

T.A. WHITE



**FACETS** *OF*  
**REVOLUTION**

THE FIREBIRD CHRONICLES



# **Facets of Revolution**

**The Firebird Chronicles**

**T.A. White**



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# ONE

*A lmaluc – A space station above the planet Jettie*

Selene tilted the cup she held to admire the lovely reddish color of the liquid inside. It really was the perfect shade. A delight for the eyes and a promise for the palate.

It was amazing how a love of plants steeped in hot liquid was a universal concept that transcended boundaries of culture and species.

From the seemingly infinite variations of tea and coffee you encountered while visiting human space to the Haldeel's *zier*, an underwater flower that released a unique neurotoxin when exposed to hot water that made the lips, tongue, and throat tingle while stimulating the nervous system in much the same way caffeine did humans.

And finally, the Tuann *laug*, the beverage Selene was currently enjoying.

Closing her eyes, Selene lifted the cup to her lips, breathing in the steam for a short second before indulging in a tiny sip.

Yes. Absolutely perfect.

The taste was unlike anything else Selene had encountered. It wasn't quite an oolong. Something about the high and low notes in the tea were a little too spicy for that. If Selene had to pick a comparison, she would say it was a mellower version of chai. A little bit smoother with a more delicate finish.

It was the kind of tea you might savor in the quiet moments. Those times when you wanted to bask in simplicity.

Selene set the delicate cup on the saucer she held.

“You were right. This was well worth the experience,” Selene told the person sitting across from her.

The woman finished pouring her own cup before setting down the pot and straightening. Everything about her—from her elegant bearing to the floor length robes and the way her straight black hair was arranged so it cascaded over her shoulder—was a carefully crafted image designed to put Selene at ease and lower her guard.

Yukina was about as far from being the refined, gentle creature she was portraying herself as one could get. As the oldest Face of the Tuann emperor, she was someone who regularly swam in the shark-infested waters of some of the most politically dangerous arenas in both the Haldeel and Tuann empires.

She didn't spend her time sipping tea while exchanging inane chatter with perfect strangers. Not unless it served her agenda in some way.



Selene studied Yukina over the rim of her cup, taking in every shift of the woman's expression. It wasn't easy. Yukina didn't give her much to work with.

There was a reason the forty-three had listed Yukina as one of the top ten Tuann to avoid under any circumstances. The other used deceit and manipulation the same way most breathed air. You could never trust what she was showing you on the surface. It made her a difficult opponent. Even for someone as experienced as Selene in the art of deception and misdirection.

"I am so glad you enjoyed it." Yukina paused. "If you were to return home, you would find many other things to your liking."

Selene hid her smile behind her cup. No wonder Kira had so much trouble with this one. For someone as used to saying what she meant as Kira, it would be difficult to play these subtle word games.

Not that Selene thought Kira incapable of it. Selene didn't think there was anything Kira couldn't do. But such methods would annoy her youngest sister.

And an irritated Kira was rather dangerous.

No, Kira preferred to beat and batter the situation until it took the shape she wanted. She lacked patience. It was her defining weakness—and sometimes her greatest strength.

Selene was different. Patience was where she lived. Sometimes for too long. She would rather the moment pass

than risk herself.

In Yukina, Selene saw a kindred spirit. Each understood that words were a weapon every bit as dangerous as a blade. That it took a deft hand to shape and mold them to their maximum potential.

Perhaps had circumstances been different—had Selene not been kidnapped from the Tuann as a child and grown up in hell—they might have enjoyed matching wits in this fashion.

They could have been—maybe not friends—but acquaintances who regularly challenged each other to a battle of wits.

Selene thought she might have enjoyed that.

As she was thinking, her gaze drifted to the man standing behind Yukina. The armor he wore was distinctive of a Tuann oshota, an elite warrior class responsible for the protection of their chosen one, the person they called a sword. Known as synth armor, it was far more advanced than anything humans had created.

Harder than any metal or alloy, it could stop all but the most extreme ballistic weapons. However, it wasn't without its drawbacks, proving weak to en-blades and a few other types of weapons.

This version was a matte black darker than the void of space outside this ship.

He was tall, towering over Yukina with broad shoulders and a wide chest that pointed to a life devoted to training.

Despite his size, he was trying not to seem dangerous—and doing a bad job of it.

Selene suspected that the reason for that was his eyes. They were the first thing you noticed about him. A gold that was striking against his light brown skin.

He watched Selene with the kind of intensity that said he was trying to peel back her skin to study what lay under it.

“See something interesting?” he asked.

Selene played with the handle of her cup. The revelation of secrets was a delicate thing.

Too much and you risked destroying the very thing you hoped to help. Too little and nothing ever changed.

Selene needed change. They all did.

Very well. A hint then.

“I knew a boy with eyes like yours once.” Selene pretended not to notice the subtle tension that entered the man’s stance or the way everything about him sharpened.

The man tried to stare Selene down, a predator in that moment before it struck. “And what happened to that boy?”

Selene occupied herself with her cup and the liquid inside, done with this topic for now. “Some stones should be left unturned.”

Yukina and the man exchanged a quiet look before Yukina took the lead in the conversation once again.

“You’re very different from her.”

“No one is like Kira. She is unique.”

“You sound admiring.”

“Do I?” Selene swirled the liquid in her cup. “Perhaps that is because I am. She is the best of us.”

“There are more then?” Yukina asked, as if she didn’t already know after Selene’s hint earlier.

“There are.”

“Why won’t they return to us?”

Selene couldn’t tell if the ache in Yukina’s voice was real or not. In a sense, it didn’t matter.

The forty-three were aware that the Tuann yearned for those they lost in an event they called the Sorrowing. It was a time when hundreds of their children were taken from them and hundreds more of their people were killed.

It was a devastating blow for a people who reproduced extremely slowly. The mental bonds the Tuann made with their loved ones made it doubly so. When those ties were severed in such a traumatic fashion, it caused the slow decline of those left behind.

Those Tuann who couldn’t recover perished as they faded away from sorrow.

Selene was sure it felt like a dream to discover not all of those children had died. It was a gift the Tuann would never walk away from. They didn’t realize the cost their former

children had already paid for survival. The nightmares they still lived with.

That hell had tempered the two youngest, Kira and Jin. Like phoenixes, they'd risen from the ashes of their beginnings.

The rest of the forty-three weren't so lucky. They were broken.

Monsters—better left alone.

Selene feared the Tuann wouldn't accept who the forty-three had to become in order to survive—or what was done to them.

Perhaps because of their long lives there was a rigidity to their social structure. And the stolen children would never be bound again.

She blinked at her tea, dismissing the memories through an effort of will.

Across from her, Yukina reached for her own cup, taking a small sip as she studied Selene in the same way Selene had her earlier. "The trip to Ta Sa'Riel will take up to a month. There will be a lot of time to discover what other things you may have missed in the intervening years."

A faint smile graced Selene's face.

Clever woman. Yukina acted like Selene's accompaniment was already a foregone conclusion.

It was a move taken out of Selene's own playbook when dealing with her children. How strange to see her own tactics



used against her.

While she was considering Yukina, the doorway adjacent to their table dissolved to reveal a pair of people—a mountain of a man in matte black synth armor in the process of murmuring something to his companion.

A woman. Tall by human standards, though still short compared to the man. Gray-purple eyes that seemed like they'd seen all the pain this world had to offer focused on Selene. Their owner scanned her quickly as if to assure herself Selene was in one piece.

Hair the color of wine framed delicate features. Like Kira, it was untamed. Beautiful in its disarray.

Warmth filled Selene's chest. She'd come.

Against all odds. Despite any arguments the Tuann would have thrown her way.

Kira's face revealed a worry Selene knew she didn't deserve. Not after all that she'd done. The wrongs she and the rest of the forty-three had turned their faces from. Determined not to see. Or feel. Or interfere with.

Despite all the anger and hurt, Kira had set it aside to come to Selene's rescue. Willing to risk everything.

It was why the forty-three loved her and Jin so much—though they made sure the two never realized.

Kira and Jin were the sun and the forty-three the planets that watched over them from afar. Only intervening when the worst possible outcome was assured.

Such as was the case on Rothchild.

There was a loud clink in the sudden silence as Yukina set her cup down harder than necessary.

“Why did you bring her here?” Yukina demanded of the mountain standing next to Kira.

“She’s rather persistent when she wants to be.” Graydon prowled into the room, his movements like that of a lion. Someone dangerous and assured of his place at the top of the food chain.

Kira remained motionless on the threshold. Her hands moved in an unobtrusive gesture Selene remembered from their childhood when any form of unauthorized communication would result in a beating.

Roughly, the gesture meant, “Do you need assistance?”

Selene ran a finger along the rim of her ear. “Do not interfere.”

Once, her ears had been as pointed as the Tuann’s across from her. Now, like the rest of the forty-three and Kira, they were docked to allow them to blend in with humans easier. Just one more scar that separated them from their former brethren.

“I don’t care how persistent she is. Her presence here is not welcome,” Yukina said to Graydon as he sprawled in the seat next to her.

“You’re welcome to try to move her,” Graydon rumbled with an amused look that said he looked forward to the

attempt.

It was strange. If asked, Selene would have said Graydon was far too loyal to his emperor and his position as the emperor's Face to be here, helping Kira circumvent another Face's will.

Yet that was exactly what he was doing.

Kira stepped into the room, revealing the man waiting behind her. Selene sucked in a harsh breath as recognition darted through her.

Taller than Kira, the man wore a pair of wire-framed glasses that managed to make him seem almost nondescript.

"Alexander," Selene whispered.

Hope was a fragile concept, and it was one of the first things their masters had beaten out of them. What was the use of wishes and dreams when your present was filled with nothing but survival at all costs?

That loss made you forget that such a thing ever existed in the first place.

She never in a million years would have hoped for Alexander's interference in this matter. Life had taught her to be pragmatic.

Something as innocuous as a prince riding to a damsel's rescue was as far out of reach as the sky was for a frog stuck at the bottom of a well.

“What is the meaning of this?” Yukina demanded as Selene experienced the unsettling sensation of butterflies in her stomach. Something she’d thought she was much too jaded to ever entertain.

It took a moment to understand Kira’s expression, the pinched, almost combative look that made her seem as bristly as a porcupine.

Kira was worried, Selene realized with a soft amazement.

She shouldn’t be. She’d given Selene a gift beyond measure by convincing Alexander to come. Selene had always thought she was done with that fleeting emotion called hope. Kira had shown her she wasn’t.

What a lovely discovery after all this time.

Alexander spared Selene the briefest of glances as he entered. Kira shadowed him, keeping to the edges of the room. As if by doing so, she could keep her presence unobtrusive.

Unlikely, but Selene appreciated the attempt.

“Would anyone care to explain why the Tuann abducted a Haldeel citizen from one of our planets?” Alexander asked, coming to a stop beside Selene.

He reached down, dragging a chair out from the table with a loud squeal before lowering his body into it.

Though tall, Alexander’s frame was leaner than either of the two men across from Selene, his well-tailored clothes hiding the dangerous man he could be. They made him seem

harmless. Not giving a hint as to the true power that lay under them.

“I’d consider your next words carefully if you don’t want a war,” Alexander advised when Yukina simply stared.

Graydon reached for a bowl of fruit, snagging one of the blue spheres and popping it into his mouth.

“She is Tuann,” Yukina finally said.

“She is a Haldeel citizen. As such, not even your emperor can remove her from our borders against her will.”

Alexander placed a token on the table before pushing the button at its center. An image with Selene’s face was projected into the air, along with a full set of papers proclaiming her citizenship of a Haldeel planet.

Yukina studied them for half a second. “They’re legitimate.”

“I know.” The smile that touched Alexander’s face was sharp and faintly mocking. “Why do you think I’m here?”

“Why weren’t the Tuann informed that one of our people had applied for citizenship?” Yukina asked.

“You’re our allies; not our masters. Do you think the Haldeel are required to keep you apprised of our own affairs?”

The skin around Yukina’s eyes tightened. She didn’t like that question, and it was easy to see why. Alexander’s argument had the advantage of being legally foolproof. The Tuann would be hard-pressed to come up with a counter that would allow them to take Selene without her permission.



If she wanted, Selene could take the hand Alexander was offering and walk out of here free and clear. The Tuann wouldn't be able to touch her. Their enemies, on the other hand, wouldn't be so easily dissuaded.

They were the ones the forty-three were most concerned with.

The wisest choice would be to take the exit Alexander procured and disappear. It would take time, but she could establish another home for herself and the children Kira had rescued. She would have peace in her life. Far from the threat of danger.

Nothing would change. Particularly not her.

As if from a distance, Selene heard herself speak up. "I'll go."

Kira straightened from the wall.

A balloon built in Selene's chest. "I'll go with them. I'll accompany the Tuann to their home world."

Relief replaced the tight feeling of that balloon. She'd done it. She'd taken that first and hardest step into the light.

"What are you doing right now?" Kira loomed over Selene in a manner Selene knew wasn't meant to be intimidating. Her sister couldn't help her nature. Even as a child, Kira's stare could make others back down when she was angry. As an adult, that ability had only grown.

Ignoring the hot splash of power against her skin, Selene reached for the pot of tea and filled a second cup before

handing it to Kira.

Bafflement showed on Kira's expression as she took the offered tea.

"They issued an invitation, and I am accepting," Selene said by way of explanation.

Kira raised the cup and blew on its surface before taking a small sip. She made a pleased expression. "You have obligations. Remember?"

"I would never forget."

The children were Selene's heart and soul. They were her salvation at a time when she'd contemplated ending the monotony of her existence.

Selene didn't think Kira was aware of how close she'd been to the abyss when that first child was brought to her. Or maybe Kira knew, and the children were her solution.

Selene had taken that first child and built a life around them and the others that followed.

She would never leave them in danger.

"I've already made arrangements for another to take up my duties in my absence."

"Are you sure about this?"

"Yes."

Selene had never been surer of anything.

Something inside her said Kira would have need of her soon. That her presence was necessary for the other's survival.

If that was the case, Selene planned to accompany her—whether the rest of the forty-three approved or not.

“Much as it pains me to say—I agree with Kira. It will not be easy to leave later.” Alexander’s gaze bored into the side of Selene’s face.

Kira continued to sip her tea, watching the byplay between them with a look of avid interest.

“It is time,” Selene said, facing Alexander.

His disapproval over this course of action radiated from every line of his body.

Selene channeled the calm that had served her well in the worst times of her life as she met his stare. One no less intimidating than Kira’s own.

Selene didn’t let herself waver, despite the instinct warning her to retreat. That she wasn’t as powerful as either of the other two. It was one she had practice in denying.

She wouldn’t allow herself to be swayed. This was her path. She would take it no matter the cost.

Alexander’s eyes closed in defeat. “Very well. If that is your wish.”

Kira gave him an appalled look. “That’s it? That’s all you have to say? She tells you she’s going and you’re like, okay?”

Alexander glared at their youngest sister. “She isn’t as reckless as some I could name.”

Kira’s scowl deepened. “I’m not reckless.”

A scoff came from across the table. The target of Kira's ire shifted to Graydon.

"Then it's settled. We'll leave in two days," Yukina said, quick to press her advantage.

To her credit, there was no sign of smug victory, her expression as calmly poised as it had been before Alexander and Kira's interruption.

"Not quite." Alexander gave the emperor's Face an unamused smile. "I'll be accompanying Selene to your planet."

A choked sound came from Kira as she lifted her head to stare. "Is this a joke?"

Alexander ignored her as he focused on the Tuann.

Yukina gave him a polite smile that did nothing to conceal her dislike. "As noble as your offer is, I'm afraid you're not invited."

Alexander lifted a hand, *ki* pooling his palm. Before the rest could react, he slammed his hand onto the table. A concussive wave erupted.

For a split second, nothing happened. Then the table crumpled as if a giant had smashed it as flat as a thin piece of paper.

"Whoa." Kira's expression hinted at a jealousy Selene found amusing.

If her sister wanted, Kira could do far more than flatten a table.

Faint interest showed on Graydon's face before he selected another piece of fruit from the sideboard and popped it in his mouth.

“What about now?” Alexander asked with a smile as polite as the one Yukina had just offered him.

Yukina's gaze lifted. “The Tuann welcomes the return of our child.”



## TWO

Kira drained her tea and set the cup beside her feet since Alexander had so helpfully destroyed the table. “And on that note, it’s time I take my leave.”

Call it cowardice. Survival instinct or what have you, but Kira felt a very real need to skedaddle before Alexander found a way to place the blame for this mess at Kira’s feet.

It was the petty type of logical reasoning that had made him so famous. The kind that was hard to argue against because it contained a tiny grain of truth that made you second guess whether he was right or not.

Things like claiming Selene would never have chosen this dangerous path, one that ran counter to everything Kira thought she knew about the forty-three, if not for Kira’s involvement.

Never mind that Kira wasn’t responsible for the attack by the Tsavitee, an alien race obsessed with conquering the known galaxy.

Nor was it her decision for Selene to leave her well-defended home to face the invaders on her own.

It certainly wasn't Kira's fault that a group of oshota responding to the attack had happened on Selene in the immediate aftermath and identified her as Tuann.

But she'd be the one he'd blame. Not Selene. That was how things worked between them.

Kira rose, surprised when Graydon chose to remain seated. His posture was that of a lazy cat with no intention of stirring.

As the one responsible for her gaining entry into this private meeting, she hadn't thought he'd choose to remain behind when she left.

Graydon's expression was almost playful as he stared at Selene and Alexander. A hunter who'd caught sight of fascinating prey. "Go on without me. There are a few matters here requiring my attention."

Kira mentally shrugged. "Your funeral."

She, for one, was going to get while the getting was good.

Kira left the room the same way she entered, the door appearing as soon as she neared before disappearing once she'd stepped through.

Oshota stood guard on the other side. Two directly by the door and several others stationed throughout the hall. Without Graydon's assistance, Kira didn't think she would have gotten within earshot of those inside.

At least not without resorting to violence.

Kira slowed at the sight waiting for her. Though the oshota weren't making it obvious, they were on high alert because of the standoff happening ten feet away.

Kira's shoulders sagged as she caught sight of the two groups. "I never should have left the room."

Her life would have been easier—and anything she did less likely to provide the inciting spark that tipped the balance from peace to war.

The beginnings of a well-known joke ran through her mind—a Haldeel and a human walk into a bar.

Kira tipped her chin at an oshota she recognized. Solal. Graydon's right-hand man. "How long has this been going on?"

"A while."

Kira kept her groan to herself as she scrubbed one hand down her face. Why didn't that surprise her?

Tensions between the Haldeel, an alien race whose advanced technology gave them an advantage over a large swath of the galaxy, and the Consortium, the alliance of planets that governed human space, were at an all-time high after the attack of a few days ago.

Understandable given a small contingent of humans had helped bring about the situation.

It would take a miracle to preserve the alliance that protected humanity from another invasion by the Tsavitee. Something that had already devastated them once and brought them to near annihilation.

You'd think that would make them smart. That they'd do anything to keep the alliance that had once shielded them. But no, humans always had to learn things the hard way.

Solal's voice was amused. "Playing peacemaker?"

"Someone has to," Kira said as a sphere the size of her head floated down from its hiding place near the ceiling.

"You weren't in there long. How'd it go?" Jin asked.

"I'm surprised you don't know already. I would have thought you'd find a way to listen in."

After all, he was her partner in all things mischief related.

Once a Tuann like Kira, Jin's soul was now housed in a military grade combat drone. As such, there weren't many places he couldn't inveigle his way into.

"That's kind of hard to do with your mountain's lackeys making that impossible," Jin grumbled. "Every time I moved; they were on me."

Ah. So, he *had* tried to eavesdrop.

"Well played," Kira told Solal, not missing the tiny tilt of his lips that said he'd enjoyed coming out the winner in their exchange.

“Yeah. Yeah. They’re fucking awesome. Are you going to tell me what happened?”

Jin rotated so he could fix the camera that acted as his “eye” on Kira. The lens was an inside joke between the two of them that referenced an old Earth TV show. It was one of a dozen camera lenses built into his exterior that allowed him a 360-degree view—but the only one visible.

“Selene and Alexander have chosen to accompany the Tuann back to their home planet.”

Kira allowed herself a smirk at Jin’s surprised squawk as she started toward the staring contest. Unlike the Tuann, she wasn’t satisfied to stand back and watch when she could act.

“What?!” Jin whisper-shouted as he chased after Kira. “I did not expect that.”

That made two of them.

Kira’s approach attracted attention from the Haldeel and human representatives facing off with one another as they looked in her direction.

The humans’ leader was an old friend of hers and had saved her life more times than she could count.

Rear Admiral Jace Skarsdale had always been considered good-looking but age had refined his features, adding a level of maturity that only enhanced him.

Today, he looked tired. Exhausted. Even more so than the last time Kira had seen him.

Assuming command was never easy. Especially with the current situation.

The Haldeel were angry at the part humans had played in events. The Tuann too.

They wanted someone to pay. The Consortium made for a ripe target.

Though he'd been trained to assume Admiral Himoto's mantle, no one thought he'd have to do so under such tragic circumstances or so soon.

Himoto had been both their mentors. Losing him was a blow there was no time to recover from.

Kira lifted her chin at Jace in greeting. "What are you doing here?"

"We were summoned." Jace's stance relaxed, his tension seeping away as he acknowledged her presence.

Kira had assumed something to that effect. The Haldeel and the Tuann were unlikely to let humanity sweep their involvement with the attack under the rug. There would be meetings. Negotiations. They'd want concessions that humanity might not be willing to give.

Kira looked over at the contingent of Haldeel and inclined her head in a respectful nod at their leader. "Lieven, it's good to see you again."

The Haldeel were an interesting race. From the waist up, they resembled humans except for the lack of hair and the dual-toned pigmentation of their skin.

Lieven, for instance, had an undertone of ink black skin with violet markings that swirled along his exposed arms and shoulders. Those markings marched up the outer edge of his neck, lining his temples and jawline in a strange tattoo that wasn't a tattoo at all.

It was from the waist down where the Haldeel were truly unique. Built like a cephalopod, the Haldeel had eight prehensile appendages that pointed to their evolution in the oceans of their home world. A place whose landmass comprised one tiny island.

“As it is to see you, *za na ri*.” Lieven's stance shifted in query. A silent way of asking if she had been well.

An interesting facet of the Haldeel language was that it went beyond the verbal, relying heavily on subtle, nonverbal cues of body language along with the emotion you tied to your words and gestures.

It was this last piece that tripped up most when learning the language. The Haldeel were mildly empathic, and, as such, emotion underpinned every aspect of their communication.

It was why Kira leaned into the warm burst of surprise and happiness at seeing an old friend before focusing on Jace again. “Is this about the treaty?”

“You could say that.”

Kira's gaze flicked to those standing behind him. A man and a woman. Neither of whom held the rank or authority necessary for talks of this nature.

By now, enough time had passed for the Consortium to have sent personnel skilled at handling these types of discussions. An admiral or a diplomat at the very least.

Except Jace was the highest ranked person in his group. The other two not even coming close to his station. A fact that could be considered an insult in a very delicate situation.

Jace's look was wry as he read her expression. "The Haldeel closed their borders to all human ships. No one in or out until this matter has been resolved."

No wonder Jace was on his own.

It was never a good sign when your ally shut their borders to you. The effects of which could have far reaching consequences.

"I hope the Haldeel are taking into consideration that while some humans joined hands with the Tsavitee there were many more who fought against them." Kira's tone was careful as she radiated sincerity and concern. She didn't want Lieven or those behind her to take offense. At the same time, she needed them to hear her words.

"Some humans paid the ultimate price to protect the vulnerable on this station," Kira finished, changing her stance to one of sorrow.

Himoto was one of those. As were many of the soldiers he'd led.

It was ironic but the Tsavitee's attack on Almaluc was the first time the Haldeel, Tuann, and humans had fought on one



battlefield. Side by side as they protected each other's back.

How sad would it be if they let themselves be divided in the aftermath.

Lieven's body flowed into a stance that spoke of understanding as well as firmness. "We remember, *za na ri*. It is why we have yet to purge the survivors."

Kira caught the warning in his words. The Haldeel would play nice for now because of the actions taken by Jace and Himoto, but it would be a mistake to assume the Haldeel would take this lying down.

Though the Haldeel preferred peace, they wouldn't hesitate to bare fangs capable of tearing out humanity's throat if crossed.

Before Kira could think of a response to that, the door she'd come through opened again.

Yukina, Graydon at her back, stepped through it before stopping to observe the small tableau with a cool glance.

Graydon's face showed amusement as Yukina started to speak.

"We apologize for the delay. There was an unavoidable matter that needed our attention. If you'll follow me, we can begin negotiations."

Yukina stepped to the side to reveal an empty room. There was no sign of Selene or Alexander anywhere. Even their teacups and the destroyed table had been cleared, a new one in its place.

Lieven murmured something to his companions. They nodded before heading inside the room and leaving Lieven behind.

“It was a joy to see and compete with you again.” A few of Lieven’s appendages lifted off the ground, their tips fluttering in a gesture that meant happy sorrow before he smiled up at Jin. “Perhaps our next face off will result in something other than a tie.”

Jin snorted. “We’ve got to work on your trash talk.”

Lieven’s stance changed to one of amusement. “And you must improve your sneaking skills, my friend. As much fun as our security team has had matching wits with you, we ask you to behave for the remainder of your stay.”

Kira kept her gaze trained on Lieven, pretending not to see Jace’s choked laugh or the fuming look Yukina sent her.

Jin’s laugh held a touch of awkwardness. “Oops. I didn’t think they knew about that.”

“I can assure you they did,” Lieven murmured with a twinkle in his eye.

“I promise he won’t bother them again,” Kira interjected before her friend could make things any worse.

Lieven’s appendages rippled in a way Kira knew meant laughter as he reached into the pocket of the warrior’s uniform he wore. A sleeveless vest with a split paneled skirt that would allow his appendages ease of movement.

He withdrew a marble and handed it to Kira.

Jin glided closer for a better look. “Is that a Haldeel communication orb?”

“It is, *za na ri* Jin. The *za na ri na* Tierni asks that both of you keep in touch this time. Should you need our help, this will make it easier for you to reach us.”

Kira took the orb carefully, knowing how precious an item it was. At one time, Himoto would have given his right arm for direct access to a Haldeel royal.

And now here she was being handed it as if it was no more important than a marble.

Lieven nodded a farewell and started after his companions.

“Look at you—making friends all over the place,” Jace drawled as Kira tucked the orb into her pocket.

“Jealous?”

“A little.”

“How much trouble is the Consortium in?” Kira asked.

“Things aren’t good.”

“You poor sucker. You’ve inherited a thankless job,” Jin told him.

Jace dragged a hand along his jaw. “Don’t I know it.”

“You’ll get through it,” Kira assured him. “Just remember what Himoto taught you.”

“Easy for you to say. You’re not about to get ripped to pieces by a bunch of angry Tuann and Haldeel.”

Kira shrugged. “You could always take a page out of my playbook.”

“What page is that?”

Kira’s quick smile held a touch of wickedness. “When all else fails—beat them until they submit. Or you could kill them. Whichever you think best.”

Jace stared at her in stunned amazement. “That is a spectacularly bad plan. I would be court martialed. They might even bring back hanging as a method of execution.”

“Naw. I’d help you hide the bodies.”

Jace barked out a laugh as he strolled toward the room and those waiting inside. “I’ll keep that in mind, Nixxy.”

She hoped so. She really did. A little bloodshed never hurt anyone. Sometimes it was even necessary.

Graydon’s shoulder brushed hers as he came up to stand beside her.

“Get what you wanted?” Kira asked him.

“You’d be surprised.”

Kira flashed a smile designed to butter Graydon up. It was sweet and innocent—or at least it tried to be. “About that second favor.”

Graydon’s amused sidelong glance told Kira she wasn’t fooling anyone. “You haven’t even heard the payment for the first.”

Kira made a come-on motion with her fingers. “Let’s hear it then.”

The smile that spread across his face did dangerous things to Kira’s insides. Particularly when he stepped into her personal space, using his larger size to loom over her.

There was nothing threatening in his manner, but that didn’t stop a delicious thrill from sliding through Kira’s insides as Graydon caught a disobedient strand of her hair and tugged.

His bewitching gaze snagged hers, tempting her to close those last few inches and steal a kiss.

Kira’s gaze dropped to his lips, her resolve teetering. It didn’t help that she knew exactly what they’d taste like. The way they’d feel against hers.

Kira swayed forward as those tantalizing lips formed words that were as effective as a splash of cold water on her libido.

“You’ll travel back to Ta Sa’Riel with the rest of the Tuann contingent on our ship.”

Kira jerked back, her hair sliding out of Graydon’s grip as he watched her with a predator’s stillness.

“You asshole,” Kira swore.

There was always a catch.

“Big favors require an equitable exchange. I could have asked for something much more difficult for you to give. In the scheme of things, I’m letting you off easy.” Graydon was unrepentant in the face of her anger. “I don’t think you realize

how upsetting Yukina found your involvement in the discussion regarding Selene's future. It's almost like she's afraid you'll infect Selene with your bullheadedness."

Kira's scoff would have contained fire had she been a dragon. "She should be thanking me. My interference resulted in another of their lost children coming forward."

"Which is why I was able to ask this in exchange as opposed to the price she wanted to exact."

Kira's mouth clicked closed on the rest of her argument. She'd known when she asked Graydon to get her into the meeting that it would put him in an impossible position and that she might have to give up some things as a result.

At the time, she'd judged the risk as necessary.

"I'm not leaving my ship behind," Kira snarled.

The last time she left the *Wanderer* unattended her niece had stolen it and put herself in danger. While Elena would be under Kira's close supervision for the foreseeable future, Kira didn't want to leave anything to chance. The *Wanderer* was staying with her. End of story.

"No need to fret, *coli*. There's plenty of room to store your vessel in our ship's docking bay."

"Why can't I travel to the Tuann's home planet on my ship?"

Graydon threw his head back on a roar of laughter, the smooth line of his throat distracting Kira for a moment.

That didn't last as he continued to chuckle, her glower growing more pronounced the longer his laughter rang out.

Finally, Graydon got ahold of himself as he wiped away the tears that had formed at the corners of his eyes. "I apologize, *coli*, but if you think you'll be allowed within eyesight of that ship before we reach the waystation on the edge of our solar system, you have another think coming. No. You will travel with the rest of your House and stay in the room I've already procured for your use. Once we arrive at the waystation, you may make repairs to your ship before journeying to the planet."

"Oh yeah, that makes a lot of sense," Jin interjected from where he hovered over their heads. "You don't trust us with the ship on the journey to the planet but you'll let us fly it down?"

Kira was with Jin this time. The Tuann's reasoning was nonsensical. Illogical even.

"The ship we'll be traveling in is much too large to land on Ta Sa'Riel. Otherwise, you'd never be allowed to have contact with your ship," Graydon said. "Besides, our defenses have been instructed to pay careful attention to every move your ship makes. Try to run and they will stop you."

He didn't have to say the means by which they'd do that. Kira was betting they'd disable her ship in a way that would render it unusable.

"You get to have your ship and the Tuann get to have you. This is a reasonable compromise, yes?"

Kira's eyes narrowed, her tongue tingling with the urge to argue. The problem was he had a point. Their requests could almost be considered sensible even.

That didn't stop Kira from wanting to argue however.

Graydon leaned over, his breath brushing her ear. "Play nice and I'll get you that meeting with the Tsavitee prisoner you've been asking for."

Damn.

"And have to pay another price? What's next? My firstborn child?" Kira bit out.

"Nothing so extraordinary, though I'd never say no to a child of yours," Graydon teased, his face softening in a way she knew that meant he liked that idea. Liked it very much. "But no, any exchange would be no more painful than the current one."

"When?"

Graydon straightened, the question a sign of Kira's surrender. "Three days from now. Once we're under way. I'll send you the location."

Smart man. He knew Kira well enough to realize if he left anything to chance, she'd use it to wiggle out of any agreement she made with him. This way he guaranteed her presence on the ship *before* she got what she wanted.

"Can I bring a friend?" Kira asked.



Graydon considered her with a deep gaze. “Depends. Do you trust this person?”

Kira barked out a laugh. “You know me better by now.”

Trust wasn’t exactly a well-used word in her vocabulary.

“But they have knowledge that could prove useful,” Kira conceded.

“Very well. If that’s what you desire.”

“I’ll be there then.”

And hope she found the answers she sought.

“I look forward to it, *coli*.”

That made one of them.

## THREE

*Three days later – Tuann ship*

*Somewhere between Jettie and Ta Sa'Riel*

“Wait for me here,” Kira told the figure next to her.

The person, their face and hair hidden by the hood of the cloak they wore, dropped back, waiting on the threshold as Kira advanced toward Graydon.

Her footsteps echoed in the large room, the sounds bouncing off the empty surfaces of the walls and floor.

As irritated as she'd been at being told she had to return to Ta Sa'Riel via a Tuann ship, she had to hand it to the Tuann. Their ships were works of art.

Better than the human rust buckets she was used to. Every bit as beautiful as a Haldeel cruiser.

She didn't know if it was because she was Tuann but she found a part of her preferring this ship to the Haldeel's.

Every room and communal area were as perfect as they were functional.

Of the areas of the ship she'd seen, she'd have to say this room was her favorite. Something about it called to her. The place was simple. The walls, floor, and ceiling a dark black that transitioned nicely into the transparent floor-to-ceiling wall that offered a view of space.

The sound of Kira's footsteps changed as she stepped onto glass. She paused, noting the stars streaming beneath her feet before examining her surroundings a little more closely.

What she'd previously thought of as a simple wall was actually more of a bubble, allowing viewers to step onto the glass. It gave the illusion of the person being *in* space. Without an EV suit, armor, or any other barrier separating her from the great universe beyond.

Graydon stood in the middle of it, his back to her as he observed the stars.

Waiting.

"I love it out here," Kira said, joining him.

There was a quiet peace to being surrounded by the cold beauty of the void. Stars streaming by as the ship made its return voyage to Ta Sa'Riel, the emperor's home planet and the center of the Tuann empire.

Space had always been the place she felt most at home.

It didn't matter if sometimes the air was stale from too many times through the *Wanderer's* scrubbers or if she was stuck eating nasty MREs when her fresh produce ran out.

She didn't care that it was inhospitable in the extreme, a single misstep carrying the possibility of death. You had to be on guard at all times. Prepared for that instant when things went wrong—especially when that danger came from an unexpected quarter.

Kira had gotten so used to that heightened sense of alertness that it felt unnatural when it was no longer required.

Awareness spread through Kira as Graydon's gaze swept over her.

He had always seen too much. Even from the very beginning. His storm gray eyes penetrating her thickest defenses.

With as many secrets as she had, the feeling was disconcerting.

In her more paranoid moments, she thought it would have been better to maintain her distance. Something she recognized as impossible even then.

There was a raw, magnetic pull between them that she'd long given up resisting. Graydon wouldn't have allowed it anyway.

As the youngest Face of the Tuann emperor, he was used to getting his way. Even when he didn't, he was capable of turning any situation to his advantage.

There was an almost cruel beauty to the line of his features as he turned to face her more fully.

“I can see the draw. It would seem like freedom out here,” he said.

That was exactly what it was.

Graydon looked past her to the person waiting on the threshold of the room. “Is the hood necessary?”

Kira’s grin was brief. “They have a slight obsession with seeming mysterious. You’ll get used to it.”

Graydon shook his head, not pushing the issue. “I hope you know what you’re doing, *coli*.”

Kira did too.

“I appreciate the risk you’re taking,” Kira told him.

Gratitude was an uncomfortable and new experience for her.

In the past, she’d always played by the rule that it was far easier and less emotionally messy if she took things into her own hands. Who cared if a few laws got broken?

It was simpler that way.

Unfortunately, such a lifestyle was no longer conducive to her goals. She needed friends—and allies.

Also, she’d looked into doing this on her own. It was virtually impossible to penetrate the tight security of the place where she wanted to go. Not even the two best hackers she knew were confident in their chances of success.

Hence her asking Graydon for a favor of this magnitude.

Graydon’s smile was slightly crooked. “We both know you would have found your own way whether you had my help or

not.”

True.

It would have been a tad messier, though. Not to mention she probably would have angered a lot of people she couldn't afford to offend in the process. At least this way, she wasn't in jeopardy of being thrown in a jail cell next to the person she was trying to get a conversation with.

Graydon moved past her. “I'm simply glad you chose to use words this time to ask for what you want rather than blunder forward on a dangerous plan that was bound to backfire.”

Kira followed him off the glass and onto the black floor as her companion, sensing Kira had won the argument, glided toward them.

“As always your faith in me is overwhelming,” Kira said in a dry voice.

Graydon's chuckle rumbled from his chest as he stopped in the center of the room.

Kira frowned before noticing the complicated pattern inlaid into the floor. Almost unnoticed, due to the dark swooping lines that looked like shadows against the dark background.

Kira crouched, tracing a line with one finger. She jolted as a hum of electricity zipped up her arm.

“Recognize it?” Graydon asked.

“Should I?”

Tuann technology wasn't always obvious. A simple stone could act as an unexpected communication device. A doorway could sometimes teleport you halfway across the planet, and apparently an unobtrusive pattern embedded in a floor could allow one to contact a secure prison—the location of which was so secret this was the only way to gain access.

“Ta Da’an.”

Graydon's answer made Kira frown.

Her stay on the planet of Ta Da'an, home to House Luatha and her mother's family, had been short—but memorable.

“I'm still not quite sure how you managed to project your consciousness onto my diplomatic ship since the Nexus isn't really built for that. But this is the proper way to do the same thing,” Graydon explained.

Kira stiffened, avoiding Graydon's gaze as she rose. “Ah. That.”

“My captain thanks you for your assistance, by the way.”

Kira's nod was uncomfortable.

Her actions might have saved his ship and the planet from invasion, but she'd also used the chaos to her own advantage.

“This will enable us to astral project to the prison?” Kira asked.

The term “astral projection” originated from early nineteenth century Earth as a description for what was

essentially an out-of-body experience where one projected their consciousness onto the astral plane.

Most humans considered the idea nothing but superstitious nonsense. How fitting that the Wizards, as humans sometimes called the Tuann, were the ones to make the idea into a reality.

Himoto always did say that the separation between magic and science became more and more indistinct as civilizations advanced their technology.

“Something like that,” Graydon said.

Kira’s companion joined them as Graydon lifted his hands, palms facing up as a look of concentration showed on his face. A hum rose all around them before the pattern beneath their feet took on a soft glow that grew.

Graydon’s hands dropped, and the world changed.

The stars disappeared to be replaced by the unrelenting gray of stone.

Kira took a moment to glance around in amazement at the surrealness of it all. Her senses doing a very good job of insisting she was actually standing in a prison cell despite her physical body existing trillions of miles away.

It was all so very real. The smell of mildew and rot all around her. An aura of bleak desperation clung to the walls.

She shivered as a damp chill invaded her bones.

If she concentrated very hard, she could make out the thrum of the ship’s engines under her feet. The feeling grew as black



invaded the gray.

Graydon touched her elbow, the black of the room vanishing as her focus snapped. “Careful. If you think too hard, you’ll be pulled back.”

Kira nodded, a little relieved.

If breaking the connection was as simple as a thought, it meant the danger of getting permanently separated from her body was small.

“This is amazing.” Kira touched the wall next to her.

It was more than an illusion. She could actually feel the stone under her fingers. The rough imperfections of the rock.

The bio feedback loop was probably one of the most realistic she’d ever experienced. Leagues beyond what the Consortium created through their online holo experiences.

“I was expecting you a lot sooner than this,” a voice said from the corner of the cell. “Tell me, Phoenix, what brings you to my humble abode?”

Kira looked at the speaker, locating a young man sitting with his back against the wall on the cold, hard floor. His legs were extended in front of him, and there was a flat look in his eyes that reminded Kira of a caged tiger she’d once seen.

The animal was considered a rarity. Almost extinct even on Earth where it had originated.

And like the boy, it possessed an aggression that nothing could hide.

“Aeron. It’s good to see you. You’re looking better.”

It was true. He seemed healthy. Far from the boy barely able to breathe through the blood filling his lungs.

Aeron touched the spot where his injury had been. “Wounded prisoners aren’t as easy to interrogate. That whole threat of dying and all.”

“Yes, your death would be such a shame,” Graydon drawled.

Aeron’s gaze flicked toward the emperor’s Face.

As a general, Aeron was part of the ruling class of Tsavitee. Those Kira had considered her greatest enemy and the mastermind behind their species until recently.

It had become clear, however, that there was a group above them, pulling the strings.

That even the masters had their masters.

She found it interesting that he was in his Tuann form and not the general. It made Kira wonder if the choice was his own or part of some plan.

To Kira’s surprise, Aeron didn’t respond to Graydon’s taunt, instead focusing on the cloaked figure beside Kira. “Who’s your friend?”

“No one to worry about.” To distract him, Kira changed the subject. “I hear you’ve been less than cooperative.”

It worked as his focus jumped back to her. “Would you bow to your captors?”

She wouldn't. She'd proven that time and time again.

Aeron settled against the wall. "Why have you visited me?"

"You have answers I want. Isn't that enough?"

Aeron studied Kira for a moment. "If that was the case, you would have been here weeks ago. No. Something has changed."

Kira held still at the astute observation.

Aeron's eyes narrowed before widening in realization. "You met her, didn't you? You found Elise."

Kira said nothing as Aeron threw his head back on a laugh, the sound containing a hysterical edge.

"Tell me what you know about her and her goals."

"What's wrong, Phoenix?" There was a twist on the last word. "Not the reunion you hoped for?"

Kira's face remained blank as she let him talk, hoping his arrogance would allow something to slip through.

"I take it you know she's working for us now," Aeron said. "How does it feel to be made a fool?"

"You're awful confident I'm the fool in this equation."

Step one of her goal had been accomplished—verifying that Aeron was aware of Elise's cooperation.

It was a start. She was close; she could feel it in her bones.

"You mourned a traitor and now you want to find out how deep the betrayal goes," Aeron guessed.

Kira didn't give him a reaction; her face blank.

That didn't stop Aeron. "Elise was one of ours. She has been working with us since the beginning."

How long had he been waiting for this moment? The moment he could spew venom in her ear. Plant a kernel of doubt that would continue to grow long after this conversation was over.

"She's not the only one we've put by your side either." Kira's tiny flinch made Aeron grin. "Do you think your encounter with the young lord and his sister on O'Riley was an accident? Wake up, Phoenix."

Graydon shifted closer to Kira, placing one hand on her hip as he lowered his head to rumble in her ear. "He's trying to get in your head."

Yes, he was.

"You're nothing but a tool. Every move you made was by our design. Elise's design."

Kira was growing tired of this game. It was time to change the set up.

"There's a lot of things I'm afraid of—Elise being a traitor isn't one of them," Kira confessed.

She'd had time to think over the last few days. Once the shock had worn off. Admittedly, it would be easy to question Elise's loyalties. Had there been something she'd missed all those years ago? Was Elise exactly as Aeron had claimed—a traitor?

Somewhere in asking herself all those questions, she'd remembered Elena, the daughter Elise had left with Kira. The one she had gone to painstaking lengths to hide and protect.

If Elise had been on the Tsavitee's side, she would have handed Elena over long before now. It was as simple as that. A Tsavitee believer never would have left Elena in Kira's care.

Kira had to believe Elise had reasons for the actions she'd taken. Until she had proof otherwise, and possibly even after that, Kira wouldn't think otherwise.

"Tell me—was your incarceration part of the plan?" Kira mused, smiling when his flinch told her she'd struck a nerve. "Were you a sacrifice, Aeron?"

Sloppy of him. Trying to prey on her uncertainty while leaving his own exposed.

"Nice try though. You almost had me." Kira snickered to herself. That was a lie. He wasn't even close. "I didn't come here to talk about Joule and Ziva."

Or whether they'd been a plant as Aeron suggested. She knew both children well enough to trust they wouldn't knowingly be a part of any plan to lure her to the Tuann. Of that, she was certain.

Unknowingly was a different story, but that was a concern for another time.

Aeron dropped all pretense of cordiality. "I'm not telling you anything."

Well then. Kira guessed she should move on to plan B.

“I figured you might be difficult,” Kira said in a chipper voice even she found irritating. “That’s why I brought a friend.”

The figure next to Kira reached up with fingers a tad longer and thinner than any human’s to push back their hood. The face that was revealed was as beautiful as it was alien. Something in the being’s bone structure screamed other. There was no way to tell whether the person was male or female, a kind of absolute androgyny overriding any characteristics that would have declared their sex. There was a perfect balance in the visage that pointed to the person being both and neither.

An eye patch covered one eye. The other a brilliant green.

The expression in those eyes held a wisdom and indifference that was all the more chilling considering the mischievousness that was usually present.

Thin beads were threaded throughout the person’s chin length hair. Three tiny triangles had been painted onto the light brown skin under the right eye.

Aeron froze at the sight of the other.

Something very like fear crossed his face as he started shaking.

“Traitor. You traitor.” What started as a hushed whisper rose to a roar by the end.

Aeron pushed himself against the wall, climbing to his feet in horror. “What are you doing working with one of the Syc?”

So, he did know what Odin was. Kira had wondered.

Odin's race was special, not experiencing gender in the same way as humans did. For them, the concept was a little more fluid. It allowed them to be female or male as circumstances and desires dictated.

There was also a third form. Something they called the "Sye"—which translated meant all and neither.

"Ah, good. You recognize my friend. I was afraid you wouldn't."

Though Odin had assured her he would.

"Do you know what their race does? What it means for one of them to be standing here?" Aeron shouted.

Kira frowned as she spoke to Odin. "I'm a little insulted that he has more of a reaction to you than me."

Red symbols scrawled across Aeron's skin as the two bumps where his horns would have been had he been in general form pushed through the skin on his forehead. A whimper left him as the red drained out of the symbols and the bumps vanished.

Aeron slumped against the wall, barely able to stand.

"Calm yourself, brother. No one is here to hurt you," Odin advised.

Not true. Graydon would have been more than happy to put the hurt on Aeron if it would get them what they needed.

Aeron's labored pants were loud in the sudden quiet as he focused on Kira. "Do you know who you're working with?"

“I have an idea.”

Admittedly, most of Odin’s history before meeting Kira was shrouded in mystery, but she knew what was important.

Though she did find Aeron’s overreaction to Odin’s presence quite interesting. It made Kira wonder exactly what part the Syc played in the Tsavitee’s ranks. Something told her they weren’t rank-and-file grunts. That perhaps their ties to the generals were tangled and deep.

“You don’t have any clue.” Aeron sounded very certain of that. “If you did, you wouldn’t be within a thousand miles of them.”

“Why don’t you educate me then?” Kira invited.

She was interested in what he had to say.

“The Syc are the masters’ most trusted pets. They are never free,” Aeron hissed.

“You’re wrong about that.” Odin reached up to remove the eye patch, revealing a sunken, empty socket. The skin around it was filled with twisted scars. The ugly raised ridges of which gleamed in the light. “Though the cost was quite high.”

Aeron backed himself into the wall as if he could disappear into it as he shook his head. “They would have eliminated your entire line.”

Odin inclined their head in agreement. “Only if they knew I’d survived. They do not and so my line is safe—from death at least.”



Everyone in the room knew that death could sometimes be a mercy—particularly when you were in the clutches of beings as ruthless as the Tsavitee’s masters.

Kira took advantage of Aeron’s unbalanced state to advance her cause. “You were right earlier. I did encounter Elise. She left me a message. ‘Help the changeling.’”

There was only one person she could have meant. Odin.

Aeron’s head dropped against the wall. “Good for you. Why are you telling me this?”

“Much as it pains me to say, I think we might be on the same side.”

And how that fact grated. Kira and the generals had been enemies for so long it was difficult to see them as anything else. Victims of the same masters who’d tried to twist Kira and the forty-three into their monsters.

Now, she was finding that maybe the generals had gone through the same hell. Only, unlike her and the rest, there had been no escape.

“You told me once that I always saved everyone else, but I never came for you.”

Kira remembered because the comment had always bugged her. Until he’d said that, she’d never viewed the generals as beings who might need rescue.

Perhaps that’s why they’d gone to Elise for help.

Aeron's laugh held an air of despair that made Kira's heart clench as he looked at the ceiling. "Does this mean you want to save us now? Will you forgive us for those we took from you?"

The air stilled as Kira looked away from him for the first time. "No."

The answer was a foregone conclusion. Kira couldn't forget or forgive.

The people they'd killed were never coming back. Kira would always feel hate for what they'd done.

Aeron's face twisted before his hands came up to cover it.

"But I don't expect forgiveness for the lives I've taken either," Kira finished.

It was always easier to view the opposite side of any war as monsters. It took away the guilt that accompanied the taking of a life. You didn't have to care if the soldiers on the other side were evil. You could tell yourself you were doing the right thing.

Kira's mentor and father figure had always said the only thing that separated two forces was which side of the battle line they stood on.

Kira had forgotten that. Though the generals had made that easy given all they'd done.

Still, swaying the generals away from their masters would deal the Tsavitee a tremendous blow. Kira's dead would kick her ass if she didn't take advantage of such an opportunity.

Aeron brought his knees to his chest and wrapped his arms around them before lowering his head to rest it on his knees. “Nothing will change as long as they hold our young.”

“And if those young were free?” Kira asked carefully.

Aeron lifted his head. “Then some of us would no longer have a reason to obey.”

“Some?” Not all?

Aeron gave her a twisted smile. “Not everyone resents our masters’ yoke.”

Good enough for Kira.

“Thank you, Aeron. You’ve been very helpful.”

He’d given her a place to start if nothing else. Break the Tsavitee masters’ hold on the generals and they’d create a schism. There would be no one to lead their horde. The chaos that would ensue could give her a real shot of eliminating the masters entirely.

“Time’s up,” Graydon said, just as black spots started eating away at the gray of the prison cells.

Aeron’s gaze pierced Kira’s. “There’s a reason they went after the emperor’s son.” He paused. “Both of them.”

Kira resisted the pull of her body as the cell flickered in and out of her sight. “What does that mean?”

Aeron’s lips lifted. “I think you know.”

She did.

Jin. Her best friend. And likely the emperor's eldest son. Stolen the same day as Kira and the forty-three. Unlike them, however, he no longer possessed his original body. Instead, his soul had been bound to a combat drone.

If the Tuann ever found out, they would destroy him.

They'd consider him an abomination. They wouldn't care that her friend was nothing like their stories of the soul bound. Twisted creatures with no empathy or restraint. Monsters who were once people.

Aeron's insinuation said the masters knew or at least suspected what Jin was. That it was why they'd been after him and Devon all along.

They would come for Jin.

It was only a matter of time before Jin's secret got out.

The connection thinned further. Aeron's image wavered.

"One final piece of advice," he said, recovering his smirk. "Don't worry about finding Elise. She'll find you on Ta Sa'Riel. Prepare, Phoenix."

The last of the connection snapped. The gray walls disappearing to be replaced by black ones.

"Damn it. Tricky, deceitful, fucking generals," Kira ground out.

Why had she thought it was a good idea to talk to Aeron? What was she thinking? Their mind games made Himoto's look gentle by comparison.

“I did warn you,” Graydon said.

“Thanks. It really makes my day to have you tell me I told you so.”

“Happy to be of assistance.”

Kira shook off the lingering effects of the astral projection. There was a slight disorientation. As if part of her still thought she was in that cell.

“Did you learn what you were hoping to?” Graydon asked.

“I learned something.”

Kira wasn't sure if that something was of any use.

“You should be happy. It sounds like your friend will surface soon enough,” Graydon pointed out.

“Yes, I'm thrilled.”

Graydon's grin was slight even as his glance at the doorway betrayed his restlessness.

“You should go,” Kira said. “I'm sure the emperor is waiting for your report.”

She didn't bother asking him to keep the conversation they'd had with Aeron secret. For one thing, she knew he wouldn't. She had to trust that Graydon understood what information could be shared and what would become a noose around her neck.

It was a dangerous line to walk. One Graydon managed to make look as effortless as everything else he did.

Graydon moved away after a faint squeeze of reassurance. "I'll find you later."

"I'm counting on it," Kira said, watching him prowl toward the door, his oshota appearing as if from thin air.

A woman named Amila winked at Kira in solidarity before falling into step with Graydon.

"It was unnecessary to involve him. I told you I would have found a way in," Odin pouted from behind Kira.

Sometime in the last few minutes Odin's features had developed a more feminine cast. Her lips slightly plumper. The line of her jaw a little softer.

The change was subtle but unmistakable.

"You also said the chances of getting caught were high," Kira pointed out.

"Better that than the emperor being privy to all our secrets."

"Not all." Kira looked out the view port at the stars. "Besides, we need allies."

It was becoming increasingly clear to Kira that they needed someone powerful on their side. The attack on the Haldeel empire and those present at the quorum had changed the game. War was coming. Chaos would follow.

They would accomplish nothing except maybe dying if they went at this solo.

"Are you sure you need to leave?" Kira asked Odin.

Her friend hesitated before giving a reluctant nod. “Yggdrasil is the only place where I can run the calculations I need.”

In old Norse mythology, Yggdrasil was a sacred tree that was said to exist in all the worlds, its roots and branches spreading along the fabric of their realities.

Outwardly, Odin’s lair held little in common with the myth, but there was still an essence of truth to the name. It wasn’t a stretch to say the “Allfather”, as Odin was known to some, had a presence throughout the Haldeel and Tuann empires as well as humanity’s Consortium, making the name Yggdrasil rather appropriate.

“I have all the necessary star charts. It won’t be long until I can locate the Tsavitee home worlds,” Odin assured her.

“I’ve heard that before.”

“This time I’m right.” There was a certainty in Odin’s expression that was rare. A confidence unmasked by Odin’s mischievous teasing and sly smile.

Kira offered her hand to shake. “Alright. I’ll wait to hear word.”

“What will you be doing until then?”

Kira tilted her head at the pattern they’d used to appear in Aeron’s cell. “You heard him. Elise will come looking for me. It’s best if I don’t make myself too hard to find.”

Which meant a return to Ta Sa’Riel and House Roake, her father’s House, and all the problems she’d left behind when

her niece decided to abscond with her ship.

The cloak rustled around Odin's legs as the Sye moved toward the door, drawing the cloak over her head as she did so.

Kira didn't ask how Odin planned to get off the ship. The Sye had her own methods, and she wasn't about to share them with Kira.

"Not going to say goodbye to him?" Kira asked.

Odin was there for Jin when he needed her the most. The two shared a connection Kira didn't pretend to understand.

She didn't think Jin would take the Sye's absence in stride. Especially if Odin left without a word.

"He'll get over it. It's better this way."

Kira's smile held a note of self-deprecation. How many times had Kira or Jin said something similar?

Somehow, it felt fitting to have those words turned back around on them in this situation.

Kira didn't stop Odin as the Sye departed, leaving behind an echoing silence that felt an awful lot like the feeling before battle. A quiet stillness you knew couldn't last before the terror of war.

Soon. One way or another, things were coming to a head.

"I wish you luck, my friend," Kira whispered softly.



## FOUR

*Three weeks later*

*On a waystation at the edge of Ta Sa'Riel's solar system*

Sparks flew from the welding rod as Kira repaired one of the cracks on the underside of her ship. The face shield darkened as she struck the arc, protecting her eyes from the intense light that would have blinded her otherwise.

A voice intruded.

“Se—“

Kira kept working. The sizzle of the welding rod holding her entire attention. It sounded like cooking bacon, a low hissing drone as she dragged the rod across the metal.

Kira stepped back, examining her handiwork. The ship's underbelly now had another scar to add to the dozens already present. The repair wasn't pretty, but it would do until she could find a skilled welder familiar with human vessels to replace those panels that had been damaged.

She could have asked her hosts for help, but she didn't trust them not to add a few of their hard to detect pieces of

technology to monitor her ship. At least with a human, she knew what to look out for.

“*Seon’yer*, I know you can hear me,” the person said again.

Kira raised the face shield of her welding helmet as she looked in the direction of the speaker.

A young girl who looked to be around the age of seven or eight waved madly at Kira from her crouch near the aft of the ship.

The girl looked like one of those pretty dolls Kira never got to play with as a child. Her hair a white blond and her eyes a deep blue. She was dressed in a green jacket with gold buttons marching down the front. Her pants were a dark brown and tucked into cute calf-high boots.

A teenage-looking boy stood next to her with a shy smile.

“Ziva, what did I tell you about the ‘S’ word?” Kira asked the girl.

Strictly translated, the term *seon’yer* meant mentor or teacher, but the concept was much more complex than that.

In ages past, humans had similar ways of calling their mentors depending on the region. Sensei in Japan. Shifu in China, and master in other parts of the world.

The relationship between *seon’yer* and *yer’sé*, or disciple, was a deep one, approaching that of a parental figure with their child. As far as Kira could tell, it was a relationship that stuck with both parties for the entirety of their lives.

Dissolving it wasn't something done on a whim and usually involved the dishonor of one or both of those involved.

It was why she was so resistant to Ziva taking her as her seon'yer.

Kira didn't know what her future involved. There was also the fact she had not yet passed her *adva ka*, a rite of passage Tuann must undertake before they were considered an adult.

Until she did, she could not formally take on any disciples. Even if she wanted to. Which she didn't.

Ziva's nose scrunched with stubbornness as she set her hands on her hips. "The eldest *yer'se* advised me that sometimes your words don't match your actions."

Kira shook her head as she flicked off the welding rod. That child was going to give her a coronary one day. Kira just knew it.

Kira sent a respectful nod at the boy next to Ziva. "Joule. You couldn't have talked her out of this?"

There was a maturity to Joule's face that had been lacking the first time Kira met him. He'd lost some of the softness of youth, his features thinning out a bit. Weeks of intensive training had added a little muscle to his frame.

Outwardly he looked around fourteen years old, but the Tuann grew slowly, taking decades to mature.

Kira herself was ninety-two though she appeared in her mid to late twenties at the most.

“She was most insistent,” Joule explained.

Kira grunted. “That seems to be going around.”

Kira hated to admit it, but she saw a lot of herself in the girl. They had the same stubbornness that masked their heartbreak and loss. The regret that came with being the one left behind. It made them all the more determined to succeed at any cost.

Kira could already see it. Ziva would eventually wear her down.

Decades of training and experience on the battlefield would be nothing in front of the child. Her reputation as the Phoenix would go down in flames. All because a little girl turned out to be more obstinate than her.

Kira ducked out from under the ship, ushering Ziva and Joule in front of her to where a pair of oshota from Luatha waited on the walkway.

They were Ziva’s escort while on the station.

Though both children came from a fallen House, their former House had sworn loyalty to Luatha. As such, Luatha was now responsible for their wellbeing until they came of age and left to pursue the *adva ka*—as was the case with Joule.

Ziva was still too young for such an undertaking—hence her escort.

Dozens of ships surrounded the *Wanderer*. They were arranged in neat little lines that extended the length of the massive dock. Many lacked the crests of one of the five major Houses, proclaiming them as belonging to a minor House.

“Do you know what’s going on? Why are there so many people?” Kira asked, studying the swarm of activity.

There were far more ships and Tuann present than she’d ever thought possible. The station practically bursting at the seams.

She’d always gotten the impression that not just anyone could visit Ta Sa’Riel or call it home. Certainly not the invasion force currently on the station.

She counted at least fifteen other Houses—and that was in her immediate vicinity. Berthed ships extended as far as the eye could see. That didn’t account for those ships that had already come and gone while Kira was working on the *Wanderer*.

For this many Tuann to be heading planet side, something had to be going on.

So many bodies in one place made Kira itch to disappear to a far corner of the universe where no one would find her.

“It’s the *adva ka*. Word is that it is set to open in the coming weeks,” Joule explained. “Any Tuann hoping to embark on the rite has flocked to the planet. It’s the only time so many different Houses are welcomed at once.”

The *adva ka* was one of the most sacred rituals of the Tuann. A rite of passage considered necessary to be viewed as an adult—with all the rights and privileges that came with.

It didn’t matter how old you were. Ten years or a thousand. Or if you had fought on countless battlefields. Until you went

through the *adva ka*, you were considered a dependent of your House.

“*Adva ka*, huh? Graydon and his people must be going crazy.”

An influx of that size would pose security issues. From verifying the identity of those traveling to the planet, to ensuring they don’t sneak any nasty surprises to the surface.

It was the perfect opportunity for Elise—or anyone hoping to cause trouble—to infiltrate Ta Sa’Riel.

Maybe Aeron hadn’t been talking out of his ass about Elise’s next destination after all.

Kira slapped the panel to extend the *Wanderer’s* boarding ramp.

Joule’s sideways glance held a touch of wryness. “You know it’s unlikely they’ll let you participate, right?”

The ramp lowered.

Kira set the welding rod inside the threshold as she studied the walkways teeming with Tuann boarding their ships. “Don’t worry. I have my ways.”

There would be objections, but Kira didn’t really concern herself with things like that.

It was time.

A part of her found the entire situation ridiculous. But if that was the hoop she needed to jump through to restore her autonomy, that was what she was going to do.

“I don’t suppose you’d be willing to include me in that?”  
Joule asked with a hope she couldn’t ignore.

Kira wasn’t the only one up against the wall.

Joule needed to resurrect his fallen House or risk its members drifting away. Some would end up as wanderers. Viewed with suspicion and pushed out to the periphery of society.

The talented would find invitations to other Houses, but even that wasn’t the salvation it seemed. They would still face suspicion along with now being on the bottom rung of the hierarchy in any House they joined.

Neither option was what Joule wanted for the members of his House.

He needed to pass the *adva ka* as much as Kira did. It was the only way to save those who’d survived the fall of his House. A duty Joule took seriously.

It was a dangerous path that could easily end in his death. If Kira was smart, she’d turn him away for his own safety.

She sighed, already knowing she wasn’t going to do that. “I’ll see what I can do.”

Joule’s fist clenched in a small celebration before his expression smoothed out.

Kira shook her head, reaching out to ruffle his hair. “Don’t make me regret this.”

“I won’t.”

Kira hoped he was right.

“What are you two doing here?” she asked.

“About that—“ Joule started as Ziva’s gaze darted to the ship and back.

Kira had a sinking suspicion she knew what they were about to ask. “No.”

Joule’s smile showed he was undeterred. “We were hoping for a ride to the planet.”

“Doesn’t Luatha have their own shuttles to the surface?” Kira whined.

“They do but since I’m technically part of House Roake while I am in training it will be difficult for them to transport me,” Joule explained.

Red tape. The bane of Kira’s existence and something that obviously transcended race and culture.

“We want to go down together,” Ziva explained.

The separation between the two while Joule was in training was hard for them. The trip back to the planet over the past few weeks had allowed them to catch up, but now that they were home, they faced another separation.

“Why do I get the feeling that’s not all there is to it?” Kira asked dryly.

Ziva’s answering grin was impish.

Yeah. That’s what Kira thought.

The children’s gazes lifted to a spot over Kira’s shoulder.



Ziva's face brightened. "Jin!"

A sphere floated out of the ship, stopping when it reached the air above Kira's shoulder.

The color of graphite, the drone was about the size of Kira's head. Once meant for combat, it was now considered outdated by Consortium standards.

"Kira, the electrical panels have been fixed and I've completed the diagnostic," Jin told Kira as his anti-gravs whirred. To the other two, "Did you convince her yet?"

Expectation filled Joule and Ziva's faces as they looked at her pleadingly.

Even Kira's shriveled heart couldn't withstand the begging. "Fine. You can come."

A cheer erupted.

Jin darted forward, circling behind them before ushering them forward. "All aboard the Kira Express before she changes her mind."

Ziva wasted no time grabbing the small bag at her feet before bolting up the ramp. Joule picked up his own bag and followed at a more sedate pace.

Kira met the gaze of the man waiting for her at the top of the ramp.

Finn's face was expressionless as he watched her approach. Assigned as her oshota when she first reached House Luatha,

Finn had shown a surprising ability to stick to her despite all her best efforts.

He was considered among the elite of the oshota's ranks. A badass who'd gotten saddled with the likes of Kira. She didn't envy him his predicament. Not even she would want to safeguard someone like her.

It was a thankless task he'd undertaken with only a few complaints.

"What?" she asked.

"You're soft on them."

"It's just a ride."

Finn's mouth tilted up on one side in a micro expression Kira would have been envious of when she was younger. "There's also the question of Joule and the *adva ka*."

"You know—just because we've reached a truce, it doesn't mean it has to stay that way."

Finn's face remained blank except for the tiniest gleam of interest. "Say the word and I'll be happy to renegotiate the terms."

The two stared at each other in a battle of wills.

Kira had only gone up against Finn once. It had been a difficult encounter.

Admittedly, she hadn't been at her best. Ship life had left her a little out of shape. Not to mention the havoc her

untrained *ki* had exacted on her body. Still, it was enough to know how skilled an opponent he was.

The sudden hush on the docks behind Kira distracted her from the promise of a spar. Something she hadn't indulged in enough over the last weeks.

She looked over her shoulder to find movement on the dock had ground to a halt as the Tuann stopped and stared at the two figures making their way across the deck.

Selene was almost regal as she glided forward, her Haldeel style robes sweeping the ground. The bell-like sleeves fell to a point in the middle of her hands and her hair was swept up into an elaborate braid at the back of her head. Alexander's face was inscrutable as he paced at her side. A caged beast tasked with the protection of the princess.

"Are you going to talk to them?" Finn asked when Kira remained where she was.

"No need. We're strangers who share the same beginning. Nothing more."

Kira ignored the feel of Finn's eyes on the side of her face, knowing he probably didn't understand. That was okay. She didn't need him to.

Friendship? That wasn't a term you threw around in relation to the forty-three.

A sigh came from her oshota before he patted her on the shoulder and disappeared into the ship.

Jin moved out of the shadows, joining her. “This feels weird.”

Kira nodded. He wasn’t wrong.

Selene and Alexander weren’t acting like they’d come to expect of the forty-three. The knowledge made Kira antsy. Like she was waiting for the other shoe to drop.

“When was the last time so many of us were in such close proximity?”

“Nine years. No. Eleven.”

Right after she’d woken up from her coma and realized Elise wasn’t as dead as the Tsavitee would have had her believe.

“I don’t like it when they act out of character. It gives me the shivers.”

At that, Kira raised her eyebrows at him. “That’s quite a feat since you lack any skin.”

“You know what I mean.”

She did indeed.

“Why do you think he came?” Jin asked.

“He cares about her.”

He didn’t want to leave Selene to face the Tuann alone.

“The forty-three all care about each other. I don’t see any of them here.”

That brought a small smile to Kira's face. "Who's to say that they aren't?"

The forty-three were masters of infiltration. There was every possibility a few of them had managed to insert themselves into the periphery of the situation given the activity surrounding the *adva ka*.

Jin made a grumbling sound that said he took her point as Kira crossed her arms and leaned against the side of her ship.

Kira nodded at Alexander. "He loves her. That's why he's here."

In his shoes, Kira might have done the same for Graydon. Nothing said love like a willingness to go through the same trials.

People underestimated how reassuring it could be simply to have a companion when you faced your greatest fear. Not to have them fix the problem but rather hold your hand through the worst of it.

Alexander wasn't here to solve Selene's issues. Selene didn't need that. He was there to provide a steady shoulder for when things got heavy.

"I don't see it," Jin said. "What makes you think it's love?"

"He broke the rules for her."

For Alexander that was the ultimate proclamation.

"What rule?"

“The forty-three have a time limit for how long they can exist in close proximity.”

It was smart if you thought about it. Keep a distance from each other so if one is compromised, they can't drag down the rest.

Of course, it also made for a lonely existence.

“How do you know that?” Jin asked.

“Elise told me.”

It was one of the few things she'd shared about the forty-three. It had slipped out one night when Elise was feeling nostalgic.

“I suspect this is the longest they've been together since their escape,” Kira said as Alexander looked in their direction.

“That's kind of sad.”

It was.

The two were quiet until another commotion on the dock attracted their attention. The noise level dipped as two men strode into view. Kira could recognize the smaller of the two as Graydon. His matte black synth armor gleaming with a subtle threat that caused those in front of him to give way. A second man prowled at his side. He had a hood pulled over his head, his features impossible to distinguish behind the energy field he used to hide his face.

“Does the emperor think he's fooling anyone in that getup?” Jin asked with a snort.

Kira frowned as the person Jin identified as Emperor Torvald leaned over to Graydon and said something.

She stiffened as Graydon's gaze swung her way.

"Wait. Why are they heading in this direction?" Jin asked in alarm as Graydon and his companion changed course toward the *Wanderer*. "Kira, do something."

"What do you want me to do?"

It wasn't like she had the power to order the emperor around. The man owned this station and every inch of space for thousands of light years.

"I'm blaming you for this," Jin hissed, disappearing into the ship as Kira sputtered.

"Jin," Kira started to say, but he was already gone.

She stared at the spot where he'd been in disbelief. If she'd known all it took to make Jin retreat was the threat of the emperor's presence, she could have saved herself a lot of trouble all those times he irritated the living daylights out of her.

A throat clearing at the bottom of the ramp redirected her attention to where Graydon and his companion waited.

Graydon propped one foot on her ramp, his roguish smile sending a flood of warmth and alarm spreading through her.

Graydon's draw went far beyond his looks. It was infused in the predatory way he moved. Every word and gesture possessing a charisma that was bewitching.

Worse. The reality of Graydon was far greater than even the promise of him.

Graydon was a drug. One hit was never enough.

Kira was already addicted.

Her challenge lay in not letting him realize that. If he ever knew how deep she'd fallen, he'd own her—body and soul.

She wasn't ready to let that happen.

“Are you lost?” Kira drawled.

“If I am, will you give me directions?”

Do not react, Kira warned herself as tingles erupted, knowing that was exactly what he wanted.

Kira was contrary enough to go out of her way to not meet expectations. Call her cruel but she enjoyed challenging him.

He liked it too if his expression was anything to judge by.

“Maybe but I'm pretty sure you won't like where I send you. I noticed a few airlocks that could be tricky to escape from.”

Gagging sounds issued from the bowels of Kira's ship. “Save the flirting for later. Ask him what he wants.”

“I'm getting to that,” Kira shouted over her shoulder. She rolled her eyes before she focused on Graydon and his companion. “As ridiculous as he is, he has a point. Why are you here?”

He and the man beside him should be concentrating on their own journey to the planet. Kira couldn't think of one good



reason for him to be standing there.

“Remember that favor I did for you?” Graydon asked.

Kira’s stomach sank. On no. She did not like where this was heading.

Graydon’s smile was smug as he straightened. “It’s time to repay it.”

She’d been right. She really didn’t like this.

“Next time, I really should just break into the prison by myself,” she muttered.

That way she wouldn’t have to deal with the bill later on. Himoto always said there was no such thing as a free ride.

As always, he’d been right.

Graydon and his companion moved up the ramp. Graydon stopped beside Kira as his companion strode into her ship without a backward glance.

Guess she didn’t need to ask what that favor entailed.

“You realize my ship isn’t a ferry, right?” Kira asked.

“You’ll barely know he’s there.”

Kira scoffed. “Doubtful.”

An emperor as powerful as that one wasn’t exactly someone you could overlook.

A dull headache took up residence behind Kira’s eyes as she thought of all the ways this could go wrong. If the emperor got so much as a scratch on him, Kira would be the one to blame.

This time there was not even a speck of attraction as she eyed Graydon with a hint of dislike.

This was a disaster. The emperor and Jin on one ship. Kira could only imagine all the ways that could blow up in her face. Not to mention all the other secrets that were hidden on board.

“Why can’t he go through normal channels? I’m sure there are plenty of ships that could get him planet side.”

All of which would have been nicer than Kira’s. She loved the *Wanderer* but it was considered a clunker even by human standards.

“No one knows he was at the quorum. We’d like to keep it that way,” Graydon said in a low voice.

Kira was quiet as she considered. “How bad would it be if news of his presence was to get out?”

Graydon’s grim expression was all the answer she needed.

“That bad, huh?”

“The political ramifications would give those factions who oppose the emperor an opportunity to create trouble.”

That answered that question. It seemed Kira wasn’t going to wiggle or argue her way out of this. The emperor was tagging along with her to the planet. End of story.

Lovely.

“What about Yukina?” Kira asked, not quite ready to roll over and concede the battle. “She got him off the planet. Can’t she get him back down?”

Kira had stuck close to her quarters or the gym to avoid the higher-ranked Tuann during the trip. Happily, the ship was large enough and Graydon had been busy enough that her evasiveness had succeeded in minimal contact.

“That might have been a possibility if she hadn’t remained behind on Almaluc to deal with the Consortium’s mess.”

Kira didn’t have to ask what mess he was referencing.

Like the Tuann, the Consortium was made up of various factions who often engaged in power struggles with one another. It’d been a particularly nasty faction who’d been instrumental in violating the treaty that protected the Consortium from another invasion by the Tsavitee. Without it, they were vulnerable.

The Consortium would face reprisal for that faction’s actions. The question was how severe that punishment would be.

Kira hoped Himoto’s death in defense of Almaluc would be enough to buy a little good will. If not, things were going to get dire for the people she’d once called her own.

Kira aimed an irritated frown at Graydon. “You couldn’t have given me a heads up about all this?”

A little notice would have been nice. A “Hey, make sure your ship is in order because you’re going to have a royal guest.”

Was that too much to ask?

Graydon invaded her space with a playful look as he whispered into her ear. “We both know if I’d done that, you would already be gone.”

Kira quelled the shiver his breath brought forth as she set one finger against his chest and pushed him back to create distance between them.

Graydon let her, his expression inviting her to contradict him. It galled that she couldn’t.

He was right. The moment she got news of what they were planning to make her do and she would have taken off even if the repairs weren’t fully done.

The man knew her far too well.

Seeing he’d won this round, Graydon straightened and flashed her a smug smile before moseying down the ramp. “I look forward to seeing you on planet.”

“Wait. Where are you going?”

He wasn’t just going to leave her with the emperor, was he? He wouldn’t do that to her.

“I think you and Torvald could use a little alone time to get to know one another.” He smirked up at her from the walkway. “Besides, someone has to escort Selene and Alexander to Ta Sa’Riel.”

Graydon strolled into the crowd, making his way toward the ship Selene and Alexander had boarded earlier.

“Kira,” Jin moaned beside her.

“I know.”

“We’re doomed. So very doomed.”

Yeah. Kira thought so too.

“You need to fix this,” Jin informed Kira’s back as she stepped into the ship.

“It’s too late. We’re committed.”

Kira pushed the button that would raise the ramp before anyone else had the chance to seek her out for “favours” she didn’t want to give.

It closed, sealing her ship in preparation for departure.

Jin pouted. “Fine, but don’t come to me when you realize I’m right.”

“It’s not going to be that bad. We’re giving him a ride. That’s it.”

“Isn’t that what you said on Osiris when we were ordered to evacuate those government officials? Remind me again. How did that work out for us?”

Kira grimaced. The incident had been a shit show from beginning to end. Everything that could go wrong, did. Almost as if they were cursed.

Half the Curs wound up with injuries that took them out of commission for weeks. The other half almost ended up court martialed.

All because a handful of arrogant officials thought they knew better than her how to fight a war.

“I’m sure we won’t even know he’s here,” Kira said, coming to a stop almost immediately.

The hooded figure of the emperor faced down another man as the two stared at each other silently. Joule and Ziva stood at the mouth of the hallway, their stances tentative as if they didn’t know whether to retreat or stand their ground.

“Famous last words,” Jin crooned softly.

Kira flicked him an irritated look as a young girl who looked a few years younger than Joule ducked her head out of one of the access panels in the cargo hold ceiling.

Short hair the color of gold framed a mischievous face. The pert nose and pointed chin lent her an air of adorableness that was deceptive as Kira’s niece grinned and waved.

Kira lifted a hand in greeting, looking at the man standing opposite the emperor under Elena’s perch in the ceiling, his arms folded in an unmistakable sign of challenge.

“What’s going on?” Kira asked.

She recognized the look of appraisal on Raider’s face. It was the one he got whenever Himoto or a commander tried to stuff new soldiers into their team.

It never worked. Mostly because Raider was an intimidating son of a bitch when he wanted to be. The few times he’d failed to scare the prospective hopefuls off, Maverick or Bayside had done the job for him.

The military was one giant game of chicken. Flinch and you were out.

Given the dangerous missions they undertook, the Curs couldn't afford any but the best and bravest at their back. Their numbers might have been few, but every person in the squad had been mighty.

Raider tilted his head at the other man in question. "Why is he here?"

"Graydon asked me for a favor," Kira said, hoping he would leave it at that.

She wasn't too sure how much Raider suspected of the other's identity. He wasn't privy to Jin's eye color and wouldn't automatically jump to the conclusion the two were related.

The only time they'd met was in the aftermath of the battle for Almaluc where Raider had been understandably distracted by Elise's circumstances.

He might not have known the identity of the hooded figure.

If so, Kira wasn't going to tell him. He could figure it out on his own.

Raider grunted, his expression guarded as he ignored the emperor to focus on Elena above them. The motion highlighted the faint scar that ran along his chin.

"You." Raider jabbed a finger at Elena and then the floor.

Jin made a choked sound of disbelief before reversing direction, shooting out of the cargo bay and abandoning Kira in the process.

Kira wished she could go with him as she eyed the mulish expression on Elena's face which was a replica of the one she'd seen dozens of times on Raider's features. Her friend didn't know it, but he'd met his match in his daughter.

Something Kira was looking forward to him discovering. On his own. When she was far away.

Elena's head disappeared back into the ceiling. A frustrated growl left Raider.

His eyes practically glowed with irritation as he fixed a dark gaze on Kira. "Fix this."

There was a deceptive edge to his voice that he used to get when someone challenged him. It was the one that said his patience had reached its end.

Corrective action would have been his next step.

Except this was his daughter he was dealing with. He couldn't treat her the way he had his soldiers.

The sooner he learned that the better off they'd all be.

"And how am I supposed to do that?" Kira asked carefully, not wanting his anger to spill over onto her.

"Convince her to come down."

Elena's head popped out of the ceiling. "He tried to ground me."

Raider's jaw worked. "I did not try to ground you. I simply explained the chain of command and how acting outside of it could get other people killed."



Kira nodded slowly. “And?”

She was betting that wasn't all he'd said. Otherwise, her niece wouldn't be ensconced in her ceiling when they should be preparing to disembark.

Frustration ate at Raider's control. “I may have mentioned some of the punishments those who were insubordinate received.”

Ah. Kira saw where he'd gone wrong.

“Was a week in the brig among those examples?”

Raider's teeth ground together.

Kira tried not to laugh at his plight. It wasn't funny. It really wasn't.

“Fix this,” Raider ordered through clenched teeth.

Kira held her hands up. “Oh no. I know better than to get in the middle of this. You want a relationship with your daughter. This is up to you.”

Raider's expression soured further.

It looked like the poor man could use a hint.

“I'd suggest not treating her like a grunt,” Kira shared in a low voice.

Elena was as rebellious as Kira and Jin at that age. Neither of them had responded well to orders either.

It didn't help that Raider and Elena's relationship was in the nascent stages. Still fragile as they worked to get to know one another.

That was Kira's fault. One she was working to correct.

Raider scrubbed a hand over his face. "I'm trying. I've never had a daughter before. I'm fucking up and I know it."

Kira gave him a look of sympathy. "It'll be fine. You'll get the hang of it. Just treat her like another Jin."

"What a horrifying thought."

Kira ignored his mutter as she focused on Elena. "Try to give him a break. Normal parents care when their children place themselves into danger."

The bravado dropped from Elena's expression as she peeked at Raider with a look of regret.

Kira jerked her head at the cargo bay deck where Joule and Ziva waited. "Listen to your father and get down from there. We'll be leaving soon."

Elena scrambled out of the ceiling. Raider jolted forward to catch her but was too late as she dropped to the ground.

She landed easily, not seeing the way her father's jaw flexed or the slight shake of his hands as she bounded in Joule and Ziva's direction.

Raider's glare was full of suppressed anger as he followed at a slower pace.

Kira watched him go before turning to the man she had every reason to suspect was the Tuann emperor.

Jin was right. They were probably doomed.

## FIVE

The resulting silence felt oppressive in the enclosed space.

Without facial cues to interpret due to the energy field masking his features, Kira was left without a clue as to what the other was thinking.

Stranger still was the idea that she was standing face-to-face with the man Graydon had sworn his allegiance to. It felt uncomfortably like meeting her significant other's parents for the first time.

Except this parent was the leader of an entire race.

No pressure or anything. It wasn't like her entire future and that of Jin's rested on his good will or anything.

Into the awkward silence the emperor held up the welding torch for her to see. "This is a primitive tool."

There was tinny echo to his words that would make his voice unrecognizable even to those familiar with him.

"Watch." The emperor picked up a sheet of unused metal that Kira had been using to patch the hull. A dagger flashed,

opening a tear the length of her forearm as Kira bit back her instinctive objection.

Quality materials suited for the inhospitable environment of space weren't easy to come by. Nor were they cheap.

It didn't help that the *Wanderer* tended to see more than its share of damage. The ship attracted trouble in the same way its owners did, stressing Kira's already finite supply.

The emperor pretended not to hear her as he drew two fingers along the tear, fusing the metal in a nearly invisible line.

Fascinated in spite of herself, Kira stepped forward to run a finger along the tear. She was barely able to feel the raised ridges.

“You should be using your soul's breath for these types of repairs. It allows for a more even distribution of molecules, making for a stronger weld.”

That was easy for him to say. He didn't know what it was like to feel himself dying a little bit more each time he tapped into his power. The sensation of thorn-filled vines wrapping themselves around her organs, pulling tighter and tighter until it was difficult to breathe.

Kira didn't know if she'd ever be capable of such casual use of her soul's breath.

Jin cleared his throat through the ship's speakers. “Testing, testing.”

Kira and the emperor looked up.

“Welcome aboard the *Wanderer*. I am Jin and I will be your pilot today. Please note that the ride may be a tad bumpy. Seats are interspersed throughout the ship for your comfort but will do jack shit to save you should we crash.”

The ship’s engines growled to life. A faint jolt came as the station’s docking beam retracted.

“Ah—I would like to remind those who forced their way onto our ship that we are not liable for any mental or physical distress that you may experience during the journey. Barf bags are located in the latrines. Thank you and please don’t die.”

The speakers crackled as they cut out.

“That is an interesting way of welcoming strangers aboard,” the emperor observed. “Almost like your passengers aren’t welcome at all.”

Kira flashed him a humorless smile. “If you wanted politeness, you’re on the wrong ship.”

He’d find none of that here.

“I’m heading for the bridge,” Kira continued, heading for the corridor to her right. “Do me a favor and keep your face shield up while you’re here.”

“Afraid someone on board will betray your confidence?”

“More like, I don’t want to deal with the questions.”

Kira was a lazy person at heart. If she could avoid unnecessary trouble, she would.

Besides, something told her she'd have more than enough problems on her plate once they landed without adding the complexity of the emperor's presence to the mix.

The longer she could delay others knowing about him, the less explaining she'd have to do. Simple as that.

Kira headed for the bridge that served as the ship's brain, the emperor following. Briefly, Kira thought about deterring him before giving up on the idea.

She didn't know too many emperors, but she was familiar with those accustomed to power. Trying to tell someone like that they couldn't do something was the height of futility. They'd do it anyway.

Better to save her energy for more useful pursuits

"How is it looking?" Kira asked as she stepped onto the bridge.

Raider was preoccupied with the monitor as he went through the final flight checks prior to departure. Finn stood in the corner of the room, gazing at the dock outside the window.

At Kira's question, he looked over. A scowl took up residence on his face as he glared at the man behind her.

Kira held up a hand to forestall the argument she could sense brewing. "Blame Graydon. This was his idea."

As her oshota, Finn took her safety seriously. He didn't like the unexpected.

Unfortunately for him, Kira was the epitome of surprise. She didn't have to go looking for trouble. It always found her.

That fact made Finn a tad grumpy and prone to believing that she was the cause when things went wrong.

To be fair, she usually was.

Finn didn't look happy at her explanation but he didn't argue with her as she made her way to the copilot seat next to Raider.

Kira jerked her thumb over her shoulder. "Up."

Jin didn't move from the seat he'd chosen as his perch. "There are two other unoccupied seats. Why do you have to have this one?"

Kira bared her teeth at him. "Because it's mine. Skedaddle."

The two stared at each other for one long, drawn moment before Jin conceded the battle.

He rose from the chair. "Fine, but remember one of these chairs is mine during re-entry."

The emperor peered over Kira's shoulder in curiosity as she slid into the spot Jin vacated. Her hands flew over the controls as she checked the systems.

"Why does a machine insist on a chair?"

The question came out of nowhere.

Kira's movements paused as Raider shot her a glance before busying himself with a task she knew he could do blindfolded.

“All loose items are secure during re-entry,” Kira answered. “It’s safer that way.”

It was a lie, but Kira didn’t think telling the emperor of Jin’s irrational fear of a crash landing would go over so well. Right now, the Tuann thought Jin was nothing more than an advanced artificial intelligence. Kira wanted to keep it that way.

“The ship is ready for departure. All systems are green. We have clearance from the Tuann station,” Jin said in an emotionless voice, falling into the role of a soulless drone like he had countless times in the past when someone had questioned his too-human personality.

Kira fell into the familiar rhythm. “Are all passengers accounted for?”

“There are nine souls on board.”

“Nine?”

Surprise moved through Kira. There should be more than that.

Kira’s seon’yer, Wren, along with the rest of his pod had been a constant presence on the *Wanderer* throughout their return journey. For them to be missing at the most crucial stage was unlike him.

Raider leaned in her direction. “I forgot to tell you. Wren had a few things to take care of. He said they’d meet us on planet.”

What could be more important than safe-guarding Elena?



“He did leave Maksym behind, however,” Raider added.

Ah. Great.

The overly chipper oshota had been Kira’s training partner recently. The man was so damn smiley all the time. That, if nothing else, put her on guard against him.

Nobody deserved to be that happy outwardly. Nobody.

Raider’s grin said he was enjoying her reaction. “Sorry, Nixxy. You’ll just have to get along with him for the duration of this ride.”

Not if Kira had anything to say about it. The *Wanderer* was equipped with several handy air locks. Perfect for tossing an overgrown male behemoth out of them.

The only trick was getting him there.

“Remember, Phoenix,” Jin crowed. “We arrive with the same number we departed with. Your rules.”

Damn it. This was the drawback of traveling with people who knew you so well. They could tell when you were plotting.

Kira switched to manual control with a little more force than was necessary. The *Wanderer* purred as the engines cycled. They lifted smoothly off the platform, hovering in place as Kira pointed the nose of the ship at the view of space.

“Wait a minute, Kira.” Jin sounded distracted as he zoomed toward Kira, stopping next to her head. “Something is strange.”

Seconds later, the wail of the proximity alerts interrupted.

Raider stopped what he was doing to look up. “That doesn’t mean what I think it means, does it?”

“If that something is an object hitting the ship, then yes, it’s exactly what you think,” Jin returned.

The alerts continued to sound as Finn and the emperor moved closer.

The monitor next to Kira looked like it was having an epileptic seizure as streams of data ran across it, too fast to decipher what was appearing until it stopped on a diagram of the *Wanderer*. Red marks highlighted the belly of the ship.

“That’s the problem,” Jin said as the red marks flashed.

“Finn, head to the lower decks to check that out,” Kira ordered.

Finn sent her a serious nod before disappearing through the hatch.

“It’s probably nothing,” Raider said.

Kira nodded. “Let’s not take chances though.”

The two shared a look of mutual understanding.

Raider threaded his hands behind his head as he stretched out in his chair. “Fair enough. It’s not like your paranoia hasn’t saved us in the past.”

The proximity alerts hit a new pitch as a shape blocked out the stars, sliding over the topside of the *Wanderer* and out into space.

“Son of a—“ Raider started as his hands dropped from behind his head and he sat forward.

“Here comes another,” Jin warned.

A second ship followed the first, cutting over in a narrow miss.

“These people are idiots,” Jin hissed, sounding enraged.

Kira yanked back on her throttle, sending the *Wanderer* roaring forward as she threatened to ram the other ship.

The Tuann vessel veered, listing to the side in its hurry to avoid them.

“You’re so mean.” Jin couldn’t hide his delight at that fact.

“Kira, I’m at the lower decks. I don’t see anything that is cause for concern,” Finn announced over the comms.

“Just what I wanted to hear,” Kira said.

With nothing holding her back, Kira narrowed the distance between the two ships.

Chicken was a game she hadn’t played since she was an ensign, but if they wanted to have fun, she’d indulge them.

Her comms squawked as the other ship hailed them.

Kira ignored them; her hand steady as she guided her ship toward the open space just beyond the Tuann vessel.

“Adjust your vector upwards by two degrees,” Jin instructed.

Kira obeyed, the ship responding as easily as if it had read her thoughts.

Raider cursed as they closed on the other vessel.

“Ten meters. Five,” Jin said, counting the distance left.

The *Wanderer* was relentless as it bore down on the other, forcing it to choose between running aground on the deck or risking a collision with her ship.

In the end, the Tuann vessel chose to crash into the deck, scraping its belly along the ground in a way Kira knew would leave a mark on both station and ship.

Jin crowed in victory as the *Wanderer's* nose penetrated the membrane separating the station from space. They slid through with barely a hitch.

“Was that wise?” the emperor asked from where he'd been silent until now.

Kira shrugged as she turned control of the ship over to Jin. “Probably not.”

In truth, it would have been better not to pick a fight that would distract from her reasons for returning to the planet.

“It was fun though,” Jin interjected.

The emperor's attention never left Kira. “Then why?”

Kira rose from her seat, taking a moment to stretch. “They thought I could be bullied. I taught them otherwise.”

Raider propped an elbow on the arm of his chair. “You always did favor a scorched Earth policy when it came to this

sort of thing.”

“I’ve found it best to start as I mean to go on,” Kira explained.

It was better for the Tuann to learn the type of person they were dealing with now rather than later. As dangerous as this stunt was, the lesson might cut down on the future body count.

The Tuann were a violent race. Even during times of peace, their lives revolved around challenges for power and dominance. It was one of the reasons they had so many rules regarding their behavior.

It was to keep them from ripping each other’s heads off for no reason.

It was a facet of her birth race that Kira understood. Inactivity and boredom had always been dangerous companions for her, leading her to seek out trouble on more than one occasion.

Now that they’d challenged her and lost, it would be a while before they tested her again.

It was a tad reckless, but that was life. You got nothing without a bit of risk.

“You understand us better than expected for one who has spent such a short time in our company,” the emperor mused.

Kira tensed for a split second before forcing herself to relax. Ignoring the emperor’s words, she tapped Raider on the shoulder. “You’ve got the command. I’m heading to the mess hall for a drink.”

“Bring me back a coffee,” Raider instructed.

Kira pulled a face. “You know I don’t keep that nasty stuff on my ship.”

