time to get to know him. However, his methods had made her feel like a hunted animal and filled her with a helpless rage that caused her to lash out, usually in a physical manner.

Kiger had suffered numerous bruises and a few broken bones in his quest to claim his wife. She had finally told him to leave her alone and go find someone else to screw.

His downcast expression had made her feel like she had just kicked a puppy, but she had hardened her heart to him and left the words hanging in the room. He hadn’t bothered her as much after that. Now it was as if they were roommates thrown together by necessity, and they barely tolerated each other’s presence.

Ruri didn’t like the person she was becoming, but she felt she was helpless to stop it. The anger festering in her heart drove her to hurt the people around her. It had taken her a very long time to understand that she wasn’t angry with Kiger so much as she was angry with her situation. The helplessness and vulnerability she felt spurred her to lash out at everyone around her.

Her first reaction to feeling scared or hurt had always been anger but, even now that she felt more in control and less vulnerable, the anger had become a habit and she didn't know how to break it. She had managed to alienate everyone around her except Thea. It was not a pleasant feeling to know the people around you barely tolerated you and only did so to make another person happy. If anything it magnified her loneliness, which in turn fed her bitterness and created a downward spiral.

After spending time on Ta'e with Sya'tia's family she had come to understand the Ta'e'sha better and learned more about their culture and habits. It had put a very different slant on Kiger's actions. What had made her feel stalked was actually his culture's courting customs. She had spent much of her time with Sya'tia's mother, Kokia, during that stay and had learned quite a bit from her.

Something about Kokia had soothed Ruri. Maybe it was that Kokia reminded her of her grandmother. Or, it could have been the instant acceptance by Sya'tia's family. Since Thea had introduced Ruri, Zinnia, and Cristabel, the other two witches who made up Ruri's small coven, as her sisters they were considered family and treated as such.

Between that acceptance and Thea's unflagging friendship she had something to hold onto. A foundation that had been missing since the day she had awakened to find Kiger leaning over her. It had given her time to catch her breath, and since they had no expectations about how she would act, she could be herself for the first time in a long while.

The other two witches were slowly warming to her and she was learning that she actually liked Sya'tia. Hell, she even liked Kyrin and Daeshen, Thea's husbands. They, on the other hand, were very wary around her after being the victims of her sharp tongue many times. It would take time before they relaxed around her. At least they were willing to give her another chance.

Thinking of second chances, she was hoping that Kiger would give her another one too. This evening, a week after returning to the ship, she felt ready to accept Kiger and spend

time with him. And, she hoped, find a man she wanted to spend the rest of her life with. She knew that she had a lot to make up to him and it was her turn to make the first gesture.

Carrying a tray holding tea and cups she walked with the careful mincing steps required to move in the kimono. Her cerebcom had told her that Kiger was in the bathing area and she wanted to serve him the tea and talk with him while he was relaxing in his bath.

The door slid open at her command and she entered with her head down to concentrate on not spilling the hot beverage.

A soft masculine gasp made her look up. Pain knifed through her heart when her husband slowly looked up from the man his arms and his prehensile hair were twined around. Dimly, she admired the man's dramatic, turquoise and pale green shaded hair and tail curling around her husband's rose-gold form.

Her shocked gaze locked with Kiger's. He lifted an eyebrow in slightly irritated inquiry. When his expression flowed from irritation to curiosity and settled into nervous bemusement she knew he hadn't recognized her at first.

"Ruri," he blurted out, trying to pull free of the man's lingering grip. "Is something wrong? I thought you were still at work."

"No, nothing is wrong," she replied through numb lips. "I left early because I thought we could spend the evening together." She carefully drew herself together. "But I see you already have plans." Her vision grayed out a little as she glanced at the man lounging in the water with her husband.

The man smiled in a cool but friendly manner and stroked his fingers down Kiger's chest. His skin had a faint bluish cast while his hair and tail seemed to absorb light and fling it back out like sunlight through a stained glass window. He was the most beautiful Ta'e'sha male she had seen. None of the others she knew had clear, glasslike hair and scales similar to

his. It was as if his gods had created him from the blue seawater of the Caribbean Sea. *I bet he'd make pretty babies*, she thought, feeling dazed.

Feeling like someone had hit her between the eyes with a brick, Ruri turned on her heel and quietly exited the room. She tried not to hear the hushed conversation that was taking place in the tub. The door slid shut, silencing the splashes and deep murmurs issuing out of the men's mouths.

Under the white makeup on her face Ruri's cheeks burned with humiliation. Tears stung her eyes and eased down her cheeks. She didn't stand a chance of making up with Kiger now, and it was her own fault, her words were coming back to haunt her.

With studied care she set the tray on a counter and untied the kimono so she could move easier. Once in her bedroom she slowly stripped off her clothing and scrubbed the now gooey makeup off her face with some of the towelettes she kept on her dresser. Then she carefully pulled on one of the black jumpsuits the Security personnel wore. It didn't have the badges and insignias that would mark her as a member of Security, and it was the best thing she could find to use as exercise gear. Next she pulled the sticks out of her hair and carefully put them away.

She had a vague thought of going to the gym to practice with her sword since it was something that always soothed her. Not that she held out much hope that it would help.

A knock on the doorjamb made her turn slowly.

Kiger stood in the doorway looking ill at ease. "Are you all right, Ruri?" he asked cautiously. Water dripped from his hair and rolled down his chest to be absorbed into the towel he had snugly wrapped around his trim waist. Like most Ta'e'sha his body was slender with the lean muscle that was developed from swimming often. Unlike most of his people his body shimmered all over as if had been sprinkled with ultrafine gold dust. It should have made him look feminine, but somehow he still managed to retain his masculinity.

“I’m fine,” she replied. Her voice sounded tinny to her ears. “I’m sorry I disturbed your” -- she paused and struggled to find something noncommittal to say about what she had walked into -- “festivities,” she finished lamely.

His worried expression hardened. “You don’t have any right to be snide!”

“I wasn’t --”

Kiger cut her off with a sharp jerk of his hand. “Nothing ever makes you happy does it?” He ran a hand through his writhing hair in agitation. “I can’t live like this, damn it!”

“I didn’t --”

He continued as if she hadn’t said anything. “I have tried so hard to make you at least *like* me. I wanted you from the moment I saw you and felt full of possibilities. But, you wouldn’t give us even a chance.” He stalked into the room and began pacing as he warmed to his subject. “You’ve hurt me physically, emotionally, and mentally since the moment you met me. I don’t know what you want, Ruri, but obviously I can’t give it to you. You told me to find someone else. So I did. I’m happy with Hadri and I have no intention of letting you ruin it for me. I give up. Live your own life and let me live mine.” He ran his hands through his wet hair again and sighed tiredly, his hair now drooping listlessly around his shoulders. “I’m so tired of the fighting. I understand that you can’t forgive me and that nothing I ever do will make things right between us. I can only say I’m sorry so many times.” He looked at her, both sad and hard at the same time. “I’m not going to try anymore. Just leave me alone.” Saying that, he turned and left the room.

Ruri staggered back and sat on her bed with boneless shock as his words hammered at her. Icy cold despair rolled through her in waves. She listened to him talk to his lover outside and then their voices faded.

Shrayne, her clouded leopard familiar, slinked into the room. “*What happened?*” she asked.

Shrayne's mind-voice always made Ruri think of wispy clouds floating across the sky. It had the same lazy, dreamy quality. But, she didn't think even it could soothe her this time. "I have to go, Shrayne. I'll talk to you when I get back," she said in that same tinny voice and stumbled out of the room. As she left their quarters she realized that her whole body felt kind of numb. It she was like she was drunk or not connected to it. Her vision had narrowed and taken on that strange quality that made it feel like she was looking at the world through glasses that weren't quite the right prescription.

She wandered down the corridors of the ship, not really having a destination in mind. Her hyperaware senses tuned in to the people she passed and she noticed how many of them seemed to shy away from her. *Have I been that bad?* she wondered. Each sidelong look scraped over her raw nerves, not that she could really absorb the sensation. Like everything else it had that distant quality. *It's like I cut myself,* she realized. *I know it's going to hurt horribly in a moment but all I can do is stare at the blood.*

Her cheek tingled and she reached up to swipe away whatever was causing the sensation. Her fingers came away wet and she realized that she was crying. *Oh, that explains some of the looks, I guess.* But, she couldn't really force herself to care so she continued to meander along the halls.

At last she arrived at the huge indoor forest that made up a large portion of the ship's recreation area. She gazed blankly at a seat made of a substance that appeared to be pink coral, carved and polished smooth. Slowly she sat down and stared at one of the smaller ponds in the rec area. The faintly green water lapped gently along the bank and was almost completely covered with floating flowers in delicate pink and lavender hues.

She folded her hands in her lap and tried not to think about anything. Not that it worked, she had never been able to completely blank out her mind. Thoughts always intruded or her body vibrated with the need to move. Thea had jokingly told her it was because Ruri had been born under a fire sign.

She gave up trying to clear her mind and just thought about what Kiger had said to her. She wasn't sure what had caused him to explode like that considering she had done much worse in the course of them living together. Something had apparently been the straw that broke the camel's back tonight.

The irony of it being the first time she had even attempted to make a friendly overture toward him was not lost on her.

Hours passed as she turned the events of the last year over in her mind like she was going through a book. A false dusk settled around the area as the computers simulated the sun's passage and still she did not move.

I'm turning into Daeshen's mother, she finally concluded painfully. *Thea was right. Chisha is a mirror of what I will become if I continue along the path I have stepped upon.* Chisha, Daeshen's mother, had been forced into an arranged marriage by her parents and, angry with them, she had made life miserable for her husband, Ma'ash. Finally Daeshen's father had given up on his wife and fallen in love with another woman, Larasin. When he had approached Chisha about asking Larasin to join them in marriage the fight was nuclear, from what Ruri had been told.

It had only ended when Ma'ash had threatened to leave his wife and live openly with his lover, which would have been a huge scandal for both families since divorce was not an option for the Ta'e'sha. Things had to be beyond horrible for one of the partners to give up so completely as to move out.

The end result had been Chisha living in an entirely different wing from her husband and wife, and the family's three children with a very skewed view of what marriage was like. It was a wonder they were as normal as they were.

Ruri hadn't believed it was that bad since Chisha had given birth to two children during the marriage. She had jokingly asked how they had kids if they never even spoke and Thea had replied, quite seriously, that Ma'ash and Chisha made appointments once a month

to have sex and that they had quit making the appointments the moment Fwa'twee, Daeshen's sister, had been born. The third child, Tre'nan, born between Daeshen and Fwa'twee, was Larasin's son with Ma'ash and Chisha barely acknowledged that he existed.

Her stomach churned as she thought about a future stretching out before her of monthly appointments so Kiger could coldly rut on her while he stared down at her with hatred. *I don't want to live like that*, she thought helplessly, staring blankly at the water while new tears tracked down her cheeks and dripped onto her folded hands.

Someone sat down next to her and she refused to turn and look at them, hoping they would go away and leave her to contemplate her sins in silence.

Several minutes passed as the presence next to her didn't move or speak. She listened to their quiet breathing and wondered why they didn't leave. Finally she slowly turned her head to see who it was.

Sya'tia sat next to her quietly watching the water. She was the last person Ruri expected to see. Sya'tia was yet another of the people Ruri had managed to piss off. Granted, Sya'tia was slowly warming to her but Ruri knew it would probably take a very long time before the Warrior Chosen forgave her for slapping Thea. So, why was she here? Ruri didn't think it was to gloat since Sya'tia wasn't that type of person.

Another tear dripped from her jaw as she studied the other woman.

Sya'tia finally turned away from the water to inspect Ruri's tear streaked face. "What happened?" she asked in her throaty voice. She twisted her body to sit sideways on the bench and lanced Ruri with the full impact of her pure black eyes. There was an expression of detached interest on her face, but Ruri was coming to understand that it was a mask Sya'tia wore around people she didn't know well.

Sya'tia's features were subtly different from the very human looking Ta'e'sha and her people had always treated her oddly because of it. Not badly, per se, but it was similar to how

humans treated someone who was mentally or physically challenged. Ruri didn't think about those differences often because she was used to them. It was just Sya'tia.

Ruri swallowed hard, looking down at the ground. "I tried to fix something and it blew up in my face." She wiped the moisture off her hands. "Just one more fuck up from the queen of them."

"Huh," Sya'tia replied thoughtfully and Ruri looked back up at her. "Must have been a really good one. I don't think I've ever seen you cry. What did you do?"

Ruri scrubbed her cheeks. "I took some tea into the bathroom because I wanted to spend some time with Kiger. I thought, maybe, he would give me a second chance."

Sya'tia nodded solemnly.

She gulped down a fresh wave of tears and her chest jumped from a swallowed sob. "He was with someone."

The skin over Sya'tia's cheekbones tightened. "What?" she asked in a deadly voice. The Ta'e'sha had severe punishments for what they considered adultery. It wasn't adultery to take a lover if one's mates didn't object, but usually they wanted to meet the potential lover first before deciding to give their permission. To have sex without that permission, however, was considered adultery and had many social and legal consequences.

Ruri continued, "We got into a fight a few months ago and I told him to find someone else to fuck. But, I didn't know he actually had."

Sya'tia winced. "Wow, that was really awful of you, Ruri."

Ruri sniffled loudly. "I know." Now that she knew more about the Ta'e'sha she understood that she had basically told her husband she could care less about him and if he died she would dance on his grave. By her telling him that she didn't care whom it was he was having sex with and not being even remotely interested in meeting them was a huge, and very hurtful, insult to Kiger.

