



THE TA'E'SHA CAESURAE:
CRIMSON SHACKLES

Theolyn Boese

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Published by
Loose Id LLC
870 Market St, Suite 1201
San Francisco CA 94102-2907
www.loose-id.com

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ISBN 978-1-59632-839-6

Available in Adobe PDF, HTML, MobiPocket, and MS Reader

Printed in the United States of America

Editor: Crystal Esau
Cover Artist: Anne Cain

Chapter One

Shay paused at the sound of an auctioneer's fast-paced babble and glanced into the room it was coming from. Several well-dressed men and women milled around a stage that held a young woman in chains and tattered clothing. A moment later the bidding was concluded and the girl was dragged offstage, her face a mask of hopelessness.

Fucking slave auction, she thought in disgust as a young man was yanked roughly onto the stage. She hated slavers.

The handlers forced the young man to his knees. Acid burned in her stomach as memories assailed her. The handlers always got to have their fun before the auction, provided they didn't mar the "merchandise" too much.

It had been over a decade since she had been one of the poor souls on a stage very similar to the one she was looking at now, but the memories still had the power to make her sick. *Never again*, she vowed to herself. *I'll never give someone that much power over me again. Death first; it's a kinder Mistress.*

She was about to walk away when the young man slowly raised his head. A jolt went through her when she saw the burning hatred in his eyes as he gazed at the people murmuring excitedly in the audience. As she watched, the hatred faded into dull acceptance.

His hair was leaf green and barely brushed his shoulders. She squinted for a better look as it seemed to move around his head with a life of its own. Each strand ended with a black spot as if it had been burned off.

He looked half-starved, but his lean frame hinted that he would have been strong and muscular if he had ever been given enough food and care to grow into the broad shoulders that graced him. A shimmer of color around his hands caught her attention. Someone had tattooed leafy vines and starbursts along his wrists and hands in an iridescent green, which matched his hair. *Odd, maybe one of his former masters did it.* Although, it was rare for a slave to be permanently marked, as it lowered his resale value in this sector. His deep green eyes threw daggers at the crowd of vultures waiting for the bidding to begin.

Unconsciously, she took another step into the room and absently took the bidding chit an attendant handed her. Her movement somehow caught the slave's attention and his gaze collided with hers.

He held her stare as if it were the only lifeline in the universe as the auctioneer began listing his attributes.

"Male of unknown race, approximately twenty cycles in age. Excellent body slave. Unfortunately, he's impotent," the auctioneer began, ignoring the murmurs of dissatisfaction that rolled through the crowd. "However, he has a fine, tight ass for the discerning gentleman and has been well broken to ride." The auctioneer motioned to the handlers, and they yanked the slave to his feet and spun him around, tearing off the loincloth that was wrapped around his genitals.

One of the handlers leered at the crowd and squeezed the slave's ass, pulling the cheeks apart to flash the crowd.

The auctioneer continued without pause, "His vocal cords have been cut since he had some ability to cloud minds with his voice. We do not recommend having them rebuilt." He paused and scanned the restless crowd. "Damaged, but still usable. What am I bid?"

Shay watched the slave tremble, his back still to the crowd. “*Please help me,*” a wispy voice said in her mind. She jerked and looked around cautiously. Psychics were hunted and killed in this area of space as heretics to a faith no one really worshiped anymore. If anyone learned she could hear people’s thoughts, she would be dead within a week and so would her partner.

A halfhearted bid of one thousand credits scrolled up on the reader board and the auctioneer tried to drum up a few more. Shay watched with one eye as she continued to scan the crowd.

Another bid scrolled, someone was offering fifteen hundred credits. It was a ridiculous amount for a slave. The average amount was twenty thousand, but no one really wanted an impotent troublemaker, and having his vocal cords cut indicated a difficult slave, no matter what the auctioneer claimed.

Suddenly the bid jumped to five thousand and a deep voice rolled across the room. “I’ll take the little scrap. The crew needs a new toy.”

Ice formed an ugly ball in the pit of her stomach. She knew that voice. Everyone else in the room knew it too and backed away like herd animals scenting a predator.

Skand Toolon.

Pirate. Assassin. Slaver. Pedophile.

The local government hired him to keep the other parasites away. And as long as they kept him supplied with his favorite toys, he did it. Occasionally he just took what he wanted. No one disputed anything he did because people who pissed him off had a habit of disappearing and then showing back up. In chunks.

Not quite sure why she did it, she bid eight thousand on the slave. Gods knew she didn’t need the trouble, but she also knew what would happen to the slave if Skand got hold of him. He’d pass the slave around to his crew until he died as a result of the gang rapes and beatings. Then, Skand would go buy another one for them.

Skand raised an eyebrow at the new bid that flashed up on the board and looked around slowly, obviously trying to figure out who was challenging him.

Shay inspected her fingernails and fixed a bored expression on her face, trying to act like she wasn't paying attention. *Pick your battles, baby*, she thought to herself. She would be happy stealing Skand's prize but wasn't stupid enough to give herself away so he could hunt them down.

He stopped glaring at the crowd and pushed the bid to nine thousand.

The handlers spun the slave around, and he stared at Skand. Fine, visible trembles shook his emaciated frame.

She didn't know how the slave knew who else was bidding and prayed he wouldn't look at her as she bid ten thousand.

The slave jerked his eyes to the floor and kept them there, almost as if he had heard her thoughts somehow. She didn't think she had sent anything; she was very careful about shielding her mind.

Skand scanned the crowd again and growled like a feral beast and bid eleven.

Shay's stomach jumped around her insides like it was trying to crawl up her throat as she bid twelve. *What the fuck am I doing?* she screamed in her head. She had already used up half her savings on a slave she didn't want. If the bidding went much higher, she would be forced to back out. Gods help the slave then. Skand was sure to take his anger out on him.

Suddenly Skand laughed. "I like a challenge, makes the rape more fun later," he snarled and exited the room from another door.

Fuck. Shay had just screwed herself. Whether she got the slave now or not, Skand would be after the person who dared to bid against him.

The auctioneer cleared his throat. "Any more bids?"

The crowd whispered and nudged, but no further bids flashed across the screen. Apparently, they had no desire to take on anyone who was willing to piss Skand off.

Feeling like her innards had turned to jelly, she used the chit to pay for the slave and arranged to pick him up in an hour. Then, she waited until three more slaves were sold before strolling out of the room with forced casualness, tossing the chit back to the attendant. She had pocketed the chit with the proof of ownership and lifted another out of someone's pocket. Now it would look like she had left without making a purchase.

Skand was lounging in the hall, watching everyone who came and went from the room. She nodded politely and continued on her way to the marketplace. She still had some supplies to arrange to have delivered to her ship, *Crimson Shackles*, before they could get as far from the station as possible. Hopefully, also before Skand figured out who stole the slave out from under him.

Her teeth started to chatter with nerves and she locked her jaw, trying to pretend nothing was wrong. She froze as she realized Skand could track her through the credit account she had used to pay. *Fuck! I gotta get that account closed out now!* She mentally thanked whatever Gods were listening that she had set up a temporary account when they had docked; there wasn't any way to track them once it was closed. Looking around slowly, she spotted a Cashet machine and strode toward it and had the account closed and cash chits issued to her. The machine burbled a cheerful message that the station was not responsible for lost or stolen chits and sang out a mechanical salutation before humming back into its passive mode.

A quick look assured her no one was paying her any attention, so she eased back into the flow of foot traffic and made herself scarce. *Raerei is gonna kill me!* she thought as she made arrangements for the deliveries hours sooner than her partner was anticipating.

* * * * *

Jaed'aden shook from the sick fear swirling through his body and he choked back the greasy nausea rising in his throat. He had all but given up hope that he would ever see his

people again. It had been eleven years since pirates had attacked the tiny shuttle his parents had been piloting toward a new planet they had wanted to explore.

Within minutes they had been overtaken and he had watched his parents die. His father had been the first, stabbed trying to defend his wives and children. He had been the lucky one. Jaed'aden's mothers had lasted weeks, slowly dying from the repeated rapes and beatings that had taken a toll on their bodies and minds. He knew that they would have died faster if he hadn't been with them. They had hung on as long as they could to do their best to keep him safe.

The pirates had thought it hilarious the way the women fought to defend him. They had devised many games to break his mothers' spirits. But their sick pleasure was completed by making him watch his mothers degrade themselves for his sake, making him watch as they were raped and beaten.

Both women were finally broken when the leader of the pirates raped him in front of them. When he finished, the man had cut his mothers' throats and held their twitching, choking forms so that their life's blood rained down on him.

He had been ten years old.

He had never learned of his baby sister's fate. He suspected the pirates had killed the three-year-old. She was too young to be useful, and the market for young children was almost nonexistent.

The handlers suddenly yanked on the manacles around his wrists and pulled him from of the stinking pen they kept the slaves in after the auction. They laughed as he tripped and stumbled and stuck him next to the door to await his new owner. *Please, Lithen, let it be someone kind*, he prayed desperately. He had hoped the lady with the sad eyes would buy him, but she hadn't seemed interested. *Don't let it be the man, please, not him!* The man who had bid on him looked evil and reminded him of the pirate who had captured his

family. Instinctively, he knew if that was who'd bought him he would be dead within a month.

The handlers hosed him down with cold water and wrapped a fresh loincloth around his hips before leaving him under the watchful eyes of the guards. He shivered as the wet, cold misery just added another layer to his despair.

As time passed, his trepidation built until his tight muscles screamed in agony.

A tall man with red hair slipped silently into the room and spoke to the guards quietly. After a minute of arguing, the guard motioned toward Jaed'aden and gave the man a key. The redhead took it and claimed Jaed'aden, quickly removing the chain that was threaded through a metal loop in his manacles. He jerked his head to signal that Jaed'aden should follow.

Jaed'aden panted with fear as they quickly made their way to a men's restroom and the man pushed him into a cubicle.

The man leaned close and whispered in his ear. "Don't try to escape and do exactly what I say or we are both dead. Do you understand?"

That voice! He nodded quickly. The man spoke with a woman's voice. It was deeper than average for a woman and husky, but definitely female. He took the coarse brown robe thrust at him and held very still as his new owner removed the manacles and the nerve threads attached to them to keep the slaves under control.

He wiggled into the clothing as soon as his hands were free and covered his hair with the hood. The man touched a device on his belt and suddenly he was short, with medium brown hair and looked so completely average Jaed'aden knew anyone looking at him would forget about him ten minutes later.

Jaed'aden's new owner attached a similar device to his belt and punched a couple of buttons on it and then motioned for him to follow again. They exited the restroom through another door and Jaed'aden tried to mimic the man's casual stroll. He must have been

mistaken about the voice because he had never seen a woman who could walk like a man before.

They meandered through the crowds for several minutes as if they had nowhere important to be and he was surprised when they were suddenly at the docks.

His owner gave up the pretense of casualness and grabbed Jaed'aden's elbow and hustled him through the rows of ships. His stomach roiled at the touch and he tried to keep up as best he could, but it had been several days since the slavers had bothered to feed their cargo, and he was feeling dangerously weak.

They stopped in front of a small, worn ship and his owner punched in the codes that would allow them to board. He was shoved inside and the door closed behind them.

His owner sighed with relief and turned off the disguising device.

It was the lady he had watched!

She had long, dark brown hair with lighter streaks woven through it, and pale, reddish-brown eyes that were set into pointed features that reminded him of his own people's. Her feminine frame was leanly muscled and looked strong and healthy.

He smiled tentatively, feeling hopefully for the first time in years. Maybe this time he would have a good Mistress instead of a cruel one. At the very least, it wasn't likely she would have the same cruelly sadistic streak his former Mistress had taken such pleasure in displaying.

She glowered at him for a minute before turning off the device at his waist. "C'mon, cutie, let's get our asses chewed." She took his hand and led him into the rest of the ship.

A door slid open at the end of the hall and a huge man stepped into the hall. He had long, black hair that fell to his knees in a silken curtain, "I hope you have a damned good reason for sending those supplies two hours..." He stopped talking as his gaze landed on Jaed'aden.

"We gotta go, Raerei. Now!" his Mistress snapped out. "Chew butt later, get away from here first. Skand is gonna be looking for us."

The man spat out a curse and spun around. The door opened into the cockpit of the small craft, and the woman pushed Jaed'aden inside and strapped him into a chair.

"I know this is confusing, cutie, but just stay here until we can get off this metal nightmare, *dinii?*" She smiled weakly and patted his cheek.

Jaed'aden sucked in a breath as the heat from her touch lingered on his cheek and spread through him. Such a tiny touch, but it was the first kindness he had felt in eleven years, and it rocked him to his core. He shook with confusion and huddled back into the chair as she moved to strap herself into the copilot's seat.

They spoke to the docking attendant quickly as they started preparing the ship for liftoff. Then their voices faded as he realized he had no idea what was going to happen to him now. In the past, Mistresses and Masters had pretended kindness in the beginning. They were always the worst once the masks fell away.

Shay was aware of Raerei watching her as the ship slowly lifted away from the station and then quickly increased speed. He obviously wasn't taking any chance that she was stretching the truth about Skand. The silence that filled the cockpit was heavy and broken only by the slave's frightened panting behind them. It sat around her like a smothering blanket of tension.

Half an hour later, Raerei found a strong solar wind and cut the engines so that the ship drifted into it. Then, he hit the commands to unfurl the sails and the ship shuddered as they filled with the winds and began to glide with the invisible currents of space. His next command turned on the shadowing device that would make it nearly impossible to track them.

Solar sailing was a pastime that had fallen out of fashion over two hundred years ago. Now, it was rare anyone even knew what it was. Shay wasn't sure why the *Crimson Shackles* was equipped with the archaic mode of travel, but over the years the pair had found it very handy for losing a tail. The sails also needed very little energy to control, and that saved them many credits in fuel costs. Their sails were a carefully guarded secret.

Raerei checked their heading and made calculations on where the winds should take them before setting the ship to autopilot and turning in his chair to glare at her with a menacing expression. "You want to tell me what the fuck is going on now?" he growled out from behind clenched teeth. His deep, raspy voice sounded like rocks grinding together just then.

"Um," she mumbled, checking the slave. He had curled himself into a compact ball and was watching them with wide eyes. He trembled when Raerei followed her line of sight and ground his teeth.

"There was this slave auction on the station and I just stopped for a second. Then they brought him up and I stayed to watch." She was talking so fast her tongue was tripping over the words. She'd never seen her partner so pissed off. "And Skand showed up and started bidding on him." She swallowed convulsively. "He wanted a new toy for his crew," she finished with a whisper, knowing that her face was haggard with memories of being a similar toy.

Raerei blanched, his normally dusky skin turning a grayish-green. He knew as well as she did what would have happened to the boy. After all, both of them had had run-ins with Skand before they had escaped and shed their slave names. Both still had the scars to remember it by and still woke screaming on the bad nights when nothing could dull the memories. Raerei threw himself out of the chair and towered over the cowering slave. "What's your name?" he barked out.

The slave convulsed silently and curled into a tighter ball, staring up at him with abject terror. He shook his head frantically, darting glances between the two of them as if he was

not sure who was the greater threat. His blatant fear made her muscles contract with the need to comfort him.

Shay pushed herself out of her chair and moved to stand between the two of them. "He can't answer you, Rae; they cut his vocal cords."

If possible, her partner became even more furious. "The ship isn't equipped to repair something like that, Shay! And the minute we take him to a medic, Skand will know," he bellowed, veins standing out in his neck. "He'll find us within days! What in the names of the Gods were you thinking, woman?"

"I wasn't, dinii?" she screamed back at him, feeling cornered and unable to explain why she had risked both their lives for a stranger. "I just knew I couldn't stand there and do nothing!"

Rae sucked in a lungful of air and ran his fingers through his hair in frustration. "We can't keep him, Shay. He's too damned unique," he stated hoarsely. "Anyone who sees him will remember him. It'll pin a big fat target on our backs everywhere we go."

She touched Rae's shoulder. "We could keep him on the ship. Maybe try and find his people. There have to be more like him," she said hopefully. "You always said you wanted to leave this system and start over. Maybe this is our chance, Rae. We just needed a good reason to try." She bit her lip and shut up. They didn't ever bring up the subject of why they had never returned to their home planet.

He stared down at her for three full minutes without speaking, his black eyes still sparking angrily. "Fine, but he's yours to take care of." That said he spun on his heel and stomped toward the door. "We're sailing at least three days to make sure no one is following us. If it looks clear we'll stop at Devret for supplies, if you can figure out where the fuck we're supposed to go from there," he snarled over his shoulder.

Shay blew out a long breath. "Well, that was the hard part, right?" she said with forced cheerfulness as she turned back to the boy.

He was huddled in the ugly robe she had given him and making soft hissing mews of terror. She suspected whoever had cut his cords hadn't finished the job properly because he made more sounds than he should have been able to. He flinched and cringed back away from her when she crouched down in front of him and released restraining straps. Little moans of helpless fear seeped past his compressed lips.

"Hey, cutie, it's all right, Rae's all bark and no bite," she whispered the lie soothingly as she unbuckled the safety straps and placed her hands on the armrests where they would be in plain view and empty. She was careful not to touch him, because she knew it would only push him further into the fear. His eyes flickered wildly from green to pure black every time he glanced at her. "No one is going to hurt you. You're safe here," she crooned reassuringly, carefully watching his body language to see if anything she was saying was sinking in or if she would have to sedate him.

Suddenly he uncoiled from the chair and launched himself at her. Her screech of surprise was cut short when he landed on her and knocked the air from her lungs. Her hands were already reaching for his throat when he hunched his shoulders and buried his face in her belly and began to sob brokenly.

She slowly sat up and cradled him against her. In silence, she stroked his hair and rocked him, letting him cry. A movement at the door caught her attention and she looked up to see Raerei leaning into the room. His fingers dug into the top of the metal jamb as he watched the young man weep. Rae's eyes were haunted with memories as he gazed down on them.

He shook himself like a *froegin* shedding water and silently left again.

The tears slowly subsided to a trickle, and he wound his body around hers like a vine as he drew in shuddering breaths. Her vest was soaked but she didn't mind.

Her fingers paused their stroking when one of the blackened tips crumbled and the strand began bleeding. *What are you?* she wondered silently. His hair felt most like faintly abrasive skin than any hair she had ever touched.

"Ta'e'sha..."

The word had no meaning to her as it floated through her mind. Her gaze jerked from the blood on her fingers to his face. *"Can you hear me?"* she sent tentatively with her mind.

"Yes..." The acknowledgement sighed through her thoughts as dark green eyes met hers.

Her muscles rippled with nerves. Gods help them all, he was a telepath. She cupped his cheeks and stared hard at him. "You must never 'path to anyone except Raerei or me," she whispered urgently. "Do you understand?"

Another "yes" breezed through her head as he sucked in another sobbing breath. His liquid green eyes gazed up at her trustingly. It rocked her soul. How had he held on to the innocence and hope she saw in him? Slaves usually had both qualities beaten out of them very quickly. It was at odds with the hate she had glimpsed briefly in his eyes when he had stood on the auction block.

"Does it hurt?" she asked softly, referring to his hair as several more of the black tips fell away and began to seep blood. He nodded slowly, and the raw ends brushed against his clothing, staining the material.

"I'll never have a mate now," he 'pathed to her in the same sad, whispery voice. *"No man or woman would take a mate who is so damaged and made to look like a child."* Despair edged his mental voice. *"The Mistress cut it before she sold me."* A violent shiver wracked his half-starved body. *"It hurt so much."* His eyes turned glassy with remembered agony. *"I could feel every snip, and she did it one strand at a time to make it last."*

"Well, let's see if we can make it feel better," she said, trying to sound upbeat when all she really wanted to do was find "The Mistress" and beat her head against a wall until blood

poured from her ears. She wiggled out from under him and tugged him up, wrapping an arm around his waist when he staggered. Once he had his balance, she led him through the halls toward the ship's tiny medical cubicle.

She gently pushed him into the unit and closed the lid, smiling reassuringly down at his frightened face through the plasglass window as she set the controls to scan and repair. White mist filled the chamber, and she held his gaze until the sleeping gas overtook him. Once she was sure he wouldn't wake, she sighed tiredly and went looking for Rae to tell him their little foundling was a telepath. She smacked her forehead when she realized she hadn't remembered to ask him his name. *I can't keep calling him cutie. I'll ask him later.*

Chapter Two

Raerei looked up from his plasreader when she stepped tentatively into the room. He tossed the reader onto the table beside his bunk. "Well?" he asked brusquely.

"He's in the medic," she answered tiredly. "Rae, he's a telepath."

Rae's facial muscles tightened. "This just keeps getting better and better, Shay. Any more surprises?"

She shook her head and looked at the floor. "Not that I know of, but I'm not holding my breath at this point." The medical chamber dinged softly and announced it had completed its scan and was beginning repairs. "At least he's enough like us that the medic can work on him."

Rae grunted and picked up his reader again, pointedly ignoring her.

Shay slinked out of his cabin, hoping he wouldn't stay angry with her for long. Their relationship was complicated enough without the added tension. She went to her cabin to try and find some clothing that would fit their new crewmate. He looked close to her size, although she had a suspicion that he should have grown much taller. Obviously years of neglect had stunted his growth.

Raerei set down his reader when the door hissed shut behind Shay. His brooding gaze was drawn to the clear plasglass case bolted to the far wall. The items displayed inside it were a daily reminder of his past. Four sets of iron shackles still coated with the rusty stains of his and Shay's blood. Every day he vowed they would never wear them again.

Shay's actions today jeopardized that vow.

Even while he was angry with her he knew why she did it, although she probably wasn't aware of the reason. It was in her scent. A subtle shift in the alluring fragrance that was hers alone. A new thread wound through it. It was ripe and heavy with a call toward the men she had chosen to father her children. That scent hung on the young man like an invisible cloak. It would tease and beckon the slave as surely as it did Raerei.

The vicious animal inside him, a remnant of his life as a slave fighter in the pits, was warring with the half-forgotten cultural imprints that demanded he accept and even embrace the man his mate had chosen for them.

He wanted to kill the rival for her affection. He wanted to cover him in his scent at the same time. The conflicting desires made his body shake and he hunched over, burying his fingers in his hair. Harsh, ragged breaths filled the air as he attempted to control himself.

Rae feared losing Shay to the newcomer. Even trembling in terror, gentleness rolled off the boy in waves. He would be able to nurture Shay in a way Rae never could. There was nothing left in Rae that was gentle. He was hard, scarred, and brutal, filled with a rage that fed Shay's. Their mating was fiery and full of explosive arguments followed by near-violent passion.

He didn't know how he could compete with a young man who had the potential to steal away the thing Rae most valued. How could he accept another man? Rae had fought viciously for everything he had. Now, he would be expected to share. His nails lengthened into razor-sharp talons and pricked his scalp. Rae sucked in a shuddering breath and released the death grip on his hair and sprawled back in his bunk.

He would have to find it inside himself to care for the newcomer. He would find a way to woo the young man, integrate the three of them into a family.

Because the price of failure was more than he could bear.

Shay paused in the doorway of her cabin and stared at her bunk with dismay. There wasn't an extra bunk on the ship and she had a hunch Rae had no intention of sharing his. He was even more territorial about his private space than she was. *Crap, I hope cutie doesn't snore.*

It took her almost an hour to repair one of her old jumpsuits for him to wear. She decided to work on a couple more while he was in the medic, since she had plenty of time before she had to start fixing their dinner. She was feeling a little smug about still having the suits, since Rae had been trying to sneak them into the trash since she had quit wearing them. It had become both a game and silent contest of wills.

Raerei didn't want her to start wearing the staid suits again, and Shay's frugal nature wouldn't allow her to throw away something that was still useful.

Once she finished that project, she set out fresh towels in the tiny shower and went to find something for him to eat that wouldn't upset his stomach. Unless things had changed drastically at the auction houses, he probably hadn't been fed in days.

She remembered the fresh *rilanka* fruit she had bought for Rae before everything else happened and jogged back to her cabin to get it. Maybe if she made him a sweet with the fruit he would forgive her. It was unusual to find it on space stations since all attempts to grow it off its home planet had failed. It had cost a small fortune, but she didn't begrudge the credits she had paid for it. There had been so little pleasure in their lives that they both bought little presents for each other when they ran across them.

Peeling the leathery, spine-coated skins off the fruit was tedious, and she was only half-done when the medic chimed again, announcing the repairs were complete. Wiping her hands on a towel, she went to release the man.

He was already awake when she got there, which was surprising; the sedative should have still been active. He pressed his hands against the plasglass window and stared at her beseechingly.

She punched in the release code. "How long have you been awake?" she asked as the lid slowly slid up.

He coughed and shivered as he slithered bonelessly out of the unit and landed on his knees next to it. "*Don't know. A while. The mist smelled funny and something kept tickling me.*" Long locks of green hair followed him out and curled and swayed around his shoulders.

Shay blinked in surprise. "Uh, it made your hair longer."

His head jerked up and he looked at the long strands wonderingly. A slow smile spread across his face as he petted the freely moving tendrils.

Her heart clenched when he looked up at her. *Damn, he's beautiful*, she thought absently, entranced by the sweet smile that slowly turned shy.

"*I think you're pretty too,*" he said softly in her head.

A hot rush of crimson burned her cheeks. "Well, let's get you cleaned up. What's your name anyway? I can't keep calling you cutie." She tugged him up and led him toward her cabin. He wouldn't let go of her hand, so she finally twined her fingers through his and let him hold on.

"*My name is Jaed'aden.*"

"Hmm... Well, we don't usually use our full names once we reach adulthood where Raerei and I come from, but I can't see calling you Jae. Rae, Shay, and Jae just sounds stupid." She winked at him.

He blushed prettily. "*I don't mind if you call me cutie,*" he offered tentatively.

She giggled as she pushed him into the shower. "That would just make men want to beat you up. Don't worry about it, Jaed'aden. Go ahead and take a shower. You can close off the bottom portion of the shower to make a hip bath if you have trouble standing. When you're done, meet me in the galley and I'll give you something to eat, dinii? There's clean clothing for you on the bunk."

His stomach rumbled loudly at the mention of food and he blushed again. Without waiting for her to leave, he started stripping his clothing off and she beat a hasty retreat to give him some privacy.

She returned to the galley and the task of peeling the rilanka after stopping by Raerei's cabin door to shout their new passenger's name to him through the locked door.

Jaed'aden stared at the closed door in shock. He had expected his new Mistress to test his abilities. That was what usually happened. He might be impotent, but his mouth had been well trained to please, as had his ass. Feeling cast adrift, he turned and stepped into the cramped shower and closed off the bottom. He ran water into it and adjusted the temperature until it was where he liked it, then he sank to the floor. The water slowly rose around him and his parched skin eagerly absorbed it. It was a supremely sensual feeling and one of the few pleasures left to him after his enslavement.

The hip bath was far too small for him to *saras*, change forms, but it did allow him to open the gill slits under his collarbones. His gills burned and ached when the water began sliding through them and he longed to set his tail free. He hadn't seen his tail since before he was captured. Something told him to never allow anyone to know what he could do. Even now, feeling safer with Mistress Shay than he ever had before, he didn't want to risk his secret.

His eyes closed and he lolled in the water for as long as he dared. Finally, when he had used up most of the oxygen in the water and his gills weren't hurting as much, he slid

upward and started washing himself with a scrap of cloth and a handful of the special soap that was provided on ships. It was something that was easy to remove from the water and could be recycled back into soap again. Unfortunately, the scent left something to be desired. The water was gray by the time he felt clean, and he eyed it with distaste before draining the tub and turning the spray on to rinse the residual soap away. After he finished, he scrubbed the soap scum off the walls and stepped out of the shower. Warm air immediately began blowing on him, drying his skin and sucking all the moisture out of the room, where the ship would recycle it. He barely needed to use the towels left for him.

He dressed in the clothing she had provided for him. It covered him from the neck down, and he felt odd wearing so much. He was used to only wearing a loincloth. His newly grown hair wound itself into a braid and flipped itself over his shoulder. He stroked it with trembling fingers, still barely able to believe it was there. With it returned hope that if one day he could return to his people, he wouldn't spend his life as an outcast.

