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The Family **JEWEL**



Raina James

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DEDICATION

To my sister authors Lara Santiago and Morgan Ashbury. Without their brainstorming and timely advice, Shantay wouldn't be the strong woman her mates are fortunate to love.

THE FAMILY JEWEL

RAINA JAMES

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Prologue

Citadel City, planet of Kalaria, early spring

Zahra pushed past the filmy drapes and joined Teeka on the balcony overlooking the dusty courtyard. Shoving a handful of tangled blond hair over her shoulder, she tugged the silk wrap a fraction higher on her shoulders—more to enticingly frame the expensive lingerie that curled over her breasts than for warmth—and leaned her elbows on the elaborately carved railing. Her eyes narrowed as she tracked the progress of four men as they exited the pleasure house and crossed to the stables. Her gaze lingered on the dark, tousled hair of one man in particular. He wasn't the tallest man, or the most handsome, but he was by far the sexiest. Men like him always drew her—men of power, hard, decisive, sure of everything they did. She found it actually made it easier to control them when they were so cocksure they *couldn't* be controlled. Still, a man like that would succeed at whatever he put his mind to, no matter the handicaps of birth or status. She rather admired that. The trappings of wealth were all very good when coupled with a respectable birth and clan, but there was just something about a man who succeeded despite the lack of those things. Plus, he was *delicious*.

Her tongue darted out to touch the upper bow of her lip as if she could capture another taste of him.

A dramatic sigh made her glance at the woman at her side. Like Zahra, Teeka's coloring instantly marked her as an off-worlder. Instead of the native Kalari coloring of dark hair and eyes and golden caramel skin, hers was an exotic pairing of vibrant red and pale green with milky pale skin. If Zahra weren't so confident of her own appeal, she might feel her blond and blue match a bit drab in comparison.

She assumed Kalari women had the same dark looks as their men. Not that she'd ever seen a native Kalari woman. They were too rare to be permitted the freedom of the most secure buildings in the city, let alone a pleasure house like this, despite its status as the most expensive of its kind on the planet. Only the wealthiest Kalari men and extravagant off-worlders could afford to enjoy its delights.

No, the Kalaris kept their women close, cosseted and protected. She shuddered as she thought of the cloistered life Kalari females must lead. No man would ever restrict *her* that way.

The men reappeared in the courtyard mounted on their sleek-limbed whraken. A string of preyan, the lizard-like beasts widely used as the planet's pack animals, plodded beneath the cargo draped over their scaled flanks as they docilely followed the men's furred steeds.

The youngest man in the group spotted the two women on the balcony and tipped them a jaunty wave. Even from this distance, the glint of good humor in his eyes was as obvious as the rakish curve of his lips. Teeka perked up and returned his wave with a happy laugh. Zahra gave him a slow smile.

Two of the other men followed his gesture, nodded their own brief acknowledgments, then returned to their conversation with each other.

The fourth man, the one Zahra wanted so desperately to look up at her, the one so many of her hopes and plans depended on, didn't so much as tip his chin in her direction. He clucked his mount into motion and led the group through the gates to the dusty street beyond to join the rest of their clan's trading party.

Teeka gave another gusty sigh.

Exasperated, Zahra snapped, “Oh, very well, Teeka! What’s with all the dramatics?”

Smile gone, the other woman shrugged listlessly and turned to lean her elbows on the railing.

“Oh, nothing really.”

Zahra glared. She didn’t have time for the other courtesan’s foolishness right now. Another client was due to arrive, and she needed to bathe and prepare herself, and her rooms, to suit his particular tastes.

Turning on one bare heel, she started to stalk back into the darkened receiving room.

“It’s just that I’m really going to miss Kai.” Teeka let the words dangle, her wistful tone failing to mask the malicious pleasure that soured her sweet voice. It was apparent she knew something Zahra didn’t and relished the fact.

Zahra closed her eyes and cursed under her breath. Wiping her expression smooth, she faced Teeka and arched one precisely shaped brow. “Miss him? Is Kai not pleased with you, Teeka? Has Tamarin finally managed to pluck your lovely boy away from you?”

Teeka wrinkled her nose and gave a delicate snort. “As if that lizard-faced preyan could,” she scoffed. Tamarin might have the cold blood of one of the homely pack beasts, Zahra thought, but her retribution would likely be swift and nasty if she heard the other woman referring to her in such unflattering terms. Zahra briefly thought of how she might surreptitiously turn her rivals on each other.

“No,” Teeka said. “I’m losing Kai to the same thing you’re losing Jerran to.”

“Losing him? I think not. Jerran is so hungry for me, we are barely alone before he rips my veils from me so he can sink his lusty cock deep inside. He’s not going anywhere.”

Teeka gave a tinkling laugh. “Then he hasn’t told you.”

Infuriated by the other woman's gloating, Zahra dropped her pretence of cool control and stalked forward. Grabbing a fistful of red curls, she yanked them, hard.

Teeka yelped, one hand flying up to try to pry at Zahra's fingers, the other reaching out to do some yanking of her own. Zahra shoved it aside contemptuously and delivered a stinging slap that made Teeka's eyes water with mingled pain and helpless fury.

"Start talking, or I'll use my fists on you instead," Zahra hissed. "Then maybe your clients won't be noticing how pale and pretty your flesh is."

Teeka fingered the rising welt on her cheekbone and set her lips in a mutinous line. Zahra took one more step forward, until their breasts almost touched, and stared into the taller woman's eyes. As if sensing the danger, Teeka dropped her gaze and crossed her arms protectively over her chest.

All malice gone, she said, almost softly, "The Black Moon Clan has been granted a Jewel."

Zahra gasped. "Wha—?" Her voice cracked in a suddenly dry throat. She tried again. "What did you say?"

"The Kalari Elders have granted the Black Moon Clan a Jewel. They receive their honor at the end of the season."

"But that is months from now," Zahra said, mind frantically working to plan her next step. First, find out if it was true. It couldn't be.

Teeka shook her head. "It doesn't matter. Kai told me to return would dishonor their Jewel. He won't be back. And neither will Jerran."

"Only the most important clans are granted Jewels! Black Moon has no Family. They are first generation." A distant part of Zahra thought she'd never spoken with such desperation. "Jerran isn't even full Kalari. Why would the Elders grant them one of their precious, goddamned women?"

Teeka shrugged. “I don’t know. Apparently, the Elders aren’t as concerned with Jerran’s bloodlines as you thought.”

Confidence returning in the face of Zahra’s distress, Teeka edged around her and made for the draped archway. Before she went inside, she paused to fling one last taunt.

“So much for your plans, Zahra. Why would Jerran settle for a spaceport whore like you as a wife when he can have a Kalari Jewel instead?”

Zahra growled, fingers raised in claws, but the other woman was gone. She stood alone on the balcony with nothing but the wind flirting with the drapes covering the arch into the pleasure house.

Jerran had been her best hope of getting out of her indenture. How could she have known a Kalari mongrel with off-worlder blood, no matter how prosperous, could have aspired to one of the coveted Jewels? On a planet where even off-world women were in short supply, the unmated men took what they could get. The indenture contract of more than one courtesan had been bought out by a desperate Kalari seeking a mate.

Anger and despair left a bitter taste in her mouth. Zahra closed her eyes and fought for calm. For control. If she couldn’t convince Jerran to buy out her contract and marry her, she’d have to start over, think of some other way to secure her future. And she’d have to think of a way to punish Jerran, oblivious Jerran, for taking away this escape route. He would pay. And so would Black Moon Clan.

Chapter 1

Citadel City, planet of Kalaria, late fall

Jerran and his clan brothers watched through the intricately worked lattice as the woman entered the bathing chamber. Her back to them, she crossed the room to the sunken pool of steaming water with a gently swinging stride. She wore a simple white robe, secured at her slender waist with a braided cord of blue silk. The white seemed brilliant against the golden honey of her skin. Thick black hair spilled in loose waves from a topknot on the crown of her head, revealing the curve of a delicate jaw and slender neck. She unfastened the robe and turned to place it on a bench that held a number of plush folded towels. Jerran swallowed as he saw her face for the first time. He didn't know what his clan brothers—Loran, Mikah and Kai, who was also his half-brother by blood—felt, but possessiveness and pride seized him. She was a beauty.

In truth, her attractiveness hadn't really been in doubt. Kalari women were renowned for their beauty, after all. But this woman, Shantay, would be the Jewel of Black Moon Clan. That made her beauty unmatched in his eyes.

Jerran clenched his hands at his sides in an effort to quell his rising excitement, glad of the relative privacy offered by the small, dimly lit viewing chamber. His cock was hard as polished starstone in his trousers.

Shantay, her body dainty except for the round fullness of her breasts and feminine curve of her hips, tucked a few loose tendrils of hair into the jewelled band that secured it. Unhurried, she walked to

the pool and started down the steps. Ankles, calves, knees, thighs—the water enveloped that golden skin until her hips were submerged. She began to scoop handfuls of hot water over her arms and shoulders, smoothing the glistening drops of liquid over breasts tipped with copper-pink crests.

Twisting slightly, she shifted a tray of bath stuffs along the edge of the pool. She scooped a handful of soft soap from one jar and began to lather her upper body with exquisite slowness. Streamers of white foamy bubbles slid over her shoulders and down her arms. Another handful of soap added to the tantalizing trail that wound its way over and between her breasts. Slender fingers plucked at hardening nipples that peaked rosily through the bubbles. Not once did she turn away from the lattice that concealed the four men.

A suspicion began to form in his mind.

When the elders offered Jerran and his clan brothers a chance to see their Jewel before the joining ceremony, he had accepted for them all with alacrity. It hadn't occurred to him they'd be granted such an intimate preview, though. At first, the thought of spying on an unsuspecting young woman in such a private moment had been a bit off-putting, if exciting. He didn't want to dishonor their Jewel, even if she never learned of this hidden visitation.

However, something in Shantay's sensual bath made him think she wasn't as unaware as he'd feared.

She was displaying herself for them.

As if in confirmation of his conclusion, Shantay rinsed the suds away with more handfuls of water, her motions languid, seductive. Taking a couple of steps out of the pool, she balanced one small foot on the top step and began to lather the exposed leg from hip to heel. When she ran soap-covered fingers through the dark curls between her thighs, Kai exhaled on a soft curse. Jerran shot the younger man a silencing look. If they were all to pretend that Shantay bathed alone, so be it.

Their Jewel took her time with the rest of her bath, then towelled off with equal care before donning her discarded robe and leaving the bathing chamber. For long moments, no one said anything.

Kai finally broke the silence. “Brother, when you asked me to leave my mother’s house to start a clan with you, I never doubted you would make Black Moon a great family. But this Jewel, my brother.” He grinned and clapped Jerran on the shoulder. “I have a feeling she will be your greatest accomplishment.”

Loran, usually the quickest with a smile, turned away from his thoughtful contemplation of the now-empty bathing chamber. “You know, Kai, I think you’re right. There’s something about Shantay that tells me she is the piece we didn’t know we were missing. Mikah?”

Jerran watched this quietest of his three clan brothers closely. Loran’s lover and Black Moon’s master trader, Mikah had said the right things when informed the Elders had granted them a Jewel. Yet, despite his quick mind and glib tongue when it came to making the most advantageous bargain for the clan, Mikah was a self-contained man wary of change. It would take a far less perceptive leader than Jerran to realize he had reservations about the biggest change of their lives. Jerran knew those reservations wouldn’t stop Mikah from accepting Shantay for the boon she was to their clan. His estimation was proven when Mikah dipped his head in a single nod and said simply, “She is truly a Jewel of Kalari womanhood.”

“True,” Jerran said. “But that isn’t the most important thing about her.”

“No?” Kai asked.

“No.” He walked to the hidden room’s door and pulled it open. “The most important thing is that tonight, Shantay will belong completely to Black Moon. She will be all ours.”

* * * *

When Shantay entered the joining chamber, she felt their eyes on her. Flaming torches in unadorned metal brackets threw flickering light over the wide, cloth-draped altar that dominated the center of the room. The Elders in their robes stood unobtrusively against the rough-hewn rock wall, faces shrouded by the cowls of their rich burgundy robes of office. The exception was the Speaker. A widowed Jewel whose children and grandchildren were long since grown, she was still beautiful despite the many lines that showed in her face. Cowl thrown back, she stood beside the altar, waiting with the men of Black Moon Clan. Soon to be *her* men.

Shantay forced her pace to remain measured, as dictated by the solemn nature of the joining ceremony. She could do nothing to slow her racing heart. She'd prepared for this moment from the day she arrived at the cloistered Citadel. As was custom with Kalari females, she'd left her clan's home as an adolescent to train for the time when she would become a mated Jewel. It was hard to believe it had finally come.

She came to a stop beside the Speaker, grateful that her own metallic-gold robes hid her unsteady knees.

"Shantay, daughter of Levanian of Golden Ridge Clan, daughter of Zethryn of Finnebarr Plains Clan, daughter of Olianthe of Blue River Valley Clan," the elder said in ringing tones. "You have been a Jewel of Kalaria from the moment of your birth. Tonight, you will become a Jewel in truth. Do you accept your duty?"

"I do."

The Speaker gave a satisfied nod. "Men of Black Moon Clan, Jerran, Loran, Mikah and Kai. Long have you labored to prove your worth. The council is impressed with your efforts, and has deemed you worthy of a Jewel of Kalaria. Do you accept this honor?"

One man stepped forward. Like his clan brothers, he wore a simple black silk robe. Shantay was instantly riveted by his intense expression. Instead of looking at the Speaker, he addressed Shantay. "We do."

Shantay let out a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding.

The Speaker took an elaborate, double-handled goblet from the altar and bade Shantay to drink. The spicy liquid bit at her taste buds and warmed her throat as she swallowed. That warmth flowed through her body, furling her nipples into sharp points beneath the thin fabric of the robe. It swept down her belly and lower to settle between her thighs. There, it flickered fretfully like banked coals just waiting to be fanned into full flames. Shantay licked her lips and handed the goblet back to the Speaker. Solemnly, the Elder handed it to each man in turn until all the liquid was gone. Another robed Elder stepped discreetly forward to carry it away. The Speaker took Shantay's hand and drew her close.

"I bid you to greet your Jewel and seal your vows." With a regal nod, the Speaker signalled two more Elders to come forward to help Shantay from her robes. Then all three returned to the shadows along the walls to wait and watch. The Elders' roles weren't complete until they'd witnessed the entire joining ceremony.

Shantay faced her mates with a proud tilt of her chin. They'd seen her already at her bath, of course, but she wanted to remember this moment forever, and not with shame or embarrassment. She'd never lacked confidence before, and she refused to be timid now. These men would be her mates forever. She would give them a Jewel to be proud of right from the first instance of their joining.

The man who'd spoken for the clan removed his robe. His cock, long and thick, stood straight from his body, more than ready seal their vows. He took something from one of the robe's pockets before tossing the garment aside. The other men quickly followed his example until all stood almost as naked as she was, their bodies in varying degrees of arousal. Bands of gold glinted at their wrists, as did the distinctive glisten of starstone. Pinpoints of light shone from the skillfully cut black gemstone, the stars on an ebony silk sky that gave the rare stone its name. The men's wide wristbands bore the

raised emblem of Black Moon, a rounded disc of starstone surrounded by four symbols.

The first man approached her. “I am Jerran, clan leader of Black Moon.” He lifted his hands, and she saw what he’d taken from his pocket: a delicate golden crown set with a constellation of cut starstones. Shantay’s eyes widened at the extravagance. “A crown for the queen our home.” He settled it on her head and pressed a chaste kiss on her lips before moving to her side to face the other men.

The second man stood taller than Jerran, but his mouth looked softer, as if more used to smiles than solemnity. Dark hair dusted his chest and trailed down his belly, where it thickened at the base of his cock. He wore his hair longer than the other men, and it was lighter than their black, the chestnut shade unusual for a Kalari. “I am Loran.” He smiled warmly and let his own gift dangle from his fingertips. He secured the elaborate necklace around her neck and the centerpiece jewel—a starstone the size of a baby’s fist—dangled between her breasts. “A heart stone for the heart of our clan.”

The third man wore a more serious expression. “I am Mikah.” He took first one hand, then the other, clasping a smaller, less utilitarian version of the men’s bands around her wrists. “Fealty cuffs, to remind our people of our servitude to the needs and future of the Black Moon Clan.”