"It's not very much fun to live with the results of your actions, is it?" Sya'tia asked quietly after several more minutes of silence.

"I don't need a lecture right now, Sya," Ruri replied in a watery voice. More tears burned down her cheek and she scrubbed them away. "What are you doing out here anyway? It's pretty late for you."

Sya'tia shrugged gracefully. "Thea kicked us out of our quarters. She said she wanted to be alone to contemplate her navel."

Ruri blinked.

"I think she's just cranky. She caught some sort of stomach flu and the guys are driving her nuts fusing," she continued, pulling a knife out of somewhere and checking the edge. "Wanna spar?" she asked suddenly as she tucked the knife away. Sya'tia's cure for everything was exercise.

Ruri shrugged listlessly. "Sure."

Sya'tia slid off the bench and tugged Ruri up by the wrist. She paused for a second before hesitantly hugging Ruri. "It'll be okay," she whispered.

Ruri sniffled and returned the hug convulsively. "Thank you. I didn't think you even liked me."

The taller woman released her and stepped back. "Most of the time I don't," she said artlessly. "But you're growing on me." She grinned mischievously. "Kinda like mold. Gods know you're soggy enough to grow some right now."

Ruri barked out a watery laugh. "Gee, thanks."

Sya'tia snickered. "You're welcome."

The women meandered toward the door, neither feeling the need to rush to the gym. They didn't speak, but for once the silence was a comfortable one. Ruri wondered absently what had caused the change. Sya'tia seemed different tonight.

A flash of blue caught her attention and she idly glanced to the side. A gasp wheezed in her throat.

“What’s wrong?” Sya’tia asked in concern.

“That’s him,” Ruri hissed at her from the side of her mouth, staring at Hadri, who was digging industriously at the base of a bush with a small trowel-like tool.

“Him who?” Sya’tia looked completely lost as she inspected the man Ruri pointed toward.

“Kiger’s boy toy!”

Hadri turned just then and his gaze locked with Ruri’s. He smiled tentatively as he got to his feet and waved.

“Really?” Curiosity filled Sya’tia’s voice. “Uh, are you sure? That’s Hadri Velaan.”

Her eyes still locked with his she nodded. “I’m sure. Kiger called him Hadri.”

Sya’tia hummed softly in surprise.

Ruri tore her eyes free and looked at her. “What?”

The taller woman looked uncomfortable. “Nothing.”

“Tell me!”

“Well, he’s been on the ship for about ten years now,” Sya’tia said reluctantly. “And the High Priests date more than he does. In fact, I don’t think I’ve ever heard of him taking a lover.”

“Really?” She turned back to stare at him again. He smiled uncertainly again and started walking toward them. “He’s coming over!” she squeaked out. He pulled off his gloves and tucked them into a pocket with his gardening tool.

He came to a stop in front of them and offered his hands in the traditional Ta’e’shian greeting. “*Kya* Osan, *Kya* Takashi, may I introduce myself? I am Hadri Velaan.”

Ruri stared at him, feeling like a mouse hypnotized by a snake.

Moments passed and he started to look distinctly uncomfortable.

Sya'tia dug an elbow into her side and she jumped. "What?"

The taller woman let out a long-suffering sigh and extended her hands to stroke them along Hadri's. "It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, *Kye Velaan*." She slid a sidelong look full of meaning at Ruri.

Ruri quickly ran her hands along Hadri's arms, removing her hands before she reached his skin. She really had no desire to hold hands with the man who had been touching her husband so intimately just a few hours before. Even if he was the sexiest bastard she'd seen in eons. "Nicetomeetyou," she mumbled. The man was a freaking giant! He stood at least a foot and a half taller than her small four feet nine frame. Strangely, she wasn't intimidated because it didn't feel like he was looming over her.

"I'm so happy to finally meet you, *Kya Takashi*. *Kiger* has told me so much about --" He stuttered to a stop.

Ruri schooled her face to impassivity. She had a good idea what *Kiger* had told him about her and didn't want him to know that his words hurt her. "Unfortunately, I cannot say the same, *Kye Velaan*," she murmured.

He looked alarmed. "He said you gave him permission to take a lover."

Sya'tia mumbled something under her breath. Ruri ignored her. "That is correct, *Kye Velaan*. I just was not aware that he had done so. Therefore, I must apologize for intruding on the two of you this afternoon." The words threatened to choke her.

His anxious expression didn't change as he inspected her face. "I see." He tucked his hands into the sleeves of the robe he was wearing over a jumpsuit. "No apology is needed. I would ask that you join me for dinner this evening so that we could learn of each other and discuss our arrangement?"

Yeah! Cuz I really wanna have dinner with the guy who's banging my husband! she thought wildly. *Is this guy smoking crack?* "Deepest apologies, *Kye Velaan*," she said

smoothly and bowed slightly, “I have other plans this evening. Kya Osan and I are going to the gym to spar. Perhaps another time?” *Like when I’m dead?*

Sya’tia broke in, “Oh, you know, I have to go home, Ruri.” She smiled angelically when Ruri spun to glare at her. “Thea just commed and she wants to talk to me about something. Can we reschedule?”

Ruri glared at Sya’tia. She had a pretty good idea that Sya’tia had not received any such message. “Oh, really?” she said from behind clenched teeth. “That’s too bad.”

The wretched woman grinned wickedly, not in the least intimidated by the daggers Ruri knew were shooting out of her eyes.

“Wonderful! Please come with me, Kya Takashi. I’m so pleased to have this opportunity to spend time with you.” He took her by the elbow and started towing her toward the door, his deep voice vibrating down her spine in tingling waves as he continued to express his pleasure in formal tones.

Ruri cast a desperate look at Sya’tia over her shoulder.

Looking gleeful, Sya’tia waved and blew her a kiss. *Bitch.*

Chapter Two

She sat at a table staring at a plate of perfectly prepared sashimi and wondered how she had gotten herself into this situation. Because she couldn't think of any other woman in her acquaintance who would willingly eat dinner with her husband's lover and attempt to be sociable.

Although she thought her teeth would break from the force with which she was grinding them together in an effort to stay civil.

"I have become very interested in Japanese culture recently," Hadri was saying in that sinfully deep voice of his. She could feel it all the way to her nipples, which tingled with delight. "I wanted to speak with you about it, but Kiger insisted you are American, not Japanese."

His tone was friendly but Ruri was very aware of the wary alertness in his gaze. It had appeared not long after they had left Sya'tia's company. *He knows how upset I am*, she realized with a start. Several small things clicked into place. Why he had brought her to one of the human restaurants, the gesture of traditional food and the careful way he had brought Kiger up. *I thought he was oblivious to me not wanting to come but he's very aware of it.*

“My parents immigrated to America before I was born but I was raised in a fairly traditional household,” she replied cautiously, watching him closely.

A hint of emotion she couldn't decipher flashed across his face so quickly she would have missed it if she hadn't been looking. She grew even more uneasy about eating with him.

“May I pour your tea, Kya Takashi?” he asked with careful politeness.

“You may,” she replied with the same rigid formality. She suspected that he was much more intelligent than the people around him gave him credit for and she couldn't think of a good reason why someone would disguise themselves in that way.

His motions were graceful and solemn as he filled the small handleless cups with green tea. He waited until she had picked hers up and sipped before touching his own. He cradled it in his large, long-fingered hands and inhaled the steam meditatively. “There seem to have been many misunderstandings between you and Kye Takashi,” he observed, taking a slow sip of the hot beverage.

Ruri jerked slightly and quickly set her cup down. It was Ta'e'sha custom for men to take their wife's name, as they were a matrilineal culture, but it was the first time anyone had referred to Kiger using her last name. “Yes,” she agreed. “May I prepare the wasabi, Kye Velaan?” It was an obvious attempt to change the subject and the way his sharp gaze seemed to absorb every facet of her expression warned her that it hadn't worked.

“Please do. I have not yet tried this food and do not know the way.” He seemed willing to let her wiggle out of the conversation for now.

She picked up the black lacquered chopsticks the waitress had brought with the food and pinched off a generous portion of the green paste and dropped it into a tiny bowl. It was tempting to drop the whole ball of wasabi in and set his head aflame with the first bite but she resisted the catty gesture. Mostly because she would have to eat it too. She poured soy sauce over it and mixed the two together until there were no lumps left and the black liquid had turned an odd shade of green brown.

The waitress returned and set down another plate, this one covered with a variety of rolled sushi. "I did not know your tastes so I ordered many kinds," Hadri replied, awkwardly picking up his chopsticks and attempting to mimic her smooth, confident motions.

Several minutes passed as she ate and watched him struggle with the unfamiliar tools. Finally she couldn't stand it any longer. "Would you like some assistance, Kye Velaan?"

Subdued frustration tightened the corners of his mouth. She wondered if it was the sticks or her insistence in calling him by his last name. "That would be welcome, Kya Takashi." Obviously their little game of formality would continue. She would have enjoyed it if she hadn't been playing with her husband's lover.

She set her chopsticks on their small ceramic rest and reached across the table to show him how to position his hands. The moment their hands touched she froze as emotions and sensations cascaded through her. Desire, interest, and muted tenderness flooded her. She felt a subdued tendril of arousal curl through her loins and all of the emotions were threaded together with anger.

Her gaze collided with his and cool satisfaction made his teal eyes glimmer as a feeling of smug triumph flowed across the link between them. She jerked her hands away from his, breaking the link.

A small smile played at the edges of his mouth as he expertly picked up a sushi roll with his chopsticks, dipped it into the wasabi mixture and guided it to his mouth.

She watched mutely as the pink tip of his tongue flashed out to catch a drop of the sauce after he finished chewing and swallowing the bite.

"Excellent," he all but purred locking his gaze with hers as he dipped and ate another bite.

He just wanted me to touch him, she realized. Thinking about her initial greeting she remembered that she had stopped just short of touching his skin. She watched him continue to eat as if he had been born with chopsticks in his hands and felt the familiar anger unfurl in

her. *He played me for a fool.* She tamped down the urge to slap the arrogant little half smile off his face.

“Do you believe in love at first sight, Kya Takashi?” he asked idly as he sipped from his cup.

Ruri jerked as if struck. Whatever she had been expecting him to say, that wasn't it.

“I fell in love with Kiger the moment I saw him,” he continued blandly as his intense stare never wavered from her face. “But all he could talk about was a human wife. I knew a life with me could never compare to the possibility of having children.” He sipped more tea. “So I waited. When he chose you I bribed the medic to add my DNA to yours and his when the procedure was done.”

She reeled, her hands going to her stomach where a sick knot was forming. *Could this day get any worse? No, don't answer that. I'm sure it could.* The food she had just eaten churned in her stomach and threatened to make a rapid reappearance.

“Gods know what I was thinking. I suppose I was hoping to become your lover as well if you both accepted me, perhaps even husband eventually.” He carefully set the cup down. “I hated you when I saw what you were doing to him.” His voice still hadn't changed and she found the conversational tone disconcerting.

She swallowed hard, unable to look away from him. It shouldn't surprise her that he hated her but for some reason it did. She supposed that there were a lot of people who hated her.

“Then I started watching you.”

She wasn't sure she wanted to know why he had been watching her. Hate and watching weren't two things that went together for any good reason. Usually they culminated in a foreign object being embedded in one of the participant's bodies.

“And then I realized that there was more going on between the two of you than anyone else realized.” He seemed to be oblivious to her turmoil but she knew that was a

fallacy. He knew exactly what he was doing and what she was feeling. She wondered if Kiger had any idea what his lover had been up to. Somehow she didn't think so since it wasn't Kiger's style to be sneaky. He was too transparent to pull it off.

She also knew that there was no way she would be able to separate the two of them. Hadri was determined to not lose his place in Kiger's life and anything she said to Kiger would be misconstrued and probably make the whole situation worse. She then realized that Hadri was probably going to move in with Kiger and she would have to face him every day, and from the sense of anger she had gotten from him it would never be pleasant.

So, this is going to be how it is from now on? Despair threatened to overwhelm her again. She shoved back from the table and turned to leave. Deserve it or not she had no intention of sitting there and letting him play with her.

"Ruri."

She froze but didn't turn back to him.

"Kiger isn't the only one I want." His deep voice thrummed through her like electric shocks.

"So you can make me spend the rest of my life being punished for hurting Kiger? No thanks, Kye Velaan. I hope you enjoyed your little game. I didn't." She staggered unsteadily from the restaurant, her arm curled protectively around her seething stomach.

Hadri sighed and paid for the meal before standing to leave. No, he hadn't enjoyed his game, but then, it hadn't been a game to him. It had been a declaration of intent and now he was wondering how badly he had screwed up. She was much more complicated than he had thought. He had arrogantly assumed that if he could just get her to touch and link with him it would make everything clear to her. Instead it had further muddied the waters. The pain and anger that poured off her was staggering. He had felt her grasp his own lingering anger and paint it into everything else she had felt from him.

She was expecting anger, he realized, and once she found it nothing else mattered because it matched how she already feels about herself. Now he had made it even harder to convince her that he wanted her for herself and not just as a way to be with Kiger. Or punish her for her actions.

Initially he *had* decided to pursue her so he could have Kiger, but it hadn't taken him long to realize that he wanted her as well. She drew him to her like a moth to flame. Some instinct, some faded memory he couldn't quite grasp gave him little tidbits of information about her. It was little things, like knowing that she loved bumblebees and hated spinach when he didn't even know what they were. And yet he did. Sometimes, when he dreamed, he would feel her touching him with phantom hands. He *knew* how it felt to make love to her, even though he had never touched her before tonight. He remembered conversations that never happened and how her eyes would sparkle during an argument. Maybe he should start paying more attention to those wispy thoughts and dreams.

