





Outcast Mine

By Jamie Craig

There is nothing Aleron Pitre can't steal, nobody he can't con and no situation he can't slip out of—until he's sent to the prison planet Tantoret, where every sentence is death. If the prisoners don't kill each other, they'll die slowly from mining the poisonous drug chojal. Yet Aleron still hopes that he can escape.

Only thirty Athaki guards keep the chaos of Tantoret in check, a race of aliens stronger and faster than their human charges. Most intimidating of all is the head guard, Jasak, who has his own reasons for being sent to Tantoret.

Amidst the darkness and desperation, Aleron and Jasak share an unexpected attraction. An attraction neither can resist when Jasak claims Aleron as his mate to protect him. Then they discover that both guards and inmates are planning a coup, while a traitor from an enemy

nation threatens the whole planet. Suddenly escape from Tantoret isn't just Aleron's dream—it's a matter of survival for them both.

Dear Reader,

A new year always brings with it a sense of expectation and promise (and maybe a vague sense of guilt). Expectation because we don't know what the year will bring exactly, but promise because we always hope it will be good things. The guilt is due to all of the New Year's resolutions we make with such good intentions.

This year, Carina Press is making a New Year's resolution we know we won't have any reason to feel guilty about: we're going to bring our readers a year of fantastic editorial and diverse genre content. So far, our plans for 2011 include staff and author appearances at reader-focused conferences such as the RT Booklovers Convention in April, where we'll be offering up goodies, appearing on panels, giving workshops and hosting a few fun activities for readers. We're also cooking up several genre-specific release weeks, during which we'll highlight individual genres. So far we have plans for steampunk week and unusual fantasy week. Readers will have access to free reads, discounts, contests and more as part of our week-long promotions!

But even when we're not doing special promotions, we're still offering something special to our readers in the form of the stories authors are

delivering to Carina Press that we're passing on to you. From sweet romance to sexy, and military science fiction to fairy-tale fantasy, from mysteries to romantic suspense, we're proud to be offering a wide variety of genres and tales of escapism to our customers in this new year. Every week is a new adventure, and we want to bring our readers along on the journey. Be daring, be brave and try something new with Carina Press in 2011!

We love to hear from readers, and you can email us your thoughts, comments and questions to generalinquiries@carinapress.com. You can also interact with Carina Press staff and authors on our blog, Twitter stream and Facebook fan page.

Happy reading!
~Angela James

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This book is dedicated to Caerie for her encouragement, patience, enthusiasm and brilliance.

Chapter One

Jailors who thought dropping Aleron Pitre into a dark, dank hole was any kind of real punishment were idiots. At least, that was Aleron's assessment. Small, insurmountable spaces were his specialty. Anyone with half a functioning brain cell should know that.

How did they think he'd stolen the Leriph Crosier? The only way in and out of the shrine, other than the all-too-public front door, was the network of tunnels that ran below the planet's surface. Some of the passes were barely big enough for him to squeeze through. He still had a scar along his left side where he'd scraped the skin raw shimmying back with the abbot's staff firmly strapped to his stomach.

So when they kicked him over the miry edge of the narrow breach, he laughed the whole way down. It didn't matter he fell the length of five men. The earth at the bottom was as soft as that above. His hip and shoulder took the worst of the impact. He would have attempted to slow his descent by clawing at the sodden walls, but the heavy cuffs they'd clamped on to him when they'd picked him up on the Athess Space Station

were new models. They extended over his fingers like gloves and folded his thumb against his palm to render it useless. All they were good for was blunt force.

He knew that for a fact. He'd swung at the more brutish of the pair who'd cuffed him and felt the bones crunch beneath the blow. Few sounds were as satisfying as a thick-skulled thug's howls of pain.

Aleron rolled to his knees and straightened as gracefully as the muck would allow. Tantoret's pallid sun barely penetrated the hole, and he had to narrow his eyes to see anything in the darkness. What he'd first thought a hole was more like a rip in the planet's crust. It stretched indefinitely ahead and behind him, and a hollow whistling slithered along its towering sides. It curled around his bare ankles and crept up the loose pants they'd put on him on the landing craft. Goosebumps erupted along his legs.

Cruel laughter drifted down. "Welcome to your new home, Pitre!"

More laughter, harsh and mocking. An electronic pulse vibrated against his eardrums. A moment later, the cuffs fell from his hands and landed with a squelch in the mud.

Aleron crouched to pick them back up before the dampness ruined the mechanisms. Everything

had a use. The trick was being patient long enough to discover it.

At the distant roar of the landing craft, he jerked his head upward again, though he saw nothing beyond the slice of yellow sky. The chasm vibrated from the force of the ship's take-off, loosening clumps of sod and rocks to rain around his head. He pressed his body to the wall and discovered something else about his so-called new home. The ground was alive. Through his shirt, he felt hundreds of individual movements, the wriggles of wormlike creatures, the crawling of those with legs. Tantoret might have been subjugated as a prison planet, but it was still capable of sustaining independent life. Those who thought to sculpt the universe in their own image, with their own narrow set of rules and tenets, had forgotten one very crucial element in selecting Tantoret to house criminals.

Life begat hope. And hope was all a man like Aleron needed to survive—and better, to escape.

Tucking the cuffs into his waistband, he dropped to his knees and began to feel around the wet earth, learning its mysteries as best he could in the absence of illumination. More of the planet's life seethed between his fingers. None of it was large, and nothing did more than brush across his skin before burrowing back into the muck, but it provided a sense of direction when

his eyes could not. Nearly all of the creatures swept past his legs, fleeing to some spot behind him.

Aleron turned around and crawled forward. He couldn't see, but he didn't need to. His body did the work for him, bending to the curves of the walls, molding to the ground when necessary.

He crawled until his hands were numb, and then he crawled some more. Minutes, hours, didn't matter. The cuffs fell from his pants more than once, and he scooped them up with barely a break in his rhythm. The soil reminded him of loam, the way it clung to his skin when he pulled away, the way it sucked him back in when his palm returned. It started to itch as it dried, encouraging him to plunge his fingers deep through the surface, but that had its own danger. Fighting the chasm would tire him out even more quickly. He had no idea how long he would be in it and had to reserve as much of his strength as he could.

He knew very little about Tantoret, other than its function. Few authorities utilized the planet. Flung to the outer corner of the Athess system, it took several days to reach by transport even within the system. There was only the one space station, and no other habitable planets. It was easier, and cheaper since it used less far less fuel,

to dump prisoners on Eldechray. When it came to cutting corners, authorities were masters.

Of course, Aleron had escaped from Eldechray both times he'd been captive there. Whoever had orchestrated this latest arrest would have accessed his files and known that. Dumping him on Tantoret had probably seemed like a last resort.

At some point, his journey took on a downward angle. He slid forward more than once as the slope became increasingly slippery, and only prevented a full-out tumble by hooking his fingers into the soil as deep as he could go. The second time it happened, his hand caught on a stick, and he wrenched it free, using it as an anchor when he began to lose his grip again. It drove easily into the ground. There was even a knoblike appendage on each end to give him extra leverage.

It occurred to him more than once that he crawled to his death. He had no proof there was an end to the chasm, or that it led to anywhere helpful. Instead of being a prison, Tantoret just might be a death chamber. Prisoners could get dropped into the holes without food, without light, and left to die. The sudden certainty the stick he'd grabbed was actually a bone spurred Aleron to throw it aside in a moment of alarm, only to scramble for it again a second later when he realized how ridiculous he was being.

Still, the fear that he was going nowhere lingered. He closed his eyes. There was no light anyway, so straining his vision wasted energy, but it had the added bonus of honing the remaining sensations into something manageable.

Smell.

Earthy. Damp. The acrid bite of decay beneath the oily coating of new growth.

Touch.

Boggy. Rich. The walls narrowed at unpredictable intervals to press on to his shoulders, providing a welcome embrace, then spread again as if driven back, beyond reach. More sticks poked up at him through the mire, and always, the skitter and slink of Tantoret's native inhabitants reminded him he was the outsider here, that he was the one who would perish long before they did.

Sound.

The whistling he'd heard after first being dropped never disappeared. That, more than anything else, was the straw at which he clutched. The movement of air was caused by a difference in pressure, whether natural or artificial. Either way, its source gave Aleron a compass, as much as the worms burrowing beneath him did. Find it, and find the end. Find the end, find freedom.

When he finally had to stop from sheer exhaustion, those were the words that lulled him to sleep.

He didn't dream. He found blackness, or maybe blackness found him, but he never had images plague him while he slept. When he'd been sixteen, the year he'd stowed away on a pleasure cruiser and left Old Earth, he'd known a doctor who told him it was physically impossible for him not to dream.

"Everybody does," Marcus had said. "It's the fact that you don't ever remember what it is you're dreaming that makes you so interesting."

Personally, Aleron had always believed Marcus was so fascinated with him because he was the only man aboard the ship Marcus hadn't had sex with. Aleron had fostered that hope in the doctor until he'd found another cruiser upon which to stowaway, one that would take him even farther from Old Earth. Marcus had been surprisingly generous. That was when Aleron had learned that the promise of something was often more valuable than the actual something itself.

Ironical, considering he was a professional thief.

When he woke up, his muscles had stiffened to the point of pain. The toil of his descent was the most work his body had done in the four days since his capture. His hands had been bound in the

cuffs the entire time, which meant a liquid diet consumed through tubes.

Inertia caused the muscles to seize. As he sat up, his shoulders spasmed, driving him back to the wet earth. He lay with his cheek in the muck, his breathing labored, waiting for the pain to go away.

Without the benefit of adrenaline, he couldn't move his thumbs, either. Four days with them strapped in had finally stolen their mobility.

He refused to accept this would be it. He was not going to die on this miserable planet, in the middle of nowhere, without even a decent pair of pants. He had not spent the last thirteen years of his life trying to steal himself a better one to have it end like this.

Slowly, he rolled onto his back, ignoring the sharp pain radiating down his spine. Deep breaths. Relax. He stared up into the dark, only to blink when he realized it wasn't as dark as it had been. Flecks glowed along the wall, not many but enough to break up the swathe of midnight. How had he not noticed those before? The answer was simple. He'd focused on going forward, not looking up.

Lesson learned.

Somehow, he fell asleep again. Waking the second time was easier, with less agony as he pushed himself upright. His pace was slower, though, eroded by his gnawing hunger. The grubs

in the ground were probably edible, but he couldn't be sure. Soon enough, he'd have no other choice but to try them.

As he moved, he drank in all of his surroundings, not just the bank in front of him. The flecks grew more plentiful, coming in clusters like bursts of bloom. Most were white, but occasionally, a sparkle of gold or a hint of violet peeked through. They were almost pretty, in a cold, distant kind of way, like watching stars in a cloudless sky on a planet he'd never visited before.

They were what distracted him from the chasm's shifting landscape until it was too late.

A shadow swept across his face. Aleron snapped his head forward, but the shadow had already moved closer, driving him back onto his haunches in fear, then onto his hands as he tried to crab-walk up the slope. His hands sank into the wet earth, trapping him as effectively as the cuffs ever had.

Away. That was his only thought, his sole instinct. *Get away.*

But his progress was too slow, and the sucking sounds of the mud too quick to be his. Twin pinpoints of light appeared ahead of him at a level high above his head, growing brighter at the same time they became larger. Something occasionally covered one, like a curtain falling in front of it,

and when powerful hands reached through the darkness and grabbed his shirtfront, Aleron finally saw what they were.

Eyes. Icy, luminescent eyes.

They pinned him to the wall as easily as the creature that'd picked him up had. "Look at me."

The creature spoke in an Old Earth tongue, not one of the new languages scattered throughout the galaxies. Aleron was curious enough to obey, and he opened his eyes again to see his new companion.

The curtain he'd noticed was actually hair, long waves that fell to shoulders that completely blocked out the wall behind him. It caught enough of the natural flecks in the earth to tell Aleron it wasn't dark, but didn't have the unnatural paleness of the man's skin or eyes. He assumed it was a man, or at least part human. A web of dark lines covered half the man's face, though without real illumination, he couldn't be sure if it was scarring or a tattoo or something else.

He hoped for a tattoo. A man like this with that many scars was not someone he wanted pinning him to the wall like a bug.

"You are?"

As deep as the man's voice was, it didn't rumble. It was smooth and fluid, much like everything else on Tantoret. Aleron grinned in spite of his precarious position and said, "I am."

The icy eyes narrowed. One of the hands holding his shirtfront shifted to grasp Aleron's throat. The man squeezed enough to make breathing more than a little difficult.

"If you prefer to die now, I have no problem obliging you. One less prisoner makes my job easier."

Aleron tried to pull the hand off his neck, clawing into the skin, yanking at the wrist. Nothing worked. The man's arm felt like it had been forged at the bottom of a volcano.

"Pitre," he gasped. His ears were already starting to ring from the lack of oxygen. "Aleron Pitre."

Immediately, both hands disappeared. Aleron fell to the ground, his forehead smacking against the man's knee on the way down.

"Welcome to Tantoret, Aleron Pitre." Did everyone who came here have the same sick sense of humor? "Come with me."

He could barely push himself back to his feet, but the guy was already walking away. "Wait." It came out as a croak. "Give me a second to recover here."

The man stopped. "You've had a full cycle to get to the core. Consider yourself lucky I bothered to fetch you at all."

Irritation at the man's tone rose inside him. "I didn't ask for a personal escort. I was doing perfectly well on my own, thank you very much."

The air was forced from his lungs again when the man shoved him back into the wall, violently enough to make him cry out. He would have new bruises on his chest, provided he got away from this maniac in one piece.

Hot breath fanned across his cheek when the man leaned forward. "I should kill you now. Something tells me you'll be more trouble if I let you finish the journey."

I'm always trouble danced on his tongue. He had to bite it to keep the words from coming out.

The man waited for a response, but when none came, said, "Disrespect me one more time and it'll be my pleasure to drag you to the core and roast you for the other prisoners' dinner. Do I make myself clear?"

A chill ran down his spine. "Yes." Hurriedly, he added, "Sir."

This time, he was ready when the man released him. Grabbing the wall for balance, he tried to follow as quickly as he could, but failed to match his companion's pace.

"You know my name," he said in a valiant attempt to keep his voice casual. "But I don't know yours, sir."

Though the sucking sound of the man's steps didn't stop, his icy gaze shot over his shoulder, boring into Aleron. "You may call me Jasak."

In the next moment, the darkness swallowed him up.

Chapter Two

Tantoret was a prison without chains or bars. The guards took turns patrolling the chasms every other cycle to gather the bodies before they filled the caverns with the scent of rot. But Tantoret was a prison with rules. Jasak always made sure new arrivals understood the laws that would now govern their lives. The ones who couldn't understand the system, or couldn't ingratiate themselves into it, didn't survive in the caverns for very long.

"What do you think of the new one?" Tias asked. They stood at the edge of the main cavern, with the man in question positioned on Jasak's far side. Aleron looked up, as though he sensed Tias was speaking about him. There was intelligence in his dark eyes, but no understanding. "I give him two cycles. Maybe three."

"No."

"You think it'll be less than that?"

"Longer."

"He's weak."

"He almost made it all the way to the core by himself. He's not stupid."

“Perhaps I will keep him for myself,” Tias announced.

“Leave him alone,” Jasak snapped, using the high language of their people. “Or you will be banished to the chasms.”

Tias regarded him with glittering eyes, but he didn’t protest or ask for clarification. The men sent to Tantoret might have been given effective death sentences, but Jasak still believed they were entitled to certain basics. The inmates under his care never died of starvation. They never died of dehydration. And they were never tortured to death. Tias was young. He viewed the inmates as nothing more than toys for his amusement. Not that Jasak blamed him for desiring their new prisoner. His black hair and eyes were naturally attractive to the Athaki race, who found such features exotic. He was young and healthy. His skin still had the rosy tone of a person who spent most of his time aboveground. Most important, he didn’t have any of the symptoms of chojal poisoning—his hair was still full, his teeth still in place, his skin still whole.

“Come.”

Aleron jumped at the Old Earth word. Jasak had learned the Terran language when he was young, but the words still felt fat and awkward in his mouth.

“Where are we going? To get some food, I hope.”

Jasak didn't answer. There would be food eventually, but not until Aleron's introduction to the core. He began walking, confident the new prisoner would fall in step behind him. The smart ones knew when not to resist.

“Are you aware this is a mining planet?” Jasak asked.

“Mining? What's here to mine?”

“Chojal.”

“Are you serious?”

“You know what the substance is then?”

“Of course I know what it is! I also know that it's illegal and you can get about ten thousand credits an ounce on the black market.”

“Yes.” Jasak stepped into a smaller, shallow cave, gesturing for Aleron to follow. He lit the light near the entrance, casting a bright yellow glow across the etched walls. Jasak did not require the lamp, but he knew the human did. The chojal stuck out of the stone in bright flower-shaped crystals. The crystals hung like big, juicy berries. Like they could be plucked from the stone with no more effort than it took to pluck spring fruit.

“Don't touch,” Jasak warned.

“Don't worry. I wasn't planning on it.”

“Due to the venom inside the chojal skin, we cut around them to remove the stone. Once the

stone is removed, it is processed through the core. It takes one full cycle to separate the venom from the minerals.”

“Why? Chojal is only used for one thing, and that thing is illegal throughout the Athess system.”

Jasak didn’t respond. If Aleron was half as smart as Jasak had already given him credit for, then he would figure it out sooner rather than later. There were millions of similar deposits throughout the long, twisting chasms and the larger, natural occurring caverns. Some scientists insisted they were the fossilized remnants of a life form that had inhabited the planet thousands of years earlier. Others claimed they occurred naturally, and thus, were naturally renewable. Jasak didn’t know, and he didn’t care. His job was to remove them.

“This is the machine that moves the minerals from the core to the surface.” It stretched from ceiling to floor, disappearing into Tantoret’s innermost depths. Large doors on either side allowed it to be fueled, while the gap around its lower edge allowed enough room for a single entity to crawl beneath its belly and reach its most sensitive controls. “If the minerals are allowed to stay underground after treatment, we will all suffocate.”

“The treatment makes the minerals toxic?”

“Yes. The chojal turns to gas and is moved via a pipe from the core to tanks on the surface. If the core ever stops...”

“Let me guess. We all suffocate?”

“Yes. You will be given the necessary tools and a quota for each cycle. You may work when you wish but if you fail to reach your quota, you will be punished.”

“Where are the rest of the prisoners?”

“Working. The tunnels go very far and very deep. I will show you where you’ll sleep.”

“Do the authorities know you’re mining chojal?”

“Who do you think we are mining it for?”

The words temporarily silenced Aleron, and Jasak took advantage of the quiet to lead him away from the core to where the prisoners slept, ate and spent their few free hours. The walls had long ago been mined for the deadly chojal and stripped of the toxin. The main cavern was almost as large as the one that housed the core, and its massive walls were lined with small, man-made tunnels that opened into large, round rooms. These rooms had their own tunnels which led to another level of small caves. They continued on like that for several miles, creating a confusing catacomb where men could easily hide from the view of the guards. Men who got themselves lost

in the catacombs starved, and the guards used their strong sense of smell to find them again.

“Find yourself a place to sleep in one of these tunnels. Don’t try to take one that already belongs to somebody. Everybody eats out here. Do not attempt to smuggle food back to your sleeping area. With each meal you will receive a salt tablet. I suggest you do not attempt to hoard those, either.”

“What about a bath? Can I get one of those?”

“There are naturally occurring springs throughout these tunnels. It is not rationed by me, but some of the prisoners attempt to control the access to water. There are two more meal times before the end of the current cycle.”

“How will I know when it’s time to eat?”

“You’ll know.” Jasak turned to walk away, but Aleron grabbed him by the arm, just above his elbow. He froze, not because of the pressure of Aleron’s fingers, but because of the flash of white heat detonating at the point of contact. His immediate thought—his only thought—was for more heat. He wanted to press his body against Aleron’s, hold him in place, and fight off the ever-present chill of his subterranean home. It would be easy to overpower Aleron and take anything and everything he needed. Instead, he yanked his arm away with a soft growl. “What do you want?”

“You can’t just leave me in here.” There was a hint of alarm in the man’s voice, but none of the slobbering fear Jasak was accustomed to.

“You have time before the next meal. Find a place to sleep, get settled, and get cleaned up before the men return.”

Aleron didn’t attempt to stop Jasak again, and he left the man standing in the middle of the cavern. He was already proving himself different from most of the men sentenced to Tantoret. Most of them were in tears by the time Jasak left them. Crying was a natural response as understanding began to sink in. They were living in their own graves. Very few people sent to the caverns ever saw sunshine again—even the ones with relatively short sentences didn’t usually make it. They picked fights with the wrong people, they got themselves lost in the catacombs, they exposed themselves to the chojal for too long, they failed to take their salt tablets. Or they simply gave up, losing the interest and the ability to keep themselves alive. Aleron had already demonstrated stronger survival instincts than any other new prisoner in recent memory. He wanted to live. Based on what he had seen so far, Jasak was almost convinced he might succeed.

Tias was gone by the time Jasak returned to the core. The main cavern got the most traffic as prisoners and guards passed from the living

quarters to the mines. But for the moment, Jasak was alone. He closed his eyes and perked his ears, listening for any signs of trouble. He heard the steady clink of steel against stone, the low grunts marking each swing of the heavy tools, and the occasional growls from the Athaki guards. The sounds were almost comforting. For the moment, everything was as it should be. The core shuddered and grumbled, its massive, cylindrical body glowing bright red as the first round of super-heating began.

With a rare moment to himself, Jasak considered dropping to all fours and crawling through the narrow tunnel behind the core that led to the cave he had claimed for his meditation. The humanoids lacked the flexibility to maneuver their bodies to reach it. They were also scared to get that close to the core.

A sudden crash and shout of pain pulled Jasak from his thoughts, and he reacted automatically, rushing toward the sound. The sound was too close to the core to be the result of a mining accident. Jasak's pulse quickened to almost double his standing heart rate, and the rest of his body responded accordingly. His ears went straight up, and his hidden fangs extended, filling his mouth. His twitching nose caught the rich, copper scent of blood, and a string of drool caught at the corner of his tight lips. The muscles in his

stomach and thighs clenched as he prepared to pounce, but his groin was pulling tight as well, and that had nothing to do with an attack and everything to do with the sweet smell of blood growing stronger by the second.

He pressed down on his legs and sprung forward, his outstretched hands barely touching the floor before another leap carried him several more feet. The sounds and smells of an attack grew stronger with each bound, and a familiar battle waged inside his flesh. His instincts told him to join his Athaki brethren in the attack, to give in to the craving that held him captive. Nobody would know. Nobody would ever know. His assignment to Tantoret did not have to be a punishment. He could follow the example set by Tias and make it a reward. Make it his own personal kingdom of delights. The fleshy, salty smell of terror could be a bonus, not a warning.

But when he saw the man crying and holding up bloody hands helplessly, the horrible, awesome hunger abated. As powerful as it was, and as loud as his instincts shouted, he still had a choice. With his head spinning and his mouth watering, he bypassed the succulent, broken inmate in favor of the guard responsible for his torment. He grabbed Tias by the throat and slammed him as hard as he could into the wall. His skull cracked against the

rock, but Jasak didn't care and he didn't loosen his hold.

"What do you think you are doing?" Jasak demanded in the Athaki tongue.

"He's sick."

"What are you doing to him?"

"I wasn't..."

Jasak tightened his grip and slammed Tias's head against the wall again. "Answer me. You were harming him. What were you doing?"

"I only wanted a taste."

"No."

"What do you care? He's probably going to die anyway."

"Not by our hands."

"He's worthless. He might as well be some good to somebody." Tias spoke rapidly, each word coated with frustrated anger. "I will make sure he doesn't suffer."

"No, you will not touch him again."

"Jasak..."

"I warned you. I told you what would happen if you touched another prisoner."

"You won't throw me to the core. You need me too much."

"Everybody is expendable here, Tias. Even you."

Tias's eyes widened. "Jasak, please. I wasn't going to let him suffer. I didn't really want to hurt him. Please don't throw me to the core."

Jasak appreciated the fear he heard in Tias's voice. It told him the other guard was at least taking the situation seriously. Death should have been welcomed as the obvious release it was, and yet, guards and inmates alike resisted that peace. The survival instinct was strong, and when Jasak pressed the issue, he always discovered it was the only instinct that really mattered. He knew Tias's bloodlust had not truly subsided, but it was forgotten now. Why? Why did any of them fight and claw for every additional minute of life they could manage?

"I won't. You're right. You are more valuable to me alive than you are dead. But this is the third time I have caught you attacking a prisoner. I think it's time that you learn a lesson."

"What are you going to do?"

Jasak tugged on the leather ties that kept Tias's belt in place. It dropped to the ground, leaving him without a weapon. He was naturally stronger than any one humanoid, but he could not overpower an entire group of them without a weapon.

"I am going to leave you to their mercy until the end of this cycle."

"Jasak, please."

“Yes. Perhaps then you will have an appreciation of what it feels like to be overwhelmed and weak.”

It was a rather severe punishment, and it could very well result in Tias’s death. There were several inmates who held grudges against Tias, and who would be eager to get their own delayed revenge. But that was all of Tias’s doing. There were three dozen guards in all, and Jasak could toss any of the others into the living area and expect them to survive the night. Because they followed the rules that were in place to keep everybody safe.

Jasak dragged Tias out of the cave, leaving the prisoner huddled on the floor, clutching his hands and still crying softly to himself. It didn’t take much to break the men. Not after they had been living in the toxic dark for weeks and months. There was no sport in torturing them. Even if they tasted of the world, of a time, of a place, of an existence, that none of them would ever find again.

Tias was still babbling about how he was sorry, how this wasn’t necessary. Jasak ignored him. He still smelled of the man’s blood. It sharpened Jasak’s hunger. He had been built for the hunt. His entire body was a weapon, from his retractable fangs to the claws that were sharp enough to shear through bone. The hunger was

why he was trapped there. Why all of them were trapped there. Unlike the prisoners, they might receive wages, but outside of the money, there was no difference between the incarcerated humanoids and the Athaki guards. They were all being punished. They had all lost something far more precious, more valuable than any credits. They would all die underground.

Aleron was gone when Jasak returned to the common area. That was good. The ones who were paralyzed when they arrived were always seen as the easiest targets. The prisoners who figured out ways to defend themselves usually rose to the top of the pecking order quickly. He tossed Tias to the floor like he was nothing more than a weak child.

“You are not to leave until I fetch you. If you try to escape, I’ll make your stay here permanent.”

“Yes, sir.”

He stalked off, confident that Tias would not attempt to follow him. The prisoner hadn’t moved from the spot where they left him, and the scent of his blood hit Jasak like a stone wall. He sank to his knees, telling himself that he was only going to offer comfort. “Are you injured?”

“My hands...they’re...peeling.”

Chojal poisoning. “Come with me and I’ll bandage them. You do not have to return to the mines.”

“This cycle?”

“Ever.”

The hope in the prisoner’s eyes instantly dimmed. “It’s progressed that far?”

“Come with me.” He wrapped his arm around the prisoner’s thin shoulders and hauled him to his feet. The man slumped against Jasak, but now out of exhaustion. That will for survival that so impressed Jasak had faded. He couldn’t do anything except make sure the sick man was as comfortable as possible as his body continued to eat away at itself. Had he done the man any favors by rescuing him from Tias?

Was he doing *any* of them any favors by keeping them alive in this hellhole? He asked himself that question several times every cycle. But he never found his answer.

Chapter Three

The lack of doors and locks was encouraging. There was nothing to stop Aleron from leaving. It was just a matter of finding his way back to the surface.

On the other hand, there had to be a reason why doors and locks were superfluous. He needed to be patient and learn Tantoret's secrets before attempting an escape. No system was perfect. He would best this one, too.

The rules had been clear, Jasak's tone firm. Though Aleron's stomach complained loudly, he went off in search of a hole to call his own.

It was easy to tell which were inhabited and which were not. Those already claimed had rudimentary beds, worn blankets made from every kind of material under the stars, elements of individuality to mark a prisoner's territory. Some had men asleep in them, curled into tight balls with their backs to the wall. One room had chunks carved out of the wall in some sort of fresco. Aleron had wandered in to take a closer look when he realized what he was doing—and more importantly, where he was—and rushed back out before he was seen.

The farther away he got from the main room, the fewer occupied rooms he found. He settled on a smallish one, three turns off the primary tunnel. The entryway was lower than others. He had to stoop to get inside, though he could stand to his full height once there. The lamp that had long ago been embedded in its wall was filmed over with some kind of dust or ash. Nobody had been inside this chamber in a very long time.

Aleron smiled. Privacy. Hard to believe he'd found such a precious commodity in a place like this. He wouldn't have to worry about interruptions while he formulated his escape routes.

He stood in the middle of the room and scanned the walls. A niche over the curved doorway was out of view of anyone standing outside, and from anyone standing in who might not be looking for it. Stretching, he shoved the cuffs deep into the recess. Short of keeping them on him at all times, it was the best he could do if he didn't want them found. Sooner or later he'd disassemble them for better stowing.

As he lowered his arms, he caught a whiff of his body odor and grimaced. Next order of business. Find someplace to bathe.

Jasak had mentioned natural springs. That meant running water. The difficulty in trying to locate it, however, rested with the low throb of the

machinery they used for the chojal. It blocked out most ambient sound, creating a natural bass line he was sure he'd probably not even notice after a few days. Now, though, he couldn't dissociate it from the rest of the noise. Not without some effort.

Choosing a spot against the wall facing away from the main room, Aleron slid to the floor, folded his legs and leaned back.

He closed his eyes.

Sound.

Like any piece of music, all he had to do was separate the instruments. Gears ground against gears. Metal squealed against metal. Expelling gas hissed. Voices. Male. Occasionally barely there, like it was only one or two, but swelling into something more until it carried its own melody.

And there it was, the distant splash. Aleron waited several moments, orienting himself to the crystalline rush, then opened his eyes and stood. His feet moved assuredly to the previous tunnel, but instead of turning toward the cavern from which he'd come, he ducked into the passageway carved almost directly across from his.

The spring was tucked away at the rear of a room the size of five bedchambers. It wasn't large, and from the high-pitched drip from the walls into the pool, it probably wasn't very deep. The room was devoid of other prisoners, which

meant he could wash in peace, and he stripped out of his clothes as he nearly ran to its edge. He carried them in as he waded into the chilly, clear depths. There was no telling when he would be given new ones, or even if. What was the point of washing if he was only going to put the filthy clothes back on?

At its deepest, the water only reached his waist. Everything inside and out of his aching body had shriveled into hard knots at the first blast of its arctic temperature, but he was in it now, no sense in turning back or not finishing what he started. Still with his clothes gripped in his hand, he ignored the gooseflesh warning him of the chill and instead sank to his knees, submerging himself from head to toe.

He was laughing when he burst through the surface again. Anybody listening would probably think him crazy. Here he was, stuck on a planet nobody cared about, imprisoned for the rest of his life because he'd made the mistake of falling asleep after a celebratory fuck. The guards were more than a little crazy, and the notion that they were mining chojal, one of the most powerful hallucinogenic drugs available on the black market, for governmental authorities even more so.

Yet, here he was, splashing and washing away the detritus of his crawl through the exterior

fissure, hopeful of what was to come. Jasak had mentioned quotas, but those were simple. Aleron wasn't averse to hard labor. He simply preferred the game of thievery. He'd meet his quotas for the guards and take advantage of his free rein to gather as many resources as possible. This was simply another puzzle to solve. As long as he treated it as such, he could last indefinitely.

"You!"

The sharp call broke through his preoccupation with plans. He paused in the scrubbing of his pants to look over his shoulder. A group of three men clustered in the entryway. All wore similar clothing, pants that tucked into their shoes, high-collared shirts with long sleeves. All three were filthy, too, hair muddy, something brackish staining their hands and cheeks. The shortest sported a fresh cut on the side of his face, though he wouldn't have to worry about it harming his looks. He'd already lost his eye and ear on that side, long ago if the puckered scarring was anything to go by.

He was the one who stepped forward first. "What are you doing in there?"

Aleron recognized the voice as the one who'd interrupted him. "Am I not supposed to be?" It wasn't the sarcastic comment that automatically sprang to his lips, but Jasak had warned that some of the prisoners attempted to control the springs.

He wasn't so green not to recognize a potential threat when he saw it.

"There's a schedule. You're not on it."

"No, I'm new here."

"You'd have to be."

Forgetting finishing up, Aleron bunched his clothes into his hand, surreptitiously winding his wet shirt around his fingers as he strode out of the pool. Three against one odds were guaranteed not to turn out in his favor, especially since the one was naked and shivering, but the water weighed down the fabric enough to turn his hand into a mallet that would hurt a lot more than his fist if it came down to a fight.

His gaze flickered over the other two joining their friend. The dark fluid on their hands could only be blood. Still fresh.

He sincerely hoped it didn't come down to a fight.

"It won't happen again," Aleron said. "If you'll just tell me what the schedule is, I'll get out of your way."

None of them moved. "I don't think I want you on my schedule," the leader said. "Which means you owe me for contaminating my pool, pig."

The itch to provoke them grew. Common thugs, that's all they were. Bullying to get their way. In the outside world, they'd be seen as less than the dirt under people's shoes, which of

course, was why they were probably here in the first place. *Play along*. Until he knew more about the hierarchy, he was in the weaker position, not to mention he was tired, hungry and still a little sore from his journey.

“I don’t have anything.”

“Yet.” A sly gleam appeared in the leader’s lone eye. “I’ll take your quota for the first cycle.”

“Jasak said there was punishment for not meeting quotas.”

The men laughed. “Oh, Jasak *said*, did he?” One-eye stepped closer and poked Aleron in the chest. “Except Jasak isn’t here, and even if he was, it wouldn’t matter. He doesn’t play favorites, so you can forget about getting in his good graces. He’s Athaki.” He waved his bloody hand in front of Aleron’s nose, splattering droplets onto his wet skin. “He doesn’t even protect his own kind.”

Aleron refused to flinch, though the acrid stench of the blood made bile rise in the back of his throat. It wasn’t human, not with that smell. One-eye’s implication that they’d just come from beating one of the guards conflicted with the first impressions Aleron had got of Jasak. The guard was tough, but seemed fair. He gave an order and reacted reasonably when it was filled. The only threat he’d posed came when an order was disobeyed. He didn’t seem like the type to ignore unwarranted violence, though he hadn’t

specifically said he did anything about the prisoners who attempted to ration the few amenities.

“I’m not interested in Jasak’s protection.”

“You say that now. See how you feel when your flesh is rotting away.”

“Won’t happen.”

“Always happens.”

“I plan to be the exception.”

One-eye’s lip curled into a snarl. “Think you’re better than the rest of us?”

“I think I do what it takes.” He looked pointedly past the other men at the exit. “Now if you’re done, I’m freezing my ass off here. Don’t worry about me using your spring again. I’ll find another one.” He couldn’t resist adding, “With a more hospitable environment.”

The snarl erupted into a scream of pure rage. A flash of metal appeared at the bottom of his peripheral vision, and he barely had time to lift his arm to block it before the knife slashed at his midsection.

It caught in his bound hand, slicing through the fabric like tissue. Only the momentum of both their swings stopped it from reaching skin. Aleron didn’t have time to think, not with One-eye’s other fist undercutting his first attack, and he took the slam into his side rather than his stomach as he twisted away.

The others fell on him like a pack of wild dogs. He lashed out with both feet, catching someone in the groin, but someone else caught his ankle and wrenched with unbearable force. Fire shot up Aleron's leg. He couldn't risk getting seriously hurt, not on his first cycle here. He wouldn't be able to defend himself, or survive whatever punishment came from not meeting mining quotas. Sheer panic compelled him to swing his bound hand in a wide arc. The impact with hard bone, followed by the shout of pain, was a small victory.

Every time he caught sight of the knife, he tried to block it. He hadn't survived the transport or crawled for hours to die now. Twice, the blade met flesh, though both times, the cuts were shallow. Blood dripped down his arm now, and when he managed to roll over onto his hands and knees in a desperate bid to make a run for it, it reversed direction to tickle from his pit past his elbow.

Somebody kicked him in the stomach. Their shoes were mercifully soft, but there was enough power to knock him off-balance. He landed on his hip, and a fresh flare of pain stabbed down his thigh. He rolled off it before the pain got worse, and barely avoided getting the same foot driven into his face.

"The guards are coming!"

The warning came from an unknown voice, maybe one of the two who hadn't spoken. Aleron couldn't risk looking up to see who it belonged to, but whoever had interrupted gave him the reprieve necessary to scramble farther out of his attackers' way.

"Get him out of here," One-eye growled.

"There's no time."

"They won't care about a little fight."

"You so sure about that? Look at how Jasak turned on Tias. And how Tias turned on Macario. I'm telling you, something's in the air today."

Carefully, Aleron pushed himself more upright. His leg burned like hellfire and threatened to buckle beneath his weight, but it wasn't broken, and if it wasn't broken, he could still stand. He never took his eyes off One-eye, not even to give the newcomer who'd shouted the warning a second glance.

"They've never interfered before," One-eye said.

"They never caught you with a blade before, either."

One-eye looked down at the knife he still held loosely. He rolled it between his fingers as he contemplated the warning. After a few seconds, he lifted both his head and the blade, pointing its tip straight at Aleron.

“Your quota for the first cycle. Or I’ll finish what I started.”

He didn’t wait for a response, not that Aleron would give him one. Turning on his heel, he marched out of the room, the newcomer turning sideways to give him and his cronies space to leave.

“You should get out of here before the guards show up, too,” the newcomer said.

Aleron nodded. After rolling around in the dust, still damp from his bath, he needed to wash more than ever, but he wasn’t about to do it here. “Are there any springs I can use without getting sliced and diced?”

The newcomer kept glancing from him to the main tunnel. He was thinner than Aleron, with gray stubble covering his head and jaw. His clothes were more tattered than the trio’s. One sleeve was completely gone, replaced by a series of small, stained bandages. “Raimo controls the water in this quadrant. You’re better off trying something closer to the core.”

Aleron used the remnants of his shirt to wipe away the worst, then picked up his soggy pants and stepped into them. “I don’t suppose I can get you to show me where those are.”

“Only if you hurry up. I’m not getting caught by the guards for this. They’re crazy today.”

The urgency in his tone spurred Aleron to go faster, and though his leg was killing him, he limped to the door. The newcomer immediately took off, forcing Aleron to follow at a quicker pace than was comfortable.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

“Luca. You?”

“Aleron.”

“You must be new. Nobody fights with Raimo if they don’t have to.”

“He started it. I just wanted a bath.”

“You can’t do that without getting on his schedule.”

“Yeah, I know that now.”

“You shouldn’t have provoked him. He was already hot from the attack on Tias.”

Aleron recognized the name from Luca’s earlier warnings. “Is that somebody else who went skinny-dipping without a license?”

“Tias is a guard.”

That changed the picture completely. But when Luca disappeared around a corner, Aleron doubled his pace to catch up. He couldn’t afford to lose his guide. He couldn’t concentrate enough at the moment not to get lost. More than that, though, he needed answers.

“What did you mean back there?” he prompted. “About something being in the air today.”

Luca cast a frown at him. “Do you always talk this much?”

He grinned, hoping it didn’t look as gruesome as it felt. “How else am I supposed to learn the ropes?”

“It’ll get you in trouble.”

“So tell me enough to shut me up.”

Luca sighed and turned down another tunnel. “It won’t mean anything to you. You have nothing to compare it to.”

“But you do? How long have you been here?”

“Two hundred and three cycles.”

It wasn’t the first time he’d heard the cycle reference, but it was the first time he felt comfortable enough to pursue clarification. “How long is a cycle?”

“The time it takes the core to process a batch of chojal.”

“Can you put that in Terran terms?”

The question earned him another hard frown. “You’re from Old Earth? How did you get all the way to Tantoret?”

“The scenic way. You’re not?”

Luca shook his head. “I lived on the Athess Five space station most of my life. My parents were born on Old Earth, though. I’ve heard the stories.”

“What did you do to get put here?”

Silence.

A shadow passed one of the openings in the tunnel ahead of them. Luca froze and swore under his breath. A moment later, he whipped around and ran off in the direction from which they'd come.

"Wait!" Aleron scowled at the emptiness behind him. There was no way he could catch up, not in his current state. Every joint ached, and the chill from the water was sinking into his bones. He would kill for a warm bed and a warmer body to snuggle up to. He'd even kiss up to Raimo if it meant feeling better.

"You're bleeding."

He hadn't heard Jasak approach. He really hoped that meant he was just more tired than he thought. The prospect that the guards could move so stealthily as to avoid even his sharp ears only worsened his mood.

"It's just a scratch." He backed away, all too conscious of his near nudity. It was one thing to be naked around other humans. Around alien jailors, even if they looked mostly human, it felt like inviting disaster.

Those pale eyes swept over him. The light here better illuminated the web across the side of Jasak's face, an elaborate tattoo of finespun black and blue filaments. It was no less imposing even when Jasak's hair fell forward to obscure it. If anything, it lent an added menace, an austere

authority that would have warned men away in any environment. Aleron wondered how it was somebody became a guard for the forgotten, though he doubted he'd ever get the opportunity to find out. Jasak didn't seem entirely partial to Show and Tell.

"Two," Jasak said.

"What?"

"There are two...scratches."

"Oh." He couldn't even feel them anymore under Jasak's intense scrutiny.

"You're wet, too."

Something snapped. "And I'm hungry, and I'm tired, and I feel like a drowned rat, except I'm too tired, hungry and wet to really care right now."

Jasak seemed unfazed by his outburst. "Did you find a room?"

"Yes." He glanced around. "Not that I think I can find it without going back to the main cavern. Wherever that is."

"Come."

The same implacable order. When Jasak started walking, Aleron fell into place behind him. What other choice did he have? The guard had turned one of his own over to the prisoners. Aleron wanted to believe there was a good reason for it, but in this kind of environment, he knew that was too optimistic.

"How did you get Athaki blood on you?"

He didn't know what Jasak was talking about until he remembered what Raimo had said. "Somebody had it on his hands." He wouldn't give Raimo's name, not even if Jasak asked. That would be suicide.

"You should wash it off. It'll incite the other guards."

"It's not an aphrodisiac or anything, is it?"

He'd meant it as a joke, but Jasak clearly was not amused.

"Tias is still Athaki. Wearing his blood will be seen as a challenge. You might get more than scratches next time."

Aleron shook his head. "Well, this place just gets better and better, doesn't it?" He failed to see Jasak come to an abrupt halt. Colliding with his broad back, Aleron grabbed his arm to keep from falling.

Jasak caught him first.

Their hands tensed around each other's biceps. Aleron meant to let go as soon as he was steady, but under Jasak's fierce gaze, he couldn't move. Again. The muscles beneath his fingers were like stone, and the earthy scent of Jasak's clothing and skin filled his head. Blood dripped from the cut on his shoulder, rolling down his wet skin until it met Jasak's unyielding grip.

Jasak's nostrils flared. Muscles in his jaw moved, like his face was going to rearrange itself.

The moment before Jasak released him, Aleron would have sworn he felt needles pricking his skin.

“Go,” Jasak said, sweeping an arm toward the common room behind him. “Find your room. Someone will bring you food and dry clothing.” He held up a warning finger. “But only this one time.”

Aleron fled. But even when he’d reached his chamber, the image of Jasak towering in front of him, the shadows flickering across his exotic features imprinted over everything he saw.

Chapter Four

As the newest guest on Tantoret, Aleron was at the bottom of the hierarchy, and nobody let him forget it. Each time Raimo targeted him, every instinct Aleron possessed screamed at him to fight back, to stand up for himself, but he didn't want to die in that hellhole. He especially didn't want to die at the hands of some two-bit thug who was only at the top of the pecking order by virtue of being the meanest bastard in a pit of bastards. So he sacrificed half or more of his quota to Raimo, and he kept his head down and tried to avoid the inmates and guards alike.

Unfortunately, hiding in his cave was not an option. All able-bodied men were required to meet in the cavern when it was time to eat, or they would starve. Aleron could appreciate the simplicity of the arrangement, even if he resented it each time he had to leave the privacy of his room. After his first cycle ended and another began—Aleron estimated approximately two Terran days had passed—he began to understand that food wasn't the only good reason to emerge from the little hole he called his own. In the mining chasms, nobody ever spoke unless they

had to, and he never saw anybody once he retired to his room. After too long, the silence and the darkness became too much to bear. Even the constant hum of the core, working nonstop, didn't alleviate that strange oppression. His mind began to play tricks on him to compensate for the silence, and he needed to stay sharp. Being in the large cavern with a hundred other reeking, shouting men was a good way to break up the monotony.

Aleron lined up to receive his rations like everybody else, and didn't give too much thought to what the rations actually *were*. He refused to think of it as food. It was thick with a strange texture, like fine sand mixed in warm water. Aleron could have believed it was sand, except that sand had absolutely no nutritional value. Whatever else was happening, the guards weren't starving the prisoners. Aleron always felt full and always had the energy he needed to mine for his regular quotas.

He took his bowl, and his cup full of water—once there had been a strange sort of tea that he happily drank just because it had an actual flavor to it—and found a clean patch of floor against the wall. He ate slowly, so it wouldn't sit like a brick in his stomach, and listened to the conversations and arguments flowing around him. Nobody ever

tried to draw him into the discussions or the fights.

There was always one word that caught his attention faster than anything else. *Jasak*. Aleron didn't see much of Jasak in the course of his daily routine. The other guards were always there to serve the rations or to step in to break up a brawl if it got too out of hand or threatened to harm the mining operation. But Aleron was always interested in information about the guards, and when his sharp ears picked out Jasak's name, or any mention of the Athaki, he listened.

During the fourth meal after Aleron's arrival, everybody was discussing Jasak, though none were talking about him openly. They huddled away from the guards, or settled in the narrow corridors between their rooms and the main cavern, and spoke in hushed, alien tongues. Aleron had a working knowledge of nearly every language in the system, and while he wouldn't consider himself fluent in any of them, he understood enough.

It wasn't difficult to trace the source of the excitement. Raimo and his band of merry men. Aleron was beginning to suspect that any time there was trouble in Tantoret, it could be traced to the one-eyed bastard. There was a certain buzz in the air. Whispers of escape, of rebellion, of fights raced from prisoner to prisoner like wildfire

racing over dry wood. Judging by the growing excitement, the men were beginning to believe in Raimo's success. Aleron couldn't believe his luck. Raimo could provide the opportunity that Aleron had barely even hoped for.

But before Aleron could take advantage of what was happening, he needed to know just what had ignited the excitement. The best way to do that was to go to the source, though Aleron knew he couldn't very well walk up to Raimo and start a casual conversation.

That left subterfuge.

Aleron waited until Raimo and his group left the main cavern before following them through the branching tunnels until they reached the spring. He found a short, shallow cave—one that barely accommodated his lanky frame—and folded himself into the dark space, listening intently.

"Tias still hasn't recovered." That was Raimo's favorite, and maybe only, argument. "There are three hundred of us and about thirty of them. You don't think we can take them?"

"Tias wasn't fighting back." Aleron didn't know who offered the counter argument, but from the sounds of it, he got a fist to the face for his effort.

"Tias fought back plenty. Nals, you were there. Tell him."

“He tried...fight. At first. It wasn’t long until...gave up, though.” Aleron had to strain to catch every syllable and still couldn’t do it. Something was wrong with Nals’s voice. A scar stretched from his left ear to his Adam’s apple, like some foolhardy person had attempted to slit his throat.

“What about the Athaki’s strength? Jasak is probably stronger than the five of us combined.”

“The five of us could take Jasak,” Raimo declared. “We spend all day cutting through that fucking rock with chisels. What does he do?”

“Raimo has a point.” A new voice. It was low and surprisingly confident. Like the speaker didn’t understand he was several kilometers under the surface of a forgotten planet. “Weaklings die early here. They don’t survive two cycles, let alone twenty or thirty. Like us.”

“That’s what I’m saying.”

“Fine, we might be able to take down Jasak, but what about the other thirty guards?”

“They’ll be busy,” Raimo said. “We’ll cause a distraction. If we can take Jasak, we’ll have his belt. Which means we’ll have complete control of the core.”

Aleron’s stomach clenched at that. It wasn’t difficult to understand just what that meant. Whoever had control of the core effectively ran the entire prison. Nobody would cross the person

who had the means to blow a crater into Tantoret the size of the Terran moon. How would the Athess authorities react when they got word that a thug had access to the core? Every scenario Aleron could imagine resulted in gruesome, horrible deaths for everybody on the planet. Of course, none of the conspirators were smart enough to consider the long-term ramifications of their plot.

“How are we going to cause a distraction? It’s not like the guards care if we fight.”

Everybody lapsed into silence at the question. Aleron remained still, unwilling to risk the sound of his foot scraping against the rock, or clothes rustling as he shifted position. It wasn’t the first time he’d had to remain completely still in a tight spot, and he hoped to God it wouldn’t be the last.

“Blood,” Nals finally said.

“Blood? But they don’t care if we fight,” Raimo responded.

“No, but did you see Macario before Tias...him out of the mines? Everything was normal until Macario...on his chisel. Then Tias...crazy.”

“Crazy how?”

“Like a...animal. As soon as he caught the scent of blood...couldn’t help himself.”

“I don’t know.” Raimo sounded more than a little skeptical. “I’ve seen people bleed around

here before. I've never seen anything like what Tias did to Macario."