The last man eagerly stepped forward. He was younger than the others, only a few years older than Shantay. The biggest man there, muscle corded his arms and thighs and ridged his chest and belly in sharp definition. His arousal was so high—and not solely due to the aphrodisiac in the wine, she thought—that his cock nearly touched his belly. “And I am Kai.” He knelt, surprising her. Even in that position, his stature was such that his head came level with her breasts. He seemed momentarily distracted by them before pulling his eyes away to meet hers. Giving her a broad smile, he secured a golden chain just above her hips, the links alternating between hollow ovals and starstone-studded. A center stone dangled from the chain to sway

tantalizingly above her mound. “May the links of this chain symbolize the links of love between treasured mother and the future children of the Black Moon Clan.” He placed a reverent kiss just below her navel and rose to join Loran and Mikah.

Shantay felt overwhelmed. Their gifts were extravagant, but she was more touched by the thought they had put into composing their vows. Each man looked at her with sincerity, and her heart swelled with hope and anticipation. She could very easily fall in love with them.

Jerran touched her shoulder, gentle, but firm. He guided her to the altar and helped her onto it. Beneath her bare buttocks, the cushioned altar’s edge was firm. The velvety fabric covering it tickled where it touched her skin. Nerves made her shiver, but the nuptial wine had done its work. Her body moistened, more than eager to begin the final ritual of the joining ceremony. Jerran spread her thighs and stepped between them. He kissed her lips one more time, making her blink. This was supposed to be a symbolic, almost spiritual claiming. Passion was for the privacy of a clan’s marital chambers. None of the Elders protested the break in ritual, though, so she relaxed.

Jerran eased her down onto her back and for the first time she felt truly exposed. He took her thighs in his hands, as if adjusting their position. Instead, she felt the shocking brush of his fingertips between her legs, stroking her clit. She was certain no one could see his caress. But oh, she could feel it. She stared at Jerran and saw amusement lurking in his eyes. A spike of lust shot through her and she bit her lip to keep from crying out. He hadn’t even penetrated her and already she was on the cusp of coming. She knew she must stay silent. Surely the Elders would wonder if she began to writhe on the altar. The aphrodisiac was only supposed to ease the claiming, to ensure that the men and their Jewel all stayed aroused enough to complete the ritual.

The broad head of Jerran’s cock nudged her slit and she gasped, unable to remain quiet. His fingers maintained their stealthy seduction, palms easing under her thighs until he could use his

thumbs to hold her slit wide for his first plunge. A twist of his hips forced the bulb of his cock inside her tight passage. He pulled back, but pulsed forward almost instantly, pressing more deeply inside her. And again. He nudged the barrier of her virginity, but kept going, his rhythm a compelling rocking that made her want to move with him despite the distant twinge of pain. Only his hands on her thighs, the thumbs that pressed against the tiny, hard nub above where they joined, kept her from losing herself completely.

Abruptly, he leaned down until his chest brushed over her turgid nipples, bringing an entirely new sensation into play as he surged into her more heavily. Instinctively, Shantay clutched his forearms, trying to draw him even closer.

“Shantay, my Jewel,” he whispered so only she could hear, his voice almost a growl. “I’ve been waiting to do this since you teased us so mercilessly this afternoon.”

Her lips parted, but she couldn’t think what to say. How did he know?

“Do you like to tease?” he asked.

“It’s only teasing if I don’t follow through,” she said breathlessly.

He grinned and surreptitiously touched his cheek against hers in another clandestine caress. Then he stepped up the tempo of both his hips and his fingers, shafting into her mercilessly. Shantay forgot about the elders watching from the anonymity of their hooded robes, even forgot about Loran, Mikah and Kai. Every particle of her being focused on the friction of Jerran’s body possessing her, dominating her. She’d never felt anything like this before. For the first time, someone other than herself pushed her body to the edge of orgasm. Shantay knew she was making noise again, whimpers that grew louder the faster Jerran thrust into her. Then, he reached it. They reached it. Shantay’s inner muscles clamped down on his cock as she came, hard, repeatedly. She felt the answering pulse of Jerran’s cock as he shot his seed into her womb, heard the bitten off curse he muttered in her ear.

When their shudders eased, he held himself over her, their only connection his cock between her thighs. As if moving was an act of supreme will, he slowly backed away and let her thighs fall lax against the altar.

She still fought for breath when Loran took Jerran's place between her thighs. She watched him through dazed eyes. His expression one of comfort and understanding, his cock was just as hard as Jerran's had been. "It's all right, beautiful Shantay," he said softly. "I know this must be difficult for you to have everyone watching. The ceremony is almost over."

With that, he pressed into her and began to thrust. Over his shoulder, she could see Mikah and Kai waiting with stiff and ready cocks for their turns to claim her, one with a hint of trepidation in his eyes, the other with fiery anticipation. Beside them, Jerran wore an expression of total satisfaction. Shantay felt another orgasm building as Loran slapped wetly into her. By the two suns, if this was supposed to be difficult for her, she wondered, what it would be like when she had these four lusty men all to herself?

Chapter 2

On the trail to Moongate, secure compound of Black Moon Clan, four days later

Even with the fabric sides of the litter tied back, it was stiflingly hot. The sheer veil Shantay wore draped over her face to protect it from the suns fluttered under the breeze of the fan she plied with waning enthusiasm. She watched her mates enviously as they rode their long-legged whraken along the trail. Although one sun hung high in the sky, and the light of the second shone full on them as it set, they seemed far less bothered by the heat than she was. Away from the plentiful fountains and bath houses of Citadel City, this part of Kalaria seemed a barren and unwelcoming place of rocks and sand. Still, the stark beauty of the landscape, with its bold lines and mysterious shadows, appealed to her.

Mikah ranged up and down the line of the caravan, checking the pack animals, chatting with the dozen or so clansmen he'd brought for the final trading journey of the season.

Kai, as she should have guessed from his honed physique, served as Black Moon's First Warrior. He led his own compliment of a dozen men responsible for the caravan's safety as they traveled to Moongate, their home. Each warrior, well-armed with a selection of menacing weapons, sat their equally lethal feline mounts with an alert competence that made her certain only the foolish or truly desperate would attempt to thief from their caravan.

Loran said this was actually a fairly small expedition, since the main purpose of their journey had been to attend the joining ceremony

and claim Shantay. However, Mikah, ever the canny businessman, also took the opportunity to combine that vital mission with a profitable trading foray. Soon, the painfully cold Kalari winter would descend, and the preyan would take to their subterranean kennels to begin their hibernation. Once that happened, the clan would be confined to Moongate, save for the occasional foray on the whraken, which weathered the cold well but were not suited as pack beasts. The arrogant felines tended to shred anything that wasn't sentient.

Kai, serving his own stint as scout, ranged ahead of the caravan. Jerran and Loran rode on either side of Shantay's litter, quick to offer her food or drink and see to her comfort in general. Loran had insisted she use the litter rather than ride her own whraken. The clan's healer, he feared the claiming would leave her in too much discomfort to ride. So, over her protests, he ordered the litter prepared. Two lizards had been pressed into service, one in front of the litter, the other behind, the lush little conveyance suspended between them. Loaded down with a surplus of thick, soft cushions and pillows, the litter *was* more comfortable on her bottom. It was far from cool, however. Sighing, Shantay rearranged her robes to create a layer of air between the thin fabric and her damp skin, consoling herself with a mental picture of the cool bath she would revel in once they reached Moongate.

Kai rejoined them a few hours later, his chestnut-furred whraken kicking up puffs of dust with its long-clawed toes as it clambered over a ridge to run back to the caravan. The big feline bared its teeth as it passed the preyan at the front of Shantay's litter. The scaled beast stolidly ignored the feline and held its plodding course as Kai pulled his whraken into line beside the litter.

"We're almost home, my lady," he said with a grin.

Mikah rode up from the rear of the train to take his own place beside the litter, so she was surrounded by her four mates as they crested the rise and stopped.

The cliff-like face of the ridge arced off in the distance to either side, circling the bowl of the valley. Moongate, as large as a small village, nestled in the bottom of it. The trail continued down into the bowl and to the gates of the tall, thick wall that surrounded Moongate. To her untrained eye, it seemed the only way to approach the compound, as the ridge appeared unbroken by any other crevasse.

Where the native stone ran the gamut from dusty brown to rust red, Moongate rose out of the rocky plain like an unblemished pearl, built using a far paler stone. At its heart was a sprawling building with ornate lattice-work covering slits of windows and what could only be a rooftop garden. A sparkle of light drew her eye to an inner courtyard that featured a fountain and large pool. Numerous outbuildings, barns and sheds circled the main building. It was difficult to determine their purpose from this distance, but the small figures of men going about their everyday business moved between them.

Considering Moongate's distance from Citadel City, it very likely *was* a small village, with all the attendant businesses and amenities.

Now that she'd noticed the men, she saw that more stood atop the wall. Rather than positioned at intervals along its length, most had gathered on either side of the imposing gates that bore the Black Moon Clan emblem.

"So much for discipline," Kai grumbled, although he didn't sound especially aggrieved. "They just can't wait to catch a glimpse of our Jewel."

"Can you blame them?" Loran asked with a smile for Shantay.

Jerran grunted, his eyes alight with amusement. "Not especially." He bowed his head to Shantay. "Well, my lady? Are you ready to meet your people?"

Shantay lowered her eyes with sham meekness, enjoying the possessive flicker of his gaze. "Of course, Jerran. I only await my mates' desires."

“No long wait, I hope,” he murmured. Chuckling softly, Jerran slapped the lead preyan’s rump to get the beast moving and they began the ride down to Moongate.

* * * *

She learned distances could be deceptive away from Citadel City, but it was surprising how long it took to traverse the barren bowl to Moongate’s entrance. The flames of torches, lit for the night, looked like gold stars trapped in large iron baskets along the top of the wall. When the massive doors swung wide, a company of men marched smartly out to form an honor guard for the caravan. Each clansman watched with evident pride as the preyan carried her litter down the line. Their own consequence was greatly improved by being part of a Jewel-worthy clan. More men gathered just inside the gates to greet the returning party, the warriors in their leather battle gear stippled with weapons, the craftsmen and servants in less regimented attire. Regardless of station, all appeared prosperous and unintimidated, which spoke well for her mates and Black Moon Clan.

The clan fell into step behind the caravan as it wound through the compound to the wide, shallow steps that led to the main house. Jerran handed Shantay down from the litter and took her up the steps. Flanked by Loran, Mikah and Kai, they turned to face the expectant crowd as a young groom took charge of the preyan bearing her litter. Jerran placed her hand on his forearm. Without preamble, he addressed the waiting men. “Lady Shantay, Jewel of Black Moon Clan. Our heart, our hope, mother of our future.”

The clansmen cheered and voiced their approval as one. “Lady Shantay!”

Shantay unhooked the veil from the gemstones that secured it to her headscarf so the men could see her face. Smiling, she nodded regally in acknowledgement of their approbation.

With a wave, she followed Jerran's hand on her elbow and walked to the front doors of her new home.

Kai strode ahead and pulled them wide. Suppressing a sigh of relief, Shantay stepped inside the cool, elegantly tiled entrance hall. About a dozen men stood at attention to one side. An older man moved forward to greet them. His silver hair was sleeked back from his face in a neat club to reveal an interestingly lined face. Bowing, he said, "Lady Shantay. I am your major-domo, Ghezran. Welcome to Moongate."

She took his hand, obviously surprising him with the familiarity. "Thank you, Ghezran. I'm sure I will rely on you for everything."

With a pleased quirk of his lips, he stepped back to join the line of house servants.

"Shantay, if you wouldn't mind, I think it would be best if we delayed a tour until the morrow," Loran said, taking in her face with an assessing glance. "You're not used to the trail as we are. Well, I know I'm not," he added with a wink. "Why don't we get you settled in our chambers, where you can bathe and get a proper rest in a proper bed. Moongate will still be here in the morning."

Shantay could have kissed him. Only a fear of shocking Ghezran and the other servants stopped her. She didn't know them well enough yet to say what would unsettle them, but since this was a household of men unused to women—well, Kalari women—she would follow her teachers' advice and study the men of her clan well. Soon, she would know them, and they would know her. That was the secret foundation to all successful clans, or so she'd been told.

She contented herself with a gracious nod and placed her hand on Loran's proffered arm. "As you say, Mate Loran."

He appeared pleased with the title, gently squeezing her hand on his arm. "Then let us show you the marital chambers we've prepared."

Shantay felt Jerran, Mikah and Kai behind them as Loran guided her along one hallway, then another. Inexplicably, she felt excitement

build in her breast, though she knew she would go to bed alone tonight, and for a number of nights to come. Excitement and desire. Her body had barely tasted male flesh against hers during the claiming ceremony, and already it hungered for more. Inexperienced she might be, but not ignorant. She was well-schooled in everything a woman might need to know to be a matriarch of a powerful clan. For that's what every Jewel was—the feminine leader of her clan, a woman of intelligence and seductive allure and the cunning to know when to use either, or both.

Part of that cunning was bolstered by tradition, which said that only a Jewel could decide when to accept her mates into her bed. And by tradition, it was no sooner than two weeks after the claiming ceremony. Kalari men might choose to believe the waiting period gave an uncertain female time to grow accustomed to the idea of sharing intimacies with mates who were virtual strangers to her.

In reality, as she'd been taught in the Citadel, the grace period gave a Jewel time to learn her household and, more importantly, her mates. In a culture where men, possessive creatures by nature, had to share a woman, it was crucial that she be the perfect woman each man needed. Often, that meant she was a *different* woman for each mate. And so harmony within the clan was preserved.

While she might go to bed alone tonight, Shantay was eager to take this next step in her mated life with these four men she had slowly come to know and like. Love, she was certain, would come as well, with time.

Unaware of her thoughts, Loran opened one panel of the solid-looking double doors they'd arrived at. "These lead to our private chambers," he explained. "None of the servants will enter, save by your leave."

He gestured to the familiar brackets and bar and an unfamiliar square box mounted on the wall. "The doors can be barred from our side, and Jerran, who is clever with such things," he grinned at the other man, "has installed a locking mechanism of his own design that

will only open to one of us. Simply hold one of your fealty cuffs to it, and it will lock or unlock.”

Shantay watched with interest as he demonstrated with one of his own cuffs, holding his wrist in front of the black box. A light flashed on the top of the box and her eyes widened. She’d heard of such things, but she’d never seen one. That her clan had such a wondrous thing impressed her. Loran tugged on the handle of the door, demonstrating that it was secured without the bar and brackets.

Jerran said, “Go ahead. Try it yourself.”

Tentatively, Shantay raised her wrist. The mysterious light flashed again and Loran opened the unlocked the door with ease, then closed it. Smiling in delight, Shantay held her cuff to the box and watched the light signal the activation of the locking mechanism, re-engaging the hidden lock. “How wonderful!”

“Like I said, our Jerran is very clever,” Loran said.

Kai laughed at his half-brother’s obvious discomfort and punched his shoulder. Even serious Mikah quirked his lips in amusement.

“Why don’t we show our Jewel to our chambers, as we intended,” Jerran said, shooting Kai an annoyed glance.

Still smiling, Shantay again took Loran’s arm. The hall ended after about a dozen paces at a wide arch. The room beyond was a large, open circle dominated by a massive bed on a raised platform. Not quite a square, its rounded, cushioned expanse was covered by an assortment of pillows and lush bedding. Gauzy drapes suspended from the ceiling fell around it in an illusion of privacy. Shantay released Loran’s arm and stepped further into the room. Her eyes took in the brilliantly burning braziers scattered around the room, the lush rugs layered on the tiled floor, the beautiful workmanship evident in the chamber’s every detail.

Arched doorways along the wall led to more rooms, some shielded by rich fabric drapes, others not. Through one, she could see an inviting pool of water in a bathing chamber. Another was clearly a

dressings room, with shelves, drawers and cabinets waiting to be filled with her trousseau.

“We moved our belongings here before we departed for Citadel City,” Loran said at her shoulder, “but tonight will be the first in the marital chamber for all of us.”

The men moved beyond her, Jerran and Kai going to either side to hook back the drapes on opposite rooms to reveal their private chambers. Loran and Mikah went together to a third door and opened the drapes of their shared chamber.

“You may change anything you wish, Shantay,” Jerran said, firmly taking the role of spokesman back from Loran. He stood, arms crossed over his chest, an intense expression on his face. “This is your home, and all will be as you desire.”

She was becoming familiar with his easy command of the clan’s leadership. Already, she was forming an idea of how best to please him, this oh-so-controlled mate of hers.

“It is beautiful,” Shantay said, slanting him a look as she slowly walked to the bathing chamber, loosening her clothes as she went. The dusty outer robe dropped to the floor in a whisper of fabric and her fingers went to work on the folds of under dress caught in twin clasps on her shoulders. Soon, that, too, slithered down her body to join the robe on the floor. She lightly toed off her sandals. All four of her mates watched her with captivated expressions. “And I have all I desire right here.”