He just didn't understand where all the anger was coming from. It dwarfed anything he had felt from the other human women. The force of it made him wonder how she could function at anything resembling normalcy. It was a virulent, seething poison inside her. The sweet, honey-flavored taste of her venom shocked him. Turning that vindictiveness over and over in his mind he realized how closely Kiger had come to being killed by his tiny wife. It would not have taken much to push her that final step.

He arrived at his quarters and poured himself an alcoholic beverage to sip as he continued to explore the emotions he had gleaned from his brief taste. A warm soothing gray-blue flavor had cocooned the fiery red heat. It was slowly soothing the jagged edges of her anger and, from the amount of energy he saw, it had been working on them for several months. *A soul healer has been working with her,* he deduced. The energy had a feminine feel to it and brought to mind the taste of deep, cold seawater. It wasn't like anything he had felt before. Both Ruri and the unknown woman felt elemental; therefore it wasn't one of his people. The two energies worked together and dueled at the same time. *It's like a spirit rain!*

He sat up and paid more attention to his meandering thoughts. The fire that was Ruri heated the other woman's water energy, but instead of dissipating as it would normally it condensed and fell as rain, cooling the fire only to repeat the cycle again. *That's brilliant!* He was in awe of the mystery lady's talent.

He was a touch empath, able to send and receive emotion. It was far different from what he saw here. This was changing emotion without damaging either person. Over time it would give the person being healed the ability to change the emotion themselves.

Which told him why Ruri seemed different. It also gave him fresh hope and he eagerly sought the source of her anger. He delicately separated the despair emotions and absorbed their flavors. An unbelievably strong sense of loss, heartbreak, and loneliness sent him reeling and he fell to his knees retching violently. Shuddering, he turned away from the vomit and panted weakly. *Oh, poor little love. What have we done to you?* Shivering, he sent a command to the housekeeping drone to clean up the mess and plotted out his next move.

Kiger looked up from his book when his wife slipped silently into the living room. Her normally golden skin was tinged a greenish yellow and large dark circles stood out prominently under her glassy black eyes.

He stood in concern. "Are you sick?" He had been waiting for her to come back so they could talk again.

Ruri's gaze skittered across him and she sidled past like a beaten animal. "No, I'm fine," she said hoarsely and darted into her bedroom. The door slid shut with a small whoosh of displaced air behind her.

He stared at the door with helpless anger. Nothing he did seemed to get through to her and even though he was tired of trying he found himself constantly returning for more.

He had fallen in love with her the moment he had seen her. She'd been having coffee in the same shop as one of the other women scheduled to be taken. She had been so beautiful and bright as she talked animatedly with another woman. They had been pointing at a blurry black and white photo and hugging each other. Entranced, he had watched her for hours as she left the other woman and went shopping for baby clothes. That had alarmed him until she had asked the sales girl to gift wrap them.

Kyryn, the ship's captain, and several others had tried to talk him out of choosing her. They had a list of reasons, but at the top was her family. This wasn't a woman who could just disappear. She would be missed. Second was that her personality profile did not show someone who would easily fit into his culture or way of life. But none of that had mattered to him. He had to have her. He wanted to be the one those bright eyes smiled at. He wanted those baby clothes to be for their baby.

He got Ruri, but the beautiful woman he had fallen in love with had died. Left behind was the woman he was married to. The only smile she had was malicious. Her tongue could cut stone and she hated everything with a vicious intensity that stole the air from his lungs.

And the hardest part was realizing it was his fault.

A com from Hadri interrupted his brooding thoughts. "*Hey.*"

"Greetings, Kiger. Could you send me Ruri's file?"

Suspicion formed a cold ball in his belly. "*Why?*"

"I want to check something."

"That file contains very personal information about my wife, Hadri; it is not public reading to soothe your curiosities."

"Fine. I'll ask her then." His lover's mental voice had cooled considerably.

"Stay away from Ruri. She has nothing to do with us."

"Oh, that is not true and you know it," came the silken reply. *"She has everything to do with us."*

“*What have you done, Hadri?*” He felt a tendril of dread curl through him. Hadri always seemed to have plots within plots spinning in his head, and he rarely did anything without a reason.

He sometimes questioned the wisdom of asking him to be his lover. He probably wouldn't have if he'd know what a manipulating creature the other man could be. He smiled wryly. *Like I had much choice. Hadri made it clear that he wanted me even before I started hunting for a wife. Wonder what he would have done if I hadn't chosen him?* It probably had something to do with Hadri's abilities as an empath. They were all a touch manipulative in some fashion. They couldn't seem to help it.

Hadri abruptly cut the communication off and Kiger frowned, wondering what his lover was up to now. Did he have something to do with the way Ruri had looked when she came home? He combed Hadri back to ask, but the other man didn't answer. With a growl of frustration he stomped into the kitchen to prepare dinner. Maybe if he made Ruri's favorite meal he could coax her out of her room and they could talk civilly.

He regretted the words he had spoken this afternoon and wanted to apologize. He was also curious about what she had wanted to speak with him about. At the time he had been feeling guilty about the look of shock on her face when she had seen him with Hadri and had lashed out in defense of his actions.

He quickly put together the ingredients for the meal and set the table while the food simmered. Once everything was prepared he went to her door and tapped lightly. There was no answer so he tapped again. A minute passed and he became concerned. It wasn't like her to hide. Even at her angriest she answered the door, if only to yell at him again. He ordered the computer to open the door and slipped in cautiously.

She was curled in a fetal position in the middle of her bed. Worried she was sick he quickly approached her. She was hugging a pillow to her middle and, from the red streaks marring her cheeks, had cried herself to sleep. He carefully eased his body onto the bed so he didn't wake her. A lock of her inky black hair had escaped her ponytail and fallen across her

nose and he tenderly smoothed it away from her face. Tears continued to leak from her closed eyes and the sight of them hit him in the gut like a fist. He had never seen his wife cry and he had to wonder what caused it now.

She mumbled in her sleep and rolled onto her back, dislodging the pillow. Several photos and pieces of paper fell out. She had been sleeping with them wedged between her body and the pillow.

Curious, he gathered them up to see what they were. The first was a photo of her family. It looked like it had been at some sort of summer gathering. He had to smile at the joy on her face as she stood behind an older man with her arms curled around his neck and her cheek resting on his head. A younger man stood behind her posed to slap her ass. A wide grin split his face and a tall blonde woman was laughing and trying to pull him away.

He remembered from her file that she had two older brothers. Smiling, he set the photo aside. *That must be one of them*, he thought to himself. The next paper was made from a curious slippery paper and he recognized it as the picture she had been looking at the first time he had seen her. Twisting his head he tried to figure out what it was. Finally he gave up and checked the ship's computer. It sent back that it was an ultrasound photo of an unborn baby. He realized the woman who had been with Ruri that day was the blonde in the photo of her family.

Checking her file again he discerned the woman was married to Ruri's youngest brother. A tender smile crossed his face. *Ruri is an aunt. How exciting!* He loved children and desperately wanted his own. Then he realized that Ruri would never meet her niece or nephew and his smile slowly faded away.

The next paper was actually a card of heavy cream paper etched with gold bells and silvery doves. He opened it and read the inscription. It was a wedding invitation and the man's name on it was her oldest brother's.

A folded note on blue stationery fell out. He opened it and read:

%%Hey Ruri Baby!

Only three more months until I am MRS. TAKASHI!!! Thank you for agreeing to be my maid of honor. It's only fitting since you introduced us! I can't wait until we are really sisters. That's almost the best part. We have gown fittings next Thursday and I know you and Shannon will look fantastic!

Now we just have to get you married off too. (hehehe)

Love You,

Kaelyn%%

There were more photos of her family and he looked at them, smiling at how happy she appeared in them.

The last paper was a letter from the United States Forestry Service. He scanned it quickly. It was a job offer. She would have started a week after she had been taken.

He gathered everything together neatly and set it on the table beside her bed and quietly left the room. He could understand her keeping the photos and invitation but wondered why she had the letter. It's not like one job was any different from another. They were just a way to support a family, weren't they? At least that was all his job meant to him.

The stack of photos and papers was a reminder of just how much he had taken from her. Guilt made his chest tight and he trudged wearily into the kitchen to eat. *It's no wonder she's bitter. I should have listened to the captain. Both of us would probably be happier.*

He ate his dinner in silence as he once again attempted to decipher the puzzle his wife presented. His neck pricked as the sensation of being watched stole over him; he paused eating to look around. Ruri's cat was staring at him. He shivered turning back to his meal. That cat made his skin crawl at times. So did Ruri's attachment to it. He had heard her talking to it on several occasions. Listening to those one-sided conversations had sent cold chills down his spine. He would have hauled her off to the medics if he hadn't seen Thea,

Zinnia, and Cristabel talking to their respective cats the same way. Maybe it was some strange human custom. It still bothered him, though.

He could feel that unblinking stare boring into his back and he hunched his shoulders. The udon noodles stuck in his throat and he finally gave up trying to eat. “Why do you always watch me, cat?” he muttered under his breath.

“Because you interest me,” came a soft reply in his mind.

He spun around and almost fell out of his chair. “You can talk,” he croaked out.

The cat lay down and curled her paws under her chest. “*Yes.*”

He stared at her in disbelief. “Why haven’t you said anything before?” he asked, still not really believing that he was going to be answered.

“You have never spoken to me before,” was the simple reply.

“Oh.” He groped for something else to say. “Do all of you talk?” He was referring to the other cats that had appeared on the ship.

“Some of us. Only nine were blessed by the Lord and Lady.” The cat pulled a paw free and licked it daintily. When she finished she went back to staring at him. “*Oh, what a tangled web we weave,*” she said at length.

“I do not understand, Kya.” He frowned. “We have weaved nothing.”

The cat chuffed softly and he felt her gentle amusement. “*It means that you and Ruri have made a right mess of things.*”

He flushed with the beginnings of anger. “What do you know of it?” he challenged, wondering what his wife had told the feline.

“Quite a bit, actually,” she replied mildly. “*I watched the two of you for some time before Ruri knew I was here.*”

That took the wind out of his sails. “Oh.”

She sprawled lazily on her side and yawned, exposing the long, sharp teeth of a born predator. *“It’s neither here nor there at the moment, though. I merely wanted to let you know you could speak with me if you wish. I thought, perhaps, you could use someone who understands humans and their customs since you seem woefully ignorant of both.”*

He blinked, trying to decide if he had just been subtly insulted. It was hard to tell because Shrayne’s voice was so gentle and soothing. “You think I am ignorant?”

“Oh, you’re not stupid,” she assured him. *“But you only apply your intellect to things that interest you. And the moment Ruri was brought here she ceased being human to you. She became Ta’e’sha and you seem to think she would act like one.”* The cat sneezed delicately. *“It doesn’t work that way, my dear.”*

Kiger glowered as he filled a bowl with udon noodles and broth and set it down on the floor.

The cat sat up in surprise. *“Why, thank you.”* She ate carefully and with obvious enjoyment.

He tamped down his instinctive denial, and thought about her words. Maybe she was right. He tried to recall any conversations about Earth he’d had with people and couldn’t remember them in anything other than the vaguest terms. “You have given me much to think on, Kya Shrayne.” he finally said.

She looked up from her bowl and cat-grinned. *“There is no need for the Kya, Kiger. Simply calling me Shrayne is more than enough.”*

He smiled tentatively. “Very well. Shrayne, then.” He gathered the now empty dishes and took them into the kitchen. When he came back out the leopard was gone, so he went to his bedroom to mull over her words.

* * * * *

Ruri cracked her neck and yawned as she made her way to the kitchen to grab a slice of toast before she left for work. *I think I'll stop by Shana's coffee shop on my way. It's a triple shot morning.* She didn't drink coffee in the morning often and certainly didn't have Thea's fixation on the beverage, but she was feeling very muzzy-headed this morning and hoped coffee would lift the fog.

She came to a stop when Kiger backed out of the kitchen balancing two plates loaded down with what looked like vegetable omelets and the blue Ta'e'shian seaweed he liked for breakfast. Both items steamed enticingly.

He smiled hesitantly when he saw her and slid the plates onto the table. A pot of his favorite tea and eating utensils were already placed on it.

She warily eyed the food, "What's this? Is Hadri joining you for breakfast?"

He fussed with the *vaton*, a Ta'e'shian combination of knife and fork, at one setting. "No. I thought we could have breakfast together this morning."

"Oh. I was just going to have toast and coffee," she said uncertainly. "But, this is fine," she quickly added when he seemed to sag.

He perked right up when she slid into a chair. He sat across from her and poured them each a cup of tea. "I'm sorry for my behavior yesterday, Ruri."

She shrugged and picked up the *vaton*. "It's okay, Kiger. It's not like you haven't dealt with worse from me." She applied far more attention to using the unfamiliar utensil than was strictly necessary. His hand covered hers and she went bone still, resisting the urge to slap it away out of habit. Her muscles quivered with nerves.

"That isn't the point. I was feeling guilty and angry and I took it out on you," he said quietly. "I didn't mean what I said."

"Yes you did, Kiger," she replied just as quietly, staring down to her plate. He yanked his hand away and she very carefully set down the utensil. "You don't have to lie about it," she continued. "It's only fair that you have your say, considering how I have acted in the

past. Lord and Lady know what a bitch I've been." She finally looked up at him; he was gaping at her in openmouthed shock.

