



This book is a work of fiction. The names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the writer's imagination or have been used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to persons, living or dead, actual events, locale or organizations is entirely coincidental.

Bound to Fall

Copyright © 2009 by Ann Somerville

All Rights Are Reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

Encounters: 3

Bound to Fall

Ann Somerville

For my dear friends and wonderful readers. You keep me going.

*Thank you to the many generous people who read and advised me on this. All credit to them, all errors
are mine.*

Chapter One

"Dinun?"

"Here, Moon." Dinun's voice, weak and pained as it was, would never carry, but his lover didn't need ears to hear it. "I...fell." Understatement of the year.

"Hurt?" ::Worried:: "Where?"

"Yeah. Uh...."

He looked around him, and strained up, gasping against the sharp tug from his ribs. The rocks he'd slipped down like a clumsy toddler, bore distinctive bright green streaks in the dark red stone. Moon should be able to work it out from the pictures in Dinun's mind. "Hurry," he whispered.

"Yes." ::Determined::

Dinun closed his eyes. He felt shivery, light-headed, and the pain pulsing from his leg and chest made it hard to concentrate. For the first time in his life, he felt close to the possibility of death. *Hurry, Moon.*

Suaj, working at his drafting table in their shared home workroom, smiled as familiar fingers walked up his neck. "Run out of things to do already?"

Rael swung onto the stool next to him. "Hungry, bored, needed a kiss." Suaj took the hint, and the caress against his nape as his due. "How's it going?"

"Fine. How's the big bird?"

"On schedule for the first test flight next month." Rael pouted. "They won't let me fly her. Or you, before you ask."

"No, I suspected not. Eggs, baskets, and so on. I've been promised I can test this, however." Suaj tapped the drawing transport of the engine he'd designed.

"Not the same. It was a lot more fun working for you guys when you didn't value me so much."

Suaj slid an arm around his cranky lover's waist. "We always valued you. We just didn't like you."

Rael screwed up his nose. "Is the word 'tact' even in your vocabulary?"

"Which language?"

"Never mind. Hungry?"

Suaj stretched, feeling the kinks in his shoulders. He should go for a run tomorrow. "Yes, in fact. Officer's mess?"

"No, I'll cook. Don't worry, I can do eggs."

"Very well. But let me complete what I was doing. I wouldn't want to leave a mess behind me if I die unexpectedly." He laughed at Rael's expression. "Go on. I'll be with you soon."

"Why do I put up with you?" Rael complained as he slid off the stool.

"I believe you said something about fur over your nipples, but perhaps I misheard."

"Oh yeah. Terrific sex. Had to be a reason. Five minutes, furball, or you can eat leather."

Suaj made a face as Rael escaped. He intensely disliked that nickname, but it amused Rael disproportionately to get away with using it, so he endured. So many sacrifices for terrific sex, indeed. He'd been called much worse things, after all, and by people for whom he cared nothing. Rael did not fall into that category in the slightest.

Dinun didn't remember anything from when Moon found him to when he woke up on a treatment table in Doc Uton's surgery, the smell of disinfectant and cough syrup instantly recognisable from his childhood years. He tried to sit up, and groaned as he grabbed his ribs. "Crap, that hurts."

"Careful there, young Dinun." The doctor eased him back onto the gurney.

Dinun stared up at the man, still trying to catch his breath over the pain in his chest. "Moon?"

Doc Uton jerked a thumb. "Over there. He and his friends brought you in, and a good thing too."

Dinun searched the room and found Moon standing in the corner, wings furled and arms crossed, staring back unblinking at him. "*You. Good?*" ::Anxious::

"Don't think so. Doc? How bad is it?"

He felt kind of floaty, and the pain was kind of distant. Drugs? He glanced down at his body. His leg, supported on a pillow, wasn't splinted but looked badly bruised. No obvious break but he didn't know what the doc had done while he'd been unconscious. The Angels must have kept him knocked out to

make handling him easier. X-rays of long bones hung on a light box on the wall. Sure didn't look right to him, though he was hardly an expert.

"You've banged yourself up well and truly, that's for sure. The worst of it is you've badly cracked three ribs and broken your right leg. You won't be going anywhere for a while." The doctor glanced at Moon. "Uh, is he going to stay?"

"Why don't you ask him yourself?"

Moon didn't wait for Doc Uton's question. *"Staying." ::Determined::*

The doctor didn't seem too happy about that. "You'll have to step out for now, Mister Moon. I have to set Dinun's leg and run some tests."

"No. Staying." ::Determined::

Dinun grunted and touched the doctor's arm. "Maybe...you could ask Sora to come over for him?"

Doc Uton glanced at Moon again and grimaced. "All right. Don't move, son."

Dinun had no intention of doing so, fearing he'd set up the horrifying agony he'd felt lying on the side of the hill after the tumble. "Moon, you don't need to—"

His lover walked over. *"Staying."*

"Yeah, I know, but the doc needs space to do what he's got to do. You like Sora, right? Can you go to her house? I'll probably end up with her anyway. Can't see me walking for a while. You could even go back if you like because they—"

"No. Staying. I. Worry." Moon touched his face. "You. Hurt. I. Scared."

"I know. I was pretty scared too. Where are the others?"

"They. Go. Will. Come back. I. Stay. Sora. Home."

"Thanks." Dinun rubbed his cheek against Moon's fingers. "Sorry about this. My hands went numb and I couldn't hold on. It was the damndest thing."

"Numb? Why?" ::Confused::

"No idea."

He'd been having some odd spells lately, ever since that really bad bout of flu. Sora had looked after him then too. Staying with the Angels wasn't too bad unless he took sick or was hurt. But more and more he'd been coming to the unwelcome conclusion living with them long-term probably wasn't going to work. He hadn't talked to Moon about it. Didn't know how to. They wanted to be together. Trouble was, the world didn't work so neatly.

The doctor returned, expression still a little sour. "Right, I've sent someone over to Sora. Mister Moon, if you're staying, keep well back and don't interfere. Do you understand?"

"Yes." ::Annoyed::

Dinun smiled at Moon to reassure him, but he didn't really blame his lover. People tended to talk to the Angels as if they were simple-minded, and they really weren't.

Doc Uton pursed his lips. "Very well. Just relax, Dinun."

The doctor wouldn't release him that day because he wanted to run more tests, and insisted on Dinun staying overnight in the ward attached to the clinic. Dinun, out of it on drugs and exhaustion from the pain and fall, didn't argue once Sora had come along to collect Moon. He'd be all right with her. The kids loved Moon and he was good with them. Getake had become used to the presence of Angels on and off in the last year, so no one was likely to give Moon any trouble. Dinun hoped not, because he wasn't in any shape to do anything about it.

He slept through to morning with the help of painkillers and sedatives. Medic Rafil helped him do the necessary, and Doctor Gusek, Doc Uton's wife and clinic partner, brought him a light breakfast and gave him a check over.

The food didn't appeal much but healing bones needed nourishment, his ma always said, so he made himself eat the eggs and smoked meat. Doc Gusek kept him company, sitting beside his bed. He was their only in-patient, and the clinic was rarely so busy the two doctors didn't have time to chat.

As he laid the fork down, he asked her, "When do I get out, doctor?"

"When Uton comes by. Don't be in such a hurry, Dinun. You won't be on crutches when you get out, not with those ribs."

"I have to be."

"Sorry, no. Wheelchair only for a while. Sora said she'd help you stay in your house, and we'll organise other assistance. What about your friend?"

"Friend?"

She wrinkled her nose. "The one with wings."

"Moon, you mean." Dinun having a male lover was hard enough for the townsfolk to swallow but that he was of another species went well past most

people's ability to understand. "He can't lift me. He's never lived in a house either."

"Then best he goes home until you recover," she said brusquely. She stood and scribbled on the chart at the end of his bed. "Uton will be by soon, and then we can organise the equipment you need, like the chair."

Dinun agreed politely and she left. He poked at the toast she'd brought, but he couldn't face it. How would he manage in a wheelchair? His house was small and narrow and definitely not designed with a cripple in mind. Definitely not a cripple with a four tarm tall winged lover. Moon wouldn't be able to lift him, and Dinun had no idea how much of the other nursing he could or would do. Angels rarely needed it. They healed so fast, even a broken leg only slowed them down for a couple of days. He doubted Moon realised how long it would take Dinun to recover.

No, Moon had to go home. Wasn't fair on him to be stuck in Getake for months. Dinun would go back with him when he was fit again.

Probably.

Suaj sat astride Rael's hips as they lay in their bed, and leaned down, resting his folded arms on his lover's chest. "You've been irritable this evening. Is something going on I should know about?"

"No, nothing. Hell, I'd tell you if there was a problem at work. Speaking of which, why are we talking?"

He pulled Suaj forward for a long, slow kiss, cupping Suaj's buttocks and massaging them with intent. Suaj was in no hurry. He enjoyed foreplay and the feel of Rael's thick cock against his own slimmer erection. He'd sit like this for hours if Rael would let him, which he rarely did. Rael's libido wasn't designed for patience. "Because I want to know what's making you so snappy."

"Sorry." He pulled Suaj down against him and hugged him tight, kissing his forehead. "Jefor was talking about the satellite again. He thinks we could have one launched in two years. I'm all for that. It would revolutionise communications planet-wide."

"Agreed. So why would that...ah." Suaj pulled back and rested his chin on his arms again, so he could look into Rael's eyes. "Space capability."

"Yeah. Which is stupid because launching a satellite into geosynchronous orbit and developing a hyperdrive aren't exactly the same things, and there's still no sign of a viable fuel source."

"But you still can't stop hoping."

"No. So...that's why I'm cranky. Feel free to smack me out of it."

Suaj wriggled his hips and Rael grinned. "Oh, I think I can come up with something *much* more distracting, Mister Kine."

"You happy up there?"

"Always." He'd prepared himself earlier because he'd been in a mood to be taken, and Rael never turned down that kind of offer. So he only had to rise, and lower himself carefully onto Rael's thick erection, a slow but pleasurable process Rael watched with wide, avid eyes.

When Suaj was fully seated, he stretched and clenched. Rael gasped at the sensation. "Zoka, you're tight."

"And you're big, stop fishing for compliments." He clenched again, relishing the fullness. Every nerve ending tingled, eager for more.

Rael reached for Suaj's erection, his big hands enfolding it, warm and dry. "You're the most amazing sight, you know that?"

"Of course." He smirked as Rael rolled his eyes. "I am, after all, a rather special creature."

"You are. Plan on moving, Mister Special?"

"In my own time."

He liked the control of this position. Rael's impatience had no effect on the rhythm Suaj set, raising and lowering himself with maddening slowness. Maddening for his lover, that was. Rael began to tug on Suaj's erection as a less than subtle hint, but Suaj knew that game now. "Won't work, you realise."

"Oh come on, Suaj. A little faster?"

"No. I'm enjoying myself, and so will you if you relax."

"What did I do to deserve the only lover on two planets with thigh muscles strong enough to build a suspension bridge with?"

"If you keep up the unerotic imagery, beloved, this will only take longer."

Rael made a face, but then plastered a leer across his features. "Suaj, I want to lick your nipples. I'll coat your cock with honey and—"

"Please, the bridges were better."

"But you said—"

"Yes, but you're incompetent at sex talk. You may use your hands. Please me and be rewarded. That's how it works."

"Bossiest lover on two planets too," Rael grumbled.

"Quiet. I've waited all day for this, and I won't be distracted."

"Oh yeah?"

Suaj suppressed a grin at the glint in Rael's eye. "Of course not."

Of course Rael lost the challenge, but they both enjoyed his attempts. Suaj permitted him his orgasm when it pleased him, and funnily enough Rael had no complaints afterwards. He never did, and smiled dreamily as Suaj wiped them both down, tugging him close when Suaj climbed back into bed.

Rael's breathing deepened, and Suaj, listening to that now familiar sound, felt himself drowsing. How had he slept on his own for so long, when being with Rael was the perfect way to rest?

He heard the words through Rael's chest as he lay with his ear against it.

"Will I ever get over this, do you think?"

Suaj draped a leg over Rael's body. "I don't know."

"I should have by now."

"You've been with us less than two years, and it's only been a few months since you realised you wouldn't go back. It's not unreasonable to be homesick."

Rael sighed, his voice still soft. "See, I'm not. I love being here, with you. I'm not sure I'd go back if I had the chance. If I could send a message to my family that Harnol didn't have a chance to dick with, that'd be all I'd want."

"Still need faster than light capability."

"Yeah. Ignore me, okay? I'll be stupid for a bit and get over it. I'm *happy*, understand? Being with you, doing this work, being here, makes me happy and fulfilled. There's nothing you need to do and I'm not leaving."

"Then I too am happy."

Rael squeezed Suaj against his side. "Can you put up with me being like this every so often? I'll try not to be a pain in the arse about it."

"You can hardly help how you feel, Rael. I am merely frustrated by being unable to help or offer a solution."

"That's where you're wrong. You *are* a solution. All you need to do is remind me."

"As often as possible."

"Correct." He kissed Suaj on the lips. "'Night, Fluffy."

"Good night, pale human."

Dinun lay staring up at the infirmary's yellow ceiling, trying to take in what Doc Uton had just told him. How would he tell Moon? What would Moon do?

He heard footsteps and turned, half-expecting Moon before reminding himself Angels didn't wear boots, and stifled his disappointment. Of all the people he didn't want to see right now....

"Hello, Jenke."

The man swung down into the visitor's chair, holding his hat in his hands. "See you made a real mess of yourself there, Dinun."

Dinun screwed up his nose. "Don't start, I'm not in the mood."

"I wasn't. Just...." Jenke twisted the hat in his hands. "Let's start over. Sorry to hear about your accident, Dinun."

"Thanks." He couldn't scrape up more politeness than that.

"Any idea when you'll be out? Doc Gusek came over to the council chambers this morning to see about getting some help for you. We're trying to sort something out."

Dinun turned his head towards him and glared. "What's the point? I'm screwed, so what does it matter if I stay here or go back to my house?"

Jenke leaned back and gave him a long, narrow look. "Doesn't sound much like you."

"Well, no one's ever told me I've got an incurable, fatal disease before."

Jenke sat bolt upright in shock. "What the hell? Spit it out, man."

"Multiple sclerosis. Been having these numbness attacks, other strange things going on. It's why I fell."

"Damn. Are they sure?"

"As they can be. Doc's got some new equipment and stuff—you know, with all the money. He offered to send me up to Polsa, but it's not like they have any treatment."

"So—"

"I can't go back. To the Angels. I can't go back with Moon." Dinun put his arm over his eyes and tried not to cry. He really didn't want to do that in front of Jenke.

"Well, that's a shame. I'm sorry, son."

"Yeah. Lot of it going around."

"Talked to your fella about it? What does he say?"

"No, and I don't know. I can't ask him to stay. Angels don't belong here, you know that."

"Maybe you should give him the choice."

Dinun moved his arm to look at Jenke. "It's not up to him. His pa won't agree. He already doesn't like me because some of the younger Angels are a bit too interested in human technology. Moon asked him if he could come to Getake and have lessons in maths and science, and Dust Storm nearly had a stroke. Moon won't go against his pa. The clan's everything to them. I know that. I don't want trouble for them."

"Still think you need to talk to him. Isn't that what you kept telling me?"

"Yeah. Nearly didn't go so well for you, though."

Jenke gave him a weak smile. "Oh, Keris got over it. Won't say it was much fun for either of us, but talking was the right thing to do in the end. Anyway, we still have the problem of where to put you."

Dinun shrugged. "Doc says I can stay here, least until my ribs heal. Don't want to bother Sora, put anyone else to any trouble. It'll be at least six weeks before I can use crutches, and my house is too small for a wheelchair. Can't be bothered thinking about anything else."

"So you're just giving up. Guess all that fancy talk of yours was just that—fancy talking."

"Go away, Jenke."

"Oh I will. I'm marching right down to Sora's and fetching your Angel so he can talk some damn sense into you."

Dinun leaned up to yell, ignoring the pain. "Keep the hell away from Moon. He hates your guts."

Jenke sneered. "Too bad. If you're going to lie there and cry like a baby, then I don't have much choice." He stood, shaking his head. "Looks like it's not just me who let a dream slip through my fingers."

"I'm sick."

"And whiny. Great combination, Dinun." He jammed his hat on and turned on his heels, striding out of the ward.

"Jenke!"

But the man had gone, and Dinun couldn't chase him. Damn him! Moon would freak out, and what good would it do? He hadn't exaggerated. He couldn't go back to the Angels' settlement and that was that. The doc wasn't even sure he'd be still walking in a year's time.

He covered his eyes again, and this time, didn't make any effort not to cry.

"Dinun?" ::Worried::

"Here." He didn't uncover his face. Didn't want to look at Moon and have to tell him the truth.

Quiet footsteps crossed over to his bed, and then Moon took his free hand.

"You. Cry. Why?" ::Anxious::

"Because...I can't be with you any more. Didn't that bastard Jenke tell you?"

"He. Say. You. Sick. Me. Need. Urgent. You. Sick?" ::Confused::

"Yeah. Moon—"

His lover silenced him with a kiss, gently stroking his lower cheek. Dinun's tears soaked his pyjama sleeve. "Don't...Moon, I can't go back. Ever. And I might die. I'm scared."

Moon pushed his arm away and stared down at him with his big, limpid eyes. *"I. Scared. Too. I. You. Help." ::Determined::*

"Nothing you can do, that's the problem. Jenke can throw his weight around and insult me, but facts are facts."

Moon stroked his hair. *"I. Help." ::Determined:: "You. Leave. Here."*

"I can't."

"Yes. Jenke. Say. He. You. Help. Sora. Say. Too. You. Leave. I. Stay. You. Home." ::Insistent::

"Your father will flip."

"Too. Bad."

Dinun let out a laugh. Moon coming out with a bit of human idiom like that never failed to amuse him. "Did Jenke tell you what was wrong with me? That they can't fix me, and it'll get worse?"

"Yes. I. You. Love. I. Stay. You. Home." ::Determined::

"You can't lift me, and I sure as hell don't want to ask you to nurse me."

Moon folded his arms—another gesture he'd stolen from humans—and glared. *"I. Can." ::Insulted::*

"Not my point. It's hard, and dirty, and I don't want to ask you."

"Dinun. Stupid. I. You. Nurse. I. Sora. Talk. All. Ready."

"Really?" Moon gave him a look. "Oh. But it could be weeks, and I still can't go back to the settlement. Moon, I can't let you give up the others for me. They love you too."

"Yes. I. Visit. They. Visit. You. Worry. No." He touched Dinun's forehead. *"Is. Messy."*

"In my head?"

"Yes." ::Sad::

"Sorry."

"I. Help. You. Leave. Now."

Moon tugged at his arm. "Wait! Moon, that hurts, knock it off. Where will I stay?"

"You. House. Jenke. Fix. Sora. Help. You. Stop. No." ::Determined. Irritated::

"Okay, okay. But...I think I need to speak to the doctor first. I can't just walk out."

"I. Find. You. Wait." And then he swept off, wings half-unfurled like a luxurious white fur cape.

Dinun slumped against his pillow. He couldn't even enjoy a perfectly good brood any more. Maybe that wasn't such a bad thing.

Chapter Two

Rael pointed to the photograph on the display board. The engineers and military officers around the table listened intently, for all eagerly awaited the project's completion. "Provided the test flight goes well, we anticipate beginning production on a further four aircraft in the next three months. We hope the first scheduled cargo—"

A female voice coming over the PA system cut him off. Suaj only recognised a few of the words through the distortion, but Rael's shocked expression confirmed what he guessed.

"That's Tusan." Rael stared incredulously at the speaker on the wall. "What the hell?"

"What's she saying?" Commandant Hedike demanded.

Rael, eyes intent on the speaker, held his hand up. "Wait."

Suaj stood and went over to his lover's side so he could also listen.

"It's a scientist from Tuzax. She's asking permission to land her ship. Here. In Polska."

The room broke into pandemonium as Suaj stared at Rael. His lover's eyes had widened in shock, but Suaj didn't know what else he felt.

Hedike banged the table. "Ladies, gentlemen, officers. Please. Raelne, Suaj, get over to the comm tower now and find out what's going on. Lasit, Krael, go with them. The base is now on full alert. To your stations, please."

As Rael and Suaj ran to the door, Hedike was already on the room's telephone, giving orders to prepare for attack.

The comm tower was only a couple of hundred yards from their meeting room. Soldiers saw them coming and rushed them inside and up the stairs.

"They're broadcasting on all frequencies, sir," one of the radio operators reported. "They're jamming us."

"I don't think that's their intention." Rael asked for a headset and microphone. "Okay, boost your output signal. Let's see if I can get their attention."

"Which frequency?"

"Whatever you like. They'll be monitoring." The two officers with them asked for headsets. Suaj preferred to translate through Rael's thoughts instead.

The operator adjusted the equipment. "Mic's live, sir."

"This is Kine Raelne of Tuzax. What's your position, over?"

He repeated this several times, until an excited yelp nearly deafened Suaj. "Kine Raelne? We thought you were dead!"

"Well, I'm not. Who are you, and what's your purpose? The Quarnians expect an attack."

"Oh, we're not attacking. I'm Fusil Dera. I'm leading a team of scientists who'd like to study the indigenous residents of this planet. May we have permission to land?"

Rael passed on the request but Captain Lasit shook his head. "That's a negative, Dera," Rael reported. "For now at least. Our people aren't exactly in good standing with the Quarnians at the moment."

"Sir," Lasit said, tugging Rael's sleeve, "can you find out how many people are on board, and if they intend to force their wishes through?"

"I can do that. Dera, will you respect the refusal?"

"Yes, for now, though we'd like a chance to negotiate."

"Understood. How many of you on board in all? And your position?"

"We're in geosynchronous orbit."

Suaj wrote down the coordinates she gave them, then pointed to the sky. "Over our heads more or less. Don't tell her that."

"I know. Dera, how many on board?"

"Twenty scientists, ten aircrew, thirty support staff. Military. We come in peace." She laughed. "Oh, I've always wanted to say that."

Rael grinned at Suaj. Suaj had trouble imagining this woman as a threat but that didn't mean the soldiers on board with them would be so friendly. "Dera, maintain your orbit. You understand I'm not the person to grant permission."

"I figured, Raelne. We can wait. We mean no harm, and we have no intention of removing any individuals without consent."

"Right." Suaj cocked an eyebrow at the obvious reference to the past 'visit' from Tuzax. "Guess they learned one lesson," Rael said to him off-mic. "Dera,

can you restrict your broadcasts to...?" He nodded at the operator. "Give me the channel you want to reserve." He repeated the operator's information, and almost immediately, the speakers in the room and on the base fell silent. "I'll be in contact shortly. Kine out."

He took the headphones off. "If they thought you were dead, why did they come?" Suaj asked. "That makes no sense."

"I'm confused by the whole thing. We'd better find Hedike, but I think this might be more than he can deal with."

It was indeed, and within an hour, Rael, Suaj and Hedike were sped under escort through the streets of Polsa to the presidential offices. Suaj wasn't entirely sure why Hedike considered him indispensable since his telepathy was useless over radio communications, but where Rael went, Suaj was presumed to go. He didn't mind, and Rael seemed glad enough of his presence. Suaj couldn't help wondering what this meant for the two of them, even if he should have turned his attention more to the possible threat the Tuzai ship posed. They had thousands of soldiers to worry about that. Rael only had him.

Guards rushed them into the presidential building where an aide met them and escorted them directly to President Bedun's office. The president was, as always, straight-backed and elegant, hair immaculately coiffed, her pleasant expression hiding an admirably trained mind. Suaj tried not to read it, helped by her adeptness at not projecting more than absolutely necessary. She was refreshingly free from paranoia on the issue, however. He'd met her before, but Rael had not.

"Commandant, Mister Suaj, welcome once again. Mister Kine, nice to meet you."

Rael bowed awkwardly. "Thank you, Madam President."

She gestured for them to sit. "I'm glad to hear the faith we placed in you over the pardon has been justified. Do you come here as a friend of Quarn or as a citizen of Tuzax?"

"Both, I hope. Madam, I don't believe this ship has come with belligerent intent."

She held up her hand. "Commandant?"

"We have no way of knowing at this point, Your Excellency. However, we also have no way of keeping them from landing."

"That's my point," Rael said. Hedike and the president both frowned at his interruption. "Sorry."

"Go on," she said.

"Well, they could have just landed instead of asking for permission. Given what they would have been told by my former colleague, they could treat you all as hostile. Yet they're being polite and friendly, and have respected your wishes."

"Mister Suaj? Your opinion?"

"I agree with Mister Kine, reluctantly." His lover shot him a look. "I have no love for the Tuzai as a race—present company excepted. We've been shown little good faith in the past. But the approach this time is quite different. If they force the issue, we can do nothing about it."

She tapped her pencil on the pad in front of her. "Commandant, can you give us any protection? Any guarantees?"

"Only what they choose to allow, your Excellency."

"Mister Kine, what can they possibly want from us they haven't already had?"

"I don't know, your Excellency."

"The Angels," Suaj said. "It's always about them. We can't sit back and let the Tuzai exploit or kidnap any of them."

She nodded. "Indeed. But it's too late to implement any serious protection or concealment. Mister Kine, would Joese have told them about Mister Suaj's telepathy?"

"I don't know. He told them I was dead, apparently. At this point they could believe almost anything."

She drummed her fingers as she thought. "Very well. I think, since it's impossible to prevent, we'll act as if it suits us to have them land. Commandant, I want every telepath at our disposal to be with the personnel involved in meeting and greeting these people, and as many as you can secrete among them as they travel about. Mister Kine, clearly you're hearing this under privilege. If I believe you've told them of our precautions, your status and pardon will be revoked on the spot, and the commandant has his orders as to how to treat you."

Suaj stiffened at the threat. Rael, eyes narrowed in anger, tilted his chin. "I don't work too well with people who treat me as a criminal."

Hedike frowned again, but Rael's expression didn't alter. The president's did, after a prolonged stare at her troublesome visitor. "Perhaps I stated that

rather strongly. I should have said you've now shown yourself willing to place Quarn's interests first, so long as no threat was made to Tuzax, and I can't see any reason why that would change now."

"Nor I," Rael answered politely through a still-tight mouth. "The telepaths are a good plan. If they're honest, then we're doing no harm, and if they're of Joese's inclination, then I want nothing to do with them. It's not Tuzax over everything. I'm not one-eyed."

It was the right answer, though Madam President, Suaj noted, had no idea how insulted Rael really was. "Glad to hear it," she said. "Gentlemen, I shall expect a delegation in short order. Mister Kine, as our only official translator, you're going to be worked hard. I don't want them to be told of our telepaths. They may already know, of course."

"Hope not. Suaj...um, Mister Suaj, speaks conversational Tusan. He could assist."

She inclined her head. "By all means. Commandant, their military must not keep their weapons or be allowed access to any sensitive areas. Mister Kine, you're not to be alone with any of them, even briefly. If you're to return to Tuzax, I would prefer you to have that choice freely and with our permission."

"I understand."

"Do you wish to return?"

Rael and Suaj shared a quick glance. "I...need to talk to Suaj about it. Mister Suaj. I haven't had time to consider everything."

"Quite. Commandant, how long will it take to assemble our telepaths and be ready as we can for these people?"

"Three or four hours, at the most."

"Fine. I'll arrange accommodation for the civilians in the Ochari Hotel. Mister Kine, Mister Suaj, you'll have to join them, I'm afraid."

"Of course." Suaj mentally calculated how much valuable time this business would take up, not daring to think about the issue with Rael. Not until they'd had a chance to talk, at least.

"Your Excellency," Hedike said, "would it not be better to have them at the base? Quarantine them from the population?"

She frowned delicately. "For medical reasons?"

Hedike coughed. "Uh, no. Political."

"Leave the politics to me, please." Her tone was polite enough, but Hedike still wilted under it. "I see no reason to exclude the existence of the Tuzai from

our people, and provided they're kept under close supervision, I can't see what harm they can do. Mister Kine? Thoughts?"

"I agree. The more of them who know the truth about Quarn, the better for everyone. Hard to make war on friends."

"True. Commandant, the soldiers will have to remain on their ship if they can't be billeted on the base without compromising security. I won't tolerate even the hint of an invasion, and I expect a vigorous defence of our sovereignty."

Hedike agreed with a meekly submissive bow of his head. "Yes, Your Excellency."

"Keep me informed. Thank you, gentlemen."

Hedike led them from the office, and the aide escorted them back outside where their automobile stood waiting.

"Nice to be so trusted," Rael muttered.

"Yes, I thought that quite unnecessary. But then she doesn't know you as we do," Suaj said.

"No." Hedike turned to him. "I'm not in any doubt where your loyalties lie, Raelne. If I was, you wouldn't be working with us."

"Thank you, sir. I hope I'm right about their intentions."

"Spirits save us, so am I. Because if you're not, there's nothing I can do about it."

Hedike told the two of them to remain at the workshop until he came to collect them. Suaj did his best to concentrate on his tasks, conscious it would be some time before he could return to them, but his thoughts kept drifting to Rael and what this might mean for the two of them. He found he'd made a ridiculous error in one of his calculations, and erased it with a sigh.

"Finding it hard to focus?" Rael stood in the doorway. He'd spoken in Tusan.

"Yes. Want to talk?"

Rael came in and closed the door. "Why now? Why at all?"

"The burning question, of course." Suaj did his best to keep up in Tusan as he'd need the skill, though his telepathy would make up the gap. He'd learned a lot from translating for Rael in the early months but his lover had a knack for languages and now spoke Quarnian very well, albeit with a heavy accent. Suaj wondered if his Tusan was equally disfigured. "I'm not expecting you to make a decision, or to consider me when you do."

"Why the hell not?" Rael glared. "You're my damn lover. You have a right to make demands."

"Maybe so, but I won't. You have a right to happiness and if going back makes you more happy than staying, then that might be the best thing for you."

"If we were married, would you say this?"

"Yes. Unequivocally." Suaj smiled, though it hurt. "You're my lover. I have a right to want the best for you, even if..."

"Even if it would make you miserable?"

"I have no right to give my potential misery more weight than your actual pain. Maybe we're getting ahead of ourselves."

"You think I won't be able to go back with them?" Rael made a rude noise. "Come off it. This is my ticket home. If I want it."

"Only you know if you do. Or if you do *enough*."

"It would make it easier if you told me to stay."

Suaj shook his head. "But I won't. I would never do that and you know it."

"Yes, I do, damn it. Just once in your life I wish you'd be a selfish demanding bastard."

"I thought I *was* a demanding bastard. You say so often enough."

"Only with work, and it's never for you." Rael rested his forehead on Suaj's desk. "My parents think I'm dead. How could Harnol have done that?"

"His moral instincts do seem rather crippled. But at least these people can rectify that crime."

"Yeah, but a message is a bit cold on its own. Maybe I could go back for a while and come home."

Suaj thrilled a little to hear Quarn described as 'home', though it was likely only a habit of speech. "Perhaps. That's what I mean about getting ahead of ourselves. You know I'll oppose any further exploitation of the Angels."

"Yeah, so will I. So will the president. But we can't stop them."

"They might lose more than they can afford to in trying. We're not entirely without weapons."

"Suaj, even the ship we were on could have wiped out this base without much effort and it wasn't even armed. You don't want to take these guys on." Rael sat up, eyelids drooping as if he was tired. "I should be happy. Why aren't I happy?"

"Too many conflicting desires."

"You know whatever happens, I want you, and I want to be with you."

"Then use that as your starting point."

Rael sighed heavily. "I am. That's the problem." He sat glumly in the chair, not speaking. Suaj wished he could hold him, but they'd agreed right from the start they would never indulge the need for physical affection at work. The office windows were unshaded. Sometimes ethics weren't comforting things to have.

A knock at the door and a soldier answered Suaj's "Come in."

She saluted. "Sir, Commandant Hedike asked if you and Mister Kine would come to the communications tower. They're about to start discussions with the aliens."

"The *other* aliens," Rael muttered.

"Sir?"

Suaj shot Rael a quelling look. "We'll be along shortly, Private. Thank you." The soldier closed the door. "If you're not ready, I can ask Hedike to delay."

Rael shrugged. "No point. Let's get it over with. But Suaj, stick with me?"

Suaj got up, came around to the other side of the desk, and leaned against Rael's back, uncaring who could see. "They'll need to shoot me to take me away from you."

Rael twisted to look up into Suaj's face. "Being shot isn't all it's cracked up to be."

"Then I shall avoid it." He risked a quick touch to Rael's cheek. "Shall we find out what we're dealing with?"

"Yeah. Better to know than imagine the worst."

"Thanks, Moon." Dinun accepted the mug of tea. Moon sat on the armchair and watched him sip, emitting confusion, as if still puzzled why anyone would drink steeped herbs for pleasure. Human beverages didn't appeal at all to his lover.

"You. Pain." ::Concerned::

"Only the usual. Stop fretting. Why don't you go outside? Go visit Sora's kids. You haven't left the house in days."

"No. I. You. Help." ::Determined::

"Jenke said he'd come by later."

::Annoyed::

"Still don't like him, huh?"

"His. Mind. Angry. Sad. Confusing."

"Oh." Dinun had assumed Moon still bore a grudge over Jenke's thoughtless remarks when they'd retrieved the Angel children. "I don't think he can help it."