With that parting promise, she disappeared inside the bathing chamber to wash the dust from her body, content with the start she had made with her men.

Chapter 3

Jerran came to a halt on the threshold of the marital chamber. The sconces around the circular room were unlit, but two tall, flaming braziers positioned on either side of Shantay's bed illuminated it like a sacrificial altar. A number of tiny candles placed discreetly around the room added to the sense of intimacy, the near-reverent feeling that reminded him of the claiming chamber at the Citadel. Unlike that chamber, where the men of Black Moon made Shantay theirs in the eyes of the council, there was no sense of hidden eyes witnessing the traditional ceremony of claiming. Nor were his co-mates here to take their turn with their mate.

No, Shantay waited for him alone.

She knelt on the floor at the base of her dais, facing the entrance with head bowed, subservience plain in her demeanour. A diaphanous gown of purple silk draped her slender body, the fabric so sheer her golden skin gleamed beneath it. Purple gemstones had been woven among the lush black curls that framed her face and wound sinuously over her shoulders and down her back.

Apparently, the weeks of waiting were over. Shantay had decided.

He sucked in a long breath through his nose, nostrils flaring as he picked up the faint musk and womanly scent that was all Shantay. His precious mate.

Slowly, aware of the honor Shantay granted him with a Jewel's first claiming in her marital home, Jerran walked into the chamber.

He stopped less than a foot away from her, waiting for his Jewel to show him what she wanted.

* * * *

Shantay watched Jerran through lowered lashes. She had thought very carefully about how she would proceed. As she'd been taught, a Jewel must be both wise and clever when it came to dealing with her mates. She must meet each man's needs, whatever they may be. Only a Jewel could decide when to fully consummate her union with her men, because she needed time to assess them, bond with them, and truly learn their desires—especially those that even they didn't realize they had.

Jerran's hands hung loose at his sides, but she wasn't fooled. His lean, muscular body practically vibrated with tension held under firm control. Jerran placed a high value on control. His responsibilities to the clan demanded it. She meant to break through his reserve. He would learn he could be whoever he wished with her.

Feigning meekness to arouse his dominant tendencies, Shantay eased closer until her silk-covered breasts grazed the supple leather of Jerran's trousers. The muscles of his thighs were as hard as carved stone as she rested her palms on them, then slowly glided her hands up to his hips. His dark eyes, already hot with desire, seemed to ignite at her touch. Rising slightly on her knees, Shantay rested her cheek against the hard rod of his cock where it pulled the leather tight, straining the sturdy laces that secured either side of the front flap. Rubbing her cheeks, first one, then the other, along his length, her nimble fingers made short work of the laces.

No longer loose and easy, Jerran's hands fisted at his sides when she unthreaded the final tie, pushed down the flap and let his cock bob free of restriction.

Shantay turned her head and gave it a tiny lick, nothing more than a flick of her tongue. It jerked like a restless whraken fighting the reins. She proceeded to press little sucking kisses along its length, around the raised bulb of its tip, but never over it. She saw Jerran's aborted grab, the way he jerked his hands back to his sides.

“Jerran, my mate. Show me what you like.”

“Shantay,” he said, his rough voice caught between a growl and a groan.

“I only wish to please you, mate. How can I do that if you do not teach me?” She gave him a longer lick this time, hoping to tease him into doing what she wanted. “Show your Jewel how you wish to have her.”

He hesitated only a moment before reaching for her. One broad, long-fingered hand cupped her jaw. The other tangled in her loose hair, wrapping it around and around his fist until he couldn’t catch it any tighter. His thumb grazed her lips. “Very well, my Jewel. Open for me, then.” The tip of his cock nudged her mouth, seeking entrance. “Put that teasing little tongue to work. That’s it. Ah, yes, my Jewel. That’s the way. Taste my desire for you, Shantay.”

He used the fist in her hair to guide her into the rhythm he wanted, helping her work her mouth over his cock as he thrust forward with tight jabs of his hips. Following his murmured instructions, she laved her tongue around the head, prodded the dripping slit, and swallowed as much of his length as she could, until he almost hit the back of her throat.

Her fingers kept busy, too, sliding into the open flap of his trousers to cup and play with the hard spheres in their delicate sac. Moving her hands to his hips, then around to his ass, she hummed with pleasure as she felt the push and pull in his flanks with every flex that shallowly drove his cock between her lips.

Jerran groaned. “Don’t do that, Shantay, or I’ll spurt down your lovely throat instead of what I’ve been waiting to do again since the ceremony.” He let her suck his cock a bit longer before tugging her hair and pulling her away from him. “Enough. On the bed, Shantay.”

Licking her lips, savoring the taste of him, she stood and freed the polished metal clasps at her shoulders that were all that secured her gown. The sheer fabric whispered down her body, revealing the betrothal chain secured around her waist, the teardrop gem nestled

just above her mound. Jerran's eyes fastened on the gem, and he touched it, pressed it into the black curls at the top of her thighs. Trailing his fingers lower, he parted her slit with one finger and brushed her desire-slickened clit once, twice. "Bed, Shantay. Now."

His eyes were hot on her back as she turned on one bare foot and walked up the two steps to the bed's edge. Her knee sank into the mattress and thick coverlet. Instead of pulling the coverlet aside, she crawled to the bed's center. Bending down, she stretched her hands above her head and thrust her ass in the air in an obeisance he couldn't miss the invitation of. Jerran didn't say a word. She heard the matching thuds as he tossed off his boots, the hiss and rustle as he removed his clothes. Then the mattress sank beneath his weight. His wet, strong tongue unexpectedly probed through her nether curls to find the pearl he'd teased and sucked it into his mouth, making her gasp. He ravished her with his mouth until her hips thrust helplessly back, pushing shamelessly against his face as the desire built inside her belly until she could barely breathe.

"Jerran," she cried, gripping the coverlet with desperate fingers. Belatedly, she recalled that she was supposed to be the one making him lose control. Gulping for air, she forced her breaths to steady and stilled her hips. "Jerran," she said in a much steadier voice. "Mate, please don't make me wait any longer. Take me."

His answer was a dark chuckle, but he stopped teasing her clit and eased away. Shantay started to edge her knees wider apart, but he stopped her. "No. Like this," he said, guiding them closer, until they almost touched. His hair-dusted thighs bracketed hers, knees pressing into the mattress on either side. The head of his cock was a blunt pressure against her slit, pressing, pushing, throbbing. She thought it might not go in, she felt so tight. "Easy," Jerran said, steadying her with a hand at her waist. And then he slid smooth and sure into her slick passage. Shantay moaned with delight.

Jerran leaned over her back, wrapped an arm around her waist and set up a steady thrusting that would have moved her forcefully across

the bed if not for his own thighs trapping and holding her to his satisfaction. Again, Shantay found herself lost in his lovemaking, crying out her pleasure with abandon. “I love to hear your passion, my Jewel,” Jerran praised, alternately sucking and biting her neck in a way that made her want to wiggle even closer to him.

She didn’t know what made her open her eyes. But when she did, she saw they’d drawn an audience. Loran, one leg dangling comfortably over a thickly padded arm, lounged in a wide chair against the wall that separated Kai’s room from Mikah and Loran’s. Mikah leaned against the wall at his side, one hand toying with the curls at the nape of Loran’s neck. Kai was a dark shadow where he sat on the edge of his bed in his own chamber, his eyes a faint glitter as they watched his half-brother and their Jewel.

“They only wish to see your beauty, my Jewel,” Jerran whispered, the pace of his thrusts seeming to speed with each word. Skilled fingers worked between her thighs to pinch and tease her clit as he pounded into her, his breathing becoming increasingly ragged. “Come for me, Shantay. Come for them.”

The tight knot in Shantay’s belly suddenly unravelled, flinging threads of joy through her body. She screamed as the sensation ricocheted inside her, making her toes and fingertips tingle, her womb clench and the walls of her passage close around Jerran’s cock as if she’d never let him go. It jumped and she felt the gush of his release as he shouted in triumphant possession, clutching her even closer.

Exhausted, Shantay was barely aware when he dragged her down to the bed with him, turning her to curl in his arms and tuck her head against his still heaving chest. She drifted off in satiated slumber as the other men withdrew, leaving them to recuperate alone.

She wasn’t too exhausted, though, when Jerran woke her in the night with his mouth on her breast and the slow glide of his cock between her thighs. Nor when he woke her again with similar skill just before dawn, either.

Chapter 4

The door to Loran's workroom stood open, but still Shantay knocked and waited for an invitation to enter. His eyes brightened when he saw the small tray she carried.

"Is that *bakrash*?" he asked eagerly. It hadn't taken her long to discover Loran's sweet tooth, nor to learn he particularly enjoyed the layered nut and pastry treat drenched in honey. The delicacy was particularly dear, but Mikah made sure that Black Moon had plenty of the golden syrup in stock at all times for his lover.

"Yes, and that herbal blend we discussed."

Eyes lighting with professional interest, Loran plucked one of the mugs off the tray and sniffed the curling steam that rose from it. Watching him closely, Shantay set the tray on a clear space on her mate's workbench.

"Hmmm. Sorgam root. Flalet. Zuszir seeds and ..." He took a sip and quirked a brow. "Hellan pepper?"

Shantay laughed. "Yes! I was pleased and surprised to find a packet in the pantry."

Loran shrugged. "While I am trying to grow everything I need here in the greenhouse, Mikah stays on the lookout for interesting specimens whenever he's in the bazaars."

"Just one of the many benefits of having such a skilled barterman in our family."

He grinned. "Exactly. Now, come bring your own drink over here and see what I've been working on."

Obligingly, Shantay sipped her hot tea as Loran showed her the herbal he had begun to compile. It described native Kalari herbs and

plants, how to harvest them and prepare them for use, their medicinal uses and risks, recipes and other lore he'd learned in his years as a healer. Medicine and healing was a particular interest of Shantay's, and it pleased her that Loran so willingly shared his knowledge.

He'd made a place for her in his workroom so they could experiment together. She'd begun helping him prepare the medicinals he created for Mikah to barter on his various trade missions. Loran also created a selection of more frivolous items for Mikah's customers, including colognes, perfumes, scented cleansers and lotions that were in particular demand by the denizens of an arid planet.

Shantay felt comfortable here, surrounded by the familiar scents of plants, both dried and green, and the healthful concoctions Loran created. It reminded her of the stillroom where she'd learned her own, granted, more basic, healing skills in the Citadel. It was also welcoming because of the man who occupied it.

All her mates had their own retreats.

Mikah's was largely filled with books and ledgers, records of his transactions and clients, who was buying and selling, where to get certain items. With the cold season upon them, he spent long hours ensconced there, planning caravans for the following season. He tended to be solitary by nature and used his workroom as a chance to enjoy what privacy could be had in a communal residence with three co-mates and a Jewel.

Kai's retreat was filled with books, too, but they leaned more towards strategy, accounts of historical disputes and various forms of combat. Exotic weapons decorated the walls, and he was rarely to be found there, spending most of his time training with his soldiers in one of the compound's open yards or working with the combat-trained whraken in the enclosed arena.

Jerran's den was largely a mystery to her. He spent a great deal of time there, much as Mikah did in his own retreat, but he very clearly worked on something. Large boards covered the walls in the room.

They, in turn, featured odd drawings that she didn't understand. They weren't precisely art, but there was an attractive appeal in the spare lines and Jerran's firm hand in the symbols of a language she didn't know. There was ample evidence of the technology Loran said Jerran was so clever at creating, but she didn't know how to use it. He also spent time tinkering on various projects in a large workshop in a separate building.

Jerran never discouraged her from entering either space and was even pleased to see her when she did, but the servants were not allowed inside. She preferred not to disturb him at his work, though. She might not understand what he did, but she did know it played a large role in the clan's success. She got the impression it was one of the reasons such a young clan had earned a Jewel.

No, she didn't want to bother Jerran at his important work.

Turning her attention back to Loran, she took a fortifying sip of her tea.

"Loran."

"Hmmm?" He didn't look up as he measured a portion of crushed leaves into a mortar.

"About Mikah ..."

Now she had his attention. Putting aside the jar of leaves, he sat back on his stool and studied her. "What troubles you, Shantay?"

"It's not so much what troubles me, but what troubles Mikah."

Loran nodded slowly. "Yes. I know what you mean."

"He is not cold to me," she said. "But I can't get past the sense that he is uneasy. And I certainly don't wish to make him uneasy. We are a family. We should all be open with each other."

Loran took her mug and set it on the workbench. Catching both her hands in his, he rubbed his thumbs soothingly over the backs of her knuckles. "It's not you, my Jewel. Mikah and I have been paired for a long time now."

Shantay nodded.

“He is uneasy, I think, because it has always been just the two of us for him. When we were younger, before we were paired, I did go into the city every now and then with my former clanmates.” His eyes sparkled with mischief. “I will admit to sampling the hospitality of the off-worlders at the pleasure houses. Including the females.” He shrugged. “Mikah didn’t. He never had a desire for anyone but me.”

“You are fortunate in his devotion.”

“Yes, I know. I don’t think Mikah believed we would have a chance at a Jewel, so it never occurred to him that it would ever be anyone but the two of us. After all, Black Moon *is* a first-generation clan. Of course he couldn’t refuse the honor when it was offered to us. Not that he would,” Loran hastily added. “He is uncertain because he knows what an honor it is to have you with us, yet he fears the change that comes with welcoming you to join us.”

He hesitated. “You do know that it will be both of us?”

This time, it was Shantay who soothed with a caress of her thumbs. “Yes, I do. How could I possibly have one of you and not the other? You and Mikah are so obviously halves of the same whole, I would not dream of separating you.

“I must beg for your help, though, Loran. I feel it is time to make our joining complete, yet I don’t know how to make this the wonderful experience it should be for Mikah. I have learned his needs quite well in other respects, but I’m at a loss about this,” she admitted.

Loran picked up the tiny plate of *bakrash* and offered it to her. Bemused, Shantay took one of the treats and watched as her mate selected one for himself. “As it happens,” he said. “I’ve been thinking about that myself. And I’ve come up with a plan.”

He popped the honey-drenched square in his mouth and gave her a wicked smile. Feeling her worries ease, Shantay toasted him with her own *bakrash* and took a bite, licking the thick honey from her lips as he told her what they would do.

* * * *

The ropes bit into Zahra's wrists as the man thrust brutally into her from behind, crushing her hips against the rough wooden hobble he'd secured her to. He jerked her ass back onto his cock and thrust a hand between her thighs to roughly rub her clit. Sweat covered both of them, and each thrust produced a sucking sound that was raw in its sexuality. Her shoulders ached, both from the strain of her outstretched arms and the lashes her client had laid across them with a short crop. She hated and loved what he was doing. It made her furious that such uncaring domination turned her on like nothing else.

"That's it, my pretty bitch," he growled in her ear. "Grind that ass against me."

A twisting pinch of her clit made her cry out, first in pain, then in ecstasy as the orgasm roared through her like hot lava. He gave a satisfied grunt and came with a bellow that reminded her of preyan she'd seen rutting in the street as their handlers tried unsuccessfully to separate the giant lizards.

He collapsed bonelessly over her back. Her breasts protested as they were crushed against the hobble, and Zahra couldn't hold back a whimper. He ignored her, staying where he was until his breathing steadied. The slide of his cock out of her ass caused another twinge of pain, but a familiar one she could ignore. He gave her buttock a stinging slap of careless approval, like he would a mount that pleased him. Which she guessed she was, to him.

Whistling under his breath, Killian Osphren of Daylak jerked the knots free just enough that she could pull her hands out of the ropes. She hissed as the rough twine scoured her sensitive skin and ruefully examined the bright pink abrasions that marked her wrists. She'd need to get some salve on that, or she'd risk scarring.

"Zahra." Killian said, cracking a yawn as he lolled on her bed. Scratching his chest with one hand, he gestured with the other. "Get your ass over here. I don't stop in this shithole so you can pamper yourself."

Forcing a seductive smile to her lips and a sway to her hips, Zahra strolled to the dresser and poured some warm water from the carafe into a waiting bowl and picked up a cloth. “Of course,” she said, approaching the bed. Setting the bowl on the floor, she dipped the cloth in the water and wrung it out. Starting at his shoulders, she began to bathe him with long, smooth strokes.

Killian’s pure arrogance, his total rejection of her as a person, was like salt in the wound when she thought of what she could have had with Jerran. Leave it to a man to ruin her plans. Thinking of Black Moon Clan’s proud parade through the streets of Citadel City with their precious Jewel perched in an exquisite litter made Zahra’s fury burn all the hotter.

Lowering her eyelids with the subservience Killian expected in his paid bedmate, she said, “I suppose you’ve heard about the Kalari Jewels.”