He shut his mouth with a snap.

"You made your position quite clear yesterday," she continued. "All I ask is that when you and Hadri decide you want children that you allow me to be artificially inseminated instead of setting up appointments." She swallowed hard. "And I would still like to be part of their lives," she added, referring to those future children.

Kiger looked bewildered. "What are you talking about? Appointments for what?" He turned a little green. "What does Hadri have to do with this?" After a moment his confused expression faded and was replaced with angry frustration. "Do you hate me that much? You would rather have the medics get you pregnant?" He shoved back from the table. "Obviously just the thought of making love with me makes you sick! Try not to throw up on the table," he bit out with a sneer. "I'll tell you what, Ruri. Why don't you find someone else to fuck too, and I'll donate the sperm? Although, Gods only know where you'll find some poor fool stupid enough to live with your poison!" He stormed out of the room.

Ruri stared after him in shock, shaking from the effect of his words. She looked back at the table and felt her gorge rise. She pushed back from the table and attempted to get herself under control so she could go to work. *Good job, Ruri. Now he's even madder.*

* * * * *

Gaia sighed in disgust. "Have You been watching Your daughter?" she asked Her mate, Skye.

The God looked offended. "Why is she *My* daughter today?"

"When she's good she's Mine. When she fucks up she's Yours." The Goddess smiled winningly.

He just glowered at Her with ruffled dignity. “And here I thought it was the other way around.”

“Her actions are rebounding already. I wonder why,” the Goddess said thoughtfully, suddenly serious. “I wasn’t expecting to see this until her next life.”

Skye contemplated His fiery daughter silently for several minutes. “She wants it now. Interesting. Kiger has never been with her in her past lives. Maybe she instinctively doesn’t want the karmic debt to carry over. Hadri on the other hand --” He broke off suddenly.

Curious now, Gaia took a closer look at Hadri. “What the -- How did he end up on Ta’e? And why didn’t We notice?”

“I don’t know,” Skye replied slowly. “But, there is only one person who could have done it, and made Us forget about him being Ours.” They looked at each other and finally realized it wasn’t just the Ta’e’sha the Great One was taking an unusual interest in.

Chapter Three

Ruri entered her cabin later that evening feeling completely wrung out. Shrayne paced serenely at her side. "Any luck with the rats today?"

"*We caught five of them.*" Satisfaction colored the cat's mind-voice. "*Although it's a trial to keep them alive. They taste so good,*" she ended plaintively.

Someone's pet rats had escaped their cage and the little buggers seemed intent on populating the ship. So far they hadn't managed to get into the recreation forest but the maintenance crew knew it was only a matter of time. In a fit of disgust Kyrin had asked Condezl, Thea's jaguar companion, if he and the other cats would help round them up.

The cats had dived into the task gleefully despite being told sternly they were not to kill the rodents. In response to that decree, the cats had talked someone, no one knew whom, in the galley into programming the computers to produce dead rodents for their dining pleasure. Ruri found it very disturbing.

They stopped by the kitchen and Ruri procured a cup of tea for herself and a bowl of chopped meat for Shrayne before continuing on to the bedroom they shared. The door slid open and they both froze.

Two pale figures writhed against each other on her bed. Kiger moaned softly and rubbed enticingly against Hadri who was seated between his thighs. A black blindfold covered Kiger's eyes and his arms were stretched above his head to grasp one of the bed's canopy posts. Hadri rocked slowly in and out of the smaller man's body. He turned his head and locked gazes with Ruri. A small smile teased the corners of his mouth and he ground himself against Kiger's trembling body. His hands swept down Kiger's shoulders and chest. Down his belly and finally along the hard, curving shaft of her husband's cock.

Kiger gasped and arched erotically into the lingering caresses. A droplet of precum trembled on the tip and Ruri watched it shimmer and then fall. It pooled on the taut skin of his abdomen and she licked her lips. For some reason she found that tiny glimmering drop unbearably exciting.

As if reading her mind Hadri swept it up and daintily licked it off his finger. He smiled with dark sensuality when she jerked in reaction. Shadows of satisfaction and arousal chased each other across his face.

Keeping his face turned toward her he bent and lapped his tongue over Kiger's nipples, first one and then the other. Several strands of his hair fell across his face, obscuring all but his mouth and eyes. She knew it wasn't by accident. Every motion he made, every scrap of pleasure he gave was carefully planned.

Somehow she knew he was always like this. Loving someone, yet keeping himself distanced from them. Driving them to orgasm over and over again before allowing himself to come. She wondered what would happen if his iron control was ever taken from him or if he ever let go.

Another sharp cry from her husband brought her attention back to him. He was whispering hot, anxious words to his lover as the strong columns of his legs wound around Hadri's hips. Hadri finally turned away from her and locked his mouth over Kiger's in a deep, wet kiss. His narrow hips worked harder and faster as he seemed to forget she was there.

Ruri had never seen two men locked together intimately and had never really had any desire to see it either. Now she found herself reevaluating that decision as she stared, entranced by the very sexy sight of two gorgeous men going at it on her bed.

She knew hurt would set in over them using her bedroom to stake their claim on each other but, right now, that blessedly numb sensation was filling her heart even as arousal flooded her body.

Kiger's hair reached for the other man and twined intimately with Hadri's seawater-colored locks. Her loins throbbed as she admired them moving together. Even now as Hadri mantled over him like a predator marking his territory, there was a tenderness that bespoke making love rather than mere fucking.

You want to be part of that, an insidious little voice whispered in her head. *You would give almost anything to belong again*. She jolted as she realized that voice was right. She was so tired of being alone and scared. More anger leached out of her heart, the rage was almost gone now. It left the cold ache of loneliness behind as she watched the two men loving each other on her bed. She felt like a child staring desperately into a store window, yearning for something she could never have.

Hadri was watching her again. He rose above Kiger and caressed Kiger's cheeks, stroking his fingers over the blindfold gently. "Is this what you want?" he whispered, his eyes locked with hers.

"Yes," Kiger moaned, drawing her gaze to his face. His tongue flicked out as Hadri's finger trailed across his lips.

Ruri bit her lip and choked back a whimper as he drew one of Hadri's fingers into his mouth and sucked on it with sensual enjoyment. Her nipples hardened and throbbed as she absorbed the bliss on his face as he surrendered to his lover and she wanted nothing more than to crawl to them and beg them to love her too.

Hadri paused his subtle thrusts to roll and grind his hips against Kiger. His deep groan of pleasure covered her own soft moan of anguished desire. His eyes turned a stormy blue as he held her gaze prisoner. He pulled the finger from Kiger's lips and wrapped his hand aggressively around his lover's throbbing cock. "Mine," he growled, his eyes wild. "All mine. Forever." He worked his fist up and down the straining shaft while his hips beat an urgent tempo between Kiger's tense thighs.

"All yours," Kiger screamed, bucking his hips into the long, hard strokes.

Ruri's eyes widened as the rose-gold spirals at the head of her husband's cock flared open and thick, white ropes of cum shot from the swollen head. The cup and bowl fell from her numb fingers as heat bloomed in her cunt and small, aching bursts of pleasure centered at her clit and spread outward with each jet from his penis. Her shocked gaze tore from his cock and fixed on Hadri's face as his lips pulled back in an animalistic snarl. His eyes closed tightly as he fought for, and found his own completion. His muscled chest and belly rippled and a savage groan was torn free from his throat.

Both men froze and the deep masculine cries of their climax echoed in the air. Her body pulsed, empty and aching, ready for them to take and be filled. A small sob of hunger escaped her and she fell to her knees, as her pussy spasmed painfully.

Hadri pulled slowly out of her husband's body. Cum dripped from his slowly softening shaft and she moaned despairingly at the dark, satisfied expression on his face.

Kiger sighed softly with waning pleasure.

A small sound caught his attention. He ripped the blindfold from his eyes. Cold washed through him as he saw his wife on her knees, tears streaming down her face. Beside her, Shrayne hissed furiously, her ears plastered back against her head.

A brief, horrified, glance was all it took to realize he wasn't in his bedroom as he had thought. "What have you done?" he yelled at his lover. He pulled free and ran to his wife. He fell to his knees beside her and hovered, unsure if he should touch her.

She looked at his stomach and then at him, tears swimming in her shocked eyes. Shame scorched him as he felt the wet slide of cooling semen on his skin. "Ruri, I'm sorry," he whispered, reaching for her.

She shook her head and scrambled to her feet and ran from the room, her cat following. He spun on his knees and glared at Hadri. "Why?" he asked hoarsely, his heart breaking. How could Hadri betray him like this? "Why did you hurt me like this? Why did you hurt my wife?" He couldn't begin to decipher the expressions on his lover's face and that only made him angrier.

Hadri slid off the bed and started yanking on his clothing, "I wasn't trying to hurt her. I wanted her to see what we could have together."

Shock jolted through him. "You manipulative son of a bitch." The human curse rolled off his tongue. "Get out."

The other man froze. "Kiger --"

"Get out." Kiger glared at him. "You had no right to hurt my wife and no right to use me to do it."

A shuttered expression fell across Hadri's features. "Fine," he said shortly, stomping out of the room. Kiger waited until he was sure Hadri was gone before yanking on the jeans he had been wearing when this whole fiasco started. Then he wiped the semen off his chest and belly with his shirt and went in search of his wife.

After several minutes of looking, he found her curled up in the bathroom sobbing. His heart broke as he listened to her. He went to his knees and pulled her unresisting body into his arms. He crooned softly, pressing kisses onto the top of her head. "Please, baby, stop crying. I am so sorry," he whispered. "You'll make yourself sick."

Her arms wrapped around him desperately. "I'm so sorry, Kiger," she sobbed into his chest. "I'm so sorry for everything." She crawled into his lap. "I wanted to make it up to you, but it's too late."

Her tears wet his chest and he cuddled her close. His heart was breaking and he felt torn in so many directions he didn't know what to do.

"I wanted to start over," she continued brokenly. "I wanted to be your wife and make it all up to you." Shock rolled through him as he realized that was why she had come to him yesterday. Before he could reply she was talking again. "But you have Hadri and you both hate me." She tried to crawl away from him and his arms tightened convulsively around her, stilling the movement.

She raised her head, another sob heaving in her chest. Her tortured gaze met his and several pieces of the puzzle clicked into place. Why she had been acting different the past few weeks. Why she was so hesitant around him now. The meaning of her words that morning at breakfast.

She had been trying to give him what she thought he wanted. She didn't realize that all he had ever wanted was her love.

His hands came up to cup her cheeks. He stared into her beautiful eyes and pressed a kiss onto her trembling mouth. "I love you, Ruri. Even when things were at their worst I loved you," he whispered against her lips. His thumbs stroked her cheeks, wiping away the tears that still eased from the corners of her eyes.

A shuddering sigh tore from her chest and her eyes fluttered shut as her mouth opened under his, inviting his kiss. He closed his eyes and tilted his head, easing his tongue in to twine with hers.

He shivered when she sighed into his mouth and her hands hesitantly touched his chest. His heart clenched at her shy uncertainty. He slid his hands around her waist to cradle her more securely against him.

Her tongue withdrew from his and she leaned back in his arms, her face wary. Her expressive eyes searched his face and after a moment she relaxed fully against him and tilted her face up. Her hands moved up his chest and curled around the nape of his neck. She pulled him closer and kissed him again, her lips soft and silky against his. His cock stirred and pressed against her tight buttocks. He tensed, half expecting her to jump up in outrage and give him a blistering set down as she had so many times in the past when his body had expressed his interest in her.

She moved back in his arms and gave him a surprised look. "You still want me?"

"Yes," he replied cautiously, still waiting for his temperamental wife to take offense. His hair twisted behind him as he resisted the urge to touch her as much as he could before she could push him away again.

"Oh." She appeared at a loss for anything else to say so he gave in to his urges enough to rub his hand up and down her back. Her muscles relaxed under the light touch as she stared at his chest. Many expressions flashed across her face so quickly he couldn't catch them all.

Except the confusion, that he knew all too well, having lived with it so long himself. Her fingers absently caressed the back of his neck as she thought and he couldn't resist letting several locks curl around her fingers.

A shy smile flirted around the edges of her lips as the strands tickled her hands. The smile faded almost as soon as it formed and she looked up at him solemnly. He couldn't help but tense as he waited for her to push him away once again.

"Would you make love to me, Kiger?" she whispered softly, her dark eyes uncertain.

His heart jumped in his chest and his breath caught in his throat. "Yes," he replied, his voice just as quiet and uncertain as hers had been.

He slid his arms under her knees and across her back and carefully got to his knees and then his feet. As he carried her to his bedroom she laid her head on his chest. They didn't

speak as the door opened and he strode in to carefully lay her down on the rich red-brown satin comforter he had found in a store on Earth. He had decorated the whole bedroom in shades of deep red and brown after he had seen her the first time. The dark vibrant colors reminded him of her.

Not that she had ever actually slept in the room. He doubted the decor had even registered the few times she had come in. He unzipped his low-slung jeans and pushed the heavy material off and kicked it aside. Nude and aroused he paused with one knee on the bed, curious about the look on his wife's face.

Gods, please don't let me mess this up, he prayed silently. He had a feeling he would never get another chance.

"Where's Hadri?" she asked suddenly.

"He left." Kiger didn't really want to talk about Hadri. He was torn over his lover's actions. He eased onto the bed and his fingers went to the buttons of Ruri's shirt and he slipped the first one free, stopping when his wife tensed. His eyes met hers and he waited for her to decide if she wanted to continue.