"You ever see...bleed that much right next to a guard? Guys are disappearing...all the time. How do we know...guards aren't killing them? Eating them?"

"Why..." This new voice sounded *young*. Aleron knew it must have been a boy, but he couldn't have been far past shaving. "Why would they have bloodthirsty guards watching us?"

"Why are we mining chojal in an Athess prison?"

"I don't know the answer to that question," Raimo said. "But I do know we're all going to die here if we don't try something. And now we know we can beat down an Athaki."

"We'll need...bleed somebody," Nals whispered. "Somebody weak. Somebody...hasn't been here too long."

"Why?"

"Blood's not poisoned. Smell's better."

"He's right," Raimo said. "Besides, if it's the new guy, nobody will miss him. Not many survive their first two or three cycles. Nobody will question it if he doesn't show up for duty. We'll paint the walls with blood and lure the guards deeper and deeper into the tunnels."

"And send some other men after them?" The young voice again. "They'll turn on them and be

too caught up in their own fights to worry about Jasak fighting with anybody.”

Raimo actually laughed at the suggestion. Aleron had no doubt that it was him. The sound was ragged and rusty and sliced through the conversation like a splintered knife. Every muscle from his throat to his stomach clenched, and adrenaline flooded his body. He wanted to run. He wanted to get as far away from that sound as humanly possible. He had heard death rattles that were less chilling.

“I like you, kid. That’s a good idea.”

“When?” Nals asked.

“Soon. The end of the cycle. Jasak is always distracted when they shut down the core. We’ll use that. Nals, you’re in charge of the bait.”

“No problem.”

Aleron closed his eyes and saw his own demise. Asleep in his tiny, dark room, he didn’t move at all as Nals crawled in through the low door and slid a blade across his throat. One easy stroke and the job would be done. He’d have to remain vigilant. There was no doubt of that. But should he take this information to Jasak? If they couldn’t find him at the end of the cycle, Raimo could simply pick a different victim. And Raimo wasn’t the only one smart enough to take advantage of the resulting chaos. Every prisoner in Tantoret was a dead man walking—would he

have blood on his hands if he participated in the plan? Did he care?

He never thought he'd agree with Raimo about anything, but the bastard was right about one thing. If they stayed there, they would all die. Aleron wasn't done living yet. He needed to act. One way or the other.

Chapter Five

When he'd been seven, Aleron had crossed the Channel with his family for a short summer break. Nobody had said so, but even at that young age, he'd understood the deceit. His parents wanted a reprieve from the constant oppressive threat of attack Besancon suffered from the east. He hadn't wanted to go. He'd only just discovered that some of the meurtrieres at the Citadel led deeper into Mont St. Etienne, places that weren't marked on any of the maps. He'd wanted to spend his break exploring, not going to a country where they made fun of his poor English or called him names for being so skinny.

While they were away, a small cell of technological terrorists attacked Bregille. He didn't learn about it until they returned and his father suggested Aleron accompany him to his work. Aleron usually had to beg to go with him to the Citadel. He'd never heard of the scientists who'd been killed, but he'd always wondered if his parents had known before they went. The timing seemed too fortuitous. The greater implications if they had, however, changed forever how he viewed them.

He hadn't thought of that incident in years, but now, with Raimo's plans looming ever closer, he couldn't get it out of his head. He wasn't an altruistic man. He stole from whomever looked interesting, regardless of whether or not the theft would hurt them. He could save his own skin by hiding, then take his chances afterward in getting off Tantoret. But someone would still die, and it was entirely possible anything alive on the planet would get destroyed once the authorities discovered the coup.

That was a lot of death. Including his own, if he wasn't fast enough in finding an escape. He didn't think he could carry that much weight on what remained of his soul.

He abandoned any pretense at mining. With only two meals left before the end of the cycle, he couldn't afford wasting already precious time.

Jasak was nowhere to be seen. Aleron considered finding one of the other guards to convey what he knew, but that presented its own risks. Though the other guards feared Jasak, he couldn't trust they didn't still resent him for the example he'd made of Tias. Telling them might actually make matters worse. Only one viable option remained, and even it wasn't guaranteed to work.

After a quick trip back to his cave, he returned to the common room and scanned around for the

best possible mark. Few guards remained. Two he discounted immediately. Too aggressive. They didn't mind knocking around prisoners after watching them go at each other first. He didn't need another fight he wouldn't win.

The one nearest the tunnel leading to the core was his best bet. Aleron didn't know his name, but he'd seen him more than once on the rations line. He was leaner than the other Athaki, a fraction shorter, which, on the surface anyway, made him less of a physical threat. His eyes had the same pale glow as the other guards—Aleron had finally figured out it helped them see in the dark—but his hair was dark and cropped short, like he hadn't been here as long as the others for it to grow out.

One new guy to another. Aleron liked those odds.

He had to walk more slowly than usual, with his left arm held as still as possible to keep his approach quiet. When the guard glanced in his direction, he turned into a tunnel he knew circled behind the common room wall to open up within touching distance behind the guard, provided he didn't move while he was out of view. His heart pounded. Not in fear, but in exhilaration. His nerve endings surged with newfound life, and his cock was partially erect against his thigh. Something about hitting a mark would always get

him hard. The thrill of success. The rush from knowing that this time, he might not make it out alive.

The guard was still there when Aleron emerged. He stood with his narrow back in full view, his arms loose at his sides.

Silently, Aleron thanked God for small favors.

Though his step was silent, the cuff made a small click as it slid from beneath his sleeve and into his palm. The guard's head started to turn, and Aleron closed the distance, clamping the cuff over the Athaki's wrist. In the space of the second it took Aleron to place the mate over his own wrist, the time it took for the rest of the cuff to slide out and immobilize the guard's hand, he saw claws break through the guard's fingers.

They were stopped by the cuff's supple metal. Sounds like bones snapping came a breath before the guard's roar of pain. Aleron barely ducked out of the way when the guard swung his free arm toward him. Now that they were attached at the wrist, though, there was no escaping as the sideways momentum of his movement pulled the guard down onto him.

His head scraped across a rough outcropping, but the sting of fresh blood was nothing compared to the anger of the Athaki atop him. He'd miscalculated. He hadn't known about the claws. Now, he had an injured alien thrashing around

against him and no way to flee since he'd so carefully manacled them together.

Brilliant plan, Aleron.

He rolled away as soon as he had wiggle room, curling into a tight ball to protect his head and stomach. A glancing blow over his ear sent a new rush of blood down his neck, hot and sticky. The Athaki vibrated against him, growls, screams, all the sounds it made running together into one long roar. Aleron didn't have to worry about Raimo killing him. He'd done it perfectly well, all on his own.

Voices filtered through. Some of the voices weren't human, but he didn't have time to wonder why the other guards would watch without interfering. The weight above him disappeared. He had a split second of blessed relief, when a powerful hand grabbed the back of his neck and pulled him upright.

The room spun. Reflexively, Aleron thrashed against the painful hold, but his wild swings were kept in check by the cuff firmly around his left wrist. Whoever picked him up shook him, and through the fog, Jasak's voice sliced into his awareness, louder and more impassioned than he'd ever heard before.

The grip on his neck opened. He would have fallen to the ground if another hand hadn't grabbed his shirtfront.

When he tilted his head back, he froze at the sight of Jasak's icy gaze.

At the best of times, Jasak scared him. Brutality shimmered beneath the surface of his skin, and emotion rarely flickered across his face. At first, Aleron had credited the tattoo for the mask effect. It distracted from vulnerability. But now, with Jasak only inches away, he realized he was wrong. Jasak revealed emotions. They simply moved too swiftly for casual notice.

This was not one of the best times. Aleron's pulse thumped far more wildly in Jasak's grip than it ever had in anticipation of a mark.

"What do you think you're doing?" Jasak growled.

Out of the corner of his eye, Aleron saw the few prisoners who'd been around clustering closer to see what was going on. He had no idea if Raimo or any of his cohorts were among them. He couldn't risk them catching on to the fact that he knew.

He smiled, ignoring the pain in his head. "Well, it was supposed to be an escape, but it doesn't look like it went too well, does it?"

"An escape."

"Not that I don't love what you've done with the place."

"You cuffed yourself to a guard."

Jasak's unbelieving tone had him worried. "A hostage. What other kind of leverage could I have?"

Jasak slid his focus to Aleron's joined wrist, his arm pulled taut by the guard forcibly put at some distance from him. "Where did you get those?"

"There was a sale on the space station. Couldn't resist."

One of the other guards said something in their native tongue, distracting Jasak for a moment. He replied, still unintelligible to Aleron's ears, then reached for something on his belt.

The familiar electronic pulse resonated through him. The cuffs fell off, and his aching arm drooped at his side.

The guard's hand was broken and bloodied. He curled it against his chest and glared at Aleron, spitting something out that Jasak immediately cut off. Sweat had time to trickle down the back of Aleron's neck while they spoke, stinging where it met open skin.

A third guard took his would-be hostage by the arm and led him away. Jasak barked orders to the ones remaining, then did the same to the prisoners, dispersing them with just a few words. Aleron waited to be let go, his muscles burning from the strain of trying to keep his feet on the ground, but Jasak whirled on his heel with him

firmly in grasp, half-tugging, half-dragging Aleron behind him. He had no choice but to stumble along and try to follow.

Looked like he was getting what he wanted, after all. He just wasn't sure he would survive long enough to have the chance to tell Jasak the full extent of the danger ahead of him.

He lost track of Jasak's twists and turns, though the thrum of the core got louder with each step. When Jasak finally pulled him into a darkened room, more parts of him ached than had since his arrival. He crumpled to his knees at Jasak's sudden release and caught himself from landing on his face by flattening his palms on the soft ground.

Jasak remained silent. It took several minutes for Aleron's head to stop bouncing from wall to wall to get the strength to look up, but though he'd expected the guard to be standing over him, Jasak instead leaned against a desk on the far side of the cave. A single light glittered in the wall behind him, outlining his broad shoulders rather than illuminating them. Aleron waited for his eyes to adjust.

"Your stunt will put one of my guards on the no-duty list for weeks," Jasak said. "His hand will be useless until the bones reknit themselves."

"I didn't know about the claws."

"Most prisoners don't. That's not an excuse."

"I wouldn't have done it if I did." That was the truth. He would have gauged the injury as too dangerous.

"You weren't really trying to escape."

"No." Pointless to pretend. "How'd you guess?"

"Because you're not that stupid. So why did you do it? Did Yoirryn do something to provoke you?"

Yoirryn must have been the guard. He shook his head. "He looked like my best chance at actually getting the cuff on someone."

"And why would you do that?"

"To get your attention."

Jasak's tattoo fascinated him. He had no idea what its significance was. None of the other Athaki had one. But at moments like this, when the lighting was just so, it looked like a separate living entity, shimmering on the side of his face as if it breathed on its own. Every other part of Jasak was completely still. No visible reaction to Aleron's confession. Nothing to indicate surprise, or disgust, or rage. Nothing but the black filigree's disconcerting slither.

"My attention is a dangerous thing," Jasak said. "Most prisoners do everything they can to avoid it. Most of the guards do, too."

"I know."

"Do you know why?"

“Because you have the power to destroy any one of them. Whether they admit it or not, people are generally pretty scared of the ones who have all the cards.”

“But you’re not.”

Aleron laughed at how ludicrous that was. “Are you kidding? You terrify me.”

Jasak narrowed his eyes “You risked extreme punishment. That’s not the action of a fearful man.”

“No, it’s the action of a desperate one.” He was still bleeding, and his hip throbbed, but the room had sufficiently settled for him to push upright, onto his knees, then onto his feet. Jasak didn’t stop him, though his shoulders stiffened. “I’ve heard some things. Things you’ll want to hear.”

Shaking his head, Jasak straightened and moved around the desk. “I’m not interested in prisoner politics. If you hope to curry favor—”

“I’m hoping to keep both of us from getting killed.” In a burst of annoyance, he darted forward until only the desk separated them. “Raimo is planning a distraction for the guards at the end of the cycle, so he and his crew can jump you and get control of the core. You can’t tell me that’s not worth me getting a little banged up to tell you.”

Jasak’s nostrils flared, and the way his gaze swept over Aleron’s body was pure lust. Where

his hands rested against the desk, his fingers curled in toward his palms. Aleron realized with a sharp thrill stabbing through his body that Jasak did so to either hide or protect his claws.

“Your bloodshed is never worth it,” Jasak said. “You should go to the infirmary and get your injuries tended to.”

He was dismissing him? “What about Raimo?”

“What about him?”

“You’re just going to ignore this?”

“No. I’ve been preparing for his attack since I first learned of it.”

Aleron stared at him. “You know? How? I only found out a few hours ago.”

“None of your concern. But I do appreciate the confirmation. I have fewer qualms now in preventing it.”

There was no denying the tone of his voice. The order to leave hung between them, and if Aleron had been any other man, he might have obeyed. His clothes were sticking to his skin, uncomfortable and itchy, and the adrenaline from hitting his mark—even as backward as the result had been—was wearing off.

But his feet remained planted. He even leaned closer. A single drop of blood landed on the desk between them.

“Raimo wants me dead,” he said. “I’m the target in this distraction of his. So until you assure

me I'm safe, I'm not walking away. I didn't use my one and only tool to get your attention so that I could get sent away like some kid."

A muscle moved at the corner of Jasak's mouth. It wasn't a tightening. It was a throb, as if he'd run his tongue along the outside of his teeth in only that one spot. Aleron watched it, unable to take his eyes away, wishing the Athaki didn't always find a way to mesmerize him when it was least convenient.

"Do you truly want to test me?" Jasak murmured. His lips barely moved, and the sudden certainty he was about to strike brought goose bumps to the back of Aleron's neck. "There's a reason I'm feared. Unless you wish to know it firsthand, you'll leave now. Hide if you're so convinced I won't take care of this matter."

Slowly, his hands uncurled. Long, silvery claws, longer than Yoirryn's, more deadly than anything Aleron had ever seen before, sprung almost gracefully from where his fingers should have ended. Gouges where they'd cut into the desk when he'd unfolded them gleamed pale within its polished surface.

"Choose."

Chapter Six

Anybody else on Tantoret would have run away. They would have ducked out of the room, scurrying like the scared little rodents they were. They would have seen the danger—the promise—lurking in Jasak's eyes, and they would have decided discretion was the better part of valor. Why else would he cultivate a reputation of menace? The more prisoners and guards feared him, the fewer confrontations he actually had to engage in. But Aleron was either very stupid or very brave, because he didn't run. He stood there, dark eyes darting from Jasak's face to the ceiling and back again, blood dripping down the side of his face. Each drop was a tiny shard of ruby clinging to Aleron's skin.

A second drop of blood hit the desk. Then another. Another. Jasak counted five drops before he lunged forward and closed his hand around Aleron's throat. He knew exactly how to hold a prisoner with claws extended and not tear through the tissue-thin skin. His heart pounded, and his erection pressed painfully against his rawhide pants. He tried to keep his breathing shallow, but one deep, involuntary breath was all it took to get

the high, bittersweet scent of blood and sweat and fear.

Aleron's pulse raced beneath Jasak's thumb. The man was terrified. If Jasak bent his thumb, or twitched his finger, all of that precious blood would burst from Aleron's throat and drench his shirt, then Jasak's hand, and finally, the floor. It was too easy to imagine. Especially since that coppery scent was already infusing the room.

"So are you going to kill me or what?" The words taunted, but Aleron barely moved his lips. As if to ensure he wouldn't accidentally cause Jasak to sever his artery.

Something told Jasak he *should* and be done with it. But instead of slicing him open like a ripe piece of fruit, he retracted his claws. His fingers sank into the pliant flesh, and he pulled the gasping man across the desk until their faces almost touched. The head injury wasn't serious, but like all cuts to the scalp, it bled profusely. The last time Jasak had been in this position...

The last time Jasak had been in this position was the last time he had seen his own sun. Fat and red, it had painted everything the color of blood.

Without giving himself a moment to reconsider, Jasak closed the remaining space between them and dragged his tongue over the thin streams of blood coating the side of Aleron's face. The taste was dark and sweet and perfect. It

exploded on his tongue, and his entire body responded immediately. His fangs itched to descend, his claws flexed against his skin, his throat and balls tightened, and thousands of years of instincts shouted at him to finish what he started.

His bruising hold on Aleron relaxed, and the man could have pulled away, but he didn't. He didn't move. He didn't even flinch under Jasak's tongue. In fact, he held himself completely still, his flesh tense and trembling. Jasak had no right to do that. He had no right to taste that man—that *prisoner*—like he was a slave. Or his partner. Like Aleron's body belonged to him. It *didn't*. Not at all. The second he started treating the prisoners like they did belong to him would be the second he lost his tenuous hold on the prison.

But Aleron tasted so good. It wasn't just the blood. His skin still carried the slightest hint of fresh air, of rain, of sunshine, of wind. He was warm, so unlike the cold stone that constantly surrounded them. His hair smelled of sweat and dirt, but it wasn't sour. Not like the men who were forced to make do with just water and no soap. As Jasak continued, the rapid rate of Aleron's heart slowed until it was almost back to normal and a small, treacherous thought reared up in the back of his mind. Was Aleron *enjoying* the contact? Perhaps he was. After all, Jasak wasn't *hurting*

him. He wasn't drawing fresh blood from his veins.

Some of the blood caught in the stubble on Aleron's jaw, and Jasak didn't let it escape his attention. He dragged his tongue through the hair, noting that it was much rougher than the strands that hung over Aleron's temple and tickled against his cheeks.

"Uh...Jasak? Sir?"

The softly spoken words broke whatever spell was holding Jasak in stasis, and he jerked back, putting what might have been a safe distance between them. He opened his mouth to apologize, knowing he owed Aleron that much, at least. He owed him *more* but didn't have anything more to offer. It wasn't as though he had the power to grant Aleron his freedom from this place—or freedom from Jasak himself.

But before he could utter the too-weak words, a commotion from the tunnel caught his attention. "Don't move."

Aleron swallowed and nodded, a hand going up to the side of his face. There wasn't any blood left to wet his fingers. Jasak pushed that thought out of his mind and turned to face the guards shouting his name. There were six of them, and as they emerged from the tunnel, Jasak recognized the anger contorting their features.

Icera stepped forward. He wasn't quite as tall as Jasak, but he had broad shoulders and thick muscles. He was the youngest of the Athaki guards, the most impetuous. His records hadn't indicated what he was sent to Tantoret for, but Jasak knew what clan Icera was from, and he had his suspicions about the younger Athaki's crimes.

"Jasak! We want the prisoner."

"No, you may not have the prisoner." He kept his language as formal and stiff as possible.

"Yes. Yoirryn is crying with his pain. When Tias hurt a prisoner, you turned him over to the inmates. Now we want our turn. It's only fair."

Jasak couldn't deny the logic of the request. He had set a new precedent—perhaps a foolish one—for punishments when he allowed the prisoners to beat Tias. It was a lesson that Tias would never forget, but prisoners and guards alike had learned a different, unintended lesson. One that Jasak couldn't call back now. One that Aleron did not deserve to be punished for.

"No. You may not have him. This is the end of the conversation."

Icera didn't back off. In fact, the entire group took a single step forward, as if to insist that they would not be leaving before they were damned good and ready. Jasak frowned at the gesture. Aleron hadn't left, either, when he was told to. When had he started to lose control? He needed to

get it back before everything got completely out of hand.

“If the prisoner isn’t punished for what he did, then all of them will think it’s all right to hurt the guards.”

“Are you telling me that you’re afraid of humans? I hadn’t thought you were so cowardly, pup.”

The other Athaki growled, his lip lifting to show a hint of fang. If Icera took the first swing, then honor and tradition would hold back his friends from joining the inevitable battle. Jasak could easily take him in a one-to-one fight.

“I am not afraid of humans.”

“You must be, if you are so frightened of how the prisoners will act now. This one had contraband. Otherwise, he wouldn’t have been strong enough to harm a single hair on Yoirryn’s body.”

“They have weapons. We arm them every day when we send them to the mines.”

“You can disarm any one of these prisoners with minimal effort,” Jasak shot back. “You do not need to use this one to create an example. Unless you’re only interested in him because you can smell him.”

All of them, even Icera, averted their eyes. Which was all the information Jasak needed. Athaki never considered humans a source of food.

They did not hunt and eat sentient beings—even if they were much weaker and the kill would have been easy. But in the belly of Tantoret, the Athaki guards had two things working against them. First, their natural source of food was not even an option. The lich and the toir couldn't live on Tantoret, and the cost of transporting the flesh to the outreaches of the system was prohibitive. Athaki had developed alongside the beasts for millennia, turning into the perfect predators. On Tantoret, the prisoners were the only thing resembling prey. Worse, the iron-based blood smelled and tasted almost exactly the same as the game they had once hunted. Their noses and instincts told them the hunt was on, even if their eyes and their minds told them the opposite.

“Give us the prisoner.” Icera's tone had changed. Now it wasn't demanding and angry, but wheedling. Almost like a child. “We won't let him suffer.”

If he handed over Aleron, he'd restore the guards' wavering loyalty. Better yet, he would sate their bloodlust, and the distraction Raimo had planned would not be as effective. While the guards indulged with Aleron, he would deal with Raimo, and before the next meal, order and balance would be restored. Jasak would have his control back.

Jasak looked over his shoulder to where Aleron stood, watching the entire exchange. It was safe to say that he didn't understand a word of the Athaki tongue, but he was a smart man, and he had probably caught the gist. Judging from his tight-lipped look and the fear in his eyes, he understood Icera's demand. Did he also understand that Jasak had denied it? Or was he preparing for Jasak to hand him over?

Jasak had tasted his blood. Had taken something he had no right to take. Had probably frightened the man with no real justification. Worse, he had broken a promise he'd made to himself. He could not compound that crime by adding another to it. There was one option. Once he uttered the words, he could never take them back. But if he didn't speak them, Aleron would meet an unjust end. Jasak couldn't stand the thought of that. Worse, he couldn't stand the thought of the other guards tasting what had already belonged to him.

"He's mine."

"What?" Icera asked. The question was echoed by every other guard in the group.

"The prisoner is mine," Jasak said slowly, surprised by how right the words felt. Every single one of them felt the weight of each syllable. "He belongs to me."

"Jasak, you have never taken an inmate."

He'd never wanted a human. Especially not the dirty, vicious inmates. But he did want Aleron. He wanted to taste every inch of him. He wanted to *possess* him. The desire frightened him, but he locked that fear away, burying it so deep the other guards couldn't sense it. When he staked his claim, he needed to do it with perfect authority, perfect confidence. Nobody could doubt the sincerity of his words, or the bond would be weakened to the point of uselessness.

"I am now. He is mine, and anybody who harms him will answer to me."

Icera blinked, his pale eyes reflecting more than a hint of confusion. But there was nothing else to be said. Once an Athaki had claimed somebody—whether another Athaki or a human—the bond could not be disrupted or broken by another Athaki. They'd all been trained since birth to defer to the power inherent in the sacred connection. The relationship between bondmates was the cornerstone for every Athaki clan, a relationship forged for survival, based on the deepest trust. It wasn't a choice made lightly, and Athaki who never led the hunt rarely took a mate. In the strength of the bond, there was vulnerability. Nobody could forge one effectively without laying themselves bare, removing all shields and secrets until nothing separated two spirits except the cage of flesh. Aleron was now

his until he announced otherwise—and he had no intention of announcing otherwise. The guards turned without another word and disappeared down the tunnel.

“What...the hell just happened there?” Aleron asked, his voice surprisingly even.

Jasak didn’t turn around immediately. He took a moment to compose himself, reminding himself that just because he’d made the claim didn’t mean he had the right to take what was now his. “You belong to me now.”

“What?”

Jasak barely heard his question. “I’ll have to keep you away from the other prisoners for a time.”

“What? You’re not making any sense. I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Word travels very fast here.” He’d been so caught up in the immediate problem of protecting Aleron—of keeping Aleron for himself—that he hadn’t considered the long-term ramifications. But now his number one priority, even above Tantoret, was protecting Aleron until the bond between them was fully forged. He felt incomplete, acutely aware of the emptiness inside of him. “The guards will talk amongst themselves and a prisoner will overhear it. Soon, everybody will know that you are mine, and that will make you a very attractive target.”

Aleron held up his hand. "Okay, wait. Let's say you're right, and I do belong to you. Wouldn't that actually help me out there?"

"Don't you think Raimo will find this new information useful for his plan?"

A frown settled between Aleron's eyes. "What just happened? Did they want to take me?"

"Yes." After a moment of debate, Jasak decided it would be best to stick as close as possible to the truth. "They felt it was only fair, since you injured Yoirryn."

"But that was an accident."

"That is of no concern to them. You drew blood, like Tias drew blood. They felt it was their right to punish you as he had been."

"Isn't it?"

Jasak moved to the other side of the desk, hoping that the barrier would help him keep his hands to himself, though it hadn't worked before. He hadn't expected that response from Aleron. He thought the other man would thank him for his protection and quick thinking, but he was impressed Aleron apparently understood the guards and their demands.

"It's not up to them. I decide what and who they have a right to. Come."

"Where are we going?"

"Your new home for the time being."

Aleron had no idea what the fuck was happening. When the other guards arrived, he had known he was going to die. The guards had clearly been furious, and their angry gestures toward him left no doubt in his mind that he was the target. As he watched them talk to Jasak, he could only hope that he'd get a chance to defend himself, or that Jasak would explain about Raimo and the guards would realize Aleron had been trying to do the right thing.

He had not expected the exchange to end with Jasak announcing that Aleron now belonged to him. What exactly did Jasak *mean*? Aleron was his toy? His dinner? His lover? His slave? Something else that Aleron had no word for? He wasn't particularly eager to find out, either. Especially after Jasak had so thoroughly licked the blood from his face.

Though, if Aleron was being honest with himself, that had not been unpleasant. Jasak's tongue was a bit rougher than a human's, and his body seemed to be warmer. Being that close to a much stronger, much larger Athaki should have been terrifying, but Aleron had thought it more than a little intoxicating. At any moment, Jasak could have bitten. He could have torn his face off,

and yet Aleron's cock had been throbbing from the first touch of Jasak's tongue.

Jasak led him back down the tunnel, but took a sudden sharp right through a narrow opening that Aleron hadn't even noticed before. There were no lights embedded in the walls or the ceiling, and Aleron had no choice but to reach out and take Jasak's shoulder while using his other hand to trail along the wall. He wouldn't have dared to touch Jasak like that before and wasn't completely sure he should now, but unless he wanted to be left lost he needed to trust in the hope Jasak hadn't saved his life just to take it later.

They finally emerged into a room that was slightly larger than Aleron's own sleeping area. It was just like the caves where the prisoners lived except for two unbelievable luxuries. The first was a fire pit in the middle of the floor. The flames were low, licking slowly at a thick piece of wood, and the smoke drifted up to a tiny hole in the ceiling. Through the hole, Aleron saw a hint of stars. He could see outside, and it was night. Something like joy pushed up through his chest. He wanted to cheer and shout. It was night, there were stars, and it was indescribably glorious.

The second luxury was a bed. A real, honest-to-God bed. With a real mattress, real blankets, an actual pillow and a frame. It wasn't large. It certainly wasn't new. But it wasn't the floor,

either. Just looking at it made Aleron tremble. Would he be allowed to sleep on that bed? Would he be allowed to rest his aching body and sore joints on something softer than rock?

Jasak pointed at another opening in the cave wall. "There's a spring through there."

"Your own personal spring?"

"Yes."

"I guess being the head guard has a few perks."

"A few," Jasak admitted. "I want you to stay here until I fetch you. You'll be safe."

Aleron wanted to demand how he could be sure of that, but then he realized the room was silent. Completely silent. He couldn't even hear the rumbling of the core. Just how far away were they from the main cavern? It was difficult to gauge distance in the prison—just as it was difficult to gauge time—but Jasak might have led him miles from the core. Which meant he was miles from prisoners and guards alike.

"Why am I here? Why didn't you let the guards take me? You were ready to kill me yourself, after all."

Jasak met his eyes, and Aleron resisted the urge to look away, though holding Jasak's gaze made him distinctly uncomfortable. "You hadn't done anything to deserve what they wanted."

"You could have told them the truth."

“They marched into my private quarters and demanded I turn you over. They are already questioning my authority. If I tell them what Raimo is attempting, I will be further undermined.”

“Even if you stop him?”

Jasak folded his arms. “The fact that Raimo has progressed this far in his planning is enough to undermine me in their eyes. If I stop him before there is any true bloodshed, order will be restored.”

“And if it’s not restored?”

“The Athaki have a great hunger. One that cannot be satisfied on Tantoret without spilling blood. On Belenia we hunt two different beasts, the lich and the toir. The lich are predators. They’re massive carnivores with thick hides, long claws and teeth. They’re very fast. Their blood is very rich with nutrients, but the flesh is nearly inedible. During the winter months, when food is scarce, we survive on their blood. We spend most of the cold months hunting just to make it to the spring. The toir are also large, though they mainly graze for sustenance. Hunting them is not so dangerous, and they’re plentiful during the warmer months.”

“So...you have a literal bloodlust.”

“Yes. It’s instinctual. Innate. It’s the force that drives us from the safety of our homes to hunt the

lich, even though many Athaki die every year. It's powerful enough to destroy us if we don't keep order. Especially here, where there are no beasts to hunt. The guards will give in to their bloodlust, slaughter all the prisoners, and production of the chojal will stop. The authorities will investigate, learn what has happened and respond by executing every remaining guard."

Aleron shook his head. "If it's so precarious, why make Athaki guards at all? There must be another race that isn't quite so..." Aleron shuddered, remembering the soft sounds of satisfaction Jasak made as he lapped at Aleron's blood, "...bloodthirsty."

"Nobody is at their best here." Jasak actually looked away, as though he were ashamed. "No matter who you put in a position of authority in a place like this, that authority will be abused. We might crave blood and flesh, but we also have the superior intelligence to help control those cravings. Also, the chojal has no effect on us, so there is no temptation to steal it once it is processed. Our strength and our superior senses ensure that chains and bars are not necessary. Otherwise, this prison would never be possible, let alone productive for the Athess authorities."

It made sense, except for the part about the authorities producing chojal.

"What can I do to help?"

“Just stay. If you’re not in the way, you can’t get hurt.”

Aleron took a step forward, and another, and another, until he stood right in front of Jasak. That close, there was no mistaking just how tall the guard was. There was a certain nobility in the way he held himself, arms folded, his face an impassive mask once again. But he was still alien to Aleron in every way.

Knowing he was pushing his boundaries—and his luck—Aleron straightened and pushed his heels off the floor to give himself another couple of inches. He was mostly acting on his own curiosity, but he also wanted to understand his new place in the prison. He believed the Athaki’s explanation that he didn’t want Aleron to die in order to appease the guards. Did that mean he had a particular fondness for Aleron? Or would he have done the same thing for any wrongly accused inmate? Aleron’s gut told him the answer was *no*. So what was so special about him? Or was he really just a pawn in a complicated game of dominance and submission between Jasak and his subordinates?

Aleron reached up and gently traced the tattoo on Jasak’s face, stunned by his own audacity. He expected Jasak to catch his fingers and smash them in his much larger hand, but he did not

move. He stood as still as Aleron had stood while Jasak tasted his blood.

The tattoo was slightly raised from his skin, creating a series of strange peaks and valleys across Jasak's face. The lines of the web were all connected in an intricate pattern. His fingertips tingled, and that feeling grew, moving along his arm and down his spine until his entire body vibrated from the single point of contact. Had anybody else ever stood this close to Jasak? Had anybody else ever dared to touch him like this?

"Why does it look like it's moving?" he asked softly.

"Because it is."

"How?"

"The ink isn't dormant. It's harvested from the spines of a sea urchin only found on my homeworld, so it's still alive when it's injected into the skin."

"Doesn't it die?"

"It bonds with the host, so it survives as long as the host does."

"Why are you the only Athaki who has one?"

Jasak's mouth thinned, and his hand came up to capture Aleron's wrist. "We are even now."

Aleron waited for Jasak to pull his fingers away. When it didn't happen, Aleron shook his head. "Almost."

"What do you mean?"

He leaned forward and pressed his mouth to Jasak's jaw. He didn't dare kiss him on the mouth—for all he knew the Athaki would take that as a great insult. But this was good enough to get the feel of him. The taste of him. The smell of his skin and of his hair. The kiss only lasted for a moment before he leaned back again, tugging gently until Jasak released his wrist. "Now we're even."

Jasak studied him, his eyes still inscrutable. Aleron stared back with more boldness than he actually felt. He didn't want Jasak to know how frightened he still was. Not now that he was in Jasak's private room. He wanted—needed—Jasak to view him as more of an equal. Somebody who could be trusted. Somebody who didn't need to be watched constantly. Somebody who could know all the secrets of Tantoret. After a long beat, he averted his eyes respectfully. He also needed Jasak to believe in his submission.

When he looked up again, the Athaki was gone.

Chapter Seven

Icera's demand changed everything.

Jasak had hoped to select two of his best to aid in Raimo's punishment, but with the guards' faith in Jasak's leadership wavering, he couldn't risk it. Tias's punishment had created a vacuum amongst the Athaki. It slowly sucked their loyalty away as they questioned Jasak's sanity. They couldn't know how far the revolt had progressed. The fact that it would get this far, that Jasak had only learned of it a few hours before Aleron's confirmation, would be seen as further proof of his weakening power. The prisoners would not be the only ones ready for a change in administration.

He retreated to his meditation room to try and focus. Though he preferred the silence of his quarters for rest, the nearby rhythm of the core gave him a metronome to better regulate his body's and head's responses. He stretched out on the floor, closed his eyes and forced himself to relax.

Images invaded his thoughts:

Aleron, and his nimble fingers tracing over Jasak's tattoo. The human had no clue as to its

significance as a marker for the hunt, and yet, he treated the marks with reverence, his hands almost trembling as he followed its lines. Jasak had fought the urge to mark him more permanently as his, and had almost done so when he'd felt the soft brush of lips along his jaw. Then he'd recalled how quickly Icera and the others had responded to Aleron's blood. Even in the security of his quarters, Jasak wasn't willing to risk luring them there again.

Aleron, dripping in blood, too delicious to ignore, too intelligent to dismiss. He claimed to be frightened of Jasak, but his actions said otherwise. Not even the difference in their sizes seemed enough to deter the man.

Belenia, its twin moons winding around each other as they danced across the night sky. The air was always ripe with the scent of local chagea herds, always warm even without the sun. Sometimes, Jasak would lead hunts in the dead of night, just to get the full effect of his home's beauties. He always let the prey stay one step ahead so that he could prolong the pleasure of the hunt.

Raimo, and his band of thugs, his smug, rodentlike face lurking on the periphery of everything that was wrong about Tantoret. He'd hated the man since his arrival. Always angling

for power, regardless of who was hurt along the way.

Jasak would not be his next pawn. Tantoret was hell for all of them, but he did what he could to make it more palatable. He refused to let Raimo destroy that delicate balance.

He opened his eyes and stared at the black wall. He could still execute his plan for Raimo. He would simply do it himself.

Since the cache of contraband was located near the infirmary, he checked in on Yoirryn first. Back on Belenia, doctors would have his hand in a xulip plasma bath to help the claws regenerate. He would have been incapacitated for days instead of weeks. Here, they only had bandages, painkillers and antiseptic to keep his hand from getting infected. Ultimately, only the bandages would do much good.

The young guard slept on a narrow bed against the wall. Jasak wanted to speak to him, but he wasn't willing to spoil what could be one of his few restful sleeps. Once Yoirryn was discharged, he wouldn't have access to the infirmary's limited supplies. If he had a painless night before the healing process was done, it would be a miracle.

The doctor on duty was Rosany, an ex-medico from the border wars. He didn't care about niceties or power plays. He'd only come to Tantoret because his brother had been assigned

there as punishment for his part in a scheme to assassinate an unfriendly ambassador. The brother had been injured by an inmate within a few cycles, and Rosany had received special permission to come and treat him. He'd never left, even when his brother died. The entire incident happened before Jasak's sentence. As far as Jasak knew, Rosany was the only living being to ever come and stay on Tantoret out of choice.

"How is he?" Jasak asked.

Rosany didn't look up from where he worked on his notes. His scalp was clean-shaven, revealing fine scars at the base of his neck. "A gift from an unhappy patient," he'd answered the one time Jasak had asked. Long, slim fingers flew over his tablet, far more delicate than most Athaki. So was the rest of his form.

"He'll live."

"What's the extent of his injuries?"

"Five broken claws. Snapped off to the bone, not superficial fractures. His thumb shattered, and his wrist hemorrhaged where the cuff tore the veins." He glanced toward his lone patient. Empathy flitted behind his eyes. "I'll monitor the regrowth so they're as normal as possible, but the bleeding destroyed the neural paths. He won't be able to retract his claws once he gets them back."

Jasak kept his features neutral, but the news disappointed him. Being forced to bare his claws

at all times would make Yoirryn seem more of a threat than the Athaki already were. Their authority required maintaining a precarious balance of fear, respect and power. Too much fear, and the prisoners saw the guards as a threat to be dealt with.

“I heard you took the prisoner for your own,” Rosany continued.

“I did.”

“Does he need attention?”

“Nothing I can’t take care of.”

“He hasn’t been under treatment for poisoning?”

“He hasn’t been here long enough for the exposure to damage him.”

Rosany nodded and made another note on his tablet, then set it aside and leaned back. He rubbed at his scalp, clearly exhausted. “Yoirryn should be reassigned to maintenance or scout duties. He won’t be much good in the general population. The other prisoners will see him as a target, and he’s too young to lose yet.”

Jasak nodded. “Keep him here as long as you need. Some extra recuperative time will do him good.”

“Yes, it will.” Rosany cocked a brow. “Thank you. I’d planned on doing that anyway, but it’s nice to have it sanctioned. Here.” He rose and

crossed to a locked cabinet, pulling out two small boxes. “You’ll want these for your prisoner.”

The salt tablets, he’d expected. The iron pills, though...

He held it out. “I don’t need these.”

“You took a prisoner. Consider it a precaution.”

“I’m not...*eating* him.”

“Then you can return it to me unopened if you ever give him up.” Rosany folded his arms over his chest. He wasn’t going to budge.

Tucking the boxes into his pockets, he nodded and cast one last look at Yoirryn. “I’ll be back at the end of the cycle to see how he’s doing. If you need anything before then, ask Icera.”

“Why? Where are you going to be?”

Jasak was already leaving. “I have a punishment to mete out.”

Hidden in the shadows, Jasak watched the prisoners trudge toward the common room for the upcoming meal. He kept both eyes and ears open, ready to approach as soon as he spotted Raimo. He’d debated doing it when the man was alone, but decided it was better for those with Raimo to witness. Then, they might reconsider further revolutionary tactics.

Fortune was on his side. No other guards were around when Raimo appeared in the tunnel, three of his usual coterie flanking him.

Jasak did his best not to react to the prisoners. Emotions could be exploited, which made him less effective. But seeing the smug bastard's face, knowing he dared to think he could destroy both Jasak and Aleron, sent ice-hot fury through his veins. It would be a pleasure punishing him.

He waited until they were almost level before stepping out in front of them.

Raimo jerked to a halt, and for a second, exhibited true alarm. It was quickly gone, though, so elusive Jasak knew none of the others had seen. He refused to lower his gaze, instead tilting his head back to stare up at Jasak in defiance.

"Is there something I can help you with, sir?" he said, the politeness in his words thick with sarcasm.

Jasak didn't blink as he turned away. "Come."

He'd gone two steps when he heard the multiple footfalls behind him.

"Only you, Raimo."

All motion stopped. Jasak reached the bend in the tunnel and looked back to see Raimo frowning at him.

"What's this about?"

No more attempts at respect. He preferred it this way. It made Raimo more honest.

“Have you become so gluttoned on your own power, you think you can defy me to my face?” Jasak slowly advanced. “You don’t get to ask. You’re lucky you still have a tongue to speak with. But I can rectify that, right here, right now. It would even be my pleasure.”

Hatred burned in Raimo’s lone eye. The smell of it poured from his skin, so pungent that Jasak’s fangs itched. It would take little to provoke him to violence. Men like Raimo thrived on it.

“I’ll be right back,” Raimo told his friends, never looking away from Jasak.

Jasak didn’t bother correcting him. “Bring your tools. You’ll need them.”

The bag of items he’d collected from the contraband clicked at his side as he strolled away from the common room and deeper into the tunnels. Raimo’s quick, even steps behind him blocked out most of the sound. Did he hear them? Did the man suspect what was to come? Unlikely. Jasak had never done this before, but then again, many of his actions of the past few hours were unprecedented.

He kept a sharp ear out. It was dangerous walking with his back to someone who wanted him dead, but he had to lead the way. It did occur to him he could simply knock Raimo out, take his tools and leave him to find his way back. That would certainly solve the immediate problem of

the coup. If Raimo figured out how to return, the lesson might be a good one.

Or it could breed even more hatred and anger. No, his original plan was better. More honorable.

More final.

When the last of the light dissolved, he heard Raimo's pulse finally quicken.

"Where are you taking me?"

The bravado was gone.

"Up."

"Up?" The increasingly damp ground sucked at Raimo's shoes, especially when he tried to move faster. "You mean out?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

Jasak didn't speak. Raimo would have his answers soon enough.

He'd chosen the fastest route he could, though it still took several hours to taste fresh air. What he hadn't counted on was the soft patter of rain, or the added dripping into the shallow chasm they now walked. Rain distorted and hid. It brought life with it, but it also brought potential failure. He would never have chosen rain as his milieu. There was time to turn back and try a more orthodox method of punishment, or he could wait out the soft storm, but Jasak had come too far now.

When the rain began to hit their heads, Raimo stopped.

“No more. Tell me what the fuck is going on.”

They were close enough now for Jasak to acquiesce. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out the band he'd brought with him and caught his hair at his nape to tie it back. He'd only grown it out since coming to Tantoret. He wanted to be as close to his former self as he could for this. Here, he could be hunter, unfettered by the rules he was forced to maintain belowground.

“You want to kill me. I'm giving you the chance.”

“Everybody down there wants to kill you. What makes me so special?”

Jasak would argue that a few of the prisoners might not agree with Raimo, but that was beside the point. “They weren't attempting to make it an unfair fight.”

“I don't know what you're talking about.”

“Yes, you do. But five against one? You really think that's an honorable way to win?”

Raimo sucked air in through his teeth. “Who told you?”

“It doesn't matter.”

He took the bag off his belt and tossed it at Raimo. The darkness stopped the man from catching it, though he scrambled quickly to his knees to pick it up when it fell.

“What is this?”

“The only help you’ll get.” A feeble light washed through the murk, illuminating Raimo’s scowling face. “You have fifteen minutes before I come after you. You’re welcome to use anything in that bag, your chisel or anything you can find on the surface to try and stop me from killing you.”

“And what are you going to use?”

“Nothing.”

Raimo snorted. “Right.”

“Look for yourself.” He held up his hands and waited for Raimo to sweep the beam over his body. “I’m not armed. I haven’t stashed anything to use against you. If you don’t wish to try those odds, then I have no qualms in killing you here instead.”

“Do I look stupid to you?”

For the first time, Jasak allowed a small smile. “You don’t want to know my answer to that.”

Raimo turned the light back to the bag, rummaging through it as he took better stock of its contents. What he found apparently satisfied him. It should. Jasak had made sure to select some of the more deadly weapons that had ever been confiscated. The bag held two different kinds of blades, as well as a synaptic disruptor. Everything required a close distance, which was the only thing Jasak had done in his own favor.

“What happens if I kill you first?”

“There’s a homing beacon on my belt. Take it, and it’ll lead you back to the core.”

“And how do I know you’re not going to jump me as soon as my back is turned?”

“Because you have my word.”

“That doesn’t exactly make me feel better.”

“Your life has been in my hands from the moment you walked away from the others. I could have killed you at any point until now, and chose not to. That should be enough.”

Raimo grunted and turned back to the weapons. He slid both sheathed blades into his waistband, and hooked the bag around his neck.

“How do I get out of here?”

Jasak flattened against the wall. “There’s a steep incline just ahead. It opens on to the surface. Your fifteen minutes will start as soon as you pass me.”

Raimo still looked unsure, but at least he’d recognized he no longer had a choice. Without taking his eyes off Jasak, he crept forward, hugging the opposite wall. Jasak paid close attention to the man’s hands, ensuring he hadn’t tried to palm a weapon and end the hunt before it began, but Raimo went by without a flicker of movement in Jasak’s direction. Jasak stayed still until he couldn’t see Raimo anymore, then slid to the floor to wait.

Fifteen minutes.

He closed his eyes and breathed.

Meditation didn't bring clarity, even if his body got harder by the moment. It brought back the earlier images, and the reminder that Aleron would be there when he returned, ready for...ready for what? What did he want from the man? What could he take?

But Aleron had responded to him. When Jasak had tasted his rich, mouth-wateringly warm blood, Aleron had strained closer. The man was gregarious by nature. From everything Jasak had witnessed among the prisoners, he had yet to make any friends. In fact, he'd made enemies, which had only separated him further. He was simply lonely for company. They could talk. Be civil. He could provide discourse to keep Aleron intellectually stimulated.

In some societies, that would be considered friendship.

He didn't want Aleron's friendship.

He forced himself to open his eyes before time was up, though he didn't rise. The rain plastered his clothes to his skin, but with his hair pulled back, his skin finally felt free, and he tilted his head to bare even more to the cool water. His tattoo tingled, every strand searing into his flesh. The rain wasn't the same, not warm, not hard, but it was worth every droplet that rolled beneath his shirt.

He gave Raimo three extra minutes, just so he could enjoy the rain that much longer.

While he retraced Raimo's path out of the chasm, Jasak concentrated on the scents. He could smell Raimo within the cavern walls, but as it opened up, the smells faded, washed away by the very thing he'd been savoring. The moisture opened up the earth, liberating the multitudes of insects that lived within, everything masking the one prey he hoped to target. Any other time, he would have gloried in the wildness of it. Now, it interfered with his hunt. He reached the surface with no hint at all of Raimo. He might as well have traveled alone.

Tantoret was mostly flat and barren. Heat from its center splintered the crust, creating the labyrinthine fissures that scored the earth and burrowed deep into its heart. Vegetation was light, composed mostly of lichens that clung to the rocky soil. Nothing reached toward the sky to provide shelter. The only places to hide were in the darkness and below the ground.

Jasak dropped to his hands and knees, burying his claws in the wet muck. He let his fangs descend, though he didn't sense Raimo anywhere around. He refused to waste time once he found him. Stretching his senses, he strained to pick up any clue where the man might have gone. Water collected on his eyelashes, forcing him to bow his

head, and his too-sensitive ears started to ache in the cold. Soon, he realized it wasn't enough.

A normal hunt without definitive leads would start with concentric circles. That wouldn't work here. The fissures prevented that. What they also did, however, was force Raimo to travel in specific directions, natural boundaries to his options.

So Jasak poised at the exit of the chasm from which he'd emerged, decided which was the most logical path to take and began creeping forward on his belly. If this didn't work, he'd try the second most logical, then the third, the fourth, all of them until he found Raimo and finished this.

He caught Raimo's scent beyond the next fissure. It was faint, and it evaporated almost as soon as he recognized it, but it was still there, which meant he was on the right track. He almost smiled. Raimo wasn't stupid, but he wasn't inventive, either. This hunt would be over long before the cycle ended.

The rain never stopped. It soaked the ground, making it harder and harder to pull his claws free. The chill underground was nothing compared to the ice running down the back of his neck, and he almost wished he was back in his quarters, with Aleron's warm body to take for his own. He'd curl around Aleron and envelop him completely to steal every degree of heat he had to offer. Perhaps

he could even convince Aleron it was worth sharing other heat. Bend the human backward and bury both fangs and cock into his pliant flesh.

A sharp prick in his thigh caused him to roar in surprised pain. He barely rolled out of Raimo's path before the blade he held sank into the earth. Now, all he could smell was Raimo, and he chastised himself for getting lost in fantasies about Aleron for even a moment.

Jasak leapt at Raimo. His claws slashed through empty air, and he blinked away the rain to see the prisoner leaping into the chasm he'd been hiding in. When he twisted to follow, though, his leg went out beneath him.

Raimo laughed when Jasak fell onto his hands. "You're such an arrogant son of a bitch. You give me these kinds of weapons, and you think I won't be smart enough to know how to use them?"

As more of Jasak's leg went numb, he realized Raimo hadn't tried stabbing him, like he'd first thought. It had been the disruptor.

"I think you're still going to be dead," Jasak growled.

"Not by your hand."

Jasak heard the click the second before Raimo turned the light directly into his eyes. He had just enough time to turn his head and avoid being blinded, though it didn't do much for avoiding the smaller knife hurtling through the air. It sliced

across the top of his shoulder, missing major arteries but stinging nonetheless.

Now, the smell of his own blood joined that of Raimo's adrenaline. The cut wasn't deep, but added to the dead weight of his thigh, it slowed him down. He wasn't going to win this fight through superior biology, and as much as he hated the man, he had to begrudgingly respect him for evening the field. Perhaps he'd even wanted him to, somewhere deep down. It made a fairer hunt.

Getting his good leg beneath him, he sprang over the fissure, contorting his body at the last moment to push off again, back in the direction he'd come from. It messed with his equilibrium, but it also forced Raimo to search for him, taking away a viable target as he waited for Jasak to pause long enough to strike. Jasak didn't mind taking advantage of the man's blind side. An advantage was an advantage.