"This. Know."

"Maybe you should go out then. I worry about you, stuck in here."

"I. You. Help." ::Irritated::

"Yeah, you said. But it's not a lot of fun for you, is it?"

"Fun. Later. Now. Help."

Dinun admired Moon's motives, and he'd made a surprisingly good fist of adapting to a human house and human ways, however weird it was to see him in Dinun's little kitchen with an apron protecting his beautiful fur while he made Dinun's supper. But it was like having a caged bird in the house, and Dinun could never bear wild things kept as pets. Moon belonged in the sky and the hills and the plains, not here. The longer it went on, the guiltier he felt about the situation. After three weeks he still hadn't grown used to it. Sora said people no longer thought it strange to see Moon around the town. Dinun wished he felt the same.

Someone knocked at the door. Moon rose silently and answered it, and Jenke walked in, nodding to them both.

"Good morning, Moon. Morning, Dinun."

"You're early, Jenke."

Jenke was due to go fossicking again in a week. Dinun half-wished it was next week already, because he hated anyone, especially Jenke, seeing him like this. But the man, give him credit, had been good to him, and it would have been a lot harder to manage without his help. At least he hadn't offered to help with Dinun's bathing and toilet arrangements. Those were embarrassing enough without Jenke's presence.

"Had things to do, thought I'd drop by now. Can come back later if you prefer."

"No need. We've got things handled, haven't we, Moon?" His lover looked at Jenke in his inscrutable way, and didn't answer. "Uh, would you like some tea?"

"Sure, why not?" Jenke didn't seem to notice the lack of welcome. Dinun wished he could be nicer to the man, but Jenke made him uncomfortable. Always had. Didn't make any difference now he knew so much more about him.

Moon fetched another mug from the kitchen. "Thank you, Moon." Moon inclined his head a little. "You're doing a fine job with our boy."

Moon didn't react. Dinun didn't know if he responded to Jenke mentally.

Jenke served himself some tea, then gestured to Dinun with the pot. "Top up for you?" Dinun nodded and Jenke poured for him. "Well now. What have you got planned for today?"

He was serious, Dinun realised. Did the man not know this was as exciting as his life got these days? He reached for his mug to delay answering. He had it almost to his lips when the mug fell from suddenly nerveless fingers, spilling hot liquid all over his shirt and lap.

"Crap, that's—!"

But Moon and Jenke had already leapt up to clean him, fussing and mopping, Jenke grabbing a tea towel from the kitchen and patting Dinun's lap.

Mortified, Dinun shoved at him. "Leave it! Damn it, don't...everyone leave me the hell alone!"

Moon and Jenke froze. "We only want to—"

"Go the fuck away. Both of you. I don't...just stop it! Go away! I don't want to talk, I don't want to be cleaned up! Get out! Moon, go to Sora!"

Jenke put his hand on Moon's arm. "Maybe we should give the man some time." His compassionate tone made Dinun even more angry and embarrassed.

"Dinun? You. Want. I. Leave?"

"Yes! Get out. Just...give me some fucking space. Please."

Angry tears filled his eyes and he couldn't look at either of them. He stared at the fallen mug and the sopping mess of his clothes, and wished the fall had killed him. At least he wouldn't be facing this slow decay.

The front door opened and closed. After a few moments he glanced up. Both of them had gone. Jenke had left the cloth in his lap, and Dinun wiped at the worst of the wetness, before hurling the thing away from him. Now he was alone and helpless, and serve him right for being such a bastard to Moon. Even to Jenke, who'd only been doing the decent thing. The problem was Dinun, not them. His body was breaking down, not healing. Bones might mend, but the multiple sclerosis would never be fixed. Eventually, this wheelchair would be his for good, not just a couple of months.

With no one to watch his disgrace, he let the shameful tears fall. What was he going to do now?

Chapter Three

"What's taking so long?" Rael murmured.

Suaj wondered that himself. "Don't know."

They'd been in position for over twenty minutes—him, Rael, five telepaths, and three hundred soldiers, a quen from the base at the place Hedike had judged best for the Tuzai spaceship to land. Hedike hadn't told the ship to come in yet—he'd need Rael to do that and as yet, he hadn't given the word. What more could they do to prepare?

But at last the automobile's radio squawked. "Raelne, would you request the Tuzai to land at the arranged position?"

"Yes, sir. Patch me through on that frequency."

A few seconds' wait while the connection was made. "Go ahead."

"*Nezeu*, this is Kine Raelne, come in."

"Raelne, this is Dera. Are you ready?"

"Yes. Be careful not to land on top of us. Killing three hundred Quarnians won't make you popular."

She laughed. "Understood. We'll be with you in five minutes. Hold on to your hats."

Suaj thought it odd the lead scientist, rather than the ship's captain, responded to Rael's call. Perhaps they'd decided it was friendlier that way.

Around them, soldiers scanned the sky with binoculars. Rael didn't even look up. In the privacy of the front seat, Suaj touched his hand. Rael turned tired, worried eyes on him. Suaj hoped this wouldn't trigger another breakdown. His lover was a rather highly-strung individual and though he dealt with work stress very well, emotional pressure was another thing altogether.

Rael stroked the furry back of Suaj's hand. "I'm glad you're here."

"I'd be nowhere else."

The murmur of excitement gave them the warning of the spaceship's approach. Thirty seconds later a deafening whine and a rising dust cloud

heralded the arrival of a beautiful, sleek, white vessel generating more power than all the output from the Polsa wind turbines, and with three times the efficiency. Even though it might mean more pain for his lover, Suaj couldn't help his awe and wonder at the sight. Much as he disliked the Tuzai, he lusted after their technology almost as much as he lusted after Rael. If only he could have both....

Hedike's voice came over the radio. "Raelne, you and Suaj should be ready to move forward, but not before the soldiers do."

"Yes, sir."

The ship touched down, sending dirt everywhere and making the soldiers crouch protectively. The engine roar stopped with astonishing suddenness, as if a recording had been sliced across the tape.

But still they had to wait, and wait. Finally a hatch opened underneath and folding stairs rolled out. Down them came dark uniformed soldiers bearing what had to be weapons, and behind them, more people without any obvious guns or defences. The civilian scientists, Suaj guessed.

Hedike's soldiers moved in. The Tuzai remained calm, and their weapons, though held at the ready, weren't aimed.

"Raelne, Suaj, go in."

Raelne acknowledged Hedike's command and Suaj started the engine. He drove them close to the group, and Raelne climbed out of the automobile. He didn't advance, only stood and regarded his fellow Tuzai.

Suaj used his telepathy for discretion. "*You can't stay here forever.*"

"I know."

They walked forward. One of the female civilians waved happily as she spotted them. "I guess that's Dera. Friendly, isn't she?"

"Are you sure you don't know her?"

"Never heard of her." Rael waved back. "Okay, let's do it."

The woman called as they came closer. "Raelne! It's me, Dera. Nice to see you."

She broke out of the group, her hand extended. Rael accepted it. "Welcome to Quarn, Dera. Let me introduce Suaj qel Gwan, my colleague and partner."

"Partner...as in lover?"

"Yes."

She grinned wider. "Wow. You really aren't dead. This is a story I want to hear." Suaj could read nothing from her thoughts to contradict her words. She was genuinely pleased to see Rael, so far as he could tell.

She was a middle-aged woman, her short, dark hair streaked with silver. Her green eyes glinted with lively intelligence, and the lines around them owed much to good humour, Suaj felt. She was probably good-looking by Tuzai standards, though he was singularly unqualified to judge. Her mind, glowing with cheerful, clear thoughts, attracted him more. He rarely encountered people past the age of thirty with such a refreshing outlook.

Rael smiled at her, as charmed as Suaj was by her manners. "I'm sure, but you didn't come all this way for that."

Another vehicle drove up at speed, and came to a halt a little way from them. Hedike and Captain Lasit emerged. Raelne introduced them to Dera, and then translated.

"Welcome, Miss Fusil."

"Hello, Commandant. Technically it's Professor Fusil but I don't like titles much. Call me Dera. Oh, but I'm being very rude. Let me introduce our captain and military leader, Colonel Tikmu Taj."

The colonel saluted. Older than Dera, and of painfully strict military bearing, his mind was much more guarded, full of assessments and suspicion, but still nothing untoward. "Greetings from Tuzax, Commandant. We're here on a peaceful mission."

"So I gather. I'd appreciate it if your people would lower their weapons."

Tikmu issued the command. Dera smiled. "So, Commandant. We'd like a chance to explain why we've come, and deliver greetings in person to your president."

He liked her, Suaj decided. He probed her thoughts more deeply, and then the colonel's, to find out what they knew of the previous mission, and of the treacherous Joese Harnol. Hmmm. Now that was worrying.

Pity Rael was their only official translator. He wanted to talk to him and Hedike together. He sent a quick warning to Rael, and when his lover acknowledged, Suaj turned his attention to the commandant. "Sir, I need to speak to you. Can you arrange another telepath to go with Raelne?"

"Werse can go with him. Problem, Suaj?"

"Not necessarily. I want you to know what I know before they tell us, if you see what I mean."

"Understood."

Dinun sat on his own for half an hour or more, the spilled tea chilly on his legs, his heart colder than his skin. What if Moon really left? Not just while his leg mended but...but maybe he should. It wasn't fair to tie him to a cripple, or to expect him to act as a nurse. Wasn't fair on anyone. Dinun could hire someone, maybe. He had the money. That was about all he had.

A knock on the door, and when he didn't answer, it opened anyway. Sora walked in and stood with her hands on her hips. "Hiding out won't fix things, Dinun."

"Go away."

"After I clean you up."

He ignored her, which didn't stop her at all. She fetched a towel and clean clothes, and stripped him with the efficiency and speed of a mother with three children and no patience with nonsense of any kind. After he'd first been injured, she'd run him up some loose trousers that buttoned down the side and slid easily over the cast. All he had to do was roll from one butt cheek to the other to allow her to pull them on. Just as well, since he couldn't even lift himself to help her, not with the broken ribs.

Sora didn't meet his eyes as she worked. Dinun's shame choked him and he couldn't see for the aggravation and anger at his helplessness.

When she finished, she stood, and took the towel she'd used to dab his eyes. "No one thinks less of you, Dinun."

"I'm a cripple." He hated the thick and whiny sound of the words.

"You're injured, sure. It's not easy, and you've got other things going on. But you're still you." She shoved the bundle of dirty clothes and the towel away from her on the floor and sat down on the sofa near his wheelchair. "I've known you since you were in your ma's belly. I saw you when you were less than a day old, all pink and tiny. We've been friends since you could talk. You think I'd change my mind about you because you're poorly and a bit cranky?"

"I threw him out. I treated him and Jenke like crap."

"Are you forgetting Moon's a telepath? He doesn't go by what you *say*."

She took his hand, a gesture she'd never made before. They'd never been the kind of friends who hugged or kissed. She saved her physical affection for her kids. "What's really bothering you, Dinun? You've got more sense than to think you'll be stuck in that chair forever."

"See, I don't know I won't. I won't be able to go back to the Angels' camp, won't be able to go fossicking, probably won't even be able to look after myself. The doc was cagey but I looked up Ma's textbooks. I could be dead in five years."

"So could any of us. You think Ryden figured on being shot by an alien last year?"

He stared at his lap. "You think I'm stupid."

"No, I think you're getting ahead of yourself. If the worst happens, then we'll deal with it. You'll always have a home with me, and Jenke seems set on helping you too, not sure why."

"I wish he'd leave me be," Dinun mumbled.

"He can be abrupt, but he's good-hearted. He's been so good to Ryden's kids and his wife. Man's a saint, if you ask me."

Dinun refrained from rolling his eyes. "Don't want to live dependent on anyone. Not him and not you."

"'Fraid it happens to most of us, when you're a kid and when you grow old. Doc Uton told me multiple sclerosis is unpredictable. You might never be worse than you are. They might even find a cure one day."

"Oh yeah, sure. With all those scientists in Polsa building rocket ships and radios and flying machines. Sure they're going to spend a lot of time on a disease hardly anyone gets."

She shook her head at him. "You haven't left the house in over a week. Kaji's been pestering me, and when she'd rather see you than your winged boyfriend, she really must miss you."

He scraped up a smile. "I miss them too. I can't handle them jumping all over me, that's all."

"I can stop them, and Moon will distract them." She stood, took the dirty clothes and towel out the back to the laundry, then came back in and grabbed hold of his chair. "Now, come with me. You need the sunshine for your bones, and I bought some of Tujen's sausages yesterday. You can have lunch with us."

"You don't have room for me and this thing." He banged the arm of the wheelchair.

"I can make room. Not taking no for an answer, Dinun qel Noto, so you just be preparing a nice little apology for Moon while I run you down there."

Like she said, she wouldn't let him refuse, and Dinun knew from experience all the sulking and whining in the world wouldn't work with her—her kids had found that out as soon as they could talk. So he folded his arms and smiled as

pleasantly as he could, and wondered exactly how he'd apologise to Moon for behaving like a thug. Maybe he needed to stop acting as if the world owed him anything, even fairness.

Suaj had a headache so severe he'd done what he rarely did, and taken a painkiller. Rael had offered to give him a neck massage, but his lover's frown indicated he was also suffering, so Suaj pushed him away. "No, you're worse off than I am. I suggest we take advantage of the president's hospitality and order some alcohol at her expense."

"I can't think of a good argument against it. But I'm going to have a hot bath first."

"Go run it, I'll order the drinks, and we can share."

Rael gave him a tired smile and went off to the bathroom. Suaj called downstairs and asked them to send up a half dozen bottles of cold beer, not caring if they thought the two of them were about to embark on a drunken orgy. Rael had worked his brain down to the nubbin in the service of Quarn today, which made the president's remarks even more insulting. Suaj had taken some of the translating strain, but to maintain the pretence he couldn't read minds, he'd had to mostly do it the hard way. It'd been quite trying for all concerned. Dera and some of her teammates were adept at picking up words and the odd phrase here and there, but for now, the communication remained slow and tiresome.

Also fascinating for what the Tuzai didn't know as much as what they did. They were aware of Angel telepathy, but not that some of the chimerical humans had it too. Joese Harnol had been most remiss in what he had omitted from his reports—and Suaj had to wonder why. The man had been discussed only briefly, but as soon as Suaj realised the kidnapped Quarnian woman had never made it to Tuzax, he'd quickly and covertly warned people to stay off the subject. There was more afoot here than could be dealt with using such clumsy translation.

A knock at the door announced their drinks. Suaj put the bottles in the little cooler and opened two. He stripped and walked naked into the bathroom. Rael was already in the bath, eyes closed but at Suaj's approach, he cracked one eyelid open. "Now that's a sight for a weary man."

"Me or the beer?"

"Hmmm. I'm in trouble if I'm honest, aren't I."

"Not today. You've earned the drink, and more." Suaj handed him a bottle and then slid into the other end of the generous bathtub. Rael had filled it with

very hot water, Suaj's preference too. He rested his feet on Rael's groin, leaned back and took a sip of his drink. "That's more like it."

"I'm going to be an alcoholic before these people go home. You're saying they're telling us the truth and they really *are* just here for anthropological studies and to make friends? Even Tikmu?"

"He's military, so of course he has his eye out for all possible threats. But they genuinely have no hostile intent, which makes me wonder why your former colleague edited his narrative so heavily."

"I want to know what happened to Kulil."

"He certainly killed her," Suaj said. "And threw her out an airlock. Again, I want to know why."

"Threatened to reveal his scam, I guess." Rael grimaced and sipped his beer. "How is it possible I worked alongside him all that time and didn't realise he was capable of murder?"

"We all are. I could have even killed *you*, had I met you just after I'd learned of the death of those Angels."

Rael stroked his leg. "I'm sorry."

Suaj dismissed it with a wave. "In the past, and I've gained some perspective. Though I'm not thrilled at the idea of these people going anywhere near the Angel communities."

"There's that Dinun qel Noto fellow who helped your people collect the semen." He winced. "Something else to hold against us."

"Perhaps not. The Tuzai gratitude is real and the debt is all theirs. We got nothing out of the bargain at the time, but it would appear we have now, if their offers to help and teach are genuine, which I believe they are."

"They want to take Angels back with them. That's never going to happen. Not without force."

"Agreed. But Dera does appear to be an open-minded and intelligent person, and remarkably free of prejudice. Her reaction to me was only curious and admiring."

"Hey, so was mine!"

"Yours was prurient and rude. We will not speak of it." Suaj glared at his lover until Rael meekly apologised. He held no resentment *now*, but he wouldn't allow Rael to rewrite history. "My emotional reaction is to keep them away from the Angels. Intellectually, with the proper precautions, there's likely to be little harm, other than our lost work time."

"And as Hedike said at least twenty times today...."

"...We can't stop them. No. Ironical, don't you think? We're in exactly the same position as the Angels were when the human colonists first landed. Invaded, in fact. The Angels couldn't stop them, and our ancestors did whatever they felt like. The miracle is that any of them survived."

"If we can convince the Tuzai how precious and unique they are, hopefully that will convince them to leave the Angels alone."

Rael took Suaj's foot in his hand and started to massage it with his strong fingers. Suaj sighed with pleasure. "Unfortunately, the other human reaction to uniqueness is to kill all existing specimens and collect them as trophies."

"Thanks. I wasn't feeling quite depressed enough, Suaj."

"Sorry. I wasn't aware you wanted me to lie."

Rael crooked his finger at Suaj to lean forward for a kiss. "Mmmm, that's more like it. They really don't know any of you are telepaths?"

"Not a one, and the president wants it to stay that way."

"Pain in the arse."

"Sadly, yes. Perhaps you should put what little spare time you have into creating a Tuzai-Quarnian dictionary."

Rael pulled a face and leaned back. "Maybe I'm going to need an assistant."

"Yes. I suggest Werse. I'm sure after working with Joese, he'll find you a much easier ride."

"The only person I plan on letting ride me is you, my little furball."

Suaj took a long swallow of beer, set the bottle down on the floor outside the tub, then slithered into Rael's welcoming arms. "Then let's get on with it, Mister Kine. It's been a long day, I've been very patient and so have you. I plan to reward you in appropriate fashion."

"The best words I've heard all day in any language, Suaj."

Pushing Dinun's chair was difficult for Moon, but he wouldn't allow Dinun to help. He wouldn't talk either as they travelled back from Sora's house in the dusk light. In the end, it hadn't been too bad a day. Kaji and the two boys had been ecstatic to see him, and between Moon and Sora, even Kaji's exuberance posed no threat to his damaged ribs and leg. The kids adored Moon and he indulged them as much as Sora would allow, showing them his wings, and flying around above the house on command, letting little Jol stroke and play with

his tall, furry 'uncle' as long as he wanted. Dinun felt a little jealous, actually. He couldn't even sleep with Moon at the moment, since he was downstairs and had to make do with the sofa. Cuddling in a wheelchair was no replacement.

But Moon had accepted his apology without any apparent grudge, and the world didn't seem so dark and hopeless as it had that morning. Maybe Sora was right. Maybe the multiple sclerosis would hold off. Maybe something else would kill him. Worrying about it before it happened meant going through it twice, as his ma would have said.

Moon closed the door and switched on the light for Dinun—something he'd learned to remember to do, since he could see perfectly well with the ambient light from the street, even if extra lighting made it easier.

"Boy, I'm tired. Think I'll turn in early. I'll call Rodin over to get me ready."

Moon crouched down and looked into his eyes. *"I. Want. You. Wait."*

"Why?"

Moon stroked the furry back of his hand down Dinun's cheek. *"You. Sad. Always."* ::Concerned::

"Don't worry about me. I was out of line before, and I'm sorry."

Moon made a peculiar hissing noise—the sound of an intensely irritated Angel. He tapped Dinun's forehead. *"Lie. No."*

"I am sorry."

"You. Sad. You. Worried. Want. I. Leave."

"Because this is no life for you."

"I. Choose. Stay. I. You. Love. I. This. Want." ::Determined::

"And what if it ends up being years, Moon? What if I never get better?"

"So. What?"

"You'll give them all up for me? I don't want that."

"I. Go. Come. Back. Have. Wings. You. Remember. Wings?" ::Irritated::

Dinun grinned. "Yeah, I remember them. So you'll come and go between the two places?"

"Yes. Good. Plan?"

"Yes, it's a good plan. But will you promise me something?" Moon cocked his head, a gesture which looked very odd on him. "You have to get out and about. Visit Sora. Go home, see your pa, Cloud, Flower, all of them. It's great having you here but I *can* manage without you. That way I won't feel so damn guilty all the time and be likely to bite your head off for nothing. Doing it to Jenke isn't so bad, but you...I can't forgive myself."

"I. Forgive. I. See. Here." He touched Dinun's forehead again, and drew his finger down his cheek, touched his lips. Dinun kissed his fingertip. *"We. Move. Bed. Here. Tomorrow. Ask. Rodin. Jenke. Help."*

"Down here?" The room probably had just enough space for the bed, if they removed the sofa and armchair. "But where will the visitors sit?"

"You. Lap." ::Amused::

Dinun laughed. "You're nuts. But okay, having the bed would be nice. I miss you at night."

"I. You. Miss. Much." ::Sad::

"Then let's make life easier on ourselves. Still going to be hard, though."

"This. Know. Be. Patient."

"Says the man whose broken wing mended in a *day*."

Moon shrugged. *"Advice. Easy."*

"Yeah. But I'll try. So when Rodin comes over and sorts me out, I'm going to give you a blowjob because I miss it. And then if you feel like it, you can blow me, because I miss *that*. How does that sound?"

"Good. Plan."

"Damn right it is." He grinned at Moon, and Moon gazed back with his huge, green eyes, radiating pleasure and anticipation—the nicest thing Dinun had experienced all day. He held out his arms and Moon nestled carefully against him. "You can read my mind. You know how I feel about you."

"Yes. This. Know." ::Happy::

"I've never been injured this bad before, or sick like this. I'm scared."

"This. Know. Too." Moon stroked his face. "Worry. No. I. Leave. No."

But Dinun couldn't help worrying. Not about Moon leaving, but what would happen if he didn't. Sora had convinced him to see how he felt when he could walk again, and it might make a difference, but wishing wouldn't cure the multiple sclerosis, and even Moon's powerful determination couldn't stop it wreaking havoc with his body.

"I. Ask. Rodin. Help. You. Worry. No. You. Think. Blowjob." ::Anticipating::

"Sure beats anything else I could think about."

Moon leaned back and stared into his eyes. *"Yes. I. Wise. You. Listen."*

"I will. I always knew you were smarter than me."

"Yes. Is. Obvious."

Dinun grinned. Yeah, it really was.

Even though he could read their minds, Suaj found the Tuzai scientists most puzzling. For one thing, he found it strange they could spend so much time and tie up so many trained personnel on what was essentially an intellectual luxury at a time when Tuzax's population was crashing. How could they spare so many people, and a spaceship, to study a population of aliens far from their home? He could detect no ulterior motive, and none of them had been trained with the mindblocks Rael possessed. Their secret thoughts held nothing sinister, at least as far as Quarn was concerned. Yes, they hoped to bring an Angel and more semen back, which gave the trip some point, but the whole thing was overkill—especially as they had no reason to expect hostility after Joese's dishonest briefing.

However, Joese and his crimes had to be dealt with before the Tuzai could be allowed to carry out their study. Allowing a week for pleasantries, diplomacy and limited sight-seeing, President Bedun called Dera, Colonel Tikmu, Commandant Hedike, and other senior staff from both sides to a meeting in her private office. Rael and Suaj were naturally pressed into service as translators, and Suaj for his 'extra' translations.

The president welcomed them all and asked Hedike to speak, Rael translating on the fly. He'd become quite adept at it.

"Colonel, Professors, there's an issue which Her Excellency wants me to raise with you. Your citizen, Joese Harnol, left this planet in the company of Kulil qel Feer, one of our engineers. All the indications are that this was against her wishes."

"Kidnapping?" Tikmu frowned. "He returned alone. Are you implying...?"

"Yes, I'm afraid I am. We haven't brought this up with you since it's a matter of considerable delicacy, but Joese lied to you about almost everything. Mister Kine was not lost, presumed dead, in a flying accident from which he miraculously recovered—Joese duped him and callously left him behind."

Dera drew in a breath and stared at Rael, who nodded. Her shock was genuine, Suaj saw from her thoughts. They really hadn't had any idea. Not even Tikmu. Very odd. "What happened to the others?" she whispered.

"Three of your officers were killed in a battle with the Angels. Mister Fane died of cancer, despite vigorous efforts to save him."

"They did everything," Rael confirmed. "They were going to let Harnol take him home and everything, but...."

His fist clenched. Suaj put his hand over it, careless of anyone's opinion. *"Stay calm."* Rael gave him a sickly smile.

"We knew nothing about this," Tikmu said, his back stiff and his eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Are you quite sure about the woman?"

"Absolutely sure," Hedike said. "I'll be happy to show you all our logs. It's our wish that you present the evidence to the appropriate authorities, and prosecute the man for kidnapping and murder."

"Of course. Though without a witness...." Tikmu turned to Rael. "Would you be willing to return and help with this matter?"

"Can I think about it?"

"Certainly. Commandant, I understand there'll be a little delay before we can head out to the Angels' territory because their mediator's injured. We can use the time to go over this matter in detail."

Hedike bowed his head in agreement and the tight lines around the president's mouth disappeared. She'd expected a fight or anger. But the Tuzai, again, were preternaturally understanding and cooperative. Suaj half-wondered if they were on medication.

Dera was still in shock. "Why did the Angels fight our people?" she asked Suaj.

"Professor, your people stole their children and killed their fathers. Of course they fought."

"We never meant it to be that way."

"So I understand." Rael looked away and played no part in the discussion.

"But you believe we can go there regardless? And they donated the semen. I don't understand. Joese Harnol told us they'd been prevented from taking the children but that relations were excellent despite the initial mishandling."

Suaj raised an eyebrow. "Professor, does that really seem likely to you? It took a good deal of delicate negotiation to collect the DNA material, and this Dinun qel Noto is almost entirely responsible for that. It's why we can't move until he can, and even with his help, your approach to the Angels will have to be handled with extreme care. Mister Kine's assistance to our planet is the only reason we can have a civilised conversation with your people at all. Excuse me for my rudeness, Your Excellency."

The president waved her hand dismissively. "No, carry on, Suaj. You state the case admirably. Professor, I too do wonder at your acceptance of Joese's narrative."

Dera shifted uncomfortably. "He was apparently convincing to those who needed to be. And he had the semen. How could that have been collected by force?"

"It wasn't. But it could have been," Rael said. "What he's done is send you on a mission to a planet where the people had good reason to shoot you on sight."

She paled, but Tikmu wasn't as shocked. "You suspected, didn't you?" Suaj knew he did. "Hence the large military escort."

"A precaution only, Mister Suaj." Tikmu spoke the truth as he understood it. "I've never met Joese, but I did think the Quarnians had to be an amazingly forgiving lot."

Hedike snorted. "We are, but not to that extent. Mister Kine is owed the credit there."

"So it seems." Tikmu nodded to Rael. "Tuzax owes you a great deal."

"I owe Quarn a lot too. Look, I don't care about me. I just want Harnol locked up for killing that girl. He deserves to be punished for possibly sending you all to your deaths as well."

"We'll do our best," Tikmu said. "So, Commandant, when do you want to brief me fully?"

Suaj didn't have a chance to talk to Rael in private or undisturbed until they were in their hotel room again late that night. He almost didn't bring it up at all since the prolonged absence from their home had his lover exhausted and irritable. He'd extracted a promise of a couple of days off in a week's time, but it still meant very long periods of duty before that with intense concentration and often dull translation. Suaj had faked a rapid improvement in his conversational Tusan to assist, but it wasn't enough. Werse was under pressure to complete the short dictionary which would give the visitors some measure of independence and take the strain from Rael and Suaj. Such tasks could not be completed overnight, unfortunately.

Suaj bathed Rael and took him to bed. Rael couldn't even raise any interest in sex, a sign of just how truly weary he was. Suaj wrapped around his lover, giving him the feeling of fur on his skin which Rael adored no matter how tired, and licked his ears and neck.

"Feels nice." Rael yawned. "So damn *tired*."

"I know. Rael...is it possible someone on Tuzax *wanted* the mission to fail?"

"Why the hell would they do that? If they wanted to invade, they could do it. No excuse needed."

"Perhaps someone doesn't like Dera. Or Tikmu."

"Damn expensive way to bump someone off." He fell silent. Suaj kept up the little caresses because Rael's skin held a peculiar fascination for him. Quarnians had very little skin hair unless they were sports like Suaj. Sparse fine hairs covered Rael's skin, and his face and neck frequently carried bristle now because he only had time to shave once a day. The texture was strangely enjoyable under Suaj's tongue.

Rael's voice vibrated through his jaw as Suaj licked it. "I think something's weird, but I'm too punchy to work it out."

"Perhaps you need to before you consider returning."

"Maybe I need to return to find the answers."

"Yes. You haven't decided, have you?"

"Not without talking to you, and I'm not doing that until I've had a good long time to think. And more sleep." Rael pulled Suaj almost on top of him, his favourite position. "'Night."

"Goodnight."

Suaj had actively avoided thinking about Rael going back to Tuzax, but now the topic intruded once again. Rael not going back despite his homesickness was always possible. Rael allowing Joese Harnol to escape the consequences of his heinous crimes, was not. And Suaj couldn't seriously argue against it, for he burned to make Joese pay for what Rael had suffered and the pain he'd caused Kulil's grieving parents. Someone would now have to break the news to them their daughter was certainly dead. Joese deserved the worst punishment in Tuzax's code for that crime.

Rael would go, undoubtedly, and Suaj would support him doing so. But would he come back?

He nuzzled Rael's whiskery cheek and his lover snuffled in his sleep. The choice had to be Rael's. At least Suaj would know he hadn't been shoved out of an airlock to die in the frigid vacuum of space, and that, if necessary, would be a comfort he could cling to.

Chapter Four

The coming of the spaceship had been the talk of Getake for weeks, and shameless rubbernecks from other towns had already invaded the settlement, days before the vessel was due to arrive. A raggedy tent camp had sprung up at the end of town, and the local storekeepers were doing great business supplying the incomers.

Jenke made his disgust plain, but then he'd seen spaceships before and wasn't impressed. "Don't these people have work to do?" he grouched to Dinun as he helped him back from his doctor's appointment.

Dinun had only just graduated to a stick, and felt distinctly shaky on his weak leg. The pain in his ribs had lessened and he was healing well according to the doctor. Unfortunately, the signs of his multiple sclerosis had not gone away, though they were, for now, no worse.

Moon had flown back to his home as soon as Dinun could leave the wheelchair, for he had to contact his father about the approach of the 'bare skins'. Dinun didn't know how that would go at all, considering Dust Storm's growing hostility to all things human. But Dust Storm only spoke for one clan, and not all his clan agreed with him. Dinun had persuaded some of the Angels to help out before, though he'd heard nothing about the aliens after that—not until he'd received a truly surprising telegram asking for more help, and advising him to anticipate a visit from the aliens themselves and their amazing craft.

For himself, he longed to see a spaceship again and have a chance to explore it when the situation wasn't so tense. The Tuzai engineer in Polsa had done good things, people said, and already the regions saw some of the benefits. Airplanes visiting remote towns. Money flowing along with infrastructure projects. Reports of automobiles being available for civilians, and expansion of biofuel plantations and power generation. Already some of the settlements closer to Polsa had been connected to a new radio network and could communicate instantaneously by voice. Getake would be connected in the next two years, so they said.

"Can't begrudge them their curiosity," Dinun said, watching his feet. "I sure would like to fly in one of those things."

"Looks like you'll have your chance. Maybe you could find room for a few more of us?"

Dinun grinned. "I'll ask my good pals from Tuzax if they mind. All these folk are bringing money into the town, so why do you mind?"

"Don't need the money. Don't like being stared at. I reckon your Moon didn't either."

"Not much. Some of them could learn some manners." Moon hadn't taken at all kindly to two children—strangers to the town—running up and grabbing his wings, trying to make him unfurl them. He had flown back to his settlement the next day, still hissing in anger over the incident.

"That's my point. We know how to treat him. They don't."

Dinun gave the man a look. "I recall a certain councillor...."

"Yes, yes, I know. I learned my lesson. He forgives me. He said so. Mighty nice of him to say it, I thought."

"He's a nice guy."

"Yes, he is," Jenke said a little wistfully. "You're lucky."

"Don't always feel it."

"Now don't start up that self-pitying nonsense again or I'll sic Sora onto you. Here we are. You sure you won't come over for supper?"

"No, thank you. You don't have to worry about me. I can manage fine."

"Sure, but you mope and worry people, and Moon specially asked Sora and me to look after you. I'll bring over some of Keris's cooking—how about that? I won't stay."

Dinun repressed a sigh. "Sure. She's a great cook. Thanks." Sora had lectured him about being more gracious when people offered to help—said it was a kindness to let them and he shouldn't be such a hard arse about it. Jenke didn't grate on him as much he used to, or as much as others did, like the doctors. "But I'm fine for now."

He reached determinedly for his front door knob because Jenke and Moon and the others had got into the habit of opening the door for him while he'd been in the chair and he was trying to train them out of it.

"Okay. See you later. If you change your mind, just come on over."