She bit her lip and relaxed slowly so he opened another button. When she didn't protest, he finished with the rest of the buttons and hesitantly pushed the material off her shoulders. Ruri hunched her shoulders and looked faintly embarrassed when he stopped to admire the lacy pink bra she was wearing. Her breasts were as small and delicate as the rest of her and she didn't really need to wear one. Not that he would ever tell her that. He loved the way her golden skin was framed by the sexy lingerie.

She seemed to come to some internal decision and rapidly unfastened her jeans and slid them off. Afterward she knelt nervously on the bed wearing only the matching bra and panties. Faint color tinged her cheeks and her eyes were downcast. "I'm not very good at this sort of thing," she mumbled self-consciously.

Kiger pulled her against him and lay back against the pillows. "What thing?" His hands moved soothingly up and down her back.

"Sex." Ruri felt horribly self-conscious lying against Kiger. It wasn't that she was a virgin or anything like that but she had never been one for cuddling. She found she liked being close to Kiger and just letting him hold her and that made her wonder what was different. She wasn't sure what had prompted her to ask him to make love to her, but it was too late to back out now, not that she really wanted to. Her body was still aching from watching Kiger and Hadri together and she felt a suspicious dampness in her panties.

Feeling shy, she rested her head on his chest and drew small circles around his nipples. His skin shimmered with warm golden tones in the room's low light. His nipple puckered in response and she licked her lips, remembering how Hadri's tongue had looked when he had bathed the hard tip. Feeling the need to stake her claim on her husband she bent her head and daintily lashed her tongue over it.

Her finger squeezed the other nipple gently as she closed her mouth around the tight nub she was licking and suckled. *He tastes good*, she decided and pushed all other thoughts out of her head so that she could focus all of her attention on him and their being together and not fighting for the first time in their marriage.

He tensed under her and hummed softly with pleasure, obviously enjoying her attentions. His hands skimmed along her back and paused at the catch of her bra and hovered there uncertainly.

She didn't know if she should let him make the decision or encourage him to finish undressing her. Before she could decide he tentatively released the catch and smoothed the straps off her back and shoulders. It bothered her how nervous he appeared to be because she knew it was her fault.

She slid one of her legs between his thighs and sat up, straddling his leg. His hands fell away from her and he watched her with shadowed eyes. He seemed to steel himself for something.

Ruri pushed the straps down her arms and tossed the bra aside. She let him look at her, knowing that her body was too thin and angular with muscles. Not exactly a sight born to incite men to lust.

He didn't seem to mind, though. He smiled slowly and reached up to pull the scrunchie out of her hair and then speared his fingers into the thick, black strands and ran them through his fingers. The expression on his face told her how much he enjoyed the sensation. He pulled several more handfuls through his fingers and forward so they fell against the tops of her breasts. His hands followed the strands and stroked lightly over her breasts. He didn't stop there like she expected him to. Instead he continued to draw light patterns across her skin like he was trying to memorize every curve and angle of her body. As he did so his face took on a delighted cast and he smiled shyly up at her.

"You're so beautiful," he murmured, continuing to explore her body.

She felt a warm blush spread across her cheeks. "I'm not beautiful," she mumbled. "I'm too skinny and my breasts are too little."

His hands covered the dainty mounds. "Not at all. They are just right. I've been dreaming of them for over a year." He rubbed them gently with the palms of his hands. "I never thought I'd get to see them, though." He grinned mischievously and pinched her nipples.

He suddenly sat up and wrapped his arms around her narrow waist and pressed a kiss onto her mouth.

"Oh!" She jumped and then giggled softly. Apparently he wasn't feeling intimidated any longer.

He pressed her back against his arms and covered a nipple with his lips and sucked the tidbit in. She moaned softly as his leisurely suckling sent pulses of excitement through her loins. She slid her fingers into his hair and cradled him against her. His hair wound around her arms and writhed caressingly along them. The slightly abrasive texture felt exquisite and she wondered how those delicate strands would feel rubbing against other places. Much lower places. The warm blush on her cheeks heated even more as she realized what Thea had meant when she had caught her and Sya'tia giggling over Daeshen's "tentacle games."

She squeaked when Kiger suddenly lifted her off him and laid her out flat on the bed and came down on top of her. His mouth immediately returned to the important task of tasting every inch of her breasts. His tongue flicked and bathed the tender buds crowning them and then swirled in lazy circles from there all the way to the base of the curves, one after the other.

Once he finished, he licked his way down her belly and then knelt and gently slid his hands between her closed thighs and slowly pushed them apart. His amber-red eyes glowed and he sighed with obvious delight as he stared down at the juncture of her thighs. His hair unwound from her arms and spread out across her stomach.

He settled himself into the V of her legs and purred sensuously. "So wet," he murmured, casting her a sly, aroused smile. His smile widened even more when she gasped softly in outrage. "Is this for me? If it is I like it." Keeping his gaze locked with hers he scraped his teeth across the lacy fabric covering her mound. "I'm going to have to do my best to keep you like this from now on," he whispered and stroked his tongue over the wet panties.

It felt divine and she lifted her hips for more. The fabric was tight across her wet sex and the sensation of his tongue and lips playing across it was unusual and sexy. After several hot minutes of him nibbling and licking at the juice soaking into the lace, he slid his fingers under the side seams and tugged them slowly down. The panties rolled under her ass and then slowly came down until they were stopped by the spread position of her thighs.

With a regretful sigh, Kiger slid back and lifted her leg over his head so he could finish rolling the scrap off her legs. Once off, he sat up on his knees and smiled down at her. His erection was hard and pressed against his belly and a drop of precum beaded the tip.

She licked her lips as the urge to taste it overcame her again so she rolled to her knees and turned. Braced on her hands and knees, she stole a kiss from him. He sighed into her mouth and tangled his tongue around hers, not touching her with anything but lips and tongue.

He spread his knees a bit and leaned into the kiss. His moan vibrated against her tongue and she slowly pulled back after a last, lingering lick of her tongue across his full lower lip. She had never realized how erotic it was to not touch a lover with anything but her mouth.

She eased down onto her elbows and lapped his hard cock from base to tip. When she reached the damp head she paused in anticipation and admired that welling drop she wanted so much. His hands came up and he started to touch himself. “No,” she commanded. “That’s mine, don’t touch.”

His hands fell onto his thighs submissively and he tensed under her scrutiny, fine visible tremors shook him and she realized that her gentle husband enjoyed being ordered about.

She smiled and finally allowed herself to take the glistening jewel she wanted. Her tongue swirled lazily around the crown before pausing for just a moment before lapping it up. The taste eased into her mouth, salty like seawater and faintly licorice. She moaned happily and knew that licorice was going to be her new favorite treat. Wanting another taste she covered him and sucked the throbbing length in as far as she could. Once the head of his penis brushed the back of her throat she stopped and hummed.

Kiger jumped and groaned. The frills decorating his glans trembled and brushed the inside of her mouth as she slowly pulled back. They folded tight against him when she drew him back in and hummed again. His hands came up and hovered uncertainly around her

head, but he didn't touch her. His hips squirmed anxiously as she enjoyed the hot shaft throbbing against her tongue.

Several minutes passed as she pumped him in and out of her mouth, sucking each drop that seeped from him and lashing the underside of his cock with her tongue. Finally she lifted her head and sighed contentedly, her wet pussy spasming and hungry.

Her husband's face was tight with pleasure and his eyes were dark with need. She feathered a brief kiss across his lips. "Make love to me, Kiger."

He groaned and pulled her against him and laid them both down. Then he spent some time arranging her legs just so around his hips and spreading kisses and whispered words against her neck. The hard ridge of his erection pressed against the damp petals of her bare slit. She had been horrified when she had discovered that her body hair had been removed but now she was glad for it because she didn't want even that small of a barrier between their bodies.

He raised his head and locked his gaze with hers as he angled his shaft against the soft opening of her body and slowly pressed the thick length in. They both groaned when he sank in to the hilt and Kiger trembled above her, coming down onto his elbows. "So tight," he moaned pulling out a bit and then sinking home again.

Ruri whimpered a soft agreement. The intimacy of the act was heightened by his unwavering stare. She felt trapped within his gaze and as if he was absorbing every expression that crossed her face. A connection seemed to snap into place between them and she instinctively pulled back from it.

As if sensing this, his face hardened and he thrust heavily into her again. "Don't leave me, Ruri, please, not now. Not when we are just finding each other." His voice was hoarse with need and she knew it wasn't just the sex. He wanted and needed her on every level, but could she give him what he wanted?

He pulled out slowly and slammed back into her again, making her cry out. Her eyes closed in reaction to the cascade of sensation that sparked through her. When she opened her eyes again he smiled down at her and brushed a tender kiss over her mouth.

With a sigh her lips blossomed open under his and she accepted his questing tongue within. His heat and body surrounded hers and she felt the ice that had encased her heart for so long crack and fracture so that she could finally be free again. She tore her mouth from his and cried out softly, her eyes squeezing shut as he gently rocked inside her.

She twisted her legs tight around his hips and arched into his movements, eagerly meeting him thrust for thrust. "Harder, baby, let me feel you," she encouraged him.

He growled softly and began to move faster. "So hot and wet. Gods I love you, Ruri." His mouth covered hers in a fierce kiss and the only sounds in the room were their harsh breaths and the moist slap of their bodies coming together.

He seemed to swell even harder and he groaned, resting his forehead on her shoulder. "I can't wait, Ruri," he gritted out just as she felt the frills on his penis snap open and lock him in her. Hot jets of semen splashed inside her. She screamed and arched under him as he swiveled his hips, pushing one last inch inside her. His frills fluttered to keep his rich seed at the mouth of her womb and the sensation sent her careening over the edge. She writhed and convulsed around him, wringing another groan from him. Her squeezing sheath coaxed another burst of cum from him and her body greedily sucked it up.

He collapsed over her and panted heavily into her ear, occasionally sighing and moaning as another twitch or shiver in her cunt stroked him intimately.

The fluttering of his frills was driving her crazy. Every time she thought her orgasm was waning they would start up again and send more little shocks of pleasure through her. She screamed when Kiger rolled onto his back, taking her with him and making the small spines tug threateningly against the tender walls of her vagina.

He cupped his hands around her legs and held them tight to his sides and hummed contentedly. "Stay with me tonight," he whispered against her hair.

"Oh God, yes," she moaned as another bubble of heat bloomed and burst inside her.

Kiger cupped her cheeks and kissed her gasping mouth. "Good, because it's going to take a while for us to catch up," he growled. "By the way, I think you're very good at this sort of thing."

* * * * *

Hadri trudged into his quarters still trying to understand what had gone wrong. He had carefully calculated his actions. If one of his people had found two people making love on their bed they would have recognized it for the invitation it was. Not fallen down crying.

"Perhaps that is the problem, Hadri. She's not one of your people," said a smooth deep voice.

Hadri looked up in shock. A tall, imposing man dressed in black leather leaned lazily against the far wall. His arms were crossed over his chest and a booted foot was propped up on the wall behind him. Gray eyes watched him with wry amusement. The long hair draped over his shoulders changed colors from black to brown to white. Each color bled down from his scalp to tip of each strand before another color began to take its place.

A shiver worked down Hadri's spine. "Who are you?" he asked cautiously. It was obvious the man wasn't Ta'e'shian and he knew that no human men had been taken from Earth, much to the disgust of many Ta'e'shian women.

The man grinned mischievously and pushed himself away from the wall. "Call me Skye," he said easily. "Got any beer around here?"

"Yes," Hadri replied, feeling like he should know this man. His heart yearned toward him. Not in a sexual way but as if he had just found a friend he hadn't known he was

missing. It left him feeling even more confused and he wondered again who this man was and how he had gotten into Hadri's cabin.

"Great!" Skye rubbed his hands together in anticipation. "Pop us a couple and let's have a little chat." Not waiting for Hadri he turned and strolled into the living room.

Bemused, Hadri grabbed two bottles of ale from the kitchen refrigeration unit and trailed after Skye, who was inspecting the sunken sitting area. After a moment he sprawled comfortably in it and crossed his legs, resting an ankle on the opposite knee. He accepted the cold bottle and took a sip. He sighed appreciatively after he swallowed it. "Nice." He looked around the room with bright curiosity as Hadri eased down across from him. "Interesting place you've got here. This is My first visit to the ship. I usually leave the personal appearances to My wife," he confided. "She's better at that sort of thing."

"Your wife?" Hadri asked cautiously.

"Yeah, you can call her Gaia. Most of Our witches are women these days and they seem to be more comfortable with Her."

Hadri jolted as he realized that he had almost missed the sharp intelligence behind the casual words and actions. Then the meaning of the man's -- not man's, God's -- words hit him.

Skye smiled slowly. "Figured it out did you?"

Hadri gulped and nodded as Skye's friendly smile took on a cruel edge. "I think so, Lord."

Skye's gray eyes bled to black for several long minutes as trembles of atavistic fear shook Hadri and held him mute. Finally, the God smiled again and leaned His head back against the seat.

Silence stretched out, tense and uncomfortable. Hadri didn't want to be the one to break it. *How does one speak to a God?* he wondered a bit wildly. *Especially when He seems*

to be relaxing and just enjoying a beer? Did I make Him angry? Is He just bored? Did Ruri sic him on me?

He snuck another look at the God who now had His eyes closed and a secretive smile teasing the corners of His lips.