Humans and the Tuann didn’t share the same taste buds. Whereas Kira wouldn’t wish that bitter, dirt tasting sludge on her worst enemy, humans craved it.

She’d been threatened with bodily harm on more than one occasion when Raider and the rest of the Curs ran out.

“That’s why I added my own stash,” Raider called at her back as the emperor followed her into the corridor.

“Be careful. The emperor wants something,” Jin warned through their internal comms.

“Like I couldn’t guess that for myself,” Kira muttered.

Torvald glanced at her. “What was that?”

“Nothing.”

Absolutely nothing.

And that was how it needed to stay.



Torvald peered over Kira’s shoulder into the tiny nook that she had remodeled to serve as her kitchen for her former crew of two.

More of a closet than anything, it contained the bare minimum. A few cabinets that acted as storage for the pre-

made meal packets and nutrient solutions. A sink for any dishes she might have. A wave heater to warm up her food on those rare occasions she actually took the time to sit down for a meal.

“I don’t mean to be rude, but this does not look like a kitchen,” Torvald observed.

Kira took a deep breath. “No, it does not.”

Gone were her sad looking table and its pair of chairs. It was replaced by weapons cabinets that lined one entire wall. Her guns were arranged in neat little lines inside. Everything securely in place.

The crates containing her ammo and other demolition paraphernalia were stacked to one side.

That wasn’t all Kira found as she opened one of the weapons lockers. Tuann weapons were stashed inside. She selected a *zuipei* from the open locker, holding it up to inspect.

The *zuipei* didn’t look like much, resembling a bastardized version of a bow sans string. Kira had seen it in action enough times to know how formidable it could be in the hands of someone who knew how to use it.

Soul’s breath was required to operate the *zuipei*, enabling the wielder to shoot something that Kira described as energy arrows. Only these arrows could penetrate human armor and many types of metal.

“Jin, is there something you would like to tell me?” Kira asked in a carefully controlled voice, conscious of Torvald’s

curious gaze on her.

Kira bared her teeth when the line crackled with a conspicuous silence. Jin didn't really think he was fooling her, did he? The ship was as much his creation as hers. He had this thing wired with microphones and other sensors that enabled him to listen in on conversations anywhere in the ship.

Kira had drawn the line at cameras, not wanting to feel like an animal in a zoo, but she'd conceded on the listening devices.

She'd been a very different person in the early days after her coma. She'd walked a little too close to the edge, taking chances that were almost suicidal. Jin had needed a way to check on her while letting her wallow.

This had been their compromise.

With Torvald's presence, there was no way he was keeping his distance—which meant he was ignoring her.

“Very well.” Kira turned on her heel, marching toward her former armory. “If you're going to be like that, I'll figure it out for myself.”

If in the process she was forced to maim someone for having the audacity to touch her ship, that was too bad.

Torvald trailed behind Kira as she made the short trip, reaching her destination in less than two minutes.

She stopped abruptly on the threshold of what should have been her armory, only to find it restored to the functionality it possessed when Kira first bought the ship.



No, Kira took that back. It was far nicer than the kitchen the ship had back then.

A stove and oven that looked of Tuann origin was surrounded by beautiful cabinets; the likes of which Kira had never seen on a ship. Made from a weathered wood, the kitchen looked like something that belonged in a cozy cottage.

A table took up the middle of the room. Far larger than her original and built to accommodate a decent sized group of people.

Kira suspected an artisan had crafted that table. It was too beautiful to be something that was mass produced.

The entire kitchen was far grander than a ship like the *Wanderer* deserved. Hell, it was nicer than many kitchens she'd been in on most planets.

“Oh good. You're finally here. What do you think?” a voice asked from behind her.

Kira looked over her shoulder to find a Tuann giving her a wide, friendly smile that begged for praise. Raider lurked in the hallway beyond him, a hand raised, not quite covering the snicker she could see forming.

Kira glared at her friend. “Weren't you the one who told me to bring you a coffee?”

“I figured this would be faster.”

Yeah, sure he did. It had nothing to do with witnessing first hand her reaction.

Kira's gaze shifted to the Tuann who was soon to be renamed as the bane of her existence. Maksym was considered short by Tuann standards, though still taller than Kira and Raider. What he lacked in height he made up for in the width and breadth of his shoulders.

His orange hair stuck up in tufts, making him seem almost harmless. Charming even. Like a giant puppy bouncing around for attention.

Kira knew better. This was the same person who'd subjected her to marathon long training sessions where he basically pounded her into the ground while never once losing his smile.

"Marvelous, isn't it?" Maksym nodded at the redone kitchen.

"That's not how I would phrase it."

There were certain things you never touched on a ship that wasn't yours. The armory was foremost among them. Let alone relocate rooms.

Maksym slunk close, wrapping Kira in a bear hug before she could dodge. For such a muscular man, he was quick on his feet. Maksym rubbed his cheek against the top of Kira's head. "Grump Grump. Don't be so dour. You know your closet couldn't continue to accommodate everyone. This was the best solution."

Kira squirmed, trying to break free of his grip. She slapped at his hands and arms. When that didn't work, she aimed a

kick at the side of his knee.

Maksym turned with the blow, never once losing that annoyingly amiable smile.

Sick of that expression, Kira planted a hand on the side of his face and shoved.

“How many times have I told you not to call me Grump Grump? It’s Kira. Phoenix on occasion. Nix or Nixxy, if you’re dear to me.”

Which at the moment, Maksym was not.

Raider skirted past them in the hallway, entering the kitchen. “Don’t forget Nixxy Poo.”

Kira pointed at Maksym in warning. “No. Don’t ever call me that. I hate that name.”

Enough to stab the next person who used it. Over and over again.

Maybe, then finally, people would get it through their heads how bad of an idea it was to use it.

Maksym allowed Kira enough room to wiggle out of his hold. “But Grump Grump, your name is appropriate since you are so very grumpy.”

Raider looked over his shoulder as he started his coffee. “He has a point.”

“Shut it,” Kira snapped back. To Maksym, “Put my kitchen back the way you found it.”

Maksym rubbed his square jaw. “I’m disappointed you don’t like my present but if that’s how you feel, I can return it to the dreary state I found it in.”

“Great.”

Now that the issue with the kitchen had been resolved, Kira could focus on other matters. Like figuring out why the emperor was really here.

“Of course, you’ll have to do something for me first,” Maksym drawled.

Kira should have known nothing would be easy where the oshota was involved.

“This is my ship. I shouldn’t need to jump through hoops to have my orders followed.”

“True, but this is a gift. One you wish to return. That requires a toll be paid.”

“A gift I didn’t ask for,” Kira pointed out.

“You could always return the rooms to their original state yourself,” Maksym suggested, regarding Kira with the steady gaze she recognized from training with him. If he said he wouldn’t help, he meant it.

Kira could force the issue. When it came to physical skills, they were evenly matched. Unfortunately, Maksym was much more skilled when it came to fusing soul’s breath into his fighting style.

A battle between them could easily get out of hand and threaten the structural integrity of her ship.

“Let’s hear it,” Kira said, giving in. For now, anyway.

Maksym should just wait. Soon they wouldn’t be stuck inside a metal can and she could go as crazy as she wanted.

They’d see then whose will was stronger.

Maksym motioned for her to hold out her hand. When she did, he set a smooth, oblong shape the length of a sword’s hilt in her palm.

“What’s this?” Kira asked, frowning at the item.

She squeezed, the smooth surface biting into her hand. The grip was surprisingly comfortable. As if it had been created with the size of her hands in mind.

Maksym took the hilt from her as a soft glow ran through the tiny grooves she hadn’t noticed before. Fine lines raced across the surface. Metal unraveled, a sword extending from the hilt, the same glowing lines that were on the hilt wrapping along the metal of the sword’s length as well.

“When you can do this, I’ll return the kitchen to its original state.” Maksym flicked his wrist, the sword disappearing into the hilt as if it had never been. “That is if you still want me to by then.”

He returned the hilt to her hand as Kira stared at it in surprise.

“What is this? Is this a type of en-blade?” Kira lifted her head to find Maksym disappearing down the corridor. “Wait. Aren’t you going to explain how you did that?”

Torvald leaned over, plucking the hilt from her hand. “I haven’t seen one of these in years. Not since I was a *yer’sse*.”

Golden lines threaded through the metal as it extended into a sword a little longer than Kira’s arm.

Torvald admired his work before dismissing the sword.

“It’s not an en-blade. It’s something much rarer but just as good.” Torvald handed the hilt back to Kira. “The *akieri* has fallen into disuse because of the amount of control and concentration you need to operate it. Most warriors prefer the en-blade because it can be used even when you’re low on *ki*.”

Kira understood what he was saying. Without the *ki* that its wielder inserted into the en-blade, its efficiency might go down but it could still cut. The *akieri* couldn’t make the same claim. Without a constant input of *ki*, it was nothing but a hunk of pretty metal.

“Sounds perfect for you, Kira,” Raider said from his position at the counter as he finished preparing his coffee. He tossed the spoon he’d used to stir in the creamer and sugar that weren’t Kira’s into the sink before heading in her direction.

“I’m heading to the bridge. For what it’s worth, I think Maksym did a nice job,” Raider said, sweeping a glance over the kitchen. “You should keep it this way.”

Raider took a sip of his coffee, making a pleased expression before ambling out.

Torvald stepped into the kitchen. “I was told your connection with others was tenuous but that doesn’t seem to be the case.”

“No, you were told right. I resist anyone getting close,” Kira admitted, following him. She could see the confusion though. “Raider has the advantage of knowing me longer than most.”

Even if she wanted to, she couldn’t pretend at a distance with him. Their history made that impossible.

“And Maksym is Maksym.”

The oshota was one of those rare specimens who was even more stubborn than Kira. He’d determined he would be the big brother she’d never had and no amount of resistance on her part would deter him.

Kira might have a lot in common with a porcupine, bristling anytime someone got close, but even she had her limits.

Resisting Maksym had proven more tiring than previous comrades. She’d found it easier to give in on some things. Besides, his training was helpful. Kira’s control of her soul’s breath had improved by leaps and bounds under his guidance.

“I’ve heard the stories.” Torvald dragged a chair out from the table and took a seat as Kira crossed to the new counters.

She fished through them until she found what she was looking for. Two packets of freeze-dried chai. They were from

a brand she didn't normally buy because of how expensive it was. Maksym must have added it to her stash.

Though she wondered how he knew it was her favorite human drink.

She found the cups on her second try, grabbing two and dumping the mixes in before adding hot water.

Finished, she carried the mugs over to the table and set one in front of Torvald.

Kira sat and wrapped her fingers around her own mug, studying Torvald as he simply looked at the cup that she'd given him.

In retrospect, it probably hadn't been the best idea to offer a man hiding his identity a drink that would require him to remove his face shield.

To her surprise, Torvald picked the cup up, examining the liquid inside for a moment before lifting the cup to his face. The lip of the cup penetrated the energy field as he took a sip.

"Interesting flavor," he remarked, the cup reappearing in its entirety as he lowered it.

Kira's nod was distracted. "That's one way to put it."

The energy field masking his face was permeable. Kira wondered if that was by the emperor's control or if anything could penetrate the field.

Kira set her cup on the table in front of her. "I'm assuming we're not here to talk about my choice in beverages."



Torvald paused with his cup half raised to his mouth. “True.”

“Then regale me. To what do I owe this pleasure?”

Torvald gestured to the empty space at Kira’s right. “We’ll get to that. First—why don’t we ask your friend to join us? He must be tired of all his sneaking around by now.”

Kira stilled. “I’m not sure I know what you’re talking about. We’re alone in here.”

“Oh? Are you certain of that?” There was a challenge in Torvald’s voice that told her she wouldn’t like the consequences of lying further to him.

And here Kira was hoping he wouldn’t pick up on Jin’s presence. What a futile hope that was. This was the man who had a hand in shaping Graydon into the person he was today, after all. Kira suspected he didn’t miss much.

With a sense of defeat, she glanced at the spot containing the small presence she recognized as Jin’s.

A sigh filled the air. Jin’s camouflage fell as his sphere became visible. “How did you know?”

“I would be a fool if I didn’t recognize when our own technology was being used against me.” Torvald nodded at the spot next to Kira. “Join us. As fun as it’s been to watch you attempt to spy on me over the past few weeks, that game is at an end.”

The look Kira gave Jin held reproach. “Tell me you didn’t.”

Jin cleared his nonexistent throat. "I'll explain later."

He'd better. He'd need the best explanation he could muster. Of all the hair-brained schemes he'd embarked on over the years, this one was at the top.

"Now that you have what you wanted, perhaps you can answer my previous question." Kira glared at Torvald, already fed up with the games. "What do you want?"

The ship jolted.

Kira crashed to the floor. A burst of pain shot through her as her ship was dyed in red.

## SIX

Kira blinked up at the ceiling, her body surrounded by the cups she'd served the tea in and whatever else had been lying out unsecured. A feeling of wet soaked into her pant legs. Probably from the tea she hadn't managed to finish.

Her brain felt sluggish as she realized the red tint to the room was from the flashing red lights that indicated a ship wide emergency.

That shrill sound beating in her ears was the proximity alerts.

Torvald rose gracefully from his chair. Somehow, he hadn't gotten tossed about in the collision, managing to maintain his seat.

Kira eyed him with envy as she rotated the shoulder that had taken the brunt of her fall. Wouldn't it have been nice if someone shared that trick with her?

Kira pushed herself off the floor, turning on her comms. "Would someone like to explain what just happened?"

"We were hit by something," Jin said.

Kira gave him an incredulous look. “You think?”

Raider’s voice interrupted through the ship’s intercoms. “Kira, I need you on the bridge. We’re in a bit of a situation, and it’s about to get worse.”

The ship heaved as if dodging something.

Kira stumbled, nearly losing the balance she’d just recovered.

Jin shot past her. “That bastard switched the ship to manual.”

“Jin, wait—“ Kira’s voice trailed off as Jin disappeared down the corridor. “For me,” she finished with a sigh.

Torvald caught her as the ship did another of its maneuvers. “Is this type of excitement normal for you?”

“I’d really like to say no.”

But the truth was Kira and Jin attracted trouble like flowers did a bee.

The *Wanderer* had seen more than its share of this type of excitement. There was that time on Galileo where they ripped half the belly of the ship off. Then there were those pirates near New Neptune who thought they were easy pickings and tried to commandeer her ship.

Such stories numbered in the dozens.

Sometimes she thought they were cursed.

“It seems I didn’t know what I was getting into when I boarded,” Torvald observed as Kira staggered toward the door.

Rather than concerned, Torvald seemed almost amused by that fact.

Kira ignored him as she concentrated on making her way to the bridge. “Status report.”

“Everything is fucked,” Raider growled.

Kira reached the corridor that led to the bridge. “That’s a lovely image but it doesn’t really give me a picture of the situation.”

“You want a briefing. Here it is. The system’s defenses attacked us and they’re getting ready to do so again.” Raider sounded stressed. “They have mines, Kira. Mines.”

“The *Hakeeb*, those things he’s calling mines, are the least of his problems,” Torvald said. “Soon your human’s piloting will trigger the secondary layer of defenses.”

Kira clutched at a handhold on the wall as the ship swooped and dove. Torvald swayed slightly but didn’t even stagger.

“I see he found them,” Torvald observed.

“The mines are shooting at us!” Raider snarled.

Kira forced herself further down the hallway, the bridge’s hatch just ahead. “Finn, I need you to find Elena, Joule, and Ziva and get them secure.”

It was likely none of the three had been in a space battle before. They wouldn’t know how rough the ride could get.

Kira didn’t want them breaking their necks by accident during a quick maneuver.

“Don’t worry about us, Auntie. I’ve got Joule and Ziva and we’re already strapped in,” Elena responded.

The tight knot in Kira’s stomach loosened.

“Finn, what about *ki* shields? Can you use them to protect the ship?”

“I can, but I don’t think it will help much. *Ki* shields aren’t meant to deflect that kind of fire power. We’d need someone with a shield affinity who has been trained in that art,” Finn responded over the comms.

Torvald nodded. “Our defenses wouldn’t be worth much if every Tuann could circumvent them.”

Joule’s voice came through the line. “I can help.”

Kira hesitated. Joule wasn’t wrong. As the only person on the ship with the affinity they needed, he could be of help.

The problem was that Joule was still young. He was at the beginning of his training. As talented and determined as he was, that would only take him so far in a situation like this.

Kira made a split-second decision. “Do it.”

Joule would never get the chance to grow into the man she knew he could be if he didn’t survive.

“Is that wise?” Torvald asked as Kira cut the line. “He is young.”

Kira headed for the bridge’s hatch. “Do you know what the worst feeling in the world is? It’s being powerless as you watch the world burn around you.”

Kira didn't expect miracles from Joule. It was enough if he could delay their deaths by even a second.

That second might be all she needed.

Kira burst onto the bridge. The view outside careened as Raider worked to keep the ship away from the mines chasing them.

The cameras located on the *Wanderer's* hull zoomed in on the objects chasing them. Kira was familiar with them, having seen them once before during the voyage to Ta Da'an. Like the sea mines of humanity's nautical past, they looked vaguely like angry hedgehogs. They bristled with spikes, their exteriors blending in almost perfectly with the black of space.

As she watched, yellow lights lanced the darkness. They headed straight for the *Wanderer*.

Raider cursed as he pulled back on the ship's yoke.

"Can we return to the station?" Kira asked, finding a seat and strapping herself in.

Torvald moved up behind her, not bothering with finding a chair as he studied the monitors.

"No. We've already tried," Raider said.

"Every time the ship veers that way, the mines cut us off," Jin added.

Kira studied their trajectory. From the looks of things, it appeared the mines were forcing them toward the planet. It

was not a tactic Kira would have predicted. She'd expect the mines to try to keep them away from the planet.

Kira cursed silently to herself. What did she want to bet she had a guess as to why?

Ta Sa'Riel was protected by a planet wide defense system that Kira and Elena had already run afoul of once during their previous exit from the planet. The moment they got close to the planet they'd be besieged on two sides. There would be no escape then.

"Someone come up with a plan. Playing tag isn't going to work for much longer." Raider jerked the yoke to the side as the ship rolled.

"You're not supposed to be playing at all, Meat Sack." Jin circled Raider's head.

Raider batted one hand at him. "Get away from me, Tin Can."

"It's Tin Man. Get it right!"

Kira ignored the two as the comms panel lit up, indicating someone was trying to contact the ship.

"That is an interesting tactic in the face of certain death," Torvald observed, studying Jin and Raider as they fought over who would be the pilot.

"This is my ship! I should be the one at the helm," Jin argued.



Kira spared them a quick glance as the ship tilted left and then right. “You get used to it.”

“You have a history of making bad piloting decisions,” Raider snapped back.

“That’s Kira. Not me.”

Kira rolled her eyes as she opened a channel to Graydon.

“Who is the one responsible for burning out the engines on Castaway?” Raider pointed out. “Who flew us into that asteroid in the Kuiper belt? You, Tin Can. Both times, you.”

Graydon’s face showed up on the screen, making Raider and Jin fall silent. “I’m glad to see you three are taking the situation in stride.”

There was a carefully hidden tension around the corners of Graydon’s eyes that betrayed the fact he wasn’t as at ease as he seemed.

“It’s good to hear your voice,” Kira admitted.

Graydon inclined his head. “As it is yours.”

She offered him a tight smile. “I don’t suppose there’s anything you can do about this situation we’re in.”

“No.” Fury cracked the hold he had over himself before his expression was wiped clean again. “I’ve already tried.”

Kira nodded slowly, disappointment making her voice soft. “That’s too bad.”

Just once, she’d like to take the easy route. Not have to fight tooth and nail to survive. Was that too much to ask?

“I don’t have the authority to override the system defenses.” Graydon paused, his gaze sliding to a spot over Kira’s shoulder where Torvald stood. “The emperor is the sole person with that right.”

Kira and Graydon stared at each other as Jin made a soft sound of understanding.

Kira muted the line, freezing the video link at the same time. Raider’s forehead furrowed in confusion as Kira swiveled to face Torvald.

“I don’t suppose you have any insight into whether the emperor will intervene or not?” Kira prodded.

A growing suspicion replaced Raider’s confusion. “Wait. Don’t tell me—“

Torvald regarded Kira. “He will not.”

Raider banged his head on the back of his seat.

“You’ll die too,” Kira pointed out.

“I doubt that.”

Kira wanted to admire the man’s arrogance, but a part of her knew he was right.

He would survive.

The rest of them, however, would not. They would die—with the possible exception of Kira who had surmounted similar situations in the past.

She didn’t want to, though. She’d been there and done the lone survivor thing. It sucked.

If the ship went down with everyone on it, she'd go with it.

“You'd sacrifice everyone on board?” Jin asked.

There was a note of disillusionment behind Jin's question that made Kira aware just how important the answer was to him. In a way, Jin was slower to trust than even Kira. He'd been hurt too many times in the past by those who denied his existence. They couldn't conceive of a drone possessing a soul or self-will.

Those who did often looked at him like he was a monster.

Jin's “spying” was his attempt to understand the character of the man who may have given him life.

If Torvald failed Jin's assessment, that would be it. Jin would never reveal their relationship. Torvald would never learn what happened to his firstborn.

“The *Hakeeb* are programmed to respond when they sense a danger to the planet. I would be doing a disservice to those below by allowing a threat to land.”

Torvald's answer surprised Kira. She had thought he would ignore Jin as many Tuann did.

He didn't. Even better, his answer was reasonable and one she'd likely make if she was in the same position.

Jin too.

Kira kept her smile to herself, relieved that Jin wouldn't write Torvald off quite yet.

“Whatever triggered the mines has to be located on the outside of the ship,” Kira said, thinking out loud.

Jin made a soft sound of discovery. “The proximity alerts. They went off when we were leaving the station.”

Kira nodded in agreement. “That’s what I was thinking as well.”

Something had set them off. Kira was betting whatever it was, it was responsible for their current predicament.

With a renewed sense of purpose, Kira unmuted the line. “Graydon, can you get a close-up view of the belly of our ship?”

Graydon nodded to someone outside off screen.

“How is my package doing?” Graydon asked while they waited.

Kira flashed him a humorless smile. “Still in one piece. Though I can’t promise it’ll remain that way.”

Graydon’s mouth opened only for him to pause as someone murmured something off screen. “Send it.” To Kira, “I think this is your problem.”

Kira leaned forward as a video feed of the underside of her ship took up one side of the screen. The video feed magnified several times until a flower bud no bigger than the size of Kira’s palm came into focus. Vines spread out beneath it, burrowing into the metal of her ship.

Raider’s curse was heartfelt. “Well fuck.”

“You made the right call not standing down your defenses,” Kira told Torvald, not looking away from the feed.

The bog’s hag was a Tsavitee bioweapon whose primary purpose as near as Kira could figure it was to terraform any planet it landed on. Only instead of creating a paradise, it left behind a wasteland that was toxic to most living creatures.

It was considered so invasive that the only solution if a planet was exposed was a complete quarantine.

No one in or out.

Such an event would spell economic doom to any planet unlucky enough to be infested.

Cut off from trade, they would have to survive with only the resources available to them. Not an easy task when technology and goods were often imported from other planets.

It was near impossible to fully rid a world of the bog’s hag once it began to spread. Once it sensed a livable atmosphere it would come out of hibernation. Soon after, it would emit a toxic gas capable of rewriting the genetic code of those exposed.

The process was slow and agonizing.

Death was preferable to the alternative however. Those who survived became little more than zombie-like creatures that possessed a level of aggression that was off the charts. They would hunt and kill any living creature in their vicinity. They felt no pain or fear either, making them difficult to fight off.

Kira was pretty sure the only reason the Tsavitee hadn't used it more often during the war was because they feared how invasive it was. After all, what was the point of conquering a planet when you couldn't even land on it?

Graydon's gaze developed a piercing intensity. "I am ordering you to abandon ship. I'm already in position. I will pick you and the rest up."

Kira stared at the video of the bog's hag, the single flower bud floating with the weightlessness of space.

It looked so benign for something so horrible. Beautiful almost.

"I can't do that," Kira said in a flat voice.

Even if she'd been willing to abandon her ship, her home, the chances of Graydon's plan working were slim.

They would have to trust that the mines would lock onto the ship and not them. It would leave them vulnerable, without the speed or maneuverability of the *Wanderer's* engines. That was also assuming the roots of the bog's hag hadn't already penetrated their hull.

If they had, Kira and the rest might be carrying the spores of the bog's hag on their skin and clothes. The outcome should those spores reach the planet would be the same. Ta Sa'Riel, the capital of the Tuann empire, would be completely and irrevocably isolated from the rest of the universe.

"You are being stubborn."

Kira shot him a crooked smile. “It’s the only way I know how to be.”

“Kira—“

Kira shut down the link before he could argue further. There was work to do. She had a ship to save.

Kira shoved to her feet. “Buy me as much time as you can.”

“You know this is reckless, right?” Raider asked.

“I do.”

Jin trailed her to the hatch. “I’m coming with you.”

Kira shook her head. “I need you here.”

“Kira—“

“You were right earlier. You know this ship better than anyone. You’ll be of more help here.”

It was an argument she knew Jin would understand.

Their skill sets may have been different, but they were equally important to the success of the plan.

“You’d better come back, Phoenix. You don’t want to know what I’ll do if you don’t,” Jin snarled.

Kira chuckled. “I’ll consider myself warned.”

Kira stepped off the bridge to find her way blocked.

“This is a mistake,” Finn informed her.

Kira slid past him and headed for the armory where her armor was stored. “I get that you think so.”

Just as long as he didn't try to stop her.

"The Tuann have stories of that abomination," Finn informed her as she set out at a quick pace.

It took only a few seconds to reach the armory. Kira crossed to the locker that contained her armor and reached inside.

Finn turned his back as Kira stripped out of her loose clothing, replacing it with a skintight under suit that would lie beneath her armor.

Next, she grabbed the individual pieces, sliding them on with the ease of long practice.

Originally designed for combat where you needed to be suited up in minutes, the process was a quick one.

Kira latched the final piece of the armor over her chest.

"All the more reason, I need to do this." She grabbed a pair of gloves and slid them on. "I've considered our options, and this is the best one for survival. The bog's hag will be dormant due to the cold of space. If I can separate it from the ship, the mines will target it instead of the ship."

It would leave them free to land without having to dodge the full force of the Tuann defense system.

There was no need to mention the possibility of the bog's hag coming out of dormancy once disturbed.

She preferred to think in best-case scenarios until the situation dictated otherwise.



“Where’s Maksym?” Kira asked, noting Torvald’s presence at the doorway.

The man was as stealthy as his son—and as curious as him too.

Finn glanced in Torvald’s direction and frowned. “With the children. He has instructions to get them off the ship if things go wrong.”

Kira tucked her helmet under her arm. “Someone needs to see if the roots have breached the hull.”

Kira wouldn’t be able to do it as she would be outside of the ship, and something told her it would be a bad idea to make demands of an emperor.

Something about possibly shortening her life span.

Finn’s jaw tightened as he held Kira’s gaze. A battle waged inside him. The traditional mindset of an oshota conflicting with the part of him that Kira had only caught glimpses of since their first meeting.

That part of him that was willing to consider other options even if they had never been done before. To act outside the system when the situation warranted.

He would need that side of himself if he was to remain at Kira’s side.

Tradition and procedure were two words that had never been used in conjunction with her and she didn’t plan to change that now.

Defeat showed on Finn's face seconds before he took a step back. "You're not to get a scratch."

Kira slapped his shoulder as she moved past him. "You know I can't make any promises."

Finn's reaction didn't leave her disappointed, an annoyed growl following her into the corridor as Torvald fell into step beside her.

"You have an interesting way about you," Torvald observed as they descended a level and headed for the aft of the ship.

Kira looked at him, not saying anything.

"I didn't think he would compromise. Oshota usually don't."

They neared the airlock. The door already open in preparation for Kira's arrival.

"The same strength of mind that allows them to become an oshota also makes them more stubborn and set in their ways," Torvald explained.

Kira stepped inside the airlock as Torvald fell back a step.

"Maybe that's the Tuann's problem," Kira said. "It's not a partnership if one side always dictates the other's actions."

Or maybe they had just never encountered someone quite as stubborn as Kira.

Torvald waited as Kira fastened her helmet over her head before flashing him a thumb's up.

"Jin, I'm ready to go."

The airlock door slid shut as Kira turned herself to face the hatch that would lead to space. There was a whoosh as the enclosed room depressurized. Kira's feet came free of the floor as the gravity cut off.

She floated toward the outside door as it slid open, revealing an endless black studded with bright pinpricks of light.

“Raider has bought us all the time he can, but the engines are close to being maxed out. The mines should reach us in about ten minutes. You need to be back on board before that happens or you'll get torn apart by shrapnel,” Jin warned as she kicked on the suit's thrusters.

There was a slight vibration as Kira shot forward.

“Understood.”

The *Wanderer* passed over top of her. A hulking beast against the black of the void.

Kira reached out, skimming one hand along its side as she glanced out into the starry sky. Data streamed down one side of her visor. With a flick of her eye, she magnified the view of the mines.

“No time to waste,” Kira whispered to herself.

Everyone was counting on her. She couldn't let them down.

“Tell me you at least have a plan,” Jin urged.

Kira grinned as she increased her speed. “Working on it.”

Silence echoed over the comms.

“We're doomed.”

A snicker left Kira as a red dot flickered to one side of her visor, indicating she was nearing her destination.

She blinked, expanding the screen and zooming in on the bog's hag.

In the short time since they'd discovered its presence, the plant's tendrils had spread even further. It now took up a space about five feet wide. Thickly intertwined, each feeler was no thicker than Kira's pinky finger.

Upon closer inspection, Kira could see what looked like tiny, orange blood vessels interspersed throughout the green of the vines.

The tightly furled flower bud looked like a dead thing. Its petals black and withered. Once it bloomed, however, the flower's inner petals would be the same shade of orange as the veins on the vines.

Kira landed gently on the hull, far enough away that there was no chance of disturbing the bog's hag. Her armor's magnetic boots engaged.

"Finn, how are we looking inside?"

The ship bucked before he could answer. Kira's body whipped to the side. Only luck and her quick reflexes enabled her to engage the thruster, steadying her torso.

Thank any god that existed that she'd sprung for the high-grade armor that nearly bankrupted her at the time. Otherwise, that stunt would have destroyed her legs.

“What the fuck, Raider? A little warning next time,” Kira shouted, checking on the bog’s hag.

The flower bud was still tightly furled, indicating all the jostling hadn’t brought it out of its dormant state yet.

“You act like this is easy,” Raider argued through gritted teeth. “It’s not.”

Finn cut in before Kira and Raider could argue any further. “There are no roots that I can see on the inside of the ship.”

Finally. A bit of luck.

“Pull back to the closest bulkhead. Once there I want you to weld the hatch shut. I’ll blow this section of the hull when you’re done.”

If Kira had had the time, she would have preferred to use a welding torch to cut the section with the bog’s hag free of her ship since using an explosion carried inherent risks.

Too much power and she could rip the ship in two. Too little and the section containing the bog’s hag wouldn’t detach.

“You want to put a hole in our home?” Jin asked, sounding horrified.

Kira looked out to the mines chasing them. “I’m not seeing a lot of other options, are you?”

Jin’s silence was grudging. “This will cause problems during re-entry.”

“One thing at a time.” Kira brought up the targeting function of her helmet. “Finn, let me know when it’s done.”

Once finished marking the spots where her charges would need to go, Kira lifted her arm and pointed.

A ball bearing shot from the weapon's port of her armor, zipping toward the first of the target locations. It hit the metal of the hull and stuck.

It was followed by nearly a dozen more.

Kira was two thirds of the way through placing the charges when a shiver ran through the bog's hag. A pair of tendrils that had been floating free until now, twitched.

"Shit."

Kira kicked free of the hull, shooting backward as those tendrils snapped in her direction.

The tendrils followed as Kira banked left.

"Why does it sound like something is wrong?" Jin asked.

"Perhaps because there is," Kira grunted.

She banked again, trying to line up the shot for the final two charges. It was a no go. She didn't have the angle.

"I'm done on my end, Kira," Finn told her.

Kira gritted her teeth and reversed course, charging directly at the bog's hag.

"Why does it look like you're playing chicken with the bog's hag?" Jin asked as a pair of tendrils speared toward her chest.

"Because I kind of am."

Kira's vision spiraled down until all she saw was the tip of those tendrils. Her breath echoed loud in her ears as the distance narrowed. Almost there.

Kira caught the faint tightening as the tendril's flexed.

Now.

She dodged to the side, brushing past its length with centimeters to spare. The thrusters in her suit whined as she pushed them to their max.

The black bud passed beneath her as Kira took aim. The ball bearings launched and then Kira was past.

"The charges are set. Blow it now."

Kira put distance between her and the bog's hag, angling toward the top of the ship.

In the lower left-hand corner of her display, a feed of the bog's hag popped up. A small explosion came before the section the vines and flower were attached to started floating away.

Exhilaration filled her as she cleared the top. It quickly changed to horror as the sight of dozens of golden ribbons of light converged on her ship.

"Go! Go! Go!" Kira screamed, hoping Raider and the others were seeing the same thing she was.

Their time was up.

"Not without you. You're still outside the ship," Jin argued.

Even as he said it, Kira could sense the *Wanderer's* engines cycling in preparation of a burn.

"I'll match the trajectory," she said, despite full knowledge of how impossible a feat that was.

"This is madness," Raider muttered.

Still, he listened as the ship dove; Kira a tiny figure struggling to follow.

"I need you, Jin," Kira whispered.

He was her only hope if she wanted to survive.

His presence flooded her mind, the link that always existed between them becoming a river.

Kira's vision doubled. Her mind expanded and separated. A part of her remained in her body, flying through the dark of space. The rest hovered on the *Wanderer's* bridge.

That part yanked control from Raider as Kira/Jin locked him out of the system.

They became the ship. More than a shell wrapped around an organic form. Rather, it became their body.

They rolled, evading the first wave of golden streaks. The streaks shot past them, curving and looping around.

Jin/Kira charged forward, much as she'd done with the bog's hag. Their minds united.

They swerved left then right, weaving through the brilliant gold streams of light like a bird through the trees.



A hum buzzed in Kira's ear. An annoyance she tried to shrug off.

It remained persistent, a cadence developing as it repeated over and over again.

“Get..in...the...Get in the ship!”

Raider's shout brought Kira partially back to herself.

There was a reason Kira and Jin didn't try this often. Kira's current confusion was a big part of that. The longer their link remained open, the more it would become increasingly difficult to distinguish where Jin began and she ended.

Kira's mind was sluggish as she forced herself to concentrate, untangling her thoughts from Jin's.

Airlock.

Where was it?

The feeling of being in two places at once lessened as Kira focused. The air lock was just ahead. Five meters at most.

Kira angled for it.

Jin's panic burst through the link as a single golden streak glanced off the *Wanderer* in front of Kira.

A piece of metal came free, crashing toward Kira.

She had a split second to think, *This is going to hurt.*

Seconds before impact, a sheet of soul's breath formed between her and it. The shield took the brunt of the collision.

Even so, Kira bounced off it with enough force to send a burst of pain all along her right side. Agony swamped her as something wet slid down over her eye. Unconsciousness ate at her vision.

Jin flooded their bond. A pulling sensation came, sucking away her pain. Cool, methodical reason replaced it.

Kira forced her body to move. Brief sparks of agony lit her nerve endings before they disappeared down their bond.

“Hurry, Kira.”

Jin’s voice sounded strained.

For a being used to the cold, unfeeling of metal and circuitry, he had no way of coping with this level of pain.

“Jin,” Kira whispered as more blood obscured her vision.

Her mind was breaking. Her body following.

“Reach, Phoenix. Reach for us.”

Blindly, Kira extended her hand.

A hard grip caught her wrist, pulling her inside.

The link between Kira and Jin snapped.

Kira crumpled. The last thing she saw was a dark figure standing over hers. An unending void where his face should be.

Kira mouth formed a single word. “Torvald.”

Behind him, the hatch opened as Joule stepped inside with a worried look on his face. Finn behind him.

Kira's body went limp as darkness descended.

## SEVEN

Kira's head pulsed as she groaned. Why did she hurt so much?

The pain was everywhere. Every bone. Every muscle. She was pretty sure even her hair was in agony.

A hand touched her shoulder as Kira tried to sit up and failed. "Easy."

Kira forced her eyes open to find Torvald crouched over her. His touch calming as his hands moved over her armor.

"Your shoulder is dislocated," Torvald informed her.

"My ribs are broken too."

In multiple places from the feel of it.

Kira tried very hard not to glance in Finn's direction, his severe expression almost frightening in its intensity.

Kira focused on Joule as the lesser of two evils. "Was the *ki* shield you?"

Joule's gaze flitted over the damaged sections of her armor, not seeming to know where to look.

To be fair, her armor was pretty impressive at the moment. It looked like she'd tangled with a meat grinder and lost. The armor dented and banged up, scrapes running along one side like she'd been shoved into her ship and then dragged the length of it.

Regret filled Joule's expression. "I'm sorry it wasn't enough."

"Don't be," she gasped out, trying to breathe around the compressed feeling in her chest. "I would have been dead otherwise."

A coiled sense of danger rolled off Finn as his expression tightened further. "What happened to 'not a scratch?'"

"I improvised."

Fire lanced through her, stealing the rest of what she wanted to say. Kira's mouth dropped open on a silent scream as her back bowed.

"Breathe through it," Torvald instructed in a soothing voice. "You're in really bad shape. My *ki* can help your body repair most of the damage. It will be painful though."

The last was said almost as an afterthought.

Tears leaked out of the corner of Kira's eyes. She kicked the wall, wanting free from this agony as a whine fought its way past her lips.

Concern replaced the anger on Finn's face as he made an aborted movement toward her.

“Better?” Torvald asked a second later as Kira blinked up at the ceiling in surprise.

Actually, yeah.

Torvald took her arm to help her up.

“Jin, how are things looking outside?” When no answer came, Kira looked up. “Jin?”

Static crackled over the comms.

Kira pushed Torvald’s hands away and forced herself to her feet. “Someone answer me.”

Raider’s response was slow in coming. “You should return to the bridge.”

Kira didn’t like the sound of that.

Finn caught her arm when she would have staggered to the door. “Is that necessary? She’s injured.”

“Do you really think you can keep her out of the action?” Raider asked.

That was a good question. Kira arched an eyebrow at her oshota.

Resignation settled on Finn’s face as his grip changed to one of support.

“I knew you’d see it my way,” Kira said.

“Every day I question what I did in my youth to deserve a sword like you.” Finn’s response was dour as he helped her hobble into the hallway, Torvald and Joule shadowing them.

By the time they reached the bridge, Kira was feeling a lot steadier. She pushed away from Finn as she made a beeline to where she sensed Jin's presence.

She found him still and motionless, resting in the copilot's chair to Raider's left.

It felt odd seeing Jin so inanimate. Her friend was a force. Sometimes for good. Others for chaos.

But he was always there. A comforting presence. Her support and her champion.

With a hesitant hand, Kira reached out to touch the cool metal of his casing. Most of the time she could forget Jin's limitations.

Although his exterior was that of a machine, his personality shone through to such an extent that it was easy to forget he wasn't flesh and bone.

It was only in times like these where he was abnormally quiet that she remembered again.

Relief filled her as she sensed the deep current she associated with Jin, running through the metal.

He was dreaming, she realized with a soft smile.

"He dropped as soon as you were in," Raider explained, glancing at her out of the corner of his eye.

That made sense. He'd hung on long enough for her to get to safety.

The second the connection narrowed he would have suffered the same rebound she did.

It was just taking him longer to recover, Kira assured herself.

“I have to say it would have been nice to have a little warning before he went dark.” Raider hit several buttons on the ship as the view outside tilted, the planet with the hazy boundary that marked its atmosphere dominating. “I almost didn’t gain control in time.”

Kira picked Jin up off the seat to cradle him in her arms. “He couldn’t.”

As a drone, he wasn’t used to the physical sensation of pain. It probably took everything he had to endure as long as needed for Kira to get to safety.

Raider’s voice turned soft. “Yeah. I figured that was the case.”

Kira seated herself in the chair, taking a moment to make sure they were both secured with straps.

As illogical as it was, Jin had a paranoia of being untethered during a re-entry. If he was awake, he’d want to be secure.

“How are we doing?” Kira asked.

“Our engines are fucked and we’re already in Ta Sa’Riel’s gravity well. We’re going down one way or another.”

“Lovely.”

A controlled crash landing. Her favorite.



“I really didn’t miss this part of being your friend,” Raider told her.

Kira accessed the ship’s comms. “Elena, please show our guests to the overflow seats and prepare for a bumpy landing.”

“Are we crashing?”

Elena’s cheerful voice made Kira take a second glance at their comms. Why did her niece sound so excited about that prospect?

“No.”

“It’s okay if we are,” Elena assured her.

Kira shook her head as she looked over her shoulder at Joule. She tilted her head at the hatch.

He gave her a quick grin and raced out the door.

“Finn—“ Kira started only to find the oshota already seating himself in the emergency reserve chair along the back wall.

He strapped himself in before giving her a look that practically dared her to try to order him off the bridge.

“Make yourself comfortable,” Kira said stiffly, casting a quick glance at Torvald.

She didn’t need to say a word to know the emperor had no intention of leaving the bridge.

She shook her head dismissing him from her mind. If he wanted to risk a broken neck in a crash, that was on him.

She had more important things to attend to—like making sure the ship made it long enough for such matters to be a

concern.

She accessed the computer, bringing up the exterior cameras that were on the planet side of the ship.

An image of Ta Sa'Riel expanded on her monitors.

Like the planet of humanity's origin, Ta Sa'Riel had several large continents that were surrounded by the oceans that took up the majority of the planet's surface. Unlike Earth's pure blues, the colors of Ta Sa'Riel were a little more muted. Its turbulent oceans a deep blue edging on gray. The continents were little more than rocky outcroppings interspersed with pockets of green.

Kira scanned the display, finding several concerning energy signatures amassing on the planet below.

Sparks of yellow and orange began congregating at several points, growing in intensity as the *Wanderer* was drawn closer to the planet.

"This is not good," Kira said, recognizing those energy signatures.

"What are you talking about?" Raider asked as Kira glanced at Torvald.

"The planet's defenses are preparing to fire."

Raider blanched. "I thought we made it through the defenses."

"The system defenses, yes. The planetary ones?" Kira shook her head.

They weren't that lucky.

She'd barely survived her last encounter with these particular weapons, and that was with a fully functional engine.

Torvald turned away from the view to regard Kira steadily.

"Will they really fire on this ship?" Kira asked him.

"That depends."

Kira frowned. Why did she have a feeling she wasn't going to like whatever came out of his mouth next?

"On what?" she asked, playing his game.

"On whether the daughter of a powerful House owns this ship or a nameless wanderer," Torvald said softly.

Raider snarled. "Fucking great. They're playing politics."

For once, Kira and Raider were in perfect agreement.

"Did my uncle put you up to this?" Kira asked.

"You underestimate your worth. The Overlord of Roake isn't the only one who will benefit from your return to the fold."

No, he wasn't.

Kira had been a fool to forget that.

House Roake wasn't the most numerous or the wealthiest of the other Houses but it was the strongest in terms of military combat power.

The best way to ensure their future was to appoint an heir.

And since Kira was the only child of the former Overlord, she fit the role perfectly.

“I can see why Graydon is your Face. The two of you are very alike,” Kira said.

They both played games with other people’s futures.

“I taught him everything I know.”

Kira could see that. Too bad Graydon hadn’t impressed on the emperor just how much she disliked being manipulated in this fashion.

“I don’t like being put in a corner.”

Torvald inclined his head in a respectful nod. “I understand.”

Raider snorted. “I doubt that, but you will.”

Yes, he most certainly would.

Later. When they weren’t about to die.

Kira hit the button that would allow the ship to broadcast her message.

“This is Kira Forrest, daughter of House Roake. I suggest you reconsider firing on this ship. You will not like the consequences otherwise.”

That should do it. She hoped.

The only thing left to do was wait and hope that her House’s enemies didn’t take advantage of the situation.

Her death would be a blow to House Roake. Not just from the position of losing an heir either.

Kira's existence represented hope to those who'd lost children in the Sorrowing. Losing her would take them back to that time, crushing morale as well.

Her ship chimed, announcing an incoming transmission.

Kira didn't have time to accept before the hazy figure House Roake's Overlord appeared next to her.

Raider jerked in surprise at the unexpected arrival as her uncle swept a dismissive gaze over the bridge before focusing on Kira.

Even slightly see through, Harlow's resemblance to Kira was unmistakable.

As her father's twin, he was what her father would have looked like had he survived.

Hair the same color as Kira's, a deep, rich burgundy that was half pulled back from his face. Features that held the same shape as hers.

The biggest difference was in their eye color. Whereas Kira's were a violet that could change shade based on her mood. Harlow's were the piercing gold of a hawk's.

Harlow's body had been honed into a weapon, carrying a strength and power that hadn't been built in a day. Scars marked his features. The most prominent of which bisected his eyebrow, just missing taking his eye, before carving a long groove in his cheek.

Another followed the line of his jaw, visible even through the shadow of his trim beard.

“House Roake will consider firing on the heir’s ship as a declaration of war,” Harlow rumbled.

Kira mentally winced. She’d hoped to avoid having the title of heir attached to her name since it would make it more difficult later if she ever decided to walk away from House Roake.

It was much easier for a rank-and-file member of a House to leave versus someone who was considered integral to the House’s future.

Harlow’s words made that a futile hope now.

As if sensing her reservations, Harlow turned to regard her with a steady gaze. “You look like you’re in one piece. That’s good.”

A shiver raced down Kira’s spine at that statement. As if he was saying she needed to be in good shape to face the consequences soon to befall her.

“I look forward to seeing you face-to-face once you land.”

This time Kira could hear the faint threat in his voice as his figure faded from view.

“You’re in big trouble,” Raider observed.

“Tell me something I don’t know,” Kira groaned, pressing her head against the back of her seat as the ship’s rocking worsened.

By now, they had entered the atmosphere. Flames licked along the belly of the ship and up the sides as Raider struggled to control their descent.

Harlow's threat had worked, Kira noted as her sensors read a decrease in energy output below. The swarm of yellow and orange lights dispersed as the weapons powered down.

Around them, the ship groaned as the metal of the hull flexed under the strain of re-entry.

Kira held onto Jin, pressing him securely against her stomach as the ship hurtled through the upper atmosphere of Ta Sa'Riel.

Streamers of white obscured the view as there was an ominous creak from the ship. A piece of gray metal collided with the windows before ricocheting off the ship.

Kira and Raider shared a grim glance.

It was never a good sign when your ship started disintegrating around you.

They burst through the clouds to find the planet spread out before them. The turbulent gray of the ocean, white caps dotting the waves. In the far distance, the rocky cliffs of the shore beckoned.

Millions of tiny flecks of light, each no bigger than a pin prick, gathered around Kira.

She lifted a hand, fascinated as the orbs landed on her finger, only to soak into her skin a second later.

Several of the flecks drifted toward Jin, melting into his casing.

Kira looked around to find her ship inundated with the light motes. A large river of them headed for Torvald while a smaller branch flowed into Finn.

Even Raider had his own tiny gathering of light.

Given how no one else was reacting to the unusual phenomenon, Kira had to think she was the only one who could see it.

For a split second, her eyesight wavered, the view of the bridge replaced by the image of a tightly coiled translucent creature. Wings wrapped around it like a cocoon.

“How unexpected and rare,” Torvald murmured. “You’re quite sensitive. It’s been a long time since a beloved of the *Mea’Ave* partook in the *adva ka*. I think I’ll see some interesting things this cycle.”

Kira took that to mean he could see the light show too. So good to know she wasn’t going crazy.

Any response she might have made was forestalled as the ship’s comms chimed. Raider opened the channel.

A woman’s voice came over the line, her tone crisp and impartial. “You are in violation of our air space. Redirect to the coordinates that are being transmitted to your ship.”

Raider laughed. “You can send all the coordinates you like but that’s not happening.”



“You will face the consequences if you do not redirect,” the woman started.

“I suggest you take a look at your sensors. This ship is basically in free fall. We land where we land. Got a problem, take it up with Roake.” Raider flicked off the comms. “Think that pissed her off?”

“You always did have a winning personality.”

It was why one of the other Curs usually took the point when dealing with those outside their unit.

Raider laughed as the *Wanderer* continued its breakneck descent. “It might not matter after the next few minutes as we’ll probably all be dead.”

There was that.

“Happy thoughts,” Kira said.

The ocean sped underneath them as they arrowed past the rocky cliffs that served as the boundary for land. Smoke billowed out of the ship’s engines as there was another crack and then part of one wing ripped free.

Kira hung onto Jin for dear life, wishing there was a god she believed in to pray to.

Crash landings weren’t something you got used to. No matter how many times it happened, there was still a level of fear.

A moment where you threw your fate to the wind and hoped it wasn’t your time to go.

Beneath them, they broke free of the trees and onto a wide plain. Mountains rose in the far distance, light glimmering off what Kira suspected was a lake.

There was a bone jarring jolt as the *Wanderer* collided with land, skipping across it like a flat pebble along the water's surface. Metal screeched as the *Wanderer's* hull tore apart.

They went airborne twice more before skidding to a halt.

The seat belt of her chair bit into Kira's shoulders and waist as they stopped her forward momentum.

For a moment, no one spoke as they processed the fact they were still breathing.

"I'll be damned," Raider breathed. "We're alive."

Kira was a little surprised herself as she hit the button to release her seat belt.

She moved gingerly, her ribs protesting. Even with Torvald's earlier healing, the crash hadn't done her any favors. The just-healed breaks reopening in places.

Kira breathed through the pain as she looked at Torvald who had somehow maintained his balance throughout it all. As if the crash had been no more challenging than a sedate stroll in the park.

"Elena, Maksym? How are you down there?" Kira asked through the comms.

"Auntie, that was fun. We should do that again."

Raider shook his head. “You’ve turned my daughter into an adrenaline junkie.”

“You can’t blame me for this. Not even I’m crazy enough to find a crash fun.”

Maksym’s voice interrupted. “We’re a little banged up but otherwise fine.”

That was good to hear.

The overflow seats were located in the safest part of the ship. A place that had more protection than the rest but there was always a chance of something happening during a crash.

Raider bent over the radar screen. “Looks like someone sent out a welcoming party. They’re five minutes out.”

On screen, dozens of dots converged on their position.

What did she want to bet those weren’t Roake’s ships coming to provide assistance?

Kira looked up at Torvald. “I think it’s time for you to go.”

Long past time to be honest.

If only she could go back to the moment where Graydon asked this favor of her and ignore everything he said.

Who cared if he’d done her a service or two? This was well beyond anything she owed him.

Torvald glided toward Kira. “You realize the presence of the bog’s hag could have resulted in the death of everyone on this ship.”

“That fact is not lost on me.”

And when Kira found the party responsible, she'd show them the depths of her appreciation.

“Your continued survival is not in the best interest of those responsible.”

Kira had already considered what Torvald was suggesting. There was every possibility that those outside intended to deal with Kira and the rest before help arrived. Given how battered the *Wanderer* was, they could claim Kira and the others didn't survive the crash.

“We don't know if the bog's hag was meant for me—or you,” Kira told Torvald.

If it was the second, all the more reason to get Torvald off the ship.

The emperor was a scatter bomb just waiting to go off. If he was harmed or killed while in Kira's vicinity, the consequences would be far reaching and devastating.

It was possible they would use Raider's presence as an excuse to go after the Consortium while also casting House Roake's loyalty into doubt.

Kira had to play this situation right.

“Very well. I'll leave this matter in your hands,” Torvald murmured after a tension fraught moment.

Kira hooked an arm over her seat. “You never did answer my question about what you wanted and why you're on this ship.”

“Several reasons,” Torvald murmured with an amused glint in his eye.

Kira tilted her head. “I’m listening.”

“I hoped to confirm something with my own two eyes.”

Kira straightened in her seat. “And did you.”

Torvald finally looked at Jin. “I’m still unsure, but the answer is getting closer.”

“What’s your other reason?” she asked, trying not to read more into that than she had to.

His words could mean a lot of things. It didn’t necessarily have to do with Jin being his son or a soul bound.

“I had planned to ask you to look out for Devon during the *adva ka*.” Torvald’s smile didn’t reach his eyes. “Something tells me I don’t have to.”

With that he prowled toward the hatch as Raider raised his eyebrows at Kira in question.

Kira froze in the act of shaking her head at Raider as Torvald turned back one final time. “I suggest you be careful. I do not want to see my Storm upset further.”

What was that supposed to mean?

Finn stirred. “You handled him well.”

Why didn’t it feel like that then?

Dismissing the emperor and his schemes from her mind, Kira jerked her chin at the hatch in a signal to get moving. “Let’s go. We have our own welcome party to prepare.”



Kira took in the tilted wreckage of the *Wanderer*. The ship lay half on its side, the skyward wing shorn clean off. Jagged pieces of metal were all that remained. Tears and holes littered the body of the ship. Smoke wafted from the engines.

Kira set her hand against the hull. “Thank you for protecting us. I’m sorry I couldn’t do the same.”

Sorrow moved through her as she gave the ship one last regretful pat.

It hurt to see the *Wanderer* like this. Battered and broken.

To her, it was more than just a ship. It was her home. A place that had provided shelter and solace in her dark times.

Raider dropped to the ground from the open airlock.

The crash had compromised the landing ramp, necessitating them finding alternate ways off the ship.

Not that it was hard given the many holes in her hull.

Raider adjusted the gloves of his armor as he joined her and Finn. “You can always repair the ship.”

“Once something is broken, it will never be the same,” Kira said without looking at him.

It didn’t matter how hard you tried. The pieces could never be glued together in exactly the same way. There was always a trace of the original break.

“Perhaps it won’t be exactly the same and will carry the proof of its survival, but that’s not necessarily a bad thing. There’s a certain poetic beauty in that,” Raider answered.

Kira stepped away from the *Wanderer* as the sound of engines announced that their guests were close.

“Are we still talking about my ship?” Kira asked, looking up at the three Tuann vessels coming into view over the treetops.

The ships flew past before turning and making their way back toward them. They landed, wind buffeting Kira and the rest, blowing her hair into her face. She shoved it out of the way as Raider and Finn flanked her.

“I don’t know, are we?” Raider asked, his attention on the grounded ships as their doors opened.

Oshota clad in a style of synth armor Kira wasn’t familiar with flooded out to surround the man stepping off the ship in the center. Their protective stance along with the haughty look on his face proclaimed him as the leader of this little expedition.

His expression was one Kira was all too familiar with from her time in the space force. Usually seen on people in authority. Those were the leaders she went out of her way to avoid. Their arrogance and aloofness always tempted a younger Kira to see how far she could push before she provoked them.

The current Kira was a little wiser, knowing nothing good would come of testing this person's boundaries.

At least not as long as she was at a disadvantage.

"This should be good," Raider muttered. "He looks like he has a stick up his ass. Your perfect mark."

Kira chose to ignore Raider's statement as Finn's disquiet registered. "Do you recognize him?"

Finn's stance shifted as unease entered his expression. It was the most uncertain Kira had ever seen her normally confident oshota.

"His name is Jarek. He's an inquisitor under the emperor's Face of Justice."

"That's good for us then?" Raider asked, his tone suggesting he knew that wasn't true.

"The fact he is under the emperor's banner is misleading. An inquisitor has full authority and can pry into any situation that justifies their involvement." Finn lowered his voice as he glanced down at where Kira still cradled Jin in her arms. "Jarek's order views the soul bound as abominations and has vowed to eradicate any they come across."

Kira resisted the urge to hide Jin behind her, knowing such an action would only draw more attention to him.

"That's lovely," Kira said. "I thought not accepting that promotion to Centcom all those years ago meant I'd never have to deal with zealous idiots. I guess I was wrong."



Raider arched his eyebrows at her. “What idiot wanted to promote you to Centcom?”

“Himoto along with two other admirals.”

Raider shook his head. “Thank any god that might exist you didn’t accept. Centcom would have been nothing but chaos with the Phoenix in its ranks.”

Kira rolled her eyes as she faced forward again. “Sometimes I really hate you.”

“Ah, Nixxy. I’m flattered.”

“Delay until the Overlord arrives,” Finn advised softly as Jarek and his escorts neared.

The inquisitor was dressed differently than the rest. He wore a high collared, knee length jacket that reminded Kira of starlight. It was a silvery white that made him stand out among the darker armor of his oshota.

The jacket was fastened at his waist and held shut by a bronze broach that was in the shape of a flower. Horns jutted out over the top of the flower in a way that felt jarring—and a little bit familiar.

“Are the children safe?” Kira asked in a low voice as silvery eyes the same shade as his jacket met hers.

Finn bent toward her. “Maksym is standing guard.”

Kira hoped that would be enough. She was a lot more confident in this plan before Jarek and his oshota showed up.

There was an undercurrent of power in this man's presence. An air of watchfulness that suggested he was biding his time.

Kira would much prefer this confrontation to take place when she was at her best. Not with her ribs still cracked, her ship broken, and her best friend out of commission.

Jin's groggy voice came from her arms. "Are my eyes deceiving me or is that man wearing a circlet on his head?"

Despite the grim circumstances, the question made Kira smile. Same old Jin. If that was what he was concerned about, he would be fine.

"No, that's exactly what you're seeing," Kira said softly.

The piece of jewelry was delicate looking and formed from two interwoven strands of bronze and silver that met in the center of his forehead to cradle a jewel no bigger than the nail on Kira's pinky finger.

"He should be quiet or he'll get us all killed," Raider sang in a soft voice.

Much as Kira hated to admit it, Raider had a point.

"Comms only, Jin," Kira instructed softly as Jarek and his oshota reached them.

To Kira's surprise, the oshota didn't stop with Jarek. Several split off to head to the ship.

Raider moved to block their path. "What are you doing? You can't go in there."

The oshota pressed forward, treating Raider's words like air.

“A human has no say on Ta Sa’Riel. Remove yourself from their path or suffer the consequences.” Jarek’s voice was every bit as cold and disdainful as his appearance suggested.

Kira stepped forward. “Maybe he doesn’t, but I do. This is my ship, and I am a daughter of Roake.”

The oshota paused, sending questioning looks in Jarek’s direction.

A part of Kira wanted to sneer at their actions. They disregarded Raider because of what they thought he was and treated Kira a little more respectfully for fear of what her House might do if they trespassed too far.

When really Raider was the greatest threat in this situation.

With Elena on that ship and the secrets her existence created, there wasn’t much Raider wouldn’t do to safeguard her—making an enemy of the inquisitor included.

“No introduction?” Kira mocked.

She needed to keep them distracted and the situation from deteriorating until reinforcements could arrive.

“Even humans aren’t so rude,” Kira said, knowing these Tuann would view the statement as the ultimate insult.

Raider took advantage of the oshota’s hesitation to maneuver himself between them and the ship again.

“Your ship set off the defense network. That coupled with the fact you’ve landed on sacred land makes you and this ship suspicious.” Jarek flicked his hand at the two waiting oshota.

Raider shifted as he lowered his center of gravity, preparing for a fight.

“If you were paying attention, you would know your defense network broke off their attack once we identified the source and eliminated it,” Kira said, attempting to keep the situation from descending into violence. “As for this being sacred land—does it look like my ship had a choice in where it crashed?”

Kira could see the consideration on several of the oshota’s faces as they took in the wreck. Anyone with half a brain would know the *Wanderer* had no control over its landing.

“Remove your human or see him hurt,” Jarek ordered again as if he hadn’t heard—or cared—about Kira’s logic.

Raider braced as the oshota started forward.

“Why is it you always encounter assholes on a power trip?” Jin griped from Kira’s arms, his words bringing the action to a halt. “You’d think we’d eventually run into a normal person who doesn’t feel the need to throw around threats in front of someone as crazy as you.”

Silence descended as Kira looked up at the sky.

Why? Was it something she did in a past life? Was that the reason she was saddled with a best friend who was no better at taking orders than herself?

Raider’s stance relaxed. “As always, great timing, Tin Can.”

Jarek’s gaze landed on Jin’s sphere. “What’s this?”

Kira's jaw locked at the abhorrence in his tone made

Before she could speak, Jarek held up a hand, palm facing Kira.

An invisible force tore Jin out of her arms. He sailed toward Jarek as if pulled against his will. The inquisitor caught Jin, studying him with a detached gaze.

“An abomination,” Jarek pronounced before tossing Jin at the oshota next to him. “Destroy it.”

## EIGHT

“**Y**ou will do no such thing,” Kira said in a guttural voice that spawned from the depths of the abyss. She didn’t need to look to know symbols had begun appearing on her skin, their lines a soft violet.

“Kira,” Finn warned softly.

Kira twitched but didn’t react as she locked on her prey.

The oshota holding Jin froze. The knowledge that a predator was in front of him was written on his face and in his body. As if by remaining utterly still, her monster might forget he was there.

Not likely.

Kira’s primus, as her monster was called, had a very good memory.

As long as the oshota was holding Jin, he was prey. If he wanted to survive, he should put her friend down.

Kira couldn’t stop herself as she slid forward a small inch, making everyone around her flinch.

“She’s not going to do anything, are you, Phoenix?” Raider said with a calm that managed to reach Kira even in her current state. “Not with the children so near.”

Right. The children.

Elena. Joule. Ziva.

Her primus might not be able to distinguish friend from foe. It had happened before.

Kira eased back the small inch she’d claimed earlier as those around her breathed a sigh of relief. She sensed rather than saw Finn relax as she forced herself to take a deep breath through her nose, holding it for several seconds before releasing it again.

It was a meditation technique Himoto had taught her once upon a time. It didn’t always work, but she’d take anything she could get right at that moment.

Kira’s hands shook as she struggled to put the primus back in its box. Never before had it come so easily when her life wasn’t in danger.

The fact that it had was a cause for concern.

Only when she had a modicum of control again did she focus on the oshota.

“You’re going to put him down.” Her voice developed an edge. “Gently.”

“He will do no such thing,” Jarek contradicted.

Raider sent him an irritated frown. “You should really stop talking now. You’re only making things worse.”

Kira ignored the two of them as she focused on the oshota, the sole person in the situation that could stop this.

“Listen to me,” Kira crooned. “I don’t want to kill you.”

She really didn’t.

“You have your orders,” Jarek said.

The oshota’s decision to listen flashed across his face, a split second of warning.

Kira leapt forward, Finn drawing his en-blade to protect her back. Raider cursed, punching the oshota closest to him.

Time slowed.

*Ki* gathered as the oshota prepared to destroy Jin’s casing.

A whistle sounded a split second before a miniature bomb exploded against the oshota’s chest.

He stumbled back a step, losing his grip on Jin in the process.

Jin fell to the ground, stopping an inch above it.

The action ground to a halt as they looked up at the top of Kira’s ship where Elena stood, the device responsible in her hand like a giant target.

“No! She’s a child,” Kira screamed.

The oshota didn’t listen as they launched a return attack. A wave of energy bolts headed toward her niece.



Kira and Raider raced for the ship.

Desperation filled Kira. They were too far to be able to stop this.

A *ki* shield formed in front of Elena, the bolts slamming into it inches from her face.

Kira sucked in breath as her lungs started working again.

Joule's frantic face appeared beside Elena. He latched onto her niece's arm and jerked her out of sight.

"Where the fuck is Maksym?" Raider roared.

"So noisy," Maksym said with a yawn as he scratched his side where he leaned against Kira's ship.

"Why weren't you protecting them?" Raider pointed at the top of her ship.

Maksym aimed an unconcerned look at where Elena and Joule now hid. Probably with Ziva too, knowing the young girl.

"They had it handled." Maksym smiled at the two oshota next to Raider. "Katrina, Cassimir. How have you been? It's been ages since I last broke your bones."

The oshota drew back, their faces blanching.

Where Kira's threats had been met with minimal amounts of fear, terror showed on the expressions of those around them at Maksym's presence.

"Youngest, you needn't worry about us," Maksym advised Kira, giving the other oshota a smile more suited to that of a

sociopath. The one that said he would be happy to cause undue amounts of pain and would sleep like a baby afterward.

It seemed Maksym wasn't always the light-hearted goof he pretended to be.

“Raider, protect—“ Kira broke off at finding Raider already halfway up the ship's side.

He flapped an irritated hand at her. “Yeah. Yeah. I've got the kids. Already on it.”

The female oshota, Katrina, he'd called her, found her backbone as she squared off against Maksym. “Do not interfere with the inquisitor's business.”

“No can do. Your inquisitor has upset our heir. We can't let the youngest confront you alone,” Maksym said with an easy smile.

Jarek's face was arrogant as he pointed at Kira's ship. “Defiance will not be tolerated for abominations. Eliminate any who resist.”

Something in Kira's mind tore. The primus she'd suppressed earlier rose, this time like a tidal wave intent on washing away everything before it.

She had no chance to force it back into its cage. Nor the desire.

She let the primus come, her skin losing its color as it became gray except for those violet symbols.

Those oshota closest to her converged.

Kira shifted, their blades coming at her in slow motion. Too lazy to dodge, the primus caught one, examining it curiously before tearing it out of its owner's hands and flinging it at another.

A cry of pain followed. The scent of fear soaked the air.

The primus smiled, her teeth sharp and pointed.

She loved the taste of fear.



“Did she make it on board?”

There was no answer as the flight crew worked frantically.

Graydon's control snapped. “Did. She. Make. It. On. Board?”

The words were a roar by the end.

The urge to do violence rode him hard. A yearning for an outlet from the helplessness he felt.

Graydon took a deep breath and then another. Ripping the flight crew apart wouldn't get him the answer he needed.

Their heads had to stay where they were.

A frightened sound came from the woman as Graydon loomed over her. “Yes. I just got the verification.”

She hit a button, putting the image on screen.

Everything in Graydon stilled when a piece of metal nearly hit Kira. If not for the barely visible flux of a *ki* shield, it would have.

Even with that shield to soften the blow, the force would have been devastating.

It wasn't until he saw Torvald's arm reach out and drag Kira inside that Graydon felt like he could breathe again.

The *Wanderer* broke free of the bombardment and hurtled toward the planet. A giant fireball as it entered the atmosphere.

“*Mea 'Ave* protect them,” Amila whispered.

They were going to need a lot more to survive the next few moments.

“Follow.” Graydon's command was terse.

“We won't be able to keep up,” the captain started, nearly flinching at the murderous look Graydon shot him. “We'll do our best.”

He'd better.

Graydon wasn't in the mood for excuses. It was safer for everyone if the captain and his crew made it happen.

The ship accelerated as they dove toward the planet, trying to follow the *Wanderer's* path.

“When we get close enough, Amila, Isla, and Cord with me,” Graydon ordered. “Baran, Solal, you're to escort our guests to the palace before heading back to the station. I want answers. Find them.”

No matter what it took.

Graydon didn't care what toes they had to step on or what Houses they had to offend. He wanted the necks of those responsible under his boot.

They'd not only put Kira's life in jeopardy but his emperor's.

Graydon's wrath would be swift and fierce.

He'd made a promise to himself that he would never have to sit on the sidelines while watching the woman he loved gamble her life against almost certain death.

They'd made him break that promise. Now, they would pay.

Graydon's swept the cabin with a quick scan, his gaze pausing on Selene and Alexander. Their expressions held a calm that felt out of place.

Everyone else on board, whether they knew Kira or not, were caught up in the drama.

Not those two though.

They seemed detached. Bystanders without any stake in the situation.

Strange since Graydon was convinced the only reason they hadn't disappeared from Tuann sight was because of the woman whose life was currently in jeopardy.

"You don't seem worried," Graydon said.

Alexander's stare held a flatness Graydon had seen a time or two before. Mostly on the faces of warriors who'd seen too

much. Those who were afraid to feel again.

Kira had a trace of that on her when Graydon first met her.

She was better now but Graydon still caught that look on her face when she thought no one was watching.

Graydon wondered if it was a remnant of their time under the control of monsters.

“Kira has done much more foolish things than this,” Alexander said.

Either the man didn't care, or he was pretending not to.

Graydon couldn't tell which.

And that troubled him.

“What he means to say is that our youngest sister is quite talented at surviving situations others would not.” Selene stepped in to play the role of peacemaker.

Although Selene and Alexander had spent most of the journey in seclusion, rarely stirring from their quarters, Graydon had noticed a few things. Like the fact Selene seemed to play that part often.

Selene smiled briefly. “There is a reason they call her the Phoenix.”

Was that supposed to be comforting?

The problem with Kira's pseudonym was that it inspired a blind faith that she'd come out of any dangerous situation in one piece.

That wasn't always the case.

Graydon had seen evidence of her at her most fragile. He knew how close she'd come to death.

This conviction she would always come through was bound to fail at some point.

“My lord, we're at jump altitude,” the captain interrupted.

Graydon jerked his chin down in a nod, dismissing Alexander and Selene from his thoughts as he prowled toward the side of the ship where the jump would take place.

Amila, Isla, and Cord joined him, their synth armor helmets already raised.

The door slid open, an energy field dropping into place to make sure the cabin didn't lose its air.

Amila grinned before doing a back flip out the door. Isla jumped as Cord gave Graydon a firm nod, falling forward to follow the other two.

Graydon raised his suit's helmet, the pieces crawling up the side of his face and back of his head.

*I'm coming for you, Kira.*

Graydon arrowed toward the ground, his soul's breath aiding his descent. He cut through the sky like a blaze of light, hurtling toward his objective. Ahead, the wreckage of the *Wanderer* came into view along with three ships that bore the insignia of an inquisitor.

Of all the people for Kira to encounter, an inquisitor was the worst. Holding a power that could rival even the emperor's in

the right circumstances, they were a difficult foe to deal with.

Worse yet, the situation looked like it had already descended into chaos as a battle waged.

Graydon tamped down on his anger as he sped toward where Torvald watched the situation from his vantage in the sky above. The emperor was using *ki* in much the same fashion as Graydon to hover above events.

This was not why Graydon had arranged for the emperor to meet her one-on-one.

Black wings appeared from Graydon's back as he ripped through the sky.

The emperor raised an arm, a thunderclap erupting. Golden *ki* poured out from the emperor, the air crying under the enormous strain.

Those below were knocked flat.

Raider fell mid stride, landing face down on the ship. Jarek and his oshota fared no better, lying prostrate.

Finn and Maksym were luckier, catching themselves on one knee as their faces showed the strain of resisting the emperor's power.

Kira's primus was the sole exception, remaining upright when all else had fallen.

Solal used his soul's breath to transmit his words to Graydon. "I didn't think anyone but the emperor's Faces could stand before him when he's like this."



Graydon was less surprised. He'd always known his *coli* was unique. She possessed a strength of will not many could match.

She bowed for no one. Not even Graydon's emperor.

Pride filled him as Kira's primus advanced one step and then a second, never looking away from Jarek's prone form.

A golden gaze met Graydon's as the emperor's voice transmitted in his head. "She cannot be allowed to kill my inquisitor. Not even you will be able to protect her from the consequences."

"Amila," Graydon barked.

The oshota plummeted as Graydon headed for the emperor, despite every one of his instincts urging him to go to Kira.

In a situation as delicate as this, he couldn't give any indication of partiality toward Kira.

Particularly not in front of this inquisitor.

Jarek was a zealot. A purist. And powerful enough that he could cause problems if he made the effort. A single misstep on Graydon's part and Jarek could use it to hang not only him but Kira as well.

"You worry too much, my Storm. Your heart is much more capable than you give her credit for," the emperor murmured.

"This was not supposed to happen."

"And yet, she's handled it beautifully."

That had never been in doubt.

“Did you get what you wanted from this encounter?” Graydon asked.

Kira liked to call him tricky, but the emperor was far worse than Graydon could ever hope to be. Even after all this time at Torvald’s side, Graydon couldn’t predict everything the emperor was up to.

A fact he found as intriguing as he did frustrating.

Kira was the only other person who could surprise him as easily as the emperor did.

“I found far more than I imagined,” Torvald said, his gaze lingering on the sphere lying next to Jarek’s fallen body.

A hint of apprehension stole through Graydon’s thoughts as the air around Torvald sharpened, indicating threat and danger. A demand for submission that was difficult to resist.

“Is there something you’re keeping from me, my Storm? Something related to my firstborn?”

Graydon held very still, conscious that Kira wasn’t the only predator present. “There are many things. You know that.”

One of the most difficult things a Face learned was the balancing act that came with the position. The emperor couldn’t be told everything. Plausible deniability was a powerful weapon.

If he knew, he’d have to act.

Particularly in the instance of a soul bound who was also Torvald’s firstborn.

It was Graydon's job to protect him from the regret that would follow such an action.

Though a part of Graydon wondered if the other reason he kept this secret was because he knew Kira would view it as the ultimate betrayal if he didn't.

"It's strange. It's almost like she has a third heritage beyond that of Roake and Luatha." Piercing golden eyes pinned Graydon in place. "One that bears a striking resemblance to my own line."

Graydon's heartbeat was loud as the moment lengthened between them.

"It is not time," Graydon said carefully.

Torvald's chest rose as he inhaled, a brief crack appearing. The emperor looked away, composing himself.

When he focused on Graydon, the pressure he'd exerted before was gone. He was just a man. No longer the terror that made even Graydon stiffen his resolve.

"I will trust you know what you're doing for a while longer."

"I'm honored," Graydon drawled, knowing the concession Torvald was making.

Graydon's gaze landed on Kira as she reached Jin, snagging him off the ground from where he'd fallen with one hand as she grabbed Jarek by the throat with the other.

She didn't know it yet but her time for keeping secrets was quickly ticking to an end. Graydon only prayed that when they rose to the surface, they wouldn't destroy the woman he'd come to love.



Kira froze as a blade touched her neck, cutting gently into the skin as blood oozed to the surface.

Not much could hurt this form. Even less could kill it.

Despite that, instinct warned the woman holding the blade might be capable of both. What was even more interesting was the fact that the primus could sense no hostility in the other.

Only a calm assurance.

“I would prefer not to use violence to settle this situation. Rescind your primus and put the inquisitor down.”

Kira turned her head to fix a glowing violet gaze on Amila. Her silent stare more intimidating than a roar.

In this form, she was the apex. Faster. Stronger. More resilient than the other.

Others feared her. Not this woman though.

Kira struggled to understand why.

Reason still existed for her in this form. Though the first few seconds after a transformation were always a little hazy, her control at its worse.

Right now, she was still Kira. Just a more blood thirsty, merciless version of herself.

From under her hand, her prey fought to speak. “The toy too. She cannot keep it.”

A silent growl rumbled in Kira’s chest.

Oh right. She’d forgotten how much she wanted to kill this person.

So good of him to remind her.

Her grip tightened, a pained sound escaping Jarek that made Kira want to bathe in his blood.

It was difficult to resist the blood lust, her vision getting lost in a sea of red before a prick of pain at her neck brought her back to clear headedness.

“Do not make me do this, my friend,” Amila said, a hint of pleading in her tone.

Kira froze as she studied the pulse racing beneath the skin of Jarek’s neck. The feel of its frantic beating under her fingers.

Amila was right. They were friends.

Which was why Kira couldn’t let her live with the pain and knowledge she’d had to force the primus’s compliance.

Kira loosened her grip slightly as she twisted to keep Amila in sight. “We can put away the monster, but we will not compromise on Jin.”

Her voice sounded rusty, the words stilted and rough as if she hadn't spoken in centuries.

Amila glanced overhead at the two figures hovering in the sky that Kira had been aware of from the beginning but chose to ignore.

Torvald's nod was minimal, Graydon a watchful presence at his back.

"Your terms are reasonable," Amila said as she withdrew her blade from Kira's neck.

A rumble of amusement vibrated Kira's chest as her grip loosened on Jarek's throat.

It seemed he got to live another day. Lucky for him—disappointing for her.

She would have enjoyed toying with him a while longer.

Perhaps she still would.

Kira eyed Jarek, her expression making both him and Amila tense.

A pop of air and then a thump from the top of her ship distracted Kira from the desire to push the boundaries just a little more.

She squinted as a man wearing the synth armor of House Roake straightened. The person moved with the grace and assurance of an assassin.

He was tall with a slim build and skin the color of night. His hair was cut close to his head, giving the impression he was

bald. The style suited him, showcasing the delicate strength of his features.

His amber eyes reminded Kira of a panther's. They held that same lazy danger as if he could destroy all in front of him but wouldn't because it was too much work.

Makon, the Marshal of House Roake. Second only to the Overlord.

If he was here, Harlow wasn't far behind.

Kira bared her teeth in disappointment. Even as primus, she wasn't willing to test her uncle. It seemed her fun was at an end.

From his position kneeling on the ground, Maksym lifted his head and glared. "You're late."

Makon regarded the other man with a calm expression. "This is quite the mess you've allowed. Prepare to be punished upon our return."

Maksym pulled a face. "I underestimated how much of a handful the youngest could be."

A hint of warmth entered Makon's expression as he glanced at Kira. "So I've heard."

Kira concentrated on stuffing the primus in its cage. It went easily, far more so than it ever had before.

A heaviness entered her limbs, a lethargy replacing her previous feeling of indestructibility.

Kira shook herself, trying to get rid of the awful feeling. This was always the worst part of coming back to herself. Though, admittedly, she usually was unconscious for this part. Mostly because the primus refused to go back to sleep until it had exhausted her to such an extent that she collapsed.

Kira lifted her hand, studying it as her skin slowly regained its former color. The gray faded, the violet lines dulling before disappearing entirely.

Was this a sign the inhibitor had worked? That her *ki* channels were healing?

The air cried as a fast-moving object approached.

Kira looked up, spotting her uncle as a small dot racing across the sky far faster than should have been possible.

She started to lift her hand in greeting, her smile falling as the surrounding air went weird.

An ominous pressure built. The air vibrating with danger.

Kira twisted. Too slow.

Graydon's roar was the only thing she heard as a force punched her in the chest. Jarek's enraged expression met her eyes as she flew.

Kira hit the *Wanderer* hard, a piercing pain stealing her breath.

This was bad, she thought as a numb feeling spread.

The cracked ribs were now fully broken. A few slivers of bone had penetrated her organs, including her lungs if her



struggle to breathe was any indication.

A dark shape dropped out of the sky. The earth cracked, a crater forming as a figure that looked like a nightmare straightened.

Her uncle's expression turned murderous as he caught a glimpse of Kira. Midnight blue flames burst from his body as Kira fell forward onto her knees and then onto her side.

She ended up on her back as Finn's face appeared above hers, concern written on it.

She looked past him to the sky where two figures hovered.

So fancy.

How did the emperor manage to change his armor so quickly?

The black armor was now edged in gold interlocking plates, each one glimmering with a brilliance that was dazzling.

Had he swallowed the sun for that glittering bright effect?

The sharp protrusions that marched along his shoulders and arms made him look like a porcupine. She especially liked that fur-lined cape flapping in the breeze. Graydon should get one of those.

She wished Jin was awake so they could make fun of him together.

Kira blinked slowly as a roaring started. "Somebody sounds so mad."

“Shh. Don’t speak,” Finn urged as his hands moved over her.

Kira’s next blink lasted longer. Finn’s face blurred. At least she wasn’t the one at fault—this time.



Grumbling punctured the soft cloud Kira was floating on.

“You promised me no more comas. If you don’t wake up right now, I’m going to consider that promise broken. You don’t want that, Phoenix.”

Her eyelashes fluttered before her eyes opened a small crack. A dim room greeted Kira as she squinted at the ceiling to bring it into focus.

Half of her brain was aware of how comfortable the bed under her was. The blanket pulled up to her shoulders and her body mysteriously free of pain.

An indecipherable moan left her as Kira tried to croak Jin’s name.

The shadows stirred before a spherical shape blocked her view of the ceiling.

“Kira?”

“Wh—“

“Easy. You’re safe. They brought us to the palace after your collapse,” Jin soothed, not needing words to know what she

was asking.

Kira's forehead furrowed. The palace? Not the Fortress of the Vigilant?

That didn't sound right. Harlow wasn't the type to let others care for his niece. Something had gone wrong.

“O...k?”

Jin's chuckle was faint. “I'm fine. Better than you, you crazy woman.”

Good.

“Don't smile at me like you think it all worked out for the best,” Jin scolded.

Kira's attempt at a chuckle was more of a pained exhalation, her throat too raw to do anything but huff a breath out.

A glass of water levitated from somewhere out of sight.

“Here. Drink this,” Jin fussed. “You biologicals are so high maintenance.”

It took effort and a little bit of help on Jin's part to work her way up on the bed until she was half reclining on the pillows he had relocated for her.

Once ready, the cup floated into her hands, courtesy of Jin's anti-grav engines.

The first sip of water was glorious, wetting the parched tissue of her mouth and throat that felt like it hadn't seen water in a decade.

“How long was I out?” Kira asked when she felt like she could speak again.

“A week.”

Kira lowered the cup, glancing at the intruder who’d answered her question.

Quillon’s expression was grave as he regarded her with a steady gaze. “You’re lucky to be alive. If you hadn’t had such a large dose of the emperor’s *ki* you would never have made it to treatment.”

Kira’s hands clenched around the glass.

As a healer and someone who’d passed the trial to be an oshota, Quillon would know better than her.

If he said she’d been close to death, she believed it.

“I fucked up.”

Kira could admit it. She’d overestimated the emperor’s authority, trusting the other side would play by the rules with him there.

They hadn’t—and Kira had paid the price.

Quillon’s expression thawed. “At least you know.”

“The rest? How are they?”

Quillon advanced across the room. “Your *seon’yer* was unhappy with how you managed to almost get yourself killed in his brief absence. He sent Maksym to the gauntlet training as punishment. Finn joined him.”

Kira’s eyes narrowed. “Wren punished my oshota?”

That was a serious breach in etiquette. An oshota answered to their sword first and foremost. In this case—Kira.

Even as her *seon'yer*, Wren didn't have the right to punish him without Kira's permission.

“Finn did that to himself.” Quillon's smile was sharper than Kira had ever seen on the mild-mannered healer. “The man has trauma from watching his first sword die right in front of him. A wound you re-opened. Again.”

Kira's chin dropped as her eyes avoided Quillon's.

She took his point.

Regret was like a poison. It stole into your heart and ate away at the healthy tissue until you were a shadow of the person you once were. Right when you thought yourself fully healed, it was easy to suffer a relapse. Particularly when the person you're supposed to protect makes it so very damn difficult.

“He really should have chosen a better sword,” Kira said almost to herself.

He'd know nothing but more of the same if he stayed by her.

“Too late.” Quillon placed his hand on Kira's wrist as a tendril of his *ki* slid under her skin.

The feeling was uncomfortable, requiring restraint on her part not to retaliate. Something Kira was only capable of because of Quillon's prior work in trying to help her heal from the *ki* poisoning she suffered from.

“I recommend you break the bastard’s legs next time. Injure him so badly he can’t concentrate on anything but staying alive.” Quillon’s *ki* withdrew. “Better yet, kill him so you no longer have to worry.”

Jin drifted closer. “Is that something a healer should say?”

Quillon’s mouth quirked. “You forget I’m not just a healer; I’m an oshota too.”

Yes, Kira was beginning to see that.

Quillon’s grip on her hand shifted, lifting her wrist between them. “You realize removing the inhibitor the way you did was a dangerous and foolhardy thing to do.”

Kira’s grin was rueful. “Believe me, it wasn’t my choice.”

Moreover, she would have died had it remained. Kira wanted to avoid that outcome if possible.

Quillon’s gaze lingered on her wrist a moment longer before he shook his head. “It’s quite remarkable actually. Your *ki* channels are much further along in their healing than they have any right to be.”

“What do you mean?” Jin asked, moving to Quillon’s shoulder to peer down at Kira in the same way he was.

Quillon hesitated. “I noticed something strange after you saved the *lu-ong* baby from poachers. I wanted to confirm my findings, but my patient ran away before I could.”

Quillon’s glare was severe.

Technically, she hadn't run away, but Quillon didn't know that.

If possible, she'd like to keep the reason for her disappearance a secret as long as possible.

The circumstances of Elena's birth placed her in great jeopardy. Kira might trust Quillon with her life to a certain extent, but her niece was a different story.

"There were some unavoidable circumstances," Kira said with an apologetic shrug.

"I'm sure."

Quillon's dry voice made Kira grin.

"Either way, your *ki* nodes were entirely different after your encounter. It was almost like some of the damage had been reversed," Quillon continued.

Kira fell silent.

As a species, the *lu-ong* were shrouded in mystery. They looked like a cross between a dragon and a serpent and were both feared and revered. Stories said that the *lu-ong* were the ones responsible for saving the Tuann during their flight from the ancient masters.

They were also the ones to teach the Tuann about *ki*, the soul's breath that fueled much of their technology.

What's more, Kira remembered her brief vision of a cosmic tapestry she'd been convinced represented her *ki* and the baby

*lu-ong* who'd swam among those darkened lights. Every damaged spot he'd touched had come alive again.

Now, Quillon was telling her he'd noticed a difference in her *ki* channels immediately after that event.

It didn't take a genius to put the two things together.

"You think the *lu-ong* healed me."

"Stranger things have happened," Quillon said. "The *lu-ons* are difficult to know. If they did this, they expect something out of you."

No surprise there.

Kira had learned a long time ago that you couldn't get something for nothing. Particularly not with gifts of this magnitude.

"So, I'm healed." Kira found it a little hard to believe.

Quillon's smile was brief and didn't reach his eyes. "You could say that."

"But you aren't," Jin said, sounding suspicious.

Quillon gaze didn't leave Kira's. "You've fixed some of the damage, yes. The underlying cause is still an issue. If you don't learn the proper usage of *ki*, you'll be right back here again."

That wasn't dire or anything.

Quillon patted Kira on the shoulder. "I recommend you stop when you feel pain."



“You make it sound so easy,” Kira said on a huff of laughter. “Life and death situations don’t usually leave you a choice.”

“That’s why you have an oshota. Rely on him a little. You’ll live longer.” Quillon started for the door. “I’ll let the others know you’re awake. I suggest you rest. They’re going to want to speak to you.”

Quillon disappeared out the door as Jin glided to hover over Kira’s bed.

“Think he’s mad at you?” Jin asked.

Something told her yes.

Kira slid down her pillows until she was flat on her back and staring up at the ceiling again. “I miss my coma.”

## NINE

Kira tugged at the skirt of the floor length coat she wore, trying to decide if her outfit was a form of punishment.

Designed to showcase Roake's colors, the coat was a midnight blue with an even darker blue embroidery overlaid on top. The neckline was more revealing than Kira was used to, plunging into a deep vee that ended just above the intricate silver belt she wore around her waist. The vee's opening was held closed by silver clasps of the same design as the belt.

The coat had a slit in front that came all the way up to the buckle, and when she moved others would catch a glimpse of the skin-tight pants she wore as well as the luxurious pair of calf-high boots.

Overall, the effect was stunning. Particularly when coupled with her burgundy-colored hair left to float loose and untamed around her shoulders.

If only Kira didn't feel like a pretty doll dressed up for a visit to the guillotine.

Her outfit was a hint as to what was coming. These weren't the kind of clothes you wore for a walk from one place to another.

No, this outfit was meant to be seen. Armor similar to what she'd worn into battle.

A presence registered as Kira became aware she wasn't alone in the room. Her hand dropped from where it had been resting against the ribs that had been broken.

Eyes the color of a storm tracked the movement, his face expressionless.

“Nothing to say?” Kira asked.

Too late she caught the faint signs of strain. The micro expressions that as good as announced the state he was in.

It wasn't until Graydon exploded forward that Kira became aware.

By then, he was already on her. One hand spearing into the hair at the back of her head as he picked her up with the other.

His hand cupped her ass as her legs closed around his waist. She was suddenly glad for that split coat.

He walked her backward, stopping once she touched the cool surface of the mirror. The entire time Graydon devoured her.

Kira didn't resist, even tilting her head to allow him better access.

A hungry growl rumbled in his chest as Graydon pressed against her, fitting his hard length against her core.

Kira barely registered the lack of synth armor between them, too lost in passion to know anything but him.

Graydon's lips left hers as her head leaned against the mirror.

Kira panted as he kissed his way down her neck, lingering on a spot that he knew drove her crazy.

A soft moan left her as he nibbled there.

It was only when his hand landed on her naked breast that Kira realized that somehow the fastenings of the vee had come free, and the belt had long been discarded.

The coat hung loose around her, leaving her upper half bare except for her arms.

There was something erotic about being half clothed as Graydon's gaze burned into her, holding a possessive desire Kira found tantalizing.

Graydon stared at her like she was a feast and he had spent his existence in starvation.

Kira was no less captivated. Her gaze ran over the strong lines of his upper chest and arms. The tapered line of his waist.

Even through the thin clothes he wore, she could feel the rigid definitions of his muscles. The power that said he could crush her easily.

It was an irresistible lure that Kira didn't even try to thwart.

She leaned forward at the same time Graydon reached for her.

They froze as someone close by cleared their throat.

“Don’t mind me. I’m not looking. Just thought you two would like to know that you’re about to have company,” Jin said in a cheerful voice.

Graydon’s body stilled against Kira’s, his previous passion vanishing as he rested his forehead against hers. “Now I know why my ancestors banned his kind.”

Kira’s smile was a surprise as she lifted her head to give him one last soft kiss. “They were missing out.”

Graydon’s chest rumbled with a chuckle as he let her legs drop. He turned her toward the mirror in a quick motion.

Kira’s disheveled reflection greeted her. Hair tousled. A strip of bare skin on display.

There was something sensual in the way Graydon’s gaze held hers, his body dwarfing her own as he reached around her to fasten the clasps that would hold her jacket together.

Kira made no move to take over, knowing Graydon needed this.

His hands slowed as he reached the top clasp.

“Graydon?” Kira asked in question when he didn’t move for a long second.

Graydon closed his arms around her shoulders, pressing her back to his front in a hug. He buried his head in the crook of

her shoulder.

Kira clasped his wrist, not resisting as he simply held her. They didn't speak, allowing the moments to flit past. Each of their presences acted as a balm against the close call they'd had.

They could have lost each other.

It was horrifying to think it could be that easy.

If Joule had been a little slower with the *ki* shield or Kira had landed wrong when Jarek's attack threw her into the ship, that would have been the end.

No more them. No more Kira.

"I couldn't do anything," Graydon whispered against her shoulder as his grip tightened.

Kira made no attempt to shrug off his hold, needing the comfort as much as he did.

Sometimes the depth of emotion she felt for him frightened her. The knowledge that she was purposely leaving herself vulnerable where he was concerned.

Kira dropped a kiss onto his muscular forearm. "How bad is this?"

Graydon nuzzled her shoulder one more time before his arms loosened and he took a step back. "I'm not going to lie. The situation is delicate."

Kira bent and swiped her belt off the ground, clasping it around her waist as she turned toward him.

“Furthermore, my authority is limited.” There was a self-deprecating look on Graydon’s face as if the admission stung.