Dinun waved the man off and limped into his house with a sense of relief. The place felt empty. He hoped Moon would come back before the aliens arrived in three days' time.

He didn't know much about what they wanted. To study and meet the Angels, he'd been told. Made a change from the last time they turned up, for sure. One of the guys Dinun and his helpers had caught—the engineer—was coming back as a translator. Should be interesting. He better not try anything funny though.

President Bedun adamantly stated no Tuzai military could go with their scientists into the Angel exclusion zone. After some polite negotiation she permitted Colonel Tikmu and two of his officers to travel with the team, though Suaj could see no reason for it. Tikmu was only protecting the honour and welfare of some important people—he had no ulterior motive—but clearly he didn't understand the extent to which he insulted the Quarnians by his insistence. All the Tuzai Suaj had encountered so far—with the exception of Dera—seemed to be somewhat clumsy, socially. Even Rael's diplomatic instincts were often too dull to cope with the negotiations required involving their military. Perhaps the Angel DNA conferred a degree of empathy along with telepathy—a fascinating concept he probably wouldn't mention anytime soon.

But finally they had word their contact in Getake was well enough to cope with their arrival, and Suaj and Rael had done all they could to leave their work in a fit state. Werse's little dictionary helped the Tuzai considerably. There was nothing left but to actually head west and engage with the Angels, and now they were ready to go.

They had an early start, but his brain refused to be convinced of the need for sleep. "You're like a six-year-old the night before his birthday," Rael commented dryly as Suaj rolled over in bed again, still unable to sleep.

"I'm sorry to keep you awake."

"Don't be silly. Come here." He pulled Suaj to him and kissed him tenderly before releasing him. "Is it the spaceship or the Angels you're most excited about?"

"Both. Not merely excitement. Worry too."

"You've read their minds. You know they're not up to anything."

"I know but...." He sighed deeply. "I'm being ridiculous and it aggravates me."

"Suaj gel Gwan showing a flaw. Wonders will never cease."

"You're also aggravating."

"Yep. You should relax and enjoy it. It's a vacation."

"Not really. We're both working, and quite hard."

"True, but time out of the office with you, seeing Angels...." Rael kissed him again. "Could be fun. The worst that can happen is it'll be boring."

"True."

"Then go to sleep. Want a blowjob?"

"Another one?"

"Sure. It's a hardship but I'll struggle on. Only for you, of course."

Suaj rolled on his back and poked Rael in the side. "Oh, go ahead. At least you'll stop talking."

The journey took a little over two hours. Though he'd experienced it before, and was no stranger to flight, Suaj felt the same rush of sheer joy and wonder as the first time. So much *power*, and to think he sat in a craft that had come from light years away. A trip to the moons above them would take less time than the trip to this small western settlement in the middle of nowhere. A tiny part of him that, as a professional engineer, he could never acknowledge, thought it magical. Miraculous even. Even though he knew how the miracle happened, he remained in awed thrall to these wondrous spacecraft. Rael understood, for he'd fallen under the same spell as a child. The difference was, he'd grown up to live the dream of space flight. Suaj didn't know if he'd ever have the chance in his lifetime.

The local council in Getake had been asked to keep people away from the landing site, but as the ship descended, Suaj realised the council's control was tenuous at best. Blessed spirits, there were hundreds of people waiting for them. Surely not all from this tiny settlement?

Rael leaned over to look out the window. "Looks like we're the biggest show that's hit this place in a long while."

"I wasn't expecting this. I should have, I suppose."

Dera came to stand by their seats. "They look friendly. Are they?"

"Hard to tell, but no one's carrying any weapons. Hope you've learned enough Quarnian to make a good impression."

She smiled. "I've been practising. *Good day, I am pleased to meet you all,*" she said in Quarnian. "How's that?"

"Not bad," Suaj allowed. "But we should still let the soldiers secure the area first."

"I'm worried it'll offend people," she said, frowning.

Suaj refrained from pointing out it was less likely to cause offence than the kidnap and murder her race had committed against the Angels and the human Quarnians both. "Can't be helped."

"Everyone, prepare for disembarkation," the captain announced over the intercom.

Suaj and Rael did nothing, though Dera and the other Tuzai hovered impatiently at the windows. Captain Lasit and the soldiers would take a little time to ensure order and security, and have the necessary officials brought forward to meet the scientists. Rael seemed calm, though he could only have the worst memories of his time here as an injured prisoner.

"No mixed emotions?"

"No. They treated me decently, considering. You all did, really."

"I'm glad of that."

Rael gave him a little smile, and resumed looking out the window.

On the ground several people had separated out from the crowd—middle-aged and older men and women, and a younger man, using a stick, looking a little uncomfortable. That had to be Dinun qel Noto. The man with an Angel lover. Suaj had been ragingly jealous of him from the moment he'd learned of his existence, but here he was at last, in person. He seemed so ordinary to have done something so *extra*-ordinary.

Lasit spoke into one of the little hand radios they all carried, and a few seconds later the captain came onto the intercom again. "Professor Fusil, Mister Kine, Mister Suaj, please disembark."

"Ready or not," Rael murmured.

The crowd's silence unnerved Suaj a little. It felt predatory, threatening, as if they saw him and the others as enemies. But the mayor and councillors who came forward to greet them all smiled in a friendly fashion, even at Rael. His fluent Quarnian clearly impressed them as he introduced the other Tuzai.

"And Dinun qel Noto?" Suaj asked, pretending he didn't know very well which of the people hanging back he was.

"Here."

The man with a stick limped slowly over. One of the councillors, a tall, rangy man, went over to offer a hand. Dinun looked about to refuse but then allowed the assistance.

"Thanks, Jenke," Suaj heard him say, though his thoughts were less grateful. History there, apparently. "I'm Dinun. Pleased to meet you...again," he added somewhat coolly to Rael.

"Pleased to meet you under better circumstances, Mister Dinun. I'm Kine Raelne. You can call me Raelne—or Mister Kine if you prefer."

Dinun nodded, but didn't say the rude things he was thinking. Suaj, of course, had to pretend he knew nothing of them, but he didn't hold it against the man—after all, Rael *had* threatened him and his lover, and done a lot of harm. "Dinun, I'm Suaj."

He held out his hand. Dinun took it, then registered the oddity of the skin colour and fur on an apparently chimerical human. Suaj expected his surprise—those with his particular morph were exceedingly rare, after all. "Are you—?"

Suaj cut off the inevitable question, since this wasn't the place for it. "As human as you. I'll explain later. Ah...is your friend, Small Moon, going to come later?"

"He might. I thought I'd check you all out first."

The mayor coughed, irritated at Dinun's bluntness, though Suaj thought it perfectly reasonable he should be so protective. "Mister Suaj, would you please let your companions know we've set up a little reception for them in the council rooms? We don't have a hotel or boarding house in the town, but they told us you had accommodation on that thing?"

"Yes, we do. Let me inform them."

Dera and her people smiled and thanked the mayor for the invitation in halting Quarnian, which went down well. Dinun was less impressed and kept away from the councillors as everyone walked back to town—although the fascinated crowd remained to gawp at the spaceship and the soldiers guarding it.

Dinun came alongside Suaj as Rael stayed back to translate for the mayor and Dera. "Figure you can shake these guys for a few minutes?" he murmured. "I think you should meet someone."

"Someone with wings?"

Dinun jerked. *"You read minds too?"*

"Yes. Only Raelne knows, of the Tuzai. Don't tell them."

"I won't." He grinned. "That's a hell of an advantage."

"Isn't it? I'll make an excuse and we can split off closer to town. I've wanted to meet an Angel all my life."

"Not surprised." He thought but didn't 'say' a question about Suaj's wings. Suaj respected his tact. "You trust these people?"

"Rael, with my life. The others...to a limited extent."

Dinun narrowed his eyes. *"He's your lover, isn't he?"*

"Yes. You have a problem with that?"

"Yeah, but I'll get over it. He won't be the first person I've met I started out on the wrong foot with."

The tall councillor, Suaj realised. He resisted the temptation to poke more, but there was a story there, most definitely.

As they drew closer to the cluster of houses and low buildings that made up Getake, Suaj drifted back alongside Rael. *"Dinun wants me to meet his lover in private. Cover for me, will you?"*

"Damn, I wanted to be there."

"Sorry. He doesn't like you, which isn't surprising, and doesn't trust the others yet. Give the man time."

"As much as he wants. He knows you're a telepath?"

"Yes, and understands the need for secrecy. I'll tell you about it later."

He spoke aloud about Dinun wanting a private word regarding the Angels before the meeting, and Rael conveyed it convincingly. Shortly after, Suaj climbed aboard Dinun's little cart to be driven into town. After handing the cart and rejer over to the stables, they walked slowly together to a small house on the only street in the settlement.

Dinun hesitated at the door. "I didn't know you'd be with the others, so I didn't have a chance to warn him."

"I think you'll find he already knows. And the others."

Dinun gave him a startled look. "Oh. I forgot you could...I didn't know if they'd hang around, see."

"No harm done. Shall we go in?"

Dinun wasn't sure where the impulse to bring Suaj back to the house had come from, but he just *knew* he had to. The man looked so much like a clothed Angel, it was slightly horrifying, even if Suaj wasn't really an Angel...

But then he remembered the man was a telepath, and glanced at him in embarrassment. "Sorry."

Suaj's expression revealed as little as Moon's. "I don't blame people for their thoughts, Dinun, and yours aren't offensive."

"Hope not." He opened the front door and stepped in, Suaj behind him.

The three Angels in the house stood up, and Suaj inhaled sharply. "Suaj, meet Moon, Cloud and Flower. I think I'll let you introduce yourself."

He sat down to watch, and ease his aching leg. Pride had prevented him from using a wheelchair out to the landing, but he regretted it now. Still, nothing would distract him from watching the Angels meet this strangest of strangers.

Cloud and Flower hung back while Moon stepped forward. Suaj stood frozen on the spot, eyes wide with strong emotion. Moon reached out, touched Suaj's face, then his bared, fur-covered arms. Suaj's face contorted, and Moon pulled him into a hug.

Dinun turned to Cloud. *"Is he all right?"*

"Sad. Is. Good. Is. Moon. Help. Wait."

This, Dinun hadn't expected. Or maybe he had. He'd gone with his instincts, and it had been the right thing to do.

"Welcome, cousin. We did not expect you."

To his surprise, Suaj 'heard' the words in the Angels' language. Nothing like interpreting Rael's words from Tusan. *"I have long wanted to meet your people, Small Moon."*

Moon touched Suaj's face, then his arms. *"Where are your wings, little one?"*

"They...my parents...they removed them."

Moon pulled him into a tight embrace, and Suaj, overcome by the sudden flood of pure warm sympathy, wept as he had never done in his life, not over this, not over anything. *"Your pain has been so great. Why did they do such a cruel thing?"*

"They thought...I'm not really one of you, Small Moon. I only look a little like you."

"You are not one of them either, cousin. Not if they took your wings and your happiness."

"I'm happy. So much now I've met you. You are more beautiful than I ever imagined."

"So Dinun says." ::Amused:: "You are beautiful too, despite these coverings they make you wear."

"I used to wear more. My lover, Rael, convinced me to stop."

::Angry:: "He is of those who stole my child, and killed my kin. Your kin, cousin."

"Yes. He's sorry, and tried to make amends. He must make his peace with you. I think he's a good man, and I love him."

"I see that in your mind, little one. I won't harm him unless he attacks, but he is our enemy."

"That's fair."

"But you are like us in your thoughts. You will always be welcome with us."

Suaj found himself surrounded by tall, beautiful creatures, hugging him from all directions. He closed his eyes and let their affection and friendship envelop his mind as their furry arms enveloped his body. *"I wish I hadn't taken so long to meet you."*

"You came finally. This is good." ::Happy::

Yes, it was.

Dinun cleared his throat. "Um, the mayor's probably wondering where we got to."

Suaj wiped his eyes and broke away from the Angels. *"We will speak later, my cousins."*

"Assuredly," Moon told him, patting his shoulder.

"Are you going to bring Moon with you?"

From Dinun's thoughts, Suaj knew Dinun hadn't planned to, but Suaj's presence made a difference. "Moon? Would you three like to come?"

Moon looked at his brother, Cloud, and his friend, Flower, before replying in halting Quarnian, so very different from their natural language. *"Yes. We. Come. Show. Them."*

"It will give them a chance to assess the Tuzai in a safe environment. Your townsfolk are used to them, are they not?" Suaj said.

"Pretty much. Moon at least. Cloud...you want to be around so many humans?"

"I. Go. Bare skins. Me. Worry. No."

"I'll monitor things on both sides, Dinun." Suaj smiled. "You've given me something today...I can't tell you how precious it is."

"I've got some idea. I'm warning you, if that boyfriend of yours or any of his friends lifts a finger—"

"I assure you, you won't have to react because I'll be there ahead of you. You can trust Rael, but he knows none of you are under obligation to forgive him. He's trying hard to make amends."

"Knowing it was wrong is a start," Dinun allowed grudgingly. He climbed slowly to his feet and picked up his walking stick. "Okay, let's go."

Some of the gawpers from the spaceship had drifted back into town, and stood staring as the Angels passed. One of the men called out an obscenity. Cloud turned, lifted his wings, and hissed. The man stepped back hastily and found business elsewhere.

"You have a lot of that here?" Suaj asked.

"No. Those are strangers. Our folk mostly treat the Angels like miracles. First time they saw these guys, they were bringing in our dead and wounded. Then Moon's been around while I've been sick and stuff, so they see him as being with me. Tell the truth, he gets more stick because of that than because of who he is."

Suaj read the thoughts behind the statement. "Ah. The small-mindedness of small places. I'm sorry."

"I'm not." Dinun took Moon's hand with a defiant expression. "Folks can say what they like about me. Moon doesn't care what they say about him. They don't know the first thing about either of us."

"I understand your point exactly."

Dinun smiled a little. "Figured you probably would. It's over there, near the courthouse."

The chambers fell silent as Dinun and the others walked in—three adult Angels made quite an impression after all. For several seconds, no one moved, and Dinun wondered if the people here had forgotten they were turning up.

But then at the far side of the room a Tuzai man stood, his chair screeching back. Suaj stiffened, and Dinun recognised the Tuzai as Suaj's lover. The criminal turned sympathiser. Raelne something, or was it something Raelne?

The man approached slowly as if worried he'd spook them. No one else spoke, apparently as surprised as Dinun and Suaj. Dinun put his hand on Moon's arm but his lover kept his thoughts and feelings to himself.

When the man was two paces from them, he dropped to his knees and spoke in Quarnian. "I am Kine Raelne. I have sinned against the Angels and against you, Dinun. I committed a terrible crime, and I wish to apologise. My service is yours, as long as you wish it, whenever you wish it." Then he bent right down to the floor, his forehead touching the ground.

Dinun blinked. He'd never seen anyone do anything like this. Suaj said nothing, at least out loud. "*Moon?*"

"Mind. Read. No. Words. Only. You. Trust. No?" ::Confused::

"I don't know. He sounds honest. Can you forgive him if he is?"

Moon stepped forward. Suaj started but then subsided, as if Moon had reassured him. Dinun hadn't the faintest idea what his lover proposed to do.

Moon stood in front of the kneeling man, crouched, and yanked him up by his hair quite cruelly. Suaj made a small sound of distress, but didn't move. Moon stared into the man's face as the man swallowed nervously. Whatever conversation they were having in their minds, went on for some time. A low, questioning murmur rose among the seated guests, but no one interfered.

At last, Moon let the man's head go, and the man stared at the floor. "Rael, get up," Suaj whispered, and stepped forward, offering his hand and helping his lover to his feet, before hugging him and kissing his pale, damp cheeks. The man looked fairly shaken.

"What did you do?" Dinun asked as Moon came to his side.

"I. Him. Show. Angels. Dead. Families. Crying. Show. Him. Sorrow."
::Determined::

"But do you forgive him?"

"I. Hate. No. Will. Take. Time."

The man—Raelne—wiped his face and gave Dinun a wobbly smile. "Sorry for the dramatics. I hope you believe me."

"Got no reason not to. Doesn't mean I won't be keeping an eye on you."

"Understood."

His arm still around his lover's waist, Suaj said, "We should sit. Your honour, sorry for the delay."

The mayor stood. "That's understandable, young man. There's a lot of history. Do, please, come and sit. Professor Fusil has so many questions and we need a translator."

They hadn't enough chairs for the Angels, who would have been perfectly happy on the floor, but three of the councillors, including Jenke, stood to make room. Jenke gave Dinun a nod—of sympathy, understanding, he didn't know what—as Dinun took his place.

The friendly-looking female professor beamed in delight, and Raelne translated. "I'm so pleased to see the Angels in the flesh. My name is Dera," she said to Moon.

"Ma'am, he can read your mind. You don't need a translator. Just think what you want to ask. You only need to speak if you need me or someone else to help."

She coloured as Raelne translated Dinun's words. "Oh, of course. Sorry. This telepathy thing takes a bit of getting used to."

The mayor, the councillors, the military guys, were all forgotten. Dera communed intently with Moon and the other two, with her scientist friends joining in. The conversation was fractured between speech and mental communication, Raelne or Suaj offering translations. The rest of the room watched, and seemed content to do so.

But twenty minutes later, the mayor cleared his throat. "Dinun, maybe it'd be more appropriate for the professor and some of her colleagues to call on you and your friends in private. We've sprung this on them without warning."

"Good idea. How about tomorrow? Let everyone get acquainted, settle in."

Dera opened her mouth to protest but then smiled. "Of course. We have plenty of time, and we'd like a chance to get to know our kind hosts better too. I wonder if Colonel Tikmu might allow a few to come on board the ship to tour?"

The colonel narrowed his eyes. Dinun would bet half his savings she'd sprung *that* on him too. "Of course. If his honour would like to select, say, twenty? To begin with? Mister Kine, we'll need your assistance of course."

"Uh, sure. After lunch, though."

The colonel nodded. Suaj turned to Dinun. "*Moon told me he doesn't want Rael to be at this interview tomorrow. So it'll just be me.*"

"Okay. Sorry, but he's —"

"Entitled to his feelings." Suaj's tone made it clear he didn't want to discuss it. "*If I were you, I'd leave now, before Dera pounces.*"

"Good idea. Is, uh...he all right?"

"He will be. I'll speak to you later." He smiled. "*Thank you for today.*"

"You're welcome."

Now if it had been his lover humiliated and upset like that, Dinun couldn't have been so gracious. Suaj was either a lot more tightly controlled than Dinun could ever be, or a lot more generous. An unusual man any way you looked at it.

Suaj didn't know how Rael kept it together that afternoon, with an obvious headache and suffering from what Moon had done. But he did, and the local

dignitaries probably never realised just how strained their polite and helpful translator was. Rael bid them all farewell from the steps of the spaceship, then turned to Suaj. "I've got to lie down."

He didn't wait for Suaj to join him, just walked quickly towards the quarters assigned to them. Suaj hesitated, and didn't follow right away. Instead he found Dera, and begged some painkillers from the ship's well-stocked medical stores.

"Is he ill?" she asked as she fetched the drugs.

"Tired and stressed. I think he won't be joining you for supper. Please make our excuses."

"Of course. Suaj...what he did today. Took a lot of courage."

"Yes, it did. I hope you remember that as you negotiate with the Angels."

"I will. I never heard the full story about that mission, you know. It was definitely odd so many civilians were sent."

Rael had explained it by the small number of people who could maintain a mindblock. Suaj had to wonder if that was the only—or primary—reason. "I don't know anything about that. Please excuse me. I'll see you in the morning."

She let him pass. In their quarters, Suaj found Rael on the lower bunk, his arm over his eyes. "Not the best of company right now," Rael said through gritted teeth.

"I know. Please, take these."

Rael obeyed, but resumed the same position as before. Suaj stripped to his underpants and climbed in alongside him against the wall, letting his warmth and presence offer some small comfort.

They lay like that so long, Suaj wondered if Rael would simply fall asleep. But finally he sighed and moved his arm. "Thanks. The pills helped."

"But you're still upset."

"Yeah. My own fault." Suaj put his hand on Rael's chest and Rael covered it with his own hand. "They'll never forgive me. Why should they? Five dead Angels. We're murderers. I've been so outraged about Harnol, and I'm no better."

"I think if Moon believed that, he wouldn't have bothered to talk to you at all. He's still upset but he wants to build bridges. He's a most unusual person."

Rael rolled over and looked into Suaj's eyes. "So at least it was good for you, meeting them?"

"It was the most amazing moment of my life. Like finding the missing part of me. He understood at once about...."

"The wings."

"Yes. I cried, Rael. I've never cried about it. I never felt I could. But he accepted me so easily...it felt like being wrapped in love." He smiled. "Dinun's a very lucky man."

"Guess he is. When will he be fit to go back with them?"

Suaj remembered what he'd learned from Dinun's thoughts, though the man had not expressed them out loud. "Ah. Actually, he won't, since he's not so lucky after all. He's suffering from multiple sclerosis."

Rael frowned. "So?"

"So, it's incurable and possibly fatal. Certainly he won't be able to sustain the rigours of living with the Angels."

"But it's curable...damn, I keep forgetting. We found a cure for that ten, fifteen years ago."

"On Tuzax. Not much use...you mean he could have the cure sent back?"

"Well, I don't know the specifics since I'm not a doctor. But Dera will have the info in the database. We have to help him, Suaj. It would be something I could do to make amends, wouldn't it?"

"Yes, it really would. Moon's quite distressed over it, and so is Dinun. I don't know how he could bear not to go back with them. Moon said I'd always be welcome and I confess, I'm tempted, even though I know the problems. To feel truly at home...."

Rael nodded. "I've spent a lot of today wanting to go back to Tuzax. I haven't felt all that welcome here."

Suaj didn't know what to say. He could take offence his love and affection weren't enough for Rael, but that would be more egotistical than he was capable of. What had happened today, not just with Moon, had been inevitable and necessary, and Rael had not shied from it. "Whatever you want to do, I'll support the choice."

"Would you come with me?"

"Does that make a difference to your decision?"

"Hell, of course it does."

"Then it's hardly fair to ask. I don't want that kind of power over your fate."

"You have it whether you want it or not." He flopped onto his back. "Maybe we shouldn't talk about it right now."

"I think it would be wise to let today's upsets settle. I was tremendously proud of you. You say you're just like Joese? You're not. I can't imagine him apologising so honestly in a million years."

"Doesn't absolve me of my guilt."

"That wasn't the point of the exercise, was it?"

"No. I just...had to."

"Yes. And that's why I'm proud of you." He rubbed the back of his hand against Rael's bristly cheek. "Are you hungry?"

"I think I'd puke if I ate."

"Then undress and let's sleep. Fortunately the bunks are made for people your size. Almost a double bed for me."

"You always sleep on top of me anyway, Fluffy."

"Of course. It reflects the nature of our relationship."

Rael grinned. "Truer words never were spoken."

Suaj left Rael—in better shape after a night's rest and time to absorb and reflect—to continue the goodwill side of the Tuzai mission, letting the local sightseers tour the ship and ask inane questions. Suaj had the far more pleasant task of supervising and facilitating the question and answer session between the Angels and Dera's team. Only three of her scientists joined them, since Dinun's house was small and Dera felt it would put the Angels under less stress.

Dinun's haggard, dark-shadowed face greeted them as he opened the door to them. "Are you all right?" Suaj asked.

"Bad night. I'm...well, you probably worked out I'm sick."

"I know. I'm sorry."

"Nothing that can be done about it. Come on in."

The tall councillor, Jenke, acted as the local chaperone, sitting at the back of the overcrowded little living room and saying nothing. Dera clearly had instructed her colleagues to rein in their enthusiasm, since they carried out their questioning in a far calmer and more objective manner than on the previous day. Suaj had to resist 'helping' with Moon's translations into Tuzai and Quarnian, for it frustrated him to see the difference between the clean and elegant phrasing in the Angels' own tongue, and the clumsy words that emerged when they tried to communicate with the humans. Dinun, he realised, had no idea how the Angels really sounded. He'd have to find a way of sharing it with him, at least once.

Dera's team spent over an hour asking Moon and the other two Angels basic questions about their culture and daily life. Then the tricky issue of visiting the clans came up. Moon said his father was likely to be hostile, but other clans might be open to the idea. The three Angels would spend more time with the Tuzai, assessing them and learning more of their intentions, before making such enquiries.

"There's something else," Dera said with one of her disarming smiles. "Do you think any of you might like to visit Tuzax and see how we live?"

The Angels lifted their wings in agitation. Cloud answered for them. "*You. Steal. Child relatives. We. Trust. No.*"

Her mouth turned down. "I know. We thought...if our people could see you and understand the enormity of what we tried to do...it's harder to attack friends, you see. We'd love to obtain more DNA—we're desperate—but we understand completely if you aren't interested."

"There's something else to consider." Suaj surprised himself by speaking, but having started, he ploughed on. "Dinun, the Tuzai have a cure for multiple sclerosis."

Jenke grunted in surprise. Dinun's mouth opened. Moon stared at Suaj. "*Is this true, cousin?*"

"I believe so. Ask the woman."

He waited while Dera's expression grew intent, listening to Moon's slow questioning.

"A cure?" Dinun whispered, stunned.

"Rael said so. Even if an Angel doesn't go, you could go and speak on their behalf. Couldn't you?"

"Sure. That's the solution...but what if they won't help me without an Angel going back?"

Dera turned to him. "We'd never do that. I think that's a wonderful idea, Suaj. I believe the treatment takes several weeks, but it's not dangerous."

"Little one, you have brought a great gift."

"Not me, Small Moon. Rael, and the Tuzai."

"Would he be safe with them?"

"I don't know. You need to judge. I trust these, but I don't know the others. Rael's colleagues were not all honourable."

"True." Moon looked at his lover—read, as Suaj did, the painful mixture of hope and fear in Dinun's mind. "*Perhaps you should not have mentioned it yet.*"

"I'm sorry."

"It's no matter. If these people can cure Dinun, I would give up my wings."

"I hope you never have to."

"As do I."

"I'll need to talk to Taj about it," Dera said. "But if there's no security reason why Dinun can't come back, then he should. I'll put my career on the line to make sure no one uses his health as a lever."

"That's appreciated," Suaj said. "Perhaps we could have a break? Councillor?"

Jenke cleared his throat. "Sure. Maybe you could let the lady know I can take her people out for a walk, catch a cup of tea. Figure I can manage for half an hour or so. Dinun, you okay, son?"

"I'm fine." He managed to smile. "Just in shock."

"I'm sure. But this is wonderful news." The man's pleasure was genuine, almost as much as Moon's. A very strange relationship these two humans had.

Suaj passed on his invitation to Dera and said Moon would be able to let Jenke know when they were ready. Dinun sagged with relief as they left, Moon going to his side and putting a protective arm around him.

"Sorry to spring it on you," Suaj said. "I was too eager to give you some good news."

"Don't worry about it. It's incredible. What is their world like to have medicine that good? And yet they could do what they did. I don't understand it."

"They're desperate, just as our ancestors were. Their world was dying, and now you've given them hope. They owe you. For that reason, I think you can expect to be treated well." Suaj took a breath. "Rael's going back too, I think."

"Without you?"

"I...don't know."

"For good?"

"I don't know that either. He's homesick."

"Know how that feels. When I'm with the Angels, I miss Sora and the kids something fierce. But I miss the Angels too." Dinun leaned his head on Moon's shoulder. "Even with so many friends, and so much kindness. Seems like I can't be happy wherever I am."

"Rael will feel that way. I don't know what to advise him. I'm hardly impartial."

Dinun shook his head. "It's for him to decide. You make the choice for him and he'll always resent it."

"Yes."

"We shall not go to Tuzax."

Suaj turned to Cloud. "I understand that. Seems to me there is very little benefit for you, outside satisfying curiosity."

"I. Go."

"No, Moon, you can't." Dinun stared at his lover. "They'll have no special interest in me, but you guys are different."

The look Moon gave Dinun was entirely human in its clarity. "You need privacy to discuss this," Suaj said. *"My friend, I fear for your safety also."*

"I cannot allow Dinun to travel to this unknown place alone. He is our kin. These strangers will want him also—is that not true?"

"Yes, I suppose it is."

"Will you assist me in talking to him? Bridge our minds?"

"Certainly. What do I do?"

"Open your mind to us both, and clear your thoughts. You will not hear us."

Suaj obeyed, and almost immediately Dinun jerked, his eyes widening to saucers. Moon hugged him close, Dinun burying his face in Moon's neck. Cloud and Flower watched impassively.

Suaj had no idea what they talked about, but when Dinun lifted his head, his eyes were wet. "Spirits above. All this time and I didn't know...how will we go back to talking as we did?"

"Teach him more of your language formally. Learn some of theirs."

"I tried that but they don't think in words...it's really strange. They kind of sing to each other. They don't sing to you?"

"Er, no. I can't explain how it feels. Did it help?"

"Yes," Moon said. *"We will talk more, however. If you will assist?"*

"Any time, of course. I'm glad to help you. There's no hurry. Dinun's condition won't worsen dramatically in a month, and they expect to be here that long. Take your time." Suaj stood. "I'll make tea. Catch your breath before they return."

Chapter Five

If it hadn't been for Suaj, Dinun would have gone crazy while Moon went back to the clan to talk to his father, and to talk to the other clans. The house felt so empty, and for someone who'd lived happily on his own for so long, he sure was a pathetic mess now. Suaj and his lover moved in for the duration when Suaj realised how hard Dinun found it. Dinun wasn't sure how he'd find being around Raelne, but the man wasn't that bad once you got to know him. He didn't intrude when Dinun and Suaj got to talking, and didn't take offence at Dinun's wariness. Hard to hate a fellow that accommodating.

Sora kept him busy in the day with the kids, and Jenke always seemed to be lurking, which made Dinun wonder if the man would ever go back fossicking. But he was company of a kind, and he needed Dinun more than Dinun needed him. Dinun had always been a sucker for that. Jenke had improved a lot over the last year, and he was one of the few staunch supporters of Dinun's relationship with Moon in Getake. He'd taken some crap for that too. Had to admire him for his stance.

Suaj helped because he didn't need to be told—knew without asking when Dinun wanted company and when he didn't. He and Raelne continued to work, of course, and dragged Dinun into expanding a Quarnian-Tuzai dictionary one of their people had made. In the evening, they talked about their real job, the plans they had, the dreams they cherished. It made Dinun even more curious to see Tuzax, since so much of what Suaj and Raelne hoped to achieve had already been created on that planet. He wanted to see if this shiny new vision was as wonderful as they made it sound. In his mind, there was no doubt he would go to Tuzax. The only sticking point was Moon.

Nights were the worst, when Suaj and Raelne retreated to the small room Dinun had used until his ma died. He lay down alone, his leg and ribs aching from the day's exertion, and feeling all the pains and twitches and odd sensations in his body which might be tiredness, might be healing from the injuries, or might be this hideous disease. Being with Moon made it all tolerable because he knew the load was shared. On his own, he became a coward, unable

to face a future without the Angels and without the robust good health he'd enjoyed all his life. He wanted this cure so badly he could smell it. He almost didn't care if the Tuzai ended up experimenting on him. Better than life as a helpless cripple.

Nearly two weeks after he left, Moon appeared without warning. He just walked in and upstairs to the bedroom where Dinun lay dozing, startling him out of his skin, and sitting on the bed next to him. Dinun buried his face in his lover's lustrous fur. "Missed you so damn much."

"Me. Too." ::Happy:: He stroked Dinun's back and Dinun held on like he'd never let go. Which he wouldn't if he had a choice about it. "My father won't consent to any of the Tuzai visiting."

Hearing Moon's 'real' voice was a bit of a shock. "Huh? Did you just ask Suaj...?"

"Yes. My cousin is happy to help us talk, despite the inconvenience."

"Can you thank him?"

"I did."

"Good. What about the other clans?"

"They are cautiously open to the idea. But not all Dera's team. One or two, to live among our people for a short space of time, perhaps no more than a month."

"Can't see how she could complain about that."

"And I, Big Cloud and Red Flower will go to Tuzax with you."

"No!" Dinun pushed Moon back so he could stare into his huge, unblinking eyes. "It's not safe."

"No. But I wish to see the world of the humans, and to know what will become of our children. Have you forgotten they took our seed? Their people will become ours, as you have done."

Dinun honestly hadn't thought about it that way. "But I could go, Raelne can go, and tell you all about it."

"I wish to see for myself, and my brother and my friend insist on coming to protect me. There is much protectiveness about." ::Amused::

"Sure is. Please change your mind?"

"I don't wish to make you sad, Dinun. I feel it is something I must do."

"But you don't even like Raelne. How can you bear to be on his planet?"

"I will be with you."

Dinun sighed. *"And I thought I was a fool for love. We should let Suaj go to sleep. But before he does, do you think there's any way we could learn to talk like this without him?"*

Moon hesitated. *"I spoke to some of the elders on this subject. They believe Suaj offers a unique opportunity, since he speaks your language. But they thought, if you and I work hard, we could learn to bypass your verbal thought processes and link our thoughts directly, as I can with Suaj. This is another reason to travel to Tuzax, as we can work with him."*

"He'd never agree on that basis."

"I will speak to him." Moon kissed his forehead. "But now I wish to do things to you that do not involve talking, so I will ask him to break the bridge so we can communicate with our bodies. This is agreeable to you?"

"Read my mind, Moon."