“Your totems and birth animals always have eight legs, Hadri,” Skye said meditatively, not opening His eyes. “I don’t suppose you would remember that, though.”

“My birth animal is an octopus,” Hadri agreed cautiously.

“Mmm, is it?” Skye chuckled softly. “You are so much My son.” He opened His eyes and gazed at Hadri. “You always approach life like you are trying to ambush it.” The God seemed heartily amused by this. “And Our darling Ruri is like a freight train. Once she decides to go after something everything in her path gets run over.” Skye sipped His ale and fell silent again. “The two of you have been very entertaining over the centuries, but I think it’s time to put things back on track now.”

Hadri gulped a swallow from his bottle, very glad to have alcohol at hand. *Centuries? What is He talking about?* He stayed silent, not wanting to interrupt his unexpected guest. Actually, he didn’t feel comfortable participating in the conversation either.

Skye sighed and sat up. “Well, things to do. Gotta be going. Nice to see you.”

Hadri blinked in confusion several times as the God got to His feet and chugged the beer as if it were water. He stood, unsure how one went about showing a God to the door.

Skye sighed with pleasure and stretched. “Oh yeah, I almost forgot.” He reached out and touched a finger to Hadri’s forehead.

And that was the last thing Hadri remembered for quite awhile.

Chapter Four

“Someone got laid last night.”

Ruri felt her cheeks heat and she slashed her practice sword at Sya'tia's outstretched arm. “Oh shut up!”

The taller woman grinned impishly and parried the blow and then twisted the dulled blade aside with a deft movement of the sai-like weapons she held in each hand.

“Oh, c'mon, tell me all about it! Was it hot and sweaty? Does he make weird noises?” She continued her relentless teasing as their weapons flashed with lightning quickness. “I'm tellin' Thea on you tonight! You know she's gonna want all the juicy...” she leered as she drew the word out, “...details.”

“No details.” She paused, considering for a moment. “No weird noises either. That's all you're getting too!”

Sya'tia giggled and dropped the subject and advanced on Ruri in a flurry of blows that she was hard put to keep up with. “Nice one!” Sya'tia applauded after a particularly grueling-looking twist to avoid a blow. “I thought I had you that time.”

Several minutes passed as they sparred in earnest. Ruri loved working against Sya'tia. The Ta'e'sha had a completely different fighting style than she had ever paced herself against

and it worked out very well for both women since they were forced to pay more attention to their opponent. Their bouts were evenly matched for wins and losses and neither seemed to get the upper edge on the other.

Suddenly another blade joined the fray and both women turned in surprise to face the wielder.

Hadri stood there with a look of consternation on his face. Apparently he hadn't expected both women to turn on him.

Ruri swung and slapped his calf with the side of her blade. She smirked when he swore and jumped back, barely raising his blade in time to deflect a sideswipe blow from Sya'tia.

"Look, Sya, fresh meat," Ruri drawled. There were a few smothered chuckles from the other people using the room. She and Sya'tia usually had several Warrior Chosen watching them spar. Ruri finally understood why it was rare for anyone not also a Warrior Chosen to practice with them. They were the elite fighters of the Ta'e'sha and most of the general populace couldn't keep up with them, let alone occasionally defeat them. It made her a novelty. She was even starting to get requests for classes and instruction.

Sya'tia snickered and bowed out. "I'll leave this to you, my dear. I'll com you later for coffee."

Ruri concentrated on smacking Hadri again. He was surprisingly good with a sword. "Okay, kiss Thea for me," she said absently, still watching Hadri's moves. It was a British style that would have been better suited to a heavier blade. She wondered how he could have possibly learned it since she wasn't aware of anyone who knew those techniques on the ship and it wasn't something he could have picked up from watching movies.

"Ruri, I'd like to talk to you, please," Hadri panted out, just avoiding a rap on the knuckles. He clumsily backed away, obviously not wanting to continue sparring with her.

She decided she wasn't feeling particularly generous. The man had no idea how hard it was to get the bloody stains out of her carpet once she had finally gotten around to cleaning

the floor where she had dropped Shrayne's snack last night. The meat had dried into the fiber.

"So talk," she commanded, tripping him with her foot and following him to slap his ass with the side of her blade again.

He yelped and staggered away, glaring at her. "Could you put the sword down?"

"Nope, you interrupted us and I haven't even broken a sweat yet."

He faltered again and Ruri backed away to let him catch his balance. Once he recovered she advanced on him again in a whirlwind of stinging smacks resulting in a series of lurid curses from him.

I could get to like this, Ruri decided with a fiendish grin. It was nice to see Hadri on the defensive for once instead of her.

She had a pretty good idea what he wanted to talk to her about too. Kiger was still steaming over Hadri's actions yesterday. He hadn't actually come out and said that he was going to break off his relationship with him, but Ruri suspected Kiger was thinking about it.

She wasn't too sure how she felt about that. On one hand she didn't really like Hadri too much right now but she was very attracted to him and she knew Kiger loved him. On the other hand she liked matching wits with the sexy Ta'e'sha. It was a tough call, knowing she was the one in control and both men would have to bow to her wishes.

Ruri liked being in control. But, she also knew that she and Hadri would be constantly competing with each other over that power because Hadri liked being in control also.

She found the idea of spending the rest of her life making Kiger happy and competing with Hadri very appealing.

Deciding that she had beat on him enough for one evening she easily disarmed him and knocked his ass to the floor. She rested the tip of her blade against his throat.

He sighed and lifted his chin, ceding to her victory. "Can we talk now?" he murmured, obviously trying not to move his throat too much.

Ruri shrugged. "I guess." She moved the blade back and strolled to the door, leaving him to scramble up behind her and follow. Ruri sheathed the practice blade and waited for Hadri to catch up to her. "Where do you wanna go?"

He was rubbing his arm and staring down at the dull sword in his hand like he had never seen it before. "We can talk in the Temple Gardens. They are quiet this time of day." He stepped a little closer to her and Ruri felt her nipples harden as the scent of his bath salts drifted toward her.

She cast him several glances as he led her through a maze of corridors, He seemed troubled and very unsure of himself as his gaze jumped around. It was as if he didn't completely recognize his surroundings and was moving toward his destination by instinct alone.

"Are you okay?" she finally asked him in a low voice, moving closer to him so someone could pass by.

"I don't think so," he mumbled distractedly.

He fell silent again until they reached a gate she had never seen before. He unlocked it and led her into a secluded garden laid out in patterns she recognized as Ta'e'shian religious symbols. With a sigh of relief he sat down on a bench near a contemplation pool and some of the tension in him seemed to drain away.

Warily she settled next to him. He didn't seem to be in any hurry to speak so she stayed silent. His obvious disquiet made her uneasy and she had to wonder what happened to upset his careful control.

After several minutes he released a shuddering sigh and set his sword on the ground before turning to her and taking her sword to set it next to his. He took her hands in his and she felt him open a narrow empathic link between the two of them.

She tensed instinctively but he was being much gentler this time. The flow of emotion between them was passive and she relaxed, realizing he wasn't trying to glean information. It was more like he just needed the contact.

"Kiger doesn't want to see me anymore." He didn't meet her gaze as he told her. "He said that he wouldn't risk losing you by staying with me." His face was tortured as he continued to tell her about the conversation and Kiger's gentle rejection of him. "He doesn't want to take the chance that you will leave him again because of me. He won't even discuss it with you." Hadri was obviously devastated Kiger wouldn't even consider talking to her. "Kiger feels that you would not forgive me for what happened in your room." He paused and shot her a shamed look. "I didn't mean to hurt your feelings or make him feel caught in the middle. I was trying to invite you to join us."

Ruri glowered. "Not your brightest move, Hadri." A twinge of contrition filtered through the empathic link between them.

"I know that now," he mumbled. "I've been just as bad about expecting you to react like we do as he has. I'm very sorry. Can you forgive me?"

For once he didn't seem to be hiding what he was really thinking or feeling and Ruri found it was a refreshing change. Despite the seriousness of the conversation she felt lighter and more at ease with him and began to feel almost cheerful.

"Would you please consider me as a lover, Ruri?" he asked hopefully. "I know I haven't shown my best side to you so far, but I do care about you both. I think, if you give me a chance you'd like me. At least a little bit. And maybe, if you do, Kiger will take me back," he finished earnestly. "Not that I'm only interested in him," he added hastily. "I'm not trying to use you to get on his good side."

Ruri didn't reply right away. Instead she did something rare; she thought before she spoke. She gently removed her hands from his. He hunched his shoulders and turned away from her. *He thinks I'm rejecting him too.* Even knowing this she didn't rush to reassure

him. She needed to think first, not give him answers she might regret later. It hurt her to see such a proud man humbled and she knew how hard it had been for him to come to her for help. She did not want to hurt him more and took no pleasure in his misery.

That told her more about her growing feelings for him than anything else. *Either that or I'm finally growing up; I don't want to hurt everyone around me anymore.* She brushed that thought aside to concentrate on the matter at hand.

Do I want Hadri? Or do I just want to make Kiger happy? Because I know he'll go with what I decide, but can I live with two husbands? That's what it would be, she knew. If she accepted Hadri now it would be forever. She had learned to accept the Ta'e'shian polygamous marriages but had never really thought of them in relation to herself. It had never occurred to her to be anything other than monogamous if she and Kiger resolved their problems. Hadri had thrown all those plans out the window and now she had to face issues she had not foreseen.

Kiger being bisexual, for instance. She knew that it wasn't a need that would go away and now that she and he were sleeping together she couldn't be casual about him taking lovers outside their marriage.

She felt torn in so many directions she didn't know what to do. It was going to take more than just a few minutes to know what she wanted.

"Hadri," she said softly. He flinched and braced his shoulders.

"Yes?" he asked quietly.

"I need to think about this. It's too much for me to make a decision now."

He nodded still not looking at her.

She sighed and turned his face toward her so he would have to look at her. She leaned forward and pressed a kiss against his lips. He looked surprised and hopeful when she pulled back. "It's not a no. I need to think, okay?"

He nodded slowly, some of his usual confidence seeping back into his eyes. “Will you come with me when you know?” he asked softly.

“Of course. These are beautiful gardens,” she said, not wanting to talk about it anymore because she knew it wouldn’t be hard for him to sway her if she gave him a chance.

Hadri smiled wanly. “Thank you, I’m very proud of them.”

“You did this?” she asked in surprise.

“Yes, well, most of it. I’m the Head Groundskeeper for the Temple Gardens. Would you like to see the rest?” He seemed willing to let her change the subject as he stood gracefully and began to point out different features and plants.

They spent an hour talking and exploring the gardens together. Ruri watched as Hadri slowly gathered himself and allowed her glimpses of what he was like when he wasn’t trying to manipulate his surroundings or the people around him.

He had a huge heart and was very careful with his plants and, from the tender way he handled them he obviously loved them. They seemed to respond in kind. She could swear they leaned toward him as he passed. It was a little strange. They rustled and whispered to him and fronds reached out to catch his clothing.

“Why did you decide to work for the temples?” she asked as he walked her back to her cabin. He shrugged tucking his hands in the sleeves of his robe.

She noticed he almost always wore one over his jumpsuit and made a mental note to ask him why later on. Usually the Ta’e’sha only wore them before or after swimming or when they were lounging around at home. Well, except the Priests and Priestesses, they always wore their holy robes in public.

“I’ve never felt the connection to our Gods that the rest of my people feel,” he replied. “I think I know why now,” he added under his breath. Ruri opened her mouth to question that, but he continued before she could. “Anyway, I thought if I worked in Their gardens I would feel closer to Them.”

“Huh,” she said thoughtfully. “Did it work?”

He smiled faintly. “A little. I love the plants, especially the water garden.”

“It’s gorgeous,” Ruri said sincerely. The water garden was a huge, deep pool filled with sea life and artistic air fountains that regulated the airflow through hundreds of holes of varying sizes to create bubbling patterns. Just thinking about the science behind them made her brain hurt and Hadri assured her that it was even more impressive when viewed underwater. She had elected to stay on the bank and observe it from there since she hadn’t had any desire to go for a swim.

They paused at the door to her cabin and Hadri cast a longing look at it. “I should go. Thank you for talking to me.” He brushed her cheek gently with the backs of his fingers before turning to walk away.

She watched him until he turned a corner and was out of sight before she entered her home. Kiger wasn’t home; he was working an evening shift for the next month. She was looking forward to his next schedule change so they could spend more time together. He worked in the maintenance department and they rotated the shifts every six months to keep everyone happy, but he assured her that he was moving to a position in engineering soon and would have a set schedule.

She wandered into the bathroom and ran a bath in the huge sunken tub that dominated the room then she placed some fluffy towels on the towel warmer and stepped into the hot water for a good long soak. Feeling kind of sexy, she poured in a generous portion of Kiger’s favorite salt oils and sighed with pleasure as the steaming water became sweetly scented and slippery against her skin.

She closed her eyes and floated lazily in the water, listening to the faint hums that signaled the water shutting off and the heaters kicking on to maintain the water temperature she had set.

I'll talk to Kiger when he gets home, she decided sleepily as the heat leached her energy. Baths always turned her to mush and were her favorite cure for insomnia, which is why she usually took showers in the morning instead.