It made her wonder what part of this situation she wasn’t understanding.

Kira’s eyes narrowed. “There’s something you’re hiding from me.”

Graydon touched his chest in mock hurt before flashing a smile that made her stomach tremble. “*Cheva nier*, you know me so well.”

Kira’s glance was wry. “That’s what happens when you make a practice of studying someone and their habits.”

A hint of playfulness entered Graydon’s expression. “I didn’t realize you were so fascinated with me.”

“I wouldn’t let it go to your head,” Kira advised. “I study everyone who might become an issue.”

“I find the fact you consider me dangerous enough to be wary of highly flattering.”

Kira scowled. “Who said anything about me being wary?”

A teasing look settled on Graydon’s face. “You would only take precautions if you thought I was a threat. I’m gratified to know I’ve made such a good impression.”

Kira stared at Graydon like she thought he’d lost his mind. “Most people would feel sad to know their lover considered them dangerous.”

Graydon leaned forward. “Those people are not Tuann.”

Kira placed one finger on his chest and pushed him away. “I think another sparring session is in order.”

Maybe it would remind him of how painful such a mindset could be.

Graydon’s eyes went half-lidded with desire. “I would enjoy that.”

Of course, he would. Graydon saw those bouts as a form of foreplay. How could she forget that?

If she was being truthful, she found them no less enjoyable.

It was so rare to find someone who matched her in every way. She didn’t have to hold back with Graydon. He could take her worst and return the favor.

There was something appealing in knowing she could give him every part of herself. The good. The bad. And the vicious.

Kira took a tiny step back in retreat. If they weren’t careful, they’d end up right back where they just were. Kira half naked and Graydon looking at her like she was his salvation.

It was hard enough resisting temptation the first time around.

A knock sounded at the door, snapping the brewing tension.

“Thank God. A distraction,” Kira said with a bit of relief.

A husky chuckle followed Kira to the door.

She opened it to find several people on the other side. She dismissed the presence of the lackeys, focusing on the person in the middle. The one in charge.



Wearing robes like that of Jarek's, the woman was tall and had a poise that Kira envied.

Unlike Jarek, who could be considered an ice prince, this woman had a certain amount of warmth in her manner. Approachable in a way Jarek wasn't.

The lines around her eyes and mouth suggested she was someone who spent more time smiling than frowning. Her hair was a mass of frizzy corkscrew curls that were even more untamed than Kira's.

Tension entered her posture as the woman caught sight of Graydon at Kira's shoulder.

"My lord, how unexpected. I wasn't aware you and the lady were such close acquaintances."

Although the woman managed to maintain her smile, there was a note of strain that hadn't been there previously. She wasn't easy about Graydon's presence and didn't hide that fact as well as she likely should have.

Graydon didn't help matters, a faint hint of challenge in his stare. "Is that a problem?"

The woman brightened; a fake smile plastered over her face. "No problem at all. I will let my superiors know you will be attending the trial."

"Trial?"

Whose trial? Hers?

Kira shot Graydon an irritated frown. Did he not think this was something he should have led with?

“I apologize for my distraction.” The woman dipped her chin in a respectful nod, pretending not to see their exchange. “My name is Cora, inquisitor of the second order and a direct subordinate to Eurus, the emperor’s Face of Justice. Your presence is requested in the Hall of Determination. If you’d allow me, I’ll be your escort.”

How would Cora react if Kira refused? If she said no, she didn’t require an escort?

The temptation to do exactly that was damn near irresistible. The entertainment value alone might even make it worth the trouble such an action would bring down on her head.

“Kiirrrraaaa,” Jin sang in their comms, dragging her name out. “I know what you’re thinking, but don’t you dare. You heard the mountain. The situation is ‘delicate.’ Don’t go making it worse.”

Kira hated to admit it as she looked at the two figures flanking Cora, but Jin may have a point. Cora’s companions were oshota. Probably dispatched to accompany her in the event Kira took it into her head to cause chaos.

Too bad. Rebelling against the status quo might have been exactly what she needed. A way to stretch her muscles after a week spent bed bound.

Graydon’s touch landed on the small of Kira’s back, distracting her. “It will be fine. I am here.”

Kira gave him a look that said she didn't believe him. Maybe if he'd made that claim *before* he mentioned he might not be able to help it would be different.

Graydon bent his head toward hers. "Trust me."

Kira concealed her shiver as his breath whispered across the sensitive skin of her ear.

When he put it like that, how could she not?

For him, she'd try. A little.

"Sure. Why not? Escort away."

Kira took a step forward only to be halted as Cora held up a hand with a regretful expression.

"Pardon me, Roake's heir, but the summons is not just for you."

Kira regarded her blankly.

"Your 'friend' is also invited."

"What friend?" Kira asked, making a show of glancing at the empty room behind her and then up at Graydon as if to share her confusion.

His eyebrow twitched up as if to say he was as lost as her.

Mentally, Kira gave his acting ability a thumbs up.

There was a patronizing look in Cora's eyes that said she wasn't falling for it. "I speak of the one who has been hiding out of sight since our arrival."

Would you look at that?

Cora could sense Jin's presence. Mentally, Kira elevated her status from possible threat to a definite one.

"Ah. That friend."

Kira had hoped to keep Jin out of this. Guess she was destined to fail from the beginning.

"Jin."

Kira didn't take her eyes off the three in front of her as Jin revealed himself, his engines whirring as he joined Kira and Graydon in the doorway. Kira caught the faint tightening in the faces of the oshota before they schooled their expressions back to neutrality.

"Finally, someone on this planet recognizes my greatness," Jin grumbled. "It's a refreshing change after Luatha and Roake."

"I'm not sure that's what they're going for," Kira responded.

Cora showed no outward reaction to Jin's presence as she met Kira's gaze with a faint smile. "Shall we?"

Kira grunted. Like she had a choice in the matter.

They moved through the empty hallways of the palace, their passage the only thing to disturb the quiet solitude. It was an imposing place. The hallways immense and the ceilings high. Masterpieces decorated the walls between the tall windows that allowed shafts of sunlight to play along the floor.

It was a monument to the emperor's power, the beauty concealing hidden dangers. Fitting considering its owner's personality.

“What can you tell me about what I'm about to face?” Kira asked, not bothering to lower her voice.

There was no point. Tuann hearing was better than a human's. The oshota and Cora would be able to hear her no matter how low she whispered.

“Eurus, another of the emperor's Faces, has been called to preside over this matter,” Graydon said.

“Will he be a problem?” Kira asked, recognizing the name from Cora's introduction.

“Not necessarily. Eurus has an inflexible personality, but he is firmly on the side of justice.”

Kira wasn't sure if that was a good or bad thing for them as her gaze drifted to where Jin floated beside her, humming softly to himself. She couldn't argue that Jin's existence violated the Tuann's taboo. At the same time, he was nothing like their stories depicted.

Either side could hold more weight with the emperor's Justice.

“Alexander?” Jin said in surprise.

Kira looked up to find the path blocked by a tall man wearing a pair of wire-frame glasses that seemed out of place with the outfit he was wearing. Like Kira, his attire was more

on the formal side. His hair styled back from his face, showcasing the sharp planes of his features.

Apprehension spread across Cora's face as her back straightened. "I'm afraid you cannot be here."

"It's amazing how often I keep hearing that," Alexander said before focusing on Kira and Jin. "I'm your representation when we enter that room."

Kira frowned as she looked up at Graydon. "Is this also your doing?"

"Impressed?"

Kira grimaced. "That's not the word I would use."

Confused? Suspicious? Distrustful? All concepts that worked so much better to convey what she was feeling right now.

Alexander had never bothered to hide his disapproval of Kira and her choices. It was out of character for him to stand up now to defend her.

Graydon shrugged his massive shoulders. "He looked bored, so I thought I'd give him something to do."

"How did you manage to convince him?" Kira asked.

Kira was no Selene. There was no love lost between them. She was pretty sure if she were ever drowning, he wouldn't toss her a life preserver. Instead, he'd watch from the shoreline to make sure she didn't drag any of the forty-three down with her.

That was the kind of man he was.

“We don’t need him,” Jin argued. “I’m enough.”

Alexander smirked, seeming genuinely amused. “Oh? If that were true, you would never have fallen into Roake’s trap. Tell me again how I’m unnecessary.”

A growl came from Jin as the artwork around them shook.

“He has a point,” Kira interjected before Jin could fling any loose items in the vicinity at Alexander’s head.

“Kira,” Jin whined.

“He’s more familiar with Tuann law than either of us.”

He’d demonstrated as much with how he’d handled Selene’s situation. If Selene hadn’t disrupted his efforts, he would have emerged victorious.

Kira hated to admit it, but in a situation like this Alexander was a handy person to have at her side.

“This is not—“ Cora started.

Alexander ignored the woman as he gave Graydon his attention. “I received the information you sent me. It should be enough for our purposes.”

Kira looked between the two.

“I exercised my authority as the emperor’s Face to procure the station feed and forwarded it to Alexander,” Graydon said, anticipating her question.

Kira patted him on the shoulder, absentmindedly. “Good job.”

The rest of her attention was on Finn who stood off to the side of the door Kira suspected was their end destination. His attention was on the ground, the gloomy aura that hung around him hard to miss.

“Where are you going?” Alexander asked as Kira moved toward Finn.

“There’s something I need to do.”

Cora followed Kira. “I am afraid I must insist you leave your oshota out here.”

“You can insist all you want. Doesn’t mean I’ll listen. Last time I trusted one of your lot to act honorably I paid the price. That won’t happen again.”

Kira left Cora behind, reaching Finn seconds later and stopping in front of him. He avoided looking at her, staring past her with a set expression.

A perfect, emotionless robot.

Well, damn.

Quillon hadn’t been exaggerating. She wasn’t the only one who’d walked away from the crash and subsequent confrontation with injuries. Though Finn’s were the sort that were invisible to the eye.

It made them no less dangerous, however.

Kira moved to his side, putting her back to the wall and leaning against it as she watched Alexander and the others file inside the room.



Graydon paused, shooting her a look that asked if she needed help.

She shook her head at him.

She did this. It was up to her to fix it.

“I wasn’t at your father’s side when he died. He’d ordered me and the others to help defend the fortress,” Finn said into the resulting silence. “Then he felt the attack on your mother and raced to her side, not giving us a chance to follow.”

Kira paused, not entirely surprised at the statement. She’d suspected as much from the few hints that had been dropped.

“He was like you. Brave. Foolhardy. He didn’t think he could be defeated,” Finn confessed. “When he died—the way he died—I was angry for a long time. At myself. At him. After I recovered, I promised myself that I would never let someone I protect die ever again. I think that’s the reason I chose Brianne for my next sword. A part of me knew she wasn’t the person she presented herself as, but I didn’t care because she wasn’t going to throw herself headfirst into danger. That ended in a disaster of an entirely different nature.”

“And then Graydon assigned you to me.”

Of all the shitty luck. Kira didn’t know whether to sympathize or laugh.

“And then he assigned me to you,” Finn agreed. “Someone who wasn’t like my second sword at all. Someone who I would be proud to serve. Someone even more foolhardy and death-seeking than my first sword.”

Kira supposed she deserved that.

“Did you agree to be my oshota as atonement?”

“That was part of it,” Finn admitted.

Kira let out a sigh as she looked up at the details on the ceiling. Architecture had never been part of her knowledge base, so she didn’t have the words to describe the features to someone else. All she knew was that the design was complicated—and beautiful.

“I was very young the first time I saw someone die,” Kira confessed. “I was the one who killed them.”

If they were going to play bare their souls, it was only fair Finn received a piece of information of equal value to what he revealed.

“It’s not my first memory—or the second.” Kira thought about it. “Maybe the third. But I remember everything about that moment. They were one of us. One of the Tuann’s lost children.”

Kira kept her gaze fixed on the ceiling as Finn’s shock colored the air between them.

“Is that why there is tension between you and the other two?” Finn asked in a hushed voice.

Kira gave a humorless laugh. “No. They have their own fair share of blood on their hands. All any of us cared about was surviving back then—though why we were fighting to stay alive, I have no idea.”

Those days had been dark. Hope a word that held no meaning.

It would have been easier to give in. Some did.

Kira pushed off the wall and faced Finn. “To be honest, I’m tired of being the one to survive. I have no intention of outliving you.”

Or Graydon or anyone else for that matter, Kira finished silently.

Kira poked Finn’s face, hoping to alleviate the devastation she saw there. “Don’t look like that. I’m not going to rush into death just yet. I intend to live a healthy, happy life now that Quillon says I’m on the mend.”

She just thought he should know.

Kira headed for the door. “Coming?”

Finn didn’t move. “Jin says you treat me like one of your Curs.”

Did she? Perhaps she did.

She sent a sidelong glance at Finn, studying him for a long moment. “I do see a little of them in you.”

It was a quiet resemblance.

Mostly about their perseverance. Their ability to take the hits and keep on going. To not bow even when circumstances seemed insurmountable.

The Curs had that; Finn did too.

“Should I be honored?” Finn asked.

“I think so. My Curs were among the best people I’ve ever known.”

Otherwise, it wouldn’t have hurt so much when she lost them.

Jin lowered from the ceiling where he’d been hovering as Kira approached the door.

“Don’t think we’re not going to have a talk later,” Kira told Jin.

“I just told him a truth he needed to hear.” An arch tone entered his voice. “Or do you disagree that you treat him like you once did the others?”

Kira didn’t speak as she entered the room, finding herself the center of attention almost immediately. She hovered at the top of a set of steps that descended to the main floor below. Tiered seating stretched in a semi-circle to either side of her.

Kira hesitated for a moment before she descended the stairs, those below turning to watch her approach.

At their center was a man Kira had never met that she suspected was the much talked about Eurus. The emperor’s Face of Justice.

He looked like something out of a painting. One that featured a vampire. A count maybe.

The red of his hair offset the paleness of his face. The long locks were tied back, exposing the pointed tips of his ears and making his red eyes more prominent.

Though he didn't wear the synth armor of an oshota, something whispered that he was no less dangerous in his own way. The collar of his black jacket was held closed by a large bronze broach at his throat, the design of which was similar to the one Jarek had worn the first time Kira had met him.

Before him stood several people, Harlow and Jarek among them. Both turned to watch Kira's approach.

Her footsteps paused as she caught sight of Jarek's face. It was mottled with bruises. Blues and blacks giving way to purples, yellows, and green.

He looked like he'd taken a beating. A single-sided one.

"Did I do that?" Kira asked.

It was possible.

She didn't remember doing it, but it wouldn't be the first time she'd lost memories while in primus form. It was one of the reasons the form was so dangerous. Kira's control had gotten better since the first time she'd assumed the form but there were exceptions.

If she was unconscious or injured so badly her mind retreated, it would leave the primus fully in control. Like a battleship on auto pilot.

"Not you." Finn nodded at her uncle.

"Harlow?"

She couldn't believe it. Her uncle wouldn't attack a representative of the empire. No matter how much the man

deserved it.

“You didn’t see what you looked like.” There was a haunted look in Finn’s eyes as memories surfaced. “He was most unhappy about your injuries.”

Apparently, he’d taken that unhappiness out on Jarek.

Though why those injuries were still in the process of healing rather than already gone was another question Kira had. There was no doubt in her mind that the emperor had healers at his call who could make those bruises disappear in an instant.

Just look at Kira.

She’d been damaged beyond belief with multiple broken bones and lacerated organs. Yet here she stood a week later, almost fully healed.

Her gaze drifted to the dais waiting on the side of the room. Torvald sat on a throne; his chin propped on his hand. Graydon beside him.

Then again, maybe she didn’t need to wonder why Jarek had been forced to let his injuries heal naturally.

It was a punishment. A subtle one.

Reaching the floor, Kira swept her gaze over the rest of those assembled. Makon and another person from Roake she didn’t recognize stood behind Harlow.

The stranger regarded Kira with interest. “Is this the heir everyone is talking about?”

There was a playful look on the man's face, reminding Kira of Graydon. That same cockiness and charm.

"Yes, Caius," Makon answered as he sent a respectful nod Kira's way.

The stranger didn't say anything else as Alexander fell into step beside her, crossing the last few feet at her side.

Kira examined Eurus, finding him a hard one to read. Like the rest of the emperor's Faces, he seemed to have perfected the art of maintaining a blank expression.

Despite that, Kira thought she caught a spark of interest in his red eyes as he looked at Alexander.

"I'm almost glad Jarek attacked you," Jin said through their comms. "I didn't get to see Alexander in action last time. This should be good."

Kira nodded in agreement.

Alexander was a force to be reckoned with, even managing to get the best of Yukina. Jarek should be child's play.

Kira studied the inquisitor, finding the former arrogance missing. His manner subdued. She wouldn't go so far as to say he seemed regretful, but there was definitely something different.

"It is surprising to find a member of your line here," Eurus said, addressing Alexander. "They tend to prefer more physical pursuits."

“Then I can only count myself lucky to have grown up not suffocated by tradition. Such a situation would have been untenable,” Alexander returned.

Eurus made a small sound in the back of his throat, his expression showing more interest than before.

Kira didn't move as his red-eyed gaze shifted to her, holding still as he examined her with that same detached curiosity.

“So, you are the ones to have led my inquisitor into such turmoil.” Eurus's head tilted as he studied her and Jin. “My inquisitor is rarely impetuous, but I can see now his reasons for acting the way he did.”

Kira tensed, Harlow's hand landing on her shoulder a second later.

“Do not react,” Harlow warned in a low voice.

“I know,” Kira responded.

And she did know.

Violence or a smart-ass reply would only hurt their position.

She was grateful for her restraint when she looked up to find Eurus's speculative gaze on her.

“Attacking an inquisitor in the course of his duties is a violation of our laws,” Jarek interjected. “Roake's heir set off Ta Sa'Riel's defense network when she attempted to smuggle a plant that could have had a catastrophic effect on our ecosystem. Her companion shares many characteristics of a



soul bound, yet when an oshota attempted to grant it the mercy of a release she intervened.”

That was a poetic way of describing murder.

“I recommend her name be withdrawn from the list of those nominated to participate in the coming *adva ka*,” Jarek finished.

What was this? Did she hear that right?

The only person who could have added her name from Roake was Harlow, and he’d made no secret of how much he disapproved of her fast tracking her path to complete autonomy. He thought she should wait until she was fully healed and had a better handle on her *ki*.

Kira had disagreed.

“Her actions have demonstrated a lack of control and maturity that are concerning,” Jarek continued, unaware of the stir his words had caused.

Kira looked up at Harlow in question.

If she’d hoped for answers, she wasn’t going to find them in his expressionless features.

“Furthermore, I recommend the machine be taken into custody and destroyed,” Jarek finished.

It took effort but Kira managed to avoid reacting to the provocation, clenching her teeth as she remained quiet and still.

“Let’s take this in order, shall we?” Alexander reached into his jacket, withdrawing a tablet. He hit several buttons before an image of the space station appeared. “First, this is footage that proves the bog’s hag was placed on Kira’s ship without her knowledge.”

Alexander stopped the video, highlighting an image of the *Wanderer’s* hull that had no sign of the plant as the ship’s engines came online.

Several seconds later a crowd moved across the screen. One of their members knelt by Kira’s ship to touch a glass cylinder to its side.

Once finished, the man looked around before rising and swaggering away.

Seconds later a ship nearly clipped the *Wanderer* as it cut in front of her ship on its way out.

“As you can see, Kira is not responsible for placing the bog’s hag on her ship’s hull. She’s innocent. The responsibility for that lies with this man.” Alexander zoomed in when the crowd thinned, showing where the seed had attached to the ship’s hull, tiny vines already spreading along the gray metal.

“I cross checked it with the time stamp of our proximity alerts,” Jin said through their comms. “The timing fits.”

How convenient that a ship nearly collided with Kira’s at the exact moment when the bog’s hag was being placed.

Somehow, she didn’t think that was a coincidence.

It was a well thought sleight of hand. Distract her with a near collision so she'd attribute any alert to the more obvious explanation.

Kira had fallen for it too.

Eurus looked over at Graydon. "Have your people identified the culprit?"

"They have. He belongs to House Ithor. A minor House on the outskirts of the Talut sector. From what his House members claim, he was a fringe member that few knew well," Graydon said. "I sent people to pick him up as soon as we had a name."

Eurus's gaze shifted to the empty seats beyond Graydon. "And? Where is he?"

"Dead," Graydon answered. "Someone ripped out his heart."

## TEN

“**Y**ou’re not that someone, are you?” Jin said into the sudden silence.

“No. More’s the pity. He was like that when we found him.” Graydon’s jaw flexed, his expression pissed as hell that he’d missed his chance to exact a pound of flesh from the culprit.

“Once we’re out of here, I’ll get started on finding the owner of that ship,” Jin interjected.

Kira kept her expression blank, giving no sign she’d heard him as Alexander started speaking again.

“The fate of the person who did this isn’t up for debate.” Alexander fixed Jarek with a flat look. “We’re here to discuss the ramification of your actions. Had you taken any amount of time to figure out the truth of the matter, we wouldn’t be here.”

Jarek’s expression tightened. “Time was limited and she had trespassed on a sacred area.”

Alexander’s smile didn’t touch his eyes. “A total of forty-three minutes passed from the time the defense network

activated to the time the *Wanderer* crash landed. It took me fifteen minutes to procure this footage and find the moment in question. Don't blame others for your own ineptitude."

Jin chuckled. "I never thought I'd enjoy watching him do this to someone else."

Kira didn't share Jin's same level of amusement. Memories of Alexander doing something similar during one of their few encounters made her empathize a tiny bit with the inquisitor.

"I had credible intelligence that a soul bound was on that ship," Jarek argued.

Poor guy. He still didn't realize Alexander would rip him apart.

Though Kira would be interested in knowing who the tattletale was. Probably one of any number of Tuann who'd encountered her and Jin while on Jettie.

"I'm so glad you mentioned that," Alexander said with an icy smile. "Let's talk about J1N, a valuable piece of property belonging to the First division of Centcom. Specifically, the squad known as the Curs."

At that, Kira stiffened, no longer as amused as she'd been before.

"Easy, Nixxy," Jin cautioned as Kira's fists clenched. "I knew about this beforehand. He asked permission and I okayed it."

Kira struggled to find her composure, taking a deep breath and then another when that didn't work.

No matter how many times they had to play this card, she still hated the idea that Jin could only be safe as long as he was regarded as “property”.

It was wrong.

No one could own Jin. He was a person. A thinking, feeling being who deserved the respect of being seen as such.

“Kira, I really am okay with it.”

Jin’s whisper made Kira’s eyes smart. “I know.”

That still didn’t make it right.

Kira’s expression showed nothing as Alexander shot her a cautious look.

He didn’t have to worry. She was fine. There wasn’t going to be any meltdown. She wasn’t going to shift to her primus form and go on a rampage.

Everything was fine. For now.

Jarek scoffed. “Humans hold no power here. If we decide to destroy one of their toys, there is nothing they can do about it.”

“Oh?” Alexander asked in a silky voice that made Kira shiver from remembered trauma. It was the exact same tone he used on her whenever he went in for the kill.

She had nightmares about that voice sometimes.

“Are you saying that might makes right?” Alexander asked. “If that’s the case, then the Tuann can have no objections to what members of the Consortium did during first contact?”

Kira looked alertly between the two. What was this?

“I believe a few of those humans are still imprisoned on one of your planets,” Alexander said.

Kira shot a questioning look at Jin to see if he knew what was going on.

“I’ve no idea either,” Jin answered through their comms.

Shock was written on Jarek’s face as he watched Alexander carefully. “How do you know about that?”

Alexander’s lips twisted. “My youngest sister may have been ignorant of her origins but the same can’t be said of the rest of us. The forty-three have been watching you. We are not impressed by what we’ve seen.”

Jin whispered a curse.

Alexander was practically taunting the emperor and the rest with the knowledge that their lost children knew about them and still did not seek them out.

“Is this who the Tuann are?” Alexander’s gaze swept the room. “The type of people who take things that do not belong to them? Who pursue their agenda so aggressively that they don’t care who is hurt in the process—including children, who, by the way, you and your people attacked multiple times. If Kira hadn’t taken her primus form, would you have gone so far as to kill them?”

The silence that fell was stark as Alexander paused to let the gravity of that image sink into their brains.

Jin whistled. “Oh, wow. He’s just like you—but way better at using his words.”

“Mistakes were made in the handling of this matter.” Eurus cut a look at Jarek whose gaze had fallen to the floor, shame written on his face. “A fact my inquisitor will answer for.”

Kira felt the tension she’d been carrying start to slip away, only for her hopes to be dashed a second later.

“Be that as it may, the issue of a potential soul bound is one that cannot be ignored.” Eurus’s expression remained grave.

Alexander adjusted his glasses. “I’ve heard stories of the soul bound. J1N does not fit the description found within. He shows neither madness nor a desire for death and destruction.”

Eurus looked deep in thought as he considered Alexander. “If the J1N, as you call him, is truly the property of the military, it is all the more reason to question his presence here.”

Alexander lifted his tablet as several documents appeared in the air.

“As you can see, Kira underwent a mental health assessment after the war. The doctors recommended a service animal to assist with her mental state.”

Kira’s head whipped toward Alexander.

He flicked his fingers in their silent language, signaling “eyes front.”



Kira grumbled internally as she listened, Jin's cackling howls making her want to beat someone.

Preferably Alexander.

"Only Kira isn't skilled at caring for living creatures. As a result, JIN was given the programming to act as Kira's mental health support drone."

Humiliating. That's what this was. Absolutely humiliating.

Jin gasped for breath. "I can't. This is too much. Ahahahahaha. Stop. I can't breathe."

Kira gritted her teeth. "You don't have lungs."

Jin's chortles continued through the comms, his mirth unchecked.

Out of the corner of her eye, she caught Torvald covering his mouth to hide his smile. Graydon coughed into his hand as his shoulders shook.

Caius leaned over to Makon. "The heir and her companions are more humorous than you led me to believe."

Kira ground her teeth, wishing that a hole would open up and swallow her.

"I see," Eurus said after a protracted silence. "Very well. I'll allow the drone's presence on Ta Sa'Riel, but we will be watching for any sign that he is not what he seems."

Kira released the breath she'd been holding.

"Don't feel too relieved just yet. I'm not done," Eurus advised. "You are the one who will be held accountable if this

goes wrong. As an heir of Roake, your fate is shared with theirs. Everything you do reflects back on them. I want you to truly think about which pieces of your past to keep and which to let go.”

In other words, he was saying Jin should be relegated to a dark closet somewhere and forgotten.

Kira held Eurus’s gaze. “Jin will never be a part of my past.”

Maybe it would have been better to nod and act like she would consider his advice.

Something in her couldn’t do that. Not after Jin was already designated as property. There had to be a line, and this was hers.

“If Roake ever has a problem with that, they are welcome to find another heir,” Kira said, meaning every word.

She wouldn’t abandon Jin for Roake. No how; no way.

Eurus sighed. “You’re every bit as stubborn as your parents.”

So Kira had been told.

Eurus waved his hand at her. “You’re dismissed.”

Kira started to turn when Eurus’s voice brought her up short.

“Not you, Overlord. We still have things to discuss.”

Kira hesitated, looking up at Harlow in uncertainty.

He set a hand on her shoulder and nudged her toward Makon. “Go. I’ll be fine. Makon will get you settled in my absence.”

Kira sent one last look Harlow’s way as Makon gestured for her to proceed him.

“Heir, this way, if you please.”

Reluctantly, Kira started after Makon, following him up the stairs as Finn and Alexander trailed behind them.

“What do you have to say for yourself?” Eurus asked as the doors to the chamber closed behind Kira and the rest, cutting off Harlow’s response.

Kira stared at the wood paneling for a second more, uncomfortable at the turn of events.

Jin let out a whoop as he did a quick loop in the air. “It feels so good to be out of there. I thought I would suffocate.”

Makon started down the hallway as Caius stopped next to Kira. “You needn’t worry about the Overlord. Harlow is skilled at taking care of himself.”

There was a playful smirk on Caius’s face that didn’t quite match the penetrating look in his eye.

This man was trying to get her measure, Kira realized. Analyzing every expression and gesture to see if she was wanting.

Huh.

Caius wasn’t the friendly, easy-going person he seemed.

Kira supposed that was a given considering he was one of her uncle's trusted subordinates. He wouldn't be here otherwise.

Kira kept her thoughts to herself as she started after Makon, Caius strolling in her wake.

Finn looked from Alexander to Jin, a question lingering on his face.

"Go ahead. Say what you're thinking," Alexander told him.

"Lying to Eurys was a mistake."

"I didn't lie. Kira really was given a mental health assessment when she woke up from her coma which expressed a concern for her mental wellbeing. They even issued a tixsi as a companion animal."

Tixsis were a common choice for military veterans, particularly those who served on ship. Looking like a cross between a rabbit and a chinchilla, the tixsi was smaller than either a dog or cat and fit easily into ship life.

It was the minor empathic abilities they possessed that allowed them to anticipate when their companion was in mental distress and provide relief.

Alexander's lips quirked as he looked at Kira. "She had that tixsi for a whole two hours before she lost it. They found it a day later trembling and terrified in a small closet in the belly of the station."

"It wasn't my fault," Kira said defensively, feeling Finn and Caius's stares on her. "The tixsi ran away."

“Yes, apparently her mental state scared the poor thing so bad that it preferred to flee rather than spend another moment in her company,” Alexander agreed.

Kira stomped ahead, joining Makon as he led them through the halls.

“After that, it was agreed it would be best if Kira wasn’t responsible for another living creature,” Alexander continued. “As a compromise since Kira couldn’t be released under her own cognizance, Admiral Himoto designated Jin as her support drone and ordered a program be uploaded to help him with his new duty.”

“Then he really is what you claimed,” Caius said, sounding impressed as the exit of the palace came into view.

A woman’s silhouette stood in the doorway, the sun beyond casting her face into shade. Despite that, Kira could guess her identity as Alexander’s entire being seemed to soften.

“On paper anyway,” he said, distracted as Selene stepped forward to meet them.

Caius frowned as Alexander’s pace increased. “What does that mean?”

Alexander barely looked at him as he reached Selene. “Whether Jin ever acted in the capacity of a support drone is up for debate.”

Selene tilted her face up to look at Alexander. “Did you accomplish what you needed?”

“I did. My victory was never in doubt.”

Kira rolled her eyes. And he called her arrogant.

Alexander touched Selene's elbow, his body hovering protectively over hers. "I've kept you waiting too long."

"You know I don't mind," Selene said with a soft smile.

Alexander looked over at Kira as he started to herd Selene away. "Do me a favor and try not to cause any further trouble."

Selene glanced at Kira. "I will find you later. I imagine you have a few questions for me."

Kira watched them go, disappearing into the palace with a pair of oshota shadowing their movements.

"His bedside manner hasn't gotten any better," Jin observed.

Kira didn't think it ever would.

"It's curious," Caius said from beside her. "House Asanth is notorious for their arrogance. I never thought I'd see one of their descendants willing to assort with a woman whose affinity is so common that it is no help in pinpointing her birth House."

Jin started for the door where Makon waited. "I dare you to call Selene common to her face. I want to be there when she shows you how 'common' she is."

Kira laughed softly under her breath as she and Finn strolled after Jin, stepping onto one of the five avenues that extended from the palace like spokes on a wheel. This one was maintained by House Roake. If they followed the several miles

long avenue they'd eventually arrive at the Fortress of the Vigilant, Roake's stronghold on Ta Sa'Riel.

"Don't take me wrong. I meant no insult. I simply find it amazing that a House notorious for their arrogance has a descendant like him," Caius said in a conversational voice. "You do realize our House has blood feud with his?"

Kira looked away from the sky as she walked toward the fortress in the distance. "That has little to do with either of us."

Caius pursed his lips. "I beg to differ. You proclaimed yourself heir to this House. As such, you've inherited our vendettas. Eventually, your old ties will have to be severed."

Kira stopped walking. "First—I called myself a daughter of Roake. The word heir was never mentioned."

Caius started to speak, stopping when Kira lifted a hand.

She shot him a hard smile. "I'm not done. Second—I will never undertake an action that would threaten or cause harm to any of the forty-three. No matter what vendettas or blood feuds my House may have. They are family."

"We don't hurt family," Jin added.

A smile played on Caius's lips. "I notice you didn't say anything about the humans."

"The Consortium is a more complicated case." Kira started walking again. "Did I pass your test?"

Caius stopped, barking out a laugh. "I like you, little heir. I think we're going to get along nicely."

He turned back to the palace.

“You’re not coming?” Kira asked in surprise.

He raised a hand in goodbye. “Someone has to make sure the Overlord returns in one piece.”

“So much for Harlow being able to handle himself,” Kira grumbled.

Caius’s voice spoke into her ear, sounding like it was coming from right next to her. “Harlow is a good Overlord who allows us the luxury of fussing over his safety. Never doubt his capabilities, little heir.”

“I don’t know whether to find him irritating or wise,” Jin said from above Kira as they watched him walk into the palace, whistling as if he didn’t have a care in the world.

“Caius holds command of the sixth quadrant of Roake’s territory and is the House’s military adviser. He means well, but he is an acquired taste,” Makon said, facing forward. “Come along. I will show you to your room.”

Kira and Jin didn’t argue, allowing the rest of the journey to be completed in silence.

The longer they walked, the bigger the Fortress of the Vigilant grew in the distance until it dominated the sky. The dark stone of the fortress’s walls seemed to absorb the light as House Roake’s crest flapped in the breeze coming off the ocean beyond. Birds circled in the air, their cries reaching Kira and the others. The fortress was imposing, almost austere as



they passed through the avenue gate and crossed a small bridge that spanned the long drop on either side.

Oshota in armor greeted Makon, their curious gazes resting for a second on Kira before moving to Finn.

Jin hummed as he kept pace with Makon, drifting a few feet over his shoulder. They passed through several hallways containing members of Roake, all of whom stopped to stare at Kira's presence.

Used to it after her previous visit, Kira sent them a respectful nod as she passed.

It wasn't until they reached a section in the upper levels of the fortress that Kira didn't recognize that she finally spoke.

"This isn't the way to my room," Kira said.

Her room had been on the opposite side of the fortress and several levels below this one.

"That room is no longer acceptable. As an heir of Roake, you deserve quarters in the area designated for the Overlord's family," Makon said over his shoulder, his pace never varying.

Kira frowned at his back. "How long do you plan to refer to me by that title?"

She'd hoped it was a passing thing, but that didn't seem to be the case.

"You are the heir. It is only proper I call you as such."

Kira shot a look at Finn, asking for help. He turned his head, pretending to examine the artifacts that decorated the wall.

Kira scowled. Did he really think she was stupid enough to believe he was fascinated by sights he'd probably seen a thousand times?

“You accept me just like that?” Kira asked. “No objections? No tests like Caius?”

Makon reached a door and stopped, facing her with the same calm he always seemed to have. “I do not need to. You will be good for this House. I already see that.”

Kira scoffed. “You don't even know me. I could be a Tsavitee sleeper agent for all you know.”

The corner of Makon's lips lifted in a tiny smile that was chilling. “If that was the case, you would already be dead.”

Kira had always known Makon wasn't someone to trifle with, but this confirmed it.

His presence was a little less loud than Caius or Harlow's, but Kira was guessing he could be just as dangerous.

Maybe more so considering you probably wouldn't see him coming.

There would be no warning before he cut your head off. Just a slice and then a spray of blood.

She should know, having seen him in action once before. He'd been a ghost. Right up until the moment he killed a man.

“These are the quarters you would have had, had you been raised in Roake,” Makon said. “Your parent's former room is located right across the hall. Harlow had me program your

biometric data into the permissions so you can visit any time you'd like. It has been kept in the same condition as it was when they were alive.”

Kira couldn't help taking a quick look at the set of doors he indicated, a strange yearning filling her.

“I'll keep that in mind,” Kira said, opening her own door and stepping inside.

She came to a quick stop as she got her first glimpse of the room.

To call it a bedroom was to do the suite a disservice.

The room was massive, with a set of French doors leading onto a balcony overlooking the line of cliffs the fortress perched on and the ocean beyond. Decorated in dark tones, it didn't feel gloomy with the large windows on either side of the French doors allowing light to illuminate the room.

A bed sat in the middle; a blanket made of white fur tipped in specks of black draped over its end.

The room was fit for a princess—or the heir of one of the strongest Houses.

Jin disappeared through one of the doorways off the main room.

“Kira, get a look at this bathroom.” Jin's words echoed from the other room. “It's huge.”

Unable to resist, Kira moved a few more steps into the room, looking through the doorway to catch a glimpse of the

space that had put an awed note in Jin's voice.

The room was even more luxurious, and over the top, than the bedroom.

A glass shower with black, stone walls took up one side. To the other was a massive in ground tub that Kira would have to step down into.

There would be enough room in that tub to fit Kira, Graydon, and his entire pod of oshota if they'd wanted.

Kira didn't think she'd ever seen a bathtub that big. The mere thought of how much water it would take to fill was enough to boggle the mind.

"Do you know what happened to my ship?" Kira asked, distracted by her surroundings.

"It took heavy damage in the landing."

Makon's answer came from behind her as she ventured toward the balcony, stopping on the threshold.

"At the moment, it is no longer space worthy."

The answer was expected but it didn't stop the tiny curl of pain in Kira's middle.

"The Overlord suspected you would want it repaired," Makon continued when she remained quiet. "He had it taken to one of our docks and assigned several of our engineers to bring it back to its former glory."

At that, Kira looked over at him. "That was kind of him."

"The Overlord loves you."

Kira smirked as she leaned against the balcony doors and crossed her arms over her chest. “How many trackers is he going to put on my ship before he’s done?”

Makon’s gaze was steady.

Kira chuckled to herself. Jin was going to have quite the time locating and destroying all of them.

Still, Kira wouldn’t put it past Harlow and the Tuann to have some sneaky type of tracker Jin couldn’t detect.

“Should be fun,” Kira murmured.

Makon moved toward the door. “I suggest you get some rest. Tomorrow is going to be a long day for you.”

“Oh?” Kira asked curiously.

“Your *seon’yer* deals with his emotions through an abundance of training and you’ve made him quite unsettled of late.” Kira caught her flinch as Makon slid her a look. “The Overlord possesses a similar temperament. You should prepare mentally for what you will face.”

“Lovely,” Kira muttered, slumping.

She could see it now. Wren had probably designed a training regimen straight out of the bowels of hell.

The worst part was Kira couldn’t even complain because she’d emerge stronger on the other side.

“Your oshota can take one of the attached rooms,” Makon instructed as he departed.

Jin popped out of the bathroom as Kira flopped on a settee.

She sprawled along it, lifting her legs onto the cushions as she put her hands behind her head and looked at the ceiling.

Jin drifted into her line of sight, using his “eye” to look down at her. “Fancy digs.”

Kira hummed an agreement.

“From the look of this place, they’re going to do everything they can to convince you to stay. I don’t think they plan on letting you go.”

“No.”

She was beginning to see that.

“What are you going to do?” Jin asked as Finn stepped out of the room he’d chosen to lean against the wall.

Kira glanced at the oshota before sitting up.

“Are you going to play the part of their heir?” Jin asked, moving to give her room.

“For now,” Kira said, leaning against the settee’s back. “The future is still undecided.”

There were still a lot of things Roake didn’t know about her. Jin and how he was treated was also a factor.

She’d be lying though if she said she hadn’t thought about what it would mean to stay. For the first time, she could picture the life she’d have if she allowed Roake to become her new family. If she became the heir they wanted.

The temptation was there.

So many things would be easier—but not all.

Kira draped one arm across the back of the settee. “What do you think our chances are of making it through this *adva ka* without anything happening?”

Finn pushed off the doorway he’d been leaning against, strolling across the room before taking a seat on one of the chairs across from Kira. “Before I met you, I’d have said pretty good.”

Jin snickered. “You’re a slow learner, but it seems you do learn.”

Kira ignored the irritated look Finn shot Jin. “Tell me what I’ll be facing.”

At her question, Finn turned serious. “The *adva ka* itself is closed to all but those attempting its passage. The Houses will not be able to directly interfere.”

“You’re saying any threat I face is likely going to come from the initiates themselves,” Kira said.

On the surface, that didn’t seem too bad. Those who attempted the *adva ka* were among the youngest of the Tuann. Except for outliers like Kira, their skills would be along the same level.

Unfortunately, things were never as simple as they seemed at first glance.

For a House to rise in power, they needed to increase their number of warriors and oshota. Obstruct that path and you could hamper a House’s military readiness.

Someone like Himoto would keep a few subordinates who were highly trained in reserve so he could easily take out those who might become a future threat.

Kira was willing to bet the other Houses would have taken the same stance.

That was to say nothing of the sleeper agents the Tsavitee had likely seeded throughout the Tuann who would like nothing more than Kira's death.

Even for her, this would be a tough fight if she couldn't rely on the backing of her House.

"If Elise is really on this planet as Aeron said, she'll likely use the influx of Tuann attending the *adva ka* to hide her presence," Jin said.

Since this was considered a major rite of passage, most Houses would have some level of presence. That was a lot of people going back and forth. Perfect for someone like Elise and a few Tsavitee generals to slip in unnoticed.

"It would help if we knew what they wanted," Kira said.

"Any leads yet?" Finn asked.

Kira and Jin stopped to look at him.

He spread his hands. "I'm assuming you've already started looking."

"Jin's right. You are learning," Kira said, a little amused.

Finn inclined his head. "It's either anticipate your actions or watch you almost die. I prefer the first—even if I don't always



agree with your choices.”

Kira rubbed her forefinger and thumb together as she considered Finn. “Jin, feel free to tell him.”

A hologram of the station formed in the air in front of Jin.

“Graydon’s not the only one who thought to check the station footage. I took the liberty of hacking the feed while we were there,” Jin said as Finn sat forward in surprise.

“You realize if you’re caught Alexander’s efforts to get you legal protection will go down the drain,” Finn pointed out.

“Big rewards sometimes necessitate taking a few risks,” Jin said. “I’m glad I did. Take a look at this.”

The angle of the camera changed to a different section of the dock.

A group of six Tuann wearing cloaks, the hoods raised, marched down the walkway.

Kira focused on the one at their center. The person’s build suggested a woman or a youth.

“I’ve gone through most of the feeds. There are a couple of groups that trigger some red flags, but this one is the most suspicious,” Jin said.

Finn’s brow furrowed as he examined the group. “They’re wanderers.”

Kira glanced over at him. “How can you tell?”

Finn nodded at the group. “Zoom in on what they’re wearing under their cloaks.”

The image adjusted to show the mismatched armor that peeked out from beneath the fabric of their outer layer. It looked like each suit had been assembled from different sets.

“No Tuann would wear armor like that. Even someone in low standing with their House rates something better,” Finn instructed.

You could tell a lot about a person based on how well they cared for their gear. Someone lazy would skip steps in favor of expediency. They were the type you wanted to avoid entrusting your life to.

These Tuann treated their armor like it was something precious. Previous damage had been carefully repaired and the metal polished until it shone. There were also long swords strapped to their backs, the hilts sticking up over their heads.

“We don’t wear our weapons like that either,” Finn continued. “That method is favored solely by wanderers.”

“Or people who want to look like wanderers,” Jin pointed out.

Finn’s lips flattened.

Kira glanced at him. “I thought the wanderers weren’t an accepted part of your society. How could they be here?”

Finn hesitated. “The *adva ka* is open to all Tuann who have not broken our laws. For those who wander, this can be a chance for re-entry into our society by winning the favor of a House through their performance.”

Kira studied the frozen images. “I can’t imagine that’s easy.”

Even as the heir of House Roake, she’d faced resistance. Some thinking she was insane for living alone on a ship except for the company of a drone.

She imagined it was worse for the wanderers. The exiles of their society.

“It is rare that such an endeavor succeeds,” Finn admitted.

A short silence fell as Jin shut off the hologram.

“When is the last time a wanderer has attempted the *adva ka*?” Jin asked.

Finn paused, looking away as he considered. “Over a hundred years.”

Jin bobbed slowly.

“Either these six are anomalies or Elise is using the identity of a wanderer hoping for redemption to conceal her movements,” Kira said slowly.

“That about sums it up,” Jin responded.

Kira grimaced. “I’m assuming confirming either one will be difficult.”

Finn’s nod didn’t make her feel any warm fuzzies.

“Maybe if he hadn’t drawn the attention of the inquisitors,” Finn told her. “They’ll be watching him now. Any signs of aggression or anything out of the norm and they will destroy him.”

Kira looked up at Jin. “Do you hear that? It’s danger close. No shenanigans.”

“You worry about yourself.”

Kira planned to.

“A little more caution before you jump off the deep end is all I’m asking.”

“Right back at ‘cha, Miss wants to play chicken with a ship.”

One side of Kira’s lips tilted up in a wry acknowledgement. “Then we’re agreed.”

They would both think twice before throwing themselves into danger.

“Not yet—when are you planning to inform Raider of Elise’s current status?”

Kira looked away, wishing she could delay the coming conversation a little longer.

There hadn’t been a lot of privacy after the attack on Almaluc before they boarded the Tuann ship.

Kira never got the chance to tell Raider she’d met the real Elise, only that the Elise that died wasn’t the one he knew and loved. She wanted to wait until she was sure they weren’t being monitored.

“If I were you, I’d do it sooner rather than later. Wait any longer and you risk him considering your withholding information a betrayal. I don’t think you want that.”

No, she didn't.

Kira would never forget the look Raider had given her when he learned she'd kept the existence of his daughter from him all these years. Like she'd walked up and plunged a knife on his back

"I'll take care of it," Kira said.

Truth was a medicine. One that sometimes burned on the way down. Raider would get through this—and so would she.

"I need you to do me a favor," Kira said.

Jin snorted. "What else is new?"

"Find out everything you can on that ship and who owns it. I have a feeling any clue you find will be very important for identifying our newest batch of enemies." Kira paused. "Also take another look at House Danai. They might have nothing to do with this incident, but their name has been in the mix too many times when things have gone bad."

"You have a plan?" Jin asked.

Kira shook her head. "I wouldn't call it something like that."

At least not yet.

"As far as we know House Danai is unrelated to everything that's happened."

It could be they were a scapegoat, and any links were circumstantial.

“It’d help to know more—including their relationship with Roake,” Kira said, glancing at Finn. “I want to know their strength and weaknesses—just in case.”

Kira frowned as Jin started for the balcony. “Where are you going?”

“I’m off to complete the task you gave me.”

The doorknob rotated.

“Jin—“ Kira started.

Jin threw the door open. “You didn’t think I could complete an investigation like that locked in this room, did you?”

Kira’s mouth shut. That *was* in fact what she’d been hoping for.

Jin chortled as he glided toward the railing. “I know you’re not that naïve.”

He disappeared over the balcony before Kira could raise an objection.

Movement from the chair across from her drew her attention to Finn as he rose. “Where are you going?”

“Bed. You heard Makon. Tomorrow is going to be rough.”

## ELEVEN

**K**ira didn't know what impulse compelled her to rise from her chair, but before she knew it, she'd already crossed the room to push open the doorway to the hallway. She leaned against the door's frame to stare at her parents' bedroom.

The thought of going inside was tempting. All that separated her was a few inches of wood and several hidden Tuann defenses.

The idea of a mother or father had always been a foreign one.

Himoto was the closest thing to a parent she had.

It was kind of sad when she thought about it. As a mentor, there was none better. Himoto was a soldier others looked up to. A born leader.

As a parent, he was less than ideal—even to his own biological daughter.

He had always preferred a hands-off approach, saying people learned best from their own mistakes. While true, it was difficult to accept that kind of mindset when you were a

child who only wished for the attention of the person you respected the most.

Things like love and affection weren't high on Himoto's list of necessities.

Kira had grown up strong and independent—if a tad lonely.

She'd tried to tell herself she didn't care. Not about the way she'd grown up or the parents who would have loved her.

“The past should stay in the past,” Kira whispered, trying to make herself believe it.

Pain was the only thing that would come of opening that door.

Harding and Liliana weren't waiting for her in that room. All that was left was their memory and the remnants of the life that should have been theirs. The dreams they'd had for their future daughter.

Kira leaned her head against the doorway.

Judging by Harlow's actions, her father would have been a good man. Her mother beloved. Not just by him but by many in Roake.

People like that deserved a good ending. Not the one they'd got.

There was an ache in Kira at the knowledge she'd never truly know the people they were. Never experience the love they would have heaped on her.



Once she opened that door, she'd know all that she'd been missing. Grief would come and along with it, fury.

Did she want to put herself through that?

She was already angry enough. Rage woven into the tapestry of her soul. It was what made her such an effective soldier.

Despite knowing all that, she couldn't help but waver in her resolve to leave that door locked.

Just a glimpse. That was all she needed to assuage her curiosity. To say she did it and move on. Then she'd go back to burying her head in the sand.

Kira took a tiny step forward.

A sound intruded.

Kira froze.

Harlow stood in the middle of the hallway, seeming almost as surprised as Kira at their unexpected meeting.

His gaze went from Kira to the door she had been about to approach. "Going in?"

Kira hesitated, casting a final glance at the intricate carvings before taking a step back. "No. Just curious."

Harlow murmured something to the two oshota standing beside him. They nodded before taking their leave.

Kira watched them go, her attention moving to Harlow as he approached her. He looked tired. The skin around his eyes and mouth carved with grooves.

“How much trouble are you in because of me?” Kira asked with a sense of guilt.

A quick smile came and went on Harlow’s face. “Nothing I can’t handle.”

“You’ll tell me if there’s something I can do,” Kira said.

Harlow inclined his head. “Of course.”

He was lying.

Harlow patted her shoulder, his hand coming up to touch her hair gently. “Don’t push yourself. Things will fall into place on their own.”

Kira wished she could believe that. She truly did. However, in her experience nothing ever came without a struggle.

“Your parents would want you to be happy—even if that means leaving their memory behind.”

Kira wasn’t sure how to respond to that.

Harlow shouldn’t know her that well. For him to guess the path her thoughts had taken meant he’d put a lot of effort in studying her personality. What’s more, she didn’t expect someone who’d loved his twin and his twin’s wife as much as he obviously did to advocate delaying her knowing their memory.

It was surprisingly considerate of him.

Then again, Harlow had been consistent from the beginning in the care with which he’d treated her.

Even when he opposed her decision to undertake the *uhva na* and step onto the path of the *adva ka*, he'd supported her. He'd made sure she had the training she needed for success.

She suspected he was a big part of the reason Wren had taken her as his *yer'se*, despite rumors saying he'd never done so with someone who wasn't at least past their rite of passage.

"When you're ready, I'll be here," he said, unable to hide the hope she would someday get there.

Kira tried to imagine how she'd feel if Elena had rejected everything to do with her mother.

"I hope you're right. That things will fall into place on their own," Kira added, seeing the question on his face.

She hoped there would come a day when she embraced that part of herself. When she could listen to Harlow tell stories of the people her parents had been.

It was sad but that day wouldn't be today.

Harlow's expression softened. "Me too."

Kira didn't say anything as he continued down the hall, heading for the door on the other end that she hadn't paid attention to until now.

"Harlow," Kira said, stopping him. "I know I'm difficult, but I do appreciate everything you've done for me."

Much of which went above and beyond the care of an uncle for a niece.

Harlow inclined his head, leaving Kira to her solitude as he disappeared into his.

Kira didn't return to her quarters immediately, instead leaning her side against her door's frame.

"Where's Graydon when you need him?" she asked softly.

It wasn't lost on her that Harlow had managed to avoid any further questions about what price he'd paid for beating Jarek.

She supposed if she wanted to know she could simply track down Graydon.

Of course, knowing him, she wouldn't have to. Graydon would come looking for her soon enough.



The next morning Kira stared at the table laden with food in appreciation. She inhaled the delicious scents rising from the table, her mouth watering in anticipation.

Maybe being referred to as the heir wasn't such a bad thing if it came with perks like this. Her previous stay in Roake hadn't come with meals delivered direct to her room. She'd needed to venture to one of the dining rooms if she wanted sustenance.

More often than not, Finn had had to procure dishes that could be eaten on the go since Kira didn't often make time for a sit-down meal.

She had to say she was quite enjoying the special attention.

A knock sounded at the door to the room, interrupting Kira's perusal.

Finn and Kira looked at each other.

He set a napkin on the table, rising from his chair. "I'll get it."

The tantalizing scents of the food washed away any objection Kira might have had as Finn disappeared through the balcony doors, crossing the floor of her room to the door leading to the hallway.

It appeared a week spent healing while in a coma had left her ravenous.

Nothing would keep her from her meal. Even unexpected visitors.

Kira paid no attention as Finn opened the door, a woman brushing past him.

"I see you haven't managed to lose your ball and chain," the woman called as she crossed Kira's room to the balcony.

Kira paused in the act of spooning pieces of a blue fruit with flecks of green scattered through its flesh onto her plate to look up at the person standing over her. Short by human standards, the woman had delicate features that pointed to an Asian ancestry.

"Blue," Kira said with a measure of surprise as she looked past her to Finn's irritated face.

The woman's real name was Yuki, but they'd always called her Blue on account of the way she dyed the tips of her hair blue.

Not terribly original but the name had stuck.

Once an orphan Kira rescued, she was now a part of the new Curs.

"I'm a little surprised you remember my name." Blue propped one hand on her hip as she attempted to look down at Kira from her less than impressive height. "What with you disappearing without a word—again. Did you forget I existed?"

Kira put the spoon she still held in her mouth, wondering how she should answer that question.

The truth was she *had* kind of forgotten Blue had remained behind in Roake while she and Raider were at the quorum.

Blue's eyes widened in disbelief as she read the answer on Kira's face.

"I expected something like this out of you. You have a history. Raider, however, is an entirely different story."

Underneath Blue's annoyance, Kira thought she caught a glimpse of hurt.

Blue wasn't some random person who'd joined the Curs because they were considered an elite unit. She'd done so as an homage to those who'd died. They'd been her family too, once. The only one she'd had after her planet was invaded and her family killed by the Tsavitee.

Blue flopped into the chair across from Kira. “I can’t believe you left me behind—again.”

The put-out expression on her face faded to one of bewilderment as Finn loomed over her.

“That’s my seat,” he informed her.

Blue looked around in confusion, taking in the two empty chairs to either side of her.

“Move,” he said again more slowly this time.

Blue sent him a grimace as she leveraged herself out of his seat before sprawling in the one right next to it. “Fine. Happy now?”

Finn lowered himself into the chair she’d vacated. “Ecstatic.”

Blue eyed the oshota. “I didn’t think you lot were capable of having a personality—or sarcasm.”

Finn preoccupied himself with filling his plate with food from several of the dishes in front of him.

“Then you haven’t been paying attention while you were here,” he told Blue, placing the plate before him.

“Is that right?” Blue asked with a challenge in her voice.

Finn’s gaze shifted slowly to her, the condescension in it making Blue straighten. “That is right.”

Blue faced Kira. “Is he allowed to talk to me like that?”

Kira considered her with some amusement. “I think he just did.”

A pout formed on Blue's face as she folded her arms across her chest and propped a knee against the edge of the table.

"Tell me what's going on. What made you leave? And why did Raider act like someone had murdered his best friend for a week afterward before up and leaving without a goodbye?" Blue complained.

Kira reached toward one of the platters in the center of the table, scooping a piece of the white, flaky fish that had been calling her name for the last few minutes onto her plate.

"Did you already talk to Raider?"

Blue used her knee to tilt her chair back until it balanced on two legs.

"I tried. He was babysitting some kid." Bafflement showed on Blue's face. "He hates kids."

Kira paused in the process of forking up a piece of fish.

From the sound of it, Raider hadn't told Blue about his relationship with Elena. A fact Kira couldn't help but be relieved about.

It meant he was taking Elena's safety seriously. Even going so far as hiding her existence from those he trusted the most.

The thing with secrets was that they had a way of getting out.

A fact Kira could attest to.

While hiding Elena forever wasn't an option, she wanted to delay the inevitable for as long as possible.



The more people who knew, the greater the chances of other's finding out.

As one of the few born of both human and Tuann parents, Elena was a unique existence that some would fear, and others abhor.

Kira wanted to protect her from that for as long as possible.

“What’s going on?” Blue demanded.

Kira raised an eyebrow at her. “What makes you think anything is going on?”

Blue’s eyes narrowed. “You and Raider are up to something. Don’t think I don’t recognize the signs.”

Kira slipped the fork laden with fish into her mouth, fighting the urge to close her eyes at the scrumptious flavor.

“I brunt no wha cha takhing about,” Kira said, too busy chewing to talk properly.

Blue sent Kira with a dour look that showed she didn’t believe that for a second.

The door to Kira’s room burst open as Raider strode inside.

Finn’s fork dropped with a clatter to his plate as he fixed Kira with a look that said his patience was reaching an end.

“How is he able to get in here without one of us letting him in?” Kira asked as Raider reached the balcony.

“I added his biometrics to the system last night as a precaution.”

Kira's eyebrows climbed. The fact Finn had done such a thing showed how much he trusted the human. Something that would have been unfathomable not too long ago.

The two had grown close after they'd fought side by side against House Dethos on Almaluc.

Finn's jaw flexed as he flicked a look Raider's way. "I did not think he would be so presumptuous as to enter without an invitation."

Raider didn't look at him as he crossed to Blue's side.

"What are you doing?" Blue asked as he lifted her out of her chair and ushered her to the door.

"Sorry, kid. I have a few things to discuss with Kira."

"Wait. No. I'm a Cur too!" Blue shouted as Raider shepherded her away from the table.

"It's classified."

"I have one of the highest security clearances," Blue protested as Raider pushed her out of the room.

"Not this time. Not for this."

Raider slammed the door closed in Blue's face.

"I don't think she's going to forgive you for that," Kira observed as Raider returned to the table.

"I'll worry about that later."

Brave man.

Blue might seem like a pocket-sized, harmless person, but she had earned her place at the Curs' side. What she lacked in stature, she made up in brains—and vindictiveness.

There would be a painful reckoning in Raider's future.

Kira just hoped Blue's retribution didn't spill over onto her.

Setting her fork down on the plate in front of her, Kira gave up on the possibility of a peaceful breakfast as Raider flopped on the chair Blue had vacated.

“Want to tell me why you interrupted my breakfast in such a dramatic fashion?”

He propped his chin on his hand as he blinked his eyes at her in a way that she was sure he meant for her to understand but didn't.

“Anything you want to tell me?” Raider asked.

Kira frowned. “Okay, I'll bite. About what?”

Raider dropped his hand and reached for a basket of fluffy violet offerings Kira assumed were similar to biscuits.

Finn slapped his hand away. “No.”

Raider cradled the offend appendage as he stared at the oshota. “I was just going to take one.”

“I don't think so,” Finn told him.

Kira stared at the basket, suddenly way more interested in the biscuit things than she'd been previously.

“We have to talk,” Raider said, choosing to ignore Finn's rudeness.

A weighty silence built before Finn sighed, pushing back his chair. "I'll be in the other room."

Kira made a disappointed sound as the oshota gathered his plate and the basket of Tuann biscuits.

Finn gave no signs he'd heard as he stepped through the balcony doors.

"You're ruining my breakfast," Kira informed Raider, unhappy to have lost the chance to taste the new dish.

Raider didn't seem concerned as he tilted his head at Finn. "Do you think he really can't hear us or is he just pretending?"

The oshota had taken a seat on Kira's settee and was now staring at them from the other side of the window as he slowly ate his food.

"It's hard keeping secrets from an oshota," Kira said.

One side of Raider's mouth lifted. "Are you telling me there are still things Finn doesn't know about you?"

Kira gave him a thin smile. "I said hard; not impossible."

Raider smirked as a husky chuckle rumbled from his chest. "Something tells me you always have a few tricks up your sleeve. Secrets you're not willing to part with."

Kira didn't laugh with him, regarding Raider with a steady gaze.

Somehow, she didn't think he'd come all this way to ask her what secrets she'd shared with Finn.

Raider turned serious, the look in his eyes deepening as he pinned Kira with an intense gaze. “I’m giving you one last chance, Phoenix.”

Kira reached for the tea next to her and lifted the cup to her lips. She took her time taking a sip as she waited.

“I didn’t say anything earlier because we were on a Tuann ship, and I know how paranoid you are. Since I share in your paranoia, I decided to be patient.” Raider leaned forward, a slight threat in his expression. “But now we’re no longer on that ship. It’s time to come clean and tell me what you know about Elise.”

“I’m surprised you waited this long.”

Raider arched an eyebrow. “You’re not going to deny it?”

“There’s no point, is there?”

Kira could see from his expression that she was right. Raider wasn’t going to let this drop.

In all truthfulness, he, more than anyone, had the right to know everything Kira did.

“Just answer me one thing—is Elise on this planet?”

Kira’s gaze shifted as Jin joined them, his engines almost silent as he lifted over the balcony.

“If I say yes, what will you do?”

Some of the fight went out of Raider, a mask dropping down as his gaze turned distant. “You encountered Elise on Alamluc.”

Raider's certainty left Kira with no room for denial. Not that she'd planned to anyway.

"That's how you knew the other one was a fake," he said to himself as if Kira had only confirmed something he'd long suspected. His gaze locked on hers. "What aren't you telling me?"

"She's working with the generals."

Kira caught the faint tightening around his eyes that whispered of his instinctive denial. The same one she'd felt when she saw Elise at a general's side.

"Could she have been brainwashed?" he asked after a long moment spent conquering his emotions.

Kira shook her head. "I don't think so."

Elise had seemed too like herself with no signs she was acting under duress. Many of the things she'd said were the types of things the Elise Kira knew would have said.

Raider stood in an explosive movement, crossing to the balcony to stare at the ocean beyond.

"I'm trying to decide if I'm angrier about the thought that she might be a traitor or the fact that this is the second time we've been on the same planet, and she has made no attempt to contact me." Raider's fists clenched on the balcony, giving away the amount of anger he was pretending didn't exist.

Kira rose to join him at the balcony. "We don't know that she's actually here."

Raider's gaze swung to her, the magnitude of his pain making her want to flinch.

There was an anguish in his face that made her heart clench. A misery that she was helpless to alleviate.

"We don't know everything," she told him, wanting to grasp onto hope no matter how faint it was. "For all we know, everything she's done has been to protect us and Elena."

Elise wasn't here to speak for herself.

Until they had all the facts, Kira wouldn't judge one way or the other.

"But you think she's here," Raider said in a flat voice.

Kira hesitated, her gaze moving to Jin.

He floated forward. "Our source seems to think so."

"Why?"

"We're still piecing that together," Jin said. "But we suspect it has something to do with the *adva ka*."

"Of course, it does." Raider stared at the sky for several minutes before focusing on Kira. "What's your plan? I'm assuming you have one."

"Of course, we do," Jin said.

Kira inhaled a deep breath. "It's simple. I participate in the *adva ka* and wait for Elise to make her move. Once she does, I capture her and force an explanation out of her."

And pray like mad that Elise wasn't the one responsible for the death of the Curs.

There were many things Kira could forgive, Bates, Bayside, and Walker's deaths weren't among them.

Raider's nod was slow. "Agreed with one correction."

Kira sent him a questioning look as Raider straightened.

"You aren't the only one who will be participating in the *adva ka*."

Kira blinked at him. "Who else?"

Raider bared his teeth. "Me."

"You?" she pointed at him in surprise.

"That's right."

"You're going to participate in a Tuann rite of passage?"

"I knew you were smart," he told her, leaning against the balcony and folding his arms over his chest.

Obviously not smart enough since she still was struggling to understand.

"How?"

"Apparently any *yer'se* can enter with the approval of their *seon'yer*," he informed her.

"And Wren gave his permission?"

"He did."

"And you agreed?" Kira asked, a little baffled.

Raider gave her a crooked smile, some of his old self peeking out. "I did."



“Why?”

A chuckle left Raider. “If you think about it, I’m sure you’ll arrive at the correct answer.”

“Elena.”

Raider inclined his head. “Ding. Ding. Ding.”

It made sense. As much as they tried to protect her, there would come a time when her origins got out.

As a half human, Elena would face discrimination—on both sides.

The best way to combat that was for Raider to prove himself in the most explosive manner possible.

“Himoto always said if you couldn’t be respected—be feared,” Kira said on a sigh.

There was a vicious look in Raider’s eyes that Kira hadn’t seen since the war. Not when he was angry at her for her perceived abandonment. Not even when he found out about Elena.

There was a void in his gaze that said he’d shut away the softer emotions, leaving nothing but the killer behind.

It was a look Kira had hoped to never see again.

“I don’t mind being a monster if that’s what’s needed to protect her,” Raider informed Kira.

“There are other ways that don’t include making yourself a target for all the Houses.” Kira tossed her napkin onto her plate.

The conversation had officially ruined what was left of her appetite.

“Name them,” Raider challenged.

Kira lifted her chin, knowing he wasn’t going to like this next part. “You could keep your distance from Elena.”

“No.” Raider didn’t even hesitate to reject Kira’s suggestion.

From a certain standpoint, his objection was reasonable.

Raider had already lost twelve years with his daughter. That was twelve years of experiences he’d never get back.

All the firsts he’d never see.

Like the first time Elena smiled. The lisp she’d had when she lost her front teeth. The excitement she’d had the first time Kira put her on a wave board.

Raider would be loath to miss any more of his daughter’s life.

What’s more, their relationship was still in the nascent stage. Any perceived rejection from Raider would crush Elena.

“If you fail in the *adva ka*—“ Kira trailed off.

Right now, the relationship between the Tuann and the Consortium hung by the thinnest of tendrils.

Since most Tuann had likely never interacted with a human, only hearing about them through unflattering rumors, they would use Raider as an example by which to measure the rest of humanity.

If he showed the slightest weakness, they'd use that as further confirmation that humanity wasn't worth the effort.

"I won't fail." Raider's gaze was steady, conviction burning in his eyes.

One side of Kira's lips tilted up. No, he wouldn't.

People often underestimated the power of their own will. They let the weakness of their mind dictate how high they could rise.

True strength came by finding your wall and overcoming it.

It was something the Curs had excelled at.

"I miss the days when I could order you not to be a dumbass," Kira said, pretending more irritation than she felt.

Raider's smile held a touch of the rogue. "Let's be honest—those days never existed."

Kira snorted into the cup she'd just lifted to her lips. "Since you're going to anyway, do what you want. I'll be here to catch you if you fall."

As she always did when one of her Curs got themselves in over their heads. Just like they would her if the situation was reversed.

Jin bobbed up and down, calling Kira and Raider's attention. "I'm so glad everyone is on the same page. I have a way to ensure Raider's and your success."

Kira froze with the cup half lifted to her lips as a creature slithered between the rails of the balcony.

As if sensing her gaze, the creature paused, lifting its small head to fix eyes the color of rubies on Kira. Its tongue flicked out before it lowered to the ground and continued slithering in their direction.

“Jin, what is that?” Kira asked in as calm a voice as she could muster.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Finn rise from the settee and move slowly to the balcony doors.

“Do you like it?” Jin asked, sounding excited as the snake reached the leg of a table, winding up it until it reached the top.

The serpent-like creature slithered across the surface, stopping in front of Kira to coil its body in a tight circle.

Finished, it lifted its upper half to peer curiously at Kira.

Unable to help herself, Kira reached for the tiny snake. “You’ve outdone yourself this time.”

“I know.” Jin sounded proud.

Kira lifted the snake to examine it closer. It was about half the length of Kira’s forearm and as wide as her pointer finger.

There was a faint transparency to the blush color of its body, reminding Kira of a gem humans called morganite.

“Did you base this off a *lu-ong*?” Kira asked with a frown, noting the whiskers that extended from either side of the snake’s nose and the crest that ran along the back of its head like a mane.

The *lu-ong* were sacred to the Tuann. Kira wasn't sure how they'd feel if a piece of jewelry was made in the creature's likeness.

"Don't be ridiculous. It's a snake."

It was certainly not like any snake Kira had seen in the history books or on the holovids.

Finn moved closer, peering at the snake. His eyes widened before his gaze shot to Jin in accusation. "What did you do?"

Kira paused, looking over at the two in curiosity.

"I don't know what you mean," Jin blustered.

Kira didn't need their bond to sense the guilt in Jin's tone.

Finn stabbed a finger at the snake. "That thing is made out of *tolial*. There are only two places on this planet where you can find that material. One of them is the Shining Palace's treasury. The other is in Roake's."

Raider's shoulders shook with repressed amusement as Kira let out a moan. "Jin, tell me you didn't."

"They weren't using it," Jin protested. "It was just sitting there."

Kira's head thumped onto the table. "Which did you get the *tolial* from?"

Jin's answer was filled with sulkiness. "Roake."

Kira breathed a sigh of relief. At least it wasn't the worst-case scenario.

She looked up at Finn. “How much is it if I were to buy it from Roake?”

Finn’s expression was heavy. “Two hundred *veryls*.”

“What does that amount to in the Consortium’s currency?”

“Two million credits.”

Kira’s breath stuttered in her chest as Raider choked.

“How much did you say?”

“Two million.”

Kira blinked rapidly at him. Even if she were to work a thousand lifetimes, she didn’t think she’d be able to come up with that much money.

It was an impossible amount.

Jin backed away as Kira pinned him with a look.

Was there a stronger word for death? Because that was what she planned to do with him.

“Now, Nixxy,” Jin started.

“You’re going to put this back where you found it,” she said through clenched teeth.

“I can’t,” Jin confessed. “Once the process has been started, I can’t return the material to its original state.”

Ah.

Kira figured out the word she wanted.

Extermination.

That's what she was about to do to him. Exterminate him so thoroughly that even his ancestors felt it.

## TWELVE

Kira hurried through the halls toward the training room, knowing she was running the risk of being late.

“I think you’re worrying for nothing,” Jin said, speeding after her.

Kira was irritated to see the gem snake riding on the top of his sphere, its head lifted as it stared around in fascination.

“Roake isn’t going to just look past the theft of something as priceless as what you used in that thing’s body.” Kira pointed to the snake. “Why did you even bring it?”

He should have left it in her suite.

Right now, no one knew what Jin had done. Kira wanted to keep it that way.

That was difficult if Jin continued to run around advertising the fact that he’d not only breached the treasury but also made off with a precious item.

Kira stalked down the hallway, nodding politely at the pair of women heading in her direction.



They dipped their heads in a sign of respect. “Heir.”

Their gazes flicked to Jin and then Finn before they moved past Kira and continued on their way.

“You said it yourself. The inquisitors camp will probably place me under observation. This guy can help me be places that would be hard to explain otherwise.”

Kira pinched the bridge of her nose. “Why this material? You couldn’t have picked something a little less conspicuous?”

If Finn recognized it at a glance, it meant others likely would to.

Seeing a set of stairs, Kira descended them at a near run.

“No, the conductivity in this material is better than any other I’ve used so far.”

“Wait.” Kira stopped as a thought occurred to her. “Did you use Roake’s treasury to create your other spawn?”

“Ah.”

Kira’s eyes widened. “You did!”

A stream of curses went through her head as she reached the hallway that would lead to the training area.

“Not the first one,” Jin said defensively. “After it was destroyed protecting you, I learned the material I used was important. It took a bit of trial and error to find what substances worked best.”

His words got Kira to move past the worry to actually listen.

It occurred to her that Jin's obsession with his "spawn" was a relatively new development. One that began once they reached Ta Sa'Riel.

She had to wonder if perhaps this was a manifestation of his soul's breath.

She knew for a fact that human technology had not advanced to create artificial creatures as independent or lifelike as the one perched on Jin's casing.

It was a question she didn't know how to ask. Particularly when they were surrounded by prying ears.

Whatever the case, they needed to hide the snake's presence.

At least until Kira figured out a way to break the *tolial's* theft to Harlow.

Kira held out her hand to the snake. "Here. Get on."

Its tongue darted out, investigating before the snake slid forward. Its belly was oddly warm as it slowly wound its way up Kira's arm.

The entrance to the training room came into view as the tip of the snake's tail disappeared under her sleeve just as the woman standing outside caught sight of their approach.

"What is Auralyn doing out here waiting for us?" Kira asked softly.

As a member of Wren's pod, Auralyn would know Kira's presence was requested for training. She was also the only one

of Wren's oshota that Kira hadn't had the opportunity to learn from.

"She's here for me," Raider said, lifting his hand in greeting.

Auralyn's expression didn't change from the boredom that Kira had come to realize was her default. The oshota jerked her chin in a silent summons before strolling away.

"A woman of few words," Raider said under his breath.

"Good luck," Kira said, sharing a look with Raider.

Despite her quiet, Auralyn had always struck Kira as capable. Raider was in for a hell of a time.

"You should be more concerned about yourself," Finn informed Kira as Raider started after Auralyn.

"There's no fear of that. I'm plenty worried already."

Jin glided into the training room. "Let's see what fresh nightmares they have in store for you."

"Oh goody," Kira grimaced, trailing behind Jin with the unsettling sense of feeling like a prisoner walking to her execution.

The Warrior's Hall was a familiar sight. Mats covered the floor except for a narrow strip along the walls, offering a protective surface for those training in the middle of the room. Simulators where Tuann could conduct mock battles against holograms existed off to one side.

To her left, a wall was papered in sapphire-blue banners, names written on them in white. It was a memorial wall meant to remember those who'd fallen in defense of Roake.

Kira's gaze lifted, finding the largest of the banners located in a place of honor. Its blue had faded with age until the letters that spelled out her father's name, Harding, were nearly unintelligible.

Catching sight of Harlow's distinctive burgundy hair, Kira changed direction to skirt the edge of the mats.

As she passed, a woman slammed her opponent into the ground right next to Kira.

"Sorry, heir." The woman flashed a smile that said she wasn't sorry at all as her opponent groaned.

"Arley, do you have to be so violent in front of the heir," someone called at the woman's back.

Arley moved away, giving her opponent room to rise. "Better the heir understands us now rather than later."

Kira almost laughed at the challenge she saw on Arley's face as she continued toward Harlow.

"It's been a while since someone wanted to test us," Jin crooned.

Kira schooled her features to an expression of neutrality as she made her way across the room. If she had to guess, she'd say these were some of Harlow's oshota. Warriors responsible for the safety of the House.

Probably here to get a look at the prospective heir and judge for themselves whether she had what it took to be their next leader.

Kira didn't pay them any attention as she reached Harlow, Caius, and Wren whose expression was hard to read as she joined them.

"You're late," her *seon'yer* said.

Kira offered no excuse for her tardiness. It would do her no good and likely lead to more trouble when the other was determined to find fault with her.

Kira didn't know if Wren's mood was a form of retaliation for placing herself in danger or if he had ulterior motives.

Either way, the result was the same. She had to take what was coming without an ounce of protest.

Sometimes your best way out of a situation was to take the hit and keep going. Arguing would only lead to worse results—even if you were right.

Caius covered his mouth, looking at the ground.

The three men looked over as a commotion started at the entrance. Graydon prowled toward them, Amila and Solal flanking him as the rest of his oshota lingered on the edge of the room.

"Did I miss anything?" Graydon asked.

"You're right on time. She was late," Harlow informed him.

Graydon lifted his eyebrows at Kira, a faint smile lingering on his lips. “Brave of her.”

Kira rolled her eyes at him, not reacting otherwise as those training in the hall drifted in their direction to form a circle around Kira and the others.

It looked like she’d been right earlier—they were here because of her.

Oh goody.

Caius’s gaze was fixated on Jin. “How about a match? I’m interested in seeing your capabilities.”

Kira started, looking between the two as Jin bobbed like a boxer preparing to get in the ring.

“It’s been a while since anyone’s invited me to play,” Jin gloated.

Caius didn’t know what he was asking for. If Raider was here, Blue even, they could have warned him.

“That’s a really bad idea,” Kira started.

Caius cut her off. “I’ll be the judge of that.”

As if obeying some unseen cue, the Tuann tightened the circle around Kira in a move meant to intimidate.

She wasn’t, but they didn’t need to know that.

Kira held up a hand in surrender. “Alright. You win. I withdraw my objection.”

She was trying to be nice and protect him from himself, but if he wasn’t going to appreciate her good intentions he could

deal with the consequences.

She just hoped he didn't live to regret this.

Actually, scratch that, she was looking forward to seeing the look on his face when he learned how badly he'd miscalculated.

“One final thing,” Caius said as Kira started to withdraw to give them room for the match. “We have a tradition in Roake. For every minute you're late, you must take a blow from those whose time you wasted.”

Wren leaned forward. “And you're very late.”

Realization dawned, aided by the look of satisfaction on Wren's face that she saw too late. She'd been set up.

Finn caught her startled gaze. One of his eyes slid closed in an exaggerated wink.

Son of a—Finn knew about this.

Kira didn't have any time for surprise as a shift of air warned of an attack. Kira sidestepped, whirling to find a woman completing her attack, blade still extended in front of her.

“That's one,” the woman shouted with a grin. Her gaze shot to someone standing in the crowd. “Your turn.”

Kira sucked in a breath as an attack came from her right. She evaded, dodging easily.

A man straightened. “Two.”

Jin started for Kira. *Ki* flashed bringing him to an abrupt halt.

Caius lowered his hand, the air above it still sparking from the outpour of soul's breath. "Your opponent is me, remember?"

A tense moment passed.

Jin reversed direction, gliding slowly in Caius's direction. "By all means. We shouldn't disappoint those who came all this way to see us, should we, Nixxy?"

"No, we cannot."

"Let's give them a show, then."

Kira settled into a defensive crouch. "You took the words right out of my mouth."

No wonder Finn hadn't objected to Raider and Blue crashing their breakfast. He'd known this was coming.

She wouldn't be surprised if the breakfast itself was a way of slowing her down.

She suspected everyone in the training hall would get a turn at trying to land a blow against her.

This was going to be protracted—and messy.

Kira slipped to the side as a Tuann man charged, arms outstretched to wrap her in a bear hug.

Kira pivoted as he blundered past her, kicking the back of his knee hard enough to send him crashing to the ground.



She bared her teeth at the rest. “Come on then. I was starting to feel cooped up. This will be a nice exercise.”

A pair of Tuann who looked like twins snickered as they circled to either side of Kira, keeping five feet of distance between themselves and her as they tried to split her focus.

Kira kept on the balls of her feet, prepared to move in any direction at an instant’s notice.

“You’re not supposed to fight back,” the one to Kira’s left said.

Kira kept her guard raised, knowing that the words were an attempt to draw her focus and give the other an opening to exploit.

“I’ve never been a fan of playing by the rules.” Kira let her eyes un-focus, her mind going silent as she waited.

There.

A shift in the balance of the Tuann who had spoken as they prepared to spring forward.

It turned out that the other was a decoy.

Kira darted forward, easily dodging the stream of *ki*. She grabbed the person’s arm, directing it at the twin.

There was a grunt breaking her opponent’s concentration.

“Felix.”

Kira smirked. Exactly as planned.

She shifted her grip, yanking him into the path of another who’d tried to attack while she was preoccupied.

To her right, the sound of laser fire rent the air as Jin pursued Caius.

The two wove across the floor in a graceful dance, taking turns attacking and evading.

For such a big man, Caius was surprisingly nimble. He moved as if he knew exactly where Jin would attack next.

No wonder he was part of Roake's upper echelons.

"Where are you looking?" a Tuann woman snarled.

Kira bent backward, avoiding the wooden blade that missed her face by a centimeter.

Kira's hand snapped out, latching onto the woman's wrist. "Enough of this."

She twisted.

The woman yelped, the practice blade dropping from her grip.

Kira caught it.

"Thanks," Kira said in a chipper voice as she shoved the woman into another group of Tuann.

It gave Kira time to break out of the encirclement. She raced through the room, several warriors following.

This would take her forever if she had to wait for each to take a turn attacking.

While that might be fun in its own way, Kira was an impatient sort.

Kira parried two more attacks before sprinting for the simulators. She needed to figure out a way to speed things up if she wanted to keep the advantage.

The longer she fought; the more tired she'd get. Eventually she was bound to make a mistake.

While that wasn't the end of the world, Kira refused to make things that easy for them.

She crossed the invisible barrier that announced the edge of the simulator. Four Tuann followed, war cries issuing from their throats.

Kira reached the simulator's control. She brought up the menu, scanning it quickly for a species she recognized as one of the Tuann cursed.

Realizing her plan, he put on a burst of speed.

Kira smiled at him. "Have fun."

She chose the image of a ripper, jumping backward out of the simulator as ten holograms stepped into being.

Kira had no idea why the Tuann would have a ripper programmed into their simulators.

The creatures bared their fangs as they slunk toward their prey, lowering their heads as they crept closer.

Covered in fur on their torso, the ripper had a pair of scraggly wings that made them look like a rat had mated with a bird. While they were native to a planet that was comprised largely of swamp, most people chose to avoid the world.

As far as Kira knew, it was unclaimed.

No one wanted to deal with a territorial species like the ripper which would attack on sight for a world that was severely lacking in resources.

“*Mea’Ave* take her. I fucking hate rippers,” one of the Tuann exclaimed.

The four changed tactics, putting their backs to one another as the rippers surrounded them.

Kira waved when she caught one of them looking her way before sauntering away with a laugh.

“You’ll pay for this!” someone shouted at her back.

Kira was sure she would, but not before she made them regret tangling with her.

Thought they could try their hand at hazing her, did they?

Ha!

The last people who’d tried that still ran the other way when they saw her coming.

“Does anyone else find her smile a little scary?” one Tuann asked the other.

His companion nodded.

“Jin!” Kira shouted, marching toward him. “Are you ready to change the game?”

The drone broke away from Caius, rising into the air where the other man couldn’t reach.

“I thought you’d never ask.”

Caius lowered his practice blade, looking between the two of them with a suspicious frown.

Kira’s smirk widened. “Switch.”

Jin screamed a challenge as he shot toward the mass of Tuann. “Prepare for the Tin Man’s wrath, bitches!”

Kira laughed as she sprinted forward. She lifted the stolen blade, slashing at Caius’s torso.

Caius’s blade blocked hers. The force of the crash sent protest rocketing through Kira’s wrists.

Her muscles burned as Caius used his greater strength to bear down with his blade on hers.

Kira locked her legs and gritted her teeth as she forced herself not to yield.

“This is quite the unexpected turn of events,” Caius said in a conversational tone.

Kira snarled at his nonchalance.

He acted like he was out for an evening stroll, his face showing none of the strain she was feeling.

“I do that a lot.” Kira’s arms started to shake.

She let her guard collapse, stepping to the side as his sword swished past her and thrusting into the opening she’d just created.

The tip of her blade met empty air. Caius was now several feet away, the blade he’d held moments before nowhere to be

seen.

“That’s not how the game is played,” Caius reproached.

Kira sank into a defensive posture, alertness filling her.

Caius was much faster than anything he’d displayed while dueling Jin. So fast she hadn’t been able to track him with her eye.

As if he could tell what she was thinking, Caius gave her a closed mouth smile. “Nevertheless, I’ve learned what I wanted to know so I’ll consider this my part of your initiation.”

Kira narrowed her eyes, unable to bring herself to believe his words.

She’d been expecting an epic battle that would take care of some of the restlessness she’d had since awakening in the Shining Palace.

He was giving up? Just like that?

Caius looked behind her to where Jin faced off with the rest. “Are you sure you want to leave him like that?”

Kira hesitated, shooting a glance at Jin to find him besieged.

He was in his element, cackling merrily as his lasers fired without pause. Every few seconds he would jerk to the side as a Tuann launched a *ki* wave at him.

He never stopped, smoothly weaving through the bodies as he sniped them from above.

*Ki* flew, the situation growing more dangerous as the Tuann began to cooperate.

Kira gave Caius her back, sprinting toward her friend.

Caius's voice followed her as she plunged into the crowd. "I look forward to your display, little heir."

Kira ignored his words as she fought her way to Jin's side, not pausing as she laid about her with the practice blade.

Finally, she reached Jin. She whirled to face the Tuann, trusting Jin to protect her back.

"Having fun?" she asked Jin.

A circle opened up around them, giving them a brief respite.

"You always show me the best time," Jin said playfully. "I really don't know how to thank you."

Kira snickered as a wave of Tuann advanced.

"Ready, Tin Man?"

Jin's lasers fired. "Always, Nixxy."

"Then see if you can keep up," Kira ordered with a grin, charging the Tuann.



"Her skills have improved," Harlow observed as Kira and Jin defended themselves against the Tuann. The two made a perfect team as they glided over the floor. Jin guarded her blind spots as Kira attacked, merciless as she took down those who came against her.

Their movements were a synchronized work of art that any of Graydon's oshota would be jealous of.

"Little Storm, you found a gem this time," Caius said, joining them.

Caius slapped Graydon on the shoulder as they settled in to watch.

Kira probably didn't realize it, but those she'd faced so far, with the exception of Caius, were all in the lower ranks of Harlow's forces.

Things would get more difficult from here as she deflected those with more experience.

Graydon caught her wince followed by a glare as Jiru landed a blow on her upper arm.

Jin retaliated with a laser strike that made Jiru laugh.

The rest of Jiru's pod closed in on the two. For a brief time, Kira's blade became a whirl of movement as she fought to avoid any further breaches of her defenses.

"Her father would have been proud," Finn said softly.

There was a nostalgic look on the oshota's face, as if he were watching a scene from the past.

Harlow looked over at him. "Are you going to renew your vow after she passes her *adva ka*?"

Finn's gaze met Graydon's. "This is what you've been hoping for, isn't it?"



Graydon's lips curved. "You act surprised when you knew this was what I wanted all along."

Finn had been adrift for a long time before Kira's arrival. The man was far too talented and loyal to be left to his own devices.

Graydon had seen an opportunity to bring him back to Roake and seized it. The bond that had formed between the two was far more than he'd dared to hope for.

Strong enough to keep Finn at Kira's side even after she passed the *adva ka*. One of the few instances where it would not have been seen as a mark against his honor should he choose to step back as her oshota.

Finn's mouth twisted. "One day, little Storm, all of your machinations will get you into trouble."

Graydon focused on the challenges as Kira defended against the last of those standing. "As long as that day isn't today."

Kira's chest heaved as she blinked away the sweat in her eyes as those surrounding her took a step back.

"Is it over?" Jin asked, sounding almost tired for once.

A path opened between Kira and those beside Graydon.

Finn shook his head as he stepped forward, grabbing a practice blade from one of the motionless Tuann.

"I'm not going to go easy on you," Finn informed Kira.

She lifted her blade, a fine tremor in its length pointing to her exhaustion. Despite that, her gaze was alert.

Kira didn't know the meaning of the words "give up".

Silence spread as Finn stilled. The world seemed to slow.

Finn burst forward, covering the distance between them in a split second. Kira met his momentum, her blade coming up to block his.

There was a clang before Finn withdrew with a respectful nod that said it all. He wasn't going anywhere after Kira's *adva ka*. He'd stay right next to her.

"Any further news regarding the incident with her ship?" Harlow asked.

A low chant ran through the hall as Wren stepped forward next. The words developed a pulse, a feeling of anticipation building in the crowd.

"I learned who owned the ship that nearly collided with Kira's," Graydon said, not taking his eyes off the pair.

"And?"

"House Votair, though they deny any culpability for the bog's hag."

Harlow snorted. "And I'm betting it's hard to prove."

"Impossible."

Wren moved just then, his strike poetry in motion as he attacked.

Kira spun out of the way, the exchange over almost as soon as it began.

The ground started to shake as the Tuann stomped their feet in time to their chant.

Harlow squeezed Graydon's shoulder. "At least we know who to be on the lookout for."

The chant rose to a crescendo as Harlow approached Kira. The room hushed as Harlow stopped in front of her.

"No weapon?" Kira asked with a brash cockiness few would be able to muster while standing in the Overlord's presence.

Only his *coli* would be unwise and arrogant enough to dare.

"It is not necessary," Harlow rumbled with an amusement only those close to him would hear.

Far from being insulted at the insinuation that she was too weak to take his full power, Kira seemed almost excited as she readied herself.

Even Graydon found himself swept up in the moment, a buzz filling the air as uncle and niece faced off.

There was no greater triumph than watching the woman he adored take her place among the warriors of her House.

To watch as the wounds created ninety-three years ago slowly began to mend.

No matter how far Graydon roamed or what master he chose to serve, Roake would always hold a piece of his heart.

Now, that held true in an entirely different sense with Kira's addition to their ranks.

She was going to change Roake along with the rest of the Tuann. Graydon could feel it the same way he sensed when a storm was forming off the coast.

What's more, he would be right there next to her while she did it.

A support and a shield against those forces that would batter her brilliance into dust. The sword that would cut through her enemies.

Anything she wished, he would be.



Kira fought to bring her heart under control. A difficult task considering the exhilarated feeling coursing through her veins.

It had been a long time since she'd fought like that. Perfectly in sync with Jin as they poured every ounce of energy into the physical.

She'd gotten swept away by it all. Every blow she'd successfully deflected driving her adrenaline higher.

It helped that she hadn't actually been in any danger. She'd noticed in the midst of the encounter that no one was trying to hurt her. It was a game. One only the Tuann would think of. A showcase of her abilities and perseverance.

Toward the end, she was pretty sure a few had held back their true power.

It allowed Kira to sink into herself. To reach deeper. Move faster. Hit harder.

The few blows that made it through her guard provided a stinging counterpoint to the euphoria-like feeling.

Sweat dripped down her forehead. The shirt she wore was wet and sticking to her.

The hand holding her blade had developed a fine tremble from the extreme amount of stress she'd put on it over the last few minutes.

Quiet rang in the air as Harlow regarded her with a severe expression.

This was the Overlord. The most powerful person in Roake. Her uncle but also the person she would obey if she decided to stay.

The moment lengthened. The room still as if those present were holding their breath.

Kira braced, letting the blade fall to her side. She planned to take his blow head on.

It was crazy.

Then again, what was life without a little craziness in it. There were moments you needed to be fully present for. Your defenses fully down.

This felt like one of them.

It might be painful, but pain made everything that followed a little sweeter.

Harlow's hand lifted.

Here it came.

A touch landed on Kira's head as Harlow ruffled her hair. A broad smile broke through his harsh expression, like the sun through a mass of storm clouds. Radiant and warm.

"I'm proud of you," Harlow told her as she froze in surprise.

A cheer shook the training hall as Wren and Finn congratulated her, patting Kira's back.

Graydon clapped as he joined them, a soft look in his eyes that made butterflies take off in Kira's stomach.

It was different than the way he normally looked at her. It was more than passion or love.

There was a tenderness. An affection that acted as a cool balm.

Devotion—and yes, passion.

She would have turned away from those emotions not too long ago.

A laugh broke from her. A cathartic release, every bit as needed as the one she'd gotten while fighting.

For so long, home was a concept she didn't understand. It was something other people had. Never Kira.

This feeling right here must be what so many spoke about. The thing they wanted to defend even at the cost of their life.

She understood now.

This was something worth defending.

If memories were a strand of pearls that could be collected, she'd store this one in a place of honor to be taken out and cherished those times when she forgot what home meant.

The sound of stomping built. Slow at first before the tempo picked up.