"I already did."

Suaj did his best not to read either Moon or Dinun's thoughts until he had a chance to talk to Moon alone, but he had a fair idea of what Moon had decided before they took a walk together out of town, leaving Dinun with his children and Raelne with the never-ending task of translating for his Tuzai countrymen.

"Dinun's not happy about you going. You realise that our government won't be either. There is much distrust of Tuzax at that level."

"I don't trust them either. I can't let him go without me. He's frightened and worried and increasingly unwell. I love him, so I must support him. He is of my clan now."

"I understand."

"And...I wish to see more of this world. My father doesn't understand such curiosity. It makes him angry and fearful. He believes our clan is threatened by our people being tempted away by human concerns."

Suaj felt for the old Angel. None of these problems existed before the cursed invasion, and he shouldn't have had to deal with any of it. *"He has a point, of course. Human history is littered with stories of native people's culture being destroyed by exposure to outside influence."*

"By other humans. We can never be part of your culture, nor do we wish to be. But I don't believe we should remain ignorant, even though we remain separate."

"You'll disobey your father to do this? Have two sons disobey him?"

"My father has many children, many grandchildren. I have fathered three offspring, and if I father no more, I have done my duty to the clan. I am tired of obedience that admits no questioning. I have been a good son. I wish to be naughty for a while."

Suaj laughed. *"You know, that's how I feel. I spent so long fitting in with the humans, and I'm just a little sick of it. I want to run away, even for a while. And I want to see Tuzax."*

"Raelne is going?"

"Yes, because of Dinun. But he wants to return. He simply wants a chance to speak to his family, reassure them and say goodbye. They can come visit, possibly. But he's committed to Quarn."

"It is not without danger. But nothing worth having is. Like flight."

"I wouldn't give up flight for anything."

"Nor I. So, Suaj, you and I will do something remarkable, and then we shall return to our ordered lives, our curiosity sated. Is this not a fine plan?"

"Very fine to me, my cousin."

Chapter Six

Three weeks later, the spaceship *Nezeu* lifted off from near the Polsa base. She carried all of her previous military passengers, some of the original Tuzai scientists, one former condemned prisoner, six chimerical humans and three Angels who found the business of space flight less remarkable than irritating, as the ship had not been designed for people of their height to move around freely. The Angels had greeted the technology of Polsa and of the ship with equanimity while Dinun regarded it all with a mixture of suspicion and wonder. After three weeks in the capital, the three of them now took each shiny new toy in their stride.

Suaj had had much longer to grow used to Tuzai technology, and had no anxiety about the flight to Tuzax at all. He happily put the stress, the political arguments and the anxiety behind him, and Rael too was now more cheerful. He'd made the decision to go back to his planet, say farewell to his family, and return to Quarn, and with that question settled he resolved, he said, to enjoy the trip and help the Quarnians get the most out of their visit.

Dera was delighted with everything, and with good reason—she had accomplished all she'd wanted to do, and returned now not only with more DNA to secure her planet's future, but also three healthy, virile male Angels, as well as a diplomatic representative from Quarn to foster good relations between the two races. If all continued to go well, she thought regular traffic and exchange of information between Quarn and Tuzax would be possible and desirable.

The hastily appointed 'Ambassador to Tuzax'—a senior public servant named Marlo qel Berd, and his assistant, Zern qel Cay—were ready to enjoy the trip of a lifetime, learning Tusan as quickly as possibly with Dera and Rael's overt assistance, and Suaj and Werse's covert translations. The week-long trip, dull as it would be from the scenery aspect, would not be wasted time for them.

To Suaj's sorrow, the only person on board not looking forward to anything was Dinun. Nothing anyone had said to the man had been able to ease his anxiety over the Angels' presence on this journey, and even the prospect of a

cure for his illness wasn't enough to assuage his worry and guilt. Once the spaceship had engaged its hyperdrive and the wonders of space disappeared from the observation windows, Dinun retreated to the quarters he and Moon would share for the trip. Moon hadn't joined him, seeking Suaj out instead on the flight deck where Suaj had watched the handling of the craft's exit from the planet with a mixture of envy and awe.

"Do you need me for something?" he asked.

Moon, too tall to stand easily in this space, knelt by his chair. Suaj put his hand on Moon's shoulder since the Angel liked to be touched. *"My lover is most troubled, little cousin, and I don't know how to ease his misery."*

"Nor I, Small Moon. He feels the price for his good health may be too high."

"His overprotectiveness is a fault I cannot fault."

Suaj smiled. *"Indeed not, for it's nearly as great as your own."*

::Amused:: "The only solution will be the success of this journey. I am determined to enjoy it. Already I have seen much that I can sing to my clan."

"Doesn't make you want to live like a human, though."

"No. Your ways are too...complicated. Much in your lives is driven by the need for this money, and for clothes, varied food, a permanent mate, and children who remain dependent too long. We do not have such things. The only artefacts I crave are the books. A written language has its uses. Much has been lost of our history when the singers die prematurely, or the knowledge is too subtle and complicated for song. My father will not admit this, but it is a truth I state firmly."

"I believe other cultures without written language have developed one."

Moon made a human-looking dismissive wave. *"It is not simply that, little cousin. We have no paper, no books, pens, pencils. Art, yes, but no other records. Where would we keep such things? Our culture is not based on permanent residence or possession."*

"Sounds like you need human assistance."

"I believe so. Dinun is concerned for his old age, as am I. He won't be able to live with us forever, regardless of a cure. This is a chance for your people and mine to join together, to record our history and store it. I have spoken to Dera of this and she is enthusiastic."

"She is about almost everything."

::Amused:: "I would bring this up with Dinun but he is not receptive right now. I must be patient."

"He'll be fine. Just love him and listen to his fears. Rael gets like this too. Both are intelligent men, so they work things out if you wait for them."

"Yes. But now I will go to him." Moon paused. *"Little one, how do you help your lover at such times?"*

"With physical affection, because he becomes too exhausted for speech."

Moon hugged him, and Suaj let himself sink into the gentle kindness of Moon's emotions. *"Like this, cousin?"*

"Just like that. His fears are real, but they don't need to isolate him. Teach him this."

Dinun didn't like the spaceship at all. Big though it was, when you came down to it, it was just a big tin can with a motor on it—and space was very big and very, very dangerous. He liked to face danger where he had at least some chance of fighting back.

The cramped quarters were as bad as sleeping in a tent. Suaj told him the accommodation was rather like that on a boat, something Dinun had never experienced either and decided he'd give a miss if he had the chance. He had to admit he wouldn't be so harsh in judging standards if he wasn't so worried about the end of the journey. The Tuzai who'd come this second time were as nice and polite as you could want anyone to be—but the first ones were killers, even if Rael had apologised and tried to do better.

And Dinun had been party to killing *them*, something no one had mentioned, but which hung on his conscience anyway. Did Rael know? Did Suaj? What if the Tuzai turned around when Rael brought up this business about his former colleague, and said, "wait a minute, that there Dinun qel Noto's a murderer too, and so's his lover"? Maybe he was worrying about nothing, but he couldn't reconcile the two sides of the Tuzai nation, and didn't know which to trust. Even Jenke said he couldn't figure it, though he thought Dinun should go for the cure.

"Dinun?"

"Yeah, Moon. What's up?"

"You. Come? Room. Close." Moon sent him a mental image of the officer's lounge, a small open area with now useless observation windows.

"Is there a problem?"

"Yes. Come. Urgent."

Damn it, what had happened now? And why hadn't Suaj called him? Maybe the problem was with Suaj. Spirits, he wished he had his rifle with him.

Where was that lounge again? Down this corridor, and through...that was right. "Hold on, Moon, nearly there!"

He barrelled into the room faster than he planned, the lighter than standard gravity making even his weak legs sprightly. He pulled himself up short when he found Moon standing calmly by one of the windows, Cloud and Flower sprawled on one of the couches. "What's the problem? Are you okay? Why did you say it was urgent?"

"To make you stop sulking and come to me without question." ::Amused::

"Not funny, Moon." He folded his arms. "Why did you want me to come?"

Moon walked over to him, and cupped Dinun's face in his hands. *"Because you are in pain, and anxious, and I would ease that. Come and sit with me. Suaj, thank you. I can manage now."*

Dinun almost asked Suaj to continue helping them because he wanted to talk to Moon but he had to respect Suaj's time. "Why didn't you come to the room?"

"No. Space. Sit." Moon tugged him down onto the couch where Cloud and Flower sat—and instead of the other two making room for him, they crowded around him, pressing against him, holding him. Moon knelt in front of him and wrapped his arms tightly around Dinun's waist.

Dinun was about to ask rather crankily what the hell was going on, but then he felt it. Affection, concern. Warmth. Not just from Moon, but Cloud and Flower too, at an intensity he'd never experienced from them. "Guys...."

"Be. Calm. Sex. No. Friendship. Yes. Is. Okay. Dinun. We. Care. You. Relax."

Cloud tugged him backwards, more or less into his lap, and tucked Dinun's face against his neck. Moon climbed up onto the couch, and embraced them both. The other presence at his back had to be Flower. Dinun wanted to die of embarrassment. What if someone saw them? Saw *him* being cradled like a child.

"Worry. No. Others. Come. No. You. Rest. You. Safe."

"I'm not a baby, Moon. The things I'm worried about are real. Everyone's pretending I'm crazy."

"You. Crazy. No." ::Determined:: "Worry. Make. You. Sick. I. Worry. I. Get. Sick. This. Bad." ::Certain::

"So this is all about you."

"Yes." ::Amused::

"Silly bugger."

"Yes. Rest. We. Care."

"Yes. We. Care."

That was Cloud, his mental voice deeper and 'wider' somehow than Moon's. Then Flower's gentler, lighter tone came in. *"Worry. Useless. Hurt. You. Be. At. Peace. Friend. Dinun."*

"I guess I'm outnumbered."

"Yes," Moon confirmed. *"You. Listen. Me. I. Smart."*

Dinun laughed against Cloud's soft fur. "Yes, you are. Okay. You be in charge. I'm useless at it. Do whatever you want with me, guys."

"Dinun. Smart. Also," Flower said.

Rael found Suaj in his favourite place, with the Angels and Dinun in the officer's lounge. The Angels no longer reacted to his presence, though Moon remained cool towards him. Suaj expected little more at this stage.

"Taj contacted the space base," Rael announced. "They're asking us to hold in orbit for twenty-six hours to prepare for the 'aliens'."

The Angels all stiffened and Dinun frowned at Rael. "Who are they calling 'aliens'?"

Rael grinned. "Well, you guys. Settle down. All of us, even the Tuzai, have to go through decontamination, and then they need to make sure they have accommodation and transport for people," he coughed and nodded at Moon, "of your stature. There's nothing to be alarmed about. The message was friendly. The government will have to decide how to play it. I think they'll keep us quiet for now. They did that over Harnol's return too."

Suaj looked at his lover, reaching out a hand and drawing him down on the couch next to him. "This secrecy worries me. It means they can conceal we were ever here."

"Not much we can do about it." Rael leaned against him and yawned. "Another day of language lessons. Dera's really fluent now, and Marlo and Zern can hold a conversation pretty well. Won't hurt to have a bit more time to practice."

"Some of us just want to get this done and over with."

Rael shrugged at Dinun. "Maybe so, but there's nothing I can do about it. Isn't there anything about this you're looking forward to?"

"I don't trust your kind. Not my fault."

"No, it isn't," Rael said, with what Suaj considered admirable patience. "But maybe you'd enjoy it more if you relaxed."

Moon tightened his hold on his anxious lover, but Dinun's strained, irritated expression didn't change. "There's something wrong about this entire set up, and by the spirits I wish I'd never agreed to come."

"I'm sorry. Uh, I didn't only come down here to tell you about the delay—they've asked if you have any requirements or requests about diet or accommodation. I've explained about your need for meat, Moon, Cloud, Flower. If there's anything else...?"

"Not for me," Dinun replied. "Just get us out of there fast."

"I'll do my best," Rael said with a smile. Suaj was proud of him—he'd learned a little diplomacy at last. "I'll come back and let you know the latest as we hear it. You might want to rest—I think when we arrive, there's going to be a lot of chatter and meetings."

"Rael, have your parents been told?" Suaj asked.

"Not yet. I asked them not to." *"In case we crash land,"* he added mentally.

"How cheerful."

"Don't want them to grieve twice, that's all. They're not young people."

He stood, and Suaj rose too. "Need to stretch my legs," he explained. *"My cousin, is Dinun in pain? He's unusually irritable this morning."*

Moon turned his huge eyes upon Suaj. *"Yes, he is, and unwell. Though he is anxious, I can't wait for him to receive this cure. Let me comfort him. There is nothing you can do. Please thank Rael for his consideration. We appreciate his attempts to make this easier for Dinun."*

"I will," Suaj answered, surprised and pleased at the gratitude.

He walked Rael out, and pinned him against a bulkhead as soon as they were clear, kissing him without asking for permission.

"Mmmm." Rael grinned as Suaj set his mouth free. "Always cheers me up. Poor Dinun."

"He's sick and suffering. Moon's grateful for your trying to help. But you know I share his feelings to a certain extent."

"Me too. Come and talk to Marlo and Zern. They need the practice."

Even the Tuzai couldn't conceal their nervousness as the *Nezeu* touched down at the military spaceport. Dera had broken out her one dressy suit for the occasion, Colonel Tikmu remained strictly at attention in his seat, and Rael's hands felt icy in Suaj's. The Angels kept a tight grip on a grim-faced Dinun, and

Marlo and Zern looked about to vomit with nervousness. The long delay before the captain announced they could disembark did nothing for the tension.

Suaj, however, was filled with childish excitement. The view of the green planet as they orbited had thrilled him, knowing he was among the first of his race to ever see the sight. Quarn was an oceanic world with two vast and rather dry continents. Tuzax had few oceans, though much fresh water, and the long-dead terraformers had turned it into a tropical paradise. Ironically, it turned out to be the undoing of the millions of colonists, for it had unleashed pathogens which, over time, had altered the genetic makeup of the human population. This, along with the radiation levels damaging sperm production, had nudged the humans towards deadly infertility. Tuzai scientists had had some success with gene therapy undoing some of the genetic damage, but the Angel DNA was considered a much faster and complete solution. They could have just *asked* for it, Suaj considered.

But the effect on the population aside, Rael's world was a very different place to Quarn, and Suaj couldn't wait to see it, or as much as they could in the period allowed for their visit. A month seemed to be the accepted time frame, since Dinun's treatment would be completed then. More than that, and Quarn would suffer from the loss of key personnel, and Moon's clan would become anxious. If successful, the trip could be repeated and Suaj hoped it would. Even with his reservations about aspects of Dera's mission, this visit held so much potential benefit for Quarn.

"Your brain never stops, does it?" Rael gave him a strained smile as they lined up to enter the disembarkation chute. "Even during sex, you're planning."

"Usually how to have more sex, but yes, it's true. Have you met your president before?"

"Are you kidding? Of course not. Not even the prime minister. There are fourteen million people on the planet—you think the politicians know any of us?"

Suaj, familiar with the intimate participation in democracy practiced on Quarn, thought Rael's cynicism rather sad.

"Here we go."

The humid warmth after the cool, sterile air of the ship was welcome, but also an immediate sign they were no longer on Quarn. The Angels behind them sniffed curiously.

"What do you smell, cousin?" Suaj asked.

"Human machines. I am sick of that scent. I wish to fly, little one."

"In time, Small Moon. How's Dinun?"

"Terrified, but holding up. There are many waiting to see us, do you sense them?"

"I do. I sense no hostility."

"Agreed. Ah, another enclosure. Will we never see the sun on this planet?"

The chute came out into a huge, high-ceilinged hall, filled with soldiers and behind them, shielded by a glass wall, a number of male and female civilians dressed in sober-coloured suits. Well to the front, a dozen people in white overalls and helmets waited—to enforce quarantine, Suaaj read from their minds. They were as nervous as the passengers on the *Nezeu*. Not exactly afraid, but wary.

Dera, Colonel Tikmu, and Rael stepped forward, and spoke at length to the people in white. Finally Rael turned and addressed the Quarnians. "All of you and I will go left for decontamination and tests. Should take a couple of hours. Dera's people and the soldiers will go to a separate area for decontamination and debriefing. We'll all meet up at the presidential residence where we've been offered hospitality. That's where the formal welcome will happen. Marlo, your counterpart will speak to you in the decontamination area."

"More waiting," Dinun muttered. "What kind of tests?"

"Blood and skin, that's all."

His anxiety was for the Angels more than himself. Suaaj moved to his side. *"I sense no ulterior motives."*

"What if they're just waiting to grab Moon or all of them?"

"I don't read that in their minds."

"They might have mindblocks. Like Rael."

A fair point. *"My cousins, can you sense anything amiss with the aliens' thoughts? Any block as in Rael's mind?"*

Cloud answered. *"Nothing at all. I feel the barrier when I brush against his thoughts, but not in anyone else's."*

Suaaj put his hand on Dinun's arm. "I believe all is well. But you can return to the ship if you aren't happy."

"Sure. One of their ships on their planet. We're trapped, Suaaj. No turning back."

Suaaj inclined his head slightly in acknowledgement. "Then what choice do you have?"

"None. Let's do it. But if they hurt the Angels...."

"You won't be the only one coming to their defence. Let's show them what we're made of."

Dinun wished he was in better shape to meet the Tuzai president, but the truth of it was he was sore, sick, and sorry, and after hanging around waiting for the never-ending tests to be run at the blasted spaceport, tired too. At least the tests had been superficial and respectful, the Angels treated as honoured guests and with courtesy. The main problem was Dinun's increasing pain and exhaustion, and all the manners in the world wouldn't help those. He tried to be cheerful because he represented Quarn, but he found it hard.

At least when their convoy arrived at the presidential residence—Moon, Cloud, and Flower dressed in light, hooded cloaks to minimise the alarm to the locals—they had been spared the ceremonial welcome. A couple of servants attached themselves to Dinun immediately and took him and the Angels to a spacious apartment with two huge bedrooms where they could rest. He guessed there were gadgets aplenty hidden away, but on the surface, the room didn't look all that different from the one in the hotel where he'd stayed in Polsa. Maybe a bit shinier, and with a lot more glass and metal, but the chairs looked like chairs, and the beds looked bed-like. Nothing like as weird as the spaceship had seemed at first.

The room had window doors out onto a lovely garden—but these were locked, Cloud discovered. *"They. Do. Not. Trust. Us?" ::Annoyed::*

"Probably not," Dinun said. "Let's take it easy and see what they're going to do."

A couple of minutes later Werse and a Tuzai woman came in. Werse introduced her as a doctor who would take the initial readings and begin the preparation of the medicine he'd need.

Dinun submitted to the prodding and questions, and to having more blood drawn as well as cells from inside his mouth sampled. The doctor explained a complicated process where the cells would be altered and grown, and then reinjected into his spine over a week or so. They would also give him drugs that would help control the symptoms until his body repaired itself.

"The blood is to test your compatibility with the drugs," Werse explained. "She'll begin treatment tomorrow."

"Okay. Thank her for me."

The doctor smiled and bowed, then left them. Servants came in with food and drink for all of them, which Dinun appreciated.

"I need to find the others," Werse said when they were alone again. "Rael and Suaj say they'll come to you shortly, but you should rest and not worry about anything. Do you need something else?"

"We're fine. Thanks."

Dinun already felt a little better. No one had arrested him or attacked the Angels, and the doctor had been very nice. The food was tasty too, and the Angels liked the plentiful meat. The only thing bugging them was the closed windows. Moon kept staring longingly outside. "*Wish. To. Fly.*" ::*Sad::*

"Soon. I bet their president wants to see you in action."

Moon moved over to sit on the floor near his couch and Dinun stroked his wings gently, taking delight in Moon's pleasure and from the intimacy. Much as he wished the Angels weren't here, he'd never have managed without them. He hoped the Tuzai would let them see something of this planet, even if he had little curiosity. Maybe he'd change his mind once he felt stronger.

A few minutes later, Rael knocked on the door. "Decent? You've got visitors."

Dinun stood and straightened his shirt. Moon got to his feet, and stood flanked by his taller companions.

"His Excellency, Vice-President Quinero of Tuzax."

The man who entered was shorter than Rael and chubbier, but there was a presence, a calmness about him that Dinun had seen in their own president. Dinun bowed. "Pleased to meet you, your Excellency."

Rael translated back and forth. "As I am, young man. Welcome to Tuzax. Please forgive our not including you in the formal welcome, but we understood your medical needs took priority."

"That's okay. I'm not a big one for ceremonies."

"Still, you and your comrades have done our planet much kindness, when you could have withheld it. We are in your debt, Mister Dinun. Would you like to introduce your companions?"

Dinun did so, and Moon even shook hands with the vice-president, though Cloud politely ignored the extended hand. Flower waved and Quinero smiled. "By Zoka, you're all such marvellous people. Is there anything we can do to make you more comfortable? You'll be staying here, of course, but I don't know if you want to retire this early in the day."

"I'm feeling better, thanks. Actually, Moon and the others would like to see more of your planet. Any chance they could go flying?"

Rael's smile slipped as he translated. "Ah, now, there's a slight difficulty there, because we have to be careful no one thinks the Angels are attacking, or is alarmed. However, I've arranged for a tour this afternoon for all of you—we had a little difficulty finding comfortable vehicles for gentlemen of your height—and I'm sure there will be opportunities for discreet flight." Rael coughed and stopped translating. "Um, they want us to wear trackers."

"No way!"

"Wait, Dinun. It's for our protection, and theirs. They're only bracelets, and quite harmless. Apart from anything else, it'll mean the Angels are identified as being under the president's protection."

"This. Acceptable."

Dinun looked at Moon. "Are you sure?"

"We. Wish. To. Fly. Is. Acceptable." ::Pleading::

"Um, okay. Moon says he'll wear one."

"Good. It means we can move around a little more freely."

The vice-president cleared his throat. "The president would like to invite you to dinner this evening—just a small affair. Do you think you'll be up to it, Mister Dinun?"

"I think so, sir, if I have a chance to rest first. Really appreciate all the consideration."

"Nonsense, my dear fellow. Tuzax owes you, and wants to apologise sincerely for its past actions. We want to be your friend and to make this stay as pleasant as possible. We also want you to return in good health to your home."

"I hope so too. Uh...Dera, I mean, Professor Fusil said you guys still wanted more Angel DNA."

"Yes, we do," Quinero said, looking directly at Dinun. "I won't lie to you, Mister Dinun. We're desperate and we need your help. Will you give it?"

"I think they're ready to. But I won't let you hurt them."

"Goodness, no. There'll be no repeat of our ghastly mistakes. As I understand it, the process of semen, er, donation, can be done at the same time as your treatment, and perhaps the Angels can spare our scientists a couple of days of study—non-invasive—before they go home. It must be entirely with their consent. I won't stand for anything else."

"Me either. I'll talk to them, but I think it'll be okay."

"Wonderful. Well, the president and I have a few matters to talk to Ambassador Marlo about, which will give you a chance to settle into your quarters. Engineer Kine can remain to assist you."

"Thank you." Dinun would have preferred Suaj, but they had limited translators.

"See you at dinner then."

Rael closed the door behind the vice-president. "Suaj says he's blocked," he mouthed. "Room might be bugged. Be discreet."

Dinun nodded, and changed to a neutral subject. "Sure live a nice life here, don't they?"

"It's not like the president uses the rooms personally. Is there anything you need? More food? Moon, Cloud, Flower—would you like some more meat?"

"They're fine. You don't have to sit with us." Dinun wandered into the largest bedroom and tested the huge bed. Nice. And plenty of room for all four of them, if they wanted.

"I do, actually. Presidential orders. Suaj and Werse are handling translations. As you're the star guests, you get the star translator."

"Uh huh. Spoken to your folks yet?"

"No. My parents have had a message. I'll have to call them later."

Dinun looked around and saw something that might be a telephone. "That thing connected to the outside?"

"Possibly, but—"

"Then call them. It's not like we can do anything else while we're waiting. I'm going to take a nap with the guys. I'd be grateful if you'd ask someone if we can have those windows open."

"The room's air-conditioned."

"Don't care. I want to breathe air no one else got to first. Please?"

"All right. I'll be back shortly."

When Rael closed the door, Dinun stripped and laid his clothes on one of the leather chairs, then looked over his shoulder at the Angels. "Coming?"

"Yes."

Only Moon followed him, but that was okay. The other two wanted to poke around the apartment. "I'm so tired. Sick of feeling weak."

"They. Cure. You. Soon." ::Determined::

"Sure hope so."

He didn't bother with the covers—the place was a little too hot for him, another reason he wanted the windows open—and lay down on the fancy bed cover. Moon was better than any blanket anyway, draping himself across Dinun's body, his face against Dinun's ear as he preferred. Dinun wriggled with pleasure as Moon licked his ear. "Mmmm, comfy."

"Yes. I. Like."

"Taken to civilisation pretty fast, haven't you? Think you'll be happy to go back to the clan?"

"Yes. I. Like. Many. Things. This. Only. One."

Dinun smiled and rubbed his face against Moon's. "Good attitude."

He heard the apartment door open again, and then a bit of clunking and clanking which he figured was the windows being opened. The slight breeze confirmed it, as did Rael, popping his head around the bedroom door. "There'll be a guard at the window, to protect you all. They won't interfere with you."

"That's fine. Thanks. Go make your call."

"I can wait."

"Rael, your ma thought you were dead for over a year. The poor woman needs to hear from you. We won't listen in, promise."

"All right. I'll use the communicator out here. Want the door shut?"

"No. I like the breeze."

Rael nodded and disappeared again. Dinun snuggled up to Moon and did his best to ignore the sounds of one-sided conversation from the other room. It went on for a long time, and he dozed before it ended. He woke to Moon's gentle nudging. "Huh?"

"Rael. Distressed."

"Suaj?"

"Busy. Help. Him?" ::Pleading::

"Suaj asked me?"

"I. Do."

Dinun blinked, but climbed off the bed anyway. Moon rarely asked for anything and the request was too unusual to ignore. He didn't bother dressing, just walked out in his underwear, and found Rael in one of the armchairs, his face buried in his hands. Cloud and Flower were nowhere to be seen—probably in the other bedroom. "Hey, what's up?"

Rael jerked up, his face red and tear-streaked. "Uh...did I wake you?"

"No, Moon did. What's wrong? Bad news from home?"

"No. Not at all. Just...hearing their voices, and...I missed them so much...." He bent his head and covered his face with his hand again.

"Your ma cried, right?" Rael nodded without uncovering his face. "But they must be pretty happy too."

"They're...in shock. Want me to come home. For good. I...haven't told them I'm going back with Suaj."

Oh. Dinun looked around and saw a chair he could drag over and sit on, so he did, getting as close as he could without crowding the guy. "Not really right to unless you do it in person. Give them a chance to get used to the idea of you being around at all. Anyway, it's not like it's forever. Aren't there plans for you two to go back and forth?"

"I don't know. Sorry. I...I've been a bit worked up about this."

"Understandable. If someone told me my ma had come back from the dead, I don't know how I'd react. At least you spoke to them, right? So next time, you can talk about the future and stuff."

Rael looked up and wiped his eyes with his hand, then blew his nose. "Uh, yes."

"Want some water?"

"Please."

Dinun found glasses in the opulent bathroom, and brought the water out to Rael, who drank it thirstily. "I'm sorry for imposing."

"Moon asked me to help you."

"Oh. I'm all right now, if you want to...."

"I'm okay." He could have made some remark about it being ironic Rael would get to go back to his family when those Angels who died, didn't, but it would be too cruel. "When will you go see them?"

"I really don't know. You need all the translation help you can get, and someone to explain the system. Soon, I hope, but I can't tell them exactly. I said I'd call again."

Looked like they'd exhausted the conversational limits. "Feeling better?"

"Yes, thank you. Do you mind if I sit here for a bit, or do you need something?"

"We're fine. Everyone's napping."

"I might do that myself until I'm needed. Uh...thanks for letting me make the call though."

"That's okay. See you later."

Moon was fairly insistent Dinun come back to the bed, and wrapped himself around Dinun in a way that made it clear Dinun was going nowhere soon. "When did you become so keen on Rael?"

"I. Have. Thought. Much. Listened. Much. Talked. Much."

"Suaj?"

"Yes. And. To. Rael. I. Am. Not. Angry."

"I am."

Moon kissed him. *"Makes. You. Sad. I. Wish. You. Not. Sad."*

"So...forgive him for my own good?"

"Yes. Him. Too."

"Because Suaj is your friend."

"No. Because. I. Love. You."

Dinun sighed. Lately he felt like everyone around him thought faster and smarter than him. "I think I get it."

Moon nuzzled at his cheek and made it clear he wanted non-verbal communication now.

Dinun still didn't understand Rael, but if Moon could forgive him, and be concerned about him, then maybe Dinun should take his cue from his Angel lover. Moon was the smartest person he knew. That ought to count for something.

During the lengthy welcoming ceremonies and prayers—politely phrased to encompass the deities of both worlds—Suaj hadn't been able to talk to Rael at length except to tell him there were a number of mindblocked people around. Dinun and the Angels had been whisked away suspiciously fast, Dinun's failing energy notwithstanding. The Tuzai weren't naïve, of course. Just rather poorly informed by one of their own.

The decision to exclude Rael from the diplomatic discussions puzzled him more. His allegiances were well known, as were his experiences. He was, so far as the Tuzai knew, their best translator. Why did they not trust him? The president wasn't blocked, but Suaj couldn't possibly keep up with his thoughts, spinning fast and ranging over so many subjects at once. Suaj had enough to do concentrating on his surface thoughts to translate, making occasional errors to convince people he did it the hard way.

He felt as exhausted as Dinun by the time the president and vice-president had finished discussing preliminary issues with Marlo. There would be much more of this kind of thing over the next few days. Tiresome, when he wanted to see Tuzax and all its technological wonders.

He won a little taste of it when their party—including Dinun and the Angels—went on a tour of the city and the surrounding countryside. Though it was painfully obvious the Tuzai were keeping them away from the general public and anything militarily sensitive, just the everyday scenes around him with the casual use of technology they were years away from developing on Quarn, made him slaver. The height of the buildings, the lightness of their structures, the perfection of every surface travelled over by machine, person, or eye, and the compactness of design left him yearning to spend years with their engineers and designers, learning their secrets. Even the sleek, quiet vehicle which discreetly and smoothly whisked them around the city, aroused feelings of envy and lust inappropriate in a scientific mind. He couldn't stop them, and he found it very hard to think about the political implications of their hosts' behaviour when he would give the entire Tuzai cabinet blowjobs for a year to obtain copies of this planet's core datastores.

Rael grinned at him suddenly. "I wish I could take a photo of your expression."

"Am I being obvious?"

"It's the little trickle of drool..."

Rael mock-wiped Suaj's chin and dodged the mock-slap in return. Rael had been subdued since he'd rejoined their group, and unwilling to talk about the reason, so it cheered Suaj to see him clowning around. He wouldn't bring up his lover's sombre mood here, when a driver could see and hear them. "We must negotiate for some of the data. Anything your people will let us have."

"No argument from me. We need people as much as information though. That's what's holding us back now."

Suaj nodded. It had been the problem for many years, and though the population was expanding as fast as anyone could wish, still too few trainees came through the system. He and Rael would be dead before Quarn could even dream of rivalling Tuzax.

As it was now, of course. Tuzax might continue to grow if it could halt the steep decline in its birth rate. Would the two planets ally or make war? So much would depend on each keeping within their own resource limits.

A call came over the vehicle's internal communicator, then the driver spoke into the intercom. "Mr Dinun's friends would like a chance to fly. Any objections to that, sirs?"

"None at all," Suaj said. "It will be a treat for your people to see them."

The expressionless driver passed the message back, but his thoughts betrayed his curiosity. All the Tuzai Suaj could read desperately wanted to see more of the Angels, but until now they had been kept away from observers. He looked forward to gauging reactions, but even more, a chance to talk in private with Rael.

"Looks like we're heading to Wiol Mountain Reserve," Rael said as the driver turned right. "Good choice—there are lots of private areas, plenty of height. Moon and the others should love it."

So would he, Suaj thought, if they had their little plane. Would he have a chance to fly a Tuzai version?

The road began to ascend as they left the built-up area, and the vehicle took them up a densely forested trail. The air through the window was lush with exotic, damp scents, and seeing Rael's slight smile, guilt attacked Suaj. For now, his lover was home, but would no longer be once they left in a month's time. Rael had given up a lot for love and expiation. What if he decided he couldn't do that any more? Suaj would have to make a choice then, and he wasn't sure if he could.

"There's a few lookouts along the road here. I guess the president will have had them cleared for us," Rael said. "I love this place."

There was nothing in Polsa like it, though Quarn was not without its charms. Suaj could only hope they exerted some pull on Rael that might draw him back. If not...well, then they would have to see.

After a forty-minute drive, they came to a viewpoint where tall, broad-leafed trees opened out to blue sky and fluffy, friendly clouds.

"Looks like someone's ready to stretch his wings." Rael pointed at Moon exiting their vehicle at speed, Dinun tugging on his arm to restrain him.

"My cousin, you'll cause the Tuzai alarm."

Moon glanced back at Suaj. *"I need to fly, little one."*

"A brief wait would be seemly."