He crept out of the cabin and padded silently down the hall, peeking into the open rooms in search of his Mistress. He tapped on the doorjamb to let her know he was there.

She turned, holding a spiky plant in one hand and a knife in the other. "There you are," she said warmly. "Have a seat and I'll get you something to eat."

He cautiously eased onto the bench she indicated. He wanted to trust her so badly, but experience had taught him it was better to wait and see what happened first. He leaned back away from her as she set a tray down in front of him. It was confusing how he was instinctively drawn to her touch and still felt his normal revulsion from being touched by anyone. It was as if his instincts were at war with one another.

"I know, it's only grain cereal and bread, but you don't look like you've had much to eat lately, and it's easier on your stomach." She patted his shoulder and his muscles flinched away from the contact even though he didn't move. "I put some syrup on it, though, so it shouldn't be too bad," she added as an afterthought as she returned to the plants on the counter.

He waited until her hands were full before he tentatively picked up the spoon and took a bite of the food. He was so hungry that it took all of his willpower to not shovel the food in and fill his belly as fast as possible. Instead, he took tiny bites and chewed each thoroughly before swallowing. Not that hot grain cereal required much chewing. The dark bread was dense, sweet, and nutty. It was also worlds better than anything he had eaten in years.

He was full by the time he finished the small portion she had given him. He set the spoon down and waited to see what she would tell him to do next. She didn't seem to be paying him any attention as she hummed and sliced what he now realized was fruit into a bowl. He took the opportunity to study her and see if he could glean any insights as to what kind of woman she was. There had to be more to her than he had seen so far.

No one bought a slave just to be nice.

She finished slicing the fruit and seemed to notice the scrape of spoon on plastic had stopped. She turned with the bowl in her hands and opened her mouth to speak when Raerei came in.

He gave Jaed'aden a smoldering look, which caused Jaed'aden to cringe and hunch his shoulders submissively. Raerei transferred his attention back to Shay, and his gaze was drawn to the bowl in her hands. He focused on it with single-minded intensity as he slowly stalked into the room. His gaze slowly traveled over the fruit to her breasts, and Mistress Shay shivered in reaction to the burning lust that slowly tightened Rae's features. "Is that for me?" he rasped out.

She nodded slowly and offered him the bowl with both hands.

Rae paced across the room, casting another glance at Jaed'aden that was both predatory and territorial. He grabbed a handful of the hair at the back of Shay's head and pulled it to tilt her face upward. His mouth slammed down over hers as his free hand took the bowl out of her hands and slid it across the counter. Then he released her hair to unlace the vest securing her breasts and roughly pushed it off her shoulders.

His lips forced hers open and Jaed'aden saw Rae's tongue spear into her mouth in a voracious kiss. Rae's lips and throat flexed as he deepened the kiss. His fingers fumbled with the zipper, which ran the length of her flight half suit and curved past her pubic mound and her buttocks.

When a trilling moan vibrated in Shay's throat, Jaed'aden froze. It almost sounded as if she was in pain. His instincts warred within him. The need to protect his Mistress fought with the desire to hide and hope Raerei didn't notice him. He panted and clenched his fists, trying to decide what to do.

Raerei raised his head and finished pulling the zipper open. He growled ferally as Shay's full breasts spilled free and her pussy was exposed. Her skin was the same dusky shade of reddish-brown as Rae's. Her nipples and the small glimpse he had of her labia showed a deep brown that matched her hair.

Raerei turned his head, and another low sound rumbled in his throat as he locked his hard, glassy gaze on Jaed'aden. He snarled warningly, exposing double sets of small, serrated fangs in his upper and lower gums.

Shay's hands trembled and she seemed to melt submissively into the much larger male's body. She made soft chirping sounds and nuzzled his neck, resting her hands on his hips. The sounds reminded Jaed'aden of a distressed bird and pulled Rae's attention back to her.

After another warning glance at Jaed'aden, he turned back to her with a gentler kiss. His hands curved around her waist, and he lifted her onto the counter, nestling his hips between her legs. His deeper chirrup echoed hers as he spread kisses along her jaw and throat.

Rae's engorged penis sprang free as Shay opened his pants. She ducked her head and caught his mouth for another passionate kiss. She hummed softly when he pressed the full length of his cock against the dark skin of her pussy and ground it against her.

When Rae pulled back, her moisture coated him, making the dark-skinned pillar glisten. An unfamiliar tingle started in Jaed'aden's balls and spread into his flaccid penis in warm waves. Blood began to fill the length, bringing with it the first erection Jaed'aden had ever experienced. The tingle gave way to a pulsing ache, and Jaed'aden whimpered as his clothing quickly became uncomfortably tight and restricting.

He spread his legs to ease the pressure, freezing when the movement made Raerei's head snap around.

A soft growl thrummed in the big man's chest. His gaze locked with Jaed'aden's as he rolled his hips to spear the thick stalk of his penis into Shay's body. A wave of satisfaction rolled over his face when he was fully seated inside her. Never looking away from Jaed'aden, he set up a hard, pounding rhythm against Shay.

Whimpers escaped Jaed'aden's and Shay's throats as Raerei staked his claim over the woman wrapped so tightly around him. She buried her face in his throat and appeared oblivious to Jaed'aden watching them from across the room.

Jaed'aden dragged his gaze away from Rae's and found himself focusing on the man's tight-muscled buttocks as he thrust into Shay with heavy, bone-jarring force. A throaty moan from Shay brought his attention back to her.

Rae was cupping her breast with his fingers scissored tightly closed around her dark nipple. He wrapped his other arm around her waist and hauled her closer. His lips nuzzled her throat when he finally quit watching Jaed'aden and spread kisses across the smooth skin of her collarbones, and he paused when his mouth brushed over the ball of her shoulder. After another moment, he sank his teeth into the tender muscle.

Shay's head arched back in reaction to the sudden pain, and Jaed'aden felt entranced by the pleasure on her face as she let out a warbling sigh and bucked spasmodically against her lover.

Rae's whole body tensed, and then, after a minute, he sighed with satisfaction and released her shoulder. His mouth captured hers tenderly and they kissed, relaxing into each other. His fingers speared into her hair as he rested his forehead against hers and stared into her eyes. "*Ananashay zeet Rastcharaereig*," he murmured softly, almost as if vowing something.

She smiled up at him, and Jaed'aden felt as if he was intruding on a very private moment. "*Rastcharaereig zeet Ananashay*," she whispered back.

Jaed'aden shifted on the bench, a mere whisper of sound but enough to draw their attention.

Rae rested his head against her throat and turned to look at him. His face settled into a considering expression, and Jaed'aden trembled as the much larger man seemed to catalogue everything about him, down to his very soul. He slowly pulled away from Shay and tucked himself back into his pants. He walked to Jaed'aden and stared down at him.

Jaed'aden shook as a sick feeling built inside him. The other man didn't seem to be trying to intimidate him, but somehow, Jaed'aden knew Raerei was the one he would have to watch out for of the two of them. Shay might be exactly what she seemed to be, but he felt that he would never be completely sure of Raerei.

Raerei reached down and hauled him up by the front of his suit.

Jaed'aden went nearly limp and whimpered. He just hoped this wasn't a prelude to a beating. He couldn't think of anything he had done wrong, but that didn't always mean he wouldn't be hurt. Some Masters just liked inflicting pain.

Raerei tilted his head and bent to brush his lips lightly across Jaed'aden's. He slowly deepened the kiss, teasing his tongue across the seam of Jaed'aden's mouth until he parted his lips in surrender. Rae's tongue surged inside and stroked sensuously against his, and Jaed'aden's hands came up to rest hesitantly on Rae's shoulders. Not pushing him away but not feeling secure enough to draw him closer either.

The erection that had slowly begun to subside quickly swelled back to throbbing life, and he grunted softly at the sensation.

Rae released his suit and curled his arm around Jaed'aden's waist and pulled him closer. He lifted Jaed'aden off the ground easily and ground their hips together.

Minutes passed as Jaed'aden felt his senses cloud from the drugging potency of the taller man's kiss. He felt like he was floating when Rae finally raised his head and smiled down at him, his eyes heavy with satisfaction and stormy pleasure.

"You'll do, little man," Rae rasped out and gently set Jaed'aden on his feet. "And we'll call you Jaed. Shay can call you cutie around the ship but not in front of others." He leaned down and nipped Jaed'aden's full lower lip. "No one else is to know your full name unless they are your people from here on out. Is that understood?" His thumb stroked the lip he had just bitten.

Jaed'aden nodded, still feeling dazed. He wondered how Raerei knew what his name was.

Raerei eased him back down onto the bench and strode out of the galley, pausing only to swipe his bowl of fruit and another kiss from Shay.

Shay slipped off the counter and blushed as she felt Raerei's semen ease from her vagina in a warm rush. She wasn't exactly modest, that had been beaten out of her as a slave, but she was feeling a little out of sorts with the way Raerei had staked his claim in front of Jaed'aden. No, Jaed. She'd have to remember to call him that.

Raerei was usually very careful to not let anyone see him in an intimate embrace, so she felt a little confused at his display. His actions and the kiss he had given the younger man meant that he accepted Jaed as a mate and third, but she knew he had never wanted another man to touch her before. He was giving both her and Jaed tacit permission to behave in any

fashion they wished, and it left her feeling cast adrift. Did Raerei desire the younger man, or was he simply losing interest in her?

Her knees trembled a little as she turned to wet a cloth to clean herself. A rustle of fabric behind her made her spin around. Jaed stood a few inches from her. She understood the look on his face. Confusion and need seemed to flow across his features in waves. They mirrored her own emotions.

He took the cloth gently out of her hand. “*Let me, Mistress,*” he whispered in her mind and fell to his knees before her. He ran the rag along her thighs and gently pushed her belly so that she leaned against the counter. Then, he hesitantly lifted one of her legs and draped it over his shoulder. Locking his gaze with hers, he slowly leaned forward and pressed a kiss to her damp curls.

She sucked in a sharp breath at the first touch of his lips against her and grabbed the edge of the counter behind her as his wicked little tongue delved into the creamy folds of her nether lips. A sigh eased past her lips as he pushed her thigh farther up and back and braced it with his hand to spread her for his ministrations.

He lapped wetly, his eyes darkening with pleasure. He seemed to fall into a trance as he continued to watch her face. His tongue whirled around the swelling bud of her clit, and she bit her lip and arched into the sweet caress.

“You...don’t have to...do this, Jaed,” she panted out, squirming into the wet strokes and darting jabs. It felt so good, and she loved feeling his mouth tease and torment her. He seemed intent on licking and suckling every drop of juice from her wet sex.

Jaed closed his eyes and smiled against her damp folds. “*But I want to, my Mistress,*” he murmured seductively in her mind. “*For the first time, it is my pleasure to do this.*” He let her thigh rest on his shoulder again and ran the palms of his hands up her belly to cup her breasts, delicately toying with her nipples. “*Will you sing for me too, my Mistress?*”

Shay was shocked when a mating trill burst from her throat in response to his request. He seemed to shiver and buried his face even deeper into her aroused body. Heat coiled in her belly and hung there, just waiting for the ripe moment to burst. "Oh please, more," she cried out, sliding her hands into his hair to hold him against her aching flesh. "So sweet, your tongue is magic, Jaed."

He pressed the tip of his tongue against the hard point of her clit and then swirled, slow and hard, around it and squeezed her tender nipples at the same time, and she came, bucking and rocking into his mouth as her essence rained into his mouth.

She froze for an endless moment to savor the sensations sweeping through her body and slowly relaxed back onto the counter. She felt limp and wrung out as Jaed continued to nibble and suckle on her lower lips, teasing the last drops of cum from her shaking body.

After he finished, he gently tugged the zipper closed, shielding her sensitive pussy. Then he stood to slide the vest onto her shoulders and lace it into place. She gazed at him with dazed surprise and finally found the strength to lift a hand and slide it into his hair to tug his mouth to hers for a tender kiss. She could taste herself and Raerei on his lips, and it was almost enough to arouse her once again.

She tickled his lips with her tongue until he yielded his mouth to her, and she slowly eased her tongue inside to stroke intimately with his. "*Thank you, cutie,*" she said softly in his mind. "*That was wonderful.*" He smiled against her lips and seemed to melt into her body in a way that reminded her of how she submitted to Rae.

She was a little surprised to feel the urgent press of his penis against her hip, but decided she liked the feeling. Not breaking the kiss, she asked him about it. "*I thought you were impotent?*" Her tongue tickled the roof of his mouth.

Jaed cuddled closer. "*Not impotent, immature. I was still a child. I became an adult this year. Our sexual organs are the last things to fully develop.*" He seemed to tense after her told her that, as if he had imparted a big secret.

Shay pulled back and kissed his forehead. "Oh, poor baby, you're safe here. I promise."

He released a shuddering sigh and laid his head on her shoulder. "*That would be nice,*" he whispered sadly.

* * * * *

The rest of their day passed quietly. Shay found some books for Jaed to read, and he disappeared into her cabin like a child with new treasures. She, on the other hand, spent her day cleaning. Raerei was a bit of a slob outside his cabin and left things lying wherever he happened to put them down. The laundry unit was on the fritz too, so she spent a couple of hours tinkering with it until coughed back to life. The ship was old and needed constant maintenance to keep running smoothly.

She didn't see very much of her partner, either. He hid himself in his cabin and didn't come out except to return the empty bowl to the galley. Leaving it for her to wash, of course. *Men.*

Finally, the need to know why he had acted the way he had drove her to seek him out.

She tapped on his door and waited until his deep bass voice beckoned for her to enter. He was putting a piece of equipment back together and glanced at her impassively before completing his task.

"What is it, *zeeta?*" he asked in their language once he finished wiping the grease off his hands.

Shay swallowed convulsively. "Why have you given me away, *zi'nen?*" she asked in the same language. "Are you so angry with me? Have I shamed you?" Her heart thrummed in her chest as she waited for his answer.

Raerei sighed and moved to wash his hands in the tiny lavatory. "I have not given you away, my zeeta, my wife." He came back into the room and cupped her cheek, bending to press a kiss onto her trembling lips. "I share you with the one that the Gods brought to us. It

hurts me, but he is ours, and we will need to find a way. Your desire for him flowers in your center, and the sweet scent fills my head like strong wine. His presence with us ripens you.”

Shay drew in a shuddering breath. “It cannot be so, he is not Aspect. Only Aspects should ripen me.” She moved closer to her mate, her partner. His arms curved around her and drew her even closer. He sheltered her with his large, strong body.

“Even so, your scent tells a different story, and I heard your song after I left the galley. He is yours and all that is yours is mine.” He nuzzled her hair. “And all that is mine is yours. As it should be, my little bird.”

She knew he was as confused as she was. It took the presence of three or more Aspect males’ semen to ripen an Aspect female’s womb. That a male not of their species could bring her scent to the fore was unheard of, and it was even stranger that it would happen without his semen. “I-I need to think on this, my zi’nen,” she finally said softly, stepping away from him.

“I know. I will be careful of your little one. He will eventually grow accustomed to me. Until then I shall keep my caresses light.”

Shay had to smile at that. Raerei’s idea of “light” and the rest of the universe’s were two very different things. “Sleep well, Raerei.”

She slipped silently into her cabin, noting that Jaed was curled up on the bunk, sound asleep. She tiptoed into the lavatory to bathe.

After she finished bathing she stared at the bunk in dismay, just now realizing she didn’t own any sleep clothing that wasn’t a prelude to seduction since she usually slept nude. Mentally shrugging, she crawled into the bunk. He would just have to deal with it. She was a little surprised to discover he slept nude too.

His body went rigid at the first touch of hers and she froze. “It’s dinii, cutie, it’s just me,” she murmured soothingly and eased onto her back.

After several minutes, the tension eased from his stiff body, and he turned to face her. *“I’m sorry, Mistress, I didn’t know this was your bunk.”*

Shay smiled up at the darkened ceiling. “You don’t have to call me Mistress. Just Shay is fine. Rae doesn’t like sleeping next to anyone.” She knew she sounded sad as she said this, but couldn’t seem to help it. She had always wanted to snuggle next to his big body and feel safe while she slept.

“I see.” He fell silent and Shay slowly relaxed, growing accustomed to the unfamiliar sensation of someone lying next to her. After a time they both slept.

Raerei took another sip of his ale. The need to see his mate was a burning itch in his brain, and he finally stood. He moved into her cabin like a silent shadow and stared down at the two bodies entwined on the bunk. His heart ached to join them, but he didn’t think he could bear it if one of his frequent nightmares woke them. He knew that he sometimes woke violently. It was why he never let Shay sleep next to him. He couldn’t take the chance of hurting her before he woke up enough to realize that she was not some phantom enemy from his past.

Shay lay on her back with one arm curved protectively around Jaed. Even in her sleep, she was trying to keep him safe. Jaed slept with his face pressed into her shoulder and a blissful expression that was at odds with the tension that still tightened his body. The sight made Rae smile. His zeeta needed someone to care for. He was too scarred to allow her to show the nurturing side of her nature to him often. He didn’t know how to deal with someone caring for him.

He was hard and brutal. Exactly what the slavers had made him into. A killer. *Too many years fighting in the pits to be a husband and father. What was she thinking to claim me?*

Jaed seemed to have kept some semblance of innocence and hope. Rae hoped that Shay could reach him. The wary, hunted-animal look in the younger man's eyes told a story that Rae was all too familiar with. He knew it would take a long time before trust came. It wouldn't be an easy relationship for any of them, but they weren't the ones who had made the decision. Biology and fate had made it for them.

A slight smile crossed his face as Jaed's hand slid up Shay's torso to curl possessively around her breast. His sudden lack of jealousy surprised him. Ever since the day the slavers had thrown Shay into his cage, he had killed anyone who had tried to touch her. She was his, and he was just as possessive of her as he was of anything else that belonged to him.

He settled into a chair and watched them. He often slipped into her room to watch her sleep. When she was sleeping he could watch her with all of his love shining in his eyes instead of feeling compelled to hide it. An hour passed before his mind quieted enough for him to feel sleepy, and he carefully let himself out of the room.

"Good night, Master Raerei," a sleepy voice said in his head. Rae smiled and raised a hand in response before finding his bed. He should have known that a former slave would sense someone else in the room.

Chapter Three

Iliria hovered invisibly over the pair sleeping so closely together on the narrow bunk. Her aquamarine eyes burned with unshed tears as She ran a ghostly hand over Her child, Jaed'aden. "You'll be home soon, My darling," she whispered into his sleeping mind, smiling as the tension that filled his young body even in sleep seemed to ease.

Mo'aton moved to float beside Her. "It is time, My love. We can make the arrangements for Silaari. Send him the dream; bring them home."

Her slow smile lit the room. "Yes." All of the pieces were finally in place. It had taken years of watching and hoping before an opportunity had presented itself, but She believed the time was well spent. Years spent sending hope to a broken young man and his lost sister. Years of nudging possibilities, the few They had the power to influence. Because that was all They could do.

She bent to whisper in Shay's ears. "Take care of Our little one, Ananashay zeet Rastcharaereig." The woman's nose wrinkled, and she pulled Jaed'aden closer but did not wake.

Jaed'aden frowned in his sleep. A woman's voice was whispering coordinates into his mind over and over and over until he thought he'd go mad from it. He awoke with a gasp and sat up, panting.

Shay squeaked beside him at the sudden movement and fell off the edge of the narrow bunk.

Jaed winced at the thud and the round of lurid cursing that followed.

She jumped up and snarled at him, dainty little serrated fangs flashed in the dim lights, and he cringed back against the bunk. "*I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry,*" he chanted, hiding his head under his arms and curling away from her as terror and memories flooded through him. His body tensed as he readied himself for the pain that was sure to come.

The snarling stopped abruptly.

A gentle hand brushed his shoulder. "Jaed?" Shay said softly. "I'm not going to hurt you, baby. You just surprised me."

He huddled into a tighter ball, not believing her. He shook his head frantically and pulled away from the light touch on his shoulder, expecting to feel her hit him at any moment.

"What happened?" a deep voice asked behind him.

"I scared him," Shay replied, and Jaed screamed soundlessly, wondering why they were playing with him. Waiting for teeth and claws to rend his flesh. Always waiting, because it always came.

Raerei pulled him backward by the scruff of his neck and picked him up in his arms. "Give us a few minutes, Ananashay."

Jaed quivered but didn't struggle, knowing the futility of such actions. *Don't anger the Master, don't make him madder, go limp, maybe it will be over quickly.*

"I wasn't going to hurt him, Rae, I swear." She sounded thoroughly miserable, but it was a lie. They were toying with him.

“Go, zeeta, now.”

Jaed’aden cowered in the taller man’s arms. “*I’m sorry, so sorry, I didn’t mean to do it, please don’t hurt me,*” he babbled. He threw his arms around Raerei’s neck and sobbed into his shoulder.

Raerei sighed softly and rubbed Jaed’aden’s back without saying anything.

Jaed’aden was vaguely aware of Shay leaving the room and Raerei sitting on the bed and leaning back against the wall. Neither of them had made any attempt to hurt him, and that confused him and made him even more wary. He slammed up his mental walls and waited to see if they were just trying to lull him into a false sense of security. The minute he relaxed and started to hope that they wouldn’t beat him was when it would start. He’d played this game before and wasn’t going to fall for it again, damn it.

The coordinates started scrolling through his head again, and he clutched his head and screamed soundlessly, wondering if he was going mad. The woman’s voice would not leave him alone. A burst of pain in his head had him arching back against Raerei’s arms, and the bigger man struggled to hold his thrashing body.

“*Be at peace, My son, let the images come and go. You will remember them and be able to tell your new family. Just breathe, child.*” The voice softened, and Jaed’aden felt a phantom hand stroke his brow soothingly.

He went limp and panted, feeling as if he had run miles. The sensation of his skull splitting into pieces faded, and he moaned with relief.

Raerei rubbed his back and sang to him with deep fluting trills that teased his nerves gently. It reminded him of his father singing him to sleep, and a sensation of contentedness stole over him. He curled his arms defensively against his chest and buried his face in Raerei’s neck, breathing in the man’s musky scent. It confused him that he felt cherished and safe by the one he feared would hurt him.

He didn't know how much time passed before he finally lifted his head and looked up at Rae. Nervously, he lowered his mental shields and sent out a thin tendril of thought.

Rae smiled down at him and stroked the back of his fingers down Jaed'aden's cheek. "Better, Jaed?" he asked softly.

Jaed'aden nodded slowly.

"Good." Rae leaned down and brushed a light kiss across his lips. "You might want to go tell Shay. She's been pacing the hallway for over half an hour, she's feeling pretty miserable because she didn't mean to scare you."

Jaed'aden blushed and averted his eyes.

"You're safe here, Jaed, but we both understand that it will take time for you to trust us." Rae laced his fingers through Jaed'aden's and smiled, flashing those dainty fangs.

"I didn't mean to knock her out of bed," Jaed'aden whispered to the other man. *"I was having a bad dream. She's not angry with me?"* He tried not to sound like a lost child but feared he failed.

"Is that what happened?" Rae chuckled. "I can see where that would make her spit like a wet karracat, but she'd never hurt you, sweet. Now, if someone tried to hurt you, she'd rip their liver out through their ass."

Jaed shuddered at the image that caused.

"Yeah, it's not pretty. She gets a little too creative when she's pissed." The big man smiled maliciously. "I like that in a woman. I never have to worry about my zeeta. She can be a mean one." He frowned. "Dinii, that probably wasn't very reassuring, was it?"

Jaed'aden hid his face in Rae's chest again and shook his head.

"You and I are probably the only people she would never hurt, Jaed. So, don't worry about it. Once you are feeling more secure and we get a few good meals into you, we'll teach you to defend yourself as well."

Jaed sighed and snuggled closer, enjoying the soothing rumble as Rae continued to speak and tell him stories about Mistress Shay.

A tap on the door brought both their heads up. Shay stood in the open door, nude and shivering. “Is he dinii?” she asked worriedly.

Rae nodded.

Shay sighed with relief. “So, uh, can I get dressed? It’s cold out here. I think the heater is acting up again.”

Jaed smiled and nodded.

She padded into the room and knelt in front of the men. “I didn’t mean to scare you, baby. You just startled me.”

He smiled again and leaned forward to brush a kiss over her lips. “*I’m sorry, Mistress Shay.*”

“It’s dinii, cutie. We’ll get a bigger bunk at the next station, dinii?” She looked relieved, and Jaed’aden realized she was almost as upset as he had been.

He nodded slowly. “*Devret auction house, fourteen days, six hours, and thirty-two minutes. Silaari,*” he blurted out suddenly, then felt like someone smacked him in the back of the head.

Shay and Raerei were staring at him like his mind had cracked. “*Silaari,*” he said to himself. Suddenly he sat straight up, his head knocking into Rae’s chin. He ignored the man’s curse. “*She’s alive!*”

Raerei grumbled and rubbed his chin. Jaed turned and pressed an apologetic kiss onto the abused skin. “*Sorry, I’m a little clumsy sometimes.*” He ducked his head in embarrassment.

Shay’s fingers pinched the back of his neck, and he froze as she turned his head to meet her burning gaze. “Who or what is a Silaari?” she growled out, her eyes smoky with the beginnings of jealousy.

He looked anywhere but at her. "*She's my sister. I thought she was dead.*"

"And you know she's not how?" Shay's expression did not ease. If anything it became harder.

"*I-I don't know. I dreamed the words,*" he stuttered, not sure how he could stutter with mind speech.

Shay's breasts jiggled temptingly when she sank down onto her heels. "You dreamed it?" she asked suspiciously.

Jaed huddled against Rae's chest and nodded hesitantly. His mind spat out the garbled sequence of coordinates. Rae stood abruptly and dumped Jaed out of his lap. He landed on Shay with a grunt.

Shay screeched and wiggled out from under him. She sat up and glared at Raerei accusingly.

Rae was staring down at Jaed with a look of disbelief. "Where did you hear those coordinates?" he rasped out hoarsely.

"*I don't know,*" he replied miserably, curling into a ball on the floor as his head began throbbing again. "*A woman's voice kept saying them over and over again while I was asleep.*"

Shay and Raerei shared a long look. They peered down at the young man hunched in on himself on the floor. "It's a trap," Shay said at last, crossing her arms defensively over her bare breasts. *I need to put some clothes on*, she thought to herself, torn between cuddling her cutie and getting warm again before her nipples froze and fell off.

"I agree," Rae growled out. "We don't go. Someone wants us there, and we don't know who. If they can reach his mind this far out, they pose a danger."

Shay nodded. She tugged the blanket off the bed and wrapped it around herself and pulled Jaed'aden into her arms. He was grunting softly in pain and wouldn't release his head.

“She’s hurting him,” she snarled, suddenly very angry with the unknown individual. Her nails curved into small talons and pricked his delicate skin before she pulled them back.

Wiggling into a cross-legged position on the floor, she cradled him against her and began rubbing the back of his neck soothingly. After a minute or two, he relaxed against her and panted. “Better?” she asked him gently, continuing to massage the tight muscles.

He nodded, his head resting on her shoulder.

“We’re not going to those coordinates, cutie. We don’t know who told them to you. It could be dangerous,” she whispered into his hair. “We will try to get your sister, though. Won’t we, Raerei?” She looked up at her partner, who nodded solemnly.

Jaed’aden sucked in a deep breath and went limp against her. She leaned back to look at his face. He appeared to have fallen asleep. *Odd, we were just talking.*

His eyes opened slowly, but they weren’t his eyes. The deep green color had changed and spread to cover his entire eyeball with a deep, luminescent aquamarine. He levitated off Shay and stood, staring at them with those scary eyes. “You will take My children home.” A woman’s voice rasped the words from Jaed’aden’s ruined throat. It vibrated with power and made the hair on the back of Shay’s neck prickle.

Shay gasped and scooted away. Raerei choked and moved in front of Shay protectively.