I do want Hadri; I think. Hell, how bad can it be? Thea keeps up with her guys. Doesn't she? Besides, Kiger doesn't like conflict and even before I became the Wicked Witch of the West I liked a good argument. She waved a lazy hand in the silky water and smiled up at the ceiling. *Guess I'll have to talk to Thea about Ta'e'shian marriage customs.* Her thoughts meandered in different directions as she thought of scenarios for problems that could come up from being involved with two men. *Definitely a long engagement*, she decided as she waded out of the water some time later to dry off. *I won't have to worry about making love when I don't want to either.* Her sex drive flowed in cycles. Sometimes she was a horny little sex kitten and other times she felt frigid. It was one of the reasons she had always been wary of getting into a relationship. Sex could make or break a marriage.

She walked into the bedroom she now shared with Kiger and relaxed on the bed to enjoy the feel of the air caressing her nude body. Suddenly she realized she was being way too accepting of everything. Suspicion raised its ugly head and she glared up at the bed's canopy. *What the fuck? Am I becoming domesticated? I should be thoroughly pissed at Hadri. He's a sneaky rat!* She chewed on her lower lip while she contemplated her lack of resentment.

A scratch at the door signaled that Shrayne wanted to come in. She rolled onto her belly. "C'mon in."

The cat strolled in and jumped up on the bed. Her tail flicked over Ruri's back as she lay down.

Ruri smiled at the caress and scratched her familiar behind the ear. "What's up, pretty kitty?" she asked as the cat purred and leaned into her hand.

"Your thoughts are buzzing," the leopard replied in her gentle voice. *"I thought you might want to talk."*

Ruri folded her arms and rested her chin on them. "I was just wondering why I'm not so crabby and don't feel the urge to strangle Hadri." She unfolded one arm and picked at the coverlet with a fingernail. "It doesn't seem normal for my emotions to pull a complete one-eighty. Makes my wonder if I'm being manipulated."

Shrayne sprawled on her side as her tail flicked back and forth across Ruri's back. *"Mmm, good questions, I would say yes and no. But, it's not Hadri doing it."*

Ruri turned her head to study her friend as a flicker of resentment sprang to life. She didn't like knowing someone was messing with her head. "Who then?"

"Thea mostly, but you're manipulating yourself too," was the calm reply.

Ruri jerked. "Thea?" She couldn't believe her friend would do something like that.

"Yes. She probably isn't aware of it, though. It's part of her ability to heal people. It's stronger with those she cares about and it's instinctive." The cat paused to lick her paw. Once she completed the little chore she continued. *"Every time she's around you she takes away some of the hurt, anger, and other bad stuff. And since her element cancels or negates yours it gives you time to find your balance a little more each time. That means you have better control of yourself. Please don't be angry at her,"* the cat added earnestly. *"She's still learning and I don't think she's aware she's doing it. Even if she is, she wouldn't be able to stop because she loves you and wants you to be happy."*

Ruri had to laugh at that. "You don't have to defend Thea to me, honey. Trust me, she can hold her own and she isn't all sweetness and light. If you think she is, man, has she got you snowed!"

The cat chuffed in amusement.

Ruri rolled onto her back again. "So it's not some nefarious plot, huh?"

Shrayne rolled onto her back as well, her paws sticking into the air comically. “*Nope. It’s just that you are feeling better.*”

“Huh.” Ruri fell silent as she mulled that over. She folded her hands under her head and absently watched Shrayne bat at the air. “What about Hadri?”

Shrayne’s paws stilled. “*Hadri is different,*” she replied. Her mind-voice took on a pensive quality. She suddenly rolled over and pinned Ruri with an intense stare. “*You need to talk to him about the Lord and Lady.*”

“Why?” Ruri asked warily. She didn’t like talking to outsiders about her religion. Her family hadn’t responded to her conversion well and it made her hesitant to talk about it with anyone who wasn’t a witch.

“*I’m not sure.*” The leopard sounded a little lost. “*They just want you to.*”

Ruri chewed on her lip again “Okay.” It wouldn’t be wise to ignore that. She had no desire to get a Cosmic Bitch Slap, as Thea called them, from the Lord and Lady for ignoring a request They made. “What do you think of Hadri?”

Shrayne snorted delicately. “*I think he spends way too much energy trying to be subtle.*”

Ruri snickered.

“*But you would be good for each other and Kiger.*” Her voice softened. Shrayne had a soft spot for Kiger. “*And if he gets too uppity I’ll pee in his boots,*” she added with a wicked tilt to her ears.

Ruri laughed. “Ya know Kyrin is still hiding his boots from Condezl after the last hairball incident.”

Shrayne’s mouth fell open in a cat grin and she rubbed her head against Ruri’s cheek before hopping off the bed and heading for the door. “*I’m going hunting. Be back later.*”

“Be safe,” Ruri called after her.

The cat's tail waved a jaunty acknowledgment as the door slid shut behind her, leaving Ruri to wonder just how the cats managed to work the doors and computers on the ship. She had asked Shrayne once and the snow leopard had narrowed her eyes, stuck out her fangs, and intoned "ancient Chinese secret" with a bad accent. Ruri snickered again, remembering the cat's comical expression.

The conversation had woken her up a bit so she decided to throw on some clothes and see if she could catch up with Kiger in time for his dinner break.

Chapter Five

Ruri paused in the living room doorway and watched her husband read. Shrayne was stretched out next to him with her head on his lap and a blissful expression as he gently stroked her head and ears.

He lifted a hand to turn a page and immediately went back to stroking Shrayne's soft fur.

In the past week they had fallen into a pattern of easy camaraderie. Ruri found that she liked it. She had thought it would be harder for them to adjust to each other.

The cat was the first to notice her. She yawned and rolled to her feet. "*Is it time?*" she inquired softly.

Ruri nodded and the cat strolled out of the room without another word. Once again Ruri thanked the Lord and Lady for the gift of her companion. Shrayne was a loyal friend and took her role as counselor very seriously, and Ruri didn't know what she would do without having her friend to confide in. She found she could talk to Shrayne about things she didn't feel comfortable talking about with anyone else, including Thea.

Kiger set his book down and smiled at her warmly. "Did you need something, my love?"

Ruri settled into the couch across from him. "I wanted to talk to you about Hadri."

A flash of pain and sorrow crossed his face and his beautiful rose-gold hair twisted into a tight braid. "What about Hadri?"

"You broke off your relationship with him?" She made it a question.

"Yes," he replied cautiously.

"Why?"

Kiger looked disconcerted by the question. "I didn't it want to hurt you or upset what we are building." His braid lashed anxiously behind him.

A few months, or even weeks, ago she would have left it there, but she knew him better now. "You love him, don't you?" she asked softly. This was important to both of them, which is why she hadn't spoken to him about it before now. She had given herself time to decide what she wanted instead of talking to him about it that first night like she had originally planned.

It hadn't really been that difficult a decision, especially after she had started spending time with Hadri. Once you got past his need to control everything he was a big marshmallow inside and completely devoted to Kiger. And her. That had been a huge surprise to her. It had taken a few more touches before she had finally believed it.

"Yes," he replied sadly. "But that doesn't matter." He looked away and blinked rapidly.

"Why don't your needs matter as much as mine, Kiger?" she asked gently. It had rocked the foundations of her soul when she realized how much she loved the gentle man she was tied to. She had never said the words, though. She had a feeling he wouldn't believe her. Her actions had left him with little self-confidence and from things he had said, she knew he was scared to death that she would leave him again.

"They just don't," he replied shortly, standing up. "I don't want to talk about this any longer."

"Hadri wants --" she began.

“I said I don’t want to talk about this,” he yelled, cutting her off, his hair flared out behind him as he spun and stormed out of the room.

She winced when something crashed to the floor in the other room and a moment later she heard the door to their quarters open and shut. “Well, that went over like a lead balloon,” she muttered sarcastically to the empty room.

Time to pull out the big guns, she thought to herself. *Which will require a visit to Thea and then I’ll track down Hadri.* She had a plan. It was a cunning plan.

And if said plan backfired she was fucked.

Thea’s mouth dropped open. “You want what?”

Ruri repeated her request.

Thea’s eyes sparkled devilishly as she returned a few minutes later with the requested items. “Somehow I don’t think these are for you,” she said with a giggle as Ruri took them from her. “These are all new, so you can keep them. Daeshen stocked up before we left Ta’e.” Thea rolled her eyes. “Lady forefend we should run out before we can go back for more.”

“Thanks, babe,” Ruri said, kissing her friend on the cheek. She felt a blush heat her cheeks as she turned to leave.

“I expect details later!” Thea called after her.

Now she just had to find Hadri and hope he went along with her plan, because she couldn’t think of another way to get Kiger to take what he wanted. She had no intention of letting her husband be unhappy for the rest of his life because of a decision he wouldn’t even discuss with her.

* * * * *

“He’s going to kill us.”

“No, he won’t.”

Kiger woke slowly as the whispered argument penetrated his slumbering brain. He had worked a double shift that evening and was exhausted. "Ruri?" he mumbled. "What's going on?"

He heard Hadri hiss at his wife, "He's awake! Hurry up, damn it!" and felt metal close around his wrists. That jolted him wide awake. His eyes flew open and he stared up at his wife and former lover.

Ruri smiled wickedly down at him while Hadri looked pale and unsure. Somehow that just made him more nervous. Hadri was never unsure of himself. He always had a plan. He tugged his arms and heard the chain linking the cuffs together rattle against the bedpost above his head. A warm flame of nervous anger burst to life in him. "What is this?" he growled, glaring at the culprits.

Ruri leaned down, her mouth hovering just above his. "You told me I could take a lover, darling. I decided I want to share yours." Her lips feathered gently across his for several moments before she deepened the kiss and flickered her tongue across his tightly closed lips in invitation.

Hurt and fury welled in him. His wife wanted a lover! He had hoped that she was finally happy with him and now this. His heart felt like it was breaking and for once he wanted to hurt her like she had hurt him. He opened his mouth and bit down hard.

Ruri jerked back with a squeak and wiped her fingers across her lips. "You bit me!" There was blood on her fingers. She glowered and swiped a bag off the bed and dug in it for the gag she knew Thea had thrown in there. Her cheeks heated when she took it out and saw that the small rubber item was shaped like a miniature penis, complete with little rubber frills that mimicked those found on a Ta'esshian penis.

Her husband's eyes widened at the sight of it and he clamped his mouth shut.

She crawled up his body awkwardly and straddled his sheet-covered hips and teased the gag against his flat lips. "Open," she coaxed, "if you can't use that mouth for nice things it gets something else to chew on."

He shook his head as arousal swirled in his eyes with the angry red sparks that were already shooting out of them. Oh was he pissed!

Somehow that just made her want to make him bow before her even more.

She leaned closer and placed her mouth right up against his, the gag brushing her lips. "Be a good boy, Kiger, and I'll give you some sweet candy," she whispered. Hadri sighed behind her and she felt the bed depress as he climbed on it and pushed his face next to hers.

"Please, Kiger, open your mouth." His deep voice vibrated against the rubber penis. He moved his mouth and nibbled Kiger's ear gently. "We just want to love you."

Kiger whimpered softly and shivered but kept his mouth tightly shut.

"I'm going to make love to your wife while you watch, my beloved," Hadri growled softly into Kiger's ear, "and then I'm going to make love to you until you scream for mercy."

Kiger's penis hardened under her buttocks and he moaned in defeat. His mouth opened in a long sigh. "Yes, love me," he groaned. His tongue flickered out to taste the gag as Ruri slowly pressed it in.

Watching his mouth purse around the imitation cock and begin to suck at it with a needy expression made warmth pool in her belly. She clipped the straps around the back of his head and then slowly sat up, her hands trailing down his smooth chest. He was beautiful in his submission. In a flash she realized that her husband liked having his control taken from him.

He never would have taken Hadri back unless she forced it because it was against his nature to. He wanted her to make the decisions for him, but if she didn't make it clear this first time that Hadri was permanent he would just think she wanted it once in awhile. That she wanted it for him just as much would never occur to him. In that moment she knew that

she would need to have a very long talk with Thea about bondage and submission. She couldn't hurt him and would need to know how to meet his needs. Just the thought of meeting those needs made her labia swell and rub against her clothing with aching sensations.

Hadri was stretched out beside them, his mouth spreading kisses along Kiger's neck as his hands roamed over her husband's skin in feverish need. She knew he was starved for Kiger's touch and love. He had been wilting like a flower without water in the week that Kiger and he had been apart.

She rocked her hips against the tantalizing erection pressing against her buttocks. Kiger's eyes opened and he stared up at her worshipfully. "That was very naughty of you, Kiger," she whispered in a throaty voice. "Biting me like that. I may have to spank you later."

His red-amber eyes flamed with lust at her words and he whimpered softly around the gag in his mouth. His hips rose under her, lifting her slightly off the bed.

Hadri raised his head and smiled at her with slumberous desire. "I think he liked that, my dear." His fingers pinched Kiger's nipples, first one and then the other. "But not yet. I want you first." He flowed up and eased behind her, straddling Kiger's thighs. His hands slid down her arms and she sighed with pleasure. He lifted them to wrap around his neck as he bent his head to taste the curve of her neck.

She tilted her head to grant him better access as his fingers skimmed across her still-clothed form. His fingers came to rest on her belly and he slowly slid them under the hem of her shirt. "Are you watching, Kiger? Isn't she beautiful? See how golden her skin is against mine?" He eased the shirt up her belly as Kiger moaned unintelligibly behind his gag. His amber-red eyes tracked Hadri's hand eagerly and he pulled anxiously against the cuffs. "You've tormented me for a week now, Kiger. I ache with want and I'll ease it in your wife's tight body."

Ruri shuddered when Kiger bucked and growled under them. Hadri finally teased the shirt over her head and arms and tossed it aside. His large hands cupped her ribs, just under her bare breasts. His thumbs rubbed lightly against the undercurves and her nipples hardened and plumped out in invitation.