So was surprise.

Before hitting the original bank, he twisted his angle yet again, this time aiming downward.

He slammed into Raimo's shoulder, sending the disruptor flying into the dark. They landed on the wet ground and sank into the muck. Jasak butted his forehead against Raimo's skull. He heard a crack and a groan, but didn't wait for Raimo to recover.

“You should have immobilized my arms.” He slashed his claws deep across the front of Raimo’s throat, pleased with the thick spurts of blood that coated his hand.

Human skin was so fragile. Raimo should have remembered that.

Chapter Eight

Any other time, Aleron would have begun his investigation as soon as the echo of Jasak's steps faded, but he couldn't ignore the powerful allure of the bed. He was painfully aware of his own exhaustion. When was the last time he had had a decent sleep? Perhaps the final moments of his freedom, just before he had been arrested. Despite how that turned out for him, Aleron couldn't help but smile at the memory. Rilios had been a *thorough* lover, and his bed had been made from the richest silks and the softest feathers. Even the fact that it had probably been Rilios who turned him over to the authorities couldn't sour that memory.

Every moment since his arrest weighed on him. The transport to Tantoret. The constant struggle that represented his new life. The threats that hung over his head through no fault of his own. The occasional flash of fear that this was really *it*, and he wouldn't be escaping—he would never find his way out of hell. But all of that pain, and fear and weariness could be forgotten in Jasak's bed.

In his other life the bed would have been a disappointment. The mattress might have been

soft once, but now it was lumpy and the stuffing was coming out through the frayed material holding it all together. There were long scratches, prompting Aleron to wonder if Jasak's claws ever involuntarily extended while he slept. He shuddered at the thought, imagining those blades shredding through flesh and bone while Jasak was oblivious.

Aleron fell into light slumber that carried him far from the narrow caverns and cold water of Tantoret to the home of his heart. Detin. A moon on the border of the Athess system, it had been enjoying a rare ceasefire when Aleron arrived at the age of eighteen. The moment he had disembarked from the transport, he understood why Detin had been at the heart of a twenty-year struggle between the Athess and Lonan systems. Due to its position relative to its planet, Detin enjoyed mild weather year around, perfect for the constant harvest of critical crops. It never suffered from droughts, or frosts, or infestations. At night, Detin's skies were often bright with lasers and explosions from Athess and Lonanian ships battling for supremacy, while her people tried to put away their constant fear and move on with their lives. The bloody war between the two species might have been waged for nearly a century, but neither side had been willing to send ground forces and risk destroying the jewel they'd

invested so many resources in winning. Each was as bad as the other. Neither would be missed if they managed to exterminate each other in their endless hostilities.

Aleron had lived there for two years, new violence forming a backdrop for some of the most critical moments of his young life. He often returned to one memory of Detin in his dreams—an unbelievable fireball directly above his head, the flames spreading out like twisting, grasping tentacles. In the moment before he fully processed what he was witnessing, he thought it was the distant birth of a new star, not the much closer reality of a lost battle. A hand had closed over his to lead him to safety. That contact was accompanied with the softest feeling of peace, and he sank deeper into sleep, past the point of dreams.

When Aleron opened his eyes again, perfect darkness greeted him. He held his breath and remained still, listening for any evidence that he wasn't alone. The silence stretched on like the darkness, unbroken and complete and cold. Unsure of what he might see, Aleron slowly turned to his side. The faint orange glow of a dying fire sent a wave of relief through him. He was still alone, but at least he remembered where he was.

Aleron settled on his back, not in a hurry to get out of the bed. He felt the passage of each second and knew he was losing valuable time, but if he rushed himself, he might make a stupid mistake. If he missed his chance, he would just have to wait for another opportunity. If he blew his chance because he wasn't thinking clearly, he could very well die as a result. He had to be slow and careful.

His eyes naturally sought the small patch of darkness that stood out from the surrounding black. It was deep blue in color, with exactly five tiny points of light. Some sort of haze obscured the stars, like a cloud was just forming or just dissipating. A cloud. An actual cloud. It might have been raining before. Aleron tried to imagine the cool water rolling down his face and getting caught in his hair, washing away the dirt and grime of the mines.

There was no way to tell how long he had been asleep. Physically and mentally, he felt great. Strong, sharp and ready to take advantage of the situation in any way he could. Ideally that would mean finding an escape route before Jasak returned, but he would be happy with exploiting anything that could give him an advantage in the long run.

First he needed light.

Aleron eased himself out of the bed and padded over to the fire. He threw a few pieces of

wood onto the red coals, watching as the tiny flames licked at the fresh fuel, gradually growing until the cave was pleasantly warm and bright.

Common sense told him he probably wouldn't find anything useful here. Jasak wasn't stupid. He wouldn't have left Aleron in his personal chambers if he thought for a moment Aleron could use anything there to escape. On the other hand, he might have thought it was worth the risk to keep Aleron from being caught between the blood-hungry guards and Raimo's insane gang. But why was Jasak so interested in protecting him?

Aleron touched the cut on his temple and his stomach clenched reflexively. He knew why. Even though he had never met an Athaki before his arrival on Tantoret, he knew exactly what Jasak wanted from him. With his back against the wall, Aleron would happily give in to whatever Jasak demanded. He wasn't so sure he would have done the same in other circumstances. Especially since Aleron didn't have the first clue of what Jasak could want. Aleron understood sex. He was even a willing participant of interspecies sex, eager to experiment when the opportunity presented itself with a trustworthy partner. But he had a feeling sex with Jasak would not be a straightforward affair between equals. There would be customs Aleron didn't understand,

gestures for which he had no definition, and expectations on both sides that neither would think to voice. The mate business only complicated matters. He still didn't fully grasp what it meant to Jasak and how it would impact his actions.

Regardless of what he found in Jasak's quarters, Aleron vowed he wouldn't forget that he had something Jasak wanted. Even if he was still trapped there, empty-handed, when the guard returned, he wasn't completely powerless.

Aleron stepped away from the warmth of the fire to survey the room. The walls curved upward, creating a dome shape. The top of the dome, where the night was still evident, was about twelve feet above the floor and probably five or six feet from the flattest part of the wall. Tiny cracks ran the length of the stones, and Aleron thought with enough time and precision, he could turn the cracks into toe and finger holds. But he didn't have the time. Not right then. If Jasak allowed him to stay in his quarters, then it might be a different story.

With a deep sigh of regret, Aleron turned away to inspect other parts of the cave. He had to bend at the waist to make it through the tapered passage that led to Jasak's private springs. He felt along the inside of the wall until his fingers brushed against something that didn't feel like stone. As

soon as the cavern was illuminated, Aleron resolved to never go back to the tiny, filthy spring he had been forced to use.

The pool was about the size of the one that Raimo guarded so jealously, though Aleron could tell at a glance that it was much deeper. He was tempted to dive directly in and enjoy it as he had enjoyed the bed, but he noticed another opening on the opposite side of the small cavern. He skirted the edges of the pool, walking stiffly to avoid slipping on the rocks, and crouched down to get a better view of the passage.

His heart stopped as a rush of cool air hit his face. Cool *fresh* air, that didn't reek of chojal, dirt, sweat and shit. It smelled of rain. He whimpered, the sound echoing off the water and walls. Seeing the stars had been a shock to his system, but this was something else entirely. This was more visceral. Eyes played tricks. They could do nothing more than offer hollow assurances about reality. But a nose was honest. It was incapable of fooling somebody into a false belief. And his nose told him freedom was somewhere nearby.

The opening was just wide enough to let his shoulders pass. Aleron already knew from experience that the tunnel could narrow as it moved upward. If it did, he could very well get himself stuck, and nobody would know about it until Jasak finally smelled his rotting body. On the

other hand, it could widen, or lead to a new tunnel that would take him *up*. Up to wherever that sweet smell of rain came from. The lack of light was almost enough to stop him from venturing farther. Memories of his arrival to Tantoret were still fresh, and he wasn't in a hurry to slide through the creeping, crawling masses with his face less than an inch from the insects he could feel and hear but not see.

But fortune never favored the meek or the cowards. Escaping Tantoret would require risks.

Aleron exhaled slowly, concentrating on making himself smaller. He hunched his shoulders to narrow his frame and pulled his stomach muscles tight. What would Jasak think if he returned while Aleron was crawling through a tunnel? Would he feel betrayed? Annoyed? Exasperated? Or would he continue his indifferent attitude toward attempted escapes? Aleron didn't want to think too much about the question because he didn't like any of the answers. He certainly didn't want to be on the receiving end of Jasak's anger, but he didn't want to be treated like any of the other inmates, whose lives meant nothing to the Athaki.

For the first hundred yards, he moved slowly on hands and knees, wary of putting his hand into something he wouldn't want to touch. More wary still of reaching into the darkness and touching

absolutely nothing at all. The stone floor eventually softened to give way to the mud he had experienced on his descent, and more than once, he saw the dim glow of chojal clinging to the walls. Enclosed spaces never bothered him, but the combination of the thick mud and the nearly unbroken darkness did slow him down considerably.

The angle of the floor changed just as the ceiling scraped across his bare back. He gritted his teeth but pressed forward, convinced he was now moving up. The draft seemed stronger now, and Aleron prayed that wasn't just his imagination, or wishful thinking. Each inch he claimed fed his careful optimism.

With the lack of sun or any true external yardstick, Aleron's sense of time had been fucked up since he arrived on Tantoret. But he felt like hours had passed since he began his journey. There was never a break in the ceiling above him, never a moment of relief from the bugs. He was grateful he had slept before beginning. No doubt he would need his strength for the journey back—which could very well be ass first instead of head first.

When Aleron saw the light, he almost dismissed it as a trick of his overtaxed system. It pierced the black air like a knife, impossibly bright, impossibly painful, forcing him to look

away. Aleron stole careful glances, measured in microseconds, until his pupils finally adjusted. He crawled toward it, thankful even if he couldn't stand to actually gaze upon it. It was too powerful to be from Tantoret's moon or a distant star. Was it the planet's sun? Or had he found something close to the transport pad? As far as he knew, there was only one way off the planet, and if he was close enough to actually see the reflection of the landing lights...

Aleron stopped the thought in its tracks. It didn't matter *what* was on the other side if he couldn't break through the opening. It was just large enough to fit his hand, and he pushed his fingers through until the width of his forearm stopped him. The rain landed on his skin in a soft mist, coating his nails and his palm. The same air that had lured him through the darkness *tickled* him. Was he dreaming? Was he still asleep in Jasak's bed?

No, this was real. This was real, and freedom was literally within his grasp.

He pushed against the dirt and stone, trying to force his whole arm through the opening, but it refused to budge. He clawed at the rim, pulling dirt down into his mouth and eyes. Despite the rain, the ground hadn't really softened, and Aleron realized that he would not be able to

simply dig his way out. He would need tools. He could mine his way out.

Aleron's heart fluttered in his chest like a trapped, wild bird. This was possible. It wouldn't be easy, but it was *possible*. Now laughter joined the tears. Nothing was going to keep him from his freedom. Even if he had to dig himself out inch by slow inch. He would still have to find a way to get off the planet once he was aboveground, but getting there was half the battle. If he could do half, he could do all.

Bringing his hand to his mouth, he licked the fresh water away, a plan forming while he said a temporary farewell to his salvation.

Chapter Nine

As soon as Jasak stepped out of the remote spring, he shivered. He would have preferred not having to strip and wash after the cold rain, but the scent of Raimo's blood had burrowed into his skin, taking up residence for anyone to sniff out. Punishment was one thing. This was something else entirely. How long before the guards viewed Tantoret as a buffet rather than punishment? Tias had acted on instincts honed by centuries. The others might consider the beating he had at the hands of the prisoners a worthy exchange for samples of the humanoids' iron-rich blood, especially if they could smell it on their leader. His precedents would have further reaching ramifications than he'd foreseen.

He dried as quickly as he could. The cut on his shoulder no longer bled, but it still stung. It required a bandage when he had the time to get one. His true worry lingered with his leg. It ached, and if he stepped on it wrong, it collapsed beneath him. The disruptor had taken too long to wear off, and now, the end of the cycle was nigh. If he wasn't around, others would ensure quotas were calculated and recorded, and the tanks checked,

but he had to hurry back or risk having his actions discovered.

Jasak chose back tunnels to return to the prison population, going straight to his makeshift office. He might get lucky. The others might assume he'd been there all along.

When he rounded the last corner, he found Icera leaning against the wall opposite his doorway. Fate was a vengeful mistress tonight.

Icera snapped to attention as soon as Jasak appeared, though the way his mouth tightened suggested Jasak hadn't been as thorough in his ablutions as he would have wished.

"Is there a problem?" Jasak said.

"Tanks passed three-quarters capacity, and we're not scheduled for another transfer for five more cycles."

He frowned. "Why have they filled up so fast?"

"We're still unsure. Quotas don't seem to have been much higher than the norm."

"Are the tank gauges working correctly?"

Icera's gaze flickered sideways. "I don't know, sir."

"Then they should be checked." He stepped into his office, taking his time to ensure his leg didn't fail him in front of Icera. "That should have been your first priority."

"Yes, sir. I'll dispatch a team right away."

“It’s raining. Make sure they’re prepared for it.”

Icera murmured acquiescence, but the stiff set of his shoulders radiated his surprise at Jasak’s knowledge of the surface weather. Jasak ignored it. Doing otherwise would lend it more weight than he wished it to have.

“Has anyone reported this to Athess authorities yet?” Jasak asked.

Icera shook his head. “We tried, but received no response or acknowledgment. We haven’t had the opportunity to try again.”

Which meant Jasak needed to. Even if the tanks simply had faulty gauges, they would have to be replaced. The only way for that to happen was for new ones to arrive on the next transfer. And if it wasn’t the gauges, the schedule needed adjusting for an earlier arrival.

Though he was done with Icera, the other Athaki didn’t move. Jasak scowled. “Is there something else?”

“You didn’t ask about Yoirryn.”

“I already spoke with Rosany. I know about his hand. Accommodations will be made.”

“He’s going home?”

“Of course not. Nobody leaves. You know that.”

“But—”

“He’s not crippled. I won’t put him in danger by putting him close to the population. Trust me to do my job, or I’ll reprimand you for insubordination. I’d really rather not.”

Icera bowed his head, clasping his hands behind his back. “Yes, sir. That wasn’t my intent.”

Jasak didn’t necessarily believe him, but he returned Icera’s gesture with equal grace. “Yoirryn will recover. I’ll do everything I can to ensure it’s as painless as possible.”

Everything, that was, except turn Aleron over to the guards in a show of reciprocity. It didn’t matter what he did for Yoirryn. It would take some time for the memory of what he hadn’t done to dissipate.

Though Icera kept his eyes on the ground, his nose twitched. Searching for hints of Aleron, most likely. Those, at least, he wouldn’t find.

With a final bow, Icera left Jasak to his first moment of peace. His body felt like marble, lifeless and frozen. It took all his strength to keep moving. What he wanted was to retreat to his quarters. Light a fire and bury himself under blankets. Anything to get warm.

Aleron is warm.

Aleron could help him thaw. It was an equitable exchange, wasn’t it? Nobody would get hurt. Nobody would be compromised. Such a

small thing. Aleron would have no reason to deny giving something that cost him nothing.

It gave him purpose. The sooner he finished his administrative duties, the sooner he could rest.

The usual crew manned the core when he arrived. Inaet and Zidoyi supervised the dumping of the chojal into the ovens, while Soseros had taken Jasak's normal place in recording the prisoners' quotas. Jasak didn't step in. Soseros was one of the more trustworthy guards he commanded. He had faith the numbers would be accurate.

He waited until the last of the prisoners left before addressing Soseros.

"Any shortfalls?"

"None."

"What about excess?"

"No, numbers are consistent."

"And how many accounted for?"

"Nearly ninety percent. I'm missing several names, though."

"Make note of the list when you're done. We'll have a fresh scout team go out in the next cycle to find them."

"Yes, sir."

Jasak looked over Soseros's shoulder and saw the blank space next to Aleron's name. He tapped it to draw Soseros's attention. "Exempt this one

for this and the next cycle. He's the human who tried to use Yoirryn to escape today."

Soseros made the note in silence. Jasak had to assume word had already spread amongst the rest of the Athaki about him claiming Aleron, but Soseros was smart enough not to comment.

He moved on to Inaet and Zidoyi, as they took the chojal from the few waiting prisoners. This was their sole responsibility, though they occasionally requested other duties. Jasak always denied them. Both Athaki had been found guilty of a mass slaughter on a peaceful planet near Belenia. They were more muscle than masterminds. Jasak wasn't willing to put the prisoners at a greater risk by exposing them unnecessarily.

From there, he went to the small alcove farthest from the core. Communications with Athess authorities were established so that anyone could actually access them, though every guard in the place knew that unsolicited transmissions risked disciplinary action. Requests for added transfers weren't superfluous. Jasak had only ever had to make one before, but he knew they wouldn't argue.

The only problem was, nobody responded.

He tried a different frequency. Sometimes, planet rotation affected communications efficacy. It wouldn't if they had better equipment, but he'd

found ways to work around the base technology. It meant being persistent and obsessive, but it invariably worked.

As long as he didn't give up.

The one downside to spending so much time in Jasak's quarters was not having anything to do. Aleron had washed up from his last trek, erasing all hints he might have gone somewhere he shouldn't have, then settled in to wait for Jasak's imminent return.

Minutes stretched into more. Aleron dozed, but when he woke up, the room was still empty. Through the porthole in the ceiling, he could see the sky starting to lighten, but it never got brighter than a dull gray. The cycle had to be close to over, if not already into the next. He didn't understand what was taking Jasak so long to come back, but because he knew it could happen at any moment, he didn't dare return to working on widening the hole.

He searched everywhere he could. There weren't many options. He already knew Jasak kept his toiletries in a waterproof box at the bottom of the spring. Aleron had stubbed his toe on it when he'd washed off all the mud from his climb. The cracks in the walls were too fine to be

anything but fractures in the rock. Some of them had dust clinging to their dark recesses. He cleaned them out, using the edge of his sleeve.

The only personal items he found were under the mattress. A book, made from a greenish hide so soft with age Aleron couldn't resist petting it, and a long, slim rod. The rod was pale, the length of his hand, with tiny pit marks dotting its surface. One end was roughly broken, the other bulbous. He hastily put it back when he realized it looked like some kind of bone.

A strand of hair marked a place near the end of the book, but that, too, offered no secrets. He didn't recognize the language, though he wished he did. For some reason, he'd never considered Jasak educated. He hadn't thought about Jasak's life before Tantoret at all. Maybe there was some aspect there he could use to ingratiate himself.

The silence betrayed Jasak's approach. Aleron shoved the book back where he found it and curled up on the far side of the bed, trying to appear as innocuous as he could. When Jasak finally appeared in the entrance, though, he limped heavily.

Aleron leapt up without further thought of feigning weakness. "What happened?"

Jasak braced against the wall. In his other hand was a leather bag, which he held out. "Empty this. There's food in there for you, as well as your salt

tablets.” His gaze narrowed. “You haven’t eaten, have you?”

“No, nobody brought me anything.” As hungry as he was, he couldn’t take his eyes off Jasak. “What happened with Raimo?”

“It’s done. Now, I’m going to sleep.”

He took two steps toward the bed, then, without any provocation, crumpled sideways. Aleron darted forward to catch him, grunting when Jasak’s full weight crashed into his slighter body. He kept him from falling to the floor, but his muscles strained to help Jasak upright again.

“You need a doctor.”

A glint of sharp teeth snapped in his direction. “I need my bed.”

Aleron flinched and struggled not to let Jasak go. They reached the edge, and Jasak lurched forward, his natural grace now angles and awkwardness. He pulled Aleron down with him, and in spite of the inelegance of their position, Aleron couldn’t help but notice just how powerful Jasak’s body really was.

Jasak dropped his head back against the pillow and closed his eyes. “Cold.”

Aleron shimmied up and crawled over the blankets to the firepit. The flames were low, but crackling along. He selected a solid piece of wood and crouched there until fresh heat rolled into the room.

“You need to eat,” Jasak said.

When Aleron glanced back, it was to see Jasak completely motionless, eyes shut. His hair had fallen away from his face, exposing the strong lines of his straight nose and firm jaw, but even relaxed he looked every inch the proud predator. Still dangerous, but Aleron wasn’t as frightened as he’d been earlier. If anything, he longed to close the distance between them.

He’d been given an order, though. If he wanted to convince Jasak it was worth keeping him around, he couldn’t disobey.

The bag held food, but not the sandy porridgelike food he was accustomed to. There was some sort of dried jerky, as well as dried fruit and a flask. When he uncorked it, he smelled the same strange tea he’d gulped down the one time it had been offered.

Food with flavor. Texture. Substance.

He lifted his head to stare at Jasak in shock.

“You’re not eating,” Jasak said, without opening his eyes.

“Why this? Why not the other stuff?”

“Would you prefer the soup?”

“No, but—”

“Then stop arguing.”

He turned the jerky over in his hands, then held it to his nose. He didn’t recognize the meat, but it

smelled rich and spicy, strong enough to make his stomach growl. "Where did you get it?"

Jasak sighed. "It comes with our supplies. I have it set aside for those who are no longer capable of mining."

The simple gesture left Aleron dumbstruck. He had so many questions for Jasak, like what happened to those who got sick, or how often the transport arrived with more supplies, but he couldn't find the voice to ask them. He looked down at the jerky and tentatively lifted it to his mouth, licking it first before nibbling a bite off the end.

The flavor erupted on his tongue.

Jasak hadn't moved by the time he finished. Aleron refreshed the fire, then hovered at the foot of the bed, wondering what he should do next. He wanted to stay, but he didn't know what Jasak wanted. The Athaki had been a riddle from the start. Would it be presumptuous to join him? He hadn't been invited. There wasn't anything else to do, though, and he had little idea what was expected of him now.

His initiative hadn't been shot down the last time. Perhaps it wouldn't again.

Aleron crawled to the bedside and reached for Jasak's shirt. He gasped when Jasak moved, quick as lightning, his implacable fingers as strong as any cuff around Aleron's wrist.

He held Aleron still while slowly opening his eyes. "What are you doing?"

"You looked uncomfortable. I was going to help you change."

"I'm fine."

"You said you were cold. You must have warmer clothes."

Some of the power in his grip eased. "It doesn't make enough of a difference to bother."

"Then what can I do? I don't...you said I belong to you, but I don't know what that means. Tell me what you want. I'll do it." His heart pounded. There was no way Jasak didn't feel it, not with his fingers against his pulse like that.

Jasak started to pull him closer, only to stop quickly. His tongue darted out and moistened his lips, and Aleron's mouth dried at the memory of that rough texture dragging over his cheek.

"I'll take nothing you won't freely offer." His quiet tone contradicted the grip of his hand.

Eager excitement shot through his body, though under that mesmerizing gaze, he wasn't entirely sure if it was because his hope for escape was one step closer with the statement, or because it came from Jasak. "I told you. Anything you want."

"I'm cold." He tugged Aleron off-balance, pushing their hands beneath Jasak's shirt. Aleron opened his fingers, flattening his palm against the

hard muscle. It shocked him a little to feel the flesh give beneath his touch. "I would like to share your warmth."

Of all the things he could have requested, heat was the last thing Aleron expected. He didn't know why Jasak was cold. His skin was as warm as Aleron's. But if Jasak wanted to cuddle...

He ducked his head to hide his unbidden smile. It wasn't cuddling. It was sharing body heat. He wasn't about to make matters worse for himself by assigning inappropriate terminology to a species more accustomed to higher temperatures.

"You're welcome to it. How do you want me?"

Jasak let him go. "Strip. To the waist."

Jasak sat up and pulled his shirt over his head. Aleron's breath caught at the chiseled musculature of his chest, its perfection marred by a long, slivered cut along his shoulder. Unable to resist, Aleron reached out and skimmed his fingers along the thin, dark line. Still fresh. The scab was soft.

"Did Raimo do this to you?"

He thought Jasak would ignore this question, too. The low, "Yes," shocked him to the core.

His hands shook as he took his shirt off. They were still shaking when he climbed onto the bed beside Jasak.

He jerked when Jasak immediately surrounded him. There was no time to pull away, or shift into a more comfortable position. Jasak rolled over,

almost onto his stomach, and curled his entire body around Aleron, legs over legs, arms around chest. Aleron's nose was pushed into the mattress, making it harder to breathe, but he couldn't protest, not without fighting. He'd given his permission, hadn't he? And he could still breathe, even if it was a little shallower than usual.

When Jasak rested his mouth against the back of his neck, he stiffened. He hadn't meant to. The last thing he needed was to put more barriers between them.

"Thank you for the food." His voice was muffled, but he was fairly sure Jasak heard him. "For everything. I owe you."

"You owe me nothing. We're even, remember?"

"I didn't think this was what you meant by belonging to you."

"It wasn't."

He waited for elaboration but received only silence.

"What did Raimo do? Why are you limping?"

"Go to sleep."

"I slept while you were gone."

"Then be quiet, so I can sleep."

"Will you tell me when you wake up?"

"That wouldn't be appropriate."

"Is sleeping with one of the prisoners appropriate?"

More silence.

“Will you at least tell me what took you so long to get back? Is that how long you’ll always be gone?”

Jasak’s breath stole down the back of Aleron’s neck. He had been warm before wrapping around Aleron’s body. Now, every inch of contact between them scorched him.

“I had to finish the cycle,” he said. “I couldn’t get away until I’d reached the authorities about transfers.”

“Oh.” That was more information than he’d hoped to get. If he could find out when the next ship would arrive, or what its schedule was, he could better plan his escape. “And did you?”

Another sigh. An even quieter response. Jasak must have been more tired than Aleron had thought.

“No.”

Chapter Ten

Icera hated Tantoret. He hated the stale, bitter smell of too many bodies pressed into the claustrophobic space. He hated the dampness of the walls and the sloppy mud underfoot. He hated the rations they were given. The authorities didn't feed the guards the same slop they gave the prisoners, but Icera suspected that was only because such a diet would kill them, and the Athaki were too valuable to leave for dead. But if the inmates of Tantoret were the slime of the Athess system—insignificant in every way—the valuable Athaki guards were only a half-step above that. He only needed to look at poor Yoirryn to know that was true.

If Yoirryn had been injured on Belenia, he wouldn't have been sent to a cold, dark infirmary with weak painkillers and a doctor who was, in Icera's estimation, insane. The very fact that he chose to stay on Tantoret told Icera everything he needed to know about Rosany. Icera often chose to nurse himself back to health, or to rely on one of the other guards for assistance, rather than put himself at the mercy of a man who probably had his own little distillery going. Icera couldn't think

of another reason why anybody would find Tantoret a suitable home. On Belenia, an injury like Yoirryn's would have resulted in the best care possible. There were fewer injuries as life threatening as damaged or snapped claws. Without them, an Athaki could not hunt. He could not provide for his family. And if he did not have a family, he wouldn't be able to find a mate with such an obvious deficiency.

Icera had been living on Tantoret a little over a Belenia year. Everybody else easily fell into the habit of marking time in comparison to the core, but Icera resisted. His sense of time—his connection to his own planet—had not faded and he refused to forget his home. He might be doomed to Tantoret for the rest of his life, but it would never be his home, and Icera knew one thing for sure. On Belenia, Jasak's betrayal would never go unpunished.

When Icera had arrived, Jasak had introduced himself as the head guard. The one in charge of the entire prison. At the time of his disembarking, Icera had been more than a little dazed. The trial—in an Athess court, not a Belenia one—had lasted for less than three days. The five judges each voted Icera guilty for a crime that he had no memory of committing. The finality of the sentence still weighed on his shoulders when Jasak shook his hand, and it never occurred to

Icera to question just who gave Jasak the power he claimed to possess.

But it occurred to him now. Jasak lacked the temperament and the knowledge for the job. He was brilliant with the core—even Icera could not deny that—but when it came to the day to day running of the prison itself, Jasak failed. Uneven and illogical punishments were the rule, not the exception. The prisoner, Aleron, should have been *killed* for what he had done to Yoirryn, and yet, he had been rewarded.

Jasak didn't handle any of the prisoners well. He was far too lax with the inmates, adopting a revolting hands-off approach. He only enforced rules about the chojal quotas for each cycle. In all other things, he fostered a strange dynamic between the guards and the prisoners. Thugs like Raimo should have never been able to gain so much control by appropriating the springs and the best rooms, and often causing disturbances over the rations. In some ways, Raimo had more control than the guards themselves. He remained influential despite his absence by virtue of his lieutenants.

The Athaki were an orderly people, not prone to overthrowing the status quo. Icera had kept his discontentment a secret from the other guards, never letting on that he found Jasak's authority questionable and his style weak and ineffectual. In

Tantoret, it was important to remain part of the group. Prisoners and guards alike couldn't afford to be made an exile. Life was too delicate and survival too difficult. But Icera wasn't stupid. He recognized an opportunity when he saw one.

As soon as Icera completed his duties, which included dispatching a team of three to double-check all the gauges, he swallowed his disgust for Rosany and headed to the infirmary. When he finally removed Jasak, he would rid himself of Rosany, as well. Then the Athes authorities could send a doctor who wasn't interested in sampling each shipment of chojal.

The old doctor nodded as Icera entered the room, but then turned back to the musty volume he was reading. One of the very few books on Tantoret. Icera had never been much of a reader, but he found he missed books. He missed the luxury of discovering new thoughts, the joy of being exposed to fresh voices, and the sense that he wasn't alone. Above all that, he missed being entertained. There were so few things to break up the monotony of this life. Sometimes, he picked fights just for something to do.

"Yoirryn? Do you sleep?"

"No."

"Are you in pain?"

"Yes, but the medicine has helped. What are you doing here?"

“We were worried about you.”

“Rosany says I’ll recover.”

“Not completely.”

Yoirryn sighed deeply. “No, not completely. Rosany tries, but he doesn’t have the knowledge necessary for this. Nobody here does.”

“On Belenia, it would be possible to recover.”

“On Belenia, it would be possible to do many things. But we’re not on Belenia, and we never will be again.”

“Don’t you think Jasak could send you home if he wanted to?”

“He said he could not.”

“Oh well, if he said he couldn’t perhaps he is telling the truth. I believed he had more power than the rest of us, since he has so much more authority.”

Yoirryn frowned. “If Jasak could send me home, he would. I’m of no use to him here. I won’t even be capable of guarding the inmates when I’m released from the infirmary.”

“That’s true,” Icera acknowledged. “But he certainly doesn’t seem upset by that fact. You know what he has done with the prisoner who injured you?”

“What?”

“Claimed him.”

“He...claimed him?”

“Yes. None of us can touch his new favorite.”

“Jasak keeps his distance from the prisoners. He always has.”

“Except now. Aleron has been in Jasak’s private room since your fight. When the rest of us demanded justice, Jasak refused and announced that the prisoner belonged to him.”

“Why would he do that?”

“I can’t answer that. But I thought you should know what your pain means to him.”

“I’m sure there’s a reasonable explanation for this. Jasak is a reasonable man.”

Icera almost smiled at the desperation in Yoirryn’s voice. He might be useless for any physical altercations now, but having Yoirryn in his corner would still be a major boon. There wasn’t an Athaki guard on Tantoret who wouldn’t feel sympathy pains for Yoirryn’s mangled hand. They would share his outrage, as well, when it came time for that.

“Jasak hasn’t been reasonable for several cycles now. You know, it’s not unusual for people to go crazy here. Especially the ones who spend so much time near the chojal. Do you think it was reasonable, the way he turned on Tias?”

“Tias broke the rules,” Yoirryn responded.

“That’s what Jasak claimed, but the prisoner Tias was accused of attacking is now placed with the others suffering from poisoning. We only have Jasak’s explanation of what happened. The

prisoner might have been bleeding from the poisoning and not from anything Tias did.” Icera leaned closer. “But say you’re right. Say Tias broke the rules. Isn’t it interesting that when a prisoner breaks the rules, he is not similarly punished?”

“I’m sure Jasak has his reasons.”

“Of course, he does. But there’s no reason to believe they were necessarily *good* reasons.” He patted Yoirryn’s knee. “I need to eat and get some rest. If you need anything at all, just have Rosany tell me. I’ll make sure you get it.”

“Thank you.”

“It’s my pleasure.”

Shortly after Icera’s arrival on Tantoret, he had met a prisoner who simply went by Max. He’d been surprisingly educated for an inmate. He would entertain the other prisoners with stories of Old Earth, weaving history and legends together until nobody could discern one from the other. Icera had been left with the impression that Old Earth had once been a true paradise, full of wonder and mysticism. The stories had kept Max alive for many cycles, and had been so valuable to the other prisoners that they were willing to take on his quotas in order to spare him from the inevitable effects of the chojal. Icera had been present once when the conversation had turned to

Jasak and the Athess authorities. Max had simply shrugged and said, "It's better to rule in Hell."

Icera might never be free from bondage, but he certainly didn't have to be a slave for another Athaki. Tantoret could be his. The lives on Tantoret still had some innate value, Icera's included. If Icera were the head of the guards, he could maintain his dignity, as well as the dignity of all the Athaki. It was better to rule in Hell than to serve anywhere.

When it became clear that Raimo would not be returning, a fight broke out. For the first time in over a dozen cycles, nobody had direct control over the springs. Worse than that, nobody had direct control over the psychotics that Raimo had always liked to surround himself with. Each one of them claimed to be Raimo's second-in-command. Bloodshed was inevitable.

Snod watched the battle from a safe distance, idly picking the dirt from beneath his fingernails as Raimo's so-called favorites pounded on each other. Snod had no use for them. Tantoret would be better off if they killed each other. Apparently, he wasn't the only one who felt that way. Nobody, guards or prisoners, made any effort to intervene.

Snod had known Raimo when they were both working on Oena. Raimo had never struck him as particularly intelligent. He liked to work jobs that were all muscle and no finesse. Why worry about a clever plan to steal a million credits when he could hijack a transport and walk away with an easy ten thousand? That had been how Raimo lost an eye. He hijacked the wrong transport and took a shot to the face with a disrupter. He had escaped anyway, but he hadn't been bright enough to avoid transports after that. Snod had no patience for men who made the same mistake more than once.

That wasn't to say Raimo had no good ideas. Like every other prisoner in the main cavern, he had heard of Raimo's plan to take out Jasak and hijack the core. It had been inelegant, but it probably would have worked if Raimo had been careful. The basics of the idea were sound, and Snod figured it would be a terrible waste to just forget the whole sorry affair. Staging a coup and taking over the whole prison would be a hell of a trick. Nobody else currently sentenced to Tantoret would be able to pull it off, but Snod wasn't an amateur. And the groundwork had already been laid. All he had to do was wait for those jokers to kill themselves.

The guards weren't around for the brawl—it seemed like they never were these cycles—so

Snod felt comfortable pulling a long, thin piece of rock from his pocket. The guards hadn't figured out a way to stop the inmates from fashioning crude weapons. Snod had carefully cut a thin piece of rock the shape of an arrowhead out of the wall, and honed one edge until it was razor sharp. The bottom was just the right size and shape to fit in Snod's hand comfortably.

This wasn't the first blade he had fashioned. Shortly after his arrival, he had immediately tested the boundaries of Tantoret by openly making a weapon. And then openly using it to cleave Raimo's ear from his skull. Despite the fact Raimo had survived the attack, the stone knife was tossed into the core, and Snod had been placed in solitary confinement for one full cycle. Snod never caused anybody a moment of trouble after that. He fulfilled all his quotas early and pointedly stayed out of Raimo's way. He never even spoke.

Behaving himself wasn't any sort of great hardship for Snod. He knew how to be good, he just didn't care for it. His mother had always said that Snod had been born under a bad sign, and that's why she named him as she had. Maybe his mother had been right. She hadn't even seemed shocked when he drove a knife through her throat.

The unmistakable sound of a skull smacking against stone caught Snod's attention, and he

looked up just as blood began to pollute the spring the two men had been fighting so hard for. The winner laughed and raised his arms above his head in a sign of victory. A few of the men cheered, a few others rushed to the loser's side, but everybody else went about their business, not-so-patiently waiting for the fight to be over so they could have their baths.

Snod pushed to his feet. In his world, chojal grew at the sites of battles. The larger the battle, the more the bloodshed, the more chojal would be harvested from the ground. He crossed the cave in five long strides, grabbed the victor by the hair, yanked his head back and slit the man's throat. The dirt absorbed the blood like it was hungry for it.

Jasak was moving. Not a lot. Aleron might not have even noticed, except for the fact he was intensely aware of his bedmate. Every breath, every beat of his heart, every sigh, every shift of his body. Jasak's frame felt like an extension of his own flesh. When he tried to shift away from the Athaki, Jasak responded by tightening his hold and pulling Aleron closer in his sleep.

But he wasn't awake. He wasn't responsive. He was simply moving.

Jasak's cock lay trapped between the two of them. Aleron felt its heat through the material of their pants. For the first time since Aleron arrived on Tantoret, his skin was slick with sweat. His cock was also as hard as a rock, and when Jasak rocked his hips forward, his own erection rubbed against the mattress.

Aleron had no great desire to learn what happened when an Athaki was startled out of sleep. Before he could decide just what to do, Jasak settled more firmly on top of him, pinning him completely. In other circumstances, Aleron might have enjoyed the friction Jasak created between them. But he was too busy worrying about what could happen to him if he woke Jasak—and what would happen if he didn't.

Aleron's mind raced, searching for possible escape routes, his lungs aching from lack of air, and his groin aching from the pressure. His ass clenched again and again, as if preparing for the slow, inevitable penetration. He still had the mental capacity to plan his escape—until Jasak pressed his mouth to Aleron's neck just below his ear and moaned.

Something about the sound sucked the fight right out of Aleron. His limbs went lax and the tension drained from his muscles. When Jasak moaned again, the sound pierced Aleron, hot and sharp, cutting through him like a hot blade

through flesh. It was a strangely vulnerable sound, like Jasak was lost somewhere and struggling to find his way home.

Maybe he used to sleep curled around somebody, and he still sought their warmth and companionship. Maybe in his dreams he was back in... Where did Athaki come from? Belenia? Maybe he was back on Belenia, surrounded by its familiar scents and sounds, and as far away from the darkness of Tantoret—and the pain in his body—as possible.

Aleron turned his head carefully until his lips brushed against the corner of Jasak's mouth. He half-expected the contact to startle Jasak awake, but the Athaki's eyes remained tightly closed. Emboldened, he pushed back, rocking his own hips in response to Jasak's slow movements. Jasak immediately jerked his hips, and his hand slid up Aleron's arm until their fingers touched. Without thinking, Aleron entwined his fingers through Jasak's, holding him in place as they continued to thrust and rock against each other.

Was Jasak still asleep? Despite the nearly violent way he moved his hips, Aleron thought he must be. Jasak wouldn't let himself lose control. Not while he was conscious.

Jasak had been freezing when he finally returned to the cave. Not only that, he had been injured. What if he was delirious at the moment,

and not really asleep at all? Aleron had very little desire to be trapped under an ill, delirious alien who was probably ten times stronger than him and with at least twice the body mass. Especially since said alien had razorlike claws and retractable teeth that could literally tear through his bones.

“Jasak?”

Something scraped across his face, and he realized it was the points of Jasak’s dull teeth.

“Jasak? Sir? Can you hear me?”

Aleron tried to twist away, but the fingers wrapped around his tightened until he thought the bones were going to snap. He immediately froze, catching his breath and trying to force himself to relax again. He realized he was starting to panic, and knew it was dangerous, but he couldn’t will away the fear threatening to overwhelm him. It began crowding out the arousal he felt before. He was helpless. Breakable. At Jasak’s mercy, and no matter how many times he tried to scream Jasak’s name, his muffled voice fell on deaf ears.

Don’t fight him and he won’t hurt you. Don’t fight him. Just breathe. He’s not trying to hurt you. He’s not even awake. Move slowly.

Instead of trying to squirm free, Aleron very slowly rolled to his side. The action disrupted Jasak’s rhythm, but not enough to actually prompt him off the bed. He also didn’t release Aleron’s hand, so he was forced to lift his arm above his

head, twisting his elbow as much as he could without dislocating his shoulder. In that way, he managed to turn onto his back without prompting retaliation from the still-sleeping Athaki.

The elation of the minor victory was short-lived. Aleron wasn't sure if he had improved his situation or made everything substantially worse. His cock was pressed against Jasak's erection, his blood roared in his ears, and his mouth was only an inch away from Jasak's full lips.

Chapter Eleven

“Run.”

“No.”

“They’ll arrest you if you don’t.”

“Maybe they should.”

“You don’t mean that.”

“Don’t I?”

Lips pressed into a hard line. Bodies stiffened even more. Jasak tightened his grip, feeling sinew mold to the curve of his hand.

Kayoly bent his head to rest his brow against Jasak’s throat. The act of ultimate submission, but Jasak recognized the ploy that it was. “Don’t make me watch them take you. Please.”

“I’m not a coward.”

He snapped straight again, the warrior returned. “No. You’re a fool.”

Jasak caught the claws from slashing across his face and bent Kayoly’s arm back, then away. Heat still bled through his body, the imprint of his lover branded against his flesh. He took a long, deep breath, and shuddered at the fear seeping beneath the familiar scents.

Wrong. It was all wrong. They were all gone, he shouldn’t feel anything anymore, shouldn’t

smell the tang of prey. He'd given up the rights to all of that too many cycles before.

Cycles...

His eyes snapped open. Instead of Kayoly's clear gray gaze, he met a startled brown one, pupils devouring the irises. Sweat dampened straight black hair against a wide forehead, and the smell of fear and arousal thickened the air between their crushed bodies.

Prey.

His nostrils flared.

No.

Aleron.

The remnants of his dream faded, replaced by the all-too-real presence of the human sharing his bed. Memories of Aleron yielding to Jasak's desire for warmth rushed back, how he'd kept on talking long after he'd joined Jasak. His voice and heat had lulled Jasak to sleep far more quickly than he would have expected. And the dreams...

He couldn't think of that. His dreams were always torturous, though nothing he didn't deserve. The fact that he'd slept more deeply, more satisfyingly, than he had since being shackled and dragged from Belenia was all that

mattered. And all because of the man beneath him.

The one whose heart thumped almost painfully against Jasak's chest.

"I was hot," Aleron blurted, then swallowed as if he wished to take the words back. "I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize."

He started to shift, only to freeze when he became more aware of their bodies. He held Aleron's hand in a tight grip, his arm stretched above his head, while their legs lined up as neatly as their hard cocks. Now, he understood at least some of the scents coming from Aleron's flesh.

Easing his hold, he pulled his arm back, skimming his fingers along the slick skin. Aleron was drenched in sweat. Salty, tangy, mouth-watering sweat. Fresh desire raged through Jasak, and need drowned out temperance. He turned his head and dragged his tongue over Aleron's stubbled jaw.

Aleron shivered. The ripples radiated through Jasak's tongue, adding to the explosion of flavor that already made him ravenous for more. He licked again, lower this time, over a pulse point and fragile skin. It would take so little effort to pierce the delicate membrane. He could tap into the iron-rich blood coursing just beneath the surface, and satisfy more than his need for warmth.

One bite. That's all it would take.

One bite.

Jasak froze. Pinned below him, Aleron held his breath, waiting for whatever would come next, waiting because he had no other choice. He'd told Aleron he wanted only what was freely offered, but that wasn't entirely true. His conscience demanded it, but his body wasn't nearly as solicitous.

"I would tell you to run," Jasak said. "Except I fear I'd lose the last shred of my reason, then."

Aleron let his breath out in a quick, hot blast that blew across Jasak's ear. "I don't want to run."

"You should."

"Why? Are you going to kill me?"

He couldn't stop himself. He caught a sweaty patch of Aleron's shoulder in his mouth, and sucked as hard as he could. Aleron jerked, rubbing their cocks together, and a low growl emanated from Jasak's chest. The salt made his head spin. It made him want more. He tore himself away, because he knew if he didn't, he'd take it.

"You taste like prey." He met Aleron's dark gaze again. Aleron needed to know how serious he was. "And I've been here for a very long time."

"You could have killed me at any point." His voice was eerily calm. "You haven't."

"That could change."

"Somehow, I don't think you'll let it."

That was Jasak's fondest wish, but he had learned a long time ago not to put too much stock in wishes.

"What do you want?" Aleron asked.

The answer came swiftly. "To devour you."

His pulse leapt, but he didn't otherwise move.

"Do you want me dead?"

"No." This response was just as quick as its predecessor.

A hint of a smile softened Aleron's mouth. "So let's find something in-between."

"Like what?"

"Well...you seemed to like licking me." His other arm stretched above his head, lengthening his slim, smooth body even more. The muscles remained relaxed, though, all except those in his thighs. "If that'll satisfy you, I'm more than willing."

It wasn't a question of satisfying him. It was a matter of not triggering stronger, more dangerous urges. But Aleron was according him free rein, knowing full well the threat. That held value, whether the man realized it or not. That trust gave Jasak all the strength he needed to continue.

He bent his head again, collecting every ounce of salt and fluid. His second lick was slower, longer, and his eyes fluttered shut, too overwhelmed by the bounty within his grasp. He fisted the bedcovering at Aleron's sides, using it

to brace his weight, but he couldn't stop his hips from undulating against the firm body in tandem with the sweeps of his mouth.

Aleron groaned. His breath came faster, and fresh scents emerged from his skin. Fear vanished. In its place was his arousal, the pungent smell settling wet and heavy on the back of Jasak's tongue. When he started to move his arm down, Jasak grabbed his wrist and held it in place, changing the course of his attack to hone in on his armpit.

First, Jasak breathed him in. This wasn't the sweat of exertion, the type that tasted like oil and coated the tongue until it lost all sensation. This was earthy and ripe, the film of lust. Inhaling it took Jasak away from the cold caves of Tantoret. Here, he was under the bright moons, buried in the long grasses with a more than willing partner writhing beneath him.

When his head was filled with Aleron's scent, he nosed in the dark hair to make it stronger. The moment the smell erupted, he dropped his jaw and sucked at the damp skin, moaning at the new tastes dancing along his tongue. Aleron squirmed at first, but the harder Jasak sucked and licked, the calmer he got, until the only movement at all came from the rapid rise and fall of his chest.

He cleaned away every drop he found, sliding over Aleron's torso to reach the other side. He

paused when the sweep of his tongue over a flat, coppery nipple elicited a sharp gasp, and he glanced up through the waves of his hair to see Aleron watching him, a hunger he hadn't anticipated gleaming in his eyes.

Jasak didn't look away. He lowered his head, dropped his jaw and licked across the small patch of flesh again. The corresponding shudder was the only proof he needed to confirm his suspicion.

"You enjoy this."

"Yes."

"Not all males of your species do."

"They don't know what they're missing."

The answer amused him, though he was quickly learning that much of Aleron's manner intrigued him. He flicked his tongue over the tip that had hardened with his last lick and watched the color deepen in Aleron's cheeks.

He would get great pleasure discovering what other parts of the man's body brought such strong responses. For now, though, he wanted to finish what he had started, before Aleron's flesh had a chance to cool.

By the time he'd licked away the last of the sweat on Aleron's other side, Aleron whimpered at every caress. Muscles beneath the skin trembled. Where their groins pressed, his pants had gone wet with his arousal. Jasak deliberately

lengthened the grinds of his hips to better allow the coarse fabric to scrape over Aleron's shaft.

The man's sweat was no longer enough. Jasak wanted more.

He released Aleron's wrist to better shift his position, and immediately, Aleron lowered his arms to touch the back of Jasak's head. The first threading through his hair almost made him stop. The touch was too intimate, too reminiscent of other hands. He had to focus on the fact that they were smaller before he had the fortitude to touch his lips to Aleron's skin again. Even then, he had to keep his eyes open, on the unblemished perfection of the human beneath him, to remember who exactly he was with.

When he reached the waistband, he made short work of the tie that held them up, freeing the garment to push it down Aleron's legs. Aleron helped by lifting his hips, and the fleeting glimpse of his curved ass brought a sharp edge to Jasak's desire. He didn't let Aleron settle. Instead, he slid between his thighs and knelt, cupping Aleron's buttocks and holding him off the bed. It angled his body, putting most of his weight onto his shoulders, but Aleron didn't fight it. He met Jasak's eyes and smiled, spreading his legs even more to allow Jasak room.

He didn't need it. As soon as Aleron was exposed, Jasak lowered his head and licked the straining shaft from balls to dripping tip.

He'd never tasted a human's arousal before, though with a prison population comprised completely of men, he'd certainly smelled it. It was clearer than Athaki fluids, but far more tantalizing, carrying with it the richness of human blood. The temptation to take the head past his lips and simply suckle until he had his fill nearly won. Only the quiver of the thigh at his shoulder had the power to draw him away.

He feasted. There was no other word for it. Sweat had accumulated in every crease, the junction of leg to hip, the nook of cock to stomach. Jasak took it all. He swept his tongue over the furry sac, catching some of the loose skin between his teeth for a moment before letting it go. He traced the rough skin on the back of Aleron's thighs, the muscles tightening at his touch. Digging his thumbs in, he widened the gap between the firm cheeks and licked along the valley, detouring only to bury his tongue inside the man's opening.

Aleron cried out at that. He scrambled to try and touch Jasak, but the angle made it too difficult. He had to drop his arms to the bed and hold on instead.