It stopped abruptly.

Finn was the first to kneel. Then Wren.

From there, a wave caught, spreading through all those present.

Kira looked over the sea of Tuann who knelt on one knee, a hand to the ground and the other touching their heart as they bowed their heads.

Kira twisted, feeling overwhelmed by what was happening, lost in a way she hadn't been moments before.

"I don't understand," Kira told Graydon.

He took her hand, pressing a kiss to the inside of her wrist before placing her fingers against his chest where his heart was. "This is a show of approval for Roake's heir."

Kira looked around her, feeling no less confused. "I haven't done anything to deserve this."

Graydon rumbled as he reached up to cradle her jaw, one thumb sweeping across her cheekbone in a gentle caress. "You proved you were worthy."

"How?"

Graydon lips touched hers in a light kiss. “You’re Kira. That’s enough.”

Kira drew back from Graydon, reading the sincerity in his face. He really believed that.

She didn’t know why that surprised her. Kira had never had a problem with self-confidence or self-worth.

Except right now there was a voice whispering in her ear that she wasn’t worthy. That she’d disappoint them.

That voice made her want to run even as the rest of her wanted to grab hold and never let go of these people.

Graydon shifted backward as Harlow approached, leaving Kira to face her uncle on her own.

Nerves filled her as Harlow stepped in front of her with a lightness to his expression that had never been there before.

He looked delighted. Happy in a way Kira knew was rare for him.

It made it impossible to express worry about this whole heir thing.

Kira was coming to understand that if you gave the Tuann an inch they’d take the whole solar system.

It left her in a difficult predicament—particularly because a growing part of her no longer wanted her long-coveted freedom.

It wanted this family. All she needed to do was let herself accept it.



“My brother’s daughter,” Harlow said in an emotion filled voice as his gaze roved Kira’s face. “I have waited for this for decades. The hope of your return is the thing that kept me going.”

Kira held still as he pressed a kiss on her forehead.

“I suppose I should be grateful this wasn’t as bad as Makon seemed to think it would be,” Kira said as Harlow stepped back.

He flashed her a smile every bit as dangerous as the one she sometimes saw on Graydon’s face. “We’re not done yet. This is just the appetizer.”

## THIRTEEN

Hours later Kira's head pounded with the beginning of a headache. Tiny zips of pain pulsed along her nerve endings, a precursor to *ki* overload.

"Again," Wren barked.

He stood off to the side with his arms folded across his chest as he put Kira through her paces.

With a monumental exertion of will, Kira lifted leaden arms that felt like they had a thousand pounds attached to them.

She held the *akieri* up in front of her and concentrated. *Ki* coalesced inside of her before she attempted to push it into the hilt of the *akieri*.

Careful. More careful than weavers handling the silk of the butterfly worm on New Lexington.

A spiderweb of violet lines started to show through the metal of the hilt as a metal slowly extended upwards.

For a brief moment, Kira felt hope that this time she'd succeed.

The shape collapsed, a pulse of pain numbing her hands and making her head pound harder.

“Damn it.” Kira’s arms dropped as she got frustrated with herself.

She’d been at this for several hours and was no closer to forming the *akieri*.

“You are rushing the formation and using far too much ki,” Wren observed.

So, he’d said. Several times now.

“I don’t even understand why it’s so important that I’m able to do this.”

The *akieri* exacted a heavy toll on a person’s *ki*. Materializing it and using it created a serious drain and hastened exhaustion.

It made Wren a sadist for forcing her to practice this after the physical training he’d put her through.

A sadist of the highest order.

“No one else in the *adva ka* is going to be able to use this either,” Kira said, barely able to keep the whine out of her voice.

Wren paced in a circle around Kira. “You are not everyone else.”

“I can change that,” Kira muttered.

Wren ignored her. “You are the daughter of Roake. The heir of our House.”

Kira knew she'd regret not objecting to that title. It hadn't even been a day before karma came knocking.

“More importantly, you will be a target for those who have vendettas with our House. You need to be ready.”

Kira gave him a flat stare. “I don't need a fancy *ki* blade to defend myself. I'm always ready.”

There was a choking sound from the edge the hall.

Most of those present when she'd arrived had long since drifted away. Some returning to their duties. Others to train.

Even Harlow and Graydon had left at some point, leaving Kira alone with Wren.

Finn was blowing off some steam with several oshota as they dueled on the opposite side of the room.

Apparently being back in Roake had made him loosen some of his vigilance. A fact Kira was regretting right about now. It sure would be nice for someone to intervene and save her from this purgatory.

Wren made a “give me” motion with his fingers. Kira tossed him the *akieri*.

It took only an instant for him to form the blade. He slashed it in front of him, seeming to almost split the air as glowing lines infused the metal of the blade.

The blade retracted and Wren tossed it to Kira. “The *akieri* is powerful. It can cut through anything.”

Kira refused to be impressed. “So can an en-blade.”

And she wasn't going to run out of energy halfway through a battle with an en-blade.

"You're not an oshota. Until you obtain the scale of a *lu-ong* which serves as your synth armor's genesis, you are not qualified to carry an en-blade," Wren said with a patience Kira knew was quickly fading.

Wren wasn't used to being questioned so she was sure dealing with her was quite the adjustment.

He'd handled it beautifully until now, but Kira thought this might be the day she broke him.

"This was your father's weapon and his mother's before him. All the way back to the first Overlord," Wren snapped, slapping the *akieri* into Kira's hand. "You *will* learn to use it."

Kira's fingers closed around the hilt; her arguments locked inside her throat as she looked at the *akieri* with new eyes.

"My father's?"

Some of the irritation faded from Wren's expression as his face softened. "It's a symbol of your House."

As interesting as that was, Kira cared more about the fact the *akieri* had once belonged to the man who'd given her life.

She smoothed her thumb along the edge, lost in thought.

"Fine," she said, giving in.

As much as she disliked doing something simply for tradition's sake, it was a different story if this was truly her father's former weapon.

Maybe using it would make her feel closer to him.

“But I’m not learning this today.” Kira lifted her head to focus on Wren. “Quillon instructed me to stop when it hurts. That time is now.”

Kira hated admitting that.

Weakness was always something she’d gone out of her way to conceal. She would push and push, break herself to pretend she wasn’t hurt.

For some of it, she hadn’t had a choice. The Tsavitee would have taken advantage of any opening they could.

Humans couldn’t always be trusted either.

But this was training. There was no reason to destroy her body because she was too proud to call uncle.

That way lay idiocy.

Wren’s lips curved. “You pass.”

Kira furrowed her brow. “What is that supposed to mean?”

Wren’s enigmatic expression was hard to read as he reached forward to remove the *akieri* from Kira’s grip.

She let him as she waited for an answer.

“Although you are skilled, I needed you to demonstrate a few things before I agreed to let you undertake the *adva ka*.”

Kira’s frown grew more pronounced. “I thought my name was already added to the list.”

“Your Overlord and others judged your abilities as being of sufficient enough quality to advance to the *adva ka*, but as your *seon ’yer* I have the final say.”

Kira stared at Wren. “And you didn’t decide I was qualified enough until right this second.”

His faint smile proved answer enough.

“Lovely,” Kira spat, running her fingers through her shoulder length hair in a nervous gesture. “Would you care to tell me why?”

It was alarming to think she could have been taken out of the running and not known until it was too late.

“You know why,” Wren informed her.

Some of the anger went out of Kira. If she was honest, she did. “My *ki* poisoning.”

He nodded. “*Ki* poisoning is a symptom of a larger issue. It is unique to people like you and me. Those who find their limits and then break them.” He held up a hand when Kira would have said something. “That’s not a bad thing on occasion. It’s when it becomes repetitive that you place yourself and others in danger. You’ve never seen a full *ki* implosion. I have. It is horrifying and often kills not only the patient but those around him. If you couldn’t recognize when you were approaching your threshold in training, there’s no chance of you doing so on the battlefield.”

Much as it grated, Kira couldn’t argue with that logic.

The mindset of a soldier regarding injuries and limits transcended species and race. It was so easy to fall into the trap of thinking that taking time to heal was a sign of weakness. That raising your hand or taking a knee was letting down the people you served with when in fact it was the opposite.

If your body or mind failed while on the battlefield, you risked dragging everybody down with you.

It was a balancing act—weighing the need for giving yourself time to heal with the necessity of being there for your people.

It was something Kira had never quite managed to conquer. The mission always came first.

But that hampered your ability to do your job long term.

“Another test you didn’t bother telling your disciple about.” Kira joined Wren as he strolled through the Warrior’s Hall. “Suddenly, I have a lot more sympathy for what Maksym has gone through.”

Her *seon’yer* was maddening. No wonder Maksym was so happy to no longer be the youngest.

A group of children flooded into the room, nearly bumping into Kira and Wren as they chatted happily with each other.

“Elena,” Kira called, pleasantly surprised to spot her niece.

Elena’s face lit up as she jogged over to Kira, stopping abruptly as if she had to hold herself back from giving Kira the hug she wanted.



Kira watched in confusion as Elena's gaze darted to Wren and then away. Her niece bowed slightly.

“Heir, it's good to see you again.”

Kira was quick to catch on.

This was a game they'd played often over the years. Mostly when they were unsure of their surroundings and wanted to conceal their relationship.

Elena straightened as Auralyn strolled toward them, looking just as bored as she'd been when she escorted Raider away.

Ziva scurried next to the oshota, her legs moving quickly so she could keep up.

Surprise showed on Kira's face. “Ziva, what are you doing here?”

Now that they were back on Ta Sa'Riel, House Luatha should be caring for the girl.

Seeing Kira, Ziva rushed to give her a bow, nearly toppling onto her face. “*Seon 'yer.*”

“I requested her presence,” Elena said before Kira could correct the girl.

Kira sent her niece a bewildered look.

Elena's smile turned sweet as she took Auralyn's hand. “My sister was good enough to allow me a companion while I adjust to my new home.”

Sister? Kira mouthed to herself as she stared at Auralyn.

“It is so good to finally be able to join the main House of Roake. My parents kept me in seclusion growing up,” Elena said with a wink.

This must be the cover story they’d developed for Elena.

“Auralyn’s parents retreated to a remote outpost after their daughter’s death,” Wren murmured. “Very few knew they’d had another child in the years since.”

Smart.

From what Kira had been told, Elena’s appearance was very similar to that of her grandmother, Wren’s deceased wife and Auralyn’s sister. It made sense to use that family as a screen for Elena. What’s more, since they were related, it made it less likely they would betray her.

“How are you enjoying Roake so far?” Kira asked as the small group moved toward the door and the hallway beyond.

Elena’s respectful demeanor disappeared as soon as they were out of earshot of the rest of the training hall. “Save me, Auntie.”

“From what exactly?”

For a moment Elena resembled the preteen she actually was as she exuded disdain. “I’m surrounded by children.”

That surprised a laugh out of Kira. “You *are* a child.”

Elena fixed Kira with a disgusted look. “*Not* like them.”

It pained Kira that she was right.

Like Kira and Elise, Elena had been forced to grow up early. She lacked the innocence of the rest of Roake's children and possessed a maturity that they likely wouldn't grow into for years to come.

As much as Kira tried to shield Elena, there were places where she failed. It was a fact that haunted her.

"I never thought I'd say this, but I miss Tommy and the rest." Elena scowled at the gaggle of children who had surrounded one of the Tuann adults. A teacher, Kira suspected.

Kira suppressed her smile. "I seem to remember you calling Tommy an idiot too when I first found him."

"That's because he is an idiot." Elena pouted up at Kira. "Can't you fix this?"

"Exactly how am I supposed to do that?"

Elena waved her hands in the air. "Don't you have connections to the big, intimidating sourpuss who calls himself the Overlord? Use them to get me out of this."

Kira's eyebrows climbed as she regarded her niece as if the girl were a mythic creature she'd never seen before. "Sourpuss. Wow."

One side of Auralyn's mouth quirked. "She called him much worse—to his face."

Kira was sure that had gone over well. As Overlord, Harlow probably wasn't used to a mouthy preteen convinced she was immortal and thus didn't need any pesky emotions such as caution or fear.

“I was worried,” Elena muttered, her gaze dropping. “You looked really bad when they took you and no one was telling us anything. They wouldn’t even let me see Uncle Jin.”

Regret moved through Kira.

She could only imagine what it would have been like for Elena and the other two children to see her in that state. They must have been terrified.

A commotion from the group of children drew Kira’s attention as a boy around Elena’s age jogged their way. There was curiosity in his gaze as he took in Kira and Wren’s presence before focusing on Elena.

“New girl, it’s time to get started. Quit bothering the heir and get a move on,” he ordered.

Elena gave Kira a frown that seemed to say, “see what I’m dealing with here.”

“New girl,” he said again, this time sounding a lot more irritated when Elena didn’t move.

“I heard you the first time. And I have a name.”

The boy turned away. “I don’t care.”

Elena’s glare contained enough heat to scorch anything flammable as the boy jogged toward the rest of the children.

“I swear, Auntie. If I have to deal with these brats for much longer, I can’t promise there won’t be bloodshed,” Elena muttered as Ziva giggled next to her.

“I’m afraid that is not part of the deal you made with me,” Harlow said as he walked toward them, a serious expression on his face as he regarded Elena.

To Kira’s surprise, her niece clammed up. Her face a tad sulky at Harlow’s arrival.

“You have class,” Harlow said. “I suggest you join your peers.”

Elena shot Kira a pleading look.

“He’s right.” Kira tugged on a lock of Elena’s hair. “This is an opportunity. There are things they can teach you that I can’t.”

Kira and Selene might have given Elena the skills she needed to physically survive in a harsh universe, but her education was seriously lacking in other areas.

The use of her soul’s breath for starters.

Formal training would help with that. Then there was the socialization aspect of what Harlow was proposing.

This was a rare chance for Elena to interact with children in the same age group as her. To learn what it was like to grow up in an environment that didn’t necessitate keeping secret who and what she was.

Although Elena was close to the rest of Selene’s waifs, they were no more familiar with what it meant to have a normal childhood than Elena.

It was an opportunity Kira hoped her niece would grasp with both hands.

“I agree with our *seon’yer*,” Ziva chimed in with a serious expression that looked almost comical on her young face. “We can’t overlook this chance to obtain allies for our future endeavors. We have to get to them while they are young and build trust for later.”

“Right. That’s not what I meant at all,” Kira said, knowing it was a lost cause from the growing determination on the faces of the girls.

They weren’t listening.

Kira pinched the bridge of her nose as she reached for patience. “At least tell me you remember the rules.”

“Don’t show off even if you are better than everyone else at something,” Elena recited. “But, also, don’t let others walk all over you.”

Not exactly but good enough.

Kira made a shooing motion at the two. The girls turned and raced for the crowd of children as Harlow stepped up beside her.

“What did you teach those children?” he asked her.

“I don’t even know at this point.”

The only thing Kira was certain of was that Ziva showed as much of a tendency as Elena to hear only what she wanted to hear.

Kira almost pitied the poor soul responsible for the two of them over the next few hours. They had no idea how to manage the wrecking balls currently heading in their direction.

After offering a brief prayer for the person's future sanity, Kira lifted her chin at her uncle. "You do realize Elena is my responsibility. Next time you make a decision in her education, I'd like to be informed of it beforehand."

Kira didn't debate the fact he'd made the right call. Elena deserved to know what it was like to interact with other Tuann the same age as her.

Kira just would have appreciated the heads up.

Elena was wild in the same way Kira and Jin were at that age. Kira would have liked to say Elise had been the same but by that point Elise and the rest of the forty-three had been long gone.

It meant her niece had to be approached in a certain way. Otherwise, Harlow risked another incident where Elena made off with the closest ship for a cross-galaxy adventure.

"About that." Harlow tilted his head toward the hall in unmistakable command.

Kira shot a look at the children to find Ziva watching her with a cautious expression that seemed to say she was willing to throw herself into the breach if that's what Kira should require.

Against all odds, the expression made a smile form on Kira's lips.

She appreciated the girl's bravery, but she hadn't fallen so far that she required a child's rescue.

Though if she ever did, Ziva and Elena would be the ones she'd call for help.

Kira didn't pay much attention to those they passed as Harlow escorted them through halls that felt ancient. As if these passageways had existed for time immemorial and would continue to do so for millennia to come.

The home of House Roake suited its inhabitants, possessing an austerity that still managed to be impressive. It held a simple beauty that Kira didn't think she'd ever take for granted.

The best part was the balance of the fortress's defensive features and the offensive capabilities she knew it hid.

It would exact a steep price from any who tried to breach its walls.

Perhaps that's why Kira felt a sense of safety even with an escort that made her feel like she was being marched to the gallows.

They climbed several flights of stairs before turning right down a hallway Kira wasn't familiar with.

Ahead, a massive wooden door loomed.

It reminded Kira in some ways of Himoto's office door. Not in looks—Himoto's office door had been metal and average sized—but rather in the way it engendered the twin feelings of



nervousness and a desire to leave the best impression on the one waiting inside.

Harlow reached the door, flinging it open before gesturing for Kira to go ahead.

With only the smallest sign of hesitation, Kira steeled her spine and stepped inside to find the room already occupied.

“What’s this?” Kira shot Harlow a suspicion-filled look as her uncle brushed past her.

Harlow moved toward the ancient looking desk waiting in a place of importance. Its surface covered in nicks and scars, evidence of its long history.

Comfortable looking chairs were scattered in front of the desk, each one inhabited by a Tuann.

Graydon winked at her. Caius lounged in the chair next to him.

Kira’s gaze moved on, taking in Makon’s respectful nod as Wren walked over to one of the few empty chairs.

In addition to Makon and Caius, Kira was also familiar with the other Tuann present.

“Silas, Maida.”

Silas was one of the very few Tuann that Kira had met who showed even the faintest signs of age. Crow’s feet lingered at the corners of his eyes, giving credence to the weight of centuries contained within his gaze.

He had a gentle demeanor. Quiet in a way that said he would listen to your troubles.

He inspired trust—even in someone like Kira. There was just something about him. Like he cared.

It made him very good at his role as an advisor in Roake.

Maida was his opposite. At first glance appearing to play the role of seductive temptress, clad in a few pieces of cloth held together by chains. The breast plate she wore was more ornamental than functional. There for appearances only.

But Kira knew her to be an accomplished warrior. One of Harlow's most trusted.

Since they'd met during Kira's training period prior to the *uhva na*, Kira had learned that Maida had quite the reputation.

Many outside of Roake feared her. Such was her fame that they'd even given her a name. The Red Witch.

Kira couldn't help but like someone who could spark trepidation in others by her mere presence.

Perhaps a portion of Kira's partiality toward the other lay in the fact that she'd learned Maida had volunteered to be Joule's *seon'yer* when so many others had passed over him. Kira didn't know if it was sympathy or if Maida saw his potential. Either way, Kira was grateful the woman had given Joule a chance.

Sometimes a chance was all you needed.

“Well, well, well, if it isn’t the little heir that my *yer’sé* worships,” Maida drawled. “Come to take him off my hands?”

“I think you’re mistaken. Joule is blessed to have a *seon’yer* of your rank. I wouldn’t dream of depriving you of him.”

Maida’s snort held little elegance. “You think I don’t know what his sister calls you?”

“Ziva is not Joule.”

Maida’s expression turned sly. “Then my *yer’sé* has never attempted to pledge his allegiance?”

“No such words have ever passed his lips.”

The best part was she wasn’t lying. Kira had stopped him before he could commit such a monumental mistake.

As his *seon’yer*, Maida would have been well in her rights to take insult if Joule had followed through on his impulse.

The Tuann took their vows very seriously. A *yer’sé* pledging an oath to a second *seon’yer* without approval of the first would have been a blow to Joule’s honor. The stain would have followed him through the rest of his life.

Maida stared at Kira for a second before she flashed a crooked smile. “You should know, if it’s you, I don’t mind sharing my *yer’sé*.”

“You don’t want him?”

If that was the case, maybe Joule would be better off finding a new *seon’yer* after all. Consequences to his reputation be damned.

“Don’t be ridiculous.” Maida made a dismissive motion. “I took Joule as my *yer’sé* because I truly think the boy has potential that should be developed.”

Kira felt herself relax.

Maida held up her hand, making a fist with it. “You know mine and Joule’s affinities lie in different realms. If there is another who can teach him better, I will not object.”

Kira stared unblinking as Maida lowered her fist.

There was one other she could think of who shared Joule’s affinity. More importantly that person’s grasp of a shielder’s capabilities would be better than Maida’s—or any of the Tuann.

The trick would be convincing her to help.

“Wren’s new granddaughter, on the other hand, would make for a perfect *yer’sé* to someone of my abilities,” Maida said with a teasing sidelong look toward Wren.

Kira’s *seon’yer* stiffened. “You will not get your claws into her.”

“We’ll see,” Maida purred.

While the two debated, Harlow gestured at the sole unoccupied chair waiting in front of the desk.

“I’m starting to get the feeling this is an intervention of some sort,” she joked halfheartedly as she moved toward the chair.

Not that she'd ever been present for anything like that, but the situation contained all of the signs.

An ambush by those who knew and cared for her coupled by a growing sense that something was afoot. If Raider had been present, she would have been even more convinced that was exactly what this was.

Kira's uneasy feeling was compounded when Caius made a show of looking at the air above her head where Jin would typically hover. "No friend?"

"Jin has always had a short attention span. He lost interest hours ago. I'm sure he's around here somewhere."

If by somewhere, she meant outside of Roake getting the lay of the land while also spying on any of those he considered a potential threat.

Caius leaned his chin on his hand. "Is that so?"

Kira's eyes narrowed as she glanced at Graydon. "Are you two related?"

The longer she spent in Caius's presence the more of a resemblance she saw to Graydon. The similarity lay not in their looks but rather their personality. The mannerisms they used to express themselves.

Even now, their postures mirrored one another. Both sprawling in their chair with a lazy nonchalance.

Caius barked out a laugh as Graydon straightened.

“We are not related in any way,” Graydon said in a suppressive voice.

Maybe not by blood but they’d spent time together. A lot of it.

“I helped train Graydon,” Caius said with a veiled look in his eyes. “For a while, he was my shadow.”

Friends, then. That could explain it.

“Don’t think you distracted me with that question,” Caius admonished playfully. “I would hate for your friend to get himself into trouble so soon after he got out of it.”

“He’ll be fine.”

“I hope so. House Roake might not be so quick to step in to solve your problems next time.”

Kira supposed that was a veiled threat meant to remind her that it was only because of their House she’d been able to escape repercussions this time.

“You don’t have to worry about Jin.”

As much trouble as her friend got into, he was reliable when it counted. He would keep a low profile as much as possible while Kira drew attention to herself, allowing him to act covertly.

It was a tactic that had always worked for them in the past. She saw no reason that would change—even if it was Tuann they were up against this time.

“I hope so,” Caius said with an unchanging expression. “For your sake if nothing else.”

Kira held his gaze, refusing to let herself be intimidated.

“The question of your companion isn’t why you’re here,” Harlow said, taking control of the conversation.

Kira redirected her attention to him, deciding the best policy was to wait and see. She couldn’t afford to let them bait her into any further unwise words. She’d already been stuck with the title of heir. She didn’t need to make her situation any more difficult than it already was.

“I understand your concerns about the girl and how you’ve been responsible for her safety for all this time,” Harlow started as a fine tension invaded Kira.

She shifted in her seat. The desire to stand and physically distance herself from what was coming was almost impossible to ignore.

She shook her head at Harlow, wanting to stop him from saying what came next.

*Don’t do it,* Kira silently warned as Harlow’s mouth firmed.

“That will have to change if you both are to remain in Roake. For now, I want you to keep a distance between yourself and the child,” he finished, landing a death blow on the last of Kira’s hopes.

## FOURTEEN

“No.”

Kira didn't have to think of her response. It was as simple as that. She refused to do what Harlow was suggesting.

“Elena is my niece. That isn't going to change. Not ever,” Kira ground out.

Just when she'd been getting comfortable with members of Roake, Harlow had to go and pull a fast one.

“Does Raider know about this?” she hissed.

“Yes. I spoke to him an hour ago.”

Kira rubbed a hand over her face.

“It's not forever, Kira,” Harlow assured her, the look in his eyes almost begging her to trust in him. “Just until after the *adva ka*.”

Kira's hand dropped. “How do things change between now and then?”

“It will give us time to cement her cover story. Her great grandparents are in the process of returning to the fold. Their



presence will protect against scrutiny by those outside our House,” Silas explained.

Kira forced herself to take emotion out of the equation.

After a moment she shook her head. “It won’t work. Too many people saw me with Elena on Jettie. She even called me auntie.”

Though sparingly and usually not in the hearing of others.

“That’s fine,” Harlow assured her. “Those attending the quorum come from all parts of our territories. Few would live on this planet. As long as you don’t remind them of Elena’s presence, the other Houses will have no reason to investigate her origins.”

Meaning Elena’s presence might fly under the radar.

“What do you think of all this?” Kira asked Graydon.

Until now, the emperor’s Face had been content to sit quietly in the corner. Kira didn’t let that fool her into believing he didn’t have his hand in the situation.

More than anyone here, Kira trusted his opinion.

“You said Elena is your highest priority. It’s time you prove that,” Graydon said softly.

He held Kira’s gaze, his sincerity wrapping around her like the embrace of her favorite sweatshirt.

“Alright, we’ll do it your way,” Kira said, not looking away from Graydon as she gave him an arch look. “Was your presence really necessary for this?”

Kira was flattered that Harlow had felt the need to call in reinforcements—if a little surprised.

Graydon’s lips curved in a wicked smile. “They feared you might be unreasonable and that my participation would have a calming influence.”

Kira couldn’t contain her derisive snort. “They don’t know you very well.”

She thought it far more likely for Graydon to exacerbate the situation than placate her wrath.

“I don’t know, I like to think my presence has some effect on you,” Graydon said, giving her a look that made Kira’s core clench as she was reminded of the kiss they shared yesterday.

This man was dangerous—in more ways than one.

Kira rose. “I’m going to let you explain this to Elena. I wish you all the luck.”

Lord knows he’d need it.



The room was silent as those inside stared at the door Kira had disappeared through.

“That was easier than I expected,” Caius said with a thoughtful glance.

Harlow and Graydon shared a look, similar thoughts running through both their minds.

“I don’t know whether to be relieved or worried,” Harlow confessed.

Worried. Always worried when it came to a reasonable Kira.

Graydon kept that thought to himself.

This way it would be so much more fun later when Harlow and the rest came to the inevitable conclusion they’d never had control of the situation in the first place.

Graydon rubbed his hand over his lips, hiding his smile. He was already anticipating the resulting blowout. The best part was they didn’t even realize the grenade she’d lobbed into their laps with that last statement.

Graydon did. Wren, too, if the tight look on his face was anything to go by.

They’d forgotten—even Harlow—that it was Elena who had stolen Kira’s ship in the first place.

The girl wasn’t someone who would be easily controlled. She would have her own opinion on the situation.

One bound to conflict with that of the Overlord and his council.

That meant things weren’t likely to play out the way Harlow expected. It was a miscalculation on the Overlord’s part.

Graydon unfolded from his chair as he set a coin on Harlow’s desk before inserting a tiny bit of his soul’s breath.

Those present sat forward to study the data projected into the air.

“I’m sure you’ve noticed the increased presence of the *lu-ong* over the past few months and have realized by now that this *adva ka* will not be like the others,” Graydon informed them once he had their attention.

Harlow leaned back in his chair with a sigh, steeping his fingers in front of him. “I suspected this might be the case.”

Silas nodded. “The *lu-ong* would have known about Kira’s existence and arrival long before us, but that doesn’t explain the number of births they’ve had in the last five years. Twenty by our oshota’s count.”

For a species as long lived as the *lu-ong*, it was rare for them to welcome young to their ranks. That they felt comfortable spawning so many in such a short time meant they knew something the Tuann didn’t.

Caius crossed a foot over his knee as he settled into his chair, staring at the image of a translucent creature curled around an unknown object at its center.

”A *Mea’Ave lenacht*,” Caius murmured. “How long has it been?”

*Lenacht* was the Tuann word for blessing. Usually used in relation to the *Mea’Ave*.

“Five. No. Six hundred and four years,” Silas answered.

Those present let that fact sink in.

One of the biggest secrets the Tuann possessed was how reliant they were on the *Mea'Ave*.

While the *Mea'Ave's* influence wasn't necessary for life, it played a significant role in their health.

Just look at what happened to Kira and how her *ki* had started attacking her body.

For those who could channel only a standard amount of *ki*, the *Mea'Ave* was less important. It was the most talented who truly suffered.

People like Harlow or Torvald.

It was one of the reasons the Tuann rarely settled in places that didn't have its own *Mea'Ave*. The House's health would wane.

Which was why a *lenacht* was so prized.

Once mature, the candidate it selected would convey it to a new home where it would take root.

As an offshoot of the source, it was connected to its parent and would create a *ki*-rich environment capable of sustaining Tuann presence.

This was the true reason for the *adva ka*—though ensuring the overall character and abilities of those who might one day be among their strongest was also important.

“Why is the emperor giving us this information?” Harlow tore his gaze away from the mesmerizing beauty of the *lenacht* to focus on Graydon. “Why hand this to House Roake when

there is far more political benefit to be gained if he were to give this opportunity to his son.”

The strategic advantage a *Mea’Ave lenacht* could offer to a House and its chosen could not be overstated.

The ability to guide a *lenacht* to its new home was a coveted one that had spawned more than one feud amongst the Houses.

No House would pass up the opportunity to add to their strength by increasing the number of worlds in their control with a *Mea’Ave* rich environment. To say nothing of the fact that those who spent an extended time with such a creature often walked away changed.

Sometimes the *Mea’Ave* unlocked additional affinities within the recipient. Other times it enriched what was already there.

Whatever the gain, it was sure to rewrite the power structure of the Houses.

As emperor, Torvald could control who received the information of the birth of a new *lenacht*, but it wasn’t foolproof.

The signs were there for those who knew what to look for.

It made the entire situation a powder keg waiting to explode in all their faces.

Hence the emperor tasking Graydon to relay the message to Roake.

Caius's frown grew more pronounced as he studied the careful blankness on Graydon's face. "That's why you're here, isn't it? He doesn't plan to involve his son in this matter."

The air around Harlow turned heavy. Almost oppressive as Graydon's silence confirmed Caius's guess.

Graydon held himself still, keeping his gaze trained on the Overlord.

Despite the short nature of their acquaintance, Kira had become a vulnerable point for Harlow. Anything that jeopardized her safety would inspire a quick and violent reaction.

Harlow slammed his fist into the desk, the sturdy wood bowing under the force of the blow. "I will not allow him to sacrifice my niece to protect his son."

Harlow rose, his features thinning with rage.

A chill brushed along the back of Graydon's neck.

Something he'd always understood about his mentor was how dangerous Harlow could be even under the best of circumstances.

Harlow had never needed a primus. He was lethal all on his own.

In a way, Kira reminded Graydon of her uncle.

Neither relied on the abilities they were born with to carve out a path in life. Many Tuann allowed their *ki* and affinities to be a crutch.

After the passing of Harlow's twin, Harding, the former Overlord, House Roake should have fallen into disrepute. They shouldn't have been able to sustain themselves. It was thought they'd be easy pickings for the other Houses.

They hadn't. That was in large part due to Harlow's contribution.

It was that part of Harlow that faced Graydon now. A warrior who had already traveled through the abyss. Someone unafraid of death if it would allow him to protect what was truly important.

As the Face of the emperor, Graydon could be considered an aspect of him. A threat against his life was a threat against the emperor's.

Harlow could be charged with treason for his actions just now.

Graydon kept his gaze level, conscious that being the emperor's Face or even his history with Harlow wouldn't save him if the other man decided he was a danger to Kira's life.

*Ki* saturated the room. Graydon remained unaffected, accustomed to the oppressive feel of the atmosphere.

By now, Solal and Amila would have detected the change and were probably going crazy. Graydon would get an earful from them later.

"Of the two, who do you think is more likely to retrieve the *lenacht* safely?" Graydon asked calmly, pretending not to notice the danger.



He could take Harlow. He'd hate to do it, but he would.

It was the addition of Caius, Makon, Silas, and Maida that worried him.

Graydon was confident in his abilities one-on-one, but if all five of them attacked, he would find it difficult to escape with his life.

“The emperor is afraid to risk his son after what happened to the last one.” Caius’s words broke the standoff Graydon and Harlow had fallen into. “Why should a daughter of Roake be the one to place herself in danger?”

Graydon allowed some of the tension to leave his shoulders, not taking insult at Caius’s words.

As insulting as the question was, Caius was offering him a chance to explain himself.

Caius hadn’t reached the status of House Roake’s forward general without the capabilities and strategic mind necessary for the role.

Makon might be considered Harlow’s number two as Marshal of the House, responsible for maintaining its defensive capabilities, but Caius was the person Harlow appointed for all offensive maneuvers.

If a planet needed to be invaded or another House started a war with them, Caius was the one Harlow sent to conquer their enemies.

Harlow’s ferocity eased as a frown replaced his anger.

The situation was still dangerous but at least he was listening.

“The emperor cannot overlook the fact that there have been several incidents of late that point to interference by our old masters. You’ve experienced their betrayal yourself,” Graydon said.

Harlow’s expression tightened at the reference to a member of his former pod who had played a role in the death of his twin and the abduction of Kira and so many other children.

Anger mixed with shame in the faces of the others.

No one liked the reminder that they’d missed the signs.

“Torvald doesn’t think your House is the only one who the old masters have sunk their tendrils into,” Graydon continued. “He believes they will try to intercept the *lenacht* for their own agenda. That cannot be allowed to happen.”

Such a breach would break the oath they’d made to the *lu-ong* and the *Mea’Ave* to serve as their protectors. It would also place a valuable weapon into their enemies’ hands.

The reason the Tuann had been able to rule their section of the galaxy with little challenge was because of the *Mea’Ave*. If it turned its face from them, it would be a powerful blow that affected everyone—Roake and Kira included.

“Devon holds talent but he is untested,” Graydon said.

His *yer’sé* would be powerful one day, but for now, he still needed seasoning. Something Kira’s time in the Consortium had provided her plenty of.

If Graydon had to choose between experience and someone who had mastered *ki*, he'd choose the former.

The set expression on Harlow's face remained unconvinced. "You have yet to say anything that would change my mind in this matter."

As expected of Graydon's mentor and Kira's uncle. He was as stubborn as her.

Graydon supposed there was nothing to do but to play his final card. He should have known it would come to this.

"There are signs that indicate Kira may be a beloved of the *Mea'Ave*," Graydon revealed.

Shock showed on some of the faces of those around him. Silas and Harlow were the only two who seemed to take the news in stride.

"You knew."

Graydon wasn't surprised. Finn must have given him a report of what he'd seen on Ta Da'an. Silas would have had his suspicions as well.

Harlow's stance eased further as he straightened, not responding to Graydon's statement.

He didn't have to. Graydon was aware of how his mentor thought. The canny, old bastard had always been one step ahead of everyone else. It was good to see that hadn't changed.

"Then you must realize, it doesn't matter who the emperor appoints. If Kira is a beloved, the *Mea'Ave* will guide her to its

resting spot regardless of what the rest of us might wish,” Graydon pointed out.

The *Mea’Ave’s* will was a mysterious thing. Circumventing it was no easy feat. Tuann history was littered with stories of those who’d tried and wound up broken as a result.

If the *Mea’Ave* truly wished for Kira to act as its chosen, nothing Roake or the emperor did would change that.

“All we can do is have faith in Kira,” Graydon said.

“And if the emperor is right and our old enemies wish to stretch their hand out toward the *Mea’Ave*?” Caius asked.

Graydon’s smile bared his teeth. “Then we cut that hand off and slaughter any who wish to threaten her.”



The Tuann manning the bar looked up as Kira pushed her way into the establishment.

Talon jerked his chin up in greeting as Kira lingered just inside the room, letting her eyes adjust to the change in light

At this time of day, the *Sirav Ryttil*, a phrase which meant second chance in Tuann, was largely empty. In an hour or so that would change as the *oshota* who went off shift made their way here for a drink.

For now, Kira had the place mostly to herself.

Located outside of the fortress's walls on the edge of the city, the Sirav Ryttil had a bar that curved through the middle of the room. A set of wide-open windows along one wall overlooked the city below and the ocean beyond.

"Look who's back," Talon remarked as she and Finn moved in his direction.

Her oshota had been waiting for her the moment she stepped out of Harlow's office and made no argument when she headed for the bar.

Talon was a little different than most of the Tuann Kira kept company with. Once an oshota, he now owned this bar. A watering hole for any Tuann who stepped through these doors.

His hair was shaggy. A little unkept. It matched the almost surly expression he had on his face each time Kira saw him.

"You've created quite the splash since the last time I saw you," Talon said as she and Finn stopped in front of the bar. "People are talking about you."

Kira leaned one arm on the polished wood surface of the bar. "What are they saying?"

"That you are impetuous for one so young," Talon drawled.

Next to Kira, Finn was quiet as he observed his friend.

Talon and Finn went way back. Both had served in the same pod for a time but had since gone their own ways.

The two were as close as brothers. Kira suspected if Finn ever indicated he needed someone to watch his back, Talon

would be the first to answer his call.

His loyalty made Kira like him a little more.

Perhaps that was why she wasn't as prickly as she would have been if another stuck their nose into her business.

Finn didn't strike her as the type who made friends easily. If this man had managed to become one, he was someone worth knowing.

"That's not new," Kira said.

Talon's lips tilted up as he set down the knife he'd been using to slice fruit and picked up a bottle filled with an amber liquid the same shade as his eyes. He poured the alcohol into a short glass and slid it to Kira before doing the same for Finn.

"They also say you show signs of isolation madness."

At that, Kira's eyebrows rose. That was new. Someone had started a smear campaign against her.

It had been a matter of time. Discrediting her was the easiest way to prevent Roake from accepting her as its heir.

If that didn't work, they'd try different methods.

Kira lifted the glass, steeling herself for the burn of the alcohol as it worked its way down her throat to light a fire in her belly. "Anything else?"

Talon's hands stilled in the middle of pouring a drink for himself as his eyes lifted to Kira's. "There are whispers you've created a soul bound."

Kira suppressed her reaction, aware that Talon was watching her in a way that could only be described as analytical.

At her side, Finn went alert.

She touched his arm to keep him from interrupting.

It was clear Talon was testing her. If Finn were to come to her defense in this moment, he would confirm the very thing he was trying to deny.

That was the problem when someone knew you well. They could anticipate your reaction. Read between the lines.

“Is that your way of asking me to leave?” Kira gave Talon a small smile, neither confirming nor denying the rumors.

She didn’t want to lie. If Jin’s secret ever did come out, Talon would remember this moment later and know she’d chosen a falsehood over the truth.

For a moment, Talon didn’t respond. His face as expressionless as Finn’s when her oshota was being inscrutable.

Half a beat passed before his lips twitched up in a micro smile that warmed his eyes. “Refrain from destroying my bar and you can sit anywhere you’d like.”

Kira smirked as she took her glass and pushed away from the bar.

When Finn moved to follow her, she shook her head at him. “Stay and chat. I’m sure you two have a lot to catch up on.”

A sour look appeared on his face. “You get into trouble when I’m not within arm’s length.”

Kira walked toward the open windows. “I get into trouble when you’re around too.”

The murmur of a low conversation accompanied Kira as she sat at a table next to the window.

Kira stretched her legs out in front of her with a wince as her sore muscles protested before loosening. Her mind emptied as she stared outside at the white caps of the ocean and the clouds drifting past on the horizon.

She didn’t know how long she sat there in silent contemplation as she watched a storm front roll in. Minutes turned into an hour.

There was just something about a good storm to put everything right again. The drama of the clouds as they frothed. The knowledge that soon hell would be unleashed and the only thing you could do was endure.

There was a peace that was almost primal. As if it had been encoded into her genetic memory.

It was very different from ship life where the environment was static and unchanging—which was exactly what you wanted when a single shift could mean death.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” a woman said from beside Kira as the two got lost in the approaching storm.

“I’m surprised you found me,” Kira said.



She hadn't thought she was sitting here long enough for rumors about her presence to spread.

Selene's gaze swung toward Kira, containing a trace of amusement. "I keep tabs on those who are important to me. Don't tell me you're any different."

Ah, but Selene didn't have a Jin to keep an eye on things.

"*Keeva*, dear sister?" Selene asked, spotting the glass in Kira's hand.

"My attempt at blending in."

Selene's mouth quirked as she reached for the *keeva*. "There's no chance of that happening. You are someone destined to stand out."

Selene downed the remainder of the amber liquid like she was taking a shot of human liquor.

"Please. Help yourself," Kira remarked in a dry voice.

Finished, Selene lowered the glass to give it an appreciative look. "This is a fine vintage."

Kira hooked one arm over the back of her chair as she made herself more comfortable. "So glad you liked it."

Further evidence that Selene, and likely the rest of the forty-three, had a familiarity with Tuann society that surpassed her own.

"Don't look at me like that, dear sister." Selene set the glass on the table in front of Kira. "I'll think you're angry with me."

Kira tapped her finger against her thumb, telling herself that anger would get her nowhere with Selene or the others. It never had.

Still, Kira couldn't resist a small jab. "I wonder what reason I would have for that."

Maybe the fact they'd left her twisting in the wind when a simple warning the Tuann existed might have led her to make different choices.

But no, they'd kept that tidbit to themselves.

Rather than dwell, Kira chose to focus on something different as she nodded toward the two oshota, a man and a woman, waiting a short distance away from them.

Selene's escort.

"You brought friends."

There was a faint expression of discontent as Selene glanced at the two. "It was unavoidable."

Kira considered Finn's expression, more familiar with that sentiment than she'd like to admit. Her oshota looked like it was taking every ounce of his willpower to not spring across the room to save her from Selene and her escorts.

"As I'm sure you understand," Selene added, seeing the same thing Kira did.

"I never warranted two oshota, though. Should I take the fact you did as an insult or be gratified that I escaped that level of scrutiny?"

“The Tuann likely learned their lesson from trying to deal with you.” Selene flashed Kira an impish smile. “Alexander and I are paying the price.”

Kira’s flat look said she didn’t find the other amusing.

A faint trace of laughter lingered in Selene’s expression as she tilted her head at the city outside. “Shall we take a walk?”

A transparent box formed around Finn and the other two oshota. One Kira knew from experience was virtually impenetrable until the *ki* sustaining it faded.

“Alone, if you would,” Selene added.

Fury showed on Finn’s face as he hammered a fist into what was essentially a *ki* shield like the one Joule used—only ten times stronger and more durable.

When that didn’t work, Finn unsheathed his en-blade, slicing at the box of pure *ki*.

Selene’s escorts were frozen in place, their faces showing an almost comical amount of surprise. As if they couldn’t fathom how the poor, untrained Selene had managed to trap them.

“Release them,” Kira ordered

“Are you sure about that?” Selene asked with a composed look. “I don’t think this conversation is one you want overheard.”

From that, Kira understood that Selene didn’t plan to budge. This was her way of laying out Kira’s choices—agree to go along with Selene or risk not having this conversation at all.

There was an apology in Kira's eyes as she glanced at Finn. Disbelief showed on his face as he swore, most of the words not ones Kira had learned yet.

She stood and crossed to the bar where Talon waited. "If you could, take care of him for me when he finally manages to escape."

It might take a little bit of time, but she had no doubt he would.

"Are you sure you wouldn't like my help?" Talon asked.

One of his hands rested on the bar while the other waited out of sight. It didn't take a genius to know he had a weapon stashed somewhere. There was a readiness in his stance that suggested he'd be up and over this counter in the blink of an eye.

"Do you think you could take her? She's pretty dangerous," Kira asked, unable to help her curiosity.

Talon bared his teeth in a fierce smile, not taking his glare off Selene. "So am I."

Kira glanced in Selene's direction, noting the other's poise. You'd never know from looking at her that she'd managed to put three elite oshota out of commission with little effort.

A part of Kira was interested to see how Talon would fare against her friend—but then she wouldn't get that information she needed.

"I'll be fine on my own," Kira pushed away from the bar to pause in front of Finn. "Sorry about this."

His incredulous expression asked if she was really going to be this stupid.

The answer was yes. She really was.

“Come find me when you’re out,” Kira instructed before ambling toward where Selene waited in front of the pair of glass doors that led onto a patio and a set of stairs descending to the city below. “Let’s get this over with.”

The two were quiet as they crossed to the stone steps and started down.

The Sirav Ryttil was located on a small hill, the fortress less than a quarter mile behind them. It left most of the city to their front.

“Did you know?” Kira asked as they wound their way toward the streets below.

The stairs were uneven and old. Moss grew between the cracks while wildflowers bloomed along one side.

“You will have to be more specific, little sister. I know many things.”

Fine. If she wanted to play games, Kira would humor her.

“Did you know about Elise?”

That she was working with the Tsavitee. That by doing so she was betraying everything they’d fought for. That she’d voluntarily abandoned Elena and Raider—and Kira.

Sadness showed in Selene’s face.

Kira's heart clenched. "You did." They must have all known. "This is why none of you would help."

When she'd been so certain they would.

Elise was different than Kira; she was one of them. It was why their decision to leave Elise to her fate never made sense to Kira.

Until now.

Of course, they would've refused. Kira would have too if she'd been in their position.

"We suspected." Selene's admission was the last nail in the coffin. The final cut that snapped the frail tendril of hope Kira had hung onto until now.

Kira slowed and then stopped as Selene continued downward. She stared at the distant horizon feeling numb.

"How?"

How did they see what she missed?

Selene reached the bottom of the stairs and stopped to look up at Kira.

"Because of this." She tapped the side of her head with a sad smile. "After our escape, we made a pact never to allow ourselves to fall into the hands of our former masters."

## FIFTEEN

They'd implanted kill switches into their brains to prevent them from falling into their former masters' hands, Kira realized with horror.

It was a shocking revelation. Yet not truly since Kira had considered a similar method. A tiny poison capsule that would render her lifeless in seconds.

She'd never used it. No matter how dire the situation she'd chosen to hold on and continue, trusting she'd find her way out in the end.

But simply knowing she had that "out" was a comfort.

Silence descended after Selene's confession. They strolled through the city streets. Past charming stone houses and through alleys, some of which were so narrow it was a squeeze to fit side by side.

They reached a main street, turning toward a wide-open plaza in the distance guarded by a ten-foot-tall statue of a Tuann woman. She wore a long flowing dress and held a

spear. Her eyes seemed to follow them as they passed, entering the plaza where dozens of Tuann milled.

A tree covered in tiny white flowers grew in the center of the cobblestone space. A beautiful focal point against the gray of the sky.

The breeze picked up, rustling the branches.

“You could have warned me,” Kira complained, giving Selene a sidelong look. “A ‘Hey, just so you know, Elise let them capture her on purpose. We don’t know why, but we’re pretty sure she’s working an angle.’”

Kira wasn’t so naïve as to think that knowledge would have given her complete respite from the overwhelming guilt she’d felt at surviving Rothchild, but it might have taken the edge off.

Maybe reduced it from a ten to a nine point nine.

Kira was distracted from Selene’s response as a clump of Tuann caught her attention. Somehow, in the few hours since she’d last seen them, Joule, Ziva, and Elena had found their way out of the fortress and into the city.

Kira frowned, locating Auralyn posted under the branches of the tree a second later. Her arms folded as she frowned at the group across from the three. “What are they doing here?”

Heckling started as the tall Tuann across from Joule gave him a cocky smile.

Kira picked up her pace, not liking the look of that expression. Bad things happened when people were that



cocky. Usually to them because she made them happen.

Joule's eyes spat fire as he held onto his temper. He and Elena stood slightly in front of Ziva; their stances protective. Behind them, Ziva's expression was set and guarded. The clenched fists at her side telling Kira that whatever the other group was saying it wasn't nice.

Kira's eyes narrowed.

Was this bullying she was seeing? Were these Tuann really so stupid that they thought they could get away with picking on her chickadees?

Kira started to stalk forward when Selene's touch at her wrist brought her to a halt.

"You cannot intervene," Selene warned her.

"Pretty sure I can."

The Tuann in front of her three didn't look so tough. Teaching them a lesson would be a matter of moments and require little effort on Kira's part.

"We are being watched." Selene's gaze flicked up and to the left.

Kira held herself still, taking her time as she tried not to be too obvious as she scanned the surrounding area.

Kira found in seconds what she would've missed if not for Selene.

Oshota wearing a style of synth armor Kira didn't recognize surrounded a man at their center whose attention was locked

on her. The group was arranged on one of the balconies overlooking the plaza.

“You cannot give them a weakness to exploit later,” Selene advised.

“Too late.”

They’d already clocked her and her reaction to the impending situation.

They’d know what Joule and the other two meant to her. They’d realize if they wanted to hurt her the best way would be through them.

Rooky mistake, Kira. Especially when you’ve been so careful all this time.

If this was a test, she’d failed. Might as well do what she wanted at this point.

“You will not help him by fighting his battles for him. He must do this for himself. Otherwise, you’ll hinder the person he will grow into.” Selene’s grip tightened on Kira’s wrist. “Intervene now and he’ll carry the stigma for the rest of your life.”

As if to reinforce Selene’s statement, Auralyn shifted. Once she had Kira’s attention, she shook her head with a warning in her eyes.

Fine. They won.

Still, Kira made a mental note of their dress and faces for later. Maybe she couldn’t do anything right this second, but

that wouldn't always be the case.

She was nothing if not patient when it came to revenge.

Kira shook free of Selene's hand. "I won't do anything. I promise."

Selene's relief was short lived as Kira drifted toward Joule and the rest.

"Where are you going?" Selene asked.

"You said not to interfere but nothing about watching."

If she couldn't protect Joule, the least she could do was provide moral support.

Ziva glanced Kira's way, her small face brightening with hope. Kira gave her a wink as she joined the crowd that had congregated to watch the show just as the tallest of those present gave Joule a shove.

"I am Notus, a member of House Votair. Know your place, son of a fallen House."

Joule barely budged; his face remarkably calm as the man's companions jeered.

"Show him his insignificance, Notus," one of the Tuann with the other said.

"It might be wiser to move on," Selene murmured in a low voice at Kira's shoulder.

"I'm staying. End of story."

"This will be agonizing for you—watching but unable to act."

Yes, it would.

But Kira was going to do it anyway.

In front of them, Joule took a step forward, lifting his face to stare up at the tall man as he invaded the other's space. "I know my place, and it's not for the likes of you to decide."

Would you look at that. Joule had grown a few teeth in the time since Kira had known him.

She was so proud.

It was like watching a child take their first steps. If those steps led them to making monumentally bad decisions that involved challenging someone much older and better trained than them.

She should really advise him not to learn from her.

"Promise you won't interfere even if it looks like he'll lose," Selene urged, distracting Kira from the brewing tension.

She was tempted to ignore Selene's nagging. Only, Selene wouldn't go away that easily.

"You have my word that I won't step forward unless I think he's in actual physical danger."

That was as far as Kira was willing to go.

"You don't have to worry about that. They won't let it go that far." Selene nodded at Auralyn and then several other oshota who'd appeared in the crowd.

Their expressions were attentive as they watched the confrontation. From their postures, Kira could tell they were

prepared to stop the fight if things went too far.

“Tuann society is so weird,” Kira muttered with a bit of disgust.

It was obvious the group facing Joule were all much older than him, but because of some archaic rule that those who’d passed their *adva ka* couldn’t interfere in the duels of those who hadn’t, no one would intercede on his behalf.

The complete ridiculousness of it made Kira want to kick something. “This fucking sucks.”

Amusement touched Selene’s face as she looked at Kira out of the corner of her eye. “Would you still be saying that if you were over there and not here?”

Kira gave Selene a sulky look. She really hated it when the other was right. “Yeah. Yeah. You know me so well.”

Kira looked over to find Elena’s eyes trained on her, a small frown on her face.

Elena’s mouth opened to call Kira’s name before she thought better of it. She pressed her lips together and darted a quick glance in Auralyn’s direction.

Smart girl.

But then she always had been. She was like her mother in that way.

Kira dropped one arm, giving Elena a hand sign that meant “I am here.”

Useless, at the moment, but she had hopes that wouldn't always be the case.

There was a renewed sense of confidence in Elena's expression as she focused on Joule's confronters. Her eyes contained a brightness that had been lacking before.

She seemed almost perky as she waited for the others to make their first move. Anticipation showed on her face as she squared off with the Tuann from the opposing House, a similar cocky smile to that of the other side's leader playing on her lips.

"I find your arrogance offensive." Notus slapped a challenge coin against Joule's chest. "Someone needs to teach you how the world works."

Joule caught the engraved piece of metal before it could fall. "Someone already has and she's far more qualified a teacher than you."

Selene shifted closer to Kira as the crowd around Joule and the other moved back, giving the two space. "I think he means you."

Kira didn't respond as she studied Joule's opponent. Notus appeared unarmed but such things were always deceiving with the Tuann.

"He's issued a challenge that relies on pitting their soul's breath against each other. Weapons won't be allowed," Selene informed Kira. "I'm guessing his is one of the more combative

types. Your friend may be in some trouble since he's a shielder."

"I think he might surprise you."

He would surprise them all.

A circle formed around Joule and the man as the crowd debated who would win.

"Kick his ass, Joule!" Ziva shouted.

His opponent focused on the girl. "Little one, confidence is admirable but too much makes you look foolish."

Ziva glared at the man with a fierce look that was surprisingly at home on her young face.

Joule made a quick gesture. *Ki* exploded out of him, his hands quickly shaping it to the form he desired before thrusting it outward. It rushed in a narrow line at his opponent, striking him in the chest with enough force to knock him off his feet.

The crowd went silent.

Selene gave Kira a considering look that Kira ignored.

Joule dropped his hands as the other Tuann lifted onto his elbows.

"That's something my mentor taught me," Joule said with the faintest trace of gloating. "Never lower your guard when an enemy is in front of you. It's too bad you never learned that lesson or else you might have won."

Ziva let out a war cry as she slammed her hands together. “House Maxiim! House Maxiim!”

Joule’s expression showed nothing but calm as his opponent scrambled to his feet.

Notus’s face was a mask of fury as *ki* built around his hands. The air warped.

The oshota in the surrounding crowd started forward.

Joule didn’t wait.

He dashed forward, closing the distance before the other could finish constructing his *ki*. Taking advantage of his opponent’s momentary inability to move, Joule sunk his fist into the man’s stomach.

Breath exploded from Notus as he bent over. The *ki* he’d been accumulating burst out in a violent eruption that passed harmlessly over Joule’s shield.

As soon as the wave finished, Joule followed his punch with an upper cut to the man’s chin.

The man’s legs went limp, spilling him to the ground.

Kira pumped her fist covertly. “Yes!”

That was how he should do it.

Joule’s face was cold as he ran his gaze over the other man’s prone body, disgust curling his lip. “That’s another thing she taught me. Never wait when you could do.”

Selene let out a small huff of amusement. “He’s picked up a few of your habits.”



“There was a lot of time on the trip back to Ta Sa’Riel.” Kira shrugged. “I gave him a few pointers. That’s all.”

Joule wanted to learn; she’d wanted a sparring partner. They both got something from the exchange. Win, win.

Selene’s sidelong look said she wasn’t fooled. “And I suppose some of those suggestions included telling him about my techniques.”

There was a slight smirk on Kira’s face as she held Selene’s gaze, letting the other woman draw her own conclusions.

Selene’s chin dipped. “How naughty of you.”

Kira lifted a shoulder. “I may have mentioned a few things. He figured out the rest himself.”

Quite beautifully, she might add.

Joule headed back to Elena and Ziva, his face lighting up as he caught sight of Kira. He jogged her way, the other two following.

“Did you see?” he asked excitedly.

Kira hummed an assent.

“And?”

Kira’s silence made some of Joule’s happiness dim as suspense replaced his former pleasure.

Finally, she couldn’t take it anymore and reached to ruffle his hair. “I’d say you showed improvement.”

Delight filled his face.

“But next time, knock him out with the first blow. Never let them get back up if you can at all help it,” she advised, not wanting him to get too cocky.

He was good, but there was still a long way to go.

He nodded, looking as if he was hanging on every word.

“His *seon'yer* probably won't appreciate your bad influence,” Selene observed in an amused voice.

Joule's gaze moved to her as his head dipped in a respectful nod. “Lady.”

Selene smiled at him, the expression oddly sweet. “That was a very interesting use of your affinity.”

Joule's gaze darted Kira's way. “I would never have thought to use it that way if Kira hadn't made the suggestion.”

Selene eyed Kira with a probing look. “You don't say.”

Kira's response was forgotten as a woman stepped out of the group of Tuann surrounding Joule's fallen opponent.

Her hand flashed as she hurled a coin infused with *ki* at Joule's face. “Answer my challenge.”

Kira's hand snapped out, intercepting the coin's trajectory in a lightning-fast movement.

“Kira,” Joule protested as he gave her hand a concerned look.

Kira ignored the sting in her palm, resisting the urge to shake out the appendage to get rid of the sensation.

From the level of pain radiating from her hand, it was clear the woman intended to severely injure, perhaps even kill, Joule.

“It is not your place to interfere in a challenge,” the woman warned Kira.

“A lot of people keep telling me where my place is.” Kira fought to maintain a calm expression as her hand slowly tightened around the coin.

Pain bit into the flesh of her palm from how hard she was squeezing. Anger became a balloon in her chest as it expanded. Bigger and bigger until she felt like her skin would burst from the pressure.

“It’s too bad not a damn one of you are qualified to comment on where that is,” Kira continued.

Those in front of her flinched from Kira’s stare. The wise took a step back, physically removing themselves as if by doing so they could guarantee their safety.

The oshota in the crowd tensed, watching Kira with suddenly alert gazes.

One of the woman’s companions considered Kira with trepidation. “Maybe we should rethink this course, Renata.”

“Yes, Renata, maybe you should,” Kira purred.

Though she really hoped she wouldn’t.

Toying with Renata like a cat with a mouse might be quite fun, all things considered.

It might not be the wisest move, but Kira couldn't help but feel anticipation at the thought of spilling Renata's pretty blood all over these lovely cobblestones.

The stench of fear permeated the air as Selene let out a resigned sigh that made one side of Kira's mouth hook up.

"How insecure your House must be to issue back-to-back challenges to someone who is little more than a child. Is this how your House fights? You wear your opponent down with greater numbers?" Kira asked.

A growing discontent came from the crowd around them as many agreed with Kira's words.

"Such an act stinks of cowardice." Kira swept her gaze over those watching from the balcony to include them in her statement. "Is that what you are? Cowards?"

Renata held Kira's stare for only a moment. Knowing she had no hope of winning either verbally or physically against Kira, she chose easier prey.

Renata looked past Kira to Joule. "I guess I should expect no better from the son of a fallen House. You require others to fight your battles for you?"

To his credit Joule remained expressionless at Renata's provocation, regarding the other with an almost apathetic expression. It was a sharp turnaround from the boy who'd once come to Kira worried about the things other people had said about her.

That Joule would have already leapt into battle, a marionette bound by his emotions for others to manipulate.

Kira found it interesting how the woman had changed tactics as soon as she sensed her side losing ground. She'd gone straight for Joule's perceived weakness, hoping to taunt him into a foolish reaction.

"I can take her," Joule assured Kira.

Kira considered him as the rest of the crowd faded into background noise. A smile grew on her face. "I believe you."

Although, if she was honest, she wished he wouldn't have to.

Unfortunately, Selene had been right before. There were some things he had to do for himself. Maybe if his goal had been less lofty, not something as major as resurrecting his fallen House, it would be different.

Kira sighed, knowing she had no place in stopping him. "Do what you want."

Joule's attention snapped to Renata, a bit of the warrior he'd someday be in his young face.

"Don't think your tricks will work this time," Renata informed him as he moved to the center of the empty circle.

"You care for him quite a lot," Selene observed.

"He has potential—if he can find the right teacher."

Selene's lips pursed. "Is that a hint?"

“If you want to take it as such.” Kira shrugged as Ziva’s gaze moved back and forth between them. “I just thought since you don’t have a lot to do while here you might give him a few tips.”

Kira took it as a good sign when the other woman didn’t show anger at her suggestion. A few more subtle-ish hints and she might actually convince Selene.

Kira mentally rubbed her hands together in glee.

A disturbance spread through the crowd as Joule and Renata took up combative stances.

They paused as a pair of oshota pushed through the circle, striding directly toward Selene and Kira.

“What now?” Kira whined.

“My, my, you’re so popular,” Selene observed, lifting a hand to cover her giggle.

Kira shook her head doubtfully, noting the focus on their faces. All of which was on the woman standing next to her.

“I don’t think they’re here for me.”

Kira had a feeling if she hadn’t been standing next to Selene, they wouldn’t have given her a second look.

Behind her back, Kira made the sign for retreat.

Elena pulled Ziva away, fading into the crowd as she headed for where Auralyn still leaned against the tree.

Good.

Kira didn't think things would get out of hand in such a crowded setting, but she didn't want to take any chances.

Until they knew what these Tuann wanted, it was best to be careful.

Selene's amusement faded at the other two's approach, leaving her expression guarded as she took in the synth armor that announced their House allegiance. A deep red with black accents.

"House Kashori," Selene murmured for Kira's benefit.

There was renewed interest in Kira's gaze as those present opened a path to allow the oshota from House Kashori to pass. From Jin's research, she knew Kashori was considered one of the major Houses but beyond that they were largely a mystery.

A carefully guarded one from what she could tell.

The approaching oshota wore arrogant expressions that went well with the dismissive way they scanned Kira before deciding to ignore her.

She laughed under her breath.

It wasn't that Kira thought she was the center of the universe, but experience taught her that most people took notice of her in one way or another. Sometimes they were happy to see her. Other times they took an instant dislike.

But deliberately pretending she wasn't there? Not so much.

It made the pair a little more interesting than they would have been otherwise.

Kira made a small nod at Joule, telling him to finish his duel quickly as the oshota stopped in front of Selene and her.

The taller of the two had what Kira would describe as a brutish-looking face. His nose a little squashed, suggesting it had been broken a few too many times in the past. The pronounced ridges of his brow gave him a severe countenance.

Kira was willing to bet most people assumed he was scowling at them all the time.

His companion had hair that was a shade of bluish black and eyes a light brown color. His features were sharper than the other's.

The brutish oshota was the first to speak as he put on a pleasant expression that was ill fitting.

“Lady, allow me to introduce myself. My name is Boden and this is Edris. We are most happy to make your acquaintance.”

Kira nearly choked on a laugh at the stilted words.

Whatever Boden's talents were, diplomacy wasn't one of them. He hadn't quite nailed the level of obsequiousness needed.

His companion, Edris, remained silent, limiting himself to a simple nod of greeting.

Perhaps their performance would have been easier to believe if they didn't make it quite so obvious they'd prefer to be anywhere but where they currently stood.



Boden recovered his somewhat terrifying attempt at a smile, determinedly ignoring Kira. “If you’d allow, we’d like to speak with you.”

The sound of *ki* crashing distracted Kira from their conversation as she looked over to check Joule’s progress. He and Renata were exchanging blows as they engaged in hand-to-hand combat.

The woman was better than Notus, using *ki* to strengthen her blows similar to the way someone who reinforced their body with *ki* might but with a subtle difference.

An internal *ki* type affinity would normally allow the user to strengthen their muscles and bones.

Renata wasn’t doing that. Rather, she was overlaying *ki* on the exterior of her arms and legs. It was almost like a thin membrane of *ki* that worked with the molecules in the air to reduce friction, enabling Renata to move faster and hit harder.

As an opponent, she would be a tough one for Joule to handle.

“I’m afraid I must decline your offer.” Selene nodded to where Joule and Renata were going at it. “As you can see, my sister and I have other matters that require our attention.”

For the first time since his arrival, Boden’s face showed confusion as he looked between Kira and Selene. “I was unaware that Roake’s heir had siblings.”

A wintry glint showed behind Selene’s mask of kindness. “A childhood like the one we had tends to bond people. That is

the case for Kira and I and all those who walked out of that place alive.”

Alertness entered Boden and Edris’s stance as they locked onto the key part of Selene’s statement.

“There are more,” Edris said, sounding certain.

Selene’s expression turned coy. “Are there?”

Kira rolled her eyes at the other woman’s back.

That was just mean. Why offer hope then take it away in the next moment?

Typical of the forty-three.

Kira didn’t make the mistake of thinking her choice of words was accidental either. She’d chosen to say it in that way for a reason.

“Joule’s match is going to take a while. Why don’t we head over there?” Kira jerked her head at the second-floor balcony of the building next to the duel.

“I’ll get a drink. You can talk while we wait for Joule to wrap up.”

And Kira would get a chance to take a look at the Tuann she suspected were the architects behind Joule’s bout of challenges.

Selene’s knowing look said she had guessed Kira’s real motives.

Boden was quick to step forward as if afraid Selene would change her mind. “We accept your proposal.”

“Oh good. I’m so glad,” Kira said in a snarky voice, unable to resist.

She took one look at Joule’s focused expression as he parried Renata’s blows, reading the flow of the fight at a glance.

By the time she finished her drink, he should have figured out how to deal with the other woman.

Otherwise, Kira would start to think all that time spent training would have been for naught.



The balcony café that Boden and Edris led them to was a charming little spot with only enough tables to sit four different groups of guests. Planters hung from the ceiling, trailing tiny, purple flowers. To their right, a trellis climbed the wall, covered in green vines with red flowers that reminded Kira vaguely of roses.

It was a spectacular view, offering a bird’s eye vantage of the comings and goings of the plaza while putting you on eye level with the crown of the tree and the adorable tiny birds roosting in its branches.

Kira threw herself into an open chair next to the balcony that enabled her to check out their neighbors in the next balcony over in addition to keeping an eye on Joule.

Her target was an imperious looking bastard.

Already Kira didn't like him. There was something about the snobbish and arrogant cast to his features that pointed to this person being an asshole of the highest order.

His oshota wore armor Kira didn't recognize from the any of the Houses she'd had issues with in the past.

Its design wasn't from House Dethos. Of that she was certain. Beyond that was a mystery.

Selene settled gracefully into the only available chair next to Kira.

There was a disgruntled expression on Boden's face as he came to that realization a second too late.

"What?" Kira jerked her chin at a pair of chairs at the table next to them. "There are more chairs over there."

The chances the oshota would compromise their dignity by retrieving them was small, making Kira interested to see what they'd choose to do.

She wasn't entirely surprised when the pair remained where they were.

So rigid and uncompromising. How could anyone live like that every day for hundreds of years?

So many missed opportunities for fun.

Maybe it was better she and Jin had grown up among humans. They'd have suffocated in Tuann society.

"I've taken the liberty of ordering a local specialty," Boden said, not quite hiding his irritation.

Kira smirked as she studied the fight. Joule was maintaining his defense but from the looks of things Renata was controlling the pacing.

Kira stretched her legs out in front of her and propped her head on her hand as a Tuann crossed the balcony to set a steaming mug in front of Selene.

Kira sniffed, a scent not unlike chai filling her nose.

Curious, she swiped the mug from the table and lifted it for a better smell. Hmm. Definitely chai-like.

Kira was picking up all sorts of interesting spices. All subtly different from the ones she was familiar with.

“That is not yours,” Boden said through gritted teeth as he cut a seething look her way.

Kira looked from the cup to him. “I beg to differ.”

She was the one holding it after all.

“I ordered that for the lady.”

Kira squinted at Selene. “Why is it that people always call you lady but never me?”

Selene’s eyes warmed. “Perhaps that is something to think about.”

“No thanks. I’m happy as I am.” Kira looked up at Boden. “Whoever you ordered this for; it’s mine now. If you want her to have one, I suggest you order another.”

Consider this payback for Selene swiping her *keeva* earlier. Not that Selene appeared particularly interested in having the

drink for herself.

“That is unnecessary,” Selene instructed before Boden could turn to do exactly that. “This will not take long.”

Kira let Selene take the lead in the conversation. After all, her “sister” was the one they wanted.

Boden’s uncertainty was transparent as he hovered next to the table.

It was enough that Kira almost took pity on him. She might have too if movement from the balcony next to theirs hadn’t caught her attention. She watched as one of the oshota at the man’s side leaned forward to say something into his ear.

She strained, unable to decipher what they were saying without the use of her *ki*. Something she couldn’t chance in a setting like this.

Such an action would be considered rude if she was caught. While she didn’t mind being considered without manners, it was another story if they became aware she was suspicious.

Kira bit her lip in frustration as an outcry came from the crowd below.

Joule stood over the prone body of Renata, breathing heavily. From under the tree, Ziva and Elena let out a victory shout.

Kira tipped her cup at Joule in salute as he looked up at her. “Well done.”

Another of Renata's companions stepped out of the crowd, tossing Joule a coin.

"I challenge you. Do you dare accept?" the man taunted.

The volume of the cheers lowered as Joule caught the coin, cradling it in his palm before shooting a look in Kira's direction.

Her hand clenched around the mug as her laziness vanished.

Son of a bitch.

## SIXTEEN

**K**ira's pulse pounded, drowning out the sudden silence that resulted from the third challenge.

Its rhythm grew louder and louder. It wasn't until Boden, Edris and the rest on the balcony looked around them with confusion that she realized that pounding sound wasn't coming from her.

The floor of the balcony exploded upward, raining pieces of tile and other debris on those around them.

A shape shot out of the hole, stopping to hover several feet off the ground before twisting to focus its "eye" on Kira—or more accurately, the mug she held.

"Is that chai?" Jin asked as if unaware of the tension in those around them—or the fact that Boden and Edris had drawn their en-blades.

Kira ignored his question as she sent a glare at the Kashori oshota threatening her friend. "Put those away."

Before I feed them to you, she finished silently.



The back-to-back challenges to Joule had already put her in a foul mood. Pointing a weapon at Jin in this moment would be a good way to send her over the edge.

“I would listen to her if I were you,” Selene advised.

Kira’s body was a coiled spring as she regarded the oshota, wanting nothing more than to throw herself at those in front of her to work off some of this rage.

Finn dropped down from the roof, landing lightly behind the oshota. His en-blade already drawn and pointed at the duo as he rose to his full height.

Edris whirled to face him, putting his back to Boden.

Finn’s gaze flicked past the pair to Kira, full of irritation and blame as if to say he’d anticipated this scenario upon his arrival and was disappointed to find he was right.

“Impressive,” Selene observed. “There was at least ten more minutes in my construct.”

Kira ignored both Selene and Finn as she stared down Kashori’s oshota. “Did you not hear me the first time? Put. Your. Blade. Away.”

The Tuann’s constant hostility toward Jin was growing wearisome. She’d lost count of the number of times his mere presence had sparked a similar reaction.

Boden’s nice guy act shredded. “Or what?”

For a moment, Kira didn’t move. She sat there staring at him, motionless. Then she smiled.

It was a peaceful smile. Beatific really.

Kira exploded forward, closing the distance between them in the blink of an eye. She stopped just outside his reach, happy when he tensed.

“Or I feed it to you.”

Kira gave him another deranged smile, liking that confused look in his eye. It suited his brutish features as did his troubled frown that showed he didn't know what to do with her.

That was okay. He didn't need to. Kira would be happy to educate him.

Finn's shoulders rose and then fell as he heaved a sigh. “Kira, that's enough.”

“I don't think it is.”

People kept forcing her to teach the same lesson over and over again. How hard was it to understand that the drone wasn't to be touched?

“You don't need to get involved in this,” Finn said. “I'll be the one to challenge him.”

Selene's hand landed on Kira's wrist. “He's right. There are a lot of people watching. It's better to let him take the attention away from you.”

A look of caution entered Boden's face as his grip tightened on his en-blade.

Kira found it mildly insulting that Boden regarded Finn as more of a threat than her.

She'd worked hard to earn a reputation as a terror. How disappointing that years of effort meant nothing in Tuann society.

Perhaps it was time she start again—this time among the Tuann.

Kira's gaze was cold as she smiled at Boden. "I dislike playing by other people's rules—so I think it's time I stopped."

Tension crackled.

Kira started to lunge forward when a sheet of *ki* came out of nowhere to whack Kashori's oshota in the side, making them stumble. A second shield rose from beneath their feet, physically lifting them and sending them careening over the balcony.

Kira was quick to react, manipulating the air molecules to guide their descent just the tiniest bit. Enough so Boden crashed into Joule's new challenger and Edris into his companions.

Selene arched an eyebrow at Kira in question.

Kira shrugged. "You can't blame me for a little interference."

She was sure people would hardly notice.

Selene's smile was gentle as she shook her head and glided toward the balcony railing, lifting her long dress so she could climb on top of the chair and then onto the railing. She stepped off, *ki* forming under her foot and then dissipating as soon as she took her next step.

Selene descended toward those on the ground. A goddess deigning to spend time with her supplicants.

“I’ve decided you’re right, Kira,” Selene said over her shoulder. “The boy shows promise. I’ll have a word with him before I go.”

Selene stepped onto the ground next to Kashori’s oshota who still lay on their backs, staring up at the sky and looking like they weren’t sure what had just happened.

Selene inclined her torso in a shallow bow. “I understand it is unorthodox for someone who hasn’t passed their *adva ka* to challenge one who has. Should you wish, you may file a complaint with the emperor over my behavior.”

From beginning to end, Selene’s tone was polite. If she felt anger, there was no sign of it in her voice.

Jin moved up beside Kira as Selene stepped past the Kashori oshota, gliding toward an awestricken Joule.

“Why do I feel like we don’t understand Selene and the rest as well as we thought we did?” Jin asked.

Kira shook her head as a shield of *ki* formed around Selene and Joule, cutting them off from the rest of the crowd for a private conversation.

Joule was safe—for now.

Finn moved up beside Kira, radiating unhappiness. “This makes the second time you wound up attacked while in the company of that woman.”

“Technically, I wasn’t attacked,” Kira corrected.

Jin snickered. “That’s because you were the one doing the attacking.”

“My argument holds.”

Being attacked and attacking were two very different things.

Frustration detonated in Finn. “You two are ridiculous and you know it.”

Kira and Jin shared a look that ended with her nodding. “That’s a fair assessment.”

“What are you even doing here?” Finn snarled, for a brief moment looking like he was on the cusp of violence.

“Saving the day—like always?” Jin questioned.

Finn’s mouth flattened as he reached for control. “You’re supposed to be keeping a low profile.”

Jin moved closer to Kira as she reached for her mug. “You never answered my question earlier—is that chai?”

There was an almost tangible snap as Finn lost the tenuous hold on his temper. He stalked away, rather than continue to engage with Jin.

“Finally! I thought he’d never leave,” Jin muttered.

“He still hasn’t.”

Finn’s presence hovered on the edge of her senses, a sentinel who had decided to keep his distance but was still within reach should she need him.

Kira shifted to give Jin a look. “Besides, weren’t you the one who told me to treat him like a Cur? Why drive him away?”

Jin snorted. “You act like we never kept things from the Curs.”

One side of Kira’s mouth hooked up as she conceded his point. Neither of them had ever believed in sharing more information than what was necessary.

Kira turned back to the plaza. “He does have a point though. That was reckless.” And way more dramatic than necessary. This was a perfectly good balcony. He could easily have chosen a more accessible entrance point that didn’t destroy someone else’s property or cause the oshota to treat him like a threat. “What are you doing here?”

Kira didn’t think it was chance Jin arrived at exactly that moment. Right when she was contemplating doing something very foolish in Joule’s behalf.

“Information gathering. Identifying our enemies. You know—the usual.”

“Find anything out?”

Jin slunk a little closer, gently bumping Kira’s hand that held the mug. “How about you let me ride your senses in exchange for information?”

“You’re going to share anyway.”

“True but this way I get something out of it.”

Kira cupped the mug in both hands, letting the scent wash over her as she let the moment lengthen.

She'd say yes but hearing Jin beg was rare and too tempting an opportunity to pass up.

It was quite by accident that they'd discovered Jin's ability to ride her senses. Since then, it had been an infrequent but highly coveted experience. One Kira was loath to deny him. Especially since she was beginning to suspect it was one of the reasons he'd never gone soul bound mad.

"Please. Please. Please," Jin wheedled, the lens on his "eye" making a sound as it focused on her.

"Fine. Just do me a favor and stop with the puppy dog eye. You know it doesn't work for you."

"Considering it got me what I wanted, I think it worked just fine," Jin grumbled.

Kira ignored his sulky words as she reached for the connection that was always present between them. Most of the time it hovered in the background at the periphery of her consciousness. As long as neither of them concentrated too hard, that was where it would remain.

It was only when they pulled it to the forefront, widening that connection from a pinprick that things changed.

Jin moved from the back of her mind to the forefront, intruding on the area solely reserved for Kira.

It was a stressful process for them both, leading to headaches on Kira's end and increasing confusion on Jin's as

each of their senses of self deteriorated the longer the connection stayed open.

Normally, they wouldn't try this so soon after what had happened on the *Wanderer*, but Kira wanted to give Jin an experience that didn't center around pain and fear.

Something that was based in pleasure and comfort.

She took a small sip of the drink, allowing herself to linger on each part of the experience. The warmth still contained in the mug. The steam she breathed in right before letting the drink touch her tongue. The fascinating scent of the spices.

And finally, the taste of the drink itself.

It wasn't chai, but it was something damn close. It tasted like a memory floating just out of reach. A feeling similar to the one she'd had the first time she tasted chai.

Hmm. Perfection, Kira and Jin thought, perfectly in sync.

His contentment filtered to her, making her choke on a laugh. Disgruntlement at her amusement came next. Quickly forgotten as Kira took another sip.

She let the liquid coat her tongue before swallowing, not hurrying so Jin could get the most out of the experience.

His satisfaction left her with a warm feeling. Such a simple thing and yet he derived such pleasure from it.

She needed to do this for him more often.

*No need. This is enough*, Jin's whisper made her smile sadly before she shoved the emotion away, not wanting it to taint his



experience.

Jin stayed with her until she finished the drink, leaving Kira with a soft “thank you” before withdrawing.

The connection dampened, stretching until it was gossamer thin, and they were each alone in their own minds again.

For a moment the sensation of aloneness felt strange. Wrong. As if the rug had been yanked out from under her, leaving her to feel as if she was in free fall. Nothing to catch her.

She resisted the urge to reach out to him, knowing it would prolong their confusion.

Kira steadied herself against the table, sinking into the physical sense of touch. The cool feel of metal under her fingers. The way her muscles flexed as she lowered herself into the chair, re-learning what it was to be her again.

Kira Forrest. The Phoenix. And now, daughter of Roake.

As was always the case, the re-acclimation was brief. A handful of seconds until she felt stable enough to resume their conversation.

From the outside looking in, no one would be able to tell anything out of the ordinary had happened. Kira would simply be a woman enjoying a cup of tea. Jin silently watching.

“Your turn,” she told him.

Jin made loops in the air, unable to stay still as he worked through the same sense of disconnection on his end.

“Remember how you asked me to identify the owner of that ship? The one whose timing oh so conveniently allowed the bog’s hag to be attached to the *Wanderer’s* hull without us noticing?”

“You’re telling me the people on that balcony are them?”

Kira’s blood heated at the knowledge that her quarry was so close. A railing and a few feet of space were all that separated her from her maybe enemy.

“That’s not all. Those two who challenged Joule first are from the same House.”

In other words, they were targeting Joule. Because of Kira? Or another reason?

Kira leaned an elbow on the table before giving up and sprawling across it.

The entire conversation was conducted in Japanese since the likelihood of the Tuann knowing an ancient language of old Earth was small.

Japanese, along with many other languages, had fallen into disuse once humanity reached the stars. While not considered a dead language, the number of people who knew how to speak it was quite small.

The reason Kira and Jin were among them was entirely due to Himoto’s influence.

“Before you ask, they’re not House Danai. They don’t share the smallest affiliation with them. Outwardly, at least.”

Kira's gaze sharpened as she eyed the balcony next to theirs with renewed interest. "Who are they?"

Jin switched to their comms. "A House called Votair. As far as I could tell, they share no ties to any of the major five Houses."

That was quite a feat since most of the Houses were arranged in a type of pyramid. The major Houses at the top and many affiliate Houses making up the bottom levels of the pyramid.

"No idea why they're targeting Joule, then?"

"No. Not yet."

Knowing him though, he wouldn't rest until he'd uncovered the rest of the mystery.

"Those challenging Joule aren't all from that House," Kira observed.

"Good eye. You're right. Only the woman and Notus were from Votair. The last was a man from Terot, a sub-House of Danai. Spreading the challenges among Houses like this is a smart tactic. It makes it look less like a single House is bullying Joule."

Kira tapped a finger against the table, lost in thought. "How did you stumble on them?"

"Like I said, I tracked the owner of the ship which led me to House Votair. Imagine my surprise when I discovered the Overlord of Votair exiting House Danai's stronghold after a meeting—so I followed them."

He wouldn't be Jin if he hadn't.

“We need to learn more before we make any conclusions,” Jin said.

Kira understood what he was saying. There was every chance Votair was a red herring designed to draw their focus from the real enemy. Another proxy appointed by Danai to fight their battles.

Or maybe Danai had nothing to do with this at all and everything was simply coincidence.

“Either way, they're becoming a problem I no longer want to deal with.” Kira sat back in her chair to stare across the plaza.

It was time to deal with them in a more permanent manner.

“Tell me about the one in charge,” she instructed.

“His name is Terrel. Their Overlord, and from what I gather, he's ambitious.”

Kira made a disgusted sound in the back of her throat. “Not surprising.”

It was always those with the most ambition who were the first to fall prey to the Tsavitee's manipulations. It was like they had a sixth sense for those who were unhappy with their position but lacked the talent to achieve their dreams.

They'd done it with humans and now it looked like even the Tuann weren't immune.

“They do have a type,” Jin agreed.

The Tsavitee would know how to use Terrel's desires against him, luring him ever deeper until he compromised his values. Once he crossed that line, the Tsavitee would own him body and soul.

"I want a solution for the next time he goes after Joule," Kira ordered.

Jin's chuckle sounded evil. "I've already got a few ideas."

Kira grunted. "As long as it gets me the results I want, you have clearance to create as big a splash as you want."

She'd probably end up regretting that offer but that was a problem for future Kira.

Current Kira was more interested to know why the wanderers, the second most suspicious of those Jin was investigating, were paying a little too much attention to Kira's balcony.

Kira tapped her finger on the table, surreptitiously indicating the group not far from them in the plaza. "How about our mysterious friends? Do any information gathering on them?"

"What kind of drone do you take me for?" Jin asked with a snort. "Of course, I did."

Kira arched an eyebrow at him when he said nothing further. "And?"

"I found nothing to indicate they were anything other than what they portrayed themselves to be." Jin moved up beside

Kira, focusing on the group that had caught her attention. “I looked too.”

If Jin said he’d looked, it meant he had left no stone uncovered. In this, he was absolutely trustworthy, putting most intelligence networks to shame.

Either the wanderers were exactly what they appeared, or they were keeping a low enough profile that even Jin couldn’t get anything on them.

“Keep an eye on them anyway,” she told him.

She wanted to know the second there was any suspicious movement. Something about them set her instincts to tingling. She couldn’t put her finger on it, but she knew there was more to them than what they were showing.

“I’ve already assigned a few of my spawn to keep an eye on them.”

Kira’s head snapped toward Jin as her mouth dropped open. “How many of them did you make?”

A smug pride radiated through their bond. “Enough that some would consider it an army.”

What a terrifying thought. An army of mini-Jin’s running around Ta Sa’Riel creating who knew what sort of havoc.

“You have a problem,” Kira informed him as she rose from her chair.

“What?”

She shook her head at him as Finn reappeared at her side like a ghost. “You need help.”

Jin trailed after them as they headed inside the café.

“I’m procreating. Isn’t that what people our age do?” Jin complained.

There was a long-suffering expression on Finn’s face as he stared at Jin.

“That’s not what that is called,” Kira informed Jin as they reached a set of stairs, leading down into an alley that would allow them to depart without attracting attention.

“What would you call it then? I created more of my progeny. That fits the definition of procreating.”

“That’s not—“ Kira shook her head as she trailed off.

She wasn’t going to win this argument. She could already tell.

“Let’s get out of here,” Kira told Finn.

“Are you sure there aren’t any other dangerous situations you want to throw yourself into?” Finn asked with a touch of sarcasm.

Kira’s smile spread across her face. “Don’t tempt me or I might do exactly that.”

She was sure there was plenty of opportunity for someone who looked hard enough.



Leaving the café, Kira wasn't quite ready to return to Roake's fortress and the expectations waiting for her there, instead preferring to wander the city in the company of the other two.

Jin's delight rang through their bond as he swooped and dove to examine anything that caught his interest. Kira trailed behind him; her hands tucked in her pocket.

It hadn't dawned on her until just now how long it had been since they had enjoyed such simple pleasures. Meandering aimlessly. Without destination or agenda. Not worrying about when their enemies would strike next.

Just the feel of the sea breeze on her face and the waning light of the sun as it began its descent.

Though the streets were a little more crowded than the last time she'd traveled these paths with Graydon, it didn't take away from her enjoyment.

The day's shadows were beginning to lengthen by the time Kira made her way toward the fortress, her body tired but her soul exuding with contentment.

Luckily, they encountered no further incidents as they walked through the city, and by the time the exterior walls that guarded the fortress came into view, most of Finn's antagonism had eased.

His relaxation didn't last long as he spotted Graydon and several of his oshota waiting for Kira in front of the walls of the fortress. A tension entered his body as his guard immediately slammed up.



Finn slowed. "I think news of your escapades has spread."

"The Tuann are as gossipy as a bunch of human teenagers," Jin grumbled.

Kira made a face that said she agreed. They were as bad as the space force where gossip had a way of taking on a life of its own.

"I suppose we should see what he wants," Kira started toward Graydon.

Solal and Amila stood at his back. She found Isla and Baran not far away. Amila acknowledged her with a wry smile before her expression returned to its typical blankness.

"Fancy meeting you here," Kira said in lieu of a greeting.

Graydon leveled a look on her. "You're lucky your uncle chose to send me and not someone else."

"I suppose that means he knows."

Lovely.

Graydon suppressed a smile. "It's hard not to when Kashori's heir shows up on his doorstep demanding an audience with you."

"Please tell me you're kidding."

"I wish I could. They showed up not long before you did."

Kira cursed silently to herself. "Fucking tattletales."

A doorway formed in the wall, the stones parting to allow Kira and her companions through.

It was one of many defenses embedded into the fortress's design and quite the clever one.

It was more difficult for enemies to invade if they constantly found their way obstructed by unrelenting wall and impassible rock. While the sturdy walls wouldn't stand up to anyone truly determined to get inside, they would create enough of a barrier to slow the enemy down long enough for those within to mount a defense.

Of course, all the hidden doorways and defenses in the world wouldn't protect you if the enemy was on the inside already.

"Harlow was most interested to hear how your oshota was nowhere in sight," Graydon remarked as he prowled at Kira's side.

Finn grunted; his expression unaffected.

Trust Graydon to poke her oshota's sore spot right when he'd finally recovered some of his mood.

"And he sent you to summon me home?" Kira asked, casting him an arch look.

Graydon's smile was easy. "He didn't have to. I volunteered."

Kira doubted he'd made that offer out of the goodness of his heart.

"Afraid I can't handle the pampered heir of another House?"

Graydon's head dipped, his lips hovering a centimeter from her own.

Kira's eyes darted to them. As always, the banked desire she had for him was quick to rise, tempting her to close that minuscule distance.

Her lips tingled with the knowledge of what he would taste like. The way he would feel against her.

"*Coli*, you're never the one I worry about," he whispered, his lips brushing hers before he withdrew. There was a wicked look in Graydon's eyes that said he'd had fun toying with her.

Kira cleared her throat, forcing herself to return to the subject at hand.

"I assume the emperor would prefer I not humiliate one of his loyal subjects and start a House feud."

The warm weight of Graydon's palm landed on the small of Kira's back, sending a jolt of awareness through her as he guided her forward. "I'm sure your uncle would prefer that as well."

Kira snorted. "Then perhaps he should stop trying to make me Roake's heir."

"I think you would make a fine Overlord." Graydon had a way of smiling without ever moving his lips. The grooves around his eyes deepening as warmth entered them.

If she didn't love seeing that expression on his face so much, she'd be tempted to kick him.

They entered the fortress's inner courtyard, the door sealing behind them.

There was a minimalistic beauty to the Fortress of the Vigilant that Kira had always appreciated. It stood stalwart and tall. Its walls built from a stone that seemed to absorb the light. Tall spires stabbed the sky's underbelly, an austere monument to the stoic warriors who called this place home. The towers merged into one another. A self-contained city in its own right.

Kira crossed the courtyard, avoiding the exterior buttresses.

House Roake wasn't what you'd call welcoming. They viewed strangers as hostiles who hadn't yet declared themselves as enemies.

It was why Kira found it extremely unlikely that Harlow would allow their guests to step foot within the fortress's walls.

That left one place for Kashori to cool their heels while awaiting Kira's arrival. The formal entrance for the fortress.

Technically speaking it wasn't inside the fortress itself but rather just outside. Part of the same raised bridge that extended all the way to the Shining Palace.

It didn't take long for Kira and Graydon to reach the impractical, if intimidating, archway that framed the massive stone doors that acted as the fortress's formal entrance. The doors were carved with the crest of House Roake. A *lu-ong*, fringe flared as it guarded a blue stone that acted as the handles for both doors.

Harlow stood in front of them, his face an impassive mask. Every inch the Overlord, despite the synth armor he wore being no different than the oshota flanking him on either side.

No one would ever mistake him as anything but what he was. The ruler within these walls.

Beside him, Wren was an aloof presence. Unflappable and stoic as he stared down the trio from Kashori.

It was easy to identify the two oshota as the ones Selene threw off the balcony.

They hovered protectively in front of the third, a woman a few years younger than Kira. Her hair was a reddish gold, hanging loose except for a single section near the front that had been woven around a strand of leather into a thin braid.

Kashori's heir, Kira assumed.

She certainly looked the part. Her clothes were made from *ethieri*, a material Kira recognized since her own garments contained it.

Clothes made from the pricey fabric contained anti-ballistic properties able to stop most forms of small weapon fire. It also had a climate control function that ensured the wearer became neither too hot nor too cold in most environments.

"This is going to be a pain," Kira said.

"Indeed, it is, but avoidance never fixed anything, Nixxy Poo."

Jin evaded Kira's swat, darting away to find a hiding spot among the shadowed recesses of the fortress before anyone could see him.

Before Kira could avoid it, Harlow and the rest looked in her direction, cutting off Kira's last opportunity to hide and hope this all went away.

With a feeling of resignation, Kira trudged forward.

"Regretting anything yet?" Graydon asked.

"Hush, you," Kira told him, lifting her chin as she joined Harlow and the rest.

"Niece," Harlow said in greeting.

Kira was proud when her response contained only a little awkwardness. "Uncle."

"I'm glad to see you found your way."