Jaed’s hair rose on an unseen wind and whipped around him. “I have waited long enough.” Her voice was implacable.

“Who are you?” Shay whispered. “What have you done to Jaed?”

“Jaed’aden is fine, little one. He was born to be My vessel.” Those eyes seemed to swirl with color and glowed eerily in the dim light. The marks of Jaed’s hands glowed as well; they were the bright, shining green of new leaves. “I am Iliria, Healing Goddess of the Ta’e’sha. Jaed’aden was stolen from Us long ago.” Heart-wrenching sadness filled Jaed’s face. “You have the chance to return him and Our lost daughter to Us. Please do not fail.” With that Jaed seemed to fold into himself and dropped to the ground in a dead faint.

Shay swallowed hard. Raerei sank to the floor beside her with a thump.

“Well, we did decide we wanted to try something new, right?” Shay asked weakly, leaning against her mate and shaking a bit.

Raerei curved his arm around her shoulders as they watched Jaed. “Yeah. I just didn’t expect a God-ridden slave to tell us exactly where to go, little bird.”

* * * * *

Jaed sighed and rubbed his head as he slowly came awake. It took him a minute to realize where he was. He sat up and groaned softly at the soreness from sleeping on the floor. *Why am I on the floor?* he wondered groggily, rubbing at the stiffness in his neck. Rolling to his knees he looked around the cabin. It was empty. There was a blanket wadded up beside him. He picked it up as he stood and started making up the bunk, moving cautiously when his body twinged and protested the twisting movements required to tuck in the ends.

Once he completed his self-appointed task, he padded into the hallway, unconcerned with his nudity, to find his Mistress.

He found her in the engineering section of the small ship. All he could see of her was the shapely jiggle of her ass where she was bent almost double inside the belly of some barrel-shaped piece of machinery. “*Mistress?*” he sent softly, not wanting to startle her.

“Hey, cutie,” she called back. A hand waved the air. “Can you hand me that wrench?”

He handed her the greasy tool and leaned against the machine, enjoying the muscled flex of her buttocks under the skintight pants she had poured herself into. His cock swelled and curved hard and proud against his belly as he imagined being given permission to nibble and lick every inch of that wiggling flesh.

One of her feet lifted off the ground as she strained forward onto the toes of the other foot, and he groaned softly in reaction. He slapped a rag into her hand when she asked for it and tried to resist the urge to stroke his straining erection. Since a Mistress had never

sexually excited him before he didn't know if he would be allowed to touch himself. It was sheer torture.

Mistress Shay had told him several times that he wasn't a slave anymore, but he didn't really believe it yet. Even if he was truly free, he wasn't sure he wanted to be. He wanted to belong to Mistress Shay and Master Raerei. The thought of being dominated by them, being submissive to them, almost made him orgasm then and there.

He sighed softly and decided that touching her was worth the risk of a beating. He ran his hand along her back and down the curve of her ass. The material of her pants was velvety soft, and the firm curves under it pulled another groan from his chest. He squeezed gently when she went still and leaned down to rub his cheek against the small of her back. Her vest had ridden up, exposing her soft skin, and he swiped his tongue along the tantalizing line.

"Mmm, that feels good, baby, but give me a few more minutes to finish this, please," his Mistress called back to him, her voice throaty with burgeoning arousal.

He smiled against her skin and, with a last lick of his tongue, stepped back. She continued working on the machine, but he liked to think the added sway to her movements was for his benefit. Unable to resist touching himself, he pinched his nipples and rubbed his fingers along his belly, carefully avoiding his aching groin. Anticipation built as his need grew, and he found that he enjoyed the tension of awaiting his Mistress's command.

He was quivering by the time she wiggled out of the machine and shut the cover. She turned to him, wiping her greasy hands on another rag. She smirked and raised an eyebrow. "My, don't you look tasty." She eyed his erection appreciatively and licked her lips. "Is that for me?"

He nodded, feeling the urge to fall to his knees and nibble his way up her long legs.

She smiled seductively. "Kiss me, baby, then you can help me take a shower."

His penis jumped at the thought of her wet and slippery with soap, and he stepped forward eagerly for his kiss. Feeling a little nervous, he put his hands on her hips and drew

her against him. His lips brushed lightly against hers and she trilled softly and moved a little closer.

Her lips opened and she tickled his with the tip of her tongue. He groaned and tilted his head to the side and pushed his tongue into the moist depths of her mouth. With a sigh, he slid his palms around to cup the tantalizing globes he had been admiring and squeezed them. His Mistress had the most amazing ass he had ever seen. As firm and round as ripe fruit and it felt wonderful in his hands.

She purred and looped her arms around his neck, being careful to keep her greasy hands out of his hair. One of her legs wrapped around his hip and she rocked her mound teasingly against his erection, tearing a groan from his chest. Oh, how he liked that they were the same height, every inch of her could press delightfully against him.

He crushed her lips under his, and their tongues dueled together passionately. The sensation was unlike anything he had ever felt. It didn't feel like his Mistress was taking from him; it was a sharing, her pleasure for his, and he reveled in the freely given gift. He pushed her leg off his hip and walked her back to arch her over the machine she had just been working on. His mouth trailed kisses down her throat when she obligingly tilted her head back for him. He continued to work his way down to her full breasts, which were barely contained by the vest she was wearing with nothing underneath. Kissing the rounded tops, he toyed with the lacings for a moment before hesitantly untying them and tugging them loose enough to nuzzle one breast free.

Latching his mouth around the hard tip, he sighed, licking and nibbling on it as she squirmed against him, her leg wrapping around his hip again.

Her fingers threaded through his hair to hold him to her, and he smiled against the curve of her breast, realizing that she had forgotten about her dirty hands in her eagerness. He couldn't seem to stop analyzing every touch and sensation; it was all so new to him. He felt freer in his Mistress's arms than he ever had before.

She moaned softly, murmuring encouragement against the top of his head. Her fingers massaged his scalp like a *sleedon* with a new pillow. “*You feel so good, Mistress. I could nibble on you for hours,*” he finally sent to her, easing back from their intimate embrace to kiss her again.

She smiled against his lips and gently pushed him away, untangling their limbs.

He sighed with disappointment and helped her straighten her vest. Remembering she wanted to shower, he took her hand, turning to lead her from the room.

Raerei was leaning against the doorjamb watching them, his arms crossed over his heavily muscled, bare chest. He slowly straightened from his slouched position and stalked toward them, a slight smile playing with the corners of his lips. “That was very hot,” he rumbled, coming to a stop inches from them.

Jaed’aden blushed and looked at the floor, wondering if the big man was irritated with him for touching Mistress Shay. Fingers caught his chin and tipped his head up so he had to meet his Master’s gaze. His eyes widened as Master Raerei bent to brush a nibbling kiss across his mouth. He trembled with surprise and need.

Raerei crowded him with his large frame. “Don’t I get a kiss too, little man?” he said, nipping Jaed’s lower lip and then sucking it into his mouth.

Jaed wavered, wanting to trust him but feeling intimidated. Finally he surrendered and melted into his Master, opening his mouth for the aggressive thrust of Raerei’s tongue. He didn’t let go of Shay’s hand, needing the contact. Raerei growled softly, curling his arm around Jaed’s waist and hauling him against his chest.

Jaed gasped and moaned with excitement. Some instinct kept telling him that they wouldn’t hurt him, and he was starting to believe it. His fingers clenched on Raerei’s arm, and he leaned into the deep, plundering kiss. His Master was all hard, hot muscle and barely leashed aggression, and for once, Jaed enjoyed feeling small and helpless in someone else’s hands.

He was aware of Mistress Shay joining them as she bit his neck with gentle firmness and pressed her breasts against his arm. He could feel one hard nipple through the material of her vest, and it tore a groan from his chest.

Master Raerei growled again in response and grabbed the back of his neck in an iron grip, deepening the kiss until their teeth clinked together.

Jaed whimpered, going almost limp as a thrill of fear darted through him, and seeming to sense this, Raerei eased the pressure and massaged his neck in apology. Trilling softly in reassurance, Shay licked her way up his neck to tease her tongue along the tightly sealed seam of their lips.

Quick as a thought, Raerei snarled and darted a nip against her tongue before crushing his mouth against Jaed's again.

Jaed'aden's thoughts clouded over, and he felt moisture leaking from the slit in the head of his cock. Dimly, he heard Shay laugh softly as his eyes fluttered shut. He gave himself up to the sensation of their hands roaming possessively over his body.

He felt Shay move behind him and mold herself against his back. Her sly little hands curved around his hip to circle the base of his cock. A cry burst from his throat and was swallowed by Raerei's mouth. Her clever fingers cupped the heavy weight of his sac, and she rolled his balls in the palm of her hand as her other hand stroked, long and firm, up and down the rigid length of his aching prick.

Her thumb brushed over the webbed spines that spiraled along the tip of his cock with apparent curiosity, and he couldn't help but thrust into her touch. It felt amazing, easing the burn and inflaming it at the same time. She released him long enough to tug at the closure of Raerei's pants and release his Master's throbbing length. Raerei sighed into his mouth with pleasure and rubbed the hot spike against Jaed's stomach. Shay wormed her hand around his cock again and grasped Raerei's as well and began stroking them hard and fast.

Jaed pulled his mouth away from Raerei's and moaned softly in response. His cock felt like it was going to explode, and he felt blood rush into his cheeks in embarrassment as Raerei stared down at him, his black eyes filled with a burning intensity that Jaed didn't understand. Raerei's hand was fisted in his hair, and he felt helpless to look away.

His lips parted and he grunted softly, wishing he could sing out, it felt so exquisite. His hair wound around Raerei's forearm and rubbed the bulging muscles in the same rhythm Shay was using on their cocks. It was as if he was being pushed toward some precipice. He didn't know what would happen when he fell over and was both eager and scared to find out.

He began panting in time with the motions of Shay's hands and bit his lips as his body began to tremble and shake against Raerei's. The only stable thing in his world in that perfect moment was his Master's gaze, and he clung to it like a lifeline. A choking gasp escaped his mouth, and his eyes went wide and blind as he felt his frills pop open and a hot, liquid splash on his belly. He groaned raggedly and felt another lava-hot burst of moisture, and he collapsed against Raerei's straining body, still spraying his seed on their bellies.

His lips feathered kisses along his Master's rock-hard chest, and the taller man growled low in his throat, the rumble vibrating against his lips as he felt semen erupting from his Master's penis to coat their chests. Raerei rubbed against Jaed, mixing their fluids together and trapping Shay's hands between them.

The big man groaned and jerked as another hot splash shot between them. Then, with a rumble of pleasure, he leaned down to give Jaed'aden a tender, tongue-lashing kiss, mating their mouths together as fluted sounds of contentment hung in the air.

Shay squirmed her mound against his ass and spread wet, openmouthed kisses across his back. "*What about me?*" she sent plaintively, grinding against him and trilling softly.

Jaed slowly pulled away from the dreamy slide of his Master's mouth and turned in his arms to smile seductively at his Mistress. The hot gleam in her eyes when she licked along

the line of his jaw made him feel like the sexiest man in the universe. “*Does my sweet Mistress need some love?*” he whispered playfully on a general thread so that Master Raerei could hear him. A new confidence welled inside him when she nodded and eagerly lapped at the semen coating his chest. His Master was still rumbling happily against his back and leaned down to nuzzle the sensitive spot where Jaed’s neck and shoulder joined.

He shivered, reaching out to unlace her vest and unbutton the fly on those indecently tight pants of hers. His Master’s fangs scraped delightfully over his skin and bumps broke out across his body. He felt a twinge in his spent cock and sighed softly with pleasure.

He wiggled his hand into her pants and discovered she wasn’t wearing anything under them. Another groan worked its way free from his throat just thinking about being able to slip his hand in there and rub her wet mound anytime he wished. “*So hot, sweet Mistress,*” he said, wrapping his other hand in her hair. His fingers eased between her slippery lips, and he sank two fingers into her, rubbing her swollen clit with his thumb.

She cried out and arched her hips to give him better access. After a couple of moments of his teasing thrusts, she groaned in frustration and pushed her pants down to the tops of her thighs and leaned back against the machine they had never gotten very far from. She draped her arms over her head and swayed beguilingly, tempting him closer, her wet sheath still hot and tight around his fingers.

He sighed and leaned down to kiss her perfect breasts, the tips jutting proudly in the air. His Master followed his motion, curving his big body against Jaed’aden’s back to continue nibbling. Jaed’s fingers thrust faster in and out of his Mistress’s slick channel, and she responded by rolling her hips upward into the caresses. He resisted the urge to drop to his knees and lap the sweet cream coating his fingers. Instead he bit the tender tips of her breasts and sighed. “*I want to be inside you soon, Mistress. Will you take me inside? Let me slide in this sweet juice until I fill you with mine? Please, Mistress? Will you?*” He knew he was begging and didn’t care; all he could think of was losing himself in her body until the world blew up around them.

The thought of actually giving himself to someone had always filled him with repugnance. Knowing they would be taking one more thing from him, he had been grateful that his cock had never risen. As if by saving that one part of himself he was saving his soul. But, he wanted to belong to these two people so badly it brought tears to his eyes. Somehow, he knew they would treasure him, maybe even come to care for him.

Shay moaned, rocking into his touch. "Oh yes, lover, I'll let you do that." She seemed to shiver at the thought, and her beautiful coppery eyes opened to gaze up at him tenderly. "Can Raerei watch? I want him to see your cock disappear into me, see you moving and flexing in my pussy, and hear our song when we come together."

"I cannot sing anymore, Mistress," he replied sadly.

"Oh yes, you do, cutie," she moaned, a pained look on her face. He knew she was quickly reaching her peak and rubbed her straining clit harder. "Your body sings for you."

His Master growled in agreement against his neck and reached down to rub a caress along his spent penis.

Jaed gasped, his mouth leaving her breasts as his head arched back, and his hips pumped into his Master's hand.

Shay's knees came up, and she clamped her thighs around his hand as she pulsed on his fingers. Soft screams and trills filled the room as she writhed and twisted in her orgasm. It was a beautiful sight, and Master Raerei rested his chin on Jaed's shoulder to watch also, his hands idly caressed Jaed's belly and balls with lazy, absent motions.

Unable to rest the sweet motions of her body, he went to his knees before her, vaguely aware of his Master following him. He pulled his fingers free and wiggled into the narrow part of her thighs, leaning down to lap wetly at her creamy folds. He loved the sweet musky flavor of her juices and moved a little closer to dine on the succulent banquet.

His Master pushed his hair to the side and spread nibbling, licking kisses across the back of his neck. "How does she taste, little man? Is she not the most delicious thing you

have ever eaten? Would you like to ride her?” Raerei whispered against his skin, his fingers sweeping up and down Jaed’s chest. “We could take her over and over again until we fell asleep, exhausted by our loving. Then do it again.” His voice deepened to a raspy growl. “She’s ours now, little man, and we will never share her with anyone else.”

Jaed moaned into Shay’s body at the thought. Oh, how he wanted to claim them as his mates. He would be so proud to wear their marks on his throat in the way of his people. They would be his forever. His to love and pleasure and submit to.

He sighed happily, wiggling his shoulders and tugging her pants farther down to widen the spread of her legs, and just enjoyed being with them. His Mistress’s fingers slipped into his hair and she lazily stroked his scalp, leaving tingles in the wake of her touch. His eyes fluttered shut and he sighed again. He wasn’t feeling the urgent need to climax again so he just let himself touch and taste, exploring each crease and fold of her sweet sex.

Once he finished lapping every juicy drop from her, he had every intention of turning to explore his Master’s body with the same slow thoroughness. He was hungry to taste him and see if his flavor was as delicious as his Mistress’s.

With one last, long lap, he pulled away and rested back against Master Raerei’s chest. “*Do you still want a shower, Mistress?*” he sent.

Shay sighed and stretched with lazy satisfaction. “Yes.” She peeked at them and smiled. “I think we all need one. I got you two all dirty.”

Raerei chuckled huskily against Jaed’s shoulder, where he was still licking and nibbling. “Even if you didn’t, I’d want to wash the cum off, my little bird.”

She grinned and Jaed laughed soundlessly. “True,” she replied complacently.

Jaed turned in Raerei’s arms and pressed a kiss against the big man’s chest and eyed the greasy smears on his cock. Maybe he would wait until later to take his taste. Somehow, he didn’t think the oil would enhance the flavor. “*May I suck you later, Master?*” he asked shyly.

Raerei tilted Jaed'aden's face up for a lingering kiss. "I would enjoy that, little one."

Jaed'aden ducked his head and smiled, rubbing his cheek against the strong muscles in Raerei's shoulder.

Shay stood and pulled her pants up but didn't bother fastening them as she strolled out of the room. Jaed peeked over Raerei's shoulder to watch her hips sway back and forth. "*Um, I have to go, Master. Mistress Shay wanted me to help her bathe.*" He hoped he didn't sound too eager.

His Master chuckled softly and released him. "I guess you'd better hurry, then," he murmured.

He grinned up at him and scrambled to his feet to follow his alluring Mistress. Would the ship soap make her as slippery as he hoped? How tightly would he get to press against her in the tiny shower cubicle? These were the things he really wanted to know. And he couldn't wait to get his answers!

Chapter Four

Shay hummed softly as she finished preparing the evening meal. They were one day away from reaching Devret, and Jaed'aden was antsy about more than just finding his sister.

Rae had decided they shouldn't have actual intercourse with Jaed'aden until this evening. His theory was that it would give them more time to become comfortable in each other's presence. Obviously, her hulking mate hadn't taken their lust into account when he made his decree.

Between Jaed's moping and Raerei's short temper, Shay wasn't sure if she wanted to kill them or pin them down and tear their clothes off. It was a tough call, but one she wouldn't have to worry about much longer. She was getting what she wanted tonight, and if Rae decided they should wait another day, she was going to lock him in the medic until it was too late to save Jaed's virginity.

And considering how Jaed felt about the whole thing, he would probably help her.

Raerei strode into the room, smirking, and Jaed trailed after him, looking miserable.

"Master is teasing me again, Mistress," Jaed sent to her plaintively. The tented front of his jumpsuit showed her exactly just how Rae had been tormenting him. Rae had been

taking great delight in making Jaed hard as a rock and then forcing him to wait before he was allowed to come.

She would feel sorrier for Jaed if she didn't know how much he enjoyed it. Her nipples hardened as she remembered walking into the galley last night to find Rae had tied Jaed's aden across the table and was lazily sampling Jaed's cock with long, lapping strokes of his tongue. Something about the younger man brought out her partner's playful side, and she loved it. Jaed chased away Raerei's shadows, and she would have felt jealous if he didn't do the same for her as well.

She wasn't sure what had changed for Jaed, but she noticed that after their love play in the engines he seemed to be much more secure and happy. The only times she really saw the effects of his slavery was when Rae or she lost their temper. They were much more cautious about it now. Instead of yelling at each other to clear the air like they used to, they would disappear into Rae's cabin and have low-voiced arguments where Jaed couldn't hear them.

"Come give me a kiss, baby," she said, holding her arms out to him.

He grinned and snuggled up to her for his kiss. "*You just want to tease me too, my Mistress.*"

She smiled and licked his lower lip. "Always, my pet." She nuzzled his neck. "*But if you want to get your Master back, why don't you sit in his lap and feed him his dinner?*" she sent to him telepathically.

"*Oh, that's a good idea!*" He stepped back and unzipped his suit to draw out his swollen penis. "*Would you bring the tray, please?*"

She nodded and smiled wickedly at Rae, who was digging out the cutlery. He dropped it on the table and sat down, obviously lost in his own thoughts.

Jaed slid onto his lap, ignoring the surprised look Rae shot him as his arms curved automatically around Jaed's waist.

Shay set the tray down and winked at Jaed, who beamed and offered Raerei a bite of fruit. She sat down across from them and began eating with the goal of finishing as quickly as possible. She had other things she wanted to do tonight, and they didn't involve reconstituted fruit.

She and Raerei had tried to talk Jaed out of calling them Master and Mistress, but the young man was stubborn about it and claimed that even if he was no longer a slave, he still belonged to them and it was his right to address them as such. She wasn't sure why he had decided that he belonged to them, but she wasn't going to argue the point, since both she and Rae already felt like he was theirs and had no intention of letting him get away from them if they could avoid it. Their only fear was he would decide to take a mate from his own people when they reached his home space.

It would break their hearts to lose him, but they couldn't keep him with them in good conscience when they knew Shay would never be able to provide him with a child. She sincerely wished she could, though. Since Jaed had joined them, her nesting instincts had arrived with a vengeance, and she found herself longing to present her mates with a baby. It didn't help that Raerei wouldn't make love to her either. He was waiting for Jaed'aden to join them. She really wanted to kill him right now.

That was another point she and Rae had been arguing about. She wanted to claim Jaed openly and he wouldn't let her. He said it had to be Jaed's choice, since so many choices had been taken from him. He wouldn't even let her broach the topic.

With a sigh, she finished her meal and dumped her tray into the sink. Jaed and Rae were completely involved with each other, sharing kisses and caresses between bites, and didn't notice when she left. She was feeling out of sorts from her dark thoughts and wanted to give herself a few minutes to shake the mood off before they joined her.

She grabbed one of the few nightgowns she owned, a creamy confection of lace that Raerei had bought her, and slipped into the lavatory to shower. When she finished, she grabbed several pillows and blankets and spread them out on the floor to make a cozy nest

for them to lie in. Then, she tucked some packets of lubricant under the edges in case they were needed. She knew how much Raerei wanted their cutie too.

She had just finished when Raerei led Jaed'aden into the room, and she felt the last remnants of her sadness dissipate like mist in the sun at the sight of them.

Jaed took in the nightgown and bedding and a hopeful smile transformed his face. She knew that he believed they were going to have another night of pleasuring each other, but they hadn't told him what else was going to happen. They wanted to make this night special for him.

Rae released Jaed's hand and lit several scented gel candles around the room and turned the lights down to their lowest setting. A sweet musk filled the room as he settled on the blankets and sprawled beside Shay. He smiled tenderly and ran his knuckles down her cheek. "*Are you ready, my little bird?*" he sent to her.

She smiled and nodded, marveling over the changes in Raerei in the past few days. Had it really only been two weeks since Jaed joined them? It seemed much longer. Jaed had been a catalyst for huge changes in both of them. She patted the blanket in front of her when Jaed just stood there, uncertainly shifting from foot to foot. He grinned and dropped bonelessly down and reached out to touch her gown.

"*This is very pretty, Mistress,*" he sent to her shyly. He rarely sent private thoughts to them anymore and instead used a general thread so both of them could converse with him.

She leaned forward and pressed a gentle kiss onto his mouth. "Thank you, cutie. Why don't you help your Master get undressed?" She leaned back on her elbows to watch as Jaed'aden grinned and pushed Rae onto his back.

He straddled the big man's hips and began slowly unfastening Rae's shirt, pausing every now and then to kiss his skin as it was revealed. Rae's hands rubbed up and down Jaed's body as he lay passively under him. He lifted his hips to help slide his pants off and sat up so that Jaed could push his shirt off. Nude, he cradled the smaller man and kissed him with slow

passion, making love to his mouth with sure, gliding strokes that drove Jaed wild. He didn't stop until the younger man was writhing in his lap and panting softly with desire.

"Take your clothes off, Jaed," he whispered between kisses, then leaned back to watch.

Jaed didn't move for a moment; his eyes were dazed, and fine, visible tremors ran down his body, testament to the power Rae had over him. After a moment, he shivered and unzipped his suit, trying to wiggle out of it without actually getting off Raerei's lap.

Raerei groaned as Jaed shimmied and writhed on top of him, obviously enjoying it. Once he was nude, Jaed laid full length over Rae and rubbed himself sensuously along the man's much larger body, hissing softly with pleasure. Rae sighed and cupped Jaed's cheeks, kissing him again.

Shay fluted a soft sound as Jaed's eyes fluttered shut and he melted against her mate. They were so beautiful together it almost broke her heart. She could watch them all day and never get bored. Jaed's bright green locks tangled into Raerei's inky black hair and rolled in it.

Jaed had demonstrated just how much control he had over his hair just yesterday, and her sheath clenched at the memory. It had been a fiery interlude and she would treasure the memory forever. She closed her eyes and stretched seductively as those memories made her mound throb and her nipples harden. When she opened her eyes, both men were watching her, cheek to cheek, with identical gleams of avarice in their eyes.

Rae stole another kiss. "Go to your Mistress, little man."

Jaed smiled and slowly sat up, still straddling Rae's hips as his fingers trailed along Rae's chest. He carefully eased off Raerei and crawled toward her with a fluid grace that always made her want to mount him then and there. He stopped and crouched over her, their faces a bare inch apart. His tongue flicked out and licked her lips, making her smile.

She leaned back on her hands and thrust her breasts up. "Aren't you going to open your present, Jaed?" she whispered seductively.

He smiled shyly, reaching out to touch one to the ribbons that tied the gown closed. He peeked up at her from under his lashes and tugged the bow loose. Then, he rose to his knees and bashfully asked her to stand.

She stood and watched him as his fingers moved to the next ribbon and slowly pulled it free.

With a small sigh of appreciation he opened the rest and pushed his hands under the filmy fabric. He groaned with pleasure and parted the edges to devour her with his eyes.

She ran her fingers through his hair when he kissed her belly and wrapped his arms around her waist. Rubbing his cheek against her midriff, he cuddled close to her. It was one of her favorite things about him. He loved to be petted and stroked and would snuggle up to them anytime he felt the need for some affection, which was often. She caressed his hair gently, knowing that the strands could feel it.

He didn't seem inclined to move. Continuing to rub his cheek against her belly, his fingers roamed across the rest of her. She wondered what he was thinking in moments like this, when his lashes fanned across his cheekbones and an expression of blissful peace stole over his face.

Jaed smiled and turned his face to press a kiss against the ultrasoft skin of his Mistress's belly. He loved touching her and Master Rae. They would almost always stop what they were doing to cuddle him for a moment or give him a quick kiss, and he was becoming addicted to their easy affection. Strangely, he noticed that while they gave it to him whenever he wanted it, they rarely touched each other that way. He didn't fully understand their relationship, but somehow, he felt he was a bridge between them.

They also didn't seem to notice the little tests he gave them. He knew it wasn't fair, but he was so wary that he couldn't seem to help himself. It was little things, but they were actions that would have brought on a swift and bloody beating from his former owners.

Stealing a piece of fruit without permission, or purposely getting his clothing dirty. One day he went so far as to tell them no.

Inside he had trembled with fear. Master Raerei had asked him to pick up his dirty clothes and take them to the laundry. Instead of a beating, Master Rae had glowered and done it himself, muttering that Jaed was spending too much time with Shay and picking up her bad habits.

Afterward Jaed had hid in the shower and shook, sick with fear. He'd stayed there until Mistress Shay had called him out for dinner. With his innards still clenching, he had slinked into the galley, but Master Raerei had just kissed him absently and heaped a tray full of food for himself.

That was when he truly began to believe they wouldn't hurt him. He knew when they were angry at each other, because they would disappear into a cabin, and their muted voices would carry a small distance. After the argument was finished, they would stalk out of wherever they had taken themselves off to, cheeks flushed and a gleam of triumph in the eyes of whoever had won the argument.

He was determined to not be a burden on them, so he took it upon himself to take over cleaning the small ship. Mistress Shay never ordered him, but she would always smile and hug him in thanks when she noticed something he'd done.

Once he realized they were really going to go after his sister and take them home, he had found a large storage room that looked like it had once been another cabin and began hauling the clutter out of it. Mistress Shay had watched his progress sadly, but never said anything to him about it. Master Rae had finally asked him what he was doing, and he told them he was making a room for his sister.

His Mistress had relaxed and smiled. Later that night she spent the whole evening caressing and stroking him and bringing him to orgasm over and over again, until he thought he'd drop from exhaustion. He'd spent a good portion of the next day in bed, sleeping it off.

They spent most of their days working on the ship or reading. His Mistress seemed to prefer reading repair manuals, but Master Raerei had accumulated a large collection of fiction that he was willing to share with Jaed.