::Disappointed:: "As you advise. This world is most strange, but beautiful."

"It is. Rael is glad to be home."

"And glad to leave? I think not. Ah, finally." One of the Tuzai officials came over and spoke to Werse and Dinun. *"We are free to fly over this park. We will return...soon."*

Suaj hid his grin and waved as Moon took flight. Always a twinge of regret and envy to see them go aloft, but blessed spirits, what creatures they were. The Tuzai stood with open mouths, utterly under the spell of the Angels' magnificence. Werse led Dinun to a long wooden seat where they watched, just as entranced.

Suaj took Rael's arm. *"They'll be a while. Come and sit."*

No one stopped them. Not that there was need to worry. The little silver bracelets all the Quarnians wore reported their position accurately and instantly, so he'd been told. He had suspicions they also acted as spies, and so restrained his vocal conversations to what couldn't be held against them. *"It's a beautiful planet."*

"Yeah." Rael sighed. *"So, tell me what's going on."*

"You're tainted. Biased, because of your relationship with me. No one's calling you a traitor, but that's why you're out of the loop."

"Figured. What did they say about Harnol?"

"It really came as a surprise to them. Which, when you think about it, is worrying. However, the president says he'll actively investigate it personally. Your mission to Quarn was something of a political issue, and has remained so. There is need for delicacy. The man himself is in Gerdira, in a position of some responsibility."

"Hell of a long way from here." Rael's mouth tightened with suppressed anger. *"Guess he got out of town before anyone suspected what he was up to. I want to chase him, Suaj."*

"Leave it to the professionals. You and I will be busy, and you have your family to think of. Ah, one issue which came up over and over in the president's mind is your prime minister. The two are most antagonistic, it seems."

"Yeah. Different political persuasions. The prime minister's from the Defence of Identity party. They wanted a forced invasion of Quarn. Our mission was a compromise between them and the Pacifists. I guess the president's party lost ground after the mission didn't turn out so well."

"And yet from their point of view, it was hardly a disaster." Interesting, Suaj thought. He should set Rael to searching through recent journalism to see what had been happening in his absence. *"You were upset. Feeling better?"* He reached for his lover's hand, feeling unrestrained by the discretion he'd normally show in Polsa.

"I called my mother. She cried. I cried. Dinun...um...was nice."

"Really?"

"Yeah. I felt bad about imposing...you know, considering."

Suaj squeezed Rael's hand. *"He would have told you if he couldn't handle it. This situation bothers me. It's almost as if we are surrounded by people who haven't been completely informed, so they can't tell us what's really going on."*

Rael turned to him, eyebrows raised in surprise. *"Why are you so paranoid? The mindblocks aren't surprising given they expected Dera to return with telepaths."*

"It's not that, it's...you said it yourself. This planet wanted to invade us. Your people have every reason to consider us enemies since we killed three of your kind. Giving us technology could make us a formidable opponent. Yet no one's worried about more than offending us. It's odd."

"You're not exactly experienced in interplanetary diplomacy."

"No, but I've dealt in detail with two of you, and heard the thoughts of a third."

"What does Marlo think?"

"Marlo's too worried about making a mess of his new job."

Rael stared out over the valley where the Angels flew in lazy circles, exploiting the thermals and the freedom. *"Should we call this off?"*

"We can't. If your people mean us harm, we can hardly stop them, and if they don't, it would be a dreadful insult. I'm merely making an observation."

"Sometimes your dedication to the truth is an uncomfortable virtue."

"I know. All we can do is be vigilant. I'm most worried about Dinun and the Angels."

"Like you said, we can't really do anything to protect them."

"My telepathy means I'm not completely helpless. I have a few tricks up my sleeve."

"Oh?"

"I might even show you a few tonight."

Rael smiled, albeit stiffly. *"Something to look forward to."* He nodded in Dinun's direction. *"Maybe you should talk to him. He's looking lost."*

"Yes. Will you be —?"

"I'm okay. Let me enjoy the view."

Suaj leaned over and brushed his lips against Rael's cheek. *"I won't be long."* He would give anything to read his lover's thoughts right now. It wasn't like Rael to hide his emotions this way. But then he'd never seen Rael at home before.

Dinun could hardly breathe for the melancholy and worry in his chest as he watched Moon, Cloud and Flower wheel through the alien sky, graceful as feathers on a breeze. From this distance they seemed so fragile, although he knew they weren't. Someone with a gun or one of the Tuzai's mysterious weapons could easily take them down from here. But why would they? The Angels were worth more alive than dead, and yet Dinun couldn't shake the memory as a child of seeing a farmer with a bloodied pair of raptor wings hung from his belt. The Angels would be a hunter's prize, if someone took a fancy to them.

"I'm coming over," he suddenly heard Suaj say in his mind. *"The tracker bracelets may record our conversations. We need to be discreet when speaking aloud."*

"Got it." Suaj sat down. *"Sure is lovely up here,"* Dinun remarked.

"Indeed. You're looking very tired. Do you want to go back to the residence?"

He wanted to go back to Quarn, truth be told, but that was kind of pointless. *"No. Moon needs it. He's been feeling cooped up, and he might not get many chances to do this."*

"True." Suaj's dark features didn't change as he added, *"I believe you and they are being deliberately segregated, to prevent the Angels picking up sensitive thoughts."*

"Figured as much. Moon even guessed it."

"Are you bothered?"

"Makes sense, doesn't it? I mean, even our president's nervy around you. Are they hiding anything?"

"Not that I can tell. They're planning to cooperate with the DNA donation?"

"It's not exactly hard to jerk off into a pot once a day. Specially if I do it for them."

Suaj smiled. *"Must be wonderful to have three lovers of such beauty."*

"Cloud and Flower are just occasional, for friendship's sake. To them it's like sharing a cup of tea and a chat. Nice, friendly sex and a cuddle. Don't think I'd like it to catch on in Getake though."

"No. Your friend Jenke--?"

"Not even as a joke, Suaj. Blessed spirits, are you trying to make me sick?"

"He's a fine-looking man if you like that kind of thing."

"No way. He's nearly old enough to be my father, and...no. Uh uh." He shuddered, even though he suspected Suaj was teasing. "They're going to start treatment right away. Taken all the samples. Do you think it'll work?"

"No one's uttered a word to make me think otherwise. The only complication is your chimerical DNA, but Dera didn't think it would make a difference."

"They inject cells into my spine. Don't like the sound of it much."

"How can we reassure you?"

"You can't, really. This isn't like me. I didn't used to worry about things at all. The accident...and then the diagnosis...seems like all I do is worry about being sick and dying. I drive myself crazy."

"Go through the treatment, regain your health, and you'll feel very differently."

"Once we go home."

"Yes. And we will. Your fears make everything seem dangerous, but I believe we will leave as we planned to."

"I hope so. It worries me the way these guys," he indicated the Tuzai, watching spellbound as Moon and the others showed off a little, "really want a piece of them."

"We're all leaving together, or none of us will."

Dinun turned to face him. *"That's not exactly cheering me up, Suaj."*

"Sorry. I'm not good at such matters. Perhaps...Rael could talk to you."

Since Suaj had just warned him someone might be listening to their conversations, Dinun doubted the man was serious. But he definitely was curious. *"Moon's pushing the forgiveness line. It'll take me a while to follow him."*

"Moon is? Why?"

"He says it's better that way. They're not big on grudge holding, Angels. They don't feud. If they remember a fight or a crime, it's more about protecting the clan from it happening again. So maybe he figures Rael's not a threat any more."

"Possibly. We could learn a lot from them."

"That's what I keep telling people. Most of the folks in Getake think they're not much smarter than rejers."

"Fools. Utter fools."

"Yeah. But Angels can't talk, so they must be dumb animals. Jenke's one of the few who treats them like people. Which is funny, considering his attitude at the start. He doesn't even hold a grudge —" Dinun stopped. This wasn't his secret to tell.

But he could keep no secrets from a telepath. "About his dead lover?"

"Not a lover. Beloved. You did not hear this from me."

"Of course not. In fact, I learned it from him when we met. Telepaths are by necessity discreet. But it's strange how he doesn't blame Rael."

"I know. Just when I thought I had the guy figured out, he goes and surprises me. Drives me crazy though. Like we should be best friends or something because we're both inverts."

"Must be hard for him."

"Yeah, but it's not my problem." Thinking of Jenke had distracted him nicely from his depression, but only by replacing it with irritation. *"You like it here."*

Suaj stretched in the warm sun, his furred arms shining. *"It's a world of wonders—and dangers. I consider the risk worth it for myself, but I wouldn't risk anyone else for my curiosity."* He turned to face Dinun. *"I understand your concerns. But as you're here, and we're in their hands, I can only suggest you try to enjoy yourself, and concentrate on being cured. This is an experience to tell your children about. All of us are as anxious as you to protect our friends out there, and equally helpless should this go sour. Chances are it won't."*

"Stop my whining, you're saying."

"No. You're a sick man with limited energy, so let Rael, me, and the others watch out for the Tuzai, and you get well. I know that's the dearest wish of Moon's heart. He's frantic with worry about you."

Dinun smiled. *"He's a great guy. They all are."*

"I know they esteem you just as highly." He switched to voice. *"The president wants to make your treatment as comfortable as possible, so you only have to ask if there's anything that will help."*

"I'll do that."

Moon swooped low over them and wheeled above their heads. *"Are you well, Dinun?"*

It always shocked him a little when Moon's 'real' voice came in. Made him sad too because he wanted to be able to talk like this all the time. *"I'm doing okay. Tired, but I'm not working. Suaj is looking after me."*

"Please thank my cousin for his help. We should return?"

"Maybe in a few minutes. Enjoying yourself?"

"This world is very strange, but beautiful. We wish to see more."

"You'll have your chances. I'll wave when they want you to come in, okay?"

"That's fine." ::Contented::

Moon's huge wings bore him silently away to where his friends drifted like elegant clouds over the landscape.

"He says thanks for looking after me."

Suaj smiled slightly. "I wasn't aware I was. But I'm grateful too." He jerked his head slightly back towards Rael.

"No problem. He misses his ma. Know what that's like. He's human, same as the rest of us. Sometimes it's hard to remember what he came to Quarn to do. What they did do."

Suaj remained silent. Tricky for him, knowing what his lover had been part of. Not really fair to put him on the spot again. "How's he doing now?" Dinun asked.

"His emotions are conflicted, naturally. Not dissimilar to your own, I expect. Difficult choices."

"Thought he'd already decided to go back with you?"

"That was before. I can't hold him to that until he'd seen his family again. He won't make any decision which harms you or the Angels, I promise."

Not the issue, Dinun thought. "Good." He shivered suddenly, a wave of nausea overcoming him. "I think...we should head back." He tried to stand, and his sight blanked out.

"Dinun!"

"S...sh...uash...."

Someone grabbed his arms, but he could barely feel them. The touch of the ground reassured him, and his sight came back. He blinked up at Suaj's face. "I...feel f-funny."

"Lie still. Help's coming."

As people fussed around him, and Suaj reassured Moon, Dinun thought enjoying himself on this strange, humid planet would have to wait a while.

Chapter Seven

"You look disgustingly smug," Rael said as Suaj encountered him outside Dinun's apartment.

"I feel smug. Come into the garden and we can talk there."

He hadn't seen Rael since breakfast. Same as the previous ten days, he'd been busy with translating and researching, scrambling to take copies of anything and everything the Tuzai would let them have and which would be of use to Quarn. Aside from military installations and equipment, the Tuzai had been almost indecently eager to assist. Rael had his own projects, but this afternoon had been at Dinun's side as usual, translating and explaining the treatment the man was receiving.

They found a bench under a shade tree offering a little relief from the late afternoon sun. "How's our boy?" Suaj asked as they sat.

"Very well. The treatment's finally starting to make a real impact on him, and he's much more positive. Moon's relaxing, finally." Suaj nodded in understanding. Dinun's lover had been overanxious since Dinun's collapse on the day of their arrival, and nothing Suaj or Rael could say made much difference. Hopefully he and the other Angels would settle down now. "So why are you looking so gleeful?"

"The mountain of data disks I just put in our luggage. If they would allow me to smuggle a few more engineers, everything would be perfect."

"Looks like you'll have to do with me...oh, hello, Dera."

Suaj turned and nodded in greeting to their friend, striding over with her usual cheerful expression firmly in place. He'd seen her but an hour ago. "I thought you were on your way home for the evening."

"I was but I had a call and thought I'd better come see you two." She sat on the grass in front of them, as always, utterly unconcerned with propriety. "I've been ordered back to my job, and so have our people."

"But we still need their assistance." Suaj hadn't expected this at all.

"I know, and I'm sorry, but the presidential staff assure me you'd have plenty of people to help and you've broken the back of what you wanted to copy, haven't you? I hoped I'd have another week, but the university administration want me to start teaching on the material we've obtained." She shrugged. "I can't complain. They've been very generous with the release."

And yet she was annoyed and surprised, Suaj read from her thoughts. *Hmmm.*

"Surely we'll see you again," Rael said.

"Oh sure, and once Dinun's a little stronger, we want to invite him and the Angels over to the campus to talk to our students. Our physical anthropologists are slaving at studying the way they fly. Only if Moon and the others agree," she added hastily. "Nothing invasive."

"I'm sure Moon will find it fascinating," Suaj said. "Everything about your world fascinates him."

"It does, doesn't it? So many questions. He's one bright man. He's determined to find a way of introducing written language to his people, and of learning how to vocalise like humans. He's accepted we can't learn to speak as they do. It's absolutely astonishing to watch a culture adapt in this manner right before our eyes." She glanced at her watch. "Oh, Zoka, I need to get going. My daughters will string me up if I miss another family dinner. You should come meet them sometime."

"I'd like that," Rael said. "But my own family's expecting me soon...."

"I bet." She climbed to her feet. "You can always call if you need any help, but you seem to have it all under control. I only wish I could spend more time with you all. I'll miss that."

Suaj agreed they all would and she left them with her usual warm wishes, superficially, the same as always.

"How aggravating," he said. "Still, Werse should be able to pick up the slack." He tried not to sound as annoyed as he was—or as puzzled by what he'd read in Dera's mind.

There was no hiding from his lover. "*What's wrong?*" Rael said.

"*You're entirely too sharp at reading my attempts at non-expression.*"

"*I've put time and effort into studying you. So what's wrong?*"

"*Dera wasn't expecting to be recalled now—or before we left. Someone is pulling strings and she's angry about it.*"

"*Academic politics?*"

"Possibly. Have you been reading the news reports?"

"I've tried to keep up, but there's so much to do. Never did have much interest in politics. The prime minister is slamming the pacifists pretty hard. Nothing new about that."

"Perhaps. And it may have less to do with us than unconnected petty rivalries. However, I think I have gathered enough information to take back even without what has been promised, and Werse is handling the negotiations with Marlo perfectly well. Ready to go home?"

"Yes." Rael's shoulders relaxed a little. "And I have a surprise for you. Come around to the back."

The surprise turned out to be a sleek yellow automobile the Tuzai called a 'sporter' for reasons which escaped Suaj. The name mattered far less than the beautiful engine which powered it, and the fact Rael was prepared to let him drive. Suaj walked around it, unable to resist stroking the incredibly smooth finish on the body—smooth as polished glass. "Are you sure?"

"I've driven them before. But you'll need to practice. It's not those lumps of rock we drive back on Quarn."

"When?"

Rael laughed. "Now you're not eager or anything, are you? Let me set up a lesson with an advanced tutor—they'll have a dedicated track. The president will have to secure it, keep the gawkers away."

"Of course." Suaj would be glad to get away from the security imposed on them in the city. "What about the business with Joese?"

Rael's expression slipped. "Moving like honey down a block of ice. I might even have to fly back from Quarn, it's taking so long."

"Curious. The man's a murderer. Is justice always this slow here?"

"Didn't used to be. I don't know what's going on, and unless you've picked a mind or two, I can't find out more than I have. I'm worried the bastard's going to get away."

"Unless he steals another spaceship, where can he go?" Suaj put his hand on Rael's shoulder. "I believe the assurances we've received. He won't escape." There, that should satisfy any snoopers. The bracelets weren't bugged, he'd learned by mindreading, but their bedrooms were, the devices tiny and well hidden in the lamps. All of them worked on the assumption they could be overheard at any time. It was most tiresome. At least the Tuzai were completely unaware they harboured two more telepaths than they knew about. That had been quite handy at times.

A driving lesson was set up for the following afternoon, and Rael received permission for the two of them to go to his parents for ten days. Dera's sudden departure put extra pressure on Suaj to make sure the material they gathered was what they needed, and its nature translatable with the limited resources they would have on Quarn. Given his choice, he'd have remained here in Kosat working on things, but Rael had become progressively more tense and irritable since their arrival. Being Dinun's translator and the constant exposure to the Angels, arousing such intense guilt in him, explained some of that, but the need to see—not just talk to—his parents, was the greatest part. Suaj didn't suffer from such feelings, but he couldn't deny the real effect they had on his lover. He had to put his desire to acquire more precious knowledge behind sparing Rael more pain. Rael had suffered enough.

So after spending an hour with Dinun talking about his treatment and receiving reassurances from all four of them that Dinun was much better mentally and physically and would handle Suaj and Rael's absence just fine, he was chauffeured outside the city to meet Rael at a large training facility for drivers.

The instructor's thoughts about Suaj's appearance were somewhat less polite than his spoken words, but that had long since ceased to surprise Suaj. The main problem turned out to be his height—not even extending the driver's seat as far back as possible made the position comfortable. But he wouldn't be deterred, and with a grinning Rael watching and the Tuzai instructor seated nervously beside him, he started the sporter up.

"Now, she's a little more powerf—"

Suaj gunned the engine, slipped down a gear and took off, ignoring the man's startled yelp, and tearing down the straight track as if he planned to launch a plane.

"Zoka's wings, slow down!"

"Why? I have control. You want me to go around that?" A bundle of plastic barrier forms made an obstacle. He steered smoothly and swiftly around them, admiring the way the sporter hugged the ground. Very nice.

"Could you *please* slow down?"

Suaj glanced over and found his instructor clutching the doorframe with white-knuckled hands. "Oh, I'm sorry." He brought the sporter down to a sedate crawl. "I thought this was the advanced lesson."

"I teach people how to drive safely. That wasn't safe!"

"Well, no. Where's the fun in that?"

The instructor gave up in ten minutes. "I would never get into any vehicle with that man," he declared to Rael, slamming the sporter's door. "And I advise you not to, either, Mister Kine."

"Too late," Rael said airily and jumped into the vacated passenger seat. "Okay—do your worst, Mister Suaj."

Suaj happily obliged. Rael grinned and whooped with delight as they ripped around the track, passing the scowling instructor three times before he stomped off and left them to it. Suaj kept it up until he grew bored with the limited vista. Rael took a few turns but simply going around the same track over and over quickly palled. They agreed Suaj had more than established his ability to handle the sporter, so they called it a day.

"Could we take it out of the city?" Suaj asked as Rael pulled up at the administration centre.

"Not today. We leave at dawn though. You can't drive in the city—that's the only restriction the president wanted. Otherwise...."

"But you have speed limits. How tiresome." Such a concept didn't exist on Quarn. Not yet at least.

"Not on all roads. I made sure our route takes as many of those as possible."

"Forget the hot sex. This is the reason I love you." He leaned in and gave Rael a long, appreciative kiss.

"I'm still counting on thank you sex though."

"Of course. An experience like this makes me *very* grateful."

Someone knocked at the door and Dinun lifted his head. "*Rael*," Moon advised.

"Come in."

Rael entered. "Am I interrupting?"

"No. Just writing lessons. Moon's learning a nice hand."

"May I look?" Rael was always formal around them. Nervous and embarrassed, Moon and Cloud said. Dinun couldn't really relax around him, though he felt no threat. He settled for politeness. Easiest that way.

Dinun showed him the letters Moon had painstakingly learned in their evening lessons, though he struggled with the whole concept of reading and writing despite his intelligence. Cloud and Flower had only passing interest in it—Dinun suspected they waited to see how Moon got on, and for him to explain

it in more Angelic terms—and spent the evenings cuddled up on the couch together, or even in the bedroom. They weren't bored, they'd assured him. But Moon's agile mind demanded stimulation, and as soon as Dinun had the stamina, he'd asked in his usual persuasive manner to be introduced to the mysteries of literacy.

"You're right. Very nice work, Moon."

"Than...kk...you."

Rael jumped. "Zoka's nuts! When did you learn—?"

Dinun grinned. "He's been working on that for weeks, haven't you?"

Moon inclined his head, radiating pleasure at Rael's surprise. Sure, it hadn't sounded much like human speech, but the syllables had been recognisable as words. Dera said the difficulty wasn't in the Angels' incredibly flexible voice boxes, but in their brain. What Moon had done was more than mimicry, because he understood what he'd said, but thinking in words was such an alien idea for his kind, he might never be able to achieve fluency. Dera thought the writing had more potential. Moon had amazed Dinun by how far he'd come in so short a time.

So was Rael. "I had no idea. I'd be happy to help...uh, when we get back."

"So what can we do for you?"

"Oh. Nothing. I just wanted to see how you were, ask if there was anything you needed before we left."

"We're fine. Werse dropped by, but I understand enough Tuzai to handle the doctor visits. With Moon's help, I mean. I feel good. The doc says I'll be done in two weeks, back to normal. I guess we owe you."

"No, you don't. Even if we cured a hundred like you, it wouldn't repay...." He coughed, his eyes shifting guiltily. "You know how to contact us. Don't hesitate to do that if you need anything, or you're worried—"

"Rael, we're fine. Stop worrying. You sound like Sora."

Rael smiled a little. "Sorry. We're leaving at dawn because we're going the slow route. I've made sure you four are going to be shown around some more, and Moon, you'll have opportunities to fly every day."

"Thank. You. Travel. Safely. Enjoy. Cousin. Anticipates. Greatly."

"Yes, he does. Right, then I'll leave you. Good luck with the writing and the treatment and things."

Dinun waved him goodbye, but as the door closed, he turned to Moon. "Now what was that all about?"

"He. Worried. Guilty. Is. Friend. Trying."

"With me? Why?"

"Nature. Is. Bad. No. But. Mind. Messy. Is." Moon tapped his workbook.
"Work. More. Now?"

"Okay." But Dinun continued to puzzle over Rael's apparently purposeless visit. The man confused him more than Jenke did and that was saying something.

Dawns and evenings were the most delightful parts of the Tuzai day, at least in coastal Kosat. Rael said the mountains, where his grandparents had lived and where his parents had moved after his 'death', were cooler and more pleasant to a Quarnian. Suaj enjoyed it all, and the fresh scents of the morning and the streaking colours of the lightening sky made a cheering backdrop to the start of their journey.

As soon as they cleared the city limits, Rael turned the sporter's controls over to Suaj. The sweet engine purred quietly even at speeds that would make them airborne if the sporter had wings. He dropped to a slightly more pedestrian speed so they could enjoy the scenery.

"Do you think, if I asked nicely, the president would let me take one or a dozen of these back to Quarn?"

"Probably. There doesn't seem to be anything he's prepared to refuse you."

"No. One would think they were scared of us. Don't they have enough DNA that even if we stopped cooperating on that front, they could secure the next generation?"

"I'd have thought so. Even if they artificially inseminated women instead of cloning the DNA and injecting it, they must have enough. Moon told me they'd been wanking into cups three times a day since they started. The doctors said once was enough but, uh, I think they're showing off."

Suaj laughed, but quietly so not to arouse the suspicions of the snoopers. The car was bugged, but they'd expected that. He knew how to turn it off, and how to remove the tracker bracelets, so they could have as much privacy as they wanted. The Tuzai listeners must have thought he and Rael didn't talk much.
"Yes, they probably are. And they have absolutely no inhibitions, of course."

"No, they don't. I have no idea how they work that four in a bed thing but...."

"Ever tried it? More than one?"

Rael looked offended. *"Of course not. I told you, I'm not like that."*

"I have. Twice. Man and a woman, both besotted with my fur. It was...stimulating. Not intellectually, unfortunately. Doing it with people you love and like would be so much more satisfying."

"Would you...with Moon and the others?"

"If they offered and you didn't mind. But they won't and you would. Kine Raelne, you're jealous."

"Yes. As hell. I still can't believe we killed five of them. They're...incredible."

Suaj sighed. *"Your people aren't the only ones to have killed them, Rael. My human ancestors have much more blood on their hands. But they are incredible. My heart eases every time I see them, talk to them. I'll miss them all when we return to Polsa."*

"Incentive to get on with the long-haul flight routes."

"I don't need more incentive, but yes."

Rael grunted. *"Right turn, next junction."*

Unnecessary to mention it as the sporter had a heads-up navigational display so perfectly designed it made Suaj's balls tighten with lust every time he used it. Rael was therefore changing the subject. Being a good lover, Suaj let him, and stroked his arm as additional reinforcement. He would never sleep around on Rael, but equally he would never lie about his desires. Rael understood intellectual honesty.

The roads were a wonder, but for how long? Already the infrastructure in outlying cities and towns had begun to suffer from the falling population, and even with the help of the Angel DNA, the turnaround would take many years. Suaj couldn't waste time worrying about it. He had his own planet to improve.

But he could easily love this one, even with all it had done to his. The lushness, the intensity of the vegetation and scents, the purity of the technological design, and even the people, for he had encountered mostly good will and the precautions taken against the Quarnians were understandable. If Rael said he could not leave....

Still, a decision not to be decided now or lightly. *"How do you think your parents will react to me?"*

"Uh, I've sent pictures, and told them as much as I can. They're educated and open-minded. Just rein in your habit of blunt honesty until they've had a chance to talk to you."

"Be nice?"

"Well, be...less you."

Suaj smiled. *"Should I be insulted?"*

"You know I love you, but diplomacy is never going to be one of the reasons."

"You're not exactly skilled either."

"Suaj, you're a walking culture shock. They're old. Be...delicate. Treat them like fragile pieces of valuable equipment."

"Very well. I shan't poke them with anything sharp, like my tongue."

"Glad to hear it. Oh...and my sisters can be, um...protective."

Suaj glanced at him and found his expression serious. "So be nice to you too?"

"Er, lay off how ugly Tuzai are, that's all."

"You're no fun at all."

"You have no idea how to be a bride-to-be, do you?"

"I beg your pardon. 'Bride'?"

"You're already dressed in white...eyes on the road! Hitting later!"

Suaj growled, a deep-throated sound from the bottom of his larynx he'd learned from Cloud. Rael actually cringed. "Son-in-law," Suaj said firmly.

"Got it. Not a bride."

"Not if you don't want to walk the rest of the way. With a limp." And what would the snoopers think about that?

Rael carefully made no further jokes along those lines, but they had other things to talk about, plans to make. Rael appeared eager to keep off the topic of his future and his family. Suaj obliged, and hoped the reunion would go smoothly. Rael's jitters had become quite worrying.

As they ascended the mountain to reach the plateau where the town of Pugil stood, the temperatures slowly declined, and at the top of the range the air felt distinctly chilly. Rael suggested they turn the heating on to at least keep their feet warm since Suaj preferred to drive with the windows open. The flat land ahead of them reminded him not a little of Quarn, though it was all still very much greener than his homeland. "It snows?"

"Not at this time of year. But yes. Heavily too. Staying with my grandparents on holidays often meant being snowed in and digging out. Funny, it feels colder in Quarn than it did then. Drier, I suppose."

Suaj agreed, and wondered what it would like to be surrounded by deep snow, high as a man. The snow in Polsa was thin, miserable stuff. Enough to make travelling and walking treacherous, but not to do anything imaginative with. Children's stories spoke of a past on Old Earth where snow featured

strongly, but he'd never seen what the old pictures conveyed. He regretted he would still not do so, before he reminded himself he might yet return to Tuzax. The signs looked favourable. The space flight's costs were trivial compared to the cost of building the craft. The Tuzai travelled all around the planets and solar systems near to them as easily as he and Rael had journeyed to Pugil. The day when Quarn and Tuzax citizen would routinely exchange visits surely could not be far off.

"It's the farm with the blue metal posts."

"The navigation is working fine, you know." Suaj pulled over to the side of the road and turned the engine off. Before Rael could ask what he was up to, Suaj cupped his chin and drew him in for a long, tender kiss, gently stroking Rael's cheek before he let him go. "It'll be fine. I'll be good, they miss you, and they're not savages."

"It's just...I don't know if I can leave them again."

Suaj stared into Rael's blue eyes. "Whatever you decide, I'll be with you. So decide when you're ready."

"You mean that?"

"Do I often say what I don't mean?"

"No. Suaj...." Rael laid his cheek against Suaj's. "Let's go."

"Yes. Farm with blue posts. Got it."

Two minutes later, they drove up a narrow road to a neat, low-set farmhouse, built out of wood and steel, and surrounded by a lovingly tended garden. As Suaj brought the sporter to a halt, people burst out of the house and ran towards them. As soon as Rael climbed out of the vehicle, laughing and crying men, women, and children swamped him, surrounding him until Suaj could no longer see him.

Suaj kept back and tried not to read any of the many confused thoughts and emotions Rael's family sent him. He couldn't recall experiencing such exuberant feelings from his parents, or his only sibling. His mother and father had allowed him to go to a residential engineering school in his teens with nothing less than relief, and his sister, ten years his junior, had always kept her distance, embarrassed by his intellectual talent and his appearance. They'd come to his graduation, and letters were exchanged once or twice a year. But he had no interest in his nieces and nephews nor in playing devoted uncle or son. Lack of interest was the dominant emotion all round, really. He wondered if he'd ever want the passion and love that swamped Rael now, but there was no doubt Rael expected it and almost certainly needed it in a way Suaj would never do.

Finally Rael broke away from the others, wiping his eyes, smiling with trembling lips. "Come and meet everyone. Father, Mother, this is Suaj qel Gwan."

The two elderly people he'd spoken to smiled at Suaj, and to his pleasure there was nothing but warmth and a little pleased surprise behind their expressions. He wasn't as strange as they'd feared.

"Suaj, welcome to our home. I'm Edin, Raelne's mother, and this is Felmar."

She held out her hand and he shook it, shocked a little at how thin and papery her skin was. She stared a little overlong at his fur, but only out of curiosity and some admiration for its beauty. Then her husband offered his hand. "Welcome, son. I understand from Raelne we owe you a lot."

"It's mutual, sir." Rael slipped his arm around Suaj's waist as he answered. "Rael?" he added as the four women and their presumed spouses, not to mention six small and not completely obnoxious children, stared at him intently.

"Oh." Rael came back to himself and made the introductions. His siblings were more guarded in their reactions, one not altogether approving of her brother taking up with an alien, but none outright hostile. Their partners had no strong feelings, and the children only wanted to know what his fur felt like.

"Rael, dear, bring Suaj inside. Everyone, give them room. Boys, collect their bags, will you?"

Had it been a normal 'meet the family' visit, it might have been an awkward situation, with people artificially on their best behaviour. But with a beloved son and brother back from the dead, and only a few short calls to assuage both worry and curiosity, all that mattered was Rael telling them what had happened to him since his family had last seen him nearly two years ago. Suaj sat thigh to thigh with his lover, supporting him vocally and emotionally. Much was difficult to retell even at this distance. Deaths of friends, crimes committed against others and against him, homesickness and gnawing pain over what the situation had done to them all. The well-mannered children sat on the floor and listened to the adults talk, cry and even shout at and over each other.

Suaj knew by the way the lines around Rael's eyes deepened and his voice roughened that he had a severe headache and he'd had more than enough emotional stress for now. Catching Edin's eye, Suaj turned to the oldest girl child. "Would you like to touch my fur?"

The girl glanced at her mother who nodded warily. The girl scooted over and Suaj leaned down to give her access to his arms.

"Soft," she cooed, and in seconds, he found himself surrounded by eager youngsters, rubbing small hands up and down his bare arms, amazed at the feel of his fur. He couldn't imagine doing something like this on Quarn, but somehow it felt the right thing to do here. And it gave Rael time to gather his thoughts a little.

"Suaj, if you don't mind me asking," Rael's father said. "We've heard about these Angels you brought with you. What are they like?"

"Like me, only with wings," he said bluntly. Rael put his hand on his thigh, but he didn't need the reassurance. "Taller, more powerful about the shoulders, and wings wider than they're tall."

"They fly?" one of the boys asked.

"Yes, indeed. Like birds."

The children begged for more information, and once Rael joined in, Suaj knew he'd recovered his composure. But Suaj had some questions of his own. He'd have to be careful, as the house may have been monitored, but political discussions in themselves weren't unusual. "I'm curious about something. I understand the president and prime minister actually come from opposing parties. How does that work?"

He'd struck gold. Both Rael's parents had strong, informed views and were only too happy to expound. "It doesn't, and that's a fact," Felmar said. "Prime Minister Karor's answer to everything is invade, invade. Move the population to another planet by force, take what we need from your planet and others by force, search the galaxies for other organisms who can augment the damaged DNA. His predecessors concentrated more on boosting the birth rate, though I admit in the long run it's not enough. But Karor's cut funding for maternity leave and sperm donation fees, and so made children expensive when not having them will cost us much more."

"And he wants to turn our children into freaks."

Everyone turned to look at Rael's oldest sister, Ipanine. "What do you mean, Ipi?" Rael asked.

"Contaminate our heritage. Make our babies something other than human."