It was easy to tell what Aleron wanted. Part of Jasak wanted it, too. The constriction around his tongue was but a shadow of what it would be like around his cock. He ached, hot and hard and hungry. But Aleron hadn't offered, and Jasak hadn't asked, and the lure of every drop leaking just inches away grew increasingly difficult to ignore.

The taste lingered after he withdrew, and though Aleron tried to curl his leg around Jasak's shoulder to force him back, his strength was no match. Jasak lowered him to the bed, glancing up once to catch the disappointment in Aleron's face before he studiously masked it away.

"Thank you," Aleron said, his voice thin and breathless.

Jasak shook his head. "I'm not done." He ran his finger though the clear liquid smeared across Aleron's stomach and licked it clean. "I want this, too."

"Take it. Whatever you want."

As Jasak cradled the thick shaft against his palm, he mused over whether or not Aleron realized what he offered. He doubted it. He was too caught up in his own need to think clearly. Otherwise he would have been more careful.

The moment his tongue touched the soft, wet head, all of Jasak's rational thought fled. Only need remained, the need to take Aleron into his

mouth, past his lips, to rest heavily on his tongue with the tip nudging the back of his throat.

Aleron bucked at the contact, but Jasak clamped an arm over his waist to force him down again. Jasak was most interested in devouring the full extent of his arousal. He sucked hard at the inches in his mouth, swirling his tongue around to feel every pulse and ridge, swallowing every drop that flowed free.

Within seconds, Aleron was babbling, pleading for Jasak to move, to stop, to do anything but what he was. The delight Jasak felt surprised him. He hadn't done this for Aleron, not completely. He'd been more than a little selfish in what he took. If this was how the man responded with such little effort, how strong would the reaction be if Jasak took more care?

He let Aleron push him down, but the very first time he swallowed around the length lodged in his throat, a corresponding pulse echoed back into him, followed immediately by Aleron's shout.

He slid up quickly enough for warm come to gush across his tongue. Jasak kept his lips sealed around the shaft, convulsively drinking everything Aleron had to give. Even when the cock stopped twitching against the roof of his mouth, Jasak sucked, ravenous for more. The only thing better would be Aleron's blood and the tear of soft tissue against his fangs.

That image was the one thing powerful enough to stop him. He let Aleron go, the softening flesh slapping lightly against his stomach, and rose from the bed, turning his back immediately to hide his own erection. When he heard the bed creak from Aleron's movements, Jasak stepped farther away, beyond his reach, to the small chest that held his few items of clothing.

"I'm going to speak with the doctor about assigning you new duties," he said, removing clean garments. "Raimo is gone, but his lieutenants are still here. I'd prefer to move you out of harm's way, rather than put you back in danger."

"What kind of new duties?"

Jasak ignored the question. He wasn't sure Aleron would like the answer he would give. "Don't go anywhere until I come and fetch you. It's not safe for you to wander around."

Aleron called out after him when he went to the spring, but thankfully didn't follow. The cool water was enough to take the edge of his remaining hungers, and he felt almost normal by the time he stepped back into his quarters.

Aleron was still on the bed, curled on his side as he watched the doorway. He sat up as soon as Jasak entered.

"Let me come with you," he said.

Jasak shook his head. "I don't have time to wait."

"But what am I going to do while you're gone?"

He hadn't considered that. The previous cycle, Aleron had needed the rest and wash, but now, he was clearly ready to get back to work. The prospect of sending him to mine, however, left Jasak sick. That was why he wanted to discuss other possibilities with Rosany.

"Be glad you're alive to be bored." Before Aleron could try and sway him, he marched out of the cave.

His steps grew easier, the farther he got away. His leg was better than it had been before sleeping, the effects of the disruptor now completely out of his system. His shoulder was still a little sore, though. Rosany would need to look at it, to ensure it was no more serious than he'd thought. He had no more fears of Raimo's scent clinging to him. If all Jasak could smell was Aleron, that was all anyone else would smell, too.

He felt almost cheery when he stepped into the infirmary, though one look at Yoirryn was enough for guilt to prick his mood. Aleron needed to be shown the gravity of what he'd done, though how Jasak was going to accomplish that, he had no idea. Nodding at Rosany, he strode to Yoirryn's

bedside and scanned the length of his body before addressing him.

“How do you feel?”

Yoirryn glanced at his hand. “It’s manageable.”

The words of a brave man. “I’m sorry this happened to you, Yoirryn. I regret my failure in preventing it.”

“It wasn’t your fault, sir. But...”

Jasak waited, but Yoirryn seemed hesitant to finish his sentence. “Speak your mind.”

He glanced at Rosany, then back at Jasak, clearly uncomfortable. “I wondered...how has the prisoner been punished?”

His guilt stabbed even deeper. “I’m making those arrangements. Don’t worry.”

“Icera said, you claimed him?”

Jasak tamped down his annoyance. “Icera shouldn’t have been bothering you.”

“But is it true?”

It was pointless to lie. “Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because he was in danger in the general populace. And I can’t punish the man if he’s already dead.”

In the background, he was all too aware of Rosany’s interest in their conversation. Yoirryn was young and green. His crimes had been those of a follower, not a planner. Jasak knew he needed

to believe in a leader, and trusted that his simple explanation would be enough to appease him, if only temporarily. Rosany would not be so easily fooled. Just as Icera hadn't been. But they were not the ones Jasak worried about at the moment.

"I'm changing your duties as soon as you've healed," Jasak continued, before Yoirryn could pose any more questions. "I've given instruction to keep you here as long as necessary, too. You've suffered a terrible blow."

Yoirryn gave him a small smile and immediately looked even younger than he actually was. "Thank you, sir."

"If you need anything at all, I want you to tell Rosany. Understood?"

"Yes, sir."

Satisfied he'd done what he could, Jasak nodded and walked back to Rosany's desk. He tapped on its edge to get the doctor's attention, then gestured toward one of the private cubicles burrowed out of the wall.

"He's going to ask for more pain medication, you know," Rosany said, as soon as they were alone.

"Then give it to him. I'll requisition more."

"They won't help his claws heal back to normal."

"I know."

Rosany sighed and shook his head. "I'm not even going to try and understand what goes through your head. I'm just going to trust you know what you're doing."

"So am I." Grabbing the hem of his shirt, he pulled it over his head and turned his injured shoulder closer. "Can you tell me if this is going to heal all right?"

At first sight of the cut, Rosany frowned. "Did your prisoner do this to you?"

Jasak barely felt Rosany's expert fingers as they probed at the wound. "No. I got it from Raimo in a fight."

"Raimo? I would've thought Snod."

Mention of the brutish, silent prisoner had Jasak stiffening. "Snod? Why?"

"He slit another prisoner's throat at the start of the cycle. Over one of the springs, I think."

"Who?"

"You'd have to ask one of the guards. They didn't even bring me the body. He was already dead by the time they broke it up."

"What about the knife?"

Rosany stepped back. "Again, I defer to your guards. All I know is the gossip."

Jasak regretted his lazy time in bed more than ever now. While he'd been indulging in the taste of Aleron's body, his prison had turned on its ear.

Chaos only bred more chaos. He needed to get it in check before matters became worse.

Pulling his shirt back on, he was almost to the door before he remembered his original purpose. "I'd like to assign Aleron to medical instead of putting him back on the mining floor. What are your thoughts on the matter?"

Rosany blinked. "You want the man who broke Yoirryn's hand to be his nursemaid? Not even Yoirryn is that patient."

"No, I want him to tend to the poisoned. They don't get enough personal care, and they're going to get even less with you more distracted here."

"Is this supposed to be his punishment?"

"Would you like to be surrounded by men who have no hope of survival for the duration of the cycle? It's hardly a pretty way to die, Rosany. And the poison isn't communicable, so he can take care of them indefinitely. Another life sentence, so to speak."

Rosany still seemed unsure, but he nodded anyway. "The help would be good."

"Good."

He didn't necessarily like the idea of Aleron surrounded by the chojal poisoned, but at least there, he was in no danger of contracting the illness that would ultimately kill him. He just had to survive witnessing the effects of it.

It was the best Jasak could do.

Chapter Twelve

Since his arrival on Tantoret, Aleron had spent a great deal of time wondering what each of the inmates had done, but that question disappeared once he followed Rosany into the cavern where they kept the poisoned men sequestered. It didn't matter what brought them to Tantoret. No man, regardless of his crime, deserved to die like this.

Thirty men were ensconced in medical. Most of them were beyond speaking, lacking the strength, will or need to form words. Five of them were breathing corpses, their skin waxy and pale, their lips bloodless, their bodies motionless except for the slow movement of each shallow breath. Their hair had long since fallen out, though a few baby-fine tendrils still clung to their soft, wrinkled scalps. When they cried out, Aleron saw their teeth were gone, leaving black gums behind. Nobody remembered their names.

The other twenty-five men weren't in much better condition. One glance at their haunted faces and sunken eyes, and Aleron knew he was in a fresh hell. When Jasak had told him his new assignment would keep him from the mines and remove any reason to return to the main cavern,

Aleron had been pleased at the thought of special treatment. Now he wondered if this was some sort of punishment.

“They can’t hurt you,” Rosany said, “so don’t be afraid to touch them. Just be careful. Most of their skin has basically rotted, so it doesn’t take much to start bleeding. Once they start, the blood won’t coagulate. The number one cause of death for chojal poisoning is blood loss.”

“Why not just kill them when they’re this advanced? Why are you keeping them alive?”

“Those are my orders.”

Aleron tilted his head. “Orders from who? Jasak?”

“No. Though he probably doesn’t want them to die, either.”

“It’d be kinder.”

“You’re talking about mercy? Maybe it would be kinder to put them out of their misery like sick dogs. But one of these days, you’re going to be in the same boat. Do you think you’d want me to decide when you live and die?”

“Why do you say that?”

“What?”

Aleron gestured at the prone men. “That I’ll be in the same boat one day.”

“Because you will be. If you don’t get a blade to the stomach, you’ll live long enough to contract chojal poisoning and die a long, lingering death.”

Only here. The Athes authorities had specifically banned the mining, processing, selling and use of chojal because of the health risk, but in its manufactured form, it was mostly harmless. The hallucinations themselves were generally mild, and the intense sense of happiness, of peace and comfort, was probably the most addictive thing in the known universe. In Aleron's experience, however, the comedown was hard. It was different for everybody, but when he crashed from the impossible high chojal gave him, it felt like waking up from a horrific dream only to realize the monsters were real and there was no such thing as being safe. The edges were always too sharp, the world always too hard, and the promise of more chojal too sweet to ignore.

Rosany pointed to a large cauldron. "That's delivered here twice a cycle. We don't bother to keep it warm, but you're welcome to eat from it. Most of them still have the ability to swallow on their own. There's a spring through there. It's important to make sure they have enough water."

Aleron tried to imagine cradling the sick men with one arm and pulling back their sunken lips to force down the food and water. His stomach churned. He wasn't going to survive a single cycle in this place.

"If you need anything, I'll be in the infirmary."

"Wait. You're not going to stay here?"

“Why do I need to stay? I’ve got you now.” Rosany paused at the entrance and looked over his shoulder. “One more thing. Don’t turn out the light. For some reason, the dark gets all of them screaming.”

Aleron tried to imagine the five corpselike bodies shrieking in the darkness. “All of them?”

“All of them. It’s a hell of a thing. Maybe they think they’re already dead.”

“Well...thanks for the warning.” If the lights went out, they wouldn’t be the only ones screaming.

Once Rosany was gone, Aleron walked along the perimeter of the cavern, surveying the area. It was an oddly shaped space, longer than it was wide, with protrusions jutting out at irregular angles from the walls. In the dim light, he noticed many of the protrusions had strange shadows, and as he got closer, he realized they weren’t shadows at all. They were letters and figures and hash marks—each one painted on to the stone with blood. Each one told a different story of the prisoners who had passed their final days there, simultaneously praying for and terrified of death.

The faces of the men he passed blurred together, though in most cases, all distinguishing features had been erased. One skull looked like another, even when the skull still had a thin layer of skin resting over it. The men who had their

eyes open stared back at him. Did the poisoning affect the brain? Was it rotting away, too? Or did they still have all of their faculties? Aleron couldn't decide which was worse.

"You're still alive."

Aleron immediately spun to find the speaker. There was no doubt that the words had been addressed to him, but he couldn't quite place the voice. The face, on the other hand, was familiar, including the gray stubble that covered his head like fur.

"Luca? Is that you?"

"It's me. You're that kid that Raimo wanted to cut, right?"

"Yes. Aleron."

"Aleron. What are you doing here? You already sick?"

"No. I've been sent to tend to all the sick prisoners."

"Tend to us?" Luca bent, his slight body folding in half as he began to cough. "What for?"

"To make you comfortable."

"There's no getting comfortable here."

"Yeah. I can see that. How long have you been sick?"

His body shook with another torrent of coughing. "A long time. If I had known...well, I probably wouldn't have done what I did."

Aleron waited for further explanation, but when none was forthcoming, he decided not to press. "If there's anything I can do..."

"Nothing you can do." He leaned against the wall and shut his eyes again. At that angle, and in that light, he looked like a ghost. Moisture on his face caught and reflected the light, and Aleron realized it was tears. "Nothing anybody can do. Not anymore."

The reality of those words almost drove Aleron to his knees as he was once again faced with the crushing reality of Tantoret. Even in the caverns free of chojal, he couldn't escape the toxicity in the air.

A tiny voice whispered from behind him. "Help me."

"Who said that?" Aleron turned in a slow circle, searching for the most likely speaker.

"Help me...please..."

"Where are you?" Aleron took a step, spun to a new direction, and took another step. "I can't tell who's speaking."

"By the wall... I can hear...the water."

That was enough information to at least set Aleron in the right direction, but it still didn't tell him who was speaking or the kind of help they needed. He carefully stepped around the jutting mounds of rock and the shallowly breathing prisoners until he heard a soft, "Please help."

"I'm here. I'm here." He crouched beside a startlingly small form. "Who are you?"

"Macario. Who're...you?"

"My name is Aleron. I've been assigned here to help. Do you need anything?"

"Yes...out of here..."

"I wish I could. I really do."

"Need...to see...Tias."

Aleron frowned. "Tias? The guard?"

"Yes."

"What do you need with him? Has somebody hurt you? Did he hurt you?"

"No. No...I just...need to see him." The man looked at him with huge dark eyes. Like Luca, he had been crying. His tears left tracks in the dirt before they dried. Aleron looked down and noticed his hands were completely bandaged. Rags had been tied in tight knots from his arms to the tips of his fingers. They wiggled uselessly, reaching for nothing, unable to grasp anything at all.

"Aren't you the prisoner he attacked?"

"He just...wanted some...of my blood. But I...have something of his. He won't come here."

"No, I don't think he will. But I could give him a message. Or the item."

"It's...in my shirt. Take it."

Aleron lifted the loose-fitting shirt with one hand and slid his other beneath the material. He

was careful not to touch Macario's skin at all. The last thing he wanted was to cover the other man with fresh blood. His fingertips finally brushed against a piece of warm metal. He hooked his finger through it and tugged gently. The chain it rested on gave way and Aleron pulled it free, holding it up to the light.

It wasn't a piece of jewelry. It was too big to be a ring, even for an Athaki. It was probably gold, carved in the shape of a serpent swallowing its own tail. The sign of eternity. He gave it an experimental shake and thought he heard something rattling inside. A flick of his finger against it confirmed it was hollow.

"Promise to...give it to him. I need—"

The floor and walls shifted suddenly. Aleron lost his balance and tilted to the side, putting his hand down to catch himself. Rocks the size of fists showered from the low ceiling, and he automatically rolled into a fetal position, moving to protect his head. The lights flickered on and off and on and finally blinked off. As soon as the room plunged in darkness, the shaking stopped.

Within seconds, the crying began.

"Macario? Are you all right?"

No answer, except the sounds of ghosts. Over two dozen phantoms screaming for light, for help, for any sign that they hadn't yet fallen into hell.

The core ground to a halt. In the tunnels below, at least one hundred prisoners and twelve guards were trapped with freshly mined chojal that had nowhere to go and nothing to do but leak poison. In the main cavern, another two hundred prisoners huddled in the dark, clutching the bowls that contained their first meal of the cycle. Without the core, they had no way to minimize the poison in the air. Without the core, they couldn't power the cells that generated their lights. Without the core, they were nothing more than corpses in the grave.

In the years since Jasak's arrival on Tantoret, he had learned everything there was to know about the core. It was a massive piece of machinery to be respected, and even loved. It wasn't terribly complicated or impressive, though. The Athaki were not a technologically advanced race—they didn't seek the stars, but were carried out to them—but the core wasn't anything Jasak couldn't have seen on Belenia.

Jasak raced through the twisting corridors, using his memory and sense of smell to guide him through the tunnels. He had only one thought, one goal, and nothing would stand in his way. When the lights were back on, he could coordinate whatever rescue efforts were necessary. When the lights were back on, he could survey the damage.

The darkness was so complete that even his sensitive eyes couldn't pick anything out. There wasn't a hint of light from the world above, and though he kept lanterns and flashlights, none were immediately on hand. He didn't dare divert from his path to search for one. Every second he spent fumbling in the dark would be a second that brought them all closer to suffocation. The core was also responsible for pumping in fresh oxygen from above. He couldn't rely on his eyes for this task. And the radio was still down. He couldn't even hope that the authorities would send aid or support. Not that they had the time to wait.

The sour, sickly smell of chojal assaulted him as soon as he entered the core's cavern. His body responded by going on the defensive. He willed his claws to retract, but didn't bother with his fangs or his ears. Being prepared for an attack—even an imaginary one—kept all five of his senses alert.

He slowed to a careful walk as he approached the silent machine. Jasak often wondered who had first built and installed the thing. Tantoret hadn't always been a prison planet. Were the authorities responsible for the thing that made life possible there? Or had they simply taken advantage of what was left behind by a conquered civilization? Knowing its origins would have helped Jasak understand how it worked. There were so many

holes in his knowledge. So many spaces and blank spots. He could blow them all to the stars if he wasn't careful. But taking his time could condemn them to suffocation.

The core was still expending a huge amount of heat. He ignored the way his skin tightened and hair singed as he moved closer to the control panel. From a great distance he heard shouts and answering growls from the guards. If it wasn't for those echoing cries, Jasak could have believed he was alone. If all of them took advantage of the darkness and the chaos to race to the surface, Jasak knew he wouldn't try to bring any of them back.

He dropped to his hands and knees, then flattened himself to the ground. He had to shimmy under the machine to reach the panel, leaving himself immobilized and vulnerable. The light beneath the core was always limited, but Karis, his predecessor, had made it a point to teach Jasak how to work in the dark. Even though he couldn't see the various buttons and levers, he knew exactly which ones to press.

Once he began the process, he would have exactly thirty seconds to complete the sequence and slide to safety. If he didn't make it clear in time, the massive intake system would suck him into the fires. But if he failed to ignite the

sequence, the core was programmed to respond to an emergency by locking itself down completely.

With his heart in his throat, he pressed the second button to his left. The core growled above him and the countdown began.

Chapter Thirteen

The dark swallowed everything but the whimpers and screams, amplifying both until Aleron's ears vibrated. Every hair on the back of his neck stood on end, goose bumps rippled across his shoulders, and his lungs refused to expand properly, allowing only the shallowest of breaths, small gulps of air that added to the sensation of being buried alive. He didn't fear the darkness. The darkness had been his savior more than once.

But death terrified him.

The thought of reaching out and accidentally touching the dying made him want to retch. The bodies surrounding him wavered on death's edge. One glancing blow, and he was convinced he would push them over, or worse, get dragged along with them.

He managed a single shuddering breath, and took one step. The circlet seared into his palm. Macario had trusted him to return it to Tias. Aleron had no clue as to its significance, except that it had some. To a dying man, a man with no more hope, no more ties, no more reason to exist except the one he'd created for himself. That alone gave him the strength to set aside his selfish

panic and inch along the wall in search of the light.

The occasional rock still fell. Aleron kept his head low, his shoulders hunched, protecting himself from injury. His empty hand splayed against the soft wall, searching for anything that might help. A candle. A torch. An exit. He had to stop when his toe nudged against the edge of the bed, and one particular keening grew immediately louder.

“Sorry,” he murmured, though there was no way he could be heard over the cacophony. He dropped to his knees and crawled around the end of the pallet. His only thought was to get the lights back on.

A sigh beneath the anguish. Someone else lapsed into French, a language he hadn’t heard since running away from home. That, more than all the rest of it, made his stomach heave, and he swallowed down the bile burning in the back of his throat.

He cried out when a hand curled around his shoulder. He tried to wrench free, but the grip slipped downward, around his wrist, the sharp edge of unmistakable claws digging slightly through his thin shirt.

“Rosany?”

“Stand up.”

The doctor's voice was close and firm, a welcome rock to cling to. Aleron summoned what little resolve he had left and pushed to his feet, forced forward when Rosany unexpectedly moved.

"Where are we going?"

"I need to get you out of here."

"You can see in this?"

"I don't need to."

"I'm not hurt."

"And you won't be."

He tried to pull free, but couldn't break Rosany's grip. "But what about the others?"

"It's too late for them anyway."

He had more questions, but Rosany wasn't stopping, weaving back and forth. Once, Aleron tripped over the corner of a bed, sending forth another wail, but all that did was speed Rosany's steps. He recognized their passage through the doorway only because of the difference in the smell. The wet scent of Tantoret earth had never been so appealing.

Rosany turned him left, into a corridor that brushed against Aleron's shoulders. It forced the doctor to finally release his hold, and in a moment of blind terror, Aleron scrambled to grab on to Rosany's shirt. His fingers slid through something slick, and he jerked to a halt when he realized what it was.

“Why are you bleeding?” he demanded.

Rosany’s voice drifted from several feet ahead. “We don’t have time for questions like this. You stay here, and you’ll die.”

“I’m going to die anyway.”

“Not today, if I can help it.”

“Will you at least tell me what’s happening?”

He only knew Rosany stopped because he could no longer hear his footsteps. “Listen.”

“To what?”

“Just listen.”

Though the darkness was still absolute, Aleron closed his eyes and focused. The air was heavy, oppressive. It weighed on the back of his head, the tops of his shoulders. The only thing breaking it was the occasional clod of rocks falling from the ceiling.

“I don’t hear anything.”

“Exactly.”

When Rosany started moving again, Aleron darted forward, scrubbing his wet hand across the front of his shirt. “What do you...?”

His query faded away. The only place he ever heard utter silence was in Jasak’s quarters. Everywhere else, the core rumbled in ragged time with everybody’s heartbeats.

Without the core, everybody would suffocate. Everybody.

When he grabbed on to Rosany this time, he ignored the blood, or the question of how he might have got hurt. He didn't even care why the doctor had bothered to get him out of medical in the first place. What mattered was they were doing something about it, escaping to the surface, or fleeing to somewhere safe, or maybe he was even taking Aleron to Jasak. The where didn't matter as long as it was secure. In his heart, he hoped Jasak was there, too.

Rosany startled him when he abruptly halted, and Aleron jerked back to avoid collision. A moment later, a feeble white light outlined Rosany's shoulders, and then they were moving again, into the stifling silence, past an arch that Aleron recognized would take them toward the infirmary.

"Where are you taking me?"

Still no answers. They rounded another corner, and this time, Aleron didn't have time to stop before crashing into Rosany's back. He had to duck down to see around him, and the flimsy illumination—an oddly shaped piece of chojal Rosany must have dug out of the wall—cast an oblong circle into the yawning space before them.

Bodies rushed around, more shadow than form. Rosany's arm shot out and snagged one.

"Where's Jasak?"

The guard he'd stopped wasn't one Aleron knew. He answered in the Athaki tongue, too swiftly for Aleron to decipher. His grasp on the language was limited to the basic words he'd been exposed to.

He didn't need to understand to know the words under Rosany's breath were curses.

The guard rushed off, and when Rosany didn't try to stop him, Aleron knew it was bad. He squeezed around and cut off the path to escape, staring up at Rosany in growing alarm.

"Just tell me if he's dead." Because if Jasak was dead, Aleron's protection was gone. He'd be open prey for anyone, and his chances of getting aboveground would drop to less than zero.

"He might as well be." Rosany dragged the back of his hand across his mouth. His lip had been bleeding, too, and now, another smear stained his face. "He went to the core to try and get it started again."

"Why did it stop?"

"Your guess is as good as mine."

"Isn't anybody going to help him?"

"Nobody else is crazy enough to try."

He had a point. Jasak had been adamant about the core's danger from the start. But he would still fight for his prisoners' last hopes.

When Rosany attempted to move, Aleron darted in front of him again. "How do I get there?"

"You don't."

"Are you going to stop me?"

"I'm not going to help you."

"Really? You got me out of medical when you didn't have to. All I need is for you to point the way."

Rosany was usually the picture of indifference, but right now, he looked every inch the predator the rest of the guards did. The blood on his face lent an added ferocity, and the way he shoved his fists into his armpits, as if to keep them away from slashing into anyone who dared cross his path, made Aleron stiffen, though not yield an inch.

"I got you out for Jasak."

"Why?"

"Did you get sent here for annoying the wrong person with all your questions?" Though he glared at Aleron, Aleron held his position. Rosany growled in frustration and looked away. "Jasak has never claimed a prisoner before, and I consider him a friend. I got you out because you must matter to him." His head snapped back, eyes glowing in fury. "Not that any of this means anything if we're all going to die anyway."

Before, Aleron wouldn't have been so sure about how much he might mean to Jasak. He'd condemned him to help with the dying prisoners, after all. But he'd also spent long minutes driving Aleron insane with desire, licking over every bare inch of him, sucking his cock with an exquisite expertise that left his legs useless long after Jasak left. He'd protected him, when he had every right to punish. Perhaps there was a small grain of truth in Rosany's assessment.

"If Jasak dies, so do I. I'm not asking you to go with me. I just want to know how to get there."

Rosany's mouth thinned. He wasn't going to answer.

With a snort of disgust, Aleron whipped his shirt over his head and wrapped it around his free hand. It wasn't the best protection, but it would have to do. Rosany didn't protest when he grabbed the chojal, neither did he stop him when he swept the light over the room they were in. It was one of the ancillary caverns off the main chamber, used by many of the men for private games. No games were played now. Only the frantic shift of shadows as guards and prisoners alike bolted for safety.

He knew the general direction of the core, if not its exact location. Leaving Rosany behind was easier than facing his choice to go after Jasak, so Aleron concentrated on the rhythm of his feet

rather than the frustration of his thoughts. The light helped, though his prison had never seemed so sinister before.

Then, the walls shuddered again.

He ducked his head out of instinct, but no rocks fell. In a moment, he realized it wasn't another tremor. This noise was familiar, and for the first time, a relief.

The core. It was groaning back to life.

It gave him new direction, and he took off down the left hallway. Some of the lights started to flicker on, and as soon as he didn't need it anymore, he tossed aside the chojal. He wouldn't think about the possibility of its venom seeping through the fabric to infect him like those he'd left behind. He concentrated on following the sound, each step deepening the resonations through his skin.

The fact that almost everybody ran in the opposite direction only confirmed his path. Everybody, that is, but a guard he had to look at twice to recognize.

Aleron pressed against the wall, trying to disappear. He hadn't seen Icera since Jasak's claim. His instincts shouted at him to run away. Why was he going after Jasak anyway? Survival was his priority, and the slight chance Jasak might be able to help in that regard was not necessarily

worth the greater odds he might get killed if he tried to help.

Perhaps Icera was going to help Jasak, too. They *were* on the same side.

If anything proved his worth to Icera, it would be helping. When Icera stepped through a low-pitched opening in the wall, Aleron followed a couple steps behind.

The heat blasted into him, stealing his breath. He crumpled silently to his knees, lingering in the shadows, as he fought against the urge to vomit. How did the Athaki stand it? Already, he felt his hair crisping at his nape, his eyeballs drying out in the temperature's onslaught.

He squeezed his eyes shut to search for some balance. When he opened them again, he saw the core in the center of the room, and Icera standing beside it. A shape separated from the void beneath the massive machine, and Aleron's pulse jumped when he recognized Jasak's long, honeyed hair masking his pale skin.

Icera hadn't noticed. He was too busy working at some kind of panel out of sight.

"Who's there?" Jasak twisted toward Icera, though from his vantage, Aleron was sure he could only see the guard's feet. "Help me out of here."

His words were nearly drowned out by the core. Though they were faint, Aleron heard them,

and more, Icera did, too. He glanced down at the floor, but didn't otherwise move, his fingers flying faster over the controls.

Jasak pulled himself out a few more inches, but stopped, his progress impeded by something unseen. There was no way Icera couldn't see him now. Aleron held his breath, waiting for him to do something, anything, to help his superior, but when it became obvious he wasn't going to, finally broke through the stasis holding him in place.

"Jasak!"

He scrambled forward, dropping the circlet Macario had given him to the dust. His scurried entrance attracted both sets of eyes, nearly pinning him in place with their intensity. Jasak's burned with surprise, while Icera's chilled in hatred.

Both reactions were gone as quickly as they'd appeared. Icera dropped to his knees and reached for Jasak at the same time Aleron did. Together, they pulled him out the rest of the way.

Jasak rolled onto his back and gasped for breath. Blood trickled from a long gash down the side of his leg, his pants torn to reveal the jagged skin beneath it. It was the same leg that had been giving him problems the night he'd come back to his quarters and crawled into bed with Aleron.

"Are you okay?" Aleron's hands fluttered over Jasak's upper body, unable to land in any one

place. He was nervous about seeming too familiar in front of Icera, but Icera wasn't bothering to help. "Can you walk?"

Slowly, Jasak turned his head toward Aleron. "What are you doing here?"

"Helping if you'll let me." He focused on Jasak rather than Icera, more confident that he'd be all right as long as he didn't antagonize the other guard. "Tell me what to do."

"He's wearing Athaki blood," Icera growled. "We should throw him into the core."

"It's Rosany's. He was hurt when he came to get me out of medical. I didn't do it."

"I'm not giving the core another reason to shut down." Bracing his hands, Jasak pushed himself upward, grunting against some unknown pain as he straightened. "We're lucky it's back online as it is. Do the controls look all right?"

His last question was directed at Icera, who nodded. "Everything is functioning as it should be."

"Get back to the main population, then." Ignoring Aleron's hands, Jasak heaved to his feet, leaning heavily on his uninjured leg. "There will be chaos. We need to restore order as soon as possible."

"What happened? How do we know it won't shut down again?"

Jasak glanced at Aleron once before shaking his head. "It's too early to determine. But I'll stay here until I'm sure it's stable. Go."

Icera cast one hateful glance at Aleron before storming off. When it was just the two of them, Jasak's hand clamped over Aleron's shoulder.

"Help me get to the wall."

Aleron slipped beneath Jasak's arm, guiding him away from the core. With the wall at his back, Jasak took the weight off his hurt leg, though he didn't sit down as Aleron had expected.

"You shouldn't be here," he said.

"I don't care. Somebody needed to help you."

"Icera was here."

"Icera ignored you until I said something."

His accusation brought a frown. "Did something happen that Rosany felt the need to get you out of medical?"

Aleron hesitated. He didn't want to reveal Rosany's explanation, for fear of damaging his relationship with Jasak. If they even had a relationship.

"The men were screaming. I think he came to check on them, and decided to get me out while he could."

The reason appeased Jasak, at least for the moment. Aleron doubted little could distract him from the problems with the core anyway.

"You should go. I will be here for some time."

He'd said *should*, which wasn't a direct order. Aleron took the option gratefully and shook his head. "I want to stay in case something happens again."

Jasak sighed. "All right. But only because I'm too tired to argue with you right now."

Relief replaced his fear, and he leaned against the wall at Jasak's side. Their arms touched, oddly reassuring, but while the core's heat heightened the smell of blood that clung to both of them, Aleron felt safer than he had since he'd last been in Jasak's bed.

That almost made the rest of the nightmare worth it.

Chapter Fourteen

Neither one of them spoke for a long time. A hundred questions crowded Aleron's mind, but he didn't dare give voice to any of them. He didn't know if Jasak was off in his own little world or listening to the core's familiar rumble in order to diagnose any further problems.

The pressure of the silence finally became too much.

"What if nobody had been here?" Aleron asked.

"What?"

"When you were under the core. What if nobody had been here to help you out?"

"It doesn't matter. You were here."

"But what if I hadn't been?" Aleron pressed.

"I would have died."

"How?"

"I would have been sucked into the core."

The answer was so simple, so straightforward, that Aleron didn't know what to make of it at first. Jasak had been within seconds of dying. Icera would have known that.

"Maybe we should go back to your room."

"I can't. Not until the end of the cycle."

“You can’t stay here for the rest of the cycle. You’re injured and you’re exhausted. You nearly died.”

“Do you know how to start the core if it dies again?”

“No.”

“Neither does anybody else. I’m not going...”
The words died on his lips and he tilted his head.
“What’s that?”

“What’s what?”

“That.” Jasak pointed at the ground just past his outstretched legs. “What is that?”

Jasak leaned forward and snagged the invisible object. As soon as he touched it, Aleron realized what it was. An unaccountable wave of fear rushed through him, as if he had done something wrong and was going to receive the punishment he rightly deserved. Aleron swallowed his nerves and set his face in a careful mask as Jasak held the circlet up to the light.

“Is this yours?” Jasak asked without looking away from the ring of gold.

“No...well, yes. But not really.”

“It’s yours but not really?”

“It’s not *mine*. One of the prisoners gave it to me right before the lights went out.”

“Who?”

“Macario.”

Jasak's face flickered with something that Aleron couldn't quite name. It wasn't anger. It wasn't confusion. It was almost *recognition*.

"Why? Why did Macario give this to you?"

There was no question of telling Jasak the truth. He owed Macario nothing, and at that moment, he owed Jasak everything. But he still wished he didn't have to answer the question. He had the feeling that Jasak was not going to like the answer.

"He told me to give it to Tias."

Jasak's shoulders stiffened, and the eyes he turned on Aleron were hard as stone. "Are you certain?"

"Yes, of course I am. Macario said he had something that belonged to Tias. I said I would deliver it for him." Aleron pushed himself to his knees so he was eye level with Jasak. "What is it?"

"You don't recognize it?"

Aleron shook his head. "Should I?"

"It is the mark of a traitor." He spat the last word, and the earlier rush of fear flooded Aleron again. He could read Jasak as well as he could read any mark, but it didn't take any special ability to realize he was furious. Everything from the set of his face to the tension in his body revealed the depth of his anger. "One I should have killed when I had the chance."

“Wait. Who is the traitor? Macario?”

“Tias.”

“I don’t understand. How can you tell? Who did he betray?”

Jasak pushed himself to his feet and walked to the other end of the room then turned on his heel and returned. He had a noticeable limp, but it didn’t slow him down. His skin gleamed and Aleron caught a flash of fang before he turned away. Feeling more than a little helpless, Aleron stayed on his knees, hands resting on his thighs. Every instinct told him to stay low and calm and as non-aggressive as possible. Jasak was tense enough that he would interpret even the most innocuous of actions as a possible attack.

“You’re a thief, aren’t you?”

Aleron stiffened. “If you think I stole that from anybody...”

“No, that isn’t what I meant. You sell what you steal on the black market, don’t you?”

“I usually have a fence find interested parties, but yeah, that’s how I move everything.”

“You deal on the black market and you’ve never seen a Lonan bangle before?”

“That’s not... It can’t be.”

“It is.”

“But...how can that be? Unless Macario is Lonanian.”

“He’s not. If the Athess authorities tried to imprison a Lonanian for anything, and I mean *anything*, they’d consider it an act of war.”

“It can’t belong to Tias, though. How would he get something like that? I mean, isn’t it against the law for a common Lonanian to wear one of those bangles? I passed through the system once, and they seemed like they were pretty big on keeping the classes separated.”

“They are.”

“Then why would Macario have such a thing? Why would he send it to Tias?”

“Whoever wears one of these things is essentially untouchable. It’s a death sentence if anybody from Athess catches somebody wearing it. He must believe Lonan will get here first.” Jasak clutched the circlet in a tight fist, and the tattoos on his face shifted in the light. “Stay here.”

“Where are you going?”

“I want to talk to Macario.”

“Then I’m going with you.”

Jasak acted so quickly that Aleron didn’t even have the chance to brace himself for the attack. A hand around his throat lifted him from the ground and pressed him to the wall. “Do not presume that you can tell me what to do just because I’ve let you take certain liberties. Do you understand me?” He slammed Aleron against the stone. “Do you?”

The edges of Aleron's vision were already shimmering and dimming. He tried to claw at the hand on his throat, but Jasak didn't even twitch. There was only one way to break his hold, but Aleron was not going to say the single word Jasak waited to hear. "He...tried...kill you..."

"What?"

"He...tried...kill you..."

The steel band suddenly disappeared from Aleron's throat, and he dropped to the ground in a heap, gasping for breath to clear his swimming head. The heat in the small room did not help, and for a moment, he wondered if he really would pass out. He blinked several times, but that didn't help bring things into focus.

"What did you say?"

"He tried to kill you. Icera...your own guard...an *Athaki*, tried to kill you." Aleron rolled to his back and stared up at Jasak. "You would have died if I hadn't been here."

"So now you think I owe you something?"

"No. Now I think I'm your only friend here. And I think you probably need one."

Jasak's nostrils flared. Aleron wondered if he had gone too far, said too much. He should have apologized. He should have kept his mouth shut to begin with. The last thing he needed was to demand Jasak's complete attention. He couldn't exactly tunnel his way out of that hellhole if he

became Jasak's shadow. Or if he allowed Jasak to become his.

"Be careful what you ask for, Aleron."

"I know what I'm asking for. You want to get to the bottom of this. I want to help you." The words were said with conviction. Aleron believed them himself, though he didn't understand where it came from. What did he care if there was a traitor on Tantoret? In some ways, he was in the middle of his own betrayal.

"Stay here."

"But..."

"Stay here. Nobody will bother you this close to the core. I'll bring Macario back here. I don't want to interrogate him in front of the other prisoners. Especially in medical."

Aleron inclined his head. "That makes sense."

"And don't touch anything. In fact, don't move from that spot."

"I have no desire to," he answered honestly. His throat hurt, his head hurt, and his back hurt. The floor wasn't exactly comfortable, and he could have done without the tremendous heat pouring off the core, but he was safe there and he welcomed the chance to rest.

He turned his head and watched Jasak stalk out of the room with great purpose. No amount of credits could make him trade places with Macario. Or Tias, for that matter. Even injured and

exhausted, Jasak was menacing. Was that why Icera had taken the coward's approach? Because he knew he couldn't take Jasak in a fair fight?

Aleron counted to sixty, made note of the sound the core made at that point and began again. In that way he marked five minutes, watching in his mind's eye as Jasak stormed into medical, grabbed the dying man by his throat and marched him back to the core. Jasak wouldn't speak, but the human would be babbling, demanding an explanation, maybe even offering apologies for a crime he wasn't sure he committed. Could it be a big mistake? A misunderstanding? Regardless of the bangle's symbolism, it was still made of gold. But then, what value did gold have on Tantoret? You couldn't drink gold. You couldn't use it to fulfill chojal quotas. You couldn't buy your freedom with it. An ounce of chojal was worth more than an ounce of gold—they literally had an embarrassment of riches at their fingertips and it was of no value at all.

The sound of echoing whimpers brought Aleron to a seated position seconds before Jasak threw his prisoner onto the ground in the center of the cavern. Fresh blood dripped down Macario's face and arms, but there was no way to tell if Jasak had been responsible for that. He immediately tried to curl in on himself, but Jasak didn't allow him to defend himself. The Athaki

grabbed him by the shoulder and lifted him to his feet. More blood flowed down his back, staining his filthy shirt.

“Talk,” Jasak growled.

“I don’t ...I don’t know...what....”

“You don’t know what I’m talking about?” Jasak lifted his free hand, holding up the circlet. “Does this help clarify things?”

Macario’s bloodshot eyes immediately sought out Aleron. “You...fucking *rat*.”

“He didn’t do anything. I found it. Now talk. Where did you get this?”

“Where do you think?”

For a dying man, his question was surprisingly loud and defiant. The hand holding the circlet curled into a fist again, and Aleron averted his eyes a mere second before Jasak drove his knuckles into Macario’s mouth.

“Are you Lonanian?”

“No. I’m from Old Earth.”

Jasak shook Macario until his teeth rattled. “Where did you get this?”

“None of your business.”

“Do you want to die?” Jasak asked between clenched teeth.

“I’m going to die either way. Do you think I care if it’s at your hands?”

“Where did you get the bangle?”

Macario reared back and spat directly into Jasak's face. The blood and spit barely hit Jasak's cheek before the Athaki responded, violently throwing Macario across the room and directly against the core. Macario bounced off the machine and landed on his face, unable to break his fall. He placed both hands against the ground and pushed himself to his feet. When he lifted his face, he smiled, and blood poured from his broken teeth.

"You think I'm going to tell you anything? My only regret is that I won't be here when you're torn apart." He sidled toward the heavy grate, seemingly unaffected by the heat. "Maybe I'll have a front-row seat in hell."

"Macario, don't." Aleron put his hand up, but didn't try to reach for the other man. "You shouldn't do this."

"Why not? Because I have so much to live for here? Because I have an obligation to let the hired thug pound on me a bit? This isn't what I signed up for."

"Signed up for?" Aleron tilted his head. "What are you talking about? Do you think any of us signed up for this?"

"I was supposed to be out of here by now. Even if I do manage to survive until they come for me, God knows I won't be around for much longer after that."

“Who?” Aleron asked as Jasak slowly approached Macario. “The Lonan authorities? Is that who you’re talking about?”

Macario grinned again and yanked the grate open. “That’s for me to know, isn’t it?”

Aleron and Jasak both moved at the same time, but neither of them were close enough, or fast enough, to stop Macario. Aleron dove forward and wrapped his fingers around Macario’s ankle.

“I got him!”

“Let him go, Aleron.”

“I got him. Will you help me?” He looked over his shoulder. “Help me.”

“Aleron...” A strong hand settled on his shoulder. “He’s already gone. Let him go.”

When he still didn’t obey, Jasak gently pried his fingers from the dead man’s foot. Aleron stumbled back as the body fell into the burning depths, and the core didn’t make a sound as it swallowed the corpse.

“Oh my God. Why did he do that? Why did he?” Aleron demanded, turning to clutch Jasak’s arm.

“He didn’t want to tell me what he knew,” Jasak said grimly. “That’s all right. I think he told me enough.”

Aleron tried not to stare at the blood stains on Jasak’s sleeve. “What are you going to do now?”

Jasak exhaled slowly. "I believe you have something to deliver to Tias."

"You want me to give him the bangle?"

"It's his, isn't it? Don't tell him what happened here. Don't tell him that I know or that Macario is dead."

Aleron nodded. He could handle that. He wasn't going to be in a big hurry to tell anybody about the stench of human flesh, or the desperate sight of blood, or the gruesome grin Macario flashed just before he took his own life.

"Right now?"

"No..." Jasak straightened and gently pulled Aleron to his feet. "When you see him, I don't want you to reek of Macario's blood. Or Rosany's. Come."

Aleron let Jasak lead him into the narrow tunnel, happy to put the core behind him. Judging from the sounds of the main cavern, the men had calmed down considerably. He wondered if medical had likewise quieted, or if they were still moaning in their terror. How many of the guards and the inmates knew just how close they had all been to death? Did they know how close they still were?

"What did you mean when you said that he already told you what you needed to know?" Aleron asked, once they reached Jasak's room.

"He was sent here. Not sentenced here."

“By...the Lonan authorities? You think he’s some sort of...agent?”

“You don’t?”

Aleron studied Jasak’s face, his eyes following the infinite lines of Jasak’s tattoo. The Athess authorities were sitting on a planet of inestimable wealth, and they could do nothing to defend it. They couldn’t provide air support or station thousands of troops there. They could do nothing except make it so inhospitable, so intimidating, nobody would have reason to travel there. Unless they had no choice, and then they would never be able to leave.

“Chojal isn’t illegal in the Lonan system,” Aleron muttered.

“No, it’s not.”

“Do you think—”

“I don’t know. But I intend to find out. In the meantime, let’s make you presentable.”

Aleron didn’t need any more prompting to follow Jasak to his spring. His mind raced with possibilities, and every single line of thought led him to the same conclusion. Jasak must have shared the same thought. The nonresponsive radio, the broken gauges, the malfunctioning core—it all pointed to sabotage. The Lonan authorities were making a move on Tantoret, and nobody could do a goddamned thing.

“Why are you here?” Aleron asked as he stripped his clothes.

“What?”

“Why are you here? Why are you on Tantoret? What did you do?”

“I don’t wish to talk about it.”

“Was it worth dying for? Are you being paid to work here? Are the wages worth it?”

“Aleron...”

Without thinking, he reached up and touched Jasak’s cheek. His skin was hot to the touch, like his flesh had retained the heat from the core. “You risked your life for everybody here. You won’t let anybody hurt me. You try so hard to keep everything...balanced.” He stepped closer, pressing his body against Jasak’s. “What are you doing here? Do you deserve to be murdered by traitors? Do you deserve to be burned to death? To suffocate? Do you deserve this?”

Jasak took a step back. “Yes.”

“How can that be?”

“You don’t know me, Aleron. You don’t know or understand anything.”

“Then tell me.”

“Why? Because you’re my only friend?” Jasak asked, flinging Aleron’s words back at him.

Aleron regarded him for a long beat then inclined his head. “No. Because I’m your mate.”

“Bathe. You’re...distracting me. After that, we can talk.”

Aleron looked down at his bloody palms. Where had all that blood come from? It wasn’t his, and Aleron was grateful for that at least. Nodding, he turned and slipped into the dark water.

Chapter Fifteen

He watched Aleron wash. It was impossible not to. Even if he hadn't been captive on this planet, he would have found the man's form beautiful. Lean muscles sliced through the water, emerging glistening with droplets. The contrast of fair to dark, the hair clinging to his perfectly shaped skull, the curls around the base of his cock, added the air of exotic to its perfection.

He would be lying if he didn't admit he loved the shade of Aleron's still-healthy skin. Aleron belonged under a dazzling sun, dappled by the light, flushed with heat.

Jasak left him alone to dry off and change. No other prisoner in recent memory had gone through as many clothes as this one had. He could think of no one he would have allowed such liberties. Aleron wanted to call him his friend. Jasak couldn't find the strength to deny the claim.

Kneeling at the side of his bed, he rested his brow against its edge, closing his eyes to concentrate on his breathing. He needed to find time to meditate. How long had it been since he'd had this much lapse between sessions? Never.

Aleron's near silent footfalls weren't enough for him to lift his head. "Nothing has gone right since you arrived," Jasak said.

The mattress bowed under the man's weight. "You're not really blaming me for it, are you?"

"Omens often come in appealing packages."

"I'm not an omen." Fingers threaded through Jasak's hair, trying to uncover his face. "I'll take the appealing, though."

He knew he should forbid the touch. Aleron took too many freedoms, more with every passing hour. Jasak had attempted to take back some of that control at the core, but he'd only succeeded in hurting Aleron and squeezing out more truths he didn't want to hear.

One truth remained unshakeable. He did deserve this nightmare. All of it. When Aleron heard the story, he'd know that, too.

"You're cold." His hands had found Jasak's skin, grazing along his tattoo. He was endlessly fascinated with it, something Jasak found more amusing than anything else. "Come up here and warm up."

Aleron's ability to hone in on what would sway Jasak was evidence of his thieving skills, his ability to manipulate a potential mark. Jasak had read enough of the man's file to recognize he was being played. Yet, the desire to acquiesce almost won. He *was* cold. Aleron would be chilled, too,

after his bath. Together, they could wind around the other's body and find the heat they both needed. It made logical sense to agree.

"Do you wish to hear what I have to say or not?"

"Of course, I do. I could hear you better if you were up here, though."

Slowly, Jasak lifted his head, already missing the comfort against his brow. "What if I told you the guards are as much in the wrong as the prisoners? That you might be here because of your stealing, but that my crime was much, much worse?"

He'd tried to finger-comb his black hair into place, though a few spiky strands had escaped his attention. The dark eyes fixed on Jasak were wide and expectant.

"Someone with your kind of honor? I find that hard to believe."

"You're too trusting."

Now Aleron laughed. "I'm a thief. I don't trust anybody."

"Your file said someone turned you in. Did you not trust that person?"

"No, I slept with that person. There's a difference."

"So you have poor choice in bed partners, then."

His amusement started to fade. "This isn't your way of getting out of telling me about you, is it?"

"What do you know about Belenia?"

"A little. That it doesn't worry about technology. Or getting out into the galaxy. That it's more agricultural than industrialized. Why?"

"And Athaki?"

"Even less."

Jasak nodded. That's what he'd expected. "I'm a second son. It's a position of relative freedom. I could choose to do anything I wanted, rather than what was dictated. Do you have family?"

A direct question created a different response, a careful shuttering of his eyes as walls went up. "Just my parents. I haven't seen much of them since I left Old Earth."

"So no siblings."

"No. Why? What does this have to do with anything?"

"Everything. I'm here because of mine."

"What did they do to you?"

His sharp bark of laughter took both of them by surprise. Jasak shook his head, unfolding himself from his bent position. "You're so quick to expect the worst of people, and yet, you don't see it in me. That's a mistake."

Aleron scooted back on the bed, making room for him he didn't take. "You've given me no reason to think the worst."

“I would have killed you at the core.”

“I was getting in your way. You were doing your job.”

Jasak stopped where he'd been wandering around the edge of the room. It was the first hint Aleron might understand after all. “My responsibility,” he tested carefully.