The first time his Master had tied him up, Jaed was scared stiff, thinking that he was wrong and he was going to be hurt. It had been a different kind of torture than he had expected, though. His Master had stripped Jaed's clothes off and nibbled and licked him all over until Jaed thought he'd go mad. Then, Raerei had left him alone and tied to the bunk for a few minutes, just long enough for his aching erection to subside.

He'd come back with a bottle of flavored oil, which he'd poured onto Jaed before slowly massaging it into his skin, taking care to cover every square inch of Jaed's skin, saving his throbbing cock for last. When he'd finally taken the aching member in his hands Jaed had bowed up off the bed and shot his cum all over his Master's hands in long, pearly ropes.

While the trembles still racked his body, Master Rae had crouched over him and licked every drop up, growling with delight. Then, he'd rubbed and stroked Jaed's cock until he was hard and squirming anxiously again.

With a shiver, he recalled that his Master hadn't allowed him to come so easily again. He'd teased Jaed for hours before finally bringing him to completion. Once every bit of his seed had been lapped up, his Master had untied him and urged Jaed to take him in his mouth.

Jaed had taken his time in retaliation, resisting his Master's rumbling growls to speed up. Finally he'd swallowed as much of the long, thick member as he could and drank every ounce of his Master's thick cream.

Now, instead of trembling in fear, he shivered with anticipation when his Master appeared in a doorway with cords dangling from his fingers and a hungry expression on his handsome face.

His Mistress caught a handful of his hair and tugged his head back, bringing his thoughts back to her. She stroked her thumb across his lips and smiled sweetly. "Do you just want to cuddle tonight, baby?"

He shook his head, leaning back and patting the blankets beside her. He pounced on her the moment she was comfortable and kissed her passionately. She giggled under him and wrapped her arms around his neck, opening her mouth to invite his tongue inside. He sighed softly at the wet slide of her lips against his. His Mistress tasted delicious, sweet and warm and hot.

His fingers pushed the gown down her shoulders and off her arms so that it pooled under her. He lifted his head to admire her darker skin and hair against the creamy fabric and ran his hands down her body. With a groan of pleasure, he bent to flick one puckered nipple with the tip of his tongue.

When she gasped and threaded her fingers through his hair, he eased himself down over her, taking the tempting nub into his mouth and suckling lazily. His hand cupped the full mound and massaged it until she was arching into his touch and whispering hot love words against the top of his head.

Her response to his touch made him feel like the sexiest man in the universe and knowing his Master was watching only enhanced that sensation. He transferred his attention to her other nipple and turned his head slightly to peek at Rae, who had moved closer and was stroking his cock as he watched them.

Jaed wedged himself between Shay's thighs and rubbed his aching penis against her dampening core. Her labia parted under the pressure and his cock slid between her lips. He moaned, stroking himself into the groove. Her clit swelled under the stimulation, and she cried out softly, lifting her hips to rub it against his length. He licked her nipples one last time before scooting up to kiss her again. He slid his hands into her hair and held her still for the deep thrusts of his tongue, mimicking the motion with rolls of his hips.

He ached to slide into her hot passage, but knew that his Master would stop him. He sighed and moaned, grinding himself into her wet slit. With every twist of his hips, he spread her juice until it coated his cock from crown to base.

He jerked in surprise when his Master laid a hand on his buttocks. He'd almost forgotten they weren't alone. Rae's fingers trailed down the crease separating his cheeks, and Jaed trembled in reaction. Fingers rolled his balls gently and he gasped, jerking up and into the caress. His Master's fingers continued to explore, sliding up his damp shaft to hold it in a firm grip.

His Mistress parted her legs even more and curled her foot around his calf, holding herself open under him. Her hands cupped his cheeks and she stared lovingly into his eyes, stroking his lips gently with her thumbs.

Jaed stiffened, knowing something was different, but not what. His eyes closed briefly as Rae's fingers stroked him intimately, then began to pull his cock away from his belly and aim it at Shay's hot core. He shuddered as the head pressed against the opening of her body, and his Master silently began to urge him in. Jaed sucked in a deep breath and pressed just the tip inside.

Rae's hand released him and moved to rub the cheeks of his ass reassuringly.

Jaed stared down at his Mistress wonderingly. She smiled slowly and waited, not taking him any deeper inside her, and he understood that it was his choice to go any further.

He drew in a shuddering breath and slowly sank in to the hilt. The sensation was indescribably good. Hot and wet and clenching tightly around him like she would never let him go. Resting his forehead against hers, he slowly withdrew and then thrust home again, just as slowly. "*Oh Gods, Mistress, I'm not going to last,*" he sent, feeling his balls pull up tight against him.

"That's dinii, baby; you don't need to. This is all for you," she whispered against his lips. Her hands stroked down his back to cup his ass and squeeze. "You feel so good," she moaned, arching into his next removal and insertion.

His focus narrowed until all he was aware of was the woman writhing under him as he pumped himself in and out of her blissfully tight channel. He grunted softly and wound her legs around him, until all he could feel and think about was her touch and the driving need to come. Cupping her cheeks, he pressed his mouth against hers in a wet, openmouthed kiss that made his blood boil in his veins.

Her nails dug into his shoulders as she arched and pushed up against him in an effort to meet his downward movements. He shuddered as a tingling burn built in his loins and began moving more frantically, eager to fill her with his seed and wanting the act to last forever at the same time.

He buried his face in her shoulder and trembled as she convulsed around him and grunted as his frills blossomed open inside her and streams of semen shot into her welcoming body. Her arms and legs became steel bands, holding him tight to her as she screamed and thrashed under him, the contractions in her creamy channel milking the fluid from his cock joyously.

After several long minutes her hold on him eased, and she sighed with sated pleasure, stroking her hands up and down his back while he shivered and bit down on the soft join of her neck and shoulder. It was almost more than he could bear. His frills fluttered and waved inside her, making it feel like she was still climaxing around him. It was an exquisite torture, and he couldn't wait to do it again. Finally, he lifted his head and started to pull free of her clinging softness.

"Ow, ow, ow, stop, baby," she gasped, reaching down and clutching the cheeks of his ass to stop him.

He froze and stared down at her. “*What is it, Mistress? Did I hurt you?*” He was horrified that what they had done had damaged her in some way.

She winced and blinked back a few tears. “It’s dinii, baby; it’s just your spiny things. They gouged me a little.” She petted him reassuringly. “Um, I don’t know what to do.” She looked over his shoulder and another hand joined hers in caressing him gently.

“Just relax, both of you,” came Raerei’s deep, rumbling voice. He lay down beside them and turned Jaed’aden’s face toward his and stole a soft kiss. “They fold back down a few minutes after he finishes coming.”

She breathed a sigh of relief. “Oh, dinii.”

Jaed felt the same way, and since he was going to be locked in his Mistress’s tight embrace for a little while longer, he decided to take advantage of the situation. His fingers found her nipple, and he lifted his chest away from her to toy with it gently. She had such beautiful breasts, full and plump and topped with the most delicious nipples.

He wedged his thighs under hers and sat up, careful to not tug too hard on the delicate skin inside her and cupped her breasts, rolling and massaging them with fascination. She sighed and arched into the caresses, lifting her arms above her head to stretch lazily.

“If you keep that up, baby, we might have to do this again.” She smiled sweetly up at him and reached up to stroke his lips with her thumb.

He grinned and nipped the pad of her thumb. He felt his cock start to soften, and the frills folded back down. With a sigh of regret, he eased himself free of her clinging warmth and cuddled against her chest. “*Thank you, Mistress. That was beautiful.*” He kissed her softly and laid his head on her breasts. Turning, he smiled at his Master, who reached out to stroke the length of Jaed’s body.

After several minutes of enjoying their caresses, Jaed felt himself drifting half-asleep. He felt cherished and loved. It was a novel experience, and he intended to enjoy it to its fullest, even if it was an illusion. Soon his sister would be with them and his family would be

complete. His hope was that after they found his people, he could properly propose to his Master and Mistress and offer them veils.

Raerei sighed into his hair and gently rolled Jaed onto his back. "Are you ready for me, little one?" he asked huskily.

Jaed nodded uncertainly, coming fully awake in an instant. He knew what his Master wanted and was nervous about it. He had so many bad memories about men touching him, hurting him. He feared he wouldn't be able to respond properly.

Rae pulled their bodies together and kissed him deeply, his erection nudged Jaed's hip and a drop of precum smeared his skin. Fear filled him, and he felt himself slide into the part of his mind that protected him from the abuses he had suffered. Woodenly, he pulled away and crouched on his hands and knees.

His Master sat up behind him and touched his back and curved his body around his.

Jaed flinched and went still, waiting for the ripping pain of the first thrust. His Master pulled him back until he was kneeling between Rae's spread thighs. He shook with confusion. This wasn't how it normally happened. Why wasn't his Master rutting in his body? He understood the gentleness when they played with bondage and oral sex, but he knew that Raerei liked his actual penetration hard and fast. He'd seen his Master with his Mistress. It was rough and gritty, and there was very little tenderness in the act.

Hands caressed his chest and lips brushed over his shoulders. "What was that about, pet?" Raerei rumbled out. Fingers stroked his nipples until the tiny nubs were hard, sharp points.

It was impossible to stay in the safe spot in his mind when his Master was being so gentle. The caresses coaxed him out, and new arousal tingled in his penis until the long, thick length began to plump and harden again.

“*I was assuming the position so that you could fuck me, my Master,*” he whispered. His head went back against Rae’s chest when a big hand wrapped possessively around his cock and squeezed.

Rae’s lips feathered across Jaed’s ear before swiping the shell with a flick of his tongue. “I didn’t plan on fucking you, pet. I am going to make love to you.” He turned Jaed and cupped his cheeks, spreading nipping kisses across Jaed’s lips. “And I want to look into your eyes while I do it.”

Jaed nodded uncertainly and let Rae push him down onto his back. He tried to relax as his Master leaned over him, but found he was unable to regulate his breathing. In spite of himself, he continued to pant from the stress. His desperate gaze locked on Rae’s face. Rae’s calmness comforted him on some levels, but he was still fighting the urge to run away.

He didn’t understand why this scared him so much. By recognizing his fear, he knew he would have to face it or risk never being able to break its hold on him.

Raerei settled beside him and propped himself up on his elbow. His hand petted Jaed from shoulder to knee reassuringly. “Only when you are ready, Jaed,” his Master said quietly, leaning down to kiss him soothingly.

Jaed nodded, closing his eyes and blowing out a deep breath. “*Would you let Mistress help me?*” he asked hesitantly.

His Master smiled and nodded, glancing to the side where Shay was sprawled.

With a soft rustle, she moved behind Jaed and lifted his head onto her folded legs. She carefully smoothed his hair so that it wouldn’t be pinched under him.

It was a small gesture, but the implications of it made him relax. He knew his Master had noted the change when he loomed over him, slowly lowering his head to kiss Jaed sweetly.

Jaed lifted his arms and buried his fingers in the heavy, black fall of hair curtained around him. His lips parted and he twined his tongue around his lover's, drawing it into the moist depths of his mouth. *"I love your hair, Master; it feels so good on my skin."*

Raerei ended the kiss and smiled down at him. "I'm glad." His thumb brushed lightly across Jaed's nipple. The tiny nub hardened immediately.

Jaed giggled soundlessly when Rae rubbed their noses together. He looped his arms around Rae's neck and smiled up at him. This would be dinii. It wouldn't be like before, where pain and degradation was the objective. His Mistress and Master cared for him, and he believed they wouldn't hurt him. For the first time he realized he could say no without reprisals. And he believed it.

He looked up and met the soft gaze of his Mistress. She smiled down at him, and he let his hair curl around her hands. She laughed with delight and rubbed the strands.

His Master moved and kissed the curve of Jaed's jaw. He worked his way down Jaed's throat, leaving tingles of pleasure in the wake of his caressing lips. Jaed let his eyes flutter closed and gave himself up to the sensations. He wished he could echo the soft sounds his lovers were making and felt, again, his lack of voice. A soft sigh eased past his lips when Rae's tongue swirled around his tight nipples. His back arched, pushing the hard, flat nubs into his Master's mouth.

Rae growled softly and latched onto one and scraped his fangs back and forth across it. His arm curled under Jaed's back and held him securely against Rae's body. "You taste good, little man. It must be you, because I know it's not that evil soap Shay buys us." His tongue trailed wetly across Jaed's chest to his other nipple and laved attention on it as well.

Jaed smiled dreamily, kneading Rae's scalp. *"It's not that bad, Master. Maybe we could talk her into getting one that smells better, though."*

Rae chuckled huskily. "Maybe we can." He shifted over Jaed's legs and wedged a knee between Jaed's thighs.

A shiver racked Jaed's body, and he looked up at his Mistress apprehensively. He spread his legs slowly so his Master could settle between them, holding her gaze like a lifeline. He stiffened involuntarily when Rae's heavy body eased lightly onto his.

Fingers caught his chin and pulled his stare to his Master's face. "Is this dinii?" Rae asked softly. "We can stop anytime you want, pet." His hand moved and cupped Jaed's jaw gently. "We have time."

Jaed nodded jerkily. "*I know, Master. I'm just scared.*" A convulsive shudder racked his body.

Rae sighed softly and bent his head for a series of tender little kisses. "Maybe we should try something different?" He sat up, pulling Jaed's head up with him and flipped them over so that Jaed sprawled across his chest.

Jaed gasped and stared down at Rae in shock. Shay cleared her throat, and his startled gaze jerked to hers. His hair was twisted and curled around her hands in a death grip, forcing her to hold her arms up to keep from getting tangled with the two men. He blushed hotly and released her hands. "*Sorry, Mistress.*"

She smiled ruefully for a moment and lowered her hands to massage Rae's scalp. "He's right, Rae, You do have beautiful hair. I'm glad you let it grow."

Rae closed his eyes and purred with contentment. His strong hands made lazy sweeps up and down Jaed's back, squeezing his buttocks with every pass.

Jaed watched a smile creep across Rae's face when he stretched out comfortably on his Master's chest, his legs easily straddling Rae's narrow hips, and Jaed sighed blissfully, rolling and rubbing against the muscular body beneath him. The tension and fear that had gripped him floated away. The simple change in position made him feel more in control of his situation.

He no longer felt he was passively accepting whatever was done to him. He was an active participant in their lovemaking. Realizing he could get up whenever he wanted made him freeze and stare blankly down at his Master.

Rae opened his eyes and raised a questioning eyebrow. He didn't speak, simply watched Jaed while his hands continued to caress Jaed's back and buttocks. The engorged column of his penis pressed hotly between them.

Jaed beamed down at him and pressed their lips together with eager passion. After several long minutes, he lifted his head and simply looked at his Master.

A small smile played with the edges of Raerei's lips as he relaxed his head on Shay's lap. Her strong fingers combed through his hair and massaged his scalp. Jaed knew exactly how good it felt. His Mistress was very tactile about hair of any sort and couldn't seem to keep her fingers out of it. Even her own. Jaed knew she played with a lock of her hair whenever she was thinking about something hard.

He slowly sat up, his fingers trailing along Rae's chest and belly. He grasped Rae's cock firmly in his fist and stroked it slowly and firmly from root to tip.

A groan rumbled from Rae's chest and he lifted his hips into the touch. "Oh, that's nice, pet, give me more." He reached back and wrapped his arms around Shay's bent legs and hips, leaving himself wide open to Jaed's touch.

Jared took his time. He caught a drop of the fluid leaking from the silky glans and massaged it into his Master's skin. His cock began to stir and rose to press against his belly.

His Mistress held a small clear packet out to him. He took it and examined it curiously, one hand still stroking up and down Rae's cock. "*What is this?*"

"Lubricant, baby." She went back to playing with Raerei's hair, bending to bury her face in a handful.

Jaed frowned. "*Huh. For what?*" Did she want him to fix something? It was an odd time for her to ask.

Raerei and Shay both froze and stared at him.

"It's for you," Shay said slowly.

"*Oh.*" He grew uncomfortable under the weight of their stares. "*What do I do with it?*"

His Master and Mistress exchanged a glance and they both shuddered. "Put it on Rae's cock, baby," Shay finally answered. "Then you put some on your anus so that he doesn't tear you."

Jaed brightened. "*Really?*" He tore the packet open with his teeth and dribbled some onto his Master's shaft and slowly smoothed it down the hard length. "*It's slippery,*" he exclaimed with delight, pouring more of the liquid on his fingers and using both hands to rub it in. He scooted back a bit so he could lean down and lap the swollen head. "*Mmm, berries!*" He cast a sly look at his Mistress. "*I like berries. Yours especially, Mistress.*" He leered playfully at her breasts. Her return smile had a strained quality to it, but he didn't feel like worrying about it just then.

He moved back up and rose onto his knees to smear some of the slippery stuff on the rose between his buttocks. Suddenly, he was very eager to try out the lubricant and see if it felt as good as he thought it would.

It did. Now he wouldn't mind taking his Master into his body. It would be a totally new experience for him if there weren't any pain or tearing. He grasped his Master's cock and angled it between his buttocks and pressed it against the opening of his body.

Rae stiffened and watched him intently. He didn't speak, but anticipation drew his facial features tight. His muscles flexed while his arms tightened around Shay's hips.

Jaed bit his lip and slowly sank down. A surprised gasp burst past his lips as his body slowly stretched to accommodate the thick pillar. Instead of the burning pain he had been expecting, there was only a pinch as his body opened to the intrusion. He took his time, sinking an inch at a time. Finally, his buttocks rested on Rae's groin and he sighed at the almost too full sensation. "*Oh, this is nice, Master.*" He sighed and slowly lifted off and, just

as slowly, sank back down. The ache gave way to exquisite pleasure, and he placed his hands back on Rae's thighs for leverage as he moved lazily. It was totally unlike anything he had ever experienced before, and he knew he should have expected it to feel new. Everything was different with them.

His eyes shot open when Raerei suddenly grabbed his hips and urged him to quicken the pace. Feeling bold, he took his Master's hands and pulled them away and asked his Mistress to hold them. He grinned she did, and he returned to the slow up-and-down motions, watching Rae's face as he did.

"It feels so good, Master," he said with a teasing moan and little shimmy of his hips. *"You're so hard and hot inside me. I'm so full; can you feel me stretching for you?"* His eyes half-closed with pleasure as he listened to his Master growl and grumble under him.

Rae gritted his teeth and raised his knees and bucked his hips, making Jaed bounce on him.

Jaed squeaked at the sensation and then writhed as his Master continued to buck and thrash under him, awkwardly taking control of their lovemaking. Jaed reached back and grabbed his Master's knees, then lifted his hips slightly to let the big man thrust and grind against him. A thrill went through him as he locked gazes with Mistress Shay and he saw desire flickering in her light copper-colored eyes.

Still holding Rae's hands, she leaned toward him and licked her lips in invitation. "Kiss me, baby. You two look so hot together it's burning me up," she whispered seductively.

Jaed smiled slowly and leaned toward her, bracing his hands on Rae's chest. His tongue flicked across his Mistress's lips as Rae continued to thrust urgently in him. Jaed's swollen cock pressed tightly against his belly and wept drops of precum. He took her mouth in a ravenous kiss and whined softly into her mouth as his Master plundered his body.

Shay sighed softly and broke the contact, pressing another kiss against the corner of his mouth. "Lovely." She let go of Rae's hands to cup Jaed's face and rested her forehead against his. "Does it feel good, baby?"

"*Oh yes, Mistress,*" he replied. "*It's perfect.*" He pulled away and lay down on Rae's chest, letting his Master love him as he wanted to.

Rae's arms wrapped around him securely and grabbed Jaed's ass, holding him steady as the position made his thrusts shallower, but still sweet. His big body grew damp with sweat and fused their skin together, and Jaed moaned and grunted with each insertion. "So good, so good, come for me, pet," Rae panted in his ear. He slowed his pace and instead made deep, powerful lunges.

Jaed shuddered in reaction, his prick twitching between them. "*Close, Master, so close. I want you to come first.*" He bit Rae's shoulder and whimpered with pleasure when his Master responded to his plea by moving harder and faster again. His big chest rose and fell under Jaed quickly as his orgasm approached. The lubricant made every motion a smooth, slick glide over every sensitive nerve.

With a roar of satisfaction Rae pulled Jaed's hips down tight while he plunged his full length into him and shook as hot jets of semen shot from the tip of his cock.

Jaed squeezed his eyes shut and spasmed in Rae's grasp and gave a choking gasp as his penis creamed between their bellies. He lay tensely as waves of pleasure rolled over him. Finally, he relaxed and panted against Rae's chest, content to listen to Shay and Raerei make soft noises of happiness.

Shay moved to lie down beside Rae, and she rested her head on his shoulder and smiled with her eyes closed.

Jaed stretched out an arm to drape it across her waist and snuggled blissfully. *Perfect.*

Chapter Five

"You're not going and that is the last of it," Shay growled in frustration as she finished buckling a long, wickedly sharp knife onto her belt. She stretched and twisted to make sure that her clothing wouldn't restrict her movements in any way. Once she finished, she began tucking assorted daggers and poison-tipped needles into tiny, hidden pockets sewn into her leathers.

Jaed sat on the new double bunk and pouted adorably. "*She's my sister,*" he said, challenge clear in his tone. "*I should help her! Not leave it to someone else to do.*"

They had arrived two days before the auction to make sure that their supplies were in order. If everything went from sugar to shit, Raerei wanted to be able to leave as soon as Silaari was on the ship.

"Yeah, well, you can't," Shay shot back heartlessly. "You don't know how to fight, and I only have two maskers. I'm going to need both of them to get her back to the ship. Anyone who sees you is going to know why we want her, and I want to make this a clean operation. If I can't buy her outright, I'll have to steal her, and I don't want to have to worry about what you are doing." She speared him with a fierce glare. There was no way she would risk him, why didn't he understand that? They had been arguing for hours now.

Jaed had been bright and bubbling with excitement right up until the moment he discovered he was going to be staying on the ship with Raerei.

"Please, Mistress," he began, a definite whine in his voice now.

Shay spun around and grabbed his face, ignoring the way his eyes went wide with the beginnings of fear. She pushed her face into his until their noses almost touched. "I. Will. Not. Risk. My. Mate." Ignoring the shocked expression that grew over his face, she pushed him away and stalked out of the cabin, yelling for Raerei.

Shit! She couldn't believe she had blurted it out like that! Granted, he was driving her nuts, and the arguing was making it difficult for her to keep the animalistic side of her nature under control, but she had promised Rae she wouldn't say anything. He was going to kill her.

Rae slid out of a doorway and leaned against the wall, crossing his arms over his chest. Amusement lurked in his eyes as he raised an enquiring eyebrow. "You bellowed, my zeeta?"

She walked to him and dropped her head on his chest, trembling with nerves and anger. His arms opened and curled around her waist loosely. "You do something with him. I'm wanting to tie him up and lock him in a cabin." She shook her head against his chest and sighed. "I called him mate, zi'nen. I'm sorry; it just slipped out."

Raerei was glad she wasn't looking at him as a slow smile spread across his face. He had been listening to the arguing. It had started within minutes of his mates waking up. While he was pleased Jaed felt secure enough to argue, he had not picked the best time to show some spine.

He rubbed his hands up and down Shay's back soothingly, a little amused that he was the one who would have to play peacekeeper. He knew Shay had been fighting the urge to claim the young man and wasn't very surprised the declaration had slipped out once her temper was roused. She had done much better than he had thought she would. Just listening to them made him want to assert his dominance over Jaed.

The scrape of a shoe made him look up from Shay's dark head. Jaed was staring at the woman in Rae's arms like he had never seen her before. Confusion and hope swirled comically across his face. He took another step in their direction and met Rae's gaze questioningly. "*I think you've bedeviled your Mistress enough for one day, Jaed,*" he sent silently. "*You're staying here and that's final.*" His voice was implacable.

Jaed nodded in a dazed fashion and went back to watching Shay. His gaze grew hungry and he cuddled against her back, pushing the hair away from the nape of her neck to lay a gentle kiss on it. "*I'm sorry, my Mistress. I'll be good. Be safe and come back to me whole.*"

Rae grinned. If he'd known that was all it would take to end the fighting, he would have told her to tell Jaed hours ago when his head was throbbing in time with their voices. Jaed tended to forget to control his mental volume when he was worked up.

Shay growled and Raerei snickered. She didn't let go of her anger quickly. She would no doubt still be festering over it when she got back. He'd have to give Jaed a few tips on dealing with an irate Aspect woman.

She shook herself and gave him a quick kiss before turning to grab Jaed and lock her mouth on his angrily. The passionate kiss didn't end until the young man was sagging against her. When she released him, he sank to the floor with a befuddled expression. Turning on her heel, she stalked away, her booted feet silent on the metal floor.

Raerei picked Jaed up and let him lean against his chest as he watched his fierce mate leave. She moved like the assassin she was. Silent, fluid, and deadly. He knew she was completely focused on what she was about to do, now that her men were safe. His karracat Aspect howled with aroused approval as it recognized its mate. She was magnificent.

Once the ship's hatch closed, he grinned down at his new mate. "We are going to have a talk, little man," he said, purring menace filling his voice.

Jaed gulped and gave him an apprehensive glance. "*Am I really your mate?*" he asked hesitantly.

Raerei stopped and watched him solemnly. “Only if you choose to accept our suit, pet.”

Joy transformed Jaed’s face. “*Oh yes, Master. I accept.*” He trustingly laced his fingers through Rae’s.

Raerei smiled slowly, leaning down to press a gentle kiss against Jaed’s lips. “Good, that will make Shay very happy.”

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Shay pushed the argument and confession into the back of her mind. She needed to focus on what she was doing. Stopping at the nearest Caset machine she deposited a hefty sum into a temporary account and hoped that she had enough funds to buy the girl. It would be much simpler that way. If she didn’t, she would have to find a way to steal her from her new owner and smuggle her back to the ship. Rae had changed one of the smaller smuggling holds just in case it happened, and they were searched before they could leave. They would tuck Jaed and Silaari into it and then leave as quietly as possible.

According to their calculations, it would take all of their resources to make it to the coordinates Jaed’s Goddess had given them. They would have to take advantage of every habitable planet they ran across to keep from arriving and being stuck because they ran out of fuel and energy. Since the space they were going to had not been explored by any of the local people, it was a gamble that they would find anything.

Ironically, Shay’s home planet was the last known habitable planet they would stop at. Hopefully, they would find at least one more on the last leg of the trip.

The auction would be starting soon, so she hustled through the slow-moving throng of shoppers. She was grateful that Raerei had the foresight to get there early so they could be fully stocked. *At least one of us knows how to plan ahead.* She took the chit the attendant handed her and blended into the crowd, trying to look inconspicuous.

The next hour was pure torture. While she fought the nausea in her belly, several slaves were paraded across the stage. The dejected expressions and sour smell of fear and

excitement made her stomach roil. Each frail body was covered in bruises and scars. The handlers here never medically treated the slaves because the bidders found the signs of abuse exciting. Some were bought because of the marred flesh. At last, Silaari was brought out.

It was obvious she was related to Jaed'aden. The same delicate features marked their pretty faces, and they shared the same hair and eyes, except that her hair was as short as Jaed's had been when Shay had found him. It barely brushed the tops of her shoulders.

Unlike Jaed, Silaari looked completely blank. He had given off sparks of life, hate, and spirit. His sister looked like no one was home in that pretty head. Not stupid, just...broken. She was tiny and definitely not an adult. Her breasts had not formed, and her limbs had the awkward length of a child just hinting at adolescence.

She stared a little ahead of her like she didn't see the crowd in front of her. It was as if she existed in a world inside her head, and nothing outside it could touch the core of her. The sight of that detachment sent a shiver of dread through Shay. *Oh, this is bad.*

The auctioneer was babbling the girl's attributes and motioned for the handlers to strip her. "Young body slave, used as a whipping child." They spun the girl around and pointed out the thick, red scars that coated her back so heavily there was no sign of clear skin left. "These could be removed with a simple skinning and medic treatment." Shay shuddered. When he said skinning, he meant it literally. The person's skin was carved off them and then rebuilt by a medic unit. It was an agonizing process even if anesthesia was administered. He paused and scanned the crowd, as if about to impart a great secret.