"You mean, like me," Suaj said.

She flushed, but didn't look away. "I'm sure you're a fine man, Suaj. But you're not like us. I don't want furry children."

"You won't have them. I'm unusual. A freak. Most Quarnians look nothing like me. They're not born with wings either."

That remark caused a ripple of speculation through the minds of his audience, but Ipanine wouldn't be deflected. "It's not right for a mother to bear a child who looks nothing like her or her partner." Her husband took her hand. "I don't want my grandchildren to look like aliens."

"You won't have grandchildren at all if you do nothing. Male fertility will fall to ten percent in fifteen years without action."

"What about those who retain their fertility now? They're superior stock. Why don't we concentrate on breeding from them?"

"Ipi, dear, do you think this is a suitable subject to talk about in front of the children?"

"Yes, because it's their future, Mother."

"If we only breed from the men who can," Rael said, "we'll end up with a dangerously limited gene pool. This way even men like me can fertilize eggs."

"But your children won't be Tuzai. Or human."

Rael put his hand firmly on Suaj's shoulder. "Human enough for me."

Ipanine's son looked up at Suaj. "Can you lay eggs? Does Uncle Rael ferti..fertilize them?"

Rael's brother laughed, though Ipanine scowled. Suaj covered his mouth to hide his grin. Felmar's mouth twitched and his wife sighed, though she too hid a smile. "No, I don't lay eggs, and neither do the Angels. They do have pouches though. Want to hear about them?"

Changing the subject defused the tension, even if Ipanine remained unconvinced. Suaj couldn't even resent her attitude given how alienated he'd felt from the rest of the Quarnian population most of his life on account of his appearance. He'd have given anything to have grown up with children who looked like him, and she only wanted the same for her children and grandchildren. Perhaps it was fortunate he and Rael couldn't actually breed.

He was rather more interested to learn about the difference in political stances between the current president and prime minister. There hadn't been time to pursue any in-depth study of the roles of either position, and in truth he'd never expected to need the knowledge, nor to pay much attention to the individuals. Now he realised that had been a foolish mistake. So while Rael spent time with his siblings and mother and the offspring, Suaj engaged his father in conversation about Tuzai government.

"The president and Karor loathe each other well beyond political differences," Felmar said as they walked through a planted woodland at the edge of the farm. "Karor came in on a tide of anxiety and desire for a change, but he's

used his office to pursue vendettas and his own peculiar agenda ever since. We can't get rid of him for at least two years."

"So his approach to the donated DNA might be that it thwarts his ambitions?"

"I don't know. To be seen to be too openly opposing an acknowledged successful solution would be a killer, but Ipanine isn't the only person against the idea. I think he'll be disappointed your Angels cooperated so easily. The man wants to wage war on someone. I guess running one planet isn't enough for him."

Suaj probed further, and discovered the Tuzai government head had the most peculiar division of responsibilities. The president was in charge of the military, the prime minister the justice and police system, dividing health care between them. The prime minister looked after children's education, the president took charge of university and higher-level teaching, and so on.

"How does it work?" Suaj wondered. No surprise there were tensions—it was built into the system.

"We've muddled along surprisingly well. Probably because it's a wealthy planet, and life's easier here than for some—like your own. The flaws in the set up have been exposed over the last five years or so as the population fall has started to bite. Reform is needed, but Karor seems to be bent on achieving that by emasculating the presidential office. It makes a lot of people nervous because the balance between the two has been a useful check in the growth of power and privilege. President Mendaljo is a bit too loyal to his pacifist origins, if you ask me."

Suaj did his best to understand the complicated situation, and Felmar, a retired university lecturer and engineer, made an admirable teacher. But he still had questions, and as he and Rael were finally allowed to retire to the privacy of their bedroom, he wanted answers, even as Rael determinedly stripped and kissed him, making his need for physical comfort clear.

"How do the two missions to Quarn fit into all this?"

"I don't know, and right now, I don't care. I'm talked out, Suaj. I'm wrung out. I need...."

"To be fucked?"

"Yeah. Until I can't think any more. What a bloody day. It's been great, and seeing everyone...never thought it would happen. But I'm shattered, and I need you."

As he lay wrapped around an exhausted but finally peaceful Rael, Suaj could make no sense of the facts he had and the information he'd received. In the end, it might be nothing to worry about. The Tuzai had been helpful and friendly and genuinely regretful over their past crimes, just as Rael himself was. Dera's recall was probably exactly how she portrayed it—the impatience of university officials anxious for some return on the investment in time and staff. Suaj had never had any great interest in or exposure to high-level politics, and had never had to play games to get what he wanted in his career—the advantage of being the best in a severely understaffed field. Maybe this was all quite normal, and by worrying about it, he added unnecessarily to his and Rael's stress.

But the niggle of concern that had built slowly over the last two weeks and peaked with Dera's sudden departure, refused to be argued away. He didn't know how to address it, or what he could do even if he learned the truth. They could not leave this planet without Tuzai help. If their hosts decided it thus, the Quarnians could be prisoners—forever—in a heartbeat, and nothing Suaj could plan or do would change that.

"Stop thinkin'," Rael mumbled against his neck. "S'leep."

"Yes, dear."

Easier said than done but for Rael's sake, he'd try. And hope all his fears meant nothing at all.

Chapter Eight

Being told he needed to become an inpatient for a few days had come as a shock to Dinun, but the experience hadn't been too bad in the end. He only had to lie or sit around on a drip and be monitored. Boring for sure, and too much for the Angels who, at Dinun's insistence, spent only a couple of hours a day with him. But now it was all over, the drips, monitor leads, and patches removed for the last time.

"You're doing very well, Dinun," Doctor Benot said through Werse. "We won't need to continue the supplementary treatments now."

"Great," Dinun said with heartfelt gratitude. The spinal injections had been unpleasant, even with mild sedatives to help him stay calm. Though now he knew how much good they'd done him, he'd endure it all over again to feel this normal again. "So how much longer before you sign me off?"

"If all goes well—" The doctor stopped as a man in a black uniform entered the cubicle. She said something sharp but the man ignored her, staring at Dinun.

Werse grabbed his arm as Dinun started to stand. "*Dinun, he's coming to...run!*"

But there was no time, and no space—chairs and the doctor's misguided attempt to help them, blocked Dinun and Werse's escape and their assailant could pick them off as he liked. He raised a strange gun and fired three times, soft 'pffft' sounds with each shot nothing like a rifle's. Before Dinun even registered the small yellow tuft sticking out from his chest, he was already falling backwards, dizzy and disconnected worse than the disease had ever made him. Still he tried to warn the Angels. "Moon...."

He never heard the reply.

"Do you want to pull up for a while?" Suaj asked. Rael had sat bolt upright with gritted teeth since they'd left his parents' place a good half hour ago. Suaj would have given anything to read his mind right now.

"Uh...please."

As soon Suaj stopped the sporter at a small rest stop overlooking the mountain range, Rael threw himself out of it and stalked over to the viewing point. Suaj waited a minute before following, unsure if his lover wanted company or not, but then deciding it would be better to be supportive and told to go away, than let Rael believe he had to deal with his feelings alone.

Rael said nothing as Suaj stood next to him, arm around his waist while they stared out towards Kosat and the distant ocean. The departure from the farm had been strained, with everyone trying to be cheerful while their miserable thoughts swamped Suaj's telepathy and broadcast their presence through reddened eyes, tight mouths, and cut off sentences. Rael's family had been so careful in not making the smallest demand on him to remain, but their minds screamed with pain and the need for their son, brother, and uncle to stay with them. Suaj hadn't known what to say, so he'd said nothing. Cowardly of him.

"I know I said I'd go back." Rael turned to Suaj, sorrow heavy in his eyes. "But...I can't. I can't bear to."

"Then don't."

"But you...and Quarn needs me."

I need you. "If you became ill and died like your friend, we'd have to manage." He struggled to keep his voice cool as always. "As for me...it's not impossible I could return here, or that you could visit Quarn. With the new, friendly relations, many things are possible that weren't before."

"You could bear it?"

"Like you, I have pulls in both directions. It wouldn't be easy. But it wouldn't be something to dismiss out of hand."

"I've felt—until I went home—I didn't really belong any more. I wanted to go back. I miss Quarn, our friends, the job. But seeing my family...and what my sister said about making babies. I'd never have that chance on Quarn. Here...I could be a father, even if only in name. It wasn't even something I actively wanted until...."

"Until it was possible. That's understandable."

Rael turned wounded blue eyes on him. "How can you be so calm? Why aren't you angry with me? I know you care."

"What would raging do except to upset us both? Your feelings are a fact, and not a surprise. Forcing you to act against them would cause misery for the two of us."

Rael seized him and kissed him hard. He was rarely rough, so it had to result from strong emotion. Suaj rather liked the possessiveness, but wished his lover wasn't so torn up inside.

"Take a few more days to think. If you want to remain until the next Tuzai visit, we'll manage. I need to return to Quarn. But I'll come back."

"What if you can't?"

"Do you feel so confident predicting the future with your recent past, Rael? I have no choice but to return. You're the one with a decision to make. I promised you the whole of my lifespan. Were you to take ten years to come back, that wouldn't change."

"Same here. Why do I have to decide who I love more?"

Suaj laid his cheek against Rael's, the tremors in his lover's body vibrating against his own. "You don't. You only have to decide who you can live without. We don't have to go back immediately. We could stay in a hotel or whatever you call them here."

Rael wiped his eyes and stared out over the landscape again. "Yeah. I'd like that. You and me. Can we just...be here for a bit? It's nice here."

"Of course."

They sat on the grass, and Suaj looked out over an alien yet lovely land, his arm still firmly around Rael's waist. "Things will work out."

"Blind faith seems wrong coming from you."

"True. But they have up until now, so I believe it is not unwise to predict this state of affairs to continue. The alternative is to believe your deity or ours decides at random to screw your life up for amusement. I choose not to."

"Put that way, I guess it makes sense."

"I always make sense."

"That you do, my little fuzzball."

For the first few seconds, he thought the multiple sclerosis had come back, until he remembered the man with the gun. His brain worked slowly—drugs, he realised—and the inability to move wasn't caused by disease but restraints. A featureless, windowless, grey room with one harsh overhead light. "Werse? Anyone? Moon?"

His voice was rough, his throat dry. Down lower, the sensation of violation made him sick. While he'd been out, strange hands had made free with his body,

inserting, removing, probing, and attaching. He couldn't move his head, but he knew he was naked apart from the leads.

"Werse?"

"Here."

From behind him. Werse's voice was weak too, and since he hadn't come around to Dinun's side, he had to be tied up as well. "Any idea what the crap is going on?"

"No. I can't hear the Angels."

Werse wasn't using his talent. The drugs. "Can you hear anyone?"

"No. Or see anyone."

"Moon? Cloud? Flower?" He called with voice and thoughts, but no reply.

"No use, Dinun. They could be anywhere."

Dinun tugged at the restraints, but he was bound across the chest, stomach, hips and legs. He couldn't even wriggle.

They were screwed. "Suaj will come get us."

"By the time they know what's happened, we could be dead."

Dinun swallowed. "They won't want to kill us. We're valuable." Spirits, please let that be enough to save Moon and the others.

"Then maybe we'll just wish we're dead."

"Don't talk like that."

"Sorry."

"Suaj will come, I know he will. And Commandant Hedike. You wait."

But he didn't even convince himself.

Since the Angels' minds broadcast very loudly compared to other mortals, Suaj noticed the absence of his fellow telepaths as soon as they drew into the residence's carpark. As it was after dark, this was unusual enough to worry him. "Dinun and the Angels aren't here."

Rael peered at the residence as if he could divine their presence by sight alone. "No? Maybe they're out being wine and dined."

"Moon, possibly. Cloud and Flower? I think not."

He had to wait until he had a chance to speak to Zern, and pretend he didn't already know Dinun was missing, before he found out what was going on.

"It's most unfortunate," she said. "Dinun went into hospital to have some supplementary therapy—"

"He said nothing about this to us," Rael snapped.

"Calm down," Suaj told him. "And then?" he said to Zern.

She glanced nervously at Rael, perhaps expecting another eruption. "He didn't know before you left. The therapy wasn't working as fast as it was supposed to, so the doctors thought they could enhance the effect of their treatment. But while he was in the ward, he and Werse were exposed to an infectious patient. Normally it wouldn't cause a problem but the two of them became very ill. The Angels took sick too. Because of being Quarnian, they said. Werse was in a coma though he's a little better. All of them are in quarantine for the moment."

"For how long?"

"Another week. They told Marlo there was no need for concern. They want to be absolutely sure the infection is past and there's no chance of giving it to us."

Rael stared at Suaj, brow furrowed. "This stinks."

"Perhaps. Maybe Dera could find out more for us, if I don't. You need to remain calm. We have no overt reason for alarm."

With obvious difficulty, Rael eased his taut expression into something resembling a smile. "So long as they're okay."

"They're fine. We've had daily reports."

"Have you spoken to Dinun at all?"

Zern frowned. "No, but the doctors are better able to assess his condition and tell us the situation. We've sent over what books we have and so on. Very boring for them, I'm sure, but they'll be out soon."

She had no suspicions, Suaj read from her thoughts, and other than the natural alarm at the Angels being out of contact and secluded, he could give no rational reasons to consider things to be other than as described.

Rael remained unconvinced. "*You'd think they'd be worried about the rest of you,*" he said as they walked along the halls, politely acknowledging the welcome of staff as they passed them.

"We weren't exposed. And it's not an implausible scenario. What would anyone gain by concocting this story? We're in their hands anyway."

Rael shrugged, his mouth still turned down. Suaj had nothing to offer one way or the other. It would help if they could speak to Dinun directly. He'd have to arrange it.

When they arrived in their own apartment, Rael found a message waiting for him which took his mind right off Dinun and the Angels. "It's from a prosecutor at the Department of Justice," he said. "They're preparing to indict Harnol in Gerdira for murder and treason, and want me to travel there to give formal evidence."

Suaj had to switch his mind from worrying about their friends, to thinking about a much-hated enemy. "Excellent news. Do they mention needing anyone else, like Marlo?"

"Not in this. I need to call the prosecutor's office. I'll do that from the bedroom."

While Rael attended to that, Suaj concentrated on unpacking and listening to the messages from Dera and other colleagues. Nothing recent from Werse, poor man. Such a promising engineer. To lose him to such a trick of fate would be both a personal tragedy and a loss to Polska's development programme. Suaj hoped the doctors' reports were accurate and their friends were indeed recovering well. He was on the verge of contacting the residence's clerical staff to find out how to call the hospital, when Rael came out.

"They want me to leave tomorrow. Short notice but they want it tied up before we leave."

"Reasonable. I'll go with you."

Rael held up his hand. "They want me to go on my own."

Suaj's suspicion spiked. "Why?"

"Because they don't need anyone else. I have details of a shuttle flight leaving first thing in the morning, and a police officer will meet me at the airport. It would be a waste of time you going anyway. We still have a lot to finish, and it'll be tedious."

Rael didn't look bothered, and Suaj forced himself to calm down. "True. I'd like to support you. It's bound to be stressful."

"You're the best boyfriend, you know that?" Suaj smiled a little at the praise. "I'll be fine, and I should be back in four days. He said I'll be quarantined until the hearing to protect my evidence."

Suaj didn't like the word 'quarantine' being used again. "Never heard of such a thing."

"Me either, but they don't want this screwed up. Harnol's lawyers, not to mention Harnol himself, will try everything they can to get out of this. They don't want to take any chances."

"I suppose that makes sense."

Only it didn't. Suaj couldn't claim to be a lawyer, and his sole exposure to a trial—that of Rael and his colleagues for their crimes—had not given him any taste to explore more, but the reasoning escaped him. Rael didn't seem surprised or worried though, and he would know.

Rael wandered off to deal with laundry and repacking for the newest trip. Suaj obtained the hospital's number but the telephonist told him the doctor in charge of the case had gone home, and the patients were too unwell to speak to him. He left a message sending his good wishes, and wondered if presenting himself in person would make a difference.

He went into the bedroom and hugged Rael from behind. "Are you sure you can manage this? Confronting him again won't be easy."

"I might not even see him. It's not the trial, just a preliminary. I'll be okay. It's good that they're doing something."

"Yes. I wasn't able to speak to Dinun. Too ill, they said."

Rael's back tensed under Suaj's embrace. "Damn it. Hope the Angels are all right. I suppose we should have been more careful, considering. Even a cold on this planet could kill them. For all we know, it *was* a cold they caught."

"You risked as much, as did Dera and her people."

"Yeah. And now it's biting us on the backside." Rael sat on the bed. "Now I'm back here...staying without you doesn't appeal."

Suaj bent and kissed his forehead. "Think about it while you're away. I'll enquire about the logistics of travelling back and forth. You don't need to decide yet, remember."

"I know." He looked up. "You realise this'll be the first time we've been apart in over a year. Strange to think that."

"We should get married, don't you think?" Suaj said it lightly, deliberately so. They hadn't talked about it at all except for Rael's jokes before he'd met up again with his family.

Rael's eyes lit up, and Suaj chided himself for not bringing it up before. "You mean, if I come back?"

"Why wait? Do you have such things here?"

"Yeah. Kind of. Different term for same-sex couples, but same deal. Really?"

Suaj shrugged. "If you'd like."

"Yeah, I think I would. You don't have to, though."

Suaj poked him in the nose. "I would do many things under orders, Kine Raelne, but marrying you isn't one of them. How long would it take to arrange it here?"

"I have no idea. Dera would. Maybe you could ask her to help set it up?"

"I will. But I want your decision to stay or go to be made independent of whether we marry or not."

"Do my best." Rael grinned suddenly, his mouth quirking up mischievously on one side. "We'll need best men."

"I'm sure we'll have a selection to choose from." Suaj kissed him again. "Better finish packing, and then I'll arrange supper. "

Despite the happy subject, Suaj couldn't shake the sense of wrongness and impending doom, however sternly he told himself precognition was a myth and all he experienced was heightened anxiety brought on by a stressful and unnatural situation. Rael's earlier concerns about Dinun and the others had dissipated, and he didn't mention it again that evening. Suaj kept his worries to himself. Rael had more than enough on his mind. Unfortunately, it meant no one could talk Suaj out of his gloomy thoughts.

At first light the next morning, Rael drove himself in the sporter out to the hire centre, and would obtain a lift to the airport from there. His departure only added to Suaj's unease and generally sour mood. He contacted Dera and arranged to eat lunch at the residence with her, and forced himself to concentrate on the data collection which was, after all, even more essential if he really did plan to leave Quarn—or Rael did. A topic he tried very hard not to think about.

Marlo dropped in to check on progress and to let him know a firm departure date, provided their friends were fit, had been set two weeks hence. "And I for one," he said, "will be glad to go home."

Suaj had thought the man was enjoying the visit. "The wonders of technology palling a little?"

"Not at all. I can't wait to tell everyone about it."

"Ah. Understandable." *"Have you spoken to Dinun or Werse?"*

Marlo pursed his lips. *"No, but we're receiving regular reports. Everyone's been tremendously kind."*

Not a whisper of suspicion. Had Suaj's own pessimistic nature coloured his assessments unduly—influenced by Rael's dilemma, perhaps? He never thought himself prone to self-doubt, but now that he lacked the familiar markers, he couldn't trust his judgement.

He called the hospital again and spoke to a doctor, but the man had difficulty understanding his accent or so he claimed. The most Suaj learned was Dinun and Werse were recovering steadily, though still quite unwell. Nothing about the Angels at all. Exactly what he'd already been told, and nothing like as much as he wanted to know.

So he welcomed Dera not only for her cheerful intelligence, but also for her sane opinion on Tuzai matters. The news of his intention to marry Rael delighted her. "Oh, you have to have a ceremony here! I'm sure the president would host it."

"I doubt that. After all, we're hardly—"

She wagged her finger at him. "Nonsense. You're highly valued guests, the first of your kind to visit our planet. What a gesture of goodwill from both sides it would be if you formalised your relationship here. And Rael's family could attend."

A consideration he hadn't thought of. "Yes, of course. So can you help?"

She grinned. "Try and stop me. My girls and I will send you off in style. When are you thinking of?"

"Ah, well, after Rael returns, naturally."

He explained his lover's sudden absence, and she frowned as her thoughts raced in confusion. "I've never heard of such a thing. Mind you, I know nothing about prosecutions. Would you like me to ask one of my colleagues about it in the Law department?"

"If you could. I feel at a loss."

"Of course you do. And you're worried about Dinun and the others, I suppose."

"No one's been able to speak to them, and the staff at the hospital are being less than forthcoming. Could you perhaps call them? I only want to speak to Dinun or Werse, or even the Angels somehow."

She patted his hand. "I'll do what I can. The hospital here in Kosat is excellent. The president would never permit substandard treatment of such important guests."

The president. That was what bothered him. None of the residence's staff had come near him to report on the condition of their friends, and neither Marlo nor Zern had mentioned their involvement.

He said none of this to Dera as he thanked her for her offered assistance. They ate their lunch in a shady spot in the garden while she chatted about university politics, and poked him to reveal how he'd handled Rael's family. He

kept Rael's reservations and feelings to himself, but Dera, perceptive woman, guessed many of the issues for herself.

"So long as you both live, one of you is going to have to surrender some of your happiness. It's inevitable. That's why I divorced. My husband and I had different goals, and he wasn't prepared to make any sacrifice to allow me to achieve mine."

"Up to now, it's been him doing the sacrificing. I could live here easily, but do I have a right to put myself ahead of my people? You've seen Quarn, you know the challenges."

She bit her lip. "Yes. And I don't myself believe love is the most important thing in the world. Love without honour is a miserable thing."

Exactly his own view. "He'd never ask it—or permit it. I could live without him, and he without me."

"But you wouldn't want to try."

"No."

Once, he'd only needed flying and his work. Without Rael, those activities would now be singularly joyless, his life drier than dust. Nonetheless he could *survive*, and his work would—eventually, at least—offer a way to feel fulfilled.

But they weren't at that point yet, and dwelling on it was maudlin. "Things will work out," he murmured.

"Sure they will," she said, smiling brightly, her thoughts more ambiguous. It would be so nice to be able to take people at face value.

She called that evening to say she'd had no luck contacting the doctor in charge of Dinun and Werse's care, although she'd received fulsome assurances about their welfare.

"When can I talk to them?" Suaj asked, worry making him sharp.

"Soon, they said. A day or two."

He wanted to snap it wasn't good enough, but she was only the messenger, and a friend as well, so he kept his tone deliberately mild. "Thank you."

"No problem. I'll let you know about the other thing as soon as my colleague replies. You could come and stay with me, you know. We'd love to have you."

It tempted him, but in a way he didn't want to be distracted from his thoughts. Something still needed to be puzzled through. He wanted to know what. So he declined with thanks, though left the idea open.

After a sleepless night fretting about Rael and Dinun and things he had no power over, he decided to go in search of the strangely reticent presidential staff.

However, the absence of both president and vice-president, as well as a good number of their key employees, derailed his intentions. Those who remained politely listened to his requests and offered to pass the messages on, but could do nothing more than Dera had. He considered asking Marlo to push harder, but the man, a natural diplomat, disliked causing a fuss. Suaj didn't want to create suspicion where none might be justified, as he had nothing but an inexplicable hunch something was wrong. He disliked hunches. He preferred solid evidence.

He heard nothing from Rael, and though only what he expected, it added to his unsettled mood and an increasingly edgy temper. When two days had passed and he still couldn't speak to Dinun or Werse, he took himself away from work and to the residence apartment to avoid barking at people in frustration.

As he peered at his notes, failing miserably at concentrating, a call from Dera was put through to his apartment.

"Suaj, could you come over for dinner tonight?"

Unlike her to be so abrupt. "I'd be poor company, Dera. Perhaps when Rael—"

"But it's important."

He frowned at her tone. "What—"

"I mean, it's about your future. You and Rael. Getting married."

He stared at her image on the screen. The dissonance between her words, her expression and her tone was subtle, but something was definitely wrong. "You think I should?"

"Yes, I really do. We want to do this right after all. For your future."

That phrase again. "Certainly. At eight?"

"Seven."

He agreed and she closed the call. Dera didn't realise the apartment was bugged...did she? But the conversation had been nothing like her—stiff, abrupt, short, with none of her usual easy friendliness.

Something was up, and hunch or not, he wouldn't ignore it.

Then it was simply a matter of waiting impatiently until evening. He tried to use the program on the apartment's computer to work on a simple utility vehicle design he and Rael had discussed on the trip to his parents, but after two hours, he had nothing worth saving. The waste of his time and this wonderful resource made him even more cranky.

He closed the machine down and called the hospital again, and again was treated as if his Tuzai was unintelligible. Strange how no one else had remarked

on it, but perhaps the nonverbal cues helped. Or perhaps someone had been told not to talk to the Quarnians. If he didn't win some real answers tomorrow, he decided he would go to the president himself, protocol be damned. He would tell Dera what he planned too.

So he was in a cranky mood as he arrived at Dera's small house near the university, and not really up to socialising. He had his apology ready as she opened the door, but one look at her face wiped it from his mind and replaced it with a sick worry curdling cold in his guts. She pulled him inside the door and shut it firmly.

"What's wrong?" he demanded, not bothering with meaningless politeness.

"Keep your voice down. I've sent my family out for the evening, but I don't want people overhearing me."

He leaned in and whispered, "The presidential apartments are bugged." Her eyes widened in shock. "They had plenty of warning I was coming here tonight."

She chewed her lip, then hauled him, to his considerable surprise, into the bathroom down the short hall and turned the taps and the shower on full blast.

"What—?" Her behaviour completely confused him.

She put her finger to her lips. "I read about it in an old book, hope it works. Keep your voice low."

It might frustrate the receivers, he thought. And if not, perhaps it was worth the risk anyway. "Tell me."

"There's no record of Dinun or the others at that hospital," she said. "My brother works in Health Administration and I, um, asked him to look."

"An alias? For discretion?"

"There are no patients in isolation or in intensive care remotely fitting the description."

"But he was treated at that hospital."

She nodded. "Yes, and Jurdin found those records. Nothing of inpatient care."

"Spirits—what's happened to them?"

"I don't know, but there's more. I asked my colleagues in the Law department about that witness thing with Rael, and they looked at me as if I'd gone mad. There's nothing in our legal practice which requires what he described. They couldn't even come up with a theoretical scenario."

Suaj probed her mind but she told him only the truth as she knew it. *Rael. Moon. Dinun.* "There's no precedent. Could it be the unusual circumstances?"

"Yes, it could. But I don't like it. It's not how things are supposed to work here."

He searched further. "You have other suspicions."

"Ye-es...at work. The Angel studies are meeting resistance. My people are being diverted onto other projects, and I've had my teaching load increased. No one's said stop, or even mentioned it directly in a negative way—but this is one of the most important projects we've ever undertaken at the university, and it's suddenly become very low priority. Like they want attention taken off it."

"The president and vice-president have been incredibly supportive."

"I know. And the president directs higher education. I don't understand it, Suaj. It just all feels wrong. You think I'm overreacting?"

If she was, so was he. "Who have you told?"

"No one. The law colleagues, a little, but nothing about the Angels. What will you do?"

He swallowed down the rising nausea of fear and helplessness. "For now, pretend we think all is well, and plan my wedding. Tomorrow I'll confront the president and try to get some answers. You might have endangered yourself by this."

She stuck her chin out. "I don't care. Rael and Dinun are my friends, and I brought you all into this. I have an ethical duty to ensure you return home safe and well."

"You have a family."

"Who manage fine without me. I won't be scared off, and if you need help, I'm here. Taj as well, I'm sure."

Suaj was less sure—the colonel would follow orders. It was what soldiers did.

"You really can't talk to your colleagues in privacy?" she asked.

"Uh, I might be able to find a way. Now turn off the water and make an excuse about a plumbing problem. I'll stay for the bare time that appears credible, and leave."

She touched his hand. "I'm sorry, Suaj."

"It may be nothing."

He'd never thought himself much of an actor, but somehow he managed to convincingly pretend to be happily planning a wedding ceremony with a man he very much feared was lost to him. The only way he could do it was to believe his own act, pretend Dera's learned colleagues were quite wrong, that the niggling

worry irritating his subconscious ever since Rael's departure hadn't bloomed like lake weed into a full-grown paranoia.

He barely remembered the conversation with Dera, nor of saying goodbye. Only when he was back in the presidential vehicle, did it hit him again, and he had to hold tight onto his knees to keep his hands from shaking. Where was Rael and what was being done to him? To the others, to young Werse, the Angels, and to Dinun? Suaj had persuaded them to come, and if they'd been hurt in any way, he could never forgive himself.

Commandant Hedike was not at the residence when Suaj returned, and Marlo and Zern were at yet another reception. Not being able to express his worry made it so much worse. Suaj couldn't trust any of the Tuzai, and none of the Quarnian team had the power to force their hosts to do anything, nor to surrender their missing colleagues.

Rael.

He couldn't sleep. Lying on the bed without his lover was an inescapable reminder of what was wrong, what could be going wrong. But sitting up, staring at the alien, wonderful computer, a symbol of all he'd hoped to bring back to Quarn, mocked his damn blind pride. He should have seen this coming. Dinun had warned of it, been rightly afraid of it—and Suaj had talked him into going to Tuzax.

He ended up kneeling on the floor, staring out the window at the dark garden, seeing nothing but his own memories, his own nightmares.

Rael.

He'd been so sanguine about Rael remaining if he insisted, believing he could go on with his career, his mission. That there was a higher goal than happiness and love, and Suaj could take comfort in it.

What a fool he'd been.

Their captors released them from their physical restraints after what Dinun guessed to be a day or so, and put them in a bare cell with two cots, a toilet and a sink. Considering how shitty the two of them felt, there was no need to tie them up or sedate them. Whatever they'd been given made them sick as anything. When he wasn't throwing up or sipping water, Dinun could manage nothing more but to lie on the hard little cot. Werse spoke little until the sedation wore off and his telepathy kicked back in a few hours—two meal times—after they were dumped in the cell.

"Can you sense Moon?"

"No."

Dinun's aching gut tightened even more with fear. *"Is he—?"*

"Almost certainly sedated, Dinun. They know about their powers, remember."

Dinun unclenched his fist. *"Why are they doing this?"*

"I guess because they can."

"And that's it?"

"I'm trying to find out more."

Dinun remained quiet so Werse could concentrate. His companion closed his eyes and seemed to doze. Dinun would have done the same out of boredom, but worry over his lover, his friends—and their own situation—kept him wide awake, despite the sickness and trembling weakness. This was worse than the multiple sclerosis. Why would a culture like this do something this cruel?

"Everyone's blocked."

Dinun almost groaned. Made sense, but how were they ever going to get—

Werse hurled himself at the door, screaming brokenly, pounding with strength Dinun could hardly believe he had left. "No! Stop it! You're hurting—No, no!"

Dinun stumbled over and put his arms around his friend. "Werse, stop it. What's going—?"

"Cloud. They're hurting...torturing. Stop! No, please, don't—"

Werse collapsed and Dinun couldn't hold him. "How are they hurting him? Why? What's happening?" He shook Werse. "Tell me!"

"I can't...you don't want to. Spirits, no."

Werse hid his face in his hands, his breathing sobbing harshly. Dinun held him close, wanting to scream too, but what was the point? *Moon, why are they doing this? Fight them, make them stop! You can do it, love.*

Strain as he might, he couldn't hear anything of what made Werse shake and whisper denials of unseen torment. Why couldn't Moon talk to him?

Too late he realised the trick played on them. The door crashed opened and without any warning, a guard at the door fired a dart at Werse, ignoring Dinun's shout. Two more black-uniformed, masked guards came in, one forcing Dinun back against the wall, while the other two dragged Werse to his bunk. The same attendant who'd periodically injected them while they'd been restrained, now emptied a syringe of clear liquid into Werse's neck, before nodding at the guard holding Dinun. The man pulled him towards the door.

"Wait!" Dinun yelled in Tusan, struggling as best he could. "Don't hurt him! Why are you doing this?"

But they ignored him, and the last he saw of Werse was his unconscious form on the cot, surrounded by those who wished him harm.

The guard threw him into another cell, identical to the one he'd been removed from, and left him. He wasn't what they were after. Werse and his telepathy had been the prize. Now they had four telepaths, and were prepared to hurt them to get what they wanted.

Dinun slid down the wall and slumped against it, sitting on the cold floor. *Moon*. Would these bastards stop torturing Cloud now they'd got what they wanted?

Suaj. Suaj and Rael and Commandant Hedike. They had to come. Unless they were prisoners too. Maybe all the Quarnians were.

They wouldn't leave this planet alive. Not the Angels, not Werse, and not him because he knew what they'd done.

He shivered. How long would it take them to kill him? Was it better to pray for Moon and Cloud and Flower to die fast, or to hope for things to be drawn out as long as possible, to give Suaj as much time as possible?

Didn't matter, most likely. The spirits couldn't hear them so far from home.

Moon, I'm here. I'll hang on as long as you do. Long as I can.

Close to midnight, Suaj sensed Hedike returning. *"Commandant, I need to speak to you — discreetly."*

"Go ahead, Suaj, I'm alone."

Suaj quickly reported what Dera had told him, and his own experiences trying to contact Dinun and the others, being careful not to embellish any of it with his own emotional responses.

"Should we worry?" he asked finally.