Kira glanced up at the mountain beside her. "How could I not when you send such an insistent guide?"

Graydon's lips tilted up on the ends before he focused on Kira's unwelcome guests all of whom seemed more than a little surprised at his presence.

Edris's expression was carefully blank as he stared at the emperor's Face. Boden, on the other hand, seemed almost disconcerted, eyeing Graydon like he was some zoo animal who'd just sat up and talked.

The woman at their center was the least affected, more interested in Kira than why the emperor's Face would be in

her company.

Kira's expression remained bland, giving them no hint as to the reasons behind Graydon's presence.

Mostly because she didn't understand it either.

"Our guests have been filling my ears with such interesting stories," Harlow drawled.

"Is that right?"

"Indeed." There was a wry curve to Harlow's smile. "I found several parts most fascinating and am looking forward to discussing the details with you later."

Kira was betting she wouldn't enjoy that conversation or the repercussions that came from it.

There was a subtle amusement in Harlow's gaze that disappeared almost as quickly as it had come as he focused on their guests.

"House Kashori has grown bold since the last time I dealt with them," Harlow said in a pleasant-sounding voice that was still vaguely threatening. "To think their heir would make demands of an Overlord."

The woman maintained her calm as she sent Harlow a respectful bow. "It was not my intention to make demands."

"Whether it was or not, that is exactly what you've done."

There was an air of disapproval in Harlow's words that made those in front of him stiffen.

The woman's face showed alarm as her head lifted. "No—"

The pressure in the air dropped as fury settled on Harlow's face.

“You've arrived at the gates of my fortress, a place used for centuries to declare vendettas, then insist I call forth my niece. Do you expect me to stand idly by while you challenge her to a duel?” Harlow's voice had grown to a thunderous roar by the end of his statement. “Has Kashori grown so fat and bloated that they've forgotten how Roake earned our name?”

Boden placed one hand protectively in front of the woman, keeping his gaze on Harlow as a precaution. “You're mistaken about our purpose here.”

Kira had to give it to the woman. She was brave in the face of Harlow's wrath. Even Kira felt the hot splash of his anger, lapping at the periphery of her senses.

In the same position, Kira wasn't sure she would have risked poking the beast further.

Who was she kidding? She probably would have taken a giant stick and whacked him on the head with it.

“Oh?” Harlow said in a silky voice that managed to sound scarier than the shout of before. “Then enlighten me—why have you come here?”

“To apologize,” the woman burst out, ignoring the way Boden tried to stop her as her gaze found Kira. “That's why we're here. To atone for attacking you.”

The air went electric.



*Ki* manifested around Harlow, a rare phenomenon that Kira had experienced a handful of times. It coiled around him, snapping and crackling as the pressure in the atmosphere dropped.

Storm clouds roiled above the fortress. Thunder cracked.

A monster looked out of Harlow's eyes. "Tell me again. You did what to my niece?"

## SEVENTEEN

Kira shook her head. Poor fools.

“I guess when you were telling stories you forgot that part,” Kira drawled, forcing herself not to flinch as the heat of Harlow’s anger threatened to spill onto her when he glanced at her.

Was this what others felt when she lost her temper?

The tightness in the chest and the crushing knowledge that a single wrong move could be their end?

Kira breathed through the overwhelming power.

Movement from one of the windows above caught her attention as Elena was pulled back into the fortress by Raider.

He sent her a hand signal that said, “I’ve got your back.”

It was unnecessary. Partly because Harlow wouldn’t hurt her. Mostly because Raider stood no chance against the Overlord.

He might slow him down but that was about it.

Jin had the same thought as Raider, shifting to a lower altitude so he could act if the situation deteriorated.

“You threatened my niece.” Harlow’s voice had developed an animal-like growl that sent chills down Kira’s back.

It was hard to believe Harlow lacked a primus.

The menace he was projecting was the same type Kira had in the moments leading to the primus assuming supremacy.

Kira wouldn’t be surprised if in the next second symbols started scrolling across his skin as a monster tore forth.

Almost unconsciously, Kira slowed her breathing. As if by doing so, she could reduce her sense of presence.

Jin slipped closer, careful to stay in Harlow’s blind spot.

Kira glanced to her left and then her right, carefully cataloging everything nearby as she considered her options for defusing the situation.

What kind of idiots delivered themselves up on a platter like this? If she got injured saving them, she was going to be pissed.

Boden touched his chest, looking vaguely insulted. “I would never threaten a child.”

All thought of interfering on their behalf vanished as Graydon choked on a laugh.

“It is amazing how insulting a Tuann can be without even trying,” Kira said with a glare.

In this situation you'd think they'd be trying to get her on their side. Not making her angrier.

The writhing mass of power that had surrounded Harlow abated, vanishing beneath his skin as the storm clouds above dissipated.

"It's probably a genetic trait." Jin's voice came from overhead as he moved out of the shadows to join them. "You have the same ability to send others into a rage by simply being yourself."

Kira ignored Finn's nod of agreement and Graydon's chuckle as she pointed to Boden and Edris, catching them in the act of reaching for their en-blades.

"Don't even think about it," she warned. "I'm less gentle than Selene. I won't simply knock you off a balcony."

Not to mention it was the height of stupidity to draw those blades while standing on Roake's doorstep and in the presence of the Overlord.

Already, she could feel the change in air pressure around Harlow as he fixed his gaze on the three from Kashori.

"I think I'm beginning to understand what happened." Graydon's gaze lingered on Jin. "You were somewhere you weren't supposed to be, weren't you? What happened to behaving yourself?"

Jin made a disdainful sound. "Did you really think that would last?"

Graydon's eyes narrowed. "Be careful, drone. Your fate affects hers."

The rebuke caused Jin to fall silent as the woman stepped forward.

"I apologize for the confusion. I only hoped for a chance to talk to you," she said with an earnestness that Kira found off putting.

Others had looked at her with that same type of gaze. Tuann who hoped Kira's survival meant their own children had too.

Kira shook her head at the woman. "No, you didn't. You wanted Selene, but since she's under the protection of the emperor, you settled for me."

It was why they'd tracked Selene to that plaza. Once she was inside the palace, she was untouchable.

That left Kira as their sole avenue for the answers they sought.

To Kira's side, Harlow's anger was banked. For now, he seemed content to let Kira direct the flow of conversation. An unspoken sign of support that she suspected these three would carry back to their House.

Likely before nightfall, Kashori along with all of their allies would know Roake's new heir had the acknowledgement of her Overlord—exactly as Harlow intended.

"What's your name?" Kira asked, fighting the headache that wanted to spawn.

“Tinsley.”

“Why are you really here?” Kira lifted a hand when the other woman started to respond. “Don’t say it’s to apologize either. We both know your oshota acted according to their training.”

It wasn’t something that required an apology and everybody standing here understood that.

“That’s not true. We are here to offer an apology for offending you,” Tinsley said with a stubbornness that was a little unexpected.

Though Kira supposed it shouldn’t have been if this was really the heir to House Kashori.

You didn’t get to a position like that without having a bit of a backbone.

“Oh? That’s interesting,” Kira said with a smirk.

Boden glowered at her. “You’re making this deliberately difficult.”

A snicker came from Jin as Kira flashed a humorless smile.

“It’s a personal failing of mine.”

One she took great pride in.

“Boden,” Tinsley rebuked with a warning look before aiming a tentative smile Kira’s way. “We realize we overreacted to your drone’s presence earlier and wish to make it up to you.”

“By ‘we’ do you mean you specifically or Kashori?” Kira challenged.

Her answer would change how Kira responded to her.

Kashori was a major House—like Roake. If the other woman had approached her as the heir of Kashori and not Tinsley herself, Kira would have to end this conversation right now.

She had no intention of getting involved with the politics behind House relations.

“I—“ Tinsley started before breaking off.

Kira sighed. “How old are you?”

Although she looked not much younger than Kira, her mannerisms pointed to her as being someone who didn’t have a lot of experience.

“Ninety,” Tinsley said with a look of confusion.

Kira whistled silently to herself. “You missed the Sorrowing by three years.”

A blink of an eye as Tuann measured it.

Tinsley made a small movement, her crestfallen expression making Kira feel like she’d slapped the other.

“My mother took my sister’s disappearance hard,” Tinsley said. “My father hoped another child would bring her back to the world.”

Kira grimaced, her half smile not reaching her eyes. “Let me guess—it didn’t take long before her problems returned.”

Kira didn't need Tinsley's hesitant nod to know she was on the right track. That small movement told Kira everything she needed. Tinsley's sorrow at not being enough. Her determination to latch onto anything that might pull her mother back from the abyss.

The problem was that what she was asking wouldn't accomplish what she wanted.

"That's the thing with grief." Kira moved her gaze to the avenue stretching behind Tinsley and the others.

In the golden hour before sunset, the Shining Palace had developed a reddish hue as the sun's rays began to fade. The remnant of the earlier storm allowing the setting ball of fire to put on a brilliant show.

"You can't run from it. Distractions only work for so long."

There was no shortcut to dealing with grief. It was a truth Kira knew better than anyone.

For such an advanced race, the Tuann were surprisingly shitty at handling loss.

Kira supposed being so long lived played a part in that. Maybe it would have been the same for her if she hadn't grown up under the shadow of grief's presence.

A specter that eventually came for them all.

Kira looked back at Tinsley. "Eventually that thing you're trying to avoid sinks its claws back into you."



Edris's gaze sharpened on Kira as if he were seeing her for the first time.

"You understand then," Tinsley said, an impassioned look on her face. "Proof there are others like you who survived can give her hope."

Kira nodded. "I do."

"You'll help us then."

"I will not."

Devastation moved across Tinsley's face. Her mouth opened and then closed as she struggled to find words.

"Why?" Tinsley's voice cracked.

"Because you're forgetting all those you lost aren't sweet children anymore."

And as long as they continued to ignore that fact, Kira didn't think it would be a good idea to introduce the forty-three to them.

Boden scowled. "They will always be our children."

Graydon shook his head as Kira glanced in his direction. "Don't look at me. I don't understand the point you're trying to make either."

He wasn't the only one, Kira saw as her gaze moved from to Harlow and finally to Wren.

It was the issue she kept butting up against. No matter how many times she said it they couldn't wrap their heads around the why of it.

The reason their children refused to come home.

Jin's engines whirled as he circled Kira drawing her attention. She stared at him for a moment, contemplating.

There was one way she knew of that might help them understand but it involved sharing secrets that weren't only hers to share.

As always Jin seemed to anticipate what she was thinking. "They will not like this."

No. They wouldn't.

"Selene and Alexander seem to be doing whatever they want. I think it's time we do the same," Kira answered.

Jin made a soft sound that was close to a laugh as Kira bent, holding her hand at knee height. "What were you doing when you were about this age?"

Confusion showed on Tinsley's face as her gaze darted from Kira to her hand. "What does that have to do with anything?"

Kira's words were relentless as she continued as if Tinsley hadn't spoken. "You were probably treasured. I'm betting dozens came running the moment you made the smallest cry."

Tinsley's mouth closed as she frowned at Kira.

"Your mother. Your father. Members of your House. Maybe you were learning to walk. You might have even advanced to running."

Who knows what normal children did around that age?

“Your sibling would have slept on a cold floor every night. If she wanted food, she would have had to fight for it. Beatings would have been more common than not.” Kira flashed a humorless smile. “Our masters thought it would make us stronger.”

In a sense it did. Just not in the way their masters had intended.

Kira’s hand rose to hip height. “What about when you were this tall?”

This time Tinsley didn’t answer as she watched Kira’s hand like she expected it to hurt her.

“By this age, your sister had already taken a life.”

Finn’s expression closed down. He knew what came next.

“Sometimes, it was criminals our masters took from Consortium planets. Other times, it was the homeless or those they thought wouldn’t be missed.” Sorrow crept into Kira’s smile. “Occasionally, it was each other.”

A brittle silence descended.

Carefully, Kira remained focused on Kashori’s heir, not looking at the men beside her. If she did, she might not be able to finish this—and she needed to finish this.

Tinsley’s chest heaved from the effort to hold back tears.

“Believe me when I tell you they’re not the children you remember. They are killers. *We* are killers.”

And the sooner the rest of the Tuann accepted that, the better for everyone.

Finally, Kira allowed herself to look at Harlow and the rest.

She nearly flinched at the utter blankness she found in Harlow's expression. The very lack of emotion saying he felt too much. As if giving in the faintest bit would be the spark to ignite an inferno that might destroy everything in front of him.

Wren's expression was the one that shredded Kira's heart.

An old human saying was that "the truth would set you free." Kira had never been able to agree with that.

Sometimes the truth just hurt.

What she shared would haunt Wren for a long time to come. The knowledge of what his daughter had survived would plague his thoughts along with the realization that there wasn't anything he could do for her.

Kira didn't think there was a worse fate for a parent.

"I'm sorry," Kira told him.

Wren's hand trembled as he held it up to stop her. "You have nothing to apologize for."

Kira wished that was true.

"I—" Tinsley's voice cut out almost as soon as she spoke.

Boden touched her shoulder in silent support as he sent a sympathetic glance in Edris's direction.

Oh.

Tinsley wasn't the only Kashori who'd lost something that day.

Edris surprised Kira by folding into a ninety-degree bow. Far deeper than she'd ever seen a Tuann make to anyone not of their House or an emperor.

"We appreciate you sharing your perspective with us," Edris said to the ground.

"I'm sorry it's not what you wanted to hear," Kira told him.

If she thought sparing them the pain of knowing what their lost ones had gone through would work, she never would have revealed what she had.

Edris straightened. "Pain is sometimes necessary for healing to begin."

The other two were quiet as Boden took Tinsley's arm to usher her away.

Tinsley yanked herself out of his grip as she whirled to face Kira. "I'm not giving up."

Kira's eyebrows rose. "I hope you don't."

She really did. She could think of no better person to show the forty-three what they'd been missing all these years.

"Fight like hell to drag them out of that darkness when you finally find them again," Kira told her. "Make them remember that there were once people who loved them."

Maybe then the forty-three could start living again.

Tinsley squared her shoulders as her chin lifted. “I’m embarking on the *adva ka* this year. Will I see you there?”

Kira’s lips quirked. “It’s possible.”

Tinsley gave Kira a jerky nod. There was nothing of defeat in her posture as she stalked away, Boden and Edris bringing up the rear.

“What are the chances her sister survived?” Harlow asked.

Kira considered him with a side long look, unsure whether she should answer his question or not.

“We don’t know,” Jin answered for her. “If the forty-three know which Houses they belonged to, they haven’t informed us.”

Another reason Kira couldn’t have helped Tinsley even if she wanted to.

“Your best guess.”

Kira lifted a shoulder. “If her sister was special in some way, her chances are better than most.”

“What does that mean?” Wren asked.

“Those who survived either held affinities that were unique or were able to make the ones they held different in some way,” Jin answered.

Kira’s eyes flickered. He was straying dangerously close to the truths Kira had carefully avoided.

“As the child of an Overlord, she will likely possess powerful *ki*. There’s a chance she survived,” Wren said to

Harlow.

“If she did, would you be pleased or see her as a political hindrance?” Jin challenged.

Harlow’s gaze was probing as he studied Kira. “What do you think?”

Kira was calm as she returned his stare. “It doesn’t matter one way or the other. None of us will raise our hands to the others.”

It was a vow they all respected.

Even if the forty-three returned, the Tuann wouldn’t find obedient children who’d help them make war on their fellow Houses.

The forty-three would be neutral.

Harlow’s nod was pensive as he glanced in Graydon’s direction. “I’ll leave the rest in your capable hands.”

What was that supposed to mean?

Kira didn’t get a chance to ask as he strode toward the arched door of the fortress. It opened, allowing him passage as Wren lingered for a second longer.

Her *seon’yer* frowned at Graydon before shaking his head and following the Overlord.

“What is with them?” Kira asked, confused at the abrupt departure.

“Uh, Kira,” Jin said. “I’ll catch you later.”

Kira gaped in disbelief as the drone darted up the wall, disappearing into the window Raider had yanked Elena back from a few minutes ago.

Confusion changed to understanding as she sensed a dark gaze on her. Kira stilled, the feeling of a predator at her back making her cautious.

Finn faded away. Amila and Solal doing the same to give them privacy.

Kira's eyes closed. She'd miscalculated.

She'd thought Wren would be the one to feel the most upon learning their childhood. She'd forgotten there was another who would empathize and experience pain knowing the person they loved had gone through so much.

Summoning her courage, Kira faced Graydon.

If she'd ever wondered what it would be like to see a man who defined himself by control lose it, she no longer needed to.

Emotions, raw and intense, battled inside him. Cracks appeared in the defenses he used to protect that big heart of his, one small line at a time.

It was scary. Terrifying as Graydon focused every ounce of his attention on Kira. His gaze searing.

“Graydon—“ Kira started, not knowing what she planned to say to make this better.



He closed the distance between them, his hands coming up to cup her face.

Kira caught his wrists, wrapping her fingers around them as she resisted the urge to hide.

Allowing herself to be vulnerable to another took a strength every bit as monumental as the one she'd needed to free herself from that place.

“I see your pain,” Graydon whispered. “I can feel it burning in my chest.”

Emotion moved through his gaze. Tenderness and love as he pressed his forehead against hers.

Kira calmed as their breaths mingled.

They stayed like that, each letting the other's presence comfort them.

Kira didn't know how long they stood before Graydon lifted his head, his eyes roving over her face like she was the most amazing thing he'd ever seen.

Tuann spilled from his lips. Phrases she'd heard before on the planet of her mother's people.

Back then, she hadn't understood. Now she did.

“From this second forward, you shall not know fear or sorrow. For I am with you. Your shield and your sword. Defender and protector. The shelter in the storm. This I so swear as the child of Marcus and Ashlyn, former son of House

Roake and the Face of the sixth Tuann emperor, Torvald Elden.”

There was a weight to his words. A magnitude that felt inescapable. The Tuann took their vows very seriously. Once given, they were impossible to take back.

And Graydon had just given one that felt like the most permanent and momentous of all.

If he hadn't already given her this vow once before on Ta Da'an with Joule standing right next to her, she'd be tempted to think it was a vow of love.

But that was nonsense. He'd barely known her back then, and she was pretty sure he had considered her a nuisance in his perfectly planned life.

“What have you done?” Kira asked him in a trembling voice.

On one hand, there was nothing more seductive than a promise like the one he'd just given her. On the other, she knew the tolls such a vow could exact—particularly for a man in Graydon's position.

Graydon's thumb sent a fleeting caress across her cheekbone. His other dragged her lower lip, desire burning in his eyes as he stared at the spot he touched.

Just when she thought he'd close the last few inches, Graydon withdrew. His hands dropped to his side as a mask descended.

“I did what I felt right.”

Graydon stalked away, his powerful strides carrying him down the avenue toward the Shining Palace.

“How bad is this?” Kira asked Finn, not taking her eyes off Graydon.

“The oath of Aliria can only be given once in a lifetime.”

Kira looked at him. “That’s not what I asked.”

“Most women would consider his vow the height of romantic declarations.”

Kira rolled her eyes and headed for the fortress’s entrance. “As Graydon would say, I’m not most women. Quit playing games and tell me what this means.”

Finn strolled after her. “There’s no need to fret. The oath is a promise of protection and support between two equals.” There was a pause. “Moreover, it’s one he’s made to you before.”

Kira scowled at him. “Does everyone know?”

Everyone but her that was.

Amusement touched Finn’s face. “Not everyone.”

Just him, Graydon’s oshota, and Joule, she was guessing.

“How is this different than the vow of an oshota?” Kira asked.

“It’s not. Technically.”

The arched doors of the fortress parted, allowing them entrance. Kira paused on the threshold to send Finn a no-nonsense stare.

She was getting a little tired of the teasing.

His expression sobered. “An oshota’s vow is one of service. I will fulfill your orders to the best of my capability. The oath of Aliria is a promise of help whenever you face strife. As such, the giver does not serve at the other’s behest. In simple terms, it is a promise offering protection. Nothing more.”

Somehow Kira had a hard time believing that. The first time Graydon gave her that vow Joule had seemed almost shocked. Not to mention, the weight of those words seemed much heftier than what Finn was suggesting.

“Doesn’t this conflict with the oath he made to the emperor?”

That was the part truly giving Kira trouble. She knew how much serving as the emperor’s Face meant to him. It was one of the highest positions a Tuann could hold, and this vow could jeopardize everything.

“I wouldn’t worry about it too much,” Finn said. “Although an oath like this can cause a conflict of interest, Graydon wouldn’t have given it without considering the ramifications.”

What went unsaid was Finn’s admonishment to trust Graydon.

Kira did, but there was a part of her that worried.

She’d long passed the age where she prayed for someone to rescue her. Honestly, Kira didn’t think she’d ever been given to such flights of fancy. She’d always considered it her and Jin

against the universe. Any saving they needed, they'd do themselves.

Still, there was something appealing in knowing someone cared enough to make an oath for her. One that said they'd be there waiting if she should ever need it.

“The first Overlord to use the oath of Aliria made it to an unrequited love as a symbol of his esteem. There is no pressure to return it,” Finn informed Kira as they stepped into the fortress.

The great hall that served as the entryway for the fortress was every bit as intimidating and majestic as the rest of Roake's home. High ceilings and stone walls were softened by fabric banners carrying Roake's insignia and colors.

The massive windows to either side of the arched doors and above allowed shafts of sunlight to trickle into the hall creating pockets of light. The antique looking sconces and light fixtures dangling from the ceiling added to the somber atmosphere of the hall.

Their footsteps echoed against the stone floor as they moved toward the double staircase located on the other side of the hall.

Kira paused at the sight of Raider and Elena waiting for her on the landing at the center of the staircase where the two sides met.

“What are you doing here?” she asked with a frown as she selected the left flight of stairs to climb.

Raider's shrug was awkward as he folded his arms to rest against the banister as Elena fidgeted by his side.

Kira raised her eyebrows at them both. "Something tells me this isn't what Harlow meant when he warned us to keep our distance."

Elena's fidgeting stopped. "I don't care what he wants. There is no one around anyway to tell on us."

Kira sighed at her niece. "To have the misplaced confidence of youth again. Ask your Uncle Jin how many times the Tuann have managed to sneak up on him."

The number was higher than any of them would like.

Elena's face showed obstinance as she jabbed Raider in his side.

Raider straightened, his gaze somehow avoiding hers as a hint of uneasiness escaped. "We maybe overheard a little of what you said to those three from House Kashori."

Kira stared at him. "Are you trying to comfort me right now?"

Raider's awkwardness vanished as a familiar scowl settled on his face. "The kid was worried."

Kira nodded. "And you wanted to make it all better."

Aw. How adorable.

Raider's lip curled in a sneer.

Kira was a little surprised when he didn't stalk away. Old Raider would have. Elena's influence no doubt.

He didn't want to disappoint his daughter.

Kira didn't know why that made her smile. Just that the sight of her amusement made Raider's scowl deepen.

"Tell her," Elena urged.

Kira leaned a hip against the banister as she folded her arms across her chest. "Yes, Raider, tell me."

Raider glared at her from under lowered brows. "You're not making this easy."

Kira's laugh was a snort. "Payback."

He sighed and shook his head before turning serious. "You're not the only one."

Kira's amusement faded.

"We're all killers. Monsters."

The smile fell from her lips. Of course, he would have caught that.

This was Raider. A brother to her in the same way Elise and Selene were sisters. He would know why she'd chosen that manner to reveal her childhood to Harlow. The motivation behind her choices.

"Don't forget that," he told her.

Kira blinked, pretending she didn't feel the sting in the bridge of her nose.

Raider flashed her an easy grin, tilting his head at Elena. "Maybe not the squirt though."

Insult appeared on Elena's face. "Not true, sperm donor."

All traces of humor dropped from Raider's face as a wolf looked out of his eyes. The killer he'd been careful to conceal from his daughter.

Kira shook her head at him. "Not me. I'd never allow that at her age."

Selene wouldn't either.

They'd both agreed that the children would remain children for as long as possible. Neither wanted to be responsible for destroying the childhood and innocence of the next generation.

"When?" Kira asked.

Caution finally entered Elena's expression. An awareness of how deeply she'd stepped in it.

She fiddled with the banister, digging a thumbnail into the wood. "On Almaluk. A Tsavitee war drone tried to stop the *Wanderer*. I used the ship to run him down."

Kira blinked, barely reacting as Raider made a choking sound.

"Stop laughing," she muttered to Raider as he bent at the waist. "It's not funny."

Kira focused on Elena over the growing sounds of Raider's amusement. "And you, stop using my ship as a battering ram to take down Tsavitee infantry."

Elena snapped a salute at Kira. "Of course, Auntie."



Kira hesitated in the act of stalking away. Why did she have a feeling Elena didn't mean those words?

## EIGHTEEN

Graydon's anger carried him down the avenue toward the Shining Palace. An awful, fractious thing that spilled in front of him like the preceding edge of a tsunami.

Amila and Solal and the rest of his oshota struggled to keep up, maintaining enough of a distance so they wouldn't be caught in the seething mass of energy forming around Graydon.

Right now, he was a danger to everyone.

Moreover, he didn't have it in him to rein in the scorching power of his *ki*.

His steps slowed and then stopped as he tilted his head back to glare up at the multi-hued colors of the sky as the sun set over the ocean.

This shouldn't have been the fate of Harding's daughter. Harlow's niece should have grown up happy and safe in the bosom of her family and House.

Kira never should have had to think she was a monster for a single second.

Another coil of *ki* manifested, biting into the avenue and burning a hole into the near indestructible material.

Frustration lived and breathed inside Graydon as the knowledge of everything Kira had gone through settled.

He'd been confronted with the agony of her past before, but it was different hearing it from her own lips while she looked right at him.

It burned that she tried to downplay something that would have broken many.

He suspected it did break the forty-three. That this was part of why they would not return.

How did you face the families of those whose lives you took so you could survive?

That wasn't all of it Graydon knew. The look Kira had given Jin hinted there was something more.

Something neither wanted any of the Tuann to know.

Already Graydon had begun to consider the possibilities. Each more terrifying and horrible than the last.

He hoped he was wrong even as his subconscious whispered that this was the reason she had been so careful to hold herself back from Roake and the Tuann all this time.

The repercussions if Graydon was right were too terrible to consider.

For the forty-three—and the Tuann as a whole.

“Do we have anyone we can send to Consortium territory?” Graydon asked, staring at the sky.

Solal and Amila shared a brief glance before Graydon’s First stepped forward.

Solal’s face was a mask of calm as he approached Graydon. “You wish to investigate the area where Kira was found.”

Graydon’s lips twisted into an animal-like snarl. “You know me better than that.”

What Graydon desired was a little more extreme. He needed these people hunted down and brought before him so he could destroy them so thoroughly that not even an atom of their existence survived.

Maybe then he would stop feeling like his flesh was too tight on his body, unable to contain the fury resting in his heart.

“Any evidence has likely long been wiped away,” Solal pointed out.

Graydon rolled his shoulders as he sent Solal a sidelong look.

Solal bent his head, hiding his slight smile. “I’ll see who we have available.”

“You do that,” Graydon said.

Now that there was the makings of a plan, Graydon felt the compression around his chest loosen.

“I will have some of our people reopen the investigation into the Sorrowing.” Amila offered Graydon a cheeky grin. “Discreetly, of course.”

“That is a given,” Solal responded in a haughty voice that made Amila smile harder.

Graydon started for the palace again, changing course for the sparring room where he knew the emperor and Devon would be at this time of day.

He felt the need for a little violence to help bleed off the rest of this energy. What better partner than the *yer'se* who insisted he was ready for all that came with the *adva ka*.



The sounds of sparring spilled into the hallway as Graydon waved away the oshota standing guard by the entrance. They acknowledged his arrival with a nod, letting Graydon pass unchallenged as they tilted their chins in greeting at Amila and Solal behind him.

The rest of Graydon's oshota had been left behind once they'd entered the palace.

Graydon pushed into a narrow hall, columns forming a colonnade that stretched in either direction. Dim golden lights flickered as twilight deepened outside the many sky lights that marched the length of the room.

The emperor's personal sparring room wasn't the biggest his palace boasted, but its privacy was guaranteed. It was the perfect size for when he wanted to test his skills without drawing an audience.

Even better, every stone in the place was imbued with a technology that would repair any amount of damage inflicted by Torvald or his opponent.

The young man at the center of the floor looked up. The golden eyes his family line was known for standing out against his light brown skin.

There was curiosity in them as he took in Graydon's presence.

"*Seon'yer?*" Devon's forehead wrinkled. "Are you here to spar?"

There was eagerness in the question despite the signs of exhaustion written all over him. He was coated in sweat, his face slightly red from exertion.

There was also a bruise forming on one cheek bone and the side of his arm.

Graydon knew if he gave the slightest sign he was interested in a match Devon would accommodate him.

It wouldn't matter that Devon had barely enough strength left to grasp his practice blade.

All Devon cared about was creating a favorable impression on Graydon.

If it had been any other time, Graydon might have been tempted to test how far the other man could go.

But now wasn't that time.

Graydon had too much pent-up energy to risk engaging Devon in battle. It would be too easy to miscalculate and injure him by accident. With how exhausted Devon already was, he wouldn't have the strength to get himself out of danger if that happened.

Torvald patted Devon's shoulder. "You're not his match today."

Standing next to Devon, the resemblance between father and son was more pronounced. Undeniable.

Torvald moved around his son, eyes the same color as Devon's observing Graydon with an amused gaze. "My Storm, I'll be your opponent this round."

Graydon's body had a predatory stillness as he considered Torvald's offer.

A merciless smile formed as Graydon prowled forward. "I wouldn't want to put you out. After all, you seem tired. Did my *yer 'se* wear you out?"

Torvald's eyes showed amusement as he watched Graydon approach. "There's no need for taunts, little Storm. I've already agreed to give you what you want."

Torvald's movements were subtle as he mirrored Graydon, turning to keep him in sight as Graydon circled him.

“How do you want to do this?” Torvald asked.

“No *ki*.”

Graydon’s control wasn’t what it should have been. He couldn’t chance what might happen if it got away from him.

Torvald would likely be unharmed but nothing in this world was definite.

Besides, what Graydon was really looking for was the physical release of a no-holds-barred, drag-out fight. The kind where winners and losers didn’t matter. Only the ache that came afterward.

“As you wish,” Torvald murmured in a way that said he’d been hoping Graydon would choose that option.

The oshota standing on the edges of the room drew closer in anticipation, knowing they were about to watch something momentous as Graydon and Torvald stopped moving in the center of the room.

Torvald was motionless. The type of stillness that made you forget the other was a person and not a statue made of stone or metal.

The hairs on the back of Graydon’s neck lifted, his primal self knowing the danger before his brain did.

Graydon stepped to the side, Torvald’s en-blade cleaving the air where he’d stood.

Graydon’s body reacted without any input from his mind. One hand unleashing his en-blade before swinging it up to



block Torvald's follow up attack.

A second's delay and Torvald would have decapitated him.

It seemed Graydon wasn't the only one who was feeling pent-up and frustrated.

"You're being a little harsh, aren't you?" Graydon observed.

Torvald's expression was slightly deranged as he bared his teeth at him. "You're the one who asked for this."

Torvald bore down with his sword, using his larger stature to try to break Graydon's defense.

Graydon's muscles screamed as he held his ground.

"I may have been a tad presumptuous in my request," Graydon said through gritted teeth.

"Too late."

Torvald forced Graydon's sword down, before whipping his own up.

Graydon leaned back, the tip of his opponent's blade whispering past his nose.

As soon as it passed, Graydon straightened and hammered a fist into Torvald's shoulder, shoving the larger man back.

Torvald responded by kicking Graydon hard enough in the thigh that he felt it even through his synth armor.

Pain blossomed.

That would cause a bruise later.

Torvald came after him again. Relentless. His own defense an afterthought.

It was what made the emperor such a difficult opponent—and a trait Graydon had incorporated into his own style of fighting. Not many would be able to go toe-to-toe with someone who fought as mindlessly as they did.

It was natural to think of defense first. After all, you couldn't win if you were dead or bleeding out.

But that was what made life fun—the risk and challenge.

Graydon blocked Torvald's next blow, only to miss dodging the fist the emperor aimed at his eye.

Graydon retaliated by sinking a blow into the spot above Torvald's kidney.

If the emperor planned to fight dirty, Graydon was happy to do the same.

The look Torvald aimed at Graydon was slightly murderous as he straightened from his hunch.

Graydon grinned at him.

“Very well then, little Storm,” Torvald growled.

After that, the fight was mostly a blur. Graydon lost track of who landed what blow, continuing to fight until his body begged for mercy and he tasted blood in his mouth.

Even then, they refused to end it.

They fought on until neither could lift their blade any longer and the breath burned in their lungs.

Torvald disengaged. “Had enough yet?”

Graydon snarled at the emperor, his arms developing a fine tremble. “I can continue if you can.”

Graydon was lying. Right now, he wasn’t even sure he had enough strength left in his limbs to return his blade to its sheath in his armor.

Calm was beginning to filter into Graydon’s bones. The surplus of energy that had sent him to this room settling.

He no longer yearned to rip everyone else apart.

Graydon considered that progress.

Torvald started to smile. A shift in the air around him caused his smile to fade as his gaze grew distant, his attention turning inward.

It was a look Graydon had seen on his face several times throughout the years. Usually when Torvald communed with the *Mea’Ave*.

Graydon waited, taking the towel Devon offered and wiping his face.

He winced as the towel brushed across one of the open cuts on his cheekbone.

“That was—“ Devon trailed off, looking like he didn’t know whether to be thrilled at having a front seat to their match or terrified about whether he’d ever reach their level.

He needn’t have been concerned. He showed promise. Graydon wouldn’t have taken him under his wing otherwise—

no matter who he was related to.

“We were right. The *Mea’Ave* has opened the *adva ka*,” Torvald said on a shaky exhale.

Devon’s hands clenched at his side.

For him, this was exciting news. The chance he’d been waiting for all this time.

The desire to prove himself was what drove him—and so many other Tuann.

Torvald studied his son, the look in his eye distant.

Graydon could see his desire to hold Devon back. To keep him safe and protected where there was little chance of danger.

“We must step out of our forebear’s shadows at some point,” Graydon told the emperor. “You taught me that.”

As much as Torvald wanted to protect Devon, it would only cause harm and do him a disservice in the end. Whether Torvald liked it or not, his son had too much of him to stay on the child side of the *adva ka* forever.

Torvald touched one of the swollen bruises Graydon had left on his face. “Next time try not to hit so hard.”

Graydon’s bow was a touch mocking. “Only if you promise to do the same.”

“Impudent child.”

Graydon raised his head. “Weren’t you the one who taught me to be this way?”

Torvald's scoff made Devon hide his smile. "Don't blame me for that. Harlow is the one responsible. I simply inherited your bad traits."

The emperor handed his blade off to one of his waiting oshota.

"Send out the call, my Face." The emperor strode toward the door. "It is time to see if your Kira is as capable and trustworthy as you claim."



Several days later, chatter rose from the seats around Kira as she stared out the window of the hovercraft. An endless expanse of trees spread to the horizon as the craft zoomed by, its air wash ruffling their crowns.

In the far distance, Kira could make out a break in the tree line and the impression of a large structure.

Before she could determine its details, the craft's trajectory changed.

Bored with the view of trees, Kira looked away from the window.

The craft was at capacity, full of *adva ka* hopefuls and their *seon'yers*. There was an electric buzz in the air that fed off the excitement and nerves of those around her.

The prospective Roake hopefuls for the *adva ka* numbered a handful. In addition to Joule and Devon who sat quietly by

themselves on the opposite side of the aisle from Kira, she recognized two.

She knew Rheyra and Blake in passing from her time spent training in Roake.

The rest of the dozen were strangers. She was betting from the looks they were sending her, part envy and part curiosity that they had passed the *uhva na*, Roake's own smaller version of the *adva ka*, before her.

From what Joule had told her, it was rare, but not unheard of, for a Tuann to go straight from obtaining a *seon'yer* to the *adva ka*.

Usually, it took years. Sometimes decades depending on how strict the *seon'yer* was and how talented the *yer'se*.

The fact that not only Kira but also several others in the same training class as her were advancing so quickly had likely led to jealousy.

Kira dismissed their gazes with a shrug.

Envy her all they liked; she'd earned her stripes. For her, the *adva ka* was merely a formality.

Next to her, Raider was a quiet presence as he leaned his head against the seat with his eyes closed.

Getting some shut eye before the uncertainty of what was coming felt like a good idea, but someone had to keep an eye on things.

Finn had told her enough about the *adva ka* that she knew it wasn't uncommon for Tuann to knock their fellow initiates out of the running. While she didn't want to think Roake would practice that against members of their own House and allies, Kira wasn't going to put her trust in that.

History was written by those who betrayed their nearest and dearest.

So, Raider could sleep while Kira kept an eye on things. Later he'd return the favor if need be.

Besides, Kira was more interested in learning what Roake was planning than getting a few minutes of rest.

It was clear they were up to something. She just hadn't figured out what—yet.

If she had to guess it was some type of initiation.

Pretty much every military organization had something. The Curs did and so did most of the ships she'd served on.

Sometimes it was as simple as buying a round of drinks for your squad mates the first time you went out on the town with them. Other times it was completing an insane workout that left you flattened by the end.

This scene had a similar vibe.

Movement came from up front as Harlow stood to face the initiates.

Kira nudged Raider in the side.

His eyes opened a crack. “Are they finally about to get started?”

“Looks that way.”

He sat up with a yawn, alertness quick to replace his sleepiness as he gave Harlow and the rest of the *seon'yers* standing at the front of the aircraft his full attention.

“What’s your guess? Leave us in the middle of nowhere or something like you faced during your training session?” Raider asked, attracting Joule and Devon’s interest.

“I’m sure whatever it is will be good.” Kira held onto the back of the seat in front of her as she looked forward.

The armor she wore was of Tuann design, identical to the one Auralyn had fitted to her before her final race for the quorum. It was lightweight and as durable as any combat armor she’d ever worn.

Many of those around her were outfitted with something similar, including Raider.

“You look almost Tuann,” Kira informed him.

It was true. The armor gave him the same aura of sleek danger that all Tuann seemed to project—at least the ones Kira hung around.

Raider shoved her with his shoulder as Harlow addressed the initiates.

“Roake has a reputation as the strongest House.” Harlow didn’t shout yet somehow his voice managed to fill the space.



“That starts here.”

The walls in the back half of the hovercraft slid open.

Wind buffeted those inside as a few initiates were ripped from their seats.

“Members of Roake and its subordinate Houses earn what they receive.” A slow grin replaced Harlow’s serious expression. “They don’t accept free rides.”

The ship tilted before anyone could react.

Kira caught Joule’s and Devon’s startled exclamations before they, like the majority of those assembled, were jettisoned.

A woman with dark hair and skin and eyes that held laughter crowed as she nudged the person beside her. “Guess you owe me the next round this time. Your *yer’s*e failed to outlast mine.”

The burly man beside her had a gruff expression on his face as he scratched his beard-covered jaw. “Yeah, yeah. The *adva ka* isn’t over. We’ll see how many rounds I need to buy before the end.”

Raider patted Kira on the shoulder giving her a hand sign that meant “see you below.”

“What—“ Kira started as Raider jackknifed to a standing position.

He let out a whoop before sprinting toward the back of the vessel and taking a flying leap into midair. His arms and legs

went wide as he arrowed toward the ground below.

She watched him go, shaking her head. The man was every bit as crazy as he'd always been—long lost daughter or not.

Kira lost sight of him in the trees but couldn't bring herself to worry. She had every bit of faith that Raider would find a way safely to the ground.

She was more interested to see what the next few minutes held for her.

Kira leveraged to standing, a little surprised when she looked to her left and then her right to find she was the last initiate left.

The conversation at the front of the aircraft faded as the *seon'yers* began to realize not all of the initiates had fallen for the trap they'd lain.

More than one considering stare found its way to her. Most surprised on one level or another. A few looked impressed.

Silence descended as Kira studied them with an alert gaze. Harlow's expression was hard to read as he regarded her evenly for several seconds.

An oshota Kira didn't recognize said something, sparking laughter in the others.

Harlow's mouth quirked seconds before he advanced on Kira.

She held still, jealous of how steady his balance was given the strong winds still buffeting the inside of the craft.

She'd like to know how he did that.

She glanced at his boots. An application of *ki* she didn't yet know? Or maybe a function of his synth armor since the rest of the initiates hadn't seemed to know how to circumvent their ejection?

"As talented as you are, niece, even you must follow tradition," Harlow informed Kira.

Any question she might have asked died a vicious death as Harlow shoved her hard. A force caught her body, yanking her out of the aircraft before she could resist.

A strangled curse left her as she plummeted.

"Find your own way to the arena, niece," Harlow said, his voice sounding like he was speaking right next to her.

Kira let herself fall for a second longer, her gaze on the turbulent gray of the clouded sky and the sight of Roake's hover craft streaking over the trees.

Feeling resigned, Kira flipped in midair so her front side was facing the ground.

The trees that had seemed so small when seated in the craft loomed larger with every passing moment.

Kira watched their approach, her body tensing.

Her hands clenched and then opened as she reached for her *ki*. It flooded her senses, like a hyperactive toddler released from its leash.

It changed the air around her, slowing her descent as she broke into the canopy of the forests.

Branches cracked, unable to take her weight.

Kira grabbed one, letting go the moment it snapped. She landed on another, using it to change the trajectory of her fall.

She landed hard on the ground seconds later.

Kira straightened, using every one of her senses to check out her immediate surroundings.

The distant sound of birds trickled to Kira. The trees whispered to themselves, their voices louder and more distinct than the last time she'd walked among them.

There were no signs of Tuann presence nearby. For now, Kira was alone.

Her stance relaxed. "Jin, can you give me an idea of where I am?"

Silence filled their comms.

"Communications blackout. Lovely."

That meant she had no way of contacting Raider or anyone else. She supposed that was the point.

It wouldn't be much of a test if the initiates could rely on those stronger than themselves.

Kira wiped her hands on her armor as she looked around. "Would have been nice if they'd given me a hint on which way to go."

That they hadn't must mean this was also part of the test.

Kira used her time to get her bearings. She turned in a circle. Unless her instincts failed her, Roake's fortress and the city lay in that direction.

The trees seemed to agree as the wind set their branches swaying.

Kira studied them, noting the direction of the broken branches. The ship had been traveling in a northwestern path. A normal person would estimate that if she continued in that direction, she'd find the place she was supposed to go.

Of course, that was assuming that Harlow hadn't chosen a deliberately misleading route. Something she was finding she couldn't put past her uncle.

He and Graydon might as well have been related given their preference for the art of deception.

All she needed to do was solve the puzzle before her. Until she figured it out, there was no point moving from the spot where she'd landed. To do otherwise held the potential to lead her astray.

In this forest, that would be a mistake.

Already, darkness crept along the edges. Wander without a purpose and there was every chance it would try to swallow her.

The forest felt almost sentient as it waited for her to make a choice.

Kira set her palm on the tree next to her, tuning her senses to pick up the faint trace of consciousness contained within.

A spark lit deep in her mind as something in her chest drew her to the north and west, a few degrees off the path of Roake's vessel.

It was like a lodestone, trying to guide her home.

Kira's eyes opened. "Of course, the forest on a Tuann planet would be as strange as everything else."

She lifted her palm from the tree, whispering a soft "thank you". With the feeling in her chest acting as her compass, Kira trudged forward, hoping she didn't have far to travel.



Hours later, Kira was hot and thirsty despite the cooler temperatures as she finally left the trees behind. A massive stone monolith jutted into the sky before her, a lake carved into the ground at its feet.

Kira resisted the allure of the water as she skirted its edge, heading for the large opening she could see in the rock face of the monolith.

She eyed a pair of wooden gondolas waiting on the banks of the lake for any brave enough to risk the water.

They were tempting, but Kira had one too many encounters with the *lu-ong*, who seemed able to mysteriously travel through the depths of any body of water, to trust it wasn't a trap.

It was exactly the type of thing the Tuann might do. Offer a shortcut that ended up being a massive pain in the ass.

No, thank you. Kira preferred the longer but less treacherous path. At least until circumstances dictated otherwise.

She plodded over the sandy shores of the lake, working her way around until she stood in front of a sizable cave.

Despite the natural features of the entrance, Kira suspected she was in the right place given the complicated set of carvings surrounding the mouth of the cave.

The symbols reminded her of the archways that dotted the surface of Ta Sa'Riel. The gates acted as a type of teleportation device, enabling those who stepped through to travel instantly from one point to the next.

It was a significant technological advancement that the Consortium was decades from replicating.

Kira couldn't help admiring the cleverness behind its placement here. The gates would allow initiates and others access to the site for the duration of the *adva ka* while also denying them knowledge of the test's exact location.

Its presence protected the site from those forces that might seek to take advantage of it.

The shadows stirred as an oshota appeared in Kira's peripheral vision. Her synth armor proclaiming her as Roake.

The woman provided silent witness as Kira marched toward the mouth of the cave.

Kira stepped through.

A charge skated along the surface of her skin. The world tilted around Kira, depositing her into an immense corridor that reminded her of the architecture from humanity's ancient history.

Many of those buildings had been destroyed in the war with the Tsavitee but Kira had seen pictures of them. Enough that she imagined those halls had once been infused with the same weight that came from centuries of use.

It was like a soul resided in this place. Fed by the thousands of visits from Tuann over the years. A feeling of community and connection wound through every inch of the space.

It was as comforting as it was intimidating.

A reminder that even as powerful as the Tuann were—or could be—they were still no more than a speck in the long existence of the universe. No more consequential than a tiny ant.

The floor of the hall was flat and glossy, echoing with Kira's footsteps as she moved forward.

Columns ran the length of the avenue. Each one carved with a motif that Kira suspected belonged to a Tuann House.

Roake's *lu-ong* wasn't hard to spot among the various insignias.

Vaulted arches supported the high ceiling.



“Humans would call those a groin vault or a double barrel vault.” Amila’s voice came from the columns on the right side as she moved into view. “I always found it interesting how many terms they can use to describe the exact same thing.”

“You’re joking,” Kira said.

Amila shook her head, still staring up at the vaults in the ceiling. “You’d think but no. That’s really what they’re called. You can look it up.”

Kira narrowed her eyes at the oshota, moving further down the avenue as Amila strolled beside her. “I didn’t peg you as someone with an interest in architecture.”

The words made Kira realize how little she knew about the woman at her side.

In a strange sort of way, Kira considered Amila as a friend. Their acquaintance had been short—but memorable. The fact Kira hadn’t taken even a small bit of interest in Amila’s personal life made her realize the other might not feel the same about her.

“My family wasn’t always oshota. The first of our line helped build the Citadel and the Shining Palace.” Amila sent Kira a wink. “Humans would call this a hobby, I think. A pursuit I enjoy but not something I’d want to do every day.”

Kira returned Amila’s smile as they reached the end of the corridor. Amila nodded at the doors in front of Kira. “Your destination is through there.”

Kira started for the entrance.

Amila's voice followed her. "There was a bet going on which initiate would be first through those doors this year. I'm happy to say Graydon and I won."

Kira sent her a smile. "You know that means you owe me a drink later."

Amila smirked. "Pass this and I'll buy you all the *keeva* your body can handle."

"Deal," Kira said over her shoulder.

## NINETEEN

Kira stepped into a room that was in the shape of a rotunda with a solitary tree growing at its center. The ceiling was a glass dome, allowing a shaft of solid light to play in the tree's gnarled branches.

Gold accents ran throughout the room. A monument to the Tuann's wealth and history.

The scene looked like something out of a fairy tale. Almost dream-like.

The tree at the rotunda's center was covered in blooms whose color reminded Kira of the trees that lined the road leading to Himoto's ancestral family home on Atlas. The petals and shape were different. The light blush edging to brilliant pink in the center, but it had that same delicate appearance. The same ability to create a sense of awe and admiration in its viewer.

Kira circled the room, noting the alcoves dotting the perimeter. The eyes of the statues inside seemed to follow her as she passed.

Kira ignored the feeling. She'd never had any real expectations of privacy.

The Tuann might not be as high profile with their use of technology as the Consortium, but only a fool would expect they wouldn't be observing from behind the scenes in something as important as the *adva ka*.

Kira suspected every step of the initiates progress was being recorded and displayed somewhere.

Who had access to those recordings was the real question?

The emperor definitely. Likely the Overlords of the major Houses as well. Beyond that she was uncertain.

Kira completed her circuit, making note of the six doors leading into the rotunda.

Five of those doors contained the crests for the major Houses. It was the sixth and final door Kira found most fascinating.

The crest was one she hadn't seen before. A motif of the tree at her back.

She couldn't help but wonder at its meaning. The other five were easy to figure out since the door Kira used to enter carried Roake's symbol.

She was betting once the rest of the initiates started trickling in, they'd do so via the door affiliated with their House. Did that mean this door represented Houses not within one of the major five? Or was there a sixth House that wasn't spoken of?

As interesting as the question of the sixth door was, Kira didn't want to waste more time thinking about it.

She raised her arms above her head and stretched, enjoying the gentle pull of her muscles. Her jaw cracked around a yawn as she searched out the best spot for a nice snooze fest.

She dismissed the benches with barely a thought. They'd be far too uncomfortable to sleep on for long. Not to mention their easy accessibility practically invited challenges.

No, she needed something that wouldn't be immediately visible upon arrival and would allow her to study her intended prey before they took note of her.

Kira twisted to look up at the tree, noting the sturdy branches and blooms that offered cover.

Kira grinned. If she really was being watched, she should keep things interesting for them. It was only fair.

Without letting herself think too hard about the wisdom of what she was about to do, Kira sprinted for the trunk of the tree.

She planted one foot on the tree and leapt into the branches, scaling the tree until she'd found the ideal location for her nap. A spot where the branch and trunk came together in a perfect cradle for her weary bones.

Almost as if the tree had known what Kira would want and had grown over the centuries to accommodate that desire.

Kira settled into the spot with a sigh, wiggling a little until she found the most comfortable position.

She leaned her head back against the trunk, her eyes closing as she felt the warmth of the sun on her face.

Was there anything better than a nap stolen in a fairytale tree while awaiting the arrival of possible danger?

Kira didn't think so.

A smile was on her face as she allowed herself to relax under the gentle hum of the tree. The gentle whispers of its voice keeping her company as she drifted off, knowing her senses would wake her again the moment they detected an anomaly in her environment.



Kira roused from her nap a short time later, the groan of one of the doors warning her she was no longer alone. Her eyes cracked open as she held still, not moving from her perch in the tree as she peered through the branches.

She was careful not to cause any shift. Not wanting the faintest rustle to announce her presence or the fact the other initiate wasn't alone.

At least not until she'd gotten their measure.

People were the most themselves when they thought no one watching. Even the most honest and straight forward person couldn't help but to adjust their behavior based on the presence of others.

The best way to understand a person was to see what they did when they thought they were alone.

Did they immediately assess for threats? Or maybe they went straight for the refreshments?

Either scenario would tell her something about the person who'd arrived first after her.

Not knowing what challenges she'd face once the rest of the initiates arrived, it was important to learn all she could now when there was still time.

Later would be too late.

The person who'd arrived appeared bland and unremarkable as they prowled the perimeter of the room much like Kira had a little while ago.

She didn't recognize their face, unsurprising given the limited contact she'd had with other.

Kira squinted at the person. They weren't of Roake. That much was obvious. While her acquaintance with the rest was short, she'd made a point of memorizing their faces.

This person wasn't any of those. Nor was their face among those in the list Jin had compiled for her.

So not an ally—or known enemy.

That still left a lot of room for trouble to spring forth.

Kira shot a glance at the door the person had used, finding that it belonged to Asanth. Another House, like Kashori, that Kira had little interaction with.

Kira stiffened as the stranger shot a glance at the tree where she sat. Did the woman know she was here?

Anything was possible with the Tuann.

After the glance, the woman changed direction and headed for a bench directly across from Asanth's door. There was a calm expression on the stranger's face as she sat with a straight back, waiting for others to arrive.

Kira lost interest in the other rather quickly and was on the verge of another nap when Roake's door opened, and Rheyra and Blake stalked through. They paused at the sight of the Asanth woman before continuing toward a bench not far from where they'd entered.

Danai's door was next to open. One of the Tuann who'd been in the crowd who'd hassled Joule stepped through.

He and Asanth's initiate glared at each other. Rheyra and Blake watching from their spot off to the side.

Kira wouldn't quite describe the tension between them as hostile. More like they'd come across another they viewed as dangerous but hadn't yet determined if they were a potential enemy or not.

Kashori's door was next to open. Tinsley and a few of her fellow initiates following.

Disappointment showed on Tinsley's face as she scanned the rest of the room and failed to find what—or who—she was looking for.



Her companion murmured something to her before they stopped at a table of refreshments.

Not bad. It seemed Kashori's heir was no slouch.

A second arrival from Roake's door drew Kira's attention as Devon entered, his expression a stony replica of Graydon's.

Interesting.

She'd known Devon had talent but perhaps not to this extent. It was impressive he'd managed to beat the likes of those she knew Roake had spent a lot of time and effort training.

In some ways, she saw echoes of Jin when she looked at Devon. If her best friend had been allowed to grow up among the Tuann, would he also have done this well?

She smirked. What was she thinking? Of course, he would have. He'd probably have given her a run for her money—if he didn't set up a trap somewhere to give himself a head start.

Kira didn't move from her place in the tree as Devon stuck to the edge of the room. His posture that of someone waiting as he leaned against the wall and folded his arms across his chest.

The Tuann below were playing nice for now as they eyed their competition, but Kira was interested to see how long that would last. Especially as the Tuann began to trickle into the rotunda faster than before.

Not all of those who entered were warriors either. Their physiques were a little bit softer, pointing to pursuits that had

nothing to do with violence or weapons.

It reinforced the Tuann's claim that not all those who undertook the *adva ka* were required to be adept at fighting. These would be those Tuann interested in becoming masters of their craft. Adults with a voice aimed at shaping their House's future.

Kira wished them luck. She had a feeling this experience would be more difficult for them than it would be for those who'd trained in the art of war since they could walk.

The change in the room's atmosphere was gradual as more and more bodies occupied the space. The distance between initiates began to disappear as more aggressive arrivals stalked the edges of the unspoken territories that had been established.

Votair's initiates, all of whom entered through Danai's door, were among the worst offenders. They skated Luatha's border, heckling those across from them.

See—this was why Kira avoided the benches.

Roake's door opened to admit another group.

Raider stalked into view, the armor Wren had gifted him smeared with mud and other plant matter. Joule trailed behind him, looking similarly disheveled.

Their arrival sent ripples of awareness cascading through the room as whispers containing the word "human" followed.

Raider ignored them as he scanned the room, his gaze almost immediately locking on the tree where Kira sat.

It wasn't surprising he had figured out her position within seconds of arriving.

If anyone could, he would. Raider had always understood the way she thought, in part because he thought the same way.

Joule said something to Raider's back as the human started toward the tree. Receiving no answer, Joule shook his head before heading over to where Devon waited.

Raider stopped under the tree, exasperation on his face as he set his hands on his hips.

A Tuann from a house Kira didn't recognize shoved his shoulder into Raider's in deliberate provocation. "Watch it, human."

Older than most of those present, there was a jaded look on his face that made Kira think this wasn't the first time he'd been through the *adva ka*. He was one of those Finn had warned her about. Someone who had no intention of passing the *adva ka* and made it a practice of targeting newbies with the goal of knocking them out of the running.

"What are you looking at?" the Tuann barked when Raider's response was to roll his eyes at Kira.

If the Tuann had bothered looking up, he would have easily spotted her hiding spot. Instead, he was too busy picking a fight with Raider to wonder why the human was less concerned about him and more interested in what waited at the top of the tree.

Kira supposed that was her cue for a dramatic entrance.

She wrapped her legs around the branch of the tree, falling sideways and letting gravity claim her until she was hanging upside down.

“Hello,” she said.

The Tuann screeched and leapt sideways, *ki* scorching the air.

Kira’s amused expression changed to a serious one as she caught his wrist, shoving his arm down as her legs let go of the branch.

She flipped in midair, her grip on the man sending him face first into the trunk of the tree as she landed on the ground.

A groan left the man as he jerked away from the tree trunk, holding his nose.

Kira grimaced at the blood and snot he’d left behind on the bark of the tree. “Eew.”

Murmurs escaped those watching as the Tuann eyed her with surprise.

“Is that her?”

“Where did she come from?”

“Has she been here the whole time?”

“I didn’t see her arrive, did you?”

Raider’s face showed boredom. “As always, you’ve created quite the entrance.”

Kira picked a leaf out of his hair, examining it closely before flicking it to the ground. “I could say the same about

you. What happened?”

“Someone tried to ambush the kid. I got caught in the crossfire.”

From the way he said that Kira suspected the responsible party wouldn't be joining those waiting in the rotunda.

“Roake?”

Raider shook his head. “Someone from one of the minor Houses.”

“They're getting bolder.”

Particularly if they were willing to make an incursion into Roake's territory.

The opening of a door distracted them from their conversation.

To Kira's surprise, it wasn't any of the doors associated with the five major Houses but rather the sixth. Unused before now.

A wanderer stepped through.

“They don't belong here,” a Tuann nearby murmured.

“Neither does the human,” someone else responded.

Raider smirked at those eyeing him. “It's amazing how the species changes, but the trash that comes out of their mouths is always the same.”

Kira made a sound of agreement as she met the gazes of those looking in their direction, making a note for later.

There was a lot of disdain in the faces of those around them. Not all of it limited to House Danai and their allies.

Raider had an uphill battle in front of him.

Before anyone could make a move, the sixth door opened again, allowing two more people entrance.

Selene and Alexander's unexpected arrival sent a buzz coursing through those present.

Kira blinked rapidly as she fought to keep the surprise off her face. "What are they doing here?"

"Maybe the same thing you are," Raider said as the pair glanced in Kira's direction and then away, acting like they had every intention of ignoring her.

Fine. That suited her.

She'd planned to keep her distance anyway.

The wait after Selene and Alexander's arrival wasn't long. Only a few more Tuann stepping through each of the doors before a change spread through the room.

"Something is happening," Raider said, looking around him with suspicion.

"I feel it too."

As did many of the rest in the rotunda.

Joule glanced in her direction. She shook her head at him, motioning for him to stay where he was.

Oshota appeared from the walls, stepping out of them like they were ghosts.

Those who hadn't had any prior warning of their arrival startled as the oshota herded them toward the tree.

Kira and Raider didn't move, having already anticipated their arrival.

She was interested to see there were a few others, Asanth's first arrival and the wanderer among them, who showed little reaction at the oshota's sudden presence.

Graydon stepped out from the oshota's midst, his arrival causing a silence to fall.

Selene and Alexander moved smoothly across the ground, stopping not far from where Kira and Raider waited by the tree.

Graydon scanned those present, his storm-colored eyes pausing on Kira for a moment before moving on.

"On behalf of the emperor, I welcome you," Graydon started.

Raider frowned at Kira as she jerked, something catching her attention.

"What are you doing?" he hissed, trying not to move his lips as the nearby Tuann glanced in their direction before focusing on Graydon and his speech.

Kira didn't answer as she listened, trying to catch the sound she'd just heard.

There. There it was again.

A voice. Tinny and indistinct crackling through her comms.

Kira stiffened. She knew that voice as well as she did her own.

“Oh no.”

Raider glanced at her, his gaze seeming to tell her to stop acting crazy and pay attention to the instructions Graydon was giving.

She'd like to. She really would, but there were more pressing matters to attend to.

Kira searched the ground as the voice grew more distinct, developing an almost sing song quality as its owner continued to broadcast.

“Kira? Phoenix? Nix? Nixxy poo? Lovely lady who forgot to take me with her. Where are you?”

“It's not forgetting if I deliberately leave you behind,” Kira declared through gritted teeth.

“There you are,” Jin said at the same time she spotted the flicker of light shimmering against pink crystal.

The *lu-ong*/snake lookalike made a beeline straight for Kira.

“That little—“ Kira cut herself off as she drew attention from those around her.

The last thing she wanted was for someone to see her dumbass friend in what was probably the grossest security violation the *adva ka* had ever seen.

She gave them a stiff smile that probably looked as awkward as it felt.



“I’ve been calling you forever. How dare you leave me behind,” the source of their future doom exclaimed as he slithered over the tops of shoes and in-between legs.

Raider’s angry exhale told Kira when he spotted Jin a second later. The warning look he shot her was pointless. Did he really think she wasn’t aware of the shitstorm Jin’s presence had landed them in?

Dead. That’s what Jin was. So very, very dead.

The *lu-ong* snake reached the toe of her boot, lifting its head to glare up at her. “Are you just going to leave me down here?”

Kira was tempted—but no. Jin was more likely to be discovered if left on his own.

She squatted, pretending to tie her shoe as she held her hand out to the mini spawn.

Raider shifted to block the others’ view of what she was doing, his face tight as he glared around him with a scowl that would have once terrified their subordinates.

Jin wriggled onto her hand and up her palm before twining around her wrist.

“Why is he here?” Raider asked under his breath as Kira stood.

She tugged her sleeve over his body, making sure he was fully covered. He wiggled, trying to stick his head out from under her sleeve.

She flicked him between his eyes before yanking the sleeve over his body again. “Stop that.”

“I can’t see if you cover my head!”

“You also can’t be seen.”

Something that felt incredibly important as Graydon glanced in her direction. He wasn’t the only one paying attention to her either.

Selene also stared at her with a questioning look. Not to mention the interested gazes both the wanderer and the woman from Asanth were giving her.

“You’re so twitchy,” Jin complained.

“I am trying to pay attention, so we don’t get knocked out of the *adva ka* early,” Kira ground out. “Remember all our reasons for participating?”

For instance, the Tsavitee general’s claim that Elise planned to infiltrate the *adva ka*. Not to mention the small manner of obtaining her full independence as a Tuann adult.

All good reasons to be on their best behavior.

“That’s why I would think you would want me as a partner on this,” Jin said with an insulted sniff.

Raider’s head moved slightly, showing he was listening even if it didn’t look like it.

“For instance, I don’t like the way those two to your right are looking at you.”

Kira was careful to act casual as she looked in the direction Jin indicated.

“Recognize anyone?”

Kira scanned the faces of those on her right which included Asanth’s initiate and the wanderer.

A pair of hazel eyes peeked through the wanderer’s hood before looking away.

The person was young from what Kira could tell. Devon’s age or a few years behind him. She’d expected someone older.

From this close, she could see the marks that said their armor had been modified. As well as the amount of care they’d put into the maintenance.

“Know this trial will test the core of who you are. Not everyone will pass. For those who do, you will be the very best of us,” Graydon was saying as Kira continued to search for the pair Jin had been talking about.

She found them a few steps from the wanderer.

Renata and Notus glared at Kira, making no attempt to conceal their enmity.

Kira could see why Jin was bothered by them. She didn’t like the way they were looking at her either. Like she was rabbit they intended to rip apart.

In front of them, Graydon was finishing up. “You will find yourself driven to the brink. Hold fast to the ideals and teachings of your House. If you waver even a tiny bit, you will

find yourself dashed against the rocks as so many of your predecessors have been.”

“That’s not grim or anything,” Raider muttered.

“Reminds me of the speech they gave at the academy—except for the whole rocky death part. That’s new,” Jin quipped.

Kira’s smart-ass response died as her senses tingled.

Movement from the tree caught her attention as the branches extended. They reached out, almost as if stretching.

The buds that dotted the limbs with barely opened flowers in varying shades of pink bloomed. Their petals lengthened until the tree was covered in blossoms.

So many that Kira could no longer see the bark of their branches.

Gasps let her know she wasn’t the only one who’d noticed the tree’s change.

Light started to gather in the blossoms. More and more until Kira had to shield her eyes from the piercing glow.

She looked away from the tree, surprised to find the walls of the rotunda shimmering. Almost as if the heat from the blossoms was creating an optical illusion much like you might encounter in the desert.

A familiar sensation built as her hair stirred.

Kira didn’t even have time to draw breath before the bottom dropped out of her stomach. The tree and its blossoms

shattered, the pieces exploding outward.

There were screams as the initiates ducked away in an attempt to protect themselves.

Raider grabbed Kira, yanking her down and covering her head with one arm and his with the other.

The pain they braced for never arrived.

Kira lifted her head to find the shards from the tree suspended in midair. The world dropped out from under her in the next second, sending Kira and everyone else into a dizzying free fall.

## TWENTY

When the world finally stopped revolving, Kira became aware of the fact she was crouched on a flat floor covered in a fine-grained substance very similar to sand. Unlike sand, it was firm under her feet as she rose to standing.

A roar assaulted her ears.

Next to her, Raider pressed a hand to his head, his snarl a touch murderous. “Have I told you today how much I HATE Tuann technology?”

Kira made a preoccupied sound as she took in their surroundings.

They stood on the floor of an arena, stands full of cheering Tuann rising in a sharp slope around them. The colors of the five major Houses dominated but the smaller Houses were also represented. Their numbers, if taken together, almost equaled that of the major five.

The swath of midnight blue caught Kira’s attention as she located the box holding the higher-ranking members of her House.

Harlow and Wren looked down on her.

There was an amused cant to Harlow's mouth that said he found Kira's reaction to the exploding tree and her subsequent teleportation amusing.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm sure it's hilarious," she muttered.

Movement beside Wren showed Elena peeking over the side of Roake's railing.

Her niece's face lit up as she waved, saying something to the person beside her.

Being smaller than Elena, Ziva had to resort to grabbing the railing to hoist herself up so she could see those on the floor.

"That's interesting," Jin observed, spotting the two. "I would have thought they would keep Elena out of sight."

"Sometimes the best place to hide someone is in plain view," Kira told him.

Around her, the initiates waved at the crowd. Some performing minor tricks as they laughed up at their audience.

Kira took a moment to locate Luatha's section of the stands, finding the box where Liara sat on a throne-like chair.

Her cousin from her mother's side had her hands clasped in her lap, her only attendant an oshota by the name of Roderick. The Overlord of House Luatha's expression was hard to read from this far as she gazed down at the initiates.

Kira followed the line of her eyes, spotting the three from Luatha clumped together not far from where Joule and Devon

stood next to each other.

Like Joule and Devon, they seemed wary of those around them. Not participating in the antics of the rest. Unlike Joule and Devon, two of the three didn't look like they knew which end of a blade to hold. In another life, Kira would have called them civilians.

As Kira studied the rest of the initiates, she found several groups behaving with the same level of caution.

Those were the ones who'd probably been warned by their Houses about the gauntlet the *adva ka* could become.

They were the real threats once the rest had been weeded out.

But first—they had to protect themselves from those intent on preying on the rest, Kira noted as she saw a group talking among themselves before glancing in Joule and Devon's direction.

Surprise, surprise, Renata and Notus were among their numbers.

"I've got them," Raider said, noticing where her attention had gone.

"Be careful," Kira warned.

"Don't worry, Grandma. I know the drill."

"If that was the case, I wouldn't have had to bail you out of the brig so many times."



“You’re forgetting half the time you were in the cell right next to me.”

Kira’s mouth clicked closed as Raider used her insulted silence as an opportunity to saunter toward Joule and Devon.

“I should have let Bayside and Walker beat him up more often,” Kira muttered, referencing two Curs who’d died in the battle at Rothchild.

“Agreed,” Jin said as Kira turned away from the three to find Graydon watching her with a veiled gaze that gave her no hint as to what he was thinking. “Maybe he’d be less arrogant.”

Kira started toward Graydon as the rest of the initiates spread out, investigating the arena floor.

“You should be careful to keep your eyes in your skull,” Kira warned Graydon.

She was a little surprised to find he and his two oshota hadn’t already departed now that they’d been delivered to their newest stage.

“Why?” Graydon challenged with a rugged grin. “When they’ve found something worthy of their regard.”

Kira’s snort held amusement as she looked beyond him to the stands, locating the emperor’s box easily.

For one thing, it dwarfed the boxes of the Overlords. Its size alone made it hard to look past. To say nothing of the fancy throne Torvald reclined against.

“This is going to be bad, isn’t it?”

Graydon’s mouth quirked. “I have faith you’ll find your way.”

Someone was feeling a little overconfident in her.

Graydon leaned forward. “You’re far too paranoid to fall for the obvious tricks of those around you.”

Kira stilled, picking up his warning.

“How unexpected,” she said, staring at the side of his face. “And here I thought you liked to play by the rules.”

Graydon pulled back a tiny bit. “You’re the one who said rules are made to be broken.”

“As if you didn’t have that habit before you met me.”

Graydon’s chuckle did delicious things to her insides. “I’m looking forward to what’s coming. I have a feeling it will be something for the history books.”

Kira eyed him as he straightened. “Of course.”

She was the Phoenix, after all. The person Himoto compared to a wrecking ball.

A mad smile formed on Kira’s face. It went perfectly with the fierce glint in Graydon’s gaze that dared her to do her worst.

“You really need to stop smiling like that,” Jin muttered through their comms as Kira moved past Graydon.

A rush of air at her back announced Graydon and his oshotas’ departure, leaving Kira and the rest of the initiates to

whatever fate now awaited them.

“You’ll terrify the rest if you don’t,” Jin added.

“Yes, that would be terrible.”

How would they get the courage to make things interesting if they were too scared to make a move in her direction?

Kira knelt, more interested in the mystery behind the sand than finding out what her fellow initiates were up to. She brushed away the surface particles to find more of the same below. Even poking a finger as deep as it would go couldn’t help her find the bottom of the particles.

As she withdrew her finger, she watched the hole she’d made fill in with grains. Almost like water welling up from the bottom. It seemed there was some type of memory function in the particles, allowing them to restore their original shape after a disturbance.

“Could they be nanites?” Kira mumbled to herself.

“Something like that,” Alexander said from over her head as his shoes entered her field of view.

Kira wiped her hands against each other as she looked up to find Alexander and Selene standing over her.

Someone nearby snickered.

“How pitiful to be impressed by such a small thing,” someone sneered. “You really did grow up in a technologically backward society.”

Kira and Alexander looked in the person's direction, neither bothering with a response.

Selene was equally silent as she stared at the person and their companions. Many of whom were from the same group as Renata and the rest.

There was a watchful look in Kira's eye as she rose.

"It's a tragedy what growing up in such conditions did to you," the person who'd spoken said with fake sympathy.

Kira looked up at Alexander before pointing at the idiot in front of them. "Is he talking to me or you?"

It was important to know in order to allocate the appropriate energy needed to deal with them.

If Alexander was their intended target, he could bear the brunt of the effort.

"You."

"I don't think so." Kira shook her head before waving her hand at his body. "Your overall vibe is way more tragic than mine."

Alexander faced Kira more fully, squaring off with her.

A sigh came from Selene before she made a gesture.

The man and his companion shot into the air with a shrill scream. A second *ki* shield crashed into their sides, knocking them into the stands.

Selene's hand dropped as her shields dissolved. "Are you two done?"

Kira nodded as Alexander did the same.

“You two are no better than children,” Selene scolded.

“She means you, right?” Kira asked Alexander.

He glared. “No, it’s you. It’s always you.”

Alexander stomped away, the sound of his passage making it seem he was much larger—and heavier—than he appeared.

Selene paused at Kira’s side. “You’ve evolved.”

Kira frowned at her in question.

Selene nodded at Raider, Joule, and Devon as they squared off against their own group of nuisances. “There was a time you would not have been able to act as a bystander. You would have already stepped forth to solve their problems. It shows you’ve grown.”

Alexander’s snort came from in front of them. “Barely.”

“Growth is still growth,” Selene returned.

Kira’s shoulders shook at the pinched look on Alexander’s face that said he was dying to argue but didn’t dare. It seemed even the grumpiest and stodgiest of the forty-three had someone he didn’t dare cross.

“Nixxy, I’m picking up multiple energy signatures that suggest this arena isn’t as harmless as it appears,” Jin interjected.

Kira’s gaze jumped to the tall walls surrounding the arena, the stands above them.

“Not there. In the sands.” Jin sounded grim. “One at your three o’clock. Five meters out. A second to your five o’clock seven meters out.”

A part of Kira balked in remembered dread of the last encounter she’d had with those little bastards.

Tuann drones packed a mean punch. Like much of Tuann technology, they were highly advanced, able to achieve almost perfect camouflage.

Otherwise, Kira wouldn’t have needed Jin to inform her of their presence.

From what Kira had seen, they were primarily used for training purposes and lacked the intelligence or reasoning capability of a drone designed by the Consortium.

Even an outdated model like the J1N could perform more analytical activities and functions than any of these.

The Tuann drones acted much like mines—if that mine was capable of jumping up and chasing you for a while before shooting you with lasers that felt disconcertingly real.

Just thinking about the last time she’d tangled with them made her molars hurt. She’d been lucky to walk out of that forest on her own two feet.

“Devon isn’t going to like this,” she said in a low voice.

Not that she blamed him. Drones much like these had sent his primus into unconsciousness before shooting up his defenseless body when he changed back to his Tuann form.

“Why did it have to be them?”

Anything else would have been preferable.

“Just think—if I wasn’t here, you wouldn’t have known they were there until they were lighting your ass up,” Jin gloated.

Kira’s lip curled as she eyed her wrist with an expression of dislike. No way was she confirming that—even if it was a bit true.

The stands quieted as Torvald stepped into sight, wearing the same fancy synth armor and cape he’d worn when he’d intervened with Jarek.

“Is that a fur-lined cape?”

Kira’s lips curved. “It is.”

“What is the purpose behind those protrusions on his shoulders and arms? Is he hoping to impale his enemies with them? He looks like a porcupine. So embarrassing.”

A strangled giggle escaped Kira. Jin’s reaction was every bit as awesome as she’d expected.

Torvald gave the crowd a regal nod.

The Tuann in the stands stomped their feet to show their approval at the appearance of their ruler. The rhythm of the sound was slow at first but growing in intensity until critical mass was reached and it turned into a thunderous roar.

Torvald lifted his hand, silencing the barrage as effectively as if he’d hit a button.

Those in the stands watched him with an alertness that was almost intimidating.

Chills moved up Kira's back as the arena's mood blanketed her and the rest of the initiates.

It was easy to get swept up into the excitement and fervor, making you feel like you were part of something bigger than yourself.

It was connection. Strong and unyielding. A history shared with the countless people who had come before. All of whom would have stood in this spot, looking up at the emperor.

Kira's hands clenched as her feelings threatened to overwhelm her reason.

"It's something, isn't it?" Jin whispered as Graydon appeared next to Torvald's shoulder.

The emperor nodded at his Face before making his way toward the throne stationed in his box.

"A little dramatic though," Jin finished.

Kira grinned. As expected, Jin's reputation as a mood killer continued unbroken.

Graydon stepped to the front of the box, his eyes seeming to find Kira before sweeping over the rest of the initiates. All of whom had their faces tilted toward the emperor and his Face.

"For you to be here, it means you were called to this place and time. The Tuann have been blessed by the *Mea'Ave*, but those blessings come at a price. Our history is littered with



those who've abused that which was given. That is why the *adva ka* exists." Graydon paused, his gaze landing on Kira as if his next words were meant for her alone. "Prove you are worthy. Prove you can survive."

A roar greeted the end of Graydon's speech as a buzz filled the arena and the sand shifted.

Transparent circles appeared on the periphery of the arena floor.

Kira counted. Ten. Each with a symbol above them.

"What do they mean?"

"So now I can poke my head out of your sleeve?"

The sand to her five o'clock started to shift. Kira dodged to the left as a flash of laser fire missed her arm by millimeters. The blast close enough that she felt the charge in the air.

"Don't test me right now," Kira snapped. "Can't you see I'm a little busy trying to survive?"

Oh. So that was why Graydon had chosen the words he had. Very clever.

Kira felt the *lu-ong*/snake bracelet loosen as Jin peeked his head out from under her sleeve.

Kira dodged a second blast of laser fire, this one originating from the drone at her three o'clock.

The drone dug itself out of the ground, crawling upwards with dozens of tiny legs. Its body was segmented and long.

Like a centipede—only covered in a silvery metal with blue dots running along its back.

The first drone was still half buried, only the blinking blue lights on its shell warning Kira that it still targeted her.

“They’re numbers,” Jin called. “A different one for each circle. The three closest to us say two, ten, and twenty respectively.”

As he spoke, Kira spotted a Tuann darting toward the circle with the number ten.

He charged the wall, bouncing off it with enough force to send him staggering backward before falling on his ass.

Kira didn’t have time to figure out the reason for his failure as a shift in the air around her announced danger.

Kira reached for the blade at her waist, a split-second’s distraction nearly costing her. Only instinct and training saved her as she spun out of the way, the woman’s sword cleaving the air she’d just vacated.

Putting distance between herself and the woman, Kira frowned down at the blade in her hand. She didn’t know what this blade was, but it didn’t belong to her.

Oh, it looked like hers, certainly. An exact replica of the one Harlow had gifted her after she’d passed the *uhva na*. Its weight the same. The look and feel. The way it fit her hand.

All a match except for the fact it wasn’t hers.

Kira's weapons were an extension of her own body. Another limb as familiar to her as her hand or arm.

Which was why she knew it wasn't hers.

She took a second to examine it closely, reaching out with her senses to find that what she held wasn't an actual physical object at all.

She'd call the force holding it together *ki* but the flavor was different. Similar but worlds apart.

The source was the same though, making Kira think that her weapon along with everyone else's had been replaced when they'd been transported to this arena.

She didn't have time to ponder further as the woman sliced her blade at Kira's head.

Kira shied away. "If you wanted to play, you only needed to ask."

There was a thought running through her head at the reasons her blade might have been replaced. The woman in front of her was as good a person to test her theory out on as any.

*Ki* built up around the stranger's blade.

"Behind you," Jin warned at the same time Kira's instincts twinged.

She stepped to the side as the woman unleashed a small sheet of *ki* Kira knew would have caused internal injuries.

The drone that had taken advantage of Kira's blind spot fired at the same time.

The woman yelped as the drone's laser hit her chest. At the same time, the sheet of *ki* sliced the drone in half.

Kira whistled. "One stone; two birds."

Not bad, if she did say so herself. Though her opponent's elimination meant she'd have to wait to verify her hypothesis.

By now, the other initiate's body had shattered into a thousand shards in a manner similar to the way they'd arrived. Kira was guessing there was some type of teleportation happening, and that when an initiate received a mortal blow, they were evicted from the arena.

She was betting that's why their weapons had been replaced with replica's. The Tuann had already proven their mastery of sensory feedback loops with their drones. Why not something similar for the *adva ka*?

It would certainly cut down on unnecessary deaths. Maybe not eliminate them entirely but it would up the survival rate.

She plunged the tip of the blade into the sand beside her, withdrawing it from a destroyed drone in the next second.

Kira stared down at her blade. "This is going to be fun."

Jin's sigh gusted in her ears. "I've told you before not to smile like that."

"I can't help it. The Tuann have handed us the perfect hunting grounds."

And Kira intended to take full advantage.

“Don’t you want to see what I can do without the inhibitor to slow me down?”

Kira stopped in the middle of the arena as the sand stirred under her feet.

To her right, Joule threw up a *ki* shield right as an arrow from a *zuipei* impacted the air directly in front of his nose.

His face showed no fear as he stared at the person responsible, his hands already moving to create another shield. This time to protect Devon’s flank as he sliced the long sword he held across the attacker’s neck.

The person dropped, his body disappearing before he hit the sand.

Devon straightened to glare at the person’s companion.

The Tuann woman’s eyes widened as she back pedaled, shooting *zuipei* arrows at Devon that glanced harmlessly off the shield Joule was quick to create.

Devon’s pace was steady as he advanced, lifting his sword and stabbing it into the other’s torso before she could do anything.

Like the other Tuann, she disappeared into dozens of light motes that faded in seconds.

Raider’s face was almost bored as he watched from the side.

He waited until both Tuann had been taken care of before sauntering in the direction of the clump of initiates who had been talking to Renata and Notus earlier.

The Tuann smirked, the idiots probably assuming Raider would be easy prey.

Raider's head tilted as he closed the distance, not even bothering to draw his blade as the first ran toward him.

Dumbass.

The Tuann would have been better served attacking Raider from a distance.

Sure enough, there was a scream as Raider knocked the man's sword away before latching onto his arm.

It took seconds for Raider to maneuver the other into an arm bar.

"Tap out or I break it," Raider informed him.

Kira shook her head at the man's snarled obscenity. Wrong answer.

Raider shrugged. "Your choice."

A scream came from the man as Raider pressed up on the man's elbow.

The man crumpled to his knees, cradling the injured arm.

Raider pushed him away as Kira approached.

"Having fun?" Kira asked.

"A little." Raider looked past Kira to Alexander and Selene.

The two progressed across the sands at an even pace, only stopping long enough for Alexander to deal with those who strayed into their path.

His movements were economical as he knocked his opponents out. Almost as if his foes were no more of a nuisance than a pesky mosquito.

The delay cost them only a few seconds before they were on their way again.

Alexander turned his head, saying something to Selene that made her smile.

Amusement still lingered on her lips as she murmured something to Alexander before changing course and heading in Kira's direction.

Alexander's reluctance was almost comical as he trudged after Selene.

"Problem?" Kira asked, picking up on the subtle aura of animosity coming off Raider.

"No problem."

Kira had a hard time believing that with the way Raider continued to eye Alexander.

Alexander's manner was almost dismissive toward the other. "The human is not worth the time or effort it would take to become a problem."

Aggression rolled off Raider.

Kira moved between them. "That's good because I have no intention of being either of your babysitters."

She meant it too.

“Does anyone have an idea of what we’re supposed to do?” Kira asked, hoping the question would make them focus on the task at hand.

Joule raised his hand tentatively. “I think I do.”

Joule fought not to shrink in on himself as he became the focus of attention. In the end, he stood his ground admirably. No easy feat given Alexander’s and Raider’s glares.

Kira beckoned for him to continue. “Go ahead.”

“It’s a puzzle.”

None of the transparent circles had been breached yet. After the first few attempts failed, the initiates seemed reluctant to waste any more time on them. Particularly since the drones’ avenue of attack was focused on the immediate area surrounding the circles.

“What does it mean?” Selene asked.

Joule shook his head. “There’s a piece still missing. Until it reveals itself, I don’t think anyone is getting inside one of them.”

“Lovely,” Raider muttered.

“You don’t have to be here,” Alexander pointed out.

Raider’s response died as the ground shifted. The sandy particles piled one on top of another, erecting a stone-looking wall. A pair of drones affixed to the top.

Kira grabbed Raider’s collar, dragging him back as Joule and Selene stepped forward to erect shields in front of them.



“Thanks,” Raider said as Kira let him go.

Above them, a set of symbols appeared.

“What do you want to bet that’s our missing piece?” Raider said, his eyes on the symbols.

“I don’t need to.” Kira was certain it was.

“It’s a timer,” Joule exclaimed.

Kira squinted as the numbers changed. The same symbol that was on one of the circles flashing.

A Tuann broke toward the circle, racing across the sand as drones converged on his position as if trying to keep him away.

He dodged, reaching the circle by some miracle. Strain showed as he forced his way forward, one slow step at a time.

Finally, he breached the perimeter, collapsing into a heap seconds later.

“The timer tells us which circle is open,” Raider said.

“The number went down by one.” Devon nodded at the symbol above the circle. “Once occupancy is reached, they won’t allow any others through.”

Selene’s eyes closed as a look of concentration formed. “The higher numbers have a denser barrier. They will require a higher level of *ki* to penetrate.”

Which meant those circles with a lower number would be quicker to fill up.

Throw in the walls rising from the ground throughout the arena, each equipped with several drones, and this was no easy task ahead of them.

A group of Tuann stopped not far from them, their leader's gaze on Alexander.

The man was around the same height as Alexander but bulkier and with a slightly more feral edge that Alexander lacked.

At least nowadays.

The present Alexander masked his aura of savagery through a neat, scholarly appearance.

"You have the look of Asanth," the leader told Alexander. "Come with us. We can watch out for you."

"No, thank you," Alexander told the man. "I will watch out for myself."

"Cadel, let's go. He's already said no," someone urged the man when he hesitated.

"Should you change your mind, Asanth will welcome you home," Cadel said before loping away to rejoin his companions.

"I'm surprised." Kira joined Alexander. "That offer was downright respectful."

Nothing like the one she'd gotten which was more along the lines of "you have no choice but to come with us."

“Asanth has always respected independence. Their members are more likely to become wanderers than any other,” Alexander explained. “They also have the highest acceptance rate of those who return from wandering.”

Kira stared after Cadell and his companions. “That’s almost admirable.”

“They also fight each other for sport.”

“Oh no. Not that,” Kira said in a deadpan voice as the rest of them turned back to their group.

This time Kira caught the faint twitch of Alexander’s lips that hinted at the presence of a smile. One quickly hidden as they tuned into the conversation taking place around them.

“It’s pointless to make a plan without knowing the lay of the land,” Raider was saying.

“That’s easily solved,” Kira said with a glance in Selene’s direction. “Care to give me a lift?”

“Happy to.”

The consistency of the ground under Kira’s feet gained a slight buoyancy that required her to bend her knees and brace.

A transparent box lifted her into the air.

This was a risk. A higher vantage allowed her a bird’s eye view of what was happening below, but it also made her a target.

She’d have to be quick.

With that in mind, Kira scanned her surroundings.

The sand had turned the field of battle into a mine field strewn maze, leaving most of the initiates scattered over a large area. Though a few had gotten lucky enough to be standing next to a circle when it opened.

The rest were left to the uncertain fate of finding a circle to target and praying it would open before time ran out. It was going to be mass chaos with the circles containing a lower threshold for passage drawing the most competition.

They needed a happy medium. One where the number was on the lower side but not so low the members of their party couldn't pass through.

Selene, Alexander, and Kira would probably be fine targeting any of the circles.

The real question lay with Devon, Joule, and Raider.

Without having tested any of the circles herself, she couldn't determine how difficult they would be to breach.

It left Kira having to guess. Kira hated guessing.

She wanted certainty. A sure bet.

Unfortunately, as with most things in life, such things were nothing but a dream.

Instead, she was forced to rely on instinct and experience. All while knowing that she had moments before dozens of drones locked onto her position and lit her world on fire.

"If you have any advice, I'm all ears," Kira said.

"Give me a moment," Jin responded, sounding harried.

“Take your time.” Kira looked up as the shadows above their head stirred. “It’s not like we’re in an exposed position or anything.”

Spots of blue shown in the dark against the starry night sky that she now realized was an illusion rather than the actual sky.

Several drones dropped from where they’d been clinging to their perches.

“Crap,” Kira breathed as the drones rotated to face her, the lights that lit up their insect-like shapes reminding her of eyes.

“I don’t have it,” Jin blurted. “I tried but I can’t find a pattern.”

Kira felt herself calm, her mind emptying of extraneous concerns as she focused on figuring out their current problem. It was a skill cultivated through countless experiences on the battlefield where panic would result in loss of life.

The more chaotic the situation, the calmer and more focused she needed to be. It was the only way she’d survive.

Graydon and Torvald wouldn’t have left the *adva ka* up to chance. The very thought went against the purpose of a rite of passage in the first place.

While luck could also be considered a skill, it was one that couldn’t be controlled.

They’d want Tuann who possessed both talent and luck—which meant there was a solution to this riddle.

Kira let her thoughts wander, not worrying about the dozen or so drones bearing down on her position.

“You have forty seconds before the first wave of drones reach you,” Jin pointed out, sounding nervous.

Plenty of time.

The world grew distant as Kira sank into an almost meditative state as her mind puzzled through the problem.

The quiet stillness allowed her to pick up on something she'd missed before.

A niggle on the edge of her senses. Easy to miss with all the external stimuli.

Threads of *ki* radiated from the timer, waving through the air as if searching for something to connect to.

Kira mapped them in her mind's eye, noting their destination and the thread already connected to the currently open circle.

As she investigated, one of those tethers attached to a circle on the other end of the arena.

*Ki* pumped through it, strengthening the line as the other attached thread started to weaken.

“Kira,” Jin urged. “You need to move. Inbound strike in ten seconds.”

Kira looked up, the atmosphere of the arena shifting as the timer changed. The symbol it projected matched the circle the thread had just attached too.

Gotcha.

“Move, Phoenix!”

Kira dropped.

## TWENTY-ONE

Laser fire bombarded the perch Selene had created for Kira, shredding the top.

Seeing their prey had escaped, several drones dove after her.

Below, Selene's hands moved with lightning speed as she cast shields in Kira's direction. The first appeared a foot under her.

Kira stepped onto it, using it to launch herself in the opposite direction.

A laser pierced the platform an instant later.

By then Kira was already landing on a second shield platform using it to propel herself downward.

Drones swarmed her, chasing after her fleeing form. Always several steps behind her as Kira and Selene worked in tandem. Selene providing temporary perches as Kira pushed her muscles to the limit to lead the drones into the trap she and Selene were laying.

Alexander rushed from the ground, using the same shield perches as Kira.



The facade of the mild-mannered scholar had disappeared, his expression containing the wild ferocity that had always been present in the camps.

It was a welcome sight, a thrill filling her as their gazes locked.

A tacit understanding passed between them. The years of separation and hard feelings washed away.

In that moment, they knew exactly what the other wanted.

Could guess which way each would move and what needed to come after.

A platform formed to Kira's left.

Kira leapt for it, planting one foot on its surface. Her quads burned as she launched herself sideways.

The drones shifted to intercept, locking her in their sights. A blue glow built as their lasers powered up.

Alexander burst out of the blind spot Kira and Selene had created.

He snatched the first drone out of the air, crushing it with one powerful hand.

It crunched, sparks flying. The blue glow died as Alexander hurled it at its brethren.

It flew, crashing into another drone with the force of a missile.

Kira took advantage of the distraction Alexander had provided to unleash a wave of *ki*.

It flooded out of her, whipping over Alexander's head to collide with the front wave of drones.

The drones dropped, raining down on the sands as if they'd had their wires cut.

Kira and Alexander let themselves fall.

They landed within feet of each other. As one, they straightened, already prepared to face the second wave.

There was no need as a shield snapped over their heads.

Selene regarded them evenly. Beside her, Joule stared open mouthed as the perches Selene had created vanished.

"That. Was. Awesome," he exclaimed in a near shout.

Selene's lips tilted in a half smile. "Practice those exercises I told you about and you'll be able to do this too."

Joule nodded eagerly, his chin jerking up and down as fast as it would go.

"Impressive." Raider held up his hand for Kira to clasp. "You looked like your old self."

It had certainly felt that way, Kira thought as she glanced in Alexander's direction. For a moment, she had deceived herself into thinking she was part of a unit again.

The teamwork with Alexander and Selene had felt natural. Second nature as all that training from the camps flooded back.

It was like she was with her Curs again. The camaraderie lulling her into a false sense of contentment.

Because Alexander and Selene had never been one of her Curs. They hadn't wanted to be.