“Exactly. I know that.” He grinned. “I don't like it, but I know it.”

“What I did, the reason I'm here...that was my responsibility, too.”

“I still don't know what that was, though. Or what that has to do with having brothers and sisters.”

Because he was talking in circles. Because he didn't want to talk about this at all. Because it was hard enough to bear the weight of his memories without having to worry about some weak-willed human passing judgment on him for the choices he made, even if in Jasak's mind, there were no choices at all.

“I have three, all brothers. Two chose lives of serenity, rather than the hunt. On Belenia, that means isolation, because clans are built around the hunt. They took their families and moved into the mountains, rather than stay in the lowlands where most Athaki live.”

“They were pacifists?”

“In a way.” The fact that Aleron was attempting to understand drew Jasak closer. “They focused on internal peace, rather than external strife. That’s how they viewed the hunt.”

“But I thought that’s what Athaki lived for. You’re predators.”

“Any species with a decent survival rate are predators. All that differs is the prey.”

“It sounds like they got to do whatever they wanted, too, and they weren’t second sons.”

He liked Aleron’s sharp mind. He didn’t miss details. “That did not go unnoticed.” He perched on the edge of the bed. Sitting gave him permission to turn his back on Aleron and continue, remarkably easier when he didn’t have that penetrating gaze watching his every move. “It wasn’t a problem for Syleg. He enjoyed the same privilege I did. But for my older brother, it meant foregoing the natural order of things. Turning his back on leading the hunts for the clan.”

“Which put you in the position to do so, instead.”

The implication of Aleron’s conclusion, whether intended or not, triggered the fury that always bubbled under the surface whenever Jasak thought of his past. He whipped his head around, baring his fangs at the man, and was mildly gratified to see him shrink against the headboard.

“They did what their hearts considered best,” he snarled. “Whatever it meant for me, they honored their own truth. There is nothing wrong with that.”

Aleron started shaking his head before Jasak had finished speaking. “I didn’t say there was. I’m just trying to understand what this has to do with anything. I’m sorry if I misspoke.”

Once his rage was sparked, though, it was difficult to tamp back down. “I loved the hunt. I never regretted taking it over.”

“What happened, then?”

“Not everyone was as understanding as my clan.”

He still remembered those endless nights, when he had to stand guard against insurgents who considered Jasak’s clan weak for allowing members to leave at will. More than one of his own had argued with him to bring his brothers back. He’d had to stamp them down, as well. Fights he didn’t necessarily want to have, friends he’d lost...there had been more losses than he could count, more than anybody should have to endure. He tried not to be bitter about it. He didn’t regret his actions in the slightest. But it was a fine line he constantly felt wavering beneath his feet, and he wasn’t entirely sure how much longer he could balance.

He would not have expected Aleron to approach him when he was in this state, not if he was smart. When the mattress shifted beneath him, though, and Aleron crawled forward on his hands and knees, his head bent low in a state of submission, Jasak didn't swat him away. He held his breath and waited to see how close Aleron would actually come. Only a fool would put himself within biting distance when an Athaki was as worked up as Jasak was.

Aleron did more than that. With his head still dipped, he curled into Jasak's side and rested his forehead against Jasak's throat.

Jasak froze. By his own admission, Aleron understood little of Belenian culture, let alone Athaki custom. He could have no idea what his pose meant, the promise it made. Jasak struggled not to wrap his arms around the slim back and draw him even farther into his flesh. All he could yield to was the need to close his eyes and breathe in the clean, warm scent.

"You lost them, didn't you?"

The words came softly, without censure. Somehow, that struck deeper than his earlier misunderstanding.

"They were killed by cowards who crept into their homes in the dead of night and slit their throats." Grief still tasted acrid after all this time.

“They didn’t even have the nerve to battle them, fangs to fangs.”

“Did you find them?”

“No. They weren’t discovered for weeks.” Jasak had welcomed the unexpected respite to take more joy in longer and longer hunts. He’d languished in bed with his partner, and when Kayoly had joked about his laziness, he’d languished even more. He’d been decadent for the first time in his life. Until... “My youngest brother took them supplies. He came back with bones. They’d been laid out for animals to scavenge.”

“Oh, Jasak...” A warm hand stole around his waist, slipping inside his shirt to settle in the small of his back. “I can guess what happened. You don’t have to tell me.”

“Would you guess I hunted down the killers and slaughtered them in front of their children?”

Aleron let out a long, ragged breath. “I would’ve guessed something along those lines, yeah. Is that when you got caught?”

“No.”

That surprised Aleron enough to finally look up. Immediately, Jasak missed his heat.

“No?”

“I turned myself in.”

“Why would you do something like that?”

“Because it was the honorable thing to do.”

Aleron blinked. "Honorable? How honorable is it to purposely get yourself sent to the worst place in the galaxy?"

"I killed six men."

"You were avenging your family's deaths."

"It's still murder."

"With extenuating circumstances."

"Running away would make me no better than those who killed my brothers. I wouldn't be able to live with myself then."

Aleron's jaw hardened. "No offense, Jasak, but I'm not so sure you're living with yourself now."

"You don't understand."

"You're right. I don't." He jabbed a sharp finger into the middle of Jasak's chest. "You said it yourself, you're a hunter. You did what you had to, to save face for your clan."

When Aleron moved to poke him again, Jasak grabbed his wrist and yanked his arm behind his back. "I do not hunt sentient beings. That's not our way." His eyes narrowed. "Why are you so cavalier about their lives? You tried to save Macario, even suspecting he was a traitor."

"I didn't do that for him. He was dying anyway." He lifted his chin, no longer subservient to Jasak's pain. "I did it for you."

It was his turn to ask, "Why?"

"You want a list of the reasons? All right. You saved me from Icera."

“You saved me from the core.”

“You’ve allowed me to share your quarters.”

“I’m stealing your heat.”

“You took care of Raimo for me.”

“I resolved an issue that would have threatened my authority here.” Jasak shook his head. “See? There is no valid reason for you to do anything for me.”

“Has it been that long since somebody’s cared about what happens to you, that you’ve forgotten what it feels like?”

He had, actually. The other Athaki feared him or resented his power. The prisoners loathed him, as well. He’d tried to maintain his honor by treating the dying with respect, but that was a shallow substitute for what he’d once had back on Belenia.

“You’re a prisoner,” he said in a last attempt to get Aleron to see reason.

Aleron smiled. “That didn’t stop you from making me your mate.”

“You don’t even know what it means, Aleron. And if you knew...”

“If I knew what?”

“Right now, it’s all one-sided. If you keep pressing the issue, that might change.”

“What does that mean? That I belong to you, but you don’t belong to me?”

“Essentially.”

“What if I wanted to change that?”

“You don’t know what you’re asking for.”

“Tell me. *Show* me. But...I don’t want to make you relive it any more than you already have. I’m sorry I caused you pain.”

“You needed to know. We have a secret, you and I. You needed to understand you could trust me with it.” He tried to smile, though he knew it was half-hearted at best. “For all your protestations about not trusting anyone, you don’t have much of a choice now if you wish to survive.”

“Neither do you.”

On impulse, Jasak cupped the back of Aleron’s neck and drew him forward again, until his forehead returned to rest against Jasak’s throat. The warmth and comfort compelled him to close his eyes, blocking out the worst of the memories from rampaging through his thoughts.

“So be it.”

Chapter Sixteen

Aleron remained still, his face buried against Jasak's neck, his senses overwhelmed by the Athaki's presence. His body tingled from the proximity, and his mind was on a loop, playing and replaying the memories of Jasak's mouth learning every inch of his flesh. Every word had been burned into his mind, every touch branded on his body. And if he did survive Tantoret, he knew that he'd have nothing but his memories of Jasak. His only hope of escape would be at Jasak's expense.

But he didn't want to think about that. He wanted to focus on the texture of Jasak's skin, and the smell of it, and the evenness of his breathing. He didn't want to think about Jasak's crime or the raw loss that had colored each word of his confession. He didn't want to think about the implications of the serpent bangle or Macario's suicide. Because if he did, he would have no choice but to admit that they were nothing except pawns. Pawns that were moved and directed by unseen, unknown hands. If either of them had any desire to break free of those hands, they needed to rely on each other.

They could still very well die. The Lonan authorities had already infiltrated the prison deeply enough to sabotage the communications and the core. There was no telling just how many prisoners—and guards—were spies willing to sacrifice their own lives to pave the way for their government to take what it wanted. The chojal that still lurked beneath the surface of Tantoret would be enough to fund the ongoing war with the Athess system. Aleron barely cared about any of that. It wasn't as though Athess was without blame or guilt. But he had managed to avoid being a casualty of the war, and he didn't want to be one of the thousands of people to lose his life and spill his blood in the ongoing struggle.

Aleron shut down those thoughts. Later. There would be time later for all of that. When he wasn't pressed as close to Jasak as possible. When he wasn't inhaling the curious, heady scent of Jasak's skin. When he wasn't listening to the Athaki's steady breathing and the rapid beat of his pulse. Normally, Aleron wouldn't be pleased at the thought of physically arousing a predator—especially a predator ten times stronger than him. But he trusted Jasak, the man who could break him in half on a whim. More than that, he had found a way to get under Jasak's skin. That much was obvious. And now that he was there, he just

planned on burrowing deeper and deeper until Jasak would feel him everywhere.

Aleron turned just enough to let his lips brush across Jasak's skin. The contact was electric. Jasak didn't stop the kiss. He didn't pull away from it. He didn't voice another warning, or try to remind Aleron that he was dangerous. Aleron took that as a good sign. He kissed Jasak again, this time allowing his lips to linger at the hollow of his throat. His tongue darted out, and he tasted the core—the heat and fear and sweat that had coated Jasak's skin while he brought the old machinery back to life.

And then the warmth of Jasak's body was gone. Aleron couldn't stop his moan of protest as Jasak left the bed, and frustration began to bubble beneath the surface. He felt like he was starved for contact in general, but worse than that, he genuinely craved the texture of Jasak's skin and the feel of his body.

"You shouldn't do that," Jasak said, his voice soft.

"Why not?"

"Because it's..."

Aleron stood. "It's what? It's dangerous? For who? You or me?" He slowly stepped forward, like Jasak was a skittish bird who might fly away with a sudden rush. "All we've got right now is each other."

“You don’t know what you’re asking for.”

“I know that you want me. That you want to taste me and...”

“And you smell too much like prey.”

“You should know by now that doesn’t bother me.”

“I don’t want to just use you.”

Aleron lifted his shoulder. “Use me, if you have to. Jasak...don’t you miss being close to somebody? Don’t you miss just *being* with somebody? Don’t you miss losing yourself and accepting what comfort you can find?”

“Isn’t that the sort of thing that got you sent to this place?” Jasak asked.

“Sure. But now that I’m here, I realize I need it more than ever.” He took Jasak’s arm, holding him in place as he touched his lips to Jasak’s throat again. “I trust you. I know you trust me. You don’t have to fight this.”

Fresh hope surged in Aleron until Jasak grabbed him by the shoulders and gently, but firmly, pushed him back. Aleron immediately opened his mouth to protest, but the words stilled on his lips when he realized what Jasak was doing. He stripped his shirt first, exposing the carved muscles of his torso and arms. A stark reminder of what he was capable of. The skin on his face felt dry and tight, and he was so flushed that he forgot he had ever been cold. He tried to

respond in kind, but his fingers were, for the first time in his life, fumbling and nonresponsive. He felt like they were too fat and too cold. When Jasak pushed his pants to the floor, Aleron gave up.

Jasak's cock was thick as a clenched fist and semi-erect. His thighs were corded with muscles, a visible reminder of his speed and strength. Without clothes, Jasak was even more imposing than usual, and Aleron felt even smaller. The sight of him did more than pull the moisture from Aleron's mouth. It made his stomach churn and his groin tighten. He absently ran his clammy palms up and down his thighs until Jasak grabbed his wrist. His fingers were implacable bands, and he pulled Aleron to his feet without warning.

He expected to be handled roughly, but Jasak surprised him. He was careful with each garment as he stripped them away from Aleron's body, and the clothing hit the floor with a dry whisper. Jasak took his wrist again and pulled him a step closer. Without speaking, he placed Aleron's palm flat against his chest, extending the only invitation Aleron needed.

With a soft sigh, he smoothed both palms over Jasak's chest, first moving down to his ridged stomach, and then back up to the column of his throat. He watched Jasak's face from beneath his lashes, waiting patiently for any sign of his

pleasure. Aleron briefly rested his thumb against Jasak's pulse point, and it hammered harder than before. His own heart raced, and he knew Jasak could hear it with his sharp ears.

His fingers slid down Jasak's torso and over the line of his hip until his knuckles brushed across his cock. He was fully erect now, and just touching the smooth shaft sent a jolt right to Aleron's groin. He wrapped his fingers around Jasak's shaft. In the dim light, the Athaki's pale skin appeared golden, and Aleron's fingers were just dark shadows. When he looked up again, Jasak's eyes were heavy with hunger, and his nostrils were flaring, no doubt picking up the scent of Aleron's arousal. When he cupped the back of Aleron's head, the touch was undeniably gentle. Aleron didn't need the guidance. He took another step closer, until their chests were touching and their mouths only separated by inches.

Jasak tilted his head just as Aleron lifted his chin, and their mouths connected, neither one fully responsible for instigating the caress. Aleron immediately parted his lips, inviting Jasak to deepen the kiss. Jasak growled as he claimed Aleron with his lips, and tongue, and teeth. Aleron pumped his wrist, twisting his palm with each stroke, learning the texture and size and sensitivity of Jasak's cock. As Jasak's tongue swept through

his mouth, it was too easy to forget everything outside the small chamber. Aleron pushed away anything that might distract him from the simple pleasure of touch, of contact.

But there wasn't anything simple about it, either. Contact had once been simple, and so readily available that it had little value. That was why Aleron had been caught. He'd had his pick of men, and he never bothered to take his time, to be careful. It hadn't mattered, because even when it was bad, it was good. And there would always be somebody else to wipe away the memories of the person before. Like so many other things, Aleron had taken the physical contact, the bliss, for granted. But what had once been so commonplace was precious now. As much as Aleron wanted Jasak—and he very desperately wanted him—he *needed* the Athaki more. He thought Jasak needed him, too.

Aleron took deep breaths through his nose, doing his best to prolong the caress. Even when Jasak pushed him backward, they didn't break apart. Aleron sunk down to the edge of the bed, pulling Jasak with him as he fell. He didn't know what Jasak would demand, and he didn't know what he would offer. But he knew he ached for everything he could get. Each time he reached the base of Jasak's cock, he shivered in anticipation, imagining what it would feel like to have the

length sliding down his throat. Or even better, thrusting into his clenched ass, filling his body.

Aleron brushed his thumb across Jasak's crown, spreading the pre-come across his skin. It was thicker than the fluid already caught on the tip of his own, and there was more of it. Did Jasak produce enough of it to use it as a lubricant?

The thought made his cock jerk, and Jasak reached between them to grip Aleron's shaft. The sudden pressure around his flesh set off flashes of lights behind his eyes, and for a brief moment, he was worried that would be it. He was too wound up and Jasak's grip was too strong. One more squeeze, and he'd explode, painting Jasak's large hand with his come. But the pressure eased, and Aleron finally tore away from Jasak's mouth, gasping for breath.

"Are you all right?" Jasak whispered, his words barely heard over the sound of Aleron's ragged breathing.

"Very. Very all right."

"I thought I hurt you."

"Definitely not."

The hand that had been on his cock moved lower, briefly fondling Aleron's balls before the long fingers reached behind his sac, seeking out his ass. Aleron caught his breath as the tip of Jasak's finger finally traced around his opening.

Jasak paused, his face creasing with a worried frown.

“What?” Aleron asked. “What is it?”

“It’s...small. Smaller than I expected.”

At first, Aleron didn’t understand. Not until he felt Jasak’s tentative finger pressing against his ass again. It hadn’t occurred to him that there would be any meaningful differences in their anatomy, beyond the obvious. After all, Jasak had a cock, and Aleron had two perfectly good holes for it. Said cock was definitely thicker, and a little longer, than what he was accustomed to, but he didn’t care.

“It’ll be fine,” Aleron said quickly. “Really.”

“I don’t want to cause you any damage.”

“You won’t. You just need to help me get ready. It’s not the same for Athaki?”

“No.”

When no more explanation was forthcoming, Aleron decided not to press. He could do some exploring on his own and find out later. “You have complete control over your claws, right?”

Jasak almost looked amused at the question. “Yes.”

“Then just start with a finger. Just slide it in.”

The tip pressed against the clenched muscle and then eased into his channel. Aleron dropped his head back, focusing on his breathing as his body burned from the intrusion.

“That’s good. Just...move your hand... a little...oh...”

Jasak did move his hand, thrusting his finger in slow, careful strokes. The pain was sharp at first—no doubt a result of the fact that he hadn’t been fucked in a long time. He bit back his discomfort, hesitant to give Jasak any more reason to think this wasn’t going to work. Now that he felt the pressure and friction from Jasak’s finger, he knew it wouldn’t be enough. He ached to feel Jasak’s cock in his ass, to feel Jasak’s weight trapping him against the bed, to hear Jasak’s moans of pleasure, and taste the salt on his skin and his lips as they moved together. Nothing else would satisfy him.

“More.” Aleron lifted his head. “Another finger. Please.”

Jasak still looked concerned, but he carefully worked his middle finger inside, the added width enough to steal Aleron’s breath.

“Are you hurt?”

Aleron shook his head, though pain had flared through him. It was most likely from the lack of lubricant, but Aleron wasn’t worried about that, either. He would just have to make sure Jasak was good and slick, which shouldn’t be too hard to do at all. He took slow, deep breaths, focusing on pushing the pain away with each exhale. Soon, there was nothing except the exquisite pressure

and the ache that no amount of breathing could overcome.

“Do you want another?”

Aleron nodded and tried to brace himself. He felt Jasak’s blunt finger working its way into his body, felt the way his flesh stretched to accommodate it, and the undeniable burn of flesh stretching too far. But that was eclipsed by a sudden bolt of pleasure as Jasak closed his mouth around Aleron’s cock, sucking him down to the root. Aleron’s head dropped back, and his hips pushed forward, his back arching from the mattress. His world narrowed down to the heat, the pressure, the bliss of Jasak’s mouth. His tongue wrapped around Aleron’s shaft, and the suction increased steadily, as though he wanted to suck the come right out of Aleron’s body.

Jasak released him with a small gasp, and Aleron collapsed back to the mattress like a string had been cut. “You taste delicious.”

Aleron could only whimper at the compliment. His cock throbbed from the unbelievable suction, and his walls were clenching and pulsing around Jasak’s fingers. His balls ached, and there was a certain warmth in his abdomen. He was only moments away from begging Jasak. Already words crowded in his throat. A whole torrent of pleas, and maybe some moans and shouts.

Except, when he opened his mouth, he could only whimper and gasp for breath. He flexed his hands into fists, fruitlessly searching for something to grasp. He wanted to take Jasak by the arm and haul him up until their bodies were aligned, their mouths crushed together. Jasak could guide his cock into Aleron's stretched passage and the handful of stars he could see over Jasak's shoulders would explode in dazzling lights.

Then the pressure of Jasak's fingers was gone, and Aleron felt empty. Hollow. He reached blindly for Jasak again, but the Athaki caught his wrists.

"Turn over. Onto your stomach."

Aleron wanted to protest. He didn't want to face the dirty mattress. He wanted to see Jasak's eyes, and the tattoo shimmering in the shadows. He wanted to see the stars overhead. He wanted to see the glow of the flames on the cold walls. But two thoughts cut off his words. First, the different position might be easier on Jasak. Second, turning over would definitely be easier on his own body. At least this first time.

Aleron did as he was told, rolling over and trapping his cock against the mattress. At first, Jasak didn't touch him, but Aleron could still feel the weight of his stare as he studied Aleron's form, and then the warmth of his breath as he

brought his mouth closer to Aleron's ass. A careful swipe of his tongue across Aleron's opening electrified his flesh. He tried to push back against Jasak's mouth, but a strong hand held him to the mattress. Jasak continued to use his tongue to soothe the sore skin, but it did so much more than that. It heightened Aleron's hunger and focused it into a tight, pulsing light, right in the center of his body. He could imagine it there, flaring brighter each time Jasak licked him, waiting to be fanned into a fire that would race through him, igniting his blood.

"Please...Jasak...I can't... I need you..."

His words were muffled against the bed, but he had no doubt Jasak heard him. A few moments later, his tongue disappeared. Neither one of them spoke, and Jasak wasn't touching him. Aleron felt more vulnerable than he had at any other point since his arrival to Tantoret. He was exposed, laid out on the bed like an offering, his muscles watery and weak, his heart beating a tattoo of desperation against his ribs. That same tattoo echoed behind his eyes. This was different than Jasak lapping at his blood or using his body for warmth or tasting the sweat and come on his skin. That knowledge pressed in on his flesh, making the ache worse.

He sensed movement, and then Jasak's hands settled on each side of Aleron's shoulders, essentially caging him between his arms. His

knees were on either side of Aleron's hips, his legs pinning Aleron's to the bed. He felt Jasak's slick head exactly as he had imagined it. The pre-come felt slightly cool and thick. It coated his entrance, and he felt Jasak spreading it with two fingers, both around the entrance and then inside. He was ready. They were both ready. And there was nothing left between them to stop the inevitable from happening.

Aleron kept his face buried in his arms as the blunt tip pressed against his entrance. Once he was in the proper position, Jasak used his weight to overcome the natural resistance of Aleron's body. The first inch was almost excruciating. As Jasak claimed another inch, Aleron fisted the mattress, his fingers curling into the dirty, torn material as though he was holding on for his life. At the third inch, he was just grateful that he had the bed to muffle the sounds, otherwise his ragged screams and moans would echo through the chamber and down the long corridor to be heard by the entire prison.

Jasak was a patient man, and Aleron was thankful for that, especially since he felt like he didn't have a single ounce of patience left in him. Instead of trying to force his entire length into Aleron's channel, he stopped and eased back until only the very tip remained. Then he pushed forward again, maybe gaining an extra half an

inch before sliding out again. Aleron gradually adjusted to his size, until he only felt bright flashes of satisfaction and desire, without even a dark hint of discomfort.

Jasak must have sensed the moment that happened, though Aleron didn't understand exactly how. Maybe a certain tension drained from his taut muscles. Or maybe the pitch of his whimpers changed. Maybe he hadn't sensed anything at all. Maybe he had just become impatient and eager to feel Aleron's ass wrap around the entire length of his shaft. It was impossible to say, and the result was the same in the end. He thrust forward with a low grunt, fully sheathing himself.

That had been exactly what Aleron had been waiting for—and the wait had been worth every second. Every nerve-ending burned, and all his blood rushed south, leaving him light-headed and gasping. Once Jasak was completely buried, he shifted, lowering his frame to rest against Aleron's. His chest on Aleron's back, their legs entwining. The position was familiar at that point. It was how Jasak preferred to sleep with Aleron in his bed, trapped and hot and helpless. There was one difference, though. Jasak closed his teeth over the flesh on Aleron's shoulder. He didn't apply enough pressure to even sting, but Aleron felt every point and ridge resting against his skin.

Even though it probably wouldn't leave a mark, Aleron knew he'd always feel it. If only because he'd never forget the moment that Jasak could have crushed him and instead chose to gently hold him.

Jasak rocked his hips without surrendering a single inch. He felt Jasak's heart pounding and his blood rushing through his veins. He felt every breath, every rise and fall of Jasak's chest. They moved together effortlessly, as one, until their skin felt like nothing more than the ridiculously thin boundary it was.

When the power went out, Tias smiled. When the lights finally returned, he was still smiling. The simple act made his broken jaw flare with pain, but he didn't care. He reached over his head and used his claw to scratch a hash mark in the stone, marking the passage of another day. He wondered if Macario was doing the same thing in the medical cavern. He was one of the most fearless men Tias had ever met, but the prospect of chojal poisoning had terrified him. Both Tias and Dansay had spent days placating those fears and wearing the human down until he had finally agreed to get himself sent to Tantoret. At the time Tias had genuinely believed Macario would survive.

He hoped Macario forgave him his mistake. If that were even possible.

Everything was moving now. The plan was entering its final stages, and Tias had to be prepared. The fact that the lights were back on didn't bother him at all. He knew Jasak understood how to repair the core, and he hadn't done anything so dire that Jasak couldn't fix it. But the sabotage had still accomplished what it meant to.

Hundreds of thousands of miles away, a satellite orbited an uninhabited planet. Officially, it was an outdated piece of junk monitoring a useless rock on the boundaries of the Lonan system. But it was still close enough to Tantoret to gather data and send it back to the Lonan authorities. Due to the age of the satellite and the distance, direct communication was essentially impossible. Indirect communication, however, could be quite effective. And Tias had just engineered an undeniable signal.

There had been ten rotations of Tantoret left before the core shut down. Now they were down to nine before Dansay's arrival. Nine days until he would be allowed to leave the stinking, rotting depths of hell. Nine days until he would be on his way to his promised rewards, a hero to the Lonan authorities. His own people would call him a traitor, and the thought troubled him mildly, but

not enough to make him change his mind. What had the Athess authorities ever done for Belenia? Nothing, except hijack their entire legal system and use the accused Athaki as slave labor. Even the protection they offered the planet was laughable, as Belenia had had no enemies before the Athess system began to expand. They had not even offered the Athaki leadership an option of joining the system.

But none of that would matter once the Athess authorities were brought to their knees. Tantoret represented their major source of funding for their endless aggression and expansion. They artificially inflated the value of chojal so they could steal money from their own citizens as they encroached farther and farther into Lonan space. They weren't even particularly sneaky about it. He knew that Jasak, at least, must have worked out what was happening. Yet, he was so wrapped up in his own penance, such a prisoner of his own honor code, that he meekly enforced the rules that would ultimately lead to the destruction of everything he loved.

Tias regretted that the most. Jasak was the only one who really did not deserve his punishment. But he was the only one who truly cared about serving out his sentence with as much dignity as possible. It was that very tendency that led Tias to forming the plan for the end game. Jasak would

not be able to forgive or overlook a series of infractions. He hadn't counted on Jasak throwing him to the prisoners, but even that worked out for the best in the end. He had broken bones to nurse back to health in isolation, which gave him all the time in the universe to do what he needed to do.

And what he needed to do was simple. He would fix the radio next, allowing Jasak to contact the Athess transport. They would arrive to empty the too-full tanks three days ahead of schedule, which would leave the space around Tantoret completely unguarded. Dansay would arrive during that window, and nine days from that moment, Tias would shut down the core again and meet him on the surface. He felt more than a pang at the thought of all the Athaki who would die slow, painful deaths, struggling for nonexistent air. He would pray for them once he reached safety.

Chapter Seventeen

Without being able to hear the core, Aleron didn't have to think about how close they'd come to dying, or the fiery heat that sank to his bones, or the flash of terror when he'd realized Icera wasn't going to help Jasak. Instead, he could focus on the now, and the ache in his lower extremities from Jasak's almost tender attentions, and the smoky scent of the fuel burning in the pit. He could gaze up at the ceiling and see stars, not earth falling to bury him alive. He could watch the play of muscles in Jasak's bare back as he crouched and built up the fire, the light sculpting him into even finer lines than Aleron had already witnessed.

He could feel content. In that moment, in this place, with this man.

He could smile and mean it.

"Did you have a job on Belenia?" he asked, suddenly curious. "I don't mean leading the hunt. I mean, something you got paid for."

"I was a..." Jasak paused and looked up thoughtfully. "I believe the Old Earth word is carpenter. I built things."

His gaze dropped automatically to Jasak's hands. Strong. Capable. The new knowledge didn't surprise him.

"What kind of things? Like furniture?"

"Everything. Anything that needed to be done." Jasak sat back on his heels. "Though the last thing I built was a piece of furniture. A cradle."

Aleron's breath caught. He hadn't expected that. But of course, it made sense. Jasak, for all his supposed crimes, was a caretaker. He oversaw everyone on Tantoret. Aleron shouldn't be nearly so jealous about others who'd received Jasak's bounty. He chose his words carefully. "I didn't realize you had a family."

"I didn't." He straightened and stretched, drawing Aleron's attention to the shape of his ass. "It was commissioned. They paid in advance, but I never had the chance to deliver it to them. I always wondered if they received it."

"I'm sure they did." He said it automatically, his brain working separately from the rest of his body as he released the air he'd held in his lungs. "I'll bet it was beautiful."

"It was for their first child. Rinka visited me every single day to make sure I was building it exactly to her specifications. I started to look forward to her visits, actually. She was never pushy about it. Just...worried." Jasak sat on the

edge of the bed, his hand resting on Aleron's knee. "What about you?"

Aleron had never been ashamed of his choices, but in the face of what he knew about Jasak, he had the urge to lie and make his past more noble than it had been. The problem with that was Jasak had his file.

"What you see is what you get," he said with a smile. "I stopped schooling on Old Earth when I was sixteen. That was when I left."

Jasak's fingers flexed on his leg. "That's a young age to leave home. On Belenia, you would have still been considered a child."

"Technically, I was still considered a child on Old Earth, too. I stowed away when my parents refused to let me get emancipated."

"Were you running from something or to something?"

"Both. Where we lived was a technological center, and there were always disputes about who owned what. I got tired of the constant threats, but my father's work was there and they refused to leave." Leaning back on his hands, he tilted his head to look up through the porthole, staring at the distant stars. "I wanted more. To explore. Find a place of my own."

"Did you ever think you'd end up in a place like this?"

"No. That's probably arrogant."

“Probably?” Jasak’s mouth twitched, almost as if he wanted to smile.

“I’ve always been good at getting in and out of places, so I never thought too much about getting caught.”

“I don’t understand why you’d take the risk. You’re an intelligent man, Aleron. You probably could have done anything you wanted.”

“I chose what made me happy.”

He didn’t like the current direction of their conversation. He’d never liked being lectured at the best of times, which was why he so rarely put himself into a position where it could happen. Easier to live in the moment, in the current plan, in the immediacy of today and maybe tomorrow. It was harder to ignore the fact that maybe he’d had other options when he actually respected the person reminding him.

Rolling onto his side, he inched back to give Jasak more room to join him. “What makes you happy? How do you get through each day here, when you’d rather be back on Belenia?”

Jasak accepted the silent invitation, stretching out to face Aleron. Less than an inch separated them, and Aleron could feel himself straining toward Jasak’s heat. “I don’t know how I get through each day. Each cycle. Sometimes...” He reached out, as though he felt the same draw

Aleron did. "Sometimes I try not to think about home at all."

"That can't be easy." He had to touch. Jasak was too near to resist, the fresh scent on his skin adding to the musk that set Aleron's nerves on end. He brushed the back of his knuckles over the hair curling around the left nipple. "You left people behind. Family. Your clan."

"It's easier than you think. And sometimes it's necessary to block it all out. To pretend this is the only life I've ever had."

"So...you've never had a mate before?"

Jasak exhaled. "Why do you ask?"

Because he was crazy, that was why. He didn't need this information. Not really. But he wanted it, even knowing it might hurt.

"Well, the way the other guards reacted to you claiming me. It seemed like a big deal. And you just don't seem like someone who'd be able to forget someone like that in your life. Or...is that why you have to block it out?"

Jasak studied him for a long moment then looked up at the ceiling. Aleron followed the direction of his gaze, wondering if Jasak imagined he was looking at his home star. "It's why I have to block it out. Otherwise, I feel...everything that's missing."

Someone else he cared about. Someone important enough to claim. Someone who wasn't Aleron.

Aleron was the one who was here now, though. Jasak might have only meant to spare his life, but that didn't change the fact Aleron was his mate. He could do whatever it took to help ease some of Jasak's pain.

Turning his wrist, he pressed his palm flat against Jasak's chest. "Tell me what I can do. I don't even know what being claimed should mean."

"You don't *have* to do anything. I did it to protect you."

"I want to, though." The admission shocked even him. He wasn't used to caring too much about another's misfortunes. He'd been too busy taking care of his own. But standing by Jasak, even if he couldn't do much, felt like the right thing to do. The only thing to do. "I thought we decided we had to trust each other. That we're friends. I meant that. And everything that went with that."

"We are friends," Jasak echoed softly. "What if I thought you'd be happier not knowing? Would you still want me to tell you?"

"Yes," he said without hesitating. He never turned down knowledge when given the chance, but this went beyond that. A part of him truly

wanted to give something back to Jasak, a part that grew every cycle he knew him. "Please, Jasak."

Jasak cupped the back of his head and pulled him close enough to touch their mouths together. Aleron didn't have a chance to respond to the brief kiss before it was over. "The Athaki have a very complicated family system. We have parents and siblings like humans do but it doesn't stop there." Jasak caressed Aleron's cheek before dropping his hand. "I did have a mate before I came here. His name was Kayoly. He led the hunt with me."

Aleron's heart twisted at having a name, but he refused to let it show. Jasak wouldn't tell him any more if he suspected it bothered him. "I'll bet you two were spectacular together."

"Why do you say that?"

"If he led the hunt with you, it was because you moved well together, right?"

"Yes. We didn't just move well together. We were completely in tune with each other. No matter how many miles separated us, we always worked as a perfect team. Of course, other Athaki have this ability. It often develops between clan-mates. A claim is made when you don't want anybody or anything to interfere with that bond."

"But I'm not Athaki. How does that apply to me?"

“We’re raised to respect the significance of that relationship because it’s so vital to the hunt. It supersedes every other bond and obligation. It doesn’t matter that we’re on Tantoret instead of Belenia. It doesn’t matter that you’re human and not Athaki. Nobody here will disregard that. It’s more than a marriage, more than a friendship, more than a partnership. It’s a permanent commitment to protect each other and the rest of the clan until death.”

“Does it have anything to do with love? Could anybody make a claim on anybody else?”

“It’s about more than that. It’s...it’s about faith. When I told them you were my mate, I was telling them that everything I possess, everything I am or ever will be, belongs to you. And you, in turn, keep nothing from me.”

Aleron had seen similar claiming relationships in other cultures, though different species had different names for it and different rules governing it.

“Okay, so let’s say that an Athaki finds his other half and leads a successful hunt. Everybody’s happy. Why would anybody want to interfere with that? Isn’t it counterintuitive?” Aleron asked.

“Imagine that you’ve formed this sort of connection with somebody who was already married. Or perhaps your mate is another male,

not a female. The bond might form at any time between anybody, and if it forms between the wrong clan-mates, the entire clan may fall apart due to fighting and politics. This way, once a formal claim is made, nobody can protest. But at the same time, it cannot be broken, either.”

“Will you go find him when your sentence is up?”

“My sentence will never be up. Never. As far as Kayoly is concerned, I’m dead.”

Aleron frowned. “He would just forget you like that?”

“What choice does he have?”

“But if you’re that deeply connected, it can’t be that easy, can it?”

“As I said, it’s complicated. He’d be within his rights to take another mate, or to marry and have children, or to take a lover, or another dozen options. But he doesn’t have the option to hang on to me for the rest of his life.”

Their circumstances saddened Aleron. If anybody deserved a little bit of happiness, it was Jasak. He was probably right about Kayoly moving on, too, but that only made it worse. Jasak was stuck on this rock with nothing to help him forget about what he’d left behind, nobody who would understand what he had to bear.

Nobody but Aleron. And when Aleron escaped...

Ducking his head, he burrowed into Jasak's body so Jasak wouldn't see the guilt in his eyes. Aleron wanted nothing more than to get off Tantoret. He'd even found the means to do so. But how could he abandon Jasak when the Athaki needed him? Maybe he didn't have to do it straight away. He had more comforts now, and he wasn't in danger of chojal poisoning. He could forego his escape attempts for a little while. It would make it easier to escape in the long run, anyway. The longer he stayed the obedient prisoner, the more leeway he would get from Jasak.

Those were details he'd worry about later. Now, Jasak commanded all of his attention.

"I've never experienced that kind of loss," he said softly, keeping his nose buried in the warm hair on Jasak's chest. "But I'll do everything I can to help you deal with yours."

"Aleron..." Jasak's fingers slid through his hair, surprisingly gentle. "I dealt with that loss before I turned myself in."

Aleron chuckled. "You've definitely been here too long if you didn't recognize that as a come-on."

"You should be less subtle. English isn't my first language, after all."

"Then I have something more I can help you with." He eased away, propping his head up so he

could meet Jasak's eyes. "You're very fluent, though. Can you read it? Or just Athaki?"

"Just Athaki. I'm not sure I've ever seen English written."

"We should do a trade, then. You teach me Athaki, and I'll teach you English."

"You want to learn Athaki?"

"Sure, why not? It'll only help, right? I'll be able to communicate with you better, and if I can write and read it, I can help Rosany, too."

"Why not? Because if the other guards found out you wanted to learn Athaki, they wouldn't take it calmly. Icera would probably tell them you're only interested in spying on them."

Aleron frowned, his mind racing. "They don't have to know. I won't tell them, and if you'd rather I didn't use it in the infirmary, I won't. I just...it feels more than a little selfish you're always speaking in my language and I don't speak yours. And I thought maybe it might be nice for you to be able to speak to someone in your native tongue who didn't you see as the boss or the enemy."

"Maybe it would be. I could teach you a few words from the simpler dialect. Too bad there are no English books on Tantoret. I'd learn it right away if it meant having a new book to read."

“A new book?” He posed the query in as neutral tone as possible. He’d rather Jasak didn’t know he’d been snooping.

“I think there are only three on this rock. And two of them belong to Rosany.”

“Who has the other one?”

“I do. I smuggled it on to the transport.”

“Can I see it? I don’t even know what your language looks like.”

Jasak didn’t move immediately. Aleron wouldn’t have been surprised if Jasak refused the request. It was clearly one of his prized possessions, something he didn’t want anybody to know he had. But genuine curiosity burned in his chest. He wanted to see the book again, wanted to know what the words meant, and more importantly, what they meant to Jasak. Of all the books in the known galaxy, what prompted him to choose that one? Did it bring him comfort? Was it purely for sentimental reasons? Or was it something educational? Something Jasak had anticipated needing?

Aleron bit back his pleased smile as Jasak released him and turned to reach under the bed. After a moment of fumbling, Jasak sat up again, this time clenching the small volume between his thumb and forefinger.

“It’s the *Vayodui Morikau*. I think that roughly translates to rightful living.”

He didn't reach out for it, though he desperately wanted to. It was a part of Jasak, more so now that he had some kind of idea what it was about. A text to help guide an honorable life? In hindsight, it was the only book it could have been, made all the more fascinating for the prison that now bound them together.

"Will you read some of it to me?"

"I don't know if I can translate it."

"So don't. Just read it the way it's written. If nothing else, I'll get more familiar with the rhythms."

Jasak lay back and held the book open above him. After a moment of hesitation, Aleron settled his head on Jasak's chest. With one ear, he caught the low rhythm of Jasak's voice as he read from the well-worn pages. With the other, he listened to the rapid beat of his heart, pounding a swift rhythm. When Aleron had heard the guards speak to Jasak in their own tongue, it had seemed harsh. Frightening. Like the words were closer to growls and snarls. Each sound had seemed a sort of attack. But the words in the book seemed quite different. They were almost musical, like a melody ran through the text and Jasak was picking it up with the rhythm and tenor of his voice.

He closed his eyes. The purpose of the exercise might have been to see the printed language, but it was easier—and far more enjoyable—to let

Jasak's voice wash over him. His cheek where it pressed to Jasak's skin seared, while the gentle rise and fall as he spoke lulled Aleron into forgetting everything but whose bed he was in. Jasak shifted beneath him, and a strong arm curved around Aleron's back, drawing him more tightly into Jasak's body.

Aleron went willingly, hungrily. His hand stole across Jasak's torso to complete the circle, and he turned his head the fraction he needed to brush a kiss across the nearest patch of skin.

"My father gave this to me to help me prepare for my first hunt. It's actually not that popular anymore among the Athaki. Most of the copies are old. Like this one. It was my grandfather's." Jasak's hold tightened for a moment. "When I took it with me, I didn't know if I would ever read it again. I just couldn't stand the thought of it being burned with everything else I left behind."

"Is this the first time you've read it here, then?"

"Yes. Like I told you, it's easier to block Belenia out of my mind."

Guilt assailed him. It was more than a little selfish to have practically begged Jasak to pull it out. The last thing he wanted was to cause Jasak any more pain.

“If it’s too hard for you, you don’t have to read,” he said. “I can learn Athaki from Rosany’s books.”

“I wouldn’t ask Rosany if you could read his books,” Jasak said softly. “He’s a private person and he probably has personal reasons for bringing them with him. Besides, I don’t mind sharing this with you.”

“He probably wouldn’t let me lie on him like this to get the full effect, either,” he teased. To accentuate his point, he rubbed his cheek over Jasak’s chest, the friction between the hair and his stubble sending shocks down his spine. “Thank you, by the way. For sharing it with me.” Jasak ran his fingers through Aleron’s hair and down the back of his neck in a lazy, sleepy gesture. He closed his eyes, surprised by how content he felt in that moment. He was not the sort of man who took the time to relax with his lovers. They were essentially cuddling, and that was something Aleron never consented to unless he’d just had his brains fucked out and he was too tired to resist. But now he couldn’t think of anything else he would rather do.

“I’m your mate, too,” Jasak said softly. “That means something.”

Aleron swallowed. “What does it mean?”

“It means I owe you honesty. It means you have the right to question me. It means I’m an open book to you.”

He lifted his head and smiled. “You’ll never be an open book. There’s too much of you that you’d like to keep for yourself.”

“That’s one of the lessons I learned here. If you don’t keep something of yourself hidden away, you risk losing everything. But in the strictest sense, my life is your life now. Keeping something from you is like keeping something from myself.”

Aleron frowned. “Is that a two-way street? Am I supposed to tell you everything about me?”

“You mean you haven’t?”

“No, and I don’t know if you’d like what you’d hear.”

“I didn’t mean you had to tell me everything. We both had our own lives before Tantoret. I guess what matters now is the life we have here.”

Aleron rested his head on Jasak’s chest again and exhaled softly. For the first time, he wondered if he could convince Jasak to go with him. He would never want to exploit Jasak’s most personally held, sacred beliefs. But if the connection between mates was really as strong as he claimed, then wouldn’t he want to stay with Aleron? Even if that meant leaving with him? Could Jasak be convinced to escape with him?

Once the idea took hold of Aleron, he couldn't shake it. It wormed its way into his brain, burrowing deeper and deeper until it was attached to everything, coloring every thought. A part of him knew it was nothing except a hopeless daydream. Another part of him still felt a twinge of horror at the thought of being tied down to one person for his entire life. Even if he did escape the prison planet, wouldn't he still be a type of inmate? One forever bound to another person instead of literally bound to a rock?

Jasak ran his fingers through Aleron's hair again, and Aleron realized it didn't matter. Freedom wasn't an objective concept. He'd never married. He'd never been willing to die for another person, or invest himself in another person's happiness. He'd never had faith in anybody, and he sure as hell never allowed anybody to put faith in him. Aleron had been willing to betray anybody for any reason if it made his life easier. He lacked the concept of self-sacrifice, and he couldn't quite imagine what it must be like to live in a tightly-knit clan, where a single bad hunt meant the difference between life and death for *everybody*. But Aleron didn't live for himself anymore, and he wouldn't be free if his mate was still imprisoned. His heart beat for Jasak.

Aleron headed for the common room, his steps measured and light. The labyrinthine corridors that had once presented such a torment now unfurled before him without trouble. He'd woken up after an unbroken sleep with a large, exquisite body bearing him into the bed, greeted by Jasak's rough tongue licking away the sweat collected along his neck. They'd both had hard-ons, but Jasak had rolled away before Aleron could catch him. Then, the way he'd stretched to burn off the vestiges of sleep, the muscles in his broad back rippling, his buttocks clenching, had dried Aleron's mouth to the point of speechlessness. Jasak gave his order before Aleron could contradict it. Deliver the bangle to Tias.

It didn't matter. Because when he was done with his shift, he would return to Jasak's quarters and pick up where they'd left off. That, alone, merited his good mood.

He paused in an entryway to the crowded common room, sweeping his gaze over the vista. Some semblance of order had been restored, but not much. Loose rocks stippled the ground. A set of table and chairs often commandeered by the larger, healthier inmates was turned over, a skinny olive-skinned man Aleron didn't recognize

impaled on one of the legs. More bodies littered the periphery, forlorn, forgotten.

A trio of guards stood near the exit that led to the kitchens, barking instructions to the prisoners. Not one moved a muscle to help cart the bodies out of the room, though all tracked the movements every step of the way. It wasn't until the smallest dragged the back of his hand across his mouth that Aleron realized why.

They smelled the blood. Each second they remained was another test of their willpower. Even dead, the humans represented prey.

Aleron instinctively withdrew a step into the shadows.

He chose a different corridor to reach his destination, the primary pathway that led to the core. His skin tightened just at the memory of standing in its shadows. Jasak had given him the route to memorize, an exercise that made his thieving synapses shout in ecstasy, and he turned at the second left, following the path etched in his brain.

Within two turns, the walls glittered with unmined chojal. White and gold and pink clusters spangled the craggy surfaces, wilder in their beauty than what he'd seen when he'd been mining. These corridors felt untouched. The caverns the prisoners mined had been picked over for dozens of cycles, and he hadn't been around

long enough to be part of the crews that moved first to the richer veins. The guards always sent those on the verge of being medically dismissed to scout the next location, as if their lives were no longer valuable enough to spare. More than once, Aleron had seen men return from those missions, only to be released from duty completely.

Nobody had come through these halls yet, or at least, nobody human.

The distant thump of the core was oddly reassuring. Aleron didn't miss it when he was in Jasak's quarters, but here, knowing what he was about to face, it felt good to cling to something familiar. The few artificial lights came at long intervals, forcing him to rely on the chojal's illumination, but the blanketing darkness calmed his suddenly skittish nerves.

The entryway Jasak described was a mammoth hole in the wall, with sharp, jagged edges ringing its sides that looked alarmingly like teeth. Everything about it screamed "Go away!" Considering the lack of guards or prisoners he'd come across to get here, it looked like it worked.

For the first time since arriving, he wished this place had doors. What he wouldn't give to have something announce his presence, something that wouldn't take the occupant by surprise. He didn't really fancy getting his throat torn out because he'd woken someone from their nap.

Staying off to the side, he edged as close to the wall, out of view, as he could without letting the chojal come into contact with his skin. “Tias?” The core’s muted pounding ate away his voice. He cleared his throat and tried again. “Tias? I’m here for Macario.”

Invoking Macario’s name was his best hope at not getting attacked. Jasak had said Tias’s injuries had been severe, but he was still dangerous. He was stronger than Aleron, and worse, he would be in a foul mood. Aleron had to be very careful how he dealt with him.

A scraping sound emanated through the hole in the wall, growing louder as it approached. The guard who melted out of the darkness barely resembled the one Aleron had seen on his first day on Tantoret. His hair had been hacked away, leaving patches of his scalp bare and scabbed, and his broken jaw destroyed the elegant lines of his face, leaving his skull misshapen and lopsided. Over his bruised and swollen lips, the gleaming tips of his fangs were in full prominence. Aleron wondered if it hurt too much to retract them with the rest of his musculature so broken.

The scraping came from the leg he dragged after him. His pants had been cut away to allow a thick splint to brace an obviously shattered calf. More slices and scrapes disappeared beneath his clothing, but Tias managed to hold his head high,

his glowing eyes narrowing when he spotted Aleron.

“You’re the new one.”

“Aleron.” He was a little surprised Tias remembered him. He’d only seen him that first cycle. “Macario asked me to find you.”

“Why?”

“To give you this.”

He held out the Lonan bangle on the palm of his hand, keeping his fingers flat and unthreatening. When Tias glanced at it, his nostrils flared, but he didn’t otherwise move to take it.

“How did you find me?”

Time for the lies to come out and play.

“I’m a thief.” Aleron offered his most charming smile and prayed it still worked. “Finding my way around mazes is my specialty.”

“Nobody knows I’m here.”

Which wasn’t exactly true, since Jasak had been able to give Aleron a very accurate map on how to find him, but he was pretty sure Tias referred to the prisoners.

“All right, I confess. It took me a little while. Macario gave this to me yesterday before the core shut down. But don’t tell anyone, okay? My rep will be ruined.”

His playful tone seemed to be doing the trick in keeping Tias slightly off-balance. But then the

words he dreaded most came from his swollen mouth.

“You smell like Jasak.”

Though Aleron had done everything in his power to scrub away any lingering scents, Jasak had warned him their type of contact went deeper than skin. “You can’t hide the truth from an Athaki,” he’d said. “Even an injured one.”

Aleron had shelved the warm glow of delight at how much they’d absorbed each other to focus on the greater problem at hand. “So what do I do?”

Jasak hadn’t blinked. “Don’t hide it.”

Aleron kept his hand outstretched, waiting for Tias to take the circlet. “He claimed me to keep me from getting killed by the other guards. He said I was in danger, otherwise.”

He had no idea how much Tias knew about what was going on in the rest of the prison in his absence. Getting caught in deception would destroy any hope he had in gaining the Athaki’s trust.

Tias stalked closer. The scrape across the rough earth rattled down Aleron’s spine. His pulse leapt at the raptorial intent in the guard’s twitching muscles, but he stood his ground, unwilling to give Tias a reason to chase him. It was worse than anything with Jasak. Though Jasak scared him, he knew enough about the

man's honor to know it was stronger than his baser instincts.