"I think we're not being told the whole truth. Say nothing for now. In the morning, I'll make enquiries. They may have lied but not for a sinister reason."

Hedike's calm confidence eased Suaj's anxiety a little, but still he couldn't sleep. Dawn found him staring at the slowly lightening ceiling, and straining his telepathy to seek out a mind, any mind, who could give him the answers he wanted. But no one in the residence knew more than he did—a fact suspicious in itself.

Distracted by a servant asking him about a breakfast he had no interest in, he missed Hedike's approach until the man was almost in his room. Suaj read his thoughts, and collapsed onto a chair. Hedike shooed the servant away, then closed and locked the door.

"Rael's been detained and will be charged with treason. He won't be returning to Quarn. I'm sorry." Hedike, his expression sombre, took the other chair. "The president didn't even know."

"Detained, charged with treason? How could he not know?"

"Not his area of authority, he said."

"You believe him?"

"I don't know." The commandant circled his finger around his head and pointed at his ear, reminding Suaj of the bugs.

"Then let him...and Dinun! The Angels...."

Hedike nodded and confirmed the rest of his bad news verbally while Suaj pulled it from his mind. "The president sends his sympathy. We won't be able to visit, but the prognosis is poor."

"But how can they be dying? The Angels weren't even as sick as Dinun and Werse. Why weren't we told?"

"Because we'd demand a visit and we can't."

Suaj's nostrils flared in anger. "Let me talk to the president—I'll learn the truth."

"You can't. He's still away. I spoke to Vice-President Quinero."

"Damn it, he's blocked."

"I know and the president is away for the rest of this week."

"I want to see Rael. I'm his lover—I have that right."

"Not here, you don't. Suaj, he's considered a traitor. He has no rights. He probably won't even see a trial."

"We did better than that for him."

"I know. Quinero suggested once the condition of Dinun, Werse and the others...stabilises..." Suaj pulled 'died' from Hedike's mind, "that we return to Quarn to minimise the potential for conflict. He said they would do all they can to compensate for this terrible loss."

"No one can compensate me for Kine Raelne. He's not the traitor—that cursed Joese is."

"I agree, but we have no power here. Marlo can continue to argue for him, but I doubt the authorities will change their minds. And nothing we can say will alter the situation for Dinun and the Angels."

"They're lying. They're all lying. I don't believe Dinun and Moon and Werse and Flower and Cloud are dying. Not all five. It's impossible. And why arrest Rael now instead of when we arrived?"

"I agree they're lying. But I have to pretend I believe them, Suaj. My job is to get you all home safe, and if I can't help the others, I won't put you and the people we have here in danger. I won't allow you to either."

Suaj bared his teeth. *"Try and stop me."*

"You think Rael would want this? Would Dinun? You know they'd say 'save yourself'."

"That's too bad, Commandant, because I won't leave until they're safe."

"And how do you propose to achieve that?"

Of course, there Hedike had him. Suaj had only two weapons—his brain and his telepathy. If he could find someone who wasn't blocked and who knew what the hell was going on, he could use those weapons, but apparently no one in the residence did. Dera? But she'd told him all she'd found out. Colonel Tikmu...no, he was a soldier. Suaj had to get out of the residence and among the people pulling the strings here.

"I want to speak to the vice-president."

"He thought you might."

But calm and collected in his office, Vice-President Quinero wasn't cowed by Suaj in full protective mode. In response to demands and worries, he simulated sympathy so well that Suaj, unable to read the man's thoughts, couldn't prove he was faking. He still wanted to punch the smarmy concern from the man's sickly pale face.

"I understand your concerns, Mister Suaj, I truly do. I'll certainly make the strongest representations to the office of the prime minister concerning Mister Kine. I ask you to remain calm, however."

"And if it was someone you loved, Your Excellency?"

"Then I would feel as you do. This is all most unfortunate, coming at the same time as the illness of your colleagues."

"I want to see Werse. He's my subordinate. I want to see Dinun. I talked him into coming. And I want to see the Angels."

"I can't allow that. Their infection is deadly to your race. We've done enough harm to you."

Suaj narrowed his eyes and did his best not to project his thoughts at the idiot. "More than you possibly know. I won't leave without them, dead or alive."

"The situation is not...completely hopeless, Mister Suaj. The doctors are working as hard as they can to save their lives."

But those efforts weren't enough. That afternoon, while Hedike ate lunch with Suaj in his apartment, trying and failing to cheer up his engineer, the vice-president himself came to the rooms. Even without telepathy, Suaj knew the news was bad. Hedike too, as he stood to greet their visitor.

"Who?" Suaj asked, not bothering with pointless politeness.

Quinero seemed genuinely sorrowful. "All three Angels—and Mister Dinun and Mister Werse are in comas. They're not going to make it. Today, tomorrow, they'll pass on. I'm so very sorry, Commandant, Mister Suaj. This is a true tragedy."

"No. You're lying. They can't all be—"

Hedike put a hand on Suaj's shoulder, the slight pressure telling him to shut up as clearly as his thoughts. "Your Excellency, we want to see the bodies and return them to Quarn."

"We'll make arrangements for a viewing, or course, but you can't take them home. It's too dangerous, Commandant. What if this infection was released to your population?"

"We could all be infected," Suaj ground out. "No one's taken any precautions against *that*, have they?"

"The strain of infection was limited to the hospital environment. You were and are at no risk here. Provided no infectious material goes back with you, at least we won't be guilty of killing more of your people."

"You've killed eight Angels, Your Excellency. No hell of yours could be sufficient punishment for that."

Hedike's grip tightened. "Suaj, please."

But Quinero held up his hand. "It's all right, Commandant. Mister Suaj's anger is to be expected. We'll offer compensation—technical assistance, data, equipment—in full measure. Give me a list and we'll prepare the material. We'll also arrange for a funeral as closely in line with your local practice as we can. Uh...you have no priests or holy people with you?"

"They don't have such things," Suaj spat. "To be laid to rest has no meaning for an Angel. You have no idea about them, or what's important to them."

Quinero spread his hands. "I know. Please help us make amends."

"You could start by giving Rael back to us."

"Yes, Your Excellency," Hedike agreed. "That would go some way—"

"It's not in the president's powers, Commandant, or it would have been done already. Perhaps I should leave you alone to...grieve. Ambassador Marlo will be told. If you want, as a group, to...carry out some vigil, some memorial?"

Hedike started to refuse, but Suaj interrupted. "Yes. Take us to the mountains and give us complete privacy. I believe Professor Fusil and Colonel Tikmu would like to know, perhaps join us, since they both became close to our colleagues."

Hedike's silent thoughts asked what the hell Suaj was up to but Quinero was almost indecently eager to agree. His guilt was genuine, if nothing else. "Of course. I'll arrange it this morning. Anything else, just let my staff know. We'll give you every facility."

Except a bug-free apartment. But the presidential staff wasn't the only one holding back information, and Suaj planned to use that fact to whatever advantage he could derive from this situation.

Dera arrived within an hour, flung herself at Suaj, and cried on Hedike's shoulder. Colonel Tikmu's more restrained response to the bad news didn't conceal the depth of his regret, and his apology to the Quarnians for bringing so many of their people to their death, was genuine. His reaction to the news about Rael was equally shocked and surprisingly sympathetic, though he followed the official line that Suaj should return home and make his life without his lover. Suaj derived no reassurance from the fact Tikmu had been kept in the dark about Rael as much as any of the Quarnians. The man was Presidential Elite. If anyone should have known, he should.

They made a silent and sombre convoy up to the mountain. Hedike's mind buzzed with questions about Suaj's plans, but the others had no suspicions, and Hedike was too smart to make an issue of it. Suaj had only told him if they couldn't give the Angels the farewell their own clan would, at least they could spend some time thinking of them and their dying colleagues in a place they'd enjoyed on this unlucky planet.

The chimerical humans had their own religious practices—something Suaj had long ago decided had nothing to do with his own faith, and set aside as soon as he left home—but Dinun and Werse wouldn't care. Their families would grieve no matter what mockery of a funeral the Tuzai put together.

At the scenic lookout, Hedike sent the Tuzai drivers away, though Suaj had no confidence their group was not being monitored in some way. He asked everyone to sit on the grass where they could look out on the valley. Though the 'ceremony' was a cover story only, he couldn't help but remember that day when the Angels soared with such joy, such exuberance. How could they be dead? Were they really dead? Would they ever know?

But grieving wasn't the reason he'd brought them all up here.

"Everyone, please hold hands," he requested. Dera complied at once, seizing Suaj's and Tikmu's. Hedike took Marlo and Zern's, raising his eyebrows in surprise for this, as he and Suaj both knew, was not part of any Quarnian ceremony. But the Tuzai wouldn't know that. "Now give your thoughts to our friends."

It was all he could do not to roll his eyes at himself. He sounded like the sanctimonious local preacher who'd inflict himself on his school at moments of triumph or tragedy, riding in on unearned emotional energy. If Rael could see him now, he'd laugh himself sick. Suaj truly wished his lover was there to mock him.

But the true purpose of this gathering was to gain privacy with two people who needed to learn a precious secret. He entered their minds and spoke.

"Colonel, Dera, what you are now experiencing is something I reveal to you on trust."

Dera's eyes widened hugely, her mouth opened to ask questions, but Tikmu, jerking in shock, beat her to it. "You—"

"Please be quiet, Colonel. Your people have had us monitored from the moment we arrived. We aren't necessarily private here."

"You read minds. All this time, you've concealed this?"

Suaj nodded slightly. "Yes. We had little enough reason to trust you, and it was little enough protection also."

Tikmu's mouth tightened in anger. "You've been spying."

"Please, Colonel—I'm an engineer, not a spy, and everything I've wanted to learn has been freely given to us. Everything except the truth about my lover and our friends. I asked you and Dera here because we're desperate. We've apparently lost three Angels,

and may be losing Dinun and Werse. We have to know if this is true and if your people did it deliberately. And I need to know how I can save Rael. He's no traitor."

"I won't betray my own people." Tikmu glared at Dera who met his accusing eyes unflinchingly. "Nor will Professor Fusil."

"Colonel," Commandant Hedike said, "we don't want to do anything to hurt your people. We only want to retrieve our own."

Dera eagerly supported him. "Taj, we owe it to Suaj and his people to help them. We invited them here, and look what happened. The government lied about Rael too. They said there would be no charges laid, no retribution."

"Clearly new facts have come forth."

"Oh really?" Suaj snarled at Tikmu. "The only new 'facts' are those concerning Joese. The man is a murderer, a traitor, and a thief. My lover has been imprisoned because of something Joese said or did."

Tikmu's anger at Suaj's deception admitted no mitigation. "Maybe they decided Kine was lying."

"Or maybe they know he's telling the truth and the truth is embarrassing to someone—like your prime minister. Tell me, Colonel—why did you or the president know nothing about this? Who benefits from exposing you to traitors, telepaths, or other hidden danger?" Tikmu didn't reply but Suaj read it from his mind. "Yes. The prime minister and his party. Something stinks, and I need your help to find out what."

"I can't do anything, Suaj. We're no part of the cabinet authority."

"Give up easily, don't you? Dera knew more about this than you did." She glanced at him, and dropped her gaze guiltily, even though he didn't blame her in the least. "Looks like Rael's not the only person they don't trust."

Tikmu didn't like that, but he equally had no argument against it. "Give me one reason why I should help you when you've been reading our thoughts and lying to us."

"Because I've done nothing you wouldn't have done in the same circumstances and for the same reasons. And my people haven't twice come to your planet to kill our most precious residents. Three dead Angels, Tikmu. Moon, Flower, Cloud. Beautiful, intelligent people, the rarest of the rare. Dead. My friend, my colleague, dying. And my lover—"

Choked with sudden emotion, he stopped. Dera leaned her head on his shoulder to comfort him as she looked at the colonel. "Taj, we should help. They just want to go home safely. All of them."

"We treated your men honourably." Hedike's piercing gaze pinned his military colleague against the wall of tradition. "We've been repaid with death and betrayal."

Hedike knew exactly what would hit hardest, but still Tikmu held back. Suaj wanted to scream in frustration.

"I can't help the Angels," Tikmu said, avoiding looking at either of them.

"At least find out why they died. If they're even really dead. I don't trust anything I hear from your people now."

"Then why trust me?"

"I've read your mind."

Tikmu didn't like it. But he didn't like what had happened to the people he'd escorted to Tuzai any better. *"I can't promise anything. There's almost no cooperation between our people and theirs."*

"But you have ways."

"Maybe. You're asking a lot, Suaj."

"Only because it's right. Help us. Please help us."

Tikmu's communicator trilled and with a vocalised growl, he yanked the thing out of his pocket. His expression changed as he listened, and closed the call. *"Dinun and Werse...died. Twenty minutes ago."*

Dera gasped. Zern covered her mouth in shock. The men went stock still, immobile in the face of news they'd feared.

"No." Suaj set his jaw. "Too convenient. I don't believe it."

Tikmu too had doubts, but kept them strictly private. *"Autopsies will be carried out today. You can view the bodies tomorrow morning at the hospital."*

"Thank you, Colonel," Marlo said before Suaj could bark at him. *"Suaj, it's not his fault."*

"It's his planet's fault. And I want answers, Marlo. I want my lover back and I want to know if the others are really dead, and why."

Tikmu met his eyes. Suaj glared back, giving no quarter.

Finally the colonel gave a curt nod. *"I'll do all in my powers, but I won't compromise this planet's safety or that of any of its citizens."*

"Thank you."

They could do no more, and Suaj had to agree to wait patiently, pretending to accept the official story. There would be nothing suspicious about continuing to press for Rael's release, but Tikmu was certain nothing would change the minds of those who'd decided to detain him. He believed Rael had to be in civilian custody since the army was officially under presidential control, but beyond that, he had no idea.

They parted at the residence. Hedike accompanied Suaj to his rooms. "A sad day for us all," he said for the benefit of the snoopers.

"I can't believe it. Five of them dead." But they'd overplayed it, Suaj thought. One Angel, maybe two. But all five was too much to swallow, even if Suaj hadn't already been suspicious. The people behind this were either desperate or stupid—or planned to make sure none of the Quarnians would survive to tell their story.

"I have trouble believing it too." Hedike gave Suaj a cool look. *"And next time you decide to reveal militarily sensitive information to a potentially hostile alien, would you mind very much letting me know in advance?"*

"We need his help."

"Yes. But he could betray us, and a real, live Tuzai-speaking telepath would be a real catch."

"They had one in their hands and they killed him." If they had, Suaj thought. Werse was one of their youngest and brightest. It wasn't fair.

"We'll do what we can for Rael, I promise."

"I won't leave without him."

"You may have little choice about that, Suaj. You have no right to stay."

"They have no right to detain him. He's done nothing wrong."

Hedike's sigh was for the listeners, but his frustration with the situation was real. He could offer no comfort, and being an honest officer, he refused to lie. Suaj respected that in a man, but it gave him nothing to cling to. At this point, he'd have even taken false hope.

The residence staff left him in peace, discreetly offering meals and light refreshments at the usual times. The vice-president's formal note of sympathy was delivered to Marlo, who called on Suaj to let him know. "The funeral will be the day after tomorrow. They, ah, suggest we leave after the president returns."

"Embarrassing, are we?" Suaj hoped so. He hoped someone, somewhere, felt ashamed of what they'd done to a completely peaceful race. Two completely peaceful races, in fact.

Marlo made a face, his thoughts mirroring Suaj's, though his spoken words held the appropriate diplomacy. "It's all very awkward and sad. Is there any reason to delay?"

"Yes. Rael's not back."

"I'm doing what I can, Suaj."

True enough, but Suaj didn't hold any expectation of success. Colonel Tikmu was their only real hope, at least for now.

Exhaustion wrung a few hours' troubled sleep from him, but he woke early, still tired and heartsick, Rael's name in his thoughts even before he remembered the other disaster this ill-fated mission had brought them. If Tikmu could find Rael, Suaj would get him out. There had to be a way.

That certainty took a jolt at the hospital. Polite orderlies took them to an isolation ward, where behind a glass wall, five corpses lay covered in sheets, dark, elegant faces exposed and horribly still, appeared to confirm the worst of Suaj's fears. Zern began to cry, and Marlo put his arm around a stricken Dera's shoulders.

Suaj almost believed it then. Almost gave up hope, until he remembered that was exactly what their enemies wanted. So he refused to be distracted by his grief or that of his colleagues, and concentrated. The hospital gave him his best chance of learning the real story by scanning the hospital employees. That doctor knew nothing, that medic, that clerk, but...*oh, yes.*

There was one who knew the truth, and the lies. Suaj, pretending to look at his 'dead' friends through the window, stared instead at the reflection in the glass of a man, smirking at the secrets he concealed.

Bowing his head as if in sorrow, he poked Tikmu's mind. "It's fake. Those are mannequins. They think we've fallen for it."

Tikmu didn't react visibly at all, his head bowed like Suaj's, hands clasped behind his back, but his thoughts betrayed his shock. *"How do you know?"*

"Behind us, someone is watching our reactions. He's wearing a doctor's coat, but he's not a doctor. Someone called Kikilian. He works for...IIS?"

"Internal Intelligence Service. Under the prime minister's control. Are you sure those are fakes? They look real."

"They've had weeks to prepare them, Tikmu. Smug bastard. I wish I could tell him I know what he's up to."

"If he believes you've been fooled, then they'll relax. You need to make sure no one suspects."

"They're alive, so find them."

"Any clues from him?"

Manipulating thoughts, rather than simply reading them, was not something in which Suaj had any skill. He put an image of the Angels as subtly as he could into Kikilian's mind, and was rewarded by a picture of a grim room, Moon

strapped to a gurney, one wing pinned open and bleeding. It was all Suaj could do not to vomit.

He gave the image to Tikmu. The colonel's visceral reaction matched Suaj's own. *"Zoka's blood. What the hell are they doing to him?"*

"I don't know, but we have to get them out, and quickly. Where is that?"

"I don't know. I need a name, an exterior."

Suaj delved deeper. *"Wait...Narnel?"*

"The Justice department has a hospital for the dangerously insane at Narnel."

"And abducted Angels. Get them out of there."

"Give me some time, Suaj."

"You have until the end of the week. I want them and I want Rael."

"I know that. Keep reading Kikilian's mind."

The images Suaj garnered made little sense to him, but Tikmu thought them useful. As the viewing came to a close, and Dera and Tikmu said their goodbyes, Suaj met Tikmu's eyes. *"We're running out of time."*

"I'll be in touch. Warn your colleagues to be ready at very little notice."

Back at the residence, as the staff and Marlo drew up plans for the farce of a funeral, Suaj did as Tikmu instructed, holding himself on tenterhooks, waiting for contact or even an invitation from Dera to visit, which might mean a covert conversation.

But nothing happened and no one called. Two days later, the vice-president led the funeral held with full ceremony at a private crematorium a little way out of the city. A number of dignitaries attended, the mourners outnumbered ten to one by soldiers. Tikmu wasn't one of them, and Dera didn't know why, which did nothing to ease Suaj's anxieties. If Tikmu betrayed their secret, all would be lost.

As five empty coffins were consigned to incineration Suaj used the chance to scan the strangers in attendance, seeking out Kikilian's smugness, or someone else who knew the truth. The Tuzai display of regret was mostly genuine. But even though some of the attendees were more bored than sorrowful, none Suaj could read knew about the fraud. Whoever was behind this, was as secretive as they were ruthless.

The ceremony over, the Quarnian survivors made final preparations to leave. Suaj went through the motions, but his thoughts were with his friends and his lover and what was happening to them. He kept up the official demands to know what was happening to Rael, but Vice-President Quinero continued to deflect

them. Suaj heard not a whisper of Rael's name in any mind but his companions, as if Kine Raelne had become a non-person, erased from official records, to be disposed of like a wild animal. But he wasn't, and Suaj would not allow Rael to slip away from him, no matter what he had to do to stop it.

Chapter Nine

Three nights after the funeral he woke to a hand clamped hard over his face.
"Suaj! It's me, Tikmu Taj."

He had to wait until his stomach returned to its normal position and his heart slowed a little, before he could frame a reply. *"What's happening?"*

"We need to talk privately. Don't make a sound. The bugs aren't the president's."

Under the hand gag, Suaj nodded, having read Tikmu's mind and confirmed the man had no ill intent. *"Let me up and let me dress. Where are we going?"* The bedside clock told him it was close to midnight. Appropriate for skulduggery.

"Out of the city. Hurry."

In the dim light of a veiled flashlight, he dressed in under a minute, unlocking the bracelet tracker and leaving it in a drawer. Tikmu tossed him a scarf. Suaj wrapped his dark features and telltale fur as best he could, then followed Tikmu silently through the residence and into a dark-windowed vehicle that moved off as soon as the doors closed. There, waiting for them, were three other men and Vice-President Quinero, all dressed in dark non-reflective clothing.

"What's he doing here?"

"We need him."

Quinero stared at him. Suaj stared back, not sure what to say—or to think.

Tikmu's driver took them outside the built-up area and into the countryside. Perhaps an unnecessary precaution but it gave Suaj extra reassurance no one would observe or overhear them.

Wherever it was they'd stopped, it was as perfect a hideout as he could have designed. No lights, no road, trees overhead to prevent observation from the air, and water running in some kind of shallow stream or waterfall close by would frustrate a listening device.

"What's happening?" he demanded. He'd have used his talent but he didn't know if Quinero was aware of it.

Tikmu responded. "We've confirmed your five colleagues are alive and being held in the facility at Narnel. We need your help to get in, retrieve them."

His heart skipped with the adrenaline jolt. At last some good news. "I'll do anything. What do you want?"

"We plan to bring you there 'in custody' as a ruse to gain entrance. Then we'll break them out, get them to the spaceport and onto a waiting ship. Dera will accompany Commandant Hedike, Marlo and Zern, and be ready to depart. If we fail, they'll leave without us."

Suaj stared at Quinero. "'We?'"

"Presidential Elite, working covert," Quinero replied. "Officially, this is a rogue operation. The president *officially* knows nothing about it, and will repudiate Colonel Tikmu's actions. By then, if they succeed, the colonel and his men will be on his way to Quarn."

The callous simplicity shocked Suaj. He considered himself a ruthless person, but not to this degree. "You're casting them off—out? For us?"

"We're all volunteers, Suaj," Tikmu said. "We can't afford to allow the Justice Department to exploit and abuse the Quarnians, or your power."

Quinero smiled a little. "The colonel, ah, let me know about your talent, Mister Suaj."

Suaj contented himself with a single irritated look at Tikmu. The damage was done. "Why do you care who has control of us? You're all Tuzai."

Quinero explained. "The cabinet forced that first mission to Quarn through very much against the wishes of the president. All we could win were a few concessions—no lethal force, the use of as many civilians as possible, the eventual return of the Angel children. Even those did not mitigate the crime against the people of another planet. We've since learned—only very recently—that most of what you told us of Joese Harnol's actions was known to the cabinet, and sending the second mission was intended to be an outright provocation."

"They hoped we'd slaughter your people and justify a war?"

"Unfortunately, yes. The Defence of Identity party are unpopular now even with the hope the Angel DNA has given us. The president believes the cabinet hopes to discredit his office through Rael, and use the Angels to parlay up a threat from Quarn. At the very least, they want unfettered experimental access to three telepaths. They may also know about your colleague, Mister Werse."

"Their goal is to control the army. Already they interfere past their remit, as Dera has discovered," Tikmu said. "We can't allow this to happen."

"I don't care about your internal politics. I just want our people back. Including Rael."

"Forget Rael," Tikmu said flatly. "We can only save the Angels and the other two Quarnians. We'll get one chance. Five against one, Suaj."

"Would you 'forget' your wife, Tikmu?"

"No. But she's dead, and I've freely chosen to leave Tuzax forever to save your people. My children, my family, will believe me a traitor, but this is the right thing to do."

Suaj closed his eyes. With so many people risking so much, how could he insist on saving one man who might already be dead? "Do you know where he is?"

"No. If we did, there might be some chance of helping him, but the cabinet wants you gone. We're out of time. The president returns tomorrow, and the day after, you three are supposed to leave. We have to use the time we have to make this plan airtight."

"Mister Suaj," Quinero suddenly asked, "do you have other powers than telepathy?"

"No, but get me into the hospital and I'll pick Rael's location out of their captors' heads."

"Too late. We won't have time."

Suaj pretended to agree. But if they thought he'd simply fly off this planet with half his heart left behind, they were in for a very rude shock.

Commandant Hedike, eating a solitary breakfast when Suaj broke into his thoughts, was about as ecstatic to hear Tikmu's plan as Suaj expected him to be. *"There is no way I can permit this. I'm the only military officer—I'll go."*

"You're not a telepath, and besides, Quarn needs you. Quarn needs me too, but I'm not going without Rael and that's final. Sir, you need to make sure the president understands the threat from this planet, and do whatever you can with Tikmu's help to defend our people. At least make sure Marlo and Zern get home, and with any luck, you'll have another five passengers."

"You must come back."

"Not without him."

"Tikmu will force you to leave."

"He can try," Suaj conceded. "But he'll fail."

A long pause, the mental equivalent of a resigned sigh. *"I want in on the planning."*

"Sir, the residence is bugged. Unless you leave with him, which will attract attention, you can't speak to him without being heard. All you need to do is what you would normally do."

"I don't like it."

"I know. I'm sorry. But the important thing is getting Dinun and the others out."

To Marlo and Zern, Suaj entrusted his precious data collection, and the machinery and tools the president had given to the people of Quarn as partial compensation for the loss of their colleagues. Several vehicles, including a sporter, would accompany them back. Suaj had a moment or two of wistfulness about that—he'd have very much liked to have driven them on the open plains of Quarn, but without Rael at his side, how would he ever take any pleasure in it?

Letters of explanation to the president, to his parents, to his team, also went with Marlo. Then he had nothing to do. He hid in his apartment and ran over and over the plan Tikmu had set out, mentally preparing himself and accepting that not only failure, but death, was the most likely outcome of the scheme. At the very least, he'd be a prisoner at the end of it, but with any luck, a prisoner along with Rael. Engineers weren't supposed to rely on luck unless there was nothing else. Suaj was at that point now.

He couldn't sleep however much he sternly told himself he needed to be alert and sharp. He couldn't eat either, his stomach as rebellious as his mind. He could only endure the hours until departure.

Marlo and Zern—no actors, either of them—couldn't conceal their tense unhappiness at the situation as they gathered in the residence parking area, ready for their lift to the spaceport. Hedike hid his feelings better, but his thoughts blasted Suaj with his disapproval and worry. *"It's not too late to halt this, Suaj."*

"Yes, it is. Good luck, Commandant."

"You too, Engineer Suaj qel Gwan."

Dera arrived a minute or so later, her face a mask of anxiety, looking nothing like the confident, friendly person who'd emerged from the *Nezeu* all those weeks ago. She hugged Suaj, her thoughts overwhelming him with her sorrow. *"I wish I could help you."*

"You can. Help my people. Who knows, we may meet again."

She bit her lip, tears on the verge of falling. *"This is all my fault."*

"No, it's really not. Good luck, Professor."

She left with the others in a van ahead of Tikmu's. Suaj hadn't wanted her involved, but Tikmu insisted she had to be—and that she wanted to be. "Her staff are still on Quarn. If they can't return, then she doesn't want to abandon them. She's volunteered."

Which was true, but didn't make Suaj any happier. He didn't want any more lives screwed up by Tuzai politics. But like Commandant Hedike, he had little choice in the matter.

The secure hospital at Narnel was close to the spaceport, which gave them a slight advantage. Inside the van Tikmu and his men changed into Justice Department uniforms, and as the convoy split, he put a pair of electronic cuffs on Suaj's wrists—unlocked, but convincing. "We might have to be rough. Play it up."

He imagined Rael wearing these things for real, and shivered. "You mean pretend to be angry and afraid? That won't be hard."

"You'd have made a good soldier, Suaj."

Despite the situation, Suaj grinned slightly at the inaccuracy of that statement. "Colonel, Commandant Hedike has more than once given thanks to the spirits in my hearing that I'm *not* a soldier under his command. Something about being uninclined to follow orders I deem stupid."

Tikmu snorted in amusement. "Perhaps. But you've got the guts."

"You need that in engineering too."

"Thirty seconds to ETA, sir," the driver called.

"Ready?"

Suaj nodded. "Remember the Angels might not realise you're friendly. Project as much calmness as you can."

"I'll remember."

And then they were there, pulling up with a jolt outside an anonymous complex that could have been an office block as easily as a medical prison. "Ready?" Hedike muttered to Suaj.

"Do it."

Hedike presented his credentials at the gate and they were waved through to a back entrance. The soldiers hauled him out of the vehicle with convincing roughness, and Suaj played it up for all he was worth, struggling and spitting insults in two languages as they dragged him towards the guarded entry. Hedike had a snapped, urgent exchange with the guards, who saluted and led their

group inside. As soon as the doors shut behind them, Hedike dropped the act and their people drew their weapons on the guards, two clerks and a passing doctor.

Suaj took the cuffs off and shoved them into a pocket before grabbing one of the guards by the neck. "The Angels, the Quarnians. Where are they?"

Too terrified to lie, the man babbled while Suaj read his thoughts. "That doctor," Suaj snapped, pointing. "Take him. He knows."

Hedike's men secured the others and locked them in a side office. The doctor didn't resist as Hedike seized his arm. "Take us to the Quarnians."

Watchful for other personnel or the sound of alarms, they ran down halls of metal doors and cold unfriendly lighting. The doctor stopped in front of one door. "Here—but I don't have the code."

"You're lying," Suaj said coldly, and plucked the information from his mind, giving it to Hedike. The doctor stared, amazement and chagrin racing through his thoughts. "Lie again, and I'll shoot you."

The man believed him. Good. Suaj meant it.

No matter how many times it happened, the crashing of that heavy metal door as it was flung open sent Dinun's heart racing at nauseating speed every time. But the terror this time was immediately replaced with—

"Suaj!" He struggled to stand, stumbling on wobbly legs, but Suaj was there right away, holding him up with a strong grip under his elbow. At the doorway, Tuzai soldiers...but one was Colonel Tikmu. That meant help, right? "Moon, Werse. Help them."

Suaj was so calm. "Don't worry, we plan to. Can you walk?"

He nodded. One of the soldiers—where had they all come from?—helped him, Suaj keeping a hand on him. "I don't know where the others are. Suaj, they're hurting them."

"I know, and we know where they are. Stick close."

He had no choice with the firm hold the soldier had on him. The man half-carried him at a run down a corridor. They had a doctor with them. One of the ones who'd shoved all that crap into his veins? Dinun couldn't see his face.

"Are we safe now?" he whispered.

Suaj glanced over his shoulder. "We will be."

Commandant Hedike opened two doors side by side. Suaj and a soldier dashed into one, Hedike into another, dragging the doctor with him. Suaj emerged almost immediately from the cell with a shaky, grey-skinned Werse. Dinun struggled free and went to him. "Are you all right?"

Werse blinked slowly. "The Angels...."

"Suaj?"

"We've got it. Look after him, Dinun."

But Werse wouldn't wait, and followed Suaj into the other cell, dragging Dinun with him.

A chamber of horrors lay before them with all three Angels, unconscious and strapped to gurneys. Bags of fluid dripped into their pinned arms, and wires had been inserted into their scalps. Gleaming medical instruments sat ready for use at the side, bright lights overhead picking up the blood on the lustrous fur.

Dinun stumbled to Moon's side, despairing at the wires, the leather straps, the signs of past injuries. "You bastard!" he yelled at the doctor. "What are you doing to them?"

"Torturing them," Werse whispered. "To torture me."

Suaj hissed and grabbed the doctor's collar, yanking him clear off his feet. "What have you done to them? Why are they unconscious?"

The man huddled inside his coat, trying to get away from a scary, angry Suaj. "It's just sedation. Safe. No harm's been done."

"Liar. Undo it."

The doctor nodded jerkily. Suaj, keeping a grip on the man, went with him over to a cabinet on the wall.

Dinun kissed Moon's cool face. "Wake up, love. It's over." Moon's stillness terrified him. Was the doctor lying? Was Moon dead?

Werse stroked Cloud's face, his expression grief-stricken. "They kept hurting them, over and over and over. I had to listen...." He scrubbed at his eyes. Dinun reached out a hand to him. "I wanted to kill them."

"The doctors?"

"The Angels. To make it stop. Save them. I didn't....don't hate me."

Dinun squeezed his hand. "You didn't do anything wrong. Suaj, hurry."

"Coming. Is Werse drugged?" he snapped at the doctor.

The man, holding drug vials, shook his head. "The most recent dose should have worn off. The antidote works very quickly."

"Do it," Suaj ordered, but then gripped the man's chin. Hedike passed a pistol to him, and Suaj put it against the doctor's temple. "If any of them suffers so much as a spilled drop of blood, I will kill you." He lowered the weapon and pointed it at the doctor's gut. "Slowly."

The man had better believe it. If Suaj didn't kill him, there were two other people right there, ready to do the job for him.

But even so, Dinun held his breath as the doctor injected the Angels. Nothing happened. "It's not working. Why isn't it working?"

Suaj shook the doctor who held up his hands in defence. "Wait. Give it a minute or so."

Suaj shook him again. "Release those straps, and take those monitoring leads off. Do they need other medical attention? What else did you give them?"