Something of her thoughts must have shown on her face because a mask descended over Alexander's expression. He looked away and cleared his throat, as if everything they'd shared was nothing more than a figment in Kira's imagination.

Kira looked away from him, her gaze meeting Selene's.

There was sadness in the other woman's eyes. A regret for what had been lost.

Selene dipped her chin in silent acknowledgement.

Kira didn't say anything as Selene moved away, joining Alexander.

"What?" Kira asked at Raider's inscrutable look.

Raider shook his head. "Nothing."

Kira decided it would be best to drop the subject. Raider was a difficult person to predict in the best of circumstances. Kira didn't want to delve into the mystery that was him while in the midst of battle.

"Did you learn anything?" Devon asked, his gaze intent.

Kira concentrated, picking up on the threads.

She pointed to her right. "If I'm correct, we need to head in that direction."

Joule and Devon drew closer as they looked where Kira indicated.

“The number ten circle is in that direction,” Joule said slowly.

Kira nodded. “Enough slots for all of us.”

“How can we be sure it will open at the right time?” Devon asked.

There was no hostility in the question. He wasn’t trying to second guess Kira’s decision. More like he was trying to understand the reasoning of it for himself.

“Close your eyes and concentrate on the *ki* surrounding us,” Kira instructed.

Devon and Joule followed along, startlement showing on their faces a second later as their eyes popped open.

She nodded. “By my calculations, we have about ten minutes before it opens then another five before the window closes.”

Plenty of time to achieve their objective.

“How many walls between here and there?” Raider asked.

“Three.”

“Weapons?”

Kira paused, leaving that question for Jin as it was more in his realm of expertise.

“Heavy artillery,” he said after a short pause. “But they look like fixed mounts so they should be easy to deal with.”

Joule and Devon’s gazes fell to Kira’s sleeve and the place Jin’s voice had issued from.

Devon's stance turned rigid as a cautious look entered his eyes. Joule's response was a little more subdued as he gave Kira a resigned look.

She shrugged at him. "It wouldn't really have been fair to make him sit this one out."

In more ways than the two in front of her probably understood.

Despite his present form, Jin was Tuann. He had every bit as much right as the rest to complete the *adva ka*—even if nobody but them ever realized.

Kira bent to sketch a quick map of their route on the sandy floor, adding the locations of the fixed mounts with the help of Jin.

Raider studied it for a moment before reaching out to tap two points. "There's an opening here and here."

He cocked his head, reaching out to touch a third spot. "We'll need to be wary here. Their echelon lines of fire intersect ten feet from the opening. It'll shred us if we're not careful."

Kira nodded in agreement. "We'll also have to be on guard for ambushes. It looked like there were two groups posting themselves around these points."

She pointed to where she thought they'd been heading.

"You got a plan?" Raider asked.

Kira glanced over at him. "Remember Epiron?"

Raider made a face. "I hate this plan already."

"Agreed," Alexander said. "You nearly didn't make it out."

Kira froze for a second before she and Raider shifted at the same time to look at Alexander.

"How did you know about that?" Kira asked.

"That was classified," Raider said at the same time.

Discomfort showed on Alexander's face. "I hear many things. That doesn't make you special."

"Sure, it doesn't," Raider drawled.

Kira ducked her head to cover the twitch of her lips as she rose. "Everyone ready?"

Raider gave her a cocky smirk. "I was born ready."

Despite the lighthearted words, there was an intensity in Raider's eyes that said he was looking forward to this.

"Let's make it hurt, Nixxy," he told her.

"Always and forever," Kira promised. "Let's see how much damage we can do as they try to take us out."

Raider let out a war cry as he rose and loped away, Joule and Devon tearing after him.

Alexander shook his head in resignation as he ambled in their wake in no hurry to catch up.

Selene waited for Kira, falling in to step beside her. "You always were the leader in whatever you did."

"I never tried to be."

Kira would have been perfectly content for someone else to take the role. It was simply that no one ever seemed to have a plan or the ability to step up in her place. There had been plenty who thought they did, but most of those had been more in love with the idea of leading than being able to actually lead.

Their incompetence always forced her hand before long.

“We know,” Selene said with a smile. “It’s why we love you.”

Kira’s snort held disbelief.

“I never said we weren’t complicated, but that doesn’t mean we don’t see you.” Selene paused to aim a look at Kira. “Even when it sometimes feels that way.”

Selene patted Kira on the shoulder, leaving her alone with her thoughts as she moved to catch up with the rest.

“You believe her?” Kira asked.

“I don’t know.” Jin sounded troubled about that fact. “We may have made certain misjudgments about the forty-three.”

Kira was quiet.

For so long, the forty-three had been a source of frustration. A thorn in her side. Neither her nor them were able to reconcile themselves to the other’s way of thought.

Kira had assumed they viewed her with enmity or a thinly veiled tolerance.

Maybe she'd been wrong about that. It made her wonder what else she could have been wrong about.



Kira hurried toward the rest as Raider and Alexander took cover behind Selene's shield, careful not to get too close to the mounted cannons.

In the distance, the whine of cannons charging was followed by a thunderous thump she felt as much as heard.

Screams announced the departure of several more initiates as Kira reached the others.

Devon glanced in her direction as Joule listened to Selene's instructions. Raider and Alexander were too busy arguing with each other to notice her presence.

"I don't care how they did it in your camp. Kira and I have worked together for years," Raider was saying. "This tactic will work."

"You are impetuous," Alexander spat. "It is better to be cautious in this situation rather than foolhardy."

"What's going on?" Kira asked.

"They are having a difference in opinion on how best to test the cannon's range," Selene answered. "They both seem to think they would make the better bait."

"Really?" Kira's expression made it clear she didn't understand.



“It appears so.”

“We don’t have time for this,” Raider snapped, losing patience.

He made a blade with his hand, slashing it through the air and then toward the cannons in one of the hand signals the Curs had created to mean an attack was commencing.

Before anyone could stop him, he slipped through the protection Selene’s shield offered.

In different circumstances, Kira might have found Alexander’s look of fury hilarious.

She paused to think.

Scratch that, she did find it hilarious. Not to mention gratifying.

“He is brash,” Alexander said with a tight expression.

“That’s one way of looking at it.” Kira moved to the edge of Selene’s shield as Raider crept forward, his attention locked on the cannon for the slightest sign of movement.

“How would you put it?”

“Confident. Brave. Maybe a little bit brash.”

Raider had earned every bit of his brashness through blood, sweat, and tears. If he thought he could do this, he could.

“Just because it’s not the way you would do things doesn’t mean his method is without merit,” Kira pointed out.

Raider reached the edge of what Kira predicted would be the cannon’s range, pausing to give it another look. He

bounced on his toes a couple of times as if psyching himself up.

“He’s also right in that he has more experience in these matters than you.”

Alexander and the rest of the forty-three were amazing fighters but they’d never fought in battles involving fixed-mount firepower.

Kira and Raider had.

“It looks like things are about to get started. Be ready,” Kira warned as Raider lifted a hand and pointed at the cannon. She nodded at him holding up a hand with two fingers, telling him she’d be ready in two minutes.

“Devon, Joule, you’re in charge of taking care of any Tuann who try to ambush us.”

The two nodded, looking excited to have a task.

“Selene, Alexander—“ Kira started, not even getting to finish before Alexander stalked toward the secondary cannon mount. “Never mind. You do you.”

She supposed that meant the truce was at an end.

Selene squeezed Kira’s hand. “Take care of yourself. There are many among the Tuann who wish to see you fail.”

“You think they see you two any different?” Kira asked.

“We don’t have quite your propensity for attracting attention.” Selene glided toward where Alexander was waiting for her.

Alexander charged the second cannon with a roar that shook the air. The cannon pivoted to face him, tracking his path.

A thump came as it fired.

Alexander didn't shy away, instead picking up speed as he raced for the arc of light closing in on him.

Two steps before it would have taken off his head, a shield formed. The blast splashed harmlessly against the transparent walls.

Then Alexander was through, a mad snarl on his face as he sped toward the cannon.

Off to the side, Raider threw up his hands. "Are you kidding me?"

Kira shrugged at him. "Apparently those two have their own plans."

"And he gave me shit about being impetuous. What the fuck is that?"

Kira shook her head. "I don't know."

If she did, she'd probably find Alexander and Selene a lot easier to understand.

"Let's punch through," Kira told Raider, shifting the focus of the conversation back to the matter at hand.

Right now, they stood on the edge of the cannon's range but the moment they took a step forward that would change.

"Fine, but you're the bait though. I'll be the hammer."

Kira scowled. "Why do I have to be bait?"

“Your plan. Your dirty job.”

Kira grimaced, really wishing she could argue with that statement.

It would have been easy to point out that he held no sword or *ki* with which to take out the cannon. However, she knew that if Raider dared to make the offer it meant he had something up his sleeve.

As cocky as he was, he'd never let that lead him into biting off more than he could chew.

As if sensing her question, Raider held up an oblong object. “Blue’s work. I’ve been dying to put it to use.”

“Must be nice to have a weapon designed especially by Blue,” Kira said, a tad jealous.

At heart, Blue was an inventor rather than a soldier. Anything created by her was guaranteed to work better than that low quality trash the military usually threw their way.

There was once a time when her modifications to the Cur’s weapons were highly sought after.

“It is.”

There was a smug look on his face that made Kira’s palm itch to do something about it.

She might have done it too if they weren’t being watched by a good chunk of Tuann society.

The loss of dignity that would have resulted on both ends from such an action wasn’t worth the momentary satisfaction.

And Jin said she was incapable of maturity.

Kira threw a look in Devon and Joule's direction. "Stay back. Things are about to get dangerous."

"Why do you have a smile on your face when you say that?" Devon asked.

Kira's answer was cut off as an explosion from the second cannon announced the success of Alexander and Selene's campaign.

Kira looked over to find the two disappearing through the hole in the wall they'd created.

"Our turn," Kira said softly.

She burst forward. The cannon rotated to face her.

She darted to the side as it fired. The ground shook, particles of sand spraying everywhere as the blast hit.

That's it. Stay focused on me, Kira silently told the cannon. Forget about everything else. Like the human who just stepped into your range.

Kira reached for more speed, changing direction abruptly to charge directly at the cannon in what should have been considered a suicidal move.

Raider let out a silent curse, sprinting for the cannon when he saw Kira playing chicken with it.

Kira pushed herself faster.

The mouth of the cannon swung in her direction; Raider's presence forgotten as it focused on what it perceived as the

greater threat.

A little more. Almost there.

The space in the center of the cannon's barrel pulsed, power building.

Kira's world narrowed to that tiny pinprick of light.

It grew, the area around it distorting.

Her muscles tensed.

Now.

Kira sprung to the right. The left side of her body was bathed in heat as the beam lanced past her.

The ground shook again, sand flying.

Kira darted backward, putting ten feet between herself and the cannon in an instant.

In the back of her mind, she realized her smile probably looked a tad deranged. She couldn't bring herself to care, having far too much fun with her new toy.

The cannon roared again. And again. And again.

Each time, Kira barely evaded as she played the role of bait.

If it was possible to make an inanimate object insane with frustration, that was what she was trying to do.

The better for Raider to slip in unnoticed.

Jin kept a running commentary in the background, noting the power fluctuations in the cannon to provide her with enough warning each time to evade.

Raider was within feet of the cannon when it finally shifted in his direction.

“I guess it finally figured out who the real threat was,” Jin said.

“I suppose that means our fun is over,” Kira muttered as she launched herself in the cannon’s direction.

Even pushing herself as hard as she could, she knew she wouldn’t make it in time.

Not by foot anyway.

Kira concentrated, unfurling a tendril of *ki* and hardening it into two short spikes.

She launched them at the cannon as Raider raised the rod he held. With a flick of his wrist, he extended the rod to the length of a long sword.

He reached the base of the wall as the cannon fired, the blast sailing over his shoulder.

He swung his arm, the rod sheering the cannon in half.

Kira’s spikes landed a second later, embedding deep.

There was a pulse that had Raider’s eyes widening.

“Fuck,” he yelled as he shoved away from the wall, racing away.

Kira changed direction in the same instant.

There was a whoosh and then an explosion shook the arena. The force of which knocked both flat.

Kira rolled onto her back, her ears still ringing from the blast. Her shoulder throbbed, the pain letting her know she'd probably have a bruise later.

“Was that necessary?” Raider shouted.

His face was covered with sand from his hasty dive for the ground, giving him a strange looking beard and eyebrows.

“Probably not,” Kira groaned.

Raider crawled to his feet. “I had it.”

Kira raised herself to sitting, wincing at the faint twinges in her body. “You always double tap. You know that.”

It was one of the first things they'd learned in military training. The first shot to kill. The second in case the first missed.

Raider would have done the exact same if the situation was reversed.

Kira forced herself to one knee as she took stock of the aftermath.

The wall had been reduced to rubble, a smoking crater where the cannon had once been.

Kira jogged to the wall as Devon and Joule started toward them. She climbed the pile of broken stone, pausing once she was at the top to peek over the side.

She jerked back just in time as a half dozen blasts from *zuijis* attempted to turn her into a pin cushion.

Kira crouched, using the remnants of the wall as cover.



Raider put a hand on her back, leaning over to get his own look before taking cover again.

“You realize this is no longer the punch through,” he said with a scowl.

“That’s why we have them.” Kira nodded at Devon and Joule.

The two stood a few feet away. Their faces tense, their gazes focused in a way Kira recognized. Both boys had trained for this but that wouldn’t keep the jitters away now that their moment had arrived.

Right now, adrenaline was flooding their veins, throwing their bodies into a state of flight or fight.

Kira bet there was a faint tremble to their limbs, and they were fighting to keep a clear mind. Despite that, neither seemed like he was going to be sick which was better than Kira could say about some of those she’d led on their first time.

Of course, Devon and Joule wouldn’t be fighting against a horde of Tsavitee who wouldn’t know how to show mercy to their victims if it bit them on the ass.

And unlike the battlefield, there was relatively little chance either of them would die if they froze up.

That thought made Kira appreciate the genius of the arena and its illusion weapons a little more, letting the future warriors of their race ease into the fury of battle with little risk to life and limb.

“Ready to show us what you’ve got?” Kira asked them.

Both boys nodded, looking seconds from charging over the wall.

“I’ll give you an opening. It’s up to you whether you can take advantage.”

If they couldn’t, it would be proof that neither were up to the challenge of the *adva ka*. In that event, Kira would leave them to their fate.

Taking a deep breath, Kira placed one hand against the wall. She sank into the wild tangle of *ki* at her center, extracting two small strands while leaving the bulk of her *ki* where it was.

The attempt would have been impossible a few weeks ago.

The rest of her *ki* would have tried to flood out along the narrow paths she’d spent considerable effort to widen without bursting them.

Control had always been her primary problem when it came to *ki*. The soul’s breath as unruly and untamed as its owner.

Even now the great mass at her center tried to follow the small amount she’d taken; only her training with Harlow and Wren enabling her to soothe it back into place before it destroyed everything around her.

Sometimes it wasn’t how big or powerful your *ki* was—it was about how you used it.

And right now, Kira needed a needle not a nuclear bomb.

Kira spooled the two tiny strands into the center of her palm before compressing them into a spherical shape.

The method was slower than the way she used her *ki* before. When she'd rip it from her core and whack her enemy upside the head with little finesse.

She was hoping the tradeoff would result in less damage to her veins.

Footsteps sounded on the other side of the wall as those waiting lost their patience, deciding to pursue their prey rather than wait for it to come to them.

Tighter and tighter Kira spun her *ki*. Until it bucked against her control like a wild horse being brought to heel.

Pain lanced the inside of Kira's mind.

Not yet. Just a little more.

Like idiots, the enemy on the other side of the wall crept closer, never questioning why Kira and Raider had relinquished the field of battle without firing a single shot.

There.

Kira glanced at Joule.

He took a deep breath, one hand forming the shield as the other lifted the blade he held.

Devon firmed his stance.

Good luck, Kira told the two silently as the footsteps paused on the other side of the wall she was touching.

About damn time.

Kira released the tight clamp on her *ki*.

For a moment, the world stilled, nothing happening.

The *ki* lay there.

And then, like a pressurized volcano whose magma had finally found its way out, her *ki* erupted.

It exploded outward, pulverizing the particles that made the wall into dust, but not killing anything beyond.

Dust and rock billowed outward as Kira took back her hand, feeling pride in her work.

That technique had worked so much better than she'd anticipated.

With a final nod of approval, Kira looked back to find Devon, Joule, and Raider frozen in shock.

"All yours," Kira said.

Her words jolted the pair out of their stunned states.

Joule and Devon surged forward, disappearing into the cloud of dust.

"Could have used a skill like that during the war," Raider observed as he joined her in front of the hole she'd created.

Kira shrugged. "We could have used a lot of things in those days."

Ships that could better withstand Tsavitee weapons. A fleet with experience in fighting an enemy like the one they'd faced. Allies who didn't try to make deals with their enemies.

The sound of battle came from the depths of the dust as it began to settle, showing Devon and Joule holding the advantage.

It was obvious from the way the two fought that they'd trained for countless hours to achieve such flawless teamwork.

As Kira watched, Joule punched the shield through the air, stirring up a cloud of dust to conceal Devon's form as he snuck toward their opponents behind.

“You suppose we should do something about those?” Raider used his chin to gesture at the drones silently slipping their way over head. The commotion of the blast had probably been what drew their attention.

Kira sighed. “Might as well. Those two are working so hard. We can't let them show us up.”

They had their reputations as Curs to protect after all.

## TWENTY-TWO

“The human is impressive, wouldn’t you say?” Torvald leaned back in his chair, his eyes on the floor of the arena as Raider hid himself in a pocket of the dust cloud Kira had created.

“He is,” Graydon responded as a swarm of drones closed in on where Kira still stood, immobile, in the hole she’d blown in the wall.

She hadn’t just disrupted the tether that enabled the particles to communicate on a molecular level to assume different shapes and densities; she’d reduced them to dust.

They would be nothing but inert matter now, unable to relink.

It was a remarkable feat in someone who was relatively new to *ki* training—and a decent approximation of the technique Graydon first showed her on Ta Da’an when he’d reduced a statue to rubble.

Pride filled Graydon at the sight.

“This level of skill is sufficient to get him through the test of survival but to advance further he will need to be capable of more,” Torvald said as the drones passed over Raider’s position.

The human stepped out of the dust cloud, lobbing a small object the size of a fist in their direction.

The drones parted, allowing the object to pass before closing ranks and changing targets.

Raider smirked as they slunk in his direction and held up his middle finger.

Light and electricity burst from the shape. An energy field hit the drones directly around it.

They dropped.

Kira laughed as she darted across the ground toward the closest intact wall. She raced up its side before pushing off and flipping to land on a drone passing by.

Sensing its passenger, the drone activated its defenses. Blue light arced upward as Kira punched down.

Her fist broke through the casing. She ripped her hand free, the core of the drone clutched in her fingers.

She hurled it at another drone, leaping off the first and onto another.

Quiet rippled through the audience as they watched the destruction the pair wrought as Joule and Devon completed

their task of dealing with those Tuann who'd been foolish enough to try to ambush them.

Torvald propped his head on his fist as he and Graydon watched the spectacle quietly.

A drone graveyard grew around the pair, many of the machines lying in pieces on the ground. Sparks still flew occasionally as Raider dealt with the final drone.

Their conversation echoed in Torvald's box as the monitoring devices installed throughout the arena transmitted their voices.

It was an honor only those the Overlords and those within their boxes could access.

Several Houses had designated a few of their initiates as priority, allowing only themselves the ability to eavesdrop. Roake had done the same for Kira.

Such an action would block the rest of the arena from spying on those initiates who didn't belong to their Houses.

Only the emperor could circumvent those restrictions.

Of course, some of those below had made their settings public. Those were the initiates hoping to be recognized and recruited by another House.

"Didn't think I'd get such a good workout during this," Raider said, tossing the drone he'd destroyed to the ground.

"You know what they say, 'Participate in an insane rite of passage. Get your sweat on,'" Kira joked.



“I doubt the Houses expected them to be quite so dangerous,” Torvald murmured in a distracted voice as Devon studied the carnage with envious eyes.

“No one did,” Graydon responded.

They all underestimated Kira and Raider. Of course, for different reasons. Kira because she lacked the training of a Tuann warrior and Raider because he carried the stigma of being human.

“Asanth has learned,” Torvald responded, his gaze moving to Asanth’s initiates.

The small group were keeping their distance from Alexander and Selene, choosing a different circle when it became obvious which one the pair was heading for.

It was a surprising gesture of respect.

Below, Kira was in the middle of giving Joule and Devon a confused look. “What’s up with you two? You’re acting like I did something surprising.”

“It’s different seeing this in person,” Devon said slowly.

Kira’s face showed confusion. “You were there the last time I went on a rampage.”

Something in Devon seemed to withdraw at the reminder. “I remember little of that day. Mostly pieces. You standing over me. The lights on the drones as they swam through the darkness. The sound of their weapons. But nothing of the fight itself.”

If anyone understood what he was going through, Kira would, having her own primus.

Graydon knew Devon still had nightmares about his primus assuming control and killing everyone around him.

It had left him with a trauma that was slow to heal. Months after the incident that had caused his pain and Devon was still reluctant to have anything to do with his primus.

It was a wall Graydon hadn't figured out how to help the boy overcome.

“She has talent as a teacher. Perhaps the child who refers to her as *seon'yer* is more perceptive than I gave her credit for.” Torvald looked up at Graydon. “Even with you as his *seon'yer*, he's been resistant about discussing anything to do with that day.”

It was one of the reasons it had taken them so long to realize his primus rising wasn't a natural event and instead a Tsavitee plot designed to isolate him from his peers.

“She understands better what he's going through,” Graydon said.

From what the oshota Graydon had assigned to investigate Kira's past had told him, Kira's primus had killed quite a few allies by accident before she'd managed to gain control of it.

She was in a unique position to help Devon work through his issues.

“I never did thank you for what you did for me,” Devon was saying slowly.

Graydon chuckled at the uncomfortable look on Kira's face. As if there was nothing she'd like better than to run away from Devon's words.

Joule moved forward, setting a hand on Devon's shoulder as he saved Kira from awkwardness. "It just means we have to work harder."

Determination filled Devon's eyes. "You're right."

Raider waved at them from where he'd been scouting. "Get a move on, Grandma. Time is a wasting."

Kira's scowl was magnified on the transparent screens in front of Graydon and Torvald.

"You know I hate it when you call me that," Kira was saying.

"Don't act like one and I won't have to."

Kira made a tsking sound with her tongue. "I should have picked a less mouthy second-in-command."

That she hadn't said a lot about her as a leader. She'd chosen to surround herself with people who weren't afraid to challenge her.

Jin. Raider.

Both individuals who wouldn't hesitate to voice their disapproval of a plan. Even as they remained ready and willing to walk into the fire with her.

It made Graydon wonder what sort of people the rest of her Curs had been. For her to mourn them as she did, they had to

be individuals worth knowing.

They must have shone as bright as the two below.

It was pity he would never have the chance to meet them.

“Their bond is much deeper than I had been led to believe,” Torvald observed, one finger tapping against the arm of his throne as he studied Kira and Raider. “It is as strong as any familial bond between Tuann.”

It was in moments like these that Graydon saw how Torvald could maintain control of as fractious of a race as the Tuann. One that could all too easily fall prey to internal divisions.

He saw more than most.

Enough to pick up on the strength of the tie between Kira and her human.

“I see evidence of damage in their bond that frayed it but it’s been strengthened since then.” Torvald’s head tilted, fascination on his face. “Intriguing.”

Graydon said nothing as he stood beside Torvald, watching as Kira and her team advanced toward the circle they’d selected.

As powerful as Graydon was, he couldn’t see what Torvald did. The emperor was famed for his sensitivity and intuition that far surpassed any other Tuann, except one, that Graydon had met.

Graydon had to form his own conclusions from having interacted with Kira and Raider. Enough to know that the bond

they shared was a precious thing. Something not even other Tuann might be able to achieve.

“I didn’t think we could create such an intricate bond with a member of another race,” Torvald said pensively.

Graydon understood his concern. A tie such as the one between Kira and Raider could strengthen each half immeasurably.

The problem lay in it ever being severed.

The resulting devastation would desolate the person left behind.

At least if that person was a Tuann.

There was a possibility a human might not suffer the same effects.

“This is concerning,” Torvald said, his gaze swinging to the one circle in the arena that had yet to be breached.

“It’s not over yet,” Graydon responded, knowing where Torvald’s thoughts had gone.

Golden eyes peered up at him. “You have such faith in her.”

“She has proven worthy of that faith,” Graydon said firmly.

Torvald leaned his temple against his fist as the four below reached the end of the maze of walls.

“I hope you’re right.”

As they were talking, a person wearing the garb of a wanderer approached the circle.

Above, the tendrils of *ki* realigned as the symbol prepared to change to the next access point. The transition created a split second of weakening in each of the circle's barriers.

A fact the wanderer took advantage of as the Tuann pressed forward, breaching the outer barrier in an instant. They looked like they were moving through a thick wall of mud as they slogged toward their goal.

In all too short a time, they breached the wall of *ki* and moved into the center of the circle.

"I don't know whether to be worried or impressed," Graydon said.

What the applicants may not have realized was that there was a purpose behind the circles. By tradition, each one contained a purpose behind its existence.

It went far beyond the difficulty level of breaching their walls. It was once thought the circle chosen today would determine the path of tomorrow.

The higher the resistance, the more difficult the journey would be. It was a way of testing whether someone had the strength needed to walk the path. Many might desire to be an oshota or an Overlord, but few possessed the determination and will to overcome the obstacles that would inevitably rise.

That wasn't to say that if a person entered a circle that differed from the path they desired that they wouldn't someday find themselves on that very course, but rather the circle assessed where they stood in the current moment.

Most were only capable of passing the *adva ka*. To reach higher, more sacrifice and ability would be required.

The circle the wanderer had chosen fit none of these avenues. It was once called the emperor's path. Though that name had fallen into disuse. Walking it no more guaranteed that you'd become an emperor than the oshota's path promised you'd become an oshota.

They named it that because of the difficulty level.

For starters, the symbol above would never call that circle's number, making the wanderer's method the only way to breach its walls.

"It is an unusual step but in line with their stated goals."

Despite Torvald's words, Graydon caught the flex of his fingers on the chair of his throne that said he was deep in thought.

"I hope you're right," Graydon said.

Because there was another purpose beyond that of an emperor's path in that circle.

"We won't have to hope if she answers the call." Torvald gestured with his chin at those below as they reached the edge of the walled maze. Devon and Joule started to cross the wide-open space that lay between them and their destination.

Kira dragged them back before they could take more than a step.

She slapped them on the back of their heads while saying something sharp.

Torvald balled a fist and hid his smile behind it as his shoulders shook at the sight of his son being chastised.

“There is still purpose in her current trajectory,” Graydon said. “Time remains for her to answer the call.”

Torvald might be able to see into the truth of things, but Graydon understood people and how they operated.

Kira would do what they needed her to do. She wouldn't be able to help herself.

“If not, we'll have to take more drastic measures,” Torvald's voice was grim.

Graydon hoped it didn't come to that.



“Why are you stopping me?” Devon asked, sounding frustrated.

The look Kira leveled on him was chock full of patience.

It was the expression she'd perfected when dealing with stubborn soldiers who refused to recognize that someone as young looking as her knew what she was talking about.

A little patronizing. A little sympathetic. It usually drove people mad—but it did make them listen.



“Because you’re being stupid, and I don’t want you dragging the rest of us down with you.”

Devon glared at Kira after those words. “The symbol is changing.”

“But it hasn’t changed yet.”

Though it was about to.

Kira could feel the pressure in the air, the sapping of the *ki* barrier around the circle.

It was mere moments from opening.

“It’s going to. We should be standing there when it does.”

Devon’s argument made sense to a certain degree. There was a reason for the saying “first come, first served.”

However, Kira thought caution was the better part of valor in this moment.

The Tuann were a tricky lot. There was no telling what traps lay between here and there.

Not to mention, she was almost certain there were those lying-in ambush waiting to pick off the unwary.

“Is there any reward for being first?” Kira asked, trying to use logic rather than force.

Devon wasn’t her soldier. She couldn’t order him to stay put and expect obedience. Not to mention, by explaining her reasoning, she hoped he would learn something.

Unfortunately, Devon stubbornness didn’t allow him to see the concession she was so graciously making. That was a trait

he and Jin shared.

Through the comms, Jin snickered. “I like his fire. Let him go. I think he could make it across by himself. If not, he’ll make a stellar pin cushion distraction.”

Kira wasn’t doing that. For some reason, she felt an obligation to Devon.

Whether that was because of Jin or the fact she could see his potential, she didn’t want to abandon him unless he made her lose her temper.

“Not officially,” Joule answered for him. “But impressing the audience can lead to a more advantageous position in your birth House or another should you choose to relocate.”

“Neither of you are planning to join a House,” Kira pointed out calmly. “So, what’s the point of assuming all the risk when there’s no reward at the end of it?”

Devon avoided her gaze, the stubbornness in his face fading but not entirely disappearing.

Ah. Reputation.

Devon’s flaw was that he was ambitious. He wanted to create a name for himself. Like Graydon. And his father.

Ambition wasn’t always a bad thing, but if he wasn’t careful, it would get him killed.

Possibly others if he did stupid things in their vicinity.

“Legends often have short lives,” Kira told him.

If he wanted to be one of those idiots, he was welcome to try—but not at the expense of doing things properly.

A whistle caught their attention.

They looked up to see Raider tilt his head at the open stretch of ground. “You want a reason. Look there.”

Three individuals burst out of a break in the wall as the symbol overhead finally changed over. They raced across the floor toward the safe zone.

They’d made it a quarter of the way when the sound of *zui-pis* being charged filled the air. Energy arrows launched in their direction as the person at the rear shouted a warning.

He stopped, spinning to throw up a shield.

He never finished as the ground erupted next to his foot. The person who’d lain in wait rose, slashing at him with their sword.

Unprepared for the ambush, the man never had a chance.

He fell to the ground, his body vanishing within seconds as the arena booted him from the area.

Without his protection, the energy arrows pierced the backs of his companions.

They fell face first toward the ground, their bodies vanishing before they could hit.

“You see now why I wanted to wait?” Kira asked the two beside her.

They nodded their heads in tandem.

Kira moved past them toward Raider. “What do you see?”

“It’s going to be tough.”

“Tell me something I don’t know.”

Kira really wished they still had Selene in their party. The other woman’s shields were better than Joule’s. With her, there would be little issue of reaching the other side of this killing field.

“My calculations say the next circle to be chosen will likely be on the opposite side of the arena,” Jin inserted.

Great.

That meant a trip back through the maze and its warren of traps and drones while hoping there was enough time to reach their destination before it changed again.

Everything in Kira rebelled at that plan. Her instincts said she and the rest needed to stay on this side of the arena.

That this was where they would find success.

“This isn’t a test. It’s a battle royale,” Kira muttered unhappily.

“You are correct,” a voice said from the side.

Kira and the rest peered to their right to find Alexander resting against the wall, his arms crossed over his chest as he stared at the circle.

Selene perched on top of the wall, kicking her feet.

“I count twenty along the perimeter,” Alexander said as if his and Selene’s presence wasn’t a total shock.

“Twenty? Is that all?” Raider asked sarcastically.

“I thought you went ahead,” Kira said, ignoring the human.

“As you can see, you were wrong.” Alexander unfolded his arms and straightened. “It took you long enough to reach this point. Have your skills lapsed?”

Kira’s glare grew heated.

Not that Alexander seemed to notice as he turned to help Selene down, gentle as he lowered her to the ground.

“What’s wrong? Are we keeping you?” Raider asked with a taunting note in his voice.

“It’s good that you know.”

Kira grabbed Raider before he could do anything stupid.  
“Later.”

Raider’s shoulder relaxed under Kira’s hand as he backed off. “Sure. Later works for me.”

Joule looked between the two men, reading the atmosphere.  
“Do we have a plan?”

A low tone sounded, causing them to look up.

As if the universe had decided to up the difficulty level, shadowy shapes dropped from the ceiling. They flipped midair, small wings coming out as they glided toward Kira and the circle beyond.

A whooshing sound came next, capturing their attention.  
Like sand sliding against sand.

“Oh shit.” Raider stepped back, fear on the face of a man who once charged a company of Tsavitee infantry all by himself.

Kira felt her heart sink as she looked beyond him to the massive creature rising from the center of the maze.

“The fierot,” Joule whispered as the pupils of his eyes narrowed to small pinpricks.

The fierot’s limbs were thin and long, reminding Kira of tree branches. They had the same texture and color too, but that was where the resemblance stopped. Shaggy strands of black hair straggled down its back. Its face was swollen and bulbous looking.

An unsettling feeling filled Kira. One that approached terror as the fierot’s tiny eyes focused on Kira and the others.

Or more accurately the circle behind them.

“Something about this circle must require a greater test,” Selene said, echoing Kira’s thoughts.

“What do we do?” Devon asked.

Kira’s expression turned grim. “You wanted a plan? Run.”

That was the plan. Pure and simple.

There was no time for anything else.

Sure, they could try another circle but there was no guarantee the fierot or the creepy bird drones would let them go.

Their only hope for safety lay in that circle.

Alexander nudged Selene in front of him as the two raced forward.

Joule and Devon remained locked in place, staring up at the fierot with terrified eyes.

Raider swore, grabbing the shoulder of Joule's shirt and shoving him toward the circle. "Move!"

The action broke their paralysis.

Joule and Devon dashed after Selene and Alexander.

The appearance of the fierot had caused a disturbance in those waiting to ambush them. Panicked cries spilled out of the maze as the other initiate's finally caught sight of the terror.

"Selene!" Kira screamed.

Selene raised her arms, her hands flying through several gestures Kira couldn't have replicated even if her life depended on it.

A narrow corridor extended from Selene to the circle. The walls ten feet high and transparent.

Joule and Devon raced into the corridor as Selene formed a third wall over their heads.

Alexander charged to the front. He plunged one hand into the ground, snagging the person hiding there and tossing them outside the corridor.

Joule and Devon reached the circle.

Kira slowed then paused as Alexander plunged his hand into the sand a second time, locating his victim unerringly.

He yanked upward; a person's foot clutched in his hand.

"Do you remember the old rules?" Alexander asked, blocking the woman's swing before tossing her away like trash.

"I do."

How could Kira forget?

Those rules had kept her and the rest alive during the dark time in the camp.

"Perhaps you should follow the third one a bit more closely today," he advised.

It wasn't hard to figure out the one he meant.

The rule that stated they should only ever show what was absolutely necessary. The one that told them to survive—but only by the narrowest margin possible.

It was so their masters would underestimate them.

If a person didn't know fully what you were capable of, they couldn't defend against you.

Kira couldn't understand why Alexander mentioned that rule to her. She strolled after the rest, trying to puzzle out the meaning behind his words.

Up ahead, Raider, Devon, and Joule had already reached the circle and had started to force their way inside.

To Kira's surprise, Selene didn't join them.



She reversed course toward the maze, a corridor once again extending in front of her. Alexander followed.

“Where are you two going?” Kira asked.

Alexander didn't stop. “Our fate does not lie in this direction.”

A frown crossed Kira's face. Then why had they come?

“Worry about them later,” Jin instructed. “The window is closing.”

Kira started forward again, only for her steps to slow a second later. There was something inside that resisted the idea of continuing in her current direction.

In front of her, Devon was the first to breach the circle's barrier. Sweat showed on his forehead as he turned to encourage Joule and Raider.

Behind Kira, those who'd waited in ambush and those who were just reaching the area raced toward the safe zone.

Kira saw why a second later as the fierot advanced in this direction, flushing everyone in front of him.

They had no choice but to reach the safe zone or be evicted from the arena.

Joule finally made it through. Raider seconds later.

They beckoned her, screaming for her to get inside.

Kira's pace didn't pick up. Instead, it slowed further.

More and more, the feeling of repulsion was getting harder to ignore. Something whispering that she was heading the

wrong way.

Kira stopped on the periphery of the circle, unable to take another step.

“What are you doing?” Raider asked, staring at her as if he could force her to claim that last foot of space.

Good question.

Kira looked up at the box where she knew Graydon was. From this distance she couldn't see his expression but something about the way he stood seemed to urge her to listen to that little voice.

“Kira, you need to hurry. There's only one slot left,” Joule urged.

One side of Kira's mouth quirked up as she looked back at her friends.

Raider, who appeared as if he suspected what she was about to do. Joule, who was mostly concerned. Devon, whose confusion said he didn't understand her hesitation.

“Don't—“ Raider started.

Kira sidestepped as wind whistled past her head from an attack. The person responsible stumbled forward.

Kira planted a foot on their back and shoved.

The initiate hit the wall of the circle, sticking to it like a fly on sticky paper for a moment before slowly pressing forward.

Raider's expression turned severe, his stare going from the stranger to Kira. “Why did you do that?”

He spoke with carefully controlled precision. As if doing otherwise might result in a tantrum of epic proportions.

“Not going to lie, I’m with the meat sack on this one. This wasn’t part of the plan,” Jin said.

Kira stepped back, giving Raider a pained smile. “I know but everything in me is saying it would be a mistake to enter this circle.”

She’d ignored her instincts once to a devastating cost. She couldn’t force herself to do so again.

“This isn’t my path.”

The words felt like a release.

She’d gotten Joule and Devon where they needed to be, but their path wasn’t hers. It never had been.

Even Raider had a different fate than her.

Though sometimes their paths might converge, each person had to determine the route they’d take.

For now, hers would diverge.

She could feel it. In her bones. And her soul.

Kira wasn’t a spiritual person. She didn’t believe in fate or any of that nonsense. Choice was what decided your future. The ones you made—the ones you didn’t.

Right now, instinct and the *Mea’Ave*’s will had tangled together, telling her one thing.

Her enemies expected her to be in this circle. They had planned around that scenario.

It's why they focused on Joule. Why the ambushers had seemed to drive them along this path—even as they tried to obstruct them.

They wanted her distracted.

What would happen if she flipped the board? Acted out of character?

Kira didn't know, but she really wanted to find out.

## TWENTY-THREE

**B**efore she could second guess herself, Kira spun and raced toward the one circle nearby that was guaranteed to have a slot remaining.

The circle she chose contained a solitary figure. The wanderer. A person who might very well be her enemy.

Electricity built in the air. Along with the knowledge that if she wasn't somewhere safe when it burst, she would be in for a world of pain.

Maybe that was why those Tuann who'd been intent on attacking their fellow initiates were now scrambling for the remaining slots in the circles.

A time limit was approaching. One everyone could feel—even if they didn't know when that limit would arrive.

“You couldn't have made this easy on yourself, could you?” Jin snarled as Kira sprinted toward the circle she'd targeted.

“Why don't we leave off on questioning my judgment for the moment and worry about my impulsiveness later,” Kira grumbled.

Like when she wasn't trying to attempt the impossible.

She dodged several traps her senses told her were waiting below the sand, along with a chunk of stone the fierot hurled at her.

"Do you have a plan to get inside?" Jin asked, unable to disguise the worry in his voice.

Even for Kira, this was a bad idea.

Changing the fundamental rules of a competition like this simply because you willed it was impossible.

Despite that, she couldn't force herself to divert to another course.

Something compelled her forward.

Kira was curious enough not to resist—for the moment.

"I'm working on it," Kira said as she arrived at the perimeter of the safe zone.

She touched the wall of the circle, an invisible force preventing her hand from pushing through by so much as a centimeter.

"You'd better work fast. There's thirty more seconds before this symbol changes over, and I don't think we want to be standing on the outside when that happens."

Kira squinted up at the tendrils of nearly invisible *ki* she could see feeding into each of the circles, not letting Jin's words bother her.

There were two ways she could see this going.

The first was to use brute force to force her way inside.

While such a method was impossible for most, Kira sensed she could do it.

There were several reasons she preferred to avoid that option. One—because it would show too much of what she was capable of.

The most pressing reason, however, was that everything inside her was telling her this wasn't the end of the *adva ka*.

It couldn't be.

Everything they'd done to this point was far too easy for a rite of passage that instilled trepidation into anyone considering an attempt.

There had to be something more. Which meant she needed to conserve her strength and not waste it unnecessarily.

That left finding a way inside that didn't require her to tap too deeply into the well of massive soul's breath waiting at her center.

"Fifteen seconds," Jin's emotionless voice came as his training kicked in. "Ten."

Under Kira's palm, the resistance in the outer wall of the circle abated.

Just slightly.

Sensitive to the change, Kira pushed forward, her hand sinking in about a centimeter.

Thinking of something, Kira twisted to take in the tendrils of *ki*.

Wasn't that interesting?

There was a slight flux in the amount being fed to each circle. Particularly the circle she stood in front of where the discrepancy was the highest.

If she was reading the pattern right, that meant this circle's barrier would be vulnerable for the smallest of windows.

"Count it down," Kira instructed, turning back to the circle with renewed determination.

Jin's tinny voice sounded through their comms, noting the seconds as Kira set her other hand on the wall and braced.

"Four."

Kira gathered herself, sending tiny amounts of her soul's breath to reinforce her muscles.

"Three."

She took a deep breath. She could do this.

"Two."

Kira surged forward, her mind shouting "now" at the same time Jin reached "one".

The barrier resisted, a flood trying to eject her from its boundary. It was like trying to step into a wall of rushing water.

Stubborn, Kira dug in, the legs of her muscles straining to allow her to maintain her footing.



That's it. Just a little more.

As if sensing her thoughts, the resistance from the circle increased.

It was like confronting a water hose on full blast, the pressure threatening to rip the surface of her skin away.

Kira reacted instinctively, sharpening her soul's breath into a blade before her. It cut through the influx of external *ki*, forcing it to pass to either side of her.

Even then, it took a monumental amount of will to take that first step forward.

The seconds that passed seemed endless as Kira forced her way forward inch by slow inch.

To bystanders the time would have seemed like no more than a blink of an eye, but to Kira it felt like days.

Finally, her hand encountered no resistance as she stumbled through the final layers of the barrier.

The wanderer looked over at her, their expression still hidden in the shadows the hood of their cloak cast.

Kira didn't say anything to the stranger as she straightened, taking stock.

She'd been arrogant before. There was no way she could have brute forced her way through that.

"Jin, how are you doing?" Kira asked in a low voice.

She hadn't been the only person to pass through that barrier. Jin was able to feel *ki*. Though not with the same sensitivity as

Kira.

Before he could answer, a tone sounded in the arena. A finality to the note as the symbol controlling the circles exploded.

Fire shot out in all directions, a curving rope that wound and twisted its way through the maze as it hunted those who hadn't reached safety yet. Screams echoed as the slow pokes were caught in its blaze.

Several figures broke from the walls of the maze, fleeing toward whatever circle was closest.

Some were lucky, reaching one and forcing their way inside.

Without the symbol controlling the barriers, all circles were open.

A Tuann hit the side of the zone she stood in, trying to break through. Unsuccessfully as a rope of fire speared him through the torso.

An agonized scream ripped from his throat as the fire consumed him.

"To answer your question, I'm really glad we're not out there," Jin said in a grave voice.

Kira hummed an agreement, reaching over to touch the *lu-ong* around her wrist. Its weight was comforting in the face of the chilling sight of the fire hunting the initiates.

Though they would survive being burned alive, they would come out of the experience having learned a cruel lesson.

It was one Kira was grateful to avoid. Although she would have been unharmed if she'd been caught and burned—physically at least—the same might not be said of Jin.

She didn't know whether the fire would have been capable of destroying the mini spawn.

Although Jin and his spawn were two separate entities, the mini spawn contained enough of Jin's essence that Kira feared what would have happened had she failed to enter the safe zone.

“This looks like it could take a moment,” Jin said after a drawn-out silence. “How about you get some rest while we wait for what's next?”

The military had a saying. “Never run when you can walk. Never walk when you can stand. Never stand when you can sit.”

The purpose behind the mantra was simple. Don't waste energy.

When a break was offered to you, take it. You never knew when you would get another one—if you got another one.

It was advice Kira decided to heed as she took a seat on the ground, her eyes closing as she leaned against the barrier and let herself sink into a meditative state.

A short time passed before Graydon's voice once again echoed throughout the arena.

“You have survived the gauntlet of your peers and chosen your path whether by luck or other interference. Now, it is

time to demonstrate the skills imparted to you by your House. Fight wisely. You never know when the next one will come.”

The barriers dropped, the flame serpent retreating to where the symbol had been. It coiled into a flickering ball of fire. An artificial sun blazing against the shadows of the ceiling.

Everything outside of the safe zones had been swept clean. The maze and drones gone. Along with the fierot.

A platform formed under Kira’s feet. Matte black, it was a perfect square of ten feet by ten feet. She tapped on it with one toe, finding the surface solid and stable.

“You made the right call breaking with the others,” Jin whispered as similar platforms formed in each of the circles.

He wasn’t wrong. The circle Raider and the rest had targeted was made up of six individuals. Had Kira remained, it would have meant one of their party would face elimination.

Four people. Three slots.

It wasn’t hard to do the math.

Because she’d chosen a different route, they’d escaped that fate.

“This test is vicious,” Jin said.

Kira found herself in agreement.

To pass the survival phase, many of the initiates had chosen to work together. Now the Tuann were telling them they had to fight their previous allies.

She couldn't help but wonder what the lesson was in all this.

Possibly that today's friend could be tomorrow's foe?

She had no idea.

Nor did she have time to ponder further as the wanderer stood in a smooth movement that contained a predator's grace. He prowled toward the center of their platform where he spun to face in Kira's direction.

"Someone's eager," Jin observed.

Kira didn't move, taking the time to study him.

To make it this far, she was betting he wouldn't be an easy opponent. Particularly given the difficulty level contained in breaching the circle's barrier.

"Be careful. He looks like a scrapper," Jin said.

The wanderer reached over his shoulder to clasp the hilt of the broad sword he wore on his back.

Kira's face soured as he withdrew a blade that resembled a claymore sword that was longer than her arm and thicker too. Edged on two sides, it was meant to be wielded with two hands and featured a heavy build.

Parrying it would be hell.

Still, all wasn't lost. That heaviness and size would sap its owner's strength far faster than her lighter blade while also making him slower.

Kira could work with that.

She drew her blade, holding it loosely at her side.

The wanderer's gaze dropped to her sword. "You're not going to take your stance?" His hand tightened around the hilt of the claymore. "Are you looking down on me?"

At her silence, there was a shift in him—almost as if her lack of response was seen as an insult.

"I see. Then allow me to make the first move."

The wanderer closed the distance, appearing before her in an instant.

He was fast. Much faster than he should have been capable of with a sword of that size and weight.

Kira evaded by a thin margin, the wind of the claymore's passage ruffling her hair.

Close. Way closer than she'd planned.

Kira recovered her balance, watching the other with a newfound respect.

He was talented. Very talented.

How did someone like him end up as a wanderer?

Already he was shifting his weight, preparing for a sideways slice.

Kira faded out of reach, surprised when he moved with her. He was relentless as he pursued her across the floor. His movements containing a faint air of familiarity the longer they fought.

Kira's foot touched the edge of the platform. Victory showed in his face as he sliced his sword downward.

The screech of metal reverberated throughout the arena.

Kira blocked, her teeth gritting as her arms shook from the effort.

The man hit like a tank.

Kira's arms threatened to buckle as she sank all her strength into one upward heave, sidestepping as she let her guard fall.

His blade whispered past her body, slamming into the floor and cracking the platform.

Kira would have attacked, but in the instant that she shifted to do so he had already recovered.

"You're good," Kira told him.

"You're not trying."

Kira rolled her shoulders, wincing as she moved her arm. Her biceps protested.

"I wouldn't go that far," Kira said.

Now that they'd exchanged a few blows, Kira had a better grasp of his style.

Strength wise, she wasn't his match.

Good thing duels were about more than how strong you were.

Still, there was something bugging her about the way he fought. It was in his movements and the beauty of his slices.

“Do I know you?” Kira asked.

It was a stupid question. What kind of idiot would admit that when they’d been so careful to hide the majority of his face behind the hood he still wore?

She could see enough of his jaw to know he was male. There was something weird about the shadows his hood was casting, veiling everything above his mouth except the intermittent glimpses she caught of his hazel eyes. It was enough to make her think there was some type of technology or *ki* preventing her from getting a really good look at his features.

Despite that, she couldn’t shake this sense of recognition. Not so much of him but of his technique. Like she may have known the one who taught him.

“Mind games won’t work on me,” he informed her.

“We’ll see.”

She hadn’t attempted any of those on him, but that could change.

“I was wrong before. You aren’t looking down on me,” he said unexpectedly.

He reset his stance, raising the sword in front of him.

“I’ll get serious now.”

Wait. He wasn’t serious before?

Kira danced out of the way as his sword sliced into the spot she’d just been. They swept back and forth across the small



square as he attempted to corner her.

Each time, she escaped. Her goal: to make this bout last as long as possible.

To her surprise, he didn't lose his calm. Not even when the minutes ticked passed and their duel became one of the longest lasting.

The world faded as she moved faster, her movements getting sharper with every second. Her muscles screamed and her breath shortened but she never faltered.

The phoenix always rose. Even if she had to burn in her own fire.

Shouts from the platform next to them distracted Kira for a brief instant. Her focus fractured as she darted a glance toward the rest to find Joule desperately maintaining his shield as his opponent hammered against it with everything he had.

“Where are you looking?” the wanderer snarled, sinking everything into his downward swing.

A blaze of lightning slashed across Kira's shoulder and upper chest before lodging where her lungs were.

The wanderer dipped his face toward hers. “A warrior such as you should know better than to get distracted on the battlefield.”

It took two tries to get her voice to work.

“And you should beware of traps.”

His gaze followed hers to where her hand was located against his stomach. The blade of her sword piercing his abdomen at an upward angle and exiting out of his back.

Kira coughed, her lungs trying to fill up with nonexistent blood as her body insisted it had suffered a mortal wound.

“The sensory feedback in this place is no joke,” Kira gasped.

It was difficult—especially when both her mind and body experienced sensations that were all too real.

Kira had been close to the brink a time or two. She’d be a fool not to recognize the slow creep of death stealing over her.

“Kira, your vitals are all over the place.” Jin sounded panicked as his mini spawn shifted on her wrist.

“A little death. No big deal.”

Kira twisted her blade in the wanderer, making sure the wound she’d dealt was as fatal as the one he’d given her.

The last of her strength expended, she didn’t try to stop him as he stumbled backward.

The shock on his face made her grin.

“Mutual destruction. Fitting, wouldn’t you say?”

Kira’s vision wavered, her body trying its damndest to shut down. Her mind attempted to follow.

Kira refused to allow it.

In real life, she would have had little choice but to yield. Determination and will took you only so far. Eventually,

reality caught up.

An illusion, no matter how realistic, was different. The same incontrovertible rules did not apply.

The wanderer pressed a hand against the spot where her blade had penetrated, his expression still a little stunned.

Not expecting that, was he?

Ah, well, Kira didn't like to be predictable.

Distantly, she became aware of the hush that was slowly falling over the arena as her platform became the center of attention.

Tuann whispered to each other, their eyes on Kira and the wanderer.

“Why haven't we been booted yet? We both failed.” The wanderer's hand dropped from his side as he stared up at their audience.

“It's not just what is said that is important. It's what they're not saying that really matters,” Kira replied in a distracted voice as she looked up at Roake's box.

An outsider would never be able to see the worry and tension on her uncle's face.

Kira did, though. Or at least thought she did.

It was hard to see but she thought she caught a glimpse of apprehension on those austere features.

The problem was she couldn't tell what about the situation had unsettled Harlow.

“What does that mean?” the wanderer asked.

Kira finally looked at him. “Graydon said it before. ‘Demonstrate your skills.’ He didn’t say anything about winning.”

It was a gamble, but Kira had been right in her assessment of the situation.

Graydon was a clever man. For him to leave such a big loophole in his words had to mean something.

Turns out she was right.

Not that she’d ever had any real doubts.

“I can’t tell if you care about passing the *adva ka* or not,” the wanderer said with a thoughtful stare like he was looking at a puzzle he wished to solve.

Good luck with that. People had been trying for years and never succeeded in deciphering the riddle that was Kira Forrest.

“Don’t expect something you can’t give yourself.” Kira looked over her shoulder as the rumble of rock sliding against rock filled the air.

A doorway appeared directly across from their platform, the cavernous opening beckoning.

Kira took a look at some of the other circles, noting that the numbers inside the arena had been drastically reduced. It wasn’t until she saw one of the initiates win their bout and then disappear into their own door that she understood why.

“I suppose that’s our next stop,” Kira said softly as she made her way slowly toward the door.

“What did you mean before?” the wanderer asked, dogging her steps. “About not expecting something I can’t give?”

Kira didn’t answer immediately, shooting a look at the platform Raider and the rest had chosen.

Devon was absent. Joule too.

Kira didn’t know if that meant they’d been eliminated or gone through their door.

Raider still fought, happily hammering a fist into the nose of his opponent. At this point, Raider was just toying with the other. The duel already over.

“If I asked you why you’re in the *adva ka* when the Tuann are not welcoming of your kind, would you tell me?”

Kira didn’t have to see the other man’s expression to know the answer was a big fat no. His silence spoke volumes.

Kira stopped on the threshold of the door as an icy breeze swept out of the tunnel. It carried a warning against trespassing further.

How amusing. First, the *Mea’Ave* disrupted her plans by pulling her in this direction. Now, it tried to push her away.

It was as mercurial as a toddler.

Kira started forward, not letting herself be bothered by the change.

It was already too late to turn back. It was doubtful the Tuann would allow her to use one of the other doors even if she had the mind to listen to the warning.

“If I am willing to part with that information, would you tell me?” the wanderer asked from behind Kira.

She paused. Would she?

“Nope.” Kira stepped into the mouth of the tunnel. “That’s another thing you have to learn. People don’t always reciprocate.”

It was a cold fact, but there were those in this world who would suck you dry and then say it was your fault when you ended up broken.

It only took a three-year coma and the loss of everything she cared about to learn that lesson.

She hoped the wanderer was smarter than her.

Darkness wrapped around Kira, the light fading as she trudged forward until finally it disappeared altogether.

For a moment, Kira got the sense that she was in a cave. The blackness containing the absoluteness that came only with the complete absence of any form of light.

Kira didn’t mind darkness, not even when all sound disappeared, leaving behind nothing but an echoing silence that rang in her ears.

It was an odd sensation, moving forward without sight or hearing. Almost like being stuck in a sensory deprivation

chamber.

It was disorienting to say the least.

Time held little meaning. Kira had no way of knowing how long she'd been walking, but she was thinking it was more than long enough to have reached her destination.

She could only attribute the experience to another illusion.

Or maybe it was reality, and she really was stuck in a cave of some sort, winding her way deeper and deeper underground.

That was a chilling thought. One she was glad she hadn't voiced as the *lu-ong* avatar shifted uneasily on her wrist.

Jin did not like being underground. For any reason.

He had no problem being stuck in a giant metal can hurtling through space but stick him in even the shallowest of caves and he'd melt down in the most epic of fashions.

"How much further?" he whined.

"It'll take longer the more you ask that question."

This place was strange.

Kira couldn't shake the impression that any reaction to their surroundings would end in a lengthier and more rigorous test.

"You always say that," Jin complained.

"That doesn't mean I'm not right."

Jin grumbled to himself but settled down.

An undetermined length of time later, Kira finally sensed a change in their surroundings as the smell of water reached her. It carried with it the scent of dirt and growing things. Neither of which belonged in a cave-like environment.

Light pierced the veil of black.

Kira squinted, resisting the urge to raise one hand to protect her eyes as she found herself on the edge of an immense room like that of the ancient cathedrals.

Only on a much greater scale than those human masterpieces.

Intricate columns held up a ceiling covered in complicated mosaics and beautiful paintings. Sculptures decorated the entrance of each tunnel, featuring long dead heroes whose names were likely still remembered.

It was the emotion on each statue's face that stuck with Kira. The anger and determination as they battled invisible enemies.

One guess as to the identity of those enemies.

The Tuann were nothing if not tenacious in the way they clung to the story surrounding their origins. It was a species-wide trauma that fed into every aspect of their society.

Of course, the *adva ka* would feature heroes from that time period.

What did Kira want to bet that a big part of the purpose of this rite could be directly traced back to that era?



It made the familiar cast in the features of one particular statue all the more intriguing.

She recognized the line of the person's nose. The angle of their jaw.

She saw those same features in the mirror every day.

This was her ancestor. Likely one of the early Overlords of House Roake. If not the first.

As Kira moved deeper into the room, she was a little surprised to find the crowd waiting for her much larger than she had expected. Several of the initiates milled around, looking confused as Tuann trickled out of the tunnels surrounding the perimeter the room.

Kira paused on the faces of a few initiates she'd personally eliminated.

Huh.

It seemed that being evicted from the arena after receiving a mortal blow wasn't the fail that she'd assumed. Judging by the number of bodies waiting, not a single initiate was missing. Every person who'd been transported to the arena had made it to this point.

Fascinating. And not the outcome Kira had expected.

It seemed the rite of passage wasn't as straightforward as it appeared. Why did Kira find events so much more interesting because of that?

While Kira was pondering, Solal, Amila, and Baran appeared from the shadows like ghosts. Faint distortions rippled around the room's perimeter, leading Kira to suspect they had quite the audience watching from the sidelines.

The knowledge made her a little more cautious as she joined the rest, unsurprised to see Alexander and Selene already present.

They were part of the forty-three, after all. Children who'd been pushed to the brink and had no choice but to succeed.

It would be strange if something as minor as this gave them trouble.

Besides them, the woman from Asanth stood a little apart, watching the rest with a bored expression similar to Auralyn's.

Renata and Notus were in their own pocket of space as they whispered among themselves and to those initiates surrounding them.

A ripple went through the crowd as the wanderer stepped out of the same tunnel she'd arrived from.

He took in the gathering for half a second before finding a column to lean against, crossing his arms as he watched the rest of them as carefully as they were surveying him.

"The Tuann haven't changed," Alexander said, coming up beside Kira. She didn't jolt, having already sensed his presence.

"They are as suspicious and closed minded to outsiders as ever. I don't know if that man is brave or foolish for

attempting to rejoin them,” Alexander continued.

“Maybe he’s a little of both.”

Or maybe he had a goal that he could only accomplish by being here.

“Have the forty-three ever dealt with the wanderers?”

Kira couldn’t help her curiosity. It was obvious the wanderer was skilled. Far more so than most of the initiates. There was also the fact his technique was eerily familiar.

What drove a man like him to a place like this? Especially when he knew the Tuann wouldn’t welcome him with open arms no matter how well he performed.

Someone like that could go anywhere. Both the Consortium and the Haldeel would make a place for him.

Why choose the one group who would do their best to push him away?

“Some of us. Yes.”

That was helpful. Not.

“Anything of note to share?”

Alexander narrowed his eyes at Kira. “Why are you asking me this?”

“Just curious.”

Her answer made him pause. “You’ve noticed something.”

Kira sighed. Of course, that would be where his mind went.

“Don’t overthink. Sometimes curiosity is simply that.”

Alexander peered at her with an assessing expression as if he was trying to peel back her layers to see what was inside her mind. “Not when you’re involved.”

“Answer or don’t,” Kira said, losing patience.

Everything always had to be difficult with him.

“They are lawless.”

Kira blinked in surprise both at the description and the fact that he’d deigned to answer when she thought he wouldn’t.

Moreover, his choice of words was an interesting one. The term “lawless” didn’t necessarily mean something bad.

There were many areas in Consortium space where the law of humans didn’t reach. One of the things she’d learned over the years was that a place without law didn’t always lack justice.

There were many faces to justice, and it was up to those frontiers to determine what that looked like.

In Kira’s opinion, they did a better job than the Consortium sometimes.

“You are as unhelpful as ever,” Kira told him.

She’d hoped for more. Something that might give her insight into the other.

Alexander smirked as he patted Kira on the shoulder. “Maybe if you’d taken my advice about keeping a low profile that would have changed.”

## TWENTY-FOUR

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Kira muttered as Alexander started toward Selene. “I did an excellent job of keeping a low profile.”

Jin’s guffaw was loud enough to make Kira flinch. She took an uneasy look around to make sure nobody heard. Luckily, most of those present seemed too lost in their own thoughts to pay any attention to what was happening around her.

The journey to make it this far had taken a toll on some. They were too busy remaining upright to care about anything else.

Good. One less problem to worry about.

“If you think the way you settled your duel wasn’t flashy, you’re fooling yourself,” Jin said after he’d finally stopped laughing.

“I have no idea what you mean,” Kira muttered as she shot a glare at the tunnel that would eventually spit out Raider and the other two.

What was taking them so long?

Devon and Joule had left before her. They should have been here by now.

Jin chortled, the *lu-ong's* tail flicking against her wrist in amusement. "You survived a death blow."

"It wasn't real," Kira said.

"Doesn't matter. It felt real. Your body thought it was dying," Jin responded. "That makes it real enough. Yet, you didn't fall. Instead, you acted like you'd suffered a bee sting. How do you think the Tuann will react to that?"

Kira hated when Jin sounded logical. She wasn't used to him being the sensible one in this relationship.

In retrospect, she probably should have found a different method to accomplish her goals.

"The wanderer didn't fall either," Kira pointed out defensively.

It took willpower to ignore the signals your body was sending you. It showed he possessed determination on par with Kira's or that he'd faced training as brutal as what she'd undergone.

Perhaps both.

"You're still an idiot," Jin retorted. "We'll talk about how suspicious he is later."

Kira grimaced. Why was he suddenly so focused? Normally, he would have let himself be distracted a dozen times by now.

“Did you really think no one would notice?” Jin griped. “You might as well have stuck a sign on yourself that says ‘Look at me.’ You overcame death. If that’s not dramatic, I don’t know what is.”

“Yes, yes. I made a mistake. I get your point.”

It would have been better if she’d won by a narrow margin instead. Too bad she hadn’t realized how lifelike the bio feedback was until far too late.

“Not yet, but you will,” Jin threatened.

Sure. Right about the time she learned to fear cute, fluffy bunnies.

Quiet settled as Jin let the topic drop.

Not even a few minutes passed before he wasn’t able to resist breaking the silence. “Where are those three? They should have been here by now.”

Kira rubbed her forehead and closed her eyes. “I’m sure they won’t be much longer.”

“How can you say that? Joule and Devon left before us, and Raider was only minutes behind us.”

Kira gave her wrist a look, finding his frustration revealing. “Are you saying this because you’re worried about all three? Or just Devon?”

“I just think it’s weird how long they’re taking,” Jin said, choosing to ignore her question. “Maybe I should go check on them.”

“Don’t you dare,” Kira said, her humor in the situation falling away. “Have you seen how many oshota are on the edges of this room? There’s no way you’ll be able to make it into that tunnel without one of them noticing.”

Not to mention, there was a possibility that the tunnels were like the archways and every path was different. She would have liked the chance to ask the others about their experiences and whether they’d walked through the same abyss she had.

Unfortunately, such questions would only draw attention to her.

Well—more attention than she’d already garnered.

“The quickest way to find out what is going on is to do a little reconnaissance,” Jin argued.

“Don’t you do it.”

If his mini *lu-ong* stretched so much as a tail off her wrist, Kira would incinerate the spawn with every bit of *ki* at her disposal.

Attention drawing actions be damned.

Before Jin could argue further, Devon stumbled out of the darkness. His face exhausted. Far more so than warranted based on Kira’s experience.

It was further evidence supporting her theory that the tunnels contained different experiences for those traveling through them.

Kira sensed rather than heard Jin’s sigh of relief.



Joule stepped out of the darkness next.

The two boys said something to each other before they started forward, a unit as they faced the rest of the initiates.

It was Kira's turn to feel worried as the minutes passed with no sign of Raider.

Not much concern. Just a tiny amount. No bigger than a thimble full.

"He's certainly taking his sweet time," Kira remarked as Solal stepped forward, signifying the end was close at hand.

*Hurry up, Raider, Kira mentally urged. Waiting on you, buddy.*

"Is he trying to be the last one across the line?" Jin hissed.

Looked like it.

Jin let out an amused huff. "At least someone remembers the correct way to fly under the radar."

Kira gave the sleeve that hid her best friend a dirty look.

Solal opened his mouth to speak but paused as Raider stalked out of the darkness, covered in blood with a face that said he'd gladly murder anyone who stepped in front of him.

"Get held up?" Kira asked as Raider changed course toward her.

"You could say I had to take care of a few, small annoyances."

Kira shot him a quick glance, noting the shadow of a bruise on the side of his face along with a tear in his armor.

Kira knew exactly how much damage their armor could take. For it to show signs of battle, it meant Raider had tangled with someone or something a few categories above a simple annoyance.

Not that Kira planned to question him on that manner. If he wanted to downplay things, who was she to argue?

Solal started speaking just then. “The emperor wishes for me to convey his congratulations upon reaching this point. Some of you have shown your skills in battle and proven your ability to survive. Others may be confused as to why they remain after facing such a loss.”

Raider shifted his weight as he looked around at the bafflement on many of the faces around them. “They certainly like to state the obvious.”

In front of them, Solal waited until the murmurs in the crowd died before continuing. “Traveling beyond this point means leaving your childhood behind and stepping into the realm of an adult. Certain responsibilities come upon passing the *adva ka*. A few of you have tasted what that might involve. The possibility of death is something you should not forget. For that may be what is asked of you should your House ever come under attack. You will be the one standing at the forefront. The first to fall in defense of the more vulnerable members of your House.”

Solal’s gaze swept the crowd, lingering on the faces of those initiates who hadn’t made it through the battle royale.

“It is an unpleasant fact that we live in a dangerous universe. Your end may come at any moment.” Solal paused to let that sink in. “From here on out, the stakes become very real. It will no longer be pretend. If you die in the next stage, it will be for good.”

Solal’s gaze was solemn as two doorways shimmered into view behind him. One led to a dark tunnel, the second a large chamber that seemed to whisper Kira’s name.

“Those who wish to withdraw from the *adva ka* may do so now.” Solal gestured to the doorway on his left. “There is no shame in turning from this path.”

“What do you think?” Kira asked Raider.

Her friend flashed her a cocky grin. “I’m going all the way, Nixxy. You should know that.”

Kira’s snicker was soft, having expected that answer. Raider had always been a competitive asshole who never turned away from a challenge and his reasons for being here hadn’t changed.

“What about you?” Raider asked.

“You have to ask?” Kira smirked. “Forward, my friend. Always forward.”

Solal was still speaking. “If there is even a hint of uncertainty in you, I advise you to reconsider your limits and how well you know yourself. The *Mea’Ave* will certainly judge you by them.”

For a short time after he finished speaking, there was silence. No one moving toward either door.

Kira was interested to see the initiates appeared contemplative as they considered the ramifications of the two options Solal had laid out in front of them.

It was no easy decision. Particularly in light of the fact that many of them had experienced the closest thing to death they could without actually dying.

They were no longer behind the safe, comforting walls of their Houses. There was no safety net waiting to protect them. Any choice made now held serious ramifications.

In a way the move was pure genius, bringing home in a visceral way exactly what they stood to lose.

Some would rise to the challenge while others would falter.

Kira was interested to see who would choose what.

It didn't entirely surprise her when Tinsley was the first to march forward, moving into the chamber without a backward glance.

A distortion rippled the air as an oshota stepped into view, following Tinsley as she disappeared past the statues guarding the entrance.

Tinsley's actions broke the ice, several more initiates following. A few took advantage of the distraction to slink toward the tunnel, disappearing into it without a word.

“I’m surprised.” Raider nodded toward Renata and Notus as they headed for the tunnel. “I thought they’d be in it to the end given how combative they were toward Joule.”

Kira too.

It unsettled her that they were acting out of character. Both had made it into one of the circles, so she doubted it was the fear of possible death keeping them from advancing.

“Jin, do you have any more mini spawn lurking around?” Kira asked.

“Maybe.” Jin dragged the word out.

Raider patted her on the shoulder, signaling he was going ahead. She nodded to show she understood as he moved past her to join Devon and Joule.

Together they headed for the chamber.

“See if you can have them follow Renata and Notus,” Kira instructed.

“On it.”

Aware of Solal’s approach, Kira lifted her hand to cover her mouth as she spoke under her breath. “And don’t think I’m not mad that you created more of those things.”

Jin’s cackle made Kira want to roll her eyes as Solal stopped in front of her.

“Am I to take it you drew the short straw as my escort?” Kira asked.

“Not me.”

Kira glanced at Baran behind Solal and almost laughed. “Are you sure about this? He’s zero for two so far.”

Kira didn’t know the oshota very well. Mostly because he’d remained behind in human space for an as yet undetermined reason Kira bet had something to do with her. The few encounters she’d had with him always resulted in him chasing her with the aim for capture

He failed. Twice.

“I won’t make the same mistakes again,” Baran promised.

“Sure. If you say so.”

Kira moved past him, getting her first good look at the chamber and what was inside. It was a grotto, light trickling through several openings in the ceiling.

A brook wound through the space, moss clinging to its banks. The plants were a deep verdant green mixed with varying blues and purples. Glowing insects flitted from plant to plant, hovering a few inches off each one as their light flicked on and off.

The scene looked like something out of a fairy tale with small bridges offering passage across the brook in several places.

Pavilions were interspersed throughout, the structures almost blending into nature.

“Kira.” Jin’s whisper pulled Kira out of the trance she’d fallen into.

Kira swallowed hard. “I know.”

The next room wasn't just otherworldly—though it certainly was that.

There was more than beauty contained in this place. Pressure clamped her body, growing with every step she took.

Power. Pure and hypnotic.

Enough to set Kira's molars tingling.

The feeling was an uncomfortable one. The equivalent of being dipped into a pool of hot water that was just this side of boiling.

“This is a Nexus,” Kira whispered in realization.

A place where the *Mea'Ave* spilled into the world unfiltered.

Kira concentrated to force a little more strength into her limbs, becoming aware of a splash of red off to her right. An oshota withdrew her blade from the back of the initiate she'd been tasked with following. A young woman who now lay face down on the ground, the mossy plants absorbing the blood that had spilled onto them.

With an expressionless face, the oshota cleaned her sword before turning back the way she'd come.

Her gaze met Kira's briefly as she left the fallen initiate on the ground at her feet.

Suddenly, Baran's presence took on new meaning.

At her glance back, he smiled wide at her, the corners of his eyes crinkling as if to ask if she planned to continue.

Kira faced front, the unsettling feeling of an executioner waiting behind her as she struggled to figure out the reasoning behind the initiate's death.

Because that woman *was* dead. True dead. No illusions or second chances kind of dead.

The Tuann had been so careful until now to keep casualties at a minimum. What changed?

Was it the abundance of *Mea'Ave* surrounding her? Soaking into her skin and bones. Filling her up.

Not until she saw the entranced expressions on several initiate's faces, did she understand.

Temptation.

That's what this place was.

Now that she'd had the thought, she could feel it. The whispers promising her anything she wanted.

She could take the *Mea'Ave* and rule. Not just the Tuann. But everything.

The Consortium. The Haldeel.

The Tsavitee would be no match for her. All she had to do was reach out and claim it.

Kira didn't even hesitate as she paced toward the nearest bridge.

"How are you doing?" she whispered in Japanese.

"This is like nothing I've ever felt. It's—" Jin trailed off.



“Like you’re experiencing everything at once.”

Every single thing.

Life. Death. What came between—and afterward.

All of it.

It was overwhelming. Seductive. With the force filling her up, she could become a god. Someone no one could stand against.

“How do they live away from this?” Jin asked dreamily.

Kira’s steps slowed.

“Does that mean you wish to stay here for the rest of your life?” Kira forced a teasing note into her voice. “That’s a pity. Guess I’ll have to find a new copilot for the *Wanderer*.”

That seemed to snap Jin out of his enthrallment. “What are you talking about?”

Kira shrugged. “You’re the one who was talking about not being able to live away from the *Mea’Ave*.”

Jin sputtered. “That’s not what I meant.”

Baran’s voice interrupted. “Who are you talking to?”

Kira and Jin went quiet as she looked over her shoulder. Baran’s narrowed eyes darted around the space as if he were trying to find the other person.

“Myself,” Kira said after a tense moment.

“Really?”

She nodded. “You don’t see anyone else, do you?”

Had he been Finn or any of Graydon's other oshota, he would never have fallen for her lie.

But this was Baran.

He didn't know her like they did nor was he familiar with Jin's tendency of using his mini spawn as avatars. It left Kira a little wiggle room for half-truths.

Not much, mind you, but enough.

His eyes narrowed further.

"Shall we continue?" Kira asked, hoping to distract him from the suspicion she could see growing. "Or are you planning to put that en-blade to use?"

Baran looked down as if just realizing his hand was on the hilt of the blade.

He moved it away. "That won't be necessary."

Kira didn't say anything about the fact he'd been fondling his blade, knowing the gesture was just as much about seeking comfort in the familiar as it was a potential first move toward violence.

Who hadn't done something similar?

Kira practically lived with one hand on her weapon when she was a salvager. As long as that blade stayed in its sheath, she'd have no problems with him.

It was only if he drew it that she'd be forced to reconsider.

Kira turned back to the path. "I take it I passed the test."

By now, Kira had crossed the bridge over the brook and was making her way toward the large stone structure built into the side of the rockface.

“You succeeded as soon as you took your second step into this room,” Baran informed her.

“Then why are you still following me?”

Baran gave her a flat look. “Observation.”

His answer made her realize that every oshota tasked with shadowing the initiates had worn the emperor’s colors.

There wasn’t a single exception.

“A neutral party is required to ensure Houses don’t try to assassinate the young of their rival’s,” Baran continued.

“What’s to stop the emperor from doing the same to those who might one day grow to oppose him?” Kira asked.

“No one is forcing them into the *adva ka*,” Baran pointed out.

Kira scoffed. Some future that would be.

To never be considered a full adult. Kira couldn’t think of anything worse.

At the same time, she couldn’t fault Torvald’s decision to only allow his oshota to preside over the event.

The Houses’ participation would have been an invitation for bloodshed. Their feuds likely to rage through the *adva ka* even more than they already did.

Nor could she blame Torvald if he did take advantage of that small loophole to kill future enemies.

Maintaining the balance of the Tuann was a delicate thing.

Also, just because he could do something didn't mean he would.

Kira moved past several columns, finding a set of steps leading upward. Vines crept over the walls. A carpet of gently glowing purples and blues that seemed to almost pulse with a heartbeat.

Kira set a hand on the railing, following the spiral staircase upwards.

She forgot about Baran, lost in the murals that depicted several battles.

Kira paused in front of the first, her gaze lingering on the artist's use of light and dark. It drew the viewer's attention to the hundreds of Tuann kneeling in the rain. They were guarded by shadowy figures whose features were indistinct and veiled by the rain.

The use of light threw the expressions of the Tuann into stark reality. The blankness of their faces. The way their eyes screamed with a pain so deep and stark it felt like Kira's own.

The world faded as the sound of rain began to drown out the gentle babble of the brook.

As if from a distance, Kira heard Jin ask a question, but she was too immersed in the sensations of the painting to respond.

Water soaked into the knee of her pants as she knelt on the muddy ground. She bowed to the person in front of her, dread threatening to choke her.

Evil radiated from the outline of her master. A corruption she knew would destroy her soul.

There was no escape. Not even in death.

Kira became aware that she was crying. Tears trickled down her cheeks to be washed away by the falling rain.

“Kira!”

A sharp pain lanced the web between her thumb and forefinger jolting Kira out of the vision.

“If you don’t answer me right now, I will bite your finger off,” Jin snarled through their comms.

“Do it and I’ll destroy your spawn,” Kira retorted as liquid ran down her index finger to drip onto the stair where she’d paused.

Kira lifted her hand to find two deep pinpricks in the skin between her thumb and forefinger.

“I can’t believe this! You bit me!”

Kira’s anger made her almost forget that Baran was still watching her. It meant she didn’t yank up her sleeve to grab Jin’s spawn and stomp it into a million little pieces—but just barely.

Baran’s forehead wrinkled as his gaze landed on the injury.

Kira dropped her hand, tugging her sleeve over it before he could say anything.

“You know how I feel being ignored. If you didn’t want the consequences, you should have responded to any of the five times I called you.”

Kira paused. Five times?

“I didn’t hear you.”

“Hence the reason I gave you a snake bite.”

Unsettled and wanting to distance herself from the mural, Kira started climbing again.

“What happened?” Jin asked.

“You don’t know?”

“If I knew, do you think I would have employed such a drastic measure? I couldn’t get through to you.” Jin’s confession held fear.

“I felt like I was in the painting,” Kira murmured.

It was more than that. It was like she’d become the Tuann inside it. Every feeling and sensation as clear as if she were the one experiencing them.

She could have lived with that, but it was the unsettling similarity to her own past that made her want to flee and never returned.

“You really didn’t feel it?”

“No,” he said finally. “I felt nothing.”

Kira didn't know if she should be grateful for that fact or worried since the murals seemed designed to engender a reaction in those passing by.

At least as far as she could tell.

It was difficult to know for sure without other Tuann nearby to act as a control sample.

Despite her worry, Kira had no choice but to continue to climb. A story began to emerge as she did.

The first image she saw below was the one where the Tuann were at their lowest. Slaves to their ancient masters.

The second mural featured the fateful encounter that would lead to their salvation.

It was of a Tuann whose back faced the viewer as they confronted a massive *lu-ong*, its mouth open to reveal teeth the size of a person. The creature flared its crest, the colors a brilliant azure and magenta amongst the dark subject matter.

Vertigo tugged at Kira as the *lu-ong's* gaze shifted past the warrior to look straight into the heart of her.

This time Kira was smarter, jerking back before she could fall into the painting.

She told herself she was imagining the drip of water droplets on a stone floor. The whisper of scales that pursued her even as she started climbing again.

And she definitely didn't feel the hilt of an invisible blade digging into her palm.

Nope. Not at all.

“You alright?” Jin asked as she hurried up the stairs.

Kira hummed an answer, not wanting to speak any further with Baran standing right there and watching every move.

She had no doubt at this point that he was there to observe—exactly as he’d stated before.

He’d probably carry every word and gesture back to Graydon and the emperor. Without knowing what these paintings meant, Kira didn’t want to reveal too much.

Kira reached the end of the stairs, stepping into a long corridor with several doors opening off it.

Two of the rooms were occupied. The rest on the floor were still open.

Kira counted. There were exactly the same number of doors as there were initiates.

Solal’s words came back to her.

“Rest. Right.”

Kira hesitated for only a moment before crossing toward a door with the outline of the same tree she’d perched in what felt like days ago.

She couldn’t say what made her choose that door out of all the rest. Simply that it felt right.

Like it was waiting for her to claim it.

Kira went to push it open, surprised when color spread from the place she’d touched.



A bird took shape next to the tree. Its wings spread as reds and oranges mixed with an electric blue until it looked like fire trailed in its wake.

“It’s a phoenix,” Jin said in an awed voice.

Kira stopped and stared, admiring the addition of the bird. One of the most powerful entities in human mythology.

There was a reason Kira had chosen the phoenix as her call sign over all others.

It was because the phoenix was a creature revered for its ability to resurrect itself from the ashes of its downfall. Having fallen a time or two herself, Kira could admire the fortitude it took to pull itself back together.

The sound of footsteps behind Kira announced Baran’s departure.

Jin took the opportunity to slip out of Kira’s sleeve, dropping to the ground as she pushed open the door.

The focal point of the room beyond was the bed. Soft and dreamy, its design delicate and feminine. It seemed to sing Kira’s name, the comfortable sheets and pillows beckoning her.

How nice would it be to lay down and forget everything for a while?

The same glowing vines below were present along one wall here too. They climbed toward the ceiling, an intricate tapestry.

Kira whistled as she leaned against the door's frame and looked around, Jin having already disappeared.

Good thing too, given the man watching her from his seat on the opposite side of the room.

“This is certainly fancy. Not the sort of accommodations I'd expect in a challenge as strenuous as the *adva ka*.”

“Those who work hard should be rewarded,” Graydon told her with a faint smirk. “Don't you agree?”



Coli, *subtleness isn't in your skill set*, Graydon thought at her with a silent rumble of laughter. For all her attempts to go unnoticed, she shone as brightly as any star.

Personally, he found it quite amusing.

A woman set on obscurity unable to achieve it because of her excellence.

Yes, it was entertaining to watch, if nothing else.

Had Kira been anyone but the heir of Roake, he was sure Torvald would have already drafted an invitation requesting she pledge her service to him.

As it was, Roake had lucked out in its chosen heir.

“First your warning in the arena. Now your presence in a place I'm certain would meet with disapproval.” The tilt of Kira's head was almost coy as she stepped into the room,

letting the door close behind her. “What’s the matter, Graydon? Miss me?”

This time Graydon’s rumble was audible. “Always, *coli*.”

Every second she spent away from him. She was an ache in his bones. A gaping hole in his soul.

Warmth expanded in his chest as he caught the way she froze in place, her eyes blinking rapidly as if his answer had surprised her.

It took effort to remain seated and not respond to her delightful reaction.

Tension entered his body as he controlled his breathing, watching Kira with a careful gaze.

A predator afraid of spooking his prey before it was time.

*That’s it, coli. Come closer,* Graydon whispered in his mind as Kira advanced a few steps toward him.

“Enough flirting. Why are you here?” Kira said with the cute little frown that always made Graydon want to kiss it from her face.

He resisted the impulse, watching her out of the corner of his eye. “Truthfully, I expected you sooner. Anything I should know?”

Kira narrowed her eyes at him, the expression making him bite back a laugh.

“Excuse my delay. I was distracted by the whole oshota murdering initiates thing,” Kira said in a sarcastic voice that

couldn't quite hide how disturbing she found that fact.

Graydon couldn't help but regret the harsh return of reality. "Now you know why Harlow wasn't thrilled with your decision to step into the *adva ka*."

"He could have warned me."

He did. Kira simply hadn't listened.

"There is a vow of silence involved with the *adva ka*. Advice can be given but only up to a point."

Graydon was sure Harlow and Wren did everything in their power to prepare Kira for what she would face.

It was one of the reasons a position in Roake's training program was so highly coveted. Tuann who underwent the *uhva na* almost never failed this section of the trial.

"Tomorrow's trial is where most Tuann fall," Graydon informed her.

Kira's gaze sharpened, a blade trying to dig out all Graydon's secrets. "Is that why you're here? To warn me?"

Graydon allowed himself a small rumble of amusement. "You could say that."

Kira's eyes narrowed. "What is that supposed to mean?"

As ever, his *coli* was as suspicious and wary as a *turz*. A small mammal on one of Roake's planets that was cute and adorable but highly paranoid.

When agitated, it had been known to take on adversaries twice its size.

In that, the *turz* and Kira shared much in common.

“Each initiate is permitted a guide in hopes the counsel they provide can help them with what is coming.”

Kira stopped to aim an arch look at Graydon that spoke volumes. “And Harlow was okay with you taking that spot?”

He wasn’t.

In fact, he’d been quite vocal in his opposition. The only reason he backed down was because Kira had entered the emperor’s path.

As much as he loved his niece, Harlow was also an Overlord of the Tuann. Duty and the preservation of their way of life were difficult taskmasters he couldn’t ignore.

Kira shook her head after studying him for a moment. “I don’t think so.”

Clever woman.

But then, that was what he loved about her.

“The emperor may have intervened,” Graydon admitted.

“I bet Harlow was thrilled about that.”

Graydon let out a hum of agreement. That was putting things mildly.

Kira flopped onto the settee across from him, sprawling along its cushions with a boneless grace. “Are you going to tell me why you’re really here? Or should I just guess?”

## TWENTY-FIVE

“Careful, my love. I’ll think you aren’t happy to see me,”  
Graydon warned in a soft voice.

“I’d be happier if you’d cut the shit.”

Kira was tired. Graydon wasn’t here because of sentiment. This reunion could have waited until the *adva ka* was over. For him to be here, breaking tradition, there had to be a reason.

She wanted to know what that reason was.

Graydon regarded her with a contemplative look before he rose, crossing to her side with a few powerful steps.

Kira held carefully still, the sensation of being hunted by a dangerous predator hard to ignore.

He leaned down, planting a hand on either side of her body.

Kira’s breath froze in her lungs at the sight of his face so close to hers. Despite the serious nature of his presence, she couldn’t help the curl of awareness that made her all too conscious of everything about him.

The heat of his body next to hers. The scent wafting off his skin. The dark look in his eyes that made her want to close the little bit of distance between them.

His hand touched her cheek, leaving a trail of fire in its wake. "I'm hurt."

His gaze lingered on Kira's lips, leaving her feeling restless.

"And here I was about to impart useful information to you." His thumb brushed across her lips, the pupils of his eyes dilating at her harsh inhale.

Possessive desire showed on his face, and for a brief second Kira thought he'd forget his purpose here.

The moment lengthened.

"Get on with it then," Kira said through an act of will, wanting nothing more than to investigate what lay between them.

The need she knew they both felt.

She'd never wanted to give into something as much as she did right now. It had been too long since they'd let themselves seek pleasure in each other.

The wait was killing her.

Despite that, she resisted the urge to submit first. Perhaps it was childish, but she couldn't shake the hope Graydon would be the first to fall this time.

His gaze deepened in understanding as his lips twisted in a smile that she could only call evil.

“Stubborn,” he whispered.

Kira’s eyes narrowed grumpily. He was one to talk.

Or did he not remember the last time they did this dance?

Graydon rested one hand on the settee by Kira’s head.  
“We’re quite the pair. Each as headstrong as the other.”

Kira sniffed. “Speak for yourself. I’m perfectly reasonable.”

Amusement touched Graydon’s eyes. “Is that why you let Jin accompany you into the *adva ka*?”

Kira froze. “You knew.”

Of course, he did. Baran probably informed him the second he noticed something strange.

Kira’s reaction sparked a chuckle in Graydon. “It’s kind of hard not to when you talk to him right in front of my oshota.”

Kira glared up at the ceiling.

Damn it.

Graydon had always seen too much. It was one of the biggest reasons she hadn’t wanted to get involved with him.

That ship had long since sailed. A fact she was glad for.

Still, she couldn’t help but worry that someday she would push him too far. That her insistence on doing things her way would spell the end of them.

A frown formed as she took in his playful expression, not seeing any of the anger or rebuke she was expecting.

“You’re not angry.”



That was strange. He had every right to the emotion. In his place, she would have pitched a tantrum if someone had brought a dangerous and untrusted person to her super-secret rite of passage.

“It would be a waste of energy to get mad at something I know will never change,” Graydon said with a soft look. “I’ve chosen to see it as fortuitous that he included himself.”

“Why is that?” Kira asked cautiously.

Don’t get her wrong. She was grateful not to be dealing with an annoyed, grumpy Graydon, but it was confusing.

Graydon’s touch was affectionate as he smoothed a piece of her hair off her face. “He is Tuann; no matter his form. That makes the *adva ka* his birthright.”

“Even though he’s soul bound,” Kira pressed.

“Yes.”

Graydon’s gaze seemed to see straight through her as Kira searched his expression.

There was no deception in his eyes. Only a sincerity that stole her breath.

Kira made a small sound. A tiny mewl of need.

Before Graydon could move, Kira hit the bend of his elbow and tangled her legs with his. She heaved, toppling them both to the floor where she landed on top of him.

She crouched over his body, her hair sweeping forward to brush his face.

Graydon froze under her, his gaze taking in the abundance of emotion in her expression.

His body relaxed as his eyes clung to her face, seeing all the feelings she had trouble putting into words.

Kira had always been a person who felt action spoke louder than words, but right now she wished she had the skill to convey everything she was thinking and feeling.

Her gratitude at the way he saw beyond Jin's exterior to the truth of him. Her gratefulness for how he was always on her side. A steady presence at her back when she'd grown used to solitude.

She loved this man, she realized.

That vow he'd given her? She'd return it if she could.

He was worth every risk.

Graydon cupped her neck, drawing her down to him. "You leave me speechless, my soul."

The breath Kira drew sounded clogged with tears as she lowered those last inches to touch her lips against his.

Wet spilled down her cheeks, the taste of salt mixing with the flavor of Graydon.

Their fingers intertwined as Kira pressed their hands against the floor next to his head, needing control in this moment.

Graydon let her have it, the kiss they shared sweet and soft—until it wasn't.

Kira wasn't sure quite when it happened. When she forgot about being gentle and got lost in the sensation that was Graydon.

It wasn't until his fingers tangled in her hair, angling her head to deepen their kiss that she realized she'd given up control.

A fact she couldn't bring herself to care about as Graydon devoured her.

He lifted his hips, grinding his hard length against her center.

Kira broke away from the kiss, needing to catch her breath.

That didn't stop Graydon as his lips trailed along her jaw and throat up to the lobe of her ear, nipping as he left little zings of sensation that rocketed straight to her core.

Kira groaned, needing to be closer to him.

It was a craving she couldn't quite scratch. A fire she'd willingly burn herself out on.

The world tilted as Graydon scooped her off the floor and into his arms.

Some time while Kira had been preoccupied, he'd taken the opportunity to retract his armor, leaving his upper half bare.

He placed her on the bed, climbing onto it with her.

Kira watched him crawl toward her, anticipation making her breaths short.

As always, she couldn't help but appreciate the perfection of his body. The broad shoulders that tapered into a narrow waist. The ropes of muscle that defined his chest and the hard grooves of his abs.

Graydon lived a life of violence and it showed.

Scars dotted his skin, proof of how hard he'd struggled to survive.

Graydon held still, a faint quiver running through him as Kira's fingers danced over the raised ridges of his muscles before sliding down to investigate his length.

He hissed, the sound making Kira's lips curve in pleasure.

"Careful, *Coli*," Graydon warned.

Kira lifted up, her breath stirring the hair next to his ear. "What if I don't want to be careful anymore?"

A growl left Graydon as he pounced, spilling her onto her back as a giggle left her.

Graydon made quick work of her armor, divesting her of it in no time.

When she was finally bare, Graydon stopped. Hunger filled his face, his hands clenching in the sheets next to her.

"What's the matter?" Kira taunted. "Afraid?"

Graydon's mask slipped, the monster he kept carefully leashed staring out at her.

Kira swallowed the words she'd been about to speak, holding very still even as a part of her thrilled in anticipation.

Graydon swooped forward, yanking her flat as his body came over hers. Kira arched into his touch, twisting at caresses that didn't quite fill the need ballooning throughout.

Her breath shuddered as his fingers found her, teasing and light as Graydon spared no effort in driving Kira wild.

She cried out as Graydon's gaze never left Kira's face.

Sensation jolted through her as he finally speared one finger into her center.

"Yes," Kira crooned.

Just a little more and she'd be there.

Graydon's husky laugh made her stomach drop, a protest leaving her as he withdrew his touch.

"Not so fast, my soul."

Kira growled at him, wanting him back. Needing it like she did her next breath.

Her response made him grin as he lowered his face between her legs.

"I have plans for you tonight," Graydon told her.