“Might’ve,” he said after a moment. When she didn’t continue, he frowned. “Why?”

Zahra shrugged and dipped the cloth back in the water, then began to wash his flat belly. “It just came to mind because the Elders recently granted a Jewel to a new clan. It caused quite a sensation here.”

He snorted. “I’m sure an eclipse is a sensation to these backward barbarians.”

Again, she waited for her silence to prod him into another question. “These Jewels, they’re supposed to be quite the thing. The ultimate sex slaves, I’ve heard. Is that true?”

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “But they do undergo years of training at the Citadel. Trained in all kinds of sexual practices and secrets,” she said, thinking she embellished the truth. She didn’t care, as long as she piqued Killian’s mercenary instincts. “Orgies, too, from the tales. So they can keep their harem of men sated and satisfied.”

He made a sound of amusement. “Harem of men.”

Zahra rinsed her cloth and began to wash Killian's cock and balls with particular care. Soon, the flaccid flesh stiffened in her hand and she dropped the cloth in favor of stroking the water over it with her fingers. "Black Moon must be very, very rich," she said.

Killian absently tangled his fingers in her hair, his eyes never leaving her fingers as they played along his shaft. "Rich?"

"Oh, yes. Black Moon's a young clan, and normally they'd never have earned a Jewel. That means they must have bought her, and considering how the Kalari feel about their Jewels, the price must have been astronomical."

"Really." Killian pulled her hair until her lips covered the purplish-red head of his cock. A jerk of his hips thrust his shaft into her mouth until it touched the back of her throat and made her eyes water. "Later, you can tell me more about this Black Moon Clan," the slaver said. "After you show me again what a good little cocksucker you are. If memory serves, that's what convinced your first contract holder to pay me so much for you."

Zahra forced down her gag reflex and fluttered her tongue around the crown of Killian's cock as he fucked her mouth.

She'd long since accepted she was helpless to gain revenge against the man who'd sold her into bondage. Unlike her, Killian had the freedom of space and credits to spend. But maybe she'd be able to turn the greedy space pirate's attention to Black Moon's precious Jewel. Killian's fingers bit into her neck as he ruthlessly thrust harder between her lips. Zahra slid a finger into his ass to massage his prostate and he bellowed like a male preyan in rut. Forcing herself to gulp down his salty semen, she thought of how much Jerran would regret not choosing her for a mate.

Chapter 5

Loran pulled the robe over his head and hung it neatly on a hook in the clothing nook of the room he and Mikah shared. Mikah stretched out on their bed, arms crossed behind his head as they talked. They had been a pair since they were little more than boys. Watching Mikah now, Loran thought his lover had long since left their boyhood behind. The lean, awkward youth was all man now, his intellect as attractive to Loran as his beautifully sculpted body. Kai might be the warrior in their family, but Mikah had his own strengths.

He wasn't blind to Mikah's apprehension over Shantay's arrival in their lives. It had been birthed when they'd received word that the Council had elected to honor them with a Jewel and grown as the time of their claiming neared. He hoped that Mikah would steady once their Jewel was ensconced in the home they'd made for her, but that hadn't happened. Mikah, ever certain and confident when it came to trading and business dealings for the clan, was afraid.

Loran couldn't accept that. It was in his nature to heal, be it physical wounds or those of the spirit. Besides, Mikah was as much his mate as Shantay was.

Unfastening the loose pants he wore under his robe, he pushed them off his lean hips and tossed them over a convenient chair. He was gratified when Mikah lost the thread of their conversation as he crossed the room and got into bed beside him.

Loran pressed a kiss to the other man's lips. "My love, what troubles you?"

Mikah's features tightened with an all-too-familiar reserve. "Nothing."

Loran teasingly nibbled his chin. “Tell me. You know you can’t keep secrets from me.”

Mikah sighed, but still didn’t say anything.

“It is Shantay,” Loran prompted.

“No, of course not! Our Jewel is an honor to our clan. Black Moon is fortunate—”

Loran’s clicking tongue stopped him. “Mikah. Yes, our Jewel is precious. More than that, she is a true treasure of Kalari womanhood. But that doesn’t mean you aren’t troubled by her. Yes?”

Mikah dropped his eyes, as if ashamed, and whispered, “Yes.”

“Her presence changes nothing of my feelings for you.”

“I know.”

Loran cupped his hand under his lover’s chin and gently urged him to look up. “Mikah. I love you. I will always love you. Shantay is part of our family, just as Jerran and Kai are—” he continued despite Mikah’s soft snort of denial at that, “—and what’s more, she will give us children of our own. For that alone, she is worthy of our affection.

“And,” he sighed, “I know that despite the bond we share, it will take time for you to trust me in this.”

“I trust you.”

Loran stroked his fingers along Mikah’s stubbled cheek and chuckled. “In most things. But in this, maybe it would be best if I eased your concerns another way.”

Loran pressed his lips against Mikah’s, ignoring the pause in the other man’s kiss. Then Mikah opened his mouth and sucked Loran’s tongue deep inside, as if starved for the taste of him. Loran took his time, savoring his mate’s kiss as their tongues tangled in a familiar dance that had only grown richer over their years together. When Mikah’s breathing began to hitch and his fingers tangled in Loran’s longer, paler brown hair to drag him closer, Loran eased the sheet away to bare their naked, aroused bodies.

He let Mikah push him down on the bed, knowing the other man needed to exert his dominance after showing the weakness of his

insecurity over their Jewel. Loran lay supine as the larger man threw a leg over his thighs, the hard, hot flesh of his staff burning against Loran's leg, just as his own nestled against Mikah's belly. Unhurriedly, Loran stroked his free hand down his mate's body, taking the time to tease his sensitive nipples and trace the taut muscles of his abdomen before going lower to capture his cock in a hard clasp. Mikah pushed urgently into his palm, slicking it with pre-cum as he moaned into Loran's mouth.

Reluctantly breaking away from Mikah's kiss, Loran gasped as he tried to grab control of his own lust. When he thought he could hold on to it for a while longer, he gave Mikah a hard, fast kiss and whispered, "Trust me," before calling out, "Shantay."

* * * *

Mikah stiffened when he heard Loran call their Jewel's name. Shantay appeared in their doorway and he drew away, briefly tormented by indecision. Did he scrabble for the discarded sheet to shield his body from their mate, who certainly had every right to look upon him whenever she chose, or did he grab hold of his pride and refuse to cower? The answer was obvious, though the impulse to cover his now wavering erection was strong.

Leave it to Loran to force the issue. He was always so certain he was right. Which, of course, he usually was. It was what made him such a skilled healer.

All of which did nothing to ease Mikah's irritation with the other man, who watched for his reaction to Shantay's arrival in their room.

She wore the clan bracelets he'd clasped on her wrists at their joining, and the necklace Loran had gifted her with. Her black hair curled around her shoulders and breasts like liquid starstone, and the robe she'd donned for bed was pretty, but modest. Still, he couldn't help thinking of how they'd watched Jerran take her wildly from behind on her massive bed, Shantay responding just as wildly to him.

Now, as then, he felt his body stir with unfamiliar interest. No other woman had inspired so much as a twitch from him. Maybe it was because his body knew, even if his mind had trouble accepting it, that she was his and Loran's mate, as well as Jerran's and Kai's.

Jerran had certainly been enjoying her in full measure in the days since she'd allowed him her bed, revelling in his exclusive possession of her. They had become accustomed to the mingled cries of pleasure from that bed at all hours of the day or night.

She smiled tentatively at Mikah, obviously well aware that this forced meeting was not of his doing. She wouldn't do something so graceless as shrug, but he could see the gesture in her eyes as she looked to Loran, then back at Mikah, a silent admission of, "Well, what could I do?"

"Mikah, my love." Loran's soft words drew his attention back to him. "Never mind about Shantay. She is here just to watch." Obediently, Shantay settled herself in the cushioned chair where Loran had earlier tossed his pants. "I want you to grow more comfortable with her presence. And when you're ready, then she can join us. Together. All right?"

Mikah slid Shantay a sidelong glance. He'd never been comfortable with public displays of affection, let alone public displays of the kind Loran was asking for. But then, this wasn't public. This was the privacy of their room, with their Jewel. Feeling as if he was stepping through a door into the unknown, he nodded. "Yes, Loran, my love. Let our Jewel watch."

Loran's smile, full of pride and satisfaction, was beautiful. He lay on the bed and drew Mikah down over him, lifting his lips for Mikah's kiss, passion putting his fine features in sharp relief. Tentative at first, Mikah sipped at Loran's lips. Gods, he'd always loved the lush fullness of the other man's bottom lip. Nipping it now, he felt a measure of control slip back over him as Loran groaned and jerked his hips against him, pressing their cocks together. Mikah

didn't forget Shantay was there, but as he sank deeper into Loran's loving, he found it mattered less.

His hand glided down the bones of Loran's spine, tracing each one before moving lower and lower, until he could massage one ripe buttock. Squeezing it in his hand, he guided Loran's thigh up and over his hip, opening the other man up until he could snake a hand between his legs to fondle and caress the balls that were hard as stone in their silky pouch. Loran murmured hoarsely and shifted his leg higher, making himself even more accessible to Mikah's seeking fingers.

As soon as Mikah left Loran's lips to trail wet, biting kisses down his neck, the other man threw back his head with a loud exhalation that mingled curses and praises. Mikah pressed two fingers against the tight rosebud of the other man's ass, toying with it until it gave under the insistent prodding. Loran's hands roved restlessly over Mikah's body, becoming increasingly urgent as his lover plunged his fingers in and out of his ass, slowing only to ease a third past the barrier of flesh.

"Mikah," Loran moaned. Almost desperately, he grabbed Mikah's cock and rolled his fist over the dripping head. Mikah sucked in his breath and set his teeth. "Mikah," Loran said again. "Enough, lover. Take me. Please."

Fired by the submissive tone and words, Mikah hooked Loran's leg over his elbow. Eager hands tugged his cock closer, guiding them to the other man's softened ass. Loran expertly rubbed Mikah's cock against his hole, spreading the dripping cum around until they were both slippery with it.

"Enough," grated Mikah, and he began pressing forward without help.

Loran grasped Mikah's hipbones and obligingly tilted his lower body as much as he could. Awkward as it was, Mikah loved taking Loran face to face, loved seeing the bliss suffuse his lover's expression as he sank deeper and deeper. Neither man minded when the pressure, as it sometimes did, took a bit of the stiffness from

Loran's cock. Many of their most enjoyable nights had been helped along by just such a delay of passion on the part of one or the other of them.

Grunting with effort, Mikah began to jerk his hips forward, powering into Loran's ass with such force that the other man held on even tighter to his hips. Loran tipped his face up just as Mikah's lips crashed down on his, their teeth clicking together with the passion of the kiss. Mikah felt the heat coiling at the base of his spine and his balls drawing even tighter against his body. Tearing his mouth away, he buried his face in Loran's sweat-dampened neck, breathing in the deliciously musky scent of him.

"Mikah," Loran gasped, stroking a shaking hand down the back of his head to clasp his neck in a tight grip. "I love you."

The coil gave with sudden fury, and Mikah pumped into Loran violently as his seed began to spurt.

* * * *

Shantay's body tingled with desire. Her cheeks felt hot. Jerran would be more than happy to help her ease her need, and she considered going to him. Mikah had been asked to accept a lot tonight. No need to force him to witness her lust for him and Loran on top of that.

Her instruction at the Citadel had been designed to prepare her for life in a polygamous clan, so of course it included demonstrations of varied couplings between men and women. But watching the choreographed sexual dance of highly paid prostitutes from the pleasure houses, while stimulating, was nothing compared to seeing her own mates' loving. Their true affection for each other infused each gesture and glance with more passion than all the practiced caresses of those jaded professionals.

Unwilling to disturb Loran and Mikah, she shifted on her chair and prepared to quietly leave the room. Not quietly enough. The two

men entangled on the bed stirred. They seemed to share a mutual sigh of satisfaction as Mikah eased away from Loran, pulling his softening cock slowly from the other man's body. He sprawled on his back and threw his arm over his eyes, ignoring or uncaring of his nudity now. His cock lay damply against his thigh and sweat gleamed on his lean torso in a way that made her want to lick it off. Loran was just as delicious looking. His cock wasn't as soft as Mikah's. Obviously, since he hadn't come. It didn't look like it would take much to fully harden it.

Realizing she'd been captured by their beauty, Shantay shook her head at herself and rose, pulling her thin robe around her. On the bed, Loran leaned over to whisper in Mikah's ear. Mikah lifted his arm to peer blearily at Shantay, then nodded.

Smiling, Loran pushed to his feet. The low lighting glanced off the curve of his shoulder and hip as he walked to Shantay and took her hand. "Please, join us." Casting a wry, affectionate glance at a drowsing Mikah, he added, "To sleep. For now."

A warm little sunburst of pleasure ignited in her chest. Loran's plan had worked. Mikah felt comfortable enough to welcome her to their bed, even if only to sleep. Their family was beginning to bond.

She allowed Loran to take her robe then, following the urging in his eyes, her sleeping gown, which he tossed across the arm of the chair. Again taking her hand, he led her to the bed and held the sheet aside so she could lay down beside Mikah. She and Loran both laughed softly when he exhaled on a soft snore.

"He'll be out for a while," Loran said, getting in beside her and pulling the sheet over the three of them. Snuggling against her, he lay his hand on Mikah's belly, trapping her cosily between the warmth of the two men. He yawned and kissed her cheek. "Sleep now, Shantay. All will be well."

Yes, she thought. It would. She would accept no less.

* * * *

On the edge of waking, Shantay recognized the fluttery sensation floating down her body as the sheet moving lower and lower, then finally off. She felt warm, and very safe, so she lay as she was.

“Isn’t our Jewel a beauty, Mikah?”

“Yes. Lovely.”

A delicate touch brushed against one nipple, which hardened in instant response, eliciting a masculine chuckle. “She’s as responsive as you are.”

The hushed conversation made her smile inwardly. More alert, she decided to keep her eyes closed to see what they would do next.

“And her lips...” A pair of strong lips covered hers in a sweet kiss. “Very nice. Taste them.”

She felt the mattress shift on her other side as another set of lips settled on hers in a more tentative kiss. The first—Loran’s, she knew—returned to take a longer sip. Mikah followed his lover’s lead again, and they took turns giving her increasingly bold kisses. She parted her lips when theirs urged her to, lazily twined her tongue with first one man’s, then the other’s. She remained passive, though, and kept her eyes closed to preserve the fiction that she was not quite a participant in their shared exploration.

After a while, they began to move down her body. Mikah again followed Loran’s lead, trailing kisses down her neck, over her collarbone, along the top of her breasts. He hesitated only briefly when Loran began to tease the tip of one breast with his tongue. When both nipples were sucked and tongued, each by one man, Shantay quelled the urge to squirm with pleasure. Loran’s hand slid between her legs and she eagerly shifted to make room for it. The mattress dipped again and she sensed him lean away. Slitting her eyes, she saw him propped up on one elbow, watching Mikah with a pleased smile as the other man continued to lave Shantay’s nipple with increasing interest. Loran’s gaze roved down her body and he parted her folds with two fingers. Their devoted attention had made

her wet with desire, and his fingers swirled around her tight bud before dipping lower to stroke her inner lips.

Shantay moaned in decadent pleasure. Mikah's head jerked up, nipple popping out of his mouth, as if he'd forgotten she was even there. He cast her a sheepish look. "Sorry. We were just..."

"Oh no, don't be sorry," she said on a gasp. "Just don't stop."

She took his hand and placed it invitingly on her breast. When he didn't move it, just looked at their hands nearly clasped on the clear, honey-pale skin, she showed him how to massage her the way she particularly enjoyed. He was a quick study. As his fingers traced the golden circle around her stiffened nipple, she saw that his pinkie finger was noticeably shorter in proportion to his other fingers. She smiled and wondered what special, hidden traits she had yet to learn about her other mates.

"We won't stop, Shantay, until we've pleased you as mates should," Loran said, immediately making her forget all about the peculiarities of Mikah's fingers as the other man slid down the bed and positioned himself between her thighs. Without further warning, he tongued her clit with amazing skill. The combination of Loran's tongue on her clit and Mikah's on her nipple, the sight of the dark, tousled heads bent over her in concentrated devotion, was too much. Shantay's orgasm raced through her, exploding from her lips in a helpless cry of completion.

Chapter 6

Now that she'd become used to it, Shantay found she quite liked sleeping with a warm man or two curled around her. If she wasn't with Loran and Mikah, Jerran shared her bed.