"N-nothing. We were testing their healing ability."

"Then what did you give me?" Dinun yelled. "You were filling me full of crap!"

"We wanted to know if hybrids could tolerate our drugs. You weren't harmed."

Suaj bared his teeth and growled. The man went three shades paler. "Only by accident. Free them!"

The man hurried. The fur on Suaj's head was actually erect. Dinun hadn't even seen that with an Angel, but then he'd never seen one as angry as Suaj was that moment. As Dinun was. He hated this race.

By the time Flower's restraints were loosened, Moon started to move. Dinun helped him sit. His lover looked at him with dazed eyes, dots of blood marring his head fur where the wires had been extracted. "*Dinun. Safe?*" ::*Confused*::

Dinun stroked his face. "Yes, we're safe and getting out of here. Are the others okay? Can you hear them?"

"Yes, they're waking up," Werse confirmed, lifting Cloud to a sitting position. Suaj helped Flower. The three Angels were helped from the gurneys, Cloud wrapping Werse in a hug as soon as he stood. But then the big Angel let Werse go and looked at the doctor, measuring him up with cold green eyes. With deliberate force, he belted him across the face with a clenched fist. The man cried out in pain, and cringed before his former victim, his lip bleeding.

"Hit him again," Werse said, but Hedike held up his hand.

"Gentlemen, we have to get out of here."

"Turn around," Suaj ordered the doctor, and pulled a pair of handcuffs from his pocket. He secured the man, and told him to get onto a gurney, before strapping him down. "Cloud, knock him out please. With your mind, though I won't blame you if you punch him again."

Cloud refrained, and as the man passed out with no dramatics, Dinun felt a little disappointed the bastard had got off so lightly. Moon stared impassively at his tormentor, his thoughts private. Dinun hoped this silence wouldn't last too long. He'd had more than enough of not hearing Moon's voice in his head.

"Right, let's move," Hedike said. "Hurry, everyone. The van will be out front and we have to get clear fast."

Suaj pressed the release code on his tracking bracelet and tossed it aside. "I'm going after Rael."

"You can't do it on your own," Tikmu snapped. "That place is secured and I don't have time to argue with you."

"He won't be alone." Werse shrugged out of the arms of the soldier assisting him. "I'll go."

"As will I, little one."

But Suaj couldn't allow Moon to come. *"Dinun needs you, and so does Flower, my cousin."*

"Then I will go. I have the strongest mind," Cloud announced, holding himself fully erect, making sure no one underestimated his ability or his resolve.

"Then that's three," Suaj said, smiling at Werse. The man could barely stand but there was no arguing with the determination in his jaw and his thoughts.

Tikmu let out a long irritated hiss, but accepted the inevitability. "All right. I need one more volunteer."

A young soldier raised his hand without the slightest hesitation. "Me, sir."

"Corporal Uedelo, thank you. The rest of you, get these people to the spaceport and order Professor Fusil to take off immediately. We'll have to find our own way to Quarn."

Dinun struggled in the grip of the helping soldier. "Suaj, no!"

"Dinun, no arguing. Look after our people, and I'll see you back home."

Dinun stared at Cloud and Werse who did their best to convince him. Moon gripped his lover's arm. *"We. Go."*

"Thank you, cousin."

Moon turned to Suaj. *"Make sure you succeed, little one. I want my brother and you to return safely."*

Sensing things had been settled, Tikmu raised his weapon, ready to go. "Move out. Good luck, men," he added, saluting.

"We need transport," Suaj said, moving after the soldiers.

Tikmu made a face. *"Now you think of the details. We'll have to steal one. Werse, Suaj—there'll be a weapons cabinet down the hall. Mister Cloud, can you use a pulse rifle?"*

"Will. Learn. Fast."

"That'll have to do. Hurry, everyone. The Justice guards will be here in minutes."

Tikmu and his corporal went scouting for a vehicle, while Suaj and the others, their appearance too distinctive to hide, stayed out of sight with their weapons ready. He took the opportunity to check out his companions, and winced as he encountered the images of torture and torment in their minds.

"I'm sorry," he said to Werse. Cloud had his arm around the lad for mutual comfort.

"They found out about my telepathy."

"Probably inevitable."

Werse nodded, his gaze bleak. Over his head, Cloud's green eyes met Suaj's. *"This race must not be trusted again."*

"Can't blame you there. But don't forget some of them are trying to help."

"These, we would not kill."

The coldness in Cloud's words sent a shiver through Suaj, yet there was no emotion there he didn't recognise in himself when he thought of what had happened to the Angels, and to Rael.

"Tikmu's coming," Werse said.

The colonel wanted them ready to run for it. Cloud put his arm under Werse's armpits, and Suaj readied himself to grab Cloud if needed, but in the end, they managed to hurl themselves through the open back door of an anonymous black van. Uedelo drove, engine roaring at maximum revolutions, tearing along the streets, using the van's emergency lights and siren to clear their way.

"So, plan?" Suaj asked.

"I thought you had one," Tikmu said. Suaj gave him a look. "What can you guys give me?"

"Cloud can stun and knock out humans."

Werse muttered, "So can I."

Suaj blinked at his mild-mannered subordinate. "Since when?"

"Uh, since the flight. Moon and Flower...." The young man bit his lip as if confessing to a horrible crime.

"Why didn't you use it to escape?"

Werse flushed, and Suaj immediately regretted his accusatory tone. "*We were given medicine,*" Cloud said, radiating disapproval at Suaj. "*Our minds were weakened. We did our best.*"

"Sorry, Werse. I was only curious." Suaj would have to apologise more fulsomely later. "*Cousin, are you and Werse strong enough now to attack our enemy?*"

"Yes."

Suaj turned to Tikmu. "Very well. We find where Rael is in the building, we knock out or disable his captors, and retrieve him. Your biggest problem is getting us off the planet since you just sent our transport away."

"All arranged. You think you can simply walk in and grab him?"

"Yes."

Tikmu raised an eyebrow at him. "You Quarnians sure have balls."

"I wasn't aware there was any doubt on that score."

Tikmu snorted, then tapped on his earpiece. "Pull up outside the range of surveillance."

They stopped in an alley behind an office block. The sudden cessation of engine noise made Suaj's heartbeat sound shockingly loud. His insouciance had been faked for Tikmu's benefit, but now he was, at most, two building widths from Rael. A little closer and he could speak to his lover—if Rael was conscious.

"Okay, this is my plan," Tikmu said. "The news about you people escaping will have reached them here. So Uedelo and I will turn up with two prisoners, saying we caught you running away. Mister Cloud...."

"*I will go to the top of the structure, and assist.*"

Suaj nodded and passed on his words to Tikmu. "Works for me. Take the weapon, and try not to shoot us. You'll have to monitor us and meet up if we manage to escape. We won't have the luxury of waiting."

Suaj added, "Cloud, come down to this vehicle as soon as you know we're leaving."

"If we don't escape, go to the spaceport," Tikmu said. "My men are expecting you, and there'll be a ship waiting to take you home. They'll flag you in."

Suaj explained that more simply and explicitly to Cloud. *"I understand. But I will not leave without you."*

"You must, cousin. Moon and Flower need you and if we are lost, we can console ourselves you are safe. You can't help us. Go home and defend your clan."

Cloud leaned forward and rested his forehead against Suaj's. *"We will sing of you."*

"I would be glad to know it. But we're not going to fail."

Tikmu coughed. "Gentlemen? Mister Cloud, fly up to the roof and stay low. We'll move into range of your telepathy, which is...?"

Suaj converted the distance into Tuzai units for him. "The building is within Cloud's range already."

"Good. Mister Cloud, please get into position and let Suaj know what's going on. We'll move in as soon as we know the situation."

Tikmu opened the back door, and Cloud rose easily without any sign of injury or weakness, his enormous wings making no noise and his ascent unnoticed by anyone but those waiting in the vehicle.

"They made him scream so much." Werse swallowed.

Suaj touched his arm. "Can you do this?"

The young man's mouth tightened. "You bet."

"We'll have to cuff you. Not locked though."

Werse swallowed again. "Got it."

Some of them had bigger balls than most. Suaj heard Cloud's voice in his mind. "He's located Rael," he told Tikmu. "Ground floor, windowless room. There are thirty people in the building. He believes there are five people on the ground floor. No one with Rael at the moment."

"Have him warn Rael we're coming. Is he in a fit state to be moved?"

Suaj held his breath as Cloud checked. *"He says he can walk. He says that for you, he would crawl out."*

Suaj exhaled in a sob. He couldn't form a reply to Cloud, but the Angel seemed to understand. "Can we go now?" Suaj asked Tikmu, doing his best to restrain himself from leaping out of the vehicle and running to his lover.

"Uedelo, bring us in with sirens and speed."

The hospital rescue had been hard enough. This was much worse, playing the angry prisoner while concentrating on Cloud's feedback and Werse's mental preparations, and forcing himself not to contact Rael because it would fatally distract him. At least he didn't have to pretend for long.

Cloud and Werse dropped the men rushing towards them like stunned rejsers. Ignoring the fallen guards, Suaj threw off the cuffs, and ran down the corridor. *"Rael!"* He thumped on each door. *"Tell me which room is yours."*

Fourth one down, and Rael responded. *"Tikmu! We need this open."*

Tikmu skittered to his side. *"No idea what the code is. Tell Rael to move away, and since this is going to make a hell of a noise, get ready to scoop and run."*

"Rael, get back. Tikmu's going to blast the door."

Tikmu switched his weapon to maximum power and fired at the lock, twice, leaving it a melted mess. Suaj spared the weapon a single respectful glance before shouldering the door hard. It burst open, revealing Rael crouched in the corner of a room devoid of even basic facilities. *"Your transport awaits, sir."*

Rael turned slowly, showing a bruised and stubbled face. His hands were bloodied and burned, and the deep shadows under his reddened eyes showed him to be beyond exhausted. But he managed a smile even if it didn't quite reach all the way up. *"Oh, there you are."*

Tikmu helped him to his feet, and Suaj kissed him carefully, fury rising at the damage to his lover's face and what his dirty, torn clothing must hide. *"You can walk?"*

"Not far or fast, but yeah."

Suaj had only time for one swift, gentle caress to Rael's bruised cheek, before weapons fire from the front told him help had arrived for the downed officers. *"We have to go,"* Tikmu said. *"Ask Cloud to back us up."*

By the time the two of them helped Rael limp to the exit, Werse and Cloud had used their talent to knock out the new arrivals.

"Hurry," Werse urged. *"I don't know how long the effect lasts."*

Suaj needed no encouragement, and Rael did his best on obviously sore or injured feet with Suaj and Werse supporting him, Tikmu and Uedelo covering them from behind. The few dozen torn to the vehicle felt more like ten times that distance, but finally they reached it, Tikmu and Suaj bundling Rael and Werse into the back, Uedelo jumping into the driver's seat and revving the engine.

"Wait! Tikmu, Cloud's not here!"

"I'm coming, cousin."

But as Suaj strained to see Cloud's wings against the brilliant sunlight, a blast of energy hit the ground near them, and Tuzai guards shouted as they poured out of the building. "We have to go!" Tikmu yelled. "Suaj!"

"Nearly there! Go, just go!"

He leapt out of the vehicle, slammed the door and thumped it to make Uedelo leave. The vehicle tore off and Suaj crouched behind another, parked on the street.

"Cousin, stand up, I will collect you."

More weapons blasts, but this time from the sky as Cloud swooped in. Suaj waited until the last possible second and stood.

"Catch."

Suaj caught the tossed weapon, then Cloud grabbed him one-handed and flew strongly upwards. Suaj blasted away in the general direction of the ground, only hoping to deter their attackers. It worked—the firing from the Tuzai stopped as they took cover away from his un-aimed shots.

"Can you fly like this all the way to the spaceport?"

"Watch me."

But Suaj's weight, slight though it was, slowed them down. He threw the heavy weapon away, allowing Cloud a little more lift, but the loss of cover gave the men on the ground a clear shot. A blast scorched past them, hitting them both. Suaj caught the worst on his back and screamed with the burning agony. Cloud tightened his grip even though he too was injured.

"Hold on, little one."

Suaj did his best through the disorienting waves of pain and shock, the disgusting stench of burned flesh and fur. He clung as tight he could, vision and consciousness fading in and out as they flew over the roofs of the city.

They landed with a thump, he didn't know how long after, and hands helped him onto something softer than the ground. People shouted in Tuzai, and he believed they meant no harm, but he was past being able to fight them.

"Sleep, cousin, we are safe."

He thought he nodded and after that, knew no more.

Chapter Ten

The air was wrong, and so were the minds. He felt...light, yet weighed down. And in pain, but not in distress. Lying on his front. Where...?

He moved and the pain started up. Not as bad as before, but enough to make his breath catch.

"Keep still and it won't hurt so much."

"Rael?"

A familiar hand gently stroked his cheek. "Right here."

"Are we safe?"

"Completely. Guess you don't remember much."

"Nothing. Are you all right?"

"A few burns, bruises and cuts. I'm fine. You're the worry." Rael stroked his face again, small vibrations in his fingers.

"Bad?"

"Bad enough. Fortunately one of Tikmu's men is a medic and their supplies here are better than anything you'd get on Quarn. You should heal okay, but you're going to have a nasty scar. It wasn't a full power blast, or you'd be dead."

"Like you said, being shot isn't all it's cracked up to be. Cloud?"

"He's fine, except for the bald spot. And the others are okay too—at least, they cleared the planet without incident and they should be on Quarn just before us. We're still four days out."

Suaj relaxed. "We stole two spaceships. They'll come after us."

"Maybe. Tikmu thinks not. The president is going to make a lot of capital out of the other side torturing friendly aliens and trying to foment war."

"I want to look at you." Rael bent so Suaj could see his face. He still seemed tired, but at least the bruises were healing and he was clean and shaved. "What did they do to you?"

Rael winced. "Sleep deprivation mostly. Electrical shocks, burns, beatings. Asking me stuff about Quarn and Harnol and the Angels. Trying to soften me up. Setting me up as sacrificial victim."

"They tortured the others."

"Yeah, I know. Cloud and Werse are spending a lot of time together. I think they need it. And I, uh...well, we've got a lot in common now. It'll take a while to put it behind us."

"I wish I could have stopped it."

"You couldn't. And by the way, when you recover, I'm going to kick your arse for that stunt you pulled. I nearly had a heart attack when we drove off without you."

"But it worked out."

Rael growled. "It nearly didn't, you moron. Cloud isn't supposed to be able to carry one of us without help."

"But he did. I'm lighter than most Quarnians, and it was worth the risk."

Rael sighed and kissed his cheek. "I owe you so much. But don't ever do that again. I can't bear the thought of losing you."

Suaj closed his eyes, letting Rael's petting soothe him. Even with the pain, the scarring, it had been worth it and more. It wouldn't have been worth losing Cloud or anyone else, but he'd have paid any price to save Rael—and Rael felt the same. Who needed a wedding ceremony when he had that?

By the time they approached Quarn, he was ambulatory, though still in pain, and far from healed. The drugs on board—basic supplies to the Tuzai, miracles to the Quarnians—had sped up his already rapid healing process and kept infection at bay. The soldier medic had bemoaned the inability to clone skin to make a graft, but did his best with a product called 'synthaskin'. He said Suaj's unusual physiology seemed to be closing the gap between what was ideal and what he could offer, though Suaj would always have a large bare patch of scarred skin on his back, and would need more treatment for some time to come.

The young medic was quite a catch for them. He was naturally apprehensive about leaving his home planet, probably for good, but Tuzax's loss was Quarn's gain. All the soldiers had skills Suaj's planet desperately needed, and with the right attitude, they should fit in as well as Rael had. If they wanted them, they'd find friends aplenty on Quarn.

He and Rael hadn't talked much about what had happened, since Suaj spent a lot of time sleeping, sedated to control the pain. When he was awake, Rael didn't want to discuss the past or what he'd lost. Instead they talked about planes, and vehicles, and what the new data and equipment from Tuzax would mean for Quarn's race to improve its level of technology. The dark shadows in Rael's mind would take more than a few days to erase, and Suaj could only offer his company and affection. No one knew if that would be enough.

To Suaj's relief, Commander Hedike's voice greeted them as they entered orbit, and ordered their vessel to land close to the other one. So everyone had escaped safely, more or less. Dinun and the two Angels ran up to meet them as they exited the spacecraft.

"You're hurt!" Dinun exclaimed as he saw the bandages on Suaj's shirtless back.

"I'm fine."

Moon and Flower embraced him carefully, and then Cloud. Werse too was taken into an affectionate huddle of furry wings, bonds forged by pain and tribulation unlikely to be broken in this lifetime.

"Glad to see you too," Suaj said, grinning. Rael yelped as the Angels ambushed him.

Dinun laughed. "You should have listened to them all the way back. If you all hadn't turned up safe, I don't like to think what they'd have done."

Then the army medical staff took charge of the new arrivals, though Cloud refused to go anywhere near a human hospital. The Angels went off to fly free, needing to spend time with each other and away from humans for a bit, while Dinun accompanied the others to the hospital. He'd already been cleared, and pronounced in remission as far as the multiple sclerosis was concerned.

"They think I'm probably cured, but you know doctors."

Scrubbed and gowned to discourage an infection in Suaj's burns, Dinun settled into a chair by Suaj's bed in a side ward. Suaj had been admitted, and though it chafed to remain away from his home and work even longer, he wasn't up to looking after himself at the moment. And where he was, Rael was, because neither of them could bear to be separated again. The comfortable hospital bed only held one person, but the staff had placed a cot in his room for his lover to use. Gowned as Dinun was, Rael sat by Suaj, content to listen to them talk, holding his hand and stroking the back of it with his thumb.

"Will you go back immediately?" Suaj asked.

Dinun nodded. "Soon as we can. The army sent a message back to Getake so Sora and the kids know I'm okay, but I want to go home. No offence, guys, but I'm all technologied out."

"Not surprised. What about Moon? Is he cured of curiosity about human things?"

Dinun shook his head, smiling affectionately. "You know, I don't think he is. He spent most of the trip practicing his writing and speaking. He's not feeling too friendly towards Tuzax, though. Present company excepted," he added, nodding to Rael.

A bright female voice interrupted him. "*There* you all are. Hello, Suaj." Dera swept into the room, and bent and kissed his cheek, before hugging Rael. Suaj felt at a disadvantage having to have this conversation lying on his front, but no one seemed to care much. "I didn't think I'd see either of you again."

She appeared in good health, and was dressed Quarnian style in pale blue shirt and trousers, as cheerful and friendly as ever. But her smile, unfeignedly joyful as it was, still hid the same shadows as Rael's did. She too had lost much.

"We shouldn't have dragged you into this."

"Of course you should—we got you into the mess in the first place, and I had to come back for my people."

"But you can't go home."

Her smile only faltered for a moment. "Not now. One day, maybe, and what an adventure we'll have before that. Think of the research I can do. I'll be famous...eventually."

Her optimism wasn't entirely real, but Suaj respected the pretence. Quarn would honour these brave souls from Tuzax, and make them welcome. Rael would have other of his people to speak to, and hopefully it would ease whatever homesickness lingered for all of them.

"Oh, and we left with unfinished business!" she exclaimed, clapping her hands. "Dinun tells me you Quarnians have troth ceremonies for same-sex couples, and there's no way I'm leaving Polsa until you two have that wedding."

"Huh?" Rael looked to Suaj for clarification. Suaj had forgotten about the whole thing with everything else that had happened, and it was hardly a priority now.

"Dera, I'm not really—"

"Yes, you are. You promised me a wedding and a wedding I shall have."

"Only if Dinun and the Angels agree to be there."

Suaj was sure Moon and his kin would be too eager to go back to the clan, to consent, but Dinun dashed his hopes. "Sure they will. Moon's wild to see a human party, and I think it'd be fun after what we've been through."

"Beloved, tell the woman I am sick."

Rael smirked. *"Sweetness, do your own dirty work."*

Suaj sighed. "All right." The things he did for his friends.

Dera took Dinun away not long after. Rael remained, to no one's surprise. Suaj drifted on the pain medication and the cessation of stress, letting Rael's fingers ease him into a light doze.

He woke with a start some time later, the sudden movement pulling unpleasantly. "Careful. How do you feel?"

He twisted his head so he could see Rael. "I should be asking you that. Sorry, I've not been very supportive."

"Don't be an idiot. You're here. That's all I need."

"Really?"

Rael's smile became wry. "Maybe not. There's a lot to take in, think about. I'm concentrating on you because that's easiest."

"We don't have to do this wedding thing. Dera's only using it as a distraction from her own thoughts."

"I know."

"On Tuzax, there was some point to a big show, for your family—" He could have kicked himself. *How diplomatic of you, you damn fool.* "We don't need it here."

"I thought that to begin with, but I've been thinking while you've been asleep. Maybe I lost one family and gained another one back here. Kind of, anyway. Friends, definitely. I miss my sisters, my parents, but all the way back I kept thinking how good it would be to see everyone here again. And Cloud and Werse...they've been kind."

"You've been kind to them, Rael."

"Well, that's what families do, don't you think? I know you're not big on that kind of thing, but..."

Suaj reached for his hand. "I'm happy to make a family with you, Kine Raelne, if that's what you want."

"I really do."

He hoped it would help Rael accept what couldn't be changed, and what his life was to be. He hoped it would be good for all...well, yes, their family, if Rael wanted to call it that. His people, Suaj preferred, for 'family' wasn't a term with

fond memories for him. Whatever word they used, it meant the same thing. Those who offered them succour, and who looked to him, to Rael, in turn. It was, he found, a comforting concept.

"Suaj?"

"Yes?"

"I knew you'd come for me. Never doubted it for a second."

"You're a man of perception and intelligence, and as soon as they let me out of this bed, I'll show you how much I appreciate that."

Rael grinned, and kissed him. "Hold you to that, Mister Suaj."

One unexpected benefit of hightailing it back to Quarn with two stolen spaceships was that it took just a few hours for Dera, Dinun, and the Angels to return to Getake, instead of days. Even hanging around for the hastily arranged wedding, they were still back in less time than it would have taken on the train, and with no curious on-lookers either.

Short trip or not, Cloud and Flower had had enough of all things human, at least for now, and as soon as they cleared the ship, flew off with only a quick farewell to Dera and Dinun. Dinun watched Moon go far more calmly than he'd have managed before. Things had changed, and been settled, and now he hoped middle ground between his life and Moon's clan had been reached. Moon had to get his father's consent, which couldn't be taken for granted, all things considered, but they'd hatched a plan that might persuade the old Angel. He wouldn't know until Moon returned in a couple of days, if the idea had worked.

Their welcoming committee was larger than the first time the spaceship had come to the settlement. Jenke grinned like a fool as he and Wilum grabbed his arms and dragged him over to Sora and the kids.

"Pa come home," Dai solemnly pronounced.

Dinun knelt down in front of his older son. "Always will, Dai-boy."

"Uncle Moon come?" Kai demanded.

"He'll be back too. He promised you a ride if you're good."

"I'm *always* good!" she yelled, and Sora grinned.

Dinun ruffled the hair on the three of them. "You sure are. The best kids on Quarn."

There were too many people and too much to tell for a pot of tea at his house to cover it all, so Jenke co-opted the council meeting room for them, with Dinun and Dera taking pride of place.

"Well now, young Dinun," the mayor said. "Tell us all that happened on that planet."

"Okay. I got cured, we came home and Suaj and Rael swore their troth. The end."

He sat down to rude noises and groans of disappointment. "What? That's what happened."

Jenke shook his head in disgust, and Dera rolled her eyes at him. "Tell the rest of it," she chided. He was almost sorry he'd spent so much time helping her with Quarnian.

"Oh, you mean...okay. Yeah, the president wants me to be the official government liaison between the Angels and humans. We're planning on establishing a special settlement out yonder for me and Moon, and Dera and her people, and I'll be in charge of licenses and discussions. We'll keep the numbers of non-Angels to a minimum so Moon's pa and the other clan heads don't think we're trying to corrupt their people, and Moon gets to be with me without being in a human settlement. Dera's going to write the history of the Angels, and um...do all kinds of stuff. Um, and the Angels can learn our technology there if they want. Dunno if they will or anything. And that's it."

He sat down again, determined not to speak again. Jenke gave him a hard look, as if he knew there was more to it. But Dinun couldn't talk about the rest of it, not with kids listening, and he'd rather not think about it at all, at least for now. He couldn't let those bastards steal his happiness.

Dera explained a little more and fielded questions, with Dinun helping out when her Quarnian failed. She was better at this kind of thing anyway, and her mind wasn't full of horrors. Jenke kept shooting him worried looks, and Dinun did his best to grin back. He was fine, really. They'd get through it together.

Sora took Dera in that night, and Dinun let Jenke put him up, so he could give the older man the details he wanted, in private, and without censoring it for little ears. Jenke listened to the gruesome tale in silence, and that gave Dinun the courage to tell all of it, even the things that made him ashamed.

But Jenke still said nothing when he finished. Dinun immediately regretted being so open. Jenke would think him weak, a fool, a coward—going to a strange planet and being taken captive like an addled rejer.

While he cursed his stupidity, Jenke got to his feet and poured them another cup of tea, setting Dinun's mug down in front of him. Then he fixed Dinun with his gaze. "You're among friends here. You always will be."

"Thanks," Dinun said, too surprised to say more.

"You made us proud, Dinun. No man could have done more."

Dinun started to protest, but Jenke held up his hand. "Enough. You look done in, and I expect you don't sleep so good without Moon. So let's call it a night, and tomorrow, you can fill me in on this house you want to build and where. It'll take some planning, and I'm your man on that."

Sometimes, Dinun thought, Jenke wasn't all bad.

There was a lot to organise the next day, and Dera was a ball of cheerful, friendly energy, determined to settle in among her new people and make friends. Colonel Tikmu—former colonel, because all the Tuzai army personnel had been made civilians, and given formal status as Quarnians—would be joining them soon, since part of Dinun's job was to help create a refuge for the Angels in the event of a Tuzai attack. Tikmu had suggested it and volunteered to design it. The fact he and Dera had become cosy together during Suaj and Rael's wedding, probably had a little to do with his enthusiasm, but Dinun didn't care why—he only wanted to make sure no one from any planet ever again came anywhere near his Angels with hostile intent.

But all of their plans rested on the approval of the clans, and Moon's father was the most stubborn of all the clan heads. If he agreed, the others would too. If he didn't, things would be awkward. Dinun didn't want to go against Dust Storm's wishes, not after what had happened on Tuzax. The old Angel's worst fears had been realised, and Dinun couldn't argue if he decided humans were an evil upon his people. Dinun wasn't sure they weren't.

Keeping busy pushed away the anxiety about Dust Storm's decision, and by the time he sat down to supper with his family and Dera, Dinun felt more optimistic about it all. If Dust Storm turned them down, Tikmu could still go ahead with his plans, and Dinun could easily afford to build a place away from the settlement where he and Moon could live in peace, close enough to both their families for comfort, far enough away for privacy. Surely Moon's pa wouldn't object too hard so long as Moon didn't hang around Getake itself. The president would just have to do without her fancy liaison post, and Dinun would keep breaking the law because no one seriously thought he threatened the Angels'

safety, and anyone trying to take him away would have to deal with Moon's clan.

The door rattled, making them all jump.

"Unka Moon," Dai whispered.

Kaji ran out and threw the door open with a thump. Her excited squeals confirmed Dai's words, and Moon swept in with Dinun's daughter in his arms.

"Hey," Dinun said, grinning at the sight.

"He-llo," Moon vocalised. Dera clapped and Kaji stared at her 'uncle' in amazement.

"Come and sit, Moon," Sora said. "Plenty of meat left if you're hungry."

Dinun didn't think he'd ever get used to the sight of his lover sitting at a human table, on a human chair, calmly using a knife and fork like he'd done it all his life. Cloud and Flower had never managed to learn how, but Moon believed in fitting in and setting a good example to the youngsters. Sora approved of that attitude, quite definitely, and so did Dera—she smiled at Moon for the whole meal. In this little part of Getake, Moon had no lack of friends.

Once the children had been put to bed—not without lots of cuddles from Uncle Moon—and the tea made and poured, Dinun asked the question at the front of his mind. "Did he agree?"

Moon nodded for the benefit of the others. *"Yes. He thinks. Is good thing. Increase protection. For us."*

Dinun exhaled. "Great. And you and me?"

"Parent thinks. Is too hard to stop."

Dinun repeated this, to the amusement of the women. "Smart man," Sora said, sipping her tea. "Hope you plan to drop by once in a while, Dinun. Things get mighty dull when you're not here."

"I'll be in and out, don't worry. That's the point—we're going to link the two communities, be part of both. The Angels need us and we need them, if there's an attack from Tuzax. I know, Dera, it might never happen...."

"Spirits, I hope not," Sora muttered. Dera winced.

"But there's no harm being ready."

Moon turned to him. *"Dinun, I want. Go your home." ::Anxious:: "Now?"*

After Tuzax, Dinun would never ignore that plea. "Sora, Dera, see you tomorrow. Moon and I need to catch up."

Sora only tilted her head in slight surprise, then nodded, and patted Dera's hand. "Come on. The boys want to be alone. You know what men are like."

"I certainly do." Dera waved to Dinun and Moon, promising to see them early.

Moon kissed Dinun as soon as they were out on the street, clutching at him and delving deep with his tongue as if he was trying to lick him from his toes inside out.

"Missed me, huh."

"Yes. Is hard. Be apart. Feel need. You same?"

"Definitely." He stared into Moon's eyes. "How did it really go back with the clan?"

"Is hard. I miss you. Cloud, Flower help much."

Dinun put his arm around Moon's waist and they walked like that up the street to Dinun's place. Now they were out of Sora's house, Moon's troubled emotions dominated, unmasked by his pleasure at being in the company of friends, and Dinun regretted even this short time apart. Now was not the time to be alone with their terrors.

After Dinun shut the door behind them, Moon took his hand and tugged him upstairs towards the bedroom. Sometimes talking would help, Suaj had told him. And sometimes words would get in the way. Looked like tonight was one of those times.

Moon pulled at Dinun's clothes, radiating impatience and need. His haste lacked the humour Dinun thought of as part of his lover's core. This wasn't foreplay. This was desperation.

He grabbed Moon's hands, and made him stop. "Love, I'm here. I'm safe. We both are."

::Want::

"Me too. Didn't it help being with your family at all?"

"Little. They understand no." Moon stopped and corrected himself. "They not understand."

"Hard for anyone. But they'll want to help."

"I need. Be with you."

"Here I am." Dinun stripped the rest of his clothes and tossed them at the chair, then cupped Moon's face, drawing him down to kiss him with lingering care. "Still together, after everything."

"I afraid. Was. I was afraid."

"On Tuzax? We all were. I was sure they were going to kill us. I don't know why they had to do all that. We'd already said we'd cooperate."

"I. Want to kill."

"Yeah. I know."

For the first time in his life, Dinun had felt he really could murder someone. If he met any of the bastards involved again, he might just do that. He didn't like they'd made him feel that way. "After those five Angels died, Flower said, 'we go on.' That's all we can do. It might be hard for a while, but we're safe. Hang on to that."

"Try."

"Good. Now...want a blowjob?"

::Pleasure::

Dinun grinned. "That was easy."

They'd been apart for only a night, less than two full days, but tasting Moon was like the first time, tinged with need and wonder and urgency. Moon's conflicting emotions washing over him added bitter to the sweet, but Moon's cock, his tight fuzzy balls felt just the same to Dinun's mouth and hands, familiar and loved, shivering with every touch. And Moon's call of ecstasy as he came, was a pure note of joy resonating in Dinun's very soul.

Moon held him afterwards, stroking his cock lazily, tormentingly, the back of one furry hand stroking over Dinun's nipples in a caress both maddening and wonderful. However much Dinun wanted Moon to get on with it and let him come, he wouldn't hurry his lover. Moon's emotions quietened, became joyful as he luxuriated in touching Dinun, and Dinun in turn indulged his never satiated desire for Moon's body and his amazing fur.

Seeing its silky perfection reminded him of Suaj's terrible injury, the marring of what had once been just as beautiful as Moon, but then Moon kissed him and took his mind off sad thoughts. Suaj was happy and alive, content with his lover and his life. He said the scars were a small price to pay, and Dinun believed him.

Moon increased the pressure on Dinun's cock and as Dinun cried out in pleasure, Moon kissed him again, more determinedly. "*Thinking. Messy.*"

"Yeah...uh, spirits...Moon!"

The orgasm hit him out of nowhere, but it hadn't surprised Moon, who licked his hand clean with a suspiciously smug look on his face. Dinun nibbled his ear. "As distractions go, that's pretty neat."

"*I hear. You...your thoughts. Me make....make me unhappy.*"

"Sorry. Guess it'll be a while for both of us, and them."

"*Leave no. You not leave. Ever.*"

"I solemnly swear next time someone offers to take me to another planet, I'll turn them down."

Moon took his time understanding all that, and absorbing it, before vocalising, "Good."

"Same goes for you."

"Yes."

"Need anything else?"

Moon considered. "*Sleep. With you.*"

"That I can do."

Sleep couldn't be taken for granted these days, but it was always easier when they were together. Everything was, and he hoped, always would be.

The end

To read more works by Ann Somerville, visit her website at
<http://logophilos.net/>