Kira's response died as his lips closed around the sensitive bud at the apex of her sex.

A moan left her as sensations that were almost too good to be true flooded her.

Kira's body coiled as Graydon drove her higher, never quite letting her fall over the edge. He consumed her, holding her hips still as she tried to deepen the sensation a tiny bit more.

Kira snarled.

Just he wait. They'd see who would be laughing in the end.

Even as she thought that, she knew it was a losing battle. Already, little flashes of *ki* were condensing in the air around them.

Kira was lost as Graydon curled a finger inside her, her body exploding in climax.

Sparks danced across her vision as she went limp, her nerve endings still twitching from the sensations as Graydon covered her body. His large hands spanned her hips, lifting to fit her against him. He plunged forward, a low groan leaving him.

Kira tensed at the almost too full feeling that quickly changed to pleasure.

She hadn't recovered before he started to move, sending waves of sensation flooding through her core.

It was just this side of pain. Almost too much in too short of time. Her clitoris and the walls of her sex still sensitive from her climax.

Still, Kira made no attempt to stop Graydon as he thrust forward, needing him as much as he did her.

It was madness, but one she had no intention of stopping.

Her hands clenched into fists on his back as she started up the precipice again, each time he slid inside her sending her higher.

They climbed, their moans intermingling.

Finally, Kira couldn't take it anymore, falling off the edge as another climax took her.

Graydon thrust once and then again before following her. He pushed as deep as he could go, staying there as he came down from the climb.

Kira's arms closed around him as he settled on top of her, careful not to put too much of his weight on her.

There was a quiet intimacy to the moment as Kira trailed her fingers along Graydon's sides

Graydon turned onto his back, his arms pulling Kira more fully to him as he looked up at the ceiling.

She settled her head onto his chest, listening to his slowing heartbeat.

"If that was your reason for taking Wren's spot, I approve," Kira said.

His chest shook under her as it rumbled with a laugh. "As satisfying as this was, it was not my intent."

Kira rested her chin on him as she shot him a grin. "I'll take that as a compliment."

Who wouldn't want to be considered distracting by their lover?

Graydon arms squeezed her. "Come. There is something I want you to see."

Kira lifted her head, giving him an incredulous look. He wanted to go somewhere? Now?

Graydon aimed a closed lip smile at her that was echoed in the warmth of his gaze. When he looked at her like that, it was impossible to argue with him.

Conceding defeat, Kira reached for her armor, finding the pieces strewn on the floor next to the bed.

They were quiet as they dressed.

Once finished, Graydon held out his hand to her. Kira stared at it for a second before taking it.

Graydon led her out of the room and into the hall beyond, walking in the opposite direction of the way she'd come.

Graydon's hand was warm and reassuring in hers as they found a staircase and descended to the ground floor. They stepped out of the building onto a stone path cutting through an overgrown garden filled with many of the same plants she'd seen before.

Trees spread their arms, their branches covered in colored leaves no human world had ever seen.

The entire scene was almost surreal. A serene vista that was as soothing as it was fantastical.

Mini stone houses perched on intricate columns lined the path, a few sticking out of the vegetation.

Kira and Graydon's feet whispered across the ground as they continued forward, their path lit by glowing lanterns as they passed under arches covered with vines and white flowers. Pavilions dotted the area, offering the initiates a



soothing place to sit and enjoy the beauty of their surroundings.

Each one was different in design, interspersed throughout.

To Kira's surprise most of them contained people. Far more than the number of initiates should have allowed.

Graydon tipped his chin as they passed a group of Tuann comprised of several who were much older than the rest of the initiates.

They wore synth armor, marking them as oshota from one of the Houses.

"I thought the Houses weren't allowed in here," Kira said, staring.

"I can see why you misunderstood," Graydon said, looking back at her. "But no. The Houses can visit their initiates as long as they don't enter the structure where your rooms are located or the interior garden."

Kira frowned as she caught the gazes of several Tuann from the Houses looking in her direction.

"That seems like it could backfire."

"Why do you think the emperor's oshota have remained?" Graydon asked. "The Houses and their representatives are forbidden from interfering directly."

Which didn't mean they couldn't intervene at all, Kira realized, catching what Graydon hadn't said. They'd probably

use the same tactics as the first trials with the initiates themselves doing the dirty work of their Houses.

“What a disgusting practice.”

The intention of the Houses was once to provide a safe place for their members to flourish and grow. They weren't supposed to be the very thing that endangered them.

For such petty bullshit too.

Don't get her started on that crap about it being for the greater good either. Maybe that was how it began but at this point their actions were little more than schoolyard bullies throwing their greater power around to suppress those who might one day stand up to them.

Otherwise, they wouldn't be targeting Joule. Someone whose political power was practically nonexistent.

“The Tuann are not without their flaws,” Graydon admitted as he reached the end of the path and stepped to the side to allow Kira to see what lay beyond.

There was a sharp boundary that marked the end of the garden and plants. What lay beyond was a complicated maze of rock through which countless streams of glowing water cut. In several places, swirling pools had formed shooting shafts of lilac and azure light toward the rock ceiling above.

Beyond it all lay a cavernous maw that exuded an ominous atmosphere that contrasted with the sudden need Kira had to explore what lay within.

“The reckoning,” Graydon said as Kira took a step closer. “This is where you and the rest will go tomorrow.”

Kira’s gaze fixed on the shafts of light, a strange desire compelling her toward them.

“Come,” they seemed to say. “What you need is here.”

Graydon’s hand touched hers, breaking the spell she’d fallen under.

“The reckoning will promise you everything you desire,” he told her when she looked up at him.

“But it would be a lie.”

“It won’t feel like one.” Graydon’s gaze turned inward, almost wistful as he stared unseeing at the pools. “It will seem so real.”

Kira was quiet, sensing Graydon was telling her this for a reason.

After a long second, Graydon came back to himself, his hand squeezing hers as if to assure himself she was still here. He gave her a small smile before tilting his chin at the closest shaft of light. “Look closely. What do you see?”

Kira squinted, surprise widening her eyes seconds later. “There are people in the pools.”

They weren’t simply standing in the water but rather submerged within.

“Those who’ve abandoned themselves to the dreaming,” Graydon said. “They will spend their lives lost in the fantasy

the *Mea 'Ave* has created to fulfill their desires.”

Kira couldn't help but be a little repulsed at the thought of being trapped in a constant illusion. Neither alive nor dead. Simply existing in a world you refused to wake up from.

“This is what happens to those unable to let go,” Graydon continued.

Ah. Kira thought she understood more of why he'd interrupted their evening for this visit.

“You're warning me.”

It made sense. Kira's past was riddled with pain and things she would give anything to put right.

She started to tell him his concern wasn't necessary when his expression caught her attention. His face showed surprise as he stared at her with a look that made her second guess herself.

“It's not?” Kira asked uncertainly.

Graydon's features softened as he reached out to catch one of her hands. He lifted it to his lips, placing a kiss as light as the brush of a butterfly's wing against her palm. “My apologies if I gave you that impression. I can say I've never once questioned your mental strength. If there is one thing I don't have to fear, it is you wandering lost in your dreams.”

Despite the confident way he said that Kira couldn't shake her doubt. He'd said one thing. That meant there were other things he worried about in relation to her and the *adva ka*.

Seeing her uncertainty, Graydon gave her a crooked smile. “Since I’ve taken the role of guide, I felt I should act like one.”

Graydon didn’t let her put distance between them, using his grip on her hand to draw her in front of him. He turned Kira to face the pools before embracing her from behind.

Kira let him, finding comfort in the warmth of his arms around her. The feel of his body behind hers.

“Beyond that point lays something that may be in need of your help,” Graydon said into her ear.

Desire tried to rise at the sensation of his breath whispering across her skin. A passion she’d thought they already sated.

“My hope is that you will answer its call if the need arises.”

Kira stilled.

She leaned forward, moving her head so she could glance up at him. “This is why you came.”

He dipped his chin in acknowledgement.

“What is it?” Kira asked, curiosity getting the better of her.

“I can’t tell you that.” His arms tightened at her glare. “It is one of the most closely guarded secrets of our race. If you are called, you will know then.”

Kira didn’t know if she liked that answer.

“It has something to do with the *Mea’Ave*,” she said, watching his expression for clues.

To her disappointment, there were none.

Very well then. He could keep his secrets.

“If there is something I need to do, I will do it,” Kira promised him.

If it was this important to him, there was nothing she could do but listen and wait.

Graydon’s arms squeezed her in silent gratitude as they went back to watching the eerily beautiful sight.

They hadn’t been standing there long when the scrape of a shoe on the path behind them announced the fact they were no longer alone.

“Speak,” Graydon ordered.

“There is an issue,” Amila said.

Kira peeked around Graydon’s shoulder to nod a greeting at the oshota.

Amila sent her a gentle smile before focusing on Graydon. “There has been a break in at the prison.”

Tension invaded Graydon’s body.

“A prisoner escaped,” Amila continued, answering the question they could all feel hovering in the air.

“Don’t tell me,” Kira started.

“It was the general Roake captured during the *uhva na*,” Amila confirmed.

Damn it. Kira had been afraid of that.

Graydon's arms fell from Kira, the peaceful moment ruined at the unexpected intrusion of reality.

"I will go with you," Kira told Graydon.

Aeron and everything to do with him was of concern to Kira. Particularly now that his allies had managed to break him out of a prison so secret that only a very few knew the location of it. A prison that until today had likely never seen an escape.

Graydon denied her with a shake of his head. "You cannot. Should you leave the *adva ka*, you will be considered to have withdrawn."

It was on the tip of Kira's tongue to tell him she didn't care. Her main goal had been accomplished anyway.

The biggest thing stopping her was the certainty that Aeron's escape wouldn't be the end of things.

It could very well be that this was a feint designed to draw Kira's attention away from the real plan.

The Tsavitee had employed such tactics many times before.

As Kira wavered, Graydon leaned forward to press a soft kiss on her forehead. "I need you here."

It was a reminder of the conversation they'd just had regarding the mysterious something that might require her help.

Kira's shoulders slumped in defeat. How could she argue when Graydon so rarely asked for anything?

She couldn't.

Seeing her answer, Graydon withdrew, stepping away from Kira. "Let's go."

He swept away, Amila sending Kira a respectful nod before following Graydon.

It left Kira standing alone on the edge of the maze of pools. A solitary silhouette as she turned back to the view, hoping she hadn't made the wrong choice in staying behind.



Aeron's former cell was little more than a smoking hole by the time Graydon reached the prison. The person in question having long since disappeared.

Despite what he knew Kira assumed, the prison wasn't located on a far-flung outpost halfway across the galaxy. Rather it was based much closer than that.

On Ta Sa'Riel, in fact.

Not everything he'd told her had been the entire truth. He could have made an exception for her to leave the inner sanctum of the *adva ka*. Such allowances, though rare, had been made in the past.

He'd decided against it for a couple of reasons.

Kira wasn't the most logical when it came to a certain person. Emotion clogged her normally good judgment.



Before he brought her into this, Graydon wanted confirmation.

It was selfish of him, but he couldn't help his desire to protect her. Kira would resent his interference when she learned of it, but he could live with that.

Seeing the pain and sadness that came with disappointment was far worse of a price to pay.

“What did the witnesses have to say?” Graydon asked, not taking his eyes off the ruin of the cell.

Five guards had been injured in the escape. Five of their most elite warriors. Men and women Graydon trusted to do their duty at all costs. Two of whom now clung to life while their healers did their best.

“There was a woman and two others,” Amila answered from behind Graydon.

“Is it her?”

Amila's reluctance to answer was palpable. “She appears to fit the description I was given.”

Graydon exhaled a long sigh. “So, it's Elise.”

This was a disaster.

If any of the guards died, it would be a bigger one.

Whoever did this would answer for their crimes. Whether that was Elise or someone else.

This was an attack on the emperor's authority. There would be consequences.

It was a big part of why Graydon had asked Kira to remain behind. He couldn't be sure she'd be able to accept what needed to be done.

He'd need to break the news to her carefully if it really was Elise responsible.

"How did they find this place?" Solal asked. "No one but the emperor's people know where it is."

Graydon felt the inquisitor's presence before the man spoke.

"This is why I advised the emperor's Justice not to allow you and Roake's heir to interrogate the prisoner." Jarek swept a cold gaze over the wreckage of the cell, his lips twisting at the sight of the damage. "She should never have been given access to this site."

Graydon faced him. "Jarek. You made good time. I wasn't expecting to see such a high-ranking representative of the emperor's Justice in a place like this."

Jarek's look of embarrassment almost made the irritation of his presence worth it.

As an inquisitor, Jarek would have been within his rights to send a subordinate. The fact he'd come in person showed his fall in status.

Graydon quirked his lips in an expression Kira would have called insufferably arrogant. "As to your statement, I can say with confidence that Kira never stepped foot into this prison and has no knowledge of its location. All contact was

conducted via a melding. She never saw the outside nor did she know it was on Ta Sa'Riel. I made sure of that myself.”

For exactly the reason he was standing here now.

He wanted no doubt cast on the question of her innocence if Aeron ever escaped.

His foresight was one of the reasons he'd managed to survive so long as the emperor's Face. A position that made him a target.

“Her toy has proven quite resourceful in the past,” Jarek pointed out. “It is possible he found a way to follow your signal.”

Graydon's eyes narrowed the faintest bit as he wiped away any trace of annoyance. “The JIN is composed of human technology. Do you actually think they are capable of such a feat?”

“Humans have surprised us in the past. Recently at that. It is possible they are working with an outside party.”

Jarek's perceptiveness and creative thinking would be impressive if not for how rigid he was in his beliefs.

Jin was exactly what he'd claimed. A soul bound.

Moreover, he really was working with a third party. The mysterious figure Kira had carefully not introduced Graydon to.

There was also the fact that Graydon suspected Kira and Jin had modified the original drone his soul had been attached to.

None of which Graydon could allow Jarek to discover. Not if he wanted to protect Kira and her soul bound.

“Inquisitor,” Graydon said sharply. Once he had Jarek’s full attention, Graydon gave him an insincere smile. “I believe the emperor’s Justice already had this discussion with you. I will personally report your actions if you continue to pursue this topic.”

The way the skin around Jarek’s eyes tightened said the other man heard and understood Graydon’s warning.

Good.

Graydon hoped he would listen.

It would be a pity if he had to kill the other man because he threatened that which Graydon held dear.

## TWENTY-SIX

“Kira!”

Jin’s shouting interrupted Kira’s quiet contemplation, her thoughts on Aeron’s escape and what that could mean for her plans.

Aeron now knew of Odin. There was no taking that back.

There was a general running around with knowledge that Kira was working with a Sye who was doing everything in their power to find and locate the Tsavitee home worlds.

As a clusterfuck, this was a doozy.

“Kira!”

Hearing her name being shouted, Kira turned to find Jin’s spawn slithering down the stone path she and Graydon had taken.

Finn followed quickly in his wake.

His gaze shot over Kira’s shoulder, his expression darkening at finding no one standing beside her. “Where is the emperor’s Face?”

Kira shrugged. “He had something to take care of.”

Finn’s jaw flexed. “And your observer? Did he have something to take care of too?”

Kira stayed quiet, knowing anything she said would most likely make the situation worse.

“Chastise her for being without protection later. We don’t have time for this now.” Jin’s *lu-ong* came to a stop in front of Kira’s boots. “We have a situation.”

Finn aimed an unhappy look at the spawn. “You are causing unnecessary drama. This doesn’t require her interference.”

“You keep saying that,” Jin snarled. “I disagree and as the one with the most history with Kira it’s my decision.”

If anything was guaranteed to spark Kira’s curiosity, it would be Finn’s hesitation.

“Don’t keep me in suspense,” Kira ordered.

“You know that plan you had me come up with?”

Kira’s body tightened.

“I think it’s time we implement it.”

Those fools.

“Joule.”

The *lu-ong* nodded. “Yeah. Joule.”

Wrath kindled in Kira’s gut, burning slow and hot. It wasn’t the type of anger that bubbled up like a volcano, splashing everyone in the vicinity.

No, this emotion simmered. A low-banked fire that could become an inferno the moment she needed it to.

“House Votair is determined to destroy themselves.” Kira’s words held a calm Raider would have described as terrifying if he’d been standing there.

He and Jace had always said Kira was at her scariest when she stuffed her emotions down deep. That was always their first clue that things were going to get a little crazy.

Kira knelt, holding out her hand to the *lu-ong*. It slid forward, the stone of its body warm to the touch. Almost like living flesh.

Jin’s spawn wrapped around Kira’s wrist as she rose.

“A few of my darlings are already moving into position,” the *lu-ong* informed Kira.

“How long?”

“Fifteen minutes.”

It would have to do.

“Where are they?” Kira asked Finn.

“You are making a mistake. He will not welcome your interference.”

“Where?” she barked, not having time for this.

His stubbornness matched her own.

“I won’t ask again, Finn,” she warned him. “You’re the one who said you wanted to follow me. This is what that means.”

There were times she'd go off halfcocked and do things he didn't agree with. He could either accept that and stand beside her or get out of the way.

His gaze lowered in defeat. "The arena."

Kira turned on her heel. "Good decision."

Now, it was time to teach House Votair a lesson they wouldn't soon forget.



Kira was grateful for Finn's presence as he led them to a path that was much quicker and more direct than the tunnel she'd used to arrive at the sanctum, as Graydon had called it. Cheers assaulted Kira's ears as she appeared at the top of the arena's stairs, looking down at the floor where two figures were locked in combat.

"Well, well, there's quite the audience," Kira said softly.

Almost every initiate who had elected to continue in their *adva ka* was present along with any friends and family members who'd come to offer their support and guidance.

It was quite the crowd.

All to watch Joule be taught his place.

His wasn't the only duel being fought, but it was the one that drew the most attention. Initiates ringing him and his opponent.



Kira started down the steps to where Raider leaned against the railing, Blue beside him.

Raider straightened at Kira's approach. "Don't do anything crazy."

How well he knew her.

Kira looked away from him to Elena and Ziva, setting a hand on each of their heads and ruffling their hair.

"Don't look like that," she told them.

Elena was as angry as Kira had ever seen her. Furious to the point Kira thought about warning Raider that Kira wasn't the one he needed to worry about.

One more challenge and Kira was betting Elena would do something he'd classify as unwise.

Ziva was more subdued. Her eyes and nose red as she fought not to cry.

Kira patted them both once more. "It's going to be fine. You'll see."

She'd make it that way.

Raider shook his head and sighed. "Whatever you're going to do, you should hurry up. I'm not sure how much longer he'll last. He's on his third opponent already."

"How many duels have you fought?" Kira asked, noting the tiredness on Raider's face along with the signs he'd been in a scuffle.

"A few. They're more focused on the kid."

Of course, they were. They'd been after Joule from the beginning.

Raider probably got swept up in events when he tried to redirect the focus from Joule to himself.

It had worked but only temporarily.

"What's he doing?" Kira asked, tipping her chin at Devon where he stood between Joule and his opponent saying something.

"Acting as referee." Raider leaned one arm against the railing. "You should be grateful. He's ensuring Joule gets time to rest between each challenge. It's letting the boy hang on but barely."

Jin let out a harrumph. "I guess he's not totally useless after all."

Kira's lips twisted as she turned to look up at the stands, locating her quarry easily. "Don't sound so approving while you say that."

There Terrel was, looking just as smug and arrogant as the last time she'd seen him.

"Let's introduce ourselves, shall we?" Kira started up the steps without waiting for an agreement.

She'd been looking forward to this. A chance to work off some of her aggression and exact a little vengeance in the interim.

"Just remember not to go overboard, Nixxy," Raider called.

Sure. Sure. She'd do her best. No promises though.

Terrel's House had already used up the last of her good will.

"You cannot kill him," Finn warned.

"I won't."

Not when there were so many other fun things Kira and Jin could do to him instead.

Selene's blank expression caught Kira's attention; the other woman's tension evident in the ramrod straightness of her back.

Kira sent her a smile that made Selene blanch.

Huh. Maybe her reassurance skills needed work.

Alexander's arms were crossed as he stared at the duel.

"You can't do anything to him either," Finn nagged.

"Is that my oshota or House Roake speaking?"

"It's your friend telling you that any action you take against House Votair will not lead to the outcome you wish," Finn snapped.

"Friend," Kira tested the word.

She liked the sound of that.

"Good. Friends then," Kira agreed before continuing up the steps. "Don't worry. I won't raise a hand to him."

Finn stopped arguing, probably recognizing the futility of the endeavor.

"Are you in position?" Kira asked Jin.

“Is a baby’s bottom smooth?”

Kira’s steps paused. “And how would you know that?”

“I’m a genius, Phoenix. I know things.”

Sure, he did. That’s why he constantly got into trouble.

“At least send the girl back. This isn’t the sort of thing someone her age should witness,” Finn tried one last time.

Kira paused to look at their shadow, finding Ziva with a determined expression on her face that Kira knew meant the girl wouldn’t allow herself to be sent back. She clung to Kira’s side with all the tenacity of a tick. Only instead of sucking Kira’s blood, Ziva would absorb every action, word and deed.

An impressionable disciple who might later employ what she saw here today in her own adventures.

Finn was right. Kira should send her back. She really should.

But she wasn’t going to.

Joule was Ziva’s last remaining family. Watching him battle alone against their enemies would have been an unimaginable hell.

At least this way, Ziva would feel like she was doing something.

Sometimes that was enough.

“Life doesn’t always wait for us to grow up,” Kira finally said to Finn.

It hadn’t for Kira and Jin. Ziva and Joule shared that fate.

All she could do was give them the tools to carve their own path and provide guidance when possible.

Finn made an annoyed sound. “Sometimes I wish I’d told Graydon no when he first asked me to take you as my sword.”

He really should have.

Ziva’s small face wrinkled in confusion as she looked between them as if trying to understand a mystery. “I thought shields were supposed to be unquestioningly loyal.”

Kira and Finn stopped to look at each other.

“Am I wrong?” Ziva asked when neither of them said anything.

“Not entirely,” Finn started at the same time Kira answered, “Yes.”

“You are teaching her bad things,” Finn growled.

Kira chose to ignore him as she looked at Ziva. “A good oshota does both—supports and challenges their swords when they’re being idiots.”

Finn sent her a look. “Does that mean you acknowledge the fact you’re being unreasonable?”

Kira flashed him a sweet smile. “I never said otherwise.”

She knew perfectly well that what she was about to do was reckless. It was just that she didn’t care.

“You must be able to voice your opinion to your sword—especially when that sword is about to be dumb,” Kira

instructed Ziva. “Just don’t be surprised if your sword still does the thing anyway.”

“There it is,” Jin crooned. “I knew there was a catch.”

Kira pretended not to see Finn’s scowl as she turned back to the stairs only to find her way blocked by an oshota wearing House Votair’s colors. A sickly yellow that was probably meant to emulate the emperor’s gold and failed miserably.

“The Overlord of our House has not invited your presence,” he informed her. “Please return to the arena below.”

Kira looked beyond him to Baran and a second of the emperor’s oshota. “Am I correct in assuming that none of their House can offer me violence?”

The question threw the two men off balance, their hesitation marked as Finn let out a weary sigh.

“You are,” Baran finally answered.

“Ah. Good.”

That simplified things.

Kira continued forward, trusting Votair’s oshota would move rather than allow her to bump into him. If that didn’t work, Kira was sure either Finn or Baran would move him for her.

Either way, he wouldn’t be able to stop her and judging from the sick look on his face, he knew that.

Bet he hadn’t ever seen an initiate use the rules in this fashion.

Jin's giggles sounded through their comms as the oshota gave way, allowing Kira to step onto the level where the Overlord and his lackeys had made themselves comfortable.

Kira found herself the target of several hostile stares as she made her way to the Overlord's side. There were none brave enough to obstruct her. Not with Baran and his fellow oshota shadowing her.

"This is not your place, Roake," Terrel finally spoke. "Leave."

There it was. A command.

He was stupider than Kira gave him credit for. Why he thought she'd listen to his orders when she hadn't anybody else's was beyond her.

"Nice view." Kira whistled. "Much better than down below. Also, call me Kira. Roake sounds so impersonal."

Kira flopped into the seat next to him, Finn moving to take a position at her back.

Ziva followed, squinting up at the oshota before adopting the same vigilant posture. Right down to the stoic mask he wore.

She was adorable. A tiny, fierce mini-Finn.

The Overlord aimed a pointed glance at the battle taking place on the arena floor. "I am surprised you have energy to waste up here."

Kira pointed at where Joule was crouched behind his shield as his opponent hammered against it. Strain showed in Joule's expression as his shield wobbled with each blow.

It looked like his opponent had an air affinity, striker class. The worst match up for Joule.

It wouldn't be much longer until Joule's shield collapsed.

"You mean because of that?" Kira asked with feigned surprise.

She pursed her lips as she stretched her legs out in front of her, crossing them at the ankle and relaxing into her seat.

It was a surprisingly comfortable fit, cradling her backside perfectly.

"Naw." Kira poked at the cushion with a preoccupied expression before looking up. "He's got this handled."

A cry came from below as Joule's shield collapsed. He burst forward, delivering a crippling blow before his opponent could recover from his surprise.

Another initiate stepped forward. "I challenge you."

Terrel made a tsking sound. "Such a pity. It looks like your friend has angered a House he should not have."

Kira didn't let any emotion show as Terrel pretended at a sympathy that would have been more convincing if the boy who'd just challenged Joule wasn't from Votair.

From underneath her sleeve, the *lu-ong* moved furtively. The blush color of its scales appearing as it stuck its head out



from under her clothes.

Kira tensed, trying not to call notice to him as the *lu-ong* convulsed once and then again.

What the hell was Jin doing? Was he throwing up?

Impossible.

Though it certainly looked that way as the *lu-ong* continued to heave.

Kira fought to keep the disgust off her face as the *lu-ong* spat a thumbnail sized disk into her hand.

“I prepared a visual aid.” Jin sounded proud in their comms.

Kira unobtrusively wiped her palm against her pants, swearing in her mind. She couldn’t believe he made the *lu-ong* throw that thing up—and why was the disk covered in slime?

Terrel was still talking. Just chattering away not realizing Kira had stopped paying attention several minutes ago.

Finn did, though. His glare was hot enough to burn a hole into the side of her face.

Ziva looked confused.

“This has grown boring,” Kira declared, interrupting Terrel’s monologue.

Affront pulled his eyebrows down into a frown. “I beg your pardon.”

“He should,” Jin grumbled. “He’s annoying.”

“Do you know what I admire most about humans?” Kira asked. “They’re amazingly adaptive.”

Kira lifted the disk, hitting a button at the center and expanding the screen until it was a several inches wide.

“They have to be. They don’t have *ki* to make their lives easier. As a result, their creativity far outstrips that of the Tuann.”

Kira finished fussing with the disk as an image formed.

“For instance, this tiny device can pick up any feed that is streaming within a certain radius.”

A man standing behind Terrel started. “That’s the *Dauntless*.”

Kira pretended to be surprised. “That’s strange. I wonder why an image of your ship is being broadcasted for anyone to intercept.”

The man’s face closed down, but his gaze didn’t move as the image started to play.

Kira let out a low whistle as the camera moved over the ship, showing the fancy exterior of one of the newest ships in House Votair’s fleet.

The angle widened until the insignia of the House appeared.

“What is the meaning of this?” Terrel demanded.

“I wonder,” Kira chirped in a sugary sweet voice.

“Stop this,” the man behind Terrel urged. “If you do anything to that ship, House Votair will seek recompense from

Roake. You will start a war. Are you prepared for that?”

“I’m not afraid of war.” Kira relaxed into her chair. “Besides, for your Overlord to declare war on mine, he will need evidence. And as you can see, I am seated right next to you. I suspect you won’t find a scrap of evidence linking me to this. Though you’re welcomed to try.”

With a whoosh the interior of their flagship caught fire. Within seconds, it had turned the ship into a funeral pyre, flames licking up the side.

A pained sound escaped Terrel.

Lovely.

As always, Jin had given her a masterpiece. She knew without having to ask the accelerant would only affect the flagship. Any other ships in the vicinity would escape unscathed.

“Oof,” Kira pretended to wince. “That’s got to hurt. How much did your House spend on that ship? I hope it wasn’t much.”

Jin snickered. “Oh, it was. Most interestingly, it was bought with a recent influx of cash I’m having trouble tracing. What do you want to bet it comes from House Danai?”

Kira couldn’t have picked a better target if she’d tried.

Terrel’s body was shaking as fury poured off him. “You will pay for this.”

The levity dropped from Kira's face, all the rage she'd been suppressing replacing it. "Like I said earlier, prove it."

"You're gloating," he snarled.

"That doesn't mean I'm guilty. Isn't that right?" Kira tossed a look at Baran. "I'm simply a concerned citizen going out of her way to share intel with you."

Quiet descended as those nearby stared at Kira with something approaching shock. She was sure none of those present had considered that angle.

She had, though. As did Jin. It was why they'd chosen this avenue of attack.

Jin hadn't been idle while Kira was training. He'd spent the time looking into everything surrounding blood feuds and vendettas. One of the things he'd noticed was that clear evidence of fault was needed to spark a blood feud that involved the entire House. Let alone draw punishment from the emperor's Justice.

That was a lot of wiggle room for someone as creative as Jin.

"My hands are clean," Kira spat.

And they'd never prove otherwise.

Terrel and his companions were speechless as Baran stirred. "Her assessment is correct."

On screen, the image reformed. A second ship took shape.

Terrel made a pained sound in the back of his throat that was music to Kira's ears.

That's it. That's the reaction she was hoping for.

She didn't know what it said about her that she was enjoying his pain, but she reveled in it. It was satisfying on a whole other level.

"You shouldn't have touched the kid," she told him.

Now, he had to pay. That's just how it was.

"What do you want?"

Kira tapped a finger on the arm of her chair as she considered the fight taking place below.

Joule was still holding his own. His expression focused and intent as he fended off his opponent's blows.

"So many things," Kira said.

If it were up to her, the man beside her would lose a ship for every bruise or scrape Joule received.

Sadly, it would be unwise to take this too far.

Himoto taught her that a cornered beast was unpredictable. She needed to leave Terrel with an avenue of retreat or risk retaliation outside her expectations.

"But in this case, I'm sure you can guess," Kira said with a sidelong glance.

His chin lifted. "If I refuse?"

On screen, the second ship caught fire.

Kira smiled. "I guess you'll lose the rest of your fleet."

It might take Jin a while, but eventually, one by one, every single ship belonging to his House would go to a fiery grave.

Below, Joule knocked his opponent unconscious.

An initiate stepped forth, his mouth opening.

Terrel exploded to his feet with a roar. "Enough!"

Kira uncrossed her legs and rose. "I thought you might see things my way."

She sauntered toward the stairs.

"This isn't over," Terrel snarled.

"I think it is." Kira paused at the top of the stairs to shoot a teasing smile his way. "If I'm wrong, that could be fun too."

Finn and Ziva brought up the rear as Kira took her leave, departing from the box and descending toward the arena floor.

"This is disappointing. I was hoping he'd hold out for at least one more ship," Jin whined. "I had a whole thing planned. It was going to be beautiful."

"I would have liked to have seen that," Kira said, reaching the floor of the arena.

She stepped onto the sands, advancing toward where Devon was congratulating an exhausted Joule. Raider and Elena had a head start on Kira and were already halfway across the sands.

Ziva stopped a few feet onto the arena floor. "I recognize that man."

Kira looked back to find a serious look on the girl's face. Ziva's forehead was wrinkled in a frown as she stared down at the sands.

"My father, the Overlord of our House, and his First met with him several times right before." Ziva stopped speaking, her expression threatening to crumple in a way that made any need for clarification unnecessary.

Before her House's fall. Before her parents' deaths and the loss of her world.

Ziva lifted her gaze to meet Kira's. "My parents were always very angry after meeting him."

Kira looked at Finn to find the oshota with a dark expression on his face. "Could Terrel and Votair have had anything to do with House Maxiim's fall?"

As far as she knew, they'd been nearly wiped out by pirates. An admittedly unusual happenstance given the strength of the House but still within the realm of possibility.

Finn hesitated, his desire to deny her suggestion warring with the things he'd learned since being in Kira's orbit. Things like how the Tuann weren't immune to betrayal from within.

The faintly ill look on his face told Kira all she needed to know.

"I picked up a few interesting tidbits of information on Terrel and Votair while I was snooping," Jin said. "From what I've gathered, Terrel is ambitious. Very ambitious. Word is he's been trying to raise his House's standing from that of a

middle tier House to reach the power and status of one of the five Majors.”

“That’s not easy to achieve,” Kira guessed.

Finn shook his head. “No, it’s not. While Votair is considered a large House, I wouldn’t go so far to say it is close to becoming a major power.”

“How so?” Kira asked, not quite understanding how a House became a major one.

Finn paused to consider how best to explain. “If we were to judge based on the merit of numbers or size of territory, Votair would be considered more powerful than Roake.”

Kira blinked as she took that in. Was Roake that small? Or was Votair that big?

“Papa said to be considered a major House you had to be more than just strong,” Ziva chimed in. “You had to offer something that no other House had.”

Finn nodded. “It comes down to influence. Luatha is known far and wide as having the best artisans. Roake, the strongest warriors. Each of the Houses has something that sets it apart. Whether that is in the affinities of their bloodlines or the niche they’ve carved out for themselves. In that respect, House Maxiim was far closer to stepping into the ranks of a major House than Votair.”

Ziva’s nod was sad. “We were known for our ships.”

“Both the design and their ability to fuse the House’s shielding ability into its defenses were highly coveted among



the rest of the Tuann,” Finn agreed.

That made their fall to space pirates more suspicious than it already was.

Kira had the fortune of meeting what remained of the House’s oshota when she’d saved Joule and Ziva. Though their warriors weren’t as highly trained as Roake’s, they were still skilled. A House filled with them shouldn’t have fallen so easily.

Unless things weren’t as simple as they appeared.

Movement behind Ziva attracted Kira’s attention as Selene and Alexander crossed the sands toward them.

Kira frowned. There was something her senses were trying to tell her that she wasn’t picking up on. At least not enough to understand this unsettling feeling that was growing by the second.

A looming disaster she couldn’t quite put her finger on.

Did it have something to do with what Ziva and Finn shared?

Terrel and House Votair were at the center of things. That much she could be sure of.

While Kira was thinking, she caught sight of Terrel making his way down the same stairs Kira had a short time before. Instead of descending all the way to the arena floor, he stopped at the landing where the wall that separated the floor from the stands lay.

Rather than the defeat and anger she expected to see, Terrel seemed almost gloating. Victorious as he lifted his hand and set something on the wall.

At first Kira didn't understand. Not until a low hum went through the arena as a force field rose from the wall all the way to the ceiling, cutting off those below from those standing above.

Baran and a few other oshota frowned and stepped forward, banging at the wall.

All the while Terrel smiled, his gaze moving over Kira's shoulder to something behind her. She spun, scanning the arena floor.

The initiates hadn't realized anything was wrong yet. Some cheered. Others were dissatisfied at Joule's win.

Kira dismissed them, focusing on the single point of utter calm. Out of place in a sea of movement as the initiates milled around, chatting.

Renata's features were perfectly blank. Eerily so. At least until a smile formed. Unnatural as the muscles in the rest of her face refused to move.

Her eyes were empty. A void where Renata's personality should have been.

And it was hungry.

The thought triggered something in Kira, calling half remembered knowledge to the forefront.

Of a creature her fellow soldiers had once treated as myth. Stories of a bogeyman whose existence was proven only by the utter lack of survivors every time it was thought to have stepped onto the battlefield.

A class of Tsavitee Kira had thought was a hoax right up until the moment it almost killed her.

Face changer.

Renata's smile continued to spread. Wider and wider until it looked like her face would rip in two.

And then it did.

Blood poured down her body as something climbed out of her skin. Those nearby froze in horror.

They should have run.

Kira launched forward, pounding across the sands as the creature stood upright.

Tall and spindly, it looked like it had been skinned as it flicked away a ribbon of flesh and threw its head back on a scream.

In a sense, it had.

Face changers were unnatural, requiring a seed to be inserted into a living victim. Eventually, that seed took root, growing the face changer within a host.

The most terrifying thing about them was the way they evolved through each life they claimed.

It was also why they were so tricky to fight. No two face changers evolved along the same path. Each one reacted to the stimuli in their environment to become something totally unique.

This one was at stage one of its evolutionary path.

To avoid a blood bath, Kira needed to ensure it didn't evolve any further.

Closer to Joule and the rest, Raider cursed, coming to the same conclusion a second after Kira.

“Get away from it!” he screamed at Joule, Devon, and the rest who were only a few feet from it.

Joule and Devon backed away quickly.

The rest of the initiates were slow to react as the creature's arm lengthened, becoming a thin spear. It stabbed them in the back as they tried to flee.

“Damn it,” Kira ground out.

Every death fed it, enabling it to get one step closer to the next evolution.

“Stay here,” Raider shouted at Elena before dashing toward Joule and Devon.

Kira fought to make up the distance, Finn at her back.

“Don't you dare,” Kira shouted when it looked like Elena wasn't going to heed her father's advice. She reached her niece in the next second. “Protect Ziva.”

With them cut off from the oshota, they were going to have to rely on themselves. As the youngest, Ziva would be the most vulnerable. The face changer would target her.

Elena gave Kira a sharp nod, reversing course and racing toward the girl who was already trying to follow Kira into danger.

By now, the arena floor had descended into chaos. The initiates scattering in several directions.

Raider was almost to Devon and Joule as the pair raced in his direction. Behind them, the face changer finished with its victim.

Slowly. So slowly that it was terrifying, its face turned in Devon and Joule's direction. The same smile it had worn when it was covered in its Renata-skin formed. This time with needle-sharp teeth.

For all that it had two slits where its eye sockets should have been, the face changer looked blind. There was no nose. Its face flat except for the protruding curve of its forehead and bald head.

“Shield!” Kira screamed as it slammed its hands and feet against the ground, loping after Devon and Joule almost too fast for the eye to track.

Devon broke away, lifting his blade to meet the face changer head on.

“No!” Kira shouted as Devon struck.

His blade sliced through the air, sinking into the creature's shoulder. There it lodged.

The creature's face split in a rictus grin.

Devon let go of the sword, one hand sketching a symbol before he whistled. The sound piercing.

Two invisible blades of wind cleaved the air in front of him. Blood spattered as the creature's arms fell from its body.

That wouldn't be enough. Not by a long shot

"Kira, hold out as long as possible," Jin said through the *lu-ong*. "I'm coming."

Kira didn't get the chance to answer as a spear made of bone shot from the face changer's chest. It pierced Devon's upper torso.

He staggered, held upright by the spear.

Kira cursed the distance that still lay between her and Devon as he reached up to grab the spear with one hand.

She was too far.

Raider reached them in the next second, a glowing blade in his hand. He sliced the spear, breaking it and grabbing Devon's shoulder in the other hand to shove him backward.

Joule was quick with a shield. It bubbled around them as Devon collapsed. His blood spread in a pool across the sand as Raider stood over him, blade in hand. Joule was beside them, his face arranged in lines of concentration.

It bought Kira the time she needed to reach between them. She shoved a hand forward, mustering every bit of *ki* she could.

It deflected off the energy field that suddenly surrounded the face changer, most of the force rebounding.

Kira dodged, but Joule had to take the brunt of the impact since he couldn't abandon Devon.

That's what she hated most about these bastards. They were always so damn unpredictable. It made them almost impossible to fight.

Thankfully, the force of her *ki* knocked the face changer backward. It landed in a heap twenty feet away, giving the *lu-ong* time to drop from Kira's wrist and slither toward Devon where Raider was doing his best to perform first aid.

Kira followed Jin, leaving the face changer to Finn.

She'd made it only a few steps before a second face changer ripped its way free of Notus.

Kira let out a heartfelt curse. She should have expected that. She hadn't and now she'd have to scramble to keep up.

Kira reached for her blade, cursing when she found the replica.

Fuck.

Her only weapon was useless. How was she supposed to fight these things without a sword in her hand?

The face changers and the people pulling their strings couldn't have chosen a better venue or moment for their attack.

While she was distracted, the initiates in the second face changer's vicinity fled. They'd learned from the previous victims.

"Finn, if you kill that thing, will it respawn in the waiting room," Kira shouted, sprinting at the second face changer.

Finn snarled. "No. My en-blade is still mine."

Kira had no more time as the face changer leapt to meet her with a bellow. It swiped at her head with a set of claws the length of her hand.

Kira ducked below his reach to sink a fist into its side.

His torso was spongy, swallowing her hand up to her wrist.

She tugged, finding her fist caught fast.

Pain prickled along her knuckles in warning. She tore her hand free as tiny, thin spears shot after them.

Dots of blood oozed from the surface of her skin where she hadn't been quite quick enough to avoid getting stabbed.

Screams came as another face changer bloomed like a caterpillar from the cocoon of its host.

Selene's face was a mask of determination as she stepped forward, one of the largest shields Kira had seen in a long time forming a dome around her. "To me!"



The initiates fled toward Selene, the shield parting to allow them through. Elena and Ziva were among them.

Selene said something to Elena. Her niece nodded, shoving Ziva between the two of them before whirling to face the rest of the initiates. She drew her dagger, standing guard as Selene gave her attention to maintaining the shield.

“That’s my girl,” Kira said with pride.

Trust Elena to understand what the rest of the initiates still didn’t. That the only thing standing between them and a grisly death was Selene.

Allowing the initiates into her shield was a risk. Several had already lost themselves to the seeds within. There was no guarantee there weren’t other face changers hiding among them.

Elena had thought far enough ahead to ensure Ziva couldn’t be used as a hostage, sandwiching her between herself and Selene.

It freed Kira up to concentrate fully on destroying the face changers before they evolved further.

Out of the corner of her eye, Kira caught the confrontation taking place in the stands as Baran and several other oshota confronted Terrel. A few warriors were trying to bring down the barrier, but Kira could already tell they wouldn’t be in time to be of any help.

They were on their own.

## TWENTY-SEVEN

“I’m almost there,” Jin promised as Kira dashed for the face changer. The needle-sharp teeth in its mouth flashed as the lower part of its face elongated into something resembling a snout.

Kira changed direction, barely evading as it tried to wrap her in a bear hug.

If it had succeeded, Kira would have been speared alive by the hundreds of spikes sprouting along its body.

It would have been a painful way to go.

This wasn’t good. The face changer was evolving too fast. Far faster than the previous time she encountered one.

How many Tuann had it fed off of for it to be in such an advanced state of evolution? It would have had to be over a hundred.

You’d think someone would have noticed if that number of Tuann had gone missing.

Maybe the rules changed when the face changer fed off bodies that were rich in soul’s breath. It could be that was why

it was evolving so quickly.

Kira had no further time to consider as the face changer struck. She dodged, barely escaping.

“Stop playing with it,” Jin urged. “You need to kill it before it’s too late.”

“Working on it,” Kira sang, dancing out of the way again. “It’s not like this is easy.”

If it was, she wouldn’t be so worried.

Kira could feel Jin rushing in her direction. He needed time to get there. Time to save Devon.

She could hear the panic in his voice as the *lu-ong* kept a running conversation up with Devon’s still body.

“It’s going to be okay, Devon. You’re going to be alright. I’m almost there. Everything will be okay once I arrive. You’ll see.”

Kira hoped so, but it was hard not to expect the worse with a wound like Devon had received. The few glimpses Kira had caught involved Raider applying as much pressure as he could to Devon’s wound.

Blood still leaked out of the hole, and it wouldn’t be long before he passed the point of no return.

Death was close.

Kira could see it in Raider’s resigned gaze. Could feel the cold touch of the grave waiting for the last spark in Devon to go out.

Kira put distance between her and the face changer, not looking away from her enemy. “Jin.”

“I’m doing this, Phoenix. Don’t try to stop me. He’s my brother.” There was a tremble in Jin’s voice.

Kira nodded. “I won’t.”

It was Jin’s risk to take. She’d lay the groundwork and make sure he had a brother to reach.

With that goal in mind, Kira raised her voice as her face changer lowered to all fours. “Finn, end this before he reaches stage two.”

Kill the face changer by any means necessary. That was the plan. The end.

Kira didn’t have time to talk any further as the face changer rushed her. The sound of something heavy thundering its way from behind her made her take a step back.

Just in time as Alexander pounded past her. He grabbed the face changer’s arm and tossed the creature away like it was nothing more than a frisbee.

“What are you doing?” Kira asked as Alexander straightened.

“You looked like you could use help.”

No, she didn’t.

“And?”

Alexander reached up to remove the wire-frame glasses he wore. He folded them gently and placed them into his pocket.

“I came to help.”

“Help who?” Kira demanded.

Not her. She had things well in hand.

Alexander brushed her away. His form slipped. His body expanding as everything grew broader and taller at once. The mild-mannered image of a scholar disappeared to be replaced by something much less civilized.

An aspect of Alexander that Kira had always referred to as the berserker.

It was still him—but a different, much larger version of the man she knew.

If Kira had to put it into words, she’d say Alexander resembled a character from one of those ancient films Jin favored. The ones featuring a man with two sides. One was a mild-mannered doctor; the other a ruthless monster.

Only this monster had just been released from its cage.

Kira was never sure if the berserker was a trait he’d inherited or the product of Tsavitee tampering. If they survived, she was sure his birth House would be able to clear up that question for her.

Alexander’s monster was one of the main reasons he was considered among the strongest of the forty-three.

A deep voice issued from Alexander’s chest. “See if you can keep up.”

He tore forward without waiting for her.

“You take off your glasses and suddenly you think you’re an entirely different person,” Kira grumbled.

Kira was reluctant as she reached for the blade Makon had gifted her on the ship. She’d never successfully called the *akieri* in practice with Wren. To use it now was madness.

Unfortunately, Kira’s options were limited.

Hand-to-hand combat, *ki*—or her primus. Those were her only choices for landing a death blow. The last of which she didn’t even want to consider given the possibility of her out-of-control primus becoming as big a threat as the face changers.

The first option was equally bad. Almost impossible even with her skills.

But the second—the *akieri* could help her channel her *ki* into a usable weapon. If she could make it work.

“Wren said this would be an important skill,” Kira told the blade. “Damn if he wasn’t right.”

She’d have to take back all the nasty thoughts she’d had about Wren and Harlow. Their spartan training in wielding this thing was about to save her and everyone else’s ass.

“Kira.” *Ki* transmitted Selene’s voice to her. “I’ll provide the path. You follow it.”

By now, Alexander had engaged the face changer. Kira raced forward, relying on instinct and dim memory to tell her when to jump.

She leapt, landing on the flat block Selene had created. It extended in front of Kira, forming a road high in the air she could sprint along.

With it adding to her speed, she covered the distance Alexander had created between her and the face changer far faster than what she was capable of on her own.

Alexander attacked from ground level as Kira channeled her *ki* into the blade. Not too much or too little. Just enough to form the sword she needed.

Like in practice, violet lines ran through the hilt. A charge built. Gradually, far slower than Kira would have liked, metal began to extend from the hilt of the blade, an aura of violet *ki* surrounding it.

She resisted the urge to hurry the blade along, knowing a single loss of focus would cause failure in a moment she couldn't afford.

The arena reached out, trying to gobble down her weapon. For an instant Kira thought her gamble had left her screwed as the arena tried and failed to create a replica of the just barely formed sword.

Yes!

Alexander roared as he grabbed the face changer's wrists, holding him immobile as Kira dropped from above.

She swung, the angle wrong as she missed taking its neck. She settled for severing an arm from its torso.

The face changer wailed. It thrashed in Alexander's grip, breaking free.

Kira jumped back, landing on another block of *ki* that lifted her into the air and out of the creature's reach.

It blundered forward, slashing at the block and destroying it.

Kira was already stepping onto the next as it appeared a foot to her right.

Alexander distracted the face changer with a well-timed punch. The leash he kept on himself snapped as he began to rain down blow after blow as a berserker's rage claimed him.

Kira circled, waiting for her chance.

Each blow from Alexander taught the face changer how to strengthen his skin, and all too soon the battle began to shift in the creature's favor.

Alexander tired as his fists slowed. The face changer grinned in victory.

Now.

Kira lunged forward, swiping at the face changer's neck. Her sword cut cleanly through the creature's neck, its head rolling off its body.

Alexander, still lost in his berserker rage, stared dumbly.

Kira smirked. "Did I keep up well enough for you?"

Alexander's berserker lifted its lip in a sneer before plunging his fist into the face changer's back. Seconds later his



hand emerged covered in blood, a stone the size of an egg held in his palm.

“The seed,” Kira said.

It was amazing how something so small could cause so much death.

Kira plucked it from his hand, holding the mottled colored stone up in front of her. Pinks blended into metallic golds and purples. Strangely beautiful, it whispered promises of power and glory.

Kira closed her fist around it and concentrated. “You are not needed.”

Cracks spread along its surface like spiderwebs as Kira tightened her grip, bringing her soul’s breath to bear.

The seed gave way, becoming dust. Kira opened her hand, tipping it to dump the seed’s remains on the ground.

“One down.”

Alexander’s steps were heavy as he joined her. “Two more left.”

A boom rent the air.

Kira and Alexander looked over to find Finn a short distance away. He was covered in blood from head-to-toe, a difficult-to-read expression on his face as he stared at the body of the first face changer.

“I take it back. There’s two down. One to go,” Kira corrected, taking in the mangled remains.

Finn's feat was impressive.

Kira and Alexander had to work together to take down their face changer. Finn had done the same on his own.

He'd been right all those weeks ago. He really was a bad ass.

"Make sure you take out the seed or they can be revived with blood," Kira warned him.

Finn tossed something at her.

She caught it before it hit her face, lowering her hand to find another seed in it.

"How did you know to remove it?" Alexander asked, looking from the seed to Finn.

"These are some of the oldest enemies of the Tuann," Finn said with the same unreadable expression from before. "They are the servants of our ancient masters. Every oshota is taught the method of ensuring permanent death."

That explained his strange look.

"I did warn you," Kira told him.

He inclined his head. "You did. It is different seeing it for myself, however."

For Finn, this must be like witnessing the emergence of something out of myth. Like a human suddenly confronted with the vampire of storybook fame.

It would be hard for anyone—and that was before you took in the crimes the ancient masters had committed against the

Tuann.

The sound of something slamming against a hard object interrupted their discussion. Kira and the rest turned to find the last face changer pounding its fists into the barrier directly in front of Selene.

There was a distinct lack of worry on Selene's face as she stared at the face changer with a analytical look in her eyes.

"We should—" Kira started.

Alexander was already gone.

"He is more impetuous than he seems," Finn observed.

"Only when Selene is involved." Kira shook her head. Everyone else was treated with a calm rationality that was grating. "Think we should back him up?"

Alexander thundered toward the face changer, taking it by surprise as he slammed it headfirst into Selene's barrier.

Alexander's palm cupped the back of the face changer's head and drew it away from the barrier before propelling it forward again.

"I'm not sure we're needed," Finn admitted as the boom of the face changer's head hitting the barrier resounded in the arena.

Again. And again. And again.

Truthfully, neither was Kira.

"Your siblings are quite able to handle themselves," Finn commented.

“You could say that.”

The Tuann were getting quite the education from Alexander. Even from where she was standing Kira could see uncertainty in the faces of the initiates. A little horror at Alexander’s display.

Not everyone though. The group from Asanth seemed undisturbed, their expressions reflecting mild interest.

Kira glanced at Raider, tilting her head at Selene and the rest. It would be best if he used the distraction Alexander provided to get Devon to a safe place.

Raider nodded and picked up Devon.

With that settled, Kira gave her attention back to Alexander. She’d have to take her life into her hands, but it was time to convince him to part with his new toy.

Before she could take a single step, sand sprayed. Alexander flew backward, as a blur shot after him.

Selene let out a scream of rage, her barrier falling as she thrust a hand out.

Transparent spikes formed around Alexander where he had fallen, resembling a spiky flower with him at their center.

The face changer stopped just short of being impaled. A laugh rumbled from its chest, the sound low and grating as it straightened, giving those assembled their first glimpse of Alexander’s attacker.

The creature that stood there was as different from a face changer as two beings could get.

Whereas the stage one face changer had looked unfinished, the surface of its skin raw and red looking as if it had peeled a layer off, this creature was a thing of beauty.

Its body lithe and well formed. Skin the color of ash.

Red and orange lines were drawn across its face and torso, intersecting to create interesting designs.

The same colors burned in its eyes, giving them an eerie glow. Horns jutted from its forehead, curving upward. They weren't as long or developed as a general's, but they weren't small either. They were riddled with the same lines as the rest of its body.

The most concerning thing, though, was the intelligence with which it regarded the Tuann around it.

“Stage two,” Kira murmured through numb lips.

The exact thing she'd so desperately hoped to avoid.

Raider shoved Joule backward with his shoulder, retreating several steps in the process. “Why is it that when you think it is over, it never is?”

That was a good question.

The stage two's calm was a terrifying thing as it observed them like they were bugs.

Blood oozed from a cut on Alexander's head as he climbed to his feet, still surrounded by Selene's spiked bloom.

“Don’t you look at him,” Selene told the stage two as she whipped up a hand to surround it with her shields.

They slammed into it, piercing its body and anchoring it to the ground.

The stage two gave the shields a curious look before wrenching its limbs to the side, shattering every single shield.

Selene didn’t hesitate, continuing toward the creature.

“Raider, keep going,” Kira ordered. “Finn, with me.”

She and Finn started forward only to stop as the stage two’s head turned, his gaze moving to track Devon and Raider.

“They are not your concern,” Selene hissed.

A sword of light appeared in her hand as Alexander threw himself forward. The stage two met them in battle, weaving through their attacks as if they presented no more nuisance than a fly’s.

Kira and Finn reached the battlefield in the next second. The four fought, trying to force the stage two backward and largely failing.

Alexander attacked from the side as Finn took the stage two head on.

The stage two shrugged off the blows, grabbing Alexander and flinging him to the ground. When it would have taken advantage of the distraction to run Alexander through, Kira stepped in to fend him off.

Selene attacked from the rear. Blood flew as her sword made of *ki* and light bit into his back.

The stage two hissed and drove an elbow into Selene's gut.

The woman grunted, bending forward from the force of the blow. The stage two twisted, grabbing her head in an effort to slam her into the ground.

A shield surrounded Selene's head, knocking his hand back.

Taking advantage of the momentary distraction, Kira darted into its blind spot.

Kira's world spun down to the feel of the *akieri's* hilt in her hand. The delicate manipulation of *ki* as it sang the song of death. The flex of her muscles and the power contained in them as her grip shifted, bringing the *akieri* up.

Time slowed.

Her front foot landed, her arm swinging. Success at hand.

Right until it all changed.

A hard force punched Kira in the chest. The world spun.

Kira flew.

She landed hard, the impact knocking the breath out of her lungs as she hit the sand.

She lay there for several seconds, struggling to relearn how to breathe as her mind screamed at her to get up.

Somehow, she summoned the energy to lift her face out of the sand and squint through the blood she could feel pouring down her face.

What the fuck just happened?

Kira couldn't understand. She'd had the stage two. Her blade millimeters from stabbing the crap out of its stupid crystal.

But now, her ears were ringing with a high-pitched and annoying buzz that usually only happened after she got a little too close to something that exploded.

Or when Jin decided to sing those Haldeel arias.

Kira forced her hands under her, lifting her torso as she assessed the situation.

First off—find the stage two.

Hopefully it wasn't already preparing to deliver its own death blow on her unsuspecting self.

Then—check on the others.

Plan in place, Kira grasped for the hilt of the *akieri*, finding that the blade had rescinded the moment she stopped channeling *ki*. At least it wasn't lying halfway across the arena.

Kira scanned the arena, spotting Finn not far from her on the ground. His limbs twitched, his head lifting to do the same thing Kira was.

They shared a quick look before searching for the stage two.

Selene and Alexander were on the opposite side of the arena. Alexander crawling toward Selene's motionless body.



The stage two stood in the exact same place where they'd fought. The creature's hands were held in front of it. Curiosity in its gaze.

"Fascinating," the creature said, turning a hand palm up.

A swirling ball of *ki* manifested, playing above the surface of its fingers like a naughty sprite.

Kira got one leg under her as she remained crouched, not wanting to draw the stage two's attention quite yet.

From the presence of *ki*, Kira was guessing that was how the stage two had managed to fling her and the rest back. The face changer must have incorporated the soul's breath it took from the Tuann into its evolution somehow.

Just great. As if the monster hadn't been difficult enough to fight before.

Kira manipulated her *ki*, projecting her voice in a way she'd seen others do but never tried herself.

"Alexander."

Relief filled her as she saw him respond.

It was a small reaction, a slight lift of his head and a stiffening of his shoulders but she caught it nonetheless.

"We can't let it evolve to stage three," Kira told him.

Stage two was already more than they could handle. She shuddered to think how much worse it could get.

"Are you with me?" Kira asked.

It would be really nice if he was.

They nearly hadn't survived with four of them attacking. Taking the stage two on with only her and Finn would be madness.

She'd do it, but it would really help to have Alexander on their side.

Across the arena, Alexander smoothed Selene's hair back before placing a kiss on her forehead.

"I will rip that thing apart with my bare hands. It dies—or I do."

The *ki* manifestation the stage two was playing with winked out.

"I can hear you whispering amongst yourself. You may attack if you wish, but it will be you who dies. Not me."

The stage two's hand dropped as it turned to stride toward Raider and the rest of the initiates—including Joule and Devon.

Damn it. The creature was targeting them again.

Why, when everything she knew about its kind said it should be fixated on those who posed the greatest threat?

Raider twisted to study the initiates before pointing at Tinsley. "You. Come here."

Her step forward was hesitant.

Raider bared his teeth at her. "Get your ass over here if you want to live."

That got her moving.

Tinsley dropped to her knees next to Raider. He took her hand, pressing it against the wad of cloth he was using to staunch Devon's bleeding.

"Push as hard as you can," Raider ordered before rising to his feet.

Tinsley's gaze followed him even as she did as he told her. "What are you going to do?"

The look on Raider's face was that of a man staring down his end and standing firm anyway. "What I have to."

Kira made a gesture toward Alexander and Finn that said, "Get ready."

Raider glanced at Joule. "Close it up. Nobody gets through."

The leader Kira knew Joule would one day be warred with the sacrifices he'd have to make along the way. Defeat showed on Joule's face as his chin dropped, his hands already lifting to flow through the symbols needed to create his most powerful shield.

"No! Wait!" Elena started forward.

Too late as Joule's shield rose, enclosing him and the rest in a transparent dome.

"Sperm donor," Elena said in a small voice.

Raider reached for her cheek, the shield blocking his touch. "I love you, kid. More than the moon and stars and everything in between. Don't forget that."

Raider reached for the weapon Blue had made for him.

Elena shoved at the wall, her expression panicked as the stage two loped toward Raider. “No! Joule, let me through!”

Joule bit his lip hard, pain filling his face.

The stage two stopped in front of Raider.

The weapon Raider held glowed blue as he pointed it at the other. “I guess we’re doing this.”

“Dad! Daddy!” Elena continued to hit the shield, not stopping until Ziva grabbed her arm, pulling her back.

Kira’s niece was crying as Ziva tugged her toward Joule, positioning her behind Joule before turning to put her back to the two and facing the initiates in a mirror of the same position Elena had taken earlier.

Ziva lifted the dagger she’d picked up from somewhere, her gaze steady as she stared at the rest of the initiates with a vigilant expression.

“Go,” Kira ordered.

Raider attacked. Alexander and Finn shot forward at the same time.

Kira hung back, waiting for her moment. Her calculations said they’d only get one chance at this.

The stage two lifted a negligent hand, blocking Raider’s attack with no effort.

“Pathetic,” the stage two sneered.

Raider grinned. “Checkmate.”

The weapon hummed as Raider let go, jumping backward at the same time. The weapon exploded, a boom rocking the arena.

The stage two examined the torn flesh of his hand with a dispassionate gaze before shifting his attention to Raider. “Is that all?”

Raider’s eyes widened, his body already moving as the stage two flicked his hand.

A whip of *ki* arced in his direction, white-hot plasma that would cut Raider in half if it touched him.

Alexander was there in the next moment, grabbing the stage two’s head and slamming him face first into the ground.

Finn swung his sword a second later aiming at one of the stage two’s arms.

Before he could complete the swing, the stage two exploded upward. All three men were forced to dodge as whips of *ki* shot outward.

Finn, Alexander, and Raider engaged as Kira slowly walked forward, the *akieri* at her side.

She stopped a short distance away, holding the *akieri* in front of her as she concentrated on the feel of *ki*.

Not just what lay in her or this sword, but in everything around her.

Coursing under her feet. Flowing in the air of the arena. Existing in every molecule on this plane.

All of it.

And when she felt she had a handle on it, she pulled it toward her. Slowly at first and then with growing speed until it whirled in a funnel around her body, lifting her hair from her shoulders as she fought to keep her blade steady.

All the while, she waited for her moment. A tiny window where the stage two was vulnerable.

But as time passed, Kira started to fear that moment wouldn't come.

The three were losing ground. One of Raider's arms was broken, and Finn's right leg was struggling to support his weight.

Alexander was marginally better but his torso was covered in blood and his berserker fading with every second that passed.

Her grip on the blade tightened, her front foot digging into the sand as she started to push off.

"I'm here, Phoenix," Jin said in her ear as Kira surged forward. "The Tin Man has arrived."

The ceiling burst, raining hunks of rock on those below.

Finn grabbed Raider and covered his body with his own. Alexander stepping in front of both to shield them.

Kira's breath sounded loud in her ears as the distance between her and the stage two narrowed.

It turned to face her, those whips reaching for her.

Music blared as Jin shot out of the cloud of dust, his outer casing lit up with a white-hot glare of manifested *ki* that matched Kira's own.

They charged the stage two, their thoughts and bodies in perfect sync.

One step. Then two. A meter and then another.

Jin screamed as he flung his *ki* outward.

The world turned white, blinding as Kira drew her arm back. She slashed forward, releasing the *ki* she'd built.

It wasn't the burst—but it was close. So close that the two could be cousins.

Jin's *ki* collided with Kira's, wrapping around it and adding to the destructiveness.

It hit the stage two, incinerating the arm he lifted and half of his torso.

It created an opening.

Jin dove, every weapon Kira had installed on his casing firing.

Lasers blasted into the stage two's body. Projectiles following a second later.

The *akieri* bit into the stage two's side. She twisted, searching and finding the seed.

She felt it crack.

Kira ripped the sword out, plunging her hand into the wound the instant it was open.

Still, the stage two wasn't done, reaching to stab Kira's chest with its claws.

Alexander caught his arm, yanking it back as he wrapped a hand around the stage two's neck from behind and squeezed.

Kira touched the seed as Alexander bared his teeth and ripped, yanking out the stage two's spine.

She did the same to the seed an instant later.

A laser fired from Jin, hitting the seed and destroying it with a finality that felt almost surreal after the battle they'd just waged.

The light in the stage two's eyes extinguished, the glowing lines on his face and torso burning out in the next second.

With a yell, Alexander ripped the stage two's head off and spiked it into the ground.

Finished, he glared at Kira, his breathing fast.

Kira held still, conscious of the fact that a single wrong move could trigger an attack.

"Devon!" Jin shouted, not noticing or not caring how on edge Alexander was.

He zoomed in the dome's direction, forgetting about Kira.

The dome dropped and Elena sprinted forward with zero regard for the tense situation.

Throughout it all, Alexander stared at Kira. His posture that of someone who could attack at any second.



He didn't move even as Elena dropped to her knees beside an unconscious Raider.

"Dad, please don't be dead," Elena pleaded.

Something in Alexander relaxed. His berserker stepping back from the edge as his body started to shrink.

Kira let out the breath she'd been holding.

Whew, she really hadn't been looking forward to going head-to-head with him.

That would have been the horrible cherry on top of an already awful day.

## TWENTY-EIGHT

One thing she could take comfort from was the fact that Alexander's restraint proved that Selene was alive. Unconscious but breathing.

Otherwise, Alexander's berserker wouldn't have backed down so easily. He would rage through the arena. Probably with the intention of disemboweling the stage two and then using the entrails to decorate the stands.

Maybe after that he would have finally remembered Kira and the debt she owed him for drawing Selene into this.

Kira found Jin hovering over Devon's body. The boy alive but just barely.

Kira went to her knees beside him as Tinsley looked between them in question.

"I have to ask. Are you sure you want to do this?" Kira stroked a finger along the back of the *lu-ong* still sitting on Devon's chest. "There will be consequences."

It would out him as a soul bound.

"I don't care."

Kira nodded, not bothering to talk him out of this. There were some things you had to do no matter the cost.

“Alright then,” Kira said. “No matter what happens it was a good run.”

“The best. I regret none of it,” Jin said with a sob in his voice.

Kira offered the seed she'd pocketed when no one was looking to Jin. “It should be enough, but if it isn't, take what you need from me.”

The seed lifted from her palm to hover over Devon's wound.

“What is he doing?” Tinsley asked.

Neither of them answered as the seed started to glow. Pieces of it began to flake off from the rest. Cracks appeared in Jin's casing as his *ki* reached out to the seed.

Kira could feel Jin's effort and knew the toll this was taking. She widened her defenses, offering up every part of herself.

She set a hand on his casing, repairing the cracks that appeared as fast as they could form.

Wren had been easier to heal, but Devon was further gone. The price to save his life would be steep.

Kira felt the drain as her deep well of *ki* left her for Jin. She closed her eyes, not allowing herself to narrow the connection even when the sting threatened to become unbearable.

An image flashed. The same vision she had of the winged, translucent creature she'd seen days earlier in the crash.

A summons pulled at Kira.

It wasn't a voice that called her. There were no words telling her what she needed to do, just an unspoken command that Kira felt in her soul.

To finish quickly because she was needed elsewhere.

There was a gasp from those around them.

"Soul bound," someone whispered.

Jin continued to distill the essence of the seed into pure *ki*, threading Kira's and his soul's breath in with it before slamming it into Devon's wound.

Jin dropped.

Kira caught him, placing him next to Devon's head before giving him a pat. "Good job."

"Did it work?" Jin asked in a groggy voice, too weak to fire his anti-gravs.

Kira concentrated. Where before Devon's life force had been fading, it was now growing stronger.

"I think so."

He'd live. A silver lining in all this.

"I'm glad," Jin said, sounding exhausted.

Jin used his soul's breath only rarely. This was the third time in all their years. One of the reasons for that was the cost

that came with wielding it.

Kira could already feel his mind fading from hers as he started to slide into his version of a coma.

“You know this was a distraction, right?” he told her.

He was unconscious before she could answer.

“It had occurred to me,” she said anyway.

Devon twitched as he came to wakefulness. His eyelids cracked.

“You’re awake,” Kira said when his gaze shifted to hers.

Devon reached up to touch the wound, knocking Jin’s *lu-ong* in the process. The *lu-ong* chirped before slithering toward Jin’s main body.

“He saved you,” Kira said.

“I remember.” Devon’s gaze lifted to Kira’s. “He’s my brother, isn’t he?”

Kira didn’t answer, tapping him on the cheek instead. “I have something to do. Watch over him for me.”

Devon’s nod was weak.

Kira rose. Sometime in the aftermath of the battle, Baran and the other oshota had gotten the barrier down. Too late to be of any help to those below.

At least they could assist with first aid, Kira conceded as she turned toward the tunnel that would take her to the sanctum and beyond.

For a second it occurred to her to wait. A thought she dismissed almost instantly.

Finn was unconscious. Raider immobile.

Terrel also wasn't an issue at the moment, surrounded as he was by the emperor's very angry looking oshota.

Dealing with him could wait. The summons couldn't. This next part she'd have to do alone.



Beeping interrupted Graydon's study of the tracks outside the prison that led into the forest.

If it wasn't for how off everything felt, Graydon would have already given orders to Solal and Amila to pursue their targets. Yet Graydon couldn't shake the feeling that this was too easy.

Unfortunately, the tracks were his only lead and ignoring them wasn't an option.

"Something you'd like to share?" Graydon asked when Jarek's comms continued to chirp.

Jarek's face registered confusion as he stared at his forearm. His insignia was flashing. Something that should only be possible if his seal was in use.

An inquisitor's seal was special. It wasn't something to be given out lightly as it provided the user with authority to access the highest levels of Tuann security.

“Who is in possession of your seal right now?” Graydon barked

“I—I don’t—“ Jarek cut himself off as his gaze flicked from the flashing insignia to Graydon.

“Get ahold of Baran to find out what is going on,” Graydon ordered Solal.

His First was already in motion as he attempted to contact his fellow oshota.

“No one is answering,” Solal said a second later.

“I trust the person holding my seal implicitly. He would have been a member of my Order if not for being called to another path. If he’s used it, it’s for good reason,” Jarek argued.

Solal and Graydon shared a look as Graydon lifted a hand, summoning those oshota who had spread out to investigate.

“Where are you going?” Jarek demanded.

“This was a distraction to keep us occupied,” Graydon said, picking up his pace to sprint toward the gate that would return him to the *adva ka’s* testing site.

He prayed he wouldn’t once again be late.



Chaos greeted Graydon as he entered the arena. Jarek and the others slowed to take in the carnage.

Multiple initiates were down. Some injured, others dead.

Several Tuann, including many of the emperor's oshota and Graydon's surrounded the Overlord of House Votair.

Spotting Baran, Graydon made his way over. "Report."

Baran snapped to attention, his expression grim. "There was an attack. The Overlord used an inquisitor's badge to raise a barrier that prevented us from rendering aid."

Unhappiness radiated off the oshota and Tuann standing around them. Graydon suspected heads would have already flown if not for the fact that most of the dead belonged to House Votair and its allies.

The situation balanced on a knife's edge.

The Tuann didn't take the loss of their young lightly—no matter what House those young belonged to.

"Did you know about this?" Graydon asked Jarek. "Is this why you gave him your badge?"

The inquisitor tore his gaze from the bright splashes of red on the sands. Bodies still lay where they'd fallen. Tuann and three misshapen lumps which had been pummeled into an unrecognizable pulp that Graydon assumed belonged to the attackers.

"Absolutely not. My badge was to contain the soul bound. Nothing more." Jarek's horror seemed sincere as he shot a glance at Votair's Overlord. "What did you do?"



Terrel's nostrils flared as he lifted his chin to meet his friend's gaze. "Exactly what you requested of me. You wanted the soul bound contained. He's now contained."

There was an ill look on Jarek's face as he took in the fallen again. The price paid for his victory bought with the blood of their most promising youths.

"Liar." Ziva pushed past the much taller adults around her. They shifted, allowing the child to pass.

Ziva's eyes were glassy, and her chin trembled as she glared up at Graydon. Her clothes were disheveled and there was a spot of blood on her cheek but otherwise the child was unharmed.

"He's lying," Ziva said again. "Jin was nowhere near the arena when he raised the barrier. He didn't show up until afterward."

Terrel fixed a cold gaze on the child. "Yes, well, I had to protect the rest of us from the threat at hand."

"At the expense of those below?" someone asked in a sharp voice.

Graydon looked over to find Tinsley glaring from the crowd. The heir of Kashori was covered in more blood than Ziva. None of which looked to be her own.

"A handful of deaths versus many more. The choice is obvious," Terrel drawled.

"You're still lying," Ziva screamed, lunging at the Overlord.

Graydon moved quickly, grabbing the child before she could try to stab him with the concealed weapon she held.

He palmed the tiny knife before anyone could see.

“He’s lying. He is.” Ziva’s eyes glistened with tears as she fixed a gaze on him. “I was there. He raised the barrier before those things came out of those people.”

“You cannot believe this traumatized child,” Terrel sneered. “What reason would I have to sacrifice my own initiates?”

“You were angry because you thought she destroyed your ship. You did this to make her pay.”

Terrel’s gaze sharpened. “She *is* responsible. Her soul bound was obviously working on her behalf.”

Ziva bared her teeth in a snarl. “Prove it.”

Graydon gently tugged her out of the way when Terrel looked like he was thinking of doing her bodily harm.

“The child’s version of events is accurate,” someone from the crowd said.

Graydon looked over to find a high-ranking member of House Asanth standing a few feet away. Though the man had never undertaken the *adva ka*, he held status and influence among the members of his House. He was one of their most trusted advisors and likely present to provide guidance to those initiates who’d chosen to progress.

“Karl,” Graydon said in greeting before glancing in Baran’s direction for confirmation.

His oshota nodded, looking like he'd tasted something nasty as he glared at Votair's Overlord. "Their sequence of events is correct. House Votair's Overlord appears to have acted with foreknowledge of the coming danger."

Graydon held himself still. Not yet. The accusation wasn't enough to justify the arrest of a prominent Overlord.

"Moreover, two of the three creatures appear to have come from House Votair," Baran continued. "The third initiate had had extensive contact with the other two in the time leading up to events."

A cruel smile appeared on Graydon's face. There it was. The final piece he needed to make a move.

"I want the Overlord and the rest of House Votair placed under immediate arrest," Graydon instructed Baran and the rest of his oshota. "All properties will be confiscated while the emperor's people conduct an investigation into his role in these events."

Terrel started forward. "You can't do that. I am the Overlord of a powerful House."

Graydon rounded on him, letting his desire to end the other man appear on his face. "Did you really think you could cause the deaths of so many and not answer for it?"

Terrel's look of shock said he had. Something Graydon found appalling.

"You're done," Graydon said in a silky voice. "Your House will not survive this. Look around you. The other Houses are

already preparing to move in to claim what is yours.”

Terrel’s shoulders stiffened as he became aware of how those from the other Houses were staring at him. Their hostility and desire to make him pay permeating the air.

“Everything you’ve built, everything you sacrificed to make, they’re all gone. It’s only a matter of time.”

The Overlord flinched away from Graydon as Isla and Cord closed in on him from the sides.

Graydon waited for his oshota to escort the Overlord away before looking at Baran. “What else?”

The oshota took a deep breath. “Devon was mortally injured.”

Graydon’s stomach clenched, his expression still outwardly calm.

Baran flicked a glance in Jarek’s direction as he struggled with how to say the next part. “I suspect a soul bound was instrumental in saving his life.”

Graydon’s eyes closed in defeat as Jarek reacted, the words pulling him out his shocked state.

Fuck.

“Kira went missing in the aftermath,” Baran finished in a low voice meant for only Graydon’s ears.

“The soul bound must be destroyed,” Jarek started.

Graydon didn’t think, grabbing the other man and yanking him to face him. He placed a dagger against Jarek’s throat.

The inquisitor was careful not to move. “I advise you to rethink this action.”

It was almost admirable how calm Jarek was in the face of death. Had the circumstances been different and Jarek not a zealot, Graydon might have found him a worthy adversary.

As it was, Graydon struggled not to end the man where he stood.

Ultimately, killing Jarek wouldn't solve Graydon's problem. Too many had seen Jin exposed for what he was.

No action on Graydon's part would change that.

“I want you to listen carefully,” Graydon said in a controlled voice. “That soul bound is the emperor's son and Devon's brother. You will not harm him. Apprehend him if you must but you will leave his fate to the emperor to decide.”

It was Jin's only chance of coming out of this alive. A small one at that.

Graydon thrust his face closer to Jarek's, invading the other man's personal space. “Kill him and I will hunt down every member of your order and force you to watch while I end them.”

Jarek was a true believer. The possibility of his own death meant nothing to him.

The continuation of his order, on the other hand, would hit him where it hurt.

Graydon would do it, too. He'd dismantle the order one by one until there was no one remaining.

He'd like to see them guard against the soul bound then.

Graydon might do it anyways when this was over. Insurance for the future.

Graydon shoved the other Tuann away from him.

“Kira would have gone to the *Mea'Ave*. I plan to follow her,” Graydon informed Solal and Baran. “Ensure he follows my instructions.”



This close Kira could see that the rock formations and the glowing ribbons of water that wound through them was a maze in truth. Paths led over the rocks, water flowing under and around them in a steady trickle.

She could feel a tug in her chest as the pools created by the meandering maze beckoned her to step into the water's depths. It promised her everything she wanted if she'd slow down and stay a while.

Kira set her gaze on the cavernous maw and what lay beyond. She didn't let herself stray, not even when she caught glimpses of the individuals she'd loved.

“They're not real.” A sob tore at her throat. “Don't look at them.”

She continued, her hurry forcing her to backtrack several times as she took the wrong path.

A third of the maze was all that lay before her when Bayside's voice brought her to a halt.

“Are you really going to leave like this, Nixxy?”

Kira froze.

Her mind screamed at her to keep going, to not turn around. Both orders her body refused to obey.

Somehow Kira found herself facing Bayside.

He stood on the rocky path behind her, hands in his pocket in that same casual stance that used to make her laugh.

“You don't have to go.” There was a half-smile on his face as he looked at her with warm eyes. “You can stay.”

Kira looked beyond him to find the others waiting for her in the launch bay of the *Vega*. Walker and Bates stood shoulder to shoulder with Ranger and Park.

“I want to,” Kira said.

The dream they were offering her was a beautiful one. It would be so easy to allow herself to let go of her pain and suffering.

To forget.

“But you're not you.” Kira took a step backward. “And this isn't real.”

Much as she might want it to be. Bayside and the rest wouldn't wish her to live a lie. They'd want her to move

forward—even if that meant leaving them behind.

The hardest thing Kira had ever done was turning her back toward them and continuing her voyage. Every step hammered a nail into her heart. Agony threatened to sunder her.

Kira drew strength from the pain, allowing it to bolster her as she reached the edge of the water maze.

“I’m proud of you, Nixxy,” Bayside whispered. “It was an honor to serve at your side. Sorry I didn’t get to see it to the end, but I know you did everything you could.”

A sob ripped from Kira’s throat as she kept going, walking right into the maw of the cavern. The darkness that closed around her was a soothing balm to the wounds on her soul that felt as raw as the first day she received them.

Despite that, Kira felt a release. Almost as if a wound had been lanced and the poison and pus that had been infecting her for so long could finally drain free.

Maybe not today but some day not too far in the future, Kira thought she’d finally be able to lay him and the others to rest.

Before she could dwell, light flickered to illuminate the space.

The wanderer looked as shocked as Kira when he looked up to find her standing there.

“Wait,” Kira yelled.

The wanderer turned and fled into the tunnel behind him.



Kira chased after him, abandoning the hope of taking him by surprise.

Between one step and the next, he disappeared from in front of her. Kira slowed at finding herself alone. No sign of the person she'd been pursuing.

She turned in a circle, unable to make sense of it.

There was only one direction in this tunnel and that was forward.

She wasn't so slow as to have fallen behind. Nor had she passed him.

So where had he gone?

Kira considered her options. There were really only two. Continue forward and hope he was still ahead of her—or backtrack to search the tunnel she'd already traveled.

A pulse of warmth and welcome decided her. The summons from earlier repeated, this time a little stronger and more insistent.

“Guess I know which choice the *Mea'Ave* wants me to make,” Kira muttered. “Awesome idea, Phoenix. Pursue a possible Tsavitee co-conspirator into a mysterious tunnel that leads who knows where. That can't go wrong. Not. At. All.”



Waves of *ki* buffeted Kira as she approached a room. The only room she'd found in this tunnel. Those waves punched her in

the face. Metaphorically speaking.

It was like stepping into a gelatinous mass. Piping hot. The abundance of *ki* almost scalding.

Breathing was difficult.

Worse was the sensation of her ribs compressing. As if a fist had wrapped around her body, squeezing tighter with each step she took.

“I should have stayed with Bayside and the others,” Kira complained.

She inched forward another step, finally crossing the threshold to stand in the room beyond.

A soft glow emanated from the underground lake. A raised platform and dais existed in the center of that lake. A sphere filled with a kaleidoscope of shifting colors and symbols hovered over the dais.

It was difficult to see details, the light coming off the sphere too intense.

A stone walkway extended over the water to the platform. Seeing it, she made her way over to it.

“Chase a bad guy. Complete a rite of passage,” Kira mocked herself as she stepped onto the stone path.

Kira was halfway across the bridge before she realized she wasn't alone.

Hidden by the light coming off the sphere, the wanderer regarded her carefully. “I'm not your enemy. This isn't what it

seems.”

Kira looked him over carefully. “I don’t know about that.”

From where she stood, there wasn’t a lot of room for interpretation. Why else would he have taken the opportunity to come here when everyone else was preoccupied by the attack?

“You should listen to him, pippy bunny,” a soft voice said from behind Kira on the bridge. “He’s not lying to you.”

Everything in Kira stilled at the familiar name. A name only one person in this world knew.

“Elise.”

But when Kira glanced behind her, it wasn’t Elise’s face that she found.

The initiate from Asanth smiled at her.

It was a smile Kira had seen countless times. The way the corners of her eyes crinkled. The slight crookedness as one side of her lips tilted up a little more than the other. Strange to see the smile she knew on a face she didn’t.

Asanth spread her arms and turned. “Do you like it? I had to change things up a bit considering how recognizable my face has become.”

“It’s heinous. Take it off.”

Elise’s arms dropped, her features transforming in a slow process to the ones Kira was more familiar with. “Always so serious.”

Kira was careful to keep the wanderer in sight out of the corner of her eye as she moved backward onto the platform and toward the light sphere to avoid being trapped between the two.

“Are you the one I have to thank for the face changers?” Kira’s voice was flat.

“Yes—and no,” Elise confessed.

Kira made a pained sound.

“Don’t look at me like that,” Elise pleaded.

Kira felt lightheaded. “What have you done?”

She’d risked so many lives. People had died. This wasn’t the type of thing Kira could overlook or brush aside.

“They’re fine. You saved them; just like I knew you would.”

Kira gave Elise a wide-eyed look that held a touch of the hysterical. “Not everyone!”

“That is regrettable, but I didn’t have a lot of choice. My cover had to be maintained.”

“That’s your excuse?” Kira nearly roared.

Elise’s shoulders rose as she took a deep breath, the gesture the same as the one she used when she was reaching for patience.

“The Tsavitee’s masters aren’t a fan of disappointment. After my failure to procure Jin on Jettie, they decided I needed a reminder of my place.” Elise nodded at the sphere of light behind Kira. “I was given the choice of completing my

original mission with the addendum of killing you or I could steal the *lenacht* and leave you a few gifts in the process.“ The look in Elise’s eyes hardened. “Sacrifices sometimes need to be made. I’m not happy about that fact, but in a tossup between you and Jin or some random Tuann, I would choose you two every time.”

Kira had forgotten that about Elise. In some ways, the other woman was the most loyal person Kira knew. In others, she held a cold pragmatism that was chilling.

To the Curs, Elise had given everything. Love. Affection. A willingness to sacrifice for their small family.

To the rest she was stand offish and cold. Disregarding those who weren’t part of her circle as unimportant.

Kira had seen it a thousand time. The abrupt reversal in personality when dealing with those Elise viewed as outsiders.

It was nothing overt. To most, Elise would appear to treat those people with the same level of kindness and care she reserved for her friends. It was why they’d used her as their liaison with other units. Because she was capable of faking empathy better than Kira and Raider. But it was a superficial friendliness that didn’t extend past banal pleasantries.

It was the reason behind many of their biggest fights. Kira couldn’t walk away from people in trouble whereas Elise would watch a person drown while never extending a helping hand.

Something in Elise's words made Kira stiffen. "You're responsible for the bog's hag being placed on the *Wanderer's* hull, aren't you?"

It wasn't just the face changers. There was more.

Elise's eyes were sad. "Not my idea. That was the work of another faction who wanted you either side lined or dead. Bonus if Ta Sa'Riel and all those on the planet had to go into isolation to prevent the bog's hag from spreading to the rest of their empire."

"And the face changers. Why seed them in the initiates?" Kira asked.

"Another distraction to keep you from noticing our movements. For the same reason they convinced House Votair to target your young friend. Not that it was hard. It seems their Overlord had a vendetta against the boy's former House."

"Why?" Kira gritted out.

"The generals thought if you were preoccupied by danger to those closest to you it would increase our chances of success. I knew better, of course." Elise offered a small smile. "You are at your best when you have someone to protect."

Was Kira supposed to be flattered by Elise's confidence in her? Because she wasn't.

"I like him by the way. Joule. He reminds me of Selene."

Kira's primus moved under her skin at Elise's nonchalance at everything that had happened. "You don't even know what you've done. Devon was Jin's brother. He nearly died because

of those things. Not to mention the close call Raider had or the fact you put Elena in danger.”

Was she so far gone that she didn't see how inexcusable that was?

It was small but Kira caught Elise's flinch before the other lifted her chin. “I knew you would protect Raider and my daughter. While I regret the boy's involvement, I stand by my earlier words. Between him and Jin, I will always choose the latter.”

“Except you didn't,” Kira snapped. “You misjudged. To save Devon, Jin outed himself as soul bound. Do you know what the Tuann might do to him because of that?”

How could Elise not have thought of that? How could she not see how wrong all of this was?

It felt like Kira was stuck in a dream. An awful nightmare from which there was no waking up.

Calm descended.

There was no use talking to Elise like this. They'd just go round and round in circles. She needed to take control of the situation. Later, she could get to the bottom of why Elise was so fixated on this course of action.

Kira reached for her *ki*. A sharp zap of pain blocked the attempt as the vestiges of her soul's breath scattered, sliding out of her grip before she could fully grasp it.

Blood trickled out of her nose.

Kira wobbled, fighting to remain standing after the backlash.

Elise tsked. “I wouldn’t if I were you. You won’t be able to access your *ki*. This is the *Mea’Ave’s* domain.”

Kira wiped away the blood with the back of her hand. “That’s regrettable.”

If that was the case, she wouldn’t be able to use the *akieri* either. Knowing Elise, she’d have some sort of insurance. A weapon of some kind.

Worse—she was as dangerous as Kira in her own way.

Movement flickered in the darkness of the tunnel. Graydon slipped out of the shadows, a ghost as he nodded once at her before letting the shadows wrap around him to conceal his presence.

Something in Kira settled at the knowledge she wasn’t alone. Backup had arrived. Though the situation was no less dangerous than it had been a moment ago.

“Why are you doing this?” Kira asked as a distraction.

Though her question was sincere. Elise had gone pretty far maintaining this cover of hers. To the extent of betraying her friends.

Because make no mistake, that’s what this was. A betrayal.

“I thought you would have figured that out by now.” Aeron’s voice bounced off the walls of the chamber, making it impossible to distinguish where he was standing.



Everything in Kira tightened as she scanned her surroundings for signs of the general. She found none. Only an empty room, Aeron completely hidden from sight.

Kira could only hope he'd missed Graydon's arrival, but she wouldn't hold her breath.

Luck didn't seem to be on her side today.

"I told you to head for the transport already," Elise said with a chiding sigh.

The loving indulgence in her tone as she spoke to someone who should have been their enemy was just one more slap to the face.

"I was curious to see how this would end. Does the Phoenix win or Sunshine?" Aeron drawled.

The wanderer, quiet until now, shifted closer to the sphere.

Elise's gaze found him instantly. "I wouldn't."

The wanderer froze.

Kira took the opportunity to start toward Elise, only to come to an abrupt halt an instant later as Elise removed a hand from her pocket to point the Tsavitee weapon humans had dubbed the sleeper at Kira.

"I'm sure I don't have to explain what this is," Elise said.

No, she didn't.

Kira didn't take her eyes off that device, a cold sweat breaking out along her neck and back.

"Don't worry. It won't kill you," Elise assured her.

No, it'd just put her into a coma. The length of which no one could predict. Days. Years. Maybe decades.

Then there were those who didn't wake up at all. They just languished in sleep until their body finally failed, never once having opened their eyes again.

"I didn't want to have to use this. I know how much you lost during your long coma."

Kira forced herself not to react to Elise's words. Though it was difficult. Excruciatingly so.

There was nothing more she'd like than to cross the short distance between them and rip the sleeper out of Elise's grip.

She'd never make it in time.

"I have to admit—you've found the one thing I'm actually terrified of." Kira raised her hands slightly to show she wasn't a threat.

Then again, Elise had once known Kira better than anyone but Jin.

She'd understand how much Kira feared losing years to a sleep she couldn't wake from. To be trapped in her body as the days slid into months while she could do nothing but dream.

Stupid, Kira. You should have attacked Elise the second she arrived. It was a mistake you might not get the chance to recover from.

Elise gave her a regretful half smile. "I've been assured your coma this time won't be as long as the previous one."

Was that supposed to be comforting?

Elise chuckled at whatever expression she found on Kira's face. "I've missed that about you. Your face always did reveal everything going on inside that mind of yours."

"You've known where I was all this time. You could have reached out to me anytime you wanted," Kira pointed out.

She hadn't and that knowledge hurt.

Was this how Raider felt when he learned Kira had hidden Elena from him? If so, it was a wonder his reaction hadn't been more extreme.

In his place, she didn't think she'd have forgiven herself.

Sadness replaced Elise's smile. "Yes."

She didn't argue. That was something at least.

"Why didn't you?"

Elise must know how far Kira would go for her. To hell and back as the saying goes. Same for Raider. They would have done anything.

"So many reasons."

Kira made a come-on gesture. "I'm listening."

Elise moved closer, watching the wanderer carefully as she did so. "Elena, for one. I needed you to protect my daughter. That would be difficult if you got involved."

Kira scoffed. "You'll have to do better than that."

Elena was an excuse. Particularly since Kira couldn't afford to be too visible in her life.

"You could have gone to Raider," Kira bit out. "He would have helped you."

Elise's laugh held a touch of humor. "I love Raider. He is the light that kept my world from turning dark, but he's a hard man. Do you really think he would have helped his enemy?"

Point to Elise.

"He might have. For you," Kira argued.

Elise hadn't given him a chance to choose.

"Would you have?"

Kira's jaw tightened. "We'll never know now, will we?"

"I suppose not," Elise said, her expression bittersweet. "To be honest, a part of me didn't want to taint you with the path I chose to walk. You and Raider were everything beautiful. I needed the illusion of something to come back to when this was over—even if that point never arrives."

A silence fell as the two stared at each other, the gulf between them seemingly so wide where once they'd been perfectly in step with the other.

"Were you behind Rothchild?" Kira couldn't stop the impulsive question. One she had no business asking with everything else going on. "Are you responsible for the Curs' deaths?"

Maybe there was a reason she and Jin had never been able to find the traitor. They'd been looking in the wrong place.

A stricken expression filled Elise's face. As if Kira just walked up to her and slapped her.

"How can you ask me that? They were my family too!" For the first time, there was something of the old Elise in her voice. A hurt and pain that sounded so real. "I would have died for them. I was prepared to do exactly that."

Kira wanted to believe Elise. Wanted it like nothing she ever had before.

"And yet somehow you've survived," Kira forced herself to say, knowing how the words would flay the Elise she once knew. The one who had loved the Curs as much as she had.

"Because—" Elise cut herself off, her eyes closing as she reached for composure. When she opened them again, a different person looked back at Kira. Her emotions locked down and her features resolute. "The how and why of what happened is no longer important. You'll have to look elsewhere if you're looking for a traitor. That's not why I'm here."