She sighed as he finally cupped the small globes and held her nipples between his thumbs and forefingers. He rolled them teasingly between his fingers and set his teeth into her shoulder, biting down with gentle firmness.

“Doesn’t she have beautiful tips, Kiger? I can’t wait to taste them. I’ll roll them in my lips and lave them with my tongue.” One of his hands released her breast and slid back down to her belly. “We’ll love this sweet body until she’s ripe with our child and we’ll finally be a family. Isn’t that what you’ve always wanted, my love?”

She whimpered as his hand continued to tunnel into her pants and finally arrived at her damp slit. He rubbed his palm in slow circles against her hairless mound. “Oh, she’s wet, Kiger. Already moist and slippery on my fingers. Would you like to taste?”

The smaller man moaned and pulled against his shackles, his gaze was glued to the spot where Hadri was rubbing her so slowly and sensuously.

“Oh, that feels so good,” Ruri gasped out as Hadri slid a finger into her lips and massaged the tight opening to her vagina. “It’s so sweet, Kiger.”

He growled against his gag, straining his head up to better see what the other man was doing.

“Would you like me to take her clothes off so you can see how wet she is, my love?” he asked in a gentle voice.

Kiger nodded eagerly.

Hadri released Ruri’s breast and slid his fingers teasingly out of her moist lips. “Stand up, darling, show him what he’s missing.”

Ruri reached back and held Hadri's shoulder as she stood above the men on the bed. Hadri's hands curved around her waist to hold her steady as he rose to his knees so she could rest against him. Once she was sure of her balance Hadri flicked open the catch to her pants and slowly peeled them down her legs. She hadn't worn any undergarments today, knowing what was coming.

She daintily stepped free of the pants and Hadri tossed them carelessly aside. His hands cupped the cheeks of her ass for a moment and he pressed a kiss against the firm globes as a hand returned to the task of caressing her wet slit. Her knees trembled as arousal shook her. It was so sexy to have him touch her while her husband watched with hungry eyes.

Hadri peeked at Kiger from around her hip. He rubbed his cheek against her. "Would you like to taste, lover?"

Kiger nodded eagerly, mumbling around the rubber penis in his mouth.

Hadri chuckled evilly. "You can't, though, because you were a naughty boy and bit her." He tsked. "And these lips are much too tender to be gnawed upon."

Kiger moaned in disappointment as he cast a yearning look toward Ruri's damp pussy.

She rolled her hips more firmly into Hadri's caress just to torment Kiger a little more. Her husband strained against the cuffs and just barely managed to knock her off balance. With a gasp she swayed and fell to her knees and then sprawled over him.

Kiger chuckled behind his gag and rubbed his cheek against the top of her head.

She giggled and raised her head. "Bad Kiger, no cookie."

His eyes danced back at hers.

Hadri laughed and pulled Ruri away. "Just for that little trick you get to watch longer." He sprawled beside Kiger and rested his head on the other man's belly and tugged at Ruri until she knelt above him.

Ruri swallowed hard at the dark, sensual enjoyment on his face as he slowly pulled her pussy to his mouth. Kiger whimpered as Hadri's lips parted and his pointed tongue delicately danced over Ruri's mound.

She moaned softly at the fleeting touch and bucked her hips closer as his tongue withdrew.

He chuckled and pulled her closer to lap slowly along her damp slit. His tongue wiggled a bit, parting the lips and then he was there. Swirling and tasting her juice and tickling her engorged clit. His fingers dug into her hips as he held her in place for his long, licking strokes. He growled with pleasure and watched her face.

She braced her hands on his shoulders and rolled her head to watch her husband. "So good," she murmured, gasping as Hadri focused his attentions on her clit once again.

Kiger growled and bucked his hips, making Hadri's mouth jerk against her. The taller man didn't even pause. Instead he latched his mouth onto her with a powerful suction and teased her to the point of madness. Only when she was writhing against him with all thought but the pleasure he coaxed out of her trembling body driven out did he finally relent and ease the delicious torture.

He gently pushed her off of him and scooted behind her.

"What are you doing?" Ruri asked softly as he fit his body closely to her back.

He cupped his hands over her breasts. "Taking you, lover." His voice had deepened and she could feel the rumble in his chest against her shoulders. His legs moved between her calves and spread her thighs. Then he sat back on his folded legs and pulled her hips down. The tip of his erection brushed her sex, moist and hot.

She groaned as he held himself steady with one hand and slowly pulled her down, penetrating her tight channel carefully. It took several minutes for his thick shaft to completely fill her and finally her buttocks were pressed tightly against him. Her legs were spread to either side of his, giving Kiger a clear view of Hadri's cock buried in Ruri. She

looped her arms behind her to toy with his hair as he lifted and lowered her over him. He fucked her with slow, delicious movements while Kiger mumbled encouragingly behind his gag.

She groaned when Hadri stopped moving her and let her rest against him. His hair curled around her hands and held them in place as he pinched and tugged at a nipple with one hand while his other hand teased her aching clit.

“Do you want me to fill your belly, little girl?” Hadri murmured in her ear. “Do you want me to flood your hot pussy with cream?” His fingers moved faster and her hips jerked eagerly into the caresses.

“Oh yes, oh yes,” she moaned, feeling him slide in and out just an inch or two as she rocked and writhed on him. Little tremors of pleasure shook her and she knew her orgasm was quickly approaching, whether he wanted it or not.

He grabbed her and held her still against him as he grunted and she felt the flare of his frills in her and his cum spurted into her eager body. The tiny webbed spines fluttered and vibrated and Ruri screamed as she slipped over the edge. *God, I love that!* She trembled and clenched around him as the electric waves rolled over her. She was aware that she was crying out with each pulse inside her but couldn't seem to stop herself. Hadri chuckled softly and ground himself into her and pulled back just a little so that the spines in his frills caught in the soft flesh in her vagina.

“Oh yes, little love, Kiger says you love that. Do you like feeling us come in you?” He stroked his hands over her breasts and teased the hard beads of her nipples.

“Yes, yes, yes,” she chanted as he pulsed inside her again.

“Mmm, I like coming in you too.” His tongue traced the shell of her ear as she keened softly. “I'll have to do it often.” He groaned as she tightened around him in one last contraction.

She trembled and relaxed limply against him as his hair untangled from her hands. With a smile she tilted her face to his for a soft kiss. His arms came around her middle and he cradled her tenderly against him as his mouth made love to hers with teasing strokes of his tongue. She lost herself in the sweet aftermath and gentle strength of his arms around her until Kiger cried out desperately and writhed against their knees.

She pulled her mouth away from Hadri's drugging kiss and blinked lazily at her bound husband. "Oh, love, it's your turn now."

Kiger's eyes were nearly wild with arousal as he watched them.

She slowly lifted herself off Hadri's softening penis and bit her lip at the exquisite tugging as his frills folded and eased from her. Reaching behind Kiger's head she released the gag's catch and he turned his head to spit it out.

"Kiss me," he panted imploringly. "Touch me, I burn." He lifted his head beseechingly and she folded herself across his chest and kissed him with slow passion. He whimpered into her mouth as his tongue dueled aggressively with hers. She purred softly as she felt Hadri move behind her and pull away the sheet that still covered Kiger's hips. He moaned and jerked and she lifted her head and glanced over her shoulder to see Hadri swallow the straining length of her husband's cock.

Kiger panted and arched into Hadri's suckling lips. "I want to taste him on you, wife," he moaned, thrusting in and out of his lover's mouth eagerly. His eyes stared into hers blindly.

She stole another kiss before turning and presenting her dripping sex to his mouth. Stretching out on him she nibbled and kissed his belly and then sighed as his tongue flickered across her pussy. He hummed with pleasure against her as his tongue dipped into her cum-filled sheath.

"So good," he murmured in a tight voice, lapping furiously. "Gods know I wanted to see you like this, wife."

Ruri rest her cheek on his belly and watched with dazed pleasure as Hadri scraped his teeth across the purpling crown on Kiger's penis. Her husband groaned again and nibbled on her clit, which pebbled under the caress and she pushed herself harder against him as renewed arousal coursed through her. It had a dreamy quality about it and a lack of urgency that indicated it would take a long time before she came again so she luxuriated in it and purred softly.

It didn't take Hadri more than a few more moments to have Kiger wild and ready to come. The taller man rose to his knees between Kiger's spread thighs and pumped the hard stalk between his lover's legs and aimed it at Ruri's face.

Under her Kiger screamed and Ruri moved down to lap at the dripping tip of her husband's cock. The tiny rose-gold frills popped open and he sprayed his hot seed against her tongue. She pulled back a bit to keep from getting him caught in her mouth and then continued to lap the delicious fluid away. He rambled hoarse, hot love words against her thigh as his orgasm racked his body under hers and she reveled in his pleasure.

While he was still shuddering she rolled off him and released his arms from the cuffs. His arms closed around her and he buried his face in her hair and cried softly. Hadri still knelt between Kiger's legs and watched with a longing expression. She held out her hand to him and a smile slowly transformed his face.

He clambered up to curl against Kiger's trembling form and gently stroked them both. He kissed the back of Kiger's neck and tears swam in his eyes when the smaller man's hair curled around him and pulled him closer. "I love you both so much," he whispered in a shuddering voice.

Ruri smiled and wrapped her arms around both her men and just held them. "My darlings." She pressed a kiss to Kiger's shoulder as he stopped crying and slowly began to return their caresses.

Epilogue

Thea glanced up at Sya'tia as the taller woman wrapped her arms around Thea's waist. Together they both inspected the turquoise and green silk veil Thea was weaving. "I hope you're right, lover," Thea said softly, caressing the smooth fabric.

"I'm right." Sya'tia sounded supremely confident.

It had only been a week or so since Sya'tia had come home and told Thea that she needed to start working on a marriage veil for Ruri to offer someone.

She didn't know what compelled her to use an old Earth coat of arms, but it seemed right as she stared down at the shield with a five-petal flower set in a circle in the center. Somehow she knew that it was Hadri's shield, even though she had never met him. She also knew that he would join the coven and she wasn't sure why that didn't bother her more.

This *knowing* raised more questions than it answered.

Obviously the Gods weren't done with her or her sisters yet.

~ * ~

Glossary of Terms

Arkaa -- planet where samples are to be collected

Arkaana -- ace of humanoid spider people

Asana -- Priest(s) and Priestess(es) of the Lithen; group term

Byasuen -- Goddess of Craft and Arts (Ta'e)

Cerebcom -- technology implanted in the brain to allow communication between a ship's artificial intelligence and/or another individual who also has an implant

Chosen -- individual of Ta'e'shian society who is born with markings showing they are favored by the Gods

Com -- to send a communication to someone using an implanted cerebcom

Corgan -- motorized object used to pull someone through water at high speed

Creamstal -- powdered shell of a sea snail, used in cooking

Crystalshroom -- type of mushroom that secretes a liquid that hardens upon contact with air, used in artwork

Chrystarea -- sea flower, blooms once every seven years

Deema -- affectionate term for "father"

Dorya -- small fish that travel in large school, also known as nibblers

Ecoha -- God of Craft and Arts (Ta'e)

Felbos -- messy sea creature; similar to a monkey

Gaia -- generic name used to refer to Lady of Witches (Goddess)

God-marks -- features used to identify Chosen of the Gods

Holoreader -- a small flat computer used in place of paper
Iliria -- Goddess of Healing (Ta'e)
Kashka -- Goddess of Warriors (Ta'e)
Kya -- Honorary title for a Ta'e'shian female
Kye -- Honorary title for a Ta'e'shian male
Kyen -- Gentleman, or gentlemen
Kysout -- God of Soul Renewal (Ta'e)
Lavoaya -- dinner dish made with seafood, dish title, not an ingredient
Lith -- single set of Gods and Goddesses of the Ta'e'sha
Lithen -- Gods and Goddesses of the Ta'e'sha as a whole group
Meecha -- animal native to Ta'e
Mo'aton -- God of Healing (Ta'e)
Samonan -- Goddess of Soul Renewal (Ta'e)
Saras -- shape shift; to change one's form
Sea Fern -- food plant, grown and used similarly to wheat
Sha'ki -- moon of Shya, to be terraformed
Shaysha -- Goddess of Spiritual Balance and Mental Healing (Ta'e)
Sho'bi -- moon of Shya, to be terraformed
Shoomoe -- dinner dish of fish fillets and fried vegetables
Shya -- planet to be terraformed
Skye -- generic name used to refer to Lord of Witches (God)
Solune -- God of Spiritual Balance and Mental Healing (Ta'e)
Sparker -- wire suit, used as a sex toy
Tabet -- Goddess of Atlantis
Teirnan -- God of Atlantis
Vaton -- Eating utensil, combines knife and fork
Vosh -- God of Warriors (Ta'e)

 THE END 

Theolyn Boese

Theolyn Boese lives in Oregon with her wide assortment of animals, which include two cats, Goblyn and Stupid (yes that really is his name and well earned), a Border Collie named Fuzzbutt, a few ducks, and her pheasant, Samurai.

She has been writing since grade school, starting with a poetry class her teacher enrolled her in to help her learn to work with dyslexia. Bolstered by her teacher's faith in her she quickly learned to love reading and writing instead of being afraid of it. Soon after she was reading voraciously and scribbling poems on everything.

She would love to hear from her readers and invites them to write to her at Sabrielle@gmail.com, and to check out her website at <http://www.theolynboese.com>.