Considering Tias was a traitor to his own kind, Aleron had no such belief he would act in the same way.

Tias halted an inch away. Aleron pressed his shoulders into the wall, trying to lengthen the distance between them, but that just put him closer to the tilt of Tias's head, the audible snuffle when he inhaled Aleron's scent. Hot breath washed beneath his loose shirt, wet and slippery. He could almost feel the fangs sinking into his flesh, though he knew that was his overactive imagination. Tias wasn't touching him.

Not yet, anyway.

Aleron closed his eyes and waited for the inspection to pass. When it had been Jasak sniffing him out, desire had undercut his fear to make it bearable. With Tias, there was nothing to alleviate the blood-pounding terror. He wanted to run and forget about all of this, find Jasak, drag him back to bed and refuse to leave until they absolutely had to. But he couldn't. They had no idea how much time they had left, not with traitors in their midst. He had to bear the beads of sweat springing from his pores, trying to escape when the rest of him was trapped. He had to fight his instincts, his muscles quivering from how tightly he kept them still.

“He hasn’t bled you.”

The accusation hissed in his ear. Tias hadn’t moved an inch to utter it. Aleron replied without moving, too.

“No. Why would he?”

“Because you’re human. Why else would an Athaki, even one as low as Jasak is now, take a human as a mate?”

“I told you why. It has nothing to do with...bleeding.”

“He must want to devour you. It must drive him crazy to be so close to something so easily taken. I bled my human.”

Aleron swallowed. “Didn’t that...didn’t that hurt him?”

Tias scoffed. “Hurt him? He was happy to give me what I needed. He gave me blood, and in return, his heart beat with an Athaki’s strength.”

“Is that a metaphor?”

“No, it’s the bond. One heart, one soul, two bodies. Perhaps he’s afraid to go that far with you. But he’s taken you in other ways.”

“Yes.”

“He’s a fool.”

Aleron held his tongue. There was no correct response to that kind of statement.

“Does he know you’re here?”

“No. I’m supposed to be on duty.”

“And why would Macario trust Jasak’s mate with anything, let alone this?”

On *this*, he curled his hand around Aleron’s, enclosing both it and the circlet within his wide grasp. Aleron’s bones ground together, drawing a whimper he couldn’t hold back, but thankfully, he felt nothing break.

“Because Macario doesn’t know about me and Jasak. He’s been in medical since the attack.”

Tias’s sharp inhalation brought goose bumps to Aleron’s skin. “It’s progressed that far?”

In that single reaction, Aleron learned something he hadn’t known before. Tias might have some sort of treasonous plan in place, but in spite of it all, Macario’s health mattered to him.

“Yes. I’ve been tending him. That’s how he was able to give this to me to give to you without anybody else knowing.”

Tias withdrew then, though Aleron took several seconds to open his eyes. The Athaki regarded him warily. “What did he say to you?”

“He asked me to make sure you got this. He made me promise. He wanted to see you, but he said you’d never go to him.”

A muscle might have twitched in his cheek. It was hard to tell with the broken jaw. But Tias loosened his grip, hooking a finger through the circlet to take it with him when he dropped his hand.

“What else did he say?”

“Nothing. There wasn’t time. The core turned off right after, and then everything was chaos.” He straightened his shoulders, daring to meet the guard’s eyes. “Is there a message you’d like me to give him?”

This had been Jasak’s idea. Nobody knew about Macario’s death. If Tias believed him still alive, they might be able to glean some information about whatever he was scheming.

Tias shook his head. “You’re Jasak’s mate.”

“And I’m still a prisoner, just like Macario. I’m human, just like Macario. I didn’t ask for Jasak to do what he did. He decided that all on his own. He doesn’t get my loyalties. He just gets whatever he can take.” He took a deep breath. “You should know that better than I do.”

The reference to Tias’s punishment did the job. Thank God, because Aleron didn’t know how long he could keep up the charade Jasak meant nothing to him. It was one thing to lie to humans. It was something else entirely to do it with a species that read body language as easily as they breathed.

“No message,” Tias said.

As disappointed as he was, Aleron accepted the answer with a nod. He couldn’t afford to press any more than he had. He slid along the wall to begin

the route back, stopping when Tias held up his hand.

“Was...so he’s your mate?” Aleron asked.

“Yes.”

“Why did he need to send you this?”

“He’s trying to save my life,” Tias growled.

“Now get out of here before I end yours.”

Aleron didn’t need to be told twice.

Snod had expected punishment for having a weapon, but the guards only confiscated his blade and knocked him around a bit. He had fresh bruises on his ribs and scrapes across his shoulders from getting tossed around like a ball, but once they got bored with their game, the guards left him alone. Jasak hadn’t been involved. He was distracted by the problems with the core for part of the time, yes, but there was more to it than that. More, in the form of a too-skinny, dark-eyed thief who moved like quicksilver around the edges of the prison.

Snod didn’t know his name. Nobody did. All they could tell him was he was the newest prisoner, arrested for theft. It wasn’t until he found a witness to the attack on Yoirryn that he discovered more, like how the guards seemed to loathe this strange man. And how Jasak didn’t.

So Snod watched him. He disappeared regularly to the infirmary. Since he was clearly not sick, there had to be another reason. Aleron was getting quite a reputation, without ever being present to appreciate it. Jasak's attention, his daring bid to take a guard hostage, his absence from the mining...in some ways, Snod respected him for accomplishing so much in such a short period of time. Another example of Raimo's shortsightedness. He'd been ready to sacrifice Aleron to accomplish his goal.

Aleron wasn't the lamb to lead to slaughter. He was far too useful to dispose of so casually. The more Snod learned about him, the more convinced he became that Aleron would be the one to lead him straight to Jasak.

And the belt that held the keys to the kingdom.

Chapter Eighteen

After Aleron forced him to utter Kayoly's name, Jasak couldn't push it out of his mind. He had so many vivid memories of his mate. They would replay in his mind on a constant loop if he allowed them to. Soon after his arrival on Tantoret, he learned the danger of that. Kayoly distracted him. And when he was distracted, he was vulnerable. But now Kayoly wouldn't leave him. He could almost hear his deep, patient voice.

You're troubled.

He was supposed to be filling out his regular reports. He doubted anybody ever read them, but the authorities still expected him to file the paperwork regularly. "I'm always troubled, *atdormi*," Jasak said under his breath, staring blankly at the desk in front of him.

Don't call me that. You were supposed to let me go. I'm not allowed to mourn you, remember?

"It's different. You're not allowed to mourn me because it'd put the whole hunt in jeopardy."

It's not different. Do you think I'd be angry if I learned of Aleron?

That sliced right to the heart of the matter. Kayoly had always been good at that. When Jasak

wanted to pull away and shield himself, Kayoly forced him to be honest. The same way Aleron forced him to be honest. He admired that even if he did resent it at times.

“Aren’t you angry? I can’t even think about you with a new mate, Kayoly. It kills me to imagine you with another. And I know it’s my fault. But if I had chosen to hide like a coward, could you have still loved me?”

I would have loved you no matter your decision, and you know that. But that doesn’t matter anymore. You didn’t tell Aleron the whole truth about mates.

“I told him everything he wanted to know. I answered his questions.”

That’s true. But the real terran word is helpmate, isn’t it? You should teach him the Athaki word for mate. You should show him everything.

What difference did that make? But the answer didn’t come to him in Kayoly’s voice. It came to him in Aleron’s.

Because that’s what I am now.

But he wasn’t really Jasak’s mate at all. Not in the real sense. There had been no formal ceremony to consecrate their bond because they didn’t *have* a bond. Not like two Athaki would have. He couldn’t read Aleron’s thoughts, couldn’t sense his emotions, couldn’t force his

heart to match the beat of Aleron's. He knew Aleron's scent and the taste of his sweat and arousal, but that was not enough.

They hadn't tasted each other's blood, and should he offer Aleron the opportunity, the human wouldn't understand the purpose. Jasak didn't know for sure, but he suspected a human's tongue wasn't sensitive enough to taste the nuanced story a drop of blood could tell about the clan and the hunt. He wasn't even sure if the bond would be as he knew it. Aleron's humanity could very well stand in the way of anything but the most shallow of connections.

Jasak sighed and buried his head in his hands. He was becoming more attached to Aleron. Even now, with so many duties on his plate, so many obligations to fulfill, he wanted to go back to his cave, find Aleron and pull him into bed. He wanted to keep the man at his side every waking moment, and with that knowledge came guilt. Didn't he owe more to Kayoly? Didn't he owe more to the memory of the mate he'd lost but never wanted to let go? It was best not to think about it and not to compare the two, but he couldn't *stop*, no matter how hard he tried.

He realized in an absent way that his hand was moving. When he looked down, he saw Aleron's name written across the top of the paper again and again.

“Are you angry, Kayoly? Is this betrayal?”

How can it be a betrayal? I don't want you to be alone. You need him. You need him because that's how you were built. You were never meant to be alone. You need the strength and security he will give you. You can't trust anybody like you trust him.

“If I admit I need him, I'll lose him. They'll take him from me.”

He's the only thing left to take away from you. That's true whether you perform the ceremony or not.

The ceremony was an act that every Athaki hunter learned after their first kill. Not every hunter found his or her mate. The desire to create the bond was rare enough that some Athaki died without ever attempting the ceremony at all. Now Jasak was actually considering performing the ancient ritual for a second time.

No. No, he wasn't considering it. No, he could never really *consider* it because he'd never ask that of Aleron. Even if he wanted it more than he'd ever wanted anything in his life, including the bond with Kayoly. The prospect of possessing that human, and being possessed in return, satisfied a deep yearning all Athaki shared. A hunter with a mate was strong enough to form and support his own clan, taking an elevated place in Athaki society. The second he'd avenged his

brothers, he'd given up any chance he had at having his own clan to love and protect with Kayoly. He'd given up every chance for happiness.

Aleron represented a different chance at happiness and fulfillment. One Jasak didn't deserve. No matter what Kayoly would say about it.

Jasak wished he could have the actual conversation. But communication was impossible. Even if he could contact Kayoly, his former mate wouldn't answer. Their culture and his own conscience would stop him—after all, how can you talk to a dead man? You can't. Not ever. Not for any reason. But Jasak didn't need to talk to him, because whether he wanted to admit it or not, he wasn't alone anymore.

“Oh, Kayoly, what have I done?”

I think you fell in love, atdormi.

Jasak closed his eyes. He'd fallen in love with an inmate, a human, a thief. He'd fallen in love with a man who didn't belong to him, who perhaps was incapable or unwilling to give Jasak what he needed in a mate. He couldn't even ask Aleron to see him as more than just his protector. What he gave to Jasak must be given willingly, without fear or hesitation. How could they ever have a truly equal relationship when Jasak would always know that Aleron's primary motivation

was fear? Who was he to even hope for it? He clung to his honor because it was all he had left, but an honorable man would not have acted so rashly or selfishly.

By the time Aleron heard the telltale scraping of cloth against rock, it was too late. He stopped in his tracks, peering down the long corridor and trying to see past the dim light, but there was nothing. He did, however, hear the same low rustling sound, as though somebody was letting his arm drag along the wall. It could have been anybody approaching. Rosany on his way to see the sick inmates, or another guard bringing a dying prisoner to Rosany's care. It could have even been Jasak. His rational mind happily accepted these possibilities, but his gut did not. It twisted itself into knots, kick-starting Aleron's fight-or-flight instinct.

"Who's there?"

Aleron waited, feeling slightly silly when the only response to his question was its own echo. Overhead, the lights flickered, sending a new rush of fear through his system. If the core shut down again, he'd be fucked. Jasak, too, probably. He wasn't too far from where the corridor met the

main cavern, and from there, he was just a quick jog from Jasak's quarters.

He took five steps before a hand slammed into his chest. It was more startling than painful, but it was still hard enough to temporarily knock him breathless. A man stepped out from the recess in the wall, his unfamiliar face twisted in a filthy smile. Had he been in Raimo's gang? Was he one of the traitors? Had Tias sent him?

"Where you off to?" The man's voice was unnaturally deep and raspy. As though he had suffered a blow to his throat and had never properly recovered.

Another hand fell on his shoulder, and he barely had the chance to wonder just how a second person got behind him before he was spun around. The man now gripping him was much taller than the first one, and when he smiled, all of his teeth were missing. His tongue and lips weren't discolored, though, so his lack of teeth probably had more to do with his mouth being kicked in than chojal poisoning.

"Gentlemen. Is there something I can help you with?" He tried to make a mental map of the corridor, but he couldn't gauge the distance to the core. If a guard heard him fighting or screaming for help, would any of them bother to come for him? His stomach sank like a stone at the thought.

Of course, they wouldn't. The only person who would bother to help him was Jasak.

The man he faced answered by driving his fist into Aleron's stomach. He immediately doubled over, clutching his aching abdomen and gasping for breath. He didn't even have the chance to respond before a sharp elbow between his shoulder blades drove him to the ground. He hit his knees and put a hand out to brace himself, but two hard, quick kicks to the ribs had him flat, aching with each gasp. With a soft moan, he pushed himself to his hands and knees again, only to be rewarded with another kick to his kidneys.

A large hand curled in his hair and dragged him up from the ground. His scalp burned and tears pricked at the back of his eyes as the pain spread down his neck. The man pulled him up to his feet, cocked his fist back and slammed it into his cheek. Fire detonated under his skin, and blood poured from his nose and the corner of his mouth. Aleron tried to twist away, tried to protect himself from another blow, but the second man caught him by the shoulders. He wrapped one large arm around Aleron's chest, holding him in place while the fist connected again. And again.

Aleron's upper body was immobile, but his feet weren't. He kicked his legs, twisting his hips and struggling to break the other man's iron hold. His feet connected again and again with shins and

knees and even a thigh, but he never had enough momentum to really cause any pain. He lost track of how many blows landed, lost track of how many different areas were bleeding. The hot blood flowing down his face and chest got trapped in his shirt. The world turned red with it, and copper coated his tongue. Blood from his nose glided down the back of his throat, thick enough to gag him. He coughed to clear his airway, pulling against the arm holding him down to struggle for more air.

Aleron slammed his head back and finally heard a sharp crunch. The man behind him screamed in agony and released him, dropping him so suddenly that Aleron didn't have the chance to catch himself.

"That fucker broke my nose!"

The man with no teeth brayed like a donkey, too distracted by his amusement to see Aleron roll out of the way of his foot. Aleron grabbed it with both hands, twisted and pulled, yanking the man off-balance. He collapsed to the ground, his head slamming into the stone wall. Aleron rolled again to avoid his other foot, but couldn't escape the attack coming at him from his right. He kicked the back of Aleron's thigh with so much force the world actually wavered, all of the lines blurring as the edges of his vision dimmed.

Can't pass out. Can't pass out. If he did, they'd kill him. He had no doubts about that. Shaking, he pushed himself up to his hands and knees and tried to crawl out of their reach, but the man who had kicked him followed right behind. Aleron tried to scramble to his feet, but his legs tangled with his attacker's, and they both fell again. The other man was larger than him, and stronger, too. Maybe he had been down in the mines for dozens of cycles, building up his muscles, while Aleron had always relied on his intelligence and speed to avoid serious injury. But right that second, he wasn't fast enough or smart enough to get the upper hand.

The attacker rolled him over onto his back and straddled his chest, pinning him to the ground. He smiled as soon as he realized that Aleron wasn't going anywhere, and even in the dim light, the other man's eyes gleamed.

"Didn't get my usual fee, but I think this'll definitely be worth it." He raised his fist and brought it down on Aleron's cheek, just below his eye. "God, this is gonna be good."

He raised his hand again, but this time he was stopped by an unmistakable growl. A fresh wave of fear sent Aleron's heart racing as he imagined one of the guards, like Icera, stumbling over them. The chances of Icera rescuing him, of *helping*

him, were slim to none. The only person in Tantoret who valued his life was Jasak.

The toothless man cried out, and then bones snapped, and everything was silent. Aleron wasn't breathing. Neither was the man sitting on top of him. His heart thudded dully in his ears, and the pain behind his eyes grew with every breath.

"Snod? Is that you?"

Aleron caught his breath. He didn't know who Snod was, but he was about ninety-nine percent sure that he wasn't a guard. Whoever it was picked the man up by the back of his neck and slammed him face-first into the wall. He groaned, a low, wet sound, but another blow against the wall silenced him. Probably permanently, for all Aleron knew.

"Can you stand?"

Aleron blinked up at the new arrival, partially relieved that he was looking into the face of another prisoner.

"I don't know." The words came out a garbled, broken mess. His jaw ached, and more blood welled up behind his lips. He spat and tried to speak again, but none of the sounds really turned into words. Strong hands gripped him by the shoulders and picked him up. As soon as his feet hit the floor, he tensed, ready for another punch to the face.

"Not going to hurt you."

The voice wasn't familiar, either. He thought that probably meant he hadn't been one of Raimo's friends.

"Should get moving before their friends show up. I'll take you to the main cavern."

Aleron shook his head. If he went there, it'd be like chumming the waters. Everybody with a real or imagined grudge against him would see their opportunity to attack. Concentrating as much as he could with the pounding in his ears growing louder and louder, he murmured, "Jasak."

"You're the one he claimed, huh? I heard about you. Come on."

"Where?"

"Where does he sleep?"

Aleron opened his mouth to answer, but the floor tilted without warning. He would have crumpled to a heap, but Snod caught him in time and effortlessly picked him up. He stank like sweat and mildew and something sour enough to trigger Aleron's gag reflex, but he choked back the bile.

"Go down...the third right from here...then the second left."

"Right."

Each step jostled his fractured bones and bruised muscles, sending fresh jolts of pain through him. The pain kept him awake, which, as he kept reminding himself, was a good thing. If he

gave in to the sweet blackness, he'd be free of the pain, but he'd be at Snod's mercy. He couldn't let go until he was with Jasak again. Couldn't drop his guard until the one person he trusted could look over him.

"Who...who were they?"

"Thugs."

"Paid?"

Aleron felt Snod's shoulder lift in a slight shrug. "Yeah, probably. They don't mind doing everybody else's dirty work."

Aleron didn't ask why anybody would bother to pay off a couple of thugs to attack him. Even if the answer wasn't obvious enough, it didn't matter much in that moment. All that mattered was getting back to Jasak.

"Just took the second left. Where now?"

Aleron's brain slowly processed the words and automatically found the correct answer. "Second right and then straight down to the end."

Something occurred to him as he was speaking. Some vague memory, or order. But his brain wasn't making the right connections. Nothing made sense. Did he have a concussion? Was that the problem? Or had he just lost too much blood? Maybe both? Maybe neither? Aleron didn't know. Nothing made any sort of sense. Snod walked in a steady rhythm, his long strides eating up the

ground as he moved closer and closer to Jasak's private quarters.

Private.

Snod was an inmate.

By the time Aleron made the connection, it was too late to do anything about it. He couldn't stop Snod, couldn't tell him to go back, to turn around and take him to the infirmary. Jasak would be furious, and the thought of his rage added a thick layer of dread to the pain already coating his arms and legs and stomach. He felt like he had been dropped in wet cement, and now that cement was hardening around him, forming an immovable cast, securing his limbs.

"Does he have water?"

Aleron opened his eyes to look up at the hole in Jasak's ceiling. It wasn't night aboveground, and the sky was a strange chalky color. The sight of it was enough to lift Aleron's spirits, but only slightly.

"A spring." He gestured to the left. "Through there."

"You'll feel better once you clean up a bit," Snod promised him once they entered the small chamber. He splashed into the water, apparently unmindful of his own clothes, and gently lowered Aleron into it. The cold was a welcome shock to his system, pushing back the encroaching

darkness and immediately thinning the blood flowing from his open wounds.

“Thank you, I...”

A roar cut off Aleron’s words of gratitude, and fresh terror seized him. They both looked up at the same time to see Jasak’s face, twisted with undeniable fury, his eyes glowing, his fangs flashing.

Air rarely moved through the tunnels, but the smell of blood always wafted toward the core sooner or later. Jasak had jumped to his feet at the first hint of the heady scent, instinctually following his nose. There could have been another fight, or maybe one of the prisoners had been injured while mining. After about one hundred feet, the scent took on a familiar dimension. As Jasak moved beyond the core’s chamber, he had no doubt who was bleeding. He just didn’t know where.

Jasak sprinted through the corridors, navigating through scent alone as he wound through the endless paths. His nose led him to a side tunnel that led directly to the long-term medical cavern. There were two bodies on the floor, both of them still, and Jasak could tell at a glance that neither was Aleron, though his scent lingered. The air was

thick with blood and sweat and fear. Judging by the marks left in the dirt, he had been attacked without warning, and there was enough blood on the floor and walls to tell Jasak that he had been overwhelmed. But where was he now? Had he crawled to the infirmary? Had he managed to knock both his attackers unconscious?

Jasak inhaled deeply and tried not to gag on the scent. In other circumstances, he loved the coppery, tangy, sweet, heavy smell of Aleron's blood. But not like this. Not mixed in with the blood of two attackers. Not permeated with so much horror and fear. A set of tracks led away from the fight, and Jasak decided to follow them, though the stride was much too wide to belong to Aleron.

As soon as he realized where the tracks were headed, he started to run again. Every instinct shouted at him to *kill*, to *murder*, to rend from limb to limb. He was going to destroy whoever had harmed his mate, and his mouth already watered for the taste of their flesh. If any of the Athaki were behind this attack, he would find them and destroy them, too. He knew that as certain as he knew his name. If either Icera or Tias had orchestrated this, it would be the last thing they ever did. And if Aleron hadn't survived...

Jasak's fists clenched. His heartbeat drummed, banging louder and louder, urging his rage and

bloodlust until he couldn't think of anything except revenge. He felt like he was running through a veil of blood. The smell clung to him, clung to the walls, clung to the floor. It surrounded him and would always surround him until he washed it away with the scent of somebody else's blood. That would be the only way to neutralize it.

Jasak wasn't quite sure what he expected to see when he followed the scent to the spring, but it wasn't Aleron huddled and shivering at the feet of some brute. They both looked up at the same time—both of them wearing identical masks of fear. Jasak decided he would think about that later, opting to grab the prisoner by his throat and lift him a foot out of the water.

“What do you think you're doing?”

The man clawed at the immovable hand around his throat, pulling at the fingers and opening and closing his mouth in silent pleas.

“Jasak...he helped me...”

The sound of Aleron's voice more than the words themselves prompted him to finally release the prisoner. Everything was mushy and broken. He dropped into a crouch and gently cradled Aleron's battered face.

“What happened?”

“I didn't see it all.”

Jasak looked up, and now that his vision wasn't so blurry, he recognized Snod. "What did you see?"

"Just the end, when he was trying to get away from those two fuckers. I helped him out."

"Why? That's not your usual response."

If Snod was offended by Jasak's question, he didn't show it. "Knew who he belonged to."

"If you think that this is going to allow for any special treatment..."

Snod held up both hands defensively. "Not trying for any. You should be more worried about him, anyway."

Jasak redirected his attention back to Aleron and his chest tightened. The rage was still there, but it was dampened by very real concern. This wasn't the first time Aleron had been injured, but this was the first time that his pale skin had been stained with so much blood. Even the water around him had a slightly pink tinge.

"I'm going to get you cleaned up," Jasak promised. "And everything's going to be fine. How are you feeling?"

"Okay," Aleron said, but one eye had already swollen shut and the other was damp with unshed tears.

Jasak created a cup with his hand and poured water down the side of Aleron's cheek. He repeated the action three times before he could see

the source of all the blood. A long cut just below his eye. It was wide, but not deep, and Jasak had to swallow down a strange emotion. Aleron could have lost his eye. Judging from the bruises and the way his face was swelling, his attackers were hoping he'd lose more than that.

"Do you know the names of the prisoners who jumped him?"

"One of them was Cisios. I don't know about the other."

Jasak looked back to Aleron. "Do you know Cisios? Ever crossed paths with him before?"

"Never."

Which was more or less what Jasak had expected. He had sent Cisios into solitary confinement three times since his arrival. It was easy to manipulate him into doing pretty much anything, judging from what Jasak had witnessed. Chances were good that somebody had used him to attack Aleron. At that moment, Icera or Tias ranked highest amongst the possibilities.

"Go get Rosany. Tell him to bring his bag. Oh, and Snod?"

"Yes?"

"Thanks. You can take the next three cycles off."

"Yes, sir."

"I'm sorry," Aleron murmured thickly, once they were alone.

“For what? You didn’t do anything.”

“For bringing him here. Know it’s private.”

Jasak shook his head. “No, you did the right thing.” He repeated that again as he washed the other side of Aleron’s face. No matter how much of the clear water he poured over Aleron’s skin, he couldn’t make the purple-and-black marks fade away. He hoped the water was at least cold enough to numb the pain. “I’m sorry.”

“Not your fault.”

“It is. Somebody planned this attack, and I should have known about it. Should have stopped it.”

“No. You have enough to deal with.”

“I know how much the other guards resent you. I thought I was keeping you safe by keeping you out of the mines.” He washed more blood away from Aleron’s temple, realizing in a distant sort of way that it wasn’t attractive at all. It didn’t smell good. He didn’t want to lick it away. He never wanted to see any blood outside of Aleron’s body again.

“Might not have been them.”

Jasak settled on his knees and gently lifted Aleron’s shirt. He had hoped that the skin there would be unmarked, but it was a foolish hope. Bruises the size of feet mottled his chest and ribs, and blood was starting to dry over the bruises. He wrapped one arm around Aleron’s shoulders,

cradling him gently and easing him back into the water. Aleron didn't struggle, and floated easily while Jasak began to wash him.

"Either way, it's too dangerous for you here."

Aleron blinked. "Can't leave."

Any other time, Jasak would have agreed. Nobody ever left Tantoret. It was a death sentence for all of them. But then, Jasak had information the Athess authorities clearly did not. He might have been able to use that information to bargain for his own release, but Aleron's freedom was worth more to him than his own. He wasn't sure why or how his heart had changed, but he didn't question it. They may not have exchanged blood and history, they may not be bound together with timeless vows, but Aleron was *his* mate. It was just a fact, immutable, like the core that governed their lives. And he was not going to let Aleron die like the rest of them did—withered and desperate and bleeding in the dark.

Chapter Nineteen

The moment Aleron's one good eye drifted shut, the gentle touch of Jasak's hand swiping over his midsection stopped, and the grip around his shoulders tightened.

"Don't you dare fall asleep," Jasak hissed. "Open your eyes."

Though his brain was still muzzy, Aleron did as he was told, wincing from the jolt of pain that shot through his head when his swollen left eye tried to do the same as its mate. He blinked away the moisture collecting on his lashes, but the added clarity to his vision only brought the look on Jasak's face into sharper relief.

The fangs were gone, though he couldn't remember Jasak retracting them. The hair hanging over Jasak's tattoo was wilder than ever. But it was the eyes that made his breath stop, the near colorless radiance that caught and trapped him, the faint lines scoring the corners that relayed far more than he thought Jasak realized.

Panicked. That's how Jasak looked.

He'd believed nothing panicked Jasak. He was the strongest person Aleron had ever known.

Reaching up made every muscle in his arm scream, but he did it anyway, taking his time to correct for his damaged depth perception. His fingers touched Jasak's chin, then skimmed upward, along the lower lip, over to the tattoo, through the fine filigree to the temple and hairline. He threaded through the roots and combed out, catching more than once on the knots along the way.

"I know the danger," he said. "I won't do anything stupid."

Jasak held still throughout Aleron's simple grooming, though he snorted softly under his breath. "I think your definition of stupid and my definition of stupid are two entirely different things."

Aleron smiled, or tried to. From the way Jasak frowned, his broken face had likely contorted into a grimace. "Those damn language barriers."

"Yes."

The hand on his stomach started moving again, back and forth across his ribs in strokes so light Aleron barely felt them. Aleron dropped his arm back to the water, allowing it to drift along the surface. With Jasak's strength, he felt weightless, and as long as he didn't move, most of the pain was tolerable. He could float along indefinitely, forget about Tantoret, forget about conspiracies, forget about—

“Aleron.”

Jasak’s sharp tone pulled him back. He hadn’t been aware that his eye had shut again until he opened it.

“You must stay awake,” Jasak said. “At least until Rosany is here and says otherwise.”

“I’m not tired.”

“You closed your eye when you said you wouldn’t.”

“It hurts to keep it open.”

Water splashed across his throat as Jasak lifted his hand out of the spring to touch the side of Aleron’s face. The coolness had been a balm when Snod had first brought him here, but now all he seemed to notice was how cold it was. It dripped into his hair and across his ear, tickling and annoying, but he couldn’t summon the strength to shake it off.

“I know.” He swiped his thumb across one of the open cuts. “But your heartbeat isn’t as strong as it usually is. You can’t risk falling asleep.”

“I won’t fall. You’ll catch me.”

The sudden pinch of Jasak’s mouth made Aleron wonder if the words hadn’t come out correctly. He’d meant to tease, but now that the sentiment hung between them, he wanted Jasak to understand he meant them.

“That’s why Snod brought me here,” he continued. “I told him to.”

“Don’t apologize for that again.”

“I’m not.”

“You shouldn’t speak at all. Conserve your strength.”

Not until Jasak heard him out. “Nobody else could have helped.”

“Few of the prisoners are as strong as Snod.”

“No, not Snod...”

His brain tripped over the words he wanted, while his mouth tried to adjust to the thickness of his tongue. Whole parts of his body felt disjointed now, coming apart at the seams. Aleron swallowed to regain control of his throat, and the ensuing pain drew both whimpers and a fresh sting of tears.

Jasak spoke, but in his native tongue with the words so fast and jumbled, Aleron couldn’t translate to understand what he wanted. Without a voice, he needed to convey his intent in other ways. It took everything he had to catch Jasak’s wrist.

Jasak froze. Aleron turned his head and brushed his lips across the palm at his cheek. He barely felt it. Like the rest of his body, what wasn’t in excruciating pain was numb. But he managed to smile again, and this time, make it less monstrous.

Voices murmured in the distance. When Jasak stiffened and looked over his shoulder, Aleron followed his gaze and sighed in relief.

Rosany was here.

Now he could rest.

Jasak only looked away for a moment, but that was all the time it took for Aleron to lose consciousness. He cursed himself for the lapse. He sprinkled water over his mate's eyes. He tapped the less injured cheek. He shook his shoulders, hoping the water would cushion the movement, but all that did was draw more whimpers, sounds he never wanted to hear again.

He hoped Snod hadn't killed Cisios and his unknown cohort. Jasak wanted the satisfaction of hearing their screams when he ripped out their vital organs and crushed them before their eyes.

He doubted they could scream loud enough to erase the memory of Aleron's pained cries.

Two sets of footsteps hurried into his chambers. He didn't look back this time to know Snod had returned with Rosany.

He lifted Aleron to the very surface, cradling him carefully to give Rosany the best view. "Tell me what to do," he said, turning bleak eyes to his friend.

Rosany touched a finger first to Aleron's throat, then beneath his arm. "Get him out of the water. Now." Straightening, he backed out of the way and nodded toward Snod. "Get the blanket off the bed and lay it out on the floor in here." Snod rushed out, but at Jasak's frown, Rosany added, "I'd rather not move him more than I have to until I know what's broken."

Jasak held Aleron against his chest, soaking both of them with the freezing water. For once, the cold didn't bother him. Aleron's body was icier to the touch, and now that he was free of the spring, his damp skin tinged in pale blue. Rosany was here now. He'd know what to do.

When Snod returned, he snapped the blanket flat over the ground. Jasak laid Aleron down, then knelt at his other side, waiting for instruction.

He tried to focus on Rosany rather than Aleron, but failed miserably. He watched as the doctor cut away Aleron's clothes, and was left staring at even more mottled skin. He gained no pleasure seeing Aleron naked now. There was no joy in broken bones and blossoms of purple and green when the victim was not prey. The vivid sight was all too close to the images that haunted his every dream, though those were of his own imagining. He hadn't seen his family's bodies, after all. He'd only seen the corpses of their executioners.

Rosany moved quickly from head to toe. First, he pried open the one eye not swollen shut and peered into its depths. Scarlet stained the white at the corner. Jasak hoped it was just a broken blood vessel from a blow rather than something internal.

The mouth next, to check his air passage. A back tooth had broken and sliced into his cheek. Rosany siphoned out blood and emptied it onto the earth. Jasak's senses were already full of the scent, but seeing it spilled so carelessly, seeping into the hungry grit like the damn planet was ready to eat Aleron up, made him want to vomit.

Careful prodding along the jaw and skull. A scan over torso and hips. Only two cracked ribs there. No broken vertebrae.

At his swollen knee, Rosany frowned. "You said he couldn't walk at all?"

Jasak was ready to respond when Snod beat him to it.

"He tried. Took one step and almost passed out."

Rosany manipulated the joint. When a choked whimper vibrated from Aleron's throat, Jasak nearly grabbed Rosany's wrist to make him stop.

"It's not dislocated." Rosany met Jasak's eyes. "But it is strained. I can immobilize it for now, but he'll need lerestage injections to repair the ligament if you want him walking any time soon."

Lerestage. One of their most valuable drugs, because of its powerful recuperative capabilities. The only thing it couldn't do was repair nerve damage, else he would have given Rosany permission to use it on Yoirryn. Beyond Tantoret, it was widespread, but it wasn't cheap. Authorities refused to provide great quantities for lowly criminals. They considered it a last resort. Jasak could count on one hand how many times he'd sanctioned its use, unwilling to waste what few resources he had.

A flutter of eyelashes snapped his gaze back to Aleron. Humans were such fragile creatures. He'd always known that. He'd held it up as a reminder of why he had to protect them, even when brutes like Raimo and Cisios deserved otherwise. But in the face of their physical weaknesses, they also demonstrated a resilience of spirit, of will, he'd respected from the day he'd arrived.

In that regard, Aleron had shone from the moment Jasak set eyes on him. He had done so, time and time again in the interim since. This attack had been Jasak's fault, whether Aleron recognized it or not. He couldn't treat him like an ordinary prisoner, even if he wanted to.

"Give it to him," he said.

Rosany nodded. He registered no surprise at the order. Jasak doubted any of the Athaki on Tantoret would, once word got out.

Even more reason to get Aleron off the planet as soon as possible.

"I need to straighten this before I can splint it," Rosany said. "It's going to hurt."

Aleron's breathing was quickening, more evidence he was coming back around.

"Can I hold him?"

"As long as you're careful."

As he slid his arm beneath Aleron's shoulders, Aleron moaned, a wracking shiver jerking him away. Rosany caught his leg when it flailed, but when Jasak did the same for the nearest arm, the chill in his skin scared him more than the potential pain.

"Why is he so cold?" he demanded.

Rosany cocked a brow. "He's underground, he's naked, he's soaking wet, and he's lost a lot of blood. Go get the other blanket." The latter was directed at Snod, who loped off to obey. "Get out of those wet clothes and curl up in the blanket with him while I immobilize his knee. You can keep him still and warm him up at the same time."

At that point, he'd do anything to calm Aleron's now constant quivering. He yanked off his clothes and tossed them aside, dropping his belt on top of the pile just as Snod approached with the blanket.

He'd pulled Aleron into his arms enough times for his body to retain the memory. He'd stolen

every degree of heat the man had to spare, and basked in the sweat that invariably glued them together when they woke. He craved Aleron's warmth every moment he didn't have it, but this was nothing like any of those other times. Drawing Aleron into his body now too closely resembled picking up one of the corpses they found lost in the catacombs.

"Jasak..."

His name was a breath on Aleron's lips. Jasak bent his head, tightened his embrace and murmured, "Be still."

His turn to share. Aleron was a thief, after all. It was only natural that he steal everything Jasak had to give.

He couldn't see what Rosany was doing, but he heard it. More importantly, he felt it reverberating through Aleron's slim body. He loathed every tremor, every cry, every twitch. Rosany probably only took a minute or two to set the knee straight, but Jasak bore them like an eternity.

"It'll get better." He kept his words soft so only Aleron could hear. "I promise you that."

Aleron took a shuddering breath. His good eye closed again, but Jasak didn't prompt him to open it. Perhaps if he passed out, he could sleep through the worst of the pain.

"I'm sorry," Aleron whispered. "It's supposed to be my job to keep you warm, not the other way around."

The small joke helped the ache in his chest, if only a small bit. "I told you to stop apologizing."

"Keep him in here until I get back with the first injection," Rosany said as he rose. "Once he's had the first dose, you can move to the outer room and light a fire."

"He needs dry clothes."

"I'll send Snod for them, and to fetch some food. For both of you." He paused. "I imagine you won't be returning to duty immediately."

"No. Not until I'm sure he's not in danger."

"What do you want me to tell Icera?"

"As little as possible. I don't know who orchestrated the attack."

"He could help you investigate."

"He could have done it himself."

Rosany frowned. "How are you going to investigate if you won't leave your mate's side?"

A fair question. Aleron had opened his eye again, in anticipation of hearing this particular answer, Jasak presumed.

But one look at the bruises that marred his exotic beauty had Jasak itching to flay the perpetrators again, one strip of skin at a time.

"I'll make arrangements."

The answer didn't satisfy either of them, but at least Rosany realized it was the only one he was getting. With a shake of his head, he gathered his kit and left the room, Snod slipping out after him.

"Do you really think it's Icera?" Aleron asked.

Jasak turned his full attention back on to his mate, burrowing as close as he could without jarring him. "You need to rest. You lost consciousness the last time you talked too much."

"You told me to stay awake until Rosany got here. I did."

For all the pain he must be in, Aleron's mind was certainly clear enough. He wondered if Rosany had given him a painkiller when Jasak wasn't looking.

"Did you learn anything from Tias?" If he could exclude Tias from suspicion, his job would be infinitely easier.

His waft of breath seemed warmer than it had before, slithering against Jasak's neck to wrap invisible tendrils around parts of him he'd long thought dead. "Just that Macario matters to him. I don't think he'll be happy when he finds out he's dead."

He didn't know how to reconcile what he'd witnessed between Tias and Macario with what he now knew of the other Athaki. "Jasak—"

"No more. Rest."

Aleron tensed. Another argument was coming. Jasak saw only one way to stop it.

“I can’t lose you, too.”

The time it took for Aleron to relax was worse than the minutes Rosany had taken to splint Aleron’s leg. Jasak couldn’t even breathe, fearful of harming what had already been broken. Perhaps he’d said too much. Aleron had never asked to be claimed. They enjoyed each other’s flesh, and being with Jasak afforded him more pleasures, but Aleron had been beaten, threatened and nearly died more than once because of Jasak. Shared secrets and a developing friendship might not be enough to bridge the wide gap between them. Jasak wanted so much more from Aleron, and that possibility seemed more remote than ever.

Then, Aleron shifted. Only inches, and they were slow, painstaking inches at that. But they were toward Jasak, not away, and when he felt the light touch of Aleron’s brow at his throat, the skin warming more and more every second it remained there, Jasak squeezed his eyes shut against the sudden leap of his heart.

“Rest,” he whispered. His hand came up to cup the back of Aleron’s head.

Neither man moved.

Chapter Twenty

The fire did nothing to chase the chill away. The flames sparked and danced, licking over the precious firewood, constantly searching for more fuel, but it was still too damned cold. The flames nearly hypnotized Jasak as he watched them, his body possessively wrapped around a sleeping Aleron. He would have to leave his injured mate sooner or later. He needed to find more rags, or maybe go to the infirmary and see if there were any extra blankets in their supplies. But he knew that no amount of blankets would fight the cold as effectively as his own body heat.

Jasak buried his nose in Aleron's hair and inhaled. The fresh scent he had so long associated with Aleron was starting to fade. But the natural scent of his skin still wrapped around Jasak, and there was no hint of infection on his skin or in his blood. Thanks to Snod's quick reaction and Rosany's care, Aleron would be fine. The first injection was already wending its way through his body. Jasak knew that. All of his senses told him that was true. But the part of him he'd thought died when his brothers were murdered couldn't be assuaged. That was the part that wouldn't let him

sleep, only watch. As though he had the power to stop infection, to soothe pain, to guarantee Aleron's life.

He kissed Aleron's forehead, finding a patch of skin without blood, without a bruise. He pressed his mouth to that spot and closed his eyes, feeling his blood pulse under the skin. "You're still here," Aleron murmured.

Jasak sat up, surprised by the pang of guilt in his chest. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"Your duties. The core."

"Everything's under control."

"How long have I been asleep?"

"Awhile," Jasak murmured. Aleron hadn't opened his eyes, but the slack had left his face. Now he was tense, his mouth tight with the pain.

"Have you slept?"

"No. I've been keeping an eye on you."

The corner of Aleron's mouth lifted, a ghost of his usual smile. "Why? I'm not going anywhere."

Jasak swallowed. "I wanted to make sure you're well."

"What did Rosany say?"

"He said you should recover. We need to talk about what happened. Not right now. When you feel up to it. But we need to talk about it."

"Okay. I don't feel up to it right now."

"That's fine."

"Do I look terrible?"

Jasak didn't want to say as much, but Aleron looked worse than terrible. The bruises had fully blossomed, and Aleron's face was so swollen it was barely recognizable. "A little."

"That's what I was afraid of. Where would I be without my pretty face?"

"I still think you're pretty."

That earned a smile—a very small one, but a smile all the same. There was still blood on Aleron's teeth. How could he have ever liked the sight of that blood?

"I didn't think you even noticed how pretty I was."

"Of course I did."

The eye that wasn't completely swollen opened. "I want to kiss you, but my mouth hurts."

"I can find the parts of you that don't hurt."

"There aren't many of those, to be honest."

"Do you want me to?"

"Yes."

Jasak started at the same spot on Aleron's brow. After a small kiss, he moved to Aleron's right temple. The skin there had been completely unbroken, and it didn't taste like blood at all. It tasted of salt and spring water and Aleron. Even though he knew there wasn't a cut or bruise there, he barely skimmed the spot with his lips. Aleron sighed softly, but Jasak had grown so accustomed to his noises that he knew it wasn't a sigh of pain.

“Would you like me to continue?”

“Yes, please.”

Jasak found an area of Aleron’s cheek to kiss, but then he had to move down to Aleron’s throat. Some blood had dried there and not been washed away. Jasak gently rubbed it away with his finger, doing his best to erase the mark from Aleron’s skin. Once it was gone, he lightly sucked on the skin, pulling it between his lips so he could run his tongue over it. Aleron arched off the bed, dropping his head back to expose more of his throat.

Jasak used both his eyes and nose to find the uninjured inches. He worked down Aleron’s body with deliberation, taking care not to miss a single spot, no matter how minute. Aleron made soft, appreciative moans in the back of his throat. The best sounds Jasak had ever heard. Sounds that reminded Jasak that Aleron was still there, and more, could still feel pleasure through the walls of pain.

He was careful as he investigated Aleron’s torso, taking care not to jostle him. His ribs seemed more pronounced now than when he’d arrived, and his stomach had grown concave. The sight of it reinforced Jasak’s desire to get him off Tantoret. Aleron couldn’t survive for long there, and Jasak was not going to let him die.

Jasak's fingers glided over the skin that he'd kissed so delicately. Aleron touched the back of his hand in encouragement, the pads of his fingers running over his knuckles and down to his wrist. It was the only thing Aleron could reach comfortably, and it was hardly any contact at all, but it warmed him, chasing away the bitter cold that had plagued him since he jumped into the cold spring to hold his mate.

A bruise the size and shape of a boot stood out plainly on Aleron's side. Jasak was oddly drawn to it, and he traced the edge of the discoloration with light fingers. "Am I hurting you?"

"No."

"Tell me if I do."

"You won't."

Aleron sounded more certain than Jasak felt. Hurting Aleron wouldn't be a challenge at all. He was so fragile, so human. Why couldn't he be Athaki? Why couldn't he have the strength and speed of Jasak's own ancient race? He would have been able to crush his attackers. But Aleron wasn't Athaki, and despite human frailty, wasn't that one thing Jasak secretly found attractive about him? Aleron's exotic beauty might have been the initial draw, but the differences had been a silent permission to start over, even before he recognized it. He could have a new life without being forced to relive the old.

Jasak rearranged himself, settling between Aleron's legs as he had done before. The last time he had Aleron open and spread before him, he had been more than happy to feast on the man without any real thought of what Aleron might want. Now each moan, each twitch, each shiver and each sigh told Jasak the story he wanted to hear. Aleron's cock grew as Jasak's mouth moved closer to its shaft.

Jasak pressed his face to the seam of Aleron's thigh, letting the rough hair scratch his cheek and jaw as he inhaled deeply. There was no hint of blood there, only the earthy scent of Aleron's flesh. He dragged his tongue over the skin, savoring the taste. For the first time, his own cock twitched, as though he now had permission to feel any arousal over Aleron's battered body. Intoxicated, happy to pretend that all of Aleron still smelled and tasted this way, he licked the skin again and again.

"Oh, God...Jasak, that feels so...God..."

Encouraged, he switched his attention to Aleron's other thigh, letting his tongue dance over the skin in a dozen different ways. Aleron's breath was climbing, coming in higher, faster gasps. Jasak wanted Aleron to remember that his body was capable of so much more. Of pleasure. Of bliss. That the same nerve endings that kept him

awake with pain could be manipulated into easing that pain, too.

Jasak shifted his position and attention, moving to suck Aleron's sac into his mouth. His balls were pulled in tight, but Jasak still managed to get his mouth around them. While he lapped at them with his tongue, he wrapped one hand around Aleron's cock. He stroked the shaft slowly, dragging his palm from the top to the bottom as though he had nothing better to do with his time.

He could feel every change to his pulse, every rapid beat of his heart. He could smell the fresh arousal slicking Aleron's crown, and hear the light whimpers. The knowledge of what he was doing, of what he could do, of what he wanted to do, swept through him, and with it was a blind sort of possession. *Mine. My mate. His mind, his body, all of it. Everything. Mine.* His claim on Aleron might not hold any authority on Jasak's homeworld, but on Tantoret, it was sacrosanct. It was all he possessed.

And what would he do to protect what was his? Anything. Everything. No questions, no second thoughts, no hesitation. A different sort of lust flared inside of him. Bloodlust. He wanted to destroy everybody in Tantoret who could have been remotely involved in the attack, but he had the self-awareness to stop himself, to stay right where he was.

Jasak stroked Aleron's cock until the entire length was slick with pre-come and the whimpers had turned into hoarse pleas. He didn't want or need Aleron to beg, but he did want to make sure Aleron was pushed to the edge of his endurance. When Jasak finally gave in, he wanted to make sure the release was swift and strong enough to leave him tingling and exhausted.

"Please, Jasak...I just need...I need to feel your mouth."

It wasn't the words Jasak was waiting for, but the tone. An undeniable combination of lust and desperation, pleasure and desire. He released Aleron's balls and gripped the base of his cock, angling it downward to his mouth. The smell of arousal was so strong that Jasak could taste it in the back of his throat, and his mouth immediately watered for more.

He closed his mouth around Aleron's cock and swallowed him to the root. Aleron shouted, and his fingers curled in Jasak's long hair. Jasak swallowed again and again, letting his throat squeeze and flutter around Aleron's shaft. He enjoyed the weight on his tongue, the pressure as his muscles stretched to accommodate Aleron's length, and the taste of his skin and pre-come. He liked the way Aleron's fingers flexed in his hair, liked the way his thighs trembled, liked the sounds that weren't quite moans or shouts. They

echoed off the walls, traveling higher and higher until they disappeared through the tiny opening in the ceiling.

Jasak could have let Aleron fuck his throat. In fact, he would have been happy to. But the most important thing was to keep Aleron comfortable, which meant he couldn't make him move and awaken all the agony that lay dormant, waiting for an excuse to rouse. So he kept his lips sealed tight around his base, letting his throat and tongue do all the work, gradually coaxing the pleasure to greater heights.

"I'm going to...I'm going to...I'm...Jasak... Jasak..." The final syllable of his name broke in a harsh moan as warm liquid spilled into the back of Jasak's throat. He swallowed quickly, catching all of the come, and nursed the orgasm for as long as he could. Aleron made sounds of protest—something about being too sensitive—but, ultimately, he didn't push Jasak away. Jasak didn't move until every drop had been sucked from his body and licked off his skin.

Jasak settled at Aleron's side exactly as he had before. He could tell by the way Aleron's good eye gleamed that he wanted to say something. Or maybe offer to return the favor. Before he had the chance to speak, Jasak very tenderly touched his mouth to Aleron's bruised lips.

“Go back to sleep,” he whispered. “I’ll be here when you wake up.”

A promise he always intended to keep.

Once Rosany saw to Yoirryn, he ducked down a narrow chasm and into his private cavern. It wasn’t as large as Jasak’s, and it certainly didn’t have the luxury of fresh air or a fire pit, but it was home and had been since his arrival to Tantoret. Once, his brother had shared the space with him. They had huddled together for warmth, communicating without saying a word. He had personally experienced every second of Sohin’s torment. The foiled assassination attempt had haunted him every second. He lived with it, he dreamt of it, he obsessed over it. He never spoke a word of it, but Rosany knew his brother. Knew that he berated himself daily for the pain and suffering of the Cucon planet, its people held firmly under Ambassador Kuri’s thumb, due to the compliance of the Athess authorities. A successful assassination would have set the stage for a coup and the return of the Cucon royal family to power, and Belenia’s once greatest ally would again be able to help the Athaki assert their independence, rather than bow to Athess tyranny.