Elise finished crossing the bridge, stepping onto the platform as she tilted her head back to survey the sphere.

At some point during their conversation, its glow had dimmed. The intensity of the light no longer as piercing. Enough for Kira to just barely make out the fact there was a

creature inside. Its details indistinct. Like something emerging from a cocoon.

Kira caught the impressions of wings and a tail before Elise set a hand against the sphere. She drew it back with a small yelp.

“You are not worthy of the *lenacht*,” the wanderer informed her.

Elise shot him an irritated look as she shook out her hand. “Good thing I came prepared then.”

She withdrew a device in the shape of a small cylinder from her pocket.

From the way the wanderer stiffened, something like concern flashing across his face, Kira guessed whatever the device was, it wasn't good for them.

“It took the masters a long time to figure out how the Tuann escaped their control. They'd thought their slaves much too afraid to challenge their authority.” Elise busied herself twisting the rings on either end of the cylinder. “Those who remained suffered for that oversight. The masters punished them by trapping them in the forms of monsters, the generals you now know, and to make sure a rebellion would never happen again, they took their young as hostages.”

Kira's flinch made Elise's lips twist.

“That's right, Nixxy. Children are taken from their parents the moment they're born and placed in camps exactly like the one we grew up in.”

A seam appeared on the cylinder, the line running lengthwise as lights lit up on either end.

“Every so often they make an example of one of those children as a warning against what will happen if the generals are anything but absolutely obedient.” Elise paused to look at Kira. “Imagine it—your children stolen from you. Tortured. Sometimes killed. What wouldn’t you do to stop that?”

Kira was quiet in the face of Elise’s pain. Her former friend’s gaze distant as her mind turned inward.

Kira shifted forward, stopping when Elise’s attention snapped to her. Any evidence of distraction gone as Elise gave her a knowing look.

“The same things you’ve already done,” Elise said. “I know you’re the one behind the theft of the master’s new test subjects. How many camps have you destroyed? Three? Four?”

Kira ignored those words to nod at the cylinder. “What is that?”

In the back of her mind, she could sense the thread she associated with Graydon. There was an impression of him maneuvering into position.

“It’s a stasis field. She’s planning to steal the *Mea’Ave’s lenacht*,” the wanderer answered for Elise.

From that, Kira was going to guess the *lenacht* was an offshoot of the *Mea’Ave* in some way. She didn’t need for

anyone to tell her how bad it would be for the Tsavitee or their masters to get their hands on something as powerful as that.

“The *Mea’Ave* won’t let you take it,” the wanderer said. “You’re neither a beloved nor a person of their choosing.”

“I’m aware of Tuann superstition, but that won’t stop me from finishing this mission,” Elise informed him.

Kira let out a small snicker. “From where I stand, former friend of mine, it doesn’t look like a superstition to me.”

Call her crazy but she didn’t think the *Mea’Ave* or its *lenacht* were as vulnerable as Elise assumed.

It was faint but Kira caught a sense of expectation around them. As if forces they couldn’t see were waiting for something that hadn’t happened yet.

“No matter how it appears right now, we’re still friends, Nixxy.”

“If you want me to believe that, put down the sleeper and come with me now. I will speak on your behalf to the Tuann. Maybe get your punishment lightened.”

There was no way Elise wouldn’t pay for all she’d wrought. Hell, she’d broken a prisoner out of a secure facility.

That alone would demand recompense.

There was regret in the shake of Elise’s head. “I can’t do that. Much as I might want. There are people counting on me.”

“You know I’m not letting you take it,” Kira warned.



Even if the *lenacht's* summons wasn't a tug in her chest, Kira would have stood in Elise's way. There was no universe in which she was letting her walk out of here.

If she had to, she'd use force. Though she really hoped it didn't come to that.

"Put down your weapon," Kira ordered, taking a step forward.

Elise pointed the sleeper at her. "Stop."

"No." Kira took another step. "You're not going to hurt me."

She believed that. Wholeheartedly. She had to.

Otherwise, what had this all been for?

The sleeper's barrel shook. "Don't make me do this."

"I'm not making you do anything."

The barrel steadied as Elise gave her a pained smile. "I suppose it was selfish to think I could do this without having to make sacrifices of my own." Elise's finger tightened on the trigger. "Forgive me."

For an instant, shock rendered Kira immobile. Her brain trying to catch up with the fact Elise was really going to do this.

Graydon dropped from the ceiling, landing in front of Kira. His body jerked, a stunned expression on his face before he smiled.

"I made it."

Kira caught him as he sagged forward. “No. No. Graydon.”

Her hands roamed his body.

This couldn't be happening. This wasn't right. She was dreaming.

Yes. The *Mea'Ave* was showing Kira her greatest fear. That's what this was.

There was no pain on Graydon's face as his gaze clung to her features. “I guess Jin was right when he named me your mountain. I'm so glad I could protect you this time.”

Graydon's eyes slid shut. His body went limp, his knees bending as he started to collapse. Kira lowered him to the ground, not wanting him to fall.

She shook him. At first gently. Then more forcefully.

“Wake up, Graydon. Wake up for me,” Kira pleaded.

He was unresponsive. His face still. That presence she'd always equated to a force of nature dimmed. It was shuttered. Sleeping.

He was gone.

Kira felt numb as she looked up at Elise. “What did you do? He's my Raider.”

Elise shot Graydon. She'd taken him from Kira.

“ELISE, WHAT DID YOU DO?”

Tears welled in Elise's eyes as she lifted the sleeper and pointed it at Kira again. “What was necessary.”

The world slowed to a crawl, Kira not moving. A part of her unable to believe Elise would pull the trigger even after what she'd done to Graydon.

The wanderer appeared out of nowhere, grabbing Elise's arm to yank it upwards. The sleeper discharged into the ceiling.

And the world started moving again.

Kira was up and across the platform in seconds. Her fist collided with Elise's temple as she turned to fight off the wanderer.

Elise dropped.

"Why did you do that?" Kira asked Elise's unconscious body.

Elise didn't answer.

The wanderer took a step back, his gaze on the bridge.

"Are you here to try your hand?" Kira asked Aeron where he waited behind her.

Her primus moved below her skin, the symbols that harkened its rise appearing and disappearing from her skin as the *Mea 'Ave* drained it away from her.

"It's tempting. But no, I'm quite content to return to my cage."

Kira finally looked at him. "Why?"

Aeron's face was contemplative as he considered Elise's sprawled form. "Let's just say I think you have a better chance

of freeing our future than her.”

“Is that right?”

Aeron’s gaze was calm. “I guess we’ll see.”

Or Kira could kill him.

Things would be so much simpler if she did. No more questioning whether she’d been right to view them as an enemy for all these years. None of that pesky empathy that might one day cause her death when she hesitated a second too long.

Aeron tipped his chin at the sphere. “What are you going to do about that?”

The sphere pulsed from the tiny streams of manifested *ki* feeding it. The pressure in the room built as power flooded the space.

Cracks ran through the chrysalis as what lay inside began to push its way forth.

The moat of water surrounding the platform frothed as something large moved beneath its surface. Several somethings, Kira realized as bright sparks registered in her consciousness.

Kira didn’t move as three *lu-ong* surged up from the channel of water she would have sworn was much too shallow to accommodate their large bodies.

There was a depth of wisdom in the *lu-ongs’* gazes that hinted at the immense span of years they had lived.

Resembling humanity's myths of eastern dragons, the *lu-ong* possessed a serpentine body. A crest decorated the area around heads that were more birdlike than dragon. Horns and long whiskers trailed from their snouts completing the image.

Of the three, Kira only recognized the big one in the middle. He had a scar along one side of his jaw that trailed over his snout. His crest and whiskers were made up of the colors of dawn. His scales as black of night.

The other two *lu-ong* were equally eye catching. One an azure blue with a silver mane and the other white with flecks of gold.

Aeron and the wanderer drew back in fear as water cascaded off the *lu-ong*'s bodies to shower the platform.

"See, Elise," Kira said softly, not taking her gaze off the *lu-ong*. "I told you it wouldn't be that easy."

The *lu-ong* would have stopped Elise before she ever made it across the bridge. She would have died for nothing.

A deep voice resounded in Kira's mind.

*"Daughter of Harding, Beloved of the Mea'Ave, we have come to witness the birth of the lenacht."*

As if sensing their presence, the chrysalis split to reveal a creature the size of Kira's palm. Curled into a fetal position, its shape was humanoid—at least on the upper half. The lower half looked more like a *lu-ong*'s tail.

Wings that resembled a butterfly's fanned the air gently. Miniature horns jutted from its head.

Colors shimmered across the surface of its translucent skin in a beautiful display that made Kira forget for a moment how dead she felt inside.

Sensing her attention, it lifted its head to fix eyes filled with a wisdom far beyond the span of its short existence.

Kira fell into its gaze, getting lost for a timeless second.

Another voice, this time female, inserted itself into Kira's mind. "*Will you be this child's future?*"

Kira's lips curved as she brushed a finger down the young one's cheek. *Ki* nipped at her skin.

"That's not why I'm here."

She didn't know how she knew that. Just that she did.

It was like the knowledge was inserted into her mind. There, the second she needed it.

The *Mea'Ave*, she'd learned, didn't communicate with words. Rather it relied on a more nebulous method of conveying its meaning.

It was odd, but everything in her told her she was right.

She wasn't called to carry the child to its next home. That task lay with another. The wanderer. Her duties were in a different direction.

For now, she was here to witness the *lenacht's* birth along with the *lu-ong*. A kind of godmother. Someone to watch the *lenacht's* journey and who would pick up the slack if the wanderer fell before his task was complete.

Kira withdrew her hand as tendrils of the *ki* wafting off the *lenacht* sank into her skin, burrowing below the surface to write itself into her bones.

A symbol formed above the Overlord's bands that the *Mea'Ave* had given her after the *uhva na*. Two crescent moons facing in opposite directions one above the other, spikes coming off them. Small dots of varying sizes created a curvy line above and below the moons.

Kira's touch was gentle as she ran her fingers along the violet lines. "Another mark."

It seemed she was collecting them.

She looked up to see the wanderer reach for the *lenacht*, Aeron a fascinated bystander beside him.

"*Welcome, young one. May your chosen guide you with wisdom and courage,*" the scarred *lu-ong* intoned.

The *lenacht* butted its head against the wanderer's hand. Its body started glowing with the same light its sphere had seconds before it burst into millions of tiny sparkling lights that surrounded the wanderer.

At the first touch of the light, the wanderer froze, his body locked in place like it had just been zapped by an electric wire.

He trembled as the lights sank into him one by one, creating an after image of the creature before it too vanished.

Seconds later, his body relaxed.

*“We wish the new chosen and his lenacht luck in your future,”* the female *lu-ong* whispered.

When Kira looked up again, it was to find the *lu-ong* gone. Only a ripple of water to show that they were ever there.

“Well then,” Kira said. “Who wants to be the one to carry Graydon back?”



## TWENTY-NINE

The journey back to the arena took much longer than the one to the chamber. Part of the blame lay in the fact they had two unconscious people to transport. One of whom was a heavily muscled Tuann the size of a mountain.

Kira didn't trust Elise to be there when she returned, and she wasn't willing to leave Graydon behind so it meant taking both with them.

She could have sent the wanderer for help but in the end decided against it.

Once they left this place, her instincts told her they wouldn't be able to find their way back. With the *lenacht* having chosen its carrier, the chamber's purpose was at an end.

Best for everyone if they didn't delay vacating it.

Aeron carried Elise while Kira and the wanderer, whose name she still hadn't gotten, supported Graydon between them.

Their journey went by in silence.

Kira was too heartsick and exhausted to do more than put one foot in front of the other, and the wanderer didn't strike her as the type to engage in aimless chatter.

It wasn't long before they used the same entrance Finn had shown her to find their way to the arena.

A little of Kira's numbness dissipated.

The arena and its floor looked like someone had kicked over an anthill. The bodies of the face changers still lay where they had fallen. As did the bodies of those Tuann who hadn't been lucky enough to survive.

The sands were stained red.

Truthfully, Kira was a little surprised the arena hadn't booted the dead as soon as their hearts stopped. Maybe because they were true dead and not killed by one of the weapon illusions.

In the end, it didn't matter.

Kira and the wanderer hobbled forward, drawing the notice of several of those who'd responded to the emergency.

There was a cry as Amila spotted them. She broke from the crowd, Solal and the rest of Graydon's oshota, including Baran, Isla, and Cord sprinted up the stairs.

"What happened?" Solal demanded as soon as he was within reach.

Kira let Amila and Cord take Graydon's unconscious body, stepping aside while they lowered him to the ground. "He's

alive but unconscious.”

“It’s more than that,” Isla said with a focused look in her eyes.

Kira’s nod was weary. “He was shot by something that induces comas. He will wake up.”

She had to believe that. Any alternative was unacceptable.

Graydon would wake up. He would.

Solal’s gaze moved to Aeron who still held Elise. “Did he do this?”

For once Solal was easy to read. His desire to murder Aeron if Kira answered yes written on his face.

Kira put herself between the two men. “Not him.”

Solal considered her, his expression loosening as understanding dawned. “She has to pay for this.”

Kira forced herself to meet his stare head on. “I know—but not with her life.”

Even with everything Elise had done, she was still precious to Kira. Punishment might be necessary, but Kira wouldn’t let them kill her.

Solal’s stance eased. “You have your own situation to worry about.”

Kira nodded as Jarek, flanked by a contingent of oshota stalked up the stairs. “I expected as much.”

There’d be no more hiding. No more lying.

She supposed it had always been inevitable she and Jin would face a reckoning. From the moment her marking tying her to House Luatha and the Tuann was exposed, they'd been barreling toward this point.

At least after this she'd know for sure.

The Tuann would either accept the price their children had paid for survival, or they'd turn from them.

Kira straightened her shoulders, readying herself for the upcoming battle.

If Jarek felt a sense of victory at the turn of events, Kira couldn't see it in his face. There was none of the antagonism Kira expected as he stopped to take in Graydon's prone body and Aeron where he held Elise.

"You're under arrest for harboring a soul bound and your possible role in its creation," Jarek informed her.

Kira lifted her chin. "His name is Jin, and he's the reason Devon isn't dead."

If nothing else, that should have earned him a bit of goodwill with any reasonable group of people. Unfortunately, the Tuann were far from that, veering toward hysterical when anything having to do with the words "soul" and "bound" were linked together.

"You may be right, but there is a reason the Tuann outlawed his kind. If found guilty of his making, you will face punishment." To the oshota beside him, "Take her."

Before they could move, Roake's oshota flooded the landing where they stood, surrounding the emperor's inquisitor and the rest.

Harlow stepped out of their midst. Wren appeared from behind him, his gaze landing on Kira as if to assure him she was still in one piece.

She knew the instant he spotted Elise, his body going utterly still as shock coated his face.

A pained sound left him as he took a step toward her. "My child."

He lifted a hand to touch her face, stilling as she shied away from him slightly. A mask dropped over his expression as he let his hand fall to his waist.

He didn't try to touch Elise again, but neither did he retreat from her side. His stance signifying his silent support.

"You will not touch Kira," Harlow declared. "As a daughter of Roake, she will remain in our custody until her trial as is our custom."

Jarek inclined his head. "That is acceptable as long as she receives the same treatment any Tuann facing such charges would."

Harlow's tawny golden eyes found Kira's, emotion moving in them before he looked away. His jaw flexed as he nodded at Makon.

The Marshal stepped forward, taking a black band from one of Graydon's oshota.

“Forgive me, heir,” Makon said, stopping in front of Kira.

There was a hint of apology in his eyes as he held up the two-inch wide band of metal. It was a collar for her neck, Kira saw. Once on, there would be no removing it.

Kira was betting it contained a tracker. Not to mention some means to knock her unconscious or kill her if her jailers decided it necessary.

Worse was the nasty feeling it projected. A sense of wrongness that felt like it was trying to latch onto Kira’s *ki* and leech it away.

And she hadn’t even touched it yet. Oh joy.

If she let them put that collar on her, she’d be defenseless in a way she hadn’t been in a long time. Her chances of escaping later almost nonexistent.

“Trust your Overlord,” Makon advised.

Kira flicked a look at him, holding still as he reached forward to snap the collar around her neck.

Cold bit into the skin around her throat as the collar settled into place. Ice spread in her veins, traveling from her neck until it invaded every inch of her body.

By the time Makon stepped back, the last remnant of *ki* in her body had vanished, leaving behind a heaviness that dragged at Kira’s limbs. It sapped the color from the world, turning it a little less vibrant.

Makon nodded at Harlow. “It’s done.”

“Happy now?” Harlow asked.

“I know you don’t believe this, but I have the best interests of our people at heart,” Jarek said calmly.

Harlow lifted a lip but didn’t comment.

“What about Elise?” Kira asked when Makon gestured for her to precede him. “She’s a daughter of Roake as well.”

Harlow hesitated at the sight of Wren hovering next to his daughter, his blank face not quite masking the yearning. A flicker of emotion showed in Harlow’s expression before it was stamped out.

“And she shall be treated as such,” Harlow agreed.

Solal didn’t give way as a pair of Harlow’s oshota approached.

“She has not formally been acknowledged as a daughter of Roake, like Kira has. Moreover, she injured the emperor’s Face. I cannot allow her to leave our custody,” Solal said.

“A compromise, then,” Makon inserted smoothly when Harlow’s expression darkened. “Members of Roake will accompany her until her fate has been decided.”

Harlow and Wren shared a long look before Harlow inclined his head. “That is acceptable.”

The matter settled, Makon once again gestured for Kira to follow him.

Not yet. There was still one matter to settle.

Kira searched and found Jin in the grasp of one of Jarek's oshota. "What are you planning to do with him?"

"When he wakes, he will face trial," Jarek answered.

Kira wasn't a fan of that suggestion. Right now, Jin was defenseless and would be for days. He'd have no way of protecting himself if the Tuann decided they would prefer to skip holding a trial for him.

Devon pushed his way through the oshota. "You don't have to worry. I won't let anything happen to him."

There was a promise in his gaze, a level of determination Kira hadn't seen in him before.

Whatever the rest of the Tuann thought, there was at least one who saw beyond Jin's outer layer to the amazing person inside.

Devon would protect Jin. That would have to be enough.

Kira nodded, her gaze sweeping the arena in search of those she'd had to leave behind when she answered the summons.

"The injured, including Finn and your human, have already been taken to the Shining Palace to receive treatment," Makon informed her.

A wave of relief went through Kira as Makon's words removed the weight from her shoulders.

Now was the time to take a step back in retreat. As long as the Tuann came to the right conclusion they could have all the trials they wanted.



And if they didn't—well, Kira wouldn't be held responsible for that. They'd been warned.

If the Tuann thought something like this collar could contain her, they had another think coming.



*Four days later*

Kira waited at the end of Graydon's bed as Quillon completed his examination. The healer's expression was regretful as he shook his head. "I can't tell you anything different than what the other healers already have. He is sleeping comfortably, but there is no way to tell when he will wake up."

The answer hurt. As did the knowledge that there was nothing anyone could do.

"Thank you for taking the time," Kira told Quillon.

His face was full of sympathy as he squeezed her hand before making his departure.

Finn saw him out as Raider joined her at the bed. His arm was in a sling. He was nearly back to full health, but the healers wanted him to keep it immobile for a few more days since they weren't sure how a human's physiology would react to their medicine.

They seemed to think different meant weaker, but Kira had already caught Raider testing the range and motion of his arm.

She was betting it wouldn't be long before he ditched the sling for good.

"What did you tell Elena about her mother?" Kira asked.

It was the first time they'd had a chance to talk since the arena. Elise and Aeron had been taken into custody immediately after Kira.

Unlike Kira, Elise didn't get to keep a modicum of freedom in the form of the prisoner collar. Instead, she'd been placed under guard, her movements restricted.

Kira didn't know if that meant a prison cell or a nice room. Quite frankly, she couldn't bring herself to care.

It would be a long time before she forgot Elise's betrayal. Much less forgave it.

According to Finn, Elise had asked to speak with Kira.

Not her daughter. Not Raider.

A fact that had to burn.

Raider shook his head. "I haven't been able to figure out what to say."

Kira could imagine. How did you tell your daughter that her mother not only doesn't have any desire to see her after a lifetime of absence but that she also attacked the aunt that raised her?

Kira wouldn't even begin to know where to find the words.

"Wren and Auralyn are watching her for now. The old man looks like he has aged a century," Raider confessed.

Another person Elise's actions had hurt.

"How are you handling this?"

Raider snorted. "About as well as you're handling that." He nodded at Graydon's immobile form.

Kira smirked. "You mean fragile. Angry. Like there's this ball of rage you don't know what to do with because if you do anything, try to set it down or aim it somewhere else, you're afraid it might burn down the world?"

"Something like that."

The answer drew a smile from her. It died as she returned her attention to Graydon's face.

"I should be happy she's alive." Kira's throat was tight. "I spent so much time feeling lost when I thought she was dead. This should be a good thing."

There had been a point where she would have given anything to have Elise back. She hadn't cared how that might come about.

It turned out she'd overestimated her threshold of acceptance.

"Elise's return has brought up a lot of bad feelings in all of us," Raider agreed. "It's made me question a lot of what I thought I knew about her."

If anyone understood the conflicting feelings in Kira, it would be Raider.

Elise had once been his everything. To have her returned in such a way that he had to doubt what they'd once had must be agonizing.

Kira couldn't forget that she wasn't the only one Elise had betrayed.

What she'd done to Raider and Elena was arguably worse.

"What a pair we make," Kira said, tilting her face to the ceiling.

Raider grunted as Finn returned, the oshota taking up a position against the wall. Kira had tried to convince him to take a seat since he'd been hurt worse than Raider, but the man had refused.

He was taking his loss of consciousness after the battle with the face changer and her choice to confront Elise alone hard.

He'd been even more bull-headed and stubborn since he'd reported to her side immediately after he woke up.

"The question of Elise and her return can wait," Raider announced. "Jin's situation is more pressing right now. Things don't look good. I've already put a call in with Jace. He doesn't think the Consortium has the resources to pursue a case for Jin being their property. Evidently, while we've been here getting our asses kicked, the Consortium has decided they no longer wish to abide by the Haldeel's treaty. Several factions have motioned to reject the demands the Haldeel and Tuann have made as recompense for the Consortium's part in the attack on the quorum."

Kira's feeling of disconnection faded as she gave Raider a sharp look. "What are you saying?"

Raider's face was grave as he met her eyes. "The Consortium plans to withdraw from the alliance with the Haldeel."

Kira sucked in a breath. "How can they do that?"

Did they not remember how many died in the last war against the Tsavitee? Without the Haldeel's protection, they would be ripe for invasion. They'd lose everything they'd worked to rebuild over the past decade.

"They are convinced they're strong enough to withstand anything the Tsavitee throw at them."

Kira let out a huff that told him what she thought of that idiocy. "They're fools."

Raider's grunt said he agreed. "Be that as it may, Jace says he lacks the influence necessary to stop this. He's in the process of relocating his forces to one of Himoto's secondary bases."

"The ships Luatha gave him?"

"Also relocated. He'll keep them hidden until they're needed."

There would come a time Kira would have to reckon with the fact that Centcom and the Consortium had decided to blow up a treaty over which so much blood had been spilt to forge. But not now.

Right now, all she had room for was Jin.

Humanity could wait.

“The Haldeel?”

Kira still had allies among them. A royal who owed Jin her life.

Tierni would do everything in her power to help. The question was timing. The trial began tomorrow.

Even if she could get in contact with Tierni, there was no guarantee the other would be able to come to their aide on such short notice. Or that she'd be able to cut through the political red tape to do so.

Raider scratched his jaw with one thumb. “Alexander put in a few calls. He used the communication marble the Haldeel gave you. Not that he shared how any of those calls went.”

“He wouldn't. Alexander likes to play things close to the vest.”

It meant his machinations were harder to counter but it also left those with most reason to be concerned in the dark.

Raider started to turn and then hesitated. “You should prepare yourself. Elise will be there tomorrow.”

Kira's hands clenched and then relaxed. She dipped her chin in acknowledgement.

“I have to face her sometime, I suppose,” Kira said.

“Tomorrow is going to be tough, and there's no guarantee you'll win.”

Raider didn't need to say the consequences if they lost. The Tuann would destroy Jin and likely Kira in the process.

Raider's shoulder brushed hers as he lowered his voice. "This might be the point where you consider an alternative exit strategy."

Their gazes met as they shared a knowing look.

Kira dipped her chin to show she understood. "I'll keep that in mind."

Raider's lips twisted. "You do that, Phoenix."

Finn watched Raider depart, saying nothing as the human lifted a hand toward him in goodbye.

Only when he was gone did Finn push off the wall. "I'll wait outside."

Kira appreciated the gesture, knowing how hard it was for the oshota to leave her on her own.

Finn closed the door behind him, giving Kira privacy to share what might be her last moments with Graydon.

If only she knew what to say. The exact series of words that might make what she was about to do okay.

Kira moved to the head of the bed, taking a seat in the chair waiting beside it. She settled into the soft cushions with a heartsick feeling.

"This is quite the predicament," Kira informed Graydon.

The door behind her opened as someone stepped into the room. Kira chose to ignore them as she brushed a lock of hair

out of Graydon's face.

"I *do* love you. That's part of what makes this so hard." Kira reached for Graydon's hand, taking it in hers. "I won't let them kill Jin. You might not approve what I do next."

It was a warning—for herself and the room's other occupant.

Kira would like to believe any rescue attempt would end with no one hurt except for a few bruises and maybe some broken bones, but she'd be lying to herself.

Graydon possessed a protective nature that rivaled Kira's own. He might not be able to forgive her for doing what she felt she had to.

Kira's clogged laugh held a touch of self-deprecation. "I guess Elise is a little easier to understand now."

Maybe Elise's loyalties to Kira and Raider had conflicted with what she felt was her duty to the generals. If so, Kira couldn't help being a little sad for all of them.

Pain twisted Kira's heart as she gave him a sorrow filled smile. "This is why I tried so hard not to love you."

She'd seen this coming and yet fell for him anyway.

She was a fool.

With nothing left to say, Kira rose. She hovered over Graydon for a moment before leaning down to whisper in his ear. The words were familiar ones. The same ones he'd given



her on Ta Da'an and then again standing in front of Roake's fortress.

Speaking the oath of Aliria to him felt right. Important.

A promise that even if circumstances and life separated them, she would be here if he ever needed. His shield and his sword.

It might be all she could ever give him.

Kira pressed a kiss against his lips and straightened to find the emperor watching her. He said nothing as she stepped away from the bed and advanced across the room.

Throughout it all, Torvald made no move to prevent her departure.

It was with mixed feelings that she stepped into the hallway. In any situation where you were facing a superior force, the element of surprise couldn't be overstated. An element she'd just shot to hell by giving the emperor warning.

Call it a sign of respect to the man lying comatose in that bed or some vain hope that the emperor had even the smallest iota of empathy for his firstborn.

Either way, she'd let him know her intentions. What he chose to do with that knowledge was in his hands.

Kira found Finn standing at attention outside the door. No greetings were exchanged as they made their way toward Roake's avenue by silent agreement.

Since Finn had woken up after his injury, the mood between them had been uncharacteristically strained. More so than could be explained by Kira's actions of heading to the sanctum alone.

Of Finn and Raider, she was the least injured.

Still, he was quiet. As if he was wrestling with something only he knew.

Kira left him to his silence, more preoccupied with memorizing every detail of their journey to be worried about what was going on inside his mind. The way the sun's rays slowly faded from the sky. The golden tinge of the horizon. The flags flapping in the wind. The salty smell of the ocean and the brisk breeze against her face.

A cold front was coming. There'd be snow soon.

Too bad Kira wouldn't be here to see it. She'd have liked to have experienced a snowfall in Roake's fortress. Snug in the warmth of her room drinking a cup of *laug* as nature decorated the world with white.

They reached the entrance of the fortress all too soon.

Finn stopped at the door, his expression unreadable. He gave her an abrupt nod. "I'll let you go alone from here. There are a few things I need to take care of."

Kira didn't think she was imagining the unspoken goodbye as Finn bent in a respectful manner and touched his chest.

He looked up. His eyes catching hers for a long moment before he strode away without another word, leaving Kira

staring after him speechless.

Where was he going? His room was in her suite.

As her near constant shadow for weeks, it was hard to wrap her head around his sudden departure.

She hadn't realized how lonely it would be with him no longer at her side.

Feeling at a loss, Kira went inside the fortress, making her way to her floor where she found herself standing in front of a door that wasn't hers.

The entrance to her parents' bedroom beckoned. A silent reminder of the things she'd be giving up if she followed this course she was considering.

She owed it to herself and them to know what she'd be missing out on.

Kira gathered herself, searching for the courage to lift her hand and take that final step.

In the end, it was easier than she thought. Almost too easy as she set her hand on the knob. There was a pause as a hum of electricity swept through her, the *ki* contained in the lock reading her biometrics.

The door gave under her touch, opening a centimeter before stopping.

Kira's heart pounded in her ears as she stared at the small gap of the opening. This was it. The last thing she needed to do before tomorrow came.

She wasn't ready. Probably wouldn't ever be.

Which was why she should just do it and get it over with.

Kira gave the door a push before she could talk herself out of it. The door creaked open, revealing a room much like the one Harlow had given her.

Kira hovered on the threshold, slowly taking in the furnishings. Though its inhabitants had been absent for nearly a century, the room looked like it had been empty for no more than a few days.

Harlow had kept it exactly how it was the day her parents died.

The bed was made but a robe had been tossed over the end of it. Its presence making the room's emptiness all the more sorrowful.

Her mother had good taste, Kira saw. The robe a delicate weaving of the finest silk. The pattern a work of art in and of itself.

Belongings were scattered throughout the rest of the room. Small things that pointed at the occupants' personalities. A variety of weapons mounted on the walls that must belong to her father except for the pair of daggers whose hilts looked like they were made from a butterfly's wings.

Those would be her mother's, Kira guessed.

There was a small replica of one of Roake's battleships in the process of being assembled on a table in the corner. The

pieces still arranged in neat little lines as if waiting for someone to finish putting them together.

Her parents had been neat but not immaculate. The room had a lived-in feel even after all this time. As if waiting for its owners return.

A picture of Liliana and Harding was hung on the wall. The image of her father was of a younger, less rigid version of Harlow. Love radiated from his gaze as he stared at the side of her mother's face.

Kira resembled him. Her mother too—in the eyes and her smile. But Harding was the one who'd donated most of her looks.

They seemed happy.

They *were* happy. It was written in every line of their features. Whatever their ending had been, they'd lived a good life.

If nothing else, that was a source of comfort as Kira crossed the floor. Their lives weren't filled with only tragedy. They'd laughed and they'd loved and made a million good memories between the two of them.

Kira's only regret was that she didn't get a chance to make any of those memories with them.

The sight of a bassinet in the corner stopped her in her tracks. Other items intended for babies were arranged neatly around the bassinet. A bookcase with toys already put in their homes. Play stations with soft rugs meant for a baby's knees.

Above the bassinet was the Tuann version of a mobile. *Lu-ong* swam together, rotating through various poses when Kira pushed the mobile. Light caught their scales, creating a shimmering pattern that would probably have left a baby enthralled.

It took a lot of time and effort for the artisan who had carved this. Care and love were embedded in every inch of the mobile, showing the level of thought they'd put into this area.

Kira hovered over the bassinet, staring at the tiny blanket crumpled inside. Hesitant, she reached for it, picking it up to stroke the material. It was soft except for the slightly raised ridges along one corner.

Embroidery, she found as she investigated further, tracing the lines someone had stitched into the blanket.

Whoever had done them had struggled. The lines slightly wobbling and the pattern a little crooked.

Her fingers encountered a round object that gave slightly under her touch.

A hologram formed over the bassinet. Her mother leaned over something in her hand, the blanket Kira held, her face full of love as she pulled a needle free of the fabric.

“Are you working on that again?” a man teased from out of sight.

Harding moved into view, dropping a kiss onto Liliana's head as he gently touched her round stomach.

“Don't tell me you're recording again.”

Harding flashed her a grin that was a replica of Kira's own, unaffected by the faint note of rebuke. "I want our child to know she is loved."

Liliana rolled her eyes. "How will she ever forget with how much you are sure to spoil her?"

Harding leaned one hip on Liliana's chair, his arm sliding behind her as he touched the embroidery. "No more than you, my heart. It's a fine name you've picked for our daughter."

"Do you think she'll like it?"

So much love shone from Harding's face as he leaned forward to kiss his wife. "She couldn't ask for a better one."

The hologram stopped. Liliana and Harding's foreheads pressed together as they looked down at Liliana's handiwork.

"I still don't know what name they gave me." Kira held up the blanket. "I can't read Tuann."

In the last months she'd learned to speak it fluently, but she hadn't quite progressed to the level of reading. Jin had always been there for that.

Harlow joined her beside the bassinet, his hand finding its way to the blanket. "That's an easy thing to fix."

Kira nodded, swallowing down her grief.

Nearly a hundred years but she could still feel the hole Harding and Liliana had left. If that didn't say all she needed to know about how amazing these two people had been, she didn't know what would.

“It’s ironic then that I may not get the chance,” Kira confessed.

Who knew what tomorrow would bring or if she’d even be alive to see it?

Kira set the blanket down, smoothing it flat as she straightened. “I’m not sure I’m going to be able to be the person you need me to be.”

Roake’s heir. Harding’s daughter.

Wasn’t it strange? Kira had spent so much time fighting Roake’s hold over her and now she didn’t want to go.

She would have given a lot to stay—but not Jin.

He was her line in the sand. Ancient Greeks would have labeled him her soul mate. Not in the romantic sense, of course. Once, the word soul mate had quite literally meant, the other half of a person’s soul. That was what Jin was for her. Her soul mate.

She’d sacrifice anything for him. Even her place in Roake.

“Child, I’ve never expected more of you than what you were willing to give.” A hand cupped the back of her head as Harlow pulled her into his embrace. “Your ship has been prepared and is ready to depart should you choose.”

Kira lifted her head to look up at Harlow. This was a gift. An unexpected and dangerous one.

His enemies could use this against him. Claim his actions constituted treason.



By now, he had to know she wouldn't go quietly. She'd try to take Jin with her and in so doing leave the aftermath firmly in his and Roake's laps.

Harlow's gaze was calm. "If you run, they'll hunt you. Eventually, they'll catch you. A soul bound isn't something they'll allow to run loose."

"I don't know about that. I have a few tricks up my sleeve."

"You'll have to face this eventually. It's better to do that now when you still have some leverage."

His hold on her shifted to touch the new marking on her forearm, his meaning clear.

Kira didn't say anything as he stepped back, heading for the door.

"My name," Kira started as he stepped out of the room

Harlow stopped and looked back at her.

"What name did they give me?" Kira asked.

"Layana. It means protector in our language."

Then he was gone.

"It is a beautiful name," Kira whispered, alone again.



"Does she realize the consequences will fall to you if she runs?" Caius asked.

The commander eyed those entering the audience chamber, an irritated sentry whose presence managed to warn off all those who thought of disturbing his Overlord.

As a commander and having taken a pod of his own, there was no need for Caius to act the part of an oshota any longer. Yet every time he was home, that was exactly the role he designated for himself every chance he got.

Outsiders saw it as a sign of respect, but Harlow leaned more toward it allowing Caius privacy to nag. Like now.

“Your family has always been foolishly loyal to the end.”

Harlow shot the other man a sidelong look. “Is that a complaint?”

Other Overlords would have seen Caius’s words as evidence of insubordination. His mouth would have gotten him cast out ages ago had anyone else been his master.

It was a pity the man was so damn talented, or Harlow would have been tempted to follow suit.

Caius’s grin was unrepentant. “Now, now, don’t get riled. I was simply pointing out the obvious.”

Harlow let out a quiet snort as he returned to his vigilance.

A steady hum came from the audience chamber behind them as Overlords for some of the most powerful Houses and their advisors filed inside.

Kira and Jin’s situation had made the rounds. Many had voyaged quite the distance to be a part of the spectacle as their

fate was decided.

Caius leaned over, lowering his voice. “I’ve placed our forces on standby. They’re ready to act in your defense the moment I give the word.”

“If anyone hears you, they would consider that treason,” Harlow murmured, his gaze lingering on the prisoner waiting across the hallway from him.

Elise was surrounded by oshota, her hands and feet unfettered by chains. The glint of cuffs around her wrists were from an inhibitor, designed to cut her off from her *ki*.

But to the casual observer she would appear to be free.

It was clear she was waiting for something. Harlow had a feeling he knew what that something was—or rather who.

Wren and Auralyn stood a short distance away, trying to hide the torment he knew each felt. Wren’s gaze met Harlow’s briefly before the oshota dipped his chin in a sign of respect.

“How’s he coping with this?” Caius asked.

“He’s pulled every favor he could to get her a lighter sentence.”

“Will it be enough?”

Unlikely. The Houses were out for blood.

Harlow didn’t know how lenient the emperor would feel. Particularly with the news of his eldest son’s fate and subsequent trial.

A storm had landed that might sweep the entirety of the Tuann into its grip.

Harlow wasn't certain their empire would weather it unscathed. Crashing waves were threatening to sunder their Houses. Already, he could see the cracks as alliances shifted and fell.

Torvald was in a difficult position. With his firstborn being at the eye of the storm, the Houses would argue he was unable to be impartial at the slightest sign he wasn't following the law. If he wasn't careful, they would use it to unseat him from his throne.

Civil war would break out and the Houses would turn on each other the same way they had the last time no one sat on the throne.

It would be chaos.

And Harlow's niece was standing at the center of it all.

Elise straightened as she caught sight of something down the hall, her expression intent as if mentally begging the other person to look at her.

Harlow wasn't surprised as Kira stepped into sight. His niece met his gaze for a moment before stalking forward.

"That's a surprise," Caius said.

One side of Harlow's mouth tilted up. "I never doubted her."

Caius reached for his communicator. “I suppose I can call off our forces now that we won’t need them.”

Harlow placed a hand over Caius’s, stopping him. “We don’t know that yet.”

Caius paused before dropping his arm, the message unsend. “As I said before—foolishly loyal.”

## THIRTY

**K**ira kept her gaze fastened on her uncle's as she made her way down the hall, a part of her still surprised she'd decided to come. She'd spent hours last night in her parents' bedroom. It wasn't until dawn stole across the horizon that she'd arrived at a decision.

To stay and take her chances.

It was a risky move that threw both her and Jin's fates into question. The thing was neither she nor Jin had ever backed down from a fight and this was one of the biggest they'd ever faced.

They owed it to themselves to see it all the way through. No matter the ending.

Only then could they move forward.

Not to say she wouldn't fight if they tried to destroy Jin. She'd tear this planet apart if she had to in defense of him.

But she wanted that chance to prove not all soul bound were what the Tuann thought. It was a decision she thought Jin would approve of.

Finn joined her, appearing from behind her like a wraith.

“Did you take care of what you needed to?” Kira asked.

“It turns out my preparations weren’t necessary.” He inclined his chin. “At least not yet.”

Kira sent him a look, reading the promise there that left her with the sense she hadn’t been the only one preparing for a departure.

It was on the tip of her tongue to ask him if he’d really considered going with her when she left. A question she refrained from voicing in case she’d misread him.

This wasn’t the right venue for such questions anyway. The hall far too crowded to allow for a private conversation.

More gazes turned toward Kira as the Tuann milling in the hallway caught sight of her arrival. A murmur started before several began moving toward the audience chamber as it became clear the trial would soon start now that the guest of honor had arrived.

Blue darted in Kira’s direction, her shorter stature making it easy for her to go unnoticed among the much taller Tuann. Her expression was furious as she caught up to Kira.

“Nixxy, what the hell is going on?” Blue snapped, blocking Kira’s path. She turned to follow as Kira side stepped her and kept going. “You’ve been AWOL for days and now I have to hear that Jin’s under arrest and might possibly be put down? What the fuck?”

“I can’t explain right now,” Kira told her, wrestling with a sense of impatience.

Blue didn’t deserve her irritation. Especially since her anger was justifiable. In her place, Kira would have been angry too at being left so far out of the loop.

Underneath Blue’s annoyance was also a thread of fear for Jin, reminding Kira that the two had once been close. Blue had always considered him family. They shared a love for all things technological that had bonded them.

Blue had started to speak when she fell silent again, her gaze moving beyond Kira. Her shock palpable.

“She’s alive?” A fragile hope bloomed on Blue’s face. “What about the rest of the Curs? Does this mean they’re alive too?”

Kira started to shake her head and then stopped. She hadn’t fully considered that.

No bodies had ever been recovered, the debris field of the half-destroyed moon making them impossible to find.

Their graves were still empty.

Elise had survived. Why not the other two?

Though after how much Elise had changed, Kira didn’t know whether to hope for their survival or the preservation of their memory that their deaths would ensure.

Kira shook her head as Raider and Elena arrived.

“Did you know about this?” Blue asked.



“Not until recently.”

Blue wasn't listening, her head shaking back and forth. “This is—I don't know what this is.”

Blue's gaze landed on Elena, suspicion growing. “Wait a minute. I knew it was odd you were hanging around a kid when you hate them. She's yours, isn't she?”

Raider twitched.

“Holy shit, you're a dad,” Blue gasped, seeming equally parts titillated and horrified. “I don't know whether to sympathize or give you a high five.”

Raider's jaw flexed. “How about neither?”

“Sure thing, boss.” Blue cackled before heading for the chamber doors. “I'm going inside. I want a good seat before the trial begins since I don't trust certain people to share important details regarding the outcome.”

When an oshota moved to block Blue's path, she bristled like an angry hedgehog. After a moment, the oshota lifted his hands and moved out of her way. Blue swept forward with a haughty tilt of her chin.

“Who is she?” Elena asked.

Raider scrubbed a hand over his face. “A Cur and a very good friend.”

Elena's face puckered in a frown. “Are you sure it's not more than that?”

Kira almost laughed at the way Raider seemed to freeze.

“What are you talking about?” Raider hissed, sounding almost scandalized. “She’s like a sister. An obnoxious and annoying little sister.”

“Hm.” Elena folded her arms over her chest not seeming convinced.

Raider’s eyes held shock as they met Kira’s.

Despite the tense situation, she couldn’t help but chuckle at his discomfort.

“Kira?”

Kira stiffened at the soft voice coming from her side, Raider doing the same in front of her. Elena’s face was a blank mask as she studied the woman who had given birth to her.

Elise’s gaze darted to her former lover and daughter. Pain and other things filling her face for a brief second before she tore her glance away to focus on Kira with a desperation that was carefully hidden.

Kira could see it, though. All this time and she could still read Elise. A little, at least. The other woman cared about Raider and Elena. Too much. Though she was trying not to show it.

Kira steeled herself against feeling any sympathy for the other. Elise chose this path. Not Kira.

If Elena was upset at Elise’s determination to ignore her, she didn’t show it, instead examining her mother with the same penetrating stare she reserved for her enemies.

Kira pretended the other woman wasn't there as she ushered Elena in front of her.

“Are you really going to ignore me?” Elise asked with a faint huff.

Raider moved closer to Kira and Elena, his stance protective.

Hurt showed in Elise's face before it vanished. “Kira, come on.”

Kira maintained her silence and continued forward with her niece.

Elise caught Kira's wrist, bringing her up short. Elena whirled, slapping at her hand and breaking her mother's grip.

Elise drew back with a stricken look that changed to one of determination as she focused on Kira. “Please.”

“As long as Graydon is still in a coma, I have nothing to say to you.”

Elise caught her elbow again, her expression pleading. “You don't know everything.”

Kira yanked her arm out of her hold. “Whose fault is that?”

Kira reached her hand out to Elena, the girl taking it as they turned their backs on Elise. Elena's hand trembled in Kira's, evidence her niece wasn't as unaffected as she was pretending.

“I wasn't willing at first,” Elise said in Japanese, her voice desperate. “They took my future. Pieces of me that I have to get back.”

Elise's gaze dropped to Elena, a meaning in them that made Kira's heart skip a beat.

No. Please no.

"She's not the only one of mine," Elise said.

Kira thought she would be sick. It was something humans had been doing for centuries to help couples unable to have children. The years since had seen an improvement on the technology. Made it less invasive. Upped the odds of success.

She was relatively sure the camps had used it on a few of the older female and male children. Those whose abilities and bloodlines they thought worthy of preserving to experiment with later.

She'd never been able to confirm that though.

"Your enemy's children aren't the only ones at risk," Elise said. "In either case, I cannot walk away."

If true, it would change everything.

The problem was Kira didn't know if she trusted the words out of Elise's mouth. She could be lying. She was good at that.

There was a reason the forty-three had chosen Elise to infiltrate the Curs during the war. The woman had always been a talented spy. A chameleon, if you would.

Raider shoved his way between Elise and Elena, inserting himself between them. "Step back."

Elise's face softened, unable to conceal her yearning. "My light."

“You don’t get to call me that,” he told her in a hard tone that made Elise flinch. “We would have helped if you’d asked. You didn’t.”

And in Raider’s mind that was a betrayal.

Raider turned his back on Elise, dismissing her as if she was nothing to him. “Let’s go. The Tin Can takes priority right now.”

Kira’s nod was slow as she looked beyond him to Elise, catching the sorrow the other woman wasn’t quick enough to hide.

Elise’s gaze hardened. “You know I can’t leave them out there.”

Kira didn’t know anything anymore, and right now, she was too tired to figure it out.

A hand slid into Kira’s as Elena looked up at her, a question in her gaze.

Kira nodded, patting the hand in hers before taking a deep breath and striding forward. Her uncle met her at the door to the audience chamber.

“You came,” he said with a glint of approval.

Kira jerked a shoulder up. “I didn’t have anything better to do.”

He didn’t remark on that as his gaze dropped to Elena. “And you listened to none of my instructions.”

Guilt warred with stubbornness on Elena's face as she lifted her chin at him.

Harlow sighed before nodding at Wren. Kira's *seon'yer* allowed the emperor's oshota to take his and Auralyn's spot beside Elise as he held out his hand to Elena. "Come, *di aloashka*. You will sit with me during this, and I will make sure you cause no trouble."

Elena's reluctance was obvious as she clung to Kira's hand.

"Go." Kira released Elena and patted her arm. "Keep your head down and listen to Wren."

She sent an appreciative look Wren's way, grateful he'd watch over Elena in her stead. Her *seon'yer* hesitated before stepping forward to wrap Kira in a hug.

"Have faith, my *yer'se*. You are not abandoned yet," he said into her ear with one final squeeze.

Kira gave him a shaky smile. "I'm here, aren't I?"

If that wasn't a show of faith, she didn't know what was.

"Stay the course." Wren hesitated. "And thank you for what you did for my daughter. I know you could have settled things in an alternative fashion."

By that Kira assumed he meant, she could have killed Elise.

The thought had occurred—especially when Graydon's coma lingered with no end in sight. But such an action would have been impetuous. As angry as she was with Elise, that didn't mean she wanted her truly dead.

“I couldn’t. She’s family.” Kira watched as the oshota guarding Elise prodded her toward the audience chamber. “Even if it doesn’t feel like it right now.”

If there was one rule Kira lived by, it was that you didn’t kill your family. Not unless there was truly no other option.

Elise might still die if the Tuann decided to exact vengeance. But it wouldn’t be by Kira’s hand.

It was a small distinction—but an important one.

The thought sent a pang through her. Perhaps she wasn’t as sanguine about the possibility of Elise’s demise as she was pretending.

Kira wasn’t sure how much of that hesitation came from Elise’s confession. For all she knew, Elise’s desperation had compelled her to feed Kira lies designed to prey on her sympathy.

Wren’s nod held exhaustion. These last few days had taken their toll on her *seon ’yer*, aging him. To find his daughter after all this time, only to see her arrested had to be agonizing.

Wren didn’t say anything else as he ushered Elena in front of him, trailing behind Elise and her guards.

Auralyn paused beside Kira, waiting until Wren was out of earshot. “You’ve done a good job until now, but your part in this is done. We’ll handle those two. From here on out, your focus should be on yourself and that soul bound of yours. Nothing else.”

It was good advice from a woman who treated her words like precious treasures to be doled out only when absolutely necessary.

Kira nodded, taking comfort in the knowledge that if she wasn't here Auralyn and Wren would pick up the slack. They'd watch out for Elena and though it would hurt, they would accompany Elise to the bitter end if the Tuann decided to exact justice.

With this she'd freed Kira from the last thing holding her back. Elena's safety was the only thing that might have prevented her from doing what she had to for Jin.

Auralyn had just removed that weight from her.

Auralyn dipped her chin in a gesture of respect before sauntering after the rest.

"Not following them?" Kira asked, looking up at Raider.

He frowned after Auralyn and the other two, his expression grumpy. After a moment, he shook his head. "No. An idiot got themselves arrested and can't be trusted on their own."

"I know you're not talking about me."

Raider flashed her a smile. "Of course not. I mean the other idiot in my life."

Kira rolled her eyes before focusing on Harlow. Her uncle waited on the threshold of the audience chamber, Caius the only one at his side.

Harlow held out a hand to her. "Ready?"



Kira took it, trying not to let him feel the way it trembled. “No, but life doesn’t usually care about that.”

Approval glinted in Harlow’s gaze followed by a wry agreement. “No, it doesn’t.”

Caius moved impatiently at their front. “Enough chitchat. Let’s get this done before someone discovers my forces aren’t where they’re supposed to be.”

Kira gave Harlow a startled look.

Her uncle’s smile had a crooked slant as Caius strode forward, stopping at the top of the stairs where he posed.

“Overlord of House Roake submits his niece, the heir of Roake, daughter of our House, beloved to the *Mea’Ave* and the *lu-ong* to judgment under the emperor’s authority.”

“Those are some interesting titles,” Kira murmured in a low voice. “Even I didn’t know the last two.”

“Caius is skilled at setting the tone in situations like these. The Overlords need a reminder of exactly who they risk upsetting if you’re threatened,” Harlow answered.

In Kira’s opinion, he was taking a certain amount of latitude by linking her to the *Mea’Ave* and the *lu-ong*. But sure, they could do it that way.

Caius’s speech wound down. “She will be tried for the crime of participating in a soul bound’s creation as well as hiding its presence from an inquisitor’s inquiry.” Caius broke off to look at Kira. “How do you plead?”

Kira didn't have to think. "Guilty."

She lifted her chin to meet the stares of those assembled head on, her lips quirking as a murmur ran through the crowd.

Her answer threw Caius off balance as he gave her a disgruntled look. "That's an unusual tactic. Most people would have pled their innocence in these circumstances."

Kira let go of her uncle's hand, taking the last few steps to the top of the stairs by herself as Finn and Raider moved to flank her. "Why lie? I did exactly what they're accusing me of."

There was no use denying it.

"Jin is soul bound. My purpose isn't to hide that; it's to make the Tuann realize he's not the monster they think."

Kira started for the stairs, leaving Caius and Harlow behind as she began her descent. She didn't bother trying to convince Finn and Raider to remain with the other two. Neither man would listen anyway, so it was best to save her strength.

Kira swept a gaze over the crowd, finding her cousin Liara sitting at the bottom of the amphitheater. Given the four formal looking chairs positioned beside hers, each containing the symbol of their House, Kira assumed that was where the major Overlords sat.

Every chair was occupied except for Roake's. It seemed they'd all come to watch the fate of Roake's heir be decided. Lucky her.

Except for Liara, the Overlords were strangers to Kira. Two men and a woman.

Kira's gaze lingered on the sharp features of Danai's Overlord, interested in a glimpse at the man who could very well be the enemy pulling the strings from the shadows.

Or her enemy's patsy.

Kira was still undecided.

Danai's Overlord was an attractive man if you went for the sort who looked like they might stab you in the back the moment you took your eyes off him.

The Overlord shifted in his chair to fix an assessing look on Kira.

From that one glance, she could tell this was a dangerous man. It wasn't in the amount of *ki* he could wield or his physical capabilities. This was someone who liked to slink in the shadows. To call him a snake would be an insult to snakes everywhere.

He was the sort who'd use you up and then toss you to the side when he was done with you.

Enemy met and identified.

With this, it no longer mattered if this man was a patsy or a mastermind. He'd be a problem for future Kira one way or another.

She could see it in the way he watched her. A scavenger waiting to pick apart her bones once other hunters finished

with her.

Oh yeah. Definitely someone she'd need to keep an eye on.

Kira dismissed him from her mind as she focused on the cage of light in the center of the floor. Jin hovered inside it, careful not to brush against the walls.

The cage sat directly in front of the bench where the emperor's Justice sat.

Eurus looked even more like a vampire lord today. His hair braided back from his face to expose the points of his ears. The high collar of his jacket framed the pale column of his neck.

His red eyes were expressionless as Kira reached the bottom of the stairs.

Two oshota appeared from nowhere to block Finn and Raider's path who had accompanied Kira in her descent.

"She must go alone from here," the oshota told them.

Raider's protest cut off when Kira glanced at him.

"We'll be right here if you need us." He gave her a look filled with meaning before glancing up at Finn. "Isn't that right?"

Finn didn't hesitate, his gaze landing on hers. "For once, the human is not wrong."

The responsible thing to do would have been to tell them no. To not get involved if things went south.

Kira didn't have it in her to do that. She'd need their help if she really had to fight her way out of this place, a prospect that was looking slimmer and slimmer by the second from how many oshota were gathered along the edges of the room.

"Understood," Kira said, stepping past the oshota and crossing the floor toward Jin.

She stopped in front of his cage, lifting a hand to touch the energy barrier. Lightning speared through her as it zapped her fingers.

Kira's expression didn't change as she considered the red marks on her skin from contact with the barrier. It seemed they weren't taking Jin lightly.

Her arm had gone numb all the way up to her elbow from a second's contact with the barrier.

Extracting him would be difficult. Perhaps impossible.

"You okay?" Kira asked.

"Never better. Who wouldn't want to experience the joy of imprisonment?"

Sarcasm. He couldn't be too bad off if he was still capable of snark.

Kira cleared her throat. "They hurt you?"

"You know they didn't. Devon made sure they couldn't touch me." Sadness tinged their bond along with grief. "You should have run."

Kira couldn't quite manage a smile. "Where would I go without you? You know what sort of trouble I'd get into. I wouldn't even make it a month."

"True." Jin moved closer to the barrier where Kira stood. "I'm sorry I got us into this."

"Does this mean you regret saving your brother?"

Jin's instant denial filtered through their connection. "Of course not."

"I don't either." The edges of Kira's eyes crinkled as she gave him a tiny smile. "There's never been a need for apologies between us. Let's not change that now."

Jin should never have to hold himself back for her. He'd made the correct decision in sacrificing his possible safety to help Devon. He wouldn't have been him if he'd made any other choice.

"I'm with you to the end." No matter what that entailed. "You'd do the same for me."

Kira looked up at Eurus's impenetrable face. Truly, the man was beautiful. Almost otherworldly.

"Should we get started?" Kira challenged.

The emperor's Justice stirred, a statue come to life as the room quieted.

Jarek strode onto the center of the floor, bowing slightly to the emperor on his throne, Devon at his side, and then Eurus.

He shot Kira a quick glance. “Since she’s already pled guilty, there is little need for a trial. Although I admit that the actions of this soul bound do not seem to hold much in common with those from our stories, it does not change our laws. Any time a soul bound is encountered it is to be destroyed. It is the only merciful thing to do. As much pain as that fact might bring to others.”

A man spoke from behind Kira, his voice coming from the vicinity of the Overlords. “Danai is in agreement with the inquisitor.”

“Asanth agrees as well,” another man said.

The crowd stirred.

Kira put her back to Jin’s cage as she faced down several Tuann who encroached on the floor. Terrel was among them, his face an ugly mask as he pushed his way forward.

A concussive wave came from behind Kira, a wall of *ki* picking up those who’d trespassed on the amphitheater floor and throwing them back into the stands.

“I am the only one who can pass judgment in this room. Another display like that and you will be the ones facing punishment.” Eurus’s powerful voice echoed throughout the room, cutting off the chatter.

Danai’s Overlord sat back in his chair, crossing his legs. He was undaunted in the face of Eurus’s anger. “Then hurry up and do so. You have your confession. What more do you need?”

Kira's hands trembled as she clenched them into fists, hating how helpless she felt in all this. A pointless bystander, unable to do anything but stand there.

Eurus was still for a second before he glanced in Torvald's direction, the two trading a long look. At Torvald's side, Devon made an aborted motion and took a step forward to face the emperor and Eurus.

"You can't kill him. He's saved my life twice. That must count for something," Devon pleaded with a beseeching look.

Kira stilled, for a moment feeling hope as Devon fought for his brother.

A hope that was dashed by Torvald's unyielding expression. He was going to do it. He'd let their enemies destroy Jin.

It would kill him, but he'd do it for the good of his people—everyone but Jin.

Kira was already in the process of moving, whirling to face the barrier. Before she could touch it, a clap of sound rocked the chamber.

A rip tore through the fabric of time and space a few feet away from her. A black gash from which stepped a wanderer and another.

"See, I told you, you didn't have to worry. We made it just in time," the wanderer said, removing his hand from Alexander's shoulder.

Alexander was hunched in on himself, his expression slightly sick as he tried to keep from throwing up.



The wanderer clapped his hands in glee and stepped forward. He was a stranger. Likely one of the ones who'd accompanied the wanderer Kira had met in the *adva ka*.

“Who are you?” Jarek demanded as the stranger looked around, his face still covered by the helmet of his armor. “What are you doing here?”

Kira fought the urge to take a step back as the wanderer changed direction toward her, his arms open as if to embrace her.

Kira slid away from him. There was only one person she knew capable of doing what he'd just did and who would also be in the company of Alexander.

And that person was someone she usually went out of her way to avoid.

“Not him. Any of the others but him,” Jin pleaded as Jarek motioned for the oshota surrounding them to remove the wanderer from the floor.

Alexander finally straightened, sending a glare at the oshota to warn them off. “I wouldn't.”

The wanderer reached up to remove his helmet, revealing a face that made Kira want to curse as he gave her a cheeky grin. “Hey there, little sister. Miss me?”

“Not even for a second, Pallas.”

The man's head was shaved on both sides, his hair long on top. It gave him a roguish look that was compounded by the trim beard along his jaw and the piercing through his eyebrow.

Metal glinted from the rim of his ear where there were several more earrings. Like Kira, his ears had been docked, but unlike her, one was missing a sizable chunk from a fight of some kind.

“Why would you bring that psycho?” Kira hissed at Alexander.

Pallas was who the forty-three sent when they were feeling a little vengeful and wanted to wipe clean whatever or whoever had offended them. Considering the man had named himself after the Titan god associated with war, it was no wonder he was their first pick whenever they needed a hammer or a strong fist.

Then again, maybe Pallas was exactly what the forty-three thought was needed for this situation.

Pallas caught Kira, grabbing her cheeks and smushing them together as he pressed his face against hers. “Don’t tell me you’re still sore about that time I almost killed you.”

Kira drove her elbow into his side, biting back a whimper as pain lanced her arm from the hard impact with armor.

“Multiple times,” Jin shouted, lifting so he could see Pallas better.

Pallas’s grip eased as he got a thoughtful look on his face. “Oh yeah, you might be right.”

See, this was why Kira hated him. The man couldn’t even bother to remember how many times he almost killed her.

“As to your question, he didn’t give me much choice,” Alexander informed her with a glare at Pallas. “He was already here anyway.”

Pallas strolled over to Jin’s cage, tapping against it much the same way Kira had. She couldn’t describe how unsettling it was to know their first instincts were exactly the same.

Pallas rubbed his fingertips together with a thoughtful look before sending Kira a wink. “Thanks for the care you gave my *yer’s*e. He learned so much from his duel with you. I couldn’t have asked for a better lesson. We’d have been here sooner, but I wanted to see him to safety first.”

Kira stiffened, a few things finally clicking into place. She should have seen it sooner. No wonder the wanderer’s moves had been so familiar. He learned them from Pallas.

Even that habit of chatting with his opponent while battling. It was the same.

Pallas waved at Jin through the cage. “Little brother, this is quite the pickle you’ve landed yourself in.” Pallas didn’t pay any attention to Jin’s snarl as he finally looked in Elise’s direction. “Traitor, I’ll deal with you later.”

Elise’s eyes narrowed. “I see your social skills haven’t improved any.”

Pallas waved a hand in dismissal as he finally focused on Torvald and Eurus. He’d always been good at identifying the most dangerous prey in a room and locking on target.

What was stranger was how neither had tried to interrupt his grandstanding, letting him parade around without making the slightest effort to stop him.

It told Kira they were aware of his identity as one of the forty-three. The Overlords too, given how they were staring at him like he was a juicy steak they were set on devouring.

Fools.

Pallas was much more likely to devour them.

“I seem to remember a warning being left that your lost children would judge you by the way you treat our youngest siblings.”

Pallas didn't raise his voice, but he didn't have to. His words echoed so even those located in the back would hear every word he said.

“I suppose this mockery of a trial is your answer,” he said with a twist of his lips. “How disappointed the others will be.”

The Overlord of House Danai sat forward. “What House do you belong to?”

Interest showed on the faces of the other Overlords except for Liara and Harlow.

“It's always the same with you lot. House. Pah. Like that's all that matters.” Pallas rolled his eyes up to the ceiling and sneered before sweeping the five major Overlords a mocking bow. “To answer your question, I was born to House Shivie. Stolen at the age of fifteen and thrown into a fate worse than death.”

Asanth's Overlord frowned. "House Shivie has no affinities like the one you just demonstrated."

Pallas stared, his expression flat before it shifted in one of those lightning-fast changes he was capable of and a large reason why Kira steered clear of him whenever possible.

"Very good eye. You're right, it's not an affinity of that House—or any Tuann lineage. It's a product of our master's tampering, a gift they took from an interesting race called the Blat that you've probably never heard of."

For all that he was still smiling, there was a calculative look on Pallas's face as he took in the reactions of the Tuann.

"None of your children are the same as they were when they left you. We all have a few extra odds and ends, courtesy of our masters in their pursuit of a genetically superior creature who would serve at their beck and call." Pallas lifted one shoulder, ignoring the cold looks on Alexander and Kira's faces as he revealed secrets no one wanted out. He had a sly expression on his face as he slid a sidelong glance in Kira's direction. "My sister tried to spare us by sugar coating the matter. What she doesn't realize is we never expected acceptance from the Tuann. We remember how close-minded you bastards are. The way you refer to humans as half dead because of their inability to sense their soul's breath. You are far more like our masters than any of us care to be reminded of."

Danai's Overlord stood from his chair in challenge. "Then why have you come?"

Pallas looked over at Alexander with a faint smile. “I think that’s your cue.”

Alexander stepped forward, raising his arm and the pinky sized tablet on his wrist. He flicked several data streams to Eurus.

“The Haldeel Royal, *za na ri na* Tierni, sends greeting and a warning. Should the Tuann choose to persecute her savior, Jin, for the crime of his existence, the Haldeel will see it as an intent to exterminate an intelligent species and declare war,” Alexander informed Eurus and Torvald. “She also sent a message, ‘if the Tuann cannot recognize the treasures they have in the two souled, Jin and Kira, the Haldeel would be happy to claim them as their own’.”

Eurus took his time to peruse the letter Tierni had written, forcing the rest of the chamber to wait as he considered Alexander’s argument.

Kira felt like she was standing on a bed of hot coals as anxiety twisted in her stomach. Jin held still in his cage, but she knew he, too, was hoping for a miracle that didn’t involve bloodshed.

Finally, Eurus lifted his head and looked at the emperor. “The Haldeel Royal makes an interesting case.”

Torvald’s expression shuttered as he dipped his head. “Since my judgment is considered compromised, I’ll leave the decision to you.”

Eurus dipped his chin in acknowledgement, his gaze catching Kira's. "I side in favor of the soul bound and recommend the inquisitors re-examine whether a soul bound is automatically deserving of the fate they've historically been given."

There was an outcry from those behind them as Terrel shouted an objection.

"You can't be serious," Terrel argued. "That thing is an abomination."

"You have heard my decision. I suggest you step lightly Overlord of House Votair. You have yet to meet your own judgment for your actions during the *adva ka*," Eurus warned, making Terrel blanch. "We have not forgotten what you've done."

Terrel backed down, chastened. Danai's overlord shot him a disgusted look as the other withdrew.

Eurus waited until he was certain there would no more objections before turning his attention to Jarek. "Inquisitor, I know this goes against your order's vows."

Jarek was staring at the ground in thought. He blinked and raised his head.

"It does—and while we may not be able to touch the soul bound at this time, we will be watching him for the first sign of madness." His eyes were cold when he glanced at Jin. "At that point, we will not ask for permission but rather execute without regard for the political ramifications."

Eurus nodded. “That is satisfactory.”

“There is, however, the matter of the soul bound’s creation,” Jarek added before Kira could breathe a sigh of relief.

“No,” Harlow snarled from his seat.

Jarek folded his hands in front of him. “I move for her memories and the soul bound’s to be examined to ascertain the truth behind his creation.”

Harlow’s roar shook the chamber as several oshota appeared to point their en-blades at him. Caius held him back with a tense look on his face.

Kira wasn’t sure what about Jarek’s suggestion had set Harlow off, but it was clear the Overlord of Roake was in the process of losing his shit in a way that might start the war Alexander and Pallas’s interference had just prevented.

“What do you say, little sister? Willing to take a trip down memory lane?” Pallas asked with a wink.

“Why do I get the feeling you’re hoping I agree?”

Pallas’s grin was wicked. “Because I am.”

Kira shot a quick glance at Harlow, giving him a tiny nod to say she would be fine. Her uncle calmed but not before sending a murderous glare Jarek’s way.

The inquisitor had better be careful from now on. He’d made an enemy of Roake’s Overlord—and by extension the rest of the House.



Kira squared her shoulders. “For Jin. Anything. But first—I want the room cleared of all these people.”

“You are the one on trial. You have no right to make demands,” Danai’s Overlord said.

Kira ignored him as she met Eurus’s eyes. “My memories aren’t fodder for entertainment. They’re private; I’d like them to stay that way as much as possible.”

Eurus considered her with a gaze that felt like it saw too much. “I can’t empty the room all the way, but I can dismiss the lesser Houses and those whose opinion carries no weight in these matters.”

That would leave an audience far larger than Kira was comfortable with.

“I can also extract a vow, witnessed by the *Mea’Ave*, from those who remain that states they will not share anything of what they learn here. Should they break their vow, the *Mea’Ave* will bind their *ki* and their status as Overlord will be revoked,” Eurus continued when Kira held silent for too long.

After a moment of hesitation, she nodded. “Very well.”

That was probably the best offer she was going to get.

Eurus waved his hand in dismissal. Obeying some rule of hierarchy only they understood, those Tuann located in the back rose, filing out of the room.

To Kira’s disappointment, the Overlords of the five major Houses and several of their higher-ranking members remained seated.

When the room was only a quarter full, Jarek approached Kira. “Are you ready?”

Kira narrowed her eyes at him in confusion.

“My affinity lies in the realm of the mind,” Jarek explained. “I will access the memories you have surrounding this event and display them for the rest to see.”

Oh joy. The man who hated the soul bound the most would be the one infiltrating her mind. Could this day get any better?

Kira steeled herself and nodded. “Do it.”

Before she lost her courage.

Jarek touched his fingers to her forehead. There was a crashing sound as Kira’s memories swamped her, yanking her under before she could even take a breath.



A cruel smile split their captor’s face. “We have a winner. Bring him.”

A boy with golden eyes was dragged out of formation, already sobbing as they put him on his knees and proceeded to beat him.

Rain poured down, mixing with the red of his blood as she held perfectly still, weapon extended before her.

There was a low pained-filled sound like that of an animal in agony that didn’t seem to go with the scene. It was followed

by a soothing voice. “Sire, I know this is hard, but this is only a memory. His pain would have faded long ago.”

To her left, whispers started as the others began planning. “We must leave tonight. We can’t delay any longer.”

Her weapon dropped to the ground with a clatter as she stepped out of formation to face their captors with a challenge.

There was a flash, and she was running through the woods. Desperation beating at her, accompanied with the knowledge they were being hunted like mice in front of a fox.

A hand being ripped from hers as a boy tripped.

Eyes the color of daisies were filled with tears as the boy looked up at her. “Go. Don’t wait. You’ll never make it with me slowing you down.”

He was right. She wouldn’t.

She cast around for a hiding place, finding one in the hollow beneath the trunk of a fallen tree.

“Stay here. I’ll be right back.”

Another voice intruded. “How ashamed Roake must feel for naming an heir so lacking in courage.”

The disbelief and lack of hope on the boy’s face made it clear he thought she planned to abandon him. She didn’t have the time to argue, already sprinting through the forest.

She stopped as soon as she detected the presence of another.

She slunk through the darkness, waiting as her victim left the safety of their four wheeled vehicle to shine a light into the

trees. She swung her knife, slicing his throat with the same move they'd forced her to practice a thousand times.

Her prey never made a sound.

She let his body fall, darting to the four-wheeler and climbing aboard. It took a second of study to figure out how it worked.

The vehicle roared to life, and she pointed it in the direction of the boy's hiding place.

"What was that about her courage?" someone taunted.

The scene shifted.

The area under the log was empty. There was a growing desperation as she searched.

Where was he?

Noise from the copse of trees to her left had her freezing. A pained scream disturbed the night.

The girl dashed to her chariot, kicking it awake and aiming it toward that sound.

She shot forward, the edges of the world collapsing in on themselves as darkness claimed her.

"What happened? Why aren't we seeing her memories anymore?" someone demanded.

"There's damage," another person said, sounding surprised. "Let me—ah, there it is."

The perspective changed as they slid deeper into her mind, down a thread that wasn't entirely her own.

The little boy looked up at a monster. He should have died. That would have been better than being caught. Despair choked him as his captor raised his arm.

The girl exploded out of the darkness on a mechanical steed that breathed smoke and fire.

She leapt off her ride, allowing it to crash into one of the monsters as she landed on the back of another. Her arm flashed as she plunged her makeshift blade into the monster's back over and over.

“Damn, she’s a vicious little thing,” someone said in an admiring voice.

The boy didn’t move as those holding him down let go, rushing for the girl.

She pushed off her victim, flipping in midair. She landed, her blade flashing again as she cut through the larger foes. A beautiful goddess of vengeance.

For the first time in his short life, the boy knew hope. She was his light in the darkness. The only person who’d come for him—not once but twice.

A watcher drone swung out of the shadows. A flash came, hitting the girl in the chest.

She collapsed with a shocked expression, taking all that beautiful light with her.

The boy screamed, an agonized sound ripped from the most primal part of him as the world turned gold.

When he could see again, everyone else was on the ground—including the girl. The drone that had extinguished her light next to her.

The memory jumped again. The moon and stars visible through the tree branches as a boy with gold eyes appeared above her.

His mouth moved as he reached for the drone that killed her and set it on her chest.

The girl could have told him it was useless, but she was too tired and the moon too fascinating to bother.

It was a shame she wouldn't see what lay beyond the forest. She'd always wondered what was out there. Now she'd never know.

Her thoughts were already fading as a golden light tried to swallow her. Only it failed as the violet lightning housed in her center rose to absorb it instead.

## THIRTY-ONE

Memories clung to Kira as she struggled her way back to consciousness. There was shock on the faces of those around her as she rolled onto her side from where she'd landed.

"Tin Man?" Kira asked, not caring what those around them thought.

Kira should have been the one in that drone. She was the reason he had to live the way he did.

The shame and guilt choked her.

If not for her, he could be normal.

"I forgot that. You were the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen," Jin reminisced. "An avenging goddess that I'd given up hoping for."

Kira's gaze dropped. She didn't deserve that praise.

"Don't regret it," Jin told her in a fierce voice. "If this was the price for saving you, it's one I was and will forever be willing to pay."

Tears threatened.

“Besides, we had an amazing life all things considered,” Jin said in a cheerful voice Kira didn’t deserve.

She forced back the desire to cry. “You’re right. We did.”

They’d built a legend for themselves. Together. If he thought the loss of a biological body was a trade he could live with to have all that, it wasn’t her place to argue.

“Does that answer your question?” Pallas asked Jarek. “Jin’s soul ending up in the drone was an accident of his own doing. A tragic result of him trying to save her life.”

Jarek considered the floor, his hair hiding his expression.

“Kashori will side with the two souled,” a woman spoke when the silence lingered.

“As will Luatha,” Liara declared.

Asanth waved a hand as he stared at Alexander. “If it will help us keep ties with our lost ones, we are willing to change our stance as well.”

“You have my answer already,” Harlow told Eurus when he looked at him.

The Overlord of Danai sat back in his chair with a dissatisfied expression that said he knew he’d lost the battle.

With four of the five major Overlords siding with Kira and Jin, no amount of arguing on his part would turn the tide.

Eurus looked at Jarek. “And you?”



The inquisitor finally raised his head, meeting Eurus's gaze. "I will rescind my request for judgment—for now."

"Yes!" Elena shouted from where she and Wren had remained when the majority of the room cleared out.

She and a few others, including Finn and Raider, had managed to be exempted from the eviction because of their ties to Kira.

The other Tuann who'd remained, Kira was less happy about, but she decided to concentrate on what was important.

They'd won. It was hard to believe.

Eurus waved a hand, banishing the cage of light containing Jin.

He shot forward with a whoop, crashing into Kira's arms.

"Isn't this disappointing?" Pallas observed Kira and Jin from far too close a distance. A fact that was slightly concerning since neither of them had been aware he'd moved. "I was looking forward to escorting you home."

Kira started to respond as her eyes caught on Danai's Overlord giving Terrel a considering look. Since he had a stake in things, Votair's Overlord had been allowed to remain for viewing of Kira and Jin's memories. A fact she hadn't liked at all.

"Overlord Votair, please step forward to face your trial," Eurus intoned behind her.

Terrel's laugh held bitterness. "This isn't fair. My House will be disbanded while you face no consequences."

His arrogance was breathtaking.

Kira wasn't the one who sacrificed her own people in this plot. That was him. He deserved what was coming to him.

"No, I won't let it end this way." He shook his head and glared at Kira. "You took what's mine. Let me return the favor."

Too late, she realized he stood perilously close to Wren, Auralyn, and Elena.

He flicked a glance at the pair of Danai oshota standing behind the trio. "Do it."

Wren whirled, his en-blade flashing up as the chamber erupted into disarray.

The room's doors burst open as dozens of Tuann belonging to different Houses poured inside to attack those present.

Harlow and Caius shouted something as they laid waste to any unfortunate enough to target them. The emperor's oshota closed around him and Devon, protecting them.

Pallas roared with a laugh as he threw himself forward. Alexander grimaced, following. Finn headed in Kira's direction as Raider sprinted toward his daughter.

Wren defended against his attackers as Auralyn snagged Elena. She shoved the girl behind her as Terrel bore down on them.

Kira started forward, Jin zooming past as Terrel threw something at Auralyn.

She deflected, flicking *ki* at the object. Surprise filled her face when it detonated on contact, a shrill screech of sound nearly causing Kira's ears to bleed before a blast shook the chamber.

When she recovered, it was to find Auralyn on the ground. Half her face covered in blood. Her arm missing. And Elena being held as a shield in front of Terrel as he held something to her throat.

"I wouldn't," he snarled in Raider's direction.

Raider stumbled to a stop; his eyes locked on his daughter's scared face.

A bubble of calm formed around Terrel as those who'd been about to attack him held off, too afraid of what the Overlord of Votair would do to the child in his arms.

"Let the child go," Jin instructed. "She's not the one you want."

"No, she's not." Terrel's features twisted as he glanced at a still Elise, her expression haunted as she stared at her daughter in his clutches. "That bitch failed. Who do you think they'll punish now?"

Him, of course.

Another person might have felt bad for him. Not Kira. Not after he'd chosen to take Elena hostage.

The fighting around the room gradually stopped as Harlow and the oshota from the other Houses took control, killing or rendering immobile their attackers.

“But not if I give them something more important.” Terrel gave Kira a nasty smile as he caught her tiny flinch. “Yeah, you didn’t think anyone would notice, did you? Surprise.”

Wren slipped into Terrel’s blind spot, rage twisting his face into something Kira didn’t recognize. So all-encompassing and horrible, it was hard to believe he was her *seon’yer*.

“Ready when you are,” Jin said through their comms.

Elise made a small movement as Terrel shifted his grip, finally revealing the object he held. An item that looked more like a strange looking needle than a knife.

“Stop him,” Elise screamed. “It’s a summons marker.”

Terrel was too quick, injecting Elena with the needle. He shoved her away as he lifted a stone-like object Kira knew from a glance probably wasn’t a stone at all. His smirk turned victorious. “I win.”

Wren stabbed his blade into the Overlord’s back. Terrel’s face went slack as the stone fell from his hand, hitting the stairs and bouncing twice before it landed at Kira’s feet.

“Guess not,” Jin told him as Elena dashed forward.

Kira caught her. “It’s okay. You’re going to be okay.”

Her hand went to Elena’s neck. No blood. That was good.

“Oh, Nixxy,” Elise said in a lost sounding voice.

Kira barely heard as Elena collapsed, her face wreathed with pain. Kira caught her, holding her up as whimpers left her niece.

“It hurts,” Elena gasped with none of her normal bravado. “It feels like I’m being ripped apart.”

“We need a healer,” Kira told Harlow, trying to hold Elena still as the girl started seizing.

“It won’t help,” Elise said. “He injected her with a marker. Right now, her body is fighting the summons, but it will lose.”

“What does that mean?” Raider demanded.

“She’s being recalled to a Tsavitee home world,” Elise informed him.

Kira shook her head. “No.”

That wasn’t going to happen.

“Blue!” Raider screamed. “Get in here.”

Blue raced down the stairs, having entered sometime during the fight. Kira didn’t question how she had managed that. Blue probably took notice when the Tuann who’d invaded the audience chamber headed inside and decided to follow like the nosy person she’d always been.

Blue knelt beside Elena. “Tell me about this device.”

Her hands were already busy assembling something only she would understand.

“You can’t stop it,” Elise said, her voice anguished.

“Not with that attitude I can’t,” Blue snapped. “Quit wringing your hands like some melodramatic heroine and help me figure out how to fix this.”

Elise moved closer. “You’ll have to find a way to disrupt the isotope that enables the summons.”

“You mean like a signal disrupter? Easy enough.”

Blue pulled several objects from her pocket, disassembling them in a blink before adding them to her creation.

“Jin, do you—“ Blue cut off as the small turtle hair pin that Elena always wore levitated from her head.

A spawn like the *lu-ong* bracelet Kira still wore, its parts unraveled as Jin extracted a small glowing piece of metal in the shape of a horseshoe and floated it toward Blue.

“Ah, thanks. I needed that for my battery source,” Blue said, flashing a smile as she plucked the object out of the air and inserted it into her device. She added a few more odds and ends before snapping the last wires into place. “That should do it.”

While Blue worked, Eurus gestured at the emperor’s oshota who had taken control of the room. “Escort everyone out. Right now. And I want an investigation into what happened here.”

Blue didn’t look up as the survivors of the battle began filing out of the room, her concentration entirely on her device. The rest of them might as well not have existed for how much she was aware of them.

“Let’s see if this works.” Blue pressed on a button and then waited with bated breath.

A scream ripped from Elena as she writhed, her body convulsing.

“Turn it off,” Raider shouted. “You’re hurting her.”

Blue’s face fell as she rushed to pull apart the connections on the device.

Elena’s convulsions stopped as her body went limp.

“I don’t understand,” Blue said. “That should have worked.”

Elise’s face was sad as she shook her head. “The Tsavitee would have anticipated such a solution. They would have built safeguards into the marker to ensure the target suffered, leaving you no choice but to let this happen.”

Alright. Kira had had enough of this.

She reached for the collar around her neck. She needed her *ki*.

“Get it off,” she ordered. “Get it off right now!”

“It won’t work, Kira,” Elise said softly.

“You don’t know that,” Raider snarled.

“Even the most powerful *ki* user wouldn’t be enough to stop this, isn’t that right?” Elise said with a look in Torvald’s direction.

To Kira’s surprise, the emperor hadn’t evacuated during the attack, instead remaining.

Regret was on his face as he shook his head.

“Did you know about this?” Raider demanded, getting in Elise’s face. “Did you know what he planned to do to our daughter?”

Jin nudged Kira’s arm, slipping under it to press his shell against Elena in wordless comfort.

“I would never do anything to jeopardize our child,” Elise snapped. “You should know that.”

Raider’s laugh was ugly as he pointed at Pallas. “That man said it—traitor.”

Elise flinched. “It doesn’t matter what you think of me. There’s no stopping this once the marker is injected. Either someone uses the recall stone to complete the summons, or she will be torn apart on a molecular level. Your choice, lover.”

For a moment, Kira thought Raider would hit Elise. The other held her ground, not looking away from him.

A hiccupping cry from Elena forced him to back down as he turned toward his daughter, taking Kira’s place.

“It’s going to be okay, sweetie. I’m here.”

Wren looked up from where he was giving emergency aid to Auralyn. Elena’s aunt was conscious, but just barely. Her eyes were glazed with pain as her armor sealed itself around her wound to lessen her bleeding.

Kira could see the willpower it took for the other woman to stay present. Wren cradled her in his arms, an agonized



helplessness on his face that matched Kira's own.

"I can end her suffering if you can't," Pallas offered.

In his mind, such an action would be a mercy. A twisted one maybe but mercy nevertheless.

"You know what they're like. Death would be preferable," Pallas warned.

"Touch her and I'll separate your head from your shoulders," Kira snarled, sounding like someone else in that moment.

Pallas shrugged, unaffected. "She's your child. Your choice."

Kira wasn't listening as her gaze landed on the syringe still clutched in Terrel's curled up fist. She reached for it, sliding it free.

Raider's hand landed on hers. "I'm going too."

Kira's gaze held his. "Okay."

There wasn't enough for two.

"You won't survive," Elise informed her, drawing a step closer. "They'll detect you the instant you arrive."

Kira raised the syringe to her neck. "I don't care."

Elise struck the oshota beside her with two sharp blows, tossing a tiny ball bearing into the air as she took a knee and pressed her face to it.

The flash disoriented those left standing—including Kira and Raider.

A hand closed around Kira's, yanking the syringe from it.

Kira blinked her eyes into focus as Elise inserted the needle into her neck and pressed down on the plunger. Wren grabbed her hand an instant too late, pulling the syringe out.

"You can't save her—but I can," Elise informed Kira with a resolute stare as she raised her hand to show Kira the stone she held.

Kira whirled back to Elena, grabbing her niece's face and tugging it toward hers. She only had seconds.

"You survive. You hear me? I don't care what you have to do or who you have to kill, but you don't die. I'm coming for you."

Elena's eyes contained a fear that gutted Kira. She leaned forward, pressing a kiss against Elena's forehead as tears started to fall. God, this was hard.

"I *will* come for you," Kira promised again.

The *lu-ong* Joule had returned to her the day after the battle with the face changer shifted, sliding off her wrist and onto Elena's chest. It disappeared into her clothes as Kira felt Jin do something to their bond.

It dimmed for a moment before flaring to life again. The balance was wrong, only a thread of his presence existing where it was supposed to be as his sphere thumped to the ground and rolled.

Awareness shone in Elena's gaze along with shock.

Kira smoothed a finger down her cheek one last time.  
“Protect each other. I’m right behind you.”

“Find Odin. The Allfather is your best bet of locating us,”  
Jin informed her through their comms.

Kira steeled herself and looked at Elise. “Do it.”

Elise’s nod was the same one she’d always used as acknowledgement when Kira gave her a difficult order. A combination of determination mixed with a resilient fire.

Kira grabbed Raider, yanking him away from Elena as Elise squeezed the stone.

A cry of grief tore out of Raider as both vanished, leaving behind the burned scent of ozone as he collapsed to his knees.

Kira’s grip on him loosened as her gaze met Harlow’s.

She’d lost Elena. Graydon might not wake up. Jin was gone.

Distantly, she was aware of Harlow moving toward her, his hands grabbing her arms as the black hole where Jin should have existed threatened to swallow her.

No. No. She had to find Elena. She couldn’t collapse. Her niece was counting on her.

Jin was gone though.

“It’s okay, Kira,” Harlow’s voice was low and soothing.  
“Let yourself break for a moment. We’ve got you.”

A ringing sounded in her ears as that black hole got bigger.

Jin was gone. JIN WAS GONE.

Kira's knees stopped supporting her. A wail left her. The cracks she'd managed to patch over all these years, the ones stemming from her first loss of the Curs, opened wide.

Something exploded from Kira, taking her consciousness with it.



Harlow hovered on the edge of the room, taking in the defeated figure of his niece where she sat on the balcony watching the waves of the ocean. Finn a silent sentinel in the corner.

Harlow didn't think the man had slept or taken his gaze off his charge in the four days since the event.

That was how much time had passed since Kira had retreated so far into herself no one could reach her.

Not Harlow. Not Finn. Not anyone.

Since then, Harlow had put their House to searching every nook and cranny of the universe for where Elena might have been taken. Wren was a man possessed as he sat vigil over Auralyn's bedside while issuing orders for the rest of their pod.

Auralyn had lost her arm, the healers unable to salvage it. When she recovered from the rest of the damage, she'd have to decide what course her recovery would take. Whether that

meant allowing the healers to construct her a new arm or an alternative treatment plan.

Raider was a ghost. He and the other human female had been locked in his room since the event, activating every contact they knew in their hunt for a person Raider called Odin.

As far as Harlow could tell, they'd been unsuccessful so far.

"How is she today?" Harlow asked Quillon.

The healer shook his head in regret. "The same. I suspect her link with the soul bound is the reason she hasn't come out of this yet."

It made a certain amount of sense. The method of the soul bound's creation had irreversibly tied Kira and Jin together. With that connection strained due to the distance between them, it was possible Kira's mind was forced to shut down to cope.

"I don't think she would have survived the soul bound's destruction," Quillon offered softly.

Another reason Harlow was thankful for the emperor's machinations. Though most wouldn't recognize Torvald's hand in events, Harlow did. The emperor's actions hadn't been overt, but he'd helped create the window for Alexander and that other to step in the way they did.

"If this continues, however, I fear she is at risk of fading," Quillon said with another look in Kira's direction.

"She's strong. She'll pull through this."

She had to. If she didn't, Harlow would fade with her. He had no interest in existing in a world where none of his family remained.

A knock came at the door.

Caius marched inside without waiting for an acknowledgement. His face was serious as he crossed the floor. "Graydon is awake."

A whisper of sound came from Harlow's side. He looked over to find his niece standing beside him.

Violet eyes stared into his. "I will see him now."

## TERMS

- **Adal** – Loosely translated it means the reckoning – challenging to dangerous undertakings
- **Adva Ka** – A rite of passage Tuann must pass
- **Akieri** - similar to an en-blade. One must utilize their *ki* to extend the blade for use.
- **Aksa** – Fist sized animal who is stubborn and blood thirsty
- **Alja** – Haldeel word for spy. Often used in reference to the ilsa
- **Almaluk** – the crown jewel of the Haldeel empire. It doesn't have a fixed location but rather wanders space.
- **Azala** – Child
- **Azira aliri** – Cat ear shaped flower
- **Aza** – Polite form of address, ex: Sir or Ma'am
- **Balial** – the material with anti-ballistic properties often used in the clothes Kira is given by House Roake
- **Buka** – a carnivorous fish raised by the Haldeel
- **Cheva nier** – My love
- **Choko trees** – A tree on Ta Sa'Riel
- **Coli** – Affectionate term of endearment similar to sweet heart
- **Colina** – A formal form of coli
- **Etheiri** – Place of remembrance
- **Etair** – Horse-like creature
- **Di aloashka** – term of endearment given from someone older to someone younger
- **Feilli** – Symbiotic creatures in the ocean
- **Fendrik** – An enemy on Roake's border

- **Hakeeb** – the defensive mines deployed around Ta Sa'Riel
- **Iffli** – Insult. Roughly translated – mutt, half-breed, waste
- **Ilsa** – alien arachnid that is sometimes used as a spy or pet
- **Kattas** – Warrior forms
- **Keeva** – Alcoholic drink
- **Ki** – Soul's breath
- **Kithiw** – derogatory term by the tsavitee used in reference to humans. Loosely defined it means fodder or food
- **Kueper** – A snack wrapped in a pastry
- **Laug** – A type of tea popular among the Tuann
- **Lenacht** – It means blessing in Tuann and is in reference to the Mea'Ave's child
- **Loaw** – Hoverbike
- **Lu-ong** – Dragon like creature who is able to manipulate ki.
- **Mea'Ave** – The soul of the planet
- **Ooros** – Beast of burden, pulls carriages, looks like a cross between a bison and woolly mammoth
- **Ooril** – Night animal
- **Oshota** – Elite Tuann warriors – their name means shield
- **Seiki Stone** – Drains ki
- **Seon'yer** – Teacher or guide
- **Sirav Ryttil** – Second chances
- **Sye** – direct translation means all and none. It is the third neutral gender of Odin's people, being neither female or male
- **Tala dog** – Cross between boar and wolf and armored tank



- **Tilu** – A Tuann invention that looks like butterfly wings and allows the user to fly
- **Tijit** – A small angry rodent
- **Tixsi** – Looks like a cross between a rabbit and a chinchilla. They possess minor empathic abilities that allow them to act as emotional support companions
- **Tolial** – A special gem that is considered valuable
- **Uhva na** – Trial of the Broken. A rite of passage those of House Roake must pass before receiving a teacher who will prepare them for the adva ka
- **Ural** – Similar to synth armor but not as advanced
- **Vertier Order** – an order of the Haldeel that is considered sacred
- **Yer'se** – Student or apprentice
- **Zala** – Infant
- **Za/Za na/Za na ri/Za na ri na** – various forms of formal address by the Haldeel
- **Zinyai** – precious small one
- **Zuipi** – Tuann energy/projectile weapon that looks kind of like a bow and arrow

## **TUANN HOUSES**

### Five Major Houses

**Luatha** - Ruled by Liara.

**Roake** – Ruled by Harlow.

**Danai** - Overlord unknown

**Asanth** - Overlord unknown

**Kashori** - Overlord unknown

### Minor Houses

**Dethos** – Sworn to Danai

**Maxiim** – Fallen House formerly sworn to Luatha

**Remie** – Sworn to Danai

**Shivie** – allegiance unknown

**Terot** – Sworn to Danai

**Votair** – Allegiance unknown

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Writing is my first love. Even before I could read or put coherent sentences down on paper, I would beg the older kids to team up with me for the purpose of crafting ghost stories to share with our friends. This first writing partnership came to a tragic end when my coauthor decided to quit a day later and I threw my cookies at her head. This led to my conclusion that I worked better alone. Today, I stick with solo writing, telling the stories that would otherwise keep me up at night.

Most days (and nights) are spent feeding my tea addiction while defending the computer keyboard from my feline companions, Loki and Odin.