The crowd went still and anticipation fogged the air around Shay.

"This slave is a virgin, freshly examined and authenticated." He beamed with oily pleasure. "What am I bid?"

Shay's heart sank. There was no way they would be able to afford to buy a virgin slave. It was incredibly rare to find one. The bidding immediately jumped to one hundred seventy-

five thousand credits. And that was just the beginning. Forty-five minutes passed as the bidding grew, and the auctioneer was almost spitting with excitement.

It finally came to a halt when a fat, greasy-looking man bid five hundred fifteen thousand credits and won the girl. He even had the audacity to wave his hands in triumph over the crowd, who cheered like a pack of starving scavengers. He would easily make double that amount when he sold her virginity to a noble, if not reselling the girl altogether.

Shay ground her teeth and slipped out of the room. She'd have to wait until he picked the girl up and hope that he took her somewhere private enough to knock him out and steal her.

* * * * *

Skand Toolon pushed himself away from the wall he was leaning against. The masker he had bought was working perfectly. No one recognized him. Satisfaction filled him as the fat man trundled out of the room. He knew the little bastard wasn't his prey, but he still hoped that the ones he was looking for would show up. He had spread the word of an exotic coming up for auction as far as he could and made sure a description of her was included in the rumors. Even if they didn't show up, he had still made a tidy bundle off the little slut. It had been easy to get his hands on her. The former owner had been married off, and the woman's new husband wasn't of a mind to put up with his bride's antics like her parents were. He had decreed that his bride would take her own beatings instead of letting a worthless slave accept the punishment.

Not feeling the least inclined to have a concubine from another race, he had sold the girl to Skand for a pittance. Skand silently applauded himself for remembering the wench. After he finished killing the scum who had challenged him, he planned on breeding the slaves. There was always a good market for exotics.

Now, all he had to do was follow the fat little *squick* and see who else showed interest.

* * * * *

Shay slipped into a dark corner and set her masker. That finished, she strolled to the holding pens. No one seemed to be paying attention so she sat down on a bench and pretended to work on a plasreader while she watched the doors. Several men passed her and a small, rodentlike individual sat down next to her and promptly began to snooze. She shot him a look of disgust when a wet, nasal snore issued from his mouth along with a toxic stench.

She saw the fat man approach and made sounds of displeasure, nudging the buffoon next to her. When he did nothing more than snort and drool, she got up and moved off down the hall, pretending to mutter under her breath about drunken derelicts. It actually gave her a good opportunity to leave without attracting suspicion. Once out of direct sight, she leaned against the wall and waited for the slave owner to come back with his prize.

Several minutes passed before he came huffing back down the hallway, now tugging the girl along behind him. Silaari was clad in a simple linen shift that barely covered her young body. Shay pretended to ignore them as they passed. Just before they got too far away to track, she pushed away from the wall and strolled along behind them.

The man was talking excitedly into an ear communicator. "Yes, Bordida, a virgin. Contact whomever you need to; we could make a fortune. She's an exotic; I haven't seen anything like her before. She could easily take the place of that murderous bitch you sold years ago. She's very docile, so that could increase customers, too!" He was talking so fast he was almost babbling, but Shay wasn't paying attention any longer. A red haze of murderous fury almost blinded her. Her focus narrowed until the only thing that mattered was getting the man and girl alone.

He wouldn't be leaving the station as anything but a bloated, foul-smelling corpse. It was his bad luck to be the agent of the whore-mistress who had taken such joy in Shay's bondage.

Bordida would never touch the girl.

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Skand chuckled to himself and dropped his pose as a sleeping drunk. The girl was on the move and so far no one had paid any attention to the coming and goings of the holding pens. It looked like he had been wrong. No trouble, he had other ways of finding his prey. He would return to where it started and scan the logs of all the ships that had left that day.

* * * * *

Shay smiled with grim pleasure as the pair she was trailing stopped in front of a rented room. The man shoved Silaari in and followed without making sure the door shut behind him. She slipped through the closing door and waited until it was securely shut behind her before advancing farther into the room. She deliberately made plenty of noise so there was no way he could miss that there was someone else in the room with them.

He spun around and stared at her. She hit a button on the masker and the facade fell away.

He blanched white and then green, obviously recognizing the promise of death in her gaze. She didn't remember him from her stay in the whorehouse, but from the dawning knowledge on his face, he knew who she was.

"Hello, slug," Shay crooned, reaching out to trail the backs of her fingers down his pasty cheek. "Raped any women lately?" She blinked lazily.

He backed away, shaking his head rapidly.

"I don't believe you." She sighed, shaking her head with false sadness. She flicked a glance at Silaari. "I'd stay longer to make you rethink the error of your ways, but, alas, I'm on a schedule." She drew out a long needle and rolled it between her fingers. "Anything to say to your God before you meet Him?" The karracat in her wanted to play with him more, but she knew it wouldn't be a good idea.

The man started crying, babbling nonsense about how she must have mistaken him for someone else and he hadn't hurt anyone.

Silaari stood behind him, passively watching the drama unfold as if it were a particularly boring vid.

Shay let him sob and make protestations of innocence while she inspected the girl. There didn't appear to be any more damage than what she had seen at the auction. Finally, growing tired of the noise, she jabbed the needle into the man's neck and watched dispassionately as he collapsed to the ground gurgling. It would take some time for the poison to completely work through his system, so she didn't know why he was acting as if he could already feel the burn. *Coward. It's so much easier to hurt someone else, isn't it?* she thought with disdain.

She tied and gagged him before withdrawing the needle that was still sticking out of his neck.

"Now for you," she said turning back to Silaari.

"Will you kill me now, Mistress?" the girl asked, as if it didn't really matter to her. And maybe it didn't. Considering the scars on her back, there was little that could hurt as much as anything she'd already experienced.

She was a little surprised at the throaty vibrations in the girl's voice and remembered why Jaed's vocal cords had been cut. Maybe the ability to beguile was not just the excuse of a cruel owner. Silaari sounded years older than her actual age of fourteen when she spoke.

"No. I'm taking you home." Shay sighed and dug through the slug's pockets until she found the release codes for the shackles and nerve threads. He gasped and kicked weakly, beginning to feel the pain of the poison. She smiled a bit grimly; he would wish for death long before it came to him, and she did not feel an ounce of remorse.

"I have no home, Mistress, except as my owner bids," the girl replied tonelessly. She held her hands out without being asked.

“You have a home now, and a brother,” she added, looking up to watch the girl’s face for any sign of recognition.

“I have no brother, Mistress.” She lowered her hands after the shackles were removed. “Thank you, Mistress.”

Shay sighed and placed the second masker on the girl’s waistband. “Come on, let’s go.”

“As you wish, Mistress.”

She changed the settings on the masker. It wouldn’t do to have anyone recognize them before they reached the ship. “Don’t speak; just follow me.”

Silaari nodded without changing expression.

The reached *Crimson Shackles* without any problems, and she ushered the girl in. Jaed and Raerei were waiting in the galley. She stretched her neck muscles as the tension rushed out of her body, and she was suddenly exhausted. “We should go, Rae. I left a soon-to-be corpse in a room, and as soon as it’s found they will lock down the station.”

Raerei muttered something under his breath and walked out of the room.

Shay ignored Jaed’s anxious expression and turned to take the masker off herself and Silaari.

With a happy gasp, Jaed grabbed the girl and hauled her into his arms.

Shay saw something flicker across the girl’s face as she stood stiffly in her brother’s embrace. She didn’t return the hug or even really acknowledge the man holding her.

When Silaari didn’t respond to anything Jaed’aden sent to her, which he was broadcasting on a broad thread, he pulled back. Hurt and confusion spread across his face as Silaari simply stared at him silently.

Finally, Silaari turned and looked at her.

With a wince, Shay belatedly recalled that she had ordered the girl to be silent. “You can talk, Silaari.”

"Thank you, Mistress," she replied woodenly.

An uncomfortable silence filled the room when she didn't say anything more.

This is going to be difficult, Shay predicted. She turned and hugged Jaed and kissed him gently. *"Give her time, baby. I'm sure she's just, uh, surprised."*

Jaed nodded wanly and left the room quietly. She heard the door to their cabin hiss open then shut and winced again. "Come with me, Silaari. I'll show you to your room." The girl followed her quietly and sat down on the bunk when Shay told her she needed to be stationary for liftoff.

* * * * *

Shay entered the cabin without announcing her presence. She wanted to check on Silaari, but knew the girl wouldn't understand someone asking her permission for anything. It had been several hours since they'd left Devret, and the girl didn't appear to have moved since Shay had left her.

Silaari was sitting on the edge of her bunk with her hands folded in her lap. From the blank expression and rigid posture, Shay knew the girl was waiting for the abuse to begin. She looked like a perfect little doll.

As long as you ignored her shattered eyes.

"Do you have everything you need?" she asked quietly.

"Yes, Mistress. Thank you, Mistress," the girl replied tonelessly. She stared at the floor, still motionless.

"The lavatory is through my cabin. Come with me and I'll show you where everything is." Shay stepped back into the hallway. Silaari followed silently. Shay's skin prickled and her nerves twitched anxiously. Jaed's little sister unnerved her. The silent acceptance grated on her nerves because it brought back too many memories. The passive, robotic slaves survived the longest. If one could really call it survival.

Once they reached the point Silaari had, something inside them had died. It left a walking, talking shell. There was no hope of them ever being free because they simply withered away until their hearts stopped. They didn't care about anything, not even dying.

Gods only knew what it would do to Jaed if they'd rescued his baby sister only to have her will herself into death weeks later. She had spent most of her time since liftoff comforting Jaed and assuring him that his sister was still somewhere inside the tiny stranger who looked at him with his own eyes.

As she showed Silaari around the ship, she silently prayed to Jaed'aden's Goddess. *"Please help me. I don't know if we can save her. Is there anything left inside her to bring back?"*

A single word sighed through her mind. *"Sing..."* She jerked as shivers ran through her body followed by a wave of tingles. She hadn't really expected a response and getting one frayed her nerves just a little bit more.

The tour didn't take long, so Shay took the girl to the galley with her to prepare dinner. She set Silaari to peeling vegetables while she started the main course.

Jaed slipped in a few minutes later, and Shay watched him stare at his sister with a hopeful and hungry gaze. The girl didn't even look up when he sat across from her. He set down a bundle of leathers and started cleaning them, still sneaking yearning glances at his sister.

Shay cleared her throat and fluted a few tentative notes before launching into a very long lullaby of her people. After a few minutes of listening, Jaed joined her, his telepathic hum tickling her brain like the wings of a small bird.

Jaed scooted away from the table and wrapped his arms around her waist. He rested his chin on her shoulder and continued to hum along with her. She relaxed into his embrace and let the harmony carry her away while her hands stayed busy.

Halfway through the song, Raerei joined them. His arms hugged both of them and his hands came to rest on her belly. His much deeper voice joined hers. He didn't sing the lyrics, instead took up the melody so that Shay's lighter tones could soar above his. This changed the meaning from being sung to a child, to hope for conception. Shay turned in their arms. Jaed had his eyes closed, lost in the music. Raerei met her gaze, his eyes tender and shadowed. She forgot everything and let herself become a part of them. The song was a prayer, a hope, and a wordless expression of love and recommitment to her mates.

Only Raerei understood that this particular song had a special meaning. It was sung only in the presence of one's closest family members. By him singing it with her now, he was accepting Silaari, not as a sister-in-law, but also as a child of their family. She was a sister and daughter now.

Shay smiled luminously, knowing that they would both fight to the death for their foundlings. It was a responsibility she accepted gladly. They had been without Clan for so long that she reveled in their budding family.

They had both been so young when slavers decimated their Clan, just barely into puberty and feeling so very adult.

The slavers killed most of the adults and infants. Those who survived were captured and sold into slavery. Some escaped, she knew. The elders who were able had hidden as many of the children as they could.

What was left of the Clan would have been absorbed into other Clans by now. No Clan was allowed to survive if they were not strong enough to protect their young. Those who escaped would be taken in, but at a very low status until they proved themselves an asset to their new Clan.

But it would be at the high cost of giving up their Karracat Ghost and absorbing the Ghost of their new clan. It was a ripping tear in one's soul.

Aspects were a fierce people. Most who were taken didn't survive long, because they would never bow to a master. Those who lived, like Raerei and herself, were quickly and brutally broken. At least, that was what the slavers had believed.

Raerei had been sold to the owner of a gladiator pit. He was forced to become little more than a vicious animal, killing and fighting for every scrap of food and minimal safety until his value as a warrior allowed him greater concessions.

Shay was sold to a brothel that catered to some of the most depraved bastards in the system. Her value rose because she would savage any customer stupid enough to attempt to use her body without drugging and binding her first. They had loved raping her struggling form because, unlike most slaves in the brothel, she never quit fighting.

Then, Rae's owner got the bright idea of breeding his best fighter.

He found Shay and bought her from the brothel at a phenomenally high price. Then threw her into a cell with Rae and locked the door. He and his guards laughed and watched while placing bets on the whole spectacle. Everything from how long it would take Rae to subdue her to whether he would kill her.

The song faltered in Shay's throat for a moment as she shook off the memories, she was safe and free now. The dark memories had no place here.

Shadows chased across Raerei's face, as if he knew her thoughts. His hands tightened on her hips as the song slowly faded away. He bent over Jaed's shoulder and kissed her. The kiss was filled with hope and the new gentleness she sensed in him. It was a promise and an affirmation of her value to him. Jaed sighed and cuddled contentedly between them, and she wondered if he sensed the undercurrents of emotion around him.

Shay knew he didn't understand why it was such a gift that he could submit so totally to Raerei. Her mate's desire to dominate was something she had never been able to completely satisfy. Her treatment in the brothel had left her too scarred. Being bound

brought her bloodlust to the surface. She would attack her mate if he ever tried to tie her up. His instinctive reaction would be to fight his attacker.

One or both of them would die.

A small sound drew her gaze to the girl. Her eyes were closed and tears slid down her cheeks. She had lifted her face, as if absorbing warm sunlight.

Shay pulled away from her men and knelt at Silaari's side, chirping a soft inquiry. Jaed's baby sister slowly opened her eyes. The tear-filled, moss green orbs glistened like jewels. A smile teased the edges of her lips, fading before it was fully formed. Shay opened her arms to the girl, twittering a soft invitation. After a minute of solemn contemplation, Silaari slid off the bench and onto her lap. Shay cuddled the child and sang another song into her swaying, shoulder-length hair.

Jaed knelt beside them. He didn't touch the girl, simply watched her wonderingly. His hair twisted and writhed anxiously around his shoulders. He almost vibrated with the need to run his hands over her. Shay understood he needed to assure himself Silaari was real.

The girl slowly reached out and touched his cheek. Shay held her breath as Jaed went still at her touch. His eyes closed and he sighed as delicate fingers explored his features.

"I remember you," Silaari said wonderingly. "You played *meecha* on my belly."

Jaed's eyes popped open and he nodded eagerly. "*Meechas love tender little dorya bellies*," he replied, joy filling his face.

The fingers withdrew. "You left me, Jaedie." Years of heartbreaking pain and loneliness echoed in that simple phrase,

He held out a beseeching hand. "*I didn't leave you, Lala. They took me.*" Tears filled his eyes.

Silaari shook her head and hid her face in Shay's shoulder. "*Deema* and our *Meemas* left too," she cried in a muffled voice.

Jaed sobbed silently. “*They died protecting us, Lala. I swear.*” He glanced at Shay helplessly. “*You were our precious jewel, Lala. We would never leave you.*”

“She hurt me, and I called and called and you never came, Jaedie,” she cried.

Jaed pulled the little girl away from Shay and clutched her to him. He buried his tear-streaked face in her writhing hair while his locks cocooned her. “*I would have come, Lala. I would have come if I could.*”

“The lady hid me from the others, Jaedie. She liked little girls.” Her voice was haunted, and Shay shuddered. Most pirates were pedophiles and sadists; they were the scum of society and openly did what was only whispered about elsewhere. “She sold me when she was tired of me. I waited so long for you, Jaedie. I knew you’d save me. But you didn’t come,” she wailed.

Jaed shuddered under the weight of her accusation. Anguished eyes looked up at Shay, and she knew he was blaming himself for not being able to protect Silaari. “You couldn’t have stopped them, Jaed. All you can do is heal and help her heal,” she said quietly. “The past is done, and it has helped shape you into who you are today. Learn from it, but do not let it rule you.”

He nodded, burying his face in Silaari’s hair again. The little girl cried as if her heart was breaking. It was probably the first time she had done so in many years. While Shay knew it was healthy, the ragged weeping frayed her nerves and made her wish she could have killed the whoremonger twice because he was the only one she could reach. Knowing that there was nothing else she could do then, she stood and took Rae’s hand and they quietly left. Letting the siblings share their grief.

Chapter Six

With a frown of concentration, Shay watched Silaari go through the motions of the fighting maneuver Shay was teaching her. A month had passed since Silaari had joined them, and she was slowly coming out of her lifeless shell.

She still had times when she shut down and would stare at the wall for hours. Shay knew the girl was lost in her past when it happened, and it was a struggle to bring her out of it. In the beginning, she would lock herself in the tiny cabin they had given her for days at a time, only coming out to eat or use the lavatory.

A smile softened her frown. Both Jaed and Silaari would spend an hour or more in the lav each day. She wasn't sure what they were doing because there was no sound for most of the time one of them was in there. With as little privacy as they had on the ship she could understand Jaed disappearing, but Silaari had her own cabin.

"You're dropping your left shoulder, Lala. Repeat it again." Raerei had started training Jaed in basic self-defense while Shay had taken over Lala's training. Jaed was afraid of being hurt, and Raerei had the patience to teach him. Silaari, on the other hand, feared nothing. When she trained, she seemed to go inside herself and not feel anything. It had reminded

Raerei too much of what Shay had been like when they had first escaped, and it unnerved him to the point that he couldn't work with the girl.

They had both adopted Jaed's nickname for her. She didn't seem to mind, but then, it would be hard to tell if she did.

The girl finished the maneuver and stopped, holding the final stance and waiting for the next order. Shay walked around her in a slow circle, correcting the position of the girl's knees. "Good. Again, this time faster." She stepped back, watching from a different angle.

The girl moved with the natural grace of a dancer. She also absorbed the lessons like a dry sponge. Shay nodded when Lala finished without a single mistake. "Excellent. Again. We won't stop until you can do it without thinking."

Lala nodded. A sheen of sweat coated her face. She wouldn't stop practicing until Shay made her. *Well, at least it passes the time*, Shay thought to herself ruefully. "Good. Now with me. Remember, you will probably be smaller than your opponent for a few more years. The longer you are in a fight, the better your chances are of losing. Take them quickly and make sure they stay down." She positioned her body against Silaari and waited for the first attack.

The girl nodded with a frown of fierce concentration.

They spent another hour practicing before Shay sent the girl off to bathe, then she went to find her mates.

They were in Raerei's cabin. Machine parts were spread across Rae's worktable. He was tinkering with something, while Jaed carefully read to him from a manual. "What are you two doing?" She peered over Raerei's shoulder.

"I found a manual on building energy cells," Rae rumbled absently. "I thought it would be a good project. They don't hold too much, but as a spare for emergencies they could be helpful, so I bought a bunch of the parts we needed to make them."

Shay looked at the mess with new interest. "How much power are you talking about?"

Rae finished what he was doing and leaned back in satisfaction. "Once I finish making them, we'll have enough for an extra two weeks. They are solar powered, so we can recharge them anytime we land planetside by letting them sit out for a few days."

Shay felt her eyes go wide. "Wow, that's a huge boost!"

Jaed quit reading and beamed at her. "*Even if we don't find another planet to land on after Kleeg, we won't have to worry nearly as much about getting where we are going!*" Kleeg was the name of Raerei and Shay's home planet.

Shay nodded in agreement. "I'd still like to find at least one more planet before then." She slid a smirk at Jaed. "Especially since we have two passengers who think they can live under water. The lavatories have never seen so much use!"

Jaed blanched and she arched an eyebrow curiously. "*Are we depleting the water supply too much, Mistress?*" he asked cautiously.

"No. I'm just teasing you, baby," she assured him. "If we start getting too low, I'll let you know, all right?"

He nodded, relief evident in his posture.

She shrugged it off and went back to examining the new power cells. They were fairly small, so they would be easy to move around. It was a fantastic idea; hopefully, the parts hadn't been too expensive. Although, it didn't really matter how much they cost since they would never be coming back to this area of space. "What else was in the book? Anything interesting?"

Rae shrugged and started assembling more parts. "I haven't read the whole thing. You can look at it later and see if there is anything you want to do. It's a pretty big reader, so I'm sure there's more stuff in it."

She nodded and turned to leave. "Let me know when you're done with it." With a wave, she left to find something to do. For once the ship seemed to be running smoothly. *Maybe I'll inventory the supplies and run a few simulations factoring in the extra power*

cells... They weren't factoring sailing time into their calculations since they had no idea if they would find a wind going in the direction they wanted to, so any added energy they could save or scrounge together just gave them that much more room for error.

* * * * *

Shay smiled and drew in a deep breath of the rich air. Something hard and tight in her soul eased. It was good to be home. She watched Jaed laugh soundlessly and run to the edge of the deep lake. He quickly stripped and dived into the water. Silaari followed him more sedately, stopping to solemnly inspect each flower she saw. After several minutes she reached the water's edge and disrobed to walk reverently into the lake. They had both begun putting on weight, and it looked good on them. Lala hadn't been as starved as Jaed, but it was obvious she had never had an overabundance of food, either.

Jaed was beginning to bulk up a little from the self-defense lessons. He no longer looked like a famine victim, but Shay had her doubts that he would grow any taller. The years of neglect had left a permanent mark on him. Silaari was already almost as tall as he was and would probably grow much taller if what Shay knew of Ta'e'shian physiology was true. She had begun picking Jaed's brain for as much information as he remembered as soon as they had learned Silaari would be joining them.

Rae joined Shay and slung an arm around her waist. "It will take ten days to charge the extra cells. Then, we should have plenty of power to make it to the coordinates we have. I'm worried about our food..." He broke off and Shay glanced at him questioningly.

"What is it, Rae?" she asked after several moments passed and he didn't speak.

He shook his head and squinted at the water. "I thought I saw a giant fish tail."

Shay frowned at the water. There was no sign of Jaed or Lala. "I don't remember anything larger than a meter in this lake." Growing concerned when they didn't surface, she walked to the lake edge. "*Jaed?*" she called to him mentally.

Suddenly, he burst from the surface and dived back under. Sunlight sparkled on leaf green scales. His joyous laughter echoed in her mind.

She felt Rae go stone still next to her while she gaped at the spot where Jaed'aden had gone under. Silaari rose to the surface nearby and lolled in the sun for a moment before sinking under the water again. She too had a fish's tail where her legs used to be.

"I think they've been keeping secrets," she finally wheezed out, feeling like someone had punched her in the chest.

"I believe you're right," Rae rasped out next to her.

Jaed appeared at the water's edge and beamed at them. He pulled himself up to sit on a half-submerged boulder. "*Thank you for this gift, my lovers,*" he sang in their minds with a bashful smile on his face. He trailed his fingers in the water and peeked up at them from under his long lashes.

Shay felt an unwilling smile tug at her lips. After another minute she caved in to his charm. "Go play, cutie. We'll set up camp and talk when you're done." With another happy grin, he disappeared under the water.

Raerei shook himself all over and glared down at her.

"Hey, I didn't do it!" She shook her head ruefully. "At least life will never be dull with him."

"Yeah, well, I like dull. I strive for boring," he growled out, stomping to their packs. Shay snickered and trailed after him to help.

* * * * *

Jaed sighed happily and snuggled closer to his Master. He smiled when the massively muscled arm around him tightened possessively. He could not ever recall feeling so content. After being yelled at by both Shay and Raerei about not telling them he could shape-shift,

they had dropped the subject and simply accepted it as another aspect of the Ta'e'sha being different.

He didn't tell them how much time he and Lala had spent trying to decide how to tell them. It wasn't something they would have been able to keep a secret once they reached the Ta'e'sha again. In the end, it had seemed simplest to just do it and see how Shay and Raerei reacted.

Apparently, they had several legends about members of the Clans being able to fully change into their Ghost animals, but the ability had been lost, other than partial shifts that included teeth, claws, and the occasional tail for balance. To them, a fish tail wasn't that strange, although none of the Clans had fish Ghosts.

The past few days had been like a dream. He had taught his sister to make reed nets to catch the fish in the lake. His Master and Mistress were being very careful to only take what they would need and nothing more.

Once enough fish were stored, Shay had taken Jaed and Lala into the forest to forage nuts, berries, and other vegetation while Raerei hunted long-tailed tree animals.

He was hoping to see one of the karracats their Clan was named for, but Master Raerei said the animals were very shy and might not show themselves. He had offered to present Jaed'aden and Silaari to the Ghost as children of the Clan, but Jaed wasn't sure he wanted to be bonded to the fierce animals. He had to wonder how it would affect his ability to saras.

Silaari had accepted the offer eagerly. She wanted to be more like Mistress Shay, who was quickly becoming the girl's hero. She didn't seem that interested in her Ta'esshian heritage. In fact, it was as if it was a nuisance that hindered her ability to become a woman of the Aspect Clans.

He smiled drowsily at his baby sister. She was sound asleep on the other side of the fire with her head pillowed on Shay's lap. She was so relaxed and childlike in her sleep it made

Jaed's heart clench. Sometimes he thought it was all a dream, and he'd wake up cold, hungry, and still a slave.

Shay stroked caressing fingers through the girl's green tresses. A tender smile teased the edges of her lips when her gaze met his.

Jaed returned the smile and leaned up to press a kiss against Rae's smooth jaw. The kiss turned into a smile when his Master rumbled with pleasure. Jaed nibbled lazily and idly wondered if he could talk them into sleeping together on the ship.

Silaari's presence had put a damper on their lovemaking the last few days, and he was missing the pleasures they shared. "*I want to take you into my mouth and taste you, Master,*" he whispered seductively in the big man's mind. He wiggled onto Rae's lap, wrapping his arms around Rae's neck.

His Master cradled him securely and smiled warmly down at him. "Just a few more days, pet. Don't you want to enjoy being planetside as much as you can?" He leaned down and nuzzled Jaed's hair. "There's no telling how long we'll be stuck on the ship once we leave here."

Jaed pouted but tilted his head into the affectionate gesture. "*It's hard to enjoy anything when my cock could break rocks, my Master,*" he groused, slipping his fingers into Rae's vest to tease the hard nipples he found. "*Maybe we could slip off, if Mistress doesn't mind?*" he offered hopefully.

Rev grinned. "How is that fair to Shay? She would be left out."

Jaed licked his lips. "*I could help her out with that afterward, if you would watch Silaari, my Master.*" He smiled slyly. "*I wouldn't mind. Mistress tastes very, very good.*" He licked his lips again just imagining her sweet, musky flavor.

Raerei rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Or Shay and I could go and you could watch Silaari."

Jared felt his eyes pop wide open. He hadn't considered that possibility. He was at a loss to think of a reason they shouldn't either.

He stared up at Rae helplessly.

Raerei smiled blandly.

He twisted his head to look at Shay. "*Mistress?*"

"Yes, baby?" she asked with false innocence,

He gave her the pathetic look that usually got him out of trouble with her. He let his lower lip quiver just a little bit.

She chuckled richly, still stroking his sister's hair. "Not working, my man. I want more than some licks and nibbles. I've been going without too."

He heaved a woeful sigh. "*Yes, Mistress.*" A shadow moved behind her, catching his attention. Jaed tensed and slid off Rae's lap. "*There's something out there.*"

Raerei and Shay both stiffened and lifted their noses into the air to inhale deeply. After a tense moment, they relaxed again.