Mikah's reticence disappeared with gratifying speed. Loran's plan had obviously worked, easing Mikah's fears that she would replace him in his mate's affections. Jerran, lusty as ever, enjoyed his dominant role to her submissive. He loved it best when she let him take her in the big bed, where anyone could walk in and see her reaction to him. If that was what it took to satisfy his possessive streak, she was happy to accommodate him. No one seemed to mind, although she worried about poor Kai. She didn't want to hurry her bonding with Loran and Mikah, but she really would have to seduce Kai before too much longer.

Shantay licked her lips as she considered her options. She'd come up with a scene she was sure would appeal to her youngest mate. She only needed the perfect time to implement it.

She woke with surprised pleasure when masculine lips covered hers in a demanding kiss. She smiled, recognizing the owner of those lips before she even opened her eyes. "Jerran," she sighed.

He gave her another quick, but thorough, kiss, then held up the tray he'd brought to the chamber. It was loaded with sliced fruits, pastries and a selection of hot breakfast items that made her mouth water. Jerran, gloriously naked, urged her to move over. He got into bed beside her and settled the tray between them so they could share.

“This is wonderful,” she said around a mouthful of crisply fried meat, ravenous after another energetic night with Jerran. “But why are we eating here instead of with the others?”

“I wanted to spend a little time with you before I have to leave.”

Shantay looked at him, a glass of juice halted halfway to her mouth. “Leave?”

Jerran smiled crookedly and urged the glass all the way to her lips. “Not for long. A few days. Not more than a seven-day, at any rate. We’ve received word of trouble at one of the mines, and I need to ride out with some of the men.”

“Oh.”

Jerran laughed. “No need to look so crestfallen, my Jewel. I appreciate that you will miss me, but I’m sure the others will keep you well entertained.”

She loved the way the laugh made his dark eyes sparkle. In the weeks she’d been at Moongate, Jerran seemed to have lost a good portion of his serious mien. He laughed easily now, where before he’d been more restrained. Kai told her he was much more fun to be around now, too, and thanked her for it. While her youngest mate was a warrior to be reckoned with, she appreciated his easygoing nature and sense of humor.

She’d become quite prideful of her mates. She was grateful she’d been joined with them rather than one of the older clans. It was exciting being part of the young and dynamic Black Moon Clan. Their welcome had been wholehearted, as had their appreciation of her talents outside the marital chamber. Jerran happily ceded the day-to-day running of the household to her so he could concentrate on the esoteric designs in his workshop. Loran put her healing skills to use in Moongate’s infirmary and cajoled her into providing hand-drawn illustrations for his herbal. While she couldn’t help Kai with the specifics of his duties overseeing Moongate’s security and working with his warriors, he gladly spoke of his work and its challenges, teaching her about the clan’s land and interests. Even Mikah turned to

her for specific knowledge of the Citadel and its workings so he could approach Kalaria's most powerful institution with trade offers in the spring.

"When do you have to go?" she asked.

"Soon," Jerran said. "The mine is a fair distance away, and I want to get there before the second sun sets."

Shantay put her juice cup back on the tray and took Jerran's plate from him. Gathering up the tray, she set it beside the bed and knelt beside Jerran, head bowed. Peeking at him through her lashes, she saw that his cock has perked up beneath the sheet. "Surely you don't have to leave that soon, my mate?"

His eyes alight with passion, he traced one pebbled nipple with the tip of his finger. "No, mate. Not that soon."

* * * *

Killian Ospfren sat in the cockpit of his personal yacht and studied the documents he'd downloaded about Black Moon Clan. It had been ridiculously simple to hack into the ancient system the Kalari government used and steal the records it contained on the wealthy clan the pleasure-house whore told him about. They owned an impressive list of properties—gemstone and mineral mines, warehouses, arable farmland and a number of smaller estates aside from their stronghold, Moongate. He'd tried accessing a system at the clan's compound in an attempt to secure plans about its layout, but it seemed they were so backward they didn't even *have* a computer system. At least, he couldn't detect one.

It looked like this heist would be laughably easy. Fine by him. Easy money spent just as well.

The plan he'd use to gain admittance to Moongate was one he'd used before, to great success. Once inside, he'd take what he wanted. After that, Black Moon could pay his price if they wanted their treasure back. Then again, maybe he wouldn't give it back. Win-win.

Killian preferred to think on his feet, as it were, adapt to changing situations. He'd snag the treasure, then decide what to do. It wasn't like these barbarians could stop him.

Grinning, he set about preparing his ship for the first stage of his plan.

Chapter 7

Kai swiped a sweat-covered forearm across his forehead and grimaced at the gritty feel of dust and sand. Away from his men, he allowed himself to feel the ache in his muscles after a morning spent sparring in the practice yard as the second sun seemed to blaze hotter with every swing of his staff or jab of his fist. It was a good ache, but an ache nonetheless. Thinking of how perfect a bucket of cold water and a rough rag would feel right now, he quickened his pace to a near-trot, deciding at the last moment to cut through the greenhouse rather than take the long way around the compound to the bathing lodge. He didn't want to trek sand and dirt into the marital chamber.

Keying in the code to pass through the deceptively simple lock arrangement his brother had designed was the work of moments. He pushed through the lush shrubs and fronds, both native and off-world, that Loran had coaxed to flourish with such abundance. While the plants and trees served many purposes, from foodstuffs to medicinal, all Kai cared about was the way he immediately felt cooler surrounded by them. The air was almost as hot inside as it was outside, but the greenery made it seem much more bearable.

He'd taken two steps from the path into the clearing at the centre of the enclosed oasis when a tiny splash drew his attention to the grotto. He froze.

Shantay was in the pool. She sat on one of the rock benches carved into the side of the natural hot spring, arms draped loosely on either side of the rim, head tilted back and eyes closed. She looked so relaxed she could have been asleep. He could see every luscious inch of her creamy-gold skin under the crystal-clear water. Her breasts

bobbed gently to the surface with each inhale of breath that lifted her chest, the flushed nipples peeping above the water line, then ducking below like shy water sprites playing a child's game.

Kai swallowed heavily, his exhaustion instantly forgotten as every muscle tensed in appreciation of his mate's beauty and blood rushed to his cock. He was certain that forcing himself to take a step—quiet, so as not to disturb her—back the way he'd come was the hardest thing he'd ever done. But it wasn't for him to make the first move. Shantay hadn't accepted him into her bed yet.

"Kai."

Her soft voice stopped him. A glance over his shoulder showed she'd lifted her head, but otherwise her relaxed position stayed the same. Her deep brown eyes sparkled as she smiled in welcome. "Where are you going?"

"Oh, well." He felt himself flushing. He'd never stumbled over his words with a woman in his life. He cleared his throat. "You looked so relaxed, I didn't want to disturb you. I'm just on my way to the bathing lodge."

"Disturb me?" She laughed and finally moved, flashing him a clearer glimpse of her bare breasts as she glided across the small pool to lean her arms on the side closest to him. "How can you disturb me when I've been waiting for you?"

"You were?"

"Of course. I knew you were practicing, and I thought you might like to take your ease with me." She gestured to the grassy area to one side of the pool. Only then did he notice the blanket and pillows arranged there, a woven basket perched on one corner of the blanket. He was chagrined to realize he'd been so focused on Shantay's charms that his usually keen observation skills had gone lacking. Some security expert he was!

"That sounds wonderful." He thought of how sweaty and dirty he must look, while Shantay was as daintily beautiful as ever. "I'll just go bathe first—"

“Nonsense. This just saves Ghezran from delivering my invitation to you.” She was out of the pool in a flash, the water sheeting off her slim form, sparkling like liquid diamonds in the sunlight that blazed through the glass roof. She reached for his belt, loosened and freed it from the loops in his pants. Efficient and quick, she stripped him to his skin, humming appreciatively as his unruly cock bobbed a bit when he numbly followed her orders and stepped out of his trousers. Then she ushered him into the water.

He sighed as the mineral-heavy liquid leached the last of the tension from his aching muscles. What felt even better were Shantay’s fingers as she took a handful of soft soap from a conveniently placed jar and began to wash him. First she had him tip his head back to wet his hair as she freed the shoulder-length mass from the leather thong that held it away from his face. Her fingers dug rhythmically into his scalp, and he groaned in pleasure. He couldn’t remember anyone ever having done this for him, at least not since he’d been a child. Once she’d rinsed away the suds, she told him to sit on the edge of the pool while she washed his legs and feet, for the moment ignoring the insistent thrust of his cock. The thick muscle twitched every time she neared it, hitching higher against his belly with every pass of her palms up his thighs.

“All right,” she said, taking his hands. “Stand up so I can do the rest.”

His belly clenched as she slowly trailed her nails from his navel up to his throat. He swallowed, unable to tear his gaze from her nipples, which had hardened to sharp points. He imagined suckling those beautiful tips, and his own nipples tingled almost painfully at the thought. He clenched his fists to keep from grabbing her. This was Shantay’s seduction. He just needed to be patient.

His breath left his chest in a rush as her exploring fingers went to the disks of his nipples and traced them with teasing strokes.

“Shantay,” he gasped.

“Kai,” she said, her voice throaty. “What a strong, powerful warrior you are, my mate. Your body is magnificent. So honed and sculpted.” Her palm flattened on his belly and slid down to his shaft. “Hard.”

Cupping her palms, she trickled water over his shoulders and chest and the suds slid down his taut body. The ever-replenishing water of the spring swirled them away through the unseen filtration system—another of Jerran’s creations, but Kai didn’t want to think about that right now. All he wanted to do was revel in Shantay’s exclusive attention.

Again, he had to stop from reaching for her when she stepped away. He gritted his teeth and kept his hands firmly at his sides. His patience was rewarded when Shantay took his hand and urged him out of the pool and over to nest she’d prepared.

“Lie down.”

With each gentle command, his desire ratcheted higher. Without a word, he dropped to the blanket. She laughed again, the happy sound full of mischief. “No. On your belly.”

He rolled his eyes. “Seriously?”

“Definitely.” She tugged on his shoulder. “Now, come on. If you’re careful, I know you can do it.”

Kai gingerly rolled, pausing to adjust his cock so he wouldn’t abruptly end their romp before it really began. As soon as he was facedown, Shantay straddled his thighs and sat down. He could feel the crisp hairs shielding her sex softly rasp the back of his thighs, and his imagination quickened with another hot vision, this one of what it would feel like to put his tongue there. He winced as his cock reacted predictably, and enthusiastically, to the mental image.

He felt Shantay shift around, saw from the corner of his eye as she rummaged in the basket and took out a small flask. Something warm dribbled onto his spine, briefly tickling before it began to tingle. Shantay put her hands to him and began to skillfully massage his back, shoulders and neck. With each stroke up to his neck, she

stretched along his body. As she did that, her pubis rubbed against his buttocks, and her hardened nipples brushed just below his shoulders. It wasn't until she began to nip and tease at his earlobe that his control slipped its leash.

In one smooth motion, he rolled beneath her until they faced chest to chest and his cock settled along her clit like it was coming home. Laughter sparkled in his mate's eyes as she stared into his and a grin stretched his mouth.

"I'm sorry, little one, but I just can't wait."

"Then don't," she said, wiggling enticingly. "Take that big cock of yours, mate, and take me."

His breath whooshed out at her bold order, and his excitement reached wild heights. Kai reached between them to position the aching head of his penis at her entrance. She purred and wiggled again, the juices of her sex wetting him, readying him. "That's it, Kai, my big, strong mate. Now thrust. Take me. Take me."

Kai obeyed, jerking his hips up with a growl to breach her tight pussy and sink halfway up his shaft. Shantay moaned. Kai grasped her hips and thrust again, following the motion up and to the side as he rolled Shantay to her back and settled between her thighs. Immediately, her legs wrapped around his hips, her small heels digging into his ass as she ordered him to take her, harder, faster. Kai did, driven on by her assertiveness. Gone was the meek female who submitted to his half-brother in her massive bed. This woman told him what she wanted, ordered him to submit to her bidding. No other female knew how much it torqued Kai's passion to give over control. But his Jewel did.

His chest slid along hers, the oil she'd picked up while rubbing her tits against his back slicking her up until the glide and pull of their bodies was a seamless rock and slide. Kai cupped one large palm under her ass and scooped her as close as he could, grinding into her sex as she murmured words of praise and command in his ear, telling

him how wonderful he was, how much she wanted him, how his cock made her feel, and, oh, right there, right there, right there!

Shantay's fingers tunnelled into the tangled mane of his hair and tugged him down until her lips fastened on his and she cried out into his mouth, the shaking and trembling of her body as her pussy milked him in her release setting off his own. Kai yelled as he thrust into her once more and shot his hot seed deep into his mate.

* * * *

Kai jerked awake. Shantay drowsily lifted her head from his chest. She'd fallen asleep curled against him, one leg hugging his thigh, after enticing him to take her again. Well, it hadn't taken much enticing. Exhausted and satisfied to a degree he'd never felt before, he'd quickly drifted off with her soft breaths tickling his neck.

"What is it?" she murmured.

Kai listened intently. He thought he heard shouts in the distance. "I don't know." Gently, he eased her away from him and began to pull on his clothes. When she just lay there, watching him with curious, slumberous eyes, he picked up her sheer robe and began to help her into it. "Shantay, love, I need you to go to our chambers."

She let him wrap the blanket around her. "But why?"

"Because it's the safest place in Moongate. I think I heard an explosion." He strapped his weapons on without thought, like another man would don his boots. Claspings Shantay by the shoulders, he kissed her soft lips with loving attention. Turning her around, he hurried her to the door that led into the main house. "Go, mate, now. Once you're in our rooms, don't open the door for anyone. Loran, Mikah or I will come for you."

"All right." She kissed him sweetly. "You be careful, Kai. I don't want to miss you in my bed tonight."

Grinning at the thought, Kai said, "Now, that's what I call incentive." He watched until she disappeared into the house, the smile

dropping from his face. All warrior, he turned and sprinted to the door at the other end of the greenhouse, to the yard and the barracks, mind already on the task of protecting Moongate and their Jewel.

* * * *

Killian examined his ship with a critical eye. The cleverly engineered landing struts gave it the appearance of a precarious tilt on the side of a rocky hill, as did the jumble of boulders he'd grav-hoisted into place on the tipped nose and the spider-webbed glass of the bow port. Keyed from its usual nondescript grey, the camo-skin hull displayed a melange of dents and scratches. The most obvious deception was an elongated scorch pattern that emanated from a twisted oval of metal that had once been a lift engine. Pure optics, of course, a bit of space junk that added to the illusion of a catastrophic explosion. Ribbons of black smoke stretched from the ship into wisps of nothing in the sky.

In the past, the ruse had fooled marks far more technologically savvy than a pack of Kalari tribesmen.

He checked his timepiece. By now, they would be boiling out of their fortress to investigate the source of the flash-bang he'd set off. Loud enough to send a hail of gravel pinging against his ship, it must have sounded like the crater walls were falling down around them.

With a final look at his preparations, Killian made himself comfortable on the ground in front of the passenger hatch and sealed it. Digging a pointed stone out of the small of his back, he leaned against the hatch, as if he'd just managed to crawl to safety. The gel cap he took from his breast pocket was a sickly green. Grimacing in anticipation of discomfort, he popped it into his mouth. The thin casing began to dissolve as soon as it touched his tongue, already releasing a timed sedative and its payload of nanobots as it slid down his throat. Fuzzily, he had time to be grateful the sedative had kicked in before the black market 'bots started the work of remodelling his

face. By the time his “rescuers” arrived, Killian’s face and unconscious body would look every bit as wrecked as his ship.

Chapter 8

Loran met them at the gate, going directly to the injured man strapped to the stretcher carried by two of Kai's warriors. Competently, he ran his eyes and hands over the unconscious man's body, assessing his injuries.

"It doesn't appear as if anything's broken," he said to Kai, fingers gently probing through pale blond hair made spiky with dried blood. "Mainly minor cuts and bruises, although this lump on the back of his head could be a concern. What happened?"

Kai shrugged. "Looks like the off-worlder was trying to land his ship and crunched it into the rocks on the west face of Drahallan Point."

Loran quirked an eyebrow. "Land? So far from the spaceport? Do you think there's something wrong with the ship?"

"Hard to tell. It looks pretty banged up to me, though Jerran'd be able to tell for sure. Still, I don't think it'll be going anywhere for a while." He narrowed his eyes on the stranger. "Either he's one very stupid off-worlder or blessed with the gods' own luck, if all he got out of that crash is a dented skull."

"Maybe both. We'll take him to the infirmary so I can give him a more thorough going over. Better send someone for Jerran, too, just to be on the safe side."

Kai signalled to one of his men, who immediately obeyed the silent command, remounted his whraken and guided the grumbling beast back out the gate to fetch Jerran.

"Ghezran."