But Sohin had not been successful. He trusted the wrong man, someone too easily swayed by Lonan's so-called ideals, and what should have been a clean kill turned into an unnecessary slaughter. Children had died. The image of the ambassador saving a trapped woman was transmitted across the galaxy. The evil man Sohin had set out to kill became a hero, while the Athaki who only wished to restore a planet's peace was sentenced to the worst punishment possible. Death would have been too quick. The slow torment of Tantoret would force Sohin to live with his mistakes for the duration of his days.

When Rosany requested that he be allowed to join his brother, the Athess authorities had been more than happy to oblige. After all, what did they care if the brother of some worthless rebel from a backwater planet chose to live and die among the worst criminals in the entire system? They had Lonan breathing down their necks. They had bigger problems than Sohin and his insignificant brother.

It had been a long time since Sohin had finally died of a broken heart, his mind and soul fractured by the reality of his failure. After he had died, Rosany had kept his clothes and his few pitiful belongings, setting up a small shrine to Sohin's memories, to his principles, to his ideals. There were many such shrines on Belenia to Athaki who

had fallen in the hunt or in battle before their time, their youth memorialized to serve as a reminder of how perilous their existence was. In those shrines, the living would make vows to their dead, swear oaths that could not be broken. Sohlin deserved a larger shrine and a better oath than Rosany could give him. His death would not be in vain, and the shrine was his daily reminder. The loss of Kuri would have been a blow to the Athess empire, but they would have recovered swiftly. The loss of Tantoret's chojal would debilitate the Athess war machine, and give the planets in rebellion the upper hand. For once, the chance of victory would be real and not just a dream.

With a soft groan, Rosany lowered himself to his makeshift bed. At that moment, he would have given anything for companionship. Somebody who would take the cold from his bones, somebody who could talk the loneliness away. Somebody who would distract him from the fact that he wasn't going to get any sleep that cycle.

The timing of the attack on Aleron galled him. Rosany knew it had just been an unfortunate coincidence, but he couldn't help but feel the universe was out to get him. At roughly the same time Rosany had finally decided to recruit Aleron, two brainless thugs had made him useless to everybody. But all wasn't lost. In fact, he might have discovered an even more powerful ally in

Jasak, though dealing with Aleron's injury had set him back several hours.

Rosany gently pushed the shrine away, exposing the old radio he had smuggled to the planet. He kept it hidden, though he suspected Jasak wouldn't turn him over to the Athes authorities if he did discover the contraband. Soon, he would pass his final night underground, and then he was leaving. He had no guarantee he would survive his escape, but Rosany didn't care.

"Star four-two-four-two, this is Detin Alpha checking in. Star four-two-four-two, do you copy? Over." Rosany counted until thirty and then pressed the button again. "Star four-two-four-two, this is Detin Alpha. Do you copy? Over?"

He repeated the call every thirty seconds for five minutes. He didn't let the silence discourage him. After the eleventh call, the radio crackled in response. Rosany swallowed a familiar cloud of nerves and prepared to offer his report.

Chapter Twenty-One

Jasak took the meeting with Icera in the hallway outside his quarters. The scent of Aleron's blood was less out here, though the coppery smell permeated everything from the air to Jasak's skin.

Icera only made one small move toward the door, but a flash of Jasak's fangs stilled him. Icera was remarkably restrained, considering the enmity between them.

"We finally reached the authorities to report the full tanks," Icera said. "Transport's on its way to empty them."

Jasak nodded. That was one less thing to worry about. "Did you determine why we were dark for so long?"

"No. But I explained the situation, and they're bringing a replacement radio. They seem concerned we were out of touch for any length of time, though they're pleased with the numbers."

Of course, they were. More chojal meant more money.

A slight whimper from his quarters made him twitch to return, but Jasak stifled the instinct, quelling the rush to protect his mate. He had to be strong.

“Cisios’s and Darel’s bodies were thrown into the core,” Icera said, voice tight. “There’s no indication yet why they might have attacked the new prisoner.”

He almost snapped, *His name is Aleron*, but Jasak held his tongue. “Nobody else was attacked?”

“No.”

“Have their quarters searched.”

Icera frowned. “But they’ve already—” His jaw snapped shut at Jasak’s warning growl. He gave a sharp nod and turned on his heel to leave. Stopping in midpivot, he tilted his head to allow his words to carry back to Jasak, though he didn’t go as far as meeting his gaze. “It wasn’t me.”

The denial abraded Jasak’s already worn nerves. “I didn’t accuse you.”

“You didn’t have to. But I wouldn’t touch your mate, Jasak.”

“You wanted him before.”

“Then you claimed him. You did claim him, right?”

“That’s none of your business.”

“I think I have the right to know if the bond is complete.”

Jasak gritted his teeth. “It makes no difference. The punishment for touching him is the same either way.”

Jasak wasn't sure he believed him. Icera wanted to use honor as the reason he wouldn't harm Aleron, but Aleron had claimed Icera would have let Jasak die when he'd been trapped beneath the core's machinery.

He didn't offer any more refutation of Icera's denial. More words might prompt arguments he wasn't ready to have, and the violence beneath his skin already crept too close to the surface to risk having it erupt before he was ready. He had to ball his hands into fists and fold his arms over his chest to stop from shaking the truth out of Icera.

After several moments of crushing silence, Icera nodded and resumed walking. He disappeared around a bend, his footsteps echoing in Jasak's blood long after they were gone.

Another whimper shattered Jasak's stasis. He whirled and leapt for the doorway.

Aleron's injured leg stuck out straight and awkward from beneath the blankets, the edge of the fabric caught on the splint. The lerestage would speed up repairing the ligaments, both preventing Aleron from going lame and getting him back on his feet in days rather than weeks, but keeping his knee immobile eliminated unexpected jarring. Aleron had complained about the splint once in between naps, and while Jasak agreed it was a clumsy device, he refused to contravene Rosany's order.

Though Aleron was normally a very peaceful sleeper, this rest had been more fitful than usual. Jasak tugged the blanket free and covered him back up. He held still, waiting to see if Aleron would drift back to sleep, transfixed by his mate's profile. Even so battered, there was an elusive beauty to the man, a delicacy of bone and contour the ugly bruises couldn't mask. Aleron had joked about relying upon his looks, and while Jasak certainly appreciated them, he knew now they masked something richer.

Honor Aleron couldn't hide behind his thievery.

Intelligence that separated him from the brutes.

Bravery when selfishness would be more self-serving.

For several minutes, he didn't move. As much as he wanted to crawl back into bed with Aleron, Icera's visit reminded him he had work to do. He had to take advantage of the windows of opportunity he was granted.

Pushing his pants down his legs, he tossed them aside with the rest of his discarded clothing and went to the spring. He needed to rid himself of any drop of Aleron's blood. Any venturing back into the prison population had to be done from a position of power. The inmates might not notice, but the guards would.

He almost threw up as soon as he submerged his head. The water reeked of Aleron's blood. Jasak leapt from the spring, dripping onto the cold earth, and stared at the churning waters. The surface appeared brackish, though he'd been here long enough to know that was a trick of the lighting. No blood. No pieces of Aleron floating away. His overactive imagination exacerbated both his guilt at not protecting Aleron and his fury that it had happened at all.

"Jasak."

Rosany's calm voice jerked him out of the dark corners of his mind. Shaking the worst of the water from his hair, he returned to the outer room to find the doctor hovering in the doorway.

"Is it time for another injection?"

Rosany shook his head. Though he'd said he was going to check on the infirmary and retire to bed, he looked more tired than when he'd left, his mouth a hard line, his eyes flat. "I need to talk to you."

He didn't want to wake Aleron unnecessarily. Jerking his chin toward the door, he said, "In the hall."

"No." Rosany stood firm. "I can't risk being overheard."

An odd statement for him. Jasak glanced at Aleron, then stepped clear of the spring entryway. "Come."

For all the weariness of his appearance, Rosany walked more briskly than usual, only casting his patient a brief glimpse before passing Jasak. Jasak took a moment longer to follow, listening for others, sniffing the air, ensuring nobody came behind Rosany.

“Is there something wrong with one of the other prisoners?” Jasak asked.

When Rosany shook his head, the web of fine scars at the base of his neck danced. “You have a rebellion on your hands.”

“I know. Icera wants my—”

“Not Icera. His ambition is the least of your worries.”

“Then...?”

“A Lonanian spy.”

“Tias approached you.”

Rosany jerked in surprise. “It’s Tias?”

The query stumped Jasak for a moment. Only one other name was possible, but then it would mean Rosany had sat on the information for longer than left Jasak comfortable. “Then what did Macario say to you?”

The second name garnered the same reaction as the first. Rosany’s gaze jumped to the doorway for long seconds, his features inscrutable. For once, Jasak could not read his friend. Under other circumstances, he wouldn’t mind so much, but too

much was at stake right now for him to be kept in ignorance.

"I wondered why Tias would turn on Macario like that," Rosany mused. "He never struck me as the type to lose control. They must have had a falling out."

Jasak didn't think so, not if Aleron's judgment was to be trusted. "If neither Tias nor Macario talked to you, how do you know about Lonan's interest in Tantoret?"

"I have a radio."

"Who have you been in contact with?"

"Friends who tell me Lonan is on the move. To Tantoret. Their arrival is imminent."

The bottom of Jasak's stomach dropped. "There's a transport due any day. They'll cross paths." Worse, they would get in the way of his rescue for Aleron.

"My friends would like nothing more than for them to destroy each other before they ever get to Tantoret, but they're not willing to risk finding out." Rosany stepped closer and rested a hand on Jasak's shoulder. "That's why I've come to you. You're the only one I trust."

"Trust for what?" The question was automatic. Possible answers fought for dominance within his head. "Who are these friends of yours, Rosany?"

Rosany didn't blink under his intense scrutiny. "Comrades from before my time here. The people Sohyn and I stood side by side with in the war."

His brother. The one who had been involved in the assassination attempt. Jasak had never known Rosany had been a part of those rebellious attacks, though.

"How long have you been in contact with the rebels?"

The corner of Rosany's mouth lifted. "I was never out of contact."

Understanding dawned. Jasak tore away from Rosany's grasp and backed off, shaking his head. "Is anybody here who they claim to be?"

"You," Rosany said without pause. He glanced at the door. "And oddly, I would put Aleron on that very short list, too."

"I thought you were my friend."

"I *am* your friend."

"There is no honor in lies."

A shadow passed behind Rosany's eyes, and his slight smile disappeared. "I have never lied to you. I have never acted against you, or the prisoners, or even the warmongers who put you here, though trust me, I've thought about hurting them more than once. But the time for that has changed, which is why I've come to you now. I need your help."

"For what?"

“Lonan wants Tantoret.”

“I know that. Athess won’t give it up without a fight.”

“Neither will Lonan.”

“What do the rebels care? It’s only one planet. A rock with nothing but the forgotten and the damned.”

“And chojal.” Rosany swept an arm around the room. “Have you ever considered how many worlds have been crushed under the Athess fist because of what we’ve mined here? We’re as guilty as the rest of them.”

“We had no choice.”

Fire flashed in Rosany’s eyes. “We always have a choice. You, more than anyone else, should know that.”

“And you want me to what? Help Lonan take Tantoret?”

“No. If we’ve learned anything, it’s that Lonan is as corrupt as Athess. They’ll abuse Tantoret, too.”

“Then your rebel friends should stop them.”

“That solves nothing.”

“Then I’ll tell the Athess authorities so they can stop them.”

“*We* will stop them. We can make it so neither side has Tantoret.”

Jasak had feared this was where Rosany was going, but hoped he was wrong. "You want me to help you destroy the planet."

"Do you see any other way?" The fervency was gone, replaced with a desolation that would have destroyed Jasak if he'd seen it on Aleron's face. "What Athess is doing is wrong, Jasak. You know that, I know you do. I've watched you try and make things better for these prisoners, for our fellow Athaki, for years, as if they weren't condemned to an awful, malicious death being sent here. You wouldn't have done that if you didn't care."

"That doesn't mean I'm willing to end their lives in one fell blow."

"I can't do this on my own. And if we don't remove Tantoret from their battleground, it'll continue. Athess wins, and the cycle gets perpetuated. More men, more Athaki, die horribly. Lonan wins, and it'll be the same thing. They don't even have laws against chojal mining."

Rosany startled him by darting forward and catching his elbow, dragging him to the doorway to the outer room. They didn't cross the threshold, but stood there with a direct view of the bed and Aleron's broken form upon it.

"Tell me you can allow other humans like him to suffer, and I'll walk away. Tell me you could live with yourself, knowing you could have

seriously crippled two of the most murderous regimes across the galaxies, and chose not to, and I will leave you with him. To live with your honor.”

Jasak remained frozen, ignorant of how tightly Rosany gripped his arm. *We had no choice*, he’d said. Because that was the best way to deal with the day to day, the best argument for the decisions he was forced into on a cycle basis. But deep down, he knew it was a lie. He questioned his actions incessantly, repeating the rhetoric over and over until he had to believe it. He’d done so until Aleron, until he’d been given a glimmer of hope there might be more, that he didn’t have to be alone, that there was fire even buried in a bed of ice.

Every man who’d died from the poisoning already weighed on his soul. If Rosany was right, more would follow. Lonan wouldn’t have planted spies amongst the population without wanting it to pay off somehow, and their lack of legislature meant certain death for those unfortunates they ordered belowground.

He already knew how Athess would play. He’d been wrestling with it ever since his judgment.

Rosany must have taken his silence as the proof it was he was weakening. “The rebels are on their way. They’ll be here within the cycle. All it would take is a single message from me for them

to send a shuttle ahead, and we can have Aleron out of here before any of the violence starts. He can be safe, once and for all.”

Safe. Wasn’t that what he wanted for Aleron? Somewhere he wouldn’t hurt, or be at risk. He’d been willing to blackmail the Athesse authorities. Would it be any different to throw his lot in with Rosany and the rebels to achieve the same goal?

“If anything happens to him, I’ll make it my life goal to destroy you and everything you work for.” Jasak met Rosany’s eyes to impress upon him his seriousness. “Our friendship be damned.”

Rosany didn’t blink. “I would expect no less.”

Extending a single claw, Jasak scratched across his opposite palm to draw beads of blood to the surface. He pressed his hand to the middle of Rosany’s chest, directly over his heart. “Done.”

Rosany repeated the motion. “Done.”

Aleron woke to murmured voices. The pain he’d borne since the attack felt different, muted and watery rather than the jangling blades that had sliced through skin and sinew. His eye still wouldn’t open right, though, and he considered drifting back away without bothering to open the one that hadn’t swollen shut. There was nothing wrong with sleep. Jasak had told him to rest.

Thoughts of Jasak brought back a flood of sensations, far more pleasant than the memories of the attack. As he recalled the tightness of Jasak's throat, his cock started to swell. Jasak's soft words of compliment had almost been a greater aphrodisiac than the heat he had lavished. Flattery was not Jasak's forte. Any words, even those as simple as *I still think you're pretty*, were worth more than an entire planet's worth of chojal. Aleron had wanted to say as much to Jasak, to thank him for the lengths he'd gone and more, but he hadn't had the strength to stay awake.

The voices grew louder. Before he summoned the fortitude to open his eye, strong hands slid beneath his back. He felt like he was floating, weightless and everywhere. Especially when he met the hard, broad expanse of a familiar chest.

He hummed and buried his nose in the rough fabric of Jasak's shirt. A soft jolt of pain reminded him of his recent fight, but it was more than worth it to breathe in the sultry musk. "I like this."

Something wrapped around him, and though the bands of Jasak's arms seemed to evaporate, Aleron remained cradled against Jasak's body.

"I thought you said he wouldn't wake up until we met the shuttle." Jasak's voice.

"He's not alert." Rosany. Farther away. "Isn't that enough?"

"No."

Why were they having a conversation that didn't include him? "Enough for what?"

Fingertips skimmed over his forehead, down across his closed eyes. "Rest," Jasak murmured.

Aleron chased after the touch when it withdrew, and when he couldn't catch it, finally blinked his good eye open. Jasak's face swam above him, out of focus, grim until he glanced down. Then it softened.

"I told you to rest, *atdormi*," Jasak scolded.

"What does that mean?"

"Literally, it means you're my beautiful helpmate."

"Are you holding me? Where am I going?"

"Someplace safe."

The muscles shifted beneath his cheek. The sway of the walls beyond Jasak's head made Aleron groan. Jasak immediately stopped.

"He's in pain."

The statement was directed over him. To Rosany, Aleron realized a moment later.

"He shouldn't be."

"Give him more."

"He's had as much as his system can handle. Humans don't have the same tolerance levels we do."

"I'm all right," Aleron managed. "I got dizzy."

Jasak's bright gaze returned. How could Aleron have ever considered his beautiful eyes cold? "More reason for you to go back to sleep."

"How about if I close my eyes?"

"We don't have time for this." Rosany sounded impatient. "There's a very narrow window here. If you want Aleron to—"

"All right." Jasak touched Aleron's brow again, though this time, he carefully pressed his lids shut. "I have to move quickly. It'll be best if you don't watch."

He didn't wait for Aleron to respond, simply started moving, swiftly enough for Aleron to feel the slightest of breezes along his cheek. His skin felt sensitized but not pained, which was odd considering the circumstances. The drugs Rosany had given him, obviously. Not chojal. This felt different. No euphoria, but a sense of being cushioned against the world.

That might have been Jasak. He created that feeling by being in the same room.

It didn't take long for Aleron to figure out how he was being held. A sling bound him to the front of Jasak's body, strapping their torsos close while cradling his injured leg. The splint was gone. His knee didn't hurt, further proof Rosany had him hopped to the gills.

None of it prevented him from feeling the sinuous play of muscles through Jasak's clothing.

He'd witnessed the speed and power of the Athaki's body, but never this viscerally. Aleron got hard at the promise of it, remembering each long swipe of that rough tongue over his bare skin when he'd dared to tease the predator within Jasak, the unyielding grasp of hands at his flesh as Jasak devoured him from head to toe, tilting him up, dragging him in, finding every secret place and claiming it as easily as he'd claimed the rest of Aleron.

Aleron nuzzled against his chest, rubbing his nose over the tip of what he knew was Jasak's nipple. Its tense peak betrayed the effect he had on his mate, and he smiled at the same time Jasak growled.

"Does someplace safe have a bed?" he asked without opening his eyes.

Rosany snorted. "And you thought I didn't give him enough. We might as well have given him chojal."

The air rushed in ever-growing currents up and across him, fooling him more than once with its freshness. He even thought he smelled rain, but that had to be a mistake. The only place to smell the rain was in Jasak's quarters, with its tiny porthole to the world, and his clawed path to escape. Guilt assailed him at how he'd planned on using Jasak to get away from Tantoret. Things had changed. Would Jasak go with him if he could

find a way off? Could Aleron convince him they both deserved better than this self-induced hell?

He wanted to ask. His swollen mouth tensed to speak.

Then, light pierced his eyelids. He blinked, curious about what was going on, and cried out at the stab of pain through his eyeball from the unexpected sunshine.

Jasak shielded the side of his face with his hand, blocking out the light again. "We're almost there." He almost sounded like he was begging. "Be strong."

For Jasak, he could be anything.

Rosany's voice rang out, in a tongue Aleron didn't recognize. Shouts in the same language answered him. Jasak tightened the arm he had around Aleron's back, and his pace slowed to a walk.

"What's going on, Jasak?"

Without removing the protection of his hand, Jasak stroked softly along Aleron's jaw. "I'm getting you out of here."

His heart leapt. Those were the last words he'd expected to hear. "What? Where are we going?"

Jasak stopped, and a shadow fell across them. Aleron turned his head, breaking the contact to see Rosany standing there, a small, sleek shuttle behind them.

“We have three minutes. We have to get Aleron secured.”

Jasak nodded. He swept past Rosany and up the slight incline of the docking ramp.

Unfamiliar hands reached for Aleron, but Jasak growled and bared his fangs at them. He was the one who bent over the narrow bed lining one wall, his fingers the ones that loosened the sling holding Aleron close to his body.

“I would ask you to behave and do as you’re told, but I know better than that.” Jasak ghosted a touch along the side of Aleron’s face, all too fleetingly. “Just don’t create too much havoc.”

He tried to smile, but the look in Jasak’s eyes kept it at bay. “Havoc finds me, not the other way around.”

That garnered the response he’d hoped for. Jasak knelt at the side of the bed and touched his mouth to Aleron’s temple, a hot, lingering caress that sent a tingle all the way to the bottom of his feet. Aleron tried to reach for him, but Jasak was already moving, bending his head farther until his brow touched Aleron’s throat.

He didn’t understand the Athaki words Jasak murmured. His lips parted to ask for clarification, but Rosany’s sharp call cut him off.

Abruptly, Jasak rose. The tangled strands of his hair hid his face from view as he turned away and left Aleron on the shuttle.

Alone.

He struggled to push himself up. “Jasak?” He only made it to his elbows before a dark-haired woman loomed above him and slipped a mask over his mouth and nose. He tried to bat her away, but his body betrayed him.

He couldn’t even keep his eyes open to watch Jasak disappear. Blackness won again.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Once the decision was made, Jasak easily made his peace with it. He was just a very small cog of a much larger machine, and while he had his own role to play, if he failed to do his job, the machine wouldn't stop. Now that events were set in motion, Jasak felt a pressing sense of inevitability and even destiny. It was that sense of peace that allowed him to set about his tasks without a twinge of remorse or guilt. Lingered on everything he couldn't change and everything he wished wasn't true wouldn't do any good now.

When he had been sent to Tantoret, he hadn't known any of the Athaki guards. But now he felt as though they were his brothers. He wouldn't let his brothers die without a single warning. But if he told them the truth, they would probably try to kill him and Rosany. They couldn't contact their family or the friends they left behind on other planets. They would have the burden of the knowledge of their own death, and no realistic way to change the course of their fate.

But they didn't have to die like rodents in the dark, either. If he had the choice, he would choose to die with the sun on his face and fresh air in his

lungs. If they were still in the caverns when the core stopped, they would slowly suffocate to death. There would be enough air and enough time for them to realize what was happening. They would panic and race for the tunnels that would lead them to the surface. They'd form a mob, they'd trample each other, they'd claw and fight and panic, and they still wouldn't reach the surface before they ran out of oxygen. While they killed each other to have the chance of survival, the poisoned inmates would cry in the dark, screaming at the ghosts of the already departed, greeting the ghosts of the men who perished in the tunnels.

Jasak would not be able to design a more horrendous end.

With that in mind, he made one more decision as the head guard and default boss of Tantoret. He called every guard he dared into his office, including Yoirryn, who stood against the wall with his hand cradled carefully against his chest. He specifically kept the meeting a secret from Tias, but Icera was there, his eyes curious and sly. The other twenty guards crowded into the small space, casting nervous glances between Icera and Jasak, and occasionally sending more troubled looks to Yoirryn. He knew once he gave them their orders, the questions would be swift and demanding. He also knew he was at great risk if

they didn't like his answers. Nothing would stop them from following Icera's lead and simply attacking him.

"What's going on, Jasak?" Icera was the first to speak, of course.

"I have new orders. And I expect each and every one of you to obey them to the letter."

The other twenty Athaki nodded, but Icera remained motionless, his face impassive. "From where?"

"From Athess, of course. As many of you know, our gauges have been inaccurate for the past several cycles. On top of that, the core is not functioning at full power and there's a high risk of it breaking down again. They're sending special technicians to upgrade the core and install much-needed failsafes. In order to do this, they have to shut the core down completely."

"Are they going to leave us here to die?" Icera demanded.

"No. They want us to take the prisoners to the surface. After they complete the upgrades, we're to bring them back down."

"How are we supposed to do that?" Icera asked, and behind him the other guards nodded, clearly content to let him speak for all of them.

"That's not their problem, and you know it. You're faster and stronger than the inmates, and you'll be the ones with the food."

“But what if they rebel?” This was from Yoirryn, and everybody immediately directed their attention to him. “Down here, if they try anything we’ve got every advantage. Up there? I don’t know about the rest of you, but I don’t want to get into some sort of armed conflict with three hundred angry prisoners.”

Jasak smiled sadly. He was proud of Yoirryn for considering that possibility. He wished he could explain why it wouldn’t be an issue. “The surface of this planet cannot sustain life for any period of time. You’ll be armed and you’ll also have the food. If they try to run away and start some sort of rebellion, they’re doomed to failure.”

“How are we supposed to get them to the surface?” Icera asked.

Jasak retrieved the small map from a hole beneath his desk. It was the prison’s only map. The only document that showed what all the guards knew anyway—exactly how to get out of the prison and back to the surface.

“There are tunnels that lead directly to the surface. I want you to divide into four teams. Each team will be responsible for seventy-five inmates. Right now, the first shift is in the mines and there should be about one hundred prisoners there. They can take this tunnel. Jasak pointed to a narrow, snakelike line on the map. “Hopefully, if we limit

the number of inmates in each tunnel, we'll also limit the possibility of a stampede."

Breaking the guards into teams and giving each their assignment wasn't difficult. The Athaki were accustomed to working together in small packs. They felt more secure with four or five others than they did alone or in a larger group where the dynamics were less stable. Icera seemed temporarily mollified when Jasak named him as one of the group leaders.

"How long are we going to keep them on the surface?" Icera asked.

Jasak felt another twinge. "It should take a full cycle. The technicians will be here soon. I want the prison completely empty before they arrive. That way, there won't be any delays on shutting down the core. Are there any other questions?"

There were. Dozens and dozens, because the Athaki guards might have been prisoners. They might have been thieves, and liars, and murderers, but they weren't stupid. But every single question went unspoken. Maybe they preferred not to know the answers. Or maybe they would take any chance they could get to climb up to the surface.

"Try to keep things as organized as possible. Use force as a last resort, but don't let them get out of hand."

With that, they all turned to file out. All except Icera.

“There’s something you’re not telling us.”

“I’m telling you everything you have a need to know. That’s all I can do.”

“Why would the authorities even care if the prisoners survived this so-called upgrade? Were you told to save the poisoned ones, too?”

“Do what you’re told, Icera.” Jasak looked up and caught Icera’s gaze. He held it, giving Icera the perfect opportunity to read all the regret and sorrow he still harbored. “For once in your pathetic existence, just do what you’re told. You can hate me. You can curse me with your dying breath. Just do what you’re told.”

Icera opened his mouth, but he must have thought better of whatever he was going to say. This would probably be the last time he saw Icera alive, and a part of him insisted there needed to be more between them than a final warning. Jasak kept his mouth closed, his lips thin over his descended fangs, until Icera finally looked away and marched out of the room.

All Tias had to do was survive. He and Macario would be set for life if they could just survive. He knew it would be best to wait until the last possible moment to take Macario from the infirmary. The longer he waited, the safer Macario

would be. He didn't want to fight Jasak until the Lonan transport was already there. He'd never escape Tantoret otherwise.

But Tias wanted things to be fast, and he wanted them to be easy. Instead of waiting until the last possible moment, he simply waited until the last moment he could tolerate being separated from his mate. He raced through the long corridors, his blood thrumming through his veins, his cock half-hard at the thought of finally wrapping himself around his human and taking a deep drink.

"Where's Macario?" Tias demanded as he burst into the infirmary.

Rosany looked up from the bag he was holding. Tias couldn't tell if he was unpacking supplies or filling the bag. He didn't care, either. "What?"

"Macario. Where is he?"

"Tias. Oh, Tias, I thought you knew."

"Knew what?" He crossed the room in three long strides and reached out, claws extended, to wrap his fingers around the doctor's throat. "Where is he? Tell me."

"He's...Tias, I'm sorry, but he..."

Tias wasn't sure if Rosany finished his sentence. He couldn't hear anything besides the blood rushing to his head and the roar erupting from his chest.

When Snod had been a boy, he practiced killing his mother's chickens with his knife, and with rocks, and the slingshot he found, and the gun he snuck out of the house. Even so, when his mother told him to watch those birds, he didn't disobey her. He watched them closely. He made a game of it, and there wasn't a single hen in that entire flock that escaped his notice. Later, Snod wondered if his mother had been aware of his little hobby. If so, her plan to set the fox to watch the henhouse had been a good one. The Athes authorities would have liked his mother.

Every moment since he'd stolen the key had been utter agony. He had been unable to sneak into the core's cavern due to the guards, and he was certain that Jasak would realize the key was missing before Snod even had the chance to use it. And if Jasak did realize his key was gone, nothing would stop him from tracking Snod down. He was the most obvious culprit. He was *always* the most obvious culprit, even in a roomful of murderers and pimps.

But Jasak never came for him. Nobody did.

Keeping near to the wall and disguised by shadows, he slipped out of the main cavern and down the short corridor to the core. The

machinery called to him, its very presence enough to taunt him. If he used the key at that moment, he could blow up the entire planet. But he didn't want to do that. This wasn't a suicide mission. He needed to wait until the right time.

He needed to wait until he was alone with the controls. Once the guards saw he controlled the core, they would have no choice but to cede to his command.

With that in mind, he began searching for a place to hide. He found a small opening near the floor. Dropping to his hands and knees, he backed into the small entrance, hunching his shoulders to make them fit. He barely had room to breathe, but the sound of the core obscured the sound of his breathing. He could only hope that the overwhelming smell of the processed chojal would mask his scent, as well.

Like a snake under a rock, Snod settled in for a long wait.

Rosany managed to twist from Tias's grasp and avoid the sharp claws slicing toward his skull. He slammed his fist into the other Athaki's chest and sent him stumbling back, allowing himself enough time to get out of reach of the enraged guard.

"Tias...listen to me. I didn't kill him."

It was true, but it was obviously of no consequence to Tias. Rosany's fangs automatically descended and his claws itched, ready to burst through the end of his fingers. He hadn't used his claws as a weapon in years. Even now, he could compartmentalize and justify his decision to destroy Tantoret, but he couldn't quite stomach the thought of murdering somebody with his own hands.

"You kill all these prisoners. You're a butcher."

"It's not me, Tias. It's the chojal. It's Athess."

There was no way to tell if Tias even heard him. He advanced toward Rosany, his teeth and claws gleaming, his eyes red in the dim light. Tias lunged, claws at the ready. He wasn't attacking with any particular style or grace. Too much anger and hurt clouded his mind. He was just lashing out, powerful arms swinging wildly. Rosany wasn't as fast as he had once been, but by keeping low and always moving, he managed to avoid the worst of the attacks. But he didn't avoid Tias's claws completely. They still sliced through his clothes and nicked his skin, drawing thick drops of blood.

Tias managed to get a hold of Rosany's shirt and took the chance to lift him several feet off the floor. He dangled there for countless moments, his feet futilely seeking the floor, his palms pressed

against Tias's shoulders, trying to hold him back. With a roar, Tias tossed Rosany into the opposite wall, which was lined with makeshift shelves. Glass and wood exploded around him, shards burying themselves in his shoulders and back. The air rushed out of his lungs, and he slumped against the wall, aching, bleeding, while Tias loomed over him.

"He killed himself," Rosany said. Each word made his skull vibrate. "Jasak questioned him and he threw himself into the core."

Tias grasped the front of Rosany's shirt and hauled him to his feet. His nostrils flared and his eyes seemed wilder than ever. "Macario would never do that."

"He did."

"He'd never do that," Tias repeated, as though that were enough to make it true. He slammed Rosany back against the wall and his teeth slammed closed on his tongue. "Is that what Jasak told you? Were you there?"

"I wasn't there," Rosany admitted. "But Jasak didn't do anything to him."

"You don't know that. He's working for Athess. He's their little pet." Tias tossed Rosany aside like he was nothing more than a rag doll. "He found out about Lonan, and he killed Macario instead of facing me."

Rosany tried to protest again, but the words wheezed from his throat without substance. He fumbled through the wreckage of his office, fingers searching for the object he knew was there. As they closed around the cold steel, he knew he wouldn't be able to use it. He had never been able to use it. He only kept it in his office as his very last line of defense. But he leveled the gun at Tias's chest, and hoped the other Athaki couldn't see the truth in his eyes.

"If you try to leave, I'll shoot you."

"You wouldn't."

"Yes, I would. Just stay right there. Don't move."

Was Aleron awake yet? Had they told him who they were, where he was and what was going on? Or was he still lost in his own dreams, comforted and warmed by the drugs Rosany had given him? Jasak wished he'd had the time for a proper goodbye, but he thought his mate would understand. Maybe he would even forgive him one day. He hoped that Aleron would return to Old Earth, or at least venture to one of the neutral planets, and find a career worthy of his potential.

Not that his desires mattered at all. This was nothing more than idle speculation. Something to

keep his mind occupied while he waited for the minutes to tick by. He needed to start the final destruction process before the cycle completed itself. That meant he had a window of approximately three hours. The guards might not get the inmates up to the surface by the end of that time, but it was the best Jasak could do.

With time and Aleron both weighing heavily on his mind, Jasak left the relative comfort of his office to seek out the heat and noise of the core. A corner of his mind rebelled against the notion of sabotaging the machine he had coaxed and babied into operating. The hours he had spent beneath its guts numbered in the hundreds. Maybe even the thousands. He had fed the machine his own blood and sweat, had cursed it, and cried for it and managed to find ways to keep it running even though he wasn't an engineer and had no formal training.

And now he was going to undo all of that hard work.

Jasak stood in front of the locked control panel, skimming his fingers over the top edge. Behind the bolted door was a series of buttons that, when pressed in the right order, would cause the core to self-destruct. Athess had long ago converted the core into a bomb—just in case they needed to dispose of the evidence.

He opened the small pouch on his belt where he kept the key and reached into it without looking. His fingers brushed against the bottom of the leather, never touching the small piece of metal. He tried again and again, but no matter how many times Jasak checked the pouch, it was empty. He couldn't have lost the key, which meant that it had been stolen.

Names flooded his mind. Tias. Rosany. Aleron—as much as it pained him. But Tias never had the opportunity to steal the key ring, and while both Rosany and Aleron had the chance, they never had the motive. Icera? He'd definitely have the motive, but like Tias, he never had the opportunity. The only time he ever removed his belt was when he was in his own quarters. And excluding Aleron, prisoners never ventured there.

Except one.

The realization struck him the same time a rock slammed into the back of his skull. Pain momentarily eclipsed every thought, but his body still knew what to do. He bent his knees and sprung out of reach of his assailant, his powerful legs carrying him to the other side of the small room. When he turned to face the attacker, he wasn't surprised to see Snod there with a perplexed look.

“That's usually enough to kill a man,” Snod mused.

“I’m not a man.”

“What does it take to kill an Athaki?”

“More than you’ve got. Give me back my key.”

“No.”

“You don’t know how to use it. You don’t know what it’s for.”

“They don’t know that,” Snod pointed out. “All I have to do is get rid of you, and I control the core. If I control the core, I control Tantoret.”

“It doesn’t work that way. You think Athess would allow you to control this planet? You’ll be king for a day, and then you’ll die.”

“They wouldn’t risk their operation here.”

“You don’t know that. You don’t know what they’d risk or what they’d do. You don’t know them. Give me the key, and we’ll forget this ever happened.”

“No.”

“Then I’m sorry you made me do this.”

Blood flowed down the back of his skull and neck, but the pain had eased. Or maybe he was beyond pain at that point. He had lost the only person he cared about and he was staring down his own death. But he wasn’t going to give a rat like Snod the satisfaction of taking his life. Snod bent his knees and braced himself, like he was settling in for a charged attack. Maybe in the cavern with all the other prisoners, that’s exactly

how this fight would have gone. But Jasak didn't need to wrestle with Snod.

He lifted the knife from his belt and then released it in a fluid motion. He expected the blade to bury itself in Snod's heart, but it didn't. Instead of killing him, the knife sank into his left shoulder. Jasak could only watch with horror as Snod gripped the handle with his right hand and pulled the blade free of his flesh.

"Nice knife. I've been trying to make my own but I keep losing them. You just figured out you lost the key, didn't you? I honestly thought you'd notice it sooner."

"You can still walk away from this if you put the knife down."

"I'd rather you not walk away from this."

Jasak took a deep breath. "Did you plan the attack on Aleron?"

"How else was I going to get into your room?"

"That's all I needed to know."

The sense of fairness that might have otherwise held Jasak back completely disappeared. The rage he had been holding at bay roared to life, and every bit of frustration, every bit of longing, every bit of pain he had experienced while holding Aleron's broken body fed the inferno. Centuries of civilization, of ritual, of careful socialization to sublimate the killing instinct into the proper channels meant nothing in that moment. He

wasn't a disgraced guard on a forsaken rock. He wasn't a former member of the Woor Clan of Belenia. He was an Athaki warrior, born and bred to kill.

With a snarl, he launched himself across the room. Snod held the knife out, ready to attack, but Jasak used his superior speed to bat it away. It fell harmlessly to the ground, the sound of the steel hitting the stone drowned out by Snod's startled scream. The smell of Snod's blood leaking from his arm sent Jasak into a frenzy. He attacked with claws and fangs, biting and tearing and ripping everything he could reach. Snod continued to scream and the blood continued to flow, and he became more ravenous.

At first, he had been thinking only of avenging Aleron. But it wasn't long until even Aleron slipped from his thoughts. He was *powerful*. The more blood that covered his skin, the greater his power. Snod's screams stopped, but Jasak didn't. He tore chunks of flesh from Snod's throat and torso. He dug his fingers into Snod's abdomen, pulling and tearing until his guts were exposed, like long, dead snakes.

He might have continued on like that until Snod didn't even resemble anything human. He wanted to rip the man's limbs apart. He wanted to hear the satisfying crunch of bones breaking against stone. But a deep boom echoed through

the tunnels, startling him out of his bloodlust. He lifted his head, ears straining for a clue, his nostrils quivering as he sought a smell that wasn't blood and anger.

For several beats of his heart, there wasn't another sound. The entire prison had gone silent. He imagined guards and inmates alike, looking around for the possible culprit, questioning if the sound was really what they thought it was. And then questioning who would have a gun and why they'd use it.

And then the corridors and the caverns echoed with shouts and screams as chaos fell.

Chapter Twenty-Three

The female voice threw him. Tantoret didn't have women prisoners. A good thing, too. The population would get insane with the added tension of sexual rivalries tossed into the mix. The feminine tones belonged to no one Aleron knew. It took several seconds of concentration to remember why.

The race to the surface. The shuttle.

"Jasak..."

"Ssshhh..." Cool fingers probed along his forehead. "I know you feel better, but you need to rest."

He shifted his focus from her touch to the workings of his body, specifically the various aches and pains that had plagued him since the attack. His headache was gone, though he thought it had been gone before, thanks to Rosany's drugs. His mouth still stung from getting cut and split, but his ribs no longer ached, and his knee didn't make him long to cut it off. He felt...stronger, if that was possible.

How long had he been out of it?

Remembering the agony from the last time he'd opened his eyes, Aleron held his breath as he

peeked through his lashes. Dim lighting encouraged him to open them the rest of the way, and he was more than a little surprised when he realized he could see out of both.

When he reached up to touch the eye that had been swollen shut, a firm grasp encircled his wrist.

“What did I say about rest?” She appeared in his view as she guided his arm back to his side, though her face was obscured behind a cloud of dark hair. “None of this will mean anything if you push yourself too hard.”

“It feels like I’ve been resting for days.”

“That’s the drugs.”

“What did you give me?”

“Enough to make you feel better.”

She was worse than Jasak when it came to oblique answers. It made him wonder if she was Athaki behind all that hair. He’d never seen a female one before.

“My name’s Aleron.”

With an exasperated sigh, she stopped her probes to sit back on her heels and frown at him. Eyes the color of rich, wet earth proved she wasn’t Athaki after all. Her skin was too dark, a richer amber than his tanned tones. She wore a faded shift top that did little to hide her generous curves, with heavy bracers binding her forearms.

Those were what drew Aleron's immediate attention. The thick leather had definite ridges visible along the outside of her arms, spaced in hard, even intervals along a line that ran straight to her elbow. His gaze jumped to her legs to confirm they would be the same, but they were tucked beneath her, out of sight. Still, he'd seen enough to be reasonably sure.

"You have Athess blood in you," he said.

Her gaze was hard, though she pulled her arms closer into her body, as if suddenly self-conscious of what her bracers hid. Athessians were an odd blend of avian and reptilian features. Instead of skin they had a rough, mottled green carapace. Spurs ran the lengths of their forearms and calves, though Aleron had no idea what purpose they served. At a quick glance, his caretaker might have passed for human. She had oddly fine features and smoother skin than most Athessians, but the ridges covered by her wristlets and pants gave her away.

"Rosany was right," she said. "You talk too much."

"You know Rosany?"

Her frown deepened, like he'd asked something insanely stupid. "If you want to be able to walk around, I need to put my hands on you. Do I have your permission for that?"

"Of course, but—"

She whipped the blanket down, exposing his nearly nude form. The shorts he wore weren't anything he'd ever seen on Tantoret. They only covered his hips, leaving the bruises on display. Twisting out of sight for several seconds before straightening again, she rubbed her hands together. They gleamed, and when she pressed her fingers to his body, her skin was wet and hot.

"What are you doing?"

"It's a topical nerve suppressant." Her hands were strong without causing pain. "I can't give you more pain medication because of the dosage Rosany already gave you, so this is my only alternative. It blocks the signals to your brain by going straight to the nerve instead of traveling through the blood stream."

Now that she mentioned it, he remembered more snippets of the conversation he'd overheard between Jasak and Rosany. He was going someplace safe, Jasak had told him, but he'd never answered when Aleron had asked for specifics.

"Where are we meeting up with Jasak's shuttle?"

Her head remained bowed, her focus on her work. No response came.

"Are they that much behind us?"

She massaged his injured knee now. It looked more normal, a good sign that maybe it wasn't as

badly strained as Rosany had originally diagnosed. He would have been excited about the progress if her lack of answers wasn't tying him into knots.

"Where's Jasak?" He sat up before she could stop him, scanning the shuttle for the first time. The bed upon which he rested was narrow, short and the only seating available outside of the two pilot seats. Besides his new doctor, the only other occupant was a youthful Lonanian at the helm. His gaze jumped back to the woman, his eyes narrowing. A half-Athess and a Lonanian on the same ship? They shared a common ancestry but had been blood enemies for almost as long. "What's going on here?"

She cut a glance up to the front, a silent debate warring behind her eyes. It only took a moment for her to decide.

"Rosany deemed you important enough to get off Tantoret before the ships arrive," she said. "Jasak is still there."

"Still...?" His throat closed around the rest. He'd wanted to escape the prison planet, but not like this, not alone, not after everything he and Jasak had done and said. "He's my mate. He should be here." Then, the rest of her words sank in. "What ships are you talking about?" He had an awful feeling she wasn't referring to Athess transports.

“The Lonan ships.”

He'd grown to enjoy playing cryptic games with Jasak, but her carefully schooled statements only frustrated him into shoving her away and swinging his legs over the edge of the bed. His head spun for a moment as he caught his bearings, but he gritted his teeth to keep it from showing.

“If somebody doesn't tell me what's going on here, and who you people are—”

“Chiyo.”

“What?”

“Chiyo,” she repeated. “That's my name. And that's...” She gestured toward the helm, and the slim pilot, his iridescent feathers almost glittering in the dim lighting, bowed his head toward Aleron. He hadn't bothered hiding the more delicate spurs common to Lonanians. “Rikif. We're part of the revolutionists.”

That explained why an Athes and a Lonanian would work together, but not why he was on one of their shuttles. “Rosany contacted you? How?”

“Does that really matter?”

“To the one without the answers? Oh, yeah.”

Shaking her head, Chiyo reached for a towel to dry off her hands. “Rosany has been one of us since before his assignment on Tantoret. He's the one who decided the time has come for us to finally take action.”

Jasak must have gone to his friend about Tias, and Rosany had done the only thing he could. "What kind of action are you taking?"

Her lips thinned. She wasn't going to talk. It didn't matter. Her silence told him everything he needed to know.

"Take me back."

"That's not—"

"I don't care. I belong with Jasak, and as long as he's on Tantoret, that's where I should be, too." He hadn't thought of the words before uttering them, but the truth rang out, clear and inarguable, erasing any doubts, all fears. "Did you hear me? He's my mate. Do you know what that means?"

"Do you?"

"I know it means I'm not leaving him behind, no matter what he thinks."

"You don't have a choice."

"Because you say so?"

"Because a deal was made. We won't fail to keep our part of it." Her face grew fierce. "We're not like those Athess bastards who only care about themselves."

"And you think I am? Look." He pushed himself upright, forcing his leg to take his weight. Somewhere in the back of his brain, he knew it should hurt. He felt the throb of the tendons protesting, and he was pretty sure if Jasak saw him right then, he'd be ordered back to bed. But

he could still stand, and he could tolerate all the discomfort, and he wasn't going to stop until she listened to him. "You've done what you can for me. Now I have to do what I can for Jasak."

"Your safety was his primary concern."

"And his is mine!" His vehemence startled all of them. "Maybe I'm not a warrior like he is, or like you and the rebels, but that doesn't mean I can't help. That doesn't mean I'm willing to stand on the sidelines and watch while those I care about put their lives on the line."

Chiyo seemed unimpressed with his argument. "If you were on Tantoret, and you're not Athaki, you're a criminal. Someone with no thought for anyone but himself. I have no reason to believe you."

"Except I'm not lying to you. What could I possibly have to gain by wanting to go back? If something serious is going to happen, a selfish man would want to be as far away from trouble as he can get. A smart man definitely would."

"Well, at least we agree you're an idiot for wanting to go back."

"Do you really want to be stuck with me when you could be in the middle of the fight? Neither one of you would have turned against your own people if you didn't care. If Tantoret is as important as you say it is, shouldn't you be there,

helping the others, instead of worrying about one, insignificant human?"

She watched him long enough for his muscles to start to protest. He should sit down and conserve his strength, but to give even that much would be the only ammunition she needed to deny his request.

"Your Athaki mate cares for you very much," she said. "He refused to let me carry you on to the shuttle."

"I know."

"Going back will only make him worry about you. You'll distract him from what needs to be done. Worse, you'll put your life at risk. A life he paid dearly to save."

"Paid dearly? How?"

"Rosany offered to transport you off the planet if Jasak agreed to help him."

"Help him do what?"

"Destroy Tantoret."

Jasak and the Athaki guards had weapons, but nothing powerful enough to destroy an entire planet. Nothing powerful enough to stop Athess from mining its depths.

Except the core.

"When are we going to rendezvous with his shuttle?"

"We're not."

Aleron tried to swallow the thick fear burning the back of his throat, but couldn't. "Why not?"

"Because our other ship won't arrive until the end of your next cycle. Both Athess and Lonan are currently heading to Tantoret. We can't risk drawing even more attention to our presence."

"You can't leave him."

"We don't—"

"You *can*'t leave him!"

Chiyo's voice didn't rise to meet his. If anything, it grew softer, forcing him to listen to each syllable. "We don't have a choice. You're alive. Isn't that enough for you?"

"No. Not even close. Not remotely." He finally crouched, his thigh trembling the entire way, and laid a hand on her bracer-covered arm. Through the thick leather, her spurs quivered with barely controlled emotion. "Jasak saved me, but that means I can save him now. If I didn't, I couldn't look myself in the mirror. I couldn't live with myself, knowing the only reason I'm alive is because he risked his life to save mine. Not when he's the most important...Jasak isn't a revolutionary, but he's doing this because he believes in honor. Doing the right thing. What about you?"

Part of being a good thief meant being able to read people. Understanding motivations. Deducing how they might react. Most of the time,

his instincts didn't fail him. Chiyo wore bracers to hide her spurs. An individual with that much shame for her own race would take pride in being true to herself.

She spoke without looking away from him. "Rikif, turn around. And you, let go."

Aleron dropped his hand. He had just convinced a stranger to fly back into the mouth of hell, but his fear didn't recede. It wouldn't until he knew he wasn't too late.

Tearing through the prison, Jasak felt like the beast authorities considered him to be. Blood streaked down his chin and neck, whittling into fine slivers where the air rushing past him drove it beneath his shirt. At his frenzied pace, his claws barely touched the floor, but where they did left scarlet droplets quickly swallowed by the earth.

Tantoret feasted tonight. Taking the souls of the damned and demanding more. Jasak would gladly give it more of Snod's blood, but the cycle wouldn't end. Nothing would sate this hell.

Shouts beat against the walls. One group of prisoners leapt out of his way when he threw himself past them, not as scattered as he'd expected under the circumstances. He would have

rewarded the guards who led them if he thought for a second they would be returning at any point.

But no. If he failed to destroy the core, the rebels would find some way to interfere with the Lonanian insurgence. Nothing would ever be the same again.

The only thing that made that better was knowing Aleron was safe from all of it.

The gun's retort was long faded away, but its acrid smell still tainted the air, winding a trail into the common area and straight toward the very last place he wanted it to be. Everything dissolved away. He could not save them all, but those he had some sway for would not die. Rosany, especially.

He flung bodies out of his way. His claws clicked where his pace was less than graceful, but then there was the infirmary, and even more blood and destruction than littered the rest of the prison.

Rosany sagged against the wall, smaller than Jasak had ever seen him. An old-fashioned weapon weighted his palm against the floor, his fingers lax, and the scent of hot metal filled the back of Jasak's throat with saliva. He wore almost as much blood as Jasak did. The doctor's head hung at an almost awkward angle, his scalp scratched and bleeding, but his chest rose up and down, his breathing like the sharp rasp of a file.

Jasak followed the angle of the gun to the other body in the room. A single hole burned through Tias's inert form, eyes wide and wild even in death.