The liquid shadow separated itself from the trees and padded soundlessly into the circle of light cast by the fire. Black feathers rustled as the massive creature sat on its haunches and casually lifted a paw to its mouth for a careful lick.

Jaed sucked in a breath and trembled against Raerei's side as the huge male karracat studied him impassively. He looked exactly as Mistress Shay had described. Inky black feathers coated his heavily muscled feline form, and two gigantic wings folded closely across his back and crossed at the tips over the animal's hind end.

Long black feathers sprouted around his head and throat in a silky mane. The feathered tuft at the end of his tail flicked with lazy curiosity as he studied Jaed'aden with the same intentness Jaed was studying him.

Rae scooted away from Jaed and approached the cat cautiously. He knelt and offered his throat.

The karracat purred deeply and took Raerei's throat in his mouth. The crushing jaws closed gently and held the large warrior immobile. Moments passed and Jaed feared drawing a breath or moving, anything that might startle the huge predator. He couldn't comprehend why his Master would put himself in such a vulnerable position and darted a quick glance at his Mistress to see her reaction.

She was smiling calmly at the cat and reaching down to shake Silaari's shoulder gently. His sister woke up and rubbed her eyes with a yawn. Jaed knew exactly when she realized they weren't alone in the camp. Her green eyes rounded with wonderment as she took in the tableau before her.

Her head whipped around to Shay, her face questioning.

Shay smiled and nodded.

They both rose and moved to kneel before the cat. As one they lifted their throats and waited for the animal to acknowledge them.

A whimper squeezed past Jaed's tightly compressed lips. His nerves twitched under his skin as the animal released Rae's throat and moved to lightly bite Shay's. The karracat seemed oblivious to Jaed, and he hoped it stayed that way. Then, he berated himself for being a coward when his baby sister was brave enough to offer herself to the animal.

When the cat moved his attention to Silaari, Jaed stood, shifting anxiously from foot to foot.

The cat inspected Silaari with eyes as hard and dark as volcanic glass. Those huge jaws opened wide and he hissed in her face. She swallowed hard and trembled but didn't move. Her eyes fluttered closed as Jaed's mind scrabbled with frantic fear that he was about to witness his sister's death.

Finally, after several agonizing minutes, the cat closed his jaws gently around her throat. Silaari shuddered and a sigh eased past her lips. She relaxed and let the cat hold her.

Shay and Rae smiled and watched her with pride, and Jaed felt an unexpected urge to brain both of them with a rock. He manfully beat the urge back and eased back onto his knees.

The cat released Silaari and stalked toward Jaed with fluid grace. His eyes crossed when the massive beast leaned in and snuffled him all over. Seeming to be finished with his inspection, the karracat pulled back and sneezed violently in Jaed's face.

Jaed knelt there, eyes and mouth tightly shut as he tried to absorb the indignity. Apparently, he didn't pass muster. A thread of relief eased through him at the same time as he grappled with the thought of how many germs were now swimming around on his face. He lifted his arm and wiped the cat spit off with his sleeve.

The cat seemed to be grinning at him when he opened his eyes. With a contented growl, it traipsed back to the trio still kneeling and rubbed against them. Once he finished scent marking all three, he threw himself down next to the fire and purred happily.

When Shay grinned at him, Jaed huffed out a disgusted breath and stomped off to swim. He had no intention of sleeping with spit all over him, and the appearance of the cat combined with his Mistress's amusement had succeeded in cooling his ardor.

Shay snickered as she watched Jaed stalk off, offended dignity in every line of his body. Her attention turned to Silaari, and the wicked grin softened into a tender smile as the girl cuddled against the karracat, who threw a paw over her slight form and washed her giggling face with his long, rough tongue.

Rae wrapped his arms around her, resting his head on top of her head while he watched Silaari. "Are you happy, my zeeta?" he asked in their language.

She nodded, not taking her gaze away from the promise of life for her tiny Clan. "Yes, my zi'nen. We have hope again."

Raerei's hands slide down to cup her belly. "Hope. I had forgotten what it was like. Thank you for dragging home a bedraggled slave boy, wife." He turned her head and kissed her. After a long, satisfying moment he lifted his head. "How long before she passes out?"

Shay wiggled her ass against his muscled thighs. "Not long. As old as she is, I think she'll go under fast. The karracat will have plenty to do to claim her." She turned in his arms and smiled seductively up at him. "We don't have to worry about leaving now. The cat will keep her unconscious."

"Hmm. I don't feel comfortable making love so close to her." Rae bent and stole another kiss.

Shay turned and curled her arms around his neck. "Let's go down by the water, then. It's far enough you won't have to fuss about corrupting her and close enough we will hear anything coming."

He grinned down at her, and she was struck by the mischievous expression. "You'll have to be quiet, my love. I don't know if you can do that. You're a noisy lover."

She giggled and jumped up to wrap her legs around his waist, confident that he would catch and hold her. "We'll see about that."

He smiled and strode toward the water's edge.

"Where are you going?" Silaari called in a sleepy voice.

Shay peeked over Rae's shoulder. Lala was curled against the cat's belly, and her eyelids drooped adorably as she struggled to stay awake. "We're going down to the lake. You're safe, love."

Lala yawned. "Dinii. You want sex. Have fun." Her voice trailed off as she gave in to the languorous pull of sleep.

Rae glanced over his shoulder and nodded shortly, as if communicating with the karracat watching over the girl. "She's out. The cat will stay until we return. He seems eager

to have a larger Clan and heartily approves of our desire to mate.” His teeth gleamed in the moonlight as he leered down at her teasingly.

Shay was surprised. “The cat spoke to you?”

“Only with emotions and impressions. He has been lonely, little bird. After the other Clans absorbed our Clan, many of his kind died. Only a few survive. He is filled with joy that we have returned.” Rae paused as if sorting his thoughts. “It is confusing. He feels stronger already, with the acceptance of Silaari. She is as precious to him as she is to us.”

Shay smiled and licked his lips. “Well, then, my love, shall we see about making some kittens for him?”

His hard mouth softened under her lips and a smile teased the edges. “Yes, my zeeta.”

They reached the mossy shore of the lake, and he released her legs, letting her slide down his body. They both turned and watched the silvery ripples of water, hoping for a glimpse of Jaed. He surfaced briefly and waved to them before sinking beneath the surface again.

Shay smiled, reassured that he was safe and turned to Raerei and began unlacing the front of his leather tunic. Her skin prickled with awareness as his hands made lazy passes up and down her body.

He pulled the tunic over his head when she finished, bronzed muscles rippled temptingly in the moonlight. Unable to resist, she slid her hands over his chest. Her fingers tingled where they rested on his smooth skin. With a trill of pure pleasure, she licked his nipples, which quickly hardened under her tongue. “Mmm, you taste good, mate. I have missed you. Cover me with your scent.”

He growled and scooped her up and laid her down on the soft grass, stretching his body out next to her. He half rolled over her and nuzzled the heavy fall of hair around her neck. “Mmm, I love the new soap, Shay.” His tongue flicked out and trailed along her throat, leaving fiery tingles in its wake.

She sighed and looped her arms around his neck, arching into the lazy, wet strokes of his tongue with pleasure. "Good, I was tired of listening to the whining. It's not like there are many choices." Her fingers slid along the firm muscles of his back. He had such smooth skin it was always a shock when she touched a raised ridge of scar tissue. He had so many scars it broke her heart. They had faded with time, but she still felt a pang when she saw or felt one.

Rae stilled under her touch and slowly looked up at her. His gaze was dark with some unspoken emotion. "Let it go, Shay. We're free now."

Shay nodded and cupped his face. "Sometimes it seems like yesterday." She kissed him hard. "You've changed," she said softly when she finally eased away from his lips.

He rested his forehead against hers and nodded. "So have you." He pulled away and stared down at her solemnly. "I know that you took me as mate because you had no other choices, Shay. I understand that if there had been another Aspect available you probably would not have chosen me at all. We were forced together by necessity. If I were a stronger man, I would let you go, but I'm not. If I lost you, I'd lose everything. You're the air I breathe."

Shay's eyes burned as they filled with tears. "I would have chosen you, Rastcharaereig. Even when we were children, my eyes followed you. My mother used to tease me about it, saying I was too young to be so possessive." She paused and smiled secretly.

Her mate went still and slowly raised an eyebrow. "What's that look for?"

She tried to look innocent. "Nothing."

He growled. "Don't you 'nothing' me. I know you too well to not recognize that smile. What did you do?"

Shay huffed out a breath and stared over his shoulder. "Let's just say... If you ever sneak off to the caves with another woman again, I won't be so nice."

Raerei jackknifed off of her and glared down at her in disbelief. "That was *you*?"

Shay rolled her eyes and hummed innocently. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

He glowered. "It *was* you! Do you have any idea what happened?"

She snickered.

"You put nettle juice in my contraceptive gel," he bit out from behind gritted teeth. "It took two weeks for the swelling to go away! Do you have any idea what it was like to walk around looking like you have an erection for *two weeks*? And the blisters?" He rolled off her and glared up at the night sky. "Chaara wouldn't even look at me after that. She was miserable! I can only imagine what it was like for her."

"You were too young to be having sex, anyway," Shay stated primly, but with a definite note of satisfaction.

He gave her a smoldering look of mute outrage.

"Well, you were," she stated defensively. "And you were mine, even then. I had every intention of doing whatever it took to claim you when I was of age, even if it meant chasing off every one of those wenches sniffing after you."

His offended expression slowly gave way to masculine satisfaction. "Did you now?" he purred, leaning over her again. "I had no idea," he murmured, bending to kiss her throat. "So fierce, my zeeta." He tugged at her vest until the lacing gave with a snap, and he pressed soft, sucking kisses all over her breasts. He nipped the tip of one sharply, then laved it with his tongue when she whimpered in protest. "But if you ever play a prank like that again, I'll paddle your ass until you can't sit for a week."

She grabbed a handful of his hair and pulled his face up. "Fine, but if I catch you lusting after another woman, I'll cut out your heart and feed it to you."

He smirked. "Oh, so you get two men, but I don't get two women? That hardly seems fair," he teased her gently.

"I never claimed to be fair," she retorted with an evil look. She pushed him over and straddled his hips. With a shimmy, she pulled off her loosened vest and tossed it aside and went to work on the side closures of her calf-length pants. They finally came loose, and she pulled the pieces apart and cast them after her vest.

"Leave the boots on, baby," Raerei rasped, sliding his hands up her thighs.

She giggled and lay down on his chest. A small smile crossed her lips as he cupped her cheeks and drew her down for a slow, thrusting kiss. "We need to talk about your shoe fetish sometime, baby," she murmured when he released her mouth. Shivers shot through her when he chuckled huskily.

He pushed her up and cupped her breasts, rubbing her sensitive nipples with his palms until they hardened into tight peaks. "I want inside you right now, Shay. Let me feel your hot pussy squeezing me. You're so tight and silky around me."

She groaned as a spurt of wetness dampened her sex. She slid back a little and fumbled with the closure of his leathers. It took several moments to get her trembling fingers to work properly so she could release his straining member.

She curled her fingers around his rock-hard penis, marveling at the amazingly soft skin covering it. Touching him was so arousing and sexy. The dark-skinned cock was throbbing eagerly in her hands, and as she watched, a clear drop of precum beaded on the tip. Licking her lips, she moved down a bit more so she could lick it off with a dainty flick of her pointed tongue.

He jerked and grabbed her arms with a growl. With a smooth motion, he pulled her back up and rolled her under him while she giggled softly. He pushed his hips between her thighs urgently and pressed the damp crown of his cock against the wet folds of her lower lips. Catching her mouth in a deep, wet kiss, he slowly tunneled his thick, hard length into her clenching sheath.

She gasped and writhed under him. Her body was wet but hardly ready for the deep intrusion. They panted into each other's mouths as his pelvis came to rest against her. She could feel the wiry coarseness of his pubic hair rasping against her sensitized sex.

He gave her a chance to get used to the feeling of fullness for just a moment before beginning a hard-driving rhythm that had her crying out and digging her nails into his back. She wound her boot-clad legs around his hips and tilted her head back, letting him thrust and grind against her.

"You didn't wait for me!"

She looked up at the angry shout in her head to see Jaed pouting down at them.

He fell to his knees and pressed his erection against her lips and grunted softly when she immediately opened her mouth to take him inside. She moaned around him as he began moving in and out with the same rhythm as Raerei. It was very arousing to feel the pleasure they took in her body. Jaed was sharing the sensations of her lips gripping him and the suction of her throat and mouth, and it made her burn even higher. In a few short minutes, all three of them were gasping and moaning as shudders of excitement and pleasure racked them.

She moaned in disappointment when Jaed jerked out of her mouth, and his seed sprayed across her face. He swayed and jerked above her. His hand was a blur as he stroked his cock to extend his orgasm.

Raerei let out a hoarse shout and bucked spasmodically against her as his cum bathed the mouth of her womb.

She arched into him and screamed, gripping his hard cock with her silky walls.

Jaed collapsed beside her and kissed her jaw before nuzzling Rae. All three of them sighed with contentment in unison and traded kisses and caresses as their bodies slowly calmed down. No words were needed as they enjoyed the quiet intimacy.

* * * * *

Shay snapped the storage container shut and stacked it on top of the others to be taken to the ship. Lala was laughing and play wrestling with the karracat who had adopted her. The huge cat didn't seem all that inclined to leave them until he had to. Lala's hair and skin had begun to darken and change in response to her claiming. Shay was hoping it wouldn't stay its current muddy green and sallow yellow for very long.

She turned to watch with amusement as Jaed tried to skin an animal. The look of abject disgust on his face made her snicker. If she were a nice person she'd take over the job and let him do something that didn't involve bloody carcasses.

A sound to her right drew her attention. Five men stepped out the trees and stared at her, Jaed, and Lala impassively.

Her body relaxed, and she felt herself become ultra-aware of every sound and movement they made. Her hunting knife made a soft hissing noise as she drew it from its sheath. She heard the karracat growl quietly, and from the corner of her eye, saw him crouch protectively in front of Lala. "*Jaed, come here slowly and stand behind me, please,*" she sent silently. Once he was safely behind her, she mentally called Raerei back to the camp. She continued to stare at them silently, unwilling to break the stalemate.

They were dressed in hunting leathers dyed in mottled shades to match the foliage around them. White, cream, and light beige hair was in several small braids along their temples and pulled back to keep the rest of their long, flowing locks out of their eyes as they moved through the trees and bushes. Their skin was the same dusky brown as Shay's and stood out in stark contrast against their pale hair. Long knives hung on their slim hips and bows and quivers of arrows were slung across the backs.

The man in the center of the group finally spoke, using the language of the Aspects. "You trespass on Winter Owl lands."

Raerei stepped out of the trees behind them silently. "These lands belong to the Karracat Clan," he stated in a deep, rumbling growl. The cat crouched in front of Lala snarled in apparent agreement.

The men spun around, drawing their weapons. "The Karracat Clan is dead and gone, stranger. These lands have been claimed by the Winter Owl Clan, along with the straggling remains of that lost tribe," the man shot back with a sneer, eyeing Raerei's massive form and confident stance with an expression of growing apprehension. Shay smirked at the telling reaction to her *zi'nan*'s size.

Raerei crossed his arms over his chest and stared at the smaller man disdainfully. "As long as a single karracat lives the Clan survives. Your claim is premature."

"There are no children left. A Clan cannot survive without children."

Shay sighed and motioned toward Lala. "We are Karracat, and we have a child in our Clan. Your claims have no substance. The Ghosts do not recognize them. Karracat lives, and thus, these are his lands. You are the trespassers."

The man stared hard at Lala, who stared back with her empty slave's face. "That is not an Aspect child. She is not Clan."

The karracat stood and roared loudly, flaring his wings out widely. Lala stepped back away from the angry cat as he started pacing in front of her like a caged animal. His predatory glare was locked on the men, who began shifting uneasily.

"I don't think he cared for your opinion, little man," Raerei said mildly. "I know I didn't. You insult my Clan by denying my *kika zi'nen*. You insult us further by not offering a use name. Your voice is a wailing wind to me. Noise without substance."

The man stiffened and drew himself up proudly. "I am Krayg, hunter of the Winter Owl Clan."

Raerei unfolded his arms and strolled around Krayg, inspecting the man insolently. "I am Raerei of the Karracat Clan. My zeeta, Shay, and my zi'nen, Jaed. Behind the very angry cat stands our sister and daughter of the Clan, Lala." He moved to stand beside Shay.

Krayg raised an eyebrow. "You claim a dead Clan. It would be best if you came with us. The Winter Owl will take you in and give you family." His tone was supremely arrogant as he made the offer. "I assume you were of those taken."

Raerei nodded.

Shay glared at the cocky young man. "We give up the Karracat when our bodies rot into the earth beneath us. We have family, and we will not bow before another Ghost."

He stared down his nose at Shay. "I was not speaking to you, woman. I was speaking to your zi'nen. He will decide, and you will bow your head to that decision."

Raerei threw back his head and a deep, rolling laugh echoed through the clearing. "Either you are beyond stupid to speak to an Aspect woman this way, or your women have the spirit of cold porridge." He smiled lazily. "I should let her kill you for your disrespect, but we have better things to do. Leave now. We will not yield our lands to you. Tell your Elders the Karracat Clan breathes as long as we do and will grow to become strong again." The karracat moved to sit beside Raerei and folded his wings back. He appeared to be smirking at the small group of hunters.

"I will speak to my Elders, but one family does not a Clan make, Raerei." The men melted back into the surrounding forest and were gone.

"Cocky little bastard, isn't he?" Shay ground out, turning to grab a stack of boxes with jerky motions. "Let's get these loaded. We are leaving in the morning before I decide to go hunting him instead of prey animals."

"Yes, my zeeta," Rae replied in mock meekness. "You're gorgeous when you're angry," he added, surprising a chuckle out of her.

"*Is everything dinii?*" Jaed asked softly, also taking a crate.

Shay rolled her neck to release the tension and sighed. “Everything is fine, my love. Just irritating little boys with delusions of greatness.”

He laughed softly in her head and followed her up the ramp.

Chapter Seven

Three months later...

Rae jerked as a proximity alarm sounded. He rolled out of his bunk and loped to the cockpit.

Shay met him in the hallway. Her eyes had already begun to ice over. They were in unknown space, and there was no way to know if the approaching vessel was friend or foe.

They would cautiously expect an enemy until proven otherwise, even if it was Jaed's people. Just because Jaed was a good person didn't mean his race was. He had a child's perception of his culture, which were now only faded memories. Silaari remembered even less. The entire trip was a gamble based on their own desperate wish for a home and on the words of a Goddess they didn't know.

He slung himself into a chair and began examining the sensor readings. Shay wheezed behind him. "Gods help us, Raerei, if that's a ship. It's huge."

Rae nodded as his fingers flew over the screen. "I don't know what to do, Shay. We're smaller, but I bet they have better engines. How do we know if they are Jaed's people? We're still a month away from the coordinates we were given."

Shay sat down in the chair next to his and began scanning the nearby planets. "Are we still shadowed?"

"Yes."

"Good. This planet has atmosphere. We can hide there if we need to and reshadow before launching again." She frowned at the scans.

"We have visual in ten. Should we get Jaed? He might recognize the design of the ship. It's very unusual." Rae leaned back in his chair as the initial flood of data slowed and began to repeat.

"Yeah," she replied absently, still reading her scans. "Bring Lala too. Either way this goes I want them strapped in where we can keep an eye on them."

He rolled his eyes and bellowed for them. "Jaed! Lala! Get your skinny asses into the pit and strap in." He tapped in a sequence of commands to open the plasglass window panels and computer imaging panels. "Visual in seven. How are the extra cells?"

Shay grimaced. "Eight percent empty. I've been using them when we have them charged to save on our base cells. Use the last twenty and we can recharge them on this planet if we need to."

"How much extra do we have now?" he asked as he switched the ship to the rechargeable cells.

"Month and a half, not counting this recharge. If this goes badly, we should be able to limp back to Kleeg. The winds are mostly going that direction." Shay rubbed her eyes. "This ship is almost as big as the stations, Raerei. How do they power something that large?" Jaed and Lala shuffled into the room and strapped themselves into their chairs between yawns.

The ship began to appear in the window, and magnified images were shown on the computer screens. Rae heard Jaed's latest yawn cut off and his mouth shut with an audible snap. "*Is that...*" His mental voice trailed off, and Raerei turned to watch the younger man stare at the screens with huge eyes.

"Do you recognize it, Jaed?" Rae asked as he scanned the initial weapons readings. For a ship its size, it wasn't packing the heavy weaponry he had expected. If anything, that made him more nervous. They had no idea what kind of damage the foreign ship could do, but it was a sure bet it was massive if they were confident enough to travel without worrying who could see them.

"I think so," Jaed replied hesitantly. *"Scan the sides and see if there is any writing visible."*

"We're still too far away. Give it a couple more minutes." He tapped in a few more commands. "I'm changing our heading for the planet you found, Shay. Scan for somewhere we can hide."

"Working on it already, baby. There is a cave system that might work," she replied absently, apprehension threading her voice.

The computer calmly reported the unknown ship was hailing them and asked if they would care to open communications.

Raerei felt every muscle in his body still, then begin to hum with nervous tension. He pushed himself out of his chair and turned to his mate. It was almost a relief to see the same ice-cold ruthlessness he felt reflected back at him from her predatory gaze. "I'm going to go get dressed," he informed her quietly. "Then you can answer the hail and use caution. I don't know how they saw us past the shadow, but it doesn't put me in my happy place."

She nodded. The computer repeated the hail notice. "Go. I'd feel better if they didn't know about you until we know if they are friendly."

Shay waited until he left before she answered the hail, silently cursing herself for not being prepared for something like this. She knew better than to be in uncharted space and not wearing her gear.

The screen flickered before resolving into an image of several people working on the bridge of the ship. A tall, imposing man with an amber braid draped over his shoulder stood confidently in front of what she assumed was the captain's chair.

They stared at each other silently for several moments before his hard gaze flicked to Jaed and Lala. Surprise and shock flowed across his features before they hardened into a stone mask.

He barked out something in a liquid language that reminded her of waves lapping over sand. From the corner of her eye she saw Jaed jerk as if struck.

"Did you understand him, Jaed?" she asked quietly.

"*Yes, Mistress,*" he answered softly. "*He's Captain Kyrin Auralel of the Dark Queen, and he's demanding to know who we are.*" He paused for a moment. "*They are too far away for me to telepath.*"

Shay didn't take her gaze off the screen as the captain repeated himself. "Come sit in Rae's chair, baby, and tell me what to say. You're sure they are Ta'e'sha, right?"

The captain's eyes narrowed when she spoke, and he turned to the green-haired man beside him and muttered something. The man nodded and left the screen.

"*Yes, Mistress, they are Ta'e'sha. The ship's named after the Warrior Goddess, Kashka.*" He slid into Raerei's chair and buckled the straps with trembling fingers. "*Say this.*" Words rolled through her head.

"Slower, baby," she asked, turning to stare at him intently. She took his hand when he reached for her.

He said each word slowly, giving her time to repeat it aloud, she didn't know what he was telling them, but hoped it wasn't something that would get them shot at. Once she finished, she turned back to the screen.

The captain was watching her with an inscrutable expression.

Knowing that there was no reason to continue running the ship in shadow, she turned it off. The amber-haired man was speaking again. Raerei sent that he was ready just as Jaed began translating.

"He wants us to land in bay sixty--" He was cut off as a blast rocked *Crimson Shackles* violently.

Shay swore luridly as the damage report began scrolling. "Fuck! Rae, are you alive? I need you up here!" She cut the com, ignoring the captain's shouted questions. She didn't have time to get a translation.

Raerei lunged in. "Jaed, move. Shay, where were we hit?" He threw himself into the chair as soon as Jaed scrambled out of it. "Strap in, pet. You dinii, Lala?"

Before she could answer another hail was sent along with a second blast. Sirens went off as the ship started sealing doors to prevent all of the air being pulled out of the ship.

"Damage is in the tail end, and the engine room has a breach. We have to land, Rae," Shay bit out. Her fingers flew over the controls as she ordered the computer to accept the communication. "There's a shadowed ship out there. The hits aren't coming from the Ta'e'sha. They just started powering their weapons."

Skand Toolon's face materialized the screen. "It's been a lovely chase, but it's time to end this. Prepare to be boarded. I'll take my time with you before I claim my property." He smiled with evil glee.

Shay swung the ship around as their weapons system came online.

Skand made a tsking noise and wagged a finger at them. "You don't want to fire. You might hurt your friends." He twisted slightly and dragged the form of a badly beaten Aspect male into view.

It took some time before Shay recognized the man as Krayg of the Winter Owl Clan. There was little left of the cocky young man who'd been so sure of himself.

A slow, burning rage began to seethe in her veins as the abused man met her gaze, his eyes almost completely swollen shut. Dried blood coated his skin and caked his hair. His lips were split open and blackened with more bruises. The braids along his temples had been hacked off and the rest of his hair had been butchered, leaving ragged ends hanging around his ears.

“His ass was almost as sweet as his screams,” Skand continued, shifting his grip to Krayg’s hair. “I think we’ve almost broken the rest. A pity there were no females among them. I do so love a man’s helpless rage when his woman is raped in front of him. It is absolutely delicious.”

Krayg’s eyes burned like coals. “Death with honor is life to the Clan,” he rasped out in their language.

Beside her, Raerei nodded. “An Aspect’s blood is red and shed with joy.”

Shay sucked in a breath at the ritual offerings taking place. “Your children shall live beneath the sun and scent the winds,” she said softly, adding her acceptance. He was offering his life and lives of all the other men on the ship to safeguard their Clans.

Krayg sighed and seemed to fold in on himself. He sagged to the floor, not even flinching when Skand viciously kicked his ribs.

Shay turned to Raerei, who nodded solemnly. They could not leave those men to Skand, in spite of what they’d said. She cut the com and turned back toward the planet. “Find a landing area. I’m going to change.” The familiar calmness that presaged a battle fell over her. She brushed her fingers over Silaari’s cheek. “Come with me, little sister.” She bent and kissed a tear off Jaed’s cheek. “We won’t let you be taken, Jaed’aden zeet Rastcharaereig zeet Ananashay.”

He nodded, but the fear and horror didn’t leave his face.

She left, Silaari trailing after her like a ghost. When they reached her cabin she began stripping her clothing off. “Strip, little sister.” Silaari’s eyes went blank, and she began taking

off her clothing with jerky, clumsy motions. Shay quickly dressed in her leathers and pulled out a red-brown bundle of smaller leathers. "I cut these down for you last week," she told the nude child. "I hadn't intended to give them to you yet, but I think you should wear them now." She offered them to the girl formally. "Wear them well, Silaari. Wear them with pride."

Silaari's eyes shone with tears as she carefully took the leathers. She nodded solemnly as she began to dress. "I won't let them take us again, Shay. I promise."

Shay nodded and began tucking knives and poisoned needles into Silaari's clothing. "Your brother will never be a fighter, Silaari. He'll let them take him because he can't bear to hurt anyone," Shay said softly. She couldn't meet the younger woman's eyes.

Silaari's fingers catching hers made her look up. "You won't let them have the chance, sister. We have too much to chance losing it now. I know what you are so carefully not asking me. I'll kill him and myself if you and Raerei fall." The girl's lower lip trembled as she made the vow.

Shay hugged her hard. "Pray to your Goddess it doesn't come to that, little sister," she whispered into Silaari's hair.

"I know Kashka and Vosh will be watching us," Silaari whispered fiercely against Shay's shoulder. "I may not be Their Chosen, but I am Their daughter."

Shay wasn't exactly sure whom Silaari was talking about, but decided it didn't matter if it comforted the girl. She slowly pulled back and locked her gaze with eyes that were no longer the same color as Jaed's. Now they were the exact shade as Shay's. The Karracat had claimed the girl completely. All that was left of her Ta'e'sha heritage was a green streak flowing from the crown of her head and down the side. The vibrant leaf green was a startling contrast in the rich browns and tawny beiges that now composed the rest of her hair. Even Silaari's skin had darkened to the same dusky brown as Shay's. "Have your fangs come in yet, little sister?" she asked softly.