The major-domo stepped forward from the crowd that had gathered to watch the search party's return. "Yes, Lord Kai?"

"Where is Lady Shantay?"

"In the marital chambers, sir. Lord Mikah is with her."

"Good. Let them know we've returned, please."

The older man nodded and went to do his bidding. Frowning in thought, Kai looked after Loran to where his clan brother led the way to the infirmary. Off-worlders were bad news at the best of times. To have one suddenly appear virtually at their gates, conscious or no, seemed a bit beyond belief. Where before he might have shrugged off his suspicions, the presence of their Jewel changed things. There was no longer such a thing as too cautious.

He'd station guards outside the infirmary and await Jerran's return before deciding what to do.

* * * *

Shantay tried to distract herself with a hot bath in the sunken bathing pool. She still felt pleasantly loose from her interlude with Kai in the gardens, but she had to do something to get her mind off her curiosity. Mikah left with Ghezran when the major-domo arrived to notify them of Kai's return. He'd come back briefly to tell her what he'd learned, about the discovery of the crashed ship and its battered off-worlder occupant, before leaving her alone again to work in his private chambers.

Thinking of her promise to Kai for the night ahead, she took her time selecting the perfect combination of bath oils, using a blend of scents she'd learned he particularly liked. She dropped her robe and started down the steps. The sigh of pleasure that left her lips was almost a groan as she sank shoulder-deep into the steaming water. Her nipples tingled and she let her head fall back on a boneless neck to rest on the stone rim.

Jerran's mother was an off-worlder, but he looked like a native Kalari down to his toes. So did the off-worlders she'd seen during her lessons at the Citadel. Mikah said the injured off-worlder had hair the color of dried grass. She wondered what that looked like on a man.

Stirring herself, she picked up a fluffy twist of fabric and trailed it down one arm, then the other. Frustrated, she realized the soothing scent of the bath and the relaxing heat did little to calm her agitation.

First, she had to wait in an agony of unknowing while Kai checked out the explosion he'd heard. It was all well and good to know he was more than capable of handling himself. He wouldn't be First Warrior if he wasn't. But it was quite another situation to sit trapped in their rooms while he blithely went about his business and she worried over him.

He was safe, but there was a stranger in their home, and an off-worlder at that. The curiosity was killing her.

But she'd promised to stay here until one of her mates came for her. And so, she was stuck.

Shantay stood up in a splash of water and got out of the pool. Drying herself briskly, she dressed in comfortable, loose-legged pants and a tunic-style blouse. Resigned to waiting, she curled up in a chair with paper and a stylus and began to make notes about household changes she wanted to discuss with Ghezran.

By the time Loran entered the chamber, Shantay was engrossed in her work. His light touch on her shoulder startled her into jerking the sharp tip of the stylus across the page, leaving a short tear in the paper.

"Blast," she muttered.

Loran chuckled and sat on the arm of the chair, leaning close to kiss her forehead. "Jerran is a bad influence on you."

"And you aren't?"

"Of course not." He tried for an innocent look, but couldn't quite pull it off.

Laughing, Shantay put her papers and the stylus on a low table nearby and shifted to face him. “Well?”

“Well, what?”

“The off-worlder?” she prompted. “Your patient? How is he?”

Loran’s expression grew serious. “It’s hard to say. He doesn’t seem all that battered, at least not when you consider the condition Kai said his ship was in when they found him. But he hasn’t wakened yet.”

“Head wound?”

He nodded. “Again, it doesn’t appear too serious, but you know how it is with head wounds. I’d like you to take a look at him.”

Shantay straightened. “Really?” She reminded herself the man was injured and needed her help, not her unabashed curiosity. “I mean, certainly, I’d be glad to help. Just give me a moment.”

She went quickly to her dressing chamber. The fealty cuffs clanked softly as she draped a pretty cloth over her damp hair and secured the veil to it with thin chains. Warm boots under her wide-legged pants and a sturdy coat over it all completed her ensemble. The walk to the infirmary would be chilly, now that night had fallen.

Sliding her hand in the crook of Loran’s arm, she followed him down the hall. With a motion that had become automatic, she flashed one cuff at the box on the wall to unbar the door to the marital chambers, and they headed through the house to the exit closest to the infirmary. As they walked, Loran detailed the extent of the off-worlder’s injuries and how he’d treated them. All but the head wound were minor.

Outside, the compound was shrouded in darkness, save for the puddles of light cast by the torches mounted at regular intervals throughout Moongate. Two guards stood outside the infirmary doors. When Shantay looked a question at him, Loran said, “Kai won’t take chances with Moongate’s security, even for an injured man.”

The warriors nodded respectfully as they saw Shantay with the healer. One held the door, and she murmured her thanks as she swept into the infirmary.

The open room had an even dozen cots in it, six lined up on either side of a wide aisle. The off-worlder lay in a bed halfway down one row, a candle burning in a glass pillar on a low table to one side. The light seemed to glint off his pale hair. Fascinated, Shantay left the doorway and walked farther into the room until she stood at the foot of his bed. Yes, his shock of hair was indeed a pale yellow color she'd never seen before. It didn't look very attractive, she thought. Loran's hair, a rich brown several shades lighter than the near-black of her other mates', was much more appealing.

A bit disappointed that the man's appearance wasn't as drastically different as she'd hoped, she examined him again, this time with the eyes of a healer. His chest rose and fell in steady, untroubled breaths. His pale skin tone looked good, as well, marred only by a blackening bruise along one side of his face and some superficial cuts on the hands that lay limply on either side of his blanket-covered torso.

"Did you try a poultice of anzan root and fenicsbane?" she asked Loran, moving to the side of the bed to touch her wrist to the off-worlder's cheek and forehead to test for fever.

"Without knowing what his homeworld is, I didn't want to risk using anything he might have a reaction to."

"Probably wise. Perhaps just a packet of crushed ice, then. That would at least combat any swelling until we can contact Citadel City and find out where this man is from."

Loran sighed. "My thought, too, though I'd hoped you might have a different solution we could try. I'll get some from the kitchens." He glanced at the man on the cot. "Maybe you should come with me."

"The off-worlder's unconscious, Loran. I'll be perfectly fine. You go ahead, and I promise I won't move from this spot."

Loran's brow lowered, but he looked from Shantay to the door. "I suppose that will be all right. I'll only be a few minutes and the guards are just outside the door if you need them."

"Exactly. Now go."

She watched with affection as he strode out of the infirmary. While she'd been annoyed earlier when they insisted she wait in their chambers, she appreciated their care for her safety.

Shantay looked down at the man just as his eyes flicked open. Her jaw dropped. His eyes were *green*. A brilliant acid green she'd never seen anywhere but in certain breeds of whraken. Now *that* was truly exotic.

The off-worlder tried to speak. He cleared his throat and tried again, but his words were unintelligible. Slowly, as if it took some effort, he raised a hand to his throat, his eyes conveying some message she didn't at first understand.

"Oh, water!" Rolling her eyes at herself, Shantay filled a cup from the pitcher on the small bedside table. Sitting on the stool beside his bed, she offered it to the off-worlder. "I'm sorry, how foolish of me. Here." Taking note of his struggling attempt to sit up, she put the cup down and helped him, adjusting the pillows at his back for added support. Again, she held out the water.

He reached for it. Her only warning was the curve of his lips in a satisfied smile. Then something pricked her hand. Dumbly, she stared at him as the room began to go dark. Was the candle going out? The cup fell from her hand. Shantay swayed, tried to stand, but her feet tangled together and she fell off the stool. The last thing she saw was the water dribbling out of the cup to form a tiny stream as it spread along the floor and touched her cheek with tendrils of ice.

* * * *

As soon as the woman went down, Killian threw off the blanket and stood up. He couldn't believe his luck. He thought to continue his

ruse for at least another day until they let down their guard enough for him to sneak into the main house and secure their Jewel. If that didn't work, Plan B involved a lot less subtlety and significantly more force.

Instead, the woman had come to him.

Absently, he snapped the casing back over his thumb ring to hide the tiny, drug-laced needle. Stooping, he flipped the veil away from her face. His smile was slow and satisfied. The whore hadn't lied. The Kalari woman was a beauty with her delicate features, large, dark eyes and the lush black curls that trailed from beneath her headdress. Add that to the novelty of her status as a legendary Jewel, and he was certain the bidding for her would be high indeed in the private auction he'd arranged. He cupped one breast and weighed it in his hand. Her nipple hardened involuntarily under her robe, and he gave it a hard pinch. She didn't even twitch. Out cold. Good.

Pleased with his day's work, Killian propped one foot on the edge of the cot he'd feigned sleep on and released the hidden compartment in his boot heel. First, he used the tiny communicator to signal his ship to initiate its pick-up sequence. Returning the communicator to its hiding place, he took out the small weapon also concealed in his boot and activated it.

He picked the Jewel up and slung her over his shoulder. She smelled soft and sweet and his dick hardened in anticipation.

Killian strode for the door and yanked it open. The two warriors outside barely had time to turn before he shot them. Kicking the arm of one man out of the way, he stepped over the other Kalari and jogged in the direction of the gate. A shout went up from one of the men guarding the wall. Killian ignored it, tightening his arm around the woman's thighs as he ran faster. Shit, he hated running.

A second shout, this time from the ground and nearby, made him jerk his head to the side to see a huge man barrelling towards him, face twisted in fury.

"Off-worlder! Release our Jewel now and you may die without pain."

“Thanks for the warning,” Killian sneered. Casually, he fired his weapon at the other man. Instead of falling to the ground as the other warriors had, this one dodged the beam with surprising agility and kept coming. The warrior reached for him and Killian jumped back. He felt the Jewel begin to slide off his shoulder. No, wait—the warrior was attempting to snatch her back.

Growling possessively over his prize, Killian shoved his weapon into the other man’s belly and fired again. The breath left the warrior’s chest in an explosive gasp and his eyes widened in pain. Killian jerked the woman out of his arms, then used the tiny metal gun to club the other man in the temple. The warrior fell to his knees. Killian watched in disbelief as the man, weakened though he was, continued to reach for the woman. “Shantay,” he said.

“Would you just fucking go down?” Viciously, Killian chopped his hand down at the other man’s head and heard a satisfying crunch. The warrior crumpled like a giant tree felled by a storm.

Killian glared at him for a moment longer, until a crack like thunder made him look up. His ship roared over the wall, hidden guns coughing energy bolts as the computer laid down covering fire for him. “About time,” he grumbled. Hitching the Jewel back over his shoulder, he raced for the gate as all around him men took cover. A well-placed shot from one of the ship’s guns blasted the gates open enough for Killian to sidle through with his unconscious burden.

The ship set down for the few seconds it took him to scuttle aboard and lifted off again. Far below in the Kalari compound, men raced around like ants out of a kicked hill as gouts of black smoke poured from scorched holes in a number of the buildings.

Killian slapped the control switch just inside the iris-ing exterior door. “Computer, orbit altitude, all possible speed.”

“Acknowledged, sir.”

He let the Kalari woman slide off his shoulder until she was cradled in his arms. Her cheeks were pale despite their golden tint. He

wasn't concerned, though. She'd wake soon enough. A good merchant knew how to care for his stock.

The men of Black Moon already forgotten, not to mention the whore who'd set him on this path, Killian strode into the body of his ship, his latest acquisition held firmly against his chest.

Yes, she'd wake soon enough.

Chapter 9

Jerran returned to a nightmare.

Torches blazed throughout Moongate, making the black marks of laser fire that marred the encircling wall and inner buildings apparent even from the ridge. Heart in his throat, Jerran kicked his whraken into motion. Yowling in complaint, the sleek predator bounded ahead in a ground-eating stride that still seemed too slow. Leaning low on the beast's back, Jerran urged it faster, faster, heedless of the men he left behind.

A shout rose up as the warriors on the walls saw him coming and ordered the gates opened. Fear clenched his gut with an icy fist when Mikah ran to meet him. Barely slowing, Jerran offered his forearm, which the other man used to swing up behind him.

"Jerran, Shantay's gone."

The icy fist twisted. "Gone." He felt numb.

"The off-worlder took her," Mikah said, then hissed out a raw curse.

"Where's Kai?"

"Loran's with him. The off-worlder did something to him, to a number of the warriors, but worst to Kai. Our clan brother tried to stop him from taking Shantay, and the stranger turned on him with some kind of weapon, beat him—"

The whraken streaked through the gates and Jerran tightened its reins, wrestling it to a pawing stop.

"Will he live?"

They slid off the beast's back and Mikah touched Jerran's arm, directing him towards a group of men. "Loran says he will. He doesn't look good, but he's just stunned."

Seeing them coming, the group parted to reveal Loran crouched beside Kai's body. The fist grabbed a new hold on Jerran's gut as he saw his half-brother's too-pale complexion and closed eyes, the bloody mess of his face. The thought that the man who did this had their Jewel...

Jerran dropped to his knees on Kai's other side.

"How is he?"

"He'll be fine." Loran's usually mobile expression was a mask of tightly-held temper. His eyes glittered with fury as he met Jerran's gaze. "The off-worlnder used some kind of stun weapon on him, then beat him down until he couldn't get up anymore. The men who saw it happen said Shantay didn't move through the whole exchange. He must have knocked her out, too. Before we could stop him, he carried her onto the ship we thought was wrecked and escaped."

Mikah started cursing again.

The clansmen gathered around them made way for the old major-domo. Ghezran handed Loran a bowl of water and some cloths, then unslung the healer's bag from his shoulder and set it on the ground beside him. They all watched silently as Loran wet a cloth and began to wipe the blood from Kai's face. "His nose is broken, but that's the worst of it."

Kai jerked as Loran touched his nose, then groaned. Without warning, his eyes flashed open. "Shantay!" He lifted his shoulders off the ground, as if to sit up, paled even further and sank back down. After a moment, his eyes cleared and he saw Loran and Jerran leaning over him. The panic faded from his face. "Jerran, thank the gods. I hope you've got the bastard locked up in a very small, very dark little room. Where's Shantay?"

He looked around as if expecting to see her.

Jerran put his hand on his half-brother's shoulder. "The off-worlder took her," he said softly.

Kai froze. His big body shuddered, as if absorbing a blow. Expression hardening, he said in a cold voice, "Then we best get her back." With that, he pushed himself to his feet. If he swayed, no one noticed. Water and blood dripped from his face and he looked at Jerran, at Loran and Mikah. "Well?"

Jerran and Loran stood, their expressions equally determined. "Yes," Jerran said. His clan brothers fell into step behind him as he stalked towards the building that housed his workshop. "We'll get her back."

* * * *

The first thing she noticed was the smell. It didn't smell of flowers or herbs, animals or people. It didn't carry any identifiers, actually. She just knew it was wrong.

She lay sprawled on her back on a somewhat soft surface. A bed, she surmised, but again, it didn't feel like one she knew. Shantay tried to open her eyes. For a long moment, nothing happened. Her eyelids refused to lift. A bloom of panic broke through her muddled thoughts, and her lids flashed up. The panic threatened to spread when she still couldn't see anything, until she realized that her hair was tumbled haphazardly over her eyes. Her veil and headscarf were gone and the long ebony strands had escaped their pins. Grimacing at her foolishness, her thoughts clearer with each breath, she raised a hand to swipe the hair away from her face, surprised at her fingers' clumsy response. Nothing looked familiar. She didn't recognize the room, a fact not helped by the dim lighting.

She began to push herself up on her elbows and fell back with a cry of pain as the muscles in her belly contracted spasmodically. It felt like her middle had taken a pounding. Gingerly, she rolled to her

side. Moving slowly, she eased into a sitting position on the edge of the bed and looked around.

Her boots and coat were gone, too, but she didn't see them anywhere. The room seemed a combination of bedchamber and sitting area, decorated in rather dull hues. Some machines were similar to ones Jerran used in his work, but others were completely alien. Clothing strewn over a bench told her the space was occupied by someone other than herself. If only she could remember how she came to be here.

"Good, you're awake."

Shantay leapt from the bed and turned to face the sound of the voice, stumbling a bit as the room whirled around her.

"Careful there," the man said as she lifted a hand to one abruptly throbbing temple. He came fully into the room, carrying a steaming cup of something. "I wasn't sure how much dayanthan to use, so you might be feeling a bit of a kick now."

"Where—" Shantay had to start again when the first word emerged as barely more than a rasp. "Where am I? Where's Kai? Loran?"

She didn't like the look of his smile as he sauntered to the tiny table and leaned one hip against it as he took a sip of his drink. He shrugged.

"Don't know. Don't care. And you shouldn't anymore either."