Primal instinct curled his lip back from his fangs. "It's a very good thing he's dead." He didn't care if Rosany heard him or not. "Or I would have made sure he suffered."

"It was grief, not evil." Slowly, Rosany lifted his chin, exposing the marks around his neck where Tias had clearly tried strangling him. "If you discovered Aleron was dead, you would have done the same thing."

Only Rosany would justify the actions of the Athaki who tried to kill him. Only Rosany would have the nerve to throw it back in Jasak's face. And he was right.

Shrewd eyes scanned his length. "Did you fail?"

"I haven't tried yet. I found the man who set up Aleron."

Rosany's gaze flickered to Tias. He didn't utter the obvious.

"We don't have much time." Jasak strode to his side and crouched, ready to slide an arm around Rosany's back. "Your shot turned it into a feeding frenzy out there."

Rosany waved off the help. "Finish packing my things. I need to catch my breath. Then I'll help with the core."

"I'm not sure we have time for that now."

"And if we get caught out because we didn't take a couple minutes now? Please, Jasak. I know I've asked a lot of you, but I can't leave what little I have of Sohlin behind. Not now. Not after all this time preserving it."

He would never have called Rosany sentimental, but Jasak was quickly learning there was much about his friend he didn't know. With a sharp nod, he picked up the bag Rosany had been packing and worked at gathering the supplies he'd laid out, picking through the rubble of his office with Rosany's guidance. His fury ebbed. He held no remorse for what he had done. Given the opportunity, he would do it again. But by the time he put the last bottle of medicine in the bag, his respect for Rosany had swelled. He was in control again. Focused. All due to the time Rosany had demanded.

"In my quarters..." Rosany struggled to his feet, tossing Jasak off when he attempted to help. "There's a radio. Get that."

His implied *In case there's a problem* went unsaid, but Jasak understood. He slipped into the inner room, and knew within a glance where it

would be. It was exactly where Jasak would have hidden such an item.

A roar reverberated through the walls. It didn't belong to Rosany.

"Jasak!"

He ran because he had to. He expected to find Rosany against the wall again, but he leaned against the desk, his eyes fixed on Icera standing in the outer doorway. Icera's attention couldn't settle. It danced from the gun still on the floor, to Tias's dead body, to Rosany and finally to Jasak. His only concession to Jasak's bloodied state was a flare of his nostrils.

"Your orders suddenly make a lot more sense," he said, his jaw clenched. "But then you prefer to do your killing without witnesses, don't you, Jasak?"

The reference to Raimo stung, though it wasn't unexpected. "What are you doing here? You were given instructions. I made you a leader for a reason."

"Tias attacked me," Rosany interrupted.

"Jasak still overstepped his bounds. Do you even have boundaries anymore, Jasak? Is there anything you care about except your own hide? Your own satisfaction?" He edged closer, but Jasak remained still, poised for more should Icera choose to attack. "You even dare to enshroud

yourself in human blood. Did you really think none of us would find out?"

"It's not—"

"I shot Tias," Rosany said. "Not Jasak." He bent and scooped up the gun, and though he held it casually, his fingers were tense enough to use it before Icera could disarm him. "Don't you have better things to do than to question your superior?"

"I do when he is clearly unfit to lead us."

"He is a better Athaki than—"

"Don't, Rosany." He was tired of the duplicity, tired of the lies. "It's not worth it."

"Of course, we aren't," Icera sneered. "We're beneath you. We always have been."

"Yes, you have." His agreement made Icera growl, claws clicking against each other as his hands curled. "But only because Athess placed me in that position. To maintain order, Icera. Not for anything else."

"A position you've abused."

"How?"

"You killed Raimo. Everybody knows you did."

"There was reason."

"A reason no other guard could be privy to?"

"Punishments are my responsibility."

Icera glanced at Tias's body and shook his head. "And then commit the same crimes of those

you punish. Or do you deny drinking from your mate?”

His earlier ire threatened to return, sharpened by the fact he couldn't defend himself or his earlier decisions. Tias had *never* told him Macario was his mate. He'd allowed Jasak to believe the worst in order to protect his treachery, and Jasak refused to live with that on his head. He didn't have time for guilt, and he didn't have time for this. His only choice not to unleash it was to get away from Icera as quickly as possible. “I will not discuss him with you. Rosany, finish your packing. As soon as I'm done, I shall meet you to help you to the surface as we discussed.”

On Rosany's nod, Jasak marched toward the doorway, his eye on Icera. He didn't want to leave Rosany behind, but there was no other way. The core had to be destroyed, or all the chaos would be for naught.

The moment Icera fell from his view, the air whispered.

He barely had his fangs out before the other Athaki slammed into his side.

When Aleron thought of Tantoret, he thought of the wet, of dark and damp. The Tantoret he saw from the sky was different, like a biscuit left to

dry out in the sun. Fissures riddled the earth, with no vegetation or water as far as the eye could see. Metallic landing pads patched some of the land together, while several storage silos kept the tanks in perfect order for the Athess authorities to drain, but the slight bit of industry contaminated any natural, arid beauty the planet could have hoped for.

Chiyo regarded it with obvious disgust, but she kept her voice flat and even as she guided Rikif to where she wanted him to land. Aleron watched without asking questions. The instrument she used wasn't part of the ship, but he knew a portable homing device when he saw it. All he didn't know was where its counterpart was. He assumed it was Rosany, since he was their so-called contact.

He didn't even care if Jasak wasn't with him. Aleron only needed to get back on familiar ground. He'd find Jasak on his own.

The shuttle landed without a jolt. Before Rikif could disengage the engines, Chiyo unstrapped from the other seat and marched to the rear of the ship. She grabbed a thick belt, laden with an assortment of tools, and opened the hatch. The seconds it took the door to open frayed Aleron's already taut nerves. He wanted this over. He wanted to be gone.

He wanted Jasak.

“Last chance,” Chiyo said without looking back at him. “Because if you fall down there, I am not carrying your ass back.”

“You won’t have to.” The edge of the door scraped across the hard earth, spurring Aleron to his feet. He came up to her side and grinned, though he knew it was wasted. “Just as long as you realize I’m not carrying you, either.”

As dry as the ground looked, his bare feet sank past the surface, evidence of the rains. Chiyo hadn’t had shoes that fit him, but as he trailed after her, toward a downward slope he hoped didn’t dead-end, he realized he was glad for it. Not only because it put less of an impact on his injured knee, but because it reminded him of Jasak, of how he had likely existed when he’d hunted back on Belenia. Thoughts like that helped him focus on his objective, rather than how long the drugs were going to give him before he was in agony again.

She led the way into the chasm, her eyes locked on the homing device she held. It glowed dark green in the thickening murk, but soon, the chojal added its pale illumination, blossoming along the walls as they trudged deeper beneath the surface. For all his nervousness about Jasak, an odd sense of coming home washed over Aleron as the earthen walls became increasingly familiar.

When Chiyo hesitated at the first fork in their path, he pushed ahead of her without pause.

“This way.” He pointed toward the left.

She frowned as her gaze jumped back and forth between the device and the darkness. “How can you be sure?”

“Because the sound of the core’s stronger this way.” He was already moving, his pulse quickening at the thought of finding Jasak. “Come on.”

He was grateful she didn’t argue. Truth be told, he wasn’t one hundred percent positive he was choosing correctly, though pretty damn near. But she also wasn’t questioning why he could still hear the core’s pounding. Maybe he’d been wrong about what Jasak intended to do. It was entirely possible there was another way to ruin Tantoret.

When the distant roar of men’s shouts grew distinct enough to separate from the core, he slowed down. Chiyo noticed his change of pace immediately, and caught his arm.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. Just be quiet.”

She stayed closer after that, shadowing his every step.

The louder the prisoners got, the more anxious Aleron became. Though he recognized the section of living quarters they were in, he opted for circuitous routes as much as he could, senses alert

for any sign of an inmate or a guard. His ears strained hard enough for him to feel the blood rushing to his head. The hair on the back of his neck crisped in spite of the growing cold. He imagined his ribs scraped against each other as he edged along, but that, he hoped, was just a symptom of his overactive imagination.

A sudden vibration beneath his feet made him grab Chiyo's arm and yank her into the first dark recess in the wall he could reach. Her mouth opened to protest, but he clamped his hand over it and hissed, "Be quiet."

She froze against him.

A second later, five prisoners raced by them, the first one bleeding, the followers drunk on adrenaline.

Neither one of them moved, even after the footsteps faded away. He hadn't given a thought about the fact Chiyo was female, or that Tantoret was populated by men who hadn't seen a woman in years. Men who sounded like they were on the warpath. She was in danger here, far more than he could ever be. For the first time since making the decision, doubt began to creep in.

"You need to go back to the shuttle." His voice was barely a whisper. He wouldn't have been sure she'd even heard him except for the narrow-eyed frown she twisted in his direction. "It's not safe for you here."

She grabbed his wrist and tugged it away from her mouth. "You convinced me to come back to help. Don't even think I'm going to run away from that now."

"You really think I can protect you from three hundred more men like that?" He waved toward the empty corridor.

"Who says I'm not the one protecting you?"

Her bald audacity would have made him laugh any other time. Hell, he was close to it now. What it did tell him was this wasn't an argument he'd win. He just had to be more careful about getting to Rosany. Rosany could worry about her then.

Slowly, she tilted the device away from where she'd cradled it to her chest, glancing down to assess where it would lead them. "It doesn't look like we're very far now."

Based on where she was pointing, Rosany was in the infirmary. "Except the shortest route from here is through the common area. We go that way, we don't make it."

"Then find a longer route that gets us there."

He poked his head out around the corner, scanning the hall. The infirmary didn't have back ways in. It was kept secure for a reason. Her order was easier said than done.

"Come on. But be prepared to hide when I tell you."

Icera's claws stung where they sliced along the side of Jasak's neck, fresh blood flowing to join the dried streaks of Snod's. Jasak tucked and rolled when Icera dove to pin him to the wall, angling away from Rosany and the primary exit. Part of him kept waiting for Rosany to shoot Icera. As far as he had seen, there had been one or two open shots already. Another part conceded Rosany would probably only shoot if it looked like Jasak would lose this battle.

He took that as a good sign he was fighting better than it felt like he was.

The blood distracted him. Snod's blood, clogging his head, reminding him of how badly Aleron had been hurt. He'd been warned Aleron would be used as his weakness. His dismissal had cost his mate. Getting Aleron off-planet was a start at making things up to him, but Jasak wanted to do more.

Every time his thoughts drifted in that direction, Icera landed a blow.

They weren't particularly vicious. Icera was driven but weaker and slower. When Jasak leapt out of his path, he did so with time to spare. The chaotic destruction gave him ample obstacles, as well. He vaulted over the overturned shelves,

hooking a small box into his claw and hurtling it behind him.

It glanced across Icera's ear, forcing him to stumble. Jasak contorted his body to change direction, bracing against the wall to leap behind the other Athaki.

Icera hissed as he whirled to face Jasak. He slashed blindly, but his sweep was too high. Jasak caught the hem of Icera's shirt and yanked at the same time he drove his shoulder into Icera's abdomen.

The sudden blow winded Icera. He gasped for breath, a harsh, hollow sound, and flailed against Jasak's continued momentum. His back slammed into the wall, sucking away even more air. Jasak felt no satisfaction clamping his forearm across Icera's throat to pin him in place.

"Yield," he hissed. He caught Icera's free hand and compressed the primary artery until the fingers went lax. "I do not wish to kill you."

Pure venom glowed in Icera's eyes. "Because you're a coward."

"If I wanted you dead, I wouldn't have ordered you to the surface."

"Jasak..." Rosany warned.

"No." The lies needed to stop. "He should know."

"I know enough."

“Do you know Tias sold us out to the Lonanians? That he has been working against us from the start?” Though Icera didn’t move, enough doubt shadowed his eyes to convince Jasak to ease his hold. “You heard me. He attacked Rosany because we discovered the truth.”

“You lie. You malign his name because he can’t defend himself.”

“I wish I was. It would mean we’re safe. That we haven’t been backed into a corner with only one means of defending ourselves. But he turned Tantoret into a battleground between Lonan and Athess, not between you and me.”

Icera looked past his shoulder for confirmation, but Rosany remained silent. Jasak didn’t think Icera would believe him anyway.

“Your logic doesn’t support your lies,” Icera said. “If war is coming, we have no means to defend ourselves unless they bring the fight to us. Which they won’t because they’re not stupid.”

“No, they won’t. But we do have one thing they do not. Tantoret.”

Icera finally understood. As Jasak’s meaning sank in, his jaw went slack, and his eyes widened. The questions he’d asked earlier finally had answers. Jasak wondered if he wished he hadn’t remained ignorant now.

Carefully, Jasak relaxed his grip and stepped back, allowing Icera to stand free. "There is no reason for us to be enemies here."

"We need to hurry," Rosany said.

Jasak didn't move. His attention was still focused on Icera. "Can I trust you to do as I asked?"

Icera sneered. "You didn't ask. You ordered."

"Don't turn this into semantics—"

"Rosany!"

At first, he thought the voice was a figment of his imagination, but when Icera snapped straighter in front of him and turned his head to glare at the doorway, Jasak had no choice but to believe it was real. His skin crawled in an odd mix of fear and desire as he slowly followed the same line of sight.

Nobody was there.

"Rosany!"

The shout was closer now. Jasak took a step forward at the same time Aleron appeared at the infirmary door, the woman from the shuttle at his side.

Standing. On his own. Both beautiful eyes open and widening when they fixed on Jasak.

Aleron's first reaction was relief. Pure, hot, blessed relief. Jasak was here, and he was alive, and now they could get off this rock together. The way they should always be.

His second reaction was fear. Not of Jasak. He doubted he could ever be afraid of Jasak again. But for him. Every exposed inch of skin was stained with blood, painted like tribal badges of honor. The ends of his hair were matted with it, and there was a fresh gouge along his neck. The filigree shielding the side of his face writhed as if trying to crawl farther into his hairline, while the large, powerful hands hanging at his sides were tensed and curled, ready to strike.

Aleron moved because he couldn't stay away, especially with Icera standing right there. The fierce need to pull Jasak from the danger choked him, but he didn't question or deny it. He stood in front of Jasak and lifted his hands to his bleeding neck, angling his body between his mate and Icera.

He pressed his fingers against the cut and smiled. "You're in the middle of the infirmary, and Rosany isn't even offering you a bandage?"

Jasak raised a hand to his face, the tip of the claw on his index finger skimming over the corner of his bruised eye. The touch was so gentle, it didn't even scratch the skin. "How are you here?"

“You must have got knocked around pretty hard if you can’t figure that one out.” He hated the feel of Jasak’s blood, but he refused to show his panic at finding him so badly injured. “But now I get to prove you’re not the only one with a great bedside manner.”

“It isn’t safe.”

“That’s not stopping you.”

“I wasn’t beaten half to death, either.”

“Really? We need to get you a mirror.”

“How are you even standing?”

That question came from Rosany, and Aleron shot a crooked grin where Chiyo lingered at the edge of the room. “Someone has better drugs than you do.”

Chiyo lifted her chin against the flat stares both Jasak and Rosany leveled at her. “I’ve done many things since I joined the rebellion, but I would never try to convince a man he should leave his mate behind.” She looked at Rosany. “And I couldn’t leave a comrade behind.”

Jasak’s mouth thinned. “You have to leave. You’re not safe here.”

When Jasak tried to drop his hand, Aleron caught it and brought it to his chest. “Safe doesn’t matter to me if you’re not there.”

“It matters to me. It matters to me because—” Jasak’s voice caught, the words stopped on something indefinable.

“Come with me.” He pressed Jasak’s hand harder into his chest. “Please. We can still get out of here. The shuttle’s waiting. We can beat the Athess and Lonan ships. Please.”

“The core is still active. I can’t go anywhere until it’s not.”

“Then, let me help you.” Aleron swallowed. He knew what he was saying. Knew what he was offering to do, but the alternative wasn’t any option at all. “You needed me the last time. I can help you again.”

“No. I’m not going to let you do that. You’re going to leave. Rosany and I will finish this and collapse the mines.”

“I’d rather run the risk with you, than live out there alone.”

Jasak didn’t move. He didn’t blink, he didn’t twitch, he didn’t appear to even breathe. Then his free hand lifted to cup the back of Aleron’s head, drawing it closer until his forehead rested at the base of Jasak’s throat.

Aleron closed his eyes and melted into the embrace. Every action he’d taken, every step, every breath, had been worth it to get exactly where he was. This was the only place he belonged.

Rosany cleared his throat. “The time, Jasak.”

Aleron felt Jasak lift his head, though his continued hold on Aleron didn’t allow him the

same luxury. "How long before the Lonan ships arrive?"

"Before the end of one of your cycles," Chiyo answered.

"Which means the core has to be completely shut down before they arrive," Rosany added. "And the mines must be completely caved-in. We can't leave any hope of using the chojal."

"How long will the drugs you gave Aleron work?" Jasak asked Chiyo.

"Not much longer. It took us longer to find you than I anticipated."

"If you think you're going to be able to make it to the core covered in blood and dragging your mate along behind without someone noticing or getting in your way," Icera interrupted, "you're an idiot, Jasak."

"We're wasting time we don't have," Rosany said.

Jasak tilted Aleron's head back. "I need to stay. If I leave, there won't be anybody to finish the job."

"There won't be another shuttle until it's too late."

"I know. Go back with Chiyo. Get the hell out of here."

Aleron shook his head. "The Lonanians will kill you as traitors."

“We just need to live long enough for the rebels to find us,” Rosany said.

“That’s not good enough!”

“There’s another way.” Chiyo’s calm voice cut through Aleron’s panic, drawing all eyes to her. “Destroy the core remotely.”

“Can’t be done,” Rosany said. “We don’t have powerful enough weapons on the ships to cut through Tantoret’s surface. You know that.”

“I do.” She reached behind her back and unhooked a small leather bag to toss to Rosany. “That’s why I brought along some help.”

Nobody spoke as he tipped the bag’s contents onto his palm. Four small, metallic disks glinted in the dim light. Aleron’s eyes widened when he recognized the miniscule explosives.

“I have the detonator,” Chiyo said. “Plant the bombs, get a safe distance away, then activate them.”

“Those will never destroy all the tunnels,” Icera interjected. “They’re used for very contained explosions.”

Before Aleron could spend much time wondering how Icera would know that, Jasak spoke up. “They don’t need to. The core’s explosion will create a chain reaction.”

That meant they would work. Aleron could have kissed Chiyo for thinking ahead.

“Let’s do it then.” He caught Jasak’s hand and tugged. “The sooner they’re set, the bigger head start we get on the other ships.”

“The effect of the drugs won’t last long enough. You need to get back to the shuttle.”

“You need help.”

“I have Rosany.”

“He’s hurt.”

“And you’re not?”

Icera stepped forward. “I’ll do it.”

Jasak’s eyes narrowed, and the muscles within Aleron’s grip tensed. “Why?”

“Because your mate is correct. Two will work faster than one, and other than you, I know more about the core than any other Athaki here. You need me.”

Aleron shook his head. “He tried to kill you, Jasak. Don’t listen to him.”

Except Jasak was still staring at Icera, unmoving, assessing. “He never wanted my death. He wanted my power. And he won’t kill me this time because there’s something else he wants instead, isn’t there, Icera?”

Icera gave him a small nod. “Safe passage in return for my aid. It’s an honorable trade.”

Chiyo growled. “He’s a criminal.”

“We’re all criminals,” Jasak sighed. Slowly, he pulled free of Aleron’s hold. As Aleron watched, he scratched his palm and pressed his bloody hand

over the middle of Icera's chest. The word he murmured was in Athaki, but Icera's mirroring of both action and speech suggested they'd just struck a bargain.

"Go now," Jasak said, his gaze sweeping across the others. When he settled on Aleron, his eyes softened, and his bloodied hands reached out to scoop Aleron against his chest. His mouth descended to graze along the corner of Aleron's, and the lips that touched his skin quivered as they slid to Aleron's ear. "I will come. I give you my word."

Aleron clung to Jasak's shoulders, squeezing his eyes shut against the sudden onslaught of emotions. "You better. I belong to you. In every way possible."

He didn't. But he would. And as soon as they didn't have an audience, he planned on showing Jasak how much he loved him.

In every way possible.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Rosany kept hovering behind him, trying to coax him back on to the shuttle, but Aleron refused to move from where he sat at the open bay door, watching the fissure from which Jasak and Icera were supposed to emerge. Sitting had been a compromise. The nerve suppressant Chiyo had given him had finally worn off, and his knee throbbed in time with his pulse. But taking anything was out of the question. At least until he had visual proof Jasak was all right.

“This isn’t what Jasak would want,” Rosany said, not for the first time.

“I don’t care.”

“You should. He’s taking a great—”

The rest was cut off by a distant rumble, and the shuttle tilted dangerously beneath his butt. Behind him, alarms went off on Rikif’s panels, but Aleron’s eyes were glued on the crack in the earth, his heart in his throat.

“They did it,” he murmured.

Not that he’d had any doubts Jasak would destroy the core. He simply hadn’t been sure how. The resulting tremors that continued to shake the

planet, however, suggested the kind of rippled explosion the revised plan would generate.

He straightened, craning his neck for the best view possible. He had to hold on to the edge of the door to keep from toppling out, his sweaty palm constantly slipping against the smooth metal, but he forgot his pain, the shuttle's klaxons, even Rosany, as he waited out the interminable moments. Movement flickered at the corner of his eye, and the dull sky flashed in impending warning. More rain was on its way. The first fat drops began to fall just as shadows separated from the chasm, a trio of forms led by Chiyo.

Jasak was right behind her.

"Go, go!" Chiyo shouted as she leapt into the shuttle. She shoved Rosany out of her way, dropping the gear she'd carried to the floor. He barely got it pushed aside in time for Icera to crowd on behind her, but Jasak paused long enough to scoop Aleron into his arms.

The door was still ajar as Rikif pulled away from the surface, but Aleron was kept from helping Rosany and Chiyo by the tightness of Jasak's embrace. He buried his face in the damp shirt, uncaring of the blood and dirt that stained the thin fabric, because through it, he could still smell Jasak. Jasak was here, and they were together, and the rest of it didn't matter.

"Is it over?" he murmured.

Lips brushed across his temple “Almost.”

The shuttle veered sideways, throwing Jasak off-balance. Aleron cried out when Icera stumbled against his injured knee, and Jasak’s ensuing growl vibrated against his cheek.

“Everybody sit!” Chiyo ordered.

Only Jasak’s body curled around his protected Aleron when the ship tilted again, this time in the opposite direction. Jasak landed hard against the narrow bed Aleron had woken up on earlier, twisting to lay him down. Aleron clung to his shoulders, refusing to let go, regardless of the fresh pain blooming in his leg.

“You’ll feel better if you sleep,” Jasak said.

“I’m not sleeping until we’re safe.” And from the back and forth of the ship, as well as Chiyo’s continued sharp instructions, they weren’t there yet.

The shuttle had seemed small when it was just him and Chiyo, but now with three, very large Athaki taking up space as well, it was almost claustrophobic. Icera crouched at the rear, stiff and silent, his gaze locked forward. Two new scratches marred his cheek. Aleron made a mental note to ask Jasak later what had happened belowground.

Heedless of Chiyo’s warning, Rosany stood behind her seat, tense and focused on the approaching sky. Aleron followed his line of

sight, but the cloud cover was too dense to see anything, darkening with each passing second. Harsh winds buffeted against the shuttle's walls, proof of the oncoming storm, but Rikif's careful maneuvers didn't seem to correspond with the atmosphere's actions.

"What's wrong?" Nobody else seemed prepared to ask.

"Lonan arrived early," came Chiyo's tense response. She grabbed on to the edge of the board when Rikif dipped again to the right, lurching Aleron hard into Jasak's chest. "If we don't want to be noticed, we have to hide in the storm's wake."

That explained the bumpy ride. Aleron had no need for further clarification. He burrowed against his mate and simply watched, just like everybody else.

In spite of the insurgent winds, Rikif navigated through the cumulus with a delicate effortlessness. He avoided as much of the turbulence as was possible, but enough jolts tossed the tiny shuttle around to force Aleron's eyes shut if he hoped to contain his nausea. Jasak's suggestion to sleep during their escape was sounding better and better, though he knew it was too late to take him up on it. Rosany was as caught up in their flight as their two pilots.

He peeked in time to see the clouds grow thinner as they neared the edge of the atmosphere, translucent specters bidding them a final adieu. Quickly, Rikif fired the thrusters to break through the last of Tantoret's gravitational pull, and the sudden added velocity sent the clouds scattering, propelling the ship into pinpricked space.

Chiyo let loose a long stream of curses. They banked a hard left, and through the front portal, the distant hulk of a Lonanian war ship disappeared out of sight.

"Did they see us?" Rosany asked tightly.

"I don't think so."

Rosany didn't move. Even Jasak was on alert, his arms rigid around Aleron's body.

Rikif kept the shuttle moving, though his sweeps back and forth as he broke away from the planet were less sharp and drastic as those he'd made in its atmosphere. Though clouds covered a good part of Tantoret's surface, enough of its riddled earth peeked through that they could see new chasms forming as its center collapsed in on itself.

Slowly, Aleron let out the breath he'd been holding. "You did it."

"We all did it," Jasak corrected.

Rosany finally retreated from the front, perching on the edge of the bed next to Aleron. "The universe has never looked so beautiful." His

gaze had turned wistful, especially as they left the Lonanian ship behind. "I might stay on this shuttle indefinitely."

Jasak almost smiled. "Something tells me, eventually, you'd miss solid earth."

"Perhaps."

Their path smoothed. Aleron eased away from Jasak's heat, swallowing his wince of pain. "Where are we going now?"

Chiyo was the one to answer. "We'll rendezvous with the others at the edge of the system. We'll do better to get out of Athess space before we risk exposing you. Hopefully, they'll assume you've perished with the others."

"And then?"

"We shall cross that bridge when we come to it," Jasak said. "You need to rest, which you should have done long before now."

"You could join the rebels," Rosany said with a half smile. "Thieves are always handy to have around."

Jasak snorted. "Aleron hardly needs your help in getting into trouble."

"Better to have it sanctioned and for the greater good, though," Aleron quipped.

"Your good is all that concerns me now." Moving off the bed, Jasak cradled Aleron in his arms before laying him down, forcing Rosany to move again. His fingertips skimmed along

Aleron's brow, lingering for a moment on the eye that had been swollen shut just hours earlier. "Rest, *atdormi*."

Aleron cocked a smile. "You don't want to curl around me?"

"Until you're better healed, we'll need more room than this bed can provide."

"I don't want to sleep and not have you there."

"No fears." He brushed a kiss across Aleron's mouth. "I will be here. Always."

Aleron might not be able to pronounce the planet's name, but as he stretched out in the long, wavy grass, his head resting on his folded arms and the heat prickling the back of his neck, it was officially his favorite place in any galaxy. He loved the smell of the purple bushes with the sour berries that burst as soon as he touched them. He loved the songs of the tiny bugs that darted through the air right after the suns went down, swarming in masses even when he passed his hand through the clusters. He loved the constant wind, and the long daylight hours, and even the sparks that lit up the sky from cruisers in orbit.

But most of all, he loved the freedom. The choice to do nothing and lie on the ground, or go off exploring in search of new delights, or lock

himself in the small hut he'd been allocated and hide away from the rest of the world.

A shadow fell across his closed eyes the moment before he heard, "If we were on Tantoret, you'd be dead."

Sunlight silhouetted Jasak against the sky. Everything about him seemed sharper here, and his tattoo no longer seemed like a mask that hid his true self away, but an etching along his skin grown tawny from the hours spent outside. Though he had yet to cut his hair, he tied it back with a leather lace to keep it off his face. If Aleron had his way, Jasak would leave it long. He loved the way it tickled along his naked flesh when they were tangled together in bed.

Jasak lowered himself to the ground, his shirt pulling tight across his chest. He had definitely gained weight since they left. Both of them had. Aleron's second favorite thing to do since their escape was eat.

"How are you feeling?"

Aleron lay back down, folding his arm beneath his head. He smiled when Jasak's gaze flickered down the side of his body pulled taut by the motion, and reached out with his free hand to lazily caress Jasak's thigh.

"Warm. My knee felt good enough this morning that I almost left the crutches back at the

house.” He laughed at the slight tightening at the corner of Jasak’s mouth. “I said almost.”

Jasak touched Aleron’s cheek with the tips of his fingers, and gently tilted his head back. Aleron waited patiently while Jasak studied him. It wasn’t the first time it had happened. Aleron wasn’t quite sure why he did it. Maybe he liked the sight of Aleron in the rich sunshine. Maybe he remembered the endless days beneath Tantoret’s surface. Maybe he just found Aleron pleasing to look at.

He turned a fraction into Jasak’s touch, savoring the slight scorch even that delicate contact had. “How long are we going to stay?” Neither one of them had discussed it, not since the night Rikif had spirited them away from Tantoret.

“I don’t know. I can’t return to Belenia, and this might be the only planet in the universe where you won’t find trouble. Where would you want to go?”

“I’m in no hurry to leave yet, if you aren’t. Maybe we should take Rosany up on his offer.”

“That might be the only option for a thief and a murderer.”

His hand stilled. “I hate it when you call yourself that.”

“I know you do. But that doesn’t change anything. And by helping Rosany, I only added to

my body count. But I didn't come out here to talk about that."

"Good, because it's too beautiful out here for that." Resuming his soft massage, he turned his eyes back to the heavens. "What have you been doing today?"

"Watching you."

He laughed. "No, really."

"I'm serious. I like to see you in the sun. Especially when you don't know anybody's looking."

He hadn't known Jasak was looking, which was a little disconcerting because he'd always thought he'd be able to tell whenever Jasak was around. The way Jasak overwhelmed him with his presence felt like it should happen regardless of proximity. "Does that mean I'm busted on carrying the crutches out here?" he said, trying to joke his way into understanding.

Jasak frowned. "Did I make you uncomfortable?"

"You mean...watching?" His cheeks felt hot. The sun or his embarrassment, he wasn't sure which. "It's just...you can do anything you want now. You're free to hunt or run or whatever. I guess I don't understand why you'd choose to watch me, especially when the most exciting thing I've done all day is scratch myself."

“Every day of my life has been in service to somebody else. First it was my obligations to my family and the hunt. And then I had the responsibility of Tantoret and the never-ending struggle to...” Jasak sighed, as he often did when he tried to discuss Tantoret. “To at least keep everybody alive. But now, you’re right, I’m free to do whatever I want. And you’re the only thing that matters to me anymore.”

The power of his simple words lodged in Aleron’s throat and heart, making it difficult to breathe properly. They didn’t talk about the sentiments they had exchanged on Tantoret, those last fateful minutes when their futures had hung in the balance with honor and duty. Aleron had meant every word of them, but while he knew he meant something to Jasak, something important enough to want to protect, he hadn’t been sure how that translated to a world without invisible bars and rules meant to corral them like beasts. Until now, anyway.

“That’s why I want to...make you my *atdormi*. Officially.”

Aleron frowned. “I thought I was. Haven’t you been calling me that for the past few weeks?”

“Yes. But there’s more to it. I never thought I had any right to ask it of you but...”

“Tell me what it is, and I’ll do it,” Aleron interrupted. “I don’t care what it is.”

“How can you say that without knowing?”

“Because it doesn’t matter. I already consider you mine. If we have to get married or something to make it official, I’ll do it.”

“Have you ever tasted anybody’s blood?”

“Not on purpose. I have to taste your blood?”

“Yes, and I yours.”

“From where?” Aleron remembered the vow he’d witnessed between Jasak and Icera. “My chest?”

“Yes.”

Aleron whipped his shirt overhead. Jasak’s eyes widened slightly, and his tattoo seemed to be moving faster than ever. He inched closer, holding his hand up to reveal his exposed claws. He tensed but didn’t pull away as Jasak rested the tip of one claw above his heart.

“Aleron Pitre, I love you. Thank you for this gift. I vow I will never dishonor you or your love for me. I swear my oath to you and our clan.” With that, he sliced across Aleron’s chest. The wound wasn’t deep, but blood immediately pulsed from the torn skin. Before he even had a chance to gasp, Jasak lowered his head and dragged his tongue over the ruby liquid. The pain faded, and Aleron arched his spine, pushing himself against Jasak’s hungry mouth.

When Jasak lifted his head, the blood was beginning to congeal and the pain was still a very

distant entity. There must have been something in Jasak's saliva to help close the wound and soothe the burn.

"You taste better than I could have imagined. You taste...you've had an amazing life."

"You can tell that by my blood?"

"I can tell everything by your blood."

"Do I do the same now?"

"Yes, but you don't have to. I've not known humans to enjoy the taste of blood."

Aleron cupped the side of his mate's face. "Would you like me to?"

"Very much."

"Jasak of the Woor Clan, I love you. I vow I will never dishonor you or your love for me. I swear my oath to you and our clan. Forever." On the final word, Jasak sliced into his own chest. His blood was darker and thicker than Aleron's, but Aleron didn't feel a hint of disgust or revulsion. He licked his lips, looked up into Jasak's intense eyes and then let the tip of his tongue drag over the bleeding cut.

Aleron had expected something salty and coppery, like when he got a bloody nose or a good punch to the mouth. He didn't expect something sweet and wild, or the images flashing through his mind in a kaleidoscope of colors and changing emotions. He saw ancient forests, trees older than mankind and a great beast crashing through them

like they were matchsticks. Jasak raced behind him, using all four limbs to gain ground, his thick muscles rippling with each extension of his long body. He was fierce, gloriously powerful, perfect.

Aleron jerked back, losing the vision as soon as he lost contact.

“Did you see?”

Aleron nodded and lifted his head. His stained lips were tentative at first, but Jasak opened to the kiss immediately, his tongue sweeping through Aleron’s mouth. Though Aleron’s ribs didn’t hurt anymore and he could hold himself off the ground without pain, Jasak slid an arm beneath his shoulders to brace him up, the muscle unyielding, the action unconscious.

Jasak didn’t rush the caress. Aleron didn’t know if that was because he wanted to be careful with Aleron’s healing body, or if he felt like taking it slow. His tongue swept through Aleron’s mouth, and his lips were gentle, coaxing a response rather than demanding it. The sun warmed Aleron’s skin, but Jasak heated his blood and made him flush. With Jasak supporting his weight, he could relax into the warmth, like he was floating.

The shift of Jasak’s position gave Aleron room to pull his hand free. He wanted to be bold. He wanted to strip Jasak down and take the same time exploring him as Jasak had done over the past

several weeks. He wanted Jasak to be the one writhing with pleasure, his shouts those that echoed against the walls. Getting his mouth on Jasak today would be an excellent start.

Jasak lowered Aleron to the ground and pressed himself to Aleron's body, chest to chest. Skin to skin. Their mouths met again, and this time, Jasak was a bit more demanding.

The breeze tickled the long grass across his arms, but Jasak was the reason he had goose bumps. Jasak, and the rough thrust of his tongue, curling into corners unseen. Jasak, and the weight pinning him to the ground, no longer fearful of harming him. It wasn't until this moment, tasting Jasak's barely pent-up desire, straining for every inch of contact they could make, that Aleron realized how badly he'd craved being taken on a level field. No injuries to stand between them. No hierarchy to erect walls. Mates, in every sense of the word.

To test the boundaries, he dug his fingertips into Jasak's back, uncaring of the nails digging into the skin. A growl rumbled between them, deep, satisfying. When Jasak nipped at his lower lip, the slide of his mouth gave Aleron the opportunity to have his own sampling, and he skimmed kisses down Jasak's rough jaw to suck hard at the base of his throat.

He had always enjoyed the way Jasak tasted, but he realized that Jasak had carried the constant stench of the core. Now, Aleron experienced Jasak without the taste of the mines and the sweat and the violence on his skin. Now, he tasted of sweat and soap, with the sweet breeze mingling in his hair. Once Aleron got his mouth on Jasak, he didn't want to pull away. He sucked and nibbled at the flesh, soothing the skin with his tongue when he eased the pressure. Jasak tilted his head back in encouragement, another low rumble of satisfaction vibrating through him.

Aleron closed his eyes to block out every distraction that wasn't Jasak. His hands remained steady, anchoring him as he dragged his tongue first over one strong collarbone, and then across the other, always returning to that softer patch in the center, the quickening throb of Jasak's pulse as his desire mounted. Of all the lovers he'd had, none had ever been as powerful as Jasak, none as overwhelming. His head spun at the riches he had to explore. It didn't stop him from venturing farther, though, following the defined muscle to the taut peak of his nipple.

Jasak slid his hand through Aleron's hair to hold the back of his head, his fingers like bands of steel holding him in place. Aleron ran the tip of his tongue over the nipple, happy to taste him and gauge Jasak's response to the caress. He seemed

to be responding favorably. Especially when Aleron caught the flesh between his teeth, gently biting down. Jasak didn't moan, but he did suck his breath in sharply while his fingers flexed and relaxed in Aleron's hair. He bit down harder, until Jasak stopped him with a soft growl.

Aleron straightened, resting again on the grass, his head cradled in Jasak's palm. "So, for future reference, does biting make you crazy in lust, or crazy out of control? Because I think it's safe to say that you like it, at least a little."

"It just makes me crazy, period. And, for future reference, you probably shouldn't do it at all."

"Why?"

"Because I don't want to...forget my strength with you."

"Well, I guess that gives me incentive to bulk up a little so I'm not quite as breakable, then."

"No, I don't think you're breakable. I think you're the strongest person I know."

"You might be the only person who's ever said that to me before." He smiled, dancing his fingers along Jasak's bare skin. "I usually get sneaky, or arrogant, or once, I even got oil-tongued. Not a very flattering image."

"Well, I can't argue with at least two out of three."

He laughed. He loved hearing Jasak relaxed enough to joke around. “Do I want to know which two?”

Jasak ducked his head to pepper soft kisses along Aleron’s shoulder and neck. “We’ll leave it at that.”

There was something infinitely soothing in the camaraderie between them now, velvet bonds that kept them together while allowing him the space to smile and jab back at Jasak without fear of reprisal. The more time they got to spend together, the more he came to appreciate Jasak’s dry wit and sharp intelligence. Life would never be boring with Jasak around. Even if they never left their idyllic temporary home.

Though he was drowning in pleasure from the soft rasps of Jasak’s tongue, his mouth watered for more, his short foray down Jasak’s chest a mere appetizer for what he really wanted. “So you’re going to let me have whatever I want, right?” He slipped a single finger inside the waistband of Jasak’s pants and caressed the sharp line of his hipbone. “Because it hasn’t escaped my attention that you haven’t let me taste your cock yet.”

“Oh. I heard humans didn’t really like to do that.”

Disbelief had him pushing Jasak back so he could meet his gaze directly. "You've been exposed to the wrong kind of humans."

"Really?" Jasak grinned, and it transformed his face. He seemed like a completely different person. Younger than his years, and joyful rather than exhausted. Aleron was quite sure he had never seen anything like it. "Show me."

He pushed at Jasak's shoulder, unsurprised when he sat back easily. Though he straddled Aleron's legs, there was still enough room for Aleron to move, easing upright to smooth his hands up Jasak's strong thighs. The thick line of his erection bulged at the front of his pants, a small wet spot already forming at the tip. Aleron kept from touching it as much as he could, focusing instead on opening the garment and freeing the shaft to the open air.

The sight of Jasak's gorgeous cock would always make him stop in awe. No matter how often they came together, Jasak was always courteous and gentle, aware of his size and unwilling to hurt Aleron in any possible way. Aleron loved that about him, but there was something to be said for the sheer beauty of his nudity. Never had he a lover as perfectly formed, who made his entire body tense with desperate need. The hand that stretched to pull the shaft and balls away from the fabric's confines trembled a

little from the force of holding that desire back. The thumb swiping over the wet tip quivered as he brought it back to his mouth.

Jasak watched him with heavy eyes as he licked his thumb clean before wiping it across his crown again for a second taste. When he lowered his hand again, Jasak caught his wrist and guided Aleron's palm to his shaft. Aleron automatically wrapped his hand around the hard flesh, and Jasak shuddered as all five fingers closed around his length. Another shudder followed a gentle squeeze, and Aleron caught Jasak's mouth in a soft kiss, muffling his low moan.

He pumped down the length once, the thick pre-come slicking his path. He would have done more if it hadn't jerked within his grip, tempting him with the promise of its weight, but he wasn't nearly as patient as Jasak always proved to be. When his mouth watered, he slid away from the kiss, painting a wet line down the center of Jasak's chest, straight to the object of his desire.

He had to reposition himself on his side to reach it, his legs stretched out perpendicular to Jasak's. With the shaft nestled in his palm, he held it still, avoiding the tip to run his lips down the heavy length. Rather than stopping at the sac, he continued downward, opening his mouth to let his tongue finally get the first musky taste.

It was almost too much to register all at once. The smell of his skin made him heady, and the taste was better than anything he imagined. Jasak's hand was in his hair again, his fingers curling through the strands, the tips massaging his scalp absently. Jasak was silent at first, as though he was holding his breath, waiting to see what Aleron would do. But the silence ended when he sucked first one ball, and then the other, between his lips. At first, his hair was rough against Aleron's tongue, but he ignored that in favor of the smooth skin. His skin was warm. Much warmer than Aleron expected. Much warmer than any human would have been.

Much better.

The heat spread into his cheeks, heightened by the stretch of his lips when he dropped his jaw and took the entire sac into his mouth. Jasak tensed, his grip pulling slightly at Aleron's hair, but Aleron was too focused on the concentrated flavor, intoxicated on the ripe flesh made richer with the sheen of light sweat. He pulled at Jasak's cock and was rewarded with a new sound, another growl deep within Jasak's chest.

The kind of sound that made him shiver with anticipation.

Aleron lost track of time and everything that wasn't Jasak's body. He felt the Athaki's blood throbbing through his veins, felt his strong, steady

pulse against his tongue and lips. He marked the seconds by the sound of Jasak's rough breathing, and the minutes by the weight of his own desires. His cock was hard against his thigh, and he could feel the sticky pre-come collecting at the tip. Despite the tightness in his groin, Aleron thought he could stay there for the rest of the day.

But Jasak apparently couldn't.

He gripped Aleron's shoulder and pushed him back, until he was forced to release Jasak's balls. Jasak pressed him to the ground, pinning him there.

Aleron smiled. "What if I wasn't done?"

"I never said you were," Jasak murmured, moving to straddle Aleron's shoulders.

It shouldn't have been possible to get even more excited. But as Jasak carefully situated his weight above Aleron's torso, pinning his arms out of the way, Aleron nearly whimpered at the fresh stab of lust coursing through his body. He licked his lips at the same moment Jasak caught the base of his cock between his thumb and index finger, then parted them wide when Jasak tilted the tip downward. It felt like an eternity before the velvety head made contact, not with his tongue, but with his lower lip, the thick pre-come wetting it far better than Aleron ever could.

"Please, Jasak." He would beg for as long as it took. "I need to taste all of you."

Jasak's eyes seemed to glow as he complied with Aleron's heated plea, easing the crown between his lips. Aleron immediately wrapped his tongue around the flesh, tasting the skin and the pre-come and the sweat. The weight on his chest overwhelmed him and added to his lust. He lavished the skin, seeking any sensitive points, searching for the spots that would make Jasak moan his name. Jasak pushed his hips forward, easing another inch into Aleron's mouth.

He didn't know if he would be able to take the whole thing, but damn if he wasn't going to try. He kept the suction tight, as tight as he could make it, all the while letting his tongue explore every ridge, every throb, every spot that would give Jasak the most pleasure. Another inch slid inside, followed by another, stretching his jaw wider to accommodate the girth, and still, it wasn't enough.

When he felt the tip against the back of his throat, he took a deep breath through his nose and tried to prepare himself for the pressure. The last thing he wanted to do was trigger his gag reflex—he didn't want to give Jasak any reason to stop or pull away. He wanted to feel his throat stretch, wanted to gorge himself on the thick length. Another gentle thrust, and Aleron's lips met the base of Jasak's cock. He looked up, trying to gauge his mate's reaction as he swallowed.

Jasak's mouth was slack, his breathing labored. As Aleron watched, his tongue darted out to moisten his lips, but his eyes remained unblinking, fixed on Aleron's, brilliant in their appreciation. He'd done that. He could do even more. When Aleron swallowed a second time, this time moaning to let Jasak know just how much he loved it, Jasak shuddered and tightened his hand around the back of Aleron's skull.

Aleron could feel the tension in Jasak's frame as he kept a firm grip on his control. It was a tension that Aleron was already becoming well familiar with, and one he normally respected. But now something made him want to push Jasak to the edge. His hands went to Jasak's hips, and he held his mate tightly, easing him back and then urging him forward again. Jasak's moan spurred him to repeat the act until they established a hard rhythm.

Once Jasak gave himself over to the tempo, Aleron could afford to free one of his hands and reach for his own cock, fumbling to open his pants without distracting his mate. He cried out at the first touch, shocked at how sensitive he was, but the sound was muffled by another drive into his throat. He would be raw when they were done, and gladly so. Knowing he could do this for Jasak, that Jasak wanted him enough to take it,

transformed this from just a simple blowjob into something far more meaningful.

Aleron stroked himself faster and faster, driven to reach the same level of pleasure he wanted to give Jasak. His cock and fingers were slick, and whether or not he had his eyes open, he saw Jasak. Sometimes, when he was alone, he closed his eyes and saw Tantoret. Sometimes, he suspected the same thing happened to Jasak. But not when they were together. Never when they were together.

He flexed the fingers holding Jasak's ass and was rewarded with a hard thrust forward. It sent a shockwave down his body, and the base of spine began to tingle. His skin became extremely sensitive, and every sense amplified—he could feel every single blade of grass pressing into his bare skin.

Clinging to Jasak, the weight bearing him down, the heat merging their bodies wherever they touched, Aleron believed with all his heart that it couldn't get any better. Each stroke was its own fractured bliss, coalescing into an explosion that had him arching away at the same moment Jasak came down, heavy balls slapping against his chin, hot come spilling through his fingers. He squeezed his eyes shut in a desperate bid to keep it together, but that only intensified his release, giving him no choice but to sink his nails deep into Jasak's flesh.

In his euphoria, his jaw tensed. Only a fraction. Only the most minute of movements. But enough for the edge of his teeth to graze along the base of Jasak's cock.

Jasak stiffened, and for a split second, Aleron wondered if he had pushed the Athaki too far. For just that split second, when Jasak's fingers pressed into his scalp, he wondered if Jasak would slam his cock down his throat. But as that second passed, Jasak groaned and shifted back. The only thing that stopped him from pulling away completely was Aleron's hand, holding him in place, keeping him still so he could catch every bit of the hot come splashing against his tongue.

He swallowed convulsively, unwilling to lose any of it, convinced Jasak wouldn't allow him to, anyway. He kept his eyes open. He didn't often get to see Jasak come. On the occasions when Jasak had fucked him, it had always been from behind, though now that Aleron was nearly healed, he intended to show his mate it could be just as good face to face. But now, with Jasak in the throes of his orgasm, Aleron needed to watch.

Because Jasak was, simply put, the most magnificent creature he had ever seen. Potent. Powerful.

His.

Jasak dropped his head back, his own throat working as he gasped for breath. The hint of tattoo

Aleron could see shimmered in the light, and the muscles in his shoulders flexed and bunched. His chest rose and fell rapidly, gradually evening as Aleron finished licking his skin clean. He was still transfixed when Jasak gently pulled away. He met Aleron's gaze, held it and slid down his body until he was even with Aleron's cock. He dragged the flat of his tongue across Aleron's sensitive head, sending a shiver through his frame.

Aleron lay as still as he could manage under the tender onslaught, only indulging by threading his fingers through Jasak's hair and keeping it off his face. He could barely breathe without it being audible, but it was worth it. It had all been worth it. He suspected there would never be a day when it wasn't worth it.

"So do you believe me now?" he said. "Or do I have to show you again?"

"Both," Jasak murmured against his skin, his eyes crinkling with a smile. He kissed along Aleron's softening shaft, and then trailed his mouth over his stomach and up his chest. When their mouths were almost even, Aleron tugged him into a slow kiss. Their tongues slid together, and Jasak's breath fanned over him in a soft sigh.

"I've never been happier than I am right now." He didn't want to abandon Jasak's mouth, but the need to press his brow to his mate's throat overwhelmed that desire. He still didn't

completely understand the significance of the gesture, but he knew it meant something to Jasak, something vital, something important, and that was all that mattered. "And it's because of you."

Jasak swallowed. "I keep thinking this is just a dream. That I'm really caught underneath the core or under a cave-in. Like I can't really have this...and you."

"You can." He pressed his lips to the center of Jasak's chest. "You do."

"Good. Because I'm not going to let you slip away from me now."

"Will you teach me more Athaki? You should hear how much I love you in your own language."

Jasak pressed his mouth to Aleron's forehead. "*Roima dekt.*"

"*Roima dekt.*"

His accent was atrocious, but Jasak didn't seem to mind. As often as Aleron intended on repeating it, it would smooth itself out soon enough anyway.

About the Author

We have been writing as a team since 2007, and in addition to Carina Press, we also have titles with MLR, Samhain Publishing, Liquid Silver Books and over three dozen with Amber Quill Press, including two bestselling series. Our urban fantasies *Mosaic Moon* and *Dominion* are two of our six 2008 EPPIE finalists. For a complete list of our published and upcoming books, please visit our website, www.jamie-craig.com.



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