Silaari ducked her head. “Last night,” she said with shy pride. She smiled to show off the dainty sets of serrated teeth.

“Very nice. Let’s go up front and strap in, baby girl.” Just as she finished speaking, another blast rocked *Crimson Shackles*. She spat out a curse and hauled Silaari down the hall as quickly as she could.

They broke into the planet’s atmosphere, and Shay slung herself into her chair as the ground rushed up to meet them.

“This is gonna be a rough landing. I think one of the hits took out an engine. Strap your ass in, zeeta! I don’t want to be scraping you off a wall later, damn it!” Veins stood out in Rae’s neck. It was his only outward sign of the tension she knew was tearing into him.

Crimson Shackles skidded into the ground, tearing a dark scar of fresh earth in its wake. Metal screeched as rocks scraped against it. The small ship shuddered and convulsed to a halt and silence filled the room.

The ship broke it moments later with a monotone recital of the damage sustained in the flight and resulting crash. Shay and Raerei pulled themselves out of their chairs and turned to see Jaed and Silaari doing the same. “You two dinii?” Shay asked softly.

Jaed nodded. The white edges around his mouth told her he was about thirty seconds away from throwing up all over the floor. Silaari unclenched her death grip on the armrests and released her safety straps with trembling fingers.

Raerei cracked the vertebrae in his neck and moved to the hall, leaving the others to follow with Shay bringing up the rear. He paused at the airlock and stared hard at Jaed and Lala. “If this goes bad, lock yourselves in the ship. Hopefully those Ta’e’sha people are curious enough to come looking for you.”

Lala glanced back at Shay and nodded wordlessly. Raerei didn’t need to know of the alternate plan.

The hatch slid open with a tortured groan. Raerei led them out just as Skand's ship landed lightly. The other ship's hatch began to open as Shay and Raerei pushed Lala and Jaed behind them and took defensive postures.

Several badly beaten men were pushed out first. Their bruised and torn bodies rolled to the ground, and they brokenly tried to push themselves up. Several pirates strolled after them and arrogantly surveyed Shay's family with expressions of gloating avarice. They traded jokes and kicked the Aspect men back down when they tried to stand. A few pointed at Shay and Silaari and made obscene gestures of invitation.

The last to arrive was Skand. He moved with the lazy unconcern of a man on a walk in a park. "Well, here we are. Shall the games begin?"

"How did you find us?" Rae asked. Wind blew through the dusty canyon they had landed in, dulling the black leathers covering his hard frame. Several strands of his long black hair whipped around his face dramatically. In spite of the danger, Shay couldn't help but admire the picture he made.

Skand smiled smugly. "Tracker in the girl's skin. I was hoping you'd take her." He paused to eye Raerei. "You look familiar." He switched his gaze to Shay. "So do you. I saw you on the station. I'd be very interested in knowing how you slipped by me both times."

"Guess I'm just smarter than you," Shay replied drolly.

The pirate's face tightened with anger. "Bitch," he spat out.

Jaed trembled against her back. "*Move back, baby. Stay close to Lala,*" she sent to him. "How do you want to handle this, Raerei?" she softly asked him in their language.

"Dead. As quickly as possible. We'll figure out what to do with the hunters after," he replied tersely. His black eyes scanned the pirates. She knew he was looking for weaknesses they could exploit. "Stay back unless it looks like I'm in trouble. Keep them safe, zeeta."

He started to move forward in a liquid slink. Claws extended from the tips of his fingers, and although she couldn't see it, she knew that his face was beginning to take on the aspects of the karracats their Clan was affiliated with.

The pirates muttered nervously and tried to hide it with bravado. There were ten of them, mostly men, but a few hard-looking women could be seen among them. All had the greasy hair and shifty eyes common of people in their profession. For some reason she had never understood, all pirates started looking alike.

They drew their weapons and twitched, gazes locked on Raerei.

Skand jumped off the edge of the ramp and strutted a few more feet and waited for Raerei to get within reach of his sword. Projectile weapons had been banned centuries ago and were no longer being produced. Being caught with one without the proper forms was an automatic prison sentence.

Shay was actually glad for that little law. If they had been using projectile weapons, the odds would have been much worse.

The hum of another vehicle made everyone freeze and look up. A large, rounded ship made of the same bluish-gray metal as the Ta'e'sha ship hovered near them. Delicate, translucent sails swayed along the underside, reminding Shay of the fins running down the back of Jaed's tail when he was in his water form. As they watched, several tentacles unfolded from the bottom and daintily coiled onto the ground to support the ship's weight.

Another tentacle eased down, carrying three people. They stepped off the appendage and took in the groups facing off. The way their hair twisted itself into braids told Shay they were Ta'e'sha. They drew several weapons but made no move to approach either group, simply scanned them until their gazes locked on Jaed.

A rough chuckle from Skand drew Shay's attention back to him.

“Well, well, looks like we’ll get an even better harvest than we had planned,” he called back to the pirates behind him. A crafty expression of greed crossed his face as he surveyed the Ta'e'sha.

Shay wondered if he was beyond stupid to even consider trying to take them. Hadn't he noticed the huge ship approaching? Did he honestly believe that the Ta'e'sha would calmly accept the abduction of their crew?

Four of the pirates sidled down the ramp and began moving toward the Ta'e'sha like scavengers.

Raerei threw back his head, roaring a Clan war cry and charged Skand, hands open, clawed fingers curved in preparation for the first swipe. “You’ll never take another slave,” he growled out in a voice dark and guttural with the partial change in his form.

Skand danced back, away from the slash of Raerei's claws, just missing being hit. The razor-sharp talons shredded his leather tunic and drew thin lines of blood on the pale, dirty skin underneath. “What are you?” he squeaked out in a terrified voice.

“Vengeance,” Rae replied in a growl.

Shay let her claws and teeth come. Her muscles shifted under her skin, becoming stronger, more supple.

“Kill them,” Skand screamed, thrusting his blade at Rae. Despite his fear he wielded the blade with sure, deadly motions.

The pirates charged Shay and Rae, and the Ta'e'sha ran toward them, shouting something in their language. They bounced off thin air and landed on their asses just as the pirates reached Shay.

She let out a catlike scream that ended in the shriek of a bird of prey and dived at them, knives in each hand.

Kyrin Auralel grunted and sat up. Getting to his feet, he cautiously reached out a hand to feel whatever he had hit. The air in front of him was a solid wall. He looked at the young Ta'e'shian man on the other side of the wall. The green-haired man wasn't paying them any attention. He was completely focused on the brawl before him. His hands were white-knuckled with fear as he desperately tugged the young girl back from the fighting.

She shrugged him off and drew two daggers, watching a greasy-looking man who had slipped past the woman fighting to protect them. A feral smile filled with rage and hate crossed her tiny, delicate features as she crouched, waiting for him to get close enough to strike.

At first he had thought she was the same race as the woman and black-haired man, but watching her shoulder-length hair twine itself back away from her face, he had to revise that assumption. She was Ta'e'sha, and her coloring was unlike any he had ever seen. Sya'tia and Whist came to stand beside him.

"We can't get past the barrier, Captain," Whist said, watching the deadly battle tensely. "We can't 'path past it either."

Sya'tia hissed with displeasure and began stalking up and down the barrier, looking for a hole they could get through.

Kyrin stepped back. His stomach roiled as he watched. He hated feeling helpless and knew that the two warriors were outnumbered and appeared to be protecting the two young Ta'e'sha.

The young girl lashed out with her foot, expertly kicking the greasy man's knee and dislocating the kneecap. She danced back before lunging in to slash him across the throat. The man fell to the ground clutching his throat as blood sprayed and arced in crimson pulses. The girl backed away quickly, pushing the young man behind her and yelling something at him.

Behind the pair a wispy shape began to coalesce. It took the form of what looked like a ghostly Terren lion with huge wings. It reared up on its hind legs and slashed out with gigantic clawed paws and flared its wings, roaring soundlessly.

Kyrin yelled a warning and began pounding on the barrier. Beside him, Whist was doing the same.

The creature fell onto all four paws and slowly turned its head to stare at them with vaporous golden eyes. Its lip curled in a warning snarl before it deliberately swung its head around to look at something.

He followed its gaze and saw a man-sized clump of mist form into some kind of bird in front of the crumpled men moving weakly around the ramp of the second ship. It had the same misty golden eyes as the cat-beast and flared its wings in front of the beaten men in a gesture of protection.

Both animals stared at him for a moment before turning their attention back to the fight. They watched with so much intentness that Kyrin felt a shiver run down his back. The wraithlike cat paced in front of the two young Ta'e'sha, snarling and rearing each time the brown woman or black man took out an opponent.

Finally understanding they would not be allowed to pass until the battle was over, he began watching the fighters intently. All he really knew was what the young man had asked the woman to say. He and his sister had been stolen as children and their family was dead. That he could not speak any longer. It was so little information, and he already had his crew searching for lost ships in the area.

The man and woman moved with a blurring speed that rivaled the Warrior Chosen. The claws on the tips of their fingers shredded skin and clothing with each swipe.

The woman killed her last opponent and spun around just in time to see one of the attackers stab the black-haired man in the back. He crumpled to the ground in shock and reached back for the knife.

She screamed something and rushed the backstabber and slashed his face, throat, and torso open in a flurry of moves. Then, she head butted the last standing man, pushing him away from the fallen warrior. They engaged, sword and claws flashing in the dim, dusty light; at some point, she had lost her knives.

He looked over at the two Ta'e'sha. The girl was using her whole body to keep the younger man from running to the black-haired man. Tears streamed down both their faces, leaving muddy tracks on their dusty cheeks.

The black-haired man staggered to one knee and coughed up a mouthful of blood and went to both knees, swaying drunkenly.

Kyrin commed the ship. "Send Chief Medic Corvin down with a team; we have casualties." He waited for an affirmative and denied needing additional security. "Just get him down here as quickly as possible."

The girl was now sitting on the young man, holding him pinned in what looked like a very uncomfortable position. His gaze swung back to the fight, the black, murderous fury on the woman's face made him glad he wasn't the target of her rage. She slammed her clawed fingers into the shoulder of the man's sword arm and dragged them downward, shredding the muscles, until his sword fell from his suddenly nerveless hand. Another lash of those razor talons rendered his other arm useless also.

Not finished there she drew back her foot and snapped it forward, straight into his testicles. When he went screaming to his knees she caught a handful of his hair and tore out his throat with her teeth, then threw his bleeding body away from her like so much trash.

She called something to the girl, who responded by getting off the young man, and both scrambled toward the fallen warrior.

With an audible pop of displaced air, the barrier fell. Kyrin, Sya'tia, and Whist stumbled forward, not realizing they had been pressed tensely against it as they watched.

They quickly caught themselves and raced to the small group huddled around the black-haired man.

Sensing their approach, the woman spun around and crouched protectively in front of them. A snarling scream emitted from her mouth, torturing their ears. Her features were barely recognizable, so mixed with those of a cat. She growled out something they didn't understand and slinked in a predatory pace in front of her small group, obviously warning them off.

He skidded to a stop about ten feet away and motioned for Whist and Sya'tia to do the same. The woman watched them for a moment before scuttling back to the fallen man, still watching them with wary, feral eyes.

The girl's head came up, and she stared at them and hissed, baring small, serrated fangs. She said something he didn't understand and nudged the young man. He shook his head, sobbing soundlessly.

They rolled the black-haired man onto his stomach. Blood pulsed sluggishly around the knife in his back, and he choked on another mouthful of blood. He mumbled something, and the woman pulled the knife out in a quick motion. The girl quickly put her hands on the wound, applying pressure in an effort to stem the flow of blood.

He heard an engine and knew the medics were arriving and turned, sprinting to meet them. Corvin jumped off the transport leg and ran to meet him. "One man down with what I think is a punctured lung. Several other men badly beaten and I don't know how many dead," he barked out.

Corvin nodded grimly and ran beside him as Kyrin spun and led him back to the warrior. Several more medics followed them, carrying field kits.

"I don't know if I can get you close; they don't speak our language except the green-haired man, and he's hysterical," he added as the woman's head came up again and she growled at them warningly.

The rest of the medics veered toward the beaten men, not seeming to be aware of the ghostly bird watching them and clacking its beak angrily.

Kyrin stopped and called to the young man, trying to get his attention. He was sobbing; ragged grunts and moans were the only sounds he made. Kyrin saw the God Marks on his hands and wondered why he wasn't healing his friend.

The girl seemed to be watching them while she pushed down on the wound, and she finally barked something out to the older woman. It seemed to snap her out of her feral rage, and the catlike features melted away. She reached out and pushed the young man's shoulder. When he looked up at her, she jerked her head toward them and growled something.

He shook his head, mentally speaking to her. They could hear the conversation since the young man was using a general thread but couldn't understand the words. She snarled out a reply, and he hung his head and drew in several shuddering breaths.

Corvin muttered under his breath, obviously wanting to help the man bleeding on the ground.

The young man finally turned his head to them, tears still streaming down his face. "*I am Jaed'aden. Please give us time to help my mate, then we will talk to you,*" he said into their minds, looking like his world was caving in.

Kyrin sucked in a breath. He didn't look old enough to have a mate. "We can help; this is our doctor. Could you ask the women to move back?"

Hope lightened Jaed'aden's eyes, and he sent a translation to the women. The brown-haired woman nodded shortly and backed up, watching them intently. She said something to Jaed'aden.

He nodded. "*Don't make any sudden moves; my Mistress is riding the killing edge,*" he sent to them softly.

Mistress? Kyrin thought silently to himself.

One of the medics checking the men who had fallen during the fight called that one was alive. The girl asked something and Jaed'aden translated. She shot to her feet and loped to the medic. In a sudden move, she drew a dagger and stabbed the fallen man through the heart.

The medic scuttled away from her with a look of shocked horror.

The girl stood after wiping her blade and spit on the corpse. Then, she moved to check the rest of the men they had fought. She dispatched another in the same manner before stalking back to her group.

Kyrin stiffened, wondering what he had gotten himself into. The girl met his gaze calmly and slowly raised an eyebrow in challenge. It was disconcerting to realize that he was feeling intimidated by a child. He looked away.

Corvin managed to seal the wound but told him the man would need surgery to repair the damage. Jaed'aden translated, and the woman shook her head sharply and picked the man up easily despite of his size. She marched toward the ship, ignoring Corvin, who hurried after her shooting questions.

Jaed'aden and the girl followed them. The girl pushed Corvin away and sealed the ship's hatch so he couldn't follow.

The cat-beast suddenly appeared in front of the hatch and become a solid, if misty, animal.

Corvin backed away slowly and turned to look at Kyrin.

"I don't know, Corvin," he said in reply to the unasked question.

Shay eased Raerei's massive body into the medic unit and shut the lid, grateful he had fallen unconscious while the medic had worked on him. She turned and looked at Jaed and Lala. "Are you two dinii?" she asked hoarsely.

They nodded, scrubbing the muddy tears off their faces.

“Go shower and change. I’ll stay here until one of you is out,” she paused and swallowed hard. “He’ll be dinii, I promise.”

She slumped miserably against the wall when they each disappeared into cabins to bathe. Her palm came to rest on the plasglass window. She couldn’t see her zi’nen past the mist, and it scared her. Intellectually, she knew he would survive, but her heart couldn’t get past the image of him falling with a knife embedded in his back. If the medic hadn’t been able to stop the blood they would have lost him. Their medic unit was good at repairs, but useless with emergency procedures. It just didn’t have the capacity to work fast enough.

Minutes passed as she stared at the swirling mist, trying to catch glimpses of Rae. A soft touch on her elbow made her turn her head to meet Lala’s eyes. “I’ll watch him, Shay. Go shower. I put out clean leathers for you.” Lala was still wearing hers but had brushed off the dust.

“Thanks, baby,” she said tiredly, trudging into her cabin.

She showered quickly and dressed in record time. When she returned to the medic, Jaed and Lala were leaning against each other and watching the window just as intently as she had. “We have to go outside, my loves.” There was no putting it off, and Raerei would be in the medic for a few hours at least.

They eyed her apprehensively and nodded.

When the hatch opened, the first thing she saw was the Karracat Ghost. She fell to her knees and raised her throat submissively, praying Lala would do the same. A soft thud behind her told her the girl had. The Ghost stared down at her with golden eyes of swirling vapor before bending to take her throat in its mouth. It slowly bit down until she felt those razor teeth break her skin. It pulled away and licked the small beads of blood. She stayed where she was until a soft mew told her Silaari had been treated to the same honor.

And, it was an honor. The Ghost only took the blood of the Clan members it was proudest of.

Once the ritual greeting was finished, it paced toward the Winter Owl hunters, looking over its shoulder commandingly.

As they followed, she met the gaze of the Ta'e'sha captain. His eyes were wide, and he watched her as if he wasn't sure she was a victim or a monster. With a mental shrug, she turned away. It wasn't her problem.

The Winter Owl Ghost shimmered into view. It spread its wings and clacked softly in greeting. The medics scrambled away when it waddled over to the beaten hunters and cooed softly in distress, swaying above them.

Shay knelt beside Krayg and gently lifted his head onto her lap, tenderly brushing her fingers over his eyes. "You are free, brother. Open your eyes and scent the wind," she said softly. Jaed and Lala also knelt and cradled a man, offering what comfort they could without knowing the language.

Krayg's eyes opened to slits, all he could manage through the swelling. His trembling hand reached up to brush her cheek. "You are a miracle to me, sister. As fierce as the karracat huntress and just as beautiful. It shames me that I could not fight them off."

Shay hushed him gently. "You fought with honor and expected the same. These men and women had no honor. They were beasts in the skins of our species. Do not feel shame, brother. There is no shame in defeat." She stroked his hair.

The other men dragged themselves close and rested against Shay. They ran weak hands over her, Jaed, and Lala. It was the Aspect way, seeking comfort from touch. "Where is Raerei, sister?" one man asked in a gritty voice.

"He was wounded and is being healed. We only have one medic unit," she added regretfully. "It will take time before all of you can be healed."

The Winter Owl Ghost hooted imperiously, and the hunters shuddered and dragged themselves to their knees, bowing their heads before it to bare the backs of their necks.

The Ghost preened their matted hair and gently nibbled on their skin before moving to stand beside the Karracat Ghost.

The Ghosts turned to face each other.

“My Clan has defended its young; they retain the right to be a Clan,” the Karracat said.

The Winter Owl bowed to the Karracat. “It is so. Your Clan is redeemed and yours again. Your Clan sacrificed blood to save my hunters, without thought for themselves. A debt is owed that cannot be paid. I offer blood bond. We are Clan of your Clan.”

The Karracat stretched out a bow. “It is so. We are Clan of your Clan.”

They faded from view, leaving the Aspects trying to understand what had just taken place.

Chapter Eight

Shay sat down on a rock and watched Jaed talk to the captain a few feet away. Most of the conversation was telepathic and in Ta'e'shian, so it was a little boring. Silaari flopped down next to her and leaned against her leg. Shay reached down to stroke her hair. "You did well, little sister," she said softly. "I am sorry you had to kill. It is not something I would have wished for you."

The girl shrugged, her gaze locked on the doctor helping the hunters. "It's dinii; death isn't a stranger to me, Shay." She finally tilted her head back to look up at Shay. "I wasn't going to let them hurt my brother."

Shay nodded solemnly. "I know."

"It's hot here," Silaari said suddenly, shrugging out of the leather vest she wore over a linen halter top.

"Yes, it is," Shay agreed. "There doesn't seem to be much on this planet except dust and wind. I wouldn't want to stay too long."

"How long do you think it will take to fix the engine?" Silaari was back to watching the tall doctor.

“A couple of weeks, I think. Depends on how much damage was done. I’ll take a look after Rae gets up.” She hoped it was soon. She was feeling twitchy with all of the bustling strangers moving around them. Not having Raerei watching her back made her feel naked.

She studied the tall woman standing quietly behind the captain. She looked different, and Shay wondered if she was Ta’e’shian or some other race. She had white hair and very pale blue skin. The woman held her body with the wary alertness of a trained fighter or bodyguard. Her black eyes were constantly moving, assessing where everyone was and if they posed a threat.

Shay’s hackles rose every time the woman’s gaze paused on Jaed or Silaari.

The sound of groaning metal made her look at *Crimson Shackles*. Raerei slipped out looking wan and exhausted. She rose and went to meet him with Silaari following anxiously. She trilled softly and slid under his arm, supporting some of his weight.

Silaari cuddled against his chest and hid her face. He curved an arm around the girl’s shoulders as he bent awkwardly to kiss the top of her head.

Jaed suddenly appeared on his other side and went up on his toes to kiss Rae. “*I was so worried. Are you all right?*”

“I’m fine, just tired,” Raerei replied in a raspy voice.

Shay heard a rock crunch and turned to see the captain approaching. He was staring at Silaari’s back. She stiffened when he asked Jaed something that made him tremble and huddle against Raerei’s side.

“What did he say?” she growled out. Silaari went still as a stone and slowly turned to face the newcomer. Shay could tell the girl knew what he had been staring at when the expression bled from her face, and she watched him like a blank doll. It made her angry to see Silaari like that.

“*He wants to know who hurt Lala,*” Jaed said softly.

The captain called the medic over. When the doctor reached them the captain grabbed Silaari and spun her around roughly to show the doctor the scars.

Shay growled and yanked the girl out of his hands. Pushing Silaari behind her, she snapped her teeth inches from the captain's nose in warning. No one would touch her family like that!

The blue woman shoved him out of the way and hissed down at Shay. Long fangs unfolded from the roof of her mouth and a clear drop of fluid trembled on the tip of one.

Shay bent her knees slightly and felt her claws pop out. A deep growl rumbled in her chest.

The captain said something to the blue woman. She shook her head and hissed at Shay again.

Shay snarled and trembled with the need to attack.

Silaari took her arm and tugged her back.

"Shay, drop it," Rae muttered. When she didn't respond he continued, "Don't make me put nettle juice in your gel."

The growl in her chest stuttered as her eyes went wide in disbelief. "You wouldn't dare!" It was a moot point and they both knew it; she didn't use any contraceptives.

"I would if you don't quit acting like an idiot. He wasn't going to hurt Lala." His big hand landed on her shoulder and he tugged her back. She didn't take her eyes off the blue woman, who stopped hissing and cuddled against the captain's side.

They exchanged another virulent glare.

Shay curved her body against Rae's. "Jaed, tell them that if they lay another hand on either of you I will personally feed it to them."

He blanched, but did as she asked.

The captain's eyes narrowed, and the woman hissed again.

“I don’t think we’re getting off to the best start,” Jaed offered tentatively.

Shay didn’t take her eyes off the strangers when Raerei let out a long-suffering sigh. She didn’t like feeling vulnerable and not being able to speak with these people, of whom more and more kept arriving, was making her feel twitchy.

The captain bent his head and said something to the woman pressed against him. After a moment she nodded and stepped away from him, returning to her professional stance. The captain then turned to her and said something with a slight bow. She turned and looked at Jaed.

“He says he is sorry for his actions and those of his...” He paused and appeared to be searching for words. *“His future wife. He says that he was shocked by the marks on Silaari’s back and acted without thinking.”*

Shay mulled that over for a moment. The situation could disintegrate quickly at this point, and she had no wish to make things difficult for Jaed or Lala. “I apologize as well. It seems a day for actions without thought.”

Jaed translated and the captain nodded. They exchanged a few more words before drifting off to stand a bit away from Shay, Raerei, and Lala.

The rather confused-looking doctor looked at all of them and finally shrugged. He made motions with his hands toward Silaari that Shay interpreted as him wanting her to turn around so he could see her back. “I think he wants to look at your scars, Lala.”

Lala shook her head and hid behind Shay. “I don’t want to, Shay,” she said tonelessly. “They are ugly, but they don’t hurt anymore.” She buried her face between Shay’s shoulder blades.

Shay turned and wrapped her arms around the girl. “I know you don’t want to, but he won’t hurt you. I’ll tie his dick in a knot if he touches you.”

The girl nodded against Shay’s breasts. She slipped out of Shay’s arms and turned to show the man her back.

Shay turned to watch him closely. She was glad Lala didn't see the expression of shocked horror that flashed across his face. He hummed a few mournful notes, and his hands fluttered anxiously around her skin, as if he wanted to touch her. A quick glance at her made him drop his hands and lean forward to inspect the ruined flesh instead of probing it with his fingers.

After a minute he stepped back and nodded at her before turning to stand beside the captain.

"Go change into something else, Lala," Shay said quietly, wishing once again she had thought to ask Jaed to start teaching them the Ta'e'sha language.

Raerei leaned back in the chair Shay had insisted on dragging out of the ship for him to sit on. His arms tightened around Jaed, who curled up in his lap asleep. He had thought his life was over when the knife had been buried in his back. It was a miracle to him that they had been able to get the bleeding stopped in time.

He watched his mate and Lala bustle around a large inflatable tub. They were filling it with hot water and bathing the hunters two at a time. Shay wouldn't let the doctors bother them anymore. At some point the medical care had segued into tests that had nothing to do with their well-being. He was quickly coming to understand that the Ta'e'sha were insatiably curious.

Just as he finished that thought, one of them came trotting over with some small device and an eager expression. He curled his lip and snarled almost soundlessly, and the medic scurried off again with a hunted look.

Kyrin, the captain, sat down next to him with a tired sigh. He smiled briefly down at Jaed and then leaned back against a rock and closed his eyes.

Rae watched him curiously. There wasn't any point in trying to make conversation, so he didn't try. After a few more minutes, the woman Shay had been in a hissing match with

came and sat next to him. They talked quietly to each other. After a bit he ignored their whispered conversation and bent his head to press a kiss onto the top of Jaed's head.

When he looked up both of the Ta'e'sha were watching him intently. He slowly raised an eyebrow. Damn, there was something about them that got on his nerves. He could almost understand why Shay was so jumpy. Jaed and Lala didn't grate on his nerves like this. Why did the others?

He muttered a curse under his breath and nudged Jaed awake. "Your friends are here, pet. I'm going inside to sleep. Wake me when the three of you come in."

Jaed yawned and nodded. He slipped off Raerei's lap and helped him stand and walked with him back to the ship. "*They can wait a bit, Master. I want to make sure you get to bed dini.*" He leered up at Rae playfully. "*If you get enough rest, maybe we can play later. It'll be nice having you on your back instead of me for once.*" He grinned.

Raerei chuckled and stopped his mate to give him a deep kiss. "I'll be fine. Go talk to them, and I'll see you later."

Jaed sighed with disappointment, but did as he was told.

Rae stopped and told Shay and Lala where he'd be and went to bed. The medic could fix his wound, but it couldn't fix his exhaustion.

Jaed watched his Master enter the ship and felt his shoulders slump. He didn't really like talking to Kyrin without his Master or Mistress with him, but neither seemed to like the Ta'e'sha. He didn't understand it. After another minute of wishing he could just follow Raerei into the ship, he turned back to the couple still resting against some rocks.

He nodded to them as he sank down into the chair. "*Hello,*" he offered hesitantly. Sya'tia smiled, her black eyes glowed warmly. "Hello, Jaed'aden. How are you?"

"*Fine, thank you,*" he replied, scooting back into the chair.

"Can you tell us what happened to you?" Captain Kyrin asked gently.

He nodded jerkily. *"I think it was almost eleven years ago. My parents, sister, and I had left our ship to study a new planet the scanners had picked up. Silaari and I weren't supposed to go, but she had just gotten over a cold, and our mothers didn't want to leave us behind because they were going to be gone for at least a month."* He paused and drew in a deep breath. He had never told anyone what had happened, and it was much harder than he thought it would be.

"We were attacked by pirates. They killed my deema and took my mothers and me." His hands clenched together. *"I thought they killed Silaari. I didn't see her after they took us. They raped and beat us and killed my mothers. Then they sold me."* His breath was coming in rasps, and he desperately tried to calm it when his Mistress looked over at him with a piercing gaze. He didn't want her getting upset again. She had just started calming down.