"What? Of course I care! They must be frantic..." Her voice trailed off as she realized who the man was. The foolish off-worlder who'd crashed his ship. But he looked very different from the man in the infirmary. Instead of pathetic and battered, he was the picture of good health. His golden hair was clean and pulled away from a face full of hard planes and angles, his strange green eyes seeming just as hard. His clothes and boots closely fit his lean body. Perhaps too closely. She felt her cheeks redden as the tight trousers failed to hide his arousal. She forced her eyes to his face, then blushed harder at his knowing smile.

She couldn't believe this was happening. Where were her men? Her mates? Terror shot through her as it occurred to her that something must have happened to them. But what?

Shantay forced herself to calm. Panicking wouldn't do her any good. When she spoke, she tried to keep her voice as cool and in control as she expected Jerran would. "Where am I?"

"On my ship, *Killian's Whip*." He took another leisurely sip of his drink. Shantay didn't like the way his eyes traveled up and down her body.

"And you are?"

"Killian Osphren of Daylak. But you can call me 'Master.'"

Shantay would have gasped if all the air hadn't abruptly rushed out of her chest. "What?"

"Well, until someone buys you, that is. Then you can call *him* Master." He put his cup to his lips, this time taking a long sip before setting the cup on the table and straightening from his relaxed pose. His fingers went to the fastenings of his shirt and he began to open it. Instinctively, Shantay took a step back.

"Buys me."

He shrugged, discarding his shirt and conveying his indifference in the same motion. "Such is the life of a slave, I'm afraid. Now, as charming as your voice is, I really think I'd rather your mouth was otherwise engaged."

In three short strides, he closed the distance between them. Shantay jerked away as he reached for her, sprang up on the bed, then down the other side, putting the wide mattress between them. His excited laugh was far from reassuring. "Perfect. Don't want to make it too easy for me. Of course, I'm sure you were taught all about what the thrill of a chase does to a man." Killian's arousal had become a menacing bulge in his trousers, leaving her in no doubt that he was 'thrilled.'

"If it's ransom you want, my clan will pay well for my safe return," Shantay said, desperate to distract him.

“So I was told. Don’t worry, I’ll get a good chunk of change from your men. Then I’ll get an even better chunk when I put you on the block.”

“But if my clan pays—”

“Enough talking,” said. He bounded over the bed, jumping down in front of her when she would have fled through the doorway he’d entered by. He grabbed her forearms and roughly hauled her closer. His fingers dug cruelly into her skin as he used his grip to force her to her knees. Quickly, he shifted his hold until one hand held both her wrists. The other went to the fastening of his trousers. “Come on, my little Kalari sex slave. Suck me and show me how talented you are. It always helps if I can give my buyers a firsthand account of your wares.”

Shantay froze, horrified. She had never heard of such a thing as a man forcing himself on a woman. Yet here she was, helpless to stop it from happening. What she only shared with her mates was about to be tainted, soiled by this crazy off-worlder who had stolen her from her home. Her eyes narrowed. No! She wouldn’t let this happen to her. Not without making him pay for it. Quick as a whraken, she jerked her hands into her chest and sank her teeth into the back of his hand until she tasted blood. He yelled and reflexively let go. Going for the biggest target, hoping to shock him, she dragged her nails down his bare chest. He cursed violently and backed away, fingers going to the bloody runnels she’d left in his pale skin. Without pause, she aimed for his eyes. He flinched away at the last moment, and she only caught the corner of one eye with her fingernail, enough to make his eyes tear, but not enough to debilitate. Turning, she fled for the doorway.

“You little bitch!”

She heard him start after her and ran faster. She ignored the other openings in the hall in favor of running straight for the archway just ahead, where she saw the glimmer of stars. If she could get outside, she could maybe find somewhere to hide, or see a way to escape. She

raced through the arch, but pulled up short when she saw it only lead into another, smaller room, with just three chairs in it. The stars glimmered through a large window. And they were everywhere. Everywhere.

Hard hands grabbed her shoulder and jerked her around. An open palm slammed against the side of her face. Pain crashed through her left cheekbone and the side of her eye. Killian hit her again before she could recover. She tasted blood, and it wasn't his. He raised his arm a third time, hand balled in a fist. Shantay stared at him through dull eyes, refusing to cower. Biting off another curse, he snarled, "No. That would be too easy. If you thought you didn't like what I wanted before, you Kalari bitch, it will seem like a sweet dream after I get done with you now."

He hauled her back to the bedchamber, not caring when she fell, and he dragged her across the floor, tearing the light fabric of her loose trousers and scraping the skin of her knees and hip. He threw her onto the bed. Weakly, Shantay crawled for the edge. She gave a short scream as he grabbed a handful of her hair and used it as a leash to yank her back. He slapped her again, though not as hard. "Stay the fuck here, or I'll add it to the list when we get started."

He pressed a hard knee into the middle of her spine. Shantay bit back a whimper. He fished around under her body until he pulled her arms free. Forcing her to extend her hands out in front of her body, he again caught her wrists in one hand until her fealty cuffs dug into her skin. "It's real convenient you're wearing these. Means I don't have to dig out mine." He leaned forward and touched something on the headboard. Shantay cried out as a jolt screamed through her body. The pain originated from her fealty cuffs, its aftermath making her skin tingle painfully. He let go of her wrists and sat up.

Shantay struggled but couldn't move her wrists so much as a hairsbreadth. It was as if her cuffs held her in place, but she couldn't see how.

Chuckling with malicious humor, Killian got off the bed and walked around it until she could see him. He held up a small box and waggled it at her. “Don’t you just love magnetics? Oh, I’m sorry, was that a little too technical for the little barbarian Kalari? We’ll just call it *magic*.”

Killian’s fingers moved over the box. The fealty cuffs jerked up, taking her wrists with them. The thin metal gouged into her skin as the cuffs rose higher in the air, compelling her to scramble to her knees. She started to stand on the bed, but Killian tsked and sliced the side of his hand into the back of her knees, forcing her to kneel, arms stretched far over her head.

Shantay’s chest heaved with gasping breaths, her breathing made more difficult by the constricted position of her upraised arms. Killian stepped up beside her. Her sleeves fell away from her arms, fully exposing her fealty cuffs for the first time. He traced the cut starstone set in the metal. A small frown furrowing his brow, he leaned closer to examine the symbols carved into the cuffs. Killian shook his head, seeming to dismiss whatever he’d been thinking.

Cupping her chin in his hand, he forced her to look at him. He examined her face where he’d struck her, much like a preyan dealer would check the beast’s scaly skin for dullness. “A bit of a bruise there. I’ll put some regen cream on it. Later.”

His hand dropped to the top of her shirt, caught in the delicate fabric, and ripped it free. Her loose trousers proved equally impotent against his strength. Shantay heard him moving around, but couldn’t see him. Even when she craned her neck, her upraised arms served as effective blinders. The mattress depressed behind her, and she felt the heat of his body as he moved closer. The sensation of his naked skin pressed against her back, and a hard, strange cock burrowing between her spread thighs, made her stomach roil.

“Please—” she began, then bit her lip. Without being told, she knew begging wouldn’t make him stop. Nothing would. A tear rolled down her cheek. Angered by the sign of weakness, she vowed it

would be the last tear she shed because of this man. “My men will come for me. They’ll avenge me, you foolish off-worlder. I swear it.”

His laugh came in a wash of hot breath against her neck. Killian trailed his hand down her belly to tangle in her nether curls. He pinched her clit and forced one long finger into her dry channel.

“I wouldn’t count on it, my *Jewel*,” he sneered. “Unless they can fly. In space.” When Shantay said nothing, he continued, thrusting his hips to drive his cock along her clit without penetrating. “Didn’t you get it when I said, ‘my ship’? We’re in orbit around your little dustball of a planet. Pretty soon, the ship will start us on our way to rendezvous with the bidders I’ve lined up for your auction. You won’t notice, though, since I plan to keep you well occupied for the duration of the trip.” He sighed, as if in reluctance, and pulled away. “Unfortunately, this won’t begin as pleasantly as I’d hoped. For you, at least.”

Fire raced across Shantay’s back and she screamed.

Chapter 10

As soon as Shantay screamed, Kai abandoned stealth and charged down the corridor to the living quarters at the ship's rear. Jerran, Loran and Mikah were right on his heels.

The off-worlder stood naked at the foot of the bed, arm raised as he wielded a glowing red whip. Shantay, equally naked, writhed on the bed in apparent agony, her hands bound above her. The whip had just begun its descent when Kai leapt at the off-worlder. They hit the floor, Kai on top, and the whip fell out of the stranger's hand. The red lash winked out, leaving nothing but a plain black handle to roll away on the deck.

Kai clenched a handful of blond hair and pounded a fist into the man's face. Something crunched and blood spurted. Kai didn't care. Maddened by what he'd seen, by the thought of what this bastard had done to their Jewel, he began to rain down blows on him. When Jerran's voice penetrated the haze, he saw the off-worlder's feeble counterblows had stopped and he seemed intent on trying to pull Kai's hands away from his throat. Beneath the blood, his face was a satisfying shade of purple.

"Kai!" Jerran again. "Let him go. Shantay needs you."

Shantay needed him? Grunting, Kai dropped the off-worlder like a rotten piece of meat and stood up. While he'd been busy, the others had freed Shantay. She now sat curled on Loran's lap, shoulders shaking with quiet sobs as Mikah stroked her hair.

Kai knelt beside the bed. "Shantay." He reached for her, hesitated. It was his fault she'd been taken. He was responsible for Moongate's security, for their Jewel's safety, and he'd failed. Spectacularly. He

swallowed heavily and felt his eyes prick with moisture. Kai bowed his head. Shantay must hate him.

Her touch on the back of his head made him look up. Shantay's beautiful dark eyes were filled with emotion. "Oh, Kai, my sweet one." She urged him closer. "I was so afraid of what that beast had done to you all. He wouldn't tell me anything, only that I'd never see you again."

Unable to resist, he put his arms around her and pressed his face against her belly, not caring that Loran and Mikah were caught up in his embrace. "Shantay. Forgive me."

"Forgive you? For what?"

"For not protecting you. For failing you. For failing us all. For—"

"Shh." She stroked his hair. "I'm fine, now that you are all here."

Kai remembered what the off-worlder had been doing to her just before they came in, and wondered how he could have forgotten. He jerked away from Shantay with a gasped apology. "Your back!"

"She's fine," Loran said, his voice a shade uneven with emotion. "No wounds that I can see."

"But the whip ..."

"A molecular whip," Jerran said. "It's keyed to its owner and, unfortunately, won't work for anyone else without some time-consuming tinkering, or I'd be tempted to turn it on this piece of offal. The only good thing is it tortures the nerves with electric jolts rather than physical damage." He waved the subject away, as if realizing he was talking over their heads. "Anyway, as Loran said, Shantay won't have scars or lasting pain because of the whip."

The man on the floor started to stir. Jerran casually kicked a boot tip against his temple and he stilled. Jerran left him where he lay and stalked to the bed. He sat down and Shantay transferred easily to his lap. He hugged her close and closed his eyes. "Ah, my Jewel. Thank the gods we've got you back." He kissed her hair and Shantay nestled closer as her men surrounded her with love.

* * * *

Killian Osphren of Daylak woke to agony in his shoulders and a somewhat troubling numbness from the neck up.

Blurrily, he blinked until his surroundings came into focus. He was on *Killian's Whip*, in the living quarters. From the feel of it, his wrists were bound in his own secure cuffs, magnetically suspended over his head. He was naked. And two men sat in chairs a few feet away, hatred in their eyes. The younger one he recognized as the barbarian he'd felled in Moongate, Kai, the clan's security chief. Purple bruises ringed his eyes, and the bridge of his nose was a puffy medley of colors. From their resemblance to each other, he surmised the older man was Kai's half-brother, Jerran, Black Moon's leader.

There was no sign of their Jewel.

More troubling was the puzzle of how the barbarians came to be on the ship, which at last check had been in orbit above Kalari. Killian had the niggling suspicion he was forgetting something.

No matter. He decided to try for bold. "You can't keep me here. I demand to be freed. I'm a citizen of the Third Republic of the Galactic Council."

"No longer," Jerran said.

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"I said, you are no longer a citizen of the Third Republic of the Galactic Council."

Killian curled his lip. Stupid barbarian. "If you don't release me, the Council will send soldiers to stomp on your little shithole of a planet, Kalari. Understand that?"

Kai growled and started to rise. Jerran stopped him with a look. "No, it is you who doesn't understand, slaver. First, I doubt the Council could be bothered to stir itself on behalf of a despicable slaver like you. Second, the Council, on the other hand, does understand the language of credits. Third, Black Moon Clan has rather a lot of those. Credits, I mean."

“Fourth,” interjected Kai, “Jerran’s lady mother is likely to take serious exception to the fact you tried to steal his Jewel.”

Their confident tones made Killian’s mouth go dry. “His mother?”

“Lady Jiri. She is ...” Kai turned to his brother. “What’s the title, Jerran?”

“Fleet Admiral.”

“Right.” Kai looked at Killian with cold eyes. “Fleet Admiral of the Third Republic.”

Killian felt like he was strangling. “Your mother is Fleet Admiral Jirinissa Huardon?”

“It’s been somewhat handy building the business. I get a lot of military work. Ship design, mainly.”

“Black Moon Clan,” Killian said slowly and felt the blood drain out of his face. “B. M. C.”

“So you’ve heard of BMC Design, then. I’m so proud.” Jerran stood up and Killian flinched. “Oh, not to worry, slaver. I’m just going to take over the controls for landing at Citadel City. This one’s a private strip, though, not the commercial spaceport. A little more secluded. Besides, it’s not me you have to worry about.”

Killian watched as Jerran calmly left the room. His eyes swung back to Kai. The younger man smiled. It wasn’t a nice smile.

“Jerran always was the brains in the family,” he said. He leaned back comfortably in his chair and crossed one ankle over his knee. “Now, where were we? Oh, yes. ‘You can’t do this to me. I’m a citizen, blah blah blah.’

“You see, slaver, as far as the Third Republic is concerned, you are nothing and nobody. No one’s going to come looking for you and no one’s going to save you. But unlike when you said that to Shantay,” Kai’s fingers dug into the arms of his chair, “you can take that as truth.”

Kai went silent and looked away. Eventually, his fists unclenched, but his jaw remained tight when he pinned Killian with deadly eyes. “Do you know, Shantay didn’t even know the word for what you tried

to do to her? Rape is unknown on a planet like Kalari. We call our women Jewels because that is what they are: priceless treasures. Only a madman would even think of harming one. And it is the Council of Elders' duty to ensure it doesn't happen, ever. So they've come up with some rather creative disincentives."

Killian couldn't have spoken if he'd wanted to. Cold sweat coated his skin, and his arms trembled in their bonds, more from fear than pain. His balls had shrivelled so tight in their desperation to seek safety that he suspected they'd crawled up inside his body.

"And slaver?" Kai said, his smile as cold as space. "You'll be screaming for death before they even get to the castrating."

Chapter 11

Shantay woke to the wonderful sensation of her mates' bodies pressed against her, seemingly touching every inch of her skin.

Jerran did something to the clan's ship—"automatic return command"—that instructed it to fly them to Moongate. It settled down in Jerran's workshop with the easy grace of a bird landing in its own nest, and the open roof slid shut over it. Loran and Mikah whisked her to their marital chambers, where they proceeded to pamper her shamelessly with good food, a gentle massage and lots of loving touches.

Still, it was hard to be easy without all her mates close at hand. Jerran and Kai had taken the off-worlder to face judgment before the Council of Elders. Her sleep, when it came, wasn't easy.

Now, callused hands ran over her knees and along her thighs, wordlessly encouraging her to spread them wider. She recognized that touch, just as she recognized Loran and Mikah's lean bodies on either side of her. Shantay smiled and eased her legs apart. Jerran's broad shoulders brushed her inner thighs. Strong thumbs parted her lower lips and a masculine tongue licked up her slit to catch her clit in an intimate kiss. Shantay gasped and arched her back, pressing her hips closer to Jerran's skilled caress.

"Shh," Kai said, and she felt him settle on the mattress at the top of the bed. His fingers smoothed the hair away from her face. He pressed a gentle kiss to her temple. "We're here, my love. We'll always be here for you."

Jerran continued to tease and nibble her clit, driving her passion higher with each lick and nip. She opened her eyes and met his gaze.

He lifted his head, lips shiny. “Oh, don’t stop now,” she gasped. Threading her fingers through his hair, she tugged insistently. He resisted only a moment before grinning and diving down to flick his tongue rapidly against her engorged clit. Mikah leaned in to suck one of her nipples into his hot mouth. Shantay cried out, her legs stiffening, hands clenching, hips thrusting as orgasm raced through her.