"They sold you?" Kyrin asked, his expression told Jaed that the man didn't understand.

"Yes." He didn't really know how to explain slavery to someone who had no concept of it.

The captain shook his head. "Go on, please."

A hand fell onto his shoulder and he jumped. He craned his head around to see his Mistress watching him, looking concerned. He reached up and caught her hand. *"It's all right, Mistress. I'm telling them what happened to Silaari and me. It's very hard."* Tears burned his eyes as hers became sorrowful.

She pulled him out of the chair and sat down, drawing him onto her lap and cradled him in her arms. "I'm here, baby. No one will hurt you again."

He nodded and turned back to the waiting couple. *"As a slave I was required to perform any tasks given to me. Usually, I was required to perform sexual acts --"*

"You were a child! You are barely an adult now. I could have that woman brought up on charges for even touching you," the captain burst out. He glared at Shay accusingly.

Jaed recoiled and Shay hissed warningly.

“*They didn’t care,*” he replied softly as shame welled in his heart. He turned and hid his face against his Mistress’s neck.

“It’s not your fault, Jaed’aden,” Sya’tia inserted quickly, sending a sharp elbow into the captain’s side.

Jaed shook his head as he watched them from the corner of his eye. “*Maybe it would be better if we finished this conversation in the morning.*” He didn’t want to talk to them anymore.

“Of course, Jaed’aden,” Kyrin replied, still looking like he was thinking of arresting Shay. “We, ah, we have some sublim recording that will help your...Mistress and her friend learn our language.” He was changing the subject. “Doctor Corvin tells me that Silaari’s cerebcom is still functional so we’ll program that as well.”

“*Thank you.*” He raised his head and stared hard at the captain. “*And do not threaten my Mistress or my Master. They are my mates. They are my life and soul.*”

“You are too young...” Kyrin started to say and was silenced by Sya’tia’s hand clapping over his mouth.

“Good night, Jaed’aden. Please give your family our regards, and we will see you in the morning. We will be leaving a small security team here should you need anything.” Sya’tia appeared to be ignoring her captain’s struggles to free his mouth.

Jaed nodded. “*Mistress, let’s go home. I’m tired and I know you are too.*” He took the small satchel Sya’tia handed him and slid off Shay’s lap.

Shay nodded slowly, obviously wondering what was going on.

“*They gave us a machine that will teach you the language. You should be able to understand some of it by tomorrow.*” He didn’t want to tell her what the captain said for fear that she would rip out Kyrin’s throat. His Mistress had very strong feelings about people who abused children and being accused of it herself would send her into a fury he didn’t think anyone would ever calm.

"Dinii, baby. You go on in and I'll get Silaari. The hunters don't want to sleep on the ship so could you grab a few more blankets for me before you go to bed?" She seemed willing to let it go, but he didn't know for how long. He hadn't realized before today how far she was willing to go to protect him.

He looked over his shoulder at the captain and his betrothed. They had their faces together and appeared to be having a heated argument. He rather hoped Sya'tia won. This was not anything like he had imagined their homecoming would be.

Silaari bounced over and hugged him hard. He smiled wanly and kissed her cheek gently. She was watching the doctor again. All day her gaze had strayed to the older man, and he didn't understand her fascination. "*What do you watch so intently, my Lala?*" he asked teasingly, feeling his heart lighten at the happiness on her face.

A sly look crossed her little face. "The future," she said simply, lacing her fingers with his and going with him inside.

He tugged a lock of her hair. "*Indeed? And here I thought I was going to have to sic Shay on Krayg. He's watching you with a very possessive expression, little sister.*"

She wrinkled her nose and grinned. "Not Krayg. He's too young." A shadow crossed her face. "Although now he's much older than he was when we first met him."

"*Aren't we all, baby?*" He hugged her and grabbed the blankets Shay wanted. "*Let's get these to Mistress and find ourselves some dinner.*"

She nodded and followed with another stack of blankets.

They helped make pallets for the hunters, who were in much better spirits. Shay had managed to rotate them through the medic in short intervals. The result was that while they weren't completely healed the worst of their injuries were gone, and the Ta'e'sha had given them medication for the pain. The painkillers left the men a little giddy, and they were making motions and talking to Silaari teasingly, even though she didn't understand most of what they said.

Shay laughed and slapped one lightly on the back and replied to something he had said while clutching her hand over his heart.

Krayg suddenly roused himself from where he had been drowsing and said something to Shay. She jerked as if struck and spun around to stare at the ship and shot back a question. He replied and Shay charged over to the row of dead pirates and started going through their clothing frantically.

Jaed followed in confusion. “*What’s wrong?*”

Shay shook her head and kept digging. “They took a mated set of karracats! They are on the ship; Krayg just remembered them.”

Jaed paled, hoping that the proud cats hadn’t been hurt. He started digging through pockets too. “*What are we looking for?*”

“Control for the hatch. They always bring one. Pirates don’t trust anyone to not change the codes while they are off ship.” She pulled out a small metal box triumphantly. “Ha! Found it. Get Lala, baby. Meet me at the hatch.”

Jaed didn’t bother looking around. “*Lala, come help us; the pirates took two karracats.*” Almost immediately she was beside him.

Sya’tia came over as well, obviously understanding that they were going into the ship and probably wondering why they were behaving so urgently. “What’s going on?” she asked Jaed in an undertone.

“*The pirates took two karracats from Kleeg. Oh, this is bad; it’s a good thing they are dead or Shay would torture them.*” His hands twisted together nervously.

“What are karracats? What are pirates and Kleeg for that matter?”

“*Karracats are the totem animal of my family’s Clan,*” he answered distractedly as the door slowly opened. “*Pirates are the people who attacked us, outlaws and outcasts. Kleeg is the planet the hunters and my Master and Mistress came from.*”

“Oh,” was the somewhat confused reply. “May I assist you in getting the animals?”

He nodded and followed Shay. *"Yes, but don't try to touch them. Let Mistress and Silaari go first."*

They had to search every filthy room in the ship before they found the cats chained in the cargo hold. The male had heard them coming and was stalking back and forth at the end of his chain. When he saw them he roared a challenge and flared his wings, hiding the huddled form of his mate. Their ribs stood out against the dull feathers and fur of their coats. It was obvious the pirates had been barely feeding the animals. Red marks could be seen through their black-and-tan fur, signs of a recent beating.

The female's belly was swollen and her nipples stood out, betraying her advancing pregnancy. She hissed and trilled, backing up against the wall.

Shay slinked forward. "Jaed, we need food for them. Get me as much fish and meat out of the freezer as you can carry. See if one of the hunters will help you." She knelt and fluted a few notes before beginning to trill a soft song at the angry, scared cats.

"Mistress Sya'tia, we need meat and fish. Could you come with me and help me carry it back?" He didn't think it would be a good idea to leave the woman alone with Shay since Sya'tia had dropped into a defensive crouch the moment she had seen the cats.

The woman nodded, not taking her eyes off the huge animals. The male took a swipe at Shay and screamed angrily. Shay had gone to her knees well out of range, though, and didn't flinch. Instead she lifted her chin, exposing her neck as she continued to sing.

"Are you sure it's safe to leave them here?" She was referring to Shay and Silaari, who moved to kneel beside Shay and started singing as well. Her voice wasn't like Shay's. It had the heavy vibrations of her Ta'e'shian heritage and seemed to twine around Shay's notes.

"Yes, we have to get Master Raerei too." He scurried down the hallway with Sya'tia following. *"The male might not calm down without him."*

"Why not?" the woman asked curiously, easily keeping up with him. They ran across the clearing, ignoring the questions shouted by the other Ta'e'sha.

“*Because they are both male. Just trust me.*” He didn’t have time to answer her questions. He skidded to a stop in the doorway of the galley and hurriedly showed her where the meat was and how to thaw it quickly and went to wake his Master.

He pounded on the door until it slid open and the cranky face of his Master glared at him. Jaed hurriedly explained the situation then dashed back to the galley to help Sya’tia. It took several minutes to thaw the fish and meat, and they were just finishing when Raerei joined them.

Rae dug out several bags and started shoving the food into them. They each took two bags and loped out of the *Crimson Shackles* and back to the pirate ship.

When they got back to the cargo hold the male karracat jumped to his feet and growled warningly. Raerei made a series of chuffs and growls. After a moment he rumbled a strange trilling purr, and the cat eased back down onto his haunches.

Rae opened the first bag and started hauling the meat out and tossed a piece to the cat.

The cat snatched it out of the air with a clawed paw and sniffed it all over before picking it up and slinking back to his mate, still watching them with wary black eyes. He set the meat down and hovered protectively while the female devoured it hungrily. Once she was done, he turned back to Raerei and grunted demandingly.

Raerei tossed him a large fish and the process was repeated. The male didn’t eat a single mouthful of the food until his mate was sated. Then, he stalked to the pile they had left within his reach and began to feed himself. Once he finished, he licked his paws and mouth thoroughly before staring at Raerei in expectation.

Shay, Silaari, and Raerei moved forward cautiously and knelt to offer their throats to the animals. Sya’tia hissed uneasily and started to move forward. Jaed caught her arm and shook his head, pulling her behind him. “*Don’t. They know what they are doing.*”

She subsided slowly and stiffened when the male took each of the kneeling trio by the throat.

Unlike the first time Jaed had seen this, the cat punctured their skin and licked the blood away with a long, raspy tongue. His little sister trembled, but didn't resist.

The female slinked forward and repeated the greeting. When she finished, Shay offered her wrist and trilled softly. The cat bit Shay's wrist open and lapped eagerly at the freely flowing blood.

Jaed trembled. He didn't like this change in behavior.

The cat lapped for several minutes before she butted her head against Shay's cheek and purred softly. Her coat and feathers began to shine softly and the dull, dirty sheen faded. He turned and looked at the male, who was also gleaming softly, but not as brightly as the female.

Talking to the cat quietly, Shay fumbled with the collar until it fell away from the female's neck with a thud. The cat stepped back and shook herself all over and stretched.

Raerei was working on the male's collar and finally got it free. "Bastards had it so tight he could hardly breathe," he muttered in an outraged voice. "Let's take them outside."

Jaed pushed Sya'tia, then moved behind her. The others followed, still murmuring to the cats reassuringly. The male growled and grumbled but followed, curving his body protectively around his mate.

They slowly made their way down the ramp and stepped back as the cats peered out the door, then slinked down the ramp. The moment his feet hit the dirt the male flared his wings and reared up on his hind legs, roaring a challenge. He was magnificent. The female crouched low to the ground and screamed a birdlike reply. They launched themselves into the air and flew above the haphazard camp joyously.

The Ta'e'sha screamed and shouted and ran for their ships to huddle under them nervously. Except for the captain, Sya'tia, and a few others, who watched the spiraling cats in wonder.

After a minute the cats landed gently and twined themselves around Shay, Raerei, and Silaari with loud purrs and trills. The hunters scrambled out of their beds and started using the blankets to make a large nest. They called Shay over and backed away as the cats came with her.

The cats sniffed the blankets, then moved to inspect each hunter thoroughly. The hunters stayed still, cooing and shurring in soft distress over the animals' wounds. The male swiped his tongue across Krayg's face then settled into the nest of blankets.

The female lay down and rolled onto her back. "She wants you to rub her belly," Shay said softly. "She's sending me pictures of all of you sneaking into the hold to smuggle them food." Tears filled her eyes. "You kept her babies alive, and she wants you to feel them."

Tears tracked down the men's faces as they reverently placed their hands on the cat's distended belly. They gently rubbed her skin and gasped softly in delight when the kittens moved.

"They are the first karracat litter in years," Krayg said softly, moving the caress the cat's ears. "We did everything we could, Shay. But, they didn't let us roam often, and they didn't give us very much food. We took turns, pooling our food, then one would sneak off to give it to them."

Silaari sat down next to the male and petted him when he lifted his head into her lap. She bent over and buried her face in the feathered ruff around his neck and sang to him softly. "They are so beautiful. How will we get them home, Rae? We can't take them with us."

"I don't know, Lala," he replied, sitting beside the cat and rubbing his shoulder. "We'll figure something out."

Jaed turned as Kyrin and the doctor joined them.

"What are they?" Kyrin asked softly, stepping back when the male lifted his head and curled his lip.

"Karracats. The pirates stole them when they took Krayg and his men." Jaed sighed. *"They are the totem animals of my family's Clan. Their survival is linked to Shay, Raerei, and Silaari."*

"Extraordinary," Doctor Corvin murmured softly, obviously entranced by the beautiful animals. "They look like lions, but not. May I touch one? They appear to be wounded."

"I don't know," Jaed said hesitantly. *"They may not let you."* He translated the doctor's request for Raerei.

Raerei nodded slowly. "I'll try to convey it to them. Most medications should be fine, and I'd like to have the whip marks cleaned at least." He turned and growled softly at the cats. The female rolled over and padded to the doctor and sat on her haunches, watching him with piercing copper eyes.

Corvin knelt slowly.

The cat curled her lip.

"Tell him to show his throat so she knows he's submissive," Raerei said quietly.

Jaed translated. Corvin's eyes rolled a little nervously before he slowly lifted his chin.

After a moment the cat lay down and curled her paws under her chest, she didn't take his throat in her mouth as she had the others. Corvin ran gentle hands over her sides, pausing to push the fur away and inspect the marks. "Hmm, Sya, would you grab my bags, please?"

"Of course." She left them to do as requested.

"Does he have any bone supplements?" Shay asked suddenly. "I'm worried about the kittens."

Jaed asked him.

The doctor frowned. "I think I have some calcium injections, but not with me. I'll bring them down in the morning. I'll take a scan and get their physiological information in

the computers and see what else it comes up with.” He paused and peered up at Jaed’aden. “It would be helpful if we could take scans of the others too.”

“*Tomorrow*,” Jaed said firmly. “*We need a good night’s sleep, and they’ll have some understanding of the language tomorrow. Now is not the best time to push my family.*”

Corvin sighed, but left off the subject. He took his bag from Sya’tia and withdrew several large swabs and a bottle of milky fluid. Dipping a swab in it he began gently cleaning each scratch carefully. When he finished, he shuffled over to the male without getting to his feet and lifted his chin with much more confidence.

The male sat up and snuffled the man all over with obvious curiosity. After a bit he lay back down and let the doctor care for his wounds. When Corvin finished, the cat chuffed and butted him in the chest, knocking Corvin over so that he fell against Silaari.

The girl giggled and helped him sit up, and Jaed smirked. “*I think he likes you, Doctor Corvin.*”

Corvin blushed and stammered an apology to Silaari, who giggled again and looked away. “I, uh, I’ll take my leave of you and see you in the morning,” he muttered as he got to his feet and back away quickly.

Shay snickered softly and shared a grin with Jaed.

Kyrin slid his arm around Sya’tia’s waist and nodded. “I think we’ll be going as well. If you need anything, please tell the security team.” He motioned toward the group of black-suited people setting up tents a small distance away.

“*Thank you, Captain. Sleep well.*” Jaed was suddenly very eager for everyone to leave so he could be with his mates.

“Can I stay with the karracats?” Silaari asked Raerei with a pleading expression.

His Master smiled indulgently. “Yes, but stay close to Krayg and his men, all right, little one?”

She nodded eagerly, immediately laying down and snuggling against the male karracat's back.

Rae told the men Silaari was staying with the cats and bade them good sleep before trudging back to their ship. Shay smiled and held her hand out to Jaed, and he rushed to lace his fingers with hers as they followed Raerei.

Chapter Nine

Shay yawned as she stepped outside and stretched. She felt much better after a full night's sleep and the touch of her mates waking her up this morning. Spying Silaari sitting on a makeshift table with Corvin running a scanner over her, she made her way toward the pair.

Silaari was watching the doctor's every movement with bright curiosity. A short woman with long, dark hair was standing beside him, talking animatedly. With a jolt, she realized that she understood some of what they were saying. *I guess those sublim things work after all.*

"Thank you, Silaari, these scans will help immensely," Corvin was saying when she reached him.

The woman fell silent and smiled at Shay in a friendly manner. Shay nodded in return. "Is everything all right, little sister?" she asked carefully in Ta'e'shian.

Corvin turned and smiled widely. "You used the sublims. Excellent."

Shay nodded, still waiting for Silaari to answer her.

The girl leaned forward and sniffed Corvin, and he backed away a step, eyeing her nervously. "Everything is fine," she switched back to the common language she was more familiar with. "He smells good, Shay, and I like the way he moves."

She chuckled. "That's good, but it's not polite to sniff people."

Lala's head swung around. "You smell Raerei and Jaed all the time. I just saw you bury your nose in Jaed's neck and growl. Then you bit him." She turned to inspect Corvin with a definite gleam of speculation.

"That's because they are my mates," Shay cut in quickly, before Lala decided to take a chomp out of the doctor.

"Jaed said you just claimed him. Could he have said no?" She was still staring at Corvin like he was a pastry.

"Yes," Shay replied warily, having an idea where this conversation was going.

"Dinii. Good." Silaari switched back to Ta'e'sha, which she had a better grasp of than Shay. "I'm fourteen," she announced in grand tones.

"So you have told us, Silaari," Corvin replied, looking a little confused. He stepped forward again and ran the scanner over her legs. The long-haired woman leaned her hip against the table and watched curiously. She seemed to know something was about to happen and gave the impression that she was not going to miss it.

"Are you mated?" Silaari watched her prey like a karracat.

He jerked. "No," he muttered shortly.

"Betrothed?"

"No." Now he was backing away again.

"Good. I'll be an adult in six years. You can mate with me." This was said with supreme, purring satisfaction.

The woman gaped.

Corvin sucked in a wheezing breath.

Shay sighed and stared up at the sky. After a moment she shook her head. "You can't just decide he's yours, baby girl."

The woman's mouth trembled, and she spun around and jogged to the captain, laughter trailing behind her.

"Thea!" Corvin bellowed after her. "Don't leave me!"

The captain bent down to hear what she was saying to him. His eyes flickered to Corvin, and a deep, rolling chuckle burst from his mouth. He pressed a hard kiss to the tiny woman's mouth before approaching them with an arm tightly wound around her waist.

The doctor was trying to sidle away, and Silaari's hand shot out to catch the front of his uniform.

He froze and stared at her like she was an unstable bit of explosive.

Shay rubbed her eyes as Kyrin and the woman, Thea, joined them. She muttered a healthy curse in her home language.

"You haven't answered me yet," Lala said earnestly, looking up at Corvin with big, vulnerable eyes.

Shay snickered softly, wondering where the girl had learned that expression.

"You haven't asked me a question," the harried man hedged.

Lala frowned and the beginnings of temper began to cloud over her face.

Shay reached out and pried Lala's fingers away from the man's clothing. "I'm sure he is just..." She searched for an appropriate word. "Overcome...with surprise."

Raerei joined them and frowned at Shay's fingers tugging at Lala's, which refused to release Corvin. "Has something happened?" He glared fiercely at the hapless doctor. "Did he do something wrong?" He was growling now and had switched languages.

"No, no, Lala has just decided to inform him he could marry her when she's an adult, and the poor man looks like someone hit him with a rock." She succeeded in getting Lala's hand off him, and Corvin stumbled back.

He smoothed the front of his uniform, trying to recover some modicum of dignity. His hair unwound from its tight braid and rippled down his back like glistening moss green silk.

Raerei smiled slowly as the protectiveness fell from his expression. "Well, well, well. She's taking more after you all the time." He approached the doctor and buried his face in the man's neck and inhaled a deep breath.

Corvin's eyes bulged and he looked at Shay with silent desperation. It was obvious that he didn't know what to make of them and was intimidated by Raerei's massive size.

She smiled reassuringly and stroked Lala's hair.

Rae pulled back and smiled thoughtfully. "He has a good scent," he said to Lala in Ta'e'shian. "He's healthy and does not have the scent of cruelty. A bit older than you, my Lala, but not too old. You wouldn't do well with a young kit like Krayg." He folded his arms over his chest. "I approve this mate choice. Though, I fear, he'll be hard preypreypr to tree."

Silaari beamed proudly.

Corvin had obviously had enough and scurried off.

Silaari hopped off the table and, ignoring the snickering captain and the woman, hurried after him. She was obviously intent on finishing her proposal to Corvin, whether he wanted to hear it or not.

Shay smiled fondly after the girl until the newcomer drew her attention.

"Hi, I'm Thea, Kyrin's wife." The little woman offered her hand.

Shay shook it uncertainly. "I'm Shay. This is my mate, Raerei. Our other mate, Jaed, is around here somewhere."

The woman smiled. "Sya tells me that you've had a rocky start with our crew. I thought I'd come down and let you know we're not all crazy." She leaned against her much taller husband and beamed up at him.

He looked down at her with amused resignation.

Shay felt something inside her relax. Maybe this wouldn't be so bad. At least someone was friendly, and she didn't sense the same arrogance in Thea she did in so many of the Ta'e'sha. Then, she suddenly realized that Thea wasn't Ta'e'shian. Her hair and face were different. Thea's hair was like hers and Rae's, not the muscled tendrils the Ta'e'sha had. "You are not Ta'e'sha?" she asked carefully.

"Nope. I'm human," was the cheerful reply.

"Oh." Shay didn't know what a human was.

"From Earth," Thea added helpfully.

"I see."

Thea seemed to realize that she was losing them. "Anyway, Sya told me a little of Jaed'aden's history, and I tried to explain it to Kyrin a little better."

Shay frowned thoughtfully. "What is there to explain? It speaks for itself."

"Not really." Thea sighed and hopped up on the table Silaari had been sitting on. "The Ta'e'sha have no records of slavery, so they can't comprehend it. They don't have very much experience with rape either." The woman's face paled, and Kyrin rested a hand on her shoulder when she seemed to withdraw into herself for a moment.

Her expression made Shay focus on her intently. "You understand it, don't you? Better than you want to."

Thea nodded and looked away. After a moment, she returned her gaze to Shay and Raerei. "My culture has a history of both, so I explained it to them. Then I had them watch a few theatrical portrayals of events in my people's history. It seemed to give them a better grasp of the situation."

Kyrin entered the conversation at that point, all signs of his earlier amusement wiped away. "I apologize for the way you were treated last night and what I said."

Shay shrugged uncomfortably. She made a note to find out from Jaed what the captain said. "It was a difficult day." She turned her head to watch Silaari. Krayg was standing beside the girl, holding her hand to his heart and talking with a very earnest expression. As she watched Lala's expression grew dark with the beginnings of anger. "Rae," she said softly.

"I'm on it." He strode toward the pair with a menacing expression.

Shay returned to the conversation. "What did Jaed tell you?"

"That they were attacked by outlaws and sold into slavery." Thea twisted her hands in her lap.

Shay sighed and rubbed the back of her neck. "That is the short story. Jaed was sold as a sex slave. Silaari was kept by a woman who had an unnatural passion for children." She was trying to explain as best she could with her limited vocabulary.

Thea made a soft sound of distress.

She plowed on. If she could make this woman understand, maybe things would go easier for all of them. "When she tired of Lala, she sold her as a whipping slave."

Kyrin broke in here. "Are there no laws to protect children? How can they condone slavery? It is evil."

Shay watched Raerei as she tried to decide how to answer. He was holding Krayg by the back of the neck and whispering something in the other man's ear that made Krayg go pale. "The only laws are those that are made by the highborn. And they don't care what happens to anyone born beneath them. Lovers of children are frowned upon, and it's kept as an open secret. Slaves have no rights; they are disposable property."

Jaed crept up to her as she was talking and curled his arms around her waist.

"I found Jaed in an auction several months ago." She paused to kiss the top of his head. "I bought him because I couldn't bear to let Skand have him, for some reason."

He looked up when she said this and smiled winsomely. Gods, how she adored him.

“Jaed is your slave?” Kyrin sounded as if he was going to explode.

She chuckled softly, still watching her love. “No, he was free the moment he set foot on our ship.” Jaed grinned a little at that. “Skand is the man we fought yesterday. He was angry that I bought Jaed and set up Silaari’s auction as bait. Which we took,” she added ruefully.

“I don’t understand.” Thea frowned, looking at the graves the Ta’e’sha had buried the dead pirates in.

“He was one of the worst of them. He was going to buy Jaed as a plaything for his crew. No one ever stood up to Skand. When I did, it infuriated him. He couldn’t find us, and so he found Silaari, the only other Ta’e’sha he knew about, and planted a tracking device on her and set her on the block.” She watched the girl mock battle with Raerei and marveled over the changes in her. It was unusual to see the blank doll face anymore, and Shay hoped she’d never have to see it again.

“You bought Silaari also?” Kyrin seemed appalled.

“No. She’s a virgin. I couldn’t afford to buy her. I had to follow and kill her new owner.” She smiled with secret satisfaction. Jaed’s arms tightened around her. “Remind me to tell Corvin she will never accept a woman’s touch,” she told Jaed absently.

He nodded.

“We decided to come looking for Jaed’s people, and Skand followed us. He stopped on Kleeg, where we had resupplied, and took Krayg and his party.”

“What I really don’t understand,” Kyrin said slowly, “is how you knew where to find us.”

Jaed looked curious too. Shay and Rae had never told him the whole story.

“Jaed had a dream; a woman kept telling him the coordinates to go to. We were worried that someone had planted the information and decided to try and get Silaari and find

somewhere to hide for awhile.” She took a deep breath. “Then Jaed went still, and when he opened his eyes, they weren’t his anymore. A woman spoke through him, and he can’t talk. She said Her name was Iliria and that we had to bring Her children home. She claimed to be his Goddess. It was very unnerving,” she finished lamely.

Kyrin looked like someone had slapped him, and Thea was grinning. “I know how you feel,” she giggled out.

Kyrin shook himself all over. “Well, whatever your reasons, we welcome you and your family and offer our assistance in any way we can.”

Shay sagged against Jaed with relief. Maybe it was going to be all right after all. She could only hope they would find a home among these people, because that was what Jaed wanted so desperately. She gazed at each member of her small family for a solemn moment. They would be safe.

“*Mistress?*” Jaed said softly.

She smiled into his eyes.

“*It’s going to be dinii. As long as we are together, we can do anything.*” He kissed her gently, sending pulses of love and hope to her mind that reassured her more than anything else.

Epilogue

On Kleeg

They fell where they stood as a blinding agony raced through their bodies. It went on for an hour, while the rest of the Clan could only watch helplessly and attempt to make them as comfortable as possible.

Hair colors changed and vocal cords were altered to create different sounds.

At last the pain faded, and the victims lay on sweat-soaked pallets. Their bodies were sore and ached in time with their heartbeats.

Without conscious thought, they rose as one and staggered into the sunshine.

Arranged in a half circle around the entrance of the Clan tent sat karracats. Far more of them than the Clans had believed existed any longer. In the center stood the Karracat Ghost.

“I have returned to claim my people. The laws of the Clans have been met. The Karracat Clan has defended its young from sure death. Thus, I claim all of my Clan again. It is so.” His growling voice echoed in the mind of every person present.

The Winter Owls murmured uneasily. Such a thing had never happened in all the history of the Clans. But they could not deny the Karracat's claim. The change would not have taken place unless the claim was true.

The reclaimed Karracat Clan members crawled toward their Ghost and his cats with joyful tears tracking down their faces. They lifted their trembling bodies to offer themselves to the animals.

One elderly woman threw her arms around the neck of the cat before her and sobbed uncontrollably.

The chief of the Winter Owl Clan did not know if she should be offended by their joy or grateful to see their happiness.

The Winter Owl Ghost shimmered into view before her. He clacked his beak and speared her with a piercing gaze. "Karracats shed blood joyfully on behalf of the Winter Owl. We are kin. Blood family shall not be sundered. The Winter Owl and the Karracat are forever tied. If one should fall, so shall the other. It is so."

The chief went to her knees, head bowed submissively to expose her neck to the cruelly hooked beak of her Ghost. "It is so, Honored Ghost. They are kin."

 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>.