Jerran waited only until her limbs stopped quaking before he crawled up her body and hitched her hips up on the shelf of his palms. Almost reverently, he placed a kiss on her brow. “Shantay, queen of our clan,” he whispered, and plunged his cock into her dripping warmth. He was wild as he rode her. She held on to his shoulders with desperate passion as he bucked and plunged into her. His excitement fanned the flames of her desire and she felt another orgasm building. When he gave a hoarse yell, she was almost there. Almost.

Panting, Jerran pressed a hard kiss on her lips and backed away. He was barely clear of her thighs before Loran took his place.

Loran kissed her breast, over her unsteady heartbeat. “Shantay, heart of our clan,” he said. Like Jerran before him, Loran seemed to lose control. Usually the most patient of her mates, he pounded into her as if he couldn’t get deep enough. Within a few strokes, she was just as hungry for him, fingers digging into his ass to urge him faster, faster. Loran gritted his teeth and a shudder wracked his body. He clutched her tight against him and his cock pulsed inside her. She felt wonderful, but her second orgasm remained elusive. Almost there...

Loran made way for Mikah. Solemnly, he picked up her hands. The fealty cuffs were gone, replaced by rings of cut skin and swollen red bruises hidden under thick bandages. Thankfully, a healing salve helped numb the pain. Now, Mikah placed a kiss on the inside of each covered wrist. “Shantay, we are your servants in all things.”

Then, with a desire glowing in his eyes that was nothing like the duty that had been there during the claiming ceremony, Mikah slid his cock into her dripping passage and thrust into her until he shouted his

climax. He rolled to the side, still holding one of her hands clasped in his.

Shantay practically vibrated with need. She wanted to come so badly, needed to come. But her mates needed this more.

Kai. Sweet, funny Kai. Her young lover. He rose over her, matching groin to groin, and stared down into her face. Easing away, he slid down the bed until his head came even with her belly. He kissed her, just below her navel. “Shantay, mother of our children.” And kissed her again. Gliding up, he smoothly slid into her, thrusts as fluid as water. His hips rolled against her, picking up the pace. Shantay matched him, rising and falling with each plunge and pull. She could feel the others watching, but no one touched her, no one but Kai. He hooked a hand under one of her knees and guided it up along his side, opening her wider. She moaned. The scent of sex filled her senses. Kai moved her knee a fraction higher and leaned a breath closer. Suddenly, Shantay couldn’t contain herself. She flung her arms out, felt strong hands catch her hands, bracing her. More hands slid from her shoulders to her breasts, where they began to tug and tease the turgid crests.

“Oh. Oh. Oh, gods. Oh!” Shantay held tight to the hands holding hers and threw her hips into Kai’s. Someone said her name in a hoarse murmur. She screamed. Fire raced through her, but this time there was no pain, only searing pleasure. Kai’s voice joined hers as his cock pulsed his seed deep into her womb. Her knee tightened against his hip, pulling him closer, as close as she could. Flashes burst behind closed eyelids and every muscle flexed and she didn’t think she’d ever stop coming.

When it finally ended, she doubted she’d ever breathe again.

Her mates seemed just as wrecked. They lay sprawled around her, safe in their combined embrace, each touching her somewhere: Kai, over her thighs and belly, although he’d somehow managed to roll mostly off her; Mikah and Loran, each holding one of her hands;

Jerran, who'd taken Kai's spot at the head of the bed, tracing the features of her face with one fingertip.

This, she thought sleepily, is love. Love. The most important Family Jewel of all.

Chapter 12

Zahra looked at the silent woman at her side. Teeka kept her eyes straight ahead as they walked to the madam's formal reception chamber. Other than to deliver the message that Zahra was wanted, Teeka refused to say anything more about the summons. That concerned Zahra more than the summons itself. It was hard to fathom what could put such a solemn expression on Teeka's generally impish face, or what could silence her so completely.

Her confusion grew as they turned the last corner and she saw four strangers stationed outside the reception chamber's elaborately carved double doors. The men were imposing figures even from a distance. All were tall and broad-shouldered, their matching black leather trews and sleeveless tunics emphasizing strong limbs and honed muscles. An aura of alert readiness reinforced their military bearing more than the wicked knives strapped to their hips.

Dark eyes tracked the women's approach, and Zahra saw that each man wore his hair in the sleek, distinctive topknot of the Guardians, the Citadel's elite eunuch warriors. Only Kalaria's best fighters were accepted as Guardians, sacrificing their manhood for the honor of protecting the young Jewels and serving the Council of Elders as assassins and soldiers. Zahra didn't doubt these warriors' devotion to the martial order. Their expressions were so forbidding that she felt fear brush her skin with icy fingertips.

"This is the woman Madam Ourtay asked me to bring," Teeka said, a faint tremble in her voice.

Without speaking, one of the men opened the door.

Zahra hurried after Teeka, spurred on by the sensation of merciless eyes stabbing between her shoulder blades.

The door closed with a damningly soft click.

It was almost anticlimactic to see only two people waiting in the reception chamber.

One was Madam Ourtay. The aging beauty ran her pleasure house with a ruthless practicality Zahra admired. As long as the courtesans, male and female, pleased the clientele, they were well-treated, even pampered.

Zahra was a survivor. Her clients were always satisfied, and more.

Madam Ourtay cultivated the standard that her personal attention was a mark of favor. Zahra had seen her coolly stare down more than one client who made the mistake of treating her as a servant or common flesh peddler.

Not today. Haughtiness gone, Ourtay was all but wringing her hands.

Her alarm growing, Zahra scrutinized the woman who waited with the madam. She sat in an expensive, hand-crafted chair as if it were a throne. Wrapped from head to toe in a confection of embroidered white silk that deepened the warm tone of her skin, she looked like a barbarian princess. A starstone-studded headdress held back a waterfall of glossy black curls. A matching necklace graced the top curve of her breasts and gold wristbands glinted beneath her sleeves.

She was young, yet her dark eyes held both knowledge and a self-confidence Zahra envied. This beauty would make a fortune in any pleasure house. Without being told, Zahra knew that wasn't this woman's lot.

She was disconcerted to realize that the stranger watched her with equal interest.

"My lady," Ourtay said, dipping her head in a facsimile of a bow. "This is the woman you asked to see. Zahra bal Osphren."

"Thank you. You may go."

With another bow, Ourtay herded a wide-eyed Teeka from the room without as much as a glance for Zahra. She watched the door close behind them, leaving her alone with the stranger.

"Please, sit." The woman gestured to the low couch set at a right angle to her chair.

Zahra gathered her composure and sat, taking care to arrange the skirts of her robe around her legs. The costly fabric could have been the costume of the meanest whore for all the confidence it gave her now.

"Do you know who I am?"

Although months had passed, and sheer curtains draped the litter, Zahra thought of the slender figure she'd seen carried with such fanfare down the street in front of the pleasure house. She used pride and anger to give her strength when she said, "Jerran's Jewel."

"Hmmm." The woman nodded and her lips curved. "Yes. Jerran's Jewel. And Loran's and Mikah's and Kai's. I am Shantay of Black Moon."

"So, you've come to punish me for pleasuring Jerran? And he did find pleasure with me," she added maliciously. "Many, many times."

Shantay's answer was a husky laugh rich with innate sensuality. "Not at all. Jerran is a lusty man. I'm glad my mate found pleasure with others before our joining. Why shouldn't I be, since I am the happy recipient of his skill now and for the rest of our lives."

Zahra frowned. "If not for vengeance, then why are you here?"

Shantay cocked her head. "Vengeance, now, that's an entirely different subject. Tell me, Zahra bal Osphren, does your shared name with Killian Osphren mean you are kin?"

Zahra couldn't help it. She recoiled and almost spat the word, "Kin? Killian Osphren is no kin of mine. Far from it. He is simply the slaver who registered my first contract. For that, I am forced to bear his name until my contract holder chooses to allow me to change it or my contract ends. And considering what my contract period is, that won't be for a very long time. If ever," she added bitterly. It wasn't

until she'd subsided that Zahra realized the significance of what the other woman had asked. She knew of Killian. Knew, too, that Zahra had turned his avaricious attention on Black Moon and their Jewel.

"Ah, I see you perhaps understand what has brought me here," Shantay said, making herself more comfortable in the chair. The gold wristbands clinked together as she folded her hands in her lap. "You see, Killian Osphren was very clear that the idea to steal Black Moon's Jewel was yours."

Zahra straightened. "My idea? What could I possibly have to gain from any plot against your clan? You would believe the word of a slaver?"

"No, actually, I wouldn't. And least of all that creature's. I believe he would say anything in his attempt to save his manhood from the Citadel's Guardians."

"What do you mean?"

"He raised his hand to a Kalari Jewel," Shantay said matter-of-factly. "His manhood is forfeit. So is his freedom. The Council of Elders has yet to rule on whether he will be executed or made a servant of the Citadel, but that is neither here nor there. My concern is you."

Light-headed from panic, Zahra shot to her feet. "Me? But I had nothing to do with whatever he did!"

"Sit down," Shantay said coldly.

Zahra hesitated. She thought of the Guardians waiting beyond the doors, the room's only exit. There was no escape. She had nowhere to go, anyway. She sank back down on the couch.

"I feel for you, Zahra bal Osphren. For the little time I was with him, Killian Osphren impressed upon me what an evil beast he is. I can't imagine what your life has been like. For that, I am sorry, and I would be inclined to forgive you for the pain you caused me." Her voice hardened. "What I cannot forgive is the pain you caused my mates. Kai was injured in the attack, and all my men suffered for knowing they failed to protect me. I have tried to convince them

otherwise, but they are stubborn and determined to blame themselves, especially Kai.”

Zahra didn’t particularly care if any Kalari men were filled with sorrow, especially at the Black Moon enclave. Accepting she’d likely be punished regardless, she squared her shoulders. “What will happen to me?”

Shantay made her wait for an answer. “I wanted to meet you before I decided.”

“You decided?”

“Of course. As the Jewel of Black Moon, it is my right.” Shantay shook her head. “Even after living on Kalaria for years, you still don’t understand us, do you?”

What was to understand? Her life would never be that of a Kalari woman. No man had ever fought for her or cared for her. Only death would change her circumstance. Likely her end was coming now at the hands of Jerran’s Jewel. The irony was not lost on her. She didn’t respond, pressing her lips into a defiant line instead.

“No matter. Your employer says your greatest wish is to be free of your indenture. Is that true?”

“Yes,” she said, grudgingly.

“Then you will get your wish. There are conditions, though.”

Zahra’s lips twisted without humor even as surprise flitted through her mind at the seeming reprieve. “There always are.”

“Jerran says there are places you may go, planets or,” she thought for a moment, “stations in space with many people where a determined woman may make her own way. Is this so?”

“Yes. Many places.”

Shantay nodded, as if she hadn’t expected a different answer. “Jerran will arrange for you to be taken to such a place. You will be given enough coin, credits, to support yourself for a time while you get settled.”

Hope filled her for the first time since entering the chamber, but she hid it. “What do I have to do to get this wonderful new life?”

“Something I don’t think you’ll mind all that much. Stay out of trouble, never return to Kalaria, and never give me reason to regret my decision. Do you accept?”

Zahra thought for a moment, trying to see the trap. “How will you know if I ‘stay out of trouble’?”

Shantay shrugged delicately. “Jerran tells me he will be able to keep track of you, if I wish it. I’d really rather not have him do that, though. Are you a woman of your word, Zahra?”

“If I said I was, how would you know if I lied?”

“If you lied, you would have given me your word immediately.”

Zahra disagreed with the Jewel’s logic, but didn’t quibble. If she had a chance to get out of her indenture and all she had to do was agree to the conditions, she’d be a fool to turn this offer down. “Then I accept, and give my word I will abide by your conditions.”

“Good.” Shantay stood up. “You have some time to gather your things. The Citadel will notify you when the arrangements have been made.”

Zahra stood, too, but didn’t take the obvious hint of her dismissal. “What about Madam Ourtay? She may not wish to sell my indenture.”

“That woman will have no say in it. The Citadel will demand it, and she will comply. Ourtay is already in enough trouble for allowing a criminal such as Killian Osphren to use her establishment. Her license is in jeopardy and she knows it.”

Zahra nodded and walked toward the door. Her fingers touched the handle and she paused. Turning slowly, she faced the Jewel from across the room. “Why are you being so kind to me?”

Shantay glanced at the bands on her wrists, absently spinning the delicate cuffs over white bandages they couldn’t quite conceal. Her eyes were clear when she met Zahra’s gaze. “It’s time someone was. No woman should be at the mercy of a man.”

“But you were forced to marry four men,” Zahra said. “Kalari women are little better than slaves, locked up and forced to bear the children of many men. Everyone knows that.”

Shantay looked at her as if she had lost her mind. “Forced? I am a Jewel of Kalaria, Zahra. My men, as they well know, are at *my* mercy.”

Epilogue

“Maybe we should have taken her to a healer,” Jerran said for the hundredth time.

“I am a healer,” Loran said, somewhat testily for someone who was supposed to be concentrating on the task at hand, Shantay thought. Then another contraction gripped her, and she forgot to be annoyed.

“I meant at Citadel City. Or one of the hospital space stations. It’s really not that far—”

“Jerran,” Kai interrupted. “Enough. We went over this months ago. Hells, we went over it *yesterday*. Shantay doesn’t want to go anywhere else.”

Silently, Mikah drew a dripping wet cloth over Shantay’s forehead, lifting her hair to give the back of her neck the same soothing treatment as she took what rest she could between contractions. “Jerran. I’m fine. I wouldn’t trust anyone but Loran—” She hissed out a breath as another contraction tightened like a rope around her belly, making her want to push, push, push. When it ended, she continued, “Trust anyone but Loran to bring our children into the world.”

Concern plain in his eyes, Jerran quieted. He joined Mikah and Kai in seeing to her comfort, cooling her with damp cloths, offering her sips of water and juice, bracing her as she crouched on the bed. She knew they were all worried, told herself that when a particularly brutal contraction wracked her body until she felt like she’d split in two. It wasn’t their fault that women had to bear the children. The

intellectual knowledge was little consolation to the irrational emotions that said this was all. Their. Fault.

“Shantay, just a few more pushes, love,” Loran said.

Liar! she thought, sure this would never end.

“The head has crested,” Loran reported. “Our first little one is almost here.”

Following her body’s imperative, Shantay pushed when the next contraction came. She felt something slide from her body in gush of fluid.

“I’ve got her!” Loran laughed. “A Jewel! Our Jewel has given us a little Jewel!”

Shantay wanted to collapse. She knew she should be happy, but right now, all she could think was, *It’s not over yet*. Mikah and Kai held steady to her hands while Jerran took the baby and Loran dealt with the afterbirth. Jerran stared in awe at the little blanket-wrapped bundle.

Shantay’s renewed contractions quickly took her thoughts away from Jerran’s dazzled expression. Thankfully, the child’s twin was much more prompt in its arrival.

Loran gasped. Maternal fear spiked through Shantay, chasing away her exhaustion. “What? What is it? What’s wrong with the baby?”

“Nothing,” Loran said, a huge smile spreading across his face. “She’s perfect. Another girl. Shantay, you have given us *two* new Jewels for Black Moon.”

Shantay sagged with relief, too weary to complain about Loran giving her such a scare. Mikah took charge of their second daughter as Kai helped Loran with the final tasks of childbirth. Sleepily, she let them bathe her and settle her between crisp, clean sheets. Then, the men of Black Moon gathered around her bed and handed their little Jewels to their mother. Shantay kissed them and checked their little toes and fingers—and the pinkies that on both girls were noticeably shorter than their other fingers. Shantay gently held up her thumbs,

displaying the tiny hands wrapped around them. Mikah's eyes widened as he noticed the babies' hands with his distinctive short lesser fingers.

Shantay looked at the men who watched her with love in their eyes. Strong, intelligent Jerran. Loran, who was as brilliant with medicines as he was with people. Shy Mikah, who had opened his heart to her. And Kai, her sweet, light-hearted beau with the fierceness of a wild whraken.

Kalari women were the Jewels of their people, that was true.

But everyone knew it was the setting that made a jewel truly shine. Even a Family Jewel.

And these men made her *shine*.

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

My dad's career as a pilot in the Canadian military took us across the country while I was growing up, eventually landing me in the Ottawa area. A love of words and writing spurred me to pursue a career in journalism. It's hard to believe it's been almost 20 years since I first stepped into a newsroom, but every day is still a thrill.

I write in a wide variety of genres, from contemporary and science fiction to fantasy (urban and traditional) and paranormal. The thread that binds them all together, though, is romance. I just love a happy ending, even if the hero and heroine—or heroes and heroine—have to leap through fire to get there.

When I'm not writing, I'm generally riding herd on my four kids, two girls and two boys.

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